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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Glenn R. Blankenship
Conducted by Kelly Crager
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Transcribed by Sarah Tapia**

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

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager conducting an Oral History interview with Mr.
2 Glenn Blankenship. Today is 14 February 2013. I am in Lubbock, Texas on the campus
3 of Texas Tech University and Mr. Blankenship is joining me by telephone from his home
4 in Florence, Kentucky. Mr. Blankenship, to begin this interview I'd like to get some
5 background, biographical information from you, if I may. Can you tell me when and
6 where you were born?

7 Glenn Blankenship: Okay. I was born March 26th, 1944, in Torquay, Devon,
8 England.

9 KC: What were your parents' names?

10 GB: My father's name was William Blankenship. My mother's name—I'll use
11 her nickname, Nancy Blankenship. Her legal name is Annie Suzie Alice, and she just
12 detested that her whole life. So everybody called her Nancy.

13 KC: (Laughs) Well, I can certainly understand. That's a mouthful. Now, what did
14 you parents do for a living?

15 GB: Well, when I was born, dad was sergeant in the Canadian Army. Mom, she
16 was a—oh, she worked at a department store and was also a bus conductress. At night she
17 was an air raid warden.

1 KC: So your father was in the Canadian Army during the Second World War. Is
2 this why he was in England, I would assume?

3 GB: That is correct, yes.

4 KC: And your mother was—was she native to England?

5 GB: Yes.

6 KC: Okay, I see. And they met there, I guess during their time—or during his
7 time there in England?

8 GB: That is correct, in 1942.

9 KC: In 1942, okay. So he had been in England for a while then.

10 GB: 1939.

11 KC: Since 1939. Oh, okay. Okay, terrific. Now, do you know anything about your
12 father's military experience there at the Canadian Army?

13 GB: Yes. Yes, I do.

14 KC: Tell me about that a little bit.

15 GB: Well, this is probably going to cause you a little bit of, "No, this can't be."
16 (Laughs) But my family history is a little convoluted. I'll start it by saying that the
17 original family name is Adkins. Dad was born Glenn Adkins. In 1939, dad changed his
18 name to William Blankenship and joined the Canadian Army. Now, dad was born in
19 Chattanooga, Tennessee. So dad changed his name, went up to Canada, and joined the
20 Canadian Army under the name William Blankenship.

21 KC: Now why did he leave the US to join the Canadian Army?

22 GB: We'd all like to know that. (Laughs) You'd ask dad and he'd just give a little
23 crooked smile and that would be that. But I don't know. Dad stayed with the Canadian
24 Army for six years, throughout the war. You know, he didn't transfer to American forces
25 at all. So there must have been something there that kept him.

26 KC: Yeah, I'd guess so. Very interesting. What was your father doing in the war?

27 GB: Dad was in Royal Canadian Engineers. Then he got hurt, I believe, and
28 transferred to the Royal Canadian Medical Corps.

29 KC: What was his role there?

30 GB: He was—he did physical therapy for troops that had been injured. But dad,
31 he was at Dunkirk.

1 KC: Okay.

2 GB: After that, he also went back to France during the raid at Dieppe, if you're
3 familiar with that.

4 KC: Mm-hmm.

5 GB: I don't know if you know anything about that.

6 KC: Yes, yes. I'm passingly familiar with it, yeah.

7 GB: Okay. Well, dad was part of that fiasco. Something happened and then he got
8 transferred into the Medical Corps, and that's how he ended the war. He didn't go back to
9 France again. He said he'd been there twice and that was enough.

10 KC: (Chuckles) Yeah, under those circumstances I would certainly understand
11 that. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

12 GB: I had two sisters. One was killed about twenty-five, thirty years ago. The
13 other one is still alive.

14 KC: Okay. So born in England. Where did you grow up?

15 GB: Canada.

16 KC: You grew up in Canada. And where did you grow up in Canada?

17 GB: Toronto.

18 KC: Okay. Well, tell me about growing up in Toronto in the 1940s and the 1950s.
19 What was that like for you?

20 GB: Oh, you're really taxing. You know, I was just, of course, real young then. I
21 remember cold and a lot of snow. (Laughs) But little memories come back. I can recall
22 ice being delivered with horse drawn carts at that time. You know, memories come back.
23 I can remember people would make their living sharpening knives and scissors and going
24 around with little hand carts. Growing up, it was a peaceful, quiet time. Nothing seemed
25 to be wrong in the world.

26 KC: Certainly a different version of Toronto than what we're accustomed to
27 nowadays for sure.

28 GB: Yes, yes. Of course, you gotta realize that the end of World War II—I don't
29 know if they were still using horse drawn carts to some extent in the States or not.
30 Probably were, you know, for delivering milk and things. I think probably the early
31 1950s, they went the way of the covered wagon.

1 KC: What sorts of things did you like to do as a kid growing up there?

2 GB: Probably like all kids, you know, just playing outdoors. And you got cocky.
3 As soon as the first freeze came and the pond would freeze up, you'd strap on the skates
4 and out you'd go.

5 KC: Right. What about school? How well did you do in school?

6 GB: Mediocre. Never was a very good scholar.

7 KC: It's interesting that being raised in Canada during this time, of course, in a
8 global sense, the dominant feature of global activity of course was the Cold War. The
9 United States and the Soviet Union, and the two competing blocks for power and things
10 like that. Growing up in Canada, what did you see and what did you know about the Cold
11 War? What was your perspective on it there?

12 GB: Some of the memories are very, very vague. I can remember we had the duck
13 and cover up there too. What to do in case of a nuclear attack. I can remember, again,
14 very, very vaguely little radio snippets from the Korean War. I can remember hearing or
15 reading about the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. Which, you know, I don't—"Where's
16 Vietnam? What is that? What is a Dien Bien Phu?" But I can just vaguely remember that.

17 KC: Growing up during the Cold War in Canada, was military service something
18 for sure you were going to embrace or was it something that you didn't have to
19 necessarily get involved in? What was the situation there for a young man growing up in
20 Canada?

21 GB: Everybody had pride of country. I think a—it's a lot different today. It just
22 seems to be there's a select few that have that. To preface a few things in this timeframe,
23 but also to move to back to England. I went to school over in England for a while. So I've
24 shuffled around quite a bit. But when I was in high school in Canada, we were living in
25 Port Hope, Ontario at the time. When I was in high school, I joined the Cadet Corps.
26 Which, you know, you got an Army uniform and got trained by Army personnel in that
27 and got to feel cool. Then when I was old enough, I joined the Canadian Militia, which is
28 like the National Guard. I spent a while in that. Then when I was old enough, I joined the
29 Canadian Army. I was seventeen, went into the Canadian Army.

30 KC: Had you graduated high school prior to this?

31 GB: No, I hadn't.

1 KC: Okay. Now, the Canadian Army as it was at that time, explain for me the
2 kind of structure of the environment that you were in. What were you going to be doing?
3 What units were you involved in? What was it like to be in the Canadian Army at that
4 time?

5 GB: Well, I know that it was a lot stricter than the American Army. I mean,
6 discipline was really strict. But I think the esprit de corps was a lot higher than in the
7 American Army. I took my basic training out at Edmonton, Alberta. From there I went
8 into Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. Spent my time as an infantryman. When
9 my time was up, the family had moved again from Canada down to the States. So I came
10 down to the States.

11 KC: How many years did you spend in the Canadian Army?

12 GB: Three.

13 KC: Three years, okay. Was this something that was a—was it a positive
14 experience for you? Maturing experience for you? How would you describe your time
15 there?

16 GB: I think it was positive in that it gave me a lot of disciplines that helped me in
17 my situation in Southeast Asia.

18 KC: Okay. When did you and your family move to the United States? Do you
19 remember the year?

20 GB: Yeah. I got my discharge; I think it was in '63. Then I came down to the
21 States. Mom and dad were already down here.

22 KC: Why did they move back to the—or why did they move to the United States?

23 GB: I'll have to say I don't know. Moved around a lot. Never did seem to be a
24 explanation for it. I just kinda went along because that's the way things were.

25 KC: Did they move to Tennessee, where your father was from?

26 GB: No, moved to Monroe, Ohio. Dad purchased a Sunoco gas station there.

27 KC: So having been in the Canadian Army, as well as school in Canada and
28 school in Great Britain, what was it like for you, as a young man in his early twenties to
29 move to the United States?

30 GB: You know, to me it was just a different locale to party. To be brutally honest,
31 I wasn't looking at political philosophies or anything like that. (Laughs)

1 KC: Sure.

2 GB: I knew that the beer was a lot weaker. (Laughs)

3 KC: (Laughs) Well, there is that. What did you want to do when you came to the
4 States? You've already had your hitch in the Canadian Army behind you now. You're
5 coming to the United States, you have family here. What did you hope to do as a young
6 man in the United States?

7 GB: You know, just be with family. I came down and I helped dad run the gas
8 station. I really didn't have any aspirations beyond that.

9 KC: Now, again, I'm going to ask you to draw on your background as a Canadian.
10 When you come to the United States, you're looking at 19—what? '63, '64—

11 GB: '64, yes.

12 KC: End of that era. How aware were you of what was going on in Southeast
13 Asia? How aware were you of the level of effort in what was going on between the
14 United States and the countries of Southeast Asia?

15 GB: Didn't know anything about it.

16 KC: Is that right?

17 GB: It wasn't reported on other than little snippets here and there. Nobody paid
18 much attention to it at that time.

19 KC: You eventually, obviously, get involved with the United States Army. You're
20 going to be an American soldier in Vietnam. Can you tell me how that happened? It
21 seems, again, kind of unique, I think.

22 GB: Okay. Well, first off, I'll say that I was lied to. Okay? After I'd been down, I
23 went through all the legal processes, and I became a legal resident. I tried to get
24 American citizenship through my father, but I couldn't do that. Backtrack just a little bit.
25 When an American citizen joins a foreign military, they automatically lose their
26 American citizenship. So when dad joined the Canadian Army in 1939, he lost his
27 American citizenship. Now, in 1946 congress passed an act that if an American had
28 enlisted with an allied military force, they just had to apply, and they would automatically
29 get their citizenship back. So dad did this. He became an American citizen again, but that
30 didn't help me because I was born in 1944. I couldn't become a citizen through dad, so I
31 simply did the process of becoming a registered alien and got my green card. Got my

1 green card and I was advised that I would have to register for the draft. So I did. I
2 registered for the draft. A little bit of trepidation, but they said, “No, you don’t have to
3 worry. You served with an allied military. You won’t get drafted.” I said, “Okay.”
4 (Laughs) So registered for the draft. Went down to take my physical. Getting a little more
5 concerned. Again, they said, “You don’t have to worry, this is just a formality.” “Okay.”
6 Well, they lied to me, because three weeks after my physical I got my induction papers
7 into the Yankee Army. (Laughs)

8 KC: How did you feel about this, Mr. Blankenship? What was your reaction to
9 this?

10 GB: You know, I said, “Well, you know, maybe here’s another challenge in life. I
11 don’t know, let’s give it a whirl.” Because that time Vietnam was starting to come into
12 the fore. I thought, “Well, you know, let’s give this a try. It can’t be anything worse than
13 what I went through before.” I had a choice. I did not have to be inducted. I could have
14 simply walked across the border, legally, and they could not stop me. But I couldn’t have
15 come back to the States again. I guess it wasn’t me to do something like that, to run.

16 KC: What was your family’s reaction to this? How’d they feel about it?

17 GB: I don’t think they were very happy with the situation. Being as that both
18 mom and dad had experienced a lot of stuff in World War II.

19 KC: Did you have any inclination to look at the legal aspects of this and see if you
20 could avoid service in the United States Army since you had already served in the
21 Canadian Army?

22 GB: I made a few inquiries, but there was nothing to be done about it. But a little
23 side note on this, there was a family friend, kind of the same situation where their son got
24 drafted. He was half Indian from Canada. Indians in Canada come under the protection of
25 the queen. So they petitioned the queen to get him out of the draft. I don’t know what
26 happened, but he never got drafted.

27 KC: I’ll be darned. That’s really interesting. Now, you make the decision to not
28 go back to Canada. Which, of course, you had ever legal right to do. So you’re going to
29 join the United States Army. Tell me about the process of being inducted into the Army.
30 Bootcamp—where did you attend bootcamp? Tell me about your early days in the Army.

1 GB: Drafted, received orders to report to the federal building in downtown
2 Cincinnati. There I got on a bus and went down to Fort Knox and took my basic training
3 in Fort Knox.

4 KC: After having been through all of this in the Canadian Army, what was it like
5 for you in the American Army? What was bootcamp like for you?

6 GB: I mean, the DIs (drill instructors) were miserable people. You know, they
7 tried to make your life a living hell. But I'd been through it before and just simply went
8 along with it, I guess. Knowing how far to push the system helps.

9 KC: Expand on that for me a little bit. What do you mean by that?

10 GB: Knowing what you can do and what you can't do. What you can get away
11 with. How you can nonverbally disagree with what an NCO (Non-Commissioned
12 Officer) is saying without causing repercussions.

13 KC: Right. Well, then—

14 GB: And how to get out of work.

15 KC: What types of work did you want to avoid?

16 GB: Anything that caused you hard labor and sweat. Of course, that was a little
17 difficult in basic training because they followed you pretty closely.

18 KC: I'm sure that they did. Well, you have a unique perspective here, having gone
19 through basic training in both armies. Can you compare and contrast the two?

20 GB: No comparison. The basic training in the Canadian Army was longer and a
21 lot more detailed and a lot more disciplined.

22 KC: Did you find that to be disappointing in the American Army? Having been
23 through what you're saying is perhaps a little more structured, a little more disciplined
24 kind of background in Canada.

25 GB: No, it made things a little easier for me.

26 KC: What kind of specific differences did you find?

27 GB: I guess just the simple fact that the NCOs didn't ride as hard in the American
28 Army as they did in the Canadian Army. We weren't pushed as hard.

29 KC: What month did you finish up, if you remember, basic training there at Fort
30 Knox?

1 GB: Let's see, drafted July 21st. So it'd been—so probably mid-September, I
2 finished basic training at Ft. Knox.

3 KC: This was 1964?

4 GB: No, that was '65.

5 KC: Okay, '65 by this time. Okay.

6 GB: Yeah, I was drafted in '65.

7 KC: Alright. Now, by this time the American involvement in Vietnam is
8 beginning to ramp up. Is that on your radar? Do you see that coming on your horizon at
9 all?

10 GB: Yes, I can distinctly remember one day at Fort Knox we were all herded into
11 a non-airconditioned classroom for another lecture on something. I happened to look
12 down at the desk that I was sitting at, and somebody had carved into the desk, "You're
13 going to die in [Vietnamoy.]" (Laughs) I thought "Hmm, that doesn't sound good."

14 KC: That's an eyeopener, I would say.

15 GB: Yeah, yeah. After all these years remembering that.

16 KC: Well, you finish up in basic training in, I believe you said it was September
17 of '65. What did you hope to do in the United States Army? Was there a particular branch
18 that you wanted to go into? A particular part of the service? Are you interesting in—you
19 become a combat engineer. Are you interested in engineering? Are you interested in
20 medical field or one of the combat arms? What did you hope to do at this point?

21 GB: Had no choice in the matter. They picked it for you.

22 KC: Okay.

23 GB: I guess if they found out that you'd been a blacksmith in civilian life, they
24 would make you a cook. You know, there's no rhyme or reason. I guess because I'd
25 worked with my father at the gas station, they said, "Well, he'd make a good mechanic."
26 So that's what they put me in as.

27 KC: So you'll undergo further training here. Where was the next step?

28 GB: Fort Carson, Colorado. There I was attached—or at least I was with the 7th
29 Combat Engineers.

30 KC: Describe for me your time at Fort Carson. What are you going to be doing?
31 What was the environment like? Etc.

1 GB: It was a great time. Colorado is just a beautiful place. It was great duty.
2 Normally, after basic training you got through what's called AIT, Advanced Individual
3 Training. For some reason I didn't have that. They just sent me out to Colorado and next
4 thing I know I'm looking at a tank and they said, "Well, you're gonna be taking care of
5 this." (Laughs) That was the first time in my life I'd ever seen a tank.

6 KC: Well, after all, you did have all that great experience pumping gas in your
7 dad's gas station, so you would know how to operate a tank. (Laughs)

8 GB: (Laughs) Oh, yeah. Yeah. So, you know, I got on the job training, OJT, as
9 they say, in becoming a tank mechanic. I also took a course out there as a combat
10 engineer. So I basically had two MOS's (Military Occupational Specialty). A combat
11 engineer and a tank mechanic.

12 KC: I wonder if you might explain both of these in a little bit more detail. How do
13 you become a tank mechanic? You said you'd never seen one before in your life. How do
14 you go about learning how to work on these things? They're incredibly complex.

15 GB: Oh, they are. You just—just day by day you're out there learning to do
16 different things on it. How to change tracks. The maintenance on them. How to make
17 sure that the weapon inside there are working. How to pull an engine out and put a new
18 engine in.

19 KC: What about as a combat engineer?

20 GB: It was very cursory training, but it was enough for them to enter it into my
21 records. How to run a minesweeper. How to dig mines up. How to blow things up. How
22 to put up bridges, things like that.

23 KC: Did you find that you had any sort of natural facility for these types of
24 things? Whether it was being a mechanic on a tank or working with combat engineers in
25 these various things you'd been doing? Did it come to you naturally?

26 GB: Yeah, I didn't have any problems doing it. It didn't seem to require a great
27 deal of brainwork.

28 KC: Well, where do you go when your time is up at Fort Carson?

29 GB: You mean when I'm finished on duty at Fort Carson?

30 KC: Yes.

31 GB: Or after I'm done at Fort Carson?

1 KC: When you're done with your duty there at Fort Carson. I should ask you this,
2 how long did you spend at Fort Carson?

3 GB: I was there from September to I'd say probably April of '66.

4 KC: Okay, and where's your next step after that?

5 GB: Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

6 KC: Alright, and what will you be doing in Fort Bragg?

7 GB: I was with the 14th Combat Engineers. But go back just a little bit.

8 KC: Sure, sure.

9 GB: While I was with the 7th Combat Engineers in Fort Carson, I came down on
10 orders I think three times for Vietnam. But because I was not a citizen, I couldn't go
11 because they hadn't investigated my background thoroughly. So I know in talking to
12 some of my friends when I came home on leave and with mom and dad that the FBI came
13 by two or three times asking people about me. Again, I didn't think I was gonna go to
14 Vietnam. I got to the orderly room of the 14th Combat Engineers and I walked in and
15 there on the wall was a huge map of Vietnam. I knew there and then I was screwed.
16 (Chuckles)

17 KC: What were you going to be doing at Fort Bragg? Is it just further training and
18 combat engineers?

19 GB: Well, when I got to the 14th, they'd been deployed I think it was twice to go
20 to Vietnam, but they couldn't go because they were just so horribly understrength in
21 personnel and equipment. So when I got there, they were in the process of building the
22 battalion up to deploy. They only had about twenty-five percent of the personnel when I
23 got there, and maybe fifteen, twenty percent of the equipment that was needed to deploy.

24 KC: Right, so they were pretty severely under strengthened.

25 GB: Correct.

26 KC: Yeah. So how long would it take before they became full strength? Or at
27 least full enough strength to deploy?

28 GB: Well, we deployed in September of '66.

29 KC: Okay. Now, when you were deploying to Vietnam, you're getting your
30 orders and you'd mentioned that they'd come up before, but you weren't going at that
31 point. What was your initial reaction to this? I mean, you didn't think you were going to

1 have to serve. You didn't think you were going to have to go to Vietnam. Now both of
2 these things have come to pass. What was your reaction when you knew for certain that
3 you were going to go to Vietnam?

4 GB: I guess a little bit of excitement. I've never been to a place this. Never fought
5 in a war before. Also, a little bit of trepidation. You know, what have I put myself into?

6 KC: How about your family?

7 GB: I know mom and dad were—it bothered them an awful lot.

8 KC: Had you been following what was going on in Vietnam up to this point?
9 Once you kinda figured, like you said, when you got to Fort Bragg, you knew that you
10 were going to be going. Did you start to pay more attention to what was going on whether
11 it was news broadcasts in the evening, or reading newspaper, or following the news of
12 what was going on in Vietnam?

13 GB: Yeah, we were following it pretty closely at that point because we were
14 getting what they considered the best training available, (chuckles) for soldiers going to
15 Vietnam.

16 KC: Now you chuckle when you say that. Can you explain why?

17 GB: Did you ever—have you ever seen the movie *The Green Berets*, with John
18 Wayne?

19 KC: Yes, sir.

20 GB: Okay, well while the things—we helped build that Vietnamese village.
21 (Laughs)

22 KC: (Chuckles) Is that right?

23 GB: That was one of our training tasks. We helped build that. The training that we
24 got, once we got over there, we realized that they didn't know what they were talking
25 about. I remember we had one little lecture on what to do if you're driving in a convoy
26 and you get ambushed. What they said you were supposed to do, if you're driving a
27 vehicle and you're not incapacitated, i.e. meaning shot, drive your vehicle directly at the
28 source of the fire. I thought, "This doesn't sound right." (Laughs) You're supposed to be
29 getting away from it, not going towards it. And of course, the people that said that had
30 never been in the roads over in Vietnam.

1 KC: That was what I was gonna mention. It's one thing to say that, but in practice
2 in Vietnam, depending on where you are that could be an impossibility with the roads the
3 way they were and the terrain the way that it was.

4 GB: Pretty much.

5 KC: Yeah. Well, you mentioned that you were paying attention to what's going
6 on in Vietnam. What about the overall role for the United States being there? Is this
7 something that you bought into? Thought "Well, this is—the United States is doing the
8 right thing here." Did you question whether the United States should have been there?

9 GB: Didn't think about it at all. You know, I guess it boiled down to the common
10 denominator. How is this going to affect me? You didn't worry about right or wrong or
11 what caused it, all you know is that you were gonna get involved in it, and what can I do
12 to make this a little easier for myself.

13 KC: When do you receive your orders for Vietnam?

14 GB: When did I receive them?

15 KC: Yes, sir.

16 GB: Oh, when I walked into the orderly room of the 14th Combat Engineers.

17 KC: Okay, so you knew at that time it was going to happen regardless.

18 GB: Yeah, I didn't get individual orders because the whole battalion was
19 deploying.

20 KC: The unit itself was going over, just a matter of getting up to full strength,
21 okay.

22 GB: That's correct.

23 KC: Alright. So you know you're going. You have some trepidation, but some
24 excitement, like you said. Your family, obviously your mother and father aren't real
25 crazy about this having been through the Second World War. That's obviously a very
26 difficult thing for them to do. Can you tell me about the day that you left for Vietnam?
27 Was your family there with you? Did they see you off? Tell me about that scene.

28 GB: I believe it was about two weeks before we left for Vietnam, everybody got
29 leave to go home. There was about four or five of us that lived in the Cincinnati area, I'd
30 say. We rented a car in Fayetteville and drove up to greater Cincinnati and then met by
31 family members and spent the time with them. Reassembled and drove back to Fort

1 Bragg. The reason I remember that is that one of the people in the vehicle was my old
2 platoon sergeant, Sergeant Young. Who I met at the VA (Veteran's Administration) last
3 year, which is an interesting story in itself.

4 KC: That seems to be very interesting. We certainly want to touch on that before
5 we finish the interview.

6 GB: But when we talk about Sergeant Young, please bear in mind that he is not
7 the one that shot the elephant. I wanna make that—

8 KC: (laughs) Another story that we'll get to.

9 GB: Yeah. I can remember going out with friends and partying. Everybody
10 wishing me well and thinking, "Thank God it's him, not me." You know, "I'm glad I'm
11 not drafted." Then we drove back to Fort Bragg. Do you wanna know how the battalion
12 left for Vietnam?

13 KC: Yeah. Please, tell me about that. I think that'd be interesting.

14 GB: Okay. By the time, of course, we had a full compliment of men and
15 equipment. So we loaded heavy equipment, bulldozers—and I say, we didn't have single
16 tank even though I was a tank mechanic. (Laughs) You know, I got to Fort Bragg and I
17 kept looking for the tanks. They said, "Well, we don't have any. But that's okay. Don't
18 worry about it." We loaded the equipment—heavy equipment on rail and the vehicles we
19 drove to Charlotte, and from there they were loaded on a ship. We went back to Fort
20 Bragg by busses. From there everybody assembled, and we went to—I think it was Pope
21 Airfield there at Fort Bragg. We flew out to California, to San Francisco. Like in the dead
22 of the night we landed, and they herded us onto busses. Busses went to the Oakland
23 Army Pier where we boarded a troop ship, the USNS *General William Weigel*.

24 KC: Okay. Now, this is another one of these new experiences for you, I would
25 assume. Boarding a troop ship and sailing across the Pacific Ocean. You're not gonna get
26 there in a day like many of the people did who went over as individuals to begin their
27 tour. You're going over as a unit and you have a lot of equipment that has to go over
28 there as well. Describe for me what it's like to sail across the Pacific to Vietnam on a
29 troop ship.

1 GB: Boring and miserable. The air conditioning broke down about two days out.
2 It was a three-week trip. Air conditioning broke down. Buckets were placed in the
3 hallways for those who came down with seasickness.

4 KC: Were you one of them?

5 GB: No. I crossed the Atlantic two or three times by passenger ship, so I was an
6 old salt.

7 KC: Right.

8 GB: But a lot of fellas were deathly seasick. It was just boring. I mean, there's
9 just—I had KP (Kitchen Police) every other day. That was the only break in the
10 monotony.

11 KC: What sort of things do you do on a troop ship for three weeks when you're
12 not on duty?

13 GB: You just hang out with your buddies. Some fellas gambled. There was a lot
14 of money won and lost on that trip from what I understand. But I've never gambled. The
15 library had limited resources, so you'd get a book and read it, and read it, and read it. Or
16 in the morning you'd get out and look at the left side of the ocean and then in the
17 afternoon switch over and look at the other side of the ocean. In the nighttime you could
18 go and look at the stars.

19 KC: What were the facilities like there on the ship? I assume crowded, multi-layer
20 bunks, that sort of thing.

21 GB: Yes, I think there's like six high bunks. Odd numbers inhale, even numbers
22 exhale. It was miserable.

23 KC: Well, after this three weeks, where do you come into Vietnam?

24 GB: The first stop was down at Vung Tau. There was an Infantry battalion, they
25 got off at Vung Tau. Then we went up to Cam Ranh Bay. I was in A Company, and A
26 Company and Headquarters Company disembarked at Cam Ranh Bay. There, the boat
27 went up north and the rest of the battalion got off— [Tuy Hoa], I think it was. I'm not
28 sure where they got off. Because I was kinda worrying about my own little thing at that
29 point.

30 KC: Sure, sure. So you're off in Cam Ranh Bay. This is an incredibly busy
31 seaport. I mean, it's hustle-bustle. There're things coming in, there are things going out.

1 It's an incredible place of embarkation, the way I have it pictured in my mind. Give me
2 your initial impressions of Cam Ranh Bay.

3 GB: Well—actually, Vung Tau was the busiest. I can remember seeing cargo
4 ships upon cargo ships just waiting to go in to get unloaded in Vung Tau. There weren't
5 that many in Cam Ranh at that point. It hadn't really—it was just in the process of being
6 opened up. Even the airfield wasn't quite finished at that point. But we disembarked by
7 landing craft. We went down the side of the ship on landing nets, you know those rope
8 ladders. This was terrifying. We'd never done—never trained for this at all. Climbing
9 down the net and into the landing craft where you couldn't see anything. We were not
10 given any ammunition, which was probably a good thing at that point. We'd all seen all
11 the John Wayne movies, so we knew what happened when that landing craft hit the
12 beach. (Laughs) We were wondering, how are we going to accomplish this with no
13 ammunition? I can distinctly remember feeling the sand scraping on the bottom of the
14 landing craft, then the ramp slamming down onto the beach. There was a line of busses
15 waiting for us and a big sign said, "Welcome 14th Combat Engineers to Vietnam." I
16 thought, "Well, this isn't so bad." So we got on the busses. We asked the driver why did
17 they have wire mesh on the windows. He said, "Oh, don't worry about that." (Laughs)
18 We were very naïve at that point.

19 KC: Right. Did you figure out why it was on there eventually?

20 GB: Oh yes. Yes. Then we got to some temporary quarters. You mentioned
21 equipment. At this point we had zero equipment because the boat with all our equipment
22 on it was broke down and in the Panama Canal. So we had nothing other than what we
23 carried with us.

24 KC: Yeah.

25 GB: That was the case for about three weeks or more.

26 KC: Is that right?

27 GB: Yeah.

28 KC: So what are you doing in the meantime here at Cam Ranh Bay?

29 GB: I guess they just found make work for us. Well, we were part of the 18th
30 Engineer Brigade, so I would assume that the officers got together, and they found

1 equipment that we could use like shovels and picks and things like that. Wheelbarrows,
2 hammers.

3 KC: (Chuckles) Right.

4 GB: But it was a good time there in Cam Ranh Bay. They built an EM (Enlisted
5 Men) club. We had semi-cold beer. We could go swimming in the South China Sea. I
6 thought, "This is pretty good." I was getting a nice tan. "Hey, I can take this." But then
7 the equipment came in, got sent down south and it all changed.

8 KC: I'm sure of that. I wonder, during these weeks her at Cam Ranh Bay, did you
9 have the opportunity to engage any of the Vietnamese? Whether they're civilians or
10 military personnel at this point?

11 GB: No. No, not all. We were pretty much isolated.

12 KC: Alright, the equipment comes in and real work is about ready to begin. Pick
13 up the story there. Where do you go?

14 GB: Well, the equipment comes in and the orders start getting issued in that. I
15 find out that I have been attached to 2nd Platoon, who is being deployed down south to
16 Phan Thiet, and attached to the 2nd and 7th Calvary. So we loaded our equipment onto an
17 LST (Landing Ship, Tank) and went down south.

18 KC: Okay. Once you're there, what happens next? You're going to obviously
19 unload the equipment off the LST. These LSTs are big boats, of course.

20 GB: Yes.

21 KC: You unload your equipment off the LST, where are you going to be set up?
22 Where are you going to be headquartered at?

23 GB: Well, the LZ (Landing Zone) there at Phan Thiet was LZ Betty. We were
24 outside of the actual LZ itself. We were kinda on our lonesome on the top of a hill
25 looking down at the beach. If you looked at the pictures in the website, if you saw an
26 explosion—we'd blown up some VC (Viet Cong) tunnels. Where those tunnels were, I
27 was looking down at them from our compound.

28 KC: Yes, I'm looking at some of the photos right now. It really is pretty striking
29 when you see these photographs. Okay, now describe this place for me. What was the
30 layout there? How large was it? How were the quarters set up? Things like that. Describe
31 the location for me.

1 GB: It was just basic quarters. Like frame sides with a tent roof on it. An awful lot
2 of sandbag bunkers all around, which we spent a lot of time in. Just sand. God, it was
3 miserable. Dirty all the time.

4 KC: What is your unit going to be responsible for?

5 GB: Combat engineer support to the 2nd and 7th Calvary.

6 KC: What did that consist of?

7 GB: Sweeping roads. Searching for booby traps. Putting in bridges. Replacing
8 bridges that had been blown up. If you see the pictures there of the bulldozer stuck in the
9 mud, that's a bridge that the VC blew. We were just demolishing it so that we could put a
10 new one up.

11 KC: How busy—what was the rate of activity there in terms of VC activity? How
12 active were they there?

13 GB: Pretty active.

14 KC: Was it primarily booby traps and mining roads and blowing bridges? That
15 kind of activity?

16 GB: Yeah, we weren't involved in—of course, engaging the enemy. That was the
17 Infantry's job. Our job was to make sure that everything was clear when they went in to
18 engage the enemy.

19 KC: Well, take me on a typical day, if you will, Mr. Blankenship. If there was
20 such a thing as a typical day. From the time you got up, and of course, it would depend
21 on the day. It would depend on the circumstance. It would depend on all these different
22 factors. But say on an average day, what would you be doing?

23 GB: Again, it just varied so much. We never knew really from day to day. I mean,
24 you could start out in the morning and, "Okay, we've got to perform maintenance on
25 these vehicles." Then, an hour later, "Get that vehicle running and get out to LZ Betty."
26 You know, they need something done there. There's really not a typical day. Other than
27 they were long.

28 KC: Alright, well let me approach this in a different way then. Because like you
29 said, it's so incredibly varied in the jobs that you would do. Let's say that there was a
30 road that needed sweeping. Take me on one of these sweeping missions.

1 GB: Okay. We really didn't know where we were. If you look at the pictures
2 there, you'll see a picture of someone sweeping a road. Can you see it?

3 KC: Yes, I'm looking.

4 GB: Okay. More than likely we were given an assignment someplace down that
5 road. So there'd been an indication, I would suppose that mines had been planted there.
6 So we would sweep the road before we proceeded to where the jobsite was going to be.

7 KC: Where would this intel come from? Someone saying that, "We think this
8 road may be mined." Where would that come down from?

9 GB: That would probably come from my buddy Dennis Coyne. (Laughs)

10 KC: Okay. Of course, Dennis and I just finished up an interview last week or the
11 week before.

12 GB: Yeah, that's what he did. Officers knew this stuff. (Laughs) Yeah, pretty
13 much. I was at the very bottom of the pyramid. Nothing filtered down to us. We didn't
14 know really what was going on most of the time, other than we were told to do this and
15 go there. Where the intelligence would come from, it wasn't shared with us. I mean, and
16 that was a good thing.

17 KC: Right, it's a need to know kind of thing, and it's not your job to be concerned
18 about that sort of thing. Well, how many people would go out on a road sweeping
19 mission?

20 GB: Probably what you see there. You know, there'd be a couple of fellas running
21 the detector, switching on and off. A couple of NCOs, and a few other fellas for support
22 and security. You have to realize that this was just the platoon. We were there by
23 ourselves. You know, there was only about thirty of us.

24 KC: What is it like for someone who has never operated a minesweeper, walk
25 down one of these roads with a detector? What is it like to be holding that thing and
26 walking down this road?

27 GB: Well, first you say, "I hope I don't pick up anything." Then you say, "Well,
28 maybe it's better if I pick something up." Because sometimes they put stuff down there
29 that isn't picked up. Then if you do get something, you hope it isn't what you think it is.
30 It's a hell of a way to earn a living.

31 KC: Yeah.

1 GB: It just saps you of all emotion, you know. Because all you're concentrating
2 on is the sound coming out of the microphones—excuse me, out of the earpieces.

3 KC: I would assume that there was just a constant sense of anxiety when a person
4 was doing this. Did you find that to be the case?

5 GB: Yes, and really a constant sense of anxiety all the time. Because you just—no
6 matter what you were doing. Because you never knew what was gonna happen. We lost a
7 few vehicles to mines because you can't pick them all up.

8 KC: Let's say you come across a mine in the road. What would be the procedure
9 for you guys? What would you do once it's found?

10 GB: You just dig very, very carefully to see what it is. It could be nothing more
11 than a C-ration can. They would bury metal object haphazardly on a road so you would
12 just keep picking up these odd bit and pieces. They figure, "Well, finally he's gonna get
13 tired and by the time he gets to the good stuff, he won't be able to register it, or he'll miss
14 it."

15 KC: Yeah.

16 GB: You find something, dig it up and see what it is—dispose of it. A lot of times
17 they used artillery shells. Our own artillery shells. I guess they got them from ARVN
18 (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). But they'd bury an artillery shell like a 105 or 155,
19 and put a—take the fuse out and put a detonator in. Then if you set it off, you're setting
20 off an artillery round.

21 KC: These would be pressure sensitive detonators, I would assume?

22 GB: Yeah. Normally a pressure release.

23 KC: Alright, Mr. Blankenship, this is—I think incredibly interesting stuff here.
24 Say you found a, for example a 105 shell that had been buried in the road. You dug it up
25 and you know that it's a 105 shell and you're being very, very careful with this thing.
26 What do you do from there? Are you going to—you dig it out, you pick it up, you move
27 it. Do you blow it in place? What is the process for dealing with this mine once you've
28 found it?

29 GB: Dig around it very, very carefully. Particularly around the nose, where
30 they've got the fuse, to see if it's linked to anything else. If there's another wire running
31 off to someplace else. Just dig around it as much as safely possible, if that's a term you

1 can use when handling something like that. Once you figure out what it is, the NCOs
2 would try to make a drawing of it to take back to an intelligence officer somewhere. Then
3 just simply blow it in place either with TNT or C4.

4 KC: Okay, you perhaps pack C4 around it and then det cord and then safe
5 distance—

6 GB: Blow it, correct.

7 KC: You blow it, okay. Alright, now—

8 GB: Then you get to go and fill the hole in.

9 KC: (Laughs) Yes, that's the other part of it, huh? Now, did the VC bury these—I
10 mean, were their methods the same? Were they very routine in the way they did them?
11 Did it depend on the VC who was burying them on how they would put these things
12 together? For instance, if they were going to string or wire them to another one, say fifty
13 feet down the road. Were they pretty standard in how they would do it or did you have to
14 figure them out each time depending on how it looked?

15 GB: I can't recall. I guess because when my time came in to do it, you're just so
16 focused on taking care of that one that you just take care of it and you're gone.

17 KC: Right.

18 GB: But Charlie was good. He was very good.

19 KC: Now, you mentioned the artillery shells, and this is something that we hear
20 pretty regularly about the American shells that were duds or that they were stolen from
21 someone else or whatever it might have been. You mentioned that they could have
22 possibly come from the ARVN—about the 105s, the artillery shells. Were there different
23 kinds of mines that they would place in addition to the artillery shells?

24 GB: Yeah, sometimes it would just be a large amount of explosives. Or a lot of
25 times they had a lot of Chicom stuff that they'd use—mines. They had a lot of bouncing
26 betties. That's what we feared. Are you familiar with them?

27 KC: Yes, I am. Now, there's mines and then booby traps. I don't want people to
28 be confused that they're the same thing because they're not necessarily.

29 GB: Yeah, that's true.

30 KC: Tell me about—

1 GB: A bouncing betty is a mine, but it's an antipersonnel mine versus an
2 antivehicle.

3 KC: Tell me about finding these types of booby traps. I mean, describe for
4 someone who's not familiar with what a bouncing betty was or is. Explain what that is
5 and explain how you would go about dealing with these when you encountered them.

6 GB: Well, a bouncing betty is—we have to thank the German Wehrmacht for
7 that. They developed it in the Second World War. The bouncing betty is an antipersonnel
8 device that you trigger it, and a small explosion blows it waist high where it detonates.
9 It's filled with ball bearings, and it's meant to either castrate or disembowel you.

10 KC: A lot of the ground troops that I've talked to over the years have described
11 bouncing betty as being the most feared type of booby trap for that very reason. Now,
12 how would these be triggered?

13 GB: Usually by a pressure or tripwire. They could run a tripwire through the
14 foliage.

15 KC: Well, that's something I think that is also just incredibly interesting, and a
16 very difficult thing to do, I would imagine, is finding these tripwires. Like you say,
17 you're talking about people who are hot, people who are oftentimes very tired. Perhaps
18 not as focused as they might be when they first wake up in the morning after doing all
19 this all day. Going through dense foliage from time to time. These tripwires are obviously
20 very, very thin pieces of wire that are used to trigger the detonation of say a bouncing
21 betty. How were you trained, and how effective was this training on discovering
22 tripwires?

23 GB: Mostly OJT (On the Job Training). You gotta bear in mind, again, that
24 wasn't my primary job. I would just be thrown in when they needed some extra help
25 doing it. Training, just talking to fellas that had done it. Then they'd advise you, "This is
26 what you want to look for. This is what you want to be careful of."

27 KC: Do you remember any of those specific things that they would tell you?

28 GB: Yeah, if you're unfortunate enough to hit the tripwire, if there's enough time
29 if you turn backward and throw yourself on the ground. So if you could throw yourself on
30 the ground, you might get by. So when it blows, it just blows over you or maybe you get
31 hit in the back a little bit or some in the buttocks. That's if your luck holds.

1 KC: Did you ever seen any of these go off?

2 GB: Yes.

3 KC: Do you care to talk about that?

4 GB: No, not right now.

5 KC: Okay, that's fine. I understand. Well, let me switch gears here a little bit, Mr.

6 Blankenship. You talked about going down and clearing roads for mines and booby traps.

7 What about the duty with bridges? You mentioned that the VC are out there sabotaging

8 these bridges. Blowing these bridges. What would it be like once a bridge is blown?

9 What would the standard operating procedure be? Is the whole platoon going out? Is it

10 just a squad out of the platoon going out depending on the size of the bridge, etc.? How

11 would it work when a bridge was blown?

12 GB: Usually just the squad would go out. Of course, the NCOs would have gone

13 out beforehand. Assess the situation. Said, "This is what we need." Go out and demolish

14 what was left. Then put up a new one using timber.

15 KC: Who would be responsible for providing the timber? Was it something they

16 were purchasing from the native Vietnamese? Was it something that the Americans had a

17 stockpile of? Where would it come from?

18 GB: It would come in by LST. We'd get just huge bulks of lumber. Quadruple

19 soaked in creosote. I mean, that stuff would get on you and handle these things all day

20 long. You're just covered in creosote. The only way to get it off was using diesel fuel and

21 very limited water to wash with.

22 KC: That had to have taken a toll on your skin, on your body. I mean, the creosote

23 is bad enough obviously and you're handling these timbers. But to have to wash it off

24 with diesel fuel, this is a bad combination. How did that affect you?

25 GB: You felt miserable. I wish the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) had

26 bee over there. I think they could have come up with a regulation that would have helped.

27 KC: I'm sure they could have come up with at least one. (Laughs)

28 GB: (Laughs) Yeah.

29 KC: So on these bridge details, for lack of a better word—the bridge has been

30 blown. Bridge is mangled. I'm assuming you're gonna have to bring in probably

31 bulldozers and things to clear out the old bridge, the damage from the old bridge.

1 GB: Right.

2 KC: And start the new bridge completely anew. Is that the way that it would
3 work?

4 GB: That is correct.

5 KC: Now, you are a trained tank mechanic, as you mentioned. You're not
6 someone who is necessarily trained to go out and find mines, and I'm assuming equally
7 that you're not someone who is trained to build bridges.

8 GB: That's correct. But all you were needed for in that instant was a strong back
9 and a weak mind.

10 KC: Yes, yes. That's what I was getting to.

11 GB: In the engineers, there's the phrase that you use when you're working real
12 hard to move a piece of equipment, it's, "Lay hold! Heave!" (Laughs) I mean, and they
13 still use that today. You get a huge piece of timber and just, "Lay hold! Heave!"
14 (Chuckles)

15 KC: Now, with all of this incredibly strenuous activity for something such as this,
16 whether you're digging holes or you're clearing a bridge or putting up timbers for another
17 bridge, or even the minesweeping operations—we also have to remind the listener to this
18 interview that you're also looking at about 100 degrees, 95 to 100 degrees depending, and
19 high humidity. That might have been a little bit different since you're close to the coast, I
20 guess. But what kind of physical toll does the climate, the geography, and the work have
21 on your body?

22 GB: I just remember being tired all the time. I mean, because after you're done
23 working you've got guard duty. Every other night you have to pull guard. So you're
24 physically tired, you're mentally tired, and you're dirty. You're never clean. You're
25 always running out of things that they could never find replacements for.

26 KC: That's a great topic. What sort of things would you run out of that you really
27 needed to have?

28 GB: I'll give you a good example. I've got a picture of it somewhere. We had a
29 lowboy trailer that we transported our dozers on. It ran over a mine, and it blew the right
30 real axel completely off. There was not an axel, or another set of wheels to be found in all
31 of Vietnam. So we figured what to do. So I came up with the idea, said, "Well, let's

1 just”—we jack the axel up and put a huge chain around it, secured that big chain with
2 some wires so it wouldn't come apart. We ran that trailer with three wheels.

3 KC: (laughs) I've actually been a part of something like that in vastly different
4 circumstances, of course. Yeah, I can see in my mind exactly how that would have
5 worked, actually.

6 GB: Maybe later on, but there's—I found out in talking with Sergeant Young
7 there's another story within a story about that trailer. (Laughs) So it was good running
8 into him.

9 KC: Well, do you care to relate that story? Not necessarily Sergeant Young,
10 running into him. But the story within the story about the trailer.

11 GB: Yeah, we left Phan Thiet, and we went back to Cam Ranh Bay because our
12 battalion headquarters was in Cam Ranh Bay. It stayed there the whole time we was over
13 there. Boy, they had it made. But we had to go back to Cam Ranh Bay and kind of get
14 our equipment taken care of and then head on to our next assignment. Well, I guess this
15 trailer was there in the compound and the colonel came around inspecting because I guess
16 there was an IG (Inspector General) inspection the next day or two. Don said that the
17 colonel came up to him and just chewed his ass out for this trailer looking like it did, with
18 only three wheels when it should have four. And told him to get it fixed immediately.
19 There was just no parts for it. So Don went around Cam Ranh Bay trying to find parts
20 and he ended up at some signal outfit and he was ushered into the office of this major and
21 he explained the situation. The major said, “Well, we can both help each other here,
22 Sergeant.” He said, “We're having an inspection soon as well, and we've got two trailers
23 when we're only supposed to have one.” This is where my memory comes in because I
24 can remember having this almost brand-new trailer come in. I was told, “Sand these
25 numbers off of it and put ours on it.” “Okay” So I sanded the numbers of that signal outfit
26 off, and I put our numbers. I put the number of the trailer of the one that only had three
27 wheels on, and that was driven off someplace and thrown off the side of the road.

28 KC: The Army does have its ways of dealing with these things.

29 GB: Yeah. You know, it was a win-win situation for everybody.

1 KC: Now, you mentioned that this lowboy trailer had the back axel on the right
2 side blown off. Now, was this a road that was supposed to have been cleared by your
3 outfit? Was it supposed to be cleared by someone else's outfit?

4 GB: I don't recall. I have no idea.

5 KC: Well, let me ask you that. This may be a difficult question for you. But was
6 there ever a time when you or your unit, for example swept a road and said, "Look, it's
7 clear." Or "We got everything out of it and this road is clear now." And then, it turns out
8 that there was something deeper that your sensors didn't pick up. That there was an
9 explosion. Did that ever happen, or did you know of that ever happening?

10 GB: Yeah, that happened.

11 KC: An instance like that, would there be repercussions for the individual or the
12 unit responsible? Or would the powers that be look at it and say, "Look, these things are
13 going to happen. We try to avoid them when we can, but we just understand that that's a
14 part of it."? How would that work?

15 GB: I don't know. The repercussions would be the poor bastard that hit the mine.

16 KC: Yeah, yeah. How long would your days last there? How long would you be
17 working on duty?

18 GB: Twelve hours a day normally. Six days a week. We only worked eight hours
19 a day on Sunday.

20 KC: Only eight hours a day on Sunday. (Chuckles)

21 GB: That's not including guard duty.

22 KC: Right. So your routine is very, very full. It's basically a daylight to dusk kind
23 of thing. From what I hear you saying, you're going—you're working on this until you're
24 assigned to do something else. There may be a very rapid transition. Like you say, maybe
25 you're fixing some equipment, then all of a sudden, you're called off—like you said, to
26 LZ Betty to work on something there. I know that you mentioned in your questionnaire
27 that you were quite a bit all around II Corps, I believe you said. So this is, again, twelve
28 hours a day. Then you come back in the evening. Once you come back in the evening,
29 what is your routine? What sort of things do you when you come back?

1 GB: First thing is grab a shower if there's any water left. Go eat. If you don't have
2 guard duty you can hang out with your buddies and bs. If you got guard duty, you just
3 trod on off to wherever your assigned position is.

4 KC: Just around the perimeter, I would guess.

5 GB: Two perimeters. We would either pull guard on our own perimeter, or there
6 was rotation where we would pull outer perimeter guard for the 2nd and 7th.

7 KC: Just kinda taking your turn, I guess. Essentially as it was assigned.

8 GB: Correct.

9 KC: Now you mentioned taking a shower, or not taking a shower. You mentioned
10 getting some chow. What were the facilities there at Phan Thiet like for things such as—
11 for showers, the mess hall, etc. What were the facilities like?

12 GB: Well, the shower—the unit before us, they had built the shower stall, which
13 was nothing but timber frames with fifty-five-gallon drums on the top of it. So what you
14 do during—someone that would get the job first thing in the morning would go and fill
15 these drums up. I think there's probably about three or four of them. Fill them up with
16 water and during the day the sun would heat the water up. They were placed end on end.
17 There would be a hole knocked in the bottom of the barrel with a wooden bung. So you'd
18 go in and you pull the bung out really quick, get wet. Stick the bung back up. Lather
19 yourself up. Then, again, pull the bung out and rinse off as quickly as you could because
20 you didn't want to use all the water. If you used all the water, the fella behind you would
21 get mad.

22 KC: What about the mess facilities?

23 GB: I beg your pardon?

24 KC: The mess facilities. What were the facilities like where you ate? What kind
25 of foods were you receiving, etc.?

26 GB: There was a mess hall there. Again, it was like a tent with wooden sides on it.
27 The food, they did the best they could. But if you're out in the bush—I mean, you don't
28 have the mess hall. You've got the ubiquitous C-rations. I was at a reunion—I go to a
29 reunion once a year with my buddies. We were just talking this last reunion about things
30 we remembered. One fella said, "I remember being hungry all the time." I said, "Yeah."

1 You never seemed to get enough to eat. Because you're expending a tremendous amount
2 of calories just in the sheer physical aspect of your job.

3 KC: Yeah, I'm sure.

4 GB: Sometimes there just wasn't quite enough food.

5 KC: You mentioned being out in the bush. Were there times when you would be
6 out all night or more than one night?

7 GB: Yes, a few times.

8 KC: Can you describe those for me? If you remember them.

9 GB: First off, it's the silence, and the darkness. Because you don't have the bright
10 city lights. You don't have traffic noises. You don't have radios blaring. You don't—but
11 then, as you start becoming accustomed to it, you hear all the little noises that are out
12 there. You know, animals rustling and things crawling around. You're hoping you're not
13 hearing something that you don't want to hear.

14 KC: Right. On one of these times when you would be out for an entire night, or
15 perhaps more than one night, who provides security? Are you providing your own
16 security?

17 GB: It depends on what we were doing in that. Sometimes security would be
18 provided by the Infantry unit we were with. Sometimes we provided our own. It just
19 depends upon what the mission is.

20 KC: Yeah. How would you, for instance, set up a night defensive perimeter when
21 you were out there? Say if security was left up to your unit.

22 GB: I'm going from knowledge gleamed after the fact. We just went where we
23 were told. Okay, you know, "This is where you're gonna be. You three fellas get in this
24 hole, and if anything happens, sing out." From what I've read in my studies afterwards,
25 that these were set up in a very precise manner. It wasn't just holes that were haphazardly
26 dug out there. I mean, they were set up so that there was covering fire and crossfire.

27 KC: What was it like for you? You mentioned the darkness and the quiet, but if
28 you're out there in a hole providing security for that shift or for that entire evening,
29 whatever it might have been, what's it like to be out there? You have to be vigilant. You
30 have to be awake. This is after a hard day of doing your work as a combat engineer.
31 Whether it's building a bridge or whatever it might be. What is it like to be in the foxhole

1 providing security for the rest of the unit at night? Again, this is not something you're
2 necessarily trained in doing.

3 GB: No. Well, first off, it's keeping awake. I mean, because you're so bloody
4 tired. Listening and watching for anything out of the norm. In fact, I'll throw another
5 name out here. I have a cousin—excuse me. I have a nephew that's in the British Army, Sgt.
6 Brett Campbell with the 4th Rifles. I gotta throw him in because I'm proud of the boy.

7 KC: Sure.

8 GB: Did a tour in Iraq and Afghanistan. We talked before he went to Iraq, before
9 he became extremely skilled at what he does. He asked me for some pointers. I told him,
10 I said, "Well, one of the first things you want to do when you go out on guard at night,
11 count everything in front of you. Look at all the bushes and see where they are, because
12 at two o'clock in the morning, they will get up and start to walk." I mean, you can
13 hallucinate.

14 KC: Sure.

15 GB: You're so vigilant and so tired. One of the worst things that happened to me
16 when I was like that, I heard a tiger make a kill. This is when we were up in the Central
17 Highlands. Of course, it's just dead silent. I guess all the little critters knew that a tiger
18 was around. So they'd just go underground immediately. I assume this was like a small
19 deer or something that the tiger got. But I heard the scream of the deer, or whatever it was
20 when the tiger got it. I remember hearing the roar of the tiger, just letting everybody
21 know, "Hey, I just killed this and it's mine." Then listening to it eat. (Chuckles) I'm
22 terrified. I said, "God, what if he's got a taste for American?" There were a few soldiers
23 that were killed by tigers on guard duty over in 'Nam.

24 KC: Yeah, I've certainly heard about those. How close was this tiger to you? If
25 you could hear him so close that you could hear the deer screaming and him eating, you
26 must have been pretty close.

27 GB: Oh, I figured he was probably a couple foot in front of me, at least.

28 KC: Oh really?

29 GB: (Laughs) It's just hard telling.

30 KC: Yeah.

1 GB: You know, it's hard telling. Come morning, I wasn't curious to go out
2 looking.
3 KC: I'm sure. That is very interesting and it takes us probably to a good place to
4 stop here for today, Mr. Blankenship.
5 GB: Yeah. I can't believe—I really didn't think I had that much of a story to tell.

Interview with Glenn Blankenship
Session [2] of [2]
Date 19 February 2013

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History interview with Mr.
2 Glenn Blankenship. Today is 19 February 2013. I'm in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus
3 of Texas Tech University and Mr. Blankenship is kind enough to join me by telephone
4 from his home in Florence, Kentucky. Okay, Mr. Blankenship, you were talking before
5 we turned the recorder on about moving up from Phan Thiet—

6 Glenn Blankenship: Phan Thiet.

7 KC: And attaching yourself—or being attached to part of the 101st. So pick up the
8 story there, please.

9 GB: We had to—our job was to put an airfield in for an operation that the 101st
10 was going to conduct. We got to the area, and we were, from what we were told, the first
11 westerners to be in that part of Vietnam since the French pulled out. As usual, we went in
12 and secured the area before the Infantry came in. We worked on the airfield, got it
13 complete. The airfield was one of—we made with PSP, pierced steel planking. I don't
14 know if you're familiar with that.

15 KC: I am, but could you describe what PSP is for someone who might not be
16 familiar with it?

17 GB: It's long sheets of steel that got holes in it. It's kind of like putting maybe a
18 Lego set together. It's all interlocking. You just simply slide the locks in place and then
19 bang on it with a sledgehammer to lock it in. Of course, you have a level ground that you
20 put it on. That ground has to be leveled.

21 KC: I think this is really interesting here. Can you just take me through the entire
22 process from what you remember about building an airstrip? I mean, this is—this can be
23 pretty complicated work. From the ground up, what was the—what did the area look
24 like? What kind of actions did you have to take to level the ground? What kind of
25 equipment's being used? Give me the whole rundown of this. I think it's very interesting.

26 GB: I know it had to be very complicated. You have to bear in mind that I was
27 merely forced labor. (Laughs) I wasn't there handling the mathematics of it.

28 KC: Sure.

1 GB: But they would send a team in and survey the area. Find the best location,
2 then simply go about leveling the ground with bulldozers. Once you got the ground level,
3 you would lay the PSP down. When that was laid, then the first plane would land and it
4 would have the communications gear, everything that the Air Force needed to control the
5 flights in and out of the area.

6 KC: Of course, you're talking air traffic control to some measure.

7 GB: Correct.

8 KC: Not like we would understand it today, but the principle is still the same. So
9 I'm assuming there's a tower that's going to have to be built as well.

10 GB: You know, I don't think I recall a tower. I think they set themselves up on a
11 small hill.

12 KC: (Chuckles) Okay. Well, what is your job? You mentioned laying the PSP and
13 like you mentioned last time, the strong back and weak minds swinging the
14 sledgehammer and locking the PSP into place. What other sorts of things would be
15 involved in setting up this?

16 GB: Well, it's just the manual labor of hauling the PSP out to the area. Pretty
17 much everything was done manually. Then, of course, there was maintenance on the
18 vehicle and pulling security because we were down in a little valley. Fortunately, at that
19 time I didn't know anything about Diem Bien Phu, so I wasn't really worried about being
20 in a little valley in South Vietnam.

21 KC: Ignorance is bliss in that case.

22 GB: Yeah. But we put the airfield in, and the Air Force came in, set up their
23 control, and they started flying supplies in. The 101st came in and secured the area for us.
24 So we felt well protected once they arrived.

25 KC: Sure. Laying this PSP, about how heavy would one of these particular sheets
26 of PSP be? What would it weight?

27 GB: I'm thinking that they're probably maybe six, seven foot-long, two and a
28 half, three foot wide, maybe a little wider. You know, the weight of them—gosh, maybe
29 [seventy] pounds, something like that. I could go online—I'll go online and see what they
30 say about that.

1 KC: Oh, that's not necessary for sure. I was just kinda wanted to give the listener
2 some idea of the size and the weight of these things. It's gonna require a lot of them,
3 hundreds of them I would assume. Probably many more than that if not thousands of
4 them.

5 GB: Yes.

6 KC: And what kind of work if one or two people handling these things. Just to
7 kind of give an idea of what kind of physical activity would be involved in this.

8 GB: Yeah, it pretty much drudgery putting. But then again, it has to be done
9 properly, you know, because you don't want a plane to land and blow a tire or something.

10 KC: Sure, sure. How long did it take to—I mean, from the time that the bulldozers
11 show up to level off the land, to the time that the first plane lands, how long did it take to
12 set it up?

13 GB: I'm going to have to give a guesstimate here because a lot of things are really
14 foggy. Just moved around so much. One spot and then moving to another and doing
15 different jobs. But I'd say a couple of weeks. It was leveled and then another week or two
16 in getting the PSP laid. But on a little interesting side note, a few years back I was sitting
17 in an establishment, drinking an adult beverage, and started talking to this fella. He said
18 he'd been over in 'Nam. I asked him what he did, he said, "Combat engineer." We kinda
19 swapped a few stories and he said, "Yep, I had this one godawful job. We had to go to
20 this airfield that was up in the Central Highlands." He said, "It hadn't been used in a
21 couple of years, and we had to rip up all the PSP to use again." I said, "Damn, I put that
22 airfield in."

23 KC: Isn't that something? (Chuckles)

24 GB: Yeah, it's a small world.

25 KC: I would guess so. Now, you mentioned that the 101st came in after—when
26 they could be brought in, probably a couple weeks or so. It makes me wonder, what kind
27 of relationship did you guys as combat engineers have with the Infantry units or the
28 Airborne units, etc.? What kind of relationship did you guess have with them?

29 GB: We didn't fight. (Laughs)

30 KC: That's one thing.

1 GB: They didn't like us. We were legs. We didn't jump out of airplanes. They
2 looked upon us with contempt, I think.

3 KC: Yeah, yeah. Well, Airborne is kind of known to do that to the non-Airborne
4 types, I think.

5 GB: That is true.

6 KC: (Chuckles) Well, how long did you stay up here at this airfield?

7 GB: I'm thinking about five weeks. Again, things are a little foggy because of
8 moving around so much. I've looked at my records and they show me as being back
9 down in Phan Thiet for part of that time, so it's a little confusing.

10 KC: Sure, and we're also looking at forty some odd years intervening there as
11 well. We certainly understand that. Where did you go once the airfield was complete? Do
12 you remember that?

13 GB: Yeah, when the airfield was complete, we went down south onto the coast of
14 a place called Ninh Hoa. There we sup—excuse me, we supplied support for the—I think
15 it was the 1st Korean Division. The Whitehorse Division, I believe they were called.

16 KC: What was your impression of the Koreans?

17 GB: Glad that they were on our side.

18 KC: I hear that quite a bit, can you explain why?

19 GB: Maybe kind of like what we were talking about before the interview started.
20 They had a little different concept of how things should be done. (Laughs) Is that okay
21 without getting too explicit?

22 KC: If you don't care to get anymore explicit, that's fine. That's absolutely fine,
23 for sure. The Koreans were certainly known for being very aggressive, it's certainly one
24 way to put.

25 GB: And excellent interrogators.

26 KC: Yes, that's another one that I often forget about. That's right, that's right.

27 GB: But that was—really, down there it was just kind of mundane duty. Building
28 roads, bridges. Really it was—it wasn't a very exciting time in Ninh Hoa, which was a
29 good thing. We had the Koreans pulling security for us.

30 KC: And probably felt pretty secure about that as well.

31 GB: Extremely.

1 KC: Any idea how long you spent there, on the coast?

2 GB: I think I got there maybe May, and then I went home the end of July.

3 KC: So you spent the rest of your tour there at Ninh Hoa?

4 GB: That's correct.

5 KC: Okay. Alright, well that brings up another series of questions. Everybody, of
6 course—or most everybody is going to get an R&R (Rest and Recuperation) period. Did
7 you get a chance to go on R&R while you were there?

8 GB: Yes, I did.

9 KC: Where'd you go?

10 GB: Tokyo.

11 KC: Tokyo. Why Tokyo?

12 GB: That's what was open.

13 KC: That's the one that was available, and you took it.

14 GB: Yeah.

15 KC: Alright, tell me about what it's like to be a young man in Tokyo. Leaving the
16 war temporarily for an R&R in Tokyo, what was that like?

17 GB: Well, this is an excellent story that you've never heard before.

18 KC: Good.

19 GB: I went on R&R with my good friend Nicholai Tarkhan, who passed away last
20 year from Agent Orange. But Nick was Russian. He was born in Bremen, Germany in
21 1946. So I'm assuming that his family was either forced workers, prisoners of some kind
22 of the Germans. Nick was Russian Orthodox in his religion. We got to Tokyo and the
23 second day we come back to the hotel and there's a note for Nick that his brother is in
24 Tokyo from New Jersey looking for him. So Nick called the hotel up where his brother
25 was staying, and he wasn't there. He said, "Well, I know where he'll be." Apparently,
26 this was some kind of a high holy day in the Russian Orthodox religion. So we find the
27 only Russian Orthodox church in Tokyo and we get a cab to take us there. Lo and behold,
28 there is his brother in the church. So stayed for the service and that. Of course, we had to
29 be introduced to the priest. Then also, the bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church in
30 Japan was in town. Bishop Vladimir. Never forget that. We got invited to a party at the
31 priest's house. So we sat down and we're drinking vodka. Lots of vodka. There's myself,

1 Nick, Nick's brother, the Russian Orthodox priest, and the Russian Orthodox bishop.
2 Well, halfway through, in walks a Japanese Catholic priest. (Chuckles) He's got a bottle
3 of bourbon that was given to him by an American pilot. So we commenced on that. So I
4 spent the evening getting drunk with a bishop.

5 KC: (Laughs) That has the makings of a good joke.

6 GB: Yeah. (Chuckles) Well, I'll never forget it because he looked Russian, like a
7 Russian priest would be, the bishop. You know, the big, bushy beard and everything. He
8 sat beside me and of course, he was getting very drunk, and he kept kissing me on the
9 cheek. Then when Nick and I staggered to leave, he blessed both of us. Which, I'm not a
10 very religious person, but that was a touching thing that he did.

11 KC: Yeah, I'm sure.

12 GB: But that's my R&R in Tokyo.

13 KC: Were there any other activities you got involved in? Going down to the
14 Ginza or seeing any of the sites or anything like that?

15 GB: Yes. Enjoyed some Japanese food. Had a good time.

16 KC: About when in your tour did you make this R&R to Tokyo?

17 GB: This was in January of '67.

18 KC: Okay, so you're about halfway through your tour there, I guess.

19 GB: Correct.

20 KC: (Unintelligible) Alright, alright. Now I know that there was another episode
21 that you mentioned to me last time. Has to do with Sergeant Young, and I think there was
22 an elephant involved. Would you mind relating that story to me?

23 GB: Oh, yeah. When we were up in the Central Highlands—I hope I run into
24 Sergeant Young again very soon because I wanna tell him that this is going to be down in
25 posterity. He claims no knowledge of him being involved in this. But apparently when we
26 were up in the Central Highlands, the natives up there, the Montagnards, they used
27 elephants a lot as beasts of burden. Well, the story is supposedly that some sergeant got
28 drunk and shot one of the elephants. It made *Stars and Stripes*. There was an article in
29 *Stars and Stripes* about it because the Army flew a veterinarian in from Saigon to treat
30 this poor wounded elephant that had been attacked so cowardly by the VC. (Chuckles)
31 Now, Sergeant Young says it wasn't him because the elephant was shot with an M16, and

1 all he carried was .45, and we weren't issued M16s. All we had was M14s. So he's
2 standing by that story.

3 KC: (Laughs) I would too. It seems that you have a little bit of skepticism about
4 that.

5 GB: Yeah, but you know, it's his story and he's allowed to say what he wants.
6 (Laughs)

7 KC: So because this elephant was attacked by the Viet Cong, there were no
8 repercussions for the American who may or may not have been involved in it.

9 GB: Sergeant Young left with his stripes. (Laughs)

10 KC: (Laughs) Now, you're staying here at this place with the Koreans till the end
11 of your tour. Do you know—I'm assuming you're aware that the clock is ticking on your
12 tour. The second you get to Vietnam the clock is ticking on your tour.

13 GB: Correct.

14 KC: You're there, what? I believe from May to July—I believe you said.

15 GB: Correct.

16 KC: Of '67. May of '66 to July of '67.

17 GB: No, no. May of '67.

18 KC: May of '67, okay. Are you one of the people who was counting down the
19 time—how much time you had left in country? Or did you just kind of put that out of
20 your mind?

21 GB: Oh, I was counting it down.

22 KC: Is that right?

23 GB: Yeah.

24 KC: Does that include a short timer's calendar, as they called them?

25 GB: Oh yes. I had a short timer stick. Every day I'd cut off a piece of it until there
26 was nothing left. The day there was nothing left was the day I was on the Freedom Bird.

27 KC: (Laughs) I'd like to know, does it give you any sort of comfort when you're
28 whittling away at this short timer stick as it gets shorter? When do you start to feel good
29 about the time that you have left? Or do you feel good about the time that you have left?

30 GB: I don't think you feel good because as time gets shorter, you get more
31 apprehensive.

1 KC: That's what I was hoping you'd talk about. Tell me about that. How does this
2 apprehension manifest itself?

3 GB: You become—for me anyway, you just became more cautious. Became too
4 cautious. I think when you first get there, you're just too dumb to be cautious. Then after
5 you've been there awhile, you know what it takes in order to keep yourself in a secure
6 situation. Then when you get down to going close to home, you just become overly
7 cautious, which is not a good thing.

8 KC: Yeah. Do you care to elaborate on that a little bit? What sort of things would
9 you do that as you look back on it you see that perhaps you were a little too cautious?

10 GB: Just be extra, extra careful where you went. If you're out on the road, just be
11 hypervigilant even more than you normally would. Just suspicious of everybody. Non-
12 allied military personnel.

13 KC: What kind of contact did you have with the Vietnamese? The non-military
14 Vietnamese there.

15 GB: Not too much. Sometimes you'll get a pass to go down to the village, that
16 was pretty much it.

17 KC: What was your opinion of the Vietnamese? Not necessarily the military
18 forces, the ARVN or anything. But what was your opinion of the Vietnamese
19 themselves?

20 GB: Difficult to say. A lot of my compatriots have a lot of different views. As for
21 me, I just thought, "Boy, they're different. My mom would yell at me if I did that in the
22 house." (Laughs)

23 KC: (Laughs) Sure. Well, while we're on the topic, what was your opinion of the
24 South Vietnamese military forces?

25 GB: We figured that the first thing they were taught in basic was how to throw
26 their rifle down and run.

27 KC: Did you have much contact with the ARVN?

28 GB: Yes.

29 KC: What was the nature of this contact?

1 GB: Normally we'd be out on a job and we'd either run into them or they'd be
2 providing some kind of support for us. Just didn't feel comfortable when they were out
3 there. We wanted the Koreans back.

4 KC: Sure. So the ARVN would perhaps be providing security, something like
5 that?

6 GB: That's what we were told, yes.

7 KC: (Laughs) That's what you were told, right. Well, what kind of things, when
8 you think about—when you look back on your time there in Vietnam, whether it was a
9 Phan Thiet or wherever it was, what kind of cultural things do you hold onto as an
10 American/Canadian—I mean, what kind of music comes to mind when you think about
11 it? What sort of news stories come to mind when you think about your time there in
12 Vietnam?

13 GB: What sort of news stories?

14 KC: News stories or music or movies, or anything like that that kinda comes to
15 mind.

16 GB: Well, I guess I remember several songs by The Lovin' Spoonful, because
17 they were just coming into prominence. They had a short career but occasionally a tape
18 would come over with one of their new songs on it. I can remember a few of them. But
19 my—maybe diverse a little bit here, but my true music love is the son of Lubbock, Texas.

20 KC: (Laughs) Yes, yes. The icon out here, Buddy Holly.

21 GB: Yes. Yes, I listened to his music all the time—still.

22 KC: What about the *Armed Forces Radio* in Vietnam? Did you have this going on
23 in the background whether you're out working or whether you're back at basecamp?

24 GB: You know, sometimes. I can't recall listening to it very much. First of all, it
25 was getting a radio. Secondly, a lot of the places we were at we just didn't get reception.

26 KC: Yeah. Alright. Now, short timer, the time is winding down day after day.
27 When do you know that you're getting your orders to go home?

28 GB: I could probably dig around. I think I have some papers on that. Maybe about
29 two weeks before it's time to go you get your orders. It tells you when you go to the
30 quartermaster and turn all your stuff in. Where you report for the flight down to Cam
31 Rahn. You know, things like that.

1 KC: Yeah. Okay, well take me through the process of leaving Vietnam. What day
2 are you leaving? What's the process? How do you get down to Cam Ranh? Take me
3 through the process of coming home.

4 GB: I believe I went by truck to Cam Ranh. There's several of us that were going
5 home. Went down by truck to Cam Ranh. Went through the cattle call and showed all our
6 paperwork. We're given our flight assignment and we're told we'd be flying out the next
7 day. So one day I'm in Vietnam, the next I'm down in Cam Ranh putting on my set of
8 khakis. The brass was all covered in mildew and the khakis were all wrinkled. Got on a
9 plane and next day I was back in the States. Really a two-day process from leaving
10 Vietnam to landing in the States. Then one more day of getting discharged from the
11 Army.

12 KC: What was the atmosphere like on that plane when you left Cam Ranh Bay?

13 GB: Quiet. Once the wheels left the ground, you knew that was it. You knew that
14 you were on your way home.

15 KC: Can you describe that feeling?

16 GB: Relief. Just knowing that the drudgery and everything was over and you're
17 gonna be able to be clean again and have your fill of hot food. And cold beer.

18 KC: Sure.

19 GB: Not necessarily in that order.

20 KC: (Laughs) Right, right. Where do you come back into the United States?

21 Where do you come into?

22 GB: Fort Lewis, Washington.

23 KC: Fort Lewis, Washington. Okay, describe the process there in Fort Lewis. You
24 mentioned that you're discharged almost immediately afterward. Describe that process
25 for me.

26 GB: We land there and then we're driven to the base. Put up in barracks. Then the
27 next morning the process starts. I got—the first thing that they did was run us through a
28 pay line where we were given—I forget how much it was. Like twenty-six dollars or
29 something like that. "What is this for?" They said, "That's per diem." I didn't understand
30 what that was. So they explained. They said, "Well, this is for the fact that you flew over
31 and for a day you were deprived of adequate rest, adequate food." I said, "Damn, that's

1 what I've been doing for a whole year." (Laughs) So after that we went and go measured
2 for a new set of greens. Went through the medical out processing.

3 KC: How thorough was that medical out processing?

4 GB: Very cursory. If you appeared to have all your parts and you weren't
5 bleeding and had no nasty rashes on your body, you were deemed healthy. Then after that
6 we got steak dinner. Steak dinner with all the cold milk we could drink.

7 KC: Was that something that you missed, cold milk?

8 GB: Yes.

9 KC: This was provided by the US Army then?

10 GB: Oh yes. Yeah, it was in a mess hall. Get a steak cooked anyway you wanted
11 it. That was good.

12 KC: I bet it was. The next day you're out processed from the Army? You're
13 discharged?

14 GB: Yeah. The next day, given a plane ticket back home. I forget what the time
15 limit was on it, but we were told that we were allowed to wear the uniform for like
16 seventy-two hours and after that you'd be in violation of federal law because we'd be
17 impersonating a military person. Just stupid things like that stick in the mind.

18 KC: Yeah, yeah. Well, what was the—when you got back home to see family,
19 what was that reunion like?

20 GB: It was good. One thing that sticks in my mind, mom didn't recognize me
21 when she first saw me.

22 KC: Is that right?

23 GB: Yeah.

24 KC: And why was that?

25 GB: A year without sleep, proper food, malaria.

26 KC: So you had malaria while you were there as well?

27 GB: Yeah. Yeah, that's—one thing that always sticks in my mind. Went to sleep
28 that night and mom came in to kiss me. I jumped up and almost hit her. Mom's been gone
29 awhile now. That still bothers me to this day.

30 KC: Sure. I'm sure. That kind of speaks to a larger issue. You mentioned this very
31 briefly a little bit ago, that within roughly the period of forty-eight hours, you go from

1 being in as a combat engineer in Vietnam, to being released from the United States Army
2 living in the United States as a fulltime civilian. I wonder if you could talk about your
3 thoughts on the process. How it worked so quickly, leaving the warzone, coming back to
4 civilian life.

5 GB: You're just befuddled. You don't know where you are or what to do. You
6 forget what the civilized norms are. I think that's why a lot of us that were over in
7 Southeast Asia are screwed up today, because of that. Absolutely no transition. They just
8 simply cut you loose. Thanks for your two years of service, don't wear the uniform or
9 we'll charge you. It was difficult.

10 KC: What was this transition like for you? You mentioned, of course, obviously
11 that this is a difficult transition. But again, in what ways did this manifest itself? What
12 sort of—how should I put this? Events or what sort of things happened shortly after you
13 left the Army and are trying to adjust to civilian life? Are there any things that stand in
14 your mind in terms of how you were treated by the civilian personnel returning to the
15 United States from the war or opportunities for education or employment? Anything like
16 that?

17 GB: I know when I landed in Chicago—flew from Seattle to Chicago and then
18 caught another flight. There was a bunch of people there and they were throwing garbage
19 at us.

20 KC: Is that right?

21 GB: Yeah.

22 KC: At the airport in Chicago?

23 GB: Yeah.

24 KC: How did you respond to that?

25 GB: I couldn't quite believe, you know. It was disheartening when you
26 consider—and the subsequent treatment by the country, both the government and the
27 people, of us. Most of us were just drafted. We didn't wanna go there. We did what the
28 country asked and then get treated like that. I know that even—and they won't speak
29 about it now, but veterans' organizations really didn't want to have anything to do with
30 us. They had to let us join because of their charter and we had the required medals, but
31 they really didn't like us. I can remember being in the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars)

1 with some of my friends and trying to run for office. Every time we'd run for office, the
2 fellas from World War II and Korea would load the ballot box up with their friends for
3 voting. We'd never get in. Of course, that changed after a while when they started—the
4 older fellas started dying off and they realized they had to get somebody in. But yeah, it
5 was difficult.

6 KC: Did you have any aspirations for further education? For employment? For a
7 career? What did you hope to do once you were discharged from the Army?

8 GB: I had no idea what I was going to do. I wandered an awful lot. Wandered
9 around the country. Worked odd jobs. Went back to England a few times. Can you turn
10 the recorder off right now, please?

11 KC: Sure.

12 (Editor's note: interview temporarily halted)

13 KC: Okay, before we took that short break there, Mr. Blankenship, you were
14 talking about your time coming back. You mentioned that you wandered around a little
15 bit. Taking a couple of trips to England. When do you finally settle into a job or a career
16 or a sense of normalcy, if you will, following the war?

17 GB: Well, let's see. I was twenty-one when I got drafted. I was twenty-three when
18 I got out. I just wandered from job to job. I was thirty years old. Was working in a steel
19 mill and got married and started having children. I guess that's when I become part of the
20 American way of life or normalcy, I guess you'd call it.

21 KC: Did you continue to keep up with what was going on in Vietnam? You were
22 out in '67, of course, the war's going to go on for a number more years. Do you keep up
23 with what's going on in Vietnam at all?

24 GB: Yes, I do. A little side note here, I mentioned my nephew, Sergeant Campbell
25 of the 4th Rifles in the British Army. He's had a couple of tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.
26 He sent me an email saying that his—he was feeling a little—I don't know the way that
27 he described it. His recon section of his regiment was going back over to Afghanistan,
28 and he elected not to go because he wanted to further his military career. He wants to take
29 another course. He's a career soldier. He was telling me how he had mixed emotions
30 about it. His friends are going over and he's staying back. I told him, I said, "Yeah, I felt
31 the same thing during the Tet Offensive of 1968." I knew then that my unit was pretty

1 heavily engaged, and I wanted to be there. But as I told him, I wasn't stupid enough to
2 reenlist. Yeah, I kept up with things. When South Vietnam fell, that was a terrible time. I
3 can remember watching the news and seeing the hoards of refugees coming out of the
4 Central Highlands, coming down roads that I knew, that I had traveled very frequently.
5 Very difficult.

6 KC: Were you able to stay in touch at all with any of the members of your unit?

7 GB: Not for a long time. Then, as I started researching my claim for the VA, I
8 found that the battalion had a website. So I went to that and they had an association. So I
9 contacted them and joined it. Started going to reunions and ran into fellas that I served
10 with. So we meet once a year. Then, of course, running into Sergeant Young at the VA
11 was a trip.

12 KC: I wonder if you might explain that scene to me. What was that like for you?

13 GB: Well, every Wednesday I go to meditation at the VA center in Cincinnati.
14 Helps me quite a bit. One day a new member comes in. Big man. Goes around and says,
15 "Hey, I'm Don." "I'm Glenn." He goes around the table and introduces himself to
16 everybody and goes and sits down. We started chatting before things start. He asked me,
17 "Where did you serve?" I told him, I said, "I was down in Phan Thiet for a long time." He
18 said, "I was down at Phan Thiet as well." I said, "Where'd you go from there?" He said,
19 "From there I went up into the Central Highlands and helped build an airfield." I said, "I
20 helped build that airfield too." He said, "Well, who were you with?" I said, "The 14th
21 Combat Engineers." He said, "What company?" Said, "A." This is starting to get weird.
22 He said, "What platoon?" I said, "2nd Platoon in Headquarters." "You're Blankenship,
23 aren't you?"

24 KC: Really?

25 GB: "What's your last name?" "Young." I said, "Damn! Sergeant Young!"

26 KC: I'll be darned.

27 GB: We jumped up and hugged each other.

28 KC: I'll be darned. That's incredible.

29 GB: It is. They said they've never seen that before. But it was a good thing. One
30 never knows—I spent a lot of time in research working my claim with the VA. I acquired
31 an awful lot of information. Testimonial, buddy letters I had about incidents. I talked Don

1 into applying to the VA, which he did. He got a compensation. I'm glad that I helped
2 him. But I loaned him—or I gave him the letters that had written by fellas that we both
3 served with to kind of help him jog his memory and help verify things. He told me, he
4 said, "You know, for all these years I've been having these nightmares and I never knew
5 where they came from until I read those letters." That helped him. He knew where they
6 were coming from then.

7 KC: Yeah. Must have been incredibly powerful for him.

8 GB: It was. It's one of those things—we were leaving meditation one day and we
9 started talking out in the parking lot. Started to walk away to our cars and he said, "Wait
10 a minute, Glenn." He walked up to me, and he grabbed my hand, he said, "Thank you.
11 You've done me good." That was emotional. At that point I forgave him for all the
12 crappy details that he put me on. (Laughs) I asked him why once and he said, "Well,
13 someone had to do it."

14 KC: Just as well be the Canadian, I guess.

15 GB: Yeah, yeah. (Laughs) Yeah, that was a good time—me meeting him.

16 KC: Yeah.

17 GB: It helped reinforce things that I could remember happening. Things we'd
18 done that were just vague memories. I had this little memory of a truck being out of
19 control coming down the mountains out of the Central Highlands. Just one of these things
20 you can barely remember. There's something about the brakes weren't working on it.
21 Don was driving that truck. He said, "I'll always remember, Glenn, you begged me not to
22 get in that truck and drive it. You told me that the brakes were bad on it." He ran into the
23 side of the mountain to keep from going off the steep side of the mountain. But it was
24 something I couldn't remember the details. Little things like that in talking to him come
25 to mind.

26 KC: Yeah.

27 GB: And his denial of the elephant.

28 KC: (Laughs) Right.

29 GB: But we meet once a year. This coming year it's going to be in St. Louis. So
30 we're all looking forward to getting together again.

1 KC: Yeah, I'm sure. Well, I've got just a couple more questions for you, Mr.
2 Blankenship.

3 GB: Okay.

4 KC: They're questions that I ask everyone to kind of wrap up an interview.
5 They're broad questions, so please feel free to answer them however you see fit. The first
6 is, as you look back on it—and this is the Vietnam War for so many people was a
7 formative period in their lives. As you look back on it, how has your experience, or how
8 have your experiences most affected your life as a Vietnam veteran?

9 GB: People ask me, "Well, how long were you in Vietnam?" My answer is,
10 "Counting today?" I think things would have been a whole lot different if I hadn't have
11 gone. No, it changed my life completely. A lot of missed opportunities because of the
12 way I was after Vietnam. I don't know, it's—in a way I wish I hadn't gone. But others,
13 I'm glad that I went. I'd probably go again if I was asked. This country has been real
14 good to me. Like I told you, I'm a naturalized citizen. As we mentioned before, I didn't
15 have to go. Country's good to me and I feel maybe I owe this country one more fight. If
16 they asked me, I'd do it. Of course, I'd have to have my own corps of medics go with me
17 to carry all my medicine. (Laughs)

18 KC: (Laughs) Sure.

19 GB: Can I tell you what made me decide to become an American citizen?

20 KC: Please do.

21 GB: I forget where we were at, but we were getting ready to leave the area and we
22 had some wounded with us. Getting ready to leave, and we came under fire. So the first
23 thing everybody did of course, was look for cover. Where can I go? I looked, all except
24 the medics. They were laying on top of their men. They weren't gonna let 'em get hurt
25 anymore. I said, "These Americans are pretty good. I want to be one." It kinda chokes me
26 up a bit.

27 KC: That's alright.

28 GB: So if it hadn't been for Vietnam, God knows where I would have ended up in
29 this world. But now I'm here in the States. I'm an American citizen. Born in England.
30 I've got ancestors that fought in the Revolutionary War against the English. I've got

1 ancestors that fought for the Confederacy out of Kentucky. So it's a long strange trip
2 from a boy from Devon, England.

3 KC: I might also mention that of course you're involved with a charitable
4 organization that does work in Vietnam. Another individual, a good friend of yours,
5 Dennis Coyne, who we interviewed here not too long ago is involved in this organization
6 as well.

7 GB: Yes, it's an orphanage up in the Central Highlands that's run by Catholic
8 nuns strictly for Montagnard orphans. The Montagnards are the indigenous people of the
9 Central Highlands. We helped train them and then we abandoned them to the tender
10 mercies of the North Vietnamese Communists. But yeah, Dennis, he's part of the board
11 of directors and all I do is write checks.

12 KC: But nonetheless, that must serve a purpose of making you feel better about
13 helping these people out after all of things that have happened over there.

14 GB: Yeah. You know, I look at it as perhaps help repaying a debt that I owe.
15 Whether I owe one or not, I don't know. But in my mind, I feel I do. So it does—it helps
16 me. It's part of my healing process.

17 KC: Well, my final question for you today, Mr. Blankenship. Again, a very broad,
18 general one. But as we continue to look back at the Vietnam War, we're continuing to try
19 to draw lessons from the Vietnam War. What does the Vietnam War mean for us? What
20 sort of things should we learn? Etc. So let me put it to you as someone who was there.
21 Someone on the ground as a combat engineer. Someone who has certainly reflected on
22 his experiences in the war in general, and as a student of history, as you are. What do you
23 think is the legacy of the Vietnam War?

24 GB: The legacy? Gosh. Can I paraphrase my nephew?

25 KC: Please.

26 GB: Okay. When he was talking about not going back to Afghanistan and
27 furthering his military career, his comment was—even though he had a lot of mixed
28 emotions about it, he said, “You know, there's not a single thing that me, as a single
29 person can do to change that bullshit war.” Maybe the same about Vietnam. If we hadn't
30 been there, what would have happened? Who knows? But you need to fight to win, and I
31 don't think we've learned that. We talked a little bit before the recording started about

1 different things. But you need to go in and have the support of everybody and win. Do
2 what it takes to win. I don't think we had that in Vietnam. I don't think we have it today.
3 We're too concerned with niceties. But I know I went to the grocery store the other day. I
4 love Oriental food and I brought some stuff back. (Laughs) It said, "Packaged in
5 Vietnam." I said, "Oh my God." So who won the war?

6 KC: Yeah. Well, Mr. Blankenship, is there anything else you would like to add
7 before we put an end to the interview?

8 GB: No, I've enjoyed this. I appreciate the way that you handled it. Not going into
9 areas when it's indicated that I don't want to go. That's much appreciated.

10 KC: Well, I appreciate that as well and I certainly appreciate the time and effort
11 that you've put into this interview. We'll go ahead and put it to an end then.

12 (Interview audio ends)

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11/14/2019

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[Postscript to interview]

16

17

[I would like to add this to my interview.]

18

[When I applied to become an American Citizen I went through all the background

19

checks and studied for the 100 questions I could be asked.

20

When I finally sat for my final interview in front of an Immigration Officer who could

21

ask me any of the 100 questions and could reject my application if I did not answer to his

22

satisfaction. He asked me "who is the president" I replied "Bill Clinton sir". Looking at

23

my application he asked me when was I in Vietnam I said 1966 to 1967 sir.

24

He then stood up, shook my hand and said "congratulations you are now an American

25

Citizen.]