

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: John C. Burdett

COLLECTION: 4700.0941

IDENTIFICATION: Vietnam veteran

INTERVIEWER: M.P. Humphreys

SERIES: Americans in Southeast Asia

INTERVIEW DATES: 3/20/75, 4/1/75

FOCUS DATES: Feb. 25, 1963, July 1967-July 1968, Jan. 1971-Dec. 1971

ABSTRACT:

Tape 1374

Grew up in West Virginia; family; education; training at Fort Benning; first assignment was at Fort Ord, California; officer training; arrival in Vietnam, was with 1st Cav division; places he served in Vietnam; movements of battalion; search and destroy missions in plains; rotation of duty; responsible for men in company, duties; problems in rear at An Khe; hierarchy of platoons; comparisons to TV show MASH; description of villages; NVA rice supply; gathering intelligence; missions; soldiers walking up and down the plains; searching the area for tunnels, weapons, rice; catching and questioning people; hot meals; moving after dark; radio communication; finding transistor radios; interrogation; helicopter support; identifying position of enemy at night; AK-47s used by North Vietnamese; Vietnamese civilians stayed in at night so they wouldn't be shot; working in two or three-man positions; R&R centers; bridges and roads; railroads all destroyed; fire bases; barracks; delivery of supplies; movements of his battalion; base at An Khe; operating in Dak To; size of Burdett's area; guards, security; fight in Dak To; operating east of Highway 1, near ocean; reinforcing 4th Division at Dak To; how units operated together; montagnards; slash and burn economy; using ten year old maps; operating in thick jungle; native militia force that worked in mountains, assisted US Army; use of aerial photographs; catering service; hot meals; strategy of attacking from high ground down to low ground; finding signs of enemy in the area; booby traps made with sharpened bamboo sticks; Som(?) Offensive; 173rd capture of hill 875; Vietnam as a war without fronts; hearing about protests at home; rumors of buildup in the north; three battalions within his brigade, he was in 1st brigade; moving from little firebase in Binh Son; accumulation of personal belongings; troops moving by air and water; arrival in Ben Tre just after TET; trying to find people who went missing during move during NVA shelling; sharing supplies with other branches of military; terrible weather around time of Tet Offensive; one battalion separated from others; rockets fired at ARVN headquarters; fighting NVA across a cemetery; pushed Vietnamese out; interrogated Vietnamese; Tet backfired; strength of the NVA; move to Khe Sanh, then to A Shau Valley; Ho Chi Minh Trail; gateway into Hue, old imperial capital; 1st Cav working with ARVNs in A Shau Valley operation; major way station for the Ho Chi Minh Trail; found hidden artillery pieces;

destroyed Russian amphibious tanks; captured rifles; found power lines; ARVNs captured Russian trucks; logistical problems of using enemy weapons; operation halted because of weather; reopened old air strip; defoliation, burning supplies, ammo and tunnels; detailed maps; taking prisoners; change of public opinion ended defoliation.

Tape 1375

Additional training at Fort Knox and Fort Bragg; promoted to major at Fort Bragg; ordered to return to Vietnam as an advisor; types of people who went to school in Washington DC; description of course at school, intensive language program; Burdett's difficulty with Vietnamese language; test at end of course; language teachers; Burdett's first or second grade Vietnamese vocabulary; advantages of speaking some Vietnamese; sent to Saigon in 1971, brief schooling there; CORDS program; plans to phase out military, turn country back over to Vietnamese; division of country by corps; Burdett sent to Cantho, headquarters of the delta; worked with John Paul Vann, a civilian and former Army officer; other people in charge there, including full colonels and many civilians; Burdett went to Minh Duc district, called Cai Nuoc by VC; roads and transportation into district; driving during rainy season; Burdett replaced popular commander; people he worked with there; haven areas; eradicating haven areas and preventing VC assassinations; sugar and rice mills, economy going back to work; co-workers; lived in old French house with guards around it; rank, background of district chief; North Vietnamese who came south in 1954 to flee communism; gaining respect for the Vietnamese; friction with man Burdett was replacing; visiting villages in area; protecting villages; local police force known as "white mice"; command problems of police hierarchy; new Americans in this area still caused a major stir; meeting key figures, using interpreter; village market places; market activity correlated with stability of surrounding area; villagers asking for money; description of Burdett's boat; traveling in village chief's boat; villagers abusing his boat at public pier; Burdett's houseboy; raising funds for schools, bridges, markets; televisions in villages; South Vietnamese nationalists; education in villages; Burdett felt understaffed; bureaucracy; evaluating pacification program; defoliation program to eradicate VC havens; resettlement of South Vietnamese people into bad areas to establish presence; cutting trees back; military operations directed by province; Vietnamese artillery; American gunships, aircraft available to him in Cantho; playing volleyball, running, for recreation; movies; mail service; monthly meeting at Vinh Long; recreation at Vinh Long; cut from five-man to three-man team; visiting hamlets in district to gather data; dangers of hamlet visits; writing monthly letter assessing work of village chief; briefing visitors with set of charts and maps; difficulty of keeping charts up to date; writing reports; General Cushman's visit; Mr. Vann and Mr. Wilson came for monthly briefing; briefing Vietnamese advisors from Cantho; American colonel or higher would come with Vietnamese general; visits from CIA people; rare visits of Americans from Vinh Long; visits from newspaper reporters; study groups from Saigon who were interested in revitalizing local water system; Burdett's relations with legendary John Paul Vann; Vann's reputation and personality; Vann's memorandums; Vann dropping by for briefings; Vann's success in area; success of pacification program; trouble in II Corps; headquarters later moved from Pleiku down to Nha Trang; Vann's death in helicopter crash; Mr. Wilson replaced Vann; land and tiller program; building and repairing schools; instructing peasants in agricultural techniques; experimental farms; increased rice yields; opening roads that had been destroyed; constructing bridges.

Tape 1376

Delivering funds for village development programs; bridge building projects; corruption, stealing on projects; wrecker that fell through a bridge; VFD? Projects used village labor; military helped restore a church; Catholic community along Cochin River; popular Vietnamese Catholic priest at that village; Hoa Hao community; Cao Dai church; VC attempt to assassinate PF platoon leader; resettlement in an agrovillage; priorities were getting people back on land, developing rice strains, rebuilding roads, bridges, rice mills; eliminating haven areas; elimination of terrorist activity; program to open schools; Burdett helped with English class; district chief who was from the North; district chief's mean assistant; military action in Hoa Hiep?; avoiding hurting civilians; success of ambushes; injured some civilians, this caused trouble; investigating incident; rockets had misfired and hit a house, Burdett held responsible; status of being an advisor in the military; fringe benefits of advisor's job; Burdett was a command equivalent; gaining respect for the Vietnamese; position personally rewarding, but frustrating militarily; amount and degree of fighting that year; would have preferred commanding troops; Burdett now a major; relations with district chief; translators' relations with district chief and with Burdett; how translators assigned to that post; Americans advised not to go out alone; propaganda campaign in area; training, Kit Carson scouts; training local people in military operations; radio programming; literacy in villages; police force in villages; narcotics control operation; police force's patrol boats; security on the river; dealing with complex chain of command; Vietnamese pacification meetings; getting funding for programs; AIK? money; supervising spending of money; mechanics and their connection to black market; gas allocations, theft of gas; functions of his staff on three-man team; going to Vinh Long to buy food; helicopters delivered non-food supplies; visiting villages and hamlets; other duties of three-man team; woman who did laundry; houseboy and his chores; Burdett's assistant; trouble with enlisted man who hated Vietnamese; courses in Vietnamese; schools for Americans in Vietnam; Project PHOENIX; accomplishing goals in district.

Tape 1377

Rationale for frequent rotation of personnel; combat fatigue; awesome responsibility of command; commanders' lack of sleep; differences between enlisted men and commanders; duties and problems of commanders; influence of journalists on soldiers; Burdett's men; men in field had few luxuries; men shared what they had; resentment toward soldiers in rear; relative luxuries of men in rear; not enough jobs in rear to go around; R&R trips; people became cautious near end of tours; dangers of overly cautious soldiers; problems caused by idleness; racial friction; men killed in accidents; battle fatigue causing accidents; foot rot; anti-malaria pills; foot rot and malaria as signs of poor leadership; guarding bridges at night, could swim during day; prostitutes checked for VD near An Khe; corruption while Burdett was a district advisor; success of Vietnamization program; resentment against Americans; use of shotguns; misfires of M-16s; views on America's place in Vietnam; ideas about a "limited war"; search and destroy missions; joint operations with ARVNs; Vietnamese Airborne Division in the A Shau Valley; continued acquaintance with officers he knew in Vietnam; opinion on strategy of war; separation of officers from enlisted men; relations between NCOs and regular officers; justifying expenses in Vietnam; draft was not equal, students more likely to get drafted; low caliber recruits when draft first eliminated; advantages of voluntary entry into service; saddened by recent developments in Vietnam; Burdett regrets undeserved criticism about Vietnamese, and about American withdrawal;

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