

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam War

Personal Experience

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WILLIAM BURKES

Interviewed

by

Thomas J. Burns

on

June 7, 1992

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM BURKES

INTERVIEWER: Thomas J. Burns

SUBJECT: basic training in the Army, Vietnamese people  
and their characteristics, drug problems in  
rear areas, fire fights, combat

DATE: June 7, 1992

TB: This is an interview with William Burkes for the  
Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on  
the Vietnam War, by Thomas J. Burns, on June 7, 1992.

Bill, please state your full name.

WB: William Burkes.

TB: Date of birth, and where you were born?

WB: I was born in New Castle, Pennsylvania, [on] January  
29, 1949.

TB: What is your current address, Bill?

WB: 2506 Highland Avenue, New Castle, Pennsylvania.

TB: Are you employed, and if yes, where are you employed?

WB: United States Postal Service.

TB: In what capacity?

WB: Window Clerk.

TB: What are your parents' names?

WB: Mary Louise and Frank J. Burkes.

TB: Are they still alive?

WB: Yes.

TB: The names of your brothers and sisters?

WB: There's Frank, there's Pam, there's Cindy, there's Ted and Richard.

TB: Are they still alive?

WB: Yes.

TB: All of them?

WB: Yes.

TB: Where do they live?

WB: They're scattered about. One's in Phoenix, Arizona; one's in Columbus, Ohio; and the rest are in New Castle, Pennsylvania.

TB: Are you married?

WB: No, I'm divorced.

TB: Do you have any children from the previous marriage?

WB: I have one daughter, Amy. She's 17 years old.

TB: Tell us about your background, starting with your education; where you went to grade school, junior high school, and high school.

WB: I really don't remember much of that. I went to a lot of different schools. We moved around a lot. I went to Lockely Elementary School, I remember that. I went to Union Elementary School, and then I graduated from Union in 1967.

TB: Did you go to college?

WB: No. I've taken different college courses, but never for credit.

TB: I understand that you served in Vietnam in the United States Army. Tell us about how you joined the Army, why, and when.

WB: I joined the Army in July, 1967. I joined because it was a life-long dream.

TB: When you say a life-long dream--you had always wanted to be in the Army specifically?

WB: It's just what I always wanted to be. I always wanted to be a soldier. That was my life's ambition. I wanted to make a career of it.

TB: Where did you take your basic training?

WB: Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

TB: What was that like? Do you remember very much about it?

WB: Oh, yes. It was grueling. It was in the latter part of July which was unbearably hot, sandy, dusty.

TB: Now in July of 1967, there was the beginning, if not full-blown protests against the Vietnam War. How did you feel at the time about the Vietnam War?

WB: I was for it. I believed in it. I believed that it was a cause worth fighting for.

TB: When did you join the Airborne?

WB: Well, initially when I joined the Army, I joined with the stipulation that I would get that training, also. So I went to Fort Jackson, I completed my basic training there, and then I went to Fort Dicks, New Jersey for Advanced Individual Training. From there I went down to Fort Benning, Georgia for jump school.

TB: Tell us about your training for that?

WB: It was rigorous. It was grueling. Everywhere you went, you ran. But it was fun.

TB: When you first began training as a paratrooper, what were your thoughts about jumping out of an airplane? You had never done this before, had you?

WB: No. It was sort of like an abstract idea, something I really didn't know what would be like until I actually did it.

TB: How many jumps did you make during your training?

WB: You make five in jump school.

TB: What was your first jump like? Tell us about going up and your first jump. What was that like?

WB: Shooting up was always uncomfortable because you had to wait around a lot with these awkward parachutes on.

You had your reserve chute, your main chute. We didn't do too much equipment jumping then. It was a lot of training. The waiting was the worst. You'd shoot up down on the tarmac and then you'd fly towards the drop zone. One thing, the first jump I wasn't scared. I wasn't scared at all because I didn't know what to expect. I think it was my first jump that I went out the door, the troop exit door, and I didn't make a vigorous enough exit and I bounced along the fuselage, which really didn't shake me up because everything was happening so fast. It was fun. It was exhilarating.

TB: Your parachute fall down, as you descended, that was something enjoyable as well?

WB: That was the most exhilarating part of it. It was like every jump after that all the fear and the anxiety that lead up to that one moment when the chute deployed, once you saw that your chute was deployed, that's when it was the most exhilarating. As soon as I hit the ground I wanted to do it all over again.

TB: Were you able to?

WB: No, in training, you could only make jumps when they told you to make them. Then when I went to an Airborne Unit, you only jumped to maintain your jump status or when there were operations in training.

TB: How often did you have to jump to maintain a certain status?

WB: I think you had to jump once every three months to maintain your jump pay status.

TB: Were you ever injured in a jump?

WB: No. I was fortunate that way. I was never injured. But the drop zones were deep sand so I never really dropped on a hard drop zone.

TB: When were you sent to Vietnam, then?

WB: February, 1968. They woke us up in the middle of the night and asked if we had any next of kin over there.

TB: In Vietnam?

WB: Yes. And the barracks doors were chained shut. All the phones in the division area were disconnected and they said we'd be on a plane in a day or so bound for Vietnam.

TB: Why did they chain the doors shut?

WB: It was security, to limit access to the buildings. There was only one way in and one way out. Probably the whole world knew we were going anyway. But it was just something they did.

TB: Was this something you were looking forward to?

WB: I don't know. I had mixed feelings about it. In a way I wanted to go. I wanted to go to shed myself that stigma I had when I first joined the division, the 82nd Airborne Division.

TB: What stigma?

WB: You were called a "Cherry".

TB: Because you were new?

WB: You were new. Anybody that didn't have a CIB (Combat Infantrymen's Badge) was a Cherry. That was very low on the social scale. I was anxious to go in that sense just to fit in, I suppose.

TB: What was the date you were sent to Vietnam?

WB: I'm not quite sure. It was the month of February, the middle of February, 1968.

TB: How long did it take you to get to Vietnam?

WB: About 24 hours. We flew from Pope Air Force Base at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to Alaska. Then we stopped in Japan and then we landed in Vietnam. I think it took about 24 hours.

TB: What were your impressions of Vietnam when you first arrived?

WB: It was overwhelming. It was overwhelming in the sense that I felt like I had just been catapulted back through time thousands of years. People still lived in grass huts. It was very primitive.

TB: What were the people of Vietnam like? Of course, you were dealing with ones that were basically friendly to the United States, at least at that time. Is that correct?

WB: My level of interaction with the Vietnamese people was very limited. Mostly because of my MOS, what I was doing. Of course, I couldn't speak the language. I knew nothing of their customs or traditions. I really had no contact with them. None to speak of.

TB: Where did you land at?

WB: I believe we landed in Chu Li, a Marine base. Then we convoyed in trucks up to the Fu Bai province, which is where the ancient imperial city of Hue was located. That was a scene of major fighting in the TET Offensive.

TB: Were you moved around a great deal or were you stationed in one place?

WB: We moved around to quite a lot of different fire bases, LZ's and so on.

TB: By LZ's you mean. . . ?

WB: Landing zones.

TB: What was a landing zone, exactly?

WB: It was usually a designated area where a troop carrying a helicopter ferried in the infantry. A lot of times, they were made into more permanent air support bases.

TB: How long were you in Vietnam before you had your first combat experience?

WB: About a month. I had been wounded prior to that but not in a fire fight.

TB: What happened?

WB: The trucks we rode up north in had to be returned down south so I was riding shotgun in a truck and it ran over a mine.

TB: How bad was the explosion? Was it something relatively minor?

WB: No. It was a tremendous explosion. It blew the truck about 30 feet in the air, flipped it end over end and then it landed upside down.

TB: You survived that.

WB: I only had a gash in my head. The driver, whom I never saw again, he only suffered minor injuries, too. It was a fluke.

TB: Were you awarded a purple heart for that?

WB: Yes.

TB: What happened in your first actual combat experience then?

WB: Well, a lot of times I never really knew what was going on. They didn't really tell anybody below the platoon level what was going on. I just knew we went out, it was about 2:00 a.m. and we were on the outskirts of Hue. I always remembered it seemed just like being back home because they had street lights. We were walking down the streets at night under the street lights, and then we walked out into the countryside. We received several mortar rounds. One wounded me in the leg and our machine gunner, he was hit badly in the leg. He had to be medi-vact.

TB: What rank were you at this time?

WB: I was a PFC (Private First Class). I was an ammunition bearer on an M-60 machine gun crew. When the machine gunner got hit and he was medi-vact, I moved up to assistant machine gunner.

TB: Your responsibilities were what? Feeding the belts. . . ?

WB: We called the M-60 machine gun, "the hog", "the pig". I had to "feed the pig." You had to give the gun a smooth feed or it would jam. That night, we walked further down the road and that's early in the morning, just about sun-break. The company commander put the company on line and we began the sweep. I believe the right flank walked into an ambush, because there was a loud detonation. I believe it was a Claymore. That's when the whole day's battle began.

TB: What happened then?

WB: It lasted most of the day. Most of the day there was one wounded man who was out in the open, and I believe he was shot in the legs. One of the things North Vietnamese would do sometimes with a wounded man was use him for bait to lure other people out. We spent most of the day trying to rescue him. They finally did rescue him but he died from loss of blood.

TB: Were you ever actually shot or did you just receive shrapnel wounds?

WB: Just a slight shrapnel wound, that's all.

TB: That was not debilitating at that time?

WB: No. The night the machine gunner got hit and I got hit in the leg, it was minor enough that I elected to go on with the company instead of being medi-vact.

TB: How many other times, approximately were you in actual fire fights?



WB: I'd say there were four or five major, what I would consider major engagements. The rest was all snipers, night ambush.

TB: What does the term fire superiority mean?

WB: Well, essentially, that's when you put more bullets out than the enemy has going out. What you do is you suppress enemy fire. You build fire superiority.

TB: In his memoirs, Ulysses S. Grant wrote that his first real lesson as a military commander came on his first mission during the American Civil War when the Confederate troops broke and ran as he and his men approached. He had found, he wrote, "that they were as afraid of us as we were of them". How true was this in Vietnam regarding the Viet Cong, for instance?

WB: One of their tactics was what they called "hanging onto our belts". When they could avoid our firepower, which was always superior, they'd avoid it. But in any kind of engagement with us, they'd have to get in so close to us that we couldn't use our superior artillery fire or our air superiority. That's what they meant by hanging onto our belts. They were as afraid of us as we were of them.

TB: How afraid were you personally in these. . . ? I don't think that it is any secret that everyone in that situation like that is afraid. . . .

WB: My first fire fight, I really wasn't afraid because it was like that first jump. Sometimes it's a paradox the way it all works out. I rarely fired a round. The way the company was deployed that day one whole flank was engaged while the other one wasn't (the flank I was on). I went down the line towards the area where the wounded man was. He was out in the open and I crawled up through the high grass and fired my weapon. I fired about three or four magazines, that's all I fired during the whole course of the battle.

TB: Your reaction to the idea of killing another person, or at least trying to kill other people was what? Did this bother you?

WB: No. Not at all. I hate to use the old cliché, but it was kill or be killed. I disliked communism anyway. It didn't matter that I killed them. It was war.

TB: Do you have any idea or sense of how many actual people you yourself killed, or was it simply the idea of firing into, for example, brush, when you knew that people were in there but you didn't know specifically. . . ?

WB: Rarely did you see them. There were a lot of units who did see them often, but in my experience, rarely did we see them. They were so well camouflaged. The only time I ever really saw them almost face to face was on a night ambush patrol. That's when I killed my first man. The only one I really know for sure that I killed.

TB: What happened?

WB: We had set up a night ambush patrol in a rice paddy dike, a large dike. During the course of the night, a new man said he heard movement out front. He heard voices. So I looked up over the top of the dike. Oddly enough, there were three Vietnamese soldiers and one was looking right back at me. We were only a yard apart, I'd say. I didn't have my weapon with me, because I really didn't believe this man had seen anything. I kept telling him, "Kill them, kill them, kill them." Finally, he threw a grenade and I started firing my weapon. I went and got my weapon and I started firing it. They opened up the machine gun, it jammed. We went out over the dike and we found one body. We dragged him back into our perimeter. I took his wallet. I went through his wallet. He was 18 years old. He had a picture, I would assume it was his wife with two kids in there.

TB: Did that bother you at all?

WB: No. What I saw afterwards kind of bothered me. I watched a man cut his ears off.

TB: Off a dead soldier?

WB: Yes.

TB: One of your. . . ?

WB: A United States Squad Leader from one of the other platoons. I watched him cut the ears off.

TB: Why did he do that?

WB: Some people kept necklaces with ears. Some people used skulls for ash trays.

TB: Kind of like the Indians that scalped people.

WB: Yes. I guess.

TB: What was the attitude toward the war of most servicemen over there at that time?

WB: I saw it start to change drastically with a lot of protests back in the United States. A lot of us didn't know what the hell we were fighting for, really, because there was no goal, no victory to go for.

TB: Do you think that was one of the differences between what happened in Vietnam and what happened in World War II? I know you read an awful lot of military history. The idea of a clearly defined "evil" in World War II, mainly Hitler's Germany seemed to be so specific, whereas in Vietnam there seemed to be a much more nebulous type cause. Do you think that was one of the principle things that made a difference between the two wars?

WB: Oh, yes. Yes, I do. That's even more apparent with the Gulf War. You had a focused, a very focused objective in mind. That was a clearly defined "evil" there. It makes a difference.

TB: How common was the use of drugs in Vietnam while you were there?

WB: Well, most of the drug abuse was done by the people in the rear echelon (people in the rear areas). I used marijuana, myself. I never used it out in the field. I never used it when I thought there would be a remote chance of a combat experience. Most of the men in my company didn't. There were a few who did, but they were the exception. You had to be alert to stay alive. You couldn't be that way when you were on drugs.

TB: Were drugs readily available, however?

WB: Oh, yes. You could buy a sandbag full of marijuana for a couple bars of soap, cigarettes. It was everywhere.

TB: From whom?

WB: The local Vietnamese.

TB: What was the military's attitude towards that in the sense that did they actively attempt to stop soldiers from using marijuana or was it something that they simply looked the other way?

WB: I think a lot of it was looking the other way. I think a lot of officers thought that if they just did their job and they did it more or less recreationally, as long as it didn't interfere with their combat efficiency or performance, [it was alright]. The rear area was like another world, where the problem was most prevalent.

TB: You're of the opinion that drugs did not significantly reduce the combat readiness of most American troops?

WB: No. Not your line units, not your combat units.

TB: Are you aware of any attempts to distort information by American authorities and or officers to make the war seem like it was going better than it was? Referring to such things as enemy body counts.

WB: No. My whole perception of the war never really got beyond the platoon level. I never really was interested or knew what was going on on a higher level. It really didn't matter.

TB: You didn't care?

WB: No. The only thing I cared about was what we were going to do the next day. Those were things I guess I waited for, to care about what went on later.

TB: How often were you actually out in the field? Were you in a combat mission or a combat potential, versus being back behind the lines?

WB: Almost constantly. We were always out in the field. Every once in a while we would stand down. What that meant was we'd usually go back to a fire support base and pull bunker line duty for three days which, in comparison to being out in the field, was a luxury.

TB: Almost a kind of R & R.

WB: Yes.

TB: Are you aware of any atrocities, like the Mi Li incident that they covered up?

WB: Well, on a very limited scale, I've seen actual brutality. I saw one man who was, I guess you would call, murdered.

TB: A Viet Cong?

WB: They weren't sure.

TB: What happened?

WB: He was executed. We were in a village. We were taking a lot of sniper fire, and they found this old man. He had black pajamas underneath white pajamas which might have meant something, it might not have. But I watched them execute him.

TB: What happened? Can you tell us?

WB: I was mesmerized by it. I watched the whole incident unfold. I watched the platoon leader call up . . . he must have called the company commander and explained the situation to him and I heard him say to the RTO (Radio Telephone Operator) as he passed the handset back to him two words, "Body count". Then he asked, "Who wants to kill him?" A lot of people fell all over themselves, volunteering. They were mostly older guys, the guys that had been there before. They just shot him to pieces.

TB: This was something of a game?

WB: No, it wasn't a game, they just wanted to kill him. It was a blood lust. Five minutes before that there was an old man who had been shot in the stomach. He was sitting in this trail, and I ran up and kicked him right in the stomach, right where he was shot. I don't know why I did it. I still don't know why I did it.

TB: In relationship to the execution of the old man, what were your personal feelings about it? Was it something that you found abhorrent or something you felt was justified by the circumstances?

WB: I don't know. At the time, I was still too new. I didn't question anything. I didn't question anyone or anything they did. I know most of the men who comprised the company at that time were second-timers. They had been there before. You didn't question what they did, because they knew everything that was going to help you survive. I know it did polarize the company. A lot of men disagreed with what they had done, killing the old man. I remembered how they argued about it for weeks. I remember the strange logic of this one NCO. He said, "I could see killing the young ones, but not the old ones," because the man they did shoot was old. It was more the exception than the rule.

TB: What was the highest ranking officer who was there at the time?

WB: Probably a Captain. No, I take that back. Our company commander had been severely wounded the day before. I think that may have had something to do with that. He had been wounded. We had left some dead behind and we were sweeping back out toward that position to recover our dead. I think there may have been a lot of frustration there that could have lead to that incident. I think maybe that's what may have caused me to kick that other old man.

TB: There wasn't one specific individual who was in charge? Normally, in the military, there is one individual who is the acting officer or NCO. There wasn't any officer in charge?

WB: Well they had a young lieutenant who turned out to be company commander at the time, but in a combat situation, a company sometimes. . . . You have a small company of men over here engaged in fierce conflict while there is another group. . . . (tape ran out).

TB: Were there times that you had to follow orders that were really against your own conscience?

WB: I only remember one time. My first fire fight, there was an old man trotting down a road pulling a cart. My squad leader told me to shoot him. I had him in the sights, I was ready to shoot him because I just followed orders automatically, because I didn't know any better. The other men in the squad said not to. So I didn't.

TB: At Nuremberg one of the defenses of the Germans then on trial, the Nazi's, was that "they were simply following orders". Now you've been in a position where you may have had to follow orders. How valid is that as a defense in a combat situation?

WB: In the American Army, if anyone orders you to shoot someone who wasn't readily identifiable as an active combatant you could refuse the order. You could argue that it wasn't a lawful order. In the Nazi Army, I could understand the Nazi Army. If you refused an order to shoot someone, you'd be shot. There's a difference.

TB: Any other combat experiences that stand out in your mind as being something quite special?

WB: Well, they all do in their own peculiar way. Each one was different. Each one seemed to become more terrifying. There was always that. . . . This goes back to something you said about Grant. There was always that terrible urge to run, just to throw down your weapon and run. It's a natural instinct to flee from death. Yet, I always used to wonder what made me stay. Why didn't I do that? It was just I guess what you might call peer pressure. It's what the other people would have thought. I think that was true for a lot of men.

TB: When did you leave Vietnam?

WB: February, 1969.

TB: Exactly one year later?

WB: Yes.

TB: What was the system by which you earned enough points to be rotated home?

WB: Well, they didn't have a point system in Vietnam. It was just strictly a year.

TB: I thought I had read other places that you had to have a certain number of points?

WB: I know that was true for World War II and I think Korea, but for Vietnam, you were just there a year. You were there for 12 months exactly. The Marines always did the Army one better, so they were there 13 months. It may have been different with officers, but as far as enlisted men and NCO's went, you were there for a year and then you rotated back.

TB: So you were never wounded specifically in Vietnam badly. It was relatively minor wounds?

WB: Yes. Two minor wounds, that was it.

TB: You were sick when you came home. I think you mentioned one other time to me that you came home and you were quite ill with something?

WB: Yes. I spent a lot of time in the hospital. I ended up with an abscess in my liver from drinking the water over there without using purification tablets.

TB: Why did you do that?

WB: At times they didn't have them. There were times I was so thirsty I sucked on corn stocks for moisture. Sometimes you would be so thirsty that you couldn't wait for the halisone tablets to act in the water.

TB: How well were they able to supply you with food in the field?

WB: Well, my particular unit you could say we were lavished upon. I remember a chopper bringing each man a gallon of ice cream one day. We couldn't even eat it. We were never really short on anything.

TB: Where were you taken for treatment for the liver abscess?

WB: Womack Army Hospital in Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

TB: How long were you there?

WB: Off and on, I think almost nine months.

TB: In retrospect, how good was the training you received for what you were asked to do in Vietnam? How well were you prepared for what you had to do?

WB: Well, I think the training was pretty good. Most of the training you got was more or less OJT.

TB: How long were you in the hospital before you were finally discharged, fully recovered?

WB: Well, I was in and out. I was in for a few months, then they let me out, and I hadn't really recovered and I ended up back in there a few more months. Finally they did cure me. It took them most of the time to find out what was wrong with me.

TB: How good was the treatment you received as a returning Veteran? There has been a great deal of criticism of the V.A. over the last 25 or 30 years that they haven't taken care of the guys who were in Vietnam.

WB: I never really utilized the V.A. system. I had a good job. I had good medical benefits so I never really relied on the V.A. system. I always felt there were other men who needed it more.

TB: Now when you say you had a good job, are you talking about with the Post Office?

WB: Yes.

TB: So in other words, when you went into the hospital, you were not still in the Army?

WB: Yes. I was still in the Army. This is when I came back from Vietnam. I was in an Army hospital as opposed to a V.A. hospital.

TB: Oh, I see. When you were discharged from the Army, what was your rank?

WB: Sergeant, E-5.

TB: When was that? What was the date on that?

WB: When I was promoted?

TB: No, I'm sorry, when you were discharged.

WB: July, 1970.

TB: You had given up your desire to make a career of it?



WB: Yes. I became more and more disillusioned.

TB: In what sense?

WB: Well, my first fire fight I guess shattered all these romantic ideals I had of the military and combat. Then, the growing racial problems and drug problems and the overall hatred for the military.

TB: Did you become actively anti-military?

WB: No. I disliked the people who were.

TB: It has been about 18 years now since the end of the war. What is your opinion of the war now? Has it changed from when you went there? Are you glad you were there? Should the war have been fought?

WB: In a sense I am glad I was there for the experience. But I regret what it did to my life. I regret that it was all for not, in the end. I believe in what we did, in what we tried to do.

TB: So you think the United States was right in doing what they did?

WB: We were right in doing it but not right in how we did it. I feel a lot of bitterness. I feel we were stabbed in the back, sold out. We weren't allowed to win.

TB: Do you think most of the men that were over there have that same sort of feeling?

WB: I think a lot of them do. They feel a sense of betrayal.

TB: Do you belong to the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) or the American Legion?

WB: I used to belong to the VFW, but I just dropped out.

TB: Any special reason?

WB: The only club I did join, it was mostly World War II Veterans. I guess there really wasn't much in common. So I just dropped out.

TB: In addition to being in Vietnam as an active soldier, I know that you have read a great deal of military history. What experience does this teach our nation if anything? What do you think the country should have learned from the Vietnam Experience?

WB: How to fight a war properly is what they should have learned. I think that idea that they should have learned something from it was reflected in how they fought the Gulf War. President Bush said from the very beginning, "This isn't going to be another Vietnam." You're not going to go in there in a sense with one hand tied behind your back.

TB: Since you raised that issue we can explore it just a little bit. That's true, but Bush still stopped the war, and now we seem to be faced with the same problem now, in June 1992 as what we had when we started our build up in 1990.

WB: Yes. I agree. We're right back to square one, almost. Again.

TB: So you wonder if we really did learn anything?

WB: Right.

TB: If a young man or woman asked for your general recommendation on entering the military, what would be your answer?

WB: Today's military? I don't know. It's so politicized now. As a career, I suppose it's alright, especially in today's economic climate. It's good for a person in a way.

TB: Going back to Bill Burkes personally, what would you like to do with the rest of your life? How old are you now?

WB: Forty-three.

TB: What would you like to do with the rest of your life? Are there specific goals that you have?

WB: Right now, just maybe being alive. I think maybe I'd like to write.

TB: Anything special or. . . ?

WB: Different things. Anything that has to do with life.

TB: Very good, Bill. I do thank you and we'll get a transcript of this to you as soon as possible. Thank you very much.

WB: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW