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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Ollie L Langford
Conducted by Dr Philip F Napoli**

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Transcribed by Mark Steven Varela

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

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Ollie Langford: Came about going to the military academy at West Point because I grew up on a farm and wanted an education. I could not afford the education, but one year at the University of South Carolina, Strom Thurmond gave me one of his first appointments when he was elected on a right-end ballot for the senate. I was able to get my education by going to West Point. I graduated in the class of 1959. Then I was educated through the army schools and eventually went to Hawaii for my first assignment, for three years. Had two children in Hawaii. Came back to the school of Fort Sill, for advanced artillery course and was assigned to Fort Benning to the 2nd Infantry Division. That particular brigade of the 2nd Infantry Division was put into the 11th Air Assault for the air assault test. So we spent our time training. When I reported into that unit, which was the 5th of 38th Artillery, I was made battery commander of B Battery of 5th of the 38th artillery. We trained from 1964 until 1965. In 1965, after the air assault and the tests and so forth, I'd had my battery three months longer than what I'm supposed to have it and I gave it up to a Captain Bob Barker, who later became Colonel Barker and he commanded C Battery of the 1st of the 21st artillery, which we changed our name when we became 1st Cav from 5th of 38th to the 1st of the 21st artillery. Colonel Barker became the C Battery commander. I became the fire direction officer of the battalion, the assistant S3 is also the fire direction officer. All artillery fires are controlled through a battalion

1 fire direction center and each battery has a fire direction center and we coordinate
2 through each other down to the forward observers and the liaison officers for the
3 distributions of fires.

4 Philip Napoli: Tell me a little bit about how then the unit—tell me about the trip
5 to Vietnam. You went—did you go on board boat?

6 LO: Let me take you back to when we were training in the—something that really
7 had an impact on our unit was we trained for a year in the air assault concept. All of our
8 lieutenants were experts. I had five very good lieutenants. Three were so excellent that
9 they were quality of general officers. They trained all through air assault and then when
10 we changed our name to 1st Cav Division and was ordered to by President Johnson to
11 Vietnam, Secretary of Defense McNamara made a decision not to hold ROTC (Reserve
12 Officer Training Course) people, officers and so forth that was on two year tours, not to
13 hold them in the service. Consequently, we were gutted of our well-trained lieutenants
14 and had a lot of other lieutenants come into the units which they were good officers and
15 many of them did well but they had missed that year of training of air assaults. That had a
16 huge impact of a lot of our operations until we were in country long enough to get
17 through that portion of it. We were ordered in August of 1965 to go to Vietnam, we
18 loaded on buses at Fort Benning, Georgia, what is called Kelly Hill which still exists at
19 Fort Benning and we went by bus to Charleston, South Carolina. Once we got to
20 Charleston, South Carolina, we loaded on a troop transport ship called the U.S.S. *Rose*.
21 There was a song about the time, about the rambling rose. We had a lot of singing and so
22 forth. We went down, went through the Panama Canal, then we were taken up to Long
23 Beach, California. They said to bring water and take-home fuel and so forth. But we also
24 found out that we were taken to Long Beach, California, because the Watts riots were
25 going on and they had to decide, whether to unload us there for combat or whether to go
26 on to Vietnam. We sat in Long Beach for, I think two days, waiting to see whether we
27 were going to have to unload and take action there or go on over. We finally pulled out of
28 Long Beach on a thirty day cruise basically—well, twenty day cruise then. We had to
29 stop off of Pearl Harbor, off of Hawaii, to have one of our soldiers lifted off the ship and
30 take to shore for appendicitis operation. We arrived in early September at Qui Nhon,
31 Vietnam. We sat aboard ship the first night watching fires—people firing weapons on

1 shore. Next day, we got onto landing crafts and went onto the beach. As we went onto the
2 beach, they had Chinook helicopters there and we were air lifted in to An Khe, into our
3 base camp. Our base camp, called “The Golf Course” at An Khe, was being hacked out
4 of the jungle at that time and we had a forward party of a few, an officer and a few
5 people, that had been cutting out some of the jungle where we were going to put in our
6 battalion. It was in a sector that we would be on—our perimeter but we would be able to
7 control artillery fires over about a third of the area there. That area was—we did not
8 secure it the first night. It was secured by the 101st Air Borne, who had a brigade there
9 securing our perimeters, letting us get into place. All night long they were firing, and it
10 was (Interviewee makes gun noises), it was an exciting night I should say, because it
11 started to rain. They had pitched some tents and as I recall, we had cots and we were
12 laying up on cots, and I was laying on a cot with some water dripping on my head and I
13 kept saying, “This is the stupidest thing I’ve ever done in my life with all these guns
14 going around, some of that.” But there were no bullets going through the tent, I can tell
15 that because I’ve heard that sound and I thought you know, this is war? This is terrible!
16 Anyway, we made it through the night, and we took control over the perimeter and once
17 the division took over control of the perimeter it was the same thing. Everybody was
18 shooting at shadows, bushes and stuff until General Kinnard sent down a—it may have
19 been Colonel Moore at the time, but I don’t remember. Anyway, word came down that
20 when you shot one of the enemy out there, you would crawl out and drag him back. Well
21 there wasn’t much shooting that night or any other night for that point on. Nobody
22 wanted to crawl out there and pull somebody back. That’s a funny part of the story but
23 that was real life.

24 PN: What was it like physically? What was the climate like for you? Awful?
25 Comfortable?

26 LO: I grew up in the south, so I was familiar with hot weather. It’s hot and very
27 humid. I found that the big problem was that there was never enough water to seem to get
28 showers often enough, because you sweat it all the time. Our uniforms were not of a
29 desert type, they were the old green uniforms of that time and they were very hot. So I
30 found that part uncomfortable. It was one of those type things that you always want to
31 take your helmet off and wipe the sweat off your brow and that sort of stuff. You know, it

1 was something that you adjusted to that rather quickly. Then it got rather chilly at night
2 and when you went into Pleiku, the Ia Drang Valley, places like that, you had to sleep in
3 a sleeping bag at night. It got so cold you had you sleep in a mountain-type sleeping bag.

4 PN: This is September of 1965, right?

5 LO: Right. We landed in September; we did some operations that was known as
6 the “Bong Son Plain”, which later became a hot bed for fighting for many years. That
7 was kind of what we called a “Shake out”. When we made our first air assault, we went
8 up a Valley as I recall, called Happy Valley. As we made that assault up there, the
9 artillery went in, we always landed the artillery first. We landed normally infantry
10 company or something like that or platoon to secure LZ (Landing Zone) so that the
11 artillery could come in with a non-hot LZ because Chinooks are very capable of being
12 shot down easily. We went in and landed out in a sandy plain. Set the guns up, set up for
13 fire missions and I had told all of my fire direction center people all the people in the S3
14 shop to start digging holes. They started digging some fox holes, leaning on the shovels,
15 talking and all that until probably a Viet Cong fired, I believe rifles at us and one round
16 went way over behind us and another round went short of us and they were artillerymen
17 so they all realized that was a bracket. That was the wrong place, so they started digging
18 very quickly. Some were on the ground very shortly after that. It was recall rifles, nothing
19 followed that. But we did get the fire during that period of time. I personally, as a fire
20 direction officer, learned a very important lesson on that mission and that was I should
21 fire orders for all the artillery fire. If I didn’t issue the fire order, then nothing happened. I
22 had this call from a forward observer, an air forward observer, that had found a battalion
23 of enemy, Viet Cong as he identified them, marching or running, jogging down a road
24 towards our infantry positions. Of course, he wanted infantry fire. I issued a fire
25 command for battalion six volleys. Which would’ve been an awful lot of artillery fire.
26 Before the mission was ready, I issued a—at my command so they wouldn’t fire. I went
27 to ask the observer a lot of questions because I’d never seen many enemy that got out and
28 exposed themselves like that unless they were really assaulting and they weren’t close
29 enough to be assaulting. So I questioned him real hard, told him finally to fly down right
30 close to him and see if he drew fire. If he didn’t draw fire, something was wrong. It turns
31 out it was ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) airborne troops and they had on

1 black uniforms, that was their uniform. I learned right then that fire orders are dangerous
2 if you don't think long and hard through who you're shooting, when you're shooting and
3 so forth. But I came very, very close to making a terrible mistake that sounded logical
4 with everything but was not logically at all.

5 PN: Were you supported from higher up in your choice or did you get resistance
6 from this?

7 LO: No, at that time we didn't even have an S3, a captain substituted for the S3
8 because we had lost our S3. Our S3 back at Fort Benning, super officer, got promoted to
9 lieutenant colonel and went to a command position. They shipped us in an airborne reject,
10 I guess I'll call him temporarily, a major who had a broken leg from airborne training, so
11 he didn't qualify to go to the airborne brigade of the 11th Air Assault. So he was with us.
12 When we arrived in country, after three or four days, they shipped him out to one of the
13 headquarters and we had a vacancy for a while and some captain would fill in for that and
14 they would go to the meetings and get the information back to me. We went like that for
15 probably about a month or so. But we did have major in before we went into the Ia Drang
16 Valley.

17 PN: That takes us really through into October of 1965, right? The night missions,
18 you're running these shake out missions.

19 LO: Yes. Right. There's another part about the shake out that's important to the
20 artillery side of the house. We were now a unit that was familiar with shooting a certain
21 direction of fire. But we had trained to fire three-hundred-and-sixty degrees which
22 complicates artillery on the old piece artillery guns and so forth, citing devices very
23 much, you had to know whether—
24

25 (Editor's Note: Issue with the audio file, audio stops here)