

**Albert Mario Brusetti
Veteran**

**Mike Russert and Wayne Clarke
NYS Military Museum
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on 15 May 2007
at the Buffalo County Historical Center**

Q: Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birthplace?

AB: Yea, Albert Mario Brusetti. Born October 23rd 1939 in Buffalo New York.

Q: Okay, what was your educational background prior to entering service?

AB: I graduated from Bunbury Vocational High School and aviation mechanics. I took a postgraduate course in aviation mechanics

Q: Okay, did you enlist or where you drafted?

AB: I was drafted

Q: Alright, when did you enter military service?

AB: In September 1965

Q: Alright, and what branch of service?

AB: United States Army.

Q: Okay, where did you go for your basic training?

AB: Fort Dix New Jersey

Q: What do you remember about your basic?

AB: Basic training... I don't remember too much other than it was cold at Fort Dix it was in November, and what I remember mostly was the old World War II wool coat and it was worn during that period of time. It was very uncomfortable.

Q: How long were you at Fort Dix?

AB: I was at Fort Dix for basic Training from September through November

Q: Was this your first time away from home?

AB: No I had done traveling in the past but basically it was first time on my own

Q: How did you feel?

AB: I felt it was time to move on. I was drafted at a later age. I tried joining the air force when I was out of high school, post graduate school because I took aviation mechanics. Tried to join the army, I was too heavy. In 1965 I was drafted into the army and the doctor wrote on my forms that I'm not too heavy, I was heavily muscled

Q: Ok, did you go for any specialized training after Fort Dix?

AB: I went to survive school. The interesting thing was when I went to Dix taking aviation mechanics and taking FAA exam I was allowed to continue an education in aviation at Fort Dix. I showed them my paperwork they sent me to a generous supply school in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. Then I went to advanced small arms and supply in Fort Lee Virginia afterwards.

Q: How long was that school?

AB: Each school was eight weeks and there was an accelerated course in Fort Lee. We went to school nights because of the lack of training personnel.

Q: In retrospect, how do you feel the training did it prepare you for what you found when you arrived in Vietnam?

AB: When I arrived at the training was different than what my Vietnam experience was. What happened to me after Fort Virginia (?). I was sent to Fort Devens Massachusetts and at Fort Massachusetts I was assigned to the second Battalion first infantry the 196th Light Infantry Brigade. I worked in headquarters and headquarters company which is the I would say the command of the Brigade.

Q: Okay, how long were you with Devens before you were sent overseas?

AB: I was at Devens until July of 1965. We had advanced infantry training at Fort Drum New York. During the period of time that I went to Devens and I left Devens.

Q: Okay, did you then go overseas for the war?

AB: Yes, the brigade I was told was set up to relieve the 82nd airborne at the Dominican Republic but we did not go to the Dominican Republic. We left for Vietnam on ship, two ships from the Boston Harbor.

Q: So you went as an entire unit?

AB: As an entire unit yes.

Q: When did you arrive in Vietnam?

AB: In August 1965. It took us approximately thirty days to get there on ship, down the Atlantic, through the Panama Canal. We stopped in Long Beach California for one day and then went across to Vietnam.

Q: Okay what was your impression when you arrived in Vietnam? Where did you arrive?

AB: We arrived in a resort area called Vung Tau. We were told when we would get off the landing craft to hit the beach and dig in. When we hit the beach there was bands playing and the ladies were there and put leis on our necks and we thought we landed in Hawaii. The thing was though they drove us down the road we got on c130s. They flew us approximately 85 miles northeast of Saigon and we landed in the area that was a brand new base that was being prepared by the 25th infantry Division.

Q: Again, what kind of impression did you have arriving in this area?

AB: It was hot, there was nothing there. And when I first set my feet on the ground we walked to an area. A grasshopper hit me in the chest, I looked down and the grasshopper was around three inches in size and I figured then and there that I was going to have an amazing time in Vietnam if the grasshoppers were that big.

Q: What were your duties when you arrived there?

AB: When we arrived in Vietnam there was nothing there. We built the base camp, we had no utilities, no water, and we had nothing. And for instance when it rained we took our clothes off, soaked ourselves up and then waited for the rain to wash us off. So we started off with just tents and then we started filling sandbags and sand bags.

Q: How long did it take you to establish the compound?

AB: It took approximately a month and we came under fire at the first night there was a welcoming committee. It was nothing critical, after within a months' time we started to go on search and destroy operations. This was the buildup of the Vietnam War, this is when we were the aggressors I believe at the time. To go out and search and destroy.

Q: Now what kind of weapon did you carry?

AB: Well I had an m79 and a 45 pistol but I was a radio man and carried the radio man for either the company commander or our section DS4 which is the advanced supply directing helicopters and we see the ammunition and the food while we're on tactical operations

Q: Could you describe some of your search and destroy?

AB: Yes, basically during the day we would move from location to location, settle down in the evening and form a circle like in the west. And most of the time that was when we were hit, during that period of time. Surprising enough, being a new brigade we initiated one of the largest battles at the time in Vietnam was called Operation Edinburgh. We stumbled upon a regiment of North Vietnamese and we discovered what they considered hooches, Huts, full of rice, all types of supplies, enough for a regiment. We didn't know what we were getting into at that time.

Q: Now when you were hit, where you hit with mortar fire or small arms fire?

AB: Basically, we were hit by small arms fire. In the base camp we were hit by mortars.

Q: What was it like in your first action? How did you feel personally?

AB: I always felt that I would make it through Vietnam. Being an older-

Q: How old were you?

AB: When I went to Vietnam I was 26 years old.

Q: So you're the old man.

AB: I was the old man, matter of fact a lot of the officers came to me. And I was always the radio man for our company commander. Surprising enough, a lot of the officers came right out of ROTC and joined our unit and went to Vietnam.

Q: What was the daily life like?

AB: In the field it was hot, wet and walking through the jungle, we didn't follow the trails we had other ways through the jungle. That area of Vietnam, it was flat, except for one mountain which was called Ba Den which was the Black Virgin, that's what I'm told the name was. And other than that it was all flat, so it was wet and thick and hot.

Q: Did you ever contract any fevers or trench foot or anything?

AB: Yes, going through the water my feet were raw all the time and going through the jungle and through the elephant grass we used to get cut up quite a bit but I could say I was fairly healthy at that time.

Q: And did you guys wear the jungle fatigues or did you have the stateside fatigues?

AB: We were issued jungle fatigues, matter of fact, on the ship over we were issued m16s and we were told we were the first unit going over with m16s. When I saw the individuals from the 25th division they had m14s and when we stepped in with new clothing we see these young fellows coming in from the 25th division, they look quite different than we did even though they had basically the same clothing. You can see the wear and tear on their bodies and the fatigue in their eyes.

Q: As you said you were somewhat overweight, did you trim down pretty well?

AB: Yes, when I went into service it was time for me, I'm told they give you good food, I believe this is the time to lose some weight. I used to weight lift, I was a heavy muscled. I went to Vietnam weighing around 220 pounds and I left Vietnam weighing around 190 pounds.

Q: Did you have much contact with the local people?

AB: I had very little contact with the local people. I only went to the town at one point, on this operation Edinburgh, which what saddened me was that when we found this rice they brought in some individuals, some young ladies from a place called Tao Te, which was near the mission and rubber plantation. They came in, loaded all the rice, not all of it, most of the rice that we did find, at the time, and loaded it onto riverboats. And as soon as the riverboats left our perimeter, they were all hit with small arms fire and they all perished.

Q: Now, most of your contacts in your area were they with the local VC or the Northern Vietnamese units or a combination?

AB: Yea a combination in the taken area and Cu Chi area were a lot of tunnels. And us being there early on we dealt with a lot of tunnel warfare. We could be moving straight forward and be shot at and then as we move forward be shot at from the back. And we've discovered a lot of tunnels, and we used to take these eight foot Bangalore torpedoes and slide them into the tunnels and blow them up and look for smoke coming out another area. When we saw smoke coming out of another area we'd go slide more Bangalore torpedoes in the other area and blow that up. So we don't know what kind of destruction we had but we try to seal up these tunnels and we did have tunnel rats within our unit.

Q: Could you describe what tunnel rats are?

AB: Yes, tunnel rats are- and at the time we didn't have many volunteers so if you were small in size you volunteered to be a tunnel rat- a tunnel rat would crawl into the tunnels to find out what they had in the tunnels. And at that time they would find a lot of maps, ammunition, and at times they would run into individuals.

Q: Where they ones that you knew that went down into these tunnels?

AB: I remember some of the individuals, the names I don't but being with the S4 and during tactical operations in what was unique about our group is that we all knew each other. And my position was anybody that was hit, wounded, or killed I would have to put them on a helicopter. And before I went to Vietnam, I met some of their families so that was a difficult part.

Q: Do you think your unit had more of a closeness to it because you went as a unit rather than individual replacements like later in the war?

AB: Very much so, and when we did get replacements we tried to make them feel at home because we knew how they must have felt. Because we went over at one time and through Edinburgh and Junction City and Cedar Falls which were large operations at that time we lost quite a few individuals who were killed in action or wounded they start replacing people as we went along but then as the brigade got older they started taking people out of the brigade and putting more new people new just to have them gain more experience.

Q: How did you feel about your equipment, your m7, how did you feel about it as a weapon?

AB: I think it was very good, especially at night. I would never want to carry an m60 machine gun because of a mussel flash. And you can just look down the barrel if you're on the other side and see where the m60 is, of course, it's a heavy weapon to carry. The m16 at the time, we had some of the functions there were some problems with them jamming so I believe the m16 was more of the choice of like the infantry unit. We did requisition m14s for snipers.

Q: How did you feel about your enemy as a fighter?

AB: I think they were quite amazing, in the jungle warfare they would hit us and disappear. Living in those tunnels had to be amazing, I don't know how they did it. I think they were amazing fighters, we never lost a battle, they disappeared. We were near the Cambodian border so most likely they slipped back into Cambodia.

Q: How About your officers? What were they like?

AB: I think they were a great bunch of individuals. Most of them, as I said, were college graduates, most likely at an ROTC program. I just found out just a couple years ago, one of them was called in from the reserves who was well respected but was killed on our first operation. The higher ranking officers, and I would say, from major up were career military but the second lieutenants and the lieutenants who were in the platoon leaders and company commanders were lieutenants, and the platoon leader's second lieutenants.

Q: What were some events there while you were in Vietnam that maybe affected you or you recall more than other things?

AB: Through my experience in Vietnam, I've learned what a great country this is to live in. How good everything is. What I took away from there is to not complain about anything, throughout my life, I figure it's been blessed because I made it through there. Some of my friends, I'm sorry to say, who haven't made it through there, I'm quite disappointed in the respect that they never had an opportunity to fulfill their lives. And it's always been questioned, "Why were we in Vietnam." And my question was, "Why they died for this purpose?"

Q: How long were you in Vietnam?

AB: I was in Vietnam for approximately ten months, the one month on the ship was considered overseas duty.

Q: Did you ever have any R&R?

AB: Yes early on nobody wanted to go so I figured I would go. So I went to Japan, which I always wanted to see. Later on in the war when we moved up in northern area there was nobody to go on R&R because a lot of- there was new troops that just got there and we were changing over so I figured why not go on another R&R. So I took another R&R and I went to Hong Kong.

Q: Did you see any USO shows at all while you were in Vietnam?

AB: I saw- Christmas Eve, I was celebrating the occasion. Hank Snow was there so the show started, we had ammo boxes as seating arrangements around the show. I'm sorry to say is that we were partying beforehand. I fell asleep when they were introduced, and a friend woke me up and I was the only one there. I did go to see Nancy Sinatra but I was called away, I had to go out in the field with one of our companies, so I didn't get to see Nancy Sinatra. I saw her standing in the background but I didn't see an opportunity to perform. I was told after a while is that Nancy Sinatra made a remark that, "Oh there's a helicopter going down." And I was on the helicopter that went down.

Q: You were shot down?

AB: We don't know, I just heard a big ping, taking aviation mechanics I know that helicopters can rotter down. The gunner left his seat around, I would see 6 inches. I just looked at the pilot and co-pilot and saw them hitting switches. I looked over the side and saw they were in rice paddies so I knew we had a good chance. I know if we were over the jungle area that you can't land a helicopter in trees. So we hit the ground fairly hard, we buried the gear, another chopper came out, had some riflemen who surrounded us another helicopter came, picked us up and took us out to where we were going while they salvaged the other helicopter. I give the gentleman who flew helicopters in Vietnam the greatest credit in the world. For one instance, we were in the middle of the night, pouring rain, we were hit, a dust off. I don't know how they found us, but they found us in the middle of nowhere in the pouring rain to pick up our wounded. I thought that was unbelievable. I did run across dust off pilot and asked him, "How did you ever find anybody out there?" He said, "It was luck." and that's hard to believe.

Q: Now when did you leave Vietnam then?

AB: I left Vietnam in June of 1967.

Q: Did you leave as a unit? Since you all went in as a unit there must have been a big block of you that left together then.

AB: No, not really, if you would ever look into the books, because 196 light infantry brigades had more casualties than one or two of the brigades, I mean divisions. Through death and injury, when I left Vietnam there wasn't a great amount of us in the same unit, they split us up. So when I came home, I came home alone. And I flew home.

Q: Now that was prior to any of the real war protests. Did you come home in uniform?

AB: I came home in uniform, I landed Travis Air Force Base early in the morning. I was headed back home the next early morning. When I was at the airports there wasn't many people there I was unaware of what was going on in way of protests at that time. When I came back, I went to my job, back to where I worked when I left. I saw a lot that did go on and then I got active in the Veteran Service organizations.

Q: How did you feel about the protesters?

AB: I felt not so much for them, I felt sorry for the individuals who were in the service they had to see this. I believe that anybody who left this country, who went to Canada, they had the right to do so. But I feel they should come back, I said, "You can go to Canada, you stay there. That's fine" If somebody joined the reserves, I think that's great, I had an opportunity to join the reserves so I have no problem with anything in their respects. Again, I was drafted I tried to join when I was younger but I had no problem moving on with my life.

Q: With your unit, was there any racial problems at all while you were in Vietnam?

AB: There was no racial problems in Vietnam. We talked about discrimination and I understood at the time I was on a road in a convoy and our truck broke down. I was with another white fellow and two black gentlemen who was a high ranking sergeant, they left a gun chief with us with military police and went on with their convoy. Second convoy came by, they didn't have anything to tow the vehicle I was in, so the other gentlemen said, "No reason for us all dying." so the two black gentlemen left with the two white guy. I understood that, growing up as an Italian and in Buffalo my friend who was killed in Vietnam, we were good friends because associated with the neighborhood and what we did in the neighborhood. Matter of fact his father used to send us wine, Italian homemade wine in antifreeze bottles. We were the only ones who drank the wine, and we had Italian cookies and he used to sing Italian songs. So I understand when you get into different situations, certain guys get together, certain people have things that they do together and in the community and you hang out together. The black individuals in Vietnam they hung out together but when we went to the fields there was no problems.

Q: Now after you were discharged, when were you discharged?

AB: I was discharged in June 1967. Surprisingly enough I was called two hour reserve duty next year and went to Fort Drum which I was disappointed because I had to go to Fort Drum and most of the time I was on clean up duty, picking up butts for the reservists which I thought I was a combat veteran, I felt maybe I could do something more. I never understood the situation because they flew a gentlemen who residence was in New York but was in Florida, they flew him up here for two weeks, he cut grass for two weeks and then went back to Florida. I did not understand that situation.

Q: Did you ever make use of the GI bill?

AB: No I didn't, but being that I was an activist where I worked and I moved up where I worked I was a lobbyist for Vietnam Veterans America, I was also involved with the Union instrumental in getting the buyback bill for the veterans of New York State when I came back from Vietnam and went back to work I wasn't entitled to my pension I fought that. I'd come up, I found an individual in the justice department, we were going to sue the state of New York. Once they were asked, received the paperwork for the lawsuit, New York State gave me my pension and then anybody in the same situation that I was received their pension and that was if you left government service and came back to your government service that they would cover your pension. That was done in previous wars but was not done in Vietnam that took me quite a few years to do that.

Q: I know you have referred to this but you were active in veteran organizations, what veteran organizations did you belong to?

AB: When I first came back to Vietnam, I joined the VSW there was only one other Vietnam veteran there. I got involved initially in Vietnam Veterans of America and I am the past president for numerous years, vice president, board of directors through the years and I'm now the treasurer.

Q: Did you ever stay in contact with anyone that was in service with you?

AB: One of my friends who lives in Lancaster, we touch base once in a great while. When I first came back from Vietnam we were real tight, I got married, he got married and we seem if there's a need for something, we would contact one another. Other than that, I've gone to a reunion but nobody looks the same. We've all moved on with our lives and gone mostly in different directions.

Q: Now you've addressed this somewhat but how do you think your time in the service, your time in Vietnam had an effect on your life?

AB: I think it made me a better person, I appreciate everything I've done. One thing though related to Agent Orange in Vietnam is that when I went through the Panama Canal I saw a thick green jungle and I thought to myself, "What am I going to do with Vietnam." Once again, when I got to Vietnam, I saw a thick brown jungle and that was in the spring of the Agent Orange the officer I remember him saying was, has died and at the same age I am of cancer after fighting for twenty years he said, "Al, don't eat any of their fruit they're spring." And at that time we didn't know what Agent Orange is, I presently now have an Agent Orange related illness which is chronic lymphocytic leukemia, they haven't proven- they don't know what causes chronic lymphocytic leukemia, there's one reason, they say they know and that's Agent Orange.

Q: Would you show us the photograph that you have and then talk about that a little bit?

AB: This is from our museum and we have individuals from our organization who will give their pictures so we know what you looked like in the past.

Q: Now where is yours in the museum?

AB: Fifty- Seven Main Street in the city of Tonawanda. This is me here, the man I mentioned in Lancaster is Jim Chiefer (?) he is here. My Italian friend who I mentioned is next to Jim, here, he was killed in Vietnam and he was from Buffalo New York, his name is Sam Cannarodi (?). The other individuals I remember, Mark Payner (?) I believe is from the New York City area. The gentlemen on the bottom here was shot while in the helicopter three times. I don't know what happened to him but he's not on the wall in Washington. And my good friend Smurblio (?) is up here and he's from Connecticut. Now when I say a bunch of Italians getting together you can see there's three of us and also our friend Jim Cheifer.

Q: Now where and when was this taken?

AB: This was taken I would believe maybe in October of 1966, Sam was killed in February of 1967.

Q: Okay well thank you very much for your interview

AB: No problem