

Interview with Mark Ota  
Interviewer: Jon Thompson  
November 9, 2009

**Interviewer's Notes:** The interview was conducted at 6.02 pm and was held upstairs at the University Center. There is constant noise from people in the background of the tape. The interview was recorded on an RCA digital recorder and is saved in two files. I have the introduction to the interviewee and body with conclusion on one file. On the second file I held introductory questions that missed at the beginning of the interview.

**Transcriber Notes:** The digital file is clear, and all words were able to be transcribed. The two digital audio files located on the meter reading are labeled DI and D2 for digital recording one and digital recording two.

**Q:** I am here with Mark Ota today; um he is going to be participating in a Veterans History interview. It's conducted by Jon Thompson and it's for the use of University of Southern Indiana and will be in the Library of Congress for your viewing and other people viewing. I'll be asking you a set of questions pretty much relating to your war efforts. This is an interview conducted about the Vietnam War. My name is Jon Thompson. I will be doing the interview, and we shall start. Oh yea. We are conducting this interview November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009, and it is being held at around 6 pm and being conducted at the University... Orr. What is this?

**A:** University Center, Carter Hall.

**Q:** What do you recall about the events leading up to the war?

**A:** Those memories started young because when I was three, my dad went to Vietnam in 1957. Military assistance advisory group, and he told me he was going somewhere, and I go, "Where is that, daddy?" I had no concept at the time. "Viet-where, Viet-what" and so that was my first experience. As I got older, and he kept returning overseas in different departments... he was in the army reserves... he kept getting called back up and sent. It's so ironic that after hearing about it as a child when I got older it was still... in the news, it was still there it wasn't done yet. So, it felt weird because we had never fought a war that long; we also took care of business sooner than that. So, it's like they needed help or something like that (laugh).

**Q:** Why did you pick the branch that you joined and what was that?

**A:** Tradition. U.S Army. My dad was in Camp Poston, Arizona. For some reason, they felt that his mom and dad's restaurant in Redondo Beach, California, was a threat to national security so they loaded (cough) them, and everything they could pack into suitcases, up to Camp Poston, Arizona, and so they lost their house, restaurant, cars, basically everything they owned. My dad wanted to prove he was as good an American as anyone else. He had been born in America; he wasn't Japanese, he was American. So, he joined the army, so it was just a tradition after that. I love the Marine Corp; I love the blue uniform. They were esprit dé corp, but I knew that I was an army brat and army it would be.

**Q:** What were first couple days like in the service?

**A:** I enjoyed it to be honest (laugh). I think it was just the watching everyone else the shocked look on their face. Me, being an Army brat, I knew what was going to happen. You'd see, these guys come in and the first thing they would do is buzz all their hair, and they're acting like Samson with their locks shortened, like they lost all their power, walking around rubbing their hair. Everybody was getting yelled

at; you actually had people that really didn't know their left from right; it was amazing. And it was just like Gomer Pyle... they'd single these guys out and that was it. You could tell, they were going to catch nothing but hell for six weeks. It was unreal. And the drill sergeant would be there, "We've been waiting for you; we just didn't know it was you in particular but you've... pointed yourself out to us". So, it wasn't too bad on me; I was a little smarter, a little quicker than most I can catch on. So, I didn't attract near as much attention as some of these guys.

**Q:** How was the boot camp experience?

**A:** Ohm. I would say it was a challenge, but like I said once again growing up in that atmosphere, I had a good idea of what was going on. The biggest thing I had to ugh... there was one incident in particular where this guy screwed up, and drill sergeant yelled at him, and I busted out laughing, and it was because of the names he was calling this kid. And of course, I attracted attention. Immediately, there was a drill sergeant in my face "You think that's funny?" "God yes, drill sergeant." "It's not supposed to be funny. Do you like it here?" "Yes, drill sergeant." "I don't want you to like it here. Get down and push this place away. Give me twenty-five push-ups." And it was that point that I realized this is a test, (smirk) I'm either gonna pass or I'm going to have this guy on my back for six weeks. And I got down and did a hundred and fifty push-ups. I did 25, 26 and just kept going. Drill sergeant just kept standing there; he didn't say a word, just watching me. And after I got done my arms weren't worth a darn, but I stood up and my words to him were "I dare you to make me quit." And he stood there for a minute, just looking at me and goes "I like that. I'm going to be watching you." (Laughing) I was like, "oh God."

**Q:** What were your other instructors like?

**A:** Bitter... hateful. They were sending people to war. We were already losing. It reflected in their attitudes, to be honest. Because all the guys that were drill sergeants, all had combat infantry badges. They had all been there. They all knew what was going on, so I guess it was frustrating to some of them. They wanted to make sure that the lessons burned in real good because we would be using those skills. But in the meantime, it was like some of them didn't want to bother because they knew it was a losing effort. I don't know. It reflected in their attitude and professionalism. Others set the standard; those were the ones that I chose to follow.

**Q:** How did you get through all of it?

**A:** Listening, basically. It's not the idea that you can't do something that drives drill sergeants crazy, as I learned later becoming one. It's the idea if you're going to quit or not. They don't care if you fail 200 times, if you get up 201 times you earned their respect... they want you to try as hard as you can. That's all they can ask. And they can separate the non-believers from the ones that are trying, you can tell. I think that's what got me through more than anything, just desire. I've always desired to excel at certain things, that was one of them.

**Q:** Where exactly did you go?

**A:** Ugh... mostly military region 2. Vietnam was divided into four military regions. Number one being at the top of South Vietnam by the DMZ and working progressively down. Most of my operations were in what you call central highland areas, Vietnam or two corp.

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**Q:** Describe when you arrived in the area and what was it like when you got there?

**A:** What was most noticeable to me was we didn't go in on troop ships like WWII. We flew in on TWA commercial flight, and I couldn't help but notice that the closer that we got to our destination the more forced the waitress, excuse me, flight attendants, were with their smiles and their courtesies towards us and stuff. It was like they were trying to be nice, but they didn't want to look at our faces. They didn't want to place a face with the person getting off the airplane and stuff. And when we got off the aircraft, the first thing I remember was the heat and the smell.

**Q:** What was your job assignment?

**A:** Scout sniper.

**Q:** ugh... obviously you saw combat. What do you remember about the combat?

**A:** Sheer boredom, punctuated by precious moments of extreme terror, You would be bored witless... being careful not to be detected and then once you would accomplish your mission, all hell would break loose and there would be a very concerted effort to hunt you down.

**Q:** I'm sorry that sounds horrible.

**A:** It is.

**Q:** Was it different than you expected?

**A:** Actually no. I'm an army brat and my dad joined the army to get out of a relocation camp for Japanese-Americans and fought in Germany. He also fought in Korea and being around other army kids and other army vets and active duty soldiers and stuff just growing up, I had a fairly good idea other than the actual experience itself of what to expect.

**Q:** I know we heard your story a little earlier today at the Veterans Day activity that we had at the library, but I'm going to let you answer this again, were you or others treated differently because of gender, race, ethnicity, or other factors coming back from the war?

**A:** Well even in the military and stuff there was a racial hierarchy. There was a lot of problems... early 1971, I can remember an incident at a bar in [ indecipherable] that practically turned into a race riot. Even though we were all supposed to be on the same side, they didn't see it that way. I was in sort of an "ethnic no man's land" being half Japanese and half American. I actually related more to the blacks than I did to the whites. A lot of times with the whites, I would hear comments like "aren't you afraid you will be shooting your cousins or something like that. " So... it, I don't know if it made people feel better to put somebody beneath them or what but there was quite an attitude of racism at the time. It... it followed us over there from the United States; needless to say, at the time back in America, we were still dealing with issues of race. There was no reason to think that in the midst of war that we'd resolve those differences and put them aside. They were quite pronounced actually.

**Q:** What are some of your most memorable experiences?

**A:** Hum... (pause) the day a kid opened a live rocket in front of me and fired it without looking behind him at the back-blast area. When he fired this rocket, the projectile comes out the front and for 20 feet

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or more behind him it picks up the gases that are expelled from the launcher pick up anything that's on the ground behind him and throws it. This kid was about five feet in front of Ille and we came under fire, and he just panicked and opened it. I fell out of the way at the last second so (pause) in combat you almost have to expect these things. I still wasn't happy about it... the biggest thing was I knew that Vietcong were trying to kill us I could appreciate that. We were at war with them. You don't expect it from your own side (laughing). So that to me was one of the most memorable experiences.

**Q:** What was one of the largest hurdles you had to overcome?

**A:** Reckoning what I did with myself. The nature of the sniper hunt (pause) gives you a lot of time to contemplate, to think about what you're doing. It's not as though you're going out for chance and counter in combat with someone who happens to spring out in the bushes. You start shooting at each other. We left the fire base knowing who we were after and so... there was a lot of judgment assigned to that as you're sitting there waiting for this person to show up in a certain area or appear and things like that. You had a lot of time to think about... just how committed you were to what you were doing and basically the person you were hunting, how committed they were to what they were doing or else they wouldn't be out there risking it all. So, I guess I thought about it more than most', I probably shouldn't have. There were lot of guys out there that relish the idea of taking another life, and that wasn't me.

**Q:** The next sets of questions are going to relate to your lifestyle.

**A:** Okay.

**Q:** How did you stay in touch with your family?

**A:** I didn't. My mother and father were going through quite a messy divorce, and I basically had been detached from the family for a year and a half, two years before I went into service. So, I really didn't have anyone that I worried about keeping in touch with back home.

**Q:** What was the food like?

**A:** (laughing) Terrible, but that was on purpose. The army prepared food at the fire bases and stuff, but the nature of my job, (pause) if you went out into the jungle and you smelled like you ate American food and soap, mouthwash, toothpaste anything like that, there were people out there that were aware of their surrounding enough in the jungle that they could sniff you out. I ate the local food almost the entire time I was there and for. I didn't use any soap too, like I say. Anything that they could identify me as an American. It would be commented upon when I walked through the fire base. Sometime, some officer would tell me I smell like a gook and I would thank him for it.

**Q:** Since you were in a different country, how did you communicate?

**A:** That's the funniest part because anyone who knows the history of Vietnam knows that at one time the French-Indochina. The Cleveland Public School system had an advanced program for languages that I started in the fifth grade studying French, and I was a kid in school thinking, I have no idea what I'm studying this for. I had an occasion to spend a couple months in Tibet. I found it came in very handy and once I arrived in the former French-Indochina and found out that the large portion of the population as

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well as speaking Vietnamese spoke French. It made it much easier for me than a lot of the people that showed up there with neither language skill, so I had very little problem with communicating over.

**Q:** How did the people entertain themselves?

**A:** As far as the soldiers?

**Q:** Uh huh.

**A:** There were basically two groups: you had the "red necks" and the. I guess you'd call them "hop heads". You had guys that would get in one hooch or assembly area and sit there and get high and try to forget the war, and then you had the red necks that would sit over in their little area and drink beer and stuff. They rarely interfered with each other because everyone was just doing what they could to get through the night. I didn't entertain myself. I was basically a meshed in word from the day I arrived there from the day I left. There was something about... I was keeping my edge; I don't know but I didn't seek any type of entertainment at the time.

**Q:** What did you do to take your mind off the war?

**A:** I didn't. I lived and breathed it. I became war.

**Q:** That's probably a good idea honestly (laugh).

**A:** It worked for me (laughing). I can't say it worked for everyone. There were some people that would have to blow off steam. For me growing up in an ethnic neighborhood in Cleveland and surrounded by Japanese and hearing the tales of our Samurai heritage and different things like that, I had a different attitude towards war and fighting and the experience of my father being in the military also.

**Q:** Did you ever do anything when you were on leave?

**A:** No, I didn't take leave. Well I did have time off, but that was due to physical injury so (Laugh) I guess you would count that as leave, but I returned to duty as soon as I could.

**Q:** Can you describe some of the relationships you developed?

**A:** Very few. I tried in the beginning to get close to a couple of people that had the damndest of getting killed on me, so it was a matter of putting up a shield between me... and other people. Every time I would get to liking somebody, something would happen. Uh... I wasn't there to make friends, to be honest, and the ones I relied on and stuff, we enjoyed a special relationship of mutual respect and respect for our skill level and things like that, but as far as personal friend relationships, those ended quite early in my stay over there. Ugh... I was actually sitting with a guy drinking coffee with him one morning, artillery round went off about thirty yards from us, a hundred feet, and we were talking, and he quit talking. I looked over, and he was slumped over like he had fallen asleep. A piece of shrapnel went into his eye socket right next to his eye... you couldn't even see an entry wound... and killed him right on the spot. I can say that... June 22, 1971 was the last time I ever drank coffee.

**Q:** What did you think of the soldiers that you fought with or any of the officers?

**A:** The officers. There were some that were magic in a fire fight; they knew they weren't going to get so much as a scratch in the war. And the copra personality surrounding them made them people that you wanted to follow. There were other officers that were inept bunglers. The military and their wisdom decided to make the combat tour for enlisted personnel 13 months and for officers 6 months. Reasoning behind that was that it looks good on an officers personnel file to have lead a command in combat. In order to rotate as many officers as possible through Vietnam their tours were limited to 6 months so they could rotate more officers. This, (pause) led to situations including one where I was out on a scout mission with a conventional infantry unit and their lieutenant came under fire and didn't even realize what the noise was. We had to pull him down; he didn't know what bullets were. (Laughing) That was his welcome to combat. So, they were sending us people this prepared, what were we supposed to think? And you have some soldiers that were true professionals that lived it, the war, such as I did. There were others, there were kids that were yanked out of their homes, no student deferment, dirt poor. They knew their place in society, and they were at the bottom on the barrel, and they knew that or else they wouldn't have been where they were. So, you know these kids no one wanted to be the last one to die in that country and so that attitude by the time I got there in 1970 was prevalent everywhere; no one wanted to be the last one to die in Vietnam.

**Q:** What were the uniforms like?

**A:** I wore what was called a tiger stripped uniform, it was special type of camouflage that had horizontal patterns that radiated across; it was completely unauthorized by our unit but since we considered ourselves elite, we wore what they basically called an unauthorized uniform. We also had handmade unit patches; there wasn't an official patch for the unit we were assigned to, but the unit that we belong to, Charlie Rangers, we basically had our own patch, even though it wasn't authorized by the military and stuff they never complained when we wore it. So, we would go into a camp somewhere and the first thing we would do was have some what we call "straight legged conventional officers" that would single us out for our uniforms and ask why we weren't wearing the correct uniform in the day and things like that. I would invited over to come change it for me, and that usually ended most of the complaints.

**Q:** Alright, the next sets of questions are going to describe your days after the service.

**A:** Okay.

**Q:** Describe the day your service ended.

**A:** I was happy, I was sad. I was going home, my buddies weren't. It's like all the trouble I started over there, they were going to have to finish for me. I felt guilty because first of all I survived where so many others came out either horribly wounded, or not at all, so it was mixed feelings. Yes, I was happy but no, I wasn't because the job wasn't done, and I'm not one to leave something undone, so that worked on me.

**Q:** What was it like to come home?

**A:** It sucked. I flew into Seattle, Washington, in my Class A uniforms, and the first thing I did was have some girl spit at me and ask me how many women and children I killed. This was right off the plane,

welcome home. So that was the high note of my arrival back home; it got worse from there. I stopped over in Vegas (pause) and spent a day there just blowing money and wandering at slot machines, and flushed toilets that I hadn't seen in a year and things like that. I had to reacquaint myself. My mother had moved to Evansville in the meantime. I came to Evansville to stay with her, and I hadn't been home for 96 hours out of the jungle, and I was asleep on the couch. She reached over and shook me to wake me up and when I came to, I had a knife at her throat, listening to her scream about drugs and baby killers and stuff like that and that was the last time I saw my mother for quite a few years after that.

**Q:** What did you do in the days and weeks afterwards?

**A:** I first of all bought the car of my dreams. 1971 Plymouth Barracuda, 426 hemi, 4 speed... it was the kind of car I always wanted... since it had first come out in 71, I just knew I had to have one. I had been reading about them, got home, had it for about five weeks, got rid of it. I was not excited anymore; it didn't do anything for me. What seemed to be exciting then, driving that car was nothing, nothing compared to the excitement I experienced in combat. So, it was like ugh... there wasn't the same level of thrill as there would have been if I had not experienced everything else. So, I was basically out of adrenaline. The car did nothing for me. I got rid of it.

**Q:** How long did it take you to get that excitement back?

**A:** (pause) I'll let you know when I'm done. (laughing) To some extent, I still compare every experience that I have with combat. It's strange; it's like my life is in two phases, before and after because it changes you so drastically. It alters your thought process. I can have a real terrible day at work now and I'll be laughing about it and my boss would be like "well what's the matter?" "Well, no one's shooting at me." And they don't understand the logic of that. They give a little nervous laugh and walk off and they don't realize, I'm serious. It could be worse. So, I guess you could say I have a low reference point that I can always refer to when I think things are bad, but they could be a lot, lot worse.

**Q:** Umm... did you go to school or to work afterwards?

**A:** I tried to work. I was trying to figure out why I was working, what I was working for, what I thought I was going to accomplish because in the meantime when I came back, I didn't come back victorious things were still going on over there. We were still hated at home, and even, even when I got married and when I tried to get back into my profession, it was hard to focus because the importance of it just seemed to fail in comparison to what other people were experiencing. As I was living at that point there were other people that were twelve thousand miles away, some of them giving everything they had, and it didn't seem to generate any interest at home. So yeah, I did, I worked. I guess you call it work but it was more like treading water.

**Q:** Working in the process, but not...

**A:** Yeah, not really having your heart in it; it's not like I was coming back and planning some big shiny career or something like that. I was just basically existing to pay the bills.

**Q:** Did you stay in contact with any of the other soldiers?

**A:** I had one that I tried to stay in contact with for a while; he moved to Oregon, out in the forest and it was the best place for him. He belongs in the forest. He was so broke in reality that the only thing I could relate to him on when I did see him was in the terms of destruction and killing and stuff like that which were long gone. They were in the past by then. But he was still in that moment. And there's a few others. There's an author of a book about our unit that I have just recently contacted but other than that, actually it's one of those things where I think about these guys a lot and hopefully, they do me, but (pause) when you see each other it brings all the bad back with the good. It's hard to remember all the good in place of all the bad that was experienced and stuff, so sometimes just seeing them would remind me of things I was trying to forget.

**Q:** You kind of touched base a little bit on this, but what other ways has the service affected your life other than that emotional drain?

**A:** It reaffirmed what I think I already knew about myself as far as my depth of commitment, once I start a project, it's doomed to be finished, and I realized that, and the military helped bring that out of me. The other thing is, I know that things could be a lot worse and I always have days that I compare a bad day to, and they don't seem so bad after that. I think it's helped me with dealing with people because my philosophy on that is there's a lot of people that go home with their stomach churning because their boss chewed them out, and they go home thinking they should have said this, "I would have, I could have". I go home every night with a clear conscience. There's no things left unsaid with me. I guess I've always been to a certain extent brassed that way. The military service confirmed it, that I speak my mind. If nothing else someone should appreciate the honesty, and if they can't deal with that, that's basically their problem. So, I guess I brought that attitude with me, a survivor's attitude. I know what I've made it through, I've tested myself and apparently, I've passed, hopefully I've passed. I guess time will tell on that, I've since then, we've raised 6 kids, we have a family now and I try to put things in perspective and not dwell on the past but try and look at it more in a not more benevolent like but maybe with a little more understanding of how I felt back then.

**Q:** How did military experience influence your thinking of war or military in general?

**A:** The military is something (pause) I wish we didn't have. It's a shame that mankind would need weapons and guns and tanks and different instruments of death in dealing with each other but on the same token to me it would be a shame to have these skills and capabilities and not use them when needed, when dealing with other entities in foreign countries and stuff. Ugh, you could call it a necessary evil; I would just call it necessary. I don't really believe it's an evil thing, but it's not a good thing. At peace time it's easy to train with rifles and stuff and not give too much thought about it, but the people today that are training, it's for real. They might be asked at any point to give everything they are, or will be, in service of our country. I know it's necessary; I just hope that our resources in the military aren't squandered on ambiguous aims and missions and things. I'm trying to withhold judgment on what's going on today in the world, but we have so many people come home grievously wounded it's hard to turn a blind eye to it, to justify it.



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**Q:** Okay this is the point where I am going to let you talk about something maybe we didn't cover in the interview that maybe you would want to disclose at this time.

**A:** The only thing I could think of is the lasting attitude on the psyche of America. When we served at the time it was popular, God knows I protested the war before I went, I protested it when I got back. I know that sounds (laugh) hypocritical, but I had reason to bitch when I came back. So just people now days you get this conception and they still play it up in these stupid movies of Vietnam being drug crazed veterans and all these psychological they don't talk about the ones that are successful, the ones that are readjusted and entered back into American life in the knowledge that they have served proudly. I think those are the ones we should recognize and not keep looking at the exceptions and saying "Awe... see this is what happened" stereotyping everyone else in service because of that. Other than that, that's about it.

**Q:** Umm... is there any other war vet that you think we should interview for this project; it doesn't have to be anyone that has served in the war; they could have helped with war efforts.

**A:** I have this very, very good friend that I think you should interview, but you can't right now because he's on his fourth deployment to Afghanistan after having been recalled for medical retirement. He'd have more a recent story of what's going on in the military and in the war today. He would have quite an interesting story because his first war experience was in Somalia. When they made the movie Black Hawk Down, he was one of the soldiers caught on the ground in Somalia, so he probably saw more gun fire in 24 hours than I saw in 10 months; it's quite possible. Then like I said he went and served honorably in Iraq and Afghanistan and due to supreme skills with the Beret M50, 50 caliber sniper rifle he keeps being recalled to service, so unfortunately that means he's not serving as an ambassador to our country. But I would think he would make an interesting interview if I could catch up with him, I would get him in touch with you guys.

**Q:** Sounds good. Well I want to thank you for taking the time to do this interview; I know you've actually gave a lot more time what is in the actual interview and for answering the questions and it's been really interesting hearing your side of the story on this war.

**A:** Well thank you, I just like to thank all the veterans that have made this possible. There is so many stories of heroism that we will never hear about, so many tales of valor and sacrifice that are just unsung. You hear about the ones that win the declarations and stuff, but even the person that right now is away from the combat area is filing papers, they have an important job to fulfill for us too. I want to thank all of them for their service past, present, and unfortunately future.

**Q:** Thank you sir.

**A:** Alright.