

**Vietnam War Oral History Project**  
***Interview with Dwight M. Gatlin***  
**Roberts Memorial Library**  
**Middle Georgia College**  
**May 23, 2012**

**Paul Robards:** Today's date is May 23, 2012. My name is Paul Robards, Library Director of Roberts Memorial Library at Middle Georgia College. I will be speaking today with Dwight M. Gatlin from Hawkinsville, GA about his experiences in the Vietnam War.

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

**Gatlin:** Army

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

**Gatlin:** I sure didn't join. I got this letter from the President of the United States of America welcoming me to his troops.

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

**Gatlin:** 4<sup>th</sup> of December 1968, I would have just turned 23 in November.

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

**Gatlin:** Fort Benning GA. Sand Hill.

**Robards:** Where did you attend Advanced Training and how long did it last?

**Gatlin:** At that time, with everything going on, there was a lot more infantry schools than there were later. Fort McClellan up in Alabama above Anniston actually at that time was Advanced Infantry Training. A handful of us went up there; I have no idea why. Most of the guys went to Fort Polk for Infantry training. Thank God I went to McClellan.

**Robards:** What was your day like during training?

**Gatlin:** Strenuous physical training, like running from one place to another with your gear. Out, climbing through the woods in the foothills. Real strenuous physically. I don't recall that much classroom type training. We had some, but it wasn't as much as we had in basic [training]. It was more or less just teaching you how to use all the different weapons. [We had to] go through the woods at night with a compass from point A to point B and that sort of stuff.

**Robards:** What kinds of weapons did you learn to use?

**Gatlin:** In Basic, we were one of the last folks to go through the old M14. At that time it was old. Then in AIT [Advanced Infantry Training] we had the M16. That was our assigned weapon, but we also fired the .45 hand gun, the .50 caliber machine gun, and smaller machine guns that guys in the platoon toted on their shoulder. And hand grenades...we had grenade training.

**Robards:** Were there any particular events that occurred during your military training that sticks in your mind?

**Gatlin:** We had a young Lieutenant, an officer, big old dude, who wasn't much older than me, talked me into signing up for officer's school. That is the biggest thing I remember. And this black dude from Washington D.C. beat the hell out of me. It still got a scar.

**Robards:** How did your military training change you?

**Gatlin:** Really, the training, both the Basic and the AIT, more than anything else in the world, and of course, then in Vietnam...you are looking at a country boy from L.A., that's Lower Alabama. Naturally, at my age, the schools were not integrated [back then]. During my four years of college, there was one student who came, I think, my third year [who was] a black guy. [ I ] never had a black friend or anybody [black] that I knew well. Of course, that changed right off the bat in Basic Training with my bunk mate, one John Buddy Hicks, from Albany, Georgia. For whatever reason, he and I and a couple more guys were singled out to go to Fort McClellan to AIT. We were bunk mates there also. What I'm trying to get around to is that it taught me a hell of a lot about black folks, which I didn't know beforehand. I still see him occasionally. I had seen either on the Wall or read somewhere, years back, that a John Hicks from the outfit he was in was killed. I thought he was dead, but long story short, a few years back, I found out that he was not. I wrote a letter to the paper in Albany, and found him and went down about 10 years ago, and we had a marvelous reunion. Of course, when I went over [to Vietnam], there were several black guys in my outfit, over there, it didn't matter if you were black, white or purple, the guy had to have your back. That is something that I had never learned in school, college or anywhere else, was something about other folks [races].

**Robards:** What dates did you serve in Vietnam?

**Gatlin:** October '69 to October '70. I actually came home two weeks and a couple of days early. Most people came home a few weeks or a couple of months early, at least in the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division that I was in. You were only drafted in for two years, and I only spent 22 months, because if when you came back [from Vietnam] you had 6 months or less of active duty left, they sent you on to the house.

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

**Gatlin:** I went over as a PFC and made Specialist 4 probably in February. That summer I made Buck Sergeant. I actually made E-5, Buck Sergeant, in less than two years, which is amazing, I reckon.

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

**Gatlin:** Bronze Star and an Army Accommodation medal

**Robards:** Did the training you received prior to going to Vietnam sufficiently prepare you for your duties there?

**Gatlin:** No!

**Robards:** Did you bring a personal weapon with you to Vietnam, and if so, did you ever find it necessary to use it?

**Gatlin:** No.

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

**Gatlin:** I never in my entire tour saw the enemy eye-ball to eye-ball. We ran a radar outfit. I got sent, prior to going over, to radar school out in Fort Huachuca [AZ], so we ran that at night up there. Every so often they [Vietnamese] would get doped up and would try to come through the wire with satchel charges on their backs. They never got through the wire while I was there...we blew them away. The first week, or the first couple of weeks I was up there, I was coming out of the underground bunker where we lived with a towel wrapped around me to go to the shower. The shower was a 50 gallon drum up on a little platform, and I heard this weird noise. (A whistling sound). I can't make it, but if you ever heard it, you'd never forget it. [It makes] a similar sound as a mortar, but a definite sound of its own. That was my first encounter, and it just came right over me. If you don't hear it, you're dead. When it comes over, it's got that distinct sound, and then all of a sudden...[makes sound of a bomb]. I needed the towel after that not for the shower, but to wipe my rear end. You had to know what that sound was; it was unreal.

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

**Gatlin:** I don't know how to answer that, even though I was Infantry, [because] I went to that school. I never was in a firefight or anything. I just know from what I heard from other guys. I don't know about fighting ability, but their over-all army ability stunk. I was real gung-ho military; having to salute correctly, starched fatigues and all that, well not where we were up there. But there was no discipline to them; I'm talking about the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] regulars. When I left where I was, we were phasing out up there to the ARVN's all of our equipment and what-not. A friend of mine wrote me about a month and a half after I got home, and everything was completely turned over to them. They had painted our Jeep purple, and our radar equipment wouldn't even work anymore; it had gotten rusty because they didn't clean it or perform maintenance on it every day, and that sort of stuff.

The general fault with them, without me being personally involved with fighting, was they were not a very good outfit. I'm talking about the Vietnamese Regular Army. The toughest dudes over there were the ROK marines [soldiers from the Republic of Korea]. They were awesome, the Republic of Korea Marines that served there! I was talking about the Vietnamese Army not having a lot of discipline. The ROK did. One guy went to sleep up there [while on] some kind of guard duty. The little Lieutenant put him in a metal container, pulled the pin on a grenade and put his hands behind his back where he had to hold on to that grenade. If he went to sleep and let it go, he was toast. He [Lieutenant] left him in there about 12 hours. No, I know what it was, he stole something out of the bunkers, a U.S. soldier's watch or something, and got caught and the ROK Marine did that to the little guy. They were a crack bunch.

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

**Gatlin:** I thought it was very good, specifically in my area. That is the only kind I can talk about. At the fire-base where I was, there was a Base Commander, [who was] a Colonel, infantry troops, mortars, artillery, and then there was we radar guys. [It took] maybe 20 of us to man two sites on each side of the firebase. Our commander was 20 to 25 miles to the rear. We didn't even have an officer up there. From about February on, I was in charge. I was "acting jack" before I actually made sergeant. We didn't

see much of them [officers] up there. Every month or so, a Lieutenant would ride up there in a jeep and spend about an hour and go back. They were scared to death. They thought that because we were right up on top of the DMZ where you could see the North Vietnamese over there, that it was all dangerous. We actually didn't get as much of the little guys trying to come through the wire, or the rockets and mortars as you did back on the post or base. It was just the fact that you were up there within spitting distance of the Vietnamese, so they thought, "Oh, that's bad up there." What it really was, just imagine MASH and put radar guys instead of medical guys. That's how we were. We ran that radar at night. We wore shorts; we grew beards. We had our own jeep, and once about every 2 or 3 weeks we'd go get mail back at the rear and go to the BX and pick up stuff. We were out there on our own.

But that Base Commander, we were actually assigned to him. I don't know why they did that. During the time I was there, I had three different ones, and they were cool. Well, two of them was. The last one came during the rainy season; you know, when it rained every day. He came early one morning and nobody was manning the radar. He woke me up in bed in our bunker and looked at me (I hadn't shaved in about three days), and he dressed up me one side and down the other. He wanted someone on the radar. I said, "Look, we've been doing this for eleven months now. If he's not there, there's a reason for it." Long story short, that guy stayed on our ass for a while, and was trying to make us get up every morning and shave in that rainy weather in your steel pot and all that. He didn't realize...anyway, we started staying up all night, well not all of us; one guy did it, and if you got a fire mission, he'd wake up another guy, [because] it took two to do that. He [Base Commander] was going to make us man the parameter guard duty during the daytime, and do this at night. He came in there with me and my guys and said that. I said, "No." The other guys were bug eyed; all those guys were younger than me. He said we were going to do that, and I said, "No. We're not." He says, "Look, you don't understand; I'm the base commander here. You and your guys will man those bunkers tomorrow." I said, "No, sir. We'll not do that. You contact my officer back in the rear." We never did it, and I really gained the respect of my troops, right there. The guy was a Lieutenant Colonel, but it was like he was some dude fresh out of the academy or something. He wanted to treat that place like a state-side base. [You] can't do it. He found out quickly. That was the only run in or incident I saw or heard about where we had a real dodo in command of something.

I was fortunate enough to sit down and talk with Westmoreland. He actually chopper-ed in one Saturday morning and walked around with a whole entourage, and sat down and talked with us about what we did out there and what was going on. I explained it to him and said, "Now our living quarters could get better." At that time, we were living in an old bunker, and it leaked. That was a Saturday morning and on Monday, those big choppers that haul stuff dumped in all kinds of equipment. [They] built us a brand new state-of-the-art bunker. Dug the hole in the ground and we had a t.v. and a refrigerator, and of course we had to have a generator for that.

**Robards:** What did you do for entertainment?

**Gatlin:** We'd bust up ammo boxes and have a cookout. We were something like five miles up a dirt road. About five miles down the dirt road to a little village and then on to the paved road that went to Quang Tri. We stopped in the little village and bought dope from the Vietnamese there, then took it to the mess sergeant and traded it for steaks and stuff. You could also buy a bottle of Jim Beam for a dollar. During the year I was there, I smoked pot maybe three or four times. For a lot of guys, it was a daily routine. I didn't get in to that. No females could be there, no Vietnamese people could come any further North (up toward the DMZ) than somewhere in that little village, so we saw nobody. Of course, you get an R & R (Rest and Relaxation). I didn't take an R & R. We could go to Bangkok or Australia.

The guys that were married got a chance to go to Hawaii for a week or two. I turned that down; I stayed there. I saved every penny I earned, and when I got home I had a brand new corvette sitting in the Chevrolet dealership when I arrived. I almost paid cash for the whole thing. There was no entertainment.

We drew straws to go to a Bob Hope show. They wouldn't come up that far north. They thought it was dangerous too. Because of the lottery thing, a few guys got to go to that; I didn't. At the big base, there was an NCO club where they would have a Vietnamese band playing occasionally. Rarely was I back down there, but one time (I've got a picture), I saw a Vietnamese girl band. That was it for the whole year.

Oh, let me tell you about my trip! One Saturday, we got in the Jeep. We went all the way down to Da Nang. I can't remember how far that was. The Jeep was used along with the radar. We had the radar, and we had a big night-time vision device...big old scope that we could see out there. We also had an infra-red light mounted on the back of the Jeep. It looked like one of those big Hollywood spotlights. As a matter of fact, there was a switch on it so you could switch it to white light from Infra-red. What you did, was if you picked up something with the radar, you could look at it with that night scope, and see what was out there. Thirdly, you could back the jeep up and fix that big infra-red light and line it up with the correct plotted point out there. You had little things like binoculars; you could see the infra-red light going out there. I only used that one time and called everybody in to a fire-mission and said, "Now look here, when we turn on this white light, you blow this shit away." There weren't but about five little guys with satchel charges come at us, and when that big white light hit them, it was like a deer in the head lights. In about a split second, there was nothing left but a little greasy spot out there.

But, anyway, we took that Jeep one Saturday, totally unauthorized. [We] hit that main road out there, Highway 1, and went all the way down to Da Nang. There were no back seats, so two or three guys had to sit in the front, and two or three other guys were hanging out the sides—it was like stateside going to the beach. We had a case of beer iced down. We were hauling ass going down the highway. You've seen the pictures of all those little Vietnamese and the little buses with a hundred of them hanging on it; the traffic and the motorcycles—I was just weaving in and out of traffic. All of a sudden, it was like stateside, there was a light flashing behind me. I had just passed a Colonel or may have been a General, but anyway a commander for all I Corp. They took my ass directly to jail, do not pass go. I got a DUI, speeding; it was like state-side. My commander had to come over there and get me. That was coming back from Da Nang, because going down we had ice cream and hamburgers and stuff we hadn't had since we left home. [Getting stopped] was on the way back. We went to an NCO [club] down there and outside was a generator on a trailer just sitting there, and we hooked it up to the Jeep and took it back, because we needed a generator to run the stuff we had like the little refrigerator. So we actually were pulling a stolen generator when we got stopped, but they didn't notice that. That was the most entertainment we had while we were there. I hadn't thought about that in years.

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

**Gatlin:** Oh, sure! We had a little T. V. and we actually had an Armed Forces T.V. station over there, and we saw the late news and all that stuff. The worst encounter I had was when I came home to Fort Lewis, Washington. That is where I got out of the army. I flew in to Seattle [WA]. We didn't go up to the terminals like you normally did. It was the Flying Tiger Airline, and the ugliest women on it I ever seen in my damn life. [They stopped] way out in the "south 40" and had sent busses out there. They

pushed up the little stairway thing, and we got off and got on the busses out there, instead of going in to the terminal. We should have been smart enough to figure it out. At that time, people were spitting all over the guys [Vietnam veterans] coming through the terminal and doing all kinds of crap, so they started making the returning troops do like I said...de-plane on to a bus and bus all the way around the airport to Fort Lewis. Couldn't even walk through the airport.

**Robards:** Have your views about the war changed over the years? If so, how?

**Gatlin:** No.

**Robards:** If you could go back to December 1968, would you repeat this experience, or would there be things you would change?

**Gatlin:** I couldn't change going, because I was drafted. At the time, it was the most ungodly thing I thought could ever happen to me. After all was said and done, I realized that it was probably the best thing that ever happened to me, since I got to come home. I became more educated in the army, and I did four years of college and 12 years of school. It was [also] a great learning experience.

**Robards:** Mr. Gatlin, is there anything else that you would like to share with future generations about your Vietnam War experience?

**Gatlin:** I don't know what to say. Most of us didn't fully understand what the hell we were doing there, but for the most part, everyone said, 'I'm here, somebody's got to be here, so we need to do whatever it is we've got to do...we'll do our time and go on back home.' I can't think of anything specifically.

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

Pictures taken by Mr. Gatlin during his tour in Vietnam are archived in the Terry Coleman Archive and are available for the public to view. The Terry Coleman Archive is located in the Roberts Memorial Library on the Cochran Campus of Middle Georgia State College. Hours are 9am to 5pm Monday through Thursday and 9am to noon on Friday.