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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Gary L. Noller
Conducted by Richard B. Verrone, Ph.D.
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28; March 16, 2006
Transcribed by Mindy Moser

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

1 Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I'm conducting an oral history
2 interview with Mr. Gary L. Noller. Today is August 16th, 2005. It's approximately
3 4:30pm, Central Standard Time and I am in Lubbock, Texas on the campus of Texas
4 Tech University in the Vietnam Archive Oral History interview room. Gary, where are
5 you located?

6 Gary Noller: I'm located in Camp Bullis, Texas, at my office that's employed by
7 PCSI.

8 RV: Okay. Very good. Gary, before we begin the interview, I just wanted to
9 inform you and get your consent first of all, that you do consent to doing the interview in
10 free will and that you also are aware that this interview will be made public through the
11 Virtual Vietnam Archive, basically, the internet, and will also be here at the Vietnam
12 Archive's physical facility, available to the public here. And are you okay with this or
13 not okay with this?

14 GN: This is fine with me. I'm okay with it.

15 RV: Okay. Very good. Well, Gary, let's start with some biographical
16 information. I would like for you to talk to me a little bit about where you were born,
17 when you were born, and your early childhood years. What do you remember?

1 GN: Well, I was born on October 13, 1947, in Dodge City, Kansas, one of two
2 sons born at the same time. I have a twin brother. His name is Larry Noller. My
3 mother's name was Louise Herman Noller. My father was Walter Noller. She was a
4 housewife, he was a grocer. He owned a small, what was termed at that time, "Mom 'n
5 Pop" grocery. Living in Dodge City, Kansas, which is a town in southwest Kansas at that
6 time probably population of ten or twelve thousand people. Lived there virtually all the
7 way through the time I ended up getting out of the Army. It was the only place I lived up
8 until that time.

9 RV: Wow.

10 GN: And pretty much what I consider a small-town, middle America, baby-boom
11 generation upbringing. I went to all the schools there. I went to grade school, high
12 school, and even college in Dodge City, Kansas.

13 RV: Wow. What college is there?

14 GN: Saint Mary of the Plains College, which was a Catholic college. It's no
15 longer in existence. It started in about 1953 and I think it ran until maybe about forty
16 years or so, maybe the early nineties it closed. But I am Catholic and had the benefit of
17 Catholic education all the way through from grade school, Catholic high school, Catholic
18 college, mainly because they were located in that town.

19 RV: Let me ask you just a couple questions about your family, if I might. So it
20 was just you and Larry? Is that all?

21 GN: No, I have an older brother and sisters and one younger brother. I have an
22 older brother, Robert, older sisters Paula and Wanda, my twin brother Larry, and then a
23 younger brother Gregory.

24 RV: Okay, so a large family. You're kind of sort of there in the middle, you and
25 Larry are. I have to ask, what was it like being a twin in your early years? What do you
26 remember about that?

27 GN: Well, I think one of the things is in describing it is, "Well, I didn't know life
28 any differently." I don't have a way to compare it against not having a twin brother. But
29 I think one of the interesting aspects of it is we were not identical twins. We're named
30 similarly, Gary and Larry, which I guess is my mother wanted to have twin names. We
31 looked alike until maybe we were in first grade and I'm larger, lighter colored hair. He's

1 of smaller stature, shorter, darker colored hair. We pretty much never really were like
2 identical twins like you think of them as having two people but they're really the same
3 person. We had differing interests. Growing up together, we always had somebody very
4 close to us as a brother, obviously. I think we slept in the same bed until we were
5 probably about ten years of age when we got separate bedrooms. But we kid each other
6 about being twins. If one of us got in trouble, both of us got punished because they
7 weren't sure which one did it. And I think there are other things. Sometimes being a
8 twin has disadvantages because sometimes people really don't know if you're Gary or
9 Larry so they call you by one name and you're not that name, you're the other name. But
10 we remain close. We're close today. We probably talk to each other at least once a week
11 on the telephone.

12 RV: Wow. Where does he live now?

13 GN: He still lives in Dodge City.

14 RV: Okay. And where do you call your hometown?

15 GN: Well, right now I live in Kerrville, Texas, with my wife Robin.

16 RV: Okay. Well, tell me about your mom and dad. You said your dad was a
17 grocer. Was he involved in World War II or had he kind of been a businessman all his
18 life?

19 GN: No, my father was born in 1905 and he always described himself as being
20 too young for World War I and too old for World War II because he would have already
21 been thirty-five, thirty-six years of age by the time World War II came. So he's not a
22 veteran. His father did many different things. At one time his father was a coal miner; at
23 one time he ran an oil distribution facility selling motor oil. But my grandfather I never
24 knew. He died at a relatively young age so I never knew my father's father. But my
25 father got into the grocery business at a very young age. I think probably when he was in
26 high school he worked in a grocery store in his hometown and basically never got out of
27 it. Right before I was born he did spend a couple of years delivering Coca Cola for the
28 Coca Cola bottling company in Dodge City and he had the opportunity to buy a business
29 which was already a running, operating business, which was a grocery store. And since
30 he'd been in the grocery store business all his life up until that point in time—and he

1 would have been past forty years of age—he purchased that business and was the owner
2 and operator.

3 RV: Do you have lots of memories of that store?

4 GN: Well, I grew up in it from a very young age and all of us kids at one point or
5 another worked in the store. So from about the time I was ten years old, I began working
6 at least some of the time, and probably at the age of twelve years worked there every day
7 after school, worked there all day Saturday and during summer vacation worked there
8 every day.

9 RV: So that would suffice to say that you have a lot of memories of that store.

10 GN: Yeah. I mean, if you tell me some particular thing like canned corn, I could
11 draw you a picture of the store and tell you where at in the store it was located, what shelf
12 it was on, and probably the price it was the last time I put the can of corn on the shelf.

13 RV: Really? So you still have that imprinted in your mind?

14 GN: Oh yeah.

15 RV: Wow. So, Larry worked there as well?

16 GN: Yeah, we worked there at the same time and quite often we'd kind of shift
17 around through the store that we would take various duties. We could work in the
18 produce section or we could work checking out customers, we could stock the shelves or
19 we could work in the meat market because it was a full-line grocery store. But as we got
20 older we had a tendency—he worked more in the meat department and I worked more
21 with the produce and the canned goods.

22 RV: What size store was this?

23 GN: It was just a small grocery store. Back in those days it's kind of a holdover
24 from the time where women didn't have a job outside the store and a lot of groceries
25 were purchased every day so you had neighborhood stores. I couldn't tell you right now
26 the square footage on the building. Maybe it was only three thousand square feet but it
27 was an independent grocery store. It was not associated with any major brand type store.

28 RV: Right. It sounds like your dad was a pretty independent kind of guy. How
29 would you describe him?

30 GN: Well, I think that I appreciate him a whole lot more than probably I did at
31 that time because there was sometimes the conflict between, is he my dad or is he my

1 boss? And in reality he was both. But I think I'll always appreciate the fact that I was
2 able to grow up and be as close to him as I was because I learned a lot from him and I
3 think he was an admirable person and he had many, many fine qualities which I hope and
4 I think that I picked up on. I think he was very fair minded man, one of the most fair-
5 minded men and honest men, a man of high integrity. And I just knew from the practices
6 that he employed in business, the way that he would treat people, the way he expected
7 that we would treat people, the customers, the way that you maintain a good and positive
8 relationship with people is probably one of the things that I'll always take away from the
9 experience of having him as more my boss and my father both at the same time.

10 RV: Right. Tell me about your mother. How would you describe her?

11 GN: She came from a very large family. She's one of nine children that were
12 very closely tied to the ground in a very small town called Liebenthal, which is in Rush
13 County, Kansas, which is more north-central Kansas. Her side of the family is German.
14 My mother spoke German as her first language, did not learn to speak English until she
15 went to school at about the age of five or six and was made to speak English. My
16 grandparents were both born in the United States but their parents were born along the
17 Volga River in Russia. They were actually ethnic Germans living in Russia. They left
18 Germany in the 1770s and went to Russia and spent about a hundred years and then in the
19 1870s they left Russia and came to the United States. And one of the interesting aspects
20 of the reason that they left Germany was because they did not want to be conscripted into
21 the German Army. Catherine the Great of Russia said, "If you come here and populate
22 this area of the Volga River, I'll give you the land and I won't conscript you into the
23 Russian army." And that lasted of course until somebody they needed to have conscripts.
24 So at the time that it looked like they were going to be conscripted into the Russian Army
25 they then packed up and came to the United States. So there's a certain element of—I
26 don't know if I'd call it pacifism, but certainly desire not to be drafted into some national
27 Army that caused my mother's side of the family to move the way they did. Of course
28 that didn't keep me from getting drafted by the United States but it certainly was an
29 element of why they moved the way they did and when they did.

30 RV: Okay. Did your father and your mother tell you about your family and tell
31 you these stories?

1 GN: Well, yes, pretty much so. They were willing to discuss that and there are
2 even things that have been published, particularly more about the Volga River Germans
3 that you can go to libraries and you can read about the history. The small town that my
4 mother grew up in, they published a little history booklet for that town when they had the
5 50th anniversary of the founding of the town and so we have copies of that and can sit and
6 we can read that. In fact, we can look back and see pictures of our great-grandparents
7 that we never knew but they're in there and we can see a lot of our ancestors on my
8 mother's side. The early pioneers came out with absolutely nothing, took land that was
9 the buffalo grass, the prairie land of Kansas, and in most cases their first homes were
10 dugout sod homes and maybe they had eighty acres. They lived very, very austere lives
11 and brought up and forged their lives there and had kids and successive generations and
12 every generation got the American dream a little bit better than the one before it. But my
13 grandparents owned eighty acres. It was eighty acres of land. It was poor land, it was
14 rocky land. My grandfather never owned a car, never drove a car, he never owned farm
15 machinery. He always went out and worked for other farmers that had machinery and
16 then when it came time to farm his land, his payment for working for the other farmers
17 was they would let him use their machinery to take back to his farm. So they were poor
18 people but I don't remember growing up of ever thinking of either my folks or my family
19 as being poor or my grandparents as being poor. It just wasn't an issue. I look back now
20 and say "Gee, they really didn't have very much." But that's by the way we look at
21 standards today. At that particular point in time they were very proud people, they were I
22 think intelligent people, they were hard-working people, but they were very close to the
23 ground and in all reality didn't have a lot of material things to show for all of the years of
24 hard work that they certainly put in.

25 RV: Right. So your mother was basically a homemaker and taking care of the
26 family, assisting your father, I assume, when he needed it?

27 GN: Yeah, and my mother and father met in a town called Scott City, Kansas, in
28 western Kansas. My mother had gone out there to work as a housekeeper for I believe a
29 doctor, a physician, and my father was in the grocery business and he was probably at
30 time just working behind a counter or doing whatever and she would go in and buy
31 groceries at the grocery store where my father worked and that's how they met. But my

1 mother only went through about the sixth grade and at that particular point in time began
2 working at about twelve years of age. My mother was one of nine children, the oldest of
3 which was a boy but then the next six in a row were girls. And at that point in time, boys
4 were needed to work on the farm and girls were looked at as being almost a burden
5 because they couldn't do the heavy work that was needed on the farm but they were still
6 a mouth to feed. So my mother and some of my aunts, when they became old enough to
7 go to work, they basically left home and did go to work for somebody else to make some
8 type of a living, basically to feed and clothe themselves and if there was any money left
9 over that they could give to my grandparents for the support of the family, they would do
10 that. So mom was sometimes reluctant to tell us much about that. I actually probably
11 know more about that phase from talking to some of my aunts. And in fact, just saying
12 "Mom doesn't seem to want to tell us very much about what happened from the time that
13 she left home at the age of twelve until she met my dad at the age of," I don't know,
14 "twenty-five." She was relatively...I don't want to say "old." She was born in 1912 and
15 they were married in 1939 so she was twenty-seven before she got married. So there was
16 fifteen years in there and most of that time she was employed as a domestic servant,
17 probably working for somebody who had money which would be like a doctor. But
18 that's all the way through. They got married in '39 so the whole decade of the
19 Depression, my mother was probably working for somebody for pay as a domestic
20 servant. And that's because her mother and father were so poor that they couldn't take
21 care of her. And essentially what one aunt described to me was, "We couldn't live at
22 home because we couldn't pay our way and so we had to go out and work and the only
23 thing that would stop us from working was if we found a man and got married and we
24 started our own families with him." Which certainly was the case with my mother and at
25 least a couple of my aunts that I've talked to were the same thing. You either worked or
26 you got married but you didn't live at home and do nothing.

27 RV: Right. It sounds like you came from a very hardworking family. That work
28 ethic was there from the very beginning. How did that affect you mostly? Did you work
29 hard obviously for your dad? Were you that way in school? What were you like there
30 before high school?

1 GN: Well, I don't know. I guess I want to say at that young of an age, I didn't
2 know these stories about my parents so they really didn't affect me.

3 RV: But didn't they model them for you?

4 GN: Yeah, and one of the things that I always knew and understood and didn't
5 really have a problem with it was that having the family business, as soon as we would
6 become old enough to work in the store, we would work in the store because my older
7 brother did it and my two older sisters did that. Again, I don't know any different kind of
8 life to compare that to but when we became old enough to go down there; in fact we
9 wanted to do that because we thought that was a grown-up thing to do. So yeah, you're
10 correct. They kind of modeled the work ethic, particularly my dad. He worked six days
11 a week and he generally worked ten hours a day. My mother took care of us and raised
12 us and then when my littlest brother started grade school she opened her own business
13 and she opened a day care and took care of other people's kids for many, many years.
14 Probably half the kids in Dodge City at one time or another went through my mom's day
15 care if their parents both worked. So there was a huge emphasis on working and like I
16 say, even though on both sides of my family there was no money and they were poor
17 people, they did work and were proud of it. I can remember my dad saying to me things
18 like, "You should never be ashamed of getting dirty when you work as long as you're
19 doing honest work." And little things about that that emphasized the belief in taking care
20 of yourself, self-reliance, not being a burden on others, and contributing. And I think I
21 also grew up with a very strong knowledge and expectations that we kids do better. For
22 example, at a very young age it was, "You're going to college." It's not like, "You're
23 going to college if you want to go to college." It's like it was not a choice. It's, "When
24 you get out of high school, you're going to go to college."

25 RV: So that was expected?

26 GN: Oh yeah. That was like—not necessarily for my two sisters as much as it
27 was of my brother and I.

28 RV: Why not for you two sisters?

29 GN: I think it's probably that societal thing that women get married and have kids
30 and it just wasn't pushed or expected. And both of my sisters did get married let's say at
31 age twenty. They got married younger than my mother got married. But I think

1 particularly of my oldest brother Robert got a degree in Banking and went on to be
2 President of a bank. He was very successful in his career. Both my twin brother and I,
3 we went to college and came out with degrees in Mathematics. My younger brother
4 didn't go to college. He went instead, when he turned eighteen years old, he enlisted in
5 the Army and had a very great career in the Army. He probably got at least the
6 equivalent of a college education, if not more, though the schooling that he got while in
7 the military.

8 RV: And who is this?

9 GN: My youngest brother, Gregory.

10 RV: Your youngest brother. Okay. Okay, well, speaking of family military
11 service, you talk about your dad kind of being in between the great wars. Anybody else
12 who served, mother's side or father's side that was in your family?

13 GN: Well, altogether I had four uncles in World War II and one was killed. My
14 uncle Fred Noller was killed in Okinawa on April 10, 1945. He was with JASCO, which
15 was Joint Assault Signal Company, part of the 6th Marine Division. And he had spent
16 quite a bit of time in the South Pacific. He was basically a radio operator, Forward Air
17 Controller. He would land with the Marines and then he would help coordinate the
18 strikes of tactical aircraft support. But also the guns on the ships since the Marines came
19 off the Navy ships he could also coordinate the gunfire from ships in support. And the
20 Marines landed I think on April 1, 1945, on Okinawa and there was very little resistance
21 for the first few days but as they moved from one end of the island to the other they did
22 meet resistance and on April 10th, he was killed. And I have a copy of the letter that his
23 Commander sent to my grandmother, explaining about the death and I have met people of
24 the 6th Marine Division who knew my uncle in World War II. I met them about ten years
25 ago. I had another uncle, my uncle Felix Herman, which is my mother's brother. He was
26 in the 32nd Infantry Division in World War II as an infantryman in the Philippines. He
27 saw extended battle on the retaking of the big island of the Philippines. He was
28 essentially gun barrel to gun barrel with the Japanese. The Japanese would go into caves
29 on the side of cliffs and the Americans would have to basically go up to them and one
30 way or another pry them out. And he wasn't wounded but he did suffer what would
31 today be called post-traumatic stress, PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), and almost

1 died of pneumonia that he got right at the end of the war. He's suffered through the rest
2 of his life. He's still alive today. He's suffered affects in his lungs but he came home.
3 But I can remember as a young boy hearing stories about Uncle Felix and the term used
4 was "shell-shocked."

5 RV: Oh really?

6 GN: And he did take treatment. I think maybe in the early fifties he did take
7 treatment through the Veterans Administration for that condition.

8 RV: Do you know what kind of treatment he took?

9 GN: Well, I don't know exactly but I can remember some stories about that there
10 was electroshock therapy and I don't know that he was ever treated very long. But I do
11 know that it probably did cause major changed in his life. He was drafted and I believe
12 he was drafted at the age of seventeen. There were some provisions towards the end of
13 World War II where they were taking younger people. And I know he told me one time
14 that he was in combat at seventeen and a half and that after he had gotten into combat at
15 age seventeen and a half, they made a ruling saying that you couldn't go into combat if
16 you were seventeen and a half. You had to be eighteen. But if you were already in
17 combat and you're not eighteen, you can stay. So he had to stay in combat. And he said
18 that rather wryly, as in, "Well, you know, just my luck." But there are stories that have
19 been published about his unit. I believe it was Company 126th Infantry Regiment of the
20 32nd Infantry Division. And they did have a very, very difficult time on the big island of
21 the Philippines. And he did write a little book, probably about an eighty page book,
22 written on notebook paper that he'd fold in half so it would be five and a half inches wide
23 and eight inches long and he wrote it on a typewriter and he wrote very detailed
24 descriptions—people's names, officer's names that were in his unit, people that he
25 remembers in his unit, dates, times, places, and it's a very graphic description. He tells of
26 what he went through and when he showed me that book and I read it, and it was
27 probably maybe in 1990 when he showed me this book, and I was just in awe. I just sat
28 back and said, "This is the story of your time in the Army and things that happened to
29 you." And I don't know if before the day he showed me that if he had ever showed that
30 to anybody else. Nobody that I'd ever talked to, my parents, my aunts and uncles and

1 cousins, “Did you ever see that book that Uncle Felix had written about his military
2 service?” They’re saying, “What book are you talking about?”

3 RV: Wow. Where is it now? Do you have it?

4 GN: I think the original copy he has.

5 RV: Okay, he’s still alive?

6 GN: Yes, and he is a young World War II vet, probably one of the youngest
7 World War II vets you can have because he was drafted at age seventeen and I think he
8 was drafted in late 1944. So he is going to be a very young World War II vet. In fact,
9 today I think he may be seventy-seven. I’m not sure. I’d have to figure that out.

10 RV: Wow, he is young then.

11 GN: But it was a very, very graphic description and I do have a copy of that and
12 I’ve sat back a time or two and read it. It’s got some light-hearted stories in it, some
13 funny stories in it but it’s got some very, very gripping details of what it was like for the
14 American infantry to fight the Japanese infantry in the mountains and jungles.

15 RV: Wow. That sounds fascinating.

16 GN: And that’s nothing I knew before I ever got in the Army.

17 RV: Right, right.

18 GN: I had another uncle, my uncle Floyd Allison. He was in Europe. He was in a
19 tank destroyer battalion. I don’t know exactly his unit. I have that information but I
20 don’t have it in memory. It was basically under the Army that was commanded by
21 General Patton. He was wounded twice in World War II. Once of those that I know
22 more about the circumstances was during the Battle of the Bulge in December of 1944.
23 He got a leg wound from shrapnel. And when he came home he bought into a small dry
24 cleaning business. He was always a very well dressed man. Whenever he would come to
25 family functions he’d always be in a nice suit and a white shirt and a tie and wear a hat
26 and on his lapel he would wear a Purple Heart, a little metallic ribbon. And not the
27 ribbon that you would wear on a uniform, but a very small metallic ribbon. We used to
28 ask him, “What is that that you have?” And he’d say, “That’s a Purple Heart for when I
29 got wounded in World War II.” And I’ve talked some with him about what it was like
30 for him in World War II but he’s passed away now. And then my fourth uncle was my
31 dad’s brother, John Noller. He was in, I believe, Army Air Corps, and he went to Alaska

1 and he was a cook and he was also drafted. I think maybe on the outside of my uncle
2 Fred; my other three uncles were drafted. And he was in Alaska for, I don't know, a year
3 or two, and he talked quite a bit about his military experiences. He was not in combat.
4 My other three uncles were combat veterans. He was not in combat and he's the one that
5 I wrote to extensively when I was in the Army. In fact, some of the letters that I donated
6 were the letters that I had written to my uncle John. He seemed to probably be the most
7 willing to write and talk about Army life, his Army life when he was in compared to what
8 it was like when I was in. And he did tell me of one story where he was extremely lucky
9 to be alive, in fact probably shouldn't be alive. But he was supposed to get on an airplane
10 one day and fly from one place in Alaska to some other place in Alaska and when he
11 showed up with his luggage they told him, "You've got too much stuff in your bags here.
12 Your luggage weighs too many pounds. You have to go lighten your load." So he went
13 back to his barracks and took out a pair of overshoes that he had in his bag and put the
14 overshoes back in his footlocker or whatever, went back out to the airfield, but his plane
15 had taken off already so he couldn't get on that plane. And eventually that plane crashed
16 and everybody on board that plane was killed.

17 RV: Golly.

18 GN: So it's just a real quirky deal that that happened. And when he passed away I
19 told that story as part of my tribute to him at the cemetery. I said a few words about it
20 and again, members of the family came up and said, "We have never heard that story.
21 We had never heard that story. When did he tell you? What were the circumstances?" I
22 said, "I don't know. I used to just go sit and talk with him." As long as he was alive and
23 I'd go to Dodge City and visit. I'd always go see my uncle John. And at one time he
24 said, "You know, I'm lucky to have survived World War II." And I said, "Now, what's
25 the story?" So he told me that story. Although my father was not in the military, he's not
26 a veteran, there was a very high presence of that in both my mother's side of the family
27 with one of her brothers as well as two of my father's brothers and then one of my
28 father's sisters' husband were in World War II.

29 RV: How much was that an influence on you when you were a little boy?

30 GN: I don't really know. I think that growing up in Dodge City during the 1950s,
31 I do remember things like Veteran's Day parades, Memorial Day parades, the town had a

1 VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars), the town's got an American Legion. I remember a lot
2 of talk, a lot of discussion. "So and so, yeah, he was in the Marines during World War
3 II," or "This guy was in the Army. He was in England. He was a flyer." So I remember
4 a lot of talk about people who my parents associated with. Maybe they were customers at
5 my dad's store or maybe they were vendors to my dad or they were other business people
6 in town that my dad associated with that were in World War II. World War II was pretty
7 recent in my childhood and I can remember a lot of talk and I did know that I had an
8 uncle killed in World War II and I did know that I had three uncles that served. So I
9 think that particularly that that was instilled in me, the idea that this is one of the things
10 that you do. When you have four uncles in the military in a time of war, in a time of war
11 you go to the military and serve.

12 RV: That's interesting. You said, "This is something that you do," not something
13 that you should do or want to do or need to do but you just kind of expect that when the
14 country's at war then you go do this. Is that correct?

15 GN: I think that's true and I think that if you would ask me the question sometime
16 down the road, given the choice that I had, why did I do what I would do, I would
17 probably come back and say, "Well, it is something that you have an obligation to do."
18 Personally, I would probably say, "Well, I wouldn't want to ever meet the guy that took
19 my place if I didn't do it." I'd probably also say, "I went and did it and came out okay."
20 I wouldn't want to know if the guy that took my place went and did it and didn't come
21 out okay.

22 RV: Sure.

23 GN: So there's a lot of different ways that you can probably take a look at that but
24 I think growing up there was an influence of patriotism and an influence of that fact that
25 we do this. We may not like it and we may not want to do it. And like I said, probably
26 three out of the four of my uncles were drafted, which means they did not go down and
27 enlist, but in being drafted it also put them in more of an opportunity to be in a combat
28 role, which three of the four of them were. And maybe if they would have selected
29 something, that could have gotten them some other kind of assignment.

1 RV: Right. Well, I want to learn about how you were as a young boy and in
2 getting into elementary and then middle school. How would you describe yourself, the
3 young Gary?

4 GN: I don't know. I think nothing spectacular that I can think of in childhood.
5 You know, it was a lot of family life. I mean, back at that particular point in time there
6 was no TV. I mean, I can remember when we got a TV. I can remember when we got a
7 telephone. We didn't always have a telephone. I can remember times spent laying on the
8 floor of the living room listening to the radio. Some of what would now be called the
9 old-time radio shows. That was a form of entertainment and it would be done as a
10 family. I can remember going to church as a family, eating meals at a table as a family,
11 fairly—I don't know if I want to use the word strict, but probably at that point in time, a
12 traditional upbringing with both parents at home. But I think that looking back now, it
13 wasn't really materialistically wealthy but we had food on the table. My dad ran a
14 grocery store. My mom made our clothes for a long time, up until the time we were
15 maybe in fourth or fifth grade. She would make clothes for all of the kids in the family.
16 She'd cut our hair. If you were a boy you got your haircut. Whether you wanted to go to
17 the barbershop like the other guys did, that's too bad. You ain't going to go to the barber
18 shop. We had entertainment. Like in the summertime it would not be uncommon for us
19 to go out of the house as kids at eight o'clock in the morning, come back home and eat
20 lunch, walk right back out the door, come back at five-thirty or six o'clock and eat
21 supper, go back outside, and not come back in until it got dark. And you were
22 somewhere in the neighborhood with other kids in the neighborhood doing something.
23 And it was one hundred percent unsupervised, which is a drastic change from what it is
24 like now. But it was a small town. We'd go to the swimming pool. They had free days.
25 If you had to pay on a day that wasn't free, it was a quarter. Well, we're not going to go
26 on a day when you pay a quarter, we're going to go on Tuesdays or Fridays because
27 Tuesdays and Fridays are free. We could get money to go to the movie. Probably if we
28 asked for any money as kids, it would be, "We want to go to a show." And we could get
29 a quarter a piece or maybe thirty-five cents so you could get a soft drink or something
30 and back at that time you watched *Hop-a-long Cassidy* was big, *Roy Rogers* was big, the
31 *Cisco Kid* was big, and folks would always say, "Well, what's on? What's the name of

1 the show?" And we had two or three different theaters in town so we'd say, "Well, we
2 want to go to the Dodge Theater and we're going to watch *Hop-a-long Cassidy*." So
3 we'd line up in front of my dad and he'd reach into his pocket and probably if one of my
4 sisters was going he might hand a dollar out and say, "Okay, here you go. Here's a buck
5 for you four kids." We'd walk. We'd walk downtown and go to the show and walk back
6 home.

7 RV: That really sounds like a fun childhood. It sounds like an active one and that
8 you all made do with what you had and had a good time at it.

9 GN: And you know, I don't look at it as being deprived of anything. We walked
10 to school. The school was three blocks away so we left in the morning and at that time
11 we lived close enough to school that when they had lunch, we'd walk home and eat lunch
12 and then walk back to school. We had like an hour and there were a lot of kids that did
13 that. So the only thing we wanted to was when we got home we wanted to eat fast and go
14 again because when you got done with lunch there was recess so you could go play on
15 the parking lot and the playground at the school. So we'd always get home and say,
16 "Mom, we've got to eat and hurry up and leave." "Well, what's your rush in leaving?"
17 "Well, we want to go up and play on the playground."

18 RV: Tell me what kind of student you were, Gary?

19 GN: What kind of student was I?

20 RV: Yes.

21 GN: Well, I would say that grade school, I don't know that I never got a B and I
22 don't know that I ever got a D in grade school so I would say I was an average student. I
23 was in that middle ground, doesn't attract any attention because you're falling off the
24 edge not performing but I certainly wasn't in the other end where you were getting a lot
25 of gold stars by your name on the wall. And I guess I want to say that I was happy with
26 that. Or I guess I want to say that looking back now I probably was not performing to my
27 level but I don't think I began to do that until probably I was a sophomore in high school.
28 So I guess I didn't know my intellectual capability and if anybody else did they didn't get
29 it out of me but then I'm sitting here going, "Hey!" I don't know if it is called latency.
30 One teacher I can remember describing me as being complacent and of course I had to

1 say, "What does complacent mean?" And I think even after they told me I go, "Well,
2 what's wrong with that?"

3 RV: Right. "I don't see the issue here." So you said you did change once you got
4 into high school?

5 GN: Yeah.

6 RV: You improved, I assume?

7 GN: Well, yeah, I was able to get A's in subjects, in math. It didn't make any
8 difference what it was. Math, science, literature, history, but if you went to look at my
9 grade card, you'd say, "This guy's made C's his whole life and he gets in tenth grade and
10 he starts making A's."

11 RV: What happened?

12 GN: Well, I don't know. I think something inspired me and I don't know what it
13 was. It was probably—and I'll say this and probably in truth—I probably got some
14 teacher, one teacher, that said, "You know, Gary, you can really do a whole hell of a lot
15 better than this. Why don't you go back over there and sit down and do this and do the
16 best you can do and see what happens?" And I thought, "Well, okay." It probably pissed
17 me off so I said, "Okay. I've got to do this." So I went back and came back and that
18 teacher said, "This is a lot better than what you did. This is what you can do and do this
19 all the time. Why don't you do this and do this all the time?" And so I probably sat back
20 and said, "Well, okay, I'll show you." And I think I may have amazed myself and I think
21 a lot of other people looked and said, "Here's this guy that's been kind of a C student his
22 whole life, all of the sudden being able to sit down here and turn in grade A level." So I
23 want to take that back and say I'll attribute that to a teacher and maybe a couple of
24 teachers that I can remember, Mr. James Kirby and Vern Piantinida. Mr. James Kirby
25 was English and Vern Piantinida taught Mathematics.

26 RV: Can you spell the second one's name?

27 GN: P-i-a-n-t-i-n-i-d-a.

28 RV: And what was the first name?

29 GN: Vern, V-e-r-n. Piantinida. And it's spelled exactly the way it sounds if you
30 can sound Pi-an-ti-ni-da.

1 RV: I'm doing that for the transcriptionist's sake. So you got inspired and you
2 kind of took off. And this continued through high school?

3 GN: Yeah.

4 RV: What years were you there in high school Gary?

5 GN: 1961 to 1965.

6 RV: And what about sports? Did you play?

7 GN: No.

8 RV: Why not?

9 GN: Well, I wasn't interested and still am not interested. (Laughs)

10 RV: Oh really? Are you not a spectator now?

11 GN: Oh, I'll watch some but I think some of it—I did play football in like seventh
12 and eighth grade and enjoyed it but I'm not a lover of physical exertion, I guess. And
13 while I enjoyed doing that, I don't know. It was kind of a whole big macho thing, going
14 and knocking somebody's block off. And to be right honest with you, I wasn't interested
15 in going and knocking somebody's block off. It's just not me. I mean, I could probably
16 be taught and was taught to be aggressive but I wasn't so in a lot of sports you have to be
17 very aggressive, you have to be very competitive and remember, I'm the guy that was
18 told he was complacent.

19 RV: Right, right.

20 GN: So I'd have you say, "Can you be a good athlete and be complacent?" No.
21 So while I would go out and do it for fun, I couldn't go out and do it for the seriousness
22 with which some people could do it. And I think the other thing is that I started working
23 in my dad's grocery store.

24 RV: I was going to say, you had an after school job.

25 GN: So when other people would go out, although my dad said, "If you want to
26 go out and play football, you go out and play football and then when football season is
27 over you come work in the store." In fact, that would have worked out pretty good with
28 my twin brother because he had absolutely no interest in football but he wanted to play
29 basketball. So during football season I could have played football and he worked and
30 then during basketball season we would have reversed. But after the eighth grade, going
31 into high school, I said, "I'm not interested in playing football." Even though they said,

1 “Why don’t you come play?” Because I was a big guy. I’m still a big guy. So they said,
2 “We need a big body here.” I’m going, “You might need a big body here but I ain’t
3 interested in being a big body.”

4 RV: Right. “It’s not going to be my big body.”

5 GN: So it just never really appealed to me and I’ve never really been into
6 competitive athletics. It just wasn’t something that was—whatever you have to be
7 brought up with to have that in you—my father wasn’t that way. My father golfed. The
8 only thing I know my father ever doing in the way of any type of sport was golfing and
9 maybe that was three times my whole life. He’d go fishing, a little bit of hunting, so it
10 just wasn’t anything that I had to model anybody after. It just wasn’t there.

11 RV: What academic subjects were your favorites? Which ones were you best at?

12 GN: Well, I think that in high school I enjoyed math and science and in fact when
13 I went to college then I did major in Mathematics with a minor in Physics. And I really
14 did like math a lot.

15 RV: What was it about it that you liked?

16 GN: I don’t know. I guess it’s the absoluteness. It absolutely is or it absolutely
17 isn’t. And although I did okay in things like let’s say literature where you would read a
18 poem, this would be my nightmare: You go to class in English Literature. “Gary, will
19 you read the poem today?” “Yes, I’ll read this poem. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,
20 blah, blah.” “Okay, what does that poem mean to you?” And I’d probably shrug my
21 shoulders and say, “I don’t care about this poem.” “Well, it certainly has to mean
22 something to you. What do you think the author’s trying to say?” “I don’t know.” I
23 mean, that to me, would be absolutely positively the worst thing. If you would go to
24 class and the teacher would say, “We’ve got these thirty equations that you have to solve,
25 these quadratic equations, solve these 20 quadratic equations.” I’d go to the back of the
26 room and have those things done before class was over with and come back and say,
27 “Well, if you’ve got twenty more of those things, I’ll solve those.” So I don’t know.
28 History was kind of—I learned it and I did okay in English and history and consumer
29 economics and all of those courses. But if you say, “What did you like and what would
30 you prefer if you could have more of it?” I took all of the biology and chemistry and
31 physics in high school. I took four years of mathematics in high school, I took four years

1 of English in high school, I took one year of Latin in high school because I had to. All of
2 the required courses I did. It wasn't what I would call an easy slate of courses but I
3 definitely tended towards the math and sciences.

4 RV: Gary, why don't we go ahead and stop for today?

5 GN: Okay.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Gary L. Noller
Conducted by Richard B. Verrone, Ph.D.
September 12, 2005
Transcribed by Mindy Moser

1 Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I'm continuing my oral history
2 interview with Mr. Gary Noller. Today is September 12, 2005. I am in Lubbock, Texas,
3 and Gary is again in Camp Bullis, Texas, and I'm in the interview room here on the
4 campus of Texas Tech University and it's approximately 4:19pm, Central Standard Time.
5 Gary, when we left off, we had gotten you through high school and just talking about
6 your growing up period and I wanted to ask if you could reflect upon the times in which
7 you grew up, mainly the 1950s and into the sixties. What do you remember about the
8 United States in the 1950s as a young boy?

9 GN: Well, I think one thing that I recall is the first President that I remember as
10 far as government leaders was President Eisenhower and a lot of what I knew about what
11 was going on politically would have come from going to the movies because at that time
12 whenever you went to a movie they had news reels. They might last five minutes or ten
13 minutes or something like that and show a variety of topics. So I was born in '47.
14 Truman was President but Eisenhower became President in '52. I don't remember that
15 much about the Korean War. I remember a lot of talk of World War II, mainly because
16 of the huge affect that it had on people, particularly with my uncles that were in World
17 War II. But I do remember going on into probably the mid to later fifties when I was in
18 grade school, we had things like the air raid drills, the threat of nuclear war at any time
19 and if the nuclear bomb went off outside town somewhere, you're supposed to get on the
20 floor under your desk.

21 RV: Right, the duck-and-cover.

1 GN: Yeah. So I think growing up under that, there was that threat of Communism
2 and I can remember as a small child my two older sisters, if they wanted to give me a
3 good scare they would always talk about a Communist being outside. In fact I can
4 remember looking out the window one time at a man walking down the sidewalk and
5 they said, "Oh, let's go hide, let's go hide. He's a Communist coming to get us." So I
6 think one of the chief things during the fifties for a lot of people, including kids, was this
7 fear of Communism. And that was pretty much pervasive. Going to school, I went to a
8 parochial school, a Catholic school, so we heard about that in the classroom, we heard
9 about that in church on Sunday morning, so I think one of probably the biggest things
10 that I can relate to as far as politics back then was the beginning of the Cold War and the
11 big fear of Communism.

12 RV: Did your parents tell you about it, kind of inform you kids of what was
13 happening out there?

14 GN: No, I don't think that much came from parents. I don't think we really
15 discussed current events. I think more of it probably came through school, church, and
16 probably newsreels at the movie theater.

17 RV: What were the newsreels like? What kind of things would you see?

18 GN: Well what they would typically do was go out and they'd have of course
19 video and then the video would be narrated. I want to say I can remember things like the
20 McCarthy hearings. I can't tell you what year that was but it was the 1950s. I can
21 remember things like there was a Suez Canal Crisis. I want to say that was maybe '55 or
22 '56 so a lot of it was crisis that was going on. I want to say maybe I remember something
23 about Greece and Communists trying to take over Greece or something like that so it
24 could be natural disasters, it could be floods that were going on in the country; it could be
25 a political crisis going on around the world somewhere. But it would be a video film that
26 would be narrated and clips would last maybe a couple of minutes a piece. You could get
27 five or six clips before the show started. At that time we didn't have TV and we didn't
28 listen to radio much that I remember for news and I didn't read so about the only source
29 would have been through the newsreels.

30 RV: Right, right. So Eisenhower was your first memory of a President. What
31 kind of memory do you have of him?

1 GN: Well, I have no ill memories of him. Eisenhower was kind of favored. I was
2 born and raised in Kansas and he was raised in Kansas so he was looked at as being the
3 favorite son of the state of Kansas, plus a war hero. And I think during that period of
4 time the Korean War had ended, the Vietnam War had not started, so Eisenhower's
5 Presidency of eight years we were not really in a huge amount of foreign conflict.
6 During that time there were some initial battles on the civil rights. I believe that some of
7 the school integration was taking place in the mid to late fifties, some of the battles that
8 went on, particularly in the South, that was under his Presidency, and he golfed a lot.

9 RV: (Laughs) You do remember that?

10 GN: Yeah, it seemed like he golfed a lot and he had a heart attack while he was
11 President.

12 RV: Well, then through the fifties you enter in this age of very stereotypical
13 small-town rural America. You've got the interstate highways connecting the country
14 and we're on this verge of super growth internally and then this giant turmoil of the
15 sixties—as a young boy, could you feel anything coming on? I mean, did you sense
16 anything changing as you were going through grade school and junior high and then into
17 high school into the early sixties? Did you sense anything really changing?

18 GN: Well, I don't think so. I think the biggest change that I recall from that
19 period of time was probably the Presidential Election of 1960 when the democrats John
20 Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson were pretty much squared off and Kennedy narrowly
21 edged out Johnson and then picked Johnson for his running mate. And I think, but I'm
22 not sure Adlai Stephenson was the republican candidate and that election was held and it
23 was a very, very close election and Kennedy did win. And I think from what I remember
24 of that time, it particularly had a lot to do that tied into religion because being raised as a
25 Catholic and going to church and going to school, Kennedy was the first Catholic elected
26 President. There had been other Catholics that had run but were not elected. So I think
27 that colored it a lot and I think Kennedy did seem to be a totally different type of person
28 than Eisenhower. I didn't know anybody other than Eisenhower, but Kennedy seemed to
29 be younger where Eisenhower was older and Eisenhower seemed to be status quo and
30 Kennedy seemed to be more proactive. So I think that I was old enough in 1960—I was
31 thirteen years old—to be able to understand some of what the Presidential Election was

1 about that year and really I think did probably get caught up in the expectations that there
2 were big changes that were going to take place with the election of a new President.

3 RV: When do you first remember hearing about Southeast Asia and Vietnam?

4 GN: Well, I want to say probably it was 1962 or 1963. I believe I was probably a
5 sophomore in high school and we would from time to time in various classes discuss
6 current events and one thing that I do recall was that there was an attack made on, I think,
7 an air base somewhere and there were some Americans killed and a rather large number
8 either killed or wounded and at that time I may have ten or twelve, and discussing the
9 implications that that had, that we had this loss of life or these casualties in the American
10 military who were serving overseas in Vietnam. Prior to that I had heard probably a little
11 bit but more I think in line with what was going on in Laos and again, a lot of that
12 probably coming through school with discussions about Communism and the tie between
13 Communism and religion in that the Communists were atheists and if the Communists
14 ever took over you would not be able to practice your religion and what that would mean.

15 RV: Right. So that made an impact on you?

16 GN: Yeah, and I think that probably the thing that I remember most clearly is
17 discussing in a school classroom this attack that took place but also I remember vaguely
18 some other things about what was going on in Laos prior to this particular event
19 happening in Vietnam.

20 RV: Do you remember anything specific about the Laos Crisis, as they called it?
21 What were you hearing about this teeny little country across the world?

22 GN: I think that I was hearing that Communists were trying to take it over and it
23 was not good for Communists to be taking over countries. I don't know that I knew as
24 much about it then as I know about it now. I may try to say what I knew about it then
25 was what happened in China at the end of the forties and how China was lost and that you
26 had the huge amount of people behind the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe and you had
27 China, which was a huge, large country and you had the huge small country of what at
28 that time was called Formosa, which is now Taiwan, that was free and then you jump
29 over to Laos and it was trying to resist Communist takeover. Plus all of the other things
30 that were happening in some other countries, I think in Italy and Greece and Spain, that
31 had, particularly after World War II, some attempts by some people to sway the politics

1 towards Communism. So it was like there was a lot of belief that this was something big
2 and it was on the move and it was threatening.

3 RV: I remember when, in the 1980s when I was in high school, the image of
4 Communism was portrayed as this giant red octopus sitting on top of the globe with the
5 tentacles kind of wrapped around the globe. Do you remember anything similar from
6 your junior high or high school years of how visually the United States government or its
7 publications or just the mass media had a visual out there on what Communism was?

8 GN: Well, I don't know visually. I think what it reminds me of is what I spoke of
9 a little bit ago when my sisters would say they were like what we'd call the Boogeyman
10 or they'd be somebody coming to get you. It's probably personalized more that way, that
11 they would in some manner try to take away your freedom or restrict freedom. That was
12 the line out there. But I think that I do remember that it was believed that they had a
13 global goal of dominating the entire globe. They had huge chunks of territory plus large
14 numbers of people were coming under their grip and they were on the move and they
15 were on the march and they had full intention of taking over the whole world, including
16 the United States.

17 RV: And it was a real fear. You as, as young men, this was something that was
18 real?

19 GN: Yes, yes.

20 RV: Well, moving forward, Gary, you graduated high school I believe in 1965
21 and by this time the United States is fully immersed into Vietnam. We have troops on the
22 ground basically, and the Gulf of Tonkin incidents had happened the previous August of
23 1964. During these high school years of yours, what do you remember about these very
24 significant things that went on?

25 GN: Well, I remember we continued to get more and more involved militarily and
26 the Gulf of Tonkin incident, I'm sure we discussed in class and it was just further proof
27 that the enemy—whoever the enemy was, Communists and Vietnamese—were going to
28 continue on their goal or objective of militarily if necessary defeating countries that they
29 wanted to take over. And I don't remember debating at that particular point in time
30 whether the Gulf of Tonkin incident really happened or not but I do remember watching
31 TV, Johnson as President coming on and addressing the nation and describing the events

1 and what he was doing about it. And I want to say certainly at that time—I'd have been
2 seventeen or eighteen years old—I'd have been watching that and being able to
3 understand what he was saying and I want to say believe what he was saying as the truth.

4 RV: At that time—this is difficult to do when we're doing an oral history
5 interview—at that time, and not what you think now, what did you think of Johnson?
6 This is I guess pre-Vietnam.

7 GN: Well, I think that probably a lot of my outlook at that time was influenced by
8 the Kennedy assassination. I think that I really, at that time, had a lot of belief and
9 respect in Kennedy and his Presidency. He was very popular as a President. I don't
10 know what he did and accomplished in the time that he was President that would be
11 significant. The Cuban missile crisis that happened in 1961, we were pretty close on the
12 brink, at that time, to some type of armed conflict with the Soviet Union and we steered
13 out of that showdown. That facedown came out favorable for the United States from the
14 standpoint that we did not go to armed conflict, but I think that the assassination of
15 Kennedy was a huge, huge event from the standpoint of a, I might term, a loss of
16 innocence. Up until that point in time there was a lot of faith and belief and trust that,
17 "Oh, gee, everything is going to be great and we'll accomplish a lot of things. Kennedy
18 is President. He's going to get things done. It's going to be different." And then he was
19 killed in November of '63 and Johnson took over as President. And I can remember
20 cynical people at that time talking and saying, "Oh, well, Johnson had a role to play in
21 Kennedy's death. Johnson wanted to be President all along. He didn't like being second
22 man and he had something to do with it." I don't think I believe that but it's certainly
23 probably colored in some way my interpretation of Johnson's Presidency. It seemed like
24 we probably went back in style. Johnson's style would have been more like the style that
25 Eisenhower would have portrayed than what Kennedy had. The charisma wasn't there.

26 RV: What did the assassination do for you personally? How did that affect you?

27 GN: How did...?

28 RV: Kennedy's assassination affect you personally?

29 GN: Well I think to me it was a significant event from the standpoint of there was
30 a certain loss of innocence. I'll use that term. We had heard when we learned history
31 about the assassination of Lincoln and the assassination of some of the other presidents

1 but there was really I guess just a shock and disbelief that this could happen. Again,
2 Kennedy was a very popular President and I have to say that I had a lot of respect for him
3 and a lot of believe in him and maybe a lot of idealism caught up with his Presidency. So
4 when he was shot and killed, that was a huge shock and I pretty much came back and
5 said, "Life isn't always going to rosy, life isn't always ideal." Here you have a very
6 popular President and he gets shot and within an hour is dead. So I think it probably
7 brought about some cynicism, some pessimism, maybe more of a questioning of
8 whatever seems good it may not last. You've always got to be alert for the fact that
9 things can change very quickly and for the worse.

10 RV: Okay. Do you remember how your family reacted? Coming from a Catholic
11 family and Kennedy being this young Catholic President, do you remember the reaction
12 there?

13 GN: Well, I think it probably was pretty unanimous that it was a severe blow and
14 I can remember all the TV networks went on with live programming, were covering
15 events live and I don't remember what day of the week it was. I know we didn't get out
16 of school. We went to school but we watched TV in the classroom, the events that
17 followed. And I think part of this happened over the weekend and we went back to
18 school on Monday. Maybe the funeral was more like on a Tuesday or something because
19 it seems like talking with some of the people in the neighborhood more than in the family
20 when Lee Harvey Oswald was shot. He was shot and it was live TV.

21 RV: Yes, he was.

22 GN: And I can remember a comment from the neighbor across the street,
23 something to the effect of, "Good, they got that son of a bitch." And they were a
24 Catholic family also. So I think that stuck in my mind, the huge sense of loss and shock
25 and then also when Oswald was killed it was, "Good for him. He deserves to die." But I
26 think that was at the moment and that was hugely emotional and that in all reality it
27 would have been better for him to live and be brought to trial so we could potentially find
28 the truth—not that we don't know it now but in some manner to know exactly what
29 happened through all of that. But it was something that we watched on TV and I know
30 we talked about it and what the occasions were. You know, "Johnson's going to be
31 President now," and what might be different and what might be the same. But I think

1 that I can remember my dad ran a grocery store and one of the customers coming in, a
2 woman coming in, and her statement was something to the effect that, "Isn't it terrible
3 what happened to our President?" Using the word "our" to describe it, not "the." She
4 didn't say, "Isn't it terrible what happened to the President?" It was, "Isn't it terrible
5 what happened to our President?" So I think a lot of people felt that way in the
6 community that I grew up in, that it was not happening to some person detached, it was
7 something to a person that you were closely attached to. He was our President. He
8 wasn't the President, he was our President.

9 RV: You remember that?

10 GN: Yeah.

11 RV: And it struck you as a young man, that, "Wow, this is the whole country that
12 is suffering."

13 GN: Yeah. So it was very personal for a lot of people. It wasn't just something
14 that happened to somebody, it was something that happened to you, something very
15 personal that happened.

16 RV: Well, when Kennedy left office in the way that he did and in comes Johnson
17 immediately, there's a drastic change of personality. Did the nation sense that, that
18 here's this New Englander, Catholic, the Kennedy family, and then here comes Johnson
19 from a small town in central Texas, really masterful politician, maybe not as smooth?
20 And we're right in the middle of the Cold War. Things are heating up or are going to be
21 heating up very quickly in Southeast Asia. What did the country sense? What do you
22 think?

23 GN: Well, I don't know. Part of what I'm going to say is probably colored by
24 what I've learned since then. It's hard to put myself back in there right now but I do
25 know that when Johnson came on and he addressed the people, he was a humble man
26 from Stonewall, Texas, which is a small town. He had a very meager upbringing and
27 went to school and became a school teacher and got into politics and became President
28 under a very extreme situation of having to succeed an assassinated President. I think
29 probably like a lot of the country he was shocked. My recollection is that he said that he
30 would continue what Kennedy had started so I think that he wanted very much to
31 continue on but at the same time, I think that he had certain things that he wanted to do.

1 He certainly had run for President so he had some ideas of what he might want to do as
2 President. Whether those were exactly the same as what Kennedy wanted to do, I don't
3 know. But I think yeah, people knew they had a different person in there and that the
4 laws of how a Vice President succeeds a President are very definite and so we just went
5 on.

6 RV: Well, when you get out of high school in '65, what are you thinking about
7 where you're going? Are your parents saying, "College?" Is Gary saying, "College" or
8 are you saying, "Military?" Where are you?

9 GN: Well I think that it was very apparent to me for a long time that I would go to
10 college. And again, I had a twin brother and so both of us were kind of in the same boat.
11 And I'd heard that for a long time—I don't know, probably from the time when I was in
12 grade school. And neither one of my parents had a college education. My mother went
13 to sixth grade. My dad went through twelfth grade but lacked I think one credit to get a
14 diploma so I don't think he officially graduated even though he went twelve years. And I
15 think that they had a huge belief in a college education as being very valuable,
16 particularly for those of us boys. My older brother had gone to college and graduated and
17 went into banking and was successful so it was something that we were just told.
18 "You're going to college when you get out of high school," and I think it's something
19 that we wanted to do. I didn't really look at anything else. I just seemed to me a natural
20 thing to do and it wasn't that difficult because we had a four-year college in the town, in
21 Dodge City. St. Mary of Plains had been formed in I think 1953. It was a small college
22 and in 1965 I think the student population was probably around six hundred or seven
23 hundred students. So it was pretty much, "When you get done with high school, you're
24 going to go to college." In fact, college and high school were in the same building so you
25 didn't even have to find a new place to go. It was about a four-story building and the
26 high school was on the bottom floor and the college was on the upper floors so to me,
27 going to college was like four more years of high school only maybe a little bit harder.

28 RV: What was the name of the college again?

29 GN: St. Mary of the Plains College.

30 RM: St. Mary of the Plains.

1 GN: And it was a four-year college run by the Sisters of St. Joseph out of Wichita,
2 Kansas.

3 RV: Was there any other ideas or thoughts about going somewhere else?

4 GN: Well, I had applied elsewhere. I think I'd put in three or four applications.
5 University of Colorado in Boulder, I want to say New Mexico State University in
6 Albuquerque, and maybe Arizona. It seemed like I wanted to go west. I didn't have
7 really any desire at that time to go east, not even to the University of Kansas or Kansas
8 State University which where in eastern Kansas. But I did put applications in and I think
9 at that time it cost you about ten bucks to submit an application and they'd come back
10 and tell you whether you were accepted or not. But that would have meant moving away
11 from home and probably out of state tuition was a lot of money. And again, I had no
12 money. I worked for my dad and we got some money for working but it wasn't money
13 that you could accumulate an amount of wealth to pay to go away from college and they
14 pretty much said, "That's nice. You can go ahead and apply to these places and they can
15 give you acceptance letters but you're not going." So it was pretty much that I wanted to
16 go college, yeah, it would have been nice to go away because some of the people that
17 went to college did go away, but my mom and dad just said, "Okay, we've got a school
18 here in town. That's the one you're going to."

19 RV: And that was that?

20 GN: That's pretty much that and about the only thing that I could have done was
21 probably run away from home, which I certainly wouldn't have had the guts to do that.
22 It's like, "You stay home, you work in the store and part of your pay for working in the
23 store is we'll pay the tuition." I think at that time or at least part of that time, you could
24 go take sixteen hours and it would be maybe two hundred and fifty dollars a semester and
25 live at home so there's no room and board. And then you had to pay for some books and
26 stuff like that. But I had my twin brother and we went together and so that would have
27 been five hundred dollars a semester, a thousand dollars a year, plus some other fees and
28 costs. I don't know; let's say that's fifteen hundred dollars a year, but likewise, I don't
29 think my dad was making ten thousand dollars a year, either. So that could have been ten
30 percent or more of the family income just to pay tuition, which would be a pretty good
31 hunk, even then.

1 RV: Absolutely. So your life continues very similarly as to what it was in high
2 school?

3 GN: Yeah.

4 RV: Tell me about what college was like for you?

5 GN: Well, I think the big change is of course we turned eighteen and so in the
6 state of Kansas you can buy beer at the age of eighteen. Not to say we didn't have it
7 before then, either, but I think it did change a lot the group of people that we were
8 exposed to because going into college, there were people who obviously came in and
9 went to school there. Some of the kids left town, we had people that went away to
10 college, we had some people that went away to the military service right away upon
11 graduating high school. And going into college, out of my high school class which may
12 have been fifty—I think fifty or sixty—there may have been a group of fifteen or maybe
13 even twenty that continued on to college there. So we may have had a freshman class of
14 let's say two hundred so you immediately got exposed to a whole lot of people from other
15 towns. At that time there were a lot of students that came from back east—New Jersey,
16 New York. There were a lot of people who wanted to go to school then. Part of the
17 reasons that they wanted to go to school may have already been because they didn't want
18 to go in the military because they didn't care for service in a war zone. I can remember a
19 lot of people from the East Coast that came to school so we got exposed to them and their
20 New Jersey accent, in particular, people from Hoboken, Union City, places up on the
21 New Jersey side, across from New York City, and made some new friends and learned
22 about places beyond the flat plains of western Kansas. And of course the classes were
23 different. You weren't quite as structured, you could pick things of interest to you, you
24 could choose a major, a minor, kind of pick your interests but it was still—like I said, I
25 went to Catholic grade school, went to Catholic high school and now I'm going to
26 Catholic college. So a lot of the philosophical outlook is just a continuation of the same
27 and more of the same. Not that that's bad but it's certainly unified and in fact, some of
28 the teachers that we had in high school ended up becoming teachers in the college so
29 you'd have a teacher in high school and end up, three or four years later having the same
30 teacher teaching you something similar only in the college setting.

31 RV: That's very interesting. It's a very unique experience.

1 GN: Like I said, in some respects I'll say, "Well, going to college was sort of like
2 going to high school except it was a little harder courses."

3 RV: How did you do academically?

4 GN: Academically?

5 RV: Yes.

6 GN: I did okay. I did better in things I liked and not so good in things I didn't
7 like. I probably could have done a lot better than I did do. Some of it was probably hard
8 headedness on my part but what I liked was math and science so I majored in
9 Mathematics and minored in Physics. I took I think a five-hour college chemistry course.
10 I didn't take any college biology though. I took high school biology. I did okay in
11 history, did okay and took a fair amount of that in college. I did okay in languages. I
12 minored in French. At that time we had to have I think one year of foreign language and
13 the selections were French and Spanish. I don't know, maybe Latin and so I took French.
14 I don't know why, I just did and I liked it. I made A's in French in the first year so I took
15 it the second year and made B's and thought, "Well, I'm not that far away from getting a
16 minor." So I took it third year and got C's. If I had taken it one more year I probably
17 would have gotten D's and that's probably because I was outside of where I really
18 wanted to be. I wanted to be math and science and here I am taking French and probably
19 for the wrong reasons. The only F I think I got on my transcript was what was called
20 Fine Arts and it didn't count towards your grade point but they put it on your grade card.
21 And all fine arts was going to concerts and you had to go and sign a sheet of paper.
22 They'd have community concerts where they'd have different acts come in and one
23 semester I just decided, "I ain't going to go to that stuff. I don't want to go and I'm not
24 going." So I didn't go and it doesn't count on your grade point average anyway but they
25 showed it on the grade card, a fine arts F. But they did bring some very good
26 entertainment to a small town in western Kansas. I remember seeing Ray Charles in
27 Dodge City, Kansas and Van Cliburn. I remember seeing him in Dodge City, Kansas.
28 So they had some really pretty top-notch national performers that would come to town on
29 a concert and I think we could go free. We didn't have to buy a ticket but you just had to
30 sign in saying you were there. If they went down the list, they'd mark you yes or you
31 weren't and you maybe had to do two of these a semester so if you did both of them you

1 got an A, if you did one of them you got a C, and if you didn't go to either one you got an
2 F. And I look back on that now and go, "Well, that was pretty boneheaded of me to
3 refuse to go." But otherwise, academically, I did okay. I don't know what I had on a 4.0
4 scale, maybe upon graduation a 3.2 average. Which for me, being complacent, I'd say—I
5 don't know if it was overachieving or underachieving or achieving where I should have
6 been. I have no idea.

7 RV: Well, what was your future, Gary? Where did you see yourself? Were you
8 thinking, "I'm going to get drafted most likely?" Or were you thinking, "I'm going to
9 take over the store?"

10 GN: Well, really, way back in high school, the last year I was in high school, in
11 senior mathematics which was trigonometry, and believe it or not in 1965 was learning
12 computer programming. And the instructor we had, which I think gave his name before
13 was Vern Piantinida and he was from New Jersey. And he may have come to Dodge City
14 and went to St. Mary of the Plains College and got his Bachelor's Degree. But at any
15 rate, he returned to Dodge City and was the high school math instructor for I think maybe
16 two or three years. I can't remember exactly what years I had him but I know he was
17 instructor when I was a senior in high school. And he had at some point in time worked
18 for IBM, the computer company, and had learned programming. And so as part of our
19 senior math, he taught us computer programming and it was a language called Gotran, G-
20 o-t-r-a-n, and I don't know what it means but it was even before Fortran. Fortran became
21 very popular for a long time. So he would teach us how to do programming. For
22 example, if you wanted to solve a quadratic equation or something like that or if you
23 wanted to take ten random numbers and put those ten numbers in ascending order of
24 smallest to largest, how would you program that into a computer to have the computer
25 look at that number and decide how it is compared to every other number and put it in
26 that list? So he'd give us these assignments and I can remember going home and
27 spending hours at night on a Friday night, maybe two or three or four hours, doing this
28 program. I can even remember my dad coming and saying, "Are you going to go to bed?
29 When are you going to bed? It's two o'clock; you need to go to bed." And I'd say, "No,
30 I'm working on this program. I've got to get this program done." So I really enjoyed
31 that and going into college we had no computer programming at that time. But coming

1 out of college, I was able to secure what was called an assistantship at Kansas State
2 University, in a new department which was computer science, in which they would have
3 paid my tuition and I think some books and fees and given me a little bit of money. I
4 want to say three hundred dollars a month and I would have been on a Master's Program
5 in Computer Science and then worked maybe twenty hours a week somewhere as a
6 student employee. So my goal coming out of college was to go to graduate school and go
7 into computer science.

8 RV: But what happened?

9 GN: I got drafted.

10 RV: Were you expecting this?

11 GN: Expecting to get drafted?

12 RV: Yes.

13 GN: Yeah. I mean if you were 1-A you would get drafted. The only way I would
14 not have gotten drafted is upon graduation from college—all during college we had
15 deferments. They were called a 2-S deferment. 1-A was, "You're going to get drafted."
16 4-F was "You're not going to get drafted." And you ranged anywhere between a 1-A and
17 4-F, and students were given what was called a 2-S. And I think the "S" just meant
18 student. But upon graduation from college, the 2-S deferment went away and so in June
19 of '69—we graduated in May '69 and in June of '69 a bus with probably about twenty of
20 us from Dodge City went to Kansas City to the Armed Forces Entrance Examination
21 Station and went through a series of physical and mental tests and basically at the end of
22 that time you go to this little old lady sitting at a desk and she reviews all your paperwork
23 and she's got a stamp and one of them is going to say "approved" and one of them is
24 going to say "rejected." And "approved" means you're going to be 1-A and "rejected"
25 means you're going to be 4-F. And so she went through all my paperwork and picked up
26 the stamp and went "approved" and stamped the paperwork, which basically put me as a
27 1-A now in the Selective Service Draft Classification. So leaving there in June of '69, I
28 knew I was 1-A and soon after that did get paperwork from the local draft board saying,
29 "You're 1-A." And I happened to know the lady that was the clerk of the draft board.
30 She shopped at my dad's grocery store and the draft board had an office down in the post
31 office downtown. So I went to the draft board office and asked her, "Okay, what's going

1 to happen? What's the deal hear on this 1-A draft?" And she said, "Well, they're taking
2 about ten a month and you're number fifty on the list, so probably in four or five months
3 you're name's going to come up unless something drastically happens where they take
4 more people or they take less people or something happens to the people that are on the
5 draft list—they all go and join." I thought it over and she said, "If you start the semester,
6 if you go to school in September, you can start that semester and finish that semester but
7 if you get a draft notice sometime during that semester, you cannot enroll in the next
8 semester following that. You'll have to be drafted." So I basically said, "Well, there's
9 no sense in going to school because even if I get one semester in, I won't get the second
10 semester in." So I notified the people at Kansas State University that they could basically
11 take my name off the list although I had accepted—they had made me the offer and I had
12 accepted the offer to go into the Master's Program, but I expected to get a draft notice
13 prior to that time or during that time and therefore I was crossing that off my list of things
14 to do.

15 RV: What were your feelings about being drafted? How did you feel about it?

16 GN: Well, I'd have just as soon gone to school. I mean I understand the process
17 by which you get into the military at that time. If you're 1-A you're either going to join
18 or you're going to get drafted. Or I suppose you could refuse or you could go to Canada
19 or you could do other things. A lot of people didn't go.

20 RV: You mean people didn't go to Canada or people didn't go to Vietnam or
21 didn't get drafted?

22 GN: A lot of people didn't go to the military but there was some means by which
23 they didn't or people went to the military but they chose. For example, my brother
24 enlisted in the Air Force and was put in operating computers. He didn't program
25 computers but he was put into operating computers, probably because of the fact that he
26 had a degree in mathematics. So they assigned him to some school and he learned how to
27 run computers. But you know, if that's the way it was going to be, that's the way it was
28 going to be. I wasn't going to join. I can remember one time my dad came to me and
29 said, "You know, you're going to get drafted." And I said, "Yeah, I know I'm going to
30 get drafted." "Well, what are you going to do about it?" I'm like, "Okay, well what can I
31 do about it? Write them a letter and say, 'Don't draft me?'" And what he was basically

1 saying was, "Are you going to join?" You could join the active military, which a lot of
2 people, which a lot of people that I went to college with joined the Air Force or the Navy.
3 They weren't going to join the Army and they weren't going to join the Marines and they
4 would probably say the reason for that is because of ground combat. Or people joined
5 the National Guard or they joined the Army Reserve because the National Guard and
6 Reserves weren't being taken to Vietnam. And my thought, which to me probably was
7 protest more than anything, was, "I'm not joining. If they're going to draft me, they're
8 going to draft me." And so I just rode out the summer. I had some jobs, I worked, had
9 money, ran around, whatever friends were still in town, we went out at night and went to
10 movies and went to local night establishments, which are beer joints in Dodge City, and
11 when the draft notice came they just tell you where you've got to be and when you've got
12 to be there.

13 RV: And it was as simple as that?

14 GN: Yeah. I mean, I wasn't going to join and really, those were the only
15 alternatives. It was join or get drafted. One guy I went to grade school with did apply for
16 and was granted conscientious objector but I look at that and go, "I'm not a conscientious
17 objector." I don't know of anybody from my hometown that refused to go and left and
18 went to Canada or anything like that or went to jail. So to me, it's sort of like, "You're
19 either going to join or you're going to get drafted and I'm not going to join so I'm going
20 to get drafted." And I probably look at that as saying, "Okay, if you join you could
21 volunteer for the draft and that would be two years or you could get drafted and that was two
22 years." But it was sort of like, "I'll make the suckers draft me. Maybe they'll lose my
23 paperwork."

24 RV: Well, you sound pretty matter-of-fact about it, like you knew your fate and
25 you had X, Y, and Z as options and you let the chips fall where they may and you figured
26 you were going to get drafted. Was it that matter-of-fact for you? Was it that
27 simple?

28 GN: Well, I guess I want to say yeah, it was. I mean I wanted to go to college. I
29 wouldn't have gone to college just to hide out, I mean to graduate school. I wouldn't be
30 going to graduate school to hide out. I'd be going to graduate school because I really
31 wanted to get into computer science. That was really something that I thought was where

1 I was at and I had no desire to go to the military. I wouldn't have volunteered, period.
2 The only way they would get me and did get me was through the draft, but to me it
3 seemed inevitable. There was no way around it. I'd had a close friend that was drafted in
4 '67 and killed in '68 in Vietnam. I guess one of the things that probably was in the back
5 of my mind was that there is a certain responsibility. Even though I'm not going to
6 volunteer to do it, I'm not going to not do it. But yeah, inevitability. I've had people ask
7 me a question like that before. They're like, "Well, how could they make you do it?"
8 And I want to go, "Well, I think there are laws that say you have to do it. I mean, what
9 do you mean, "How can they make you do it? It's not like it's an option." I may believe
10 it should be an option. In fact, I probably did. One of my beliefs was probably like,
11 "You know, if there's a bunch of people that want to go into the Army and they want to
12 go to Vietnam and they want to be in a war, that's fine. If that's their belief they can do
13 that. I personally don't believe I want to go to Vietnam and be in a war." But I didn't get
14 to make that choice. Somebody made that choice for me and I think a lot of the reasons
15 that I did what I did was the tradition. I'm not going to not do it from the standpoint of
16 running to Canada or something like that. I just didn't feel that strongly. I could have
17 been a conscientious objector. I said, "No, I don't conscientiously object to war. I object
18 to me being in one." So I think my realization of what was going on probably occurred
19 in 1968. 1968 was a big watershed year. I think if I'd take a look at my life growing up,
20 1963 with the Kennedy assassination was a big deal was the way I looked at life. And
21 then 1968 was a big deal probably because of my friend getting killed, a guy that I'd
22 grown up with my whole life getting killed in 1968 and just a further understanding of the
23 fact that life may not be the way you want to make life to be. There are things that
24 happen out here that are beyond your control and they happen, like it or not. And '68
25 was my friend getting killed and there were huge protests in 1968, the Tet offensive that
26 happened in 1968, Lyndon Johnson basically saying, "I ain't running for President no
27 more, even though I can." 1968. So you take the first half of 1968 for me and the things
28 that happened and that's a lot that happened. And I can remember in that summer of
29 1968, basically almost coming to the decision of, "I'm not coming back to the fourth year
30 of college." Being so, I don't know what the word would be, depressed, cynical,
31 disillusioned, disappointed in the summer of 1968 as saying, "I don't believe the future

1 holds a whole hell of a lot of anything good.” I was probably almost despondent. And I
2 remember having a conversation with my brother-in-law, Tim Sartorius, who married my
3 sister Wanda. And he was a high school instructor to me. He taught me physics in high
4 school and government in high school then he went on to the college level. Although he
5 was never a teacher of mine at the college level, he was dean of students at St. Mary of
6 the Plains College when I went to college there. And I think I told him one day, I said,
7 “What the hell? Why even go to school anymore? The whole world’s coming apart.
8 Look at all the crap that’s going on. If this is what it’s like to get older and be an adult, I
9 don’t want to participate.” He encouraged me very heavily. “Well, you’ve got three
10 years in; you’ve only got one more year to go. You need to go. Don’t let this get you
11 down. Things may get better and whatever, whatever, whatever.” And I did go to the
12 fourth year but I can remember very seriously, after my junior year of college and the
13 things that happened in the first half of ’68 and going on into the summer of ’68. The
14 Democrat Convention in Chicago that year and the stuff that happened up there is just
15 disillusionment and my attitude was probably, “Oh, what the hell?”

16 RV: Okay, tell me about Vietnam? What did you think about the war itself?

17 GN: What did I think about the war itself?

18 RV: Yeah.

19 GN: Well, I think in the beginning, it was noble and it may still have been noble,
20 but I think to me, a point came when my friend was killed because I was very bitter about
21 that, a lot of bitterness that my friend who I grew up with my whole life was killed there.
22 Regardless of whether the war was good or bad, the loss of a friend that occurred at that
23 particular point in time is certainly going to color the outlook. I can remember watching
24 Lyndon Johnson’s speech and his speech was at the end of March of ’68 and my friend
25 was killed like March 11th. So it was probably within two to three weeks of the time that
26 my friend was killed so it was probably within days of him being buried and I was a
27 pallbearer at this funeral. Within days of that happening, Johnson’s on TV saying, “I’m
28 not going to run for President.” And sitting there and saying, “Good.” Probably, “Good,
29 you son of a bitch. You don’t deserve to be President.” So I think I had a huge amount
30 of bitterness then and I still do—I’m not over it—about the war claiming the life of a

1 friend who was drafted to go. He went one year to college and then dropped out of
2 college and got snapped up in the draft.

3 RV: Gary, do you want to tell me about him? I mean, who this person was, his
4 name and what he meant to you?

5 GN: Yeah, his name was James Nufer.

6 RV: How do you spell his last name?

7 GN: N-u-f-e-r. And his father ran an auto repair shop and he was born in I think
8 the first week of November of 1947. Well, my brother and I were born on October 13th,
9 1947 and we were premature. We were about six weeks premature and my brother was
10 born as what they call a blue baby. He didn't have enough oxygen at birth and they had
11 to give him a resuscitation immediately upon birth or he would have died. And we were
12 both small, I think four pounds and something. And he had to be placed in an incubator
13 and remain in the hospital. Well, since he was in an incubator in the hospital, I stayed in
14 the hospital, too, and my mom stayed in the hospital because of feeding and what not.
15 Well, we stayed there about a month so we were in the hospital nursery when James was
16 born. So at one time, the three of us were in the nursery of St. Anthony's Hospital in
17 Dodge City. Well, then we grew up together, went to grade school together. I can
18 remember one time during grade school that we went to a circus that was held. The
19 Shrine Circus was held in Dodge City and going with them. My mother didn't drive, my
20 dad worked, and he couldn't take off work, so we somehow had to get out to the
21 auditorium which was far enough away you couldn't walk, so I can remember going
22 maybe his mother drove. That's one memory I have of him. Then through high school
23 we ran around together. You know, people pick up their little cliques, their little groups
24 of people and spend a lot of time through high school. His dad, having a mechanic shop,
25 James had put together a dragster, a racecar, and then on summer evenings, I can
26 remember going down after his father's business closed and my father's business closed.
27 We'd go down and we'd work on this car and then on weekends take it out to a drag strip
28 and race the car and generally break it which means the next week you'd have to go back
29 and fix whatever your broke that week so that whenever they had the next drag races you
30 could take it back out and break it again and go back and fix it. So I grew up with him
31 and learned a lot of automobiles and mechanicing and stuff through the racecar. And

1 then he went one year to college at St. Mary's and then dropped out of college and
2 probably within a year or so was drafted and went to Vietnam. He came home in
3 December. I can remember him being home at Christmas, which would have been
4 Christmas of '67, and we went out. He was on leave and we went out doing all the
5 running around we could do and then he left in January, was killed in March, so he was
6 only in Vietnam about two months when he was killed.

7 RV: Wow. Did you all exchange letters?

8 GN: Yeah, he was there long enough to where we wrote. In fact, I think my
9 brother has a letter that he wrote to James that was returned as undeliverable. I have
10 looked but I never found any letters that he wrote but I know he did write. I remember
11 getting letters from him from Vietnam.

12 RV: Do you remember how he felt about Vietnam? Did you all talk about it?
13 When he came home in December, what was his attitude towards the war, do you
14 remember?

15 GN: I don't remember us talking. We talked a lot about being in the Army. We
16 had class members that graduated from high school in '65 and went into the service right
17 away. I remember some that went in the Navy and at least a couple that went into the
18 Marines. And some of them went in, went through training so that they'd come home on
19 leave and we'd see them. They'd talk about what training was like and several of them
20 did go to Vietnam in probably '66. I can remember one or two that went over. They
21 were Navy and they were like heavy construction, maybe Seabees, and they ran
22 bulldozers, clearing jungle around air bases or something and they came home and they
23 would talk about what they had seen. I don't remember talking with James about him
24 going to Vietnam. I can remember talking about things that he had done in training but I
25 don't think we really talked that much about, philosophically what this is all about.
26 Again, it was sort of his father was a World War II veteran, his father I believe was in the
27 infantry in World War II and went over and did his service and came home and so it was
28 just like, "Okay, this is another war and it falls on to those people that are eighteen,
29 nineteen, and twenty years old to go serve." So I don't remember anything really in
30 particular, discussing philosophical issues about the war in Vietnam with him.

31 RV: How did you find out he was killed?

1 GN: Well, it was during the school day. It would have been in March and I think
2 my brother-in-law told me, Tim Sartorius. Again, he was the dean of students and I think
3 we had just gotten on lunch break and we had a student activities center that had kind of a
4 little snack bar deal in there. And I don't remember if we were there and he walked in or
5 if he was there and we walked in but I remember him saying something to me and
6 another friend. "We just got terrible news. James Nufer was killed in Vietnam." And I
7 was with another friend of mine, a college friend, Joe Hobbs from Baltimore, Maryland,
8 and I know we just kind of looked at each other and as I recall we didn't eat. We kind of
9 went out, got in his car or my car or something and just drove around town. I don't know
10 if at that time maybe it was on the newscast then at noon or something on the local radio
11 stations. But it was one of those things that I guess I want to say I never thought would
12 have happened and I still have a hard time believing that it happened. I mean, I went and
13 I spent a year and I came home and we had other people from town that went and spent
14 their tour and came home. And I guess the expectation was, "Okay, you're going to go,
15 you're going to spend your year and you're going to come home." But that didn't
16 happen.

17 RV: Did his death make you—I mean, you describe 1968 and kind of what was
18 going on in the country and you have your friend's death in March, really at the
19 beginning of this very tumultuous year. Did it make you angry that, "Gosh, this war is
20 not a good thing," or was this something that made you—you described you being just
21 kind of melancholy and really going, "I don't see a good future here." What did it do for
22 you? I mean, you're getting ready to go over there. You're basically eighteen months
23 away. You don't know that at the time but I guess you can guess you're going. At some
24 point you're going to get drafted or you're going to sign up. We've talked about that.
25 What did it do for you personally and your attitude toward the war?

26 GN: Well, I think that it was a personal loss to me so it made me very bitter and
27 there's no way that I can say that I believe I was thinking objectively as to what was right
28 and wrong. What I was thinking probably more was from the standpoint of bitterness at
29 personal loss and like I said before, I can remember when Johnson got on TV and said he
30 wasn't going to run for President, which I think I pretty well knew and most people knew
31 that he was giving up or he was basically signaling failure in Vietnam. To me, when he

1 got on TV that night and said he wasn't going to run, and I believe he said something to
2 the effect of he was going to work towards peace. And I can't remember exactly what
3 had taken place up to that point in time. We'd having bombing halts. They'd bomb and
4 then they wouldn't bomb and they'd bomb and they wouldn't bomb. They would
5 escalate and de-escalate and retaliate and all this kind of stuff. But when he got on TV
6 and said he wasn't going to run for President again, to me it was basically admitting that
7 we were losing. So to reflect upon the fact that the situation in Vietnam was going down
8 the drain and then you have a close friend die there, I think that does cause a huge
9 amount of bitterness. I think early on I was complacent about it. Like I said, "If people
10 wanted to go to Vietnam and fight a war, go. I just don't care to do that." So I didn't get
11 into a lot of discussions over, "Is it right or is it wrong?" I was probably more in the
12 class of, "Whether it's right or wrong just leave me out of it." And I think a lot of people
13 were that way because a lot of the protesters that were protesting, although they were
14 anti-war protesters, they were probably really anti-draft. It was like they were more
15 concerned about the war because they could be drafted and go. If there wasn't a draft,
16 they could say, "Well, at least I don't have to go." I don't know that they would have
17 been out protesting. I don't know that they were on such high moral ground
18 philosophically or it was kind of more of a, "I just want to save my butt." And I would
19 certainly say that's my case. Whether the war is right or wrong to me is one issue but I
20 knew I didn't want to go. I didn't have that strong a belief in it that I felt compelled to
21 go, even though friends of mine were going. I just didn't see the compelling case to go
22 there and to fight a war so I wasn't one that was going to go down and say, "Take me, I
23 want to go." So I think the word I'll use and keep coming back to is one of bitterness,
24 bitterness over the loss of a close friend in war and then the President on TV, I think,
25 basically saying, "This isn't what we should be doing. We can't be doing this. I'm not
26 going to run for President anymore, I give up." It's kind of like, "He's flying the white
27 flag out here, saying we're going to find a way out." He's saying that in March of 1968
28 and I don't get drafted until September of 1969, which is almost a year and a half later. I
29 don't go to Vietnam until June of 1970, which is two years later and a different President.
30 So even electing Richard Nixon president, who said, "I have a plan." And I believed him
31 because I voted for him in 1968. The first election I voted in, I voted for Nixon. Nixon

1 said, "I have a plan." So I think my attitude at that particular time is, "Let's get the hell
2 out of there. Just get the hell out of that place."

3 RV: What did you think of the anti-war movement, beyond what you've said
4 about you thought a lot of them were just protesting the draft? Did you agree with what
5 they were saying about the war in general?

6 GN: I think it was easy to agree with some aspects of it. My personal thought
7 would be that I probably tend more to isolationism. It's the fact that, "You know, they
8 didn't land on the beach at Manhattan Beach, California and attack us." And I think that
9 very obviously, it was an option as to whether we go to war in Vietnam or not. I mean, to
10 me you would say, "Well, was there an option in World War II?" Well, probably not
11 after the attack on Pearl Harbor. I suppose you could say the attack on Pearl Harbor,
12 you're going to tell the Japanese, "Okay, fine, we've had enough. We'll stay out of the
13 South Pacific. Don't attack us no more." We probably could have done that but we were
14 already pretty heavily involved in Europe with lend-lease and a bunch of other things
15 going on over there, that globalization that was taking place already in the United States
16 in late '39 and '40, paralyzing the National Guard and stuff. We were on a war footing
17 going in. And that was a world war. Vietnam was not a world war. So to me, I'd say
18 yeah, it's an option, but I think Kennedy in his inauguration speech, if you go back and
19 read what he said or listen to what he said in his inauguration speech, probably not that
20 hard to figure out what he's going to do. I think there was just pretty much a consensus
21 and a lot of politicians, be they Democrat or Republican, at somewhere along the line
22 we're going to have to draw a line and be in a hot war. The Cold War is a cold war but
23 we're going to have to be in a hot war to show these people, the Communists that we're
24 going to take a stand and we're just not going to be rolled over.

25 RV: So the anti-war movement, for you, was saying some of this later on, going,
26 "Okay, back then was then." This is now, post-Tet offensive, for you post-death of your
27 friend, and I guess what I'm hearing from you is that there was a bit of reality in what
28 they were saying and you could understand it. But on the other hand you didn't
29 necessarily agree with everything they were doing?

30 GN: Well, what I remember of the anti-war movement, the earliest stuff that I
31 remember comes out of California, and I think, Berkeley—the University of California at

1 Berkeley—and it was free speech. They had disagreements with the administration of the
2 university over what they could talk about and what they couldn't talk about and on a
3 university you ought to be able to say anything in the world you want to say. That's free
4 and open. And that seemed to evolve into the anti-war movement. One of the things that
5 they wanted to talk about was getting out of Vietnam or the war not being a legitimate
6 war we need to fight. But being in Kansas, the fly-over country, you're pretty far
7 removed from that. So it was something you could watch and see on TV, hear about in
8 the news, and it gradually filtered into even small towns in mid-America but I wasn't an
9 activist. I wasn't militant. I could see and understand some of the points they made.
10 You know, we were not attacked; we just need to leave these people alone, let them work
11 out their own problems. I don't think I really believed some of the stuff like we wanted a
12 colony in Vietnam. You know, we were going over there because we were trying to
13 establish a colony. No, at that time, I never believed that that's what our intention was.
14 "We're over there because we want to fight Asians, that we're racist; we want to just kill
15 these people that are different from us," I never believed that. There are a lot of things
16 people said that I never believed, you know that, "We went to Vietnam because John
17 Kennedy was a Catholic and there was a Catholic regime in South Vietnam and the Pope
18 told John Kennedy he had to help the Catholics in South Vietnam so John Kennedy went
19 over there as a whole religion thing." I never believed that. "We went over there
20 because there's oil in Vietnam and the oil companies wanted to get the oil out of
21 Vietnam." I never believed that. "We went over there because Lyndon Johnson's wife,
22 Lady Byrd, had stock in Bell Helicopter Company and this was good for her business." I
23 never believed that. A lot of that extreme stuff that anti-war people were talking about at
24 that time, I didn't believe. I didn't believe it at that time and I still don't believe at this
25 time. So while I could see certain things that they were saying like, "This is off our
26 shores." Probably the biggest argument I have is, "Just let them people decide for
27 themselves what they want. If those people over there want to be Communists, they can
28 be Communist. If those people decide they don't want to be Communists then they're
29 going to have to fight like hell not to be Communists. But we shouldn't be over there in
30 their country trying to establish a country for them to have." And that argument, to me,
31 would probably make more sense than any.

- 1 RV: Okay. Well, Gary, why don't we go ahead and take a break for today?
- 2 GN: Okay.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Gary L. Noller
Conducted by Richard B. Verrone, Ph.D.
September 13, 2005
Transcribed by Mindy Moser

1 Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I'm continuing my oral history
2 interview with Mr. Gary Noller. Today is September 13th, 2005. I am in Lubbock again,
3 and Gary is again at Camp Buellis, Texas. And is it Bullis or Buellis, Gary?

4 Gary Noller: It's pronounced Bullis. Yeah, Camp Bullis.

5 RV: All right, well, Gary, before we move forward, I wanted to give you the
6 opportunity to kind of revisit some of things we talked about yesterday and you
7 mentioned before we began recording today that you wanted to say a little bit more about
8 this year of 1968 that was so profound in your life.

9 GN: Yes, I think that there were many, many things that happened that year and
10 that would have been the year that I turned twenty-one years old in October. And as I
11 look back on it, it's just such immensity, probably starting with my friend's death in
12 March and then President Johnson's, basically what I call his resignation speech at the
13 end of that month. There was a huge amount of protests, anti-war protests during that
14 summer, Robert Kennedy was killed, Martin Luther King was killed, and there were civil
15 rights unrest demonstrations throughout the country. Tet occurred in January of that
16 year. Of course we had elections in November and the new President elected. And it just
17 seems like probably of all the years of my life as far as political strife that I witnessed,
18 '68 was just a big year. And so I think that colors a lot of probably the way I viewed
19 things in that immediate vicinity. Then there was the sixties generation. I was an early
20 baby boomer, being born in 1949 and that whole term "sixties generation," in '61 I would
21 have been fourteen years old and in '70, I was twenty-two or twenty-three so the whole

1 decade of the sixties was my growing up period, from a thirteen-year-old to an adult.
2 And the things that happened even within that socially, the thing with the counter-culture,
3 the youth revolution that was going on, things were going on with the leisure use of
4 drugs, the sexual revolution that was taking place. So one year, the year '68, I think was
5 tumultuous and then the whole decade of the sixties. So to sit down and kind of define,
6 "How do you feel about one particular thing?" In some respects it's hard to separate that
7 one thing out of everything that was going on because so much was going on.

8 RV: Yes. That year has been named one of the most important, divisive,
9 incredible, whatever adjective you want to apply to it years in American history. Not just
10 the sixties or in context of the war, but in the history of the country. And you are going
11 to enter Vietnam on the heels of this year, which obviously colors where you are when
12 you get there.

13 GN: Yeah. Sometimes it's hard to separate out feelings. Was this feeling because
14 of anti-war, was this feeling because we were going through political changes in the
15 government, was this because of just the youth revolution? I think we were idealistic and
16 we thought we were smart; we were somehow throwing off a lot of the traditional beliefs
17 which certainly occurred at that time. That was, I think, pivotal in all our lives. All of
18 those of us that were coming of age in that decade went through a lot of stuff beyond
19 what the war was all about.

20 RV: Yes. Well, if there's anything you can add to that you certainly are welcome
21 to do that as we go forward but I wanted to kind of take you into actually going into the
22 military and what your mindset was immediately before and then the act of going in.

23 GN: Well, I think that as we discussed before, my choice was to be drafted. I
24 didn't want to enlist. I really didn't particularly care to go into the military but I didn't
25 have a case where I would take some other out, such as conscientious objector or leave
26 the country. Those two things I didn't even think about being close so it's kind of a
27 process of elimination. In a way, I guess I kind of look at it as the events were
28 controlling me, I wasn't controlling events and maybe I wasn't happy about that but
29 that's just the way it was. It was like if I was a log and you threw a log into a flowing
30 stream and a flowing stream just took the log down the stream and wherever you ended
31 up, you ended up. But I did get my draft notice report to Kansas City to the Armed

1 Forces Entrance Examining Station and I believe that was September 30th. I was sworn
2 in on September 30th and we may have went up a day early on September 29th, but the
3 swearing in was September 30th.

4 RV: This is 1969, correct?

5 GN: 1969 and they kind of split us up into groups of people and you'd go through
6 different stations, doing different types of processing. And at one point you go into a
7 room which is kind of like a small office where maybe ten or twelve of us were in, and as
8 I remember, they called each person's name individually and I don't know if they said,
9 "Make one step forward if you accept and if you don't accept, stay where you're at." I
10 believe there at least was some type of identification, the calling of names, and then.
11 "Okay, raise your right hand and we'll swear you in." So you raise your right hand and
12 take the oath of military service and eventually after that you're in. So now you're in the
13 service.

14 RV: What was your mindset that day as you went through this process?

15 GN: Well, I think by that time, I had already understood what was going to
16 happen. It wasn't overwhelming, I don't think I had any particular emotion other than,
17 "Okay, these are just the paces that we have to go through." My reflection was probably
18 more that summer when we went up there to the same building and we went through
19 physical testing and mental testing was reclassified 1-A for the draft. When I see, "Okay,
20 I'm 1-A for the draft," that's when I'm sitting here going, "Holy cow, this is going to
21 happen now." And then from that time until the actual induction was probably from June
22 until September, so there'd been some time in between to do whatever processing had to
23 be done and in my mind it's what was happening. So that day was pretty much a
24 functional day. "Okay, you go there, you run some paces, they swear you in and you're
25 in." I don't think that there was any particular striking thoughts that I had at that
26 particular moment other than, "Well, this is the beginning."

27 RV: Did you have to leave immediately or did you have time off before you had
28 to report?

29 GN: No, we understood that when we went up that day that we were already
30 classified 1-A. That's what the session was for in June. In June they would take you
31 through and basically find out if they wanted you or not and then if they did want you and

1 you had a date to go back up, well, then that's it. There's no more going home. So we
2 probably started at eight o'clock in the morning and went through whatever it was. The
3 swearing in maybe have been three o'clock in the afternoon and we were just told to wait
4 until the bus came and when the bus came, we're going to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.
5 That's where I was assigned to for training so I think about nine o'clock that night a bus
6 showed up and they said, "There's your bus. Get on it." So we filled the bus up with
7 probably forty or fifty people and arrived at Fort Leonard Wood, I want to say probably
8 nine or ten o'clock or maybe midnight. I think we left Kansas City at eight or nine
9 o'clock at night and got to Fort Leonard Wood probably around midnight.

10 RV: What about your family? What were they thinking, feeling, and talking to
11 you about? You know, coming right up to this and then that day, saying goodbye to you?

12 GN: Well, I think there was not a huge amount of discussion. I don't think I
13 really ever talked to my mom about it. The only thing I recall talking with my dad was
14 after the physical pre-induction and he asked me that one time, "What are you going to
15 do? You're classified 1-A. What are you going to do?" And I said, "Well, I'm just
16 going to get drafted." I think other than that, when I got the draft notice I probably just
17 said, "Okay, I got my draft notice. I've got to go to Kansas City on September 29th."
18 And I don't remember a huge amount of discussion. I probably discussed it more with
19 friends, particularly guys that were either—some of the friends that had gone and were
20 already back home. They went right out of high school and were back home or some of
21 the guys that went to college but they went into the Reserve or National Guard. I'm sure
22 we talked about it with that, but I just don't recall a huge amount of discussion with my
23 parents about it, other than, "Okay, be sure and write. Write us and tell us where you're
24 at and how you're getting along."

25 RV: Right. Did you expect anything more, anything different? I mean, this
26 sounds all very almost methodical. Like you knew this day was coming, you knew what
27 you were going to have to do, and then you move forward and then you just do it.

28 GN: Yeah, I think so. By that time, to me it was just the paces that you go
29 through. The decision was made. I think the draft notice said something to the effect of,
30 "Your friends and neighbors hereby request your presence to go into the Army." It had
31 some kind of little wording on it but the whole draft notice, the requirement to report for

1 induction was twenty-five words. And I think when that arrived at the house, my mom
2 said, “Well, you got something from the draft board today.” And I knew what it was. I
3 knew it was a notice to report for induction and I think I took that and put that up on a
4 shelf on the cabinet and probably let it lay for two or three days and didn’t even open it.
5 And maybe my mom came back and said, “Well, did you ever open that letter yet?”
6 “No.” “Well, are you going to open the letter?” “Well, I guess I should.” So I went and
7 opened it up and basically the only thing it’s going to reveal to me that I don’t already
8 know is the date to be at the induction center. I said, “Okay, the date is says is September
9 29th.” So going through that at that point in time, to me it’s just a functional thing. This
10 is the next step in what’s going to happen. But emotionally it wasn’t anything that
11 registered anything to me.

12 RV: What about your twin brother? What was he going through?

13 GN: Well, he decided to enlist in the Air Force and he enlisted on a delayed entry
14 program, so he signed papers. You know, you had to sign papers before you got a draft
15 notice, so he signed papers probably sometime in late June or July but he had like a five-
16 month delayed enlistment so he wouldn’t be going in until maybe December. But then he
17 notified the draft board of that so that took him off of A-1 status because he was pending
18 enlistment in the Air Force. The only thing I remember is like my last night at home, I
19 wrecked the car. My brother and I shared a car. It was a ’65 Plymouth Satellite and I
20 was out with a friend and we were running around town, most generally drank beer, and I
21 can remember coming back from a place and it was about two o’clock in the morning on
22 a Sunday morning and another person I went to school with made a left-hand turn in front
23 of me at an intersection and I collided with him in the side of his car. Well, the police
24 came, his car I think was drivable, my car was drivable, there wasn’t that much damage
25 and I know the most thing I was worried about right then at that point in time was getting
26 a DUI (Driving Under the Influence) ticket. But the officer filled out the paperwork and
27 we went on our way. I drove the car home. And that was a Saturday night and on
28 Sunday I know my mom came in and said something like, “What happened to the car?”
29 and I told her, “Well, I had a little wreck last night.” And I think that Monday, the next
30 morning, was when I left, and I think I just went to my brother and said, “Well, you’re
31 going to have to take care of getting car fixed because I’m leaving tomorrow. I’m going

1 to Kansas City and I'm not going to be home anymore." So I think he had some words
2 for me like, "Well, thanks a lot." But I don't think he and I even discussed in any
3 particular detail what I was doing. His choice was to go in the Air Force, to enlist. My
4 choice was to get drafted. Okay, I got my draft notice and left before he got his orders to
5 go report for his training.

6 RV: So you're on the bus and you arrive at Fort Leonard Wood that night. What
7 was that atmosphere like there?

8 GN: Well, I think one of the things going all the way through the whole military
9 atmosphere is you're always with a bunch of other people who are in the same boat as
10 you are so you're not really alone and so you tend to associate with those people that are
11 your peers. You're at the same level with them. So we had forty or fifty people get off
12 the bus and they line us up kind of outside some building in what they called a reception
13 station, which is where all new guys go to. Everywhere you go, you go to a reception
14 station, you do some processing, you get assigned some place to go sleep and somebody
15 takes charge of you and tells you what to do. And I know one thing. It was midnight or
16 after and I've stayed out late before but it was kind of like, "Well, how long are they
17 going to keep us up? Shouldn't we be going to bed sometime pretty soon?" And the
18 only other thing I remember in particular about that night was a guy came out and he was
19 probably low-ranking, like a PFC (Private 1st Class) or something and he asked, "Does
20 anybody out here know how to drive a truck?" Well, I had driven a truck in some of the
21 jobs I had before and a couple of other people did, too, so we held our hand up. So the
22 guy said, "Okay, fine, I've got something for you to do." Well, we didn't know what it
23 was. He takes us around the back and gives us a wheelbarrow and says, "Okay, go
24 around and pick up trash." So we pushed a wheelbarrow and picked up trash. Well,
25 that's lesson number one: don't volunteer for anything. And I don't know if he really
26 wanted trash picked up or if he just wanted to, let's say begin the treatment that we're
27 going to have, harassment or whatever. But I know the lesson I learned right there was,
28 "Okay, the next time anybody walks up to me in a group and says, 'Do you know
29 anything in the world?' I'm going to be dumb as a board. I would absolutely, positively
30 be dumb as a board and you're never going to get me to hold my hand up again." And I
31 never did except for one time later, which we'll talk about later. But going through the

1 reception station wasn't terribly tough. There were no Drill Instructors there. There's
2 Cadre there. A lot of those guys were Sergeants; a lot of them were Vietnam veterans
3 who had returned and had time left so they get to herd these new guys around through
4 different stages of their orientation into training. And the only other thing I remember
5 specifically was that we were taken—all of us who were draftees—because we were
6 mixed. We were draftees in with people who enlisted in with people who were National
7 Guard in with people who were Army Reserve. We were all together but then they
8 separated all of us draftees out and took us to a building where there was an Army
9 recruiter. They said, "Okay, you've got to go in and talk to the Army recruiter. The
10 Army recruiter's going to one more time give you the opportunity to enlist." So one by
11 one we'd go in and sit down and the guy would make a little speech and you'd say, "Yes,
12 I want to enlist," and he'd sign you up or you'd say, "No, I don't want to enlist," and
13 you'd just go back out and stand in line again. And when I went in and sat down the
14 recruiter told me, he said, "Do you want to enlist? We can enlist. You've got high scores
15 in a lot of things. Pick something you want to do. We can make sure you get what you
16 want to do." And I remember he said, "Do you want to go into aviation? You've got
17 college and you've got math and sciences. You could be a chopper pilot. We could send
18 you to school to learn how to fly a helicopter." I said, "I don't want to fly no
19 helicopters." As it ended up, I said, "No, I'm not going to enlist." And the words he told
20 me were, "Well, you know you're going to go to Vietnam. There's just no two ways
21 about that. You're going to go to Vietnam but you can choose right now what you do
22 when go to Vietnam. And if you don't take an enlistment, you're not going to choose.
23 The Army's going to choose for you." And I said, "Eh. I haven't enlisted yet and I'm
24 not going to enlist now," and I went outside. And out of our group—I don't know, there
25 may have been twelve of us draftees—nobody enlisted. And it was kind of a thing. As
26 each guy would come out, they'd go, "You didn't do it, did you?" And you'd go, "No, I
27 didn't do it." And so within the group of all new trainees, you very quickly found out
28 who was a draftee, who had enlisted, who was going into the National Guard, and who
29 was going into the Reserves. So the draftees, you immediately kind of form a little
30 clique. You know who else was also drafted so you kind of stayed close to them and you
31 give mutual support through that.

1 RV: Tell me about the other people there, these other folks who were there that
2 night, the first twenty-four hours. What were they looking like and what was their
3 attitude?

4 GN: Well, most of the people that went in were from the general region of Kansas
5 or Missouri. There were a couple other people from my hometown but I didn't know
6 them because we didn't go to school together. I went to Catholic school and they went to
7 public school so I didn't know them and didn't run around with them. But I think the
8 general atmosphere was one of, "Okay, let's get this ball rolling. We're here, let's get
9 started, let's get moving." I don't remember a huge amount of pessimism or rebellion or
10 anything. The only thing I can remember is a day or two later in the process; you get
11 your hair cut. You get uniforms, you get the haircut and some people thought they could
12 kind of tell the barber how they wanted their hair cut, which isn't going to happen. The
13 haircut takes probably about thirty seconds and you get sheared. You get everything cut
14 off. And I can remember one fellow in there basically saying, "You're not cutting all my
15 hair off," and the barber at that point in time just turns it over to the Cadre and the Cadre
16 goes in there and says, "Sit down, shut up, you're getting your hair cut." And I think the
17 other thing some people didn't realize was you had to pay for your haircuts. I think their
18 haircuts were like a quarter or something so when you got done you had to give the guy a
19 quarter. And a couple of people said, "I don't like my haircut. I ain't paying you." Well
20 then the barbers just turn it over to the Cadre and the Cadre say, "Either take a quarter out
21 and pay the guy a quarter for the haircut or we're going to take it out of your first
22 paycheck. But one way or the other you're paying for your haircut." So there were some
23 small attempts by people to kind of express how they thought things ought to be but it
24 isn't going to work that way. At that point in time you're not calling any shots
25 whatsoever. But I think that again, a lot of it was everybody was pretty much resigned to
26 the fact that this is the way it is. The best thing to do is to go in, get it done, don't make
27 waves, don't get noticed. A lot of people, this is their first step. Everybody's got to go
28 through basic. I think everybody pretty much had some ideas of what was going to be
29 expected down the line.

30 RV: Were you nervous or scared?

1 GN: No, I wasn't really nervous or scared at that point. I think one of the things
2 that I had the benefit of was having talked to friends of mine that had been through it
3 before, particularly those who went in immediately after graduation from high school and
4 came back home and we'd talk about it. Plus, during the college years there were several
5 friends that took a semester off and went in to get the training as National Guards or
6 Reserves. So I had a pretty good picture painted of what to expect myself, as far as "This
7 is going to happen, that's going to happen. Be sure you do this and be sure you don't do
8 that." So I felt like I could do it. I had confidence in myself that I could do it. I would
9 do the best that I could do so I wasn't afraid of the training and what was going to
10 happen. I guess I expected it to be hard. I knew it was going to be hard. It was going to
11 be difficult but I felt like I could handle it.

12 RV: Did your Instructors tell you right off the bat that, "We've been to Vietnam?"
13 Was this a secret or did you guys figure that? How did you find this out?

14 GN: That they'd been to Vietnam?

15 RV: Yes, or you said a lot of them were Vietnam veterans.

16 GN: Yeah. Well, yeah, and some of that—during off times and idle times, you
17 could talk with them. Particularly, these were not Drill Instructors, but even Drill
18 Instructors you could talk to. I mean, there's times where they're in the role and you
19 know to keep your mouth shut because of what's going on, but there's other times you
20 can kind of step out of that role and you could sit and have a conversation like you and I
21 are having right now. And I think that happened. Not that I did it, because I didn't
22 particularly care to get that close but the other people who were more outgoing could
23 have those discussions and maybe it would be a discussion within a group so you could
24 be just standing there listening to what's going on. There was some ways you could tell,
25 like if a guy was walking around with a combat infantryman badge on his uniform, which
26 you get to wear on a fatigue uniform. If you understood a little bit about how the Army
27 insignia worked, all combat veterans wear a combat patch on one of their shoulders.
28 After a while you could get to tell that guy was 101st Airborne, that guy was 1st Infantry.
29 Well, they're not World War II vets. If they're twenty-something years old walking
30 around with those patches they ain't World War II and they're not Korea. The only way

1 you get them is you're in combat. Well, they're Vietnam. So you could tell that
2 somewhat through the insignia that people would wear and you could also talk with them.

3 RV: Was that helpful or intimidating to you?

4 GN: Well, I think it was helpful. It didn't intimidate me. In fact, in the reception
5 station, I think the title they gave the people that were in charge was like Roster Guide.
6 You had a roster of people. The roster might have twenty-five names on it and you might
7 have an E5 Sergeant who would be in charge of these twenty-five people. And he could
8 be a guy that was a draftee and he came home and he had eight months left or six months
9 left on a two-year draft, so they put him down here and he's a mother hen to us. And
10 they were not what we would call "lifers," and they could be approachable and in a lot of
11 ways they'd tell you stuff. They'd say, "Okay, here's what going to happen in two or
12 three days. In two or three days they're going to show up with a bus and you're going to
13 get on a bus and you're going to go to your basic training unit and you're going to meet
14 your Drill Instructor and he's going to want to begin immediately on your indoctrination.
15 So you've got two more days here. It's going to be pretty light and easy but after those
16 two days it's going to be hell to pay." So again, they were kind of giving us an outlook
17 down the road so I found that helpful, that they would kind of explain the process that
18 we're going through. Maybe they didn't have to. Maybe that was part of their job, but at
19 least you kind of got an idea of something two or three days down the road here, this is
20 what the next thing you can expect to have happen.

21 RV: What were your expectations of basic training? Did you have something in
22 your mind that you thought you were going to be going through?

23 GN: Yeah, I think again, I had a pretty good description of that through people
24 who had been through it before, close friends that had been through it before and what
25 they relayed about it, and again, kind of a list of do's and don'ts. The biggest don't is
26 don't stick out. The greasy wheel is going to get all the attention. They want conformity
27 and if you conform, okay fine. We've achieved what we want to do. But if for some
28 reason you're not conforming then you're going to get pressured to conform. So the best
29 thing in the world to do is whatever the heck they say to do, do it, do it right, and stay
30 under the radar. Keep a low profile. That's what's best for you.

31 RV: Okay. And were you able to do that consistently after the trash incident?

1 GN: Well, yes, I want to say I did. There were a couple of instances—and the
2 way you tell whether you weren't conforming or not is you would get singled out and you
3 would have to pay for a mistake that you made. If you made a mistake somewhere along
4 the line, somebody's going to see it and they don't pass it by. I think there's only two
5 instances in the whole eight weeks of basic training where I had what might be called a
6 screw-up and got caught. I think there may have been a few other times where they
7 didn't catch me but that's because you've got eight Drill Instructors out here herding two
8 hundred and forty people around. So you outnumber them but on one occasion, we went
9 out for PT—Physical Training—and they have you set your gear down on the ground in
10 front of you. So they'll tell you, "Take your steel helmet off and set it six inches in front
11 of your feet, right side up with the front pointing to the front. Take your pistol belt off
12 and fold it in the middle, put the canteen on the right-hand side with the lid of the canteen
13 pointing to the front. Take," everything you took, "take your shirt off, fold your shirt up
14 in one foot by one foot square and lay it on top of your helmet with your buttons pointing
15 up." They'd tell you all this stuff so the two hundred and forty people are taking their
16 gear off and laying their gear down in front of them, all set down the same way. Then the
17 last thing is your rifle. "Take your rifle or lay your rifle with the butt pointed to the left
18 and the trigger guard pointed to the front, two inches in front of your toes." Well, this
19 particular day I laid my rifle down on the ground and when I stood back up I noticed that
20 my rifle was pointed the wrong way. So you've got two hundred and thirty-nine rifles
21 pointed to the left and you've got one rifle pointed to the right and that's my rifle. Well,
22 at that point you're sunk because if you bend over to straighten it out, they're going to see
23 you because everybody else is standing back up. So you're dead there. So the only thing
24 I could do was leave it there. Well, then they move you off there. They fall out and fall
25 back in and the only thing I can hope is that they don't see it. Well, there's probably
26 some Drill Instructor that's assigned nothing but to go back and see if all the rifles are
27 laying up the right way or not. And so immediately I hear this, "Oh, what do I see here?
28 I've got something here that I need to go take a look at. Somebody doesn't know their
29 left from their right." And he picked my rifle up and at that point I just whispered to my
30 Squad Leader. My Squad Leader was standing right next to me and I just whispered
31 something like, "That's my rifle," and he whispered something back like, "You're

1 kidding.” I go, “No.” So the Drill Instructor reads the number off. “Who’s got rifle
2 number 110?” And I go, “I do, Drill Instructor.” “Get over here right away.” So he kind
3 of starts in this little chew me out session. “What are you doing here? How come two
4 hundred and thirty-nine rifles are lined up the right way but your rifle’s not lined up the
5 right way? Don’t you know your left from your right and yadda, yadda, yadda?” And
6 I’m giving the answers he wants to hear. And at the end of that he says, “Okay, do
7 twenty-five push-ups.” So I get down and do push-ups. Well, by that time everybody
8 else is doing their PT training so at some point he said, “Get up there and get with
9 everybody else.” So it was a small incident but I think the only other time I didn’t tuck
10 my shirt in before I put a field jacket on and the front edge of my shirt was showing
11 below the field jacket and the Drill Instructor walked up and he dragged a hold of my
12 shirt and kind of tugged on it. He said, “What’s this?” “Well, that’s my shirt.” He said,
13 “How come it’s not tucked in to your pants?” And I probably said something like, “Uh, I
14 forgot,” or whatever. And he said, “Well, you owe me twenty-five push-ups.” Well, by
15 that time the head Drill Instructor called us to attention to march somewhere. He said,
16 “As soon as we stop, you do your push-ups.” Well, we marched somewhere from one
17 place to another place and we got there and that Drill Sergeant wasn’t around and I’m not
18 doing push-ups for nothing, so I never did do those push-ups. I mean, I still owe him
19 today and I can guarantee you, for the rest of the time I was in that unit and I saw that
20 Drill Instructor somewhere, I went the other way because I didn’t want him to remember
21 that I owed him push-ups and probably never did them because who knows what I was
22 going to get. So yeah, I want to say all in all, I stayed underneath the radar. Certainly
23 there were a lot of other people that had much more difficulty doing that than I did so
24 they got a lot more attention than I did.

25 RV: Right. Okay. Well, it seems that you intellectually could handle all this.
26 You had these isolated incidents. What about physically? What was basic training like
27 for you physically?

28 GN: Well, it was hard. That was the hardest part for me. I was not an athletic
29 person. When I went in I was like two hundred and thirty five pounds and six feet, two
30 or three inches tall. So I went to my highest weight in the Army which was two thirty-
31 five to my lowest weight which was about one sixty-five. I lost seventy pounds and that

1 hundred and sixty-five weight was probably December of '70 in Vietnam. So they
2 knocked a lot of weight off me and I wasn't athletic. I could walk everywhere okay, I
3 could get around, the biggest challenge was...I could even do the physical training but
4 you had a PT test that you had to take in which there were five events and you had to
5 score a minimum of sixty points in each event before you'd pass. I think the first time I
6 took the test I was like at two-eighty or something so you had to have three hundred. If
7 you got seventy points in one test and fifty points in the other test, they wouldn't take ten
8 points off the one and give it to the other. You had to score a minimum of sixty on all of
9 these. So I had difficulty in the PT test but they gave you the test two or three times.
10 You have a final you have to take. Like the last week you're there you have basically
11 three requirements. You have to qualify with the rifle, which I had no problem. I
12 qualified expert on the rifle. I think you had to score something like sixty out of seventy-
13 two hits and I think I was like sixty-two out of seventy-two so that qualified me as expert.
14 All of the written tests and that type of training was no problem. I could do first aid, I
15 could do commo, I could do map reading, I could do drill and ceremonies. All of that
16 stuff I could do. So the hang-up was getting through the physical test at the end. I at one
17 time did develop sore ankles. You actually get an inflammation in the tendon, your
18 Achilles tendon, and I had a problem with that on one ankle so I walked with a limp and
19 then the other ankle started acting up so I walked with two limps, I guess. I don't know
20 how you look any different with one limp or the other, but it was sore and it was very
21 painful. It hurt a whole lot to walk and march because sometimes we'd go to the rifle
22 range, which could be six miles. From where our barracks was out to the rifle range was
23 six miles. You'd be there all day training with your rifle, and then you walk six miles
24 back. That would be twelve miles a day. And on one particular day, we'd been to the
25 rifle range and the Drill Instructor came out and he said, "Okay." They had a truck that
26 they would pick up people who couldn't walk and they would take them in a truck back
27 and the Drill Sergeant came up and said, "Okay, who's that that's been limping here all
28 day long? You need to get in the truck." Well, I wasn't going to go in no ride. I'm
29 going to walk. There's no way in hell that I'm riding in a truck. If everybody's marching
30 out there and marching back, I'll march out there and I'll march back. And my Squad
31 Leader came to me and said, "The Drill Sergeant, he's talking about you because your

1 ankles are really sore. You're having a tough time." I said, "Well, I don't care. I'll
2 make it. Hurt or no hurt, I'll make it. I don't need to ride in that truck." Well,
3 essentially it came down to the Drill sergeant and he said, "You're going to get in that
4 truck and you're going to ride back." I think I even told him, I said, "I don't need to ride
5 back in that truck. I'm okay. I'll make it." "No, you get in that truck." And I want to
6 say I would have made it. It would have hurt like hell but I would have made it. Other
7 than that and passing the physical test at the end, which I didn't do, I made it through all
8 of the stuff, the physical training. I don't think that was an issue.

9 RV: What? Not passing at the end?

10 GN: Well, what they did—when I got out of basic training it was right at the
11 Christmas break. I went in September which was basically the first of October and so
12 you had about one week which was kind of a dead week. You went to the reception
13 station and you did stuff and then you went through your eight weeks of basic training so
14 we got out of basic training probably the end of the first—maybe around the tenth of
15 December. So everybody in basic training had to move on to AIT—Advanced Individual
16 Training—but before you did that everybody go to go home for Christmas. I think we
17 got maybe twenty days or something off for Christmas break so it worked out quite
18 fortunately that you end up basic training, go home for Christmas, then go to advanced
19 training. And the last PT test that I took, I think I scored like two ninety-two or
20 something. They said, "Well, we can't give that to you. You're at two ninety-two but
21 you've got to have three hundred. So we're not going to send you on to advanced
22 training. You're going to come back here and we're going to keep you here and basically
23 continue physical training and once a week give you this test. As soon as you pass the
24 test and get the three hundred points then we'll send you on." So I went home. I actually
25 had orders to go to Fort Leonard Wood but I went home and came back to Fort Leonard
26 Wood and went to a special training company and I think within three weeks I passed the
27 test and at that point in time they had to get me into a cycle at Fort Knox for advanced
28 training, so I sat around Fort Leonard Wood I think for two or three weeks, basically
29 doing nothing, doing detail work and going places. I know one time I went to a
30 carpenter's shop and they just had me paint boards. They needed somebody to paint
31 boards so, "Here you go, paint boards." So they had patience. I mean, I think that they

1 looked and said, "Well, you're so damn close but we're not going to give it to you.
2 You're going to have to make it and so we're just going to give you whatever time it
3 takes for you to make it." And there were other people in that same area that typically
4 either were close but under the three hundred point limit on a physical test or maybe they
5 didn't score high enough on the rifle. Let's say sixty got you in as an expert but you had
6 to score forty-five to be qualified and they scored forty-three. So they'd take them back
7 out to the rifle range and you'd practice some more and you'd go for what they call a
8 record fire, which is where they'd actually sit and count. "You're going to get your
9 targets up there and we're going to count how many targets you hit. And as soon as you
10 hit forty-five or more then you're qualified and we're going to send you to the next
11 stage." So I did have difficulty with the physical part and I'll admit a fair amount of that
12 is motivational. I could care. The guy would say, "Well you have to run a mile in eight
13 minutes or less." And I'd go, "I don't like to run a mile. I don't like to run." "Well,
14 you've got to run a mile in eight minutes or less. You run a mile in eight and a half
15 minutes and that don't make it. We need to have an eight minute mile or less." So they
16 would just take you out and you would practice. At that time in January at Fort Leonard
17 Wood, Missouri, we're talking about mornings at fifteen degrees and snow on the ground
18 when we get up and they're going to take you out there. It's sort of like, "Well, you have
19 time. We have time. If it takes a week, we'll take a week. If it takes a month, we'll take
20 a month. But sooner or later you're going to qualify so if you think you're not going to
21 qualify that's not true because we've got as much time as you've got. In fact, we've got
22 more time than you've got because there was somebody here before you were here,
23 there's going to be somebody here after you're gone. Whether you're here a week or
24 you're here a month or you're here six months, it doesn't make much difference to us.
25 You're just one more guy. But you won't move on until you do this." And I think
26 probably after about a week of getting up at four o'clock in the morning and going out
27 and marching in the snow at fifteen degrees at Fort Leonard Wood, I said, "I don't want
28 to do this anymore." So I probably motivationally said, "I can pass that damn test." But
29 I guarantee I knew what it took. If it took an eight minute or less to run a mile run, I'm
30 going to do it in seven minutes and fifty-nine seconds. And if you had to do rungs on a
31 horizontal ladder, "If you have to do sixty rungs on a horizontal ladder and do that in two

1 minutes, I want to do sixty rungs and when I get sixty rungs done in under two minutes,
2 I'm done." So I just wasn't physically competitive. I didn't compete with myself, I
3 didn't compete with other people but if I have to get sixty of them suckers in, in two
4 minutes or less to move on to the next thing in my training, then I'm going to do sixty of
5 them in two minutes or less, but I'm not doing sixty-one.

6 RV: So it seems like you were after efficiency here. You're going to do what you
7 need to do, and you're not going to do anymore because you didn't see that as really
8 necessary.

9 GN: Yeah, like I said. Some guys would do it because they were competitive.
10 They wanted to see if they could beat the next guy and they did give an award. Like the
11 guy that shot the best qualification on the rifle, he got some little award and the guy that
12 got the highest PT test score, he got some award, and I think the guy that probably scored
13 highest on something else got an award, and then they have what they called Trainee of
14 the Cycle. This is the guy that was the best trainee in the whole cycle. He gets some
15 kind of award. And to me it's sort of like, "So what? What are you going to do with that
16 award?" If you don't have the personal motivation for excellence, okay fine. You're not
17 going to stick an award up here and I'm going to go say, "Okay, great. I'm going to go
18 after that award." What I'm going to say is, "You know, I want to get the hell out of
19 here. I'm tired of being here; I want to get out of here, so I want to do what it's going to
20 take to get out of here." But as far as the physical tests goes, I didn't have incentive to do
21 any more. Now, on the rifle range it was different. On the rifle range I went out there
22 and I said, "Yeah, if you've got to shoot seventy-two targets, I want to get every one of
23 them targets. I want to hit every one of them targets." So that didn't apply to all of my
24 Army training. It applied to physical training but I think on the rifle range you've got
25 targets that are set at different distances away from you and you get so many targets
26 coming up at a time and you've got so many bullets to shoot at them and you've got so
27 much time that you have to get those shots off in. And the furthest out target I think is
28 either three hundred or three hundred meters, which is like a thousand feet, which is
29 you're shooting a human silhouette above the waist. And at like a thousand feet you can
30 barely see that sucker. And I think maybe it comes up three times, maybe that one comes
31 out three times out of seventy-two and I know I got that sucker once. I don't know if I

1 got it twice, but I'd say I got a certain amount of satisfaction that I hit that far target at
2 least once.

3 RV: So you were a pretty good shot.

4 GN: Well, I had grown up hunting and had been around rifles and pistols and
5 shotguns and was familiar with it. Of course the Army says, "It doesn't make any
6 difference what you know about shooting before you get here because we're going to
7 teach you what you need to know anyway." But there were people who came in that had
8 never in their life fired any type of firearm. But I think when it came down to listening
9 and following the instructions and learning the methodology and being able to follow
10 through and execute that methodology, yeah, I listened and paid attention and I could
11 apply that. So I don't know what percentage would be expert out of a training company.
12 I don't know if that's twenty-five percent or fifty-five percent or eight-five percent. It
13 was significant enough that if you fired expert on a rifle range, you'd get a half a day pass
14 or maybe a full day pass. Like on a Sunday they'd give you a pass and I don't think in
15 basic training anything else would get you a pass other than if you fired expert with a
16 rifle. So I got the pass and didn't go anywhere.

17 RV: (Laughs) Tell me, looking back at that, what was basic training doing for
18 you? Did it really get you kind of to the next level where you could go to the advanced
19 or did you see it merely as kind of an induction thing into the Army way of life?

20 GN: Well, I think there were things you definitely had to know that they taught.
21 Did it change me terribly much attitudinally? Probably not. Did it change me
22 physically? Yeah, because I probably lost I don't know, thirty pounds or thirty-five
23 pounds in basic training in eight weeks. I mean, I lost so much weight that I had to fold
24 the front of my pants over in front to put a belt on and at one time a Lieutenant walked up
25 to me and said, "How come your clothes are so big?" And I said, "Well, these are the
26 clothes that I got when I came here." He said, "Well, you can't be going around with
27 those clothes. They're too big. You go over to such and such a place tomorrow at such
28 and such a time and tell them you want new uniforms." So I went over and they actually
29 gave me smaller uniforms, I'd lost that much weight. So that was a change. As far as my
30 outlooks and beliefs or anything, it didn't. There are things that definitely they're going
31 to teach you. We went through a lot of first-aid training; we went through drill and

1 ceremony. You're going to learn how to march, which wasn't difficult to do. You start
2 learning some Army traditions, code of conduct, how to behave, and some very basic
3 Army stuff. They'd talk about concealment and camouflage and some very basic infantry
4 tactics, a lot of which I probably already knew anyway just from reading books and stuff.
5 I don't know that there was a tremendous amount. I think the biggest thing coming out of
6 basic training is they get you in physical shape, they get you to where you know how to
7 shoot a rifle, and you know some very basic military stuff. I mean, what can you do in
8 eight weeks? My philosophical outlook I don't think had to change any in basic other
9 than by the time I got done I wanted to get the hell out of that and go on into advanced
10 because I was tired of being at Fort Leonard Wood and being in basic training.

11 RV: Okay, Gary, why don't we stop for today?

12 GN: Okay.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Gary L. Noller
Conducted by Richard B. Verrone, Ph.D.
January 3, 2006
Transcribed by Mindy Moser

1 Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone. I am continuing my oral history
2 interview with Mr. Gary Noller. Today is January 3rd, 2006. I am in Lubbock, Texas,
3 and Gary is in Catoosa, Oklahoma, and Gary, we're going to pick up with your basic
4 training. We left off and you were shipping off on September 30th, 1969 to Fort Leonard
5 Wood. So tell me about that experience. What do you remember about basic?

6 Gary Noller: Well, I think the thing to me was really the first time I had been
7 away from home, although I was already out of college and was twenty years old,
8 twenty-one years old coming up pretty closely. It was more than Boy Scout summer
9 camp. Very tightly regulated, very strict, a lot of unknowns. Even though I had talked
10 with other people who had been through it before and had some inkling of what was going
11 on, it was still, to me, a very frightening and scary situation to be thrown into this type of
12 rigorous, regimented atmosphere.

13 RV: What was it that made it scary? Was it the regimented atmosphere or was it
14 a lack of confidence in yourself or this unknown quantity of what you were getting into,
15 the military.

16 GN: Well, I think one of the things about it probably in hearing a lot of stories is
17 nothing goes unseen. If you have any type of error or mistake or whatever, it will be seen
18 by someone and when they see it they will take immediate action. Nothing gets a pass,
19 you don't get away with anything, and typically the punishment can be anything from
20 some sort of physical duty like push-ups to going to clean out the grease pit or having to
21 pull guard duty all night long or something like that. So it was like you could get away

1 with a lot of stuff with your mother and your father and at school. People would tell you
2 to improve. Well, in the military it's, "We have our ways to get you straightened out."
3 And I think that was one of the things that was going into it was, "Oh gee, everybody's
4 going to screw up sooner or later and when you get caught, what's your punishment
5 going to be?" If I can relate one story, when we went to my basic training company,
6 which is Delta Company 4th of the 3rd, one of the first mornings there they let us go out
7 and we went to breakfast and came back and the Drill Sergeants were there already and
8 we were divided up into platoons already although we hadn't really met who our Drill
9 Sergeant was. We basically knew, "You're in this building and you're in that bunk."
10 And we went out to eat and came back and not knowing the rules all that well, I saw
11 down on my bunk. About five minutes later the door opened to the room. We're in a
12 Quonset hut type building that had I think twenty-six people in it. Twenty-four or
13 twenty-six people, an aisle down the middle, bunks beds on either side so there's
14 probably twelve bunks beds. Doubled up that would be twenty-four people and the Drill
15 Instructor walks in at the front and I'm kind of back to the back so that's thirty or forty
16 feet down, and he comes walking down the aisle and he just points to people and as he
17 points, he says, "You, you, you." And he came down to me and he pointed and he said,
18 "You." Now, I don't know what's up. He said, "Everybody outside. If I pointed to you,
19 get outside." So we went outside and he had us lay down on the ground and he said,
20 "Okay, you've got to learn to the rules here and one of the rules is that once you make
21 your bed in the morning, you don't touch that thing until you get ready to go to sleep that
22 night." Well, I was sitting on a bed and I suppose everybody else was sitting on the bed,
23 too. So he makes us crawl on the ground, and this is like one inch, and inch and a half
24 limestone gravel rock and he makes us crawl about half a block down and turn around
25 and crawl half a block back up. And this is like our first morning with the Drill Sergeant.
26 It was one of those cases where we got up and we were literally crawling on that rock and
27 tore our clothes and gauged up our knees and elbows and the stuff and the whole time
28 that we were doing that he was hollering to go faster and if you tried to raise up any, he'd
29 stick a boot in your butt and make sure you crawled on your belly. To a certain extent it
30 was probably good that that happened because that had the effect, which was, it got my
31 attention. What got my attention was that even if you don't know the rules, you better

1 follow them and if you don't follow the rules somebody's going to point that out to you
2 and there will be some price to pay.

3 RV: Right. How far into it was it when you had to do this crawling?

4 GN: It was like the first day.

5 RV: Wow. I bet that got your attention.

6 GN: Yeah. And I think that's typical of what their job is. I don't know that I
7 really understood it then. I understand it a whole lot better now, that when they come in,
8 like I said, nobody gets a pass. Everything will be done the way we want it done and
9 even if we haven't told you yet and you're doing it wrong, you'll be disciplined for doing
10 it wrong and that's part of the learning process. And sometimes they do that just to teach
11 you and other times also, if you have any inkling that you're going to do it your way
12 instead of their way. They've got their means to make sure that you will do it their way.

13 RV: Did you resist that mentally or did you kind of go with the flow?

14 GN: No, I'd do anything in the world I could do to stay out of trouble. I had no
15 intention; I couldn't see any benefit myself. A few people did. They might try to argue
16 something but if they're going to try to argue something like the guy who said, "I don't
17 want to get my hair cut," he's going to end up with his hair cut. It's just a matter of,
18 "You're going to get your hair cut either the easy way or the hard way. Now, if you want
19 to get your hair cut the hard way, it'll be the hard way. We'll take you down, sit on you,
20 and cut your hair. Or you can sit in a chair and let that man cut you hair but your hair
21 will be cut before you walk out of this room." So I had really no intention of in any way,
22 shape, or form, confronting the military instructors about what I thought I ought to
23 happen.

24 RV: What did you think of your instructors?

25 GN: Well, I think, looking back on it now, most of them were competent. I didn't
26 really have a feeling that they were incompetent. I think that they were very well trained
27 to do what they were to be doing. I think the only thing that I looked at is that I do, in
28 some respects, think that there were some of them who were probably a little bit sadistic.
29 They just got a little bit too much pleasure out of seeing other people—I'll use the word
30 suffer. But a couple of them that I knew they weren't my individual Drill Instructors but
31 there were other Drill Instructors that I look at them and say, "I don't know. They

1 seemed to be a little bit off the end as far as their expectations and what they will do to
2 people to get their expectations met.” But all in all, some of them, I think the way they
3 did it and their understanding of what their job was and their performance in their job was
4 top notch.

5 RV: Were they Vietnam veterans? Did you know?

6 GN: Most all of them were. Most all of them had probably had at least one tour,
7 if not more, because by this time this is late 1969 that I was in. So typically, they all are
8 going to be—I think they were at least E6s, which would be a Staff Sergeant. So they
9 probably, at minimum, had three or four years in and some may have had fifteen years in
10 or twenty years in by that point. I can’t remember any of them being Korean War
11 veterans but I know the majority of them all had combat patches on so they would be
12 Vietnam veterans.

13 RV: Did they talk to you about their experiences at all?

14 GN: Well, there were times where they would come out of the role of being the
15 tough disciplinarian and, “I’ll kick your butt,” to where, yes, they would sit down and
16 say, “Okay guys, we’re going to talk about stuff.” And they could relate and I think some
17 better than others. My specific Drill Sergeant, his name was Sergeant Hart and I think he
18 was an E7 Platoon Sergeant and I can remember him sitting down with us in the barracks
19 building. This would be a group of twenty-five or thirty people and we’d just all sit on
20 the floor and he’d tell stories and they were all in some way, shape, or form, directed
21 towards motivating us, giving us background information, telling us what we had to do to
22 succeed. More of a mentoring role than it would be of a tough DI (Drill Instructor) role.
23 In fact, some of the guys in basic training I guess would say they in some way, shape, or
24 form, formed friendships with the Drill Sergeant and even after leaving basic training and
25 going on down the road somewhere maybe would be writing letters back to Drill
26 Sergeants and keeping up to date with stuff that’s going on. So I don’t think I’d say it’s
27 an all-hate relationship. I got along okay with Sergeant Hart. He was kind of the fuzzy,
28 teddy bear type guy. He really wasn’t a hard-liner Drill Instructor. There were some
29 other people in the company that were more that role. But Sergeant Hart could have his
30 humorous side to him and kind of a fatherly side to him and a big brother side to him, and
31 of course the Drill Instructor side to him and the teacher side to him and a lot of different

1 things that were all compacted into twelve and fourteen and sixteen-hour days, six/seven
2 days a week.

3 RV: Do you remember any discussion of the Vietnam War itself, and progress of
4 or lack thereof?

5 GN: I really don't think we talked about it. I cannot think of that. Most of the
6 discussion would be more centered around the slogans. You know, "Stay alert and stay
7 alive." "You go to sleep at night on guard duty and Charlie Cong will come up and slit
8 your throat and everybody else's." So it was more about the military preparedness, the
9 military skills, physical, mental, whatever that you would have to have. I can't really
10 remember a discussion of politics from the Drill Instructors. If it was, maybe it would be
11 a comment. Let's say it might be, "Well, we just need to go over there and kill more of
12 them people. If we'd kill enough of them then this whole thing would be over with." It
13 could be some kind of a comment like that but I don't really remember in basic training
14 or advanced training discussion of politics. There was some discussion more after. In
15 Vietnam I can remember talking to people, officers included, about it then, but not during
16 training.

17 RV: Tell me about the kind of training you did undergo there in basic. How
18 would you describe it?

19 GN: Well, I think that it's kind of divided up into three parts. One of them is
20 physical training, in which they just basically try to get you in top physical condition.
21 One of them is rifle marksmanship where you go out and learn how to shoot the rifle and
22 then the rest of it is very basic combat skill. So in physical training you'd march, you'd
23 run, you did the horizontal ladder. They had what they called a low crawl pit where you
24 got down on the tip of your toes and the tip of your fingertips and crawled as low as you
25 could across the ground. There were other things that would be typical to high school
26 gym. Maybe you'd play football, maybe you'd play baseball, and maybe you'd play
27 basketball or some sort of organized sport like that. And then you were tested. You had
28 to test and score high enough and the end of basic training to get out. The rifle
29 marksmanship was really a big hunk of it. You always had a rifle. You got a rifle right
30 away but you didn't shoot it probably until the third week or so of the eight-week basic
31 training. You'd go out and they'd begin to give you real bullets and you got to shoot at

1 targets. And I think rifle training probably was at least three weeks or four weeks.
2 Again, at which the end of that, you had to qualify. You had to take a test and you had a
3 certain number of targets to be able to qualify. And the other stuff was like first aid, drill
4 and ceremonies, how do you march. You make a left, column left, column right, about
5 face, you learned the different ranks, the military customs, how to wear the uniform
6 properly, I think some radio communications signals, map reading was in there, hand-to-
7 hand combat, hand grenades. So that might be, like a hand grenade training was eight
8 hours and you did two hours, two hours, and four hours but then out of your eight weeks
9 you'd split that down and as long as they checked you off as having eight hours of hand
10 grenade training then you got it. There was hygiene—how to brush your teeth, how to
11 stay clean in the field, where to go to the bathroom, where not to go to the bathroom, all
12 sorts of stuff like that.

13 RV: It sounds like they covered almost everything.

14 GN: Yeah, I mean, that's kind of the basic comprehensive course. It may not be
15 intense from a standpoint that you know a lot about first-aid, but hopefully you know the
16 four most important things you need to do if somebody's injured.

17 RV: Tell me how you did in each one of those different sectors of your training.

18 GN: Well, I did real well on rifle. I had been around guns before and when it
19 came time to qualify, I qualified as expert. I think you had to have sixty targets out of
20 seventy-two and I was sixty-one or sixty-two targets out of seventy-two, which qualified
21 as expert. The other basic written tests, I did well on. The only thing I had problems
22 with was physical tests. You had five events that you had to test out on, and one of those
23 is either a mile run or a mile and a half run and I never did run in my life, I never liked to
24 run in my life, I still don't like to run and if you fail in any one of those five events you
25 fail the whole thing. You had to make three hundred points total which was sixty points
26 minimum in five events and if you made fifty-eight points in one event and eighty points
27 in another, you don't get any points off the eighty to go back and lift your fifty-eight up
28 to a sixty. And I was always missing the mile run by a few points. I maybe had like
29 fifty-seven points or fifty-eight points or fifty-five points, but when it came down to take
30 the final test, I think I was well over the three hundred points but I was about two or three
31 points short on the mile run. So that didn't let me out of basic. They could not pass me

1 on, although I'd spent the whole eight weeks there and was right at the very end and
2 everybody else was graduating and going on and I went into what they called a holdover
3 status. They basically said, "Okay, we think we can make you get sixty points on this run
4 and so we'll just work on it until we do" At that point they had eight weeks invested in
5 me and the only thing they could do was send me home. So I continued on down there
6 and I think within about two weeks or three weeks or so after that point in time, I did
7 qualify on the sixty or more point on each of those five events so they said, "Okay, fine,
8 we can send you on to advanced training." But it took about another, seemed like, two or
9 three weeks of time for them to get all that paperwork in, in which I just basically sat
10 around the company area going on details. I didn't really do too much. Somebody would
11 need somebody to go paint some signboard, I'd go paint the signboard, or if they needed
12 somebody to go pull KP (Kitchen Police) at the leadership academy, I'd go pull KP or if
13 they just wanted somebody to sit around the carpentry shop in case somebody called up
14 and needed some help, I'm sitting there. But eventually I did move on.

15 RV: So how did you feel about this? Did it really matter to you?

16 GN: No, it didn't really matter to me. I mean, being drafted, I think my attitude
17 was, "Look, you guys make the rules and I'm not going to purposefully try to subvert the
18 system. I don't think I can do it." I don't think anybody could. It would be very
19 difficult. But likewise, I think there was probably some motivation aspects to it and some
20 of my attitude was, "Look, you've got me for two years. If you want to keep me here for
21 two years and we go out and march," and during that period of time they had some
22 refresher courses. We'd go back and refresh on first-aid, we'd go back and refresh on
23 hand-to-hand combat. They didn't want you to forget what it was they just got done
24 teaching you so you had some refresher training in there but they worked very heavily
25 upon whatever aspect of it that it was that you were scoring low in. And in I think twice
26 a week, we'd go out and do a practice PT test so they'd run you through all five events
27 and they kept score and they'd say, "You're doing fine on these four events. This one
28 event here you need to do better on." And I think somewhere after a week or two, I
29 convinced myself that I didn't want to do this for two years, that I want to get out of here
30 and go on to whatever's on down the line. So I think that was totally probably a mental
31 issue because I went out and passed it and they said, "Well, you're going to have to pass

1 it two more times, so next week, we'll give you two more tests and you have to pass
2 those two tests." I passed those two tests, they said, "Okay, now we'll take you in for
3 record," which means this is the real one. The ones before were just practice. So we
4 went out for record and I passed it, but never by very much. I knew what I had to do and
5 if you had to do—on a horizontal ladder, if you had to go sixty rungs on a horizontal
6 ladder, to get 60 points I did sixty rungs. Or if you had to do—there was one called Run,
7 Dodge, and Jump, where you had to run and jump a ditch and then go sideways between
8 some upright pylons and then run and jump the ditch and then turn around and do that. It
9 was kind of like running a figure eight where you jump across the ditch a couple of times
10 and swing out of some pylons. If I knew I had to do that in seven seconds, I'd do it in
11 seven point one seconds. Or I'd do it in six point nine seconds. Some guys could go out
12 there and out of six hundred points they'd be scoring—out of five hundred points we had
13 guys that might be scoring four hundred and fifty points and here I come scoring three
14 hundred and ten or three hundred and eleven and three hundred and twelve. I was sort of
15 like, "Okay, that's what I have to do to pass. I'm passing." I had no motivation to be any
16 kind of a star performer here. I'd never been in athletics my whole life. Other than
17 seventh and eighth grade football, I never played any competitive sports. Physically, I
18 was not geared up for that kind of stuff but at some point in time, I said, "I don't want to
19 stay here forever so whatever it takes to move on, but that's the end of it." The rifle, I
20 really think I did try hard on the rifle. I enjoyed doing it. I had been around rifles before
21 and so it was somewhat I guess competing against myself. If you've got seventy-two of
22 these targets up here, how many of them can you get down? I don't know that anybody
23 got all seventy-two. Maybe the highest score was sixty-five or sixty-six. And all the
24 other stuff was mainly written tests or some type of test where you'd walk up and they'd
25 have somebody laying there and they said, "Okay, this person's got a sucking chest
26 wound. Demonstrate the first aid for a sucking chest wound." Well all of that kind of
27 stuff I could handle with no problem. I probably got ninety-eight percent of that.

28 RV: So the physical was definitely the most difficult thing for you. As far as
29 where you would go next in advanced, did they talk to you about or did they ask you,
30 "What do you prefer?" Or, "This is what you're qualified to do; this is where you're
31 going?"

1 GN: Well, they did a battery of tests I think at the reception center in Kansas City
2 and also in a reception station. When you first hit Fort Leonard Wood, you spend two or
3 three days in kind of a general status. They call it the reception station. You take a lot of
4 tests; you get your clothes issued to you. You don't have any Drill Sergeants around but
5 I think even before then, though, they pretty well know and I think I relayed last time to
6 you that we did go in and see an Army recruiter at the reception station, in which he said,
7 "Well, you can join anything you want to join." I said, "Well, I haven't joined yet and
8 I'm not joining now." And he'd say, "Well, you know, you're going to end up going to
9 Vietnam and you'll go to Vietnam and the chances are you're going to be combat of
10 some sort. If you want to make a choice away from that now, you make a choice away
11 from that." But I did know what it was. Right towards the end of basic training, they had
12 pulled a bunch of us out for some special training. When I went through Fort Leonard
13 Wood, we were one of the last training cycles to train with an M-14 rifle. And people
14 that were coming behind us, they'd start a new training company every week or maybe
15 they'd skip a week and they'd be two weeks apart. But there were two hundred and forty
16 people in a training company and you knew where you were. We were in third week and
17 that group's in fifth week and that group over there is in first week. So you pretty well
18 got to know which companies, where they were at in the training cycle. You might have
19 five companies in a battalion and each of those companies are in a different week in the
20 training cycle. So we would be marching off to the rifle range with M-14s and then two
21 or three weeks later we'd see a new company come in and they'd be marching off to the
22 rifle range with M-16s. So that transition in basic training was taking place. And this is
23 '69 and they still haven't got an M-16 in the basic training but the M-16's probably been
24 in use for five years. I don't know. But they phased out the M-14s and brought in the M-
25 16s in training. Well, there was a group, out of my training company of two hundred and
26 forty people; there was a group of fifty or sixty of us. They said, "Okay, you guys are
27 going some place tomorrow different from everybody else." Well, they took us out to the
28 rifle range and trained us on an M-16. And we qualified on an M-16 rifle and we all
29 knew right away that the guys that they cut out and took down for M-16 rifle training,
30 we're the guys that have probably got orders for Vietnam or else we've got something

1 showing on our records that indicate to them that we need to have M-16 training but the
2 rest of the guys don't.

3 RV: How different were the two rifles? Was that a difficult transition?

4 GN: Well, I think I'd say it all depends on what you want the rifle for. The M-14
5 is longer and heavier and fires a bigger bullet and I got very used to it. Going to the M-
6 16 is almost like you went to some sort of toy gun. I don't know how much difference
7 there is in weight—maybe twenty-five percent or thirty percent. The M-14 maybe
8 weighed seven and a half pounds and the M-16 maybe weighed five or five and a half
9 pounds. But in firing it, you're looking down a shorter barrel so it's harder to aim an M-
10 16. The longer barrel of course is easier to aim for a far-off target. The recoil in the M-
11 14 was bigger. It seemed like the noise the M-14 made was bigger. It had a little bigger
12 bullet in it. But to me, trying to adapt from the M-14 to the M-16, if you try to shoot an
13 M-16 like you do an M-14, you ain't going to get anywhere. You may have a tendency
14 to not hit the targets because of the shorter length. But as I remember, when we went out
15 there we were given some very basic, "This is how you take it apart, this is how you put
16 it back together, this is how you clean it, this is how you put bullets in the magazine, this
17 is how you put the magazine in the rifle, this is how you take it off safe, this is how you
18 pull the trigger," and it was more of a familiarization course. We did get to shoot at
19 targets and I did qualify expert but I think everybody qualified expert. It's like I would
20 score you and you would score me and I'd say, "Richard, what score do you want?" and
21 you'd go, "Well, Gary, I'd like to fire expert." "Okay." So I'd just make sure and mark
22 the scorecard to where you got expert. You already qualified with the M-14 so you were
23 a qualified rifleman. It's just a matter know of are you equally qualified on the M-14 and
24 M-16 but it counted really for nothing. You didn't get any more pay, you didn't get a
25 promotion, and you didn't get a star on your chest or anything if you qualified high or
26 low with the M-16. It was really more of familiarization.

27 RV: So tell me where you go after Fort Leonard Wood.

28 GN: My orders were for Fort Knox, Kentucky, to the Armor School and I was
29 trained in what would be 11 Echo MOS (Military Occupational Specialty), 11E, as an
30 armor crewman. And at that time the training was in M-48 or M-68 tanks, which are
31 called Patton tanks, the tank that was in existence at that time. The Abrams tank was on

1 the drawing board and there were maybe some prototypes of Abrams out there running
2 around. But anything in Vietnam, that big main tank would have been an M-60. The M-
3 48 was kind of the little brother of the M-60, and as an armor crewman, there are four
4 positions on a tank and we were trained for any of those four. You could be the driver;
5 you could be the gunner who actually lines up sites in the gun and fires it; the loader, and
6 he's the fellow that slides the shell in the tube of the gun; and then the tank commander
7 and he's typically the guy up on top telling everybody else what to do. So that was an
8 eight-week advanced training where we learned how to drive tanks and how to shoot
9 them and a little bit of maintenance on them but not much. The tank crew is really not
10 able to do maintenance. You're not a mechanic. We got a lot of training on signals,
11 radio, how to talk on the radio, because typically the only way people in two different
12 tanks could talk to one another, you're going to have to talk on a radio. If you were out
13 in the field in infantry, you might look at the other guy ten feet away and talk to him and
14 he could hear you but inside the tank, the next tank may be ten feet away from you but
15 there's no way in the world he's going to hear you if you try to talk to him. So they all
16 have radios. Everybody inside the tank is on an intercom where you can talk to the other
17 people on the intercom or talk tank-to-tank or what not. We got more first aid; we had
18 some weaponry training on things like the 45-caliber pistol. We didn't have that in basic
19 but we had that in advanced training. The 45-caliber—what was called a Grief gun
20 which was a little submachine gun. A very crude gun, it probably cost about nine dollars
21 to make it. It was very short barreled. You couldn't have long rifles in a tank. You
22 couldn't maneuver them around. So pistols and these little submachine guns were much
23 shorter so that was kind of your personal firearm for armor crew. And then the tank
24 weapons, there was a 30-caliber machine gun, what they call a co-axial which meant it
25 set inside the turret and whenever you turned the turret of the main gun, that little 30-
26 caliber turned with it. Also, the 50-caliber machine gun that mounted up on top and so
27 we had those four types of firearms that we trained on. And then they gave you some
28 more—they always tried to keep you refreshed on first aid, a little bit more advanced first
29 aid, drill and ceremonies, code of conduct, map reading, we always had physical training
30 in there. That was about it.

1 RV: Tell me about the tanks. Was this something that you wanted to do or where
2 you like, “Oh my god, I’m going to be driving tanks and learning about tanks all of the
3 sudden?”

4 GN: Well, it was kind of interesting to me. I’ll put it this way. If you drove down
5 Main Street Lubbock in a tank, would everybody kind of look at you and go, “Oh gee,
6 look at Richard, he’s driving a tank?” I mean, it wasn’t really anything that I’d say I
7 wanted to do but it wasn’t anything that I’d say I didn’t want to do. I found it of interest.
8 I guess to me it’s like, “Well, if I was in infantry, I’d have to walk everywhere I went.”
9 Well, in the armor, you get to ride, so maybe it’s just laziness here and you’ve got a mech
10 unit, a mechanized unit so you’ve got a machine that could ride you around where you
11 have to go. I think, as you go back and you take a look at the selection process, I scored
12 real high on mechanical aptitude and I imagine when they saw that they said, “Okay, this
13 guy’s that high on mechanical aptitude so tanks have got a lot of mechanics around them.
14 We’ll stick people with high mechanical aptitude on the tank.” But they may have a
15 hundred thousand people that are high on mechanical aptitude and only need ten
16 thousand people on tanks so I can’t say that’s a deciding factor. But when you take the
17 aptitude test, they ask you questions and one question might be like, “If you were on a
18 rainy day and you had to stay at home, what would you rather do? A: go outside and play
19 football with your friends; B: read a book; C: fix your lawnmower; D: bake cookies.”
20 Well, I was smart enough to know that, “go outside and play football,” that’s infantry.
21 “Read a book,” you’re probably going to be a linguist or a historian. “Fix your
22 lawnmower,” is like a jeep mechanic; and “bake cookies,” you’ll be a cook. I mean, I
23 don’t think you have to be that brilliant to sit down and know if this is an aptitude test
24 and they’re asking you these questions kind of how they’re sorting it out. So they’ll ask
25 you sixty questions but they’re really asking you the same question sixty times. It’s not
26 sixty different questions. So if you score a lot of times where, “Do you want to go
27 camping or do you want to go to the theater?” And I say, “I want to go camping.”
28 “Well, that’s an outdoorsy type of guy. We’re going to give him an outdoorsy type of
29 job.” So I think that I knew when I was taking the test to stay away from the rugged
30 outdoorsman. But growing up, I did like mechanical things. I wasn’t necessarily trying
31 to subvert the system there with my questions. I think that probably had a role in how

1 they selected me for armor crewman. However, I did have a college degree in
2 mathematics, also. So you take a look at that and say, "Holy cow, you should have
3 probably gone into some place somewhere that was compiling statistics in someplace." I
4 knew a fellow one time who also was drafted with a degree in mathematics and that's
5 what he did. He went to work in some place that did analysis and evaluation of
6 equipment for reliability and durability and they kept a lot of spreadsheets on things that
7 would break and things that wouldn't break. And somehow that was related back to his
8 mathematical abilities. I think at that particular point in time they needed combat
9 personnel. You can certainly enlist and get away from combat but if you were drafted,
10 it's sort of like, "We need combat people and it's nice that you've got a college degree
11 but we need combat people. Here's five categories of combat. You're going to go
12 infantry, you're going to go artillery, you're going to go armor, you're going to go
13 combat engineers, or you're going to go helicopter pilot." So it's kind of one of those
14 and I guess since I scored high on mechanical they said, "Well, we'll stick you in armor."

15 RV: What do you remember about their training regarding the armor use in
16 Vietnam and the kind of war the Vietnam War was?

17 GN: I don't know. There was some armor in Vietnam but not much. And I
18 would say that most of the armored training was probably still looking at major land
19 battle in Europe as opposed to looking at anything in Vietnam. Again, I don't know that
20 anything was really tied to Vietnam. It was more traditional, typical tank doctrine. One
21 of the things, for example, is you have to see it before you can shoot at it. A tank is a
22 direct-fire weapon. It does not fire indirectly. It can't fire behind the mountain. If you
23 can't see behind the mountain, you can shoot behind the mountain. It has no means like
24 artillery pieces do of setting in coordinates and range finders and azimuth and all that
25 stuff and shooting indirect fire. Well, in Vietnam, if you're out in the middle of the
26 jungle, you can't see very far and the enemy doesn't use tanks. Another thing was that a
27 tank was used typically for shock value. It's like if you're an infantryman walking down
28 the road and all of the sudden a tank comes over the hill, what does that do to you? Well,
29 it should scare the hell out of you because he can get you but you can't get him. The
30 armor, in many respects, took the role of cavalry. and pre-mechanized in that cavalry
31 were mounted on horseback and it was very easy for a cavalryman to overpower a

1 common infantryman because he stood up higher, was harder to get to, had the horse to
2 help him be much more mobile. So the tank was more mobile, it was protected, it had
3 armor plating on it, it had a big gun on it—in fact, it had two or three big guns on it. So
4 that was the value of tanks in fighting infantry was the speed, the firepower, the mobility,
5 the shock value. Only when the tank came up to another opposing tank did you even that
6 out. Well, the enemy didn't have tanks in Vietnam much—some, not much. So really,
7 Vietnam was not a place where I think anybody expected there to be major tank battles.
8 There never was major tank battles. The only thing that you would hear very commonly
9 is they did have some in Hue during the Tet Offensive of '68 when they went inside the
10 city. That was probably some of more prevalent use of tanks up there. But most of what
11 we really probably trained for was for World War II style battles in North Africa or
12 Europe.

13 RV: So they didn't really say, "Here's kind of the terrain in Vietnam and here's
14 what you can expect in Vietnam and here's how the tank can be used in this kind of
15 war?"

16 GN: No. In fact, technically at that point in time, we didn't know where we were
17 going. We could guess where we were going but we didn't know where we were going
18 and there were no armor divisions in Vietnam. All your big armor divisions were in
19 Europe. 1st Armor Division was over there. There may have been some armor in Korea.
20 But I think the biggest armored unit in Vietnam were cavalry squadrons like the Americal
21 Division. When I was assigned we had 1st Squadron, 1st Cav, and that's equivalent in
22 size to an infantry battalion. So you have five companies, five or six, I guess I should
23 call them troops, in the cavalry. Five or six troops assigned to the Americal Division,
24 plus each brigade had its own troop, which would be a company. So like F Troop, 17th
25 Cav or H Troop, 17th Cav, were troops the cavalry assigned to individual brigades and
26 then the division had a whole squadron. And they had some M-48 and M-60 tanks and
27 also brand new at that time was a Sheridan tank. But typically those units used a lot of
28 Armored Personnel Carriers, I think M-111 Armored Personnel Carrier. I don't know.
29 The whole number of tanks in Vietnam at that time compared to what the Army had, you
30 may have had five percent of the tanks that the Army had were in Vietnam and ninety-

1 five percent of them were somewhere else. So a lot of going through advanced training
2 in Fort Knox was, “Well, we’re going to Germany.”

3 RV: Right. You’re going to be plugging to pull the gap, basically.

4 GN: “We’re going to Germany. They ain’t going to train us on tanks and send us
5 to Vietnam because they aren’t really that many tanks over there so we’re going to
6 Germany.”

7 RV: Tell me about incidents in tank training that you remember well. Didn’t you
8 have some hearing loss at one point, there?

9 GN: Yeah, we went out. We had a night fire exercise where you had to shoot a
10 target and they’d take a target which would be maybe a four-foot by eight-foot sheet of
11 plywood painted white and they would mount it on this little track car, kind of like a
12 very, very small railroad track where this car would be moved back and forth on a cable.
13 So it would go left to right and right to left and left to right. It would just simply move
14 back and forth and what we attempted to do was to track that thing with our tank gun and
15 shoot at it and put a hole in it. We did that during the daytime. We’d fire at stationary
16 targets and we’d fire at this moving target and then we went out at nighttime where
17 they’d put a spotlight—they had a big spotlight and they’d track that target back and forth
18 with that spotlight and you had to fire at it. Well that particular night we went out there,
19 a big huge thunderstorm came through and it just was raining, very heavily raining,
20 probably had a five or six inch rain that night with wind and thunderstorms and we’re out
21 there. That doesn’t stop training and I think we had twenty-something tanks out there
22 and like ten or fifteen people at each tank and then you had to fire ten rounds. So you
23 figure a hundred and fifty people times ten rounds apiece is fifteen hundred rounds. And
24 some how or another they had screwed up and delivered double the number of rounds of
25 ammunition so instead of shooting fifteen hundred rounds we were supposed to shoot
26 three thousand rounds. And when the first guy got in the chute, everybody else stood
27 behind that tank in a line and then when he came out, he went to the end of the line and
28 the next guy moved up. He’d pass in ten more rounds or fifteen rounds of ammunition
29 and then the next guy would go in there. Well, during that period of time was the tank
30 that I was assigned to plus all the other tanks out there, about halfway through that I got
31 into very intense pain in my ears. It just felt like somebody was taking an ice pick and

1 sticking it into my ears. I told the Drill Sergeant and the Drill Sergeant basically said,
2 “Well, I can’t do much about it. We’re out here till we’re done.” He said, “Go back a
3 ways.” So I went back maybe a hundred feet or so from where the tanks were and held
4 my hands over my ears and it was just almost unbearable. For several days after that it
5 affected my hearing. When they’d blow a whistle for people to come to formation, I’d
6 see everybody get up and run down the hall. I’d say, “Where are you going?” They said,
7 “Didn’t you hear the whistle blow?” and I’d say, “No, I don’t hear no whistle blowing.”

8 RV: Wow.

9 GN: So it had pretty well damaged hearing in the right ear. In fact, at this time I
10 got a ten percent hearing loss disability through the VA (Department of Veteran Affairs)
11 for that.

12 RV: Did it get any better?

13 GN: It never gets better. Once you lose your hearing it’s no restoration. I don’t
14 think they can do anything but a hearing aid but it’s one of those irreversible conditions
15 that once it damages what it damages, there’s no restoration. I recovered some hearing
16 down the road a week or two later but it’s like if I had sixty percent hearing loss, it
17 recovered to maybe ninety percent or eighty five percent but it never recovered a
18 hundred percent.

19 RV: What kind of protective covering did you have for your ears?

20 GN: The only thing I remember is we did have these little plastic inserts and I
21 guess I want to say I believe I wore them but that’s it. We didn’t have any type of ear
22 muff device and I remember they would give us this little canister like a canister that 35
23 millimeter film comes in and you put your ear plugs in that little canister and it had a
24 chain on it so you could take that chain and put it through a belt loop or through an
25 epaulets or something up on your field jacket. I remember having them and I want to say
26 yeah, I think I used them but that’s a very crude—I don’t know what the decibel is on a
27 tank firing. When you’re standing ten feet away from the tank firing, you could have two
28 hundred decibels. Well, anything above ninety is harmful to your hearing if sustained.
29 Even if that earplug knocked that in half, instead of being at two hundred you’re at one
30 hundred. You’re still above the level. And hearing two or three thousand of those tank

1 guns fire in four or five hours, you talk to most audiologists and they'll say, "Yeah, that's
2 enough to permanently affect your hearing."

3 RV: Did others, if you remember, did they complain about similar hearing
4 problems?

5 GN: I know of a couple of others that did. Of course over the years, I haven't
6 kept track of them so I don't know how it ended up but yeah, I think there were other
7 people also that were complaining of that.

8 RV: Okay. You said that during the advanced training here that there was some
9 discussion of the Vietnam War. I don't know if that was amongst yourselves in your unit
10 or with the Drill Instructors—excuse me, your instructors there.

11 GN: Well, again, I don't remember too much during training, that it was discussed
12 from the political standpoint. I think again, if it was discussed it was more of, "Okay,
13 I've been there, I've seen it, I know what it's like, I'm going to tell you and you'd better
14 listen to me. The better you listen to me, the better your chances are of you surviving and
15 your buddy surviving."

16 RV: Right.

17 GN: So again, it was more about the military matters, not the political matters. I
18 just really have no memory of talking with the Cadre about those topics. One thing I do
19 remember, right towards the end of my advanced training, I got out at Fort Knox maybe
20 May 10th or so of 1970 and right close in there was Kent State, when the Ohio National
21 Guard fired upon students at Kent State University and I think four students were killed.

22 RV: Yes.

23 GN: And I remember talking to a fellow that I knew. He was from the same state
24 as I was. Not my hometown, but we knew some people in common and I remember
25 saying something to him. "Bob, isn't that terrible what happened at Kent State? The
26 National Guard killed four students." "Well, it's too damn bad. Maybe they need to kill
27 a few more of them and they'll quit protesting." He was a little bit older than me.
28 Definitely he had a lot different attitude because I thought at that time and still think at
29 this time that war is certainly bad. I don't think anybody's going to disagree with that but
30 now we've got National Guardsmen killing students on a campus. I guess my thought
31 was like, "Well, what were the students going that they could be so threatening to the

1 National Guardsman that the National Guardsman had to kill them?” Part of I guess the
2 training that I’d had up to that point in time was that standing there with a loaded M-14 or
3 M-16 rifle, you can be pretty lethal against a human being. Okay, now this is like,
4 “Unless these people have got some bowling balls and they’re throwing bowling balls at
5 you or Molotov Cocktails or something, these are unarmed people. What in the world
6 did you think they were going to do to you that the level of response is to shoot them?”
7 And I think if you go back and take a look at that circumstance, there was probably panic
8 that set in, there was probably some miscommunication, those people, those National
9 Guards people probably really were not adequately trained to respond and somebody
10 thought something happened and the first guy pulled the trigger and it’s almost a reflex
11 and two or three or four other people started shooting and, “Oh my god, what am I
12 supposed to do? Everybody else is shooting. I guess I ought to shoot, too, if they’re
13 doing it.” So it’s not really a managed situation and it ends up being a horrible tragedy
14 and that’s the way I felt. I guess I was kind of struck when this guy’s going, “Well, it
15 serves them right. That’s what they get for going out there and protesting.” But that was
16 not a Drill Instructor, that was just one of the other guys.

17 RV: Right. What did you think of the protests that were going on at the time,
18 when you were in basic and in advanced?

19 GN: Oh, I don’t know. I guess I had mixed feelings. I was a draftee. I certainly
20 was not a hawk. I think I expressed it before, if there’s enough guys that want to sign up
21 and go to Vietnam and fight, fine. Go ahead. But likewise, I certainly don’t look upon
22 myself as being someone who would go out on a protest line. I was probably more non-
23 involved. It’s like, “Well, I don’t want to do either. What I want to do is to go to
24 graduate school and get my Master’s Degree and if you folks over here want to fight in
25 the war, you go fight in the war and if you people over here want to go protest the war,
26 you go protest the war.” But neither one of those injure me so I just separated myself
27 totally from that. Did it affect me any from what I was going to do? No. I mean, I think
28 the thing about that is once in the situation, once being in the military, my thought—and I
29 think a lot of the thoughts of the draftees—was, “Okay, the most they can have me for is
30 two years and if I can make it through this two years then I’m out and I’m on with my
31 life.” So it’s, “What do I gotta do to get through these two years? And if they’re going to

1 load me up and take me to Vietnam and still me on a tank or whatever it is, or load me up
2 to Germany and stick me on a tank, okay, that's it." So to me, I didn't see a big picture
3 rolled out there. Now some other guys did. Some people were very much more
4 politically in tune with things and where one guy might show up and say, "Yeah, they
5 should shoot a few more students," the next guy might walk up and say, "You know, I've
6 had enough of this stuff. If you guys don't see me Monday morning, I'm in Canada." So
7 the whole spectrum, you could see the whole spectrum and I guess I'm pretty much dead
8 in the middle when I'm saying, "I've got two years and all I want to do is get through
9 these two years." So I don't think that they influenced me negatively, positively, one
10 way or the other. I was probably more philosophically in line with the protestors than I
11 was with the government, philosophically.

12 RV: Why was that?

13 GN: What?

14 RV: Why was that, Gary?

15 GN: Well, probably from the standpoint that in 19—we're talking 1969. The
16 whole war had been going for, depending on when you want to start the war, it was
17 started in 1963. I can remember hearing about it in '63; I think when I was a sophomore
18 in high school. It was very divisive and the divisiveness had shown up. The '68 year
19 which was the Tet Offensive and the Democratic Convention in Chicago—so we're
20 talking a lot of water under the bridge here where basically my attitude is, "This ain't
21 good. It could be harmful to me, physically. I don't think politically it's going to go
22 anywhere." I always look back to Lyndon Johnson and into March of '68 where he got
23 on TV and said he wasn't going to run for President. That to me, as I look back now—I
24 don't know how much I thought it then but as I look back now, it was, "We're going to
25 get the hell out of here." I think he said that he wanted to use all of his energies to come
26 up to a peaceful resolution to the Vietnam War. Well, I just look at that as pretty much
27 being an admission of the fact that, "We ain't going to get what we want so we just need
28 to find a way to get out of here." And Nixon didn't change it any. He said he had a plan
29 but I don't know what his plan was. There was the slogan going on out here, "Peace with
30 honor," which to me was sort of like, "If you give us a good way to get out of here so we
31 can save face, we'll get the hell out of here." Okay, if the President's going to go on TV

1 and basically say, "I'm so fed up with this war that I ain't going to run for President
2 again." "Okay. Are we making a mistake? Is this being something we ought to stay the
3 hell clear from? And if so, then the protestors aren't wrong. The protestors are right
4 because that's basically what they're saying, 'Get out of Vietnam.'" So I probably may
5 have felt a whole lot different in 1965 and maybe even '66 and '67. By '69, I don't know
6 if there's a whole heck of a lot of people that had a rosy attitude about what was going on
7 over there and the potential for what we might call victory. In my mind, what we were
8 doing is we're simply buying time with some sort of hope that the South Vietnamese
9 would be able to establish some type of control over the situation, which appeared very
10 slim to me. They came to rely too much upon the United States for too much stuff. So I
11 think my attitude through there was if I would have really felt like fighting in the
12 Vietnam War was something that I had to do or should do or wanted to do, I'd have
13 enlisted. But I got drafted and I didn't turn it down. I didn't say, "No, I ain't going," and
14 I didn't seek another alternative which we talked about before. It's probably because I'm
15 just passive. My personality's pretty passive. "Okay, I'll do this because you say I've
16 got to do it," but a lot of people did take alternate routes because they didn't want to go.
17 They didn't believe in it, they didn't think it was the thing to do and so they joined
18 something but they joined something that they knew would steer them clear of a combat
19 role in Vietnam.

20 RV: Were these thoughts you were having while you were going through
21 advanced and before you went to Vietnam or were these thoughts you formed while there
22 or afterwards?

23 GN: Oh, I think I had them before. I think that we had a lot of discussions like
24 the last couple of years when I was in college. I'd have people come and say, "Gary, you
25 better join the National Guard. If you don't join the National Guard, you're going to get
26 drafted. You're going to end up going to Vietnam and that's a mess over there. You
27 don't want to go over there into that crap." So yeah, that was all known even before the
28 time when I was drafted.

29 RV: Right. How much contact did you have with your family, especially with
30 Larry?

1 GN: Well, we'd write letters and I might write a letter every two weeks or so and
2 maybe call home once a month. I mean I don't look at it as being a lot. I went in
3 September 30th of '69 and I think my brother went in maybe two months later. He was
4 on kind of a delayed enlistment program but I know I went in first. I don't know that the
5 whole time that I was in, that nineteen months I was in the service, maybe I wrote my
6 brother five times and he wrote me five times. And I don't think we ever talked on the
7 phone. And the only time I talked to my parents on the phone would be when I was in
8 training at Fort Leonard Wood or Fort Knox when I was in Vietnam. You could make a
9 MARS (Military Affiliate Radio System) phone call home but I never did. And then of
10 course I made arrangements with other family members to get my mom and dad to
11 Hawaii for R&R (Rest and Relaxation) because it was something they always wanted to
12 do. So I saw them kind of midpoint in my tour but we never really talked about what was
13 going on. I mean going to Hawaii for a week on R&R would be just like if you went on
14 vacation for a week any other time.

15 RV: Why were you all not discussing the possibility of you going into combat and
16 especially with the fact that you had so much family history? You had the four uncles in
17 World War II, one of whom was killed. Why not any discussion about this?

18 GN: I don't know. I guess I want to say there just never was a lot of words
19 expressed. Not that there wasn't feelings. I think there was probably feeling but maybe
20 it was just in some way, shape, or form of an acceptance of fate or something. It was
21 like, "Well, this is going to happen and there's nothing you can do about it." Or if you
22 can do something about it, the only thing you can do is just say, "Well, I'm going to join
23 the Air Force or National Guard." The only time I can really ever remember my dad
24 saying anything to me was after I was classified 1-A for draft and he said something like,
25 "What are you going do?" And I probably responded, "Well, I'll let them draft me."
26 And I can't remember ever any words with my mom relative to what was going on. My
27 dad's brother was killed but my mother had a brother also in World War II in the South
28 Pacific who, for a long time, was thought to be dead because of no contact and I'm sure
29 they were very concerned and frightened but it's like, "I don't want to scare them so I
30 won't say anything to them and they don't want to scare me and they won't say anything
31 to me. So by mutual agreement, we just won't talk about it." Because what we'd

1 probably have to admit is, “Holy cow, you may go off and we’ll never see you again.
2 Well, we don’t want to think about that or we don’t want to verbalize that we’re thinking
3 about that.”

4 RV: Right. Did that sit well with you then?

5 GN: I don’t know of any other way that I would have done it. It’s not like I
6 wanted real bad to talk to them about it and didn’t. I think a lot more discussion—I had a
7 lot of discussions with people in my peer group more than I did with, let’s say, my
8 parents or aunts and uncles and brothers and sisters and stuff. It would be more with
9 people that were in the same boat that I was in. Definitely graduating from college, that
10 last year in, college where we all knew that we’re going to get out of college here and our
11 2-S deferments are going to evaporate and so no more hiding behind the desk in school.
12 A lot of that discussion was, “What are you going to do and what are the options?” But I
13 don’t really remember discussing that with family. It was more like I knew everybody in
14 my class. By the time we got out of college, we knew who was going to join the Guard,
15 we knew who was going to join Reserves, we knew who was going in the Air Force,
16 who’s going in the Navy, who’s going to tough it out and just take the draft and I don’t
17 know if my close circle of friends that I had in college, if anybody else got drafted
18 besides me. Maybe one other person.

19 RV: Is there anything else that you want to talk about regarding your advanced
20 training? Anything with the folks in your unit, anything that comes to mind now before
21 we moved forward?

22 GN: No, I think that pretty well—right now that pretty well sums that up.

23 RV: Okay. When did you find out you were going to Vietnam? When did you
24 get your orders?

25 GN: Probably about the last week or so if AIT (Advanced Individual Training). I
26 had an eight-week course in basic armor crew, in 11-Echo, and then they took a group of
27 us out of that class and put us into additional school for the Sheridan tank. That was the
28 M-551, which is a seventeen-ton tank. It’s made out of aluminum. It’s amphibious. It
29 can swim across water and it can be dropped out of an airplane like a C-130. And so
30 some of those were going to Vietnam and so they took, maybe out of a hundred and fifty,
31 they took forty or fifty of us out of my training company and kept us at Fort Knox for

1 another six weeks. I went through that training but we still didn't know, I don't think we
2 still knew what our final orders were. So at the end of that school, essentially they
3 probably put you all in a formation, call your name out and you go up and the Drill
4 Sergeant has a sheet of paper in his hand and he'd hand it to you and you read it and it
5 tells you—probably what all it said there at that time was to report to—I don't know what
6 it was, the 90th Replacement Battalion or something in Long Binh, Vietnam no later than
7 June 5th, 1971. So you don't know your job, really, you don't know the company or the
8 unit you're assigned to. All you know is, you're going to this replacement battalion.

9 RV: You mean, June 5th, 1970, correct?

10 GN: Yes, yes, that's correct.

11 RV: You were at Fort Knox. Was it December of '69 through what, May, I
12 guess?

13 GN: No, I didn't go to Fort Knox. Since I went—we had Christmas leave. See,
14 my basic graduating was just before Christmas so I would have been there all of October
15 and all of November. We had the reception station when we first went in and chewed up
16 a few days so I think graduation was sometime in early December and then we got
17 about—oh, it seems like we got about twenty days or so. I think they call it an exodus,
18 where everybody leaves for holiday. So we had maybe twenty days or so in December,
19 came back in January and then I went through that special training for a few weeks and
20 then got held there for a few weeks. So maybe I got to Fort Knox around the first of
21 February, all of February and all of March for basic tank training and then another six
22 weeks for the Sheridan tanks. I would have got out of Fort Knox somewhere in the
23 middle of May of '70 with about, let's say, ten days or two weeks leave to go home
24 before going to Vietnam. So Fort Leonard Wood would have been September 30th until
25 maybe towards the end of January and then at Fort Knox from January till the middle of
26 May. I mean February to the middle of May.

27 RV: Okay. Gary, this might be a good time to stop right here before we get you
28 over to Vietnam.

29 GN: Okay.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Gary L. Noller
Conducted by Richard B. Verrone, Ph.D.
January 6, 2006
Transcribed by Mindy Moser

1 Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone. I'm continuing my oral history
2 interview for the Vietnam Archive with Gary Noller. Today is January 6th, 2006. It is a
3 little after 9:15am, Central Standard Time, and I'm again in Lubbock, Texas. Gary, are
4 you still in...where is it again? Catoosa, Oklahoma?

5 Gary Noller: That is correct.

6 RV: Okay. Gary, we left off with our last session with you getting ready to go
7 over to Vietnam. You had received your orders at the end of your training there on the
8 Sheridan tank and could you tell me, when you did receive the orders and you knew you
9 would have some time off before having to get back in and report and go overseas, tell
10 me what you did in the interim before you went to Vietnam?

11 GN: Well I think I had maybe ten days or two weeks from the time I left training
12 at Fort Knox, Kentucky before I had to report to the Oakland Army Terminal in Oakland,
13 California. And during that time I went back to my home in Dodge City, Kansas. I
14 stayed there in my parents' house and essentially it was sort of like a vacation. I don't
15 think I worked anywhere. I probably went out and saw friends. We'd go to the drive-in
16 and watch the movie and drink beer, we'd go to the drive-in, watch the movie, drink beer,
17 pretty much anything that I'd do under any other normal circumstance at that time in my
18 life for entertainment. I think coming out of training, we had duffel bags full of all of our
19 military clothes and items and that pretty much just sits back in the corner until the day
20 came to leave and then I just picked up my stuff and traveled to Wichita, Kansas to get on
21 an airplane for the flight out to California.

1 RV: Did your friends and yourself, did you all talk about Vietnam and the war
2 and you going over there?

3 GN: Well I think that certainly to the extent that everybody knew that that's what
4 my orders said, family members and friends, but I don't think that there was any type of
5 in-depth discussion as to what I would do when I'd get there, what I thought the
6 prospects were, what the outlook was, any type of philosophical considerations or
7 political considerations, so I would say not a lot of discussion about that.

8 RV: How did you feel about getting ready to go into a war zone and getting ready
9 to go to war?

10 GN: Well, I think that I was certainly apprehensive about it. I don't want to say I
11 was terrified. I was able to get up and do all of my normal routines but I was certainly
12 aware of the fact that Vietnam was a war zone, that I was trained combat as an armor
13 crewman and very likely, as a draftee, would be in a combat situation, although I also
14 knew from stories that I had heard that you could end up in some job somewhere that
15 could be just like having a job in some downtown city where there was very little threat.
16 So there was always kind of trying to balance the two between, "Well, it could be a
17 combat situation or maybe it isn't a combat situation. You really don't know, you're not
18 going to find out until you get there." But I think it did weigh very heavily upon me from
19 the experience of having lost a very close friend in Vietnam in 1968 and being able to
20 watch on the evening news the activity that's going on over there and all the political
21 turmoil that was going on in the United States at that time that it certainly wouldn't be a
22 leisure trip over there. It's not a vacation trip. It's going to be very serious. It could
23 have very grave consequences.

24 RV: Did you know exactly what your...I know you knew your MOS but did you
25 know what you would be doing once you got in? I believe you went to Long Binh first.
26 What did you understand about what your assignment would be?

27 GN: Well I virtually had no knowledge of that. All I knew is what I was trained
28 in that I was to report to the Oakland Army Terminal. They probably give you something
29 like, "Don't come before 7 am on Saturday and don't be here any later than noon on
30 Sunday." So they kind of give you a window in which you report and that was for
31 mainly processing and then eventual transportation to Vietnam. So they don't really give

1 you...you really do not know at that point in time and maybe they don't even know at
2 that point in time exactly where you're going to be assigned to. So it's speculative. You
3 could sit back and you could speculate a hundred different things as to what you think
4 might happen and apply probabilities to all of those different things. I certainly—really
5 at that point in time, as much of my attitude was—I don't know if it's complacency or
6 just fate. "Well, we'll see when we get there as to what the next page of the book is
7 going to look like."

8 RV: What do you remember about saying goodbye to your parents and your
9 friends and family?

10 GN: Well, I don't remember a whole lot other than I do remember my parents.
11 When I had came in to Wichita, I had borrowed a car from my sister. I had a sister and
12 her family living in Wichita, Kansas and I think I borrowed—they had a 1962
13 Volkswagen Beetle and I drove that home so while I was home I was able to drive that
14 car around. And I remember putting my stuff in the car and my dad being out to the car
15 with me when I left. My mother was in the house and when I remember saying goodbye
16 to my mother, we had a house that had a walk-out basement in it and she ran a daycare
17 and took care of other people's children and that could have very possibly been a
18 weekday and that's where she was at and I remember going down and saying, "Well,
19 Mom, goodbye. I'm ready to leave now. I'm going to Wichita to get the plane." And
20 the only thing that I can remember her saying specifically and I've remembered it forever
21 was she said, "Well, do the best you can do. That's all you can do." And very succinct,
22 very brief, but I think in looking back upon it, it is extremely good advice. She just said,
23 "Just do the best you can do and hopefully the best that you can do is going to get you
24 through and you're going to come back home and everything will be okay." That's kind
25 of the interpretation that I've put on it since. Which, I don't know that I necessarily
26 looked at it that way then but looking back upon it, for some reason or another, I've
27 always remember what her words were to me as I left. My father was probably very
28 similar. He used to have kind of a saying whenever us kids would go anywhere, if we'd
29 go out to the night movie or go to a football game or go on some little trip, he'd always
30 say something to the effect of, "Be on your best behavior," or, "Be on your best dignity."
31 And I think that's probably what it was. It was very little probably directly with regard to

1 going to Vietnam and going into the situation as a soldier in war, as it was what they
2 might say at anytime when I'd be going off to do something. It was kind of a, "Do the
3 best you can do. Behave, and we'll see you when you get back."

4 RV: Were you in uniform?

5 GN: At that time, probably not. I think when we were in travel status we had to
6 be in uniform, so to travel from my hometown to go to my sister's house I would have
7 been in civilian clothes but then upon board the airplane to go to—I think I flew into San
8 Francisco, California and then rode a bus over to the other side of the Bay, that would
9 have been in uniform, which back at that time was probably khakis. You could travel in
10 a khaki uniform. We were not allowed at that time to travel in fatigues. You could travel
11 in a Class A uniform or green uniform if you wanted to but I think that was late May and
12 we were probably authorized then to wear khakis.

13 RV: Okay. What do you remember about San Francisco?

14 GN: I know the airplane left Wichita, Kansas, and we landed once in maybe
15 Albuquerque, New Mexico, then went to Los Angeles, LAX. I think at LAX (Los
16 Angeles International Airport) I had to change planes and I flew into San Francisco. I
17 remember coming in to the airport. I'm not sure—I don't think I'd ever been to
18 California before so it was quite a sight to see the cities out there. Potentially coming
19 into the airport there, I don't know if Candlestick Park, the big baseball stadium was
20 there, but we had some means by which when you come into the airport, they direct you
21 to kind of a military reception desk and they ask where you're going and they say, "Okay,
22 there will be a bus come up here in half an hour. Get on that bus." I remember getting
23 on a bus and going across the bridge between San Francisco and Oakland. What I didn't
24 realize was that there's a Marine base in the Bay there. You actually get part of the way
25 across the bridge and you can take a ramp down and go on this island. And as the bus
26 went off that ramp and went down there on the drive up and there's a sign that says, "US
27 Marine Corps." And I'm going, "Oh, no, they're taking me to the wrong place. I'm not
28 in the Marine Corps. I don't want to be in the Marine Corps. I've gotten on the wrong
29 bus." Well, in effect, this was some sort of regularly scheduled route and the bus went
30 down there and I don't know if anybody got on or got off but then we got back up on the
31 bridge and went over and got off at the Army terminal at Oakland.

1 RV: When you arrived there at the terminal and you got off the bus and went in,
2 was this your unit from Fort Knox? Did you see people you recognized or were you
3 going to kind of ride over by yourself and then hook up with them once you got in
4 country?

5 GN: Well there were quite a few of us that had the same sheet of orders coming
6 out of Fort Knox. I don't remember exactly how many, but it could have been as many
7 as thirty or forty. Those of us that trained together, some of us trained together in the
8 Patton tank and then we, as a group, went together through the other training on the
9 Sheridan tank and then we got the same sheet of orders to report to Oakland at the same
10 time. So in Oakland I was able to meet up with people that I did know. Again, I don't
11 know exactly how many that would have been. Thirty or forty seems to be a reasonable
12 number of people so we kind of milled around together. Many of us ended up on the
13 same airplane then, going to Vietnam, and really kind of followed all the way through. In
14 my company that I was assigned to, there were at that point still maybe five or six of us
15 all assigned to the same company at the same time that had been together now maybe
16 four months through the training process and home on leave and ending back up. So
17 there were people I knew.

18 RV: How did that help you? I mean, was that a really positive thing or did you
19 really not care?

20 GN: Oh, I think it definitely is positive. One of the biggest factors on taking off
21 and going into something like this is a little bit of the fear of the unknown and loneliness,
22 being able to meet with people that I already knew and had gone through training with
23 and considered them friends is definitely a support. It's like you're not in the boat by
24 yourself and you're not in the boat when a bunch of strangers. You're in a boat with a
25 bunch of people you already know so you're able to have a mutual support there. You
26 discuss what's going on and what you think is going to happen. And naturally we all
27 talked about what we did when we were home for the ten days or two weeks. There was
28 one guy, Jamie Acosta, who actually lived in the Bay area. He lived in San Leandro,
29 which was just south of Oakland. And I remember he showed up outside the fence.
30 Once we went into the terminal, the Army terminal, which is the processing center and
31 they had barracks there and a PX (Post Exchange) there and stuff, once you went in you

1 couldn't come out. So we reported in and they said, "Okay, come to formation at eight
2 o'clock in the morning." Well, we thought we were free to go. "Okay, we'll see you
3 tomorrow at eight o'clock." They said, "No, you're not leaving here. Once you come in
4 you can't just walk back out the front gate and go to town and come back later."

5 RV: Do you know why? Was that because they thought you maybe would desert
6 or have trouble and just not come back?

7 GN: Well I don't know that that would be the case as much as they knew
8 probably what we would do is we'd go to town and party and maybe we wouldn't desert
9 but we'd come back and we'd be in pretty ragged shape and they wanted everybody to
10 report. If they say, "We want you here at six am in the morning," it's 6 am in the
11 morning and ready to go and fully dressed and have your stuff gathered up and know
12 what's going on. So I think it's probably just the case that they didn't want people
13 wandering off and either coming back late or coming back with ill effects due to too
14 much partying. But I remember Jamie Acosta. He went through training with us in Fort
15 Knox and he did show up. In fact, I think that's what he said. "Why don't you guys
16 come out and I'll show you around." Well, we couldn't get out but we were there a little
17 earlier than we had to be. But I know he kind of pointed out we could see some things.
18 He's say, "Well, that's San Francisco over there," and I know he pointed out the
19 buildings at Berkeley and he kind of gave us a little tour, let's say, of what we could see
20 through the fence as to what our surroundings were. But once we got in we couldn't get
21 back out and I don't remember exactly how many days we were there. It seems like
22 maybe two or three days and what'd typical in that situation in that situation is that they
23 call you to formation four times a day. It might be 6 am, 10 am, 2 pm, and 6 pm and you
24 have to show up and they call your name, they make sure you're still there and then they
25 may give you some sort of briefing as to what's next. And they kind of move you
26 through a line. They say, "Okay, we're going to go fill out these kinds of paperworks,"
27 or, "You're going to turn in your stateside khaki uniforms and we're going to give you
28 jungle fatigues and you're going to get jungle boots." So there's a certain process that
29 you kind of move up through the line and it takes you a couple of days to go through that
30 processing before you're next on the list to get on an available aircraft as it is ready to
31 leave.

1 RV: How did you get from Wichita over as far as financially? Did the
2 government provide you your ticket or were you going to be reimbursed at some time?

3 GN: Well, I believe when—you get paid once a month and at that time I believe I
4 was a PFC and that may have been maybe a hundred and eighty or two hundred dollars a
5 month or two hundred and thirty dollars a month or something. So you always got that
6 pay but if you were to travel, like from Fort Knox home and then from home to
7 California, I think they gave you a payment. They made some sort of estimate based on
8 mileage or maybe they looked up flight ticket costs or something but they'd say, "Okay,
9 we're going to give you your pay here and you're travel pay and you're travel pay will be
10 six hundred dollars. And that's got to get you from Fort Knox to home and from home to
11 California, to Oakland." Now, if you wanted to walk, you could walk, and save six
12 hundred bucks. If you wanted to drive in a car if somebody would take you, you could
13 have them drive you in a car. The military at that point doesn't really care how you got
14 there because they're giving you the money and they believe that they amount of money
15 that they give you will cover the transportation. Now, once we left Vietnam of course,
16 we didn't buy a ticket to go to Vietnam. They just said, "Get on that airplane. That's the
17 airplane that's taking you there." But most of the travel inside the United States—if you
18 had leave in between, which I did; I was on leave between Fort Knox and Oakland,
19 California—then they gave you money and said, "Okay." And at Fort Knox, Kentucky,
20 there was a travel agency and I remember going to the travel agency at Fort Knox and
21 saying, "Okay, here's my orders, here's where I've got to go and here's the dates," and
22 they sit down like anybody else going somewhere and draw up the tickets. And they may
23 say, "Okay, your tickets are three hundred and fifty bucks," and my understanding or
24 belief and remembrance is if you had money left over you didn't have to pay the Army
25 back but if you were short money, too bad, because they gave you all they're going to
26 give you.

27 RV: Tell me about the plane that you flew over on. Was it a private or I guess a
28 commercial plane or was it military?

29 GN: Well, it was not a military marked plane. It was a chartered plane. I think it
30 was a Tiger, Tiger Airways, which probably is chartered. They do no commercial flights
31 but they probably leased their planes out to the military. It was a jumbo jet, I remember

1 that. I can't remember exactly who made it. I don't think it was a Boeing jet, though, I
2 think it was a stretched DC8 or something. And I think there were two hundred and fifty
3 or maybe two hundred and eighty people on that plane and what they did is they moved
4 us out of the Army terminal. You got to a particular point where you're in a big holding
5 room and everybody that's going on that airplane is in this holding room. And let's say
6 it's two hundred and fifty people and you can put sixty-five people in a bus so you're
7 going to move to four buses. And what they do is they'll line you up in alphabetical
8 order and give you a number. So they may say, "Okay, you're number 193 and when we
9 tell you to line up, you line up from number 1 to number 280. And if you're number 193
10 you need to make sure number 192 is in front of you and number 194 is behind you." So
11 when they tell you to line up, you get in this big line and then they'll probably walk down
12 the list and they'll call your name out, your number and your name and you say "Yes," so
13 they know you're there. We probably did that two or three times, one time inside the
14 building and we'd go on to the bus and they'd do it inside the bus and they take you out
15 to I believe it was Travis Air Force Base. You get off the bus, you go through this, you
16 go into a holding area there at that air base and they go through it again, and they put you
17 on the airplane and they go through it again. So it seems like about five different times
18 they came through to make sure that whoever they had on their manifest was in fact
19 present. The only other thing that I remember about that is that the officers got to go in
20 front, maybe by rank, I don't know. But other than that, all the enlisted people, it seemed
21 like we went in alphabetical order.

22 RV: Well, what was the ride over like, the flight over? What do you remember?

23 GN: Well, I remember we had to take some carry-on. Whenever we got on the
24 plane it was pretty much military style. It's "Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up, hurry up, get
25 on the plane, get on the plane, get on the plane," and then we sit on the plane for an hour
26 and a half and nothing happened.

27 RV: So the hurry up and wait mentality.

28 GN: Yeah. And I think we had pretty much a normal briefing on a plane like any
29 civilian passenger would get about if we have to go down on the water, use your seat
30 cushion for flotation and if the air masks drop down—all that stuff was pretty much
31 normal. I think we got pretty much normal airline food to eat but we did make several

1 stops. In fact, our first stop was in Hawaii. Most all of the times that I ever went
2 anywhere in the military, it seemed like it was always done at night. I think we left
3 Oakland at maybe nine or ten o'clock at night and got to Travis and the plane took off at
4 one or two in the morning. We landed at Honolulu and we actually got off the airplane as
5 they refueled because passengers are not allowed to be on an airplane while it's refueling.
6 So they just said, "Okay, get off the airplane and listen for the announcement. When we
7 tell you to re-board, we'll re-board." So we were in the civilian terminal there in
8 Honolulu. And the only thing I remember there is I'd never been to Hawaii before and so
9 I said, "Wow, I made it to Hawaii. I'm only going to be here for two hours but I'm in
10 Hawaii." And I think we went to a Coke machine or something and got a coke and just
11 kind of milled around with other people. The thought occurred to me, "They let us off
12 here. How do they know we're going to get back on the airplane? Somebody might just
13 say, 'Hey, this is a pretty nice place to be. I've always wanted to be here. See you guys,'
14 and walk right out the front door and get in the cab and go down the street." Nobody did
15 that but after all of the tight control that we were in, in Oakland where they wouldn't let
16 us walk out their front gate once we moved in and kept tracking out whereabouts four
17 times a day, they just said, "Okay, take off. We're in a terminal and listen to the
18 announcement when we re-board the plane." But we did re-board and we stopped I think
19 between California and Vietnam. We must have stopped five times. I want to say we
20 stopped at Wake Island, we stopped at Guam. I don't know if we stopped at Midway, but
21 possibly and in the Philippines and then landed at Ton Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon.

22 RV: It sounds like a very long flight.

23 GN: Yeah, I want to say from the time we got on the plane until the time we got
24 off the plane, that probably was twenty hours, maybe twenty four hours of real time. Of
25 course we went across the International Date Line so our actual—taking in the changing
26 of the time zones, from the time we left California to the time we got to Vietnam, that
27 could have been thirty hours or thirty-six hours for all I know.

28 RV: Were you able to sleep any?

29 GN: Possibly. I don't remember. I generally don't sleep very well on airplanes
30 but I may have dozed off initially.

1 RV: So you arrived at Ton Son Nhut. What time of day was this? Do you
2 remember if it was light or dark or morning?

3 GN: It was daylight. I want to say it was probably afternoon and I remember
4 coming in and we could—of course everybody's wanting to look out the windows and
5 see what it looked like down there and the first thing I remember seeing is smoke in the
6 air. You'd have something on fire burning and there was this pillar of black smoke or
7 something going up in the air and I go, "Oh, they're blowing stuff up and stuff's on fire.
8 When we hit the ground we're going to have to run off that airplane and jump into a ditch
9 real quick because all this stuff's going on all over the place." Well in fact that wasn't
10 the case. There was just a lot of plain old trash burning going on. They didn't have the
11 sanitation practices that we have so most of those fires that we saw burning were
12 probably just trash dumps that were set on fire to burn trash. But coming off the plane
13 immediately, this was the first part of June, the first week of June. I think my report date
14 to Oakland was June sixth, so maybe this was June eighth or ninth or tenth. I don't
15 know. But it was the very early part of June and walking out of the airplane, I think we
16 walked out and there was no jet way. So we came out and had to walk down the stairs
17 onto the tarmac. The immediate feel was the heat and humidity. It was like coming out
18 of the air-conditioned space on the airplane out and the heat and humidity was a
19 tremendous change in environment. And again, we went into some sort of terminal
20 building and into a holding area and everybody off the plane and they probably checked
21 to make sure that everybody's there that's supposed to be there. Then we were moved
22 onto busses and transported by a military bus from the air terminal at Ton Son Nhut over
23 to the Army post at Long Binh, which was a few miles. I don't know it could have been
24 five miles; it could have been fifteen miles. But it was only a few miles, maybe a half an
25 hour ride or so from the air terminal over to the Army post at Long Binh.

26 RV: What do you remember about that trip and kind of seeing Vietnam and the
27 Vietnamese people for the first time?

28 GN: Well, there is culturally quite a bit of difference. I think that everything,
29 from the clothes that people wore to the cars that people drove to the way they build their
30 buildings to all of those types of things. I remember on the bus, seeing a big Coca-Cola
31 sign and saying, "Well, they've got Coca-Cola in Vietnam." I guess growing up in

1 western Kansas, spending my whole life out there; I just really wasn't exposed to any
2 type of international culture. I mean, it wasn't hard to believe they had Coca-Cola, but I
3 guess the thing to me was, "Not only do they have Coca-Cola, they've got this big huge
4 sign with 'Coca-Cola' on it." I can't remember, but I want to say I remember that our
5 bus had chain link fence on the windows so you're sitting here going, "Well, you open up
6 the windows on the bus but the chain link fence is out there so that they can't toss a
7 grenade in at you." So I think there was certainly some apprehension about the safety of
8 going down the road in our Army bus. None of us were armed. We had no weapons. I
9 don't know if anybody, if the bus driver had any type of weapon or if there was MPs
10 (Military Police) leading us or what but it seems like we were pretty much just out in the
11 open, going down a public street between the airport and the Army base.

12 RV: Did that bother you?

13 GN: Oh, not terribly much. I mean, I pretty much believed that the military
14 understood what the risk and the safety issues were and they wouldn't move us that way
15 if it was unsafe to move that way, that we were in a controlled area or a secured area.
16 And like I said, there were some precautions, like they put the chain link fence on the
17 windows but they didn't put us in flak jackets and steel pots and give us rifles with
18 bullets in it either.

19 RV: What happened at Long Binh?

20 GN: Well, it's very much kind of a repeat process. Every time you change places,
21 first of all they'll take you into some sort of reception intake type mode where you go in
22 and you do some paperwork. Typically you fill out a little locator card, which is a
23 postcard sized form. You tell them your name and your rank and your serial number and
24 your home record and who to contact and this is used—this is back in the time before we
25 had computers, but it's in some method, way, shape, or form, verifies the fact that you
26 did arrive here at this place, at this time, and you're here. You fill out that kind of
27 paperwork. We were assigned barracks. Long Binh did have two-story wooden
28 structured type barracks so we were assigned probably some type of roster guide, I'll call
29 them, a person that's in charge of a group of us, maybe twenty of us or twenty-five of us.
30 He's not a Drill Sergeant or anything like that. He's just part of the personnel, the staff
31 within the replacement station that gets the group of twenty people. He'd tell us the

1 rules, go over with us what we're going to be doing, we'd draw probably sheets and
2 pillow cases and bedding and he'd say, "Okay, you twenty guys are in the bottom floor of
3 that building there. Go in and get your stuff stowed away and be back out here at four
4 o'clock and we'll go from there." And inside there, there was some things like a PX and
5 maybe there was a place you could go get an ice cream cone or soft drink. There may
6 have been a USO (United Service Organizations) there where you could go in and play
7 cards or read magazines. I don't remember watching TV. They had radio but again, very
8 primitive. The main purpose was to get you there, verify that you're there, and then
9 process you further. I don't know for sure if there was more than one Army replacement
10 station in Vietnam or if that was the only one, meaning everybody coming in to Vietnam
11 in the Army went through there. I know everybody coming out of the Army didn't go
12 through there because when I left Vietnam, I didn't go back through Long Binh; I went
13 through Cam Ranh Bay. But it may have been everybody coming in to the Army in
14 Vietnam came into that replacement station and then after you got there is where they
15 issued you further orders to go to your individual units.

16 RV: How long did you stay there at Long Binh?

17 GN: I think maybe two or three days. And again, I was with a group of people
18 that I had known from training at Fort Knox and it seemed like maybe it took a couple of
19 days to do what they needed to do and then after that it's mainly arranging your
20 transportation out. And again, everything's got to be written up in orders, so somebody
21 has to sit down and physically type all of this stuff up on a piece of paper and then you go
22 to formations four times a day and they may call your name and say, "When we call your
23 name, come up and get your orders." So you may have three or four hundred people, five
24 hundred people, I don't know, standing in a formation and then they start reading names
25 and you go up there and a guy hands you your sheet of paper and so that's the next thing
26 you know that's going to happen. One day a bunch of the people that I'd been with did
27 get their orders but they didn't call my name. And so some of my friends said, "Well,
28 Gary, we got orders. We're supposed to be leaving at ten o'clock tonight or ten o'clock
29 in the morning." I said, "Well, I don't have any." So I said goodbye to a bunch of the
30 people that I knew. As far as I knew, we were being separated. They were going
31 somewhere and I could be going the totally opposite direction. So I spent another day

1 there and then I did get my orders and then did rejoin many of the people that left the day
2 ahead of me. I caught back up with them but I was just a day later for whatever reason.

3 RV: When you got your orders, what were they and where were you going?

4 GN: Well, the only thing that we would have gotten at that time was that we were
5 going to the Americal Division in Chu Lai, that we were going to report to Chu Lai.
6 There again, now you're leaving the replacement station in Long Binh, which is the
7 Army—all guys in the Army, all people in the Army report there and then they break us
8 down. At that time there were like I think ten Army divisions in Vietnam, maybe more,
9 and some independent brigades in Vietnam. So they would break you down into that
10 level. So my orders said to go to Chu Lai, report to the Americal Division. Again, they'd
11 pick you up and they'd say, "Okay, you're going to be on a bus, the bus is going to take
12 you to the airport," and there was probably a group of us, maybe fifty—I don't know.
13 We flew from Long Binh to Chu Lai on a C-130 and I would say the C-130 was full so
14 it's how many passengers you could put on a C-130. So they put us on a bus, transported
15 us back over to the airport. When they got to the airport they put us on the airplane. The
16 airplane took us to Chu Lai. We got off in the terminal there and then they'd pick us up
17 in a bus and we went to a reception station in Chu Lai for the Americal Division and then
18 immediately following that we went to what's known as the combat center and that was
19 about a week or ten days or so of training within the Americal Division but additional
20 training.

21 RV: What was that training like? What do you remember about that week?

22 GN: Well, we did some things there that we had not done previously. I remember
23 one thing, we had training in explosives and we'd go to a classroom type setting and they
24 had these little one-pound bricks of TNT that kind of looked like a one-pound block of
25 butter and they described this explosive and you had fuse. In fact, we actually had fuse
26 that you would light with a match and they'd say, "This is how you put the fuse in the
27 explosive and then you light the fuse and when the fuse burns down to the explosive, the
28 explosive is going to explode." And we had a session in which they would have us take a
29 piece of fuse, maybe it was three inches long, and light it. They said, "Okay, time how
30 long it takes for this fuse to burn." So let's say that fuse takes one minute to burn.
31 They'd say, "Okay, a three inch piece of fuse takes one minute to burn. All right, we're

1 going to have you cut a three inch piece of fuse, put it on the explosive.” We were down
2 right in the South China Sea on the beach. There was a sandy beach out there where we
3 were taking this training. “You’re going to walk out there on the beach, set your
4 explosive down on the ground and then you’re going to light it and then you need to
5 move away from that explosive and it’s going to explode.” And we literally did that.
6 We’d blow it up, one pound of either C-4 explosive or TNT or something, as part of our
7 training. I never used any explosives before or since but that was—part of the training
8 was to blow up a pound of explosives.

9 RV: Did they tell you why you were being trained on explosives?

10 GN: Well, I think part of that was to cross-train. Again, the more skills you have
11 the more valuable you are and the Americal Division being an infantry division had a
12 high emphasis on combat operations. It could be at some point in time in the future,
13 “You may need to blow something up with an explosive so we’re going to give you at
14 least some very basic training here how to do that.” For example, one of the things in an
15 infantry company you might do is you might have to blow trees up to make a landing
16 zone to get a Medevac in to Medevac somebody out. And they knew that. You might be
17 an infantryman or you may or may not be trained in explosives but somebody’s going to
18 have to go blow some trees down. So we may fly over and throw these explosives out on
19 the ground and you have to go over there and blow the trees up. So I think they
20 wanted—at that point in time, if you had no training a guy might say, “I don’t know how
21 to do that.” If you had some training they could come back and say, “We trained you at
22 the combat center on how to use explosives.” “Well, yeah, I didn’t get very much
23 training.” “Yeah, but you got some. So use the training that you have and we’ll talk you
24 through a little bit more but take that explosive down there and blow them trees down.”
25 Or it could be blowing up anything you wanted to blow up. The only thing that I
26 remember that we might do would be for that purpose of dropping trees to create a
27 landing zone out in the middle of the jungle somewhere. But we did other things. I think
28 we fired a machine gun, we saw demonstrations where maybe they would demonstrate
29 firing the LAW, the Light Anti-tank Weapon. I know we went through the gas chamber
30 again. I went through the gas chamber at Fort Leonard Wood in basic training and it was
31 really pretty easy. I mean, the gas didn’t affect me at all. They take you in there and

1 you're in a gas mask and at some point while you're in a room full of gas you have to
2 take the gas mask off and actually breathe the gas so you know what the gas feels like.
3 Well, I don't remember at Fort Leonard Wood of that having any effect at all but they
4 took us into gas training at the combat center in Chu Lai and we're out there and it's a
5 hundred and some degrees and you're sweating. We went in there and first of all they
6 have you on the gas mask, basically to prove to you that the gas mask will work, that you
7 can be in that atmosphere and be okay because the gas mask is protecting you but they
8 also want you to know what it feels like to breathe in gas, CS gas (tear gas), so they have
9 you pull the mask off and then recite your name, rank, and serial number and maybe the
10 instructor would make sure you got a couple of breaths and he'd say, "Okay, you can
11 leave." So when I went through the gas chamber at Chu Lai, I got a good dose of it. And
12 I can remember coming outside, my eyes were watery, I couldn't see, I was coughing, it
13 felt like I ought to throw up, and the instructor kept saying, "Face into the wind, face into
14 the wind." Well as far as I could tell there was no wind. (Laughs) It was still air. I was
15 kind of going like, "Well, thank you for telling me to face into the wind, but where is the
16 wind?" And it took a few minutes for that effect to go away. I think we threw hand
17 grenades. They gave us a couple of hand grenades and said, "Okay, throw these hand
18 grenades." I don't remember that we did much with rifles. We may have but I don't
19 remember rifles. I know we had some training in again, military custom and ceremony,
20 code of conduct. I know we were told, very specifically we were told not to harass
21 Vietnamese people, civilians. I think we were given some Geneva Convention
22 instruction. I know we had a session where they brought in a former enemy sapper and at
23 night they set up a demonstration where they had concertina wire and they would show
24 us how sappers would penetrate concertina wire. They had a light there and they would
25 show the guy on the outside and they'd turn the light off and wait two or three minutes
26 and turn the light back on and you'd see how the fellow was penetrating the wire. They'd
27 turn the light back off and he'd penetrate a little bit further and they'd turn the light back
28 on. And they'd tell us, "Okay, you're sitting here in bleachers. You know this is going
29 on in front of you. It's night. Can you see it? Can you hear it? Do you know this is
30 happening?" It was a pretty grim description because yeah, virtually we're sitting fifteen
31 feet away from this person coming through this wire but we couldn't see him and we

1 couldn't hear him. We also had some first aid training. I remember a description of if
2 you have to perform a tracheotomy on somebody, how you do that. We had, I know,
3 some descriptions on how to call in artillery, how to call in air support, how to call in
4 medical dust-off, some of the weapons that were being used that we used, like, what is
5 the kill zone on a sixty-millimeter mortar; what's the kill zone on a hundred and fifty-five
6 millimeter high explosive rounds; what kind of weapons the enemy used; this is an AK-
7 47 rifle (Avtomat Kalashnikova 47); this is how many bullets a minute it can fire; an SKS
8 rifle (Samozariadnyia Karabina Simonova); and RPG (Rocket-Propelled Grenade);
9 satchel charges; what do satchel charges do when they explode? So I want to say it was
10 fairly intensive. It was much more realistic and in-depth training than what we had
11 received in basic or AIT.

12 RV: It sounds like it was relatively thorough. Did you feel that way?

13 GN: It was structured in the standpoint that we were staying barracks and they'd
14 get us up at six o'clock and we'd go to eat breakfast. They could tell you, if you were
15 there eight days, they'd tell you exactly every hour of those eight days what you would
16 be doing with regard to training. But the training was more to the point of combat related
17 and realistic. Like in training for armor crewman, we never blowed up a pound of TNT.
18 We shot a bunch of rounds through a tank but we never blowed up a pound of TNT.

19 RV: Gary, what about Vietnamese culture? Did they talk to you about the
20 language? I mean, you did mention that they said, "Don't harass civilians." But did they
21 get more specific about, "Here's the environment in which you will be operating and
22 here's a little bit about the language, their customs, how to conduct yourself within this
23 society?"

24 GN: Well, that was done so I can't answer that, no, but you have to take that in
25 context of, okay, if we were there eight days, how much of that eight days was spent with
26 that? And I'd say maybe a couple of hours. I know that they did teach us some words in
27 Vietnamese like how to say, "come here." Like if you wanted somebody to come to you,
28 how to say that. If you wanted somebody to stop, I think that's "dung lai." If somebody
29 was doing something you didn't want them to do, it's, "dung lai." I think maybe we
30 could read maybe a few words. Like, "If you see this sign, this means stop," or whatever.
31 There was some brief orientation I believe on religion, what their religious beliefs were.

1 Of course there was some Christianity and Catholics in Vietnam but there are also Asian
2 religions, Buddhism, so what their beliefs were relative to—like a temple, how sacred a
3 temple would be which to me would be comparable to what is a church like in the United
4 States. A little bit on dress. The women typically had the ao dai dress, school children
5 went to school in uniforms. I remember the boys had kind of a royal blue pant and a
6 white shirt and schoolgirls wore all white full-length ao dai. I can remember being told
7 that we wanted the Vietnamese people to look at us as being someone there to help them,
8 that we didn't want to harass them. Any type of harassment that we did towards
9 Vietnamese would cause ill will. For example, if you're going down the road, you don't
10 want to honk the horn on your truck and scare the water buffalo away that the guy's using
11 to plow his rice paddy with. That would be harassment. But I guess all in all, in treating
12 those aspects, like I said, maybe we had two hours or three hours or four hours of that. It
13 certainly wasn't a full day. It certainly wasn't a full week.

14 RV: Okay. If you don't mind, let's step back and look at the bigger picture here.
15 What did you—coming into Vietnam—what did you understand about why the United
16 States was there and once you're in country did that change?

17 GN: Well, it's kind of hard, I guess, for me to separate out what I think now as to
18 what I thought then. I mean, I don't know. I have thought the same thing then as I think
19 now but I think growing up and through the schooling that I had which was all
20 Catholic—I went to all-Catholic grade school, high school, and college—and through the
21 church, again the belief was that in some way, shape or form there was a threat from
22 Communism and this threat had to be stopped. If the threat was not stopped then the
23 whole world would be taken over. And a lot of those aspects to me at that point in time
24 were based on religion because Communism is atheistic and they would not allow the
25 practice of religion. And if the person was not allowed to practice their religion then you
26 had no guidance in life, no way of knowing how to live life correctly. So I think that I
27 did believe that then. I didn't believe the reason for Vietnam was to find oil. I don't
28 believe the reason for being in Vietnam was because Lyndon Johnson's wife owned stock
29 in Hughes Helicopter; I don't believe the reason we went to Vietnam was because John
30 Kennedy was Catholic and the Pope made him do it because the President of South
31 Vietnam was a Catholic. There's a lot of things you hear people say why we were in

1 Vietnam that I don't believe. I don't think I believed it then. Whether it was right,
2 whether politically it was conducted correctly or militarily it was conducted correctly or
3 the best way, those are other issues. But I honestly believe that John Kennedy is the
4 person who got us in to Vietnam and the reason he got us there was because he felt we
5 had to have some type of a hot war, take a stand. The Cold War was a huge immense
6 thing in Europe, the so-called fall of China on an Asian continent, plus everything else
7 that went on. We almost went to war with the Cuban Missile Crisis but that was averted.
8 But I believe that it was John Kennedy's belief that we would have to fight a hot war
9 somewhere against Communists and when the situation developed in Southeast Asia as it
10 did in Laos and Vietnam, that was the place where we're going to militarily take a stand.

11 RV: Do you remember what your morale was like and your attitude was like there
12 at Chu Lai before you—or I guess when you reported to Vietnam? Not necessarily at
13 Chu Lai but at Saigon, Long Binh, Chu Lai, and then going with your unit—your kind of
14 initial feeling and morale?

15 GN: Well, I think I was pretty well convinced that I was either going to make it or
16 not make it. I think I convinced myself initially that I would in fact do what I could do.
17 At this point in time I still haven't been assigned my orders to my eventual unit so there
18 was still some unknown about what exactly might I be doing. But I think looking at it,
19 saying, "Okay, it's three hundred and sixty-five days and we just made it through today
20 so it's three hundred and sixty-four days." I wasn't, again, fighting to the point where I
21 was going to shoot myself in the foot. I did have belief that I could make it, I did have
22 belief that I could come out in three hundred and sixty-five days and not be a casualty,
23 that I could come out in three hundred and sixty-five days and in some manner do what it
24 was that I was asked to do, but all at the same time knowing that maybe that won't be it.
25 Maybe you could be a casualty in one way or the other. Maybe you could be assigned to
26 some task or some job that you couldn't complete successfully. But I didn't dwell on the
27 possibility of things not being for the better. I think I did have optimism in that more
28 people make it out than don't make it out so I'm more likely to be one of the people that
29 makes it out than otherwise.

30 RV: So you were very aware of this countdown from three sixty-five down to
31 zero when you would DEROS (Date Eligible for Return From Overseas)?

1 GN: Yeah, and I think pretty much everybody was. Most of the people that I was
2 with were draftees so we shared a fair amount of similar attitude and there were some
3 people that were more gung-ho. They were enlisted. To me, there were only two classes
4 of people in the military. There were draftees and then there's everybody else and
5 everybody else are lifers. And they're the people that they want to be there, they asked to
6 be there and that's fine. I have no problem with that but typically with a huge percentage
7 of draftees that I ended up with like in an infantry company, with the huge percentage of
8 people that were draftees, you had a fairly common likeness to how you thought and felt
9 about things. And that was pretty much, "I don't want to be here but I'm here and I want
10 to do whatever it takes to get done and get out of here at the end of my time and be
11 okay."

12 RV: What did you think about this one year tour? Do you think that people
13 should have been serving in the military or that the military should have structured
14 service in Vietnam in this war much like what happened in World War II and World War
15 I where you simply serve until the war terminated?

16 GN: Well, I guess it could have been done that way. I think that philosophically
17 you can argue many different ways in which to get people to go off and fight a war. I
18 think that looking at Vietnam for example, there's advantages and disadvantages to the
19 way they did it. The advantage of having one-year tours was that more people would be
20 involved. In other words, you wouldn't take—I mean, if you took one person and said,
21 "You ain't coming back until this thing's all over with," he would have been over there
22 ten years. And even in World War II, towards the end of the war they put systems in to
23 get the old guys back home. They realized, particularly in a combat situation that the
24 human being can only withstand a certain amount of exposure to traumatic events and
25 you are going to become in some way, shape, or form, mentally affected. And during
26 World War II they got this down to such a fine degree that they awarded points so World
27 War II vets, at some point in time knew through a combinations of length of time as well
28 as exposure to combat events—maybe it's amphibious landings or maybe it's shelling
29 bombardment by airplane or assaults on enemy defenses or something—that when you
30 accumulate enough points you're going to go home. So towards the end of World War II
31 in the South Pacific, some of the guys that landed over there in 1941, by 1945 had points

1 and were coming home. And possibly in evaluation of that, the military said, “Okay,
2 we’ll take people over for one-year tours,” with the hopes that a one-year tour will help
3 limit the post-traumatic stress of combat veterans as well as help morale because a guy
4 will look back and say, “Oh gee, I think I can make it a year but I don’t know if I can
5 make it to the end when I don’t even know how long the end is going to be.” So there
6 could be a morale factor in there. Plus it could be just the fact that we have a huge pool
7 of people to draw from and we can train them. It only takes us sixteen weeks and I don’t
8 know how much money but we can train people in sixteen weeks or twenty weeks and
9 we’ll just spread the pain and suffering. So we’ll give one-year tours. I think there is
10 some ineffectiveness in that, you know, unit cohesiveness or experience. You’re always
11 having old guys leave and new guys come in so you could always question, “Well, do we
12 have the right mix? Do we have enough of the old people still around to where they can
13 give adequate training to new people or are we going to lose a bunch of old people and
14 get a bunch of new people in so they’re going to be green and walking into situations and
15 paying a high cost because they don’t have adequate preparation?” I don’t know how
16 you balance all those things out.

17 RV: When were you assigned weapons?

18 GN: I’m sorry?

19 RV: When were you assigned your weapon?

20 GN: Well, after we left combat center and were given a specific unit to go to,
21 which we need to talk about that, but going into my infantry company, part of drawing
22 my issue from the Supply Sergeant was to get a rifle. And essentially, everybody got a
23 rifle. Now you may trade that in later for a machine gun but typically into an infantry
24 company, if you’re going to be in the line company you’re going to get a rifle. So upon
25 arriving in my battalion and going to my company supply room, they had a rifle for me.
26 Now back in the rear area they typically did not carry rifles with us but as they move you
27 out of the rear area to go to the field you would have a rifle at that point.

28 RV: How long did you stay at Chu Lai? You went through the combat center for
29 about a week. When did you get your orders and when did you get your assignment to
30 your unit?

1 GN: Well at the end of the combat school, again, they call you up into formation
2 and say, “Okay, we’re done with your training but you’re going to have to come to
3 formation four times a day and when we read your name, come up and we’ll give you a
4 sheet of orders.” So after we had completed the training—and it may have been the next
5 day for all I know—they call off the list of names and there’s probably a PFC (Private 1st
6 Class) up there and he hands you a sheet and you take a look at the sheet and again, it
7 was very typical for several people to be named on the same sheet of orders. So on my
8 sheet of orders may have been fifteen names, my name included, and it would say,
9 “Report to Company B, 1 of the 46th Infantry.” And I know looking at those orders with
10 some of the other people that got them, we were all 11-Echo Armor and we looked at that
11 and go, “This is says 1st of the 46th Infantry. Do you think them people have tanks?”
12 And so we kind of talked among ourselves and pretty much arrived at the fact that we
13 were being assigned to an infantry company. And I can remember somebody, I don’t
14 remember exactly who, going back up to the fellow that’s handing out the orders and
15 saying something to the effect of, “You know, we think there’s a mistake here with our
16 orders because it appears as if we’re being assigned to an infantry company but we’re 11-
17 Echo. We’re armored crewmen. We need to be assigned to a tank unit.” And the
18 response probably from the PFC would be something like, “There’s going to be a bus or a
19 truck show up over here in twenty minutes and on the front bumper of that truck is going
20 to have 1/46. That means it’s coming from the 1st of the 46th Infantry. Your orders say
21 you’re in the 1st of the 46th Infantry. When that truck shows up, you get on that truck and
22 you go where that truck takes you.” So we’re sitting around here going, “Okay, fine.”
23 Well, we get on that truck and we do go to the 1st of the 46th Infantry and sure enough
24 they’re saying, “Yeah, you may be 11-Echo MOS armor crewmen, but there’s no demand
25 for 11-Echo MOS armor crewmen so your secondary MOS is infantrymen, so we’re just
26 simply changing you now. We’re going to make your primary MOS 11-Bravo Infantry
27 and your secondary MOS is 11-Echo and welcome to the 1st of the 46th Infantry.”

28 RV: What did you think about that?

29 GN: Well, I guess at that point in time it’s kind of, “So what? We’re here.” It’s
30 the same philosophy. “Okay, when I got here I had three hundred and sixty-five days.
31 Well, I’ve been here ten days. Now I’ve got three hundred and fifty-five days. If it’s

1 three hundred and fifty-five days as an armored crewman or it's three hundred and fifty-
2 five days as an infantryman, one's about the same as the other." Upon reflection now, I'd
3 probably say I wouldn't have wanted to have been in a tank, knowing what I know now.
4 But at that particular point in time, to me, if I'd already resigned myself to being drafted
5 and already resigned myself to being in Vietnam, I can certainly resign myself to being in
6 the infantry instead of being in an armor. One of the fellows did write back home and
7 there was some type of—I don't know if it was congressional investigation or what but
8 he wrote to his senator or congressperson and basically the response coming back is that
9 "Yeah, you were trained in armor and you were put in infantry. So what? You were
10 given basic infantry skills and that's adequate. The Army needs to have infantry so that's
11 where we put you." I do remember one or two people that did not want to be in the
12 infantry. They wanted to be in armor and were actually able to go, while in Chu Lai, to
13 an Army recruiter and the Army recruiter said, "Okay, fine. If you want to be in armor,
14 you can be in armor, but you're going to have to re-enlist." In other words, "You come
15 sign this piece of paper saying you're going to extend three years and take on three years
16 of additional military service then I'll get you into a unit that's got tanks." And I think
17 two or three people did do that. In fact, they immediately got a leave home so they got to
18 Vietnam, been to Vietnam a couple of weeks, re-enlisted after they got there because they
19 wanted to go into a unit with armor, got a trip back home for two or three weeks on leave
20 and then came back to Vietnam and got into that unit that had armor. And I believe along
21 the lines somewhere we met back up again and, "Oh, there's old so-and-so. Do you
22 remember them?" "Oh yeah." So we had a little chat and kind of got caught back up on
23 what they were doing and what we're doing.

24 RV: So you were assigned to Company B, 1st of the 46th Infantry, 196th Light
25 Infantry Brigade in Americal?

26 GN: That is correct.

27 RV: Okay. Gary, let's go ahead and stop for today. This will be a good point
28 where we can pick up next time with your entry into this unit.

29 GN: Okay.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Gary L. Noller
Conducted by Richard B. Verrone, Ph.D.
January 13, 2006
Transcribed by Mindy Moser

1 Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone, continuing my oral history interview
2 with Gary Noller. Today is January 13th, 2006, 2:30pm Central Standard Time. Gary,
3 let's pick up with where we left off. You were leaving Chu Lai, I believe, and going out
4 to your unit. I wonder if you could kind of describe that experience and how you felt as
5 you made your way out there.

6 Gary Noller: Well, after we left the replacement station in Chu Lai, the first stop
7 was the rear area, in the 1st of the 46th Battalion's rear area and we got fitted out with our
8 field gear there. That's where we would have picked up rifles, things like ponchos,
9 poncho liners, and the company that I was in, B Company, was just on it's way into Chu
10 Lai by what they call a stand down, which is about a three-day period where everybody
11 comes back in, they serve you steaks and beer, maybe you get to see a movie, go to the
12 PX and get a haircut, see if there's any potato chips or any of that kind of stuff to be had.
13 So I stayed in the rear area two or three days waiting for them to come back. They
14 basically said, "Well, there's no sense to send you out there because you're just going to
15 be coming back in a couple of days anyway." So during that period of time we had some
16 details to do. The trash truck route, we got to pick up the trash around our battalion area
17 and take it out to the Chu Lai trash dump, picked up police calls and stuff like that. So
18 when the company did come back into the rear area, one of the first things that I did after
19 being assigned to Company B was to go on stand down. So I thought that was pretty
20 good. "I'm here about three or four days and I'm on my first stand down. Maybe this
21 can't be all that bad anyway." But we did have the stand down and then when that was

1 over with we went out to some helicopter pad out towards the main gate, Highway One.
2 They trucked us out there and we wait until the helicopters come in. I think we went out
3 on Chinook helicopters, maybe twenty or twenty-five of us on one helicopter and we
4 went out to Firebase Mary Ann. And at that time, Mary Ann was just in the stages of
5 being built. There was not much there and a lot of our activities the first few days was
6 getting the firebase constructed—putting in bunkers, a trench line, concertina wire, and
7 that was with a group of large people. So still, even at that point in time we're really not
8 in the bush. We're in kind of a fortified, defensive position. It's not like being back in
9 the rear area but it's a lot more established than cutting a trail through the jungle going
10 somewhere.

11 RV: Right. Let me back up for a minute. Could you describe what Highway One
12 looked like as you traveled? You said you were trucked out there. Can you kind of tell
13 me what it looked like, that landscape and the people?

14 GN: Well, I don't know that we ever left Chu Lai base on this particular trip.
15 Highway One was essentially a two-lane asphalt road and it paralleled the coast, running
16 mainly north and south and it was inland a ways from the ocean and it was one of the
17 main thoroughfares. It would be like an interstate Highway 95 on the east coast of the
18 US that runs from Florida all the way up to Maine. It was a main thoroughfare, two-lane,
19 and about anything in the world could be on that road from big US Army trucks, cars,
20 bicycles, and motorcycles. The Vietnamese had a lot of very small cars like Citrons
21 made by the French since they were a French colony. People walking, people pushing
22 wheelbarrows, people carrying loads on their back are very typical over there. They'd
23 take a long pole and maybe they'd carry baskets of rice and then one basket hanging off
24 one end of the pole and one basket hanging off the other end of the pole and they'd lay
25 the pole over the top of their shoulder and just be walking down the shoulder of the road.
26 So the road was very busy. There was always something on the road, not necessarily a
27 car or a truck but it could be a multitude of different things that were going up and down
28 that road.

29 RV: Did you feel safe on the road?

30 GN: Well, the times that we did go up and down, I made two or three trips
31 between Chu Lai and Da Nang and from Chu Lai out to LZ Young (Landing Zone) that

1 we were on trucks, I didn't really feel any immediate threat. Most of that area was fairly
2 secure during the daytime. Nighttime might be a different situation but we never went
3 anywhere at night so during the daytime the enemy just didn't come out and choose to
4 fight because if they did expose themselves that close to the base it would take just a
5 matter of a few minutes and there would be some time of response come it if that was
6 helicopter gun ships or artillery fire or something so they would pick times other than
7 broad daylight that close to Chu Lai on Highway One to attack you. They're going to go
8 and attack you at some time when the elements are more in their favor. So you're always
9 knowledgeable of the fact of where you're at and what's going on but you know, on a
10 scale of one to ten with then being absolutely positively terrified, going up and down
11 Highway One during the daytime might only rate a two or a three.

12 RV: Okay. Can you describe Mary Ann, kind of the area? How big was this
13 firebase?

14 GN: Well, it was situated along side the Song Tranh which is the Tranh River.
15 It's kind of a camelback type hill that was actually two hills that sat next to each other so
16 you're on the top of the higher hill and then you went down into kind of a ravine and then
17 back up on top of the smaller hill. The total width from one side to the other might have
18 only been two or three hundred feet and then total length from one end to the other may
19 be a thousand feet. It might comprise several acres. I don't know, maybe it's as much as
20 five or ten acres but it was very rugged country out in there, the mountains. And
21 previous to our arrival out there, one of the things that the Montagnards had done is they
22 had farmed that hilltop and their methods were a slash and burn method which they
23 would cut the trees down, burn the trees leaving stumps in the ground and then they
24 would very crudely till the soil and plant corn, which is very much like the corn that you
25 would find growing in Kansas or Nebraska or Iowa, and cornfields and that's what we
26 called them. You could see volunteer corn stalks kind of dotting around the top of that
27 hill. So the Montagnards had done some clearing of that land and then again before we
28 got there, there was some type of air strike in there where they bombed the top of that
29 hill, probably with some very large bombs because I remember bombs craters on top
30 there that could be twenty or thirty feet across and eight or ten feet deep. In fact, in some
31 of those bomb craters, we made bunkers. We would drag logs across the top there or

1 actually they would take a conex, which was a metal box, an eight foot by eight foot by
2 eight foot metal box that they used to ship cargo over in the holds of ships and they
3 would helicopter out those metal boxes and set them in these holes and they would kind
4 of become a real fast instant bunker. They'd stack sandbags on top of them or up around
5 the sides of them. So between the Montagnards being there with their cornfield and the
6 bombing strike on there, the place was fairly well cleared. One of the first things that I
7 did the first day up there was I was assigned to put up concertina wire up. So they'd
8 bring these big roles of razor wire and they'd have them rolled up and we'd have to go
9 stretch this wire out wherever the perimeter was and that would be an obstacle and kind
10 of a fence to try to keep enemy from coming inside the perimeter of the firebase.

11 RV: So you literally helped set the base up?

12 GN: Yeah, that was a chore that was given to infantrymen. We kind of had a
13 saying, in fact I think one time somebody posted a little sign that said something to the
14 effect that grunts do all the work. So we were laborers. If a trench had to be dug, we'd
15 dig a trench. In fact, one of the other things I remember doing with a couple of my
16 friends is we dug kind of a fighting position which, if you were lucky and you went over
17 a spot that had a large rock in it you just took in your trenching tools and shovels and we
18 dug a hole probably two or three feet deep by five or six feet long and two or three feet
19 wide. It was about enough where two or three of us could get in there. So that was kind
20 of the place where we would go if there was any type of attack. We would go in kind of
21 an oversized foxhole. So those putting in trenches, digging foxholes, building bunkers,
22 going ahead and clearing out some of the trees that were still there that needed to be
23 cleared out, all of that kind of work, a large percentage of that was done by the infantry
24 company on the hill. We provided the defense for that firebase during the day, the
25 defense during the night, and provided a lot of labor for the construction. There were
26 some engineers that came out but what I remember engineers doing is they had a very
27 small bulldozer that about half the time didn't run and they did do some clearing with that
28 and they also had explosives. And there were very large trees, particularly on the north
29 hill there of Mary Ann that had not been taken down yet and they would go up there and
30 tack explosives around the base of these trees and blow the trees up and take them
31 down. And then a lot of times we'd have to go up there with machetes or axes or

1 something and kind of finish them off and clear them by hand. Other than that one very
2 small bulldozer there was no mechanized equipment up there to handle any of that work.
3 It was a lot of pick and shovel work.

4 RV: Gary, how were you doing with the heat? I mean you've been in country I
5 guess now for a couple weeks. How is your body adapting?

6 GN: Well, adaptation does take place over time and we had been up there on
7 Mary Ann maybe three or four days and we needed water. Typically water would be
8 brought out from Chu Lai. They were in what they called Lyster bags which were kind
9 of rubber bladders that might hold twenty gallons. They might bring out bladders that
10 held two hundred gallons, they might bring out what we called a water mule which is a
11 three or four hundred gallon water tank that sat on a two-wheel trailer and they would
12 bring those suspended underneath the helicopters. But if they didn't bring water out to
13 you and you needed water, we would take a group of people and go down off the very
14 steep east side of Mary Ann to the river. So you'd go around and maybe you'd take a
15 group of fifteen people down there and they collect one or two canteens from everybody
16 so you'd end up maybe with fifteen quarts and you'd go down and fill that water and go
17 back up the hill. Well, obviously going down the steep hill was no problem. Filling the
18 water was no problem. Coming back up, going up the hill plus carrying the weight of
19 this water could be strenuous. When I got picked to go down there, one thing I did worry
20 about was, "Well, how am I going to handle the heat?" And going down and coming
21 back up I did okay but I was totally soaked. It doesn't take very long to get all of your
22 clothing totally drenched. But that was probably a good little exercise because it didn't
23 take very long—maybe we were gone for an hour or two—but it was kind of a little baby
24 step into getting into it. Plus the work that we were doing on Mary Ann itself, we were in
25 the heat and it was probably a pretty good breaking in period for what was to come later
26 when we moved off the hill into the jungle.

27 RV: Right. How forgiving were the people who you went out there with or I
28 guess met out there who had been in country for some time? How did they treat you?

29 GN: Well, I think that as far as I saw, it was very good. I never had any situations
30 come up where I felt like someone was picking on me because I was a new guy or
31 harassment or anything like that. I think the instruction that you got was no nonsense.

1 There's no games. In fact, generally you paired up in a squad so your first level of
2 supervision above you would be your Squad Leader and the Squad Leader might be
3 responsible for four or five guys and it would be his responsibility to—I use the phrase
4 “Take the shine off of you.” You come in with nice, clean clothes, nice clean boots,
5 you've got nice pretty skin and your hair cut and that Squad Leader's going to break you
6 in to the reality of what life in the jungle is about, what reality is, and what dealing with
7 the enemy in the jungle is all about. So they would, for example, immediately begin to
8 go over things to do and things not to do. They might physically open up your rucksack
9 and go through and see what all the stuff is you're carrying and they might pull things
10 out. Like you're carrying a stateside white t-shirt. They said, “Well, you're not going to
11 ever need a white t-shirt in the jungle,” so they'd just pitch it out and tell you, “You need
12 to go get some more magazines. You don't have enough magazines for your rifle,” or
13 “You need to go get some ammunition for the machine gun.” So they would set you up,
14 tell you what to carry, kind of tell you how to carry it, where to put different things in
15 your rucksack, where to put different things at on your web gear, how to tie your shoes,
16 and then some of the rules—the rules of engagement when we get out there. For
17 example, if you were an assistant gunner on a machine gun and you're responsible for
18 putting ammo to that machine gun, the machine gunner's probably going to say, “When I
19 lay my hand down flat on the ground, that means you put the leading edge of the next belt
20 of ammunition in my hand and have the bullets pointing the same way my rifle's
21 pointing. And when I lay my hand down there, I expect to feel those bullets in my hand
22 right away.” So that's the instruction, that's training and during that period of time—we
23 spent I think about two weeks on Mary Ann at that time so there was a lot of times during
24 the day time we'd be working, doing the construction activities and then in the evening
25 after the evening meal is where there'd be a lot of reality training going on.

26 RV: Let me back up and ask you a couple of questions about some of the things
27 you just said. They're very interesting. You mentioned how to tie your shoes. Do you
28 remember what they were telling you? What was different about that?

29 GN: Well, there are certain things about dressing and very well known ones. For
30 example, you never wore underwear and I don't know why we never wore underwear.
31 One reason why we probably didn't wear underwear is because they never sent

1 underwear out there for you to wear. But there were myths or legends that if you wore
2 underwear that could promote rashes, skin diseases. A lot of people said, “Don’t wear a
3 belt. Get a pair of pants that will fit tight enough that you don’t have to put a belt on
4 because you don’t want that snugness around your waist.” In particular, on pant legs, for
5 example, there was a lot of insects in the jungle, leeches being terribly bad. And one of
6 the things you do is to tuck your pant leg into the top of a boot which is typical military
7 style, blousing a boot, but then we would take shoe strings that would come with boots,
8 extra shoe strings, and we’d physically tie these shoe strings from the top of the boot up
9 to the bottom of the knee, wrap these shoestrings around our legs real tight with the idea
10 that that would prevent the leech from getting somehow under the inside of your pant leg
11 and crawl up. Because if a leech got in around your ankle on your pant leg, that leech
12 could crawl clear up your body to wherever they decided they were going to take a bite
13 out of you. So it would be things like that. How to put a grenade on your web gear so
14 that you had a grenade that you could get to real fast if you wanted a grenade but likewise
15 that it wouldn’t fall off and explode at some time where you didn’t want it to happen. So
16 there were a lot of instructions just how to look the part and be the part; how do you set
17 up at night; how do you sleep; if you sleep in a hammock, how do you set a hammock up
18 between two trees and give yourself some protection from the rain; if you sleep on the
19 ground on an air mattress, how do you clear the ground; how do you set up a little hooch
20 made out of your poncho; how do you keep dry during wet weather, and a lot of little
21 different techniques there of how it’s going to be and none of this stuff is particularly
22 covered during any other phase of your training. You’re getting it right now and like I
23 said, it’s reality training. It’s no more playing games. What they would tell you is things
24 that they themselves learned and knew and it was very important because at this point in
25 time you’re getting very close to where your life can depend upon doing the right thing at
26 the right time.

27 RV: Right. Gary, can you go ahead and describe your uniform and basically what
28 you carried with you? You said you went first to this depot area where you were given
29 your weapon and other materials. Can you kind of describe what you were given and
30 what you did use there in Vietnam?

1 GN: Well, we wore a jungle fatigue, which was an olive drab green fatigue. It
2 came out kind of specially made for Vietnam and the shirt wasn't made to be tucked in.
3 It had four large pockets on the front and two on the chest and two down around the
4 waste and so you could put a lot of stuff in those pockets. The pant was also what they
5 call a cargo pant. You can rear pockets in it, you had the front pockets in it, then you also
6 had side leg pockets. The boots that we had were a jungle boot, which was kind of a
7 combination of a canvas boot and a man-made material, supposedly better for use in real
8 wet climates. They wouldn't rot, they would dry out faster. Everybody got issued a steel
9 pot helmet. Everybody pretty much had what we called a boonie hat, which was a soft-
10 cover hat. A pistol belt—a pistol belt you usually always put one-quart of canteen water
11 on the pistol belt and probably one field dressing, a medical field dressing would go on
12 your pistol belt and then we carried rucksacks which were canvas bags that fit on an
13 aluminum metal frame. Everything else that you carried, you put in that rucksack. So
14 you'd probably attach maybe two or three more quarts of water would go on that, any
15 ammunition that you'd carry. We typically were required to carry two bandoliers of M-
16 16 ammunition. I think there was eight magazines in a bandolier. Each magazine held
17 twenty rounds but I think we were told to only put like seventeen rounds in it so each
18 person was carrying somewhere in the neighborhood of three hundred and fifty M-16
19 rounds. You had a poncho, which was a vinyl, kind of like a water resistant sheet, then
20 you had a poncho liner which is very much like a blanket that's made out of a very
21 lightweight yet very well insulating material. We had what was known as a monsoon
22 sweater, which was a long sleeved, knit type material that you would in particular wear at
23 night because it could get chilly at times at night. C-rations, whatever you chose to take
24 for food—typically we were always told to carry at least three days worth of food. C-
25 rations were all pretty much in cans so you would select out what you wanted there.
26 Hand grenades, smoke grenades, entrenching tool...most people carried some type of a
27 hunting knife on their pistol belt of somewhere where they could get to it quickly. And
28 then beyond that is sort of like what your particular specialty was. For example, the
29 Medic had to carry all the medic gear. If you were an assistant gunner, an ammo bearer
30 for an M-60 machine gunner, you had to carry M-60 ammo. Occasionally we all carried
31 M-60 ammo depending upon what we were instructed to do. The radio operators, which

1 I was an RTO, you had to carry your radio. If you didn't carry the radio, quite often you
2 were carrying a spare battery or spare handsets or something else. The person carrying
3 the M-79 grenade launcher had to carry M-79 ammo. So everybody had kind of the same
4 load and then you had a little more specific load depending upon what your role was in
5 the company.

6 RV: Tell me about your radio. You were an RTO (Radio Telephone Operator).
7 Can you describe the radio and how heavy it was and the range and reception and things
8 like that?

9 GN: Well, the radios that we used, the official terminology, they were called
10 PRC-25 or the PRC-77 and quite frequently that was pronounced "prick-25" or "prick-
11 27" and I think the PRC stood for Personal Radio Communications or something
12 (Portable Radio Communications). They were, I think, FM radio units. The radio itself
13 was in a metal case, maybe one foot tall and one foot wide and three or four inches in
14 depth and that fit on your rucksack frame first and then you put the rucksack on so that
15 the radio was sandwiched between the frame and the rucksack. And then there was a
16 telephone cord where a spiral type cord came into a telephone type handset. And the
17 handset had a little push button on it. When you wanted to talk, you pushed the button
18 and talked and otherwise you were in a mode to listen. And the radio had what we called
19 a whip antenna, which was a metal antenna about four or five feet long. It was kind of
20 made out of metal like a tape measure has on it, and flexible. It would stand up straight
21 yet if you hemmed a tree branch or something it would bend back and bend out of the
22 way. We talked with, depending on who you were, you could talk from platoon to
23 platoon, you could talk from the platoon up to the Company Commander, you could talk
24 to helicopters that might be overhead, you could talk from the CP—the Command Post—
25 back to the Battalion Operations Center. Range was probably somewhere...I don't know,
26 maybe those radios could go ten or fifteen miles but a lot of that depended upon the
27 terrain. Because if you were deep down in the valley and there were mountains on all
28 sides around you, the reception might not be very good. But if you were out on flat
29 ground in the right conditions, I don't know, the things might be able to go twenty or
30 thirty miles.

1 RV: Well, when you actually hooked up with B Company, was that just two or
2 three days after you had arrived at Mary Ann?

3 GN: No, when we left the reception station for the combat center in Chu Lai, we
4 went directly to our company in the battalion rear area. The whole battalion, the 1st of the
5 46th Battalion had a designated area right along the South China Sea on the coast and then
6 each company had a company area. So if you knew you were going to B Company, 1st of
7 the 46th, you'd go to the orderly room and the orderly room was where the company clerk
8 was at, that's where the 1st Sergeant had his office, the Company Commander had his
9 office when he was not in the field, the Executive Officer...So you'd go to that area and
10 there were some barracks in there. So that's where I really joined the company, was in
11 the company's area in the battalion area of Chu Lai and spent two or three days there
12 until the company came in for stand down. We spent two or three days on stand down
13 and then we all went to Mary Ann.

14 RV: Okay. How did they treat you? How were you treated by the people you
15 would actually be going out into the field with?

16 GN: I was treated, I think, with some appreciation. I think that they liked to have
17 new people come because they needed the strength. It wasn't a matter of being reluctant
18 to accept new people, I don't think. It was more from a standpoint of the company
19 always seemed to be shorthanded. So anytime they got new people they wanted to get
20 you in and get you broken in and get you up the running speed as fast as they could
21 because if they were short people that meant that they had to have longer guard duty at
22 night because instead of having five people to pull guard duty over ten hours you had
23 four people. So instead of being able to go on two-hour guard shifts you had to go on
24 two and a half hour guard shifts. So I think that what I remember is really an emphasis
25 on getting new people in, getting them up to speed, and getting them assigned their job so
26 they could do what they had to do to help take burden and load off of other people. Like
27 I said, I don't remember anything from a standpoint of harassment. Now, there was high
28 expectations, such as, "This is serious stuff and you'd better take it serious." And if
29 somebody was displaying a flippant attitude or an "I don't care" attitude," or "You can go
30 to hell" attitude and "You ain't telling me what to do;" that could be dealt with in some
31 rather harsh ways.

1 RV: How would they deal with that?

2 GN: Well, I think a lot of times there at least was threat, such as like a machine
3 gunner might say, “When I lay my hand down on the ground, I expect you to slap a belt
4 of ammo in my hand. And remember, if you don’t put that belt of ammo in my hand,
5 I’ve got five or six bullets left her.” Because they never played out the whole machine
6 gun belt. He leaves about six or eight laying there and that’s what you connect to the
7 next hundred-round belt. He said, “I’ve got five or six rounds left here. When I lay my
8 hand down on the ground, you put a new belt in there. If you don’t put a new belt in
9 there, I’m just as liable to swing this gun your way and take care of you.” Because what
10 he’s saying is, “If I don’t have any ammo, I’m in an exposed position. I cannot defend
11 myself. The enemy’s going to get me because when that machine gun goes dead, the first
12 thing the enemy’s going to want to do is knock that machine gun out.”

13 RV: Right.

14 GN: So if he sits there with no bullets to shoot, that gives the enemy the
15 opportunity to turn their fire towards him. So he’s saying, “If I don’t have any bullets to
16 shoot towards the enemy and you’re not going to give me any bullets because you’re
17 sitting behind the tree, scared, I’m just as liable to turn around and shoot you so you
18 better put the bullets in my hand.” So that’s kind of very sobering—and I actually heard
19 that little scenario take place and witnessed that—and I think people sit back there and
20 go, “Okay, I understand.” So at that point in time I’m almost sure that when that machine
21 gunner laid his hand down on the ground, somebody put the bullets in his hand.

22 RV: So I guess you couldn’t afford not to, but you believed them. You said, “I’d
23 better do these things or this guy might—he’s very liable to do this.”

24 GN: Well, I think that it’s very easy to set judgment on what we know and what
25 we do in our regular, normal, everyday lives, but it’s very seldom that in our normal,
26 regular, everyday lives are we in life and death situations. So what they’re really trying
27 to emphasize here is that this is a life and death situation but we’re much better off if we
28 can lay suppressive fire down and kill the enemy versus not. I didn’t hear a whole lot of
29 that kind of discussion but there was discussion. “You either do your job—you do the
30 job the way we tell you to do your job and if you don’t do your job right and that costs us

1 casualties then you're going to deal with us. You'll deal with the enemy and you'll deal
2 with us so you better do your job."

3 RV: Did you ever see anybody within the unit—and you certainly don't have to
4 name any individuals—but did you see people who really didn't get it and were a
5 hindrance to the unit or a danger to the unit and you actually had to get them out of the
6 unit somehow?

7 GN: Well, we only had one case of that. We had a fellow and I think he went into
8 the B Company about the same time that I did. I don't think he was anybody I knew
9 from the Fort Knox bunch but he came in about the same time and he was a pretty
10 defiant, rebellious type of person. And in fact there was a story that went around about
11 him that—after we got there and I think we got assigned to the company, shortly
12 thereafter, he ended up with a broken leg and had to go to the hospital and they treated
13 him for his broken leg. They didn't send him out of country but he was gone for a while.
14 The story that went around was that he didn't want to go to the field and the way that he
15 was going to get out of going to the field was he had somebody run over his leg with a
16 jeep and break his leg on purpose. Now whether that really happened or not, I don't
17 know. I certainly didn't witness it and I didn't hear him say it but that was the story that
18 floated around about this guy. So we'd been out already two or three months and he does
19 finally show up in the company. He'd been healed; he's been cleared to go to the field so
20 he shows up. Well, none of the platoons wanted him. At this time I'm in a Command
21 Platoon. I got chosen to go to be an RTO for the Company Commander and none of the
22 platoons, the line platoons, wanted him, so they basically said, "Okay, we'll put him in
23 the Command Platoon." And this fellow was right in front of me as we were out on a
24 patrol one day and he was very loose. He didn't know what to do and I don't know that
25 if he was told what to do that he could do it but I know one of the things that he kept
26 doing was he would always take his rifle off safe. One of the rules that we had was that
27 you always walk with your M-16 on safe. Any weapon you had would be in the safe
28 position and only when you intended to fire the weapon would you move it off safe. But
29 he was continually taking his rifle off safe and it was something I could see because I was
30 close enough to him to see that he would move it off. You could see the flicker switch on
31 the side of the rifle and he wouldn't have it on safe. I'd tell him, "You've got to keep

1 your rifle on safe.” Another thing that he would do is he wouldn’t keep track of the guy
2 in front of him and as you’re moving through the jungle, it’s quite dense and you could
3 literally stand where you could see somebody in front of you and they could move three
4 or four feet further down the trail and you couldn’t see them anymore. They’d just
5 disappear into the jungle. So you had to always be very, very alert, stay close enough to
6 the guy in front of you that you knew which way he went and if he went six steps forward
7 and took a step to the left, you want to move six steps forward and take a step to the left.
8 If you go six steps forward and take a step to the right, pretty soon you don’t know who’s
9 where or what. You may be mistaken for the enemy and you end up shooting at each
10 other. So it was very, very important to keep that. Well, he couldn’t do that and I was
11 behind him one day and we were down the trail and he would always get off the trail.
12 And I’d have to get him. “No, no, they’re not going that way. They’re going this way.”
13 So it was quite a chore taking care of him. That night when we went into our night
14 position about sundown, I layed out my monsoon sweater to dry it because it was kind of
15 wet and I went over to some other area. We generally sat down and had a bunch of radio
16 communications we had to exchange with the battalion headquarters and when I came
17 back my monsoon sweater was missing. I happened to see him putting on a monsoon
18 sweater and I just added two and two together and I asked him where he got it. “Where’d
19 you get that monsoon sweater?” And he goes, “I found it.” Well, you don’t find
20 monsoon sweaters in the jungle. I mean, there’s not like ten thousand people out there
21 that are discarding monsoon sweaters.

22 RV: Didn’t he think that—he must have realized that you knew better than this?
23 Did he take you as just being absolutely foolish?

24 GN: Well, I don’t know. I never really figured it out but I challenged him. I
25 basically said, “That’s my monsoon sweater and you give it back to me right now,” and
26 he took it off and handed it to me. So he knew. I don’t know that he knew it was mine
27 but he knew it was laying there. He knew it wasn’t his and he picked it up. Well, one of
28 the things that you do not do in the jungle is you don’t screw your buddy. You absolutely
29 positively do not screw your buddy. You may be incompetent and you may be
30 ineffective and you may not be able to do the job that you’re supposed to do but you
31 don’t screw your buddy. So this irritated me and there were other people who witnessed

1 that and knew it. And shortly thereafter, somebody—I don't know who—came to the
2 Company Commander and said, "This guy needs to go back to the rear. Either you send
3 him back to the rear or if anything happens and this guy causes somebody to get hurt or
4 somebody to get killed, we will take care of him, so you get him out of here." I don't
5 know, the next day we had a re-supply or something and he was on it and he got out of
6 there. So how did we deal with discipline problems in the field? Well, you were given a
7 very stern talking to and you got the rules of how we're going to act and behave and if
8 you particularly willfully did not want to obey those rules, I think in most cases the guys
9 would go to the Company Commander and say, "Get this fellow out of here," in those
10 terms. "You get him out of here because if you don't get him out of here and he does
11 something that gets somebody hurt, we're going to take care of him." And "taking care
12 of him" meant only one thing. It didn't mean "We're going to write his mother a letter."
13 It meant that he's going to be receiving some very violent behavior upon himself.

14 RV: How far would you all go with that?

15 GN: How far?

16 RV: Yes.

17 GN: I don't know because I never saw it happen. I'd only saw it threatened
18 happening but the people that I know and that I was with, I want to believe that had the
19 next day, let's say this same fellow was there and you were going down the trail and in
20 some manner, way, shape, or form he got separated from everybody and he thought that
21 he saw the enemy over there and he started shooting and he shot a couple of guys that
22 were in the company, I guess that I want to say that it was very possible that somebody
23 would have went over there and shot him. I've talked to enough people in some
24 circumstances and know their attitude and know their capabilities to say, "Yeah, I believe
25 in the right situation, that happened." It's almost a self-defense or preservation. "Okay,
26 we told you to get him out of here and you didn't get him out of here. We've got
27 somebody hurt. We can't let this guy be out here and shoot us. It's bad enough that the
28 enemy's out here shooting us. Now we've got one of our guys, that because of his
29 inability or incompetence, is shooting us. Well, we've got to defend ourselves. We can't
30 be shot by this guy so we're going to have to..." I don't know that they'd shoot him and
31 kill him. They might shoot him in the other leg that didn't get broke already or

1 something like that or possibly they'd go administer a pretty severe beating or something
2 like that that would require him to leave the field for medical, but I wouldn't ever want to
3 dare anybody. I would never want to call a bluff on a deal like that and say, "Well, I
4 don't think you really will shoot me," because you might have fifty guys or sixty guys
5 out there that think that way and most of them won't shoot you but one guy will.

6 RV: Right. Gary, in a larger context, kind of stepping back from this is something
7 that I think is very, very important historically to understand but also on a personal level,
8 you're describing the relationships between men, between you all in this unit in a very
9 dangerous situation, a dangerous atmosphere where a number of different bad things
10 could happen to you. Could you describe this bond and this relationship? This is
11 something that I have learned, that civilians who don't experience it, or actually anyone
12 who doesn't experience it in a war zone and going through that is not really going to
13 understand it. How could you best describe that relationship you all had?

14 GN: Well, I think what it comes down to is that everything that you ever had in
15 your whole life to support you is basically gone. It's not there. Your parents aren't there,
16 your brothers and sisters aren't there, your aunts and uncles aren't there, your school
17 system isn't there, your church pastor isn't there, your friends that you ran around back
18 home with aren't there. The only people that are there obviously are the people in your
19 platoon or squad. And you're all in the same situation. I describe it as you're all in the
20 same boat and you're on a very rocky sea. And it comes down to the fact that the only
21 way that you could possibly survive—if you survive, the only way you can possibly
22 survive is through a huge interdependence upon one another. "I have to watch your back
23 to help you survive; you have to watch my back to help me survive. If I don't help you
24 survive then you may not but then I may not either because you're the guy that could be
25 there for me." So it comes within a very small group. The people that I was very close to
26 and felt very close to, the closest to might only be three or four people and you get very
27 close bonds and it's a mutual protection. "I'll protect you and you protect me and if we
28 all protect each other than maybe we'll all get out of here okay." And it's life and death.
29 There's nothing in civilian life that I know of generally that puts you to the extreme edge
30 of—you could wake up, you go about your daily chores and come back home. Well how
31 close did you come to dying that day in something? Well maybe you could say a car

1 wreck or something but when you're walking out in the jungle, the threat exists almost
2 continuously. And not only does that threat exist, it's realized at any time that you get in
3 any kind of contact with the enemy. So immediately, one of the first times that I was in
4 any type of contact with the enemy, Tommy Poppell, who was a Squad Leader, and I
5 were walking down the trail and there was some shooting that happened up in front of us.
6 We don't know what it is. We just hear shooting going on in front of us. So immediately
7 he tells me, he says, "Go to the right, I'll go to the left." So we both kind of laid down on
8 the ground. I was watching everything a hundred and eighty degrees on one side of the
9 trail, he was watching everything a hundred and eighty degrees on the other side. So I
10 didn't have to worry about what was behind me because he was watching it. He didn't
11 have to worry about what was behind him because I was watching it. Between the two of
12 us, we hoped like heck we was watching everything that we needed to watch. And he
13 had to know that if something was on that side that could be a threat to me or him either,
14 I'd take care of it. And I had to know that if there was something on his side that could
15 be a threat to us; he'd take care of it. And that could mean that we both walked away or
16 it could mean that neither one of us walked away. So that's just a very realistic, harsh
17 situation that you're in where your literal next breath is going to depend upon whether
18 this fellow that you might have your right leg laying up next to his left leg, facing
19 opposite directions, that you take care of one another. And you just don't find that very
20 much anywhere else in life that I know of. I've never found it anywhere else.

21 RV: Does that bond remain over the years?

22 GN: Well, it has for me. To this day—I mentioned Tommy Poppell. Tommy and
23 I are friends. We don't necessarily talk all that often but out of the sky blue I might hear
24 from a guy that I haven't heard from in two or three years or I might decide I'm going to
25 call somebody. But I'm active in veterans organizations, I've been to some small unit
26 reunions where we've gotten seven or eight or nine or ten guys together that were in
27 Company B at the same time and we don't always just sit back and talk about what
28 happened then. We catch up on what we're doing now, what our lives are like, but I
29 believe that that bond will exist as long as we live. It's just in all of the relationships that
30 you have in life; you can have a high school chum, somebody you went to college with,
31 somebody you worked with for twenty years, and memories of your own family. But you

1 can come back and some of these people that I knew maybe two or three months, that's
2 all I knew them was two or three months or four or five months, and I've looked them up
3 and I know where they're at and I can get in contact with them if I want to.

4 RV: Well, looking back at those first few days and your integrating yourself into
5 this unit and you said you were putting the concertina wire out there, digging defensive
6 positions and what not, when did you start to really hook up with B Company as far as
7 planning and operations and getting ready to out to the field for the first time?

8 GN: Well, while we were there on Mary Ann, one of the things that they try to
9 figure out is what is your role going to be in the company? And I did mention some of
10 the things, the machine gunnery, M-79. Most of those things didn't take a lot of training.
11 The Medic, of course, generally they like to have him gone through training to be a
12 Medic. It was kind of coming down to where they looked at me and said, "All right,
13 what are we going to do?" Well, I was tall—six foot, two inches tall—and I weighed at
14 that time two hundred pounds or something, so the taller people they had a tendency to
15 make machine gunners out of them because they figured that it was easier to lug around
16 that gun. Radio operators were the same thing because you were carrying the extra-
17 weighted radio. I was way too big to be a tunnel rat. A little bitty guy would be a tunnel
18 rat. Smaller people generally ended up being point men because they made a smaller
19 target out in front. A lot of times then enemy would shoot at the first thing they saw so
20 your point man, you want to put a small guy up there to make a smaller target. So there
21 were discussions going back and forth and it finally ended up that I was selected to be an
22 RTO and I went to 3rd Platoon. I was in 3rd Platoon when we first went to Mary Ann.
23 But they needed RTOs up in the CP, the Command Post, which is a Company
24 Commander—are you still there?

25 RV: Yes, I am.

26 GN: They came to me one day and said, "Do you want to go to the CP and be an
27 RTO in the CP?" Well, I don't even know what the CP is. "CP? CP? I don't know
28 what this is. Who cares anyway? I'm here and I haven't made a whole lot of choices
29 already. If you say they need an RTO in the CP and I'm supposed to go there, I'll go
30 there." So I went up to the CP and at that point in time they staged line companies,
31 infantry companies—there were four line companies, A, B, C, D—and one was always

1 on the firebase which generally gave you three in the field unless you had one on stand
2 down. Sometimes they'd take companies and assign them outside the battalion area in
3 some sort of task force somewhere else. So we knew that we would stay at Mary Ann
4 only so long and then we'd rotate off. We'd go into the jungle and then some other
5 company would come up and do the perimeter defense and other chores on Mary Ann.
6 So along in through there, at one point they came up and said, "Okay, we're going to
7 leave the day after tomorrow and we're going to go out on a six-day mission or ten-day
8 mission or whatever it was." So we started making preparations. You typically get your
9 c-rations like up, get your water canteens filled up, the officers and Squad Leaders and
10 Platoon Leaders would get the maps and have briefings with the operations people. Then
11 they'd always bring the other company in. I don't know what company replaced us.
12 Let's say it was Delta Company. So Delta Company comes up on top of the hill. They
13 take over all of our defensive positions and once they're kind of established in the
14 defensive position then we leave. And the first mission that we had off Mary Ann, we
15 walked off. We walked off and went to the west. And at that point in time, I didn't know
16 anything. All I know is basically, "Follow the guy that's in front of me."

17 RV: I was going to ask you, what are they telling you? Are they saying, "Gary,
18 here's what we're going to do and this is why we're doing it and this is where we need
19 you." Does anything like that happen?

20 GN: You know, I was an RTO in the Command Platoon so if anybody would
21 know, I ought to know more than anybody because the Company Commander is going to
22 know that and I carry his radio. So ninety-five percent of the time that he wants to talk to
23 anybody, he tells me and then I tell them. It's not like I hand him the telephone and he
24 talks on it. Quite frequently, messages are passed between RTOs. Whoever wants to
25 talk, they tell their RTO to call this guy's RTO to tell this guy. You get that answer and
26 then the RTO calls their RTO and back and forth. But I knew we were going out,
27 walking off the firebase going out to the west and that we were going to be on what
28 people commonly call patrol. At that time we were calling them search and clear
29 missions. They had given up calling them search and destroy missions because the word
30 destroy didn't sound very good. But how far we were to go every day, I didn't know if
31 we had an end point. All I knew we were doing is we were on patrol which means you're

1 going to go out there and essentially see if you can find the enemy or if the enemy can
2 find you. It's sort of like growing up in western Kansas and you're going hunting
3 jackrabbits. You know that there's rabbits out there in the field but they're going to be
4 hiding from you but if you go out there and walk around long enough maybe you'll flush
5 them or maybe they'll just run away from you and you'll never see them. So I knew we
6 would go out and we'd be out several days. So we left I think somewhere around mid-
7 morning and walked off in a very hot day. This is now probably the 1st of July. No, I
8 spent the 4th of July on Mary Ann. This is probably more like the end of the first week,
9 the 7th or 8th of July, so it was very, very hot. I remember going down the trail off Mary
10 Ann, a very steep trail, and then crossing a stream. There was a stream on the east side.
11 The river was—the stream was on the west side. The river was on the east side and the
12 stream was on the west side. We crossed that little stream. In fact, we may even have
13 walked in the stream for while. And then you start back up. Out there is very rugged and
14 we kind of—we would either walk along the ridge, which means we followed the ridge
15 lines or we would cross the ridge line. If you crossed the ridgeline then you would go up
16 to the top of the ridge and then down the other side of it. You go up to the top of the
17 ridge and then down the other side of it. And we went out, I want to say, about six
18 ridgelines, which means we climbed up six ridges and we climbed down six ridges. And
19 it may take us a day to go up and come down. We always stayed at night on top of a
20 ridgeline, a high spot, so it may take us a day to go down from our night position to the
21 valley and then come back up on the next ridge. That might be one day and maybe
22 length of travel; we might only go a thousand meters or fifteen hundred meters. You
23 didn't make a lot of forward movement travel. You get a lot of up and down travel but
24 you didn't travel very far on a flat piece of paper.

25 RV: How taxing was it up and down those hills, especially in your first month
26 there?

27 GN: Well, I always made it. I never was unable to do it, but again, very hot and
28 was generally drenched in sweat. And I really tried to regulate that as much as I could.
29 There were a few little tricks. Like, if you were walking through the jungle, quite often
30 you did not walk at a steady speed because your man out on point, they'd do some
31 scouting and they'd hold you up and then they'd go ahead a little bit a look around. They

1 obviously didn't want to walk you into an ambush or off the edge of a cliff or something
2 or get you somewhere where you couldn't go any further so you all had to turn around
3 and come back and go a different way. So they might take three or four people and go
4 out a hundred meters or so in front of you to kind of scout out and come back. So there's
5 a lot of times where you'd walk for a while then you'd stop. So any time we stopped and
6 had to wait in place, I always got shade. I tried to find a place where there was a big
7 banana leaf or a tree or something, which wasn't terribly hard to do because we were in
8 pretty thick jungle. So I stayed in the shade. Any time we came through water, like if we
9 were walking in the creek, a lot of times I'd reach down and pick up water out of the
10 creek and just wet my clothes to help keep me cool. I think I was more afraid of let's say
11 heat illness than I was ever ill. I mean I was aware of it. Everybody was told it was
12 going to kick your ass. "You wait till you get out there and are humping in the bush. It's
13 going to kick your ass." And I think not so much, "Can I carry sixty or seventy pounds?"
14 was, "Is the heat going to be too big a factor?" But after the first day or two I really
15 didn't worry about that too much. There was one time I did run out of water but only one
16 time and after I ran out of water one time, I knew never to run out of water again. Even if
17 you died of thirst and had a swallow of water left in your canteen, you're not out of
18 water.

19 RV: Do you want to tell me about that time? What happened?

20 GN: Well, I don't know if it was that first mission or not. It may have been. But
21 I think the most water I ever carried was maybe four quarts. I don't know if I carried five
22 quarts or not. But a quart of water takes up a lot of space and it's a fair amount of weight
23 and so you're limited. You might say, "I'd like to take ten gallons of water." Well, you
24 can't take ten gallons of water. It'd be too bulky to carry and too heavy to carry. So I
25 think were at about four gallons of water. If you were going across the ridges—and you
26 always went up a ridge and came down—when you came down to the bottom there was
27 probably a stream so you could fill your canteen up. So if we did that once day, maybe
28 you could drink a couple of canteens of water a day or three canteens of water a day and
29 fill your canteens up and you're okay. But if you ever walk a ridgeline, which means you
30 get up on the high ground and you never come off of it, it's like walking along the length
31 of a finger. You just stay on that high ground then you don't come across any water. So

1 it's either water you brought with you or water they bring out to you. If they say, "We'll
2 bring you water every three days," and you're carrying four quarts of water, you've got
3 one and a third quarts of water to drink every day. If you stop to think about that, that's
4 not a lot of water if you're just sitting still inside of an air conditioned room, let alone
5 you're walking up and down hills in a hundred and some degree heat that's got ninety
6 percent humidity. So at some point in time I remember one afternoon I was out of water
7 and I had drank all the water I had and we were getting no water that day. I don't even
8 know if I knew that we were getting water the next day but I knew I was out of water.
9 I'm sitting here going, "Oh my god. What am I going to do? I don't have any water
10 here." So finally about dark, I approached Doc Fries, Bob Fries from Sibley, Iowa, and
11 he was a Medic in the Command Platoon. I went to Doc and said, "Doc, how much
12 water do you got?" He kind of looked at me and Bob's a great guy and I love him. If
13 fact, I just met him last year in San Antonio at a reunion, first time since we were in
14 Vietnam and he could be very sarcastic. He kind of had this pretend persona of a hard-
15 ass. "Doc, how much water you got?" He said, "Don't tell me you're out of water."
16 And I go, "Yeah, I'm out of water." He said, "You're going to have to learn not to drink
17 all your water. You just can't be sucking water down all day. Where do you think you're
18 at? You need to have some control and discipline and take water in very, very small sips.
19 You just can't sit there and be guzzling water all day." So he got me some water. I don't
20 know, maybe he poured me out half a canteen of water into my canteen. And then I don't
21 know. I think the next day, finally about noon or in the afternoon we came back down to
22 some water because everybody was kind of getting short on water and we refilled our
23 canteens. So that's one of those situations there where yeah, he knew a lot more than I
24 did, he was better acclimated that I did, he knew how to conserve his water, I didn't.
25 When I asked him how much water he had, he put two and two together and he knew I
26 was out of water and he kind of gave me a little bit if a hard time but Doc always gave
27 me a hard time. He gave everybody kind of a hard time in a very loving way and he gave
28 me water to get me through. After that, I always made sure, like he said, "If you're
29 thirsty and you want a drink of water, you put about a tablespoon of water in your mouth
30 and that's one drink and you put the cap back on your canteen and you wait. And the
31 next time you want a drink of water you put one tablespoon full of water in your mouth."

1 You're not really drinking water; you're more just wetting your mouth than anything.
2 But you became very alert to every opportunity to get water. Like anytime you had an
3 empty canteen and you went across a stream you filled that up. It got to the point where
4 as ridiculous as it may seem, in the jungle, even during the dry season there was almost
5 every day that you would get this little shower that moved through. It could be late
6 afternoon, three o'clock in the afternoon or something like that and the clouds would roll
7 in and it would just start sprinkling and maybe it would sprinkle for three or four or five
8 minutes and then it would quit. So we learned that when this little shower came through,
9 everybody would grab a canteen and take the lid off of it. So as you walked along in the
10 jungle, you'd look for a big leaf somewhere along the side of it and the rain would come
11 down and hit this leaf and roll down the leaf and be dripping off the end of the leaf. So as
12 you walked by, you'd reach over there and reach your canteen underneath that leaf and
13 maybe catch three or four drops of water as you walked by. Now why would you do
14 that?

15 RV: You're pretty desperate, it sounds like.

16 GN: It's probably because at some point in the future you don't know, but maybe
17 at some point in the future, that three or four drops of water is all the damn water you've
18 got to drink and you're awful glad to have it.

19 RV: Right.

20 GN: But that was very common. A little shower would come through and you'd
21 just see everybody reach around on their pistol belt or whatever, pick that canteen up,
22 take it off, and they'd be walking along with their rifle in one hand and the canteen in the
23 other and as you kind of maybe came up and stopped for a minute on the trail. You'd
24 reach over to a leaf that was dripping water and you'd catch literally three or four drops
25 of water in your canteen. The only other problem I had one time was I drank water that
26 was bad water. They always said, "Don't drink any stagnant water, water that's just
27 standing still and always go to free flowing water that you can look at and you see and
28 you know it's flowing." We didn't really worry about pollution because we were so far
29 out there that there was nothing out there to pollute the water. So the water was—I'll just
30 use the word virgin water. It was pure God's water, the way He intended for you to drink
31 it. But we started down one time. I don't think I was out of water but I picked up some

1 water out of a stream that had little pools. There was water in here but it just kind of
2 trickled along. It didn't really flow and I picked up some water and started drinking it. I
3 think I remember somebody telling me, "Better not drink that water. That water's not
4 moving fast enough." And they gave us iodine tablets to put in water to purify the water
5 but it made the water taste pretty bad. So a lot of times we had iodine tablets but we
6 didn't use them. Well, sure enough, the next morning when I woke up I didn't feel very
7 well and during the day I just went downhill, very sick to my stomach, couldn't eat,
8 didn't even want to drink, and I got an extremely bad case of diarrhea, which I can talk
9 more about later. That night I was in such a weakened condition that they were almost
10 talking about dusting me off. I said, "There's no way in hell. You're not going to dust
11 me off. I'm not going to go in. I'll pull my guard duty. You put me on the roster."
12 Well, they said, "You're too sick. We're not going to put you on guard duty," and they
13 didn't and all night long I was sick. I had to get up several times during the night to go to
14 the bathroom. But the next day I was all right so it was something that ran its course in
15 about twenty-four or thirty-six hours and made me very sick. So I learned some hard
16 lessons. I learned the hard lesson of you don't guzzle your water. You take very, very
17 small sips and the other one is you watch where you get your water. Don't you get your
18 water out of no stagnant pool. But I had to learn them lessons the hard way.

19 RV: How far into your tour was this? When did this happen again?

20 GN: Well, I'd say both of these things probably happened in the first month or six
21 weeks.

22 RV: That is a hard lesson. Gary, we're at a good stopping point here.

23 GN: Here.

24 RV: Would that be okay with you?

25 GN: Yes, sir.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Gary L. Noller
Conducted by Richard B. Verrone, Ph.D.
January 18, 2006
Transcribed by Mindy Moser

1 Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone. I am continuing my oral history
2 interview with Mr. Gary Noller. Today is January 18th 2006. It's a little before 3pm,
3 Central Standard Time and I am in Lubbock, Texas. Gary is in Catoosa, Oklahoma and
4 Gary, let us continue with where we were in our last session. We had described your
5 initial deployment out to Mary Ann. You talked about a couple of incidents that
6 happened while you were there but I wondered if we could pick up with your first search
7 and clear mission that you went on. When you first got there you had geared up and you
8 were with your unit and you walked off Mary Ann. Could you describe what that was
9 like for you personally and then what you all were actually going?

10 Gary Noller: Well, I think for me personally, it was still a time of me trying to get
11 straight in my mind as to what's going on. There was still somewhat of a dilemma to me.
12 I knew I was there and I was out in the middle of it. I had pretty much resigned myself to
13 that fact but was still trying to figure out in my mind how I might react to any given
14 situation that might come up, particularly with the standpoint of it being a life and death
15 situation. And we went off Mary Ann and we went out, I believe for about three weeks,
16 which meant we never came back to the firebase in three weeks. We stayed out a lot on
17 high ground. We would make our night positions on top of high ground. During that
18 point in time, one of the things that I still remember was a decision that I made or a
19 realization that I made that I was going to have to decide, if I had to take someone else's
20 life to protect my life or preserve my life or the life of my buddies or I could be killed or
21 my buddies could get killed, what was the decision that I was going to make? What was

1 I going to try to do? Was I going to try to kill somebody or was I just going to say, “Hey,
2 I’m not going to do that?” And after some reflection, I decided that if it was necessary
3 for me to have to kill somebody to save myself or to save my friends, that’s what I would
4 do. So that idea or that understanding or that belief was not something that I had totally
5 worked out until probably we’d been out in the mission there for maybe a week or so.

6 RV: Now, this is a conscious thought process that you’re going through in your
7 mind?

8 GN: Yeah.

9 RV: Okay.

10 GN: And so to me, it was a huge realization of the fact that you don’t take that
11 lightly. If you’re going to come into a situation in which you can kill somebody, another
12 human being, that is a very serious decision that you have to make. As I think I’ve said
13 previously, I did not hate the Vietnamese. I still don’t hate the Vietnamese. I never hated
14 them. It was not an issue there where I believed that all Vietnamese had to die or the
15 Vietnamese were the enemy that had to die but when it came down to that survival, the
16 fight or flee issues, I’m not going to flee and that means you’re going to have to fight if
17 you want to preserve yourself and those people around you that are like you. And I think
18 the profound thing to me about that was that it would be better for the other guy to die
19 than for me to die and I don’t know what that is. I don’t think that’s racism. It may be
20 elitism. It may be that, “Any American has that obligation to do that,” but it’s something
21 that I’ve always remembered and have often thought about, was that point in time where I
22 said, “If it’s me or the other guy, I’m going to make every effort to make sure it’s the
23 other guy because it would just be better that way.”

24 RV: Well, it sounds like it’s almost a survival instinct as well that’s playing into
25 that.

26 GN: Yeah, I think it’s survival but I’ve often wondered if that had an element of
27 some sort of racism or something into it, that how did I know that I was really more
28 deserving of life than the other fellow may be deserving of life? How did I make that
29 decision? Was it based on somehow, “Well, I think I’m just better than the other fellow
30 would be?”

31 RV: Right.

1 GN: "I'm more valuable than the other fellow would be, therefore if it's between
2 me and him, it's going to be him." So after that—I mean, I never had that frame of mind
3 anywhere through basic training, I never had that frame of mind anywhere through
4 advanced training or training at the combat center in country, and it took a week or two
5 out in the field, even after spending two or three weeks on Mary Ann doing what we did
6 there, a week or so out in the field where I finally come to the conclusion that I know
7 what I'm going to do given that case and I'm going to do everything in the world I can do
8 to make sure the other guy's dead and I'm alive.

9 RV: Right. Okay. Did you discuss this with anyone or is this something that was
10 internal to yourself?

11 GN: I don't remember talking about that with people. I think probably for a lot of
12 people that was fairly common as a personal reflection. I mean I think some people
13 thought through that and said, "I can't do that," and maybe they ended up as
14 conscientious objectors before or after the fact. They couldn't do that, they couldn't
15 make the decision to take another person's life to preserve their own and some of them
16 said likewise, "I don't want to die, either." So I think I'd be surprised if everybody didn't
17 think of that. Some people maybe came to an easier conclusion or a faster conclusion but
18 I don't remember really philosophically talking about that much with other people. In
19 fact, other than you right now, I haven't really expressed that to anybody that I can
20 remember.

21 RV: As you've thought about it over the years since then, do you still feel that
22 way? Is that something that you feel like, "Okay, yeah, I made the right decision there.
23 That was a good decision for me and it was appropriate."

24 GN: I think so and I think that is a factor that I've lived with and in some way,
25 shape, or form, thought, "Well, if I made that choice because somehow I thought I would
26 be better than the other guy would be then I better be sure that I'm better than the other
27 guy would be."

28 RV: True.

29 GN: So that could be in some way a factor into the way I've done a lot of things
30 since.

1 RV: Okay. So what was the mission when you went out on this first search and
2 clear?

3 GN: Well, what we were doing was given an area—they'd just take a piece of the
4 map and they'll draw a square on that map and typically what they would say is, "Okay,
5 go out here in this square and walk around and see if you find anything." Now not
6 always, but there was not necessarily any proven intelligence that we knew. There may
7 be some type of intel that says, "Oh, we've spotted enemy activity out in this area.
8 There's trails out here and the enemy is moving along these trails. They've been spotted
9 either through aerial observation or some infrared picking up what looks like human
10 beings walking around," or maybe some other type of intelligence so "We think there's
11 activity out here. Go out and see what you can find." And that may be all it was. So we
12 would go out there and in this area there were some pretty well established trail networks
13 and a well established trail network might be a trail that's sort of like a sidewalk going
14 down the street of a lot of small cities. It may be a three or four foot wide hard packed
15 earthen trail and it might be sophisticated enough that if you come a little gully or ravine
16 that they kind of throw a makeshift bridge up and typically it would be foot traffic,
17 possibly bicycle traffic, and depending on how sophisticated this trail network was they
18 might even be on motorbikes. But we saw nothing where we were at that would have
19 like a truck or a jeep or any time of motorized equipment other than maybe a motorbike.
20 And we would walk these trails and get up in the morning and take off down a trail.
21 Sometimes we would get off the trail and cut our own trail. We might walk parallel to
22 the trail that we were watching. We might decide to go over the top of a ridge and come
23 back down on the other side of the ridge and we'd walk a trail on that side of the
24 ridgeline for a while. So it was a lot of walking, trying to see if there's anything out there
25 of military interest.

26 RV: And were you told this directly or did this kind of come down the line? I
27 guess I'm asking about how much did someone in your position get that intelligence?
28 Now, as the RTO, I imagine you're right there hearing some of this.

29 GN: Yeah, and I'd say I don't know a whole lot but yeah, I would probably know
30 more than a lot of people because of the fact that you're carrying the radio for the
31 Company Commander. You just pick up—you can eavesdrop on a lot of stuff that's

1 being conversed back and forth. If he brings the Platoon Leaders in to have a little
2 conference and discuss about what we're doing that day, you're probably sitting very
3 close by and you can hear. But I don't remember anything very specific about things that
4 we were looking for. There was a couple of things which we'll probably go into later.
5 But to me it was just a patrol. We're going out and seeing what we can find in an area
6 where there's suspected enemy activity of some sort. Now, some of the other companies
7 in the battalion found a whole lot more stuff than we ever did. Typically we might find a
8 Montagnard village that would have some hooches up in there and chickens and pigs and
9 maybe they have some rice and corn and potatoes. That's the most that I remember when
10 we went way out far, was just running through some old Montagnard villages.
11 Sometimes you'd find a camp that was used by the enemy. There might be some
12 foxholes that are dug there, some leftover trash that's been discarded. A lot of times
13 we'd find stuff from when Americans had been out there before. Other units had been
14 through there and they left trash laying around. We'd find, occasionally, things like
15 pongee pits, foot traps that would be left on the trail. With this first mission there was
16 only one incident that I remember and that's where we were walking along a trail and up
17 in the front there was an enemy that fired off about one magazine of rounds through an
18 AK-47 or SKS rifle—just kind of scattered the shots out towards where we were at. We
19 didn't see him. I don't even know if he saw us. He may have just heard us. That was the
20 extent of it. There wasn't even, I don't think, any return fire because nobody knew where
21 to fire it back at because it was just a real fast series of shots but we knew we weren't
22 doing the shooting and the shooting was coming towards us. So we all went into the
23 defensive situation on the trail and after about fifteen minutes of trying to figure out if
24 there was anything happening or not, we figured out there was not much. Typically, in
25 that situation, what they would do is if you thought the enemy was out in front of you
26 somewhere, they'd call in an artillery strike. So you called an artillery strike out there
27 and say, "Okay, if this guy's still running around out there somewhere, we'll see if we
28 can snag him with some 105 or 150-millimeter artillery."

29 RV: And this is the first time you're out, you're hearing gunfire. What was your
30 emotional reaction? Were you just kind of, "All right, what's my duty? I'm going to do
31 this, this, and this, and then I'm going to think and feel later?"

1 GN: Well, I think that very quickly we fanned out. What we would do in that
2 case is one person would go down on the ground, let's say to the left, and cover a
3 hundred and eighty degrees on that side of the trail and the next person would go down to
4 the right and cover a hundred and eighty degrees. So essentially you're just watching and
5 looking for anything that might be happening all around you, if there is in fact an ambush
6 staged here at this point or what. I don't think that that particular thing—I mean, I didn't
7 feel scared for some reason. It was just a brief seven or eight shots and it wasn't
8 sustained so it's sort of like it happened and everybody's down there. We're basically
9 saying, "What happened? What do you think it is?" And Tommy Poppell was there. He
10 was close to me and he was a Squad Leader and the only thing I remember is he made
11 some remark about, "Well, Noller, you just got your CIB award." I went, "Okay, good.
12 You've got to be in combat to get a CIB (Combat Infantryman's Badge) award and we
13 just got shot at so okay, I got my CIB award." But after a few minutes we got up and just
14 continued on the mission. I don't think that—like I said, that incident wasn't a
15 frightening incident because it was just such a short thing. It's like going down the road
16 and the tire blows out on your car and you just drive over the shoulder and stop. It just
17 didn't feel threatening because from where I was at, I was far enough back from the front.
18 The guys up on point, they may have been a whole hell of a lot more scared but since I
19 was back further from where this happened it didn't really frighten me all that much.

20 RV: How long would a typical search and clear mission last? Did it vary on what
21 your assignment was or was there a typical time period in which you all would function?

22 GN: Well, with four companies in a battalion, they tried to rotate the companies
23 so that you would spend time in the field and then time on the firebase and they'd say,
24 "Well, you'll spend three to five days on the firebase and you'll be out maybe ten or
25 fifteen days in the field, ten or twelve days in the field." But a lot of times what
26 happened was they didn't make the rotations. So like when I first went to Mary Ann, I
27 think we were on Mary Ann almost two weeks before we went out. And when we went
28 out, as I remember it, we were out for three weeks and then we went back to Mary Ann.
29 That's a fairly long time. The only, I guess, good thing about that is that time seemed to
30 go a lot faster when we were out on that type of mission. I don't know why. Time on the
31 firebase seemed to drag but time in the field seemed to go by. So three weeks in the field

1 was a fairly long time out there. The biggest thing that I recall in that three weeks is that
2 we didn't get to take showers. There was no hygiene in that time. We didn't get clean
3 clothes. We had no clean clothes to wear so you're getting pretty filthy, dirty, raggedy
4 during that first three weeks. We spent a lot of time on high ground so there was always
5 a shortage of water. We had very few brushes with the enemy. I'll say during these three
6 weeks we took no casualties. There were a couple of times where we did inflict
7 casualties on the enemy. I think on this mission maybe we killed one or two enemy that
8 happened to be not alert when we encountered them. We used the term half-stepping. If
9 they're half-stepping that means that they're very lax and essentially they could walk
10 right up to you and by the time they figured out they walked right up to you, it's too late.
11 And I don't know if it was this mission or the next one that the closest I ever came to a
12 live Vietnamese soldier, we were walking a trail and probably about ten or fifteen feet
13 away, the jungle got very dense. As we were walking kind of down a small ravine and
14 coming back up, we had stopped. And Lieutenant Powell was right in front of me and
15 there were signs on the side of the trail that people had been there. It was very typical. A
16 lot of times when the Vietnamese would sit on the ground they would peel a large leaf
17 like a large banana leaf and sit that on the ground and then sit on that leaf so they had
18 something between them and the ground. And we noticed there were a couple of these
19 leaves laying on the ground in a manner which looked like somebody had placed them
20 there to sit on. And so we're kind of looking to the right—that's on the right-hand side of
21 the trail and I know I can remember talking or Lieutenant Powell saying something,
22 "People have been here and not too long ago." And in about that time through my
23 peripheral vision on my left-hand side I just saw a movement of some sort. And I turned
24 to look to my left-hand side and then right behind me was the 1st Sergeant, which was 1st
25 Sergeant Crosby, Billy Crosby. And about that time, a Vietnamese stepped out, almost in
26 full view, stepped out of the bush, a male, and the image that I will forever have about
27 that is that his eyes got about as big as saucers, coffee cup saucers. It was just like this
28 huge look of surprise on his part, like, "Oh damn. What did I just do?" Now the way
29 we're situated on that trail, he had come up on the left side. Well, most American
30 soldiers are right handed so they carry the M-16 rifle or whatever weapon they have with
31 the barrel to the left because their hand is on the trigger which is in their right hand. So

1 we essentially had our weapons pointed in his direction when he popped out. All I
2 remember saying was, in a kind of a whisper, "Hey." When I recognized that this was an
3 enemy soldier, it was, "Hey." Sergeant Crosby, behind me, finished that sentence by
4 saying, "A dink." D-i-n-k being a term which was commonly used for Vietnamese
5 people. So I said, "Hey," he said, 'A dink,' and then at about that time the Vietnamese
6 turned his back to us and headed back the way he came. Well, I slipped my rifle from
7 safe to semi-automatic and emptied a magazine. And Sergeant Crosby behind me did the
8 same thing. Once we started firing in that direction and the people behind us could see
9 what we were doing, they all started shooting in that direction. So now you've got
10 twenty or thirty people shooting seventeen rounds a piece, so you've got three or four
11 hundred bullets that are flying in that direction and the people in front of us had to turn
12 around to kind of see what was going on and most of them started firing also. So in a
13 matter of thirty seconds or so, everybody in the company may have dumped a magazine
14 of M-16 rounds in the direction of where they saw other people shooting. The next
15 reflection I had after that was that Sergeant Crosby and I were still standing. He was
16 standing almost to where he could touch me, a foot or two behind me, and I looked in
17 front of me and Lieutenant Powell was laying on the ground and everybody up in front of
18 us, they're laying on the ground. I looked behind me and everybody's laying on the
19 ground and I'm kind of going, "Well, why is everybody laying on the ground because
20 Sergeant Crosby and I are still standing?" So I go, "Okay, fine," so I layed down on the
21 ground. We did stay there for a while and they formed a squad of people that went out in
22 the direction that this fellow was headed, looking for him. And one of the people, two or
23 three people in front of me in the line, said, "I think I got him, I think I got him. I saw
24 him. I think I got him, I think I got him." And when they went out there, in fact they did
25 find a dead body so that would have been an enemy killed in action. We recovered I
26 think a small rucksack that had some ammunition in it but we did not recover a weapon.
27 I don't recall seeing the fellow have a weapon. He may not have had a weapon. He may
28 have had a weapon and dropped it and other people were out there and his fellow soldiers
29 came up and took the weapon and ran off and left him laying there. I don't know. But
30 where we were at, there's a free fire zone, which essentially, you could fire at a military

1 age male fleeing. A fleeing military-aged male, the rules of engagement said you could
2 fire at him. So we had a fleeing military-aged male so we fired at him and he was killed.

3 RV: How far into your tour was this?

4 GN: Well, it would have been maybe six weeks. Probably the middle of July to
5 the latter half of July so six or eight weeks.

6 RV: That's pretty early to have this happen. Now, about the standing up, did no
7 one tell you, "As soon as you seen an enemy or when you're going to fire, you need to
8 get down and take cover?" What did they tell you beforehand and did the guys give you
9 a hard time afterwards?

10 GN: Well, I think that what we understood was as far as the tactic is, if you shoot
11 first—it's better off for you to shoot first than to shoot second because your fire
12 suppression—once you begin to fire at somebody, there's some things that can happen.
13 Like number one, you can kill them so they're no longer a target. Number two, you scare
14 them so they'll turn around and run away. So in total elapsed time here, we're talking
15 about maybe ten seconds. Ten seconds from the time that Sergeant Crosby and I
16 recognized what it was until the time that we had emptied our magazines, until I looked
17 around and went, "Oh gee, everybody else is on the ground." The time it takes you to go
18 from a standing position to laying down on the ground, if you think your life depends on
19 it, is in nanoseconds. I mean there's been times where I can remember standing straight
20 up and the next thing I know, I'm on the ground and you don't even think about it. You
21 do not tell yourself, "Oh gee, why don't you get down on the ground?" It's sort of like if
22 your senses tell you that you need to be on the ground, it is an un-thought, it is a single
23 motion. An NFL pro-athlete football player couldn't make the change from standing up
24 to laying on the ground as fast as a soldier can if a soldier's getting out of the way of
25 what he thinks is a bullet. So it was a matter of seconds but when we began firing,
26 everybody else—Sergeant Crosby and I may have been the only two people that saw this
27 guy. Everybody else may have been looking to the other side of the trail. So when we
28 started firing, probably their first reaction was—since they didn't know where to fire
29 anything—once they heard firing, they're down on the ground. But we're standing there
30 firing so we know what we're doing as far as why we're firing. It's only after the fact
31 that we go, "Well, if there's ten of these guys out there they might start shooting back so

1 maybe we ought to get down on the ground.” But there wasn’t a huge amount of time
2 that elapsed there.

3 RV: So it’s all happening very, very quickly?

4 GN: Yes.

5 RV: Is that how you experienced combat in general in Vietnam?

6 GN: It could be. In many instances, I guess, for me. I mean, everybody has a
7 different thing but most of the contacts that we had were kind of a hit-and-run nature.
8 They were happenstance. There was never a case where we did what you might
9 traditionally see in a lot of places where the enemy is dug in to some particular area and
10 you know they’re there and they’re waiting there with machine guns and hand grenades
11 and rifles and bazookas and you’re going to assault the hill and knock them off. There
12 were cases where that happened in Vietnam but to us it was always a case of almost a
13 chance meeting out in the middle of nowhere and whoever saw the other guys first and
14 got off the first shot probably had a ten to one advantage. Luckily, in most all cases we
15 did have that advantage because we were alert in what we were doing. On the other
16 hand, we did have booby traps to deal with, which maybe you’d see and maybe you
17 don’t. We had casualties in my company from booby traps. We’d be walking down the
18 trail and particularly the point man, if the point man doesn’t see a booby trap on the trail
19 and snags a trip wire or something and it’s hand grenade ready to go off, then you might
20 get one or two or three people killed or injured from that. With me being an RTO, I was
21 always back from the front. There was only one time where I was up in front and that
22 was for a very short time. We never really had battles that would last an hour, not in my
23 company. Now, in the battalion, some of the other companies did get into some very
24 messy stuff where they would be in sustained contact for several hours and maybe for
25 several days in a row. And that’s probably because they were up against something that
26 the enemy wanted to protect. Typically, if you’re just walking down a trail and there’s a
27 hundred Americans walking down a trail and there’s five Vietnamese walking down a
28 trail towards you and they see you, they’re not going to invade you. They’re simply
29 going to hide and let you go by because they know that they’re outnumbered. They know
30 that there’s more of you than there is of them. They know that you can get helicopters;
31 they know that you can get artillery; they know you can get jets with big bombs on them.

1 So they would probably try to practice avoidance. Their mission really wasn't to engage
2 us thirty miles away from the South China Sea. They were probably given missions to
3 infiltrate closer to the coast and engage American or Vietnamese forces at that point. So
4 the way I look at it is they were probably trying to avoid us and when they weren't very
5 good at avoiding us, that's when we got them. But there may be times when they knew
6 where we were at and they just chose not to engage.

7 RV: Let me go back to something you just mentioned, the booby traps. Could
8 you describe what you did see and what you were warned about? And when you said
9 some of your men took casualties, those there in your company, can you tell me what
10 happened?

11 GN: Well, about anything that explodes could be made into a booby trap. They
12 could be a hand grenade such as the American hand grenade. If they were able to get a
13 hold of some of those, those are very easy to booby trap. You tie them up to a tree on the
14 side of a trail, straighten out the end of the pin, put a wire or string across the trail and tie
15 it on to something else so the person coming down the trail, their foot would catch on that
16 string, pull on that string, the string would pull the pin out of the hand grenade and the
17 hand grenade would explode. And depending upon how close that was to the trail, you
18 could end up with shrapnel all over you, you could end up with a blown off foot or leg,
19 you could end up dead. And there could be one person injured or it could be two or three
20 people injured depending upon how close people were standing when it happened.
21 That's a hand grenade. But if they could get a hold of a 155-millimeter artillery round,
22 they might take a 155-millimeter artillery round and in some manner rig that up in the
23 same way. And if that exploded you could get ten people hurt. The occasions where we
24 did have some people in my company injured was booby traps that was a smaller
25 grenade. In fact, it might have been what we called a CHICOM grenade, which is
26 Chinese Communist grenade, which is kind of an almost home-built grenade. They could
27 take bamboo and cut sections of bamboo and stuff it with powder and put a blasting cap
28 fuse of some sort in there with ball bearings or whatever. A lot of times they were duds.
29 They wouldn't go off, but we did have a couple of guys injured one time. They were
30 walking in the point and they walked down the trail and they had come to a point and
31 stopped and then started back up and probably were distracted when they stopped.

1 Maybe they talked to somebody behind them and then when they started back up they
2 took a step or two and instead of really looking in front of them, they cut this wire and we
3 had two people injured. We had one person injured from what was called a command-
4 detonated mine. Again, walking on a trail and the command-detonated mine, they would
5 place something like an artillery round on the trail and run a wire back up to a hidden
6 position, maybe fifty feet away or a hundred feet away or two hundred feet away—run a
7 wire like an electrical wire and have a battery back there and they would just watch and
8 when somebody would walk by there they'd touch the two leads on the electric wire onto
9 the battery and it would explode that round. We had a guy killed one time by a
10 command-detonated mine. I think he was the only person injured. He was killed the day
11 before my birthday in 1970. He was a young fellow. He'd only been with us maybe a
12 month or so. I believe he was very traumatically injured, possible a double amputee and
13 lived for only a short time. He lived for maybe two or three minutes, conscious to where
14 he was speaking to people and I think knew the severity of his injury. Those are the type
15 of contacts with the enemy that are very disillusioning because you have nobody to fight.
16 I mean it's like the booby traps; they might sit and be there for a month before you walk
17 by and they're nowhere within ten miles of you when that thing happens so you have
18 nobody to fight back. You took casualties but you have nobody to fight back. There's
19 nobody there to fight back.

20 RV: How was that for you? What was that like?

21 GN: Well, it's funny from the standpoint that when we did talk among ourselves,
22 everybody kind of had an idea of if something bad happened to them, what would it be?
23 One guy might say, "Well, I know I'm going to get it by booby trap," or somebody might
24 say, "Well, I think probably I'll be in a bunker some night on Mary Ann and they'll
25 throw a satchel charge in and I'll be injured or killed that way." The thing that I was
26 most intense on was snipers. For some reason or other, I always looked at the trees.
27 Typically where I was at again, I was in the middle of this long line of people walking so
28 there's a lot of people ahead of me and if they're going to hit a trip wire for a booby trap,
29 somebody would have been already hit. So booby traps didn't spook me that much as
30 snipers. And snipers are much the same because a sniper could pick somebody out, fire
31 two or three or four or five shots real quick and then disappear. And since I was a radio

1 operator, I had the radio on my back, which they always said that snipers wanted to get
2 the officers and snipers wanted to get the people carrying the radios. So I spent a lot of
3 time watching trees. I guess that's what I had in my mind, that I was going to take a
4 bullet right square in the chest.

5 RV: Did that have anything to do with you being an RTO and being close to one
6 of the individuals in charge?

7 GN: That's probably the reason why but to me, I never really had as much fear of
8 booby traps as I had of let's say a sniper. But everybody was different. Everybody kind
9 of picked out their little thing and maybe that's good because now you've got fifty,
10 seventy-five or a hundred guys walking out there and everybody's kind of got their own
11 little idiosyncrasies on what they're watching for so hopefully everybody covers every
12 possibility and nobody gets hurt.

13 RV: Right. Did you ever have any incident with a sniper?

14 GN: No, not other than that time where that first mission where we took fire, but
15 that really wasn't directed. That never really had anything that was directed I think
16 specifically at me. Probably the time that I remember where I was extremely upset was
17 when we took friendly fire pretty close to where we were at but that's not the same
18 classification as the enemy shooting at you but you're just as dead either way.

19 RV: Well, I wanted to ask you about—before we continue, I want to talk about
20 the enemy. Before we continue down that road, tell me what your exactly duties were as
21 RTO. You described the equipment you used but kind of tell me what you did when you
22 were out there on these missions.

23 GN: Well, the Company Commander had two RTOs with him at all times. One
24 would walk immediately in front of him and one would walk immediately behind him.
25 And one radio would be in communication with all of the platoons in the company and
26 that would be three platoons—1st Platoon, 2nd Platoon, 3rd Platoon. And the other radio
27 behind the Company Commander would be in contact with the battalion headquarters,
28 which most of the time was on Mary Ann. So the Company Commander could talk to the
29 people below him, which are his company people and he could talk to the people above
30 him. And it was a little bit different duties depending upon which of those two radios
31 you carried but typically you relayed the Captain's wishes back and forth. If the Captain

1 wanted to tell the people up in front to go faster, “Call them up and tell them to go
2 faster.” If he wanted to tell them to move more towards the right, you’d tell them to go more
3 towards the right. Likewise, if they came across something, like maybe they’d come up
4 on a group of hooches out there then the RTO for up in the front squad would call back
5 and say, “We just found what looks like three or four hooches. What do you want us to
6 do?” So you essentially physically carry the radio and then generally RTOs talked to one
7 another. The Squad Leader in front or Platoon Leader in front would tell his RTO or his
8 RTO would call the Commanding Officer’s RTO and the RTO would say, “Lieutenant
9 or Captain So-and-so up in front says they just found four hooches.” “Okay. Well, tell
10 them to begin to fan out and put up a perimeter around them.” So there actually was a lot
11 of relay. The radio operator for the battalion, we had to continually update our locations
12 like once an hour. You had to tell them where you were at and typically they would call
13 you and say, “Okay, I need to have your location.” So you would tell the CO
14 (Commanding Officer), “We need to have our location updated.” He’d take a reading off
15 of his map, which would be a six-digit number code, and then the RTO had to put that
16 into what we called a shackle, which is a code. You take a number like 1-2-3-4-5-6 and
17 you’d code that up and would be j-k-a-w-z-r and that’s what you gave out over the radio
18 and then the RTO at the battalion headquarters would un-code that and then he would
19 plot your position on a map so everybody knew where you were at.

20 RV: How often would you change those codes?

21 GN: Typically once a month and you’d get—I want to say every RTO got one or
22 at least an RTO in every platoon got one. Whatever unit you’re going to split up into, if
23 you’re going to separate into platoon-sized units then each platoon needs to have that
24 code. So the RTO had to keep that. That was a little pad with a little plastic wheel on it
25 and there was a way that you could every day put a piece of paper, a four inch by four
26 inch piece of paper underneath this plastic dial-type wheel and then that would tell you if
27 you wanted to relay the number 7, that’s going to be R. If you wanted to relay the
28 number 3, that’s going to be a W. Your code changed every day. You’d get the
29 codebook once a month but your code could change every day. There were other things,
30 like you had to coordinate dust-off missions. The RTOs had to know how to call in a
31 dust-off and if you’re coordinating re-supply missions, the RTOs would talk to the

1 helicopters when they were coming in for a re-supply. If you're doing a helicopter
2 movement where you were going to be picked up at a landing zone and transported back
3 to either the firebase or just some other location out in the field then the RTOs would be
4 talking to the people coordinating that. Sometimes you could go quite a ways and not
5 have much to say but typically with the continual updating of where your location is, if
6 nothing else, once an hour you're going to be telling people where you're at. And if
7 anything happens, if you got in any type of contact, if you needed any type of support,
8 then all of that information would come from the platoon radios to the CP and the
9 company CP would communicate with the battalion things that were necessary.

10 RV: Were you walking with the Lieutenant of the platoon or were you walking
11 with the Company Commander?

12 GN: Well, when I went to Mary Ann, I was with 3rd Platoon, but only for about a
13 week and they needed RTOs in the Command Platoon, which is basically the Company
14 Commander. So I spent two or three days with 3rd Platoon and then I moved the
15 Command Platoon. So I was carrying the radio for the Company Commander. Now, the
16 Company Commander is typically a Captain but if he went on R&R (Rest and
17 Relaxation), they're not going to bring a Captain in to fill in for a week while the
18 Company Commander's on R&R. So they'll take probably the Senior Platoon Leader
19 Lieutenant and make him an active Company Commander. So the first person that I
20 carried the radio for, the Company Commander was a Lieutenant, and that's Dennis
21 Powell. After he left then we got a Captain in, Captain Matterson. And then after he left
22 we got another Captain. I think we went through—in my first five months we probably
23 had three or four different people that were either Company Commanders or acting
24 Company Commanders that I carried the radio for.

25 RV: Can you give me an example of how you called in a dust-off and how you
26 communicated with other helicopters and moving supplies and things like that?

27 GN: Well, everybody had a call sign and for example, I know this sounds corny,
28 but at one time a call sign that we used and I believe it was maybe the battalion, was
29 "Combat Rifles." So you had "Combat Rifles 55." Well, that might be the Commanding
30 Officer. "Combat Rifles 54," that's the Executive Officer. "Combat Rifles 30," that
31 might be 1st Platoon Leader. "Combat Rifles 31," would be 2nd Platoon Leader. RTOs I

1 think had—like if the Company Commander was “Combat Rifles 55,” the Company
2 Commander’s RTO might be “Combat Rifles 55 Romeo.” So you got into this jargon
3 and this nomenclature, but whomever you wanted to talk to, you would call their call
4 sign. And then when they acknowledged you, let’s say the other call sign is “Dusty
5 Roads.” So you’d go, “Combat Rifles 55, this is Dusty Roads 43. Over.” Well then they
6 would come back calling your name and giving their name so you know you’ve got the
7 parties square up. And then after that you just made your conversation using the accepted
8 signal terminology and then there was a lot of jargon, trying to not say a lot of stuff that if
9 the enemy was eavesdropping, that they would pick up on your conversation. But they
10 had to be pretty dumb not to know what you’re talking about if you always used the same
11 jargon. For example, you might talk about blue line. Well, what’s a blue line? “We’re
12 about ready to cross the blue line.” “Well, what’s the blue line?” Well, on a map, the
13 blue line would be a stream or a river so you wouldn’t say, “We’re about ready to cross
14 this stream,” you’d say, “We’re about ready cross the blue line.” Okay. Well, I know
15 what blue line is. Blue line means water. You might say something like—we had jargon
16 for different people or different things. One of the jargons that we had that was very
17 widely used was the term pig, p-i-g, which was a machine gun. So if you wanted a
18 machine gun moved from, let’s say the middle of your column up to the front of the
19 column because you wanted them to establish a defensive position as you passed by this
20 particular point, it would be very typical for the guys in the front to say, “Send up the
21 pig.” Well, we knew what “send up the pig” meant, and the pig meant, “Bring up the
22 machine gun.” And that got jargon upon jargon. They’d say, “Bring up the pig.” Well,
23 the next thing would be, “We need a slab of bacon.” Well, what’s a slab of bacon? Well,
24 a slab of bacon is pig. So different jargon got interspersed with a little bit of code to
25 where an RTO could be talking to another RTO and somebody could be listening in on
26 that conversation and if they didn’t know the jargon they’d get about half of the
27 conversation. They’d say, “What were you talking about?” But you’re using lingo and
28 jargon and trying to not divulge too much. A lot of stuff was talking about by nicknames.
29 We put out Claymore mines that were our booby traps. We didn’t call them booby traps.
30 When we put out booby traps, we called them mechanical ambushes. So a lot of times
31 we’d talk about a Mike Alpha, Mike Alpha being M-A. So mechanical ambush is M-A,

1 so you call it Mike Alpha. “I put out a Mike Alpha at such-and-such a location.” But
2 then we also had the name Mickey Mouse. Mickey Mouse was used for mechanical
3 ambushes. Don’t ask me why. So if a guy said, “I’m going to go pick up my Mickey
4 Mouse,” we knew he was going to go out and pick up his Claymore mine that he booby-
5 trapped somewhere. A person standing there next to this guy, and you hear him say, “I’m
6 going to go get my Mickey Mouse,” you might go, “What the heck’s Mickey Mouse
7 doing out here in the middle of the jungle?” But it’s just jargon and lingo that’s being
8 used to communicate, “I’m going to go down there and do this right now.”

9 RV: How much freedom did you have, Gary, to make up the jargon? Was this
10 something that evolved and you just became a part of or did you have a hand within your
11 particular unit of doing that? Or was it the Commander kind of telling you, “Here’s what
12 our jargon is and here’s what needs to be said?”

13 GN: I don’t think that I invented anything. I didn’t coin any terms. Sometimes
14 you might coin a name for somebody, a nickname for somebody. Particularly if a new
15 guy shows up and my name may be Gary Noller but, “We’re not calling you Gary Noller.
16 We’re going to call you something else.” I had two or three different names that I knew
17 if somebody said that name over the radio they were talking about me.

18 RV: What were those names?

19 GN: Well, one of them, Lieutenant Navor always called me November. And the
20 reason he called me November is because my last name, Noller, is an N and in the
21 phonetic alphabet, November is the word that you use to represent N. So if he wanted to
22 let me know that he was talking to me personally, he might say, “November.” And I’d
23 go, “Yes,” or whatever. The name that was used quite often was G’Noller, because my
24 name is Gary Noller and one time we were going somewhere and we had to sign in on a
25 manifest sheet of paper. They said, “Put your name on this piece of paper.” I put G-n-o-
26 l-l-e-r, and so whoever read that thinks it’s G’Noller. Well, no, it’s G. Noller. I didn’t
27 put my first name. I put my first initial and my last name so a lot of people picked that
28 up—“Oh, G’Noller”—thinking that that was my last name. Well, once they found out it
29 wasn’t my last name they said, “Well, that’s not really your last name but we’re going to
30 call you something and we’re going to call you ‘G’Noller.” I had a friend that called me
31 Flatlander, and the reason he called me Flatlander is because I’m from Dodge City,

1 Kansas, and that's flat land out there. So I had two or three names. The one that was
2 most generally in use was G'Noller. But I had a close friend, Nolan Bingham, and we
3 called him Bingy, B-i-n-g-y. Some people would kind of show up and maybe they had
4 nicknames. They said, "Hey, when I was a little kid my grandpa used to call me Fuzzy."
5 "Okay, well, we'll call you Fuzzy." Another good friend, Sonny Crowder was Critter.
6 Lieutenant Davor was called Sugar Bear. Tommy Poppell, we called him Pop. So some
7 nicknames were pretty easy to arrive at. Some nicknames, you'd have to sit back and go,
8 "Gee, I don't know." We had a guy called California Dreamer. We had people called
9 Preachers. If a guy was pretty straight-laced, he didn't cuss, he didn't smoke, he
10 wouldn't drink alcohol, a lot of times they ended up being called Preacher. If two guys
11 came from pretty close, like the same hometown, one of them's going to end up being,
12 Homie. So we had a bunch of Homies. That's even way before that became popular in
13 rap music, but you had Homies. Medics were always Doc. Chaplains were always, or
14 most often, Padres. So some people kind of had a built-in, automatic nickname, and
15 other people you would just have to figure out. Somebody called them that one time and
16 everybody said, "Yeah, that's a good one so we'll keep that one." But all of the jargon
17 and lingo that was used, I just picked up hearing other people talking. I don't think I
18 really invented it. I don't think that it was—it wasn't taught in Signal School. We
19 weren't taught lingo and jargon. It was just one of those—it's street language. When
20 you go to grade school they teach you the proper way to speak but out on the street you
21 speak the proper way or any other way you want to. A lot of the radio communication
22 was more of a street language that was just picked up.

23 RV: It sounds like a lot of the nicknames were very endearing and fun within that
24 kind of atmosphere.

25 GN: Yeah, I think so. You know, and to this day you have veterans that will
26 show up somewhere and they'll go, "You know that fellow that we called Montana?"
27 His name wasn't Montana but he was from Montana so we called him Montana. "I know
28 Montana like I know the back of my hand by I don't know what his name is. Do you
29 know what his name is?" So literally, nicknames could take the place of names to where
30 a lot of guys to this day don't know who the heck they was with. They may remember
31 them and know a lot about them and they just know them from a nickname because once

1 you got the nickname, ain't nobody called you anything else. I can't remember calling
2 anybody but—Nolan Bingham, we didn't call Nolan Bingham, Nolan Bingham, we
3 called him Bingy. And anybody knew when you said Bingy, that's Nolan Bingham. But
4 if you said, "Nolan," they might go, "Who's Nolan? I don't know anybody by that
5 name." "That's Bingy." "Oh, okay. Why didn't you say Bingy then?"

6 RV: Well, on that note, how long did it take you to become close to the men
7 within your unit?

8 GN: Well, some of it was fairly easy because of those of us that trained together
9 at Fort Knox before we went to Vietnam and then we ended up in the same company. So
10 that was almost kind of an automatic. Another example of Tommy Poppell, he was my
11 Squad Leader and so I didn't know Tommy until I got the CP. He was an RTO. Actually
12 he got a signal MOS. He didn't have a combat MOS, he had a signal MOS and somehow
13 he ended up in an infantry company. I don't know who he made mad.

14 RV: It makes you think he made somebody mad.

15 GN: Yeah. But not long. I guess it's almost an intuition of who you're going to
16 get along with and who do you want to be close with and you just gravitate towards that
17 and it takes place very quickly. I mean, there were some guys I wasn't close to and I
18 wouldn't want to be close to them. They just weren't my type. So you kind of had some
19 groupings going on of people that had some things in common and they just naturally
20 gravitated together. But I don't remember that as really something that took very long.
21 You could learn a lot about somebody very quickly and you might be with a guy for two
22 weeks and know more about that guy in two weeks than you'd know about somebody
23 you went four years in college with and who was in every class you were in.

24 RV: How would that happen?

25 GN: Well, I just think that there's probably a lot of honesty going on. As I recall
26 it's like you're away from family, you're away from everybody else. As I pictured it
27 before, you've got five or six people in this small boat and you're out in the ocean all by
28 yourselves so you don't have a lot of distractions. You don't have a lot of opportunity to
29 spread this around so you've kind of got this very small core of people and if in fact you
30 mesh well then you very quickly drop barriers that may exist in other circumstances and
31 you freely talk back and forth and there's no line. I guess the thing there is you ain't

1 going to lie to anybody. There's no putting on, there's no fakery, there's no affectations.
2 It's just plain old honest self being exposed. So you cut through a lot of distractions, I
3 guess. There's people that I know, I probably was in contact with maybe four or five or
4 six weeks that'd I'd say I considered him to be a very close friend of mine. "Well, how
5 long did you know him?" "Six weeks." "Well how could you say somebody's a close
6 friend when you only knew him for six weeks?" "Well, I don't know but I just said that."
7 It's the feeling and it's being able to get very close very quickly, because it undoubtedly
8 has to do with the shared hardship that you have and the shared knowledge that you have
9 that, "I'm here today but I may not be here tomorrow," and just a human need for
10 closeness with one another, particularly at that time and under those conditions.

11 RV: Sure. One more question, Gary, before we end this session. You
12 mentioned—you recalled this incident with the first time you saw a live enemy
13 combatant. Could you describe in general terms—and we can into more of this in the
14 next session we have together—but what did he look like? What was he wearing?

15 GN: Well, this encounter was maybe like one and a half seconds. The only thing
16 I really remember is I'll say average height, maybe five foot, seven or eight. Average
17 build, maybe hundred and fifty or a hundred and sixty pounds. Not in military uniform,
18 more of, let's say, a white t-shirt. Moderate-length hair, no beard, no glasses. I don't
19 remember tints—what color or anything. But seeing that person was probably, like I
20 said, one or two seconds so it's just like if you were to see something when somebody
21 snapped a flashbulb. So the length of time that a flashbulb would flash a light, that's
22 about as much as I remember about seeing that person.

23 RV: But his memory obviously is kind of etched into your mind?

24 GN: That's true and I think that's because of probably a couple of different
25 things. One of them was how close we were together. I mean, literally, I'll say fifteen
26 feet. Because where we were at, we were walking down a trail but the trail was in triple-
27 canopy jungle. It's not like we were walking, hidden in trees, looking out onto a rice
28 paddy or a field that had short grass so we could look out there and see for a mile away.
29 We could see fifteen feet to the side of us. Now, the trail down in front of you, yeah, you
30 could see further down the trail in front of you and down the trail behind you but to the
31 side you're not seeing that far. So the fact that we could literally get that close together,

1 up close and personal—and I know he didn't expect to see us. There's no way in the
2 world he would have popped out of there if he thought we were there. He may have just
3 came through there. He may have came through there five minutes before we got there,
4 going the other way and then he's making a trip back to some other place. So in his
5 mind, he's thinking about something, but the last thing in his mind is he's going to pop
6 out from this bush onto that trail and there's going to be a company of American infantry
7 there.

8 RV: You all must have been quiet.

9 GN: Well, you tried to have noise discipline. You very definitely had an
10 advantage if you could be quiet so we wouldn't talk. If we had to talk, it'd be a very low
11 whisper. You tried to keep things from rattling around; you tried to walk to where you
12 wouldn't step on twigs or anything. Now there were some times where you couldn't
13 avoid it. If you went into a night position and you were cutting down brush to be able to
14 put your hammocks up between trees or lay your air mattress on the ground you're going
15 to make noise. But if you're moving like we were the day that we did, yeah, you want
16 to—being quiet is to your advantage because the enemy can't detect you, plus you can be
17 listening for him so that if he's moving to the side of you somewhere and you hear a
18 branch move or a rustle of some clothes or a foot stepping on the ground, if you're quiet
19 you can hear that. So we did practice discipline in not making noise.

20 RV: Gary, why don't go ahead and stop our session for today?

21 GN: Okay.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Gary L. Noller
Conducted by Richard B. Verrone, Ph.D.
January 25, 2006
Transcribed by Mindy Moser

1 Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone, continuing my oral history
2 interview for the Vietnam Archive's Oral History Project. I'm talking with Gary Noller
3 today. It is January 25, 2006, and I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Gary is in Catoosa,
4 Oklahoma. Gary, let's pick up with some general questions about your experience there.
5 I wonder if you could first take a little time and describe the enemy, the people that you
6 faced and the government that you faced. The NVA (North Vietnamese Army)
7 obviously, but also the Viet Cong.

8 Gary Noller: Well, we did have both of those type of military organizations in the
9 area that we were at. Typically we didn't really see or know a whole lot about them.
10 When we encountered them, quite often it was only in small groups. We didn't have,
11 during my time, any type of large actions where we'd have our company-sized unit up
12 against another company-sized unit. What we more frequently did, we'd come into units
13 that were very small, maybe five, six, seven, or eight, and again their mission may or may
14 not have been to engage us where we were at. Their mission may have been to transport
15 material further in towards the coast or maybe they were some type of a picket-line
16 defense where they were the observation post that if we got to the point where they were
17 at, they were to set up some type of delaying action so that the main force of their
18 element has time to go into hiding or to move out of the area or something. But I think
19 one of my best recollections of them is that they're very resourceful people. They can
20 use a lot of very primitive means of warfare against us that was effective against us. We
21 could bring B-52 bombers in, we could bring 8-inch artillery in, we could bring

1 helicopters in, mini-guns, but they could set up a simple booby trap along a trail
2 somewhere and kill or injure our people and that could take us a whole day to get
3 straightened back out. So it was a very small expense on their part that could cause a
4 huge expense on my part. So I think the resourcefulness—I think the other thing is that
5 we encountered both male and female combatants in the field. Many of them were very,
6 very young. It was only an occasion or two where encountered anybody that could speak
7 English to where we could communicate directly with them. We did take prisoners.
8 Quite often they would be kind of intermixed in with the Montagnards up in the
9 mountains. But one time my battalion did capture an officer. I don't know what his rank
10 would have been comparable to US but maybe he was a Lieutenant Colonel and he got
11 wounded in some manner and was brought into LZ Young, which is a small firebase I
12 was at for a while. I can remember our Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Doyle,
13 talking with this Vietnamese officer in English. I think he had even maybe been to the
14 United States at one point and studied in the United States. I can remember his resolve.
15 His statement, which was very true to fact, was, "We're fighting you and some day you'll
16 go home and we'll be here." And very simply stated his belief that no matter what we
17 did, in the end the outcome was going to be that we're going to go back to the United
18 States and they would be there and they'd be the ones who would be victorious. I think
19 they had a lot of resourcefulness and a lot of resolve.

20 RV: How did it strike you when you heard such a statement?

21 GN: How did it strike me when the prisoner said what he did?

22 RV: Yes.

23 GN: I didn't disbelieve him. In fact, this was late 1970 and I think even most
24 Americans had that same idea. Again, I'll go back to March of '68 when Johnson made
25 his statement that he was not going to run for President again. A lot of people look at that
26 as basically being an admission of the final outcome, which is, "We've just got to get out
27 of there." It wasn't that we've got to get out of there and achieve any particular goals
28 like the country is a democratic country and friendly to the United States. It was, "We've
29 got to get out of there somehow that it kind of looks like we did what we wanted to do.
30 Have some type of honor intact in our departure." So my outlook was pretty much was
31 the same as this Vietnamese officer's outlook, which was, "Yeah, we're essentially

1 buying time. We were trying to achieve something politically which is some sort of
2 peace agreement that has got some terms and conditions that we can say, 'Okay, we've
3 achieved what we want to achieve and then we will go home. And whatever happens
4 after we go home is going to be out of our hands because we're not going back. We may
5 say we'll come back but we're not going back.'" I think it was very clear to me that we
6 would never return there no matter what happened a year later or ten years later or twenty
7 years later. We're not going back there.

8 RV: Right.

9 GN: So I could sit there and say, "Yeah, this guy's right."

10 RV: Did that affect your morale any?

11 GN: I don't think so. I mean I don't know of anybody in 1970 or 1971 that had
12 the expectation that in some manner we were going to achieve a military victory that was
13 going to put in place some sort of political government in South Vietnam that would be
14 able to withstand the test of time. So if we were demoralized, we were already
15 demoralized. This isn't going to demoralize us any more.

16 RV: How would you classify or describe the weakness of the Viet Cong and the
17 NVA?

18 GN: Well, I think that at times they could be just like we could be at times, which
19 would be somewhat lax in their execution of their tactics. Quite often it would be very
20 easy to spot them. They would be moving in the open, they would be moving in daylight,
21 they would apparently have the attitude that they must be invisible or we wouldn't be
22 where they were at. We had several occasions where we were able to see them at some
23 distance and set up and just wait until they walked into an ambush zone and ambush
24 them. Not that that didn't happen to us, either, but I think that it was just many, many
25 cases where encounters with them; we were probably better prepared and more alert for a
26 possible situation there than they were. They might even be moving and not have their
27 weapons in hand. They might be moving and their weapons will be slung on their
28 shoulder. They'd have a rifle with them but they're not in their hands, they're hanging
29 off their back. Well if two people are going to meet and one guy's got his rifle in his
30 hands in front of him and the other guy's got his rifle hanging off of a shoulder strap on

1 his back, nine times out of ten the guy that's got his rifle in his hand is going to win that
2 show.

3 RV: Right.

4 GN: It's just a matter of two or three second's difference but that's all it takes.

5 RV: How would you describe the Allies, on the other hand, the ARVN (Army of
6 the Republic of Vietnam) or the New Zealanders and the Australian troops, anybody that
7 you worked with or fighting with us, including the South Koreans, the ROKs (Republic
8 of Korea)?

9 GN: Well, we did have a little bit of contact with those, in particular I remember
10 we had an Australian pilot that flew an observation plane and you very definitely could
11 tell by his accent. And he would come over and I believe he was probably an observation
12 for jet fighters. They would, at times, be released into the same area of operations
13 vicinity that we were in and they may be just given a mission to look at targets of
14 opportunity. In other words, if they were out there and they saw enemy movement down
15 a trail, they could go attack the enemy. A lot of times they would come out and they
16 would just be on station, which would mean that they're out there flying around. They
17 really have nothing to do, but if we were to get in a firefight or something like that and
18 want to have support then they could immediately be directed. But being an RTO in the
19 company battalion, typically when they would come in and they would be flying around
20 where we were at, they would identify themselves. He would come on and say who he
21 was and, "I know I'm in your area and if you need anything let me know. I'm up here."
22 I think that certainly the pilot there, as expected, is very professional. I never really did
23 have any contact with Koreans. Koreans had a reputation though as being tough fighters.
24 If you want to screw around with somebody, okay, fine, but don't screw around with the
25 ROK because in the end, they're going to win. They're tough guys. ARVNs, we did
26 have some contact with them and also with what we called the Rough Puffs, which were
27 the RFPF, the Regional Forces/Popular Forces. Right on one of my last missions into the
28 field we were with RFPF forces and to be right honest, we didn't like being with them.
29 We kind of took the idea that, "Well, if they want to go over there and do some things,
30 they can go over there and if we're over here doing some things, that's fine. But we
31 don't really want to mix their unit with our unit." There was communication problems.

1 A lot of the way you work is determined by cohesiveness and if you don't know this
2 fellow, it would make any difference. It could even be another US Army unit. Let's say
3 they infused a hundred of their people with a hundred of your people and said every other
4 man was going to be mixed here and you're used to having a guy in front of you and a
5 guy behind you, somebody who you knew and worked with every day and all of the
6 sudden the guy in front of you and the guy behind you is somebody you can't even talk
7 to, that's going to cause some uneasiness. To tell a story, we were out on a mission one
8 day with these RFPFs and we did encounter some contact at the front of the line. And
9 immediately upon contact in the front, the Americans all started moving forward and the
10 Vietnamese all just kind of squatted down on the trail. Now this may be our tactic versus
11 their tactic. Our tactic is to move forward and put down suppressive fire. Their tactic
12 might be to hit the ground. Not that we didn't ever hit the ground but at least on this day
13 we began moving forward very quickly to the area in which the contact was encountered.
14 I can remember passing them on the trail. They'd be either squatting or sitting or
15 kneeling down on the trail and we'd walk right past them. And they had a 1st Sergeant,
16 kind of a field 1st Sergeant and I can remember him going back down the trail and had a
17 stick or something in his hand and he'd be hitting them on their steel pots and trying to
18 get them up and urge them forward. Well, I suppose that they may be thinking, "Well, if
19 all these Americans want to run up to the front to where all that shooting is going on,
20 that's fine. We'll let the Americans run up to the front where all the shooting is going on.
21 We'll just sit here." So a lot of the talk after that was, "Why are these guys here?
22 They're not enhancing our mission any. In fact, they're probably a detriment to us doing
23 what it is that we've got to do." They were only with us for maybe four or five days and
24 they were kind of like the—they weren't the full-time soldiers. They were the people that
25 were civilians most of the time but they were in the military and they had a certain
26 number of days per year that they had to serve so this was just their week to be out in the
27 field so they ended up with us. That's part of the Vietnamization process, was to kind of
28 take the American face off of the war and put the Vietnamese face on it.

29 RV: That's exactly what I wanted to ask you next. Did you think that these
30 individuals, this army was capable of stabilizing, defending the Republic of Vietnam after

1 the Americans left? And on the tail end of that question, after your response, what did
2 you think of Vietnamization in general, this policy?

3 GN: Well, I think that there were some Vietnamese Army personnel that were
4 very dedicated and very good at what they did and wanted very much to be successful.
5 But I don't know that I can say that that was in general how high a degree that ran
6 through their military forces. Potentially, some of that could be due to the fact that the
7 Americans had been over there, at this point, since the early sixties, eight or nine years
8 and they may have become very soft with the idea that, "We don't really have to do
9 much. The Americans can do it." I don't know that much about their motivation or their
10 philosophy. I understand that a lot of them were probably drafted, too—conscripts.
11 Were they that much believers in Democracy? I don't know. Did they believe in what
12 they were fighting for? I don't know. But there were definitely some people who were
13 capable and we gave them a lot of stuff, we gave them a lot of support, we gave them a
14 lot of equipment, a lot of training, a lot of our people went over there and fought but
15 whether they really could do it on their own, I'd say that proof was given in the
16 eventuality of what happened and in the end they couldn't do it. In fact, it was a rather
17 quick end when the end finally came. The process of Vietnamization I think was for
18 political purposes. Somebody said, "We've got to have a way that we can get out," and
19 everybody scratched their heads and said, "Okay. This is the way that we can get out."
20 And they probably did take a look at some time tables and said, "All right, 1968, we've
21 got five hundred and fifty thousand people over here. We want to be out of here in five
22 years or less so we're going to have to have withdrawals and withdrawals are going to be
23 at a rate of a hundred thousand a year. And the only way that we're going to be able to
24 leave is to let the South Vietnamese take over." So it may not have been something that
25 was a variant plan. It may have just been pragmatic or you're kind of backed into it.
26 "Well, whether this is a good plan or not a good plan, it's the plan we're going to have to
27 have because we're leaving. We're definite about leaving and so the Vietnamese are
28 going to have to take over." I mean it should have always been Vietnamization. It
29 should have always been them fighting their war with a little bit of support from us but I
30 think it turned around the other way where we were basically doing the bulk of the
31 fighting and hoping for a little bit of support from them.

1 RV: Was this a topic of conversation amongst your unit, the people in your unit?

2 GN: Well, I don't think that we spent a lot of time talking about whether this was
3 the right thing to do or not. I think most people were a lot more, I guess selfish. It's sort
4 of like, "Well, I know that I've got two hundred and fourteen days left. At the end of two
5 hundred and fourteen days, I'm going home and that's what I care about. Whether
6 Vietnamization is the right method of conducting this war at this point in time, I don't
7 know but I really don't care." So I can't remember that there were a lot of philosophical
8 discussions about the particular manner in which the strategy was being conducted. I
9 think I do remember my belief that our presence was simply delaying the eventual
10 outcome. I always believed that we would leave and when we would leave there would
11 be some intermediate time period and then the North Vietnamese would come in and
12 claim the south provinces, which is what they did. I don't know that that was any
13 brilliance on my part but it was just my belief that in a length of time that we were there
14 and we were not able to do any more than we were able to do, at best we could hold some
15 sort of status quo if we were simply the glue that was kind of holding the South
16 Vietnamese government and the South Vietnamese military together. If we were that
17 glue and we left then it's going to fall apart.

18 RV: Did you all discuss things like kind of the wider view? Not just how the
19 war's going but what's happening back in the United States; what are my friends and
20 family thinking; what are they experiencing; and especially, what about the anti-war
21 movement?

22 GN: Well, I think that we knew the anti-war movement existed and I think that
23 there was no one single reaction or belief about that. I think you could find soldiers that
24 were very sympathetic to the anti-war movement, you could find soldiers that thought the
25 anti-war people ought to be lined up and shot. In fact, the first time I heard about the
26 organization, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, I was in Vietnam and somebody
27 had had some information mailed to them about this organization. So yeah, I know we
28 did talk about the anti-war movement that was going on and it varied from individual to
29 individual as to what they thought about that. I think one of the things that I can
30 remember thinking myself and did discuss with other people is that people back home
31 didn't know what it was like for us to be in Vietnam under those conditions. They had no

1 understanding. The politicians didn't understand what it was like for us; our families
2 didn't understand what it was like for us; the military leaders back in the United States
3 didn't understand what it was like for us; and in particular, the situation where we were in
4 as being in the military in the later days of the war was that it seemed like nobody was
5 happy with what you're doing. The anti-war movement wasn't happy with what you're
6 doing because you were there but you weren't beat yet. And the military or pro-war
7 people weren't happy with you because you were there but you hadn't won yet. So I look
8 at that as kind of a tug of war. What side do you turn to? The soldier in the field, where
9 are you going to turn to find your support? The anti-war group? No, they don't like you
10 because you're still there; you're still doing all those bad things. You haven't lost and
11 you haven't come home. The pro-war group is, "Well, you're just a bunch of rag-tag
12 people out there. You're not fighting in the real war anyway and you're not doing very
13 well and you can't win." I don't think we got a lot of respect from anybody. So
14 essentially in one manner, that's what caused a lot of Vietnam veterans to simply rely
15 upon themselves is that the only people that really know and understand and you can talk
16 to and trust are other people just like you. At times I've made the statement when I came
17 home from Vietnam; I hated everybody. (Laughs) It didn't make any difference who
18 you are. It didn't make any difference what side you were on. And I use that word, hate,
19 and I say I hated everybody. There was a lot of bitterness and a lot of that just came out
20 of the fact that we felt like we were kind of left with very little support from any sector
21 other than the group of people we were with and that nobody really understood that.
22 Nobody understood the position that we were being put in by having almost nobody
23 happy with the war and therefore almost nobody happy with the people that served in it.

24 RV: What about the viewpoint of what your families were going through back
25 home? How much contact did you have with them?

26 GN: Well, we didn't have anything other than mail and I would write frequently
27 and I would get frequent letters. I would only write when I was in a rear area or on a
28 firebase. I never wrote when I was out in the bush. I just didn't do it. I could have, but
29 didn't. It may be if we were out on a three-week mission then I didn't write any letters
30 for three weeks. But when I got back to, let's say a firebase like Mary Ann or something,
31 I might sit down and in one day write thirty or forty or fifty letters and write to everybody

1 that I knew that had been writing me. I never kept an address book so I memorized—all
2 of the people I wrote to, I memorized their addresses and would just sit down with a pad
3 of paper and envelopes and write out maybe a one-page or two-page letter. We didn't
4 have to have stamps on the envelope. We got to write "free" in the corner and get that to
5 somebody and then the next helicopter that came in, they'd pack up all the mail and send
6 it back and distribute it. So there was communication through letter writing. There was
7 some availability at that time to make telephone calls on what they called the MARS
8 (Military Affiliate Radio System) network, which was a radio network where they'd
9 actually hook you up through a radio more than a telephone and you could go in there if
10 you wanted to wait in line and take the time potentially get a connection through to
11 somebody back home and talk with them. We exchanged a couple of times some
12 audiocassettes. I think maybe I got one or two of those from home and probably sent one
13 or two of them back home but not a lot. I never took pictures so I didn't send any
14 pictures home. I'd get newspaper clippings from home and occasionally I'd run across
15 something that I'd see, maybe in a newspaper or magazine and I'd send that home for
16 people to read. I never really knew or felt like there was any other way to do it. I didn't
17 really miss any other form of communication because that's the only form of
18 communication that we had.

19 RV: Did they tell you their opinion of the war and kind of ask you yours in these
20 communications?

21 GN: No, I don't think there was a lot of that discussion ever in writing back and
22 forth. If so, maybe just one sentence. The sentence might be, "Oh gee, I wish that was
23 all over with over there so you could come home," or some statement like that. The only
24 specific memory that I have is while I was in Vietnam, two people that I went to school
25 with were killed in Vietnam. They were both younger than I. In fact, they were both in
26 the same class, lived in the same town, and went through grade school together. When
27 they were killed—a few months apart, I think—my parents didn't want to send me that
28 news. I of course had no way of knowing that. They were at different places than I was
29 that. In fact, I didn't even know they were there. But I can remember getting a letter
30 from my sister and I think she put the newspaper clippings in it and she said something
31 like, "Mom doesn't think that you should have this news because this might be

1 demoralizing but I think you should know,” and so I did read those newspaper clippings.
2 I don’t think that had anything to do with philosophy about the war as much as it would
3 be would that make it more difficult for me personally to know that these two people that
4 I had gone to school with had been killed? Both of these guys had sisters that were in my
5 class. I definitely was very shocked to hear that news and disappointed to hear that news.
6 It was hard enough to see anybody die over there in the military but then to find out that
7 they were people that went to your school with and you knew and both of these had been
8 killed within a matter of a few months and it was during the time that I was there. But I
9 don’t remember any type of attachment to that politically if their deaths were in vain, if
10 their deaths were helping to achieve the goals that the military had or the government
11 had. I don’t remember any kind of discussion. It was just pretty much a factual
12 accounting of what happened.

13 RV: How did you deal personally with death kind of being in the air every day
14 and then the ones that you saw or experienced there within your unit or around your unit?

15 GN: Well, I think I was certainly well enough informed to know that it could
16 happen and it did happen. I think a lot of that reality occurred in 1968 when my friend
17 James Nufer was killed and I went all the way through school with him and attended his
18 funeral when he came home, and his burial. So does this happen? Yes it does. Can it
19 even happen to me? Yes it can. I mean, it happened to Jim. He left and he was only
20 gone for about ten weeks and he was killed. So it’s a realization and a knowledge that
21 can happen and in my unit they’d certainly taken casualties. You’d talk to the old people
22 and the guys that have been there before you and they talk about what they’d been
23 through and what’s happened and casualties that they’ve taken so it does become a very
24 prominent feature of your everyday life. Again, being an RTO, I could listen to the radio
25 and not only what was happening in our company but what was happening to other
26 companies in the battalions so you could kind of keep almost some sort of a daily
27 summary of who’s where and what did they do and what’s their casualties? And some
28 days there wouldn’t be much and some days there would but the first time I saw dead
29 American soldiers, probably close to the end of my first month in Vietnam and we were
30 on Mary Ann, doing the construction of that firebase and one of the other companies in
31 our battalion was out in the bush a ways. I don’t know what company it was. I don’t

1 remember. But they were in some pretty heavy contact and I believe they had four
2 people killed in that battle, which may have lasted two or three hours. It wasn't just one
3 of these three or four minute, everybody shoots all the bullets in one magazine and then
4 they're gone. It was a battle that lasted for a while and they were out in deep enough
5 jungle that they could not take a helicopter in to land to pick up the dead bodies. So they
6 took a helicopter in that had a device on it known as a Jungle Penetrator, which was a
7 cable that was hooked up to a wench. They had a piece of equipment on the end of it that
8 kind of reminded me of a boat anchor that they would lower down and they could put
9 somebody on that and pick them back up in the helicopter. So instead of having to have a
10 fifty-foot diameter circle to land a helicopter in, maybe you only had to have a ten-foot
11 diameter circle to bring this cable down in. And they had taken the bodies and wrapped
12 them up in ponchos, which was very typical. If you didn't have body bags you wrapped
13 the bodies up in green ponchos. And they had tied these four dead soldiers onto that
14 wench cable and the helicopter had picked them up but there was no way they could
15 retrieve them into the helicopter. So they brought them to Mary Ann slung under the
16 helicopter. We heard that, we knew that. That story went around the firebase real quick
17 that they were bringing in some bodies and they're going to be slung underneath the
18 helicopter. At that time, I was already in the company CP and the company CP was real
19 close to what we call the BIP pad on Mary Ann, which was on the south end of the base.
20 So when a helicopter came in, that's where the helicopter was going to come into. I can
21 remember watching the helicopter come closer and come closer and come closer and the
22 helicopter got over the pad and the pilot came down very very slowly, very slowly. And
23 Tommy Poppell was my Squad Leader and he said something like, "We have to go out
24 there and untie these bodies from this cable." We were the infantry company on the hill
25 providing security and we ended up doing a lot of chores. Well, somebody had to go out
26 there and untie these bodies and unhook them from that device. A few guys went up
27 there but not me. I didn't go. I'm standing back, I'm watching this, but when he says,
28 "We've got to go do it," I'm watching. And I can remember the helicopter coming down
29 very slowly, very slowly. It just inched its way down and I kept looking at the boots
30 because these ponchos were wrapped around the bodies but the feet were exposed. The
31 boots were hanging out from the bottom. They were all in an upright position so I

1 watched as they went down and I watched the boots and I my expectation and the thought
2 that I kept running through my mind is, “When their feet hit the ground, they’ll just stand
3 up and walk away.” I guess that was my desire, that was my wishful thinking. Not that
4 they’re dead and we’re going to have to go out there and untie them but that as soon as
5 their feet hit the ground everything will be okay because their feet will hit the ground and
6 we’ll untie them and they’ll walk away with us. But that’s not the case. So when they
7 untied them, they laid them down on the ground, very close to where our bunker was, the
8 CP bunker was. And they layed out on the ground there until they could get another
9 helicopter to come in and pick them up. So they may have been there a couple of hours.
10 I can remember just sitting there and staring at the bottom of the soles of the boots, the
11 pattern on the boot, and thinking to myself, “Those guys got up that morning and put
12 their boots on just like all of us got up that morning and put our boots on and now they’re
13 dead.” And the realization that yeah, that can happen to anybody at any time. When they
14 put their boots on that morning they didn’t know that that’s going to be their last day on
15 earth. But it was. And that, to me, is very subtle. Why do I remember their boots? I
16 don’t know why I remember. We obviously didn’t unwrap the bodies, we didn’t look at
17 them. I don’t know who they were. But it was, to a certain extent, the fact that the only
18 thing really visible, other than the poncho that they were wrapped it, was the boots they
19 were wearing. And I can remember those pictures just as if I was standing here seeing a
20 picture on the wall right now. There’s one of those very subtle things, an image that will
21 never go away—those four guys that came in that day dead.

22 RV: How did it strike you emotionally? Does it make it that much more difficult
23 to go out the next day and to keep performing, to keep doing your duty? Not necessarily
24 trying to not do your duty but just to really start second thinking what’s happening?

25 GN: Well, I think that there is a toll that it takes. With me, I don’t know that I
26 could go back and say, “Oh, this specific thing happened.” I mean, there were other
27 things that happened that were very harsh and very difficult to deal with. I think what
28 happened more in my particular case is it’s cumulative. Every little thing adds in and
29 everything little adds in again and you keep having continuation of these events and at
30 some particular point in time, yeah, it can make it very, very difficult. It can make it
31 extremely difficult. It could be seeing people killed; it could be seeing what machine

1 guns do to people when people get hit with machine guns; what happens to a human body
2 when a hand grenade goes off close to it; things in the environment like putting up with
3 mosquitoes, putting up with leeches, sleeping on rocks at night, going with poor water at
4 times, very little food, very little sleep at times, walking, a lot of physical strenuous
5 activity, rain during monsoons, the heat during the day, the humidity. You take a
6 hundred or two hundred factors and in that is people are getting killed and people are
7 getting hurt. Does that, after a period of time, begin to weigh on a person? Yes, it does.
8 If I can tell one story, I can probably describe this somewhat.

9 RV: Please do.

10 GN: We were out—and I don't know when this would have been, maybe the end
11 of October or part of the first of November—and we were in monsoons. And that's about
12 when monsoons start, is in the fall of the year or part where we were at. We were out
13 again somewhere in the bush in Mary Ann on a mission that was probably ten days or
14 two weeks or eighteen days. I don't know. And it was more of the same thing. You get
15 up in the morning, you move out, you patrol, you take a midday break, you patrol again,
16 you go into a night laager position, set up defensive position and next day you do it all
17 over again. And I don't remember any particular incident that happened at this time
18 relative to contact with the enemy or firefights we may have been in or anything like that.
19 We may have, we may not have. But I can just remember one night, going into a night
20 laager defensive position, and maybe this was around seven o'clock at night. It's very
21 typical, when you go in you have to set up your tent very quickly because you don't have
22 a lot of daylight. Typically you go in right about dusk. The sun is already starting to go
23 down so you've got about fifteen or twenty minutes, maybe a half hour at the most to get
24 all you positions set up to where you know where everybody's at. If you're going to dig
25 a little foxhole, you dig a foxhole. If you want to eat something you get food prepared.
26 You've got to make a little tent to sleep under or whatever. I'd gone in and for whatever
27 reason, I was at a low point that day, extreme low point, and I can remember going in and
28 when everybody else started sitting up, I just went over and sat down on the ground next
29 to a big tree and just kind of leaned back against this tree and just sat there. I think it was
30 raining. It may not have been raining hard but I think it was raining. One of the other
31 people in the Bravo Company command post was Tomlin Dista and he was a Medic. He

1 was our Medic at that time and he was a conscientious objector. He didn't carry a rifle
2 but he was our Medic. He was about ten or fifteen feet away in front of me, and he was
3 making a little tent out of his poncho. He kept after me. He said, "Noller, what are you
4 going to do? What are you sitting there for? You need to get your tent ready. We're not
5 going to have much light. You need to get your thing ready." I just kind of sat there and
6 at one point I said, "Tom, I'm not doing it anymore. I'm not going to make a tent no
7 more. I'm done. I'm finished. I've had it. All of this stuff—I've had as much as I want
8 to take. I ain't doing this no more. I'm just going to sit here." And every once in a while
9 he'd say something to me and I'd pretty much always give him the same answer. At one
10 point he was sitting there and he'd made some hot chocolate in a cup. I think he
11 recognized that maybe I was pretty close to just mentally throwing it in. He kept
12 encouraging. "You need to make your—you need to get your hooch made. You need to
13 get your air mattress blown up. You're going to have to get in out of the rain. You can't
14 sit there all night." Whatever argument he gave me, I always came back, "Well, Doc,
15 you don't think I can sit here all night? You watch. I'll sit here all night because I ain't
16 doing this no more." He finally started a little different tactic. He said, "Well, why don't
17 you come over here and drink some hot chocolate with me." "No, Doc, I don't want any
18 of your hot chocolate." "Well, maybe you'll feel better if you come over and drink some
19 hot chocolate." "Well, I don't want to feel better. You drink your hot chocolate. You
20 made it, it's yours, you drink it." "Well, I made too much hot chocolate. I can't drink all
21 this hot chocolate. I made too much and if you don't come over here and drink some of
22 this with me I'm going to have to throw some out." And after a little bit of time, I did go
23 over. And what I want to remember is that I didn't want him to throw that hot chocolate
24 away. Not that I necessarily wanted it or that I wanted to get up off the ground and go
25 over there where he was at, but when he said, "If you don't come over here and drink this
26 hot chocolate, I'm just going to have to throw it away because I made too much." So I
27 went over there and sat down and drank some of his hot chocolate. And I don't
28 remember much beyond that, if I stayed in that hooch with him that night or if I did go
29 over and build my own little hooch and blow up my air mattress and go to sleep or what.
30 I don't remember. But I do remember at that particular point that was probably my
31 lowest point in the whole time I was in Vietnam and it was, "I'm tired of it, I don't want

1 to do it no more, I'm going to sit down here and I'll just sit here till—I don't know. I'm
2 just not going to do anything anymore. I'll just sit here.” And I credit him with if he
3 didn't keep after me the way that he did, I don't know what would have happened. I may
4 have just slipped on out of it. I have no idea. But I do know that what he did, how he
5 responded to how he saw me and whether he did that knowing that maybe I was having a
6 very difficult time or not, I don't know. But I did meet him about ten years ago. He lives
7 up around Philadelphia and I told him the story and he didn't remember it. (Laughs)

8 RV: Oh really?

9 GN: He could help it. I said, “Hey, Doc, did you know that I was having a pretty
10 tough time that day?” He goes, “I don't remember that.” So I wasn't able to get anything
11 back from him as to his recollections. But my recollection is that if he wouldn't have
12 taken a little bit of time right then and there through a very simple thing as saying, “Come
13 over here and drink some of my hot chocolate. I made too much...” I don't know. I
14 don't want to think what could have happened to me from that point. Not from any type
15 of physical harm but just mentally—exhaustion I'll say. I was just totally, totally
16 mentally played out.

17 RV: When you said, “I might just slip on out of there,” what did you mean? Was
18 that a mental thing?

19 GN: Yeah. I think when you're—you can only ask your body to do so much. As
20 much as you may want to run a three-minute mile, you ain't gonna run a three-minute
21 mile. The human body can't do it. And you can ask your mental capabilities—your
22 emotional capabilities have limits, too, and there's only so much that you can demand
23 and then your body's going to start doing certain things. It will start shutting things off
24 and responding. And some people who go through very traumatic events develop split
25 personalities. They have so much going on that one personality can't handle it so they
26 split into a second personality so they kind of divide themselves and compartmentalize
27 themselves up to where in order to cope with it they use different personalities to deal
28 with different things. I don't know if—I really don't know. Some people go into almost
29 a state of shock and turn out to be zombie like. We had a guy in basic training that
30 couldn't get out of his bunk one morning. It didn't make any difference what people
31 did—holler at him, scream at him—he was emotionally played out just in training to

1 where he laid in bed and they ended up carrying him out and taking him to the hospital. I
2 think he came back later but it would be very potential that you would just be unable to
3 get your body to do anything. You might sit there and say, “Yeah, I want to get up but I
4 can’t get up,” or, “I don’t want to get up and I ain’t getting up.” So I don’t know. I think
5 it was mental and emotional exhaustion that for some reason it was just a very, very low
6 point and it hit at that time. But I came out of it. Probably you could take a look at
7 symptoms of people that are depressed. Sometimes when people are depressed they go to
8 bed and they just don’t want to get out of bed no more. And I guess it was kind of similar
9 to that. It was like, “Well, I’m just going to sit down here and I ain’t going to go
10 nowhere no more.”

11 RV: Did you see any of that in other people within your unit, reacting kind of in
12 the same way?

13 GN: Well, not like that. I mean, nobody that I talked to but I think that the people
14 reacted to what I’ll call the stress and strain in different manners. With me it was
15 almost—like I said, just slip out of reality. “I’m just going to sit here and the world can
16 go on. Just leave me alone. I don’t care what goes on; I don’t care what you guys are
17 going to do. I’m just going to sit here and you go do your thing but I’m not part of that.”
18 I don’t know what a psychologist would call that but some people—I know one other
19 particular incident where a friend of mine that I had been through training with in Fort
20 Knox and ended up in the company with reacted one day very strangely. We were, I
21 believe, on Mary Ann. And typically you’d get mail from home and a lot of times you
22 got what we called care packages, which were boxes of stuff and a lot of times it would
23 have food in it. You know little special items: cans of sardines, cans of chili, Beanie
24 Weenie, steak sauce, could be candy, canned fruit, homemade cookies, popcorn,
25 whatever. This particular fellow had got some pudding in little cans. Nowadays,
26 pudding comes in a little plastic container. Back then they came in a little bitty can and
27 they had—I don’t know if they had a lift-off top or if you had to take a can opener and
28 open it. But he had gotten some pudding and it was sitting there next to him and one of
29 the other guys went down and started talking with him and saw the pudding and picked
30 up a can of pudding and said, “Why don’t you give me this? I don’t have any pudding.
31 I’d like to have some pudding. How about if I have that?” And then the other fellow

1 said, "No, you can't have any of my pudding." And the other guy kept kind of trying to
2 talk him into letting him have that can of pudding and finally at some point, the guy that
3 had the pudding picked up his M-16 and took it off safe and said, "You put my can of
4 pudding down right now or I'll shoot you." I heard this story. The guy that was trying to
5 get the can of pudding came to me and said, "Do you know So-and-so?" "Oh yeah, I
6 know him." "Well, he's crazy." "Well, why do you say he's crazy?" And so he told me
7 that story and I didn't believe him. I said, "Oh, that didn't happen. That didn't happen
8 like that." "Yes, it did, yes, it did." And I went back to my friend and I said, "Hey, I just
9 heard that you told what's-his-name over there that you'd kill him if he didn't set your
10 can of pudding down on the ground. Did you tell him that?" He said, "Yes, I told him
11 that." I said, "Well, if he wouldn't have set that can of pudding down on the ground,
12 would you have really tried to kill him?" He goes, "Yes, my finger was ready to pull that
13 trigger. I would have killed him." And I said, "I don't know what the hell's going on
14 here over a damned can of pudding?" And his response to me was, "I just didn't want to
15 be screwed with anymore." And to him, that may have been his low point in Vietnam.
16 But to him it was this guy asking him, wanting him to give up that can of pudding to him
17 was, "I didn't want to be screwed with anymore. And the way I'm going to not be
18 screwed with anymore, at least right now with this guy, I'll kill him." And I think maybe
19 that's similar to me when I said, "I don't want to be screwed with any more. I'm just
20 going to sit down over here and I ain't getting up no more. Because if I get up and go on
21 down the road, I'm going to be screwed with some more, whatever that may entail." So I
22 think that people did have their ups and downs and you could get mentally and
23 emotionally played out. I don't know that anybody did kill anybody because of that. I
24 don't know—we had a fellow one night that shot himself in the foot in the middle of the
25 night on the firebase and claimed that he did it because he was cleaning his rifle and his
26 rifle went off accidentally. Well, you don't clean a rifle at midnight because at midnight
27 out on a firebase you can't see. It's dark. So we always felt that that was probably a case
28 of the guy did it on purpose. Well, why would a guy shoot himself in the foot? Well, so
29 he could get out of where he was at. They'd have to take him to the hospital and minister
30 to him and maybe take him back to the United States. So I think people had their low
31 points. How they coped with their low points could vary and I think in fact a lot of times

1 the way people coped with their low points is they took it out on the enemy or they took
2 it out on civilians. That what some of the tragic things that you hear happening, that,
3 “How could an American go out there and kill women and children?” Well, you caught
4 him on his low point mentally. He sees very little positive to anything in life anymore. I
5 could see that happening. You’re not talking about somebody who’s at their best and this
6 is what happened. You’re seeing somebody who’s at their worst and that would always
7 be the thing I feared. If you get somebody who is really down and out and you get them
8 in some situation and they’re going, “I can’t take this anymore,” and their idea of, “I
9 can’t take this anymore and the way I’m going to resolve this,” is that, “I’ll kill these four
10 people standing here in front of me and that will make it a whole lot better for me
11 because these are the people that are causing me the problems that I have.” You could
12 have somebody who might very easily, in that state of mind, rationalize committing an
13 atrocity because they think that that’s going to relieve them of their stress and strain that
14 they’re under.

15 RV: Right. Gary, let me ask you then about fear and how you personally dealt
16 with fear on a daily basis, if you had that on a daily basis and if not, when you did
17 experience this, what was it like and how did you deal with it?

18 GN: Well, I’ll say I was afraid all the time. But there’s different levels of fear. I
19 mean, it’s sort of like if you’re driving down the road in your car, you ought to be
20 somewhat afraid all the time that you might be in a wreck. And that’s good. That’s a
21 good fear to have because that keeps you alert, that keeps you watching for people who
22 might do unexpected things. But likewise if you’re driving down the road and all of the
23 sudden you see a guy run a stop sign about a hundred feet in front of you and you don’t
24 know if you can stop in time or not and you might have a big collision then your fear
25 level jumps from maybe one or two driving down the road to eighty or ninety, driving
26 down that same road. So I think there was always an underlying awareness of where
27 we’re at and what we’re doing. And to a certain extent you can get used to some of that.
28 I mean, it’s not like you’re forever paralyzed. You could get up and do what people tell
29 you to do, talk with people, relate with people depending upon situations. One of the
30 things I think that, for me, was going on a combat assault. A combat assault was—
31 typically, helicopters would pick us up on a firebase and we’d go out somewhere, two

1 miles, three miles, ten miles, or wherever and they'd set us down. And you never knew
2 when you went into the landing zone on a combat assault, if there were bad guys out
3 there or not. You didn't know if the enemy was sitting there. He could be sitting there or
4 maybe he isn't sitting there. So you never know when you come in there. You've got to
5 make a lot of noise and very visible. There might be somebody standing over there and
6 they see you coming, so they just wait until you get close enough and they start shooting
7 at you. So quite often, we would go in on combat assaults. I would be on what we called
8 the first lift because I'd be with the Company Commander and the Company Commander
9 was always on the first helicopters that went in. Well, if the Company Commander is the
10 first guy that goes in and his RTOs are the first guys to go in, we'd go in when there was
11 no other Americans on the ground. And they would prep that area. They would shoot
12 artillery in there, a lot of times they'd take gun ships in there and the gun ships would
13 strafe the area and the helicopter you was on, they might be firing away but you still
14 never knew. You still never knew. So you're up here flying around and you know
15 you're a minute away from landing or something and you just get all pumped up. I don't
16 know that that's necessarily fear but there is a great knowledge that several bad things
17 can happen right now. You could get shot sitting in a dang helicopter. The helicopter
18 pilot could get shot; the helicopter itself could get shot. In any of those cases you could
19 get hurt real quick. But fortunately every time we went out on a combat assault we
20 always got on the ground okay. The only time I ever remember getting shot on a combat
21 assault was when our own helicopter shot at us after we were already on the ground. My
22 reaction that time was more anger than it was fear. But we did have case where we were
23 going in and it was right before dark and we had been out all day long patrolling. In fact,
24 this is the time where we were with the RFPFs and right about dark we found a big
25 enemy...kind of a headquarters area. They had hooches in there but they were big
26 hooches. These hooches were hidden in the jungle. They were bamboo and thatch and
27 being big, they were like fifteen feet wide and thirty or forty foot long. So this was more
28 than just an individual shelter that somebody stayed in. These were hooches that were
29 big enough for ten or fifteen or twenty people to get into at one time. And right about
30 dusk is when we encountered that. The people up in front, the point element, asked for
31 permission to do a recon by fire, which means, "We just want to start shooting at this

1 place. Can we just start shooting at this place?” Recon by fire is when you shoot and see
2 if anybody shoots back. We were in a free fire zone and we didn’t see anybody, we
3 didn’t know who was there, but permission was granted. So they start shooting into this
4 area where these hooches were at and no fire came back. There was no return fire and
5 then the Company Commander says, “Okay, we want to go on line and sweep through
6 this area where these hooches are at.” And typically we didn’t go on line. Typically, we
7 walked single file. So the guys up at the front were the guys that were always in the
8 action. If you were back a ways from the front, a lot of times everything was over with
9 by the time you got up to where the front was. But I can remember that day in particular
10 when we got on line, it was starting to get dark, we didn’t know exactly what was there.
11 They said there were some big hooches up here. All day long we’d been looking for this
12 big camp that was supposedly some sort of headquarters. So we start moving, spread out
13 just like you do pheasant hunting in western Kansas, about every five or ten feet apart,
14 and we moved through there with the idea that we were going to flush the enemy out of
15 there. And that was probably the most afraid I ever was. It maybe had to do with the fact
16 that it was getting close to night and if it got dark and you were in contact, you didn’t
17 have your support. You couldn’t get helicopters in at night, you couldn’t get Medevacs
18 in at night, you couldn’t see the guy next to you to know who he was at night, so I think
19 there was a certain angle of the time of day and certainly an angle that these were big
20 hooches. We’d been told that there was this big enemy camp out there and maybe we did
21 find it and maybe there are a bunch of people and they’re just waiting until we get closer
22 and once we get closer they’re going to engage us. Maybe they left booby traps. We
23 don’t know if they’ve got the place booby-trapped. They could have trip wires; they
24 could have command detonated mines. It might be when everybody gets up there they’ll
25 blow some artillery shells that they’ve got buried. I became very apprehensive. In fact,
26 you hear the expression, “You see your life flash in front of you,” from people that are in
27 very fearful circumstances. And I can remember as we walked through there this image
28 came to me of when I was in kindergarten. And I don’t know why in the world, doing
29 that, I would think about being in kindergarten, but all of the sudden this image flashed
30 into my mind about being in kindergarten and just sitting at my desk and the guy that sat
31 in front of me and the guy that sat in back of me. And I can remember smiling and going,

1 “Why am I thinking about being in kindergarten? Why did that come up to me right
2 now?” And I can’t explain that. I cannot explain why, at that particular point in time,
3 with all the stuff going on that that came up. But was that the reaction to the fear? You
4 wanted to remove yourself from the circumstances that was facing right now so your
5 coping mechanism is to take you to some other time in your life and that’s what your
6 brain wants to think about now? “We don’t want to think about what’s going on right
7 now. This is a pretty scary thing so let’s think about being in kindergarten because
8 kindergarten really wasn’t too tough. Yeah, you had to ask permission to go to the
9 bathroom but you got to take a nap every day and they give you milk and cookies.” So I
10 don’t know. That probably was the most afraid I ever was—was that little thing. When
11 we ended up going through there we didn’t find anything. There wasn’t nothing there.
12 But it did scare the hell out of me.

13 RV: How did you prepare for a combat assault? Did you have to learn on the fly
14 or did someone actually explain to you, “Here’s what’s going to happen and here’s what
15 you need to do, Gary?”

16 GN: Well, any training that we had on that was OJT (On-the-Job Training) and in
17 fact, I’ve remarked to veterans since then that I was in Vietnam in 1970 and 1971 and the
18 helicopter use in Vietnam was novel. It had been used in Korea but not to the extent that
19 it was being used in Vietnam, particularly for the transport of troops into combat, and
20 that’s what a combat assault was. Basically, “We’re going to give you a ride out to
21 where the enemy is and we’re going to drop you off and then we’re going to leave. And
22 so instead of walking out there, you’re riding out there with us.” The idea being very
23 quick, that the enemy could be out there walking around, thinking, “Oh gee, we’re all
24 right,” and then all of the sudden the helicopters come over the ridge and you’re on the
25 ground in three minutes. So before he’s got time to react to your presence, you can
26 engage him. But I don’t remember any training and it was always odd to me that we
27 could go through basic training and I had eight weeks of advanced training plus another
28 five weeks—never, never during any of my training back in the United States had I ever
29 been on a helicopter. Not even a dummy helicopter where they said, “Okay, when you
30 get on a helicopter, this is where you sit and if you’ve got to get off it there, this is the
31 way that you get off the helicopter. Or if you’re going to go in on a hot LZ, this is what

1 different people are going to be doing.” So typically, we packed up the same whether we
2 were walking off the firebase or we were going to go by helicopter off the firebase. So
3 preparations at that point are really the same. It’s like pack the stuff in your rucksack that
4 you’re going to pack. We called it war shit. “Get your war shit ready. Get your war shit
5 on.” And people had, again, little, different idiosyncrasies about, “I want to put a hand
6 grenade over here and I want to put a first aid pouch over here and I want my magazine
7 this way.” But I had my particular way that I would arrange my equipment and it didn’t
8 make any difference where we were going or how we were getting there. But sometimes
9 on the helicopter, after we were there we might have a minute or two where if you were
10 sitting right next to somebody, you might pick a spot out on the ground and point to it
11 and say, “That’s the spot that we’re going to.” Maybe it was a log laying on the ground
12 where you wanted to go over and take some cover behind that log. I remember one time
13 we were going on a combat assault and I was with Nolan Bingham and we were sitting
14 together. And typically, we sat on the floor of the helicopter and our legs were on the
15 outside. The helicopters had no doors on them so we were sitting on the floor with our
16 legs dangling out so that when the helicopter got close enough to the ground, he just
17 jumped out of the helicopter. He may be sitting on the ground or he may not be sitting on
18 the ground but whenever you got close enough to where you think you wanted to get off,
19 you got off. And as we were coming in, I pointed out to a spot; meaning to show Nolan,
20 “Okay, let’s go over there,” and the door gunner was sitting right next to me. Well, he
21 thought when I pointed over there that I had seen an enemy over there. So immediately
22 he started shooting. Well, when he started shooting over there, I thought he saw an
23 enemy over there. (Laughs) So we get off and run over and hit the ground real hard,
24 thinking that we got what we call a red LZ or hot LZ. “We’ve got a hot LZ here! The
25 door gunner saw something and he started shooting.” Well, as we sat down and started
26 talking about that, he said—well the door gunner didn’t see anything but he thought I saw
27 something. So when I pointed out there real quickly to show Nolan, “Let’s go over
28 there,” then the door gunner opened up. I don’t know of any special preparations. We
29 didn’t even have training. All of that at that particular point in time is you just learn by
30 doing it. Guys are going to tell you a little bit about, “Okay, we’re going to go out here

1 and this is what you do and this is what you don't do and you just go do it." If you screw
2 up along the way, somebody's going to tell you about it.

3 RV: How effective was the helicopter in Vietnam? Was it something that worked
4 or worked some of the time? And if so, how?

5 GN: Well, I think that the helicopters were a very good tool. I don't think you'll
6 ever find anybody in the infantry who's going to say very much bad about helicopters. I
7 think outside of infantry, if you were to take a look at casualties by what your job was—
8 and I'm going to count Medics in with the infantry because they were out there with us
9 all the time—the helicopter crews took a terrific, terrific beating there. They're big,
10 they're very visible, they're prizes. I mean if a guy could sit there and say, "I've got ten
11 bullets to shoot. I can shoot ten bullets at these guys walking around over here or I can
12 shoot ten bullets at a helicopter, he's going to shoot his ten bullets at a helicopter."
13 You're going to take that piece of equipment down and you're going to take three or four
14 or five or six or seven or eight or ten people down with it. So they were, I think, very
15 good at what they did. I have a huge admiration for helicopter pilots and their crews. I
16 think they gave those of us walking around on the ground—we always had this sense that
17 no matter how bad it got for us, we could get the choppers in and the choppers can help
18 us if that meant bring us food, bring us water, bring us ammunition, bring us explosives,
19 take out our dead, take out our wounded, "Take us the hell out of here. That's where our
20 best support is going to come from, is from helicopters. We're not going to see tanks out
21 here, who cares about B-52s and F-101s and trucks aren't going to make it out here and
22 jeeps ain't gonna make it out here. But choppers can." And all we had to do was make a
23 big enough spot in the ground for them to land. And if we had to chop down trees that
24 were two foot in diameter, we chopped down trees that were two foot in diameter. If we
25 had to blow up trees that were three foot in diameter we'd blow them suckers up. But
26 we'd get them choppers in there. And I've seen first-hand many occasions of extreme
27 bravery by helicopter crews in support of the infantry, doing things that were
28 unbelievable.

29 RV: Can you give me any examples?

30 GN: We had a case one time, and I think I was on Mary Ann probably in the
31 second half of my tour when I was an RTO in the battalion headquarters and we had a

1 company that got in contact and had wounded. And typically, when we found out that
2 there were wounded on the ground, we would call in for dust-off support. And that was
3 one of the things I would do as a radio operator at the Battalion Tactical Operations
4 Center. And any other helicopters flying around out there, they'll monitor the radios.
5 These guys may be listening to two or three different radio frequencies so they heard that.
6 You go, "Chu Lai dust-off, Chu Lai dust-off, this is Combat Rifles 55. We have a
7 mission. Can you copy?" Well, Chu Lai dust-off would come back and you'd give them
8 the information. But this particular day, somebody else was out there and I don't know
9 who they were, if they were Rattlers or Pelicans or Muskets or Sabers or who they were
10 or what aviation company it was. But somebody came back and the pilot said, "I
11 understand you've got wounded in one of your units." "Yes it was." He said, "Well, I've
12 got space on my helicopter. I'll go get them." Which was totally allowable. If anybody
13 wants to go in there and get the wounded out, he can get the wounded. It doesn't have to
14 be by a Medevac helicopter. In fact, a lot of times the wounded weren't taken out by
15 Medevac helicopters. They were taken out by whoever was out there. So we gave him
16 the information, the location and he went in. Well, as the helicopter was making the
17 approach in, the enemy starts shooting again. The RTO in the field called up and said,
18 "We're taking incoming fire, we're taking incoming fire." Well, our typical response to
19 that was we called the helicopter and had them abort the mission because we don't want
20 to get the helicopter in there and get the helicopter shot down. So I get on the radio and
21 immediately go, "Abort mission, abort mission, abort mission. It's an unsecured LZ,
22 they're taking incoming fire. Abort the mission." And the helicopter pilot came back to
23 me and he said, "Do they have wounded ready to go at that LZ?" And I said, "Yes,
24 they've got their wounded ready to go." And he basically said, "Well if they've got their
25 wounded ready to go, we're going to go in and get them." So he made the decision. The
26 helicopter pilot made a decision at that point in time from what he was seeing—and I
27 don't know what he could see—but from the report that we were able to give him, that
28 "We've got an unsecured LZ. We're taking fire in the LZ." He basically said, "If you've
29 got wounded down there and they're ready to go, I'm going to in and get them." And he
30 did. He went in there, landed his helicopter, and they put the wounded on the helicopter,
31 and the helicopter left with them. The guy didn't have to do it and I think that's an

1 example of people who were very highly dedicated to what their mission was, what they
2 job was and what they were going to do that they would put these wounded people out
3 there that needed to be evacuated before they put their own personal safety. Because
4 when I told him, "Abort mission," I can't order him what to do. I'm not his Commanding
5 Officer. It wasn't the same as I'm giving him an order. I'm giving him information.
6 "Abort mission, abort mission, LZ is not secured," and he says, "If you've got wounded
7 down there and if they're ready to go, I'm going to go in and get them." And that's some
8 very brave action. Now, what did that guy ever get out of that? He may have gotten
9 nothing out of that. Absolutely, positively nothing. But I remember that.

10 RV: And I'm sure situations like that completely endear you all to this chopper
11 pilot and to the process of, "If I do get in trouble, they're going to come get me."

12 GN: And I had met a chopper pilot once many years ago, maybe fifteen years ago,
13 I think when I lived in Chicago in the early nineties and we were talking. We met each
14 other I think by chance and got to talking somehow and found out that we were in the
15 service together and he wanted to know what I did and I told him and I asked him what
16 he did and he told me. He made a remark to me. He said, "You know, I always felt bad
17 about taking you guys out and dropping you off and leaving you out there." And I said,
18 "Well, we always felt good that you guys would come out and get us and do the things
19 that you did." It just struck me as odd that he had this perception that in some manner
20 that there would be some animosity towards helicopter crews from the infantry people
21 because they were the ones that took us out, kicked us out, and left us there. And I said,
22 "No, no, no. That's not what I remember. I remember the times that you came out and
23 picked us up; the times you came out and brought us water and food; the times that you
24 came out and took our dead and wounded from us; the times that you came out and give
25 us gun ship support." So there was just a perception that he had probably had for a long
26 time, that somehow or other that he was not appreciated and in fact maybe there was
27 some disdain out there because, "We picked you guys up and took you out there and
28 tossed you out on the ground and let you fend for yourself." But that's not my
29 recollection. I think the chopper crews were excellent at what they did. Helicopter
30 crews, dust-off people...extreme amount of bravery, very competent, very dedicated,
31 almost sitting ducks in that big old helicopter. They go into withering fire. "Do you have

1 somebody down there? Do you need to get them out? Here I come. Get them ready.”
2 And that became routine. There is one Medal of Honor winner, Patrick Brady, who
3 received a Medal of Honor for work that he did with the Americal Division. And his
4 story, if you read one helicopter dust-off account, read Patrick Brady’s Medal of Honor
5 account on what he did. And very similar to where he returned to the same LZ and
6 would pick up people and get his helicopter shot up and would go back to the rear area
7 and jump in another helicopter and go out and pick up people and get the helicopters
8 chopped up and get in another helicopter and go back out. The man basically said, “My
9 job is to go out and get people that need to be evacuated and I’m going to go out and do
10 it.” And somebody might say, “Well, you know, you only have to get one helicopter shot
11 up a day and then you can go take a shower,” and he’s going, “Well, no, I go out there as
12 long as I’ve got equipment that will take me out there to pick those people up with.” The
13 only time we ever had a nighttime chopper come in, it was a dust-off. We had a guy that
14 had a very high temperature. He had malaria and we had to have a night evacuation.
15 And if you think it’s hairy coming in and landing in a helicopter in daylight, well think
16 about what it takes to come in and land a helicopter at night out in the middle of the
17 jungle where you can’t see squat. But they came out. They didn’t have a lot of lights
18 going, but likewise, they couldn’t see much of where we were at. That would have
19 chilled me pretty much to know that I have to go out in the middle of the night in some
20 jungle where everything’s just plain old black and try to land a helicopter down on top of
21 a little bitty hill and pick a guy up that had a hundred and four degree temperature.

22 RV: Did you ever get dusted off or have in any incident yourself?

23 GN: No, I never was. I was never wounded or hurt bad enough otherwise to have
24 to be dusted off. We had our share, we had enough. On thing was heat casualties. At
25 times we would get people that would get very down with heat illness or heat exhaustion
26 or something and quite often we could stick them in helicopter and by the time they got
27 back to the rear area, they were okay. Well, that’s because in a helicopter, with all that
28 wind blowing around, you got cooled off. But I never did have a situation where I had to
29 have any type of medical attention like that.

30 RV: Okay.

31 GN: And I’m glad I didn’t.

1 RV: Yeah, obviously. You mentioned a little while ago friendly fire, when a
2 helicopter came down upon you all. Can you tell me any friendly fire incidents that you
3 remember and how much of a fear was this with your guys?

4 GN: Well, it happened enough times that it often made me wonder what percent
5 of casualties out of all of those killed and wounded in Vietnam were done by friendly
6 fire. There's some statistics out there that claim the number's ten percent and there's
7 other people who say, "Oh yeah, it's probably more like twenty-five percent." It's just a
8 very dangerous situation where you have all of these people walking around and you're
9 armed to the teeth. It's like—what would happen if you went to the supermarket every
10 day and there were a hundred and fifty people in the supermarket and everybody had a
11 rifle, a knife, two hundred rounds of ammunition and four hand grenades? And one thing
12 about going to the supermarket is there should be no need to use that. Now let's say that
13 we'll take you to the supermarket and half the people in the supermarket are good guys
14 like you and the other half are gonna rob you. Well, at that point in time, the supermarket
15 becomes probably pretty dangerous. And if you mistake a good guy for a bad guy and
16 you shoot him, okay, that's called friendly fire. "Oh gee, I couldn't tell exactly who that
17 guy was. You shot at a bad guy but the bullet missed him and went another aisle across
18 and hit a good guy." We had incidents where one time in my company we were walking
19 down a trail one day. A guy's rifle discharged and he shot the guy in front of him, shot
20 him in the butt. It didn't hurt him very bad. In fact, as I remember, they put a bandage
21 on it and the guy was still able to walk around but he had to be dusted off and I don't
22 think he ever came back. But okay, you shot him in the butt. Well, if you would have
23 shot him a little bit differently and got him in the spine, well, he could have been
24 paralyzed. What if he would have shot him a little bit higher and hit him in the heart?
25 Well, he would have been killed. How did this guy get killed? Well, he got killed
26 because the guy in front of him, somehow his rifle accidentally discharged. We had a
27 guy one time that injured himself. He had a grenade on his pack that was a trip flare,
28 which is about the size of a pop can or a little bit smaller than a pop can and it's got
29 magnesium in it. When it explodes, it burns with a very bright light. Well, somehow this
30 trip flare went off in his rucksack. He had it in his rucksack or on his rucksack and it
31 went off. Before he could get his rucksack off he had some very severe burns on his

1 back. I talked about the incident where we were on the ground, coming in on a combat
2 assault on the ground and the next flight of helicopters came in and I don't know. For
3 some reason or another, they must have thought they were the first group to come in
4 because they started shooting. We had bullets flying in our area. In fact we were kind of
5 standing off underneath some trees. I was with the Company Commander. I was
6 carrying his radio that day and the chopper that's coming in had mini-guns. And the
7 mini-gun—you don't get a pop-pop-pop sound, you get a grinding sound. It sounds like
8 a machine with they're grinding up tree limbs. There's just this growl of so many bullets
9 coming out and they heard that and leaves in the tree above us were being cut by the
10 bullets and the leaves were coming down. I can remember looking up and seeing the
11 leaves come down. It looked like somebody was tossing a tossed salad out of the top of
12 these trees because all of these chopped up leaves were coming down. We had occasions
13 where we'd have—even in our own company—where we'd have a platoon go to the left
14 and a platoon go to the right and somehow or other they'd get mixed up and they end up
15 coming together two hundred yards down the road and each one of them thinks they're
16 coming up on the enemy. They can see movement; maybe they can hear some noise.
17 One day I can remember having a company radio and getting a call. People are going,
18 "We've got enemy." Then the other guy says, "We've got enemy." Pretty soon you
19 figure out, "Wait a minute. Neither one of you guys have got enemy. You're both
20 coming up on each other." We had in the battalion one time where we had two different
21 companies on either side of a river and they were supposedly a mile apart. Well, they
22 weren't a mile apart. They were like a hundred meters apart. And they started seeing—
23 they could look across and see movement across the river and they called in and they
24 said, "I've got enemy on the other side of the river." Well then pretty soon that guy calls
25 back and says, "I've got enemy on the other side of the river." And then all of the sudden
26 you go, "Everybody stop. Don't shoot at anything. We think you're seeing each other."
27 You could have artillery misfire. We had an occasion one night where we were in a night
28 defensive position and artillery started coming in on us. And luckily we were in the triple
29 canopy jungle where we had very tall trees above us. The artillery shells were hitting in
30 trees above us and exploding and tree limbs were being throwed around. It was on the

1 radio back to the battalion headquarters and I'm going, "Check fire, check fire, check
2 fire, check fire. You're shooting at us. You're shooting at us."

3 RV: Was that your call, Gary, or did someone say that?

4 GN: Oh nobody told me to do that. I think that's very typical with RTOs. You're
5 clued into the situation and that's an anticipation. I guess I want to say if I wasn't
6 supposed to do that, nobody ever told me I wasn't supposed to do that. Because I did it
7 and I'd do it but it's like the CO may be ten feet away from me but it's almost like the
8 communication is an unspoken communication. I mean, I know what to do in those
9 situations and so I'm on that radio and they come back from probably Mary Ann at that
10 point and say, "We don't have any artillery fire going out." I'd say, "Okay, you guys
11 don't have any artillery fire going out. I hope like hell the enemy doesn't have artillery
12 pieces out here in the middle of the jungle because if that's enemy fire then we're getting
13 artillery fire from the enemy. The enemy, as far as we know, don't have artillery." It's
14 not mortar fire, it's not RPG fire, this is—we could hear the guns. We could hear,
15 "BOOM," and the shell explodes. We're sitting here and we're hearing those guns.
16 Well, it ended up being a South Vietnamese unit somewhere else. But you can blow off
17 an artillery shell ten miles away, some South Vietnamese unit that didn't have our
18 location on their board and they're doing what we called H&I, which is Harassment
19 Interdiction, which means you just shoot out there. "The enemy's out there. We're going
20 to screw with the enemy. We'll shoot ten rounds out there." Well, where they shot
21 rounds that night, the enemy wasn't there. We was there. So I can probably sit and count
22 the incidents of friendly fire and say that I encountered more friendly fire than I
23 encountered enemy fire.

24 RV: That's amazing. Is that attributed to the environment, the jungle, and just not
25 having a clear front line?

26 GN: I think that definitely has a lot to do with it. In many cases it requires that
27 you know where you're at and you call your location information into a higher
28 headquarters and then you have people that are sitting there and they plot your location
29 on the map and they keep you separated. It's sort of like an air traffic controller. The air
30 traffic controller's job is to get all the airplanes landed at the airport but keep you
31 separated enough that you don't run into each other in the process. Well, the RTO's job,

1 let's say in the Battalion Tactical Operations Center is to make sure he knows where
2 everybody's at so that you don't get too close to each other or that you don't have a
3 bombing run close to a unit or you don't have an artillery strike close to your unit. But if
4 you don't know where you're at and you call in a location—you think you're on East 6th
5 Street but you're really on East 5th Street, but you can't really tell the difference because
6 it all kind of looks the same and there's no sign there telling you where you're at, but
7 that's where you think you're at and you call in a location and you're off even a hundred
8 meters on your location... We had a case one time where we went into an area and found
9 some enemy hooches. This is the place where we caught them about lunchtime and they
10 had the bowls sitting on a little table inside the hooch and there was live fish swimming
11 around in the bowl. They weren't big fish, you know, six inches or eight inch fish like
12 maybe a Crappie would be or something and these fish were swimming around in the
13 bowl and they had a little fire going and when they saw us coming down the trail, which,
14 they probably had somebody looking that day, hell, they'd take off. They leave
15 everything. Well, we go in there and look around. Don't see anything, don't find
16 anything. The fact that the people were there and they left, we say, "Okay, this was the
17 enemy." So we burned the hooches and we left. Well, then there was this airplane flying
18 around, a spotter airplane for fighter planes and he sees this smoke. And he looks on his
19 map and he goes, "Well, that's enemy ground. No American's down there." So he
20 comes in and shoots a couple of white phosphorus rockets into that area. Our tail end of
21 our company is pretty close there and we can see this airplane flying around and we see
22 him shoot the rockets and Dennis Powell was acting Company Commander at that time
23 and I said, "Lieutenant Powell, that airplane is marking a target." He's shooting his
24 rockets down there and the next thing would be is that he'd mark the target and the jets
25 would come in and bomb it. Well, hell, I was probably far enough away from it at that
26 point but we're strung out quite a ways back behind where I'm and so we get on the radio
27 real quick and start, "We're down here. Friendlies! Friendlies!" You call up to the
28 battalion headquarters again and say, "We've got an airplane shooting at us." They come
29 back and say, "We don't have no airplane shooting at you." That was typically always
30 the response, was that we could say what we see happening and the response is, "No, we
31 don't have an airplane shooting at you."

1 RV: And what do you say in return? “Somebody’s shooting at us.”

2 GN: Well, yeah, we come back and I could probably be a little bit smart aleck and
3 I’d say, “When’s the last time you ever heart of the North Vietnamese flying Bronco
4 aircraft? That is a friendly aircraft up there and he’s firing at us.” They’d go, “No, we
5 don’t have anybody doing that.” Well, this is kind of a sidebar. When I told Lieutenant
6 Powell, I said, “That guy’s got jets on station. He’s going to be bringing those jets in
7 here. We’ve got to get the hell out of here.” Lieutenant Powell said, “Well, you call
8 back to the people at the rear that if he makes another run that they should shoot him
9 down.” I kind of paused and I said, “You don’t really want me to call them and tell them
10 that if that observation plane makes another pass that they should shoot at him, do you?”
11 And he goes, “Yeah, that’s exactly what I want them to do.” I’m kind of sitting here
12 going, “Well, that’s all we need to do now is shoot at that guy and we’ll not only have
13 fighters after us, we’ll have B-52s out here.” But he said that and as best I remember, I
14 relayed that. I probably very hesitantly said in so many words, “The CO says that if that
15 guy makes another run with his rockets, you should engage him.” I’ve talked with
16 Dennis Powell since then and I’ve brought this story up and I’ve said, “Did you really
17 want our guys to shoot at that plane?” He goes, “Well, he was shooting at us, wasn’t
18 he?” (Laughs)

19 RV: So he was serious?

20 GN: Well, I hope not but he may be. I mean he never did come back and say,
21 “No, that’s not what I meant.” He had kind of a philosophy that if in order to keep us
22 from getting blowed up, we would have to shoot that plane down, well, we’re going to
23 shoot that plane down because we ain’t getting blowed up. But I know that ever since
24 then, what we did do right away is we started throwing smoke grenades. We thought,
25 “Well, okay, he’s seeing this and he thinks it’s the enemy and somehow we’ve got to get
26 him to stop and think about what’s going on.” And us running down the trail would do
27 nothing more than bring him on because he’d say, “Oh hell, I’ve got this enemy area
28 down here and in fact they’re running now. They know I’m clued in on their location so
29 I can see them.” Well, he can’t tell if we’re Americans running down a trail or
30 Vietnamese running down a trail. All he sees is people running down the trail. Now you
31 start shooting at him and he goes, “Oh, I’ve got people running down the trail shooting at

1 me.” So what’s he going to do? Well, he’s probably got one of these million dollar
2 target of opportunities out here. He’s going to bring everything in the world he can. So I
3 don’t know, somebody said, “Start popping smoke,” so we got smoke grenades on us. So
4 we said, “Everybody mark your location.” So we took off two or three smoke grenades
5 and just started throwing smoke grenades. So we lit up the place there with our smoke.
6 He’s probably sitting here going, “If that was the enemy, I don’t think the enemy would
7 start throwing smoke to show his location.” About that time their communications finally
8 got put together and what had happened is we had got out of our area that we were
9 supposed to be in. Like, we were supposed to be in a box. Well, we strayed out of our
10 box into an adjoining box and in an adjoining box they’re saying, “No, there’s no
11 Americans over there.” So this pilot was free to do what he wanted to do because there’s
12 no Americans over there. Well, we had gotten out of our box into another box. So I’d
13 say probably every case—I don’t know about every case. The guy shooting another guy
14 in the butt wouldn’t be a case of it, but a huge number of the cases where you just didn’t
15 know who was who. You didn’t show up on the map as being there or it took a while
16 before you could get communications to go through all the various loops to come back to
17 where people could talk to one another. But I consider a very, very high incident of
18 casualties—much more than ten percent. I don’t know if it would be twenty-five percent
19 or not but a lot of friendly fire casualties.

20 RV: Gary, why don’t we go ahead and end the session for today?

21 GN: Okay.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Gary L. Noller
Conducted by Richard B. Verrone, Ph.D.
February 9, 2006
Transcribed by Mindy Moser

1 Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone. I am continuing my oral history
2 interview with Mr. Gary Noller. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas Tech
3 University and Gary is in Saginaw, Texas. Today is February 9th, 2006 and it's about
4 1:18pm, Central Standard Time. Gary, when we left off in our last session we were
5 talking about some larger issues about the war, and I wanted to get your reflections on
6 some more of those. And one thing that a lot of veterans comment upon and discuss as
7 being very relevant to their experience is the difference between the daytime and the
8 nighttime and how they felt in the daytime and how they felt in the nighttime and how
9 they operated in both of those environments. Could you comment on that?

10 Gary Noller: Well, we did operate both daytime and nighttime when we were in
11 the field. Typically most of it was in the daytime, I'd say eighty percent of the time we
12 moved during the daytime and then set up in night defensive positions. The few times
13 that we did move at night, if you're lost during the daytime, you're even more lost during
14 night. You can't really cover very much ground. The only way you can move at night is
15 if you have full moonlight to give you some sort of way to see the route that you're
16 going, the man in front of you, which way he goes. But the main difference that I know
17 is that we never had contact at night. So I want to say we got to where we wouldn't
18 expect contact at night. All of the contact that I experienced was always daytime and
19 typically there would be a situation where the enemy would either set up an ambush, they
20 would know where you were at, they knew which way you were going, so they would set
21 up and wait for you to come into a close enough range and they might fire anything off

1 from twenty rounds to two thousand rounds, who knows? The other way we contacted
2 the enemy was kind of what I'll call a surprise chance meeting where we're traveling in
3 one direction, they're traveling some other direction and we intersect each other and
4 whoever sees who first has got the advantage. And that typically would last a very short
5 time. At nighttime when we set up our defensive positions we had basically the CP—the
6 Command Platoon—was in the middle of the circle and then we might have ten to fifteen
7 individual fighting positions set up around what they call a laager position and then each
8 fighting position might have two, three, or four people assigned to it and then you pull a
9 tour guard duty during the night. There were times where people thought they saw
10 something or thought they heard somebody out there but we were never attacked in the
11 field, off the firebase, at night. The only time we ever had problems at night was when
12 we had some of our own friendly incoming artillery fire close to where we were at. My
13 feelings—I kind of divided the day up into the daylight and the nighttime and when I'd
14 get up in the morning, I'd kind of go, "Oh gee, I'm glad it's daylight. All I have to do is
15 make it until dark and if I can make it until dark then everything's okay." Well, I
16 essentially said the same thing at night and it would be night and I'd say, "Oh, okay,
17 good. It's nighttime. All I have to do now is get through the night and it will be daylight
18 and everything will be okay." So I guess I want to say that I could see advantages and
19 disadvantages of being in the daylight and being night. I think everybody feared any type
20 of fighting at night because you couldn't see. Like I said, it was already difficult to be
21 able to see very far in the jungle to begin with. The nighttime only increased that. Who
22 was friendly, who was an enemy, where were they at, where are they coming from? But I
23 think, my experience being that we never did have any firefights or any kind of attacks at
24 night, nighttime was a relatively peaceful, uneventful, you pulled your one or two or
25 three-hour guard duty and that was about it.

26 RV: When you talk about setting up that nighttime position, where were you?
27 What would you do and what were your duties as RTO and having to stand near and I
28 guess be near the commanders?

29 GN: The way we set up is that the Command Platoon always traveled with one of
30 the line platoons so we're with the whole company. Sometimes we'd go out and we'd be
31 the entire company, which would be 1st Platoon, 2nd Platoon, and 3rd Platoon and

1 Command Platoon. And that type of arrangement, the Command Platoon walked in the
2 middle of the file. We generally always went single file through the jungle and we would
3 be—maybe you'd have 1st Platoon, 2nd Platoon, Command Platoon, and 3rd Platoon in
4 that order. And only if something happened up in the front where they wanted the
5 Company Commander to go to would we go to the front. That would be on occasion or if
6 the Company Commander was unsure of where people were headed or what the
7 circumstances were ahead and he wanted to take a firsthand look at it, then we would
8 move to the front. At nighttime or any time we went into a defensive position, as I said,
9 we'd go into a circle, set up different fighting locations, and then in the center of that
10 would be the Company Command Platoon as well as the command element from that
11 platoon, such as the Platoon Leader, would be nearby. Inside that Command Platoon, we
12 had the Company Commander, all the Company Commander's RTOs. Most of the time
13 we had what we called a Field 1st Sergeant, who may have been an E7 or E8. We had
14 Artillery Forward Observer who would be a Lieutenant, his RTO, and then the Company
15 Chief Medic would be there. RTOs were three or four people. So would station
16 ourselves in the center of that circle and potentially—we were fairly compact. To put a
17 whole company in a night defensive position, you might be inside a circle that's a
18 hundred foot in diameter, so we would be sitting in the center of that. And what we
19 would do—the RTOs—we would get all the location information and then we would
20 send location information in to the Battalion Tactical Operations Center. If we had a re-
21 supply the next day then we would gather up from each of the platoons what it was that
22 they wanted on their re-supply—how much water; how much c-rations; how many hand
23 grenades; how many rounds of M-60 ammo; how many rounds of M-16 ammo; how
24 many shirts, pants, boots, compasses, whatever. And so we would transmit that
25 information to the Battalion Tactical Operations Center. And if there were any other
26 chores to clean up any of the activity that we did that day that we needed to report on—
27 typically we reported on activity as it happened but there could be some more detailed
28 reports going in if we found something or we encountered something, kind of an
29 intelligence debriefing type. And it could be—typically we could go into a night position
30 right at dark, within the last fifteen minutes between having total darkness and still some
31 light—you know, dusk. And so we were doing most all of this in the dark and it could

1 take an hour or two for the RTOs to do the administrative chores of the company in the
2 field. We were sort of like the Company Commander's secretaries. We kept all the
3 notes. Obviously there was information that had to be passed back and forth; the
4 typically military headcount, who's here, who left today, who came in today, all sorts of
5 administrative tasks and all of those duties fell to the RTO to take care of.

6 RV: What do you mean you all would take care of the paperwork and all that?
7 What exactly was coming down from him?

8 GN: Well, one of the things that had to be done every day was a personnel report.
9 If the company had a hundred and twenty-five people then you had to account for all
10 hundred and twenty-five people. And one of the things that we'd have to do would be to
11 tell them of the hundred and twenty-five people, how many are actually out there with us
12 in the field? Because we might only have a hundred people and that might be because
13 some people were sent in because of sick leave, some people may be going on R&R
14 (Rest and Relaxation), some people may have gotten wounded that day, some people may
15 have had some type of emergency leave. Then you have new people coming in to your
16 company and that's their first day with you. They showed up, people coming back from
17 R&R, people coming back from—maybe they had to go get a tooth filled back at the
18 dental office in Chu Lai. So you had comings and goings, people coming and going and
19 every day it was a requirement to know who all came and who all went so that if you had
20 a hundred and twenty-five people assigned to you, the whereabouts of a hundred and
21 twenty-five people were known let's say at 9 pm that night. Where are these hundred and
22 twenty-five people? And again, we might have only had a hundred but we had to know
23 in some way, shape or form where these other people were. We'd communicate back and
24 forth to the Battalion TOC on changes and stuff like that and then most of the official
25 records then would be kept back in the rear area in the company orderly room with the
26 company clerk. He would be the one that would be posting this information in the
27 official record, but we had to correspond with him through the Battalion TOC and let him
28 know at least, "Who are the people that came in today, who are the people that left today,
29 who are the people that are here today?"

30 RV: How difficult was it to keep up with all those soldiers out in the field?

1 GN: Well, I guess the good thing about it is the hierarchical system. Everybody's
2 responsible to somebody, so you'd have an individual soldier out there and he'd report to
3 a Squad Leader. So the Squad Leader had to take care of say, five people. Well, then the
4 Squad Leader, there's three or four of them and they report to the Platoon Leaders. So
5 the Platoon Leader might be taking care of twenty or twenty-five people. And then he
6 reports everything to the Company Commander and the Company Commander may now
7 have a hundred people. So by going up through that chain, each person hands off to the
8 next person above them their report. So you consolidate. That's a lot of what we would
9 do. We'd take each report that we got from the three platoons and we'd consolidate that
10 into one company report. And then we would send that on to the battalion who would
11 then send that on back, for example, to our company rear area. It wasn't difficult work.
12 It did require attention to detail and it did take time. Like I said, it might take an hour or
13 two at night to do all of those things that had to be done and I can remember in particular,
14 probably two of us would do it and be huddled underneath a poncho with a flashlight
15 because we had to write this stuff down on little notepads. We all carried little pocket
16 notepads and so we'd write all of this stuff down. When we got everything all written
17 down that we needed to send then we'd get on the radio and we'd call the battalion radio
18 operator and we'd say, "We've got our report," and then we'd just read this thing. Some
19 of it had to be coded information. You don't want to say out loud that, "We've got
20 eighty-three people here," because if the enemy's listening to that he just got a piece of
21 intelligence. So we'd have to code up that number, eighty-three, and then we typically
22 used some improvised language jargon what not to where the fellow taking this report, he
23 could break down the code and say, "Okay, this is eighty-three and this is eighty-three
24 people that they've really got out there with them."

25 RV: Right. It sounds like it was a pretty good system that worked. When you all
26 would get into any kind of contact or any action, how much would that complicate things
27 that evening when you had to make this accountability again?

28 GN: Well, I think there always was urgency at getting things done. And one of
29 the things I remember, for example, if you got anybody injured and you had a casualty in
30 the field and you needed to call a dust-off, I want to remember that we had to tell right
31 away or fairly soon, we had to tell the battalion what the person's name was. They want

1 to start tracking very quickly who this is. It's not enough to say, "We've got a guy out
2 here that's an urgent dust-off," or, "We've got a guy out here who's an urgent dust-off
3 and this is the person's name." And I can remember some techniques that were used for
4 that. One of them was we did get back from our company clerk a roster and this roster
5 would have a hundred and twenty names on it. So one of the ways we could identify
6 somebody was to say, "They're line number 18." So all you had to do is go down to
7 number 18 so we didn't say that person's name. We said that person's number so the
8 people on the other end could go down that list and see number 18 and they know who
9 you're talking about. And I think some of that's because they want to know. "You have
10 a casualty. Is he your Company Commander? Is it a Platoon Leader? Is it a Medic?
11 Who is it?" Because there are some people out there that if they ended up being a
12 casualty could have large consequences for the conduct of your mission out there. I also
13 remember at times where you could actually code a person's name. So I could take the
14 name Richard and put that in a code and send that out as code. I don't think that ever
15 slowed us down but one of the things that we had to do anytime we were in a combat
16 situation is we had to make a report of what they called a combat loss. And a combat loss
17 was simply a listing of all of the equipment that you had that was destroyed during this
18 battle. So if you had like rifles come up, a rifle could get destroyed. It could get blowed
19 up. The M-16 had a lot of plastic on it. If it got hit with another rifle round you could
20 break the plastic hand guards on an M-16 rifle, therefore this rifle would now be
21 considered lost. So we'd have to send in a list saying, "Well, we had two rifles that our
22 damaged; one rifle is lost; a radio is damaged; a pistol is lost." So we'd have to tell them
23 those items of our gear that were damaged or lost. We didn't report things like shirts and
24 boots and pants and steel pots and rucksacks and things like that but the weapons in
25 particular, and items like a compass, a radio, any type of weapon, we'd have to send in a
26 report on their loss.

27 RV: How accurate were you all? Did you make that effort every day to get it
28 exactly right or did sometimes did you just fill in the blank?

29 GN: Well, I think that if anything, it was over stated. Because any time you were
30 in combat, it was like, "Well, we lost two rifles but let's say we lost three," because then
31 that gives you an extra rifle in the system because they'll say, "Okay, we'll replace the

1 two.” And then down the line, let’s say somehow a rifle just ends up being lost and you
2 don’t know how it got lost but you’ve already got an extra rifle in the system because you
3 claimed to have had three rifles lost the last time you were in combat. Well, you just take
4 that one. So if there was any fudging going on, it was always in the line of, “Well, let’s
5 use this opportunity to get an extra compass in our inventory or let’s take this opportunity
6 to get an extra 45-caliber pistol.” So it was kind of an overstating of the amount of loss.
7 So then that ended up, like I said, with probably an unauthorized or unaccounted for or
8 extra items that they may never come to the field. They may be sitting back in your
9 supply room back in the rear area, but that’s the only thing that I saw that was, let’s say,
10 subverting the system. We took it serious, at least I did. We’re going to make a report
11 back on personnel in the field or equipment in the field. We took it pretty serious. We
12 wanted to do that and do it accurately.

13 RV: Okay. How much tension did you witness between enlisted and officers?
14 You were right there in a very unique position to observe this?

15 GN: Well, it did happen from time to time but my belief is that it was very
16 minimal. And I may be biased. In fact, I’ll just say, I’m a biased person. I worked very
17 closely with Company Commanders because I carried their radio. I was either one
18 person in front of them or one person behind them. So I would like to say I got to know
19 them fairly well. I mean, there’s only one Captain out there so the Captain has no peers.
20 There may be three Lieutenants out there so the Lieutenants have a peer group that they
21 can rely on and you’ve got four or five E6s and seven or eight E5s and a bunch of PFCs
22 so everybody kind of had a peer group. But the Company Commander has no peer group
23 in the field. He is, in fact, the top guy out there. Well, the closest person or people he
24 could associate with were the Lieutenants that were the Platoon Leaders or with the other
25 people that were closest to him physically, which would be the other people in the
26 Command Platoon, and that would be the RTOs and the Command Medic and the
27 Command Platoon Medic and what not. And I’m very satisfied and very happy with the
28 level of leadership that in general was provided. The first person that was my Company
29 Commander was Lieutenant Powell. He was actually filling in. After the previous
30 Company Commander left to go home, Lieutenant Powell took the company for; I want
31 to say, a few weeks. It may have been a month. But Lieutenant Powell was a person that

1 I would have done anything in the world he asked me to do or told me to do or ordered
2 me to do. He could have—anything in the world that man would have said, I would have
3 done it. And I've told him that since. I said, "I'd do whatever you would have told me. I
4 had faith and confidence in you." And he asked me why. Well, I don't know that I can
5 explain that. I don't know why I knew that, I don't know why I felt that, but that's the
6 way I felt. I had full faith and confidence. He was a no-nonsense man, he appeared to
7 me to be very competent, he knew and understood what he was doing. There was a
8 couple of times—he had a very dry sense of humor and there were times where I was
9 trying to figure out, "Are you joking or are you serious?" Like, he's the fellow that said,
10 "If that Air Force spotter plane shoots any more rockets at us, tell the guys to shoot the
11 plane down." I'm going, "Lieutenant Powell, do you really want us to shoot at our own
12 airplane?" And he said, "Yes." I've asked him since about that. I said, "You were
13 kidding about that, right?" And he goes, "No." But I think that he had been in country a
14 few months. I think he came in, in November and went home in November and I came
15 in, in about June so he'd been there in the field for a considerable length of time and had
16 a lot of experience. You learn that very quickly, who seems to know what's going on and
17 who's stumbling around. And I just sensed that he really knew what he was doing and
18 was good at doing what he was supposed to do, so I would do whatever it was that he
19 would require of me. And during the time that I was an RTO in the company CP, we
20 went through probably about five Company Commanders and some of them were—three
21 of those would have been Captains and two of those at least were Lieutenants. And a lot
22 of times the Lieutenants would take over if a Captain was processing out of country or
23 maybe the Captain went on R&R. But of all of the people that I served under, there was
24 only one Captain that I really didn't care for and he came in right at the end of his tour.
25 He'd been in Vietnam for ten months, at least and had about five or six weeks left before
26 he was going home and he gets a company. And quite typically there are infantry
27 officers that go to Vietnam and they do a lot of stuff but they don't command an infantry
28 company, but they want to command an infantry company because that goes on their
29 record and it's used for purposes of promotion. So you could have a person that came out
30 and basically, it's hard to tell what frame of mind they were in. They may have been in
31 Vietnam a long time but they've got no field experience. But they want to get field

1 experience, they want to be a Company Commander and they could do a pretty good job
2 or maybe they were what I call just out of touch. And we had one Company Commander
3 that came in for like five or six weeks and a lot of people didn't like him. And there were
4 some very unpopular decisions that he made different from what previous Company
5 Commanders had done. He was able to go home in one piece and most of us went home
6 in one piece, too. And I don't want to say he was incompetent but most people thought
7 he was uncaring. You can hear that a lot. In fact, you probably can go to military
8 leadership classes where they say, "What's the most important thing?" You can get
9 soldiers to do about any damn thing in the world you want them to do but they've got to
10 know you care about them. Well, how do you show that? How do you exhibit that? And
11 again, that's one of those things that's kind of subjective and hard to pin down. But the
12 general feeling about him was, "He don't care about us. He's a ticket puncher. All he
13 cares about is getting his six weeks in and getting the heck out of here." And that kind of
14 attitude can be a very dangerous attitude to have. "All he's doing is he's looking out for
15 himself, he's trying to get his time in and get out of here and he's not really prepared. He
16 didn't prepare himself like he could have and should have for this position and he
17 potentially is not seeking and taking the advice of some of the more experienced people
18 in the company such as his Platoon Leaders and Platoon Sergeants," and it could be very
19 dangerous for people.

20 RV: What did you all do in a situation like that? Did you have to bite your tongue
21 and deal with it?

22 GN: Well, there were some flare-ups with this individual Company Commander.
23 One of them, we were walking—setting a trail. When you're out in the jungle, there's
24 existing trails or you can say, "We're not going to take this existing trail. We're going to
25 create a new trail." So you just take off up the hill or down the hill and you cut a new
26 trail. And there were a lot of reluctance from people to go down on the existing trail
27 because the enemy might have that booby-trapped. They might have an ambush set up
28 on it. So if we have to go from point A to point B, we can walk the trail or we can make
29 our own trail. One day we were cutting our own trail when we came up on an existing
30 trail and the Company Commander said, "Well, I want to take this trail." Well, we were
31 kind of crossing it so I called up to the front, to the Platoon Leader who was on point and

1 I said basically, “The Company Commander wants you guys to come back and we’re
2 going to follow this trail.” Well, you get static. “No, we don’t want to do that. That’s
3 too dangerous.” Well, yeah, okay. So I tell the Company Commander, “The guys up in
4 front don’t want to do that. That’s too dangerous.” “Well, you tell them to come back
5 here. We’ll talk about it.” Well, the point man and maybe his backup and I don’t know,
6 the Platoon Sergeant—it seemed like four or five people came back to where the
7 Company Commander’s at and where I’m at and there’s this discussion going on about
8 walking this trail or cutting a new trail. And the point man, who was a very tall fellow,
9 was standing there with a machete in his hand because he’s cutting the trail with a
10 machete. And he’s basically telling the Company Commander, “We ain’t doing that,”
11 and the Company Commander is basically saying, “Oh, yes you are.” And about that
12 time, I’m starting to take steps backward because I’m kind of going, “I don’t know who’s
13 going to win this but I know one guy’s got a big knife in his hand. And I know he’s
14 agitated and he’s angry. And I don’t want to say anything, whatever happens.” But at
15 that exact time on that trail, that established trail, two children appeared. They walked
16 out of the overgrowth there and walking out to where we were at. And immediately of
17 course, all our attention goes, “Hey, we’re not out here by ourselves. And if there’s kids
18 out here there’s adults out here.”

19 RV: And you didn’t even hear them?

20 GN: Did we hear them?

21 RV: Yes.

22 GN: The kids?

23 RV: The kids coming out.

24 GN: No, we saw them. They walked out on the trail to us. They met us. They
25 walked up to us.

26 RV: But you didn’t hear them coming out until you saw them on the trail?

27 GN: No, no, no. We had no indication they were coming up. Yeah, it could have
28 been somebody with a rifle because all of our attention was pretty much focused on this
29 discussion here, “Are we going to the new jungle trail or are we going to go on the
30 existing?” Well, as it happened, one of the guys laid his rifle down on the ground and
31 motioned to the kids to come to him and they did. They came over to him and I’d say it

1 was a boy and girl and the girl was maybe seven or eight and the boy was five or six.
2 Well, they don't speak English, we don't speak Vietnamese but at least there was a
3 gesture from the part of the US, the American soldier of friendship so the kids came over.
4 And they kept kind of pointing down the trail, pointing to down the trail. We didn't
5 know why they were pointing down the trail but they're pointing down the trail. Well, at
6 that point, the decision is made to go down that trail where the kids are pointing to, which
7 is where the Captain wanted to go. So the Captain got his way, but the Captain didn't get
8 his way because the point man was really satisfied with the Captain's decision to walk
9 that trail. The Captain got his way because everybody wanted to see where did these kids
10 come from and where were they pointing to? So we did go down that trail and as the
11 point went down that trail they then found a group of Vietnamese civilians. Women, old
12 men, old women, children. No military aged males. We rounded those people up. There
13 may have been ten or twelve people all together and evacuated them out of that location
14 because that's a free fire zone. Where we were at was free fire zone and not a good place
15 for noncombatants to be in a free fire zone, for a lot of different reasons. One of them for
16 the fact that if somebody would have seen a movement out in the bush and somebody
17 was taking off over the hill, our rules of engagement said you could engage fleeing
18 military aged male and maybe it's a male and maybe it isn't male. I just see somebody
19 taking off running so somebody starts shooting. Or out there, it's open for harassment
20 interdiction fire from artillery or whatever. So anytime we encountered what we called
21 civilians out there, we always rounded them up and they were sent back to some
22 resettlement, relocation area more towards the coast. So that kind of ended that whole
23 deal. And I don't remember anything being said about that. I don't remember the
24 Captain saying, "Okay, now we've got to go back and resolve this discussion we were
25 having," and I don't remember much from anybody else. But a day or two after that, one
26 of the people I knew real well, I had trained with in Fort Knox and went to Vietnam with
27 came to me and said, "This guy's dangerous. If he screws up and he gets anybody hurt
28 because he screws up, we're going to take care of him."

29 RV: You're talking about the new Captain?

30 GN: Do what?

31 RV: You're talking about the new Captain?

1 GN: Yes.

2 RV: That was actually going to be my next question, this fragging notion, and you
3 just brought that up.

4 GN: Yeah.

5 RV: Was this openly discussed?

6 GN: I took that serious. Anytime anybody was to the point of making a threat
7 against somebody, another American, I always took that serious. And the reason I took
8 that serious is because it's so easy to carry out. Everybody's walking around with a
9 personal weapon and several hand grenades and maybe a hundred rounds of ammunition.
10 There's a lot of anger, there's a lot of frustration, you've got people whose mental state is
11 on the edge, and logic doesn't necessarily prevail here. A lot of emotion prevails. So a
12 guy comes up and says, "That guy screws up and he gets somebody here hurt, we're
13 going to come back we're going to take care of him. We just want to let you know."
14 And I'm sitting here and I'm going, "Well, I hope this guy don't screw up." That would
15 put me in a position because now I know about it. Now what would I do if they'd come
16 back to get him? Would I step in front of him and take a bullet for him? Well, I'll tell
17 you right now I wouldn't do that. That might be the noble thing to do but I don't think
18 I'd do that. Not for this man. Some other man I probably would but not him. So I guess
19 I want to say, "Yeah, I agree. This guy here is a danger." But we never had, in our
20 company, occurrences of intentional murder. We did have a person, I think an E7, a
21 Sergeant 1st Class, in one of our sister companies, I think E Company, that was killed on
22 Mary Ann Firebase in a fragging. Which, you hear about this—and I don't know how
23 many people were killed that way. You could probably go find out how many people
24 were killed that way. I don't know. But in this particular case, almost everybody liked
25 the guy that got killed. In the case where I'm talking about the Company Commander,
26 I'd say, "Yeah, almost everybody disliked him," but he got out okay and nobody ever did
27 anything to him. There was nothing that ever happened that brought about enough of an
28 emotional response that anybody came to him to try to finish him off. But the soldier that
29 did get killed was very well like and in fact, the word went out immediately, "We want to
30 know who did this because we're going to take care of the guy that did this." My
31 understanding is that there was always a suspicion on whoever was that did it but there

1 was never any type of proof. I don't even think there was any criminal action or charges
2 that were ever brought in that case but I think there were people who were suspicious.
3 That Sergeant had a run-in with one guy and that night or two or three nights later, the
4 guy rolls a grenade under his bunk and kills him. So yeah, it did happen.

5 RV: What does that do to morale?

6 GN: Well, I don't think it makes anybody feel any better. It didn't make me feel
7 any better. I personally didn't know the one individual who was killed but I guess to me,
8 it's just one more element of all of the bad things that go on in war. War is not a good
9 situation to begin with. A lot of people get hurt and injured in war and sometimes people
10 get murdered. Forces kill their own people and that's not only true in Vietnam, it's true
11 in probably all conflicts. Like I say, there's just a lot of opportunities. You've got
12 everybody walking around that are armed and at times not in a very good frame of mind.
13 And you say, "Oh gee, that's pretty bad, somebody getting murdered in Vietnam, an
14 American killing an American in Vietnam." Well, is that any worse than an American
15 killing an American in Los Angeles?

16 RV: It's probably more likely in a war zone, where everybody is armed and on
17 edge.

18 GN: Yeah. So I think there's certainly a lot of attention paid to fragging, which
19 I'll just say is a term for murder. If you're in the uniformed services in a combat zone;
20 I'll say, "Okay, let's put these same two guys in civilian clothes in some American city or
21 even Lubbock, Texas, and have them get real aggravated at one another and have them
22 both with loaded pistols." Well, they're aggravated at one another and if one guy shoots
23 the other guy, I would say, "Well, that's the way some people will settle differences."
24 The military does not screen that out of the people that they take in and they don't train
25 that out. The military is—I don't know if they're any better or any worse than any other
26 organization on screening out people who might have that bent. But to me, it's like, "Did
27 it happen?" Yeah. I kind of look at that and say, "Well, do people kill one another
28 anyway?" Well, yes they do. We know they do. So in that's context, it's tough to have
29 to deal with it up front and I guess I want to say you hate to see anybody murdered, even
30 if you don't like them. I'd never condone it. I'd never say it was the right thing to do.
31 It's not the right thing to do, but is it a surprise that it happens? No, I'm not surprised

1 that it happens. And in fact, I might say I'm surprised it doesn't happen more because of
2 the nature of everybody being armed and everybody being on sometimes very short
3 emotional strings.

4 RV: Gary, what about conflicts or tension between yourselves, the people who are
5 in the field, and then when you would be back in the rear? And I know you weren't back
6 at the base camp, per se, but when you actually went back to the real rear, the rear rear
7 echelon, as some veterans call it. What about interactions there?

8 GN: Well, I think what you would typically see, and I'll make the statement is
9 that I don't like to go to the rear area. And most people that spend a lot of time in the
10 field found it difficult. One of the things that happens when you go back to the rear area
11 is they take your weapons away from you. So now you're counting on somebody else to
12 protect you. If you're out in the field you've got your personal weapon with you. If
13 you're on the firebase, you've got your weapon with you. You go back to the rear area
14 and they say, "Turn your weapons in. You can't have them back here." So I think that
15 that's probably one of those things where you go, "Okay," because you keep yourself so
16 in tune to defending yourself at any moment and now it's like, "The tool that I'm going to
17 use to defend myself, I can't have." So I think that was an issue. I think the other thing
18 that in the rear areas there were certain things that you had to deal with that you didn't
19 deal with in the field. And there were, for example, more racial tensions in the rear area
20 than you'd find in the field. In the field, typically when we got out in the bush as a
21 company, that all went away. I mean, you're here and you've all got red blood and
22 everybody's got to take care of everybody else. Only when you got back into more
23 secure areas did you then see people grouping up together in different groups. And it
24 could be by color; it could be by, "What do you like to do in your off time?" It could be
25 people that wanted to go to drugs. They got together. People who wanted to go drink
26 whiskey, they all got together. People that wanted to go to church, they all got together.
27 So it just seemed like in the rear area, there was a kind of a segregation where people
28 would go more back into some more smaller group that they felt comfortable with and
29 then maybe there could be tension between those groups now. Also, anybody who was a
30 risk in the field, anybody who really couldn't make it in the field, they were always given
31 jobs in the rear anyway. So now you're going to go back with probably those people who

1 have to be there but they are not productive. They're not contributing to any good, really,
2 and there were guys I knew that back in the rear area would be robbed. It was like,
3 "Don't go down to the beach at night alone." If you go down to the beach at night alone,
4 you've got to worry if the enemy's out there. Which, you ought not to worry if there's a
5 gang of guys out there that are just going to roll you.

6 RV: Americans or Vietnamese?

7 GN: Do what?

8 RV: Americans or Vietnamese?

9 GN: Americans that would take your wallet, take your money. If you went down
10 to the beach and had a portable radio and was listening to your radio or you had a camera,
11 they might take that. But I knew one guy that got—he used the term rolled so I'll use it.
12 He got rolled, basically robbed, while walking down the beach one night and he said
13 Americans did it. So again, that's a criminal element that, "Well, do people get robbed in
14 the United States?" If we were in Fort Worth, Texas, does anybody ever get robbed in
15 Fort Worth, Texas? Yeah. Well then, you don't take that element out. So you got some
16 people who see a fast way to come up with a little bit of cash or a camera or a radio and
17 they're just going to take it away. If five or six guys gang up on one guy, they take it
18 away and what are you going to do about it? It's at night and you probably really can't
19 see people. You can't recognize what's going on. So there was racial tension, there was
20 a fair amount of the lifer stuff that you'd have to go to in the rear area that in the field,
21 you might go three weeks and not have a change of clothes but if you were in the rear
22 area and you didn't have all the buttons buttoned on your shirt like you were supposed to,
23 they'd come to you and say, "Button those buttons." So there was a certain hassle, what
24 people might call the lifer mentality. There was more drug usage in the rear area, you
25 had more people running around—pot heads or people on heroin. Probably the crime, as
26 I described it, I don't think in the field there was anybody who got rolled for their
27 possessions. I had the one situation where the guy got a hold of my monsoon sweater but
28 we worked that out. Basically, I took it back.

29 RV: How did you get it back?

1 GN: I just told him it was mine and he didn't deny it. I think he knew that he was
2 probably on pretty thin ice with most everybody anyway. He didn't want to have no
3 problems.

4 RV: Right.

5 GN: But I went back to the rear area only for—like we had stand downs which
6 were two or three days and you go back and get clean clothes and eat good food and go to
7 the doctor and get your haircut and watch a movie and drink beer. I went back one time
8 because I did have to have some dental work done and then I went back when I went on
9 R&Rs. And I went back for promotion board. But typically it was like I'd say, "Go back
10 there, do what you got to do and get the heck back out to the firebase or back out to the
11 field. I just don't like it back there in that rear area."

12 RV: What kind of dental work did you have done, Gary?

13 GN: Well, I had a real bad tooth that had to be filled. In fact, it was bad enough
14 to where the dentist said something about pulling it and I said, "I don't think I want my
15 tooth pulled." And he said, "Well, it's going to take a pretty big filling." So he filled it.
16 And I think I went back one day and then went to the dentist the next day and probably
17 went back out in the field. That may have been three days and two nights. I remember
18 what the dentist told me. When I first went in there he made some remark about me
19 coming in just to get out of the field, which I really took offense to, because I didn't come
20 in faking a toothache and he said that to me before he even examined me. And then
21 when he examined me he said, "Well, this tooth's pretty bad. I think I'm going to have to
22 pull it." So if I'd see that guy walking down the street today and knew who he was, I'd
23 probably go over to him and say, "Oh, you're the S.O.B. that thought I was coming in to
24 get dental work done because I just want a couple of easy days from the field." We used
25 the term sham. I don't know if you've heard that term before or not.

26 RV: Yes, I have.

27 GN: S-h-a-m. "What are you in here shamming about?" We used that all the
28 time. Somebody who was not pulling the load, that term was shamming. "What's your
29 sham today?" And I'm kind of going, "Well, I've got a pretty bad tooth here. I'm not
30 coming in here..." In fact, I probably let it go way too long. And I understand that it
31 could just be that fellow that day or that fellow all the time and I got my tooth fixed.

1 When I got out of the service, one of the things I did was go to a dentist and have the
2 dentist take care of my teeth and let the VA pay for it because the VA would take care of
3 your dental care I think for up to one year after you got out of the service. The dentist
4 looked at that tooth and said, "Who took care of that tooth for you?" And I said, "Well, I
5 think it was an Air Force dentist did in Chu Lai." And he goes, "Well, okay." I said,
6 "What's that mean?" He said, "Well, he didn't do a very good job." I thought, "Yeah, it
7 doesn't surprise me that he didn't do a very good job."

8 RV: Gary, you mentioned race relations back in the rear. I wanted to explore that
9 a little bit. Tell me what you saw. You did say that it was not out in the field. Talk to
10 me about the differences and why it was not out in the field and then what you witnessed
11 behind the lines?

12 GN: Well, I think that at this time we're talking '70, '71, so there was a great
13 upheaval in the United States all over the country and in the late sixties civil rights and
14 rioting and burning of cities and this fascination started in '63 with John Kennedy and
15 Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King. And the whole atmosphere of race relations in
16 the United States, again, that cannot be taken out of the military. The military doesn't
17 have a way of going in there and saying, "You've got a bad attitude about race relations
18 so we just won't take you," or "We'll take you but we're going to convert you. We're
19 going hem you up with a very healthy attitude on race relations." So if you had that
20 problem in society then that problem also came into the military. And one of the things
21 that happened I think particularly in Vietnam at this late period of time were a lot of
22 black soldiers who were basically saying, "This is a white man's war and we're not going
23 to participate in it." So there was a certain number of refusals for some black soldiers to
24 take combat roles. In other words, they could say, "Well, I'm not going to go to the
25 field." And they were very tight with one another. They had; for example, in our rear
26 area we had barracks buildings which were wooden structures, one story wooden
27 structures that may be twenty people. You'd have five bunks in two rows and they're
28 double bunks so you'd have twenty people in the barracks. Well, we had certain barracks
29 in our rear area that were known to be black barracks and let's just say militant black.
30 Because not all blacks were militant, not all blacks were of the same mind that it's a
31 white man's war. So you typically had a division within the blacks as to those who are

1 let's say going along with the white man's war and the blacks that are saying, "No, we're
2 not going to go along with the white man's war." And a lot of times the black who were
3 resisting, they all ended up in the rear area together and that's where they stayed.
4 Because if they would go to the field and they'd bring that attitude to the field, that
5 attitude would probably not allow them to survive very long. So the blacks that went to
6 the field, they didn't have these issues. They would not use these issues or bring these
7 issues up. That's why I said in the field, you didn't have the racial tension because that
8 somehow got filtered out so that the blacks that were in the field; they just didn't carry
9 this with them. Now sometimes it was difficult for them when they would go back to the
10 rear area. It was probably very difficult for them because they had to deal with whatever
11 it is that whites thought about blacks but they also had to deal with whatever the other
12 blacks thought about them. But I remember talking to one fellow that I don't think he
13 was in my company but he was in a battalion and he told me that there was an intense
14 effort, some of the black soldiers in the battalion were trying to convince him that he
15 needed to quit doing what it was that the Army wanted him to do, that he needed to resist
16 that. He needed to go against that because the war was wrong, the war was being
17 operated to try to put blacks on the front lines to get blacks killed or whatever. And he
18 just flat told me, he said, "I'm not with them. I'm not like them. I'm doing what I want
19 to do and I don't want to do what it is that they're doing. And I told them that." Well
20 immediately then he can count on those people on the list of folks he doesn't associate
21 with no more and they ain't gonna associate with him. So there was segregation that
22 went on. It was certainly not the military requirement but it was an end result of the
23 division within the total group of black soldiers into those that are going to go along with
24 the system and those that aren't going to go along with the system. And it's one of those
25 things that we all knew, we understood, we recognized it. We may have even said,
26 "Yeah, I understand that they're trying to win equal status within the American society."
27 I can't say I would sit back here and have got a whole lot of feeling one way or the other
28 about it. My main issue—and I'll keep coming back to it—my main issue was to go over
29 there and get my time done and go home. So if these guys had issues with the military,
30 that's their issues. If they don't want to go to the field, fine. Don't go to the field. If
31 you're going to come to the field and cause problems, it's better that you don't come to

1 the field. We don't want to have those problems out in the field. So what little time I
2 spent back in the rear area, you just kind of learn, "Okay, they're over here in this
3 barracks and they're in this barracks," so you don't go there. "They've got those two
4 barracks. They're dedicated barracks to those soldiers so you don't go there." The only
5 thing that really kind of aggravated people at times is they did have a real strong buddy
6 system so you might have four or five black guys in line going to the Mess Hall to eat
7 lunch that day and a string of white guys behind them and four or five more black guys
8 come up to go to lunch. Well, you know what's going to happen. They're going to go up
9 to the group of black guys that's already in line and they're going to get in with them. So
10 you'd have a lot of grumbling about that. The reverse wouldn't happen. You would
11 never have a group of white guys that would go up to another group of white guys and
12 cut in with a bunch of black guys back in the back. But I think that again, there was
13 probably a certain amount of...I guess I would use the word leniency from the standpoint
14 of leadership, that they knew this was a problem. This is a problem in society. This is a
15 social problem that we've got going on. Yeah, it comes into the military. Can we really
16 resolve it? So a lot of times you'd kind of have a natural falling out of how things
17 worked and it kind of took on a life of its own and ran itself.

18 RV: When you said that you all realized these tensions and you saw it, were you
19 speaking of all of you in your unit or just the white guys?

20 GN: Well, I think that again, at this late date of '70 and '71, we knew about the
21 racial strife that had gone on and was going on in the United States. And so this was just
22 kind of a furtherance of that. I didn't really see it in training, though, to be right honest,
23 but it was something about being in Vietnam, I think, that there was at that time probably
24 a lot of rebellion period, even from soldiers in the way you wear the uniform. There was
25 a lot of variation. Some guys wore steel pots; some guys wore boonie hats; some guys
26 wore beaded necklaces; some guys wore tie dyed t-shirts. I think that at that time, if you
27 take a look at it historically, it was very difficult for the military to maintain the high
28 level of discipline that they'd like to maintain. They even knew it. The state of affairs in
29 the United States military in 1969, '70, '71 probably wasn't the sharpest Army that ever
30 went to the field. Certainly as I look upon the soldiers that are in the field today, I'd say,
31 "If you want to call me ragtag, you go ahead and call me ragtag because that's probably

1 what it was compared to what's in the field today." I've seen the pictures. I'm looking.
2 There's not a soldier that I've ever seen on TV in the last two or three years in a combat
3 zone that's even close to being out of uniform. If he's supposed to have something on,
4 uniform wise, he's got it on.

5 RV: Why did that change?

6 GN: Well, I think that probably the military just didn't know how to react. They
7 were—when we went in we were probably trained pretty much the same way that they
8 trained people twenty years before us or twenty-five years before us. We were draftees,
9 most of us. Today you've got an all-volunteer army. I think the expectations are a little
10 bit different. I think the training technique is a little bit different. Today they are, for
11 example, trying to train entire units and keep those units cohesive from the days that they
12 train. They may get basic training still kind of the old fashioned way but that's very brief
13 training. You go through there with their permanent unit and then they'll stay with that
14 permanent unit and they'll continue their training with that permanent unit and they'll
15 deploy with that permanent unit and then they'll come back home with that permanent
16 unit. So that may help solidify cohesiveness in that unit and help solidify discipline in
17 that unit. So I think to a certain extent there kind of was a feeling of, in all soldiers, kind
18 of a waywardness, I guess. I don't know what the right term is. Lack of strong ideal, I
19 guess, of what military role was. I'll tell you...What did Gary Noller want? Gary Noller
20 wanted to go and come home. Well, gee, is that very idealistic? Well, no, probably not
21 but that's what I wanted.

22 RV: It's very pragmatic.

23 GN: Yeah. So if you get a lot of people that feel that way, if everybody feels that
24 way then they're more looking at it very personally rather than from some stronger
25 philosophical standpoint. I think it was very difficult. I know there were people when I
26 was there, some guys come through on their third tour and they would just shake their
27 head and say, "Man, I can't believe what's going on in the Army today. When I was over
28 here the first time, hell, everybody thought this was the best thing to do, the right thing to
29 do and we're going to win. And I come over the second time and it was a pretty tough
30 chore...starting to lose a little bit of enthusiasm. Now I come over here and nobody
31 gives a dang. Nobody cares about whether we're going to win, whether we're going to

1 beat these people, whether it's worth it." And I'll have to say, "Yeah." And that's again
2 not only within the military. To me that's simply a reflection of the American society in
3 1970 compared to the American society in 1967. A lot of change took place from the
4 beginning days of the Vietnam War, the '65, and '66 time period or in '67, to where I
5 was there which was actually the downhill side of that which was '69 and '70.

6 RV: Gary, you mentioned this rotation policy, and let's finish up with this
7 question. Did you find the one-year rotation a problem with unit cohesion as opposed to
8 the war today, the war—World War I, World War II, and Korea where you served the
9 whole conflict with this one unit? You rotated in and rotated out with the same unit.
10 What was the effect there in Vietnam of not doing that?

11 GN: Well, I think that everybody knew how long they had before they were going
12 home and you kept track of that. You could come up to about anybody at any time and
13 just say, "How many days you got left?" And they'll give you a number. So that was a
14 personal goal. "All I've got to do is two hundred and eighteen more days and I'm out of
15 here." So there was no tying to, "I'm going to go home when we win," or, "I'm going to
16 go home when we lose. I'm going to go home with two hundred and fifty-eight days
17 have passed by if I'm lucky and if I'm unlucky I'll go home sooner than that. But if I'm
18 lucky, it's so many days to get through." People came and went all the time and probably
19 the worst thing about that is you did lose experience. You had people who had been
20 through tough battles and learned from that and they tried to pass that on to other people
21 but the certain amount of that you have to experience. I don't think I could take
22 somebody and describe to them what it might be like to have somebody shoot at you for
23 half an hour. I could try to describe what that'd be like and what you might ought to do
24 but if you had that happen to you and you made it through that then you're probably
25 going to say, "Okay, I've got the picture here pretty well now of what might happen." So
26 the downside of that is you're continually losing experienced people and continually
27 getting new people in. And there was always a fear—I can even remember hearing them
28 talk about that as, "We've got too many new guys. We're too green. We've got too
29 many people here who haven't been in the thick of things yet. This is not good." It was
30 almost like some people were saying, "We need to have contact with the enemy at least
31 once every ten days, just to keep people sharp. Because if we go a month or a month and

1 a half and we don't have any serious contact with the enemy, we've lost a fourth of our
2 people in that time that were experienced in combat." So I think that certainly was
3 something that I decided. And you say, "Well, gee, would you want to stay over there for
4 six or seven or eight years?" "No." And even in World War II towards the end they
5 began rotating people home, combat people, because there's certainly enough proof out
6 there that the human being can only withstand a certain amount of the difficult life of
7 warfare before mentally you'll become incapacitated. And so in World War II they set
8 down a point system and depending upon how many days you were in the service and
9 maybe what your combat role was and how many days you were on the front line and
10 how many days you were exposed to fire and different things, they'd sit down and figure
11 out, "Okay, this guy's got enough points. We'll send him home." Well, in Vietnam they
12 just basically said, "Well, you make it through a year and we'll send you home." So even
13 if they wanted to keep people longer they probably would have had to devise some
14 system of rotation. Otherwise you wear people out. You want that experience out there,
15 true, but you can come to a point where you wear people out to where they're not any
16 good to you anymore. So you've got to replace them.

17 RV: Okay, Gary. Let's go ahead and stop for today.

18 GN: Okay.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Gary L. Noller
Conducted by Richard B. Verrone, Ph.D.
February 17, 2006
Transcribed by Mindy Moser

1 Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone. I am continuing my oral history
2 interview with Gary Noller for the Vietnam Archive's Oral History Project. Today is
3 February 17, 2006, and it is 9:05am, Central Standard Time. I am in Lubbock, Texas,
4 and Gary is in Fort Worth, Texas. Gary, let's pick up where we approximately left off in
5 our last session. You were describing some of the events out in the field and your
6 relationship with the men in your unit, your duties, some of the things that happened to
7 you. I'd like to continue with that. As you moved into the fall of 1970, were you all still
8 going on the same kind of missions? Had your mission changed any?

9 Gary Noller: Well, the missions pretty much were all the same. We either walked
10 off the firebase, which I was always on Firebase Mary Ann, in which we just loaded up
11 the company and they gave us some point out away and we walked off and spent all our
12 time on patrol, on search and clear missions, or we could combat assault off the hill,
13 which they would come with helicopters and load up in helicopters and take us out
14 somewhere and drop us off. Occasionally we might be moved from one field location to
15 another field location by helicopter and then we could either return to the firebase by
16 walking back to Mary Ann, or they might pick us up in the field on helicopters and take
17 us back there that way. The missions were all very typical. The only thing I can
18 particularly remember is they were called search and clear missions in which you'd just
19 be given a specific area to go out and to patrol in and see if you could find the enemy,
20 find any type of equipment, ammunition, armament, base camp areas. There were, once
21 or twice, where we were put into a position where it was kind of a blocking position in

1 which they would have us set up at a particular point and maybe some other unit was
2 moving towards us with the idea that they would move the enemy to where we were at.
3 There was never a situation that we had while I was in where they had a huge enemy
4 contact going on and they picked us up and took us into—let's say join with some unit
5 cell already in contact. Most everything we did is what I kind of call hunting. We were
6 out there hunting them. They were probably trying to avoid us and it was a situation of
7 finding them or them finding us.

8 RV: You mentioned that some of the forces, some of the American forces would
9 try to kind of almost wrangle them into you all, to move them toward you all. Did that
10 happen often?

11 GN: Well, we may have been, two or three different times, where we were on
12 those types of missions and I don't ever remember a case that there was any huge force
13 that was pushed towards us. There was always the potential that they didn't travel in
14 large forces at that particular point in time in that area, mainly because they wanted to be
15 very secretive. Again, out where we were at we were halfway between the South China
16 Sea and the Laotian border and they didn't particularly want to engage us out there in the
17 area that we were at. Their mission was probably to infiltrate further into the country of
18 South Vietnam, get closer to the coast, closer to the villages and towns that were there, so
19 they were to kind of bypass us. We were out there to try to disrupt them and they were
20 out there to try to bypass us so that they could go to what their real missions was, which
21 would be closer in to the coastline.

22 RV: Right.

23 GN: So there was some incidents, which we can talk about later, in which there
24 were fairly significant engagements but that was not typical.

25 RV: As you spent more and more time out in the field, did you get more and more
26 comfortable, or did you get less comfortable looking toward trying to finish your tour?

27 GN: Well, I think that there is a certain routine that you do settle into at times and
28 to me, like I said, in the morning I never looked much further than that night and then at
29 night I didn't look much further than the next morning. But there were routines in which
30 you would be traveling along on a new trail that you were cutting on an existing trail.
31 Everybody kind of had their own particular things that might alarm them. I think I said in

1 the past, I was always vigilant for snipers but not for booby traps. You could sit down,
2 make your base camp out at night, fix you something to eat, have a conversation with
3 your fellow soldiers with you and not be sweating lock washers and razorblades the
4 whole time. But I think also always knowing that any given minute, you had to keep
5 your frame of mind that that could change and change in a second. All it would take
6 would be for somebody to mortar your location or possibly to fire a sniper or maybe even
7 some type of an attack where they would try to rush you and inflict whatever damage. So
8 it wasn't always intense, but likewise you never got to go back and feel like you were
9 having a day at the beach and had no worries whatsoever about the enemy's presence
10 where you were at.

11 RV: What did that do to you psychologically? I mean, the fact that at any given
12 moment, anything could happen and it's got to be wearing on you, I would believe, the
13 more time you spent there.

14 GN: Well I think it does take a certain amount of coping skills of some sort and
15 everybody probably had their own way of coping. In many instances it was just simply
16 to discount what was going on and a certain amount of black humor and morbid humor.
17 You know there would be a saying, like people would say, "This is really a screwed up
18 war but it's the only war we got." Something bad would be happening and somebody
19 would be unhappy and say, "What worse can happen? Are they going to send me to
20 Vietnam and put me in the infantry?" No, they can't send you to Vietnam and put you in
21 the infantry. You're already there. As infantry we had this saying, "Grunts do all the
22 work." We, to a certain extent, felt like if there was a bottom of the barrel where it
23 couldn't get any worse, that's where you were already at. For some respects, that there's
24 only one way to go from where we're at and that's for things to get better. So all you had
25 to do was last out this temporary time. Everybody looked at it as being a temporary time.
26 Everybody knew that the maximum tour length was twelve months and you go home.
27 Everybody kept track of that but I think in many respects, again, the camaraderie, the
28 sharedness of it, everybody's in the same boat, "I'm not really that much different from
29 the guy that's sitting right next to me. He's in the same condition that I'm in." So your
30 world really kind of shrinks down to a very small size and I think everybody tried very
31 hard to be able to keep their mental wits about them and to keep on an even keel but

1 certainly there are drastic things, individual events that could happen, or just the long
2 haul, repeatedly the same degrading environment that you're in could take its toll.

3 RV: What about sleep deprivation? How much of a factor was that?

4 GN: Well, I think that probably you can adapt to certain amounts of that. I guess
5 I'd be surprised at how little sleep that I was getting at that time and I don't know that
6 that was one of the big concerns that I had, potentially sleeping four hours a night. Six
7 hours—six hours was probably a lot. If you got to sleep six hours—and that might be
8 interrupted—that might be three hours, then you go on guard duty for two hours and you
9 get back and you get three more hours sleep. So I doubt that anybody got much more
10 than six hours of sleep and there were certain times where we were up twenty-four hours
11 and we'd be up in the morning and go all day long and then they'd decide that we were
12 going to continue to move during the night so you moved until midnight, one o'clock,
13 two o'clock and they said, "Okay, we'll take a two-hour break," in which case you just sit
14 down on the ground wherever you were standing and if you can sleep in a sitting position
15 or whatever, then that's your sleep for the night then you get up and move into the next
16 day. So we had two or three times where we literally had no sleep at night. We might go
17 thirty-six hours or forty-eight hours without really having a break to sleep. But I don't
18 look at that as being the hardest hardship of what we had to do.

19 RV: Tell me what role spirituality and religion played for you and what you
20 witnessed there.

21 GN: Well, I think that to me, I was born Roman Catholic and raised up—went
22 through Catholic schools from grade school to high school to college and certainly had a
23 very extensive education in religion, and I think to me it was a consoling factor. I do
24 have a belief in a life beyond the life that we have here on earth and that there is—virtue
25 is its own reward. Good works, good acts will get you an eternal reward and I think
26 probably my settling piece came right before I left the United States to go to Vietnam. I
27 went to basic training and went to advanced training and then came home for, I don't
28 know, about ten days or two weeks or so on leave and then left and flew out of the airport
29 in Wichita, Kansas for the Army terminal in Oakland, California. And I can remember in
30 the airplane, after leaving Wichita, Kansas, and flying—I think we flew from Wichita to
31 Albuquerque and then flew from Albuquerque on to California—that I did a lot of

1 thinking about, "Okay, I'm not going home anymore. I've been through my training, I've
2 had my leave to go home and my next stop's going to be Vietnam so there's
3 really...we're cutting pretty close here to having to go through some sort of
4 reconciliation here with what's coming up." And I think that as far as spiritually, I just
5 said, "I'm going to have to accept whatever happens and I just hope and pray that
6 whatever happens to me will be the right thing, that it will be a good thing." Not that I
7 was saying that I believed that I should be spared death or spared wounding or anything
8 anymore than anybody else, but that my spiritual faith was that I am prepared and I
9 would be prepared to handle whatever would happen. I just have to kind of put my faith
10 and trust in God to guide me and to give me the strength and the courage and the faculties
11 that I would need to carry out whatever I was confronted with. So there was a certain
12 peace of mind, I think, that came from that. I don't know, call it a resignation or a
13 reconciliation or something, just a meeting that on that level and saying, "Okay, I'm
14 going to have to acknowledge and face this and it's going to have to be with a lot of help
15 with something from beyond what I have myself to be able to make it through."

16 RV: Were there religious ceremonies that you could attend?

17 GN: Yes. They were fairly sparse. There were Chaplains in the division and they
18 would come out on visits. There were a few Chaplains that were killed in the line of duty
19 in Vietnam. I know they came to the firebase. In fact, I can remember two or three
20 different times, going to Catholic mass. A Catholic Chaplain would come and have
21 mass. That might be on a Wednesday afternoon, it could be on a Friday morning, it could
22 be on a Sunday, but probably in the almost eleven months that I was in Vietnam I would
23 be able to go to a church service maybe three or four times. I think I went every time that
24 I knew that they were having one and I was able to go but it was very sparse. It was
25 possible that Chaplains even came out to our company in the field. I know they went to
26 some companies in the field but I just can't recall if one ever came out. I don't remember
27 ever having a religious service in the field but I do remember having them on the
28 firebase.

29 RV: What about the notion that there are no atheists in foxholes? What do you
30 think about that?

1 GN: Well, I think there's a lot of truth to that. The potential for one to lose one's
2 life—to me, I don't know. Somebody made the remark one time that if you were an
3 atheist but you had to bet one way or the other, bet that there is a God because if you bet
4 that there isn't one and you need one then you're in a heck of a fix. But if you're going
5 to be wrong one way or the other, be wrong and there really is a God to guide you. So I
6 think that there are a lot of people probably of that mind. They might talk about not
7 having belief in any type of spiritual beings but when it gets right down to the end they
8 go, "Well, what if I'm wrong? If I'm wrong," you really don't have anything left. So
9 they might have a little bit more of a motivation at that particular point in time to say,
10 "Well, I think I'm going to try this anyway, just in case I am wrong."

11 RV: When you were—you did leave the field, I believe, in November 1970 and
12 went back to Mary Ann, is that correct?

13 GN: That's correct.

14 RV: So did you know this was coming up or was this something that kind of came
15 out of the blue?

16 GN: Well, it was a surprise. It wasn't unusual for RTOs—Radio Telephone
17 Operators—in the companies to be requisitioned to go to the Battalion Tactical
18 Operations Center as an RTO. So we all knew that that could happen. Maybe half of the
19 people at the Battalion Tactical Operations Center were acquired that way, and maybe the
20 other half just came through some other channels. In late November, probably at least
21 November 15th or after, we were on a mission, actually off of LZ Young. There in
22 November we had moved closer to the coast, mainly because due to monsoons and some
23 of the difficulty in getting re-supply helicopters as far out as we were, we had a mission
24 closer to an American firebase called LZ Young, which was maybe, instead of being
25 thirty miles in off the coast we were only ten miles in off the coast. And we had operated
26 down in there for a few days. That was a mission where we were Vietnamized. We had
27 some RFPPs—the Regional Forces/Popular Forces—Vietnamese soldiers with us, and
28 one late afternoon after we had been out on patrol and we returned back to our night
29 position—and in fact, we'd used the same night position for two or three days which was
30 unusual, but we did—there was a radio call came in from the battalion staff on LZ Young
31 and I was a radio operator and the person calling was Captain Strand. I believe he was

1 the S2S3 Officer in the Intelligence Operations Officer for the battalion and he called out
2 and he said, "I need to get a message to one of your people and he spelled my name
3 phonetically, which was November-Oscar-Lima-Lima-Echo-Romeo." And I go, "Well,
4 that's me," and he goes, "Well, get your stuff packed up. We're going to bring you in to
5 the Battalion Tactical Operations Center as a radio operator." And I'm kind of sitting
6 here and I'm going, "Well, this is news to me. I didn't know anything about it." At that
7 particular time, I had just become what we called the Commo Sergeant or the Commo
8 Chief in the company, which means I was the Senior RTO. Tommy Poppell had been the
9 Senior RTO right ahead of me and he had went up to LZ Young like the day before to be
10 what they called a supply rep, which is a person who helps put your re-supply materials
11 together. So I was the top RTO in the company at that time. Lieutenant Navor was the
12 acting Company Commander and I told Lieutenant Navor, I said, "They're telling me that
13 I've got to go to LZ Young to be the RTO in the Battalion TOC." And he said, "Well,
14 get your stuff together." And I said, "Well, you know, I don't think I want to do that. I
15 want to stay here with the company. I don't want to go to the firebase and be an RTO on
16 the firebase." Well, about that time, we could see the helicopter coming. They had
17 actually dispatched a helicopter to come out and get me. I can remember Lieutenant
18 Navor saying, "That helicopter's coming to get you and you're going to get your ass on
19 that chopper." And he actually started picking up my stuff. I had a rucksack there. He
20 actually started picking up my stuff and jammed it in my rucksack and the helicopter
21 landed and was sitting there, basically waiting for me to pack my gear to get on the
22 helicopter. So from the time that I knew I was going to go in to the Battalion TOC until I
23 was actually sitting on the helicopter that was taking me there, that may have been ten
24 minutes. So it was kind of, I guess a shock, in a way, from how quickly it happened, and
25 I guess my reservations about doing it and Lieutenant Navor just basically saying—I
26 remember him saying the words something like, "You can still do us a lot of good up
27 there." So I left the B Company at that time and spent the rest of my time as an RTO in
28 the battalion headquarters on the firebase as an RTO.

29 RV: How did it feel, leaving your buddies and leaving the unit that you had been
30 with for so long?

1 GN: Well, it—I accepted the fact that I had to do it, but yeah, there is a strong
2 attachment there. Some of these guys were guys that I had known almost the whole time
3 I had been in the military. I hadn't gone to basic training with any of them but there was
4 probably as many as a dozen of them that I had gone through advanced training at Fort
5 Knox, the armored crewman training with them, come over basically on the same
6 airplanes, been assigned to the B Company, 1st of the 46th at the same time, and had
7 spent, at that time, around five months I guess it was, in the bush with them and then
8 they're saying, "Well, we're packing you up and sending you up the road." So I would
9 be with people that I didn't know. And I think a lot of it had to do with both sides. You
10 know, yeah, I wanted to stay with people that I did know, and then likewise I didn't want
11 to be around people that I didn't know but the only, I guess, good thing about it was is
12 that I was going to be on the radio so I had a communication device and a lot of the
13 people, my very close friends, were all radio operators in the company CP, people like
14 Nolan Bingham and Sonny Crowder. They were both people that were at Fort Knox with
15 me, so I could talk to them every day. I wouldn't be with them everyday but since our
16 jobs were handle the radios, I could still at least be in contact with them.

17 RV: Well, describe to me what your duties were back at Headquarters Company
18 and what was different and what your typical day was like as the RTO there.

19 GN: Well, when we left the field with B Company I went to LZ Young and the
20 battalion headquarters on a firebase is called a TOC. That's T-O-C and it stands for
21 Tactical Operations Center. And that's where your Battalion Commander is always
22 going to be there and then he has a staff and the staff may consist of four or five other
23 officers, which are Lieutenants or Captains. You have, in particular, your S2 or S3. S2 is
24 intelligence, S3 is operations. And so you kind of combine that. In fact, there's different
25 names. I'll say I was an RTO in the Battalion TOC but sometimes that's listed as a Staff
26 Duty NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer) or S2S3 Duty NCO, although I was a Spec 4, I
27 wasn't a Sergeant yet. So we had very similar jobs at the battalion level that we had
28 when we were in the company CP, in that we carried out all the communications between
29 the battalion and the next upper and the next lower level. So we still talked back with the
30 company RTOs and the Company Commanders on the lower level. That was on one
31 radio and then the other radio that we had, we would talk with the brigade, which was the

1 196th Light Infantry Brigade, and that headquarters was at Hawk Hill. So we would relay
2 information. We'd get information in from the company, we would process information.
3 We kept a daily journal, which is called a staff daily journal. That was like on a legal
4 pad, which we'd just hand-write the time and whatever it was that happened—"element
5 in contact or element found enemy rifles or we're having a combat assault going to
6 somewhere that day or units being re-supplied that day or units being moved from point
7 A to point B that day." Whatever was happening at that time in the battalion, we wrote
8 down on a legal pad and any information that needed to be passed back and forth—the
9 Battalion Commander wanted to get a message to one of the companies—we had to pass
10 information on that was routine. Like, the companies informed us of where their
11 locations were in the field and we in turn notified the brigade headquarters where the
12 companies were at the field. So we relayed a lot of information. We relayed re-supply
13 information, we helped coordinate re-supply when helicopters came out and they'd
14 basically come what was called on station. They were a helicopter and they were
15 assigned to our battalion for that day and our battalion could do whatever they wanted to
16 with that helicopter. We'd say, "Okay, we need to send a re-supply out to A Company;
17 we need to send a re-supply out to D Company; we need to pick up three people from C
18 Company because they've got to go back to the rear area for R&R; we need to pick up a
19 couple of guys from B Company because their time's up. They're going home." So we
20 would handle all of the communications and administrative duties necessary with a lot of
21 the conduct of the business of the battalion.

22 RV: What was it like having that broader view, kind of seeing things more from
23 the top down? I mean, you're not the very top but you had this other, more unique,
24 different view than you had in the field. What was that like for you?

25 GN: Well, you did get to see a lot more happening because we worked with the
26 Battalion Commander who was a Lieutenant Colonel; and there are five companies in the
27 battalion, so we coordinated between those five companies. We typically had four
28 companies that were line infantry companies, A, B, C, D Company. The E Company
29 was—the mortars were in E Company. There was a Recon Platoon that was E Company;
30 the snipers were assigned to E Company. You had Headquarters, Headquarters Company
31 and there were some of those personnel on the firebase. Those could be cooks,

1 communications people, people that took care of radios, people that took care of
2 electrical generators, all your medical staff was in Headquarters, Headquarters Company.
3 Typically your line companies, A, B, C, D, E Company were pretty much always all out
4 in the field. Headquarters, Headquarters Company might be half of them on the firebase
5 and half of them back in Chu Lai in the battalion rear area in Chu Lai. So on a typical
6 day we'd be talking to each of the companies that were in the field and they would be
7 telling us what's going on with them. You know, what are their locations, are they on
8 patrol? If they get into any type of contact, they would call us and give us the
9 information. If they request any type of support, like they wanted artillery fire support—
10 if that was not called in by their artillery forward observer, we'd handle that. If they
11 needed a medical dust-off, if they'd call in, "Dust-off;" they would always call that into
12 us at battalion and we'd relay that on to the dust-off unit. And we got to work—
13 obviously over here we'd be sitting in the room. There's a Battalion Commander and his
14 staff would be discussing things that were going on and be making decisions, coming up
15 with the plans. Maybe the plans are for the next hour, maybe the plans are for tomorrow,
16 maybe the plans are from a week from now. But typically we were all in a very small
17 area. The radios were in a room in the Battalion TOC that was maybe ten foot square.
18 And so you could get two radio operators and four or five officers in there at one time,
19 conducting the business of the battalion. So it did give you a little bit wider picture of a
20 bigger area on the map as to what's going on in that area and who's doing it.

21 RV: Sitting in there with the Battalion Commander, what was that like? I guess
22 this is the first time you had kind of heard that operation and that kind of communication
23 going on and the planning. Was this something that interested you? Did you pay
24 attention and listen to what they were saying or were you just simply trying to listen for
25 what's happening in the field and then relay that?

26 GN: Well, I think the first thing was always to make sure and do the job that I was
27 assigned. The Battalion Commander at that time was Colonel Doyle, Lieutenant Colonel
28 Doyle, and I liked working for him. I considered him to be my boss. I thought he was
29 very level headed. I don't really know a whole lot about the whole officer thing beyond
30 just what I could see. I mean, I don't know about his conversations necessarily with the
31 Brigade Commander. I'd hear more of the conversations he would have with other

1 battalion staff officers like the Intelligence Officer or the Operations Officer. But the
2 staff that I worked with in the Battalion TOC, I have high regard for, and I had
3 confidence in. Captain Strand, I think at that time was Operations Officer. They changed
4 in the six or seven months I was there. Obviously people would come and go. Captain
5 Paul Spielberg, I can remember him very well. Lieutenant Good, Mike Good, I
6 remember working with him. Lieutenant Schmidt—some of these people I'm in contact
7 with or have been in contact with since Vietnam. But I think there was certainly an
8 acknowledgement of the importance of the job; the importance of what it is that we had
9 to do, the importance that whatever we had to do, people's lives depended upon it and if
10 somebody's in contact out there and they wanted dust-off and they give you a location of
11 the dust-off, you've got to get that location. And if they're giving that to you in a code
12 you have to first of all take it down and take it down correctly. They may be giving you
13 letters of the alphabet that correspond to numbers of the grid so you have to take that
14 down then you have to un-code that and find out exactly where it is. You have to very
15 quickly be on the radio and call the dust-off and get them alerted to it; get them the facts
16 that they need to know; get them to the location that they have to go to. So it's still a
17 situation where people's lives and health are on the line so you have to be at the same time
18 quick with what you're doing but you also have to be accurate. So there was a strong
19 feeling of the need to have a very high level of performance and get the job done.

20 RV: You said you had respect for this gentleman. He was a Colonel, is that
21 correct?

22 GN: Lieutenant Colonel.

23 RV: He was Lieutenant Colonel. What did you think of the officers there that you
24 were working with now, a whole different batch of them? What was that like for you?

25 GN: Well, there were a few more personalities thrown into it. The thing that most
26 all of these officers had already been to the field so they had been either Company
27 Commanders in the field or they had been Platoon Leaders in the field so they had
28 experience out there so they were very closely tuned. I can't remember a case where we
29 had an officer that came in that was a staff officer and let's say he just came over from
30 the United States and had no real feel for what was going on. So all of these people
31 pretty much had been there and done that before so they had the value of their personal

1 experiences of being Company Commanders and Platoon Leaders to call upon. I think
2 that that was good from the standpoint that it probably took a lot of pettiness out of the
3 deal. I mean, there's always going to be discussion that you have. The Battalion
4 Commander would tell the Company Commander, "You need to go from point A to point
5 B and be there in three hours," and the Company Commander says, "Well, we can't be
6 there all day. It's rough terrain or we have to cut trail or due to the heat of the day or
7 something." So there was certainly always elements of that in there but I think that all in
8 all, from the knowledge that I had of working very closely with Colonel Doyle, it was a
9 very high level of confidence that I had. The Battalion Commander that was there when I
10 first got to Vietnam was Lieutenant Colonel Richard Caravell and I'm in contact with
11 him today. I don't remember that much—I didn't work with him in the battalion
12 headquarters at that time but I did meet him in more recent times and have been able to
13 talk with him. And then the third Battalion Commander was Lieutenant Colonel Tate and
14 he came on about my last month. I just—maybe it's because I was close to them every
15 day and worked with them every day, I have a bias, but I think I can say honestly that my
16 feeling about them was that they were competent people and they were trying to do their
17 job as best they could do and look out for all of us and I appreciate the fact that they took
18 their job seriously.

19 RV: Was there any discontent with the enlisted or the draftees back in the rear or
20 at the firebase with the officers there? We discussed it in the field, but what kind of
21 relationship was there in the firebase where you were living now?

22 GN: Well, I think that there were always issues that came up and they might
23 appear to be really big issues but one particular instance that I remember, there was a
24 policy that came out about length of hair. Because out in the field, we didn't have
25 barbers so you could be out there for a couple of months and you don't get to go back to
26 the rear area so you don't get a haircut, but somehow or another you're still expected to
27 have military style hair. And if that means you just go to one of your buddies with a pair
28 of scissors and your buddy cuts your hair, and I think that there was somebody on Mary
29 Ann that I may have went to a time or two to get a haircut because I knew he could cut
30 hair halfway decent. But at one time there was an issue with sideburns. It was a lot of I
31 guess a certain rebellious element with the hair thing that was going on back in the sixties

1 anyway, and the military allowed you to have sideburns down to a certain point. And
2 they used to describe that if you were to take a pencil and put the pencil through one ear
3 and out the other ear, your sideburn couldn't come down any lower than where that
4 pencil was at. I can recall on Mary Ann one time, going into the Mess Hall to get lunch
5 one day and there was an officer posted outside and he was checking sideburns. And if
6 your sideburns were too long, he wouldn't let you eat. So he told me that my sideburns
7 were too long and I said, "Well, I don't understand. I think my sideburns are at their
8 proper length." He said, "No, they're about a quarter inch too long. You go trim your
9 sideburns up about a quarter inch and you can eat." Well, okay. And there was probably
10 about fifty percent of the guys that are getting kicked out of line that day because of their
11 sideburn length or their hair length. Well, I knew all of the cooks in the cook shack down
12 there because one of the things that I did as part of my duties when I was working in the
13 early morning was I'd go wake them up. I'd go in at four o'clock and wake them up and
14 tell them, "Okay, it's time to get up and start cooking breakfast." And so I just simply
15 went around to the back door of the cook shack there and said, "Hey, I can't get anything
16 to eat. They kicked me out of line." The cook said, "Well, what do you want?" And he
17 fixed me a plate. So I go walking back out and got my plate full. And I didn't trim my
18 sideburns. The officer saw me do that but I didn't try that a second time. I just did that
19 one time. So occasionally there could be strife over those types of regulations about
20 proper military wear of the uniform. People wanted to wear a boonie cap and the officers
21 said, "You've got to wear a steel pot," and there were discussions about "I don't like to
22 wear a steel pot, I don't want to wear a steel pot." And at times there was certainly some
23 of the things in our environment. Like, if we had to go two days and didn't get no sleep
24 then we're going to have people complain about that. If they thought that that was
25 unrealistic and too much demand, they might say, "Well, I want to talk to the Battalion
26 Commander because we haven't had no sleep in two days and I want to tell the Battalion
27 Commander I'm going to write my congressman because we can't be pushed this hard."
28 But I don't think there was any type of really widespread universal disaffection. You'd
29 have some individuals from time to time that would certainly have a pain in their rear
30 about something that was going on but from talking with people that I know, even those
31 that did not have the advantage of working as close to the officers as I did, I don't hear a

1 lot of statements like, “Oh gee, all the officers were all screwed up all the time.” In fact,
2 most of what I hear is praise and an appreciation for the fact that the officers were
3 competent and they were like us. They were trying to make the best situation that they
4 could out of some very bad situations.

5 RV: Tell me what life was like back on the firebase—what your quarters were
6 like, what you ate, did you have shower facilities, etc.

7 GN: Well, it was probably better, in most cases, than being in the field. When I
8 went to LZ Young, I was there probably about a month. I remember being there for
9 Thanksgiving because I remember the officers—the American and Vietnamese officers
10 had a table set up that they ate Thanksgiving dinner on so I know I was on LZ Young at
11 Thanksgiving. I may have still been there at Christmas but pretty much after the first of
12 the year, sometime maybe between Christmas and New Years, I went back to Mary Ann.
13 But LZ Young was a very small firebase, physically, in size. It was almost no room for
14 anything. There was a very small wooden bunker, half in the ground, built, that was the
15 Tactical Operations Center. There were a few tents around; they had a perimeter where
16 the defensive positions were set up. But when I got there, there was literally no place for
17 me to go sleep. I got off the helicopter and went in the Tactical Operations Center and
18 they pretty much—there was an empty chair sitting there with the radios on the counter
19 of the table and Captain Strand basically said, “You’re an RTO in the Battalion TOC.
20 There’s the chair, there’s the radio. Do you have any questions?” Which, I said, “No.” I
21 kind of knew what the routine was because I could hear it on the radio all day long. I
22 knew what the Battalion RTOs did, at least with the talking with companies because they
23 were talking with me. So I sat down and kind of had another RTO that was there that
24 gave me some very quick on-the-job training on how to keep journals and stuff like that.
25 Well, I think I worked from maybe four o’clock in the afternoon until midnight and at
26 that time I was relieved and somebody else came on. It’s like, “Okay, well, go find a
27 place to sleep.” “Well, where do I sleep?” “Well, go find a place to sleep.” It’s not like
28 had a tent or a barracks or even a flat, open piece of ground where they said, “Okay, you
29 go over there.” So I had to kind of wander around and midnight and the only place that I
30 found that was flat and had enough room for me to blow up my air mattress so I could lay
31 down and go to sleep that night was in the ammo dump. In fact, I think the whole time I

1 was on LZ Young, I slept in the ammo dumb, which means I had cases of hand grenades
2 and bullets and mortar rounds and whatever stacked up all around where I was sleeping at
3 night.

4 RV: That had to be a little disconcerting.

5 GN: Well, you know, I guess it did. Of course, if I needed ammo, I was pretty
6 close to ammo. I didn't have to go look for it, but yeah, if they were to launch a mortar
7 attack and hit that ammo dump, there would be nothing left to go look for as far as I was
8 concerned. And what I did there was they had some construction materials that were
9 pretty common to firebases and one of them was what they called a culvert half. And a
10 culvert half was a piece of metal in the shape of a half-moon. It might be four feet across
11 the diameter and maybe this thing was a foot and a half long. So you could take about
12 three or four pieces of this metal and set that on the ground and it would form kind of a
13 riffery, about four foot in diameter at the bottom and two or three foot high. It would be
14 kind of like crawling back into a man-made cave when you set these culvert sections,
15 culvert half sections down on the ground. And then people would take sandbags and then
16 sandbag these up for protection. And I think what I did is I took three or four culvert half
17 sections and set them up on the ground and then threw plastic sheeting or a poncho or
18 something up over the top to make them rain tight. I know I didn't put sandbags on them.
19 And that was kind of my little place to go. I kept my rucksack there. Everything that I
20 owned at that time could be all packed in one rucksack and in my air mattress so I
21 probably blew my air mattress up and let my air mattress just stay inside there and that's
22 where I slept. They did have a field kitchen set up. I don't think we had to eat c-rations
23 every day. They had some type of field kitchen there. But I was typically always
24 working a night shift. It could start at four o'clock, six o'clock, eight o'clock, ten
25 o'clock. Generally you'd start sometime after four o'clock at night and before midnight
26 and then we'd get done by six o'clock in the morning or eight o'clock in the morning. So
27 a lot of the times when I was on the firebase, I would be sleeping during the daytime.
28 And I'd get off duty at let's say seven o'clock and go to sleep right away and then get up
29 in time to eat lunch and then after that just stay up the rest of the day until I went back on
30 duty at whatever time that was. It was very muddy. This was during monsoons and it
31 rained all the time. LZ Young was a mud pit. Anywhere you walked you were in ankle-

1 deep mud. Very messy conditions. I do recall one night I woke up—I don't know
2 whether it was the first night I was there or the second night I was there and a lizard had
3 crawled up my pant leg and it woke me up. It was about where my knee is and felt
4 something squirming around in my pant leg. I didn't know if it was rat, I didn't know
5 what it was. I grabbed it and held it in my hand and I was trying to figure out, "What do I
6 do?" I always carried a k-bar knife with me and I thought, "Well, I'll just take my knife
7 and stab this thing, whatever it is." And I thought, "Well, if I stab it, I'm probably going
8 to stab myself." So I kind of just held on to it and suffocated it and stood up and shook it
9 out and it was about a ten-inch long lizard that had crawled up my pant leg. So you never
10 knew what to—sleeping on the ground, that was one of the disadvantages of sleeping on
11 the ground was whatever crawled around on the ground might crawl right up your pant
12 leg and make its home.

13 RV: Sure. Well, speaking of that, tell me about what you ran into out in the field
14 and in a situation like that. What kind of animals and wildlife did you see and experience
15 over there?

16 GN: Well, I didn't ever personally see much in the way of wildlife. I think the
17 thing that I remember the most are insects. There were some occasions of wild pigs,
18 water buffalo, some people claim to have seen tigers, monkeys, but I don't remember
19 seeing much. In fact, it's one of the oddities. In all of the movies that you see on TV
20 about all of the birds and the monkeys and tigers and stuff living in the jungle, of just
21 how little I really ever saw. I don't remember ever seeing—I don't think I ever saw a
22 monkey in the bush. I don't even remember seeing a bird in the bush. I certainly didn't
23 see a tiger or a wild pig. The only animals I remember seeing out there were the more
24 domesticated ones if we came into a Montagnard village. They would have what people
25 know as Vietnamese pot bellied pigs and they'd have chickens, just like an ordinary old
26 chicken, but typically anything out in the field that really was a huge inconvenience that
27 you had to put with were mosquitoes. Mosquitoes were all over the place. Ticks,
28 leeches, sometimes snakes. I can remember people having killed—one guy in particular,
29 I think—Pythons, and then the poisonous snakes—Cobras. But to me, the thing that
30 drove me nuts was mosquitoes and land leeches. They were everywhere and if you didn't
31 put insect repellent on you, the mosquitoes would drive you nuts. In fact, they could

1 drive you nuts anyway. And leeches were—they had some kind of a mechanism by
2 which they knew if you were there and they'd travel for miles to come get you. They
3 were constant.

4 RV: Tell me about—the leeches and the mosquitoes bothered you, but not the
5 Cobras or the Pythons?

6 GN: Well, it was just because I never saw the snakes. I mean, people would
7 always say, "Be careful. There are snakes out here and if they bite you you'll be dead in
8 ten minutes." That was kind of the story about snakes. The leeches and mosquitoes
9 wouldn't kill you. I mean, the mosquito could give you malaria but they wouldn't kill
10 you. They were both blood suckers and they may have had some type of sensing or
11 sensory capability of yeah, they could smell you from a mile away. I can remember
12 walking through the jungle on a trail and you could look down at the ground on either
13 side of the trail and the land leeches would be moving towards the trail. In other words,
14 they knew you were walking there. And I don't know if that was by vibration, they felt
15 the vibration, if they could actually smell you or something, but it wasn't like they were
16 moving north to south anyway, because they would be moving to where you were at.
17 And if you sat down on the trail, the leeches would crawl up your shoes, your boots, and
18 we always had our pant leg bloused in the top of our boot to try to keep leeches from
19 coming up into your pant leg. On time I had a leech somehow get on me and he crawled
20 up my pants and got under my shirt because my shirt wasn't tucked in, and crawled up
21 my chest and right and the bottom of my neck, right about where my Adam's apple is,
22 this leech attached itself. And when a leech attaches itself, they've kind of got some little
23 hooks that they can place themselves into you to grab a hold of you. Then they can chew
24 away at your skin until they break the skin to where it bleeds. And then they have a
25 secretion that they secrete to keep your blood from coagulating so that while they're
26 sucking your blood, they get a good flow of blood. And this leech had attached itself
27 right under my chin on my neck there by my Adam's apple and I didn't know it.
28 Sometimes you feel just a little bit of stinging, sort of like a mosquito bite and you can
29 kind of feel a little stinging but I didn't feel it. And we were out moving down the trail
30 and somebody came up to me and said, "Oh, you've got a leech up there right underneath
31 your chin." And they'll start out; they'll be about as big around as a matchstick and

1 maybe an inch long or so. And when they engorge themselves with blood, they can swell
2 up to the size of your little finger. I mean, they can grow ten times their size so they can
3 take a pretty sizable chunk of blood out of you. And typically at that point, they're very
4 lethargic. They can't even move, they're so fat with blood. But when you detach them,
5 put some insect repellent on them and they'll generally detach, you'll continue to bleed
6 for a while because of that chemical that they secreted on you. So I had blood running
7 from my neck all the way down my stomach. I remember I opened up my shirt and there
8 was just blood all the way down to my pants from this dang leech. So I have no love
9 whatsoever for them. I'm sure in the big picture there is some reason why leeches exist
10 and there's some reason why mosquitoes exist but they were pests and you constantly had
11 to be looking over your body and seeing do you have leeches on you, do you have ticks
12 on you? Mosquitoes, sometimes at night could get so bad you would throw a poncho
13 liner over your head and you could just hear the mosquitoes. They were coming right up
14 within an inch or so of your face and your ears and if you didn't have the poncho liner
15 over your head they'd be biting you. If you got a mosquito bite on your lip, it would look
16 like somebody hit you with a baseball bat. Your lip would swell up. Guys would have
17 their eyes swollen shut in the morning because a mosquito bit them on the eye and it
18 caused the eye to swell shut.

19 RV: Wow!

20 GN: So they were very much a pest.

21 RV: What did you all do on the firebase for entertainment?

22 GN: Oh, there was a lot of card playing. I can remember playing games. I never
23 gambled, although if you wanted to gamble, you could. Playing a game of Spades was a
24 very popular game, a game called Hearts—and a lot of those games could be played with
25 like two players or three players or four player or five players or six players so it's kind
26 of like how many guys could get together at one time. We played a lot of cards. I did
27 some reading. They would occasionally bring out boxes of paperback books to the
28 firebase and I think they set those down in the cook tent or the Mess Hall area. In fact,
29 one day I went down and found the book *Gone With the Wind*. And I had never read
30 *Gone With the Wind*. I got that book I think about noon. And typically I slept until about
31 noon. And I think I read that book from noon until dark, probably eight or nine hours

1 straight and I think maybe I got half the book read in one sitting. We got magazines,
2 *Look* magazines, *Life* magazines, *Stars and Stripes* newspapers, you got mail from home.
3 You occasionally had a visit from the Red Cross. The Donut Dollies would come out and
4 they would have games to play but I never really participated in that. And there was a lot
5 of times where you just a friend or buddy somewhere and find a place in the shade
6 somewhere and sit and just have conversation. We did have radios where you could tune
7 into Armed Forces Vietnam Network. There was no TV set. There was nothing out there
8 that was air-conditioned; there was no EM Club (enlisted men), no PX, none of that kind
9 of stuff.

10 RV: What do you remember about music? Did people have their own music with
11 them and did you?

12 GN: Well, I can remember—I think even in the Tactical Operations Center at
13 night we had a radio and could pick up AFVN radio and that had popular music on it. It
14 kind of had a mix of music and we listened to current songs. We knew what all the
15 current songs were, the popular songs. I remember at that time when I was in Vietnam,
16 Janis Joplin was very popular. Of course, she died about that time, too, but Baby James
17 Taylor, I remember his songs, the Beatles, their songs. Any popular songs in the United
18 States were going to be popular songs in Vietnam, too.

19 RV: What did you see as far as drug and alcohol use while you were there?

20 GN: Well, there was drug and alcohol use. I think that not in the field. On the
21 firebase it existed and in the rear areas it existed. It kind of existed within groups. Not
22 everybody did it. I think there's a perception that if you're a Vietnam vet that you were
23 addicted to drugs when you were in Vietnam and I certainly do not agree with that
24 statement. I don't know what the percentage was. It probably really wouldn't be that
25 much different than what was happening on a college campus in the United States at that
26 time. There was availability of marijuana, heroin, and there would be people who would
27 get addicted to it. In the field, if there was somebody out in the field and they were using
28 drugs or alcohol in the field, they'd probably be dealt with. They would be told to quit.
29 If they didn't quit they would probably be reported to the company commander in some
30 manner. They'd say, "You need to get this guy out of here because he's dangerous."
31 Firebases were a little bit more relaxed than that, and the rear area was more relaxed than

1 that but I never used any drugs. I will have to admit to being over the line on alcohol a
2 few times but that was always in the rear area. We'd go back once every two months or
3 so to what they called a stand down and they would always have beer on ice and there
4 was no limits. It's not like, "Okay, we're going to give you two coupons for beer and
5 when you use your two coupons, you're done." It's like you could drink until you passed
6 out. I never passed out but I came pretty close. The EM club back there at Chu Lai and
7 our battalion area was right on the cliff over the South China Sea. I mean, it was very
8 picturesque. It would probably be prime real estate if you were going to go build a bar
9 somewhere. You'd pay a lot of money to build a bar where the 1st of the 46th EM Club
10 was in Chu Lai. And alcohol was cheap. You could go to the EM Club and buy a shot of
11 good whiskey, whatever the best whiskey was that they had, for a quarter. You could
12 buy a triple, three shots in the same glass, for seventy-five cents and that's going to give
13 you pure whiskey, whatever you're drinking. You could to go the main PX in Chu Lai
14 and buy a fifth of whiskey or a quarter whiskey probably for a dollar and a half, a dollar
15 seventy-five. So alcohol was cheap. Drugs, I don't know. I never bought drugs. I don't
16 know if they were considered cheap or expensive, but they were available. It's just like
17 anywhere else, if you want some you can get tied into some network of people that are
18 going to sell them to you. Alcohol, you could just go to the EM club or go to the PX and
19 buy. It wasn't the first time I ever drank alcohol when I was in the Army. I'd had my
20 share going through college but probably the worst I ever got was we went back to Chu
21 Lai on stand down one time and I don't know exactly when this was. It's probably in the
22 fall of 1970, maybe October or November range. The Company Medic that'd I'd been
23 with a lot, Robert Fry, Doc Fry, out of Iowa, he was going home and I remember walking
24 in to the company supply room and probably I didn't go in with the company. It may
25 have been that I was already on Mary Ann so the company went in from wherever there
26 were at in the field and I just said, "I'm going to go back to the stand down. I'm in B
27 Company and they're having stand down and I'm going to back to the stand down," and
28 whoever I was reporting to said "Okay." I remember going into the supply room and
29 Doc Fry was in there and he said, "Noller, I'm going home tomorrow. You need to help
30 me celebrate." I said, "Okay, Doc, what do you got in mind?" Well, he lined up three
31 bottles of Canadian Lord Calvert on the counter he had got in the in PX. And I never

1 drank whiskey straight, but we just rolled the cap off that, threw the cap away and walked
2 around for a while. And probably within about an hour I drank half that bottle and I was
3 pretty much toast at that time. And I remember going outside and I was a pretty sensible
4 fellow, I think. I think I want to say that. But it was during monsoons and there was a lot
5 of mud and water and stuff around. I think somebody dared me to turn a summersault in
6 this mud puddle and I did. I just took off for a run and went down and took a
7 summersault right through the middle of this mud puddle and so I was pretty much
8 covered in mud. And Lieutenant Navor came by and he said, “Noller, what the hell
9 happened to you? You’re all covered in mud?” And I said, “Well, Lieutenant, I just
10 turned a summersault in that mud puddle over there.” And he said, “You didn’t do that,
11 did you?” And I said, “Yeah, watch,” and I went and did it again. And that’s pretty
12 impulsive but we were having fun. I guess this was unwinding. That’s what a stand
13 down was for, was to try to give people some opportunity to kind of wind down, blow off
14 steam, get stuff out of their system and I guess that’s what I was doing because I have
15 never turned summersaults in mud puddles before then and I haven’t done it since, on
16 purpose. And I’m sure that’s the effect of drinking about a half a bottle of Canadian Lord
17 Calvert in about an hour’s time. Last I remember of Doc Fry the next day is they loaded
18 him up in a jeep and I know we were commenting on whether or not they were going to
19 let him on the airplane, if he was sober enough to get on the airplane to come home. But
20 he did. And in fact, a year ago I met Doc Fry in San Antonio at a 196th LIB (Light
21 Infantry Brigade) reunion. It was the first time I’d seen him since Vietnam and I told him
22 that story and he didn’t remember it.

23 RV: He did not remember it?

24 GN: I remember it.

25 RV: But he did not?

26 GN: Yeah, he didn’t remember. I said, “Do you remember that going home, the
27 night before you went home?” And he goes, “Nah, I don’t remember anything.” I said,
28 “Well, it’s the alcohol.” It erased his memory, I guess. But his wife and one of his
29 daughters was there and I told that story and they got a big kick out of it and he’d kind of
30 sitting there going, “Really? Really?” I said, “Yeah, Doc, I’m not making this up. This

1 really happened. It was your last night with the company in the rear area. This is what
2 happened.”

3 RV: What about R&Rs, Gary?

4 GN: Well, everybody got one R&R and there were several different places you
5 could go on R&R. They told you where you could go. You could not come back to the
6 United States but you could go to Hawaii. And typically people that were married went
7 to Hawaii because they could be joined there by their wives. Sydney, Australia is where I
8 wanted to go. You could also go, I think to Bangkok, Taipei, Taiwan, I think Hong
9 Kong, and I don't know if there was one more maybe in Malaysia or what but I signed up
10 for Sydney, Australia because it just sounded like a good thing to me. It sounded more
11 interesting than going anywhere else. And you had to tell them the first day we got into
12 our company, in the B Company, the 1st of the 46th company clerk said, “Okay, where do
13 you want to go on R&R?” I was kind of going, “Do I have to tell you right now?” They
14 go, “Well, we need to get that on the schedule.” But then as I was corresponding with
15 my sister Wanda, and one of the things that my dad had always said was that someday he
16 wanted to go to Hawaii and he had just retired. He was like sixty-five, somewhere about
17 there and she wrote me a letter and said, “You know, Dad always wanted to go to Hawaii.
18 That's someplace you can go on R&R. If you would go to Hawaii on R&R, Mom and
19 Dad would probably come visit you. And it would be a good excuse to get them over
20 there because they ain't never going to go to Hawaii no other way.” So I went back to
21 the company clerk and said, “Okay, change me to Hawaii.” And so my date came up in
22 December. It seemed like they could pretty well pick your date fairly well in advance so
23 I told my sister. I said, “Okay, I'll be in Honolulu December 10th for a week.” So she
24 made all the arrangements to get my folks to Honolulu. Neither of my parents had ever
25 been on an airplane before as far as a commercial flight so it was a pretty big deal, and in
26 fact, I think maybe they were only on an airplane one more time in their lives and they
27 both lived to be ninety. But they also brought my brother, my younger brother Greg, who
28 I think was about seventeen at that time, so he helped, I'm sure, with navigating airports
29 and luggage and that stuff. But they actually arrived in Honolulu before I did and there
30 was an R&R center at Fort DeRussy, which was and still is owned by the military. So we
31 flew in civilian clothes. I went from either LZ Young, I believe I was at. We went to

1 Chu Lai and they took us to Da Nang and then from Da Nang we flew in civilian clothes,
2 commercial aircraft to Honolulu. Spent a week there doing the regular old Hawaii tourist
3 things and then flew back to Da Nang and flew back to Chu Lai. I remember when I got
4 to Chu Lai they said that Bob Hope was going to be there and they had tickets and did I
5 want tickets to go see Bob Hope and I said, “No. I’ve been on R&R for a week. I’ll just
6 go back. Let somebody else take those tickets.” And I think then I went back to Mary
7 Ann. I believe I did pretty close in there.

8 RV: Any regrets on passing on that?

9 GN: Do what?

10 RV: Any regrets on passing on the tickets?

11 GN: No, I mean, I watched Bob Hope on TV and knew who he was but I just
12 really had no—to me it was no big rah-rah thing to go to see Bob Hope. I mean, if they
13 want to do something, they can just send me home. They said, “Well, we’ll send you to
14 the Bob Hope show.” I said, “Well, Bob Hope’s still in Vietnam and I’m still in
15 Vietnam. I don’t see a lot of difference.” But no, I didn’t go see that show. There was
16 an interesting little story I’d like to tell on going about R&R. When I got to Da Nang,
17 you had to be in Da Nang about a day. You got there one day and you kind of got
18 cleaned up and stuff and then you got on an airplane the next day to go on R&R. I
19 remember going—they had us in some wooden barracks there. I took a shower and I
20 came back and I was getting dressed. And I don’t remember at this time if we were
21 allowed to put on civilian clothes or if we were still putting on military uniforms. But I
22 was getting dressed and a guy came up and sat down on the bunk behind me. I had my
23 back to him and he said, “Is there any hot water in the shower?” And I turned over my
24 shoulder and said, “Well, there’s no hot water anywhere in any shower in Vietnam.” And
25 the guy sitting on the bunk behind me was a guy that I grew up with in Dodge City.

26 RV: Really? Wow.

27 GN: Tom Stickney. And he’s a year older than I was but we went all the way
28 through grade school together, all the way through high school together, and in fact, he
29 finished his last year of college and so he graduated in my college graduating class. And
30 when we went to Kansas City for our pre-induction physicals in June, he went in the bus
31 with us but since he was five years going through college, his deal was basically, “If you

1 pass your physical, you're going in right away." And he did pass his physical so my last
2 memory of Tom Stickney was waving goodbye to him as he was on a bus heading out to
3 basic training. And we went home—this was June of '69 and I had graduated college in
4 May of '69—so we went home to wait to be drafted but he got drafted right away. So
5 here he was, sitting behind me. And I knew he was in Vietnam. He'd been there, I don't
6 know, five months ahead of me or something and I just said, "Well, hi Tom, how are you
7 doing?" And he looked at me and said, "Do I know you?" And remember, I had lost
8 about sixty pounds. I went in the military about two hundred and thirty pounds and at
9 this time was weighing about a hundred and seventy. And I just made some remark like,
10 "Well, Tom, if that's the way you want to treat one of your hometown friends, that's fine
11 with me," and I just turned around because I knew I had him. I knew him but he didn't
12 know me. So he got up and came around and sat on the bunk facing me and he said
13 something like, "Well, I know the voice, but I don't know the face." And I just said,
14 "Well, Tom, that's okay, there's no problem here. I understand you don't know who I
15 am." His eyes just got real big and he goes, "Nooollller?" and I go, "Yeah, Tom, it's
16 me." And he just kind of fell over backwards on the bunk. He said, "I cannot believe
17 that we're meeting here together." And I said, "Yeah, Tom, it's a surprise, isn't it?" So
18 we buddied up together. I think he didn't go to Hawaii. He went someplace else, but we
19 kind of stayed together there for that day and he said, "Well, when I get back in, when I
20 get here before you do, I'll wait for you." So when I got back on R&R, he was there and
21 we had a time to spend a little bit, too. Then I went back to Chu Lai. He was up north, I
22 think, maybe with—I don't know if it was with the 9th or the 5th or somebody, but he was
23 up around the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) and he didn't go home then. He was pretty
24 short at that time. He only had a couple of months left. And I did see him when I got
25 back to Dodge City and it was interesting. When I got back home in Dodge City, I had
26 no clothes to wear and I wore my green class-A uniform pants and he was out in one of
27 the local beer taverns drinking a beer and he told me, "Noller, when you get home, look
28 me up and I'll buy you a beer." So I happened to walk in and Tom's sitting there and I
29 can recall him saying, "Gee, Noller, why don't you go buy you a pair of civilian pants?"
30 I said, "Well, Tom, I just home last night or something. I haven't had time to shopping
31 yet." But it was one of those kind of freakish deals. Would you ever guess that you

1 would meet up with a guy that you went to school with your whole life and here you are
2 in Vietnam and you end up going to R&R at the same time but you didn't know it? It
3 was also kind of comical because I knew him but he didn't know me.

4 RV: Did you guys ever talk again about Vietnam?

5 GN: I've seen him a time or two since but I left western Kansas and he stayed out
6 there. He's a distributor for Coors beer in a few counties out in western Kansas and I've
7 seen him at some functions that we both happened to be at, school functions or something
8 like that, but we never really kept up with each other, no.

9 RV: Well, Hawaii in 1970. Was this in '71?

10 GN: This was December 1970.

11 RV: Okay. What was it like being with your family after coming out of a war
12 zone?

13 GN: Well, one of the things that I remember, when I got back there I got a haircut.
14 And Fort DeRussy has always been a military R&R location and at that time they had
15 small buildings. Now they've got two big hotel towers but I remember going to get a
16 haircut and it was a woman barber. I thought, "Boy, what a switch from having one of
17 your buddies cut your hair because that's about all you can get to cut your hair and
18 walking into a barber shop and the woman there, a young woman barber is cutting your
19 hair." That just—it was sort of the extremes. What was it like a month ago and what was
20 it like right now? The other thing was sleeping in a bed. Having not slept in a real bed
21 for like five or six months with sheets on it—in fact, I think that I couldn't sleep in bed
22 and sometime during the night I got up and layed on the floor. I don't know if I took the
23 sheets off on the floor or if I just layed on the floor with a pillow. But I can remember
24 the next day, my mom saying something like, "Gary, what are you sleeping on the floor
25 for?" And I said, "I was sleeping on the floor because I've been sleeping on the ground
26 for the last five months. I can't get comfortable in bed." I think just the idea of being
27 able to walk into a shower and turn on a shower and getting hot and cold running water
28 and being able to take a shower for as long as you want—if you want to stay in there for
29 half an hour, you stay in there for half an hour because the best we could do for a shower
30 was put five gallons of cold water in a little canvas bag hanging off of a tree branch or
31 something and standing under it or going into a stream. Sometimes you could take a bath

1 and go into a stream and wash off in a stream. So having a shower just seemed odd. As
2 far as being in Honolulu, I enjoyed being there. We took some bus tours where you
3 could go down and pay your money and get on a bus tour. And I appreciated the fact that
4 it was allowing my parents, my dad in particular, an opportunity that he talked about as
5 long as I can remember about going. He called it Hawayuh. He said, "Someday I want
6 to go to Hawayuh." So we were in Hawayuh. I know my brother and my dad and I, we
7 took one of the sightseeing tours on a boat that went out to Pearl Harbor. My mom
8 wouldn't get on a boat. My mom was afraid of flying. She said, "If God wanted you to
9 fly he would have given you wings." She was afraid of anything. Swimming, I don't
10 think she ever swam in her whole life. "If God wanted you to get in the water he would
11 have made you a fish." So I can remember my dad and brother and I getting on a boat to
12 go out to Pearl Harbor and she sat on the end of the pier there and waited for us to come
13 back, which we did. But we would walk downtown. One of the things my mom did
14 enjoy doing was she'd say, "You guys go do what you want to do and I'll just go
15 downtown," because Fort DeRussy is right square in the middle of downtown Honolulu.
16 It's right on Waikiki Beach so you can go down the strip. There was a shopping center
17 fairly close by. I can remember going to the shopping center because I wanted to buy
18 some clothes because I think I only had one set of civilian clothes. We went down and I
19 may have bought a pair of shorts. This is December in Hawaii but it's like eighty
20 degrees. I can remember buying I think a 32-inch waist pair of pants or shorts and my
21 mom saying, "Gary, you haven't worn a 32-inch waist pants since you've been like in the
22 sixth grade," or something like that. She knew and I said, "Yeah." But I had lost about
23 sixty pounds from the time I went in. I think I went in the Army at 230 or 233 and at this
24 time I was probably 165 or 170. And my ribs were sticking out. I've got pictures when I
25 was in R&R. I call them my skinny pictures. My face was very drawn, my chin was
26 very pointy. Literally, you could count the ribs when I was standing up. I was six-foot
27 two, almost six-foot three, so standing up without a shirt on, you could count every rib in
28 me.

29 RV: Wow.

30 GN: So that comes from eating about one meal a day. If you got a meal a day it
31 would be one meal a day. But I had no problems after I got home of regaining that. I'm

1 probably about two hundred and sixty pounds today. But my momma raised a big boy but
2 it sure took it off me, being in the jungle for about a year.

3 RV: Did they ask you a lot about what you were doing over there in Vietnam?

4 GN: I don't recall talking about it. In fact, I'm going to say we didn't talk about
5 it. I don't know really ever talking very much at length with my parents about that. It
6 was one sentence here and one sentence there but really, I think an avoidance on my part
7 to say anything about it and probably an avoidance on their part to ask about it. I think
8 that if I wanted to talk about it they probably would but they were letting me take the
9 lead. And if I didn't bring it up to discuss it, they weren't going to bring it up and discuss
10 it either. It would be more technical stuff like, "Where are you at?" "Well, I'm still on
11 LZ Young or I'm at Mary Ann." "When does it look like you'll come home?" "Well,
12 everybody's staying pretty much a year but sometimes they'll let you come home a little
13 bit early. So it'll be about the first of June." Well, I ended up going home right at the
14 end of April of 1970 but it was more to deal with that than, "Oh gee, what's it like being
15 in the infantry in the jungle in a war?" We didn't talk about that.

16 RV: Did you ever talk to them about that when you got back?

17 GN: No, I've talked to some relatives some about some particular things. You
18 know, I had four uncles in World War II and I can remember one time we were at a
19 family gathering and my Uncle Allison, he was in Europe in World War II. In fact, he
20 was in the Battle of the Bulge and had two Purple Hearts. And somehow we got to
21 talking about kind of life in the Army. We didn't talk about combat, didn't talk about
22 people being shot or wounded or killed or stuff like that but, "What did you eat? What
23 did you sleep? How did you travel from point A to point B? Did anything funny ever
24 happen? Did you meet anybody famous?" That kind of stuff was more the line of the
25 discussion that we had than talking about war. It was more like, "What did you do when
26 you were in Europe?" "Well, one day we went to this little town and drank wine all day
27 got drunk," or something. There were more stories like that than stories about what was
28 going on in the war and in combat.

29 RV: Gary, let me ask you one more question before we break for today. I want to
30 go back to Vietnam and can you tell me a little bit about your impression of the country
31 itself and of Vietnamese civilians?

1 GN: Well, I think that the country, to me, is a beautiful country. I was born and
2 raised in western Kansas and had never really been a lot of places outside of western
3 Kansas so I pretty much thought the whole world was like western Kansas. I mean, you
4 see pictures of the ocean but you've never been to the ocean. You see pictures of the
5 mountains but you've never been to the mountains so it's somewhat hard to visualize and
6 understand. You see pictures of the jungle, you see movies about that, you see movies
7 about far off places and people but it doesn't really give you much to go on. The
8 landscape in Vietnam is very varied. Our battalion division headquarters was right on the
9 South China Sea and there was a huge beach there. In fact, when we went to the
10 American Division combat center, it's located on a beach at Chu Lai. It's like a beach
11 you'd find in Florida or a beach you'd find in California—a sandy beach. Yet, you could
12 go then across the coastal plain there and they had a lot of rice paddies it was fairly flat,
13 somewhat reminiscent of western Kansas but close enough to where you could see out
14 towards the west—you could see the mountains. And a lot of people said, "Oh, there's
15 no mountains in Vietnam." Well, call it what you want but I think some of these were
16 four thousand feet in height. They're not fourteen thousand feet in height like Pike's
17 Peak is but to go from the ocean and go ten miles or fifteen miles further inland and come
18 to a four thousand foot peak, you have to call that a mountain. Jungles, of course, you're
19 tropical. It rains a lot in very dense jungle. Walking around in a jungle, to me was like
20 being a tourist for the first time and going to New York City and walking around and
21 looking at the tall buildings. I was always amazed at some of the huge trees, trees that
22 could be ten foot in diameter and two hundred or three hundred foot in height and you
23 could stand beside this tree and look up and just almost can't see the top because the top
24 of this tree is so high. All of the different kinds of vegetation, all of this stuff that grows.
25 In western Kansas, we pretty much had sagebrush and yucca plants and buffalo grass and
26 that's what grew. That didn't grow very much, but in the jungle, anything that was there
27 grew and grew big and was plentiful. Rivers, we would cross rivers, we would cross
28 streams. During the monsoons these rivers would get tremendously huge. A lot of
29 rain—I'm from western Kansas where it rains seventeen inches a year. Well, you could
30 have seventeen inches in a week in monsoons in Vietnam. But you know, the country to
31 me, I never felt threatened by the country. The jungle didn't scare me. The Vietnamese

1 people, from what little I was exposed to them, I thought they were a very resourceful
2 people. They had to be resourceful people. They were poor people compared, you know,
3 economically they didn't have the resources we had so about anything we would throw
4 away as trash, probably ninety percent of our trash, in some way or other, they could pick
5 up and recycle it and reuse it. I know when I first got to my battalion area, for two or
6 three days I had to wait because my company was coming back in on a stand down. I got
7 put on trash detail so they'd give us a deuce and a half truck and we'd go around the
8 company area picking up trash that would be sitting around and we'd go out to the Chu
9 Lai trash dump and unload it. And they had civilians out there and as soon as we'd pull
10 up, they'd just rush the truck and we'd start picking stuff off and they would go through
11 and pick it up. And you might have somebody that was going through picking up boots.
12 Somebody might be picking up discarded clothing—shirts and pants. Somebody might
13 be picking up anything lumber—any type of wood. A wooden pallet or old two-by-four,
14 they'd be sorting out and they were there picking up lumber. Somebody might be
15 picking up metal. It could be metal sheeting, discarded fence post or pipe or something,
16 somebody might be picking up plastic, any type of plastic sheeting. So you'd have ten or
17 twelve people come up to the back of your truck and then they'd start pulling out these
18 various items and by the time you got done the size of your load was reduced by fifty or
19 seventy percent by these scavengers that were picking up. And then you'd see them
20 heading out along the road, Highway One. A lot of times they would carry their goods
21 on bicycles so you'd have an old woman, a sixty-year-old woman, pushing this bicycle.
22 She was a woman who's got twenty-five pieces of two-by-four lumber, anywhere from
23 three or four up to five or six foot in length that she had salvaged out of the Chu Lai trash
24 dump. So I was impressed by their resourcefulness. They had to. I was never afraid of
25 Vietnamese just because they were Vietnamese. I was intrigued, I think, probably more
26 than anything. I learned a little bit about their custom and their ways. Their language is
27 always interesting. They have a very singsong language. I never understood more than
28 about two words of it. The Vietnamese children going to school always looked very
29 proper. Like in grade school the boys would wear kind of a royal blue long pants with a
30 white shirt and the girls would wear a full-length ao dai, which is their native dress. The
31 boys' hair would all be trimmed very neatly. The girls' hair was always very long. They

1 had waist-length hair. You'd see them working the fields, sometimes very primitive.
2 Work in the rice paddy is very much labor intensive, planting each individual plant in the
3 rice paddy and the irrigation. A lot of times the way they could irrigate a field would be
4 they would have a bucket with a rope on either side and two people and they would dump
5 this bucket in a canal and then kind of whip it up over the dike and dump the water
6 inside. Cutting rice by hand with a rice knife, threshing it. Sometimes you'd go through
7 a town and they'd lay the rice out on the streets so when you'd run over it by trucks the
8 tires would mash out the grain from the stalk of the rice. Farming with an implement
9 being pulled by a water buffalo. So it was a very close-up look at people that had a lot
10 less than most Americans had. If they had a little, what we would probably call a one or
11 two bedroom shack of a house with two light bulbs in it, they were doing pretty good. So
12 I was impressed with the fact that they could make their life, they could make their living.
13 They had to work very hard and they didn't have a lot to show for it. It kind of reminded
14 me of some of my grandparents and great-grandparents that probably lived pretty close to
15 that same level a hundred and fifty years ago.

16 RV: Did your units ever take part in any kind of civic action?

17 GN: I'm sorry, I didn't hear that.

18 RV: Civic action with your unit—did you all ever go into a village and work with
19 the villagers to do something for them?

20 GN: Well, we had Medics that did that. I never did that but I know in our
21 battalion when we were at Mary Ann, there was—probably the closest village of any size
22 was Tien Phuoc, which was back to the east, again, closer to the coast. And I can
23 remember that they would take Medics over there, what they call a MEDCAP, a Medical
24 Civil Action Program, or civil action project or something. And they'd take Medics over
25 there and they would do what they could do out of a medic bag to give people attention.
26 Cuts and scrapes, you know. Maybe they had people with malaria. They certainly didn't
27 do any surgery or they didn't take x-ray machines with them or anything like that but
28 they did do some first aid type work with the Vietnamese as far as civil affairs goes. But
29 I was never involved in any of that.

30 RV: Okay. Well, Gary, why don't we go ahead and take a break for today?

31 GN: Okay.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Gary L. Noller
Conducted by Richard B. Verrone, Ph.D.
February 27, 2006
Transcribed by Mindy Moser

1 Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I am continuing my oral history
2 interview with Gary Noller. Today is February 27th, 2006. I am again in Lubbock,
3 Texas, and Gary is in Fort Worth. It is twelve minutes after nine o'clock, Central
4 Standard Time. Gary, we left off basically at the end of 1970, moving into 1971 and
5 you're back with Headquarters Company and we discussed your duties there. And I
6 wanted to ask you just some general questions about what your observations were on
7 these subjects. One, could you give me your opinion on the leadership in Vietnam?
8 What did you witness and what did you think about overall leaders?

9 Gary Noller: Well, I was most familiar of course with company level and some
10 field grade Platoon Leaders, Company Commanders, Battalion Commander and staff
11 within the battalion. I did occasionally get involved in some briefings that were given for
12 the Brigade Commander and maybe one time I saw the Division Commander and that
13 was essentially because after November of '70 I was radio operator in the Battalion
14 tactical Operations Center. And my reflections on leadership were that I felt they were
15 competent. I never really had any problems or difficulties or questions. There were
16 those that were good, there were those that were better. Occasionally there was someone
17 that was very rare that I did not think much of. But overall my impression was that the
18 leadership was competent leadership. Maybe I was just lucky to be in a time and a place
19 where there was competent leadership. I don't know if that existed throughout the whole
20 war in every particular unit but I've got favorable feelings about the Company and the
21 Battalion Commanders that I worked under, as well as NCOs. A lot of the NCOs, in

1 particular E5s and E6s were draftees or maybe two-year people, did a great job. I had
2 two or three different 1st Sergeants in my company. I think very highly of them, also.

3 RV: Okay. Would you mind discussing this topic, which comes up a lot when
4 people are talking about war and that is courage and bravery? Could you make some
5 comments on what you witnessed and your opinions on that?

6 GN: Well, I think that that's probably the crucial test. If I had any anxiety
7 whatsoever about my personal performance, it would be around whether or not you'd
8 have the courage that you needed to have to do the job that was required. And I think on
9 a personal level, I learned a lot about myself. I don't want to hold out that I was perfect
10 in any way, shape or form. I think I look back and say that there were some things that I
11 had done that I go, "Oh gee, did I really do that?" From the standpoint of degree of
12 difficulty and degree of risk. Likewise, there were a couple of occasions where I look
13 back and I say, "You know, I really should have done better. I should have done more
14 than what I did." I think there's a huge fear factor. Very definitely literally life and death
15 is on the line. You can see that. There is evidence of that all the time. People are getting
16 wounded, people are getting killed, not necessarily on a daily basis, certainly within the
17 company level, but on the battalion level I don't think we escaped a period of a few
18 weeks without having casualties. The company I was in was pretty lucky. We didn't
19 have as many casualties as many of the other companies but I did see acts of courage,
20 sometimes subtle, very subtle what somebody might do. And then other occasions you
21 could make a movie about it. We discussed previously like helicopter crews and
22 helicopter pilots and what they would do to come in for support of us on the ground.
23 Maybe it was in taking wounded people out or bringing in supplies. Just landing in a
24 postage stamp LZ cut out of jungle where the rotors on a helicopter might take up fifty
25 feet and you give them a sixty foot circle to land in and off a few feet this way or that
26 way and the chopper might go down. Pilots that—extractions of wounded or injured
27 people with a jungle penetrator where they'd have to hover in one spot for ten minutes or
28 fifteen minutes while they send a cable down to hook onto a guy to pick him up out of the
29 jungle. And I've often thought as to what kind of guts do you have to have to be a
30 chopper pilot and position your helicopter right above the trees and just sit there for
31 fifteen minutes, not knowing whether or not an enemy is sitting down there with it could

1 even a single shot rifle. But a bullet put in the right place and that helicopter's coming
2 down. And I think that you hear a lot of stories about courage but you don't hear nearly
3 as many of the stories that there are to tell. There are some famous stories but there are
4 probably a lot of very courageous acts that take place that maybe only one or two people
5 know about, the guy that did it and one guy that saw him do it. Those two people are the
6 only two people that know what really happened and it will never be put in print and it
7 will never be published. There will be no books or movies, maybe never even talked
8 about. Those two guys know it and the only place that's ever going to appear is in their
9 memory. I think it's a very telling time, individually. It's a test. This is not a practice.
10 This is not a movie or a play that you're in. This is real life and I just really have a huge
11 admiration for many, many people for the courage that they displayed and what I was
12 able to see.

13 RV: When you go to reunions now, do you all talk about this courage or these
14 things, these intangibles, not necessarily an incident but just what you heard, what you
15 saw, what you felt about these topics? I'm wondering if this stuff comes up.

16 GN: Well, it does on occasion. I think one thing about it is, and probably a
17 misconception about veterans going to reunions is you go back and that's all you do.
18 You try to relive those times or you want to relive them and you constantly tell stories.
19 Well, it's not constant but it's not going to be something that is forbidden that you can't
20 talk about but it would be like if you went back to a high school reunion and the only
21 thing that you talked about was being in high school. No, you're not going to go back to
22 a high school reunion and just talk about high school. You're going to go back to a high
23 school reunion, you're going to talk about high school but you're going to talk about
24 everything else. "Where are you at now? What's taken place in the time that you've
25 been in high school to where you're at now?" So going to reunions, there are times
26 where that's discussed and that's talked about. You might bring up a particular person's
27 name and discuss something about them or an incident or something that happened at one
28 time in the past. A lot of times it's more what I call technical in nature in which
29 somebody's trying to remember something that happened and they've kind of got a fog
30 about what happened and who was involved, so they might inquire. They'd say, "Gary,
31 do you remember that day when we were up on top of this hill and a helicopter came in

1 and the guy had a problem doing this or that? What really happened there? What was
2 the nature of that? I can't remember." So a lot of that is just kind of answering questions
3 that people might have that are trying to put pieces of this big puzzle back together, more
4 than it is of sitting back and slapping each other on the back and saying, "Oh gee, we
5 really had a great time, didn't we?" And I think that some of it is certainly remembering
6 people that were lost, certainly remembering people that did outstanding acts and so it
7 will come up. But I think reunions are a whole lot more about everything that's going on
8 in our lives. The common thread is that we're veterans and we served together but I
9 don't think that the only thing—in fact, I know it's not the only thing that we get to
10 discuss and talk about is our time in the service together.

11 RV: Right. Is anybody there at the reunions that was actually in your unit?

12 GN: Oh yeah. I've met people. The reunion I go to, to see people that was in my
13 unit is held every March. It's been held about the last fifteen years and Firebase Mary
14 Ann was attacked by a sapper unit on March 29th, 1971 and it resulted in high casualties
15 for the battalion. Charlie Company was the company that was on the firebase providing
16 security. There were like thirty US soldiers killed and probably another fifty or sixty
17 wounded so we had almost a hundred casualties that took place during that attack. About
18 fifteen years ago, a couple of the veterans from Charlie Company got together and began
19 having a reunion and memorial service mainly for those veterans that were on the
20 firebase at that time but it's kind of evolved more into the 1st of the 46th Infantry Battalion
21 reunion. And that's held generally March 27th and March 28th of every year. Every year
22 so far it's been down around Fort Knox, Kentucky. And I go to those reunions and one
23 year there were about ten or twelve veterans from B Company. I was always assigned to
24 B Company. Even when I went to Mary Ann as a radio operator, I was attached to
25 Headquarters Headquarters Company but never assigned to Headquarters Headquarters
26 Company. So we might get thirty or forty, maybe at most fifty veterans there. One year I
27 probably had served with about ten of them and some of the ones that were there were the
28 first time I'd seen them in like thirty years.

29 RV: What's that like?

30 GN: Well, it's kind of interesting in a way because when we meet and talk it's
31 like it wasn't thirty years ago. It just seems almost impossible that even though we

1 hadn't seen each other in that length of time, in a way you just pick up like it was last
2 week or last month. The time span is almost negligible because they still sound the same.
3 They look different. Everybody looks older, obviously, but the personality, the character,
4 the things that you remember about the, the way they were pretty much is the same. For
5 example, I generally meet Dennis Powell there. He was a Lieutenant, the first Company
6 Commander I carried the radio for and in Vietnam he was probably about a hundred and
7 fifty pounds and now he's probably two hundred and fifty pounds so he's gained a lot in
8 weight but his voice, his manner or speaking, his sense of humor, the way he thinks, it's
9 all the same. It's just thirty years later so you kind of talk about what happened in the last
10 thirty years. But I really enjoy meeting people. It's enjoyable for me to know that I
11 know where they're at and most all of them are doing very well. They've done very well
12 and if I want to call a guy up on the telephone and just chat, I'll call him up on the
13 telephone and maybe it was three years ago since I've talked to the guy but it's like it was
14 yesterday. And you just kind of pick up. It's very easy to pick up. And it gives me a
15 certain sense of well-being to know that so many of the people that I knew are still
16 around and they're doing okay and if I want to get in touch with them and just chat, we
17 can do that.

18 RV: Could you make some comments on how you all dealt with the fear, the
19 death, kind of hanging over your heads on a day-to-day basis? One thing that I hear from
20 veterans is that they used humor to get them through the days, through the weeks. Could
21 you make some comments on that?

22 GN: Well, I think that everybody had their own particular coping mechanism or
23 whatever. To me it was pretty much take it day by day. I think that having close friends,
24 and by close, I mean maybe two or three people that you were physically closest to, you
25 were around each other all the time, you got to know real well, you kind of supported
26 each other. And in the group there's always somebody that's going to be kind of the
27 class clown, somebody that's going to find humor and use humor. Probably in the group
28 I was with that was Hubert Crowder, Sonny Crowder. We called him Critter, and he was
29 always chattering about something and wisecracking and making up jokes and playing
30 little practical jokes on one another. And there were things probably that in any other
31 situation they probably wouldn't be funny. You could probably tell somebody a funny

1 story and they'd go, "I don't see anything funny about that." I go, "I laughed so God
2 dang hard that tears were coming down my cheeks that was so funny." But I think you're
3 looking for any type of release, any kind of relief that you can have. I can remember
4 particularly when we were on the firebase at Mary Ann in the evening, like the last half
5 hour before sunset, typically we'd be done with our chores that we would do. We'd have
6 evening meal out of the way; everybody would be getting ready to set up toward their
7 guard duty that they had that night. We had the radios, the field radios, and maybe in the
8 company we had ten or twelve of those radios and they would kind of be a little—a
9 couple of guys would get to cutting up back and forth on the radio and making up stories
10 and telling things so people would just kind of gather around the radio and listen to the
11 chatter and if you had something to throw into it, some wisecrack or something like that,
12 and along about dark the Company Commander would come on and say, "Okay guys,
13 knock it off. You've had enough fun."

14 RV: Can you give me some examples of that?

15 GN: Well, you know, I'm trying to think. I can't really think of what might have
16 been said. I can remember more some kind of the pranks or practical jokes that were
17 pulled. One in particular that stands out—we were on Mary Ann and we'd always get
18 care packages, we called them, from home. It would be little boxes of stuff that the
19 relatives and friends would send and it had a lot of food items in it and there were some
20 things that were particularly in high demand. I can remember chili, any kind of canned
21 chili, something that was spicy, something that had meat in it. And we had gotten our
22 supply and it was very typical that when somebody opened up something to eat that it
23 would be shared. One reason is you didn't really eat that much. You really got down to
24 where the volume of food that you ate every day was fairly small so if you opened up a
25 can of chili, you probably couldn't eat the can of chili and we had no way to preserve it.
26 There was no refrigerators, there was really no ice that we could count on getting so if
27 you opened up a can of chili you shared it with everybody or you just ate the whole can.
28 And we were able to get some hot dogs and bread from the Mess Hall. Don't ask me
29 how, we just got them. So we were going to make chilidogs and we'd make a little fire
30 there on the ground on the firebase and were roasting these wieners and putting them
31 in—it probably wasn't hotdog buns, it was probably some bread that we sliced. And then

1 everybody got about a spoon of this chili to spoon on top of that hot dog. There were
2 probably half a dozen of us sitting around and in the bunch was a brand new Lieutenant.
3 I don't remember his name. I don't even know if he was eventually assigned to our
4 company or if he just came in with our company for a few days for training. But we were
5 sitting around, probably just about dark, eating these chili dogs and of course we gave
6 one to this new Lieutenant and he started to take a bite and a chili bean fell off of that hot
7 dog onto the ground into the dirt. And kind of in unison, all of the rest of us just stopped
8 and stared at him. And he saw us staring at him and I think Sonny Crowder started a
9 pitch on him and he said, "Lieutenant, you're going to have to learn the rules here in
10 Vietnam and one of the rules in Vietnam is you don't waste food that's been sent to you
11 from home. Relatives spend a lot of time and money to go out and buy this food and
12 send it over here and it's really a luxury and a delicacy to get this and it took a lot of
13 work and effort for us to go get bread and to go get these hotdogs and fix these up and
14 we're kind enough to let you have one. And first thing you do is this chili bean drops
15 down on the floor and that's just not showing good behavior." Something to that extent.
16 The lieutenant looked at us and boy, we were just as stone faced as we could be and he
17 reached down and picked that bean up off the ground and put it in his mouth and ate it.
18 Well, when he did that we just all burst out laughing. We were just rolling on the ground
19 laughing, and he goes, "What's so funny?" We said, "You didn't have to do that. We
20 were just scamming you. We were pulling your leg." But we did that all so well and so
21 seriously and the peer pressure—this little story that Sonny Crowder pitched him about
22 how he was breaking etiquette by dropping this bean on the ground that came all the way
23 from home, and he literally reached down and picked that up and ate that. And of course
24 it was hilarious. It was very funny. I think little things like that you kind of made up as
25 you went along to have some fun and help kind of break the tension. You know, it was
26 about the only thing we had. If we had entertainment at all, we had to entertain
27 ourselves.

28 RV: Can you give any examples of what the radio chatter would be like?

29 GN: Well I think that it was just a lot of made up stuff. I know one night—Mary
30 Ann sat on a hill right next to a river. It was a fairly prominent river, the Song Trahn, T-
31 r-a-h-n, (Song Tranh) and I know one night the guys were making up stories about seeing

1 Indians in canoes coming down the river and pirate ships in the river and stuff like that.
2 The whole thing ended up people making up stories about something coming down the
3 river. And it was all just made up stuff. A lot of times people would tell stories about
4 somebody. "You know what I heard about Sergeant Jones today? I heard Sergeant
5 Jones, when he was back home, he cleaned crap out of coo-coo clocks," or something
6 like that. They would just come up with some ridiculous story about something or
7 somebody and then another guy in the next bunker down the road, he'd get on the radio
8 and he'd say, "Oh no, that's not him. What I heard about him was something else." And
9 so you just start kind of razzing each other, making up stories about people or things that
10 are comic.

11 RV: Did you all ever receive any radio broadcasts from the enemy, from North
12 Vietnam or from the Viet Cong?

13 GN: No, I don't remember anything like that. I think there were times where we
14 could tune in radio stations that were obviously Asian but they were probably regular
15 commercial stations and of course we didn't care. We couldn't understand the language
16 and care about the music so you'd just kind of tune the radio in and you'd pick it up and
17 know it would probably be Vietnamese or something coming over from Laos. I don't
18 know. But we never did listen to it.

19 RV: How about American music or entertainment via the radio?

20 GN: Well, you could have radios. Typically we didn't have them in the field but
21 on the firebase, Armed Forces Vietnam Network provided a variety of different music. I
22 know quite a bit of the time on Mary Ann when I was working in the Battalion TOC at
23 night, I didn't have a radio but another radio operator in there, the artillery radio operator,
24 he had a little radio and we'd sit and that would be sitting there playing on the shelf all
25 night long, just listening to whatever music. In fact, you only got one station and that
26 was AFVN so whatever they put on you listened to.

27 RV: Did you all have any pets back on the LZ?

28 GN: Well, there were dogs up there. I never had a pet but there were a couple of
29 dogs that I think maybe somebody brought them out from Chu Lai. I don't think they
30 were out that far on their own but I think somebody kind of picked them up, the kind of
31 mongrel or mutt type dogs, and they wandered around. And you called them over to you

1 and they came over to you and if you wanted to play with them you could. But I don't
2 remember I had any particular interest in those dogs.

3 RV: Okay.

4 GN: I think somebody—it seems like maybe there was monkey that somebody
5 tried to make a pet out of. That either happened or I just read about that happening.
6 There wasn't a lot of pets.

7 RV: Well, let's take a look at what you just mentioned a little while ago. That's
8 the March sapper attack. Can you tell me about that night?

9 GN: Well, towards the end of March, I got orders to go to Chu Lai for a
10 promotion board. I was E4, which is a Specialist, 4th Class, and it was pretty typical that
11 after you got up to about ten months in country or so, you could go to promotion board so
12 I was selected to go in with about twenty-five other people in the battalion. They came
13 from all companies and we had to go to Chu Lai and get cleaned up. They made us do
14 some little tasks, which I don't know if that was part of the promotion board or not, but I
15 can remember filling sandbags; I can remember doing police calls. And then we get
16 called in on the day of the board. I know there was an oral exam. I don't remember if we
17 had to take written tests or not. Maybe we did. But one of the things was an oral exam in
18 which they had about five or six officers and they set up at a table inside a room next to
19 each other and then there was like a chair in front of them and that was it. There was six
20 officers and there was you. And you went in and sat down on the chair and they would
21 ask questions and you responded to the questions and then depending upon how you went
22 through that exam as well as anything else that they may have taken in—they ranked you
23 on a list from like top to bottom and then made their announcements. So I was back—I
24 think that was on March 26th, 1971. I went through that and then went back to Mary Ann
25 the next day, which was March 27th and got back there probably early afternoon—one
26 o'clock or two o'clock. And when I got there and reported into the TOC, the Tactical
27 Operations Center, and I said, "Okay, I'm back, what schedule am I going to work?"
28 They said, "Well, we're still working on that. We're going to go over to LZ Mildred and
29 set up some radios over there because we're beginning to deactivate Mary Ann." At that
30 particular point in time with the Vietnamization process that was going on, the 1st Marine
31 Division was north of us at Da Nang and they were being sent home, which meant that

1 somebody had to go in and provide security for Da Nang Airbase and all of the
2 installations there. So as the Marines were being pulled out, they were going to shift
3 elements of the Americal Division further north. My battalion, the 1st of the 46th was
4 chosen as one of the battalions to go up there. So to do that we had to move all of our
5 stuff at Mary Ann to go to Da Nang and basically close, deactivate, and tear Mary Ann
6 down. So one of the first steps there was to establish a firebase that the South
7 Vietnamese could use. Mary Ann was decided that it was too remote. It was one the
8 west side of the Song Tranh River and during monsoons the river was impassable. The
9 only way you could get to Mary Ann during monsoons was by helicopter, whereas if you
10 went on the other side of the river to Mildred, you could reach that firebase by road. So
11 the idea was to go to Mildred, set up that firebase, and in the meantime then move to Da
12 Nang. So they had Alpha Company already at Mildred and they needed it to start taking
13 battalion over there. The battalion leadership, the Battalion Commander and all of his
14 staff would go to Mildred and then they would start in earnest in tearing Mary Ann down.
15 In fact they had already started to take some of the artillery off Mary Ann and I believe
16 they started to maybe take out some other equipment. Well, when I heard that they were
17 going to go to Mildred, I volunteered. I said, "If you need somebody to go over to
18 Mildred and set radios up over there, I'll go over there and do that." And the guy I was
19 talking to was Sergeant Myers. Sergeant Myers was the head RTO for the battalion at
20 that time and I was second. And typically he would work days and I would work nights.
21 I would be in charge of nighttime; he'd be in charge of daytime. I remember him telling
22 me, he said, "Gary, you don't have to go over there. We've got some other RTOs here
23 that we can send over there. There's no reason for you to go there." The fellow that he
24 was going to send over was a PFC and I remember arguing the point, saying "Well, he
25 hasn't been here very long. He doesn't really know what we need to do. I'm pretty
26 familiar with the operation. I can go over there, I can work with the Commo Sergeant
27 E7—Sergeant 1st Class Wade." I said, "We can get this all set up and get it running."
28 And the reason I wanted to go is because if I went over there then I'd probably be
29 working days and wouldn't be working nights and I'd kind of be in charge of the
30 operation over there at Mildred until he came over, which could be two or three days
31 later. I don't know. So finally he said, "All right, fine. If you want to go to Mildred, you

1 go to Mildred.” So about four o’clock in the afternoon, I got on the helicopter with
2 Sergeant Wade and we went over and right away got generators set up and got what we
3 called the big radios, which were—I think they were PRC-46s or something. They’re not
4 the portable radio that you carry on your back. They’re a radio like you’d mount in a
5 jeep or mount in a truck or mount in a tank. And we got the radios set up, a couple of
6 them, and everything running probably about midnight. We were in a little eight-by-
7 eight connex, which is a steel shipping container. That’s kind of what we set up. About
8 three guys could sit in there shoulder-to-shoulder with a table and the radio sitting up on
9 the shelf and so I went out at midnight and slept under the stars. I didn’t even have a
10 hooch or didn’t have a tent. There was cot there so I can remember laying down on that
11 cot and looking up and seeing a clear sky above me. And then about Lieutenant Smith
12 came over. He was, I believe, one of the staff officers from the battalion that went over
13 there. He told me, he said, “Sergeant Noller, Specialist Noller, you need to get up and get
14 your radios on. Mary Ann’s being attacked. We need to find out what’s going on.” So
15 we started generators up and got the radios going and I started trying to make contact.
16 We could hear the explosions off. It was a mortar attack on Mary Ann. We could hear
17 explosions. We had no radio contact with them for a while and finally I got a hold of an
18 RTO on Mary Ann. His last name is Tarnay. And he came on the radio and I remember
19 saying something to him like, “We’ve been trying to get a hold of you for a while. You
20 need to stay by your radio so we can talk to you so we can find out what’s going on so we
21 know what we can do to help.” And he came back and he said, “Well, the TOC is on fire
22 and the whole area’s full of tear gas.” Well, when we heard that the TOC was on fire and
23 there was tear gas in the area then we just kind of looked at each other in disbelief. It’s
24 not just a mortar attack. We thought it was just an attack where they’d shoot some
25 mortars in and that would be it. But that pretty much told us that the enemy had
26 infiltrated and come in through the wire. So we didn’t know what to do. We’re sitting
27 four miles away on the other side of the river. It’s not like everybody could pack up and
28 be over there and help out and take off at a run and reach there. It’s too far to reach. So
29 we got on the radio to brigade, 196th Light Infantry Brigade headquarters at Hawk Hill
30 and basically told them, “Mary Ann’s under attack and we don’t know what’s going on.
31 We can hear the bombardment.” I don’t remember if we could see flashes of light or not

1 but we could certainly hear it. They had a helicopter up there that was a flare ship. This
2 was probably a Huey helicopter that they could drop flares out of for light and they said,
3 “Well, we can send a flare ship out.” So we said, “Okay, fine,” so the helicopter took off
4 from Hawk Hill and probably about ten or fifteen minutes later it was out there. Since we
5 had the radios running on Mildred, I was talking to this helicopter pilot and when he got
6 out there close he said, “We don’t need the flares on Mary Ann. The whole place is on
7 fire and there’s plenty of light.” He said, “I’m going to go in and set down and see if they
8 have any wounded that need to be evacuated.” So that was the first real information that
9 we got and understood the severity of the attack on Mary Ann, was from the helicopter
10 pilot when he said, “The whole place is on fire.” And there were bunkers built around
11 the perimeter. I think there were about fourteen or fifteen bunkers that had been built
12 back in Chu Lai and they were maybe eight foot by eight foot square and seven foot tall
13 and made out of timber, like four inch thick timber, four by twelves, kind of very heavy
14 sturdy bunkers. And what was happening was the enemy stormed the base, came through
15 the wire under their own mortar barrage to include tear gas and as they came through the
16 base, anybody that they saw, they engaged. It was small arms fire and very damaging,
17 the satchel charges. They would take a satchel charge, which would be like a little
18 canvas bag with an explosive in it and they’d throw this satchel charge up into a bunker
19 and blow the bunker up. There would be combustibles in there, probably paper and
20 cardboard and clothing and start that on fire and then when they got a fire going in that
21 bunker it would start the wood on fire that the bunker was made out of. And a lot of the
22 bunkers were basically just burned. So the attack occurred, it started about 2 am and
23 lasted about two hours, until about 4 am and during that early morning hours we were
24 getting any and all help that we could get—helicopters. So different helicopters would
25 come on station and they had nobody to talk to on Mary Ann. The only people they
26 could talk to is they talked to us at Mildred. Then they would go out and maybe they’d
27 pick up wounded and so the chopper would go in and then he’d take off and then he’d
28 call in and he’d say, “Well, I just picked up six wounded.” So we were getting reports
29 back on how the dust-offs were going on getting the medical evacuations. We really
30 didn’t know much until I think finally maybe seven or eight o’clock in the morning.
31 They finally got a radio working on Mary Ann to where I could talk with people, the

1 radio operator on Mary Ann and they were in no shape at that point to conduct the
2 business of the battalion so they pretty much shifted the battalion operations to Mildred.
3 Colonel Doyle, our Battalion Commander was wounded so he was dusted off. All of the
4 officers in Charlie Company were either killed or wounded. I don't know if we had any
5 battalion staff officers that were not wounded. I don't know if we had any officers on
6 Mary Ann. There may have been one or two but if they were not wounded they were
7 directing efforts to take care of the people that were wounded. They weren't in a position
8 to direct the companies that were in the field. So that took pretty much all that day up
9 and we got up like at two o'clock in the morning when that attack happened and we
10 stayed up I think until midnight before we shut the radios back down.

11 RV: Was it difficult for you to not take more action? Did you wish you were able
12 to help?

13 GN: Well, when we finally found out pretty much what had happened, and that
14 was probably midmorning of the 28th, they did come to Mildred and some of the people
15 at Mildred went back to Mary Ann. And I know I asked them, I said, "I want to go back
16 to Mary Ann," because I didn't know—some of the radio operators on Mary Ann were
17 wounded. Nolan Bingham, who was a guy that I went through training at Fort Knox with
18 and we were in B Company together, he was now a radio operator on Mary Ann, he got
19 wounded. Sergeant Myers—I can't remember if he got wounded or not. He may have.
20 But I know we had some of the RTOs there at the TOC that were gone so when they said,
21 "We're bringing a chopper in and we're going to load up..." I don't know if they gave
22 names or what. "We need some people there. People that you don't need on Mildred, we
23 want to take them back to Mary Ann because we need help up there." So I said, "I'll go
24 back to Mary Ann," and they said, "No, we're essentially running the communications
25 for the battalion right now out of Mildred and you're the only RTO we've got so you're
26 staying." And at that time, Charlie Company was on Mary Ann and there would have
27 been elements of Echo Company, that's your Mortar Platoon. But we had B Company in
28 the field, D Company was in the field, and A Company was in the field. A Company was
29 at Mildred, but B Company and D Company were still out there so they still needed to
30 have their link with the outside world come through battalion radio. So at that point in
31 time, that was me at Mildred. They immediately decided to take Delta Company to Mary

1 Ann, so we had to set up that piece of business where the helicopters came out and picked
2 up Delta Company. Delta Company had to go to an LZ if they weren't at one and get
3 picked up to go to Mary Ann because Charlie Company was extremely severely hit,
4 probably fifty percent or better casualties. Captain Knight, the Charlie Company
5 Commander was killed and I think of their three Platoon Leaders, a couple of them were
6 killed. And anybody left in Charlie Company; I think they were taken back to Chu Lai,
7 just to make sure that they got medical examinations. So Delta Company went right
8 away to Mary Ann that day. Alpha Company stayed at Mildred and B Company was out
9 in the field for whatever use. I don't know, they may have just sat still. They may have
10 just been told, "Okay, find a place and just sit and we'll figure out if we need to use you."
11 There was still a lot of questions right away as to whether that was the end of it or was
12 the enemy going to come back again the next night. Is this a precursor to something
13 bigger like they're going to attack every company in the field? They know where
14 everybody's at and they hit Mary Ann first because that's your nerve center and then
15 they're going to come to Mildred and they're going to take care of us at Mildred and they
16 know where B Company is and they're going to go get them and give them the same
17 treatment. We didn't really know.

18 RV: Was it surprising that this had happened some place that you were very
19 familiar with?

20 GN: Well, I had been on Mary Ann essentially my whole tour because the first
21 place I went to with the battalion was Mary Ann. We left Chu Lai and landed on Mary
22 Ann. It was a top of a hilltop that was a former Montagnard cornfield that they had put a
23 bombing strike on and my first night on Mary Ann there was no concertina wire up. We
24 were just sitting on top of this hill. And one of the first jobs I had was to go out and start
25 putting concertina wire up to build a perimeter and that was in probably the middle of
26 June of '70. So from June of '70 till March of '71 it's the only firebase that I ever spent
27 any time on other than just a few weeks, maybe two or three weeks at LZ Young between
28 Thanksgiving and Christmas of '70. Nobody thought that Mary Ann would come under
29 this type of an attack. If you'd sat back and said, "Well what do you think is going to
30 happen?" "Oh, well, you know, they may go out and set up a mortar tube and shoot a
31 few mortars up here just to harass us or maybe they'll shoot some RPGs in. It'll just be

1 harassment.” There was certainly no thought—I never had a thought that the enemy
2 would launch a sapper attack and bring in, they figured as many as a hundred, sappers to
3 storm the firebase to try to essentially destroy the base. There had been no enemy attack
4 on that firebase the whole time I was there. I asked people this, I said, “How many times
5 did Mary Ann get mortared before March 28th?” And they go, “I don’t know how
6 many.” I go, “I don’t remember a time.” I don’t remember one mortar round coming in
7 from the enemy. “How many times did they fire a machine gun at Mary Ann?” I don’t
8 remember any. “How many times did they shoot RPGs or rockets at Mary Ann?” It’s
9 like that wasn’t the target because it was so far out in reality that they’d go around.
10 They’d say, “We want to go in to more important places than Mary Ann. We’ll avoid
11 you. You can be a pain in the butt but we’ll avoid you because our real target is further
12 inland and further towards the coast than where you’re at.” So we had no attacks. Other
13 firebases did. LZ Professional, which was the battalion’s firebase before Mary Ann—LZ
14 Professional went through some attacks. There were firebases to the north of us, up
15 around Camp Douglass, Firebase Siberia—Siberia had been attacked, almost a siege,
16 where they’d be attacked daily for a period of time. But Mary Ann never was touched
17 and then it’s like when it was touched it was touched in a very big way. So was it a
18 surprise? Yes it was. It was very much a surprise. You know, there was a failure of
19 intelligence. I was gone a couple of days because I went to that promotion board. Like, I
20 was gone probably the 25th, 26th, 27th but there was nothing that I ever remember leading
21 up to that point where there was any kind of alert or warning. You know, “You better be
22 careful, we think there’s a sapper unit out there and we think Mary Ann’s their target and
23 it’s probably going to happen in the next ten days.” I mean, that would be the best
24 intelligence you would get. I don’t think you would get intelligence that would say,
25 “Okay, at two o’clock tomorrow morning they’re going to attack you.” But I don’t
26 remember any type of intelligence that was provided to us. Likewise, I consider it to be
27 an intelligence failure on the enemy’s part, too, because we were packing up to leave. A
28 month later, we would have done their job for them. We would have destroyed the
29 firebase and left ourselves. I don’t think they knew we were leaving because if they
30 knew we were leaving they’d say, “Hey, we’ll just let these guys out. They’ll be gone in
31 another month and they’re not going to be out here operating anymore. They’re going to

1 Da Nang. They're going forty miles to the north." So it was very devastating and I
2 stayed about three or four more days on Mildred until they were able to get reestablished
3 on Mary Ann. They got a new Battalion Commander, Colonel Tate came in and I think
4 he was there—I don't know if he came in on the day of the 28th. He may have. The
5 attack happened at like 2 am. He may have been there before the end of the day on the
6 28th or he was certainly there by the 29th. And they had to get some things put back
7 together to where they had generators running and they could get the radios running again
8 and get some critical repairs done on some fighting positions. But probably by April 1st
9 or 2nd, Mary Ann took the battalion back over as far as the communications go. And I've
10 got records from archives, a fellow that was in the battalion got that to where it shows.
11 They have a daily staff journal, which is basically your logbook. Everything that
12 happens, you write down. And strangely enough, nothing shows for the month of March
13 from March 1 to March 28 and then on March 28 you can get that record and that's the 1st
14 of the 46th Infantry, LZ Mildred. And all of those entries are my entries for like three
15 days and then finally, I think it's April 1st or April 2nd, we actually show two logs. We
16 show a log being generated at Mildred and a log being generated at Mary Ann. And then
17 I think the next day there's no more log at Mildred. I was on the last helicopter that left
18 Mildred. We ran the radios up until the last group of five people jumped on the
19 helicopter and whatever we left at Mildred we put in a big pile. We had some drums of
20 gasoline and some other supplies and stuff which we couldn't move out and I remember
21 the last thing that happened is they brought a rocket gunship in and blew up a big pile of
22 supplies and stuff that was sitting on the ground at Mildred and we went back to Mary
23 Ann.

24 RV: What did it look like after this kind of attack?

25 GN: Well, I think probably the biggest thing was those wooden bunkers. The
26 TOC on Mary Ann was about halfway in the ground. It was not fully in the ground but
27 when you walked into the TOC, you walked down about four steps. So the ground level
28 was maybe three feet or four feet when you walked down. When they built that TOC
29 they had a bulldozer come in and they scooped a hole in the ground and then they built
30 this out of wooden timbers. It's like the supports were twelve-inch by twelve-inch
31 wooden timbers and you made up a framework and then the sidewalls were made out of

1 four-inch by twelve-inch wooden timbers. And when they got that built and they shoved
2 dirt back in around the outside and then they had a big piece of rubber, like a big rubber
3 tarp that they layed down over the roof to waterproof it and then you sandbagged around
4 that. And that was maybe thirty feet by forty feet. That may have been a thousand
5 square feet and it was divided up into rooms. The radio room was in one corner then you
6 had kind of a conference room, briefing room in the other half of that side and then across
7 the hallway were sleeping quarters for the battalion staff. The Battalion Commander,
8 they maybe had ten foot by ten foot rooms and the Battalion Commander and probably
9 one or two Captains and maybe one or two Lieutenants and so they threw satchel charges
10 in there and started a fire. So that entire structure burned down. All that was left was just
11 like if a wooden building burns down and burns completely there's some metal things,
12 like there was a safe in there that they kept secret documents in. The safe didn't burn so
13 the safe was sitting there, maybe metal chairs were there and maybe some metal—the
14 radios, the metal part of the radios didn't burn. But typically everything else is just
15 burned. So you go up and you've kind of got this hole in the ground filled with ashes and
16 burned up metal stuff. And that was like totally destroyed, that thing. There was just
17 really nothing left. And some of the bunkers out on the perimeter burned completely.
18 Some of the bunkers were blown up where you could tell that they had thrown satchel
19 charges in there and they blew the walls out. And lumber, these four by twelve planks
20 would be laying scattered around and the roofs would be caved in. They put sandbags up
21 on the roofs so when they blew it up it blew the support wall out so the roof would cave
22 in and the sandbags would fall into the bunker. Practically every big bunker was
23 damaged in some way, either totally destroyed or at least blown up to where it really isn't
24 functional. They had a Mess Hall there and it was destroyed. I think a medical aide
25 station and I think it got destroyed. Artillery had their Fire Direction Control Centers, the
26 FDC, they received damage. It was pretty comprehensive. I think maybe one 155-
27 millimeter artillery gun got destroyed. Pretty widespread.

28 RV: It sounds like it was very, very intense, very deadly, and I don't think people
29 realize how intense a sapper attack could be. Does anybody know how many attackers
30 there were, approximately?

1 GN: Well, I've heard reports that it could have been as many as a hundred. I've
2 heard other reports that put it at less than that. I mean, it's known. You can go back and
3 go through historical documents and we documented our activities and they documented
4 their activities. The belief is that they had probably ten sappers killed but it's often
5 difficult to know exactly how many enemy is killed because they're like us. They try to
6 retrieve their dead and take their dead with them. So there may have been more but there
7 were obviously dead bodies left on top of the hill and in the wire that were picked up by
8 American soldiers so we know that those are definitely enemy dead. There's people who
9 have gone back—Keith Nolan wrote the book, *Sappers in the Wire*, and *Sappers in the*
10 *Wire* is about Mary Ann. In fact, the subtitle on that is *The Life and Death of Fire*
11 *Support Base Mary Ann*. And it's really about—the time frame is my tour. I mean he
12 picks up in about the middle of 1970 and goes until after the attack of March of '71. And
13 virtually all of the people he writes about I knew. Many of the instances that he writes
14 about I was familiar with and he did research into the enemy unit and who they were and
15 what they were about. You know, the way he kind of frames it is that the local VC, Viet
16 Cong, didn't like us being out there. It wasn't so much that the NVA (North Vietnamese
17 Army) were concerned so much about us. It was the local VC, NVA didn't like where
18 we were at because we were a thorn in their side. When we were out there they didn't
19 have clear run of the country. They knew we were there, they had to be careful. We did
20 cause casualties to them, we did find supplies. In fact, C Company found a huge supply
21 of rifles and ammunition and machine guns—two or three hundred weapons that they
22 found hidden out in the jungle. The story goes that they wanted to deal us a blow but
23 they couldn't do it. They didn't have the skills. They were kind of a local militia Viet
24 Cong force and they didn't have sappers. They then somehow petitioned the military
25 channels and said, "We want this base attacked." And so the decision was made
26 somewhere that they, the sapper unit would be provided but it was a one-time deal.
27 Yeah, they're going to be there and they'll carry out this attack but as soon as the attack's
28 done they're leaving. They're going on. And the local units had to provide the
29 intelligence, they had to provide security, they had to help get people in place, get
30 equipment in place, get armaments, ammunition in place, and then they had to provide
31 backup security. In other words, they didn't know, for example, if we'd counter attack

1 and come off the hill and chase the sappers through the jungle or if we'd come off the hill
2 and pursue the sappers. Then the local Viet Cong forces would have to engage us. The
3 sappers were not going to be responsible for their own rear guard security. The local
4 people had to take care of that. So that's kind of the story Keith Nolan talks about as the
5 reason why the attack took place and kind of the how it was done. I guess I want to say I
6 suppose so. I mean they carried out the attack. If they thought they could really drive us
7 off the hill, did they really want to try to hit hard enough to where the battalion would
8 abandon the firebase? I don't know if that's ever been alleged. If they wanted to do that
9 they wouldn't do that with one attack. In fact, we went back and carried out our
10 functions for the firebase all the way until I came home. When I left to come home we
11 was still at Mary Ann. Although we were moving to Da Nang that had not happened yet.
12 So we didn't close up Mary Ann the next day because we had this attack. In fact, I think
13 the attitude was pretty much, "Well, if they think they can knock us off this firebase by
14 hitting us like this, we'll show them. We'll just stay." But it was pretty tense afterwards.
15 There was still movement going on. I think helicopters that came in the next few days;
16 helicopter pilots would report taking incoming fire as they approached Mary Ann. I
17 know when I went back to Mary Ann I got put on what they call a reaction force which is
18 all of the cooks and supply people and commo people that they weren't infantry but they
19 were Battalion Headquarters Headquarters people and if there was another attack they
20 would be directed to go wherever the weakest point was. I know they told me, "Noller,
21 you're going to go with the reaction force," and I said, "Oh, no, I don't want to go with
22 reaction force. Let me go with the infantry company. Assign me to the infantry company
23 that's on the hill. I'll go with them. I don't want to go with this reaction force." "Well,
24 no, you're going with the reaction force." And we had drills. At two o'clock in the
25 morning they'd have a drill and they'd say, "Okay, go down by the helicopter pad by the
26 supply..." S4 pad, we called it, the supply pad. "Go down there and set up defensive
27 positions." And so I think we had alerts every night for at least the next week or two—
28 drills. We had no more enemy attack on Mary Ann, though.

29 RV: This seems like something that has stayed with you all these years. How
30 much have you thought back about what happened there? Of course you had this reunion
31 annually. How much does this affect you today?

1 GN: Well, I think there's a couple of things that stayed with me, yes. One of
2 them is just the sheer I guess horror of the whole thing. Not expecting that to happen in
3 the first place, and it did happen, and then I knew a lot of people that got killed and
4 injured at that time. It wasn't my company. C Company was the company that was the
5 infantry company on the hill but there were people at Headquarters Company I knew. I
6 knew Captain Knight. Captain Knight was Charlie Company Commander and when he
7 came to Vietnam to the 1st of the 46th Infantry, he spent about three or four days with us.
8 They'd always put a Company Commander with another Company Commander, an
9 experienced Company Commander for what they called OJT, On-the-Job Training. And
10 this was just so that when the new guy showed up to his own company, he at least had his
11 boots tied right. He had a little bit of experience to know how you'd set up and how you
12 do things. Well, Captain Knight came and spent three or four days with us and I got to
13 know him well enough. Being an RTO in the Battalion TOC, we'd talk back and forth
14 and if they came up to Mary Ann to pull perimeter security, he would come in the TOC
15 and we knew each other so we'd talk and chat and have conversations. He was a very
16 likeable fellow, very outgoing, very down to earth guy. A lot of times you might have a
17 Company Commander and he's not going to spend time chatting with a Spec 4, but
18 Captain Knight wasn't that way. I can remember him being a conversationalist and we'd
19 talk about something. So it was a very difficult time with the casualties. Another
20 casualty was Kyle Hamilton. Kyle Hamilton was a Medic and he was with B Company.
21 All Medics are always assigned to Headquarters Headquarters Company but they get
22 attached to one of the line companies. He was a company in I think 2nd Platoon and at
23 one time I got a pretty badly infected boil on my butt and went to the battalion aide
24 station and I just really didn't like the way they handled it. They were pretty much
25 butchers in there and so I went to Doc Hamilton and he took care of this boil on my butt.
26 He had about two weeks left to go on his tour when he got killed on Mary Ann during the
27 attack. Nolan Bingham, one of my good friends was wounded. He was in a bunker. In
28 fact, he was in my hooch. When I left to go to Mildred, Nolan said, "You know, you're
29 going to be gone. You're not coming back. Can I have your hooch?" I said, "Yeah, you
30 can have my hooch. I don't need it." It was just made out of ammo boxes stacked up on
31 one another about three foot high and then these culvert half-sections, these metal half-

1 moon sections on top of it with a poncho thrown on top to keep it from leaking water.
2 And he was in there with another B Company RTO, Dennis Shulty, and Dennis had been
3 to the promotion board with me. They were in there when an enemy threw a satchel
4 charge up in front of that bunker and blew the front of it in. It was a piece of poly
5 plywood that kind of closed off the front end. Nolan took a bunch of debris in the face
6 and almost lost an eye. They recovered his rifle, his M-16 rifle, and all the plastic was
7 blasted off of it. You had a plastic stalk and plastic hand gear up on the front and the
8 blast blew all the plastic off. So within two or three days of the attack happening, I was
9 pretty much getting reports on people I knew. It was hard to do because that's
10 insignificant. The significant thing is to get the battalion back up and running but if I had
11 time and was talking to people back on Mary Ann, I'd ask them. Nolan Bingham, I
12 called him Bingy, and so I think I was talking to Sergeant Myers and so I'd say, "You
13 know the person I call Bingy?" He said, "Yes, I know him." I said, "Can you tell me
14 what is his status?" And he'd come back and say, "Well, he's wounded." "Well, can you
15 tell me how bad is he wounded?" "Not sure. He's probably going home." And maybe
16 that's all you'd know. There'd be people you'd talk about, like in B Company, Captain
17 Gallagher, he knew that he had B Company people up there and he'd be calling me to try
18 to find out about what happened to so-and-so. "Find out where so-and-so is at." And so
19 one of the RTOs at Mary Ann, I'd inquire somehow like that. I'd use a nickname or
20 something and say, "Do you know about this person?" And sometimes they'd come back
21 and say, "No, we don't know about him. We think they're a casualty." "Well, what kind
22 of casualty? Are they wounded or are they killed?" So we filtered that kind of
23 information back and just to me, a lot of it was the personal loss. I think the shock of
24 knowing the firebase had gotten hit so bad and then the people that were killed and
25 wounded very definitely—in fact, I can remember one night at Mildred, almost breaking
26 down, just thinking about the people and what had happened to them. Such a tragedy.
27 And I think playing into that was the whole factor of I wasn't there but that's where I
28 should have been. Under normal circumstances, that's where I would have been. Why
29 wasn't I there? And you put that whole piece together, that under any other
30 circumstance, that's where I would have been. But I went to promotion board, I get back
31 from promotion board, they say, "We're going to send some people over to Mildred," and

1 I walk up and say, "Send me." "Well, you don't have to go. Why would you want to go
2 over there? There's nothing over there." "No, I'll go over there. I know how to set this
3 up." My whole time that I was in the Army, I didn't volunteer for anything. I learned
4 that you don't volunteer. Well, I volunteered. I volunteered to go to Mildred at four
5 o'clock in the afternoon and ten hours later, Mary Ann gets overrun. So I tried to figure
6 that out.

7 RV: Wasn't that fortunate though, for you?

8 GN: Oh, it was very fortunate. Extremely fortunate. But you know it just tells
9 me how close I came to being there and whatever it was that everybody else experienced,
10 I would have experienced that. It was a difference in eight hours and it was me saying,
11 "I'll go to Mildred. Send me over there." And I don't know if that's some type of divine
12 intervention, or if that's just plain luck. Just call it luck if you want to call it luck. But
13 you know, it's almost like a feeling of standing on a track with a train coming at you and
14 like a tenth of a second before the train hits you, you just step aside. It's like I really felt
15 like that was an extreme close call because of the number of people. And I've often tried
16 to run through my mind, what would I have done? What would have happened to me?
17 Would I have gone and found a hole and crawled in it? Would I run outside and try to
18 shoot these guys? Because a lot of times that's what happened. If you went inside the
19 bunker, they'd blow the bunker up. If you came outside the bunker, they'd shoot you.
20 There were people that were in the Battalion TOC like Dave Tarnay, who was a radio
21 operator that night, and Sergeant Myers—I don't think he was on duty that night but they
22 survived. I don't think both of them were wounded. Maybe one of them was. But that
23 was certainly the biggest single event that happened to my battalion, probably the whole
24 time it was in Vietnam. You know, it made all of the magazine and newspapers in the
25 United States. *Time Magazine* and *Newsweek Magazine* ran full pages on them and the
26 folks back home heard about it through the news. They knew that's where I was at.
27 They thought that's where I was at because I always wrote home and told them where I
28 was at. So they were certainly worried until they got word back that I was okay.

29 RV: Gary, this might be a good time for us to stop for today.

30 GN: Okay.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Gary L. Noller
Conducted by Richard B. Verrone, Ph.D.
February 28, 2006
Transcribed by Mindy Moser

1 Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone. I am continuing my oral history
2 interview with Gary Noller. Today is February 28th, 2006. I am in Lubbock, Texas, Gary
3 is in Fort Worth, and it's about four minutes after nine o'clock, Central Standard Time.
4 And Gary, let's pick up where we left off with our previous session. You had just gone
5 into some detail about the sapper attack of March 28th, 1971. We talked about the
6 aftermath of that and I wanted to ask you if there were any other things that you felt like
7 we wanted to talk about or you wanted to mention before we begin the process of you
8 leaving Vietnam.

9 Gary Noller. Well, I think there's one other incident that I remember very well
10 and it happened in early March, before the attack on Mary Ann. I was doing my duty at
11 the Battalion Tactical Operations Center on Mary Ann and I worked nights. A lot of
12 times I would work at nights. I'd go in at ten o'clock or go in at midnight. Depending on
13 how many radio operators we had you might have an eight-hour shift, you might have a
14 ten-hour shift, you might have a twelve-hour shift. But right about daylight on this
15 particular morning, we got a call and it was from B Company, which was my company,
16 and an RTO out there was Hubert Crowder, Sonny Crowder, was requesting an urgent
17 dust-off for two people. It was very unusual to have something happen right away early
18 in the morning like that but I took the information from him and called Chu Lai dust-off.
19 It was very unusual for us to be able to contact Chu Lai dust-off because they were so far
20 away. Typically we had to call the dust-off at Hawk Hill, which was closer to us. But I
21 called Chu Lai dust-off and they came on the radio right away and I give them the request

1 for urgent Medevac for two people. And they said, "Okay, we'll get a helicopter on
2 station." A typical time would maybe be twenty minutes. So I relayed that information
3 back to the field and I relayed the information to Colonel Doyle, the Battalion
4 Commander that B Company had wounded, requesting urgent dust-off. About ten or
5 fifteen minutes later, Sonny Crowder came back on the radio again and said, "Cancel the
6 dust-off." And Sonny was kind of the class clown. He did a lot of cutting up and I
7 thought he was joking. I thought he was pulling some kind of stunt and I know I came
8 back to him and said, "This isn't funny. We've got helicopters coming. This is no time
9 to be joking about needing a dust-off." He said, "Well, we don't need a dust-off anymore
10 because the two people are dead. They died." And I knew both of them, Sergeant Linier
11 and Specialist Johnson. I didn't know them all that well but I certainly was familiar with
12 those two. I went back to Colonel Doyle and told Colonel Doyle that B Company had
13 just called in and basically aborted the Medevac mission, the dust-off, because the two
14 people were dead—had died. And he told me, he said, "You call them back and tell them
15 that there's nobody out there that's authorized to declare these people dead and that we're
16 sending the chopper in and they should do everything that they can do for those two
17 people and get them on that helicopter and get them to medical care." So I called them
18 back and told them. I said, "We're not canceling the Medevac. It's going to come in.
19 You need to get those two individuals to the LZ and get them on the chopper." Which
20 they did do, but to no avail. They were dead. And that was right at the end of my shift.
21 This probably started at seven o'clock and was over with by eight o'clock and I can
22 remember walking out at the end of my shift out of the Battalion TOC and coming out on
23 the east side of Mary Ann and that's the side that the river was on. I kind of came out of
24 the building there, the bunker, which was kind of dim and dark, out into the full, bright
25 sunlight. The sunlight just hit me and it was just a real strange feeling of loss. In fact, I
26 actually stood there and I held my hands out in front of me and looked at my hands and I
27 looked down at my feet and I run my hands across my chest, and I go, "Something's
28 missing. Something's gone." And I was trying to find out what that was. In reality,
29 what it was, it was the death of these two people that I had known. There was nothing
30 wrong with me; there was nothing physically wrong with me, although I had some
31 sensation or some feeling that I had just lost something. And I've always felt probably

1 with those two individuals dying over there and the circumstances that they did that that
2 was and has been one of the most telling things on me as far as a sense of loss of those
3 two soldiers. Not that we were all that close but it just kind of made a huge impact on me
4 as to what it was for these two people to be killed. The circumstances is that they came
5 out, what we think happened is that they had gone out that morning to retrieve a
6 Claymore mine that they had set up themselves the night before and probably the enemy
7 had come in and booby trapped that Claymore mine because something happened, and I
8 don't know that we ever really found out, is that when they picked that up, there was an
9 explosion out there and they were right on top of it. The Claymore mine may have went
10 off or it may have been booby trapped with some other type of explosive. But it just kind
11 of goes to show the randomness, I think, of people getting killed. You can't always go
12 back and say, "Under these circumstances you're going to be killed and under these
13 circumstances you'll be okay." Because they were simply going out in the morning to
14 pick up that Claymore mine and this explosion took place and they were both killed
15 almost instantaneously.

16 RV: Gary, you said that you felt like you had lost something that morning. Can
17 you kind of go into that? Why did you feel that way? Because you had seen loss before.
18 Was it the randomness you talk about or was it the fact that this is your last full month in
19 country?

20 GN: Well, I don't know that it had anything to do with the time that I had but I
21 think probably it had more to do with the fact that I knew these two soldiers. This was
22 before Mary Ann was attacked. We hadn't had that many killed in action prior to that
23 time. I think in B Company we had one individual killed like in October. It was right
24 around my birthday and then maybe there was one other person killed sometime along in
25 there but I didn't really personally know him. But these two individuals, I did personally
26 know them. I could walk up to them and say hello and know their names and maybe
27 know a little bit about their background. But I don't know. It was just a feeling that
28 came over me. It was like you cut my hand off. It was something—it felt physical. It
29 felt like I had physically lost part of me and I was looking to see what part did I lose?
30 And there was no part. I had my feet, I had my legs, I had my head, I had my arms and
31 hands. Everything of me is intact but I lost something very close and very dear. Maybe

1 that's just the final realization of the cost of war; the terrible cost of war, in that human
2 life is lost. And no, I didn't lose my life or any part of my physical body but there was
3 something lost. When those people die there was some part of me that was lost. And I
4 think it has never left. That feeling has never left. I'll always remember that as being a
5 very significant realization on my part when those two guys were killed that morning.

6 RV: You had a very rough last sixty days, thirty-five, forty days in country.
7 Would you say that that overshadowed or was the most traumatic time of your tour?

8 GN: Well, I think when that happened and when the attack on Mary Ann
9 occurred, yes. Up until that point in time, we had casualties. We took casualties, we took
10 wounded. Other companies in the battalion had more killed in action, friendly KIAs
11 (Killed in Action) than my company did. Like I say, I think my entire time in Vietnam,
12 maybe our company, B Company, had four or five killed in action and maybe twenty or
13 thirty wounded. And that may have been the least number of people other than maybe
14 Headquarters Headquarters Company and Echo Company. Certainly of the line
15 companies that was probably the least. I can remember, like Delta Company, I think at
16 one time in a week had about ten people killed in one week. And Charlie Company lost,
17 I don't know, twenty people probably on Mary Ann. The battalion lost thirty people that
18 night. So it's certainly always been a reflection back to me is that we were—I'll call it
19 lucky—because you certainly, I don't think, were any more skilled. Our performance, I
20 don't know was all that much better—maybe a little bit. But a lot of it was just kind of
21 the randomness of where you were at and when you were there and what happened. But I
22 think coming back down, I knew that I had the bulk of my time in, that I was down to the
23 last couple of months, but there's no guarantees. It's not like, "Well if you make it nine
24 months then you can certainly make it the last three months." There were people on
25 Mary Ann—Kyle Hamilton was two weeks before he came home and he was killed on
26 Mary Ann so he made it virtually to the end of his tour and there was no guarantee. So it
27 may have been more significant to me because there hadn't been that much that had
28 happened. The battalion had a sizable action in the end of May and the first week or so
29 of June up in Hiep Duc, which was north of Mary Ann, so some of the guys that I was
30 with had seen a lot more in the month before I got there. But what I had seen, although
31 there was a little bit of everything that happened, to me it wasn't a lot of everything. It

1 was a little bit of everything and then right in that last month there, we had two people
2 killed in that incident and then the attack on Mary Ann occurred.

3 RV: I know that when I talk to veterans and ask them about this kind of fear or
4 death hanging over you every day or the possibility thereof, I think part of what I'm
5 asking is what you just described, this fact that random death, random killing could
6 happen anytime, that you could not be guaranteed. Did this really hit you in March of
7 this year, of 1971, or had you felt that all along? I know we've discussed it, but I was
8 wondering if this came into more focus for you at this point.

9 GN: Well, I think that it—I guess in a way you try to remain optimistic all the
10 time. You try to remain upbeat, you try to say, "Well gee, maybe it isn't going to
11 happen." There's always that fluke. I mean, you have to at least individually believe
12 that. I mean I don't know if you'd be there and you'd absolutely positively believe that
13 you wouldn't make it back out. I don't know how you'd go on every day. I mean, there
14 were certainly times where you had instances of that thought but it wasn't overwhelming.
15 Not for me. I think for some people it became very overwhelming, so they may end up
16 shooting themselves in the foot or they may refuse to go to the field or they might have
17 some type of mental breakdown, just trying to deal with the thought that, "I know I'm not
18 going to make it out of here." I mean, I've certainly—I didn't have the belief that I'd be
19 killed. I always had the belief that I'd survive but I had a belief that I wouldn't survive
20 without being a casualty. So it was like, "Well, if you get hit, how bad are you going to
21 get hit?" And it could be something as minor as you get a pongee stick in the bottom of
22 your foot or you get a little piece of shrapnel or something in your arm or your leg. There
23 were people who got wounded in that manner. If it was minor, they could almost be field
24 treated and go back to duty or go to the rear area for two or three days and get patched
25 back up and be sent back out. One of the guys in the company that was with me has three
26 Purple Hearts and he never got wounded bad enough to come home but he got three
27 Purple Hearts out of Vietnam. So yeah, there was always that thought that that could
28 happen, but at the same time you think that could happen, you had to go, "Yeah, but I
29 think I'll be okay. It won't be that bad that I can't survive." The more of that that you
30 have, the more that you see other people getting wounded, that you see other people
31 getting killed can certainly wear you down. I think that's the reason why the military

1 gives short tours. They know that you can only take so much of this and if you get too
2 much of it, there will be a breakdown. Mentally, the body just simply can't take that
3 much trauma and it'll find a way to cope. I think that also, it's one of the causes for
4 people to go off the end and do things that they normally otherwise wouldn't do—
5 potentially commit atrocities, go on a violent rage of their own as some means of outlet
6 for everything that's built up in them and all of the horror that they've seen. "If this is
7 happening to me then it's going to happen to somebody else, too. Somebody's causing
8 this to happen to me so I'm going to cause it to happen to someone else." Every
9 individual's a little bit different as to what they can put up with and how they cope with
10 that. But I never—we'll talk about this later, coming home—the whole time that I was
11 over there I was always on guard and on the alert for the fact that one second from now
12 everything could be turned upside down.

13 RV: Right. That had to wear on people psychologically.

14 GN: Oh yeah.

15 RV: And you just spoke of that. Well, was My Lai an issue within the Americal
16 Division? I know it was, but down to your level, did you all talk about that or kind of
17 process what had happened within the division in which you were serving?

18 GN: Well, I don't know that there was anything that talked about formally. I
19 believe at that time, coincidentally about the time of the attack on Mary Ann was when
20 Lieutenant Calley was on trial. My Lai happened in '68 I think.

21 RV: Uh-huh. And then it didn't come out until later.

22 GN: Yeah. So we knew about it. I think we certainly knew that My Lai had
23 occurred and that it had occurred in the Americal Division, but I don't know at that
24 particular point in time that I could tell you in what company and what battalion. I think
25 when our rear area for 1st of the 46th Infantry was right on the ocean, kind of north of the
26 beach at Chu Lai, and I can remember somebody pointing down—it would have been
27 south—pointing to the south and saying, "Well, that's the way My Lai is." There's a
28 peninsula that comes out so you can kind of see the beach at Chu Lai, then you see this
29 finger of land that goes out in the ocean. I remember somebody saying, "See that
30 peninsula down there? That's where My Lai is at." So we certainly knew that it had
31 happened, we knew that it had occurred in the division. Exactly what the circumstances

1 that happened that day were, at the time I was in Vietnam I didn't know that. We did
2 know that there was people that were on trial for it. But we certainly didn't walk around
3 every day going, "Gee, we're in a division that had C Company 1st of the 20th Infantry in
4 it, 11th Brigade, and that's in our division."

5 RV: Sure.

6 GN: A curious thing happened about that time in 1971. The Americal Division
7 was always called Americal Division as a throwback to World War II because in World
8 War II, the division had no number. It was the only US Army division that had a name
9 instead of a number. They reactivated heritage lineage in the Korean conflict and used
10 the same shoulder patch, for example, and reached back to the lineage, but they called it
11 the 23rd Infantry Division. And in Vietnam they kind of combined the two. You can hear
12 Westmoreland wanted to use the name Americal because there were similarities between
13 the way the Americal Division was formed in Vietnam to the way it was formed in
14 World War II. So you see variations, like the Americal Division, and then in parentheses
15 (23rd Infantry) or Americal, (23rd Infantry Division.) But towards 1971, they started
16 doing away with the name Americal and started calling the division the 23rd Infantry
17 Division. And we kind of always thought, "Are they trying to get rid of the Americal
18 name because of its association with My Lai?" And they would be on your orders. Your
19 orders may come out and on the top of the page it would say, "Americal Division, Chu
20 Lai." Now your orders are saying, "23rd Infantry Division, Chu Lai."

21 RV: Did you all talk about that and discuss it?

22 GN: Well, I think I remember us saying they're changing the name of the
23 division. Everything's the same. It's like if you went out of your house and your house
24 number is 5-2-4 and you make it 4-5-4. What did you change? Well, you just changed
25 the name outside. The people are still the same and everything else is the same. So the
26 vehicles for example, in the military all the vehicles have stenciled on the bumpers or
27 somewhere on the vehicle, information about who that vehicle belongs to. So like a jeep
28 would have AMCAL. Well, that stood for Americal Division. So you'd see that jeep
29 coming down the road and you'd know that that jeep belonged to American Division.
30 And it may have other information on it as far as like the company and the battalion.
31 And they started painting over AMCAL and putting 23INF, which stood for 23rd Infantry

1 Division. And yeah, we noticed that and we kind of felt like this is just a means of
2 changing the name because of the association that certainly was being made between the
3 division and what had occurred at My Lai.

4 RV: What did you all think of Calley or what did you think of Calley?

5 GN: Well, I think the man didn't do his job. I mean, I'm not going to stick up for
6 him. I certainly do not believe that what happened that day was something that you do in
7 war. It gets done in war but it's not a right thing that you do. You can talk to a lot of
8 Vietnam vets all over the place on what happened there but in my opinion you do not go
9 in under the circumstances that they did and kill civilians. They are not a threat to you;
10 they are not a harm to you. If anything, they should be rounded up and removed if
11 they're in an area that you don't want them to be at. I mean, that's what we did. In the
12 area that I was at, we had Montagnards and other Vietnam indigenous people out there
13 and we would take them if they were in a free-fire zone and the division would fly
14 PSYOPS, Psychological Operations airplanes and throw leaflets out and have
15 loudspeakers and tell people, "Turn yourselves in." And I remember one day at Mary
16 Ann, we had a group of probably a hundred Montagnards that came up and turned
17 themselves in and we ordered them up on Chinook helicopters and sent them away to get
18 them out of the war zone area, to get them out of that area. It's very dangerous to be
19 living in a free-fire zone. But I never took the term free-fire to mean that, "Anything that
20 moves and it's not on your side, you can shoot it." That's not what free-fire meant to me
21 and I don't think that's what it meant to the people in my battalion. That simply meant
22 that you didn't have to get higher approval. You didn't have to go to brigade; you didn't
23 have to go to a Vietnamese District Chief or something like that to ask them if you can
24 engage. You can engage basically at will but you don't engage a three-year-old child.
25 You don't engage a non-combatant that's unarmed, sitting on a trail somewhere.

26 RV: Did you discuss this with others? Was this kind of a common understanding
27 within your group?

28 GN: Well, I think that certainly in my company and in my battalion, that was our
29 belief. Now, there might be some individuals out there that say, "Oh gee, if they're not
30 Americans, I don't care who they are. They ought to be shot." Well, that's bigotry or
31 racism or whatever. But I don't think a lot of people held that view. In fact, that was not

1 the view that we were taught. Any military training that I ever received, formal military
2 training stated that you would safeguard civilians as much as you can. It's an unfortunate
3 case that they become victims in war but there was certainly nothing that I had ever heard
4 that said, "Well, it don't make any difference who they are. If they're out there, they're
5 in free-fire zone. We want them dead." Now, there are people who were around the My
6 Lai area that will say, and I think this was Calley's defense, "Well, we were ordered to do
7 it. We were told it didn't make any difference who they were. If they were not American
8 forces or friendly Vietnamese forces, women, children, old people—it didn't make any
9 difference who they were, we were told to go in there and kill them." And that was about
10 the only defense that you could come up with. Otherwise, if you don't claim that as a
11 defense, you better basically prepare to admit you're a murderer.

12 RV: When your unit would go into villages and encounter civilians, what did you
13 think was the overall attitude of your guys, of your unit, as well as what was the attitude
14 of those villagers that you witnessed? Kind of what you saw then and what do you think
15 now?

16 GN: Well, I think that in general, the people that I was with had respect for
17 Vietnamese civilians, ninety-five percent, and that if our goal was to pick them up—and
18 they used the term resettlement. They'd say, "Okay, what do you do if you encounter
19 civilians out where you're at? Okay, well if you're in an area and they're not supposed to
20 be out there and they're not supposed to be living out there but you know they're not
21 combatants, they need to be resettled." So you round them up, you call for a helicopter,
22 the helicopter comes out; you load them on the helicopter, and the helicopter leaves.
23 Once the helicopter leaves, they're not your problem anymore. What they did with them
24 when they got back to wherever they went to, I don't know. They may have dropped
25 them off and the people walked right back out to where they had been for fifty years. I
26 don't recall of any generalized feeling with the people that I was with that in any way,
27 shape, or form, we ought to just be mowing these people down, period, no matter who
28 they are. I think there was certainly a belief, or a belief that I had is that, "Well, we are
29 here to try to help these people. We are here to try to help them establish a form of
30 government that allows them to have liberties and freedoms." Well, you don't do that by
31 just killing everybody. It was very difficult for me to judge what they thought about us.

1 I'm sure if I was them in their position, I'd probably just wish they'd go away. Where we
2 were at, most of the people that we encountered were Montagnards and Montagnards
3 lived a lot differently than Vietnamese that lived in the more, I hate to use the word
4 civilized, but the more modern areas and cities and towns. Montagnards had some items
5 of modern civilization. Like they might have a steel knife, they might have a cloth, like
6 black cloth, but they made their hooches out of bamboo and thatch. They weaved
7 baskets. If they carried anything around, they'd weave baskets. They may have had
8 some steel pots and pans, maybe some glass bottles. They raised chickens, they raised
9 pigs, they farmed planting potatoes and corn, but even in Vietnam they were looked at as
10 being a very backward people. And internally within the country of Vietnam between
11 some of the indigenous people and the ruling governmental people, both in the north and
12 the south, the Montagnards were looked upon as probably a problem because of the
13 integration of them into society. They just lived so much differently. So those are the
14 people that I remember encountering. We didn't really go into a village where there were
15 houses built. Typically, if they were anything, they might be built of some sort of cement
16 block or mortar. A lot of stuff in Vietnam, if you saw anything that was very
17 sophisticated, it was probably influenced by the French. Red tile roof on the building
18 meant that that was probably a pretty nice building. A lot of buildings that are made out
19 of probably two-by-four lumber with what we called barn-siding metal—metal tin—a
20 wall with a roof on them. But Montagnards, where we were at, they made their little
21 villages out of whatever they could cut down right there where they were living. We
22 couldn't talk with them. We didn't speak their language, they didn't speak our language.
23 I never saw them as being an aggressive people. When we would round these people up,
24 normally we would get old people—old men, old women—women, and children. We
25 didn't really come across that many military age males, although occasionally we did.
26 But I felt that they were—whatever we wanted them to do, they did. If we told them,
27 “Come with us,” they'd come with us. If we'd say, “Okay, go over there and stay there,”
28 they'd go over there and stay there. But what they really thought of us, I'm not sure. I
29 tried to imagine one day an old Montagnard woman. Let's say this woman is seventy
30 years old and she's going with her tribe and they came up to Mary Ann and basically
31 said, “Okay, we understand that we need to come here for safety because if we stay out

1 there we might be subject to a bombing attack so we don't want to be there." So they
2 turned themselves in and we put like fifty or sixty Montagnards in a Chinook helicopter.
3 Well, what's it like for this seventy-year-old woman who's probably never done anything
4 more than ever walk in her whole life. Maybe she's never been anywhere more than
5 twenty-five miles away from where she's born and all of the sudden she's on this
6 Chinook helicopter flying somewhere. Well, that would scare the hell out of me. Yet,
7 these people complied. We said, "Get on that helicopter," and they'd get on that
8 helicopter. To me, it would be like if a Martian landed in my backyard and said, "Gary,
9 I've got a space ship here. I want you to get on this space ship and we're going to go
10 somewhere." I'd go, "Well, can you tell me where we're going and how long am I going
11 to be there and what's going to happen to me while I'm there?" But the effects of war on
12 civilians is traumatic. You know, you never want to have a war in your home, in your
13 homeland. It's bad enough going across the sea to have a war but outside of the
14 casualties and destruction that you have on soldiers and the military equipment, the
15 devastation that you do to the land and the people wherever the war is being conducted is
16 huge. It's immense. It cannot be prevented and it makes those people's lives utterly
17 miserable to the point—like the Montagnards that are out thirty miles in from the coast
18 out in the sticks, out in the boonies, I'm sure they'd probably say, "I just wish everybody
19 would leave us alone. We can live, we can survive. We have our way of life and we
20 don't know anything about a constitution, we don't know anything about Communism,
21 we have our little clan, we have our little tribe, we have our way of conducting our lives,
22 and we just wish everybody would just leave us alone."

23 RV: Did you think that Democracy was possible in South Vietnam, I guess then
24 and now?

25 GN: Well, I don't know. I suppose that you'd say that Democracy ought to be
26 possible anywhere but I think in reality, the longer I live and the more I learn about it is
27 Democracy has got to be pretty sophisticated. You've got to have a lot of people who
28 believe in the same thing. You know, they have to believe in rights—personal rights,
29 individual rights, and that's at the core. The people that came to the United States and
30 established Democracy, they had strong beliefs about that and they were able to persuade
31 enough people to join them and to set that up and conduct it. I don't know. I mean, I

1 guess my thought in 1970 and 1971 was that we would not establish a government. A
2 friendly government and a Democratic government would not be. Did the people want
3 it? Oh, I think there was a lot of Vietnamese people that did want that. I have no doubt
4 that there were people in Vietnam that wanted to very much to live in a free and open
5 society and be able to have a role in the government and the laws. But was it enough that
6 felt that way that they could achieve that? The answer is obvious—no, they weren't able
7 to overcome the opposition that existed from the Ho Chi Minh and the Communist
8 leadership in North Vietnam. There weren't people—if I remember history right, there
9 were a lot of people who fled North Vietnam and went to South Vietnam in the mid-
10 fifties to escape the potential of Communism. So those people certainly didn't want to
11 live under that form of government,

12 RV: Did you think Vietnamization had a chance?

13 GN: Well, understanding the theory of Vietnamization, I guess I'll turn that back
14 and say, "Well, why did we ever need to Vietnamize the war?" It should have been a
15 Vietnam War in the first place. You know, to me, Vietnamization connotes the fact that
16 there was an Americanization. So now since you had an Americanization you've got to
17 do a Vietnamization. And it definitely happened. You can take a look at what we did in
18 Vietnam starting out in the early sixties up until the high point, which was 1968; we had
19 five hundred and fifty-some thousand U.S. military personnel in Vietnam or in the
20 theater. So we were conducting the war. They had their soldiers and I guess it's sort of
21 like if I don't like to mow my grass and you're going to come mow my grass for me, why
22 would I go out and mow my grass? Well, okay, at some point in time when you say,
23 "I'm not mowing your grass anymore," and I say, "Okay, I guess if I don't want long
24 grass, I've got to go out and mow my grass." So I think they let us do that. They let us
25 take over the war, they let us run the war, and they let us put our people and our money
26 and our equipment in there and conduct the war. But at the time when they said, "Well,
27 we can't do this forever." We said, "Oh, well, gee, then how are we going to get out of
28 this?" I guess this was Nixon's plan when Nixon said, "I have a plan," when he ran for
29 President in 1968. This was his plan. Well, it would have been a plan all along. I think
30 that probably the forces in North Vietnam were more dedicated. They believed more,
31 they were willing to sacrifice more, probably had more committed leadership, were more

1 focused on one thing, which was “We’re going to fight this as long as it takes and we’re
2 going to win.”

3 RV: Well, when you mentioned Nixon and his plan to get out of Vietnam or plan
4 to end the war, did you think Johnson had something like that going on? You mentioned
5 that this should have been the policy overall, I mean, the whole time.

6 GN: Well, I don’t know. I think Johnson probably didn’t like the Vietnam War.
7 He inherited it when John Kennedy was assassinated. I think if there was any element—
8 you go back and what McNamara has claimed in more recent times, it was like, “Well,
9 this isn’t good. We may not succeed but we can’t leave.” It’s like the term peace with
10 honor. Well, we want peace but it’s got to be an honorable peace so if we can’t have an
11 honorable peace then we won’t have peace. Well, how do you define honorable peace? I
12 don’t think Johnson had a plan. I think Johnson knew it was going nowhere and that’s
13 why he did not run for re-election. He could have run for President again in 1968. He
14 chose not to, which, to me, is an admission of failure. Why didn’t he run? Well, he
15 didn’t run again because he knew he was failing, we were failing, and that failure was
16 around Vietnam. And that’s probably why Hubert Humphrey didn’t get elected in ’68
17 because they were attaching him to Lyndon Johnson. But I don’t know that they had a
18 plan. They would attack and then the bombing halts. “We’ll bomb the hell out of you to
19 show you that we can do it but then we’ll stop. We’ll show you that we’re really nice so
20 we’ll stop bombing you as an indication to you that we want to talk.” Well then if the
21 talks didn’t go well then we bombed again and then we’d stop. So it was the escalation.
22 There was a belief that we didn’t want to be any tougher than we had to be but if the
23 enemy didn’t relent then we’d be a little bit tougher. Well, we’d be a little bit tougher
24 and they’d be a little bit tougher and then we’d be a little bit tougher and they’d be a little
25 tougher. But I think if you went back and take a look at the strategy of on one hand
26 fighting and then on the other hand having cease-fires or bombing halts and trying to talk,
27 we wanted out. I think we very definitely wanted out. We knew we wanted out but we
28 wanted out on our terms. The Vietnamese wanted us out but they didn’t want us out on
29 our terms. They wanted us out on their terms. The whole Vietnam War probably could
30 have been over with in 1969 if it weren’t for the posturing that was taking place in Hanoi
31 and in Washington, D.C. over—somebody’s basically got to say, “I lost.” Well, neither

1 one of the sides wanted to say, “I lost.” It was probably more on us. We’re the ones that
2 were ten thousand miles away from home conducting a war. Johnson didn’t want to say,
3 “We lost.” He resigned. The way he got out of it, basically he resigned his office.

4 RV: Do you think that was kind of a cowardly act or a reality thing for him?

5 GN: Well, it was probably reality. I mean, I was happy when he resigned. This
6 was March of 1968 and my best friend had been killed March 11th, March 12th of 1968,
7 so I was very bitter. So when Johnson says, “I’m not running again.” I go, “Good. I’m
8 glad you’re not going to be President anymore. Get the heck out.” And that was an
9 emotional response for me. But as I look back now, I think it was an acknowledgement
10 on his part that we were not doing what he wanted us to do. And maybe it’s noble. If he
11 could not conduct a war any better than he did, then get the heck out and let the next guy
12 do it. But does the next guy have any better way to do it, yes or no? I would say, “No,”
13 because Richard Nixon was elected in ’68 took office in January of ’69 and we didn’t
14 really get much to what I’ll call the end of the war until early 1973.

15 RV: Right.

16 GN: We had another election in 1972 and Nixon was re-elected and we were not
17 to the end in 1972. We were getting pretty close. But what brought the Vietnam War to
18 the end? You could take a lot of different things but what’s commonly now called the
19 Christmas Bombings, or the December Bombings, of 1972 when Nixon just really I guess
20 got fed up and said, “We’re going to take everything to them we can. Just bomb the hell
21 out of them.” And we bombed the hell out of them for, I don’t know, ten days or two
22 weeks or something like that and they finally said, “Okay, fine.” They went back to the
23 Paris Peace Talks and signed some papers and I think in April our POWs (Prisoner of
24 War) started coming home.

25 RV: How did you feel when you saw that, when the POWs were coming home?

26 GN: Well, I was glad they got home. I was glad that they didn’t die. We had a
27 lot of POWs that did die in Vietnam, in South Vietnam, in North Vietnam, in Laos, and
28 probably Thailand and Cambodia, but I was glad that they got home. The fellow that—
29 Edward Alvarez had been there since I think ’64. I don’t think he was there ten years but
30 he was there eight or nine years as a prisoner. I was glad they got home and I’ve met a
31 few POWs and talked with them. They’re amazing people but it had to end sometime.

1 You can't do this for forever. It had to end sometime. It went on much longer than I
2 think it should have and I attribute that to both sides—both sides taking a very hard line
3 and wanting their terms. The North Vietnamese could have essentially done what they
4 did in 1969 as what they did in almost 1973, which was sign a piece of paper, "We're
5 leaving." Well, we could have gotten some piece of paper signed up saying, "We'll take
6 our troops out. You can keep your troops there because you don't even claim you have
7 them there and there will be no more conflict." It was more of a cease-fire than it was a
8 peace settlement and that could've occurred in 1969. I pretty much knew, even when I
9 was in Vietnam that there will be some type of settlement and the North Vietnamese will
10 sit back and go, "Okay, fine, we'll wait for a while and make it look good and then
11 someday we'll just bust down the gates of the DMZ and head on in and the United States
12 won't come back." I think that was the thing is that in the agreement that was signed in
13 Paris was that, "Well, the North Vietnamese are not going to conduct warfare anymore
14 and if they do, the United States will come back and help defend the South Vietnamese."
15 Well, we were never going back. Once we got detached from that and got away from
16 that, there was no way in the world that we were going to go back. I felt that and I think
17 if the North Vietnamese felt that then they should have signed the damn agreement and, I
18 don't know, maybe fifty thousand people or a hundred thousand people or two hundred
19 thousand people wouldn't have been killed—or a million people—from 1969 and then on
20 to 1973. There was a lot of casualties taken after the people started meeting in Paris to
21 discuss the arrangements for the eventual peace agreements.

22 RV: Did you say that you actually thought about the fact that the war was
23 probably going to reach a settlement? You thought this while you were actually there?

24 GN: Yeah. Yeah, in fact, one time, I think on Mary Ann we would occasionally
25 have some Vietnamese officers that would be liaisons. We called them liaison officers
26 and there was—I don't know Vietnamese rank. They had Di Wees, which I think a Di
27 Wee (Vietnamese Captain) was like a Lieutenant or something and there was this one that
28 spoke pretty good English and I remember talking with him. He was very blunt about it.
29 He said, "You know, you Americans can go home. Someday, you Americans will go
30 home and the war will be over for you. But we live here. This is our country. The war
31 won't be over for us just because you leave." And I remember having that discussion and

1 I think maybe along in there I said, “Yes, I think probably what’s going happen is
2 somewhere along the line there will be some negotiation that will take place and our
3 troops will be pulled out. But that’s not going to stop the war, the war between the North
4 Vietnamese and the South Vietnamese. It will simply be the means by which the United
5 States exits the battlefield.” And my belief was that once we exited, we would not go
6 back. It was too unpopular. 1973, when the peace agreement was signed, it was five
7 years after 1968 and people were ready get out of there in 1968 after the Tet Offensive
8 and everything that had happened in 1968. So there was so much eagerness to get the
9 heck out of there that nobody’s going to go back once you’re out. And I want to say that
10 I truly believe that I knew that and felt that then. We were buying time. We were simply
11 delaying the time and extending the time before the eventual conclusion would take
12 place. We’re not preventing the eventual conclusion from taking place. The eventual
13 conclusion, which is the North Vietnamese, will have South Vietnam—I felt sure that
14 that was going to happen. All we’re doing is it’s not going to happen in 1970. It’s not
15 going to happen in 1971. Maybe it won’t happen in 1972. It’s going to happen someday.
16 I didn’t have to happen in 1975 when it did happen, when the North Vietnamese went
17 back in there and pretty much within a month or so conquered South Vietnam. They
18 could have waited until ’76, they could have waited until 1980 but I think that to me, the
19 eventual outcome was going to happen.

20 RV: Well, Gary, we need to stop for our time limitations. Thanks for your time
21 today.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Gary L. Noller
Conducted by Richard B. Verrone, Ph.D.
March 16, 2006
Transcribed by Mindy Moser

1 Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone. I am continuing my oral history
2 interview for the Vietnam Archive's Oral History Project with Gary Noller. Today is
3 March 16th, 2006. It's about 9 am, Central Standard Time and I am in Lubbock, Texas,
4 and Gary is again, I believe—where, Gary?

5 Gary Noller: In Fort Worth, Texas.

6 RV: Fort Worth, okay. Gary, I wanted to ask you about your opinion of—kind of
7 then and now—of the media coverage of the Vietnam War?

8 GN: Well, I think that I can't say that I'm totally happy with media coverage. I'm
9 not fine with the fact that either unintentionally or on purpose there were a lot of things
10 that seemed to be skewed. I think that they certainly have an agenda. I don't believe that
11 the media's totally unbiased. I think that typically, even if you try to control your
12 personal biases or whatever, maybe subconsciously it's going to pop up. But one of the
13 things that—

14 RV: Gary, hold on just a second. There's interference.

15 GN: Yeah.

16 RV: Okay.

17 GN: Well, my belief is that the media then and now, it's very difficult for the
18 personal reporter or journalist to keep out their biases and their prejudices, and their way
19 of looking at things and I think that many times, when you talk to a journalist and you ask
20 them what they want to do through journalism, they'll say, "We want to expose the
21 truth," but in reality, that truth to them is always based upon some beliefs and feelings

1 that they have as to what the truth is. So going into it, I think that they have a tendency to
2 look for those things which agrees with their structure, their framework that they have on
3 what's right and wrong. And I think there's other things beyond that that might be just
4 technical in nature as to how much to they really understand what goes on in the military
5 and how much they understand of what really goes on during the war. And as an
6 example, I'll use reporting that was done after Mary Ann was attacked and the major
7 magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* picked up and they ran full-page articles. It was a
8 pretty big deal there for a week or two and when I came home and my parents had saved
9 for me those articles and I sat down and I'd read that one page. Well, maybe in one page
10 in *Time Magazine*, there were ten things that I said, "Well, this is factually incorrect.
11 This is factually incorrect." And a lot of it had to do with just technical things or things
12 that they would make reference to, such as one of them was that there were no listing
13 points established that night. Well, in fact, there were no listing points established any
14 night. In fact, it was not typical in Vietnam to put a listening post outside a firebase at
15 night. You want your people inside the wire, you want the bad guys on the outside of the
16 wire so if anything moves on the outside of the wire, you know it's a bad guy. If you put
17 good guys and bad guys both on the outside of the wire, you don't know who you're
18 shooting at. So kind of the sentiment that came through in that one particular thing was
19 that there was an error made in command. The Battalion Commander or the Company
20 Commander erred because he didn't put listening posts outside the wire that could have
21 detected that attack. I'm going, "No, they weren't ever used anywhere that I know of at
22 any time with much frequency." So it's just things like that that I kind of end up with
23 believing that there's a lot of mythology out there. There's a lot of stuff that's true but
24 there's a lot of stuff that isn't true and the only way you can really know what true is, is
25 you have to go through a vast amount of resources. You just can't read magazines and
26 articles of the time; you just can't read newspaper articles of that time. The worst thing
27 of all is possibly to watch the movie *Platoon* and come back and say, "Gee, I know all
28 about the Vietnam War. I watched the movie *Platoon*." And I'll go, "Well, you know
29 just a little bit about what got represented by Oliver Stone from his experiences. It's true
30 that he was there and he had experiences but if you think you know all about the Vietnam

1 War because you sat there and watched this movie for two hours, nah, you're not going to
2 get it."

3 RV: Right.

4 GN: And I think that's the importance of veterans, such as myself, telling what I
5 believe to be true so that a person can sit down and maybe if you spend enough time and
6 enough effort, at some point in time the truth can come up and be somewhat realistically
7 reflected.

8 RV: Right. So the more sources used, the better it's going to be?

9 GN: Yeah.

10 RV: What did you—well, how was it affecting you all there in Vietnam or did it
11 really affect you all until you got back and kind of felt it?

12 GN: Well, I don't know that it affected the way we functioned every day. Again,
13 I went over in '70 and there's a lot of things that had happened already. And I did follow
14 the contemporary news reports on what was going on. While we were in Vietnam we
15 didn't see any TV. We saw or listened to a radio, so the Armed Forces Vietnam
16 Network, and they did have newscasts and they would have some reports on what was
17 going on in the war. We could read *Stars and Stripes* newspaper and it would have
18 reports about what was going on. You could sit down every week and read the casualties.
19 I mean, every week when we'd get the *Stars and Stripes*, you could turn the page and see
20 how many people got killed and wounded the previous week. They may have even put
21 names in. I don't remember if they put names in or not but we knew by casualties if last
22 week was a bad week or last week was a good week as far as casualties go. We could get
23 newspapers and magazines sent from home but I don't think that we really had a huge
24 amount of exposure. We weren't sitting there watching an hour a day of CBS TV news
25 or anything like that. So we kind of had a somewhat reduced exposure to it and I want to
26 say it probably really didn't matter anyway. It didn't make that much difference to us
27 what they were saying. We were there; we knew what was going on. Reporting probably
28 didn't make us feel a whole lot worse. It probably didn't make us feel a whole lot better.
29 I don't recall, but I think we did know, in general, what was being reported to the public
30 about what was going on in Vietnam.

1 RV: Right. When you came back home and you kind of I guess watched the war
2 end on TV, I don't know if you did that or not, but how did you feel the media took the
3 war after 1975? Did it drop off the radar screen completely or did you kind of continue
4 to hear about this and watch it or watch analysis on TV?

5 GN: Yeah. Well, I did watch TV news when I came home. I think one of the
6 reasons I watched it is because even though I was home in May of '71, there were still
7 people that I knew that was over there. And a lot of times I would watch, if nothing more
8 than to see if there was something being reported about the area that I was in or the units
9 that I was in, which, I don't recall much ever happening or being reported on. But I think
10 Vietnam is a very dramatic point in the history of my life and the people of my ages and
11 you still hear Vietnam being brought up. There's probably not a week that's gone by in
12 the last thirty years that somewhere, in radio commentary news or TV news or magazine
13 or newspapers that something isn't being brought up relative to Vietnam. It might be
14 good news, such as Vietnam and the United States have got diplomatic relations going on
15 or it may be some comparison between what happened in Vietnam and what's going on
16 currently with the military or the war effort. It could be something about Vietnam
17 veterans. So I think there's been a lot said about Vietnam and will always be said, at
18 least while the Vietnam generation is still alive and doing stuff.

19 RV: Right.

20 GN: I think there's probably some unfair things that are being said. I think that
21 there's some things that can always be debated and you can disagree with. One of the big
22 issues was the ending of the war. Did we win or did we not win? Well, we signed a
23 peace agreement and left. Well, did that mean that we won or we lost? People can't even
24 agree if the way it ended was a win or a loss or a tie. So that can always be discussed by
25 historians and interested people forever. We still discuss things about the Civil War and
26 the Civil War was a hundred and forty years ago or something. So the biggest thing to
27 me, though, is myths. Things that seem to continually always to be said and you know,
28 they just absolutely positively may be untrue but people accept them as true because they
29 just heard them so long.

30 RV: Right.

1 GN: And that's what I think we Vietnam vets really have to do, is to make sure
2 that some of those myths that people seem to really want to grab onto and believe are in
3 some manner exposed as not really being the truth. If the truth is good, fine. If the truth
4 is bad, fine. I don't care which one is the truth—it just needs to be told.

5 RV: Okay. Gary, tell me about leaving Vietnam. How did it happen and what
6 was it like flying out?

7 GN: Well, everybody knew that they had a twelve-month tour, but at that time,
8 during Vietnamization, the United States was withdrawing troops. And typically what
9 they would do is by the end of the month they would have to have troop strength reduced.
10 So maybe you had two hundred and fifty thousand people in Vietnam on April 1 but on
11 May 1 you had to have two hundred and twenty-five thousand people so you had to have
12 a net loss of twenty-five thousand people during that month. In order to achieve that,
13 what was happening is that some people had to go home early. Some people had to go
14 home before their twelve months was up to get that net loss and we called that a drop.
15 You got days dropped off of your twelve months. We could generally follow that. We'd
16 find somebody who we knew what day they came in on and then they would get orders to
17 report to a processing station on a certain date. And then we could figure out, "Well, this
18 guy just got a ten-day drop. He should be going in for processing on March 14th, but he's
19 going in for processing on March 4th so he's going in ten days earlier than what we think
20 he should be going in, so he got a ten-day drop." And when it came time for me to go
21 home, I knew my date would be June 6th but we were up to a about a thirty-two or thirty-
22 three day drop and I finally got my orders to report to Cam Ranh Bay like April 26th or
23 April 27th or something like that. And at that time I was still on Mary Ann and I waited
24 until about April 20th or April 21st or something like that and went into the Battalion
25 Commander for whom I was a radio operator. It was Lieutenant Colonel Tate and I
26 basically said, "Well, Colonel, it's been nice knowing you. Tomorrow I'm out of here."
27 And he didn't know it. I was assigned to B Company and my communication was back
28 and forth to the company clerk in B Company, so he's the guy who was sending me
29 notice on what my Cam Ranh Bay processing date was. It took the Lieutenant Colonel
30 by surprise. I can remember him saying something like, "Well, what do you mean,
31 you're leaving?" And I said, "Well, my time's up. I've got to be in Cam Ranh Bay in a

1 week and before I can do that I have to process out of the division. So tomorrow I'm on
2 a helicopter and I'm going back to Chu Lai." So we sat and talked a little bit. He gave
3 me the obligatory re-up speech, to which I said, "Thank you very much but I think that
4 when I'm out, I'm out." I remember him telling me that as I got out and I'm a civilian in
5 the world and I needed any type of reference or any letter of recommendation or anything
6 to get a job to be sure to let him know. He'd be very happy to help me out in that
7 manner, which I appreciated. The next day, I got on a helicopter and went to Chu Lai
8 and in the next few days, going back and forth between Chu Lai and Da Nang because
9 our records were being moved back and forth. We got processed out of the division, the
10 Americal Division, and then moved on to Cam Ranh Bay and spent about two days or
11 maybe three days down there processing out of Vietnam. And I got on an airplane and
12 flew to Fort Lewis, Washington and spent two or three days there and processed out of
13 the Army. That was the end of my time in Vietnam and it just happened that I had
14 enough time in the Army and enough time in Vietnam that it was the end of my time in
15 the Army, too.

16 RV: How did you feel about that?

17 GN: Well, I was very happy to be leaving. You know, you literally count the
18 days and sometimes you count the hours and maybe the minutes as to how much longer
19 you have. I think that was everybody's desire was, "I have to put my time in but when
20 my time's in and it's ready to go, I'm out of here." The only people who maybe didn't
21 look at it that way were people who extended a little bit to get some more time in
22 Vietnam so that when they got out of Vietnam, they'd also get out of the Army. They
23 had a deal there that if you had less than five months left in the Army when you returned
24 from Vietnam they would release you. If you came home and you had more than five
25 months left in the Army, you'd go to a stateside post and you'd have to serve out that
26 remaining time. So there were some guys who maybe had six months left to go in the
27 Army, so they would ask to stay a month longer in Vietnam so that when they got out of
28 Vietnam, they'd also get out of the Army. But I had enough time, that didn't happen to
29 me. I didn't have to extend. But leaving Vietnam, we left at night. It seems like about
30 every time I went somewhere in the Army, we always left at night. It was probably
31 midnight or one o'clock in the morning. We were in a commercial jet. I don't remember

1 how many people would have been on the plane, maybe a couple of hundred, and left
2 Cam Ranh Bay and the airbase there. My last vision of Vietnam was looking down out
3 of the airplane at the coastline. Cam Ranh Bay of course is right on the coast of the
4 South China Sea and the guard bunker, the bunker towers that sat along the ocean front
5 there and lights—they had electric lights on them—and the lights would shine out into
6 the ocean. And I can remember seeing kind of the coastline of Cam Ranh Bay with the
7 bunkers and the lights on and the airplane climbing up and heading away. And I was
8 kind of sitting there and seeing the lights fade out behind us and I said, “Well, I made it
9 through. It’s over with, it’s done, I made it okay, and I’m going home.” And we made
10 one stop in Japan to refuel the airplane. They let us off the plane, we went into the
11 terminal for a little while, maybe two or three hours we were in the terminal building in
12 Japan. It was probably a military airbase and the first thing I thought coming off the
13 airplane is, “It’s cool. The air is cool.” Maybe it was fifty degrees, I don’t know, but it’s
14 like that time already in Vietnam it may have been getting up to ninety degrees in the
15 daytime and seventy degrees at night or something. You step off the airplane in Japan
16 and the first thing that you feel is cool air and you go, “Gee, I don’t think I’ve felt cool air
17 for a year.” It was the first cool air I really felt. I walked around the terminal building
18 and then went to Fort Lewis, Washington, which is close to Seattle. It was cool there and
19 foggy and misty and kind of the first impression was just the change in temperature from
20 being in the tropics in Vietnam and how warm it was to being in Washington State and
21 being cool.

22 RV: What was the attitude on the airplane? What do you remember?

23 GN: Well, you know, I would have to say subdued. There was no shouting,
24 jumping up and down, clapping hands, high-fiving, hollering, or anything like that. I
25 think when we left it was almost like it was an individual thing to each person. Like, to
26 me, you’re just sitting down in a kind of sense of relief. I remember the plane being
27 quiet. I don’t even remember people talking that much leaving. And I think that you
28 know, a lot of those departures can be very bittersweet because although I knew I was
29 leaving and I was okay, I also balanced that against the people that weren’t leaving, the
30 friends of mine that were still there, the people that I knew that were still there—leaving
31 them behind as well as the people that I knew that never got to go home in one piece—

1 the people that were wounded or hurt and injured very bad, the people that were killed
2 there. So it's sort of like, "Yeah, this is great for me but it's only great for me." And I
3 think I certainly tempered that with the feeling and knowledge that, "I'm a lucky one and
4 who am I to celebrate big time over getting out of there, knowing that so many other
5 people didn't?"

6 RV: Was there a sense of guilt?

7 GN: Well, I think that many veterans, myself included will feel a sense of guilt,
8 yes. And it's sort of like—it ends up by so much chance. Not that skill doesn't play a
9 part. I mean, you can do some stupid thing and get yourself killed because you did a
10 stupid thing but a lot of times you can do everything just exactly the way it should be
11 done and end up a casualty just because of the randomness and the chance that enters in.
12 But yeah, I think of the people that I was close to that were lost in Vietnam and I'll say,
13 "Well, you know, if they had to die in Vietnam, why couldn't I have been there when
14 they were in their situation and maybe I could have done something to help them."

15 RV: Right.

16 GN: Well, you can be everywhere at all times and maybe you could have done
17 something and maybe you couldn't. But I think yes, I feel it particularly when I'm
18 around parents of people that were killed in Vietnam and I have talked with parents and
19 listened to their stories. It's very, very difficult to talk with a mother about the loss of her
20 son and not feel guilty, as in, "I'm here and I'm okay but your son's gone. And what was
21 the difference between him and me and why am I so fortunate and why was he not as
22 fortunate as I was?"

23 RV: Gary, have you done a lot of that? Have you talked to parents?

24 GN: Well, I suppose maybe a dozen times. I've talked with parents, I've talked
25 with children, I've talked with brothers and sisters. A lot of times they'll show up—I'll
26 go to veterans' events and they'll come to veterans' events and they'll want to know.
27 They'll say, "I want to know somebody who knew my son or my brother or my dad."
28 And in many cases, I've been able to help them find people. "Okay, who was your father
29 with?" "Well, he was with such-and-such a company and such-and-such a battalion at
30 such and such a time," and I can do that. But often, in doing that, you know, once they
31 have a contact and they know that I will talk to them about it and I'm willing to talk to

1 them about that, then they'll ask questions. I've talked with two or three people who
2 have lost relatives on Mary Ann. I've talked to a woman who lost her husband on Mary
3 Ann. I've talked with a couple of people that lost brothers on Mary Ann. I've talked to
4 one or two people that lost fiancés on Mary Ann. And when they come up and ask
5 questions, "I'd like to find somebody who knew my boyfriend," and they give the name,
6 and I say, "Yeah, I know who that guy is." I'll make contact with them and offer
7 whatever information that I can to help them understand what happened.

8 RV: Gary, let me ask you about when you got back to the United States and you
9 proceeded home, I take it. Can you tell me what that journey was like and what
10 happened when you did get home?

11 GN: Well, we processed out in Fort Lewis, Washington, and I think maybe we
12 were there two days and there were some medical examinations. It seemed like we filled
13 out paperwork, we drew our final pay, we got our class-A green uniform, and I guess
14 some kind of final instructions or something. You know, how to apply to the VA for
15 benefits if you need VA benefits down the road, a lot of just typical standing around and
16 waiting for somebody to come tell you that you can go on to the next stage. We got
17 released, my paperwork shows I believe May 1 and we were not able to be released until
18 midnight. So we were operating on like April 30th and about 10:30, one of the Sergeants
19 who was in charge of us said, "Well, you know, I'm going to go ahead and let you guys
20 go. I'm not supposed to let you go until midnight but I'm going to let you go now. But if
21 you get in trouble in the next hour and a half, just remember you're still in the Army and
22 you're going to have to deal with the Army." So we left a bunch of us jumped in a cab
23 and went out to the Sea/Tac airport, the Seattle/Tacoma airport. Of course there were not
24 flights left to go anywhere at midnight so just sat in the airport. Another guy that I knew
25 that was from my battalion, we just sat in the airport and I remember we went into a
26 cafeteria type place and ate a sandwich. He wanted to get something to eat and I said,
27 "Well, I don't want to get anything to eat." He said, "I want to get something to eat and I
28 don't want to eat alone. Come in and I'll buy you something to eat." So I think I ate a
29 sandwich. It was kind of one of those things when what are the first things that you see
30 and remember about getting back home after you've been gone for that year and a half
31 and one of the things is we were sitting in that airport. There was a group of high school

1 kids that came through and this is the first of May and they'd obviously been to like a
2 high school prom and the guys were all dressed up in tuxedos and the girls we were
3 dressed up in prom gowns and they evidently had just gone to the airport to run around
4 and see what was going on in the airport. So they come down the corridor, probably a
5 dozen of them and we kind of look at each other and we go—the juxtaposition is a week
6 ago we were in the jungle wearing fatigues that hadn't been washed in three weeks and
7 we don't shave and don't have good showers and don't have beds to sleep on and here's
8 these kids coming down. They've just been to prom and they're in tuxedos and prom
9 gowns. And it's sort of like, "What's the real world? Was our world the real world or is
10 their world the real world?" But the two worlds are certainly a lot different. I'll always
11 remember that picture as one of the first things that I saw when I got home was these kids
12 that—to them, I don't even know if they knew about Vietnam or where we had been and
13 that a war was going on in Vietnam. And if they did, they didn't care. I don't think it
14 should totally interrupt their lives but it was kind of I guess an acknowledgement on my
15 part that yeah, stuff goes on regardless of what the last year was all about and the things
16 that I saw and did. Life in the United States pretty much went on and high school kids
17 are still going to prom and getting dressed up and going to prom parties. And I think
18 about six o'clock the next morning, we got on an airplane and flew from Seattle to
19 Denver and changed planes and flew from Denver to Wichita, Kansas. I had called my
20 parents and told them that I was in Fort Lewis and would be coming home soon. I didn't
21 know exactly the flight arrangements because I didn't have an airplane ticket and I think
22 when I got to Denver I probably called them and said, "Okay, I'm going to be on a plane
23 and I'll be in Wichita about noon." And they said, "Okay, well, call us when you get
24 here." They were at my sister's house in Wichita, so I got to Wichita and get de-planed.
25 The stewardess on the plane, they always stand there by the door when you get off and
26 tell you goodbye. And coming down the aisle, I'm dressed in my Army uniform, my
27 hair's bleached out and I've got a pretty good tan from being in Vietnam for a year. You
28 know, you've kind of got that look. She knew that I was coming home from Vietnam.
29 She might even know how to read different ribbons and insignia and stuff on the uniform
30 and she asked a very simple question. She said, "Are you home now?" And I said, "Yes,
31 I am." And to me, that's when I finally got home, is when she asked me, "Are you home

1 now?" I said, "Yes, I am." Up until that point in time, even in Fort Lewis, Washington
2 or walking around the airport in Denver, as far as I'm concerned, I still haven't made it
3 yet. But when I got off that plane and she said that—to me, that was my welcome home.
4 And she may have asked that question not even knowing the significance of it. But as far
5 as I'm concerned, at that particular point in time, that was somebody basically saying,
6 "Are you home now?" "Yes, I am." And I think she smiled and said, "That's fine," or
7 something like that, is all. I went on in the terminal and called my sister's house and my
8 folks were over there and I think an aunt and uncle had come by. They were eating lunch
9 and they said, "Well, we'll come out and get you in a little bit when we get done eating
10 lunch." And I said, "Fine," so I took my duffle bag and set it on the curb and waited until
11 they showed up to come get me.

12 RV: Did you have any trepidation about moving forward or was this really a
13 welcome, in that you were in safe hands?

14 GN: Well, I wasn't worried anymore about not getting home. You know, I didn't
15 have any concerns about physical safety or anything like that. I didn't really know what I
16 was going to do, going forward. I felt pretty washed out. Pretty washed out physically;
17 pretty washed out mentally, emotionally. What I'd wanted to do before I went in the
18 service, I didn't think I still wanted to do. But I went back to Dodge City. We stayed a
19 day or two there and went back home and I really didn't do anything for about seven
20 months. I'd saved a lot of money when I was in the service. You don't spend money. I
21 was probably sending three or four hundred dollars a month home every month,
22 particularly in Vietnam.

23 RV: That's great.

24 GN: So I probably had at that time, five or six thousand dollars in a savings
25 account. And in 1971 you could have bought a new Cadillac for five thousand dollars.
26 And I didn't feel pressed to go get a job. I didn't feel pressed to do anything. But the
27 folks certainly said, "Okay, you're home. Come on home." So I lived with my parents
28 and I did some odd jobs. I worked harvesting a wheat field that summer. I had a college
29 job working for a produce company delivering produce and I worked for them some,
30 filling in on vacation, so I could pick up a couple of hundred dollars here, couple of
31 hundred dollars there. I bought me a brand new car, a 1971 Plymouth Satellite. I bought

1 me some new civilian clothes, went out at night, visited with what friends were still in
2 town, went to the local beer joints. We'd go drink beer and saw people. One of the
3 things I can remember people saying though, was, "Well, what are you going to do
4 now?" I go, "Well, I don't know." "Well, what do you mean, you don't know? What
5 are you going to do?" I said, "Well, I don't know what I'm going to do." "Well, don't
6 you think you need to do something?" "Well, yeah, I'll probably do something." "Well,
7 what are you going to do?" "I don't know what I'm going to do." And not only did I not
8 know, I didn't care. I absolutely positively didn't care and I think part of that was I was
9 just so glad to be home in one piece that nothing else really mattered a whole hell of a lot.
10 And it was probably the best thing for me to do, was to take this seven months, from May
11 through the end of December, and just absolutely positively not do anything and not
12 worry about doing anything. I had a place to live, I had enough money. All I needed to
13 do was put gasoline in the car and whatever beer I wanted to drink going out at night with
14 people I knew. And those two things, that's what I did, and I unwound. I guess I want to
15 say I rested up, I caught my breath, I took a look around at what was going on, I talked
16 with people, I got myself re-established but I didn't get in a hurry about it. I didn't feel
17 like I was pressed and said, "Okay, I've been home two weeks. Why don't I have a job?
18 What aren't I doing something productive?" I was probably saying, "Well, I've been
19 home two weeks and I'm damn glad I'm home and I am not doing a dang thing on
20 purpose."

21 RV: Yeah. Let me ask you about—we talked about this a bit but—the television
22 coverage of the war. How much did you follow it on television?

23 GN: Well, I probably watched every day the evening news. At that time we
24 didn't have cable TV so you didn't have the wall-to-wall, twenty-four hours a day, seven
25 days a week news coverage, but all your major networks had network news for half an
26 hour or so. And depending on how they worked you might watch half an hour of one
27 network and half an hour of the other. So I kept up on it and certainly followed the major
28 events such as the peace negotiations that were taking place and the eventual settlement,
29 what's called the Christmas Bombings of '72, the release of the Prisoners of War in '73,
30 and then the collapse I'll call it of South Vietnam in 1975 when the North Vietnamese

1 attacked and virtually within a matter of days took over all of Vietnam. So I watched that
2 and knew what was going on.

3 RV: How did that strike you, Gary, when you saw the country fall?

4 GN: Well, to me it was just the eventuality that I felt would always happen. And
5 I know we discussed this before. Even when I was in Vietnam, my belief was that all we
6 were doing was buying time. We were delaying the eventuality and maybe some of the
7 terms and conditions of the eventuality. But the eventuality is, "We're going to leave.
8 We are going to leave. We're not going to stay there forever. We are going to leave and
9 probably there will be some interim period. It could be a week or a month or a year or
10 ten years but there will be some interim period and then the North Vietnamese are going
11 to come in and take over the South and we're not going to do anything about it because
12 we're gone. We're done. We did everything we're going to do. We are not going to go
13 back." So when that happened, in 1975 when that happened, to me it was like, "Yeah,
14 this is what I figured would happen." To me, it wasn't personal. I mean, I didn't feel,
15 "Oh, gee, this makes me feel terribly bad," or, "Oh, gee, this makes me feel terribly bad."
16 To me it was just, "Well, yeah, this is what I thought was going to happen and it's
17 happened." I wasn't really all concerned about the political ramifications that that may
18 have for the United States or anybody else then or any time in the future.

19 RV: How much did you talk about the war or did people ask you about Vietnam?

20 GN: Well, a little bit. But you know, I think my attitude, which probably reflects
21 the attitude of a lot of Vietnam veterans at that time, was, "When I get home, I'm not
22 going to think about it, I'm not going to talk about it. I'm going to act like it never
23 happened. I'm going to act like it never happened. I'm going to go on with my life as if
24 that two-year period absolutely positively never existed." And you know, realistically
25 you can't do that but I also say that realistically, people have tried to do that and people
26 are still trying to do that. Vietnam veterans are still trying to do that. That's what they
27 call going in the closet. You go in the closet and shut the door and I ain't coming out. A
28 compartmentalization of that particular aspect of their life's history. But there's subtle
29 things that I remember people talking about and I remember one time I think I was
30 watching the TV news at home. I don't know if it was my mom or somebody—maybe
31 one of my brothers or sisters had told me, "Well, what are you watching that for? Why

1 do you even care about that? Now that you're home, you shouldn't care about what's
2 going on over there." And I thought, "Oh, well, so, like, if you're not there or you don't
3 have somebody there that's personal—your brother or sister—you shouldn't care about
4 what's going on?" Well, I cared what was happening to the people that were over there
5 but it was just sort of like somebody said, "You shouldn't care about what's going on
6 over there. You're home. It's over with." And I know that summer, that first summer I
7 was home I was out in a place we went to. It was a beer tavern in Dodge City and sitting
8 there at the bar drinking a beer and a guy that had gone to the same school that I went
9 with but he was younger than I, maybe a year or two younger, but I knew him and he
10 knew me but we never did really run around together. He was younger than me but we
11 knew each other well enough at that point in time to sit and talk with each other if we
12 were in the same place. I think he was by himself and I was by myself. We kind of
13 started talking about people that we knew in general and he brought up somebody that we
14 knew and the fellow that he brought up had also been to Vietnam and recently came
15 home. I can't remember who he is now, but he said, "Oh yeah, old so-and-so. I saw him
16 the other day and he just got back from Vietnam here recently. I think he's kind of crazy.
17 You know, I think all them guys that go to Vietnam and come back are a little bit crazy."
18 I just sat there and kind of said—didn't say much, maybe nodded my head. Then he kind
19 of stopped and said, "Well, I haven't seen you around for a while. Where have you
20 been?" (Laughs) I just kind of probably real softly said, "Well, I've been to Vietnam." I
21 mean, he just got quiet as he could be. But that kind of showed what I call—I don't
22 know if that was true. I don't think it's true; everybody that came back from Vietnam
23 was a little bit crazy. I think everybody that came back from Vietnam certainly had a
24 very life-affecting experience. I mean, it was no little thing to go to war and come home
25 but does that mean that everybody that came home was mentally unstable? No, I don't
26 think so. I don't think I was mentally unstable. I mean, there were things that certainly I
27 was affected by and am still affected by what I saw and what I did but it doesn't mean, to
28 me, that I'm in some manner not a balanced person. But little, subtle things, very little,
29 subtle things like that that you'd pick up and I did have some people—people would say,
30 "You was in Vietnam?" "Yeah, I was in Vietnam?" "Well, is it as bad as they say it is?"

1 Well, how do you answer that question? “Well, I don’t know. How bad do they say it
2 is?”

3 RV: Right.

4 GN: Until I know how bad they say it is, I don’t know if it’s as bad as they say it
5 is. And a lot of that is just sort of like I think an acknowledgement but it’s not a true
6 interest. “Well, is it as bad as they say it is?” Well, answer yes or answer no and the next
7 question’s going to probably be, “So what are you going to do Friday night?”

8 RV: So there’s no real follow-up discussion.

9 GN: Yeah. And I use the term window-peeking. It’s happened a few times.
10 “Well, I had a brother-in-law over there and he said blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.”
11 They want to make some kind of reference to that but in reality to me, no. They don’t
12 really want to discuss it. They don’t want to really get involved so typically it’s just one
13 of these things that just passes by. And there were a couple of times where somebody
14 really seemed interested, and yeah, I would tell them about it. Maybe they would bring
15 up some particular thing. “Well, I heard in Vietnam you guys didn’t wear underwear.
16 How come you guys didn’t wear underwear?” Well, okay, I can explain that, why we
17 didn’t wear underwear. They didn’t give us any underwear to wear. But if it was
18 somebody who was just flying off ten different topics, that’s kind of one of the things,
19 “No, I’m not going to sit and tell you about it.” But if somebody genuinely expressed an
20 interest and genuinely expressed an interest, “Yeah, I’ll sit down and talk to you.” But I
21 want to talk to you as long as I’m interested in talking to you. I don’t want to talk to you
22 as long as you’re interested in listening. If you’re going to get me started then just
23 understand that if you want to open that box and see what’s in that box, you’ve got to let
24 some stuff come out. And it’s not fair to open the lid and say, “Oh gee, no, I don’t want
25 to know that,” and slam the lid back shut. If that’s the case, don’t even open up the lid.
26 So I think that I’m very guarded with who I talked to and I think a lot of Vietnam vets are
27 probably very guarded because they don’t want the window-peekers. The term I use is
28 window-peekers, somebody who wants to kind of see but not be involved. They want to
29 see but not be seen. Kind of like somebody rubber necking at an accident scene as you
30 drive down the highway. I’m going to keep on moving here a little bit but I’m going to
31 try to see as much as I can see as I go by. No, I ain’t going to do it that way.

1 RV: How often did this happen, people who were not window-peekers?

2 GN: Well, it—typically it might be somebody that I work with, somebody at
3 work, and a lot of times it's younger people, people that might be twenty years younger
4 than me and they legitimately don't know much. I don't have—the people that are more
5 my age are the people that are more apt just to kind of say something like, "Oh yeah, my
6 brother, he was in Vietnam, and he said it was hell." Okay. End of discussion. But
7 sometimes younger people that I would work with and maybe somehow in a
8 conversation, they'd start putting two and two together. They'd kind of know how old I
9 was and maybe they'd hear me make some reference to somebody or see something.
10 "Were you in Vietnam?" "Yeah, I was in Vietnam." "Well, what did you do when you
11 was in Vietnam?" "Well, I was in the infantry." "Oh, gee, well, what did in the infantry
12 do in Vietnam?" "Well, we walked around with guns and tried to shoot people and tried
13 to make sure they didn't shoot us first." "Oh." And so that could—it's sort of like if the
14 person followed up with good questions, okay, I'll try to give you a good answer. As
15 long as there's an interest there and there's legitimately good questions and there's an
16 opportunity here to explain to this person, I'll do it. And I talked to one fellow one time.
17 When I lived in Kansas City, he was a salesman and he'd gone through college. And I
18 think the way we got started one day, he said, "Well, what did you do when you
19 graduated from college?" I said, "Well, I got drafted." "You got drafted? Really?" I go,
20 "Yeah. When I got out of college, we had the draft to deal with. When you got out of
21 college, there was no draft. But when I got out of college, I got drafted."

22 RV: Big difference.

23 GN: So that may be the way you start a conversation. I can remember talking to
24 him and maybe talking to him for a few hours, you know, four or five or six hours about
25 stuff. And one of the points he came back to me with is, "Well, how could they make
26 you do that?" I said, "What do you mean, how could they make you?" "How could they
27 make you? If you didn't want to go into the military and you didn't want to go to
28 Vietnam and you didn't want to go in the war, how could they make you do that?" I
29 mean, to him it was so far out of his world. He just could not understand how people
30 could be made to go to war and fight. "How could they make you do that?" And I said,
31 "Well, they drafted you." "Yeah, but how come you had to go?" And explaining stuff

1 about Vietnam to me, he understood. But he couldn't understand this concept of being
2 drafted and being compelled to serve because he didn't grow up with it. It wasn't the
3 thing that existed in his life. To me, it's, "Yeah, well, if you got drafted you had very few
4 options. Do you want to go to jail; do you want to run to Canada? What are you going to
5 do?" A lot of people just enlisted in something else. They tried to pick where they went.
6 Me, I just said, "Come get me." But it was so beyond his belief as to how they could
7 make you do that.

8 RV: He didn't see it as a federal requirement?

9 GN: No. But there's been times like that in some small conversations. I got a
10 nephew that's in the Air Force and he went and I can remember he was asking some
11 questions about some stuff and a time or two with my brothers. My younger brother
12 served twenty-six years. He went in, in 1971, about a month after I got out and we've
13 talked a little. But more of the discussions that I've had are with people who are remote
14 from me. They're not close friends, they're not relatives, they're people who maybe I
15 know and know well enough and along the course of time they'll bring up the topic and
16 want to ask some questions. And when they find that I'll address answers, they'll ask
17 questions to kind of get their curiosity fulfilled.

18 RV: What did you think about the anti-war stuff going on? We've discussed it as
19 far as your reactions and what you witnessed at home and what you thought during the
20 war and after; but what about people past 1975 who really have expressed to you, I guess,
21 face-to-face or in the same room that the war was wrong, that the veterans really didn't
22 do a good job or something along those lines? Have you had that kind of experience and
23 if so, what was your reaction and your feeling?

24 GN: Well, I guess I want to say I don't feel a huge amount of belligerence toward
25 the anti-war movement. I mean, I think many of those people were very conscientious
26 about their beliefs. They were being true to their beliefs. I think a lot of people were in
27 the anti-war movement because it just seemed like a nice thing to do. It was an activity
28 that you could go out and you could be around a lot of young people and it was social.
29 There was a social event. I don't know if they had extremely deep convictions or not. To
30 them it was more of a social type thing. But I know there are people who are very, very
31 strong, have very, very strong convictions and I want to say I think it's probably good

1 that there are people out there who conscientiously have strong beliefs that are anti-war.
2 I don't know, if everybody walked around that the true way we should ever settle
3 anything is just to kill the other guy and win, I go, "Well, I don't believe that ought to be
4 a well-held belief." The fact that you go to war and people have to die ought to really be
5 a very rare occurrence and for something that's very necessary and very dear. In many
6 cases, it that's not the case then yeah, you probably ought to have some people out there
7 saying, "Hey, this isn't what we ought to be doing. This is not accomplishing what we
8 want to accomplish the best way we can do it." So I don't have any real deep-seated
9 hatred for the people. I think there are some misdirected people. I think there are some
10 people who have agendas that they want to pursue and they'll use kind of the anti-war
11 mechanism to pursue their agenda. Let's take the example of some of the anti-war
12 groups that were blowing up buildings. Okay, well this makes a lot of sense to me.
13 You're anti-war so the way that you show your anti-war is you blow a building up and
14 kill three people in the building. Well, I don't see you as any different than anybody else.
15 You're espousing this theory of peace and no violence and being anti-war but you blew a
16 building up? That just doesn't make sense to me. But I know one time when I was living
17 in Kansas City, there's a University of Missouri at Kansas City and they were offering a
18 graduate level course on Vietnam history. And I ran across that somewhere in some
19 literature they passed out and I thought, "Well, I think I'll go down and see what they're
20 teaching." And it was—and I could get in. I think I just had to pay money and I could
21 get into the class. And it was maybe two hours a week for a semester or whatever. And
22 the professor taught the class and there was maybe thirty people in this class and it was
23 just a lot of discussion. There would be reading assignments, there would be videos, and
24 I remember one of the videos that he played was an anti-war video that came out right
25 towards the end of the year and very negatively pitched. I mean, they had the picture of
26 Westmoreland in there with his statement, "Well, you know, these people aren't like us.
27 These people, they don't value life like we value life." They showed American soldiers
28 that were in bars in Vietnam picking up prostitutes. They showed American soldiers in
29 Vietnam doing drugs. They probably showed some of the very famous scenes—the
30 police chief in Saigon during Tet shooting the guy in the head, the girl in the war that was
31 burned by Vietnamese Air Force dropping Napalm on her village. It probably showed

1 scenes of My Lai. Anything and everything possible that was negative about the
2 Vietnam War was in this video. But it was kind of being pitched as, “Well, this is the
3 real Vietnam.” I kind of go, “Well, yeah, this is the real bad Vietnam stuff. This is the
4 worst.” But it wasn’t balanced. And I think—you know, I would make some comments
5 like hold up my hand and say, “You know, you’re going to put that out there and say that
6 that’s kind of an overall perspective of Vietnam, no. You’re showing Vietnam at its
7 worst. And you need to understand. I’m not saying those things didn’t occur but if
8 you’re trying to generalize and say that these were the common things, the things that
9 happened every day and happened to everybody and everybody did it, no. Don’t pass
10 that off like that.” So pretty soon the professor, he was able to scope me out and I’m sure
11 he knew who I was. I’m sure he knew he had a Vietnam vet in the classroom. And I
12 didn’t try to dominate. I didn’t holler everyday at something that popped up but there
13 were times when things popped up and yeah, I’d give my two cents worth. And I think I
14 was just auditing the course. I wasn’t taking it for credit so I didn’t have to worry about
15 taking no test at the end and getting the grade. But one day there was a woman that sat
16 right in front of me and she was an older woman, maybe my age. Maybe she was a
17 sixties generation woman sitting in this classroom twenty years later. And the issue came
18 up as to did the anti-war activism during Vietnam shorten the war and she got up and
19 made this very nice, wonderful speech on how if it weren’t for the anti-war activists, the
20 war would have kept on going. And so I kind of stood up and said, “Well, I’d like for
21 you to in some way, shape, or form back that up with some type of proof that you believe
22 that the reason the war ended when it did was because of the anti-war movement. If it
23 had not been for the anti-war movement the war would have kept on going. You should
24 give me some type of proof that that happened. In other words, who did that influence?”
25 And I argued that point because the anti-war movement probably got started in ’67, ’66,
26 ’67. It certainly was rolling at high speed in ’68. Well, POWs didn’t come home until
27 ’73. If the United States government wasn’t very good at ending the Vietnam War
28 quickly, the anti-war movement wasn’t any better at ending it quickly. The war didn’t
29 end quickly under any circumstances. But if you go back to some of the statements that
30 are attributed to North Vietnamese leaders, when they saw the anti-war movement going
31 on in the United States, they look at that as being helpful to their cause because they

1 knew that the United States was divided and that potentially our national will would fall
2 apart. And certainly the people that were out there in the streets and on TV and
3 demonstrating and making statements, even politicians were demonstrating that they
4 weren't for it. And all you've got to do is get enough people that aren't for it and
5 whether we tell them or not, that could bring it about. So they may have stayed in. They
6 may have said—you know, I could see their logic being that, "Why should we make
7 peace with these people now under terms that they want? We'll just stick around for a
8 while longer and it will get hotter for them and they'll eventually just leave and we won't
9 have to concede anything." So maybe the anti-war movement caused the enemy to stay
10 with it longer so maybe the anti-war movement made the war exist longer and more
11 people got killed and hurt. I mean, I'll make that argument. You'll say, "Well, Gary, can
12 you prove that?" Well, no, I can't prove that it extended the war probably any better than
13 you can prove that it cut the war short but I can certainly make that statement and throw a
14 couple of things behind it. So I don't know. To this day, if you said do I think the anti-
15 war movement extended the war or the anti-war movement shortened the war I'll say I
16 don't know? I don't know what it did. To me the reason the war ended when it was
17 probably because of the Christmas Bombings and the Vietnamese figured, "We don't
18 want to keep seeing these damn B-52s fly over every day. We'll just tell the guy, 'Okay,
19 well do it,' get them the heck out of Vietnam and wait around for a while and go do what
20 we want to do anyway."

21 RV: Right. What did you think about the Vietnam Veterans Against the War?

22 GN: Well, I was a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. I think I had
23 learned about them in Vietnam. Somebody was passing out some type of literature when
24 I was in Vietnam. I know when I came home somewhere along the line—I don't know
25 where—I mean, I'm living in Dodge City, Kansas. It's not the end of the world but it's
26 right next to the edge of the world out there. And I got a hold of a guy's name, John
27 Musgrave. And John Musgrave was a Vietnam veteran who lives up in northeast Kansas
28 around Baldwin and he was like a state coordinator of Vietnam Veterans Against the
29 War. And I think I wrote him a letter and he sent me some stuff and maybe I send five
30 dollars or ten dollars or something, some kind of dues, and he sent a membership card.
31 So at one time I was a card-carrying member of VVAW, but I never did anything. I think

1 the thing I was most interested in there probably was trying to learn what exactly from
2 this perspective—from a Vietnam veteran’s perspective and the anti-war movement—I
3 mean, I wasn’t pro-war. Shit, I was drafted. I wasn’t out here waving a flag saying,
4 “Let’s go kill some more people. Send me back, please; I want to go kill more people.”
5 It was more of a curiosity thing. And the other thing is, when I wrote him a letter he
6 wrote me a real nice letter back and it wasn’t filled with, “Down with Nixon, down with
7 the military.” It was a very levelheaded letter. I think he probably had a welcome home
8 message in there or something and maybe described a little bit about a few of the guys
9 who were in Kansas and who they were. I never went to any meetings. I don’t even
10 remember getting any newsletters or anything but I do remember corresponding at least
11 one time with John Musgrave. So this would have been maybe ’72. Well, the POWs
12 came home in ’73. Vietnam was pretty much over with. So the anti-war movement
13 pretty much folded up shop probably the end of ’72 and early ’73 so there wasn’t that
14 much of it left anymore.

15 RV: Can you tell me what you did with your life after you kind of went through
16 this period of six months or so of not caring and separating yourself from—well, not
17 separating but just kind of moving through your own mind and processing it? Where did
18 you go?

19 GN: Well, one of my friends that I had gone to school with, Bobby Sanchez, he
20 had gone into the Navy. He was a year older than me and he had gone into the Navy but
21 he had some medical condition—I don’t remember what it was—and he got discharged.
22 I think he was only in the maybe Navy six months or something. And he had moved to
23 Wichita, Kansas, and I had a sister living there so I would go to Wichita about once a
24 month and spend two or three days. That was a big town—if you wanted to go anywhere
25 in Kansas, Wichita was a big town. So I’d go up there and visit my sister and some other
26 friends and relatives in the neighborhood. I went over one time and met up with him and
27 we were going to go out and probably get something to eat and go to a couple of places
28 and drink some beer or whatever. When he got out of the Navy, he’d gone back to
29 school. We were both graduates of St. Mary of the Plains College and we were both
30 Math majors so we had a lot of classes together. He told me that he went back to Wichita
31 State University and got some additional coursework done and he was teaching school.

1 And he said something like, “Well, what are you going to do?” I said, “Well, I really
2 don’t know what I’m going to do.” And he kind of described this program that he went
3 through and I thought, “Well, you know, teaching school sounds pretty good.” I always
4 liked going to school and I always like math. I thought, “Math sounds like something—
5 maybe I could do that just to kind of get my feet back on the ground.” I had the GI Bill
6 so in January of ’72; I went to Wichita and enrolled in Wichita State University on a
7 program to get certification to be a secondary education math and science teacher. So I
8 did that for like a year and a half and that kind of put me back into kind of my age group.
9 Although I was older, I was twenty-three so I already had a Bachelor’s Degree but most
10 of my classes were with undergraduates so I was meeting people. Although I was a year
11 or two older than them that didn’t seem to be that significant so I was back into kind of
12 that crowd. I got a part-time job. I was working thirty or thirty-five hours a week at a
13 quick-shop convenience store, going to school probably fifteen hours a week. I got an
14 apartment, stayed with a buddy of mine that I’d grown up with in Dodge City. He was
15 living there so we shared an apartment. I think we split an apartment rent of like seventy
16 bucks a month. I was getting around three hundred dollars a month from the GI Bill. I
17 was probably getting paid about that much a month doing my job so I was considered
18 rich. I was walking around with five or six hundred dollars a month and I’m a college
19 student. So I completed that coursework and did get a job teaching school in a small
20 town in south-central Kansas. During that time of going to college I met my first wife,
21 Frieda Myer. We went together. We got married in 1974. I moved back to Wichita. I
22 was going to go to graduate school. Before I went in the Army I wanted to go to graduate
23 school and I always had this idea that I wanted to go further with the formal education so
24 I took an assistantship at Wichita State University. It paid me a little bit of money, I
25 taught five hours a week of Algebra 101 to college students and took a graduate load of I
26 think nine hours a semester, maybe twelve hours, so I got my GI Bill plus some money
27 from the graduate assistantship and that’s what I was going to do. And I got about
28 halfway or two-thirds of the way through the Master’s Program and I was working
29 summers for a company that manufactured liquid asphalt products. I was bored in the
30 summertime. In summer school I only took one class or something and that didn’t keep
31 me busy enough so I went out and got a job working summer times and I worked three

1 summers at the same place and they wanted me to come work full time; and I kept
2 turning them down saying, “No, I’m in a Master’s Program. I want to get my Master’s
3 Degree in Mathematics.” And they kept saying, “Well, come to work for us. Come to
4 work for us. We want you to go to work for us.” And my wife at that time, she was kind
5 of worried that I was going to be a professional student. She said, “Well, they’re offering
6 you a job. How long are you going to stay in school? And if you do stay in school what
7 are you going to do with a Master’s Degree that you wouldn’t do with a Bachelor’s
8 Degree?” So all of those factors came in, in December of ’76. I accepted a position as
9 plant manager for Highway Asphalt Products and for the last thirty years that’s been my
10 profession is operations manager, plant manager, and terminal manager in particularly the
11 asphalt or petroleum business.

12 RV: Gary, can you talk about your Vietnam experience in the context of today
13 and going to the reunions and getting back in touch over the last few years with your
14 experience?

15 GN: Well, I think there was not much done probably until the mid-eighties when
16 the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was constructed in Washington, D.C. And I know when
17 that was done there was a lot of controversy. My initial reaction was, “Well, they’ll
18 never get that built. There’s nobody who gives a dang about veterans if they’re going to
19 put a memorial in Washington, D.C.” But it did get done. In fact, my wife and daughter
20 went up there the year it was dedicated. We went before the dedication. It was dedicated
21 in November and we were up there right at the end of October so it was almost done but
22 not quite done. But there was a US park ranger there and they had a book where they had
23 all the names in it where the names are at on the wall. And I went up there and asked the
24 question something like, “Well, does that book show were the people are at on the wall?”
25 “Yes.” And then she said, “Are you a Vietnam veteran?” And I said, “Yes, I am.” And
26 she said, “Well, did you want to go look for somebody’s name on the wall?” And I said,
27 “Well, yeah, I would like to do that if I could.” She said, “Well, this is not open yet, but
28 if you go around to the other end there’s an opening in this fence and you tell the people
29 there that you’re a Vietnam vet and they’ll let you in.” So we did. We had to walk from
30 the west end all the way around to the east end and somebody let us in. And I can
31 remember going in and looking at the memorial for the first time and it was a very

1 emotional experience for me. And I can remember even physically being affected. You
2 know, my legs felt weak. It felt like some of the days when we'd been out in the jungle
3 and we'd walked all day long and you're just physically exhausted to where you start
4 getting spasms in your legs and your legs just sit there and shake and you can't control it.
5 It was just kind of a very strong feeling to the effect even physically seeing it. Now my
6 thought at that time was, "This is exactly what we need. This is good. These people will
7 now be remembered. No longer will you be able to hide this. You can't push this off and
8 say this never happened and this never existed. You can't keep it in that little box with
9 the lid on it no more because this is here. And when you come and see this you will have
10 to admit to what happened which is we were in a war, we got fifty-eight thousand and
11 some people killed in the war." And I think even with myself it was an experience where
12 I felt the same way. "Okay, for the last fifteen years I've pretty much been one of these
13 guys that's going to go around here and say, 'I'm going to act like it never happened and
14 if I act like it never happened then I don't have to acknowledge it, I don't have to deal
15 with it, I don't have to talk to nobody about it if I don't want to talk to anybody about
16 it.'" But I think, like many other veterans, seeing the memorial there is a personal
17 experience from the standpoint that you say, "I think it's okay to talk about it. In fact, I
18 want to talk about it. I don't want to deny it. It's as much a part of me as the church I
19 went to when I was a kid or where I went to school and graduated." I mean, you don't
20 deny that part of your bringing up and your life experiences. Why are you denying this
21 part relative to military service and where you were at during the Vietnam War? So after
22 that time I did start to contact people that I remembered and had pretty good luck. I
23 probably found—within the next two or three years I found seven, eight, or nine or ten
24 people that I'd been in Vietnam with and wrote their names and addresses down on a
25 piece of paper and said, "Okay, I know where you're at and I want to stay in touch." I
26 think in 1988 I became aware of the Americal Division Veterans Association and I joined
27 it and started going to their functions. I think I went to the first reunion in 1989 or '90
28 and haven't missed one since. I did get involved in a local Kansas City Vietnam
29 Veterans of America chapter. In fact, I ended up on the executive council for a while and
30 was a Chapter President for a while. And pretty much since that time in the late eighties

1 or nineties in some form or the other I have been active with veteran's organizations and
2 associations and events and things like that.

3 RV: Okay. Looking back at your experience, Gary, what do you think was the
4 most significant thing that you learned about yourself?

5 GN: Well, I think that I learned that you don't know what you think you know
6 about yourself if you're never tested. And you could probably take a look at a
7 circumstance—I could give you a hypothetical situation and say, "Okay, here's the
8 situation, now how would you react?" "Oh, well under that situation I would do this."
9 "Oh, okay. Well, I don't think you really know. Now if that hypothetical situation
10 comes to be a real life situation then you're going to find out. And you might find out
11 that you can really do a lot of things that you didn't think you could do. Or you may find
12 out some things that you thought you would do—no, you ain't doing that." And I think a
13 lot of that has probably to deal with courage. I use the word courage. You may be a lot
14 stronger than you think you are but you've never been tested. Or you may be a lot
15 weaker than you think you are but you've never been tested. And I think one of the
16 things that I've come away with that probably for most of my life up to Vietnam I was
17 underestimating myself. And one of the things coming out of Vietnam is that I probably
18 can really do a whole lot of things that I didn't think could do and all I need to do is to
19 gather those resources together that I need to have and have the will. And it may be
20 something as simple as going back to Vietnam and saying, "I will go wherever these
21 other guys go today and wherever they get to tonight, I will be with them." And it may
22 be a struggle. I mean, you may be physically ill, you may be sick, you may be tired, you
23 may be exhausted, you may be hungry, you may be thirsty, you may be scared, you may
24 be wet, you may be miserable; but we've got another hundred meters to go before we get
25 to where we're going and they're going there and by golly, darn it, if they're going there
26 I'll be there, too. So you have to call upon whatever you have to get done whatever it is
27 that you really want to do. And if you really want to do it, even if it's very, very hard and
28 difficult to do you just have to address that and go do it. So I think that's one of the
29 things I did learn a lot about myself and what I was made of and what my character is and
30 what I believed in and what I didn't believe in and how I would follow up with the things

1 I believed in and where did I fall short and things that I really wish I would have done
2 better but I just didn't bring myself out to do it.

3 RV: Is there anything you would change about your experience?

4 GN: Well, I don't think so. To me it's sort of like when I came out of it and
5 people would say, "Well, would you ever go back and do it again?" And I go, "Yeah, I
6 would go back and do it again." And that doesn't mean, "Oh, gee, I wish we had the
7 Vietnam War all over again so I could go back and do it again." That's not what I mean.
8 What I mean is that I'm not dissatisfied with what personally happened to me and what I
9 personally did. I'm not dissatisfied with that. Now what would be the alternative? I
10 don't know. I have absolutely positively no idea where I'd be and what I'd be doing right
11 now if I wouldn't have gone to Vietnam. I think Vietnam was a very pivotal part of my
12 life. I mean, I was set to go to Kansas State University and take on a Master's Program
13 in computer science in 1970 and 1969. "Well, gee, Gary, if you had done that where
14 would you be today?" I have absolutely positively no idea. I could be sitting off
15 somewhere programming computers. Who knows? Maybe I'd be washing cars; maybe
16 I'd be a failure. I don't really know.

17 RV: It's a bit of a hypothetical.

18 GN: Right. But I know where I'm at now and I know part of me getting to where
19 I'm at now was I spent nineteen months in the Army and I spent almost eleven months in
20 Vietnam. I'm not dissatisfied where I'm at now so to change that would put me on an
21 unknown course. Maybe that unknown course I'd be better off and maybe on that course
22 I'd be worse off. I don't know. But I would go back and do it again because I guess I
23 want to get back to where I'm at right now. And I think the other aspect of that is, is that
24 I want to believe I'm noble and maybe I'm not. Maybe I'm self-serving but if I wouldn't
25 have gone to Vietnam when I did somebody else would have had to go because they
26 would have got that person to go. If I had said, "No, I'm not going." "Okay, you don't
27 have to go. We'll get this other guy to go." Well, where would he be at? You know,
28 what if the situation was such that I made it through okay but if I wouldn't have gone,
29 somebody else who would have gone wouldn't have made it through okay? Somebody
30 else would have gone in my place but they wouldn't have been as fortunate as I. I don't
31 know if that would have been the case or not. So I don't have a problem living with what

1 I did. I don't have regrets. I try to look at some of the positive things, the people I met,
2 the very wonderful people that I knew then and I know now. I don't believe you ought to
3 have to go to war to meet good people but I did meet good people and I was with good
4 people that I think a lot of. And then again, just the things I learned about myself, the
5 things that I learned about humanity, about people—I was in Vietnam ten months but it
6 was probably like living ten years. I don't know if I could put any ten years together in
7 my whole life up till now and have as many significant things happen in those ten years
8 put together as I had happen in ten months in Vietnam. I mean, I could pick some things
9 out like the birth of my daughter, you know, the passing away of my parents or
10 something that were certainly significant things but that ten months, almost eleven
11 months was very, very compact with many very intense things that are simply not
12 reproduced or replicated anywhere else.

13 RV: How do you think books and movies have affected the public image and
14 memory of the Vietnam War and what have they meant to you personally?

15 GN: Well, I think there's some good books out there. I think there are some good
16 movies out there and I encouraged people to read books and go to movies. And like I
17 said before, the only thing that I tell people is that don't get too convinced that you really
18 know very much. Even if you read a lot and go to a lot of movies, even if you walk out
19 there and say, "You know, I read a hundred books on Vietnam. I think I'm an expert." I
20 go, "Well yeah, I'll tell you what. I read a hundred books on Vietnam and I was there ten
21 months, almost eleven months and I don't consider myself to be an expert because I
22 know how damn much I don't know." But I think people need to do it and try to
23 understand what they can, whatever depth that they can. Just be very careful about trying
24 to think that you know exactly what it is. I'm not even going to claim that. One of the
25 things that I wanted to do when I was in Vietnam, I swore I was going to do when and if I
26 got out of Vietnam, was that I was going to read about Vietnam and understand how we
27 got there and why we were there and what it's affect was. And I tried. I have literally
28 probably read a couple hundred books but I can't. If you say, "Well, Gary, do you have it
29 all figured out?" I'll go, "No, I ain't got it all figured out. In fact, the only thing I've
30 figured out is that I ain't going to figure it out." There's a lot of things I know and I
31 could quote you things that I've read if you want to believe what you see in print but I

1 don't have it all figured out. Where I'm going to get upset with people is like I said
2 people that go see the movie *Platoon* and say, "Oh, I know what Vietnam is because I
3 saw the movie *Platoon*." I'll sit back and say, "No." People do get caught up on that. I
4 remember this guy one time, he went and saw *Rambo*. One of the first movies that came
5 out that had kind of a Vietnam theme backed to it was *Rambo*. Sylvester Stallone played
6 a Vietnam vet that had gotten somehow shafted down the road. You know, he said some
7 things that hit home to Vietnam vets. You know, some of the sentiment that are the way
8 a Vietnam vet's going to feel but in reality, *Rambo* is a cartoon. *Rambo* is like Superman
9 or Popeye or something like that. Don't know look at *Rambo* and think that you're
10 seeing an average Vietnam vet. And the way that came to me is a guy I was working
11 with one time, we were discussing Vietnam and I had some pictures and he said, "Well,
12 I'd like to see some pictures of you when you were in Vietnam." So I took my album to
13 work one day and he looked at it and I'm standing there six foot three inches tall and a
14 hundred and sixty five pounds and my ribs are sticking out. "Is that the way you looked
15 in Vietnam?" I go, "Yeah." "Well, you were skinny." I go, "Yeah." "Well, I figured all
16 you Vietnam guys were like these big body builders with these big biceps and these big
17 square shoulders and made of iron." I go, "Yeah, the reason you think that is because
18 you watch *Rambo*. Your concept of a Vietnam vet is *Rambo*. Here's the picture. You
19 look at me in that picture and I'll guarantee you that I look like a Vietnam vet and
20 somebody who was in Vietnam because that's the way most all of us looked like. We
21 didn't look like *Rambo*. We were little skinny runts running out there because we ate one
22 meal a day if we were lucky." So yeah, I think that it's necessary. People ask me
23 sometimes, "Well, will you recommend me some books?" I'll say, "Yeah, I'll
24 recommend you twenty books." If you think I'm going to recommend you one book, no
25 I'm not. I'm going to give you a list of all those twenty books, you come back to me and
26 I'll probably give you twenty more books to read. I really think reading books probably
27 is my primary recommendation. You know, movies are not bad. Even *Platoon* is not a
28 bad movie. *Platoon* is technically a very good movie and I think everything that you see
29 in *Platoon* probably happened somewhere. Don't take that as being a true depiction of a
30 squad in Vietnam. That didn't happen to a squad in Vietnam. Those things maybe
31 happened to twenty squads. One little thing happened to each squad and he puts one

1 thing that happened to twenty different squads and had them happen to all the same
2 squad. No, that's—but some of the things that happened in that movie, did that really
3 happen in Vietnam? Yeah, I believe that. There's nothing that he puts up there that I
4 say, "Oh, that couldn't have happened." The only thing I'm going to say it, "Well, it
5 couldn't have happened to the same squad." It's an encyclopedia. No, everybody didn't
6 have the encyclopedia experience. You had one or two pages out of the encyclopedia
7 happen to you. You didn't have the whole encyclopedia happen to you. So I encourage
8 people to go to but be very diverse. Go very wide. If you know a guy wrote a book
9 because he was anti-war, read his anti-war book. If you know a guy wrote a book but he
10 was pro-war, read his pro-war book, but understand that the guy's anti-war when he's
11 writing this book or understand that this guy is pro-war when he's writing his book and
12 take that perspective into account and then somehow try to balance and see if you can
13 really come up to the whole kind of universal picture of what it was like.

14 RV: What do you think about Vietnam today? Have you had an inclination or a
15 desire to go back and see that country and be a part of it?

16 GN: Yeah, in fact, I've talked to some other vets about it and at one time we were
17 even looking at going. In fact, about right now. You know, you have to put together
18 plans probably six months in advance or a year in advance to go and I've had other
19 people ask me, "Well, would you go back?" Yeah, I'd go back. I'm not afraid of
20 Vietnam. Vietnam does not scare me. You hear some vets that will say, "Oh gee, I don't
21 know. I might go back and really have a tough time dealing with being back in that
22 country." I never left anything over there. The only thing I know about Vietnam that's
23 all bad is, "There's no way in the world I'm going back over there." But to me, I
24 wouldn't go back over there because I wanted to in some way re-live the war. If I went
25 back it would because I want to see the country that's not at war because I just saw the
26 country that was at war. And you know, I've gone back to the places that I took training
27 in. I went back to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri and found my old barracks building that
28 I was in; I went back to Fort Knox, Kentucky and found the places that I used to be at. I
29 even went back to Oakland Army Terminal and looked across the fence and said, "Okay,
30 those are the buildings we were in when we processed out." I haven't been back to
31 Seattle yet but our reunion is in Portland in June. Maybe I'll go back there to Fort Lewis

1 and say, “Well, you know, where did they used to process people out of the Army when
2 they came back from Vietnam?” And I think that’s helped. It helped to go back and to
3 see the thing not as a soldier going through that stuff but as kind of a spectator, a tourist.
4 I’ll go back as a tourist just to see what tourists see and get a more complete or a more
5 balanced picture. And Vietnam was a very beautiful country. I mean, I come from the
6 flat, western plains of Kansas where there’s nothing out there so to me, walking around in
7 a jungle with trees and water and all the stuff out there, it’s just like—people to go a zoo
8 or a botanical garden and pay money to see that stuff while I’m seeing that stuff walking
9 around in Vietnam for free. So I wouldn’t mind going back and maybe spending ten
10 days. I don’t really have that much of an inclination and want to go to North Vietnam.
11 I’d like to go to probably what was Saigon and Da Nang and maybe Hue and some of the
12 historical, really truly historical pre-American Vietnam War sites there. I don’t have a
13 strong desire to try to find some Vietnamese NVA or VC that says, “Oh yeah, we were
14 the guys that attacked Vietnam.” If I run into one of those guys, okay, fine. I’m not
15 going to go look for one. But I expect that at some time, probably within the next three,
16 four, or five years a group of us will finally get to that point in time where we don’t have
17 to work so much and we’ll finally say, “If we’re going to do it we’d better do it now,”
18 and we will load up a few and go over.

19 RV: Gary, what lessons did the Unites States learn or not learn from the war?

20 GN: Well, you know I used to think they did learn something but my opinion now
21 is they probably didn’t learn a thing. I mean, to me, as a veteran, the Vietnam War would
22 have been worth it if we learned something from it. Even if you can’t say we won, okay,
23 and to me, it doesn’t make any difference if you say we won or we lost. What is, is. I’m
24 not going to go out there and try to pin some big huge political meaning to the fact that
25 we were victorious or oh gee, we were losers. To me, my experience is my experience
26 and I’m not going to let anybody else define that for me. For me, it’s what it is to me.
27 You can define it whatever way you want to. I don’t care. But I have always had the
28 wish that if there was any value to fighting the Vietnam War, if nothing else we would
29 learn in any future war not to get into a similar situation. And that meant that you only
30 fought a war that you had the full commitment of the people. That was the hardest thing
31 about Vietnam was the divisiveness of the war. Well we had a few little things, we had

1 the thing in Grenada, we had the Panama, even the first Gulf War. We put five hundred
2 thousand troops in the mid-east before the first shot was fired. And that was over with—
3 the air war lasted for thirty-six days or something and we had a hundred hour ground war.
4 I can remember people jumping up and down and going, “Oh, this is great, the war is
5 over, the war is over.” And my comment was, “Yes, but this was too easy of a war.”
6 “Well, what do you mean?” “Well, Vietnam was probably too easy of a war but this Gulf
7 War I, this is too easy of a war and the next war isn’t going to be like this. The next war
8 is probably going to be more like Vietnam was.” Well, we’ve got the war in Iraq right
9 now and sure enough, we’re three years into it and yeah, we pretty much annihilated the
10 Iraqi Army within a matter of a few weeks and that’s good. We didn’t suffer the
11 casualties that I thought we would suffer on the initial invasion into Iraq but one of the
12 things that I did fear was that you were going to turn not into what we’ll call a
13 conventional war where people in uniforms that belong to a country are fighting people in
14 uniforms that belong to a country that are now fighting more ideas. And the type of war
15 that’s going on over there where it’s very difficult to tell who your enemy really is. The
16 guy that smiles and waves to you when you go down the street in the morning is the guy
17 that sets the explosive device to catch you when you come back in the afternoon. And
18 the resulting divisiveness within the country, particularly along political lines as to
19 whether we should be there or we shouldn’t be there—and I do look at that and go—if
20 nothing else, I look at it from the perspective of how difficult must this be for the guys
21 that are over there walking down the streets in their body armor in a hundred and twenty
22 degrees carrying grenades and machine guns, looking at the top of the buildings to see if
23 a sniper’s up there and you don’t even know if the folks back home are for it or against it
24 or some are and some aren’t. So from that aspect, I feel like we’re doing them a
25 disservice. We don’t have this together. How do we get back into a situation now where
26 we’ve got people in a hot war and we’re still debating at home whether we ought to be
27 doing this or not? We either ought to devote everything in the world we can or bring
28 everybody home right now but our politicians can’t decide. That’s a lot that I look back
29 on Vietnam with. There was not unity, there was a lot of people that would argue, “Yes,
30 we should do it,” and there’s people who would argue, “No, we shouldn’t.” They say,
31 “Well, Gary, what do you think?” Well, my point on the Vietnam War was just that, “I

1 don't want to go. You go ahead and have your debates all you want to, just leave me out
2 of it." "No, well, you're going to go," and I did go. I thought maybe we had, particularly
3 with the Gulf War I. We put five hundred thousand troops over there. Yeah, we put a
4 half a million people in theater before the first shot was fired. There's a pretty dang big
5 commitment but then the war was over for four days. The anti-war movement really had
6 nothing to go out and protest because the war was done with. So is the current
7 situation—should we be there or should we not be there? I don't care to argue that with
8 you. All I'm going to say is that I absolutely positively feel for the troops that we have
9 over there, the men and women—it used to only be men and a few women but now it's
10 more of a balance of men and women over there that are—for their year or whatever,
11 they're going through that very life-changing experience of knowing things that they
12 never thought they'd ever know in their whole life.

13 RV: Gary, tell me about disabilities that you may or may not have suffered
14 because of the war, including any Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. You have touched on
15 this before but I'd like to see if you'd be willing to talk about that now.

16 GN: Yeah, I'll talk about that. You know, I do have a VA-rated disability of ten
17 percent but that's because of hearing. I did have my hearing injured when I was at Fort
18 Knox in training with armor. On their tank range at night I have got severe hearing loss
19 in one ear and moderate hearing loss in the other and I got Tinnitus, which is ringing in
20 the ears so a couple of years ago, I filed a claim at the VA and they awarded me a ten
21 percent disability, which, they pay me a hundred and twelve dollars a month. The issue
22 to me really wasn't the hundred and twelve dollars a month, it was more the fact that at
23 some point in time where I need to have hearing aids or some type of care for hearing
24 loss that I can go to them and they'll pay for it, which I think they should. I think they
25 owe that to me. Any other employer that would harm the health of the employee, through
26 workers compensation would have to in some manner make that right. So I don't feel
27 bad taking my hundred and twelve dollars and saying, "Okay, VA, fix my hearing aid
28 when I want my hearing aid fixed." I've never been diagnosed with Post Traumatic
29 Stress Disorder. I've never gone in to be diagnosed. I could probably submit a claim to
30 the VA and maybe the VA would come back and give me some type of award. The only
31 way I'll ever find out is to submit it. They're going to look for stressors. There's a

1 couple of things that you have to do to get a PTSD claim. You could have PTSD and
2 never go to the VA and never be diagnosed, but if you have PTSD and want to get help
3 from the VA for it, you have to establish what your stressors are. Typically you have to
4 relate to them stories of the things that happened to you that were traumatic. You know,
5 you saw somebody killed in front of you, you were in a helicopter crash and you were
6 injured, whatever it is you describe that. And then you have to go through a
7 psychological examination where the psychologist would define how your life has been
8 affected by that to where you cannot function as a normal person would function. There
9 are some things that a normal person would do because you've been disabled through this
10 traumatic experience. Personally, I don't think I got PTSD. I'll do my own evaluation
11 and say, "No, I don't have PTSD." I could give you the stressors and maybe a
12 psychologist could say, "Oh gee." I've worked for thirty years, I was married the first
13 time for seventeen years; I'm married now for the second time for five years. In between
14 I was out there ten years. I can relate to people, I can talk to people, I can put things
15 together, I can analyze things, but I am affected. I had a veteran one time kind of
16 describe it as, "Just because you're affected by your experience in Vietnam doesn't mean
17 you have PTSD. You can have some things about you that hang on because of your
18 Vietnam experience but it doesn't mean that it's disabling you." I think I got one of the
19 attributes of hyper-vigilance. To this day, if I step out of a building I will look all around
20 me and see what's all around me. Well, if you do that to extreme, that's called hyper-
21 vigilance. You're looking for whatever it is out there that's going to hurt you but I
22 sometimes think that I'll step out of a convenience store and look clear to my left all the
23 way across the front and clear to the right. Well, what am I looking for? I don't know
24 but I know what's out in front of me. Am I abnormal? Do normal people do that? Do
25 you do that? I don't know but I often think, "Why, when I first walk out of a door, will I
26 look clear to the left all the way across the front and clear to the right?" Is that unusual?
27 Am I doing that because I'm scanning for somebody out there that's going to potentially
28 hurt me because when I was in Vietnam we had to keep our eyes moving? You didn't
29 just look in front of you. You looked as much as you could see from left to right. You
30 were always being vigilant, trying to see movement, trying to see something that was out
31 of place and list something that's out of place. I don't think that that's—I'm not afraid to

1 go out. I'm not afraid to interact with people and go places, but yeah, I sometimes
2 wonder, "Is this something that I'm carrying around from my Vietnam days?" When I
3 was a kid growing up I went hunting a lot but since Vietnam I've been hunting twice. I
4 don't really care to go hunting. "Well, gee, Gary, you've got PTSD." No, I don't think
5 I've got PTSD. I don't think that means I have PTSD because I don't care to go hunting
6 any more. But yeah, there was probably something about Vietnam with a rifle all the
7 time that I don't care to go out and walk around now and carry a firearm. It doesn't mean
8 that if you had me one I'll refuse to take it. In fact, if you hand me a loaded one and say,
9 "Shoot at that tin can over there," I'll probably shoot at that tin can. But yeah, I gave up
10 hunting but I don't have a problem with people that hunt. In fact, if you coaxed me into
11 it, maybe I'll go. It's just something I don't voluntarily do like I used to do and I think
12 there probably is some connection but no, I don't think that's traumatic.

13 RV: It sounds like you really do have a grip on your experience and you see it in a
14 very unique context. My question is, when you interact with other Vietnam veterans, do
15 you all discuss these things?

16 GN: Well, sometimes we do but it's not dominant to us. It's a topic. Like I said,
17 I'm in a group of about fifty Vietnam vets. Most are Americal Division veterans, some
18 World War II guys, some Vietnam guys and we email each other. We're on what's
19 called a list server so I can send a message out and that goes to fifty people and one of
20 those guys can respond and it goes to all fifty of us and we'll talk about all sorts of things.
21 We'll talk about boats; we'll talk about racecars; we'll talk about TV programs, movies;
22 we'll talk about going on vacation; we'll talk about kids; we'll talk about people dying,
23 relatives; somebody getting a promotion; somebody graduating; and we'll talk about
24 military service. Okay, that's part of us and so we'll talk about it. Even though the
25 common thread we have to us is that we're Americal Division veterans, talking about our
26 military experience, to me, doesn't dominate. In fact, it's probably at the same level in
27 the conversation as to what that experience is. I'm almost fifty-nine years old and that's
28 one year or two years out of my life but it's a pretty significant one year or two years out
29 of my life but a lot of things have happened besides that, too. So when I get around other
30 veterans, we'll talk about some things. I mean, I'll go at the end of this month to Fort
31 Knox where we have the annual reunion and memorial service for veterans that were on

1 Firebase Mary Ann in March of '71, and there will be some people I've seen ten times
2 there, there may be a new guy show up. And typically there may be some particular
3 thing that you've always wondered about and you find a guy there and he, "Gee,
4 something happened over here by the TOC. There was this group of people hanging
5 around over there. What do you know about what happened to them that night?" "Oh
6 yeah, I know what happened." So you get that piece of information that you want. "Oh,
7 okay, fine. So how do you like—are you going fishing any?" So you can address that
8 subject, you can get what you want to know and get your curiosity satisfied and you
9 move on. We don't go to these veterans' events and all carry a little box in with GI Joe
10 things and set up battlefields and run battles. I think some people think we do that. "Oh,
11 you guys, you go in there and you get dressed up in fatigues and you've got these little
12 toy soldiers and you line them up and you've got sound effects and you shoot each other
13 with little paintball guns or something." No, we don't do that. I mean, we do some
14 things that are unique to veterans, that's for sure. We'll have a memorial service for
15 veterans who were killed on Mary Ann and you probably won't get that at a golf outing.
16 Well, when you went at a golf outing, that's why you went. You went to golf. Well, we
17 go, and we have a reunion of veterans and one of the common things we have is what
18 happened at Mary Ann and we will have a formalized memorial service. That's why
19 many of us go, because we want to be there and we want to do that. So to me, yeah,
20 there's a common thread when you get a bunch of veterans together. It's there because
21 they are veterans but it's along with a lot of other things, just like if you get a bunch of
22 people who like to play golf go golfing. They probably just don't talk about golf when
23 they're out there. They talk about all sorts of other things while they're golfing.

24 RV: Right. Gary, looking back at this interview, two questions. One is there
25 anything that you believe that you believe that we need to talk about and discuss that we
26 have not talked about. Anything that you want to add to this record? And second, tell me
27 what it's been like to do this oral history interview and to talk about this experience and
28 to go into such detail.

29 GN: Well, I think we've covered a lot and no, we haven't covered everything and
30 I could sit here and tell stories probably for ten more hours of things that I remember.
31 And at some point in time I've always told myself I want to put it on record. And I

1 might. I might commit to writing and what I would write, a lot of the things have already
2 been covered here, particularly the story telling part of it because there are other things
3 that I remember happened and for whatever reason for people down the road or just for
4 my own benefit somewhere saying, "I want somebody else to know this besides me." I
5 don't know want to be the only person that knows this. I don't have any big point to
6 prove but I do think that, like I said before, how are you going to learn the history of the
7 Vietnam War? Well, go to many resources as the resources of oral histories from
8 veterans as they remember it. And there's things that I'm going to remember and I'm
9 going to be screwed up in my memory but I try to be factual and accurate and hopefully
10 not biased or prejudiced, reporting things not as they were but as I wish they were. So
11 you know, I enjoyed the ability to do that because if I never get to sit down and write like
12 I think I'm going to write, two hundred pages type-written of short stories, we've got a
13 record here with what you and I've done.

14 RV: Well, do you want to take time and do that in future sessions?

15 GN: No, I don't think so. I mean, probably what we've done now, I've pretty
16 much exhausted a lot of things but there will be things that will come to me from time to
17 time that I'll remember. So what I look at doing is, again, and I don't work sixty hours a
18 week anymore, I hope to devote maybe ten hours a week just to sitting down to a data
19 processor and just start throwing stuff in. And maybe I'll do a thousand-word short story
20 or maybe I'll do a five thousand-word long story or something but I'll just kind of roll
21 things out as they come into my mind. Right now, if you told me, "Tell me ten more
22 stories." I'll go, "Well, I can remember a couple." But tomorrow I'll probably remember
23 something. "Oh yeah, there was this time, yadda, yadda." I'll just put one more in there
24 that I intended to tell you when you talk about coming home. When we came home we
25 came home on a jet with all guys that were getting out of Vietnam. Some of us were
26 getting out of the Army and some would go on and still be in the Army but they had more
27 time to do. When we went to Fort Lewis they gave us the traditional steak dinner, which
28 was okay. I mean, it wasn't a fabulous dinner but it was a steak dinner. This is like
29 maybe two or three in the afternoon and we had to go get sheets and pillowcases. They
30 gave us a place to stay. It was a typical Army barracks building and it had typical Army
31 bunk beds in it but you had to go draw bedding. So they said, "Go down here to the

1 supply room and get your bedding.” So there was a group of, it seemed like maybe ten or
2 twelve of us. I don’t know how they got us split up but it seems like there was a small
3 group of about ten or twelve of us and we went down to the supply room and there was
4 a Supply Sergeant there and he was probably an E6 or E7 and we walked up and walking
5 in and said, “Well, we just got in here and they told us to come get our bedding.” “Okay,
6 fine, but before you get bedding, you’re going to have to go back outside down there on
7 the concrete pavement and stand in a proper military formation.” We’re saying, “Hey,
8 come on, just give us our pillowcases and our sheets.” “Well, you’re not getting anything
9 from me just by walking in there and asking for them. You get back down there and you
10 get in the military formation like you’re supposed to be.” So we’re kind of grumbling but
11 we do it. We go down there and the supply room was up dock-high, you know, three feet
12 up, so we’re standing down where a truck would back in and we get in a formation and
13 the Sergeant comes out and he addresses us and I’ll never forget what he says. I’ll never
14 forget what he says. He says, “You guys just got back from Vietnam and you guys think
15 you’ve really done something and you guys think that everybody’s going to really care
16 about you because you went to Vietnam and you served in war.” He says, “Well, I’ll tell
17 you right now, nobody gives a shit about you and nobody gives a shit about what you did.
18 And if you come around here and you think that being in Vietnam and being in the war
19 means anything whatsoever to anybody else, you better get over that thought right now
20 because nobody can care less about what you guys did.” And we’re standing there and
21 this is an E6 telling us this. We’re like, “Well, who the hell are you to talk to us like
22 that?” “Well, you may not like what I’m saying but you just wait and you look around
23 and you see the way people are going to treat you. They’re going to treat you like crap.”
24 And we got so mad that we left. We didn’t even go in and get sheets. We just said,
25 “Well, to hell with you.” And I can remember going back to that barracks where we
26 were staying at and I had a duffle bag and inside that duffle bag was a winter coat and
27 that’s what I covered up with. We layed down on bare mattresses and had pillows with
28 no pillowcases on them, but that man ain’t going to talk to us like that. In fact, I think
29 somebody in the crowd said, “You know, we could go. If you had said that to me I
30 would have shot your damn ass.” And so we left pretty much in a huff. But looking back
31 on that, I look at that and go, “You know, I think that guy pretty well was hitting it for

1 many of us.” What did people care? You walk up to someday and say, “Hi, my name is
2 Gary Noller and I just got back from Vietnam.” “Oh yeah, so what?” And I think a lot of
3 vets feel that. I mean, I feel that. If I have a feeling of bitterness, yes I do. I’m bitter
4 about some stuff and I’m very happy to have made it back and very happy to be in as
5 good of shape as I’m in but likewise, I do have some bitterness over the fact that we went
6 and I think we tried hard. We worked hard, we suffered a lot, we had people killed and
7 wounded in a war that people didn’t care about. Didn’t like it, didn’t want it, and in some
8 respects, yeah, they probably blamed you because you went and fought or they blamed
9 you because you went and didn’t win. Half the people blame you because you couldn’t
10 win it and half the people blame you cause you couldn’t lose it. So that affects different
11 people different ways but that’s one of those little stories and I don’t tell that story very
12 often but I’ll never forget it. I’ll never forget that little speech we got at Fort Lewis from
13 that Supply Sergeant when we wanted to get sheets and pillowcases. “You guys that just
14 got back from Vietnam, you think you’re really something. You ain’t nothing. Nobody
15 cares what the hell you guys did.”

16 RV: Is the guy wrong now, though?

17 GN: Huh?

18 RV: Is the guy wrong now, like the last fifteen years, ten years?

19 GN: I don’t know. You know, what I’ve basically done is I don’t care what
20 people think. If I’ve done anything at all it’s come to the fact that what I care about is
21 what I think. I’m not going to get other people define for me if that was good. I’m not
22 going to let other people define for me if that was bad. I’m going to define for me what
23 that was and then I’m going to live with myself. So if the guy walks up and says, “What
24 you guys did over there wasn’t worth a shit.” “Well, okay, that’s your opinion. You can
25 have your opinion.” “Well, you know, what you did over there, that was a great thing
26 that you guys did.” “Well, okay, fine, that’s you’re opinion.” And you know, here
27 recently, somebody sent me a little message and said, “I just want to thank you for being
28 a veteran and fighting for freedom.” And I wrote back and said, “Well, I appreciate the
29 fact that you thank me for being a veteran but please don’t think that I was over there
30 fighting for freedom. If you think I was fighting for freedom, fine, but if you asked me
31 and said, ‘Gary, was you over there fighting for our freedom?’ I’ll say, ‘No, I was over

1 there fighting because I got drafted.’” So I don’t feel comfortable coming up with
2 somebody patting me on the back and saying, “Oh, gee, we love you because you fought
3 for freedom.” No, no, no. I may be a veteran and I may have gone to Vietnam and I may
4 have fought in that war but don’t convince yourself that I did it because I was fighting for
5 your freedom. I was just fighting because I didn’t want to get my ass killed and I didn’t
6 want the guy next to me to get his ass killed. So let’s just be honest here about it, okay?
7 What I was doing over there, if you think I was over there fighting for your freedom, uh-
8 huh. That isn’t what I was doing. I was there doing that but not for the reason you think
9 it was. So I don’t expect somebody to come out there and give me credit for being
10 something I am not. I was a draftee that went to Vietnam because they drafted me. And
11 if they wouldn’t have drafted me, who knows where I’d be and what I’d be doing right
12 now?

13 RV: But you did serve your country.

14 GN: That is correct. And I will take credit for that. But if you say, “I want to
15 thank you for going into the military service and serving our country in a time of war,”
16 I’ll say, “Okay, fine.” I’ll accept that because that’s what I did. But if that same person
17 said, “Well, I want to thank you for fighting for freedom.” “Well wait a minute. That
18 wasn’t what I believe I was going then. I didn’t go there saying I’m fighting for your
19 freedom. I’m going there because—if I fought at all it was to save my life and to save the
20 life of the guy next to me.” And were we defending ourselves against Communism?
21 Well, maybe we were and maybe we weren’t. That’s irrelevant. I wasn’t walking over
22 there every day saying, “Gee, I hope I get to shoot a Communist today so our country’s
23 free.” That’s not the belief that I had when I there doing that. And maybe I shouldn’t be
24 so nasty about it. Maybe I ought to say, “Fine, thank you.” But it does kind of go to
25 either side. If a guy walked up and said, “You know all you Vietnam vets are a bunch of
26 losers.” I’d say, “Well, you know, you’re talking about a lot of good friends of mine.
27 You can say whatever you want to say about me but if you start talking about my friends
28 that way we’re going to have an issue. I’m not going to let you make that statement
29 about guys I served with. You want to say that about me, fine. That’s your opinion
30 about me. But I’ve got my opinion about the guys I served with and I’m not going to let
31 you walk away from here and that’s what you’re going to say about the guys I was with.”

1 So yeah, I can probably bristle a little bit at things people say. I say, “Gee, I don’t care
2 what they think.” Well, mostly I don’t but there are some very soft issues, very soft
3 points that I’ll probably pick up on.

4 RV: Are there any other stories that come to mind that you want to get out now?

5 RV: No, I did want to reflect that one thing. That kind of put that in my mind,
6 that little incident up there at Fort Lewis but I think all in all, start to finish, we’ve
7 covered quite a bit of ground.

8 RV: How has it been for you to do this?

9 GN: Well, I’ve enjoyed doing it. I think again, my purpose of it is to—if there’s a
10 hundred million pages of stuff to read about Vietnam, okay, there’s ten pages there that I
11 contributed. I do want to contribute and I encourage other veterans—in fact, I’ve told
12 other people, “You know, if you haven’t committed anything at all yet, if you haven’t
13 written anything down or made any type of tape recordings or put a book together of
14 memorabilia or anything like that, get a hold of TTU and get in touch with Dr. Verrone
15 and the people there and get on the schedule to do your oral history because you ought to
16 leave something behind. You ought to leave it. If it’s thirty minutes or thirty hours, I
17 don’t care, but have you and have something of your experience committed to where
18 down the road other people can look at that and be one little more reference to what went
19 on.” So it hasn’t been difficult for me. I have enjoyed being able to get this done and
20 I’ve encouraged other people to do it. But I know some guys that probably will say, “No,
21 I’ll never do that.”

22 RV: Sure.

23 GN: It may be too difficult for them to do it or they don’t think they’ll do a good
24 job. You know, what’s very common a lot of times, I’ve talked to some World War II
25 vets and kind of done some questions and they say, “Well, I never did anything. I don’t
26 have anything to talk about.” And I go, “No, you were there four dang years and I don’t
27 care if you want to talk about cleaning out bathrooms for four years, tell me about that.”
28 And once you get people talking, a lot of times you’ll find out that this humility that they
29 have is probably unrealistic, that they really did do some stuff. They just don’t think they
30 did stuff themselves.

31 RV: That’s actually very, very common.

1 GN: Yeah.

2 RV: Well, you certainly walk the talk in doing this oral history and it's made a
3 significant contribution to the record of the Vietnam War and I want to thank you for
4 your time and your effort and your honesty in this interview.

5 GN: Well, thank you. I appreciate you conducting and taking all the time that
6 you've taken out of your busy schedule to listen to me.

7 RV: Okay, Gary. Thank you so much and we'll end the interview now with Mr.
8 Gary Noller.