

Vietnam War Oral History Project

Interview with Vivian F. Yeisley, Jr.

April 3, 2012

Paul Robards: Today's date is April 3, 2012. My name is Paul Robards, Library Director at Roberts Memorial Library at Middle Georgia College. I will be speaking today with Major Vivian F. Yeisley, Jr. from Warner Robins, GA about his experiences in the Vietnam War.

Robards: Major Yeisley, You joined the military in 1962 and served until you retired in 1992 with the exception of a four year break. The questions I will ask you today are about the two tours of duty you served in Southeast Asia.

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

Yeisley: I was in the United States Army.

Robards: Why did you join the military?

Yeisley: Ah...That is actually a long story, but basically I was bored at school, getting in trouble, and I was given the alternative of going into the army, and I took it.

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

Yeisley: I joined the United States Army the year I was 17 years old. I took all my tests and everything when I was 16. They didn't like that.

Robards: What was your hometown when you joined?

Yeisley: I lived in Hialeah, Florida.

Robards: Where did you go for basic training?

Yeisley: Fort Gordon, GA.

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

Yeisley: Fort Gordon, GA

Robards: What aspects of your training did you use in Vietnam?

Yeisley: Probably all of it. Having joined the army in 1962, believe or not, in basic train I went through with the M1 rifle, and when I went to AIT, which was three months later, I actually went with the M14, and then in Vietnam, I had the M16, so I've had just about all the weapons there.

Robards: Did the military training change you in any way?

Yeisley: Ah, yeah, I grew up. Real quick.

Robards: What was your job description or occupation code?

Yeisley: I was 11 Bravo, which is Infantryman.

Robards: What medals did you receive for serving in Vietnam?

Yeisley: That is kind of hard to say. Probably the Vietnam Campaign Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, National Defense Service Medals, Meritorious Service Ribbons,

Robards: Did you volunteer to go to Vietnam?

Yeisley: No. Although my philosophy was that I would not volunteer, but when asked to go, I went. Without objection.

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

Yeisley: Kind of a chance to put into practice what I had been learning.

Robards: Did your feelings about going to war differ from that of your family's?

Yeisley: I don't think so. I was married at the time; I had a son; and that was part of my job. Part of the job in the military.

Robards: In what regions, towns or villages did you serve in Southeast Asia?

Yeisley: The first tour of duty I was stationed in Chu Chi, Vietnam, which is just northwest of Saigon. The second time I was with the 101st, and the truth of the matter is it has been so long that I'm not sure exactly where that was. I know it was called Eagle Beach.

Robards: What was your opinion about the Vietnamese people when you first arrived in Vietnam, and did your opinion about them change over time?

Yeisley: The Vietnamese people were just like any other people. They had their wants and their needs and their desires. It was different than mine, but you know food, family, health and with a war going on. Did it [opinion] change? Towards the Vietnamese military, yes. I served on my second tour as an advisor to a Vietnamese Ranger Battalion. I was very disappointed in them, because I based what I thought they should be doing on my values, not their values.

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

Yeisley: There were two distinct types. When I was not actually out in the field, we had wooden frame hooches, with screens (there were no windows). It was

adequate. I mean, it beat a tent; beat living in a foxhole. We had electricity. We had showers in a separate building, and toilets in a separate building. And then once you were in the field, you were in the field. There was no quarters. There was a time I spent 30 days in the field, never changed clothes, and that is just the way it was.

Robards: What did you do for entertainment?

Yeisley: We had the Officer's Club. In fact, I was stationed right next to it, so I could go over there any time I wanted. It happened to be near a mobile army surgical hospital, believe it or not, an actual MASH unit, and to this day when I watch MASH on television, it reminds me so much of the doctors, nurses and the situations in Vietnam, that it is absolutely amazing.

Robards: What was the most humorous event you witnessed or that happened to you?

Yeisley: God, I don't know. Humorous, I don't of anything that happened that I would call humorous. There was some lighter situations. Believe it or not, being in the Officer's Club and the mortars start falling, you take your drink and you go down in the bunker and you continue the party.

Robards: Could you share your memories of what it was like to fly in helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft during the war?

Yeisley: Well, I flew in helicopters quite a bit, because I was with a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol and also as Intelligence for the division, the 25th Infantry Division, and I volunteered quite often to do forward air controlling. The biggest thing I can remember about flying in a helicopter is watching the bullets come at you. They looked like little green balls. Fortunately, they all missed. But it is a situation where to this day when I hear a helicopter, it takes me back.

Robards: Describe the most memorable event that happened when you were in Vietnam.

Yeisley: I was over there for New Years, and as the commander, I decided to let my officers and enlisted men go, and I performed the duties the night of New Years. About 1 o'clock in the morning some people came to tell me that one of my soldiers who had had a little bit too much to drink was firing his M16 at another hooch because he was upset with [them], and I had to go there and ask him to give me the ammunition and the weapon. And he did! That was the most memorable thing.

Robards: Describe the bravest action, either friend or enemy, that you witnessed while serving in Vietnam.

Yeisley: God, it was all brave. I mean just being over there doing your job. That's basically it. It gets to the point where it's not something special because it happens every day.

Robards: Could you please tell what happened during your first encounter with the enemy and how you reacted to it?

Yeisley: My first tour over there I was in the Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol [LRRP], and the purpose of the reconnaissance patrol is to Not be seen, and we got seen, and we had a running gun battle until we got to the DZ (demilitarized zone) where they could pick us up, because there was only five of us. It [NV] was a squad, about 7 or 8 people. We managed to make it, and all of our equipment and all of our personnel were okay. The basic thing is, we failed. We were seen when we shouldn't have been. We learned.

Robards: Could you please tell about the personal weapon you took with you to Vietnam and why you carried it?

Yeisley: I took a Walter 38 pistol, automatic. It was only for self protection. I believe now the whole situation is changed, and you can't do that anymore. I actually carried it with me on my carry-on luggage on the airplane. I told the Captain that I had it and he said, "Okay, just keep it in your briefcase and don't show it to anybody." I got on and flew over there, and I had it, and whenever I went out, I was always armed. I always had a weapon with me whether it was my military weapon or my private weapon.

Robards: Please evaluate the North Vietnamese overall fighting ability. What were their strengths and weaknesses?

Yeisley: Their strength was that they fought an insurgent war. I mean, they picked and chose who they wanted to fight, when they wanted to fight, where they wanted to fight. I saw many times on the LRRP that there were huge elements out there, but they would operate independently and we couldn't find them. We would tell where they were, and by the time we got this U.S. Army Battalion coming in with the noise from the helicopter and the tanks and everything like that, they were just gone. They fought a good insurgent war.

Robards: What is your evaluation of the South Vietnamese's fighting units and their military and civilian leaders?

Yeisley: Their leaders were pretty much political. You got to be a lieutenant because you knew somebody, not because of what you knew. As you went up in rank,

it was even more so. They had a whole different set of values than we did. I did not particularly care for them. They were just not quite effective. And it proved itself out to be not effective.

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

Yeisley: Military leaders were excellent. Yeah, every once in a while you would find someone who was just not what he was suppose to be. The vast majority of leaders were outstanding.

Robards: In hind-sight, what do you believe was the reason for the war?

Yeisley: I think it was political. I want to use the word political, but a lot of economics were involved in it. Whether it affected me...I don't think so. Whether it affected big business...I do think so. It was so that the big guys could keep making money.

Robards: How did you feel about your military service in Vietnam when you left the country?

Yeisley: I was completely satisfied that I had done a good job, and I was the only one I had to please.

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

Yeisley: I honest to God didn't care. Cause they weren't over there, they didn't know what was happening, and they didn't have the obligation that a military person had.

Robards: Do you believe that Vietnam veterans encountered discrimination when they returned home from the war?

Yeisley: I can't say for everybody. I had none. There was no discrimination whatsoever. The one or two times I met someone who said "Oh you're a Vietnam vet. Did you kill babies" and stuff like that, my only comment was "You ought to be thanking me, because by my being there you didn't have to go."

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

Yeisley: No. No.

Robards: Did going to war change you in any way?

Yeisley: I'm sure it did. I'm not sure how it did. Maybe it gave me the realization that some of my priorities were not as important as I thought they were, and some other ones probably were a little more important than I thought they were. I'm not sure I could pinpoint something.

Robards: Would you repeat this experience if you could do it over again?

Yeisley: If my country called for it, I would.

Robards: Is there anything we haven't brought up that you would like to share about your Vietnam War Experience?

Yeisley: Only that if you have not experienced the situation, you cannot understand. I say that, because the majority of the time in combat is boring. Its 15 minutes of hell, and 3 days sitting around wondering when the next 15 minutes are coming.

Robards: Thank you for your time and for your service.