

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Army Intelligence during the Vietnam War

Personal Experience

O. H. 1231

THOMAS E. FORNEAR

Interviewed

by

John B. Jamieson

on

July 10, 1989

THOMAS E. FORNEAR

Thomas Fornear was born September 23, 1946, in Lynwood, California. His parents met and married during World War II, during which his father served as a Glider Pilot in the U.S. Army.

Thomas lived in California and Pennsylvania before his family settled in the Youngstown area in 1959. He graduated from Austintown Fitch High School in 1964. Thomas continued his education at Youngstown State University shortly after finishing high school.

Thomas enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1966, wanting to get out of the area. He was not in danger of being drafted. He joined the Army Security Agency upon enlistment after being assured that they had no role in Vietnam.

After basic training at Ft. Dix, New Jersey, he received advanced training in Intelligence at Ft. Deavens, Massachusetts. He received training in radio operation, Morse code and radio triangulation. After over a year of this training, Thomas arrived in Vietnam on May 1, 1967.

Thomas was assigned to a radio listening post near the city of Hue, near the DMZ. Their mission was to intercept enemy radio messages and track the position of enemy units through radio listening. Thomas was stationed near Hue when it was overrun during the Tet offensive of January 1968.

After a tour of duty in Vietnam, Thomas was transferred to a

small radio listening post near Munich, Germany. His duties included electronic eavesdropping of communist forces. Then, after being discharged in 1970, Thomas attended Youngstown State University and received a B.A. in 1972. He became involved in local government researching grant opportunities, and later was employed as a bartender.

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INTERVIEWEE: THOMAS E. FORNEAR

INTERVIEWER: John B. Jamieson

SUBJECT: radio surveillance, Hue, Morse Code

DATE: July 10, 1989

J: This is an interview with Thomas E. Fornear for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Vietnam, by John Jamieson, at 153 Upland Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio, on July 10, 1989, at 3:45 p.m.

Thomas, would you give us a little background on your family and where you grew up and things of that nature?

F: I was born in 1946 in a suburb of Los Angeles, California. My parents . . . I was post war baby boomer. My parents met right after the war and were married in 1945. I was the first and only boy out of four children; three girls, one boy. We lived in California until I was about nine years old. Then we moved to Windber, Pennsylvania, a small coal mining town about seven miles from Johnstown. I lived there for about four or five years and I moved to Austintown, Ohio in 1959. I graduated from Fitch High School in 1964 and started to . . . Youngstown State University immediately upon graduation.

J: What was your father doing during World War II, was he in the service then?

F: Yes, my father was a . . . He was a glider pilot in the European Theater. He never talked very much about it. He used to tell all the fun things; the neat experiences that he had. He never really talked about any of the . . . If there were any brutal times.

J: Was he still in the service when he met your mom?

F: Yes. He met when he was in training someplace in California.

J: This is after the war?

F: No, this is before the war. It is interesting. I have a whole stack of letters that I got after my mother died that were just the mail back and forth. It is kind of interesting just to read those things and compare it to certain kinds of letters you see today.

J: What brought him and your family into this area?

F: In 1953 my grandmother had a stroke so, we all moved back . . . They thought she was going to die so, we all moved back to Pennsylvania ostensibly for a month or two vacation. My father just decided. . . He had gotten a better job offer and he just decided to stay in Pennsylvania. We lived in . . . He was a salesman for a stapling company. He got transferred to Austintown and we moved to Ohio. So, that is what brought us here.

J: You went to Fitch High School, graduated in 1964?

F: Right.

J: Tell me about your first college experiences.

F: Kind of disappointing. High School was real easy and college was sort of the first chance to get out from under parents and go out and have a nice time. So, I didn't do that well in college. Typically we would go and skip classes and drink and play cards. I wound up with C's all the time instead of A's and B's. So, that is what finally, I think, pushed . . . One of the things that pushed me into enlisting in the Army. That and the fact that it got a little old living at home with your parents and attending "UCLA", the University at the Corner of Lincoln Avenue.

J: When you say you enlisted in the Army was there any potential for being drafted at the time?

F: None. I was a 2-S, 2-S deferment, and at the time as long as I would have stayed in college with passing grades I could have stayed out of the Army.

J: What were the circumstances behind your enlistment? Was the Vietnam War going yet?

F: To the best of my recollection the first thing that I remember about Vietnam was when I was working in a steel mill in 1965 during the summers, when Lyndon Johnson said, "We aren't going to send our boys over to fight that foreign war." Now I remember that and there

were probably about 20,000 or 25,000 troops over there at the time. In 1966--I enlisted in February 1966--by that time it had escalated to a point where there were probably 100,000 to 125,000 troops in Vietnam. I enlisted in the Army Security Agency.

Three or four of us who were really good friends all got sick and tired of college at the same time. We all went out and tried to enlist in the Air Force because we thought the Air Force was probably the safest place to go. We couldn't get in. They had a waiting list of about six months before you could get in and we wanted out right then. So, three of us decided we were going to join the Army and we all joined the Army together. We have all consecutive service numbers and two of the three of us--the other two friends of mine--joined on the buddy plan. They stayed together . . . The buddy plan was a real lie. You thought you would be able to stay together with your friend forever and ever but they split you up right after AIT. I got suckered into a . . . My friends had a three year enlistment and I got suckered into a four year enlistment because I talked to a recruiter from the U.S. Army Security Agency, which is, they do communications intelligence. The guy said, "Well, this is a four year enlistment and we can promise you that the Army Security Agency isn't in Vietnam." So, that is the reason why I enlisted in the Army Security Agency.

J: When you first enlisted where was your basic training at?

F: I did basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

J: Tell me a little bit about that and how long it lasted?

F: Fort Dix, New Jersey, let's see. When I went in it was freezing cold. We did basic training from February till April. It was just freezing. The one nice thing about doing basic training then was that it was so jammed up with people that were in the military, that they didn't really spend the kind of time on you like they did prior to that era, and probably today. You didn't get a lot of individual or specialized anything. It was just wham, bam, get them in, get them out. My recollection of basic training was something . . . It is probably the worst part of the entire four years of the Army that I was in, that eight weeks.

J: Describe a typical day in basic.

F: A typical day in basic was we were in brand new barracks and it was nice and clean; flush toilets, and nice showers. We woke up about 5:00, 5:30 every morning and did the normal clean up. Went to breakfast,

didn't have to do PT or anything like that in the morning. We just had to get up, go to breakfast, came back, and you started just your regular training schedule. Most of the training schedule it was . . . Well, it was divided into two things; it was the schooling of the things that you had to sit through and listen to, and the physical training. The physical training was running, jumping, playing and rifle. The book learning, the sit down in classroom type training, was Army rules, Army regulations, Code of Conduct, that kind of thing. For the most part it was so cold when we went through basic training that every time we would get indoors--and you would spend sometimes six hours indoors--you would be asleep most of the time or you would be drowsy or dozing off most of the time. Okay, it has been over twenty years. . . Yes, it has been twenty years since then and I can remember very little about what they told us. The things that stand out are probably those individual nasty times. The individual nasty times that you had; running into problems with sergeants, or running into problems with other recruits. For the most part basic training is a blank.

J: How abusive were they? We sometimes see on t.v. movies that the drill sergeants are real abusive physically, and verbally.

F: We had probably one of the better drill sergeants, at least for our platoon, that I ever recall anybody ever talking to. The guy copped forty tickets to a Dave Brubeck concert and passed them out to us one time. His name was Sam . . . His last name was Fischer but he is not Sam Fischer. He was a black guy, he was an E6. He, I thought, was a really nice guy. Some of the assistant drill instructors under him were typically brutal, or sadistic I suppose. I recall one time getting a rifle butt to the helmet for not doing something right but other than that I never saw much physical abuse. All of our drill instructors had been to Vietnam before. They all told us various insider stories. Probably mostly to impress the kids under them. I don't recall any real brutal war stories or anything like that. They had all been there and they told us that we were all going to go there no matter what because they were sending everybody there. As I recall everybody, of the 200 and some people in my company, when we graduated everybody but three people went to AIT infantry. The other three were the ones in the Army Security Agency and I was one of those three. While everybody else was just . . . They were going to do their eight weeks worth of AIT, or sixteen weeks worth of AIT and just put them on the boat and send them over as infantry replacements.

J: Advanced infantry?

F: Yes.

J: AIT?

F: Well, AIT is advanced individual training. I went through AIT intelligence, they went through AIT infantry.

J: Now, we are talking about?

F: 1966.

J: The war is starting to heat up a little bit. While you are still in the States what images or impressions of Vietnam do you have as you are finishing up with the training?

F: I didn't think I was going to go. I was told that I was in the Army Security Agency. They were not sent to Vietnam. What I later found out was that they finish Army Security Agency training and they reassign you. I was reassigned to U.S. Army unassigned and sent over to Vietnam. So, that was obviously why. I didn't think much of Vietnam at the time. There certainly weren't very many casualties in 1966, early 1966. When I left Vietnam there were 550,000 troops, when I got there there were about 125,000 troops. So, you can see how it escalated. That is the time when it escalated.

J: After basic you went to this advance training as part of security?

F: Yes.

J: What got you into that and how did that type of training go?

F: I signed up for officer candidate school when I was in basic training. As time went on in basic training I realized that going to officer candidate school would be a big mistake because they were taking officer candidates only for combat arms. That is infantry, armor and artillery and I didn't want to do that at all. So, I withdrew my nominated candidacy, myself from officer training, and going through all that paper work fouled up my original orders. Which were to go to California and do language training. Of course, the language training I was supposed to do was a cross between Chinese and Vietnamese. I suppose at the time I thought that was a good idea not to do that.

When I finally got into advance training through the Army Security Agency I was sent to Fort Deavens, Massachusetts, which was at the time well known as the college campuses of all military training bases. It

was a lovely little idyllic spot; brick buildings with the ivy and pleasant surroundings. A real, real nice place to go to school. It was right outside . . . Well, not right outside of Boston but within a half an hour to forty-five minutes of Boston. I was there for about for about a year and a quarter of going through training. The first training that I did was called manual wars intercept. To preface this, at the time all of this was top secret, you weren't allowed to say a word about the type of training you did or what your mission was once you arrived at your duty station.

J: What qualifications, and how did they find out these qualifications, got you in there in the first place?

F: One of the friends that I enlisted with had . . . He was a ham operator. He had always been a ham operator ever since he was a little kid. Well, he wanted to go into the signal corps. What I did prior to our enlistment . . . After you enlist you go through this testing procedure and the testing procedure helps the Army decide where to put you. So if you, for example, had been camping all your life and you knew where the north star was and you were not afraid of outdoor things, they put you in the infantry. Gary, this friend of mine, wanted to go into the signal corps. So, I sat and helped him practice for the signal corps test, which is they would take three letters, I, N, T--that is dit-it, dot-it, da--and they would run those things in a test. You would sit there with headsets on and you would hear this dit-it, dot-it, da, da, dit-it, dot-it, dit-it, da, dit-it, dot-it, da, and you would have to fill in I, N, T, T, I, N, T, I, N, T. Just to see whether or not you had the aptitude for that. Well, by doing that for him I all the sudden developed the aptitude for Morse code. So when I went in to take the same test he did I maxed out on it. I also maxed out on the language training because they used Esperanto as the language test. Now see I knew something about Esperanto before going in. That and I had taken three years of Spanish in high school and two years of Latin. So, Esperanto was a real rush. I got in there and I was originally scheduled for language training. After I screwed up my date for going to school they put me into Morse code training. That is, essentially, how I wound up doing that.

J: Okay, what types of things were they trying to train you in, in Massachusetts?

F: Massachusetts we learned how to take high speed Morse code. Now see I went through about three different schools while I was there because they were always cross training us because of casualties in Vietnam that they had to fill extra spots. The original school I

went to was twenty-six weeks and that was mainly Morse intercept. You learned you to take high speed Morse code. So, about the time I finished with that I suppose I could take Morse code at maybe thirty, thirty-five words a minute. Then we had to learn all of the machinery that we needed; the radios. We used a standard R390 receiver which could take from .5 kilohertz to 32 kilohertz, which pretty much covers the cycle for any kind of tactical communications that anybody would use.

J: Is that FM?

F: It is everything. It takes the band from top to bottom; FM is way, way up. We didn't do that, this was just carrier waves. You could intercept . . . With that machine you do a lot. You could catch most anybody, anyplace. Depending on your antennae and your ability to do that . . . In Vietnam we picked up signals in San Francisco. If you tune it in the right way you can do that. After I finished with that training--this is learning how to run transmitters, learning how to run your radio--then I had to go through a school which was devoted to direction finding. My original M.O.S. is O5H20, mainly Morse interceptor. Then my secondary M.O.S. was O5D20, which was the direction finding part; that is where you triangulate. You pick up a signal and you have three base stations, they triangulate on the signal and pin point the location of whoever it is you are looking for. In that we learned all kinds of great little machines that I suppose were classified at the time but I doubt seriously that they are now. Thing like punching holes in radar, radio finger printing, and different sorts of things, mostly which I have forgotten all about by now.

J: You were there for about a year and a half . . .

F: Year and a quarter.

J: Year and a quarter? When you finished that type of training your next assignment was?

F: My next assignment was Asmara, Ethiopia. At the time that was probably the premiere listening post in the entire world. It was way, way up high in this mountain, outside of. . . Well, let's see. . . You landed at Addis Ababa and then you would go to Asmara, which is about a three hour ride up through the hills. We needed diplomatic passports to get there because we had to with the land and all these strange places in order to get to Asmara. We were supposed to be civilians there too. About three weeks before I was supposed to leave, before I was supposed to go on leave and leave for Asmara, apparently some horrible catastrophe hap-

pened in Vietnam and they wiped out a whole bunch of people with my M.O.S. So, the cut orders on about twenty-five or twenty-six of us and they changed us from Ethiopia to Vietnam.

J: So, you never made it to Ethiopia?

F: Well, eventually I got to kind of visit there but I never made it there as a duty station.

J: What was the purpose of that listening station?

F: In Asmara?

J: Yes.

F: They could pick up all of the Mid-East, all of Israel. They did a lot of checking out on rocket testings on the Kamchatka peninsula. From what I was able to learn later they monitored atomic tests, missile launches. They watched for Soviet Mig scrambling and jet scrambling in order to find holes in their radar, things like that. I never really . . . I went there as a courier twice but I never . . . That was after I was stationed in Germany, later.

J: That was just sort of a spy station?

F: Surveillance.

J: So, through another mix up you end up in Vietnam.

F: Yes.

J: What was the date?

F: I got to Vietnam on May 1, 1967. It was real weird because it took us seventeen, or eighteen hours to get there and needless to say nobody on the entire plane slept going over. We played canasta the whole way over there. We are talking out of the entire seventeen hour trip, fifteen hours were just devoted to canasta; just played it and played it.

J: How did they route you? From D. Tyson?

F: No, we took off from Oakland, landed in Hawaii, then landed right in Cam Ranh Bay, wam bam.

J: Do you know what kind of plane it was?

F: No, it was Continental Airlines.

J: Civilian?

- F: Yes, 707. They were all civilian charters. Everything in my entire four years in the Army I never took a military transport anywhere.
- J: So, you wind up Cam Ranh Bay and what was the duty station they assigned you to?
- F: Well, the first thing I was supposed to do was I was on a ship burning detail. I was an E4 at the time and if you have ever seen the movies you know exactly what it is. They had these outhouses and they had these great big, fifty-five gallon drum things and they cut them in half and they put them under. When you get there before they . . . You are always someplace for three or four days before they find out where you are supposed to eventually go. My first detail was burning; real ugly, ugly thing. Smelled bad, stunk, was real hot, nobody liked it. You sat there and you poured gasoline in the can and lit it and then you had to stand over it and stir it to make sure it all burned. No fun. My second assignment when I was in Cam Ranh Bay, waiting for orders to be cut, was riding shotgun in a garbage truck. At one time three of us went out and they actually . . . Somebody fired on one of the garbage trucks once. That is the second, or third day I was in the country. I thought, "Jesus, I actually got fired on." I was just petrified.
- J: This is Cam Ranh Bay?
- F: This is in Cam Ranh Bay, outside of Cam Ranh Bay. We had to take the garbage about twenty miles down the road and dump it off someplace. They opened up on us. Cam Ranh Bay was at the time, and probably still could be, the largest single airport in the world. In order to get outside of Cam Ranh Bay you had to travel about twenty miles. It was huge, just huge. From Cam Ranh Bay, after the three or four days I spent in Cam Ranh Bay, they said, "Well Tom, you have orders to cut. You are supposed to go to Phu Bai." Now, Phu Bai is in I-Corps, that is way up on the top. It is about six kilometers outside of Hue and they cut me some orders. All they did was they gave you like thirty or forty copies of these orders and they said, "Okay, that is it," and they left us standing there. That is it, this is the first time you are ever in country. There is like three of us and they said, "Okay, now all you have to do is get from way down here at the bottom of Vietnam, all the way up to the top and you are on your own." So, it took us about four or five days because we didn't have any kind of a priority assignment. It took us about four or five days to get up to Phu Bai.
- J: What method of transport did you use?

F: Truck, bus, C123, helicopter, C123, helicopter, truck.

J: So, you end up in a base in?

F: Phu My, it was right across from the Phu My airport right on Route 1, right next to the Third Marine division, right next to the Seabees, right next to the Fifth M.I.C. We were in this station, it was called Tri Bauk Station; interesting place. Tri Bauk means "most northern." In 1963 it was the most northern outpost the United States Army had in Vietnam, I think up until 1964. It was nothing but a gigantic antennae field and there were probably about 900 of us there. We, at the time, they told us, we provided about eighty-five percent of all the hard intelligence for the entire country of Vietnam because we did all the direction finding. We took care of six provinces, covered them for intercept operations. Which meant that you had a mission. We had a bunch of people and we all had separate missions. We followed certain divisions, or certain units all the time and we kept track of them. We intercepted their communications and we kept calling in direction findings so that we could locate them all the time.

It was an interesting sort of thing because when you learn Morse code it is like dit-dot, dot-dit-dit-dit, dot-dit-dot-dit, dot-dit-dit, dit. That is A,B,C,D,E. But when you hear some poor, uneducated, North Vietnamese or South Vietnamese irregular sending Morse code it sounds more like somebody is taking their elbow and putting it down like that. It takes you about a month and a half to get acclimated to the way that they send but once you do you become the greatest operator in world; nobody can stop you. I could, for example, recognize fifteen, twenty different guys even if they changed receivers, if they changed call signs, if they changed frequencies, just by the way that they . . . Just their key, I could recognize that. It takes you a little while to get adapted to that, then once you are in there, you are locked up, that is it. It is fun.

J: What was the unit that you were in there on?

F: I was originally sent to the 8th RRFS. It was called the Radio Research Field Station and from that we had a bunch of RRU: Radio Research Units. Which went out into the field with whatever units were in I-Corps at that time. We had people that went with special forces, we had people that went with 101st, people that went with the 82nd, people that went with the Marines. So, you got to travel around a lot depending on what your mission was. If they needed you . . . For example, for a long time I had the 320th, 321th, and 323th PAVNN Divisions. Those were the ones that eventually

came down and overwhelmed Hue. Near the end of my tour I got to move around a lot; I spent some time with the 101st, I spent some time with the Marines, I spent some time with the Navy, just doing that kind of stuff. You know it was all . . . I'm not even sure if we were officially ever designated to do anything. I had to go down to jump school one time because I was with the 101st; because all of them went down there. They never forced me to jump out of an airplane but I had to jump out of one of those training towers one time. That is worse than ever jumping out of an airplane, it hurts, just hurts.

J: Okay, you got there right before the Tet offensive. Is that correct?

F: Yes. Well, the Tet offensive started January 31, 1968. I managed to do . . . I got there May. I was there for about nine months and nothing really happened to me. We got attacked one time. That was the elections of 1967; elections of 1967, September 1, 1967, it was the only time we were ever attacked prior to the Tet offensive which was January 31, 1968.

J: What was the indication the Tet was coming? Was there any intelligence coming?

F: Oh yes, they said we are going to attack on Tet. Everybody knew it.

J: How come it seemed like . . . ?

F: Well, I mean, we knew it because we were tracking everybody in the world and they were all coming towards us. The weirdest ugliest part of this whole thing was probably about a month before the Tet offensive they had cleared TAO to be secure; tactical area of operations to be secured.

J: That was your area?

F: That was our area, which was essentially the Hue-Phu Bai area, and they took our ammunition away from us. Which I thought was absolutely ridiculous. They actually took our ammunition away from us.

J: How well fortified were you?

F: Well, our little compound, we had about 40,000 anti-personnel mines, we had constantina all over the place, it would be claymores, .50 calibers, M60's. I thought we were fairly well fortified. We had a trench line of death. We had trench lines, star bunkers, everything; concrete star bunkers. The trouble is those aren't too good when you eventually come under mortar or rocket

attack but it will pretty much keep people from coming over the wire at you. For example during Tet we got blasted to death but right before Tet everybody complained, or somebody complained, and we got all of our ammunition back.

We knew it was coming, everybody thought it was coming. It was kind of interesting because we were sitting there waiting around. The North Vietnamese always attacked . . . For example you always got hassled on Ho Chi Minh's Birthday, you always got hassled on South Vietnamese elections, you got hassled on any kind of American holiday. It was so predictable. We knew we were going to get hit at Tet. Tet is like the Fourth of July over there or New Years. They fire off . . . All the arbins were drunk, the South Vietnamese Army. All the arbins were drunk. That night, the night the Tet started, we were sitting around in our bunker at Mac-D compound in Hue and they started opening up. We thought this is it. We would see flares and little stars shooting up and all this was really . . . It was just the South Vietnamese celebrating. Then, when the real thing happened the next day it was . . . Everybody had been up all that night before, sleeping in the trenches, or sleeping in the bunkers and boom, when it started, it just kept . . . We were under attack for like a month, a solid month.

J: Mortars, rockets?

F: Mortars and rockets, that is about it.

J: Any assault?

F: No. I got assaulted twice with the 101st at Camp Eagle. The 101st had just moved up to I-Corps and they took a bunch of us out to set up. We had to set up their communications bunkers to monitor our mission. So, we went out there and we started digging trenches and piling up sandbags and stuff like that. We had the Seabees come in and build us a couple of hooches and we strung some wire and put up some . . . put some clay-mores out like this. You could hear them yelling and you knew they were coming. They overran us twice; two or three times in three days. All I ever did was lay there in a trench and watch them. Nobody fired on them, nobody was killed. They just came in and blew up everything we had. They had to send zipper units in; they just blew up all our hooches and blew up all our radios, ran in and ran out. You know, jump the wires.

J: What did you do as they were coming in?

F: Hid, I cried. It was really weird, at the time I still had an M14. I put bayonet on and normally all you ever

used a bayonet for was opening beer cans or Spam cans or something like that. I actually remember putting my bayonet on and walking and loading and just laying there on my back in this trench thinking to myself, "Jesus, please don't see me, don't see me." You see these people jumping over here. They were going in to blow the thing up. I just thought to myself later, not at the time, "Why don't you just shoot one of these guys. You could get them real easily." You think, if you do, they will know where you are and they will kill you. So I thought best left undone. I just laid there and cried. I never messed my pants. I pissed my pants one time but I never loaded up. I have seen other people load up. I can honestly say I never really messed my pants.

J: Hue was taken over by the North Vietnamese Army?

F: North Vietnamese Army, yes.

J: How long did they keep it?

F: About a month. That was really kind of weird because we were ordered out of Hue and we sat there and hung around because nothing was happening where we were. It was just a straight shot over Route 1. The only problem we would have had was like a couple of the bridges were blown; we blew them. Then, the Vietcong would blow them all the time but they were pontoon bridges, all of them. We just kind of hung out. We were waiting because there were like eight or nine of us. We waited until we saw them actually coming into town before we left. There was no resistance at all once they were coming into town. Hue was pretty much totally undefended. It was a real pretty city on the Perfume River which is a misnomer if there ever was one because that river stunk to death. I had a friend and I actually saw the picture. He was hanging out of a jeep and he took pictures of them walking four or six abreast; doing a rout step over a bridge as we were beating it out of town.

J: How far away were they when you moved?

F: 1,000, 15,000 yards. All wearing nice spanking new uniforms and carrying their AK's.

J: Have more armor with them?

F: Not that I saw but we later heard that they did have armor.

J: You evacuated and where did you go?

F: We went back up to Phu Bai. Up to the 8th Radio Re-

search Field Station, which we also used to call the 8th Refrigerator Repair Field Station because nobody knew what we were. All we had were the antennas there. They could have guessed. The worst thing about going up there was these antennas. We just thought that they were used as aiming stakes for rockets and mortars. I mean all you had to do was . . . If you saw a complex of buildings and you wanted to be able to hit it all you had to do was aim for antennae fifteen, twenty-seven, and ninety-one and you could drop one right in. We went back up there. Of the three ships of people, our ship . . . One ship was supposed to evacuate by plane, one ship was supposed to evacuate by ship, and one ship was supposed to stay there. Now ours was the smallest ship so we were the ones that were supposed to stay there. We never really got the evacuation order from Phu Bai but we had to sit there, and honest to God, we had to burn everything, all of the documents that we had. All of the code books that . . . We had our code books, we had their code books. We had to burn everything and that took, I swear, a week. A week of everybody working around the clock to burn this stuff because we just had piles and piles and piles of paper. We sat there for awhile. We were burning stuff, they were all around the hills just shelling the Jesus out of us everyday.

J: Did that base get evacuated then?

F: No, never. We stayed there until a month later when . . . Originally the job was given to the Marines to rout out the enemy in Hue. The Marines just got slaughtered. They used to talk about kill ratios and how we were five to one and ten to one. The Marines were about one to three. For every one they would get about three Marines. They were terrible at house to house fighting. So, they eventually yanked the Marines and brought in the 101st. Part of the 101st was in there. After about a month, and it comes down to blowing apart the entire town to get them out of there. They took a perfectly beautiful city and just blew the living heck out of them. We did that is; we bombed it, we shelled it. The citadel which used to be the home of the Vietnamese government, the palace where the emperor lived in Hue, we weren't allowed to shell. They had all there outposts, all their command centers in the citadel and for a long time we weren't allowed to touch it. I mean we weren't allowed to touch it. Finally, after so many people were getting killed they finally gave the okay to open up on it. We just leveled it, finally.

J: Tom, tell me about the attitude of the troops, or what you perceived as attitude among your friends, about the war effort and the legitimacy of the effort?

F: We didn't think anything of it. Case in point, Jane Fonda visited Hanoi when I was in Vietnam and to this day I can't look at her without getting totally enraged. Now granted she may have had a point about resistance at home, and showing support for the North Vietnamese. In retrospect I still think that it was probably a civil war and we should have never been involved in there first place. Unfortunately when you are over there you don't really have much of a choice in the matter. I don't recall ever giving the right or wrong of the war a thought until the day after I left. We got newspapers from home and we had radio. Now granted we didn't get all of the bad news. We heard about all the protests at home and things like that. We mostly just thought, "Well those gutless punks wouldn't come over here anyway so screw them we didn't care." I never saw it . . . Now see I wasn't with a line grunt outfit. When we would go out, when we would have to go out on patrols or something like that, one of the rules that we had . . . It was because we had sophisticated gear and we had our one time code pads which couldn't possibly ever get captured. If they would get captured we would all be screwed. The standing rule was never engage the enemy. I remember going out and just hiding for two days. We would just go out there in the woods and hide and then come back in.

J: What was the purpose of going out there?

F: To do direction finding. Part of the thing about direction finding is calling in artillery strikes, calling bombing strikes, just locating individual units that are moving from place to place. So obviously we weren't allowed to get caught. We did direction finding in helicopters or on the ground or from base stations. I don't really recall hearing anything about the war in general, other than it was fucked up. Everybody would say that, "This war is fucked up. These people don't know what they are doing."

J: Who are you talking about them?

F: The officers and people in charge. Everybody hated officers. I mean to a man I don't recall, other than helicopter pilots, I don't recall anybody ever liking an officer in my entire one year, one day, two hours, and twenty minutes in the country. Nobody ever said anything nice about any officer. I got an article fifteen for assaulting an officer one time. Nothing ever happened to me over it.

J: What was the assault?

F: I was drunk and I tried to throw him into a swimming pool. There was no water in the pool. As I was drag-

ging him towards the pool the captain in charge of the MPs and our executive officer grabbed me. I was also AWOL from my duty station at the time. I was attending a trick beer blast when I just got unreasonably out of hand. I caught an article fifteen for that. I was supposed to have gotten busted and reduced in rank and gotten a fine but I left the country. I was leaving country like about three days later or so. We got to travel with all our own records because we were military intelligence I guess. So, as soon as I got over to the airport across the street I just ripped it out and nothing ever happened. As far as support for the war where there probably wasn't a whole lot of support for the war. There sure wasn't any sort of negativity, at least in terms of being a pacifist. It was impossible to be a pacifist.

J: Was there an attitude that you were doing something that was worth while or was it more of a cover your own rear end type of thing?

F: Well again, we were involved in not so much a strategic mission--like I did when I had to go to Germany later--but ours was all tactical. So, everything we did was very important to us. We were keeping track of all the people that were around us that were trying to kill us. That was real important and nobody sloughed off on that. Nobody sloughed off on that. I lost, right before Tet, the 320th and 321st Pavn divisions went on radio silence for two, three days. I lost them and every single day I had people coming up to me going, "Where are they?" It is like you knew where they were. They were coming down to get you but you just couldn't locate them. You couldn't locate them to call down strikes or anything like that. I was getting a lot of grief from people because they had gone on radio silence. I was a good operator. If they were on I could have found them and I couldn't find them. People were really pissed at me for a long time. Well up until the time then, "I found them, I found them." They were shelling us at the time. "Surprise, surprise."

J: They found you maybe. Okay, you mentioned some of the attitude towards officers. Was there a feeling that they were incompetent or was it just a down and out disrespect because they were above you?

F: No, it was a feeling that they were . . . Now again I'm not talking grunt units or anything like that. I am talking about specifically it is like all of the things that I was involved in. We thought they were incompetent. I had done training for ever, I was real good at my job. Everybody I knew was real good at their job and officers were ROTC. They were all ROTC. These

guys they didn't know shit from Shinola about our mission. They couldn't tell a dit from a dot. They didn't know any of the technical aspect of our mission. They were just in charge of us. They had the nicer conditions. They got to screw the American hookers. They got the better booze and we didn't.

J: American hookers? They had imported hookers there?

F: Yes; Red Cross girls, dollies, bands that would come in. I personally never saw a round eye until I got to R & R, Australia but they were there. I remember an Australian band, an Australian band coming up, and everybody was trying to get close to these real buxom, good looking women. They were going, "No, you can't. You are enlisted men." I was a crummy E4. They are just doing the officers. Well they wound up giving half the officers a dose of the clap, which I thought was just absolutely spiffy. I thought that was really great. We didn't like them because they were incompetent. We thought they were incompetent. Officers hung with officers, they didn't hang with enlisted men. If they would have tried to be your friend it wouldn't have worked anyway I don't think.

J: Okay, you spent about a year in . . .

F: A year, a day, two hours, and twenty minutes.

J: Why does that . . . ?

F: Well, everybody counts. When you hit . . . Well, everybody counts, everybody knows to the day at least. Every day you are there you know how many days you got left. When you get to a 100 days left you get a short timers stick or a short timers calender. After a 100 days you know to the hour how many hours you got left. When I was leaving the country I got bumped off my plane by some lieutenant colonel. Since I was a day over my year I got like a whole months extra combat bay. Instead of leaving on May 1, I left on May 2. I wound up with a whole months worth of goodies just for that one day. Of course, they shelled our plane on the way out. They were shelling the airbase. They were shelling it the night that I left. That was like the most horrifying/gratifying experience in the whole world because they opened up on us right when we were loading our plane. You could see the mortar bursts all over the place. Instead of turning around, running back for shelter, everybody ran for the plane. We are talking about loading up a 707 in about sixty seconds. I was the third or fourth person in the plane and I sat right at the tail section because I'd always heard that if a plane ever crashes the tail section is always the safest place. So, I always sat in the tail section.

When that plane took off, this is a civilian . . . This might have been Continental too. No, no, Braniff. Braniff or Continental; civilian pilots, civilian stewardess. We got on there and the shells were going off and the explosions and it was like 1:00 in the morning. Everybody was crying and screaming, just screaming and the plane takes off and everybody is still screaming and crying and yelling. The stewardesses are crying and everybody is crying. I'm crying and everybody is screaming. You look out and all of a sudden you see the ocean. This one kid, to my dying day, "Christ if you shoot us down, just shoot us down over international waters, so I don't have to die in this fucking country." Once we got out where we couldn't see land everybody cheered. Then everybody just kind of sat there for awhile and then started giggling and laughing and they got drunk. Everybody got drunk on the plane.

It was fun until we got to Okinawa. Christ we got to Okinawa and it was freezing. Then we flew from Okinawa . . . It is about a 100 degrees at 1:00 in the morning. Get to Okinawa. We didn't get off the plane at Okinawa but it was freezing anyway. The next stop was Anchorage, Alaska. Going off the plane, and this is in May and it must have been twenty degrees, we had to walk about a mile and a half to the bar. You know, when they unloaded us and this is like through these little wooden walk way. We were all in khakis, short sleeved khakis, freezing our asses off. But that is the Army for you.

J: Okay, you did your year there. Where was your next assignment and what did you do between assignments?

F: I only took a week. I wanted . . . My next assignment was Munich, Germany, which was beautiful. I mean it is just beautiful. I only took a week at home after I left Vietnam. That is when I picked up a stutter. I came home and I mean I was at home twenty-four hours after I was standing there getting my ass shot off. Twenty-four hours later I was sitting with these five or six friends of mine in a bar on Meridian Road. Sitting in this bar, and talking to my friends and all of a sudden I started to stutter. I stuttered the whole time I was home. I didn't know what was wrong. In retrospect now, I think back on it and the thing that was wrong was that nobody could possibly understand. You just couldn't understand. People would say, "Tell us what it was like." It is, like you couldn't tell them anything because they couldn't understand. The stutter went away just as soon as I got back surrounded by my own kind again. When I got to Germany I was okay.

- J: What attitudes did you pick up about public sentiment here about the Vietnam War? What do you recall about that?
- F: I never heard a harsh word from anybody. I mean it, I'm serious. I was there at what I think was the peak of the entire war. When I came back home I never heard anything but, "Welcome back, it is nice to see you." Nobody said anything about burning babies or napalming villages or anything like that. I never heard anything bad. The only bad times I ever had where I would get any anti war sentiment was in Europe. From the Europeans on occasion you would get the fascist American outlook. In the United States I never ran into it at all.
- J: When were you between assignments?
- F: I left Vietnam May of 1968 and I got to Munich, Germany May of 1968. I was in Germany from then until January 1970. We got there just in time for the Czechoslovakian uprising, the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Which was a real hoot. We were intercepting. I was assigned to the Czechoslovakian mission. What we were supposed to do was monitor all these communications coming out of Czechoslovakia because here is what we were told: There was going to be an uprising against the Russians when the Russians came back in, and key word for this was Tarzan. If you heard Tarzan, Tarzan, Tarzan--if you copied in Morse code or any kind of skit--if you copied Tarzan, Tarzan, Tarzan that meant that they were starting up their revolt against the Russians. This is the kind of thing that they . . . Every day they would come in, "Careful, if you hear these code words call it to somebody's attention and we will get it right off." Send it out on a red phone and everything like that, get in touch with the National Security Agency. Everything would be set right. I was sitting there joking around one day and this one kid goes like, "Check this out." So he types up this schedule that says, "ABC this is DEF, ABC this is DEF." Then he would type T-A-R-Z-blank-blank. Then he would go QRM, which means man made interference, or QRM, natural interference. You couldn't hear it. He would go T-A-R-blank-blank-blank, then a couple of lines down later he would go R-Z-A-N-blank-blank-blank. Then he would go, "here dropped too much QRM, couldn't understand it." He ripped the thing off and he took it and buried it in the bottom of the pile so that nobody would see the thing for another day and a half. The next day we were all routed out of bed. It was like, "Who copied this? Who copied this? What was going on?" They put the call . . . Everybody had to sign their own copy. You had to sign your copy with your own personal sign. They had put down the personal sign of the church

sergeant on this thing. Obviously it wasn't him. They eventually found out that it was a joke and they took it real seriously. We were in deep shit for a month. They were making us do evil things.

J: Did they get the guy that did it?

F: No, they never got anybody. Our entire trick was tried for mutiny one time. It was real weird because I was on the mid-trick which . . . Everything always happens at night. We monitored all the Soviet Block communications and we monitored embassies and things like that. If anything was going to happen that was going to be of significance it would happen at night because that is when somebody would do uncoded things or make mistakes. Something that would give you a hint as to what they are doing or give you a hint as to how to break the code. The mid-trick was the most important thing. Well, the mid-trick was the one that most people wanted to be on if you could because it was the one where you didn't have to put up with the regular brass during the daylight hours. The daylight hours are the swing shift. You wouldn't have to put up with anybody because nobody was going to be up between the hours of 11:30 and 7:30 in the morning. So, everybody loved it. The mid-trick was made up of nothing but Vietnam Veterans, which is how I got in. If you were from Vietnam, boom, you would be on the mid-trick. They put you right there because you were a good operator. They thought you were a good operations. By the time I got to Germany I had a lot of rank and I had a lot of time in grade. So, I got promoted like eleven days after I got there. This is after the bust. I got promoted to E5 right after I got there and it made me a squad leader. I was just eating up, I thought it was really great. These were the people . . . The Army Security Agency was such a small unit vis à vis everything else in the Army. There were only 25,000 people in the Army Security Agency world wide. So, you knew that if you went from one Army Security Agency duty station to another one you were going to know a bunch of people. Which is totally unheard of in the service generally. Especially for first time enlistees. I wound up knowing probably twenty-five out of the forty people on my shift as soon as I got there. Most of them I had served with or been to school with. We just had a great time. We all did drugs, we all drank heavily. Everybody did drugs all the time. As a matter of fact the whole time I was in the Army . . .

J: This is in Germany?

F: Yes, Germany, Vietnam.

J: How much do you think that may have crippled the effort

in Vietnam?

F: Again, from the point of view of the grunt, I really don't have any idea of knowing. I don't think it crippled our effort at all. Nobody did drugs while they were working. Although you were probably under the influence of them when you got there. You were certainly under the influence after you got out of work or quit working. If you would be in the field you would occasionally do drugs. The thing that crippled, I would say crippled the effort of the military all in all, is alcohol. Alcohol was the greatcrippler of young adults. They had class six stores where you could buy like a fifth for \$3. You go to the NCO club you could have a shot for a \$.25 or a mixed drink for \$.20. People drank heavily all the time, all the time, everyday.

J: What would you blame it on, boredom?

F: Boredom, yes. Availability, certainly availability and the price was right. Here it is, okay when I enlisted the Army I was nineteen, when I got out I was twenty-three. So you are talking young kids mostly. I was probably a little older than some. Not as old as others. As young kids here you are doing a really important, so to speak, job and you are nineteen, you are twenty years old, you are twenty-one, and you have got access to liquor. You would drink. Everybody drank. You would drink until you puked and then you drink some more and then you puke some more and then you drink some more. In Germany you had for like Jesus, six months out of the year you had fests going on in every town. Every little town in Bavaria you had fests going on and we would attend every fest in every town, every time it was going on; every day. So, you get hammered all the time. There is an alcohol problem.

J: You think that is still the same in the military?

F: Sure, unless they closed down those class six stores and closed down the EM clubs and the NCO clubs and the officers clubs. They sure get hammered every day. We had a trick sergeant that two weeks out of every year he would go to the Sixth Ward Munich and dry out for two weeks. He would take a medical leave and dry out. Gary Ellis was his name, Sergeant Gary Ellis, and he would have to get dried out two weeks every year. He and another kid, Jesus they got into a drinking contest one time, to see who could finish off a fifth of CC the fastest. They sat down at a table and it is like . . . Well, Gary didn't quite make it. This other kid, Bob Wahl, made it and Gary just passed out with about three ounces left in his bottle. Just dropped,

it is like an hour and a half. It was brutal.

J: How long were you in Germany?

F: Almost two years. It was a real pleasant experience.

J: You decided to get out when you were still in Germany?

F: Oh yes. Well, the Army Security Agency had, at the time, had the lowest reenlistment rate of any unit in the Army. I think that was simply because we were all in for four years to begin with. Instead of a two year draftee period, or the three year enlistment period, we were all in for four years and, although I was an exception, nobody got rank. Most the people I knew got out after four years as an E4, which is not real good at all. If you were in a radar line unit you would probably be an E6 by then. I was an E5 and I managed to keep my stripes. So, I was making money alright and doing just fine and I wasn't getting hassled as much as most people. I don't know any of my friends that reenlisted. Some of my acquaintances may have but the idea of being a puke, that is a somebody who has reenlisted, was just totally out of the question. Nobody would do it.

J: What kind of money were they offering?

F: Well, you get a \$10,000 VRV, choice of duty assignments and an extra rank.

J: How many years would you have to do?

F: Two, two more.

J: You decided when you were still in Germany to get out?

F: I decided when I was still in basic training to get out. Never a question.

J: Did you have another post after Germany or was that your final?

F: While I was in Germany I was sent on temporary duty in Spain and other places in Germany but most of the time I spent in Munich. I should say outside of Munich, it was a place called "Bad Eibing." Which is a little, small farming community that we had . . . Every community in the world makes their own beer, they have their own brand of beer there. It was just a real pleasant little place and all of the civilians were real friendly and we were all friendly to them. It was a real small . . . There were probably 400 of us there. Real small place. We had some civilian contractors doing spy stuff there. It was just a real nice place. I met

a lot of nice friends. I still have some of them today; not many but some.

J: What was your discharge, approximate discharge date?

F: January 20, 1970.

J: Came back to Ohio?

F: Came right back to Ohio from there.

J: Then you ended up going to school here?

F: Yes, I had gone to school for about two years before I enlisted and the way my family was it was just always expected that I would get my degree. I didn't know what else to do. As soon as I got out I went back to school. I graduated from school the summer . . . I graduated from college the summer of 1972. Which that was kind of fun too because after I got out of the Army I was what twenty-three years old. I got out of the Army and I jumped back into school like as a sophomore or a junior. I was older than everybody else, and a lot smarter than everybody else, so I didn't have to work very hard. I got real decent grades and finished school real quick. I went through summer school, I just wanted to get out of school too. I had a nice time in school. It was a lot easier than it was when I first went, when I first started. I was older, a little more mature.

J: That is about all I really wanted to cover.

F: Thank you John.

J: Thank you Tom.

END OF INTERVIEW