

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Army Reservists Project

Vietnam Experience

O. H. 712

WILLIAM TOLAND

Interviewed

by

Brian Brennan

on

May 22, 1985

WILLIAM TOLAND

William Toland was born on October 6, 1951, the son of William and Norma Toland, in Wheeling, West Virginia. It was here that he attended and graduated from Wheeling High School. Shortly after graduating, Toland entered the U.S. Army and served in South Vietnam from March 1971 to April 1972. Here, Toland was assigned to a transportation company, in which he was a truck driver. After being discharged in 1972, Toland went back home to Wheeling and was employed by Wheeling Machine Products Company. Currently, he is employed by the Scott Lumber Company, also in Wheeling.

Mr. Toland is a member of the Army Reserve, in which he is assigned to the 1st Platoon, 305th Military Police Company in Wheeling, West Virginia, and currently holds the rank of sergeant. He resides in the same city with his wife Debra Anne and is an active member of the American Legion, the Elm Grove Civics Association, and St. Vincent De Paul Catholic Church.

Brian K. Brennan

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INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM TOLAND

INTERVIEWER: Brian Brennan

SUBJECT: an average day, work, people encountered,
coming back home

DATE: May 22, 1985

B: This is an interview with William Toland for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Army Reservists, by Brian Brennan, on May 22, 1985.

Mr. Toland, about what time were you in Vietnam?

T: From August 21, 1971 to April 8, 1972.

B: Towards the tail end of the war. What did you do?

T: I was a truck driver for the AVEL central; we were a general support unit. It was an avionics company and all I did was drive the radio parts from one city to another, from our post to Saigon, Bien Hoa, Long Bien.

B: How did you react when you got your draft notice in the mail?

T: I was kind of waiting for it really. I phoned up a month before I even got the notice and asked when I was going to get drafted. I had enlisted in the navy a year prior to that and failed the physical. I automatically thought since I failed one physical that the army couldn't touch me. It just so happened that my sugar healed up. I had very good knees. I had something wrong with my kidneys, but other than that I was okay.

B: So you were fairly excited when it came in the mailbox?

T: Yes. I think I was the only kid on the block to get drafted. My number was six. That was the first year. Then the second year I was nine, so either way I was moving.

B: How did your family and friends react to your being drafted?

T: My friends, I don't really think they cared, but my parents did. They took it kind of hard. I did have orders to go to Germany, but they got revoked when I was in AIT, so I was on hold over there until I got the order for Vietnam. I think my mother took it the hardest. Everybody goes at least once, that is what they told me. In basic everybody goes to Vietnam at least once.

B: Is there any kind of military tradition in your family?

T: No, none at all. My father served in World War II, but other than that, no.

B: Can you describe for me what was going through your mind when you got off the boat or plane and got into in-country in Vietnam? What was the atmosphere like?

T: The temperature was very, very hot. They had just repaved the runway before we landed because it was shelled the night before. I landed there about 7:30 in the morning. I was there three days and I thought--Nothing to it. It was just like coming here. All I was doing was awaiting order to go to my company in-country. They had barracks similar to what we have here at Indiantown Gap, but they were screened and everything. I was there three days and on the third night I was on the second floor in my bunk smoking a cigarette about 3:30 in the morning. I flipped this cigarette out and I watched it hit the ground outside. It was all sand around the barracks. I watched it hit the ground to make sure it went out. I rolled back over on my back and heard a whistle. I didn't pay any attention to it and then all of a sudden all hell broke loose. They were hitting us! Then I realized I was in Vietnam. That is one of the times I was really scared. It scared the hell out of me when the first rocket came in. I'll never forget that one. I didn't think I would make it a year. It just so happens I got an early out, and then I got a release from Vietnam. They were standing down our post, turning over to the ARVNS, and anyone with six months or more in-country was either going home or more or less awaiting to go home. I was out eight months so they sent me home.

B: Did you have much contact with the Vietnamese people themselves?

T: Just the hooch maids.

B: What are hooch maids?

T: They were the people who did the laundry, shined your boots, cleaned your rooms, stuff like that. Some were into extra-

curricular activities, but I didn't have any of those. An additional fifty dollars a month, that got you a sleeping partner as well as your cleaning maid.

B: So you really didn't get a chance to see any of the regular population itself?

T: No, I really didn't mingle with them, no. I passed them along the road; like I said, I was a truck driver. Driving in Saigon is like driving in New York City here. There are 50,000 Honda 50's going down one way and you are trying to get over. It just so happens the bigger vehicle you are driving, the more power you have over there.

B: What about Saigon, what was it like?

T: Like I said, I really wasn't in there, I just drove through it. From what I've heard it was a pretty wild town. I didn't get into any bars, which I probably wish I would have. I really wish I would have seen some of the town.

B: How about the American army, how did it differ during the war from the army we have today? Was it different from the army that you are experiencing today? Was it more strict, more loose?

T: Starting with basic . . .

B: The whole army that you experienced.

T: It was much stricter. If the drill sergeant told you to get down and knock them out, you got down. You didn't wait on the guy to get down with you to knock them out. If he said something he meant it. I see Okernick, and I know he is hard-core and he is old. He is an old-timer.

B: Sergeant Okernick, our operations sergeant.

T: You can tell just by the day we were up at the Gap, the way he talks. He was yelling orders, and that is the way they were. You didn't take any shit from him. It was a lot stricter. It seemed like they did a lot more running than what we do now. I first came in the reserves in 1978. All we did was drink every night. We went up the Gap for two weeks, and except for the two and a half days we were out in the field. The rest of the time we were in the bar. I couldn't believe it; it was more or less like active duty when I was on active duty there in Vietnam at 6:00. I was done by 6:00 the next morning, well 7:00; formation is at 7:00. We had inspections every Tuesday in Vietnam. When we went to the field we would assume tactical situations. Here in Vietnam we were standing in company formation. One shell would wipe us all out. Here we are in combat zone standing in formation.

Where is the equal balance of this? You are in a combat zone and one shell is going to wipe you out. We go out here to play games and you say one shell is going to wipe you out. Who was right and who was wrong?

Once in a while there would be a convoy, like myself and a jeep in the front, but we didn't have any distance between us.

B: What were the people like that you served with?

T: I would say they were all a bunch of good people. A lot of them were teachers; a lot of them were businessmen older than myself. Hell, I was only nineteen. They were twenty-two, twenty-three years old. One fellow that I roomed with was there twenty-seven months in the same company. Another guy was on his third tour. He was coming back and going to go over again. He came back for thirty days and went back. They didn't bother you too much over there as far as harrassing you. Once you came back to the States I guess they really harrassed you. That is when the VOLAR came in, the volunteer army. That is when everything was changing while we were over there.

B: What was your most memorable moment while you were in Vietnam? Do you have one that you wish to remember?

T: No, I didn't have any memorable moments. Maybe the day I got on the plane to come back, that was probably the best day or the greatest day, coming back here. I landed in Washington, McChord Air Force Base. Coming back and knowing I was in the States, that was probably the greatest moment.

B: What kind of a reception did you meet with when you came back?

T: I came back and didn't tell anyone I was coming home. I wanted it to be a big surprise. Here I was, twenty years old, and I came back and got off the plane at Fort Dix and processed out. In eighteen hours we were paid, processed out, and going. I was in the airplane in Philadelphia and went to Pittsburgh. I went to the Hertz or Avis rent-a-car and I asked the lady at 10:00 on Sunday night, "I would like to rent a car and drive to Wheeling." She said, "How old are you?" I told her I was twenty years old. Before I left there was a certain age you had to be to rent a car. When I came back I was that age. Here they had upped that age of requirement to twenty-five. I had just missed a limo going to Wheeling. There was a taxi driver there and he said, "For \$50 I'll drive you to Wheeling." I told him I had just gotten home from Vietnam so automatically he thought I had a lot of cash. They take you down to one of those streets in Pittsburgh, mug you, and throw you in the river. I said, "No, just take me to the bus terminal."

I got to the bus terminal and there was a bus going to Columbus, Ohio. My parents lived right here on McCollach Street; that runs underneath of 170 going west, and all I had to do was walk two blocks. I asked the bus driver, "How about dropping me off right there?" There was a little outlet there that he could pull in. I had my duffel bag, one uniform, a pair of boots, and I think a tape recorder. I would have had it sitting on my lap and he wouldn't even have had to open the baggage compartment. I told him I had just gotten back from Vietnam and wanted to get home. It was about 11:30 then. He said, "I don't give a goddamn where you came from. I'm not taking you home. I don't stop this bus for anyone." I figured what the hell, this guy is a little prick. So I had to wait until 5:00 the next morning to come home. I still didn't want to call anyone. There was a bus going to Wheeling at 5:00 the next morning. I thought that was a bad scene right there, that guy. I was nice to the guy. When I got home it was okay.

B: So in a nutshell that driver's attitude was what you experienced?

T: Yes. I would have done it for someone.

B: How did the war in Vietnam change you personally, or did it change you?

T: It kind of made me grow up. Here I was, nineteen, never out of the city of Wheeling. I was once for a couple of days, but that was nothing. I became independent and didn't need my parents to fall back on or anything like that. I was always a loner anyway. I was always a real quiet, introverted person. It made me grow up. I believe to this day that everyone . . . they should still have a draft and everyone should have to go. Not because I was drafted or I had to serve or anything like that. I'm here because I want to be in the reserves. I believe that people should be made to go to the military, at least until a certain age like they do in Germany and Europe and places like that. They should go until they become independent and can function on their own. I really believe they should have a draft.

I have a twenty-seven year old brother. He takes his paycheck home every week or every two weeks and hands it over to my mother. She takes out so much for his car payment, so much for board, and she says he has so much left to spend. She pays his bills; she goes downtown to pay his bills. His car payment she takes to one bank. If he wants to put money in the bank she deposits it for him.

I don't really think it changed me mentally, but if I had stayed in the service I would have probably been an alcoholic.

B: You saw a lot of that?

T: Yes. In our company--we had a company of 72 people--there were only three guys that they caught with drugs. I would work the midnight shift, get off at 7:00 and we would sit around till noon drinking beer every day. Our bodies were backwards. When some people were eating breakfast we were eating supper. It still wasn't right. Even when I came home I was still out drinking and carrying on for awhile. That went on for about six months and then I got away from it.

B: Why did you enlist in the reserves?

T: I don't know. I didn't see that much action and I thought maybe I owed my country something yet. At first it wasn't the money because I made very good money at Wheeling Machine. It was something I wanted to do. I had talked about it years before even coming into the reserves. I let someone talk me out of not reenlisting in 1978 and 1979 and then I just decided that in 1982 I was going to go and I was going to stay. Now, I need the money. I don't make near as much as what I did before, but the money really comes in handy now paying my car insurance and stuff like that.

B: With what you've told me about your feelings toward a draft, do you feel that now looking back ten years since the end of the war that it was a just cause, that it was worthwhile?

T: Yes. We lost a lot of people over there. The thing that really got me was when in 1975 they took Saigon and all those people died for nothing. Another thing, most of the time the Vietnamese didn't want us there anyway. They would say, "Go on home! GI go home!" We had to be there. I didn't have any say in it. We had to be there, so we made the best of it.

B: Thank you for granting me this interview. Good luck to you in your future.

T: Thank you, sir.

END OF INTERVIEW