

Fall 12-7-2016

Physician in the Vietnam War

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Recommended Citation

Wright, Julia R. Miss, "Physician in the Vietnam War" (2016). *Vietnam*. Paper 14.
<http://knowledge.e.southern.edu/vietnam/14>

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HIST 155, Fall 2016 / Miss Julia Wright

Student Interviewer's Name: Julia Wright

Interviewee name Bill Bryan

Time and Location of Interview: November 1, 2016- Via telephone

The interview was conducted in one session on November 1, 2016 and lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour. It was conducted over the phone because the interviewee does not live in the state. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About Bill Bryan:

Bill Bryan was born in Takoma Park, Maryland on April 9, 1942. He was a physician in the Vietnam War in the 25th infantry division in 1969. The topics covered in the interview range from his initial draft into the army to life after the war. The interview was conducted over the phone due to distance.

Interviewer: Julia Wright (JW)

Interviewee: Bill Bryan (BB)

JW: So let's begin! Were you drafted or did you decide to enlist?

BB: I was drafted. I did not enlist. Back then there was no volunteer army. It was all enlistment or being drafted. So I was drafted.

JW: And what year were you drafted in?

BB: I was drafted in 1969.

JW: Oh okay! How old were you at the time?

BB: 27.

JW: Where were you living?

BB: At that time, I was living in Takoma Park, Maryland.

JW: Were you married at that time?

BB: Yes, I was!

JW: Did you have children at the time? If so, was that hard being drafted and leaving?

BB: No, we didn't have children at that time. However, my wife was pregnant.

JW: Awe! How did she react to you being enlisted when you had a baby on the way?

BB: Well, it was upsetting to her to know that I wouldn't be around for a year, especially since she would be delivering while I was gone.

JW: I would imagine! Did they tell you right away that you would be gone a year? Or did you just kind of find out as you went along?

BB: No, they told me right away that I would be gone a year.

JW: Oh okay. In our first interview, you said it was the Army, correct?

BB: Correct. The United States Army.

JW: Okay! Do you recall your first days in service?

BB: Let me see.. Well I was inducted into the service in San Antonio, Texas at Fort Sam Houston. Yes, I recall those days. There was a lot of paper work the first few days. I had to fill out all kinds of papers so that they could establish a file on me. So I remember that well. Following that, there was about a six-week period of time when I went to classes and they taught me a lot of army things that I need to know and also, things about the culture, war, and the history of the country before we went over.

JW: Oh I see. How was boot camp?

BB: Yeah, I mean there was drilling to learn and marching, that kind of thing. There was also an experience that you'd go out and have a.. what should I say.. a night time maneuver where you would go out and have gunfire overhead and have to crawl under barbed wire and you'd learn some of the techniques on how to handle firearms and react to various to some Army and enemy situations.

JW: Wow! I didn't know that was a part of boot camp! So you had said that you were stationed in South Vietnam. Had you ever left the country or was this an entirely new experience or a shock for you?

BB: Well I had been out of the country before. When I was eighteen, I spent a summer in Europe so I'd been out of the country before. However, besides that, I had never left the country.

JW: When you arrived in South Vietnam, what were your first thoughts? Did it seem like a war was going on? Or was it more peaceful?

BB: Well it was very tropical and hot. I arrived in September and it was humid! We flew over actually on commercial airplanes that the government had hired to fly us over. We had on our uniforms, our fatigues, on when we arrived at the airbase in Saigon and then from there, we were loaded into airplanes that flew us out to a small army airbase, and then we were trucked to our headquarter companies. There we located our 25th infantry division base camp. So it was shocking to go from life in the United States to combat situations. It was quite an adjustment!

JW: I would imagine! So you said that you were a physician in the war. Was that what you were knew you were going to be or were you assigned that when you were in Vietnam?

BB: Well when I was drafted, I was drafted with a physician draft that simply meant that I would be functioning in the role as a physician in the division that I was assigned to.

JW: Oh okay! Did you see combat in that?

BB: Our base camp, where I was located, it was in the middle of a combat zone. However, it wasn't in the middle of a line of fire. Our basecamp had rocket fire into our camp and we did having guarding of our camp. I also went out on helicopter into the jungle to give routine medical care to some of the battalion that were assigned to our division.

JW: Were there many casualties in your unit?

BB: Yeah, there were actually. These battalions were out where they got the fire and they would bring in the casualties into the base camp because we had an evacuation hospital at the basecamp where I was stationed so the casualties would come in there. We also served basic medical needs that we served as well, for sort of a medical call that we had. We treated fear and various illnesses. We saw them for the general medical needs. If they were seriously injured, they were helicoptered out to a trauma center where they were handled. We saw many patients with malaria because there were so many mosquitos there and also, routine stuff that you'd see with infectious diseases.

JW: Of course. I think I heard you correctly, but did you say something about fear? So were the soldiers also treated for psychological problems?

BB: Yes, they were. I think I actually said fever, but they were also treated for fear. There were people that dealt with emotional psychiatric problems. Where I was located, we had a psychologist to deal with emotional issues.

JW: Did you see a fair amount of PTSD issues?

BB: Yeah, there was. Back then we didn't really call it that so much, but today, in reflecting back, there were a number of cases of post traumatic stress.

JW: Of course. If you could and you don't mind, could you tell me a couple of your most memorable experiences?

BB: Oh boy, lets see. *chuckles* Well one thing that hey asked me to do was to teach the Vietnamese Army personnel basic medical care and first aid. That was an interesting experience! I got to teach through an interpreter, general medical care to the Vietnamese. Also, I got to brief the general of our division, on the health of the troops. I worked out of what you called the surgeons office so we collected data on the troops, like how many troops had fever, how many had malaria, or how many had a rash. So once a week we would report to the general of our division of about 15,000 troops, the state of health that our troops had. So I got to do that which was interesting! On a lighter side, when we were there I got to see entertainment that would fly over to entertain the troops to help them relax. Bob Hope was a big name and they brought troops over every Christmastime so the troops would come in from the field and have that entertainment to look forward to and that was fun. Now also, you know, I had a friend that was actually killed in combat when we were there. That was a traumatic experience because we had to pack up his belongings and ship them back to his family, which was always a sad occasion. Also, the helicopter experience, where you would ride about tree level, and have troops sitting on the inside of the helicopters with the doors open, and have them shot down onto anywhere where they saw enemy fire coming up. So those experiences were definitely frightening.

JW: Definitely! Wow. Was it difficult to stay in touch with your family?

BB: Yes, that was very, very difficult. When you think of how many years ago that was and there was no computer. I wrote letters to my wife everyday and she wrote to me. You didn't have to put a stamp on it, because the government would pay for it. So I wrote her and she wrote me. However, sometimes I would get four or five letters in one day and then nothing for a while.

JW: Was that just because the Postal Service had harder times-

BB: Yeah, the Postal Service wasn't always real accurate. So the only way really to communicate was through letter writing. Now there was a way to go into Saigon, where there was a telephone service that you could line up and wait to speak on the phone and I did that once. It wasn't really good though because there was a long line of people standing there listening to your conversation on the phone.

JW: So that was not the most private!

BB: No, it was not! I just did that once because it just wasn't satisfactory.

JW: Did you have a time limit?

BB: Yeah, I forget what it was. I think it was around three or four minutes.

JW: Oh, so not too long!

BB: No, not really. But just think, there was no computers, no FaceTime, no Skype, none of that.

JW: Wow, so very limited.

BB: Yes, for sure.

JW: What was the food like over there?

BB: Oh you know, it was typical Army food with Army cooks, so it was very basic food, and nothing fancy. Mostly meat, potatoes, and cereal.

JW: Oh okay! When you were a physician there, did you have plenty of supplies or were you limited in that aspect?

BB: Yeah, I mean there was basic supplies and medications that we would need. If we needed something, we could request it. But as far as the basic tools we would need to examine a troop, treat them with an antibiotic or pain medication, or suture up a wound, we had all that available and accessible.

JW: Well that's good! How was the atmosphere amongst your officers and fellow soldiers?

BB: Yeah, I did. We had comradery amongst the division and there were troops that I got more friendly with because I was around them more often, and there were some that I didn't get to develop a relationship with, but there were a few that I was close with.

JW: That's good! Do you recall the day your service ended and where you were?

BB: I do recall the day my service ended! They flew us into Saigon and held us at a camp there. The next morning, we got on the plane to flew back to the US. The night before, I didn't sleep too much, you can imagine, because of the anticipation of coming back. I tell you, when we got on that plane and the wheels came up, there was a roar yelling with all the troops knowing that they were on their way home. That was a good, good feeling. When we set down into Washington base, there was another big cheer when we set down. So that was the first year that I served in the military. The second I served was in Maryland at Fort Meade, which is a hospital that I was assigned to there.

JW: You were a physician there as well?

BB: Yes, yes I was. That was good because I was near home, in Washington D.C., so that was nice because I was able to just drive home at night. After a year of experience in the combat zone, they kind of let us have a choice on where we wanted to go. They tried to place us in facility that was close to where we requested.

JW: That's really good! Was it an adjustment coming back to everyday civilian life?

BB: Yeah, a little bit because when I came back, I had a son that was a few months old! You know, it was adjusting back to stateside life. My thoughts would go back to where I was back in Vietnam, and occasionally, I would have dreams about it.

JW: Was that a negative effect on everyday life?

BB: Well some of the thoughts were not pleasant thoughts, but some of them were of my friendships, so those were good. Even to this day, occasionally, I will have a thought or a dream of something that happened. Whenever I hear a helicopter, my thoughts zoom back to that experience because there. The helicopters, called gunships, was what we used over there so the sound of it gives me flashbacks.

JW: Yeah, I'm sure. Did you continue any of those relationships that you formed overseas?

BB: Yeah, I did for a while. Corresponding with them and then one friend even came and spent some vacation time here. Then gradually, with time, our lives took different roles. As of right now, I do not have any relationships with people I met over there, but for a few years, I did. I think about them though.

JW: Yeah, of course. You continued to be a physician, correct?

BB: Correct. After I served, I went back and got special training in pediatrics and became a pediatrician. That's what I have done for the past 40+ years.

JW: Was your education supported by the G.I. Bill?

BB: Yes, it was! That was very nice because when I got out of the Army, my education was supplemented. That was a helpful thing.

JW: I'm sure! This is my last question actually. Did your military experience influence your thoughts on war or about the military in general?

BB: Yeah, it did. I respect the military after serving in it. The idea of war, killing, and all that, I certainly see the evil of it. There were over 50,000 troops that died in that long war, which is a lot. That is a lot of lost lives, not even to mention the injures some received. You know, the Vietnam War was an interesting war that we eventually ended up losing after we withdrew. The enemy, the Viet Cong, they took over. So we spent all that money, all those lives were lost and we really didn't get anything. That was kind of sad.

JW: Wow, that is a sad reality.

BB: Yeah..

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JW: Well that is that end of my questions for you, Dr. Bill. I really appreciate you taking your time to allow me to interview you. I will send you a copy of this as soon as its done! Thank you so much!

BB: Of course. If you have any further questions, feel free to call me!

JW: Will do! Thanks so much again!

BB: Of course.

Phone call ended.

*Note

In a following conversation, I learned that Dr. Bill Bryan actually met Neil Armstrong, who went to visit and encourage the troops.

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