

**Roberts Library, Middle Georgia College
Vietnam Veterans Oral History Project
Interview with James Horne
April 10, 2012**

The date is April 10, 2012. My name is Paul Robards, Library Director at Roberts Memorial Library at Middle Georgia College. I will be speaking with James R. Horne from Roberta, GA today about his experiences in the Vietnam War.

Robards: What branch of the military did you serve in?

Horne: U.S. Army

Robards: Why did you join the military?

Horne: I didn't. I was drafted.

Robards: How old were you when you joined the military?

Horne: I was 22. I turned 23 a couple of weeks later.

Robards: Where did you go to receive Basic Training?

Horne: Ft. Benning.

Robards: Where did you attend Advanced Training?

Horne: Ft. Ord, California.

Robards: Please describe any out-of-the-ordinary incidences that occurred during your training.

Horne: The only thing I can think of is during a grenade practice in CA, one of the young recruits panicked and dropped it [a grenade] and he was killed.

Robards: What was your occupation code?

Horne: 11 B 40. Light weapons infantry.

Robards: Did you volunteer to go to Vietnam?

Horne: No

Robards: How did you feel when you learned you were going to Vietnam?

Horne: I didn't feel good, but there wasn't nothing I could do about it, and I think my family took it harder than I did.

Robards: What dates did you serve in Southeast Asia?

Horne: February 12, 1969 to February 11, 1970

Robards: Where did you serve in Southeast Asia?

Horne: Most of the time we was in Tay Ninh Province, might have been II Corp. Mostly out of Quon Loi and LZ Andy, which was about 5 or 6 miles from Cambodia.

Robards: What was your rank during the war?

Horne: Sergeant, E-5

Robards: What medals, awards or citations did you receive?

Horne: I knew I should have brought my DD214. The main ones were the Bronze Star, the Air Medal, Combat Infantry badge, Vietnamese Star for Gallantry, or something. There were 10 or 12 of them, but those were the main ones that I am most proud of.

Robards: Please describe your first encounter with the enemy.

Horne: That was about a week after I got in-country. There was a fire fight going on outside the base I was in, and there was approximately 250-300 VC killed. I didn't take part in it. I had a weapon and was in-country, but was really waiting to be assigned to a unit. So that was my first encounter that I knew I was in a bad place.

Robards: From your experience, how would you evaluate the enemy's fighting ability?

Horne: It was tremendous. They were well trained and a determined enemy. Most of them that we captured or killed had been down there in South Vietnam for 6 to 10 years, and they had a lot of combat experience. We captured some that had been there 10 years, so they were well trained and determined and they learned to live off the land.

Robards: What equipment and weapons did enemy units use that you encountered?

Horne: Mostly AK 47 and RPGs, that's a rocket propelled grenade, and mortars. Those were the three main ones. They did use missiles, 122 millimeter missiles, but most of those were fired into the airbases where we kept the airplanes; the helicopters and C130s and that type thing.

Robards: What weapon did you and your unit use the most often with the most efficiency?

Horne: The M16 rifle, artillery, 105 artillery units. If you gave them the right coordinates, they were pretty deadly. Grenades and the usual light infantry stuff, but [those were] the main ones. We had grenade launchers, but they weren't as accurate as those RPGs the enemy had.

Robards: Do you remember seeing any action that stood out as being particularly brave?

Horne: I guess all of them might have been brave, but we just did our duty. I know there was some soldiers that was wrote up for the "Seal of Stars," but I don't really remember anything like that.

Robards: What do you remember most about combat?

Horne: Not being able to sleep and wondering if the next round might be for you. Trying to not only look out for yourself but your buddies. Trying to see—so much going on, and trying to call in artillery and helicopter gunships; that was a big weapon over there. Those pilots were really good. The fire

fights that I was in wouldn't go on but about 3 or 4 hours, at least the ones I was in, because once we called in the gunships and artillery, then it was pretty much over.

Robards: Describe your living conditions, housing, and food in Vietnam.

Horne: Well, housing in the field—there wasn't any. You just slept wherever you could find a comfortable spot on the ground. When I got over there, they pretty much wouldn't let us stay out but maybe two weeks at a time, something like that, and then they'd pull us back to the base camp. We had a hooch or a bunker. Usually the hooch was the most comfortable. What we had in there was a ... cot to sleep on and you had a little mattress and you had a mosquito net, and that's all you needed really, because the weather was hot so that's all you needed—no covers or anything.

Robards: What was your daily routine while in Vietnam?

Horne: I had two things: I was in the combat area for four months, and then the commanding officer said they needed someone in military intelligence S-2 that could type. Believe it or not, I was the only one who could type. So I got to go to S-2 and type up all the combat reports, and send all that stuff back to the brigade headquarters. My day consisted of working at night, (I told them I'd rather work at night) from 7pm to 7am; that's 12 hours.

Robards: What did you do to relax?

Horne: We didn't do much to relax except play cards and write letters home. Drink us a little beer. That's all you could drink over there cause the water wasn't good. Back then they didn't have bottled water. So, beer was the main source of drinking for me over there. As a matter of fact, I drank so much beer while I was over there, I drank it for lunch and at night and every time someone went home you had a little party. When I went home, I bet I haven't drank a case of beer in 40 years. I just lost the taste for it, because I drank so much of it.

Robards: Could you tell about the most memorable event that happened to you or your unit while serving in Vietnam?

Horne: That was August 12, 1969, the morning of August 12th. The VC—the 75th NVA Regiment attacked us from 6 sides and fought all that night and part of the next day in the daylight before we finally decided to retreat. Thank goodness! That was the longest night, and then we went after them, so to speak, so I really didn't get any sleep at all for 5 days. So that was the most memorable 5 days to a week, to my mind. We killed —there must have been three hundred that we counted. We counted that many. I don't know how many they drug off. It was bad for about 8 to 10 hours. It was really bad. I thought they were going to over-run us, but they didn't.

Robards: What was the most humorous event that you remember?

Horne: One of them was a helicopter took off and it didn't get up high enough to get his skids up high enough and he hit the bunkers they land between and it ripped off the skids, so he didn't have a way to get back down. So he was flying around up there with everybody looking at him wondering what we were going to do to get him back. Luckily, he had a full tank of gas, and a whole slew of us, I don't know, maybe 50 to a hundred men, filled sandbags and built up a little thing for him to sit the helicopter on.

That was all we could do for him. We did that and then we all ran back just in case he crashed, but he set that thing down on those sandbags. When he set it down, he cut it off immediately, and the sandbags just held him and he slowly went down to the ground. Those sand bags were giving way, but he made it, and he was proud of us for doing it. Another time we were back at the base camp and we had a 122 rocket hit and the shrapnel went all through the tent. My buddy from New York, his name was D.B and I forgot his last name. I wish I had wrote his full name down, but anyway everybody called him D.B. D.B. said, "Well wasn't nobody got hit." I looked over and his belt buckle was split in two. A piece of the shrapnel hit that belt buckle and split it, went down his leg, cut his pants and didn't put a scratch on him. We all laughed at him, and accused him of trying to get a purple heart so he could go home. That was two things I can remember.

Robards: What is your evaluation of American military leadership and of other commanders you worked with in the field during the Vietnam War?

Horne: Well, you always have one or two that don't need to be there, but for the most part, all I had was good people. They cared about the men and tried to get everything that we needed to do the job we had to do over there. I can't remember a name, but we had one colonel that I wouldn't spit out the door for. He was there when I was fixin' to leave. We had one captain that came in there and was going to do all this stuff, I guess to win medals or something, and he didn't last but about 4 days. They figured out that they better get him out of there because some guy was fixin' to kill him, because he had us doing weird stuff. He got transferred back to Battalion Headquarters after 4 days.

Robards: How did you feel about your experience when you left Vietnam/Southeast Asia?

Horne: That was tough. It is still tough today, because I felt like I had just got into the swing of things over there, and I felt like I hadn't done enough to help us win the war. I just felt depressed. As a matter of fact, when I was standing there waiting on the helicopter, I just started crying, and I couldn't stop.

Robards: Have your views about the war, or your involvement in it, changed over the years?

Horne: No, not much. I see now that the war....I guess really didn't have a purpose. It's bad when I look back on it. It was supposedly to stop communism and to make Southeast Asia and South Vietnam a free country. That's basically all it was.

Robards: Did you ever feel that the American public did not support you as a veteran of the Vietnam War?

Horne: Yes.

Robards: Do you believe that Vietnam veterans encountered discrimination when they returned home from the war?

Horne: yes.

Robards: Have you encountered health problems due to your war experience? Do you know what caused the problems?

Horne: Yes, I have PTSD and cancer.

Robards: If you were going to repeat this experience, what would you do differently?

Horne: I don't know that I would ever repeat it. But I don't know of anything I could have done differently. I was just doing what the United States government asked me to do.

Robards: Do you have other memories that you would like to share about your Vietnam War experience?

Horne: Well, I'll just start at the beginning. The plane was at 45,000 feet, and the pilot came on and said that we were now over the Republic of Vietnam. I looked out the window and all I could see was these big old giant holes that looked like doodle bug holes—they were bomb craters. I looked down there and I saw those bomb craters where a B-52 probably had air strikes and I sort of had a feeling I was in the wrong place. When I got off the plane, there were these guys getting on the plane. They were all laughing and hollering at us and that type thing. And then I went up to An K. Luckily, I got assigned to the 1st Calvary Division, which was the best unit over there by far. We went up to An K where rifles was issued and then you take off whatever you was carrying that you wanted sent back home in case you were killed. So that was kind of traumatic experience for a country boy coming out of Georgia—hadn't hardly been out of the State of Georgia.

Then we went out and zeroed the rifles and my sergeant gave me an M-16. So I had it and he put me behind this rubber tree and he pointed across the field and said that if I saw anything moving out there to shoot it, to kill it. I have hunted and fished all my life, but to shoot another human was different. I just couldn't fathom shooting another human being, because I never had to do that before. It was just a traumatic experience to have him tell me that. Luckily, I didn't see anyone out there. The fighting came later, but that came with other people and when you get into a fire fight, you are just shooting, and most of the time you don't know who hit who or what's happening, you are just shooting in the direction of where the firing is coming from.

Anyway, after the first fire fighting, we were checking out the area and we ran across these North Vietnamese soldiers and they were soldiers just like we are except they were fighting to keep the country whole. They'd been fighting; they fought the Japanese; they fought the French, and then they were fighting us. So, I mean, those people over there was just hard core, and they were going to win, regardless of what we did to them. I lost my train of thought, but I wanted to tell you about August the 12th. That night we killed a bunch of them [North Vietnamese soldiers] and one of them had on that long loin cloth. He had a piece of paper sticking out of his belt. I reached down and pulled it outit was his wife and child. So, I realized they were just like we were.

Robards: Mr. Horne, we thank you for your service, and also for taking part in this oral history project.