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ORAL HISTORY

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(Signature - Interviewee)

637 14th St.
(Address)

DATE

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Jedulkenwif
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Bowles, Randy WUVVU-4

AN ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: Randy Bowles

CONDUCTED BY: John C. Hennen, Jr.

SUBJECT: History of the WV Vietnam Veterans

DATE OF INTERVIEW: September 9, 1984

TRANSCRIPTIONIST: Gina Kehali Kates

John: This is Wednesday, September 12th. I'm at the Vietnam Veterans of America on 7th Avenue...what's the address here? Fourteenth Street and Seventh Avenue. (637 = 7th Avenue) and I'm here with Randy Bowles. B-o-w-l-e-s. Okay. And Randy's going to tell us a little bit about his background, and his time in the service and what he's been up to, what he's been doing since he got back, a little bit about, probably a little bit about the Vietnam Veteran's of America that's here in Huntington. Okay, Randy, when were you born and where?

Randy: Eighth month, August, 5th day of '50 (1950) un-huh.

John: Are you from Charleston? (Mmm-hmm) Brothers and sisters?

Randy: Yes, I've got one brother and two sisters. Rick, Mallory and Lori.

John: When...how long have you been in Huntington?

Randy: Well, I've worked in Huntington off and on for the last fourteen years. I really like Huntington. This last time's probably been about...about a year. I've lived in the Barboursville Veteran's Home for about five months. Then I went to Chillicothe, VA Hospital in Ohio. And when I come back, I got this little place here at Ben Keeper, over the Vietnam Veteran's Home. And I collect rent from the people upstairs and I pay \$25 a month to live here.

John: And you've been here how long did you say?

Randy: About five months...at the Vietnam Veteran's Home.

John: Where did you go to school, Randy?

Randy: I went to Charleston High. (Graduated?) Graduated and six months later I was drafted in the Army.

John: And that would have been about when? 1968? ('69) Sixty-nine? (Mmm-hmm) Drafted right after school.

Randy: Yeah, in 1970.

John: What were you doing at the time you were drafted?

Randy: I was working at the Superior Laundry. I was a uh...I had worked ever since I was 14. My last year in high school I got a job working with a mechanic at Superior Laundry and I'd work from 12 o'clock in the afternoon until 9 at night. That's where I was working when I got drafted.

John: Sixty-you did say '69?

Randy: Mmm-hmm. Well, it was '70 when I got drafted.

John: Okay. What...give us a little info about that, where you did you basic training....

Randy: Okay. I took my basic training in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. Two months basic training, two months AIT and then I was sent to Vietnam.

John: AIT...now what is that?

Randy: Well, that is just an extra course, making sure you knew what your two months basic training was. Really what you did, you do the same thing over in AIT. You lived in better barracks, you lived in barracks. Basic training you lived in barracks that had been there for years and it was like...going through the hard part first and then going through the easy part second. But when I took this, I took it very seriously because I had bad luck a lot of times and I knew I was going to Vietnam. So I took it very seriously. Then when I did go to Vietnam guys just didn't like to cut point at all. They thought it was the worst job that anybody could ever had, because they felt like they'd get blown away first.

John: If you can, explain a little bit what that is. I've got an idea.

Randy: Okay, cut and point...you have a machete about I don't know, how long would you say...about two foot long (18 inches 2 feet, looks like--okay you were starting to explain something about cut and point). Okay, you take this machete about 18, 19 inches long and you make a path for everybody in your company, if you're with a company or a platoon. And uh, we worked in the highlands, up in the mountains. We didn't hardly ever go down in the Delta. And I cut for three months and a half, every other day. And the days I didn't, there was a guy, he was a Mexican from California, his name was Max Medina. He would cut the days that I didn't. And when I cut point, he was my backup, he watched out for me. And the day that he cut point, I was his backup, I watched out for him. And it was a very dangerous job. But the way we always done it, we would go into the heaviest terrain, because of the fact you make your own trail, you're not going to run into a land mine, a bouncing betty, a pungy stick or an ambush. You walk a trail, you've got all those options against. You're going to run into all of this. And guys would get mad at us and we would say, "Well, you cut point and we'll go in the mine and you can walk the trail and have this all done to you." And they would, no matter how big they was, they understood that we knew what we were saying, and we done it for three months and a half. And never run into any contact, as far as an ambush or a fight or anything like that.

John: So the guy on point is the most vulnerable to an ambush? That's who they're looking out, that's who they're looking for. Now is that volunteer?

Randy: Un-huh. The way it was supposed to be, you had to change point every week and guys didn't want to do it. And well, finally, we just got so wore out we couldn't do it. And uh...you know, we had to have a break. (Such a strain) Yes, it was. We'd done it too long. Three months and a half's a long time cutting point.

John: Now the combat tour was for 365 days, right? Okay. What...when you first got over there, what...if you can recall, what was your first impressions when you got over there? I mean, say from coming home and it was just a few days from the time you left home until you got over there, wasn't it?

Randy: Yeah. My first impression, I went in Cam Ranh Bay, that's where I flew in, took a whole day, day and night to get over there, across the ocean. And it was really a bad place to be, as far as...it smelled really bad. They had these tiles stuck down in the ground in 45 degree angles sort of like, and that's what they used as latrines. And I don't know.... Then, let's see, I was in Cam Ranh Bay about 4 or 5 days and I turned 20 years old. And then they shipped my company to Chu Lai and we went on one of these great big planes that they carried jeeps in, cargo and stuff. It wasn't that bad, Chu Lai wasn't as bad as Cam Ranh Bay. But still, you lived primitively. You had to take a bath when you was out in the field, they would set up guards all around the little creek, little river or whatever, and you'd take a bath. You could only do this I don't know...maybe once a week, something like that. As soon as monsoon season hit, it rained for three months, day and night. You would get so wet that you'd...you'd...swell up like prunes or something like that. One time we didn't get resupplied. I would always carry two cases of sea rations. I was probably about 110 pounds and I would have to get down on my back and put my arms in the straps of my rucksack and wiggle myself up on my feet. We would carry six cans of, six canteens of water on a rucksack. And we didn't get resupplied for seven days one time and me and Max Medina, he knew I carried extra food, my best buddy. And we didn't go hungry, but we didn't eat anything. But we finally did get resupplied. Carrying those extra sea rations helped me and my buddy out, as far as cut and point. We had to walk the Ho Chi Minh Trail, it's a great big, long trail through Vietnam. And uh...that was one time we cut point and we was so hungry, the guys were so hungry that we took chances, he and I both took chances. But we was very conscious.... The Ho Chi Minh Trail was open, it didn't have things like that because that was a trail that the Vietnamese used all the time. And we sort of found that out as time went by. Because we was on it a long time, going and getting resupplied.

But as far as any other trails, we wouldn't do it. We'd cut our own trail.

John: What was...just a general overview of the morale of the troops at the time you were in Vietnam? How would you describe?

Randy: All right. Morale was very bad because see, not the Italian that starts with Alpha Company that went to Fox Trot, and the time that I was over there, companies

was getting killed like crazy. Echo Company, some of these guys was getting killed, Alpha Company, Fox Trot.... I went in to Chu Lai because I had...I had went so long without taking a shower, I guess you might say, that I got ringworms and jungle rot on my ankles and stuff. And I had to go in to Chu Lai to go to the hospital. Alpha Company had run in to land mines. And I went in to the hospital where they was at. And these guys got their face all well, their eyes put out for life, their face blew up, Sergeant had his leg blew off. They had walked in to a place where there was land mines. These guys was messed up so bad. And the morale with my company, by this all happening, guys was ready to desert. But they wouldn't do it because of the fact that they knew it was desertion. But these feelings went through every guy's mind. They went through mine. In fact, I'd almost....well, I'd told my sergeant that I wasn't going out in the field. And he talked to me, those guys are getting killed every day, in all these companies. And he told me, he said, "Randy, who do you think you are? You think you're better than any of us?" I said, "No," I said, "They've got the right to refuse to go to the field like I do." And after he'd talked to me for a while, I seen that.... See, there was one or two guys that refused and when we went in on standout, three months after I was there, we'd got into a fire fight, a bullet bounced off this black guy's helmet, and him and the guy that was named Butch Evans, who was from West Virginia, me and him's the only ones that came home alive out of 25, they refused to go to the field. And they was supposed to send them to [inaudible]...jail, that was named after Lyndon B. Johnson. They never did go, but they lived in a tent and slept on a cot. They didn't have the luxury of living in a barracks when they was in Chu Lai. And they done this for I don't know, seven months. And they never did go to jail, but they got on drugs and ruined their lives.

And when I went in to Chu Lai on a standing one day, I went to see this guy. And he was practically dead. He was on smack, cocaine, stuff. And I told him, the guy couldn't even get up to walk to the mess hall. And I told him, I said, "Butch Evans, you're afraid to go out in the field because you're afraid you're going to get killed and you're laying right there killing yourself, you're doing it to yourself." And I said, "If you don't straighten up, when I come back next time, you won't be here." I'd never seen this guy. He lived in Dunbar. And I'd never, ever seen him until I went to Vietnam. And I've met him since he came back. And those drugs really got hold of him because, well, when he come back he wasn't doing it. He met him a good girl and got married and had a baby. And then he got on these drugs again and robbed a pharmacy and went to the pen for a few years. Of course, his wife divorced him and everything.

But I just seen him a few years ago, a couple of years ago, and he's remarried now to a woman who had three kids by another guy. And he's happy, he's driving a tractor-trailer. He's doing good. I just hope he's going to be all right.

John: Does he still live around Dunbar? (Un-huh) How about...while you guys were over there, did you get any, did you get much idea in the field of how, how people were looking at the war back home? Did you get much of that filtering through? Did you feel like you had any communication with the people back home?

Randy: No, we wasn't really worried about that at that time. He was thinking we was fighting for our country and well, before I went, I felt the war should have never been. But I never felt like I was better than any other man that went before me. Or my father. My father fought in World War II. I just felt like I was doing what he had done, fought for our country. The feelings toward people back home, I never seen anything like that until I came home. And I knew that they'd been guys that run to Canada, you know...you would might say that they deserted our country because they didn't go fight. And when Nixon pardoned them to come back home, that's something that should have never been. They deserted this country, they should have stayed in Canada for the rest of their days, I think. They wasn't any better than we was. Nixon was really funny in some ways. I'm glad it ended the war, because it should never have been. But I cannot understand why he pardoned those guys. I don't know how many hundreds of guys went to Canada. But maybe he pardoned him because of the fact that he knew the war shouldn't have been in the first place.

John: So when did you come home? When did you get back?

Randy: It was the latter part of March. ('71?) Seventy-one. And my nerves were so bad because of the fact that while I was over there, we had a day logger and they'd put me on guard. And after I'd been on guard 10 minutes, two of the enemy walked in and I'd seen them coming. We had a [inaudible]...out. And they wasn't wearing a helmet. They was wearing green clothes like us. I seen the wooden stock of their AK-47's. And I put my M-16 on automatic because I didn't know what was going to happen. I was standing beside this big tree. They walked right into our day logger. They didn't even know we was there, we was so quiet. Five of my buddies, they was fixing sea rations. They didn't even have a weapon in their hand. And they threw up their guns and was gonna blow 'em away, and I said, "Halt!" And they turned towards me and starting firing and I killed one right there on the spot. And the other one run 75 meters and as he was running he was firing at me and I was firing back. I got him 7 times. Well, anyway, we took him hostage, of course. Had, went and got my 2nd Lieutenant, he said, "Bowles, you didn't kill him. Take your poncho, cut two poles and make a stretcher and have somebody help you carry him up to our day logger." Well, we got him out, medivacked out within an hour. But he had papers on him telling us where 3,000 MVA was. And usually if you, what they would call, if you got a kill, you got 3 days in July to recuperate from killing someone. They'd give you a 5th of liquor also, to help try to get it out of your mind, put it out of your mind for a few days. I give mine to my E-6 sergeant.

But...my nerves were so bad when I came back from Vietnam, after my company got massacred. Thirty-three got killed, seventy-six got wounded on our fire base. They'd took all of our big guns off the hill and left us there for 3 weeks. And I knew...we had secured that oasis for a year. When I went there, they was bulldozing it off. And uh, we was moving to another fire base, I guess, because we had pretty well taken care of that area, our battalion, taken care of that area. But I knew when they took our big

guns off you could see a [inaudible]...taking our guns off in these great big nets and you could see all over. You could see everywhere. My nerves were so bad that I was on medical hold in Fort Lee, Virginia, for three months and a half. (This is right after you got back?) Un-huh, right as soon as I got back. A major and a chaplain asked me if I wanted out of the service on a medical discharge. And I didn't know what a medical discharge was. I thought it was something bad. I said, "No," I said, "If I can't have an honorable discharge, you all can have all of it." And this major said, if he had a hundred GI's standing side by side, around this room, and he asked them all if they wanted a medical discharge to get out of the service and he said, "Ninety-nine of them would say yes and you're that one out of a hundred that said 'no'." He said, "I'm not a lifer. I've got one more year to go. I've pulled 20 years." And he said, "To me, you're an outstanding soldier for not wanting a medical discharge." Well, I'd just turned 21. And I really meant what I said. I said, "I'm not trying to get out of the service. I've got 8 more months to go, 7 more months to go and uh.... I'm not better than any other man. I want to do the rest of my time. I said it might just be 2 years. But you know, I want to finish my time in the service.

Well, after...my nerves had got a little bit better. They sent me to Fort in Colorado to do the rest of my time. Well, I'd more or less got shell-shocked in Vietnam because of my company getting massacred. And I didn't want to handle another weapon so they put me in an infantry unit. They put me in Alpha Company. But I'd told 'em all this. And they made me Repair and Utility Man. I had my own little building that had tools and wood and glass and door knobs and things like this. And I would repair all the barracks in our company. Well, I'd done this for about 3 months, 4 months and Nixon ended the war. Everybody that was in Vietnam or anywhere overseas got a 4 month early out. I come back home, I'd been working at Galpin's Music Company, truck driving, delivering, we'd deliver grand pianos and stuff like this. They gave me my job back. They gave me a better job. They gave me a sales job. (This was in Charleston?) Un-huh, this was in Charleston, West Virginia. And I worked there for a total, all together, with Galpin's, for 3 years. I'd only been at Galpin's 3 months when I got drafted. And a K-Mart in Kanawha City was new, opening up, and I'd went there 15 times to get a job as a salesman in and I got it. I worked there for 2 years and a half. I liked the job, but I wasn't getting anywhere, as far as raises. I got two ten cent raises in 2 years and a half. All these other people who were in the _____ department were getting these raises, I was doing all the work. So, you know, I left and got me another job.

John: Go ahead. What part of the job [inaudible]....?

Randy: Well, my nerves has been so bad, I've had about 33 jobs since 1971. I've worked with Manpower off and on, (this is still in Charleston?) Yes, this is in Charleston. Uh...I wrote this down. I wrote down all the jobs that I've had. Minuteman Car Wash, what I did, I run the sweeper in the car and wash the car and wash the inside of the windows; Superior Laundry, this was before I went in the service. I wrote

down all the jobs that I've had. Galpin's Music Company....[pause]...then I went in the Army, was in Infantry. Then I worked at K-Mart. Then I worked at Yamahaw Cycles store in Marmet and I got married and my marriage didn't last but a year. Then I left there, went to Richmond, Virginia. And I worked through Manpower, got a job, well, I was doing different jobs at the time, between here and there.

John: You mentioned the other day, well, you got a temporary job at the post office somewhere. Was that in Richmond?

Randy: No, that was in Charleston. I worked for the post office in Charleston for 8 or 9 days. I worked real hard because I thought if maybe I worked real hard they'd keep me on full time. I made \$9.88 an hour as a mail handler. What I'd do I'd separate the mail, separate the bags on a conveyor belt, I'd separate bulk mail, this is magazines, like this.

John: About what time was that?

Randy: 1977. ('77) Mmm-hmm. Well, this is the last part. This is after that. I worked with my brother-in-law in St. Albans. The name of this company, he owns, him and his father owns their own business called National Hydraulics, Inc. And I was his mechanic. And what I would do was I'd take apart hydraulic jacks, strip all the paint off of 'em in a stripping machine and put in a kit, most of the time it was like a ball bearing or spring, that had to be replaced. We would repair hydraulic jacks and jack hammers and air tools. And the VA, I was going to go to the on-the-job training program with them, with the VA and they'd pay me \$240 a month to learn this trade. And the VA bought me a thousand dollars worth of tools

END OF SIDE 1

Randy: They paid me \$240 a month to learn a trade for about a year. And things was really bad with his business because of this, they don't call it a depression any more. They call it a recession, I think. (Right) I'd got laid off 6 different times. But...he'd always hire me back. And the VA, they couldn't put up with that because they couldn't pay me \$240 a month if I wasn't working. And so I ended up quitting because I wanted to work. And since then...this was 1982, since then, I haven't been able to find a job. I've looked everywhere. I've got applications in every place in Charleston. And it's just that no ones hiring. So what I've been doing, I sort of like started a little business of my own in leather work, and it's okay. I make it, but well, I've got a job application in at the Huntington Hospital. And maybe because of this I might get the job. I don't know. Anyway, things have to get better, because they can't get worse.

John: Tell me about your training, your leather work training.

Randy: I learned this leather work over in Chillecothe for, I've been in 5 different times. When I'd go into this VA Hospital, because my nerves are bad, I would take this class because it would really help you...it helps your nerves a lot. In fact, it's helped me so much that this _____ that I take, I don't even have to take it any more.

John: Had you been taking that ever since you got back?

Randy: I've took it for 14 years. I took it up to 250 mg. Well, the way things are right now, since I've had this accident, my nerves have been getting real bad and the psoriasis has been coming back in my scalp and on my elbows and I had to go yesterday to the VA and get some.... But when I'm doing this leather work, I don't need it. I don't need it at all.

John: Do you know a lot of background about the house here? Explain a little bit of that to me.

Randy: Okay. What I do, this is the Vietnam of America Veteran's Home. They have a meeting here every Monday night and I set up for the meetings and keep it clean. When the two apartments above, when they move out, I clean out apartments and put up FOR RENT signs on both sides of the house. It seems as though we've come a good ways in the last 5 months. We stenciled up VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA out here on the front in letters a good 12 inches long. So people will know this is our home. I cleaned up a few rooms that was in really bad shape when I came here. And they are livable now. We have a room back here that if guys that are veterans come from out of town, they don't have to necessarily be Vietnam veterans, World War I, World War II, Korean veterans, Vietnam veterans, if they need a place to stay, they can stay in this room for free, overnight. We had a situation like this happen. And I think the guys really appreciate that [inaudible].... It's the only Vietnam Veterans Home in the United States. There are other meetings in the state, and they have one possibly every week, or every two weeks, whatever. But this is the only home that the Vietnam Veterans of American have. And a lot of guys around here are proud to know that. But we just don't have enough participation between the guys that are members. If we did, it would probably be a better place to walk into. I'd have, have paint to paint the outside. I want to do this during my...make it look presentable and everything. It needed to be painted bad.

But I collect rent from the people upstairs and I give it to Roger Sanford and he gives it to the landlord. We have an option to buy this place. But...I don't know how far in the future this will be. I think that we've put enough money and work and time, everything, into this home that we shouldn't never, ever let it go, let it dissolve. Because if we did, we'd just be losing everything that we'd started out working for.

John: What kind of relationship do you have with other veterans' organizations? Do they get along well with you? Do they help you out?

Randy: We was in a bind a few months ago, and we hadn't had things set up like having rummage sales...like we had here a few weeks ago and made \$125 in a day. And we went and asked the DAV, Disabled American Veterans, they have a club down the street here, one night at one of the meetings, if they would donate us some money where we could keep our little home here. And they had just paid...they just paid \$72 [coughing] (you were talking about the DAV) okay. They'd bought this motel down there beside their place, \$72,000. And at first they wasn't gonna loan us the money because they'd put this kind of money in that motel. And one of the guys got up and said, "If you people can remember back when we first started out our organization, we needed help from other organizations. And if we hadn't have got it, we wouldn't be where we are today." And he suggested that they put the motion back on the floor and talk about it a little bit. They did and they loaned us \$300. Well, they didn't loan it to us, they donated it. And they told us that if they seen some results that they would loan us a thousand dollars in the future. Well, that night, because they had done that, me and Roger Sanford and Mike _____ joined the DAV. We all, we had been members of the DAV but there were other chapters. We just transferred. I go down there to their meetings. What they're planning on doing with that building is that if people come in from out of town to visit their people in the VA Hospital up here on Spring Valley, they will have a place to stay for free overnight. Or however long they stay in town. That's very nice. (That's the old Biltmore Hotel) Old Biltmore. I found this out last night what they're going to be doing.

The VFW, I remember the VFW in Guyandotte. But I remember the VFW, the DAV, you can go to any of them, as long as you have your card.

John: All right, active...do you go to the VFW meetings?

Randy: Mmm-hmm, yes. Now, they had a picnic down in Guyandotte three weeks ago, and it was a big turn out. There was a lot of people there.

John: Is there many Vietnam veterans attend the VFW?

Randy: Un-huh, a lot. Where I got my membership card was when I was in the Barboursville Veteran's Home. It's a place where, it used to be where it was just World War I, World War II veterans. But now Korean veterans and Vietnam veterans are allowed to live there. And what they do they take 40% of what you get out of your check, which all I paid when I was there, I get \$179 a month, that's 30%, I would only pay \$69 a month to live there. Well, if you don't get a pension, you live there for free. And they was, at that time, 12 Vietnam veterans when I was there. And I think it's a very nice place to live. They have three big old dining rooms, they have all kinds of activity things you can participate in. They also have leather work, leather craft class, exercise class. I led an exercise class up there for like 4 or 5 months; I worked in recreation. I showed films to guys 2 or 3 days a week. You need an exercise class, I set up everything for leather craft class, all kinds of different recreation things. They'd

have movies at night, 2 or 3 nights a week. But I don't know, I just felt like I shouldn't be there because, well, I want to work and have a job. I've been working, trying to get on with the Army Corps of Engineers the last 8 months, and I think probably next month I'll get on. That's what this guy named David Chapman has been telling me. They build dams and reservoirs and roads.

John: That'd be a good job.

END OF INTERVIEW