

Interview with Tommy Miller
Interviewer: Lyndsee Priest
November 7, 2009

Interviewers Notes: Interviewee seemed apprehensive in regard to certain subjects. The interviewee paused many times.

Transcriber's Notes: Abrupt ending is due to accidental stopping of recorder.

Q: What is your... what is your place of birth?

A: Edwards County Illinois.

Q: And your full name?

A: Tommy Louis Miller.

Q: Brief description of your service?

A: I was uh, drafted in the army, then I enlisted. [Laughs] I was infantry.

Q: So, I explained what the purpose of the Veterans History Project is. Uhm, what do you recall about the events leading up to the war?

A: You mean before I went. I knew very little.

Q: Nothing?

A: Nothing. Practically Nothing.

Q: Okay. did it seem to be expected that every person would join the military, seeing that you didn't...

A: Yes, it was expected.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah.

Q: Drafted, of course. At the time were you in a relationship?

A: No.

Q: No? How did the process go for your family?

A: Uh, well there was no real process.

Q: How did they deal with it; didn't your brothers go too?

A: After I went a year later my brother was drafted...

Q: Ok.

A: But he beat me to Vietnam.

Q: Really? [Laughs]

A: [Laughs] Yeah.

Interview with Tommy Miller
Interviewer: Lyndsee Priest
November 7, 2009

Q: So, you enlisted and then were drafted, right?

A: I got my draft notice and a recruiter came around, for some reason I signed up.

Q: [Laughs]

A: [Laughs]

Q: How old were you?

A: I was 20.

Q: 20? What kind of job did you have then?

A: I was working at the shoe factory in Olney, IL.

Q: Did you pick your branch of the military?

A: Basically, I just signed to a unit and it was infantry.

Q: How did you mentally and physically prepare for the war?

A: I guess the training they gave me, there's no, I never made any other conscious effort to prepare.

Q: [Laughs] You just knew it was going to happen?

A: Yep, just knew it was going to happen.

Q: Was the training for the full year?

A: The training was basically the basics. That every soldier gets. Everybody goes through basic training and then there's, like, if your infantry there's, a little more training or if you're going into another form.

Q: Where was your training at?

A: My training was at Ft. Leonard Wood MI.

Q: And you were there for three months?

A: Uh...I was there for, yeah for something like three months, maybe more and then I got transferred around a lot. Do you want to know where all I was at?

Q: Yeah, go ahead.

A: I was at Ft. Ben Harrison, outside of Indianapolis. Then I went to Ft. Rucker, Alabama and then I was there for a short period and then I went to Ft. Benning Georgia and I was there the rest of the time until I went to Vietnam. Ft. Benning is the infantry, home of the infantry, the army infantry.

Q: What about your brother?

A: My brother, I believe he, basic training at Ft. Leonard Wood, and then he went to Ft. Hood, Texas and he was in armor. There's three branches of combat. Infantry, Armory and Artillery.

Interview with Tommy Miller
Interviewer: Lyndsee Priest
November 7, 2009

Q: Were you stationed with any of your friends or family members?

A: No.

Q: No. What were your first days of service like?

A: It was rigorous training, physical mental basic training.

Q: Yeah? Did it kind of shock you how rigorous it was or where you expecting it?

A: I was expecting it.

Q: Yeah? Did they kind of break you down and rebuild you?

A: Eh, they used a lot of mental, but I didn't take it personally because they yelled at everybody, ya know, so I just realized it was part of the game.

Q: Where you kind of shell shocked at first, I mean when they shout at you, what is that like?

A: Yeah, it is, it's real, the term would probably be stressed out, ya know?

Q: Raises your anxiety level?

A: Basically, I expected it, so.

Q: Yeah. You see it in movies and stuff now.

A: Yeah.

Q: Tell me about any, camp or training experiences that you remember something like a friend, or an experience that you remember specifically from training.

A: They sent me to the NCO academy at Ft. McClellan.

Q: And what is that?

A: Ft. McClellan is either Georgia or Alabama. And they for six weeks, non-commission officers join. When I was promoted to sergeant, then they sent me there for six weeks to learn how to be sergeant.

Q: Learn how to be sergeant, so did you get to yell at people then.

A: No. That's mostly the drill instructors. And uh basically you are just over a set amount of men.

Q: Ok.

A: Sort of as a lead man, manager, supervisor.

Q: Did it make the experience easier, a little bit?

A: Nope, because you have a little more responsibility.

Q: Ok.

A: So, it has its advantages and disadvantages. But Ft. McClellan, I forgot to mention that, that's, at the time, that was the women's army core training center. They took their basic training there so.

Interview with Tommy Miller
Interviewer: Lyndsee Priest
November 7, 2009

Q: How was that? Was that...

A: When we'd go to dances, we were greatly outnumbered.

Q: [Laughs] Yeah?

A: Yeah, it was quite an experience.

Q: Outnumbered in a good sense, right?

A: Yeah, mmhmm.

Q: What were the instructors like? Were any of them helpful after they were done yelling at ya, or...

A: Yes, I mean, they were there to train us. But they uh, I don't know how they learned that, but they seemed to be mad all the time.

Q: [Laughs]

A: Angry all the time. It was just part of their game, I guess.

Q: Yeah. That's hilarious. What can you tell me about others in your platoon? Anyone that sticks out?

A: Vietnam or uh...

Q: Well in training camp or in Vietnam.

A: Well, I guess in my squad I had a guy that, he was my point man and he was a calm, very responsible guy. His name was Alfred, private Alfred, I don't remember.

Q: He was just really quiet? He didn't...

A: Yeah.

Q: In Vietnam did you grow really thick bonds with some of the men in your squad?

A: No.

Q: No? You guys were very separate?

A: Well....[Phone rings so we put the tape on pause]

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

A: In Vietnam?

Q: In the service. Did you just go to Vietnam? Did you go anywhere else outside the country?

A: Outside of the Country was Vietnam.

Q: Ok.

A: And I was stationed at Vietnam at Doa Chi Yang, which was in the southern part, not too far from the Cambodian border.

Interview with Tommy Miller
Interviewer: Lyndsee Priest
November 7, 2009

Q: Hmm. What did you think of Vietnam?

A: It's a beautiful country.

Q: Yeah?

A: And it's sort of shocking, ya know, you're used to electricity lines and there were grass huts, no windows, no doors, dirt floor and I thought...

Q: Is that where you stayed?

A: No, well the villages.

Q: Oh, Okay, yeah.

A: But we would go through the villages.

Q: Hmm. Interesting. So, did you stay anytime in the villages? Or was it just when you were passing through?

A: Just passing through.

Q: Hmm.

A: We, We always set up our perimeter out in the jungle away from the village.

Q: Okay.

A: Dig a foxhole and have the whole battalion in a circle.

Q: What was that like?

A: Just like a big camping trip. Although we didn't have tents, we had to sleep in a foxhole.

Q: So, just outside.

A: Yes, outside.

Q: Where you ever worried about animals coming up, or

A: No. There were, instead of a winter and summer they had a rainy season and a dry season and in the rainy season, water everywhere. All the water was leach infested, so we were constantly getting leaches.

Q: Yeah? Wow. Did you guys have to check each other all the time?

A: We would check ourselves.

Q: [Laughs] Yea. How long were you in Vietnam?

A: 5 months and 13 days.

Q: And, were you supposed to stay longer?

A: I was supposed to stay a year, but I got wounded.

Interview with Tommy Miller
Interviewer: Lyndsee Priest
November 7, 2009

Q: Mmhmm.

A: In the Tet Offensive.

Q: Do you want to explain your injury?

A: It was a back blast from a light anti-tank weapon. That had malfunctioned and so it was passed back to me and I was supposed to pass it to the engineers for disposal, but it was, it's like a bazooka and uh, the rocket was pointed up and the back blast went off and the back blast threw dirt and sand and stuff in my eyes. It burned my face scratched one of my, scarred one of my eyes, broke the optical cord of the other eye, is why it had to be removed.

Q: And where did you go after that?

A: I was in Japan for a day or in Japan for a few weeks. The Army Hospital there and that is where they removed my one eye and put the implant in. Then I went to Fitzsimmons General Hospital which is somewhere in the vicinity of Denver, Colorado and I was there the rest of the time I was in the military.

Q: And when did you leave Colorado?

A: June the 23rd 1969.

Q: And you came back to Illinois?

A: Yes. I came back home.

Q: What was homecoming like?

A: It was great.

Q: Was it?

A: I wanted to kiss the soil.

Q: Did they have a party or anything for you when you came home?

A: No.

Q: No?

A: No.

Q: Did the town recognize you at all when you came home?

A: I was in a very rural setting in the country and the neighbors came around to welcome me home, ya know, on and off.

Q: How old were you when you got back?

A: I was, let's see, I went in when I turned, I think 23.

Interview with Tommy Miller
Interviewer: Lyndsee Priest
November 7, 2009

Q: 23? So, you were in the service of total of three years?

A: Three years and they held me over, I think, let's see, about 7 or 8 months. For the convenience of the army because I was, so they could attend to my medical.

Q: What was the experience like, during the operations with your eye, how did you deal with the fake eye?

A: It was an adjustment but when they took my eye out and put the implant in there. They described it like a plastic whiffle ball and they attached the muscles to it and when that healed, they make you an eye, like a big contact that sets on that so that it will move sort of with your eye.

Q: Through technologies, have the fake eyes gotten better?

A: Not to my knowledge.

Q: No? They're all just the same? So, you're pretty used to it now, I'm sure.

A: Yes.

Q: What was your specific job assignment?

A: In Vietnam?

Q: Mmhmm.

A: It was combat infantry, squad leader.

Q: Did you get a report from somebody and then you went on...

A: We got orders from, basically we were rarely separated from the platoon. A platoon is like 4 squads and there are basically 10 people in a squad. The squad leader and then he has 9 men and, then the platoon of 4 squads.

Q: So, you guys pretty much stayed together.

A: Yeah. We rarely operated separately. Occasionally, a squad did...

Q: Ok. What kind of equipment did you carry?

A: I carried an M-16 Rifle.

Q: Was it heavy?

A: No, it was very light, it's a lightweight rifle and we carried Claymore mines, grenades and ammunition.

Q: Was it hard to travel with all that equipment?

A: We had a backpack, approaching 50 and 70 pounds counting your food sea rations. I think whatever you want to carry, mostly ammunition.

Interview with Tommy Miller
Interviewer: Lyndsee Priest
November 7, 2009

Q: Was it different then you expected it to be in Vietnam?

A: Uh, no because I didn't know what to expect.

Q: Yeah? OK. Can you think of an instance where anyone was treated differently based upon their gender, race or ethnic factors?

A: We had two race riots in my company when I was at Fort Benning. When they had a party, they got kegs and were drinking. Fights broke out between the blacks and the whites and Puerto Ricans.

Q: Really? So, there was a definite separation between the races?

A: There was no, Uh, when they throw in the liquor and some of them would start when a couple guys would mouth off an insult or something. I never really knew what started it, but pretty soon you'd have a whole company fighting. So...

Q: Tell me about... Oh, did you have something to say?

A: I never got involved in the fighting myself. As soon as I saw that break out, I separated myself, ya know, got out of the company area.

Q: Were there any repercussions for those actions?

A: No.

Q: No?

A: No. They just when it was over it was back to business.

Q: Do you think throughout that process that some of that conflict got resolved, disappeared or was it something that was always there?

A: It was something that was always there that blared up under the circumstances. I don't think there were any hard feelings, ya know, guys were drunk fighting, and no one got seriously hurt so...

Q: What about in Vietnam?

A: We had one incident where a guy, minor, well not minor, it was just, it was small, one guy got drunk and he got into a fight with a black guy and got beat up, so he went back to his tent to get his rifle. Luckily, he was drunk enough, he fired off some rounds, but it didn't hit him. The other guys quickly disarmed him.

Q: Where there any repercussions for that?

A: There was. He was court marshaled. From what I heard, he was taken out of the company and from what we heard, court marshaled.

Q: What is that process?

A: He would have been I'm not real sure, he would have spent some time in the Brigg, the military prison and I'm sure dishonestly discharged.

Interview with Tommy Miller
Interviewer: Lyndsee Priest
November 7, 2009

Q: Tell me about some of your most memorable experiences. It can be good or bad, it can be anything that sticks out in your mind, something that you've never been able to forget.

A: Well, I prevented one of my fellow sergeants from molesting this Vietnamese girl, about 16. So, that's something I look back on, prevented that.

Q: Yeah.

A: Other than that, there weren't too many pleasant experiences.

Q: I know, I'm sure. How did people move up in the ranks?

A: It was basically experience and uh ability.

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

A: Writing.

Q: Writing? How often did you get letters?

A: I got letters every day.

Q: Every day?

A: Every day.

Q: Did you? Were there people in your squad that didn't receive any letters?

A: There were, I was the envy of the platoon.

Q: Was it your parents, or your brothers? Or.

A: They wrote some, but it was a girlfriend.

Q: A girlfriend? Wrote every day?

A: A girl that I had met when I was on leave before I went to Vietnam.

Q: What was the food like?

A: The food was sea rations, basically and then when we were in the basic camp we had, ya know, the cooks. I, it was fine.

Q: Did you, what, can you remember any of the food you ate?

A: Yeah, my favorite sea rations was beef and potatoes. Uh, when we were in base camp it was a basic assortment. Vegetables, corn, mashed potatoes and stuff.

Q: Now they have, now they have the uhm

A: Meals ready to eat.

Q: Yeah. [Laughs]

A: We didn't have those.

Interview with Tommy Miller
Interviewer: Lyndsee Priest
November 7, 2009

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

A: We never had a lot of interaction with the Vietnamese because basically we were out in the jungle, the free fire zone. But mostly when we went through the villages the Vietnamese could speak English.

Q: Even in the...even the ones that were in the huts?

A: Yeah. Because we had been there, I had been over there part of 67 and part of 68 and we had been there before probably 5, 6 years before that.

Q: What was entering the villages like? Where the people, did they, I mean, did they fight against you? Did you, what was that process like?

A: They were very friendly. They came out, especially the children because they knew that G.I. gave out candy and sort. And the children were very friendly, they were excited to see us.

Q: What were your uniforms and clothing like?

A: It was OD olive drab, uh, cotton outfits.

Q: Ok. Were they comfortable at all?

A: They were comfortable. The boots were, they were called the jungle boots, they were kind of a mesh material and very light weight and had a steel shank in the bottom so if your stepping on a pongee pit or something.

Q: Oh, interesting. How did people entertain themselves?

A: Are you talking about the villagers or the soldiers?

Q: Soldiers.

A: Basically, when we was in camp a lot of drinking, smoked marijuana and they played cards. Poker was very popular.

Q: Is that were you got good at poker?

A: [Laughs] I guess so, I had never played for money until I went into the army.

Q: Now it's a big part of your life. What did you do to take your mind off the war?

A: I just kind of took one moment at a time, I guess. I don't know.

Q: Going back to the question about the letters. Do you think those letters kind of helped you throughout the process, how were the people mentally that didn't get letters compared to those like you, for example that got a letter every day?

A: The people that didn't get letters it was disappointing because that was the high point of the day. Mail call came and there was excitement and it was just that perk, ya know.

Q: Was there anyone in your squad that never received any letters?

A: Ya know, I really don't know. I rather doubt it. I don't know.

Interview with Tommy Miller
Interviewer: Lyndsee Priest
November 7, 2009

Q: Did you go on leave at all or where you there too short of time.

A: Too short of time for R and R.

Q: What did you think of the other soldiers?

A: I don't know how to answer that.

Q: You just said that you guys weren't very close...

A: We would be, we had a relationship like a work crew. Maybe, I wasn't, Maybe some of em were closer to each other. Me being a sergeant, I didn't quite mix with, ya know. It's a, in the military they don't advise you to be buddy-buddy with the privates. They want a strong, uh, how would I say that...

Q: Separation?

A: Yeah, separation.

Q: What did you do in the days and weeks after you got home?

A: I looked for a job. Basically, I guess.

Q: Yeah? Did you find one relatively soon?

A: Yes.

Q: Yeah, was it easy? Was it an easy process?

A: Fairly easy, yes.

Q: Do you think because you were a soldier, do you think it was easier for you because you were a soldier?

A: No.

Q: No.

A: I had uh, well, I was in the hospital waiting for an eye, a cornea transplant that I never did get because my eye kept improving, I took classes. They paid for that and I went to a school for 9 weeks and completed that as a computer programmer. So, when I got back, it was strictly in that profession. They looked for talent and training. I don't think the veteran made anything, made a difference.

Q: Ok. Did you stay in contact with any of the soldiers?

A: No.

Q: No. In what ways did the service affect your life?

A: Well, I don't know what my life would have been like without the service, but it broadened my world, there's no doubt about that, ya know. I had never been, the furthest I had been from home was St. Louis which is 150-180 miles. And so, it opened up a, greatly increased my horizons.

Interview with Tommy Miller
Interviewer: Lyndsee Priest
November 7, 2009

Q: How did your military experience influence your thinking about the war or military in general?

A: I would say it decreased my respect for it because I grew up in an era where the World War II veterans and to some degree the Korean veterans were looked upon with great respect, as heroes, ya know.

Q: Uh hu.

A: They fought for our freedom and everything. And uh, when I got back, especially in college, it was opposite, we were looked upon as baby killers. They just had that image. Which wasn't true, in some cases it was very isolated, and I never saw it.

Q: And, I mean, do you. When you got back and you saw the media portrayals, how did that make you feel about the war being that you experienced it and how did that affect...

A: I wasn't bitter or resentful or anything, but it did bother me because I felt like, ya know, the average soldier was being unjustly stereotyped. We did our job and we did it well, well, in general the average soldier and they just looked upon us as baby killers.

Q: What difference do you see in terms of war then in comparison of war now?

A: Oh boy. Ya know. Uh, I think the Vietnam, uhm, lowered a lot of people's opinions of war. They thought that, we weren't, like before, like with WW II we always fought for liberty, a just war and they saw a different side of it, ya know, a wasted war. The average American would Vietnam was a wasted effort.

Q: What do you think about the war in Iraq?

A: Hmm. I think it started out well. But I think we are going to become bogged down in occupation.

Q: Yeah. Is there something else in the interview we didn't cover that you would like to uhm, have recorded?

A: No.

Q: [Laughs] No? Ok. Are there other people we should interview for this project?

A: I don't know really know.

Q: Ok. Well. That's pretty much it. Thanks for doing this.

A: Yep. K. Breakfast dinner, supper before you went into the mess hall you had to recite your serial number.

Q: And so why do you think they didn't just use their, your social security number?

A: I don't know. It was important that you knew your serial number, in case you were captured. Or something.

Interview with Tommy Miller

Interviewer: Lyndsee Priest

November 7, 2009

Q: Interesting.

A: Drill sergeants had to drop down and do 20 pushups. That happened once or twice when someone had a birthday and you didn't...

Q: You just stay quiet.