

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
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Edwin Clapp
Narrator

Linda Jenson
Interviewer

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LJ: Do you want to state your name?

EC: **My name is Edwin Griffin Clapp, III and I go by Ned.**

LJ: Where were you born?

EC: **I was born in Munich, Germany. My dad was in the service during World War II. My mom served with the Red Cross, she was a lawyer, served with the Judge Advocate Corps in Germany after the war. So they were both stationed in Germany after the war. My brother, Jim, and I were both born in Germany.**

LJ: How old were you when you left Germany?

EC: **Just three years old. I was born in '47. We left in '50. We went back again after a three-year tour in the states; and we went back for another three-year tour in Germany from '53 to '57, I think, '54 to '57.**

LJ: So you told me that your father served in World War II and your mother was in the . . .

EC: **Red Cross.**

LJ: What were their names?

EC: **My dad's name is also Edwin Griffin Clapp, Jr. and my mom is Geraldine Sheffield Clapp.**

LJ: Where did you go to high school?

EC: **I went to high school, actually, in two places. In ninth grade, I went to a school called Shattuck School in Faribault, Minnesota, just south of the Twin Cities. My sophomore year, I went to Central High School here in Fargo; and then my junior and senior year, I was back at Shattuck. I graduated from Shattuck in 1965.**

LJ: Did you go on to college?

EC: **I did. I went to one year at NDSU and then I went to four years at the U. S. Military Academy at West Point in New York.**

LJ: When did you graduate from West Point?

EC: **In 1970.**

LJ: What did you major in?

EC: **At that time they didn't have majors at West Point. They did seven or eight years later, but when I graduated everybody got a Bachelor of Science degree. I concentrated on astronomical engineering, but nobody had a major.**

LJ: I see on your application that you went into the military because you wanted to fly?

EC: **Yes, I wanted to fly ever since I could remember. Dad was in an artillery unit and they used helicopters quite a bit to move around and that's where I first got my fascination with flying.**

LJ: What did you do prior to entering the military between college and military?

EC: **There was no time. I had a month. I graduated on the 3rd of June in '70 and reported for Airborne School 30 days after graduation.**

LJ: Now were you drafted?

EC: **No, this was a volunteer type of thing.**

LJ: Because you wanted to fly?

EC: **Yes.**

LJ: What branch of the service did you serve?

EC: **In the Army and then the Artillery.**

LJ: What was your military training like?

EC: **After graduation I went to Airborne School, Parachute School for three weeks. After that I went to Ranger School. Both of these were at Fort Benning, Georgia. So it would have been, I guess, July through November was Airborne and Ranger School. And then after Ranger School, I reported to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, for the Artillery Officer's Basic Course. And that lasted from November until March of 1971. I got a 30-day leave and then I went to Vietnam. I arrived in Vietnam in April of '71.**

LJ: What were some of your best memories about the military training you went through?

EC: Mostly the guys that I went through with. It was all fairly tough training but very satisfying, very exciting. Jumping out of an airplane, of course, that was a lot of fun.

LJ: What was it like the first time you jumped out?

EC: Actually, the first time I really didn't have much time to think about it. We were in a C141 with, you know, 60 other guys and a lot of anticipation. But when it actually came to the jumping out, you were running the aisle of the airplane and out the door. You really didn't have much chance to think and you are just hoping that your chute would open up. Like I say, it was very exciting.

After Airborne School and before Ranger's started, I did go through what they called a Jump Master Course. So I learned to be able to direct parachute jumps and stuff like that. So that was about a week's course. That was a lot of fun.

LJ: Once you got over to Vietnam, what did you do?

EC: I flew into Saigon at Tan Son Nhut Airport. This would have been about the, oh, middle of April 14th, 15th of April. We got trucked to an in-processing place. "Repo depo," replacement depot is what they call it. I was basically traveling by myself. I wasn't traveling with a unit or anything like that. So there were a bunch of us on the airplane that were coming in, but I didn't know any of the other guys that were there, but there was a mixture of officers and enlisted guys. I was a second lieutenant at the time. And we got our assignment.

Spent a couple of days there, then we took a C130 flight from Tan Son Nhut Air Base up to Da Nang. I knew I was going to be with the 101st Airborne when I got into country. We were able to choose our assignments when we graduated from school. Their main base camp was a place called Phu Bai, which was up close to Da Nang, up in I Corps, getting up in the northern part of Vietnam. Flew to Da Nang and got a truck from the Da Nang Airport out to Phu Bai, and I was with the 1st Battalion of the 321st Artillery there. And my job was going to be an artillery observer for an infantry company.

Once I got up there, I got quarters and got checked in. The next four or five days was just basically getting my equipment, meeting my battery commander and the first sergeant. There were not very many guys there at Phu Bai. There were three batteries in our battalion; a battery being six artillery pieces. A 105-mm howitzers is what the size of the unit was. And all three of the batteries were out at firebases, spread around the countryside. Basically, the only people in the battery that were there were just a battery commander and the first sergeant and the XO and a couple of clerks. Everybody else was out on firebases. So there wasn't much of my unit there.

I went to what they call a Fire Direction Control Center. This was held by the 101st division, and that was one that kind of oversaw all the artillery that went on within a division. We spent two or three days in the TOC or the Technical Operation Center, or the Fire Direction Center, learning what they did and the procedures that we'd have to follow. I was learning what they did at the back end for the guys that were out in the field requesting artillery fire, and stuff like that when they needed it. And the channels that you had to go through to request the different artillery fire, 155-mm fire, 8-inch, 175-mm; if you needed naval artillery or naval support.

You had helicopter gunships. You had jets. There's a lot available. As a fire observer, you're going to be responsible for being able to in fire for the company that you're with. That was two or three, four days of that, basically. It was not really intense. I only spent maybe eight or ten hours a day doing it. The rest of the time I got off to just do as I wished, although there wasn't much place to go.

They assigned me two or three extra duties. I was the officer's club officer for four or five days. All I did was count the bottles at the end of the day to make sure that they hadn't ripped off any of the booze. I was pay officer for a couple of days. Yes, just various sundry duties that the junior guys get to do when they, when they show up.

At the end of the four days of the orientation, I was supposed to go out to the field, but the company that I was with wasn't ready for me yet and wouldn't be for another week.

So I went up to a place called Đông Hà, which is another village about 30 miles north of Phu Bai, and went through a fire direction course ... relearned more detailed procedures of the stuff. This was the kind of stuff that I would need if I was going to be at the battery directing the fire, rather than requesting the fire from the artillery standpoint. And I spent about five or six days up there doing that. We spent a good 12-13 hours a day learning that stuff. The rest of the time we had off, but there, like I say, wasn't much to do there. It wasn't the kind of country you just wandered off and wandered through. And so we just hung around the firebase.

When my time was up there, I picked up all my gear and went back to Phu Bai. I got on a helicopter, got my weapon and all the ammunition and all of my bag pack and all that kind of stuff and went out with the infantry company that I was going to be with, and that was a little scary. I was going to be out with an infantry company in a in a war zone and first time.

They were in a big perimeter in the middle of an open field, and helicopter landed in the middle of the perimeter, and I got out and hadn't gone 20 feet and on the other side of the perimeter, it just opened, guys were opening up fire like crazy. Well it turned out, it wasn't any big deal. They were just

- test-firing their weapons on the other side. Of course I was flat on the ground. And everybody was standing around laughing at me. I found out that they did to all the new guys when they showed up.
- LJ: Kind of a welcome.
- EC: Yes, welcome. So I spent the next three weeks I guess, just tromping around the boonies. We didn't run into any enemy fire, we're just out wandering in the woods ... didn't seem too much direction to the places that they wanted us to go. Then at the end of the three weeks, we went back to an open area and got picked up by helicopters and taken back to Phu Bai. The company had been out for almost six weeks and so they were due for a break. Since I was with them, I got to go back for a break.
- LJ: Nice.
- EC: Yes, it was nice. It lasted about two days for me. Because my particular job you're not an integral part of the company. You can get moved around. It was just a section within the company. Somebody had found an enemy base camp of Viet Cong, North Vietnamese base camp. At least they thought they'd found one. And so they took. It was five U. S. Infantry companies and two Vietnamese companies and dropped them in around this firebase.
- The firebase was kind in a valley so they dropped us around on the ridgelines around this place. They picked two companies to go in and investigate this. My company was one of the two that got picked to go in. And we didn't run into any enemy fire but we started stepping on booby traps, right and left.
- LJ: Very scary.
- EC: It was, I think in the three days that we were stepping on them. I think there were at least just in my company alone, there were six or seven guys a day that were stepping on booby traps.
- LJ: What happened to them when that happened?
- EC: We didn't have anybody killed. The guys that were medics, were really good. Basically legs, arms, that kind of thing; and they'd always get stabilized and the helicopter would come and pick them up and take them away. I was one of the ones that got hurt during that process. That's when I got hurt.
- LJ: What happened to you?
- EC: I stepped on a booby trap on the fourth day. In fact, we had stopped for the night and set up on kind of a hilltop. That night when we stopped, I was standing just as close as you and I are right now to the company commander; and he stepped on a booby trap. I happened to be bending over getting something out of my rucksack so all this blast went and knocked me over, but I didn't get hurt at all. And he ended up losing both his legs above the knee and an arm; and his radio telephone operator, the guy that carried his

radio, took a round through the throat that bounced down into his abdominal area. They both survived.

Like I say, a tribute to the medical care. I saw about five guys that I knew get hurt, but those two guys I saw a couple of years later and they were both doing fine.

We realized right then and there that we parked our little platoon right in the middle of a booby trap area. So everybody was really careful. It was dark so we couldn't really see a thing, so we just basically settled down right where we were. We figured if we'd move around, we'd probably step on something else. And so everybody was fine through the night and then we got up in the morning and the company commander was gone so the lieutenant that was in charge of the infantry or platoon that we were with, took over with the command of the company. He had a little pow-wow with the other three platoon leaders and me. We decided which direction we were going to go and all this kind of other stuff. I was going back to pick up my rucksack is when I stepped on my booby trap. It turned out I had slept on it all night. I had just not set it off.

LJ: Unbelievable.

EC: I was just reaching forward to pick up my rucksack and it was my right foot that went down and touched and it blew it up ... tore my rucksack. I lost my right leg below the knee and I ripped up my other leg. It didn't hurt anybody else. There was one other guy that got knocked silly from the concussion but he didn't have any injuries. .

LJ: And to think you slept on that all night?

EC: Yes, I had slept on it all night. I mean right smack dab in the area and if I had set it off when I was sleeping I would have been dead, because I would have been here or on my chest or my head or whatever. I was sleeping right on top of it all night.

It was the head off a B40 rocket which is kind of like a bazooka round. They had taken the round off the rocket part and buried that along with the battery and a blade, stuck a blasting cap in the rocket head; and had a battery and just the little pieces of metal that all you had to do was make the contact to complete the electrical circuit to set off the blasting cap in the thing.

I guess, a couple of hours later, they figured out how they were marking them. So they were able to avoid them. They were marking them by a stick or a plastic bag on something 10 feet north of where the actual booby trap was. They figured that out. Two days later after they had lost – I was the 23rd guy to go in my company. And there was another eight or ten that went but they finally decided that they ought to pull the company off. So they

- pulled the company off and brought in an engineer platoon and just bulldozed the top of the hill. We had found a base camp, but it was deserted. And they just left a lot of booby traps behind for curious guys to come in and see what they could find and, boy, we found a lot.**
- LJ: And it could have been so much worse.
- EC: **Oh yes. I remember thinking the day before ... these guys were really getting hurt pretty bad, although they were surviving I was thinking that I would much rather be killed than messed up. Because I'd seen the wounds that these guys had. But as soon as it happened to me, my thinking turned 180 degrees.**
- LJ: Yes.
- EC: **Yes and I got picked up – let's see this would have been about, oh, the 2nd of June that I got hurt; and I got picked up within 20 minutes of being hurt by helicopter that it was coming out to get me. The next day would have been my year, and I was going in to get promoted to first lieutenant.**
- LJ: Yes, it was just great timing.
- EC: **Yes, just great timing. They picked me up on the helicopter. The guys did, like I say, did a marvelous job on tourniquets and all that kind of stuff. They got me squared away in a hurry and got on the helicopter and flew to the MASH Unit and the field hospital.**
- LJ: How long were you there?
- EC: **Only about a day and a half. I remember landing the helicopter. I remember them putting me on a stretcher, and I remember a nurse bending over me and cutting my clothes off. I asked her if she could give me something for the pain and she said, "If we give you something for the pain, you'll die." I said, "Okay, I'll just tolerate it." I suppose anything that would have shut down my circulatory system, they were concerned about that. The last thing I remember was being wheeled through a couple of double doors into x-ray. And woke up the next day and all in cast, and it was basically a cast from here down. My arms were fine. I had a couple of pieces of shrapnel in my forearm, and they we were bandaged up. But they had me all bandaged up and they came in the next day, on the 3rd of June, and gave me my first lieutenant's bar and gave me a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star. Tthe next day after that they casted me up and I got trucked to Da Nang Airport and put on a C141 and flown to Japan for treatment.**
- LJ: Well deserved. How long were you in Japan?
- EC: **I was in Japan for about three weeks. I underwent about four operations while I was in Japan.**
- LJ: On the legs?

EC: On the legs, yes. I didn't hurt any place except in the forearm as far as from the waist up. It was on the legs and it was an okay time there. I was confined to bed, because they had me in traction to try and pull the skin down around my stump and did skin grafts on my legs and all this kind of stuff. There wasn't much getting up and around until the last two or three days that I was there.

Then I got put on a plane. Well, first of all I thought I was going to go to Walter Reed in Washington, DC. And I said, "I don't want to go to Walter Reed." "Well, you're from North Carolina, aren't you?" I said, "No, it's North Dakota." So they, "Oh, oh, okay." They got me reassigned to Fitzsimmons Army Medical Center in Denver. Flew from Japan to Scott Air Force Base in Illinois, St. Louis, and spent the night there and then flew to Denver the next day. I got there about the middle of July when I got to Fitzsimmons in '71; and I spent the next almost two-and-half years there.

Yes, spent the next year as a patient getting put back together, the next year-and-half going through rehab and that kind of stuff. I started to learn, after about a year-and-half I was able to get my own apartment and once I got up good enough that's when I started to learn to fly and started doing some schoolwork at the University of Colorado up in Boulder, so I'd drive up to Boulder. Fitzsimmons, they really did an amazing job there. When I got there, 5 East was the lower extremity ward and there were about, oh there must have been 500 guys there.

LJ: Is this right in Denver?

EC: In Aurora right on the eastern edge of Denver ... really an amazing set up. And they treated us really well. They had all kinds of things for us to do. Out of all those guys, I would say that I would consider maybe two of three of them lost causes that just couldn't accept what had happened to them. But all the rest of them, they just did an amazing job of putting guys back together, both physically and mentally.

LJ: That's terrific.

EC: By the time I left, there was hardly anybody there. This would have been November of '73. There were hardly any Vietnam guys there. They were mostly motorcycle and car accidents that were there.

LJ: Tell us about some of the people you met during your time in the service, any special characters?

EC: Not really, I spent so little time in any particular place in Vietnam. I can remember a couple of guys, like the infantry company commander that I was with. I remember him better because I met him a couple of years after I got hurt, you know.

At Fitzsimmons there were several guys that I remember. Lyle Borders, who was a helicopter pilot, lost his leg above the knee. He and I got to be real good friends. We both applied for jobs with the FAA. We wanted to be air traffic controllers ... got turned down. didn't get the job because the guy who did the exam didn't think that amputees could handle the job.

Since then Lyle reapplied and he got in as an air traffic controller but he got fired with everybody else when they had the strike in '81. Now he's back flying helicopters. There are a couple of other, I had Scott Smith, who graduated a year before me from West Point, who is now a doctor out in Washington State. He'd started his medical school stuff while he was still in the hospital at Fitzsimmons. Jeremy Jones was an infantry private. He lives in Wisconsin. Those three guys, I guess, are the ones that I correspond with the most since then.

LJ: So you continue to talk with them today?

EC: Yes.

LJ: When did you leave the military?

EC: I didn't leave it until November of '73. I went back on active duty. I joined an artillery unit in the Fourth Infantry Division in Colorado Springs at Fort Carson. And I spent a year-and-half with them. I finally got out in August of '75 is when I got out.

LJ: That was a total of five years?

EC: It was a total of five years that I was there. I had five-year commitment with graduating from West Point, and even from being hurt I still felt an obligation to fulfil that, so. Plus I had several classmates from West Point that were down there at the time. The battalion commander was willing to take me on. And I ended up being a battery XO and a battery commander and a battalion liaison officer. Pretty good job and I went out. I was retired, medically retired as a captain.

LJ: That's fantastic.

EC: Yes, so by August of '75 was when I got out of the service.

LJ: How did you feel about leaving after all you went through?

EC: The reason I left was because I was getting into aviation. While I was in the hospital and while I was stationed at Fort Carson, I got my private and my commercial and my instrument and my multi-engine license for flying and so I got a job managing. At the time, it was called Flight Development out here at Fargo. It was a charter and a flight school. That was the main reason I got out of the service. I spent about six months in Denver learning how to install navigation and communication's equipment in airplanes before I

actually came home, but the main reason that I found something better to do. Because I always wanted to fly and I found a way to get into that.

LJ: Why be an air traffic controller when you can fly.

EC: **Well, yes. That's just about it.**

LJ: [unclear]

EC: **Lyle pursued it afterwards. In fact, the guy retired about six or seven months later so Lyle went back and reapplied and by that time I was back on active duty, and I didn't reapply. I already had something to do, you know.**

LJ: Do you have any final thoughts about what you went through while serving your country?

EC: **It was a career that I had chosen. I went to West Point. My dad was also a graduate of West Point, so there was some history there. So serving my country was something that going to Vietnam was something that I volunteered to do.**

As far as getting hurt, it's actually part of the job. I mean it wasn't like I didn't know that there was a chance that it could happen. Probably one of the best things that helped me through that was a book that I had read, oh, a year or so before I went to Vietnam. Was by an Englishman who had served in World War II, a guy named Douglas Bader, who was a bilateral above-knee amputee and was a squadron commander during the Battle of Britain during World War II. So I knew that what I wanted to do was possible. I wasn't nearly as bad off as he was and he accomplished a lot.

LJ: Good role model.

EC: **Yes, excellent role model. I'm certainly not bitter about it.**

LJ: That's great.

EC: **All of the care that I've gotten at Fitzsimmons, I mean, all the way down the line. All the way from the time that I got hurt until I got discharged out of the hospital and what the VA has done for me, even before I came to work here, I thought they had it well set up. I guess that's one of the reasons I came to work here is that they've certainly treated me well.**

LJ: Great. One last question, Ed.

EC: **Yes.**

LJ: How would you like to be remembered?

EC: **Oh, just as a nice guy and as a normal person. Sure I'm missing both my legs but that certainly hasn't inhibited me from doing probably 99% of the things that I wanted to do in the first place. I certainly don't want to be remembered as an amputee or anything like that, just a normal guy, I guess.**

LJ: That's great.

EC: Yes.

LJ: Thank you so much.

EC: Well sure, you bet.