

FIRSTHAND ORAL HISTORY (EXCERPTS)

Excerpt 1: Danny Garrett

Voices of Veterans Oral History Interview (November 19, 2019)

 Recorded Interview (46:09): voicesofveterans.org/oral-history/garrett



Garrett Interview

November 19, 2019

Danny Garrett (U.S. Army): “After being trained, I was a forward observer that was attached to Alpha company. We were in a . . . fortunately, we were in an AO, an area of operation that was settled agricultural. It wasn’t the jungle, it wasn’t the beaches, it wasn’t the rivers and the mountains. It was just in a little river valley where there were a lot of villages, and a lot of rice paddies, and wood lines, and rivers and streams. But it was heavily VC sympathetic. They tried to subdue it. That’s what Lieutenant Calley’s experience was all about. But they never did. [Note: Garrett is referring to Lt. William Calley, the only convicted participant in the 1968 massacre of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai committed by American soldiers]. I was attached to an infantry company that got up in the morning very early, ate, geared up, and moved out and we spent about six hours in the morning and early afternoon walking around the countryside “patrolling”—that’s in quotes. What we were really doing was trying to get somebody to engage us, to get some local VC to engage us so that we can engage them and hopefully engage them long enough to surround them and drop our [artillery] on them and clean up. . . . What little engagement we did run into was essentially small arms fire, occasional rocket propelled grenade, or booby traps, which were made from our unexploded ordnance. That is what we did. We just walked around trying to start a fight and engage the enemy and win that fight. The enemy was reluctant to do so because of our superior fire power. When we did engage it was a hit and run on their part. . . . [The Viet Cong] were guerillas. They weren’t regular army. They were quite brave and very determined, and I highly respected them. We did, however, manage to engage early on a battalion of North Vietnamese Army [NVA] regulars, and these were regular soldiers just like us, highly trained, highly disciplined and because they were fighting a civil war in their country. . . . very, very dedicated to winning that war, which they eventually did. Those, the NVA that I engaged were every bit as professional, dedicated, and brave as our forces were. Highly respected the North Vietnamese. I think every American did. . . . What I remember most [about combat] was engaging with this North Vietnamese battalion and we essentially got surrounded by them and had to call airstrikes on our position to keep from being overrun. . . . We were under attack all night long, and of course, we had superior fire power, but . . . that advantage of superior fire power is really only effective in daylight hours. It used to be said that the Americans controlled the day and the North Vietnamese controlled the night, which is pretty much true. We were under attack all night long and we were able to successfully defend ourselves the next morning. An overwhelming force came in to outflank the enemy. . . . push him back and when that happened helicopters were called in to extract us.”

Excerpt 2: Ed Hark

Voices of Veterans Oral History Interview (September 25, 2009)

 Recorded Interview (1:16:05): voicesofveterans.org/oral-history/hark



Hark Interview

September 25, 2009

Ed Hark (U.S. Marines): “We were a front-lined, rifle platoon. We were in the bush 20 days out of 30, probably 25 out of 30, and it wasn’t unusual for us to be out three weeks or four weeks at a time. When you’re getting about two hours of sleep a night and it’s not very restful sleep, when you’re eating in most cases one C-ration a day, as opposed to three, when you’re living under a lot of stress, probably the major casualties that we saw were either from snipers or from booby traps. The biggest battle that I was ever in in an all-out gunfight was the last one I was in. Most of them were very quick firefights that didn’t last very long. They’d hit you when they want to hit you at night. They’d hit you one side, they’d ambush a platoon, they’d ambush a squad, they would do what they had to do and then they would disappear into the night. It was just bad moments and it made for I guess hypersensitivity. It takes something out of you I guess, and that’s where you get that sort of numbness...”

Excerpt 3: Ray Castaneda

Voices of Veterans Oral History Interview (July 23, 2018)

 Recorded Interview (59:52): voicesofveterans.org/oral-history/castaneda1



Castaneda Interview

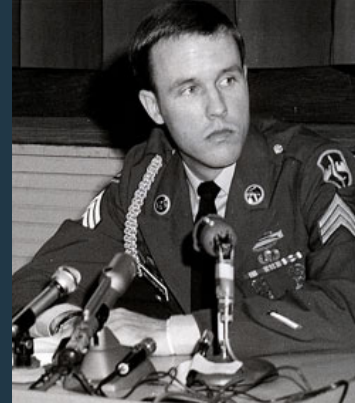
July 23, 2018

Ray Castaneda (U.S. Army): “...Anger starts coming in because it’s so hot, 116 degrees, 118...I mean, you talk about hot. I went from 195 pounds to 130 [pounds] in about seven months...I dropped some weight. I aged a lot. I knew [the American military was] using Agent Orange. Agent Orange is a chemical they used like Round Up weed killer. They used Agent Orange in Vietnam to kill the foliage so they could see the NVAs that were coming through the trails because with the jungle they couldn’t see nothing from the air, so they would spray that stuff and every leaf on the tree would be gone by morning. So it was pretty strong stuff. Supposed to be something like five hundred times stronger than Round Up full strength. And they told us it was not harmful to us. But we drank the water from the rivers, we slept on the ground. You [were] always in Agent Orange. Always. I’m [now] classified 100% [disabled]. The [Veterans Administration] sends me a little bit of money. My body’s breaking down.”

Excerpt 4: Ken Wallingford

Voices of Veterans Oral History Interview (August 14, 2009)

 Recorded Interview (1:02:21): voicesofveterans.org/oral-history/wallingford



Wallingford Interview

August 14, 2009

Ken Wallingford (U.S. Army): "...a few minutes later I heard these little thumping sounds coming in on our compound, mortar rounds, which intensified artillery rounds later on, and...probably about three hours later, we kind of intercepted enough radio transmission to figure out that we had been hit or were being attacked by three divisions of North Vietnamese soldiers and each division has 10,000 [men]. So you got five Americans, 200 South Vietnamese [allied soldiers] [against] 30,000 NVA and Viet Cong soldiers. So we called in the Air Force for air support. They provided support 24/7 for about two and a half days just trying to keep the guys off of us...

...On the third morning – now we'd gone without food, sleep, or water. I was monitoring the radio in our position from the headquarters and so forth, so you knew kind of what was going on, and so on the third day of that battle driving Russian tanks, [the enemy] came through the perimeter, and overran the camp... My game plan was to go find a secure position and hide and try and escape and evade—E&E—that night. Well I thought I found a secure position between two buildings. We put a wall of sandbags in front of us to kind of conceal our location, and no sooner had I got that last sandbag in place, a big explosion went off. And the next thing I felt like half my head had been blown away. I felt hot, burning shrapnel on different parts of my body, and I literally saw my whole life flash before me... I got on the radio and I can remember telling the commander of the air strikes, I said you put everything you got all over us. Get these guys out of here. Because the last thing I wanted to have happen was to be taken prisoner... we didn't want any [American] helicopters land and rescue because it was just too hot an area. And so we didn't want to take that risk. So we went into this other secure place, had a door on it, we had a couple of ARVN rangers, and rangers they wear different uniforms and so they're usually identified as being kind of the best of the best if you will, and so we got on the radio that night and the battery started going dead and it was night fall and so forth. We basically didn't have any more communication with the air support. And the next morning [the enemy] came back in because they knew there were still guys in there...So they just systematically went through the compound...the [South Vietnamese ARVN] rangers started stripping down out of their uniforms...I mean the Viet Cong and the NVA was right there with guns pointed at us, and they took three or four, if I remember correctly, of the ARVN rangers around the side and shot 'em...

...[After leaving the camp and] walking, they made us stop at one bunker. In fact it's this picture here - there's a big bomb crater that's in front of us and so they made us stop and pose [for photographs] with our heads down and our hands tied up, and the caption read 'Look, we've caught the American imperialist,' as they called us...I don't know how many, but it seemed like a bunch, a lot of the NVA and Viet Cong just kind of popped up behind trees with cameras, just started taking pictures. And so probably for the next 10 hours, we walked, we didn't know where we were going. We knew we were gonna go out of Vietnam [and into Cambodia], and about halfway along that walk, the guy that was with me and Carlson had to help me because I just couldn't walk any further"

End of Class Reflection Questions

1. How would you describe the ground and combat conditions these Veterans found themselves in?
2. What operational advantages, and disadvantages, did the American military, North Vietnamese Army (NVA), and Viet Cong each have? What tactics did each side use to try to exploit the weaknesses of their opponent(s) or maximize their own advantages?
3. In what ways did American aircraft play a critical role in the war?
4. In what ways did terrain and environment play a critical role in the war?
5. What experience or detail stood out to you and why?
6. In what ways did the Veterans' experiences compare to their previous impressions of the Vietnam War?