

Kenneth E. Brown  
Florence

Interviewer: J. Hanrahan  
February 4, 1984

Q. What year did you graduate from Morehead?  
A. 1972

Q. What was your major?  
A. Health P.E. and Recreation

Q. How long have you worked at the Post Office?  
A. Since 1973

Q. You were in the army from June 1967 till June 1968?  
A. No, that's when I was in Vietnam. I was in the army from January 1967 till December 1968.

Q. You were one of the early ones to go to Vietnam. How old were you?  
A. I was 18.

Q. Had you jsut got out of high school?  
A. Yes.

Q. Where was that?  
A. I went to Simon Kenton High School in Independence, Ky.

Q. Tell me a little bit about yourself before you went into the army.  
A. After I graduated from high school I worked at a job for about 5 months, stocking shelves. I followed the advice of my high school coach to go ahead and volunteer for the draft for two years and get the college benefits from it.

Q. Did you have any idea at the time what you were getting in to?  
A. No sir, I did not.

Q. You knew that there was a war going on and you might get in it?  
A. Yes.

Q. It was unusual for guys to go ahead and volunteer.  
A. Well, in 1967 the war had not fully escalated and I didn't mind going but at the time everybody said that the chances of going were slim. What happened to me was that I qualified for Officers Candidate School and was prepared to go for my interview for OCS and then I decided that I didn't want to be an officer, then they took everybody that dropped out and sent them to Nam.

Q. This was in January 1967?  
A. Well, I joined the army in January and went to Nam in June 1967.

Q. Where did you do your basic training?  
A. I did my basic at Fort Knox, Ky., and my AIT at Fort Polk, Louisiana.

Q. So you went right into the infantry. You must have known then that you would do to Vietnam?  
A. Right.

Q. Where did the OCS come into it?

A. When I was at Fort Polk they did some testing and I qualified. I was really kind of steamrolled into it. I had no dreams or ambition of being an officer. They gave preliminary tests and those that did well had to take secondary tests and that's how we qualified and I was fortunate enough to qualify high.

Q. So you decided to turn it down?

A. I just decided that the responsibility was too much for an 18 year old. You knew then that things weren't too good if they were so anxious for officers that they were willing to take 18 years olds.

Q. What outfit were you in at Ft. Polk?

A. We were just in an advanced training unit there and then we were dispatched to Ft. Lewis, Washington, as part of the Big Red One.

Q. When did you know that you were going to Vietnam?

A. Really when I told them that I wasn't going to be an officer. You had to face the reality of being an officer or going to Vietnam.

Q. So, a group of you left from Ft. Lewis?

A. Yes, we had 10 days leave and then joined a group at Ft. Lewis.

Q. So you landed where?

A. Vung Tau was the base camp.

Q. Do you remember what airport you came in to?

A. We went by boat.

Q. Was it a division you were going with?

A. It wasn't a division. I think it was battalion size.

Q. But you went as part of a group?

A. I went as a group but the 1st of the 26th had gotten shot up pretty bad and they needed replacement so they called out everybody whose last name started with A, B or C to go as replacements so I left the people that I came over with.

Q. So what unit did you join them?

A. 1st battalion, 26th infantry regiment.

Q. Where was the area?

A. Phuc Vink, southern part near Cambodia. South of Saigon.

Q. How did you feel about it when you stepped off the boat?

A. I don't think I was too nervous about it then because I was so young and innocent. I was 18, it was a big event. It was just another big event in leaving home for the first time. Like a progressive step. Leaving home for the first time, joining the army, flying for the first time, being on a boat for the first time. It was like here you are, you might as well make the best of it. There was no feeling of fear.

Q. What was your M.O.S.?

A. 11B20.

Q. What type weapons did you carry?

A. Mostly M-16s. When you first started out, you had to carry ammo for the machine gun, then they put you on point or flank.

Q. Where you with a squad?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. How many would that be?

A. We had 11 in our squad, 40 in the platoon, and 200 in the company.

Q. Did they give you a couple of days training?

A. They gave us 2 days of in-country training and it was done by short timers and it wasn't too serious. They more or less just told us war stories.

Q. Did it seem to prepare you for what you were going in to?

A. No, not at all. I think that people who talk about it after its over just try to glorify it. And the ones who have not been through it just make up things to make it seem more dangerous.

Q. I'm talking about the preparation the army gave you once you got there.

A. None at all. When you were training you used M-14 rifles, it was just hurry up and get through.

Q. They were not relating your training to Vietnam?

A. No, not to guerilla warfare.

Q. What did you think of the weapons you used?

A. Well, the M-16s we used jammed a lot. They might not get off 3 or 4 rounds. After I had been there about 5 months they re-issued all new M-16's and they were considerably better. Apparently that was the early stages of the M-16s.

Q. Still, it didn't make you feel very good knowing it might jam?

A. No, I remember cleaning mine 3 or 4 times a day just to make sure.

Q. Did you have a rod?

A. Yes, every man had a cleaning rod.

Q. Did that get you off on the wrong foot?

A. The longer you were there, the more idiosyncrasies you saw. The first in a long line of "what were we doing." The more you went out the more you thought this was a major foul up. I think the first time I realized what ill-prepared manner we were in was the ambush we walked in the first week in September where everybody in the outfit knew we were walking into it but the colonel said we were just going to walk on through instead. We said just wait until they clear the area but they said no. And there were seven guys who got killed and I don't know how many got wounded. We tried to tell this nut but he was 300 meters behind us so he wasn't worried about anything.

- Q. What you are suggesting is the leadership. What did you think of them?
- A. It was really atrocious. In the year I was there we went through 4 1st Lieutenants. None of them were killed, they would spend 2 or 3 months on the line and then rotate back and they would ship out a new one, so you never got to feel as a unit. As soon as a guy was there 3 or 4 months he would get taken off the line. We had one particular lieutenant and one captain that took real good care of us. They wouldn't take us into a dangerous situation or if they did they would make sure we had complete air and ground cover before we did. But I really encountered some bad people, especially that battalion colonel. We had been through this village 4 or 5 days in a row and it would be so crowded you could hardly move. And then one day we went in and it was completely empty so you knew yourself something is wrong. That's what we kept calling back saying nobody was out. And the people were in the habit of getting out early. It was a village of about 5 thousand people. So instead of sending a couple of people in he told us to keep going. I just couldn't believe it. I was just 18 and that was the way we were trained. That was before the protests started. It didn't take me very long before I learned that they promoted people like that, which goes back to where they tried to push me through OCS, they just wanted officers. I think there were some poorly qualified non-coms and lieutenants.
- Q. Do you think part of the problem was this rotation that you're talking about?
- A. Yeah, I think its like any business. In order to operate you need a squad or team in there that knows each other and what each other's going to do and can work within each other. And I think the concept over there was that you were only there for 6 or 8 months or a year. Let's just don't get hurt and go on home. I can remember going on night ambush with some guys and instead of going a thousand meters we would go 30 meters beyond the camp and dig in for the night and come back in the morning and say we'd been all the way out there. It was just their theory that we were only going to be there for a year, let's just . . .
- Q. This was your officers making those decisions?
- A. Yes, and the non-coms, too.
- Q. Did the non-coms have that rotation system too.
- A. Most of them were on the line and succeeded up when they were short. I went over in June and made squad leader in January. By that time I only had 5 months left and believe me its on your mind. Not only are you responsible for the other people but you're worried about yourself. In the history of other wars you took a town and kept on going. Over there we went on ambush 4 straight nights in the same place. Made 3 successful attacks but didn't accomplish anything. When we left it was still there, the people were still there. You just didn't have any sense of objective to accomplish.

Q. You'd go out in an area and come back, go out and come back. Search and destroy.

A. Right. It didn't do anything for morale. If you did run into something there was going to be a casualty on your side. And you couldn't justify that.

Q. I suppose you could justify it if you were gaining something.

A. Right. Where you just fly out in a helicopter and lose 3 men and then fly back in. Even if you killed twenty of them it didn't make up for the 3 good friends you lost.

Q. When did this begin to sink in?

A. It goes back to this ambush the colonel pushed us in to. I lost 2 guys who I had been all the way through with. When everybody says something is wrong and one guy can push 100 into an ambush blindly.

Q. What was happening to you between June and September, as you're finding out what your life is going to be like for another year?

A. As you join an outfit like that guys are telling you that this guy is an a-hole or that guy has his head up his rear, but you really don't believe them until you really get out there and see how misled you are. I think in 1967 so many people went over thinking war was going to be like John Wayne, pulling pins from grenades with your teeth. Once you realized what you're into, looking at the officers and things. This guy is responsible for my life and here he's saying go from his position of safety. So it makes you think I've got to look out for myself.

Q. So stepping into this situation you found that the morale of the men already there was low because of what they were going through in the search and destroy. They had already lost confidence in their officers?

A. Like I said we had a lot of them come and go and only 2 stuck out in my mind as being really capable officers.

Q. In the beginning did you face reality with your life on the line? Did they send you to the field right away?

A. We went right out as soon as we got there and got our gear. In the beginning I felt I was going to make it through. You think its going to be the other guy and not you that gets hit. In the beginning you really don't think its going to happen. You say its going to be a nice, safe year walking through here. It takes a while before you realize that you're in as much danger as the next guy.

Q. Did you find that the type of tactics you were using were more suited to the enemy? They were the ones ambushing you, you had to find them.

A. We weren't up in the northern sector where a lot of the combat was but we were fired upon. That's like being in a fight and letting the other guy hit you first. You're bound to suffer something if you let the other guy have the first shot. Down where we were it was hard to decipher who was who. Going back to World War II it wasn't like that. The enemy didn't have a certain uniform on. We went out on a couple of ambushes at night and saw people walking and were told not to fire because we didn't know whether they were villagers or the enemy. So you really don't know. It was kind of tough to do that. People ask you what it was like but you just can't explain. There were so many rules that we went by that they never.

- Q. What were some of them?
- A. Just like going into the villages, you didn't know where to look, what to do or anything else. The 1st infantry had a rule that we were going to bring every dead body back to the U.S. And we lost several more men going out to get bodies that we ended up leaving, which to me was idiotic. I remember we lost a guy one night and pulled back some and they told us we had to go back in and get him. We lost two more people going in to get a body. And everybody knew he was dead, it wasn't like you going in to get someone who was trapped. You could actually see him laying there dead and yet they wanted to go get that body. You knew we were going to run into a mess. I don't think it was worth it to those other two guys who got killed.
- Q. What kind of an attitude do you develop toward the people in the villages?
- A. I had very little contact with them. We went through a lot of them and searched a lot of them but the people were very indifferent to our being there. They didn't care who won and who was around they went about their business. The one thing is that when we walked into that ambush in the village that had emptied out, it looks like one of them would have come out and said that the VC are ahead if we were over there to help them.
- Q. Did you understand why they didn't do that?
- A. No, sir, not at the time I didn't. I was just so young and naive at the time that I just didn't worry about things like that.
- Q. But if one had warned you, you didn't think about what would happen to him after you left? You didn't see him as a man in the middle?
- A. Right.
- Q. He should have been on your side.
- A. Most of the people we fought were Vietcong guerillas. As years go by you look at it like if your brother was going to fight somebody, would you go and warn them. I probably would have set on my hands, too. You look back in retrospect and you can see some points, but at the time you wonder who are these people.
- Q. Did you have much to do with the ARVNs?
- A. We worked with them two times and both of them were disasters. They were a real bad bunch. As a matter of fact one of my good friends from Michigan got wounded by an ARVN where we were going out on night time search and seize. We walked in an ambush the ARVN's were supposed to set on the VC and they turned it on us. So we had a very bad experience with them.
- Q. What was wrong with those guys? Everybody seems to have the same opinion as you.
- A. They had absolutely no leadership, whatsoever. Most of them were pressed into the service. Most of them were in base camp pulling latrine duty or something. They had no pride or anything to carry them on. They were getting X amount of dollars a month to carry a rifle and that was that. They had no leadership and most had the attitude that the Americans were going to do it for us so why worry about it. We were over there 11 or 12 years and I don't think anybody ever took the time to prepare the ARVN's to defend themselves, as long as they got aid from the Americans.

- Q. Of course, they lost 3 times as many men as we did so it wasn't a case that their lives weren't on the line as a question of leadership.
- A. We heard stories that when they came into combat their officers would take off and just left them out there. It was hard to believe at the time but the material I've read since, it seems it was commonplace. I don't know what the ARVN deal was but we worked with them twice and had bad experiences both times.
- Q. Do you think that despite what you're telling me, you fought well?
- A. No, I would say not. I was in actual combat maybe 20 to 25 times and I would not say we fought well. Once we encountered any kind of fire it was more like protect yourself than let's go out and exterminate this problem. Let's pull back and call in Napoleon, artillery, or go around. I never felt like it was anything to accomplish an objective. I can't say that we really fought well.
- Q. You really can't blame that on the soldiers though, it was more or less the circumstances you were caught in.
- A. Right.
- Q. That's what you're telling me, aren't you?
- A. Right. I think when we went to Vietnam we stepped back a hundred years in the fighting and we weren't trained to do it. We lived most probably the way America was during the Civil War, they trained you on all these high intensity weapons and you couldn't use them. I remember one time we walked into a VC base camp and I was carrying a grenade launcher, and the round had to go at least 10 meters to detonate so I was totally defenseless in the jungle we were in. I just sat there the whole time. So you can have all the grenade launchers you want, but in that close fighting they were totally useless. So I was just a spectator.
- Q. You say you were in combat how many times?
- A. About 20-25 times.
- Q. What were some of the most exciting combat situations you can describe?
- A. Really, none. They all seem to have a pattern. Somebody would throw a grenade or fire a weapon. You would hit the ground and fire at anything that moved. No glory in it. I couldn't say anything outstanding stood in my mind.
- Q. They never changed that strategy that left American soldiers so frustrated in the entire time we were over there.
- A. You can talk to people who were in World War II for 3 or 4 years and they would say me and so and so went from Italy to Germany, etc. We were over there the increments of one year 12 times and after your year was up you took that experience out. You never ran into somebody who had been there 3 years, I know the territory, what to look for. You never had any teachers when you had 18 year old squad leaders which was my case. I didn't have any right to be. When you think of a squad leader you think of a guy who had been in the army for 17 or 18 years and had been a sergeant for 10 years. We have to look at it like we weren't there for 12 years, we had 12 units over there.

Q. A couple of other things about your experiences. There probably was much drugs at that time, was there?

A. No, sir, I remember two black guys from New York City smoking some dope and that was my first experience with that kind of thing. This was probably at Christmas in 1967 and that was more the exception than the common place thing. I can honestly say that I can remember no big experiences with anybody in our outfit using drugs.

Q. How did you get along with the black guys?

A. I never had any trouble with the blacks. Some of my best friends that came out of it were black. I'm a non-racial person. I don't know if its personality or because I grew up in a poor family near a black area. I treated everybody square and I really had no trouble. I remember a couple of black guys going out of their way to help me when nobody else would.

Q. You found them to be good soldiers?

A. Well, I'm not going to judge what kind of a soldier anybody was. They were good friends.

Q. As far as your concerned they were as good a soldier as the white guys?

A. Yes they were.

Q. You've developed an attitude about how we fought the war, as far as why we lost the war, do you attribute it to these mistakes by the American government?

A. I think, looking back at it, if you're going to call it a war, you have to define certain accomplishments to it. Its like playing in a basketball game and only playing defense, you're never going to score only playing defense I think if you're going to call it a war then Johnson or Nixon or somebody had to say this is what we're going to do. We're going to be so and so by December and by June we're going to be near Hanoi and by September we'll have accomplished a goal. I think all we were doing was just defending there people and if we hand't pulled out, we may still have been over there, still on the defense. That's the way I look at it. You just can't go into combat situations with no accomplishments or goals to achieve.

Q. Did you come to pinpoint where the blame should rest for this?

A. I really, really don't know, Lyndon Johnson is one of my least favorite people. I'm not sure he wasn't behind the Kennedy assassination. I feel he did a lot of bad for the country because of the Vietnam situation and his greed for power and maybe his lack of knowledge about the Vietnam situation.

Q. Some have said they should have left the war fighting to the generals.

A. Well, when I was there it had been about 17 years since Korea, and a lot of people with combat experience had retired out of the army. A lot of military personnel in high positions had gotten promoted during peure-time, maybe for doing favors for another or being somebody's nephew. I don't think we had enough people with combat experience to let them take over.



Q. So you were glad to get out of it?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Did you finish out the year?

A. Yes, I stayed a whole year. Flew home out of Cam Ruhn Bay, I think, to Kennedy airport. They divided it and anybody that was going to be stationed east of the Mississippi flew into New York.

Q. You came into Ft. Dix, New Jersey and how long did you stay there?

A. About 20 minutes. Some sergeant came and said I'm sure you're anxious to leave, so just turn your papers in.

Q. What did you think about that?

A. It was kind of a bad situation. They took me out of a rice paddy and two days later I was in Independence, Ky. You had no time to come down or decompose yourself.

Q. One guy told me that he considered himself a dangerous man when he came back.

A. I didn't consider myself dangerous. Most of the experience I had was with snipers or small groups, no human wave attacks like some of the stories you hear. I had no trouble. I didn't hunt before I went in, the two years I was in the army was the only experience I had with weapons. So when I came out I was never in a situation where I was out with a weapon to go in a frenzied state.

Q. Did you ever give much thought to the fact that you were going from a hot tub into a cold shower?

A. I remember the first night I came home I went out with some friends. It was June 28 and people were throwing fire crackers and I would hit the ground and people would laugh at you. I remember one cheerleader, she said hi and how are you, where you been, in college. Its just like nobody in that area knew where you had been or cared. It didn't bother me because I had a close group of friends who took you right back in and didn't ask you any questions about how many people you killed.

Q. Was that frustrating though, them not knowing what you had been through?

A. No, it did just the opposite for me. If I wanted to talk about it I could, and if I didn't, I didn't. This same group got me through my divorce. They weren't interested in the boring details. You've our friend and we accept you at that.

Q. You seem to have come out with a pretty level head.

A. Yes I did. I came out and went straight to good old Morehead.

Q. When was that?

A. I got out in December, 1968, and started in Morehead in January, 1969.

Q. It was about that time that the anti-war fever hit Morehead. Did you have any difficulties with that?

A. I remember one time. It didn't bother me but I was walking with a Marine veteran and somebody in a group of protestors said something to him and he went over to them and I went along to defend him. It really didn't

bother me. We finally told them if they wanted to do anything, let's get started, and that's when they started backing down. That's the only time. Most of my time was spent in class and I would go home every other Wednesday. I also played a lot of handball. I was never out on the campus scene, I wasn't a college member.

- Q. You didn't find it rough getting back into college after all you had been through?
- A. No. Morehead was kind of a peaceful place and I was involved in some things here, too, my fiance was my strength.
- Q. What did you do after graduation?
- A. I went to graduate school at Eastern for a while and then I came over here to the Florence Post Office and I've been here ever since.
- Q. Looking back at it all know, did you feel any kind of a sense of frustration for the country or yourself?
- A. I really don't think about it in terms of what it did for the country. I have my own little community and I don't travel much so its hard for me to rationalize in terms of the country. For me, I regret the two years of growing up that it cost me. I would get letters from guys I played ball with and they would say I laid so and so, or I'm dating so and so, and I missed all that because I was over there. When I came back a lot of them had already been through that and there was nobody to go through it with. Those teenage years when you start drinking, lose your innocence. I think those first two years you're out of high school are important because you're still pretty care-free.
- Q. What do you think about the attitude of the American people that they would just as soon forget all that? Do you resent that?
- A. I resent that they've never done anything to show, even though, like in World War II, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, which was questioned as to whether we knew about it or not. We never fought for the American people and that's why they have never shown their appreciation. The troops that came home from World War I and World War II, they were defending American soil. We weren't defending any soil, just a police action and I think that's why the people weren't involved in it. I know back when I went I was one of the few around here who was over there at that time. It wasn't like half of the people in the subdivisions were involved, in a combat zone. I can see myself, if I hadn't gone, not really caring about you, if you had come home. That's the way I see it. If you had been there because we were under attack then I would have been more concerned about you. I'd say, "Hey, let me buy you a drink," or something. As a non-participant I can see where they wouldn't care.
- Q. But still you were putting your life on the line every day.
- A. But for who. Not for the guy over here shopping. If I'd got killed it wouldn't have meant anything to him, or if we had succeeded he'd still be over here shopping. The goals and objectives didn't match the effort that was put into it.

- Q. You seem to have kept your mind pretty good on all this. I've met some who have burning resentment.
- A. Well, I've come pretty clean. I've got a good job here at the post office. I've got security in life. I'm single, I've got no kids, no obligations. I don't worry about a house payment. I can see that if I had been in a situation with a lot of pressure where I might have been resentful.
- Q. Do you belong to any of the Veterans organizations?
- A. I'm a non-active member of the American Legion here in Florence. I just joined to give them a membership because we eat there all the time.
- Q. You've never been active in veteran affairs?
- A. No, sir.
- Q. Have you read any books on Vietnam?
- A. A couple especially the one about the group that took our place over there.
- A. "Charlie Company."
- Q. Could you relate to it?
- A. To most of it, pretty much. The part of it I couldn't relate to was where they said the blacks and whites went their separate ways back in base camp. We never were like that. We all interacted as a group.
- Q. You all had a healthy relationship then. That's a little different from what I've heard.
- A. Right.
- Q. Did you watch that TV series on Vietnam?
- A. No.
- Q. I suppose you work a lot at night?
- A. Being single, I bowl on Tuesdays and Fridays and I'm out doing other things. I don't watch 4 hours of TV a week.
- Q. I thought something like that would have grabbed your interest.
- A. It would have interested me to watch it at my convenience, but to make plans to stay home and watch it.
- Q. Do you get concerned about the political situation in the country?
- A. No. I bet I haven't read the front page of a newspaper in 5 years. Since college.
- Q. Things that are happening around the world like Lebanon?
- A. It has an interest to me but I know that no matter what I think, it doesn't matter. I've never voted because I feel I'm just a small person in the world and it's just too frustrating for me to rally and complain.
- A. I'd just as soon let things go on. But like I say I'm single and it's easy for me to be non-committal. If they call me up for war tomorrow, I'd go.
- Q. You would?
- A. Yes, I would go.

