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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Martin Latigue
Conducted by Dr. John R. Milam
Date 11 November 2005
Transcribed by Mark Steven Varela**

The transcription of this interview was paid for by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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 John R. Milam: I am Dr. Ron Milam of Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center.

2 Today I am interviewing Martin Latigue.

3 Martin Latigue: Latigue.

4 JM: Latigue. Martin, I'd like to start by asking you to give me your MOS
5 (Military Occupational Specialty) and your rank on November 14th, 1965.

6 ML: I was forward observer for the 3rd Platoon, Charlie Company, 1st of the 7th
7 Cav. E4.

8 JM: E4. So you're an FO (Forward Observer), 3rd Platoon, Charlie Company.

9 ML: Right.

10 JM: I believe that was Captain Edwards' platoon?

11 ML: Captain Edwards was the commanding officer; Bill Franklin was platoon
12 leader.

13 JM: Bill Franklin. Okay. Let's back up to Fort Benning. When did you join the 1st
14 Air Cav?

15 ML: We was the 11th Air Assault before we became the 1st Cav.

16 JM: Okay.

17 ML: Shortly after leaving basic training, we were attached to the 2nd Division,
18 which was operating the 11th Air Assault Division, as a training unit for the use of

1 helicopters. This would've been my first year of service, which would've been the early
2 part of '64.

3 JM: Okay. You went through basic and AIT (Advanced Individual Training)?

4 ML: Right.

5 JM: Did you go through infantry AIT?

6 ML: Right.

7 JM: Where?

8 ML: At Fort Benning.

9 JM: At Fort Benning. So you were already at Benning. Where did you go through
10 basic?

11 ML: Fort Polk, Louisiana.

12 JM: Fort Polk, Louisiana. Leesville.

13 ML: Leesville.

14 JM: So then you go to AIT, at Benning and then you receive orders for the 11th
15 Air Assault as your first duty station?

16 ML: First duty station was the 11th Air Assault.

17 JM: You're MOS at that time was as an FO?

18 ML: Mortar platoon. 102 was the code number, which meant I was a mortarman.

19 JM: So you were in the heavy weapons platoon which is, as I understand it, by the
20 time you get to Vietnam, the heavy weapons platoon is a much smaller unit than would
21 be the standard TOE (Table of Organization and Equipment) for operations?

22 ML: That's correct.

23 JM: Okay. You become a member of the 11th Air Assault and about what month,
24 by the time you get out of AIT and everything, about what month was that of '64?

25 ML: Right. It would be somewhere before March, around March.

26 JM: Of '64?

27 ML: Right.

28 JM: So you're going to be in the unit testing helicopters, ready to learn how to
29 conduct airmobile operations from March of '64 until you depart for Vietnam in August
30 of '65.

31 ML: That's correct.

1 JM: Tell me a little bit about the training exercises that you participated in at
2 Benning, as we experiment with this new concept.

3 ML: Well the training was quite intense, we was not allowed a lot of liberty
4 because of training. Normally, we would've been off on weekends, we were not off. It
5 was so important that we not miss any training. This was the first time I heard that the
6 army had civilians in the States doing KP (Kitchen Patrol) rather than the G.I.s
7 (Government Issue). We had two training sessions away from Benning. One was called
8 Air Assault 2. Air Assault 1 was the previous year. So I made Air Assault 2, which was
9 in Camden, South Carolina. There we did field maneuvers against the 82nd division.

10 JM: How would you assess the quality of the training you received? Knowing
11 now what you did in Vietnam, how was the training compared to that?

12 ML: I'm glad you mentioned that, because the NCOs (Non-Commissioned
13 Officers) in this unit were career men. They had a lot of respect for the army, they made
14 us feel comfortable being—most of the guys in my unit were draftees. We didn't
15 volunteer to be there. So no one was really happy to be in the army because we were
16 drafted. But the NCOs in that unit was the finest non-commissioned officers ever. The
17 intense training, that we received from them and the dedication to the army, I guess we
18 picked up the vibes from those guys and began to follow their leadership.

19 JM: These were the NCOs, career, many of them with probably Korea combat
20 experience, I suppose?

21 ML: Yes. Matter of fact, in Vietnam my platoon sergeant, Sergeant Freeman, was
22 quite comfortable being next to him in combat because this guy had been to two different
23 wars. He was a marine in Guadalcanal, and he had fought with the army in Korea. So he
24 was a man in his third war and it's really comfortable because you look over there and
25 say, "Sergeant Freeman. Am I going to make? Sergeant Freeman, I am scared to death,
26 but I am functioning! What's wrong with me? Why am I so afraid?" He said,
27 (Editor's note: Interviewee imitates a voice)

28 "Well boy, the moment you start feeling scared, you're probably going to get killed."

29 JM: Two stars on the CIB (Combat Infantryman Badge), that makes you feel
30 good. How about the officers, platoon leaders and company commander in your training?
31 Did you think they were good officers?

1 ML: We had great officers and I was blessed. Being in a mortar platoon, mortar
2 platoon had its own company, which was Delta Company. We were not attached to the
3 line companies until we were deployed to Vietnam. One of the officers that I admired
4 was Captain Edwards. He was one of the officers that in any training his men were in, if
5 they ran that morning, he ran with him. If they ran that evening, and we did a lot of
6 running, he ran with his company. He was one of the few officers that ran every time his
7 men ran; he ran with them. So I was attached to Charlie Company and I was really
8 honored to be in his unit.

9 JM: And ultimately you would serve with that unit in Vietnam.

10 ML: That's right, that's correct.

11 JM: About August, July I believe, President Johnson gives his famous speech,
12 "We're going to deploy the 1st Air Cav." Is that the first time you realize you were going
13 to Vietnam? Or did you realize further back?

14 ML: I was blessed again, to realize by asking a lot of questions. They were
15 putting containers in front of our unit for weeks. I asked one of the NCOs, "What are they
16 doing?" He said, "Getting ready to ship." I said "Where?" "Vietnam." I said, "Well,
17 nobody is saying that!" He said, "Hey. Take my word for it, we're going to Vietnam." So
18 I go to Captain Edwards on a Monday morning and asked for leave that's Saturday which
19 is not the normal procedure, you need to have two weeks' notice. But I wanted to go that
20 Saturday because I felt that we would probably be deployed soon. So I go to Captain
21 Edwards and for the first time before I can go on leave, I had to go interview with him.
22 He gave me the laws about missing a movement. He said, "If you're on leave and miss a
23 movement, if you're called to comeback and you do not return, you'll get court-
24 martialed." So I go on and tell them, "We're going to Vietnam! Captain Edwards just
25 gave me the movement out, or whatever that stuff is." They said, "Are you crazy, we're
26 too short." That's what we were thinking because most of us had less than four months of
27 service.

28 JM: To go?

29 ML: To go.

30 JM: In July?

1 ML: Right. August. Most of us were coming out in December. So we went to
2 Vietnam thinking that we would get extended because we knew most of us would only be
3 there ninety days. It just so happened the 14th, 15th, and 16th we went to battle. The 22nd I
4 was in the United States as a civilian. Six days after the battle, the United States
5 Government didn't do anything for us, inform us, there was no contact, we were left out
6 in the street on our own. Six days after a major battle. I regret that they didn't extend it. It
7 would've been better for us to be extended for sixty days, ninety days, six months.

8 JM: Well I'm going to ask you more questions about that here in a minute. That's
9 an interesting story. Had you ever heard of Vietnam before July of '65?

10 ML: We were getting pieces and bits of what was going on in Vietnam. When you
11 pull guard duty, the inspecting officer would ask you certain questions about the
12 casualties that would be coming up. Every night, special forces would be hit. They
13 would ask you these questions to see if you were informed about what was happening in
14 Vietnam. As far as me knowing that we were going to Vietnam, like I said I got leave and
15 I was home watching television when the President made a special announcement. I was
16 at my mother's house and he said, "I just ordered the 1st Calvary to Vietnam." I told my
17 mother, "That's my unit." I was blessed. I had two weeks leave when everyone else only
18 had a week.

19 JM: I see. So you get orders, your unit is going, you're on leave, you come home,
20 you come back to base and you ship out. What ship did you ride on?

21 ML: USS *Maurice Rose*.

22 JM: You were on the *Rose*, okay. I think, everybody has kind of described it as
23 about a thirty-day trip across the seas and you end up at Qui Nhon?

24 ML: Right.

25 JM: Now, how did you get from Qui Nhon to An Khe?

26 ML: We went by truck.

27 JM: You went by truck. Deuce and half's?

28 ML: Right.

29 JM: Okay. How did you feel about arriving in a combat zone? There wasn't any
30 combat when you first got there, right?

1 ML: There was no combat. The perimeter was being guarded by the 82nd. So we
2 had a chance to talk to some of the guys that had been there for months. They were
3 saying every night they had a scrimmage, you know, but nothing serious. It was kind of
4 adventurous at that stage.

5 JM: You had to build a base camp out of nothing!

6 ML: Right. An Khe was under development and we had civilians cleaning off the
7 under growth and all that stuff. We didn't actually do that; we just deployed the area.

8 JM: I see, I see. How much training did you get in Vietnam before Ia Drang?

9 ML: We did a lot of jungle training.

10 JM: Jungle training?

11 ML: Right at Benning, Fort Sill. Matter of fact, I'd rather go Vietnam and crawl
12 around the grounds of Vietnam than to go to Fort Sill, there were more snakes there.
13 (Chuckles)

14 JM: So you went out on some in country operations after you got to An Khe, to
15 get used to the area?

16 ML: For some reason they were trying to find ways to use the ammo for the
17 division because we were going all over the country. We were flying thirty, forty miles
18 south, thirty, forty miles east. They just kept sending us everywhere. I wasn't surprised
19 on that morning, November 14th, that we were informed that we were probably going to
20 encounter a large enemy.

21 JM: Had you, before you went on the 14th into the Ia Drang, had you experienced
22 any combat? Had you ever been shot at?

23 ML: No.

24 JM: Did you participate in an operation called "Silver Bayonet"?

25 ML: I did not.

26 JM: Okay, that was over Happy Valley, I know some of the vets told me that.
27 Before November 14th, did you move with the unit to Pleiku as a staging area?

28 ML: Actually, when they moved to Pleiku, I was hospitalized.

29 JM: With what?

30 ML: Symptoms of Malaria.

31 JM: High fever?

1 ML: Yes. It prolonged for about twelve years. Even as a civilian, I still had
2 problems with high fever, loss of weight, migraine headaches. But it was never
3 determined by medical examiners that I had Malaria.

4 JM: Your records probably say you have FUO. Fever of unknown origin.

5 ML: (Chuckles) That's right, that's right exactly.

6 JM: I know the malady. So you didn't go to Pleiku with that group, when they
7 went to Pleiku?

8 ML: I joined them at Pleiku.

9 JM: At Pleiku?

10 ML: I falsified my illness, I said I was well, and I was reattached to the 3rd
11 platoon as a forward observer. I was with them at Pleiku.

12 JM: On November 14th, you get word that you guys are going into the valley.
13 What direction came to you as a soldier? What was your rank at the time?

14 ML: E4.

15 JM: You were a four, okay. What information did you get about the operation?

16 ML: Well, early that morning we received a call from battalion to Bill Franklin,
17 our platoon leader, to report to the battalion CP (Command Post) to leave his RTO (Radio
18 Telephone Operator) but to bring his Foxtrot Oscar, which is me, forward observer. So he
19 and I went to the meeting and the reason why I had to go is because in Vietnam, it's very
20 difficult to geographically locate something, find it on your map and be able to get a true
21 reading of the coordinates that you're in. So you have to go to the meetings and
22 synchronize your map. That morning, Franklin and I went to the meeting and General
23 Moore addressed the idea that we were going into this area and he mentioned the fact it
24 was a large unit. I will never forget him saying, "And they look like they wanted to
25 fight." They gave us the information, and the project was called "Landing Zone X-Ray."
26 I had to take my map and circle that area so that once I get on the ground, I wouldn't
27 have any problem laying my compass down and getting the coordinates where I was and
28 if I needed to call fire.

29 JM: Your plan, your MOS, your responsibility, would be once you're on the
30 ground to help adjust mortar fire?

31 ML: That's right.

1 JM: These were 81s? You were going to carry 81s in?

2 ML: We carried 81s and the way we were doing it in Vietnam, I would call
3 directly to the mortar platoon fire control. But it was determined by battalion what it was
4 sent. Like one time I called in a fire mission, I thought 81 was coming in, which has a
5 small version, and a 105 came in. I used profanity language on the radio by mistake! It
6 wasn't—

7 JM: Sure!

8 ML: Because it was a larger bird!

9 JM: Absolutely.

10 ML: I was calling close fire! From then on, I realized that if I was going to call a
11 fire mission to the mortar platoon, to anticipate anything coming because they would
12 override you once they got the fire order and they'd send whatever they thought could be
13 more accurate I guess, I don't know why.

14 JM: Wow.

15 ML: But I was thinking every time I call a fire mission; I'm looking for 81 to
16 come in.

17 JM: You're looking for an 81, and you're looking for a different response time
18 than you're going to get from a 105 being fired from 5 miles away, right?

19 ML: That's right. The accuracy of the 105 was just tremendous. But the bursting
20 area is what I was concerned about because calling close fire with the 81, you get like
21 twenty-five meters. You got a 105, you got fifty meters. If you call in a close fire, you
22 want that thing away from you, not what you expect an 81 to come in at.

23 JM: Sure, absolutely. Let's talk about the 14th then, which lift were you on? Were
24 you on the first lift, second lift, third lift of those that first arrived at X-Ray?

25 ML: I wasn't with the first group and in route to X-Ray from Pleiku, we landed
26 on a spot there were about one platoon already on the ground. When we landed and it was
27 the wrong place. The group had been dropped off and since I had radio contact, they
28 didn't have a radio man with them. I was to stay with them. I had to stay there and wait
29 for them to come back and pick us up. Matter of fact, I just asked that question this
30 morning to Bill Franklin. Matter of fact, I didn't get a chance to see him until—1999 was
31 the first time I saw Frank. This morning I asked him a question about that, "Had we

1 landed at the wrong place?” He said, “There was some diversion being used” and that
2 might’ve been one of them. But make a long story short, if you look at a map and this
3 place was similar to X-Ray, it was a large area like a football field clearance, with
4 elephant grass and looking in the book that Joe wrote, that might’ve been X-Ray, we
5 might’ve landed at X-Ray, that platoon that was on the ground, that might’ve been X-
6 Ray. No matter what it was, I can tell you one thing, we all fret because you can sense
7 somebody looking at you. You can sense the eyes staring at you. And I still wonder today
8 why they didn’t attack us; they did not fire on us. We were on the ground maybe thirty-
9 five, forty minutes before the helicopters came back to pick us up. Then I was attached.
10 We went into fire; actions were already going on when we got to—

11 JM: Into X-Ray?

12 ML: Yes. I had to look around, I asked people where the Charlie Company was
13 and I was scrambling, crawl and crawl and finally I was able to make it to the position
14 where the 3rd platoon was. But they were already under fire when I got there.

15 JM: Okay, so let’s describe that, the chopper is coming in, were you receiving fire
16 in the air? On the chopper? Could you hear the pings hitting?

17 ML: Yes, you could, definitely.

18 JM: You could hear them, so you knew this was a hot LZ. The first landing of the
19 first unit into LZ X-Ray didn’t receive fire, it was about the third or fourth that hit it, so
20 you’re coming in and you’re getting fired at. Did the skids set down or did you jump off
21 before?

22 ML: We jumped, we jumped. We jumped a good distance; I’d say at least four to
23 five feet. These guys were hollering, “Jump! Jump!” As they flew over the position, we
24 just had to jump. I’m quite sure with the radio on my back it was at least four to five feet.

25 JM: Okay, so you got the radio on your back and you’re carrying an M16?

26 ML: I carried an M16.

27 JM: Had you trained on that M16?

28 ML: I was trained on the M16, my MOS requires you to have a .45.

29 JM: Okay.

1 ML: Once I got to Vietnam and I saw the terrain and stuff, I had to turn it in, I
2 said, “I don’t want no .45, give me some firepower.” So I got an M16 but normally a
3 forward observer carries a .45.

4 JM: Right. What were you carrying? How many magazines were you carrying?
5 Do you remember?

6 ML: I had to have a whole clip or two. At least over a hundred rounds.

7 JM: Okay. Then you had your radio, Prick 25?

8 ML: Right.

9 JM: Were you carrying any grenades?

10 ML: I think at that time I wasn’t carrying any. I had carried them before.

11 JM: Yeah.

12 ML: A couple of weeks earlier, Sergeant Freeman asked me to throw him a can of
13 lima beans. I threw it and it went ahead this way instead of going straight. He walked up
14 to me and said, “You don’t need to be carrying these things” and took them off of me.
15 That’s why I didn’t have any. (Chuckles)

16 JM: Okay. How about other provisions, how many canteens?

17 ML: I had two canteens.

18 JM: Two canteens.

19 ML: We were basically told to always carried two canteens. We were issued one
20 and the second one we had to purchase. Some guys didn’t, so they only had one canteen.

21 JM: How about, were you wearing a flak jacket?

22 ML: No flak jacket.

23 JM: Steel pot?

24 ML: Steel pot.

25 JM: So you’re, you’re not—the chopper that’s coming in with you, who else is on
26 it? Did you have any officers on that chopper?

27 ML: The highest-ranking guy must’ve been a E6.

28 JM: An E6. You get off, you’re under fire. You know which direction the fire is
29 coming from?

30 ML: Everywhere. This time it was mad minute. The time we hit the ground it was
31 mad minute because I stayed close to the ground, because I knew—

1 JM: Did you fire your weapon on the LZ?

2 ML: At that time, I didn't fire my weapon. I was trying to find where my unit
3 was, the 3rd platoon. So I crawled up into the grass, and so luckily, I guess I was in
4 Charlie Company's area.

5 JM: So you found them almost immediately.

6 ML: Right. So I knew that was the 1st platoon by our training. We would always
7 deploy the way we trained. 1st platoon, 2nd, and 3rd. The guys that I approached was 1st
8 platoon, I knew I had to go the distance of the field to get to 3rd platoon, and that's what I
9 did. Then I found Sergeant Freeman who's a platoon sergeant.

10 JM: Did you see anybody go down on the LZ?

11 ML: Yes, I did. Immediately.

12 JM: Was he killed or wounded?

13 ML: Killed. Some of the guys that came out of the plane with me, they were hit
14 from snipers, they were hit in the face. So it was determined that was probably from
15 snipers.

16 JM: This was the first time you'd seen anyone killed in combat?

17 ML: Correct.

18 JM: So you work your way over to the third platoon, is that right?

19 ML: Right.

20 JM: So you find them after—because you know from your training where you're
21 supposed to be. You get over to them and what's the first thing—are you looking for the
22 CP?

23 ML: Yeah. I'm looking for my Platoon Leader, Bill Franklin.

24 JM: You're looking for Franklin.

25 ML: I crawled around until I finally found him. The moment I get to him, he tells
26 me, "You can ditch that radio because the battalion is directing the fire control." He said,
27 "Put your radio aside, get ready to be a rifleman." I took my radio off, put it away from
28 me. Then, started getting into the action.

29 JM: So, Franklin got his own RTO?

30 ML: Right.

31 JM: That's monitoring the battalion net, or the company net I guess at that point.

1 ML: Yeah, company net, right.

2 JM: You're not going to act as an FO at that moment. You're going to act as a
3 rifleman.

4 ML: Right.

5 JM: From the CP, with the captain. Does he say, "Go over there?" Does he tell
6 you where to go or do you stay with him?

7 ML: There was an empty stop, it was a termite hill. I took cover there and matter
8 of fact, we were told to dig that night and we couldn't dig in that area. That area where
9 the 3rd platoon was, the ground was too hard. Two guys, one would actually stay on
10 guard, contain the shooting and one would try to dig. We couldn't even scrape enough
11 dirt to be able to mound so we remained behind this termite hill and it was good
12 fortification because it was as big as this chair that you're sitting in or the one I'm sitting
13 in, about that high. So if you just stood up a little bit, you could look over and shoot. I
14 remain three days in battle, that's where I stayed.

15 JM: Okay. Did the CP essentially stay where you were? Or did it move? The
16 platoon leader?

17 ML: Captain Edwards was calling Franklin to come to his aid or something. He
18 left and that's the last time I saw him because next thing I knew, he had been wounded.
19 When Franklin left, I was real close to his position. He and Charlie Dashner—I think
20 Charlie lost his radio. I think a machine gun cut the line or something, but Charlie didn't
21 have a radio, so he was out of action. But Franklin left to go to Captain Edwards' rescue
22 or something, so he left the area. I never saw him again until '99.

23 JM: Your radio that you set down aside, did you ever use it again?

24 ML: I kept it monitored, I had it on battalion because that's where they were
25 doing fire control. Sergeant Freeman was also listening to it. So we had it between us. I
26 had it mounted on the side of a termite hill. We could hear what was being said and what
27 was going on and we could listen to the guy calling the fire power for the jets that were
28 coming in.

29 JM: So you pretty much knew how the battle was going because you were
30 listening.

31 ML: Right.

1 JM: Unlike a lot of the soldiers who were just in their own world and didn't have
2 any idea because you could hear it. Did that give you a different perspective on how bad
3 things were?

4 ML: The truth, I was in such a—the very first day I was in such a shock with the
5 noise. I was terrified. I thank god today that I didn't panic, and I know it was because of
6 the training we had. We had a lot of guys that we would call deadbeats, but once the
7 battle got started, everybody was a hundred percent solider. You can see everybody
8 deploying themselves in the right location, just doing what—the training took over. Your
9 mind, your mind—you don't know what's going on. Your training is the only thing that
10 you have to keep you, in that kind of condition, keep you going is your training.

11 JM: What did you say you called some of the guys before battle? What did you
12 call them?

13 ML: (Laughs) Deadbeats.

14 JM: Deadbeats? Deadbeats. Okay. And they weren't deadbeats once the fire
15 started?

16 ML: No, no, no.

17 JM: Were you, in your youth before you joined the army, had you fired weapons
18 before?

19 ML: I was raised in the country, shooting 22s was a pastime. I'd gotten very good
20 with it.

21 JM: Okay. So as you now are a rifleman, how close is the enemy?

22 ML: Close enough to see them.

23 JM: You can see their faces?

24 ML: When they were doing their rushing, they got close, they got very close.

25 JM: How did you see his demeanor as a solider? Was he frantic? Was he
26 operating irrationally, did you think? Or what was your impression of him as a solider?

27 ML: I could sense the same kind of fear—when I saw the movie, *We Were*
28 *Soldiers*, I realized that some of those guys had ran out of ammo when they got to my
29 position. Thinking back, because they were running, and I had exposed myself by trying
30 to entertain those guys before they got to my position. I'm putting myself in the wrong
31 position and I didn't get shot. I saw these guys picking up weapons as they were coming

1 forward, and I said, "You know what, these guys must've been out of ammo by the time
2 they got through the line, you know they were probably attacking us and we were holding
3 them back, so they ran out of ammo." As they entered the line, they were trying to pick
4 our troopers' guns up. After I saw the movie, I said, "You know what," because I knew I
5 exposed myself to a couple of guys, they were looking at me and they didn't shoot me.

6 JM: So, you're saying they were out of ammo on their AK and they are looking
7 for a 16 to pick up?

8 ML: They were picking them up, they were picking them up as they come to the
9 line, they were picking up our weapons. You could see them reaching down and picking
10 them up. Whatever they had, they were throwing them down, reaching and picking up
11 our weapons.

12 JM: And they were picking up our weapons of our KIAs (Killed In Action)?

13 ML: Right.

14 JM: As you're looking out from your firing position behind this termite mound,
15 are you seeing a lot of Americans down in the ground also?

16 ML: You know, I couldn't see them. After being in the battle, especially after
17 twenty-four hours, you started picking up senses of the small arm fire, you could tell
18 where it was coming from, you could tell if the guy next to you ran out of ammo, you
19 started listening to that burst of the rounds, and if you don't hear it, you know
20 something's wrong. Well, the day we lost most of the casualties in Charlie Company, it
21 just got real quiet to the left of me. At the termite hill that I was at, there was a guy
22 named Jerry Smith. He and I had made a decision on what was going to do. We would
23 get up and fire rounds and we would run out of ammo at the same time. I said, "Man this
24 is not going to work! Because we're running out of ammo at the same time!" We had
25 taken rifles from wounded guys as we put them on the helicopter, we took their rifles. So
26 we had five rifles at our position, and we would take the ammo off of their bodies. Dead
27 or wounded. So we had a lot of ammo. I said, "You load, and I'll shoot." Because a
28 couple of times I looked, he was just shooting down into the ground and that was wasting
29 rounds. I said, "You load it man, because we can't run out at the same time." So we
30 worked like a machine gun, as soon as I'd run out of a clip, I'd hand him the rifle, and
31 he'd hand me another rifle. So we were constantly shooting.

1 JM: Were you firing short round burst, or were you firing fully automatic?

2 ML: At first, I was firing automatic. You waste rounds on automatic because you

3 just—

4 (Interviewee makes gun burst noise)

5 That's why we became a team. He'd lock, and load and I'd shoot because we were

6 running out, both of us at the same time. I said, "That's not working. You lock and load

7 these things." By him locking and loading, and me shooting it, he kept me supplied with

8 a rifle.

9 JM: Were you getting direction from your platoon leader to conserve ammo, at

10 any time?

11 ML: No, no. Guys were actually running out of ammo. The first day, since I was a

12 forward observer and I wasn't operating as a forward observer, Sergeant Freeman told

13 Charlie Dashner, who was Bill Franklin's RTO, to go get ammo and the ammo was at the

14 CP. So I volunteered to go with him. I said, "Sergeant Freeman, can I go with him?"

15 Since Smith was on his position. I said, "Without ammo, we're not going to win this

16 battle and he's by himself, so I'll go with him." So Charlie and I became ammo bearers.

17 We'd crawl to the CP and it was very difficult crawling and carrying two boxes of

18 bullets.

19 JM: So you're carrying two boxes of 5.56 mm M16 rounds and they're inside

20 those wooden boxes—

21 ML: No, they were in metal cans.

22 JM: Oh, they were in the metal cans? Okay, but it's raw ammo, you still have to

23 load your own magazines.

24 ML: Right.

25 JM: Were you loading eighteen or twenty?

26 ML: Most of us, we had what is two magazines clipped together.

27 JM: Clipped together? Upside down so you can flip it.

28 ML: Right. So we'd load two of them in in one.

29 JM: So you duct tape together. Did your M16 ever jam?

1 ML: Not during the battle. We did an assault on a VC (Viet Cong) camp one day
2 and we came off the helicopters, none of us could get our weapons off safety. (Chuckles)
3 It wouldn't come off safety.

4 JM: None of us could?

5 ML: No! The whole squad that came off that assault—we landed and we charged
6 and everybody hollered, "I can't get it off safety!" Somebody thought about it needing
7 lubrication, we used our insect repellent to spray and that was able to get it off.

8 JM: What month was that?

9 ML: That was our first month in there, it must've been September.

10 JM: Okay, so that was when you first got there, a suspected VC camp you said?

11 ML: Right. It was a camp, they moved out. It was a training school.

12 JM: Thank goodness they weren't there that day.

13 ML: Good thing that they left. We had dropped bombs from the B-52s, so they
14 were nowhere around.

15 JM: So you're firing your M16, take me through the first—about what time of day
16 do you think you got there? That first day? Sometime around noon?

17 ML: I don't remember, it was like noon, something like that.

18 JM: About six hours later, it's going to get dark and you're locating yourself
19 behind a termite hill. How were you feeling about it getting dark compared to—because
20 you'd seen the enemy in the light, right?

21 ML: Right.

22 JM: That first afternoon?

23 ML: Right.

24 JM: What was it like anticipating darkness?

25 ML: It was another degree of fear. You're scared of death in the light, but
26 darkness made it more—well, if I was a level ten in the fear department, I must've been a
27 twenty when it got dark. Not only you couldn't see the enemy, but they were using a lot
28 of tracers, you can see those things. Daytime you can't see tracers and bullets. So you
29 could see these tracers and they were coming close to the ground, I mean three, four feet
30 above the ground, you know if you stood up, you'd get hit. You could see the burst of the

1 explosion behind them from the artillery round, but the darkness itself increased the fear.
2 I mean, just—

3 JM: Of course, if you can see a green tracer, there's three you can't see.

4 ML: That's right. We were blessed because the artillery people, they would fire
5 these canisters to light up the battlefield and when they would fire these things, it would
6 give you a sense of relief and then as they burn out, you know they only burn for a few
7 seconds, you would get a sense of uh-oh. The enemy would not move when those things
8 were overhead.

9 JM: That was going to be my next question, illumination can work two ways. You
10 know where they are, but they also know where you are during illumination. But you're
11 saying that their sense was to wait until illumination went down and then charge. So you
12 had to be ready every time that canister—

13 ML: Every time it went out, I'd say, "Here we go again."

14 JM: And you could kind of time it that way.

15 ML: Right.

16 JM: You knew that's when they would come. Were you firing into the darkness or
17 firing against the tracer locations? Or what were you using as a guide to fire?

18 ML: Again, from the termite hill, which is like a little ant hill, it was still that
19 when the battle was over with. From the amount of incoming round, you could almost
20 sense from which direction it was coming.

21 JM: Mm-hmm.

22 ML: I would basically try to find the direction I would hear the pinging on the
23 termite hill. If it was a lot of fire from my left, I would mostly concentrate my shooting
24 that way, but the guy next to me, we were kind of trying to spread it out because we
25 would shoot like this.

26 (Editor's note: Interviewee showing interviewer direction.)

27 He would shoot straight and left—shoot straight and right and I'd go to the left.

28 JM: How close were you to anyone that got hit?

29 ML: Again, when Charlie and I were doing the ammo run, he got hit. I was
30 behind him and he kind of stood up a little bit, just a little bit because I knew my arm was
31 tired and his was too. He had a short distance to get off the landing zone and into the

1 grass. I think he may have said, “Well, I’m this close, I can get up and run that short
2 distance.” The moment he stood up, he got a round. I saw it come out of his back. He’s
3 just screaming and screaming and screaming. There was a medic that was not too far way
4 and this guy is crying. I mean, hysterical. This guy was crying. “We’re all going to die!
5 We’re all going to die!” I said, “Give this man morphine!” Charlie was screaming at the
6 top of his voice; I’d never heard a man scream that loud. With all the fire power that’s
7 going on, I could hear him screaming to the top of his voice and this guy wouldn’t help
8 him, the medic wouldn’t help him. I said, “Give this man morphine, we’re not going to
9 die!” I shook him up, I said, “Hey man, get a hold of yourself!” We’re laying on the
10 ground, so I shook him and said, “Get a hold of yourself man!” And he still wouldn’t
11 respond, so I slapped him in the face and he still didn’t respond. He was just crying. I
12 said, “Please, give me the morphine.” He got in his bag and he gave it to me. I shot
13 Charlie in the leg with the morphine and I was amazed. The moment it hit him—this man
14 was screaming constantly before the morphine hit him. He said, “What? I got hit?” I said,
15 “You got hit.” I did a battlefield bandage on him and then Sergeant Freeman, because we
16 were close to him, Sergeant Freeman said, “Call medevac.” So I crawled over to where
17 my radio was and I called medevac. At this time, I didn’t know anybody else was getting
18 wounded. I’m doing what Sergeant Freeman is telling me, to call medevac. So the guy
19 says, “I’ll be over the landing zone in a couple of seconds. Throw out a smoke bomb and
20 I’ll come to you.” He said, “Okay throw it now.” So we threw a smoke bomb and he
21 landed almost as close as that wall, we took Charlie and put him on the helicopter. He
22 remembers all this, even though he was wounded. He remembers saying—I told him the
23 reason why it landed so close was because Sergeant Freeman had instructed me to get on
24 my radio and call medevac.

25 JM: The medevac that you call, was it truly a medevac?

26 ML: I don't know, it might've been what happened. I heard later that everybody
27 became medevac.

28 JM: Right. So all you were letting them do is know that you had a man down at
29 that location.

30 ML: See, every radio operator has a frequency to go to medevac. My frequency,
31 whatever it was, I went to my frequency and made direct contact with pilot. That was the

1 purpose of going to that frequency. So he came in, the moment that I called him he said,
2 “I’ll be at the landing zone in a few minutes, throw out a smoke bomb.” Thank god we
3 had a short distance to bring Charlie.

4 JM: So you put Charlie on the chopper, were there other wounded being put on
5 that chopper, from other places?

6 ML: Well, the guy that helped me put Charlie, I don’t remember his name, I
7 can’t—I don’t know if he was a Charlie Company soldier, but I can remember he and I
8 turned around to go back for cover and he got shot on the foot. He was hollering, I said,
9 “That’s your ticket out of here man, get on the helicopter!” So he got on the helicopter
10 and there was two guys that left instead of just one, but I didn’t see anybody else get on it
11 from where we put Charlie.

12 JM: I see. This was in—what part of the 14th, that day?

13 ML: No, that was the 15th.

14 JM: That was the next day?

15 ML: Next day.

16 JM: Okay, okay. Well, there were probably monitoring, all the choppers, they
17 were probably monitoring your medevac frequency because they were bringing in
18 resupplies and everything, so they had to know where to put it down. Charlie made it,
19 you said?

20 ML: Yes. It was—he got wounded on his birthday. I’d assumed he died from the
21 wound he had.

22 JM: You assumed he did?

23 ML: Yes, because when he left, when I put him on the chopper, I had no idea with
24 that type of wound that he would be able to survive and the story is, if you talk to these
25 guys that were wounded in Vietnam, especially in the Ia Drang, there was a field hospital
26 only five miles away. There was a second one a little distance from there. There were
27 actually—we had no idea. Some of the guys I saw wounded, I didn’t think any of them
28 lived, and they did survive.

29 JM: You saw the exit wound too, you said?

30 ML: Yeah. I was behind him, so I saw it come out.

31 JM: And it was an AK?

1 ML: No, it was a single bullet that hit him.
2 JM: But from an AK-47?
3 ML: I don't know the caliber. I just know he was wounded.
4 JM: Yeah, yeah. Wow. So you stayed through the 14th, 15th, 16th. The battle is
5 over at X-Ray and then your taken where?
6 ML: We went to Plei Me—Pleiku. At the base there.
7 JM: Camp Holloway?
8 ML: Camp Holloway. We were there for, I don't know, maybe a day or so and
9 then we went back to An Khe. At An Khe, we started processing to leave, to go to Camp
10 Alpha in Saigon, to come back to the United States.
11 JM: Were you surprised that you got orders to go home?
12 ML: My ETS (Expiration of Term of Service) was coming up.
13 JM: Yes.
14 ML: I was getting on sick call because I was at the battalion and a guy came by to
15 get his orders. I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "Man, guy that's leaving our ETS
16 on December 2nd, he's leaving tomorrow!" I said, "What?" "Yeah, tomorrow!" I said,
17 "Are you kidding?" So I asked him, "How are you getting out? How are you processing
18 out? There's ten places you have to go!" He said, "You don't have to go to all these
19 places, just check them." He said, "All you have you go is battalion, the mail room, and
20 payroll." Like the red cross and all that stuff, you don't have to follow through. Next
21 thing I knew, I was on a plane the next morning from An Khe going to Saigon. Which is
22 Thanksgiving Day.
23 JM: And then you were out of the army?
24 (Interviewee nods his head.)
25 So you went into battle with an ETS of December 1st, is that right?
26 ML: Right.
27 JM: They process you out on the 22nd of November, but you went into battle on
28 November 14th, two weeks before you ETS?
29 ML: Right.
30 JM: You weren't the only one? There were a few others?

1 ML: Most of every guy that was there were out of the service within two weeks.
2 What they were trying to do—they were trying to bring in guys as we would— as our
3 ETS would come up. We had received guys out of AIT from Fort Benning. I think eight,
4 nine, ten guys came in that was in our unit. None of them survived the battle. They were
5 only in Vietnam a week. There were supposed to have been replacements for the guys
6 like myself that were leaving.

7 JM: Later in the war, it would almost become unheard of to send men into battle
8 with thirty days to go in their tour. I'm telling you that, as a historian I know that the case
9 and you went into battle with two weeks left to go.

10 ML: That operation started two weeks before it happened on the 14th. The 1st of
11 the 7th had been out on the field from two weeks prior to that date. It just so happened
12 that Sunday morning everything broke loose.

13 JM: Martin, I want to ask you another question that as historians and sociologists
14 and people that have studied the war afterwards, and that is the issue of racial tension.
15 You're an African American. Did you feel in the beginning—well, in your tour, in
16 Vietnam, that you were treated differently than white soldiers?

17 ML: Stateside. At Benning, we had a lot of sudden officers.

18 JM: Of?

19 ML: All the guys that were lieutenants, platoon leaders, most of those guys and
20 they were kind of rough on us, they would show that prejudice. I mean, they would try to
21 cover it up, but they'd show it. By the time we got to Vietnam, amazingly, most of those
22 guys were not in our unit, when we went to Vietnam. As far as race harmony, it's
23 probably as big as a surprise for all of us. We had guys from Mississippi, Alabama,
24 Louisiana, all the southern states. Matter of fact, one of my closest associates and friend,
25 had never been in the presence of a black man because in Mississippi it's against the law.
26 And he was surprised that we were the same. At this time, we remained close friends. I
27 think it was basically something about the people that trained us. We didn't see colors.
28 We didn't have any racial flair up between Hispanics, whites, or anything. It just didn't
29 happen. Amazingly, we all liked each other. We spent a lot time together because of the
30 training. That may be why we are still together today. Forty years later, the men that were
31 in that unit are still close and true brothers.

1 JM: Very interesting. Very interesting. Well Martin, I have— I sure do appreciate
2 you sitting down for this interview. This is very important to us as historians to put all
3 this on tape for future generations to study. I would invite you if you are ever in Lubbock,
4 Texas or if you can ever get out to Lubbock, Texas to come visit our Vietnam Center out
5 there, We're the number one center of archival material in the world. This will become
6 part of that archive. So we very much appreciate you being here today. Thank you very
7 much.

8 ML: Thank you for having me.

9 (End of Interview.)