

Ronald K. Smith
Veterans' Project
Interviewer: Adam S. Decker
2008

Int: Alright. Could you state and spell your full name for us?

Vet: Ronald K. Smith.

Int: Ok. Thanks. How do you spell it?

Vet: R O N A L D initial K. S M I T H.

Int: Alright. Thanks. So where to you currently live?

Vet: Parowan, Utah.

Int: And is this the same place you lived when you were drafted or enlisted?

Vet: No.

Int: Ok. Where was that?

Vet: We were living in Florence, Oregon.

Int: Alright. Did you enlist or were you drafted?

Vet: I was drafted, but...so that I could choose what field I went in to, I enlisted.

Int: Alright.

Vet: And so instead of a two year draft obligation, I enlisted for three years.

Int: But you got to choose where you went, right?

Vet: I got to choose what field I went into, not where I went.

Int: Yeah. Alright. Which branch of the service did you serve in?

Vet: Army.

Int: Alright...so, were you full time?

Vet: Yes.

Int: Where was your headquarters?

Vet: Well, I went to Fort Lewis, Washington for basic training, and from there I went to Fort Watchuka, Arizona for supply school, from there to Fort Sam Houston, Texas for medical supply school, and then for permanent duty to Fort Dix, New Jersey. From there to Viet Nam and after a year there I came back and finished a year at Madigan Army Hospital in Fort Lewis, Washington.

Int: Ok. Thanks. What years did you serve during?

Vet: 1966-1969

Int: Alright, what was your highest rank?

Vet: Staff Sergeant, E6.

Int: Alright, were you decorated for your service?

Vet: Just the Army Accommodation Medal.

Int: Alright. Who gave it to you?

Vet: I can't remember.

Int: Did you serve in combat or non-combat?

Vet: Well, I served in the 37th Medical Company assigned to the 11th Armored Cavalry, Blackhorse Base Camp, in the middle of the rubber tree jungles of Viet Nam. So there was, you know, combat all around but I was never in what you'd call hand-to-hand combat.

Int: Alright. Did you meet anyone who became like an important historical figure?

Vet: No, not really. George S. Patton's son was our company commander.

Int: That's cool. When you reflect on your service what's like some of your most vivid memories.

Vet: Well, the most vivid memory I have of servicing in Viet Nam was I learned a much higher degree of patriotism. Before, I thought the America flag was basically to start ball games or parades and once you fall out into the parade grounds and listen to the Star Spangled Banner and watch the flag be raised in a combat situation it gives it a whole new meaning.

Int: Alright. Where there any particular moments of religious experience?

Vet: Well, most of them, in fact all of them, were pretty much personal because there was only one other member of the Church in the whole area there and he was assigned to the Cavalry unit that was gone most of the time. So I spent most of the time alone. Once in a while we would have...we would be able to get together and have a so called meeting – have the sacrament at least, but not very often.

Int: How was your family life while you were serving?

Vet: Well, when I was serving stateside it was wonderful. I was wonderful. I was married and other than basic training Cherie was with me all the time. She was able to go to Fort Watchuka, Fort Sam Houston, and Fort Dix, and Fort Lewis, and we actually had a wonderful experience in the military, living together, and we always had small branches where we all had two or...we both had three or four different jobs in the Church and we met wonderful people, and some we still communicate with today.

Int: That's cool. What were some of your experiences of joy?

Vet: Joy? Well...I guess the biggest experience of joy was when I got on that airplane and looked back and saw Viet Nam in the distance. Knowing that I'd made it for a year and I'd put in my time and was headed home and being reunited with my family. And then, I did get to leave Viet Nam for a few days to go on R&R, it's called. I met up with Cherie in Hawaii. That was about six...half way through my tour and then I went back to finish the rest.

Int: Did anything, like, really funny happen while you were on base or anything?

Vet: I can't think of anything.

Int: Alright. Are there any things, like sad things, that you'd like to talk about?

Vet: Well, of course there's sadness that goes along with being over in a country where you're at war. I think about the saddest thing that I had was, we played basketball and volleyball nearly every day, to pass the time of day, and there was one fellow soldier, who he was actually...I was in medical supply and he was a medic, and he went out on a patrol and didn't come back and I was called into the place where all the dead and wounded were and it was my responsibility to identify him. 'Course, he'd been killed that day and we'd played basketball together the day before. There was other times that it was tough, but you just go on with life.

Int: How were your feelings of support from home, from like from your family and your country?

Vet: Well you just, you know, it's one of the toughest things you ever do. You know, I'd left home to go on a mission and I'd left home to go away to school. But this was a totally different experience because you're just facing the unknown – that was the hardest part. You get on an airplane and you fly out of Oakland, California. You fly into Japan

and then into Viet Nam and you go to this staging area where there are all of these people waiting to be assigned to wherever they're going and you sit there and not knowing what you're doing and you're scared. You know, you just have to decide that you're going to endure this and make the best of it and somehow it passes over.

Int: So I've heard that Viet Nam was a really unpopular war. So, was, I mean, did people show that after you got home?

Vet: I really didn't notice it. I know that it was unpopular for America, or the United States, to be involved. That was no secret. I knew that before I left and I knew that when I got back. The only thing I have to say to that is irregardless of whether it's popular or whether it's not popular, you answer the call. And in some respects it's more difficult to answer the call to serve in an unpopular environment that it would be to go away with lots of cheering and band playing and so forth like, you know, kind of like they do now. You just go and serve and you're patriotic and you do it and you can't worry whether it's popular or not.

Int: Alright. So what were the physical conditions you served in? Was it like Jungle or...?

Vet: Well, this was a base camp carved out, like I said, out of the jungle – it was all around. But when I first got there we were living in tents and...but as time went on we got a big shipment of lumber so we were able to construct our own barracks and I was able to construct, with some help, a new medical supply facility. So we lived inside, most of the time I lived inside of a wooden barrack. 'Course, you didn't need insulation, or anything, because it was never cold and there was little cubicles and there was two guys to a cubicle. And there would be, I think, there was twenty in the barracks. So, to be in a country like that, I would say that for the most part the conditions were above average.

Int: Alright. Are there any regrets about your service?

Vet: None whatsoever.

Int: Alright. What do you think is the single most positive experience.

Vet: Well, the single most positive experience was two fold: One, gaining a deeper appreciation for the country we live in, the freedom we enjoy, and, you know, this business of being a good patriot; and the other was, you know, obviously a greater appreciation for family. You think about it all of the time you're over there – all the time, it's the only thing that really, you know, gets you through.

Int: Alright. Has your service colored your political or social views at all?

Vet: No, not really.

Int: Alright. Has it really colored your religious views or anything like that?

Vet: No.

Int: Alright. If you could give some advice to service men and women of today, what do you think it would be?

Vet: I would just say, “Answer the call. Do your best.” There’s obviously times in the service when you feel like you’re wasting your time – you sit a lot, you stand in line a lot, you rake rocks, you do things that are mundane and you wonder “what in the world.” But it’s just the way it is and when you think about it and the blessings that we enjoy as a result of people who have served, and it takes everybody. It takes the cooks in the mess hall, it takes those people that are sitting behind a typewriter – it takes everybody to get the job done.

Int: Alright. How do you feel about the current war in Iraq?

Vet: Well, I look at it as very similar to the war in Viet Nam. You know, we’re there. You don’t know whether you’re trying to win or you don’t know what your...the real ultimate goal is. That was the hardest part of being in Viet Nam, is we weren’t there to win, we were just there to protect and it’s pretty hard to do – to always be on the defensive. There was times you say, “Let’s just get this over” and that’s kind of what we’re in now and so we’ll just have to see what happens.

Int: Were you opposed to us going into the war or...?

Vet: I really don’t have any feelings one way or another on that. I’ve watched...I’ve listened to both sides. I think there’s valid arguments on both sides. There again, you know, we elect people, we put them in position, and I think we need to be supportive.

Int: Alright. Are there any other stories or anything that you’d like to tell?

Vet: No. Not really. What do you got in mind?

Int: Just...

Vet: Well, I’d just say, you know, my first experience in Viet Nam (I say Viet Nam [a sound like apple] have the time and Viet Nam [a sound like encore] and I don’t know which is correct) but anyway, when I got there, one of my responsibilities was to go to a city 90 miles away to get medical supplies, once a week and we would travel in a convoy, which was guarded by helicopters and armored vehicles, and so forth, and it would be a fairly long convoy of big trucks. I had a big canister in the back of the truck and I always had a medic with me that drove the truck, and so we went down to Long Binh, the first week I got there to get medical supplies, and we go to this staging area, after we picked up the supplies, to spend the night, and then we’d leave early the next morning to go back to Blackhorse. There was a company of armored infantry guys not too far away, and I was awakened in the night by the bombs bursting in air and, you know, and I thought “oh

no!” and I look over and one of them hit right over by a tank – and these guys would sleep on a mat laid out on the tracks of their tanks – and this fragment hit this one and the medic that was with me went running across and went over there and tended to him and it severed his arm clear off and the medic stayed there and did what he could to get him fixed up and I thought, “Don’t tell me – I’ve got 51 more weeks of this.” And it’s interesting that for the rest of my time we never did have any of that happen again. You know, there was a lot of mortar fire come into our base camp and, you know, I’d go out and dig shrapnel out of the side of our barracks and, you know, you just ran into it. Outside of every barracks was a big bunker of sandbags and whenever the rockets would start coming in you’d just run out there, jump out of bed and just run in to that bunker of sandbags – wait ‘til it was over then go back in. You just never knew.

Int: Yeah. So did the one guy live?

Vet: He was still alive as far as I know, but he had one arm gone.

Int: Alright. Thanks. Thanks for helping out.