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Oral History Report

Ryan A. Ramirez
ryanramirez@southern.edu

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Student Interviewer's Name: Ryan Ramirez
Interviewee name: Tom Ballweg

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted in two sessions. The first session was held on November 6, 2015 and lasted about thirty minutes. The second session was held on November 9, 2015 and lasted about an hour. The interview was conducted over the phone because a face-to-face interview with Mr. Ballweg was not possible. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About Tom Ballweg:

Tom Ballweg was born in 1949 in upstate New York in a town called Cornwall. He fought in Vietnam and was in the army for a year and seven months. He married Linda Saye Woolard in the year of 1969. Mr. Ballweg never graduated from high school or college but he went on to get his GED. This interview covered topics from his personal life before war, his experience in Vietnam, and his life and thoughts after the war.

Interviewer: Ryan Ramirez (RR)

Interviewee: Tom Ballweg (TB)

Session 1: November 6, 2015

RR: Mr. Ballweg what year were you born in?

TB: I was born in 1949

RR: Where were you living at the time of when you were born?

TB: I was living in upstate New York. Cornwall, New York.

RR: What was your education like? Did you graduate from high school or college?

TB: No I did not. I went at it at eighth grade education and went on to get my GED.

RR: Who did you marry and what is your wife's full name?

TB: My wife's full name is Linda Saye Woolard.

RR: What year did you marry her?

TB: Um.. in 1969.

RR: Do you guys have any children?

TB: We have one daughter.

RR: What is her name?

TB: Lisa Louise

RR: Throughout your life or growing up, did you have any accomplishments that you were proud of?

TB: Well Ryan I don't really... My accomplishments are really not that great. You know I mean um.. I come from a very large family, nine kids. And so my parents struggled and so um the accomplishments were hard to come by. I don't know, to me um making money to help the family was pretty good. It would make me feel good cause you know like I said my parents were they stayed on welfare a lot.

RR: Did you receive any medals or awards?

TB: No I did not, well I did get the army accommodation medal. I was suppose to get a couple of medals but they never gave them to me. So I don't really really worry about them. You know what I mean? But the army accommodation medal and the CIB which is a Combat Infantry Badge which means you've been in combat.

RR: Okay, well thank you Mr. Ballweg that is all the information that I need for now. But I will be giving you a call on Monday at one o'clock to conduct the second part of the interview.

TB: Alright Ryan you have a nice evening.

RR: You too, you take care.

Session 2: November 9, 2015

RR: Where you drafted or did you enlist in Vietnam?

TB: I was drafted.

RR: Where were you living at the time of when you were drafted?

TB: I was living in Norfolk Virginia.

RR: What service branch did you go into?

TB: I was drafted into the army.

RR: Can you describe your first days in service?

TB: Oh my, basics I had a terrible time. My first day I made a bunch of mistakes. I ended up doing a lot of pushups. It was not a very good day for me. (chuckles)

RR: Describe what it felt like. How were you feeling?

TB: Um.. not too bad you know I.. to start out with you know it was almost like another thing we do in life. Like gym class you know that's mostly what we did. Exercises and things like that. Trying to get our bodies fit for what we were going to go through.

RR: Tell me about your boot camp/training experiences.

TB: Boot camp is a..a.. basically what it is is a they teach you all the ins and outs. Mostly it's all about discipline. It's exercise just to get you fit. Uh then you go through what they call AIT. We do eight months of basic training. And then we do eight months of AIT which AIT means that they have individual training and according to what branch you go into that's what the training is.

RR: Do recall your basic training? Was it hard? Did you struggle? Or was it easy?

TB: Well no, it was a struggle I mean you run three, four, five miles a day I mean that's the struggle. You do a lot of pushups; um you do a lot of exercises you constantly have drill sergeants hollering at you. So it wasn't really easy but then it wasn't extremely hard either. I guess when I went into the army I was pre physical fit. It was a little easier on me then a lot of them. Some of the other guys struggled.

RR: Do you recall any of your instructors?

TB: I sure do, I remember two of them. I remember one was drill sergeant Sir Hulio he was a E-5 and drill sergeant Bitner who was E6.

RR: Where they tough on you?

TB: Nah they were tough on everybody. You know, I guess that's their job and um.. I have to admit I felt a whole lot better once I got out of basics because I took a lot of exercises.

TB: Now you have to see that after basic training it was split. Two months of

basic training then you do what they call the individual thing and that's where they train you to go to Vietnam. I went to Fort Louisiana which at that time was called home of the training soldiers of Vietnam. So then you have to learn how to be able to handle the swamps, we walked through swamps and um all different kinds of training. It was way more advanced. We would go on twenty-mile hikes with an eighty-pound rug sack on your back and you had to go on a twenty-mile hike and a lot of the guys didn't make it. A lot of the guys had to end up riding in the backs of trucks because they couldn't make the twenty-mile hike. What we called force marching and we had things like we had um.. let me see if I can remember what it's called.. it's called search and evade. Its been a lot of years Ryan but that is when they would take us out in the middle of nowhere and they would drop us off and we had to go find our way back to camp and all along the way there were people that would have weapons and everything and most of the people did not make it back. I did not make it back to the camp. I was caught and they would put you in jail. It was like you were a prisoner of war. So we went through training like that and there was all kinds of training and it's really again force march and we had the M16 which is the main weapon we used in Vietnam.

RR: Where exactly did you go in Vietnam?

TB: Well I flew into Kamran Bay I came back home for a vacation. It was a thirty day leave then I flew over to Anchorage, Alaska all the way from there to Guam and then to Kamran Bay in Vietnam. There we went through more training. They try and ring you up what's happening in Vietnam. And then you are set out to a company. I was assigned to the 12th infantry, which is 1st of 22nd in Anke. And I was assigned into the Charlie company and then I was going to a helicopter and was sent out to a fire base and stayed there for a couple of days and then I went out to the company. And when I went to join my company we came in on a hot L-Z. A hot L-Z is when the enemy is firing at the chopper we came on. Not much fun. (chuckles)

RR: When arriving to Vietnam do you remember what it was like? Was it how? Were you scared?

TB: Yeah it was very hot over there. But I mean it's a very dry kind of hot. The humidity I think has a lot to do with it. It's hot you know, you sweat a lot.

RR: What was your job/assignment?

TB: I was an infantryman so we went into the jungle and searched for the enemy or (Charlie) all over the place. And I was the point man. I would walk point. I don't know if you've seen some of the war movies where you have a couple of people walk to the sides and you have one guy who walks in front of everybody else. I was the person who walked upfront. I was called point man.

RR: Did you see any combat?

TB: Yeah! We walked into some ambushes and we got into firefights with them quit often.

RR: Quit often?

TB: Ah, I'm not going to say everyday you know, if we were out there we usually went out for twenty-seven days at a time and we would run into I don't know I would say maybe like five or ten times we walked into ambushes. That would result in firefights somebody shot or somebody killed.

RR: Were you injured in any of those firefights?

TB: No I was not, I think God was watching after me.

RR: Were there any injuries of casualties in your unit?

TB: Uh yes there was, we lost one guy and we had several that were injured. That's while I was in Anke. I think I told you the story while you were in eighth grade about being point man and the medics job in there was to walk around and make sure that everybody takes a malaria pill everyday and he would just sit there and watch you take it. Because if you, some of the guys didn't want to take it; if they got malaria they would get two to three weeks back in the hospital while the company is out there. So he would make sure you took the pill. One day the medic came up to me and said Tom you don't look that good and I said well I don't feel that good. So he ended up taking my temperature of 104. And he said well you have malaria the medic said once we get to a place where we can get a medevac we'll get a medevac to come get you. And I said okay. Medevac is a helicopter that has a big red cross on them. But anyway he asked who is walking point and I said me and he said you can't walk point, not with a fever like that and he said who is next and I said fast Freddy. And he said well I'll tell him that he has to walk point today. And so what happened is that we broke camp forty-five minutes later and um he walked into an ambush and he was shot and killed, along with several other people that were injured and we had to medevac them out. Charlie (enemy) would fight us for a while and then run away. And after it was all over they would call in some medevac's to come get the injured and the dead. The medic said let me go get Tom because he's got malaria and came up to me and asked are you okay? And I said yeah I feel fine, he took my temperature and it was ninety-point-six. So you know prayers, it was prayers. God takes care of us even though we don't walk sometimes in his way.

RR: Were you ever captured or a prisoner of war?

TB: No. And I thank God for that.

RR: How did you manage to stay in touch with your family and your wife back home?

TB: Uh, well.. actually we would write letters back and forth. Some guys that were lucky enough to be stationed in the radio rooms in different places would patch calls back home and be able to talk to their families. But I was not one of them. My wife would send me packages with cookies in them and all kinds of little treats in them you know. It was nice to get those packages.

RR: Do you remember what the food was like back at camp?

TB: Well most of the time we were twenty-seven days in the bush and then seven days on stand down where we would go back to the camp for seven days. During the stay in the camp most of the food was what you would eat normally you know. I mean it would be regular kitchen food. Out in the bush we used to eat what they call C-rations. Our food would come out of cans. If we came close to the enemy or knew the enemy was close we wouldn't cook the food. We would just eat it out of the can straight.

RR: Did you guys have plenty of supplies or were you rationing a lot?

TB: Well we for the most part we always had supplies. We got stocked in. Stocked in means there's a heavy fog. And when you get a heavy fog there the helicopters cant see you. You know what I'm saying? So they don't know where to drop off the supplies. We ran low one time. We ran out food, ran out of water almost. Some of the guys did and some of them didn't. They usually sent food to us every seven days but we were like at thirteen days when they finally got food to us.

RR: While in the bush did you feel any pressure or stress at anytime?

TB: Yeah, you always feel pressure because you never know. Charlie (enemy) was know for taking pot shots at people so you had to be really careful. You had to watch where you were going there were also booby traps. So you know you had to watch where you were walking where you were going; the trees, you had to put up with animals: snakes, scorpions, we even had a couple of panthers one night. Got in the trees above the camp and so we had to actually, they were both shot. There was no way they weren't going to come down from those trees and not hurt somebody.

RR: How did you guys entertain yourself while on your seven-day break back at camp?

TB: Well they would have music like a band or something like that. Usually the band was a Vietnamese band. They had other things for us to do that would help take our mind off the war. Seven days goes by really fast.

RR: What would you often do in those seven days?

TB: Uh, I would eat food and write letters. Sometimes it's really hard to write in the bush. So I would catch up on my letters. I love to put puzzles together. I would put some puzzles together at the USL. And I listen to some of that music and the bands for the most part. Just kind of relax and take, It's called R and R, rest and relaxation.

RR: Can you tell me where all you traveled in Vietnam?

TB: Well I actually I started off in Cam Ranh almost in the middle of the country. I went to Ankhe which is shortly south, and then from Ankhe I traveled to Hard Times which is a fire base. That's where they keep all your big guns, when people call in firepower. Fire from the bases. And from there I went to Laos borders to meet my company. Finally they sent the fourth division home which sent us back into camp and I had to go to the 101 air born which took us to Fu Bai. And then I went up into the Asha Valley Which is up on the DMZ almost North of Vietnam. I spent about thirty days there and then I left and went to Longman a special security detachment and I spent the remainder of my time there which is little over a year.

RR: In total how long did you spend in Vietnam?

TB: I was there a year and seven months.

RR: What did you think of the officers and fellow soldiers?

TB: Growing up you come across guys you hang with and everything and then you get some people who don't like you. Not because you did anything, just because they don't like you. You know what I mean? The army is the exact same way. You get people that just don't like. And if it was an officer then you're in trouble because they make it hard on you.

RR: Did you make any good friends while in the army?

TB: Yes I did, I came across a gentlemen in a matter of fact we were in the fourth division together, 101 airborne, we left the 101 airborne and went through special troops together and I left Vietnam like um.. twenty-two days before he did. It's been years since I've been up to see him in Indiana.

RR: You still keep in contact with him?

TB: I did until about five or ten years ago. About ten years ago. We just haven't gotten connected anymore.

RR: Do you recall the day your service ended?

TB: (Laughing) I thought it was Christmas time! (Laughing) I was very happy, one of the things we look forward to at the end of our tour is that we would start counting down the days, the hours and part of it is when you get up on that plane you still got a little fear there but once that plane took off and you got up in the air there was quite a racket on that plane. (Chuckles) Cause once that plane gets up so high that Charlie (enemy) can't shoot you anymore. And that's when everyone realizes we're going home.

RR: Once back in the United States do you recall what you did?

TB: Well actually I took thirty days, spent thirty days with my wife. Just enjoying ourselves, Vietnam was still bothering me. So I ended up taking fishing and um fishing was kind of my out. When Vietnam would bother me I would just go fishing. And so I do a lot of fishing.

RR: Did you ever go back to work or school at any point?

TB: Actually what I did was all different kinds of jobs it was unbelievable. Trying to find something I actually wanted to do. I only had an eighth grade education so I wasn't skilled in a lot of stuff. But I ended up being a bridge carpenter and built bridges.

RR: Did you make any close friends while in Vietnam?

TB: Yes, just one his name was Harold but we had a nickname for him. We used to call him the flea. One thing fleas did was that they would bother you and he used to bother us. (Laughing) He got that name from working in the automobile plants. They gave him the name because he used to bother them they said he was like a flea.

RR: How long did you keep up your friendship after the war?

TB: Probably twenty or twenty-five years, maybe thirty years. It has been the last like ten years that we haven't been in contact.

RR: Did you at any point join a veteran's organization at all?

TB: Yes, I've joined the VFW, which is veteran's of foreign wars back in 2007.

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

TB: It does change, you have to remember when you go through your training they teach you to kill people. And that's the basic thing. They change your whole mind set from what God doesn't want us to do to that is what we have to do to survive. War is a ugly thing and some guys have to.. they just have

experiences that go on while they are in war that changes their lives forever. And so I had friend that was in the marines and the marines have a motto. The motto is no one left behind. They got caught up in a heavy fog and they got into a firefight and his friend got shot and he had to carry his friend for four days on his back because they couldn't get the helicopters to come and get him out. So he carried him on his back for four days and today that still haunts him.

RR: Do you attend any reunions?

TB: Not in our company, I haven't been notified that there are any reunions for our company. So no I haven't attended any reunions at all.

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

TB: You know in order to uh.. I changed as a person. It's hard to go through everything you go through in a war zone and not be affected in some sort of way. There are so many guys that are in hospitals and everything today that are just messed up really really bad. Um because of the stuff that happened to them in Vietnam. You have to remember that most of the people.. I was actually in better shape because when I went to Vietnam I was twenty. And most of these kids that went over there were eighteen. So I was actually two years older and I've been on my own since I was sixteen. Makes it a little easier. These kids were just out of high school getting ready to go to college things like that and they're living at home and so you go from that to war and is not very easy.

RR: Well that is all the questions I had for you but I don't know if you wanted to add anything you think I may have left out?

TB: I don't know Ryan but I will tell you this, I..I probably shouldn't have made it through Vietnam. There were several instances that I should have probably died but I do know that prayers, our parent's prayers are what bring us through all this stuff that we do. The power of prayer is talking to God. He takes care of his children.

RR: I agree with you. Well Mr. Ballweg I really appreciate the time you have taken to have this interview with me. Thank you for helping me out. I will make sure that you get a copy of my project. Thank you again, God bless!