

CLIFF LEBER

Our Neighbors, Our Heroes: Forest Park Veteran's Oral History Project

NC: Today is January 19, 2018 and I am Nancy Cavaretta for the Forest Park Historical Society Oral History Project, and today I am interviewing Cliff Leber. Hi Cliff!

CL: Hi!

NC: Hi, going to ask you just a few basic questions to start out. Could you please give me your date of birth?

CL: Date of birth, November 3, 1944.

NC: And what is your current address?

CL: Forest Park, IL.

NC: Thank you. And in what branch of the military did you serve?

CL: I was in the Army.

NC: And what was your rank, and where did you serve?

CL: My rank was Sergeant E5, and I served in Vietnam.

NC: And do you have any family members who are serving in the military, or have served in the military?

CL: No.

NC: OK, very good. So, we know you were in Vietnam. Now I want to ask you about your early military training. Were you drafted or did you enlist?

CL: I was drafted.

NC: How old were you at the time?

CL: 20.

NC: How did you feel about that?

CL: Well, I really had no choice. I mean I felt it was happening all over at the time. They were pushing men in as quick as they could. So, I just felt I want to do my duty, you know. So I had to get the physical and once I passed the physical, it was just a matter of a week or so and I was on a bus from Forest Park to start my Army career. (laughter)

NC: Then where did you take your basic training?

CL: I took basic training in Fort Knox KY and that was about 8 weeks. Then I, we got orders, to go to fort Sill, OK for artillery advanced infantry training and that was about 8-10 weeks. We then got our orders to deploy for Vietnam. We received all of our combat gear, bug nets, everything and we were all set to go, I called my mom, told her I'm going and she cried, of course. So, just about a few days before we were going to leave, they changed our orders and they said you're going to Hawaii! I said, "What, I couldn't believe it!" So, we turned in our combat gear, I called my mom and said we're going to Hawaii, but I didn't tell her it was for 10 weeks of extensive jungle warfare training.

NC: My goodness.

CL: So, I got to Hawaii, went by troop carrier, took about 5 days in the Pacific. I'm not too good on a ship as far as when it's wavy. I was pretty sick. Got to Hawaii and we began our jungle warfare training. The conditions in Hawaii were pretty close to the conditions in Vietnam as far as humidity, jungle, and heat when we were training. So, we were taught many, many things. We did things as a human being I never thought I could during training and they push you. And, for instance, river crossings on one rope with your gear, and you had to do it on your belly and it was 20', 20' above the water. But they did have rafts down there in case you would slip and fall in. That's something I

never thought I could ever do, (laughter) crawl across a river on one rope on my belly, that was the way you had to do it. And we had ambush training, we had mountain climbing, that's another thing I thought I could never do. But through all the training I was able to climb mountains and repel like nothing. So, they were readying us for the mountainous area region of Vietnam. After we passed all that, we finally got our orders in Hawaii that we were going to deploy to Vietnam. We got on a ship, a troop carrier that held 3,000 men, all of our gear and everything on the ship, and we started our trip to Vietnam. The water was pretty rough and most of the guys were very sick. You really didn't want to eat anything. It took me about 6 days for my stomach to finally get used to it. The waves were very rough. We finally got to Vietnam. It took about 12 days. We got to the harbor and sat in the harbor for 3 more days in the heat. We were surrounded by destroyers and boats with 50 caliber machine guns to protect us. After all, there were 3,000 men on this ship, and it would have been easy for somebody to throw a bomb on that ship, so you were very well protected when we got there. We eventually debarked from the boat onto a boat called the LST. They were popular back in WWII and they would move many, many men to the shore. We would pile up in this boat and when we'd get up to the shore, the front of the boat would drop, and we would run through the water, get in our 2 ½ ton transport trucks, and we would go off to our base camp. My base camp was home of the 25th Infantry Division and their base camp was located in Cu chi. I was assigned to the 7th Battalion, 11th Artillery. It was a huge base camp and we were just at the beginning of the start of this base camp. It was pretty empty so we had to basically set up our own homes, I mean our tents, mess halls, latrines, etc. This base camp was so big that it had it's own airport.

NC: Oh my goodness.

CL: We, as we got established, I started to feel a little more comfortable about it. I was in the artillery and anytime that we would go out in the field on an operation we would be protected by the infantry. The artillery did most of the damage on the Viet Cong because we would transport 6 guns per battery and we had 3 firing batteries, Battery A, B, and C, and Headquarter Battery which was IWIN. I was in charge of supplying the soldiers their guns, so anytime the guns went out, I was out. I would either go out by convoy, or I would go out by Huey Helicopter. We, like I say, we were protected very much by the infantry because we did a lot of damage to the enemy. The infantry liked us, and, of course, we loved them! We experienced incoming rounds probably on a weekly basis. I was very lucky. Our artillery battalion did not lose one soldier in the 14 months I was there. And I deem it all, because of the infantry itself taking good care of us. They would set up a perimeter, and they would make sure nobody would get through to us. So, we would fire our rounds and they'd pick us up by chopper, or we would go by convoy, we would go to another operation where the VC was spotted, and we would send out many, many rounds. Like I said, we had incoming. We did have wounded, but I feel so fortunate to not be injured or ah, killed like so many soldiers did. I did have some instances where I had one instance where I was in a convoy literally driving/riding shotgun in a duce and ½ truck, duce and ½ means 2 and ½ ton truck. We were on this convoy and there was a huge explosion 2 trucks up. It was so big that I felt a concussion. I saw the door of the driver's side of that truck go flying like a Frisbee in the air, and I saw the driver. He was projected into the air like a rag doll. His leg was pretty well ripped off. (Sigh, tears) He ended in the field and my first instinct was get out and help

this guy. The medics were on their way. We were ordered to move out as quick as we could because Charlie was well known for ambushes after we would hit a land mine. So, we hit the gas and got out of there. To this day I don't know what happened to the soldier, I did not know him. He apparently was from the infantry, but that was probably the closest thing I've had to losing my life, that close because what the VC were doing, they figured out, they were taking our artillery rounds that did not explode, if they were a dud round, they actually found out, or figured out a way to convert our unexploded rounds and bury them in the roads and they were very powerful, more powerful than the regular land mines-these are 105 Howitzer Rounds. And I could tell it was one of those because of the concussion we felt and the sound when it went off, and my ears rang for days. But, we had incoming in base camp, we had mortar rounds coming in, we had rocket rounds come in. The mortar rounds would come in on a high angle and they would spin and you could actually hear them spinning, as they were coming in. So, it would give you just a little time to realize where about it was going to be coming in. So, we'd hit the ground and they would explode, and we were very lucky not to lose a man. The rockets came in a level projectory and surprised us. But, like I say, we were hit on a weekly basis and I was never so scared in my life, a 20 yr. old into combat! We were trained once we get out in the field on how to do things right, and the training helped quite a bit. To this day, out of the operations I went on, we only saw one mountain. It was a small mountain and we never had a chance to climb it, in all the training we did.

(laughter) So, a lot of times we would go out on operations where we would protect South Vietnamese army bases. The South Vietnamese army bases would be getting hit real hard from the VC so they requested us to set up camp outside theirs and hopefully

help them be protected which we did. We would get hit off and on, usually late at night, but there were firefights where we would be firing at and we would be being fired at. So to this day, I am so grateful that we didn't lose anyone. I got my discharge and I extended actually 2 more months in Vietnam for what was called an early out of the Army.

NC: And how long was your deployment supposed to be before the extension?

CL: In Vietnam it was supposed to be one year and 2 years totaled in the Army. I ended up extending in Vietnam and keeping low to get an early out of the Army. It was great because I only had to spend 21 months total in the Army and usually they have you have spend an additional 4 years stateside in the Army, but I didn't have to do that either! So after 21 months, I was discharged and at home. When I got home I was out. We took a Continental golden jet out of South Vietnam. I got on that jet and I can't tell you how happy all of us guys were! I got to O'Hare airport but I didn't go straight home. I went to a hotel and slept for 24 hours 'cuz the last few days of getting out of Vietnam, the paperwork, the lines you stood in and everything, we didn't sleep for over, close to 50 hours! We tried but we were excited that we were going to be leaving this place. So I got up, I called my brother. He picked me up, got home, my mom cried of course. She was my welcome home along with my father and my brother! And that was it! At O'Hare, we had some experiences when we were walking in our full uniforms, dress uniforms-we had some young people, I know they weren't too happy to see us for some reason, I mean, we know there were protests.

NC: Did you understand the reasons?

CL: There were a lot of protests going on at the time and I thought this might be, they're not protesting, but one of them spit on the ground near us. My buddy and I we were in

such good physical shape, we could of just floored them, but we kept walking. We held our noses high, and felt proud of what we did. I still to this day feel proud of what we did. I would never think otherwise. Got home, and a year later I became a fire fighter in Forest Park, took the test and I was a firefighter for 33 years. In fact the town home I am sitting in now is the site of one of the biggest fires I ever had.

NC: Is that right

CL: There was a meat packing plant here.

NC: Yes.

CL: And it was around the early 1970's. It was a 2-½ day fire. Anyway, like I say, as far as the Army experience is, is I'd do it over again because it was for my country, there was no questions, that's about it!

NC: That's very positive.

CL: I probably missed a lot of things..., sorry if I did.

NC: I didn't stop you because these were all part of the questions I would be asking you anyway. To convey my appreciation for your service and for your personal sacrifice is very small.

CL: Oh, thanks!

NC: ...compared to what you've done.

CL: The welcome homes today, I feel so much better about the men coming home today.

NC: Much better, yes.

CL: And they deserve it. Back then was a lot different. (sighs)

NC: Back then, a lot of the protesting was done by college students who were probably around the same age as you were when you returned and when you served. And there was

not the ability in the American consciousness at the time to be able to separate the purpose of that war and the people who served in it and their intention of serving. People in the United States have really grown a lot in terms of being conscious that there is a difference between whether you agree politically with what is going on with our military involvement, and the people who serve. I think we've been able to finally differentiate that, but it's heartbreaking for me to think that every night we would turn on the news and watch Vietnam on TV. And that those fears, those casualties, those injuries, the psychological things to figure out later on down the line, were not acknowledged for any of you who served in Vietnam. A national apology should be made in some way, but I know that your service and your belief in what you have done for your country FAR outweighs the necessity for that.

CL: Yeah. I forgot to mention some dates, like when I was drafted.

NC: Give us a time frame on some of the dates.

CL: I was drafted August of 1965 and I had an honorable discharge that would be July of '67. I received an Army Commendation Medal for meritorious service against the hostile force. I really don't know why they gave it to me. I became a firefighter in 1969, Dec. 1st of 1969, and retired in 2003. Those are the dates I have I remember anyway.

NC: Let me ask you too about some of the guys you served with. You really praised the efficiency of the infantry to be able to keep your artillery in tact. Do you ever communicate with any of the guys you served with back then?

CL: You know, I don't. I talked to a guy from our unit. He was in from California. He stopped by, we talked, and I never saw him after that again and I could not reach him anymore, I tried, but that's about it except for my high school friends and all that were

from around here. I never got in contact with any and in fact, I've forgotten most of their names. There's a couple that stood, but they were great friends.

NC: So then, you went right to the firefighter training when you came home. Did you get a feel for people's reactions to your having served in Vietnam at the time? If it ever came up in a conversation, were people receptive? What were their reactions like?

CL: At the time, they were receptive. I never had any problems at all. They were all, well most of them were my age and a little older like the officers, but I never, ever had a problem at work with that. In fact they give you extra points when you are taking a test. You get extra points for being military.

NC: ..for the firefighter test?

CL: ..For the firefighter test, yeah.

NC: You have very unique training under the most extreme circumstances to psychologically be able to be a first responder.

CL: Yes.

NC: So afterwards, did you ever join any veteran's organizations?

CL: No I didn't. At the time I just never felt like....

NC: Like doing what?

CL: ..joining. Happened I was asked a lot to do it, but I go to Hines Hospital once in a while. I have a doctor there, and I meet guys that were from my unit and we sit down, we talk. Sometimes I'm lucky enough to meet a guy from the 25th Infantry Division.

NC: That's amazing.

CL: And sometimes like if I go to the auto show in Chicago, or if I go to big get togethers or something, I'll wear my Vietnam veteran hat.

NC: I was just going to ask you if you ever wore anything that signified the time that you served.

CL: I wear my Vietnam veteran's hat. And somebody came up to me and said, "When were you there?" And I'll tell them '66, '67. "Really! I was too. Where were you?" So, sometimes a coincidence like that happens, you know. And, you bring up things, and I feel comfortable talking to another vet, real comfortable! So, I'm still not sad that I did it, that I did it at all. I'm glad I went. Guys were going to Canada or they were given college deferrals, you know.

NC: Yes, college deferrals were common then.

CL: My father couldn't afford college, so he couldn't send me to college anyway, so, (laugh). Anyway... It wouldn't change a thing.

NC: That's wonderful Cliff. I'm really happy to hear that there are no regrets and that you have positive peace about serving. If you were to leave a message for future generations who will hear this interview, like a life lesson or some really big learning, what you would like to share with them?

CL: Oh gosh, I wouldn't...

NC: I know, it's a big question.

CL: I really wouldn't know what to say in that. I'm sorry Nancy. Well, the future generation has a choice. You know, the draft is out, they haven't drafted in years.

NC: That's right.

CL: So they have a choice. They can make a career, they can make a life in the military service if they want. They can go places, they can see places, and they, my gosh, they get

free college! I'm sure there are so many more benefits than there were back when I was drafted.

NC: You had the college benefit back then though, didn't you, was that available?

CL: Ah, I don't know.

NC: ..Upon return?

CL: Upon return, you know, to tell you the truth, I don't remember. I had a job I went to before the fire department. I had a job before Vietnam, or before the Army, and then they held my job until I got back, which was..

NC: That was great!

CL: ..which really was required at the time, they had to. But, anyway...

NC: So your ideas about the military in general are pretty positive?

CL: Oh, definitely, yes. I know several who that have joined the Navy and they've seen the world, and advanced so much. After their 20 years, when they retire, they're doing quite well in retirement.

NC: That's right. So you still see it as beneficial for helping your country as well as gaining some personal perks after serving. Let me ask you this, you were in Vietnam in the 60's during lots of resistance, and rebellion, and political movements. Do you remember any songs that stuck in your mind during that time?

CL: Oh, yes. I remember all the good songs.

NC: Which ones?

CL: ...going to San Francisco, what the heck, there was so many, flowers in your hair..

What was the name of that song?

NC: Oh yes, "If You're going to San Francisco," a Haight-Ashbury song.

CL: They would always depend on me at the firehouse to remember songs, “Who sang that?” I’d go, “Oh my gosh, that was Donovan, or that was a..”

NC: So many of the songs at that time were very political and very much about the signs of the times and the things that were going on. There was a social consciousness in a lot of that music and Donovan was one of them too.

CL: Right. I mean there was a lot of good music in that time period too, ‘60’s.

NC: Oh yes, all the classic rock.

CL: But, you’re right, there were the ones that stood out, you know, that’s a weird song, but it’s telling a story.

NC: Lots of things like that. Do you have any pictures of yourself in uniform?

CL: I’ve got some that I brought.

NC: Let me take a look. Wow!

CL: These are, remember black and white?

NC: Kind of! I do, wow! Oh, these are great, Cliff. Can you tell me something about these pictures?

CL: These are the boats that surrounded our boat when we pulled into the harbor. They had 50 caliber machine guns, and then there were destroyers. This is called, this is the LST. We would load off the big 3,000 troop carrier into here, and that’s what they looked like heading to shore. And the front of this boat would drop and we’d just go out the front into the water, about a foot of water. And this is what our base camp looked like when we first showed up.

NC: Oh my goodness. You really did the start up there, didn’t you!

CL: That’s a start up, yeah.

NC: Wow, there's nothing there.

CL: Now this one's a little better than when we first started. This one has wood sides and they're called a hooch, where you live, it's called a hooch. This is a 155-caliber artillery piece shooting right now, you can see. This is how we move our hooches when we want to. We get a bunch of guys to lift them up to move them.

NC: So you could just life them straight up out of the ground.

CL: Yeah.

NC: Were they staked into the ground?

CL: Well, these are the more advanced ones where they have a wooden frame and tents over them. These are our showers.

NC: Whoa!

CL: These are fuel tanks from jet planes and what they, we would do, they clean them out, paint them black, and you put water in them and the sun would warm the water up. By gravity, we could take a shower.

NC: That's really inventive!

CL: This is our water drinking tanks, that would get constantly hit by shrapnel. You can see, it would, they would have to weld it. This is our radar and artillery. If a mortar round came in, they can determine by trajectory where that mortar round came from. Our artillery would annihilate the whole area where that came from.

NC: That's would you talked about earlier.

CL: These were the upgrades. We had thatched roofs and they were much cooler, stayed cooler, but they housed a lot of bugs.

NC: That goes with the climate there.

CL: Here's another version of the showers.

NC: That shower is amazing!

CL: Yeah, it took many, many weeks before they got showers up so, we were smelling pretty bad.

NC: (laughter)

CL: This is our interpreter with me.

NC: I wanted to ask you, did you ever have to go to any classes to learn Vietnamese?

CL: Oh my Gosh, we did just the basics.

NC: Just very basic?

CL: Very, very basics. Joe knows more than I do.

NC: I know he does a lot.

CL: Yeah, that's incredible.

NC: And he remembers it all too. (laughter)

CL: It's like Spanish. I took 2 years of Spanish in high school I can remember just that much of it now!

NC: Yes, if we don't use it. Oh, that's a great picture of you. Tell me about this one.

CL: These are the artillery pieces, the 105 Howitzers. They would pick us up by helicopter, or we would go in convoy, by road convoy. And this was a gag picture. I wanted to show this guy the speed of my camera, how fast it was, so I set up a round, I put a round in there. I put a round and I told everybody that I got a picture of the round coming out.

NC: (laughter) Look at this!

CL: "Look at how it froze that round." It was a hilarious picture. (laughter) Yeah, this is one of my bunkers. This is what we pulled guard duty on around the perimeter of our operations.

NC: I see.

CL: These are grenade rounds, M60 Machine Gun. And these are friends of mine, survey crew, and this is me with my beer drinking monkey.

NC: Is that a monkey?

CL: Yeah. That's a monkey.

NC: Where did you guys get a monkey?

CL: It hung around our camp and artillery didn't seem to scare it. And this is a letter from a teacher thanking us so much for protecting their school. We set up our camp in a dry area near the rice paddies close to the school because VC were spotted in the area. We were there over a month. And this is what money looks like in Vietnam. It's 20 (pe-ostos, phonetic spelling) it's a little bit short of twenty cents.

NC: Would you allow me to scan those pictures and then I can return them to you?

CL: Yeah, no problem.

NC: Oh, thank you.

CL: Yeah.

NC: Wow, those are fantastic pictures!

CL: See, this is my ordered report for armed forces physical examination.

NC: Oh my goodness!

CL: Uh oh, you know you're going! 7520 Madison Street.

NC: Oh, so they had a recruitment office here in town?

CL: Yeah, and that's where they physically examined all the guys.

NC: May 3, 1965.

CL: Man, and I got married May 3, 1969. This picture is all the history of our 7/11 Artillery. And, it's kind of cool to read. It states in here that we didn't lose one man.

NC: That is amazing!

CL: It is because of all the incoming that we went through. I just was one of the lucky ones, you know, 59,000+ that weren't lucky, so it's sad.

You know, I'm not going to say it was a waste, but it's just like I just feel so bad for the families of those soldiers that lost their life, you know. And, I'm sure they're all thinking, what did they die for? We lost a war and America never loses a war!

NC: Yes.

CL: But I'd do it again! I have my feelings about it, like why are we here? But, we're here to protect people that want to be free like us... One of the details of garbage duty was we go to the mess halls to get all the grease and everything. We'd put it up on the trucks, we'd go somewhere out of town, and we would dump all this garbage in a huge hole. We would dump this garbage and there would be like rotten oranges, or rotten fruit, and grease from the kitchens, and stuff and there would be South Vietnamese people under that truck in that hole scraping for anything they could possibly get.

NC: That's very sad.

CL: They were running away with rotten fruit, just anything. I just thought "Oh my gosh, you know, things are pretty bad here." But that's the 2nd job, 2-week job I had to do.

After that I think, I've seen it all, from poop to that, I'll tell you, it's like (laughter) hey, after the 1st week you get kind of sick of burning poop, but you'd see it all over base

camp. You'd see black smoke going up, you know. So, I was promoted to Sergeant, well, actually when I got to Corporal that stopped. I didn't have to do that.

NC: So, you got up to the rank of Corporal.

CL: I was, a, first Private, Private First Class. And then I went to Specialist, Spec 4-I was put in supplies specialist. And then from that I was promoted to Sergeant E5. It might have had something to do with, ah, giving me incentive to reenlist. I'm just, 'cuz to be promoted to Spec 5, or, excuse me, to Sergeant E5 in 18 months is like, unheard of, you know.

NC: That's accelerated. Very impressive!

CL: They were on me every day to re-enlist, "How bout it? Look at the future." But I said, "I'm looking around here," and I mean I'd do it again if I was drafted, of course. I would not evade the draft, but I would enlist.

NC: I have a question for you. Now that we don't have the draft anymore, we've got about 1% of our population who continually serves in the military and they're kind of recycled over and over again with multiple deployments, so it's a whole different situation now. If you were a young man today, how would you feel about getting into the military service because you would have to go willingly? Would that be an option for you do you think?

CL: Well, it would depend on your situation. There's a lot of young, you mean when I was like 20?

NC: Yes.

CL: 20 now?

NC: That's right.

CL: If I had a good job, or a prospect of something, I wouldn't. But to me, I think it's great. I mean, for some that are 20 or 21, it's something great to get into. Like I said before, it could be a great future.

NC: Yes, there are many options.

CL: I know they could be sent to Afghanistan now.

NC: That's right. We've got conflicts now in other places that are heating up, but Afghanistan has been a long run. So if you were going in today, you would be aware that there would be combat.

CL: I know, yeah. It's hard at my age now to think about being 20 again. And would I do it? -Probably not unless I was drafted.

NC: I see.

CL: 'Cuz, you do have it, I mean, let's face it, I had no choice when I was drafted.

NC: Yes.

CL: And, to have a choice to go to war and possibly be killed, it's just my perspective has changed, you know.

NC: Yes, yes.

CL: It's good for some, you know. I mean there are boys that are gung ho, and let's go, you know.

NC: Yes, and women too.

CL: And, that's great, but that's who they are.

NC: That's right.

CL: And, some might not want to take a chance, you know.

NC: That's right.

CL: But when I was drafted, they had quotas to fill at that time, and they were pushing them in like crazy. I told you I was never so scared in my life. So, once we pulled into that harbor, and the destroyers are firing their big rounds, you know, and you hear all this noise and stuff going on, smoke coming up from the land, and you think, “Oh boy, I’m into it!”

NC: Cliff, you originally told me on the phone and when you walked in today, that you didn’t have a very interesting story to tell.

CL: I didn’t think so. (laughter)

NC: It’s extremely interesting and shows the many facets of what someone who served at your time had to undergo. It was very deep and complex. Thank you so much because this was an extremely rich story that you had to tell.

CL: Oh, thanks!

NC: It’s so honorable for us to keep your story as a piece of our sacred history of Forest Park. So, thank you so much for this interview today.

CL: Thanks for inviting me, Nancy.