

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam Conflict 1961-75

Personal Experience

O.H. 1225

RONALD A. CARTMELL

Interviewed

by

James Duffey

on

July 15, 1989

Ronald A. Cartmell

Ron Cartmell lives at 6580 James Street, in Poland, Ohio. He was born August 9, 1944, in Logan County, West Virginia, the son of Aden and Zola Holeman Cartmell. Ron graduated from Dawson Bryant High School in June of 1965, and was drafted into the U.S. Army the following month. He was discharged in 1967. Ron has been married twice, divorced, and has no children. He has held many jobs in the last twenty years, most currently as a truck driver, but he is now on one-hundred percent Veteran's disability. While serving his tour in Vietnam, Ron was awarded the Combat Infantry Badge, the Bronze Star with Oakleaf Cluster, the National Defense Medal, the Vietnamese Campaign Ribbon with two Bronze Stars, the Vietnam Service Medal, the Vietnam Cross of Gallantry, the Valor Unit Citation, the Unit Citation, and the Army Good Conduct Medal. Ron Cartmell has also written a book about his experiences in Vietnam entitled Reflections of a Wolfhound in Country that depicts many of his experiences and his feelings about the Vietnam War.

D: This is an interview with Ronald A. Cartmell for the Youngstown State Oral History Program, on the Vietnam War, by James E. Duffey, at 6580 James Street, Poland, Ohio, on July 15, 1989, at 10:00 a.m.

Mr. Cartmell, in what branch of the service did you serve?

C: In the Army.

D: Were you drafted or were you enlisted?

C: I was drafted.

D: What year did you enter the service?

C: July 1, 1965.

D: When did you first serve in Vietnam?

C: January 1, 1966.

D: How long did you serve?

C: One year. January 1966 to December 1966.

D: What rank did you ultimately hold in the service?

C: E-4. Spec 4. Corporal.

D: Other than boot camp, what kind of training did you receive for service in Vietnam?

C: Jungle training in Hawaii. Six weeks of jungle training with the twenty-fifth division.

D: What exactly did you do during that training?

C: Slide for life, POW camp, RECON, ambushes, and things like that.

D: What kind of training did they give you as far as POW camp?

C: They would take you in this camp where you were captured. Then, they would tie your hands behind your back, make you squat down, and duck walk around the compound. Then, they would pull you in a room, interrogate you, and the only thing that you had to give them was name, rank, and serial number. If they did not like that, they would hit you, slap you, or whatever to try to make you talk.

- D: What was the idea of that?
- C: To get you prepared just in case you got captured in Vietnam.
- D: Did you know anybody who was captured in Vietnam?
- C: Yes. We had this eighteen year old black kid who was captured for two months, but we got him back. They tied his hands behind his back, put a bamboo behind him, and tied his hands again. They put a ring in his nose, took his boots off, and led him around the jungle for about two months. At night, they would stick him down a spider hole, which was an entrance of a tunnel. When we got him back, he looked like he was brain dead. Gone. When we captured him, we had thirty-four killed (body count) and six alive, and that was the last time I saw him.
- D: Do you think that that training as far as preparing you for Vietnam was adequate?
- C: Yes. It was adequate, but it was not the real thing. The real thing was a hell of a lot different than what the regular training was. You just get the attitude that you do not care anymore. You have to survive, and that is it. Maybe that helped. Maybe that helped me to survive.
- D: You said slide for life?
- C: You get on a rope, up on the side of a mountain, and slid down over trees or a river. Right before you get to the bottom, you drop off into the water. You also climbed mountains, hills, and things like that.
- D: Did you get a chance to use any of that specifically in Vietnam?
- C: No. I was down in the Me Kon Delta area. Three Corps, they called it.
- D: Now where would Me Kon Delta be?
- C: That would be south, or the Southern part of Vietnam.
- D: You were there most of the time?
- C: Yes. I was in Three Corps and Iron Triangle. We would go down to delta, and we would go to Te Nan. We started our base camp in Tu Che in 1966. We had to clear the area out, so that the engineers could come in and clean all of the woods out.
- D: When did you first arrive in Vietnam?
- C: I think that it was around the nineteenth of January.

- D: What was it like at that time of year?
- C: Hot. We went over by boat from Pearl Harbor. It was about a two week ride. Then, they dropped us off in Lung Tow, picked us up there by truck, and took us to an air strip. We were flown in by a C-130, and we stepped off of that plane. You talk about heat. It was like your face was peeling off. It was that hot. Then, you got this smell, like the smell of death. I said, "This is going to be a bad one."
- D: A lot of people comment on that. In fact, everybody that I have talked to has commented on the smell when got off.
- C: The smell will get you. The heat and the smell are the first two things that you notice.
- D: Could you elaborate on the kind of work you did there?
- C: I was driving a three quarter ton when I got there for my motor platoon. We got to Tu Che, we had to dig a hole like a bunker, and we had to put the mortar in there. We had to dig a trench back, zig zagging, and we had to dig another hole for ammunition. The first three months, we slept in that hole. We did not have any billets or houches. We just cleared the base camp out. I would follow the line, or the perimeter that the guys put up with a three quarter ton truck. I had a fifty-gallon drum of gas and a fifty-gallon drum of oil in the back of it, which was a good target. They would make a flame thrower, or a jelly gas for flame throwers that I made for them. I did this for two months. Then, they set up a perimeter, and we had tunnels inside of our perimeter, where they could come up and snipe at you. We lost a lot of people that way. Within the first six months, we lost half of our company. They were either killed, wounded real bad, or just put out of action.
- D: So, what you are saying is that the Vietcong would dig tunnels and come right up to where you were?
- C: Yes. I did not know it then, but I read later on that they had 25,000 meter tunnels under us that were five tiers high. We thought that it was just one tunnel, but it was tunnels on top of tunnels with trap doors and everything. I went down into a couple of them.
- D: How big were they?
- C: Some of them would have underground hospitals. Sergeant Rivera and I were out probing our perimeter one day, and we saw one houch out there. I figured that one houch was not going take out a whole company alone. We went out there one day, and it was covered with hand grenades hanging all over. So, we found the entrance to the tunnel. We started using pipe bombs. They call them torpedoes. We put about forty feet in there, and it still did not hit the end of it. We blew it up, and the ground sunk in. There

was an underground hospital.

D: How close was that to you?

C: A quarter mile from the perimeter, right in the wood line. We found a Russian flag on the wall. Sergeant Rivera took it with him. He lives in Hawaii now.

D: Were you aware of Russian weapons? For the most part, were they using Russian weapons?

C: Yes. They were using A-K 47's and Russian 51-caliber. They were using Chinese weapons, like the PGR. They had grenades where you would pull the pin, and you had to hit it on the bottom to charge it. Then, you would throw it. A friend of mine has got a couple of them.

D: Did a lot of guys bring stuff back from Vietnam?

C: Yes. But most of it today, you see at military shows. They are not alive round. They had taken the fuse out of them, but it is original stuff.

D: Let me go back to before you went to Vietnam. What were your feelings about it? You were there in 1966.

C: I did not even know about it. I did not even hear about it.

D: You had no impressions at all about what it might be like?

C: I did not hear about it until we got to Hawaii. Well, in basic training, they kept saying that we were going to get killed and all that stuff. I never did hear about Vietnam when I was in high school. If I did, I probably saw it on the news, but I did not pay any attention to it.

D: You did not have any idea that you would be going there?

C: No.

D: During the time that you spent there, what was probably the most difficult part of serving in Vietnam for you?

C: A lot of things. I think it was the heat, the leaches, the snakes, the bugs, and the red ants. When red ants get you, they bite.

D: How would you get the leaches on you?

- C: Walking through canals or through wet rice paddies.
- D: There has been a lot of talk over the years about how American soldiers' attitudes changed about the Vietnam War, and I guess that is attributed to more and more later on hearing about what went on and the protest movement. As you get closer to the 1970's, it seemed like there was a change in attitude. How was the attitude of the American soldier when you were there?
- C: We were positive that we would win the war. We were gung ho. We did not care about protesters back here. We just wanted to win the war. We were winning until they stopped the bombing of North Vietnam. I think that it was in 1965 or in 1966 when they stopped it. It would have been over in 1967 if the government would have left the Generals alone. It would not have lasted very long.
- D: So, what you were saying was that it was more of a political decision?
- C: The politicians thought that they could do it better than the generals.
- D: Some of the other vets that I have talked to have commented on the Vietnam soldiers as far as their attitude. Did you have any connection with them? Some people that I have talked to said that they really did not trust the South Vietnamese. They really did not fight.
- C: No. I did not trust them either.
- D: What was your impression of them?
- C: If they would get into a heavy fight, they would run. It seemed like you would go out with them, not necessarily all of the soldiers but some of the South Vietnamese Rangers that were really good. Also, you had the Counter Terrorists (CT's). They hated the Vietcong. The only way that they could get in that group was if their family was wiped out by them. They would do a good job. It was just the regular Vietnamese soldiers that I did not trust. You would have some that were Vietcong. They would wear a uniform in the daytime, and at night, they would snipe at you.
- D: Why do you think that was? You were there trying to help them defend their country, and they did not seem to want to do it themselves.
- C: They were lazy, and they just did not care. They figured, "Well, the American's are here, so we do not have to fight." So, after we turned it over to them, I guess they kept the same attitude. They ran.
- D: Can you name some of the places where you served when you were in Vietnam?

- C: Tu Che was my base camp. We served in the Iron Triangle, or part of Ho Boli Woods. There was Te Nin, Parrot's beak, and Plane of Reeds. I have been a lot of places. Oh, Michelin Plantation was down at the end. That is where Michelin tires got their rubber. That was the furthest north that I got. Then, we went on Black Virgin Mountain and Cambodia.
- D: Was that legal to go into Cambodia?
- C: No. They said that we did not go in until 1970. We went in in 1966.
- D: Now, what was your objective about going into Cambodia?
- C: We went in at a ten mile radius and swept the area. If there were any ying, we would take them out.
- D: So, they were using Cambodia even that early to go over from their base and then attack?
- C: Yes. We left the base camp with choppers, and they dropped us off by the Mi Con River. It looked like a dirt road. They took us right across the river and dropped us off, and we swept the area. They picked us back up, and they brought us back.
- D: Did you see anybody when you were there?
- C: We captured a couple and interrogated them, but nobody got killed.
- D: When you would interrogate or capture people, how would you deal with the language difference?
- C: Someone was there who could speak the language.
- D: Did you pick up any of the language while you were over there?
- C: Yes. Bu ku dicki means that you are crazy. Number ten G.I. means that you are no good. D.D. means to get out of here. Something else that I cannot remember means come out of the hole.
- D: You learned what you needed to give directions to people that you might capture.
- C: If you point a weapon at them, they know what you are talking about.
- D: If we could take a minute to focus on today, how have your feelings about the war and the way it was conducted changed?

- C: I will say it was a money making war. I haven't changed my attitude about going back again, I'd go back again in a heartbeat.
- D: Did you feel it was a justifiable war?
- C: Yes. When I was there. But as you look at it as it went along, it was a money making war, they didn't care about the soldiers there. They got what they wanted out of it, and they forgot about the soldiers. That's my feeling about it.
- D: Was there any point in time when you feel that happened?
- C: Yes. When we'd take a place and we wouldn't keep it. You would go out on an Eagle flight, that means you would go out in the morning and come back in the afternoon, you'd take a village or something then you would just leave it, come back, and the Vietcong would have it at night. It just didn't make much sense.
- D: You'd lose people and actually not be in there.
- C: Right. You'd come back and you'd have to probe your perimeter at night. They would send out a recon patrol. I did a lot of them too.
- D: When you say probing your perimeter, how would you do that?
- C: We'd probably send a five or six men team out and they'd check our perimeter, we'd go out in the woods which was probably 1/4 mile away and we'd set up to check if there were any people moving around or bringing in trucks for an ambush, then we would call back and tell them what was going on. Sometimes it was search and destroy operation. You'd go out, you'd find a few of them everywhere they're at you'd go out and hit them, take them out and then come back.
- D: So mostly you were always in communication with your base camp?
- C: Most of the time. Sometimes, no.
- D: Was there a ever problem as far as communicating where you felt that maybe the enemy could pick up your radio transmissions that they would know?
- C: No. Every day we would switch. Not unless they had somebody in camp, but they would know about it.
- D: It seems as though lately there have been a lot of movies on Vietnam and a lot of books put out. I have gotten a lot of reactions from Veterans on those movies.
- C: That is all they are is movies. I mean, I think that Platoon hit closest to all of them. That

is what everybody says. It is just like Hamburger Hill. It has some different stuff in it. It all depended on which corps you were in and how you reacted to it.

D: So in other words, if you were in the Marines or if you were in the Army or whatever, you would have a different perspective on the war that might be picked up in parts of different movies.

C: Most of the people that I have talked to said that Platoon hit hardest. They overused the drug scene, I think. We had drugs. We could get any kind of drug that we wanted over there. I bought a carton of marijuana cigarettes for five dollars. I tried it once, and that was it. After that, I gave it away because I woke up shaking.

D: A number of people who were there later have commented about how much drugs were used. Was it as prevalent when you were there?

C: It probably was, but I did not see it. I do not think that anybody in our company used it like they did later on. We never used it when we went out. That was the one thing we made sure of. Everybody was smoking. You could see it in their eyes. They would not go out with us. You had to be straight when you were out there.

D: That is what everybody says.

C: If you are standing off line, yes, soldiers used to party their ass off. But the next day, you had to be straight.

D: Looking back on the Vietnam War and your experiences there, how has it affected your life personally?

C: When I got back, I hitch-hiked across country for five years. I just kept moving around. I could not settle down in one spot. That was probably why I got two divorces. I just could not settle down. Still today, I cannot. I got a job driving a truck. I drove a truck for twelve years. Then, they pulled me off of the road for my disability (PTSD).

D: Everyone has talked about PTSD. Can you talk a little bit about that? How does that effect people? How do you feel?

C: Quick tempered. You blow up for no reason at all, and you want to isolate yourself sometimes. Some people just have to get away from the population. I get wound up, and I start hollering for no reason. Then, I will get in my jeep and head up to the mountains. I will stay up there for probably a week or two weeks. I do not want to come back. It is getting worse and worse now. It has gotten to the point where I just want to move up there. I would sell the house. I just do not care.

- D: Do you think that there was maybe anything you could have done when you came back to help you to adjust a little bit better to civilian life?
- C: They should have de-programmed us. We were in the fast lane for over a year fighting. After a twenty-two hour flight, they dump you back into the world. No de-programming or nothing. This is my opinion, but I think that hurt a lot of Vietnam Vets. We should have gotten used to the civilian life gradually, like they did to the soldiers of World War II. I do not think that there would have been as many Vets with problems now.
- D: Something that everybody seems to be talking about is Agent Orange. I guess that there were a lot of other chemical defoliants that were sprayed besides Agent Orange, but that seems to be the one that is most newsworthy right now.
- C: They would come over in the area of Hobo Woods where there was thick vegetation, and they dumped that stuff. You could see it. After they would get finished, you would walk through it. It was like dew in the morning on the leaves. It would get on your skin, or it would soak through your clothes. Then, it would turn white, and you could just brush it off. We would drink the water. I did that a few times. They would give us iodine tablets. If you ran out of fresh water, you would dip down a canal, put an iodine tablet in it, shake it, and drink it.
- D: Have you had any health problems that you think are attributable to that?
- C: Anything neurological. I shake a lot. I do not know if a reaction of sleep has anything to do with it, but I do not sleep well. Before I went to Vietnam, I liked all types of foods. I guess my stomach has just changed.
- D: Are there any problems that you feel are important for Vietnam Veterans today other than the repercussions of Agent Orange?
- C: I feel that if any Vietnam Vet went to a rap group to get help to get it out instead of going into a rage and killing somebody, then, they should do that. They should try to get help.
- D: Are there any available in the Youngstown Area?
- C: Yes. We have one office on Market Street. Every Tuesday night at six o'clock, we have a one-hour rap session. I have been going for six years. I do not mind talking to the brothers who have been there, but I cannot talk to anyone who has not been there. I figure that if they have not been there, then, they do not know.
- D: I could see where they would not understand. A lot of Veterans that I have talked to have been real hesitant to talk about it or just have outright refused. I can understand why they might not want to talk about it, but do you think that is something they should do?

- C: Yes.
- D: It seems like they are carrying an awful lot of baggage around with them.
- C: They do not have to talk. They can come in and sit. If they come in and sit, they see that we are not going to laugh at them or that we do not care about them because everybody that has been in there has been in the same situation. Once they get that and see that, they might come back. It took me six months to talk about it. I sat in a rap group for six months, and then, I started talking a little bit at a time.
- D: How many guys usually attend that?
- C: It would average anywhere from to twelve people from that area.
- D: How about the U.S. government, have they done anything or have they done enough for Vietnam Veterans?
- C: I do not think that they have. The VA has cut a lot of programs out, like dental care and foot care because they are trying to take away the Veteran's blue card for medical. They took away mileage for going to the VA hospital. I would say that the foot care and the dental care would be the most important. I think that you would have to be ninety days out of the service or a POW to get that. The rest of the guys cannot get it, and that does not make sense.
- D: Some of the Vets that I have talked to have commented about the VA hospitals not being very good as far as their care. Have you had any experience with that?
- C: I would say Butler Hospital, a VA Hospital. They will sit in there and do their eight hours, and that is it. The hell with anything else. You go in there and get your service connected. You are supposed to go first, but it is just the way they run it. It seems like one department does not know what the next department is doing. Departments were just passing the buck around. You get kind of pissed off, and then, you start raising hell. Then, they call security. It seems like they really do not care about you. You are just a number.
- D: Why do you think the Veteran's Administration is not doing more? It seems like it is an awful fight for them to do anything.
- C: I do not even want to get into that. In 1984, Dan Rather was on television, and they lost forty-million dollars somewhere. The money just disappeared. If the Veterans do not use that money up by the fiscal year, they will send it back. In other words, instead of putting it in the hospital to help Veterans, they will just send it back. They probably get one billion a year for all of these hospitals, but if they think that everybody is satisfied, they

send the money back.

D: If America was to become involved in another war like Vietnam, how would you feel about us getting involved in that?

C: I think that we should go there and do the job, and tell the politicians to stay the hell out of it. It would not last too long.

D: What I was thinking of was Central America. There is a lot of talk about us getting involved there. A lot of Vietnam Veterans are not sure which way to go.

C: I would go if they would leave us alone and let us do our job, but if they are going to hound us around about it, it would really make me think.

D: Somebody was commenting in one of the other interviews about different zones in Vietnam where you could see the enemy and were not allowed to shoot them. Did you run into that?

C: Not really. They had this saying that if you got fired on, you had to call back to fire back. That really did not make sense to me.

D: What was the purpose of that? Not having been there, I do not understand why you would have to clear that or why there were places where you could not attack.

C: That was what we could not understand. They gave us all that jungle training and got our minds to where we could do our job. Then, they tied our hands. That was what it felt like.

D: Since this tape is going to be listened to by high school students and probably studied by people who will be studying the war in Vietnam, is there any lesson that you think should be passed along to students? Or if you had children, would there be anything you would say to them about Vietnam if they had to go to war or about the nature of a war?

C: I would say, "Find out if the country is going to back them up or not." That would be the first thing. If they are going to hold you back from doing your job, think about it before you go. I think that everybody should fight for our country. That is the way that I feel. If they are satisfied, can do their job, and can be left alone, then, go. If not, then, think about it.

D: One of the other Vietnam Veterans mentioned something called "survivor's guilt."

C: That is when your best buddy got killed. When I left there, it seemed like I left part of myself there. The average age was nineteen over there. I wonder why they could not

make it. How come I came back and they did not? That was part of the guilt. I think about it a lot. I look at the names of my buddies and just sit there and cry. Why did they spare me and not them? I was carrying an M-60 machine gun before I got out, and your life expectancy with that is five to ten seconds when you get in a fire fight. They want to take you out first. Before that, I was an RTO, or a radio telephone operator. That is about a five to ten second life expectancy. They also want to take the radio out, so that you cannot call support in.

D: Is there anything that we have not covered that I have overlooked that you would want to talk about?

C: To me, I hope there are not any more wars, but if there are, I would like to see the kids go there and do their job. By that, I mean the government letting them do their job. If people do go and come back, I hope that they would have the facilities to bring them down slowly, so that they will not be on one-hundred percent disability like me. I think that if they deprogrammed the soldiers when they would come back, then, that would help them a lot.

D: I want to thank you for the time to be interviewed, Ron. I know that it is not an easy thing to talk about. I really do appreciate it.

C: I hope that the kids get something out of it.

D: I think they will. Thank you very much.

C: You are welcome.

End of Interview