

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with

WILLIAM B. WILLIAMS

Infantryman, 25th Infantry Division, Vietnam War

2005

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Williams, William B. (b. 1943). Oral History Interview, 2005.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 65 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 65 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Will Williams, born in Crystal Springs, Mississippi discusses his experiences as an African-American Army infantryman in the Vietnam War. He enlisted in the Army to get out of Mississippi and says this was the only option for Blacks to escape the rural area. Williams states that he has two brothers who served in the military in Korea and one who served during peacetime. He attended basic training at Fort Jackson (South Carolina) in July 1962. Williams recalls that he viewed the breaking down and rebuilding of character the Army put him through as acts of hate, but later realized that was par for the course. He also attended AIT at Fort Jackson. Williams recounts that his first assignment was with the 54th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division from 1963 to 1965. He did not like what was going on in the United States at the time and, in 1965, he re-enlisted at Fort Hamilton (New York) for another six years. He says that he was not even aware that the Vietnam War was going on and he was assigned to Hawaii where he engaged in jungle warfare training with the 25th Infantry Division; already on alert. Williams remembers that he did not get the impression that they were going to Vietnam until they were eight days out to sea. They landed in Vung Tau and Williams thought it was beautiful. He says that the hot weather did not bother him because he was used to it from living in Mississippi. Williams reports that he went to Bien Hoa via convoy and was there at a staging area for about two weeks where they ran mock patrols at the 173rd Airborne Unit's base camp. He was trained on M-1 rifles, but was given M-14's for warfare. Williams recalls senior men telling him, "War is hell," and that he should not trust anyone different than yourself. He reports that he was then convoyed to Cu Chi and experienced some sniper fire when they got close to Cu Chi. When they set up base camp for the 25th, they had to clear rubber plantations and build bunkers. Williams explains that they came under sniper fire while building because Cu Chi was built directly above tunnels and they did not realize this until they had been there for about seven months. He states that at first they had no "tunnel rats" to scope out the tunnels. From this base camp, Williams recounts that he went on search and destroy operations where they would go into villages looking for Viet Cong and assumed any young man was Viet Cong and took them prisoner. He explains that the prisoners were tortured, causing them to give interrogators information that may have been false, and sometimes even killed. Williams states that this bothered him because it created false intelligence that was acted on. He illustrates how landing zones operated by telling a story of how he jumped from a Huey early one time and had to catch up to an alternate zone about 1,000 meters away because the helicopter was under fire. The first big battle Williams tells of was in "Hobo Woods," an area in Boi Loi, where many of his own artillery unit were killed and there were friendly casualties. He became an E5 team leader then a squad leader with the 27th Infantry Regiment, nicknamed the "Wolfhounds." Williams was then sent to Saigon and worked Tent City B security. He illustrates racial tension by telling a story of

a sergeant calling him a “nigger” because he refused to send a detail for beautification of an area. Williams explains that he “went ballistic” and was court-martialed not for fighting with the first sergeant, but for disobeying a direct order. He wrote to Senator Robert Kennedy and was transferred a few weeks later. Williams says he felt bad for leaving his squad because some men had volunteered to come with him. He recalls a young man who looked up to him dying shortly after he left and explains feeling responsible for it. Williams characterizes officers as some good and some bad and discusses a story of Lieutenant Duffy listening to his concerns and feeling it was a positive experience. He also recounts a story of a young man from his hometown being killed on the tarmac at Tan San Nhut and remembers the incident turning his feelings against the military because of the circumstances surrounding it. Williams tells a story of a whole squad being killed except for a sergeant who was captured. He reveals that at first he did not see the Vietnamese as people, but as objects, then started to see similarities between the prejudices against “niggers” and “gooks.” Williams examines his feeling about the war after the *Pentagon Papers* were released. He states that he started to find out more and believes that the government was not being truthful with the public about what was going on, however he blames the public for not holding the government accountable. He reveals that he thinks the United States was duped into going to Iraq just as they were with Vietnam. In 1967, Williams was so disturbed by the protests going on in the United States that he re-enlisted and was sent to Fort Davis, a missile base in Panama. He was there for eleven months and then started a second tour in Vietnam. He went as a replacement and says he was uncomfortable because he did not know anyone in the unit. Williams worked with the MPs and was a driver for the first sergeant while they ran convoys from Cam Rahn to Nah Trang. He illustrates more racial tension by discussing fighting between Whites, Blacks and Hispanics. After seven months, he was granted emergency leave because his wife became ill. Williams says he was attached to Fort Carson, Colorado and was granted a hardship discharge after meeting with Chief of Staff General Westmoreland and President Nixon. He was discharged in March 1970. Williams then worked in the mines in Climax, Colorado and lived with his family in a motel in Leadville. He analyzes his experiences in Vietnam as events that made him a better person. Williams states, “So it made me see people as people all over the world, to realize that my life is no more important than life in Afghanistan or Iraq, and that what we are missing I think in this country as a whole is the ability of people to understand different cultures are different, but they are human--that they bleed--they breath as we do.” He is a member of Veterans for Peace, Wisconsin Vietnam Veterans, and Vietnam Veterans of America. Williams discusses PTSD and declares that he believes soldiers currently returning from active duty need help from family, local people and everybody else.

Biographical Sketch:

Will Williams (b. 1943) is a DeForest, Wisconsin resident who has been very active and outspoken locally and nationally with the Veterans for Peace organization.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2006

Draft transcription by court reporter Alis Fox, 2005

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Transcription edited by Christina M. Ballard, 2008.

Interview Transcript

- Williams: --Central Mississippi called Crystal Springs.
- Jim: Okay. And you said it's in Central Mississippi?
- Williams: Yes.
- Jim: And is that where you grew up?
- Williams: Until-- Not really. I was there until I was just turning 18.
- Jim: Okay. Well, I guess that's right.
- Williams: When I joined the service.
- Jim: Right. Right. There's quite a difference here; isn't there?
- Williams: Yeah, right.
- Jim: And that's where you went to high school—
- Williams: Yes.
- Jim: --then in Crystal Springs?
- Williams: Yes.
- Jim: And did you get drafted? Or you said before you were enlisted. That's correct.
- Williams: Yes. I enlisted, yes, to get out of Mississippi.
- Jim: To get out of Mississippi.
- Williams: And because of fears that my mother had for me if I stayed there.
- Jim: So, in other words, your mother was concerned that--we all know what was going on in the early '60s--that she wanted you to have a chance to grow up somewhere or live somewhere else; is that accurate?
- Williams: Yes. She knew that I didn't accept what was happening and that I had a lot of hate that was building up because of it, and my grandmother and my mother, grandmother mostly, were glad to see me go.
- Jim: Okay. And was that a common thing for people like you that were thoughtful at

that time to go into the military, to leave your area?

Williams: It was the only option really that many young Blacks had, was to go into the military. There was a few that were professional athletes, like Willie Richardson went to pro football from there; but most of the time it was the military that was the escape.

Jim: Okay. Were there any veterans in your family that had any influence on you or people in your community that had any influence or--

Williams: Yes. I had two brothers that served in Korea, and I had one brother that served during peacetime.

Jim: Okay. So in your family the military was kind of an accepted thing?

Williams: Yes, it was.

Jim: Okay. Where did you take your basic training?

Williams: Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

Jim: And when did you go there? I mean--

Williams: I think it was July of 1962.

Jim: And is there anything that sticks out about that experience?

Williams: Yes, how tough it was.

Jim: Was it physically, mentally or—

Williams: Mentally it was tough because they treated you like dogs then. As I said before, I had grown up in an area where a lot of hate was exerted toward me because of my color, and I remember the first day I hit basic training it seemed like that hate was there, and at the time I didn't understand that it was part of the training to break you down and rebuild you. I saw it as the same hate, which made me wonder if I had made a mistake about it.

Jim: Now, did you feel that you were being singled out at this point, or was it that everybody got treated poorly?

Williams: Everybody was treated poorly, but I didn't understand. I couldn't rationalize. Like some of the things that the drill instructors would do didn't make sense, like they treated people so bad. And I had grown up even with conditions in Mississippi and the history that my grandmother had told me of her people-- My grandmother

was Seminole. So I had a history of the natives, what had happened, from my grandmother. And even with what was happening I was always taught to love people even under those circumstances, that it was one creator; and I always tried to look at things logically, you know, why. And I couldn't understand like at boot camp when they passed out E cards out they'd call your name, you'd walk up, and the guy would drop it on the ground, and I couldn't understand why. I had a problem reasoning why they were doing these things. You know, to me it was something that you shouldn't do. But later I learned the real reason it was done and that it wasn't just singled out toward me.

Jim: Okay. Then where did you go to AIT?

Williams: Same place.

Jim: Same place.

Williams: Fort Jackson.

Jim: Okay. And anything stand out in AIT?

Williams: Not from the training. I was in AIT when my grandmother died.

Jim: Did you get leave to go back to the funeral?

Williams: Yes. Yes, I did come back home.

Jim: Okay. And then after you completed AIT, which would probably be approaching Christmas of '62, what were your assignments then?

Williams: I went to Germany.

Jim: Okay.

Williams: To Bamberg, Germany.

Jim: And who were you assigned to there?

Williams: 54th Infantry.

Jim: 54th Infantry. And that's a regiment. What division was it in, do you know?

Williams: I think it was the 3rd Division.

Jim: Okay.

Williams: I remember we had a patch—

Jim: Yeah, that would be the 3rd Division.

Williams: White and blue stripes.

Jim: Yeah, that would be the 3rd Division. And how long were you there?

Williams: Umm, from '63 until '65.

Jim: Okay. And then in '65 what happened?

Williams: I reenlisted.

Jim: Okay. And why did you reenlist? Did you find that the military was a good experience for you?

Williams: No. I got out. I came back to the states, rotated back to the states, and I was living or I was slumming around in New York, and I didn't like what I was seeing out there. So I went over to Fort Hamilton and reenlisted for six years.

Jim: And where were you assigned then?

Williams: Hawaii. During that time—they were -- I wasn't even aware that Vietnam was going on then in '65. But you could get the assignment you wanted and that stuff, and I wanted Hawaii. So I was guaranteed it and got it.

Jim: Well, that was a real treat because--

Williams: Yeah, it was.

Jim: --the 25th Division was--

Williams: Was already on alert.

Jim: [laughing] But you said you didn't even know anything about Vietnam in '65 when you—

Williams: No.

Jim: They didn't talk about that in the military at all where you were?

Williams: No. No. In Germany I was completely unaware of it.

Jim: Okay. Well, what happened when you got to Hawaii?

- Williams: Well, we started, immediately they started jungle warfare training and making preparation.
- Jim: Did that get your interest that you might be going to a jungle or--
- Williams: Yeah. When we kept doing the training it made me think that we would be going somewhere.
- Jim: Did any of the trainers have Vietnam experience?
- Williams: Yes. My platoon sergeant, Sergeant Hoopy (ph), who was a native Hawaiian--well, he was from Samoa, and I think he had been in Vietnam before.
- Jim: Did they tell you anything about Vietnam when you were getting ready to go over there?
- Williams: Yeah. In the latter part of our training, then they start telling us when they were keying in on the booby traps that we were more likely to find. Then, you know, they keyed in more on Vietnam, so we began to get the feeling that this is where I'm going.
- Jim: What was your reaction when you figured out that you were probably going to Vietnam?
- Williams: Well, I was kind of naive because until--even after all the training we did, even boarding ships where we would actually go out to sea a few days and come back, even after all that I didn't think we were going to Vietnam until we were out about eight days at sea.
- Jim: Got the impression you weren't coming back to Hawaii? (laughing)
- Williams: Right. I knew we weren't going to the big islands.
- Jim: So you went to Vietnam on a ship; is that correct?
- Williams: Yes.
- Jim: Do you remember the name of it?
- Williams: No.
- Jim: Okay. What was your days like on the ship because it probably took a couple weeks to get there I assume?

Williams: Yeah. They were long detail. I never got sick, but most of the time it was trying to escape doing the duty on the ship. I felt the Navy--I wasn't a sailor so I ---

Jim: Yeah.

Williams: Yeah, I shouldn't have to be mopping no ship.

Jim: Where did your ship land in Vietnam?

Williams: Vung Tau.

Jim: Landed in Vung Tau. And what was your impression of Vung Tau?

Williams: Beautiful.

Jim: And what was your impression of the weather and all when you got to Vung Tau?

Williams: It was nice. It was beautiful because it was hot, but I was used to that from growing up in Mississippi and boot camp in the Carolinas. So it was something that I was used to, but it was prior to--the monsoon season hadn't started.

Jim: So what month was that roughly?

Williams: Well, we got there-- We left Hawaii on January 3rd, so--

Jim: Towards the end of January.

Williams: Toward the end of January when we docked at Vung Tau, yeah.

Jim: So you actually docked at Vung Tau, or did you go off on smaller boats to land?

Williams: No. We docked at Vung Tau. I remember we sat out for about three or four days before we disembarked, and we did dock at Vung Tau.

Jim: Okay. And Vung Tau is on the South China Sea, and it's by a delta where the ship channel goes up to Saigon. So where did you go in Vietnam from Vung-Tau?

Williams: To Bien Hoa.

Jim: Bien Hoa. And how did you get to Bien Hoa?

Williams: Convoy.

Jim: Convoy.

Williams: Yeah.

Jim: Was there any difficulties in that convoy?

Williams: No. No. We never got hit or nothing.

Jim: Then when you got to Bien Hoa what happened?

Williams: We were there for about two weeks. It was a staging area.

Jim: Okay.

Williams: We was inside a perimeter.

Jim: Yeah.

Williams: I can't remember what unit was there.

Jim: 173rd Airborne, that was their home base.

Williams: Yeah, so they probably were--we were within their base camp. So that was like our orientation for us because during the two weeks we were there we ran mock patrols or whatever.

Jim: Okay. And I assume that you were assigned M16s when you came over. Or did you have M14s when you came over?

Williams: M14s.

Jim: Okay. So you did your training on--had M14s. Okay.

Williams: Well, I actually trained on the M1 first.

Jim: Right, right. We're all kind of that era.

Williams: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: Okay. So when you completed your two weeks there did they tell you more--something about the culture of Vietnam and give you any warnings or anything like that?

Williams: I remember them just telling us war was hell. That was one of the terms that we heard a lot, and they did tell us about--not about the culture but they were saying you couldn't trust anyone that was different from you. That was drilled in our heads, that there are no lines, you know.

Jim: How did you feel about that given your background?

Williams: I was gung ho. At that time I was brainwashed. I was still ---

Jim: Oh, okay. Okay. So when you completed your time in Bien Hoa what happened?

Williams: We convoyed to Cu Chi, which was our base camp for the duration of my time.

Jim: When you convoyed to Cu Chi did you have any trouble there on that—

Williams: Only after we got closer to Cu Chi itself we picked up a little sniper fire, but we didn't take any casualties or anything.

Jim: Okay. Was the base camp at Cu Chi built when you got there already?

Williams: No. No. It was rubber plantations, and we cleared and built the base camp at Cu Chi.

Jim: So how long did you take, how long did that take?

Williams: Wow, we had to do bunkers twice. I remember the first bunkers we built were built more or less for beauty. I remember they were round, donut shaped. And I think it was John Weyand was the 25th--

Jim: Yeah, he was the 25th, yes. [Records show it was Frederick Weyand]

Williams: --commander at that time, and he came through and we had to redesign the bunkers. So—

Jim: Okay. And then do you cut down the rubber trees?

Williams: Yes, we cut much of the vegetation in Cu Chi around the base camp. We cleared it out.

Jim: Did you have any sniper fire or anything like that when you were building the base camp?

Williams: Yes, but it was coming from within, that we later learned that Cu Chi was built right above tunnels at the base camp.

Jim: So, in other words, you could be kind of like in the middle of a bunch of guys and all of a sudden somebody'd shoot at you from somewhere?

Williams: Yeah. And many times they would be inside the perimeter.

- Jim: And were they in tunnels or holes?
- Williams: Tunnels. They had holes, tunnels. I think-- Well, since I've been in Wisconsin I saw an article years ago-- matter of fact, the editor of I think it was the "Cap Times" sent me some pictures of Cu Chi. He was in Vietnam, and it was tunnel city. And we were there perhaps six or seven months before we realized we were right above this huge tunnel complex.
- Jim: What did they do when they figured out that they had done this?
- Williams: Started blowing the tunnels up. See, we were there-- When we first got there there were no tunnel rats.
- Jim: Tell us what a tunnel rat was.
- Williams: Smallest people in the unit.
- Jim: It wasn't you. [laughs]
- Williams: No, but I did go in the tunnels. They were the smallest people in the units that would fit inside the entrances to the tunnels, and they went in to search for information and then they--or just to locate 'em, once we locate 'em and to put charges in and blow up. So when we got there they didn't even have a canine team.
- Jim: Yeah. Okay. So when you completed building the base camp then did you start going out on operations or--
- Williams: Yes. We weren't even completed building the base camp and we started doing search and destroy.
- Jim: And what was a typical search and destroy operation that you were involved in?
- Williams: We would go into villages, look for any signs that VC were there. You could you always find signs, you know, whether there was VC or not. We looked for men in the village, young men. If you found them, you automatically assumed they were VC, you took them prisoner, they were brought back and interrogated. And many times they, I think, told interrogators what they wanted to hear, not that it was true but--
- Jim: Were they tortured do you think or--
- Williams: Yes, they were, and--at times they were. I know at times some were even killed. And it got to a point to where it bothered me for bringing prisoners in,

not because of the torture but because they kept us going out on operations. Like they would do so much to them that they would give them false intelligence, and we would react to that intelligence, so we were right back out in the bush again based on the intelligence.

Jim: On a typical search and destroy sweep how long were you out?

Williams: Three or four days.

Jim: Three or four days.

Williams: And fall back.

Jim: And did you carry all your own supplies for those three or four days?

Williams: Yes.

Jim: And how did you get out in the bush?

Williams: Helicopter.

Jim: Helicopters.

Williams: Yeah, Hueys.

Jim: And when they landed did you have many hot LZs or did you have any experience with hot LZs?

Williams: Yeah. Yeah. We came into quite a few. As a matter of fact, I had a thing where I wouldn't wait until the skid sat down. I would jump off when it was eight or ten feet in the air.

Jim: That's a long ways down; isn't it?

Williams: I know.

Jim: Particularly with 90 pounds on your back.

Williams: Yeah.

Jim: Something like that.

Williams: But it was-- I don't know, I felt safer doing that than waiting because it was more vulnerable and I had seen choppers that had been hit when they were on the ground.

- Jim: When you came into a hot LZ, how did you get organized to deal with the people that were shooting at you?
- Williams: Most of the time we would pull out. If we had a chance, we would pull out and go to the alternate LZ. As a matter of fact, I got caught. I jumped off of a chopper once, and they pulled out and I was on the ground, and the alternate LZ was probably a thousand meters away, so I had to make way over to it. I knew where the other LZ was, so I went there. But we usually--
- Jim: Did the VC bother you any while you were going over to this other LZ?
- Williams: No. No. They fired to shoot, and after the choppers got off I think they were more or less trying to bring down the choppers and through God's grace I might not have even been seen.
- Jim: Oh, okay. So are there any outstanding experiences that stick out in your mind in your first tour?
- Williams: Yeah.
- Jim: Could you describe those for us, please?
- Williams: Yeah. It was our first big battle we had in we called it "Hobo Woods." Boi Loi was the name, and it was the first really big battle that we had. I think that was in February of '66 or early March, and it is the first time I had lost people I was that close to and actually saw the horrors of it, and what made it worse I think was that many of them were killed from our own artillery.
- Jim: So what was the kind of-- Were you ambushed when you were going-- Were you making a sweep through Ho Bo Woods or--
- Williams: Yes. We were making a sweep, and we came under sniper fire initially and we got pinned, my company. Alpha Company and Charlie Company both we were pinned, and they called artillery in, and I think the artillery took out as many or maybe more people than the Cong did.
- Jim: And was that fairly typical in your experience of artillery causing friendly casualties?
- Williams: Yes, and at times you could understand it because in another battle we had to call artillery right in the lines because the company was getting overrun. So—
- Jim: Well, their strategy was to get as close to our lines as possible just so that would happen.

- Williams: Yeah. I mean but they had to move within the line. When we took the heaviest casualties they were dropping it right in the perimeter because the company had got overrun.
- Jim: Okay. So what was the reaction of you and your friends about these friendly-fire casualties?
- Williams: We didn't-- I didn't even think about it. It was like-- I think most of the time in Vietnam I reacted. I operated on instinct rather than a thought-out process of what I'd do.
- Jim: Do you think that that was something that kept you from--you know, allowed you to come back, I mean by using your instincts and all?
- Williams: Yes, yes, 'cause I think at some point whatever you learn in a book does not apply in reality when you are in a given situation, and I think that's really part of how I made it back.
- Jim: Okay. Now, as an E5 there were you a squad leader or—
- Williams: I was a team leader for a while, then a squad leader.
- Jim: Did you spend your entire 12 months in Vietnam this first time in the Black Lions?
- Williams: In the Wolfhounds.
- Jim: Wolfhounds. I want to keep saying Black lions. I'm sorry.
- Williams: No. I left the Wolfhounds I think it was September and went to Saigon.
- Jim: Well, what did you do there?
- Williams: Tent City B security.
- Jim: Okay. And was that a voluntarily move that you got to go to Saigon or do you get just picked or—
- Williams: No. It was because of a court-martial. I refused to send a detail to the first sergeant for beautification of the area.
- Jim: So they moved you out of the unit then?
- Williams: No, no. They ah – the clerk - I told the clerk that the clerk went and I got the first

sergeant and the first sergeant came over and gave me an order and I refused, I told him we weren't there for that. We had just come off an operation and the guys hadn't cleaned their weapons, hadn't done hygiene or nothing, so I refused. And he said what we called then the magic word. He called me a nigger.

Jim: Oh, boy.

Williams: And--

Jim: Okay.

Williams: I went ballistic. We had it. So I was court-martialed not for fighting with the first sergeant but for disobeying a direct order, which I never was given a direct order. The first sergeant can't give a direct order. It had to come from an officer, and my company commander at that time didn't even know me, and he was nowhere in the picture book when the court-martial came up. It's ironic because I was on CQ the night that they got the papers ready and Captain Foley gave them to me, told me to take them to Sergeant Williams and, you know, he didn't even know who I was but yet—

Jim: So they handed you your papers—

Williams: Yes.

Jim: --when you were in CQ?

Williams: Right. And Captain Foley didn't know me at all but yet he say he gave me an order. So I went to the court. I refused a special court-martial and went for general and went through with—my JAG officer told me I would lose the whole thing, and I did lose, and I wrote-- Robert Kennedy was the senator at the time, and I wrote him, and a few weeks later I got an answer from him and I was transferred.

Jim: So you think that they chose not to get you for hitting the first sergeant because of his conduct.

Williams: Right. I think because of his conduct I think is the reason that they didn't bother with it because there was witnesses around that he did, you know, use this language. And this was in the mess hall. Myself and about four other sergeants was sitting in there. And I never will forget the words, you know, he say, you know, "You niggers make up a little rank and you get too big for your britches," you know; and, you know, that's all it took.

Jim: How did you feel leaving your unit after, you know--

Williams: Bad. I felt really bad by going because as I said I had people in my squad at the

time that volunteered to come to it because I would stand up for them, and in a way I felt I was deserting them by going; and it hurt me a lot when one guy in my squad got killed, a young kid from Florida named Simmons (??)

[End of Side A, Tape 1]

[Approx. 1.5 min. gap at start of Side B]

Jim: You were describing how you felt bad about a young man that was killed that was an acquaintance of yours. Is there anything more you'd care to share about that?

Williams: Yeah. This kid, he was probably about just turned 18, and he respected me a lot, and I looked at him--even though I was in my early 20s, I looked at him as a son, and I kind of kept him under my wing for lack of another term. And he had written his parents and told them of me, his sergeant, how much he liked his sergeant. They had written me. And after the court-martial I first got transferred from the company I was in to another company within the Wolfhounds before going to Saigon, and we were out on an operation, and Simons (??) was killed during that time and for a stupid reason I felt. He was on point, and they came under fire, and his platoon leader pulled him back and told him to come back, and he was in a bomb crater like, and I feel if he hadn't moved he would have survived it and if I had been--still been his squad I wouldn't have told him to come back. I would have left him. So I blamed myself for his death, and then I got letters afterwards from his parents even when I was back in the states wanting to know if it was really him that was in the coffin.

Jim: So, obviously you carry this guilt to this day. Is that accurate about that?

Williams: Yes. It still bothers me because I still don't have an answer. You know, did I think more about myself and my welfare than my men by transferring?

Jim: Was there any ability to have counseling or anything like that at—

Williams: No. I've talked to chaplains, but I didn't get—

Jim: Yeah. What was your opinion of the officers and NCOs?

Williams: There were some good ones, and there were some bad ones. Like you could almost tell as soon--like a new officer would come in, you could almost tell immediately how they would be--almost whether they would survive by their attitude and how willing they were to listen to people rather than come in with the John Wayne or Rambo posture. One officer I remember particularly was my platoon leader Lieutenant Duffy, and he was from the East Coast, and he came in and he didn't--he just had the book learning but he listened. You know, we talked, and I talked to him. At that time I was platoon sergeant; and, you know, I told him that, you know, the book is fine, you know, but it doesn't work out here,

you got to use common sense, yeah.

Jim: And he listened.

Williams: He listened, and he was a hell of an officer.

Jim: Okay. How long was he your platoon leader?

Williams: Probably about seven--probably about six or seven months.

Jim: Okay. Is there anything in the 25th Division experience that you'd care to share with us that we haven't covered?

Williams: No, except I'd say it was not experience but it was just my feelings of not the 25th as a whole but I had a lot of pride being with the Wolfhounds like from hearing people talk about the Wolfhounds. It was kind of an honor for me to be a part of the unit like we—well, I guess some people say elite.

Jim: Uh-huh.

Williams: Yeah. And it was, I don't know, it was a closeness there with the Wolfhounds that I didn't find in other units when--you know, when I was in service. I don't know if it was because of being in combat or going to combat together, but even before we left Hawaii it was a continuity there, like we did a lot of things. It was like a family.

Jim: Sure.

Williams: And I said earlier it bothered my wife. Sometimes she's sitting down and we talk. And I have one of the write-ups from--I think UPI wrote it of a battle we had they call Hell's Half Acre, and the names--when I sent her a copy I wrote the names of who it was that got hit, and she knew the people, she knew their kids. My daughter remembers some of the people. My daughter was 11 years old at the time and--

Jim: When you went to Saigon you had about three plus months to go in Vietnam. Was there anything about that experience that stands out?

Williams: Yes. A kid from my hometown of Mississippi was killed on the tarmac at Tan Son Nhut.

Jim: How did that happen?

Williams: He hadn't shaved. He was-- He had come out of the bush and he was ready to rotate back to the states. His tour was over. And because he wasn't cleaned up

they wouldn't let him on the plane. They pulled him, told him to get cleaned up, he'd catch another flight, and Tan Son Nhut got mortared. He got killed because of that, because of not being clean shaven, little kid named Tommy Traxler (ph). He was probably two, maybe three years younger than I, but I remember him from school, and that bothered me, and I think that started turning me against the military when things like that happened.

Jim: Was there any general reaction in the unit you were in when this happened?

Williams: No. Because see most of the people there at Tent City B and Camp Alpha were replacements, people just coming in and replacements, so they didn't know him, and he had--he wasn't stationed there.

Jim: Okay.

Williams: He had come down from the bush, and he just came down to process out.

Jim: Is there anything else that happened in Saigon that stands out?

Williams: Not in Saigon, but I remember when I was with the Wolfhounds another incident happened that made me think hard about the military and the reason and why they do things. It was a bunch of us--there was five of us that were real close. We were all sergeants, NCOs. And on the ship going over we talked and joked and played a lot, and even in Nam we would keep up with each other. We did a lot of patrols in Cu Chi. And when Sergeant Woolmeyer (ph) would be out or Sergeant Garland, I would go to the FDC and listen in to see what (unintelligible), and they would do the same when I went. And I remember one night Sergeant Woolmeyer and Sergeant Garland were out and they called back for indirect fire. They said they were being followed, and they were denied fire because of the friendly village, and a few minutes later we heard a firefight and we actually could see the traces and then silence. So we saddled up and went out to area search and then we found them that morning. The whole squad had been killed all except Sergeant Woolmeyer, and we couldn't find him and found out that he had been captured. So that led to the longest operation that we were out in the field looking for Sergeant Woolmeyer.

Jim: Did you ever find him?

Williams: No.

Jim: Is he one that came back from being in prison?

Williams: Yes, he did. He was released prior to the big release where they released the POWs because I think it was in 1969 I think when they released them. It was

either the latter part of '69 or sometime in '68 because I know my wife and I were watching TV--I was stationed at Fort Carson at the time--and we saw this news thing, and I kept looking, I told my wife, I said, "That looked like Sergeant Woolmeyer," and she looked, she said, "It is." And they called his name, and he had been released. But he was the only one out of the squad that lived. Sergeant Garland and the rest of the men had been mutilated and stacked, and I felt it was because they couldn't get fire. They knew they were being followed.

- Jim: Was there any discussion in the unit after this happened about not getting the indirect fire?
- Williams: No. No. Many times we requested fire and couldn't get it because of differing abilities.
- Jim: Did you have any opinion about friendly villages keeping you from getting support?
- Williams: I felt there weren't any. I felt there wasn't no friendly village, that they all were enemy.
- Jim: Yeah. Was that based on-- Well, it would be a good time to ask a question. What did you think of the Vietnamese people?
- Williams: Back then?
- Jim: Yeah.
- Williams: Initially they didn't register as people to me. They were objects. They were enemy.
- Jim: Did this attitude change?
- Williams: Yes.
- Jim: What caused the change, your evolution in your attitude towards the military or—
- Williams: That was part of it, and I think part of it go back--I did a lot of soul searching, and it go back to my grandmother, who taught me about lovin' all people, that we are all part of this circle. And the part that really hit me was that when I would look at some of the stuff that I had done, that I'd hear other GIs using the terms that I used, I saw where there was no difference than what was happening to me in Mississippi. I was a "nigger" in Mississippi, and I'm thousands of miles away calling people "gooks" that have done nothing to me. And, I don't know I just started to thinking more about how wrong it was. And when Daniel Ellsberg--when he released the Pentagon Papers and I started finding out more, that's when I really start doubting whether my service was honorable or not

because of the reasons that we were there, and it opened doors for me. It made me start reading more. You know, what is Vietnam, you know, what is this about it? And I start reading the history of Vietnam, how they had been in so many different wars and why, and when I read the part where Ho Chi Minh had begged for help you might as well say from this country and from the United Nations, the League of Nations and those United Nations, and where he wrote the letters to them, you know, and for the first time in history they had a government that was modeled after the American government and this country didn't help them nor the United Nations, so he turned to the next thing, which was communist. And it just made me wonder why if we wanted to liberate people or if we wanted to stop communism, which was supposed to be the threat at that time, why didn't we help this man when he had a government modeled, you know, after the American government and the French. And it made me start looking at things, that somebody is not being truthful with the people and what's happening, so it made me skeptical of just about everything that--the policies that this country had, foreign policies. And when Ellsberg released the information, when I found about the Tonkin Gulf incident, it just reinforced those beliefs that I was building up. So--

Jim: And has this continued to this day, these attitudes?

Williams: Yes, yes. And to me it's wrong. And I don't blame the government as much, now. I don't blame the elected officials only, I blame the people, because I say until people hold people accountable that they put in place to represent them then nothing will change. That's--

Jim: What's your attitude towards, you know, mainline veterans' organizations that to some degree support, you know, the militarism that you're--

Williams Against?

Jim: Yeah.

Williams: I think many of them are still, especially Vietnam vets--I think a lot of Nam vets are still seeking glory. I think many of them feel that we lost the war in Vietnam, and I think it is many who can't face the facts that the reality is it was that we were duped into going to Vietnam. And, you know, I make that connection between the people that are serving in Iraq now, and it hurts me to see them because when I went to Vietnam I had the same impression that they have, that we are doing the right thing. And I think it is hard for people to say that I was duped or I was used. It's hard for people to come to that, and I think many probably feel that it's a patriotic thing to do because they are not aware of the history of the wars in this country and why we've gone to war. So I think out of ignorance many people support policies that shouldn't be supported. I think if they knew more of the truth that they wouldn't support it, so the only thing they can fall on is to fly a flag or tie

a yellow ribbon or to send cards to troops (unintelligible) bringing them home. It's a way to support them. Support them when they get back home, give them the help that they need. And I think too many people don't look at that. I don't think many people think about the young soldier that left a wife and kids here, that perhaps had a job that paid decent and by being activated his pay is cut and the financial burden it put on the family. I don't think many people think--look at it in that sense.

Jim: Well, we kind of got out of sequence, but we'll just do this and then we'll go back to Vietnam. When you came back from Vietnam first and second time how were you treated?

Williams: The first time the protests were just beginning in 1967. I was in California, came back in December of '66 from Vietnam. And it bothered me so much, the protesters, that I put in a 1049 to go back to Vietnam.

Jim: But you-- That wasn't accepted; is that correct?

Williams: No, they didn't accept it. Instead after a while I was sent to Panama, the Canal Zone.

Jim: And what did you do down there?

Williams: I was with the (??) Unit at Fort Davis, and I was over on a missile base for a while on the Pacific side from Fort Amador.

Jim: So did you work with the jungle warfare school down there training people going to Vietnam or was this--

Williams: I did work with training people, mostly officers that came through there for jungle warfare training that came down to Fort Gulick. They were trained at Fort Gulick.

Jim: So how long were you in Panama?

Williams: I think I was there probably 11 months.

Jim: Okay.

Williams: About 11 months.

Jim: So that would take us to about 1968?

Williams: Yeah, because I left Panama and went on my second tour to Vietnam. I got the orders for Panama and I was stationed in Panama and got orders for Vietnam, and I can't even remember what month that I went back to Vietnam in '69. It was in the

fall. I know it was in the fall of the year.

Jim: So you were in Panama, that was your duty assignment between your two Vietnam tours.

Williams: Yes.

Jim: Okay.

Williams: Was partially at Fort Carson and the other part was in Panama.

Jim: Okay. What was your reaction when you got ordered to go back to Vietnam?

Williams: I hated it. I didn't want 'em because I liked my duties in Panama.

Jim: So how--you went over-- When you went back the second time you went as a replacement.

Williams: Yes.

Jim: And how was that different-- How was that experience different than--

Williams: It was different because I didn't know--when I got there I didn't know anyone in the unit.

Jim: How were you accepted into that unit that you went to?

Williams: I was accepted by--

Jim: And what was it? You were in the first log command?

Williams: Yes. I was with the MPs in the outfit. I ended up being the driver for the first sergeant of the company.

Jim: Okay. And so what were your duties as an MP?

Williams: We were in convoys, pull security around the installation.

Jim: And where did the convoys go from Cam Ranh?

Williams: Up to Nha Trang. Most of the time we would go over to Nha Trang.

Jim: Did you have many incidents on the road when you were going up to Nha Trang?

Williams: No.

- Jim: So you were in Vietnam from--this time from 19-- This is 1969?
- Williams: Yeah. I wasn't there I think probably six or seven months in '69.
- Jim: And is there anything that stands out in that experience?
- Williams: Yeah, big race riot they had at Cam Ranh.
- Jim: Ask you describe that, please?
- Williams: Yeah. I remember there was a movie playing called I think it was "A Hundred Rifles." That wasn't the cause of it. It was because of things that happened to us during a scene where Jim Brown and Raquel Welch were under the water tower. It had been something had been building up over time, and I think many of the soldiers of color, I want to say African American because the Hispanics were too, were being used out of the MOS and doing mostly ammo dump labor, the hard labor, rather than their job and many of them had been injured and came to first log from I'd say a line outfit. And it was a lot of anger there, and they saw it on a color thing that the differences were, and I remember during that scene something happened. I don't know what happened, but the fighting started and between whites and people of color, and it wasn't a one-day event. This went on for a while.
- Jim: So it went on for a while, this cropping up again, you know?
- Williams: Again, yes, because I remember my first sergeant saying to the MP, "We will have to go and take that area," and I was saying it's stupid because the people that had the weapons were the people of color. They were the one manning the ammo dumps and all that shit, and they were up on the hill and our quarters were down; and I told him there is no way you can take that from those guys, the best thing you can do is try to talk to them.
- Jim: So how did it end?
- Williams: I'm trying to think of his name. My first sergeant and I went up and talked to one of the key people that was on that side and they ended it, but it would have been a bloodbath had they tried to use MPs to go in and--
- Jim: Were there any repercussions or any court-martials or anything come out of this?
- Williams: No. It was whitewashed. I think Wallace Terry , if I'm thinking of his name, was a writer, that -- I've heard about it one time since I've left Vietnam, I've heard of--
- Jim: I got to put another tape—

[Side B, Tape 1, Ends] ca. 26 min.

[Approx. 1 min. gap on Tape 2, side A before interview resumes]

Jim: Is there anything else that happened at Cam Ranh that stands out in your mind?

Williams: No.

Jim: So you were there for six or seven months.

Williams: Six or seven months.

Jim: You rotated out. Was that when the forces were being drawn down that you left or--

Williams: No. I left in '69.

Jim: Yeah, I mean--

Williams: So-- No, I left because of an emergency. My tour wasn't up. I left because of emergency. My wife's dad had had a heart attack in Chicago.

Jim: Okay.

Williams: And she got ill. She went to Chicago to visit him.

Jim: So they just sent you back and then--

Williams: I came back on emergency leave.

Jim: Leave.

Williams: And put in for--got attached to Fort Carson again, and I put in for a hardship discharge.

Jim: And was it granted?

Williams: After I went to D.C.

Jim: What happened there?

Williams: I had put the paperwork in for it at Fort Carson, and some way they got lost. They didn't know what happened to it, and they cut the orders for me to go back to Nam from the attachment. They broke the attachment, and I was supposed to report to Fort Lewis, Washington, and I went to Washington, D.C. and went to Chief of

Staff's office, who was General Westmoreland at the time, and just walked in. They didn't have the security like they have now. I remember his office, the way it was. They had people that had medal of honors on the walls, so I was just walking and reading and just ducked in his office and identified myself and—

Jim: Oh, you talked to General Westmoreland?

Williams: Personally.

Jim: Oh, okay.

Williams: And I had talked to him before when we landed at Vung Tau. He was there when we landed. And I just told him what had happened, that I had spent a full tour in Vietnam, I wasn't trying to shirk no duty but my family needed me and that I would go AWOL before I'd go back to Vietnam. So he told me he would see what he could do. And I left there and went to Senator Dominick from Colorado, went to his office and told him; and from there I went to Nixon's office and made--making complaints all the way, and I was told to go back to Fort Carson and resubmit the papers.

Jim: So you went to the White House and--

Williams: Yeah, I went.

Jim: What was their reaction when you went to the White House? They let you in?

Williams: Yeah, I got in. I actually talked to Nixon. A lot of people don't believe it, but I actually talked to Nixon himself.

Jim: What was his reaction?

Williams: I would get out. I would get out. He would help me. And I felt good when he said it. It was a different feeling than I had gotten with Westmoreland and with--I think his name was Peter Dominick, the senator from Colorado. But I knew I was getting out once I went to the White House. So when I got back to Fort Carson there to see was a staff car picked me up the next day and brought me out to post, and I had General Johnson. I think he was the Commanding General at Fort Carson at the time, and he chewed me out for not using the chain of command.

Jim: (laughing) You kind of did break the chain of command, didn't you, went to the top?

Williams: Yeah.

Jim: So was there anybody else other than this general chewing you out for not using

the chain of command?

Williams: No, no. General Johnson was the only one that--and he asked why, you know, and I told him I had done everything right, I put my paperwork in. I had talked to my platoon leader, company commander about it and, you know, they were all saying I was going back to Vietnam, and I wasn't going back to Vietnam, and I made up my mind that I wasn't going back.

Jim: Is there anything in your Vietnam experience that we didn't cover because we kind of glossed over the Saigon situation because we went down another channel. You told us about—

Williams: Tommy Traxler.

Jim: Yeah. Anything else there that—

Williams: No.

Jim: How were you treated as a veteran then when you-- You got discharged in '70.

Williams: March of '70, yes.

Jim: How were you treated as a veteran?

Williams: You mean from the people in general?

Jim: Yeah.

Williams: Not good, I don't think so, not even for employment because I remember after I was discharged I started looking for a job in Colorado Springs and couldn't find nothing and even though there were jobs. I ended up finding a job in Climax, Colorado, where I mined. I worked in the mines. And there was some good people, like now, you know, you got some good, because I remember when I first got the job in Climax I didn't have enough money to rent a place there so I commuted from Colorado Springs to Climax--it's up by Leadville--probably 125 miles.

Jim: That's a long commute.

Williams: And I remember getting up early, driving across the mountains to get to work, and finished work, I'd drive back, and about three hours sleep and I was up again doing it. And there was no housing hardly in the area. That's why they had list problems. And I remember I stopped at this motel one evening and I talked to the owner. It was a small place and a little lady owned it, and I told her that I was commuting from Colorado Springs to Climax and I had a family, and I told her I

needed a place for my family. I couldn't continue to do it. And she said, well, I can rent you a room but I don't have any kitchenettes or anything, so I don't know what you will do about eating. And I said, okay, I'll take the room. So this was on my way back to Colorado Springs. So the next day I brought the wife and daughter up and we rented the place. Then I thought about I had spent all my money paying a deposit, like a security deposit for the room and the rent, and I didn't have money for food. So I went back to the lady, and she had only seen me the day before, and I just said, ma'am, I know you don't know me and that you don't have any reason to trust me, I say, but I gave you the rent and the security. I said, I don't have any money to feed my family. And she gave me a month's rent back and told me to pay her when I started getting paid regular from the mine, when I got straightened out. And I never will forget that. I remember we used to put our juice and meat outside the window because it was--and this is in the latter part of March or April and the snow was still up, and that's how we kept our food from spoiling. The wife would just open the window and set it outside the window. And this lady let us cook. We used a hot plate, even though she had a sign that said no cooking in the room. She made an exception for us, and it touched me. The people were-- there were a lot of good people-- The Town of Leadville itself was a small town where it was more like a commune. People knew people there, and I think it was the first time where I had been in a place where I think people really didn't see color as a barrier. Like we were accepted. My wife was accepted in different little groups. And, you know, I hadn't been that long out of Mississippi, eight years, but that's not long, you know, coming from that. And being in a little, small town that probably was about the same size as the town I grew up in or maybe a little smaller and to see that big difference in people, it started making me think more and care more. I think that's part of the Vietnam experience. Even though it bothered me what I did, I think I grew up.

Jim: Well, that comes really to a question I have here. How did the Vietnam experiences affect your life?

Williams: I think it made me a better person. I think it made me do some soul searching.

Jim: Has your attitude changed about the Vietnam experience from, you know, when you got out to here we are sitting here 2005?

Williams: Yes.

Jim: How could you describe that, please?

Williams: The Vietnam experience, I found some good in it now. I see where out of all the bad things that happened there, all the bad that I did that something good was in Vietnam and that was that I learned to respect life more than I had before, and it really brought back my old grandmother's teachings that, you know, we are all made by the same creator, we are in a circle. So it made me see people as people

all over the world, to realize that my life is no more important than life in Afghanistan or Iraq, and that what we are missing I think in this country as a whole is the ability of people to understand different cultures are different but they are human, that they bleed, they breath as we do. So, I don't know, it just made me put a human face on everything after that.

Jim: Now, this is going to seem like an awfully dumb question. You are sitting here across the table looking at me with a "Veterans For Peace" shirt on. I'm going to ask you what about veterans' organizations? I mean, obviously you are a member of Veterans For Peace.

Williams: Yes. I'm a member of Wisconsin Vietnam Veterans also, Chapter 5, and Vietnam Veterans of America. Vets For Peace is the one group that I think we have we are on the same wavelength. Others, they have good people in them, but I think many of them feel that the best support they can do is to collect money and send phone cards to people or put ribbons on the car "We Support Our Troops," which I'm not condemning them for. The way I see it is that--with Veterans For Peace is that we should look at the reasons that our troops are going to war and start trying to get rid of those edifices that creates war and then we are helping the troops, that you got to help the troops more than say we support troops and fly ribbons. You got to help them when they got back. You got to help their family.

Jim: You mentioned this a couple times Willie about helping them when they come back. Now, based on your experience what would be the right kind of help to give troops that have come back from a combat situation?

Williams: I think there is a need to help while they are making a transition from the battlefield to the world. And from just listening at the news now when they say one out of six of the people that's in combat in Iraq are affected by PTSD. Those people will need help, not just in the short term but for long, long-term they'll need it. I think people should be on their Congress people to have them do more for these people than give them health benefits and medical benefits for two years when they get back. After two years if it is not a service-connected disability they are out in the cold. But what happens if the young man starts having flashbacks five years down the road? That's the help when I say help that they need. They need help from the local people, from their family, everybody that will help. I think I survived Vietnam and what I was going through, the bout I had with PTSD, because of my wife, because I was married before I went to Vietnam so I had someone that understood what type person I was before I went and knew when I came back that I was not the same person and was willing to work with me and put up with my crap, you know, just by knowing that something has changed in me. And I think that's why many Nam vets have divorced, because many weren't married when they went and their spouses never really knew.

Jim: Do you feel that you are still living with some of the problems that came out of

the Vietnam experience for you?

Williams: Yeah. I cope with them, yeah. I still have a great skepticism about the system, the government, but I don't hold the elected officials accountable. I look at it more now that if people are being hurt by something if you don't take a stand to change it then you have no right to complain about it. That's the way I believe now. So--

Jim: Well, we've covered a lot of territory here today, Willie. Is there anything that we haven't covered that we should?

Williams: Not that I can think of.

Jim: Well, this has been for me a very good experience and interview, and I want to thank you for your service.

Williams: Thank you.

[End of interview]