

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam Veterans Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 401

JOHN LIPINSKY

Interviewed

by

Jeffery Collier

on

May 27, 1975

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: JOHN LIPINSKY  
INTERVIEWER: Jeffery Collier  
SUBJECT: Army Experiences, Army Training, Education  
DATE: May 27, 1975

C: This is Jeffery Collier with the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Vietnam. I'm sitting here with John Lipinsky at his apartment, 4811 Elmwood Avenue in Youngstown, Ohio. Today is May 27, 1975, and the time is 10:40 a.m.

John, could you tell us a little bit about yourself as far as where you were born, your education, and pretty much up to this time?

L: I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1947. I came to Youngstown shortly after that. I went to grade school and high school in Youngstown. I had two and a half years at Youngstown State University. Then I found job opportunities in the liberal arts field, which I was in, weren't as good as I thought. I got a job at the railroad. I found since I was making big money, marriage seemed like a likely prospect. I had the draft board reclassify me as 1A. I wanted to appeal it. I decided to get married because that might have saved me from getting drafted in 1969, and going over to Vietnam. So the plans were all made for the wedding, and on my birthday, July 30, 1969, I got greetings in the mail from good old Uncle Sam. The wedding was two days later. It was quite a surprise to have all of this happen at once. Since then a lot of exciting things have happened in my life.

C: Why is it that you didn't get a deferment after you got married? They didn't give deferments for marriage anymore?

L: Well, I was drafted before I was married. I had gone

through the board appeal, the local appeal, and all of the others, but they just said, "Sorry, son."

C: None of that worked?

L: No, it stalled it off for about six months. It was the last big draft that I got caught in. I was 22 at the time, and there were a lot of guys that got drafted with me that were 25 and 26. All of these guys had escaped the draft while in college.

C: What was your lottery number?

L: This was before the lottery. This was the last draft.

C: What would have been your lottery number?

L: I didn't even care to find out. I was sitting there at the basic training post and everybody was yelling, "Gee, my lottery number would have been two hundred."

C: You were in the branch of the service out of the United States Army?

L: Right.

C: Where did you do your basic training?

L: I had basic at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. My advanced infantry training was done at Fort Polk, which the Army referred to as "Tiger Land." You were sort of psyched out. If you were in "Tiger Land," you were going to Vietnam. So, you sort of resided yourself to the fact that this was what was going to happen. You became aware of it. These people that were training, about ninety percent had spent a year in Vietnam. The other ten percent had spent more than a year. You felt that these guys made it, why can't I. If I listen to what they're saying, I'm going to make it. I realized that only one person was going to save me if something happened, and that was myself. I tried to learn as much as I could. When I got drafted I had a bad attitude. I was making good money on the railroad and here I get drafted and now I'm making a hundred dollars a month in the Army. Naturally, I wanted to get it over with and get out as quickly as possible.

C: Did you know when you were drafted that you were going to Vietnam? A lot of people, at that time, didn't have to go to Vietnam, or did they?

L: Well, there weren't that many people that didn't go to Vietnam, let me put it that way. When you get an

infantry MOS, which is a Military Occupation Specialty, most of the infantry people went to Vietnam because they were falling off like flies.

C: If your MOS was infantry, you were trained specifically for the infantry then?

L: Right.

C: Did you have a backup MOS?

L: No, we didn't; it was just infantry. The Vietnam War was different from any other war because you were only over there for a year. Men were constantly moving in and out of the country at all times. They had to have fresh people to replace the ones that had already served their year over there and had come back.

C: Did any of the people that you were in there with not get orders to go to Vietnam?

L: Yes, there were a few people who went to Germany. I would say seventy percent of the people that I graduated with from advanced training went to Vietnam, had orders for Vietnam.

C: How did you feel when you got your orders?

L: We sort of knew it was coming. I think that the most traumatic thing in basic training was when I got the infantry assignment and then finally realized, or it finally hit me, that I was going to Vietnam. You know, infantry was right there. For the ten weeks of training at Fort Polk it was drilled into your brain you were going to Vietnam to kill the Viet Cong and this and that.

C: When you did your training, and you said you were at two different bases, infantry training and then advanced, how long was each?

L: Basic was an eight week course. This is a standard Army eight week basic training. Altogether, processing in the Army takes about a week. They have a holding week where they get all of your papers processed and make sure you have two arms and two legs and everything. Then they send you, finally, to a training company and when they get everybody's records transferred there, you start your first week of training.

C: You were there about three weeks before you got your first week of training?

- L: Right. Then in advanced training, by then your records travel with you and everything is together. I think we had about a one-week waiting period there and then we moved right into Vietnam training. That was a matter of nine extra weeks there.
- C: What type of things did they teach you to help you out in Vietnam? Can you remember anything, jungle type fighting or anything like that that might have helped you out over there?
- L: The basic training was basic Army infantry stuff that everybody had to take, whether you were going to advanced clerk school or advanced truck driver school. Your basic training was just how to shoot a rifle and how to march.

Then you get into the advanced training. My MOS was infantry with a specialty in mortars. We had a lot of classes on how to set up the mortar and how to fire it, how to clean it and this and that.

The actual Vietnam training was going out to these different range areas where they would teach you how to camouflage yourself by putting this body paint on your hands and face. You would have camouflage clothes and conceal yourself in the bush, which a lot of hunters do. They taught you how to break up the silhouette of your body and blend in with the trees. Then they had a course in camouflage detection, how you can tell by looking straight out that someone is moving out there. They had a course in target detection, which is on the same order. We had classes on moving at night, how to move to an area at night without tripping over anything or falling into the water or whatnot. Then there were exercises where you would just go out for a week and go through mock runs of going through a village. We would learn how you get out of helicopters, and how you do this and how you do that. It was pretty intensive training of what you would do in Vietnam in any given situation. I think the advanced training prepared a soldier very well for the war that he was ultimately going to face.

- C: To go a little bit further concerning Vietnam, did you have any feelings at all as to what was happening? When you left, I would assume you flew out to the West Coast and then left from there. When you were going out there, how did you feel; especially, for instance, upon first taking off and leaving the West Coast--and I don't know if you landed anyplace in the Philippines--and flying into Vietnam? What were your reactions also, besides your feelings?

L: Fear. It was fear of the unknown, which we all have naturally. It wasn't just the plane ride involved. I was with a friend, who I had gone all through basic and advanced training with, so at least I had someone to talk to. It wasn't a totally isolated experience. We felt that Vietnam was a forbidden country, where you were going to have to get off of the plane and crouch down to avoid the bullets.

We took off from Oakland, California, and landed in Alaska. It was cold there, blowing at night. Then we went to Japan. We landed there at night and it was a little bit chilly there too.

C: Did you stay there very long?

L: An hour at the most, for refueling. Then we landed in Vietnam the next morning and it was hot.

C: Do you remember the date?

L: It was February, sometime in February.

C: Was it in 1970?

L: Yes, 1970. It was hot and muggy, really nasty. I looked around, and it was a tropical country there at the Army base. People were walking around like they owned the place. I went inside a big terminal, the fans were going overhead and everybody was going along doing their job, just like everybody does here in this country. It was kind of surprising that this was Vietnam. We looked at each other and said, "Ah, it's not so bad so far." After a little in country processing where they tell you where you will be getting your assignments and where you'll be going for the first week and all, they put you on this air-conditioned bus that had screens on the window. The first thing that really frightened me about Vietnam were screens on the windows. I guess it was just a precautionary thing. If they did have any trouble, nobody would be able to throw a grenade inside of the bus and zap about forty people all at once. Then we went to a processing center, where the first thing they did was take all of your greenback money from you and exchange it for military payment certificates. MPC was what they called it. It was because our American dollars had a higher currency value in the exchange rate. They didn't want the Vietnamese or any black market individuals to get these. They had this money for us to use on the post. You could exchange it downtown illegally, if not on base legally. So, they did that, and then they had processing, where you got

shots and orientation.

Basically, a young soldier with no rank in Vietnam is a peon. They would have morning formations and if you didn't get assigned to a certain place, you would be put on a work detail. Then you would go work in a mess hall somewhere or work in a supply room sorting and counting, just keeping out of trouble and keeping busy.

This went on for a couple of days, I think two days. Finally, I got an assignment to go down to Can Tho, which was down in the delta. I was assigned to the First Aviation Brigade, 164th Aviation Group, which made about as much sense to me then as it does to you now. I said, "Okay, I'm going to be a helicopter door gunner or something." Their life expectancy wasn't very long at the time. You got all of this scuttlebutt talk among all of the young guys. I said, "Oh, my God." We get into helicopters and flew down to Can Tho.

Flying in a helicopter is a strange experience because, well, they're not supposed to be able to fly the way they're engineered. There was a lot of noise and a lot of wind. You get up there, and it's beautiful. All of the other flying we had done was usually at high altitudes. If you looked down you would see clouds, but when you're up in a helicopter, you actually see the ground and people down there. Really, it wasn't a bad country after all. This area south of Saigon was secured to a certain extent, at the time. There wasn't heavy fighting at all times. It was nice getting a little view of the country and seeing where I was going.

We finally landed at Can Tho, and I was assigned to this holding company where we went. They took your orders and paper work and everything that you had and told you to wait over there. They had no assignment for us, so we were put on work detail again there for a couple of days. I think we were tearing down some old barracks and rebuilding walls inside. I think the second or third day there, I was assigned to the 7th Armored Squadron which was at Vinh Long, which was about thirty miles north of Can Tho. I flew to Vinh Long in a helicopter again and enjoyed the scenery and a nice warm breeze was up in the sky. We landed there about five o'clock in the afternoon. There was only one clerk in the headquarters area where we were supposed to process in. The first thing he said was, "Do any of you guys know how to type?" Apparently, they had a shortage of clerks there in Vietnam for some reason. I don't know, maybe no one wanted to sit at a desk all day with all of the officers walking

around. Nobody raised their hands because everybody thought, we'll go out and see what's happening in the real world, and see what Vietnam is all about instead of sitting in an office. I don't know, it seems kind of heroic on the part of all of us; there were about five of us, I think. Surely, anybody can pound out a couple of things on a typewriter. Nobody said anything. I guess they wanted to see what it was all about. The second thing they said was, "Would anyone like to be a helicopter gunship pilot or a helicopter gunship machine gunner?" Oh no, no. I said I would go with this D Troop that I was assigned to which was the infantry company. I found out later it was an infantry company attached to an aviation brigade. We were the only infantry people in the Delta [Mekong] as far as actual foot soldiers walking around doing all of the things that soldiers are supposed to do. In 1970, supposedly, all of the infantry soldiers were out of the Delta. So it was rather ironic that we were there. I went there, got assigned to a platoon, and just fell into the routine of what was going on and all of the things this company was doing at the time.

C: In the week, two weeks, or three weeks that had transpired between landing and getting to your ultimate destination in the Delta, was there any evidence of the war going on at all? Were you ever shot at, or when the helicopter was moving around, did you see any action on the ground or anything like that?

L: No, nothing at all on that order. At night you could hear the helicopters flying security over the area that you were at and occasionally you would hear some gunfire and that, but nothing to indicate there was a war. It was like the Fourth of July, when you hear people shooting outside and helicopters flying over just like they do here at the freeway at certain times. It was really no indication that it was a war zone besides all of the soldiers roaming around and all of the aircrafts taking off and landing at all times of the day and night.

C: Up to this time, did you have any contact with the Vietnamese people at all? Had you been into town at all?

L: No, not into town. There were a lot of Vietnamese people that worked on these American bases. Most of the laundry was done by Vietnamese people on the bases. There was a lot of Vietnamese labor as far as any new construction. There were Vietnamese people working the mess hall and working in the PX, at all of these different bases. The PX is the Post Exchange where you go and buy shaving gear, radios, televisions, and just about anything you wanted to a certain extent. There was a lot of contact with these



Vietnamese people. I always thought, hey, we're fighting the Vietnamese, what are these people doing? Then you finally realize that these people are our friends because they are enjoying all of the benefits we have here and the security of this base. They're making big bucks, too, working on the American base.

C: Did the Vietnamese people seem to enjoy it and get along pretty well with the soldiers?

L: Oh yes, it was a very personal relationship. Most of the bases had what is called a hooch maid. When I finally got assigned to Vinh Long, I had a hooch maid. You've got a big barracks and this barracks, naturally, needs swept up every day, your bed needs made, and your boots need polished. For some reason the American soldiers had a lot of money and the Vietnamese people didn't. So out of the goodness of our hearts, we would hire hooch maids. About every five or six guys would have a hooch maid. One Vietnamese woman would sweep the floors, make the beds, and polish our boots for us.

C: On a daily basis?

L: Right, except Sundays. Sunday was the only day they didn't come in. They were there every day to take care of these little things for you while you were out working. I guess that was the psychology of the Army: While you are out filling sandbags, doing work details, and going out on missions and all, you don't have time for all of that. It was nice this way. We were spreading our money around among the Vietnamese people, besides being the lazy, rich GI's that we were.

C: After you became assigned to your squadron, I would assume that you started going out on missions and things like that. What about the very first time you went out, what happened, if anything, and how did you feel?

L: The first time was a morning training mission. We had infantry platoons and we had 106 mm recoilless rifles mounted on jeeps and mortars. We all went out along one road that was about fifteen miles away from our base at Vinh Long. We were just supposed to test fire all of these weapons into a free fire area. In Vietnam, there were areas where you could fire and areas where you couldn't fire your weapons because of the civilian population. This was a free fire area that we were bordered on. We were given fire mission to fire our mortar into a certain area and fire recoilless rifles into a certain area. There were some Vietnamese people

with us and they were observing what we were doing to see how the American soldiers did all of this. Part of our mission there was to train the Vietnamese in the ways of American warfare.

C: These were soldiers or civilians?

L: These were soldiers. It was a fun experience that day. We got out in the sun and enjoyed ourselves, getting our ears blown off because of all of the noise from all of the weapons. That night, I think, I had guard duty. Being in the mortar section, we were in the middle of the perimeter, the middle of the base. So, really, as far as guard duty, it wasn't all that hard. I didn't have to look out over the end of the barbed wire into the jungle out there and watch for people coming. Guard duty went fairly well. I think there were four of us on guard duty. We usually broke up our watch into two hours apiece, from ten to six o'clock. The next morning at formation, we were informed that we had two confirmed kills on our practice mission. I said, "Wow, that's really fantastic." What had happened was this really wasn't a practice mission for us; it was a practice mission for these Vietnamese soldiers that were with us. The area in which we fired was a known Viet Cong nesting place, so we were actually firing into Viet Cong bunkers where they were operating down there in the Delta. After we had done our firing, they had helicopters in the area with Vietnamese soldiers and they had found these two bodies that we had killed. We were an infantry company in the Delta that wasn't supposed to be there. We would work with the Vietnamese training them and we were training them very well. We were killing people in these training missions. Luckily, they were Viet Cong, the enemy, and not our own people.

C: Why is it that there weren't supposed to be foot soldiers in the Delta?

L: Because our fearless government had been trying to wind down the war. They were saying the total responsibility for the war in the Delta was being handled by the Vietnamese and all of the American soldiers were north of Saigon, up around Camrahn Bay and Da Nang.

C: In essence, the kills and everything like that that you had, the South Vietnamese Army would get credit for those because you weren't supposed to be there?

L: The Vietnam War was basically body kill so body count was what it was all about. Naturally, the Americans would get credit for it and since we weren't supposed to be there, I think the Vietnamese would get credit for them. That's

why we killed so many billions of their people and they still kept coming because all of these bodies were being counted over and over again. It must have been what the whole war was about, really. It was just a body count.

C: Did you start then, after you got into the daily routine of things, going on the missions on a daily basis, or a weekly basis, or monthly basis? Exactly how did that work?

L: Shortly after I got there, we got a new commanding officer. This guy had been newly commissioned as a captain. He was a career soldier who had been working his way up through the ranks. He had made staff sergeant and he decided if he was going to stay with it, he might as well become an officer. He had just made captain and he was assigned to this infantry. He worked out arrangements with the South Vietnamese and the MACV people, which were a Military Assistance Command in Vietnam, who were the people that were, more or less, the advisors for the Vietnamese soldiers. All Vietnamese companies, the ARVN's [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] had MACV advisors with them. So our CO got in touch with these MACV people and the Vietnamese and we started going out on joint Vietnamese-American missions.

It worked out just about in a three day cycle. The first day we would go out on a night ambush with the Vietnamese. They would have about a ten-man squad, five Vietnamese and five Americans. You would go out somewhere and set up a little perimeter along a river or some little canal--somewhere where the Viet Cong were bound to be or likely to be at any given time--in the middle of the night because they did most of their traveling at night. We would go and set up these ambushes at night, hoping to catch some of them.

On the second night, you would have guard duty, which was not too bad for the mortars because we were inside. All of the rest of the people in our company were assigned to certain areas of the perimeter. Everybody in Vietnam pulled guard duty, just about. All of the soldiers would pull guard duty. Each company was assigned a certain area on the perimeter.

Then, the third night, you would be off. You would get a chance to drink a little beer and go see a movie to enjoy yourself and get a little break from the routine. Now in between all of this, if any of the ambushes had made any contact, one of the platoons would have to go and sweep this area in the daytime.

It was a pretty hectic schedule and it kept you busy. They didn't really give you too much time to sit around and

cry that you were in Vietnam and you were a poor draftee and doing all of this hard work. Our company commander solved the problem of the men's loneliness and remorse for being there by keeping us fairly busy. In the afternoon, between all of this, you would have details of rebuilding bunkers and building new showers, just general maintenance, Army-type maintenance, working on vehicles and all.

- C: On these ambush duties that you would pull the first night or the three nights that you mentioned, was it pretty common or uncommon to have any fire fights, contact with the enemy, or anything like that?
- L: There were occasions when there were perimeter ambushes where we would go out less than a mile from our perimeter and set up a little place out there. It was like a first line defense for our perimeter. We would go out maybe a mile or so and set a little area along some convenient route and wait and see if somebody was coming towards our base. We would be there to stop them from getting very close.

There were also ambushes out in another province, the Sadec, which was about ten miles west of Vinh Long. It was a very heavy area for Viet Cong. About fifty percent of the time, when we were out in the Sadec province, we would run into Viet Cong. They would make contact of some sort. Some little Sampan would come drifting down the stream. If one guy started shooting, everybody would start shooting. You wouldn't know what it was because there was only one guy who actually saw it. You just hoped for the best. Usually, the next day the Vietnamese would go out and sweep these areas where we made contact in the Sadec. Nine times out of ten, they wouldn't find anything because the Sampan was all shot full of holes and if there were any bodies they would normally drift downstream so they wouldn't be close to the area.

- C: Most of the enemy that you had any contact with, would it be Viet Cong or would it be the Army of the North Vietnamese?
- L: Down in the Delta, it was mostly Viet Cong. I don't think that there were any instances that I can remember of North Vietnamese. However, I can remember one guy buying a North Vietnamese helmet in the downtown, I believe, from a Vietnamese person who was selling souvenirs; he had this North Vietnamese helmet. It was like the ones you see on television right now that all of these soldiers are wearing, the ones with the little gold star on it. It was the real thing. Whether that had been picked up from some North Vietnamese soldier in the Delta or just brought down somehow through the trails, I don't know.

Most of the contact in the Delta was with Viet Cong. That's why they say the South Vietnamese Army was controlling the war down there because there was no heavy fighting from the North Vietnamese.

The Viet Cong were very subversive. They would go around at night and collect taxes from the people and try to get money for their war effort. They were trying to control their minds. The North Vietnamese were the fighters. They won the war, actually, now that we look back on the whole thing. The Viet Cong realized that they didn't have the arms, equipment, or men to win the war, and they asked the help of the North Vietnamese, who actually swept through.

- C: The Viet Cong, as you say, were subversive, underground-type fighters. They could be a farmer in the daytime and an enemy at night. Were most Americans pretty suspicious of those people, of the people in general over there? If you were walking down the street and somebody shouted Viet Cong, would everybody just open fire?
- L: The base was right near Vinh Long City, and on your day off you could go downtown. You could go down to the bars and go see the women and do whatever came naturally in various places. You weren't allowed to take weapons off of the post when you weren't on a military mission. So as far as anybody yelling, "Viet Cong," it wouldn't have done you any good because you would have been in just as bad of shape as any of the civilians there. There were a lot of Vietnamese soldiers walking around town. There were civilian guards that were the local area police force and they would supposedly handle anything that would happen.

Most of the Viet Cong didn't come out in the daytime as Viet Cong. They might have been the guy who came and picked up the laundry; they could have been the women who worked in the PX. She would see what was going on and how many people were there. If she walked by the air field, she would count the helicopters and go home and tell whoever what was going on. It was hard to say who was what. Most of the American people had money and, naturally, the Vietnamese had no money. It was a report type of thing where they would sell you whatever you wanted for the price. Most of them were very friendly to the extent that we were invading their country. They tried to be sociable, I found, to a great extent. Physically we were bigger than them so we would tend to dominate them. People tend to oppress whomever they can, so there were some Vietnamese people that were abused by soldiers. After a few too many beers, they just didn't have any respect for people in general.

- C: How was it when you would go into the city? You mentioned the one city Bien Long City, what would you do there?
- L: Nine times out of ten you would go downtown and have a few beers. They had these bar girls. They would come up to you, young girls, and want you to buy them a tea. "You buy me a Saigon tea," they would say right away. You would say, "No, no way." All these young girls, hey, you're away from home and you have got nothing else going for you and . . .
- C: You say young, how old?
- L: Probably sixteen, seventeen, on up in that area. These young girls would get you a beer and then they would want you to buy another drink for them. It costs you about five dollars for a drink. The girl would get half of this and the bar would get the other half. Really what it was was either tea or coke, or something in a little glass. This girl could drink a hundred of them before you could get three beers down. If you were in an especially susceptible mood a lot of guys would lose a lot of money over there. That's why I think the pullout of all of us American soldiers really killed that economy because these were the actual people who were getting American money. The ones downtown and the people working on the bases in Vietnam were the people who were washing clothes. The hooch maids and the gentlemen who took care of the latrines were the people who were actually getting money directly from the Americans and not through American foreign aid to the government disseminated through the channels to the people. Very little of that money trickled to the people. The American soldiers actually spent a lot of money in that country directly with the Vietnamese. So, our pullout killed their economy, I believe. There must have been thousands of bases and fire bases where American soldiers were that had Vietnamese people working there. There were a lot of Vietnamese people employed by the Americans besides the ones in Saigon who managed to make it out.
- C: Would a typical city over there look like a city over here, in terms of the shops and the clothing that you can buy, trinkets, jewelry, and things like that? Was it pretty much the same?
- L: Yes, most of the cities were designed by the French who had been there for a long time before us. They were built along the order of our downtown streets. They weren't as wide, but they had many small, little shops right along the roadway there and you could go in and find just about anything you wanted. Most of the tailors would have Sears and Penney's catalogs and anything. You would just point at it, go through the catalog and point out what you wanted and then

- in two or three days they would get some material and would whip up any type of clothing you wanted. A lot of guys bought suits, jackets, pants, and shirts made by these tailors. They were very industrious people.
- C: How about the prices? You mentioned, five dollars for a drink at the bars in town. Does everything correspond accordingly, would a suit over there cost you two hundred dollars?
- L: No, the clothing prices were fairly low from what I remember. You could probably get something that was in the Penney's catalog for \$75 for maybe \$30 or \$35, something on that order. Most of the items that you bought downtown were black market items that you could have bought at the American PX, but then there were other things. There were handmade goods that the Vietnamese people had actually made themselves. There were novelties and souvenirs of the country that people would just buy. All in all, I think the prices were fairly reasonable, except in the bars; they were after your money. You would pay eighty cents to a dollar for a beer, a dollar for a mixed drink. Back at the base, at the enlisted men's club, the drinks were only fifteen cents for a beer and a quarter for a mixed drink. So, if you wanted the entertainment of the young Vietnamese women, you would have to pay for it, naturally. Just about everything you wanted you could get at the base with the exception of women.
- C: As far as the black market items over there, how would they compare in terms of price? You mentioned that you could get anything. Did they have a lot of American goods that they sold at black markets, is that what it mostly was?
- L: Yes, anything that was available to these people that they could get; they would try to sell to whoever would buy it. They had a lot of things that you would have at the base. Most of the black market items were actually things that American soldiers would buy at the PX. If he needed a few bucks, he would take them downtown and sell them. Then he would have money to go drink in a local bar.
- C: How long were you over there?
- L: I was in Vietnam fourteen months.
- C: Isn't that longer than usual?
- L: The normal tour of duty is twelve months. If you come back to the United States with less than five months to do of service time, you could get a five month early out, which I applied for. I figured I was a married man and had a

daughter at home. I didn't need to be in the Army making \$100 or \$200 a month. I figured as soon as I would get out of Vietnam I should be done with it. I extended this extra two months and got a five month early out. I was only in the Army a total of nineteen months. I had made sergeant in those nineteen months, which was kind of surprising, really, that I could make that much rank in that short of time. I think the older soldiers realized that this was the last big war so they gave away rank very easily. There were a lot of awards and decorations that were given away very easily.

To get promoted the more medals and decorations you have the better it looks on your service record. For these older NCO's and officers, the more ribbons and all on your chest, the better it looks when promotion time comes around. Our CO was very conscious of this and he had put us in for a lot of medals and ribbons, which I think we deserved, being unwilling over there doing the job. What else can they give you besides medals and ribbons?

The company did just about everything; you name it, we did it. At one time or another, having all of these vehicles besides the ambushes and all, we would go out and escort convoys, truck convoys of fuel and ammunition and all, up toward the Cambodian border. We would escort convoys to Saigon about once every month. The mess trucks from the mess hall would have to go to Saigon to get provisions; we would escort the trucks up there and then come back the next day. If a helicopter was shot down from our base, since we were the only infantry people, they would fly us out there and we would secure the area until they removed the pilot and helicopter. We also went on a mission looking for a roving POW camp down in the Delta. These were two pilots that were shot down and they flew us down there and we swept through this big area that these people were supposedly in, but didn't find anything. We couldn't find them unfortunately. I remember reading after the peace treaty was supposedly signed that the Viet Cong released two pilots down near this area; I can't remember the name of the area right now, but if my memory serves me right, these were the two pilots that we had been looking for three years before they were released. These people were roving around the Viet Cong all this time.

- C: What would you say would be the best experience that you had over there? Also, what was the worst experience in the military like?
- L: The closest to death I came . . . luckily I was never involved in fire fight so whether you can say I was an infantry soldier, I don't know. The closest I ever came to actually going was one afternoon when we were out on a day's sweep of an area looking for Viet Cong and blowing bunkers. They build



big mounds out of mud and crawl in at night; when the artillery is coming in they just hide inside of there. When the artillery stops they go out. We were out on this one sweep blowing bunkers, just sweeping through the area looking for whatever we could find. We had to cross a canal which was flowing very fast. I and another American got a bunch of weeds together and piled all of these weeds together which would float. We took off our boots and set our weapons and ammunition and all on top of this so that we could swim across and just push this stuff across with us. We got it all together and we started and we got about halfway across when the current started sweeping us. It started sweeping this little raft and the raft was breaking up. I could see our weapons starting to fall off, so I reached over and grabbed my M-79 grenade launcher. I reached over and grabbed that and a vest for this, which carried about twenty-four rounds. It was fairly heavy. I had that in my right hand and it was starting to pull me under. I was trying to swim with my left hand to get to the other shore so that I wouldn't lose this \$200 worth of equipment in one hand. As I was swimming, I could feel my wedding ring on my left hand start to slide off. Here I am trying to swim with one hand, trying to hold my wedding ring on and keep my chin above water. I thought I was going to drown. I thought should I throw the weapons down and try to make it across. I gave it one more stroke, and just as I reached my hand out one of the Vietnamese soldiers grabbed my hand and pulled me ashore. I would have drowned or lost these weapons. That was about the closest I came to being done in. Shortly after we got across we learned that one of the Vietnamese soldiers had died crossing that river because he was swimming across on a log or something, jumped off the log, and the water was too deep and he just went down. It was just that fast of a stream. It was only twenty-five yards wide I would say, but it was really flowing fast. After that when they found we lost this one Vietnamese that was with us they called in helicopters and took us out of there. We realized that crossing the stream wasn't worth it after all.

- C: You mentioned that you would escort trucks north to Da Nang and also the Cambodia things. Were there any Americans going into Cambodia at that time?
- L: These convoys toward Cambodia were American helicopter bases that were right there along the border, within ten miles of the border. We would have to escort them then. This was before the Cambodian invasion. During the Cambodian invasion we were flown up to an area right along the border and we were in charge of security at an air field where all these helicopters that were ferrying the troops back and forth into Saigon refueled. We got involved in that and they gave us awards for this, being involved in military

operations. It was an experience to be doing different things, and seeing a little bit of the country. It was really beautiful, a beautiful country. It was green, lush, tropical scenery in the Delta and it was all flat. There were a lot of old churches and monasteries, and a lot of beautiful architecture.

- C: Getting around like you did, whether it be guarding like watching the perimeter of this helicopter base, I would assume that you probably met and ran into a lot of soldiers going back and forth into other operations and stuff. What were the attitudes of the other soldiers? Were they down? Were they up? Did they feel that we should be there or not be there? Did they care?
- L: Most of the people that I met on our base were helicopter pilots, the crew chiefs for the helicopters, the door gunners, and all. These guys were out there every other day. I guess they would go out and fly and be carrying Vietnamese troops back and forth to different areas. They were out shooting up people and having a good time. They enjoyed the war more so than the guy on the ground walking around because they were flying; they were taking more of a chance. Chance is what makes life so exciting. If you don't risk anything you don't enjoy anything. There people seemed to have a good attitude. Most of the officers had signed up to go to flight school. They could have been a two-year draftee and been done with it, but they signed up for a four-year flight program to get the benefits of being an officer and the excitement of flying and being in there. I think most of the people that I ran into over there were doing a job. What's the difference between working at Sheet & Tube and flying a helicopter in Vietnam? That was their attitude--they were doing a job. There was really no great patriotism and nobody carried a flag with them when they walked down the street after they were out on their job all day. That was really what it was all about. These guys would come back after a day's work and drink beer and laugh and sing and have a good time like everybody else.
- C: One last question, and that is being that you were over there for fourteen months in Vietnam, and of course now that Vietnam has gone communistic, do you have any feelings as to knowing that there were a lot of people killed and things like that? Do you have any personal feelings that perhaps it was all a waste or it was a good thing that we were over there? How do you feel about that?
- L: Well, it kept the economy going for fifteen years. As far

as the 56,000 Americans that were killed there, I'm not being fatalistic or saying that these guys shouldn't have died or they should have died, but how many people were killed on American roads last year in accidents? It's unfortunate that they had to die, but when it's your time to go it doesn't make any difference where it is. As far as losing the war, we never really tried to win it. We had the helicopters and our top brass figured we could get soldiers from here to there in twenty minutes by helicopter so there is no point in securing this area with troops on the ground like we did in World War II and Korea; there was never really any great concerted effort to win. We were just there as a peace-keeping force, I think, trying to keep the Viet Cong and Vietnamese from fighting. It was really a political war. They were getting a lot of money and we were getting a lot of gains through our economy moving and keeping production up and everything. It was a strange situation where we were fighting a war for someone else and we had no person to hate. In World War II we had Hitler; we had Hirohito; we had Mussolini. In Vietnam who did the American people have as an enemy? Ho Chi Minh was always the grandfather image. The only time you saw pictures of him was when he was in a white outfit with the little kids running around. He was a person to love, not hate. The American people really couldn't get behind the war. It was 10,000 miles away from us in a place that nobody ever heard of before. We were really invaders in the country because it was really more or less of a civil war. The Viet Cong were South Vietnamese people who were political radicals similar to our Sons of Liberty, I think. When they found they couldn't win the war they asked the North Vietnamese for help. Here are the Vietnamese fighting the Vietnamese. They were political forces inside the same country fighting, and we actually were the invaders, which was what the Viet Cong would use in their philosophy at night when they went to all these villages and collected taxes from these people. They would say that we Americans were the invaders there. In the daytime, when the Saigon government troops would come around and collect the taxes, they would say that the Viet Cong were the invaders. The people were so torn between forces that, as you see now, the only thing they have is standing around looking and enjoying the view of these other Vietnamese troops coming into their cities now. Their loyalties were not with Saigon or Hanoi or wherever; it was right in their own little area, down in the Delta. They had their farm, if they could farm it because of the taxes on the people. If they used so much land there was more tax. They had their loyalties within their own little village and with people there. They sort of went about their own daily routine. Trade in the village was controlled by a small group. A political war didn't mean anything to them, just another place to pay taxes.

C: Do you think it was obvious in 1971 when you were leaving there that on our pullout they would eventually fall and go communistic?

L: No, there was no real evidence. The Vietnamese troops that we worked with most of the time were young guys that were basically lazy. They didn't want to fight the war that they had experienced all their lives. These twenty year old soldiers have been fighting a thirty year old war. They were very pathetic about the entire thing. They served their time. We were lucky enough to be American and have a two year obligation. They were Vietnamese and had a lifetime obligation until the war was over. There was no evidence on their part that they were actually trying to win it. They figured we would do it for them; that's why we were over there in the first place, to win the war for them. When I left I figured things would just keep going like they did. I didn't imagine that the American people would pull out and that the war would be ended so quickly. Once the Americans were there, I could see the way the Vietnamese routed within the past two months. It was quite evident from all of the fighting that had been going on, these people, even with all their American training and American equipment, just didn't have the spirit to keep fighting. Their loyalties weren't with Saigon; it was just their own individual village which they were torn away from to go fight a war in some other part of the country. I think these people will be better off now as communists because there will be a big shake-up there in their political structure, probably something on the order of China. All of the people in China, supposedly, are happy from all the reports we're getting in. I think Vietnam will turn into that type of a situation where the delta rice lands will open up to the people and there will be prosperity. Some day in the future we may be taking tours of Ho Chi Minh City and eating rice from Vietnam. I think that is what it will lead to.

C: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW