

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU Veterans Project

Vietnam War

O.H. 1224

JERRY BREST

Interviewed

by

James E. Duffy

on

July 12, 1989

## GERALD LEE BREST

Jerry Brest currently lives at 199 S. Main Street in Youngstown, Ohio. He was born in Sharon, Pennsylvania on February 9, 1947, and was raised in Masury and Brookfield, Ohio by his parents, Robert and Mary Brest. In 1965 he graduated from Brookfield High School.

In 1966, he entered the U. S. Army and served until his discharge in June of 1968. During that time, he served ten months in Vietnam as a teletype operator. It was during this period that he was wounded and was awarded the Purple Heart.

Returning from Vietnam, Jerry was hired by GATX in Masury, Ohio in 1969. He left GATX on disability and entered Youngstown State University in 1979, graduating with a Bachelor's in Philosophy in 1983. He also attended law school for one year at Ohio Northern.

Jerry is currently residing with his wife, Ginger, and has three children: Kelly, age 13; Joeli, age 6; and Breana, age 9 months. He has been active in the Father's Rights Movement and is currently Coordinator of the Vietnam Veterans Information Project. Jerry is also a member of the Vietnam Veterans of America, Voices of Disabilities, the National Federation of the Blind, and the National Congress of Men. Jerry has been very active in lobbying the U.S. government for increased veteran's benefits, action on Agent Orange legislation, and has worked to aid incarcerated Vietnam veterans.

In his spare time, Jerry says he enjoys fishing and suing the government on behalf of Vietnam veteran's rights.

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INTERVIEWEE: JERRY BREST  
INTERVIEWER: James E. Duffy  
SUBJECT: Vietnam Experience

D: This is an interview with Jerry Brest for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Vietnam War, by Jim Duffey, at 119 South Main Street, on July 12, 1989 at 4:30 p.m.

Jerry, which branch of the service did you serve in?

B: I was in the Army.

D: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

B: I was drafted.

D: What year did you enter the service?

B: I entered the service in 1966 and served two years and was discharged in 1968.

D: You served in Vietnam from what time?

B: From the end of 1967 through June of 1968.

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

B: Spec 4, E-4.

D: How far up in the ranks is that?

B: That is the fourth grade up. You go in as an E-1, the lowest private then work your way up.

D: What type of training did you receive for service in Vietnam in addition to the regular boot camp training?

B: I was a teletype operator in communications division in Vietnam and I received a teletype training, pretty extensively, however I wasn't trained at all with any weapons for the combat experience that I experienced in Vietnam.

D: You did experience combat in Vietnam?

B: Yes. I was wounded there.

D: Was there a reason why they didn't train you for the combat side of it?

B: It was because my MOS, which is your job description, as a teletype operator are usually people who are in the rear echelon, they are the protected troops, they weren't supposed to see combat until you get over to Vietnam, when you find out that nothing was protected. Combat was everywhere. So it was only the Infantry people, Artillery and the MP's that were trained in any kind of combat at all, because they were supposed to encounter combat.

D: Everybody eventually got involved in the actual combat?

B: They years I was there, you were probably one in a million if you didn't get involved in it.

D: When did you first arrive in Vietnam?

B: I got there in September of 1967.

D: You did teletype work there?

B: Yes.

D: What did your work consist of?

B: As a teletype operator, first of all, I was at a communication's station around the main base. There we had a command post. I was typing in messages, what the troops would need, what divisions were here and there. I was attached to an Artillery division with the 4th Infantry division. We had to do that back at the base camp. Two weeks after I was there, I was sent out to a fire support base out in Dac Tow, which was near the Iron Triangle. Then I took a teletype van, of course teletype equipment had to be air conditioned therefore, you had a van to transport all of that in. We went in convoys for transport. What I was doing at the fire support base that was way out in the boonies, was supporting the infantry divisions. Punching in the troop strength every day, the body counts, those killed in action, missing in action, what the enemy strength would be and relaying that back to the base camp, which was probably 50 miles away at the time.

D: Recently there has been a case in court that was dropped where General Westmoreland had exaggerated body counts. Were you aware of that at the time you were there? I know you are probably talking about our people that died, but were you aware of the differences in the numbers that the government was giving versus what you knew to be true?

B: I wasn't sure. I didn't find it out until almost twenty years after I was wounded that I was sitting on something hot. We\* had a location at Dac Tow. This had been the first time that the Vietnamese Army was going to come South. They were building up for the Tet, which was 1968. We were sitting on a very hot spot and I didn't know it until twenty years later, I read it in the Sharon Herald when I was wounded. I read on the front page, "Documents Captured at Dac Tow" That's where I was, I knew that a lot of our people (the airborne troops) had been slaughtered. I wasn't sure of what was going on. I knew we were in a lot of heavy action because every day I was punching in, although it may seem small to the civilian but when you're punching in a body count of our people killed, maybe 96 a week or something like that, you're punching in 10, 11, 12 people a day being killed. That seems small back in this country when you are in a war that's heavy, but I was also punching in the troop strength of the enemy coming down.

I saw one day, 1000, the next day 4,000, within a week it was up to 24,000. So I knew we were sitting on something hot and we were being surrounded. I was in the middle of that and I didn't know what was the truth and what wasn't. I didn't have contact with the top echelon and I wasn't out there with the combat troops, infantry guys fighting all this to verify any of it. All I could do was take that information, put it in my teletype, punch it out and send it out over signals.

D: No how did they get information like that? How did they know that there were going to be 4,000 or whatever Vietnamese? How does our Army get that information?

B: The infantry would go out and make contact with them or have a confrontation with them and they would get into certain skirmishes or battles whatever the case may be. Either a simple fire-fight or a large scale battle or something, probably 5 miles from where I was located at the fire base. That information would come through their platoon commander

back to our fire base commander and that would be given to me to send that back down to the original base that we were at. So you are taking a report from those who had contact with the troops, which was number one.

Secondly, they would try to verify it by aerial, which was when different kinds of planes or jet fighters might spot some movement, or even the choppers who were flying troops in and out would see this and confirm it. There would be all types of observations to back this up. Now whether that got juggled before it got to me, that was beyond me.

D: Then that wasn't your job to make that evaluation, just to report it.

B: No. If Westmoreland was lying or if he, himself were being deceived, there is nothing I could say. I had no information on it and had no way of verifying anything like that.

D: I'd like to go back for a minute, before you went to Vietnam, you knew you were going to go there, you probably anticipated what it was going to be like, what were your feelings about going to Vietnam and what did you expect it to be like?

B: I expected to get to Vietnam and be caught in a bunch of turmoil as I had seen in my last two years of high school, where we saw those Monks and Buddhists burning themselves in the streets of Saigon. I thought that was what it would be like because I wasn't trained for combat, so I figured I wasn't going to be in the rice paddies and all that. I got over there and I saw nothing like that as far as political protests and all that, it was just the military all over the place, and fighting day and night was going on. I didn't see all the killing, although I was real close to it. I could hear things and they'd be reported back the next day. I expected to see more political dissension that I had seen in the films in my last two years of high school. Fear was with me because I had seen my buddy two weeks before I left. Well, I was home on leave before I went to Vietnam, my buddy from Sharpsville was killed. I saw him at a funeral home in Sharon and I figured well, that's the way we're all going to come back.

D: What was the most difficult part for you about serving in Vietnam at the time you were there?

B: The toughest things were probably the personal ones. Getting wounded, I thought I was going to come home clean because I was there less than a year to begin with, 10 months. When I was wounded and I knew I was hurt, that started the bitter hatred against my government because I was drafted. I never supported the draft yet I didn't fight it. I thought it was wrong and illegal simply because it took away my constitutional rights, just not to participate in the military, although I let them take me along. That was the hardest thing after I was wounded because I thought I was going to be crippled for life. I was hit in the eye. I thought I was going to have to live with one eye.

Secondly, while I was recuperating in Japan, I was engaged at the time back in the States, I didn't know about it, I was sent back to Vietnam. I thought I was going to be sent home because I was wounded, but no, the Tet Offensive was coming and I was sent back.

They needed us there. I received a dear John when I got back. So that took its toll on me. I don't know how most of the people got through it. I don't know how they didn't blow their brains out. I should say probably the easiest thing was I had a good cause to live for. My parents wrote me, my aunts, my uncles, my cousins, everybody down the line. Even my one friend who was drafted and had to go to Korea. He was writing me from Korea trying to cheer me up. I had good support going on with those emotional downfalls that would have devastated other people.

D: How about the attitude of most of the American soldiers that you came in contact with there? As the war went along, it seems as though a lot of the guys that went there had been exposed to the protest movements. They had more of a negative attitude about why they were there and they just kind of wanted to keep their head down and survive. In the early days when I graduated and you did, it seemed like the guys went there and they had this idea that they were there for preserving democracy, stopping communism, it was the thing to do. How was the attitude of the American soldier when you were there?

B: The attitude I know best was probably among the support troops. You have to remember in 1967, this is prior to Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy being killed. Even though this is only a few months before that, there wasn't all that build up, especially when you came from a little town, as I did, in Masury with 1500 people. I was removed from the San Francisco scene. I didn't do the New York scene and things like the demonstrations. I never knew about it except what I got over there from the media. I didn't experience it among my fellow troops. I didn't know all that much about the political end. My biggest experience about the political side of the demonstrations happened to be after I got back home in 1968. I arrived during all that. I think the heaviest of that began in 1968 with the convention up in Chicago and went on through 1969 and 1970 at Kent State and things like that. So I missed all of that political garbage.

D: So most of the people that were there when you were there actually felt it was a good cause to fight for.

B: Yes, it was still a cause. You were doing it for your country whether you liked the draft or not, and there had to be something good in it. Your country put you there. The Vietnamese hadn't turned on us, which I had heard later after the Tet Offensive. Then it was "Charlie," "Charlie's got a hold of them now and they are going to slash their throats and things like that." We thought we were still doing something that was just and honorable.

D: I had talked to a Vietnam Vet a number of years ago. He was a neighbor of mine. He had a pretty bad attitude about the South Vietnamese soldiers and their commitment to the war. He felt that you really couldn't trust them. I was wondering if you had any experience with the South Vietnamese as far as depending on them when a fight broke out.

B: There, again, those are the guys who were probably in combat who had to rely on the South

Vietnamese troops. That's under military orders that those are your buddies. I didn't know of any of that so I didn't have any experience with the South Vietnamese at all, pro or con.

D: Where were some of the places in Vietnam where you served?

B: I only served in the three places. When I arrived in the country, I was in Pleiku, which was the central highlands, when I was with the 4th infantry division; and then I was sent on the outreach program at the fire base at Dac Tow, 50 miles Northwest of Pleiku at the three country junction there. Finally, after I was wounded and recuperated in Japan, I was sent to Long Bin, which was where all the brass was, outside of Saigon.

D: We've got twenty or better years behind us now, when you look back on the war in Vietnam have your feelings changed in any way about the way the war was conducted?

B: Yes. We didn't know about it but we were wasting lives. It was a massacre of people. It so happens that we killed 58,000 of our own people there, I call them teenagers. We were all 18, 19, and 20 years old. We destroyed a whole generation in the process. We're still picking up the remnants of that today. It was a wasted effort. When I came back I was in a daze about why I had been there, what had gone on, then when I saw the demonstration, I figured who the hell is right and wrong in this country? Twenty years later I'm trying to say how could anything have had such an impact on this country as that stinking war. Then when you come down to slaughtering people without any cause at all, you have no answer to it.

D: Do you think the war would have been won if it had been done differently?

B: We could have physically conquered them. In terms of politics, no, because as we are seeing today in Russia, which is all garbage. When the people get sick of it, and that was where the Vietnamese were, meaning Ho Chi Minh and his people from the north, they will say, "We are the people, we will say what goes on in our country." I was a foreigner there. No matter what differences we may have, you bring a foreigner here and watch how good we get our act together. We'll do anything to defeat them. It could have been won in a physical sense, but that is domination.

D: Since the French tried to beat them twenty years even before that and couldn't do it, maybe we should have seen the handwriting on the wall.

B: I think it was the same thing. The French probably could have physically won the war, but politically, they weren't even close to it.

D: There has been so many movies made in recent years about Vietnam, it seems to be a hot topic right now. Are any of these movies accurate or realistic in terms of what the war was really like?



B: Well most of the time, I'm going by the stories I've heard from the airborne and the grunts, those who were on the front lines. I had heard stories about the hill, Hamburger Hill. I heard about all the wasted life going up one day and coming back down. I heard it from the Marines too.

D: What you are referring to was that you could take a hill one day and at night it would be taken back over by the enemy. There was no conquered territory.

B: Twenty years later I'm talking to guys who have PTSD. Well, when they see a movie like that with blood and guts all over and their buddies gone for no reason and it's all given back anyway, it is nothing but a piece of dirt. There was no sense in that. There are different aspects according to whom you interview, although I never experienced it. That is second hand information for you. I would highly recommend Platoon, if not for the combat effect of it, because there was a lot of that going on, for the fact of receiving letters and writing home. Some of that did go on. I don't like what's going on but you keep some personal contact there. Not everybody went there waving the flag. Some went there doing their duty. They thought they were doing their duty. Some went there believing in defending the Constitution. Some went just because they were at the age of being drafted. Those who volunteered got there and started questioning why they even volunteered to go there. That I would recommend.

Another movie that I feel did not receive much publicity at all, is a movie called Bat 21 that came out last year, it didn't even hit the theaters in the Youngstown area. I just saw it recently, and it showed something that I never even knew about. Even when I was punching them in as MIA, I thought that everybody who was wounded or didn't show up, automatically became a POW or MIA or something like that. BAT 21 talks about the efforts of trying to rescue one Colonel who had been shot down in his fighter. It showed the heroic efforts, the waste of life, the 10 or 15 American who were killed just trying to get this person out. There is another aspect of the war that we don't hear about. We just assume that everybody either got killed or they're MIA or POW right now. We don't know of the ones who were retrieved by our own troops.

D: You mentioned some letters, I think it was PSTC?

B: PTSD.

D: What does that stand for?

B: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

D: How would you explain that?

B: It manifests in a mental, emotional and physical disorder, depending on what is going to hit you that day because of the trauma that you experienced in Vietnam. It used to be the feeling

that only those in combat would suffer from PTSD because they had killed. They had seen so much bloodshed and saw all their friends die. Then we found out later that it wasn't only them, it was the nurses, the orderlies, those who bagged bodies, the doctor's who couldn't put these kids back together again, things like that. It was just the utter frustration of it. That was all traumatic to them also. It has been my presumption that everybody who was in Vietnam has PTSD. Now, whether it manifests into a disorder is another case. There is always some stress but depending on how you handle yourself in life, you may be able to keep it in control. You can deal with it. If you can't resolve those things, then it turns into a disorder.

D: Are there statistics on how many people are really having problems with PTSD?

B: The last report I saw on it was that 50% of those who served are suffering from PTSD. Now that is well over one million, because almost 3.2 million served. This was information I gathered at an Agent Orange hearing I was at in D.C. in March of this year, from an American Legion report. What manifests this PTSD may also be related to Agent Orange because the chemicals that got into us affected our CNS (central nervous system). You may be showing some physical discomfort or some sicknesses, but yet it is actually coming from that. That may trigger some of the mental disabilities that veterans are experiencing.

D: I was going to bring up the Agent Orange issue later, but as long as we are on the topic, I know you have been very active in getting help from the government as far as Agent Orange. Could you describe exactly what Agent Orange was, what its purpose was, how it affects people and what have you been able to do to get the government to recognize that it has been a problem for vets?

B: Agent Orange is a name for the 55 gallon barrels that had orange bands around them and contained defoliants or herbicides that had various chemical compounds in them. They were used supposedly--this is what the government says--to defoliate the heavy vegetation over in Vietnam so that our front line troops wouldn't be exposed to so much enemy attacks and enemy confrontations. That's what the government says. There were also 11 million gallons dumped on South Vietnam, a country the size of Massachusetts. Additionally, there was 15 to 20 million gallons of agent purple, blue, green, white, pink, almost every color in the spectrum. There were poisons such as arsenic, rat poison, and things like that dumped either in gallons or poundage, whatever the case may be. Now our government says they were trying to defoliate the forest but some of the printouts that I have, which have come out of government documents, showed that they tried to destroy some of the food that the enemy was using.

When you get into things like trying to destroy food that actually gets into the humans, I believe the government was using chemical warfare in violation of the Geneva Convention. That is a whole other aspect. That is my view of it. I don't care what the government has said. They have lied to us. They have killed so many Vietnam veterans from this Agent Orange and other elements and so many of the South Vietnamese have died

from multiple birth defects coming out of the country, it is just astronomical. They can't use the excuse that they were just trying to keep the vegetation down so we could fight a better war.

D: You mentioned the food of the South Vietnamese. Did you mean they were trying to poison the food of the North Vietnamese or again defoliating, trying to poison the food of the South Vietnamese?

B: They were using chemicals on the foods over there and as it was at the time, the South Vietnamese were afraid of Charlie who were the South Vietnamese rebels, who at nighttime would come up to the village and say, "We want your food because we need it either for us or for the NVA troops coming down the Ho Chi Mihn trail," the hard core army out of the north. So the government having them in mind thought, "If we can't get to them and stop them, let's at least poison the food, and that way, they'll get it into their system. If their people do get sick then they're going to have to take care of people in the north who won't be able to fight a war." That is all part of chemical warfare. That is my reasoning on that.

D: It is likely that the problem you just talked about with the PTSD is the worst problem for vets today. But I'll ask you the question anyhow. What do you see is the biggest problem that the veteran of the Vietnam war faces today?

B: The biggest problem the veteran faces is rejection. The Vietnam veteran has never come home yet. We're here physically, we're not here mentally. That is the way its going to be and we're going to take it to our graves.

D: You mean you just haven't gotten over it, or can you explain what you mean by that?

B: It's not that we haven't gotten over it, it's that we haven't been allowed to deal with it publicly. First of all, we were rejected for the first twenty years that we were back in this country. Then, all of a sudden, movies are being made about us. Now it is good to say that we were heroes and all that. We don't want all of those labels. We are not looking for the accolades, yet no one wants to look at the fact that we were just young teenagers at the time and we went though a hell of massive killing without any reason at all. When you do anything in life in any aspect of life that has no basis to it, you are just tortured. This country is allowing us to be tortured, tortured to our graves right now.

D: What is the government doing to help the vets today, if anything?

B: The government's doing nothing. If you have been following the newspapers and anything I've been doing and anything that any Vietnam Veterans are saying throughout the country, the biggest enemy of the veteran is the Veteran's Administration. Now the public believes and as we were led to believe when we went to Vietnam and came back that the Veteran's Administration was in place to take care of us, our needs, our physical requirement, whatever

the case may be. We have been rejected over a 20 year period and it comes down to the fact that the VA is not only turning us away, when they do take us into their institutions they are giving us drugs to treat problems which are emotionally based or mentally based and that's not the way you treat individuals who have those types of problems.

Then when they can't put up with us anymore, they discard us, throw us out on the streets and say, "Hey, you're on your own. Make it as best you can." Then we're out again into the same society which has rejected us the past two decades. So, the government is doing nothing at all to help us. In fact it is taking an opposite view and putting Dan Quail in office. The government has made this statement that Vietnam doesn't count, "You veterans don't count. That is too bad about the Vietnam war. We're taking the guy who dodged the draft, he's got priority in this country." That is where we stand today.

D: If America were to become involved in another war similar to Vietnam, what would your feeling be about the U.S. becoming involved?

B: First of all, it has been my idea that the country will never become involved in another large scale war unless it is on our surface, in America, simply because war doesn't have the same meaning it did 30 or 40 years ago. Everything the military is based on right now is giving out government contracts, two congressional bodies. We see that going on in California, and in the Southern states. Congressmen and Senators who have been in office for 30 or 40 years have bases around their districts and things like that. There is never going to be a need for war again. What they'll do and what they've shown in places such as Beirut and Grenada is that if we can go in and wave the flag a few times and waste 100 or 200 bodies, America will put up with that. To me that is killing.

Back in America you'll get a president who will fly the flag and say they were proud and patriotic and all that. That eliminates the need for war, a little skirmish here and there and then you go ahead and try to rebuild the country by pumping in billions of dollars and things like that. It is all a masquerade. If this country ever went to a war such as Vietnam or anything that I disagreed with, I would be the first one to stand at the selective service offices, trying to shut it down. I'd do everything I could short of violence to shut it down, any kind of civil disobedience. I'd stand in front of airliners just to tell the kids the truth of what happened to me and what happened to our generation and how our country was divided. I would take a personal effort, but I understand I would be among the minority. I know that.

D: A lot of what you talked about here is going to go back to high school students and your own kids are going to probably have questions as they get older. If you had one important lesson about the war in Vietnam to teach to your own kids or to students, what would it be?

B: It's real simple, and I'm probably one of the most patriotic people in this country. Do not serve in the military of the United States for any reason, under any conditions. This country is not worth it. Death is the end result.

D: Do you think most wars are a negotiated settlement and why fight to begin with?

- B: Yes. I think all wars are calculated. After so many lives, after so many years, and after so many dollars this side is going to be sick of it. We see it going on over in the USSR, we see them wanting to go democratic. It all comes down to dollars and cents. They're running out of money and the people are sick of it. You can't have any more of these stupid wars. That's all America does. It is the same thing. If wars are so great for nations, then let's get the fat cats right out of D.C. and send them over. Let me load all kind of shit on their backs and dump all kinds of Agent Orange down their throats and let's send them over. If I had to do it at 19, they have no excuse not to go out and kill at 69 then; waste a few hundred of them, waste a few hundred of the suckers on capitol hill and then maybe people will have a different perspective.
- D: Do you have any other thoughts that maybe we haven't covered today before we close that you might want to bring up?
- B: I wish that somehow this country could overlook all this flag waving bullshit and reach into their hearts and have a massive welcome home for the Vietnam veterans who have paid the price, not because we were killers or heroes or because of all the medals we had, that doesn't matter. Just some human compassion. I see that nowhere. I just see people reaching deeper and deeper into their pockets, and the Vietnam veterans have to be the discarded element in society. I just wish people would have the compassion to reach down there and give something from their hearts and maybe reach into the walls and maybe show them that they were appreciated for one reason or another. Separate the warrior from the war. Forget about the damn war. That was all politics. We went, and some of us didn't want to go. Nevertheless, we went for whatever the cause was. Some of us got caught up in the killing, but then again, we were just being used by our country, for whatever the case may have been.
- D: Okay, Jerry, well, thank you very much for taking the time to spend with me this afternoon. I wish you a lot of luck with the Veterans organization.
- B: Thank you, I appreciate it, Jim.

END OF INTERVIEW