

**Michael J. Gettings
Veteran**

**Wayne Clarke
Kathleen Fogle Matthews
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on June 26, 2008
Erie County Historical Society
Buffalo, New York**

Q: Today is June 26, 2008. We are at the Buffalo, Erie County Historical Society in Buffalo, New York. Today we are interviewing Mr. Michael Gettings who is a Viet Nam veteran and the interviewers are Wayne Clarke and Kathleen Fogle Matthews. Mr. Gettings, for the record, could you state your full name and your date and place of birth.

MG: Yes, my name is Michael James Gettings, 3-10-1947 and Buffalo, New York.

Q: Okay, did you attend school in Buffalo?

MG: Yes, I went to Kenmore West in Kenmore. Prior to that I lived in Niagara Falls. I went to grammar school in Niagara Falls.

Q: Okay, what year did you graduate from high school?

MG: 1965

Q: Okay, and whereabouts did you enter the service or were you drafted or did you enlist?

MG: I volunteered for the draft, actually I tried to enlist in the Air Force. I always had a dream of enlisting in the Air Force and becoming a pilot but I wore glasses and I had some blood pressure issues. I was rejected by the Air Force and then volunteered for the Army

Q: Okay, and when did you go into the Army?

MG: 1967, May of 67.

Q: Okay, and whereabouts did you go for your basic training?

MG: Fort Dix in New Jersey, then on to Fort Gordon.

Q: Okay, what was basic training like for you? Was it your first time away from home? **MG:** Yeah, I think it was. I didn't go to college and it was soon after high school and yeah it seems like we had done some. I had done some traveling before that, on the west coast, but this was the first time, actually extended time away from home. At Fort Dix.

Q: Okay, after your basic training, where did you go?

MG: I think it was Fort Gordon, Fort Gordon, Georgia for communication or radio or radio teletype school.

Q: Okay, how long was that school?

MG: I think it was 8 to 10 weeks and maybe 12 weeks.

Q: What did you learn there?

MG: Teletype, radio teletype, communication. Morse code first and then we advanced onto radio communication including teletype.

Q: Okay and where did you go from there?

MG: We went to Fort Benning after that because at that point we were assigned to the aviation detachment that was probably made up of 8 to 12 detachments that were being assigned to Vietnam.

Q: Okay.

MG: And so, we stayed at Fort Benning, to get all of our gear and put it all together. I am sorry, yes at Fort Benning.

Q: Okay, how long were you at Benning for?

MG: Well, I think a couple of months. I think, I recall it must have been because we left for overseas in April of 68.

Q: Okay, did you go over with an entire unit?

MG: Yes, yes, like I said there was probably eight to ten detachments, we all left together. We assembled at Fort Benning and then left from Fort Benning and flew to San Francisco which was to me interesting. On the night we flew to San Francisco, we flew over Memphis, Tennessee. It was April 4, 1968, the night Martin Luther King was assassinated. I distinctly remember the pilot mentioning Memphis, Tennessee. When we got to San Francisco, we found out that he had been assassinated. That was just kind of swimming in memory, that who is going to forget. By the way we went on a ship, went overseas on a ship, a merchant marine ship.

Q: Did you go over in like a convoy?

MG: No, just one ship from San Francisco, right under the Golden Gate Bridge. Our group which again had all of our equipment, air traffic controllers and the communication group, again eight different detachments. We all needed our own

equipment to take over the airfields that we were assigned to, but no we were on a troop carrier. Another point of history, that troop carrier, the USS Barrett, looking back at history, once carried Lee Harvey Oswald to Korea years before that. I found that out just looking it up on the internet, looking at the history of that particular ship. I'm not sure if that is a good thing to remember.

Q: And how long was the trip overseas?

MG: 21 days, and it was like the whole world was ocean. A plane once flew over, you think it was Christmas just because it was another person or anything you could look at compared to the sea. We were with marines as well but we were army and luckily our commanding officer was a lieutenant colonel, so he was the most high-ranking officer on the ship so we didn't really get it too bad.

Q: What was the food like on the ship?

MG: It was good. There was one, it wasn't a holiday, actually it was a time I think when we got to Vung Tau, where we got a great meal. I think they gave us, I can't remember what it was now, But maybe it was steak, but it was better than most days. The food was fine, I guess. Another time, we were in the kitchen, in the Navy it is the galley and we hit some rough weather, a typhoon or the edge of a typhoon. I just remember going downstairs to get something to eat and just looking there was food all over. I mean there was food on the wall, on the ceiling and there was just food everywhere. I just remembered that the tables had trays on them and the tables had little boarders on them so that the trays would not slide off. They did. I said there is no way so I Just grabbed an orange and left, but the floor, you could hardly walk on it. I just remembered that. I enjoyed the trip, it was interesting. I did not get seasick. You know there was a lot of times I was up on deck and so, but an interesting trip overseas.

Q: What was it like when you departed the ship? What was the temperature and the climate like?

MG: (Laughs) Hot, yeah, I remember that warm, hot. We stopped at Nacpan Bay in the Philippines. I think that is where I was initially, but then it was Vung Tau and I remember it was hot, it was warm and of course when we got there, they were not ready for us. We had to stay out in port for some time and then finally we were able to get to where we were going to disembark with all of the equipment we had. I just remember it was hot and we didn't have any food. In fact, we didn't have any, we had our weapons and no ammo. I remembered trying to have some food with C-rations. I didn't have, I didn't know how to use a P38. No, I am left-handed so I couldn't use a P38 and a friend of mine was there and he wasn't going to help. I had to learn how to use that P38 pretty quickly to get food. In fact, now I carry one with me because I learned how to use it. The weather was hot, we were again at Vung Tau. There was a little bit of mismanagement or miscommunication and we were assigned to a place called

Dong Tam. The 9th infantry division was south of Saigon and we were transported to My Tho.

Q: How did you get down there?

MG: We were transported by a small caribou. It was a small plane with just our detachment on it. There were about 12 or 14 people, mostly air traffic controllers and communications and radio communications. The pilot stopped in My Tho or landed in My Tho and said it was near dusk and you have got to get out of here. This is not a secure area, just don't stay here and he left. We had our weapons but no ammunition because they left the ammunition on the ship, so we had no ammunition. I also remember a kid selling coke and we were given in the indoctrination that you never trust anybody. I wanted to buy that coke so bad, but I didn't because I said no I can't, I can't do that. That's wrong but some-how we got through. I think someone with some jeeps came buy and drove us back. It was 20 to 30 miles to Dong Tam.

Q: And that was your unit?

MG: Yes, we took over the air field. It was a relatively new airfield. A small air-field. With the air traffic controllers, we helped set up the communications area. They had something there but there was not much for communications. They mostly had helicopters, Chinook's, Huey's, C5A's. I think that was it.

Q: C130's?

MG: No, that was too big to make, yeah there were smaller ones. They were called caribou. That was the biggest one.

Q: Okay, and what was your living conditions like? Were you in tents?

MG: No, we were in barracks. We moved around, we moved around quite a bit because they did not know what to do with us. Again, we were down near, near the dredged- out bay are in Dong Tam. We were on the Mekong Delta, the Mekong River, in fact the hover craft are there. I mean it was there, and we were down on the bay for some of the time. Some of the barracks we got otherwise were with the 9th Infantry Division guys. They were ok. There were a lot of mosquito nets and fans and I think you could see that most of the roofs were made of metal. They got mortared, quit a bit, they got mortared, rocketed quite a bit and there would be holes in the roof and things like that. There would be bunkers you could get to at night when the alarm sounded for mortars and so on.

Q: How often did you get hit?

MG: Boy, I don't know. We were there at the end of the Tet Offensive you know it had subsided. It was possible a couple of times a week and attempts by some other times. Just I guess as we go, my brother actually two things. First a good friend of mine that I grew up with, we actually adopted him at Riverside. When I

got my first in country mail in Vietnam it was from him and he told me we were going to be stationed together. He went into service after me with the 93rd division and we were stationed from about here over to the museum part. So that was kind of strange and my other brother who was an MP stationed in Germany decided that he did not want to stay in Germany, it was too boring, so he came to Vietnam and was stationed at the main gate of Dong Tam. So, all three of us were there. Then Pat, the MP, got hurt in a mortar attack. You know I was transferred to Bien Hoa about halfway through and Pat got hurt.

Q: How bad was he hurt?

MG: Pretty, pretty, good by a mortar attack and he didn't make the bunker and he got chest wounds. He ended up in Japan, which I went and visited him in Japan. I think now he is 100% disabled. He was less than that initially.

Q: Did he get shipped back to the states?

MG: Yes, he got shipped back at that point through Japan and I was telling someone just recently that it was right after the Super Bowl in 1969. Joe Namath won the Super Bowl with the Jets and after he came to visit the troops in Japan. Pat had a chance to get a picture with him. I should have brought that with me. Maybe I'll have him come and he's got a picture of him meeting Joe Namath in a hospital in Japan after they won the Super Bowl. Again, obviously something to remember.

Q: Now wasn't that unusual to have three brothers over there?

MG: Yes, well first Bob was an adopted brother. He just grew up and his mother kicked him out and I come from a large family of ten and so what's another person? He stayed at our house and we traveled together for a year, a year and a half. We had a cottage up in Canada together. Just by coincidence I went into the Army first, then he went in and we were stationed together and then again Pat was stationed in Germany and then he decided to come over. If he volunteered, he couldn't be assigned to Vietnam, so that is why he was in Germany. They couldn't assign him to Vietnam.

Q: What was your typical day like?

MG: Yes, boy that is a good question. We ran more of an operational thing with the airport, the field I mean, it wasn't an airport. It had a real strong metal plate form.

Q: Perforated steel plate?

MG: Okay, all right, we had a small operation there. We mostly had the Huey helicopter and the Chinooks. I would do the scheduling for the tower and T worked for the colonel that was there, the lieutenant colonel that was the

commanding officer. Occasionally I would go help people get transported in and out of the airport as well. Basically, I did more of the scheduling, more of the operations of the airport.

Q: Was it a fairly busy airfield?

MG: It was yes, it was pretty busy. A lot of things in and out. Unfortunately, a lot of times you would have bodies coming back in and certainly we recall those kinds of things, not in fondness. I was worried about Bob, worried about everybody for that matter. Yes, it was. Later they explained it to Jess, I think it was Jess because, I wasn't there but yes it was pretty busy. Most of the 93rd Infantry Division would go out there and they would go out in formation. In other words, the first aircraft would take off and the next 10 or 12 would just follow each other. A lot of people flew in and out of there. Bob Hope came by one time, yeah. Our lieutenant colonel was a pretty upstanding guy and sometimes he would have to clear the airspace for a general because we would have to know that. If there were wounded troops, well the generals would just have to wait because those troops were more important than a general. We had to take care of them and not the big shots. He wasn't a typical lieutenant colonel.

Q: Did you see any delegations from the senate or any other political people?

MG: No, no political people. The only thing was well that Bobby Kennedy assassination when I was there. I was a big Kennedy fan and a friend of my brother Bob's was in town and he got me the book Profiles in Courage. I think that was one of the reasons I went into the service because of John Kennedy and the Peace Corps and his World War II experiences. My father was a WW II veteran and maybe I thought that after John Kennedy was assassinated, that I should do what I could for the country. In terms of what we all needed to do was sacrifice and the Bobby Kennedy gets assassinated. It was a down time for the country, June 6, 1968. That was it as far as politics goes. Vickie Lawrence came through once as an entertainer but that was it.

Q: Did you have to pull a lot of detail like sand bag filling or backfilling?

MG: Sandbag filling? Yes, that is interesting that you mentioned that. I was watching TV the other day and they were doing that in the Midwest because of flooding. I had a lot of experience doing that when we were building the bunkers. Sandbagging, yes, we had to do those types of things.

Q: Guard duty too?

MG: Guard duty, no, not in Dong Tam but yes when I went to Bien Hoa. A friend of mine and myself were promoted but we could only keep one E-5 sergeant so he was close to the colonel so they booted me. I went up to Bien Hoa and he stayed. I had guard duty at Bien Hoa, which was mostly Air Force but we were in an Army base protecting the outskirts. I was the sergeant of the guard with a 45 automatic.

I never used one in my life so I had to do training on it. The 101st and the 11th armored cavalry were there. One thing I learned was that when they were coming in from the field and I was doing guard duty, were these young whippersnappers going to listen to a sergeant tell them where to build bunkers. We all got along, they respected me and I respected them. I just left them alone, but they did build the bunkers, just at their own pace. They were on R&R so I didn't push them too much.

Q: Did you go out on any convoys?

MG: Well convoys, yes, just one. I think we had to get some things from My Tho and bring them to Saigon. We had to go through English Alley, I guess they called it, but it was just the one time. Mostly we were at the base camp Dong Tam and I was also at Bien Hoa.

Q: Maybe you spent a full year over there?

MG: Yes

Q: Would you get any R&R at all?

MG: I didn't take any R&R. I am just not sure why. I just never did. We could go to Bangkok or Australia, but I was saving my money. I was sending it back home to my mother so I could buy a car which I eventually did. It was a '66 mustang convertible and she had to sign for me for that one. I didn't get back until 1969.

Q: How were the PX facilities there? Could you get cold soda and drinks?

MG: Yes, mostly because we ran the airfield, we could barter a lot. The Seawolves were there, The Navy chopper pilots. We could coordinate with them in terms of rides for medical personal. Wait, I am jumping ahead a little bit. We did have a lot of parties with the Seawolves and we would have trailers full of booze and we got steaks that we would use to barter with. People would give us steaks in exchange for rides out of the country or to Saigon, so yes, we were able to get things. Ice was a big commodity and it was hard to get but we bartered. They gave us ice and we gave them trips to Saigon or where ever. I just remember the warrant officers and how young they were. I guess I was young too, but I was 21. I was probably an older person in Vietnam compared to the 18 and 19 year old's. The warrant officers, they were blue chip and fun to hang around with. The food was fine. I grew up in a family of 10 so the food was good, we just had plain food and the Army food was plain and it didn't bother me. For some reason I remember going to Saigon for Thanksgiving and having a meal for Thanksgiving at one of the hospitals there. I am not sure why we were there but we got some R&R time and went to Saigon to see the city. It was a great meal.

Q: Now when did you leave Vietnam?

MG: April 1969, just about a year later and Bob Daley was with me. By chance we

just ended up serving together. He took my plane, I think, the day before that and he took my flight and we went home together. Our lieutenant colonel, I met him at the airport, he was very personable. He asked me about my brother, he had heard he had been hurt. Most of us all left Vietnam together which was interesting. I remember it was 22 days at sea to get to Vietnam and it took 21 hours coming home by plane. I just remember taking off from the airport there and the cheers from the people as we lifted off in the plane from Saigon.

Q: And whereabouts did you land?

MG: San Francisco or Oakland. I am sorry, Oakland. They had some troop buses waiting for us but some of us were not too keen on doing that so we took a cab to Oakland to where ever we were going for processing. I remember some lieutenant chewed us out for taking a taxi cab. Mike Richardson, who was a good friend of mine, who I still cannot find was an air traffic controller was with us in the cab. We just felt like enough was enough. We felt like, hey we just got here, leave us alone.

Q: Were you discharged at that point?

MG: Yes, we were discharged right from there.

Q: You had no desire to reenlist?

MG: No, I thought it was an unnecessary war, I guess. It was mismanaged, it was just, I'm not sure. I got involved with the Vietnam vets against the war when I got home. It was just something that did not make any sense. The lies that occurred over there, the body counts. Bob and I said they were just doing things that were not publicized. There were lies. The information that was being shared by the government wasn't truthful. The people were great. The Vietnamese, you were afraid of them but I wasn't off of the base camp a lot. The war was something that did not set well with me, it was mismanaged. You were asking me about guard duty earlier and using the light scope. You would have to call people if you saw something before you could take action. You had to get the chiefs approval and they had to get the chiefs approval in the army and maybe sometimes get the Vietnamese approval. It was just mismanagement. One of our own big people over there, our staff sergeant, he went over with our detachment, I think he lasted a day and a half. He just broke down and they had to ship him home. Most of us were draftees or young people that were enthusiastic and patriotic but became somewhat discouraged with what was happening, with some of the things that were occurring. I guess I learned a lot since then from the Gulf of Tonkin resolution which was potentially almost manufactured, it was falsified. It is like the same thing going on in Iraq. I mean against what is going on in Iraq. It's not a good thing.

Q: Were you greeted with any sort of animosity as a Vietnam Veteran when you got home?

MG: Not a whole lot, other than when I was developing my resume. I went back to school under the GI bill, my wife went to school in Cortland and I went there and graduated. We had our kids when we were living in Cortland. I remember someone helping me with my resume at Cortland and said not to put anything down about going to Vietnam, you just don't do that. You can't highlight the fact that you were in Vietnam. I said boy that was interesting. So I do remember that but other than that, going down to the Kenmore Tavern in downtown Buffalo, people didn't realize you were gone. No one was going to buy you a beer. It was kind of like, it was nothing. I guess you just did not expect much when you got home. I was busy going to school and raising a family at that time. I was married right around the time of Woodstock. We would have had fun participating in that but we were in Cortland. I can't recall anything else. I don't like to remember bad things anyway. I try to be more positive about things, I suppose. It was an experience but I guess from a political standpoint, I could understand George Bush in terms of being president not wanting his son to go. I am more of a Democrat than a Republican but I can respect him and I can think about why he did not want his son to serve in Vietnam because of his experiences in WW II. He was a hero who was shot down and later rescued. I can see him talking to his son and saying to get involved with the National Guard and stay away from that. That's ok, I mean but to play the role of a war hero, I have a different take on that.

Q: How long were you involved with the veterans against the war?

MG: Not long. I was out in Cortland and Bob was more involved with that and there were different people locally involved. My brother was involved as a wounded vet and Bob was wounded too... A lot of people I grew up with had similar values and similar thoughts about the war to this day. Bob said we were supporting Dennis Kucinich. My son was involved with John Kerry and a matter of fact I met John Kerry. I told him when he was running for president that my dad and uncle believed in him. I distinctly remember him being involved with wounded soldiers. I think it was in the 1960' when he was testifying in Congress about Vietnam and said that they needed to end the war. I actually remember working in Cortland, when I was working in an appliance store when I was going to college and delivering appliances. The secretary that worked there had a husband who said that the protesters against the war at the time, he would get a machine gun and shoot them all. I said, wait a minute, that's why we fight wars for free speech. Unfortunately, that was just his mentality. I think we just needed to respect each other's views in that room.

Q: All right, is there anything else you would like to touch on and maybe missed about your experiences?

MG: Let me look at my notes.

Q: How do you think your time in service has changed or affected you? Do you think you would have gone onto college without the GI bill?

MG: I'm not sure, I always intended to go. When I was ten my father wanted me to go and he died when he was in his forty's, so I think I would have gone. The GI bill really helped, it helped me to afford to go to school and raising a family at the same time. It was a good experience. It was an experience where you learned to compete, you learned to be more independent. When you competed with others, you learned to respect others, I suppose. The comradery was a big thing. I went to one reunion in Biloxi, Mississippi several years ago when the air traffic controllers got together even though we were not controllers, we were support. I try to keep in touch with some of the guys. Mike Richardson was a good friend but I still can't find him. I have looked all over the internet. He was a very interesting man and we got along. He was a regular Army guy. It was a good experience, the people you met, that's good stuff. Getting back to my father, he nearly wrote a book about his experiences in WW II, and I often think about following up on that. He never got it published, he died before he had a chance. But to continue, I did bring a couple of photographs.

Q: Oh sure, and was it interesting that you had a totally different experience then he did when you were in Vietnam?

MG: Yes, I think sometimes politicians take advantage of our patriotism unfortunately and I think that is what's happening to our country now. I think there is a lot of dedicated people and a lot of people that would do anything they were asked to do. When they do it for political reasons, that is not good.

Q: If you can hold that picture up, I can zoom right in on it.

MG: That's me in Bien Hoa. I think I was 21. I don't look the same now. I have more of them but I could not find them. This is Bob, and that's myself. I have one with Bob, myself and my brother Pat, all three of us. I told Pat about this so hopefully he will call you and Bob certainly. Bob Daley is in South Carolina and yes he is interested in contacting you at some point. He is coming back next week.

Q: Anything else?

MG: No that's it.

Q: Thank you very much.

MG: I think this is a great thing you are doing. Oral history, I mean we have a lot of fun things to teach kids and so on.