# David Ward oral history interview

Army Specialist (E-4), United States Army
Vietnam War

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**Abstract:**

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**Interview Transcript:**

[0:02] HS: Alright, hello, this is Heidi Sheldon, Archivist at the Virginia War Memorial. I'm speaking with David Ward today on October 29, 2020. Thank you for joining me today, sir.

[0:14] DW: You're quite welcome. It's good to see you.

[0:17] HS: Can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up?

[0:21] DW: Um, I was a Navy brat. My father was stationed in Bayonne[?], New Jersey, so I was born in Jersey City, New Jersey.

[0:32] HS: And when did you decide that you were gonna join the military?

[0:36] DW: Um, it was pretty much prescribed for me. Of course, we moved all over the world before I—he landed in Fairfax County, and that's where I took the oath. I was drafted into the military at Fairfax County, the courthouse. And so uh, my dad pretty much dictated that I was gonna go face the draft irregardless [*sic*] of all the protests that were going on, that kind of thing.

[1:13] HS: And how did you feel about that?

[1:14] DW: Well, I just wasn't terribly enthusiastic about it, but I knew that I didn't want to go to Canada; didn't want to avoid the draft; that sort of thing. So, you know, I knew that my, you know, I volunteered for the draft because I knew my number was coming up, you know, for the draft selection. So, I went in with eyes wide open and a smile on my face most of the time (laughs).

[1:45] HS: And what year was that?

[1:46] DW: That was 1969, February of 1969.

[1:53] HS: And can you tell me a little bit about what training you received?

[1:57] DW: Sure! From Fairfax County, we took a bus to Richmond, and from Richmond we took a train down to Fort Benning, Georgia, which is where I did my basic training. And from Fort Benning, Georgia went to Fort Polk, Louisiana where I did the advanced infantry training. It was called Tiger Land; that's where anybody who was 11 Bravo was sent if they were training to go over as infantrymen into Vietnam—South Vietnam, I should say.

[2:36] HS: And did you have anything memorable happen to you during that training?

[2:40] DW: I got, uh, well when I was in basic training, there was—of course, it was the middle of the winter, and people were getting sick left and right—and I came down with Mononucleosis and so was sent home from training for four to six weeks while I did the recovery and then went back to Fort Benning and then on to Fort Polk. So, that was the most memorable thing. The second most memorable thing I can remember is we were on an ambush training, and we happened to be—there happened to be a Special Forces group that was training with us, and we popped an

ambush on them. And then breaking from the ambush, I stepped on an armadillo, which was the first time I'd ever encountered an armadillo.

[3:28] HS: (Laughs)

[3:29] DW: And uh, the wildlife in southern Louisiana around that area was, uh, filled with scorpions and—what were they called—pygmy rattlesnakes. And so, we were constantly, guys were getting either bitten or [stung] by scorpions, that kind of thing. That was one of the most memorable encounters, you know, being mostly a suburban city boy, that was the first time I had encountered that wildlife before. So, I was kinda amazed at the variety of biological life that you were gonna come across.

[4:13] HS: (Laughs)

[4:14] DW: The thing I would say is that at Fort Polk, Louisiana you wake up in the morning at, you know when they get you up at 4:00–4:30 in the morning, it was already 100 degrees, and the humidity was, uh, 90+ percent. So, it was *not* air conditioned, so it was pretty brutal. But it prepared us for going to Vietnam because that was extremely hostile weather and temperatures and all the rest of it.

[4:42] HS: Did you leave for Vietnam after your training at Fort Polk?

[4:46] DW: Yes, I went from Fort Polk we went to Fort Louis, Washington. And at that time, President Nixon was trying to decide as to how much of the war he wanted Americans to fight. It went from Westmoreland to Abrams was the general in charge. And Westmoreland was old-school World War II career fighter and was used to military skirmishes, where an army was against an army: the North Vietnamese Army, that sort of thing. Whereas Abrams was more into counter-insurgency. And so, a lot of the war at that point was being turned over to the South Vietnamese, and we often were in support of South Vietnamese troops. So, it was a different situation, you know, in terms of they made a decision as to what—in my particular group—how many were going to either Germany or Korea versus Vietnam. But I ended up going to Vietnam.

[6:01] HS: And where in Vietnam were you?

[6:03] DW: I was in Pleiku. Actually, I was with the 4$^{th}$ Division was where my assignment with the 1$^{st}$ and 31$^{st}$ of the 35$^{th}$ Infantry, outside of Pleiku on, uh; the base camp was known as The Oasis, and outside of that I was assigned to LZ, Landing Zone Gypsy, which was very close to the Cambodian border. And Ho Chi Minh Trail was a major route down into the Central Highlands. And so, we were in mountain area, and we worked mostly with Montagnards [mountain-dwelling indigenous people]. I very seldom saw South Vietnamese at all; it was mostly in the Highland Jungle. Our sister unit took a tiger that was out in the jungle. You know, it was filled with monkeys; it was triple-canopy jungle. You could barely see, in many cases, much beyond two or three men in front of you because the jungle was so thick, and we were all had machetes that we used to cut down the bamboo to, you know, blaze trails. A lot of the area that we were in, it didn't look like human beings had ever been in there. And the Montagnards were very interesting people because they were literally quite close to the Stone Age. That had stone axes, stone tools that they were

still using, to the extent that they hadn't gotten metal from the Americans to fashion into weapons and that sort of thing. And of course, the Army provided the, you know, weapons to them that they hadn't already captured from the Vietnamese—AK-47s, that kind of thing.

[7:54] HS: So, you mentioned being in the jungle. What types of things were you doing?

[7:58] DW: Well we were mostly, uh, doing recon. They would send us out on long recon missions, out in the mountains to see, you know, if enemy troops were moving not an area. You know, were we encountering supplies coming down from the Ho Chi Minh Trail from Cambodia and Laos? And so, a lot of it was spent, you know, they would say, "Okay, we want you to go into a particular area and recon it and find out if there are any, uh, troop movements." We would set up ambushes at night, you know, to interfere with either North Vietnamese regulars or Viet Cong that were moving at night because a lot of supplies came in darkness. At that time, uh, very few of the units actually had night-vision goggles, that kind of thing. We had one that was deployed to us that the advance scouts would use, but, you know, basically when we were out at night, unless the moon was out or stars, there was very little illumination. So, it was almost all by sound. And so, we would pop ambushes on people that were moving through the jungle that weren't supposed to be there, that sort of thing. Often we would find evidence where we had wounded soldiers, that sort of thing; you know, we'd see blood on the ground, but most of the bodies or anything that we had encountered in the ambush were quickly taken away by, you know, whoever the troops were at that point. Often, we didn't see the enemy at all; we just turned them and that sort of thing.

[9:51] HS: How much time did you spend out in the field versus back at base?

[9:56] DW: Well, I was—I should start this story. I landed in Vietnam in August at The Oasis, and Fire Base Gypsy was set up between September and October of 1969. So, we were building the LZ: you know, the bunkers and that sort of thing. It was a rat-infested hole, you know, for the most part. We had this tent that was set up and then bunkers all around, and then there was an artillery unit that was set up there. So, the first, I would say, two or three months we were out in the field almost constantly. And then I was wounded in Vietnam, and then I was sent back to Pleiku, and from Pleiku that sent me to Cam Ranh Bay because I had [taken] grenade fragments and RPG fragments to the forehead. And I had what was probably, today, would be termed brain injury. But I recovered from a concussion, and then they sent me back into the field after that. And then I was out and got wounded a second time, and then they sent me back to Long Binh. So, I would say probably six months in the field and six months in the rear. You know, in terms of being back at base, it was very seldom we were back at base for very long periods of time. And I say "the base" meaning The Oasis, which was a major base. You know, of course we were out at LZ Gypsy, you know, quite frequently when we weren't being helicoptered out to, you know, different areas along the Cambodian border doing patrols. And we would be out; there was one time we were out for almost 45 days, and it was around Thanksgiving, and I can remember them helicoptering in a hot meal. It was the first hot meal we'd had since September, you know, which is, November. And so, it was quite a treat to say the least because we were living on C-rations. They hadn't had what they called the, uh—I forget what the term was—but they had a different kind of chow later on where you just mixed water, and you could have almost anything you want. Most of the stuff that we ate was, like, "green eggs and ham," we called it. You know, it was just lousy food altogether. And the mess tent didn't have much because we weren't getting resupplied very regularly. The milk,

when it would come in, would be sour. They'd give you two sodas and a beer ever day was supposed to be the rations you were supposed to receive. And of course, the beers were warm, and the sodas were warm. You know, most of it looked like it had been dated back to the Korean War.

[13:03] HS: Did you ever had any down time?

[13:07] DW: Um, well once I got back to Long Binh, I was the supply clerk and then an armor for probably six months; that was the down time I had. Other than that, it was very seldom that we had down time. Um mostly it was out in the field, so, you know, in terms of getting to—and I call "down time" where you could go to the PX and buy cigarettes and all the rest of the kinds of things—no, I never saw that until after I was wounded the second time.

[13:45] HS: How did you keep in touch with your family and friends back home?

[13:49] DW: Letters. Course, the letters we received had to be burned immediately because they could have been used by the enemy for propaganda purposes, if we'd left them. So, I have none of the letters that my parents and friends, my brother and stuff had written me. But my mom did keep all the letters that I had written. And she gave them to me, uh, once I got back. She said she couldn't; she was so glad I was home, she didn't want to be reminded of all the stuff that I had gone through.

[14:26] HS: Sure. How long were you there?

[14:29] DW: I was there 14 months. I extended while I was over in Vietnam, especially because I was over in Long Binh, which was a rear area. I was relatively safe, even though we were getting mortared in and out. So, I felt, you know, pretty secure just staying, you know, over so that I could get out early because I had left college, went to work; it's a long story. I went to the University of Virginia and then left the University of Virginia not on great terms, but I wanted to go back to school because I realized I didn't want to spend the rest of my life working as an enlisted man in the military 'cause it's not, at least at the rank I was, it wasn't the most pleasant life. And the officers had a tendency to treat you like you were bums, even though I had a college education. So, it was, I was glad when I got home, to say the least.

[15:31] HS: So, when you came home, did you decide then that that was when you were gonna walk away? You didn't want to stay in the military; that was enough?

[15:40] DW: Right, right. Yeah, well my, you know I had grown up in the military all my life because of my father. And my father in World War II was a captain in the military; he was at Okinawa and Iwo Jima. And he was in what was called a Littoral Combat Ship [a small, near-shore ship used for both attack and troop deployment] in the Navy. And he was the captain of his vessel, and after World War II, Eisenhower and the military general decommissioned a lot of the officers, or he de-ranked them. So, he went back to being a lieutenant after being a captain, so he had to rework his way through the military. And the military just did not suit my idea of being rewarded for the kinds of work that you were doing, you know, because it was, in many cases, it was an arbitrary, bureaucratic decisions that were being made that affected people's lives. And I know that the military really struggles to try to help the people that are in the service, but the

bureaucracy can be very brutal to people. My father was an engineer, for instance; he graduated from the Naval Academy. He was in "Short School"—what they called when they graduated in '44 after three years in the Naval Academy—and was, basically, took command of the LCS ship and guided it through the Panama Canal and all the rest of it. You know, he's pretty proud of being a, you know, a sea-going. But, you know, after the war and stuff, when they got rid of a lot of the officers and that kind of thing, he was, uh, troubled because he wanted to stay at the Navy, but he had a family to raise. And so, he went into the Supply Corps. So, he was not really one of the more happy people I ever encountered in my life, you know, because of career decisions that were forced on him.

[17:54] So what did you decide to do after you came home?

[17:59] DW: Ha! Talk about ironies of all ironies. After I graduated; I went to George Washington University and finished up my degree, and then I worked for the Department of the Navy in the Department of Defense for 35 years and then retired as a civilian. So, as much as I hated the military when coming back from Vietnam, as a civilian we weren't treated very well—you know, being veterans. I can remember being spit on, coming out of the San Francisco Airport where we came in to—I guess it was the Oakland—the Reorientation Center. And we had two days of reorientation, you know, coming from Vietnam back into the United States. And they took us off the plane at Oakland Air Force Bases and took us over to the Relocation Center, and all the buses were covered with wire because people were standing outside the gates throwing, you know, trash at us.

[19:05] HS: Oh my goodness.

[19:06] DW: And so, you know they made, spruced us up, so that we were good-looking military guys (laughs), that kind of thing. And they sent us to San Francisco Airport, and we went and decided a couple of us were gonna go in and get a real meal from a restaurant in the airport. And they refused to seat us because we were in uniform, and then as we were walking out one of the ladies turned around and spit on me. So, it was not a nice situation coming home. It wasn't like it is today, and I'm so grateful that people are much more understanding that when you're in the military it's, you know, you do what you're supposed to do and try to do it the best you can. And just because you've been in combat and the rest of it doesn't mean you're any more of a killer than anybody else is, for that matter. I found, you know, the whole reintegration into civilian life was very, very difficult; very difficult.

[20:13] HS: Was that mostly because of people's reactions toward you…

[20:15] DW: Oh yeah.

[20:16] HS: Or just the change in your situation?

[20:19] DW: Well, it was the political situation in America at the time. I mean, when I was drafted, you know, I had participated in anti-war marches and, you know, the rest of it. But towards the end of the war, it was really *ugly*. Ugly is the best I can say. It's, you know, just was not pleasant, you know, going back to college and, you know, being older, you know. George Washington

University was a good campus to go to because it was, it serviced a lot of ex-military people, that kind of stuff. You know, after McCain and the bunch came back from the Hanoi Hilton, many of those men came back to George Washington University. So, there was a pretty strong veteran presence at George Washington University, so it was more accepting than many other colleges would have been, for instance.

[21:27] HS: Are you still in touch with anyone that you served with?

[21:31] DW: No.

[21:32] HS: No.

[21:33] DW: When I left the military, I wanted to forget, and I just really didn't go out of my way to try to um remain in touch with folks. It was just too painful in many regards. I've seen too many people die, too many people get injured And I just wanted to put it all out of my mind and try to get on with life. I'm not sure it was the best decision, but as a military brat, I was used to moving so frequently and not maintaining friendships for long periods of time; it was sort of a natural reaction to the, uh, my situation.

[22:15] HS: Is there anything that you wished you had been able to do differently?

[22:23] DW: Well besides going to war (laughs),

[22:25] HS: (Laughs) besides that.

[22:29] DW: No, I don't think there was anything that I would have changed. I think that, uh, my service over there was, um, credible. I did not see the kinds of, um, the Mai Lai Massacre, those kinds of things. We were so far away from, you know, the Vietnamese populations, you know, being out in the jungle in the areas that I were [*sic*], we really didn't have the situation where we were cordoning villages or, you know, herding people into relocation centers for, you know, out of the villages, that kind of stuff. I never experienced any of the torching of the Hutus and all that stuff; that's not what we were doing when we were over outside of Pleiku anyway. So, I feel pretty good about the kinds of things that I did, even though it was hard, and I wouldn't want to live through that again. I wouldn't want *anybody* to live through a war. I don't think most Americans are really prepared for it, you know. But, you know in terms of changing when I get back to the rear area, I volunteered quite a bit to help with orphanages and that kind of thing. So that, you know, made the time go by fast. And I tried to stay busy as much as possible.

[24:07] HS: Is there anything that you're particularly proud of having done?

[24:15] DW: Proud? Of surviving. I mean, the situation when I was first wounded, we were out on patrol, was a three- or four-day patrol; that was what it was supposed to be. I was out with a 11-man squad, and we didn't know it at the time, but there was a Special Forces unit that was operating in the same area, and they encountered the enemy, and they chased them into our position unbeknownst to us—at least unbeknownst to me. And the force overran our position, so there was a lot of dead and wounded. And surviving that whole situation, being able to return fire even

though I was scared out of my living wits—I'll always be proud of that, that I stood up and, you know, supported the team that I was with to the best of my ability. So uh, but beyond that, no, I can't think of anything right off the top of my head. It's not something anybody's ever asked me before either (laughs).

[25:25] HS: (Laughs) uh, if you were gonna speak to a group of high school students who were considering military service, what would you tell them?

[25:34] DW: Well, I have spoken to a high school class; my daughter's a history teacher. So, I teach a class on Vietnam from my perspective because the one thing I want to encourage—and I think you're doing an outstanding job on—is oral history. I am so regretful of the fact that I didn't get to even think about recording my father, you know, before he died even though he, uh, was definitely not somebody that ever wanted to talk about his experiences. I mean, he was, I didn't even know he was in—I knew about his service, of course, but I didn't know that he was in the battles of Okinawa and Iwo Jima…

[26:19] HS: Mhmm.

[26:20] DW: And that he was scheduled to go to the Battle of Japan, you know, the liberation of Japan. And so, he never really talked about it. In fact, as my wife once asked him, and he said, "It's none of your damn business." And that's—I think oral history's important. I think the kids need to hear that, you know, 'cause I was a History major myself when I was going through George Washington University—a History-Philosophy major with a minor in Finance, which is how I got into the government. But um, I think it's very important to try to capture as much of the oral history of what people have gone through, you know, in particular before it's lost, whether it's rural farms—you know, because so much of the folks that used to be in farming, like my wife's family, no longer own farms and no longer are tied to the earth the way they used to be. So, it's important to capture what they learned, and what they knew. So, that's what I try to teach them is that, you know, you're gonna encounter a lot of difficulties in this life, and the important thing is knowing that there are people there that will help you at any stage that you're going through. I was lucky I had close friends at George Washington University who helped me through the PTSD that I was experiencing. So, I tell my [students], it's a good life if you're able to stay disciplined. It's a stoic life; it's one where you have to self-discipline and realize that you're not gonna get everything you ever wanted in life. But it's a great way to serve. But it also can be very brutal, and it's not something you should treat lightly. So, that's, you know, the message that I send the kids: It can be very fulfilling for the right people, but if you're not the right person, it can be a very brutal experience.

[28:30] HS: You mentioned that you had been involved in some anti-war activities before you were drafted. Were you involved in any afterwards, after you came home?

[28:39] DW: I went to, um, to the march where John Kerry threw his medals away. So, I saw that whole thing. I didn't participate in it; I was more of an observer because I wasn't sure. I felt so conflicted, having been in Vietnam, and some of the guys there were much more militant than I ever was. And partly because of my background because my father was in the military, and so I was—I didn't feel the same kinds of anger that many of them felt, and the betrayal that they felt,

you know. And so, that was probably the last exposure I had. I went to, when the [Vietnam Memorial] wall was set up, my wife and I—and, in fact, my baby daughter—we all went to see the wall down in Washington, D.C. when it was con[secrated]. I forget what they call it, but they did the opening of that, and I was very proud of that, that symbol of our sacrifices and the sacrifices of most of the people had been through the Vietnam War. So yeah, but I think if anybody during that period of time felt very conflicted if they had been in Vietnam, and seeing the antiwar marches, and knowing that the war—at least from my position—was very wrong. And I say that only because I think that the politics of it was just so badly run that there was no chance for success or, you know, persuading people that, you know, democracy—you know, when many of them were living in just the most primitive conditions that you could possibly imagine. They were more about food than, you know, ideology; that's for sure.

[30:47] HS: Is there anything else about your experience that you'd like to share?

[30:54] DW: I can't think of anything right now. Um, like I say, what never leaves me is the smells of Vietnam: the diesel from, you know; the napalm; hearing the B-52s—and I'll say, you know, the *bombings*, especially when we invaded Cambodia; the ground trembling under your feet is just something I'll never forget. And it's just, you know, the razor grass that would just cut the skin right off your bones—those are the things that I remember, and I try to forget, but they come back to me every once in a while. You know, I'll be out at night, you know, and I very seldom go out at night alone anymore because of—it just scares the hell out of me, thinking of the things that we went through. So, that's all I can say.

[32:07] HS: I want to thank you so much for your time today. We appreciate you being willing to speak about these tough things with us.
[32:12] DW: No problem.

[32:13 – Part 1 of recording ends.]

[Part 2 – 0:00] DW: So much of the conflict was different depending on the area that you were in. And that's what, you know, when I'd read the history—I have a whole—I don't know if you can see the bookcase behind me.

[0:12] HS: Yes, sir.

[0:13–1:01] DW: One section of the bookcase is all memoirs of people who have been in Vietnam. And I read it, and I just marvel, listening to the Marines that fought in Khe Sanh or the Army, uh, guys that went into Hamburger Hill. And it was so different: the exposure, I mean. I was in mountains, much like Hamburger Hill, but it wasn't like we were taking a mountaintop. We were really just doing recon and counter-insurgency kinds of things, as opposed to mass movements against the North Vietnamese Army. So, I think almost everybody had a different take on what was going on, and that's what's so, uh, *interesting* about that whole era.