

Ross Bearden
HY 341
Oral History Interview Transcript
3/25/19

(Ross Bearden)

March 16th at 11 a.m. This is Ross Bearden. And if I can get you to state your name and which branch of the military you were in and your rank?

(Doyle Ross)

Doyle Ross and in the army. I was just in the army.

(Ross Bearden)

All right, so, were you drafted, or did you enlist?

(Doyle Ross)

Drafted.

(Ross Bearden)

So how did you feel about the draft overall?

(Doyle Ross)

Well, everybody had to go back then. If there wasn't something wrong with you everybody went.

(Ross Bearden)

So, looking back on your time, would you say that boot camp or any training that you had prepared you in any way for the conditions that you experienced in Vietnam?

(Doyle Ross)

Well yeah, that helped a lot

(Ross Bearden)

Could you kind of elaborate on that a little?

(Doyle Ross)

Well they, all the training stuff, you used all of it over there. You used every bit of it.

(Ross Bearden)

So, what was your experience like whenever you first arrived in Vietnam?

(Doyle Ross)

I don't know, I couldn't really tell you. It was hot, I mean hot. I got off the plane, it was air conditioned. I stepped off the plane and by the time I got to the bottom sweat was just rolling off of me. I said I can't stand this for a year. They said it takes two weeks to get used to it and then your body gets used to it.

(Ross Bearden)

In the pre-interview, you said that when many soldiers first arrived in Vietnam, many of the soldiers were crying correct?

(Doyle Ross)

Right

(Ross Bearden)

So besides being scared, were there any other reasons that many soldiers were reported to attempt to desert?

(Doyle Ross)

Well, I don't know why they wanted to because there wasn't nowhere to go. I don't know why they would want to. Because all of them was there in the same boat you was in so I just looked at it that way.

(Ross Bearden)

So, were yall allowed any leave while yall were overseas?

(Doyle Ross)

Any what?

(Ross Bearden)

Any leave, like time off?

(Doyle Ross)

Oh yeah, we took R&R and seven-day leave. We got two while we was over there. One of them was three days the other was five, I think.

(Ross Bearden)

So, were any interactions between the soldiers and any Vietnamese civilians?

(Doyle Ross)

Any what now?

(Ross Bearden)

Any interactions?

(Doyle Ross)

Well there were. The South did.

(Ross Bearden)

Was it kind of, you know, relaxed, you know everybody was fine with each other or were there like anything bad going on between some of the soldiers and some of the civilians?

(Doyle Ross)

Not really. They had some go crazy every once and a while.

{Brief pause while my infant cousin crawled into the room}

(Ross Bearden)

So, what job were you assigned?

(Doyle Ross)

I was in the infantry.

(Ross Bearden)

Were there any specific duties that you were tasked with completing?

(Doyle Ross)

We were just stood out in the woods for like three months at a time. Then they'd send us back to change clothes. You'd wear the same clothes for three months. You wouldn't take a bath unless you ran into a creek. It's nasty.

(Ross Bearden)

During the pre-interview, you mentioned one time that your unit ran into an ambush. Could you describe that ambush for me?

(Doyle Ross)

Well, mostly booby traps. We'd run into two booby traps the year I was over there. One of them was the biggest you'd ever had over there I mean it killed a bunch of people. There aint nothing you can do about a booby trap, just stand there and pick up the wounded cause there aint nobody to shoot at or nothing.

(Ross Bearden)

What was kind of the emotional response that you and over soldiers who managed to survive booby traps like immediately after?

(Doyle Ross)

Booby traps you don't know where they're at. You walk up on them. You don't know where they're coming from. Most of the time they're on the main trail. Ho Chi Minh Trail was one of them. One of them they hit. Then one of them was up on top of a mountain. But a trail was just grass. I guess two companies up there went to stand up to leave. All of them was fixing to leave, and when everybody stood up it went off. By the time you heard it, it was over with. So, you done watched people beside of you fall down and start picking them up. It was all you could do.

(Ross Bearden)

Do you know of any soldiers in your unit or company that were captured?

(Doyle Ross)

No, not in our company.

(Ross Bearden)

Were yall involved in any attempts to rescue captive soldiers?

(Doyle Ross)

No, most of them were out in the woods. Our other companies like Delta Company, Charlie Company, they'd be around close but not with us. They might be a mile off somewhere. But they'd be all around.

(Ross Bearden)

Are there any other combat stories that you are comfortable with sharing?

(Doyle Ross)

Well, booby traps were the worst thing. I'd rather be shot at than go into them because them things. People get shot. I've seen people try to get you to shoot them in the foot where they can go home. Stuff like that. I said shoot yourself in the foot if you gonna shoot yourself, I'm not.

(Ross Bearden)

Are there any memories that really stick out to you when you kind of look back on your time?

(Doyle Ross)

Any what?

(Ross Bearden)

Any specific memories that stick out?

(Doyle Ross)

To me, it was just like a job. Just do your job and go on. I had some good buddies over there. I mean some, you trust your life to you know. Still talk to one every year. And over there been fifty years this month.

(Ross Bearden)

I remember you said that you and Janice knew each other during the war, correct?

(Doyle Ross)

Yeah, I knew her before all that started.

(Ross Bearden)

How were you, Janice, and the rest of your family able to stay in touch? Were there any ways besides letters?

(Doyle Ross)

Just letters. Nah I did a call. I called my momma and daddy. We didn't have no phones. I'd call out to the neighbors and they'd come get them and then I'd call back fifteen minutes later. I talked to them twice while I was over there.

(Ross Bearden)

Today, many soldiers have a good luck charm such as a photo, necklace, or they have some type of lucky ritual that they perform before they head into any situation that there may be combat. Did you have any kind of luck charm?

(Doyle Ross)

Yeah, a little cross all the time. I had one on a necklace with a cross on it. I kept it in my shirt down to there. I brought it home when I come home and hung it over the mirror of my car. You know just let it hang there. Somebody tore it off at Dairy Queen and I aint see it since. Broke it in there and jerked it off.

(Ross Bearden)

During any down time that yall had, how were different ways that yall would entertain yall-selves?

(Doyle Ross)

Well, I remember Christmas. Well you've seen the pictures of it. We made just a little Christmas tree for Christmas. I loved that tree. Just stuff we had on it, just something like that. We'd just sit around and talk mostly.

(Ross Bearden)

Do you remember anything that happened that kind of struck you as just funny?

(Doyle Ross)

Yeah some of the people. Some of the soldiers they was funny.

(Ross Bearden)

What were some of the things they would do?

(Doyle Ross)

They'd just do goofy stuff. Just keep the morale up some. It was really. But everybody in the army...everybody liked everybody. It didn't matter what color or what it was all together. I said that's one good thing about it.

(Ross Bearden)

How was the climate like when you landed back in the United States as far as like the people and how they acted towards yall?

(Doyle Ross)

They had to start...at night. They quit letting us come in during the day time because they'd spit on you and everything else when you get off the plane. So, they start coming in about midnight where there wasn't nobody out there. We'd come in around twelve o'clock.

(Ross Bearden)

How did you view any of the antiwar protesters you ran into?

(Doyle Ross)

Never did seen none. When we'd come in it was straight to where we was supposed to get cleaned up and never did seen none.

(Ross Bearden)

So, whenever you returned back here to Boaz, did you receive like a hero's welcome, or did people be like Oh, hey Doyle?

(Doyle Ross)

Yeah, that's it. That was it. It ain't nothing like you have now. Just your family mostly.

(Ross Bearden)

So, what was your experience like in kind how you were able to live like whenever you first got back, in the months after you returned home?

(Doyle Ross)

It was hard to get used to cause you were sleeping outside on the ground. I couldn't hardly go to sleep in the house. It was like the walls close in on me. I slept out at the pump house a few nights just you know trying to go to sleep on the pump house. Look up at the stars like we done every night over there.

(Ross Bearden)

Where there any instances where you couldn't fall asleep or anything and like there was a noise and it kinda startled you.

(Doyle Ross)

Well, it was quiet. It does noise here is different. Over there it was quiet, no lights, you couldn't see no lights no where. And here you see lights everywhere and it's hard to get used to.

(Ross Bearden)

I know you said that there's friends that you made over there that you still talk to. How do yall keep in touch? Like any reunions or anything?

(Doyle Ross)

Well just we'd talk on the telephone pretty regularly. I stay on Facebook and then he's come down twice, I think. He'd usually stay about three or four nights. He's come down twice.

(Ross Bearden)

After you got back from the war. How did the experiences of being a soldier in Vietnam affect your life? Afterwards like as far as trying to get a job and stuff like that?

(Doyle Ross)

It didn't bother me. Didn't affect nothing really. Really coming back up farming and finally got into body work with TJ (my grandfather)

(Ross Bearden)

Where there any negative impacts of the war that had on your live. Like maybe any small PTSD or anything?

(Doyle Ross)

No. Me and my buddy sat on the plane when we was coming home. We come back together. And we said we're going to leave Vietnam there and we're going home. And that's where we left it. Just try to forget it.

(Ross Bearden)

Looking back at it around fifty years later, are there any regrets that you have of being a soldier in Vietnam?

(Doyle Ross)

No, I was satisfied with all of it after all those years. Glad I went and got it done.

(Ross Bearden)

Now I know you mentioned something about the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and he was still alive during that time I believe. How like was any of his forces really present in the area whenever yall would fight?

(Doyle Ross)

Well his trail, people called it a trail, but it was really a road. You know, like a dirt road. But that all it was. It had been bombed so much it was just trails because nothing.... There'd been a lot of fighting done on it. But fight another day the fight over booby traps any because you aint got nothing to fight doing them.

(Ross Bearden)

That is it, so thank you very much. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experiences over there?

(Doyle Ross)

Not really, it's all good but some companies had some bad names. Before I went over there like that Division. I was in that division. That's the one that killed all them civilians before I came, before my time. People talked about that, but we didn't have nothing to do with that. But that was done before I went over there but we heard about that when we got over there. Cause it was the brigade we was in. But I see stuff like that happening now because soldiers gets mad. They go wild sometimes. I don't know why they go wild on civilians because most time it would be the silent ones. It just bright and warm. I don't know why they done that. Don't have a clue.

(Ross Bearden)

You think they maybe just had like a mental snap?

(Doyle Ross)

Well it could've been. There was a lot of mental people here and even now. But its cause they brought it home with them. You have to leave something like that alone. It's just like that buddy of mine in Chicago. On the computer you can put our company and everything in and follow

every single footstep we took over there. And he's trying to get me to do it and I said no you better leave it alone. You done know what it was you don't need to do it again. Now he's got what PTSD or whatever you call it.

(Ross Bearden)
PTSD

(Doyle Ross)

Yeah, he's got that. I told him last time I talked to him I said that if you stayed off that computer you wouldn't have that. You live it you don't wanna watch it on the computer all the time. He'd talk to me and I said you don't need this go on already. I could tell you every time we got shot at every time we hit a booby trap. He could tell the date of it. He'd study it so much. I said you don't need it. You done know what it was. But he gonna do it. But I reckon he's doing all right. He's just got to take some medicine. Me and him took every step together the whole year and every day. We went in the same day got in Vietnam the same day and came out on the same helicopter coming home. Flew the same flight to Chicago and that's where he lived. He's a good friend.

(Ross Bearden)

Thank you, Doyle, I think that will be it

{Actually, not the end. We finished, but after my grandmother made both of use some food and a few drinks, my great-uncle began reminiscing about some of his experiences in the war, and it is as follows in the transcript.}

(Doyle Ross)

You don't see them crying about it but course most of were twenty years old. See I was twenty. He was seventeen... He was too young to be over there. He joined it he wanted it his momma just signed for it so. But that's usually the ones who cry the ones that join because they're so young. They orta not send them over until they least get eighteen anyway. They should not. But back then they sent everybody cause there were just so many people. You take 68,000 Americans killed while we were over there. That's a lot of people. I think the paper said 68,000 killed. There aint telling how many people were injured. They told on the tv on one of the channels. But it was way up there in the thousands. No legs, arms. Tore up. But, you have war you're gonna have that. It's just like that mess they're having over yonder. It's the same thing

(Ross Bearden)
Afghanistan?

(Doyle Ross)

Same thing. There's more bombings over there. Bombs. They bombed. By the time I got over yonder there wasn't no bombing. They didn't bomb, we bombed, but they didn't. That was a pretty sight to see. Watch those B52 make their strike. I'd sit down at the bottom of the mountain one day. It was armed mountains is what it was. We was camped out at the foot of it and they were bombing the top of it. Them ole B52s would come in there and just dive down like that right there then all at once when they hit the top of the mountain they'd turn the back end of that

thing up there and shoot straight up and then bombs just roll out of that thing. It just jarred the ground under us. It was fun to watch them. The only thing that wasn't fun we had to go up there the next day. We walked up there and there wasn't nothing left up there. If there was anybody there they were blown off. We went up there. It took us a day to get to the top and a day to get down. It was just bomb craters about as big as this house all over that mountain.

(Ross Bearden)

About how often would yall find enemies kind of camped out on mountains?

(Doyle Ross)

Well, most of the time they wasn't in the mountains most of the time they were down where you wouldn't expect it.

(Ross Bearden)

Hiding in the tall grass and such?

(Doyle Ross)

Yeah, well no. We was walking down the trail one day. We weren't walking point that day. But the ones who was walking point walked up on this bunch. They had an old we called it a picnic table it was just a piece of wood there. And they was playing cards is what they were doing sitting there playing cards. Had their guns propped up there beside of them. Whoever was walking point walked right up on them. They was right in the trail. They walked up on them and they shot them there was four of them there. They shot them four there and they never did touch their guns. And we'd walked up there when I seen them we walked up through there and I seen them laying there and you could see their cards laying there on the table. Most of the time they had them AK-47s. They had them. But it got to where we'd find a lot of M16s they'd have that they'd take off of dead soldiers. If you got a AK-47 you could send it home but you couldn't a M16. We done that and I don't know. People always talk about not wanting to walk point. Personally, I'd walk point any day. I walked, me and that buddy of mine, If I walked point he walked behind me and if he walked point I walked behind him. We done that for I guess about six months we was over there. I ain't gonna shoot that... I'm gonna get that behind him with that M16. That's the ones they wanted to get that M16. I liked it up there myself cause you got to see where you was going. But we, I'd walked point he'd walk behind me. I wasn't scared as long as he was behind me. Some of them I didn't trust behind me. Cause there were some of them that'd smoke that pot you could get it on the side of the road up there on the trail. It grows over there that marijuana.

(Ross Bearden)

Was it widespread up there?

(Doyle Ross)

There'd be kids the size of them two biggest in there (5 and 6 years old) would come out and try and sell you pot. You go through a little village, they'd come out there with a loaf bread sack full, and it tied up and it packed tight, for \$25 try to sell it to the Americans.

(Ross Bearden)

How did the commanding officers, how did they really view all the drugs?

(Doyle Ross)

There was a few that I knew I didn't know in the other platoons but there were two in ours that was. It was crazy to even drank or do anything. Course you could drink beer over there cause it was 2.2 you could drink it all day and not feel it. All it was cold water really. We had two that was in there. We was up there on a base camp up on top of a mountain had...on it. If you go to sleep on guard you get shot by an American. They'd shoot you. There was one ole Smokey. That's what they called him Smokey cause he smoked pot all the time. He was pulling guard one night and he went to sleep on guard. And one of them ole boys, I think we lacked about 30 days going home. He found out he went to sleep and woke up the next morning and wasn't nobody on guard. Man you talk about, I thought he was going to kill him. He stuck that 16 right in his mouth. He said ill blow your head off only he didn't say that he was cussing him. I thought he was gonna kill him everybody started talking to him telling him it wouldn't do no good he was crazy anyways. He finally let him up and said if you ever go to sleep with me here again I'll kill you. But I thought he was going to he had that barrel right in his mouth.

(Ross Bearden)

So I'm assuming you were probably on guard every now and then of course, what was that like?

(Doyle Ross)

You pulled guard every night. Every night either at your fox hole there was somebody up at every other fox hole all the way around the whole perimeter. Somebody standing in the fox hole just listening and watching. But it wasn't bad though. There were so many guys it was about an hour and a half. It didn't matter. About an hour and a half about the longest you'd have to pull guard and you'd go to bed or go sleep on the ground. But you dug a fox hole every day because you never stayed in the same place two nights. You moved, you'd get out there and dig another fox hole. And you didn't mind digging them cause you needed them that night. But we dug them every night but one night we dug a sleeping position. Big enough to sleep in. Just a hole in the ground about that deep. Just lay down in it and sleep. We did one night and our other companies stationed on the over side of us about a mountain across from us. They mortared all night long. All night you'd hear mortar rounds. And then one of them on the mortar teams supposed to have where we're at. They wrote it down where we was at. They had a new guy come in and he thought that's where you bombed. He set that thing on us.

(Ross Bearden)

How was that?

(Doyle Ross)

That wasn't good at all. There was two guys, two colored guys. They was on the mortar team. They had it right on the mortar team. Our mortar team. They was doing the same thing they was doing. You could hear the round coming whistling through the air and when it quits whistling you better hump somewhere to hide cause it didn't go over its gonna hit you. And we heard that thing and me and Jim had a sleeping position he got over there and I had one over hear and we got down in them things and we heard it quit whistling I said its fixing to hit us. Our mortar team there was two right in the middle of us right next to the foxhole and jumped down into the

foxhole and got their heads cut off. Feet. They just lacked that much being down. They lacked 30 days going home. That ole boy that done it in that other company. We had to go through that company the next morning. We walked right through them. Our boy went crazy. He went crazy when he heard that it killed two. It was just foolish stuff like that. That's how a lot of ours got killed over there is like that. By our own people. Just for foolishness. There orta check that and told him not to shoot there. The one that was over him was the one who order him to... We had one time. We were all alone out there for about three months setting up ambushes. Whole company pulled out, and the ones that stayed. The captains and lieutenants and stuff. They'd set booby traps after we went out. Then they'd call us back in. They called us back in one day. I don't remember who went in first they walked into one of their own booby traps. Blow'd his legs off. He died. If you could get to them. Like if you'd blow your legs off and you never see it, you'll live. But if you look down and see it, you gonna die. But if you walk over there and throw anything over it where they can't see it, they'll live. They'll go in shock when they see it. They did and he did. That boy hit that thing and naturally you're gonna raise up and he raised up and seen that and it just killed him like that. But if he hadn't never raised up and seen it and somebody covered it up the medic would've got there and stopped the bleeding. Lot of stuff you have to go through to do but you think about it all the time it would drive you crazy. It'd drive you crazy. I can understand people coming home and being drunks, dopers, and whatever if they get that on their mind. I can understand it myself. People, it's crazy idiots like that over yonder. I can't understand that. Going into a place and shooting them and killing them 49 the other day. I can't see that. And nobody, I don't care, that boy didn't look like... he was 28, wasn't he? 28-year-old. Sitting there just like a video game with that camera on. Not him but what he was doing. He probably got that off a video game. Wouldn't doubt it one bit. But why would anybody wanna do something like that. 49 people and I don't know how many was wounded.

(Ross Bearden)

There's no telling what goes through people's minds when they decide to do that.

(Doyle Ross)

...Was to kill them when they find them. They didn't bring them back to trail for nothing. If they know for sure who done it, there aint no sense in bringing them back. They ort to kill them right there. If they get out, they're gonna do it again. End up waiting on the electric chair. That's a bunch of bull. 20 years from now.

(Ross Bearden)

You'd just much rather have them, after they're sentenced to death or whatnot and just go ahead and get it over with?

(Doyle Ross)

Just like that guy in New York. That mob boss. That what ort to happen to them. There aint no telling how many guys that mans had killed. And there aint no telling where at. They aint gonna stop that. They can't.

(Ross Bearden)

There's just too much of it going on. Too much corruption as well.

(Doyle Ross)

Too much. Tell you what its gonna put an end to it one of these days. It aint gonna last forever. He's gonna get sick of it one day and it's gonna be the end of it. And he can do it to. And he's gonna do it cause of the people. It aint cause of the world its cause of the people. Its cause of the people. But I aint never heard of like the new. You turn on the news and somebody killed somewhere. They're killing kids it don't make no difference. It's actually getting close to around here now.

(Ross Bearden)

I know at, I'm an education major as well, so at one of the schools I'm placed at right now, in Moundville. There's a kid just last month that brought a handgun to school.

(Doyle Ross)

Brought one to school? Why?

(Ross Bearden)

There's no telling

(Doyle Ross)

They know it's against the law to do it, yet they try and sneak one in there. I mean it don't have to be loaded either. So, I don't reckon they let them carry knives in there either do they?

(Ross Bearden)

They don't

(Doyle Ross)

I didn't think there was no kind of weapon. I mean you can't go in no army place or nothing with a knife. Can't even go in the court house with one. I went down there to the court house, jury duty, I think. And I keep a knife that long in my pocket to cut the net off of the hay a hay ring. I went down there me and Janice did my wife. Walked in there and you know you put your stuff in there. My knife. He said you can't come in here with that knife. I forgot about bringing it. I said I gotta go back and take it to the truck. He said I can see somebody's got a good knife when they take it back, most of them throw it in the garbage. I said I'll be back in a minute and I went to the truck and put it in the truck and come back. I said alright I need that to cut my hay. He just laughed. Well I guess I better get back to the house and do something.

{End of Interview}