

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam War Experiences

Personal Experience

O. H. 1265

JOHN R. CUNNINGHAM

Interviewed

by

Douglas C. Senseman

on

March 11, 1987

JOHN CUNNINGHAM

This interview with John Cunningham was conducted in the living room of Tom Cononico's home in Girard, Ohio. The date of the interview was March 11, 1987. I had arranged the interview with Tom and Tom had asked John if he would like to also be interviewed. John arrived after my interview with Tom had begun. Since John was present for part of the other interview he makes the remark "As Tom said..." several times in this tape.

John was in Vietnam in the mid-1960's and thus gives us an idea of what was happening there before the United States had committed great numbers of men to the country.

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INTERVIEWEE: JOHN R. CUNNINGHAM

INTERVIEWER: Douglas C. Senseman

SUBJECT: Basic training, life of the soldier in Vietnam  
trip back from Vietnam, personal feelings on  
the war

DATE: March 11, 1987

S: This is an interview with John Cunningham for the  
Youngstown State Oral History Program on Vietnam War  
Experiences, by Doug Senseman, on March 11, 1987.

S: John, could you tell me what you were doing prior to  
the war in Vietnam?

C: I just got out of high school the Summer of 1964. I  
went into the Marine Corps in November of 1964.

S: How did you happen to get into the Marine Corps?

C: That's a good question. I guess I like to keep in  
shape and that was probably the best place you could do  
it. I just went in. I guess it was just the stigma of  
being in the Marine Corps more than anything else.

S: You said you hadn't heard much about the war, because  
it really wasn't a big thing then?

C: We were over there, but really, the Marine Corps really  
didn't get totally involved in the Vietnam War until  
the Summer of 1965. I volunteered to go over. It was  
a little bit of stupidity. The only way you could get  
any leave was to volunteer for a unit that was out of

the country. So I volunteered for the 3rd Marine Division. They were in Hawaii, I believe at the time. By the time my leave was over with, they were in Vietnam. That's where I ended up.

S: How old would you have been when you entered the Marines?

C: I was 18 years old.

S: How did your family feel when you decided to join the Marines when you told them?

C: My dad had died that summer and my mother never really said too much. Whatever I wanted to do, that was alright with her.

S: What kind of training did you receive in the Marines?

C: It was a good basic training. It got you in shape. They taught you well with the rifle. You were pretty much prepared for the general war situation. It was hard but they taught us well. We needed to know how to keep ourselves alive over there.

S: How long was your basic training?

C: I think I was in basic training about thirteen weeks. We had advanced training, I think six more weeks in North Carolina.

S: The advanced training was specifically for Vietnam?

C: Mostly. It taught you how to shoot a variety of weapons. We learned how to shoot a machine gun, and different weapons.

S: At what point did you volunteer for Vietnam?

C: I was at a school in Monford Point, North Carolina. It was a supply school, and they gave you a choice of duties. There were about five choices. If you chose one outfit in Hawaii, I can't remember what the outfit was...I think at the time, the 3rd Marine Division was still in California. They were supposedly going over to Hawaii. If you volunteered for either one of those outfits, you got to go home. If you didn't you'd have to go straight to where your duty was going to be. So I said, "Hey, I'll volunteer. I want to go home for a while." I was a little bit homesick at the time. I never really knew we were going to Vietnam, but I had an idea at that time.

S: Had you heard much about Vietnam at the time you were considering volunteering?

C: Just from what I had seen on television and from what people talked about. I really didn't have any contact with anybody that had actually been there before because there were never any outfits there before then.

S: How did you get over to Vietnam?

C: I had to report to El Toro, California, and then we stayed there for about a week. Then we loaded on a Naval Troop Carrier and from there, we went to Okinawa, which took about two weeks. Then we flew down to Vietnam on a cargo plane.

S: What did they do on the strip carrier on the way over?

C: I probably got to be one of the best 500 bid players you ever seen, because we must have played cards, day in and day out, from the time the sun came up. There were movies and other things. Really, we didn't have any duties. They didn't give us any duties. It was boring. The Navy didn't like us anyhow, so that caused a little bit of problems here and there.

S: The Navy, typically doesn't like Marines?

C: No. They don't like Marines.

S: So when you actually entered Vietnam, that was in 1964?

C: June of 1965.

S: In 1965, that's when we weren't at full force so what exactly were you doing then? Were you working at all with the South Vietnamese?

C: It was very disorganized. I was in 3rd Tank Battalion. We really actually didn't know what we were doing. This is kind of crazy. We weren't even allowed to load our rifles. We were out there and we didn't know what to expect. We didn't know what a Vietnamese was, we didn't know what to expect from the Vietcong or nothing else. They told us, "You don't load your rifle unless we tell you to." This was a war. It was crazy. We didn't know what we were doing to start with.

S: What was your first day like in Vietnam?

C: The daytime part of it was uneventful. I reported to 3rd Marine Division Headquarters. Right away, they said, "You're going to 3rd Tanks, someone will be down to pick you up." We were outside of Da Nang maybe three or four miles up on top of the hill. The daytime was nice. It was a beautiful day. The weather was

tropical but when it was nice, it was really nice in Vietnam. It was beautiful. The day was uneventful. We didn't have any problems. The first real experience was at night. I got guard duty the first night. We had a bunker right next to a tank overlooking the De-Nang River. The grunts were down in the woods in the front. We actually sat up on top the hill in this bunker and watched them shooting at each other. It was weird. I never got used to that. I never shot a rifle at anybody, other than on a rifle range before in my life. That was my first day over there.

S: What exactly was your job in Vietnam, then?

C: I was with the 3rd tank battalion. I was in the administration aspect of it. Other than when we got hit, I wasn't really into the actual out and out fighting. A couple times we'd go out to replace a ground unit, a grunt unit that had been out for three or four weeks. They'd bring them back just to give them some rest or something. For the most part, that was uneventful. That is where I got my actual experience with watching just how gory the war was. I was pretty much protected where we were. They tried to come up over the hill two or three times but with six machine guns and three of the biggest tanks you've ever seen. They didn't like our hill very well. They didn't come up there very often.

S: Now some people I've talked to told me that in some cases you can be in Vietnam and have almost a 9:00 to 5:00 war where basically you did your job and...Is that what you're telling me, that you weren't out in the field that much?

C: I wasn't out in the field that much. Where a lot of guys were subject to the war, per se, everyday, a lot of times, my day would be uneventful. I'd go down and I'd work, doing paper work, I would come back and maybe eat. With guard duty, you put a lot of 24 hour days in. Every other day, I think we were on guard duty. At least every third day. When we were on guard duty, we were up there from dusk until the sun came up in the morning. Then you still had to go take your shower if you had the chance. Sometimes you didn't even have time to get cleaned up and you had to be back on your job. They pushed you very hard like that.

S: So your first real encounter with the enemy then was your first day there?

C: Yes. I saw it. Those guys fought down there like crazy.

- S: What were your impressions regarding the North Vietnamese? How close did you actually come to them?
- C: Well, we got into a situation where part of our unit just wanted to get the heck out of there. We volunteered to protect a school because the North Vietnamese, Vietcong didn't like those kids going to school. They had a nice school. We'd go down there and protect it at night. We'd set up so they wouldn't harass it at night. I don't know whether I really met the North Vietnamese. I don't know if I'd know the difference between the two of them. They all looked like gooks to me.
- S: What was your rank when you were there in 1965?
- C: I made Corporal E-4.
- S: At that time, how were the relations in the early part of the year between the officers and the men?
- C: We had young officers. They were good people. We never really had problems. There was very little of the formality that you were taught. Over there, the officers didn't really want saluted.
- S: With the relations between blacks and whites, those seemed to be worse later. How about in the early part of the year when you were there in the early 1960's?
- C: I grew up in a home where my dad didn't care for blacks at all. I guess that was kind of in my mind too. When I got over there, I ran into a couple hillbillies that I hung with over there. We worked out and stuff with them. They had no use for them. Really, the blacks stuck with themselves. If one of them were in your tent with you, they'd treat you alright, but they are the same way a lot of them are today. One on one, they'll treat you alright, but if they get six or seven of them around together, you can't put up with them anyhow. That's what they did. If they got together, we'd just get the hell out of there. It was dangerous. You could get yourself in a jam in circumstances like that. For the most part, there wasn't any real troubles.
- S: Did some of the drug use in Vietnam start when you were there?
- C: Believe it or not, that is when I was listening to Tom's interview. I've thought and thought a lot about it. When I was there, I didn't see any instances of it. It could have been there, maybe I was naive enough to dismiss it but I was never into drugs, so I wasn't really looking for it. I don't think it was prevalent

at that time. Alcohol, yes. When I first went to Vietnam we got liberty in Da Nang until people started coming up missing and stuff. For about the first four or five months I was there, we'd get liberty once every two weeks in Da Nang.

S: What was Da Nang like?

C: Da Nang was sort of like Youngstown. It's got its nice sections and its got sections that you don't want to go to (We went there anyhow). The biggest thing was that in Vietnam, you learned new things. If you went into a bar for instance down there, there was only one restroom, because they were primitive. It was nothing for you to be in there and the next thing you hear somebody come in and there is some woman standing behind you waiting her turn. They just didn't have any cooth whatsoever, with respect to stuff like that. They catered to us. I was in an outfit where even after they quit liberty, I had a lot of occasions to go into Da Nang. I bought suits and stuff down there. They'd make anything you wanted. They'd do anything for you as long as you had a few bucks to give them.

S: You mentioned people coming up missing. How did that happen?

C: Probably the Vietcong. Many times you would go out and have to meet at a certain place for a truck to bring you back and somebody just wouldn't come back. You know what it had had to have been. That's the kind of stuff that started I think it was about four months into my tour they said, "No more liberty." Official liberty. We found a way to get in there if we wanted to but, no official stuff.

S: Did you form any friendships in Vietnam?

C: I don't think any true friendships. Probably the closest one I did know (I have to go down to the Vietnam Memorial and see his name on there) Divers. He and I were pretty good fiends. He was the only one I saw get blown away over there from our outfit. For the most part there was one guy I had his address, but it has been twenty-two years and I haven't wrote him yet or haven't called him, so obviously it couldn't have been much of a friendship.

S: Did you have problems with booby traps and mines when you were there? Was that a big factor early on in the war?

C: It scarred me. We'd sweep around at school and we'd go over there and stay at that school at night so the Vietcong would stay away from there. I wasn't really



scared of Vietnamese. They never really scared much as far as physically if I ran into one of them guys. Stepping on something or some of the nasty tricks they'd pull, that did bother me. They'd kill you that way because they couldn't kill you the way they wanted to.

S: What did you find to be the basic skills of survival when you were in Vietnam?

C: You had to keep on your toes, you had to never lose track of the fact that you were in Vietnam because like a guy that was in the Infantry, they got reminded of it everyday. But other than the Howitzers from the outfit behind you, they were on top of your head, going out and having strikes or...It is almost comical that you can sit up on top the hill and watch a war being fought and not even having to shoot at anybody. You had to keep all of that in perspective because one mistake and you're done. So you really had to watch yourself.

S: So up on top of the hill you felt that you weren't really in danger at that point, you felt secure?

C: Well, for the most part. Like I said, they came up over the hill two or three times, but we had so much fire power that they didn't get far. The biggest thing that scared me was fear. I learned how to sleep standing up, believe it or not. When you were on guard duty, there was always two people. One of you were allowed to sleep and the other one had to stay awake. Sometimes it got so hard to stay awake. What they'd do was if you were on the gun and you fell asleep and they came up over the hill and caught you asleep, they wouldn't bother you, they'd leave you sitting there and they'd kill the guy behind you because they knew you were in a whole bunch of trouble. That's just some of the stuff they pulled. It was real hard to stay awake sometimes but you had to do it.

S: Did that actually happen that you knew about?

C: An actual occasion of that, no, but we heard about it. That just fits right with them guys. They'd do something like that.

S: They would get court marshaled for falling asleep?

C: Oh, yes. plus that, you've got to live with the fact that your buddy got killed because you went to sleep. Sure they fed on stuff like that. They played with our brains a lot.

- S: You mentioned that you went out as a replacement for different units. How many times did you get out in the field?
- C: I think we went out three times. The most time I was ever out was I think one week, we replaced an outfit down in Marble Mountain. I can't even remember what the outfit was. They had been hit consistently for about a month and they were just physically tired and we had to go in and replace them. That is where I got a real education. That's when I found out what the war was all about. Guys carrying ears around on strings hanging from their belt, stuff like that. One guy was so proud he had to show me a fine looking tongue he had cut out. He was keeping it in formaldehyde. That's the truth. But then as I looked at it, they had to be crazy to survive. All I wanted was the hell out of there to be truthful with you. We got pinned down one time while we were on replacement but I'll tell you that I was never so glad to get back to that main base in my life.
- S: One of the questions I had asked in my other interviews was about forming a primitive state of mind. Is that kind of what you feel the people that were cutting off ears were doing?
- C: Yes. Sure. They shot them. They could have shot them with their rifles but these guys had hit them so many times, when they finally caught them, they used that. When they hit a guy, there would be bodies laying up on the trucks to be taken away. When they were unloading, there would be arms missing and half of their sides missing. When that thing hits you that hurts. They just did that kind of stuff. They would make you so mad that you'd do crazy things. That kept you alive too.
- S: None of the officers frowned on men doing that? Was anything said?
- C: No. It was the enemy.
- S: What kind of relations did you have with the South Vietnamese? Did you work with any of them?
- C: The only relationship we had was the bases we had in the back had clubs where at certain times of the day if you didn't have any kind of specific duty, you could go up and have a pop or a beer, or whatever. We always had a Marine in basic charge of it but the people who actually ran it were the Vietnamese. I thought I got to be friends with this guy I met. I'm glad it kind of happened early. We weren't there that long and he invited us all down to China Beach. It was a beautiful

beach. He bought all the hamburgers and the beer and they treated us real good. He ran our club. I thought I got to be real good friends with this guy and his daughter and we got hit about a month later. When they started gathering up bodies, he was one of them. He was a businessman by day and he was a Vietcong at night. When we tore the club up, we found rifles that he had stolen and had hidden under the floor of the club and stuff like that. After that I just didn't want a relationship with any of them. I just couldn't trust them anymore. I probably shouldn't have trusted them in the first place.

S: That probably wasn't unusual for them to try to do what they did. To try to get you to trust them and ...

C: Probably not. Sure.

S: You mentioned before that you were guarding a school of Vietnamese children. What was a typical day like there when you were guarding those kids. What did you do all day long?

C: We didn't go there all day long. We went in the afternoon and we'd sweep the villages around just to check out and see what we could find. You never really knew what to expect but for the most part, we never really did catch any heavy gun fire or anything like that. Then we'd go to the school itself and we'd set up, by then it would be getting later in the evening and we'd just stay there and guard the place. It was uneventful for the most part. They never really tried us. The reason we guarded the school was that they harassed situations like that. They didn't want education or anything like that, they didn't want any cooperation with people from the United State, any of the service people.

S: Did you have the opportunity to interact with any of the children or the teachers from that school?

C: A little bit. A lot of the time the kids could be nice, you just couldn't trust them. You looked at that and maybe thought that was a nice kid, then you got to thinking, well, is he really a nice kid or is he one of them or...I got some relationship with them.

S: How do you think they felt about you? Were they supportive of you being there?

C: Maybe the people at the school might have been, but the Vietnamese as a whole, wasn't grateful that we were there. They didn't care whether we were there or not. Like I said, they saw dollar signs, they'd sell you anything you wanted, and they were looking at the

commercial aspect of it. I don't think they really cared if we were there or not.

S: What were some of the things they sold to the G.I.'s?

C: I bought tailor made suits, pictures, anything imaginable. If you wanted it, you could find somebody who either had it or made it for you. They were good with things like that. If they could make a buck, they could figure out a way to get you what you wanted.

S: At the time you were there, what were the feelings on the war itself? Did the soldiers there in the mid-1960's feel that it was a mistake like they did in the later 1960's?

C: Actually, we thought we were going to win when I was there. Then towards the end of my tour is when they let you go so far and then you weren't allowed to go passed this line. Once they started that, we kind of figured, here we are, we're in another Korea. We're not going to win this one. Then people started getting discouraged. When I first went over there, we had it in our minds that we were going to go over there and kick the shit out of them and get the hell out of there. We could have done that. There isn't a doubt in my mind.

S: Did any of the big American Brass come over there? I know President Johnson visited Vietnam at one point.

C: I met Westmoreland one time, just briefly. I think that was the biggest brass I met while I was over there.

S: Did they have some of the U. S. O. Shows that you had a chance to see?

C: I saw a Bob Hope show one time. Ann Margaret came up to our complex, I saw Eddie Fischer, Billy Casper, the golfer, he came over one time, Charleton Heston came walking through. I saw a lot of people just come and go.

S: What was the Bob Hope Show like in Vietnam?

C: It was good. There were a lot of pretty girls. There weren't too many good looking women in Vietnam. When you got to see good looking women like that... Joey Heatherton was with him, she put on a show. I figured they were going to come up on the stage after her. She really put on a good show. It was something to take your mind from what was going on for a while.

- S: How did they decide which men got to see the show, or did everybody see it?
- C: Normally, you had to have so many people at the base. If you weren't on duty, per se, then you could go. That's how we got to see it. It was pouring down rain, but nobody cared. They didn't care either. If they were going to go up there and dance we were going to watch them.
- S: Did you ever require any medical attention during the war?
- C: I got blown out of bed one time from mortar fire, but I didn't get hurt. I got sick a couple times because you had to watch what you ate. I thought the medical attention was pretty good. Like I said, I've met doctors since I've been back that didn't know half as much and couldn't do half as good a job as some of them corpsmen did when someone did get hurt. Those guys really took their jobs seriously.
- S: I know you volunteered for Vietnam. You were pretty optimistic the whole time you were there that you were going to get out, survive and not have anything to worry about?
- C: Well, you didn't know how quick you were going to get out. You knew when you were supposed to get out, but if your replacement didn't show up for some reason or another, or if your tour was extended for another six months or whatever, that was always in the back of my mind. I was lucky. I spent maybe 12 months and 15 days and I was gone. The day they told me I was leaving, I was gone.
- S: How did Johnson happen to extend the tour of duty?
- C: It was in the middle of 1965 and he just extended their discharge date. These guys were due back and they were getting out as soon as they got back. He extended everybody for six months. These guys were fit to be tied. Plus, that, they weren't short timers anymore. We thought one of us were going to be killed for harassing them because they were telling up how they were going to leave and all of the sudden, they weren't going anywhere. They were stuck right there with us.
- S: How did you finally get the news that you were ready to be sent out?
- C: Our outfit worked like this. I tried to stay an extra year, early when I first got there. I told them if they would give me 30 days leave after my first year in the United States, that I would stay another year.

They weren't doing that at the time. They wouldn't let you go to the United States, they'd let you go to Hawaii, they'd let you go to Europe or wherever, but they wouldn't let you go back to the United States. I said, United States or I'm not going to do it. So about five months into your tour, they'd ask you your three choices of where you'd like to go for your next tour of duty. I put on Philadelphia as the first choice. About two months after filling that out they come back and tell you where you are going to go. They told me that I was going to Philadelphia. I got my first choice. They came back about two weeks later and told me that I could have 30 days leave in the United States if I wanted to stay over there with them. I said that they should have told me that before they told me that I was going to Philadelphia because I'm not doing it now. It worked out pretty good.

S: You were willing to take a pretty big risk though, to stay there an additional year for 30 days in the United States?

C: Yes, I was pretty gung ho. Like I said, the guys that went over later on were in a different situation that we were. We actually thought we were going to win that damn thing. Toward the end of my tour, I realized that we weren't going to. When I was willing to risk another year over there, I really thought that we were going to win it.

S: So you actually felt that in 1965 that the United States was not going to win the war?

C: Towards the end of my tour I didn't.

S: What made you arrive at that conclusion?

C: We felt that if we really wanted to win the war we should sweep, get a concentrated effort to start at the bottom and head north, and just take out everything that got in our way. A general in the Marine Corps felt the same way and brought it to their attention. The next thing you know, he was on forced retirement. When they did that we figured if they didn't want to win it, then what is the sense in us being here in the first place.

S: Now you mentioned when you first got there, you couldn't even load your rifle. How did that change by the end of your tour, or had it?

C: Well, other than being on guard duty, we were told that you didn't load your weapon. You had the clips available. We used M-14's that held 20 rounds of clips. Other than guard duty, you didn't load it.

- S: When you were leaving Vietnam did you have any regrets about it? What was the trip home like?
- C: We were all in Da Nang, they brought in a 747 Pan Am and anybody who was going back went at the same time. There were people from all aspects of Vietnam. From there we went to Okinawa, got on an old Air Force plane and flew from Okinawa to California. I remember the one engine catching on fire. Here I am, I make it through 12 months in Vietnam, this thing is going to wreck and I'm going to get killed.
- S: Were the men pretty rowdy on the way back? Were they so glad to get out that they just went crazy?
- C: Yes. That's the closest I've ever come to getting Court Marshaled. Before we left for home, they kept us for a few days in Okinawa with no liberty. We weren't allowed to go out on the town. I told my buddy that we were going. We went out anyhow. We were so glad to get out of that place, no matter how rough a time you had over there, whoever you were, once you were getting out of there and you knew it for sure, it was a load off your mind. You were just ready to party and have a good time and just start thinking about enjoying life again.
- S: Now we know the people who served in the war later in the 1960's and the 1970's were treated poorly when they arrived back in the U.S. Did you have that same problem?
- C: Sure. You had it back then. When we came in on the airplane in California, there were a bunch of them who came back on a troop ship. They were docked outside about 100 yards off the shore and all the protesters wouldn't let them off the ship. We considered them creeps. We weren't there because we wanted to be, we were there because that's what we had to do.
- S: Did you know of very many people going AWOL back in the early 1960's?
- C: Not really that many. There were some.
- S: How do you think the Vietnam war changed you?
- C: Well, I have never been the same since the Vietnam war. I still would like to be happy go lucky and so forth, it really means a lot to me. Basically I am a friendly person, but I have to consider some of the depression that keeps coming back to haunt me and so forth. Maybe there are other reasons but I have to blame a lot of it on Vietnam. It was just something I will never forget. It has caused a lot of mental fatigue.

- S: Do you believe that those 58,000 Americans died in vain in Vietnam?
- C: Sure do. I don't like President Nixon to this day. He could die tomorrow and it wouldn't bother me a bit. To me 10,000 Americans got killed because he waited too long to end the war when he could have ended it earlier just so he could get reelected to Presidency. That bothers me when I think about stuff like that. If we were going to get out, get out. Don't use that as a ploy to get reelected to office. Just get us the hell out of there.
- S: What about some of the celebrities who were anti-war like Jane Fonda?
- C: I guess she's got a right to do what she wants to do, but I don't agree with her. She was fighting an issue that she really couldn't control and it made it look bad for me and the other Vietnam Veterans because they were putting us down. We weren't doing anything wrong, we were doing what we were told to do. I think she was way off base. I think the protesters were way off base.
- S: What do you think is the biggest misconception about today's Vietnam Veterans?
- C: It is starting to get better, but I got involved in a lot of Veterans organizations when I got back right away and it seemed like in one way, they accepted us, but in another way, they didn't really give us that much credit. I even think some of the older Veterans really weren't given as much credit as they should have been given. We never got the credit we deserved. We're starting to get it now, but now is a hell of a time to get it.
- S: What is the thing you remember most about Vietnam?
- C: How primitive it was over there. How dirty it was over there. Just that it was something I wasn't used to. There was nothing like it. It was just a crude country. I remember that one buddy of mine getting blown away that night on guard duty. I was supposed to be with him and I wasn't. I try not to think too much about it.
- S: What do you think people should remember about the war?
- C: I think people ought to remember that we were a bunch of young guys who went over there, as far as we were concerned, we were fighting for our country. We were misunderstood. We were just as good fighters and as good soldiers as those who were in World War II. We



really deserved as much credit as anybody. We could hold our heads right up with the best of them. I think that's what they ought to remember. It wasn't our fault we were over there, but we went over there and we did a good job.

S: Thank you for doing the interview. I appreciate it.

C: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW