

Veteran: **BURGESS, John David**
Service Branch: **ARMY**
Interviewer: Eakin, Elizabeth
Date of Interview: April 28, 2002
Date of Transcription: March 16, 2003
Transcriptionist: Terry Moore
Highlights of Service: **Vietnam, 1968-1969; Specialist 5th Class;
196th Infantry Brigade; Helicopter Crew Chief**

Interviewer: Mr. Burgess, are you aware that our conversation will be recorded and that the tape and transcription will be placed in the Lee College Library? Do I have your permission to do that?

Veteran: Yes, you do.

Interviewer: Can you please state your name, the highest rank you held, present address, city, state, and zip code?

Veteran: OK. My full name is John David Burgess. I reside at 3811 Massey Tompkins #9, Baytown, Texas, 77521. The highest rank I held was E-5—I was Specialist 5th Class.

Interviewer: Can you give me your enlistment date and the age at which you entered the service?

Veteran: I enlisted in March of 1968. I enlisted for three years. I was 19.

Interviewer: Where did you enlist at?

Veteran: Here in Baytown.

Interviewer: What did you do before you enlisted?

Veteran: I worked at the refinery—at the Exxon Refinery.

Interviewer: How and why did you join the service?

Veteran: Vietnam was going on. I guess I saw too many John Wayne movies. All my friends were in the service, so I kind of felt left out, so I joined, too.

Interviewer: First let me ask you, where were you born?

Veteran: I was born in Huntsville, Alabama.

Interviewer: What high school did you graduate from?

Veteran: I graduated from Robert E. Lee here in Baytown.

Interviewer: And how many brothers and sisters do you have.

Veteran: I've got two brothers and two sisters.

Interviewer: What was your initial reaction to entering the military?

Veteran: I thought I made a mistake.

Interviewer: How did your family and friends react when you left?

Veteran: Well, most of my friends were already in the service. I was living with my grandmother, and she really didn't want me to go, but she knew I'd made up my mind, and so she didn't try and stop me. But she really didn't want me to go—she was worried about my safety.

Interviewer: Where did you train as a recruit?

Veteran: I took my basic training at Ft. Polk, Louisiana, and then from there I went to Ft. Gordon, Georgia for AIT, or Advanced Infantry Training.

Interviewer: What were you specialized in?

Veteran: Yeah, I was specialized in aviation electronics, or radio. In all the Army's fixed wing and rotary wing prep.

Interviewer: What were your experiences while you were in training?

Veteran: Well, when I was going to school for avionics we actually had like a big hangar—a mock hangar. We actually had some aircraft that were in there. They weren't fly-able, but all the electronics were in them. Then we also had some mock-ups. They were just like wooden boxes, but all the equipment was basically placed where you would find it in an aircraft.

Interviewer: What sort of training, if any, did you receive overseas?

Veteran: When I got to Vietnam I got a crash course in jungle survival. It was like a one-day thing, and that was it.

Interviewer: What was your opinion of the weapons you saw and used in the service?

Veteran: Oh, we had good ones.

Interviewer: So they were reliable? What kind of weapons did you use?

Veteran: Personally, I had an M-16, and then in the aircraft we either carried an M-60 machine gun or we also carried the mini-gun.

Interviewer: What were your opinions of the equipment, clothing, and the rations you were issued?

Veteran: The equipment was pretty good, but of course the rations were never that good.

Interviewer: How adequate were they for the climate that you were in?

Veteran: Oh, the clothes were actually pretty much made for the jungle-type environment.

Interviewer: What did you think of the quality of leadership while you were in the service?

Veteran: It was good and it was bad. I had a couple of sergeants that were alcoholics, so you had good and you had bad.

Interviewer: How often did you see your senior commander in your company?

Veteran: I was in an aviation section in Vietnam, and we had a major that was over us, and I usually saw him just about every day, because he was also a pilot.

Interviewer: Can you describe such a visit when they would come in? Was it a big deal?

Veteran: No. The Army is a little bit more laid back, especially in a war zone. You rarely ever saluted. You addressed him as "Sir," but he didn't really expect a salute. He did expect to be addressed as "Sir," and you couldn't talk to him like you talked to one of the guys.

Interviewer: What did you think of the discipline at the time?

Veteran: In Vietnam it was pretty lax.

Interviewer: Please recount any particular punishment for breaches of discipline.

Veteran: I don't really know of any in Vietnam. I can't recall any.

Interviewer: Was there any desertion?

Veteran: Yeah, we did lose a guy. In Vietnam, you were there for a year—you got an R&R for one week, and there was a bunch of different places you could go. You could go to Thailand, you could go to Australia, you could go to Hawaii. Well, we had a fella go to Australia, and he met a woman, and so somehow or another he managed to wrangle another R&R, and he never returned.

Interviewer: Was there much theft from one another in your unit?

Veteran: You mean personal items? No. I mean, we used to steal equipment. If you needed something, supply was pretty hard to get, so if you could find it somewhere else, you took it.

Interviewer: What kinds of off-duty recreation were common?

Veteran: In Vietnam, there really wasn't a whole lot to do other than read, but when I first got to Vietnam and I was on the Dauchai (sic) Coast, so you could swim. But after a few months they moved me into the interior, so there wasn't really a whole lot to do. Basically, we worked seven days a week.

Interviewer: What did you read in your leisure time?

Veteran: *Playboy*, letters from home. There really was no library over there. We'd maybe trade books, and we had a few paperbacks or something, but there really wasn't a whole lot of reading material.

Interviewer: How adequate was the medical care there?

Veteran: I spent some time in the hospital, and for me it wasn't that good, but then I wasn't as serious as a lot of people, and so I guess all in all it was basically pretty good, but they ran it very lean. There wasn't a lot of extra nurses.

Interviewer: Describe the health of your unit? Were they in good health?

Veteran: Oh, yeah. I mean, we were all young guys.

Interviewer: What did the soldiers spend their pay on?

Veteran: In Vietnam, you could order stereo equipment through the PX. You could have it shipped home or you could have it shipped there. Everybody bought cameras. You could buy cameras real cheap. I bought a camera and I bought some stereo equipment. There were a few EM clubs where you could go drink.

Interviewer: What does EM mean?

Veteran: Enlisted men. The liquor was cheap, so you could go and drink. But when I got moved up north, that all ended. There was no clubs.

Interviewer: Was drinking a problem in your unit?

Veteran: We had a platoon sergeant that was an alcoholic, and there was some guys that probably drank some extra beer, but the water was really bad, so a lot of guys would have beer instead of a glass of water.

Interviewer: How did they get their liquor?

Veteran: Through the PX. You had a ration card. You could only buy so much a month, but then you had people that didn't drink, so maybe you'd trade cigarettes or something. But since I was in aviation, we tried to fly to the PX about once a month and stock up.

Interviewer: Was drug use a problem in your unit?

Veteran: Well, it wasn't a problem but it was there.

Interviewer: Which drugs, and how were they obtained?

Veteran: It was mainly marijuana, and it could be obtained anywhere. It was easy to get.

Interviewer: Was there much gambling?

Veteran: Some. There were some guys that liked to play cards. I was never much for cards, but I'd play every now and then. I guess that was a form of entertainment.

Interviewer: What songs were popular during your military service?

Veteran: I can think of groups like the Doors and Jimi Hendrix. We could actually—in the helicopters, we had an AM radio that was a directional-find radio, but it tuned into radio stations. There was a radio station in Da Nang that we could actually use for navigation, but you could also listen to the music in the headsets.

Interviewer: What military slang words or phrases were popular during military service?

Veteran: There was the SNAFU {Laughter}.

Interviewer: What's SNAFU.

Veteran: Situation Normal All F----d Up. There was also FTA—that was very popular one.

Interviewer: I don't get it—what is that?

Veteran: F--- the Army.

Interviewer: Oh, OK.

Veteran: {Laughter} There's probably some more, but those are the two that stick.

Interviewer: Did you know of any instances of ethical, racial, or religious discrimination?

Veteran: Not really. When I was in the service, Martin Luther King was killed—when I was in basic training, and so there was a lot of, not violence because the Army wouldn't allow it, but I mean there was a lot of uneasiness, and so they pretty well kept a close eye on us. And in Vietnam, I mean, I guess the whites would kind of collect together and maybe the blacks would collect together, but one of my best friends in Vietnam was black.

Interviewer: When you first learned you would go overseas, what was your reaction?

Veteran: I was afraid.

Interviewer: At what point in your movement overseas did you learn your real destination?
Did they tell you right off the bat?

Veteran: I just knew that I had orders to go to Vietnam. I had no idea where in Vietnam I would go. You'd come into a center, and at this center they divided everybody up and sent them where they needed them. So, you spent about a week at this center.

Interviewer: Can you identify your port of embarkment?

Veteran: Yes, I flew out of Ft. Lewis, Washington.

Interviewer: What was your port of arrival?

Veteran: I came into country at Camron Bay, which is the southern part of the country.

Interviewer: Please describe your travel experiences. Did you travel the whole way by plane?

Veteran: Yes.

Interviewer: What information, if any, did the military give you about the country you would be serving in?

Veteran: Very little. Right before I went to Vietnam I got kind of like a crash course, if you will, just in survival, and then in Vietnam I got a one-day jungle survival course. That was basically it.

Interviewer: What did they tell you about jungle survival?

Veteran: It was how to live off the land and how to make weapons out of bamboo, and things like that, and booby traps—what to look for, how they made them, what they were made out of.

Interviewer: What were your first impressions of service abroad?

Veteran: It was hot.

Interviewer: How did your views change once you were there?

Veteran: I guess towards the end—you know, I was really patriotic when I went over there, but toward the end I was a little bit soured, I guess. The military was being run

by the politicians. We had places where we couldn't shoot even when we were being shot at. You'd have to call and get permission to shoot back, and you know they really tied our hands a lot.

Interviewer: How did you and your comrades get along with civilians overseas before, during, and after hostilities?

Veteran: About the only thing we used civilians for was we had them come in to wash our clothes, they'd sweep the hootches—we had little buildings we called hootches. They would do laundry and then manual labor. We built a helipad once, and we had these metal panels that you have to pull down, and so we would get crews to do that. There was a heck of a language barrier, so you had to do a lot of pantomiming. Of course, you'd pick up a few Vietnamese words and they'd know a few English words, but all in all they were just people caught in a bad place.

Interviewer: Was there much fraternization with local women?

Veteran: Some—it wasn't wide-spread, but there was some.

Interviewer: How was the morale in your unit?

Veteran: All in all, I'd say it was pretty good.

Interviewer: Was there a lot of homesickness?

Veteran: Yeah. When you get over there, you realize you have to do a year, and a year seems like an awfully long time, especially when you're young. It was a very long year.

Interviewer: Can you describe your living conditions?

Veteran: When I first got to my unit, we were on the South China Sea, and we had pretty nice little—they were pretty well constructed...had metal roofs. The sides were mainly just screened it because it was hot, and then sandbags all around that. Then when they moved me up north to the LZ, my little hootch was just made out of ammunition boxes—the crates that artillery shells came in—they were filled with sand, and then used like building Legos, and then they put a tin roof over it.

Interviewer: What effect did combat have on morale?

Veteran: It was awful hard. In Vietnam, you know we'd go sometimes a month and never fire a shot, and then maybe in a hour you'd fire lots of shots. It's kind of hard to describe—I don't know really how to describe it. It was just weeks of boredom, and a few hours of terror.

Interviewer: What was your reaction to it?

Veteran: It scared the hell out of me.

Interviewer: What enemy propaganda, if any, did you hear or see?

Veteran: I never saw any. I take that back—a sore subject of mine was Jane Fonda, but I never saw her while I was in Vietnam. But we did get one TV station that we could watch, and we did have a TV. It was kind of hard to understand the people that were protesting the war. I mean, some of the guys thought it was right. At the time, when I first saw it, I really didn't have any opinion on it. But that's about the only propaganda I ever saw, and it came from the Americans.

Interviewer: What's the deal with Jane Fonda?

Veteran: Jane Fonda went to North Vietnam, had pictures taken sitting on an anti-aircraft gun—that's treason.

Interviewer: How and to what extent were religious convictions expressed in your unit?

Veteran: Sorry to say religion wasn't really a major factor. I could never remember anybody going to church on Sundays. I mean, Sunday was just another day for us. The only time we probably prayed was when we were under attack.

Interviewer: If you remained with your original unit, how did you feel about individual replacements that later joined you?

Veteran: Oh, we were always glad to get them, because when one man come in that meant one of us was going home.

Interviewer: Did you see or get any newspapers while you were over there?

Veteran: The only newspaper I would get was the *Baytown Sun* that my grandmother would send every now and then. The only other newspaper I saw was just kind of a unit thing put out called the *Stars and Stripes*. Of course, it was very pro-Army. And then of course we had the TV station, and I'm not sure just how much of it was censored. We got news from home, but I don't know if we got everything.

Interviewer: What did you think of the *Stars and Stripes*?

Veteran: It was just something to read.

Interviewer: Did you take part in any combat action, and if so where, when, and against whom?

Veteran: Yes. I don't remember dates, but it was always either against the Viet Cong or the NVA, which was the North Vietnamese Army.

Interviewer: What were you thinking or experiencing at the time?

Veteran: Well, in really bad situations, you're just hoping that you come out alive. Usually the major engagements for us were at night.

Interviewer: Please describe your baptism of fire and your reaction to that experience?

Veteran: The first time they actually tried to take a shot at me was when I was in a place called Chu Lai. We used to get rocket attacks there—it was a Russian made rocket—and when they'd shoot one, they'd actually shoot several hundred at a time. And you can't fight back—you just have to hide, and that pretty well brought home the idea that we were in a serious place.

Interviewer: Please describe a typical day when your unit was committed to the front lines.

Veteran: In Vietnam, there really was no front lines. I was in aviation section, so I had a home every night that I went to. Even when I flew, I came back to the same place, so I never ventured very far. Now we had people out in the bush that we supported, but there was never really front lines. You know, we'd get intelligence, and they'd say, "OK, this mountain over here is infested," and we'd

fly over there and we'd drop troops off. So there was never any "this is the front," "this is our side," "this is their side."

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a typical day?

Veteran: For me, a typical day was up early. If I was flying that day, I'd go down to where we had the helicopters, and I would check my helicopter over and make sure everything was up—do what they call pre-flight. Then just wait for the officer, because I had no idea where we'd be going, because the officer—the pilot—would actually be briefed, and then when he got to the field, he'd let us know, "OK, we're going here, or we're going there, or we're going to be flying taxi service today." I never really knew where I was going to go until the last minute.

Interviewer: How effective was the fire support your unit received from other combat units?

Veteran: I guess when we were being overrun, I guess it was the Air Force and probably the Navy and maybe even some Marines shooting. We had Puff the Magic Dragon flying over us shooting, so I guess it was very effective. But we never—I say, my little unit—we never actually called for anything like that. We were just a very small cog in a big wheel.

Interviewer: What's Puff the Magic Dragon?

Veteran: It's a C-130, or it could be a DC-3, but it was fixed wing plane that could carry lots of guns on it, and they were all on one side, and the plane would circle and fire down. And at night, in a machine gun belt that has the belts in it, every fifth round is a tracer, and it makes solid red lines at night. You can't see any breaks, because they're shooting so many bullets with mini guns.

Interviewer: If you ever came under air attack, please describe the circumstances and your reaction to that attack?

Veteran: No, the only thing that they ever shot at us was the rockets and they came by air.

Interviewer: How would characterize your units combat performance?

Veteran: We were pretty good at what we did?

Interviewer: Was it the leadership, the discipline, the unit camaraderie, and the cohesion or individual courage, fear, or other factors that made it good?

Veteran: It was a little bit of all of it. We were all young, and even when you were afraid you wouldn't tell somebody you were afraid, and so you just went out and did it.

Interviewer: Were you ever wounded in action?

Veteran: Indirectly I was—yes. We got shot down, and mainly I suffered back injuries.

Interviewer: Can you tell me what happened?

Veteran: Yeah, every night we would fly what they called a visual recon. We would fly 360 degrees around our LZ—we'd do it right before dark, and one of us flew it every night. And so there were like five crew chiefs, and so every fifth night you flew one, and we just rotated among ourselves. I guess we'd gotten too predictable, because one of the legs of our flight, we always flew down river and it was in the summer. Summer over there is hot all the time, but it was the dry season, and so there wasn't a whole lot of water. And it was just an easy landmark to pick up, and it was an easy flight, and so we always went down this river. And they were waiting for us, and when we come down the river, they caught us in a crossfire and they actually shot us down. We came down on a sandbar in the river. Like I say, there was not a whole lot of water, and so we landed on a sandbar and managed to get out of the ship and up into the bushes. And in flying the VR, we always had a gunship behind us. We were actually flying low to draw fire, and when we draw fire, we'd get out of the way and call the gunships in—we'd spot it for them. So we got a call out for the gunships, and of course they couldn't land for us, and so we had to stay out in the bushes for three or four hours until they could get another helicopter out there to get us out.

Interviewer: So you were the scapegoat so they would fire at you?

Veteran: Yeah, we were the clay pigeons. We flew low and fast, and the whole theory was our helicopter didn't make a whole lot of noise, so normally if there was somebody on the ground we would be over them before they could really get a shot at us, because we weren't that big and didn't make that much noise. If we

did see them or did notice fire we would either drop smoke or we would call the gunship that was about five miles behind us.

Interviewer: Did you personally experience or know others that were killed or injured as the result of enemy fire?

Veteran: You know you hear talk, but I never actually knew of one for sure.

Interviewer: Did you personally experience or know of others who experienced shell shock or psychological stress in combat?

Veteran: For me, I can't answer for anybody else, but for me it was many years later.

Interviewer: Can you describe it?

Veteran: Well, I guess when I came back from Vietnam I just tried to push it all out of my head—I tried to forget it. And it was probably something that I shouldn't have done. I'm sure I handled it the wrong way, but it got to where I was having nightmares, and it was really starting to bother me. And so I eventually went to counseling. You kind of get a survivor's syndrome—you know, why did I survive and Joe didn't? You know, Joe was just as good a man as me, so why did God take him and not me. And so you get all these things running through your head, and so I did end up in counseling.

Interviewer: How did the point system being demobilization affect your unit?

Veteran: I don't know what that is. I was in Vietnam from November of '68 and toward the end of '69, Nixon was trying to wind things down, and so he was promising to get guys out early. So I actually think I left three days early—liked nearly three days from a year.

Interviewer: What awards and decorations did you receive?

Veteran: In Vietnam I got the Bronze Star.

Interviewer: In your opinion, were awards and decorations issued fairly?

Veteran: I really don't have any idea on that. I know a lot of the officers probably got a lot more because they were officers.

Interviewer: Please describe your arrival back in the United States.

Veteran: It was very uneventful. Basically, I missed my flight out of Seattle, and so I had to take a late flight. Got to Houston very late—couldn't find anybody to come and get me at the airport. I was stuck at the airport for a couple of hours before I could find somebody to come and get me, and so it was kind of an uneventful homecoming. My grandmother, who I had lived with, she was in the hospital. She had been in a car wreck, and I didn't know that, so it was kind of a stressful homecoming for awhile.

Interviewer: How long did you remain in the service after the end of the hostilities?

Veteran: I had another year and a half to serve after I came back.

Interviewer: Why did you choose to leave or remain in the military?

Veteran: I chose to leave. I did a three-year enlistment, and when my three years were up I got out.

Interviewer: Can you describe what it was like when you were discharged?

Veteran: Yes, I don't remember the exact date, but it was in March of 1971.

{END OF SIDE A}

{INTERVIEW RESUMES—SIDE B}

Veteran: I came home and went back to work.

Interviewer: Back at Exxon?

Veteran: Yes.

Interviewer: How, if at all, were your military skills or military education transferable to your civilian life?

Veteran: None whatsoever.

Interviewer: Please describe the ease or difficulty with which you readapted to civilian life and the influence your military experience had on your readjustment.

Veteran: I was so happy to get out of the Army, the only adjustment was having somebody holler at me about blowing a whistle in my ear for waking me up in the morning.

Interviewer: You didn't go to school and use the G.I. Bill?

Veteran: Not until years later. It was some years before I used the G.I. Bill.

Interviewer: What did the G.I. Bill mean to you?

Veteran: It was a good thing for me. I think it was a lot better than what it is today. I actually went to a carpenter apprenticeship school, and so it actually paid me. I got a check each month to help me. When I went into the school, I went in at a very low wage, and so it actually helped me make a living until I got out of that school.

Interviewer: What were your expectations of civilian life upon leaving the service?

Veteran: I was just ready to get out of the service.

Interviewer: Did you join the National Guard or organized reserves after your activity duty?

Veteran: No.

Interviewer: Please indicate any national or unit veterans associations to which you belong.

Veteran: The unit I was in was the 196th Infantry Brigade, and for awhile I belonged to an organization that was made up of veterans, but over the years the organization kind of went by the wayside, I guess. I quit getting newsletters, and I just didn't pursue it.

Interviewer: Please describe what veterans associations mean to you.

Veteran: The only time that I ever really got together with other people that I didn't know were veterans a bunch of years ago. Houston had this parade, and I actually got to meet some these guys that I had corresponded with, and I really knew none of them from Vietnam, but the 196th was a very large unit, and I was just in a very small section of it. There were very few of us crew chiefs. But it was people we

could relate to. When you'd say such-and-such, they knew exactly what you were talking about.

Interviewer: With whom do you feel most comfortable discussing your wartime experiences with?

Veteran: It's not really something I discuss a lot.

Interviewer: Why not? You just don't want to?

Veteran: That's history.

Interviewer: If you have read any histories, articles, or post-war writings on campaigns in which you participated, what is your opinion of their accuracy?

Veteran: I haven't read any that were specifically aimed at the unit I was in.

Interviewer: What, if anything, did your military experience teach you about America or Americans?

Veteran: All in all, I think we're a very patriotic people. I know there was a lot of discontent during Vietnam, but there was still a lot of people that pulled together, so I think as a nation we're very patriotic.

Interviewer: What did you think of all the anti-war movements?

Veteran: I really didn't understand it. Then, I couldn't understand if they really believed in what they were saying, or if that was maybe just a way to get out of the draft. I never did really decide how sincere they were. I think there were a few sincere people and a lot of follow-alongs.

Interviewer: Thank you, Mr. Burgess.

Veteran: OK.

{END OF INTERVIEW}