

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Army Reservists Project

Vietnam Experience

O. H. 708

CLINT FABRY

Interviewed

by

Brian Brennan

on

June 2, 1985

CLINT FABRY

Clint Fabry was born on June 6, 1947 in Warren, Ohio, the son of Harry and Martha Fabry. After graduating from high school, he went to Ohio University at Athens, where he received a bachelor's of fine arts in 1970. After graduating, he entered the Army and was sent to Vietnam and he remained there until his discharge in 1972.

Currently employed by the Mine Safety Health Administration, Mr. Fabry is a member of the Army Reserve in the 1st Platoon, 305th Military Police Company in Wheeling, West Virginia, where he holds the rank of Specialist 4. He resides today in Martins Ferry, Ohio with his wife Karen and his daughter, Shawna. He is a member of the First Presbyterian Church of that town and is a Mason.

As of the present time, February 23, 1988, Mr. Fabry is no longer with the Army Reserves, but has joined the Coast Guard Reserves in Wheeling as of October, 1986.

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INTERVIEWEE: CLINT FABRY
INTERVIEWER: Brian Brennan
SUBJECT: people, an average day, different experiences
DATE: June 2, 1985

B: This is an interview with Mr. Clint Fabry for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on Army Reservists, by Brian Brennan, on June 2, 1985.

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

F: From approximately March 15, 1971 to February 22, 1972.

B: What led to your going to Vietnam? Were you drafted? Did you volunteer?

F: I was drafted.

B: What was your reaction when you got Uncle Sam's greeting?

F: Well, I got Uncle Sam's greeting when I was a sophomore in college. I had a 2S status.

B: They let you in.

F: Correction, I had a 2S status all the way through school, then I graduated in June and I think around July I got the greetings in the mail, which didn't surprise me any. My lottery number was 110. I had a lot of job interviews, so it did kind of conflict with my future. I had just come back from Cranbrook Institute in Michigan. I had job offers from Henry Dreyfuss, Ford Corporation, Chrysler, Chevy as an industrial designer. They said that they would hire me if I could get my status of 1A changed or come back to them when I finished my service. So I knew that I had to go to the service to get it out of the way so I could start my career, which I just took in stride. Once you get your draft notice you just do what it tells you and you go to

a place where it tells you to go, and that is what I did.

- B: What was the reaction of your family and friends when you got your orders to go to Vietnam?
- F: My parents were divorced. I have a sister and a brother. They are both eight years older than I am, so we are not that tight. My brother wasn't around; he was in Rochester, New York so I didn't hear any reaction from him. My sister, she didn't say too much. She said to be careful. My mother didn't say too much either. They figured it was your obligation and that it was something you had to do. I was single and that was the only family I had. There weren't any big problems as far as my family was concerned. My dad was in the service and it was just common practice that you go when you are called.
- B: It was a family tradition then?
- F: Absolutely.
- B: What was your line of work in Vietnam?
- F: I was with the Charlie 52nd Infantry attached to the 18th MP Brigade, 89th MP Group. We set security guards around Generals Abrhams MAC-V; we escorted supplies north to Phue Bein and Ke Bao. I started as a clerk typist the first two months. We were the infantry unit attached to an MP unit. More or less we were security patrol or security guard.
- B: When you got to Vietnam off a plane or off a boat, what was the atmosphere like? What went through your mind when you first set foot in-country?
- F: It was a long trip over; I think it took sixteen hours and we went from Pittsburgh to California and then up through Alaska down through Japan. You could tell when you went to Vietnam; it looked like the moon with all the craters, the bomb craters. We landed at the airport in Bien Hoa. They shuttled you in buses and it was more or less just like a practice. It was warm; it was balmy. There was no fighting; it was more or less in the rear. They just put you in buses off the plane; you got in the bus and they shuttled you to the 90th replacement. Then you were with a bunch of other guys and you were waiting until you got sent out to your patrol. It was just like basic, an AIT really, but you were ten thousand miles away from your home. Still, I was with a lot of buddies who I went to AIT with. It was a good experience and it was exciting, something new. I enjoyed it.
- B: What were the Vietnamese people themselves like? Did you have much contact with them?

F: Oh yes, I was stationed in Long Bien and Saigon for awhile. The overall opinion, I think, of the Vietnamese, they didn't quite like Americans. I don't care if they were North or South, I couldn't tell them apart; I don't think anybody could. They were always trying to rip you off. The Momasons who took care of the laundry and the hooches, they were just doing their job and they weren't really friendly. They were smiling all of the time. They did a good job, but when you went into town you couldn't trust anybody. They were always trying to take things from the government; they didn't like it for one thing. I think they knew you came in and made helter-skelter of their country. I think they blamed the Americans, more or less, for the war. It seemed like you couldn't trust them, especially the males. The females too, but they more or less were interested in your money. The males didn't want anything to do with you. There were some friendly ones and then there were some real unfriendly ones. All in all, I don't think they liked Americans at all.

B: Not somebody you would really trust then?

F: Not in the position I was in. I know a lot of people who have made good friends with Vietnamese. In certain cases if you do fight aside one, if you were with an Arvan group fighting with them, you would probably make some good friends. As far as an MP or a security guard is concerned, we didn't work with the Arvans or the South Vietnamese that close. We more or less took care of our own. The Air Force base at Tun Se Nute', we patrolled that a lot. We didn't come into contact with any South Vietnamese or Arvans as far as friends are concerned. We didn't have any close contacts. The only contacts we had were when we went to Saigon on R&R or when we were off for the day or weekend. We were like tourists to them then. They were friendly, but you could see they didn't trust us.

B: Did you ever make it into Saigon very much?

F: Oh yes. I was in Saigon almost every weekend.

B: What was the atmosphere in the city like?

F: New Orleans, helter-skelter. You would jump on a motorcycle with a basket in front and the driver would drive about fifty miles an hour and couldn't care less because you would be the first one to hit something. There were a lot of women hanging around waiting for soldiers to come in. There were people on the streets selling things, little stands. It was crowded all of the time. It looked like a big, mass hysteria. It was just motorcycles; I've seen a family of five on one Honda Ninety, people laying around the streets with polio, disease, little shops. It was just like the ghetto of New York. Everything was packed so tightly into a three square

mile area. There were a lot of terrorists and blood in the city. Death was kind of cheap. If you died they would just take your numbers and put you in a casket. It was an exciting atmosphere; there was always something to do.

B: What did you normally do while you were there?

F: In Saigon?

B: Yes.

F: A normal day would be to get off at 6:00, grab two buddies. Always travel in a pair; never go by yourself. I did that a couple of times and that was a mistake. I would grab a couple of buddies, go into town on Tudu Street and visit the bars. The women would always want to buy you a tea, which cost around 10,000 Peiaster, five dollars. You would sit there and drink "33", Vietnamese beer. They had some good steak and French fries, I remember that. It was just like going drinking in a normal time. The only problem was the language. If I could have spoke Vietnamese it would have been better. That was one of my problems as far as the Vietnamese were concerned. Vietnamese was a difficult language and you could only use certain words. A buddy of mine went to an orientation on how to speak Vietnamese. He really had a better speaking relationship with them because he could talk to them. If he did have a problem he could explain it to them. I think he made more friends because he knew the language. If you do know the language in the country you will definitely get along better. The men over there knew very little English. Some of them knew a little, but they were usually stationed on the bases as interpreters. The normal Vietnamese person hardly knew anything. The girls knew all the language like, "GI want to fuck?" "GI want to have a good time?" all the illicit type sayings. They had that down pat. I talked to a couple guys and girls in Vietnam they did carry on a decent conversation, but they had been there since the Americans pulled in and they probably learned from the Americans and they were probably learning English for seven years. Things like that were rare though. Most of them could engage in limited conversations. You more or less had to use your hands half of the time, and half the talk Vietnamese. Communication was very difficult.

B: You indicated earlier that you very seldom worked with the army of the South Vietnam. Did you ever work with them at all?

F: No. They pulled their own guard duty in the city. They have their own Arvan MP police if you want to call it. They more or less patrolled. They worked a little bit closer

with the 720th MP Division, and not the 18th MP Brigade or 89th Group. When I saw a jeep of Americans I never did see a South Vietnamese sitting beside an American MP. There were usually two Arvans or two South Vietnamese in a jeep without an American; they usually were independent of each other as far as military police business was concerned. I have seen them marching in groups before, but we really didn't have that much contact with them.

- B: On the other side of the coin, the American army, how did it differ during the time you were in Vietnam with today's army?
- F: Loose, it was unbelievably loose. Rank over here is like respect. If you are talking to a lieutenant or captain in the United States you have to show a lot of respect. You really couldn't carry on a decent conversation -- I think the officers over here, this is the majority, over the rank of major, there are captains and colonels that will talk to you if they are your equals--but most of the captains and lieutenants I ran into were friendlier; they were closer. They didn't stand on rank as much; they didn't expect so much respect. You couldn't disrespect them to the point where you spit on their feet or anything, but they were more or less easier to carry on a conversation with. I think the reason for this was you were over there and everybody had a common goal; you had something to do over there. Over here it is more or less DC, all dressed, shined boots and everything. Over there they were lucky if you just had a good attitude and were out to defend your country. There was no boot shining or anything. The hair standard was kept down to a minimum. You still saw some people running around with hair running down their back. That is what I liked about it, you did your job, and if you did need a haircut a couple people reminded you, but they didn't do anything drastic about it. Dress was a little bit loose, especially if you were in the field. Nobody really cared what you looked like. If you went back in Saigon or probably down at Delta you would probably have to shine and bring your act up a little bit. There was still some camaraderie going on, some army prestige. You still had to keep it up. Once you were out in the field or on patrol for a certain amount of time you could loosen up a little bit as long as you did your job.
- B: What about the leadership in the American army? From your observation, how was it? We get the stereotype and folklore of the Vietnam War on the "ninety day wonder" lieutenant who didn't last very long. Can you give us any insight on that?
- F: We had a captain who looked like he was a ninety day wonder. Then again, I met a lot of captains who were seasoned. I've only been in the reserves, that is the only army . . . Well, I've had AIT and basic, but as far as that is concerned, over

there everything was more or less pretty well organized. If you had to a job to do it was carried out. There wasn't a lot of the old saying--The army is hurry up and wait over there. When you are doing a job you have to report at 7:00, the job started at 7:00; you didn't wait around until 8:00 or 9:00. The job started at 7:00 and you went on your way, did your job, and came back at 7:00 that night, twelve hour duty.

The leadership, as far as a Spec-4 all I had communications with would be my sergeant. It was very seldom we would run into captains and lieutenants telling us what to do. More or less they stayed behind. Most of my patrols I was on there was nothing higher than a sergeant. It seemed like no lieutenant went on patrol with us. He stayed back someplace, whatever. I did know captains and majors as far as off-duty hours, but they were more or less friends. They didn't give me any orders; they weren't my superiors so I can't really tell you on that. As far as doing exactly what a lieutenant ordered, it seemed like they were pretty organized. It seemed like everything went pretty smooth. Our supplies were always kept up. We knew where we were going before we went; nothing was a mystery. We knew exactly what we were doing, where we were going on our mission, how many people we were going to have, what we were going to do when we got there. I think it was pretty well planned out. It wasn't a minute by minute thing and then changed four or five times. It was pretty well organized, I thought.

- B: What were the general attitudes of the soldiers themselves towards the war?
- F: Most of them were homesick, some lonely. I didn't see too many people freak out. In Saigon there were a lot of people on drugs. The unit I was in, the Charlie 52nd was a unit where people from the front lines would fill their bags and we would meet in the back lines for them to recuperate and stay back there awhile. They had a lot of war stories about how many gooks they killed and their adventures. I think in Saigon, where I spent most of my time, the attitude was fairly high. We had a lot of facilities to keep our minds off our home life, our families back at home. They had a nice swimming pool, gymnasium. We were close to Saigon where we could vent our hostilities out onto the locals, which was their problem. It was exciting to be over there to begin with. Most of the people I associated with enjoyed it. There were a couple that hated it. They didn't seem like they went overboard about it. Everybody I came in contact with, they dealt with it. It was a good experience all around. I made a lot of good friends. I always remember back--I wonder what this guy is doing, that guy is doing. All in all, I figure that sixty percent of the guys that I met, they enjoyed it over there; it was exciting.

- B: So you would say that your unit was fairly close-knit?
- F: Pretty close. There was a lot of camaraderie. We knew each other. We weren't that big of a group. I could say our barracks probably contained about thirty-four people and we were pretty close. Some were stragglers; you always have the oddball in the group who goes all by himself. More or less, we all looked after one another.
- B: When you returned to the States, what type of homecoming did you experience?
- F: I was over there for five months, and I came back for two weeks and got married and I went back over for six more months. I came for two weeks, got married, went to Atlantic City, came back. Those two weeks were a waste. You can't spend five months in a place where you can't trust anybody and you don't know where you are going to live tomorrow night. Then you come back here two weeks and try to live a normal life. I was a nervous wreck. Going back in six months, being married, I think that just made it worse. Coming back I was geared up to the fact that over there you were your own person; you had to watch out for yourself even though you did have buddies. You could take a shot at any time and be gone. You are always tempting death or fate. When you come back home it takes a while to gear yourself down. Some people don't understand this. My wife and I, we almost got a divorce when I came back. I was still a little bit wild. I had responsibilities when I came back as far as looking after more people than just me. It didn't work out for a while. It was hard to adjust coming back. Nobody like the war to begin with. Vietnam veterans were considered an outcast; it wasn't like a World War II veteran where he was honored coming back. You didn't get too much respect anyway. You could just say that you went over there and somebody might say--so what. You kind of shrugged it off and didn't brag about it too much.
- B: You personally experienced some of this disrespect?
- F: Everybody says Vietnam veterans were fighting for nothing. Really, I didn't know what I was over there for to begin with; I wasn't protecting any border. All I was doing was making sure that these little people with black hair were the enemy. I don't know what they did, but I was supposed to shoot them. I would have just left them alone, come over here and thought about Indonesia. It didn't bother me. It is not like having a front line where they invade things and you have to keep away from your home country. You are too far away to let it matter when you come over here; when you get over here you forget about the whole country; you could care less. As far as I can remember, I just wanted to forget it and go on about my normal duties and to just try to get into the stream of an American life compared to military life where all of your

decisions are made for you. Now when you come over to America you have to make your own decisions and do what you think is right and you don't have a superior telling you, which was nice in a way. Then again, it is kind of scary because you make your own destiny. Over there you always have orders to follow, things to do, missions to accomplish. People lead you by the nose and you do what you are told. It makes it a little bit easier; you don't have to make any decisions as far as an enlisted man. Officers are quite a different thing.

B: Why did you come back into the reserves after going through that?

F: I don't know. I am still asking that question. I've been in here two years. I like the military; it is like a fraternity. Everybody dresses up the same so that brings unity. It is like a club; everybody has the same clothes on. You've got basically the same mission; you are defending your country or you are there to defend your country if need be, which gives you a good feeling inside. Your mundane civilian job gets kind of boring after a while, where one weekend a month you are a different person. I'm Clint Fabry in civilian life and I'm Spec-4 Fabry in military life. You have a mark of distinction and in the military there is a clear-cut path of promotion. You can look in front of you. If you don't want to do it, that is up to you, but you have the option.

As far as personal life, in my personal job I work for the government, so it is more or less structured the same. You have graduated promotions, which I like. In any industry it is probably the same thing.

The biggest reason I went into the reserves was because of the money, followed closely by experience and it is something different to do. It is something to look forward to. Every weekend is the same, except that one weekend a month where I go to reserves; it is completely different. It is a whole new world. It might be boring sometimes, but it is still different.

B: To conclude this interview, you made mention that you didn't know why you were there in Vietnam. Now with the war, or American participation in it ten years behind us, what do you think? Was it a just cause?

F: In my opinion I think the army is like a weight lifter and the barbells are the war. A weight lifter, sometime or another, has to pick up that barbell and flex his muscles. I really think that Vietnam, they had so much military intelligence, brooding, in general wanted to activate, and they needed some kind of participation. They wanted to flex

their muscles, so they just picked Vietnam. They figured it was an easy case, or whatever it may be, and they wanted to see how their military reacted in a real-life situation, a jungle situation. If they were smarter they would have picked something a little bit closer, but that was far enough away where it wouldn't bother . . . It was far enough from the United States where they couldn't have any conflict. Something like Nicaragua, you are talking pretty close to the United States. If you had a war now with Nicaragua you would have a lot more people volunteering for the draft than you would Vietnam, because you are talking a border; you are talking about a larger country and people fight with more fervor, whereas Vietnam was 10,000 miles away. I don't think anyone can say communism was the main cause for the initiation of the war. It couldn't have been too major because the North Vietnamese have already taken over the country; it belongs to them now so what good did we do? When I was there I really didn't know what I was over there for. I figured it was communism; that was the broadest picture I got out of the whole deal. As far as I know now, I've always seen "60 Minutes" and "20/20" and they are asking the same question--why did we go to Vietnam? There are a lot of people asking that question. The military has to do a job and like "A-Team" and "Wargames", it gets kind of boring after a while. You really don't get to see how your army reacts until you get into a real-life situation, like Grenada, little skirmishes in the Middle East now. The army does get a little bit of participation and gets their airborne troops. Probably the gung ho people, they want war. There are a lot of people in the army who thrive on war. There are a lot of gung ho captains and majors and generals who, I think, enjoy that. General Patton, he was one of them. He was afraid the war was going to end. He wanted to go completely destroy Russia, but they wouldn't let him. I think the same thing flows out of the generals today; they hate sitting back and playing war games; they like to get in there and do a little fighting. It is more exciting. War is exciting. The human being has been in war since the beginning of time and they will be in war until Armageddon, and then that will be the big one. It is just human nature; we've got to fight. Protect your country for some reason or another. That is what Vietnam was, just a flex of muscles.

B: Thank you, Mr. Fabry, for this interview.

END OF INTERVIEW

noticed the big thing is: Everybody seemed to be more friendly before, help each other more. And then, times have changed, too. A lot of these kids have grown up and married and they moved away. The older ones sold or died off. The new ones coming in, why they're total strangers and they don't care who lives across the street or this and that. That's the way I think you'll find that over the whole town. It's just like a different generation, complete different thinking than it was before. It was nothing how we used to visit, for example, when we were kids, our relations and friends. But today, everybody is too busy with their own families. They're trying to do and do and outdo the other guy or something. I don't know what they're trying to do but it seems that way.

Youngstown has grown in one way and it's diminished in another way. Youngstown is only so big and you can't move out, you're outside of the city limits. That's just what they're doing: They're moving outside the city limits. Now your policemen and firemen are still compelled to live in the city, and they're fighting it, trying to get it so that they can move outside the city limits. The people voted on it that they could, but still they won't let us. So until they say we can, why we just can't, that's all. These new fellows are going to have to stay here and stay in the city limits. We're paid by the people in one way and your school teachers are paid by the people in the same way, but still some of them don't even live in the state. A lot of these have got Pennsylvania licenses. It just doesn't make sense where one group has to live here and another group doesn't have to live here. I don't know what the outcome's going to be.

END OF INTERVIEW