

**Donald Smith**

**Vietnam**

**When did you enter the military?**

“ December 7 1967”

**How old were you when you entered?**

“ 21 years old”

**How long were you in the military?**

“ 2 years”

**What boot camp did you go to?**

“Fort Dix N.J.”

**Did you go to a second boot camp?**

“Yes, I went to advanced training at Fort Polk Louisiana”

**What advanced training did you go for?**

“Advanced infantry training”

**Did you join voluntarily or were you drafted?**

“Actually, I decided to take a semester off from college. That turned out to be a mistake, I got drafted.”

**What branch of the military were you in?**

“I was in the United States Army”

**What part of the Army?**

“I was with the 4<sup>th</sup> infantry division”

## **What equipment did you use on a daily basis?**

“When I arrived in Vietnam, initially I was assigned to a light weapons infantry company. I carried an M16 initially. Then after I was there about a month or two I was assigned to an M79 grenade launcher. I carried that another thirty- forty days and I became a machine gunner. I carried an M60 machine gun the rest of the time that I was in Vietnam. I advanced in rank up to squad leader, a sergeant, and I carried the M60. I had one other infantry man assigned to me as an assistant gunner. Three other men were ammo bearers. They carried boxes of 250 rounds belted ammunition for the M60 machine gun. Back during that time light weapons Infantry Company, the heaviest weapon, most powerful weapon we had was the M60. Most others were M16 rifles, shotguns or M79 grenade launchers which were similar to sawed off shotguns but they had a very large tube and fired at a grenade projectile. They also utilized shotgun rounds in those also. So once I was assigned the M60 machine gun initially we were air mobile, our particular unit, I was with the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion 12 regiment of the fourth infantry division .We were in the central highlands of Vietnam. This was, if you looked at a map of Vietnam it was right in the center of the country. It was a mountainous region and to get anywhere it would be like trying to walk the Adirondack Mountains. Therefore, most of the time, nine times out of ten, we were transported by Heli helicopters into an area whether it be a valley or a mountain top. We would set up a defensive position. We would run long range reconnaissance patrols off of those particular bases. We would dig into the mountain top we would cut trees down, build bunkers , fill sand bags, cut the trees down use the wood as a cover for the roof and put sand bags on it. Usually if we were in a position like that we would stay there for about three weeks and run long patrols off of the mountain top. We were in an area that was heavily influenced by the French before we arrived. We went through a lot of areas, towns were there was a big French influence. There were rubber plantations a lot of churches, catholic churches actually. There were Vietnamese there but they were run by catholic nuns. Even though the war was going on hot and heavy at the time. It was quite different. Our main mission was to search and destroy. We were to find them and engage them if we could and then call in support or find them and cut their supplies

routes. Anytime we found underground bunker systems where they would have hospitals or there were food or ammunition supplies, it was our job to destroy these supplies and ammunitions and things like that. We also rendered aid if we came into villages. We would tend to their sick if we were able to. Our particular unit worked closely with the ARVANS the Army of The Republic of Vietnam and their soldiers, the south Vietnamese soldiers. We worked with some of their rangers they were interpreters for us they were also guides and they would help us in areas we weren't familiar with. I spent 11 months in a combat zone. Then I was sent back to a battalion headquarters which was still in a hot bed of action. It was an armored division there that I was more or less assigned to. It was actually the first city to fall once the war ended. The name of the city was pontoon. It was the first city that was overrun by the North Vietnamese when the war ended. We travelled a great distance. Our particular division, the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry covered probably one of the largest areas in Vietnam."

**How many people were in the division?**

"We were looking, probably at full strength ten thousand."

**Wow that's a lot !**

"Our company was probably anywhere between 120-140 men at any give time. There were five companies in our regimen. I was in C company .sometimes we moves in 2 company strength with around 250/260 men depending upon where were going and what we expected to run into. "

Contrary to what people think, I always felt, and if you talk to any Vietnam veteran, we did not lose that war, it was political"

**- I got a lot of that feeling from the people that have been interviewed. It wasn't that they lost the war, it was more like it didn't work out."**

"Right, If we were allowed to bomb the north heavily the war could have ended but it was political at the time"

**The politics is what made it out of order**

“yeah it’s the same now. I have a son in the marines. He has been in for almost sixteen years. He has been to Afghanistan and it’s the same thing. We are trying to fight a war with one hand tied behind our back, they hide behind civilians. They did the same thing in Vietnam. They go into villages; they would attack us from the villages and hide behind civilians themselves. If civilians gave us aid, once we left the area they might go in and massacre everyone in the village. There were quite a few incidences of that happening. If I had to do it over again I would still do it. I am proud of my service I am proud of the men I served with and it actually started me on a career when I got back. I had 6 months to go before I was released from active duty. I was assigned to Fort Jackson South Carolina and I was assigned to a military police company. I worked with the military police until I got out in December of 1969. In September of 1970 I became a Northvale Police Officer.”

**You became part of the Northvale Police Department?**

“yeah. I worked for the Northvale Police Department before I retired. We saw quite a bit of combat. Of course the 4<sup>th</sup> infantry is a famous division. It was one of the divisions that stormed the beaches in Normandy, and the division who captured Saddam Hussein. They are still fighting now. The casualty lists still have men from the 4<sup>th</sup> infantry who are still losing their lives there.”

**When you were in the military were you ever wounded?**

“No, I was very lucky I was never wounded. A few times I came very close. I was hit with shrapnel in the helmet. I took a sniper bullet through my pants leg. The troops around me thought I had been hit at the time. It knocked me to the ground. It went in the front and left a big hole in the back. I had some letters from home in my fatigue pant pocket. The bullet went right in front and tore a hole right out the back. I tripped a couple of booby traps, that were set for us but they didn’t go off. They were grenades and the wires broke. We were lucky there too. All in all for my company in the eleven months I was in the field, we lost 12 men/friends who were killed. I was very fortunate to have come home. It just wasn’t my time. I never did anything careless or anything like that. It was the type of war where the enemy would only engage you if they had overwhelming

superiority. I would run into them and there would be a brief fire fight. Then they would run and disappear into the jungle. They did not fight because we had such superior resources we could call on. To stand and fight would have been suicide for them. It was a controversial war. It took ten years before I went down to see the memorial in Washington. I couldn't bring myself to go see it. My two sons and my son-in-law accompanied me. I looked up the names of the men who served with me."

**I saw the monument during my eighth grade trip. It was a great monument, very unique.**

"It is very moving, like I said I am very proud to have served."

**When you were in the military were you yourself in any famous campaigns or battles?**

"yes – the battle involved the, well made famous I guess by "we were soldiers" (*We were solders was a 2002 American war film that dramatizes the Battle of La Drang on November 14, 1965*). Part of the 4<sup>th</sup> infantry, part of my unit was involved in that battle in the A Shau Valley. In the A Shau Valley, there were several battles that took place. The battles were called hills ,like hill 937 was called hamburger hill. If you were to look at that movie and follow the credits at the end parts of the 4<sup>th</sup> infantry was involved. There was heavy fighting in the highlands. It was a very rugged area, very difficult for us to get support. Ground support I mean. Everything had to be brought in, air lifted. We had no armor support because it was all rugged terrain. Some of the other areas that were more flat like Saigon you could have tanks and armor personnel carriers. But in the in central highlands we didn't have armor support. We would depend upon artillery, miles and miles away, or helicopter gunships or jets to assist us. We were out there on our own, many times a long way from resupplying.

I can remember one instance they put us in to a region and we ran patrols off of this mountain top for about 30 days. We were running out of supplies, food water everything and they couldn't come and get us. The monsoon season came in with rains, heavy rains, and fog. They couldn't get us out for week it was rough.

We ran out of food and water. We were pretty ragged by the time we got out of there. Luckily, it was so bad the weather, that enemy could not get at us either because it was so slick. So that was good thing we couldn't get out, but they couldn't get in to us either."

**When you were in the service did you receive any awards or medals?**

"yes, I received the Combat Infantryman Badge, which is only awarded if you see actual combat, you are fired upon and engage enemy in battle, I received that award. My particular unit was also awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for one of our battles. The Presidential Unit Citation is the equivalent of a silver star. I didn't find this out until a couple of years ago when I did some research. So instead of giving the whole unit each individual man a silver star, the whole unit was given a presidential unit citation."

**That's an amazing accomplishment.**

"At the time I didn't think anything of it. It was only a few years ago that I did research and found out what it meant. My son said to me "do you have any idea of the significance of what it is?" I told him I never really gave it much thought at the time. He told me about it .The 4<sup>th</sup> infantry, and my particular unit, was very heavily decorated. I had a friend of mine that was killed in action. I did not find out till I got out of the service. For the particular battle that we were in that day, he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. It's a funny thing people talk about being a hero you become a hero by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. You are not doing it to get the medal. You are really not thinking about doing it for your country. It's doing it for the man that's next to you save his life, and save your own life that's what makes heroes; doing what you are supposed to do but protecting the guy that's in the fox hole next to you. Whatever, by doing those actions sometimes you are awarded a citation or a medal."

**It is obviously a great accomplishment though.**

"Yes"

**When you were in the military what would a typical or normal day consist of?**

“In Vietnam? Yes ...well let’s see, before I became a machine gunner you would go out on long range reconnaissance patrols The Company would send out four men on a patrol; the radio operator and three other men. You would go out three or four miles into the jungle designated mission to attempt to locate the enemy. Hopefully you would sneak up on them since there are only four of you. Set up a listening post and then report back to the main company. It was very dangerous to go out on those patrols. We would take turns. You had four men and somebody had to stay up all night long. One man would stay up one hour and then wake up the next man and so on. You would call in situation reports every fifteen or twenty minutes. The company radio operator would call you on his radio voice wise, he would say “26 Charlie what’s your sit rap?” ( situation report).. You would not verbally respond to him. You would push the microphone button once if everything ok, twice if you had movement or if you heard something in the jungle around you. If it was close enough, if you felt the enemy was close enough you could break radio silence. But again, you didn’t want to do that to give your position away. Long range reconnaissance patrols were just a part of the infantry company’s normal daily type of procedure. You would also have a listening post set up. If we were set up in an area like a mountain top we would have listening posts were we would go out at night too. This is outside the perimeter, the barb wire you had set down. You would set traps, claymore mines things like this. You would have your own man outside in the jungle so you would have protection against the enemy sneaking in on you. When I became a machine gunner, I no longer went out on these long range reconnaissance patrols. What we would go out on is night ambush. They would send a squad out, 12, 14, 15, men with the M60 machine gun being the heaviest piece of artillery that you have. You would set up in the jungle in an area they had determined was a trail through the jungle that the enemy was using. You would stay out there all night long waiting for them to come by hopefully you would ambush them and kill them. It meant being out there in good weather and in pouring rain. I can remember many nights laying out in the jungle in three or four inches of water just completely soaked. You can’t put on a plastic poncho to protect yourself because the rain hitting ponchos made noise. So you have your helmet on and your jungle fatigues and you would just lay there in the mud and rain and mosquitoes until the next morning if nothing

happened. It was different. I think the worst part was the mosquitoes and leeches. We would cross streams and rivers and you get to the other side and take your pants down to make sure you didn't have leeches on you. You could either pour salt on them or burn them with a cigarette lighter, or insect repellent if you had some. But we were always running low on insect repellent. The problem was that once they bit you they leave a dime size sore on your leg or wherever they bit you. In the jungle heat, within a day or two it became infected, especially if it was from the knees down. It became a real issue and could send you to the hospital because you would get what was called jungle rot. As these sores got infected, and you were walked through the jungle, the plants were always hitting your pants and opening up these wounds constantly. It was something different.

It wasn't the healthiest environment. A lot of people were taken out of the field. I was taken out for five days for that exact situation. I couldn't heal the sores on my legs so they sent me back to the rear area where they treated me with antibiotics, bandaged it, and five days later I was out in the jungle again."

**When you were in Vietnam what was the most common or normal routine while you were in battle?**

"Give me a situation"

**If the Vietnamese had a surprise attack on you while you were in their area?**

"If you were involved in a battle it was very important to know where your squad, or men were. Day time was bad enough, but at night you can't tell good guys from bad guys. You had to be very careful; I had to be very careful with the M60 machine gun. The type of bullets, the M65 is a 7.2 mill round which is in essence a hunting rifle. It is high caliber and it comes on a metal belt with clips that hold the bullets together. Each belt has 250 rounds of ammo. When I carried the M60 I would have a starter belt. I would put a round in the chamber and put the top cover down on the machine gun....there would be 7 or 8 rounds on this metal belt that would stick out. If I had to use the gun I would just take another Bandelier and clip it to it and it would feed in automatically as I fired. It ejects each sect of



metal clip as you fire. The M60 fires 600 rounds per minute. Every third round or bullet has a reddish tip on it and its paint. It's called a tracer, so at night when you fired this you could follow the bullets by watching the tracers go out into the darkness. The enemy can also see those tracers coming at him and trace that same bullet back to its source. So if I was to fire too many at once, like if I were to just hold the trigger down and fire 50 rounds at once it would appear to be an unbroken laser beam going out into the jungle. They could follow that right back and blow me up. So we were taught only to fire three or four rounds at a time, just squeeze the trigger ... three or four round.. Three or four rounds...the M60 can fire singularly, almost like a hunting rifle. It has a built in bi-part on the front of the barrel that you can flip down and you lay down on the ground in prone position with this thing. It's deadly accurate. You could hit someone a mile away with this. They have a very similar version to this day. It's a little bit different from the M60. It's more improved, it's a lighter weight. I think it still fires a high caliber bullet. But that was the danger with the M60. The Tracers. Even the men who carried the m16's, they also had tracers every third or fourth round. There were 20 bullets to a round on the M16. In Vietnam they found out the problem was the dampness the dirt. There were too many bullets packed too tight they would jam. A canvas bandolier had 26 or 7, 20 round clips when they were issued. What you would do is pop two rounds out so there was less tension on the spring in the metal magazine. Then it had fewer tendencies to jam up on you if you were in combat. That's just something they found out; it was a defect they didn't realize that this would happen in the climate. With the M16, which you fire on full automatic, again you had to be careful at night. If you fired off 18 rounds that tracer that goes out into the jungle that's keeping you on target also like I said works in reverse. Imagine you're out at night in your yard and you shine a laser beam. Someone who is out there can pinpoint you by following that laser beam back to its source.

When we arrived in Vietnam we had two weeks additional training geared toward the jungle; what you were going to encounter, what to watch out for as far as taking care of yourself. The big problem was dry socks in Monsoon season. Wet your feet, and you get infections and you're done for."

### **Isn't that why you should get wool socks?**

“Yup we all had wool socks. We all had a couple pair of wool socks. Unfortunately, when you are out in a combat zone it is very difficult to take your boots off and let your socks dry out because you don't know what's going to happen. You might have to get up and start running, and then you're in bare feet. It was defiantly a big problem. Keeping yourself physically fit and not getting sick, not getting malaria”

### **Lots of bad stuff out there**

“I am 100% service connected disabled. My hearing is shot. I wear hearing aids, I started wearing hearing aids a couple of years ago. I just turned 64. They said at the VA that was the machine gun. Back in the Vietnam War there were no hearing protectors. Even in basic training they didn't give you ear protectors like they do now so there was a lot of damage to the ears. I also was exposed to Agent Orange. I have diabetes, I've had cancer, I've come down with rheumatoid arthritis and all of these are on the list of illnesses caused my Agent Orange. a toxin a chemical that DOW Chemical's developed to spray and kill everything. It did its job, but after 25 or 30 years they found that this had poisoned the troops. I'm not bitter. I did what I had to do. I would do it again, and I'm still here so I am also luckier than some of my friends. That's the way I look at it. Every day is a gift from god.”

### **While you were at war, what helped you pass the time?**

“If you ever had any down time you tried to write letters. Letters from home were a really big thing. You get tape players. The big problem was trying to get batteries. Another big thing that everybody wanted was for people from home to send presweetened Kool-aide. The water tasted terrible we were getting our water from rivers and streams. We would put a purification tablet in to kill the bacteria but it tasted terrible. So everyone wanted a packet of Kool-aide to pour into the canteen weather it was a one quart or two quart canteen. This way you were drinking something that tasted halfway decent.

Any down time you had, you wanted to clean your weapon. The last thing you wanted was for something to happen and your weapon jam up. The M60 was a high maintenance weapon. I had to really work on that to keep dirt and rust out of it so it wouldn't jam. I carried a 45 automatic as a side arm. Down time too, try to take a nap. You never had enough rest. There was never a night that you got to sleep through the night, ever. You pulled guard duty every single night every single man. You got used to going on three/four hours of sleep a night. So if you had any down time during the day, and you weren't on the patrol or had any duty, you would try to get some rest."

**While you were at war, what helped you get past the hard times?**

"Counting the days to come home! Everybody kept a calendar. Those calendars when you got down to thirty days got transferred to your helmet and people used to keep little marks on their helmet and cross them off. They used to call you a short-timer when you got down to a couple of weeks. No one wanted to go on patrols when you only had a couple of weeks to go. You tried not to get out of any duty that put you in danger. It would just be human nature. But everyone was in the same position... men in infantry companies are very, very close. We share the good times and we share the bad times. We all looked out for each other. That was the bottom line. You depended upon the man next you to protect you and our protected him."

**After you came home from war did your perspective on anything change?**

"Yes I had to bite my tongue a lot because of the protests going on. I had a very short temper that was very hard to control. I think that's what channeled me into becoming a police officer because I could channel my aggression into protecting the public and serving. It was difficult. I got back in 1969 early 1970 the war had become even more unpopular so it was very difficult. Northvale was a very patriotic town. I think it still is."

**For the most part it really is. We have a Veterans Day celebration every year; we have the Memorial Day parade every year.**

“I never had any problems in the town itself. People knew me. They were happy to have me back. There was never a bad word spoken about a veteran. I joined the VFW within six months of my coming back. Outside the town, in my travels and such, there was still a lot of animosity with soldiers. The Hollywood stereotypes of the baby killers, that was all Hollywood. Yes there were a few incidences of atrocities being committed in Vietnam, but no different than any other war. To paint the Vietnam Veteran as a drug addicts and such was just....”

### **It was unjust**

“It was all Hollywood projection; it’s totally untrue it was an unpopular war so we became unpopular too.”

### **I think that has been corrected**

“It took a long time to correct, but yes, it has been corrected.”

### **Did you carry anything from the military with you after the war?**

“Yes I was given a good luck charm by a villager. Vietnam has a people, not the Vietnamese themselves, like our American Indians. Vietnam has what they call the Montagnard, they were named by the French. There are people that live in the mountains. (*Montagnard means “mountain people” in French and refers to the indigenous peoples of the Central highlands of Vietnam.*) They have their own tribal customs. They were fiercely loyal to the cause of a free South Vietnam. They fought with us, the American troops. They also fought with French before us, bows and arrows type fighting and spears. These people were not armed with rifles. They were very proud people. The last couple weeks when I was sent back to an area around the city of pontoon, some of the workers on the base or the out-post were Montagnards. They worked in helping us fill sand bags, repairs around the base, and in the kitchen. I would take them back to their village at night before dark and pick them up in the morning and bring them back. I became very friendly even though there was a language barrier. When I left they gave me some gifts a bracelet that was made out of copper. I was also given a cross bow by the elder of the village. Unfortunately, I couldn’t get the crossbow back to the United States. It was confiscated by the military police wouldn’t let me bring it on

the airplane. I think the guy that confiscated it wanted it as a trophy for himself. Of course I wasn't an officer; I was a lowly sergeant so I couldn't get it back. But I do have the bracelet and pictures of the people. I often wonder what happened to them because that was the first city overrun by the North Vietnamese when war ended. Hopefully there weren't any reprisals against these people. I have a lot of good memories of people I fought with, whether they be American soldiers or South Vietnam troops or these Montagnard tribesmen who like I said were very very loyal to the Americans."

**Is there anything I missed or that you might want to share?**

"No, I think you covered everything. I tried to keep it light. I don't really talk about the bad times. I found mostly amongst Vietnam Veterans, or veterans from WWII or even my son are quiet about it. Most of the people who have seen combat are quiet about it. They don't really dwell on it too much; they try to focus on the happy times."