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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Steven Hansen
Conducted by Dr John Ron Milam
Date 10 November 2005
Transcribed by Mark Steven Varela**

The transcription of this interview was paid for by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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.

1 John Milam: I'm Doctor Ron Milam of Texas Tech University and the Vietnam
2 Center. Today I am interviewing Steven Hansen. Steven, I'd like to start out by asking
3 you to tell me your MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) was and your responsibilities
4 November 14th, 1965.

5 Steven Hansen: My MOS was 11 Charlie, which was heavy weapons
6 infantrymen. I was assigned to Company D, this sometimes confuses people but I was
7 assigned to Company D, which was not a rifle company, it was a combat support
8 company and it consisted of a heavy mortar platoon, a reconnaissance platoon, and an
9 anti-tank platoon. I was in the heavy mortar platoon and my job was forward observer. In
10 the Ia Drang, I was attached to Company A. I was one of the three forward observers for
11 the platoon, each one going where the company.

12 JM: 1st of the 7th?

13 SH: 1st of the 7th.

14 JM: So you were with Tony Nadal?

15 SH: I was with Tony Nadal. I was actually a team leader, if you use that term. I
16 had a radio operator, Ray Tanner, who accompanied me, Specialist 4th Class Ray Tanner.
17 I was a buck sergeant.

18 JM: You were buck sergeant on November 14th?

19 SH: That's correct.

1 JM: You're an E5?

2 SH: Yeah.

3 JM: Okay, let's go back to the time before Ia Drang. Let's go back to when you
4 first became a member of the 1st Air Cav.

5 SH: Well, you have to go back about eighteen months. I joined the 2nd Battalion
6 of the 23rd Infantry at Kelly Hill, at Fort Benning. I'm thinking it was February of 1964. I
7 had just completed a three-year tour in Germany and came back to join that battalion. The
8 battalion was in the process of reorganizing to become one of the test battalions in the
9 11th Air Assault Division. It had been a mechanized battalion, they were in the process of
10 turning in the armor personnel carriers, they were drawing the battalion down to cavalry
11 strength. All the short time soldiers left and one of the things that I think helped us so
12 much later on is that we pretty much purged the battalion of the soldiers with flat feet and
13 other reasons for not participating fully in the training. We didn't have any slackers left.
14 All the sergeants and all the officers were very well called, and I think we have a real
15 strong cavalry. Shortly after I arrived, we began receiving replacement soldiers. Unlike
16 most situations, the soldiers we got came straight to us from basic training. They had not
17 been to advanced infantry training. Our first job in preparation was to conduct MOS
18 specific training for the soldiers that came in. We received some very fine soldiers. I
19 think that one of the things that happened was whole basic training companies were
20 loaded on buses and sent to us. So they had not been called. We got the college graduates
21 and the other strong performers if you will, and I think that made us a much better
22 organization. Once we completed MOS training, we started into the air assault test
23 training.

24 JM: And that would be about what month, would you say then that you personally
25 got into air assault?

26 SH: Well we began air assault training, let's see—probably April or May we
27 started to intensely do the air assault training.

28 JM: Of '64?

29 SH: Of '64. We continued that training, we went onto the exercises in the
30 Carolinas, we went to Fort Stewart, we conducted exercises on Fort Benning. They would
31 frequently pick us up in helicopters in our parking lot, in front of the barracks and fly us

1 out to the field. If we didn't do that, sometimes we would have morning Reveille.
2 Command Reveille on Monday morning, pass and review in front of the battalion
3 commander, and keep on marching out the field. We trained very intensely and very hard.

4 JM: During that period of time, that you're training, was there a lot of discussion
5 about Vietnam?

6 SH: You know, I have to say that not initially. But as time progressed and we saw
7 what we were doing and we saw what was happening, it became apparent that we were
8 probably going to get involved. I don't think we did a lot of talking about it, I think we
9 understood that. Shortly before we went to Vietnam, the parade ground suddenly had
10 some CONEX containers. Containers that you pack up your unit equipment in for
11 shipment. We were sitting in the dayroom a couple of days later and President Johnson
12 made his speech in which he said, "I'm sending the Airmobile Division to Vietnam." We
13 looked around and said, "That's not news." We'd already figured out that we were going.
14 People weren't talking about it, but we knew.

15 JM: The parade field there, in front of the infantry school at Fort Benning, you
16 say was—

17 SH: No, not in front of the infantry school, in front of our battalion. We had a
18 little battalion parade field up on Kelly Hill and that's where the CONEX containers
19 started to collect. That was a couple of days before the official announcement.

20 JM: It may have been a surprise to the world, but it wasn't a surprise to those—

21 SH: I think people knew what was going to happen.

22 JM: As you were saying, let's pick three or four months before Johnson's
23 announcement. Did you notice any intensity of training?

24 SH: No, I don't think so. I certainly don't have a recollection of it.

25 JM: What did you know about Vietnam?

26 SH: Not very much, to be honest, I really didn't know very much. I knew that
27 Vietnam was going on, you saw the occasional article in *LIFE* Magazine or something
28 like that, it was a topic of discussion at times. I can remember that Vietnam was going on
29 while I was still in Germany and was receiving some attention. The advisor effort in
30 Vietnam was known to me even in like '62 and '63, it was topical but you know in terms
31 of really understanding what Vietnam was and where it was, no. I don't think so.

1 JM: You'd been to Germany, you said. You had—you were a soldier that knew
2 there was a big world out there and America takes part in a lot of different places. How
3 about casualties? During the time that you were in Benning, Benning being a military
4 town, were there stories about casualties coming back to Columbus or anything like that?

5 SH: Not really. It was still up until the time we deployed, pretty much an advisory
6 effort. There were a couple of units that got there before us. The 173rd out of Okinawa got
7 there before us and I think—

8 JM: The Marines.

9 SH: I think the 1st Division had some people there and I think the 101st had some
10 people there. But there hadn't been any big deployments from Fort Benning.

11 JM: There hadn't been—there wasn't a lot of enemy contact yet that we were
12 getting word back to, but I just wondered as a soldier, if it was something that was on
13 everyone's—not mind, but discussion. If it was something that you talked about in the
14 barracks all the time, until Johnson's speech.

15 SM: I don't think so. I think we talked about it, it was a topic of discussion
16 sometimes, but I don't think that we were really that heavily focused on it. Some people
17 may have been, I don't recall that I was.

18 JM: In training at Fort Benning, you were using the M14 I assume, as your basic
19 weapon?

20 SM: M14 was our weapon.

21 JM: When you went to the range, did you fire the M14 on fully automatic very
22 much? Or was it mostly considered a semi-automatic weapon?

23 SM: Well, in order for you to have a fully automatic M14, you had to be in a rifle
24 fire team, and you had to be the designated BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) man. The
25 M14E2, I think they called it, with the bipod and the pistol grip stock and the fully
26 automatic capability was a replacement for the Browning Automatic Rifle, which
27 incidentally was being phased out just as I came into the army.

28 JM: I see. Interesting. The M16 was being—you'd heard about it, but you weren't
29 trained on it as I understand it, in Benning, was that right?

1 SM: Nope, we got our M16 shortly before deployment. We did get an opportunity
2 to fire them on the rifle range and qualify with them and so forth, but it was not a familiar
3 weapon when we departed.

4 JM: Which ship did you go over on?

5 SM: We went on the *Rose*. The 1st of the 7th *Rose*

6 JM: You were on the *Rose*?

7 SM: Yes.

8 JM: So you're issued the M16 that you would carry into combat at Fort Benning.
9 You got a chance to test it out, what was your reaction to it?

10 SM: I'm a big guy and I can carry an M14 and I liked the M14. I liked the M1 and
11 I liked the M14, I could handle it well. But my initial impression with the M16 was that it
12 was a toy. I came to respect it; I never had any trouble with my M16. I fired a lot of
13 rounds through the M16 that I was issued over the year that I was in Vietnam and it never
14 failed me. I think today, I would say that the ability to carry more ammunition, with the
15 M14, you carried a hundred-and-twenty rounds. With an M16, you could put five or six
16 hundred rounds in your buttpack and that was certainly a distinctive advantage. Plus,
17 much of the terrain that we operated in, the M16 was fully adequate. There were very rare
18 occasions when you needed the effective range of an M14.

19 JM: During your training at Benning, I know you described it and we'll talk later
20 about Ia Drang and what your role was there. But as your training at Benning, you are in
21 the mortar platoon?

22 SH: That's correct.

23 JM: You're an E5 during most of that training?

24 SH: That's correct.

25 JM: So your anticipation—what was the anticipation of your role once you got to
26 Vietnam? Did you assume you'd be a mortarman?

27 SH: I knew that I was going to mortarman when we went to Vietnam. Just prior to
28 going to Vietnam, we reorganized Delta Company. During the training phase, all of the
29 mortars in the battalion had been in one big platoon, in Delta Company. There were four
30 sub-platoons or sections. One for each rifle company, plus the heavy section. I was, all
31 through the training at Fort Benning, I was with the section that went with Company C. I

1 was a forward observer with one of the platoons in Company C. But I was also one of the
2 senior sergeants, young E5s, I was young, but I had been a sergeant for quite a while.
3 When they reorganized the battalion, I was kept in the heavy mortar platoon and became
4 a company level FO (Forward Observer), and I knew that's what I was going to do. I was
5 a forward observer, that was my niche, and I knew that I would be going. Ironically, if I'd
6 gone with C Company, I'm also assured I would've been killed in the Ia Drang. The
7 fortuous assignment of me to stay in the heavy mortar platoon and go with Company A,
8 probably saved my life.

9 JM: Except Company A had a lot of casualties.

10 SH: Yes. Company A had a lot of casualties.

11 JM: I was fortunate to talk to Tony Nadal yesterday—

12 SH: Tony has been a lifetime friend. Of all the company commanders I had when
13 I was in the army, I think Tony Nadal was the most natural leader that I have ever seen.
14 He was very—all of the company commanders in the battalion were good. John Herren in
15 B Company and Bob Edwards in C Company, they were superb company commanders
16 but I told Tony this the other night, I said, “Tony, when I become company commander,
17 you were the man that I tried to emulate. I couldn't do it, but you were my model.”

18 JM: Let's talk about deployment. You get on the *Rose*, you are I guess, on ship
19 for thirty days or so?

20 SH: Yeah.

21 JM: You end up at Qui Nhon?

22 SH: Qui Nhon.

23 JM: Qui Nhon. What's An Khe like?

24 SH: An Khe really was primitive. There's something I'd like to tell you and
25 include in the history, when the *Rose* went to Vietnam, we sailed through the Panama
26 Canal. We came up to West Coast of the United States and docked at Pier E, in Long
27 Beach, in California. I'm a Californian. I was one of four or five guys that was allowed
28 off the ship to go to see our family. Of course, they didn't know I was coming; my
29 mother and her husband were out of town on vacation, I did hook up with my brother and
30 spent a little time with him. Bob Gomez, who joined the battalion just before we
31 deployed and was killed with Company C, a good friend of mine, he was a heavy mortar

1 FO for Company C, also got off the boat and was able to hook up with his wife, and of
2 course he was killed in the Ia Drang, so that was one last opportunity for him to see his
3 wife and family. I often thought that that was divine. Got to An Khe, An Khe was
4 primitive but we went to work. I mean, they put us to work. One of the generals, who had
5 gone over with the advanced party, the brigadiers, had been a prisoner of war in World
6 War II and had been held by the Japanese, and they had made them clear by hand landing
7 fields, air fields and so forth, when he was a prisoner of war. He thought that was a good
8 idea because it didn't tear up the soil and you didn't have erosion or whatever. We set to
9 hacking down the jungle with anything we had, trenching tools, hand tools and so forth
10 and actually started clearing the perimeter, which became called "The Green Line" and
11 those sorts of things. It was hard manual work, and it was probably good for us because
12 we kind of gotten a little fat on the boat.

13 JM: (Chuckles) Was there an engineering battalion attached to the 1st Cav?

14 SH: Yes, the 15th Engineers.

15 JM: Okay, and they helped with—

16 SH: Yes. Yes, they did.

17 JM: The grunt work was done by the soldiers?

18 SH: Well we went out—if you wanted to pitch a tent, you had to chop down a
19 tree. In many cases, not completely, the center of the valley that became Camp Radcliff
20 was open, but the perimeter around had to be cleared by hand.

21 JM: I assume you set up defensive perimeter immediately, at An Khe—

22 SH: Yes, we did.

23 JM: Because no one knew for sure what that area was going to have intelligence
24 wise, in terms of what kind of enemy was out there. What kind of enemy contact did you
25 experience in say, the first month?

26 SH: You know, I don't think we experienced much enemy contact at all, I think
27 the enemy was there, I think they were trying to get a feel for us. I know that in one of
28 the—over by brigade headquarters, they killed a North Vietnamese or Viet Cong soldier
29 that was probably infiltrating or may have just been lost.

30 JM: But basically—

31 SH: It was pretty quiet.

1 JM: Compared to what would come, certainly. But even so, mortars or rockets
2 into the camp?

3 SH: No, no mortars or rockets into the camp.

4 JM: Did you participate in “Operation Silver Bayonet”?

5 SH: In Happy Valley? Yes, I did.

6 JM: As I understand it, that was kind of the first major operation of the unit.

7 SH: It was a big operation, but it was not characterized by a lot of contact though.

8 JM: Right, right. But at least it gave you a chance to operate in a battalion-sized
9 strength or later, I guess, maybe it was a brigade operation. But at least it gave chance to
10 check your equipment out and that sort of thing.

11 SH: Yeah, it did and the shake down. I think it was the first time we really
12 transitioned from this defensive mentality to an offensive mentality, and from a setting up
13 to an operational mentality.

14 JM: Now, somewhere around the middle of—well, not the 10th of November, as I
15 try to put these dates together. Somewhere between the 5th and the 10th, I guess, you’re
16 moved to Pleiku from An Khe, certain units, were you a part of that?

17 SH: Yes. As I recall, the move came very quickly. We were ordered up very
18 quickly, we were at An Khe. The airborne brigade, the 1st Brigade of the division had
19 been operating in Pleiku, along with the 1st of the 9th Cav. This was all in response to the
20 North Vietnamese siege of Plei Me Special Forces Camp. We went up and relieved the
21 first brigade and conducted some rather extensive patrols without making contact. We
22 were physically in the jungle, working very hard. We had not made contact at that point.

23 JM: What do you recall about what you knew, as a buck sergeant, about the
24 intelligence, about where you were going? Did you know anything? Or just that you were
25 supposed to move to this place?

26 SH: The word never gets really down. I learned later, when I got up into the
27 middle leadership ranks, that no matter what I said at the top never got to the bottom.
28 Certainly, not the way I wanted it to. One of the things that happened is, of course they
29 say, “This is going to be the big one. This is going to be the big one. They’re really
30 there.” Then you fly into some place and there wouldn’t be anybody there. They did tell

1 us before we went into the Ia Drang, that this was going to be a big one. Whether anyone
2 really accepted that or not, is another thing.

3 JM: That's interesting because you had some other operations and nothing's
4 happened and people had told you it would happen. Did you get the sense that anyone
5 believed it this time?

6

7 (Editor's note: Audio cuts out here.)