

Frank Geer
U.S. Navy
Interviewed by Caitlin Hunter

Oral History From Interview With Frank Greer

I was twenty when I decided to go to Vietnam. What they did is they asked for three volunteers from my navy ship to go in country to Vietnam and be involved with the turnover of the navy role to the Vietnamese- to work in a support role or an advisory role with the Vietnamese.

It was very different [from loading weapons on the ship]- my job was gunner's mate. In the navy in Vietnam a gunner's mate would normally be operating a gun on a gun boat but the boats- most of them were being turned over to the Vietnamese so my role was more of a support role, not a combat role. What we would do is, I was in the northern part of Vietnam, and we would go up to smaller bases and bring them supplies. With a lot of people there was kind of a variety of things you wound up doing over there because that's just the nature of- the war was changing and there was in some ways a shortage of people at times and to break the routine you might volunteer to do something just to get off the big base, which is what I did, and go up to remote locations and spend some time there.

There was a base about four miles from the DMZ and it was quite a bit more dangerous being there than at Du-Nang. And the purpose of that base at the time was to keep the rivers cleared of mines that would be set by the enemy in the river and boats would go up sometimes from the mines. This was the main shipping channel to points west and north so it was important to keep the rivers open. I was up there doing different things at that base- one thing was to install an underwater sonar system to prevent

enemies- they called them sappers- from setting a charge on one of our buildings and blowing us up. And y'know help maintain a generator and stand guard duty and maintain weapons and other things. The Americans there were mostly older guys- career military, about five or ten years older than me- and they were doing joint mine sweeping operations with their Vietnamese counterparts. It gave me a chance to work really closely with these advisers and sort of to see another side of the war. It also gave me a chance to have more contact with the Vietnamese people themselves which was- and to see the relationships form between the advisers and the Vietnamese in the community. There was a little town, a village right next to the base so we got to go out in the village some so it was quite a cultural experience as well.

The doc at this base I was pretty impressed with even though he was alcoholic- that made me nervous when he was taking care of me- but he was very dedicated and he really impressed me. He'd already seen three tours, at least three of those were heavy combat with marines, he was on his fourth tour and he wanted to stay in Vietnam and the reason he wanted to stay in Vietnam was not because of the fighting but because his role had now switched to that of adviser and he had learned some Vietnamese and he was delivering babies, he was caring for the elderly, he was doing a lot of things in the village that gave him a lot of satisfaction and I was very impressed with his heart and dedication to the Vietnamese people.

The problem up there was rockets- rockets or mortars would hit the base nearby. I read a statistic that in the period preceding when I came up there- six months- there were ninety rockets. So, certainly there were places that would get hit more heavily but ninety rockets in isolated incidents is very extreme and with people getting killed and

injured kept everybody's nerves on edge. When I was there, there was one fellow- this is not I guy I knew very well- when we were getting attacked one night he happened to be- he and another fellow had gone off the perimeter and were out in an area where I think they were out checking a barge and they got pinned down by enemy fire and he was wounded at night and he got medivacced.

Most of what you heard in the US was pretty bad and when you got there in some cases it was as bad as it sounded and in some cases it wasn't- what you'd heard didn't really fit reality. There was a difference- different people's experience was very different depending on what unit they were in, what job they had, and the time period they were there. The end part of the war was one experience, the middle part was another, and towards the tail end- the tail end meaning 71 to 72, through 72, was a very different experience and that's the part I was in which was, again, mostly advisers, Nixon's Vietnamization program. There was much more frustration in some ways because you were trying to teach the Vietnamese navy and, in the case of the army, the ARVN how to do certain things and the other thing is you had to rely on them under combat situations and under other situations. For example, we had a boat and we were taking supplies up but the boat was turned over to the Vietnamese and now the Vietnamese were in charge of the boat, they were piloting the boats, and we were entering this river and they were doing things very differently than we would have done- we thought some of what they were doing was- you radio the base to come out to the mouth of the river and do what we call a skimmer round where you're dropping these uh percussion grenades in the water and it will detonate any mines and the boat follows that path and then you go into the base. Well, the Vietnamese didn't see any need to call and they started up the river

without having this thing cleared and we tried to talk them out of it but there wasn't a lot we could do about it. So the two of us, I remember, we went to the bow of the boat so the idea was if we did hit a mine we'd be flipped off the front and be less likely to be injured. And we did not hit a mine but that's an example where you feel- where working together was kind of difficult.

The Vietnamese one day when I was up there- I came out of the base and there were these children and old men and women and they were all wailing at the pier and I went down to see what was going on and it turned out that the two boat crews that were doing the mine sweeping operation that day had hit a big mine and blew it up and killed both crews and they were gone and these were their family members. They hadn't been sweeping the river properly and they hit a mine and they blew up. And that was a terrible thing.