

John Nesbitt
US Army Special Forces
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Interviewed by Triston Mosbacher

I served in the Central Highlands in my first tour, which is right near Nha Trang. Then I served in the Mekong Delta. I served on an A-401, which is an A-Team next to the Cambodian border, and the name of the town was Don Phuc.

I enlisted in the Special Forces at the time. After a bit of trouble I had at school and a bit of trouble in my love life, I was trying to figure out what to do with myself and I wound up there.

Upon my entry into the army, I was originally part of the first cavalry division. Prior to being shipped out to the cavalry, the Special Forces had lost around thirty people in a camp that was overrun by the Vietnamese Army, and in order to replace these Special Forces folks immediately, they came through what was called Ben Wam, which was a Repo Depot. Repo Depot is where soldiers and men going home and soldiers coming in and entering the war are housed. During junior training I was what's called a Platoon Guide, and I was a student leader of my class, who through basic training advanced individually in the army training school. So with that, I was a prime candidate for Special Forces. I was recruited [at the Repo Depot] and then sent to Nha Trang where I was sent for about two weeks of training.

What's good about the Special Forces is that these are professional soldiers. I was not received well initially because I was a college boy. I had joined the army in January of 1966. I was now by August of '66 working with men who had been in the military for twenty years. They were specialists in their own military occupation for the

last ten to fifteen years in a war-type situation. So when I showed up, I wasn't really received well 'cause I was green, so to speak. And when you're green people don't want to know you, because you're a risk to them in the jungle because you don't know what you're doing, and normally when you're green your survival rate is not more than eight to sixteen weeks. So you spend a lot of time with the buddies that you came over with.

When I was recruited for Special Forces, I knew only one guy, who was Robert Crinshaw from Yuba City. So we hung out together. But otherwise most of the time the only way you related to officers and other folks was at a professional level 'cause of your mission, or it was just you were friends with anyone you happened to meet that was an American.

Regular troops had the USO shows come in. Or they would go back to base camp. Now, you've got to understand in Vietnam they had what's called base camp, where all these soldiers are and all these supplies. Out in the jungle there was only the enemy. Then soldiers would go back to base camp [where] there's music and recreation, and things like that. Well, that's for regular soldiers. Now, in Special Forces, the entertainment that I had sometimes when I was at Recondo, I would come back to headquarters [for]. There was a pub, and you could get drinks, and listen to music, and do your thing, or go downtown. Of course, going downtown had its risks because by curfew time, if you were a soldier out there in the streets, the Viet Cong would pay two-hundred American dollars for the ear or dog tags of any Special Forces soldier. So I didn't typically do a lot of stuff downtown and the things that would relieve me were to get by myself and do meditation, review the tapes of what I had done in the jungle prior, and to be honest with you, smoke some weed instead of getting drunk. When you're drunk you have a different body odor, you honestly shit different, your reflexes are

dulled, [and] your ability to have endurance is shortened, so I usually kept away from drinking as a rule. My basic relief was to sit and meditate alone, and rerun and master the techniques of being in the jungle with a team of six people.

The stress is what causes Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It's called accumulation. For instance, in the morning I wake up, and I have to get my team ready. That pressure right there accumulates until let's say about noon, if you're in a Mike Force you have an engagement, you have a firefight. That's pressure. Then by noon, you're eating lunch, and you're on your way again, and you have a bit of contact with bombs or booby traps or anything else that happens. Within a week, you can have three to four different engagements a day, now that's fifteen a week. Well, by the end of that week the accumulation of that causes a different kind of stress that other soldiers would use alcohol or drugs to relieve themselves from. But you need individual attention to each of the incidents in order to disperse the energy from the contact. The stress then builds up, which by the time you're home you have a stress disorder.

When you're in the jungle, you're not used to washing yourself. In fact, the more I smelled like mold and dirt, the better off I was 'cause I'm not giving myself away to an enemy who is living underground, or an enemy who is living in the jungles. So what happens is you cast off the rules of your society in order to get the animalistic type of rules of survival in the jungle. When you come home, you have to now cast off everything that you learned about in the jungle, and then pick up the rules of civilization. That becomes difficult when you're not prepared or debriefed for the purpose of coming back home.

When I left Vietnam on the 15th of October, 1967, I actually left my camp on the 13th. I got a flight home on the 15th, was discharged on the 17th, and was on the streets of Seattle within five days of being in a place where I was constantly ready to shoot somebody. So that adjustment was tough but, fortunately for me, I went back to school. Going back to school took some of that energy and dispersed it until years later. But the idea is that the stress never leaves you because the survival techniques that you used in the jungle you don't want to give up when you come back home, but you have to because otherwise you're a misfit to everybody who you're with everyday and [who] live the normal life. So the stress takes its toll in the long-term in the form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The day my service ended, I finished patrol in the morning; patrol at the A-Camp. The A-Camp is maybe a quarter of a mile in circumference, so it was essential to go within half a mile from camp, patrolling the area to look for signs of booby traps, to look for signs of infiltration or sappers, sappers being a Viet Cong with a sniper rifle or satchel charges. That morning I concluded my patrol, I actually went with a gentleman named Anderson, who is now a part of Homeland Security. We went hunting for ducks in a jeep with a recoilless rifle on it, which was a no-no. By noon, the Viet Cong was after that jeep, while I was at this pond trying to hunt ducks. We managed to get back in the jeep and shoot our way back to the camp successfully. A Caribou, which is an Australian-type aircraft, picked me up, took me to Camron Bay, and I was home. So that was my last experience on the last day I was in service.