

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam Veterans Project

Personal Experience

O. H. 528

JOSEPH OLLIE

Interviewed

by

Thomas Kirker

on

December 3, 1984

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam Veteran Project

INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH OLLIE

INTERVIEWER: Thomas Kirker

SUBJECT: Saigon, Returning Home, Life as a Solider

DATE: December 3, 1984

K: This is an interview for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. The project is Vietnam Veterans of Lawrence County, Pennsylvania. The interview is with Joe Ollie at his residence on Pennsylvania Avenue, New Castle, Pennsylvania. The time is approximately 7:15 p.m. on December 3, 1984.

The first question to get us started with, I would like to know what was your life aroundhere like? What high school did you go to?

O: I went to New Castle. I graduated in 1965. I worked one year in the mill.

K: Which mill is that?

O: Johnson Bronze. I worked in the foundry and I really hated it. I said, "I have to get out of here. I can't quit because my parents would be mad. I wish I could get drafted." I really did. I went down the street and my buddy got his papers and I knew I got mine. They were there.

K: You were drafted.

O: I was just happy to get out. I was on the street doing bad things. I just wanted to get out and I got drafted. I spent six months in the States and there I was.

K: What branch of the service did you go into?

O: Army. I got drafted in 1966. I went to Vietnam March 15 to January 6; I got injured. I had thirty days left. I got sick and injured.

K: What was your grade in the Army?

O: I was a Specialist 4. I was with the 574th support unit attached to the fourth division 15th CV.

K: Rifleman?

O: Yes. I was nineteen years old and I didn't know what Vietnam was.

K: Had you heard about it before you went over?

O: Just when we were training they told us to "get ready and get your shit together because if not, Charlie was going to kill you," and all of that. It was all that military rap.

K: How did they tell you that you were going to Vietnam? Did they just come up and say this unit is going to go?

O: I knew what I was training for. I had training and everything.

K: What type of special training did you have?

O: I have special training for the M-16, M-50, AIT (Advanced Infantry Training). That was about it. I came home for thirty days and then I went to San Francisco. I spent four days there getting processed and that was it.

K: When you flew into Vietnam . . .

O: That was it. That was the most scariest thing. It was the most emptiest feeling I ever had in my life. I was nineteen years old. I was 15,000 miles away from home. I got off of the plane at night at Ton Son Nut Air Base in Saigon. You looked up in the sky and there were these tracers. The smell of the country just hit you. When I was on the bus, that is when I knew. The bus windows were barred up. There was an MP on top. I said, "This is it." It is the worst feeling in the world. I was scared and I just wanted to be home.

K: When you went to your building or your barracks, did the guys tell you about Vietnam and what it would be like?

O: We had to go to the processing center in Long Binh; they told us what division we were in and what area. Where I was at at first, it was all guys just coming in. They didn't know anything or what was going on. They just left it to our companies and base camps. I didn't see any action for about forty days in the country.

K: Where was your base camp?

O: My base camp was at Long Bign, which was thirty miles south of Saigon. My first fire fight was in April, middle of April.

K: Of 1966?

O: 1967.

K: What was that like for the first time?

O: It was scary.

K: Have you forgotten about it since then?

O: I think about it a lot because I lost a few friends. I have what you call delayed stress syndrome. Do you know what that means?

K: Yes.

O: I flashback when I am at work. At work I think back to the fire fights.

K: Do you think the VA is helping you out now?

O: Yes. I can't complain. They helped me out financially. I get 70% disability. They were paying 100%, but it is 30% for not working. I am working now so it is 70%. I have no complaints about the VA. I know a lot of vets are having a lot of trouble.

K: Were you in a lot of fire fights and a lot of action like that?

O: Yes. I had maybe fifty.

K: Wow!

O: We got hit a lot.

K: How big was the base that you were at?

O: It was big. It was about six divisions.

K: They kept hitting you or were you on patrols?

O: Our base camp would get hit. We fought the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) and the VC (Vietcong). I was there for the TET Offensive. That was when I got hit.

K: In early 1968?

O: It was the worst.

K: What do you remember about that?

O: That was one of the greatest move strikes by an enemy in the history of our wars, I think. The TET Offensive was just one great move. It was unbelievable. They hit the north and the south, all major provinces and cities. They just came from the north right down to where a child was hit. It was a great surprise.

K: What was your role in it?

O: During TET Offensive there was no safe place at all. There was nowhere. I was just a child. It was just like street fighting. We got caught in just outside of Saigon. It was just like a street fight. MP's were even seeing action and that is very seldom.

K: How long did you see fighting going on in Saigon on TET?

O: We got our red alert around January 6. We had a red alert for the TET Offensive. That went on for twenty-some days.

K: You were fighting like that for twenty-some days?

O: Yes, around the third quarter of Saigon and Bien Hoa. It was bad. In TET Offensive, a lot of guys got killed. It was terrible. You had to put your buddies in bags and shit.

K: Did your outlook change after that?

O: Yes. I knew what was going on. I was in the hospital for six months on PC.

K: When did you get out?

O: January 20. They flew me to Japan and they couldn't do anything for me. I went to Walter Reed in D.C.

K: If I might ask, what happened to you?

O: First of all, I had schrapnel in my neck. They took a schrapnel out of my neck and a tumor out of my thyroid. It took eleven months to grow. They say it is from the agent orange. That was what I was fighting in Vietnam for. That is why I have a tumor.

K: They had agent orange that early?

O: Yes. When I was over there I used to see it. I used to see them come out and drop that stuff. I washed in it and probably drank it. Do you know what agent orange is?

K: Yes. It is the chemical dioxin.

O: I wish that you could see it. You could actually see it coming down.

K: Just like rain coming down?

O: You could see it on the leaves.

K: When you were on patrol, what would it be like? What position did you have.

O: I got injured. I will never forget that day.

K: What about some other time?

O: On regular patrol?

K: Yes.

O: We had six squads go out. They would go out and mostly search-and-destroy. I was sixth or seventh man in patrol.

K: An M-16?

O: Yes, an M-16. We would search-and-destroy and maybe have a little fire fight.

K: What do you mean by "little fire fight"? Do you mean a few minutes or a few guys?

O: About fifteen or twenty minutes. We always had that. Those were nothing. Once in awhile we would have big, long fire fights. We went through a lot of villages.

K: What were the villagers like? Did you get along with them pretty well?

O: No. They didn't appreciate us over there. I can see why though. The bad thing about it was we went over there and then we packed up and left.

K: Just left them . . .

O: Right there . . . 57,000 lives.

Vietnam is a very pretty country, very pretty. It is very tropical.

K: People say it is really green.

O: It was a beautiful green. The monsoon was . . . When we had to fight in the monsoon it was bad.

K: How often did you have to do that? Did you do that every

year in the monsoon season?

O: Yes, from June to September.

K: Didn't you have a problem with jungle rot?

O: Yes.

K: With your feet and the skin just rotting away?

O: I still have it. It would get so hot in the day around 105 and 106 degrees and we were all loaded down. The only thing Charlie had was a gun. Nothing loaded him down. He could move. The American GI there was loaded down; we had pack. It was really tough.

K: Did you wear a flapjacket?

O: Oh, yes. We were really loaded down. All Charlie had was a gun. That was one of his advantages. They were very good fighters.

K: What do you remember about spending the night in the jungle? Do you remember that?

O: Yes, I can remember that. There were a lot of nights. We really had some trouble one night. We ran into some fire support units. We were on patrol and we just couldn't get out of there. They told us in this area there would be 200 VC. When we got there, there were 600 VC. They tell us 200 and we got there and it was 600. We just got into big trouble and we couldn't get out of there. We were there for two nights and we couldn't get out.

K: You were pinned down for two nights?

O: Two days and two nights.

K: Did they bring helicopters in and gun ships?

O: Yes. We had fire support. I think onetime the 101st got us out. That was the worst time I had in two nights and two days.

K: What did you do, hold on for dear life and pray that you would get through?

O: Just stick together.

K: How many men were out there?

O: We had about fifteen.

K: That is not too many.

O: We lost five and I got hit.

K: What happened? Were you ambushed?

O: We were just overrun. It was just something . . . Mortars . . .

K: When you went back to camp, did they airlift you back to camp?

O: No, we walked back unless you couldn't walk. It was so hot in the day and cool at night.

K: How did you prepare for it? Did you have anything special like rubber blankets?

O: We always carried extra socks, poncho.

We had a problem with drugs. It was a big problem. I never even knew what drugs were until I got to the war.

K: Hard stuff like heroin?

O: It was all pure. The marijuana was excellent because it was so good to grow, the climate. I never got high until I went to Nam. A lot of the guys would get high on it. A lot of guys got killed by it, because they were stoned.

K: Was it an escape? Did they just want to get away from it?

O: You had to get high because you couldn't sleep with the guns. The mosquitos would eat you. That is how I slept. I couldn't sleep. You just couldn't sleep.

K: People were shooting at you.

O: Plus there were noises of the guns, and the mosquitos were just big.

K: How many men did you stay with in your . . . I assume that you were in a dugout with sandbags.

O: We had like a made up tent with cloth. It was a tent with cots. That was the only time that we got hot meals when we got back there. We had R & R.

K: In Saigon?

O: No.

K: In Singapore? What was that like?



O: It was fantastic. It was seven days. It was just to let it out.

K: It was a good time, like women and booze?

O: Yes. That is all, just let it out and get back. I had three more months.

K: Was it tough when you went back?

O: Yes. I was really well-prepared. I wanted to go back really.

K: You could just get back and then get back to New Castle?

O: Yes. Get it over with and see my buddies. When I went down to the memorial, it was unbelievable.

K: How many times have you been down there?

O: I went down for the dedication and the parade. It was dedicated. I was supposed to go down on Veteran's Day and I didn't. I got called out to work. It has six of my buddies' names in my company though.

K: Is it harder every time you go back and look at it?

O: Yes. It is something to see that name and know that . . .

K: You have done something.

O: I don't know about Vietnam Vets and how they get treated.

K: Do you think that is starting to change?

O: A little bit. We finally had a parade after eleven years.

K: People say that World War II Veterans give you a hard time.

O: Yes. In the VFW it is like "so what". We fought too and they didn't fight a war like we did.

K: This is true. They didn't.

O: World War II fought on the front line. Here are the Germans, you know.

K: Did that really work on you a lot?

O: What is that?

K: Not knowing where Charlie was.

O: That was the only thing. They were all around you. You

couldn't tell the civilians from the VC. It was terrible.

K: What would a day at camp be like if you were sitting at camp?

O: After we came back from an operation?

K: Yes. Say if you just came back.

O: I would just sit around and rest and listen to music and drink some beer.

K: What are some of the things that you would listen to in 1966?

O: The Stones, Steppenwolf.

K: Grateful Dead?

O: Grateful Dead.

K: Some Credence, maybe?

O: Credence, Cream.

K: Smokey ?

O: Stones mostly.

K: Just trying to relax and unwind?

O: Yes.

K: Did it take you a long time to get over the mission?

O: After I was at camp?

Yes, most of the time. Like I said, we relaxed. We would sit around and smoke a joint.

K: Get high and that? Did you ever see people do crazy things because of drugs?

O: Yes.

K: What kinds of things?

O: Opium and heroin.

There were a lot of racial problems. I had no problems with blacks; I got along with them. I grew up on the south side.

K: What types of problems?

- O: Blacks had their own groups and whites. It was mostly your Southern whites that would start. If they were taking a shower or something they would wear KKK and all of that stuff. I just didn't go for it because I felt that a lot of blacks were good fighters.
- K: Didn't these guys realize that their lives counted on them, all of the men there?
- O: They were there too to help you out if you were in trouble.
- K: The way people told me was it didn't matter what color you were, you were an American.
- O: They were good fighters just like anybody else.
- K: Did it ever get out of hand and were there any fights?
- O: A few times.
- K: What would the officers do?
- O: Just call you and break it up. They needed every man possible. They couldn't afford to send somebody to get into trouble or to sit in LBJ.
- K: When you first went in there, were you real gung-ho about fighting in Vietnam?
- O: No. I was there to save my ass and fight for my country, mostly to save my ass. It is just where the feeling is in the fire fight. It is a good feeling sometimes.
- K: What do you mean? Adrenaline flowing?
- O: When we got about fourteen guys lined up, we just let loose in a fire fight. It is just a weird feeling. It was wild. It was like you might be killing somebody, get that adrenaline.
- K: Really excited and sweating?
- O: You go to search-and-destroy. I saw the bodies a lot.
- K: When was the first time you saw a dead Vietcong or something?
- O: My second fire fight we just tore them up. The helicopters mostly buried them. We took our prisoners and I had seen some bad scenes.
- K: Is there anything we can talk about?
- O: This one GI, Stanley, put his buddies in rubber bags and stuff. He got this one Vietcong on him who was really

getting smart or something and would talk. This one captain just blew him away. We were really frustrated after the last fire fight. We lost nine guys.

K: That was the big one where you were pinned down.

O: I never did that, but I know a lot of people that cut their ears off.

K: Did that really shake you up?

O: Yes.

K: Were you used to it by then?

O: The first time I was really sick about it. One time they cut the ears off. They didn't care about life. In the VC, there were a lot of suicide squads.

K: Did you run into them at any time, I mean suicide squads?

O: We had seen a couple. They had grenades and blew themselves up.

K: Were you just fighting for your life and trying to hold on?

O: Yes. The NVA were a lot better fighters. They were well-trained. They were in uniform. They had AK 47 which was the best weapon. I shot that once. Wow!

K: Captured one?

O: Yes. It was quick.

K: Rough?

O: Oh, yes.

K: What made it better?

O: It does more damage. The M-16 is a good weapon, but it jams a lot. This AK 47 just . . .

K: Did you ever have a jam on you when you were fighting?

O: Yes. A lot.

K: Why? What do you do? Swear at it and knock it on the ground?

O: Yes. That is it. Sometimes we used to carry two of them.

K: Two M-16s?

O: They were light.

K: Did you carry a revolver?

O: No.

K: Just the M-16?

O: They were light, real light.

K: How often did they jam? A lot?

O: A few times. I had a little trouble with it. It jammed on me a few times.

K: The time that you were hit, was it because of your rifle?

O: No.

K: Just in the wrong place at the wrong time?

O: That is it. A lot of the damage over there and the KIA's were land mines and claymores. That was number one.

K: A lot of booby traps?

O: A lot of amputees were a result of that. The number one injury was the amputee.

K: Legs.

O: A claymore was a good mine. It was number one and that was it.

K: When you were on patrol, who watched out for the pointman?

O: The pointman? Two men up front.

K: Did they usually catch them and spot the wires?

O: Yes, they were very good at it. It was really hard too. There were a lot of mortars too they captured off of us. They just used all of that.

K: They used the back. When you were at camp, when was the first time you got shelled? Do you remember what that was like?

O: Oh, yes. I was in my tent writing a letter. You could hear it and that was it. We had to run to the back and get out flapjackets, M-16, and all of that shit. Actually, it is what you see in the movies blowing up.

K: Did you go into a trench or something?

O: Our bunkers, sandbag bunkers, we had them there on camp. That was what we did the first time in camp.

K: You were intense?

O: They would have blown our camp up.

K: Was there a lot of damage?

O: For the area, yes, there was a lot of damage. They got our ammo camp and our oil and all of that . . . Talk about Fourth of July!

K: When you were hit, did they take you out by helicopter? Do you remember?

O: Yes, I was awake, conscious. This one guy said, "You'll be alright. You'll be alright." That was my buddy from Cincinnati. I went to Saigon and they patched me up. That is when they found my wound.

K: Then they sent you where?

O: Japan. Japan said they couldn't do anything except for major surgery. Walter Reed, I was there for two days. They took me in and I was under the knife for about eleven hours. I just convalesced. I just forgot about it. I stayed in the hospital and I was in there for about six weeks. There was a mass down there. They were coming in like crazy, ten a day. That was in 1968. There were a lot of amputees.

K: A lot of guys missing legs?

O: Oh, that was the pain, number one. Average age was nineteen to twenty-one.

K: When you came back to New Castle, what was it like? Were you just glad to be out?

O: I was glad to be out. I was very down and depressed.

K: Why?

O: There were a lot of problems.

K: That delayed stress?

O: Yes.

K: Did you follow the war?

O: Yes, I followed the war. I followed it very much and close. Are you talking about on the news?

K: Yes, when you came back from Vietnam.

O: Oh, yes, I watched the news. I watched all the specials. I didn't see movies.

K: They do kind of go overboard.

O: I did like "Apocalypse Now".

K: What did you think of it?

O: It was excellent. I thought the acting was good. "Deer Hunter" was good.

K: Do you think that "Apocalypse Now" showed what it was like in Vietnam?

O: Yes, it was excellent.

K: What was the reaction from the people in this area when you came home? I would imagine that your parents and relatives were glad to have you back.

O: Yes. I was very welcomed. Everybody liked me.

K: Did anybody give you a hard time?

O: When I came back, I flew into Pittsburgh on American from Vietnam. I had medals and shit and they didn't even care. Just like the commercial with the guy getting home from Vietnam and into a taxicab. He does it so well.

K: That was what it was like?

O: Yes.

K: Did you have a hard time finding work?

O: Oh, yes. It was bad. I was only getting \$300 a month.

K: Disability? When you were in Vietnam, did you get a lot of mail from home?

O: Oh, yes.

K: You really liked the mail coming in?

O: I loved it. If you didn't get mail call, it was so empty. It was like, "Oh, man, didn't they think about me?"

K: Was there anything special around the holidays?

O: On Christmas, I was on patrol.

K: Really?

O: Christmas Eve.

K: Did that bother you more?

O: You really couldn't think of it too much because you had to worry about . . .

K: Staying alive.

O: The next day they had a little thing for us. We had a hot meal and a party.

K: Did a lot of drinking and that go on?

O: Yes. They had a turkey.

K: Did you see any U. S. O. shows?

O: Yes, I saw Bob Hope and Will Rogers.

K: Where at?

O: Long Bien. I couldn't hardly see him because there were so many. There were 120,000 and I was way back there.

K: That was a lot of people.

O: It was the biggest base in Vietnam.

K: How did they secure that so nobody ever attacked it.

O: Long Bien was pretty well secured. There wasn't too much trouble except for the TET Offensive. Long Bien was really big and a pretty well safe place. It was about thirty miles south of Saigon.

I saw Hope sometime in July.

K: Did you every go into Saigon?

O: Yes.

K: What was the city like?

O: It was like a madhouse.

K: Really?



O: The little kids were pimps. They were six or seven years old. The pimps could get anything that they want.

K: Was there a lot of black market?

O: Yes. It was very big over there, so was prostitution. It was terrible. Saigon was a wild city, but it was pretty nice.

K: When did they let you go in there?

O: About once a month.

K: You had to be really cautious?

O: Very cautious.

K: What do you remember about Saigon?

O: The shops, the smell, the smell of fish, the civilians. You didn't know if they were VC or not. You would go in there and drink with them and they would look the same. The civilians and the VC, they were the same people. We used to kill civilians and Vietcong. All that they wanted were bodies. That was the number one thing of the Nam, to kill a civilian as VC. We killed a lot of civilians.

K: Made them VC?

O: Yes. A lot of the civilians we killed . . .

K: When you killed a civilian, did you think anything different of them?

O: I felt bad for them. They had been fighting for sixty-some years. When I saw the pullout on TV, I really felt bad, on the last day.

K: They just left?

O: All of the equipment and machinery. For what? To stop the communist aggression is what it was.

K: Is that what they told you, to stop communist aggression? Did you believe them the whole time?

O: Yes. I really didn't know what the hell they were talking about. I was young. U.S.A. is what I was fighting for, myself. It is a good feeling.

K: Did you meet anybody there from New Castle?

O: Yes, I did. I met a guy named Shafer. I forget his first

name. He was at Long Bien. He was part of the processing staff.

K: Did you meet by accident? Did you say, "I am from New Castle."

O: Yes. It was a trip.

K: What was that like?

O: We just talked bullshit. We got separated. I was with him for one day. I see him once in awhile.

K: What part of town is he from?

O: He is from the east side. I see him every once in awhile. He lives out by my girlfriend. He has problems too. He has alcohol problems. I talk to him once in awhile.

K: We have covered a lot of things. What would you like to add to this?

O: I would do it again.

K: You would go back?

O: Damn right.

K: Why would you go back?

O: Just from what I have seen over there. I would like to go over there and finish it. I feel that there are some MIA's over there that are alive. I definitely feel that there are. There is not 1500.

K: But, there are some?

O: They have been seen.

K: What do you remember most about the country? If somebody came up to you off of the streets and said, "What do you remember the most about Vietnam?"

O: The color, the snow, the green, the beautiful, and the smell of death. The guys would be dead for six or seven days and then come home. You would line them up. You would get sick and throw up. When you were on detail, you would put them in bags.

I was pulling out on the runway. There were like thirty-six medics to keep it running, the transfer plane, the 147. I will never forget that sight. They were just lined up. They were green bags and boxes. That is how I picture

them, in line. That could have been me. That is all that I thought about after that -- Who were in those bags? What kind of guys were they? What did they look like?-- It was a trip.

K: Do you think that fragging and that went on in Vietnam?

O: Pardon me?

K: Officers being fragged and that kind of stuff?

O: Yes. I definitely feel that. There are some good officers too. I had some good officers. One got killed, the captain. He was really a good one.

K: He went out?

O: We was with the special forces. He got hit.

K: What do you tell your kids? What will you tell them?

O: My kids always ask me. Well, they really don't know. I see them and they want to know about Vietnam; they want this and they want that. The one asked me, "Who did you kill over there?" I said, "VC". They always ask what kind of guy he was. I have got all of this stuff for them.

K: You go out there interested in what is going on?

O: Yes. I think I have done a pretty good job of it.

K: What do you think went wrong?

O: . . . gave us bad information. Basically escalating the bombing.

K: Did you ever capture supplies of the Vietcong or anything?

O: Oh, yes.

K: Rice?

O: And artillery. They used to come up with stuff. They got .45s, papers, a lot of rice, AK 47s, and literature.

K: Did you ever see any water buffalos?

O: Yes. There were a lot of them.

K: Did anybody ever shoot at them?

O: Yes. Rice paddies were up all over. We had a lot of rice

paddies. The time we got hit we were walking around rice paddies.

K: Were the leaches bad?

O: Yes. They were bad. The mosquitos were bad.

I had a rash from agent orange.

K: Is there anything else that you want to add, stories or people?

O: I can't think of anything else.

END OF INTERVIEW