

Interview with Ronald Mallory

Interview by Richard Killblane

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Killblane: Ron, would you start out by telling me how you got into the Army, how you became a truck driver, and tell me about going to Vietnam.

Mallory: When I was in high school I decided to want to go into the Army but I didn't really know I was going. I graduated in June in 1969, and two weeks before Christmas I received my [draft] papers. They didn't come to my house, they came to my aunt's house. I was on my way to a party. When I picked up her kids to go to the party, she said, "I've got a letter for you." I asked, "May I have it?" She said, "No. I think you ought to wait until later." I told her, "No, I want it now."

So, she went on and gave it to me. She didn't want me to read it. I opened it up and there it was. So, I went to the party. A warrant officer friend of mine, who had been in service for years was there. The party was for him really. I was telling him that I had been drafted, and he said that was good. I didn't know a friend of mine that I graduated from school with had went in the service was home. He was at the party and there he laid it on.

So, on January the 22nd, 1970, I was inducted in at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Then I went to Fort Polk, Louisiana. I came home for about a week then I went to Vietnam.

Killblane: How old were you?

Mallory: I was nineteen.

Killblane: Where did you live and where did you work?

Mallroy: I lived in Montpelier, Virginia, and worked for a hardware company.

Killblane: Do you know how did you get picked to be a truck driver?

Mallory: I volunteered. That's what I wanted my MOS to be. I wanted to be a trucker.

Killblane: Why?

Mallory: Well, I used to help a guy with a farm and I was always driving across the field and everything. I got to like to driving trucks. That's what I wanted to do.

Killblane: When did you go to Vietnam and what was your company?

Mallory: I went to Vietnam in June of 1970 with the 359th Transportation Company. First, we started out in Pleiku, I was up there for about a week or two weeks then we moved down to Qui Nhon.

Killblane: What kind of trucks?

Mallory: I was on 5-ton cargoes. I used to pull tankers and half the flatbeds and used to pull the reefer [refrigeration] trailers. I really enjoyed it. As I drove I got better and better, and the guys had seen that I could drive. I used to like that. On the convoys, sometimes I managed to lead the convoys. They couldn't get past me, especially on An Khe Pass.

Killblane: Why's that?

Mallory: I was "sticking."

Killblane: You were what?

Mallory: What they call "sticking."

Killblane: Explain that to me, I haven't heard that before.

Mallory: Well, shifting the gears. You had low range and high, five speeds that if you let it stick, you could shift at the same time.

Killblane: Oh, split-shifting.

Mallory: Split-shifting. You had to keep it up or you'd roll back down the pass. I said that I wasn't going back down that Pass. I was going to keep going. I always liked to be up front because most of the time up front, you're less likely to get hit. They'd [enemy] always used to pick the center or rear of the convoy.

Killblane: Tell me about this. When you arrived, Route 19 was quite often and very heavily ambushed. What was it like driving out the gate? How did you feel? What was the stress level like?

Mallory: I went out every day. Every time I left out the gate I'd look back and didn't know whether I was going to come back or not. I just would go and enjoy the run. We used to stop the guys out there and have fun and talk. Sometimes, you'd just pray that you'd make it back. It was scary. Most of the times, the only scary part was when we would be driving to Pleiku and through the An Khe Pass. That was the only time I used to really get scared because you're going so much slower through the mountain and trees. We didn't know where we were going to get hit.

Killblane: Why were you so proud of being such a good driver?

Mallory: It was something you could do when you got out of the service and survive.

Killblane: Had they cleared out the foliage around those passes by that time?

Mallory: Some of it was cleared, but some of it wasn't. Sometimes you couldn't see the road.

Killblane: Were the roads paved?

Mallory: Yeah, the roads were paved, but bumpy.

Killblane: What was your normal routine during the day? How many hours' sleep were you getting? What time did you leave? What time did you come in?

Mallory: I think we used to always try and leave at least before six or seven o'clock in the morning. We'd go fuel up, fuel the tankers up, then we'd eat, and everybody got into the convoy, then we'd leave out and go where we had to go. Sometimes we had to stay over at Pleiku or wherever we went, or sometimes we would make it back by one or two o'clock in the afternoon. The latest time we were supposed to be back was by five or six in the evening.

Killblane: How did you know what truck you were picking up? Was it the same truck?

Mallory: It was the same truck every day.

Killblane: How did you know what load you were going to take out?

Mallory: Whatever tanker you had hooked to your truck, that's what you'd pick up. They had diesel, JP4, or gasoline, or sometimes they'd tell you (that) you had to pull a reefer trailer, but most of the time you just kept the same tanker behind you.

Killblane: What did it feel like pulling five thousand gallons of fuel behind you knowing that if Charlie [Viet Cong] lit it up with a rocket that was going end your day?

Mallory: It was scary. It was real scary because I was always wondering what would happen if it ever hit it. I just went on with it. It was the job we had to do. We had to keep everybody going, because the whole Army depended on us. We were transportation. We had to deliver food, fuel, clothes and everything else up there. They really depended on us. You had to do your job.

Killblane: While you were on a gun truck, were you involved in any ambushes?

Mallory: Oh, yeah. Jimmy Callison was killed. I think it was November the 23rd.

Killblane: November 23rd.

Mallory: November 23rd. I remember that I was the fifth truck pulling a flat bed with ammunition and Jimmy Callison was up there that day. He was very happy. Because we always stopped where we always stopped, everybody would mingle together before we'd go out. We

had weapons practice on the little hill then went on out. I had this guy who rode with me, on his way home. He was catching me up to Pleiku before he shipped out. We started going up to An Khe Pass and that's where we were hit. I was about the fifth truck. I was firing and trying to drive. So I made it up to An Khe where later the rest of the convoy met up with us. That's when they came in and told us what had happened. Something had been hit and I asked him what was the trouble. He said all the guys on the truck [Brutus] were hurt and Cal was killed.

Killblane: Where did you keep your M16 when you're driving and how did you fire it and drive at the same time?

Mallory: I kept it in front of my seat. I had armor plating on the door.

Killblane: Oh, this was a regular truck?

Mallory: A regular 5-ton.

Killblane: And it had armor plating on the doors by that time?

Mallory: Oh, yeah, I had armor plating on my door. I had a little hole cut in it, where you could either shoot through it or fire across the top. If driving you could let the truck go with your feet and stand up. There was no top on it. [demonstrating the motion]

Killblane: Oh, you had one hand on the steering wheel and the other hand shooting. Tell me about how you got picked for a gun truck.

Mallory: Well, I don't know. I guess because I was friends with everybody. I was jolly and would just run my mouth all the time. All of the guys that were already on the truck really liked me and other guys I hung with. Richard Bond and Chuck Hauser and all of us used to hang together. Every time we'd come in, we used to get up on that gun truck and help them take the weapons off. We asked questions all the time. Then one day they came up and said, "You all know what? If anything ever happens to us, we'd like you all to take over the gun truck." We never did think that anything would happen, but on November 23rd it did.

Killblane: What happened?

Mallory: That's when they were ambushed.

Killblane: Oh, yeah, the ambush you talked about.

Mallory: That ambush was where William Qakill and Ernest Santana were hurt and Jimmy Callison was killed.

Killblane: Oh, they were on the gun truck.

Mallory: When they towed it back in, we looked it over and a rocket grenade had come up through the floor. It went through the fender by the floor and that's what killed Jimmy Callison. The rest of the guys were hit by the shrapnel. So, we got the truck back there and unloaded everything off it because of all the blood and stuff that was in it. We were sad while we were doing it, but we took everything off it and washed it up real good. It took me almost a month to get the smell of blood out of it. Then we said we would repaint it and make it different looking before we went back out.

So, we had a guy paint it. It took about a week. Dahl was still driving tankers, but he was helping us and was fascinated. The same day it was finished, we had it parked up at the compound. Larry come by with a jeep and hit it. We broke on him, He pleaded, "Ah, I didn't mean it, I didn't mean it, I couldn't help it, I didn't hurt it. It didn't knock no paint off." We told him, "Alright, just don't do that anymore or we'll never put it on the road." He was jolly so we didn't mess with him.

Killblane: Why did you repaint the Brutus and make it look different?

Mallory: We wanted to keep up the same work and make Callison and them proud of us.

Killblane: What were Hauser and Bond like?

Mallory: They were real true friends. We were like brothers and they were cool.

Killblane: What was Larry Dahl like? Tell me about his personality.

Mallory: Larry was well-liked because he was always happy. When we were drinking beer he talked about his family, he had a kid that he had never seen and wanted to see her. He liked everybody. He was just fun. I can not think of his name but those two, oh boy, they [Larry and his friend] were tight. They were the best of buddies, both of them were about the same size. When they got back in the evening, they'd just sit, drink beer and talk trash until it was time to go to bed. I tell my wife all the time I said I can see Larry now. He always had that smile on his face. He always kept a smile. He kept a nice smile. I ain't never known him getting mad too much. He was just reckless.

Killblane: Yeah, driving into the jeep into...

Mallory: He drove the jeep into the truck.

We went on and put it [Brutus] back on the road in December. Then we were hit in February [February 23, 1971], the day when Larry was on there with us. Richard Bond was the NCOIC and just wasn't feeling good that day, so Larry took over.

Killblane: I thought Hector [Diaz] took over for him.

Mallory: Well, Hector took over but Larry was running the radio. Hector was filling in, but he didn't know anything about the radio. Larry was handling everything. He took over the radio and all. As a matter of fact, the day we went out Larry was happy. He was some kind of happy that day.

We were going up An Khe Pass toward Pleiku then when we heard a convoy was getting hit. It wasn't our convoy getting hit. They told me, "Let's go, we've got to go help."

Killblane: What did you hear on the radio going on up ahead in the ambush?

Mallory: I didn't really hear anything. I just know when they told me to go help. So we left our convoy the way it was and we went on. When we got up there, they were firing and it was getting kind of rough.

Killblane: Were there any trucks on fire when you arrived?

Mallory: Yes, a 5-ton tanker. So after everything had cooled down they told me, "Okay, we can go back and pick up our convoy." So they said, "Turn around right here." It was a big hill, so I decided to pull up and turn around. I can't remember the gun truck that was up ahead of us that had seen it.

Killblane: Okay, you had The Playboys in front and The Untouchable was behind you.

Mallory: It must have had to be The Playboys, because I told you The Untouchable was left back. We were turning around and all of a sudden I heard this big boom. I didn't know what it was, and Hauser hollered over the radio, "Go, go, go!" There was a fuel truck sitting in the center of the road and it was burning. I had to drive through it. I didn't hesitate. I just went. I didn't know what was going on but when I looked down blood was all over me. I thought, "Lord, I've been hit." So, in a few minutes we reached this Infantry unit along side the road. That's when I stopped. I stopped because I didn't know what the guys looked like on the back. So when I got there, I stopped and looked back there and Larry was laying back there with everything blown out.

Killblane: Everything blown out? [Larry Dahl had thrown himself on the hand grenade to protect his crew.]

Mallory: Yeah. The rest of them were hurt.

Killblane: Were Diaz and Hauser conscious?

Mallory: Yes.

Killblane: How long did you have to wait for the medevac?

Mallory: They had called it in. It did not take long at all. They came and closed the truck. So, the day after that we went back and I drove the truck back by myself. Nobody else was on it. It was washed out. When I got back I found out Larry had died.

Killblane: What did you do for the rest of your tour?

Mallory: I worked in the motor pool. I worked there until the time I left.

Killblane: What about Hector Diaz? Who else was in the gun truck besides Hector?

Mallory: Chuck Hauser.

Killblane: Chuck Hauser? Okay.

Mallory: He and Hector both went to the hospital. Hector was sent back home to the states, but Chuck came back and went back on a gun truck. In fact, he got on the Misfits.

Killblane: How did you feel when you finally left Vietnam?

Mallory: Well, I felt happy, then I wasn't happy because when you think about the guys that you left back that you knew, you'd wonder whether they was going to make it home, or like today I still wonder if some of them ever made it home or are they still over there because I just don't know. Every day I think of it. Life is short. I look at the pictures some times and break down and sometimes on a hot night I can't sleep, but you've got to go on.

Killblane: How did he get picked for the Brutus?

Mallory: Well, he was just close with us, too. He used to get up on it, too, and just look around. That's what all of us did in the morning. And, like I said, we never did know we would be on it. I was proud to be on it.

Killblane: Tell me about that. What was it like being on a gun truck?

Mallory: You were important. You were important because you had to take care of the whole convoy or any other convoy that needed help. You had to be involved with it. You got all those guys to their destination. You had to do what you could to protect them, and plus you protect yourself. They said that they [enemy] had a bounty on the Brutus any where over there, and they wanted to knock it out.

Killblane: Did all the gun trucks have bounties or just Brutus?

Mallory: They always said that the Brutus had the biggest bounty on it.

Killblane: Why?

Mallory: They were scared of the mini guns, I guess. They always told us Brutus had the biggest bounty. When you got on it, you were a part of it. You were proud, just like a legend.

Killblane: Did you guys really bond with the other gun trucks in Qui Nhon or just hang out with everybody?

Mallory: Everybody on the gun trucks was just like a family. You just got to take care of each other. You would see one gun truck and everybody would just get together. Just like we a reunion. It was just fun. You had fun on them. Going down the road, we'd be smiling and talking. I mean you weren't sad or nothing on there, we used to have a good time. I loved to see the guys when I was on it. We used to love to see them passing each other.

Then you had to wait on some of trucks going with you because they were slower and everybody else was going on so you had to stay back. Sometimes you got to stick it. It was fun until someone had a flat. Then you had to help change it. And that was the worst part.

Killblane: Are you talking about other trucks having a flat?

Mallory: Other trucks had a flat, you'd stop and give them a hand because we had all the equipment. We had the tires, the jack and everything, so we had to help. Oh yeah. It was fun. Good old days, you got your good memories and you got your sad memories. Most of the time you try to keep the good ones. I try to keep a good profile, you got to go on.

Killblane: Thanks a lot.