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**The Vietnam Archive  
Oral History Project  
Interview with Gordon Swenson  
Conducted by Jason Stewart  
Date: 22 January 2010  
Transcribed by Emilie Meadors**

**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.

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

1 Jason Stewart: This is Jason Stewart with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech  
2 University conducting an Oral History Interview with Mr. Gordon Swenson. Today is  
3 January 22, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, in the Special Collections Library on the  
4 campus of Texas Tech and Mr. Swenson is joining by phone from California. Alright,  
5 why don't we begin if you could tell me a little biographical information about yourself?  
6 First of all, when and where were you born?

7 Gordon Swenson: I was born in Riverside, California.

8 JS: Okay, alright. And when?

9 GS: 1949. July 28, 1949.

10 JS: Okay, could you tell me a little bit of information about your parents? What  
11 were their names and what did they do for a living?

12 GS: My father was Clarence Swenson, and he was born in North Branch,  
13 Minnesota, which is a very small farming community in, let's see, East Central  
14 Minnesota. It's about fifty miles north of Minneapolis. My mother was born in the same  
15 town and her name was Dolce Swenson, both coming from farming type communities  
16 during the era of the depression and growing up in relatively poor conditions. When they  
17 got married, they moved from North Branch out to California to try to get a better life at  
18 that time. This would have been in the late thirties. My father only got through ninth

1 grade. My mother, I think, only got through about the same grade. So, their education  
2 levels were both relatively low. But for that time and era, you know, they were right in  
3 with everybody else.

4 JS: Right, yes sir.

5 GS: My father worked a number of different jobs during World War II. He was  
6 exempt because, number one, he was too old at that point. He was also working for a  
7 food machinery corporation at that time which was a developer of military tanks and was  
8 involved in that. Obviously, he was exempt for that reason, too. My mother basically was  
9 a stay-at-home mom. My father had a stroke when he was fairly young, mid-fifties. That  
10 completely disabled him. So, my mother had to work a job and my aunt used to come  
11 over to our house and help take care of my dad all during the time when I was eleven or  
12 twelve years old. My father died when I was twelve or thirteen. Then my mother  
13 continued to work as a cafeteria manager for the local junior high school. She lived until  
14 she was like in her mid-eighties. So, she saw through the era that I wound up going to  
15 Vietnam and went through all of that. Anyway, it was a pretty typical childhood.

16 JS: Yes sir, well did you have any jobs as a kid growing up?

17 GS: You know, I started out typical kid for the fifties and sixties. I was a  
18 newspaper boy. I delivered newspapers riding the bicycle. I had one of the longest paper  
19 routes at that time and we used to ride—it must have been about fourteen miles everyday  
20 delivering papers daily. When I finally got to the point that I outgrew that I wound up  
21 getting myself a small little motorcycle and delivered newspapers from that for awhile.  
22 And then I got to a point that I graduated high school and thought, well, “I’ll get myself a  
23 good job now.” So, I worked at a gas station and pumping gas for twenty-three cents a  
24 gallon. I did that until I got drafted.

25 JS: Okay, alright. Where did you go to high school?

26 GH: My high school was actually two high schools. I went to Riverside Poly High  
27 School and that was in the old Poly High School days. Which was the same high school  
28 that my older brother and sister both went to and it was pretty dilapidated at that point,  
29 but it was Riverside’s first high school. Riverside’s a community now with well over a  
30 half a million people, but it was the original high school for the town. When they decided  
31 to tear it down and convert part of it over to the community college, they built two new

1 high schools at that point. They built one which was continued with the name of Poly  
2 High School and then they built North High School. I wound up going to North High  
3 School which was about a mile, mile and a half from where I lived. I went there for two  
4 years. We were the second graduated class and obviously when they built a new high  
5 school, it's kind of wild because nobody really knows what they're doing. It was an  
6 interesting time to go to high school there. Anyway, I grew up, like I say, in Riverside  
7 and went to school with primarily the same group of kids through the whole process from  
8 kindergarten. In fact, one of my best friends went to kindergarten with me and we were  
9 best friends when we graduated high school. We pretty much had the same group of  
10 people.

11 JS: Okay, well while you were in high school did you play any sports or any  
12 special curricular activity type things?

13 GS: Well, I wasn't a real big sports athletic player. I guess you could call me the  
14 ninety-eight-pound weakling. I probably weighed about one hundred and fifteen and I  
15 stood at 6'0", so I was a pretty skinny kid. I didn't do a lot of that. I would say my two  
16 primary things that I did during high school was my circle of friends were big dance fans.  
17 We used to attend all of the high school dances and the junior high school dances.  
18 Actually, I'm one of those fortunate few that actually was on American Bandstand a bit.

19 JS: Oh, okay.

20 GS: So, I got to do that. We had our series of dances that we went to. We did that  
21 and then I was a big hot rod car aficionado. I was always mechanically inclined kind of  
22 person who enjoyed working on cars. We had our circle of friends that did that back in  
23 the days when you could street race and get away with it. We did that quite a bit.  
24 Between those two things it kept me busy, but like I said, I wasn't really the athletic type.

25 JS: Right, okay. Well, while you were growing up and going to high school, did  
26 you pay close attention to what was going on in the world with the Cold War?

27 GS: Well, it's an interesting situation. At least in my era with the circle of friends  
28 I was with, we were pretty much focused on what we were doing and not necessarily  
29 what the rest of the world was doing. Back in those days you weren't inundated with  
30 media. We didn't spend a lot of time watching TV and we didn't spend a lot of time  
31 listening to the radio, but it was always the top forty radio AM stations that we listened

1 to. So, they were playing music most of the time. I remember seeing bits and pieces. I  
2 remember, obviously, that the Vietnam War, I knew what was going on during that time  
3 frame which would have been the late sixties. There were a number of protests going on  
4 and heard about those. Again, my circle of friends were people that I had always grown  
5 up with, so I knew all of these people and I knew a lot of people that were doing the  
6 testing. I didn't discuss a lot of politics with them. I didn't get into that side of it much at  
7 all. Looking back at it now, I would have to say I probably was very differential in either  
8 direction. I wasn't a gung-ho big supporter. You know, "Go USA, go get involved in  
9 war." I also at the same time, I wasn't one of the people who would hold a sign up and  
10 say, "I'm against the war." And things like that. I was just kind of a typical kid growing  
11 up. I was born involved in my own life and that was anything else that was going on in  
12 the world.

13 JS: Well, backing up a little bit before that, how about the Kennedy assassination?  
14 What are your memories of that?

15 GS: That was an interesting time. I was, at that point delivering newspapers.

16 JS: Okay.

17 GS: I very vividly remember the scenario as it went down. I remember being in  
18 school and hearing about it the time it happened. They played it over the loudspeaker  
19 system. I was in junior high at that point. I can't remember exactly; I was probably in  
20 ninth grade. At any rate, I do remember it was over Thanksgiving because there was  
21 quote on quote "a dance" that weekend and they cancelled it that Friday night. I  
22 obviously delivered the newspapers. In fact, I still have a newspaper from that date. I  
23 remember very vividly there being nothing but the coverage of the Kennedy assassination  
24 for basically almost a week. That's all you heard about, that was everything. Which really  
25 made an impact on how traumatic that whole situation was. You know, that's obviously  
26 one of those things that sticks out in my era growing up. I don't remember specifically  
27 having any discussions with people or any of my peers about the whole scenario and  
28 what went down. I just remember it being a very sad time during that time. It was  
29 something that dominated your life a good period at a time.

30 JS: Alright, when did you graduate from high school? What year was that?

1           GS: 1967, I graduated with the same group of friends that I've gone through all of  
2 school with. My graduating class, I'm trying to remember was about 250 people. There  
3 was some influx because the area was growing at that time so there was some influx of  
4 new people, but there was still that core group of individuals I grew up with. Don't want  
5 to get out of sequence of the questions, but I'll bring up a comment.

6           JS: Okay, sure.

7           GS: I grew up in Southern California. This was during the era of a lot of racial  
8 tension. My circle of friends that I grew up with included all nationalities, all groups of  
9 people. I had black friends, I had Mexican friends. In fact, I had mentioned earlier, one of  
10 my best friends from kindergarten all the way through high school, in fact, he's still a  
11 friend now was Mexican American. I remember very vividly his family. I spent probably  
12 more time growing up at his house than I did at my house. I spent a lot of time over there.  
13 He had a younger brother and an older brother. In fact, I became really good friends with  
14 his older brother, also. He's just a year older than I was. It was my primary circle of  
15 friends. Being a newspaper delivery kid, I worked with all of the kids in the  
16 neighborhood and that included all the racial groups and considered them my friends. I  
17 went to my ten-year high school reunion and of the things I look back at that night and  
18 one of my proudest moments was there was a group of blacks that were, I'm going to say  
19 the rebellious group during high school. They very much segregated themselves from the  
20 rest of the class. There was kind of a mall area in the middle of our high school. It was a  
21 big grassy knoll that they took over. They called it Blood Hill. They used to, every time  
22 between classes, all the blacks would stand on top of this hill and white people were not  
23 allowed to go there. That was their area, their territory and stayed out of it. Well, I knew  
24 all these guys. I went to all the school and they knew me. I never had any trouble. I never  
25 had any problems. I used to talk to them on a regular basis and just never had any issues.  
26 I know there were a lot of fights going on in the school, there was a lot of racial tension at  
27 that point, but it never impacted me in any way, shape, or form. I remember that my tenth  
28 high school reunion two or three of that group came up and said hello. That just, I look  
29 back at it now and think, "That was really neat. That was impressive." You know, it was  
30 different than a lot of other people that I talked to who grew up in the same era that had a  
31 lot of problems. I guess it was just the way I was raised. My parents were not that way, I

1 wasn't that way. I considered them friends and I think they knew that. They considered  
2 me a friend, so I guess I was really, really fortunate growing up in school because I never  
3 had any issues with anything like that and a lot of other people did. And my circle of  
4 friends didn't. That was just kind of a real good shining moment from that era when I  
5 look back on it.

6 JS: Yes sir, okay. Well how about anyone you know from your high school and  
7 from your neighborhoods that you knew? By the time you were, say a senior in high  
8 school, had anyone been drafted and sent to Vietnam by that point? Some of the older  
9 kids?

10 GS: I had a friend that was, again, in my circle of friends, guys I'd grown up with.  
11 When he graduated from high school, he joined the Navy. I can remember hearing  
12 different things. I remember him going to Vietnam and my impression at that point was,  
13 "Okay, he's on a big ship sitting out on a coast some place probably shooting guns at  
14 them, but he's probably not directly involved like the things I see on TV every night." So,  
15 that was just kind of my opinion and one day I heard that he'd gotten hurt. You know,  
16 kind of the running joke at that time was, yeah, he was probably out playing beach ball  
17 on the deck or something. Well, come to find out later he was actually one of the guys  
18 that was out on the small boats cruising the rivers. He was wounded and fortunately it  
19 wasn't real serious, but he eventually got out of the Navy. He was in for four years. He  
20 did wind up getting a Purple Heart. Again, it was remote. It was something that you  
21 didn't focus on. I knew it was there, I knew the scenario, but it didn't impact my life  
22 dramatically. He was really the only person that I was closely associated with that I'd  
23 heard anything about him. When I was working at the gas station there was one other kid  
24 that I'd gone through high school with that I knew and he lived down the street, but I  
25 wasn't real close to him. When I was working at the gas station, he came in one day and  
26 we were talking and I wound up doing something, changing the tire for him or  
27 something. He had mentioned something about he got drafted. So, he said, "Oh, well  
28 when you leaving?" He said, "Well, in a month." And so, we didn't talk about it a lot, but  
29 it was one of those things. Well, about—I guess it was about three months. It must have  
30 been longer than that. It was about six months later I'd read in the newspaper that he had  
31 gotten killed. He wound up going into the Marines in Vietnam and was only there for

1 about two weeks and wound up getting killed. That was one of the people, he wasn't a  
2 real close friend, but he was somebody that I knew. There was one other person that I  
3 remember I had heard that he'd gone over to Vietnam. I didn't know him real well, but I  
4 remember when I drove by his house, they had a big banner out in front that said,  
5 "Welcome Home." I remember he did come home. Those were the only people that I  
6 specifically remember because keep in mind; it was my immediate core group. My  
7 immediate core group pretty much all went in the Army the same day.

8 JS: Well, after you graduated you said you went to work at the gas station at that  
9 point?

10 GS: Correct.

11 JS: Alright, and how long did you work there before you were drafted?

12 GS: When I got out of high school, I tried to make a decision of what I wanted to  
13 do. I decided that I really like mechanical work, that kind of thing. So, I thought, "Well,  
14 I'll go to college and get my auto mechanics degree, my AA Degree and get a job off of  
15 that." I started going to the local community college and doing that while I was working  
16 at the gas station part time. I didn't enjoy college in any way, shape, or form. I enjoyed  
17 working in the auto mechanics portion of it. I spent most of my time doing that. At the  
18 same time, in order to get the degree, you had to take English, you had to take math,  
19 which are the things I didn't particularly care for. So, I spent most of my time working in  
20 the auto shop. In fact, I actually wound up building a car in auto shop during that time  
21 span between there and the gas station. There was a friend who was a teacher that used to  
22 come in the gas station regularly and he told me about this guy that had this old '57 Ford.  
23 He'd sell it real cheap, so I went over and looked at it and it didn't run. So, I went over  
24 and looked at it and wound up buying it for fifty dollars from this guy and towed it back  
25 to the gas station and proceeded to try to get it to run. The first time I got it to turn over  
26 and start you couldn't see the car from the smoke coming out of it. So, I decided, "Well,  
27 maybe I need to rebuild the motor." So, I pulled the engine out of it and rebuilt that  
28 during my college courses. I wound up putting it back in the car and had some real  
29 adventures with that car. When it got done it ran good. In fact, I used that to get back and  
30 forth between Riverside and Ft. Ord when I got drafted. I kept the car up at Ft. Ord on  
31 occasion when they'd let me out until I went to Vietnam and then I sold it to a friend of

1 mine who had it for a few years after that, too. Anyway, that was my adventures of that.  
2 College was a secondary thing to me. I wasn't particularly that interested. I got a  
3 deferment. The first year, I think I got deferments for that, so I didn't have to worry about  
4 the draft. The second year, for about the first half of the year I was okay and then by then  
5 I was just kind of getting burned out on the whole thing and so I let it slide and that's  
6 about the time they caught up with me, so I got drafted.

7 JS: Well, I guess if you could talk a little bit about the process of being drafted  
8 and your reaction to being drafted.

9 GS: I can remember—this was during the hay day. Actually, it was summer, so I  
10 was not going to college at that point. I worked nights at the gas station so my nights after  
11 I got off work as the station closed at ten, my nights then were out cruising and doing the  
12 little fun things you do when you're that age. I'd get home late, late at night or actually  
13 early, early the next morning, go to bed, and then I'd sleep till noon. I can remember my  
14 mom coming in with the envelope and opening the envelope and seeing, "Greetings." I  
15 had, at that point, already gone down and gotten my physical. Now during this whole  
16 process, my mindset, I guess, was, "Okay, I'm too smart for this. I know mechanics; I  
17 know that kind of stuff real well. Besides, I'm just a really skinny kid; I shouldn't have to  
18 worry about getting drafted." I went for my physical, passed that. They put me in the  
19 appropriate class for passing the physical. It wasn't three months later I got the notice and  
20 guess what? So, I kept thinking, "Well, alright, I'm smart. Yeah, I'm getting drafted.  
21 They'll keep me down there and see how smart I am, and I won't have to worry about  
22 going into the infantry. Maybe they'll make me some kind of mechanic or something."  
23 So, when I got down there and got all finished with it, they said, "Okay, well you're  
24 going to go in the Army." So, I got home from that whole process and told my mom what  
25 was going on. She wasn't too happy about it, but that's the way it was going to be. I  
26 didn't have—some people during that era were very much against it, burning draft cards  
27 and all that stuff was real prevalent at that time. I didn't want to do that. I guess it didn't  
28 make that big of a difference to me either way. I just kept thinking I'm not going to have  
29 to go to Vietnam; I'm not going to have to worry about that. I'm smart and they'll get me  
30 down there and they'll figure that all out and I'll wind up being a truck driver or  
31 something. So, that was kind of my mindset. When one of my really close friends at that

1 time, drove me to the local Red Cross office which is where the bus picked you up from.  
2 I went down there that morning and I remember I shaved my moustache off that night  
3 because I didn't want to have to deal with it, you know, having a moustache. I got on the  
4 bus and realized when I got on the bus that probably a third of my graduating class from  
5 high school was on the same bus. So, it was a very interesting trip going up there. Now,  
6 these weren't all my close circle of friends. My close circle of friends, none of them  
7 wound up going into the military. One friend that joined the Air Force reserves and spent  
8 four years doing that, never wound up going into any combat. But my close circle of  
9 friends all got exempt for one reason or another. In fact, one of my close friends, and I  
10 can only assume the story is true, was exempted because he couldn't lift his arms up over  
11 his head. Which I thought was kind of interesting. He was probably the most muscular  
12 and athletic of the whole group. And maybe that wasn't the whole reason, but anyway,  
13 that's what the story was. He couldn't get drafted because he couldn't lift his arms over  
14 his head. Anyway, the bus trip up we wound up going to Ft. Ord, which is up in Central  
15 California or Southern California, Central California all one bus, a pretty rowdy trip  
16 going up there. And then there was the shock of getting off the bus once you got there.  
17 All the drill sergeants coming out and starting the yelling process, it's just the beginning  
18 of the calls. But anyway, that was kind of the adventure of getting drafted. Again, I was  
19 not, either one way or the other way I wasn't real gung-ho about it, I didn't really want to  
20 do it, but at the same time I wasn't going to go to Canada. That was not any realm of  
21 possibility. I just wasn't interested in that. I just kept thinking in the back of my mind that  
22 I'm not going to have to go to Vietnam, I'm smarter than that and it's going to make me a  
23 truck driver or be a mechanic or something because I'm smart.

24 JS: Right, yes sir. Well, I guess the next thing is if you could talk about what basic  
25 was like for you and if you could talk about just the daily routine at basic and what it was  
26 like for you.

27 GS: Basic training at Ft. Ord, it's exactly what Ft. Ord was. It was essentially a  
28 combat training facility. Ft. Ord was originally developed and designed in World War II.  
29 Most of the buildings at Ft. Ord were temporary buildings that were built during World  
30 War II specifically for training. It was a, as I mentioned before, it's on the central coast;  
31 it's right off Monterey Bay which is very much a tourist attraction now. One thing that

1 we always used to joke about during the process of basic training was there's only one  
2 day a week where it's not foggy and that's Sunday. You could almost count on that. The  
3 fog would roll in and you couldn't see your hand from your face. It was that way  
4 everyday. The Army has a tendency to build their facilities in the crummiest places they  
5 could find. And you would think that Monterey would be a beautiful place. Which it is,  
6 but the spot that they put it on is where all the fog goes. So, it was inherently a foggy  
7 place. When we arrived there, they put us into a reception area barracks. Keep in mind  
8 now, these are mainly guys that I went to high school with, so I knew a lot of them. We  
9 were, at that point still in civilian clothes and we were all kind of waiting and going  
10 through the process. They'd get us up early in the morning and take us someplace. You  
11 went through the process of going and getting uniforms to the process of going and  
12 getting paperwork to the process of going and getting your shots. They'd line us up for  
13 formation in the morning, do a roll call and make sure everyone was there and they'd  
14 march us off. I got drafted, interesting, the day before I went into the Army, we had a  
15 party at my mom's house. Towards that evening, we all came inside to watch Neil  
16 Armstrong step on the moon. And the following day is the day I went into the Army.  
17 That's how I remember the dates. At any rate, during the process of all of this being  
18 during the July time frame, you would think it would be nice and warm. Well, it wasn't,  
19 it was foggy and cold most of the time. The people I went through, keeping in mind at  
20 basic training, one of the things they do, the drill sergeants come in and get yelled at all  
21 the time. They're in the process—and the military has a very good way of doing this.  
22 During the process of tearing, you down. That's essentially what they're doing. They  
23 would tear you down and make it to where you don't feel like a human being anymore.  
24 That's the goal from the very beginning. They were doing a pretty good job of it.  
25 Keeping in mind that these are all people that I grew up with, we were all pretty good  
26 friends. There were some that I knew in high school, I knew of them. I knew their names,  
27 I'd say hi to them, but I didn't associate real close to them. Well, when you're going  
28 through a process like this, you become— you try and you search out people that you can  
29 talk to and you look for those common things to try to, I don't want to say get around, but  
30 at least have some communications with someone that you can discuss things with that  
31 you can't talk to a drill sergeant.

1 JS: Yes, sir.

2 GS: So, at any rate, a couple of these guys that I went up with, we would have our  
3 conversations at night in the barracks. One of the days in the very beginning, we had to  
4 do KP (Kitchen Patrol) which pretty much everybody has to do. Peeling potatoes, it was  
5 all good fun stuff. Well, they found out that day that it was my birthday. Now, I went into  
6 the Army and six days later was my birthday. So, we were all in the reception center.  
7 Obviously very gallant at that point. During the process, one of these guys that I'd gone  
8 to high school with, went and stole out of the kitchen, a complete sheet of brownies and  
9 they made that my birthday cake. So, we all ate the brownies and I remember they ditched  
10 the pan underneath the front stairs of that barracks, probably still there. Anyway, that was  
11 my birthday party for that year. I turned twenty on that day. So, I got drafted when I was  
12 nineteen, but I turned twenty right away, so I was actually twenty years old at that point.  
13 Well, it turns out about two or three days later the guy that went and stole all the  
14 brownies disappeared. Come to find out, him and another guy who I had gone to high  
15 school with just couldn't take it. They wound up going up to Canada. So, they deserted  
16 and there was a little bit of that going on at that time. I don't know what their process  
17 was, but again, it was something I just never considered doing. Once we got past the  
18 reception, we got into the actual basic training part of it. It was very difficult, especially  
19 for a young skinny kid who was not athletically inclined to keep up with some of the  
20 others. We had to do our running. We spent a lot of time running, we spent a lot of time  
21 doing pushups, spent a lot of time doing physical PT (Physical Training), it was every  
22 day. During the course of basic training, you learned how to shoot a weapon; you learned  
23 how to take care of yourself. During this whole process you're going through a tearing  
24 down, so you no longer become an individual. Yet at the same time, you're learning that  
25 you have to depend on and be depended on to perform functions. It's hard to do that as a  
26 group. I look back on it now and I see what they were doing during that time frame. Now  
27 I can say how important that was a little further down the road like we were in the  
28 military. It was difficult, extremely difficult. In fact, now I don't know how I ever got  
29 through it, but I did. We all came out of that a much tighter unit, but not so much  
30 individuals. During this whole time frame, in the back of my mind, "Okay, they're going  
31 to figure out I'm a mechanic and I know how to drive. So, they're going to make me

1 some kind of truck driver or something.” Well, the end of basic training came up and  
2 there was a sheet posted on the wall that said what your next duty assignment was going  
3 to be. I went and looked at it and I can’t specifically remember now, but the 11-B  
4 designation was infantry and mine was different. It didn’t say 11-B-10 it said 11-B-20 or  
5 something like that. Well, that’s a good thing because that means we’re not going to be in  
6 the infantry. Well, when we went to advanced infantry training (AIT), guess what, that’s  
7 where I went to and I was considered designated infantry. Again, during all that  
8 processing point through AIT, which is the next step of your basic training. I kept  
9 thinking, “I’m smarter than this. They’re going to figure out I can drive a truck, or I could  
10 be a mechanic. I won’t have to worry about Vietnam.” Well, advanced infantry training is  
11 basically basic training over again in more depth than detail. I wound up taking my AIT  
12 also at Ft. Ord. All I had to do was move lower barracks to the upper barracks and now  
13 we’re in AIT. AIT was, like I mentioned before, just basically a basic training glorified.  
14 We went through the same kinds of scenarios, but since we’d already gone to the base,  
15 we were now a team. We performed in a little different atmosphere in AIT, but more  
16 intense training, more learning, more in-depth details than it was in basic training. Basic  
17 training was for everybody. Everybody went through basic training. The second step of  
18 the process, which was your advanced training if you were going to be a medic, if you  
19 were going to be a truck driver, if you were going to be a mechanic you went to a  
20 different advanced training. Infantry training went to AIT; the rest of the folks went on to  
21 different places to do different types of training. Artillery, whatever it happened to be, but  
22 I was in AIT. I did advanced infantry training. Once we got out of that, graduated to the  
23 last day of AIT. We got our designations for where we were going to go, and they were  
24 posted on the wall in great big letters. I was headed to Vietnam.

25 JS: What was your reaction at that point?

26 GS: (Laughing) The same reaction that I had to everything in the military. I was  
27 smarter than this. They’ll get me over there; they’ll figure out I know how to drive a truck  
28 or I’m a mechanic and that’s what I’ll do. I just I guess I wasn’t being realistic as to  
29 where I was going to be and what I was going to do. I kept thinking, I just kept thinking,  
30 that, you know, there’s no way I’m going to wind up being in a combat situation. I guess  
31 maybe I was just trying to convince myself it wasn’t going to be as bad as it was. It turns

1 out when I got over there; we went to a reception area in Vietnam in Bien Hoa which was  
2 a little bit a ways from Saigon. They ran us through a process there which was basically  
3 familiarization with the customs and the territory. I think they were mainly trying to get  
4 us acclimated to the heat. I got there in December which was a dry season which was, I  
5 guess, fortunate. I got there on the 15<sup>th</sup> of December which was just before Christmas so  
6 it wasn't exactly the best time, but hey, I got drafted just before my birthday so what can  
7 I say. So, it was kind of a festive atmosphere. I guess they had the Christmas lights up  
8 and stuff. You thought a lot about home at that time, but I had celebrated my Christmas  
9 before I left. It was just kind of sad mixed emotions time. I just kept thinking, "Well, I  
10 won't have to go out on the field, they'll figure out something to do with me." We were  
11 there about a week or two and got our assignment orders and they assigned me 1<sup>st</sup> Cav.  
12 So, I wound up going with the 1<sup>st</sup> Calvary Commission. They gave us the orders and they  
13 shipped us off to the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav training headquarters. There they put us through the whole  
14 scenario of, "Okay, this is how you shoot, this is what you shoot at." Air Cav or 1<sup>st</sup>  
15 Calvary Division at that time was air mobile. We were going to fly on helicopters which  
16 was kind of neat. I thought that was kind of cool, but we were going to be flying on  
17 helicopters and they wanted us to know how to repel. So, they had this 50-foot tower with  
18 ropes, and you'd build your own little harness and put a couple D-rings on there. You'd  
19 put yourself under this rope and they'd make you jump off. Well, I never had a fondness  
20 for heights. So, they made us climb up this rope ladder to get to the top and hook up and  
21 jump. I can remember being scared to death, absolutely scared to death, but I did it, I  
22 jumped. I remember when I got to the bottom and I got unhooked there was a sergeant  
23 standing there and he looked at me and said, "Do you want to do it again?" and my  
24 response was, "Are you crazy?" So, this was our first getting accustomed to, at least what  
25 it was going to be like. One of the things I remember with one of the nights I had to pull  
26 guard duty. There was—we were in a pretty secure location. We didn't realize it at the  
27 time, but it was a pretty secure location where we were. They wanted us to get  
28 acclimated, so they had us go out to guard duty. I was walking down this little road and I  
29 can remember as I'm walking along, flares going off because they used illumination  
30 flares a lot there. I remember watch the flares going off and then all of a sudden hearing  
31 something and panicking. Now, since we were inside a fairly large facility, they gave us

1 an M-16, but they wouldn't give us any ammo. I guess they didn't want anybody  
2 shooting anybody.

3 JS: Right.

4 GS: So, we're walking around with no ammo unloaded weapon, but we got a  
5 weapon. Well, I heard noise and didn't know quite what to do. I'm looking trying to  
6 distinguish it and I realized it was a rat. So, just kind of a funny thing that happened. I  
7 remember after I got done with guard duty there wasn't a whole lot to do so I went over  
8 to the movie theater and I watched, "The Green Berets." That's where I remember the  
9 first time, I had ever seen that movie. I remember watching that in Vietnam and the  
10 reactions to the different things that went off in the movie and laughs and things that were  
11 going on. A lot of guys that were there at that point had been out in the field already, I  
12 hadn't. But that was our experience at the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav Training facility. After about two  
13 weeks there I remember having Christmas dinner there and that's all. Typical Christmas  
14 dinner, but it didn't feel like Christmas, it was too hot. It just didn't feel like Christmas to  
15 me at all which I guess was probably a good thing. Then I got the official orders and they  
16 assigned me the unit I was going to be on. They put us on—there was about three or four  
17 of us going to the scene unit that day. So, they loaded us up in a helicopter, flew us out to  
18 an LZ (Landing Zone) or a landing zone which is where the company was at that  
19 particular time. They were on an LZ. We landed on the LZ and walked over to where the  
20 commanding officer was and introduced ourselves and basically pulled in a couple of  
21 sergeants that were the platoons that were going to be assigned to those platoons. That  
22 was about the point that reality set in. And I realized, "I'm not going to be a mechanic.  
23 I'm not going to be driving a truck; I'm going to be a grunt." At that point, we were told,  
24 "Okay guys, guess what, we're going back to Quan Loi and we're going to pull guard  
25 duty at Quan Loi." Everybody's going, "Yeah, yeah." And I'm like, "That sounds  
26 boring." They flew us back, that same day, flew us back to a large, secure place called  
27 Quan Loi which was an airstrip and it had bunkers, permanent bunkers and we pulled  
28 guard duty there over New Years. I can remember New Years Eve sitting on top of a  
29 bunker and everybody's talking about going down to the local bar that they had in Quan  
30 Loi itself and who was going to get to go. I remember going, "Man, you know, I'm the  
31 new guy, why don't you guys go, and I'll pull guard duty." because I didn't care to do

1 that anyway, so I wound up pulling guard duty that night. I remember when they got  
2 back, they said, “Why don’t you go down there for a little bit?” So, I walked up there,  
3 and it was a pretty rowdy place. I walked in the door and took a look around then turned  
4 around and walked back. I went back to full guard duty the rest of the night. But anyway,  
5 that was my first experience in Vietnam.

6 JS: Before really getting into your duties and the unit, your impressions of the  
7 unit, if we could back up for just a moment. You talk about your experience of the actual  
8 trip over there to Vietnam and what that was like for you.

9 GS: A long time sitting in one place. When we left Ft. Ord, they bust us up to  
10 Travis Air Force Base which was about an hour, hour and a half north of Ft. Ord. We all  
11 wound up at Travis Air Force Base. If I remember correctly, that’s where they issued the  
12 uniforms. I maybe wrong on that. I may have been at Ft. Ord, but actually in Oakland  
13 because that’s where we went initially. I think they issued the uniforms in Oakland. We  
14 sat in Oakland for about two days, and they kept lining us up in formation and telling us  
15 that we were going to get a bed. And we’d stand there for three hours and then they’d  
16 decided, “Okay, time to go to the mess hall.” They’d take us to mess hall, we’d eat, we’d  
17 come back, stand in formation. And they’d say, “Okay, we’re going to get you a place  
18 where you could sleep.” And we’d stand there for three hours again. This went on for  
19 quite awhile. They finally got us into what I’d call it a huge warehouse area. We finally  
20 got a bunk, and I can remember laying there and the lights never went off, there was  
21 always people moving, coming, and going. Always people talking and I can remember  
22 laying there with my arm over my eyes trying to sleep. Everybody was just waiting; we  
23 were just waiting. There’s no other way to put it. Everything had been done; we were just  
24 waiting for our turn to get on a plane to go. Eventually we got to the point where they  
25 said, “Okay, it’s time.” They took us up at Travis, up at Travis, sat us down. I’m going to  
26 call it an airport lobby. It was a lot bigger area than that. They sat us all down; we had all  
27 of our jungle fatigues on at that point. We were essentially ready to go. We sat there for  
28 hours waiting for a plane. And finally, the plane landed, and they took us out and it was  
29 Trans World Airlines. It wasn’t TWA, but it was something like that. It was an off airline,  
30 but it was a commercial jetliner. It wasn’t a military jetliner airplane. They loaded us all  
31 on that, everybody’s wearing jungle fatigues; we’re all in green. They actually had

1 stewardesses on the airplane which was kind of unique. I can remember it being very  
2 rowdy initially, but things quieted down after about an hour or two. They flew us into  
3 Hawaii. We landed in Honolulu about the same time the sun was going down. So, we got  
4 to watch the sunset in Hawaii. I remember stepping off the plane in Hawaii and I've  
5 never been there and how hot and humid it was. I thought, "This is kind of neat." It was a  
6 neat place. I can remember walking through a gift shop area and then basically not having  
7 a lot of time there. They loaded all of us back on the plane again. I think all they did was  
8 refuel. And then we took off and we flew again. You know, I can remember at that point  
9 it was dark and the whole thing was dark. You couldn't see out the window, you couldn't  
10 see anything. We landed in Manila and everybody got off the airplane again. I'm sure  
11 they refueled. I can remember sitting inside and looking at the Christmas decorations on  
12 the wall. And thinking, "What a lousy time to go to Vietnam." They got us back on the  
13 plane again and we took off and still dark flew. As we were approaching the coast, they  
14 announced we were getting close to Bien Hoa. We'd be landing in however long it was.  
15 Everybody's looking out the windows and I can remember seeing—now I know what  
16 they were. At that time, I didn't know what they were, but I remember seeing what I  
17 thought looked like bombs going off, bright flashes of light. All up and down the coast  
18 and I'm thinking, "Oh, this doesn't look like it's going to be fun." What it was, was the  
19 illumination rounds they were shooting off. It could have been some artillery rounds  
20 going off, too, but that's basically what it was. I can remember when we landed. The first  
21 thing I remember is stepping off the plane and the smell. You get hit with the humidity. It  
22 was very, very early morning. The sun was just coming up. We essentially flew from  
23 Hawaii to there at nighttime even though it was a twenty-one-hour airplane flight. If I  
24 remember correctly, we lost a day in this process because the date changes. You cross the  
25 International Date Line, so we lost a day in the process. So, as we landed you get this  
26 blast of heat and you get this smell. Essentially what the smell is, is the combination of  
27 the diesel fuels from all the vehicles and the burning of diesel fuel. Later on, I discovered  
28 where that basically comes from. When your latrines were half of a fifty-five-gallon  
29 drum, half filled with diesel fuel. You did your thing in those latrines and then when they  
30 got to the point that they were saturated, they'd light them on fire and burn them, burn it  
31 off and that's what you were smelling was primarily that aroma and then the diesel fuel

1 from the engines running. So, that first impression as you step off the plane is pretty  
2 overwhelming and it's something you never forget. Talking to a number of people who  
3 have gone through the experience, they all pretty much have the same feeling. The  
4 humidity and the stink.

5 JS: Yeah, and most of the other veterans that I've interviewed, that's one of the  
6 main things they mention as well so, yes sir. Alright, well getting back to once you've got  
7 to your unit, if you could talk a little bit about—you said you were based at Quan Loi?

8 GS: The 1<sup>st</sup> Calvary Division at that point was based out of Quan Loi, all the main  
9 headquarters. That area, everyone that's familiar with the Vietnam area, that's the area  
10 that was essentially called the fishhook. It would be northeast of Saigon and very close to  
11 the Cambodian border. So, the area of Quan Loi had a number of different names,  
12 different terms that were used for it. Rocket City was one of them. It was close to An  
13 Loc, An Loc was one of the big battles after the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam. It's one of  
14 the big areas of the North Vietnamese ran into. An Loc was the village that supported  
15 Quan Loi. Quan Loi was, again, it was an airbase. It was essentially a landing strip. Fairly  
16 small landing strip, we thought it was huge, but in reality, it was a very small landing  
17 strip. They couldn't get a whole lot of aircraft on it. There was one four-prop airplane that  
18 sat at the end of the runway that I can vividly remember. They were working on it and it  
19 sat at the very end of the runway which was kind of interesting because there was no  
20 hanger. That particular aircraft, turns out, back in October/November time frame, Quan  
21 Loi got a rocket attack. That aircraft was sitting there getting ready to take off and a  
22 rocket hit it and destroyed part of it. And that's what they were doing was repairing that.  
23 They called that the Queen of Quan Loi and it was there the whole time I remember it  
24 being there. I don't know if they ever got it off the ground again. That was kind of an  
25 interesting spot. When we first got there or when I first got there, the unit was there doing  
26 what was called green-line duty. We were pulling guard duty and we would put into one  
27 segmented area. What Quan Loi essentially was originally, it's surrounded by rubber  
28 rows, rubber plantations. It was French, built by the French. It was actually part of the  
29 Michelin Tire Company's back in the old, old, old days. That's what they get. They had  
30 rubber trees and people went out, processed the rubber out and freeze and that's what  
31 they did there. Quan Loi being built by the French had large mansions that the French

1 owned and lived in. Then the workers basically lived in the An Loc area that went out to  
2 these rubber plantations to get the rubber. There was a rather large elaborate swimming  
3 pool that the military obviously used and got rebuilt. At that point I remember seeing it  
4 going over and looking at it. I never got to use it; it wasn't there long enough. The  
5 headquarters for first cav at that time was all done in temporary tent type buildings that  
6 were constructed throughout these rubber plantations that were within the wire at Quan  
7 Loi. We had civilians that came in through gates to get inside. There was a large artillery  
8 group that worked at one end that fired huge guns. We were all out in the field and we  
9 were on LZ's we saw usually with 1-0-5 Howitzers. Once in awhile, if we were on a  
10 fairly large LZ they'd bring 1-5-5s out. Well, there were 8-inch guns that were sitting in  
11 Quan Loi. There was huge artillery out there. A lot of helicopters coming in and out all  
12 the time and occasionally a plane. A fixed-wing aircraft would land at Quan Loi on a  
13 fairly regular basis. So, it was a busy place, quite a few people there. A number of people  
14 were stationed there on a permanent basis. I wasn't one of those. I was out on tactical  
15 guard duty there a couple times. It was what we considered to be a large facility, but in  
16 reality, it wasn't. It was a fairly small facility, an interesting place, a very interesting  
17 place.

18 JS: So, after pulling guard duty at Quan Loi, at that point were you sent to  
19 different fire base areas or how did you operate?

20 GS: We were at Quan Loi until—I don't have the exact date, but we'll say it was  
21 like the third or fourth of January doing guard duty. And then we were told, "Okay,  
22 saddle up, you're going out in the field." What we did is we got all our equipment ready  
23 and then went down to the main airstrip and they had helicopters, a number of helicopters  
24 there and we would break into groups of about eight people and go out and get on these  
25 helicopters. The helicopters, we were told at that time we were going to the fields, so they  
26 were going to combat assault us in. Obviously, this was a very apprehensive time because  
27 I've never gone through it. I'd been assigned to—fortunately assigned to a platoon that  
28 carried senior platoon leaders. Maybe a sergeant that had been in-country for, at that  
29 time, about eight months and knew what he was doing. He'd been in a small portion of  
30 his unit call the Killer Team. He knew his stuff and knew it very well, so I was extremely  
31 fortunate meeting with him. Turns out he was from Anaheim, a California guy, so we had

1 a pretty good relationship. We could talk quite a bit about home and stuff. He was one of  
2 those people who would sit you down and say, “Okay, here’s how it is.” That was  
3 probably the biggest, most important thing that happened during my time there. So, he  
4 kind of alluded to what we were going to be doing and how we were going to do it and  
5 what we were supposed to do. So, we all got in a helicopter, took off, and we were like  
6 the third group going in. We’d missed the initial part of the combat assault, but we flew  
7 into a fairly large grassy area, keeping in mind it was still dry season so there wasn’t a  
8 whole lot of water. The grass was probably knee high. They landed the helicopter; we  
9 just jumped off and maneuvered our way out to the tree line. This is what he told us to  
10 do. And then we all kind of got down and just kept our eyes open to see if anything was  
11 going to happen. Once the last group got in, the whole company was now in the area. The  
12 whole perimeter where the helicopters had been landing were surrounded by our group.  
13 We got out of a pretty secure area. At that point, all the helicopters were gone.  
14 Everything got quiet and that was my first experience being in the field. We were now in  
15 an area where you couldn’t talk above a whisper. The idea was to keep everything quiet,  
16 no noise. We tried very hard not to get our self grouped into where there’s five or ten  
17 people standing in a group and always trying to keep yourself separate. At that point, we  
18 started out marching. And by marching, it’s entirely different than what you envisioned.  
19 We had a point man, we had a man behind the point man, and then spaced probably—I  
20 won’t use military terms here, probably about six to ten yards apart. The point man would  
21 lead, and everybody would follow it. You’d have a group of about one hundred and ten  
22 people stacked up behind you and following you down the area he was walking. One of  
23 the things we were trying not to do at that point is to use any existing trails. We were  
24 trying to always make our own trail. It turned out to be much better to try to stay off the  
25 trails if we could just because we didn’t want to run into people. So, this was in the  
26 afternoon, later afternoon so we didn’t walk real far. We’ll say maybe a thousand at the  
27 very furthest. Vietnam, being as close to the equator at the time is sun-up sun-down  
28 pretty much stays the same time everyday. It doesn’t vary like it does when you’re in  
29 North America. And so, when the sun comes up, it comes up at about seven o’clock in  
30 the morning. The sun goes down at about six at night and it’s pretty consistent. It doesn’t  
31 change from year to year or during the course of the year. It’s always pretty much the

1 same times. So, what we always used to try to do is we'd stop when there's enough  
2 sunlight to allow yourself to, put out a poncho liner, put out your air mattress, make  
3 yourself a little something to eat with your C-rations, eat your dinner, get yourself set up  
4 for the night before the sun went down. Because once the sun went down—this is  
5 something—Bill Belcher was my platoon sergeant. Bill sat us down and said, “Okay,  
6 here's some things that are going to happen so just be prepared. It's going to get dark. It's  
7 going to get darker than you've ever seen in your whole life. You won't be able to see  
8 your hand from your face and I'm not exaggerating. You won't see anything. You need  
9 to get where you're sleeping, out to this little burrow where we had the claymore mine  
10 clickers and that's where you're going to sit and you're going to stay awake. You're  
11 going to pull guard duty during the night. When you get done and your times up. You're  
12 going to have to get from that point back to the next guy and wake him up. And then  
13 you're going to sit there and wait until he's up and going out to that point. Then, you  
14 have to go back to where you're sleeping, find it, and you can go to sleep. And that's how  
15 it's going to work. And you're not going to fall asleep. No matter what you do you're not  
16 going to fall asleep because you have to wake the next guy up.” He said, “This is what  
17 I'm going to have you do.” He had us take pieces of bamboo and make ourselves a little  
18 trail out to the hole where we're going to have to pull guard duty and then back and then  
19 put a diversion to get us to the next guy who will wake the next guy up so that we could  
20 get to and from where we slept without having to see anything because you couldn't see  
21 anything. And that's the way he set us up the first night. So, sure enough, and I don't  
22 know what time it was, but it was dark. They woke me up and I had to climb out to the  
23 hole and sit there and pull guard duty. Our guard duty when I was actually doing that  
24 portion of it was about an hour. You know, I kept looking at my watch, which fortunately  
25 had illuminated hands so I could see them. When my hour was up, I went over and woke  
26 the next guy up and made sure he went out. I went over and I went back to sleep. The  
27 next morning the sun's coming up and it had just barely broken dawn. I'm laying there,  
28 I'm awake and I'm laying there on my air mattress and all of a sudden, I hear somebody  
29 yelling at the top of their lungs. I couldn't tell what they were yelling, but they were  
30 yelling something. At about that time, a claymore went off and then the trip flares start  
31 going off. I'm grabbing my M-16; Bill's telling everybody what to do because at that

1 time we had about three new guys in our platoon. He's telling everybody what to do and  
2 turns out that one of the other platoons, one of the new guys, a black guy named Rabbit,  
3 nicknamed Rabbit, got lost. And he got out past the trip flares and then decided he was  
4 lot and he sat down. And he waited until the sun came up the next morning. As he's  
5 coming in, he tripped over one of the trip flares wires, set the trip flare off and so he  
6 started yelling, telling him he was a GI (Ground Infantry). Well, one of the guys there  
7 saw the trip flare go off. He could hear somebody yelling but couldn't tell what he was  
8 saying, and he blew the claymore. Fortunately, since he'd fallen down, the claymore went  
9 over his head and missed him. He actually got sent to the rear and never came to the field  
10 again. Not exactly sure what happened, but I'm sure it shook him up bad enough that  
11 that's the reason he never came back, but that was my first night in the field.

12 JS: Right, yes sir. Before getting into more specific memories of combat and  
13 being out in the field, let me ask you this, if you could talk for a few minutes about your  
14 first impressions of the unit. I know you talked about Sergeant Bill Belcher, but about  
15 some of the other guys. You don't have to mention specific names if you don't want to,  
16 but just the dynamic of the unit.

17 GS: Okay, well keeping in mind that when I got drafted, I went over with  
18 basically my high school class. By the time we had divvied up AIT and gotten orders to  
19 go to Vietnam and got assigned to units in Vietnam, that group was dissipated. The  
20 people I went to 1<sup>st</sup> Cav with; I knew one guy. It was somebody I had gone through basic  
21 training with, but we had essentially disbanded at that point. So, when I got to the unit, I  
22 didn't know anybody. These were all new people to me. Having gone from basic in AIT,  
23 I knew what we had to do; I knew what I had to do. And so, I started making sure that I  
24 listened to other people, especially things senior people told me and tried to find and  
25 search out those senior people so I could learn as much as I could about what it was, we  
26 really were going to have to do. I tried to form my own core group of individuals to work  
27 with. Obviously when you're working in a unit, it's essentially a group of one hundred  
28 and some odd people whereas the company and being out in the field and divided as you  
29 are, you don't get to know everyone in the company that well. You get to maybe  
30 recognized faces just because you watched them past you, but you never had a chance to  
31 work or talk with a lot of the people. You get more in tune with your platoon which is a

1 group of roughly thirty people, thirty to thirty-five people and you get to know them  
2 better because you're working closer with them. Platoons were broken down into three  
3 more squad units and these squad units, you get to know because you're working within  
4 your squad on a regular basis. These are the people that you could sleep with, eat with,  
5 play cards with, talk to. You get to know them pretty well. Also, when you're on the  
6 LZ's, when you're out in the field or out in the boonies as I'll say, you work with them.  
7 You're out putting concertina up, women. You're always working with this core group of  
8 about five to ten people. You learn what their hometown is, you learn if they've got  
9 girlfriends, you learn if they've got wives. You get more in tune to them and yes, I had  
10 that group of people that I worked pretty close with. We had one guy that was from  
11 Rhode Island, nickname was TJ. He was an M-60 gunner; he carried the M-60 gunner. I  
12 actually initially was assigned to him as an ammo bearer and the term was hump DM60  
13 rounds. I carried two bandoleers, actually three bandoleers of M-60 rounds kind of in the  
14 Pancho Via style. You know, across your chest kind of thing. Plus, I carried my own M-  
15 16, plus I carried my own backpack. At that time, I think I was carrying four quarts of  
16 water, seven days of rations, an air mattress, poncho liner, and two bandoleers of M-16  
17 rounds, usually three or four cans of soda stuffed in my pockets. That's what we carried.  
18 We'd get up, walk out, and carry that with us every day. That's what everybody did so  
19 we were all common. There weren't people that didn't carry anything, everybody did.  
20 From the commanding officer all the way down. Again, within this small core group of  
21 people you learned to share. There were going to be things that you didn't care for in the  
22 C-rations that you would pass off to somebody else that did like them. They would sit  
23 down with you and, "Hey, I've got an idea. Let's mix this with this." And you'd learn  
24 how to cook. There were certain things you did that within this group to try to learn.  
25 Keeping in mind my mentality, I didn't want to carry M-60 rounds especially after the  
26 first firefight. I'll progress a little bit and I'll keep it within the corps group so that you  
27 understand where I'm coming from. I'm carrying M-60 rounds for an M-60 gunner. We  
28 had been at the field at that point for a month, close to a month. Our platoon had been  
29 assigned to work with the 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Calvary Division riding on tanks. Which that's  
30 kind of cool, all this walking around and stuff and now we get to ride for awhile. The  
31 only problem is, having been in an infantry unit for so long and not wanting noise, the

1 track units didn't care about noise. They were loud. I mean, what are you going to do?  
2 You can't muffle with a diesel engine. They didn't mind the noise. We weren't used to  
3 that at that point, so it was a little bit scary. The other thing was, we're used to being  
4 separated. We're used to being quiet, moving quiet, being separated, not sitting with  
5 other people. When you're riding on tanks, you're making a lot of noise and you're on  
6 that track. You're at one place and you can't get away from it fast enough. Our job was,  
7 if you get hit, disappear. Get off the truck and get out there as fast as you can but get  
8 away from that truck. That was our job. And then the trucks were there to do the damage  
9 that they had to do. We were just riding along for the ride, basically. They took us out  
10 into the rubber plantations for the evening and left us in a spot and then they took off. So,  
11 we're up on this little rise in a rubber plantation which was a lot different than the jungle  
12 because in a rubber plantation you can see. You can look and you can see down the rows  
13 of trees for a significant distance and see movement. You can see somebody else's  
14 around you. Kind of a good thing, but at the same time there's no place to hide. So, we're  
15 there that evening and we're all talking and I'm talking to TJ, 60 gunner, we're just kind  
16 of having a good time. Somebody had a camera so he's taking pictures and during the  
17 course of that evening, the radio operator or our squad radio guy was there. Now, I just  
18 happened to pick up his radio pack and strap it on my back and I'm sitting there playing  
19 the radio. The guy that had the camera snapped a picture. I have that picture and, in fact,  
20 in the picture you can see TJ standing next to me. So, we were just kind of taking it easy,  
21 having a good time that evening. As the sun went down that night and we're all doing  
22 guard duty and stuff, there was a fire and it was quite a ways away from us, but there was  
23 a fire down in this ravine. They thought, "Well maybe it's from artillery or something."  
24 Because we didn't hear anybody. The next morning, the sun's coming up. Our Kit Carson  
25 Scout who was a Montagnard which is one of the indigenous tribe members in Vietnam,  
26 who was Vietnamese and we used him as an interpreter. He went outside the perimeter to  
27 do his business in the morning and got outside the perimeter and as he's sitting there, he  
28 see's movement out in front of him and see's something in black which isn't good. So, he  
29 comes running back in as fast as he can come in yelling, "There's gooks down the hill,  
30 there's gooks down the hill." And about that time, everything broke loose. So, I'm there  
31 and Bill's in the area. He starts yelling at me because this is the first firefight that I've

1 been in. He's yelling at me, "Get the 60 amo out to TJ. Get the 60 ammo out to TJ."  
2 Well, they caught us at such a point. I'm probably ten, twenty meters away from where  
3 my M-60 rounds are. So, I had to crawl out to get the M-60 rounds and bring them back  
4 to the gunner. So, I get the 60 rounds back to gunner and about the time we're getting  
5 loaded up and getting ready to shoot, we start hearing people yelling, "Stop, hold fire,  
6 hold your fire. Friendlies, Friendlies, hold your fire." So, everything kind of stops and  
7 then it comes back to us that there was a group of popular forces which were the  
8 Vietnamese Friendlies that were down the hill from us. Only problem was, nobody had  
9 communicated this. So, we didn't know they were there, they didn't know we were there.  
10 So, they just happened to see us, and we happened to see them, and we all started  
11 shooting at each other. Fortunately, nobody got hurt, but at the end of this, I can  
12 remember standing up and looking at the rubber trees in my immediate area and seeing  
13 holes and rubber coming out of the holes about three feet up off the ground. So, for my  
14 experience I learned you need to get down as low as you can get. Fortunately, nobody got  
15 hurt. That was a good thing. That was the day that I decided that maybe carrying M-60  
16 rounds wasn't the best job in the world. That maybe that radio had some good qualities to  
17 it. Maybe there was a reason I should be doing that instead. So, I made my decision that  
18 day I'm going to carry out radio. That's what changed in Vietnam from then on out. As I  
19 said, "Hey, I want to do this." Everybody said, "You're nuts cause they're going to shoot  
20 the radio guy first because that big old antenna's sticking up on the radio." I said, "Yeah,  
21 but the radio guys don't have to walk around as much. And if there's a firefight, we don't  
22 have to get involved moving around. We just sit down with the radio and talk." So  
23 anyway, that's what I wound up changing to officially that day. I was going to be a radio  
24 operator.

25 JS: Let me ask you about given it was this late in the war, '69 and going into '70,  
26 what was morale like among the guys?

27 GS: This was towards the end of—it was after the major battles; it was after the  
28 Tet Offensive which is kind of where the turning point was if you go through the history  
29 books. Tet Offensive happened over a year earlier than when I was there. Basically, at  
30 that point the popularity of the war went in the toilet, everybody was against it. All the  
31 protests had started. Things were not the easiest on soldiers at that point even though I

1 always look at here; I'm just doing my job. The moral in our group, the morale within the  
2 division and the company I was in was good. We all kind of mutually came to an  
3 unspoken agreement at that point that we're here, we're doing this, and somehow, we all  
4 got to get home. And so, we're going to do what we have to do to make that happen. We  
5 obviously, at that point, we're not—we didn't want to make contact, we didn't want to go  
6 out and find them. Even though that was what we did. I mean, we went out in the field,  
7 we're actively searching. Our whole concept was to try to avoid contact as best as we  
8 could. I think we all did a pretty good job of that. These are very, very difficult situations.  
9 I mean, the worst, lowest position you could possibly get within the military is being a  
10 grunt. That's what we were, we were grunts. We were the low life. We were the guys  
11 who were out in the field getting shot at daily and we just all came to the basic concept  
12 that we got to get out of this. We got to do what we've got to do and do it to the best of  
13 our ability, but we have to work together because if we don't, you know, people are  
14 going to get hurt. The idea was to try to eliminate that. We did the best we possible could  
15 make sure that the guy on either side of us was going to come home. That's the way we  
16 worked together and as far as a morale standpoint; I think that's what kept us going. I  
17 think that's what made it work for us. During television and stuff from a lot of  
18 documentaries, you see all the drug problems and stuff. Yes, there were drugs there. First  
19 wanted to tell you that, there were. The primary drug at that point that I ever saw was  
20 marijuana. There was significant use, I'm going to say, of marijuana on the LZ's. Never  
21 ever did I see it in the field, it just wasn't done. And that was a mutual agreement  
22 amongst everybody. When you're in the fields you don't do that. When you get back on  
23 the LZ's and you're not on guard duty, you do what you do. The officers knew it, they  
24 knew it. They were aware of it. I'm not going to say that they wouldn't have done  
25 something if it was done in front of them, but they avoided situations where they would  
26 be exposed to it. And so, it was there, but I never saw any heavy drug use, ever, while I  
27 was there. I saw it after, I saw it when I got home, but I never saw it when I was there.  
28 I'm sure on the larger basis when you got into—it may have been in Quan Loi even  
29 though I never saw it, but I think maybe in the secure areas it was more prevalent. Front  
30 infantry units at that point, we had reasonable morale. Drug use was none in the field, at

1 least that I ever saw. On the LZ's yeah, marijuana was around, but that was about it.  
2 From the time that we were there, morale was pretty good for the unit I was in.

3 JS: You mentioned the drug issue, where there any racial tensions at the time?

4 GS: It was interesting because there were a number of blacks in our unit, and they  
5 tended to hang together. I'm going to say it was more because of interests. They liked  
6 their Motown music where, I think, the white guys liked other, and you know, rock and  
7 roll more. They had a tendency to congregate together when we were on the LZ's. When  
8 we were on the field, we were all one. I will tell you now, I never saw anything that I  
9 saw, and anyway, that would indicate to me that there were any racial tensions. I never  
10 saw any fights. I can't say I saw any harsh words. I just didn't see it. You know, maybe I  
11 was oblivious to it, but I don't think I was. I think I was pretty much in tune to it. I mean,  
12 we slept together, we ate together, we maybe didn't listen to the same music together, but  
13 we were around, they were around. We didn't all socialize or mix in the same group, but  
14 yet at the same time I know when we were out in the field that we were in situations, I  
15 never saw anything that would give me any indication at all that there was any racial  
16 tension.

17 JS: Okay, how about other tensions such as lifers versus draftees? Were there any  
18 problems there?

19 GS: There were a few individuals that were; I'm going to say were more isolated.

20 JS: Okay.

21 GS: Maybe kind of wanted to do things their own way. It's kind of hard to  
22 describe. They very much sat off on their own. Somebody may say, "Okay, you're going  
23 to pull guard duty from ten to midnight tonight." They'd go, "Oh man, I don't want to do  
24 that." They had a tendency to get weeded out pretty quick. In a few cases, I just recollect,  
25 we might have an individual on the unit that didn't get along with a platoon sergeant for  
26 whatever reason. They normally got transferred maybe to another platoon, maybe out of  
27 the company. They tried to minimize that and usually they got excluded pretty quick. So,  
28 we didn't have a lot of that, but there were a few instances I could think of where people  
29 with the unit seemed to have an attitude then they weren't anymore. That's just kind of  
30 the way it went down, and it usually happened pretty quick. We had a pretty good group  
31 of guys. We got a pretty strong core group of people that I was with. We went through a

1 lot of bad times. We went through a lot of stuff. It probably brought us together pretty  
2 close. I would hope so anyway. It's interesting because you go through these scenarios  
3 when you go through these situations with people on a day in and day out basis, you  
4 know, you depend on them for your life, and they depend on you for their life. Then  
5 when you get out of that situation, extracted from it, you just go on with your life and you  
6 don't dwell on it. There's a lot of people that I was in that situation with when I was there  
7 that I was very close with at the time, but I don't know where they live now. I haven't  
8 had contact with them. I have a few that I have, but for the most part they just kind of  
9 melted back into civilian life after they got out. But yeah, there were a few individuals  
10 that didn't stay in the company very long just because of the way they wouldn't melt in  
11 with everybody else.

12 JS: Okay, well getting back to this first firefight that you mentioned, I know you  
13 talked about working—well first of all, how long have you been in-country when this  
14 firefight took place?

15 GS: I was officially with the unit, would have been in January, the very first part  
16 of January. Actually, December 28<sup>th</sup> was the day I was officially assigned to the unit. The  
17 first firefight, the first actual situation that I got into would have been in February and  
18 that's when we were out working with the track unit. So, it had been a little over a month.  
19 And during the course of that month, we had been at Quan Loi until, oh, probably the end  
20 of the first week of January. I think it was around the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> of January where they  
21 went out in the field for the first time but didn't see any action as per say until February  
22 time frame which is on the flight with the popular forces. After that particular incident,  
23 nothing really happened. We just spent a lot of time moving around out in the jungle. We  
24 found a lot of stuff, found a lot of bunkers, found some ammunition. We know we heard  
25 noises. We knew they were around, but we never really got into a contact or a firefight  
26 well into March. During that time frame I can remember vividly all the platoon sergeants  
27 and the platoon leaders up to the command officer going, "This isn't good, this isn't  
28 good. We're getting way too relaxed. We're getting too lackadaisical on how we're doing  
29 things and something's going to happen, but when it does, it's going to be bad." When  
30 you get new people coming in on a regular basis who don't know how to react, nobody  
31 really knows for sure what they're going to do when you get into contact until it happens.

1 You don't know how people are going to react to things that you're depending on them to  
2 do things in an appropriate manner. If nothing happened, you don't always are going to  
3 do. So that time span of time when nothing was actually happening was scary. And it  
4 shook up a lot of people that had been in country for awhile because they knew at some  
5 point something was going to happen. And when it did, they weren't exactly sure how  
6 people were going to react. So, it made for a really tense situation until things started  
7 coming down. And then when it did, we did good, we did really well. Back to the senior  
8 people that were there at that time. They did a good job of making sure people  
9 understood when something happened, what they were supposed to do, and how they  
10 were supposed to do it. Now, did they know they were going to do it? No, they had no  
11 idea, but they had gone through this enough times with everybody and had people on  
12 their toes good enough. So, when it did finally come to intuition and things happened,  
13 everybody knew what to do and they did a good job at doing it.

14 JS: Alright, well, you mentioned in that first, I guess, that first incidental fire  
15 between your unit—between your platoon and the PFs (Permanent Force). You  
16 mentioned working with a Kit Carson Scout. Did you guys always go out in the field with  
17 a Kit Carson Scout?

18 GS: Usually each platoon had their own. Ours was, like I'd mentioned, was a  
19 Montagnard, one of the tribal people named Den. Den was kind of an interesting  
20 character. A little short guy, spoke good English. I mean, he had pretty good dialective  
21 English and had been in the military or had been in the Army at that point for a few years,  
22 had been through a number of combat situations. There were people within our company  
23 that had been through combat situations with him and learned to trust him. And that was  
24 a big thing. That was really a big thing. Now, as I progressed and I wound up going  
25 through the ranks of operated radios, I wound up being the battalion RTO (Radio  
26 Telephone Operator) or the battalion radio operator for the company. So, I worked really  
27 close with the main CP (Command Post) and I got to know most everybody being in that  
28 position. I was no longer with just 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon. I had to work with all the platoons. And so,  
29 I got to know all their Kit Carson Scouts a little bit. There were a couple of them—there  
30 was one Kit Carson Scout that we had that was new. He'd just gotten transferred in and I  
31 can remember there being conversations about him. People didn't trust him. He made a

1 lot of noise which is not a good thing. And he would make noise at very inopportune  
2 times. I can remember the platoon sergeant making the comment that he had gone to him  
3 once already and told him that he was in a position now he could no longer guarantee his  
4 safety. That if he didn't quit making noise and keep things quiet, that he couldn't  
5 guarantee somebody, was going to shoot him. I can remember that conversation going  
6 down and thinking, "That's not a good thing. Maybe we need to get rid of him." He got  
7 transferred out of the unit pretty quick, but that was a pretty common scenario because  
8 you had to depend on everybody. You couldn't let just one individual do what they felt  
9 like doing. You had to depend on everybody. If somebody elected on their own not to go  
10 under those guidelines, they usually weren't there very long. And that included the Kit  
11 Carson Scouts. An interesting thing, I want to go back and talk about Den for a second.  
12 We were all sitting in a group on night and one of the guys had gotten some photos.  
13 Keeping in mind, it's December and Christmas time. He got some pictures of his family's  
14 Christmas time. One of the photos was taken outside of his house. He lived on the East  
15 Coast and there was snow, a significant amount of snow. We're all looking at this picture  
16 and he's passing him around, you know, Den was sitting right there so he passed him this  
17 picture. Den looked at it and handed it to the next guy and then he reached over and took  
18 it back up and looked at it again. He kept looking at this picture and he had a real  
19 quizzical look on his face. Somebody asked him, "What are you looking at in the  
20 picture?" and he says, "What's the white stuff, what's all the white?" He looked at the  
21 picture, "That's snow." He goes, "What's snow?" and we're all sitting there and we're all  
22 laughing. Somebody looked at him and said, "You know the ice?" Because we'd get a  
23 block of ice when they'd do a log day, and we'd get supplies. They'd bring us out a block  
24 of ice and we'd take the ice and spin our coke cans, the soda cans on top to cool the soda  
25 down because everything was hot. You cooled down the soda and you could have a cold  
26 soda. So, we were trying to explain to him, "If you took that ice and you shaved it and  
27 take a knife and scrape it and it makes the white powder, that's like snow." But for the  
28 life of him could not figure out how it could get cold enough to do that. And it was just a  
29 very, very interesting conversation with someone that never seen snow, had no concept  
30 for snow, and it had never been in an environment where it could even reasonably come  
31 close to snowing. You could understand how that could be. So, it just kind of showed you

1 what you were dealing with. Like I say, Den was a family member. He wound up getting  
2 wounded, we got attacked on an LZ one time and he wound up getting wounded, but he  
3 came back to the unit and he liked working with us. He really liked working with the  
4 group of people he was working with. He was one of the good ones; he was a good Kit  
5 Carson Scout. And a couple others were okay, but he was the best one they had.

6 JS: Alright, one more question about that first, that incidental firefight. You  
7 mentioned the rubber coming out of the trees about three feet up. I've read in some of the  
8 books, and I've heard some people say that if because the French still owned a lot of the  
9 rubber plantations, if the Americans damaged the rubber trees that the unit or at least the  
10 Army would have to pay for those. Did you know if there was any truth to that?

11 GS: Yeah, I never heard anything. I can tell you for a fact in Quan Loi the  
12 mansions that were outside the wire at Quan Loi had gaping holes on the roofs from who  
13 knows, artillery rounds, rockets, whatever. They weren't destroyed but they were  
14 damaged pretty heavily. I had heard, and I don't know this for a fact, but I had heard that  
15 they were working some of the rubber plantations. Now, where we were and the  
16 directions that we were given, there were two basic corps operating modes. One  
17 operating mode was in a no fire zone. A no-fire zone basically meant if you saw someone  
18 and they weren't carrying a weapon or had a weapon that they were pointing at you, you  
19 had to determine if they were friendly or foe. And you did that by going up and asking  
20 for a card or identification. You went through a process. I never did that. We were never  
21 in that situation. We were always in what was called a free-fire zone. Free-fire zone  
22 meant if it moves you shot it. And so, where we were at any given point in time, even  
23 within those rubber plantations, was always a free-fire zone. So, my assumption is, when  
24 you're in a free-fire zone, I mean there's going to be collateral damage no matter what  
25 you do. If you're shooting, you're going to hit something. So, I never heard anything  
26 about that. I will agree that I've heard after the fact that that was true, that there was  
27 probably some of that, that went on. I couldn't tell you for a fact if it did in the given  
28 scenario we were in that day or not. The rubber plantations were rough. They, at one time  
29 or another had been cleaned out because the jungle grows back pretty fast. There were  
30 grasses between the trees that stood probably knee high, maybe a little higher than that,  
31 but the trees didn't look like they'd been processed too recently. I mean, you could see a

1 groove in them which is the way they do it, but the grooves were kind of overgrown. We  
2 never saw anybody out there so I can't say that they were. My presumption is that they  
3 weren't, but I don't know that for a fact. I do know that that was a huge Michelin rubber  
4 plantation that the French built, but I can't say that it was active at that point. It was that  
5 point at that particular time that we were there anyway; there was a lot of combat activity  
6 taking place. Can I take a break for a second?

7 JS: Sure, absolutely.

8 GS: Okay, let me grab some water and I'll be back in just a second.

9 JS: Sure, no problem.

10 GS: Thank you, Jason. Sorry about that.

11 JS: Not a problem, not a problem at all. Now, I wanted to ask you, you mentioned  
12 after this first incidental firefight that things were fairly quiet for awhile. How long was it  
13 before you actually came into an actual firefight with the enemy and if you could talk a  
14 little bit about that first firefight?

15 GS: Okay, a little bit of my own personal transition during that time to because it  
16 does make a difference on the scenarios as they went down. As I'd mentioned earlier, it  
17 would have been February timeframe. I made the decision that I didn't like humping M-  
18 60 rounds. That probably wasn't the best job for me. So, I made a decision at that time  
19 that time that I wanted to be a radio operator. Now, in the course of basic training and  
20 AIT, that's one of the things that they train you on. What they do is basically give you the  
21 alphabet as it's presented through a radio operator. We use a different language, but they  
22 give you that in basic training and when we did that, I didn't care for it. It didn't strike  
23 me as something that would be fun to do. When I got in Vietnam, things changed pretty  
24 quick. You start looking for, "Okay, what could I do that might be a little bit safer?" and  
25 Yeah, everybody kind of talked about the radio operator having that big antenna and  
26 yeah, you have to carry more weight on your back. The first thing I noticed was that the  
27 radio operator has always seemed to be sitting down. That's kind of cool. They don't  
28 have to get up and walk around. The other thing was, they didn't go on patrols. Once you  
29 got to the level of a CP or the command post radio operator, you didn't go out on patrols.  
30 You only moved with the company. So, I thought, "That's what I want to do. I need to  
31 get to that level. Somehow, I need to get up there. So, I started out as a squad radio

1 operator. I don't think I did that more than a week. And they made me the platoon radio  
2 operator. And it turns out that the platoon radio operator they had moved into the main  
3 CP, who now became the company radio operator. So, my thought was, "Alright, I'm  
4 going to try to follow him, follow his guidance and figure out what he does. It turns out  
5 he wound up being probably one of the closest friends I had the whole time in Vietnam.  
6 So, he kind of gave me some guidance as to, "Okay, here's what you need to do and how  
7 you need to do it." So, I wound up being platoon radio operator and did that for maybe,  
8 maybe a month. Keeping in mind, during this timeframe, we were not in contact. We  
9 were just walking around looking for things, but never really came into contact with the  
10 enemy. So, during that course of time, I thought, "You know, this is a pretty cool job. I'm  
11 kind of floating along. You know, this is interesting, different." I still had to go out on  
12 patrols because I'm still at the platoon level, but it's not quite as bad as it was. Well then,  
13 Lefty who was the guy I was talking about earlier that wound up being one of my best  
14 friends. He wound up going into the battalion radio operator which left the company  
15 radio operator position open. And I had done this long enough now that they knew that I  
16 knew how to operate the radio well. So, they moved me into the company radio operator  
17 position. So now, I'm in with the CP. Which means I don't have to go out on patrols  
18 anymore, I've worked with the company, I sit most of the day and all I do is I listen to the  
19 platoon. The way the system worked was the squad radio operators communicated with  
20 the company— no, I'm sorry, with the platoon radio operator communicated with the  
21 company radio operator and the company operator worked with the battalion radio  
22 operator. So, I'm now on the position of being the company radio operator and getting all  
23 the interworking of coordinating who's going to do what, when they're going to do it,  
24 that kind of thing. Still keeping in mind, we hadn't been in a true firefight yet. We were  
25 sitting on top of a hill with the main CP. One of the platoons was out doing a patrol. And  
26 all of a sudden off from the distance you could hear a "pop, pop, pop, pop, pop." Which  
27 is first sounds of an AK. This is the first time I'd ever heard an AK go off. Very  
28 distinctive different sound. And so, I knew what was happening. About that time the  
29 platoon radio operator called in and said, "We're in contact." And by then everything's  
30 going off. You could hear grenade launchers pop and you can hear M-16s going off. I  
31 mean, they're into the firefight. Well, the battalion radio operator's responsibility is he's

1 the one that calls in airstrikes. He's the one that calls in airstrikes. He's the one that  
2 coordinates all the overhead stuff. The company radio operator is responsible for making  
3 sure the communications channel is open between the company commander and platoon  
4 themselves and coordinating those efforts to make sure that they're being supported from  
5 the company level. So, I'm having radio conversations and making this happen between  
6 the company and the battalion radio operator who was my good friend and making sure  
7 that the airstrikes were coming in. My first firefight was basically I never fired the M-16.  
8 I'm laying flat on the ground, but I'm talking on the radio. And so, I realized at that point  
9 this is what I want to do because it's a much safer position to be in and I like the idea that  
10 I had control and I knew what was going on. I knew everything that was going on. Which  
11 when you're in a platoon level or a squad level, you don't know. You have no idea what  
12 the other guys are doing. You're only concerned with that group of five to ten to fifteen  
13 people you're working with. You don't know what the rest of the company's doing. And  
14 I was at a level now where I knew everything that was going on. So, I thought, "This is  
15 me, this is fun." You know, as much fun as you can have, but at least its stuff going on.  
16 We went through the first firefight and it only lasted maybe, maybe at the very most two  
17 minutes and they broke contact. Nothing happened, nobody got hurt, but they broke  
18 contact. I can remember that evening. My former platoon sergeant came over to me, sat  
19 down and said, "Well, you weren't in the middle of it, but now you know what it sounds  
20 like." He said, "Get used to it." I just said, "Yeah, I understand what you're saying. Yes,  
21 it's scary." So, it was I'm going to say, two, maybe three days later we were in a long  
22 line. The whole company was moving and we're going down an adjacent trail, making  
23 our own trail. All of a sudden, I get a call back on the radio in a very hush tone. I hear,  
24 "We're stopping. There's a machine set up in the middle of the trail pointing down the  
25 trail towards us, but there's nobody around." So, I get the company commander and he's  
26 going, "Okay, well what do you see, what's around?" I said, "There's nobody around.  
27 Wait, wait, wait." All of a sudden you hear the M-16s light up. And then the AKs fire up  
28 and then all of a sudden everything's breaking loose. Well, what had happened is, we had  
29 walked into a small bunker complex. They had set up—the enemy had set up a machine  
30 gun in the middle of a trail pointing down a trail towards where we were counting. There  
31 was nobody there. Well, what had happened is the two guys that were supposed to be

1 manning the machine gun had walked back into the bunker complex to get something to  
2 eat and were walking back up the trail and points a machine gun. Our point man saw  
3 them coming up the trail and opened up on them. They never got their AKs off their  
4 shoulders. He caught him in the wide open. Then there were a bunch of other North  
5 Vietnamese. They were actually North Vietnamese that were around that same bunker  
6 complex that opened up on us. Well, it turns out that there was a sniper that was on the  
7 other side that had been across from where the machine gun was. He had spotted us then  
8 when we opened up and he sat up in this tree taking pot shots. He got one of our guys and  
9 that's about the time that we turned around and I turned around to the battalion radio  
10 operator and said, "We need air support." So, he called in and originally called in cobras  
11 and they came in and we still hadn't broken contact. They got there real quick. They got  
12 there within three minutes, three to four minutes. They bounced them down right away.  
13 They got out there, opened up. It still wasn't breaking contact, so he got back on the radio  
14 again and said, "Okay, we're still in contact, we need jets." So, they brought out some  
15 jets that had two hundred- and fifty-pound bombs. They brought out a couple of jets that  
16 had napalm. They dropped a couple of bombs and still had contact and they came in and  
17 hit one strafe with napalm and broke contact immediately. So, we wound up—two guys  
18 got wounded, one guy got killed on our side. We found probably half a dozen blood trails  
19 and we know we got two for sure. We termed it a crispy critter. We found one the napalm  
20 got. So, we definitely had three kills. I think they gave us a total of about ten kills out of  
21 it based off the blood trails. That was the first true honest to god firefight. I think the  
22 thing that sticks in my mind the very most about that was I was on the company radio and  
23 was calling in the helicopters after the firefight. We had gotten to a spot where they could  
24 land some helicopters. They had brought the body of the soldier that got killed on our  
25 side. They brought him in along with guys going back for them, one of the guys that got  
26 wounded. They had him wrapped in a poncho liner with a couple of men with poles on  
27 each side to carry him. When the helicopter was coming in, there was only me and two  
28 other people standing there, but two guys couldn't pick them up on their own to get him  
29 on the helicopter. So, I had to go over, put the radio down, and I had to help him load him  
30 on the helicopter. And that sticks in my mind. That was a bad day, a very bad day.  
31 Anyway, when I got done, I came back and sat down and the helicopter pilot called back

1 on the radio and said, “Yeah, it doesn’t look like you guys had a very good day today.” It  
2 wasn’t a good day.

3 JS: From what you could tell, about what size enemy unit, about how big was the  
4 enemy unit you’d run into?

5 GS: Typically, the groups that we ran into were—keeping in mind, we were  
6 working on what was called the Sturgis Jungle Trail, which is part of the main supply  
7 routes, part of the main Ho Chi Minh Trail that came down as it crossed in from  
8 Cambodia in the fishhook region.

9 JS: Okay.

10 GS: What we typically ran into were groups of people within the supply groups  
11 that were running supplies up and down the trail. They weren’t large units. I’m going to  
12 say on an average we ran into groups of between three and ten individuals. Most of what  
13 we would find after the firefight was supplies. Ammo supplies, bicycles, rice, just any  
14 kind of typical supply that you could think of that they would need. So, I’m sure what we  
15 were primarily running into were small supply units. Never any large units that we saw.  
16 We heard them, we knew that we were there, but we never physically got into contact  
17 with them. We tried desperately to avoid those kinds of contacts. When we—I’m sure  
18 we’ll get into this later, but when we went into Cambodia, we were originally set up five  
19 hundred meters from the Cambodian border on an LZ two days before we were going to  
20 go in. We knew we were going in. We set up on this LZ and we were building the LZ, so  
21 it was brand new. It made a lot of noise, a lot of helicopters coming and going. Not a real  
22 good time to be there, but, you know, that’s what we were doing. And at night we could  
23 sit on this—we were on a hill. We could sit on this rise and see lights across the border  
24 and hear the trucks. So, you know, they were moving stuff out. They were trying to get as  
25 much out as they could get out because they knew we were coming, too. There was a lot  
26 of noise and a lot of racket and that’s what we were trying to avoid, but yet that’s where  
27 we knew we were going. Most of the units we dealt with, initially were small units, very  
28 small units. The whole time I was there, that’s what we dealt with. A lot of AK fire, some  
29 RPG (Rocket-propelled grenade) rounds, but not anything major, major, not day long  
30 battles or anything like that. Most of the firefights we were in lasted maybe five minutes,  
31 maybe ten, maybe fifteen at the very most.

1 JS: Well, I hate to stop you here, but my boss just knocked on the door and told  
2 me he's got an interview in about five minutes.

3 GS: My voice is going to give out.

4 JS: Sure, sure.

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## Interview with Gordon Swenson

Session [2] of [3]

Date 5 February 2010

1 Jason Stewart: This is Jason Stewart with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech  
2 University continuing an Oral History Interview with Mr. Gordon Swenson. Today is  
3 February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas in the Special Collections Library on the  
4 campus of Texas Tech and Mr. Swenson is joining me by phone from California, once  
5 again. Okay, last time when we left off, we were just talking about your battalion's first  
6 real firefight with the enemy. Today I was wondering if we could talk a bit in more  
7 general terms to begin with about the North Vietnamese and your impressions of them.

8 Gordon Swenson: Okay, primarily when I was there with the group I was with,  
9 we didn't see any of the quote on quote "Viet Cong". All of our firefight's battles were  
10 fought more with the North Vietnamese Army. They were very—I won't use the term  
11 aggressive, but they were very, very persistent. They were trained fairly well. At least the  
12 individuals that we came up against, they were fairly aggressive. They had a tendency to  
13 do more guerilla tactics. The groups that we fought were smaller groups. We'd go into  
14 contact, usually three, maybe up to ten individuals. No large-sized groups, but a lot of  
15 small sized groups. Most of the groups that we would go up against were primarily the  
16 resupply groups. People who were carrying supplies up and down the Ho Chi Minh Trail  
17 out of Cambodia and into Vietnam. We'd hit elements of them. Supply groups consisted of  
18 primarily carriers. People that would load up the bicycles or pushing bicycles up and  
19 down the trails and cooks and just broken up groups of people. Not large, not what we  
20 consider a regular army type group, but groups of individuals. They were all well  
21 uniformed. They all had their helmets and rifles and typical NVA (North Vietnamese  
22 Army) garb and they were generally fairly clean. No rag tagged, not torn. The clothing  
23 was fairly clean, and they were primarily well shaven, fresh hair cuts. They were a fairly  
24 organized group, but it was small bands is what we saw. Again, the reiterate, they were  
25 fairly persistent. They seemed to be fairly well trained, and it didn't give in easy. We did  
26 have a few situations where we would get into contacts or we would be ready to make  
27 into move aggressively towards the enemy. They would get word of this or see that we  
28 were moving into the area. And we would, on occasion, have them come in and  
29 surrender. For the most part, they were out in the jungle and stayed fairly well hidden and

1 I'm sure there were a lot of times they saw us, but we never saw them, and they just  
2 wanted to avoid contact because it was such a small group and we were a company of  
3 roughly one hundred, one hundred and ten people. They were kind of doing the same  
4 thing we were doing. They were just walking around just trying to stay out of contact, but  
5 if we did see each other than we opened up.

6 JS: You mentioned them being fairly well hidden. Were they using things like  
7 tunnels? Or what sort of camouflage and things would they use to conceal themselves?

8 GS: The areas that we were in were relatively thick jungle. There were a number  
9 of small bunkers. Occasionally we'd come into a bunker complex that would have eight  
10 to ten of these bunkers dug out which could easily conceal up to ten people in each  
11 bunker. They each had openings in the front where they could conceal a machine gun or a  
12 rifle. That was a fairly common tactic. I didn't see a lot of tunnels. That wasn't the  
13 common thing where we were. In fact, I can't specifically remember ever seeing what I  
14 would call a tunnel complex. A lot of bunkers, I saw those on a very regular basis—  
15 concealed bunker type situations. When we got into Cambodia—I don't want to go too  
16 far ahead, but when we got into Cambodia things changed pretty dramatically at that  
17 point. We were finding very, very large bunker complexes and much more storage areas,  
18 large, covered areas where rice could be stored or whatever the supplies were. We found  
19 one ammo cache that was a three-layer deep, huge ammo stash. They were excellent at  
20 camouflage and excellent at digging. Even though, again, we didn't see a lot of tunnels. I  
21 think that had to do with the clay that we were around that collapsed fairly easy. Bunkers  
22 were pretty easy to dig out and that seemed to be their common way of doing things.

23 JS: Getting back to that first firefight for just a second. What was the timeline on  
24 that? When did that one occur do you know?

25 GS: It might have been in February.

26 JS: In February.

27 GS: February of 1970.

28 JS: Okay, well in contrast to the North Vietnamese, I know you mentioned  
29 working with Kit Carson Scouts, but did you ever work with any ARVN (Army of the  
30 Republic of Vietnam) units?

1           GS: No, like I say, we got in our first firefight with them. That was actually  
2 Populus enforcements, but we didn't see—I always use the terminology. You know, you  
3 hear all those stories about going into Saigon and going into the large cities and stuff. The  
4 Whole time I was there, the only thing I would even remotely come close to saying that  
5 was a city was actually a large Army base called Song Vei, and we were riding on tracks  
6 and we had it on to go through a village. We were so used to being out in the jungles,  
7 being in free-fire zones that it was a complete culture shock for us to be in that  
8 environment where we saw people and we didn't shoot. It was a very, very different  
9 environment that we were in most of the time. Again, we didn't see popular forces or  
10 Viet Cong at all. Anything we ever saw was North Vietnamese and if we were on a large  
11 support base like Quan Loi or Song Bei, we would see civilians that would come in and  
12 out of the wire, but as far as the ARVN's, we weren't around, never saw them.

13           JS: Well, getting back to the timeline, as far as the narrative of the advanced that  
14 you experienced in Vietnam, following that first firefight in February, were there other  
15 significant ones that stick out in your mind prior to the Cambodian invasion that you  
16 could talk about?

17           GS: Well, we had a few that were in between the February 1<sup>st</sup> fight and then the  
18 May start of the influx into Cambodia. We had a few skirmishes. Most of those at the  
19 time—at that time I was already in the main CP and working as a radio operator. I wasn't  
20 directly out at the front with the platoons in the firefights. However, we were close. I  
21 mean, we were to the point to where we dropped the bombs, we better be laying on the  
22 ground. My primary function at that point was to call in the gunships and the bombers  
23 and directors and direct them and get them coordinated into the areas of the fire support. I  
24 also worked for a short amount of time as an artillery operator, artillery radio operator  
25 which was pretty interesting considering I had no artillery background whatsoever and  
26 I'm calling in artillery. That got a little spooky, but fortunately I had a forward officer  
27 that was artillery officer. Who primarily would either tell me what to say or he would  
28 take the radio and do all the communicating and I was there to listen to somebody having  
29 to call. I did learn a little bit about how to do it before I progressed and went into doing  
30 the actual company job. We did have one situation; we were on a fire support base. We  
31 called them LZ's or landing zones, which is basically one company comes in and does

1 the guard for the fire support base. And the fire support base is where they bring in all the  
2 artillery, that's where the artillery's been, and the mortars are there and then they could  
3 shoot out from those locations to protect all of the units out in the field. We were on one  
4 of these LZ's—typically we'd be there for maybe a week. And then what we would do is  
5 pull guard duty at night and then during the day just kind of hung around. You'd go out  
6 and add more concertina or set up your security around the fire support base. We were on  
7 the LZ—actually, it was April Fools, it was April 1<sup>st</sup> about two in the morning. I was  
8 asleep down in the bunker. I talked to people after it happened, and they all had made  
9 indication that they heard about four or five pops from outside the wire. It was,  
10 “Pop...pop...pop.” The guys that were out pulling guard duty that night all had a pretty  
11 good idea what it was. They couldn't see it, but they could hear it. And then after about  
12 fifteen, twenty, thirty seconds the first one came in. What happened was, outside the wire  
13 somewhere, somebody had set up one of the NVA teams that set up a mortar. A 122-  
14 millimeter mortar and popped in about five rounds and when they set the rounds to go  
15 off, you can determine the depth that you want the round to go before it ignites. They set  
16 them all to go off deep. We determined this after the fact. Now what they were trying to  
17 do, is for the 1-0-5 Howitzers on a fire support base at night, they used a small red light  
18 as an aiming light around each one of the guns and they could see those lights and they  
19 knew where our main command post was on the fire support base. As they went back and  
20 reviewed it later, they could see where the first round hit, second round hit, third round  
21 hit. They were trying to get those rounds to go into the fire support base or into the POC  
22 (Point of Contact), the main headquarters. Fortunately, none of them hit it. They got  
23 close, but none of them hit it. The first round landed pretty close to the wire. The second  
24 round landed almost on top of one of our bunkers that was inside the complex and it  
25 killed one of our guys, an M-60 gunner and wounded our Kit Carson Scout. The next  
26 round landed a little bit closer. One of the rounds landed just outside the bunker I was in  
27 and landed in the mound of dirt that they had. When we dug the bunker out, we piled the  
28 dirt next to it and it landed in the middle of that dirt and when it exploded, all the dirt  
29 flew outside to the side. The guy that was out on radio watch that night covered him in  
30 dirt. He was okay, it didn't hurt him, but fortunately, since all the rounds went deep and  
31 they didn't really penetrate any bunkers, we only had the one fatality. That was just

1 extremely lucky because if they would have had those rounds pull off above ground, it  
2 would have killed anybody that was outside the bunkers and would have taken out a  
3 number of people. We got kind of an unusual situation. They had taken a mini gun which  
4 is normally mounted on the helicopters and it's a six-barrel machine gun that rotates.  
5 When it fires, it looks like the old-fashioned Gatling gun, but when it fires, it doesn't go,  
6 "bang, bang, bang, bang, bang," it makes a sound that kind of goes, "Whomp." That's  
7 kind of what it sounds like. It's shooting that fast. It's a solid stream of red and the way  
8 they'd load the gun is every sixth round is a tracer round and that solid stream of red  
9 you're seeing six rounds in between each red round. So, it's putting out a high volume of  
10 fire. We had one of those on the LZ. On a helicopter, they brought it out and then set it up  
11 on the LZ without any helicopter round. Except the problem is, because they put up such  
12 a rapid rate of fire, they get very, very hot. So, when they came out and framed the  
13 sergeant to show him how to fire it, they told him, "Short rounds, short blasts of rounds.  
14 Don't fire it anymore than maybe three to five seconds and then you'll have to stop and  
15 let it cool down or you'll melt the barrels." Well, when the first rounds started coming in,  
16 he woke up, came out, figured we were going to get overrun so went out and grabbed the  
17 mini gun, opened up with it and just held the button down on the mini gun. And he  
18 melted the barrels down on the mini gun. So, it was a very scary night. We figured we  
19 were probably going to get hit, we didn't. But it turned out later when they went back and  
20 reevaluated it, they were trying to hit the main headquarters for that LZ, and they just  
21 missed it. But we had a few skirmishes after that. The conventional ten-to-fifteen-minute  
22 match, usually three-to-five-minute firefight where there'd be maybe one hundred rounds  
23 total shot off. We'd call them gunships or helicopters, bombers, whatever we could to try  
24 to break that contact. Our objective at that point was go out and find them, make contact,  
25 and then bring in everything we had to try to break that contact as soon as we could. I  
26 think the game plan was, they were trying to keep the activity level up, but not get  
27 anything too major because they knew we were eventually going to get put into  
28 Cambodia. They wanted the resources to be ready to do that and that's kind of what the  
29 Army at that point was thinking.

30 JS: Well before getting into Cambodia, you mentioned being that artillery radio  
31 operator for a moment. How did you get into that position?

1           GS: Well, it was one of those unusual things where you kind of work yourself up  
2 to the chain as you're trying to advance. I had been a platoon radio operator for a  
3 relatively short amount of time. I had a really close friend that was a company radio at  
4 that point, and he had been conversing with the captain and telling him, "Hey, we've got  
5 a guy here that's pretty good." I had talked with the commanding officer on the radio a  
6 few times. I had the ability to do that. We'd been in a couple of different small skirmishes  
7 so he knew how I would handle those situations on the radio. I had a pretty good idea of  
8 what I would do in those situations. They were looking to put me in a position to get me  
9 into the main CP of the group. We had a situation where we had a radio operator that was  
10 working the artillery radios. It was good and they put him into the main TOC (Tactical  
11 Operations Center) headquarters on the fire support base. They moved him into a position  
12 to do that to handle the fire support from that main central location where all the guns  
13 were which left the position open for the field artillery operator. So, they decided, "Well,  
14 let's put him in that slot, we'll get him in here until we can bring somebody in that's  
15 actually an artillery guy and put him on the radio." So, it was kind of a temporary  
16 position to get me into a slot to hopefully make advances for the long time, which I  
17 eventually did. I flat out told them when they said, "You know, we want to make you the  
18 artillery operator." I told them, "I don't know anything about artillery. So, whatever it is,  
19 it's going to be brand new to me." I was very fortunate in the officer, the lieutenant that  
20 was the artillery officer out in the field for us, had a lot of patience. He showed me a lot  
21 of things. And to this day, he's probably the only reason I could still look at a military  
22 map and be able to read it because he taught me how to read military maps really well.

23           JS: Well, how long did you operate in that position?

24           GS: It was probably about a month.

25           JS: Okay.

26           GS: At the very most and they eventually brought another radio operator out and  
27 very shortly after that, Lt. Griffith was the field artillery officer that I worked with, he  
28 went to the rear to work the artillery on the fire support base. When they did that, they put  
29 him, the hire ranking radio operator who knew artillery, and a new forward observer  
30 officer to work as a team. And then at that point the position was open to take the  
31 company radio position and I wound up taking that radio.

1 JS: Alright, well is there anything else we should mention before getting into the  
2 Cambodian campaign?

3 GS: Just a little bit about what the climate was like at that point. We were still  
4 working in the dry season. Water in smaller creeks was at a premium. There was  
5 generally water available in creeks all over. Everywhere we went you could walk for a  
6 half a day and you'd come across two or three small streams that were potable water.  
7 Water that you could actually fill canteens if you needed to. Water was one of those  
8 things that you just didn't run out of. It was so hot and humid that was one thing you  
9 never wanted to run out of. As a radio operator, they told me before I took the radio, they  
10 said. "You know, it's miserable carrying that big old heavy radio." A 25-pound radio and  
11 another five-pound battery and you've got seven days of food. You know, if you're  
12 carrying a radio, you've got to carry at least eight quarts of water. And so, you get all that  
13 on a backpack and it gets pretty heavy. So, as the time progressed, the water was getting  
14 drier and drier in the creeks so there were a few days where we ran short, and I can  
15 remember a few times when we couldn't land a helicopter. There was no way we were  
16 going to resupply or what we call our log day. We couldn't land the helicopter to unload  
17 the supplies. What they would have to do is fly the helicopter over a kind of open spot  
18 and do what we call the kick out. And a kick out, they basically kicked the c-rations out  
19 of the sides of the helicopter, and they fell to the ground. In order to get water to us, they  
20 couldn't land a blivet or anything that we could get the water out of. So, what they'd do is  
21 they'd take empty 1-5-5 Howitzer canisters that they put the artillery rounds in, fill those  
22 full of water, and then kick those out because they're a big metal container that wouldn't  
23 break open when it hit the ground. All I can remember is there were a lot of times I would  
24 have preferred to go thirsty over drinking water that came out of those. It was really bad,  
25 really bad. There were a few times when we would get to a creek where you'd have to  
26 dig a small little opening in the creek to get the water deep enough to put the canteen in  
27 to fill half the canteen. And you'd have to sit there and wait for ten minutes to let enough  
28 water flow past to help clear the silt out to be able to put the canteen in to get the water  
29 and that was still better than what came out of those 1-5-5 canisters. Water was at that  
30 point getting to be a little bit of a premium. Just about the time we were getting ready to  
31 go into Cambodia, the weather was beginning to change. We were starting to get into the

1 monsoon seasons. The monsoon season, it would start out by raining maybe five minutes  
2 in the morning and then it would be dry the rest of the day. The next day, it would rain  
3 ten minutes in the morning and then it would be dry the rest of the day. The next day it  
4 would rain fifteen minutes on morning. And then maybe five minutes in the afternoon.  
5 And then it would be dry the rest of the day. It progressed like that to the point where it  
6 was eventually going to rain, we thought, twenty-four hours a day. Monsoon rains are  
7 one of those things you occasionally in the United States, you'll get a very, very, very  
8 heavy rainstorm. And that was your typical monsoon. And it would do that, like I say, a  
9 period of time in the morning and then a period of time in the afternoon. And it would  
10 rain that hard. It was so predictable that we could, if we knew we were going to be on the  
11 LZ for a period of time and it was starting to get where we were out for ten or fifteen  
12 days, we all were getting kind of rank. So, what we would do is we'd take a bar of soap.  
13 You knew when it was going to start raining, pretty close, and you'd strip down and get  
14 ready and when it would rain, you'd soap up and you knew how long it was going to rain  
15 and you knew how much time you had. You could actually rinse off and time it so that  
16 you could get soaped up and rinsed off and take a shower in a monsoon rain. Everybody  
17 used to do that on a pretty regular basis.

18 JS: Well, as the Army was getting ready to go into Cambodia, did your unit know  
19 anything about the preparations and the plans and the fact that you were actually going to  
20 do this, or I guess at what point did you know?

21 GS: We had always worked very close to the Cambodian Border. Well, Quan Loi  
22 was, if I remember correctly, about seven or eight miles from the Cambodian border. We  
23 were always working between Quan Loi and the Cambodian Border, so we were always  
24 fairly close to it, but we had gotten—there had been some rumblings. Just, you know, the  
25 normal conversations that many people think, “Oh, we're getting awfully close to the  
26 border. I think they're talking about we might go in.” Then we got a notification that they  
27 were going to fly us out to a new area to build a new LZ that was five hundred meters  
28 from the Cambodian border. We'd never been that close before. And so, we got notified  
29 to go out there. We started the construction on it, we knew we were close to the border,  
30 we knew we were right in the line of path that all the supplies were getting ferried in. We  
31 learned what was called the Fishhook, we were right in the middle of it. We could hear

1 the trucks across the border at night. We couldn't see any headlights, but we could hear  
2 them, so we knew there was a lot of activity going on across the border and that's when  
3 things came down and said, "Get ready guys, we're going in. We're going to go across  
4 the border and going to go in after the supply groups. Everybody was pretty  
5 apprehensive. It wasn't official yet, but we knew it was going to happen. And then the  
6 day before the official invasion the notice came down, "Get ready, they're taking them  
7 in." Now, it turned out that our unit was pulling duty on the LZ for about four or five  
8 days. Other companies went into Cambodia officially and so they were over in Cambodia  
9 and we were still on the LZ. So being a radio operator I could listen and hear all the  
10 things that were going on. I started hearing about the other units finding these large  
11 caches of weapons and a few of them getting into small skirmishes, nothing big. They'd  
12 fire off artillery into the areas that they were going into and doing a lot of that. For the  
13 first three days, it was three days, we weren't in Cambodia, we didn't go in first. Our  
14 particular company was about three days later and then they rotated out one of the other  
15 companies to the LZ and they took us and put us back in. I can vividly remember the first  
16 day going into Cambodia for me personally. Cambodia was like a whole different world  
17 compared to Vietnam. We weren't that far away. We were probably within two miles of  
18 the LZ to the Vietnam side of the border to the Cambodian side of the border. On the  
19 other side of the border, it was completely different. Everything was bigger, significantly  
20 bigger. The centipedes were bigger, the lizards were bigger, the trails were bigger, the  
21 buildings, huts, bunkers. Everything we saw was larger, on a much larger scale. And it's  
22 because it was untouched. Vietnam's side, everything had probably either gotten killed  
23 off or was made smaller because people weren't able to stay in one location. The North  
24 Vietnamese couldn't stay in one location for a long period of time. They had to be  
25 moving so they'd build a bunker to tide them over for a day or two and then move on. In  
26 Cambodia, they'd build the bunkers huge so that they could put supplies or whatever and  
27 they could stay there for two months and nobody would ever mess with them. So, with all  
28 of those things combined, it was one of those unique situations like it was going into a  
29 whole different world going over into Cambodia. Bunker complexes over there were  
30 huge. I mean, 100-150 bunkers of complex. And we'd maybe see ten in Vietnam at the  
31 most. And it was because of the fact that it was a supply route and that's where the troops

1 freshened up. They'd go back across the border and that was their R&R spot. I mean,  
2 they could go over there and not worry about being harassed by U.S. troops looking for  
3 them. We had one situation; I think it was about the second or third night we were in  
4 Cambodia. We had been walking all day and we already found one small-arms cache, no  
5 big deal. That night, we went into set up our perimeter and they went out and put all the  
6 trip flares out, went out and put the claymores out. We're all sitting there and all of a  
7 sudden somebody called in on the radio and said, "I think we found a bunker." So, I'm  
8 figuring it's one of the guys out putting the claymores. I said, "Okay, well where is it?"  
9 He says, "In the very middle of the perimeter." And we said, "Okay, is there anybody  
10 there?" and he said, "No, it's just a big bunker." And so, we said, "Okay, look in it to see  
11 what you can see." He came back a little bit later and he says, "It's full of weapons." And  
12 I said, "Okay, it's getting too dark. We don't want to mess with it tonight. As long as  
13 there's nobody in it leave it. We'll tear into it tomorrow." So, the next morning  
14 everybody got up and they started tearing this bunker apart. The bunker size was about  
15 fifty feet wide and about one hundred feet long and about eight feet deep. So, they started  
16 hauling out weapons and they got that done and as they're finishing off tearing out the  
17 first group of weapons, they're getting those weapons out of the bunker, one of the guys  
18 says, "I just stepped through the floor." And so come to find out that there was a bamboo  
19 floor, subfloor. So, they opened that up and here's another little story to this bunker and  
20 it's full of weapons. So, they start back hauling that. So, at this point we decide, "Well we  
21 better, you know, this is going to take awhile to get this stuff out of here because we got  
22 the call from battalion and they said everything gets back hauled. You're taking  
23 everything out over there." So now we find out there's two levels to this thing so we're  
24 going to be there a few days. And this isn't good because we're going to be in one spot  
25 for two days with helicopters flying in and out. So, they know we're there. I mean,  
26 there's no way to hide that, they know we're there. And we've been mortared earlier back  
27 in April so we're all thinking, "Man, they could just sit here and pump mortars in and  
28 they're going to get everybody." We didn't have any formal bunkers to secure the area  
29 with. We were doing this like we'd normally set up a perimeter at night. Anyway, they  
30 get about half of the second floor done and they suddenly realize that they're still walking  
31 on bamboo. It turns out they popped through that bamboo and there's a third floor to it.

1 So, this thing's three stories deep, one hundred feet long, and fifty feet wide and it's full  
2 of every kind of weapon you can think of. We found Russian anti-aircraft machine guns;  
3 we found probably twenty of those. We found bazookas; we found every kind of Russian  
4 rifle and Chinese rifle you can think of. Brand new, fresh greased up, wrapped up, ready  
5 to go. We found a number of M-16s, American rifles with serial numbers on them. Those  
6 all got back hauled to figure out where they came from because they couldn't figure that  
7 out. The bottom of the bunker was filled with ammunitions, all different kinds, rounds of  
8 things. Well, by this time, obviously, battalions, "Wow, this is great. We've got all kinds  
9 of PIPs coming out." Well, everybody wants to take a look. They sent out photography  
10 guys and so everybody's getting kind of ancy because we'd been there for about four  
11 days. This isn't good; we've been there way too long. We knew that they had to be  
12 watching us. They had to know what we were doing. And we just knew we were going to  
13 get hit. We were waiting for something to happen. There the last day, the commanding  
14 officer got with me and said, "Call battalion and make sure—don't ask them, tell them  
15 we're going to blow the munitions, and we're going to blow them up." So, I called back,  
16 and I said, "Um, we're going to blow the ammunitions out here." Within five minutes I  
17 got a call back and said, "Don't blow it, we want it back hauled." "Oh man." So, for  
18 about a half a day we took about half the ammunitions out of the bunker. I mean,  
19 everybody's dead tired. Finally, the CO (Commanding Officer) comes over and says,  
20 "Alright, go in and take the rest of the ammunitions, pile C4 on top of it and let it blow  
21 it." And he said, "But don't tell the battalion we're doing this. Wait until I tell you and  
22 then what we're going to do is we're going to have a bunch of artillery called in close to  
23 this area. And then we're going to blow the ammunitions. If anybody asks, "Gee, that  
24 artillery must have gotten a great secondary." Which means the artillery hit something.  
25 So that's what we wound up doing and we walked about five kilometers away from the  
26 bunker before we blew it, and they did a countdown. Everybody got ready and they blew  
27 the bunker, and I can remember pieces of shrapnel falling down out of the sky from the  
28 realms that we'd blown up. We found an awful lot of stuff when we were in that first  
29 group. About three or four days later we were out still walking around in the jungle and  
30 came across a two-story thatch roof storage area with five hundred tons of rice. We ended  
31 up back hauling five hundred tons of rice and that took us three or four days. We found, I

1 think, it was twenty-three bicycles. The bamboo center post coming out of them that they  
2 used up to haul supplies up and down. These were brand new bicycles, so they obviously  
3 brought the bikes down to use them to get the stuff into Vietnam but hadn't gotten them  
4 out yet. These are all things that we found. There were tons and tons of truck tire trails  
5 and you could see empty bunkers that they were able to get the supplies out of it and get  
6 it out of there before we got there. So, we made a major dent when we did that, a major  
7 dent from the supply line. And that's probably the only thing that kept South Vietnam  
8 going for any length of time was the fact that we went and did the incursion and got all of  
9 those supplies out of there. Did get into any major firefights, got into a couple little ones,  
10 but it usually was remnants. You know, one or two people wound up not getting out of  
11 there and just real quick, getting contact, and get away. So, it wasn't anything major. One  
12 of the days, would have been June 3<sup>rd</sup>, as it had rained that morning and I can remember  
13 we were all sitting along the perimeter and I heard somebody walk up behind me and  
14 about the time I turned around I realized it was one of our guys taking a picture. I just  
15 kind of turned around and then I waved and smiled and waved and he wandered back off  
16 and didn't pay anymore attention to it. Later that day, we were walking down a trail.  
17 We're still in kind of mountainous areas and let's see, it would have been the executive  
18 officer was in front of me or was the second person in front of me. The commanding  
19 officer was directly in front of me and then it was me carrying the radio, battalion radio.  
20 We got at the top of this hill, the executive officer took a couple steps out and his feet  
21 came out from underneath him and he slid to the bottom of the hill. Now, this is a real red  
22 slippery clay. He's standing up there laughing because he watched him slide to the  
23 bottom; it was like a giant water slide. Then the commanding officer took a couple steps,  
24 his feet came out from under, he slid to the bottom of the hill. So, I'm up there and  
25 standing there laughing because the buddy watched two officers' slide to the bottom of  
26 the hill. So, I took a couple of steps forward and about that time my feet came out and as  
27 I landed on my back, my arms went up and I slid to the bottom of the hill and when I got  
28 to the bottom of the hill, I'm sitting there and I'm laughing because I'm laying off the  
29 ground all covered with mud. I went to turn to push myself up and I realized that  
30 something was wrong because I couldn't push. So, about that time I lifted my left arm up  
31 and realized that I had caught my wrist on an open piece of bamboo. Bamboo when it

1 dries, it splits open and it broke in half and I caught my wrist on the edge of that bamboo  
2 and sliced my wrist all the way across so blood's gushing out everywhere and I'm sitting  
3 there going, "Uh-oh." The executive officer saw what had happened and so he yelled up  
4 and said, "Get a medic." And so, the medic slid down the hill to get to me and as he's  
5 sitting there at the bottom of the hill he's going, "Okay, well what do you want to do?"  
6 And I said, "Well, I don't know at this point, what do I need to do?" He says, "Well, do I  
7 need to give you morphine?" I said, "No, doesn't hurt that bad." And the executive  
8 officer's going, "Yeah, but it looks bad." Now, you could actually see tendons sticking  
9 out of the wrist. It was fairly bad. I'm going, "It doesn't hurt so it couldn't be that bad."  
10 Yeah no. So, the medic says, "We need to get a medivac down here. We're going to have  
11 to fly you out." I went, "Okay." So, I grabbed my radio and I called in for a medivac.  
12 About two or three days before that we had set up the perimeter that night and we were  
13 on a secure radio system which was a way we could connect the radios and talk open. We  
14 didn't have to worry about using codes and stuff. I'm talking to the guy back at the main  
15 headquarters, back on the firebase and he's telling me, "Get ready because they're getting  
16 ready to pull you out of the field to bring you in and let you work and talk." That's great,  
17 I'm going to get out of the field. And he said, "So be ready because it could happen any  
18 day." Well, as I'm calling in for my medivac, the guy I'm talking to is the same guy. And  
19 so, when I call them, I said, "Okay, I need a medivac for the following location." And I  
20 gave him the grid coordinates and everything and he says, "Okay, well who's it for and I  
21 said, "Sierra 0-9er-1-1." Which was me. And he goes, "Okay." And he comes back, and  
22 he says, "Could you repeat who this is for?" and I said, "It's for me." And he goes, "Oh  
23 no." And I said, "Yeah, I fell down the hill and they have to medivac me out." And so  
24 anyway, by this time they're trying to get the radio away from me because they're trying  
25 to get ready to fly me out. I start to hear the helicopter coming or that's something I will  
26 have to say to stop for a second and mention this. We had fantastic air support. Our  
27 medivac birds, our gunships, the bombers, the guys that flew in for us, I can't say  
28 enough. They were there unbelievably quickly; they would do anything we wanted. If we  
29 asked for them to do something special it was never a question of why or when, it was,  
30 "Okay, we'll do it." We had a spotter, forward observer spotter aircraft that would  
31 actually fly over and they knew we were there, and they'd call down and see if we needed

1 anything. There were a couple of times—we could get lost fairly easy because of where  
2 we were. There were a few times that they would have to spot us, actually figure out  
3 where we were and then they could call down and give us secure coordinates, so we'd  
4 know where we were. The pilots were unbelievable, it was an amazing thing. Well  
5 anyway, I'm sitting on the ground, the medivac bird's coming in, and he's calling in and  
6 making sure where we are. He calls in and he says, "Okay, we need to bring you up, do  
7 you want a rigid litter or a jungle penetrator?" And I'm sitting there and I'm now starting  
8 to feel a little woozy holding my arm up over my head. I'm going, "There's no way I can  
9 put my arm inside a rigid litter, that isn't going to work. I've got to go up on a JP."  
10 Which is a jungle penetrator. It's kind of a T squared device that you sit on. And so, I  
11 turn to the medic and I said, "Do you think I'm going to pass out?" and he says, "I don't  
12 think so, but I don't know." I said, "Well, I guess I won't then." So then from about fifty  
13 feet, sixty feet up, they dropped at JP down. They took all of my equipment off me and  
14 they started to take my M-16 away and I said, "No, I'm taking that with me." And so, I  
15 took that and my steel pod, but everything else came off of my back. They JP-ed me up  
16 into the helicopter and then flew me out from there. I wound up going to the hospital in  
17 Bien Hoa the first night. I went to an aid station in Quan Loi first. The aid station in Quan  
18 Loi when they flew in on the helicopter, the old TV show M.A.S.H at the very beginning  
19 when they fly you in, that had to be Quan Loi, looked exactly the same from the air. It  
20 looked exactly like that. When I got off the helicopter, they took me into the aid station  
21 and they took off the band aids or the field dressing and took that off, took one look at it  
22 and said, "Well, we got to send you into Bien Hoa, there's nothing we can do for you  
23 here." So, they put it back on and I'm sitting there at the aid station waiting for the next  
24 helicopter to come in to take me to Bien Hoa and all of a sudden here comes a guy  
25 walking in the door from my company with a field dressing on his hand, left hand. I'm  
26 going, "What happened?" he said, "I fell down on the same piece of bamboo." So, they  
27 moved the bamboo after that, so he told me. They weren't going to let anybody else to  
28 get hurt with it. And then the helicopter came in, flew me into Bien Hoa and I was in the  
29 hospital there. All they could do there was stitch up the external portion. They couldn't  
30 repair any tendons, so they stitched up the external portion. Well, in the meantime,  
31 through my evil mind and having been the guy that used to say, "I'm too smart for this, I

1 won't ever have to go out in the field." I'm thinking, "Well, they'll just sew me up and  
2 I'll be back in the field in a couple of days." The doctor came in that night and he says,  
3 "I've got two things to tell you." He said, "Number one, you're in big trouble." And I  
4 said, "What's that?" and he goes, "They forgot to take the SOI's (Signal Operating  
5 Instructions) out of your pocket." SOI's are the secure codes for the radio. And they  
6 were, at that point, were extremely confidential and I didn't think to take them out of my  
7 pocket and nobody else remembered to tell me to take them out of my pocket, so I  
8 brought them with me and nobody in the field had the secure information to operate the  
9 radio. So that was kind of a big deal. So, they had locked them up in the commanding  
10 officer's safe at the hospital and I had to go down there and get them out of the safe so  
11 they could take them back out to the field for the guys in the field. He said, "And the  
12 other thing is, you're going home." And I said, "What do you mean going home?" And  
13 he says, "You're going home. We're going to fly you to Japan, they're going to fix your  
14 hand, and then we're going to fly you home." He said, "Because you're not going to have  
15 the use of your left arm for probably six months." And I'm going, "You're kidding."  
16 "No. You're going home." Anyway, a couple of days there, they flew me up to Saigon,  
17 put me on a big jet, flew me to Japan. I was in Japan for two months. I would say over  
18 my entire span of being in Vietnam, being in the field, seeing combat, the worst I ever  
19 saw was when I was in Japan. That's where I saw the damage. I saw everything you  
20 could possibly imagine that could happen to a human being and still have them be alive. I  
21 got to see that when I was in Japan, it was terrible. I can't believe the destruction. Being  
22 ambulatory and being one of the people who could actually walk and do things within the  
23 hospital, I was one of those lucky few that got to hold people down when they changed  
24 the bandages and the dressings of the people who lost legs and arms. It's just people in  
25 the middle of the night screaming in pain. It was a very dramatic time. The ward that I  
26 was in, we had three guys that were a full fraction, a complete body cast from their neck  
27 to their toes. Japan was usually cloudy, overcast most of the time. One day it was clear,  
28 and we were all sitting there, and these guys had been there for about four or five weeks  
29 and were just going stir crazy because they couldn't move. I mean, they were in full  
30 traction, they couldn't do anything. And so, since the sun was shining, we were all kind  
31 of looking at those two great big doors down there at the end. I bet I could roll those beds

1 outside. Yeah, we could do that. So, we opened up the doors and then we got the beds,  
2 wheeled them out and in the meantime, the nurses saw what we were doing and thought,  
3 “Hey, that’s kind of a cool idea.” So anyway, we rolled them out on the front lawn in  
4 front of the hospital ward, this is at Camp Drake and we’re out on this front lawn and it  
5 just so happened there was a war protest going on that day. We’re on one side of the  
6 fence and the protesters are on the other side of the fence. There were some things said to  
7 us and we said some things back and the next thing you know they start heaving rocks  
8 over the fence and they almost hit one of the guys that was in the bed. So, the MP’s  
9 (Military Police) show up, they get them ran off and we had to roll all the beds back in. A  
10 beautiful sunny day, first time we’d ever done it and we now had to roll all the beds back  
11 into the hospital so that wasn’t too much fun. Anyway, from there they flew me back to  
12 Fort Ord, wound up at Fort Ord in the hospital system there for a few more months until I  
13 got enough use of my left hand, they decided to fly me to Fort Hood, Texas, and I wound  
14 up at Ft. Hood and I wound up doing the rest of my service in the Army at Fort Hood,  
15 Texas, where they made me a company clerk.

16 JS: Alright, well we’re unfortunately running out of time for today. I would like to  
17 ask some follow up questions to some of the thing you talked about with Cambodia, your  
18 injuries, and your time in the hospital and coming home, but unfortunately, we ran out of  
19 time for today.

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## Interview with Gordon Swenson

Session [3] of [3]

Date 1 March 2010

1 Jason Stewart: This is Jason Stewart with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech  
2 University continuing an Oral History Interview with Mr. Gordon Swenson. Today is  
3 March 1, 2010, I am in Lubbock, Texas, in the Special Collections Library on the campus  
4 of Texas Tech and Mr. Swenson is joining me by phone once again from California.  
5 Okay, as I just mentioned last time we were talking, we were talking about your  
6 experiences during the Cambodian incursion and your subsequent injury. I'd like to ask a  
7 few follow up questions related to that. First of all, at that time period when you guys  
8 heard the news that you were going to be going into Cambodia, what was the feeling  
9 among the guys about going into the NVA sanctuary for much of the war? The entire part  
10 of the war up to that point, it had been off limits, but the NVA had always been using it  
11 as a sanctuary so what was the feeling, the general feeling among the guys about finally  
12 hitting the NVA in that sanctuary?

13 Gordon Swenson: Well, the biggest concern was again, we had mainly run into  
14 small groups of individuals that we took. You know, up to three to ten people at the most.  
15 And so, our anticipation was we were going to run into much larger forces once we got  
16 across the border assuming they would be there. As I'd mentioned before, our particular  
17 company didn't go across in the original day or two. After it I think we were the third  
18 date we finally went in. I know up to and prior to the date that we were going to go across  
19 we had been building a LZ within five hundred meters of the border. We were making a  
20 lot of racket and a lot of noise. At night, we could hear the movement of trucks and  
21 vehicles across the borders, but we knew they were there. We just didn't know what we  
22 were going to hit when we finally went over. As the days progressed, we heard less and  
23 less noise. And since we had a couple of companies working in the base area that went  
24 across before we did, they had gotten into some skirmishes before we went in. The  
25 biggest thing we kept hearing was the caches they were finding and not so much the  
26 major troops concentrations that they were running up against. Everybody kind of moved  
27 out and that was feeling, we were getting it, anyway, from the conversations we could  
28 hear and the scuttlebutt that was going on, on the firebase. It sounded like the majority of  
29 the troops had already left the area and we were just coming across and they couldn't get

1 out in time. They left pretty quickly. The worst—obviously the worst of them there, there  
2 were some minor skirmishes that took place, but it wasn't any major, major skirmishes  
3 that were going on. We were just finding all kinds of stuff.

4 JS: Alright, well I know you talked about finding the bunkers with the huge  
5 weapon caches. How far away from the border would you estimate these bunkers actually  
6 were?

7 GS: We were working anywhere from about one kilometer, a little less than a  
8 mile in from the border looking at it across. So, we were finding stuff within a mile of the  
9 border itself. Obviously, their intention was to get as close to the border as they could.  
10 Again, the borders are not a well-defined thing. There's not a street marker or anything  
11 like that identifying the exact border of location. It's done from maps. They had pretty  
12 good maps; we had pretty good maps, so you had a pretty good idea where that crossing  
13 actually was. So, they, they didn't get real, real close to it. They obviously wanted to  
14 make sure they were on their side, but they got close enough that they didn't have to  
15 carry it that far to be in Vietnam with it. The surprising thing was the entire time we were  
16 in Vietnam we'd come across the caches and supplies and things like that. It was all in  
17 relatively small mountains. I mean, we'd walk into an area and we'd find maybe a ton of  
18 rice and obviously that had been hauled in via bicycle or whatever, in relatively small  
19 amounts in small groups just to minimize the impact of having a whole bunch of people  
20 carrying stuff back and forth. In Cambodia, they were able to stockpile it. They were able  
21 to bring in bicycle after bicycle after truck, after truck. We never saw them bring heavy  
22 equipment across the border. We had heard there were tanks that came across and we  
23 heard that there were some vehicles, but it wasn't the common thing on the Vietnam side.  
24 The Cambodian side, they used heavy equipment. They used major things to move  
25 supplies back and forth. Once it got into those stockpiles, they could load it up on bicycle  
26 and have a team of four or five people carrying a couple bags of rice in. And when they  
27 get to a specific location, they leave that there and go back and get more. And so, again,  
28 on the Cambodian side it was like walking into huge warehouses. On the Vietnam side it  
29 would be going through a local store. I mean, it was a much small operation on the  
30 Vietnam side. It was amazing. I mean, it's just stunning to walk into an area and see a  
31 huge, huge, huge building. Keep in mind, a building is a whole different term there, but a

1 covered area that was containing rice bags that stacked thirty feet high. I mean, it was just  
2 amazing. Again, harm's caches were the same way. Absolutely huge compared to  
3 anything we'd seen before. As far as personnel were concerned, we didn't see any. Well,  
4 we had a couple minor skirmishes and who knows why they were there. I think they may  
5 have just been probing to find out what we were doing. The majority of the troops moved  
6 out of the area at that time. They just kind of pretty much said, "Okay, we'll let them  
7 come in and let them do what they're going to do and just go back and do on them later.

8 JS: Did finding these huge stockpiles of weapons and material, did that have any  
9 impact on morale among you guys?

10 GS: I'm sorry, the what?

11 JS: Did discovering this huge stockpile of weapons and material and rice and all  
12 these other stores, did that have any impact on the morale of you guys and your unit?

13 GS: Yeah, it did. Obviously, it was very impressive to see and find all the things  
14 we were finding. Everybody kind of got into it. We'd find these things and get on the  
15 radio and we'd tell everybody, and it would be a big thing to the people in the rear, and it  
16 made everybody feel really good for about the first day. And then the second day reality  
17 kind of sunk in and everybody was saying, "Okay, we got to back haul of this stuff out of  
18 here." And about that time, the chinooks would start coming in with the equipment  
19 hanging slings underneath them. Somebody had to load that stuff on those. We had to  
20 move the materials around and we were making an awful lot of noise and doing an awful  
21 lot of work. I mean, those were very, very heavy. Heavy things to pick up and move and  
22 carry and we had to get them from wherever they were stored to the closest area that they  
23 could sling them out of which had to be a much more open area. So, they'd fly in. There  
24 was a small four-wheel drive flat carrier that they called a mule. It was built somewhere  
25 like the Volkswagen, it had a pancake molder in the back, but it was nothing more than a  
26 flat deck that one person could sit and drive on it and then you'd stack everything on the  
27 back of that mule, and you could carry it around. We had a couple of those out there so  
28 we were using that to transport bags of rice from the location we found it into an area that  
29 would get back haul it out of. So, it was an awful lot of work. It was a lot of physical  
30 work. The biggest concern that everybody had at that time, we were making an awful lot  
31 of noise. When you're out in the jungle, that's just something we never did. When we

1 were on an LZ that was a different thing, but an LZ you have three or more rows of  
2 concertina wire, and barbed wire, and then you had positions that were bunkered out, so  
3 you were actually inside a bunker with firing forts. It was a much more secure area, and  
4 we could make a lot of noise on there. Plus, you had artillery right there. So, we could  
5 make a lot of noise on an LZ. Where we were was not that secure of an area. We had to  
6 go out at night and set up trip flares and claymores around the area that we'd be sleeping  
7 in. I think the first two days that we were there we stayed pretty much where all of that  
8 stuff was. And then we made—the commanding officer decision, that probably wasn't a  
9 good thing to do anymore. So, what we would do is we'd get done at the end of the day,  
10 pack everything up on our backs, and move to get away from that general area. If the  
11 North Vietnamese were out there and they were going to pop off some mortar rounds in  
12 the area, we wouldn't be there. So, you know, you work a whole day in the heat and the  
13 sweating. There're no showers so you can't take a shower, so you're physically drained at  
14 the end of the day. You got to come back and load up your pack and move a kilometer  
15 away to get away from the area. And then in the morning, you'd get back up and you'd  
16 move back in again. It was an awful lot of work. The fortunate thing was we didn't get  
17 into any major combat when we were doing that. Pretty much they left us alone. They  
18 were pretty well gone. Like I say, "I know there were some there because we saw some,  
19 but they never shot at us. We just physically saw them and then we'd pop off a round and  
20 they'd take off, we wouldn't see them again. We knew they were around, but it was only  
21 one or two individuals and we never got anything thrown in on us. We never got any  
22 mortars put in on us or anything until we left that area. Once we completed the task of  
23 getting the materials out of a specific cache area, we'd move on. And once we went in  
24 and we were looking for more caches, we'd get off in these areas and we'd go back to  
25 operating the way we always did. Everything very quiet and walking in a single line ten  
26 meters or so apart. I think on a few occasions, we actually just stumbled on them. In those  
27 cases, obviously, a firefight would break out. It was always, again, just like in Vietnam; it  
28 was always small groups.

29 JS: Well, I know it was difficult to get to news and hear about what was going on  
30 in the outside world when you would be out in the field and in a lot of cases in other

1 times as well, but had you guys heard anything at all about the anti-war reaction to the  
2 Cambodian invasion while you were there or anytime before you were injured?

3 GS: There were a few sources of information, although it'd be delayed, we did  
4 have some information. Most everyone carried a radio, a regular transistor radio. I know I  
5 had one and we'd get the Armed Forces Radio and obviously that was very biased  
6 towards the information that was coming out that was forthcoming anyway. Even with  
7 that, we would hear stories. We would hear about the protests that were going on, but  
8 there were a few of us, myself included, one of the things that I'd done when I first got  
9 there is I wrote a letter home to my mom and asked if it would be possible if the local  
10 newspaper, The Press Enterprise in Riverside, if they could mail the newspaper to me.  
11 She subscribed to that and they did. So, I actually got—I think I got it—I don't know if  
12 they were sending it to me on a daily basis because we never got anything on a daily  
13 basis, every four to seven days, but I do remember I would get newspapers and  
14 sometimes it would be two or three of them. Obviously, that was a regular publication in  
15 the United States and so you got, you got the news based off how that publication was  
16 written. Yeah, we got an opportunity to at least get some information about local stuff. It  
17 might be a week, week and a half old, but at least you had some idea of what the world  
18 was doing. We heard about things. We heard about the things that were going on. I mean,  
19 what are you going to do? You're there; I mean what are you going to do? You're not  
20 going to get to come home, there's no way to get around. And everybody, at least in the  
21 unit in the group that I was with, everybody kind of had the same gentle feeling of,  
22 "We're here, we got to do what we got to do to stay alive. We've got to help the other  
23 guys stay alive because they're going to help us stay alive." And that's kind of the way  
24 we did things. I mean, I'm not going to say upbeat, but everybody had a pretty good  
25 comradeship amongst everybody else. We got along fine, there weren't any major—you  
26 had people you maybe didn't necessarily like on a personal basis, but they were there to  
27 do the same thing you were there to do. And from a military standpoint you got along  
28 well. From a personal standpoint you may not associate with them, but from a military  
29 standpoint you wouldn't have any issues working with them directly. That seemed to be  
30 the way it was the whole time I was there anyway the six months out there.

1 JS: Alright, asking the question about the anti-war response to Cambodia brings  
2 up, of course, another question. If you don't mind me asking, what was your take on the  
3 anti-war movement?

4 GS: I think I'd mentioned in the very first part of this conversation that a couple  
5 guys that I went into the military with who got drafted with the receptions before we were  
6 in basic, these are guys I had gone to high school with and they deserted, they went off to  
7 Canada. And so that was one of those things. I mean, you had to make a choice, you had  
8 to make a decision, you had to figure out what you were going to do from a very personal  
9 level. When we were already in Vietnam, I mean obviously there wasn't anything you  
10 could do about it. All of us, for the most part—it's interesting. When you're in combat,  
11 you're probably one of the biggest proponents of anti-war there could ever be. I mean,  
12 when you get shot at you don't want war to be taking place. At that level, when you're  
13 there, you don't have a choice. I mean, what are you going to do? You get down as low to  
14 the ground as you can possibly get and when it opens up, you're going to turn around and  
15 open up right back. You're there to survive and that's really all it entails. We knew what  
16 was going on in the United States. I don't think it had a major demoralizing factor at all. I  
17 mean, we were there, it was too late. What are you going to do?

18 JS: Alright, well at the point where you were injured and you were evacuated, did  
19 you have any feelings on how the war—any feelings or any thoughts on how the war was  
20 going at that point? Did you have any notion that the war would eventually be lost?

21 GS: It was at such a stalemate at that point in time that I don't—we were fighting  
22 a battle daily. We weren't fighting a war; we're fighting a day-to-day survival. We were  
23 pretty much in survival mode. Once I got injured and started coming and going back into  
24 the hospital system like I mentioned before, I got to see some of the damage that was  
25 taking place. It's a really odd thing to try to explain. Your feelings are, we don't want to  
26 be there because we're losing people. But at the same time, you're thinking back, "I've  
27 got buddies there that I went through hell with and they're still there right now. They're  
28 still there fighting that war." What do we do? Where are we? How are we going to do  
29 this? I didn't trust anything that was going on in the peace process. I just didn't see the  
30 North Vietnamese doing that. I could see the United States going through and signing  
31 these treaties and make this stop, but at the same time I couldn't see the North

1 Vietnamese doing that. I mean, now I go back, and I look at it and I see the situations as  
2 it is today, and I see the country of Vietnam as it is today. Even though I don't agree with  
3 their political system, I see the people at peace. I see them living their life and their life  
4 seems to be, to me personally, significantly better than it was when I was there. Because  
5 those people were really struggling, both the North and South were really struggling at  
6 that point. I mean, people were getting killed on a regular basis. They were just trying to  
7 survive and now today, that isn't going on. They're not getting shot, they're not getting  
8 shot at, they're not being subjected to the torture processes that were taking place then. I  
9 think for them it's a much better life, so I guess now and today I go back, and I say,  
10 "What the heck were we doing? Why were we even bothering to do that?" At the time we  
11 didn't know what the end result was going to be. At the time we didn't know what  
12 Vietnam was going to turn out and wind up being. The assumption was the communists  
13 are going to come in, take it over, and then they'd step off into another country and do the  
14 same thing and then another country and do the same thing. And we get to see that  
15 progression potentially taking place and that's what we were there to try to prevent, but it  
16 got way out of control. The problem was, we sent in a lot of people to not do anything.

17 JS: Alright, moving onto after you were wounded and your stance in the various  
18 hospitals that you had to go to, could you talk a little bit—I know you talked a little bit  
19 about these different places that you went to, but could you talk about, I guess, how  
20 would you rate the treaty you received—the treatment you received, rather at the various  
21 hospitals and places that you were taken care of at?

22 GS: I would have to say it was probably the best in my life. The people that were  
23 there, the nurses, the doctors, and all the way through that, that's all they saw day in, and  
24 day out are the type of injuries that come out of a combat situation. That's what they were  
25 trained to do and that's what they did. I know it had to have some impact on a lot of them  
26 because of the devastation of some of these injuries. Everything I ever saw through that  
27 whole process was as good as you could get for the given situation. Obviously when  
28 you're out in a combat area and you're working out of a Quonset hut and you've got  
29 intermittent electricity based off how good your generators were working that day, the  
30 quality may not be as good as you would expect in the states from a big medical center  
31 here today. Given that, the supplies were always there. I never heard of them running out

1 of supplies. They maybe had to fight for them on their end, I wouldn't know that, but I  
2 know when I was young, I never saw a shortage of supply at all from anything we did.  
3 The care of the individuals, the people that were there cared about what they were doing.  
4 They cared about the troops. And us being trained in the military, we were used to not  
5 necessarily working under the best conditions. So, when we got into a hospital, I mean,  
6 that's like heaven. I remember when they took me out of Bien Long and flew me up or  
7 took me up to Saigon to fly out of Vietnam. I mean, I got to stay in an air force hospital.  
8 And it's like, "Wow." That was like heaven compared to anything I'd seen there. And it  
9 kind of made you go, "Gee, why didn't I join the Air Force." Everything—the quality of  
10 it was exceptional. Once I got here in the United States, again, working in a military  
11 hospital that was built for World War II so it's old. Old facility, creaky floors, that kind  
12 of thing, but the care and the treatment that we got was excellent. There were some  
13 concerns that I had because of the type of injury I had. It might be a longer-term injury.  
14 I'm left-handed and it was on my left wrist and I was very concerned that I might lose or  
15 perhaps limited use of my left hand. I mean, my right arm is just there to balance out my  
16 body. It really doesn't have a whole lot of function. I'm left-handed, very left-handed.  
17 And so, I had a lot of concern about that and going to the physical therapy, which was a  
18 daily thing. They worked me through that, and I worked hard at that, but they worked me  
19 through that to the point where I was back to as good as you're ever going to get. And it's  
20 interesting because I came back and just before I got out of the Army, they ran me  
21 through my final physical. Your final physical was very similar to your original physical  
22 before you went in. It was kind of a bend over and smile kind of thing. Yeah, you got a  
23 pulse, you're alive, you're good. And it was pretty much the same thing heading out. One  
24 of the things they did was a hearing test. At that point, they said, "It looks like you have a  
25 gradual hearing loss. Would you like to stay, and we'll put you through some more  
26 testing?" Well, that wasn't an option; I was not going to stay in the Army. So, "No, that's  
27 okay I'm fine, let me out." So, I got out of the military and that was in 1971. At about  
28 1991 my hearing was getting bad, and it was getting worse and worse. I had tinnitus,  
29 which is a ringing in the ears, and I'd had that as long as I can remember after I got out of  
30 the Army. My brother, who was also in the Army, had a hearing loss. His was definitely  
31 Army related they fired a weapon next to his ear and he lost his hearing. He told me, he

1 said, "Call the VA (Veteran's Administration). Get a hold of the VA and tell them you've  
2 got hearing loss, they'll help you." And I said, "Well, it's been so long I'm sure it's just  
3 hereditary and I'm not going to worry about it." He said, "No, you really need to call  
4 them. You need to get them involved." And I put it off. I just didn't feel I wanted to do  
5 that. I did that up until two years ago and I kept hearing from different people about the  
6 VA and different things the VA was doing so I thought, "I'll go down and talk to some  
7 people." So, I went down to the VA, talked to them, and they said, "Absolutely, we need  
8 to turn you in for your hearing right now. If you've been in combat and you have a  
9 hearing loss and you have tinnitus, that's probably directly attributable to getting it in  
10 combat. We need to get you enrolled in the system and we need to go from there." And  
11 so, they did, and the VA did hearing tests. Keep in mind; I had bought hearing aids before  
12 that on my own. I had never gone through an audiology test any better than what the VA  
13 gave me. It was absolutely excellent. A little intimidated the first time I went because I  
14 went to the major VA hospital here at Loma Linda. When I walked in, one of the things  
15 they wanted to do was give me a blood test. "Okay, we'll do that." So, they gave me  
16 where the area was and I went upstairs to the area and when we walked in the room, it  
17 looked like there had to be two hundred people sitting in that room waiting for blood tests  
18 and I'm going, "Oh, here we go. A long line, gotta wait forever." So, I went up to the  
19 front and they gave me a number. They said, "Here's your number. They'll call your  
20 number and when they do, go to the station they tell you to go to." So, I got sit down and  
21 I have number 137 or something and they're calling number three and I'm thinking, "I'm  
22 going to be here all day." And all of a sudden, I realized they weren't calling the numbers  
23 in sequence. And I was done with my blood test within five minutes. I noticed that's what  
24 they were doing. People were moving in and out of that room the whole time. I mean,  
25 you just weren't there that long. That's the kind of care that I've always gotten at the VA  
26 the last two years. You know, I'm extremely happy with the care the VA's giving now.  
27 You hear some of the horror stories and stuff, but I personally had not run into that. I had  
28 excellent care out of the VA. It kind of goes back to my time in Vietnam. It just has to do  
29 with the military's going to do the best the can under the conditions they're in at the time  
30 that they're doing whatever service they're providing and that's kind of what I came up  
31 against.

1 JS: Well that certainly answers my next question which would be how do you rate  
2 the VA, but okay, that takes care of that question. How about your homecoming? What  
3 type of homecoming did you have?

4 GS: Um, when I got home, I had already sold my car, so I didn't have any vehicle  
5 at that time. I had a pretty good idea of what I wanted to do because I now had all this  
6 fantastic \$50 a month combat pay that I got. Plus, there was no place to spend money  
7 there when I was there so all of my military pay just sat in the bank and didn't go  
8 anywhere. I think I spent ten dollars a month or something to buy cans of coke and that  
9 was about it. So, all of my income from that time, as small as it was, was getting stashed  
10 away so I knew I had some money. I wasn't sure how much, but I knew I had some. I  
11 figured when I come home, I'd buy a car. I flew home to Travis and then from Travis I  
12 came down to Fort Ord which is Monterey Bay peninsula area, and my brother and his  
13 wife lived about thirty miles away from Fort Ord. So, they were the first people I got to  
14 see. They came down a day or two after I got there and visited. The first weekend after I  
15 got back, I had an opportunity to go home. So, I flew from Monterey down to Los  
16 Angeles and my mother and a friend of mine came down to pick me up at the airport. So  
17 that was my first initial thing. From there, they drove me home and at home I got the  
18 opportunity to just go and see people. It was nice and it wasn't a big thing. I mean, there  
19 wasn't a big hoopla party or anything like that. It was more of an opportunity to go out  
20 and see people and get a chance to talk to them. One of the interesting things was when I  
21 got hurt, back in the day of no cell phones or anything like that, I was in the hospital in  
22 Bien Hoa for a day and I started to write a letter, and keep in mind I'm left-handed. I  
23 started to write a letter to my mother, and, in fact, I still have it because I never mailed it  
24 because I couldn't get it done. It wasn't very legible, but I still have that letter. And then  
25 from there I flew up to Saigon, from Saigon they flew me over to Japan. So, the first  
26 chance I got to make a phone call was in Japan. So, it had been almost a week since I'd  
27 gotten hurt. So, it was early morning in Japan time that I called my mother and not  
28 realizing the time difference I caught her at night and got her out of bed and told her. I  
29 was trying to think how I'm going to word this to give the minimal amount of shock and  
30 make it not sound that bad because really, to me personally, I didn't think it was that bad.  
31 So, I called her and told her I got hurt and my left wrist is hurt and I'm in Japan and I'm

1 coming home. During her sleepiness and my exuberance in explaining, what had  
2 happened, because it was kind of hard to explain. She somehow—the word started  
3 getting around at home. And I heard everything from my arm had gotten blown on by a  
4 land mine. My arm had been shot off to I got caught in a booby trap. Everybody had  
5 these different opinions so the rumor mill, I guess, was pretty rampant, but I did have, at  
6 that time a cast from my finger tips up to about my elbow. It was nothing more than  
7 trying to keep my hand rigid for a period of time. That spooked the new people out. I kept  
8 telling everybody, “It’s really not that bad.” I mean, it’s like a three-inch long gash across  
9 my wrist and there was a cut on my tendons, but I said, “It’s really not that bad. I just  
10 can’t move my fingers.” So, everybody kind of calmed down after that, but I guess it was  
11 pretty traumatic there for about a week or two before I actually got physically home  
12 because everybody didn’t know what happened, but everybody seemed to be pretty  
13 happy that I was back. The comments have happened since, a number of times, that  
14 people have said, “You changed, you really, really changed from the time you left until  
15 the time you got home. It was a big, dramatic change.” Like what? I don’t feel like I’ve  
16 changed, but there was a dramatic change. “You grew up and went from being that rowdy  
17 teenager kid to being a man.” I’m sure that had to do with combat experience and just the  
18 military experience in general. That was the comments that I got back since and this has  
19 been within the last ten to fifteen years. People have all said the same thing. “You really  
20 changed during that time frame.” And became much more independent even though I  
21 have always been independent and became much more independent after I got back.

22 JS: Alright, were you able to keep up with any of the guys in the unit that were  
23 still in Vietnam after your injury?

24 GS: Let me look here real quick. We’ve got a half an hour. I’ll try to keep this as  
25 brief as I can, but this was the part that I was really kind of looking forward to.

26 JS: Okay.

27 GS: Back around 2000, I was sitting at home with the wife one day and kind of  
28 bringing you current a little bit. I’ve got two older daughters now. They’re both married  
29 and have kids and stuff. We have grandkids. So, my life has gone on very well. Vietnam  
30 was always something that, I had talked about it. People knew I’d been there. I never got  
31 into a lot of conversations about it and about 2000 a movie had come out called, *We Were*

1 *Soldiers*, and it starred Mel Gibson and it was a story about the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cav and their  
2 big fight that they got into back in November of '68, I think or '65, I'm sorry. It was one  
3 of the first major battles in Vietnam. We saw the movie, watched the movie and I'm one  
4 of those people who picks things apart, especially movies about Vietnam. We're sitting  
5 there and the movie came on and I said, "Oh geez, this is about 1<sup>st</sup> Cav, that's kind of  
6 cool cause that's who I was with." And they're showing some of the beginning scenes of  
7 it and we're watching it and Mel Gibson's about to get on the helicopter. I'm sitting there  
8 and I go, "Let's see if he puts his—let's see, number one, if he rides the skids, hanging  
9 your feet out the door. And number two; let's see if he grabs a hole that's in the airframe  
10 right behind the door of the pilot." And sure enough, he did. And I'm going, that's pretty  
11 realistic. And then it got into some of the battle scenes, and it was much more long, long  
12 extended periods of time that they were in combat. Most of our firefights, like I  
13 mentioned before were short, like ten minutes at the most, maybe fifteen minutes. A lot  
14 of realism in the movie, a lot of things that were done right. The way I remembered it. So,  
15 at the end of the movie, I told my wife, I said, "That was really a good movie." I said, "I  
16 need to go back and look and figure out"—because I couldn't at that point remember  
17 which unit I was with. "I need to go back and figure out which unit I was with because  
18 that was kind of neat." And so, I went back and got my old papers out. Now, back in  
19 1986 I'd gotten a letter from a friend of mine that was in Vietnam that he was trying to  
20 put a reunion together to go to Washington D.C. And I'd actually gotten a phone call  
21 from a guy that I was really close to when I was in Vietnam. We lost contact after that,  
22 but anyway, I'd gotten a phone call from him. He had found me through my mother who  
23 still lived in the same house I was born and raised in. He knew I was from Riverside so  
24 that's how he contacted her. And anyway, he called and said they were going to do this  
25 reunion and wanted me to try to go. At that time financially I just couldn't afford to go  
26 from California to Washington State and spend time there. I just couldn't financially do  
27 it. So, I had to pass on that. In the meantime, I had that letter, so I had a little bit of  
28 information there. I had quite a few of my records that I had from Vietnam. I pulled all  
29 that information out, found out I was with D-Company, 1<sup>st</sup> of the 8<sup>th</sup> Cav and thought,  
30 "Well, now I've got this information, what am I going to do with it?" So, I tried to call  
31 one of the phone numbers that was on the letters and obviously it had been disconnected

1 because it had been quite a few years. So, I thought, “Well, I’ll go look on the internet.”  
2 So, I started googling Delta Company 1<sup>st</sup> of the 8<sup>th</sup>, 1<sup>st</sup> Cav. I couldn’t find a whole lot of  
3 information about that particular unit, but I did find out about the battalion a little bit. I  
4 started doing some more research there. I just wasn’t having a whole lot of luck. And as I  
5 found the battalion on the battalion website, they mentioned the Texas Tech Vietnam  
6 Archive Project. “Hey, that’s cool.” And they said, “You need to go, and this is what you  
7 need to do and find out this information.” “That’s kind of neat.” So, I started poking  
8 around and within the archives of the Texas Tech Project are the daily officers’ logs for  
9 everyday of every year that 1<sup>st</sup> of the 8<sup>th</sup> Cav was in Vietnam. So, there’s a daily record, a  
10 written out daily record of every day for every company for 1<sup>st</sup> of the 8<sup>th</sup> Cav all on PDF  
11 files. I thought, “That’s interesting, let’s go see if those are what I think they are.” So, I  
12 went, and I found a record for the days that I got hurt. And what the daily officer’s logs  
13 are is it’s the record that’s written by the radio telephone operators in battalion  
14 headquarters from the radio records that I used to call in daily.

15 JS: Okay, wow.

16 GS: And all that information was recorded for the entire time I was there. It  
17 basically gives you a record of everything that transpired during that time frame. And it  
18 was amazing. It was like somebody had taken and rewritten my entire life for six months.  
19 And all that information was out on the records. So, what I did was I thought, “This is too  
20 good of information to pass up on.” So, I put together my own little website and basically  
21 went back, reread all of those files and figured out day by day what I had been doing.  
22 Talk about memories coming back and just flooding memories. Just big details that I’d  
23 completely forgotten about that were brought back because of that. And I thought. “Now  
24 I got to share it.” So, I put this website together and again, I had not been able, at that  
25 point, to contact anybody from my company at all. When I got hurt, anything that I had;  
26 photos, letters, anything like that were in an ammo cam that was strapped on my back.  
27 And when I got hurt, the first thing I did was take that off me. So, I didn’t have that. I lost  
28 all my pictures, I lost everything, and I never got it back. It wasn’t something I could  
29 recover. So, I didn’t have any pictures, didn’t have anything to share from that  
30 standpoint, but I was able to at least put out this information that I found at Texas Tech.  
31 And sure enough, I started getting some hits on it and since then, I now have about sixty

1 to seventy names of people that I was with out of 110 that made it over six months. And  
2 these are people that have been able to get e-mail addresses from, they've all gone out.  
3 They now have photos. Hundreds and hundreds of photos were taken during that time.  
4 I'm in some of them. One of the guys that I made contact with sent me a picture, sent me  
5 a bunch of pictures to an e-mail and as I'm going through the pictures, I spotted one of  
6 them and I vividly remember the day he took the picture. I didn't know him that close; I  
7 didn't know his name. All I remember is hearing somebody and turning around and  
8 seeing somebody snapping a picture and that's the picture he took that day. So, I've got  
9 one that one out there, again, with hundreds and hundreds of others. Lots of them that I  
10 remember very vividly what was going on during that time frame, but the website has just  
11 gone nuts. I mean, I've got all of these stories and images and photos and things that have  
12 transpired and that all started ten years ago in 2000 when they started. But it all triggered  
13 off of the Texas Tech Archives. The things you guys are doing. It's people who don't  
14 know about it should. Anybody that's been to Vietnam should know that, that date is out  
15 there, that kind of information's available. It's absolutely amazing. It's opened me up.  
16 Like I say, I'm going to the VA now. I'm very happy with what they're doing. It made a  
17 lot of connections back with the people that I knew, the people I associated with during  
18 the time I was there. I mean, it's even so much as I had one of the guys—one of the guys  
19 that contacted me was the artillery forward observer for the company. I was in his RT,  
20 though. He sent me an e-mail that said, "This is who I am, blah, blah, blah." And I sent it  
21 back and I said, "This is amazing, this is who I am." And then suddenly it clicked, and I  
22 was his RTO. He had an audio tape of somebody had a tape player that was in the  
23 battalion headquarters and they had turned it on when a firefight took place that I was  
24 involved in. Now, I wasn't on the radio communications of going on, but the guy that  
25 took my place was. And give me an example of how this website does things, about two  
26 weeks ago I get an e-mail out of the blue saying, "I wanted to write this e-mail to you and  
27 tell you thank you so very much. I found the audio tapes of a firefight that took place and  
28 the guy on the radio, that's talking in, was my dad."

29 JS: Oh wow.

30 GS: "And he died about ten years ago." That's the kind of things that go on with  
31 this. Again, it goes back to what Texas Tech put out on the website. It's those kinds of

1 things that all tie back and connect all of these little things back together again. I can tell  
2 you for a fact that there are people that I have e-mail addresses for that know the websites  
3 there that don't do a lot of communicating. They're the types of individuals or they are  
4 the individuals that put it away, they're done with it. They don't want us to think about it,  
5 they don't want to deal with it. And maybe it's not even a strong term. Maybe it's not the  
6 fact they didn't want to deal with it, they just don't want it. They lived that part of their  
7 life and they don't want to relive it. And then there's the other side of the fence which  
8 were people that lived that and went through it and then tried to bury it, tried to get away  
9 from it. I can tell you for a fact, a lot of times drugs come into play. I can tell you a lot of  
10 times drinking comes into play. They're hiding it; they're just making it go away.  
11 Because it's a very painful memory for a lot of people and I know specific people that  
12 that's very true. That's exactly what they've done. And then there's other people that are  
13 very open about it. Hey, it's part of my life, it's what I did. It's part of my life. And that's  
14 kind of the road that I've taken. I mean, there were a lot of years and I didn't talk a lot  
15 about it. A lot of people that I was friends with maybe didn't even know I'd been to  
16 Vietnam. I got beyond that and I got to the point where I found it much easier to tell  
17 people. And let them be what it is. Things have changed. When I first came home you  
18 really didn't want people to know you've been there because there was an awful lot of  
19 people at that point, were very adamant against it and potentially take it out on you  
20 because you've been through it. I never personally ran into a lot of that, but I know  
21 people that did. So, you didn't talk about it much. Now, things have changed. I have a  
22 sticker on the back window of my pick-up truck of Vietnam emblems and people know  
23 that's where I was. I have 1<sup>st</sup> of the 8<sup>th</sup> Cav emblem on it. I've had a number of people  
24 come up to me and say, "Thank you." And that means an awful lot, an awful lot because  
25 we didn't get that when we first came home, we didn't get that at all. I didn't anyway. I  
26 got that uniform off as soon as I could because I didn't want people to know. I didn't  
27 want to have to confront anybody with that. Was I proud of what I did? Yeah, in my own  
28 mind, yes, I was. I did it. No matter how I look at it I did it. It's something I did, it's part  
29 of my life.

30 JS: Alright, well I certainly appreciate you telling me that story about how the  
31 archive, the website was able to help out in all of this because it's good to know that the

1 work that we're doing means something. That it is helping. So, I certainly appreciate you  
2 telling me about that. A few more questions if you don't mind before wrapping up. Did  
3 you follow the war closely after you returned home? And if so, what was your reaction to  
4 the way it concluded in the fall of Saigon?

5 GS: I didn't pay a lot of attention to it because when I got home and I came back  
6 to the hospital system I was still in the military, I still had roughly nine months left to go.  
7 I went to Fort Hood, Texas, I was there and in March, the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav came home so since  
8 that was the unit that I was with in Vietnam, essentially, the way I look at it, is the war  
9 had ended for us. That's kind of the way I looked at it even though the truth was it hadn't,  
10 I knew there was such dramatic withdrawal taking place at that time with people coming  
11 home. We were kind of winding down. I knew there was still a lot of activity, but there  
12 wasn't a lot of major conflicts after that. The South Vietnamese Army was taking the  
13 brunt of it then that's what they were doing was the Vietnamization program and trying  
14 to turn it over to them. I didn't have a lot of confidence that, that was going to work, but  
15 that's what the decision was to do. The person that I thought of the most during that time  
16 was our Kit Carson Scout that was a lot of fun, a guy named Den. I've mentioned him  
17 before earlier. I thought about him a lot and wondered what's happened. You know, did  
18 he make it? Is he still there? You know, obviously the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav's come home, he didn't  
19 come home, I'm sure. He was home as far as that goes. So, there was some concern about  
20 him, and I thought about him on occasion. I didn't follow it a lot. When I heard that  
21 South Vietnam fell, very mixed emotions, a lot of thoughts about why the hell were we  
22 there? What did we do? Why did we let it get to the point that essentially, we quote on  
23 quote 'lost the war'? I don't ever look at it as a fact that we lost it. We just didn't win it.  
24 We backed out of it. We just didn't win it. We didn't go in. I think initially we went into,  
25 but things so dramatically changed that the decision was made. Well, we don't really  
26 want to win this thing; we just want to get out of it. And that's the way I've always  
27 looked at it. At the same time, it's like why do we do what we did and put so many lives  
28 in jeopardy and change dramatically? So many people's lives in many cases lose an awful  
29 lot of lives to do what we did. I don't think initially the people that started this thing  
30 thought that's what was going to happen. As time progressed, that's exactly how it went  
31 down. I still don't understand exactly why we did that. Even today there's a lot of things

1 going on in the world that I wonder what the heck are we thinking? You know, why are  
2 we doing it the way we're doing it? I'm not a big war monger. I think the last thing to do  
3 is go to war, absolute last thing to do. But once you do it, you do it to win. You don't go  
4 into the concept of, "Well, we'll just go over there and fix something's and then back  
5 out." That's not how you do it. If you're going to get involved, you need to go into  
6 winning. I think over the span of time, a lot of people had maybe looked at the end of the  
7 Vietnam War as, "Oh, the United States lost that war." I still, to this day think that that's  
8 true. We just quit.

9 JS: Alright, actually, in that response answered a few of the questions that I had  
10 coming up which was—if you'd like you can certainly say more about them if you'd like  
11 to. One of the first questions I was planning on asking to wrap things up to get some of  
12 these broader issues was how you felt about American involvement in Vietnam and how  
13 you felt also about your own service in Vietnam.

14 GS: My involvement in Vietnam was kind of a surprise. I really didn't think I was  
15 going to go, but I did. Once I was there, survival mode kicked in and it's, you know, do  
16 what you got to do to survive it. It's an experience that I would not trade for anything. I  
17 think a lot of good came out of it for me personally. I grew up a lot, I learned a lot of  
18 things. I learned how to do a lot of things that I probably never ever would have in any  
19 way, shape, or form. I learned to become a lot more independent that I'd ever been  
20 before. My service in the Army, the same thing, I learned a lot out of that. I would never  
21 want to ever have to do it again, but at the same time I look back on it and there's a lot of  
22 things that I gained from doing that. I still think back to the few people that deserted  
23 when I started out in the Reception Center and I always kind of wondered what their lives  
24 are like. How did they come out? How well are they doing today versus how I'm doing  
25 today? I'm not by any stretch of the imagination a wealthy man. I live a comfortable life;  
26 I've been married for 40 years. I've got grown kids that are doing great. I mean, from that  
27 aspect I look at it as I guess I gained a lot of that. That was just part of my life up to that  
28 point. I gained knowledge from and learned from. At the same time, I look back and I see  
29 other people that I'm aware of that it probably had a negative impact because they let it. I  
30 think a lot of cases; they let the stress go a different direction from what I get. Yeah, I had  
31 some problems. I mean, I think anybody devoted to that kind of scenario does. It's a

1 matter of how you handle it and a lot of people handled it incorrectly and let it take over  
2 their lives in a very negative aspect. I personally don't think that happened to me. I mean,  
3 I had some negative impact from it, but I got past it. I think there's a lot of people that  
4 never got far with it. You know, you hear the stories about the homeless vets that served  
5 three tours of duty in Vietnam and living out on the streets now. You think, "How could  
6 it do that? How could that span of time being as terrible as it was, dramatically tear up  
7 your life? I guess it just affects people differently. Again, personally I lived a happy life. I  
8 don't regret anything. I think the sad part of it is there's a lot of people that I knew that  
9 never got to do that. Their lives were cut short. I guess that's the very saddest part of the  
10 situation. It's very unfortunate. I know relatives of these people are living today and at  
11 that instant and time had a dramatic impact on their lives. Again, I'll go back, thanks to  
12 you guys, the website that I put out. I've had contact from a few people. One of the  
13 surprising ones that I got was we had a guy and we were on a fire base and got killed. A  
14 guy named Vinny Skeretti and he was killed by an incoming mortar round. And I knew  
15 he had—he had really tight family ties, a very close-knit family. One day I got an email  
16 and the e-mail said, "Hi, my name is Danny Skeretti." I'm thinking, "This has got to be a  
17 joke, it's got to be a joke, a terrible, terrible joke." And as I read through it, it was Vinny,  
18 the guy that I knew in Vietnam's nephew and Vinny's brother is his dad and named him  
19 after Vinny. As it turned out, Vinny, the nephew, was in 1<sup>st</sup> Cav and getting ready to  
20 deploy to Iraq. Talk about spooky. I mean, those are the kinds of things that just, they run  
21 a chill up and down your spine. It happens pretty often that I get a hit on the website and  
22 then I guess something like that happening. It shows you how inter-related intertwined  
23 people's lives are. It's sad that those people didn't get the opportunity to live the life that  
24 a lot of the others must have. A I look back now and think, "Maybe that's why I do what  
25 I do and maybe that's not the way I am is I'm hopefully trying to live a bit of a life for  
26 them, too."

27 JS: Speaking along these lines, have you visited the Vietnam wall or seen one of  
28 the traveling walls? And if so, what was your opinion of it?

29 GS: I haven't had the opportunity. It's one of those things I would like to do at  
30 some point. I did have a chance back about three years ago to visit a travelling wall that  
31 was out here in Oceanside. The traveling wall that I got to see was— it's a miniature

1 replica. I don't remember the physical dimensions, but it was big. It was probably one  
2 hundred yards long. They had placed it right on the beach in Oceanside which is very  
3 much a Marine Corps base. So, we had the opportunity to drive down there and see that. I  
4 was a little bit apprehensive at that point. I didn't know, I had no idea how I was going to  
5 react. I had no idea at all. I had, already at that point; I already had the website put  
6 together, so I had the names of the guys that I was with that lost their lives during the  
7 time I was there. I had printed a list of those names because I wanted to find them. So,  
8 when I got there, we had the opportunity to start from one end and figure out where the  
9 places were of the names were that I was interested in. And then got to see, because of  
10 the way the wall was set up, and it goes into chronological order, you get an idea of the  
11 span of time. When you actually take and physically look at a given name on that panel  
12 and then you stand back, and you look at the entire panel to see where the name is that  
13 you specifically want to see. It's overwhelming. I had taken some paper and a crayon and  
14 was tracing names and looking at names that I had on my list and tracing them. I stopped  
15 for a minute and I kind of walked back about maybe five, ten steps and stood there for a  
16 second and I was about halfway through the tracing and my wife stops and she turns  
17 around and she looks at me and she says, "Are you okay?" and I said, "This is hard. This  
18 is really hard." I think that was probably the biggest impacts that I've had was just the  
19 drama of seeing the physical dimension of the size of an individual's name versus all the  
20 names. It just kind of fills a cold picture when you see something like that. Someday,  
21 yeah, I want to go see the one in Washington. One of my big dream vacations, if I can  
22 ever afford to do it is I would love to go to the east coast and see all of the historical  
23 areas. We had an opportunity a few years back to go to Hawaii and when we were talking  
24 about going; my wife and I were discussing it. All the different people that I talked to that  
25 had been to Hawaii a bunch of different times all said the same thing. "Oh, you need to  
26 go here, you need to go there. This island's so beautiful or you need to go to the big  
27 island and see this and see that." My wife and I were sitting there, and we got the tour  
28 books out and we were looking at it. She's looking at the different things and I'm looking  
29 at the different things and I said, "You know what, we just got to go to Honolulu. We just  
30 got to go see Pearl Harbor; we've got to go see the memorial of Pearl Harbor. We just got  
31 to go see the tourist trap stuff because that's what I want to do. I've never seen it. I've

1 seen pictures, but I've never physically seen it and that's what I want to do. And so that's  
2 what we did, and we had a great vacation. That's what I want to do if I ever get the  
3 opportunity to go there, to Washington D.C. I want to go see what I want to go see. I  
4 want to see, obviously, the Vietnam Memorial, I'd like to go see the Tomb of the  
5 Unknowns, I'd like to go see the World War II Memorial. Those are the kinds of things  
6 that I enjoy, and I guess I'm a bit of a historic little buff now. Those are the kind of things  
7 I enjoy. Again, hopefully someday I'll get the opportunity to go. My sister keeps  
8 threatening if she ever wins the lottery that's we'll do. Anyway, hopefully someday I'll  
9 get a chance to do it, but I didn't get to see the traveling one and that was very worth  
10 while. I highly recommend anybody to go see that. It was very worth while.

11 JS: Well, I hope you do get the chance to make the trip. Before wrapping up, is  
12 there anything else we should say or anything else you'd like to say? Anything else we  
13 should cover?

14 GS: Well, the only thing I'll throw out, and this is just for what it's worth, again, I  
15 think the project that you guys are doing and things that you're trying to accomplish with  
16 this are going to be of dramatic benefit down the road. I think one of the things that's  
17 very important that people have a tendency to forget is history. The fact that if you go  
18 back now and you start really trying to find out information and things about old wars  
19 like World War I and Civil War, especially even the Civil War and that's a very good  
20 example. The one thing you'll find is there isn't a tremendous amount of accurate  
21 individual thorough historical data. There's some letters and I think that's where we find  
22 a whole different perspective to history than what you find in textbooks that were written  
23 by people that are just gathering a historical record portion of it. They're not getting  
24 involved with the individuals and how the individuals looked at these. Everybody has a  
25 different perspective. I many, many times told different people, you know, you talked to  
26 me if you asked me something about Vietnam. You make it an entirely different story  
27 than what you would from another person because Vietnam, believe it or not, is a big  
28 country. It's about the same size as the State of California so it's a pretty good-sized  
29 country. There're mountains; very, very steep mountains. I can tell you that for a fact  
30 because I went up and down a lot of them. There's big sandy areas and beaches. There're  
31 flat planes, there's deltas, and rivers, and swamps. It's a pretty diversified area to be in.

1 The different units operated differently. The 1<sup>st</sup> Cav had very specific rules about things  
2 that we did. We weren't allowed to wear boonie hats in the field we had to wear a steel  
3 pot, we had to wear helmets. A lot of pictures you see from Vietnam and guys walking  
4 around with boonie hats when they were out on patrol. We couldn't do that; we weren't  
5 allowed to. You know, different people had different ways of looking at it and different  
6 ways of seeing things and even guys that were on 1<sup>st</sup> Cav and the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav moved around  
7 in that country a few times, so you talk to people that were there in '67,'68 and it was an  
8 entirely different war than it was when I was there. It's the combination of the territory  
9 and the way that the units operated at particular times. If you look at that and then you  
10 look at a project like what you guys are doing and you listen to some of the oral histories  
11 from different people, you're going to get all these different concepts and ideas and  
12 viewpoints and it's just an amazing way to do it. I think history will tell us that what you  
13 guys are doing now is going to pay back a thousand-fold in the years to come. And the  
14 information eventually, the true people, the people that lived and the people were there,  
15 the people had been through all of this aren't going to be around. And we're going to be  
16 in the same scenario as we do the civil war. Those people aren't around anymore. The  
17 only thing we have to go by is the history of the day that it was collected and the time it  
18 took place. Those people aren't around so you can't go and ask the questions anymore.  
19 Again, I want to thank you guys for what you're doing. I think it's a great thing.

20 JS: Yes sir, well thank you for taking the time to participate and be a part of the  
21 Oral History Program. Let me go ahead and stop the interview now.