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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Gerard Otten
Conducted by Dr. Richard Burks Verrone
November 4, 2002
Transcribed by Reccia Jobe

NOTE: 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 Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I'm conducting an oral history
2 interview with Mr. Gerald Otten. I am in Lubbock, TX at Texas Tech University at the
3 Special Collections Library interview room. It is Monday, November 4, 2002. Mr. Otten,
4 you are where, again?

5 Gerard Otten: I am in Kansas City, Missouri and my name is Gerard, G-E-R-A-R-
6 D. Not Gerald.

7 RV: Okay. My apologies sir.

8 GO: It even happened on my discharge papers in the Air Force.

9 RV: Okay, so this is a mistake that's been going on all your life.

10 GO: Absolutely.

11 RV: Okay, we'll make sure we get that right. Mr. Otten, if you could, just some
12 basic biographical information to start out. When were you born and where were you
13 born?

14 GO: I was born July 30th, 1946 in Passaic, New Jersey.

15 RV: Did you grow up there in Passaic or did you...?

16 GO: Well, I grew up in [North Jersey] Wanaque, Jersey. I didn't grow up in
17 Passaic, but I grew up in Wanaque, Jersey.

18 RV: And where is that in relation to say, New York City?

19 GO: It's due west of New York City probably 15 miles.

1 RV: So relatively near the city.

2 GO: Relatively near the city. You can see the skyline of New York City if you got
3 in a good vantage point.

4 RV: You went to elementary school in Passaic?

5 GO: No. I went to elementary school mostly in a town called Wanaque. We had a
6 couple of short moves away from there; one to Tucson, Arizona for less than a year and
7 another one back to New Jersey to a town called Upper Saddle River Township. But for
8 the most part, I grew up in Wanaque, New Jersey. I graduated 8th grade from there and
9 high school from there.

10 RV: Okay. Did you work during your youth?

11 GO: I had a part time job, except for mowing lawns and things, I had a part time
12 job when I was in high school at what we used to refer to as a hamburger joint. That was
13 before McDonald's and Hardee's and Burger King and all of them got popular.

14 RV: How about your folks? What did they do?

15 GO: My parents. My mom was a homemaker. My father was a truck driver, was a
16 teamster.

17 RV: So was he on the road often?

18 GO: Well, he came home every night. He was driving trucks for a construction
19 company in Northern New Jersey. In fact, he was driving either dump trucks or ready-
20 mix concrete trucks.

21 RV: So it was a local truck-driving job?

22 GO: Yeah.

23 RV: Okay. What kind of distinct memories do you have there of growing up?
24 Really, what I'm more interested in is the military service in your family. Was there any
25 tradition of military service in your family?

26 GO: Not really a tradition that most people can say, "Well, my father was in the
27 Navy and my grandfather before him was in it." My father served in the 2nd World War in
28 the Merchant Marines. And as you probably know, it wasn't until about 10 years or so
29 ago that they were declared as veterans of World War II. But my dad had a heart murmur
30 and some other problems and he couldn't get in the service. When the 2nd World War
31 broke out, he didn't want to be one of the males who stayed home because there was

1 apparently a stigma associated with that. So he joined the Merchant Marines and sailed
2 during the war years and was very, very proud of that service.

3 RV: How long was he in?

4 GO: He was in for, I guess, three years.

5 RV: You were born in '46, so a year after he got out.

6 GO: Yeah, he got out before I was born.

7 RV: Besides him, did anybody else in your family serve in the military?

8 GO: Nobody I can think of.

9 RV: Let's talk about your high school. What are your memories of high school?

10 GO: I went to a small regional high school that had maybe 500 students in it. It
11 was a relatively new school at the time. Let's see, I graduated in 1964. The school
12 graduated its first class, I believe in 1959. It was a wonderful place because unlike a lot
13 of the places you think about when you think about New Jersey, for example, if you
14 watch the Sopranos. It wasn't like that at all. It was a very small town. It was basically
15 rural, nestled in between two mountains; the eastern style mountain and the Appalachian
16 type with one main road that ran through the middle of it. We had a volunteer fire
17 department. We had two squad cars in the police department. It was largely an ethnic
18 community; mostly Italians, which the name Otten obviously is not. But, high school
19 experience was for the most part very positive. I was fortunate enough to be an athlete,
20 and played football and basketball. It was mostly a blue-collar town. I don't know that I
21 knew anymore than on person--I think the only person I knew of whose parent had
22 anything beyond a high school education was a fellow whose dad was the local physician
23 in town. That was about it.

24 RV: What were your favorite subjects in high school?

25 GO: My favorite subjects. I would say the science subjects, chemistry in
26 particular. In fact, my high school chemistry teacher was disappointed that I chose not to
27 go to college and major in chemistry. (Phone rings) Just ignore that. What else besides
28 chemistry? I don't remember. I wasn't fond of languages. I certainly had no love for
29 English; maybe some of history. I can't say. Math I was kind of lukewarm about. I don't
30 think I really gave academics much of a thought. In fact, I was probably well into my
31 junior year of high school before I decided I wanted to go to college.

1 RV: Really?

2 GO: Yeah. It really wasn't a foregone conclusion that I was going to go to
3 college.

4 RV: I guess from what you described, that would it be an exception for people to
5 go on from high school to college?

6 GO: I don't know if it was the exception. It probably isn't like a lot of
7 communities where it's a foregone conclusion that everybody goes to college. Certainly
8 people who wanted to get out of Wanaque, New Jersey chose to go to college, and there
9 were a fair number of us, but there was still a very high percentage of students who did
10 not go to college. I mentioned my parents. Neither of them were high school graduates,
11 although they certainly valued education, just the circumstances of the depression
12 prevented them from furthering their education.

13 RV: Did they emphasize education to you?

14 GO: My father more so than my mother; my mother never said a whole lot about
15 it.

16 RV: What years were you in high school?

17 GO: 1960 to 1964.

18 RV: '60 to '64. How aware at the time were you of American foreign policy; I
19 guess the Cuban Missile Crisis and you had the Bay of Pigs; Cuban Missile Crisis, and
20 then early stuff about Southeast Asia. Did you keep up at all with what the United States
21 was doing overseas?

22 GO: Not a whole lot to be perfectly honest with you. Probably the thing that had
23 the greatest impact on me and a lot of people of my generation. I'm sure, would say this,
24 would be Kennedy's assassination.

25 RV: Right. Can you talk about that?

26 GO: Yeah.

27 RV: Tell me what your memories of it were.

28 GO: Well, my memories were, we got the announcement. I was in a last period
29 study hall and the principal came on. Well, he had come on the PA system earlier and
30 said the president had been shot. It was the last period of my study hall where he came on
31 and said that the president was dead. I can remember a lot of students, mostly the girls,

1 crying. Just crying uncontrollably. We were scheduled to play our last high school
2 football game. That was on a Thursday, I think, he got shot. Our last football game was
3 going to be that Saturday. Of course, all the games were cancelled or postponed. What I
4 also remember was this incredible national mourning. TV programs went off the air and I
5 think they just played music on the television, and a lot of businesses closed. It was a
6 very, very sad time. That's what I primarily remember about it.

7 RV: Looking back at that, do think that was a pivotal time for the United States?
8 Some people call it a loss of innocence for the United States when that happened, when
9 we realized a president that popular could be killed.

10 GO: Yeah. I think so. I think prior to that, we were brought up in a world where
11 that kind of thing happened in other countries. We didn't have that kind of violence or
12 that kind of political upheaval. It seemed like that was a triggering point for a whole lot
13 of things that happened in the ensuing four or five years between racial riots and Martin
14 Luther King getting shot and everything just kind of going to hell in a hand basket in
15 Vietnam and the antiwar movement, Students for a Democratic Society and all that jazz.

16 RV: So when you graduated high school, did you have your college plans set,
17 ready to go?

18 GO: Yeah. Some point in there my junior year, I guess I decided I wanted to go to
19 college, and the challenge for me was to figure out where to get the money. So I applied
20 to three schools. I applied to one that I probably couldn't afford but I knew I could get
21 into, and then two others. One of the two others was Rutgers University, which is where I
22 went to college.

23 RV: Were you there for four years? Did you graduate?

24 GO: I graduated in four years.

25 RV: So that would have been 1968.

26 GO: 1968. I graduated with a Bachelors in Economics.

27 RV: So you did experience there in the mid '60s that college life. What was it like
28 on campus at Rutgers in the mid '60s?

29 GO: First of all, Rutgers at that time was an all male institution as it had been for
30 many, many years. I'd say it was a pretty good college experience if you were a young
31 male. I mean the classes were for the most part interesting. The parties were good. Young

1 ladies would flock to the campus on the weekends to meet guys. We'd have parties. The
2 antiwar movement, while existent and growing during that period of time, didn't really
3 have much of an impact on life in the campus. So I did what I would call the typical
4 fraternity boy things. We built floats for homecoming and we had beer parties on the
5 weekend and sometimes we drank too much but we were on campus so we didn't have to
6 worry about driving. Pranks of all variety; everything from building sling shots to launch
7 water balloons to dumping baskets of water off the roof of buildings on unsuspecting
8 passers by; for the most part harmless stuff.

9 RV: You said the antiwar movement had not really touched Rutgers too
10 significantly.

11 GO: No. Not in terms of quantity or volume although there was a tremendous
12 controversy. There was a history professor named Genovese.

13 RV: Yes. Eugene Genovese.

14 GO: Yes. And sometime while I was there, he was speaking at a--they had these
15 events they called teach-ins, and he spoke. The thing I vaguely remember is him saying,
16 "I do not fear or regret an impending Viet Cong victory in Vietnam." That just caused an
17 incredible explosion statewide politically. Rutgers is full of Communists. They had
18 bumper stickers they put out that said, "Rid Rutgers of reds" and a whole variety of
19 things that were just really completely illogical and reactionary but nonetheless, they
20 occurred. For the most part, the mainstream student body was kind of probably
21 indifferent to the whole thing.

22 RV: How much did you follow U.S. policy while you were there at Rutgers?

23 GO: Probably the longer I was there; the more I followed it. When I was a
24 freshman, probably not much at all. By the time I'd gotten to my junior year, quite a bit
25 because we all began thinking about what we were going to be doing after graduation. So
26 we began taking great interest in the war, and I can remember watching T.V. the night
27 that Lyndon Johnson announced he wasn't going to run for re-election. We just all burst
28 into applause.

29 RV: This is March 31st 1968.

30 GO: I don't remember the exact date.

31 RV: That's when it was. Why were you guys cheering?

1 GO: We thought he was an ass just to put it bluntly.

2 RV: That's good. Why?

3 GO: We just didn't think that he was doing very well at running the war. That's
4 why we reacted the way we did.

5 RV: Now, in the 1968 elections, did you vote?

6 GO: '68. Where was I in '68? I don't think I did. '68 election, I was in Cleveland,
7 Ohio and that would have been early November. When I finished college, and I can back
8 up and tell you some other things I was thinking about at the time. When I was a senior,
9 the job market was really quite good. Recruiters were crawling all over the campus. I had
10 several job offers, and I ended up taking a job with Alcoa aluminum in Cleveland, Ohio
11 and I started to work there within a week or so after graduation, which was in May of
12 1968. I was involved, seriously involved with a young lady who had just graduated from
13 nursing school who went to work in New York City. The relationship started to unravel
14 right after that. We really went in very, very different directions. Toward the end, I can't
15 remember when it was now. I still have it at home. I received a draft notice.

16 RV: This was while you were in Cleveland?

17 GO: Yeah. I got a draft notice, and I wanted to enlist in the Air Force, which I
18 subsequently did. The induction date that I had been given was early December, so the
19 draft notice had to have come before the November election. I had a knee problem that
20 developed several years earlier from an injury, and I went ahead and I scheduled my knee
21 surgery for about the same time I was supposed to be inducted to buy time to enlist in the
22 Air Force.

23 RV: So you did that on purpose.

24 GO: Yes.

25 RV: Would you have gone into the Army if you had not done that?

26 GO: Well, I would have gone into the Army, or I would have been one of the
27 lucky guys because sometimes when you showed up for induction, you got directed to the
28 Marines at that time. It would have been one or the other.

29 RV: Why were you set on the Air Force?

30 GO: Well, I'll tell you. When I was a junior in college, I wanted to fly as a pilot. I
31 went to Lake Hurst Naval Air Station during the summer. It may have been the summer

1 between my sophomore and junior year. I can't remember exactly which one it was. But
2 anyway, I went down to Lake Hurst and I took the written test they had for officer
3 candidates for aviation and scored very well, good aptitude, good achievement; so on.
4 There were a couple of real slick ensigns down there who obviously were good at what
5 they did. It didn't matter to me. They said to me, "Do you want to go for a ride in a
6 trainer." I said "Absolutely." So they gave me a flight suit and they gave me a helmet and
7 one of the guys took me for a ride in a two-seater, and I came back and I said, "Sign me
8 up. I'm all set."

9 RV: That's a good hook right there.

10 GO: But I said to them, "You know what, I wear glasses sometimes to see at a
11 distance so maybe I'll have to fly as a navigator or get a waiver," which they were giving
12 at the time. They said, "Why don't you run up to the infirmary, get your eyes checked so
13 we know what we're dealing with and come on back." So I go up to the infirmary, and
14 the first thing the orderly does is check my color vision, which was not normal. That
15 immediately disqualified me from aviation. I was really, really upset.

16 RV: How did you feel?

17 GO: I was broke-hearted. I think I drove home and cried. So I knew that option
18 was closed. So I then went to the Air Force recruiter with a bunch of my buddies from
19 our fraternity and we were making plans, several of them wanted to fly. I knew I couldn't
20 fly at that point. I said, "Well, I'll see about going to OCS." Well, right about that time,
21 the announcement had been made that they were not going to fill anymore officer slots
22 with the exception of pilots and some selected technical backgrounds with the exception
23 of the guys that were getting out of ROTC. So, OCS was closed out to me. I explored
24 Navy, but the Navy would only make me a supply officer and I wasn't interested in that.
25 So I went ahead and I talked to the recruiter, and they about have the value system of
26 your average used car salesman. The recruiter says to me, "Well, if you enlist and you go
27 down to Lackland, you'll already be in, and the odds are a lot better that you'll get into
28 OCS." Well I believed him. I go to Lackland Air Force base May 10th or so, 1969, and
29 I'm in basic training. I was in basic training a very short period of time. I can remember a
30 tech sergeant or somebody calling us all together and he says, "All you smart ass college
31 boys who think you're going to OCS, forget it. You're not." At that point my heart sunk,

1 and I didn't know what I was going to do in the Air Force, and then right around the same
2 time, we were paid a visit by a retired Air Force colonel who was trying to get guys to
3 volunteer to become English language instructors for the Vietnamese Air Force. That
4 sounded pretty intriguing to me. It had some advantages. Number one, I knew what I'd be
5 doing. Number two, I knew I would just be going to Vietnam right away, which would
6 mean I wouldn't be wondering if I went somewhere else stateside or overseas. Would I
7 be going sometime in the future? Three, I wasn't involved with anybody so I figured,
8 what the hell, I'll go. It'll be something to do. So that's how I ended up going the
9 direction I went in. While I was in Vietnam, I again tried to get a commission, and
10 became aware of a route to apply for a direct commission into the Army. I got all the
11 paperwork together. I had an interview before a board of officers. I had a physical and
12 everything looked really good, and the paperwork went off and about a month later I got
13 a letter back saying that that avenue was closed because they were beginning to wind
14 down. So that got shut down. But, I seriously believed that had I gotten commissioned
15 that there's a chance I would have considered being a career officer.

16 RV: It seemed like a lot of doors were shut to you along the way, though. Your
17 color blindness to all the way to when you were actually in country trying to get a
18 commission. Let's go back to your basic training. You enlist, and you go down to
19 Lackland. What was basic like for you?

20 GO: Basic was funny. I took it pretty seriously and first of all, I volunteered and
21 was appointed what they call dorm chief. That meant that I was in charge of our flight. It
22 was called a flight, of 50 guys when the drill instructor wasn't there. I had four squad
23 leaders who reported to me and so I had some authority in addition to having some
24 responsibility. I had some time at home before I went. After I had this knee surgery, I
25 went back to Alcoa, going back now, I went back to Alcoa for a short while, resigned and
26 went back to New Jersey and lived with my parents for about three or four months I
27 guess.

28 RV: How were they about you going into the military. Were they supportive?

29 GO: Yeah. They were supportive, generally. They weren't too excited when I was
30 leaving for Vietnam. In fact, I can still remember my mother refusing to go to JFK airport
31 with us to say good-bye to me. She wanted to say good-bye to me at home. So my father

1 and my older sister took me to the airport. But anyway, during this period of time that I
2 was home, I worked out. I ran. I did some push-ups and sit-ups and things. I got myself
3 into shape. So the physical part of it wasn't bad. Certainly, the academic piece isn't
4 tough. It's just a matter of adapting to the military routine and the obsessive-compulsive
5 nature of the rules. It wasn't too bad.

6 RV: So the physical part you could deal with.

7 GO: Yes.

8 RV: Do you have anything that stands out in your mind about basic training; any
9 memorable incidents or experiences?

10 GO: Yeah. I can remember at night we would lock down and we would have to
11 post a guard. We were in one of what were called the new dormitories. They weren't like
12 the old barracks. Instead of having a footlocker that we locked up, we had what was
13 called a security drawer. We were supposed to put our wallet in there and wristwatch and
14 whatever. If you forgot to lock your security drawer, there was a penalty. It was decided
15 that the penalty for doing that would be that you would have to sleep in your locker. The
16 locker was about twice the width of your average high school locker. So it was big
17 enough for somebody who wasn't obese to get inside of it. Well, it was very
18 embarrassing to me the night I got caught with my security drawer open. So I had to sleep
19 in my locker all night. Needless to say, you couldn't sleep.

20 RV: Did you shut the top of it?

21 GO: No. You just kind of got in. The door was open and you just kind of sat on
22 the bottom of it, and just kind sat upright and tried to rest but of course you couldn't. It
23 was just really uncomfortable. So I do remember that. Of course, I remember the drill
24 instructor shouting and hollering at people and carrying on and a few other minor things,
25 but for the most part. I remember the obstacle course. That was a lot of fun to run. I liked
26 to go to the obstacle course. It was kind of a deviation from the regular routine.

27 RV: How would you say the morale was of your flight there?

28 GO: For the most part it was pretty good. Certainly there were a couple of
29 recalcitrants who had some difficulty, who I suspect didn't do too well afterwards but I
30 never saw any of them again so I don't know.

31 RV: How long did the training last?

1 GO: I think it was six weeks.

2 RV: How would you rate the instruction that you received?

3 GO: I say it was pretty good. I can still remember my drill instructors name. It
4 was Sergeant Clayton. He had the Smokey the Bear hat and he was kind of a thin black
5 man. He was actually less sadistic than some of the others.

6 RV: What do you mean by sadistic? What did you see or what did you hear?

7 GO: Well some of them would just obviously get great joy out of just screaming
8 at people and trying to scare the daylights out of them or making them do things--
9 however many push-ups or running laps or running up and down stairs or whatever they
10 were doing.

11 RV: Was Sergeant Clayton; was he a Vietnam veteran?

12 GO: I don't know. I don't think he was.

13 RV: Did you receive any training from any other Vietnam veterans that you were
14 aware of?

15 GO: Not in basic; when I went into tech school we did. We had a Sergeant Garcia
16 who had been on the security force at Tan Son Nhut during '68 Tet. So he was able to
17 give us some insight into what they dealt with the morning that Tet broke loose on Tan
18 Son Nhut.

19 RV: What kind of weapons training did you have in basic?

20 GO: Very minimal. We went to the firing range a couple of time, maybe twice I
21 guess. But that was about it.

22 RV: What were you shooting? Was it M-16s?

23 GO: M-16s.

24 RV: Did you have a personal side arm? Did you have a .38 or .45?

25 GO: No.

26 RV: Nothing like that. Okay. So from there, you graduated from basic, no
27 problem. And you went to advanced. Where was your advanced training?

28 GO: It was also in San Antonio.

29 RV: San Antonio.

30 GO: It was also in Lackland. It was just another part of the base.

31 RV: How long did that training last?

1 GO: It was no more than eight weeks I don't think. We used a methodology that
2 was developed at Georgetown called the Oral, with an O, Aural, with an A-U-R-A-L,
3 Oral Aural method which meant that we didn't have to learn Vietnamese. We learned
4 how to teach the language much the same way you would teach an infant or a child.

5 RV: Teach English to the Vietnamese?

6 GO: Yeah. So we did our practice teaching with members of the Iranian Air Force
7 who were stateside for training.

8 RV: So you knew when you left basic that you would be going into the English
9 language training.

10 GO: Yes.

11 RV: So that's when someone came by, the Colonel came by and suggested that
12 you went for that. So when you did your advanced, you went directly into this type of
13 training.

14 GO: We had about a four-week hiatus there and I had to go to another part of the
15 base in kind of a holding facility where we didn't do much of anything.

16 RV: So this aural method, how would you describe it? Was it affective or not?

17 GO: Yeah. I think it was. It was affective to the extent that most of the students
18 had studied English on some level. Those who didn't had a very difficult time because
19 the Vietnamese found it very hard to pronounce a lot of the English words. Many of them
20 worked from French-English dictionaries, because a lot of them had studied French. But
21 there was a very high attrition rate because they were really expected to learn a lot in a
22 very short period of time. We had different levels of class like 101, 102, etc. Those
23 weren't the numbers that were used but basically they had to go through these two-week
24 sections if you will. If you mastered the material in one section, you would then go to the
25 subsequent higher-level section. There were maybe eight of them that they had to get
26 through in order to graduate. What percentage got through all eight, I couldn't tell you
27 but it wasn't that high. It was certainly less than 50%.

28 RV: How did the Iranians do in San Antonio?

29 GO: They did pretty well, but they were officers, and I think most of them had
30 studied English before that. I remember socializing with them, going out to eat, what

1 have you, or going down the riverwalk in San Antonio, and they had a much better grasp
2 of English than most of the Vietnamese that I worked with.

3 RV: What was your basic daily routine in advanced training like?

4 GO: We didn't stay in the barracks first of all. We stayed in a room with two
5 other guys so it was a room with three. We'd get up in the morning, put our uniforms on.
6 There was very little of the military, very little of the typical military routine. We would
7 go to a classroom. We had a civilian instructor, and we would do our work. I know we
8 had--I can't remember what period of time it was, maybe a week or two weeks. I can't
9 remember if they blocked it out that way or if we had parts of each day that were blocked
10 out for the things we had to prepare for, for combat orientation. The operative word there
11 is "combat orientation." It wasn't combat training. So we had some first aid, we had some
12 very minimal hand-to-hand stuff. We had some other types of maneuvers where you're
13 crawling on your hands and knees. They called them scribbits or something. I can't
14 remember what they even called them. We had more M-16 training. We had a little of
15 survival orientation. I can't remember the rest of them but they were that kind of thing.

16 RV: Was that kind of training adequate for you once you got to Vietnam looking
17 back at it? Was it enough or do you think you should have had more?

18 GO: Well, it was enough given what we had to do, but I think if we ran into any
19 real unusual situation that required us to perform outside our normal role with the
20 exception of squeezing a trigger on an M-16, I don't think we could have done much. I'm
21 not sure I could have survived in the jungle with the training I had. It was just an
22 awareness of certain things that one has to do, but in terms of any real, solid training, no.
23 What would I know in first aid? I could probably put some compression on a bullet
24 wound and hold the blood flow back, but beyond that, I don't know.

25 RV: So how much of this training did you have, this combat orientation?

26 GO: I think it was only a week. I mean it really was very superficial compared to
27 what one would really require if they were in a combat role.

28 RV: So you spent most of your time doing the language training.

29 GO: Yeah.

30 RV: So this goes on for, you said, about eight weeks and this is in 1969. Is that
31 correct?

1 GO: Is that correct?

2 RV: Okay. The United States was getting ready, we had already entered the Peace
3 Talks with Paris, and we were approaching the Vietnamization time within a year or so.
4 Nixon's in the White House. What were you following about the Vietnam War at this
5 poing?

6 GO: This whole effort really was part of the Vietnamizaiton.

7 RV: Is that how they described it to you?

8 GO: Yeah. Certainly I was following what was going on. We had guys who were
9 in ROTC for example who graduated before I did. We were very much aware of the
10 probability that they were going over. Certainly I was aware of the war.

11 RV: Of course, but U.S. policy, did you think Vietnamization was a good idea as
12 you had it described to you at that point?

13 GO: I felt it was a good idea to the extent that it seemed like a way for us to
14 extract ourselves from the quagmire, recognizing that we couldn't maintain a
15 commitment over there forever.

16 RV: This Sergeant Sanchez...

17 GO: Garcia.

18 RV: Garcia. I'm sorry. What did he tell you about his experiences there?

19 GO: Well, the one thing I do remember is him talking about the morning of Tet,
20 and he said that it was unbelievable to him that they got up and he said all these, I guess,
21 thousands of Viet Cong had kind of crawled in overnight through elephant grass near the
22 base. He said all of the sudden they just kind of stood up and they were all carrying AK-
23 47s or rocket propelled grenades or whatever the hell they had. I don't know what they
24 had. He said they just came. And he was part of what was called a quick reaction team,
25 which was a team of 12 guys. And I guess they had multiple quick reaction teams, but he
26 was part of this one, which had like three jeeps, nine riflemen, a grenadier and two
27 machine gunners or something like that. He said they had to quickly get themselves out to
28 a position to defend the base. That's the one story that I remember quite vividly.

29 RV: What part of the training did he take place in for you? Was he the combat
30 orientation part?

31 GO: Yeah.

1 RV: Looking back at your advanced training, was there anything that you wished
2 they had told you about or talked with you about in training that you didn't get?

3 GO: For me, no. I can't say there was anything in particular that I got over there
4 and said, gee, I wish I knew this.

5 RV: So when did you find out you were going to Vietnam? I guess you knew all
6 along.

7 GO: I knew all along I was going.

8 RV: After you advanced training was over, you went directly or did you have
9 time off before you went over?

10 GO: I had some time off. I went home for about two weeks I guess.

11 RV: How did your family feel about you knowing that you were going into a war
12 zone?

13 GO: They were anxious. I recall telling you my mother's reaction. She kind of
14 didn't want to deal with it. My father wasn't, certainly he commented to somebody at one
15 point that he couldn't see his son going over *there* to die for *that*, which I guess was his
16 way of saying that he didn't think it was worth American lives to go to Vietnam. For me
17 personally, I can remember saying good-bye to him at the airport. He and I were not real
18 close. He had a bad drinking problem, which he dealt with before I went, but nonetheless,
19 it kind of tarnished a lot of my high school years. He shook my hand and I don't know
20 that we hugged or not and he just said, "Keep you head down."

21 RV: How many sisters and brothers did you have?

22 GO: I've got two sisters, one older, one younger. The older one was already
23 married. The younger one was in high school.

24 RV: How did they feel about you going over?

25 GO: You know, I don't know. I honestly don't know.

26 RV: Have you talked to them about it since?

27 GO: No.

28 RV: Are your parents still living?

29 GO: No. They both died about 10 years ago.

30 RV: Okay. How did you feel going into the war zone?

1 GO: I volunteered for it so it wasn't a case of me saying I wish they weren't
2 sending me. I was curious. I was, hell, I was 22 years old. I didn't really give a whole lot-
3 I mean, I wasn't going over there as in infantry man, so I really didn't think of myself as
4 going into a real treacherous situation compared to somebody who was in a few days
5 going to be out in the jungle aside from having some apprehension and being aware that
6 there were dangers there. While I was in tech school, for example, one of our teaching
7 facilities in Cholon was attacked by a car bomb. There were some injuries, but no
8 fatalities. Certainly I was aware that one could get hurt over there.

9 RV: Could you describe to me the process by which you left the country?

10 GO: Yeah. I flew commercial flight from JFK to San Francisco International and
11 then went to Travis, Air Force Base, which was just mobbed. It was unbelievable. I
12 couldn't believe how many GIs were there. There were returning flights with guys
13 coming back from returning--coming back. Then there were guys waiting to rendezvous
14 to take departing flights. I remember waiting around for what seemed like an awful long
15 time before our flight left. It left, probably three four in the morning, something like that
16 and we were all pretty tired and by that time you were pretty grubby because you'd been
17 in the same clothes. We took the global route. There were two routes apparently that went
18 out of Travis. One was the global route and one was via Hawaii. We went via Alaska. We
19 flew Alaska and then Yukota Air Base in Japan and then on to Tan Son Nhut and Saigon.
20 The trip was basically uneventful. They served us the same food over and over again-
21 chicken and apples or something like that. One memory I have though is there were, of
22 course, there were black troops on the plane and they had these little cassette recorders,
23 and they had Motown music and at one point there were several of them up in the aisle
24 ways dancing with the stewardesses. It was World Airways or something that was a
25 government charter. They were just having a great time. It was really kind of funny.

26 RV: I was going to ask, what was the mood on the plane like. I guess that answers
27 part of that.

28 GO: Well, it was different for everybody. I think everybody had their own mood.
29 I mean those guys were doing their thing, and there were guys who were going back for a
30 second tour or third tour who were very business like who were probably people who
31 were very pensive and looking out the window and kind of wondering what they were

1 getting into. Because we were all from different branches of the service and all going to
2 do different jobs so everybody was facing something very, very different.

3 RV: Were these all Air Force personnel?

4 GO: No, all branches of the service.

5 RV: What was it like when you landed at Tan Son Nhut, and you got off the
6 plane?

7 GO: Hot. I couldn't believe how hot it was. It was like walking into a steam bath.
8 We were just kind of looking around and we were, I guess there were buses waiting for
9 us to process us in country. We drove through some local traffic. I don't remember much
10 about it other than seeing all the cyclos and the little motor scooters they used to ride and
11 military vehicles and of course you see bunkers. We went to, I guess, we went to MACV
12 and we were processed in. We were given uniforms and weapons and helmets and some
13 ammunition. Then we stayed, that was October 22, 1969. We were billeted from October
14 through just after Thanksgiving in Cholon. It was an old French hotel. It certainly didn't
15 look anything like the Omni. We were on a 7th floor walk up in a room. Three of us
16 stayed in this room and it was about the size of your average college dorm room. It did
17 not have potable water in it. I can remember, I guess they were geckoes, some kind of
18 little lizards, and they would be running around the ceiling. Guys would lie in their bunks
19 with rubber bands and try to shoot them down.

20 RV: Was it air-conditioned?

21 GO: No. It was air-conditioned, but not with cool air. No. It wasn't air-
22 conditioned.

23 RV: Were you all together with the people that were going to be the language
24 training or was this separate personnel?

25 GO: Well, our roommates were, but everybody that stayed in that building did
26 not. They were all different guys. We would be transported every morning by bus from
27 there to what was called JGS compound which was right next to Tan Son Nhut and
28 MACV and JGS compound was nearby. We would go by bus through the city and out.
29 There were a lot of the troops that were billeted down in there. Around from the corner
30 from us there was a building that had mostly Koreans in it. While we were there, some
31 kids tried to blow the building up. They had a wagon full of plastique explosives.

1 Fortunately, the guard on duty saw the kid pull the--there as a cord you could pull for the
2 fuse, and the guard saw the kid get ready to do this and the guard ran up and he grabbed--
3 there was a small charge sitting on top of a larger charge, and the guard had the presence
4 of mind or the lunacy to grab the charge and he threw it. The small charge exploded and
5 it blew out all the windows in the building, but fortunately, the large charge didn't
6 explode, which probably would have taken out the whole front of the building. I guess
7 that's one of the reasons why they moved us because security was a concern down there.

8 RV: How far along were you when this incident happened?

9 GO: Probably in the first month I was there.

10 RV: How did that make you feel about your time there?

11 GO: Do you want me to tell you where I was when that happened?

12 RV: Sure. Don't tell me you were across the street.

13 GO: No. I mean I was around the corner. I was less than a hundred yards away,
14 but on the ground floor of our building was a bar. I was in the bar. It certainly drove
15 home the point that there was bad things that could happen to you, even being in a "non-
16 combatant role."

17 RV: When you first got there, what your impression of the indigenous population,
18 that first month you were at this hotel, so called hotel?

19 GO: Of the indigenous population?

20 RV: Yeah. Just of the Vietnamese there in Saigon. What were your impressions of
21 them and the city?

22 GO: Well, it had a unique smell. It probably had nothing to do with the war as
23 much as it did the foods that they cook and so on.

24 RV: I can vouch for that, yes.

25 GO: I didn't look at them as gooks, if you will, the way some of the guys did. I
26 felt that they weren't terribly sophisticated, and didn't really--how do I put it? I think they
27 tolerated us. Some of them appreciated us. Some of them didn't trust us for a lot of
28 reasons, some of which were good. They were trying to survive. I learned in the course of
29 the year that I was there that there were all different kinds of people just as there are here.
30 Including, I made some very good friends over there who were Vietnamese. So, I didn't

1 mistreat them. The ones I got to know a little bit, I liked quite a bit. I really can't say
2 much more about it.

3 RV: What did you think about Saigon?

4 GO: I heard it described as a modern day version of Sodom and Gomorrah. It had,
5 as you know, it had a little bit of everything. It had some degree of sophistication. It had,
6 certainly there were prostitutes all over. There were drug dealers all over. There were
7 opium dens. If you wanted to get involved in the black market you could do that. It could
8 be a dangerous place. There were always concerns about terrorists around. I can
9 remember another time I was at another place, actually it was another bar. But it was
10 military; it wasn't a Vietnamese bar. It was inside one of these facilities. A Vietnamese
11 guy, a Vietnamese gentleman came in and he was carrying a little satchel, and he put it
12 down and he disappeared. The three of us or four of us sitting around the table, after ten
13 or fifteen minutes started getting worried saying, "Is there something in the satchel that
14 we need to be concerned about?"

15 RV: Obviously, you guys identified this guy and watched him.

16 GO: Yeah.

17 RV: Was that normal?

18 GO: Yeah. You developed a very healthy sense of paranoia. We were trained and
19 told never to walk in groups larger than three, and to always be aware of your
20 surroundings. So, the longer you're there, the more you begin to look, watch your
21 peripheral, look behind you, look for things that might be suspicious. Because that's what
22 you'd have to do. We'd have orientations by the EOD team, for example. In fact, the day
23 I got there and reported to work, they had an orientation for us there, and a mail truck
24 came in that had a plastique explosive that was tucked in the wheel well. Fortunately, the
25 fuse had fallen off. Sometime after that, there was a hand grenade that got put in the
26 toilet. It was placed in such a way that the spoon--you know what the spoon is on a hand
27 grenade- that the weight of the hand grenade was holding the spoon down, but it was set
28 so that when you flushed the toilet, the hand grenade would get dislodged, roll over, the
29 spoon would fly off and the grenade would explode. There was all kinds of bizarre things
30 like that; cigarette lighters that were packed with plastique explosives, and somebody
31 riding around with a lambretta with a claymore mine in the back. There were all those

1 kind of things. Another couple was riding around on--a man and a woman on a scooter,
2 and they would be riding down the street and she would pull out a .45 and find some
3 unsuspecting, usually an American on the side of the street and just blow them away as
4 they drove by. So you had to be alert, at least for those things.

5 RV: What happened with the satchel in this bar?

6 GO: It was nothing.

7 RV: Did you guys get up and go check it?

8 GO: No. He came back. He finally came back, so we felt better.

9 RV: When you first got in country, describe going to your job and what that
10 entailed.

11 GO: Well, as I told you, we took a military bus everyday. We would wait inside.
12 The bus would pull up. It was one of these ones with the cages on the side. So a guy
13 would run out in the middle of the street with an M-16, stop all the traffic. We'd get on
14 the bus and the bus would take off. It took a different route everyday. We would go to
15 this Vietnamese compound, and we taught in old Quonset huts. Corrugated metal and
16 they had windows that you would prop open with a stick. They had no glass in them.
17 They were just metal things. The Vietnamese would march there from a local tent
18 compound where they stayed. They lived in tents about a mile away, I guess. We had two
19 shifts. We had morning shift and an afternoon shift. The morning shift started, 7:00, 7:30
20 or so. Then we had our classes assigned. We had some guys who were extra and some of
21 them would pull guard duty in some bunkers we had around the perimeter and other guys
22 would just kind of hang out. We'd do our shift and then we'd take buses back.

23 RV: Okay.

24 GO: That was really the extent of it.

25 RV: Did you find the work pretty easy or was it challenging?

26 GO: It was challenging. We all took it fairly seriously. We wanted to do a good
27 job, so it was challenging. There was something different all the time and you had to use
28 a lot of creativity. Everything couldn't come out of the book. I remember having to do a
29 lot of pantomime and drawing pictures and acting things out to get the point across with
30 regard to certain words.

31 RV: How adept were the Vietnamese at understanding?

1 GO: They could figure it out. Those who couldn't would rely on those who could
2 to tell them in Vietnamese what we were trying to convey and then they would get it and
3 they would go from there.

4 RV: About how many students did you have in your classes?

5 GO: Ten, maybe.

6 RV: Was that a normal size?

7 GO: I would say that was about normal size. I've got some pictures of some the
8 guys and I would say it was about ten.

9 RV: Did you get to know your students at all, personally or did you kind of bring
10 them in and once they passed one level they move on and another group came in?

11 GO: I got to know some of them. There was one in particular who, one day started
12 talking to me because they always wanted to know about the United States. Where are
13 you from? So you would draw a map, do a rough map of the United States up on the
14 board and then you'd show where you were from and so on. I remember telling this one
15 group early on that I was from New Jersey. This one young fellow, his name was Ngia,
16 N-G-I-A, I think, said, "My sister was in New Jersey." I figured, oh yeah, right buddy.
17 He said, "Yeah. She went to microwave school for ITT."

18 RV: Microwave school.

19 GO: Yeah. Well, he persuaded me to come visit his sister and his brother-in-law,
20 who didn't live very far from where we were. Sure enough, his sister did go to the United
21 States and it was some communications school for ITT in New Jersey. His brother-in-law
22 was a pilot for Air Vietnam, which was a commercial carrier at the time who was very,
23 very conversant in English and knew more about what was going on than I did. The guy
24 religiously read *Time* and *Newsweek* every week and was very, very interesting and
25 somebody who I got to know and like quite a bit. They were middle-class Vietnamese.
26 They were very different than a lot of the other people. He had a car and of course he was
27 a pilot and they had a little child and they would periodically invite me to eat. I would go
28 over to eat and became good friends with them. In fact, we exchanged gifts when I left
29 the country, and had a conversation with them about what they would do if the South
30 would fall. He said that he couldn't see himself staying there, and if it looked like the
31 South was going to fall, they would leave the country. After the South fell, I tried on

1 numerous occasions to find out what happened to them and never could as recently as
2 during this past year.

3 RV: Really?

4 GO: Yeah. I could never find out what happened to them. It's been an unresolved
5 issue for me for 30 years.

6 RV: What avenues have you take to find him?

7 GO: I've tried to contact through the International Red Cross. They couldn't find
8 them. I've gone to Vietnamese organizations on the Internet and asked them for advice
9 and given them names. That didn't work. I tried writing the U.S. Embassy in Ho Chi
10 Minh city. I never even got a reply from them. I tried the Vietnamese Embassy in
11 Washington and didn't get a reply from them. I've got a friend who's an editor for *USA*
12 *Today* and asked him if he had any suggestions. He's given me a name of a woman who
13 heads up the Vietnamese Bureau who herself is Vietnamese and I might try that.

14 RV: Do you think that your experience of trying to track down Vietnamese that
15 you guys got to know there, do you think that's common? Have you heard of this
16 happening with other Vietnam veterans?

17 GO: No. But I don't talk to too many people about it, so I don't know. I think
18 there are some, yeah. But how many there are, I don't know. I think a lot of guys just
19 never got to know any or if they did know any, didn't want to know them after they came
20 home.

21 RV: Is this the only family that you got to know?

22 GO: Yes.

23 RV: Did any of your colleagues look down upon you kind of socializing and
24 getting to know these people personally?

25 GO: No.

26 RV: How did they feel about it then?

27 GO: I don't recall them expressing any opinion one way or the other.

28 RV: You had free reign to basically come and go as you pleased with going to
29 visit them or not or did your superior officers tell you to only go once a week?

30 GO: No. Our superior officers never saw us except when we were at work. No.
31 We had free reign within the limits of any curfew that was in existence.

1 RV: You did have a curfew?

2 GO: We did have a curfew.

3 RV: What was that?

4 GO: You couldn't be on the streets of Saigon after I think it was 10:00 at night
5 until like 6:00 in the morning, unless you were in a military vehicle of some type doing
6 some military work.

7 RV: Going back to your classroom experience, what teaching methods did you
8 think worked best with the Vietnamese teaching them English? You said were drawing
9 stuff on the board and you strayed a lot from the curriculum.

10 GO: Yeah. Well, certainly pantomime, repetition was important. They had some
11 difficulty, for example the letter P as in Peter or peanut butter; they didn't have a
12 comparable formation of their mouth to do that. We would do things like tear up small
13 pieces of paper and put them between them between their lips and form the "puh" or the
14 puff to blow them out. We would do things like that. That was the one that stuck out in
15 my mind the most. There may have been others. A lot of role playing, reading back and
16 forth; one person might be a customer in a restaurant and another might be the waiter or
17 waitress and have them role play and recite a script.

18 RV: Were these Vietnamese Air Force officers or were they just enlisted
19 personnel in the Air Force?

20 GO: No. We were dealing with enlisted. I guess they were enlisted. Yeah they
21 were enlisted. But they were fellows who were going to become either, subsequently
22 could go to officer school I guess for the Vietnamese Air Force because they became
23 everything from radio technicians to helicopter door gunners to helicopter mechanics. I
24 guess some of them eventually maybe became helicopter pilots. I don't think we saw
25 anybody who would have been a fixed wing kind of person. But they were subsequently
26 sent--those who completed the training were subsequently sent to the United States to
27 technical schools.

28 RV: And then back to Vietnam?

29 GO: How aware were they of what was happening as far as U.S. policy? Did they
30 understand Vietnamization and what was the transference of power?

1 GO: I think they did. I don't recall ever getting into a conversation with them
2 about it. But I think they did.

3 RV: Were you able to talk politics with them at all?

4 GO: No. Not in any real sense.

5 RV: I guess no if you're teaching in English. You couldn't really have much
6 conversation with the. How about with your friend's family? You said his brother was
7 pretty conversant in English and his sister had been over here. Were you able to talk with
8 them about overall U.S. policy?

9 GO: A little bit. I guess that's where certainly they were aware that we were
10 pulling out of the country, and that they would have to fend for themselves. I think they
11 had some apprehensions about it. They had remembered. I guess one of the concerns I've
12 had about them over the years not knowing if they were alive or whatever it was, would
13 they be sent of to a re-education camp? I don't think they would have been seen as
14 supporters of the communist regime, because they really were privileged in many
15 regards. I don't know. I can't guess.

16 RV: What do you think their attitude was of, I guess, the Vietnamese in general? I
17 guess you could start with your students and go out from there if you have any other
18 examples or something to draw from. But what was their attitude toward the Americans
19 who were there? This was late in the war. Did you sense anything that they were thinking
20 or feeling about the American presence?

21 GO: Wow. I just don't remember. I really don't. I don't recall anything that was
22 startling. I think that for the most, at least those of us who were doing what we were
23 doing, I think they for the most part liked us. Whether or not they generally like
24 American GIs, I can't say.

25 RV: You said they were really interested in what was going on in the United
26 States and what the United States was like.

27 GO: Yeah.

28 RV: What would they ask about the United States?

29 GO: Oh, about your family or how big is your home? They were really interested
30 in a lot of the material things. Did you have a car? I remember getting into a conversation

1 with them about snow one time. They just imagined what snow was like. It's hard for me
2 to remember anything else.

3 RV: You said you were stationed at this hotel for one month. Where were you
4 billeted after that?

5 GO: After that we were moved to MACV compound which is right next to Tan
6 Son Nhut.

7 RV: What were your quarters like there?

8 GO: Barracks style. They were two story tropical barracks that were built just for
9 that purpose. We had probably 25 guys on each floor. They had screens. There were no
10 windows that closed. There were just screens. They were pretty nice. We had a locker
11 and we had a footlocker and we had tropical, ceiling fans on the ceiling. Compared to
12 most people's situations, it was pretty plush actually. We had access to a gymnasium.
13 There was a library. There were movies. There was an outdoor theatre. Actually there
14 was in indoor theatre at MACV headquarters, which is where Creighton Abrams and
15 Westmoreland stayed which was only a short walk away.

16 RV: Did you ever see them?

17 GO: No.

18 RV: You wouldn't have seen Westmoreland, but Abrahams.

19 GO: No. We knew where they lived. We walked past where they lived sometimes
20 but we never saw them.

21 RV: What kind of movies did you see over there?

22 GO: Whatever they were showing here stateside. I remember seeing *Patton*. Or
23 did we see *Patton*? I don't remember if we saw *Patton* over there or not.

24 RV: That came out in 1970.

25 GO: I'm not sure we did see *Patton* over there. What the hell did we see? You
26 know, I just don't remember the movies we saw.

27 RV: What else did you do for entertainment?

28 GO: Played basketball. I played cards. Sometimes we'd go into Saigon and go to
29 the BX. We generally didn't go out and eat in the local economy. Catch a movie, listen to
30 music tapes on the post or listen to music. Sit around and shoot the bull. That was about it
31 really.

1 RV: What were your eating facilities...

2 GO: Read.

3 RV: So you could check books out of the library.

4 GO: Yeah. That or there was some organization, it could have been the Red

5 Cross, who sent over boxes of paperbacks that we would pick through and read.

6 RV: Do you remember anything you read in particular?

7 GO: One thing I do remember that I read only because it resonated with me was a

8 book called *Brief Against Death* by a guy named Edgar Smith who was a death row

9 inmate in New Jersey for a murder that he claims he didn't do not far from where I grew

10 up. I do remember reading that book. But I don't remember necessarily any others that I

11 read.

12 RV: What were your eating facilities like?

13 GO: It was an Army mess hall. It was right at our back door so whatever they

14 were serving we ate.

15 RV: Basically, life on the base, would you say that it was relatively at ease or

16 congenial or was there a lot of tension all the time because you're right there at this major

17 Air Force base, major airport there right outside Saigon? What was the mood like on

18 base?

19 GO: I think the mood was fairly relaxed. It wasn't like being out in the boonies

20 where you were concerned, when's the next attack going to come. For the most part, you

21 felt fairly secure. We weren't attacked the whole while I was there.

22 RV: No rocket attacks or anything?

23 GO: There was one night when a couple of rockets came in and hit Tan Son Nhut.

24 I remember waking up in the middle of the night and hearing them hit. It wasn't even

25 close enough for me to worry about. But you could hear it. There was the constant noise

26 of helicopters and jets flying overhead. We used to see a lot of these A-1 Skyraiders

27 which were single-engine World War II vintage planes that were used. You can hear a lot

28 of artillery and bombing in the back, off in the distance, but it sounded like thunder off in

29 the distance. So we weren't near a whole lot of active combat.

30 RV: Did you have weapons available to you?

31 GO: We always carried M-16s with us.

1 RV: Even in the classroom you took them in?

2 GO: Yeah.

3 RV: Okay. What can you tell me about drug use or alcohol use that you saw on
4 base there?

5 GO: I didn't see a whole lot of drug use. I saw a fair amount, not a fair amount; I
6 saw some marijuana use. In fact, that's the first time I ever smoked marijuana; and that
7 was only once or twice. We were more of the alcohol variety that I was with. We drank a
8 fair amount of beer either at the NCO club on the compound or we would go to the BX
9 and buy our allotted amount. We had ration cards, and so we would buy. We weren't into
10 liquor at all, but we were drinking a fair amount of beer. In fact, one of the nights, it was
11 so hot. I can still remember it was so damn hot, a buddy of mine woke me up. He said,
12 "Otten, let's get some beer." Actually, we had the beer, but we decided that we were
13 going to stay up and drink, and so we're sitting outside and the more we drank, I
14 wouldn't say the crazier we got, we just started throwing the beer cans out in the road
15 which was not a good thing to do on a military compound. We had our wits about us, and
16 we collected the beer cans before we went to bed, but we got up. The next morning, we
17 were really hung over and guys were up moving around and getting ready and everything
18 and I remember somebody shaking my feet. He said, "Otten. Get your ass up. We've got
19 to get out of here." I said, "I'm not going." So this buddy of mine and I decide we were
20 not going to go in that day. Everybody left, and about an hour later somebody else was
21 shaking my foot and it was one of the sergeants from the group. He says, "You've got to
22 get dressed and come to work." He was carrying a side arm and they woke us up. We
23 were hung over. We showered and they had a jeep waiting for us and they took us in the
24 jeep. And they had another sergeant named Bautista and he was one of these guys who
25 shaved his head. His head looked like a pool cue. He was really a pretty good guy. He
26 was a tech sergeant. He just chewed us out. He said, "Who the hell do you think you are
27 thinking you can't come to work. I ought to slap you with an Article 15." We said, "Look,
28 we were up late last night drinking and we couldn't make it." We treated it like a joke.
29 So he said to us, "I'll tell you what you're going to do. You're going to spend your day
30 filling sandbags and reinforcing bunkers." We said, "It's too damn hot to do that." We
31 said, "We want to talk to the Captain." There was an Air Force captain there who wasn't

1 a lifer. He was probably a guy who went through ROTC and didn't want to be. He said,
2 "Well, the Captain's not here." We said, "Where is he?" He said, "The Captain was up
3 late playing cards last night. He's not coming in." We thought that was really kind of
4 ironic. So anyway, he goes up to some supply shed and pulls out a bunch of bags, hands
5 us a shovel and leads us to a pile of sand and tells us that we're going to fill all these bags
6 up before we can go home. He left and he left a guy there with a .45 and I think he did it
7 more as a joke than anything. I can't believe he did it seriously. Finally, he left because it
8 was hot and I got this bright idea that if we had to fill up all the sandbags before we could
9 leave, the best way to get rid of the sandbags was to stuff some of the empty sandbags
10 into a bag. So, we would take a bag, we would throw in a shovel full of sand. We'd take a
11 couple of empty bags, stuff them in the bag and throw in another couple of shovels of
12 sand and fill it up. Needless to say, the sandbag wouldn't do much good if it had to stop
13 anything. We really didn't care. We just wanted to get rid of the sandbags, which we did
14 and we finally could go home.

15 RV: So it worked.

16 GO: It worked, but I wouldn't want to have to duck behind a bunker that the two
17 of us reinforced. I don't know how we got on that topic.

18 RV: Well, we were talking about alcohol use and beer drinking and everything.

19 GO: We spent too much time drinking beer that night. But there was a lot of
20 tedium and a lot of boredom, so it was not uncommon at night for guys to sit around
21 drinking beer and playing cards and some did more than others. We didn't get drunk
22 every night but we certainly drank our share of beer.

23 RV: What was your beer of choice?

24 GO: Whatever they had. We weren't fussy. I remember they had a lot of Falstaff,
25 which I couldn't stand. Bud was there. I can't remember what else they had, but whatever
26 we could drink, whatever we could get our hands on.

27 RV: Do you remember any of the guys that you were housed with there; any of
28 the personalities that come back to you?

29 GO: Oh, God yeah. I remember quite a few of them.

30 RV: Do you keep in touch with any of them?

1 GO: A couple of them. One guy who I just recently begun, we pretty much stayed
2 in touch the whole while. He's in California, the L.A. area, we email each other now
3 about once or twice a week. He's gone through a tough time. He came back and he got
4 married and he had a fairly decent job and that business went out of business, and he's
5 been kind of drifting now for the last ten years or so. He's got a store that he runs selling
6 water and I think he's barely making ends meet. He's having a tough time. Another guy
7 who I hooked up with three years ago. I've got a son who's a rising senior at the
8 University of Arizona. I was able to get back in touch with this guy via the Internet. I had
9 always wondered what happened to him. Just before my son went to Tucson, three years
10 ago, three or four years ago, I found this guy's name and I called. His wife answered the
11 phone and I said who I was and she said, "Steve isn't going to believe this." I said, "Why,
12 have you heard my name?" She said, "Yes, many times." So a couple of hours later,
13 Steve, who had been out playing golf called me back and he said, "Do you have any idea
14 how many times I've tried to find you?" I said, "Well, I tried the same thing, but it
15 always led to a dead end." Because he had been from Minnesota and I found him in
16 Colorado Springs, not Colorado Springs, but Fort Collins, Colorado. He's married. He's
17 got two children who are now in their early twenties. He's a drug rep for a drug company,
18 materially doing quite well. It was really nice. So anyway, when I took Tim out to
19 Tucson, I flew back through Denver and he met me and I went up to Fort Collins and we
20 periodically will call each other now. It's been kind of nice. There were other
21 personalities. There was another fellow who I stayed in touch with who actually was here
22 in Kansas, but he got irritated with me I think because he was trying to hook with me
23 when I first got back to town. Every time he would call me, my wife would be in town
24 because I was kind of commuting for the first six months I was here and he stopped
25 calling me. There were some real characters; some guys who I was friends with who I'm
26 sure I would never have been friends with stateside but because they were so damn much
27 fun when I was in Vietnam that we hung out together.

28 RV: Did you ever encounter any race issues?

29 GO: Yeah, some. We didn't have any blacks in our group but there were some at
30 MACV. I didn't see any real major incidents, but certainly there was the black power, the
31 handshake and they were wearing all the regalia that they would wear. There was some of

1 that. One of the guys who was a friend of mine was pretty racist. He grew up in a small
2 town in Kansas, and I don't think he ever saw a black person until he went in the military.
3 Maybe he did when he went in college. He was a bit over the top. It kind of grated on me
4 a little bit. I grew up in New Jersey and there were a lot of black people around. One of
5 my best friends was black, so for me it was a little bit of a different thing. It was hard to
6 deal with some of the tension that you would see, but I wasn't exposed to a whole lot of
7 it.

8 RV: Did the black power thing, did that disrupt your unit there?

9 GO: No. I wouldn't say it did. Not where we were.

10 RV: What kind of contact did you guys have with women?

11 GO: None, and next to none. There were the, what the hell were they called,
12 Donut Dollies?

13 RV: Donut Dollies. That's right.

14 GO: The Red Cross girls. They were nice. I remember a couple of them we met
15 somewhere one time and they went to one of these movies with us. But it was more like a
16 social thing. We didn't see a lot of round eyes. I'm sure you've heard that term. We
17 didn't see a lot of round eyes. Most of the women we saw came in from USO troops.
18 They were Filipinos or what have you. So there wasn't a whole lot of companionship
19 unless you went and saw one of the local prostitutes. But for the most part, it was a pretty
20 isolated existence.

21 RV: What about R&Rs and things like that? Did you have any R&Rs?

22 GO: Yeah. I had to R&Rs. I had and in country R&R in Vung Tao that I took two
23 days, three days that I took with another guy that happened to be from Kansas, and that
24 was really kind of fun because we got to stay in a regular room and you could eat and
25 drink and there was a beach there. What was really fun for me was when we went to the
26 South China Sea; that was the first time he had ever seen the ocean. It was quite an
27 experience for me to be with somebody who had never seen the ocean. He stood there
28 and he just looked and he kept saying, "Wow, I can't believe this." That was my in
29 country R&R experience. Then we went to, the fellow I've been emailing, the one I
30 mentioned from California, he and I went to Japan together. We went to Osaka and we
31 went to Tokyo and Yokahama and Kyoto where the old shrines are. That was really a

1 great week. We had a really good time. We just ate and drank and got around. In Tokyo,
2 we met a couple of young ladies through one of the organizations there and they were
3 learning English and they were guides for a day, and all we had to do was pay their
4 expenses and they were trying to develop their English language skills and that was really
5 kind of fun. That was quite an experience.

6 RV: Did you feel recharged once you got back down to Saigon?

7 GO: Yeah. Pretty good. I think it was different for us compared to guys who were
8 married or involved with somebody who maybe went to Hawaii and either got married or
9 hooked up somebody and had to leave them behind. For us it was different. I had some
10 friends who went to Australia and just partied the whole time with the girls who met them
11 at the airport. For us it was a little bit different. It was an opportunity to feel somewhat
12 recharged and to see something different. It was nice.

13 RV: Was it easier for you to be single while you were there?

14 GO: I think so. I think it definitely was. On the one hand, you could say well I
15 didn't have anybody but on the other hand, I didn't have anybody. I didn't feel that pull
16 of somebody who I missed. I didn't have somebody who was sad. I didn't have the
17 experience of getting a Dear John letter which some of my friends got; none of that. I
18 mean, I had female friends who wrote me, but I was not emotionally involved with them
19 so that was a bit easier for me.

20 RV: Did you have contact with your family?

21 GO: Yeah. We did letters, but more than that, we did the cassette tapes, which
22 was pretty easy to do. Everybody looked forward to mail. It was nice to get mail.

23 RV: Did y'all have any pet there?

24 GO: No

25 RV: No pets?

26 GO: No. We didn't have any pets.

27 RV: How about...I'm sorry, go ahead.

28 GO: No. (laughing)

29 RV: No. (laughing)

1 GO: What I'm chuckling about is there was one of the nights the guys were
2 drinking and carrying on, one guy bet another guy that he could eat a lizard, and that if
3 his buddy bit half, he'd eat the other half.

4 RV: One of the geckos?

5 GO: So they caught one. The first guy bit this gecko, swallowed half of it and
6 threw up and he handed the remaining half to the other guy and the other guy said, "Uh,
7 uh. I'm not going to do it." It caused a bit of a commotion.

8 RV: I can imagine. How about USO shows? Did you have a chance to see any of
9 those?

10 GO: Yeah. We didn't see any of the big; we didn't see Bob Hope. I remember
11 when Bob Hope came into town. He was in the country that year. He was either at Long
12 Binh or Bien Hoa, which was up the road from us and we happened to see him on T.V.
13 The other USO shows we saw were either local groups that came out of Australia or from
14 the Philippines for the most part. Nothing big, but yet we appreciated them. We liked
15 hearing the music and seeing the girls in the mini skirts. They would have the mini skirts
16 on and what have you. I really developed a real appreciation for the USO tour that came
17 over from the U.S. even though I didn't see them, and I certainly got a better
18 understanding of some of the in humor, inside humor that I wouldn't have appreciated
19 had I not been in country.

20 RV: Can you give me an example of what you mean?

21 GO: No. Not really. I don't remember any off hand. It was just one of those
22 things.

23 RV: How well were you able to keep up with the news in the United States while
24 you were there?

25 GO: Pretty well. We were able to get the international copy of either *Newsweek* or
26 whatever it was. I don't know if it's still published today, but they were on real light-
27 weight paper, and they were probably abbreviated somewhat. I don't know if they were
28 or not. The rest of the news we got, I'm sure was sanitized coming through official
29 channels. The one thing that really struck me was when the whole news about My Lai hit,
30 we got it late, because I remember getting a letter from an Aunt of mine saying how

1 terrible it is and she couldn't believe that quote "our boys" would do anything like that
2 and I didn't know what the hell she was talking about until sometime after that.

3 RV: How did you find out about it?

4 GO: Finally, it had to come back in the media, even media that we were getting. I
5 guess I heard about it either from a *Newsweek* magazine. I don't remember. It's kind of
6 hard to remember.

7 RV: Looking back now, is there anything you would change or do differently
8 about your time there at Tan Son Nhut; anything that you did?

9 GO: I can't say there is. I still wish I could have been a pilot, but that wasn't
10 meant to be. No. I wouldn't change anything. I still would go. No. That's about it. That
11 about sums it up.

12 RV: Okay, now you were there from October 22, 1969 to October 7th.

13 GO: October 7, '70. I got home 15 days early.

14 RV: How did you get home 15 days early? How did you work that?

15 GO: Well, they started accelerating the rotations, as they started to wind down
16 the troop commitment. That's how they did it, at least in our case. We just got orders and
17 we would put in our dream sheets for where we would want to be stateside coming back.

18 RV: What did you request?

19 GO: I don't remember exactly, but one of the places I listed was Arizona and
20 that's where I ended up. I ended up at a very small pilot training base called Williams Air
21 Force Base just outside of Pheonix, which was great because we spent a lot of time
22 around the Arizona State campus after that in the Scottsdale area. I ended up getting
23 roomed with a guy who I was stationed with who I didn't know that well when I was
24 stationed with him in Vietnam but he was a really nice guy. We had a good time. I was
25 there about a week, I guess and I ran into a college fraternity brother of mine who had
26 just gotten transferred there from Texas and we spent a lot of time together.

27 RV: How did you end up leaving Vietnam?

28 GO: What do you mean?

29 RV: Like, you knew your date coming up was the 7th and you packed your bags
30 ready to go and you hopped a commercial flight or was it a military flight out?

1 GO: No. It was a commercial flight. We had our dates assigned and our flight
2 assigned and you went through the usual processing of turning everything in. I think as
3 you got real close, you got real cautious not wanting to go out off the post. You figured
4 you were lucky that you didn't get involved in anything that you didn't need to get
5 involved in, so you tended to stay close to home. Buddies of yours were rotating back a
6 week or two earlier. We tended to rotate in groups, at least the group that we were with,
7 because we would graduate from different classes for this training program. So it was
8 hard to see guys who you spent the better part of a year with leave because you never
9 knew if you would see them again. You certainly did develop some very close
10 relationships with those guys. We went to Tan Son Nhut, and waited for your flight. I
11 don't know that I rotated with anybody at least the flight I was on, I don't think I was
12 with anybody I was close with. So it was kind of a lonely feeling. You checked in and
13 you had your duffle bags. I remember going out and sitting outside the terminal because
14 it was cooler and I just kind of sat down on the ground and just waited until I knew it was
15 pretty much time to go. It was a commercial flight and it was pretty quite. There was no
16 emotion when we took off. I don't even think there was any applause. Everybody was
17 just kind of immersed in their own thoughts.

18 RV: How did you feel?

19 GO: Pensive. It was hard in some ways to leave some of that behind, if that can be
20 said.

21 RV: In what way?

22 GO: Because of the personal relationships and the emotions of the whole year. On
23 the other hand, glad to be going home; very much aware that a lot of guys weren't going
24 home. Tired, physically tired, emotionally tired, and we flew back pretty much the same
25 route that we flew going over. We flew through Yukota. We changed aircrews at Yukota.
26 I remember that. Then we flew through Alaska. We arrived at San Francisco International
27 about daybreak. I remember going through, and there were customs officials there. Then
28 we went inside. We were still wearing our tropical fatigues. What was significant about
29 that was sometime before that, the military had announced that they didn't want us
30 wearing our tropical fatigues going home. I think they wanted the public to see it quite
31 differently. But there were a group of us who just didn't give a damn. We wore our

1 tropical fatigues anyway. What were they going to do, tell us we couldn't go home? So
2 we got back and there were showers and we then changed into our stateside uniforms,
3 and caught a cab to San Francisco International. The people there were great because I
4 had to catch a flight to New York, and we got there and there was a guy out front. He
5 said, "Where you guys going?" We said, "We're going to New York." He said, "There's
6 a flight leaving in a few minutes. Just drop your bags here. I'll take care of them. I'll get
7 them on the flight. You go get your ticket and don't worry." So we literally ran. We went
8 and got our ticket. We literally ran to the gate, and were the last couple of guys on this
9 flight, which didn't have many people on it. I didn't even have time to call my family to
10 tell them what time I was coming in. They knew approximately when I was coming in
11 but they had no idea exactly. We flew La Guardia, and when I got to La Guardia, I called
12 my family and said, "I'm in New York." They said, "Do you want us to drive over and
13 get you?" I said, "No, don't bother. I'll take buses. I'll be home in a few hours." I guess I
14 took a bus from La Guardia to what's called the Port Authority Terminal, and I guess
15 from the Port Authority I called them again because I knew what time I'd be getting
16 home. I called them and my father and my mother and I guess both of my sisters were
17 waiting at the street corner where the bus dropped me off.

18 RV: What was that like?

19 GO: It was really nice. They had put up a sign. (gets choked up)

20 RV: Do you want to take a minute?

21 GO: I'm okay. It said "Welcome Home" and actually what was sad about that in a
22 way was that earlier that day, one of our neighbors was working under his car, and he had
23 it jacked up, he didn't block it and the blocks kicked out and the car came down and
24 crushed him. And we had to walk by their house to go back to my house. We stayed up
25 for a little while. I was tired and (laughing) I still remember it. Everybody went to bed
26 and the house that my--In fact my sister still lives in it, she took it over for my mom, and
27 she and her husband lived there. It was on a dead end street that backed up against the
28 woods. It was all woods behind there, and it's not congested or anything. And I
29 remember everybody went to bed, and I was sitting there and I was struck by how quiet it
30 is. I started to laugh. It was kind of a nervous laugh. I realized it had been a year since I'd
31 been anywhere where there were no helicopters, no planes, no artillery, no bombs, no

1 nothing, just quiet. It was, you're familiar with the term, "So quiet it was deafening." It
2 really hit me how quiet it was, but it was nice to be home.

3 RV: Did you catch any flack or have any problems going through the airports
4 when you were in uniform?

5 GO: A little bit. There was a comment made to me on the bus coming back
6 between La Guardia and the Port Authority Terminal. I don't remember what the
7 comment was, but it was some kind of a snide comment. I just remember being struck by
8 that. That was the extent of it really.

9 RV: Did your family ask a lot about your experiences or was it something that
10 was kept quiet or what?

11 GO: No. They didn't ask, and I didn't talk about it.

12 RV: Why not?

13 GO: Why didn't I talk about it?

14 RV: Why didn't they ask, I guess, first and obviously why didn't you volunteer
15 the information?

16 GO: I think they figured it was something that they would allow me to talk about
17 if I wanted to, and I really chose not to talk. In fact, I remember a college friend of mine
18 who I also stay in touch with who did not go in the service. I remember him telling me
19 when he saw me, he said, "You know, I called your mom and I asked her how you were
20 doing and she said, 'Oh, he seems fine. He's just real quiet.'" That pretty much was the
21 way I was. I mean I just was pretty quiet.

22 RV: Were you that way before? Like in high school and college, were you quiet,
23 more quiet or not?

24 GO: I was my class clown in high school.

25 RV: Really? So this was a definite change for you. What kind of transition did
26 you have back to civilian life? I guess you went to Arizona.

27 GO: I went to Arizona, and really liked being in Arizona. I had a car. It was great
28 to drive again. I enrolled, of course, at Arizona State, and I worked in the base education
29 office. I had to be retrained to do something. I ended up doing clerical work in the base
30 education office. It was okay. I actually had some, I don't think I had difficulty in an
31 outward sense assimilating, but I probably internalized some things just from the year of

1 being away and the monotony and the boredom and the sameness of day in, day out.
2 Because I did have a period of time there where I actually was treated by the VA. I
3 developed a stomach problem and I was vomiting, so I was on a drug called Librax for a
4 couple of years. After that, it was gone. I was over it.

5 RV: Was that related to your Vietnam experience, do you think?

6 GO: They felt it was. Who know?

7 RV: How long did you stay in the service after you got back?

8 GO: I was lucky. I was in only two years. It was a four-year enlistment, and I got
9 back in October. I was on leave for a while. I reported to duty in Arizona and my parents
10 went through a divorce. My mother had been a homemaker ever since the 2nd World War.
11 I was taking this class that I mentioned at Arizona State. Williams Air Force Base was a
12 very small base. Maybe it had 2,000 people on it, and I think that included the pilot
13 trainees. One of my classmates was the base personnel officer. During one of our breaks
14 of this class, it was a business law class. I said to him, "You know," I said, "I really think
15 I need to get transferred back to McGuire." And I explained to him why, and he said to
16 me, "You don't want to get transferred. You want to get out." I said, "What?" He said,
17 "You don't want to get transferred. You want to get out." He knew that I already had a
18 degree and I was just kind of biding my time. I said, "Explain this to me." He said, "Well,
19 to get transferred, the approval has to come from headquarters Air Force and there has to
20 be a job exactly in your job classification available for you to go," and so on and so forth.
21 He said, "For you to get out, the only approval you need is from the base commander
22 here." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yeah." So he said, "Come to my office next week or so
23 and I'll tell you what you need to do." So I looked at it. I had to write a letter explaining
24 the situation, and I needed some letters of endorsement. I submitted the paperwork on a
25 Monday and that Friday afternoon they called me. I can still remember the exact words of
26 the guy who called me. He said, "Othen, get your ass up here. We're cutting your
27 discharge orders." That was it. I got out with an honorable discharge. I went back to
28 Jersey. Went to work for two years, went to graduate school and the University of South
29 Carolina, and used my GI Bill. That was it. All the while, all my other buddies put in
30 their full four years.

1 RV: I'm interested, how much discussion was there about your experience when
2 you went to graduate school? Were people interested in what you did?

3 GO: I would simply say that I taught English to the Vietnamese Air Force and a
4 few other things like that. I didn't talk about it a whole lot. I did have a classmate though
5 whose husband was MIA. He was shot down. He was an F-111 pilot. He was shot down.
6 I don't remember when he was shot down. She looked like death. She was skinny. She
7 was a chain smoker. She had a little girl who was maybe three years old, and she was
8 very active in the League of Families. While I didn't talk to her about it, there was a time
9 when the Department of Defense started to have these presumptive findings of death and
10 they started declaring the MIAs dead. I guess the League of Families was very opposed to
11 that because they felt that some of these guys were alive. She got one of the local radio
12 stations to broadcast from the steps of the state capitol on a weekend when we went there
13 to get petitions requesting that they not do this. I went with her. I was really upset by the
14 reaction of most of the public who we approached to sign this petition. We had people
15 turn their backs on us. We had people treat us poorly. It was obvious that they didn't
16 want to hear about the Vietnam War, that they didn't care about these guys. They didn't
17 care about any of the issues. They just wanted to put it in the background and forget
18 about it. It was extremely upsetting to me because I didn't expect to get that kind of
19 reaction from John Q. Public on the street over an issue like this. It was one of those
20 things that happened.

21 RV: What did you feel when you left Vietnam? Did you follow the war and what
22 went on?

23 GO: Yeah. I did. I followed the war and even today, if I see the video of the fall
24 of Saigon and the helicopters leaving the Embassy and then pushing helicopters off the
25 aircraft carriers, it's very upsetting.

26 RV: What did you feel in April 1975 when you saw those images on television?

27 GO: Sadness. (gets choked up) Because it pretty much summed up the futility of
28 the whole experience.

29 RV: Did you think while you were there that you were training these Vietnamese
30 Air Force personnel, did you feel like the Vietnamese could deal with the situation on
31 their own?

1 GO: No. I really felt for the most part, they didn't care and I also felt for the most
2 part, it didn't really matter. I never bought into the Domino Theory. I may have early on
3 when I was younger. Most of the people were peasants, farmers. It wasn't going to make
4 any difference what kind of government they had, at least in my eyes it didn't. Also, to be
5 part of a, I mean we were the children of the World War II generation. And to be part of
6 an experience where we were an embarrassment if you will, right, wrong, or indifferent,
7 to this country was very hard to accept even though I don't think the outcome could have
8 been any different. It was the wrong time, wrong place, wrong war. It just, as my son
9 would say, it was a cluster fuck.

10 RV: How much conversation do you have with him about it?

11 GO: Probably more than anybody. He wants to be a Naval aviator. He's not color
12 blind. We checked that out already. He's interested in military history. I mean, the
13 courses he's selected, he's selected History of the Vietnam War. He's got a midterm
14 tomorrow, History of the U.S. since 1945. When we started reciting the things you were
15 interested in, in many ways, it sounded like him and the kind of courses he's selecting for
16 himself right now at this point in his life. He just has a lot of interest in it.

17 RV: That's excellent.

18 GO: He asks me and I talk to him.

19 RV: Have you been to the Wall in Washington?

20 GO: Yes.

21 RV: Can you describe your experience there?

22 GO: Yeah. I've gone several times. When I lived in Virginia. I lived in Virginia
23 some years ago. I would get up there; anytime I went to Washington I would go. The
24 first few times I went, it was a fairly dispassionate experience. I then had the opportunity
25 to go with a very good high school friend of mine who was a Marine. He was a platoon
26 leader in the Marines. He spent a year in the infantry over there and he spent six months
27 in recon. I hadn't seen Dennis in a long time, and he was visiting his mother in Maryland
28 and actually he lives in Indonesia now. He's been there for years, but he was back
29 stateside. I visited him in the Baltimore area and I said to him, "Have you been to the
30 Wall?" "No," he said, "I'd like to go." I said, "Well, I'd like to take you," recognizing
31 that his experience and mine couldn't be further apart in terms of what we saw and did.

1 So we went to the Wall and it was emotional in the sense of feeling the emotion and
2 Dennis kind of looking. We sat back from the Wall some distance. I think we were near
3 the statues of the three GIs, and he talked about all the names of guys he knew (gets
4 choked up), and I juxtaposed that with the conversations that he and I used to have in
5 high school about girls; the kind of typical conversations teenage boys have about girls.
6 And realized how far we had come in our life's experiences and our perception of life. He
7 talked about going out on a patrol with 33 men.

8 RV: I'm sorry, with 33 men?

9 GO: 33. And he came back with 11 (gets choked up), and I'm certain he's never
10 been the same. He'll say he is, but the fact that he's not come back to the States. He
11 almost reminds me of Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now*. He's gotten real fat and he's
12 got a beard. There's no way he could live in the United States today. It's almost like he's
13 from a different century. But anyway, the next time I went to the Wall was just before I
14 went Ohio where I had been the last 7 years. That was the first time and the only time that
15 when I approached the Wall, I got really emotional. It's because I allowed myself to see
16 the names as people as opposed to just names etched in the Wall. I really did a pretty
17 good job of keeping myself from doing that. But I realized that at that time I was almost
18 50 years old, had kids. I'd gotten an education. I was happily married. I got to sleep in a
19 nice bed every night and I was driving a car and I thought, all those bastards never got
20 that. So anyway, that's a real special place.

21 RV: Yes it is. How do you feel about your service, today when you think back?

22 GO: I have more pride about it today than I did 30 years ago. I guess putting some
23 time, the distance that the time creates allows me to look at it somewhat differently. I
24 figure, for me, I had somebody say to me, "Why didn't you go to Canada?" I said, "I'm
25 not a pacifist." My value system was such that it dictated that I do what I did. That was a
26 personal decision for me. I don't begrudge anybody who sincerely adopted another point
27 of view. I did what I was asked. I did it to the best of my ability, and I am proud of it. I
28 wish it had turned out differently. I wish people looked at that era in American history
29 differently. I'm sure they look at it differently today than they did 20 years ago, but I'm
30 proud of it.

31 RV: Do you ever want to go back?

1 GO: Yeah. I'd like to go back. Yeah, I would. In fact--this has nothing to do with
2 going back--In my office here, I have a picture of a Buddha that I took when I was on in
3 country R&R. It was sitting on top of a mountain at Vung Tao, and it's a brilliant white,
4 deep blue sky and beneath that I have a letter from Richard Nixon. I wrote Nixon in April
5 of 1970 during the so-called incursion into Cambodia. I wrote him a letter and I said,
6 "You know, I've never been a big fan of yours, but where I am, I can tell you that the
7 guys I'm stationed with think that going into Cambodia is a good thing because we know
8 that's where a lot of infiltration is occurring. We know that's how plastique explosives
9 and rockets and those kinds of things that affect our lives here are gaining access into the
10 country. We know it's making our lives safer." So I sent this letter in the mail. Two
11 weeks later, I got a letter back with the White House letterhead on it. The Vietnamese I
12 was working with teaching couldn't believe it. In fact, they all made jokes that the
13 Vietnamese president would never write a letter to anybody. I feel pretty good about it
14 now.

15 RV: For young people today, if you were to address a group of young Americans,
16 what would you tell them about Vietnam and the Vietnam War?

17 GO: Well, I don't know. Certainly, I would tell them that as they know, it was a
18 cause for a great deal of divisiveness in the country. I think in retrospect, it was the
19 wrong war for us to fight. If they ever find themselves in opposition to a war, they should
20 not confuse their opposition to the war to the warriors who are fighting it. As citizens,
21 they've got to weigh carefully, the factors that are associated with why a nation chooses
22 to enter an armed conflict and whether or not it's truly in it's best interest to do so. I don't
23 know. I really don't know what else I would say.

24 RV: What kind of lessons do you think the United States learned from this
25 experience or didn't learn?

26 GO: Well, hopefully, it learned that you don't necessarily assume that just
27 because you've got a huge Air Force and a lot of firepower that you can go in and beat an
28 indigenous army that had demonstrated in history that it had run everybody else out of
29 the country who had tried to do that. I don't think you can fight a limited war. If you're
30 going to fight the war, fight the damn war. You can't have rules and limits that say you
31 can't cross this line, you can't cross that line, because if the enemy is adhering to a

1 different set of principles and a different set of rules, they're going to have the advantage
2 over you all the time. But I think that you ought to have darn good reasons to go to war.
3 In retrospect, I'm not sure we had a darn good reason to get involved in that one.
4 Certainly, I guess if there's been a lot of controversy about the practice of having troops
5 go over there for a year and rotate home, whether or not that was a smart move tactically,
6 strategically.

7 RV: What do you think?

8 GO: I'm glad I came home in a year. I think the country tried very hard to conduct
9 a war without letting the country believe it was at war. I was really struck when I came
10 home, looking around. I mean, the country was basically unaffected by it with the
11 exception of the political reaction. People didn't sacrifice a damn thing. There was no
12 rationing. There was no this, there was no that. And actually a very small percentage of
13 us ever got over there. Then they tried to pretty much disguise the fact that we had war
14 going on over there with some naïve that hoped they would blow up the criticism of the
15 war. You couldn't hide it. I'm probably rambling at this point.

16 RV: No, not at all.

17 GO: It was just the wrong war to fight. As you know as a historian, it just tore the
18 guts out of this country. It certainly, I hadn't thought about this, but I wonder how many
19 of the guys who have emotional scars from the war today, the ones who are non-
20 functioning or marginally functioning, would have functioned differently had it been a
21 different war with a different perception by the American public. I don't know. I wonder.
22 I wonder if it would be different.

23 RV: Do you read about the war or go see movies on the war?

24 GO: I mean, I have. I don't shy away from it all the time. Sometimes I do. It just
25 depends on what kind of mood I'm in. But the longer I've been away from it, the easier
26 it is for me to deal with it. When I first came home, I did. I shied away. I didn't even
27 watch the news.

28 RV: Any songs take you back to Vietnam when you hear them?

29 GO: Yeah. "We've Got to Get Out of This Place". There was a song called "If
30 You're Going to San Francisco, Wear Flowers in Your Hair." That was popular. They
31 were probably the two that I remember the most. I guess, you can hear some of the music

1 and some the movies I see, but I can't remember the names of any of them, but when I
2 hear them, they remind me of the war.

3 RV: Mr. Otten, is there anything else you would like to add? Anything else you
4 would like to say?

5 GO: Not about my experience; I think this is a terrific project because I truly
6 believe that certainly we would be interested if the people who participated in the Civil
7 War could have had this experience. We would have learned a lot. I think just having a
8 sense of a war being something that really affected individuals lives in a very personal
9 way is something that is very hard to capture from the, what I'll call the traditional
10 historical perspective. You're getting a lot of first person accounts; things that people
11 saw, did experienced, felt, reacted to, and I just think whoever is funding this is doing a
12 great service to the country. Hopefully, those who will study the war for many years after
13 we're gone will learn something from it. I hope that it in some way helps our country and
14 maybe others from committing a similar mistake to the one that we made involving
15 ourselves it the war the way we did. That's all I can say.

16 RV: Okay. We'll go ahead and wrap it up then. Thank you, sir.