

Fall 12-10-2015

Oral History Project/ Renaldo Rivera

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Recommended Citation

Ravariere, Candra M., "Oral History Project/ Renaldo Rivera" (2015). *Vietnam*. Paper 3.
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Student Interviewer's Name: Candra Ravariere

Interviewee name: Renaldo Rivera

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted in two sessions on November 1st and 2nd and lasted approximately 48 minutes all together. It was conducted on the phone.

***Interviewer:** Candra Ravariere (CR)*

***Interviewee:** Renaldo Rivera (RR)*

About Renaldo Rivera:

Renaldo Rivera was born on the beautiful island of St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. He is the former general of the Virgin Islands and his rank is major general right now. Renaldo Rivera works for the National Guard now for 22 years. He is currently retired and one of the last to serve in the Vietnam War. He is married and has four children and currently lives on the island of St. Croix. This interview covered the Vietnam War, and was conducted on November 2, 2015 on the phone between Collegedale, TN and Christiansted, St. Croix.

CR: Mr. Rivera, just to get started, tell me a little bit about how you came to be involved in the Vietnam War. Were you drafted or did you enlist?

RR: I was drafted in 1968 of September to be exact.

CR: Where were you living at the time?

RR: I was living on the island of St. Thomas with my parents.

CR: Why did you pick the service branch you joined?

RR: I did not pick it. It was mandatory. I enlisted with the selective service and got drafted into the United States Army. At this point of time once you reach 18 years of age it was mandatory to enlist.

CR: When you got the news you were being sent to fight in the Vietnam War, how did you feel?

RR: I was terrified to tell you the truth, it was unbelievable. I mean at that point in time all men who were of age had to enlist in the selective service but it never dawned on me that I soon would be drafted to go to fight in a war.

CR: Do you recall your first days in service?

RR: OH Yes! My first days were shocking and it was the first time being away from home, which was St. Thomas at the time. I went to Georgia for basic training and then South Carolina for advanced training. The thing that really shocked me was how these both states treated black people. It turned me off.

CR: Tell me about your boot camp/training experience(s).

RR: It was hard but I developed good friends and I started to like what I was doing. It was just all about following orders and I had no problem with that. There were 46 of us and they used three buses to get us to the basic training site in Georgia. The first time was a real awakening for me. The average day in basic training always started off with a rude shout by the drill sergeant at 0430 hours. The very first awaken was a "shark attack". A shark attack is when three drill sergeants get in your face and yell their ass off. Sorry for the foul language, but after that, 0500 hours is first formation, where we fall in and get a count. Then it's off to the PT field for about 45 minutes to an hour. Later on, you'll be doing combative during PT as well. On the third day of arriving to Georgia we received our M-16s. At first I was like, Cool I finally have my weapon. But it quickly turned into, "Shit, when am I going to get rid of these things? I had to carry them everywhere I go, and never lose sight of it, or I would have get smoked to shit by the drill sergeant and trust me you did not want to get on his bad side for sure!

CR: Don't say sorry about the language, it is ok. You can say anything you want for the record, next question.

CR: Which war(s) did you serve in (WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, or the Persian Gulf)?

RR: I served in the Vietnam War.

CR: What was your job/assignment?

RR: My job was as an Infantryman known as a rifleman in February 1969- September 1970.

CR: What do Infantrymen do?

RR: An infantryman typically is the branch of a military force that fights on foot. We are the soldiers who are intended to engage, fight, and defeat the enemy in face-to-face combat. We bear the burden of warfare and typically suffer the greatest number of casualties because we are at the forefront.

CR: Were there any casualties in your unit?

RR: Oh Lord! Um, Wow it was just um sigh, just too many, too many to mention or to discuss. It breaks my heart just to think about it. It seemed like every week there were about 150 soldiers that died. I would say about 600 a month. It was terrifying to me because everyday I wondered if I would be next.

CR: Do you think you were well prepared for what you saw while in Vietnam?

RR: No, No. I had familiarity with my gun and what to do with it they just did not train me on when to use it on the battlefield. I personally feel like my training was not enough for what I encountered in Vietnam. It was just way different than I expected. Blood was basically.... Everywhere. To me it seemed like I was going to die there. At one point in time I got really depressed, I lost my focus and the excitement to do my job it just was not there anymore.

CR: In one word how would you describe the Vietnam War?

RR: Complicated.

CR: Why would you describe it as complicated?

RR: The Vietnam War was a watershed event in both American and Vietnamese History. For Vietnam it was just a continuation of their ongoing war for independence. After being liberated from Japan at the end of World War Two, the Vietnamese turned to America to support their independence goals. However, France reaffirmed their colonial rule. This led to a guerilla war throughout the 50s, and France's eventual withdrawal. The newly liberated Vietnam was partitioned into two nations, a North Vietnam, led by Ho Chi Minh, who was the leader of the struggle against the French, and South Vietnam.

CR: What were you told about the reasons for the war and by whom?

RR: Congress passed the so-called Southeast Asian Resolution, the nearest approach to a legal declaration of war in Vietnam, making it clear that our government would take all necessary measures in support of freedom and in defense of peace in Southeast Asia. South Vietnam requested assistance of the United States. This was the reason given to us by our instructors while training in Georgia before going to Vietnam.

CR: How did you stay in touch with your family?

RR: I stayed in touch by letters. I wrote to my mother every week. She is Puerto Rican so she understood English but she couldn't write it. So I wrote to her in English and she wrote back in Spanish.

CR: What was the food like?

RR: Our food was canned products, everything was canned everything we ate was canned food. From canned corn beef to canned peaches, but I had to get use to it to survive.

CR: Did you keep a personal diary?

RR: No, that's too much writing. (Chuckles) I was already writing to my mother every week how much more writing I need to do. Matter of fact writing to her was my personal diary basically.

CR: Did you work or go back to school?

RR: When I came back from Vietnam I joined the police force, then went off to college, and then worked full time in National Guard for 22 years.

CR: Did you make any close friendships while in the service?

RR: Yes, a lot of good friends some have retired some of them have died, but very close friendships.

CR: Did you continue any of those relationships?

RR: Yes we talk to each other on the phone and meet up when we can. Sometimes I would go to St. Thomas and stay there for the day just hanging out with them. We sometimes would reminisce on our past and what we went through together.

CR: What did you go on to do as a career after the war?

RR: I came back and joined the National Guard military police, then became a Staff Officer, then later on was appointed as baton commander on St. Croix and St. Thomas and ended my career as an Adjutant general.

CR: Did your military experience influence your thinking about war or about the military in general?

RR: Yes it definitely did. I follow the orders of the Governor and President of the United States.

CR: How did your service and experiences affect your life?

RR: It was great I would tell anyone younger than me who is of the age, to join the army and forces because it is the best thing that could happen. They pay for your school and the salary is really good. You don't necessarily go to war. You can become an officer of the National Guard without the worry of having to move to and from.

CR: Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered in this interview?

RR: No I think that you have enough to make a dissertation about me. Other than that I hope you get an A+ for this class. When you get back the grade make sure to tell Barbel, so he could tell me what you get. Thank you for picking me for this interview. I also can speak to your class if you ever need a presenter. I hope you doing good there and keep your head up. You soon coming home don't worry. So after college you are planning to come back St. Croix to work for the National Guard right?

CR: HA, no I'm actually not. I'm currently studying Finance and I plan to become a Financial Analyst someday.

RR: Well you do know the National Guard has positions for persons in Finance?

CR: Well yes but everyone has to do basic training and that's the thing I don't like.

RR: Ok, but see it as a back up plan.

CR: OK, I will.

RR: Well have a good day.

CR: Well I want to thank you for your time and making this possible and also for your service.

RR: Ok, thank you. Bye.

Bibliography

I spent approximately one hour and forty minutes reading these sources in preparation for the second interview.

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Original Questions

Where were you living at the time?

Why did you join?

Why did you pick the service branch you joined?

Do you recall your first days in service?

What did it feel like?

Tell me about your boot camp/training experience(s).

Which war(s) did you serve in (WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf)?

Where exactly did you go?

Do you remember arriving and what it was like?

What was your job/assignment?

Did you see combat?

Were there many casualties in your unit?

How did you stay in touch with your family?

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What was the food like?

Did you keep a personal diary?

Did you work or go back to school?

Did you make any close friendships while in the service?

Did you continue any of those relationships?

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

Did your military experience influence your thinking about war or about the military in general?