

**James G. Wagner
Veteran**

**Wayne Clarke and Mike Russert
New York State Military Museum
Interviewers**

**Interviewed at the
Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society
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Q: This is an interview at the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, the 24th of October 2006, 10:30 AM. The interviewers are Mike Russert and Wayne Clarke. Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth please.

JW: James Wagner. I was born in Buffalo on March 10th of '48.

Q: What was your educational background prior to entering service?

JW: I had thirteen years. I had my high school and I had one year of college.

Q: Were you drafted, or did you enlist?

JW: I was drafted.

Q: When was that please?

JW: That was in April of 1968.

Q: Were you inducted here in Buffalo?

JW: Yes. I was.

Q: Where did you go for your basic?

JW: I went to Fort Dix, New Jersey.

Q: How long were you there?

JW: For my boot camp training, I'm not exactly sure how many months that was.

Q: Usually about eight weeks for basic. Did you go for any additional training anywhere else?

JW: Yes. I went to Fort Benning Georgia for cook school.

Q: How long were you there?

JW: Until I shipped off to Vietnam

Q: Could you describe your training as a cook, what things you learned. Had you had any experience prior to that?

JW: Yes. I was in college for food service administration and I cooked a couple of places here in Buffalo before I got drafted. So, when I got drafted they asked if there was anything I would like to do. I just said to them yes, I'd like to be a cook, but I didn't think I would actually get it because they said cooks become truck drivers, truck drivers become cooks you know.

Q: So, they taught you basically how to cook for large numbers.

JW: Large number That's right and they emphasized no seasonings. It was very bland. They let everybody put in salt and pepper and whatever. It was basically cooking for large amounts of people. Like I say, no seasonings which I wasn't used to it. I would always prepare it a different way.

Q: When did you go over to Vietnam?

JW: I went there also in April of '69.

Q: Were you assigned to a unit at all before you went over or did you go as a replacement?

JW: I was with the 299th Combat Engineers.

Q: Did you go over as a unit?

JW: No.

Q: How were they sent over? How did you go over? Did you go as a replacement into that unit?

JW: Yes. I was a replacement, right. That was a bad thing I think about Vietnam era veterans because most of the time you weren't sent as a unit. You were sent as individuals. I noticed in different conflicts you would go as a unit. I think it would give you more reinforcement of the fellows that you knew and stuff like that. (unclear), you were to come by yourself.

Q: So, you probably flew over to Vietnam?

JW: Right.

Q: Whereabouts did you land?

JW: When I got to Vietnam, we landed in Cam Ranh Bay.

Q: You mentioned here that you were under attack almost right away?

JW: In Cam Ranh Bay they had a mortar attack right shortly after I got there. It was like within hours we had a small mortar attack. I remember when I got there the busses that took us to where our barracks were were all...the windows and everything had all screening on them protected for shrapnel or whatever.

Q: Where did you go from Cam Ranh Bay?

JW: I went to Dak To which was in the Central Highlands. It was near Pleiku.

Q: Did you fly up on a C130?

JW: Yes.

Q: What was your impression when you got into the Central Highlands in the Dak To area?

JW: At first, I was the cook and I thought I will just be in the mess hall. Then we had a 1st Sergeant he volunteered us for a reactionary force. We would have to go out. There were convoys that were under attack. We would be the reactionary force that would bail them out pretty much. That was surprising to me because at that time we had M14's. We were issued M14's when I was there. It was a heavier weapon than what the M16 would be and the clips were bigger and stuff. Not too long after that, we were issued the M16's.

Q: So, they were using you as an infantryman besides being a cook.

JW: Yes.

Q: Which did you prefer, the M14 or the M16?

JW: M16's.

Q: Why?

JW: They were lighter. The clips were lighter. They were easier to break down. I thought they were more accurate in firing.

Q: Did you ever have any trouble with them jamming up on you?

JW: No. Not really. Now the M14, I had a problem with it doing that but my M16 I never did have a problem with it. Once we got off that reactionary.... I wasn't on the reactionary force the whole time I was there. This was right in the beginning of me being in Dak To. Dak To was, little did we know it, they had North Vietnamese regulars were surrounding the camp plus they had Viet Cong. So, after the reactionary force, I went in and mainly was doing cooking after actually like the first couple of months. Before that I was doing both. They would take me out and do so and so convoy. After a while, they didn't have convoys. They used to have the choppers dropping off supplies because it just go so out of hand that they couldn't bring in trucks and any kind of recruits or anything else were brought in by choppers.

Q: Did you get hit with mortars and rockets fairly regularly?

JW: Yes. We had to wear flak jackets and helmets all the time and we had to sleep in bunkers. A lot of times we had to go into bunkers during the day too. Then they had foxholes dug all around the compound. Every little ways there was a foxhole that you could go in because that's how often you would get hit with rockets and mortars.

Q: Did you ever run into any shortages that you had to bring in with helicopter resupplies?

JW: No. It didn't. We used to get quite a bit of suppliers. There never seemed to be shortages not to my knowledge anyway. Nothing with food wise until we actually got hit in the mess hall. There was a couple of things that got direct hits. The mess hall was one of them. The mail room was one of them. We had like a I don't know if they would call it a club or a beer tent. That was one of them. It was like direct hits. It turned out that there were a couple of guys...in the beginning they had help with village people, people from the village would come in and do odd jobs and stuff. It turned out that one guy was like pacing off different things and it turned out to be he was Viet Cong. After that, they banned all outside villagers.

Q: Did you have much contact with the Vietnamese people then?

JW: Montagnard's mainly. I would go in the beginning. We would used to go down to the village mainly to get a mamasan. We also went for the purpose of the black market, getting different things on the black market.

Q: Was that pretty active in your area?

JW: Pretty active.

Q: What kind of things did you...?

JW: You could get a lot of things. You could get a jeep probably if you wanted it. Actually, I remember somebody having a shark skin suit (unclear). You could get stereo equipment. It was funny because being a cook I had access to the fruit and vegetables and stuff you know. If you took a case of oranges for instance or apples or something like that you could practically get what you wanted. Cigarettes was another big thing. If you had American cigarettes which I didn't have. I didn't smoke really, not cigarettes anyway. But you could get a lot for a carton of cigarettes or even a pack of cigarettes.

Q: Did you have any contact at all or experiences with the South Vietnamese Army?

JW: Yes.

Q: What did you think of them?

JW: Not much.

Q: Why?

JW: When we were on our reactionary force, the first contact I had with them, they were there also when we would go out and bail out convoys. They have all heavy equipment they have, recoilless rifles, M16's, tanks, different things like that. They'd go the other way for some reason. It was like they were scared or weren't trained properly or for whatever reason in was they would seem to not take part in the fight. It just turned me off and I'm thinking here we are for them and they can't pitch in to help.

Q: You said that you found daily life to be pretty stressful there?

JW: Yes.

Q: Because you were under fire all the time basically?

JW: Right.

Q: What kinds of food did you prepare while you were there?

JW: At first, there was a lot of dehydrated foods for one thing. Potatoes, mashed potatoes and stuff was powdered. A lot of the vegetables were also dehydrated. We'd get some fresh things in, but it was scattered and sometimes depending on how heavy the fighting was or whatever. The drops and stuff that they had from the choppers that would depend on what kind of food you were having at the time. Sometimes you would have steaks. I made a heck of a soup that the other companies would come, and they raved about my soup. I'd throw everything in it, egg shells, everything, then I would strain it out and start with that. I would start with the stock first, add vegetables and meat and whatever.

Q: Did you add any seasoning?

JW: No not really. I still wouldn't put any seasoning in. there's a way of cooking with different things to give you that flavor without the seasonings.

Q: Did you have to prepare a lot of food to be sent out in the field by helicopter?

JW: No, it was mainly the big thing was C-rations. We had a lot of C-rations which were sent to the field. C-rations saved my life actually because I was in where the Bunsen burners were and the Bunsen burners for hot water to do your pots and pans and stuff. I was in there doing pots and pans with the flak jacket and a helmet on. In the next room was C-rations just stacked right up probably to the ceiling almost.

A rocket went in the room with the C-rations and went it blew the C-rations took most of the brunt of it. Of course all of that stuff flew. Pieces of stuff were on me like food and I had small shrapnel wounds and I had a concussion and some ear damage. I must have been knocked out because a fella just called me up and told me that he dug me out. He said I called your name and, of course, maybe it was my ears too, but he said you didn't respond. He said I got down and I looked, and I could see your hands. I started digging stuff out and once I got the stuff out you shot out of there like your rear end was on fire. We both jumped in the same foxhole.

Q: Do you remember him doing that?

JW: No. Things moved so fast. The only thing I can remember that after I was laying there I kind of felt I thought oh man I've got to be messed up somewhere and I was feeling my arms and legs and stuff. Then I had my flak jacket was ripped open. I can remember that. My helmet was gone but I was whole.

Q: How many shrapnel wounds did you have?

JW: I was just peppered. Just a little bit peppered. Another fella, the same rocket, all the way down at the other end of the mess hall the butt of the rocket traveled that way and took one of his legs off right up to the groin. I just met that fella after all these years

at a reunion that I went to about three years ago. He just happened to be talking to somebody and I happened to be sitting right near where he was talking, and I overheard him, and he was saying how he got this injury. He said he had a prosthesis and he said I wish I could meet the cook because I know there was a cook that came in and we were both taken to the med-evac area. He said there was a cook that got hurt too. When he said that, and I turned around and said, "I'm the cook." Oh man, it was just like it was something.

It's funny how this fella that dug me out said he dug me out he said you were about three inches from being killed because like another piece of the rocket took out a support beam. It went right through the support beam and through the wall and landed just outside the mess hall. It must have missed you by no more than about three or four inches.

Q: When did this happen?

JW: June the 3rd I believe it was. It was June of '69.

Q: How long were you in the hospital for?

JW: I was in maybe about two weeks. Then they sent me back. Then I was just like freaked out by any little noise. I remember a guy slamming a chair and a table (unclear) I thought it was incoming.

Q: It;s mentioned here that you have some hearing loss because of that?

JW: Yes.

Q: What were your officers like?

JW: Mainly they were a lot of good people. Our commander was good. A lot of the 1st Lieutenants were good. There was a couple who were full of themselves or whatever. Hard asses, you know. On the whole I would say that they were pretty good guys. Now our Sergeant had a drinking problem and I kind of got a bad taste in my mouth with him because he would volunteer us for stuff that he wouldn't do himself. He would kind of stay back and get off the hook and stuff. You would think he would go with his men.

Q: You mentioned here one of the most amusing things was your pet monkey. Was that with your unit?

JW: Yes. A fella got a monkey from the jungle I guess. One of the (unclear) must have had the monkey. They made a little pair of fatigues for the thing. The thing was only about that high. All I can remember is that the monkey reminded me of that monkey in Ramar of the Jungle. In Ramar of the Jungle, the monkey's name was Babette. What this monkey's name was I couldn't even remember.

They had this little pair of fatigues for the thing. He'd drink beer like you couldn't believe. He'd sit there and drink beer and drink beer. He gets bloated and stumbles all over the place, make all of these faces and fall off the....it was comical.

Q: You also said that one of the people you remember the most was a fellow cook.

JW: Yes.

Q: Could you talk about him a little please.

JW: George Washington was a fellow cook. He was a black man and came from the Rochester area I believe. He was one of the guys you immediately liked.

Q: Was he there when you arrived?

JW: I can't remember if I was there first or he was there first, but we were both there about the same time, the whole time. He was a...you'd never hear him say a bad word about anybody. You'd never hear him cuss, of course, everybody usually did. He was an exception. I've talked to him on the phone since I've been out. He lives in Florida right now, Gainesville, Florida. Nice guy. Nice guy. Nothing to say, nothing but good things about him.

Q: How long were you in Vietnam?

JW: I was in there thirteen months.

Q: Did you get an R&R at all?

JW: I went to Bangkok on my R&R. I was thinking about going to Australia, but I don't know how I wound up in Bangkok. But I never regretted Bangkok. It was great. You know what, I was with this one woman for the whole time. She treated me like I was a king. You couldn't even eat. She'd feed you. So, it was good and then seeing all the different things, the big golden Buddhas, the Bridge Over the River Kwai, Thai boxing, (unclear)

Q: Did you ever get to see any USO shows?

JW: I don't think they were USO shows. I don't really recollect any. There were some shows but I'm not sure.

Q: They used to bring bands in occasionally, probably.

JW: I don't recollect that.

Q: Was there any other incident...

JW: Excuse me but this thing I do remember. We were getting hit, actually overrun. They pulled everybody out except the 299th Combat Engineers because the engineers are always last to go to keep the roads and bridges open. Everybody else had pretty much gone. They finally pulled us out and put us in Quy Nhon which is on the coast of Vietnam. It was like a resort. The place had like clubs. You could go waterskiing, surfing, all different kinds and bars all over the thing.

I wasn't...at that time I didn't have too long to go. I had maybe about just over six months left to go. That 1st Sergeant who sent me back to the boons sent me back to a

place called Dak Seang which was (unclear). I was there only there about maybe six months, but I was so mad because I made it then they sent me back. It wasn't as bad in Dak Seang as it was in Dak To. Dak To was wild.

Q: When did you return home?

JW: It was January of '70.

Q: Were you aware of the anti-war movement at home?

JW: Was I what?

Q: Aware of the anti-war movement?

JW: Oh yes. Big time. That's something that it just saddens me that weren't... a lot of times now the fellas you know the veterans from Iraq and everything they get a lot of praise, which they should, we didn't get anything like that. I was called like us baby killers and spit on. I remember when we got off at the airport they were throwing bags of urine at us.

Q: Did you come back in uniform or did you change?

JW: Yes. (unclear) I came back in dress uniform. No, I did come back with fatigues. I came back in fatigues and then in dress uniform when we got back.

Q: When were you discharged?

JW: I was discharged in April.

Q: From whereabouts?

JW: It was California.

Q: Fort Ord?

JW: Fort Ord.

Q: Do you ever read about Vietnam at all now?

JW: It's a funny thing because our unit now, all of the different companies who were in Dak To during the timeframe of the sieges had a reunion about three years go. It was right here in the falls. They had all kinds of pictures. Anybody that had any kind of photograph. One guy had an 8mm movie that he had taken and turned into a video. He was showing that, and they had lots of people talking about different things what their experiences were and stuff. That was something after thirty-five years, it's there, you try to have it back and then all the stuff was coming forward.

Q: Do you watch any movies about Vietnam?

JW: Yes.

Q: Which do you think are the one that are the most realistic?

JW: I think “Platoon” was very... and Full Metal Jacket” somewhat was but as far as “Apocalypse Now” I thought that was very Hollywood. That was very put on.

Q: Were you aware of any drug use?

JW: Oh yes. Big time. I, myself, got into marijuana quite on a regular basis. There were all kinds of things going on. A lot of drinking. You could get your hands on.

Q: What were race relations like in your unit?

JW: Very good.

Q: Problems?

JW: Very good. We never had a problem and kind of depended on the other guy. We all mixed. We partied together and stuff when we could. We never had any problems as far as that goes.

Q: Did you make use of the GI Bill at all when you came back?

JW: No.

Q: How about, I know you answered some of this. You have attended a reunion and stayed in contact with some of the people you served with. Did you join any veteran’s organizations?

JW: I did belong to the American Legion for a time period but then let it lapse. It was over on Delaware Avenue, Brounshidle Post. I kind of let it slide and wasn’t going. I don’t know why. Maybe it was the distance. I lived on the east side. I don’t know for what reason but that was about the only one I ever joined.

Q: How do you think your time in the service changed or had an effect on your life?

JW: Well, when I first came back I was a different man then when I went. I was very easy to anger. My first marriage I was doing a lot of things. I would never hit my wife, but I would shout at things. I would put my head into the wall. I would put my hands through the wall, punching it. As a matter of fact, she had me put up barn wood paneling, so I couldn’t hit through it. You were getting sick of moving the pictures you could only move so many times to put them over the hole. It wasn’t good. (unclear) lock the door. (unclear). Things like that. I was a pretty nasty guy as first then over the years you kind of mellow out a little bit. My first marriage. I think, had a lot to do with what my anger was as far as the breakup goes.

My second marriage was a very good marriage. Excellent marriage. My first marriage was good too except for me. My second marriage was more (unclear) but I had a great marriage the second time around.

Q: OK. Thank you very much for your interview.

JW: Thank you.