

Interview with Mr. Charles Fuller

Veteran – Vietnam War

Date for the Interview: March 2, 2005

Place of Interview: Kinsley United Methodist Church Parlor, Kinsley, Kansas 67547

Narrators and Transcribers: Miss Beth Strong and Mr. Travis Wetzel, members of the Composition II class, Kinsley High School, Kinsley, Kansas 67547

Narrator: Today is Wednesday, March 2, 2005. This is the beginning of an interview with Charles Fuller at the Kinsley United Methodist Church Parlor, 803 Marsh, Kinsley, Kansas. Mr. Fuller is 54 years old, having been born August 28, 1950. My name is Beth Strong, and I will be interviewing him along with Travis Wetzel. Mr. Fuller served in the Army during the Vietnam War.

Narrator (question deals with whether he was drafted):

Fuller: Well, I was drafted into the army. They sent me a pre-induction notice to go take a physical. At that point, you have one month to take your physical to either join any of the branches of service that you choose ... or be drafted. I chose to honor the draft.

Narrator (question deals with why he chose the army):

Fuller: Why? I thought it was something I needed to do.

Narrator (question deals with when was the first time he was sent to Vietnam):

Fuller: I was sent to Vietnam in July 1971.

Narrator (question deals with his thoughts of Vietnam):

Fuller: First thoughts ... the whole time that I was there, I was scared to death.

Narrator (questions deals with what boot camp was like):

Fuller: I entered the service June 1970; they sent me to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri for boot camp ... 12 weeks. I did a lot of sports in high school. And boot camp was basically lots of running, lots of push ups, lots of physical work. I was in fairly decent shape. Going through boot camp didn't bother me as much as other people ... as far as the basics of how to shoot a rifle, how to use the bayonet, how to force march, which is walking as fast as you can with a rucksack ... lots of physical activity.

Narrator (questions deals with whether everyone make it through basic training):

Fuller: I would say that in the 100 or so in my basic (infantry) training class, there were three of us that were RA, which is regular army. Everybody else was ER or NG ... which is Enlisted Reserves or National Guard. Everyone's primary MOS was to be a soldier first, so everyone went through basic training and A.I.T. (advanced infantry training). After that the ER and NG went home and the RA went on to other training.

After basic training in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, I was sent to Fort Ord, California for advanced training, which was another nine weeks of basically honing your skills on dismantling and firing your rifles and 45's and hand-to-hand combat assault. After the nine weeks of advanced infantry training, where we were on a merit system, I had accumulated enough merits to be eligible to go to NCO

school. In addition, we were told that if we did not “make the grade” during NCO school, we would be shipped to Vietnam. NCO school is another 13 weeks. It was just more advanced training ... combat training.

When I entered that school, I was an E2. When you start in the service as just a maggot, you have no rank at all. All the time we were in school we got E4 pay but had no rank, period. I graduated from the school and became an E5. Everyone was then shipped to different bases for a 13-week OJT period which meant that if you can handle the work, you can stay an E5 ... but if you couldn't, you got busted back down to what you entered the school, which in my case would have been an E2. They elected to keep me at the school for my OJT period to help train the next class. So actually I stayed in school for 26 weeks ... so I could be a teacher for the second 13 weeks.

That was the part I pretty much enjoyed about the service. It was five of us. That was at Fort Benning, Georgia, by the way where NCO school was. During the second 13 weeks, we became the instructors. We rented a house off post for those 13 weeks, and it was like an eight to five job. After the 13 weeks, I was given my notice that I was going to Vietnam and I got a 30-day leave. That pretty much accumulated to one year of service.

In July, 1971, I went to Vietnam as an E5 squad leader. They told me once I got there that I would probably be there for a month before I would be out in charge of a squad so I could get oriented with the country. Up to that point I'd been training all the time so I was not connected to any particular battalion or brigade. I think I was there two or three days for processing and then they shipped me into the 101st Airborne Division to replace a squad leader due to leave. The day that I got there was the day that he left. I only got a brief orientation. I was put in charge of a good group of guys that had been there for six to eight months. What we did was, we were an infantry combat unit. We loaded into helicopters and were dropped off in the middle of the jungle in platoon size, which is two squads. I was one of the squad leaders. I'm sure the whole company (which is four platoons) was also in the area, but we were in platoon size groups. We patrolled areas for 30 days. At the end of 30 days, they shipped us to the rear area for a three-day R and R, which is rest and relaxation. In three days we were back in our helicopters and they would drop us off in a different area. Thirty days later we would be back in the rear. This is what took place, over and over again.

Narrator (question deals with what he did on R and R):

Fuller: Well, basically we just didn't do much of anything ... just goofed off. Three days isn't very much time. When we got to the rear they had Quonset huts set up everywhere, which are tin buildings with cots in them. It was nice to sleep on a cot instead of on the ground. They also had a canteen set up there. You could have a few beers and just relax.

Narrator (question deals with how the squad sleeps in the jungle):

Fuller: There is lots of jungle in Vietnam, called triple canopy jungle ... real dense, real thick, not everywhere, but a lot of it. It meant that it was half-dark in the middle of the day. So, everyday, we took machetes and cut trail wherever we went. We set up camp, consisting of a perimeter with two squads before dark. Once it got dark in a triple canopy area, you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Once we set up camp, no fires were allowed; everyone had their turn on the rotation guard duty with both squads guarding their own half of the circle.

Narrator (question deals with the food):

Fuller: Everybody carried a rucksack with their own supplies, which was about 85 pounds of weight. Each squad had a machine gunner and everybody carried one bandoleer of ammo for the machine gunner in addition to their own ammo. I also carried nine quarts of water. Good water was hard to

come by. Of course, we had malaria tablets and purification tablets to put in the water part of the time. The food we ate was World War II C rations basically. When they dropped us off, we carried a week's worth of C-rations. Once a week, a helicopter would fly in and drop off our food supply. If I remember right, each case of C-rations had 12 individual meals, so everybody got a case of food.

Narrator (question deals with his seeing combat):

Fuller: I say my share of combat and that's all I'm going to tell you about that.

Narrator (question deals with his overall feelings about the war):

Fuller: I basically felt that it was a political war. When I left, people were spitting on Vietnam vets and when I came back, people were still spitting on Vietnam vets.

Narrator (question deals with his thoughts about the public reaction):

Fuller: I didn't understand the negative reaction, but I probably didn't pay much attention or care about it at the time. I think now maybe people look at this differently because of the situation overseas. The people going over there now are going for the same reason as when I went over.

Narrator (question deals with staying in touch with others):

Fuller: They had really good mail service as far as I am concerned. When they dropped off your food once a week, if you had mail, they dropped it off too.

Narrator (question deals with possible severe lack of supplies):

Fuller: As far as food, we always had enough food. C-rations came in boxes with different ID numbers. They were all edible, but they weren't like home cooking. I preferred to get the ones that had the pound cake and beanie-weenies. We had malaria pills, purification tablets, and heat tabs, which are kind of like Sterno. Do you know what Sterno is? It's what you heat your food up with. These types of things didn't get dropped off at different points or not enough got dropped off, so sometimes we did without.

Narrator (questions deals with receiving medals or citations):

Fuller: They are listed on the sheet. (They are the Army Commendation Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Vietnam Campaign Medal with 60 Device, Good Conduct Medal, Bronzed Star Medal, Air Medal, Army Valorous Unit Citation, Army Meritorious Unit Citation, Army Presidential Citation and Combat Infantryman Badge.)

I was pretty fortunate, going over as an E5. Having my own squad to be in charge of kept my mind pretty busy most of the time. I feel lucky to have come back in one piece. Many of my friends came back missing a limb, and I know a lot of guys who didn't come back sitting up.

Narrator (question deals with life once he came back):

Fuller: When I was on my way home on the plane it was hard to believe that it was finally over for me. I had a tough time going out at night because in Vietnam, nighttime is when the Vietcong tried to ambush you, so all movement stopped when it got dark.

Narrator (question deals with keeping any of the friendships made):

Fuller: None that I kept in contact with. Well, I guess that I would have. When you are over there, you put in for a seven-day R and R to places like Thailand or Australia. I got to go to Thailand for a seven-day R and R. When I got back they told me I didn't have to go out anymore, so I never got with my squad again. They kept me at the rear for a processing out period. They processed me out of the area and sent me to California to process out of the service.

Probably about four or five months after I got to Vietnam, I caught encephalitis. You know what encephalitis is? It is sleeping sickness. They send my parents letters that I was going home and that I was dying. All that I remember is bits and pieces of waking up in Saigon hospital and being asked what my name was and I didn't know ... not because I couldn't speak, but because I didn't know.

At some point they sent me to the Philippines on the way home. I was on a big Chinook with a whole bunch of wounded guys. All I can tell you is when I woke up, I was in a bed in the hospital and I woke up and I didn't know where the hell I was. They stuck needles in my head and did brain wave tests. The doctors decided they didn't know what happened to me. Then they told me I would be returning to duty. I requested to go back to where I had been because I wanted to find out what happened. I had arrived in the rear in the afternoon for a three-day R and R. The next morning, when we woke up, we had to fall into position. I lined up my squad and ... just as stiff as a board ... feel over. Anyway, I was very fortunate because encephalitis can be fatal. In fact, the Red Cross had sent my family a letter saying I was on my way home dying. The next letter my folks got was from me after I returned to duty saying that everything was fine and how were they doing. I didn't realize that the Red Cross had notified them that I was sick. Then I got a letter from my mom saying, "What's going on?"

When we came into Vietnam, we came into Saigon on a civilian plane out of California. I think it was a 747. It was an 18-hour flight. There were two ways to go. One was from Los Angeles to Hawaii and then to Vietnam. The other way was from Los Angeles to Alaska and then to Vietnam. I figured that either coming or going I would get to Hawaii. No, I went the other way both times. I tell you – coming back was much better.

A lot of veterans were able to bring back souvenirs and such that they had picked up at the bases they were stationed at near a town. I never was in that position. We were out in the bush for 30 days, they to the rear for three days, they back to the bush for 30 days. That was all we did. The only other thing I did was on a seven-day R and R.

There have been times when I have visited with other veterans since being out of the service. Some of them were in supply or stationed on a ship in the harbor, and they felt that they really hadn't contributed anything. My thoughts on that are that when you enter the military, you don't get to choose which job you do ... you just do it. No job is more important than others. I hope that someday, they will understand that.