

Interview of Richard Ratliff by Prof. Ernst on July 23, 1997 in Menifee County, Kentucky.

E: I'm going to ask you a number of questions. If you want to say something that I don't ask, please say whatever is on your mind. The first thing I would like to ask is, are you a native born Kentuckian?

R: Yes.

E: Where are you from?

R: I'm from Menifee County, Kentucky.

E: When and where did you enter the military?

R: During the winter of 1970.

E: What branch did you enter?

R: I entered the Army and ended up training for infantry with a secondary MOS of military police. I ended up doing military police work.

E: Where you drafted or did you enlist?

R: I volunteered for the draft. I had completed college in January of 1970 and I just invited the draft board to move my name up to the top of the list.

E: Where you a Morehead State graduate?

R: Yes.

E: At that point and time, you had to realize that Vietnam was a good chance.

R: Yes.

E: It didn't matter to you? What where your feelings at that time?

R: My feelings at that time were (pause) that many of the people my age were going, had already gotten back, or were currently over there. This included my brother. It seemed like something that I needed to do. I looked at it as getting a military experience over with and serving my country and getting my obligation out of the way. I didn't want to sit around and wait.

E: I've heard that a number of times. People figured they were going to be drafted anyway and they didn't want to sit around and wait. I've also heard that employers, would in some situations, not really want to hire an individual because they thought they would be pulled to Vietnam or the military. The job opportunities weren't that plentiful. Did you have that experience?

R: I really didn't try that hard to get a job. After I finished my classes at Morehead State, I just went ahead and made the move.

E: Your brother was already in the military?

R: My brother had gone in about six months earlier.

E: Was he in training at this point or was he already stationed?

R: He was stationed in Vietnam.

E: Could you tell me where you received your training and what it was like?

R: I received nine weeks of basic training at Ft. Knox, Kentucky and nine weeks of advanced infantry training at Ft. Polk, Louisiana.

E: Could you recall that experience at all for me? (Laugh by Ernst)

R: Yes. The Ft. Knox experience was sort of a shock because I had been used to college and dorm life. I didn't realize how many comforts I had until I found myself at Ft. Knox, Kentucky in February. It was quite an adjustment, but I found that days got easier, once I understood what they were trying to do. When I heard my name mentioned as one of those who were going to Ft. Polk for light weapons infantry training, I thought that was probably the worst thing that could have happened as far as assignments. I was really dreading it because I'd heard bad things about Ft. Polk, Louisiana. I was pleasantly surprised that the training was challenging, but it had a purpose and I guess I enjoyed it much more than Ft. Knox.

E: What had you heard about Ft. Polk?

R: That the humidity, the heat, the insects, and the training in general would be terrible. My portion of the infantry training was at a section in the fort that was of a little higher elevation. The humidity was actually less. Ft. Polk is in western Louisiana, which has a lot of pine trees and open territory.

E: Was your unit that you trained with balanced racially? Were there a lot of African Americans and Hispanics as well Caucasians?

R: There were quite a few African Americans, but I don't remember any Spanish.

E: Where did you go from there?

R: From Ft. Polk, I was assigned to Korea.

E: At that point, did you have any idea that you could go to Vietnam?

R: Yes. I had been asked to come to a certain meeting. Anybody who had brother or sister in Vietnam was asked to come to this meeting and sign that they already had a relative in Vietnam. I think they were looking at the possibilities there. Unless you specifically asked to go to Vietnam, they sent you somewhere else.

E: Now you had a college degree. Did you go to Officer Candidate School? Where you even interested?

R: No. I was not interested at that time.

E: Well, what was it like in Korea? What were your responsibilities? What was the country itself like?

R: I can remember the plane landing near Seoul, Korea. I could see the rice fields and the people working on the road with their small hand tools. I realized then that I was coming into a very different environment and I was excited about that. I was seeing something very different from what I had been used to. From the airport, I was taken to an assignment area. They were asking for volunteers for the military police unit in the DMZ. They wanted people who had college degrees and who were 6'2" tall. (Laugh by Ratliff) I had the college degree and a good friend beside me, Glen Vendorsleave also had completed college, but was also shorter than 6'2". They did take us both, however, because they

weren't getting enough volunteers. They were taking some people with college degree who were less than 6'2" and they were taking people who were over 6'2" and had less than four years of college.

E: What was the height requirement for? Did you ever find out?

R: Yes. It was for the intimidation factor. We were working directly with the North Korean soldiers. They were in the mix as we were securing the area at P'anmunjom. If you were 6 foot tall, you were quite a bit taller than the North Korean soldiers and that had an intimidation factor.

E: Did you serve with any of the South Koreans?

R: Yes. I did serve with ROCK personnel and liked them.

E: They are my current research interest because they served in South Vietnam also. They were always portrayed as a very tough and professional group.

R: Well, I agree with your assessment of them.

E: So, they were very professional?

R: Yes. Any South Korean soldier who was assigned to our group had to be the elite.

E: Did you make friends with any of them? Were they fairly friendly?

R: Yes. They enjoyed talking to us about life in the United States.

E: That's interesting. What were your responsibilities at that point? What did a MP do on the DMZ?

R: A MP on the DMZ would have an assigned time to be there. Our days were ten hours, which were completely during day light hours. In the nighttime, we were actually in the DMZ for a total of fourteen hours. Seven of those we could possibly be sleeping and seven of those guarding and watching the border. Our duties involved observations. We could look right over the border into North Korea and see the statue of Kam me o shaun??. We watched the traffic come and go and gave directions to our traffic. We didn't give directions to the North Koreans, but we observed them. If someone came by our post, we would call the next post and tell them that a truck is coming with twenty North Korean soldiers. We had two telephones in the outpost. One of which we could talk with the other post in our area and one that we could be contacted by Washington, D.C. or anywhere.

E: That was a hot spot.

R: It really made a difference on how you answered the phone. (Laugh by Ernst) If one rang you could say, "Hello, what do you want?" If the other one rang you would say, "This private at post so and so."

E: Did you ever have any calls from D.C.?

R: No. We didn't have anything like that happen.

E: I can't remember the date, but were you over there during the Pueblo incident.

R: We were just following the Pueblo incident. My first day on duty, I was at the bridge that the Pueblo crew had reentered South Korea.

E: What was your feelings at that time?

R: I was awed about that experience.

E: Was there a lot of energy, or excitement, or nervousness surrounding that incident? I don't want to put words in your mouth, but I'm just curious---

R: It was exciting and I was awed just to be there. Some of the people that I served had been at the bridge when the Pueblo crew was released.

E: Was it a tense time or a time of release because of that? Were relations still tense?

R: When I first arrived, I wasn't all that tense because I was just becoming acquainted to the routine. I had never seen enemy soldiers with their weapons pointed at me. As I became more aware of what was going on, it did become more tense for me.

E: Did the Vietnam War have any kind of impact? The fact that it was going on and that it was a hot war so to speak. At any point, your situation could escalate.

R: I can remember conversations that we would have, which we would say that it was rough in Korea, but it was a lot better than where the other troops are stationed. We were lucky.

E: What was your food like?

R: It was good.

E: Was it?

R: We had plenty of good food.

E: You didn't have to do the C-Rations or any of that?

R: No.

E: So, you had hot food.

R: The military police units at P'anmunjom were treated especially well.

E: Did you have any other siblings beside your brother?

R: I had two sisters.

E: So, you two were the only males. Why did he enter the military?

R: He had completed one year at Morehead State University and one semester at the University of Kentucky. He was getting at the point where he needed to select a major and he was a little uncertain. He wanted to get the military experience out of the way.

E: How far apart were you two apart in age?

R: He was two years younger than me.

E: Did he enlist also?

R: Yes.

E: What branch did he enlist in?

R: Army.

E: Any reasons for that?

R: Our father and our uncle served in the Army and it seemed natural for us to be in the Army.

E: Can you tell me anything about his training or where he was stationed?

R: He was stationed at Ft. Knox and later at Ft. Benning, Georgia.

E: Did you communicate much?



R: Yes. We communicated probably twice a month by letters.

E: Do you remember anything he said about his training experience?

R: Yes. He would tell me about the things they were doing. He was training to become a member of a Track Team. He told me about experiences where they would set their tents up and the area became flooded. This taught them not to set their tents up on low ground and things of that nature. Apparently, he did an outstanding job. I believe he was chosen as the outstanding trainee of his company. He had a lot of leadership ability.

E: Did he have any concerns about Vietnam? Or had he also made the decision that he was going to go serve?

R: He didn't relay them to us. I'm sure he did have concerns. I know in one letter that he advised me not to come to Vietnam if I had that option. If I did come to Vietnam, that he needed to guide me to some of things that I needed to be aware of.

E: Where was he stationed at and what was his responsibilities? He was a member of a Track Team. Can you tell me a little about what they would do?

R: Yes. When there would be an engagement with either the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese soldiers, following the engagements, our troops would follow the enemy to see where they went. They would see what direction they were going and he was a member of a Track Team that did that.

E: Do you know how big that unit was?

R: Normally the Track Team unit would be small.

E: Yes. I would think so. Did he like his job over there?

R: I believe that he did find it very challenging, but I'm sure all of them would have rather chosen to be somewhere else and doing something else than what they were doing. Since they were there, I think he would have chosen that.

E: Can you tell me anything else about his experience?

R: One of things that stands out in my mind about the Vietnam experience for my brother Billy and the entire family is the loyalty of those he served with for our family. We've had cards, calls, and visits from a number of young men that trained with Billy and from one young man who actually made a point, twenty-three years after my brother's death, to come and meet with the family. He related to us, the experiences of the last day that Billy lived.

E: Did you have any idea if this guy had not returned to tell you this? Did you have any closure at this point or did this provide closure?

R: This did provide a lot of closure. We knew on what day that his death occurred and what day he arrived back in this country and I remember the day of the funeral very well. The follow-up that the military did through the ROTC unit at Morehead State University was very positive, helpful, and very professional.

E: It's up to you and if you don't want to talk about it, it is fine. If you know the circumstances of your brother's death and a little bit about the funeral, but if you don't want to.

R: The Track Unit was following the North Vietnamese troops and apparently a sniper was positioned and waiting for them. My brother was on the point and was killed instantly. This was on September 24, 1970 and I was notified in Korea by the Red Cross on September 29th. I immediately made arrangements with my unit to fly back to the States. It was a three day flight and a very rough time. I wondered about my folks at home the whole time and more so since, about the experience they went through. The community was extremely supportive. My parents had a tremendous amount of faith, of course my father has died since then. They held up. I can remember my father trying to help the rest of us hold up, but it was just a rough time.

E: Did the community really come out? At this point and time, at least in some communities of the country, the anti-war movement was very strong.

R: There was no anti-movement in Menifee County.

E: I didn't think so. They really came out and supported the family.

R: Extremely well.

E: Did you think the military did a good job of looking after the funeral and providing you with time off?

R: Yes. They certainly did. The individuals assigned to our situation were very professional and very thoughtful and maintained contact with the family for several months after the funeral.

E: Some of this was through Morehead State?

R: People were assigned by the ROTC unit at Morehead State University.

E: And they were the ones who served as liaisons, so to speak?

R: Yes.

E: How did you view the Vietnam War? Did you view the Korean situation and Vietnam in the same light? Did you see them as similar situations? I guess, how did you view what America was doing in each area?

R: I viewed them as the effort of our country to stop the spread of communism.

E: Did your brother view it the same way?

R: I think he viewed our efforts the same way. He may have questioned some of our strategies in Vietnam. I know from speaking to some of the young men he served with that they also wanted to serve their country. They may have, however, had some doubts about the strategy.

E: Can you tell me anything about the visit from your brother's friend when he returned and talked to you? How long ago?

R: It was in the summer of 1993 and the young man had trained with and was with my brother in Vietnam. He just showed up one day in the community. He met with my parents and then later on with me. He came a great distance to do that and has since maintained contact through cards and letters.

E: Can you tell me what motivated him to do this?

R: He thought highly of my brother and they were good friends. It was devastating to him, the day my brother was killed.

E: Can you tell me where he was from?

R: Kansas City, Missouri.

E: I guess one of things that intrigues me about the Vietnam War is the different people that it brings together. A small town man from Kentucky and somebody from Kansas City and how it brought them together. A lot of them did very well and worked together very well. That has always fascinated me because on the surface they wouldn't have a lot in common.

R: True, it did bring them together. It brought races together and people from different areas of the world. They became very close.

E: Did his death change your view or thoughts on Vietnam?

R: It didn't change my political thoughts. I knew that we had the treaty and the ability to win the war and get it over with. It is very frustrating to think about the fifty thousand plus lives lost there and knowing the grief that it caused and how our government followed a strategy that they knew wouldn't be successful. They should've taken action to end the conflict.

E: What do you think of Robert MacNamara's book, In Retrospect.

R: It is revealing. It is things that we speculated on in later years that were possibly happening, but it just puts it out there as fact.

E: I guess what I'm most curious about is that MacNamara always enlists an emotional response. Some people look at me and say that he should be in jail. If he had that type of information at that time and still continued to send young men over there, why?

R: He continued to send men into battle, who thought they were winning.

E: What about your family's views on the war and the military?

R: My family is very patriotic. I believe their feelings of frustration about the way things were done, are stronger than mine.

E: Did they feel better after one of your brother's fellow soldiers visited about the whole---because quite often the families did not get all the information about how their child or brother died.

R: I believe that the visit we had in 1993 from the young man was very uplifting and comforting to them.

E: Have you or any of your family members been to the Kentucky Vietnam Memorial?

R: I have.

E: What were your impressions of it?

R: It's very touching.

E: I think it's very beautiful. I didn't know that it was a sundial and set up in that manner.

R: Did you see my brother's name?

E: Well, I wouldn't have known at that time. What about the Wall in Washington, D.C., have you made a visit?

R: I have not been there, but many of friends have been there and taken pictures.

E: Do you have any desire?

R: Yes. I would go there if I was in Washington, D.C. It would be my priority.

E: Joanne has been with me once and I've been twice. I must admit that it is one of the most moving experiences that I've had. I mean there is so much to see in Washington, but for me probably because of my research interest, it is the most moving.

(Pause) You're the first person that I'm going to ask this question of because you're the first educator that I've dealt with. As an educator, what do you think students and young people should know about the Vietnam War?

R: (long pause)

E: There is an interesting book that a Vietnam veteran wrote which explains what he thinks young people should know about the war. That hit me last night when I was thinking about what I was going to ask you.

R: During that era, the threat of communism was real. It was a real threat. We had the treaty obligations that had served us well since World War II. I think we should be taught about the history of the country and the conflict. I'm a history major and I want history to be taught as it was. I don't want to color it and I don't want someone else to. I want only the facts. I think our kids should know those.

E: Let me push you a little further. If you had to come into a classroom and talk about it, what would be of most importance for you to get across to them?

R: What I would like to get across to our students is that a democracy gives us and puts on our a shoulder a responsibility for the direction of our country. We do have an obligation to the rest of the world. We must be very cautious in the selection of our leaders. We got to put at the top of the list as far as reasons to select one person over another. We need to try to get good people in our government and in those critical positions, so that when decisions have to be made, they will be made by people who are looking out for the good of the country. They aren't hiding something or are willing to hide something for their own political gain. I think we are doing less of that in this day and time, than we were doing in the 60's. In the 50's and 60's, we didn't have a lot of reason to doubt our leaders. So we believed them. We shouldn't put them all into the same category as Mr. MacNamara, as being someone who was willing to mislead. A lot of them were doing the best they could with the information they had. The lesson I would want our students to have is that we cannot let decisions be made for selfish reasons and expect things to come out good for us. I know I'm not saying that very well, but it is very high on my list. It all comes back to us. We have that responsibility in this country.

E: I'm curious if you have any thoughts on Lyndon Johnson then and now? Where you a fan?

R: No. I wasn't a fan of Lyndon Johnson and consider myself a political conservative. I know in looking back that President Johnson did a lot of good things in some other areas, but I think



he was less informed than he should have been on the Vietnam situation. He sort of inherited that anyway and didn't know which way to go. The fact that he was willing to allow it to continue without clear cut objectives was bad. I compare that with what George Bush did in the Gulf. He laid everything out that we were trying to accomplish and he tried to do that with a limited loss of life on both sides. I don't think Mr. Johnson did that.

E: Jo told me a neat story about your brother at UK. She was talking about the selection of colleges or one of the reasons why he went in. I'm a little vague.

R: I know that we discussed colleges a lot and majors. It was always assumed that the place to be was UK. During his military experience, I had written to him about whether he planned to re-enroll at UK and get a degree. He wrote back and said that he was thinking about the University of Arizona. He had found out that there were other universities besides UK.

E: I think everyone in this states love the big blue. When Jo told me that I sat and thought about it and it fascinates me. I think it's very true. For starters, everyone wants to play basketball, but I think everyone feels the need to go to UK. I think that rang so true when Jo said that. Did both of your military experience expand--you came back to Kentucky, but did you ever think of not coming home? Apparently, he had decided that there were other places in the world.

R: At that time, I was anxious to get back home with my family. Since then, I've done a lot of traveling and I know that there are some great places out there that I wouldn't mind living. I think about the western states.

E: I don't know that I have anything else. Is there anything that I haven't asked that you would like to comment on?

R: One thing that I've noticed about myself since the Vietnam experience--when there is a movie on, whether it is an older or a newer one that shows a war scene or when I watch footage of the different wars and I see somebody fall, my mind automatically goes to the grief that the family is going to experience. I don't take it lightly even if it's just a John Wayne film. That is the part that lies on my mind. In watching the account of the Gulf War, even though the casualties were low, I knew that for those individuals that it was everything. I do think a lot about that and how lightly people take those things. I've heard people say during the Gulf experience of why don't we do this and we don't we do that. I knew that those options would cost hundreds of thousands of lives on both sides. My thoughts were that we did the right thing in calling a halt to it at the point we did.

E: That's a good observation.

R: I feel strongly about that. If we are going to enter a conflict, we need to look at it as though all of us are in it and that all of our lives are in danger. It affects the families when life is lost. It is devastating. If it is worth doing, it is worth the commitment of all of us. I don't like the strategy

that says that we will give this many in the way of troops. I don't like that strategy.

E: Hollywood portrays itself in such a flippant manner. Most of the movies do.

R: Possibly, most of our audiences like to see people get shot and maimed. They don't realize that in real life those things are happening and the grief that goes with it.

E: I don't have anything else. Are you sure that you are done? I would like to see those letters at some point, if you are O.K. with it. Or if you want to Xerox sections of it and not give us the whole letter. You will be amazed of what we find of interest. One of my students, had a husband who served, showed me this one letter. What was most on this one man's mind was sledding in Kentucky. Any of that type of stuff is great. We are just trying to get a picture of the experience.