

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Army Reservists Project

Vietnam Experience

O. H. 444

RICHARD VANHORN

Interviewed

by

Brian Brennan

on

May 9, 1985

RICHARD VANHORN

Richard Vanhorn was born on April 27, 1944, the son of Porter and Mildred Vanhorn, in Pulaski, Virginia. During his youth, the Vanhorn family came to live in Normantown, West Virginia, where young Richard attended and graduated from high school. Eventually, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and was sent to South Vietnam, where he was assigned to a signal unit in the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). Vanhorn served with the Army from 1963 to 1966.

Today Mr. Vanhorn resides in Stumpton, West Virginia, with his wife Sandra and his three children. He is an active member of the Army Reserve and is the Platoon Sergeant for the 1st Platoon, 305th Military Police Company in Wheeling, West Virginia. He is currently employed by the West Virginia Telephone Company and is also a lay minister in the local Church of Christ.

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INTERVIEWEE: RICHARD VANHORN
INTERVIEWER: Brian Brennan
SUBJECT: People encountered, Work done, An average day,
Different experiences of the war
DATE: May 9, 1985

B: This is an interview with Richard Vanhorn for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. The interview is on May 9, 1985.

Mr. Vanhorn, what time were you in Vietnam?

V: It was April of 1965. I was there six months.

B: How did you come about going to Vietnam? Were you drafted or did you volunteer?

V: No, I was stationed at Okinawa as a switchboard repairman. They needed my expertise in that area in Vietnam. It was TDY, temporary duty, status and I volunteered for the duty.

B: So you were in the signal corps?

V: Yes.

B: When your family and friends heard that you were going to Vietnam, can you tell me what their reaction was?

V: Mostly concern for the fact that I was going to Vietnam, although it was early in the game. There was quite a bit of concern, especially from my own family. In Vietnam I had several letters close together, and that was unusual.

B: Can you describe what was going through your mind or how you felt when you got off the plane in Vietnam for the first time?

V: That's hard to describe. Even from the time that I said

I would go down there for duty, there was a great sense of obligation, a great sense of duty that I had felt, and I thought I was going to miss that. In a way, it was kind of like a feeling of elation where I was doing something that I felt needed done myself, as a part of my call.

B: When you first got in the country what was the atmosphere like?

V: Much different than anything I was used to. It was loose. The weather conditions were extremely hot, and I wasn't ready for that. The morale of the troops was high. Everything that I had been used to up to that point was geared to strict discipline as far as the body and the uniform is concerned. It was looser; we didn't have so much of that strictness down there. It was all together different from what I had been used to. It was something that I liked though; I liked the atmosphere. It's a difficult thing to describe. It wasn't like the Army situation; as it was you were part of a family situation. I liked that.

B: Did you have much contact with the Vietnamese people themselves?

V: Just the Southern Vietnamese people. They knew quite a bit. There were civilians in the compound. We were located right outside of Saigon. We made several trips to Saigon and got to know some of the people. One man in particular was a Vietnamese sergeant of the Southern Vietnamese forces. We talked with him a lot and became close friends.

B: How would you say the South Vietnamese Army functioned? Were they good soldiers?

V: It seemed to me they were good as far as they were being led, but it seemed they lacked a lot of knowledge of how to do things. As long as they were being led on how to do things they were good. It seemed like without the American people there, either as advisors or in some kind of capacity, they kind of fell apart.

B: How about the American Army along these same lines? Describe to me what the leadership was like. From the folklore that came out of the Vietnam War we have images of the ninety day wonder lieutenant who usually got fragged or didn't last very long.

V: I don't really get that impression of the leadership. I felt like it was good, the leadership. You learned; you went through a period of time when you learned about the country. You learned to be a leader. A good leader would

listen, especially to the people that had been there a while. I noticed they were doing this to some extent too. I felt that the leadership down there was good.

B: Does the Army of the 1960's differ greatly from the Army of the 1980's from what you've been able to observe?

V: There have been a lot of changes over the last twenty years. The change I've noticed more than anything else is the lack of discipline among the troops. I've always felt that this discipline was what made a good outfit. If you went into a battle or a war zone, I felt that good discipline is what caused a man to follow you and do what he was supposed to do. I wonder today about some of the people that we might have to follow into a battle, or that might have to follow us into a battle.

B: You're saying that the Vietnam era was a much more disciplined outfit, or discipline was on everybody's minds?

V: I believe it was higher, noticeably higher. Even though it was looser in Vietnam itself, you knew that the discipline was there, I think more out of necessity than anything else.

B: Can you describe to me how you lived in Vietnam, the living conditions?

V: I personally lived much careful living conditions. It was something we accepted. We live in what they called a Quonset hut, which was just a metal building with a rounded roof. All of us were shoved into one hut together. It was crowded. Recreation was pretty much unheard of as far as having things to do to occupy your time. The food in the mess hall was not up to the standard that we have in today's Army. I think that's another area that we differed in, although it bettered itself. Living conditions weren't good, but they were acceptable to the troops. It was about what everybody expected.

B: Did you notice a problem of alcoholism or drug abuse while you were there?

V: I don't know where you classify a problem at, but it was relevant. There was a lot of alcohol, a lot of drug use. I don't know at what point in a person's life it becomes a problem. I've seen alcohol go to the extremes in people where it caused extremely dangerous situations. That certainly would be a problem. It was like it is in people's lives today; some people could handle it and some people couldn't. Some people abused it extensively and others didn't. The few that did created hazards and problems for those that were around them. Alcohol and drugs were relevant at that time. They were widely known.

B: Can you describe what your unit itself was like, your buddies? How did they feel about the war?

V: They were down-home people; they were down-to-earth. We had a good comraderie among the people in the repair section of the whole building. Like I mentioned earlier, it was more like a family than anything else. You lived with these people and you worked with them. You tried to help them through their problems. In particular, probably one of my closest friends was a young seventeen year old boy, and I say that because he came straight from home to basic to Vietnam. The lack of experience made him young in a lot of ways. It was almost like a brother to brother relationship. I tried to help him through his problems, his loneliness, the things that he would run across being away from home for the first time. I think the people were great. Everybody looked out for one another. If one person had a problem it was like everybody had one. It's difficult to describe unless you use the old, family term that we use so often anymore--it was like a part of the family.

B: Very tightly knit then?

V: Yes. Another instance was that somebody got into trouble one time. The years take names away from me, but the entire section rose up to go down and retaliate on his particular problem. He had run across what they called a street cowboy, which was just another name for a Vietnamese gang. Everybody rose up to retaliate. Again, you have that close-knit, family type situation.

B: Can you relate to me what your most memorable moment was during the war?

V: I don't know if I had a most memorable moment or not. Going down there and feeling like I was doing something that I should have been doing, had I not done that I think I would have carried a regret with me all of my life. I don't know if you can classify that as memorable or not. Maybe the whole tour would be memorable. There is a sense of pride there because I can stand among the rest of them and say that I did my duty at the time when it was needed. I think that if that was ever needed again you have a lot of young men that would rise up and do the same thing, have a sense of obligation or a sense of duty. I can't pick out a singular thing.

B: You indicated earlier that you had been to Saigon. Can you describe this for me?

V: It was very much like any of our American cities that we might see, except it was in a Vietnamese location. Parts of it were nice and clean; parts of it had ghetto sections

in it. I recall that they had one of the finest zoos that I can ever remember being to. We visited that several times. They had all kinds of animals and nice shrubbery. The atmosphere was great; the scenery around the zoo was great. It was well-kept; it was clean. They had sections of the more wealthy Vietnamese people. It was just like any American city you might visit.

B: How do you believe that the war in Vietnam changed you, or did it change you at all?

V: I think it gave me a sense of being able to handle responsibility. I think it was a period of time where I grew up in life; that's something we wait for, all youngsters to grow up and to accept responsibility, reach adulthood. Responsibility was thrown at me and I had to take it and accept it. I think that was probably the thing that changed my life more than anything.

B: When you came home from the war what kind of a homecoming did you get from the American people? We hear a lot of servicemen say that when they came back the reactions were everything from being totally ignored to run-ins with protestors. How did you experience your return?

V: It was more like being ignored. There was nothing; there were no great banners flying or flag-waving when I came home. I came home to a little, old country town that had less than one hundred people in it. When I would meet them they would greet me and wish me well and were glad that I was home. Other than that there was nothing.

B: Did you have any trouble readjusting after the war?

V: No, I don't think I did. I think I just moved right back into society without any problems. I think I was fortunate; I didn't have any problems that some of the other people had.

B: Why did you join the Army Reserve after going through Vietnam?

V: There was a sense of something that I missed. I'm not sure that I fully understand it myself, but after I had taken a break from the service for about five years I kept thinking about the armed forces. There was a part of my life missing, and I was approached one day about enlisting in the reserve program. I gave it a lot of serious thought and I thought maybe that was the part of my life that was missing, that seems to be empty. I could fulfill that again by being a part of the program. That was the biggest reason that I enlisted.

B: It has been ten years since Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese forces. When you see news footage of the Communist tanks rolling into the city, how do you feel inside? Do you feel it was all a waste of time, or do you think it was a just cause?

V: I feel like it was a great sense of loss. I feel like pulling out when we did was the wrong thing to do, that we had spent a large amount of dollars, a large amount of lives, a large amount of time in fighting the war that I fully believed in. I felt they were using Vietnam as a stepping stone to get another hold on Communism. As it turned out, once we pulled out, that happened. I feel there is a great sense of loss whenever I think about that or watch the footages, that we pulled out too soon, that we should have stuck with it, and went ahead and won the war if that was what was necessary. I think we won as long as we were there, but then we quit too soon.

B: Thank you for granting me this interview. It has been very interesting.

END OF INTERVIEW