



Transcript of James Holbrook Interview
Salt Lake City, Utah

Interviewer

Talk about your thoughts when you knew you were going to Vietnam.

James Holbrook

Well, I was an atypical enlistee. I had a bachelor's degree and a master's degree, and I was accepted for a Ph.D. program at Yale. And this was in 1968. And I decided that instead of starting the Ph.D. program at Yale, I was going to enlist in the Army. And I intended to go to officer candidate school. And I did enlist in the Army. I had selected as the combat branch, the artillery. I went into basic training in June of 1968 at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri, and then did advanced training in the artillery at Fort Sill in Oklahoma, and then started OCS at Fort Sill and did not like it. And I told them I was going to drop out, and they said, "If you drop out, we'll send you to Vietnam." So I did and they did. I think my reasons for enlisting in this sort of unusual way, I was in an unhappy marriage at the time, my father had avoided service in World War II, which had always been an embarrassment to me, and I had been a child of the Sputnik era and had gone to school on scholarships and fellowships and felt like I really owed something to the country. And then this whole notion of, you know, what was called "seeing the elephant" in the Civil War was of a big curiosity to me. How would I react if I were in combat?

Interviewer

Tell us about boot camp and then going over.

James Holbrook

Basic training was more or less what I expected. It was very regimented, as you might expect. Because I was older and had a college education, I was selected as sort of a trainee sergeant to be responsible for drills and marches and things like that for my company in basic training. It was interesting because when our class graduated, my parents came down from St. Louis to see me graduate. And as a part of our marching, we were singing songs about Vietnam and about killing in Vietnam. And at that time, it seemed fairly remote. But it became real after that. Advanced individual training at Fort Sill was more like going to school. We had to learn how to direct artillery fire, and it required some math and some geometry and being able to look up information in tables and so on. And so it was really much more like going to school.

Interviewer

When you finished that, did you just fly over to Saigon?

James Holbrook

Yeah. A big difference between then and now is that in Vietnam almost everybody went over as what they called individual replacements. So I flew in an airplane of strangers, people I did not know. And we stopped at Hawaii and we stopped in Guam and we stopped in the Philippines before we got to Vietnam. And arriving in Vietnam was a very surreal experience. I can remember when they opened the doors of the airplane, this hot humid air rushed in with these very unusual smells. They unloaded our duffel bags and we got them and we got on a bus. And the bus had wire screens on the windows like a prison bus. And I was thinking to myself, why would they put wire screens on the window? We're not gonna escape from the bus. There's no place to go. And then later I learned that they were to prevent hand grenades from being thrown through the open bus windows by kids on motorcycles.

Interviewer

You went to Vietnam as an enlisted man, right?

James Holbrook

Right. I went over as a Private E-2, and we went first to what was called the "old reliable academy." This was a week-long or so training program that the 9th Infantry Division had for orientation for replacements that were coming into the 9th Infantry Division. And the 9th was stationed south of Saigon, and we were the southernmost of the U.S. infantry divisions in Vietnam. And we went through a week or ten days' worth of orientation that included learning how to look for trip wires on mines and booby traps and things like that. We had presentations on malaria and other kinds of diseases. And then I flew out on a two-engine aircraft to Dong Tam, which was the 9th Infantry Division's base camp near My Tho in the Mekong Delta, and then was trucked from there to Fire Support Base Moore, which was west of Dong Tam. And my unit was the Battery B of the 1st of the 84th Artillery in the 9th Infantry Division. And I was assigned to be a fire direction specialist in the fire direction center of this artillery battery. And the guns were 155-millimeter Towed Howitzers that were built during the Korean War. So they were really big heavy guns that fired about a hundred-pound projectile. And our mission was to support the infantry as they were engaged in maneuver operations.

Interviewer

Tell us about some of the operations.

James Holbrook

For the first few weeks, we were at Fire Support Base Moore, and I was learning how to compute the changes in the direction of an artillery shell based on what they called met data, weather data. And I had never really appreciated how winds, for example, can differ from one hundred meters to two hundred meters to a thousand meters, and how humidity can change the range of an artillery shell, for example. So one of my responsibilities every day was to compute how the met data was going to affect the flight of these artillery shells so that we could make corrections for that. We would often fire a number of missions every day. And I started out at a tent that had sandbagged walls outside to try to protect against mortar and rocket fire. And there was, like, a big four-by-eight sheet of plywood with a map on it, and I would compute the direction of the round from where the battery was to where the infantry unit was that was requesting our fire support. And we would telephone that information out to the guns and give them firing instructions for the guns and tell them what kind of shell to use, what kind of fuse to use, how many bags of powder to use, where to point the guns and how high to raise the guns.

Interviewer

Were the artillery guns mobile?

James Holbrook

These 155 Towed Howitzers could be towed by a five-ton truck. We were also an air mobile unit, and it would require a sky crane, which was the biggest U.S. helicopter, could pick up one gun at a time. After a few weeks, we did have what was called a road march where we went in a convoy where we were towing these Howitzers to another fire support base that was closer to where the infantry was having their maneuver operations. And then later, we split the battery into two platoons, three guns each, and we were airlifted closer to the Cambodian border to be close to some maneuver operations.

Interviewer

So the idea was to shell the invading troops?

James Holbrook

In the Mekong Delta when I arrived it was the dry season, so the rice paddies were dry. And there would be a number of rice paddies, one after another, and then separated by tree lines. And in 1969 in the Delta, the enemy forces were the Viet Cong. And they attacked U.S. forces only when they wanted to. And so part of the tactics of the Army were to try to find them. And there were operations called eagle flights where U.S. infantry units would be flown to a particular area, dropped off. The infantry would go online and move toward a tree line. And if there were Viet Cong in the tree line, they would usually wait till the infantry was quite close, within 50 meters, before opening up with machine guns and AK-47s. And at that point, the infantry would hit the ground and call in for artillery support. And it would take us a few minutes to compute the firing information for the guns and get it to the guns. And under the rules of engagement, when U.S. forces were that close and under fire, the first round out was a white phosphorus marking round that exploded about 200 meters in the air. And if we were too close to U.S. forces, we could move the rounds before we started firing high explosive rounds. And usually when the white phosphorus round went off, the Viet Cong would disengage and run out through the back of the tree line and the fire mission was over at that point.

Interviewer

Did you have any real unique or dangerous experiences?

James Holbrook

We got mortared and occasionally rocketed fairly often. If not once a day, you know, like, once every other day. And it was a real chore for the Viet Cong to be able to mortar or rocket us because, for example, if they were going to mortar us they'd have to carry a base plate out and leave it someplace. And then the next day or the next night they would bring in the mortar tube and as many rounds as they could carry. And they'd set up the mortar and fire off as many rounds of mortars as they could carry. And then they'd take the tube and leave and then come back later to retrieve the base plate. So this was fairly common.

Interviewer

So you could expect shells coming at you any time during the day or night?

James Holbrook

Yes. Right.

Interviewer

And did you witness any casualties during that time when you were manning those positions?

James Holbrook

Yeah, several people. Fortunately, we didn't have anybody who was killed in the unit, but we had some people who were hit by shrapnel. On one mission where we were very close to the Cambodian border, we set up in an area

which U.S. artillery had used in the past, and the Viet Cong had heavily mined that area. And the U.S. engineers had gone out with minesweepers and tried to find and destroy as many mines as possible, but they didn't 'em all. And we lost a couple of people who stepped on mines and, you know, had feet blown off, for example.

Interviewer

And did you have forward observers out there to pinpoint the targets?

James Holbrook

There were two different kinds of forward observers. One was an artillery, sometimes lieutenant and sometimes artillery enlisted man who would be embedded with an infantry unit. And they would be on operations with an infantry unit. And if the infantry came under fire, then the artillery FO would radio in the fire mission to us. The other kind of forward observer was someone in an aircraft, usually a single-engine fixed wing, who was flying above an area of operation. Well, in the Delta, for example, if they observed sampans on canals, they would call those in as targets to shoot at.

Interviewer

The sampans would be carrying ammunition and arms?

James Holbrook

Right. And there were areas that were deemed as just hostile, and I think back then the expression for it was that this was engine territory, and the rules of engagement provided that any human activity in those hostile areas were deemed to be enemy and could be targeted.

Interviewer

What happened after that?

James Holbrook

For the first four months that I was in country, I served as a fire direction computer for this Battery B. And for the next four months, I was an intelligence clerk in the division artillery in Dong Tam. And I was responsible for reviewing intelligence estimates that would come in about enemy troop movements and so on, and we would determine what were called harassment and interdiction fires that would be fired at night on suspected enemy movement locations. And then President Nixon began to wind down the war in 1969, and the Mekong Delta was relatively quiet compared to Central Highlands or up by the DMZ. And so the first American unit that he pulled out of Vietnam was parts of the 9th Infantry Division. And I had an opportunity to leave country before my 12 months were up, and I decided that I had been fortunate enough that I was gonna accept that opportunity to leave.

Interviewer

So you weren't there the full year then?

James Holbrook

Right.

Interviewer

What happened during the second four months?

James Holbrook

Well, during the first four months, I think the experience that's kind of haunted me for many, many years is there was an Air Force plane up flying over our area of operations, and it observed three sampans moving toward a junction of five canals. And we had what was called registered the battery at that intersection earlier that morning, which means that we had fired on that intersection. And someone had observed our fire, so we knew exactly how to hit that intersection. And this Air Force forward observer called in this fire mission of these three sampans moving toward that intersection, and we fired what was called a time-on-target mission. He told us how many seconds it was going to take for the sampans to reach the intersection, and we knew how many seconds it was going to take for the rounds to leave our tubes to hit the intersection. And so we fired before they arrived at the intersection so the rounds would arrive at the same time they arrived. And we obliterated like seven people and three sampans, and that's always haunted me.

Interviewer

Do you know that that's the enemy on a sampan?

James Holbrook

Well, we were pretty sure. And they were all male. Their cargos were covered. They were in hostile territory that under the rules of engagement could be targeted immediately. And what's haunted me about this is that, you know, I always felt that they were enemy soldiers, but as I look back at the war, those people just wanted me to go home. They weren't gonna follow me across, you know, the Pacific and fight me in Salt Lake City. They were engaged in a war of liberation, and the Americans had intervened and taken one side. And they would be perfectly happy if we had left and left them alone to decide their fate, which is exactly what happened anyway later.

Interviewer

Tell us about the Bronze Star you received.

James Holbrook

I received a Bronze Star. The Award for Valor was an Army accommodation medal. This is another one of those interesting issues. Some people regarded the award of medals in Vietnam as too commonplace. For example, they're saying in Iraq and Afghanistan now there's not enough awards of Medals for Valor. And the incident for which I received that Army accommodation Medal for Valor was one of these sort of controversial things. We had three guns out in a firing position, and we were being mortared during the day and relatively speaking, with quite a few mortars, a dozen or fifteen. And we initially went to our bunkers to try to be protected from the shrapnel, and our battery commander said, "You need to go to the fire direction tent and compute counter-battery fire." And so we went to the tent, and the tent was, at that time, not sandbagged. And so we were exposed to the mortar fire as it was still coming in. And we computed counter-battery fire and were able to fire on the areas that we suspected the mortars were located. And all of us who exposed ourselves to mortar fire were put in for the commendation Medal of Valor.

Interviewer

How about the Bronze Star?

James Holbrook

That was for service rendered.

Interviewer

What were your thoughts on the war and serving as an enlisted man instead of an officer? Did you ever have any regrets about that?

James Holbrook

Not really. By the time I got there, I wanted to get my 12 months in and get out. And at that time, there was something called an early out program, so if you agreed to serve 14 months instead of 12 months, you could have your whole two-year enlistment shortened by five months. And I thought that was probably something I was gonna do. And then when I had an opportunity to come home after eight months, I chose to do that instead. I was a good soldier. I knew how to do my job. I did my job extremely well. So from a technical aspect, I think I took pride in what I was doing and that we were effectively supporting U.S. infantry and trying to save their lives. But it was in a war that really should never have been fought and had no strategic significance for the United States. And so all of the casualties that we incurred, I think were incurred in a war that should never have been fought. And I think one reason why the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. is such a popular place to visit is that, besides it being a dramatic monument to begin with, there are 58,000 names of American young men and women who were killed in Vietnam really for the wrong war.

Interviewer

Did you have those thoughts at the time you were there, or mainly after?

James Holbrook

While I was there, I was proud that I was a good soldier. I was proud that we were saving American lives. And I realized that this was a war that was unnecessary; it should never have been started to begin with. And I really didn't think through the moral consequences of that dilemma for a long time. I read some place that one of the most difficult things for a combat veteran to come to grips with is this whole notion of guilt because it's really a white hot kind of emotion. And it took me many years to be able to work through a lot of other emotions before I came to that. But to have some real guilt about killing other human beings who had no personal quarrel with me and in a war for which the United States had no strategic interest, that has been hard to live with. I carried the war around in my head—I think like many combat veterans do—for many years.

And then in about 1995 when President Clinton normalized relations with Vietnam, it sort of broke a floodgate in my mind and I started writing about it. And I had an opportunity to write something for my undergraduate magazine and I did. And in it I said that I needed to visit the wall, the memorial in Washington, D.C., which I had not visited because I was afraid to. And I said I needed to go back to Vietnam. And in 1996, a year after I wrote that, I went to see the memorial, and I saw it at about 10 o'clock at night in the darkness. And it was an awe-inspiring experience. And then in 1997, the year after that, I did go back to Vietnam. Had an opportunity to go back to the Mekong Delta and went to My Tho, which was very close to Dong Tam, the 9th Infantry Division base camp, and took a river cruise on the Mekong River and saw a number of the places where we had fired artillery shells to support U.S. troops. One of the things I realized when I went back in '97 is the war was over. Over half the Vietnamese population in 1997 had been born after the war, so they had no experience of the war. They also had won, what they call it, the American War, and so they had no ill feelings about that because they were the victors. And we were there on April 30th of 1997, which is like our July 4th. It was their Liberation Day because Saigon fell. The North Vietnamese took Saigon on April 30th, 1975. And so we were there on their celebration of Liberation Day. And the restaurant we were eating was right across from a square that had stands and lights and speakers. And so we were really curious about how they were gonna celebrate Liberation Day, and so we stayed. And they had a rock concert with about three different Vietnamese rock bands. And so it occurred to me that after all these years, we had won

their hearts and minds without having fired a shot. And it was really ironic that we had spent so much blood and treasure in years before, and now they're a trading partner, very friendly government, if not even an ally in the area. So it's one of these real ironies, I think.

Interviewer

What would you say to future generations about your experience in Vietnam?

James Holbrook

Well, this is embarrassing to talk about. Because when I got back in '97, I was interviewed by KRCL Radio here. And the last question in the interview was sort of similar to that. "What was the purpose of the Vietnam War? What was its legacy?" And so this was in '97, and I said I think the American people will have learned, as a result of the Vietnam War, never to fight another war that had no purpose, no strategic purpose. And four years later in 2001, well, we invaded Afghanistan. Two years after that in 2003, we invaded Iraq. And we're still in Iraq and we're still in Afghanistan, so we didn't learn the lesson of Vietnam. So I think my message to the American people would be that we really need to be much more thoughtful about the kinds of wars that we initiate because the cost of war in blood and treasure is just unimaginable at the time.

Interviewer

In your opinion, what is a good strategic purpose for a war?

James Holbrook

Well, okay. World War II I think had a clear strategic purpose. It was an existential war. We were fighting two enemies that were intent on destroying us and our way of life. And had we not fought Hitler in Europe and the Japanese in the Pacific, I think our lives today would be very, very different than they are. So I think existential wars have a real purpose to them. The Civil War I think was an existential war. The Revolutionary War was an existential war. But it's hard to believe, hard for me to characterize Korea or Vietnam or Afghanistan or Iraq or what we're now doing in Libya as an existential war. Senator William Fulbright in 1966 wrote a book called "The Arrogance of Power," which I just reread. And I reread it because I was reading a book by Andrew Bacevich called "Washington Rules," and the thrust of the book "Washington Rules" is that America has been at perpetual war since the end of World War II with Korea, Vietnam, the various Grenada and so on, and then Afghanistan and Iraq. And Fulbright, in his 1966 book explains that we fight these as a matter of ideology as opposed to a matter of strategic national interest. And in Vietnam, the ideological battle was with communism, and in Afghanistan and Iraq, the battle is with the war against terror. And so we can be captives of our own ideology and engage in these kinds of wars, even though they serve no national strategic interest.

Interviewer

How were you taught to dehumanize in training?

James Holbrook

There is a really fascinating and important book called "On Killing" by Dave Grossman. And he builds on data that were assembled by S.L.A. Marshall from World War II. And some of this data goes all the way back to the Civil War where it shows that a lot of folks in the infantry either would not fire their rifles, or would fire them indiscriminately. And the hypothesis was that there is this basic human aversion to killing, and that the military obviously has to find ways to overcome that aversion to killing. And so there are a lot of different ways to do it. Part of it is just the discipline that is created in the military, and it starts with having your civilian clothes taken from you and your head shaved when you arrive at basic training, and you get a uniform and boots and so on. And then you start taking orders and you do what you're ordered to do. And then there are lots of subtle enculturations about the enemy. And there was a booklet I remember that I read in Vietnam called "Know Your Enemy." And I was quite surprised when I saw the cover of it because they were depicting Viet Cong as an extremely muscled, well-fed, well-equipped soldier. And it finally occurred to me that the reason why they were depicting that soldier in this very muscular kind of body was to make him a fearsome enemy and someone who was more to be feared than to be pitied or sympathized with.

Interviewer

Do you remember the song from graduation?

James Holbrook

It's been so long ago I can't remember the lyrics, but the gist of some of the songs that we sang in basic training were about being prepared to kill in Vietnam, which we were prepared to kill in Vietnam.

Interviewer

Talk about the morale of the troops over there.

James Holbrook

That's another interesting thing. There's an important book called "Achilles in Vietnam" written by a psychiatrist. And he emphasized that the Vietnam War was fought by individual replacements, most of whom were draftees, most of whom were 18 or 19 years old, all of whom were gonna serve 12 months and come home. All of whom went over as strangers on an airplane, and when their 12-month tour was up, they were gonna fly home with strangers on an

airplane. And you could contrast that with the Afghan and Iraq wars where units trained together in the states, are shipped over together, serve together, redeploy together, come back home and have some sort of decompression time. In Vietnam, when you serve as an individual replacement, your first thought is to serve your 12 months and come home. And everybody had what was called a short-timer's calendar that had 365 days on it, and you'd mark off every day and keep track of when you were going to come home. And when people were under a month, under 30 days, they were called short-timers. And there were jokes about when people were under seven days that they were so short that they could sit on a dime and swing their legs. And so making it home alive as an individual was a high priority. Then the second priority was to take care of your buddies. And some of your buddies were going to leave before you left because their 12 months were up before yours were, and some of your buddies you'd leave behind because their 12 months weren't up until after you were gone. And so this whole notion of camaraderie is attenuated by this service as individual replacements where you joined a unit as a stranger and you made friends, but then you left and you left those people behind.

Interviewer

Talk about the need for people to talk about the war.

James Holbrook

When I came home, I talked about the war with some people, but only talked about it factually; about what was happening there, what I did there, what I thought the U.S. was doing there, but only militarily. I did not talk to anyone about how I felt because at the beginning I wasn't sure how I felt. I was angry, and I wasn't sure to whom to be angry at. And I'm sure I went through the various cycles of grief with depression and bargaining and so on. From 1969 until 1995, this was a pretty private experience. I read every Vietnam book I could get, and I watched every Vietnam movie. And I was obsessed about the war, and I carried the war around in my mind. And it was only in 1995 when I began to write about it that I began to have some control over this experience again. And then to confront what I thought was a terror-filled experience of visiting the wall, and I did that in '96 and realized that it a poignant as opposed to a terrifying experience.

And then going back to Vietnam in '97 really helped to bring closure. And since then I've been able to write and have had things published about what I've written. I've talked to groups, including anti-war groups, about my combat experience, including how I dealt with my guilt. And I still have PTSD. When we got back from Vietnam, the whole notion of PTSD wasn't even invented by the American Psychological Society, that came many years after Vietnam. And because of this experience, I'm now working closely with veteran students on campus at the University of Utah, and we have 17 veterans and active-duty students who are at the law school, for example. And I have a special sort of bond and affection for them. And it's really interesting because even though my combat experience was more than 40 years ago, I can talk to these young veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan because we have many common bonds serving in combat. And it's easier to talk to an old Vietnam veteran than it is to talk to, you know, one's 22-year-old spouse about what happened in Iraq, for example.

Interviewer

Were you stressed in Vietnam?

James Holbrook

I've thought about this notion of whether was I afraid at the time and I still don't have, I think, a satisfactory understanding of that. Clearly, physiologically I was afraid because when we were under fire, I would hit the ground or crawl to a bunker or someplace like that 'cause I knew I did not want to be hurt or killed. But I don't remember feeling afraid, so I think I had the behavior, the physiological behavior of fear, but not the perception of it at the time. I had an opportunity to go to Baghdad in 2009 for three months and served in the green zone managing a project for the law school. And while I was there, the green zone came under rocket fire, sporadic and occasional. And a number of the people that I was working with were afraid of being hit by rocket fire. And this was something I just wasn't worried about. And I tried to explain that to be killed by rocket fire is so unpredictable that it either happens or it doesn't happen. And I felt like my name was not written on any of those rockets that were being fired into the green zone, and there wasn't anything for me to worry about. In Vietnam, there was another piece of this notion of stress, and that was exhaustion. We, in the FDC, were on eight-hour shifts, eight on, eight off, eight on, eight off, which is a terrible way to live because you can never establish any sleep cycle. And because it was so difficult to get rest, we were just exhausted all the time. And I think when you're exhausted it's very difficult to be afraid just because you're exhausted.

Interviewer

Can you explain the chaos of artillery?

James Holbrook

I'll recount a story about that. But remind me to come back to hyper-vigilance and how it produces PTSD. The 155 Howitzers produce a huge loud muzzle blast when they're firing, and our hooches--that was the name for first the tents and then later the bunkers in which we slept--were very close to the guns. And we were issued when we came in country, earplugs, ear protectors, but nobody wore them. And so when you're within 50 feet of six 155 Howitzer and they're all being fired simultaneously over your head, it's a thunderous feeling. And I lost a lot of high-

range hearing because of that, and wound up having fairly significant tinnitus, the ringing in the ears because of that. But interestingly, when I was asleep and our guns were firing out, which were outgoing, I could sleep through an outgoing fire mission. But if there were a mortar round that came in, I would immediately wake up. So I could distinguish incoming from outgoing fire at some sort of, if not unconscious level, at least deep semi-conscious level. This notion of hyper-vigilance I think is really important to understanding PTSD. I don't think one has to see mutilated bodies in order to have PTSD. Part of it is caused, I think, in some people through hyper-vigilance. And it's being on alert psychologically hour after hour after hour, day after day after day. In Vietnam, there were times when we could, the expression was "stand down."

There were times when we just knew that we were not going to be mortared or rocketed, or if we were going to be close enough to bunkers that we could easily be protected. In Iraq and Afghanistan today by contrast, any time someone is outside the wire, outside their base and in a convoy, they are at risk of being killed by these roadside bombs, these IEDs and EFPs. And so their hyper-vigilance is unrelenting. And most of the casualties that American forces incur in Afghanistan and Iraq are caused by these roadside bombs. And there is a kind of injury called traumatic brain injury, TBI, that is caused by the concussive blast. So you don't even have to be in a vehicle that's hit by a roadside bomb. If you're in a convoy and one of these roadside bombs goes off, the concussive blast can cause a traumatic brain injury. And so I see these young combat vets coming back now, not only with PTSD, but also with TBI. And one of the things that they have to deal with as they reengage as students is how to handle their PTSD and their TBI and their depression and the other kinds of psychological injuries that they deal with.

Interviewer

Is there a conflict within the Vietnam vet community as to the value of their service from the government point of view?

James Holbrook

I can speak about my own feelings about serving in what some people called an unjust war, certainly an unnecessary war. On the one hand, there are these issues of guilt that I have struggled with. And on the other hand, I'm very proud of my service and I'm proud that I served my country, even in a conflict which was unnecessary. And a consequence of this is if I were to advise a young mother who had a son or daughter that was 18 years old and thinking about enlisting to go into the military and be deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq, I would emphasize how life changing combat is and how unpredictable it is and how many visible and invisible injuries someone can suffer from combat. So on the one hand, there is this opportunity to serve and to see how one performs under fire. And on the other hand, I think almost no one appreciates how, one writer I read, says, "It darkens your soul for the rest of your life." So the cost of service is not just the few years that you are in the military. The cost of service are all these other life-changing effects that one carries the rest of one's life.

Interviewer

If you had stayed in OCS, would you have avoided going to Vietnam or would they have sent you over as soon as you graduated?

James Holbrook

When I enlisted to OCS, they said, "You can choose three schools. One of them must be a combat arms school." And what they didn't say was the only one of the three choices you were going to get was the combat arms choice. Fortunately, when I was in graduate school, one of my fellow students had served as an artillery officer in the Marines. And when I told him I was going to join the Army and that I had to choose a combat arms, he said, "Choose the artillery. You don't wanna be in the infantry or the armor or combat engineers." So on the advice of my friend I chose the artillery. And it wouldn't have made any difference whether I had stayed in OCS, I would've gone to Vietnam as a second lieutenant, and I would've had to serve another year in the Army. And at that time I was interested in serving as few months as possible.

Interviewer

Thank you for coming and sharing your insight.

James Holbrook

If there is a Vietnam vet out there who is watching this program and they haven't yet started to talk about their experiences, I would really urge them to begin to talk about them, to try to write about them. The VA has programs for Vietnam vets. They have some really good group programs, and one of my young friends is a therapist and runs a Vietnam vets group. This is an opportunity, even now as an older person, to get your life back and put it into perspective and get control of your story again. And there are a lot of important life lessons from our experience as Vietnam vets that I think the country needs to pay attention to, and young people today, young mothers today need to pay attention to as well. So I think this series is an immensely valuable public service.