

**Robert Fanniff
Veteran**

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Interviewer**

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Q: Today is September 25, 2002. We are in Albany New York. I'm with Bob Fanniff. He was born in Latham in 1948, and his current address is in Latham, New York. I guess the first question is: Were you drafted, or did you enlist?

RF: No, I enlisted. I was one of the volunteers. I thought that service to my country was the right thing to do. I thought that the war effort was something that I should support. I did not have a lot of direction in my life at that time, so I decided that I would volunteer.

Q: How old were you when you enlisted?

RF: 19 years old

Q: What war did you volunteer for?

RF: We'll, it was Vietnam.

Q: What year did you enlist?

RF: 1967. In '67, I did my basic training in Fort Knox, Kentucky. In my advanced training, which was combat engineering, what we were affectionately call fort lost in the woods of Leonard wood, down in Missouri, went to an airborne training to become a paratrooper down at Fort Benning, Georgia. I went into Special Forces training north bright at Fort Bragg in North Carolina.

Q: When did you first arrive in Vietnam? What was your first job, as a special forces?

RF: Well, when I got to Vietnam, I had loved Special Forces. I was stuck in training group, a little demoralized and was going through some things and I had decided I should go into the real war. So, I left the Special Forces and went over. I was assigned to 173rd airborne, which is up the central Highlands in Vietnam.

Q: At the time, what was your unit doing? What was their assignment in the central Highlands?

RF: We had varied assignments. But we had an area of operation that we were responsible for and there were many different types of missions. We were securing certain areas. In some point in time, we were doing road sweep operations that keep

supply lines open. The search and destroy missions in the jungles itself, you name it, all kinds of things.

Q: What was a search and destroy mission like? Was it done at night or during the day?

RF: Most of the time, you would in daylight. There was suspect intelligence, which said there was an enemy force in the area, and we had to win and try to locate the enemy force and engage them. As a combat engineer, we were some of the first guys that went in frequently, just to clear their landing zone and set up the base camp, where we operated from. Then they would bring in the artillery. We would use that base camp for a period of time, as long as that operation went on. Sometimes we had more permanent base camps that we operated out of, and we rotated, went to the different locations depending on the need.

Q: What was the terrain like in their central highlands of Vietnam?

RF: Well, it was very pretty country. The mountains were very green and very flush. It was extremely hot. I saw temperatures in the hottest point that were 130 degrees and humidity was a hundred percent. You just sweat constantly, so they had to drink water and take your salt tablets all the time. Along with the anti-malaria pills that we got every day. The area was, as I say, it was lovely, and it was all so gorgeous. The jungle is a pretty place. There is some gorgeous flowers and plant life. I saw waterfalls coming out the other side of the mountains that I still remember today. I saw every kind of creepy crawler you can imagine. Snakes and scorpions were everywhere. That was something you learn to live with. When we had the monsoon season, that became a whole other ballgame where it actually, we are near the mountains, it actually got cold.

Q: What is a monsoon like to experience?

RF: It is kind of unbelievable because it just rained and rained and rained for days upon ends, where we never saw the sunshine. It would just rain. It seemed like times that was weeks that there might have been some breaks in between, but if one operation that I'll remember if I lived to be 100 was when we were way out and we were up on the side of a mountain, and we were camping out up there for the night. Myself and another fella found a couple of trees that had been knocked down by artillery fire, so this looked like a pretty good place, stretched our poncho's out to try to be dry. Three or four times during the night, I found myself six or eight feet outside the poncho because the mud would just, and you just slide down and you crawl back up and get back under there and try to catch some more rest and slid back down again.

Q: What was daily life like in a base camp?

RF: Well, if you were in one of the more permanent base camps, that is what we considered to be really great duty because you actually had a cot with an air mattress to sleep on and then you have, what we called pooches, which we had built, which had tin

roofs and screening to keep the mosquitos out. That was great stuff, hot meals. Those were good times. Now, when you went out in operations and you went out and cleared a spot and set up a temporary base camp, you might eat maybe once or twice a day and that was sea rations, what we called work a long-range patrol ration, which use a little water that was a bit too hydrated. The conditions were much less favorable. You use mosquito repellent to keep the critters from eating you alive. You would be stepping on scorpions to kill those things and when you came across them. We had one little camp, which was more permanent base camps and there was a stream nearby and that is where we used to go to bathe a lot of times and to swim. We would take turns with one guy standing on the shore with an M16 to shoot the snakes that would be coming in and out of the water, they kind of keep the place clear, so we can enjoy it.

Q: What would you bring out into the field with you on a mission? What would your unit carry with them into the field if they were going out?

RF: Depends on the nature of the mission and how long you are going to be out there. The obvious things are weapons and ammo, which was kind of critical when frequently on missions because be an engineer, I would have demolition here with me as well. C-4 explosives and whatever we were called for. You had to bring your own water, enough to carry it through. Your get re-supplied, helicopters have to come in to get you some fresh water and drop some food off. Depending on the situations, when operating out of the temporary base camp, choppers came and went, so you did not have to carry as much. The more field type the application was, the longer and more time you are going to be out there, the more you had to carry, so you might be hauling quite a bit of stuff sometimes.

Q: Did your unit engage the enemy in the central highlands?

RF: Many times. Sometimes that they are choosing and sometimes they are not choosing. I had a lot of experience with that. Even with some of our more permanent camps were frequently attacked, especially at night, we knew that was the most likely time. We got daytime attacked, but they were infrequent.

Q: But you knew the enemy was coming, if they were coming, it would be at nighttime.

RF: Yeah, you expect it, but you never knew that they were coming. But it was more likely that you would be attacked at night, than in the daytime. As a matter of after being there for a period of time, I got so, and I am sure that I am not the only one, a lot of guys developed this, but I would hear the mortar tubes popping on the outside and I knew that would wake me up if I was not asleep and I knew we were under attack. I would be heading out from my position quickly.

Q: Did you unit sustain a lot of casualties when they engaged the enemy?

RF: Yeah, we lost a number of guys. We had guys that were killed when our camps were

attacked. We were ambushed a number of times and that was very difficult and some very close quarters fighting situations. There was a couple of real bad ones in January, in 1969, where we almost got, it was a road patrol situation, we used to rotate down there every three months to help out the mechanized unit. I do not remember the name now, 4-O first, I think it was. We would be down there, and we had a chunk of supply line that was, what was QL-19, as the highway was called. It actually was a paved two-lane highway that ran between on Kay and Pleiku in the central highlands and we had a stretch of that, that we were responsible to make sure that it stayed open, so supplies would flow. The first thing every morning, a small patrol with engineers and backup, guys with armored infantry and the tanks would go out and make sure that the road was open. They had done something along the road up, along the bridge up during the night, even though the bridges were mainly secure, that they used to blow up the culverts in places to take out sections, the highway. Sometimes a set of barricades, during the night, they frequently would be booby-trapped, so we used to have to go out first thing in the morning at daylight and make sure that our section of road was open. January 15th of 1969, we went out and they were dug in and waiting for us, and it was a mighty bad situation, and we had an awful lot of casualties, really quick, dead and wounded. If they had pressed it before the reinforcements got there, they probably would have wiped us out because there was not that many of us left that were still in good fighting shape that day. They had knocked out several of the armored personnel carriers. they knocked out the tank, rocket-propelled grenades, mortar fire was coming in on us and it was a bad situation.

Q: How long did the battle take place for?

RF: Well, it seemed like an eternity, but it probably was, I doubt it was more than half an hour, an hour maybe. It is the longest hour or half hour of one's life when you are in that situation. That was pretty tough that day and we lost some guys that day. Two days later, on the same patrol was my turn and I was wounded on that patrol. They came at us again, that day I was not fortunate as I was two days previously.

Q: Do you want to say how you were wounded?

RF: Yeah, we were in an elite vehicle, which was just a three-quarter ton truck that we operated out of because we would be looking to the sides of the road out front to see what was going on and been looking for lines on the side of the road and what not because of trucks drifted over. There were mines there that took out the vehicle, it took out the road at the same time. The automatic weapons fire started, it was probably the commander of the enemy forces, rocket- propelled grenades came flying out of the elephant grass and there was no place to go and no time to react. I only turned around as the firing started, in time to see the streaking rocket coming in. That was it, I was down and several of my buddies were down and one of them was dead instantly. One guy was blown off the back of the truck, I was sure that he was dead, and it turned out

that he did not get a scratch, just the concussion knocked him off the truck and rolled to the side of the road and survived the facts.

Q: Were you taken to a field hospital right away?

RF: Yeah, as soon as they could get the choppers in without, choppers were your lifeblood over there as far as getting you where you needed to go and getting you away from where you are needed to get away from, accept on a dead run sometimes, but we need to bring them in. The air support was critical. On the 15th, when we had that real bad situation, we had called for help immediately when we knew we were in deep trouble. They brought in a couple of them. Besides reinforcements by land, they sent some guys out from our base camp that was miles away, it was, but they came over the road. Helicopter gunships got there and that kind of helped turn the tide pretty quickly when they brought in their firepower.

Q: What kind of firepower did those gunships have?

RF: They were cobra gunships, which were state of the art at the time. They are ancient history today. They had multiple rocket pods under each of the little wings, Gatling guns and many guns they had. They also had M-79 grenade, when not a grenade, a gun in the little front turret underneath, so they could bring an awful lot of firepower, mighty happy to see it, more than one occasion.

Q: In Vietnam, if you sustained an injury that your service would be in the rear or if you would not have enlisted?

RF: I do not know where you heard it, but it is not necessarily true. In the situation, my own situation, the guys that were with me survived that day. We all ended up being then and back to a field hospital nearby and on Kay and that is where they did the immediate surgeries on you to make sure that you are going to not in danger of dying at that point and my wounds were not so bad that I was threatened, either the two guys with me were, unless we bled to death. That would be the only way, as the wounds themselves would have killed us, but they did that surgery and just spent a short time there. I think I was there only a day or something. Then they got us to the local airstrip and then they flew us out, the Air Force, who was out on the C-130's and went to an evacuation hospital in Quinlan, on which was a beautiful little town on the beach, a nice place, and so there you went through the second surgeries of you needed them, which most of us did and you got to eat a lot. If your wounds were really bad, they would send you off to Japan. My surgeon, I do not remember the man's name, he was a colonel that he had got in trouble just before I got there for evacuating too many people, so he was taking a very conservative view of it at that time and so I did not get to go to anyplace, I stayed right there for about five or six weeks of treatments and healing out, developed an infection

and about a lot for a while. Then, I ended up going getting back on a chopper and going back out to my unit and doing it all over again.

Q: Is there any situations or any humorous aspects of your service that kind of stick out in your mind, being something funny or completely out of the ordinary?

RF: There is all kinds of situations that you run into and a lot of them tend to be humorous, different things that happened, some were a little scary at the time, they are humorous afterwards. One night when we got attacked at a base camp, in one of our permanent base camps and mortar rounds were coming in because I had developed that sense for survival. We went out to the bunker, which was out on the line with trenches, impersonal prepared wire on the outside and claymore mines, everything we have quite a defensible position, so I got into the bunker and another fella came in, he stopped dead, and said, "Who is in here?" I said, Sergeant Fanniff. He said, "Sergeant Fanniff, how did you get that name?" I said, "I heard those mortars, here I was, and he says, "I did not have time." He says, "All I have got is my gun and my helmet." He was naked asleep. I said, "I do not care, and it is dark out here." I said, "And hopefully this thing will pass fairly quickly, and you can go put some clothes on." We had some good times. Yeah, you make good friends.

Q: How was the camaraderie that you hear a lot about the soldiers, the men that you served with, when the officers, was there a lot of camaraderie?

RF: Yeah, there was. You say the women, the only women I have ever saw was when I saw in the hospital, there were some nurses there and I also saw a couple times in the rear areas, I saw some Red Cross volunteers and other than Vietnamese women, I mean they were there, obviously, but I did not see too many females in uniform. We had some good officers and some of them were very close to the men and we had some good relationships. Enlisted men, that a lot of them were more tight, and Gi's do stupid things sometimes, you get rivalries. If we were in the rear areas too long, somebody take a dislike to somebody, and punches would be flying. I mean, I am sure there is a tense situation sometimes. We partied a lot, we had a good time, we were in the rear area because the fear was there. We used to periodically try to figure out a way to go to the Air Force Base, which was 40 miles south, because that was like Disneyland. Everything was real buildings and paved streets. They had a commissary and they had real bottles of good liquor there. Typical Gi's that would like to have a good time when you could.

Q: Do you remember the day you left Vietnam and how did you feel when you first arrived back in the states?

RF: Yeah, I remember the day I left, fairly well, and I was kind of excited. I had been home once because I served for 19 months and 4 days. It was like an extension, and I did that for multiple reasons. One is I thought that the army back here was b.s. because there was a lot of nonsense going on. At least I felt that there was a purpose there. The

guys I served with, we were all tight, and I wanted to finish serving with those guys. I came home once, on leave. That happened to be the same summer that Woodstock took place and one of my civilian friends says, "hey, you do not want to miss this, this is great, come to Woodstock." I said, "You do not understand, I only have a leave that goes this time." He says, "Stay another week or two." I said, "It does not work that way, as I would be in an awful lot of trouble." I said, "I am going to have to miss this big event, this big rock concert." As it was, I had to report back to McGuire Air Force Base to get back to Vietnam and the Air Force had some difficulties with planes, and I got back to Vietnam after that leave, they told me I was late. I said, "Well it is not my fault, I see my orders, I was supposed to report back, I did, I cannot help that the Air Force did not have a plane for me. They said, "Well you are going to have to stay in country two more days to make up for this town days that you were late." I said, "That seems awfully harsh." But I said to the guys that I am going to be awfully angry if something happens in those last few days. Fortunately, it did not. I was on combat patrol one day and I was packing my gear and catching a plane that goes south to Benoit the next day. I was there for about, not even 24 hours. Then we were on a plane for Japan and in Japan, didn't I run into a high school buddy, who was in an Air Force uniform, who was on his way over to Vietnam, which was that very chance encounter. We are not far from home and running into this guy at that point in time because we were only on the ground for maybe an hour and a half to Japan. We flew back. We flew into Washington, Seattle area there, got discharged. It only took about a day to go through all of the paperwork, and turning in your gear, and getting a dress uniform, and making sure you had everything that you needed, and got your travel advance for your trip home. That was it, back home.

Q: What did you do in the days, the weeks that followed them, when you got back from Vietnam?

RF: Like anybody after being away for a long time, you are trying to catch up with some family. I also caught up on a lot of sleep and it scared my mother really bad because she never saw me sleep so long and I slept for, it must have been close to 20 hours when I got home. I have been totally exhausted; I have been up for days.

Q: Do you maintain any relationships or contacts with any of the men that you served with?

RF: Unfortunately, in the last ten years or so now, I have lost track of everybody. There was a bunch that we have kept in contact, and I often wonder with some of the guys, how they made out, because some drugs were not an uncommon thing when we had a lot of guys strung out on some awfully heavy stuff. I wondered when they got back, if they ever got some counseling, if they ever got themselves straightened out or not, but hopefully they did.

Q: How do you think your service during Vietnam had changed your life and how you view the world now today, and what is going on in the world, that experience in Vietnam?

RF: I would say that the experience in Vietnam matured me a whole lot, very quickly and I had come back with a sense of value of life and how precious it is. Certainly, I became somebody had enough violence in a short period of time in my life that I did not even care to see it on the silver screen or when I was out with friends at a bar and there was something afterwards when I got back. Oh, fights, fight, everybody would empty out. I sat there and had my beer and said I do not need to see any of that. I do not care to see that, both no interest to me. I used to be an avid hunter before and I tried to hunt out a few times, but it completely lost its appeal. I had no interest in killing anything, and sold my guns, just gave up on it. I did not care to do that anymore. I decided that I needed to do something to take advantage of the Gi Bill.

Q: Did you take advantage of the Gi Bill?

RF: I went to college. I went here locally, Junior college of Albany, and got a two-year degree. Then, I went to SUNY Albany and got a four-year degree. I did some graduate studies before my GI Bill ran out, by that I was married and had two kids, and something had to go.

Q: What is your profession now?

RF: Now, I am an assistant director for data processing services for New York State Department of Tax and Finance. It was just not something that I went to school for. I have a degree in economics, but never used that. I got into data processing, and I liked that. It turned out well for me. It is good. It has been a good career.

Q: Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about, or you wanted to say before we close, anything, your experiences, there or here?

RF: Yeah, a couple of things, I guess. One is that nobody could, until you experience what war was like, you really do not have a sense of how bad it is. I wish that there was some way to be able to really communicate that to the population, as a whole and to our leaders before we make decisions. Sometimes you cannot avoid war and that is the answer, but we better think long and hard before we do it because it is a tough situation. When I think about the possibilities that they talk about Iraq now and the possibility of a war there, it bothers me to think about that, to think about how many young men and women may be lost, that conflict, and how many civilians, who have no political interest and do not necessarily support that regime. I will be careful; I am hoping that does not have to happen. I am afraid that the situation is such that, that may have to happen, but I kind of hope and pray that it does not. You look back and you know that there were good times and there were bad, and I think it is everybody's, as an individual experience, and hopefully a lot of people come out of it with a better sense of direction in life. I think

that I adjusted well afterwards. I know that there is a lot of people that have post-traumatic stress disorder and never get their lives back together again. That is an awful thing.