

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam Conflict 1961-75

Personal Experience

O H 898

ROBERT KNIGHT

Interviewed

by

Brian Brennan

on

May 5, 1985

B This is an interview with Robert Knight for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Army Reservists, by Brian Brennan, on May 5, 1985

Mr. Knight, what time were you in Vietnam?

K I entered the service September of 1968 and I spent 1969, 1970, and 1971 in Vietnam

B How did you wind up going to Vietnam?

K I had just come out of college my sophomore year and I kind of got fed up with school, and about the only thing I could do was go into the service I joined the Army and I had the choice of going to Germany or Vietnam, and I went to Vietnam

B You actually had a choice?

K Germany, to some people, is worse than what Vietnam is I talked to a lot of people who had been there before and the duty in Germany was not that great I just wanted to get away so I volunteered

B What was the reaction of your family?

K On my first tour they reacted like any other parents, I guess On my second tour, I volunteered to go back in for another tour, they kind of spoke the family out My mom and dad were not getting along that great She told him that if anything happened to me, she was going to do the same to him. That kind of split them up I left to get away from him because we did not have that good of a working relationship. I grew up and he pushed me into college I was seventeen years old, graduated from high school, and went straight into summer school, straight into my freshman year I was sick of school and just had to wait until I was eighteen to go into the service

B What were your original thoughts on the war in Vietnam at the time that you entered the service?

K Not really too much of anything because I was too young to really know I knew the war was going on In 1967, when I came out of high school it was not that big of a pressing issue You could go to college and get out of it You could get 1Y Classification, in fact they were real easy, and that is what I had was a 1Y It was not a big thing Then I volunteered for the draft and it started to come up There was not any real feeling toward being scared of going there or not going It was just something to do It could not be any worse than spending the rest of your life at school

B Could you describe for me what it was like when you first got to Vietnam? When you first arrived off the boat?

K We landed at Cameroon Bay. The first night there, the airport took rockets. I was just going on nineteen. We did not have our flack jackets, steel pots or anything, and we were getting off right into the rocket attack. It was just where could I hide at, that kind of thing, where do I run, where is my gun. It was scary. Then the second day, I was in-country and we went to the 17th Cavalry. I no more got in my unit and they threw a ruck-sack at me and told me to jump in a chopper. I was going to the field. That night I saw a lead tank hit a napalm and all four guys got burned up on it. That was my second day in-country. I said, "Wait a minute. What am I doing here? Did I do the right thing?" It is really hard to explain the feelings. It was just something new. When I first got off the plane it was something new.

B What were the people like, the Vietnamese?

K You could not trust anybody. Even the ARVN's the Republic Vietnamese, they were supposed to be fighting for us, with us, and you could not trust any of them. You would turn your back on them and they would shoot just as soon as they would shoot anything else. I am talking about six, seven, eight year old boys and girls. They were throwing hand grenades in oil cans, booby trapping things where there were GI's going through. You get the feeling, "Just stay away for me." That was the best way to be and you were not going to get hurt. That is the only kind of attitude you could really have.

We had Kit Carson scouts who were Vietcong and were retaining guerrillas as our scouts and stuff. Numerous times, as soon as your back was turned, they were gone. How could you trust them? On the other hand, it took me a whole year to realize what the people wanted us there for, maybe not what our government wanted us there for. You could go down to the Village and see it in their faces. They had nothing and were having that taken away from them. Those people were living out in the weather with nothing but straw over their heads and were getting rice ten times a day or whatever. They were trying to take that away from them. We were supposed to be there to help them develop their own democracy and all this. As far as the people go, you just could not make them your friends. As soon as you turned your back, they were on you. It might have been different in other places. I was in a lot of places over there, and the best policy was just to trust nobody.

B Did you have much opportunity to serve with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam?

K Oh yes.

B How did they rank as soldiers?

K On a scale of one to ten, maybe two. The equipment that they got from us brought

them up to maybe a three. Fighting, you would have to see it to believe it, because soon as you would turn your back, they were behind you. American soldiers were up in front doing the fighting and the ARVN's were in the back. "We were protecting you from the back." That kind of situation. Everywhere was like that.

The only ones I ever worked with and did not have to worry about were the Montagnards. Their people, they would fight for everything. They would throw everything at you that they could, knives, guns, explosives. They would just make anything out of anything to kill somebody. They were fighting for their land. When a person fights for their land, they are a better fighter.

As far as the ARVN army goes, all you had to do was watch the fall of Saigon, the fall of Chu Lai and the fall of any of the big cities where we left material there for them to defend themselves. The material was sitting there, but the people were not willing to defend themselves. The Vietcong and the NVA were coming in and taking over. That speaks right there. We left enough material over there for them to defend themselves, and everything we took over there we left; machine guns, APC's, helicopters, jets. When the last troops left Saigon, the next day it was communist country again. That is how fast it was.

B How about on the other side of the coin, the American Army? What was it like in those days? Was it much different than it is today?

K Yes. It is a hard adjustment for a person to come out of the jungles and become a garrison soldier. They are two completely different types of army. When you are out in the field, you are there doing your job and you do not have anyone trying to mess with your head, trying to shine your boots, this kind of stuff. You are there to stay alive and to keep your buddies alive. Then when they drag you out of the jungle to bring you in the garrison to teach you how to shine your boots, that is a really big adjustment. A lot of guys could not make it, a lot of guys got out. The American Army, it was split. You had what we called REMF's, rear echelon mothers, and then your combat soldiers, and one was a field soldier and went into the field. Drugs are a big thing you always hear about in Vietnam. You could go to any combat unit, in the Infantry, any airborne unit, any CAV unit you wanted to go to and it was no veil or anything when we were out in the field. Everybody knew that you might have to save my life and I might have to save your life and I do not want you out there on cloud nine, behind me, protecting my back. That was the general consensus of the combat soldier.

If you go back into the rear where you have all your maintenance people and all this, it was not anything to walk into someone's hooch and see them shooting a needle in their arm. Drugs were a big negative, but you had to remember who was doing them. The combat soldiers who were in the jungle chasing Charlie did not have time and could not afford it. Like I said, I could not afford to be on patrol and have you on my patrol when you were on cloud nine. On the other hand, guys in the rear, they had nothing to do. I have actually walked in and caught guys with needles in their arms. It makes you sick. It is their lives, and you can sit there and yell at them all day, write them up and all that, but it is their body that they are tearing up. That was one thing I hated so much about the war, I would see so many young guys come back addicted to speed. Guys that drank speed, they could stay up

all night and pull guard I saw guys go from 220 down to 160 on a year's tour and all the time it was speed They did not want to miss anything, they wanted to stay awake

You cannot blame the war on our Army Our Army fought the war they were told to fight and how to fight it That is not saying they did not fight it to win or lose When you have people saying, "No, you cannot do this." When you went into an area where you could not shoot unless the guy was shooting at you What kind of war is that? Then you come home here and all you hear is, "This is the first war we have lost " I cannot see how they can say an American soldier lost because American soldiers did their jobs, I do not care what anybody says I spent two years there and I saw it You can take the combat unit out of Vietnam and put it against any unit in the world and they would survive

B What about the leadership in those days? What was your office corp and your NCO equivalent?

K Really, the majority of the time we had a second lieutenant and he was the main person. He was your platoon leader and he was going on where you were going and what you were doing You had your E6's, E7's and E5's It just seemed like there was one soldier When you are in Infantry squad or something like that everyone looks to that one man He has got the knowledge and he is supposed to know what he is doing As far as that goes, that was great Colonels, majors, and generals and all these people who sit back here, you need to get out and see it They missed a lot of the war

B I would imagine there was a lot of resentment amongst the regular combat soldier

K Yes. That is where the second lieutenant comes in, you would not believe that the rank the man had, he was like God He was the go-between, between the higher-ups and everybody else In my Cavalry Unit, the first CAV, my lieutenant was a platoon leader and our E6 was a platoon sergeant Most of the rest of the people were E4's and E5's Really rank is more or less thrown out of the window Whoever knows the business is who people follow I do not care if he is a PFC, if he has been in-country for two years, he knows where not to walk and where not to go, you follow the guy.

B Did you have any second lieutenants who would fall under the category on ninety-day wonder?

K Every ninety days We had our share of those Even if they spent ten years as a second lieutenant they were still called ninety day wonders We had one On my first tour, we were in a village that was supposed to have been pacified He was an airborne ranger and just got out of school. We took RPG's We had to take him out of the inside of the APC and call in the artillery It was scary. He turned out to be the best platoon leader we ever had He got initiated right away. He had an RPG fly really close to his face right under his nose

B An RPG, that is an anti-tank rocket?

K: Well, a grenade Yes, if they hit, they can do the damage, especially in a CAV unit If you hit a "Sheridan" or an APC with a rocket-powered grenade and you are talking about two, three, or four guys getting messed up They burn through metal and they explode, and when they explode, hot metal goes everywhere. Ninety day wonders, I cannot remember too many bad ones.

B That is surprising because of all the folklore that came out of the Vietnam War You picture the second lieutenant as being .?

K You would shoot him just as soon as you would shoot anybody else That was not the way A lot of guys will tell you different, but talk to the people who were in the bush, who were out there walking every day with that second lieutenant, not the people who stayed back and ran the NCO club They have the biggest war stories You can always pick them that quick, guys that sat on their ass in the NCO club If you got into a line unit that actually saw combat every day you could see hardcore lieutenants that knew their job They were there to survive and keep twenty or thirty other guys alive They do not have time to mess around and learn their job

Captains, I very seldom saw a captain They were usually battalion or higher-up, making plans, overlays, and all that stuff The majority of the time, your leadership was that lieutenant

B Could you describe for me if there was such a thing as an average day in your life in Vietnam? Or were there no two days that were alike?

K No When we came back into the rear, pulling our maintenance, it was just one of those average days just like we never went anyplace else You had to wait until evening to see what you could get in the way of the rocket attacks That becomes second nature You hear rockets going off and it is second nature It hits someplace and you get low and stay low until it is over An average day, in the field there is no average day Some days you are stepping on a mine, hitting a mine, getting shot at or fighting leeches

B Were you ever wounded while you were there?

K Yes, I got run off of a APC, went airborne thirty some feet in the air, landed, and busted all of my ribs I got blown off of a Sheridan tank I stepped in a punji-pit hole and tore all the ligaments in my left leg because there were some nasty sticks in there I could have lost a leg

B How was the medical care that you received?

K It was just like M A S H on television. That is what it is like I would not do it for the world. I give all the respect in the world for anybody that was in the medical corps It is easy to sit there and talk about picking somebody's leg up and stopping the bleeding in the rest of his body, and you sit there and watch the medics who do stuff and do it every day and you appreciate it I never saw a medic who really did not have his head up in the air because he knew what he was doing Anytime we got in a fire fight, there he was You cannot say anything about the medics if you have ever been in a combat situation, because it is the dirtiest job you will ever see You cannot touch it. Those guys are in a class of their own

B How did you survive when you were there? How did you live out of a knapsack?

K Rucksack When we were in the CAV unit I had an APC. There were four guys on that plus the APC and that was your home Sitting on the back or driving, that was your home When you would sleep at night, you would find yourself something to get behind, lay down on the ground, and throw your poncho liner over you I never had a sleeping bag, never dug any foxholes, never dug any flank positions

B I would imagine being in a close quarters of an armored personnel carrier that you got close with those with you

K Yes. When I first toured, I must have spent fourteen months with the same five guys You get pretty close to them You try to stay off the lead vehicle as much as you can so you do not hit those mines or you would all go home together When I went over there, we rotated out and we had thirty-seven guys rotating to Vietnam off of our cycle base After my first tour, there were thirteen of us left The other ones, they went home one way or another.

B How did the war in Vietnam change you, or did it not change you?

K Oh yes, it changed us a lot It is hard to put up with the bullshit and it is hard to adjust to so many things I had four years in Germany tacked onto it and that even makes you work harder You would sit out there on a long day, get up in the middle of the night and find me out in the yard walking around the yard just sound asleep I was ready I would wake up in the middle of the night screaming I still do that and it has been thirteen years There is not a week that goes by where I have some kind of dream, I am fighting there back in Vietnam again, plain as day There are the same people and the same situations I wake up screaming, sweating My wife will stand out of bed, afraid to get in bed with me because I throw fists and I kick

B What was your homecoming like when you got back into the States?

K That is something I really do not like to talk about We landed in California, Travis

Air Force Base There were 325 combat soldiers There were some special forces, some rangers, CAV unit. There were E6's, E7's, and E5's. They all came back at the same time. We had protesters A guy actually had the nerve to spit on a guy The guy he spit on was wearing one of those little, green beanies

B A green beret?

K I was standing behind, because you never knew where these guys were coming from Some guy was there burning the American Flag and here are 300 AMUETS getting on the plane. No matter what you thought, after you spent a year there you might still hate the idea of the military being there, but you could see there was a reason, there was a purpose. All you have to do is look around the world and you can see what the purpose was, the communists are trying to take over everything I do not care what country it is, Afghanistan, anywhere, they want a piece of this and a piece of that That is all they were doing They call them North Vietnamese, but everything they had was communist, weapons, and everything

B How did you view the war in Vietnam now ten years since the war? Do you think it was a just cause?

K That is hard to answer When you were there you say it was, but then you sit around and listen for twelve years where people will do everything but call you a name because you were there You actually have people tell you, "You are not a veteran That was not a war. You did not do anything over there "

B People actually told you this?

K Yes American Legion commander at Baden City was one of the guys that spoke to me and another guy He was in the Navy between World War II and Korea He probably never did a damn thing except float around in a boat, but he stands around there saying, "We were in the big war," and all this I said, "When you get shot at, it is a war " "You are over there supposed to be defending your country " I have had people actually say that to me I have had people in my family who do not even know I was in the military I just do not talk about that much You finally start talking about it and you get, "You are finally getting recognition, They built a monument for you " When we came back, there was not a ticker-tape parade or anything It was not fair It makes you feel like you got cheated Toward the last part of 1972, you could almost wager that seventy percent of the people there were second, third, and fourth turners, they volunteered to go back

B Mr. Knight, you are now a member of the Army Reserve. What moved you to get back into uniform?



K I enjoy the military I planned on being twenty years when I went in So many things are told to the soldiers nowadays that never come through You always hope for a better thing, the grass is always greener on the other side I earned my education and got that finished I thought about active duty, so I joined the reserve unit I have been in and out of the reserve units now for five years I like the money, but I like coming home once a month bitching about the Army. My wife says I could not live without it She says it would not be the same

B Did you ever visit Saigon?

K One time

B Can you describe the atmosphere of the city?

K When I was there it was really busy It was a real big city, kind of like being in downtown Pittsburgh there was something going on on each corner There is a really big airport there. There really was not any fighting going on there when I was there. It was just more or less a peace time resort You could not believe there was a war going on That changed in 1972, tanks were coming down the street

B Thank you for granting me this interview

End of Interview