

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Army Reservists Project

Vietnam Experience

O. H. 729

LESLIE TOLBERT

Interviewed

by

Brian Brennan

on

April 26, 1985

## LESLIE TOLBERT

Leslie Tolbert was born on September 26, 1947, the son of James and Edna Tolbert, in Martins Ferry, Ohio. It was here that he attended and graduated from Warren Consolidated High School. Shortly after graduation, Mr. Tolbert went to work at Wheeling Pittsburgh Steel, but this career was cut short by his being drafted into the U.S. Army. In the Army, he served in Germany and in Vietnam, where he was an artillery observer with the 101st Airborne Division. Tolbert's answering the call of duty was based upon a proud family background. His father had been a medic with the Army Air Forces in World War II and his mother, a British national, is a survivor of the Blitz on Birmingham. After serving in the Army from 1967 to 1973, Tolbert went back to Wheeling Pittsburgh Steel, where he is employed today.

Tolbert is a member of the 1st Platoon, 305th Military Police Company, USAR, in Wheeling, West Virginia, in which he holds the rank of sergeant. He resides in Martins Ferry, Ohio with his wife, Aleda and his three children.

Brian K. Brennan

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INTERVIEWEE: LESLIE TOLBERT

INTERVIEWER: Brian Brennan

SUBJECT: experiences in Vietnam, Army life, an average day

DATE: April 26, 1985

B: This is an interview with Leslie Tolbert for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Army Reservists, by Brian Brennan, on April 26, 1985.

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

T: I was in Vietnam from May of 1968 to May of 1969.

B: Right after the TET Offensive then?

T: The TET Offensive was six months before I went over.

B: What was the situation like?

T: I was put "On Levy" for critical MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) and reported to Fort Louis, Washington. After three days of processing and shots, I turned in my issue that they had given me. We got on a plane and spent sixteen hours in the air with one hour fueling stop in Japan. The plane landed at Cameroon Bay. I had orders for the second field forces, after serving four months on the East German border. At Cameroon Bay they changed my order to the 101st Airborne Division. After about a day and a half they came and got us in the middle of the night. When we landed at Cameroon Bay, what confused us was that they had these Army three-quarter ton trucks towing ski boats. People were water skiing out in the bay. I thought--If these are all the horror stories I've heard about, I'll spend the rest of my life here. What I found out later was that it was like an in-country R&R (Rest & Relaxation) center and also the repo (Replacement operation) station. They came and got us in the middle of the night and loaded us on the Caribou. I

think we landed at Long Binh, which was the 101st base camp training area. Everybody who went to the 101st Airborne Division had to go through intense jungle training. We were rocketed a couple of times while we were there. Our training consisted of going out in the jungle; it was hands-on training, booby traps, and the whole works. That kind of oriented me; that was the first time I handled an M-16. We had M-14's in Germany and in basic training.

After going through the school I was in the 3rd Brigade, 101st in Phuc Vinh. They had a little airstrip there the Caribou landed on. They took four of us off of the plane. One guy was an engineer; myself and another guy all went to the artillery. We were all kind of jealous of the engineer because he would have the safest job. The second day we were at Phuc Vinh, I found out later, the guy who went to the engineers at Phuc Vinh, a rocket came in and blew both of his eardrums out. That was the end of him for his tour; the "safest" guy got it first. Phuc Vinh, the 3rd Brigade was on operations somewhere and we were just a few people guarding the brigade base camp. We manned about one out of every seven bunkers and we were mortared and rocketed no less than four times a day. You couldn't stand one or two people together; you had to be near a hole at all times. We got shelled pretty often. That was pretty much my orientation; it went from the sublime to the ridiculous. At night it was pretty hairy on the perimeter because we didn't have anybody to man the perimeter. Due to the lack of personnel there, you more or less were doing something all of the time just to stay alive. At one point they put a rocket into the ammo dump, which was one of the highlights of my life when the ammo dump went up. That was pretty much my welcome to Vietnam.

- B: Mr. Tolbert, why did you go to Vietnam? Were you drafted or did you volunteer?
- T: Mine was kind of a peculiar situation. I was drafted. I had a good job in the steel mill. I was making very good money at that time. I was making between \$37 and \$42 a day, depending on what job I was on. It was just for eight hours. The Army gave me a "Welcome to the Army" letter and I went and found out I was making about \$73 a month for twenty-four hours a day. Upon my physical to be drafted, I had a hearing test and they said I had a hearing loss in my left ear. The doctor said, "Do you want to serve? Do you want a deferment?" Being from a combat family I was hearing a lot about Vietnam and I am one who likes to go see what is happening. I said, "I would like to serve," which I did. I would have probably enlisted if it hadn't been for the good job I had. I thought only draftees could get their job back when they came back, but I found out later anybody who served could. Anyway, I told them I would serve and they said I would noncombat and I

would get a deprofile. Evidently the deprofile disappeared when I came "On Levy" for Vietnam. I sort of volunteered for the Army draft. I probably could have raised a stink about going to Vietnam, but I also wanted to go to Vietnam to see what happened. I had two brothers; one came into the service shortly after me, an older brother, and a younger brother who was due to get out of high school. I figured if I went to Vietnam maybe only one brother would be allowed in Vietnam, so I might as well go since they picked me first anyway. I'm always the adventurous type; I like adventure.

My father was in the 8th Army Air Corps in the medics. He was in on most of the major operations, Battle of the Bulge and liberating the Jewish death camps toward the end of the war, which he didn't talk a lot about. My father got married to my mother in England, and my older brother was born in England. My mother had gone through the Blitz on Birmingham. She taught in a deaf school. My father and mother were combat veterans. I wanted to follow the family tradition, you might say. I figured I would go try combat.

B: You're saying your family supported . . .

T: My family is a very patriotic family going through the Second World War the way they did and seeing what they did, my mother seeing the blitzes. London was more or less ready to go at any time during the war. My father saw what a dictator could do to innocent people in death camps. They were very patriotic. They didn't want to see a son go to Vietnam, but from what they went through they felt it was more or less an essential evil.

B: Can you describe to me, if there was such a thing, an average day in your life in Vietnam? How did you live?

T: In the 101st Airborne Division, there were stages. It changes a lot, which made the time go faster and made it more interesting, I guess. Being an artillery surveyor, we would go out when they moved the gun. We would go advanced party. They would drop us in the jungle, put in the coordinates for the battery centers. When the guns started to come out, we would go back to the rear. Until the guns moved again, there was nothing for the artillery surveyors to do. While first going over there as a Pfc, I was filling sandbags and burning manure, which we had to do to get rid of our wastes; we had to burn it every day. It was kind of KP and stuff like that. There was an opening in the battalion TOC (Tactical Operations Center) after I was there about six months. They wanted to know if anybody was interested in working RTO (Radio-Telephone Operator) and battalion TOC. I didn't really know what they were talking about, but I would volunteer for anything. I volunteered because it was pretty monotonous, these periods between the guns moving where you were going out on the air

assaults.

B: A TOC, that is a tactical operation?

T: Yes, battalion Tactical Operation Center for an artillery battalion. I was with 2nd, 319th. At that point my life-style, you might say, in Vietnam changed. I wasn't one of many; I was one of few. There were two RTO's. We had jeeps equipped with radios. I wasn't really sure what I was getting myself into, but after an interview with the major, he chose me. Life got very interesting after that in Vietnam. I spent very few boring moments after that.

B: Were you ever wounded?

T: I was wounded indirectly as a result of enemy fire, which was kind of a wrong place at the wrong time kind of thing. I had many close calls, but I always felt like I had a guardian angel or something with me. I had so many calls that were near misses.

B: When you were wounded what was the care like?

T: The medical care for nonserious injuries was sort of adequate, I guess. We had a battalion aid station. It was all right. The Army is: take two aspirins and pull detail in the morning.

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

T: There are a lot of moments that stick in my mind, but probably the one that is really etched into my brain is one day when we were dug inside of a hill. From my bunker, kind of catty-corner up the hill, was this ravine. On the other side of this ravine was a medi-vac, like a M\*A\*S\*H where the chopper would bring men in and they would patch them up to get them to the rear. They would stabilize their condition. They were built into the other side of the ravine. I walked out of the TOC one day and I was walking across this little open area between my bunker going to the TOC, and a 122 rocket came right over my head, 6'2" long, and the explosive warhead about 2½' of explosives in it. It hit in the ditch just past me. I was lucky being on that side of the ditch when the rocket came over me. Usually most of the shrapnel would go in the opposite direction. It burst out and there was a guy driving a two and a half ton Army truck down the hill toward the M\*A\*S\*H unit and one guy just walked around the bunker and it took his elbow off. That was the only thing exposed as he was walking around the corner of the bunker. The truck looked like swiss cheese. It blew the driver clean out of the other side of the truck. He was totally messed up. Luckily he was near the M\*A\*S\*H unit and they put him on a stretcher and ran him in. When the rocket came over, as soon as I heard it, I hit the ground. There was a huge explosion. I will never forget lying there.

I heard shrapnel hitting all over the place. I was afraid to move. I figured there was something missing. I started wiggling my fingers and my toes. Things go through your mind and I will never forget my thought right then. I was sure I was blown up to some degree being that close to the 122 going off. I wiggled my fingers. I remembered things about people thinking they still had arms when they had them blown off. I was afraid to look. It was a very scary experience. After looking at myself and not seeing any blood or guts or anything I stood up and to my amazement I didn't have a scratch.

B: Can you describe to me what the Vietnamese people themselves were like? How did they treat you as an American soldier in that country?

T: When we were down at Phuc Vinh, the whole brigade moved a great deal. We were usually out on operations at different places. It seemed like when we went further up north we were between Hue and a DMZ about the last five months. It was very hostile area. It was right on the edge of the Aushau Valley. I think there was only one Marine base between us and the DMZ. We took a lot of sniper fire, mortars, and rockets. It was more or less where the war was, around the northern area there. Some of the Vietnamese, I guess the ones who wanted us to be there, were very nice. Other ones would just as soon as see you dead than look at you.

B: What were your buddies like?

T: They were just about the same as any group of people. We had our depressions. We usually had a couple of guys who were close. They were run-of-the-mill Joes.

B: How did they feel about the war?

T: In 1967 when I was drafted and in 1968 when I went to Vietnam, there wasn't a whole lot of press publicity about all of the atrocities. Nobody wanted to be there to kill or be killed, but everybody pretty much felt they had a duty to do. Those who didn't, didn't last very long.

B: When you got home what kind of a reception did you get from the American people?

T: Outside of my family there was no reception. In 1969 I believe there was a lot of bad press about soldiers in Vietnam and stuff. I think the press placed a stigma on the American soldier; we were dope addicts and baby killers. Some people who were vehemently against the war naturally were against Vietnam veterans. You would get some who would compliment you and ask you questions about it and some were very nice and others were total AH's, if you know what I mean.

B: How did Vietnam change you?

T: I don't think I was the same person when I came back as when I went over. I was just out of high school, a young kid, running around sowing wild oats. When I came back I was much more subdued, probably just because of the things I had seen and experienced, maybe more mature. I guess I was still the same person, but it did change me. When you left for Vietnam, you were part of a group. When you leave something for two years, it's not the same. You don't find the same thing when you come back. A lot of people had married who were in my little, crazy gang. I would run into them and I didn't fit in well anywhere. I was a round peg in a square hole for awhile until I got reorganized. I had to start all over again.

B: You are currently a member of the U.S. Army Reserves. Why did you join the reserves after going through the hell of Vietnam?

T: I was out quite a while; I got out in 1969, out of the active army in 1969, out of the inactive reserves in 1973. That was my six year obligation. I had married and had a couple of kids and was still working in the steel mill. Life gets to be boring after Vietnam and the excitement. Like I said, I'm the adventurous type and there is only so much adventure you can find from a wife and two kids. The steel mill is rather boring routine. There was a recruiting drive at Wheeling Park and I ran into a man who is my squad leader right now, Sergeant Shultz. I didn't know they had MP's over in Wheeling. I thought the only reserve unit in the area was engineers, which I didn't have any desire to be in. The MP's were white hat. When they went on summer camp, they pulled white hat duty. I had been a temporary patrolman in the mill for a while, and I liked security work. I thought that would be a chance to do something different with my life. I don't know if you could put a price tag on the training I had received in Vietnam and in the military, but it was something I had some training in. I love shooting and it would be a hobby type thing, where I could serve my country, have something different to do two days a month and two weeks a year, and have some adventure. It would break up the monotony of everyday life.

B: Was this your way of coping with delayed stress syndrome?

T: Delayed stress syndrome. I have a few thoughts about that. One thing I didn't do in Vietnam that I've seen other people do, and probably they're the ones who have the delayed stress syndrome problem, I didn't do anything in Vietnam to be ashamed of. I didn't kill any innocent people just for the heck of it. I kept my moral values in Vietnam. If an incident came up, I would put my life on the line to stop it. I am not ashamed of anything I did, whereas some people who may have for some reason or another killed an innocent person over there or something,

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has to live with it. That may be why some of these people are having all of these problems.

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

END OF INTERVIEW