

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Army Reservists

Personal Experience

O H 873

LAWRENCE CRIBBS

Interviewed

by

Brian Brennan

on

June 6, 1985

- B This is an interview with Lawrence Cribbs for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Army Reservists, by Brian Brennan, on June 6, 1985
Mr Cribbs, about what time did you serve in Vietnam?
- C From 1968 to 1969
- B. What did you do while you were there?
- C I was a combat engineer
- B What part of the county did you serve in?
- C South of Saigon
- B What I would like to know is, what did you do in Vietnam on an average day, if there was such a thing as an average day?
- C There was never an average day, but when I first went over, my first job that I had was laying an airport out That was, grading it, packing it down, and then putting in a metal runway
- B Did you have very many Vietcong attacks while you were doing this?
- C During that particular one, no I think we had one, which was about it
- B: Why did you go to Vietnam? Were you drafted?
- C No, sir, I was a volunteer
- B What made you volunteer?
- C I guess it would be because my father was enlisted in the service in 1940 or 1941 and ended up staying until 1946, for the duration of the Second World War I felt that if he could spend five or six years in Asia, I could spend at least one It was more or less pride
- B What do you remember most of all from your experience in Vietnam?
- C The little kids
- B In what way?
- C Just coming up to you. I have heard different stories about other places, but where I was

at, they would always come up and try to help you. They would even carry your axe, pick, or shovel, or anything for you. They would go to buy you Cokes or beer if you wanted it. They would bring it back to you. Sometimes you would give them your C-rations or something along that sort. It was just that I liked the kids.

B How about your buddies, your fellow comrades in arms? What were they like?

C Oh, just regular people like you and me. We could sit and talk about home. Some guys were from California, Arizona, New York, New Jersey, the Midwest.

B Did they basically have the same convictions?

C Yes, I would say so.

B Were you ever wounded in Vietnam? Did you ever see any substantial action?

C Yes, sir, I did.

B Can you tell me the most memorable incident?

C I can relate one where I was on what they call a twenty-four-hour bunker. It was on Sunday and that was supposed to be a day of rest. My platoon leader decided that he was going to go into one of the bigger base camps to make a PX run. He would take the whole platoon except for two people, and that was myself and a spec 5.

I was sitting on a twenty-four-hour bunker and all of a sudden, about three to five rockets came in, and some mortars. There was a Buddha hut about a hundred meters away from my bunker. It totally destroyed the Buddha hut and the people who were inside, two to three priests. It kind of scared me because right after the mortars and rockets came in on them, they started opening up on me with automatic fire. I had an M14, and what magazines I did have, there were only two or three. I thought it was my time then. They were coming in so quick and fast. There was nothing I could do.

I went and scurried over to my little compound. On the way from my bunker to the compound to find the spec 5, I did finally find him, and he came over. He wanted the 30 because he knew a little more about it. He asked me why I was not firing the 50 inside of the bunker. I said, "It is too loud." I fired five shots out of it and the noise, being confined inside that bunker, was so much, that it was hurting my ears. I could hardly hear, in time, from firing just those five shots out. It just hurt my ears too much.

B I hear so many stories about senior-ranking, noncommissioned officers and commissioned officers being fragged by their own troops. Could you shed some light on the type of leadership that was in the American services at that time?

- C The fragging part, that is like if you owe me five or ten dollars and you decided that you were not going to pay, there was a possibility if you said, "No, I am not going to pay you," that you would be a hand grenade under your pillow
- B That was common?
- C That was common. There was hatred if you would give me an order to walk down the middle of the road. I would come up to you and say, "No, sir. I cannot do this." It is safer to walk in the woods than it is on the roads because of the simple reason of being attacked going down the road. So you make it back. Even though you did follow the orders, there was a possibility that that would happen. Sometimes it would happen, sometimes it would not. I guess it depended on the individual and the circumstance.
- B While you were there, how did you live?
- C Out of a tent, a duffel bag. I washed my clothes in the river. I washed sometimes in a mud puddle. I swam in a river, washed in a river. I got my drinking water out of the river. Because we were right on the river and there were no purification plants or purified water, you had to wash, drink, and clean your clothes out of the same river.
- B How about health care, did it exist?
- C: To an extent, yes, once you got back to a base camp. While you were out in the field, you went to a field medic. About all he could do was give you an aspirin.
- B You made mention of the little kids. How about the adult population that you ran across while you were in Vietnam. How did they react to the American troops? How did they treat you?
- C Some treated you fine and then some spit in your face. One time we were out on the road and there was a convoy of South Vietnamese guys that had just been drafted, and they were going to their boot camp. They had come under attack and two people had got shot in the head. There was myself and the medic who was administering first aid. Up the road, some night provision people had the road blocked.
- I was shuffling back and forth, bringing medical supplies to this medic. I walked by a bus one time and I had been pulling a plasma bottle off the ring and helping him wrap this one individual's head up. He was shot and was bleeding pretty good. I had blood all over my hands. I knelt down in a mud puddle to wash my hands off a little bit and passed the bus. Somebody said something in the bus and I looked up and I got spit on by an individual. I did not get hit in the face or anything. It made me madder than hell. I was trying to help this guy that had been shot and his own people are spitting on me because I was helping him. My experience over there varies on the grown-up

population. Some were good, some I really did not care for.

B: How were you treated when you came home? How did the American people behave toward you?

C: When I landed in California, I was put on a bus that had wire mesh over the windows. We met a lot of protesters. We were cussed at and spit at. When I got to my out-processing in Oakland, California, I went back down to San Francisco to catch my plane back to West Virginia. I walked into the bar and the man tells me he cannot serve me a beer because I am only nineteen and not twenty. In the state of California, at that time, you had to be twenty to drink beer. I told him I had just come back from Vietnam and could I at least have one beer and then I was leaving. He said, "No, I cannot do it." That still sticks in my head, and that has been a long time.

Other than that, I have had people tell me that what I had gone through and everything was okay with them. They had no animosity about me going. It varied. I have had people say that I was a baby killer, I told them I was not with the Americal Division, I was with an engineer outfit. The Americal Division really screwed us.

B: In what way?

C: The Americal Division was the division that went in and started all of that with the women and children.

B: How did your family feel personally toward your service in Vietnam?

C: They were proud of it, especially my dad.

B: You were there in 1968?

C: Correct.

B: Can you tell me some of the repercussions of the Tet Offensive? What was the atmosphere like in Vietnam?

C: We were not worried, the Americans. They got kind of disturbed because that was when the North Vietnamese and Vietcong had their New Year. That is when they started most of their bombings and stuff like that, terrorist attacks are what we called them. I was at the Bear Cat and went into the barbershop and got myself a shave.

That same night we got a few more rounds and we had some snipers come over. The next morning, when we had a body count, we found the barber that had shaved me that same day. So he was a Vietcong. That is how they worked. They got inside our bases, got the information of where the officers' barracks were, where they slept, where

the commanding officer slept. They would mark it all off on a big sheet on a map. That is how they would get their information. They knew exactly where the platoon was, how many steps. They paced off every building and put it on a piece of paper, and then their mathematicians went to work.

B: After you came home, did you feel that you had changed somehow? Did the war cause some sort of change in you or had the whole world around you somehow change?

C: I think the whole world had changed. I went into Vietnam when I was only eighteen and got out of the service when I was nineteen. I was totally out after three years. I went in when I was just seventeen. I think the world had changed for the simple reason that I was so young when I went into the service and I had matured within those three years so much.

At eighteen, when you are going down a road and getting shot at, it changes you. I felt like I was a man of thirty when I got out of there. I even looked thirty. I had aged that much. I lost my hair. I had bags under my eyes. I do not know if that was from lack of sleep. We did not get very much sleep. Really, we were afraid to sleep. You could sleep, but you could not sleep. You had to sleep so light that if a pin would drop you, could hear it. I was on a main road. We had a little camp set up right along the road.

B: Did it take you long to readjust to civilian life?

C: Yes, it did.

B: About how long?

C: To tell you the truth, I am really not even still adjusted to civilian life. I still think about being in the service.

B: Now you are a member of the Army Reserves. After going through all that, why did you come back into the service?

C: I more or less grew up being in the service. That is why I came back in. I could not really adjust to the civilian life. Even though the military is only one weekend, it brings it back to me. It brings back the memories of my service. I am more comfortable in the service, even though I am a civilian. It is hard to explain.

If you and I had bunks next to one another, I would try not to get too acquainted with you for the simple reason that today you are here and tomorrow you might get killed. You want to make friends with the man next to you, but you are leery of it. I made the mistake of making a friend. I got real close with him, talked to him. I knew that he had two boys and he was married and lived in Arizona. Like I said, I got real comfortable with him. He was more or less like

an older brother to me

I had only known him for maybe three weeks and he was coming in back off the road, driving a five-ton dump truck, and they came into automatic fire. Whoever was doing the shooting got really lucky, got him right underneath his steel cloth and just barely hit the steel cloth and went through his head with one, single shot. From then on, I tried not to make any friends. I more or less stayed by myself and tried to keep away from people. To this day I try to do the same thing. I do not make that many friends.

B Thank you, Mr. Cribbs

End Of Interview