

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JEFF SMITH
9th Infantry Division, Army, Vietnam War
2004

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Smith, Jeff, (1946-). Oral History Interview, 2004.

User Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 75 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 75 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Jeff Smith, a Plainfield, New Jersey native, discusses his service during the Vietnam War with the Army's 9th Infantry Division. Smith briefly talks about growing up in affluence in Aruba (Caribbean), receiving a draft notice while in Copenhagen (Denmark), and being spit on in the Army base he enrolled at for looking like a hippy. He talks about basic and advanced infantry training at Fort Reilly (Kansas), a Vietnam-veteran sergeant who warned the men to expect dead friends, and his family's worries about him. Heading to Vietnam aboard the *USNS General John Pope*, he mentions a soldier overdosing on cough syrup and jumping overboard. Landing in Saigon (Vietnam), Smith discusses being sent on a search and destroy mission at the docks and his impression of Vietnam as a beautiful country. In the 9th Infantry Division, 2nd Battalion, he talks about being stationed at Bear Cat (Vietnam) and the closeness of his unit. He speaks of his duty driving an armored personnel carrier and his first mission, Operation Junction City, to open Highway One. Smith describes night ambush patrols and his equipment. He highlights two times he survived "absolutely impossible situations," once when a Claymore mine aimed right at him exploded and missed and another when a Viet Cong soldier pointed a rocket-propelled grenade at him, but Smith knew it would not fire. He reflects on his Christian Scientist mother feeling fear at home during those times and praying and the possibility that his near-death situations were miracles. He speaks about volunteering for Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol and doing two missions before quitting and returning to his unit. He reveals the unofficial motto of the 9th Division was, "It don't mean nothing," which meant nobody judged anybody for doing what was necessary to get through the war. Smith discusses his impression of the officers, how small an amount of time he actually spend fighting, his love of the jungle, drug use, and how most of his platoon were killed while he was away on rest and recuperation (R&R) in Taiwan. He states his only wound came from stepping on a seashell while bathing in a bomb crater. Smith talks about spending three days with some beer-drinking Australian soldiers. With a month left to serve, he recalls demanding to stay on the base and being assigned to burn human waste. After return to the States, he analyzes why he spent three months at Fort Knox just playing basketball. Smith reflects on being spit on at the airport for being in uniform, having homecoming parties, war as a reaction to fear of communism,

and the positive and negative personal impact of his time in the Service. He talks about attending graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a brief bad experience with Vets for Vets, and keeping in touch with friends from the service.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2004.
Transcribed by Alis Fox, 2006.
Abstract by Susan Krueger, 2009.

Interview Transcript:

Jim: My name is Jim Kurtz. I'm doing the interview; and Jeff Smith of Madison, Wisconsin, is the person who is being interviewed. Jeff, could you tell us when and where you were born?

Jeff: Born August 2nd, 1946, in Plainfield, New Jersey.

Jim: And what part of New Jersey is that?

Jeff: Central.

Jim: Central. So is it a rural area?

Jeff: A suburban area.

Jim: Okay. Where did you grow up, and where did you go to high school?

Jeff: I grew up in Aruba, and I was actually born with a silver spoon in my mouth.

Jim: What is-- A-u-b-r-a?

Jeff: A-r-u-b-a.

Jim: Okay. And that's in—

Jeff: That's in the Caribbean.

Jim: Caribbean.

Jeff: And I came from a family where my dad was a high-level executive for then Standard Oil Company of New Jersey, and we had a home overlooking the Caribbean with two maids and a gardener and a chauffeur, and so that was kind of a nice place to grow up.

Jim: I would say so. Where did you go to high school?

Jeff: I went to high school in Summit, New Jersey.

Jim: So did you move back to Aruba to—

Jeff: My dad was transported or transferred, I'm sorry, back to New Jersey, and that's where I went to high school.

Jim: Okay. And what year did you graduate?

Jeff: 1965.

Jim: 1965. And what was happening in 1965?

Jeff: Well, in 1965 I was-- I graduated third in my class, third from the bottom, and I wasn't a very good student, and I flunked ninth grade, and I almost flunked it twice. So in 1965 it was sort of the hippie era, and I was caught up in my own self-indulgences and doing a lot of alcohol and drugs, and even before then--even at that time drugs was not in full swing.

Jim: Okay.

Jeff: And so I was not a very productive member of society.

Jim: Okay. And so what did you do between the time that you graduated from high school and went into the military service?

Jeff: I went to Europe, and I was living in Copenhagen for just under a year, and I was actually drafted in Denmark.

Jim: So you got the letter in Denmark.

Jeff: Uh-huh.

Jim: Did your parents forward it to you?

Jeff: Yes, my parents forwarded it to me.

Jim: Okay. And did any of your relatives serve in the military service in any of the previous wars or--

Jeff: Not many of them. I had an uncle that was in World War II, and he was an engineer, a very brilliant man, and that's about the only relative that I know of that was in the military.

Jim: Okay. And what was the reaction of your parents and family when you got drafted?

Jeff: Horrified, I think is the one-word summer-upper on the whole thing, and my mom--and this will come into play later in the interview--my mom was a very religious Christian Scientist. She was in fact a Christian Science practitioner, which is the equivalent of a minister in most other religions; and that's a faith-based religion that doesn't believe in doctors. They believe that each of us is the image of God, and so again that will come into play later; but she was very, very concerned.

Jim: Being a person whose family is of, you know, some substance and all of that, did they make any effort to get you a different deal than being drafted?

Jeff: No. My family just wasn't that way.

Jim: Okay. And so that was never discussed or anything?

Jeff: Never, no.

Jim: Okay. Did you have any pre-notions about Vietnam, you know, when you were in high school and when you were in Denmark and all of that?

Jeff: I knew it was the most dangerous place in the world and really didn't feel that I wanted to go there, but I did know going into the Army that Vietnam wasn't the only route you could take, even as a draftee. So I had my hopes up for Germany or Hawaii. (both laughing)

Jim: Good thing to hope for. Did you and your friends talk about Vietnam at all or--

Jeff: Not much. We were a fairly ignorant bunch. So I was drafted right along with my best friend in Summit, New Jersey, and we just kind of looked at each other and thought, oh, well, I guess this is better than what we've been doing, which was we were roofers' helpers at the time.

Jim: So you were a roofer's helper, you know, when you came back?

Jeff: Came back from Europe.

Jim: Okay. I don't take shorthand very well. Now, okay. When did you enter the military service?

Jeff: May of 1966.

Jim: And where did you report?

- Jeff: I reported to Fort Dix for induction and then was transferred to Fort Reilly, Kansas, for basic training.
- Jim: Basic training in Fort Reilly. That's a great place. That's where I went. Okay. The how long was your basic training?
- Jeff: Oh, Jim, I forget. I think basic is six months; is it? And AIT is about three, AIT being Advanced Infantry Training.
- Jim: Yeah. Okay. So you took your basic at Reilly.
- Jeff: And my AIT at Reilly.
- Jim: Reilly. And were you part of a basic training command there or what was--
- Jeff: Umm, yes. Basically-- I was in the 9th Division, and everybody in the 9th Division except for NCOs and officers were draftees.
- Jim: Okay.
- Jeff: And so that was--we were all in the--
- Jim: So you were trained-- So they were building a division at Fort Reilly—
- Jeff: Correct.
- Jim: --then in 1966.
- Jeff: Correct.
- Jim: And they put you there to train.
- Jeff: Correct.
- Jim: So you completed your AIT then sometime in the fall of '66 or thereabouts--
- Jeff: Uh-huh.
- Jim: --is that accurate?
- Jim: Then did you get any special training, like airborne, jungle training, MOS training, before you went to Vietnam, or what did you do after that training?

Jeff: Not at Fort Reilly. I got trained for LRRP [pronounced lurp], Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrol, in Vietnam, when I was there, but that was it.

Jim: Okay. So did you get leave then before you went to Vietnam?

Jeff: Yes. And I got leave and went home to--back home to Summit, New Jersey, and then got orders to go to Vietnam via the Steamship *John Pope* from San Diego directly to--not directly but to Vietnam.

Jim: Okay. What was your reaction when you learned that you were going to Vietnam?

Jeff: Umm, I figured I was going to die. We were pretty well trained I think at Fort Reilly in that we had a mock Vietnam village set up there with tunnels and we had a platoon sergeant, and I at that point had volunteered to be in reconnaissance.

Jim: Okay.

Jeff: They had a platoon sergeant that was an Airborne Ranger, two-term Vietnam veteran, and he kind of was square with us as to what to expect, that, you know, one minute you are walking through the jungle and the next minute you look around and half your buddies are dead.

Jim: Okay. What was the reaction of your family and friends when you knew you were going--or they knew you were going to Vietnam?

Jeff: Again, they were pretty much horrified. I grew up, again, with a silver spoon in my mouth, and they knew that I wasn't prepared emotionally or in terms of maturation or mentally for big challenges because I never met big challenges; and they were concerned for my survival in the Army, which is a very disciplined environment, and I almost went completely throughout my whole life without any discipline.

Jim: Okay.

Jeff: And they were concerned for me from all angles, just being a soldier and being in Vietnam.

Jim: Did any of your peers, you know, that you went to high school with--were they drafted at the same time you were?

Jeff: My best friend was drafted in the same outfit that I was drafted in, and he and I followed the same route except he was in a different company than I was.

Jim: Okay. But he was in the 9th Division also?

Jeff: Yes.

Jim: So you maintained contact with him through the training.

Jeff: And still do.

Jim: Oh that's good. So when did you leave for Vietnam?

Jeff: I left for Vietnam in--I think it was New Year's Eve day in 1967.

Jim: 1-1-67. Via the *John Pope*.

Jeff: Yep.

Jim: What happened on your trip over on the *John Pope*?

Jeff: Well, one thing happened that was kind of astonishing. One of the folks, one of the soldiers, on the boat took an overdose of cough syrup and absolutely went nuts and just jumped over the side. So the boat circled for three days trying to find him, and finally as I was told a Russian fishing vessel picked him up and promised to transport the body to the nearest naval vessel. And so that was kind of—

Jim: Yeah.

Jeff: --kind of strange. But other than that the trip over was just fine. I'm very seaworthy, having grown up in Aruba, and the food was great and I--it was—

Jim: So it was Navy food.

Jeff: Yeah. Correct.

Jim: And did you have any training, or how did they keep you busy when you were on the boat?

Jeff: Basically calisthenics, marching drills, and that was it, a lot of time to read. I think I read my first book on the Steamship *John Pope*.

Jim: Is that right?

Jeff: That's right.

Jim: Do you remember what the book was?

Jeff: Yeah. It was-- My uncle who was in the Army told me that I'm going to have a lot of time on my hands and why not use the time to specialize in something that you might have an interest in. I have an interest in impressionist painters. So my first book that I read was the autobiography of Vincent van Gogh--or biography, not an autobiography.

Jim: Okay. Obviously that made an impression on you.

Jeff: Uh-huh.

Jim: So where did you land when you got to Vietnam?

Jeff: Saigon.

Jim: Saigon, so right into the harbor. So you came up the Saigon River, through the **runsock(??)** and all of that.

Jeff: Correct. I think we went-- I think we had a refueling stop in Indonesia, and I don't know where in Indonesia, but we got off the boat for one night, and so that was different, and then three or four days later went into Vietnam.

Jim: When you went up the Saigon River, did you have any impression of the country?

Jeff: Oh, absolutely gorgeous, yeah. It was just primitive, beautiful.

Jim: Did you have any difficulty with sappers or snipers going up the river?

Jeff: No.

Jim: When you went by Funcao were there a lot of boats waiting to go up the river?

Jeff: I just-- I can't comment on their destination. All I can say is that the place was just full of boats of all kinds and sizes, including some what I was told later yachts owned by French plantation owners.

Jim: Did you dock in downtown Saigon?

Jeff: Yes.

Jim: Okay. And how did--What happened when you got off the boat there?

Jeff: We got off the boat and we put our gear down. We were sort of waiting around as you do in the Army for what the next step is, and all of a sudden we were told to leave our material there, that somebody would be there to guard it, and we had to go on search and destroy mission right in Saigon. I think that was fake, but who knows.

Jim: So you had weapons—

Jeff: Yeah.

Jim: --and all of that?

Jeff: Yeah.

Jim: So where did you go in Saigon?

Jeff: Honest to God, I can't remember.

Jim: Okay.

Jeff: But it was the harbor area.

Jim: Okay. So they were probably funning you a little bit.

Jeff: Yeah, I think so.

Jim: What was your impression of the country when you put your boots down in Saigon?

Jeff: Beautiful, absolutely gorgeous, and the people were-- Again, growing up in Aruba I'm used to being involved with people that were of third-world nature and so that wasn't a big shocker to me, but it really was for some of the other guys. They just couldn't believe that folks lived the way they did.

Jim: Did you have any impressions of the odors and stuff like that?

Jeff: Charcoal. Charcoal was prevalent throughout Vietnam, just the smell of charcoal.

Jim: Then when you completed the search and destroy mission-- I assume by what you said that there was no contact made with the enemy.

Jeff: Correct.

Jim: So where did you go then?

Jeff: Then we were mechanized. The Second Battalion was a mechanized division with armored personnel carriers. I was a driver at the time. We got in our personnel carriers and went directly to Bear Cat.

Jim: So how were the road conditions driving to Bear Cat?

Jeff: Well, an armored personnel carrier isn't like a Lincoln Continental, so it really didn't matter what the road conditions were like, but as I recall the roads in Saigon were awful.

Jim: And was there a lot of traffic?

Jeff: Yes. Yeah.

Jim: Okay. And did you have any difficulty other than heavy traffic going to Bear Cat?

Jeff: None.

Jim: What was your impression of Bear Cat when you saw it?

Jeff: Well, my first impression was, "My God, I got to live here for a year?" and because it is a primitive but well-constructed facilities that consisted of structures made out of two-by-fours and canvass and-- but, again, it was not like living on a semi-mansion off the coast of the Caribbean.

Jim: So the shock.

Jeff: Yeah.

Jim: So you went over with a unit with people that you knew.

Jeff: Correct. The folks that I took basic training with, AIT with, we all went over as the same exact unit that we were trained as.

Jim: So you really never got the treatment that replacements got of being a cherry or a new guy or anything.

Jeff: Never, never. In fact, we were all very close at that point.

Jim: Okay. What were your feelings when you hit Bear Cat after having seen the country and got to walk around Saigon a little bit about the war, your situation?

Jeff: Well, I figured, umm, I was just going to take this sort of one step at a time, and I knew that they weren't going to launch us right into like Hamburger Hill the first day because we were draftees and because we were new recruits, and so I just tried not to think of the future too much.

Jim: Okay.

Jeff: But I did think I was going to die.

Jim: Did this feeling change during the tour?

Jeff: Yeah, when I was done with it. I'll step ahead a little bit. When I went on my last R and R to Taiwan I had only a month left, and at that point I realized I got through this thing alive, and I went up to the top sergeant and I said, "Top"--when I got back from Taiwan, again in Bear Cat--and I said, "Top, I'm not going out in the field anymore. I did this thing. I lived through it." And he said, "Smith, you're going out in the field." And I said, "No, I'm not, Top. I'm gonna stay here, and I'll do what you want." He said, "Smith, if you stay here, you're gonna burn shit for the rest of your time in Vietnam." And I said, "That's a deal."

Jim: Can you explain what "burning shit" is?

Jeff: Well, in Bear Cat the outhouses basically consist of showers and toilets, and the toilets were made out of wood and with a circle cut out for them for the bowl, but the actual bowl was a halved 50-gallon drum; and so once a day a person would--a person who was normally in trouble, assigned that duty--pulls them out, puts diesel fuel in them, and burns them.

Jim: Okay. Didn't the Vietnamese typically have that job?

Jeff: No. It was people that were in trouble.

Jim: People in trouble.

Jeff: Yep.

Jim: Okay. So you burned shit, and that was a good deal for you because that gave you a chance to--

Jeff: To ease out of combat.

Jim: --to ease out of combat. Okay. Going back to your first months there, what was your duty assignments when you started at Bear Cat?

Jeff: I was a driver for an armored personnel carrier and-- when I first was there, and my job was to drive and maintain the armored personnel carrier.

Jim: And what--

Jeff: So I was second in charge of that vehicle. The vehicle consisted of a squad leader, who sits up at the top turret of the armored personnel carrier. I was second in charge. I was the driver, and then we had two machine gunners and a medic.

Jim: And how many people could these APCs carry?

Jeff: They could carry-- If you want to crowd them in there, they could carry up to eight comfortably, but we only had five.

Jim: Okay. What was a typical duty day like when you were an APC driver?

Jeff: Well, we were out in the field almost all the time, so I rarely saw Bear Cat. The first mission we were on was Operation Junction City, and the goal of that operation as I understood it was to open up Highway 1 and make sure that that was enemy free, and that was the largest--as I understand it the largest military operation since the Korean War, and so we did a lot of different things out in the field. We went on search and destroy missions on foot. We went on search and destroy missions with armored personnel carriers.

Jim: What did you do with the personnel carriers when you went on foot?

Jeff: We had a base camp. We established a base camp, which is basically rotating the wagons and so there was some security when we were gone. We went on ambush patrols at night, and sometimes we went on helicopter/ vehicles ambush patrols during the day. And so we really, really saw the whole mobility of the Army.

Jim: Could you describe a couple of these different-- Let's talk first about a night ambush patrol. What was that like?

Jeff: Okay. There would be usually five people going out on a patrol that you were given a specific site where it was suspected that Viet Cong or North Vietnamese were active,

and you would set up basically a viewpoint at that site, and if somebody came along you shot them.

Jim: Okay.

Jeff: And that was it.

Jim: And what kind of weapons did you have on these ambush patrols?

Jeff: Well, when I got off the boat in Saigon there was a guy getting on the boat, and he looked at me and gave me a 12-gauge shotgun with some ammunition and said, "Are you going out? Are you going to be-- Are you in infantry?" And I said, "Yes." And he gave that shotgun to me and he said, "When you get sniped at or attacked, you shoot this into the place that you think you want to dive into and that will then free it of any explosive devices." And so I had a shotgun. I had an M16. I had a .357 magnum, which is my own pistol, and a .45 revolver.

Jim: So you were pretty well armed then.

Jeff: I'm sorry, a .45 automatic.

Jim: Okay. So you carried all of those when you were out walking around?

Jeff: Yeah. Yep, and--

Jim: What else did you carry with you?

Jeff: Typically a small backpack with your lunch and some other provisions in it, any toiletries that you need, and that sort of thing.

Jim: How much water did you carry?

Jeff: Lots. We were ordered to take salt pills; and as a result, you know, the more salt you have in your body the more water you can retain, and so I did drink a lot of water. I think I had two canteens with me.

Jim: Two canteens. So—

Jeff: I was strong in those days. (both laughing)

Jim: You had to be to carry all that stuff. What was a basic load of ammunition you carried?

Jeff: I think we had five clips of-- What did they hold, 20?

Jim: Yeah, and then you'd put it down to 18.

Jeff: Yeah. And what you did was the clips, you'd tape them together with duct tape backwards so that you can just flip it around and put the other one right in again. So that was my setup.

Jim: Was that your first dealing with duct tape?

Jeff: Probably.

Jim: Yes. It was mine, too. Did you have any memorable experiences in, you know, these different field operations?

Jeff: Yeah. I said I'd get back to my mom being religious, and I guess now is a good time to bring it up. There were two occasions when I got out of absolutely impossible situations. The first was I was the point track going down a path in the jungle, and I was just looking around, doing my job as being the then--at that point I was the track commander, and all of a sudden this Viet Cong jumps out right in the middle of the path with a rocket-propelled grenade, RPG, and points it right at me, and I didn't know what to do. I had the fifty right there pointing at him, but I had to cock that. I had the M16 over the side of the track in its sling. I could go to that, which was much easier, or I could go to my .45, and I'm trying to think real fast so I can shoot this guy, and then all of a sudden instead of absolute terror this sense of peace became over me and happiness because I knew absolutely, one hundred percent that his RPG would not work. And, by God, the guy squeezed the trigger and it didn't work, and he dropped it, smiled as Orientals often do when they screw up, and raised his hands. And, okay, I went back home after Vietnam and I talked to my mom about that incident, and we got it to within three days that she was woken up at night with absolute terror that I was in trouble and she started praying her--bless her heart out. The second incident was a situation where we were in a perimeter, "perimeter" meaning armored personnel carriers circle like wagons, and I was sleeping on top of the armored personnel carrier, and I was sleeping on an air mattress, and what happened was--again, I was sleeping, so this is after the fact--a Viet Cong came up and planted a Claymore mine aimed right at me, knowing that I was asleep, that he would at least get one guy. And I don't know if people know about Claymore mines, but they basically shoot a bunch of steel shot out, and it's sort of like a shotgun in that the center of the areas of the shot is more concentrated than the perimeter of the shot. So, anyhow, this—

Jim: I got to stop you to turn the tape.

Jeff: Okay. **[Side 1, Tape 1 ends]** And so this Claymore mine was set off, and the concentrated part of the shot ends up being exactly where I was. In fact, two pieces of shot went through my air mattress. I was unhurt. It didn't even-- None of them got me. The only fatality out of that was the guy sleeping on the ground on the opposite side of the track of the Claymore mine, and he was killed. Somehow a BB found its way through the wheels and tracks of the vehicle and hit him, but the concentration-- I mean, there was one shot on the side of the armored personnel carrier every square inch, right up to the top of the track, but--and through my air mattress, but I was untouched, and that's-- I'm sorry, that's impossible. Again, I trace it back to my mom, and she again was woken up that night with a tremendous amount of fear and started praying.

Jim: Was that a U.S. Claymore?

Jeff: No. It was Chinese.

Jim: It was probably the powder not being good then or something like that.

Jeff: Yeah. It's-- Who knows.

Jim: Who knows, but it's damn good, that's for sure. That's for sure. You mentioned LRRP, which is long-range reconnaissance patrol. So you were in a track how long?

Jeff: Well, actually sort of midway through my tour of Vietnam I volunteered for night division LRRP.

Jim: Okay.

Jeff: Which was not mechanized. They were air carried. And I volunteered, got in, went to Nha Trang for training for I think it was two weeks. We were trained very well by Green Berets. And the 9th Division again was all volunteers, so we were a bunch of draftees. We weren't a bunch of gung ho—

Jim: You said the 9th Division were all volunteers?

Jeff: Well, draftees, not volunteers.

Jim: That's right. Okay.

Jeff: And so we weren't all that gung ho, but at that point I figured if I'm going to die I

may as well experience the best of a war that I can experience, and the LRRP were supposed to be the elite part of the division. So I volunteered and was trained and went on two LRRP missions. One was fine. I think we did our job. We located a Viet Cong village. And, incidentally, long-range reconnaissance patrol is you go out for two weeks at a time and you're dropped into a neutral zone, and then you basically hike through the jungle or whatever terrain to a suspected target that the CIA feels is an enemy hot spot and we try and locate that and then at best call in an air strike or just fall back and report back later.

Jim: So your job wasn't to go out and search and destroy.

Jeff: No, no. It was to find and report.

Jim: So that was a clearer mission-- Was that a clearer mission than the other missions that you had I mean?

Jeff: Yeah. It was actually supposedly less dangerous, more rigorous because you carried more equipment and you were gone from the food lines for a couple weeks, but I felt it was less dangerous until I went on my second mission, and that was when we were supposedly again given a neutral area that no Viet Cong was supposed to-- Well, actually we were after North Vietnamese at the time, and we were rappelling out of these helicopters, and all of a sudden we're getting shot at by North Vietnamese. And if you are rappelling out of a helicopter-- Even though an M16, which is basically a twenty-three or -four caliber bullet, doesn't give much kick, when you are hanging on a rope you can't really shoot without twirling yourself around in a circle and putting your buddies in harm's way. So you're basically defenseless. And so we got to the ground, got into a firefight that lasted about five minutes, and won that. They dispersed, and then we were air carried out right after that. So I quit LRRP. They didn't keep their end of the bargain, and I felt there was an intelligence leak, and so I went back to my old unit.

Jim: So was there any sanctions for retiring from LRRP or was that—

Jeff: None. None. I went back to my old unit that basically I've been with these guys for almost two years now, and they were very receptive.

Jim: What was the reaction of your company commander, platoon sergeant, and all when you volunteered for LRRP and then when you came back?

Jeff: Well, I told them that this is the only war I'm ever going to be in and I wanted to do it right, and they understood, and everybody sort of patted me on the back and said, "Have a good time."

Jim: And were they happy to see you back then too?

Jeff: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I told them why, and they said, "Makes sense to me."

Jim: Yeah.

Jeff: There is one thing that I'd like to get across at some point in this interview, and I would like to do it now.

Jim: Okay.

Jeff: Is what the mind-set was, at least among draftees, about the war. And the mind-set was you do whatever you want to do to get through this and get back home in one piece, and there is a saying that I don't hear a lot about in the movies or books that I read about Vietnam. There is a saying that just epitomizes, and the saying is, "It don't mean nothing." And that means whatever you got to do, you could be a hero going out, throwing grenades, and shooting Viet Cong or you could just crap in your shorts, it doesn't mean anything, whatever you got to do to get through this war is what you got to do and nobody is going to judge you.

Jim: Did you feel that you weren't being judged I mean?

Jeff: No. I felt that saying held true in everybody's mind.

Jim: Including your officers and senior NCOs?

Jeff: Some seasoned officers, the ones that--platoon leader that I had that was an OCS, Officer Candidate School, new graduate, it took him a while to figure it out, but I think it was clear in everybody's mind from the top down that that was the attitude of the 9th Division draftees. Other divisions I don't know.

Jim: Okay. And did the commander of the division ever address that?

Jeff: The commander of the division, who was killed, incidentally, in a firefight, he was a light colonel, forget his name, but he never really addressed that in any battalion situation. So, I would say no.

Jim: Okay. Is there anything more that you want to tell us about your combat experiences?

Jeff: I think the big three were the rappelling and the two I'll call them miracles, and but I think it was-- You know, being out for three weeks on a LRRP patrol was very

demanding and—

Jim: Did you ever get resupplied during that time?

Jeff: Never, no. We had to carry-- Actually, the 9th Division, maybe other divisions too, but I understand it that we were sort of the test group for freeze- dried food, which was new in the late '60s.

Jim: Uh-huh.

Jeff: And that's basically what we lived on, that and any bananas we could find.

Jim: What did you do for water?

Jeff: We boiled stream water and got water from any village that we happened to be in, but that--yeah, that was it.

Jim: Yep. Let's see. Did you-- Go ahead, Jeff.

Jeff: Other than that I won't say that I have any more interesting things to say about that experience.

Jim: What was your typical day like out in the field?

Jeff: The typical day-- When I was in the mechanized outfit, the typical day was that we would-- I'll give you a typical day. We'd get a mission to circle and provide support to a mortar unit, and we'd sit there all day doing nothing and basically clean our weapons or whatever the officers wanted to occupy our time with, and so that was a typical day, and then at night we would go out on an ambush patrol.

Jim: How often at night did you have to go out on the ambush patrols?

Jeff: Once, once a night. So, you know, I can sum up my Vietnam experience by this. I believe I was on 230 combat missions. Of them thirty-five involved combat and the rest didn't. Of those thirty-five that involved combat, I was in about twenty minutes of combat total. The typical event with combat was a twenty-second firefight and then somebody would fall back because firepower superiority would establish itself. And when you are shot at it's very confusing at first because the first thing you hear is the sonic boom of the bullet going over your head and the second thing you hear is the actual detonation of the bullet, which was second. So you have a directional problem immediately. And but, again, I was over there for a full year, twenty minutes of combat.

Jim: It's always good to hear the bullet go over your head; isn't it?

Jeff: Yeah. (both laugh)

Jim: Did your unit take many casualties?

Jeff: Yeah. We had one human-wave attack, and that was when I was on R and R in Taiwan, and my whole--almost whole platoon was wiped out. So, yeah, that was-- I forget what operation that was now, darn it. If I think of it, Jim, I'll give you a call.

Jim: Okay. Good. Let's see, did you have any contact with civilians?

Jeff: Oh, yeah, lots of civilians, lots of prostitutes, lots of dope dealers.

Jim: Okay. What was your impression of the Vietnamese civilians?

Jeff: Generally the ones that I met that weren't marketing something, either themselves or dope or booze, they were just outstanding people, just very friendly, very appreciative it seems to me of our situation there, and that was--and hardworking, willing to do the job, and I just loved them.

Jim: Did you trust them?

Jeff: No. No. We were very well trained on that front. I mean, you've heard of-- I don't think this is true, but you've heard of stories about prostitutes having razors in their vagina. I don't think that's true, but we were told that, so that's--that message held sort of true.

Jim: Did you have any Kit Carson Scouts work with your unit?

Jeff: No.

Jim: They were Viet Cong or North NVA defectors that became, I mean, guides and stuff. That you didn't have?

Jeff: No. In fact, when you said that I knew I heard the word but I never had any experience with them.

Jim: Okay. Did you actually do any pacification where you lived in a village or—

Jeff: By pacification you mean doing services for the—

Jim: Yeah.

Jeff: Yeah, we did a lot of that. Wherever we went to a village the Vietnamese would spy a medic and they'd bring their kids who have a cut foot or an infected arm or whatever it is and our medics would--the first thing we would do is give the medics a chance to help the village out with medical problems.

Jim: What was your officer and senior NCO's attitude towards the drugs and alcohol and stuff like that upon the Vietnamese?

Jeff: I assume it was condoned because we never ran into any problems. We openly smoked marijuana. I did. I was high every day, and at night we drank a lot and the officers knew it. So I think it was again this attitude of don't mean nothing.

Jim: Were you concerned about not having your full capacities, or would this just make you feel better?

Jeff: The first time we were called out on a-- I am very against using drugs right now.

Jim: Yeah.

Jeff: But the first time we were called out to respond to a platoon that was pinned down in a firefight we were awkward. We just couldn't get things put away in our armored personnel carriers right away, and we were very awkward. The second time that we were called to do something like that I was high and it went like-- just like greased lightning; and so I guess the answer is probably no, I'm not concerned about being incapacitated.

Jim: All right. Did you have any opinions of the enemy?

Jeff: Oh, God, I think they were relentless, and that's the reason all the experts say they won the war is that they had-- First of all, they had a bigger base of operations than we do. In order to get in the United States Army you got to be 18 years old, and they were starting at 14. And the way they propagandized their military to just be relentless was just astonishing, and I have nothing but high regard for them now.

Jim: What was your feeling towards them when you were in Vietnam?

Jeff: Hated them.

Jim: Hated them.

Jeff: Uh-huh.

Jim: That's probably because they were trying to kill you, huh?

Jeff: Yeah, probably. And, you know, I used the derogatory terms "gooks" and all that stuff, so--

Jim: Did you have any good luck charms when you were in Vietnam?

Jeff: None.

Jim: Any superstitions or anything like—

Jeff: No.

Jim: Were you ever wounded or sick when you were in Vietnam?

Jeff: Umm, the only thing I got-- The biggest problem I had was I was taking a bath in a bomb crater once. You know, a bomb explodes and all the dirt comes up and the ground water, which is fairly clean, comes up and so you can-- And I cut my foot on a seashell, and I cut my toe actually in half lengthwise, and so I hobbled up to the medic tent, and they were at the time having a volleyball game, and I showed them my problem, and the medic, who didn't wash his hands, sewed the thing up, and it got infected. And three days later I came back because it was infected and I showed the doctor, and the doctor said, well, "We're going to have to take that off." And the medic that sewed me up was standing right next to me, and I pulled out my .45 and I pointed it down at his foot and I said, "Go ahead, and he is going to lose three more toes than I am." And I told him about him not washing his hands and that sort of thing. So they went to extra effort to try and save the toe, and that was fine. I didn't lose it.

Jim: That's good. Okay. We are going to switch to assessing the experience. We've done a little bit-- What did you think of the Vietnamese climate, smell, terrain, vegetation?

Jeff: I've been in a lot of jungles since Vietnam, but Vietnam was my first jungle experience, and I thought it was just perfect in terms of the climate. During the hot season, just as that got to wear you out a little bit, being hot all the time and dry and dusty, then the rainy season would start and that would give you some relief; and then when the rainy season was in full swing it really wasn't raining all the time. It was maybe two or three showers a day, which came at a time where the humidity and heat was unbearable, and that cooled you off. You actually stood out in these

monsoons and soaked up your fatigues, and that's the way you took a bath and do your laundry at the same time. I loved the jungle. I've always felt comfortable in the jungle and spent a lot of time there in Vietnam, and I was more uncomfortable being in the city. When I went on to a rest and recuperation trip to Saigon for a weekend pass, I was in an urban environment, I had no idea what to do, and I almost spent the whole time in my hotel room watching "I Love Lucy" reruns because I felt so uncomfortable and somebody could come up to you, blow you away at any time. But I love the jungle, and I like both the micro- and macroenvironment of the jungle.

Jim: Did you see any wildlife when you were in the jungles?

Jeff: There is a reconnaissance vehicle called the "People Sniffer." That's what we called it, and it was an airplane that was a very low-altitude and slow airplane that had a heat-sensing device. And it said that we were surrounded by a company of Viet Cong, and so we sent a patrol out, and they were basically monkeys. And so, yeah, we saw some monkeys. I saw one I think it was leopard, lots of birds of all different types. So, yeah, yeah, I guess so.

Jim: Insects? Any impression of ants, mosquitoes?

Jeff: You ever see leaf cutter ants?

Jim: Yeah.

Jeff: That's fun. I mean, they are farmers. They take the leaves and basically pack them away so it becomes some sort of a fungus that they can digest; and, yeah, the insects were nice. But the insects-- I'll tell you one thing. I've been in Ecuador and Costa Rica, been in a lot of jungles, and there is no insect population worse than the State of Wisconsin. So I think the insect life there was highly tolerable compared to let's say Hayward, Wisconsin.

Jim: That's good. I wouldn't really quarrel with you about that either. Did you feel you were adequately supplied when you were in Vietnam?

Jeff: Absolutely, yeah. I mean, I never ran out of ammunition, never was in a situation where we were undersupplied. The equipment was suspect. I was given an M16 with a grenade launcher at the bottom of it that was a new Colt product that we were testing, and the first time I shot the grenade launcher the barrel part of that fell off. But, again, we were just testing it, so--but I thought the supply situation was very good.

Jim: What was your reaction toward the M16 as a weapon?

Jeff: I liked it. You know, my armored personnel carrier broke down one time and I was in an Australian Army headquarters for three days, and they had like the old M4s or whatever they were.

Jim: M14s?

Jeff: M14s, yeah. They weren't M14s, but they were big, heavy, wooden guns. And they looked at my M16, which was basically plastic, and they said that's nothing but a kid's toy, but I liked it. It was light. It was fast. And sometimes if you get a chance you can shoot an M16, a regular one, and then--on fully automatic, and then you can shoot a CAR-15, which I had for a few days, which is an officer's M16, which is shorter. And the gas chamber in that is much shorter and they shoot about a third as fast, so it's almost like the rapid-firing guns you see on TV today.

Jim: What was your impression of the Aussies? You said you spent three days with them.

Jeff: Oh, great people.

Jim: Do they drink?

Jeff: Oh, you bet, and they wouldn't let you buy a drink either. They were just big party guys.

Jim: Were you introduced to any of their beers, like Fosters or--

Jeff: I can't remember what kind of beer we drank, but I think it was Aussie beer. But what a great bunch of guys, and they were all racists (laughing) but very likable nevertheless. Bringing that up, that's one point about our division, is that there was no racism as you hear about today. We all went to basic together. We all went to AIT together. We all went over on the Steamship John Pope together, and we all were in Vietnam together, and we were close buddies. And we ranged in social status from a cotton picker in Alabama to me, which is upper- middle class from New Jersey, and we were all very close. And I still keep in touch with some of those guys today, the ones that lived through that, that human-wave attack.

Jim: Okay. We are going to want to talk a little bit about that in a few minutes. How did you feel about your leadership in Vietnam?

Jeff: It varied. We had three platoon leaders. One was a-- my age is getting to me here--the leadership school.

Jim: OCS, or infantry officer basic, West Point?

Jeff: West Point, yes. One was West Point, one was ROTC, and one was OCS; and from the first to the last those were the best. West Point was the best and most understanding and intelligent officer. The ROTC was second, and the OCS was just a complete butthead. He just hadn't a clue as to what to do and didn't feel like he had needed to think about it.

Jim: What about senior NCOs?

Jeff: The NCOs were regular Army, and we-- After four or five months in Vietnam we established our own NCO base where specialist E-4s were up to a sergeant level. So after a while our NCO base became the draftees and so it was just wonderful.

Jim: How was your company commanders?

Jeff: The company commanders were sort of distant from us because I was in a headquarters company where recon platoon is usually stationed, and he had so many other administrative duties and he wasn't really a combat person. He was more of an administrative person to make sure supplies got there, to make sure that the payroll was intact and all that sort of thing. That was his job, and so we didn't have much contact with him.

Jim: Okay. And did you have any impressions of battalion commanders?

Jeff: Well, I thought our battalion commander, who was a light colonel, and I forget his name--but I don't know why he did this, but we were in a firefight and he was in a command helicopter, which is that little bubble helicopter that you see, and he came down and landed right in the middle of this firefight and some Viet Cong shot him right in the forehead, and it took us a while to get another battalion commander. So we were without one, and I don't know who replaced him.

Jim: Okay. I'm going to have to get a new tape in. **[Side 2, Tape 1 ends]**

Jim: Was the missions explained to you about why we were in Vietnam; and, you know, then specific missions, you know, when you were in Vietnam, what was your reaction to that?

Jeff: The only operation that I understood was Operation Johnson City; and that was very simple, to keep Highway 1 open. The rest of the missions I was on except for when I was in long-range reconnaissance patrol, it seemed to me that we were supposed to be on search and destroy but actually what I perceived to be aimlessly walking

around in the jungle until you get shot. And then you get shot at, you fall back, and call in an air strike. So, no, none of it ever made any sense to me.

Jim: Did the reason why we were in Vietnam make any sense to you?

Jeff: Sure, the domino theory about communism, which a lot of guys died for that theory, that still came about and our country was not threatened by it.

Jim: Okay. Did you ever have any military experience after you left Vietnam?

Jeff: No. I am sorry. I was three months in Fort Knox.

Jim: What did you do in Fort Knox?

Jeff: Nothing, absolutely nothing. The commander in charge of Fort Knox had a great idea, and that was to let returning Vietnam veterans that were short-timers alone. So you didn't have to stand inspection in the morning. The only thing you had to do was volunteer for either color guard or the sport of the season, which at that time was basketball. So I played basketball for the Fort Knox team, and I didn't get to be on the team because I was good. I got to it because I was a Vietnam vet. So I think his point was let these guys leave the service with some good feelings about it and maybe they'll pass it on to their kids or something.

Jim: Yeah. Then you got out of the Army then in like the spring of--or '68; is that correct?

Jeff: Right. Correct.

Jim: You were in Vietnam during Tet though; weren't you?

Jeff: Correct.

Jim: I missed that. Was there anything in Tet that was memorable for you?

Jeff: No. You know, we weren't like the Marines or, you know, like the 1st Division that you were in, Jim. I mean, we were not put into-- This is my opinion. We were not put into Hamburger Hill situations. We did a lot of security for artillery and mortar units, and we went on combat missions but not in the die-hard parts of the war.

Jim: Did you spend most-- This is a question. Seeing that your base camp was in Bear Cat, then you were kind of operating in the north sector north of Saigon; is that accurate?

Jeff: Correct.

Jim: Okay. So you weren't down in the delta with the rest of the 9th.

Jeff: Went to the delta once, and we floated our tracks across the delta into the Cambodia side of the river, but we didn't really go over there. And I don't know what the heck we were doing there, but I think we were there to be some detergent.

Jim: Detergent.

Jeff: Detergent, yes.

Jim: I like that.

Jeff: Deterrent.

Jim: You were there the year before, so you didn't see John Kerry.

Jeff: No, no.

Jim: Okay. When you got home-- I mean, how did you come back from Vietnam?

Jeff: Flew.

Jim: Flew.

Jeff: Flew to the Kennedy Airport, which is sort of my home airport, being from New Jersey, and--

Jim: So did you get leave before you went to Fort Knox then?

Jeff: Yes. I think I had two weeks.

Jim: And did you fly commercial?

Jeff: I think so. I can't remember which airplane, but I think it was.

Jim: How were you received when you got home?

Jeff: Well, I'll tell you, this is true. And when I got drafted in Copenhagen I had to go to Bremerhaven, Germany, to enroll myself in the draft. And it's an Army post there and all American soldiers, and I had my hair sort of down and--at least the back of my

neck, if not longer, and I walked into the Army post and a couple of soldiers spit on me because I looked like a hippie. Well, when I come back from Vietnam I'm walking through the Kennedy Airport with a military outfit on, and I was a LRRPer, so I had a black beret and boots and I was all military looking, and this young woman with a buckskin jacket spit on me. So I got spat on for two different reasons. (both laughing)

Jim: You just couldn't win. Maybe it was that you had a problem.

Jeff: It could be. I just made their saliva work up I guess.

Jim: What did your family and friends in New Jersey feel about this?

Jeff: My family was absolutely astonished that I came back because they didn't know. I got put on that plane in a matter of hours. I didn't even have orders until I got on the plane, and so my parents had no idea that I was back, you know, and they were just absolutely flabbergasted, joyful, obviously. But they thought I was still in Vietnam.

Jim: What did the community that you lived in think about you?

Jeff: My high school buddies and myself and Joffrey, who was my best friend that went into the service with me and over to Vietnam with me, we had a lot of good welcome-home parties. So that was fun.

Jim: Okay. What do you think about your experience of being in Vietnam now?

Jeff: A waste of time, a waste of lives, just a shameful reaction to a communist government that eventually won't work anyhow.

Jim: How did your experience affect your life afterwards?

Jeff: I would say in two major ways, one negative and one positive. The negative part is that I tend to undersize problems now, still. For example, when I was married we had a toilet upstairs that leaked and it came down, ran over the television in the living room and covered the walls with feces, and my wife had never experienced anything that disgusting, and my reaction was, "Look'it, we'll get it fixed. This is not a problem." What a problem is is rappelling out of a helicopter and having a bunch of Viet Cong shooting at you. And so I tend to undersize problems, and I still do. The positive thing is that I think the Army injected me with a huge dose of ambition. So I went to school with the idea that I wasn't going to be like the grunt that I was in the Army. I was going to be managerial material. So I focused on school and did quite well for a guy that had no educational base to go into school. So I'd say that the two

things that it affected me was a good dose of ambition and the tendency to undersize problems.

Jim: Did your Vietnam experience affect your attitude towards government, you know, in either a large or negative--or in any sense on its policies?

Jeff: Well, I guess it told me that everything the government does isn't right, from a major standpoint being the philosophical basis for the war being wrong to a minor standpoint being when I was in training I was certified as a flame thrower operator. Well, I go to Vietnam, I never saw a flame thrower but they put a 106 recoilless rifle on my vehicle, which I didn't know how to operate. So it told me that government isn't always right, so you got to question it.

Jim: And does that transfer to your feeling about state and local governments too?

Jeff: Sure. I was in state government for 28 years, and I've seen mucho mistakes being made, and I feel that I have some satisfaction in trying to resolve some of those mistakes.

Jim: How did you get to Wisconsin?

Jeff: Graduate school.

Jim: Graduate school.

Jeff: Yeah. I went to Mansfield State College for my undergraduate and-- Actually I started in Luzerne County Community College because I had such a terrible high school record. That's the only one that would accept me in Pennsylvania, and then Mansfield State College is where I got my bachelor's.

Jim: Where is that in?

Jeff: It's in north central Pennsylvania, in Mansfield.

Jim: How come did you go to school in Pennsylvania instead of New Jersey?

Jeff: Because when I was in Vietnam my dad retired and left New Jersey and we had a country home in Pennsylvania in the Poconos and that's where he retired to. So I lived with them and went to school there.

Jim: And then you went to graduate school at UW-Madison?

Jeff: Correct, yeah.

Jim: And then you just like many people just didn't leave?

Jeff: Just didn't leave. I got a Master's Degree in Public Administration. I thought I'd be going to D.C., but my wife really liked the English department here and she wanted to get her undergraduate here. So here I still am staying after 28 years.

Jim: Okay. Have you been active in any veterans' organizations since you've come back from Vietnam?

Jeff: When I got out of graduate school and got a job I went to Vets For Vets, which was then on campus, and I think they still exist.

Jim: Yeah. They are on University Avenue here.

Jeff: And I thought maybe I could help somebody because I thought I came through Vietnam in terms of mental situation pretty healthy, and I thought I'd try and help somebody, and I did for three years. And I think I mentally blocked this guy's name out. But it was like the stock market except the opposite, you know. You'd see improvements one day and then he'd be down, instead of always going up he's always going down. He started to drag me down with him, and I-- In fact, even if I knew his name I don't think I'd mention it here. But I just cut that off, and that was the only involvement.

Jim: So you have not been involved with the Vietnam Veterans or VFW--

Jeff: No.

Jim: --or American Legion; right?

Jeff: No.

Jim: Is there any particular reason why other than--

Jeff: I don't know. I guess there is no reason. I can remember going to a meeting on a city committee that I was appointed to at the VFW in--on the west side, I'm sorry, the east side, and they looked like a bunch-- We had a meeting downstairs and it was unrelated to VFW, but they looked like a bunch of unhappy people and people that drank a lot, and so I guess when that happened in the mid-'70s I guess I got turned off.

- Jim: You are really courageous. We are sitting in the basement of a VFW as we talk right now.
- Jeff: I know. (both laughing)
- Jim: So have you gone to any reunions of the 9th Division?
- Jeff: No. I've never been contacted by them as having a reunion.
- Jim: Okay. But you said you kept track of some people that you served with.
- Jeff: Yes. Joffrey Plane (ph) is my best friend in high school. He went in the same division as I do, and he and I keep in touch by phone once every two or three months. And another fellow from Detroit that I kind of was very close to, we keep in touch as well.
- Jim: Okay. That's good. Is there anything that we didn't cover that we should have covered?
- Jeff: Gees, you know, I think that's all.
- Jim: Okay.
- Jeff: I really thank you for—
- Jim: Well, we thank you.
- Jeff: --you letting me blow off some Vietnam steam for an hour, and that was enjoyable.
- Jim: Okay. Well, that completes our interview at about 11:15, the 3rd of November 2004.

[End of Interview]