

Oral History Transcript

Interviewer: Anthony Leathers

Interviewee: Willie Carter

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Q: What did you do before the war? Before you were drafted

A: What did I do before the war? Well I just worked, um in New York, Pennsylvania, started out in Alabama.

Q:What did you do for work?

A: I worked at a restaurant, one of the largest chains in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, I was a porter, in New York I was a fabric manufacturer.... In Alabama, I picked cotton and worked in fields... gathered up all that good fire wood and stove wood to cook them good biscuits and stuff... we didn't know anything about electric stoves, nor gas.

Q: How was everyday life before the war?

A: Everyday life was beautiful. I mean thats the way I took it, I had no problem with the life I was living.

Q: You were talking a little bit about playing music for the church.

A: I did, my brothers quartet, my older brother they had a quartet, and I played for them; daddy didn't approve of it at fifteen years old but it was cool with my momma but uhh anyway we eased it right on past dad.

Q: You mind telling why your dad didn't approve of it?

A: You know my dad was the man that we didn't question, my daddy was not a Christian, he was a good man but he was not a Christian. My mother was 150% Christian, but uhh and uhh I guess

my dad at fifteen, me at fifteen he didn't want me hanging out with my brothers at twenty-five and thirty and some of the older guys.... I guess he thought I would be wild but uhh I always like I taught my kids travel at your own speed.

Q: How old were you when you were drafted?

A: Eighteen

Q: Did you have any plans of going before or were you just drafted?

A: I was just drafted.

Q: So no plans?

A: No plans.

Q: so how did the draft process go?

A: I don't quite understand...

Q: Like to be drafted what happened, did you send out a letter or did they just call you?

A: They just called me.

Q: How did you feel when you got the call?

A: Well I... I've always from a kid been used to doing what I was asked or told to do, that's how I grew up. So, I took it you know cause I wanted the experience you know, just thinking about it I didn't try to object, I told them about my condition. I told this one guy at the induction center that I had a bad heart, a heart murmur, and he was about 6'2 and he looked down on me and he said, "Boy, we got a war going on in Vietnam, and you are it." So heart murmur, me and heart murmur went on into service.

Q: Where did you go when you first got drafted?

A: I was drafted, I went to Fort Jackson, Carolina for the induction, then I went to Fort Gordon for basic training. I left there and went to Aberdeen, Maryland for AIT, that's advanced Infantry Training.

Q: How was the training like? How many weeks or how long did it take?

A: Fourteen weeks, I was trained to be a wheel and track mechanic, that's any machine that ran on a track.

Q: You mind explaining what a track is?

A: A track is what you see the big caterpillars are on and the big thing that carry them. I had to work on the big guns that ride on tracks, I was a mechanic. But as you get on down I did everything but that when I got to Vietnam. That was my next destination.

Q: Did you have any sort of relationship with anybody before the war?

A: As for the Lady friend? Yea I thought I was in love, but Sam took that away from me.

Q: You said you have a wife now don't you?

A: I do, 50 years.

Q: When did you meet her?

A: In high school, about age fourteen.

Q: You just knew her in high school as a friend?

A: Yea I did.

Q: How did y'all come to be married?

A: Well I got out of service and another Vietnam Veteran buddy of mine, we graduated high school together, I was over in her neighbor hood and he told me she was home from Boston and so we dropped by her dad's house and it was on from then.

Q: What was her name?

A: Nettie

Q: What was the year when you first went to Vietnam? Around what time of the year too.

A: September 1967

Q: When you first got there what did you think? What was your first interpretation of it?

A: I was uhhh I got scared because we couldn't land, my plane couldn't land because the enemy was firing rockets so we couldn't land and after traveling eighteen hours in the air we got back up went out and circled around and came back. We sat there cause we still couldn't get off the plane cause there was rockets and there was stuff all around. And by the way I turned twenty one in the jungle....but you didn't get that far I'm always jumping ahead.

Q: So once after you got off the plane how did you feel?

A: Well having um air-force and gunship support, I felt somewhat safe. But still a little bit, I guess I was too young and dumb to be scared. I got a little relaxed for a minute.

Q: So was there a base y'all landed at or did y'all land straight there?

A: No we went straight to Nam, form Fort Lewis Washington straight to Nam.

Q: Kind of explain what you did when you got there, like certain objective you had to do, if you mind talking about it.

A: Well, when I first got there I was on sandbag duty, to fill sandbags to build bunkers. And after that I went to my duty station where I was assigned duty as a lightweight vehicle mechanic for a bout four months. The last eight months I was on convoy. Delivering supplies to troops. Which was umm, a dangerous operation cause I had to deliver without my duty, the guys in the field they couldn't get ammunition, they couldn't get food or anything like that.

Q: What kind of lightweight vehicles you talking about?

A: Jeeps, three quarter ton trucks, five ton trucks, and ten ton trucks.

Q: And you basically did everything that involved the truck?

A: Yea, for about four and a half months.

Q: Like engine work? Tires?

A: Yea, anything that went wrong.

Q: Whats the worst you had to work on?

A: Well once I got used to it it was all fairly easy but five ton trucks.

Q: What was so bad about the five ton trucks?

A: Well they just had parts that was complicated to more or less get to and install.

Q: Did you have any prior experience being a mechanic?

A: No

Q: So you learned as you went?

A: Yep

Q: You might not want to answer this, but did you ever see combat? Were you ever in it?

A: Yes.

Q: You don't have to if you don't want to, but can you explain some?

A: Uh huh. Well you know its a funny thing, my wife, I don't know what she did with them, she wont tell me , but I brought pictures back of uhh enemy, dead enemy soldiers. When they were killed we would stack them up maybe ten, fifteen of them just stack them up and pour diesel fuel on them. You know I don't mind talking about this now, they didn't want us to talk about it but I'm seventy-two years old what the heck, what can they do to me? So we would stack them up

and burn em....And thats some of my triggers for PTSD when I smell diesel fuel, because I live across the street from the national guard armory and when I smell diesel fuel..umm thats a big trigger. And then if they were burning when I leave out at four o'clock in the morning before day, they were burning say like two or three miles up the highway, all you could see was a big red ball before day, that burning the enemy. So uhh burning the bodies of the enemy soldiers. And the bad thing is the average one of them was about twelve or thirteen years old. And thats one reason I've been so hard on my kids, my wife says I got too much military in me, but Ive been hard on my kids to keep them in a narrow path....Yea and one of my worst experiences was Tet.

Q: Tet Offensive?

A: Yea.

Q: We talked a little bit about that today in class.

A: I could... I could give your class some pointers on that, which I wouldn't want to but...

Q: What did you do during Tet?

A: You know, they had a sayin, "You look out for your buddy, but you CYA, cover your own... you know, behind." Tet was a surprise, you know. The Vietnamese government wanted a seize fire because that was their holiday, that's what Tet was, a holiday. So they wanted a seize fire, being Americans, we're lazy anyway...so we pulled back, having a good time drinking beer smoking loco, all of that. So when we get relaxed here it is in the middle of the night, one, two o'clock in the morning, all you get was rockets in on you. You know Lieutenants are suppose to be our fearless leaders but I heard this lieutenant cry, cry like a baby, "I don't want to die, I don't want to die... here it is, everybody grabbing their weapons and putting their flak jacket on and here he is suppose to be lookin after the men and he's crying like a baby, "I don't wanna die!" So

the first sergeant pulled his .45 and told him, "If you don't get your so and so in gear you're gonna die, from my gunshot." I remember that, that was 1968, the beginning of 1968, I remember that just like it was, before I came in here.

Q: You ever take part in drinking and all that down there?

A: Oh yeah!

Q: Of course you turned 21 down there.

A: Yea, I was drinkin before I went to Nam but I drank even more there and when I got back.. uhh.... I didn't go as far as some of the guys to end up sleeping under bridges and sleeping in cardboard city and stuff like that, but uhh I did my share of drugs and alcohol. And I thank God that I met the woman I have today or I would be six feet under or cardboard city.

Q: How long did you stay in Vietnam?

A: A year... One year and a week. That last week we couldn't get a plane in to pick us up, every time one tried to come in they put holes in it. So uhhh.. slept on the ground for a week, on that runway is uhhh a real heavy metal that the planes come in and land on its not that thick but its so durable and its got poles in it about that size (holding up his hands about three inches apart to show the size) and uhh they come in and land on that. We couldn't get any planes in and couldn't get any out.

Q: How were you informed you were going home?

A: Well... you know just about when your year, see I was blessed I wasn't in the field. Some guys in the field I dont know how they knew, maybe they had a calendar, but... I kept up with my time and uhh so you get orders so far ahead. So when I got my orders, I got pictures now of my pair of boots that I put outside the barracks and I put my cap down on top of it, short timer. I

got that picture today. You can tell when a guys about to go home they start yelling, "Short! Short! But the only thing about that, some of them never made it home. They yelled "Short! Short! Short timer!" And they caught a bullet before they could go home.

Q: What was the first thing you did when you got back stateside?

A: Well my brother in law was bad to fight my sister... not fight her but he'd jump on her and beat her up. So before I left Vietnam I wrote him a sweet letter and told him if I see any indication that he had abused my sister that I was gonna blow his brains out, serious about it , and I brought a pistol, back then we had boxers, but we the uhh jockey shorts. I brought a pistol all the way form Vietnam, I had four weeks to come home and stay with my mother, come to Alabama and stay with my mother, but I stayed in Detroit three weeks...waiting on him to even act like he wanted to abuse y sister. I might be in prison today... behind that 1968. But thank God that he was just as nice, he was just like a little baby. I went home and spent one week with my mother. And after a whole year she had been sending me care packages, Vienna sausages, potted meat, cakes, crackers, cookies; a whole year, and her I am up here in Detroit waiting on him to act up where I end up doing something stupid. So I had one week to spend with my mother and that hurts me today, my mothers been dead forty-one years, but you can't win them all.

Q: Did you ever get to go home and see your mom?

A: Yea, I came to Alabama and spent a week. And I had to fly out of here and go to Texas and thats where I did my last ten weeks.

Q: You had to go back to Texas?

A: Yea I did my last ten months in Texas.

Q: What did you do there?

A: Mechanic, on lightweight vehicles.

Q: After a few years after the war how did you feel about it? Cause you know there were some protesters against it and all that and some were full hearted for it. How were you?

A: Well when I came back, I was treated like some people would treat a dog. Spit on, cursed, called child killer; that was our title...child killers, murderers. But after I learned to pray for people, for ignorant people, I feel a lot different now.

Q: So you still believe we should have been there?

A: That I cannot say because I'm not into politics, never was. All knew to do was what, but uhhh you know to be honest with you, after fifty years I don't know today really what my mission was, I mean, I don't know why today why I was in Vietnam. That's my story and I'll stick to it. As far as I understand I was just a number that was called. And like I told them, you know, I didn't burn my draft card, I didn't have any money anyway, but I didn't run off to Canada to avoid going to Vietnam, you know like I said I was always accustomed to doing what I was asked to do or what I was told to do. So here I am. Uhh years later I'm still suffering from it, medically, physically, mentally. But I don't regret going because it was one hellified experience as a young man.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add that we didn't cover?

A: Pardon?

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add that we didn't cover? Like a story or something you would like to tell?

A: Well... nothing that I can think of right now uhh like I said I'm...I'm still suffering in many ways from that experience and when I think about so many of my relatives and friends that didn't

make it back, it makes me wonder, why me? But I feel that it was through my mommas prayers and by the grace of God which I know brought me back.

Q: Well I don't have any more questions.

A: Oh! And uhh since I... in the past uhh fifteen years I am a member of the DAV, Disabled American Veteran, lifetime member, I'm a lifetime member of the American Legion, lifetime member of the Vietnam Veterans of America, and I was commander of the American Legion for four years, and my organization, my Vietnam Veteran organization, every Christmas we feed anywhere from two hundred and fifty to two hundred and eighty veteran families.

Q: What organization is that?

A: Vietnam Veterans of America

Q: I don't have any more questions, if you have anything else to say.

A: Ummm, thats about it. Just proud to have served.