

Roberts Library, Middle Georgia College
Vietnam Veterans Oral History Project
Interview with Greg Rivers
April 11, 2012

The date is April 11, 2012. My name is Paul Robards, Library Director at Roberts Memorial Library at Middle Georgia College. I will be speaking today with Greg Rivers from Warner Robins, GA about his experiences in the Vietnam War.

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

Rivers: United States Army

Robards: Why did you join the military?

Rivers: For benefits and education. I went to Fort Valley State for one year and dropped out. My parents had three kids in college at the time, and they couldn't afford to send three at the same time, so I joined the military for the benefits.

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

Rivers: 19

Robards: Where did you go to receive Basic Training?

Rivers: Fort Benning, GA

Robards: Where did you attend Advanced Training?

Rivers: Ft. Collins, Alabama

Robards: What was your occupation code?

Rivers: 11 Bravo

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

Rivers: Discharged and retired from the Reserves after 22 years.

Robards: Did you volunteer to go to Vietnam?

Rivers: No

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

Rivers: Well, at that time and that age, I felt sort of scared, but I joined the military and knew I had to go, so it was like a no love lost situation, I guess.

Robards: What dates did you serve in Southeast Asia?

Rivers: May '68 to May '69

Robards: Where did you serve in Southeast Asia?

Rivers: Several places; the first place was with the 9th Infantry Division in Binh Phouc, a base camp. Then I got transferred to 1st Infantry Division base camp in Dian/Lai Khe. From there I got transferred to Pleiku [with the 18th Military Police Brigade]. I was in three different divisions over there.

Robards: What was your rank during the war?

Rivers: E-3

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

Rivers: Two overseas bars, Vietnam Campaign Medal, CIB [Combat Infantryman Badge with 1960 device] [Vietnam Service Medal with 2 Bronze Stars.]

Robards: Please describe your first encounter with the enemy.

Rivers: I was out on patrol one night with about 12 guys and we set the ambush patrol, we just got off our APCs and we crossed the road and set up in a rice paddy in a cemetery. We set our machine guns and about 15 minutes later we saw about 30 VC walk right by about 25 meters to our left flank. I saw the enemy and later that night we started shooting back and forth at each other. We didn't have any casualties. About 2 o'clock that morning we got picked up by our APC [armored personnel carrier] and went to another base camp.

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

Rivers: It was very hot over there and had an odor to the country. A different odor than in the United States. The people were short. It was an eye-opener for me.

Robards: What did you think about the native population of Vietnam, and did your opinion change over time?

Rivers: When I first got there I thought they were people living off the land and I thought we would just help them out. After time...as I got older I realized there were two different sides of the story. They were just trying to survive, because they had a civil war like the north and the south, and I came to realize that some of them wanted 2 countries and some wanted 1 country. As I got older, I realized that they were fighting some for one country and some for two and that they were just trying to survive. As time went along, I started to mellow out from when I first got over there.

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

Rivers: There were two types, the Viet Cong and NVAs [North Vietnamese Army] and they were very sincere fighters. At first I thought maybe it was just a rag-tag unit, but I came to appreciate their ability to fight their enemies. They were very resourceful with what they used against us. Their attitude was no matter how many they were going to lose, they were going to win the war. Very resourceful and very cunning. They had all kinds of ways to fight the war. I know they took handmade stuff and mortar techniques and they had old weapons. They had all kinds of ideas to make and use—anything they could use against us. They were very resourceful and very intelligent fighters.

Robards: What equipment and weapons did enemy units use that you encountered?

Rivers: AK-47, RPG rockets, and homemade land mines.

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

Rivers: M50 Caliber machine gun. M16 and I had an M79 grenade launcher and 90 millimeter [M67] recoilless rifles.

Robards: What do you remember most about combat?

Rivers: Combat to me was a touch and go situation, because sometimes we wouldn't fight for a couple of weeks and all of a sudden it would break out. So about the time you would start relaxing over there, then we'd start getting sniper rounds, and a couple of mortar rounds then all of a sudden there was

fighting. The next night nothing would happen and for the next couple of days, and all of a sudden there would be sniper rounds again. For actual combat—full fighting, I remember several times we got into a fight that was maybe 6 or 7 hours. We got pinned down in a bunker complex—it took four or five [hours] before we got out of there. I think that happened a couple of times to us—to the unit I was in. Other than that it was just basically sniper and mortar attacks. At night every two or three hours you would get a mortar attack. You'd go back to your bunk, and then again another mortar attack. Can't get no sleep like that. As a mechanized unit, sometimes we was in the field and we'd get mortar attack every two or three hours for a couple of days, and they would stay four or five days and nothing would happen. So you sort of let your guard down and the enemy would catch you slipping up and taking it easy, and all of a sudden—sniper rounds or either mortar attack.

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

Rivers: Living conditions: back at our base camp we had barracks, wooden barracks, wooden floors, tin top—some had a canvas top. No windows, but we had screens for ventilation. We had regular cots. Some people had bunks. When we were out in the field with the APCs [armored personnel carrier, we slept on the ground.

Robards: What was your daily routine while in Vietnam?

Rivers: It depends on the mission. At the base camp at Binh Phuoc while we were stationed there, we got up in the morning time and cleared this road of land mines. We pulled security for the demolition team. We got APCs and we went on both sides of the road and the rice paddies, because they [demolition team] were down walking, clearing the landmines, and we pulled security for them. If we was out in the field we'd have to run a mission like recon an area for the CO on our APCs and come back, and sometimes we'd pull the head observation post during the daytime. It all just depends on what the mission was at the time. Sometimes it included security guard on river barges and stuff. It was a mechanized unit, so we were real mobile, so our mission changed day by day.

Robards: What did you do to relax?

Rivers: We had a basketball court, and we played football if we had a chance out in the rice paddies. Back in the big base camp there was a USO club, and we'd go listen to music at the NCO club and have a couple of beer and stuff of this nature.

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

Rivers: No. I saw several guys smoke some pot, but I didn't see no hard stuff, just a lot of alcohol and marijuana.

Robards: Please describe the most memorable event that happened to you or your unit while serving in Vietnam.

Rivers: We was patrolling the barge one night, securing the barge, about 12 guys, and we got mortar attacked. The barge wasn't a lot of help because they were repairing this bridge and it was made of metal. There was metal flying everywhere. All of a sudden we started hearing all types of praying in several different languages: Spanish, Guam, and English. Some were Hail Mary, Baptist and Methodist. We thought about it the next morning and we had about five different prayers in different languages going. We thought it was very funny, but it stuck in my mind for a long time—still there today.

Robards: What was the most humorous event that you remember?

Rivers: That would have been the most humorous event.

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

Rivers: I thought we had good leadership in Vietnam from the NCOs up to the officers, for the time I was there and the guys I served under. I thought we had very good leadership in the United States and the Vietnam conflict.

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

Rivers: When I left Vietnam and came home, I felt really good. The experience taught me about being disciplined and teamwork, and it really carried on into later life—working together. It was a great experience for me but I wouldn't want to do it again.

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

Rivers: It changed a little bit because I was going over the first time, the only time rather, I knew that I had ought to go over there, and I had to go because of the military, and my job was to try to stay alive. Now, I look back on it and some of the things I know now, I wish I knew then. I probably have a different perspective of the war.

Robards: Has your opinion about the reasons for the war changed since then?

Rivers: It has changed a little bit. My opinion of the war then was that I was going over there to help stop communism. That is what we were told, and at the age of 19, and back then you had a different impression of the government. Now I know it was to stop communism, *and* it was a political war. As I get older, I see things a little differently now. I think that it was a war that could have been won, you understand, if we could have put more effort into it, but we were restricted with certain things we could do over there. I look back at it that way and think did we try to win the war, or was it just a political war? If we were trying to stop communism, we should have had more free reign within the laws of the war. We could have won the war—we were there so many years.

Robards: Did you ever feel that the American public did not support you as a veteran of the Vietnam War?

Rivers: I felt...when I came home from Vietnam, I was congratulated and everyone thought I was a hero. That was me. Now I know a lot of troops went through a different situation. But from my perspective, I felt like they supported me. I came through a different airport and I didn't get any hassle or things of that nature, and [even though] I had my uniform on, and I felt supported. I read stories and saw on the news about different colleges like Kent State and Texas State and how some guys came home and got spit on and stuff thrown on them and stuff like that, but none of that happened to me. So from my experience, they supported me. I didn't have no problem with that. I know some soldiers did, though.

Robards: If you were going to repeat this experience, what, if anything, would you do differently?

Rivers: I would try to learn more about the Vietnam country before I went over there. I would try to learn things like how their country works and how people in their country lives. Each country has a different culture. Once you learn that you can sort of learn what they are going through. At the time, I was just going by what I was told.

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

Rivers: I just felt like it was a good experience for me. Would I like to go to war again? I would not like to go to war again. I would like to visit Vietnam and see that country. I know a lot of guys have done

that and said it was a great experience—it was some healing time. While I was in Vietnam, my unit didn't have too much contact [with the enemy], because my first 8 or 9 months, I was in a mechanized infantry unit, and we moved from place to place, but my last 5 months, I was at Pleiku, so I was in the tower at night to secure around the base. We got some sniper fire and a little mortar fire, and I pulled security around an ammunition dump, but when I was in my other unit, we were in the field 90% of the time going back and forth. I really didn't have that much contact after that with the enemy. But every now and then we would make contact. I guess I that was fortunate not to have much contact with the enemy even though I was in the infantry.

Robards: Mr. Rivers, I appreciate your dedication to our country. Thank you so much for your service, and I greatly appreciate you doing this interview with me.

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