

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Coy Alexander

Conducted by Ms. Deb Barrett

February 16, 2015

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This interview is being conducted on Monday, February 16, 2015 with Mr. Coy Alexander at the Indian Prairie Public Library in Darien, Illinois. My name is Deb Barrett.

Mr. Alexander was born on March 8th, 1945 in Childersburg, Alabama. He is retired from the technology service industry and works part time in auto auctions. He learned of the Veterans History Project through Joe Schulok, his father-in-law, who also interviewed for this project. Mr. Alexander has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is his story.

Coy, just before you entered the service, where were you living? What was your life like at the time?

I was living in Alabama, in Talladega County where Childersburg is. Most of it was I was farming helping my father on his farm and a neighbor on his farm.

What kind of farm was it?

Mostly cotton, corn, other stuff, soybean. It was mostly just regular farming stuff. I would help with the cattle.

Were you in school at all or was this after?

After school, I finished school and I started to work at Bonnet. It was a textile place and unfortunately after I started, they closed the plant. In other words, I wasn't going back to farming. I didn't think there was any future in that so I joined the service.

So you enlisted?

Yes.

You enlisted in which branch?

The Army.

Why did you choose the Army?

They had the career path I really wanted to go into; the education I wanted to go through, mechanics.

How old were you when you enlisted?

I was 20 years old when I enlisted.

How did your parents feel about you going in? Was it commonplace for boys in your situation?

No. My mother didn't like it at all. She was not real thrilled about it. But at that time, there was no war and nothing going on so she was comfortable with it after I explained it to her.

You saw it as a path to education and she thought that was probably O.K.?

Right.

Where were you inducted? Do you remember what that whole situation was like?

I was inducted in Atlanta, Georgia. I took basic training at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina.

What was your induction like?

I went with a group of guys that were joining the service. Most of them were joining because they figured if they didn't join, they would be drafted anyway. They were at draft age and at various stages of their lives.

How far was it from where you were in Alabama to Atlanta?

110 miles.

Did you drive there?

No. They bused us there from Childersburg. I joined up in Childersburg but when you were inducted, they bused you to Atlanta and actually it was pretty close to the bus station in Atlanta at the time. That's where the induction took place. The physical and everything took place.

They picked you up at the recruiting station? It was all military?

Right.

When you got to the induction center, what was it like? How many men were there? Was there a big group of men there?

If I remember correctly, there was about 50 of us. It was a fairly big group.

You went through a physical, got assigned, got your gear?

Yes.

What happened to all your civilian gear? Did they tell you what not to bring or did they just send it all back home?

They sent it all back home. It was all packaged right there at the place. They gave you a package you could put it in, addressed it and it was sent back home.

Were you allowed to keep anything?

No.

Watch, anything?

Watch, yes. Anything you wore around your neck, like crosses and stuff like that, they didn't take. If you wore watches or if you had rings, you could keep those. Other than that, they sent most of it back home.

Were any of your buddies with you when you were inducted?

No, just me.

How long did the whole induction take?

Actually, it went pretty fast. One day was spent with just physical and stuff like that. You went through a physical whether you would qualify for service or not. The next day, that was it. They swore you in. They put you in a room and swore you into the service. That was it. How they did it, I don't know, but they had orders for you by the time you came out of the room. So I figured they always knew who was going to go in. I didn't think much of it until afterward, but I always figured they knew who was going to go.

Your orders were for Basic Training?

Right and that was at Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

So you went a little further north?

Yes. Kept going north for some reason, couldn't figure that out.

How did you get there?

Bus. They took us on a bus.

Short trip?

It wasn't that long.

A day?

It was less than a day, really. It wasn't that faraway.

You went to Fort Jackson. How were you greeted when you got there?

When you got off the bus, you had most of your gear with you and you took it. They put you in these... I don't know how they assigned these companies, I never figured that out, but they put you in a company and you were with a group of guys. They put you with a group of guys. Then they marched you off to your barracks.

What were your barracks like?

One building with a big...the building we were in, if I remember correctly, had two floors. You had an upstairs and a downstairs. I would say maybe 30, not even 30, maybe 25 to a floor.

Was it bunk beds or was it single beds?

Bunk beds.

Were you on the top or the bottom?

Always on the bottom. I didn't like the top. I always figured I'd roll off. I wasn't used to sleeping in a bunk bed.

And you had some rules you had to follow in the barracks.

Oh, yeah.

Like what?

You maintained your footlocker. I mean, it had to be a certain way. Your bed had to be made a certain way. If it wasn't clean then you went back and cleaned it again. You had to wax the floor. It had to be waxed once a week. Everything had to be clean and it had to be in a certain order.

If it wasn't?

If it wasn't, you did it over and if there were weekend passes, they didn't give them to you. It was sort of a discipline... It was kind of a disciplinary action they used to get people to do things the way they wanted them to do. And you kept the shower clean. There were details on how... It was lined out... You know, you had a certain person who took orders from the Sergeant in charge of your barracks. He delegated the power to one person who was in there. Most likely an OTC guy who had prior military in school. He told him what he wanted to do and how to split up. You had certain things that you did. Certain people waxed the floor; certain people cleaned the bathrooms.

What did you do?

Mostly the barracks itself, the floor, stuff like that. But they switched it around. They had K.P. They had to assign certain people to K.P. That's just the way things were. They assigned certain things and you'd get them. Other than training, you did all this before training. You fell out for

inspection. They had an inspection every morning. Your boots had to be shined and your clothes had to be a certain way and they didn't vary from it either.

What time did you have to get up? You were gently awakened, right?

Oh yeah, by somebody yelling every morning. I always remember that one. It was generally either five o'clock or six o'clock. Sometimes they'd let you sleep to six. If you had a real hard day the day before, they'd let you sleep an extra hour. But usually five o'clock. You got up, you went outside, you exercised, you know calisthenics and then you did a run. I always call it "Sand Hill" because it was nothing but sand. Then you came back to the barracks, you showered and then you went to eat breakfast.

How much time did you have to shower and eat breakfast?

Probably an hour.

Did you eat as a Company?

Oh yes.

Everything as a Unit.

Everything as a Unit and if you weren't there, guess what?

You missed it.

You missed it. That was it.

And when you went to eat, what type of food did you get? Could you have as much as you wanted?

Yeah, you could go back for seconds if they had extra, only if they had extra. But most of the times, the first time, believe me, you had enough. This was the funny part. I always laughed about it. They gave you clothes that were two sizes too big for you and I wondered why. After you got out of basic training, you found out why. The food was very calorie oriented.

Calorie intensive.

Yes. You fit the clothes when you got out.

What was the typical breakfast like?

You had bacon, eggs, just like you would have normal. Sometimes they would have... The one I didn't like, they had K rations. Because you were going to eat them out in field, they would serve them sometimes.

They wanted you to get used to it.

K rations were the worst, C rations were O.K.

What was the difference between the K rations and the C rations?

A lot. I think K rations were made back in World War I. They tasted like it. It was god-awful food. C rations weren't that bad.

Was one hot and one cold or was it...?

Most of it was cold. They did heat it up because it was in a barracks but if you were out in the field, most of it was cold.

What was the K or the C? What did it stand for? Do you know?

I have no idea. I never even really thought about it.

What was the difference between what you would get in a K ration package?

K rations were more dried food than anything else. I mean, it was... Like I said, I think it was packaged back in World War I. I'm not sure but it tasted like it. But C rations were food. It was high calorie and it was packaged right. It was in cans. It was very high calorie food, believe me. What I never understood about it is people who were heavy at the time lost weight; people who weren't heavy, gained it. I could never figure that one out. I mean, one guy that was in with us was a pretty heavy guy and he lost weight like mad. It was the reverse for me. I weighed 135 lbs. when I went in and when I came out of basic training, I almost weighed 148 which is huge for me, at that time. I could never figure that one out. You couldn't figure out their logic, but it worked.

After breakfast, what did you do?

Training.

What was your training like?

You went to rifle training. You went through all the basic training.

Were some in the classroom and some in the field or was it all in the field?

All in the field. It was all field training.

Had you learned to shoot before this? Had you been a hunter?

I was raised with guns. That was amateurs for me as far as the rifle range was, that was nothing. I was used to using a .22 rifle and shooting at some of the distances they were...

What type of rifle did they give you?

M-14. Trust me, at 500 yards that was nothing for me. I wasn't used to shooting that good of a gun, really. Shooting was not a problem for me. I grew up in the country so you hunted all the time. So it was not really a big thing for me.

What other types of things did they include in your training?

How to shoot mortars, some explosives. They didn't teach you a lot because that was the second phase of training. But they taught you tactics, combat tactics. How to fight as a unit and night fighting, the difference between night and day. Basically, the basics, fighting as a unit, fighting together. They taught you hand to hand combat and bayonet training, which I never thought worth teaching because I wasn't going to get that close to him. If I was that close, I was way too close. But they taught it anyway. They taught you throwing grenades and stuff like that. That's basically what they taught you in basic.

How long was your basic?

6 weeks.

Were you able to communicate with everybody back home during that time?

Yes. In fact, they required you to, at least let your family know what's going on.

So that was the first 6 weeks. Did you have a graduation at that point?

Yes. They graduated you; they gave you a certificate of completion which was a piece of paper, really.

Did you have a ceremony?

Yes. They had a ceremony where all the people who started together, graduated together. I don't think we lost anybody in our platoon. I think everybody graduated at the same time; they had this ceremony where the company commander came out and talked to everybody, gave us the pep talk, as I call it and that's it.

Did your family come to see your graduation?

No. They wouldn't. In fact, there were no families that I know that were there.

It was just all internal?

Yes, it was all internal.

After your 6 weeks you got orders for your...

Next phase. It was advanced infantry training in Fort Dix, New Jersey.

Up north again, huh?

A little, yes. Outside of Trenton.

What year was this?

I want to say it was '65 when I went to Fort Dix, probably in May, June or July.

Starting to hear more about Vietnam at that point?

Yes. It started up. The buildup started around that time. We heard about it but we weren't really concerned about it at the time. Advanced infantry training was mostly heavy guns, explosives, how to use a 105 howitzer and mortars and stuff like that. That was advanced and that was 6 weeks.

So how did you get to New Jersey?

Bus.

Bus again? Other guys from your platoon go up there with you?

Yes. There was three, four other guys: Richard Leitner, Larry Liebeck, Mike McCormack and Pete Konecky, New Jersey guy; he loved it. Like he said, he could throw a rock and hit his house from the base. He was real happy about it. I always called him the mischief one of the group. He got into more trouble than anybody. He was kind of a fun person, too.

What time of year was this?

It was mostly in the fall, late summer, early fall. It was a 6 week class and we went through all that together and then we split up. I went to airborne training in Fort Benning.

Back South.

Back South, Columbus, Georgia. Trained there for 3 weeks in the airborne training. Graduated from there and I really don't know how I got from there to Fort Campbell but I went there, Fort Campbell to the 801st.

Fort Campbell, Kentucky?

Fort Campbell, Kentucky. I was in Maintenance there for about, oh, I'd say 2 or 3 months. Then from there, I went to Vietnam.

How long was your training altogether between all these different...?

6 weeks in Fort Dix, New Jersey, 3 weeks in Fort Benning, and I can't really...I was at Fort Campbell...

Was it about 6 months of training?

Yea, 6 months training. I was in a maintenance company at Fort Campbell and from there I went to Vietnam.

How much warning did you have that you were going to Vietnam?

A week.

Were you able to contact your parents and let them know?

Oh, yeah. I can remember my mother having a fit. She was not happy about it.

That was on the New already at this point?

Oh, yeah, the buildup had already started. When I got to Vietnam, I landed in Can Tho.

How did you get to Vietnam?

Fly.

You flew there? An army plane.

No, it was a commercial plane.

It was a commercial plane?

It was Pan Am.

Really? It wasn't all military.

No, it was all military. It was a flight that the military...

Had bought.

Had bought.

What was the mood like on the flight?

Mostly, content. I don't think anybody was celebrating. It was kind of quiet. You were on the flight for 18 hours so. We landed in Alaska and Guam. I'm pretty sure it was Guam. Not

Guam, anyway, we landed twice and we never got off the plane. I know we were in Alaska because I remember it being cold. About 18 hours we were in the air.

How did you spend that time?

Sleeping. I think everybody on the plane slept the whole time. I can't say enough about the stewardesses on the plane. They were, you know, exceptional, I thought. They were real friendly. They kept everything light. I think they knew where we were going and they just kept it at a light pace. I always admired them for that.

They didn't want you to worry more than...

Yes. When I got off the plane I was sitting at Tan Son Nhut airbase in Saigon. We got off the plane and I don't know why, my whole unit was moving to Da Nang, the 101st Maintenance Unit. I figured that they flew us ahead and we would meet up. No, never happened. They pulled us aside and said, "You guys are going to be gunner zone helicopters." I said, "I have no idea what you're talking about." He said, "No." Well they had sent this unit over there; the helicopter unit and they didn't have any gunners on the helicopters. They didn't have any crew chiefs or gunners on the helicopters.

So you thought you were going to be doing mechanical and maintenance repair ...

No, far from that. I was a support group for every unit in that area. First infantry, first marine division, you supported all of them. What you did is, on the gun ships, you flew escorts for people who had landed to make sure there was no enemy within the area where they were landing and that's what you did. You escorted them in, you escorted medivacs in when they were medevacking people and you were on the helicopter.

Had you been on a helicopter before?

No.

That was a little different experience.

One officer, Stump, said I took to it like a bird. He said, "You're the only person that I've ever seen that got on a helicopter and wasn't frightened by it." I said, "I don't know why, I never was frightened." You know, everybody used an 8 ft. cord; I used a 10 ft. because I could go from side to side. If the fighting was on this side... You know the bad thing about a helicopter is you have one side or the other. But if you could move from side to side, you could get more fire power on the one side that was under attack. That's why I used a ten foot cord.

What type of gun?

M-60 machine gun. The helicopters we were on had four M-60's mounted on each side that were fired by the co-pilot. He did that. Then you had the rockets which I hated from the start because they weren't good mechanically. Some of them would spin in the tube and stay in the

tube and you had to actually get out on it and work it out. You couldn't take a chance on landing with it because of vibration. You had to work this thing out of the tube and this thing was armed. It was an armed thing and it would explode, that I didn't like.

What was the crew on the helicopter?

We had pilot, co-pilot, crew chief, and a gunner.

Four men?

The two gunners were basically crew chiefs on the helicopter. They took maintenance, they did maintenance on the guns, that's what we were mostly maintenance and like I said, we were more support for the troops going into the landing zones. You supported Medivacs when they'd go in to pick up a guy. You actually flew side by side with them when they went in to protect them. I never figured out why they got me in that but a lot of things I couldn't figure out about the service.

You were 20 or 21 at this time?

21 at this time.

What was your first impression of the country when you first landed?

Beautiful country. I always thought and still to this day think, if they had never used Agent Orange, it would be one of the most beautiful countries in the world. It had everything going for it. I think if every country had left it alone you wouldn't believe what it would have looked like. I always thought it was beautiful. When you went up to Vung Tau, when you go right up to that area, they had some of the best beaches in the world and they still do. The country itself, the people I found very friendly but then again, like I said, you didn't know if they were your friends or ...

Right.

I think we went at it all wrong, myself. When we went out on search and destroy missions, and we went on quite a few of them, when you go out there and burn something... we did it all wrong. When you burn somebody's home and move them to a location, away from where they lived all their lives, they're not going to be very friendly. They're not going to like you at all. And that's what we did; we destroyed their forest. That's no way to fight a war. You have the people against you from the start. We don't know how many enemies we've made just burning down villages, and we did a lot of it. And that I always disapproved of, I always thought it was the wrong way to go. One colonel said, "It gives them no place to hide." They already had places to hide. They had 40 years to build them. They didn't hide in the villages; they hid in Saigon and the populated areas. You didn't know which ones they were. I always thought they put our guys at a very bad disadvantage. Viet Cong and North Vietnamese picked whatever fight they wanted to get into. They didn't come out and say we're going to draw this line and we're

going to fight you. No, they didn't do that. They picked the fights. They would fight you and then they'd leave.

The bad thing about it was our country, all the people in our country, they didn't want the war. And they read, they could read too. And if you don't think all those demonstrations didn't have a bad effect, it did. I understand why they were demonstrating but they don't really know how many people they killed doing that, because it gave them every incentive to keep fighting. There were some good things, and there were some bad things about it. Me, I never thought we should have been there in the first place. I always thought we fought it wrong. How do I explain it? You're fighting a person and he's got home field advantage. He's trained for 40 years, you've trained for one. I mean, guess who has the advantage there. All of the emplacements they had over there were built 20 years before we ever got there. They had tunnels. All those tunnels they found, they were there 20 years before we ever got there. They don't know how many tunnels were there. Then, at the end of the war, they showed all the tunnels. We'd have never beat them, never. They could come out from underground, shoot at you and then go back underground. Which always brings me back to the one sniper we had when we were at Phu Loi. We were based there for about 3 months. This guy would come out at night, he'd shoot. For some reason he had a resentment for our mess hall, I don't know what it was. I think it was because it was the biggest building around. He'd come out, shoot 2 or 3 rounds, put holes in the roof, then he'd go back in. Well, this new commanding officer took over there and this one sergeant, I'll always remember, he (CO) wanted us to go out and kill the sniper. That sergeant said, "No, they're not going out and doing anything." He (CO) says, "What do you mean?" He (sergeant) says, "No, we're not going to out and kill him." The guy says, "Why?" He (sergeant) says, "Well, he's been out there for almost a year and the only thing he's hit is the roof. You might get a guy who can shoot." I always laughed about that. And I was there when he told the commanding officer that. He says, "You get a guy out there who really can shoot, and I said, "No, you don't want that." And he (sergeant) got his way. It was just so funny. Every 2 or 3 days and take 2 or 3 shots. When you flew over the mess hall, you see all these little black dots, that's where they patched the holes.

I'll tell you, when they say monsoon season, it is nothing like you think it is. It starts to rain. I mean, the skies over there were as clear as day, sometimes there were no clouds in the sky at all. When you started seeing clouds, then you better start worrying because the monsoon season was moving in. When they say rain, you know, here, you don't know what rain is. When it starts to rain, for about 4 months there, that's all it does, it'll just rain. If you've ever watched the movie, "Forrest Gump," you know when they show him in the rain. That's exactly how it rains. It's just steady, no wind, no nothing; it's just a steady rain. Nothing cotton will last over there. The mildew will rot it away and it will rot leather off your feet. That's why they went to canvass boots and rubber boots 'cause no darn leather would last. I had a pair of brand new leather shoes that sat under my bunk for the whole time I was there and I was intending on wearing them home. I never moved them because you never wore them. The day I moved them, the soles stayed there; the shoes came off and the soles stayed there. Nothing lasts there. If people want to know why the oriental people wear silk, you know why they do.

It lasts.

It won't rot. Mildew has no effect on silk. That was why. You know, the people that I did get to know over there were nice people. I think they just resented, you know, they didn't want the war any more than anybody else did.

When you got there and you're going to be a gunner on a helicopter, tell me about the first time you were on that helicopter and had to shoot?

They took us out to see if we could shoot from... Well, they took us out to see if we could shoot from... You know, me, it wasn't a matter of being able to shoot from a helicopter; it was just, you know, they wanted to see... the flying. They wanted to see actually who the people were; there were people who were actually afraid of flying, really. We had two people on the plane when we went over there that were deathly... they had to sit up front because they got sick from flying. Me, I don't know, I took to it. I didn't fear it. I would hang outside of the helicopter. Once officer Stump said he ever saw anything like it. I just took to it right away. I never really had a problem with it. I mean, they practice you when you first get there. They had sent this company of helicopters over there and it didn't have gunners on it to begin with. And then found out, hey, you had to get somebody and unfortunately, well, fortunately. I always believed that maybe it was destined because I think if I had been on the ground there was a chance I would get shot or something so... In the helicopter I always felt safe. We had great pilots. You can't say anything bad about our pilots. They would handle anything, especially the warrant officers. I was always impressed with them because these guys were unbelievable at flying. They'd fly right on top of the trees. They had no fear whatsoever. I was always impressed with their flying.

What type of helicopters were they?

Huey's, B-1. You had the H-Huey's which were the troop carriers and the B-1's which were the gunships, the ones that carried the guns and I flew in both. When we worked with the Australians out of Vung Tao, I flew with the B models because I was really not a heavy kid; I was kind of a skinny kid. If you've ever seen Australians, they're not exactly small people. We carried seven American troops and 5 Australians. They were big people. I tell you what, that was the most fun people in the world. They were still fun. We had some great times with them. They could fight anybody. They'd go out in the jungle looking for a fight. I always told them, "I don't like working with you guys." They said, "Why?" I said, "Because every time we pick you up, we're in a fight." They were pretty nice people, though.

You were a gunner on a helicopter. Did you get into any skirmishes where you had to use your gun?

Oh, yeah, plenty of them.

Tell me about the first time.

First time we were in Bear Cat. It was an outpost; it was way out in the middle of nowhere. They attacked early in the morning. The first time we ever really got into a fight was a Special Forces right outside of Phu Loi. They had come under attack. When we got the word, we weren't far away from them. All of our gun ships were just about ready to take off anyway. We

were, what were we going to do? We were going to support a group; I think it was in Lai Khe. They said they were under attack, they called in. We were all ready; we were armed and ready to go. When we got there, it was kind of a mismatch 'cause we caught them out in the open. When you do that a helicopter's deadly out in the open. I think there were 139 killed that night. They never did say how many Special Forces guys got hurt or killed. We caught them out... I don't know if you've ever seen grave yards in the orient. They're made of ...volcanic ash. When a bullet hits them, it's like an explosion. And they call them out. A lot of them were killed from the secondary explosion from the bullets hit. That happened about two weeks after we got there. And that's the realization that was when it came to, when we landed, that was the realization, that's when it hit home that this is real. This is not a game anymore. This is not practice; this is real. I think that's when I realized that all I wanted to do was get home in one piece. I didn't care how I did it. But I also found out I could fight when it came down to it. I could fight and I wasn't afraid. I would shake afterward but I wasn't afraid when I was fighting.

All the adrenalin took over.

Yes. The shaking ...I'm not ashamed to admit it. I was scared to death. After you come out of it, you realize what happened.

How many escorts, how many recoveries, how many times did you have to go up?

Oh, geez. I don't know, that's a tough one. Say four to twelve a week. Sometimes you would support a group for four days, and you'd sleep in the helicopter. That was your home, really. I slept in the helicopter more than I slept in my bunk.

What were your living conditions like when you weren't in the helicopter?

When we first went there, it was tents. Then they built permanent structures, you were in concrete. Because the tents you put up, they had a barrier but it was sandbags around. They built permanent structures because bullets wouldn't penetrate the concrete blocks that they made.

How many men were in the tents, per tent?

Two, four... It was single bunks so it was two, four, six, eight... about was sixteen.

They were regular bunks?

Yep. Well, no, not regular bunks they were the folding type.

But it was more than a cot.

Yes.

Then when they built the concrete structures, was it the same?

They just moved us up.

Was it the same arrangements?

It was four to a room. I think their reason for building the concrete structures was bullets wouldn't penetrate the concrete as easy as they would penetrate the tent.

Right. You had a mess hall?

Yes.

What kind of food did you get when you were there?

When you were at the Base, it was just about the same food you would get anywhere else, I mean, regular food. They bought it in and they had regular bakeries that baked bread and stuff. Egg, you had eggs and bacon. Sometimes you had C rations. Just so you didn't get real used to it. Mostly, it was hot food. It was kind of basically the same thing you would get in the States.

Was it tasty?

Yes, oh, yes, very tasty. Calorie intensified is what I called it; you got a lot of calories because you burn a lot. The heat over there was... 112 was nothing. I don't see how the people live there because it was hot, it was really hot.

Even coming from the South?

Yes, coming from the South, it got hot down there but nothing like this, nothing. It was very hot.

Was there anything they did to help you adjust to the heat?

No. You just had to adjust to it. You generally worked it out. I found that I could stand it. I could stand it better than most people. A lot of people had trouble with it, heat rash and stuff like that. Me, I never because I came from the South. I came from the heat; I was used to going without a shirt. Most of that was to cool down. You didn't have a pool. You had shower but what are you going to do, during the day you're not going in the shower every hour or two. But, generally, they took pretty good care of the soldiers. I mean I really not complaint about the food; they took care of them. When you're in the field, you had C-rations. Any box of C-rations is a meal. Half the time, you couldn't eat it all anyway. That was another thing we didn't plan on, too. Their soldiers could live off of a pound of rice a week. The most food we found on soldiers when they were killed in action, Vietnamese soldiers, was a small amount of rice and some dried meat. That's the most we found on them. So, they were very well equipped to fight and they could fight on a limited amount of food.

Smaller in stature and smaller in build?

And I don't care what they tell you, those soldiers could fight. They may have been small in stature and they were very well outnumbered and outgunned but, like I said, they picked the time, they picked the place and you fought them on their terms. That was the difference.

Did you encounter any surprises in the fighting? Were you in any situation when you were attacked that you were totally surprised?

Yes, Lai Khe. We had gotten too complacent at Lai Khe. We had built a run way and everything and we had never gotten attacked. About, oh, I'd say, about a week before it was completed, totally by surprise, the attack took place. It caught us all off guard.

During the day or at night?

At night. We lost, I mean in the first round, we lost three helicopters; they burned on the ground. I mean, they just came out of nowhere. I mean it wasn't like it was heavy jungle or nothing like that. They came out of nowhere. They didn't lose many men in the fight that night, really. They only lost eleven or twelve. Everybody said, "Oh, they drag their dead away." No, I got a feeling that was all they lost because they had planned it really well. Because they had picked every target and they had hit every target they wanted to. They put seven helicopters out of commission. The bullets, they had to check everything and they burned three of them. Yeah, they were pretty well organized; they knew what they were doing. They were watching.

We hear, in the military, about not leaving a man behind on the battlefield, so that is something that you experienced. You were part of those that had to retrieve?

Yes. It's all built into the way America trains. I mean all the guys... American soldiers are unique in their own sense. They are unique because of the simple fact that they believe that when you are in a fight that everybody is in it together and you don't leave anybody. If it's at all possible, you do not leave them. And if it's not possible for you to get them right then, then you go back and get them. That is a sense of how the military, the soldiers work together. It has nothing to do with the way we're training. I think it's just the people's psychic their selves. I think it's the soldiers. They don't want to leave their comrades behind; they don't want them in the enemies' hands. I think it doesn't have anything to do with the way they were trained; I think it's the way they think. Our military, bar none, is the best in the world. I will put them against anybody in a straight up fight. You have not seen a marine division of 19 to 24 year olds get pissed off. They are not something you want to fool with. They will fight you to the death. I have the greatest respect for our soldiers. Our soldier are, bar none, the best in the world.

Did you ever have to leave someone behind?

I didn't but I know some of the Marines, or some of the first infantry guys, especially with the fourth cav, they would fight in to get a person. That was the craziest group of people that ever lived. They left a couple of guys and they were all upset about it; they wanted to go back right away and get them but they were outnumbered, really, so they really didn't have any choice. They just didn't want to leave anybody. They knew that the soldiers were dead, but they just didn't want to leave them. It's just a psyche that all of them have. I don't know where it comes

from. It doesn't come from training. It comes from just people caring about somebody is what it is.

In your training, do they tell you don't leave anyone behind?

No. Nowhere in your training they don't.

They don't.

No. That's the psyche of the soldier. That's just how the American soldier works. Like I said, I don't know where it comes from, it's just their psyche, they just don't want to leave their comrades, the ones their fighting with, behind. I don't think that's built into any training manual.

When you found soldiers that had been killed from the other side, did you have orders on searching through what they had or you just did?

Really, the only thing I didn't like about it is the way they were treated. They were treated like they didn't matter and that to me...

Like what?

The way they would stack them up like wood. In one instance, I saw them stack them up like wood. That's just not the way you treat a person that's dead. A guy, even though you didn't like him and you were fighting him, you still respect him when he's dead; you don't treat a body like that. I mean you don't. That I didn't like. I didn't like that at all. That was the gory part of it. I think the thing that hurt me the most was seeing friends of mine being carried away and knowing when they zipped the bag up, he was gone. I mean, that hurt. I think that was just about the only thing I disliked about it.

Did you have rituals for when comrades were lost?

No. They all said their farewells over it. Most of the time they were gone before you got back. If you got in a fight most of them who had died had already left. They didn't like to show dead soldiers.

Right

I think it all had to do with psyche. It played on their psyche and some of them just didn't like that.

There is obviously a lot going on and a lot of stress and tension when you're in these situations. What did you do to relieve some of that stress?

Me, I liked being alone. I just... When everybody was back at the... I would just go and sit in my helicopter when it was out on the line. You know nobody there to bother you.

Did you read? Did you sleep? Did you write?

Just sat there. Sometimes read. That was about all you could do there, really. You either went to the NCO club where people drank and I didn't drink anyway and people usually got into a fight. I got into a few of those. None of my starting thought. I couldn't figure that out. I never started them but always got into them for some reason.

What were these fights about?

Things that were said. One group got macho, got to drinking and got macho and they just... I think it was more to relieve tension. Hey the next day they'd all be working together anyway so it really... I think it was just to relieve tension, I don't think anybody meant any harm by it. But they would get into it. It was a normal thing especially if ... You know it always seemed to happen after we'd been on a mission for... just to relieve tension.

Most of them were friends the next day anyway so no harm. I don't think we ever got into a fight where anybody had to go to the infirmary or anything. It was kind of relieving stuff, getting it out of the way.

Did you have down time where you could ...?

Yes.

What did you do?

I went to Hong Kong, went to Hong Kong the first time and went to Australia the second for a week.

For a week?

Yeah. They did give you time. They gave you a break. The field we were in, believe me, they needed it because you were called up within a half..., you could be sitting there doing nothing and all of a sudden you gotta be in Da Nang or in Lai Khe or in Tan An. It was a minute's notice. You had time to grab your stuff and get on a plane, I mean a helicopter. That was it. Because they would come under attack and all of a sudden, you're back in the air.

Right.

I really liked the country, believe it or not, as bad as things were. I always thought it was a very unusual country because as bad as it was, the people always seemed ... If you went out in these villages, towns; it didn't seem to affect them. It was just their attitude amazed me. People in this country don't know how good they got it to tell you the truth. When you walk in and a family invites you in for dinner and you're eating on a dirt floor, you really don't know how good you got it here. And this is one of the upper class people, they got a house. I told people when I came back, "You don't know how good you got it. They don't have wooden floors." And they'd sweep the dirt. It just amazed me at how they got by with such little... And modern convenience was nothing. They didn't have radio, they didn't have table. I mean, they got by on

practically nothing. They can survive on ... You go into their houses, if they had food for the day, they were happy.

Right. So when you would go and they would take you to Australia or Hong Kong for your week break did you fly out by helicopter, by plane?

Commercial jet.

Commercial jet?

Yes, commercial, they flew you commercial, sometimes you flew military. I flew to Hong Kong on a military plane but flew to Australia on a commercial plane, you know, just like any other plane.

By a commercial plane that was used by the military?

The one I flew on had people that were flying to Australia.

Okay.

You had South Vietnamese, business people; you know just a regular flight. Ton Sa Nut Air Base was pretty big; I mean it wasn't a small airport.

When you went to Hong Kong, for example, did you stay on a base; did you stay in a hotel?

No, I stayed in a hotel.

Did the military set it all up?

Yeah, they set it all up and they'd pay for it. I mean it was paid for by them so it was set up by them. Most of the people in the hotel were just regular customers. It wasn't military by any standard. They just put you up in the nearest hotel but it was nice. Hong Kong, you're not going to see much in a week. Hong Kong is one of those places if you don't go for a month, you don't see nothing. It was more like you just stayed in the district and you relaxed and that was about it. I did meet a Chinese family who were real nice. I met the guy's son and I don't know why, I was walking down the street and we just started up a conversation. He spoke very good English. I always remember that. He says, "Why don't you come to our place, we're having a birthday party for my sister. Why don't you come to it?" He says, "There's not going to be a lot of people there." I went to the party. They eat stuff that I wouldn't eat. I mean, when you get food that looks back at you, I'm not really into it. They had fish heads that I really wasn't thrilled about but it was a great time and a really nice family. I had a good time. Then he, actually, he said he wasn't working that week and he wound up taking us to certain places.

So you would see things you wouldn't have seen.

And you got to see things normal tourists wouldn't go to. It was kind of fun. That was a good time. In Australia, you can go anywhere around there and have a good time. That's all those people do especially if you know people.

Did you know anyone?

Yeah I operated with a guy named McCorey and he lived in Australia. I stayed with his family when I was there; I didn't stay in a hotel. Talk about people who party, geez those people partied. They have a good time. I mean, it's like I said, a lot of our people would be wise to start living like that. They live from day to day and they just have a good time. I don't know, that was the best time I had, really. I had a good time in Hong Kong; I had a good time both, but then again, I don't expect much when I go places, so I usually have a good time where ever I go.

You'd be gone for a week and then you'd have to go back?

Yes.

What was that reentry like?

It was fun. You get a week away and really you didn't want to go back. When I hurt, I was in Saigon hospital.

Tell us how you got hurt?

I was in a helicopter accident, crash. I got a severe concussion and fractured skull. I was in there for 6 days and they had written my mother. It started because I was scheduled to go with one pilot; I got on a helicopter with another one and nobody knew where I was at. When it actually happened, I was in the hospital so I was unconscious. The only person that knew where I was at was George Wilson and he was the guy that I was telling you about.

Tell us again so we can record it.

George Wilson was a black guy from Philadelphia. How we wound up friends I'll never know because you know, me being from the South, like he said, he never figured out why we became friends. Like I told him, don't mean nothing to me, you're black, you're just another person. But we'd become real good friends. His helicopter is the one that picked us up. He kept me from bleeding to death, really, because he stayed with me the whole time we were going to the hospital.

Kept pressure?

Yeah, he kept pressure on it, kept it from bleeding. The worst thing over there in the summer is bleeding to death. Your blood is so thin from that heat. Like the captain that did the surgery or that I saw when I went in there, he said, "You weren't dead from the injury; you weren't dying from the injury. He said, "You didn't have any blood." He said, "When you came in here, you had lost almost two thirds of your blood. You were on the verge of dying. If they had been any

later... Like I said, when I saw the uniform that they took off me, I thought the guy in there had died. It had blood from the top, all the way down, the pants, everything was bloody.

The crash happened when? Had the helicopter been shot down?

I think it was... Everybody says it was shot down. I think it was maintenance because when I was in it, I didn't hear anything. I didn't hear a bullet hit and usually you will hear it hit. All I hear was a ping sound, it was like something broke. We started auto rotate. I remember it but it happened so fast and we were so low it was just like it happened and then we hit the ground. When you hit the ground, the skid, that landing thing on the helicopter, broke, flipped it. I caught the gun right in the head. It was like a bang, bang and then the last thing I remember, and I remember the helmet just shattering and going into pieces. Because it was like a movie, all the pieces were going that way. The helmet was really what saved my life because if it hadn't been for that, like I said, it probably would have took the top of my head off is what it would have done. And I'll always remember the last words I heard was George Wilson coming up and I'm stunned and I'm in a daze and he says, "Are you all right?" I always told him after that, "You know, George that was the dumbest thing anybody ever said to me. I'm sitting there bleeding..." He said, "I said it. I asked you and you pitched forward, you just fell." I told him I didn't even know what happened. When I got to Saigon, like the guy said, "It wasn't the injury, it was the bleeding. You almost bled to death." 6 days later, I woke up; I think I woke up 2 or three times. I'll always remember this little Navajo nurse. Her name was Jackie. I could never figure out why she was named Jackie. Her standing over me and she says, "Are you Coy Alexander?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "Your mother, you need to call her." I says, "Why?" She said, "They sent her a letter that you were missing in action." I said, "Oh, God." I knew my mother, oh, she had a fit. Well, my sister says, how did she, how did Ann put it? She said she read the letter, she read it to Ann. Ann got upset. Ann was crying and she (mother) said, "Stop crying, he's O.K." She said that's the only thing she said. She said, "He's O.K." Actually, I always thought the Army was good at that. They walked a phone, took a phone line, they made a phone line to where my bed was, brought the phone down there and I talked to her.

How was she when she heard your voice?

Oh, she was happy. She was thrilled. I told her, "Why would they send a letter like (that)?" It was always upsetting to me but they said nobody knew where I was at. My mother, I tell you what, like that guy said, everybody in the whole United States Army knew that I was missing because she called everybody. They walked the phone down there. That was the only thing that upset me but then again, my sister said that she (mother) wasn't upset about it. My sister said she turned around and looked at her, "Stop crying, he's O.K."

Other than this phone call to your Mom when you were in the hospital, after she'd called everybody trying to reach you, did you communicate with them regularly?

Oh, yeah, I communicated with my mother. I didn't talk to her but I sent her letters all the time. The first thing they made me do was sit down and write her a letter and I wrote her a letter "I'm fine, just got injured, I'm fine, nothing wrong, I didn't lose anything." She thought I was going to come home. That's the only thing that upset that they didn't send me home.

That's why she was feeling O.K. because she thought this was your way out.

Yes. But like I told her, "I'm fine. Nothing wrong. Got a bad head ache that's about it.

How long were you in the hospital?

Six days.

And after that?

Back to my unit.

And back to work.

Back to work. I wasn't bad off really. I went back; I never had any lasting effects from it.

But you said George Wilson...

He passed away. They went to; I think it was called Cu Chi. They got in a fight; they went into help somebody, they pulled somebody out and they had gotten hit when they were flying out and the helicopter dipped forward and turned over and crashed and that killed everybody on board.

Including George.

Yeah.

And you said that was just shortly after?

Two weeks.

Two weeks after your accident?

Yeah. I always thought, "What a waste." He was a great person. I like him from the start. I guess I liked him from the beginning. Me & him, we never looked at each other than two people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Right.

He was a great person, always the world of him. Like I said, he was just a good person. The only thing I regret is I never got to meet his family when I came home. I wanted to at least meet his family but I never did get to do that.

Where was he from?

Philadelphia. I never got to meet his family and that's the only thing I'll really regret, not meeting them. Other than that I mean, they came in with orders, I was going home.

How long were you in Vietnam altogether?

Altogether, I would say 11 months.

Gunner on the helicopter the whole time?

Not the whole time. I did do convoy work. I guarded convoys which is the one thing I quit within a week. I didn't realized that when you went down highway 1 and you're on a convoy that has about 5,000 gallons of KP-4 and a tanker that you're sitting in, wasn't a good thing to do. I really wasn't a good job. And I always thought, one bomb, that's all it would take. I said, "Yeah, this job is not for me." Then I went back on the helicopters for about two months and they sent me home. He came in and asked me if I wanted to release early and I said yes.

They asked you if you wanted to release early?

Yes. They asked me if I wanted to get out early and I said yeah and they sent me home.

Did they give you a reason for it?

No.

Because this was still during the draft.

It was still during the draft. I don't know what happened.

Was it the points?

Yeah. The point system never mattered to me. I didn't care about the point system. I think it was because we had been there for almost a year. That was generally, I think that was the limit about how long they wanted you to stay there is a year. And fortunately, my year was 3 months, I think about 3 months before I was due to get out anyway. They asked me if I wanted, well, they didn't ask me, they told me I was going to get an early out. I said, "O.K." and that was the end of it. I flew back home.

Where did you fly back to?

Hawaii, believe it or not. I told them why couldn't I come here when I was coming. What aggravated me the most was we didn't get any time in Hawaii. We only got to stay there about four hours. I told them, you know, this is the place I could've went on R & R. There were guys that went there. I always thought I got gypped in that deal. I'll say one thing; I still think we've got the best Army in the world, bar none. You've got to admire them. It's like I said, you put up 300 Marines and I'll put them against any 300 in the world. They're no match for those guys; those guys can fight anybody. But you just can't put them in a position where they don't know

who they're fighting, or when they're going to fight. You can't do that to them. That's a shame that it was done like that. We went into that whole thing over there unprepared for what ... And we should've known if they threw the British out and they threw the French out, you weren't going to do much better. And the French had an air force, the British had an air force, we had an air force. We had great equipment but you can't fight a war, the war that they fought.

So, you flew back, you stopped over in Hawaii for four hours...

Right. Went back to Fort Dix and was discharged at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

Fort Dix, O.K. Did your family know, did your family know you were on your way home?

No, I never told them 'til I got home.

Why didn't you tell them?

'Cause I wanted to surprise them.

So they saw you at the door?

Yeah. That was the only time they knew I was coming home.

And your Mom didn't like, pass out on you?

She had a fit. She was mad 'cause I didn't tell her ahead of time. I think she was happy. She was kind of... she had fourteen kids what she going to do. I'll always remember that statement she made to me when I walked in the door. She said, "I know you're home now and you're happy to be here but you'll be the one to leave and won't come back." I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "You'll be the one to leave this area and you won't come back." Guess what?

She was right.

I'm the only one that ever left and not... She knew something. She was kind of funny about the kids. She wanted a lot of kids and she got them and I got seventy-two nieces and nephews.

Wow. So, when you got back home, other than surprising your parents, did they have a party?

We had a party. It was kind of a family get together. Uncles and aunts came over it was kind of a regular party.

What was the first thing you did when you got back?

Believe it or not, went fishing. I missed that more than I did anything; I love to fish. I missed that more than anything. For three days, I went fishing. I told my mother, "That's the one thing I miss more than anything." I mean, I love to fish and there was no place over there to fish.

That's what I did. I told her, "I'm very happy." She said, "They won't bother you." I said, "No, they're not going to bother me, I going fishing." And that's what I did. I went fishing for three days and that was it. I was perfectly fine after that.

O.K. You got grounded back at home.

That's right. Then I told my mother, "I'm going to Chicago to visit my brother."

So you had a brother up here?

Yeah, he lived up here. You remember the snowstorm?

In '67.

Yeah, in '67. Believe it or not, I came up here three days after the snowstorm. I told my brother, he always wanted me to visit, "Does it snow like this up here all the time?" He said, "Not really." "Well," I said, "I hope not 'cause I'm going back home." It was warmer down there. I got up here and then I got to work for United Insurance then I went to work at Western Electric. So I said there were no jobs going down South. So I wound up staying up here.

You came up here to visit your brother but also to look for work?

Yeah. The first job I had was at United Insurance and I didn't like it there. Then I applied at Western Electric and I worked for them for ten years. Most of it was with AT&T anyway. Then, I remember, I think it was, they went on strike and I didn't like that so IBM had openings and I went to work for IBM.

And that's where you spent thirty-one years.

Yes. My brother moved back South and I stayed here. He asked me was I going with him. I said, "No." There's nothing for me there.

Why did your brother go back?

He always wanted to go back; he never was a city person. He always liked the country; he liked the small town. He didn't like Chicago at all so he just moved back. He got a job down there with a trail way bus company. Me, I can probably live anywhere. No city bothers me. City, country, I can live anywhere. I can live in the city; I can live in the country; I have no preference as to where I live. Me and Carol moved out to Crestwood when there was nothing there really but an airport. Everybody followed us. I told her, we moved to get out of the city; I'll be darned if the city didn't move with us. If you look at that place right now, the biggest store around there was K-Mart on 159th Street. That little shopping center there that was the only shopping center around there when we first moved out there. I told her, it's amazing, everybody moved with us. Now it's all around us. I told her, you got Walmart, Target, Kohl's and a food store, everything, you don't have to go nowhere.

**Now, since you've come back have you kept in touch with anyone you met in the service?
Do you go to any Veteran's organizations?**

I kept in touch with Pete and Larry Leitner and Larry Leibeck but Pete died of cancer. Leitner, he died of some kind of thyroid cancer. Leibeck, I guess he's in Florida now. Last time I talked to him, he was going to move to Florida with his wife. They're in their seventies. Those are the only three I kept up with.

Do you belong to any Veteran's organizations?

No. Will not join any Veteran's organization.

Not interested.

Not interested. Not interested in the parades. Not interested in bringing up any of the old... All those groups talk about is what they did in the war and that I can do without. I don't... I lost some friends in it; I lost a lot of them and I just think it was a waste of some very good people. That's why I hate us being in any war. These kids don't deserve to be over there. They deserve to protect this country, you know, just like they train for not to protect some other country that doesn't care about us. And you and I both know we're in countries that do not like us. And to me they should all be here. I don't like seeing any kid get killed, a family having to go through that, I really don't. And to know, when I was injured how my mother reacted. I don't see mothers; I don't see people having to react that way, they shouldn't have to. Unless they're protecting their own country and you're fighting it, I don't think they should be anywhere. I think they should be right here where they belong. Like I said, our military is the best in the world, bar none. I have the greatest respect for all those kids that do the fighting. This country should, really. You don't know what it's like until you're in the middle of it and to see a guy devoted to our country, to fight for it, that's impressive to me.

Anything we haven't covered yet that...?

No, not that I can think of.

In that case, we shall go off record. Thank you for sharing your story.

I'm glad to; I mean I am not ashamed of it.