

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

VETERAN: JOHN RUFFING

BRANCH OF SERVICE: ARMY

INTERVIEWER(S): AMANDA BRADLEY AND JAMIE SOSSONG

MAY 9, 2005

May 9<sup>th</sup> and this is an interview with John Ruffing in his computer shop at 719 Kudwell Ave in Portage, PA Mr. Ruffing is 63 years old having been born on March 29, 1942. Our names are Jamie Sossang and Amanda Bradley. We will be interviewers. Mr R. is Amanda's supervisor.

Q. Mr. R. could you state for the recording what war and branch of service you were in.

A. United States Army, Vietnam.

Q. What was your rank?

A. I retired as a Chief Warrant Officer.

Q. Where did you serve?

A. I served 82<sup>nd</sup> airborne division Fort Bragg, north Carolina 503<sup>rd</sup> battle air group Okinawa and A Company 502<sup>nd</sup> aviation battalion, Vinlow, Vietnam and headquarters detachment Foot Hood Texas and Vietnamese Language School in Biggsville, El Paso, TX and camp Tow, Vietnam Psychological operations and Latrang, Vietnam and Banme Tonk, Vietnam in command and control south then back to Fort Bragg in 1970 from 1970-72 at Bragg, from 1972-76 in Schnafort, Germany 76-77 in Ta-Goo Korea, and 78-79 82<sup>nd</sup> airborne division Fort Bragg, NC 79-81 2<sup>nd</sup> infantry division Camp Casey, Korea and then I retired.

Q. Were you drafted or did you volunteer during the Vietnam War?

A. I volunteered I went into the army the day I turned 17.

Q. Where was your training conducted?

A. Basic training was conducted at Fort Knox, KY advanced at Fort Knox, KY airborne training was at Fort Bragg, NC.

Q. What about your boot camp experiences?

A. My boot camp was at Fort Knox.

Q. Do you remember anything about your instructors?

A. Well, we had 250 men in the company and they were all from Pennsylvania. My platoon sergeant had about 20 years in the army at the time he was a Korean veteran. I took training in the barracks next door to where Elvis Presley took basic training. From basic training I went to armor training at Fort Knox one of the instructors was from Scanlon Hill Sgt. Balsar which may have retired from the Army like I did.

Q. What specialties were you trained in?

A. Airborne infantry, tank maintenance, parachute training, recon training, psychological operations training, language training, and food service training.

Q. How long did you spend in Vietnam?

A. I spent 42 months in Vietnam I served three tours.

Q. What duties did you have in Vietnam?

A. When I first got to Vietnam in April 1965 I went there as a mess Sgt. And I flew door gunner on helicopters because our door gunners came from Hawaii for 90 days at a time and in between when they didn't show up everyone had to fly door gunner until we got our replacements in and I also operated the officers club in 65 and 66 when I came back to the states in 66 I went to Fort Hood TX and from Fort Hood TX I went to Fort Bliss TX

where I attended Vietnamese language school for a year and then I left there and went straight to Vietnam and worked in psychological operations in the Mei Cong Delta. We ran what we called search and destroy missions we had trying to change the people over from the communist way of thinking and give them their freedom. They would be our friends during the day and then in the night when the Vietcong came back into the village if they were seen to have been friendly with the Americans they were dead the next day by the Vietcong. After psychological operations in Cantoe I went up to Lachoo which was on the west coast of Vietnam and there I was working in procurement supplying the Special Forces A teams with logistical support. And from there I went up to Bam-me-to-it which was a forward base where we launched patrols into Laos and Cambodia and North Vietnam those areas we ran recon from there and then March of 70 I came back to the United States Fort Bragg.

Q. What enemy propaganda, if any, did you see or hear?

A. Well being in psychological operations we were responsible for drawing up the leaflets we dropped out of airplanes to get the Vietnamese people to rally to the south Vietnamese government side. Propaganda we saw a variety and read many pieces of north Vietnamese propaganda because that's what we were doing anytime that we captured north Vietnamese propaganda documents we in turn would make up a leaflet and drop it to the people the merciless acts that they committed bombing hospitals, first aid stations, just killing people for no reason at all.

Q. Did you see any combat?

A. Yes, I did. In 69 and 70 was our, I saw, more action during this period because I would run convoys from the Traing up to Bam-me-to-it and each week we ran a convoy we would have some type of an ambush or be fired upon. No hand-to-hand combat.

Q. Were there many casualties in your unit?

A. No, we were a special elite group well trained we only had one or two Americans that would go out with the

mercenaries that we supervised or the Vietnamese troops that went with, we were mostly advisors.

Q. What was the food like in Vietnam?

A. The food was excellent to the worst. Depending on where you were at the time of the year you could be eating lobster and steak seven days a week or you could be eating the army's, what we called, c-rations out of a can or later on we had the new what we called the alert rations that you reconstitute with water. All of the troops in Vietnam they had R&R centers in Bungtow they had R&R centers in Japan, Australia and Taiwan or Thailand and they had many places they could go for R&R approximately every six months. In the train we had a Dairy Queen that was put in by the Special Forces. When you went to Saigon, Saigon was a modern city depending on where you went. You still had the French cuisine, French restaurants and Vietnamese restaurants you had the American clubs all served good food as far as food goes the food was good.

Q. How did people entertain themselves?

A. We had live entertainment we had clubs every compound had an enlisted club or and officers club we had jukeboxes we had pianos we had bands that came in we had entertainment that came in from the United States, we had Bob Hope over there every year we had Eddie Fisher, Jackie deShannon, John Bubbles, Wayne Newton it was just a steady flow of entertainment from the united states. And they enjoyed coming over there and we enjoyed having them.

Q. What did you do when you were on leave?

A. Well, I went to Sydney, Australia, I was one of the first to go to Sydney, Australia for R&R and while I was there I really had a real good time the people were very friendly they welcomed Americans there it didn't matter what your ethnic background was you were an American and you were treated really good no matter where you went you were treated really good. When I went to Japan on R&R it was the same they treated you very good. When I came back to America on a 30-day leave I was not happy with the way the people looked at the soldiers they were demonstrating about the war in Vietnam and I think that every society has a class of people that don't

really understand what freedom is and since they've never been hungry and since they've never been living in a world where they couldn't get up and go where they wanted to go or drink what they wanted to drink or sing what they wanted to sing or say what they wanted to say these are the people that were demonstrating and burning flags and running off to Canada and then after its all over they want to come back and of course the united states is always forgiving and let them come back and they won't put them jail or anything like that. But every society every generation is going to have that certain group. Now we have the war in Iraq and we have the same problem there are always that few who have never been hungry that have never lost their freedom they were born free and they have no idea what it's like to live in a country where that you're not even allowed to look at another person or to talk freely you're not allowed to go anywhere without some kind of a pass from someone to allow you to that freedom of movement we Americans just don't know how free we are until you leave this country and when you visit another country you really see how difficult or why we support freedom and democracy in this world.

Q. Do you recall any particularly humorous or unusual events that happened?

A. In 20 years a lot. In Vietnam I guess that every time you had a singer or movie star come to Vietnamese there was always sometime exciting happening. They always came during Thanksgiving and Christmas New years and they gave up being with their families in America to be with us in Vietnam and the think that I thought was humorous or very funny is that when Eddie Fisher when my office called back to the united states to talk to his children and I thought that was rather something because he we are in 1965 and we had direct dial communications to the USA and you come back to America and you couldn't even direct dial from Portage to Cresson without da-da-dit I thought that was rather funny.

Q. What did you think of your officers?

A. I thought the officers were well trained I thought they did what had to be done you can't expect every officer to be your best friend you look to officers to be leaders and you may not always agree but the buck stops they are the last ones to answer so I would say 99% of the time the officers were good.

Q. How did you and your fellow soldiers regard enemy troops?

A. Enemy troops...there was a, I would say a hatred for the Vietcong this would develop and get worse especially when you would have one of your buddies get killed beside you. So the fire in you burnt hotter and hotter with your distaste for the way they treated American prisoners. I think that most of the service people now served day-to-day and hand-to-hand combat did what they were trained to do and I don't think they had much time to think about liking or disliking they were more concerned about survival and survival of the fittest was the name of the game.

Q. Were you aware of domestic opposition to the war if so what was your reaction?

A. I was aware and I feel that the opposition to the war in Vietnam or at anytime that the United States these are a segment of our society that have no idea what freedom really is they have not idea what democracy is all about they think they're ignorant to the fact that freedom isn't free.

Q. How did you feel about the conduct of the war by the leadership of the country?

A. I feel that they leadership did what had to be done even though they had had domestic opposition to deal with I always felt that had president Johnson given the authority to bomb Hanoi we would never have lost as many lives and we would have won the war in Vietnam

Q. What was your reaction when you came home from Vietnam?

A. I came home in 1970 I had been home twice before that I kept a low profile because I didn't want I more or less became isolated from civilians I stayed around the military community I didn't want anything to provoke me. And I think when I first returned I don't think it would have taken much from a long-haired hippy to upset me and for me to whip him.

Q. Did you have any type of welcome home celebration?

A. No.

Q. Do you keep in touch with any of the fellow veterans?

A. Yes. We have a green beret Special Forces association and every state has a our headquarters is at Fort Bragg, NC. And we have chapters all over the United States, Hawaii, and Korea. Thailand so I keep and some of the other units that I served in the 502<sup>nd</sup> aviation every year we have a reunion every year we have a special forces reunion email nowadays you can keep track everyday I get an email letting me know if someone has died or what's going on with the veterans in special forces.

Q. What is your opinion of what the government has done for the Vietnamese veteran?

A. I think the government had done as much as they can I don't think that the government failed the Vietnamese veterans I think we have a segment of Vietnamese veterans its that same segment of society that wants everything for nothing and they won't it's a shame that we have people in our society that thinks the government owns them everything, I believe in what John Kennedy said ask not what your country can do for you ask what you can do to your country. And I believe that.

Q. Have you visited the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C.?

A. No I have not.

Q. Did you join any veteran's organizations?

A. I belong to the American legion and I belong to the special corps association.

Q. What did you go on to do as a career after the war?

A. After the war I continued to serve in the United States army I went to school at night and on the weekends and finished three college degrees and retired.

Q. Did your military experiences influence your thinking about war or the military in general?

A. I don't think, I guess I was a soldier, always wanted to be a soldier and am still a soldier I believe if you live by the golden rule and practice the golden rule you can survive anything.

Q. How did your services and experiences affect your life?

A. My service, if I hadn't gone into the service when I look back I may have ended up in jail, I may have been a criminal, I don't know that. When I take a look at my hometown if I had gone into the steel mills or the coal mines I wouldn't have been able to retire from either one of them because they closed up. At the end of so going into the military for me and retiring from the military was a very good future and it paid off for me.