

Interviewee: Walsh, Bobby
Interviewer: Jack Sigler
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Sigler: Good morning Mr. Walsh. You understand that this interview is being recorded?

Walsh: Yes, sir.

Sigler: Okay. Why don't you tell us what you were doing before you joined the service and how you got to that path and go on from there.

Walsh: Well, before going into service I was going to school at Lively Tech and ...

Sigler: Here in Tallahassee?

Walsh: Yes, sir. Trying to pick up a trade, and I never finished it; I just tried to go on into service at the time ... go on over and do my little part.

Sigler: So you enlisted?

Walsh: Yes, sir. I was turned down the first time I enlisted and they turned me down and then the second time I re-enlisted they took me on in then.

Sigler: Do you know why they turned you down the first time?

Walsh: No, I don't. They never did tell me why, but they turned me down and sent me back home.

Sigler: So what year did you finally get your enlistment through?

Walsh: '67.

Sigler: '67, okay. Where did they send you first?

Walsh: I first went to Parris Island, South Carolina.

Sigler: Oh, so you enlisted in the Marines?

Walsh: Oh, yeah. Then from there I went up to Lejeune for infantry school.

Sigler: Parris Island was basic training?

Walsh: Right. Then went to California out to Camp Pendleton for my MOS school, which was 2531, which was radio ... field radio operator. From there, on over to the wonderful country of Vietnam.

Sigler: How did you find the Marine training in the three schools you went to?

Walsh: Number one top training. They cross-train you and everything. You're cross-trained in radio, every weapon that the military has, you're cross-trained how to use it and what it's for and general, you know, stuff.

Sigler: [Beeping the background] Sounds like you still got a radio there.

Walsh: That's my fire radio.

Sigler: Oh, okay. I don't hear CW very much anymore. Okay, from California, you went to Vietnam?

Walsh: Right.

Sigler: And when you got there, what happened?

Walsh: [laughs] Well, when I got there, I got placed in ... my company that they assigned me to was 1st Marine Division, 1st Battalion, Alpha Company.

Sigler: Boy, you were right at the top of the list.

Walsh: It was the best.

Sigler: Okay. Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Division. And you were put in there as a radio operator?

Walsh: Well, no, I was put in that as a rifleman, and then they found out that I had radio skills. Then they put radio on me then. I toted the radio a good part of the time I was over there. I had two of them shot off of me.

Sigler: Well, you got there in '68, right?

Walsh: Right.

Sigler: Okay. Where was your unit stationed at that point?

Walsh: Well, we were headquartered out of Phou Bai. At the time that I got there, we were just going into Hue City under what was a Tet offensive. It was the first time I ever, you know, was shot at, I'll put it that way.

Sigler: Now, the Tet offensive was a Vietnam offensive ... Viet Cong offensive, wasn't it?

Walsh: Yeah. Well, Tet ... I think it's one of their Christmas holidays or something. Anyway, it was hot and heavy there.

Sigler: This was your first real combat experience?

Walsh: Yes, sir. Mostly street fighting and door-to-door type of combat.

Sigler: In the city of Hue itself?

Walsh: Right.

Sigler: Can you tell me a little bit about it?

Walsh: Well, when we first got there, they flew us in on choppers and discharged us in the middle of rice patties. My first thought was what kind of fish are these in these rice patties that was jumping up out of the water? Come to find out, it wasn't fish, it was bullets.

Sigler: Wow. That would focus your mind.

Walsh: Yeah. We started fighting in the rice patties and worked our way on in to Hue City up around what's called Mac "V" Compound which was around the university there. We were there for about ... seemed like about twenty-nine days before we were pulled out of there. They pulled us out and sent us up to what they called the rock pile. We were up at the rock pile for probably two, maybe three weeks before they sent us back to Hue City.

Sigler: Now, the rock pile must have been fairly close to the DMZ.

Walsh: I don't right remember where it was at. I had just got in the country there, and I didn't really know the country there all that good ... didn't know right where it was at at the time. When we left there, they sent us back to Hue City for a few days, and then we wound up going back to Phu Bai for reinforcements to rest and recuperate. Then, from there, they sent us to secure an LZ up around ... somewhere up close to Quesan. It's called LZ Bluejay.

Sigler: Landing Zone Bluejay.

Walsh: We were there for maybe four or five weeks, securing the area for them to build a

runway and all. Then they pulled us from there and sent us on up to Quesan, above Quesan there in the hills. I was actually on two hills up there: 881 South, I believe, and the other one was 861 North.

Sigler: Now, through all this time, you were functioning as one of the radio operators?

Walsh: Yes, sir.

Sigler: Okay. Were you assigned at the platoon or the company level?

Walsh: I was platoon level.

Sigler: Platoon level. What kind of equipment were you using?

Walsh: I was using what we called a Prick 26.

Sigler: Okay, PRC-26, which is a back-pack radio?

Walsh: Yes, sir.

Sigler: Okay. Your platoon - was it the weapons platoon or one of the rifle platoons?

Walsh: It was a rifle platoon.

Sigler: Boy, you got right up in the front of it, didn't you?

Walsh: Mm-hmm.

Sigler: So you would stick pretty close to the platoon commander?

Walsh: Well, yeah. The platoon sergeant ... I stuck close to him for what time I could.

Sigler: That depended on, obviously, what was happening right around you? Okay. Let's see, where did we get to?

Walsh: Quesan. Or up in the hills around Quesan.

Sigler: That's getting over towards the Ho Chi Minh trail.

Walsh: Yeah.

Sigler: That's where the Marines spent a lot of their time in the last couple years of the war, wasn't it?

Walsh: I believe so, up around there.

Sigler: What were you doing at this time?

Walsh: I was still radio operator ... field radio operator. About a month after we were there, we got another operator and I just became a rifleman then. I went back to my old MOS.

Sigler: The original one that every marine carries.

Walsh: Yeah. I was ready to get rid of it anyway after having a couple of them shot off.

Sigler: Yeah, you mentioned you had a couple of your radios shot off your back. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Walsh: Well, actually, they weren't shot off, they were just bullet holes through the battery-case. There was shrapnel in it, and that was about the extent of it. They were still operable, all I had to do was swap batteries.

Sigler: I see. Of course, the battery-case is the biggest part of that thing.

Walsh: Yeah, that's the lower part of it.

Sigler: Right. You mentioned shrapnel. What kind of weapons were the Viet Cong and the Vietnamese using for that?

Walsh: Mortars, rocket propelled grenades, stuff like that ... RPGs.

Sigler: Yeah, because my understanding was they didn't have a lot of artillery, but they had a lot of mortars and

Walsh: Rockets and stuff like that ... small arms.

Sigler: In small arms combat, at what range did you normally engage in? I was a soldier, but I never saw combat.

Walsh: In places like that, where you couldn't see where the enemy was at, sometimes you'd be right on top of them.

Sigler: We're talking fifteen, twenty, thirty, yards?

Walsh: No, closer than that. You could reach out and slap him

Sigler: So you could get very close then?

Walsh: Yeah. About like Southern Bell - reach out touch it, you know?

Sigler: That's too close.

Walsh: Oh yeah, several times.

Sigler: Several times too close. Okay. How long did you stay with your company?

Walsh: I was with them for ten and a half months. I got wounded three times over there.

Sigler: Three times - and sent back to the company each time?

Walsh: No sir. I got hit in the left wrist with shrapnel and got hit in the back with shrapnel. The last one was a bullet ricocheted off of a rock in front of me and caught me in the leg. That was it.

Sigler: That's the one that sent you home?

Walsh: That was the one that ... well, that, and being the sole surviving son, sent me home.

Sigler: Okay, the first two were shrapnel wounds. Tell me a little about how the medical service worked there when you were hit.

Walsh: They were the best out there. If you needed a corpsman, he was right there with you.

Sigler: He was with the platoon, right?

Walsh: Yes, sir. Each platoon had corpsman. Sometimes they had two of them with us. They took good care of us.

Sigler: After they patched you up, did you go back?

Walsh: Oh, yeah. It wasn't no real ... no limbs missing or nothing like that. It was just shrapnel wounds. They'd throw a stitch or two in it and you'd either go back if you wanted to, or you'd stay out there.

Sigler: Depending on how serious it was.

Walsh: How serious, yeah.

Sigler: And how you felt about it.

Walsh: Yeah.

Sigler: Okay. And then, when you took the bullet in the leg, they did send you back?

Walsh: Well, no, I went on R and R [laughs]. It just hit the calf bone ... or the shin bone, rather. It ricocheted off the rock and hit my shin bone and then ricocheted off the bone. It was more or less superficial ... stuck a band-aid over it and cussed a little bit and went on.

Sigler: Okay. In all this time you were in Vietnam, did you ever get any R and R time?

Walsh: Yeah, the last month that I was there ... I can't tell you what month it was. Anyway, I went on R and R to Taiwan and I returned back to Vietnam, back to my company headquarters there in Phu Bai, and they told me I was going home. I didn't want to go, but they insisted. I told them I wanted to stay; I didn't have but a couple of months to finish up my year over there, and I wanted to finish it out. They said, "No, you're sole surviving son - you got to go home." I said, "Well, if I'm sole surviving son, what the devil am I doing over here in the first place?"

Sigler: Did they change the rules or just hadn't caught it?

Walsh: They didn't catch it.

Sigler: In Taiwan, what did they have - a military hotel complex?

Walsh: It was a civilian hotel; it was the Hilton Hotel. Of course, we had to rent a room. We had to pay our own way. It was nice.

Sigler: You got a month up there?

Walsh: No, it was just seven days.

Sigler: Seven days, one week. Okay, then they sent you back from the company back to ?

Walsh: When I left there, they sent me back to Okinawa and to a casual company there until they could get me some orders cut and find out where I was going. I was there for about probably two, three weeks. They sent me from there to Hawaii, where I spent about four months there at Navy 85 up above Wahiawa.

Sigler: Over on the east coast, isn't it?

Walsh: Yeah. What's called the wayward side or something like that. In the security ... I was an MP, base security and all that. I came home on thirty-day leave after that. From there

they sent me to Camp Lejeune ... I believe it was the 2nd Marine Division. I didn't really like there, so I put in for a transfer to Rota, Spain. I was in security there.

Sigler: 2nd Marine Division - did they put you back in a rifle company?

Walsh: Right. I wanted to get out of that rifle company; it was too dangerous [laughs]. I put in for transfer to Rota, Spain, in security. Pulled security there in Rota for six months.

Sigler: How big was the Marine detachment at Rota?

Walsh: I couldn't really say. I know we had two barracks there - it was security. It was probably about fifty men to a barracks.

Sigler: So you had a pretty good-sized attachment there.

Walsh: Yeah.

Sigler: So you spent ... how long did you say, about six months?

Walsh: It was about six months I spent there. Marine Corps are like the Navy; they don't leave you in one place too long. Then they shipped me back to North Carolina, back to the infantry.

Sigler: Through all this period, did they ever bother to promote you?

Walsh: Yeah, I was promoted once ... well, actually twice. I picked up PFC when I was stationed out in California, and then when I was in Vietnam I picked up lance corporal. In Spain, I went up for promotion and there was a captain ... me and him didn't see eye to eye. I didn't make corporal.

Sigler: Yeah, we've all had that experience.

Walsh: Well, what it was was they had asked me if they sent me out on mission, what was the most important: the mission or the safety of the men? I told them the safety of the men, because if you didn't have the men, you couldn't do the mission. He said, "No, the mission comes first." I said, "Well, if you got a bunch of dead men, the mission ain't worth crap." We didn't see eye to eye on that. The promotion board didn't like my answer on it, but, you know, you got to take care of your men so you can accomplish your mission.

Sigler: How did you like Spain?

Walsh: It was hot. It was nice. I wouldn't want to live there, though.

Sigler: Rota is where, down in the south?

Walsh: Yeah. On a clear day, you can see the rock from it.

Sigler: It's that close to Gibraltar?

Walsh: Yeah.

Sigler: There, did you get a chance to travel at all while you were stationed in Europe?

Walsh: No. Once we had a hop up to Germany, but we got drunk and missed it.

Sigler: Okay. So six months in Rota on security detachment. Then what?

Walsh: Then they sent me back to North Carolina

Sigler: Back to Camp Lejeune?

Walsh: Back to Camp Lejeune. I was there for about ... I reckon two, maybe three months. I was detached to S-1, where I was a mail carrier. I picked up mail at headquarters and delivered it to the different companies and all.

Sigler: S-1 is personnel and administration, right?

Walsh: Right.

Sigler: What, of one of the battalions there?

Walsh: Yes, sir.

Sigler: Is that where you finished up your Marine career?

Walsh: That's where I was discharged.

Sigler: So you did a straight three-year enlistment?

Walsh: Well, it was two-and-a-half years, or two years, eight months, twenty-one days. I'd have probably still been in, but some lieutenant come around ... well, not lieutenant ... it was a captain one day come around and said, "We're giving early outs to anybody that's been to Vietnam that wants to get out now." I said, "Hey, put my name on the list."

Sigler: You certainly had your combat time for that.

Walsh: Yep.

Sigler: So you got out and came back to Florida?

Walsh: Yeah, I got out and came back home and couldn't find a job. Nobody wanted to hire a baby-killer.

Sigler: Did you run into a lot of that kind of feeling back here?

Walsh: Oh, God, I ran into it for two years and couldn't find a job. I couldn't find a job around Tallahassee nowhere; nobody wanted to hire a baby-killer. Around home here nobody wanted to hire me. Nobody wanted to hire me. You know, every time I filled out an application, I was proud to be a Marine and proud to have went to Vietnam and I'd put it all on the application. They'd say, "Well don't call us, we'll call you." You'd never hear nothing from them. I moved to Panama City, thinking maybe I could something down there. I was down there for about a year, couldn't find nothing. I was about to starve to death, so I came back home where I could get some of Mama's cooking. Over in Quincy, I saw a job-listing for a truck driver, so I went over and applied for it. I decided not to put military time on there; I just put down military. They asked ... first words out of his mouth, "Did you go to Vietnam?" I said, "Nope, didn't get to go." "Well, when can you start to work?"

Sigler: Oh my gosh.

Walsh: I said, "Last week or last year sometime." I went to work driving and I've been driving ever since.

Sigler: Why do you think people were so down on people who served in Vietnam? I wasn't in the country at the time; I was over in the Middle East. I never really understood why ... you know, you could argue of the war, but you can't argue over what the soldiers and Marines were doing.

Walsh: Well, we didn't ask to be over there. People that treated us like dirt when we came home, they treated us out of ignorance.

Sigler: Who do you blame for that?

Walsh: For the way we were treated? The American people?

Sigler: Yeah, but what made them think this way?

Walsh: Well, I'll tell you the news media is one thing. They always showed the bad side of the story. They never showed the good side. That's one thing. That's like right now. They're showing the bad side of Iraq, and they're not showing the good side ... what's going on

on the good side of it. That's what has turned the American people against Vietnam ... and politics.

Sigler: I'm really surprised though because here in the South, people tend to be a little more patriotic and a little bit more pro-military than they do up in the east. I'm really surprised you ran into that kind of a feeling down here.

Walsh: Well, when Iraq started, I told my wife, I said, "I'm going to join the National Guard again." She said, "Again?" I said, "Yeah. I'm going to go down there and join them so I can go back over there and squeeze another trigger on somebody." She said, "You can't go." I said, "Why?" She said, "You ain't going to be no good to them." I said, "Why not?" She said, "Well, not with two broke legs and two broke arms." [laughs] She told me right quick she'd break both my legs and arms if I did.

Sigler: Okay. Just to go back over. What do you think was the most interesting thing that ever happened to you while you were in the Marines?

Walsh: Hmmm. The most interesting thing?

Sigler: That you can talk about, at least.

Walsh: I don't know. I guess the traveling part of it ... seeing places I'd never seen. If I hadn't ever went in the Marines, I probably wouldn't ever have seen Vietnam. I'd probably have never seen Hawaii or Spain or Okinawa or any of those countries.

Sigler: You've done a lot of traveling. Last question here: do you think you'd do it again?

Walsh: Of course. But my wife won't let me.

Sigler: Okay. Thanks a lot. I'll turn off the recorder now.

End of interview