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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Calvin G. Gilbertson
Conducted by Dr Philip F. Napoli
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Transcribed by Mark Steven Varela**

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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 Dr. Philip Napoli: My name is Philip Napoli, I am here with Mr. Calvin
2 Gilbertson and Mr. Richard DeBauche. We are at the Hilton Crystal City Hotel and we'll
3 talk a little bit about the Ia Drang Valley events forty years ago this weekend. What I'd
4 like to do first is to get you gentlemen to introduce yourself one after the other, even
5 though we'll focus on one story first. Let's get you both on tape, tell us a little bit about
6 how your life is now, where you live, something like that. Mr. Gilbertson, why don't you
7 go first?

8 Calvin Gilbertson: I'm Calvin Gilbertson. I live in Oregon, Wisconsin. Little town
9 ten miles south of the capital city of Madison. I'm sixty-four years old and married, have
10 two daughters and three grand-children. I served in the military from December 5th of
11 1963 to January of 1966. I did my basic training in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. From
12 basic training, we went to Fort Benning, Georgia to the 2nd Infantry Division. I did my
13 AIT (Advanced Individual Training) and was stationed there until they changed our titles
14 to the 11th Air Assault and then from there we picked up the 1st Cav colors and we went
15 to Vietnam in July of '65.

16 PN: Let's turn to Mr. DeBauche and just get you to introduce yourself and we'll
17 get back to Mr. Gilbertson's story.

1 Richard DeBauche: I'm Richard DeBauche. I'm from New Franken, Wisconsin,
2 just outside of Green Bay, Wisconsin. Cal and I have been buddies for many, many years.
3 I live out in New Franken with my wife, three children out there. I entered into service,
4 went into Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. From there we went to Fort Benning, Georgia.
5 Spent most of my training down there and got into the 11th Air Assault when they formed
6 that until we recalled over to Vietnam.

7 PN: Very good. Why don't you pick the story up with Mr. Gilbertson from arrival
8 at An Khe?

9 CG: Okay. What I remember about An Khe was that they took us off of the
10 *General Darby* and we all got on a landing craft from Seabees or Coast Guard, Seabees I
11 suppose. They took us in as close to land as we could get. Then we all just—we ran off
12 the ship and then I can't remember how far we either were trucked or we marched, I can't
13 remember. We went to An Khe and we set up base camp. I believe that was the Hong
14 Kong Mountain that was right at the foot of that. We remained there most of the time. I
15 remember being gone from base camp nineteen days without coming back. I remember
16 that seventeen of those days it rained. I think we marched across that mountain once. I
17 remember my jungle boots being wet so many times and my feet got so sore that I was
18 the RTO (Radio Telephone Operator) for Platoon Sergeant Fred Kluge in Company A, 1st
19 of the 5th and the 1st Platoon. I just couldn't hardly walk anymore, so he pulled another
20 rifleman off of the platoon and had him carry my radio. I still monitored the radio, but I
21 just walked beside him, just handled the radio and he just carried the radio. I remember it
22 weighing probably about thirty, forty pounds on your back besides the rest of your gear. I
23 remember getting to go into town once and I think I had one beer, maybe two. We were
24 looking for something to eat and the only thing we could find was some fresh baked
25 bread and we didn't have butter or anything like home. We put that and we just ate it
26 because that's all we had. No more got that ate and then they came and said—made us
27 leave town and we went on helicopters. I can't remember where we went. I know I got
28 sick and I remember we marched into—I remember going across a stream and it was
29 probably as deep as I was, I don't know how to swim. They had a rope across and we all
30 hung onto the rope. It was just enough to keep our feet on the bottom. I remember going
31 into the Ia Drang Valley, from that point that's all I can remember. Seeing all the dead

1 VC (Viet Cong) that were already there. The napalm coming in on the hillside. It was just
2 stumps for trees. I remember a big ammo dump there, that we took the ammo we could
3 carry when we left and blew up the rest, as I recall. Then, we marched from that point, we
4 were marching as a reinforced battalion with the 1st of the 7th, I think it was. We were the
5 reinforcement for that battalion. Then we got ambushed, I want to say it was in the
6 afternoon but I can't remember what time of day it was.

7 PN: How do you remember that happening? What took place at that particular
8 moment when it started for you?

9 CG: Personally?

10 PN: Yeah.

11 CG: Personally, we started hearing the mortar rounds coming in and at first they
12 weren't right on us because I suppose they had to adjust. I remember them coming in and
13 they were spread out through the whole column. One mortar round landed directly on—
14 almost one of the rifleman that was behind me in his column. I remember his name, is it
15 alright to say names?

16 PN: Yes!

17 CG: Vincent Locatelli. He probably never knew what hit him, it was just
18 devastating. It blew me forward with the radio on my back. Blew me forward and took
19 shrapnel in my legs and little pieces of shrapnel in my arms and back, shoulders. I didn't
20 think my radio worked, but my platoon sergeant told me, "Yes, it worked. The only
21 reason you didn't think it worked was because nobody else's worked." So I couldn't talk
22 to anybody, so I didn't think that it was working. But he said my radio at the end of that
23 night was the only one that was working out of all of them we had in the company. Then,
24 I was rushed off by a Huey, one of the first Hueys that came in. Platoon Sargent Kluge
25 got me on that Huey right away to Nha Trang Hospital. I spent that time there until—I
26 can remember days now, but then I was flown to Clark Air Force base in the Philippines.
27 Was there for two three days and I suppose until they got enough wounded in that we're
28 able to make the trip back to the States. I came back to the states and ended up at the
29 Great Lakes Naval Air Station because that was closest to my home in north of Chicago.
30 I stayed there, got home for Christmas and New Year. Then I came back and I stayed
31 there for a few days until my papers did get back from Vietnam, so I could be discharged.

1 PN: You were ready to get out?

2 CG: I was ready to get out. My ETS (Expiration Term of Service) was the 5th of
3 December of '65. They held me in the service—well, first off they held me in the service
4 because of my wounds, it wasn't healed completely. Secondly, they held me back for a
5 lack of records. I was discharged in January of 1966.

6 PN: Had you stayed conscious through the night as that ambush developed?

7 CG: Yes. I never lost conscious unless it was momentarily with a mortar round. It
8 landed on my chest and probably knocked the wind out of me, I don't remember that. I
9 know I had awful sore ribs from my ammo pouches were up front and they were loaded
10 with ammo. We took everything that we could carry and I probably had eight clips or
11 more of ammo, but they landed right on my ribs. That's basically my story, that's what I
12 really remembered.

13 PN: How bad was your leg?

14 CG: I had metal shrapnel go right on through, missed the bone in this one. There
15 was one in my—on the side of leg that ended up embedding right in by the bone. I still
16 got shrapnel in my hands, it was in by the nerves and they don't want to take it out. My
17 fingers get cold quick on this hand, especially this one. I don't really—if you have any
18 questions that might get something else out of me, that's fine. I don't really remember too
19 much more. Like I said, I got out of there right away. So I do remember when I was in
20 Nha Trang, Platoon Sergeant Kluge sent me a note and got it to me somehow. He
21 promised me if I reenlisted to come back and help him out that he was going to make
22 me—I never did make E4. I never got demoted for anything, but I never made E4 and
23 most—an awful lot made E4 and E5, but I don't know if the RTOs just didn't get it or
24 what, I never made E4 but he promised me E4 and E5 strip if I came back and helped
25 and, no. No, I didn't enlist to go in, I was drafted. Come from a family of men that were
26 like that. Had an uncle killed in World War II. My dad was in World War I. My stepdad
27 was in World War II, he was a prisoner of war in Germany. Both of my brothers served
28 in two years, they were both drafted in the military. Both of them were in Germany. So
29 my brother in law was in service. My uncle was killed in Italy in World War II. Basically,
30 that's my story.

31 PN: Very good. Mr. DeBauche, do you want to pick up?

1 RD: Yeah. Right from the ambush part is—I was the very last man on that patrol
2 at that time. We had stopped, we had taken a break. I don't know exactly how long maybe
3 fifteen, twenty minutes or half hour. I did doze off because I had been up all night before.
4 When we did get up and move, we no more stood up and I heard all this firing in front of
5 us and by the time I got up there, I see bodies lying all over the place. Mortar rounds are
6 coming in and that's where Calvin was at that time. When we did finally cease firing, we
7 tried to clear the zone, so we could get some helicopters in there to get the wounded out
8 and then deal with the next. So we spent a little bit of time there cleaning up the mess
9 after. After we did get it cleaned up, we took all the weapons that we couldn't carry with
10 us and just buried them and we got out of there and went to another zone. I don't know
11 exactly where that was, but we got into that area and we no more got there and we were
12 fired upon too at that time. I didn't even have a foxhole dug. I ended up in one of the
13 trash dumps where there were all kinds of C-ration cans. So I started digging the C-ration
14 cans just so I can get below ground level because we were getting shot at. It got too
15 intense, so we had to pull back and I did find a hole, a fox hole me and another fella
16 where we could stay in. At that time, I have been given a radio too because all of our
17 RTOs were gone. I was dragging this radio behind me on my foot and trying to crawl as
18 low as I could because the shells were cracking over our heads and I couldn't do any
19 firing because our perimeter was setup and I was behind the perimeter and I didn't want
20 to hit any of our guys. But we did pull back into a fox hole and this went on into the
21 night. The fella that was in the foxhole with me got shot in the neck and I said, "Oh no"
22 and it was dark out, "Now what do we do?" They had been sending in flares, all night
23 long they sent in flares. I heard the next day that they had sent eighteen hundred flares
24 that they had shot out of planes and shot out with mortars. It was pretty well lit up most
25 of the night while we were there. Well, my buddy that was in the foxhole with me, I did
26 manage to bandage him up. He had got hit in the jugular vein and he had lost a lot of
27 blood. Luckily, it was not through his neck, it was just a scratch. But it was in a critical
28 spot and they would not take him out of there that night because of the intense fire. He
29 had wait until morning to get out of there. I actually lost track of him, I don't where he is
30 or what his name is. I lost track of him. As we were getting fired on, we were running
31 low on ammo, so they had called in for more ammunition. They sent a Chinook and

1 ammunition in it and it came landing no more than fifty feet from me. We were under
2 fire. Apparently, the pilot did not see that. As he was coming down, I was trying to flag
3 him off to get out of there, but he got shot in the foot. So he came down pretty fast. At
4 least we did get the ammunition, we were able to have enough ammunition to supply us
5 for the next day. The colonel's helicopter was sitting down in that area next to his tent, it
6 got around and it blew up, went up in flames. So the colonel didn't have his helicopter
7 either. That Cal doesn't remember because Cal was out the day before. That was the rest
8 of our group. We spent that night there and the next day we got all the wounded out again
9 and then we moved out, went back to Pleiku. From there, we stayed there a day. Then, we
10 went back to base camp because I was due to get out on the 10th of December. Spent
11 Thanksgiving at base camp, C-rations. So that was our Thanksgiving meal. We did get
12 into Saigon, I believe on the 8th or 9th of December. We ended up getting out of there, I
13 got back into California—Oakland, California, where I came down with a fever of 104. I
14 was just ready to get out. All I had to do was to go medical and paid line, I would've been
15 out. It took myself and three other guys, transported us over to San Francisco, Letterman
16 General Hospital where I spent four months with Malaria. So I got out in April 2006—I
17 mean 1966, excuse me, different century. But yeah, it was April before I ever got out,
18 four months longer than I planned on. Like I say, we always kept in contact.

19 PN: You guys became friends?

20 CG: In the service.

21 PN: In the service.

22 CG: Well, he was pretty lucky, he had a car on base and we used to come back
23 home together. We arranged our leave so we jumped in the car and he was always good,
24 he could drive all night seemed like. I could never do that, still can't. Drive up all the way
25 from Fort Benning, Georgia. We'd leave in the afternoon down there and be home the
26 next afternoon. He was pretty good at that.

27 PN: How did you find one another after you guys were separated from the
28 service? You guys knew hometowns?

29 RD: We were about a hundred fifty miles apart.

30 CG: Yeah, and we still get together every year, at least once a year, sometimes
31 more. Now we're trying to get a group of Cav guys from our company together every

1 year. Maybe only eight or ten of us make it, but we try to do that at least once a year at
2 one of their hometowns. Last year we were in Green Bay, this year we're here. The year
3 before that we were in Illinois at Lavender's place in Murphysboro. Next year we may go
4 to Denver, to one of the guys. We do it for a weekend, we just try to get together for a
5 weekend.

6 RD: We decided to do this every year because of the fact that two years ago we
7 were down by Lavender in Illinois and two of the guys that were there are no longer with
8 us. So we decided to keep on doing it yearly.

9 PN: Talk to me about why it's important to do it.

10 CG: Well, every year you do it you gain more memories and more—like I wrote
11 in a lot of the guys that brought their books along for *We Were Young—Soldiers*
12 *Once...and Young*, brought their books along and I said, "When you read this book, don't
13 just think about the bad times and the rough times in Vietnam, think about all the good
14 memories we had at Fort Benning and since we got out." So we tried to do that. Want to
15 keep that camaraderie together.

16 PN: Long term, what's been the significance of those events forty years ago for
17 you? You mentioned sometimes your hand is sometimes cold, I mean surely physical
18 consequences. Are there other kinds of consequences? Other kinds of significance? Did
19 you learn things about yourself or your country forty years ago that have stuck with you?

20 RD: I think mainly bringing back memories and you know enjoying, you know
21 talking about stories from when we first got in. Being able to actually do this where some
22 people weren't able to do this.

23 CG: I think one of the things for me is—I guess when I was drafted, I said,
24 "When they want me, they'll come and get me." You know, if I'm good to go, I'll go. I'll
25 serve my time just like everyone else. I always figured that I needed to do the best job I
26 knew how to do. I think that's one thing I've learned, in life you always try to do the best
27 job that you could do, no matter what you're doing. Something that you can be proud of
28 and what at least will be—set a standard for maybe your children and other people who
29 might observe. I think that's probably one of the main things. Learn how to take orders.
30 You better learn how to take orders and usually once you take the order, in the end you
31 can figure out why the order was given, if nothing more, it was to build character and

1 you. So that other people could learn from that. I guess that's the main significance for
2 me. I tried to leave the military that and I never let it to my mind other than—you know, I
3 never let it possess me or make me negative about life or about the military.

4 RD: That's about it.

5 PN: Okay, we can stop.

6 CG: That's about all I can remember.

7 PN: Fair enough.

8 [End of interview]