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**The Vietnam Archive  
Oral History Project  
Interview with Willard Parish  
Conducted by Dr. Philip F. Napoli  
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Transcribed by Mark Steven Varela**

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**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 (Editor's Note: Audio cuts in)

2 Dr. Philip F. Napoli: Mr. Willard Parish, at the Crystal City Hilton and we're  
3 going to talk a little bit about several days in November, forty years ago. I want to say by  
4 way of making sure that you're totally aware of what we are going to do, you can stop the  
5 tape at any time. You can tell this guy to shut it off and we'll all shut it off. Reason for  
6 doing and saying all of that is that you're in control of this. In a real way, this is your  
7 interview to do with what you want to do. You can say what you want to say and not say  
8 things you don't want to say. It's very important to me that you know that you're in  
9 control. The first thing I want to do is get you to introduce yourself a little bit. Tell me a  
10 little bit about your age, where you're living today and then I'm going to ask you to back  
11 up and tell me a little bit about how you entered the military, your training and movement  
12 to Vietnam and then we'll do the several days in November.

13 Willard Parish: Okay.

14 PN: Start off with a bit of introduction to you.

15 WP: Well, I'm Willard Parish. I was born and raised in Bristow, Oklahoma, where  
16 I live today. I am sixty-four years old; I have four daughters. I have one that will be  
17 twenty-two and one that will be nineteen next month and I have fourteen-year-old twins.  
18 I kind of had a late start. I graduated high school there in '59. I was drafted, as a matter of  
19 fact, I was to report Friday, the week after John Kennedy was assassinated in '63. I took

1 my basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, and then I left there in February of '64, went to  
2 AIT (Advanced Individual Training) training at Fort Benning, Georgia. I was in the 2<sup>nd</sup>  
3 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division. We were on Kelley Hill, at Fort Benning. Out  
4 of the Harmony Church area, they were testing the helicopter concept, that which the 11<sup>th</sup>  
5 Airborne became the 11<sup>th</sup> Air Assault. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 23<sup>rd</sup>, and the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 38<sup>th</sup> shared  
6 Kelley Hill. Air assault was little understrength, so they more or less loaned us out to  
7 them to test this helicopter concept out. So we had the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division patch on our  
8 left shoulder, had 11<sup>th</sup> Air Assault patch on our pockets of our fatigues. I see in '64, all of  
9 '64 we went South Carolina and played army against the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne to test this  
10 helicopter concept out. We come back to Benning and just kind of went in hiatus, you  
11 know. Didn't really do much training and just—pretty soon we started hearing the rumor  
12 mill about Vietnam. Of course, most guys my age were saying “Where's that?” We'd  
13 never heard of it. Of course, when we grew up, it was French-Indochina. The rumor mill  
14 started, we were told not to write home, and this is big secret, secret. We found out we  
15 were going when President Johnson gets on nationwide TV and said, “I'm sending the 1<sup>st</sup>  
16 Air Cav.” Oh, yes I forgot about that, we became the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cav in—it was either in June  
17 or July of '65 and I thought, “Well, they're going to transfer us all to Korea where the 1<sup>st</sup>  
18 Cav is and then here, but we just exchanged patches. I remember taking the patches off  
19 all of our uniforms and boxing them up, sending them and then we got the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav  
20 patches.

21 PN: Do you remember watching that television program? I'm just curious.

22 WP: Yes, I was in the day room, down in Fort Benning when he came on TV and  
23 a bunch of us were in the day room when we saw it. I remember they had first talked  
24 about sending us on troop training across to Long Beach and loading on the ship there.  
25 Don't know, but the rumor mill was they had a bunch of protestors, so they decided they  
26 wouldn't do the troop train thing. A lot of people don't remember Continental Trailway  
27 buses, the ol' cream and maroon colored buses. They came to Kelley Hill and we walked  
28 out before daylight and just far down that street as you could see was Continental  
29 Trailway buses. We loaded on the buses, went to Charleston, South Carolina and loaded  
30 on the ship, USNS *Rose*. We went down to the Panama Canal, came up to Long Beach.  
31 Spent the night there and then took off. Twenty days later we landed at Qui Nhon.

1 PN: What do you remember about that trip? The boat trip.

2 WP: I did alright, but there was a lot of fellas sitting around the quote, “butt cans”  
3 and looked like they were bobbing for apples. (Laughs) But I decided that complete thirty  
4 days on ship that I wasn’t cut out to be sailor. (Laughs)

5 PN: You didn’t like this up and down thing, huh?

6 WP: Well it wasn’t so much the up and down or this way, but it was all forward  
7 motions. It was a little tough to take. Then we hit a tail end of a typhoon that was hitting  
8 Japan and it was really getting rough then, but I got through alright. I remember that we  
9 had practiced at Benning, climbing down a cargo net, you know like the old World War  
10 II movies you see getting in the LSTs (Landing Ship Tank). We walked down a ladder,  
11 had our duffle bags and I remember sitting in that LST with the duffle bag like this and  
12 we’re going in. Of course—and I’m sure all the other guys were like me, all these visions  
13 of beachheads, like in all these John Wayne movies, But we thought, “Man, when this  
14 thing hits and that front end drops down, all hell is going to break loose.”

15 PN: Yeah.

16 WP: Well, about that time I felt a bump on the bottom and tractor went up,  
17 dropped that front and started hollering for everybody to “Get off,” and “Hurry, hurry,  
18 hurry!” He ran off and my first vision of Vietnam was a big CONEX container and two  
19 guys laying on top of it and playing cards. (Laughs) So that was my beachhead, which I  
20 was thankful for. Then we loaded on a chopper, went to An Khe, and just—best I  
21 remember, most of the time we just went out. The first area we went to was Happy  
22 Valley and kind of little scrimmages broke here and there, not anything really major.  
23 They had an artist for *TIME* Magazine, for the buildup and he came around and made  
24 sketches, then went back to Saigon. We were getting ready to go to Happy Valley, where  
25 they decided that a mortar platoon—a squad actually, that’s the picture they wanted to  
26 use. So there was about five of us, six I guess it was. We went out to set mortar up and  
27 the guy painted the mortar first, then he painted Graham, the gunner, then he painted  
28 Charlie Marshall, fixed dropped around the tube and then he painted me holding a round.  
29 So we made the cover of *TIME* Magazine, which was kind of neat. The artist, he was  
30 very nice, he took everybody’s name and sent us all an autograph copy of the cover and  
31 he said—I can’t remember, Henry was his first name, pretty nice fella. Then, we started

1 hearing about special forces camp up in Plei Me and the rumor mill started again. Sure  
2 enough, we went up by that area and I can't—I really don't remember just how many  
3 days we were out. But I can remember it was a Saturday evening and our section  
4 sergeant, Mathis, came down and said, "Well, we're going to go into another area  
5 tomorrow and if we don't run into anything there, they tell us we're going back to An  
6 Khe, the base area." Sunday morning, well—I was assistant squad leader of this squad  
7 and when we came in, I would take half the squad on one side of the chopper, Sergeant  
8 Thompson would take the other half. When we landed into the valley, we knew then it  
9 was a hot LZ (Landing Zone). When the choppers lifted, I look to my right and it was all  
10 the way across the LZ. Well, if I took my guys and ran that way, we would've ran into  
11 the battalion CP (Command Post). Nearest wood line, which was to the left and that's  
12 where Thompson was running, and of course we were running right into him coming  
13 down of Chu Pong Massif. Most of the rest of the day was basically running wounded  
14 guys out to the choppers, Major Crandall's guys and go out. I think Joe Galloway used  
15 the phrase "God's lunatics" and they were. One kid got hit, who was helping me carry a  
16 guy out and the crew chief on the helicopter jumped off and helped him then to the  
17 chopper. One thing that Colonel Moore had done, instead of taking all the mortars out,  
18 we just took every other squad's mortars out and then, like my squad, we didn't take our  
19 mortar. We backpacked the ammo because he wanted to have plenty of ammo. We're  
20 over here, nobody has a clue where the mortars are and I can't find where they're at and  
21 I'm thinking, "Well, we got all the ammo, it's not going to do much good." So finally,  
22 one of the sergeants there in Charlie Company and one of the line platoons said, "The  
23 battalion's CP was over there." Which is clear cross the LZ. At that time, there were  
24 couple little A-1E Skyraiders coming in, dropping butterfly mines. So I lined my guys up  
25 and I said, "Here's the deal. When that first planes comes in, drop his ordinates, I'll run  
26 across there. If I make it, then you guys come across when the second plane comes in. Or  
27 we can all go together when the second plane goes in." James Coman, who was in my  
28 squad, he said "No, we'll all go together." So I dispersed them out, second plane started  
29 dropping its ordinates and thank god we all got across. The first guy we ran into was  
30 Sergeant Major Plumley. He told us where the mortars were, so we went over there. At  
31 that time, my basic issue was a .45. What I had been doing when they bring the wounded

1 guys out, I got with Platoon Sergeant Freeman, we called him “Big Daddy Freeman”, and  
2 I was getting his wounded guys’ M16 ammo and gave them to my guys. So Coman gave  
3 me his .45. So I wound up with two .45s. Basically, that evening, Sergeant Mathis said  
4 “We’re going to have to pull our own defensive perimeter because we don’t have enough  
5 people.” I said, “What are we going to pull it with, sarge? Mortar platoons, they don’t  
6 have any fire power.” He said, “Well, we’re working on it.” Then he told me to take a  
7 squat and go over and get some more ammo and work to company CP. I came back,  
8 Coman had the foxhole dug, he and I shared that foxhole. That evening they came around  
9 with an extra M60 machine gun and they wanted to know if anybody qualified with it and  
10 I said, “Yeah.” Which I’d never touched one before, but the next morning back to the  
11 right flank where Charlie Company was at, those guys started getting hit bad. You could  
12 hear all the gun firing, explosions and all the screaming and hollering. Delta Company  
13 was to the right. I could hear those guys hollering, “They’re coming around, they’re  
14 coming around!” Well out to the front, there was a big termite hill and elephant grass. I  
15 could see the grass kind of going down like that. So I hollered, “Who’s out there?” There  
16 was weeds and nobody answered, and I hollered again. So I turn around to Coman and  
17 you know, “Burn him.” He shot once and I hollered at him, “Put it on fully automatic.”  
18 Well, we had trouble with them jamming on full automatics, those early M16s and he  
19 said, “It’s jammed.” I remember I looked at him, he looked at me and then I looked back  
20 to the front and—I don’t know if I can describe it like these Disney movies where they do  
21 that time lapse photograph of the plant coming up out of the ground. It’s like they just  
22 started growing up out of the weeds. Things kind of went into slow motion and then all at  
23 once, everything broke out. After this, like I said in the book, the training takes over and  
24 you just become actions and reactions. A lot of guys, I know in the book remember every  
25 little minute detail, but I just remember when it started, and I remember it seemed like  
26 somebody turned the volume down. It was like I was way, way far away and I really  
27 wasn’t here, I’m just watching this from a distance. I remember when we had started, I  
28 had laid Coman’s .45 down on the bottom and mine on the other side. After the book  
29 came out and I read the book, I remember thinking at one time, “Aren’t they ever going  
30 to run out of people?” It just seemed like no matter what, they just had more people. Next  
31 thing I know it’s all quiet, and I’m standing up in that foxhole and I got a .45 in each hand

1 and they're telling me what I did and I—"No, I didn't." "Yeah, you did." I just, like I  
2 said, then I started—everything started coming back. The day we landed in the valley, I  
3 had fourteen days left to go in the army. I had a very good friend, his son is here now  
4 with us, that was killed that morning, that second morning. The day he was killed, he had  
5 seven days left to go. I remember when we got back to An Khe, Sergeant Mathis came in  
6 and he said, "I saw what you did, I'm going to put you in for a Bronze Star." I'm loading  
7 that duffle bag, "Sergeant, that's great I can take that fifty cents go anywhere and buy a  
8 beer." (Laughs) I came home in December of '65. According to my DD-214 form I was  
9 held for four days for the convenience of the government. About 6 months later, my sister  
10 called me, I was living in Tulsa then. She said, "You have a big manilla envelope here  
11 and it says 'US Army Official Business'" I said, "Oh. They're calling me back." She  
12 said, "Do you want me to open it?" I said, "Yeah, go ahead and open it." She said, "Well,  
13 there's some kind of medal in here." I said, "Medal?" She said, "Yeah." "I swear  
14 Sergeant Mathis said he was going to put me in for a Bronze Star." And she said, "Well it  
15 looks kind of bronze." And my brother was in the background and he said, "According to  
16 this paper, it says silver star." I said, "Nah, can't be that." Sure enough. I was kind of  
17 surprised and somebody asked me when we got back to An Khe about how I felt. I said,  
18 "Well, I'm just running a whole rafter full of emotions." I said, "I was very sad that my  
19 friends had been killed." At the same time, I was madder than hell because they were. I  
20 was elated I was alive, and I felt guilty because I was. Especially because I never got a  
21 scratch. I told a guy one time on a military forum, I said, "Maybe if I got wounded, I'd  
22 felt better." But basically, that's about it. I still can't remember when the really tough  
23 fighting started, and I used to wonder why we used to go out on a field there and set up a  
24 mortar and tear it down. Set it up and tear it down. Now I know why. I was a draftee, and  
25 I didn't have too much of a military mind, my mindset was to do my two years and get  
26 out. But after that battle, I have a completely different perspective and respect for our  
27 military forces and the people that are in it. What I do now, since the book and the movie  
28 came out, I get a lot of calls from guard units, especially those that are fixing to go to  
29 Iraq, "Would you come and talk to us?" Here, about three years ago, I got a call from a  
30 major at Fort Sill, he wanted to know I'd go talk to their battalion. They asked me, "What  
31 do you charge for these?" I said, "I don't charge anything. This is my way of paying

1 back. If I can do something to get one of these young men or ladies home safe, I done my  
2 job.” That’s the way I feel about it.

3 PN: Talk to me about coming to these events.

4 WP: Well, actually I didn’t know about it until General Moore contacted me  
5 about the book in 1988. At that time, I only had two daughters and he said we could  
6 either write or just talk on tape. At that time, I was disc-jockeying our local radio station.  
7 Well, I could talk better, or I could write. I just put it down, also ran a copy of my silver  
8 star orders and sent that to he and Joe Galloway. In ’92, I believe when the book came  
9 out, I had sent a picture to General Moore, but he called me in July, and the book came  
10 out in November. He said, that “They couldn’t copy the picture, so do you have a  
11 recruitment picture?” I didn’t know what he was talking about at the time, so he said,  
12 “You know, when you went through basic, the little—they took your picture and put it in  
13 the book.” I said, “Oh yeah, I think I’ve got one of those.” So I sent it. Being a small  
14 town, we don’t have a bookstore. Then I had said I wanted to get my two daughters a  
15 copy of the book and I—of course by the time the book came out, I had four daughters  
16 because I had twins! I had put a little note in there and asked the guy at Random House if  
17 I could order books through them. About two weeks before the books’ release date, UPS  
18 truck stops out front and there’s a book, this guy just sent it to me. I wound up buying  
19 one and then he wound up sending me another one. Anyway, I wound up with four,  
20 actually five books because I got one for myself and then when General Moore contacted  
21 me, he told me about these 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry reunions. When I was a kid, I remember looking in  
22 a cigar box and all my dad’s army stuff, he was in the Philippines in World War II. I  
23 noticed the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav patch. He’s never talked to me about it until I came back Vietnam,  
24 “Now we can talk about it,” he said. He did most the fighting in with the Americal  
25 Division, right there just before they dropped the bomb. He was going to be in the second  
26 wave of the invasion of Japan. Of course, they dropped the bomb, or both of them and  
27 that kind of stopped that. But he didn’t have enough points to rotate back home, so they  
28 transferred him into the 12<sup>th</sup> Cav and sent him in the occupation of Japan. He said, “I  
29 wasn’t in there but maybe six months.” “That doesn’t make a difference, you’re 1<sup>st</sup> Cav.”  
30 So when I joined the association, I got him in. In ’93, he and I went down and that’s the  
31 first time I’d seen General Moore since I’d left Vietnam. That’s when I got to meet Joe

1 Galloway. You know, somebody said, “You didn’t see Joe over there?” I said, “Hey, I  
2 had a foxhole and for three days that was my little world right there.” What went on in  
3 other places you know, as I read about it in the book. I can just tell you what went on  
4 around my area.

5 PN: Yeah.

6 WP: Anyway, in ’93, ’95, and ’97 I went to the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav reunion at Fort Hood. In  
7 November of ’95, I got an email from Joe Galloway and they were doing a ceremony  
8 here at the wall, on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary and he said, “They’ve asked Hal and I to pick  
9 somebody out to sit on the speaker stand, to represent the three hundred and fifty of us  
10 and Hal and I decided that you’re the man.” Down at the bottom, he said, “By the way,  
11 the old man said this invitation ain’t optional, you will be here.” So I came and this is the  
12 first one I’ve back to.

13 PN: How does it feel?

14 WP: Good and sad. It’s like De La Paz’s son, he comes to all these, his dad was  
15 killed. He’s the one that was killed. All of us guys, he’s kind of our son now, you know.  
16 As I told him last night, “You know with four girls, it’s nice to have a son.” (Laughs)

17 PN: So it’s a bit of a family gathering in a way?

18 WP: Yes, yes. Because they are my brothers and he’s my son now. It’s good to  
19 see him, we have some good memories, and we have some sad memories, and really it  
20 helped me with my emotions and things. To get together with these guys because we  
21 have somebody you can talk to. I know when the movie came out, my sister came, and  
22 she thought it was pretty graphic. I said, “Yeah, war is graphic.” She asked me what I  
23 thought about it. I said, “Well, they can depict the visual.” But I said, “The smell on that  
24 battlefield is something that stays with you. It’s just a death smell.” It’s the only way I  
25 can describe it. Still forty years later, a certain sound or a smell can—

26 (Interviewee snaps fingers)

27 It’ll bring something up from then. Not quite as bad as I was when I first came back. I  
28 know I was an assistant manager of a Quick-Trip, a convenience store there in Oklahoma.  
29 Back then, they weren’t air-conditioned, and we had these sliding doors, we just slide the  
30 whole front open. I was standing there one night, writing up a grocery order. Some kids  
31 drove up through the parking lot, threw out a cherry bomb. When that thing went off, the

1 pencil went one way, the book went the other and by the time I hit the floor, I felt kind of  
2 foolish but—luckily there wasn't but one or two people in the store, so they kind of  
3 giggled a little bit until they saw I was kind of mad. I apologized to them, I said, "Sorry."  
4 They said, "Hey, don't worry about it." Anyway, I'm alright.

5 PN: But the point is that most people don't understand what you went through,  
6 right? I mean your sister didn't get it; these people didn't get it. The people who do get it  
7 are here at these meetings.

8 WP: Yeah. That's it. That's why you can relate to them. I guess that's why for  
9 years my dad would never talk to me about World War II. But now, since I've been  
10 through it, he tells me a lot of things now that he would never talk about before. I asked  
11 him one day and he said, "Because you understand now." It's like with my sis, "Was it  
12 really that bad?" "It was the bad and worse." as I say when I talk to these young men and  
13 lady, even at schools, I go talk to schools on Veteran's Day. I try to instill a little bit of  
14 that patriotism on these young people. I tell them, it's kind of like the old man said, "Hate  
15 war, but don't hate the American Warrior." I said, "I just asked that you support the  
16 troops because they're just there doing their job and you know they probably don't like  
17 being there either." I said, "I hope to, pray to god that none of you young people ever  
18 have to experience anything like this. But if you do, I hope you have all the support of the  
19 people back here." As I told the lady at the radio station that I worked for during Desert  
20 Storm, there are having lots of parades there in town. They were boxing up things to send  
21 to the troops over there then and made my own heart feel good. She asked me one time,  
22 she said "Well, why do you think there such a turn around that they were supporting this  
23 war and didn't support the Vietnam War?" I said, "Deana, I really don't think they are  
24 supporting the war as they are supporting the troops." You know, I said it's like that ol'  
25 phrase I used to hear in Vietnam, "Well, it wasn't a popular war." Well if you talk to my  
26 dad, he didn't think World War II was very popular either. I don't think anybody thinks a  
27 war is very popular. Anyway, getting back, she said, "Why do you think they're  
28 supporting the troops like they are down there?" I said, "The main reason is, now it's  
29 their sons are over there. The ones that were protesting us, it's their sons and it makes a  
30 lot of difference when it's your own flesh and blood that over there, instead of somebody  
31 else."

1 PN: Would you want your children to join?

2 WP: I would. I think if that's what they wanted to do. Like I said, I didn't join, I  
3 was a draftee. Of course, they don't have the draft now, but if they decided to join, I'd  
4 back them a hundred percent. If they come up in the draft, and they drafted them, I would  
5 expect them to go. Somebody said, "Well, all those other people were going to Canada  
6 and things like that." They said, "You know, you probably could've got out of going  
7 there" I said, "You know, I could never look my dad in the eye again." Because he went  
8 through it. If I'd done that, I could never look that man in his eyes again.

9 PN: It's a good place to stop. Thank you.

10 WP: You bet.

11 PN: Will, it was a privilege.

12 (End of interview)