

2015

Lonnie Edwards Oral History

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Interviewer: Ashley Davis

Interviewee: Lonnie D. Edwards

Time and Location of Interview

The interview was done on November 1st 2015. It was held at Hardees fast food restaurant off Taylor road in Huntsville Alabama from 2:00pm to 3:00pm. Interview was done with Mr. Edwards and his wife along with myself.

Lonnie Edwards

Lonnie Edwards was born in Madison County, Alabama on December 6th 1942. He attended high school at a local school in Madison County. He had basic training at Fort Rally Camp before being sent over to Vietnam. After he came back from Vietnam he went to trade school at JF Drake in Huntsville and worked with PPJN Industries. He married and had children and later got divorced and remarried. They are both retired and living in Madison County.

Interviewer: Ashley Davis [AD]

Interviewee: Lonnie Edwards [LE]

AD: Mr. Edwards, can I start by asking you whether you were drafted or you signed up to fight in the war in Vietnam?

LE: I was drafted. Though I would have gone anyway to freely serve my duty.

AD: Ok, so where was it that you began your training?

LE: Fort Raleigh Camp; same place as my Dad though I didn't know it at the time. He fought over there in World War 2 and won four purple hearts. Dad didn't talk much 'bout the war, I can understand why now.

AD: Now, what was your M.O.S?

LE: 11B40 and then I was in 11D40. We were the straight infantry, the guys that done the grunt work.

AD: What sort of missions did you go on?

LE: Are you asking specifics? I can't quite remember the names of the jobs we done.

AD: Just anything about them you can remember.

LE: Well...we had Eagle Flights, used helicopter to sweep the area and clear paths to make sure they were safe from enemy patrol or weaponry. One mission we had to clear a highway they called Bloody Thirteen. It was the place of third largest kill ratio of Vietnamese. (Pause for a long time). Had a mission in DC valley, I had been transferred to recon by then. We were to gather information and get it back to headquarters. We got sent out early in the morning to look for a tank trail that was a year old. It was hard to find because we were in the jungle and after a year the vines and grass had grown back over the tracks. We walked right into a guarded hospital site in the mountainside. We weren't noticed at first. Once we were we got hauled up on that mountainside. We were told to stay but I told the two guys I was with to run and I would meet them back in the jungle. I threw a grenade at them and we ran for our lives.

AD: Out of all the missions you can think of what would you say was the most dangerous one you went on?

LE: (Frowns). During the night we had LP ambushes. A lot of people were killed during them. A drainage ditch was a man's saving grace during those ambushes. Another time we were all caught in over our heads was after a cannon alert.

AD: What happened during a cannon alert?

LE: Everyone fired their weapons to make sure they were working. And one time a general came out there and called a cannon alert. Had several men killed because it was the wrong time of day and alerted the enemy to our whereabouts. We hated him. (Laughs), but after that incident he was stationed somewhere else.

AD: Did you sustain any major injuries while over there?

LE: (Nods broadly). I did. When we met up at that hospital, it had a guarded perimeter surrounding it that we hadn't noticed. One guy saw, but he had also alerted them to our whereabouts. We were pinned down. We called in the artillery and were told to get out. I was with two guys who froze up. This new guy and another who was 'bout to leave the country. I grabbed a grenade and told them to go and meet me back out in the jungle. As I was 'bout to throw the grenade I was shot on my left side. The bullet traveled all the way down my leg to my foot. They call it the Million Dollar wound, usually you get to go back home after that; I was out of the field for a while before being put back in. Well I realized after I'd been shot that I was still holding on to that grenade so I quickly threw it over and we were able to escape. I was awarded the Purple Heart for that.

Got hit with shrapnel when writing a letter. We were clearing these huge thorns out with a Bangalore torpedo. (Chuckles). I was trained in demolition and I got to cut down the trees. (Laughs again). I just loved cutting them down.

AD: Agent Orange? Did you come in contact with any of that?

LE: Yes, they sprayed it everywhere. It was put out by helicopters that looked like bubbles. It came over and burned our skin. My doctors are still looking to see if I suffer from any side effects like some others have. I don't know how I escaped haven any problems later on, I just did.

AD: Was there a drug problem in Vietnam?

LE: Oh yes. Drugs were rampant! Marijuana was everywhere. Large paper sacks of it were sold for nothing everywhere you went and the men ate it up. The morning I got shot I had eleven or twelve cans of beer and I don't know how many cigarettes. How far over the edge can you go when you start doing something like that? (Shakes head and becomes lost in thought).

AD: What did you think of c-rations?

LE: They were terrible! They were packaged in 1941. Some were special rations that were dehydrated, they were much better but we didn't have those. We used C4 to heat our meals. (Laughs). We blew up a few things.

AD: What did the Vietnamese think of the American military being there?

LE: (Becomes slightly emotional). I have a personal experience with that. There was a South Vietnamese soldier that was in the same squad as I was. We cleared the highway together. He was my interpreter. He would cry at night... (Stops and begins to tear up.) He would tell me (starts crying). He would tell me how much he appreciated the Americans being over there. He had a daughter, and he told me he would like his children to grow up in a safe place like my children. (Wipes face). Next question.

AD: How did you feel about the lack of support from Americans?

LE: (Getting very angry). I hated it. I especially hated Jane Fonda. I wasn't a Christian back then I would have liked... Anyway, I didn't get it as bad because I came back to a farm town that had a closer relationship. Just felt different. Jane Fonda was telling everyone on the radio how bad we were for killing people. She didn't know. Clinton and Senator Kerry did little to help. I vote now to make sure we keep certain people out of office who would screw things up like they did in Vietnam. Find an honest man running.

AD: How did you handle coming back from Vietnam? What was it like?

LE: I was in constant turmoil. Restless and looking for something. I was very bitter. I was angry and slow to think. I was hurting myself, and to the point I was hurting my family. I didn't find peace until I found Christ. He brought me out of the torment I had put myself into after coming back home.

AD: Did you acquire any other metals besides the Purple Heart?

LE: Just the usual you get. I got a medal for carrying a man who'd been hit by shrapnel for over 1000 meters. Got the Army Commendation Metal. South Vietnamese government gave one to us all as well.

AD: Well is there anything that you think people should know about the War in Vietnam.

LE: Yes. We should have been over there. Don't ever go over with your hands tied behind your back. I would be dead if I hadn't shot first. I'm not going wait till someone shoots me before I take a swing at him. A lot of men got wounded and killed over being ordered not to shoot unless shot at. There was a reason we should have been over there! It was to help them gain their freedom. Can't speak for what the government sent us over there for, not to save those people, but we should have helped them.

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