The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Gonzalo Baltazar
Conducted by Steve Maxner
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Transcribed by Tammi Mikel Lyon

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.

Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. Gonzalo Baltazar on the 23rd of March, 2001 at approximately 11:40 a.m. Lubbock time. I'm in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Baltazar is in Denver, Colorado. Sir, why don't we begin by you telling us a little about your early life, in particular when and where you were born and where you grew up?

Gonzalo Baltazar: Okay, I was born in November, 1950, November 11th and grew up in the small town of Northeast Colorado called Fort Morgan in a family of farmers. My dad farmed some land up there in different parts of Morgan County. There was 14 of us that grew up there. I had three brothers die and a sister, so it ended up 10 of us growing up on the farm, farming, and the family operated the farm. I went to different schools because we kept moving around, away from different parts. That's about it. That's how we grew up. At 17 I quit school and I joined the Army. The only reason for that is just I think I just needed a little more discipline in my life at the time because I was kind of headed the wrong direction, and that's how I ended up being in the Army.

SM: That was in 1969?

GB: Right, '68.

SM: I'm sorry, '68 when you went into the Army. Just out of curiosity, while you were growing up, what were the principal crops that you guys, that, your family farm?

GB: We farmed sugar beets as the main cash crop, corn, hay, and wheat and pinto beans on irrigated land.

SM: And let's see, where did you fit into your family within the children, the siblings?

GB: I was the youngest.

SM: You were the youngest?

GB: Right.

SM: Wow. When you were going to school, was there a particular subject that you enjoyed?

GB: Yeah, I was a history buff. I liked the history classes. I read a lot about US history.

SM: And did you engage in sports and stuff like that too?

GB: Yeah, we were a family of wrestlers, and they still are. All my nephews are still involved in it.

SM: And when you decided to go into the military, go into the Army, what did you understand at that point concerning the Vietnam War? Of course by the time you went in in 1968 the war was in full swing, with a lot of people on the ground, a lot of news footage, and everything else.

GB: I didn't pay much attention to that. I knew there was a war going on but I really didn't pay that much attention at that time because I was kind of involved in other things, running around and all that. So, when I joined, I really didn't think of me going to Vietnam. I just thought I was going in the Army and serve for a couple of years. So it didn't even dawn on me that I was going in combat or even get close to Vietnam.

SM: When you went in and you talked to the recruiter, did they talk to you about specific jobs that you might want to apply for, or did you go straight in for infantry?

GB: I just went and signed up for the draft, the volunteer draft, and there was no recruiter to talk to, just process you through, and when I got to basic there was no kind of talk about what we wanted to do or anything. We just did our basic training in the first three months. There's nothing explained to us about trying to get in the field or jobs and all that. So, then I went to AIT training, Advanced Infantry Training, at Fort Gordon, Georgia. We went to a little camp outside of there called Camp Crockett. They said

we'd be infantry, then it started to dawn on you. I said, "Infantry?" I said, "Oh, this means combat." It was pretty tough training, both basic and Advanced Infantry Training.

SM: Where did you do your basic?

GB: I did it in El Paso, Texas, Fort Bliss, Texas, which was grueling.

SM: Actually before we talk about basic, I'm curious; when you went in, you said you quit school.

GB: Right.

SM: And you were still 17, right?

GB: Right.

SM: Did your parents have to sign?

GB: Yeah, my dad had to sign for me.

SM: Did he try to talk you out of it at all?

GB: Yeah, he did. He said I was crazy, and he knew what was going on and I just kind of ignored it about the war and everything. He signed for me finally after I insisted that I wanted to go, and that was it.

SM: Did you have any other brothers that had gone into the military?

GB: Yeah, there was seven of us in the military.

SM: Oh, wow!

GB: Yeah. We all served our time and got out. I was the only one that actually went to Vietnam and was in combat, any kind of combat.

SM: Out of all seven of you, you were the only one that went to Vietnam?

GB: Right.

SM: Amazing!

GB: Yes. But, because I was the youngest one, the oldest one is 20 years older than I am. They went different places. They were in Korea, Germany, Japan, and unfortunately I went to Vietnam.

SM: Why don't you go ahead and talk a little bit about basic, in particular, what did you find for instance to be one of the more challenging aspects of basic for you?

GB: Basic was a negative for me. It was pretty tough. They ran us to the ground all the time, to exhaustion. We were beat; we were beaten up in basic. The drill sergeants actually were hitting us. We did a lot of low crawling just for punishment out

in the desert, and we did our basic stuff, learning how to shoot our weapons. At the time it was M-14s in basic. We learned all our other stuff, grenade throwing and Bivouac, which is two weeks, out in the field in tents, and learn some maneuvers. But, everything, just learning how to fire a weapon and mostly just grenades and rifles. There was 13 of us from my hometown, we all went in together the same day which was a big thing because it's a small town, so it was all together in basic. We all grew up together and went to school. We all experienced the same thing in our basic, and come to find out our company was the most grueling company in the whole basic training camp because we were, like I say, we were beat a lot, disciplined constantly for everything or for no reason. They wanted to show you who's boss and teach us discipline. It wasn't a very good experience through basic.

SM: When you talk about physical contact between you and your trainers, what was it typically?

GB: Hitting, hitting us with their batons. I had one instance, on an M-14, its called a gas cylinder on there. It had to be loose and mine was…I was always checking mine to make sure it was loose where you could push up and down, and a specialist came by and they inspect our rifles and the drill sergeant swore it wasn't loose so he hit me between the eyes with the butt of my weapon. Of course that knocked me down. I actually still have a scar from it. It was things like that. It was a lot of fights going on. We had a couple of boxers in my platoon. My drill sergeant went up behind one of these guys and hit him for no reason at all from behind and the boxer turned around and nailed him, knocked him down, and it was forgotten about because the drill sergeant knew he couldn't report this because he had to report why this happened. Us not realizing that this was wrong, we never reported it, because if we would have reported it to the inspector general, they would have gotten into trouble. When things like that happen where a drill sergeant would get beat up, then nothing would be said. They also stole our money, took our money from us. They lied to us and said we'd be charged for this and that. So, at $98 dollars a month you were getting paid, you had no money even after we got paid because they would steal it from us. So, that was, like I said, a negative part of my Army career.

SM: How would they take your money?

GB: They'd come in the barracks on pay day and they would say, "You all have to throw in this kind of money because you did bad on this drill," or, "You didn't do very well in your marching drill and you didn't mind," and one time this drill sergeant claimed he was in trouble because of us and he was getting fined for it, and it was up to us to pay that fine. We had to give him all our money. [?] making money off it. Like I say, we were only getting paid $98 a month, that left us with nothing. He was living the good life.

SM: Have you talked to other soldiers that had similar experiences that weren't necessarily in the same unit as you were?

GB: Yeah, because we had one friend, out of 13 of us, actually 14, he was held back for one day because he had a medical problem that they wanted to check out. So, they sent him down and he ended up in a different company. We talked to him and his friends about it and they had nothing like this, nothing at all. They weren't beat, they didn't have their money taken from them. They just went through a basic training like they were supposed to go through. We would see them, every once in a while, their company was out there and they were having a good time and learning what they were supposed to learn. Ours was all just grueling, ours was grueling. When they'd make us low crawl out in the desert, they'd make us crawl for hundreds and hundreds of yards where to the point where the insides of our knees were raw and bleeding and they were raw. I witnessed drill sergeants pick up guys and slam them back down on the ground because they'd say they weren't low crawling right. It was just them showing their power. To this day, if I ever had to go through it again and I knew about this, then I'd report these guys. But, we were scared. I was 17, I was scared half to death once I got in there and so were the others. Then we met other guys from a town near us that were in basic training in a different company and they had nothing like that happen to them. But, that's why we knew everything was going on.

SM: You said you trained on the M-14?

GB: Yeah.

SM: Did you get introduced to the M-16 during basic at all?

GB: No. We got introduced to the M-16 in Advanced Infantry Training.

SM: That was outside of Fort Gordon, Georgia?

GB: Right, Camp Crockett.

SM: What were the differences between your advanced training and your basic training?

GB: We trained a lot with the M-16, all the weapons, the big weapons, the M-72 law, the anti tank weapon, all the claymores, all the big weapons, the M-60 and 50 and we did a lot of maneuvers, training maneuvers, how to fight guerilla warfare. It was a lot of combat training. It was a big difference from basic.

SM: When you say guerilla warfare, did they actually use that expression? Did they talk about fighting against the Viet Cong and whatnot?

GB: Yes, they would split us up some of us would be the VC and we'd be fighting against the Americans, actual maneuvers without the real bullets obviously. It was pretty good training. At night they'd have us out there trying to sneak up on the Americans. I was on the enemy side. We were sneaking up on the Americans and doing night raids and stuff like that. So it was a lot of good training, good information. It was a lot different from basic and we were treated pretty good. But, we worked very hard.

SM: Now did you, when you were going through this training, did the instructors talk about the specific experiences that they themselves had from Vietnam?

GB: Not all of them were in Vietnam. We had a couple of them that were in Vietnam and they talked about their experience and some were involved in a lot of combat, and some weren't. They were like in tank companies but they weren't involved in that much combat. They'd warn us that if you don't listen, you're going to die. But, it was a bit scary. They talked some sense into you to make you understand that you're going over to fight and that you don't pay attention and be a team player, you might not make it back. And, some wont make it back. Some of us here wont make it back. Toward the end they would tell you to make sure that you have your will written out if you have anything, make sure you have a will and your life insurance straightened out before you go over. It was probably a week before we finished the training. So, it was a rude awakening that maybe you weren't going to come back.

SM: Was it similar in basic in terms of the instructors having Vietnam experience?

GB: The only one that we knew that had Vietnam experience was our company commander and all he did was read about what happened to him. He won awards and medals over there and his face was burnt up a little bit, and that was it. That's all. They didn't tell us much about Vietnam, they just told us about training. They just wanted to teach them discipline and beating us.

SM: And when you finished your AIT, did you feel like you were prepared to take on the world; at least take on the Vietnamese?

GB: I thought I was and most guys around there thought they were trained well enough to combat ready, and you kind of get brainwashed into that, that you're a real fighting machine, a soldier. Realistically you weren't ready for it. You knew how to use all your weapons, your booby traps, your claymores, all your big weapons. You knew how to do all that. In actual combat, it was a totally different story. You just didn't go by the book anymore. You learn as you went along in Vietnam.

SM: When did you graduate from AIT?

GB: March or April.

SM: March '69?

GB: That was in basic. I finished basic in May of '69, and then about July of '69 I finished AIT.

SM: Then you found yourself…

GB: They assigned me to an armament company in Fort Hood, Texas because I was too young to go to Vietnam yet. What it was was a Vietnam return base for Vietnam returnees so I was just stuck in with a lot of nothing but Vietnam veterans because they were just on their way home. They were just stationed there until their time was up. So, I was stuck there for maybe two months and didn't do very much down there because all they did was play ball and whatever. They were just Vietnam vets that they didn't want to mess with. I had it easy for two months. Then my orders came down for Vietnam and those were the orders that I had to go to an airbase outside of Fort Hood called [?] Air Force Base and that's where we'd be training with a special unit that was getting ready to activate it for Vietnam and it was a special unit that we trained for probably eight months. We were trained to be rapid reaction aero-rifle platoon, which our main job was to rescue

shot down pilots, choppers, chopper pilots, and jet pilots. That was their main job and also recon. We trained for a solid eight months approximately.

SM: This was from July of ’68 to February of ’69.

GB: Yes.

SM: During that time period, the training that you had received, was it being supervised by Vietnam veterans?

GB: Yeah. A lot of them were like Vietnam vets. A lot of guys that were training with us in my platoon were Vietnam vets. They’re kind of like a leader. They helped us out, what to expect, and this helped with the training. They went with us back over to Vietnam to their second and third tours.

SM: How did they refer to the Vietnamese?

GB: What do you mean?

SM: Well, would they say, “Well, when you encounter the Vietnamese,” or would they say…how would they literally, verbally refer to the Vietnamese, the Viet Cong?

GB: You mean like gooks and dinks?

SM: Yeah, or did they just call them VC or Charlie?

GB: Charlie most of the time. It was more or less always Charlie. Charlie can do this, Charlie can do that. That’s how they referred to them mostly. Some of the hardcore guys always used gooks or dinks, the term for them. But, mostly like Charlie, everything that was taught, Charlie does this, Charlie does that.

SM: Did you feel that the training you received during that time, from July ’68 to February ’69, was more realistic and better?

GB: Yeah, I think it was because like I said, they had veterans, Vietnam veterans in there, and they pretty much knew what to really expect. We trained to repel out of choppers, McGuire, we were trained McGuireing. All us infantry guys were trained as door gunners also just in case we needed door gunners on choppers, and radio ops or radio techniques, how to use a radio and all the language to use on the radio, what kind of language and terms, different types of terms. It was a lot of good training. We did a lot of night training out in that area.

SM: During that training, were you using an M-16, M-14?

GB: Yes, it was an M-16, and an M-16 stayed with us through that and also a year in Vietnam. It was our baby for almost two years.

SM: Which one did you prefer?

GB: The M-16. As a radioman, that's all I could carry anyway until I got rid of the radio. Guys were trained with M-60s and stuck with them forever. Until their tour was up, they were killed, or they got out of the infantry somehow.

SM: So that unit you trained with, you all went over together to Vietnam?

GB: Right.

SM: What size was the unit?

GB: I'm going to guess 400.

SM: So about battalion?

GB: Right. It was infantry, it was called platoon, which are little observation helicopters, and the Cobra outfit and the Chinook outfit, they're the guys that airlifted us out to the jungle, and maintenance, all your maintenance people, radio and helicopter maintenance. We were all together.

SM: At this point were you in B Troop, 2nd of the 17th?

GB: When we got there, it was called F Troop.

SM: F Troop, okay.

GB: Obviously they changed that for reasons. Remember the old movie F Troop?

SM: Oh yes, not very glowing.

GB: No.

SM: Okay, so they changed, when you got in country, they changed it from F Troop to B Troop?

GB: Right.

SM: How were you transported to Vietnam?

GB: We were on regular commercial airline. We all went over there on two or three airlines all together. Some went over on a ship to guard all our equipment on the ship. I was supposed to but I got in a lot of trouble, so I didn't get to go on the ship. I had to go by commercial airline by escort, as a matter of fact, because I got in too much trouble. I was kind of a troublemaker.

SM: Do you want to talk about that for a minute?

GB: It was getting close to the end of our training and we went to the EM club, which was only a half a mile away up on a hill, and on the other side of the hill was an MP company. They had a floor show once in a while, singers and dancers and a fight broke out and MPs, one MP came over and hit me on the head with a baton and I turned around and smacked him, and then I realized it was an MP and I sat back down. Then he came back at me and said, "We're going outside," and I apologized to him. I said, "It was a mistake. I don't know why you hit me. I was just sitting here anyway." We ended up going outside, and a long story short, I beat up five MPs and had to go in for a court martial and ended up with an Article 15 because I put two MPs in the hospital. I was supposed to go on the ship, go home for 30 days R&R, vacation, and they cut me down to nine days and they said, "You're not going on the ship anymore." So I went home for nine days. I got in trouble at home because I beat up two policemen. I ended up in jail, and they transported me to Denver jail and the MPs came and got me there, took me out, and escorted me down back to Fort Hood, to [?] Air Force Base and from then on I had two officers escort me all the way to Vietnam. I was a troublemaker.

SM: Okay, when you got to Vietnam were you just let loose?

GB: Yeah, they turned me loose. The company commander said, "Okay, now you can go fight." I said, "Okay!" He did get a letter from the attorney, I guess you'd call him district attorney down in my hometown that said they wanted me back for my remaining 30 days in jail, but he wrote back to them and said, "You want him, come and get him." Never heard from them since. My CO was pretty good. He was pretty much my attorney when I got in trouble, when I beat up those MPs. I think he just liked me because I had a lot of fight in me.

SM: What was the morale of the unit like?

GB: It was pretty good morale because when you train together for eight months you all become pretty good friends. We all knew each other pretty well and we felt a very good trust in each other and we knew who was going to watch your back and who wasn't going to watch your back. We had a couple of slackers who didn't want to go to Vietnam obviously. As a matter of fact, we had a couple of defectors, just took off and didn't make it. One guy was from Mexico and the last day before we left, the day before

we left, he came back to the barracks and got his stuff and he said he was going back to Mexico and he tried to talk me into going back with him. I said, "Nah, I've got to come back to my country. You don't. You can go to Mexico. I have no choice." He just left and that was the last time I saw him. Another guy just defected. He left and I never knew what happened to the guy, what happened to him. Morale was very good throughout the whole company because we all got to know each other, the pilots and maintenance. So, when something happened, it hurt everybody.

SM: Was your unit primarily volunteers or draftees or a combination?

GB: Well, that's kind of funny. Some were draftees. Some were troublemakers in civilian life and the judge gave them a choice; go to prison, or go to Vietnam. So, we had a lot of those. It was interesting, we had one guy that he said that he killed a guy, ran him over with a car. It was murder, he did it on purpose, and the judge told him Vietnam or prison, and of course he chose Vietnam. He's one of the guys in our outfit that he snapped and he couldn't handle the combat.

SM: He couldn't?

GB: Nope.

SM: What happened to him?

GB: He went AWOL. We went through one big battle, as a matter of fact, Hill 376 and he snapped after that battle and he went AWOL and went back home, found his way back home to Detroit. He went to see a counselor up there and they talked him into coming back to Vietnam. He came back and the only thing that happened to him was that they made him a Jeep driver. There was no discipline. So, we had a few guys that were troublemakers in civilian life. That was the difference between then and now. Now, you've got to be a high school graduate and all that. Back then, they took anyone; criminal, you name it.

SM: In terms of, again, the composition, the makeup of your unit, how would you describe it in terms of ethnicity?

GB: What? I'm sorry.

SM: Ethnicity, ethnic background of people?

GB: We had a mixture in our infantry outfit; Puerto Ricans, myself, I'm Mexican, some Mexicans, black. We had one guy who I admired very much named

Detmer Schneider, he was from Germany and he wanted to serve the country and do his part for the country so he came from Germany. We had a great deal of different backgrounds. It was interesting.

SM: How well did everyone get along?

GB: Pretty well. There were some that didn't get along well. One guy ended up going to prison for 30 years. I still get different reports. He killed one of our sergeants with a grenade, because he was going to get court martialled because he disobeyed a direct order and the sergeant was one of the witness. So, before his court martial in Vietnam he threw a grenade in the hooch. I really don't know if he lived. I thought he was killed. He served 30 years. He got out last year, out of Leavenworth. So, some didn't get along. It was a racist thing. He was black and he had a lot of problems with race and everything and he thought everybody was racist and prejudiced towards him. There was a lot of that in Vietnam. Our outfit, he was probably the only one that didn't get along with anybody. So, it was probably a good thing that he ended up going to prison. He was just somebody you couldn't trust out in the field, you couldn't depend on him. All the rest of us get along pretty well. There was a few who did snap that couldn't fight. When we got in a firefight we just kind of froze and either or ran or just froze. So, it was a different thing.

SM: Well when you finally got in-country, you got off the plane, what were your first impressions?

GB: Hot! We got off the plane and it was hot. I thought going to Vietnam and I think most guys thought, because there were some guys that had already been there, I thought, "Jeez, are we going to get off the plane fighting? Are we going to have to run for cover when we get off this airline or what?" So once we got there it was pretty scary to me. It was hot, and then at night, our first night there, you hear the M-60 guns going off at night and you get a little worried because all our weapons were on the ship. So, I was getting worried why we didn't have guns or anything or rifles and what if we get overrun because you hear all the bombs going off and the fighting at night. It was pretty nervous. We were down at Danang, we landed at Danang, and we were there a couple of days before they shipped us all up north to our main base which was Camp Eagle at Hue and that's where we get all our equipment back, our rifles, everything we needed, our

new hooches for us and in the first week or so consisted of nothing but filling sandbags and putting them up on our hooch, building our bunkers. We were pretty busy.

SM: When you got there, what did you think the United States was trying to accomplish in Vietnam?

GB: That we were trying to accomplish to keep communist out of south Vietnam, keep it a free country. I knew that. We went in realizing that we were fighting for these people, and that's pretty much all I knew. I didn't realize there were all the politics involved in this war at the time. As we went on in Vietnam, the time went on, and I started to realize that there was just a bad disregard. You were fighting for really anything, you were just fighting to stay alive until your time was up and then hopefully you made it back. Its kind of negative, isn't it?

SM: I guess some might argue that it's realistic.

GB: Yes.

SM: When did you actually first get out into the field?

GB: April, first part of April or the last part of March I think [?] for two weeks in recon and we were out, I can't remember where we were at, but they sent us out in the jungle.

SM: This is still out, you were based at Camp Eagle?

GB: Yeah, we were based at Camp Eagle.

SM: So you were flying out into another area not too far away?

GB: Right.

SM: What was the primary mission of this?

GB: Just recon, looking for any kind of activity, enemy activity, and just learning things. We were somewhat by the ocean, by the sea, by the beach. We were just stuck there. I think that first week, middle of the first week, I got bit in the eye by a scorpion.

SM: You got bit where?

GB: On the eye?

SM: Eye?

GB: Yeah. So, I had to go. They Medevaced me out because I got pretty sick. I ended up in a hospital for a while because it was swollen up pretty large, probably the size of a golf ball. It was pretty amazing, they took a picture of it because they'd never

seen anything like it. After that was over they sent me back out to the field and as soon as I got back basically that first two weeks [?] squad is what it was, in '69. We were going up a hill and a little observation chopper, called LOHs, flew over, and then he left, and pretty soon we got hit with incoming. It killed a few of our guys, injured and wounded about 15 guys, killed a couple. It was our own artillery. This LOH was apparently a colonel flying this LOH and thought we were the NVA going up the hill and called artillery in on us.

SM: Oh, for crying out loud!

GB: So, that cut our platoon by, oh, we ended up with 20 something guys after that.

SM: My goodness. What was the original strength of your platoon?

GB: I think it was like 52, around there.

SM: Overstrength platoon.

GB: Yeah.

SM: Then you were cut down to about 28?

GB: Yeah, and then eventually we ended up with about 22. We lost people. They wouldn't replace them because we could move a lot faster with just 22, like say we NAS rapid reaction because if somebody got shot down we had to get out there before the Viet Cong got them or the NVA got to the pilot.

SM: What kind of briefing or briefings had you received at this point, especially when you first got in country, about being in Vietnam, things to do, things not to do, and then when you started going out on your missions, what kind of briefings would you get?

GB: If I can remember right, we had some short briefings with some Special Forces and Green Beret guys. We trained with them a little bit, and then they tell us what to expect out in the jungle, booby trap training, what kind of booby traps to look for, what kinds of booby traps they had, how to disarm the booby traps, what to do and what not to do as far as if you see something, don't kick it over. It might be a booby trap. They had Kit Carson scouts which used to be Viet Cong or NVA that surrendered to our side and became our scouts, and they would teach us what booby traps they had, what they would look like, and how to recognize a booby trap. If you're point man or whatever, you have

to look for this stuff. We had a lot of good briefings from the Special Forces and the Green Berets and the Kit Carson scouts. We trained more on rappelling into the jungle.

SM: What about briefings about things that you shouldn't be doing in terms of interacting with Vietnamese people and stuff like that?

GB: They brief us on the women, of course, the disease and all that. See, they did a lot of that. But, my outfit, we could never go to the town. We couldn't go to the villages because we were always on standby. So, we didn't have to worry about going into the villages, the infantry guys, because we were always on standby. If you had a day off, you had a day off. They'd tell you, "You can do anything you want," but you couldn't go down to the village. So, we didn't have to worry about women or interacting with the Vietnamese people. A lot of feeling if you get a hooch momma, to clean your barracks, your hooch, they [?] okay but we never had any housemaid. So, we just weren't allowed them, we weren't. We were pretty well…we were disciplined pretty good.

SM: During the first two week mission when you had to get Medevaced for your scorpion bite, and then the second one where the US artillery was brought down on you, did you encounter any Vietnamese, either civilian or enemy?

GB: No, never did.

SM: Did this become the routine for your unit in terms of your missions and operations?

GB: As far as what?

SM: Going out into certain areas like this, being flown out, going on two-week missions, and then coming back?

GB: Yeah, it was routine for us. We'd go out and other times we'd recon a mountain. We'd be out there for a week or two, and then if anything happened nearby like somebody got shot down, they could pick us up and take us out there right away, wherever we were at. We did a lot of that. We did a lot of blockades where the Marines or the Army would be sweeping down the beach area and we'd be a blockade for the VC or NVA, we'd catch them as they were coming down, running away from the sweeping. We did a lot of that, a lot of recon. We did go in a lot and picked up shot down pilots or recover a lot of helicopters that were shot down, a couple of jets. We'd go out and jet

pilots would tell us they were receiving fire from an [M-51 ?] this is the position and we'd go in and knock it out so they wouldn't get shot down. We did a lot of action for our platoon because obviously when somebody would get shot down the enemy's around, so there was always action. We'd always get in a firefight, short firefights, some long firefights. We captured a few VC and a couple of NVA once in a while, so it was always hot. It wasn't like a straight leg infantry outfit. They go out and they hump the jungle for weeks at a time and then they run into a battle. Ours was a lot different. We was always encountering some kind of battle, always running into NVA or VC.

SM: Why don't you go ahead and describe the first time your unit engaged the enemy, that you remember.

GB: The first time was kind of comical I think. We were doing recon up in some ridge and I know my LOH pilot, I was in contact with. Since I was the radio operator for my platoon leader I'd always talk to the pilots and these pilots would tell me what's coming up ahead [?]. So, the pilot said, "You have a Victor Charlie up ahead. We spotted a Victor Charlie," and I said, "A what?" and they said, "A Victor Charlie," and I says, "Victor Charlie?" I said, "VC?" and he said, "Yeah," and I said, "What's that?" and he said, "You know, the enemy?" because I was only 17, and then realizing that we're going to have our first encounter with the enemy, I was kind of like, "Holy cow, this is the real thing now." So we kept going and our machine gunner seen something out of the corner of his eye and he just turned and opened up on that spot and what it was, he shot some NVA, no, VC, they're VC, he shot one. He killed one and the other one I think was wounded and he tried to drag him with us into the jungle, the thick jungle, and a couple of our guys ran in after him and he dropped his dead buddy and he kept going so we got the dead VC. The other guy we couldn't find. They tell me on the radio, my company commander tells me on the radio, he says, "Go back to the LZ, the landing zone," and he says, "And hurry," and I gave the radio to my lieutenant and next thing I know we're running back to the LZ, and we've got this dead VC on our shoulders. I mean, this other guy was still dragging him because he wanted a body count, and he wanted to bring that body back. We're dragging this guy and we're getting to the LZ which is a rice paddy. We're trying hard because we're sinking in and we have all this weight and everything we have on us. We finally get on the chopper and these door gunners are opening up and

we have the Cobras opening up all around us. We find out that when we got out of there there was a like a company of NVA running down after us, and that's why they told us to get out fast. That was my first experience, first encounter with the NVA, and the VC. It was kind of scary.

SM: Now the person that you were carrying, this VC, do you know if there was anything taken from him in terms of intelligence material?

GB: He had $3,000 on him and intelligence thought that maybe he was a tax collector, and which to me a tax collector, they're just VC that go inside the villages and they get paid by the village people to leave them alone. There were no tax collectors up there. I just think he was the one that took the money so they'd be left alone. That's all he had on him was that money.

SM: You mentioned that you were of course the platoon leader's radioman and that you handed your radio off to him when you were helping to carry that body back. Was it typical for your platoon leader, your lieutenant, to go out there with you?

GB: Yeah, he had to be with us at all times. Our CO, the company commander, he always flew above us. He's the one that mostly directed us where to go, kept constant contact with him and the LOH pilot, the scout pilot. We went through several lieutenants, some got killed, some got wounded, and some couldn't handle it. The first one we had was probably the best one. It was Lieutenant Burke which retired recently as a general.

SM: I'm sorry, lieutenant who?

GB: His name was Lieutenant Burke.

SM: Burke?

GB: Charles Burke. He was the best one we had. He was actually a pilot and somehow he got talked into being a platoon leader because we didn't have one. This started back in training and he stuck with us in Vietnam for a couple of months until they finally got him an actual combat platoon leader, infantry. From then on we kept going through different platoon leaders because we kept losing them or some were some gung ho they got us in trouble, because we had a couple of Special Forces platoon leaders and things like that, and that's why I missed Lieutenant Burke because he was pretty level headed. He kept his cool all the time.

SM: Now the gung ho guys, how would they get in trouble?

GB: When we'd get ambushed or something, or we'd receive fire from certain areas, he wanted us to just charge without thinking of who we were charging. Well, we don't do that. You actually do charge if you get ambushed. If it's a posed ambush you charge that position you're getting ambushed by. But, if you receive fire from different areas, you don't charge that area. You let the scouts check it out for you and you try to maneuver your way up there and get them out. Some of these guys were just a little crazy for us. I don't know what the problem was. [?] didn't care who got killed or anything. You had ways of fighting. You learned ways of fighting the VC and NVA. We'd lose those lieutenants. They'd go crazy over the radio, I'd be the radioman and they'd be yelling on the radio and screaming this and screaming that and I think the CO realized, "This guy's out of control. I've got to find somebody else." So that's what we looked for, somebody who's sharp, and they'd bring on the next lieutenant. There's a couple of times when our senior sergeant would have to take over the platoon because our lieutenant got shot.

SM: Well I'm curious; you mentioned the fact that when you were finally on board the helicopter, having carried that dead VC soldier to the landing zone, and then you realized or you found out that there was actually a company of NVA there trying to catch you guys, at that point did you kind of pause and think, "Was it really worth this one body," putting your two lives in jeopardy, just to carry one body back for the count?

GB: At the time we didn't realize it.

SM: Right, but after the fact?

GB: After the fact, yeah. If we would have known, I think even though our CO wanted us to drag this body back, I think I would have just dropped it and kept running to get out of there quicker because you're putting a lot of people in jeopardy here. You've got the pilots that might get shot up. They get shot we cant get out. If they get shot up in the air, we crash. There's a lot of things you're risking there just for one body. You always has plenty of time to get another body somewhere. So yeah, you think about it, we thought about it later, and I don't think it was worth it. I would have dropped him. I might have would have gotten a little discipline out of it, but I wouldn't have carried him. You've got to think of your outfit because I was one of the last ones. Me and my buddy

were the last ones to get on the chopper from carrying this guy. They're not that big, but when you're going through a rice paddy that's full of water you're sinking all the time. You're talking 50-80 pounds on your back without the VC or the equipment. So, we slowed up the platoon by doing that. But, it was a body count and everybody was happy.

SM: Did you guys think about it at all or talk about that aspect at all?

GB: About the body?

SM: Well, the emphasis on the body count?

GB: Yeah, yeah, you know the platoon and infantry guys made a real big thing about the body count because we shoot VC and we're not going to bring them back. It wasn't a big thing to us but it was a big thing to our higher ups. They liked to see the body. I don't know why. They liked the body count, the actual body count, and they liked seeing this stuff. In infantry, you see it all the time. But, to them it was a big thing; to us, it was nothing.

SM: When you would go out on these missions, how much of a mission brief would you receive?

GB: Not much really. We'd actually be scrambled, they'd call it a scramble. They'd say scramble the Blues. Well, a scramble we already knew there was a chopper down or somebody was in trouble out there, some other infantry outfit. If they had time, if a lieutenant had time and he got briefed on it, he would tell us what's going on. He would say, "Chopper's down, VC's in the area, we've got to get in there," or if somebody was in trouble. That's all they'd tell us. It wouldn't be any long briefing or anything. We just knew we had to get out there as soon as possible.

SM: What about enemy strength or composition in the area?

GB: They would have no idea. They knew there was enemy out there but they wouldn't know how many or who was NVA or VC. You went in blind. It could have been a couple hundred, it could be two. We didn't ever know.

SM: Well are there any particular missions that stick in mind in terms of…well, we do of course want to talk about what occurred on Hill 376 but I was just curious about other missions before that.

GB: We had a few. We had one mission we went on. It was suspected bunker, VC bunker complex we went into. We went in and there were tunnels and bunkers. We

caught a few…I don't know what we called them at the time, they were VC civilians, a family, that we got. There was quite a few, ten to 15 with their babies and their wives. In the tunnel we'd be kind of checking the area out and we saw one tunnel, a VC ran by the tunnel entrance and so we knew the VC were in the tunnel so we called in the engineers, a couple of engineer outfits. They were experts. They would come out and blow these tunnels out. Well, I was behind this Sergeant Smith whom you have met down in Vegas. I was behind him, was walking, and a VC threw a grenade back out at us. Smith kicked it back in. He threw it back out, and he kicked it back in. I was right behind him watching the whole thing, and finally I opened up on the VC. So, he quit throwing that grenade back on us. The grenade went off and everything just blew. I think it killed the two engineer guys and wounded a lot of our guys at different entrances and outlets. They were standing by. Had one guy lost his leg, blew his leg off. Another guy, Sergeant [?] was splintered up pretty bad. He almost lost one of his legs and arms but they saved them. It was pretty bad. I think we lost one or two sergeants [?] killed. [?] sergeant lost his leg. He was pretty upset. He couldn't see that he lost it but all he could ask was, "Do I have my legs? Do I have my legs?" He said he always told his wife that that's one thing he didn't want to go back home with just one limb, and he lost that leg. [?]. We had one where we did recon called Razorback Ridge, a two-week recon, and we had to walk the whole mountain. At one point we stumbled across a lot of remains of bodies. Some flesh was still in the boots. The lieutenant called up and asked if they knew anything about this. He called up my CO and he got back to us and he said it was the 82nd Airborne and they got overrun one night. It was quite a few bodies around there and I always wondered why they never went in and recovered them because there were skeletons left. That's all they told us and so we just kept moving on our recon for a couple of weeks. One of those nights on that recon we were attacked by monkeys.

SM: Oh really?

GB: Yeah, we set up camp not realizing there was monkeys above us, and for some reason during the night, about one in the morning, we were attacked by them. That was quite an experience. They scared the heck out of us obviously. All you can do is fight them off and grab them because you really couldn't see, and the jungle's pitch black. We couldn't see a thing. So, it was a scary situation. We didn't know what was

happening. That's probably two of the biggest things that stuck out in my head I had besides that one on April 12th when they called our own artillery on us.

SM: Yes. Now, did you have any other incidents involving wildlife besides the monkey and the scorpion bite?

GB: Tigers.

SM: Tigers?

GB: Yeah, we ran into tigers. In infantry combat talk, a tiger is an ambush. So, I'm on the radio and Scott on the chopper calls up and tells me, "You've got a tiger in front of you," and obviously I'm thinking there's an ambush in front of me, and I said, "Well how many are there," and he said, "One," and I laughed. I said, "Well that's not a tiger, that's a sniper." He says, "No," he says, "Tiger, you know, the one on the four legs!" So, that was more scary than an ambush to me because a tiger can rip you apart. So, they scared it off, a tiger. Snakes of course, obviously we ran into a lot of snakes over there. That was about it. I mean, there were spottings of elephants but I'd never seen an elephant over there. That was pretty much it as far as the wildlife and the monkeys.

SM: To your knowledge, did anybody go in after you guys left Razorback to pick up those suspected bodies of the 82nd Airborne?

GB: No, they didn't. You know what? When we were in Vietnam two years ago, at Danang at the [Parama] resort ran into a search team, missing in action search team. They were Americans and I told them about it and I told them I was always curious if they were listed as missing in action or KIA. Well, I talked to the guy and he never believed me about it. He said, "That's impossible, they wouldn't leave a whole bunch of Americans out there," and I said, "Okay, you say it's impossible but I seen it, with my own eyes, I seen it," and I had a friend, as a matter of fact he committed suicide shortly after Vietnam because he couldn't handle it. He wrote me a letter about that, remembering seeing these guys, the bodies and the flesh and the boots and all that. So, I kept in contact with this officer in charge of this MIA search and I kept asking him if they checked into it and he come back and he emailed me back and said, "Well, no, we think this is a battle. Give me a date and all that," and I think that was it. But, he never actually went out to Razorback Ridge and checked it out, to look for the remains and

skeletons and all that and he just kind of brushed me off. He didn't believe me. That was the final line that I got out of it. They just blew me off and said, "This is crazy. Forget about it." So, this was it. I didn't pursue it after that.

SM: Well, why don't we go ahead and discuss the events that occurred on Hill 376?

GB: Yes. Bad day. It was a routine day. We were sent down to Chu Lai because they were having a lot of trouble down in the Chu Lai area, a lot of NVA action and everything and they needed us down there, the reaction team, to recover all those downed chopper pilots and they were looking for a big NVA unit that was threatening that area to overrun the Marine air base down there, and the Americal Division. That particular day we just routinely flew out to Tam Ky, our staging area where we stayed, the infantry team would stay there and wait for the call for a downed chopper to go in after them and around ten o'clock I was sitting, me and some guys, sitting by the radio because we could hear our RTO, we could hear all these chopper pilots calling in a lot of activity in the area and it was just intense, we were getting fired up. We were getting pretty nervous. Our Medic, LaPointe, supposed to meet his wife and newborn baby that he never got to see in Hawaii the next day. He was leaving for R&R, and he was pretty nervous about it because he wanted to go see them. So, I remember me and this other guy said, "Just stay back and we'll take care of things. It's no big thing. We've been through this many times. We don't need you out there." Well he had to get the okay from the lieutenant to [?]. We had no say so. We couldn't tell him to stay back. But, he wouldn't talk to the lieutenant. He wouldn't tell him he was nervous about this and wanted to go on R&R the next day or anything. Well he came along with us. When they scrambled us they wanted us to check the activity out that they'd been seeing and we went out there. They flew us out there and we circled the landing zone for quite a while, while the Cobras, the gunships were firing up the area with rockets to make sure we had a safe landing. As we were going in, finally, because we were really getting nervous then because we just circled and circled and looking down at that landing zone and all the fire power going into that and you're getting pretty nervous about it. We all pretty much knew that this was going to be intense because there was a lot of prepping going on. We all had that feeling that something was going to happen. We finally landed and I

understand we were fired at all the way in, so you could call it a hot LZ receiving fire going in. We finally landed and the last chopper dropped off the last of our platoon. We started down one side of the hill and we received a lot of small weapons fire coming up at us and so my lieutenant calls up the company commander. Like I say, he always fires above us, and we said, "We're receiving a great deal of fire, small weapons fire. What do you want us to do next?" and he said, "Well just turn around and go to the north side of the hill. Go down to the other side." So, we all turned around. Two sergeants at point , Sergeant Reed and Sergeant Saunders and we were going down the hill and I'm thinking, well, it's obviously VC or NVA in the area because we were receiving fire. I'm hoping our point men are alert, and you're hoping they do a good job of point. So, we get down to this clearing over by some boulders and the lieutenant and the other radio operator over by these boulders, three big boulders, and then I hear Sergeant Saunders, he yells, "Hey, we got a chicken over here," and he's laughing about it. Him and Sergeant Reed start chasing this chicken. We're just laughing. The chicken took them right into a bunker complex and they just opened fire on them. The only thing you heard Saunders and Reed start yelling, "I'm hit, I'm hit! Medic," screaming away and the medic, Joe, was behind me and he starts taking off and me and Cotter, the other radioman, yell at him to hold up, we've got to secure the area first but he kept going and he went in there and he was trying to help them out and then he got hit and Lieutenant Burke comes in, Albert Bumstead to check it out and Bumstead ran right in there, and pretty soon he ran back. He ran right towards us and as he's running back the upper left part of his chest blew out. An NVA shot him through the back and blew out part of his chest above his heart. So we grabbed him from behind the boulders. He was still alive, and as a matter of fact he did make it. He made it back home okay. Bumstead was telling me that when he ran in there all this firing was going on and he was trying to find a place to hide, take cover, and he seen this one guy, he thought it was a Kit Carson scout hiding under a bush and he thought he'd get in there with him. Well, it turned out to be an NVA. He was hiding in there with him. He said once he realized it it shocked him, it shocked that NVA soldier, and then he got up and started running and that's when that guy shot him through the back. I remember when he shot him, it just barely missed mine and Lieutenant Burke's and Kotter's head because the round snapped on the other side of your head. So, the

three of us were lucky we didn't get hit in the head. Then, all hell broke loose. We tried to get in a line to spot these bunkers that ambush but by then there's too many other guys shot, killed, and wounded so we had nobody. My friend, Sergeant Rumey got shot in the leg and almost shot one leg off. He was yelling and screaming. I remember a machine gunner was in shock at the time and he was crying and yelling and I was yelling at him to get his act together because we were in pretty bad shape. So I gave him my radio. By then my lieutenant and Cotter and Bumstead were behind me, behind these big boulders, and I gave my radio to the lieutenant. I said, "I got to get up there because Fleming is hit pretty bad," and he was by himself. So, I crawled up there and I seen his leg was just hanging on by flesh and his other leg was pretty well shot up. So, I didn't know who was ahead of me anymore. I knew there were other guys. I knew there were three guys wounded pretty bad, which was the two sergeants and our medic. I seen one guy right in front of me. His name was Richard Brack. He was leaning against a tree shooting and firing away and I looked up the hill right in front of us and I see all these NVA coming down towards us and they're firing and I said, "Oh man!" I was looking for Schneider and I thought he was dead because I couldn't see him, I couldn't hear him or anything. Then, so I was firing up above the hill trying to keep the NVA back and pretty soon I see our artillery guy. His name was Dennis Prince. He was right up there by the two sergeants and the medic and I thought he was going to put a grenade into one of those bunkers. Next thing I knew he stood straight up and he's trying to get to our wounded, the sergeant and the medic and he stood straight up and I thought, "Oh man," and pretty soon the NVA opened up with the machine gun and got him across the chest and he went down, I just watched him go down. That was it for him because he got them right through the heart. Then I looked to my right to where Breck was, and just as I looked to him, I looked at him, he got a round right in between the eyes and it just blew his brains back into my face. So, I had Fleming there and he was laying on his back and I started to move up to Breck because he had a radio and that's when he started yelling, "Don't leave me," and what am I going to do? I had to do something. So, I finally made it to Breck and I took his knife out and I cut off his radio and I pulled it back to where Fleming was [?] and I changed the frequency of the lieutenant to the old radio, he had my radio, and I called him up and I said, "We're in really bad shape here. We've got a lot of guys KIAed

and wounded and the NVA are coming on down here. Charlie's coming down at us. There's a bunch, just a bunch coming down," and he said, "Well pull back to where I'm at. Well, I couldn't come down to that area and I couldn't leave Fleming because he couldn't be moved. So I said, "I'm staying up here with Fleming," and then the Cobras were coming in firing rockets up the hill, trying to help to keep the NVA back, and pretty soon I hear Schneider. Schneider was yelling, and he said, "Man, I'm over here. I'm pinned down." He was right under the bunker and he was kind of out of sight of the NVA in the bunker and the NVA started throwing rocks at him so they could get him to move so they could get a clear shot at him and he wouldn't move. He said, "Cover me, man, I've got to get out of here," because you could hear the NVA by then. By then they're yelling, "Chu Hoi!" which they're yelling at us, "Chu Hoi," which was to surrender. That's how close we were to being killed or captured. So, I really couldn't see, the grass there was pretty high. So, I estimated where he was at and I just opened fire right above him hoping I wouldn't hit him. I fired right above him and then I could see him crawling out. I could see the grass moving where he's crawling out and he finally got out of there. Then I directed my fire up to the hill with the NVA, firing up, trying to get the NVA to hold them back and everything. That was on the radio with turned out to be Ken Barwick, gunship pilot. Apparently Lieutenant Burke was talking to the pilots, trying to direct fire, where to fire, and when I got on the radio I knew pretty much where everybody was at by then and at the time I was popping smoke so he wouldn't hit us and I was directing fire through the radio to Ken Barwick telling him where to fire and where we were at. I tell him to look for a color of smoke and that's where we were at and not to shoot there but shoot as close as you can because they're right on us. Of course after all these years, I learned two years ago that that was Ken Barwick that I was talking to. I found that out when we went back to Vietnam two years ago, I found out that was him I was actually talking to and he was one of our lifesavers. We ran out of ammunition and I called up, and of course I told my CO, "I'm out of ammo," and I went and got all the ammo I could off the wounded and the dead and pulled back and just used their ammo up. When I used it up Fernando DiParisi, our lift pilot, the guys that haul us in there, he volunteered to take ammo to us. He actually asked for single man to volunteer because he really didn't think he was going to come back alive.

So, he asked for single volunteers only but he told me that everybody volunteered to go in to fly with him and bring our resupply of ammo in. They finally made it out there, the ammo, and they kicked it out above us. I don't know why. We cant ever figure out why he didn't get shot down but we guessed that they just don't want to give away their position. So, they kicked the ammo out and I crawled up and went and got it and made sure I pulled back and it was actually two of us left fighting, fighting off the NVA were me and Detmar Schneider because Burke and Carter were pinned down behind the boulder and Barker was there too and they were all pinned down behind the boulders behind us and it was just me and Schneider up front fighting. Of course it started raining. This was going on for hours. It started raining and I pretty much thought that we were dead because if it started raining, choppers cant come out in the rain. Cloud covers are low and the cloud ceiling is low. I figured we weren't going to make it at all because we had no more big gun support from the gunships and all that. Finally the rain cleared out, the clouds had moved up, and they brought in reinforcements. They brought in I think the 501 Infantry of the 101st and I could hear all of these choppers coming and I seen them rounding the hill where they landed us and there was just chopper after chopper and they fought their way down to us and they finally broke us free. I remember Schneider, after it was all over, Schneider came over to me. I always carried two canteens on my back, my web gear, and Schneider said, "Man, give me a drink of water," and so I pulled my canteens out and they were all full of holes. So they were shooting pretty close. They finally fought their way down to us and broke us free. They took out the wounded first because it was already getting dark. It was almost dark. They took the wounded out because that's all they had time for and we set up a perimeter for the night and we laid there all through the night with our dead and had a fire fight parts of the night with the NVA trying to come up on our positions. They had a what we called Spooky, it was a C-130 plane that flew around us all night firing mini machine guns all through the night and these machine guns fired about 1200 rounds per square foot. So, it was probably one of the longest nights in my time in Vietnam. The next morning, about…oh, I can't remember, ten, eleven o'clock they finally pulled us out that were left alive and the dead out and went back to our staging area and they briefed us. Then we got word that those 250 guys that came out in the reinforcements, they were pinned down. So, then we

started to realize there's more NVA out there than we thought because there's 250 of our guys out there getting pinned down and that they only inserted 18 of us the day before. So, after a couple of months or so we find out that approximately 2,000 NVA in the whole area and that was the NVA company they were looking for all the time, threatening Marine air base out there and we were the unlucky ones to find them. So, it was pretty much it. It was a pretty bad situation we got put into.

SM: What was the biggest lesson you learned from that particular operation?

GB: A lot of that just alertness. You've got to remind everybody constantly that you've got to be alert in any situation you're in. I learned a lot of stuff, that I had to think a lot better than I did that day because we were kind of lax in our alertness. When the doc ran in there, we should have grabbed him. Somebody should have grabbed him before we had more casualties and just say, "Don't go in." Just be more aggressive on stopping certain situations. I also learned life is a…you can lose a life real easy. It don't take much to stop a life, like that day. It was just incredible watching…I mean, I witnessed two guys getting killed, just watching them dropping left and right. Then, I mean, I was killing NVA myself. I was picking them out and shooting them and dropping them. It's amazing how you can just shoot somebody and they die. That's all taken in the day after. I was in shock for days after that. Its one of those big battles that we almost got captured. Me and Schneider almost got captured and we almost lost our lives, and we lost five guys right off the bat who were killed and then we had all the other wounded. Then we had a pilot come in, a jet pilot come in and was bombing the other side of the hill to keep the other NVAs back and we had to call him off because he was dropping the big bombs and we were receiving shrapnel on our side. They were starting to hit us. We had one guy wounded from the shrapnel from the bombs on the other side. So, we had to call them off too. It was, I don't know. I think our CO learned a lesson by you've got to check the area out a little bit better, a lot better. You just don't throw 18 guys in there and think there isn't much in there. Turned out we just got wiped out.

SM: The use of the phrase Chu Hoi while you were there, of course typically that was used by the Vietnamese to surrender themselves?

GB: Right.

SM: In this instance, they were calling for your surrender?

GB: Right.

SM: Had that happened to you before or since?

GB: That was the only time that we were so close to getting captured.

SM: What were the total losses for your unit?

GB: That day?

SM: Yes.

GB: There was like two wounded, I'm sure…oh yeah, five killed, two wounded, and we had two Kit Carson scouts that were with us and they defected.

SM: Defected to the other side?

GB: Yeah, during the battle. So, we lost nine.

SM: Now the enemy strength, did you guys ever get a good handle on exactly how many enemy you were going up against?

GB: Probably immediately above us, there was probably 200 I think they thought, and then throughout the hill and the valley they say there was 2,000 NVA because they did end up sending…there was about 450 American infantrymen out there and they were pinned down for a while. So, that's a good scale to measure by; there's 450 of them to 18 of us that went in originally, so we didn't have a fighting chance.

SM: Not at all.

GB: We're just lucky that they didn't know how many of us were left. I think they just overran us, no problem, because we would have went down fighting and still they would have overran us.

SM: How much time elapsed until you went on your next mission?

GB: It took us a while to get reinforced, probably a total of two weeks because we lost so many. There is guys that were back in the rear that had guard duty the night before so they didn't come out with us. It was probably three guys so they couldn't go out in the field with us that day. So, there was probably 11 of us left, 11 or 12, so we couldn't…the only way they would use us was in dire emergency where a pilot was down and the VC were closing in on them. That's the only time they would use us until we got reinforced. Then we finally got reinforced with a lot of new we called them at the time shake and bakes. They were guys that went to basic and AIT and then went to NCO training and they came out sergeants, buck sergeants, so that's why we called them shake

and bakes. They're instant sergeants. So, we had a lot of new guys like that. We shipped a couple of veterans over to us to help us out because by then me and a couple of other guys, we were vets, we were broke in vets. So, we knew what we were doing and they got all new guys, and they gave us a few vets that were in other companies. We had to break in those new sergeants that came in straight out of the states you know, and they kind of didn't like that because I wasn't a sergeant at the time, I was a spec 4 and he didn't like me or other guys telling them what to do because they were sergeants. So, we had to kind of discipline them because either they listened to us or they die. So, we explained to them that, "Everything you learned back in the states in a book, forget about it. It's a new ballgame out here. This is combat. Either you listen to us or you're not going to make it back." They didn't like the idea and some listened to us and a couple of them wouldn't. They just thought they're a sergeant, and, "You can't tell me how to fight a war." Okay, be that way. Obviously, a couple of these guys didn't make it back because they wanted to do it by the book and they didn't make it back.

SM: Did that kind of conflict ever result in fragging or anything like that?

GB: Ragging?

SM: Fragging.

GB: Oh yeah, yeah. We had fights, actual fist fights, ragging and fist fights between us and the NCOs.

SM: But did any NCOs ever get killed? Fragging.

GB: Oh, I thought you said…no, no.

SM: But there were fistfights?

GB: Yeah.

SM: You guys would get into fistfights with them and stuff?

GB: A couple of sergeants just couldn't figure out why we had to tell them how to fight this war, and we'd get into heated arguments and end up fist fighting. You know what, at the end, we were all good buddies. It just happened that we had to make them understand and after their first big fire fight they woke up and pretty soon we were good buddies and we learned how to depend on each other. So it wasn't like we hated each other for the rest of the tour.

SM: It's just that breaking in process?

GB: Yep.

SM: You've got to break them in?

GB: Yep, exactly.

SM: What about the lieutenants that you had come into your platoon over the course of time? Did they get better, worse? I know you mentioned that the first one was probably the best.

GB: They got better; worse at the beginning, but a couple of lieutenants and a captain were like I say Special Forces, ex Special Forces, and they were pretty bad. It was really gung ho where body count was all that mattered to them, and soon they would get rid of them. The CO would get rid of them, and then it would get better because we would get seasoned veterans that came in, and they had level heads. They were young guys like that and they were level headed and they knew exactly what to do. We had a lot of confidence in them. They were good guys. We lost a couple because they were wounded, but they got better at the end.

SM: And what about the morale of the unit and the ethnic makeup of the unit? How did it change over time and was it every effected?

GB: Morale was pretty good after a while. When we went down to Chu Lai area, it was pretty bad, a lot of guys getting knocked off left and right. It was a very intense area, a lot of VC, a lot of NVA. Guys are really getting scared. They knew they weren't going to make it out of the mission, so it wasn't very good. Later on, it got better as we got reinforcements and we trained them on combat and we taught them an the field veterans taught them and morale was good. We had a good bunch of guys. In Vietnam there was a lot of racism. I never knew…I came from a small town. I didn't know what racism was as far as black. I knew what racism was as far as Mexicans because in school I ran into a lot of racism between the whites and the Mexicans, but I never knew a black so I didn't think much of it. But a lot of these guys that came from Detroit and Chicago, blacks and whites, well there was a lot of racism between them. Us small town guys didn't know that. We were learning as we're going along that man, there is a lot of racism here. They're vocal about it, too, because you'd hear the name-calling and all that. I thought, "Man, we're fighting two wars over here right now," so it wasn't very good. But, some of the guys that were having a lot of race problems had left and it turned

out in our platoon we all got along pretty well after some of these other guys left that were causing a lot of problems. So, it turned out that toward the end of my tour over there everybody got along real well.

SM: What did you guys do for recreation? Anything?

GB: We had R&R. Some of us would go to Bangkok and Hong Kong. Once in a while we'd get a two-day pass and the whole platoon would go to a place called Eagle Beach outside of Hue out by the China Sea. We spent a couple days there and that would be it. As far as recreation in camp, there was no recreation. There was nothing like that. You had movies at night. We'd go down to the theater, it's an outside theater and watch something. There's a lot of drinking. Everybody drank like fish.

SM: What did you drink?

GB: Just beer. Well, some guys drank hard alcohol but myself and most of my buddies, we drank beer. Every chance you got you had to stand down, you drank yourself silly.

SM: How about other things, drugs or anything?

GB: Oh, there was a lot of drugs up there. I seen bags and bags of marijuana that the Vietnamese civilians would sell to the Americans. My platoon, there's probably just a couple guys that smoked marijuana and that was about it. But, I've heard stories about guys in the unit, not in the infantry, but the machine gunners and the maintenance guys and all that, that there was heroin going around but I never seen it.

SM: In your unit there was only a couple of people that smoked marijuana?

GB: Yeah, in my platoon.

SM: In your platoon?

GB: Yeah.

SM: Was there an attempt to strictly enforce the rules regarding that?

GB: No, I never seen anything like that, and they never give us any talk about it. I don't know if they looked the other way or if they didn't think there was much going on in the unit. I think the biggest problem, grass wasn't the big thing. The alcoholism was the big thing. Everybody drank heavily, to forget the problems, forget the war.

SM: Were there rules about that?

GB: No, they didn't even say anything about that. Everybody drank. Very few people didn't drink. Officers, if anybody didn't drink, it would be some of the officers because some knew better. Us infantry guys, we were a bunch of alcoholics.

SM: Now of course some people might think that you're saying that in jest. Do you think that that did become a problem for some people?

GB: Oh yeah. Back in the states, you mean?

SM: Yes.

GB: Well obviously, a lot of that went on. To this day you've got a lot of guys that are in bad shape because of the drinking problems and even the drug problems. So, it caused a lot of problems in their personal lives. A lot of them are still going to counseling. They used it as something to forget.

SM: Now did you stay? Well no, you didn't. You moved around a little bit. You went from Hue down to Quang Tri, Chu Lai and Tam Ky?

GB: Right.

SM: As you were moving into those different areas, how much time did you spend in Quang Tri?

GB: Quang Tri was just a couple of days. We just worked the whole area. Chu Lai was the 90-day thing.

SM: 90 days?

GB: Yeah.

SM: And you mentioned that there was quite a bit of activity there?

GB: That was a very hot area. That was during Hamburger Hill.

SM: Any particular operations that stand out?

GB: Just the one down in Chu Lai, the big one, the Lamar Plain was the operation and that was the big one where we lost a lot of people, a lot of helicopters, a lot of pilots were killed in that area. Yeah, that was probably the main one.

SM: How about at Tam Ky?

GB: That was the same area.

SM: Oh that is the same area?

GB: Yeah, Tam Ky was just our staging area.

SM: Well are there any other operations or activities in Vietnam that you want to discuss?

GB: That was about it. Everything was routine most of the time but now it's doing recons. We captured nurses, enemy nurses. We captured officers, high ranking officers, NVA officers that had a lot of intelligence information on them, paperwork and everything that we were proud of anyway because it helped out the US a lot with the intelligence.

SM: In what areas did you capture officers?

GB: It was out in the A Shau Valley in the jungle. I couldn't tell you exactly what area.

SM: How about time frame?

GB: Probably around July and August of '69, around that time. We captured a lot of VC and just a lot of routine stuff. Just the big battles, the one I just told you. That was about it.

SM: When you captured either VC or NVA officers or whatever, was it difficult at times to restrain people?

GB: No, actually not. They were willing to go. We threw them on a chopper and the chopper took them back to intelligence. Drop them off there and that was the last, obviously heard of them. Yeah, that was about it.

SM: How about restraining your fellow soldiers not to do physical harm to the capture?

GB: We never had that problem in my outfit. I heard they did in other outfits, but we'd just capture them and we'd throw them on the chopper. From what happened at that point after we put them on the chopper, I have no idea. But we didn't do any beatings or anything like that. We found babies out in the jungle or where our medic would use a big gauze for a diaper and all that. They were just left out there, the babies are, and they end up at an orphanage somewhere. It was different things. We had to sit through one rain in the month of April of '69 and it rained either 72 or 82 inches in one month and we had a hard time with that. It was sleeping in water and all that. A lot of people don't realize what we had to go through besides combat. You had all the other elements like the scorpions and tigers and all that. We had a lot of outdoor elements you

had to battle, the rain, the cold nights out in the jungle in the rain and all that stuff. So, it was a lot of stuff involving being in combat. That's pretty much it.

SM: Now let's see, when you were getting close to your departure date, your DEROS, did anything change for you operationally?

GB: When you get close to leaving Vietnam, ending your tour, you get very nervous. About ten days before you leave, before your ending date, they pull you out of the field because they know you're real nervous, you're anxious, your anxiety is high, and you made it that far through your tour they want to pull you out and make sure you go home alive with ten days left. I guess I have to add that on my fifth day, I had like four or five days left to return home. My XO, second in command in my company, he was Captain Dave Livingston. He was a really good guy. I really admired him over there. He got shot down and he got shot in the head. He as a LOH…at the time he became the scout leader for a the LOH, the Little Observation Choppers. He got shot in the head, he went down in the thick jungle and like I said I had four or five days left and the platoon sergeant came up to me and said, "Livingston is down out there and there's not very many qualified rappellers to go in after him. Do you want to go with them?" and I said, "Sure, this is Livingston. He's a good man." So, we went out there and rappelled in and it turned out a lot of us ran out of rope because the jungle was deeper than we thought. One guy got hurt pretty bad, broke an ankle. One guy got his head split open because they threw out a box of grenades and he got hit in the head and split his head open. He lived, but he was hurt pretty bad. I ran out of rope. I had a radio on my back. I ran out of rope and free fell I don't know how many feet, quite a few feet, and hurt myself a little bit. We got the captain out and his door gunner. I thought he was dead. I thought after all these years I thought he was killed. Find out, he just lived about 60 miles south of me and I went down to visit him. Well, he's paralyzed on the left side and he showed me the wound on his head and all that where he got shot. We spent the night there and through the night there is one guy that still caught up in the tree and we couldn't get him down because it was already almost dark and through the whole night we had about 100 to 150 NVA walk right by us about ten feet away and we couldn't say…we had to be real quiet. I called it in to our company commander in the night, you know, we had NVA and I was turning off my squall to my radio because if they heard

that then we'd be dead meat. We made it through the night with no problems, no casualties or anything, anybody getting shot. They Medevaced the guys that were hurt and pulled the rest of us out. We had to McGuire out of there because we couldn't land anywhere. We made it back and I had about three days left before I went home.

SM: Now how did Livingston get out?

GB: Medevac.

SM: Oh he was Medevaced, too?

GB: We got him out that night.

SM: You got him out, but you just didn't realize he survived.

GB: Right.

SM: Gotcha. Just out of curiosity, in terms of I asked previously about recreation, did you guys have any radios? Did you listen to radio programs, music and stuff?

GB: Yeah, oh yeah. We had radios, transistor radios and all that. We never had them out with us in the field. It was just back at camp.

SM: How frequently would you be able to listen to programs?

GB: Whenever we went back there, whenever we went back to base and sat around.

SM: Was that important for you guys?

GB: Oh yeah.

SM: How so?

GB: You like to listen and you had to have something to listen to. A lot of guys of course had reel-to-reel tape recorders that they listened to their music on, and there was a lot of that. I mostly listened to the radio, listened to the broadcast, US Armed Forces broadcast. It was good music, and that was important. You relaxed by that.

SM: Would you guys have uninterrupted access to broadcasts or was it kind of difficult at times?

GB: Yeah, it was uninterrupted. We never had any problems.

SM: So reception was good?

GB: Yeah.

SM: Well, is there anything else you'd like to talk about in terms of your in country experiences?

GB: No, that's pretty much it.

SM: When you left, did you feel like you'd accomplished anything?

GB: No. When I left I was proud of the fact that I helped save lives. I saved my buddies life, some buddy, and some saved my life and things like that. That was the proud thing that I was proud of. As far as accomplishing anything over there, well, not really. I mean, there's always NVA and there's always VC and we never ran out of them because I don't think we did any help as far as winning the battle.

SM: Well, you mentioned you never ran out of enemy. Did you ever run out of anything you needed? You guys ever short of anything, supplies or anything?

GB: Beer.

SM: Beer?

GB: Beer. [Both laugh]. No, not really. No, we never really ran out of anything. We were pretty well supplied with pretty much everything we needed. We were jealous of the fact that the Air Force and the Marines, they got really good food. We found out they were eating steaks and everything. I never seen one steak over there, I never seen one hamburger over there until I was going on R&R in the airports, leaving in airports, Cam Ron Bay or down by Saigon, I saw steaks there, but as far as our camp, we didn't see anything like that and we'd find out these guys were eating steaks, the Air Force and a lot of these rear echelon guys and I thought, "Man, they treat these guys good when we're out there fighting in the jungles." But, we were kind of envious of those guys because they were eating good and we were just eating powdered eggs and C-rations.

SM: When you got back, what was the trip like when you came back and what was it like when you landed and arrived in the US?

GB: The trip was pretty quiet all the way back from Vietnam. We left Cam Ranh Bay and flew to Japan, through a field there, and I landed at Ft. Lewis, Washington. We got off, of course you've happier than heck that you finally made it back to state side. Then we're getting off the plane and there was a fence around there and there was protestors out there throwing tomatoes at us, yelling at us, "Baby killers," and "War mongers," and I thought, "Man, this is our home country right here." It was pretty

disappointing. So, you really got a bitter feeling towards the Americans who were knocking us down. We went on and did our processing out of the service and I finally got to get home about five in the morning, flew to Denver, made it home out on the farm about five that morning. It wasn't a very good homecoming.

SM: When you got home, were you able to talk with your family at all about your experiences?

GB: Not really, it was something you didn't want to talk about at the time. You wanted your time to think. You didn't really talk about it, and combat veterans, we found out that we didn't have this homecoming that we expected and you couldn't talk to anybody because we were called baby killers and murderers and all that, so most of us just went underground and kept to ourselves, kept quiet because you were already embarrassed by being a Vietnam vet. We were no hero.

SM: What did you do for employment when you got back?

GB: I worked on the farm with my dad and brothers. That was about it.

SM: How long did you do that?

GB: I did it off and on until about '76. I was too busy partying, walking myself home with my drinking and everything. I ended up joining the post office after that. I joined the post office in '72 and I got out, went and bought my dad's part of the farm out and realized I didn't like that so in '81 I rejoined the post office and I've been there ever since.

SM: You didn't have a hard time finding employment at the post office?

GB: No.

SM: You know, I forgot to ask you a question about another aspect of your in country experience. When you were in base camp, did you guys get shelled or rocketed, mortared, very often?

GB: Oh yeah, yeah. We called it incoming. We'd get mortared every once in a while. We would get a rocket attack every once in a while, sometimes we'd get sappers at our perimeter, VC would try to penetrate our perimeter. It wasn't very serious.

SM: How would you typically respond?

GB: You know, the alarm would go off and we knew something was going on. If it was a rocket attack we just head for our bunkers, which were right outside our hooches.

If it was a perimeter attack we'd just stand by, that's it. We let the guards at the perimeter take care of it and they'd send out Cobras at the perimeter and start blowing up the area. But, it was nothing serious really.

SM: Back to your post war experiences; what did you think when the war came to an end, technically in '73 with the Paris Peace Accords and the American complete withdrawal?

GB: Well, I thought we lost [?], left all these lives and lost the war and 58,000 men lost their lives and it was all for nothing. We fought for the south Vietnamese people and they couldn't fight for themselves when we pulled out. So, they just didn't want the country bad enough to fight for it. So, I decided it was a complete loss of lives, loss of lives and a lot of heartbreak for a lot of people. I was disappointed in the South Vietnamese Army because they didn't want to fight that hard. There was a time when we would fight with the ARVN, the Republic of Vietnam troops and there were times they didn't want to get off the chopper, they wouldn't go out in the field with them. They had to kick them out. So, I thought this is pretty sad that we're fighting for them and they don't want to fight with us.

SM: So that happened in operations you conducted with ARVN, that they didn't want to get off the choppers?

GB: Yeah, right.

SM: When you said they'd kick them off, usually was that just…

GB: They'd push them off.

SM: Right there at the LZ?

GB: Yeah.

SM: Do you know if that ever happened from altitude?

GB: No. Well, I don't know if it happened.

SM: You never witnessed it yourself?

GB: Never witnessed, no.

SM: Has your attitude changed over time?

GB: Not really. I have a lot of pride in what I did over there and a lot of pride in my fellow soldiers, and I still feel the loss of those guys that were killed over there, your

buddies. But, no. I have a lot of pride in my unit and in America. It's a great country and I fought with these guys and I'd fight with them again.

SM: What about your attitude towards Vietnam?

GB: Now I wish we never would have got in this mess because when we went over there two years ago, those people are happy; at least they seem happy to me. There was peace over there. Even though it was a communist country, they seem to be enjoying life. I wish we would have never got involved. I wish they would have just would have left them alone and I think they would have peace a lot sooner, but then we got involved.

SM: You said you went back a couple of years ago. Were you surprised at anything?

GB: Just at the happiness of the people over there. They were all happy, because I expected it being a communist country everybody would be tense, unhappy because they have to live by communist rule. But, everybody's life goes on as usual. Everything's happy, working, and it's a lot more poorer now since America pulled out of there because they relied on the US money and jobs, but I was just surprised by how happy they were.

SM: How about your treatment? How did they treat you?

GB: Oh, they treated us great. They thought we were great people, and they treated us really good. Even the Army did. We ran into the communist Army and they were nice to us. We never had problems.

SM: Did that surprise you?

GB: Yeah, it did because I expected the dirty looks, any kind of gesture that we weren't wanted. But no, they were good to us. I was surprised.

SM: What was the most important thing you took away from that experience personally?

GB: Oh gosh.

SM: That is your experience fighting in Vietnam.

GB: The comradery that we had over there, the guys that we trained together so much. That was very important to me, and how easy it is to lose your life, I learned that through all the combat. That's a hard one to say. There's a lot of things that I take pride in now with my ex-combat buddies. That's kind of tough to explain.

SM: What do you think we as a nation should take away from the Vietnam War experience?

GB: Don't get involved with something that a country doesn't want to fight or help themselves fight with. We should just leave them alone unless it's Kosovo or they're murdering innocent people. In Vietnam, I don't think they were really murdering innocent people there. They just wanted to make it one country and maybe they did, maybe they were killing innocent people, politicians and all that, maybe, I'm not sure, but Kosovo it's a lot worse. They're just killing civilians, innocent people. If that was the thing that North Vietnam wanted to do was kill innocent people by now they would still be killing them. But, when they won the war, everybody was left alone. They've just got to live by their laws and that's it, so they're happy.

SM: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about today?

GB: No, that's pretty much it.

SM: Well, this will end the interview with Gonzalo Baltazar. Thank you very much, sir.