

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam Veterans

Vietnam Experience

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RICK MORGAN

Interviewed

by

Jeffery Collier

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: RICK MORGAN

INTERVIEWER: Jeffery Collier

SUBJECT: Marine Corps Medics, Medevacs, Fighting, Drugs

DATE: May 23, 1975

C: This is Jeff Collier for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Vietnam. I'm interviewing Rick Morgan at the Youngstown State University Kilcawley Center. Today's date is May 23, 1975, and the time is 9:15 a.m.

Rick, could you tell me a little bit about yourself as far as where you grew up, your education, things such as that?

M: I grew up on the east side of Youngstown. I was born in Florida, but my parents moved here when I was quite young. I went to St. John's Slovak Grade School and Ursuline High School. I had a football scholarship to Youngstown from Ursuline. I graduated in 1964. I started Youngstown State, and just got tired of going to school so I went into the service. I joined the Navy, but I was stationed with the Marine Corps for three years, probably because they needed medics. They don't supply their own medics in the Marine Corps; they use the Navy's.

Then when I got out, I went back to Youngstown and took a degree in biology and I'm working on a masters now.

C: Talking about your military experience, what branch of the service were you in?

M: I was in the Navy. For all intent and purpose, I was with the Marine Corps, but for paper purposes I was in the Navy.

C: What years were you in the service?

M: From 1965 to 1969.

C: Could you tell us a little bit about your experience in the service as far as where you did your basic training, what happened during basic training, if anything, just some generalities about it if you would?

M: Basic was at Great Lakes. Actually, there were three basics that I went through because I had to go through the Navy basic at Great Lakes and then I went to hospital corps school.

C: Which was where?

M: At Great Lakes, also. Then I went from there to Annapolis; I was stationed in Annapolis for two and a half to three months. From Annapolis I went to Camp Pendleton, which is a Marine Corps basic training camp on the West Coast. I went through their basic and then I got orders to Japan. I went to Japan for a year and a half and then from Japan I got orders to Vietnam. I spent a year and a half in Vietnam, but before I went over there I had to spend a month and a half at Okinawa, which was another basic on jungle warfare.

That was quite a course they had. They had everything set up there that you were supposed to see in combat, such as some of the more antique methods of fighting like the big ball, wooden spikes and metal spikes and everything else. But the only thing that you really saw were the punching stakes. Quite possibly they were used before I got there. By the time I got there the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] were probably one of the best trained fighting outfits I've ever seen. The VC [Viet Cong] were starting to be trained by the NVA, although they were still sloppy fighters, more or less, just guerrilla warfare.

C: In your training, both at Pendleton and Okinawa, what type of training did you have that would prepare you for Vietnam?

M: At Camp Pendleton it was a basic Marine Corps type training. You went through the calisthenics. It was just a basic, it was a boot camp. But then we had to go through a field med training which prepared us for anything that might have come up in Vietnam. For instance, if they called a corpsman up and there was a wounded man a hundred yards from him that he had to pull in, they would tell him how to get the guy without getting himself killed.

C: How would you do that? Is there a special action that you would have taken?

M: Yes. Most of the time you have somebody that has already been shot and killed that is close to you. If he is dead, he is not going to be hurt anymore. You just grab him and put him over you and drag him along with you so that if you are shot at, he just absorbs the shots. It sounds kind of grotesque, and in a way it is, to be dragging along a dead body with you, but it saves your life.

C: As a medic were you trained in fighting also?

M: No, you were not supposed to carry any weapons except possibly a .45. I carried an AK .47, which is a Russian-made weapon that I found on a dead Vietnamese. I picked up several rounds of ammunition. Any time you would get in a fire fight there was always somebody carrying an AK .47 that had several rounds of ammunition, which always kept us in supply. There were several guys in my unit that carried AK's. There is no way in hell that I'm going into a fire fight and not carry a weapon. With a .45, unless you're extremely good and used to using it constantly, you can't hit anything outside of 25 yards. They kick a lot. Inside of 25 yards, the guy is already down your throat. There is no way in hell I'm going to use that; I'm going to have something that's going to bring him down a hell of a lot sooner than 25 yards. Sometimes you couldn't even bring him down with an AK.

C: When you entered the service, did you know that you would be going to Vietnam?

M: No. When I went into the service I went into the Navy. When I was in boot camp, I had thoughts about what I wanted to go into, and they always asked you. You fill out a dream sheet. If you want to go to a special school, you tell them what school you want to go to. A lot of the guys in my boot camp were going to ET [Electronics Technician School]. I thought about that and I thought that would be really interesting, but a lot of the guys were signing up for extra time, too, rather than just the minimum of four years. I said, "The hell with this, I'm not signing up for any more." I was in pre-med before I went into the service, so I thought I would see what it was like. I saw the job that the corpsmen had on the boot camp base and they had the cakiest job. They were just sitting back with their feet on the desk with a coffee cup crick in their hand. I thought it was going to be like that, but it wasn't too long after I got out that I got orders for FMF. I didn't know anything about FMF when I was in boot camp.

C: What is FMF?

M: First Marine Force, it's the field med Marine Corps medics. I didn't know anything about that; I didn't know that the Navy supplied the Marine Corps with their medics. Had I known that, I probably would have never gone into it. They were shipping out just about all the medics, all the corpsmen. The people that were taking the state-side jobs were the guys that were coming back.

C: How did you feel when you found out that you were going to have to go to Vietnam with the Marine Corps? Did that upset you or bother you?

M: Oh yes. I don't know too many guys, in fact, I don't know any, that received orders to go with the Marines that for the first week or two were totally incoherent and oblivious to everything. People would be talking to you and your mind was off wondering. You were wondering what it was going to be like. It's strange because when you're a kid you sit and watch these war movies and you say, "That happens, but that will never happen to me." Then, all of a sudden, you're caught up and you find that it's going to happen to you. You're going into a battle that almost seems like a dream; you don't believe it. It's like somebody telling you that you have cancer. The first stage of it is denial, "Oh no, not me." Then the second stage is kind of a fighting stage, "Well, I'm going to beat it."

C: You try to get out of it or something like that.

M: Sure. It's like any psychological trauma, it goes through stages. The first stage is your denial; the second stage is a fighting stage, like you're going to beat it; the third stage is a depression-type stage where you sort of give in to it and you say, "Why me?" The fourth stage is where you grow to accept it and you say, "It's going to happen to me, I know it, and I just better accept it and make do with what I can and do the best I can." Any psychological trauma follows the same trends. That, in my estimation, is a psychological trauma, to find out that you're going to war. It not only affects you, but it affects your family, and they follow the same cycle. It's not parallel with your cycle. You tell your family you're going to Nam and they say, "Okay," but after awhile they start it and say, "We're going to do this." It doesn't do any good. The third stage is the depression stage, "Why my son?" "Why is he going?" The fourth stage is just the acceptance, everybody grows to accept it. That's when you first find out you're going. When you get over there it's going through a whole new, psychological trauma and the whole cycle begins

again.

C: How did you feel when you were going and finally accepted it? Did you arrive in by ship or plane?

M: I flew in.

C: Was it what you expected?

M: No. We flew into Da Nang.

C: When did you fly into Da Nang, give me a time frame.

M: I guess it was probably around June of 1967 because I left Nam the last part of January. Actually, I left February 1st. It must have been around June of 1967. It was dusty and dirty. A lot of it seemed like Japan. Japan is a beautiful country, and so is Vietnam. If that country were ever to straighten out again and grow their foliage back, it could be a vacationer's paradise. It's beautiful.

C: You flew into Da Nang, was it at an Air Force or Army base?

M: No, it was combined services. At Monkey Mountain in Da Nang they had the Air Force. On Freedom Hill, that was all Marine Corps. Lower down was mostly Navy. They had the CV's and the river patrols and stuff. Actually, it was combined services. Army normally wasn't that far north. Army stayed pretty much south. The only Army unit that I've had any contact with in Nam was the 101st Airborne, which was north of us, right around Chontanh, Rock Pile, Happy Valley, et cetera.

C: Was there any type of a reorientation when you arrived? Did you go through any of the things that you had learned before or was it straight into the fighting.

M: No. When I went there, I was with the 1st Marine Airborne. I was an E-4. The 1st Marine Airborne wasn't a bad deal. I was with medevacs [Medical Evacuation], flying in helicopters and picking up wounded. That wasn't too bad because all we did was treat them on the way out to a hospital ship or back to a battalion hospital.

C: If there would be a fight, you would fly in and pick up wounded and fly out?

M: Right. That was only for six months. After I picked up E-5, they said they needed a senior corpsman out in the bush and that's when they sent me to 109th Charlie, which was the nickname of the unit. It was bits and pieces.

We were usually either the first or second to get in on most major operations.

C: That was with the Marines, also?

M: Yes. We took our unit to probably the most heavy casualties. We really took a lot of casualties.

C: The first six months of the medevacs what was it like? When you heard there was a battle did you get on a helicopter?

M: We wouldn't hear there was a battle, they would radio us and say that they have so many wounded that have to come out in the landing zone. The majority of the time the fire fight was already over and they would have the wounded lined up in rows. There may be three helicopters that fly in and drop down in the landing zone. We had two or three medics per helicopter. The helicopters are set up in the back with IV stands and medications and battle dressings and stuff so that you can treat them. By the time you get to them the field corpsman has already treated them. If there has been an amputation, he has done it. If there has been any battle dressings put on, he has done it. If there has been anything done, any morphine given, chances are he has probably done it. Then we would treat him with what we had until we got him to a hospital ship. We would triage, basically if the wounds weren't too bad, then we would send him back to a hospital at Da Nang or somewhere like that that would be able to treat him and send him back out to the field. If there was something psychological wrong, or if there was some bad wound, we would take him out to the repost.

C: What constituted a severe wound? As far as not going to a field hospital or a hospital in Da Nang or something like that or taking him out to his ship, what was the variable there as far as the wound? You mentioned an amputation, I want to know where they would amputate, right on the field?

M: Yes. What that is, it's not an aseptic type of amputation, it's just what we call a guillotine amputation. If a person had a mortar or a piece of shrapnel in his arm that went through the bone and left his arm just hanging, and he had an artery exposed that had just burst with blood, we would cut the rest of the arm off. If it was just hanging by some skin, we would take the rest of it off, or if the bone was so fragmented that we really couldn't do anything with it or immobilize it, we would just cut the rest of it off, put it in a little plastic bag that we had, attach it to the body, and put a battle dressing on it, a tourniquet or something else, to stop the bleeding as much as we could, and send him out

with the limb to the hospital ship. Then the hospital ship, if the limb could be saved, would sew it back on. In a lot of cases, it could be saved if it hadn't taken too long. A lot of times it was quite awhile. When I was out in the field, the medevacs would get there and sometimes it was only a matter of five or ten minutes. When I got wounded it was only a matter of probably ten minutes.

C: Before somebody got in and got you out of there?

M: Right.

C: That's pretty fast. To go on further about somebody getting shot over there, how long would it be before they had a limb severed? How much time is involved in it?

M: I don't know. A doctor would be able to tell you about that more because I don't know what the degeneration times of tissues are. They would have to take it back and debride all the dead tissue and then check the bone to see how fragmented it was. They would have to see if they could save the arm or the hand or whatever part of the body was severed off, or see if an artificial limb would be better.

C: When you went from the helicopter-type medical treatment that you were giving initially when you got over there, as far as flying in and getting out, how did you feel? Was there quite a difference?

M: A helicopter, everybody says, is bad because you don't have anywhere to hide, but with a helicopter you can get out of there really fast.

C: Did you get shot at a lot when you would fly in?

M: Yes. They usually tell you to watch the floorboard, to keep away from it. You try to keep as much of your body in a vertical position as possible so that if something comes up through the floorboard chances are it won't hit you. If it does, it will only graze you because you have less body space to hit. If you were laying down or something like that, your chances of getting hit were pretty big because you're taking up more area.

My first day out in the field I had psychological trauma because the dead person I saw was a medic. He had his Geneva Convention Card nailed to his head. Something like that is just really a trauma.

C: What was a typical day for you when you were in the field?



M: A typical day?

C: If there is such a thing.

M: There is no such thing. It depends.

C: Did you go out every single day?

M: On patrol?

C: Yes.

M: You would patrol the perimeter. You usually set up the perimeter and patrolled that. I was a senior corpsman. In my unit there were probably about six of us.

C: How many Marines were in the unit?

M: That's hard to say because we lost a lot and we would get a lot. I'd say, at one time, it was probably 103. But then there were times when we would lose thirty at a crack because we had to ship them out. There were a lot of times when we would have only eighty or ninety.

C: Did you lose some going out looking for a fight?

M: No. We usually lost them in things like Hill 881. We were the second unit in on Hill 881. We lost, at that time, about 59 or 69.

C: Was that an offensive operation?

M: No. It was really stupid because VC and the NVA had the top of the hill. We were going in and we took the hill eventually. As soon as we took it we left, and the Vietnamese took it over again and we had to retake it. I think that was probably one of the most major operations that we lost.

Khe Sanh was another one. We spent too much time there and we lost so many guys for a place that was totally nonstrategic. There was absolutely nothing there that warranted our being there, absolutely nothing. It wasn't a strategic point at all.

C: They said take it?

M: That's it, that's where they figured there was a heavy concentration of NVA and they said go in and take it. There were several units. I was in there for about eight or nine days, but we couldn't even get out. We were totally surrounded. They were mortaring and rocketing us, I'd say, about 23 and a half hours a day,

with just short breaks. I was really scared then. You lose so much sleep and you worry so much about it that you get to the point where you totally resign yourself to the fact that either you're going to get killed or you're not. Again, you learn to accept it. Then, all of a sudden, the NVA pulled out and nobody knew why. When they sent out recon and everything else to check on the outer side of the perimeter, all the gooks were gone, but they found tunnels that were tunneled all the way up underneath us. All they had to do was come straight up and they could have wiped us out. Nobody knows why they did it.

C: Orders from the North, possibly, that they didn't need that area.

M: Nobody knows why. They may have known why, but nobody ever told us. Everybody was just taking places that they didn't need and doing things that they didn't have to do.

C: The people that you were with, was everybody pretty much the same in their attitude towards the war? Was there a general attitude towards the war?

M: Sure, that's why a lot of the guys turned out to be addicts. I smoked marijuana over there like crazy.

C: Out of fear or just as something to do?

M: Something to do, take your mind off of it. You didn't have alcohol, couldn't drink. You could get an ounce of grass easy just by swapping with the Vietnamese. They had it in stockpiles. All you had to do was swap them a pack of American cigarettes. They had a lot of hash over there. I never got into Heroin or any of the heavy drugs, but there were a lot of guys over there who did. It was just something to take your mind off of it. A lot of times we would go for three weeks with nothing, I mean absolutely nothing. We were out in the bush, away from all civilization, and we wouldn't even get back to our home base to get any mail. By the time the water truck got to us for pure water, it was mostly empty. Sea rats, we had what we called ham and mother fuckers, which are ham and lima beans. A lot of times you had to eat them cold. That's really bad stuff. All you had was your sea rats. You ended up playing cards for whole paychecks because you never saw your paychecks. What did you need money for?

We would be out in the field three weeks without even a fire fight. With all this stuff working on you, you

can go crazy. You have the constant fear that you're going to get hit, or that maybe somewhere there is a sniper. We had a lot of guys who would yell, "Charlie, you don't have a hair on your ass unless you're shooting." They were just yelling for a fire fight because the whole thing was just monotonous. You are out there and you are just waiting and you're waiting. You know that it is there; you know that somewhere out there you're going to get hit, but you don't know when. You have nothing else to do, why not dope?

People say that marijuana dulls your senses. Marijuana may dull your senses as far as seeing or motor facility, but it sure doesn't dull your hearing. You could hear something a long way off. You know when you're going to get hit, you can feel it. You can hear the gooks moving in and you just know when you're going to get hit. You learn to feel it, it's like when it's going to rain; you can smell it in the air. You know when Charlie is out there.

- C: Would you be attacked once a month, or once every couple of weeks? You said you were out there three weeks and nothing would happen.
- M: That's really hard to tell, too, because it ran in cycles. I think whenever the gooks got doped up too they figured, "We're going to go and charge them." It's really hard to say one way or another. Sometimes you would go three weeks, four weeks without a hit. Sometimes you would go a week, everyday getting hit for eight or nine hours a day. You really can't judge by how often a month, it didn't work that way. They would just hit you when you least expected it.
- C: When you say getting hit, do you mean mortar, do you mean physically being attacked?
- M: Getting hit is anything, anything that is showing aggression; mortar, rockets, fire fights, snipers, anything like that is getting hit. If you have a sniper that is sitting somewhere where you can't see that is keeping everybody pinned down, you're getting hit. You don't know where you're getting hit from.
- C: Go back to the statement you made earlier about the NVA. You said they were very well-trained.
- M: Very well-trained.
- C: Could you expand on that a little bit?
- M: They fought a war, they fought a battle. They were

trained in techniques; they were trained in strategy. They weren't guerrilla fighters, they were front line fighters. They knew what the hell they were doing. They were good.

VC were another thing. They were sloppy fighters. They lost a lot of people, but they had so many of them. You didn't know who they were; they could be right among you and you didn't know it. The VC are expert guerrilla fighters. They are not expert front line fighters; they are not trained, but they know that. That's their land. They know it, and know how to maneuver in it and get around it. You could compare them to the NVA as far as being good, but they're two different styles of fighters. You knew the difference when you got hit by a company of VC. You would know that it was a company of VC.

C: Which would you more often run into?

M: VC. We ran into an awful lot of VC. We ran into an awful lot of NVA too, and the NVA had a lot of Chinese. We would have to take a body count in the fire fight to see how many were killed.

C: Both sides, your side and the enemy's?

M: Yes, you would get an estimate. You may not find them all, but you have a pretty good estimate. A lot of them were big. Vietnamese are very small, they are very tiny people. Chinese are bigger and huskier. We would find a lot of dead who were big, husky guys. You know damn well that they are not Vietnamese; they have to be Chinese.

C: Do you think the NVA was being trained by Chinese? How is it that they were, in your opinion, well-trained?

M: I don't know who they were being trained by. I know they had a lot of outside weapons. They were supplied a lot of arms, but as to who did the actual training, I could not say. If I had to venture a guess, I would say that it was probably the Chinese, simply because we found so many Chinese.

C: Did you ever take any prisoners?

M: Oh yes.

C: Did you ever see that there was a difference? As far as languages, were they similar, North Vietnamese and Chinese?

M: None of them ever talked.

C: They didn't say a word?

M: They don't say anything. A lot of times on interrogation they would take a helicopter up and take maybe three gooks up. They asked the first one a question and if he didn't talk they would push him out. They would go to the second one and ask him a question and if he didn't talk they would push him out. By the time they got to the third one he was talking. He was getting ready to talk. Some of them didn't care, they would go out.

C: Was that a common occurrence, do you think?

M: Oh yes, every day.

C: What kind of information did they want?

M: I wasn't in intelligence, but I would imagine the type of information they wanted was where the heavy concentrations of weapons were, and where their ammo guns were, and concentration personnel. They would probably want to know everything, anything that would help the Americans out. There were a lot of prisoners that didn't make it. You would have a gook next to a wounded GI, and in this one particular case he was next to a squad leader. The squad leader pulled out his .45 and blew him away; he was just laying right next to him. We used to put VC on their chests and he looked over and saw it and blew him away.

C: In those instances, would you always take out the Americans first or would you take them out evenly?

M: It depended on the company commander. A lot of times the company commander would say send out the prisoners. If they figured that it was a very valuable prisoner, they would probably send him out first.

C: How would they determine that?

M: Rank.

C: I thought the VC didn't wear uniforms?

M: Not the VC, but the NVA. That's about the only time.

C: Do you have any feelings about what happened over there, towards that whole area going Communist? Since you were over there, and you fought over there, and you saw people die over there, do you have any feelings at all?

M: I'm bitter at our president that he would bring those people over here, people like Prime Minister Keke, who is probably a millionaire and has a Swiss bank account

larger than, probably, our president. These people are coming over here now; a lot of them don't even want to be here. We feel that it's our obligation to take care of these people. I don't feel that we owe them anything. In fact, I feel that they owe us. We lost a lot of guys over there for a cause that I think would have been much better if we would have went over and blew the entire place right off the map. We should have handled it just like we handled that Cambodia mission, just go in and be very aggressive right at the beginning, and turn them back. Now what's going to happen? I can see it with trying to get into medical school, in the future the kids that are coming over are all growing up. They're going to be educated. A lot of them will go to institutions of higher learning. It will probably be all government funded and then they will get the medical schools and law schools and dental schools. They will get all the slots because they will be an American minority underrepresented in medicine. I can see it coming in right now. We're underrepresented in law, we're underrepresented in podiatry. I am extremely bitter, and I'm sure I'm not alone.

C: Talking about our aggressiveness over there, do you think that if we would have been aggressive at the beginning, that we could have won the war, if there is such a thing as winning that war? Could we have gone over there and done what we physically wanted to when you were over there, for instance, if we would have used our arsenals?

M: I think by the time I got over there it was too far advanced.

C: Thank you for taking the time to talk to us.

END OF INTERVIEW