Joseph C. Mowry

US Army
1968-1971

Joe Mowry, Vietnam Veteran

Out to Lunch

It was May 1968, Joe Mowry had just finished high school in Maplewood Missouri and had plans to attend college with a golf scholarship. "I was 18, going to college and had a golf scholarship. I was supposed to go to the college and meet the coach on that Monday. I found out even though I had a scholarship, I still had to come up with eight-hundred dollars a semester. In 1968, that was a lot of money. I knew my parents didn't have the money. So that was not going to work. We're coming home from playing golf one day with my nephew. In Maplewood, they had all the recruiting offices there right in a row. I originally wanted to join the Air Force. So I went to the Air Force office, but they were out to lunch. So I went next door to the Army. So the Army gives you the whole story. They say, here take this test. After the test is graded, they say, this is unbelievable. These are some of the highest marks we've seen. You can have your choice of MOS (Military Occupational Specialty, if you join for three years."

Eight Pounds, 4-F, Really?

So I joined the Army. This was before there was a lottery. All I had to do was pass the physical. I went in July 68. I always laugh about this. You go through the examination. You walk in this door, and the first thing they do is take your height and your weight. And then for the next hour and a half you go through all the examinations in your underwear and then you come back out to this table which is right across from the first table where you got weighed and everything. They looked at my file and say, you're 4F. You're overweight. I was eight pounds overweight. I said (pointing), why couldn't they tell me that there? So I went back to the recruiters office and asked him if there was anything we could do about it. He said, well you can sign a medical waiver. The only problem is, if you sign a medical waiver,

you don't get your choice of jobs. I say, okay. So I sign the medical waiver, went in to the service and they brought me into a room. They say, we see you signed a medical waiver. If at any time during basic, you don't think you can make it, contact me and we'll get you released. I was in.

Basic Training

Well, the first day I thought I was going to die. After that, I laughed and went through the whole thing, Then I went to Fort Huachua, Arizona. I went through radio school and went to Fort Gordon Georgia for teletype school. We were finishing the session there and they said, PFC Mowry, you've been selected by the Colonel to go to a 13 week course, we called "Instant NCO" but we called it "shake and bake." It's a thirteen week course. As soon as you went in, you were given a promotion to SPEC 4 (Corporal) and in thirteen weeks, you'd become a Buck Sergeant. I thought, this sounds okay. Then he says, and the great news is, this class when they graduate will go to Korea or Alaska. I said, well I don't want to go. He said, why? I want to go to Vietnam. I joined to see action. My brothers have been there. In fact I had a brother there at the time. He said, well the Colonel is not going to be real happy with you. I said, I guess he'll have to live with it. So the next day, I had my orders for Vietnam. I went through training and got sent over there.

"Reluctant" Screaming Eagle

When we arrived in Vietnam, we went to Cam Ranh Bay. We were given a packet. We were told if you have this color dot on your packet, you go this area. So were sitting there, and this guy says, who are you assigned to? I said I didn't know. He said, It's on you orders inside your packet. I opened it up and it said, assigned to 101st. I said, that can't be right. I'm not Airborne! He said, oh no, this is Airborne, air mobile. You can go anywhere. It was a little bit of a wake up. I said to myself, this is going to be rugged because they have quite a history. The 101st had their own two-week training course at Bien Hoa Air Base just outside of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City). What they did is just keep you up for two weeks to see if you could cut the mustard. About a week in, they called some names out one morning while we were in formation and I was one of them. They said, pack your gear, you guys are going north now. Your MOS's are needed now in certain places. I was teletype and radio operator. I got to my unit and they said, don't even unpack. Put your stuff here.

This was May of 69 during Hamburger Hill (Battle of Hill 937 from 10-MAY to 20-MAY) during Operation Apache Snow. So they sent flew me out there as a forward observer with an officer. This was 1st Calvary. Our whole battalion was helicopters. We were on the next mountain over, calling in the Cobras (The Bell AH-1 Cobra is a two-blade rotor, single-engine attack helicopter) and giving them coordinates and targets to hit. So I was 101st Airborne, Screaming Eagles, while in Vietnam.

Working on the Telephone Lines

When I first got to Vietnam, I had telephone line repair duty. I was in the radio division we had "land lines" or black wires running for miles, two miles in some places. When the switchboard couldn't get ahold of say, A-Battery or B-Battery or whatever, so they'd come and get you. They'd send you out there with a crank phone. It was pitch black out there. You had your little flashlight with the red lens (Editor note: The light from a red light flashlight or red lens helps you see in the dark, minimizes you getting noticed from a distance, and allows you to read & work in the dark without ruining your night vision) so it couldn't show up. We had to be careful because we were right on the berm line, we weren't in the camp. You walk along, walk so far and the wire might be buried two-three inches below the ground. Every once in a while, you'd pull the wire up, cut it, attach the little crank phone and ring it. If headquarter answered, you knew that the break was from that point to A-battery. A little bit further, and you'd do it again. If A-Battery answered, you knew the break was from there to the last place you cut. It was just guesswork. There was no way to know. You'd finally get it done. It was 2-3 in the morning, pitch black out. That was one of the things I did in the beginning. I didn't care for that.

It's a Jeep Thing

My MOS 05C40 Radio Teletype Operator. But I never ran a teletype machine once in my career in the military. I got to Vietnam they assigned me a Jeep with his huge radio in the back set up. They told me this is a $10000.00 radio specialist. All we would do is tune it up and put the antenna up. We'd tune it and listen to the MARS calls (Military Auxiliary Radio System). They were the calls the guys were making to back home. It would go through HAM operators (Ham radio is a popular term

for amateur radio, derived from "ham" as an informal name for an amateur radio operator). We would listen to them talking to their wives or girlfriends for shit and grins. The best one ever was one soldier said, well honey I'll be coming home next week, and the gal says, make sure you call me, and I'll pick you up at the airport. He said, I don't know when I'm going to get in, I'll just take a cab and I'll come home. She said, oh no, don't do that. You call me and I'll come get you. We knew what was going on back home. She didn't want him to walk in on her and her guy.

Friends with Benefits?

Sometimes I tended bar in the Officer's club. I was 19. I became pretty good friends with many of the pilots because they 20 years old. I worked with a number of higher ranking officers. There was a Major Coleman, I called him by his first name constantly. You work that close together depending on each other. We were all the same age. I became friends with some of the officers and got placed in operations. Because I was friends with the pilots, I got to fly door gunner sometimes. I was door gunner on mail deliveries, trips to the beach. You'd do S-5 and civil missions delivering building materials. Sometimes I flew as door gunner, I hate to say it, for fun. We'd go on mail runs, we'd take people out to Eagle Beach. We had our own beach on the China Sea. We would do S-5 (supply) missions. We would take lumber and other supplies out to villages. I worked 12 on, 12 off with no days off. You did anything to make the time pass.

We would be rocketed once in a while. But, there were times you were over there you didn't even know you were in a war zone. And then there were other times, you knew exactly where you were. I did a little bit of everything. I worked operations. I basically called it a dispatch desk because we'd send Cobras out in the field to blast people. Our whole area was I-Corp (Army Forces Command). A Shu Valley (the A Shau Valley is a valley in Vietnam's Thừa Thiên-Huế Province, west of the coastal city of Huế, along the border of Laos).

How We Defined Victory

I had to do a report at the end of the night or the end of the day when you had fire missions (A communication between the fire direction center (FDC) and an observer to direct artillery on a target)and you used rockets. So each unit would have to call and give their report on how many pounds of rockets (number of twelve pounders, number of seventeen pounders, so much white phosphorus how many

they expended. How many rounds of 40 mm they expended and what was their kill number and their wounded number. So I took all the numbers and gave them to the Major because he was going to go over and brief the General that morning. He looked at the numbers and said to me, did they not give you the formula? I said, hmmmm, I guess not. I must have done something wrong. I had like three killed. He said, no! It's basically an unwritten formula. You have so many pounds of rockets, and so many kills and this many wounded. So many 40 mm rounds you had this many killed, this many wounded.

Joe said, there is a movie called Path to Glory. It's about President Lyndon Banes Johnson and his cabinet and they were trying to figure out why we couldn't win the war. Why we're not making any progress. They did this math and was sitting there writing some stuff down and said, well General, according to my math, we've killed one and one half times the number of people in North Vietnam. For the first time in warfare, we measured success by the number of people killed not by the ground you took and held. Since there was no front in Vietnam, as there had been in the First and Second World Wars, and no ground was ever permanently won or lost, the American military command fell back on a singly grisly measure of supposed success—body count. pounds.

That's why it went on so long. Our soldiers would go out, the monsoons would come, we couldn't resupply them. The helicopter couldn't fly out there and the roads were muddy you couldn't drive them. So they'd get overrun and a couple of months later we'd be going in to fight for the same piece of land over and over.

We were caught in a political quagmire with no way out. They had plenty of young men to send. As a sergeant you had to command people. You always make the mistake of saying, "you guys hate the army so much, why did you join?" They'd say quickly, "we didn't!" More than half the people in Vietnam were draftees. They didn't want to be there. Those of us that enlisted, those that life. I would have had a whole different attitude too. A lot of these guys got pulled out of college. They weren't happy about being here.

Drugs and alcohol were a big problem in Vietnam. Some people when they first woke up in the morning grabbed a warm beer. You'd tell them when you had to go out on the front line, get in front of me. Because I don't want you behind me with a gun. Because I don't trust you because you're a drunk. You'd tell them to

stay back at camp. Some of these were your sergeants. You shouldn't be telling them this, but you feared because I've seen enough people get accidentally shot and we didn't want that to happen.

Playing the Hit Songs

We used to listen to Hanoi Hannah. The only reason you'd listen to it, is because she played some of the better music. We used to have an underground radio station. The guys that worked all across the I-Corp. We'd go to a frequency nobody was using. We all adopted our own names / call signs for the radio. Guys would tap their thing down (mike) and play music. Then you'd talk. You couldn't identify where you were at. They still tried to shut it down all the time. It went on at night, all the time. Some officers would come into operations at night and listen to some of the stuff going on. But they played the better music. There were people at radio station that sent you a cassette tape of the top songs that week. One from New York, one from Chicago. It was pretty nice.

Joe made sergeant right as he came back from Vietnam. His tour in Vietnam lasted 11 ½ months. I tried to go back to Vietnam because the stateside Army really bothered me. I didn't care for all the goofy stuff. But my mother really frowned upon it. I was going to go back over there and reenlist over there because it was tax free. If you enlist in a combat zone, all your pay is tax free for that year. For my MOS, the maximum you could for a six year enlistment was 10,000.00. In 1970, that wasn't a bad chunk of change. If you reenlist stateside, you'd only net about 6000.00 of the 10,000 after taxes.

Stateside

After Vietnam, I came home stateside for about six months. I had 14 months left so I was transferred to 1st Infantry Division (Big Red One) out of Fort Riley

Kansas. I was stationed in a college town when I got back. You couldn't hide that you were in the military. You had the haircut. The majority of us didn't have a wardrobe so you wore your dress shoes. That was a dead giveaway. Then I went to Germany with the Big Red One for two months. We went on NATO maneuvers for two months.

Return to the Links?

I came back to the states after two months. My job back in the states, was training NCO. I kept track of the records of everybody's training. I made sure everybody had taken their physical tests every year. Make sure everybody had gone through CPR, gas mask treatment and all this other stuff.

Then one day, the first sergeant came in and said, sergeant Mowry, the Sergeant Major wants to see you. We were a headquarters company, so I went over to headquarters and saw the sergeant major. He says, you need to go see Command Sergeant Major Jones for the First Infantry Division. He says, you need to go see him. He requested somebody to work on his golf course and you got experience and you are "short" don't have that much time left.

Well I knew him, because I played golf with him. He didn't quite remember me. When I walked in, he looked at me and said, "Oh, it's you." He said, "well here's what we're going to do. It really wasn't a job, so I went back, and my sergeant major said, well what happened? And he said,' well wait a minute'. He picked up the phone and called the guy again and said, 'I'm giving him to you. You have him. He'll be reassigned special services and he can do anything you want at the golf course.' So I thought, I was going to cut grass, pull weeds which was fine with me because the job I was going to when I came out was at a golf course. So I get over there and they want me to work in the Pro Shop and play golf. So I did all that.

One of the guys that lived across the hall from me, had extended for six months so he could run the Fifth Army track team. There were college scouts there. He was a pretty good sprinter. He came back from practice one day and said, hey Joe did you ever throw the shot put or the discus? I said, yeah in eighth grade! He said, well come on, I don't have anybody on the team. I said, I'm not good. He said, it doesn't matter. You get every afternoon off. We're going to Fort Bliss Texas and we get a full week down there. And you don't have any other duties. Okay, so I joined the track team. We did training every afternoon for a month. We went to

Fort Bliss for a week. I was just working back and forth on things just trying to do what little I could. If I knew they would let me stay at the golf course for the rest of my career, I would have reenlisted on the spot. But I knew that was not going to happen. Although we did call Fort Riley "Fort Homestead." Guys would get stationed there and they would be there 10, 12 years.

Editor's note: Joe Mowry was awarded a Bronze Star for meritorious service.

His brother Skip is pictured here shaking the hand of President Lyndon Baines Johnson. He was awarded two silver stars. He died in 1987