

Roberts Memorial Library, Middle Georgia College
Vietnam Veterans Oral History Project
Interview with Jimmie L. Reeze, Jr.
April 12, 2012

Paul Robards: The date is April 12, 2012 My name is Paul Robards, Library Director at Roberts Memorial Library at Middle Georgia College. I will be speaking today with Jimmie L. Reeze, Jr. from Macon, GA about his experiences in the Vietnam War.

Robards: What branch of the military did you serve in?

Reeze: United States Army

Robards: Why did you join the military?

Reeze: I was drafted.

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

Reeze: I was 18.

Robards: Where did you go to receive Basic Training?

Reeze: Fort Jackson, South Carolina

Robards: Where did you attend Advanced Training?

Reeze: Folk Polk, Louisiana

Robards: What was your occupation code?

Reeze: 11B

Robards: Were you discharged or did you retire from the military?

Reeze: I was discharged with an honorable discharge.

Robards: How did you feel when you learned you were going to Vietnam?

Reeze: When I learned I was going to Vietnam, I was...actually I was happy. I had heard so much about it. I was excited, because I wanted to see if what the people said was true. I was afraid, but happy.

Robards: What dates did you serve in Southeast Asia?

Reeze: [March 12, 1970 to November 19, 1971]

Robards: Where did you serve in Southeast Asia?

Reeze: I-Core

Robards: What was your rank during the war?

Reeze: E-3 & E-4

Robards: What medals, awards or citations did you receive?

Reeze: I received 2 Bronze Stars, an Air Medal, a Combat Infantry Badge, among others.

Robards: Please describe your first encounter with the enemy.

Reeze: My first encounter with the enemy—we were suppose to have been on a mission, looking for a hospital in the jungle that was supposed to have been built on a mountain, about 4 stories. And so we found the trail, and we set up a couple of mechanical ambushes. That's where you take claymore mines and you connect them together with wire so that they will explode almost simultaneously. Then we set up our night position, not too far, about 50 feet, I guess, from the claymore mine, on the back side. It was a mechanical ambush, because we used batteries. The Geneva Convention said that you couldn't set up booby-traps, so we used batteries to make it a mechanical ambush — just changed the name up. So we slept through the night and first day light we heard this explosion. You could hear a rat piss on cotton. Nobody moved. Nobody made a sound. And then you start hearing all this moaning and groaning, so you knew that somebody was hurt. The trail was to our left on our left flank. It was a stream bed that they [Viet Cong] were in. They came up the stream bed to our right flank, and they were within 15 meters of our position and they came by us. We were still in our night log position. They passed by, about 25 of them. We counted them as they passed by us, but they never did hear or see us. When the last one came by and they got out of sight, we went to check out what had happened. There were 4 VC sympathizers killed. The first one had both legs broke. It was like his feet were laying almost in his chest from the explosion. The second one had steel balls that went through his forehead. There was a woman, she died from the concussion. Then there was another woman who was killed from the concussion and split her mouth around almost to her ear. I was a machine gunner. We traveled in squads, which was about 11 guys. The platoon sergeant, the squad leader told me to go down the stream bed and see if I could locate anybody else—me and my assistant gunner. That was my first time of running into any contact since going to Vietnam, and I was so alert—my peripheral vision was so keen that I could look down and see a butterfly in the top of a tree. I heard a rock hit the water. Next thing I knew, I had pulled the trigger, but it wasn't anything. So we search the area; we didn't find anybody else. So we went back and the squad leader told me to sit there and guard the bodies, and they went back to the sleeping position to pack up our gear. My assistant, my ammo bearer, we stayed to guard the bodies and make sure that nobody else showed up. I was afraid, but when they packed up everything and came back, I was hungry. Even though I had never seen anybody dead, here I was sitting beside a woman that was dead with her mouth slit around to her ear, I was able to sit there and eat, which surprised me.

Robards: What did you think of Vietnam when you first arrived there?

Reeze: It wasn't what I expected. It wasn't what everybody told me. I thought I was going to get off the plane dodging bullets, and it didn't happen like that. It was hot. At 10 o'clock in the morning, it was 115 degrees.

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

Reeze: Crude, but they were dedicated to what they believed in, just as we were. We were dedicated, surprisingly. You grow up thinking "Thou shall not kill." After you've been trained, after you get in the military, you get trained to kill, and then all of a sudden, you live to kill. You're looking forward to it. Amazingly enough, you start looking forward to being in combat.

Robards: What weapon did you and your unit use the most often with the most efficiency, and what did you use them for?

Reeze: We used M16s. I carried the M60, because I was chicken. I needed something large, so that I could hide behind it. So I wanted the M60, but little did I know that if you carried an M60, every time you [your squad] made contact, you had to walk point. So whenever the fighting started, I

had to walk first. At night time, when we set up our night position, I had to sleep in the middle of the trail. You know, I've thought about it, and I sleep like a log, and here I am sleeping in the middle of the trail. You have to wake me up for me to hear anything. Thank God I survived it.

Robards: Please describe the things you remember most about combat.

Reeze: The thing I most remember about combat is I lost my emotions. I couldn't cry. I got cold.

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

Reeze: Living conditions were horrible. When I first got over there and they gave me my gear, I got me a complete rain suit, pants and jacket. We went out on a mission, and it was monsoon season where it rains seven days a week, 24 hours a day. I put on my rain suit. The other guys didn't; I didn't understand why. I didn't ask. I just thought they were crazy. Yeah, I thought maybe they had been over there too long. So I put on my rain suit and went trekking through the jungle. When the mission was over with, which lasted about two weeks, they usually sent helicopters for us, and we went back in to the secure area so that we could get a change of clothes, a shower and three meals a day for 3 days. You know, rest up. I was the only one that had heat rash. So, I found out why nobody else wore a rain suit.

Robards: What was your daily routine while in Vietnam?

Reeze: My daily routine was reading the New Testament, and humping through the jungles. That's it.

Robards: What did you do to relax?

Reeze: Read the Bible. Read the Bible and pray to stay alive.

Robards: Did you witness a lot of illegal drug use?

Reeze: Yeah, I did, but that was something that didn't appeal to me because of the fact that I didn't need any distractions. I felt like I needed to focus on staying alive, and I couldn't focus on staying alive if I started using drugs. So, I was all about staying alive.

Robards: What is your evaluation of the stateside American military leadership and the commanders you worked with in the field during the Vietnam War?

Reeze: State-side duty, I couldn't handle. During war time, you don't have rules and regulations; you have rules and regulations, but they are not strenuous, and they are not forced on you as much as they are in the States. You don't have anybody harassing you about having to do tedious things in the war like you do in the States. There is a whole lot of difference in State-side duty and war time duty.

Robards: How did you feel about your experience when you left Vietnam/Southeast Asia?

Reeze: When I left Vietnam, I was all messed up. It was like going from night time into day time. And like still being asleep.

Robards: How did it feel to return to civilian life?

Reeze: It was bad. It was rough—still is rough, because of the fact that....have you ever been really afraid; where your heart beats real fast? Can you think about going 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year with your heart racing like that? Just racing, around the clock for a whole

year? You get used to that hype, and then all of a sudden you come here to the United States, and you don't know how to relax anymore.

Robards: Have your views about the war, or your involvement in it, changed over the years?

Reeze: Not really.

Robards: Did you ever feel that the American public did not support you as a veteran of the Vietnam War? Yes, I feel like we were not supported. You know, I received Bronze Stars, and you didn't hear anything about it. And now look at guys receiving Bronze Stars. They receive one, and it makes the newspapers and it makes television, and they come home. When we received them, you didn't hear anything about it.

Robards: Do you believe that Vietnam veterans encountered discrimination when they returned home from the war?

Reeze: Yes, I do, because people were so against the war. I mean, you know, not everybody. And I'm not saying that the Vietnam veterans were like really discriminated against. They were, but not by everybody. This white guy, he and I came home the same time from Vietnam, and we both lived in Macon. We were in the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport in Texas. We were drinking at a bar at the airport, and we went upstairs to a restaurant, by the same name as the bar, and these the salesmen saw us eating, and they asked us if we were coming home from Vietnam, and we told them "yeah." They paid for all our food.

Robards: Did your service in Vietnam affect your religious beliefs, and if so how?

Reeze: Well, that goes back to what I was saying about "Thou shall not kill." It confused me. And even today, it still bothers me about that part that says, "Thou shall not kill." I still have that killing mentality. I still have that urge to kill. It is kind of hard to get over it, once it has been instilled in you. You can kind of understand why people kill, after they kill the first time. It's kind of like having sex. After the first time you want to do it again. Well, that is like killing; you do it the first time and you want to see if the second time feels as good as the first time.

Robards: How has your service most affected your life?

Reeze: It has affected my life mentally and physically. I don't know how to express myself. I don't trust people. I don't trust anybody but myself. Can't nobody do anything right but me. I don't trust other people with my way of being—my body, my mind.

Robards: Do you have other memories or thoughts that you would like to share about your Vietnam War experience?

Reeze: War is hell. Vets are the most [mis]understood people. A lot of people think that vets with PTSD are putting on, but it's not. It's real. People who do not have any knowledge of it, it's hard for them to understand and accept it, and it's hard for you to talk to them about it. I had an incident when I came home from Vietnam. I was dating this young lady, and she was visiting at one of her girlfriends one night, and I had told her I wanted to see her. She told me what time she would be home, but she wasn't there. So I went by her girlfriend's house, and her girlfriend asked me "Who is it?" I told her and she said, "Well, what do you want?" About that time, a bad feeling came over me. I said, "I want to talk to my girlfriend." She said, "Well, you are not going to talk to her here." So, I'm wondering, "Why. Why can't I? I just talked to you a little while ago, so what's wrong with me talking to her here? You know, I haven't done anything wrong. All I came to do was give her a birthday present." You know this was in

my mind. So why couldn't I talk to her for a minute? So, she says, "If you knock on my door again, I'm going to shoot." So, I asked her did she have a gun. She said no. So I said, "Well, go get one." I gave her a few minutes, and then I knocked. Then I heard this gun shot. Next thing I knew, I was inside the house. I said this to say that I was trained to kill. When I heard that gunshot, Jimmie Reeze stepped aside, and PFC Jimmie Reeze took over. Instead of running, I charged. The Vietnam side of me came back. I didn't think anybody could bring out that side of me. It frightened me so bad that I quit that girl that same night. I never did get back involved with her anymore after that night, because of the fact that she brought out the beast in me. I didn't want anybody to ever see that side of me, because I spent so much time trying to conceal the side of me that Uncle Sam had instilled in me.

Robards: Mr. Reeze, we sincerely thank you for your service and dedication to our country and also for participating in this oral history project.

Additional pictures and records are available at Roberts Memorial Library's Special Collections. [Click here](#) for library hours and contact information.