

**Roberts Memorial Library  
Middle Georgia College  
Vietnam Veterans Oral History Project  
Art Howard Interview  
June 25, 2012**

**Paul Robards:** The date is June 25, 2012. My name is Paul Robards, Library Director at Roberts Memorial Library at Middle Georgia College. I will be speaking today with Arthur Howard from Warner Robins, GA about his experiences in the Vietnam War.

**Robards:** Mr. Howard, what branch of the service did you serve in?

**Howard:** The Air Force

**Robards:** Why did you join the military?

**Howard:** I wanted to fly. One of my uncles at that point was still serving in the Air Force, and I just wanted to fly.

**Robards:** How old were you when you joined the military?

**Howard:** I joined ROTC when I was 19 and graduated and got a commission, so I entered in 1967. I was 21.

**Robards:** What was your hometown when you joined?

**Howard:** Chico, California

**Robards:** Where did you go to receive basic training?

**Howard:** I went to Biloxi Mississippi; that would have been Keesler [AFB].

**Robards:** Where did you attend Advanced Training?

**Howard:** Navigator training at Mather AFB in Sacramento California.

**Robards:** What were you trained to do in Advanced Training?

**Howard:** I was an Air Force navigator and had an undergraduate in navigator training.

**Robards:** What weapons did you learn to use and did you ever have to use them?

**Howard:** We were taught to use handguns, a 38 [pistol], and also M16s. I never had to use one.

**Robards:** Were there any particular or special incidents that occurred during your training, and how did it affect your life?

**Howard:** Yes, I met my wife, and we got married when I got back from survival school, and we are still married. That was 44 years ago.

**Robards:** Congratulations!

**Howard:** Thank you. We have two children. In terms of the training itself, it led to a 30 year career. It led to a new direction. So it had a profound impact; I met my wife and that really changed my life.

**Robards:** Did you volunteer to go to Vietnam?

**Howard:** Yes. Well, in navigator school, you got a choice based on your class standing. I remember we went into the auditorium and they had all the assignments on the chalkboard. We just went down the row, and all we knew is that this one specific assignment was in PACAF (Pacific Air Command). We had scoped it out, and I thought a 130 would be a good navigator airplane, so that is why I picked that.

**Robards:** How do you think your experiences in Vietnam affected your family?

**Howard:** My wife and I, we got married [after] I finished navigator school and went to survival school. We went on our honeymoon at Lockbourne AFB in Ohio, which is closed and no longer there. That is where I went through 130 [plane] qualifications. Then I went over to Okinawa in August of '68, and she followed in November. For the first two and a half years of our marriage, we were together and away from home. We've talked about that a lot; it was a time in our marriage where we really got to know each other. We were away from our families, and we got to know each other. It turned out that it was a good time. The difference we had there, Paul, is that we [airmen] would be home; go down for 15 days to Vietnam or Thailand, and then we'd come back. So it was like being a long distance truck driver. Unlike people who had to spend a year in Vietnam, half of my time was spent with Paula. That strengthened our relationship, I think. It was very different than other people [s experience], because there wasn't a long period of separation.

**Robards:** What dates did you serve in Southeast Asia?

**Howard:** September '63 to January '71.

**Robards:** What are the names of the units you were assigned to?

**Howard:** I was assigned the whole time to the 35<sup>th</sup> Tactical Air Squadron [TAS], which is part of the 148 Air Lift Wing, at Naha Air Base in Okinawa.

**Robards:** What was your rank during the war?

**Howard:** 2<sup>nd</sup> & 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenants and then Captain.

**Robards:** What was your first encounter with the enemy?

**Howard:** The flying time over there was split in two parts. When we would go into South Vietnam, we'd fly the first part out of Cam Ranh Bay which is about in the middle by Nha Trang, and then we also flew out of Tan Son Nhut [Air base] which is in Saigon. During that phase, we'd fly and carry whatever needed to be carried—ammunition to beer to people; once or twice we had to carry bodies. We never had any direct contact with the enemy. Once or twice at the base, the base was mortared. So there was no direct contact. Another part of the mission: we flew a night forward air control in Laos. We also had flares. At that point, we fly in either to look for trucks, or if forces were in contact at night we'd fly over them and drop flares and keep them wet while they were under attack. In that phase, we were shot at by anti-aircraft, predominately 23 millimeter or 37 millimeter, 57 millimeter.

**Robards:** No SAMs (Surface to Air Missiles)?

**Howard:** No, thank goodness. We had electronic gear on board that would tell us if we were illuminated by radar, but we never were. After late [19]'71 and '72, in that same area, is when the North Vietnamese did bring in SAMs, and also, I believe, fire-controlled anti-aircraft guns. We always flew at night; we flew about 7000 feet above the ground, ground level, and they were using acoustical sights and that was a little long, thank goodness. Another thing is that they would know that when we were around that we were going to call in fighters. Predominately, they would wait until the fighters came in and pester them more. That was a time when I came into direct contact with them.

**Robards:** What medals or awards did you receive for your service in Vietnam?

**Howard:** I received a Distinguished Flying Cross; the Air Medal, a seven oak leaf cluster.

**Robards:** From your experience, how would you evaluate the enemy's fighting ability?

**Howard:** From my experience, it was very good. They were tenacious. I'm talking now about Laos. It was called the Blind Bat. We were trying to stop trucks, and the bombs basically at this point were really World War II vintage. We had just started getting laser guided bombs, and the specter gunships were just coming on line. They [specter gunships] replaced what we were doing. Once they got going, it was a different story. When we were there, it was really Rube Goldberg (9?) almost, except for the flares for the troops in contact; that was a different story. Trying to direct a fighter to drop a bomb at a point...

**Robards:** What is your evaluation of American military leadership in Vietnam and of your immediate commanders in the field?

**Howard:** By immediate commanders, it would be the squadron commander. They were very good overall. From my point of view and the way we were being used, I think, looking back, this is hindsight, but I think strategically we made a lot of mistakes.

**Robards:** As a young serviceman, did you understand the politics and diplomacy of both the United States and Southeast Asia that landed you in the middle of a war?

**Howard:** No. I tried to keep informed. I brought along a book, for example, Hell in a Very Small Place: the Siege of Dien Bien Phu by Bernard Fall. There was no discussion; it was very routine. We were stationed in Okinawa and we'd fly in there; we were very much mobile. But was no discussion about the war in terms of purpose or the futility; we were just doing a job.

**Robards:** Did your fellow servicemen have the same opinions and understanding that you held?

**Howard:** I would say in terms of flyers, yes. We spent a lot of time griping and complaining, but yeah, I think for us, now this would be different than the Air Force people who are fighters, but for us, it was just routine. It was what we were trained to do. We were also over there in a period after TET and before late '71. From our perspective, it was relatively quiet. Flying in South Vietnam, there was no threat. It was after Kaysan and before mid-'71 when I left. In mid-'71, I've talked to people who were in 130's and, oh boy; it wasn't routine then. They had a lot of ground threats. The period of time I was there it was relatively benign. [This is] from my point of view; I'm just talking about my experience.

**Robards:** Did your understanding of the situation effect how you did your job?

**Howard:** From my perspective it was really important about what the people I worked with thought of me, so I wanted to do a good job and be thought of as competent. It was particularly important for me to be well thought of by Senior NCOs. I remember they paired me up with a flight engineer, a master sergeant; he sort of took me under his wing for the first six months, just to make sure that I understood the ropes and how things worked and to make sure that I didn't make any serious [mistakes].

**Robards:** Describe your living conditions, housing, and food in Vietnam.

**Howard:** I was on air bases; we had (?) trailers, you know, two or three people to a room, air conditioned. That was also true in Thailand when we were there; there were six people [in a space] about the size of this room, divided into bunks. We shared our bath, so it was sort of like camping. It was always air conditioned, because we would fly all times of the day or night, so when you came in in the middle of the day, you had crew rest, so you had air-conditioning, which was...

**Robards:** A little R & R?

**Howard:** Yes. And then the food was chow hall...

**Robards:** Beats c-rations from what I understand.

**Howard:** Yeah, yeah. The powdered eggs were an acquired taste.

**Robards:** What did you do to relax and have fun?

**Howard:** For example, in Cam Ranh Bay, you had the air base, and you could just walk to the beach. It was a fantastic beach; so, you could go there, or there was also an inlet where you could rent a boat and go water skiing; those kind of things. I spent a lot of time at the club talking, playing. It was just a routine you fell into, because you knew you were only there [for] 15 days. When we flew out of Ubon in Thailand, several times we would go downtown, and one time we befriended the intelligence officer. He took us on a trip down the river and went up to several villages; so that was pretty exotic.

The most interesting experience was at Ubon. I was sitting there, and a fellow I knew from ROTC showed up! He was a Japanese American. It wasn't quite clear what he was doing [there], but he was in civilian clothes. He could speak Thai, and he said he was traveling. I wasn't quite sure what he was doing.

**Robards:** Sounds like a "don't ask" type situation.

**Howard:** Yeah. We had a couple of beers and talked about girls back at college.

**Robards:** When your assignment in Southeast Asia was finished, how did you feel?

**Howard:** It was a little different [situation]. Our unit was being deactivated, so everybody was leaving. It would be different if just one or two people [were leaving]. My next assignment was in South Carolina at Pope Air Force Base. So there was a lot of excitement about where everybody was going, and we were consumed with buying cars. The Dotson 240Z was new, and so we brought those back. In January we stood down, so for about a month we were just getting ready to go back and all that, so it was pretty much caught up. There really wasn't any sadness about being finished. It was "what's coming next?".

**Robards:** How did you feel once you arrived back in the United States?

**Howard:** I was happy. I went back to family, and was reunited with them. It was interesting; it was like "Oh, you've been gone? Good to see you back." There was no comment either way. It wasn't negative. My dad was particularly worried [about me being in Vietnam], so for him, me being back... [was good]. He didn't express it while I was gone, but he was worried. My mom was worried, but he was particularly worried while I was gone.

**Robards:** What is your view of the war and your part in it today?

**Howard:** I can see that in the strategic picture that it was part of the maneuvering with the Cold War and the Soviets. But our mind set was that we had to do it, [because] there was this threat. But we look back now; we look at the relations we have with Vietnam and the Vietnamese and the commercial relationship that we have, and [it makes you wonder] if there was another way. But I think that we were just so caught up in their situation with China and Russia. Yet a few years later, when Nixon and Kissinger went to China, they understood that it [Vietnam] was not a monolith. I'm just wondering if maybe there could have been something different. I think it was a hand that we had, and we played it out. In terms of my role, I'm thinking it was not a terrible experience for me. I think it was important to do. Given the situation, it was important to do.

**Robards:** Did you ever feel that the American public was less than enthusiastic about those who served in Vietnam?

**Howard:** Not directly. I was in the ROTC in San Francisco, and this was during the time of what was going on at Berkley. There were very active discussions and arguments about Vietnam. At that time we still wore our uniform once a week, but there was never any direct [opposition]. I remember [talking to] a guy about two years after I was back, and my car was broken down and had to be towed in. [This guy] was a mechanic, and had been in the army, and we were talking about something like this question, and what I told him was that I really didn't expect anything from those c--- s----- . Pardon my language.

**Robards:** Do you think that Vietnam veterans were discriminated against when they returned to the U.S. after their tours in Vietnam?

**Howard:** I know some were-- look at the number of Vietnam veterans that are homeless. In fact, I work with a fellow [who] still has nightmares. What strikes me is that all the men and women coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq now; I think that the country asks a lot [from them], but we aren't willing to pay, and we are going to short-change them, I'm afraid. We just want it on the cheap.

**Robards:** Why do you think that the Vietnam War Memorial Wall has such a profound effect on people, even those without any connection to the wall?

**Howard:** Well, the effect that it has on me is that there are no statues and no heroic pictures, but just the names. You look at it and come face to face with [the names] and it personalizes it, even if you don't know anyone [on the wall]. If you do know someone, and you go there, and you find him; it personalizes it in a way that has never been done before.

**Robards:** It is a list of uncompleted lives.

**Howard:** Yeah. A guy I went to high school with, he was in the 173 Air Assault, and he was killed in '65. I was at summer camp. They never found his body, so I think of him a lot.

**Robards:** Is there anything else that you would especially like to share about your Vietnam War experience?

**Howard:** I was really fortunate; more [so] than many people who went through [the war], and the prisoners of war. I think, as a country, we need to understand what we ask people to do, and we need to step up and take care of them and give them what they need [when they return], and I don't think we are.

**Robards:** Thank you, Mr. Howard, for your service to our country and for participating in this oral history project.