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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Willard Bennette
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 Philip Napoli: I am Professor Phil Napoli, today is the 12th of November 2005. I
2 am with Mr.—listen to me, if this were television I'd be in trouble—with Mr. Will
3 Bennette and we'll talk a little bit about your memories of the Vietnam War era. The first
4 thing I'd like you to do is just introduce yourself to us. Give us your age, where you live
5 and that kind of stuff.

6 Willard Bennette: Well my full name is Willard M. Bennette. I go by Will ever
7 since high school days. My father was Willard, and I was a Junior. I'm three months away
8 from being age seventy-five. I entered the service out of a ROTC (Reserve Officer Training
9 Corps) program at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado, which is my
10 hometown. Went in as a reserve officer. Signed up for flight school because a fraternity
11 brother of mine was at Fort Sill and at flight school. He said, "This is a pretty good deal,
12 you know? You get a hundred bucks." I signed up for it. Eventually, went regular Army
13 and decided to make it a career, and twenty-eight years later I got out as a full colonel and
14 that was 1980 when I got out of the service. I started back in January of '54. So I went to
15 flight school. I was an artilleryman in the Army but once you entered the aviation program,
16 you pretty well stayed in aviation assignments although they were supposed to rotate you
17 back into your basic branch once every six years or something. I got rotated once and I
18 commended a 105 artillery battery at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and that was the last time I ever

1 saw a piece of artillery. So I was in aviation specialty really. That was the days before the
2 Army created an aviation branch. We just had aviators, but we also had your basic branch.
3 So to pick up—where I got introduced to the 1st Cav in Fort Benning, Georgia, was—I
4 came out of Alaska. I was up in Alaska for three years, basically flying the de Havilland
5 fixed wing aircraft but I also transitioned into the Huey. In July of '64 I got a set of orders
6 saying go to the 11th Air Assault division at Fort Benning, Georgia, and then the fun began.
7 We joined the division; it was very hectic. I was operations officer for A Company 229th.
8 We went through the Carolina maneuvers. I don't know if you know much about that, but
9 it was about a three-month exercise, we went all through the Carolinas. Finishing up with
10 a big air assault at Fort Bragg where we conquered the whole city and, you know, we went
11 back victorious. From then on, we just worked local training at Fort Benning. I was
12 fortunate enough to be given command of Charlie Company of the 229th in March of '65.
13 And in July of '65 we deployed for Vietnam. My helicopters of my company and almost
14 all the officers and enlisted people went down to Mobile, Alabama, I believe where they
15 boarded an aircraft carrier. I never went there, never saw it. I was with General Wright,
16 one of the assistant division commanders and my operations officer Ken Jayne, who you'll
17 probably interview later. We went on the C130 with the advanced party. I was on the very
18 first party of the advanced party. The idea for sending company commanders on the
19 advanced party was that they assigned us up to join in-country helicopter companies that
20 had been there, and I went to Pleiku and I was attached—whatever word, to the 119th
21 Assault Helicopter Company. I stayed there for about two weeks, flew a few missions with
22 them. Didn't learn a thing because I think we knew it better than they did, even though they
23 were in-country. Then we got the word to come back to An Khe and all of us were given
24 an entrenching tool and we were told to go out and clear the weeds and prepare our pads
25 for our helicopters, which were due in about two weeks. So being an aviator with an
26 entrenching tool wasn't all that exciting but we cleared the entire Golf Course, as they
27 called the helicopter area. I remember General Wright putting out the word that he wanted
28 absolutely no bulldozers, no blades, no heavy equipment because he was afraid that we
29 would destroy the grass and we'd have a dustbowl. Well, we destroyed the grass anyway
30 and we had a dustbowl. When you put about, what? Four-hundred helicopters in this area.
31 I was also given my plot of land where we staked out where we would establish our

1 basecamp for Charlie Company. And worked until the helicopter showed up. They finally
2 showed up. From that point on, the division assigned missions and we flew some assault
3 missions into Bong Son area. Never had any fatalities, never had anyone wounded to speak
4 of—maybe a graze of a bullet or something like that. Then, I guess all heck broke out over
5 there in the Plei Me area, which was outside of the Ia Drang Valley area. I don't know the
6 history any better than probably you do, but when the scouts found it, did this and did that.
7 Things started getting heated up, I think probably like on the 14th of November. Charlie
8 Company and my company was habitually attached to the 2nd of the 7th, commanded by
9 Colonel McDade, Lieutenant Colonel McDade. For example, A Company commanded by
10 Bruce Crandall was habitually associated and attached. That word "attached" doesn't mean
11 that—we were just habitually associated and supporting these infantry battalions and Bruce
12 was doing his attachment with General Moore, Colonel Moore in the 1st of the 7th. The
13 assault into X-Ray was a normal mission that I can remember. As a matter of fact, Charlie
14 Company was not involved other than I think I had to provide a flight of four, which was
15 a very common thing we did. Some company—like I would have a mission and other
16 companies of the battalion would come over and be attached to me for that certain mission.
17 I think I had a flight of four that went into X-Ray. So I was not on the ground and I was
18 not involved in those flights. Of course, all hell broke out in X-Ray. People went in and
19 out. I did not go into X-Ray until—I guess it was either the third morning or the second
20 morning. I went in there at early dawn with the visibility pretty bad with fog and all. We
21 brought in a lot of ammunition and we took out a lot of dead and wounded. So many that
22 we had to pile dead and wounded in the same hole of our helicopter. It was not the most
23 pleasant thing to do. My involvement in X-Ray was only that maybe one or two approaches
24 in there doing what I just said. Then in the meantime, 2nd of the 7th, who I was attached to
25 as far as supporting, marched overland from X-Ray to what was become Albany. Of course,
26 they got ambushed severely. They lost something like two-hundred and sixty people. One
27 of my officers, Ken Weitzel, who I'm sure you've interviewed, or I hope you do, was on
28 the ground. Not to be derogatory toward Lieutenant Colonel McDade, but McDade seemed
29 to always be behind the power curve as far as what was going on and what was needed. I
30 just couldn't stay ahead of his lack of planning, so I picked out Ken Weitzel who was a 1st
31 lieutenant infantry officer. Good, smart mind and I said, "You're going to go down there

1 and become my liaison officer.” Which meant I was short a helicopter pilot, but it was
2 more important to have him on the ground. He had the radio, and we communicated all the
3 time on my company’s frequencies. He would give me warning orders as to what they were
4 brewing up and gave me a chance to plan to respond to what Colonel McDade wanted to
5 do. But I was getting advanced notice, it didn’t have to go through the channels, I knew
6 about it. They marched overland. I was talking to Ken Weitzel last night. First time I’d
7 seen him was two nights ago for the first time in forty years. He said he was going to ask
8 this question and I’ll ask this question and then maybe you guys can figure it out. Why did
9 they march the 2nd of the 7th overland from X-Ray to Albany instead of letting us fly them
10 from X-Ray to Albany? And no one has been able to ever tell Ken Weitzel that. Why didn’t
11 they fly them? Why did they march? But they did march, and I can remember Ken Weitzel
12 telling me that the troops were very wounded, tired, exhausted, lack of security, being on
13 the guard was just lax. It wasn’t happening. Of course, they got whammed. We flew in
14 reinforcements about dusk. I can’t remember what unit it was, but we flew in
15 reinforcements. Then through the night, there was a couple of missions that went in and
16 brought in some ammunition. My hairy experience with them—I mean it was hairy going
17 into there, but I was always “Yellow 1”, which was the first aircraft in that I insisted on. I
18 was the company commander and I insisted on being the first aircraft to lead. I was leading
19 the flight to go in for that reinforcements, I think around 1700 hours. The fire was so
20 intense, that if I had to break off—I thought it was wise to break off and some other
21 aircraft—the fire was suppressed and they got in and I came in tail-end Charlie, you know,
22 big deal. So I wasn’t the first one in LZ (Landing Zone) Albany. I was supposed to be, but
23 I broke off and went around because of the enemy fire. I am leading up to the fact that I
24 was involved in that. It’s interesting as exciting that was it was sort of routine. Fire and
25 getting pinged at, stuff like that. Then we got a call, I was at Pleiku in our bivouac area.
26 My operations sergeant woke me up about 12:30 to one o’clock and he said, “They’re
27 crying for more help down there.” Not to bad mouth medevac, but I do believe—all these
28 years later, I do believe that he said that medevac had turned the mission down because the
29 intensity of the situation. That sound like a slam to medevac, but I know it happened on
30 several occasions. You know, they were unfamiliar with the place. I took the mission, I
31 asked for a second helicopter and that was Ken Jayne, who flew number two, and we took

1 off somewhere like one o'clock, 1:15. Of course, we'd been in that LZ four and five times
2 that prior twelve hours. We entered to the area and I always describe the landing the air
3 space was total chaotic mess. There were tracers going off everywhere. People dropping
4 flares above. I don't know who was doing that, Air Force, somebody was dropping flares.
5 There were A-1s buzzing through the area, dropping napalm. This was at one o'clock, pitch
6 black. It wasn't black, it was just—we couldn't find the landing zone. I couldn't find
7 landing zone LZ. Talking on the radio with Ken Weitzel. Talking on the radio with Frank
8 Henry who was executive officer down there. "Where are you? Where are you?" Our fuel
9 warning lights started flickering. Once they come on, you got about twenty minutes of fuel
10 left in the Huey. Just about that first flicker we caught—I think Ken James said, "I've got
11 a beam of light." Because we've told him to get in the LZ or give us a beam. They could
12 see us; we couldn't find them. Little pocket flashlight they beamed that light at us, we
13 talked on the radio, beeped three times. We didn't want to go down on Charlie's flashlight.
14 We made sure—we were convinced it was our own people's flashlight. I asked Ken
15 Weitzel the other day, "Was it you in that LZ with that light?" He said, "Well, we all shared
16 that." Jim Spires, who was the 3 of the battalion was out there in the landing zone. Sergeant
17 Major—we evacuated that night. I can't think of his name right now. They all claimed that
18 they were out there flashing lights at us. And I thought that was pretty neat because we
19 finally found it and we just flew that light beam just like we would fly an ILS (Instrument
20 Landing System) on an instrument approach. Came in there with the tracers were just going
21 "zing, zang" everywhere. Why we didn't get hit, lord only knows. We touched down. Our
22 crew chief and our gunners got out of the helicopters to help. Of course, push the
23 ammunition out and bring the wounded in. We started getting some mortar fire at some
24 part of the landing zone, to the point to where I said, "Let's pick up and move." We move
25 maybe about thirty yards, forty yards in some direction, which made our gunners, and our
26 crew chiefs hump the wounded a little further. I know that they returned fire with their
27 weapons, they had their M-16s, so they were either dragging the wounded and firing—I
28 don't know what they were doing because I was standing at the controls. They were fighting
29 for their lives and helping bring in the wounded. We finally got everybody aboard that we
30 thought we needed to get on board. We were quite overloaded, but we took off. Whether
31 we had dead aboard, I don't know, they might've been. I hope they weren't any dead. I

1 think they used all the room just for wounded. We got out of there. That fuel warning light
2 was blaring in our face and we B-lined it back for Pleiku. The medical station as I remember
3 was sort of next to the main airstrip at Pleiku. We touchdown there and I shutdown. I told
4 Ken Jayne, I said, “Let’s shut these suckers down. We’re not going to hover from there to
5 our company area because we’re going to run out of fuel.” So we decided to shut them
6 down and bring the fuel trucks to us. The next day we would resume missions. I really
7 can’t pinpoint missions specifically other than that one. I was awarded the Silver Star, as
8 well as Ken Jayne for that two o’clock in the night mission. Did I earn it? Yes, I did. Should
9 others have been given awards? Probably so. The heat of battle, you know, everything was
10 hard to document as to who was doing what. I know that was being written up by Colonel
11 Winkel, who’s done a lot of research on helicopter operations in the Ia Drang. The infantry
12 would always say, “Well, that helicopter crew, they were just so heroic. They came in
13 there.” “Well, who was it?” “Well, that helicopter.” Well, you know, you got four souls on
14 that helicopter, but nobody knows who they were. And nobody looked at the tail numbers,
15 so it was “the helicopter crew.” To give awards to “the helicopter crew”, you had to find
16 out who was it. And Winkel’s done a lot of research trying to pinpoint things. Whether he’s
17 accurate on his information—I mean, it’s so long ago I can’t remember who was my co-
18 pilot. Things like that have left me. But I do remember that night. Like I said, I think the Ia
19 Drang Valley—that would’ve been the night of the Silver Star Award and all of that
20 would’ve been about two o’clock in the morning on the 18th of November. I would assume
21 that everything calmed down. I think we were back and out of there by the 19th or 20th of
22 November. I don’t know what happened in Ia Drang after that. The 229th I think were told
23 to go back to An Khe and the 227th, which is our sister battalion, I think they may have
24 come in. I don’t really know what took place in the Ia Drang after the 18th. You’re going
25 to have to ask me a question, I’ll go on. I commanded the battalion, I commanded the
26 battery—the company, I’m sorry. I’m an artilleryman, so they’re called batteries. I
27 commanded the helicopter company Charlie 229th for nineteen months, which I was very
28 proud of. Total twelve months over there and the other eight months or whatever I said in
29 Fort Benning before we left. I don’t think after that people got command of anything in
30 over six months. They tried to rotate and let everybody enjoy a command, but it was six
31 months. I went back later, two years later, and commanded the 227th Assault Helicopter

1 Battalion. Which was fun but nothing compared to being a company commander. Because
2 I got to fly all the time.

3 PN: Did you learn anything about flying those missions in those months that you
4 hadn't learn at Benning?

5 WB: Well, I learn that we couldn't fly low level without either assistance from
6 someone higher up—either the battalion commander to give us some steers. Steer right,
7 steer left. Start the flair. Because it all was a jungle. The maps we were going by were
8 certainly not the greatest or the most accurate maps. So we flew low level. We did a lot of
9 low level in Fort Benning exercises, and we tried it over there and we basically—I can
10 remember we just got lost. I did do a lot of reconnaissance before a mission and maybe that
11 was not smart. Maybe that was—I knew where we were going if I got advanced notice.
12 Now, whether the enemy knew that and watched me, I don't know. Because, for example,
13 we would go out and I knew which area that they were wanting to land. I was just going to
14 check out terrain features and all that. I also had the aerial artillery rockets people with me.
15 They would accompany on this reconnaissance because every time we went in on mission,
16 we would have them firing our rockets for us to prep the area. But let's say we had our
17 landing zone, but we also did the low-level reconnaissance to four areas. So hopefully
18 Charlie, the enemy, would know which one of those four was going to be for real. Whether
19 we faked them out or not, I don't know. You know, they probably would monitor—we
20 didn't have secure radio on those days either. My second tour we had secure radios where
21 hopefully they weren't breaking in and listening, but I don't know. I always said this about
22 Fort Benning and Vietnam. I thought the exercises in Fort Benning and the Carolinas was
23 probably just as tough or tougher, except we didn't get fired on. But I thought the training—
24 I would like to mention the training. I thought those that developed the training of General
25 Seneff, Colonel Seneff then, commanded the group. A fellow by the name of Leo Sucheck
26 who later made General, they developed—and battalion commander of the 229th was Earl
27 Buchane. They did one great job in developing a training program. I thought when we went
28 over there, there couldn't have been a better trained unit. I compared that when I went over
29 there early to learn some lessons from the 119th. I didn't learn anything!

30 PN: Yeah.

1 WB: I didn't like the way they conducted their missions. I'm not going to criticize
2 the company commander and tell him what's he's doing wrong, it wasn't my business. I
3 didn't learn anything from them because I thought we came over much better trained from
4 my experiences at Fort Benning. So I don't know what else to tell you.

5 PN: I'm afraid that given our time, I have stop. There's much more I would
6 personally would like to ask.

7 WB: All right.

8 PN: So I apologize. But these guys are running me, effectively.

9 WB: Okay.

10 PN: But I wanted to say—

11 (Interview audio ends)