

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam Conflict 1961-75

Personal Experience

O H. 1478

MICHAEL COPE

Interviewed

by

Darlene Pavlock

on

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P This is an interview with Michael Cope for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Vietnam War, by Darlene Pavlock, on October 29, 1991, at 3920 Welcker Drive, Warren, Ohio, at 7 30 p m

Did you live in East Palestine all your life?

C Yes

P You were born there?

C Yes, born and raised there

P Tell me about your family

C I have two brothers and a sister, all older than I am. My parents are both deceased. My brothers and sisters still live in East Palestine.

P And you just moved from East Palestine to Boardman?

C Yes, just this past week. I had lived out of town for about six years. I lived right on the edge of town for a couple of years and then I lived in Struthers for a year when I was married. Then I went back to East Palestine and I pretty much stayed there.

P So you are a hometown and a small town person?

C: Yes, definitely

P Tell me about your high school years. Were they eventful?

C Not really, I was really a quite and shy kid. I did not date at all. I would run around with the guys and play sports.

P What sports did you play?

C Baseball and football mostly. The only thing I wanted to get out of school was me. I wanted to get out of school and get a job and buy a fast car.

P I think that has to do with our age group and the time period in which we were brought up.

C I started to work the day after I graduated and I bought my first fast car about three days later.

P What was your first fast car?

- C My first car was a 1965 Impala which was fast and a real nice car. My next one was a real fast one It was a 1966 Chavel
- P What traveling did you do when you were younger with friends, the family, and yourself?
- C My entire life I never traveled until the year I graduated from high school My family went to Fort Reilly, Kansas, to visit my brother who was stationed out there That was the first time
- P You did not take yearly vacations?
- C No, my dad worked a lot He had a full time job and two part time jobs We had money, anything you could ever ask for, but he was never there as a father Something I always looked back on and always felt sort of cheated
- P Why did you enter the Service?
- C The good old draft
- P You were drafted into the army?
- C Yes
- P Did you have a choice?
- C No, I was drafted into the army I was in the army for a week and they gave me their re-enlistment talk If you reenlisted for one more year, they would guarantee a certain training for a year
- P So you were in for three years instead of two years?
- C Yes, two years, ten months, and eleven days
- P It has been twenty some years and you still remember?
- C Yes, that is one thing I will never forget
- P Tell me about your basic training
- C Basic training for me was easy I was young at the time I was twenty
- P That was when you were drafted, at twenty?

- C Yes Everybody else in my unit was about twenty-five, twenty-six years old So they pushed the average guy I was still used to football and everything, so I was in pretty good shape. Basic was not bad physically It was mental for me The weekend that we were supposed to get weekend passes, after being there for five weeks, was the weekend that Martin Luther King was killed and they would not let anyone leave the base We were all scheduled to go home for three days and we could not go
- P Where did you do your basic training?
- C Fort Knox, Kentucky
- P That is about twelve hours from here is it not?
- C Yes, something like that
- P How does it feel to be twelve hours away from home for the first time?
- C The whole thing was scary You hear all the horror stories of the Drill Sergeants and what they put you through. I never really thought about being twelve hours away from home It seemed like I was a world away from home. They took us up to Cleveland and flew us down in some old army airplane It just seemed like from day one, even though it was only five or six hundred miles, it seemed like the end of the earth.
- P When did you get your orders for Vietnam?
- C Actually, I went through the advanced in Oklahoma and I think I told you I was a Ballistic Meteorologist I got stationed in Germany I was outside of Nurnburg and I had been there from July until December I guess Then in December I volunteered to go to Vietnam
- P You volunteered?
- C Yes Then my orders came down, that was at the end of March of 1968
- P You volunteered, so it took them three months to get you over there I have heard of people that have had like over night orders
- C Like half the people that were in my unit got orders and they went home for twenty-eight days and then they were screened over to Vietnam
- P Now did you do weather reports in Vietnam as well?

- C Yes What we did it was not actually weather, I mean it was weather reports but it was not weather forecasting We set up the balloons and we did a weather message and they put it into a computer and they would put corrections on the canons to allow for the weather and the density and things like that.
- P You did that on a daily basis?
- C Yes We did six flights a day, every four hours We had to twelve hour teams
- P Did you go in the planes?
- C No, we were all on the ground We had a big radar device that tracked the weather balloon and that sent a message back that told us what the temperatures and the winds and everything were Then we plotted all that out and then they put the correction out on the guns. That was one thing that amazed me The biggest canon they had was a 1 7 5 howitzer and it could fire about thirty miles and based on the weather it can be off up to three miles in either direction They claimed that our weather messages could bring it within maybe a hundred yards They could fire up to twenty-five or thirty miles and if we had a good message, they could hit within a hundred yard area Which was very necessary over there because a lot of times they would call artillery in and you would be firing within a hundred to two hundred yards of the friendly troops.
- P Would they call you in on the phone or did they have those little things you see in the movies that are like those little packs?
- C We had the field phones that we would broadcast our message on We would also send it over the communications We would send it over a regular schedule like at midnight, four, eight, and twelve, around the clock It usually took us about an hour and a half to do one and then we would broadcast it Then you would wait and get ready for the next one for two hours
- P How long were you there?
- C I spent about nine months in country I spent two months in the hospital with a noncombat injury Then I got about a month early out.
- P If I can remember when my first husband was in there, they said they were going to send him for a year and a half, then they cut it back to a year, and he was actually there for nine months
- C They had us scheduled for a twelve month tour When I left Germany in March, I came home and my mother was real sick I stayed in the country until June and I went to Vietnam the first week of June Then I came home in the first week of May

- P Where were you stationed in Vietnam?
- C I was up close to the Cambodian border, it was in the Saigon area. It was maybe twenty-five miles from Saigon
- P What was a typical day like and what were your living conditions?
- C Basically the only memorabilia I brought is just some pictures I took when I was there
- P Were your bunkers wooden barracks?
- C Yes, it was a wooden barracks with screen around them and were no windows We each had a cot and a foot and wall locker
- P Did you have a motorcycle?
- C No, that was all the Vietnamese people We all kept our M16 and our ammo right there at all times
- P How did you pass your time?
- C When you are off duty, most of us drank, gambled, did drugs, and whatever There was one kid there that kept five dollars a month out of his pay and he would buy a case of pop which cost \$2 40 and he would buy 26 \$ 10 comic books He would drink a can of pop and read a comic book
- P What time did you get up? What did you do during the day? Did you have a certain routine?
- C I worked mostly the midnight shift, six in the evening until six in the morning We had two twelve hour shifts We worked roughly seven days a week Sometimes you would get a day off depending on who was available to fill in and what not We had no real army stuff, no formations, no inspections It was real loose
- When I first got there, we had a first sergeant who had just come from a basic training unit and they made him go there before they would let him retire He tried the basic training techniques He made spit shined shoes and things like that There was a medic, a black kid and I cannot remember his name, who he made get a hair cut because he thought it was not short enough He came back and he said it still was not short enough and the kid went and when he came back he had just skin Unbelievably, the kid just flipped He walked into the orderly room and just shot him sixteen times between the belt and the shoulders, killed him Then he ran out into a bunker and shot himself
- P And this was a real unstructured area and he still did that?

C Yes The guy that took this first sergeants place had just got to the unit two days before, and when that happened they put this new sergeant in and it was basically laid back If you wanted to get a hair cut you did, if you wanted to polish your boots you did

P And if you did not, that was fine?

C Yes As long as you went to work and did your job That was more or less what it was, it was a job You worked twelve hours a day Sometimes you went to work drunk and sometimes you did not Basically we would eat chow at five in the evening and then go to work We would send our first flight up at about 8 00 so we would get ready for the first flight

P Was there a landing strip near you?

C There was a helicopter pad just maybe a hundred yards from us Our message was used for all the gun batteries which were within about a twenty mile radius of our location You would stay up all night, maybe like the 4 00 a. m. flight, as soon as that was done, you could go to bed because you knew the next crew would be coming on A lot of times we would work short handed because guys would be loaded on booze or drugs. During the day you would sometimes sleep for a while We had a NCO Club there with a pool table and the bar and everything so we would usually go down there through the day and sit around there and drink and take a nap in the afternoon then go back to work

P What major event stood out in your mind today that happened?

C Probably getting my jaw broke

P Was that your injury?

C Yes, I was in the NCO Club and got in a fight over a pool game and just as the fight ended a guy hit me with a brick and broke my jaw and put about forty-three stitches in my face I spent two months in the hospital The worst thing that happened was the day they made me go back When I left the hospital, I had sixty-three days left until I rotated and they made me go back to Vietnam I guess even when you are not in combat you are always thinking the land mine, they sniper attack or whatever Once you are out of it, you kind of think that you do not have to go back, and then I did

P Did you have a calender that you counted down with?

C You did not need a calendar, you started counting the day you got there

P And you knew it at all times?

C Yes, from the day you landed there you started counting days. Some guys had calendars and crossed them off. To me I never needed it. It was three hundred days and I am going home. The best thing about Vietnam was being short. It all depended on who you talked to. If you had a hundred and eighty-five days left and were talking to a guy that had two hundred, then you were short.

P What images did you hold of home when you were there?

C My grandmother sent me a subscription to East Palestine Daily Leader and it was a little four page newspaper and they were so small I would get about seven or eight of them at a time.

P Because of the way the mail ran?

C Yes. They would wait and then send a whole group of them at once. I guess, probably East Palestine to me, seems to be a smaller, homelier, and friendlier town than it really was in my mind. You would get to read in these newspapers and all the guys from Chicago and New York would sit around and read these hometown papers. They would have things like forty years ago Mrs. Brown's pig got shot. We would sit around all day long reading these newspapers and it really made it seem more like home.

P And those were the images you had? It was bigger than life?

C Yes.

P When you came home, how did all of that look to you? How did it change?

C That is a hard question because it was something that I really never thought about. I guess that is one of the things that bothered me when I came home. As friendly as you picture it, most of the people except for your close friends and family tend to ignore the fact that you were just over there for a year. In some ways it was kind of disappointing. I was coming out a period where I was over there looking back through rose colored glasses. It was great to be home and all that. My first weekend home was the weekend of the Kent State shootings. My ex-wife went there when we were first dating and I had spent a lot of time there in 1966 and 1967.

P Now were you dating her when you were there?

C We were engaged. The night that I got my jaw broke was the night that I got my orders for R and R. I was going to meet her in Honolulu, my other brother was stationed there. That is part of the reason that I volunteered for Vietnam. I had two brothers that were in the service and they were both married and Dean, my oldest brother was an MP and he was stationed in Honolulu with his wife.

- P Was he in the army?
- C Yes Then my brother who is next to me, Dusty, was also in the army in Fort Reilly, Kansas He drove a gasoline truck and he was married with his wife there I figured out of the three of us, I had the safest occupation I had a staff sergeant in Germany that said throughout the whole time of Vietnam, there has never been a weather man killed I hated the army in German
- P And back then, if one brother went the other two did not go?
- C Yes As long as I was there, neither one of them would have to go That put them in a safety capacity and I am sure I would have been better off there then they would have
- P When you came home and you mentioned how the town was different, was your family, fiancée, or your room different?
- C No, they were all the way I had pictured them It is an emotional thing and you kind of block them out I guess I got upset with myself during the Persian Gulf War I was doing a job and getting by and doing what it took to get back home
- P It still had an effect?
- C Yes Maybe part of it was the part of coming home I guess what bothers me aside from friends and family, nobody said thanks
- P Did many people ask you questions? Did your friends or family even ask you?
- C Some but not a lot I was pretty much put away and left there
- P How did you adjust to that? Did you have thoughts about it at that time?
- C Looking back on it, I am sure that is why I crawled into a bottle When I was in Vietnam I drank constantly, I did some drugs but nothing main line, and I stayed drunk most of the time I guess I came home and for the next four years I stayed that way
- P Did you get married at that time as well?
- C Yes I got home in December 1970 I got out of Vietnam in May and I had to go to Portland, Texas, until December I came home in December and we got married in the following August of 1971 I stayed drunk pretty much until January of 1974 I was in jail for forty-five days for public intoxication and for hitting my wife The Chief of Police of East Palestine told me he would let me out of jail whenever I wanted out, all I had to do was go the Brecksville P A for the rest of the time that I

had on my sentence I spent about four days there by myself and I was willing to go anywhere to get out of there I went to the Brecksville P A and spent about close to three months there

P Is that how long the program was?

C It was a twenty-eight day program I stayed for an extra two weeks and then they asked me if I would stay there longer and help with some of the counselors and stuff So I stayed for about another six weeks I was working at Sheet and Tube at the time I came back home and went back to work and then on July 21, 1974, I went back out for another weekend of drinking and went back to Brecksville on Monday and spent another two and a half months there I came out and went through some AA and some Gambler's Anonymous Gambling, I do not think I was ever a real compulsive gambler but I felt more comfortable with gamblers' meetings so that is what I went to Looking back at it, I guess I really crawled into the bottle then back in 1968, maybe that was my way of dealing with it

P Is there anything we have missed, anything you would like to talk about?

C The only thing that I have ever done in any relation to Vietnam that did not have an emotional effect is when I went to the wall, in Washington D C I knew a couple of people that died there but I did not have any real close friends I thought I would just go there and then leave, but I could not It was hard for me to leave

All the things that relate with the wall I have always wondered why me There are fifty-eight thousand people my age that are dead and I always wondered why I was not there What separated me, whether it was an in coming rocket or a sniper that bombed the mess hall or whatever I always had a hard time dealing with that Sometimes I did not like myself I did not talk to many people about it and sometimes I would think that I was really a coward, maybe that had something to do with why I volunteered. I am glad I am alive and I am glad I am here I do not want to sound like I am suicidal or something because I am not I think there are so many people that had so much to offer that are dead today and here I am

P When you look at your life or when I look at your life, it seems like you have adapted quite well, that you have moved into the mainstream of life quite normally and there are things that you think about a lot even after all these years.

C Yes I have always had a hard time with Vietnam movies

P Have you watched them?

C I have in the passed four of five years started watching some of them I watched a couple episodes of China Beach I saw the last episode of it, that was going home

(Sign posts the names of big cities with mileage attached as you would see in an episode of China Beach or M A S H C and P are describing a picture in the interview)

P Did the guys hang around that pole or was it basically the men that were getting ready to go home and they would go there and the other ones would stay away because it was too hurtful?

C Usually, it was as hard going home as it was staying because of the friends you made there

P More closeness or more survival?

C I think closeness as well as bitter sweet things, you are so happy to go

P And you were not in combat so none of you really depended on one another for your lives so it was a different type of friendship that you established

C It was more of a mental survival Usually when you are going home, two of three of your good friends would take you It took you a couple of days to get out of the country Getting on that jet was scary I do not want to equate every thing to television shows, but on M A S H., the Colonel was going home and his plane was shot down and back then you think about things happening like that

P Was there a lot of combat around you?

C. Not right in the area of our base camps We had infantry units that would go out on patrols in the fields and stuff Within a couple of the miles there was combat going on

P But it was relatively peaceful and calm around there

C Yes

P Did you have a lot of flashbacks when you came home and you were trying to adapt to life? Did you reflect on those times back then or did they basically come into view?

C I think I pretty much blocked them out for the first three of four years that I was home When I was home or at work in the middle of the night by myself, I went to the mills after I came home, and sometimes at night shifts I would start thinking about different things and different people It just seemed like such a different friendship

P Have you talked to any of them or kept in touch with any of them?

C No

- P You have this something that is always with you
- C There are three or four of them, Jack Meyers is from Springfield, New Jersey, and Paul Trembly is from Salem, Oregon You remember names and hometowns and stuff I just have had no urge at all to get in touch with them
- P So you figure it has been twenty some odd years?
- C Yes I came home in May of 1970
- P And your folks were still alive at that time?
- C Yes My mother died in September of 1971 and then my dad just died in 1987
- P So they had time to spend with you and they were glad to see you come home
- C Yes My mother had been sick for years. She had had high blood pressure, cancer, and diabetes I always felt that she stayed alive until I got married I was the last one of the four to get married
- P Did you think about her illness over there, or did you view her more of the healthy mother from your childhood?
- C No I did not believe that she had lived the whole year that I was gone From as sick as she was when I left, I really thought that she would die before I would come back home
- P Did you have your own room at home?
- C Yes, for the last couple of years before I went to Vietnam It was the same when I came back
- P Did you focus on that while you were gone?
- C Oh yes
- P How did you visualize it?
- C It was always neat and clean which it never was. We had dogs, my father did not like that, we had a boxer and she would sleep on my bed The bed was in the corner and it was always made and a lot of times he would be sleeping on it He died while I was in Vietnam
- P But you carried all those images with you, and you were able to recall them?

- C My mother used to send me Marmaduke cartoons
- P And when you came home your room was still the same?
- C Yes, it was even cleaned
- P That is interesting the thoughts that go through your mind and what compelled you to be in a situation like that What compels you when you come home and everything is different, everything has changed?
- C It is hard to look back and focus on one thing, a lot of it seems like a blur We used to go and do beer runs for the NCO Club and we would have to deliver different weather equipment to different units. We went to this one place called Swan Lock and you had to drive through a rubber plantation that was probably fifteen or twenty miles long and the rubber trees were so high and so thick it was black in there, you had to use headlights The whole way along that road there were tanks blown up, and army personnel carriers blown up, and jeeps blown up We got in the habit that when you left the base camp you had to have one M16 in the jeep and you all had to have a steel helmet and that was it We had never been to this place before, we just had directions and we just started driving. Nothing happened There was not a sniper shot or anything Just driving through that, it was like watching a movie on television or something. It seemed almost unreal that there was so much stuff and destruction around it
- P And you ended up not being a part of it
- C When we drove up when we got there, it was dark so we had to spend the night because you were not allowed out on the highways after dark
- P Was it a paved road?
- C I think it was like a hard clay, I think there was only one paved road and that was Highway 1 and everything else was like a country road with no black top on it, but it was as straight as an arrow Then we had to spend the night there and then we had to go through that the next day We had our M16 and our black jackets and the whole thing, we were scared shitless and that was the last time we ever went there After that we told them they could fly stuff up to them because we were not going back
- P When you came home did you use firearms after that?
- C I had an old 16 gauge shotgun that my dad gave me when I was twelve. After I was married in 1977, we bought the farm Then in November, when hunting season came, I bought a box of ammo We had fifty some acres with woods and the first day of hunting season, I went

up in the tree stand at like 4 30 in the morning and sat out there and I saw one doe and I watched her walk by and that was the only day I went out. The next year I went out and I did not even take my shot gun with me, I took a thermos of coffee and sat in the trees and just saw a couple of deer that day. I had no urge to kill them. As a kid, I used to hunt and I just never had the urge to kill I guess. I did not like to eat wild meat anyhow. I could not see why I should just kill something just to kill it. Right now, my youngest son has my shotgun and he likes to hunt. He lived on a farm so I gave it to him. When everyone came home from the Gulf, I was really happy with all the attention they were getting.

P Did you have a lot of derogatory remarks made to you?

C, Not really. When we landed in California, no one was there.

P It was like vacation and coming home.

C That was the good part, but there was no one there saying thank you, no one throwing things at you either, I guess from that point of view it was good. Looking back that bothered me, well maybe if someone said something derogatory, maybe it was better than not saying anything at all. That really bothered me. The way they had more and more parties made me feel guilty at it.

P How did you adapt to the changes and what were your most significant memories upon your return home? Did you think about the stores? Did you envision the city itself or just the down home friendliness?

C I guess one of two things come to mind. When I think about East Palestine in general terms, I think of all the friends and all the nice people and how homey it is. When I think about going home, I could still see the vision of driving down East Hager Street, which is the type of street that comes into town as if you were coming home from the airport. There is a Fiesta Drive-In on the left and we used to always hang out there. If you went a little bit further there was a VFW on the right and into the downtown section. I guess I thought about driving through town like I used to.

P Did you keep your car, was it in storage while you were gone?

C No, I wrecked it before I went. And the one I bought, I had to sell because I could not afford to make the payments on it.

P So you came home to no car?

C Yes. I bought a 1961 Chevy four door automatic and named it Maggie.

P Why did you do that?

- C I was planning on getting married and I did not want to have to deal with a car payment and it was cheap. When I was in Vietnam I almost reenlisted and the sole reason was because I could have gotten a bonus of eight thousand dollars
- P How long?
- C I would have had to reenlist for another four years in the service, one being another year in Vietnam. The re-enlistment basically read that if you reenlisted they would give you thirty days free relief time and with your eight thousand you can have a brand new Corvette waiting for you in New York City and you can drive it home. I guess I am glad I was not quite as drunk as I thought I was then and I did not do it. I thought seriously about it for two days Then I thought, "Well, I can go home and work two jobs and buy one in a half a year "
- P When you were coming home what did you think about in your life, your future Did you have plans?
- C. I was going to home and work and get married and raise kids and be happy I never actually planned to work in the mills.
- P I see you started at Youngstown State University
- C Yes I went to Youngstown for a quarter, but I would not study I partied all the time and I was drinking I was working in a little factory in East Palestine and I heard the mills were hiring and they hired me the day I walked in.
- P Where there demonstrations on the campus at the time in which you were there? Did those affect you?
- C. I was going to night school because I was working the day time You would read about it in the paper and stuff but I do not think that it really had much of an effect on me When I was home from Vietnam and they had the shootings at Kent State, they made a big deal about possibly sending troops over to Cambodia. My base camp was just a few miles from Cambodia We were like five miles away. I thought it was so stupid for college kids to riot about something they know nothing about and we have been doing for years anyhow
- P Do you think Vietnam had an effect on what you would have done in your life had you not gone?
- C I do not know I drank before I went into the service I would like to think that I would be an alcoholic today, but I might have been worse off then I am today
- P Do you think some of the choices you made in your life where influenced by going there?

C I guess I never really looked at it as making any choices in my life I guess I always felt like situations just came up and it happened. I never really looked at it as making a conscious choice It was more reaction then action I have never been a real aggressive person so I guess I sit back and sort of let things happen and react to them after they happened I always thought it was kind of funny, when I got my draft notice I wanted to go to Canada so bad, I thought seriously about it I got my notice at like the beginning of the year and I went in on February 13 I ended up being more afraid of going to Canada then I was about going to Vietnam

P Why is that?

C Well, when I looked at it back then I felt that Canada was forever If you went, you never came home. That to me, the thought of never seeing my friends or family again was worse then going to Vietnam I thought at least if you go to Vietnam you had at least a 80% chance of coming home and if you were lucky you did.

P Were many of your friends from East Palestine in Vietnam with you or did they go in different units and then you were together again?

C There was one real good friend that was over there and we got together for a little bit

P Close by?

C No, he was stationed up north of where I was He was just one of the guys that partied and was a hell raiser He turned to God and he prayed saying that if he got out alive he would turn if life around He was working at Lordstown before then, he quit his job there and went to Seminary. He is now a Southern Baptist Minister down in Arkansas We used to call him Blondie.

P When you came home, you did not really have peers that you were close to that were in Vietnam so you did not have all the same war stories so to speak even though you were in different areas?

C No I was with seven or eight guys that I had ran around with Blondie and I were the only ones that went to Vietnam I had a real good friend that was in Fort Hund, Texas, in infantry training that got shot on his ammo pack He never left the States Out of eight of us, only three went in the service

P I think what you have told me is very interesting and very important Thank you very much

End of Interview