

## **MIKE MOHR**

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

NC: OK, today is August 9, 2018 and I am Nancy Cavaretta for the Forest Park Historical Society Oral History Project interviewing Mike Mohr. Hi Mike!

MM: Hello Nancy!

NC: Mike, could you please provide your date of birth?

MM: Yes, Feb. 16, 1950.

NC: Thank you, and you do not currently live in Forest Park but have you lived here before?

MM: Oh yes, probably  $\frac{3}{4}$  of my life.

NC: Very Good.

MM: I'm 68 years old so approximately 40+ years. Born and raised here.

NC: 40+ years, so you're a long time resident. Very Good-And in what branch of the military did you serve?

MM: I was in the Army.

NC: Did you serve during combat?

MM: Yes I did.

NC: OK and in what war was that?

MM: Viet Nam.

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

MM: I ended up as an E5 Sergeant. I served in Quang Tri, which is I COR in Viet Nam. I was there for 15 months from Dec. '69 through Feb. 1971-actually 14 months.

NC: So, from '69 to '71. Thank you. And have you had any other family members who have served in the military?

MM: Yes, grandfather, great-grandfather, uncles, and my brother.

NC: So you have a long lineage of people serving in the military.

MM: Yes.

NC: Were they all in the Army?

MM: No. My father, and his uncle and his brothers, my uncles, were all Navy. And I did have one uncle that was killed in WWII, he was a B17 pilot and he was shot down over France coming back from a bombing mission in Germany, Stuttgart Germany, and his plane was shot down.

NC: So, your family has really contributed a lot to the United States safety and security. Yes. I know military families really sacrifice a lot. Well, thank you for that Mike. Yes. I'm going to start asking you about just the circumstances around the time that you came into military service. Did you enlist, or were you drafted at the time?

MM: At the time I was out of high school about a year and ½ and I was due to be drafted in Sept. of '69 and at the time I just wanted to get in, get it over with so I "what-cha-call", upped my draft and went to the draft board and said I'm ready to be taken now. So, that was in May of '69, so the next draft call was in July so I went in July 14<sup>th</sup> 1969.

NC: And you were 19 years old?

MM: Yes, so I was considered a draftee.

NC: So where did you take your first training?

MM: That was Ft. Leonard Wood MS., and that was 9 weeks of training and that went from July to I would say the first of October I believe end of September.

NC: I forgot to ask you how you decided on what branch of the military you wanted to serve.

MM: I was always interested in the Army, and it just, I had a very good friend that was a Marine and got killed in Viet Nam June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1967 and he was in Northern Viet Nam, they called it I COR which is up near the DMZ and I really wanted to set foot on the hill that he was killed on and I found the only way that I could ever do that was if I was in the Army and got to be the 101<sup>st</sup> airborne and I got my wish and I did set foot on hill 881 North. That's where my very close friend got killed.

NC: So that was a real life changing and life guiding experience for you. Yes, it's amazing that you had the opportunity to do that. Because not everybody knew where they were going to be sent during that time.

MM: Yes. It was just the luck of the draw-I just got what I wanted.

NC: So from there did you feel like your mission was protected or guided from being able to do that?

MM: I just felt a sense of peace that I set foot on the hill that he died on.

NC: Now, back to the training at Ft. Leonard Wood, after basic training did you specialize in anything?

MM: I was sent to Ft. Sill, OK and that's the big artillery school so I was trained on the big howitzers; 105 howitzers, 155 howitzers, the big guns, the 8" that were mounted on tanks, like self propelled, they look like a tank with the big artillery gun on there. I was trained on all that equipment.

NC: And I see you have a photograph with a large tank. Was that representative of what you were trained on?

MM: Yes.

NC: Now was that photograph taken during combat or was it during training?

MM: That was in Viet Nam on the firebase.

NC: Wow, so tell me a little bit about your first impressions of going to Viet Nam, like where were you sent and what did you see when you arrived there.

MM: We landed, I went there just prior to Christmas 1969, and I saw the Bob Hope Show over there which I am a life long fan after seeing his show and seeing what he contributed, the time that he spent, etc. It was truly a great show and I did see it again in 1970 so I was there 2 Christmases. And I landed in Tan Son Nhut Air Base which is in Long Binh which is near Saigon-that's where we landed and then we were all corralled on an Army base and we were there for about 2 or 3 days until we were all assigned. I was with 300 other guys and we were waiting for our assignment and we were sent to various divisions. So, I got assigned to the 101<sup>st</sup> so immediately we went up to, oh it was a town called Phu Bai, excuse me it was North of Phu Bai, main base camp with 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne called camp Evans and it was near KheSan, you've probably heard of KheSan, big battles were there. And anybody assigned to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne had to go through a 5-day school where we lived out in the field and got all our meals C rations and we lived out in the field for 5 days. Even if you were a cook, you had to go through all this training. That's where I went in training for soldier that got killed. We were on a patrol, I was only in the country 5 days and one of the soldiers hit a it was a booby trap and so that was very frightening and a real eye opener to what we were going to experience.

NC: Yes, Yes, so you were basically being trained for gorilla warfare.

MM: Yes, yes.

NC: You know, in terms of the people you trained with, did you make any close personal bonds or friendships while you were at that stage?

MM: Oh yes, I have about 8 close friends that I see on a regular basis. In fact, the picture of this one fella to my left, he came home, he was a citizen of Panama and he ended up enlisting in the Army. After he left Viet Nam he became a drug enforcement agent(DEA) because he spoke fluent Spanish and he served for 30+ years, and now he's since retired. We just got together recently, probably 3 months ago.

NC: That's wonderful, where does he live?

MM: He lives in Houston.

NC: Yeah, those are life long bonds, aren't they?

MM: Oh yes.

NC: Lets move now into past the training. What was your position then as you moved forward into the actual combat?

MM: Well I served on many firebases and I ran a mortar platoon and our job was to, if our base was under attack, we would provide illumination, usually when we got attacked it was always at night. So we would wake up, jump out on the 81 mm mortar, fire illumination rounds, so that we could see if the enemy was inside our perimeter. Then we would get orders from the FDC, Fire Direction Control, they would by phone, we had one of those military phones the kind you would wind up, they would call in coordinates and we would set as you could see the settings on the mortar. There's a quadrant and deflection you have to set on there and we get those orders from one of the Lieutenants because you just don't fire that at will, somebody has to give you the directions and that would be the angle of the tube, and the directions. So, we always got those orders from above.

NC: Were your orders ever interrupted in terms of radio connection?

MM: A few times, yes, a few times and then the officer who was on duty would come down and physically be in our mortar pit, there was a sandbag pit as you can see by my pictures where we were surrounded by sandbags and had our ammunition in here and we had to store it very carefully so the gun powder would not get wet or damp. That was quite a job because if you had wet powder the rounds would not go the distance they were supposed to so you would have a short round and during Monsoon seasons it was very tough to fire those mortars.

NC: So, that continued to be your job throughout your MOS, through the time that you served.

MM: Yes.

NC: Did you during that time lose any of your friends, lose any people from your unit?

MM: Yes, yes most of the people that we lost were from incoming rocket mortar attacks on our position. And, it's just the luck of the draw that I escaped without injury.

NC: Did you ever sustain any injuries when you served?

MM: No.

NC: That's amazing, no injuries. I see too, tell me a little bit about this letter, you received a commendation here.

MM: Yes, this was my commanding officer who I really respected and we did have some officers that we did call "Shake and Bake" commanding officers fresh out of ROTC school and they really got no respect from any of us but this man was a true Captain.

NC: Explain what this medal meant in terms of your service.

MM: Well, I received a few medals; Bronze Star for actions that we were involved in basically fire support for our infantry troops is what we provided, and we were in many operations and I did receive Army Commendation Medal and both of those certificates I have framed-they were signed by the Head of the Department of the Army, I forget who that is, but I have them on my walls in my home. I have an office on the first floor and I have a lot of my military awards in there.

NC: It's really good that you display them. Not everybody is willing to do that.

MM: Not many people see them, but they are there-I know they are there.

NC: That's right. I want to just ask you about the officer, the "Shake and Bake Officer" right out of ROTC. I've heard this from other people who have served in combat that I know in the military there is a cast system of people who enlist and people who are officers, but what was the general feeling about these officers that they were not able to command the respect of those of you who were "boots on the ground" so to speak?

MM: Right, it seemed like the first, well the only one that I really remember, it was a long time ago and I can't even remember his name, but I can still picture him and we all asked him, well one of our fellow soldiers asked this Lieutenant he said, "I always thought there was a height restriction." Now, I'm not that tall, I'm 5'7", but this officer was about 5'5", and he was trying to command respect from guys that had been in combat for 10-11-12 months, and he comes over and he's trying to give us orders. We didn't take them very well and he was trying to get us to shine our boots and cut our hair real short like when we were in basic training. There was really no rules on our haircuts. We could grow beards whenever we wanted to. He wanted to clean us up. He said we all look like F-Troop when we were in formation. And, he ended up being transferred out of

our unit after less than a month. He didn't cut it with us. He had no respect. And one of the Lieutenant Colonels got aggravated and pulled him out of our unit and they sent him somewhere else and I don't know where he went, but a couple of the individuals, fellow soldiers, got his gas mask, took the filters out of his gas mask and when he went in to sleep at night they threw a tear gas grenade inside where he was sleeping and his first reaction was to put the gas mask on. He had no filters in there so he was just inhaling the tear gas and everybody else in our unit knew that he was going to get tear gassed and we were all walking around with our gas masks that night the minute we heard, we could smell the gas so we all put our gas masks on. He was the only one that didn't have an operating gas mask.

NC: So, his duty to keep you safe wasn't what he actually provided.

MM: No. No, and like I said he just, we just felt that we didn't need him-he was just in our way. We felt like he wasn't really trained properly to order us around.

NC: That's right. Now, with being in artillery you serve as protectors for the infantry.

MM: Yes.

NC: Did you have any interaction with the infantry?

MM: Oh, yes, sure. Any time they came onto our base we would fraternize with them. Oh yes, and they always thanked us for our protection that we gave them.

NC: I'm sure the gratitude level was very high from them.

MM: Oh yes, yes.

NC: Now, Mike let me ask you this, 19 years old, when we think about the 19 year old of today and the 19 year old of when you were 19, there's a lot more, there's a big difference in the maturity level now. You know, we keep our adolescents younger longer, we keep our adult children younger longer, whereas with your experience at 19 you were not old enough to vote, you were not old enough to drink, but you were old enough to be put in harms way in military combat.

MM: Yes.

NC: What are some of your feelings about that?

MM: Well, my experience is that we literally grew up overnight and the training we went through we were young men and we were pretty, I feel we were very good soldiers. And the difference between the 19 year old right out of high school or a year after high school vs. college graduate those 4 years were a big difference. We were more in shape than the 23-24 year olds and I feel the 19 year olds were better soldiers.

NC: Were you frightened?

MM: Yes, yes, many times. But, that was usually when we came under attack, it was always at night, never daytime.

NC: So, did you adjust your sleep schedule to be more alert during the dark hours?

MM: To this day, I can wake up just like that! And, I can fall asleep, it takes me literally 3 minutes to fall asleep and I could be woke up 6 or 8 times in a night and keep falling back to sleep.

NC: So, you really have mastery over your own sleep schedule.

MM: Yes, and I think that came from our training.

NC: With subsequent attacks, I mean with artillery, you've got these very large capable weapons. After a round of attacks if it was a particularly bad one and there were lost lives, did that ever weaken you for the next time that you had to respond?

MM: I would say yes.

NC: Like how?

MM: Just wondering if it was your time where you would get killed or your fellow soldiers, buddies would get killed. When you're living together with a group of guys 24 hours, you really become close, really close, and it's very hard when you see one of your close friends get killed. To this day I still think about many friends that I've lost.

NC: Yes. You know one thing I didn't ask you about before these questions was the reactions of your family when you decided to enlist.

MM: At the time my father was the Mayor of Forest Park and a State Senator. He wanted me to go into the National Guard and which I really wanted to get in, get it over with. I really did want to serve. At the time, I know it was a political war, but at the time we had so many soldiers from Forest Park go in and all my friends were going in and coming home and we had a home in Wisconsin that I had many friends up there and everybody was going in, all my friends were going in. So, we felt it was the right thing to do. We never questioned our government, not like people today.

NC: Yes. Now with that point about questioning the government, when you were there, did you feel a sense of understanding what the mission was?

MM: Well, it was either kill or be killed basically. We were all very young and naïve and we just felt we were doing the right thing.

NC: And what was the right thing, for the purpose of doing what?

MM: Well, to win the war.

NC: And what would that gain?

MM: I know it was a totally political war, but we just felt we were doing what we were told and we just assumed we were doing the right thing.

NC: Now looking back, the whole question of Viet Nam is still talked about, discussed, it's studied because it was very complex with all the escalations.

MM: Yes.

NC: Looking back, do you have a feel or have an understanding of what that purpose of that war was all about?

MM: Well, LBJ really escalated the war and I don't know if many people realize it, but he owned an ammunition company somewhere in Texas. And, I think he made a lot of money off of all the artillery shells and all the ammunition that was spent over there. And we had monthly allocations; we used to keep track of our ammunition, how old it was, and we would be up some nights all night long on firing missions just firing rounds all over the place just to get rid of them because they were old and ready to be expired, which didn't make a lot of sense, but that's what we were ordered to do.

NC: So, you pretty much feel that there were reasons outside of the public's understanding for the escalation of that war?

MM: I would say so, yes.

NC: Interesting. OK Mike, is there anything else you want to share about your time over there?

MM: I know when our plane landed in Viet Nam as we hit the runway what I remember is the pilot announcing over the speaker system, "Take your last breath of clean fresh air," which we all did. And the minute they opened the door of the plane you could just feel the heat and the horrible smell. I can still smell it to this day. The minute we just got the fumes from outside you could just smell death, and that's very hard to explain. And then after we came off the plane, there was probably 200 of us on this particular plane and we saw 200 guys all lined up that had spent 12 months there and they were waiting for us to get off the plane and they would get on. And, I could still see the looks on these young soldiers faces, and what they were going through, what they had been through-you could just see it in their faces. And they're looking at us we're looking at them and you could just see they went through hell. Just their uniforms were all raggedy, old and beat up and worn out, and us all have brand new uniforms on and I'll never forget that! They never shut the airplane off because this was a big jumbo jet one of the regular airlines and we got off and the other troops got on and we saw it take off. So, we were only on the



ground maybe 30 minutes that plane reloaded guys taking them home, and I remember when it was my turn, seeing the young kids coming off, and we would just feel so sorry for these guys knowing that they're going to go through 12 months of combat. That was really tough, very tough to see.

NC: Very hard visually to take in.

MM: Yes. Those sights in my head will be with me forever. I can still see them like it was yesterday.

NC: Right. I think today so many people don't understand the sacrifice because we don't have the draft anymore.

MM: Right, and I feel so sorry for some of these young kids today that serve 2 and 3 and 4 terms in combat and it's like nobody could be normal after going through that.

NC: That's right because only 1% of our population is serving so they're recycling these people like you said, over and over again.

MM: And that's very tragic because their lives are never the same and I feel there should be a law against, nobody should have to serve more than one tour.

NC: I would agree with that. Well Mike, let me ask you some questions about returning to civilian life after that whole visual of looking at these guys coming and the guys going out. What was it like when you came home?

MM: I remember, I just happened to get out, by coincidence, it was my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. I got out of the Army and processed out, we got our final pay, and we were right outside Ft. Lewis Washington, I don't know if I was in Seattle or Tacoma, I think it was Tacoma, and we got to the airport and it was like homecoming week with half a dozen guys that I went to basic training with so it was like homecoming, we were all together. And, I was going to turn 21 in 20 minutes; it was 20 minutes before midnight. So, we're waiting for our flights to take off so we had a couple of hours waiting at the airport. So, right away we said let's go to the bar. So, I step up to the bar and ordered a rum and coke and the bartender who had long hair and a couple of earrings on, tattoos, and not very clean cut, but he said, "I need ID." And I'm like "An ID, what do you mean?" And he said, "In this country you've got to be 21 to drink." Well, that didn't go over well, did not go over well. I had been in Thailand, and Australia, and just all over the place and drinking constantly and the Army gave us 2 or 3 cases of beer every month everybody got it if you wanted it. Beer was free, but they had the worst beer-Falstaff, and Black Label Beer is what we had and I don't even know if they have that stuff today on the market, I'm not a beer drinker. But, I remember my parents picking me up at the airport 5 o'clock in the morning and my mother made 2 sandwiches for me. I used to love bologna sandwiches on rye! So, she made me a couple of bologna sandwiches and she had a 6 pack of Budweiser. So, I drank the 6 beers and I had 2 bites out of my sandwich because our

stomachs were shrunk, basically. We didn't eat very much over there-mainly liquid diet. We weren't fed very well.

NC: Did it take a while for you to be able to eat?

MM: Yes, one of the things I wanted my first fast food meal was a Burger King Whopper and I was able to eat 3 or 4 bites out of it. That's all I could eat. My stomach was full.

NC: How about the reception of people at the time when you came back from Viet Nam like friends and family, neighbors, etc. ?

MM: Yeah, made a lot of friends. I spent my first week up in Wisconsin. I took 2 weeks off and ended up going to work in the family business. I got out on Feb. 15<sup>th</sup> and March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1971 I started to work at Mohr Oil and I've been there every since. I've got over 47 years there.

NC: Since you lived in Forest Park, came back and worked in the family business in Forest Park, and that Forest Park had such a big military presence with the Amertorp Plant, were locals appreciative of your service? Many veterans who came back from Viet Nam suffered a lot of indignities from people because they didn't agree with the war.

MM: Yeah, I didn't really find that very much. Where I hung out, my friends we all supported each other. Most of my friends all served.

NC: So, you had a community of people who you were still connected to and you didn't really face people.

MM: No, I didn't see much negative.

NC: That's good, that's good because a lot of people did at that time.

MM: Right.

NC: Very good. So, in terms of life lessons from your military service, what would you say you gained the most from serving at that time?

MM: I would say that if I have something to do I'm a perfectionist at everything I do and give me a job to do I'll get it done right and I'll find shortcuts how to do it and do it right. Discipline, discipline I think is good for every individual. I feel all our kids to this day should have to serve a year in the military and I think we'd have a lot better country. I see, this day and age, too many people point the fingers, their fingers at other people they should do it, and I shouldn't have to do it, and I really feel everybody should have to serve. I mean we've got the greatest country on the planet. And I think things, material things I take care of, like our equipment, our trucks, I try to keep it all in tip top shape-

I've learned that through the military. We learned to take care of everything we were entrusted with.

NC: So, the discipline and the commitment to the country you think are most important.

MM: Oh yes, yes.

NC: Definitely.

MM: Patriotism.

NC: Which again I'm going to say a lot of people nowadays because we don't have the draft are very disconnected from what all it means.

MM: Sure. Yeah, they have no clue why our country is so great.

NC: Do you think it continues to be great through the military at this point in time?

MM: The military now, there are a lot smaller numbers when I was in, and you have a lot more electronic things and things are computerized so they're eliminating a lot of positions where you don't need as many people. You still need the pilots to fly the jets. There's a lot of things that need to be done by people.

NC: That's right, like special operations for example.

MM: And I think today's soldiers are a lot better trained than we were. When the Viet Nam war was going and it's like they pushed us after 4 months of training, boom, you're in combat.

NC: That's right.

MM: Today, I don't think it's as fast. You get a lot better training nowadays.

NC: I think you are absolutely right about that Mike and I think better training and I even think better after care if you've been in combat.

MM: Yes.

NC: I mean it wasn't all that long ago that posttraumatic stress syndrome was even given a name for what people have gone through and like you said, with these multiple deployments..

MM: Yes, it's very common now, very common.

NC: In terms of those issues like when your group came back from Viet Nam there was really nothing there to help like a network.

MM: No, right a lot of the people came back and turned to drugs, which was really rampant. Forest Park had a big drug issue back in the 60's early 70's. We lost a lot of people, a lot of young kids from drug overdoses.

NC: That's very sad, very sad. Well Mike, I have one very big question to end up with and the question is, what message would you leave for future generations who are going to hear your interview?

MM: I did the best I could with the training I had and I'm very proud of serving our country and at the time we felt we were on a mission and we felt we were doing the right thing. Our government asked us to serve; we just respected the government, and just assumed that we were doing the right thing.

NC: Well, I want to personally thank you for your service. Thank you for your sacrifice. Thank your family for their sacrifice as well because all too often, nowadays people don't understand that a whole family sacrifices when they have someone serving.

MM: Yes, that's for sure.

NC: And I really from the bottom of my heart want to thank you for everything you have done and what you continue to do for Forest Park.

MM: Thank you.