

**Vietnam War Oral History Project**

**Interview with John Blanks, Jr.**

**March 26, 2012**

**Paul Robards:** The date is March 26, 2012 My name is Paul Robards, Library Director at Roberts Memorial Library. I will be speaking with John Blanks, Jr. from Warner Robins, GA today about his experiences in the Vietnam War.

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

**Blanks:** I was in the US Army Infantry

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

**Blanks:** I started in the Military as a career. I had been to a military high school and to a military college and the next obvious step was to go into the military as a career.

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

**Blanks:** 20

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

**Blanks:** In basic training I went straight to my unit and I took a special basic training out of Ft. Carson CO.

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

**Blanks:** Ft. Benning GA. I believe it was nine weeks long.

**Robards:** Did this training sufficiently prepare you for your duties in Vietnam? If the answer is no, explain why the training was inadequate.

**Blanks:** At one time, prior to the advanced course, I was an instructor at Ft Benning of the advanced course. So, I actually designed the curriculum for using mortars and both 4.2 and 81 millimeters, so part of that, I was already aware of when I went down there to Ft. Benning.

**Robards:** What was your occupation code?

**Blanks:** I was a 1542. Light infantry leader.

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

**Blanks:** I did the first time.

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

**Blanks:** That is a very good question, because I had mixed feelings. On one hand I was excited. On the other I was apprehensive about what to expect and the dangers I knew were awaiting me there. Since I was a career soldier, I was, in a way, actually looking forward to testing myself while leading my

men into combat. The worst feeling that I had was having to leave my family. Separation was particularly hard on wives.

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

**Blanks:** I was in Southeast Asia twice. I was there part of 1966, '67, '68, and '69. In '66 I was there from June 66 to June 67. And then from October 68 to October of 69. First tour I was with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne division, the second tour I was with the Americal division up in Icorp.

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

**Blanks:** First tour I was a Lt. company commander. Second tour I was a captain company commander.

**Robards:** If you were in a combat unit, what was your first encounter with the enemy?

**Blanks:** The first encounter with the enemy was when I was on a patrol with my platoon into a village that we thought was deserted, but after we entered in to the village, we came under fire from a Viet Cong unit. The encounter occurred shortly after being assigned to my unit and when the action began, my men did exactly what they were trained to do. We routed the VC and none of my men were wounded or killed. I would call it a successful first encounter.

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

**Blanks:** They were very good fighters, because it was their country. Most of them were more dedicated to the cause than the U.S. soldiers were. Their overall strengths were adaptability, stealth, and the ability to use anything and everything as a weapon against us. They were very determined and special squads, usually the North Vietnamese regulars, were specifically trained and we called them "sappers." Generally, their speciality was crawling under the barbed wire barriers unnoticed and throwing satchel charges into our positions. They were generally suicide squads and could really wreak havoc on us.

**Robards:** What weapon did you use the most often with the most efficiency?

**Blanks:** It depends on the situation; I had several weapons that I used. I had, of course, my M16. I also had a grease gun, which was a .45 caliber blowback automatic weapon. I had a .45 caliber pistol, a .32 automatic, and also a combat knife. When I was going into tunnels, I used my .32 and my knife. If we were in very, very thick brush, and I was operating more on my own, which I was in a lot of instances during the second half of both of my tours, I was using primarily the grease gun and my M16. While actually working with my unit, my primary weapon was my M16 rifle.

**Robards:** Describe the bravest action you witnessed during the war.

**Blanks:** Probably the bravest action I saw was done by our company commander. At one time, we were up in the Dak To area and we were being overrun by an NVA [North Vietnamese Army] division, and my company commander actually ended up, to protect us, calling napalm in on our own position. None of us were hurt by it; they were very, very accurate, but it busted up their assault on us and we were able to turn the tide.

**Robards:** What do you remember most about combat?

**Blanks:** It was scary as hell. It was either complete and total boredom or complete and total chaos. For a line unit, there was never anything in between. The most memorable thing was flying in on an air assault mission. You never knew what was going to happen when you hit the ground in the landing zone. If it was “hot,” that would be the enemy shooting at you when you landed and that was really scary. The other thing was moving through the jungle not knowing exactly if you were being watched or if someone was taking a bead on you, or you were walking into an ambush.

**Robards:** What awards did you receive?

**Blanks:** I received 4 Bronze Stars, 5 Army Accommodation Medals, Air Medal, Purple Heart, and Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with palms; Vietnamese Staff Medal First Class, National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Vietnam Campaign Medal. I think that is all of them.

**Robards:** What is your evaluation of American military leadership in Vietnam and of your immediate commanders in the field? Can you give examples to support your statement?

**Blanks:** You had good and you had bad. A lot of times you would run into a commander that was just there, and this would probably be at the battalion level, probably an individual who was close to the end of his career and in my opinion was just trying to get his card punched for the next promotion. They were not really the most astute in the combat area. They had been desk jockeys for quite a few years before that, and they had volunteered to go so they could get their card punched. That would be one extreme. The other extreme, the ones I ran into most, were officers who were very competent. They were very astute in planning operations. They had tremendous control over the happenings there, and the men loved the heck out of them.

**Robards:** As a young serviceman, did you understand the politics and diplomacy (of both the United States and Vietnam) that resulted in a war? What is your opinion now?

**Blanks:** I’m an old man now, and I still don’t understand what that was. I assume that they thought they could stop the communist menace from toppling Southeast Asia one country at a time. It is really, really bad when you’ve got politicians who have never been in the service, much less been in combat, trying to run a war from Washington D.C. and to appease all the people who are against the war.

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

**Blanks:** It had no effect on it whatsoever. My job was to accomplish my mission, with the least loss of my personnel, and to get as many of them back home alive as I could.

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

**Blanks:** Well, if you want to call it housing, while in the field, my housing was a hammock that I liberated from a VC who did not need it any more. I slept in the hammock primarily because I didn’t want to sleep on the ground because of the ground leeches. They were attracted to heat and if you were sleeping on the ground, you were very apt to wake up in the morning in a Medivac helicopter with leeches inside every cavity of your body. I put a couple of sandbags around my hammock; it was also easier to get out of if you were under attack. Now while we were in base-camp, which was not very often, in a combat unit, the unit I was in anyway, we would stay out in the field anywhere from 60 to 80

days at a time without going back in to re-supply or any type of off duty from the actual operation itself, but when we did get back there, we had tents that were sand-bagged and it was sort of a compound area surrounded by barbed wire fence and it had a mess hall [in it]. It had the same food as you would have if you had been back state side—prepared a little differently in some instances, but still the same basic food, same basic menu. In base camp you also had movies now and then, so base camp was a little bit of a respite from being out in the woods, so to speak.

**Robards:** What was your daily routine while in Vietnam?

**Blanks:** There really wasn't any daily routine for combat units. You were in the field on operations, some lasting as indicated in excess of 60 days at a time. Or you were in base camp, resting, recuperating, resupplying and waiting to be sent out on another operation. Most of the time on operations, we were just walking through the jungle from point A to point B, looking for an enemy who didn't want to be found. When and if we found them, that's when all hell would break loose into a fire fight. Sometimes we came out without a scratch, other times we weren't so lucky. Most of the time the biggest problem we were dealing with was jungle rot, leeches, heat, humidity, eternal rain during the monsoon season and all the insects and snakes.

**Robards:** Did you ever do anything just for the fun of it?

**Blanks:** R & R was always fun. In the field about all you could do was read books your family had sent you, and play cards every now and then, nothing really fun because you're always alert against being attacked. In base camp there were officers', and enlisted clubs, usually just modified tents where you could socialize, have a few drinks, play a slot machine, or just simply relax a little bit. Everyone looked forward to the one week of R & R, which was rest and recuperation. You'd be out of Vietnam and have not a worry in the world—complete relaxation in places like Malaysia, Hong Kong, Thailand, Hawaii, Australia and a few other locations. I was even able to meet my wife in Hawaii for one of my R & Rs.

**Robards:** Please tell us about any community involvement you participated in such as irrigation or construction projects,

**Blanks:** That [was something] I did an awful lot in. The second half of both of my tours, I was actually an S-5, which is a Civil Affairs Officer. In Civil Affairs, I worked directly with the Vietnamese people. The fun part of that was that I was in price control in the villages, and every time I walked into a store, the prices would drop like that. During that particular period of time, we, the 101<sup>st</sup> for instance, gave scholarships to the high schools we had there—took up collections within the division or the brigade at the particular time. They had to pay to go to high school, and a lot of them could not, so we had some scholarship programs, and since we were the 101<sup>st</sup>, we gave 101 scholarships to deserving Vietnamese children. I was also very much involved in coordinating the operations of some of the engineering units building playgrounds. During the Christmas season, we would pass out Christmas presents to the regional forces, popular forces who were in camp. They were sort of like the National Guard and local militia, and all they had with them was their wife and kids and that's about all they had except for an old carbine, and they didn't have a lot of supplies, so each Christmas, we would give them presents and that was very rewarding. Also one of the things we did a lot of was the medical civic action programs [MEDCAP] where we would go into a village, and we would basically set up shop. It would be myself, as

the S5 [civil affairs officer], several of the medics from the battalion, and in a lot of instances, the battalion surgeon would go in with us, depending on the security of the area. On a couple of occasions, we even had some of the Red Cross girls go into the area with us, if it was secure enough. The rest of the time, [I] was doing a lot of work with the Montenyard tribesmen up in the mountains. They were just about two years past the caveman, still hunted with crossbows, and very, very loyal to the south, and then obviously to the United States, and they were awfully, awfully good fighters too. They definitely knew the area, in fact a lot of them joined in on the South Vietnamese Tiger Force units. But I was very much involved in some of the civic affairs there.

**Robards:** Could you tell about the most memorable event that happened to you or your unit while serving in Vietnam?

**Blanks:** There are far too many to narrow it down to just one, but one occurred in an operation shortly after I had arrived in my unit. We were trying to recover the body of a fallen comrade from within a minefield. By the time we were able to reach his dead body, we had to clear the mines [from the field] out first, several days had passed and in the heat of Vietnam, the body was all bloated and covered with maggots. Another time, we were under attack, and I went to get some wounded men out of harms way so their wounds could be treated while trying not to become a casualty myself. Another [incident] involved chasing some VC [Viet Cong] who had captured one of our guys. Before we could reach them, they bound the captive and executed him right there in a rice paddy and were gone. We were on an operation I had in my company in Mi Lai, almost a year to the day after Callie had his famed experience there, and while I was giving instructions to one of my platoon leaders, he was shot in the leg by a sniper. I always think that was almost me. Fortunately, the leg wound wasn't life-threatening, and my lieutenant was sent home. We used to call that the million-dollar wound, because you went home alive and with all your limbs still attached. One more, because they all bear repeating again and again so that people will know what the war was all about: our firebase was under attack by an NVA unit and an enemy rocket-propelled grenade was launched into a bunker where our battalion chaplain, Chaplain Chuck Savely, he was a Lutheran chaplain as I remember, and his assistant were seeking protection, they were obviously non-combatants. The explosion killed Chuck's assistant and [wounded] Chuck. Chuck was a bachelor and the last I heard about him, was that he was in a field hospital recovering from his wound. He has his intestines wrapped on the outside of his stomach with a wet towel covering them, chasing nurses around the hospital.

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

**Blanks:** Oh, absolutely. They hated us and they didn't know the first thing about it. I can remember several instances that really just rubbed me the wrong way. One of them occurred with my wife. We were just finishing up R & R and I was headed back to Vietnam. I had met her in Hawaii, and after I left on the very sad day that I returned to Vietnam to finish my tour of duty, she went to have her hair done to keep her mind off the danger I was going to face yet one more time. While she was in the salon chair, the hairdresser asked her how it felt to sleep with a baby killer. That in my opinion was completely out of place and uncalled for.

Also while I was in Vietnam, I received a package. We always enjoyed receiving packages; it was always like Christmas come early. This package particularly, however, I regret receiving. It was from an anonymous individual who sent me a box of soap with a letter inside stating I should use tis soap to wash the baby corpses I had killed. I don't know who the SOB was that sent it nor where it came from, but we did not kill any babies. The other thing about it, when we returned from protecting our country, that's a stretch maybe, but as least when we returned from doing the duty that our country had sent us to, we were mocked, cursed at, spat upon. Just isn't the way we should have been treated. Unfortunately, events like this number in the thousands. I remember one time in particular after one of my tours I was going to an assignment, and didn't know about the hotels to stay in while we were traveling, so we stayed in a little motel, and each time you were changing posts, you had a sponsor. Our sponsor asked us where we were [staying]. I told him the hotel we were staying in and he said, "Do not under any circumstances wear your uniform."

That is a couple of things that need to be stated. Also, as Vietnam vets, we never received, not that I wanted it or anything (a lot of the other guys needed it), any acclaim for what we had done or any appreciation for what we had done. Like I said, if you walked back into the airport, they would spit at you if you had your uniform on. Much contrary to what is happening now. It does my heart good when I see the guys coming back from Afghanistan, and Iraq, as they walked through with their uniform on people stand up and gives them a round of applause. We never got that.

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

**Blanks:** Not really, I was looking at it as just another assignment and career. It [my view] probably got a little bit more tainted, after my first tour there and I saw what was actually occurring in politics of the war. It did not seem that the commanders, and I'm talking about the general levels and the politicians, were interested in any more than the body count. If you had a lot of body counts, they gave you a bunch of medals, If you didn't have a large body count they relieved the commanders of their command, and they would put someone else in there they thought would get a full body count. They were not really, in my opinion, concerned about what the soldiers thought it was all about.

**Robards:** Would you repeat this experience if you could do it over again? Why or why not?

**Blanks:** Absolutely. Absolutely. The people that I served with [in Vietnam] were some of the finest people I've ever served with. It was quiet a brotherhood. I probably wouldn't volunteer, (I wouldn't run the other way to Canada if I was called up), simply because it is very, very hard on families, wives and children. It is really, really bad, because they never know what is happening. Nowadays it is a little bit better. I remember my wife saying that she used to sit in front of the television watching the news hoping to catch a glimpse of me or my unit so she would know where we were; whereas, nowadays they [the cameras] are right in your face when your RV gets blown up.

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

**Blanks:** I think that there is a lot of Vietnam [war] that was not only funny, but it was interesting. I can remember one occasion, probably the most humorous thing that happened to me, We had done some work with a Montanyard village, and the village chief was throwing this great big banquet in honor of

me and a couple of people that had participated in this civic action program. He had this large banquet, and there was a large crock, probably two to three feet across, a round bowl, and it had a crust or something on top of it. It had these long straws coming out of it. You would stick your straw through the crust, and it was some of the most potent adult beverage that you could ever come across. Then they passed around the meal. The meal was a very interesting meal too; since it was the Montanyards, the meal consisted of a combination of rat and rice. It wasn't the gray city rats; it was the brown field rats, sort of like eating squirrel or rabbit, but it still had an interesting taste, because it was all cooked outside over a little grill. When we got ready to break it up, one of the people from the village came over and presented me with this plate with a chicken head in the middle. The village chief was to my left and the interpreter was to my right, and I looked at this chicken head and didn't know what I was supposed to do with it, so I turned to my interpreter and said, "What am I supposed to do with this chicken head?" He said, "Well, you are supposed to eat it, because you are the guest of honor." I ate an awful lot of stuff in Vietnam, but I drew the line at eating chicken heads; so what I had to do was do a little bit of quick thinking. I turned over to the village chief and told him that I was just not worthy of this particular honor and since he was the village chief and he was the hero of the village, that he should eat the chicken head. He was happy because he was elevated, and I didn't have to eat the chicken head.

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