

A Soldier's Experience in Vietnam: Herbert Rhodes ^[1]

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What kind of contact did you have with the Vietnamese people?

Well, when you're out on patrol, you always run into villagers and so forth. One thing about Vietnam I always say today, when you're out there in the field, you don't know friendly from foe. They always say like NVA, which is the Northern Vietnamese Army, they wear uniforms. But who's to say that they ain't gonna get out of uniform and out on pajamas, and pretend that they are a farmer or something like that. Vietcongs, they just wear everyday clothes and so forth. You got those 2 different types of people, the NVA and Vietcongs, and when you're out there in the field, you don't know them from anybody else. You gotta take everything with caution and so forth. When you go into a field, you don't go in shooting or nothing like this here. You go in there and hopefully someone can speak English, or someone in the squad can speak Vietnamese and so forth. We used to have what we called, I forgot what we called it, a guy that was former Vietcong or NVA, and normally we'd have one of them for every unit that could speak their language and so forth, and could speak our language fairly well. They would go in there and ask questions or, "have you seen any NVA or Vietcongs in the area?" and so forth; and "do you have weapons?" and stuff like this here. But me personally, I didn't have much contact with my Saudi individuals or the Vietnamese and so forth, and didn't actually have much contact with them. I had never had that much contact. On patrol you see one or two persons. Certain words you learn, like - "come here," or --, or "go away" or something like that. Other than that, that's all we really know.

How did you understand the purpose of the Vietnam War?

To be honest, I really never understood it. It was explained to me that South Vietnam, the country wanted to be independent, and North Vietnam was a country that wanted to dominate the South Vietnamese and so forth, and they wanted to be independent, they didn't want to be dependent on the North Vietnamese. That's the way I really understood it at that time.

How did your understanding of the war change as a result of your service?

Well...it made me more aware of life, how a person's life is. I did see a lot of people die over there in Vietnam; service people and civilians, and the Vietnamese and Vietcongs as well. So it made me more aware of what life is all about. But, then again, at that same time, when I left Vietnam, I had some attitude about life and so forth, that you never know when death is gonna come around and so forth. And I had an attitude that, if I survived Vietnam, then I could survive anything. That death did not mean anything to me. If it came, it came. Only thing I thought about was, when it came let it come, don't let me suffer.

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