

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Army Reservists Project

Reserve Experiences

O. H. 722

JAMES MORFORD

Interviewed

by

Brian Brennan

on

May 7, 1985

JAMES MORFORD

James Morford was born on March 11, 1945, the son of Charles and Georgia Morford, in Neffs, Ohio. His family came to reside in Bellaire, Ohio, where he attended Bellaire High School. Soon after graduation Morford was inducted into the U.S. Army and was sent to South Vietnam. He served there from September 1965 to September 1967 as a member of the 1st Infantry Division.

Morford currently is a member of the Army Reserves, assigned to the 1st Platoon, 305th Military Police Company, where he holds the rank of Specialist 4. He has attended classes at the Northeastern Business College in accounting and is an active member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. He resides in Bellaire with his wife Donna Lee and his four children.

Brian K. Brennan

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INTERVIEWEE: JAMES MORFORD

INTERVIEWER: Brian Brennan

SUBJECT: Experiences, average days, work done, people
encountered during the war

DATE: May 7, 1985

B: This is an interview with James Morford for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Army Reservists, by Brian Brennan on May 7, 1985.

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

M: I was in Vietnam in the last part of 1966. I was there in 1966 and 1967.

B: Could you describe the atmosphere of the country when you got to Vietnam?

M: The atmosphere was that some of the people were friendly; some were unfriendly towards us. Some of them acted like they really didn't care whether we were there or not. The country had been fighting the French and quite a few different other countries for twenty-five years or more.

B: Why did you go to Vietnam? Did you volunteer or were you drafted?

M: I was drafted for two years and I was sent there by the government.

B: What was your reaction when you got your draft notice?

M: It was a shock at first, but then I figured I might as well go and get it over with. I was kind of afraid. I had never been away from home before. It was really a shock to me.

B: About how old were you?

M: Twenty.

B: What was the reaction of your family when you were ordered to go? How did they feel about the war, generally speaking?

M: They really never said a whole lot about it. I think my mother was worried about it, but she is not the type of person who shows her feelings or shows her emotion. My stepfather, he really didn't want me to go, but there wasn't much he could do about it.

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

M: I had two brothers who were in the Second World War. They didn't say too much about it.

B: Can you describe to me what you did during an average day in Vietnam if there was such a thing as an average day?

M: In base camp we got up in the morning, cleaned our gun, ate, maybe fired a few rounds, and most of the time we just sat around in the building and waited for somebody to call us for fire mission.

B: What type of unit were you with?

M: I was with an artillery unit.

B: What was your higher headquarters? What was the main unit you were with?

M: I was with the 33rd artillery; they were part of the first infantry division.

B: What was your most memorable moment of the war?

M: My 22nd birthday. There was the executive officer who was a day older than me. We were celebrating. March 10th was his birthday and March 11th was mine. We were doing a little bit of celebrating and we got hit. We ended up getting a declaration for keeping our unit from getting overrun.

B: What sort of an attack was it?

M: It was a ground attack. There were some North Vietnamese regulars and some guerrillas. They hit our sister unit which was a different battery. They were roughly a quarter of a mile away from us. We were the only ones in a position who could really fire and help them out.

B: Were a lot of people wounded that day?

M: Quite a few. I don't remember the exact count. According to the records the body count was 197, but we counted 202 in our actual count.

B: What was the army, in general, like?

M: It was a lot harder than what it is now. It had a hard attitude. It was more disciplined than it is now. In general I think it was a lot better than it is now as far as discipline, military respect, and things like that.

B: In what way was the army more disciplined than it is nowadays?

M: There was more respect for officers, NCO's. If you were told to do something, you did it without any questions. It just seems like today the army is more lax. There wasn't as much paper work as there is now and things seemed to operate a lot smoother.

B: Did you have any "ninety day wonder" lieutenants?

M: I worked with a lieutenant and you might call him a ninety day wonder. I was an RTO for a forward observer.

B: An RTO, that is a radio telephone operator?

M: Right. We went out and he called in two fire missions in the same day. Instead of plotting the enemy's position, he plotted our's and we almost dropped our own rounds on us. It made me think he was pretty much a ninety day wonder.

B: Whatever became of him?

M: When we got back in base camp I complained about what had happened and they took him and put him in the fire direction center with more supervision. They took me off and put me back on the gun.

B: Getting back to the idea of the army and what it was like, can you describe to me what your comrades in arms were like, your buddies in your unit?

M: We were like a close family, but we still didn't want to get too close because we never knew who was going to the front. It is really hard to explain the feelings you had towards them. You wanted to be a friend and a buddy, but you didn't want to get that close because of fear of losing a friend.

B: And you lost many friends?

M: I lost three of my gun section. We were one of the lucky units; we never really got into any serious battles.

B: About where was your base camp located?

M: It was located right at the bottom end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail; it is about fifty miles north of Saigon.

B: Did you ever get into Saigon much?

M: Five or six times. Saigon was different; it was kind of rowdy at times; it was kind of peaceful at times. You never knew what to expect in Saigon. We tried to stay away from Saigon; we didn't really care for it.

B: Where did you go when you had any time off? Did you have much time off?

M: We were about 50-50 on time off. We were always in base camp. We went to villages close by, secure villages. They had different activities there to get involved in.

B: Did you get a chance to work much with the army of South Vietnam?

M: Once or twice. They were mostly with special forces, but every now and then they needed support and we would support them. They were really not an army. I think it was more of just something to do. They weren't trained very well.

B: How do you think, in your opinion, they fought?

M: I would say ninety percent of them, in a major battle, would leave.

B: Just desert?

M: Desert. They were that way. I don't think they really wanted to fight their own people is what the reason was.

B: Were you ever wounded?

M: Not wounded. I was injured. I dropped an artillery round on my foot and broke it.

B: In your opinion how did Vietnam change you, or did it change you?

- M: It changed me a whole lot at first. When I first got back to the States I didn't really know how to act. It was hard to fit in. People's reactions to me being a Vietnam vet, some would sympathize with you; some didn't even want to talk to you, didn't want you around. It was a hard adjustment. When I first got back I drank quite a bit. I went through two divorces and I think Vietnam was the main cause of both of them.
- B: Why did you return to the army? Why are you in the reserves these days?
- M: I really don't know; I like it. I liked the army when I was in there, but Vietnam changed me so much that it took me a while to get myself back into a position where I felt that I could do some good. So I came back into the reserves. I enjoy the reserves quite a bit.
- B: Did you suffer from what they call delayed stress syndrome? Other than your divorces did you have any really major problems in coping with life?
- M: Not a whole lot of problems. It was just adjusting to people around me. A lot of times I felt like I didn't want anybody at all with me or close to me. I didn't want to associate with a lot of people. I would say I had some symptoms of delayed stress.
- B: What was your homecoming itself like, the day you got on the plane to come home?
- M: The day I got on the plane I ran into a bunch of friends at the out-processing center. They were with me when I was in Oklahoma. We sat together and told some old stories and drank a few beers. They just about carried me on the plane. After I got on the plane it was hard to adjust to getting off the ground. I didn't know whether I was going to make it back or not. I was afraid they would shoot me out of the air because they were shooting at quite a few of our planes at the time. I think that was my greatest fear, leaving. When I got back to the States I was at Fort Dix, New Jersey and I couldn't sleep for three days. I was a nervous wreck. I couldn't adjust to the traffic outside the buildings or anything. When I got home my mother had moved to California. She mailed me a letter and the letter got there after I had left. I didn't know she moved. I went home to an empty house with the exception of the dog. That was my home greeting. I kept that dog until it was sixteen years old.
- B: When I was interviewing another person on this subject he made mention the children of Vietnam as the thing he remembered most of all. Did you have any contact with the youngsters of Vietnam?

- M: I had a lot of public relations in the base camp. They stressed it a lot. The children you hated to really get close to; you felt sorry for them because of the way they had to live, their ways of life, the food they had to eat. You couldn't really get close to them, but you could talk to them and try to associate with them and try to be as friendly as possible. Then in some places you had to have a lot of fear of the children because they might walk up and hand you a hand grenade or some kind of satchel charge strapped to them; you never knew what to expect of them.
- B: Did you have any experiences where they did that?
- M: No, I didn't and I'm really glad that I didn't. I really don't know what I would have done in a situation like that.
- B: You were saying that some of the Vietnamese people supported you; some of them didn't like the American presence. In what way did you get this feeling that some of them didn't support the American and South Vietnamese war effort? Did you have any particularly bad experiences personally?
- M: Not really any bad experiences; it was just something that you could feel in talking with them, their attitudes, the way they talked, the way they acted. They were distant; they didn't want to get close to you. They didn't want to talk a whole lot, and when they did it was just strictly business.
- B: How did you survive? How did you live? Was there a secret to getting through the hell hole sanely?
- M: Sanely? I think at one time or another almost everybody that was there had a point where at one time or another they might have cracked up and went insane. There was a lot of stress a lot of times and then at times there was no pressure at all. One day it was peaceful and the next day you might be shooting or getting shot at. As far as survival, I think everybody that was there had a positive attitude about coming back. I didn't want to be there, but I didn't want to die there either.
- B: The Vietcong guerrillas, did they have the tendency of attacking your position frequently? Did you ever see any face-to-face?
- M: I've seen a few face-to-face. The guerrillas were hit-and-run type people. They might fire a few sniper rounds at you. They might throw ten or fifteen people in there and hit you all at once and take off. All they wanted to do was more or less inflict a few casualties where it would take a few of our men to take care of them. They figured if they knocked one man out it took three to four to handle him, so they couldn't be in a position to fight. When they

did things like that usually you could expect the North Vietnamese regulars to hit you pretty soon after that.

B: Do you have anything further you would like to add?

M: It seemed to me that there was a whole lot of politics in the Vietnam War. At one time I was at a special forces base camp. We had several high-ranking officers there. We knew there were Vietcong and North Vietnamese regulars in the area, but we didn't have any idea where they were. The Vietnamese regulars were there with us and they showed us on the map right where they were. Our high-ranking officers said that with our superior equipment and this and that and the other we were one of the greatest armies in the world. We used our surveillance and there was nothing there. I believe we had three companies walk into a horseshoe trap because of a simple mistake like that.

B: A horseshoe trap?

M: Yes, there was sort of a little half circle which had an opening and the men walked in. As soon as they got in the Vietnamese closed the back side of it off and they had them in a circle. They couldn't get out and we lost quite a few people. They were forty-eight wounded and thirty-five killed. I really didn't have much respect for all the high officers afterwards. It seemed to me that our superiority got us into something that should never have happened.

B: What you're saying though is that despite our technological superiority their guerrilla tactics were far superior. They won the day.

M: At times they were. At times our superior tactics were pretty good, but when you live in a country you know it. I think they should have taken their word just as a precautionary measure; they were told that they were there and they said no they weren't. When we went in and found out they were it was too late then.

B: Were you ever really dissatisfied, other than in this instance you just brought up, with your superiors and their conduct?

M: Other than that incident, not really. There were a few other things like different congressmen came out in the battlefield with us. We had a female reporter that was with us and she ended up getting shot. She didn't get killed, but she got wounded pretty badly. In a combat zone I don't think we need people like that.

I came home and my stepfather told me he sat there watching t.v. one time and he saw me on t.v. That was quite a shock

to him and it was quite a shock to me to find it out. I knew that we always had cameras there; we had magazine reporters there; we had newspaper reporters; we had t.v. reporters there. We didn't really need them. A lot of times they were in the way. Woody Hayes came out on the gun. I got to shake his hand. That was a little bit of a morale boost, but still, we didn't need him there.

B: Did you have an opportunity to talk with any of those congressmen?

M: Not really. They tried to keep them away from the lower ranking people because the officers really didn't want them to hear what we had to say.

B: Any particular reason why?

M: They were probably afraid of what we might tell them.

B: I take it your officers were, at least on the surface, very gung ho about the war?

M: Some of them were gung ho; some of them seemed to like it; some of them seemed to just want to cover it up and hide it and forget the fact that we were there. You never really knew who was who and what was what when it came to the officers. You might say something to one that you wouldn't say to the other. Then you might not want to say something to them and end up doing it by accident. There was a lot of cover-up there; accidents happened and they tried to cover them up. They didn't want people to know what was going on. They had quite a few suicides. I had one in my own gun crew. I lost almost all of my gun crew because of the suicide. The man was very smart; he was classified as a genius, but he felt that the army did him over and he took it out on himself. He used two hand grenades. Taking his own life he wounded about eight other people, which was my gun crew. They kind of wanted to cover it up; they didn't want it out to the general public what had happened.

B: How did they try to cover it up?

M: They just got everybody out. They wouldn't really tell us what happened, but the ones in the immediate area knew. They ran me out as soon as I got in there. They didn't let anybody in there, but I saw the people; I saw the body. That is one thing I don't think I'll ever forget.

B: Was there an ensuing investigation?

M: They had the CID [Criminal Investigation Department] come in. They just did their investigation. They wrote it off as an accident. It's hard to believe a man talked suicide

all the time. He always talked about the last flash. He wanted to shoot himself with a cannon. He always talked about the last flash at the end of each life. I can't believe it was accidental. Two hand grenades? He always talked about doing it with an explosive. I really thought it was a shame. He was very smart; it was just a waste of life.

B: How did he figure the army did him in?

M: Well, when he came in he signed up regular army. He was supposed to go to officer's candidate school. Well, somehow the paper work got fouled up and he didn't get to go. He ended up in the artillery as an enlisted man. He wasn't satisfied with that. He wasn't satisfied with the army in general. He was really too smart to be where he was. The average person couldn't really sit down and carry on a conversation with him because he used words that they never heard before. I think they said he was classified as a genius. He read books; he read just about every one of Hitler's books. Anything you wanted to talk about in general, baseball, football, he knew it. He just picked up everything. He could pick up a paper and read it and in thirty seconds it seemed like he knew everything that was in it.

B: Did anyone else attempt suicide?

M: We had one who attempted it his first day there. I never even got to meet the man. His first day there our unit was out and he came into base camp. He wasn't there more than two hours and stuck an M-14 to his chin and pulled the trigger. The bullet came out through the bridge of his nose and now he will be blind for the rest of his life. He probably had to have quite a bit of plastic surgery.

B: Did the army also try to cover that up?

M: I really don't know in that incident. I wasn't back when it happened. All we heard was that the guy set the gun to his chin and pulled the trigger and shot himself. We never heard anymore after that.

We lost a gunner for the second time. Actually, the first time we lost it was because of some bad ammunition that we had. We fired a .105 and it exploded coming out of the barrel. About eight feet out it exploded. It dropped everybody but me and another guy. The same person survived a hand grenade incident too. He and I were the only two who survived the time I was there.

B: A charmed life.

- M: We must have been living good. When that round exploded I really didn't know what happened. We had excess powder bags that we had to get rid of and they were in the back of a three-quarter truck. The powder was set off and there was this terrific explosion. There was a big ball of fire and the next thing you know I was three guns down from where I was standing and I don't know how I got there. When I got back there were people laying everywhere. We just didn't know where to go first; I didn't know whether it was the fire, explosion, or the fact that everybody was laying down there. That was my first incident that anybody had gotten hurt other than minor injuries.
- B: With all this going on did anybody take an interest in health and welfare of your unit?
- M: They managed to get food out to us. They tried to give us hot meals when they could. Every now and then we would get with an engineering unit and they had a water processor that they tried to use so we had showers. But there were a lot of times we went with the same clothes for weeks. We would take them off and throw them away because it wasn't worth washing them. They sent different things; they called them sundries packs. They had candy bars, cigarettes, and toilet items, razor blades.
- B: On the order of an old Red Cross package or a care package?
- M: Yes. If we were in a place where they could land a helicopter they would send beer out to us. With our headquarters and all there were more or less ten squads so we would get ten cases of beer. That would average about two or three beers a man. They tried to keep the morale high at times. A lot of times it got real low. You got bored and sometimes you just sat for days and didn't do a thing. Sometimes you would shoot 1,200 or 1,500 rounds a day, which was rough. At one time I fired 600 rounds in roughly two hours. At fifty pounds a round it got pretty tiresome. Instead of one person loading you had to have at least three, which is kind of dangerous because you are crowded and the barrel slides back.
- Once in a while you would get in soft dirt. I got run over by a cannon wheel one time because I fired a high charge and it backed up and hit me and knocked me out. I got burned because when I got knocked down I went into the middle between the trails and when it threw the casing out it hit me in the back. We were firing a pretty serious mission so they just dragged me out of the way and called the medic and kept on firing.
- B: Do you have any comments on the use of alcohol or drugs in your unit? Did you see any of it?

M: There was a lot of alcohol. I was over there right before a lot of the drugs started coming in. The most drug abuse was probably alcohol or Darvon. It seemed like everybody had those. You got a headache and the medic would hand you a handful of Darvons. I had a toothache and I think everybody in the unit handed me a handful of Darvons and said, "Here, take these until we can get you out of here." I was out in two days with a tooth that was really driving me up the wall. They flew me out and I got it pulled and then went back. As far as drugs, I didn't see a whole lot of them, but I did see a lot of alcohol. Vietnamese had alcohol. Our own government shipped a lot over there. I saw a lot of it. When we were in the base camp and didn't have anything to do we sat a lot and talked, maybe fired a few rounds at somebody who was trying to harass the perimeter or something. We fired a few rounds, but that was about it. The only thing to do was drink. Every gun had at least one cooler on it, and it was always full of beer.

B: After going through all of this what are your thoughts on the whole war itself? Was it worth it?

M: I really don't think it was. I feel like being over there I wasted the time. I was in a country where the people didn't care whether we were there or not. It seemed like a lot of the officers wanted to be there for no reason at all. We were fighting a losing battle. Most of the time we didn't know who we were fighting. I've seen times where you might be talking to a person in the daytime and at night shooting at him. I really think it was a waste of my time.

B: Thank you for this interview. It has been most enlightening.

M: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW