

Vietnam Veterans Oral History Project
Interview with Julian Alexander
March 19, 2012

The date is March 19, 2012. My name is Paul Robards, Library Director at Roberts Memorial Library at Middle Georgia College. I will be speaking today to Julian Alexander from Warner Robins, GA about his experiences in the Vietnam War.

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

Alexander: United States Army

Robards: What did you join the military?

Alexander: I was drafted.

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

Alexander: I was sworn in on my 23rd birthday.

Robards: Where did you go to receive basic training?

Alexander: Fort Benning in Columbus, GA.

Robards: Describe your basic training experience. What was your daily routine and what kind of training did you receive?

Alexander: Well, basically you would get up at like maybe 5 o'clock in the morning, could have been sooner; go on 2 or 3 mile runs; come back, eat breakfast; clean up the dorm; make your bed, clean the bathroom; spend the rest of the day until lunchtime going to classes or some kind of physical training. You would eat lunch, and then after that, you would either have classes or more physical training depending on the schedule of the day. PT exercises, hand grenade practice or rifle range. At night you would have distant runs or you would go through what they call the night crawl under live fire, through barbed wire, through mud, over logs, through trenches, More PT exercises during the day, and classes during the day — general military procedures.

Robards: What lessons did you take away from basic training?

Alexander: I think I became more disciplined, because of the structure. I think I became more responsible, because I was 23 years old, but I had never done anything with my life up to that point, even though I was married to my first wife at that time. I think I became more aware of the world around me. I think I became more aware of what military life was all about, because

prior to that, my father had been in the army in World War II and he didn't talk about it much, so I didn't know too much about it.

Robards: Where did you attend advanced training and how long did it last?

Alexander: I attended advanced training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. It was an 8 week course. I was trained in 105 millimeter howitzer.

Robards: Big guns. What was your occupation code... your MOS?

Alexander: It has been a long time...I'm not really sure. Seems like it was either 10 Bravo 40 or 13 Bravo...it involved artillery. It wasn't infantry or anything else. I can't remember exactly what it was.

Robards: Did you volunteer to go to Vietnam?

Alexander: No I did not. At the time I was sent to Vietnam, like I said earlier, I was married. My wife had just had our first child in June of 1967, and I got orders for Vietnam shortly after that. I was allowed a 30 day leave and then I was sent to Vietnam in August of 1967.

Robards: What are the names of the units you were assigned to?

Alexander: Well, I was in an artillery unit and we were assigned for fire support to different units such as the Big Red One, the 25th infantry division. Those are the two that stand out in my mind the most after all these years. I'm sure that there were many, many others because we constantly moved from place to place providing fire support to infantry units.

Robards: What was your rank during the war?

Alexander: When I went to Vietnam I was a PFC [private first class], then I made corporal, then I made sergeant in early 1968, prior to the TET offensive, I believe, and when I was discharged in 1968, I was a sergeant E-5.

Robards: Where did you serve while in Vietnam?

Alexander: Mostly in the southern part of the country, Xuan Loc was the main place I remember; we spent several occasions at that place. The base camp was a place called Bear Cat, don't remember exactly where it was located, probably near Ben Hoa, but I was only there when I came in country, and when I left country.

Robards: Which campaigns or engagements were you involved in?

Alexander: Like I said earlier, it was constant fire support for infantry units and then the biggest campaign was the TET Offensive of 1968.

Robards: Could you tell us about your encounters with the enemy?

Alexander: Well, being an artillery unit, you are normally in the rear echelon, doing fire support for the infantry units that are right up there in the mix of things, but on several occasions we would encounter the enemy and have small skirmishes. The biggest one we had, as I mentioned earlier, was the TET Offensive of 1968 where the enemy was right within the perimeter of our camp, and we were firing not the normal five or six or seven miles for support, we were firing point blank range at them coming through the barbed wire and over the bunkers and everything else. Hand to hand combat.

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

Alexander: That would be the TET Offensive of 1968. I think I basically just described that as the enemy being close enough for hand to hand combat.

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

Alexander: At the time I was there, and I don't think my opinion has changed much over the years, but I didn't think much of the immediate commanders, like the captain of my unit. As far as the upper echelon commanders like the generals and everything else, I think the only thing I can say about them is they were doing what they thought was best. I think a lot of times it was for show for the people back home, for the news reports for the American public to get behind the war that they weren't behind. In my mind, it was a war that we shouldn't have even been participating in.

Robards: You were a gunnery Sgt E-5, as a leader, what was the most difficult challenge you faced in Vietnam?

Alexander: I think the most difficult challenge I faced as a gunnery Sgt. was commanding and earning the respect of the men under me, because I had come up through the ranks with those same men, and coming up through the ranks, you're more on a peer basis, a friend basis, and when you make rank over them, and now you're in charge, it's kind of hard to command the respect that a commander is supposed to have, because of the relationship you had with them prior to that. So, sometimes it was hard to get people to do things that needed to be done, because they didn't feel like you as their friend would pursue the matter.

Robards: As a young serviceman, did you understand the politics and diplomacy of both the United States and Vietnam and landed you in the middle of a war?

Alexander: No, I didn't. I really didn't. I went because I had to go because I was drafted. I've always loved this country and I still do, but I didn't go because I wanted to stop Communism and all that stuff. I didn't understand it.

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

Alexander: I don't think my understanding of the situation effected my job as much as the fact that I wanted to survive and go back home. So therefore, I did what I had to do to survive, so that I could get back home. I performed my job as ordered to perform, no matter what I was told to do, and I was never told to do anything that was like Mi Lai or anything like that. I did what I was told to do by my superiors, because I knew that what I was being told to do would help me get through this thing, and get back home to the people that I loved, and who loved me.

Robards: What did you think about Vietnam when you first arrived?

Alexander: Oh, Lord. When I first arrived, I was scared to death. When I got off that plane at Tan Son Nhut Airbase, I was scared to death. It was in the middle of the night. All you saw was machine gun bunkers along the runways and jeeps and 50 caliber machine guns and soldiers everywhere and you thought, what have I got in to? I'm never going to get out of here alive. Daylight came and you were assigned to a unit, and in daylight, things didn't look as bad. So, it is just something that grows in you, on you and you learn to deal with it; you learn to live with it; you learn to survive.

Robards: What was your opinion of the Vietnamese, and did your opinion change over time?

Alexander: To be perfectly honest, my opinion of the Vietnamese was the same as my opinion of the Japanese in World War II. Even though I wasn't around in WWII, I know enough about it from the history books and movies and talking with my father. I didn't have a very high opinion of them at all. Didn't trust them. To me they were a two faced people, because they are friends to you---the Vietnamese people, not the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese Army—but the Vietnamese people themselves were friendly to you face to face, but I would never turn my back on one of them. I guess I just more or less to be perfectly honest with you, I just despised them. And my opinion has changed somewhat since then, because it has been 45 years this August when I got out of the army. My opinion has changed somewhat in the sense that I don't despise them anymore. I still don't---I know they are a very poor people; they been under the rule of a, you might as well say, a communist dictatorship for all of these years. They have a very hard life. Being an American, being born and raised in this country, and growing up in this country, I appreciate everything I've got, everything I've had and everything I may have in the future, whereas compared to us, they don't have anything.

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

Alexander: First night and first day at base camp you were in a big tent with cots and outdoor latrine, outdoor showers. Of course now, let me back up and say that I experienced the same thing at Fort Sill, OK. The latrines were outdoors. I was there in the wintertime and there was snow on the ground, and to go to the latrine or take a shower, you had to go like a hundred

yards in the snow cold to the shower or latrine and then back to the dorm. But back to Vietnam, once I got to my unit, which was Charlie Battery 7th battalion 9th artillery, we were mainly moving from place to place, sometimes on a daily basis, sometimes on a weekly basis, so we didn't have permanent housing. We slept in bunkers built in the ground made out of sandbags and empty ammo boxes filled with sand, and you slept on your poncho or anything you had to lay on the ground. You didn't have bunks or cots. As far as food, the only time I remember having hot meals was when we were in a permanent location for more than a week, then they would set up a kitchen, and you would have regular meals three times a day, but a lot of times when we were moving daily, it would be just c-rations. Some of those c-rations weren't bad.

Robards: What did you do for recreation?

Alexander: Played a lot of cards: hearts, pinochle, poker. If we were fortunate enough to be somewhere long enough to have, not a club, because there wasn't a building, but sometimes we would have a big tent and we would set it up to have ping-pong tables and card games—and drinking a lot of beer.

Robards: Could you tell me the most humorous thing that happened during your tour?

Alexander: I really can't think of anything humorous. I'm sure there were humorous things that happened during the course of that year over there, but I think the most humorous thing that happened to me was when I went to R & R (rest and recuperation) to Sidney Australia. I'm going to be honest about this—I was really tired of seeing slant-eyed people. I was given an option of Bangkok Thailand, or Sidney Australia, so I chose to go to Sidney Australia. And I met an Australian girl there who was---the Australian people were very friendly people. They welcomed the GIs with open arms. And this girl, I met her, I guess, at the airport. She volunteered to take me around Sidney and show me some of the nightlife. It was a friendship thing, that 's all it was, because at the time I was married and had a child at home. She took me to a nightclub that was full of exotic dancers. That's all that was there was exotic dancers. During the show I was commenting to her how gorgeous these women were up there on the stage. And when the show was completely over, she told me something to the effect that "those are not women; those are men in drag." It was humorous now, but I was taken aback at the time. I was kind of like in shock.

Robards: How did you feel when you got on the plane to leave Vietnam?

Alexander: Lord, just get this plane out far enough over this ocean so they can't shoot this thing down before we get out of here. After surviving 11 months and 20 days on ground, when that plane left that runway going back to the United States, I was I think more fearful then that we'd be shot down taking off and crash and burn than I was the whole time I was over there.

Robards: Did you feel that the American public was less than enthusiastic about those returning from Vietnam?

Alexander: I can only base a “yes” on what I saw on the news and read in the papers after I got back, because I came back to Warner Robins, GA. I landed at Cochran Field between Macon and Warner Robins, so I didn’t experience any bad remarks or hatred or slurs or anything else from anybody, because my mother and father and brothers and sisters met me at the airport. It was just like a normal homecoming to me. I didn’t experience any bad things like some guys did who came back.

Robards: Do think Vietnam veterans were discriminated against when they returned to the United States after their tours in Vietnam?

Alexander: Only based on saw on the news reports and read in newspaper accounts, because like I say, I didn’t have any personal discrimination against me. I wasn’t called a baby-killer or anything like that.

Robards: Have your views about the war changed over the years?

Alexander: Not in the sense that we did the right thing, or that we should have been there. I still believe that was a political war. I don’t understand all the things about politics, but I still think that to this day, it’s another one of those wars that I think this country should not have gotten involved in. I know we were there to stop communism, but if the communists from North Vietnam took over South Vietnam, I don’t think it would have gone any further than that. Where else are they going to go?

Robards: Did the war change you in any way?

Alexander: For years after the war, it made me a harder person. I got out of the army in 1968 and it wasn’t until 1991 or 1992, which is 23 years that it probably took me to get over the bitterness of not only the war, but of some of things that the war caused to happen in my life, or I felt like the war caused to happen. So, even though I was bitter and hard towards people after coming home from the war and that continued for several years. At one point in my life, around 1991 or 92, I was able to overcome that bitterness. I still have feelings of, I don’t know, sadness rather than bitterness about my experiences in Viet Nam and the whole thing.

Robards: Did this experience affect your religious beliefs.

Alexander: Well, at the time I came back from Vietnam, I was not a Christian. I was saved in February of 1975, while I was a student at Georgia College, as a matter of fact. The experience of Vietnam itself didn’t affect my beliefs, because, as I said, I wasn’t a Christian at the time, but once I became a Christian, it was a work in progress until 1991 or 92 when I was able to overcome the anger and bitterness in me that resulted from the Vietnam War.

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

Alexander: I think it was a positive experience in the sense that it helped me realize, that even though I saw it on newsreels prior to Vietnam, about Korea, about World War II, it was a positive thing in the sense that it helped me sort of relate to the fact that there are people in the world, like I said earlier in this interview, that really have it bad. I think the United States, this is not in answer to your question, but I've felt this for years, I think the United States would do well to do like Israel does and require their young people to serve a minimum of two years in the military. I think that is a requirement in Israel, not only for boys, but for girls. It would help them gain an experience to appreciate what they've got in this country, because this generation right now is the most unappreciative generation this country has ever had, and unless something happens to change it, it is only going to get worse.

Robards: Sgt, thank you for your service to your country, and thank you for participating in this project.

Alexander: Thank you.