

Bousselham Chaki

Jaouna Al Basra, Morocco

I've been one who appreciates, and perhaps look for, coincidences. Perhaps looking for a coincidence makes one happen. In any case, I want to relate the following coincidence that happens to be something I experienced.

I served with the 20th Engineer Battalion, from October 1967 to October 1968 in Vietnam. A few months ago, I found the web site for the 20th, and learned that it was in North Africa during WW II. For those of you who don't know, Morocco is in northern most Africa.

I had occasion to work in Morocco in the summer of 1998 and again in the summer of 1999. I was working at an archaeological site in a small village called Basra. Basra has a population of about 250; no running water; no telephone; no electricity. The homes are constructed of field stone and mortar, with wood or corrugated metal roof. Each home has a number of small living units, connected by common walls, and live stock area, around a small courtyard. Most of the homes are whitewashed.

Our workday started about 6am and continued until about noon, with one mid-day break for breakfast. Breakfast consisted of warm flat bread; shaped something like pizza dough, with the consistency of "Elephant Ears" that one can buy at Dunkin Doughnuts, sprinkled with a small amount of sugar or cinnamon. Accompanying the bread was always Moroccan mint tea. The tea is served in a silver teapot, and drunk from small glasses.

Most of the days the temperature rose to about 90 degrees. Our saving grace was the breeze, as our work area had no shade. There were about a dozen olive trees but no part of the work area was near the trees. During teatime, we would break into groups of about 8 people; 7 locals and one American per group, and move to the shade of the trees.

The groups facilitated blending with the culture and prevented the establishment of the class system of worker and boss. The most difficult part was the language. I do not speak Arabic, and most of the locals do not speak English. But teatime gave us an opportunity to practice communicating. And a practical joke can be understood regardless of the language barrier.

I had been in Morocco for about three weeks, and had started looking forward to returning home. Our group was enjoying teatime under the shade of an olive tree, as the temperature was approaching 90 degrees. Off in the distance I heard singing. As the singing grew louder, I got curious and stood up to see who it was.

A small old man was seated on a donkey, slowing going about his self appointed rounds, singing. He passed us by with nary a glance. About a half hour later he returned, still singing, still riding the donkey. One of the men said something that was translated to me. "That is my father. He hasn't been right since the war". I asked "Which war, WWI"? Translated back to me was "No, Vietnam".

Well, as the goose bumps popped out all over me, I grabbed the guy who could speak the best English and trotted off after the old man.

We quickly caught up with him, and the local tugged at the old man's shirtsleeve, so as not to startle him. Thru the translator, I told the old man that I had been in the army; "Where and when" were his questions. When I said "Vietnam", no translation was needed. The old man's eyes filled with tears, and he sat up straight as a broomstick. We had a conversation that only could have happened between vets.

He had originally fought in WW II in North Africa, and then fought in France and in Italy. After the war he mustered out for a few years. Later he served in Indochina in one of the twenty-one battalions of Moroccan tirailleurs, which were part of the French forces.

After our 1999 archaeological survey work in Al Basra, Morocco, I started searching for information about the involvement of the Moroccan military in Vietnam. Eventually, I found the Oral History Project, of the The Vietnam Archive, The Vietnam Center, Texas Tech University. The OHP has an interview guide and a set of questions. I brought the questions, and a mini-digital recorder with me for the sole purpose of conducting the interview. Shortly before mid-day we went to visit Bousselham Chaki and his son Mohamed Chaki. We talked with Bousselham about his military experience in Vietnam fighting with the French. Actually, I listened, while Aziz asked the questions. I think Chaki is around 90 years old.



Bousselham Chaki and Jim Franklin in 2004

BOUSELLHAM CHAKI



Du 4th Regiment
De Tirailleurs Marocains

Letter to Mohamed Chaki

Dear Mohamed,

I trust that God has kept you well.

I am hopeful of being able to travel to Morocco this summer, God willing. When I am there, I would like to visit with Yacine who helped me with the first survey, and Said who is now a professor. I especially want to come to Basra so that I may visit with you and your father, and also with Aziz. Aziz has invited me to stay at his home while I am in Basra.

A University in Texas, USA, is creating a Viet Nam War reference library. Part of that library is a section for personal narrative accounts of those people who fought in the war. Vietnamese, Americans, Australians, Koreans, ... anyone who was a part of the war. I have decided to participate by writing a personal account of my experience while in Vietnam, and after. A wonderful part of my experience after the war was meeting your father. I believe that God directed me to Basra and to your father. For what reason, I do not know, and I do not ask.

I would be most grateful to your father if he will agree to discuss with me, his personal experience while in Vietnam, fighting with the Colonial French Forces. If he agrees to do this, his personal narrative will be published in a computer database for all to study and learn from.

I will help your father do this, by tape recording an interview with him. The interview may take place for 2 to 3 hours each day, for 2 or 3 days. The University has written an outline of questions to guide the interview process. He will not have to write anything, just discuss his experience with me.

I know that we may have some problem with our conversation because I understand only English. God willing, I will have help from someone who understands both of our languages. Like my friend Said, who translated this letter for me.

When I have returned home, I will have our conversations translated and transcribed. That may take many months, but when it is complete I will send it to your father, and then a copy to the University. This will not cost your father any money, and the University does not pay any money for doing this.

If you and your father agree to do this, please have Aziz write to me, or telephone me, and let me know. I would like to come to Morocco the last week in July and the first week in August. I have enclosed some photographs of me while in Vietnam, and a map of all Vietnam. These are for your father. The other photograph is for you.

God willing, I will visit with you soon.

Jim Franklin

Spring 2004

Interview in Morocco
2004
BOUSSELHAM CHAKI

Interviewer (Aziz Benlayachi) AB: Start from the beginning!

Bousselham Chaki (BC):

In 1942, the American Army came to Morocco and we went with them to Tunis. There was the German army over there. We had to fight them and then they retreated to Italy. We stayed in Italy for more than three years, until 1945.

After that, we went to France in Alsace where we had to fight in the cold snowy mountains. We stayed over there more than 4 months. We had to cross some river to finally reach Switzerland and then we came back to Morocco for three months. Then we went in to Vietnam in 1947 and we stayed from 1947 to 1950 until we went back home. I went with the fourth battalion.

We were 30,000 Moroccan chosen by the French occupation army for the fight. We came from Casablanca, Agadir, Marrakech, from everywhere. The war was the worse over there. We had to walk barefoot to Saigon.

We had a difficult time in Vietnam, we had a soldier with us everywhere, even when we were sleeping, eating, and going to the bathroom, which was in the river. The fight in Vietnam was very hard.

AB: When did you start the military?

BC: 1939.

AB: How old were you?

BC: When I started I did not know how old I was. They had to find out my age through my weight, my height, and then they told me that I was born in 1915. So I was 22 or 24 years old when I started.

AB: Why have you been in the military?

BC: We had no choice at that time. We had nothing to do, no school, no job.

AB: What was your job description? What kind of gun did you have at that time?

BC: Just being whatever they ask you to do. You can be an officer or a chief. I had a submachine gun, but nothing special to do. Our duties were to be ready at anytime for the fight, to go on guard and being in the armored car.

We had to protect some strategic points as arming factory, and pipeline. The differences between the Africans and the others, we used to have a special helmet.

AB: How many soldiers were under your command?

BC: 12 soldiers. I was their chief. We had with us, God forgive him, FEKIR (name of person who died) and then I started to be Corporal in Chief, because I did a good job over there. It was a kind of promotion.

AB: Where were you in Vietnam? What is the name of the place?

BC: Saigon. We always stayed in Saigon. We had to go 100 km around the area, far from there and came back.

AB: Do you remember name of the other places?

BC: Chinese names sound all the same. They took us in those big trucks without any information about our destination.

AB: For how long did you stay there?

BC: 3 years. From 1947 to 1950. We had to be ready for any time. Vietnam was a very dangerous place, and the fight was everywhere.

AB: Have you been to Cambodia?

BC: Yes, I did go there.

AB: And what did you do there? What role did you play in Cambodia?

BC: We had to be ready for fighting in case of enemy attack.

AB: Did you go to Cambodia by truck or did you fly?

BC: We went by truck and we had to take a boat to go through a river. The French had tanks and armored car. The trucks were especially for Muslims soldiers chosen by our chief.

AB: In World War II you fought with the French against the Germans; and then you fought with the French against the Vietnamese. But in the World War, the Vietnamese fought against the Japanese. France was occupying Morocco and they were occupying Vietnam. I don't understand why you fought with the French against the Vietnamese. So why was someone from Morocco with the French and fighting the Vietnamese? Why did you go there and help them in Vietnam?

BC: The Moroccan army was not independent. Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia were under French occupation. We had to follow the orders. We were under French occupation. We had to fight with them, and we had no choice.

AB: The people of Morocco should have revolted and said no.

BC: We did revolt against the French in 1956.



Aziz Benlayachi Listens as Chaki emphasizes a point while talking to Yacine.

A second, follow-up interview was conducted by the author and Yacine in April 2006, which, to date, has been lost.

AB: Were you wounded over there?

BC: Yes

AB: How was the circumstances? How were you wounded?

BC: We were in the middle of the battle fighting. I was injured by a mine explosion. My Command in Chief was seriously wounded and one corporal was killed. The truck rode on the mine and I found myself a few meters away. I was blessed by God, thank God.

AB: Did you have any disabilities from your wound?

BC: No disabilities.

AB: What was your most memorable moment aside from the attack experience during that period? I remember that in some base camps, they had monkeys. Did you have this kind of an experience that was pleasant for you?

BC: Yes. I remember that I didn't eat as much rice and as many dogs in my life than I did during the Vietnam War.

AB: Some had memorable experiences because of the recreation and baseball, soccer, and basketball. What was yours?

BC: We never had anything like that. No recreation, no rest, just fighting. We used to go to the city on Sunday but with the same equipment.

AB: What were the name of French officers and the name of the Commander of the unit? Which was the name in charge of the unit?

BC: De Gaulle was the French President at that time during the war, but we had Oulfekir, Mesrani, Moroccan officers, and Butchi as French officer, and General Beaudilateau. We had Fekir as Commander in Chief.

AB: Did you learn to speak French or Vietnamese languages during the Vietnam War?

BC: I was just speaking French. Nobody knew Vietnamese language.

AB: In which conditions were you living?

BC: We used to live in a huge habitation like a garage, built with brick. And, they used to feed us with rice, paste, and Lents.

AB: Do you remember any funny story?

BC: I don't remember any funny story. We had no vacation, and for us, it was wartime.

AB: Did you correspond with relatives or friends in Morocco, or did you write letters to Morocco from Vietnam?

BC: I was sending letters to my mother and some money too.

AB: Were you married?

BC: No, I was not.

AB: After you came back, when did you get married?

BC: Yes when I came back from Vietnam, I got married in 1950.

AB: Did you keep a diary or journal?

BC: I am not educated enough for doing that stuff. I don't know how to write. I just kept letters that I received from my mother or relatives.

AB: Did you bring any pictures from Vietnam?

BC: Yes, I did.

AB: Since the war ended, have you gone back to visit Vietnam?

BC: Who's going to take me there? Traveling to Vietnam costs a lot of money.

AB: If you had money would you go back to Vietnam?

BC: Never, Vietnamese eat more dogs than we eat chicken. I don't like their living style.

AB: Many veterans went back to visit France, Germany, London. If you had the chance to visit or the opportunity to visit to do that, would you?

BC: Of course I would. I would love to go there. Maybe to France, Germany or Holland.

AB: Were you practicing your religion in Vietnam?

BC: Yes, I was doing my daily prayers and fasting during Ramadan time. They have a mosque where we were doing our prayers, and there were a lot of Muslims there.

AB: Have you seen any lions or tigers in Vietnam?

BC: We had seen snakes two meters long. They look like a bamboo. Snakes whistle as machine whistle. We had gun machine that was carrying more than 500 cartridges. We had to open fire to kill them and of course they have lions, tigers and monkeys. We had all our weapons from Americans troops.

AB: Did the unit have a mascot? Some had a dog, cat, cow and some had even a monkey.

BC: No, we didn't have any of this. Somehow, one of our officers had witnessed deliveries of deer when she had a baby. He brought one of them to Morocco.

AB: Were you welcomed back or were you not welcomed back?

BC: We were very happy to be back of course, and being around our family.

AB: Did you all come back as one group, all at one time?

BC: We all came at the same time by boat. We made a stop in Oran, Algeria and then we took the train until Casablanca. Then, when we were there, they started to write down in the board from which area we belong.

AB: Did you receive more medallions?

BC: Yes, I do have more but I lost them.

AB: You have a medallion from Algeria, Italy. You have more than seven or eight. You can write to the government for replacement. If you lost it then they replace them. Do they do it here?

BC: You have to send money to get replacement. You have to pay them 50 Moroccan Dirham for just one.

AB: Can you buy new ones with the paper or the certifications that you have?

BC: Where can I buy them again. I have no idea where to get them again.

BC: I still have the certification and few pictures from Vietnam with my troop. Even the pictures of the boat that we came with. I have pictures with some Vietnamese soldiers. This other picture is with two sergeants and me. We were in France for World War II.



SERVICE

MAROC: 01/06/1940 TO 13/02/1943
ALGERIE: 14/07/1943 TO 25/11/1943
ITALIE: 26/11/1943 TO 11/01/1944
MAROC: 12/01/1944 TO 19/02/1945
METROPOLE: 20/02/1945 TO 29/03/1945
ALLEMAGNE: 30/03/1945 TO 05/02/1946
METROPOLE: 06/02/1946 TO 09/03/1946
MAROC: 10/03/1946 TO 31/05/1946
MAROC: 01/06/1946 TO 11/04/1947
MER: 12/04/1947 TO 01/05/1947
INDOCHINE: 02/05/1947 TO 10/09/1949
MER: 11/09/1949 TO 07/10/1949
MAROC: 08/10/1949 TO 28/10/1949
CONGES FIN COMPAGNE: 29/10/1949 TO 19/02/1950
MAROC: 20/02/1950 TO 19/03/1950



BOUSELHAM CHAKI

With the medals he received in 2006
Courtesy of Francois Gauthier, Consul General De
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and the author.

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