

ATTENTION: © Copyright The Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. The following materials can be used for educational and other noncommercial purposes without the written permission of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. These materials are not to be used for resale or commercial purposes without written authorization from the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. All materials cited must be attributed to the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with George Forrest
Conducted by Dr. Richard B. Verrone
Date 12 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 Dr. Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone I am conducting a video oral
2 history with Lieutenant Colonel George Forrest. Today is November 12th, 2005 and it's
3 approximately 12:05 pm and we are in the Crystal City Hilton, Washington D.C., at the
4 40th anniversary reunion of the battles of the Ia Drang Valley, Falcon, X-Ray, Albany,
5 and others. Colonel Forrest, tell me a little bit about your recollection of arriving at X-
6 Ray on the 17th, 16th and on that Tuesday. What did X-Ray look like to you?

7 George Forrest: Probably a sight like we never seen. My unit unlike the other
8 units, we walked into X-Ray. We had spent the previous night at LZ (Landing Zone)
9 Columbus. Then, the next morning went over land into X-Ray. On the way in to X-Ray,
10 we could see some of the causalities, at least of the North Vietnamese causalities as we
11 got into the landing zone. Yeah, we saw guys who were absolutely physically exhausted.
12 I think Jack Smith characterized it once, he said they had that blind combat stare.

13 RV: Did you all know what had happened there?

14 GF: We did not, because communications were poor. We were not on Hal
15 Moore's frequency until we actually got into X-Ray.

16 RV: Okay. Do you remember the then lieutenant colonel and what he was—

17 GF: Absolutely.

18 RV: Tell me about what you saw that day with him.

1 GF: He was probably this monumental figure standing in the middle of all this
2 chaos with total control of who he was, what he was and what he wanted us to do.
3 Without hesitation, he told me, "This is where I want your unit in the perimeter and move
4 out." So we basically did and deployed. Some point later, we came back for more
5 thorough briefing by him on what had gone on and what he'd expected, what he had
6 anticipated would happen the rest of the day and the next night.

7 RV: He came in and addressed the company commanders?

8 GF: His company commanders came in. I guess it was part of his normal either
9 morning briefing or afternoon briefing. Because we got there fairly early in the morning.

10 RV: Right. What did he tell you? What did he say he thought would be
11 happening?

12 GF: Well, he knew that the North Vietnamese forces were still there. That we
13 needed to first of all do some policing in the battlefield to try to recover as many
14 American soldier's bodies as we could. Tried to get them back inside the perimeter. Then
15 go through your normal routine as a company once you go in line. Establish your
16 positions, put out listening posts, do all the kind of military tactical things that a unit
17 should do. Then establish good communications with the unit on the right and the left and
18 to the battalion headquarters.

19 RV: So you stay there in the day and the night before your walk to Albany. What
20 was that night like?

21 GF: There were a number of probing attacks, at least on the sector that we were
22 on. As I recall, we were on probably the Western side of the perimeter. No real heavy
23 probes because they were looking for weaknesses in the line. Again, my company being
24 fresh, we had an ample supply of ammunition, so we were pretty solid company. So they
25 didn't find too many weaknesses, so they obviously probed someplace else.

26 RV: Tell me a little bit about your general feelings and your remembrance of
27 Colonel McDade, before the walk. What kind of commander was he? I know he'd only
28 been there just a little while.

29 GF: Before?

30 RV: Before, yes.

31 GF: Didn't know him.

1 RV: He was what? Three weeks, four weeks?

2 GF: Even if he'd been there the whole time, I didn't know him. He was a battalion
3 commander of another battalion. Remember my unit was attached.

4 RV: I'm asking because did he make contact with you all?

5 GF: Didn't make contact with us because we didn't fall under his command until
6 we were ordered to move out. I mean, I could say the same about Hal Moore. I had not
7 laid eyes on Hal Moore until the morning that we walked into the LZ. Now his reputation
8 is being a tough battalion commander, but I was in a separate brigade, separate battalion
9 and we just happened to be attached. And as I tell folks all the time, being attached to a
10 unit is like being a stepchild, you're the last to do everything. But in my case, it worked
11 well.

12 RV: Yes, it did. So you get through that night and the decision was made to walk
13 to Albany. What do you know about that decision to walk instead of being lifted? There's
14 also the question of why you even—why people were even going to Albany.

15 GF: In hindsight? Or do you want my—

16 RV: Well, then and hindsight.

17 GF: On that particular morning, when the colonel calls you to the command post
18 and the orders of the day are, "We're going to move out. We know that a portion of this
19 unit is going to be air lifted out and some of you guys are going to walk!" Now, again, I
20 overlay my attachment mentality. They're obviously not going to fly out the stepchildren.
21 So we assumed that we would probably be one of the units that walked out because
22 again, I think the concept was at that time we also established communications with my
23 parent battalion. There was some discussion of marrying up with that battalion at Albany
24 and that was an assumption on my part that we were going to go. Once we got to Albany,
25 we would be air lifted back to my battalion so we would marry up with my battalion.
26 Now after forty years, I understand one of the reasons we walked out is because there
27 was not enough air lift, helicopter lift support to fly everybody out. The months leading
28 up to Albany, there was lots of flying. Most of the helicopters were at their one-hundred-
29 hour mandatory maintenance, so a number of them were probably down. Again, that's
30 after I read the book.

1 RV: Right. So you all move out and you're in the rear. Were you tasked with the
2 rear guard? Or were you again just the stepchild?

3 GF: Again, understand the military tactics, when you are the last unit, in military
4 missions they are implied and specified tasks. Implied tasks of being the last unit is you
5 are rear security. That was a given, that was Fort Benning 101. Being the last unit, rear
6 security, but more importantly security of my particular unit was paramount in my mind.

7 RV: Tell me about your lieutenants.

8 GF: Good lieutenants, young, had one OCS (Officer Candidate School). Larry
9 Haas. He was the one that was killed. Terry Martell. Terry Martell, I believe an ROTC
10 (Reserve Officer Training Corps) lieutenant from Berea, Ohio. My other lieutenant was
11 Jim Patzwald and he's from Baltimore. I had one platoon that was commanded by non-
12 commissioned officer and his name for whatever reason I haven't been able to—And last
13 night when we were talking, I kept trying to get these guys to refresh my memory so that
14 when I did this interview, it would be up to speed on who was there. Then I had my—
15 which was unusual scenario, my XO (Executive Officer) was also on the ground with us.
16 His name is Don Adams and Don's from Atlanta.

17 RV: And your radio operator?

18 GF: Radio operators, Hurst from Allentown, Pennsylvania. Jimmy Smith from
19 Albemarle, North Carolina.

20 RV: So you all move out that day and a lot of people said you were weighted
21 down. The whole group was weight down, moving a lot of materials.

22 GF: A lot of, I won't say a lot. But we had equipment that normally anticipating
23 being flown out, soldiers carry a lot more stuff than they would if they had to pack it. We
24 normally had the two canteens of water and extra ammunition. A lot of—we had gotten
25 resupplied, so lots of the resupplies that we had we still had because we didn't expand an
26 awful lot of ammunition that night. Again, even the ammunition that we expended, we
27 replenished in the morning. So I wouldn't say we were burdened down, but it was an
28 unusual load for an air mobile company to be carrying and it was unusual for an air
29 mobile company to be walking around in the woods. Normally, what happened airplanes
30 came, picked us up and we got a free ride. So I wouldn't say we were unusually burdened
31 down, it was probably more than we were used to carrying.

1 RV: Tell me about the formation you were in as you marched.

2 GF: My best recollection is that we probably were in a platoon company wedge
3 with probably one platoon leading and then two kind of on a flank, with some flank
4 security. With the depth of that formation, I probably was not anywhere close to the
5 manual that spells out what it should be given the terrain. Again, a lot of that formation
6 and a lot of formations are dictated by terrain. I think the overriding factor here was how
7 much security can you have not knowing the situation that you're going into and that's
8 probably the most cautious formation, short of being an administrative formation. Of
9 course administrative formation is what the battalion was in, one company stack behind
10 the other.

11 RV: What was the terrain like?

12 GF: For the first part of it, it was fairly clear because the initial walkout was
13 again, part of LZ X-Ray. But as we move further north, the elephant grass become more
14 prevalent. So that became an issue in terms of visibility. But other than that, relatively
15 flat. I think when we went back in '96 and looked at it, it looked more like north Georgia
16 woods than we imagined, with the elephant grass. So the visibility was really limited and
17 at least a portion of the way. Of course, the closer we got to Albany, there were these—
18 terrain that sticks out in everybody's mind. These enormous ant hills which still don't
19 know how, why, where, whatever. But they became part of the terrain. But again, I would
20 imagine that visibility probably no more than a hundred meters in either to the right, to
21 the left or even to the front of the formation. So I think guys were pretty close.

22 RV: Did that worry you? Do you remember being concerned about—

23 GF: Every day that I was in Vietnam, I was concerned. Not so much concerned
24 about me but concerned about the welfare of those guys that depended on me to do some
25 stuff. So concerned, absolutely. After all, we had just witnessed horror. Some people
26 probably talk about a let-down because we weren't more relaxed. I got to tell you, the
27 commanders or the leaders were not relaxed. I know none of my NCOs (Non-
28 Commissioned Officer) were relaxed. These guys are always cautious about what we did
29 because we didn't have the normal intel. We didn't have the kind of navigational aids,
30 good maps to basically point out what the terrain was, so we were kind of stumbling in
31 the dark!

1 RV: Didn't you have one map? In alpha?

2 GF: Yeah. Right.

3 RV: And you got someone to make another rudimentary map?

4 GF: We did some and the reason was again, going back to how we got there in the

5 first place, we were doing highway security on a pass just south of An Khe. Our mission

6 was to provide outpost highway security. We got a call that, "You're going to be airlifted

7 into LZ Columbus for an operation." No maps, not even the kind of communications, the

8 exchange of communications that you would normally get when you exchange units like

9 that. So flying in the Chinook pilots, because again, we landed on an LZ, a non-secure LZ

10 in CH-47.

11 RV: We can go into detail on that another time.

12 GF: Yeah, that's a whole another story. Yeah.

13 RV: So the two North Vietnamese are captured by Delta company up front?

14 GF: Right.

15 RV: They run into them, they get them, and McDade calls all the company

16 commanders to the front.

17 GF: Mhmm.

18 RV: How did you feel about leaving your company and going that far up the

19 column?

20 GF: Again, reality and what I know now. My thought process has changed over

21 forty years. But at that point you have to remember I was a good infantry captain,

22 RV: You went, you said, "Yes, sir."

23 GF: Who if they said, "We want you to come up front." I didn't go through this

24 check list of how do I evaluate the commander. Why is this guy not using the radio? Why

25 is he? No, it was, "Okay guys. Off and on. "Off your feet, off your ass. On your feet,

26 we're going forward." That's basically what we did.

27 RV: Tell me about McDade and the conversation you all had up there, when you

28 got there.

29 GF: Didn't really have a conversation. When I got to the position where we were

30 actually starting to assemble to do the briefing, we started to get incoming mortar fire.

31 My immediate reaction was, "I don't know anyone in front of me, I don't know any of

1 those guys on the side of me. They only comfort zone for me and this whole scenario is
2 back down that trail where A Company 1st of the 5th is.” So my response to the incoming
3 fire was a reaction of, “I need to get out of here so that I can get back to a position.”
4 Again, in hindsight, now that I think about it and was it a conscience thought of, “I need
5 to go back and save my guys?” Or was the conscience thought, “I’m scared as hell and I
6 need to get out of this particular environment, so that I can get my thought processes
7 together and do the things I was trained to do.” I haven’t quite figured out what the
8 answer was, but I think it was more training. I think it was more instinct. I think it was
9 more a response to a dangerous situation. This may sound melodramatic, but I got to tell
10 you, the safest place I believe for me on that battlefield in that particular day was back at
11 A Company 1st of the 5th.

12 RV: With your guys. You knew them.

13 GF: Because I knew these guys.

14 RV: Did you ask McDade permission?

15 GF: No.

16 RV: It was reactional.

17 GF: Didn’t do the traditional click your heels salute three times and turn around
18 and go. It was turn around and go.

19 RV: What about the other commanders who were there, company commanders?

20 GF: Again, don’t have a clear recollection of that particular day. Having talked to
21 Larry and some of the guys afterwards, I kind of know now what their reactions were.
22 But to actually—I can’t even remember where McDade was standing, what he said, any
23 of those. Because I think it went so fast that it was turn, let’s go.

24 RV: And you have your two RTOs (Radio Telephone Operators) with you.

25 GF: I have them with me.

26 RV: And the trap has been sprung in the middle. There you go, you’re off. How
27 fast are you going?

28 GF: (Chuckles)

29 RV: It’s chronicled in the book, but I want to know what you say.

30 GF: Miles per hour. I’m being silly.

1 RV: (Laughs) Were you sprinting full speed? Or were you trying to drag these
2 guys behind you?

3 GF: No. No. These were—I mean I was young, but these guys were younger than
4 I was. They had more equipment than I did. But again, because they were so good, I
5 never had to look for them. Wherever I went, they appeared. So my assumption was that
6 these guys are right there with me. I'm thinking that probably for a portion—I would like
7 to think that probably for a portion of that trip that they were, and I would hope, I'll
8 probably never get the answer for that, but I would hope that I didn't leave them. I would
9 hope that they were able to stay as close as they possibly could, but obviously it wasn't
10 enough because I got there, and they didn't.

11 RV: How long did it take you? Was this a five-minute run? Was this thirty
12 seconds? You were traveling about 560 yards.

13 GF: In my mind it seemed like forever, but I think in actual time it probably
14 didn't take very long at all. Six hundred yards is a couple of football fields, three or four
15 football fields. So the actual—to qualify in minutes it may be five minutes or six minutes.

16 RV: What do you remember seeing? Were you—was it a trail? More of a trail or
17 were you picking your way?

18 GF: It was more tracing the steps that had come up. Again, this was not a
19 conscience effort of, "If I don't stay on this trail" or "If I get off this trail, I'm going to get
20 lost." I laugh all the time about paying attention to where you go, so you can always
21 know how to get back. Again, that's another one of those learned infantry officer things
22 that they put in the back of this little computer and it's there. So I kind of retraced where I
23 was going. To actually see actions to the right and left, to see guys fighting and firing
24 those kinds of things, that's a blur. That's a blur. I think conscience vision from the time I
25 left McDade until the time I got back to the company is like a fuzzy TV screen. I knew it
26 was there but I don't recollect what it was all about. I think my conscience sense of
27 responsibility kicked in once I moved into A Company and these guys were looking at
28 me like, "Now that you're here, you got to do something. Tell us what to do."

29 RV: What did you tell them? What did you do?

30 GF: "Guys we—" Number one, we didn't have to tell them, they already knew.
31 "We had been ambushed; we need to execute the processes that we know to go about."

1 So the first thing we needed to do is establish a position where we could be fairly secure.
2 Once we did that, try to do again what every good leader does, account for your people.
3 Try to account for the people so that you can make a determination of where the holes are
4 in your organization. Redistribute supplies and ammunition. Then, hunker down and try
5 to get an evaluation of a situation and call for help. The only help that was available
6 again, was my parent organization. On the radio talking to my battalion commander or
7 my S3 and gave him a situation report and he said, "We have a company." Because they
8 probably had the division view of what was going on because they had better
9 communications. "But we have a company that is on the way, they will marry up with
10 you and then from there the two company commanders figure out what the next step is
11 going to be." And that was Bravo company, 1st of the 5th and it was commanded by a guy
12 named Buse Tully.

13 RV: So tell me kind of the sequence of events, what happens once you all
14 established your position?

15 GF: Well, once we established our position, again first thing we started to do is
16 call in medevac. One of the first airplanes that landed in the makeshift perimeter that we
17 had, were medevac choppers. When they came in, I basically went over to the first bird
18 that landed and talked to the pilot, basically said, "This is what's happened on your way
19 back in. If you can bring ammunition, water, medical supplies whatever we need because
20 we've been hit pretty bad." And we're in pretty good shape, but I would imagine that the
21 units in front of us were having more problems than we are. Our combat effectiveness of
22 my unit was probably seventy-five percent. After having read the book, you kind of know
23 what the guys in front of me were like.

24 RV: Yes.

25 GF: It was—once we started to again get the wounded out and get some supplies
26 and whatever then we concentrated on accountability and where everybody is.

27 RV: Can you describe kind of the physical layout of your perimeter? How large
28 did you set up?

29 GF: It was wide enough that we could accommodate at least three platoons and I
30 had my weapons platoon which was inside and a headquarters. So pretty good size. And
31 large enough that helicopters could come fairly close. I don't think they landed inside the

1 perimeter, but fairly close. Because I only remember probably two sorties, maybe three
2 sorties of medivacs came in because it was getting pretty late. The battle about 1:00, 1:30
3 about the time everything kind of calmed down. It was getting dark because I remember
4 Charlie and his guys came just at dark. So if recollection serves me, the perimeter was big
5 enough that his company could fold in and we didn't have to push out in it.

6 RV: Tell me about the battle during the day, before the night. How intense does it
7 get for you all?

8 GF: Pretty intense because we got some pretty serious and I will call them more
9 than probes, they were assaults. At least in my mind, assaults on our position. Once you
10 can reestablish company integrity or unit integrity, whatever, an infantry company is a
11 pretty formable force if you don't have to worry about rear security. Because we are
12 where we are, most of our efforts are outwards, so we're in pretty good shape. Again, as I
13 recall the assaults on our positions probably came from the direction of the ambush, so
14 we could pretty well concentrate most of our fire power. Again, I did have indirect fire
15 weapons too to help us out.

16 RV: What about fire support?

17 GF: Yeah, and again, one of the guys wounded in the initial assault was my
18 artillery FO (Forward Observer). They had back up, their RTOs or radio telephone
19 operators were also skilled fire support guys. So we did get artillery support, particularly
20 as we knew we were going to turn off the air coming in. We could do some night defense,
21 we used to call it night defensive fires to put them around the perimeter. So we did have,
22 there was artillery at—the LZ slips me. It's probably in the book.

23 RV: It was still at Falcon, I believe. So tell me about that night.

24 GF: The hour slips me, but we were getting these intermittent radio calls from—
25 we initially thought it was probably the North Vietnamese probably recaptured some our
26 equipment, and they were using our radios to try to get us out of our relative secure
27 position back into the ambush area. But we were getting this, and one radio call was
28 fairly consistent. It was from the callsign that was Ghost Force 6. If you get an
29 opportunity to interview John Generac that would be—because his experience is one that
30 I cannot imagine. I cannot imagine what that must've been like. Any rate, we got these
31 calls. I was convinced that there were people still left in the ambush site and that we

1 needed to do something to try to get support for them or to get them out. At some point,
2 we decided we needed to go. So I basically made the decision that I was going to take a
3 patrol and go out. Sergeant Kluge and I don't know whether you've interview Fred or
4 not.

5 RV: No

6 GF: He said, "Captain. You cannot leave this perimeter and go out on a patrol and
7 trying to bring—you got more guys in here that you need to worry about." Because the
8 XO is wounded. I got lieutenants that are down. I got a number of my key NCOs are
9 wounded and I'm going to go out on a recuse mission, not even knowing what's out there.
10 So Kluge said, "I'll do it." He takes a patrol and some stretchers that had been dropped
11 off by the medevac guys who were coming in to go out into the LZ. We were assuming
12 we'd get a single radio call that's probably not a lot of folks out there that probably are—
13 I don't remember the number. But whatever the number was, we took enough guys to do
14 two manned stretchers. So I would imagine that maybe fifteen guys went out. We did
15 send a medic; his name is Daniel Torres. They get into the LZ or into the kill zone and
16 Sergeant Kluge calls back and says, "There's not one guy our here. There's a whole lot of
17 guys out here and we can't bring them all back. So I said, "Okay, we need to make a
18 decision." He said, "I can't leave them out here because some of these guys are really in
19 bad shape. We need to try to get them back." Because at that point Tully had come in
20 with his company and had brought his medical teams, which gave us additional medical
21 support. He said, "Some of these guys need treatment." I don't know whether he gave the
22 order or whether—and I would like to think that Torres said, "Okay, you guys go back,
23 I'm the only medical guy here. I'll stay in this LZ with these guys." They loaded up as
24 many guys as they could, and they brought them back into the LZ. On the way back in,
25 we had some guys who didn't get the word that a patrol was coming in and they got fired
26 on. I think a couple of guys got wounded coming back into the LZ. But we got these guys
27 back. Then the night, fairly quiet night and then the next morning was probably the most
28 difficult piece to go back up. Torres stayed out there all that night. His account of what
29 happened out there was pretty—I guess his account of what happened out there really
30 reveals the inhumanity of man for each other. I mean, when you start shooting guys

1 because their wounded and those kinds of things. I'm not saying we were any better or
2 they were, whatever but—

3 RV: But it happened.

4 GF: But it happened. The reality of it happened.

5 RV: When did you hear about that?

6 GF: Probably after we got back to An Khe. Because the guys didn't talk. They
7 didn't talk loud about you know, what basically happened out there. I guess the difficult
8 part for me is again, we knew we had missing folks, I knew that I had missing folks from
9 my unit. Part of that soul journey into that pure hell was looking for A Company guys. I
10 mean, the others guys I didn't—I mean there was some concern, but there was more
11 concern about the guys from my company. As reflected in the book, when you believe
12 that you have rescued everybody and brought everybody back and then some months
13 later you find out that one of the guys was still out there. I think we went back out there
14 in April. I think it was April and found parts of his equipment that basically says he never
15 got out. After some investigation, some of the guys in his unit basically thought they saw
16 him getting on a helicopter because he was wounded. The only reason that we realize that
17 he was missing is we had gotten a letter from his mother that had basically said she
18 hadn't heard from him since December, November-December time frame. So you go
19 back out there and find this guy and it makes it a tough piece, cause you never want to
20 leave anybody back or at least think that you left them.

21 RV: Yeah. Tell me about the next day.

22 GF: We got up the next morning. Went back into the LZ, by that time some of the
23 units from the 2nd of the 7th were doing some of the same kind of searching for American
24 bodies.

25 RV: Did you realize then kind of what had really happened up and down the line?

26 GF: Right. Because we could see. I mean, because we walked going back into the
27 kill zone, we walk up the same trail where these guys had just sprung in, lots and lots of
28 wounded dead folks. I'm saying lots and lots but more than I had seen prior or more than
29 I would see in any one given battle. So it was one of the reasons. I think Larry Gwen, one
30 of his comments was, "There's no real glory in war. Anybody who's ever said that has
31 never been in war." Because what happens when you encounter that much violence in

1 that short period of time and how—I'm searching for the words here to try to describe the
2 emotion of going in the next day. Because I'm thinking long range as I'm going, "How do
3 I get these guys?" Because this is not, for a lot of these guys, this is not the end of the—a
4 number of them were schedule to rotate in December. But for a lot of the guys, there was
5 going to be a next day and there was going to be another battle and I'm thinking, how do I
6 motivate these guys? How do I make sure that what they're seeing here today will serve
7 to keep them alert?" And then the question in my mind is, how do I as a company
8 commander keep them safe?

9 RV: What did you tell them? What did you do to do that?

10 GF: We talked. We talked about the need for preparedness. The need for not
11 being careless and we always have discussions about taking care of your equipment and
12 making sure that everything functions and that you don't lose sight of where you are
13 because early part of there was more pacification. So we just kind of went around and
14 handed out medical stuff. This was a rude awaking for us because up until that time, I
15 think I had one casualty in the company. This guy was killed. He went out of the
16 perimeter and either didn't remember the password or didn't say the password quick
17 enough and on the way back into the perimeter, he was shot. I don't know if you've
18 talked to Freddie Owens yet or not—

19 RV: Not yet.

20 GF: But this was one of Freddie's buddies that died in Freddie's arms because
21 again, and I won't say it was carelessness, but it was a lapse, a mental lapse. So we talk
22 an awful lot about that. Again, the rest of the guys went back, 2nd of the 7th, 1st of the 7th,
23 these guys went back to thanksgiving dinner and whatever. We got back and my battalion
24 commander said, "We have another operation."

25 RV: Wow, you weren't back very long.

26 GF: We weren't back very long before we were out in Bong Son, but I think a
27 better unit because I didn't have to tell them, "Make sure you have your water, make sure
28 you have your ammunition, your weapon is ready to fire, you don't need to be smoking
29 on the trail so these guys can pick you off, you need to make sure that security is out."
30 Once burned, you become a better unit and I think they became a better unit. As a result
31 of that battle.

1 RV: What was your morale like?

2 GF: Low. Really low because I had lost people. I think if you watch—after the
3 war, the only time I’ve seen Hal Moore breakdown is when he talks about this feeling
4 that he had as a commander that he survived, and his guys didn’t survive. And that’s kind
5 of the same feeling that we all—he just expressed it a little bit, I think with a lot more
6 passion. Again, my morale was really low because first of all I’m going, “What the hell
7 am I doing here? Why am I doing this? What is this really all about?” And again, I’m
8 twenty-five, twenty-six. What do I know about—what ordained me to be this leader?
9 Because I went to infantry school or whatever at Fort Benning? Or some guy in ROTC
10 told me that? I mean it just makes it—you start to question your ability to be able to
11 manage this. Then you have to start sitting down and writing these absolutely horrible
12 letters. “I regret to inform you that your son died.” There is a form letter that you can do.
13 But my mother would have been absolutely livid if she’d received a form letter from
14 somebody that said, “The president regrets that your son was killed and whatever.” So I
15 used to do those myself and that’s a hard task.

16 RV: Looking back at Albany now, what are your thoughts? What do you see in
17 your mind’s eye actually when you think about that now?

18 GF: Waste. What a waste. What a waste of young people’s lives. I don’t know in
19 those seventeen guys what they might’ve been, could’ve been. Then again, I know this
20 sounds melodramatic, but who knows that Robert Hurst, my radio operator who often
21 talked about what I want to do in the future. Do I want to go to medical school? Suppose
22 this was the guy who was go to medical school, become the next great Ben Carson brain
23 surgeon. I mean, those were all things that you think about.

24 RV: This is what you’ve thought about over the years?

25 GF: This is what I’ve thought about over the years. For a number of years until
26 Joe wrote this book, until Joe and Hal wrote this book, I would not first of all be able to
27 do this interview, nor would I have been able to sit down and talk to anybody about it.
28 Because when he first called me, I said, “You obviously have the wrong guy because I do
29 not want to talk about what happened to me in Vietnam.” In a lot of ways, I’m still
30 reluctant to do it. For a lot of the guys that you will interview here, and this is not a
31 criticism, for a lot of guys that you will interview here, this is their life! They are locked

1 here! I can do this once a year, maybe twice. But after that, it's really hard for me to sit
2 down and have a discussion. Everybody keeps telling me, "You need to think about what
3 if you hadn't done?" I mean, last night I'm in this room with a bunch of guys and their
4 wives and their children and their grandchildren and whatever. Not that I have any
5 responsibility for them being there. There's a deity somewhere he or she had control over
6 whatever. If I had done something different or just laid there on the ground and not done
7 anything and the whole company—I mean these guys wouldn't be here. And I don't want
8 to make that sound like I had this great power over making it happen. But it is a reality
9 and I think last year, maybe two years ago I met the son of one of these guys who did
10 make it and he said to me, "I'm here because you led my father."

11 RV: Two questions, what's that do for you personally? And when you were
12 actually thinking these things, when you see this room full of men last night, you're
13 still—

14 GF: It's still there. I mean it is a part of you that you can put away for a little
15 while, but when they're staring you right in the face, when they're looking at you. I think
16 sometimes they don't, and I haven't been able to successfully communicate this,
17 sometimes I don't think they understand that I am not the captain anymore. I am not the
18 guy that pulls it all together, that leads them or whatever. I'm just me.

19 RV: They still see you that way, as their leader.

20 GF: Oh absolutely. I mean it is—

21 RV: You don't want to be?

22 GF: No.

23 RV: Why?

24 GF: Because it's an awesome responsibility. It really is. I know, and I know Hal
25 Moore would never tell you this, but I know he gets tired. I know he gets tired of leading
26 and we're forty years out! And he's still leading this organization.

27 RV: Eighty-four years old.

28 GF: Yeah! Eight-four years old. I would not be surprised if Hal Moore says
29 tonight, "I have enough. I'm going to do Hal Moore stuff." And I know he enjoys doing
30 this but again, at some point you have to step back. I guess a lot of it is what the other
31 piece of your life and I guess in my case the other piece of my life, what I do now is so

1 rooted in “You got to make decisions.” Sometimes I go home at night and don’t ask me
2 what to make a decision about, what we’re going to do for dinner or where we’re going to
3 go to eat. I done that all day, all I want to do is put my feet up, turn on the Western
4 Channel and watch Gene Autry. (Laughs) So when I come to these and we have these
5 discussions about—I always want to be socially correct and I always want to remember
6 who they are, and I always want to remember what they did. But sometimes I look into
7 the faces of these guys and I don’t have a clue. It was so long ago that I remember there
8 are some faces that I remember, and I don’t know how to communicate this, but there
9 were a hundred and twenty three guys in this unit and if they did what they are normally
10 supposed to do as soldiers then coming into my conscience is remote. I guess I can relate
11 a lot of my life experiences after the military to the military. When I was a principal of a
12 high school, one of the commitments I made was, I want to learn the names of all the kids
13 in the school. Now, this is a school of nine hundred, so I know I’m not. But what drives
14 me to do that is because when I see these guys, I mean I saw a guy yesterday. I mean, I
15 remember his name because it’s in the book.

16 RV: But you don’t remember him?

17 GF: But I don’t remember him because he was a good solider! And being a good
18 solider, the company commander doesn’t pay attention. It’s like in school! We don’t pay
19 attention to the average good kid. We look at the AP (Advanced Placement) kids and we
20 give them lots of attention and we look at the kids on the other end of the spectrum. In the
21 middle—there’s a great book written by a guy who talks about education and it’s called
22 *The Neglected Majority*. It is so reflective of the world that we live in. Those folks who
23 are in the middle and who pay their taxes and vote and do whatever, nobody pays any
24 attention to them. It is the hot flyers and the low achievers. The health and strength of this
25 nation is in that little group. In my college years I cannot remember the name of the
26 number one graduate from my college. Probably Phi Beta Kappa, straight A or whatever.
27 But in that middle group, there are a whole lot of guys in that middle group that I do
28 remember. Maybe it’s because I was in the middle group. Maybe on the low end of the
29 middle group in terms of achievement, accomplishment. I’m kind of circling back to why
30 do you want to be the leader. I didn’t want to be the leader in school. I think in my
31 relationship with my parents and my brothers and sisters because I was the second child

1 and there was not a lot of expectation for the second child, at least in my mind. My father
2 tells me now that's a miss on my part. But I have an older brother who has my father's
3 name, he's a junior. He was highflyer, he was an overachiever and he got lots of
4 attention. My reaction to that was be a low flyer and you'll get lots of attention too. So
5 here I am, sixty-seven years old now and I walk into a room of men that I have not seen
6 in a year and I'm not sure what their expectations are.

7 RV: This is an interesting commentary on leadership and that book, and your
8 reputation proceeds you. You know, the leadership qualities you exhibited. If I'm hearing
9 you correctly, now you just want to be one of the guys and the burden of leadership, not
10 necessarily a horrible burden, but the burden of leadership from Albany and from this
11 company and going forward with this company after Albany it's still with you.

12 GF: And I guess at some point, maybe I'll get comfortable with it. But I am not
13 comfortable with walking into a room and guys coming up and saying, "Sign my book!"
14 So what do you say? "No, I don't want to sign your book." No, you sign the book or
15 whatever and then when you do that, I guess you continue to learn as you grow. When
16 we—and what really kind of made this or pulled this to some different level for me, when
17 we went out to California for the screening of the movie, I had the pleasure of having
18 some meaningful conversation with Sam Elliott and in that conversation, I made a
19 mistake. I had a program in my hand, and I asked him to sign the program. His persona
20 changed and he basically said to me, "I'm here for you guys, not here to be a celebrity."
21 Those weren't his exact words, but that was kind of his—and that's kind of where I'm at.
22 I mean the valuable guys at these reunions are Freddie and Purp, Fred Kluge, Al
23 Montgomery, Alan Brown. You know, they're not here.

24 RV: Why did you come back then? That might be a way to escape it and I can
25 probably guess your answer.

26 GF: Maybe I need them as much as they need me.

27 RV: Do they know that? That you need them like they need you?

28 GF: No, because I don't think I've gotten in touch with my sensitivity to be able
29 to communicate that and the other thing is, we never have time for a meaningful
30 conversation. For example, tonight when we go to the dinner, we will be overcome by
31 lots of stuff. So to sit down and to have a meaningful conversation with these guys about

1 what you feel, how you feel, where you are, whatever—I've never done that. The only
2 guy that I've spent after Vietnam some quality time with, is Don Adams and that's just
3 been recent because we go to football games together. He's a big Georgia Tech guy and
4 we go down and spend time with him and I stay at his house. But we've never had real
5 dialogue about the war and what we did, and I don't think we've reached that comfort
6 level yet. And Don is a funny guy. So a lot of our experiences is about funny stuff that
7 happened.

8 RV: The safe stuff.

9 GF: The safe stuff that doesn't make you vulnerable or sensitive or whatever and
10 maybe my discussion of the sensitivity.

11 RV: This is going to be a start.

12 GF: Yeah, probably therapy for me, I don't know.

13 RV: George, are you going to have those conversations?

14 GF: Um, at some point. At some point. It's a work in progress, as I am a work in
15 progress.

16 RV: I guess as we all are, to some extent.

17 GF: As we all are.

18 RV: Okay. Well, in an interest of time, we need to wrap this up. Thank you very
19 much for sitting with us and doing this.

20 GF: Thank you.

21 (End of interview)