Interviewer: This is Joni Espinoza, and I would like to begin my oral history report, so I’m going to begin with the first question. What is your name?

Veteran: Burton Alvin Fowler, Jr.

Interviewer: And what war did you participate in?

Veteran: The Vietnam War.

Interviewer: What military branch were you involved with?

Veteran: The United States Army.

Interviewer: What was your rank?

Veteran: I was a sergeant—E5. I didn’t go to school for it. I earned it while I was in the field.

Interviewer: How did you become with the military?

Veteran: I was drafted right out of high school.

Interviewer: So, how old would that have made you—about 18?

Veteran: No, it made me 20.

Interviewer: Explain your training experience.

Veteran: We had six weeks of boot camp, which is just a training exercise to get you in shape physically, to get you acquainted with some of the weapons, and then we had a two-week course called Leader Preparation, which I had to go to, and that was to teach you to be a leader in the next phase of training. The next phase of
training was AIT, which was more intensive. They taught you more detail in weapons, how to search and seize, just different things like that. Then we had three weeks of special training on an army personnel carrier, which transports troops. It looks like a tank without the gun, and it transports soldiers.

Interviewer: Did you specialize in any certain weapons?
Veteran: I was expert marksman in the M14, the M16, and the military .45 pistol.

Interviewer: Once you completed your training, did you feel that you were prepared for battle?
Veteran: Yes, I did, because we were in Fort Polk, Louisiana, and that country was pretty close, weather-wise anyway, compared to Vietnam.

Interviewer: Upon entering the war did you fully understand it’s purpose or its cause?
Veteran: Not at first. I just thought we were out there fighting an enemy because they were the enemy, but as I grew in knowledge being there I found out that it was a method that the United States used to try and slow down the progress of communism, but I really felt that the main reason was to show Russia that the United States was willing to sacrifice a lot of lives to stop communism. In a sense it turned out to be a political war.

Interviewer: I know you mentioned Louisiana, but where all were you stationed?
Veteran: Louisiana’s where I took my boot camp, that’s where I took my leadership preparation course, and then I also took my AIT training there, which was in Tiger Land. That’s what they called it for infantry soldiers. Then army personnel carrier training was took in Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Interviewer: In those various places, did you ever have contact with civilians?
Veteran: You mean during training?

Interviewer: Or during battle?
Veteran: Oh, in Vietnam, yes. I met several civilians. That’s one of the things that made me realize that the people in the United States have got it easy—real easy. We take everything for granted. I don’t now, but I know before I went there I did, but
that’s one of the main things I learned while I was there, that if you had a bicycle, you were really well off. If you had a car, you was really high society, and if you had a Cadillac, you was top of the line over there. But we just take way too much for granted here as the race of the people we are here, because we’ve had everything given to us, or it’s so easy to get. We just don’t appreciate what we’ve got, because over there those people appreciated everything they could get because there wasn’t much to get.

Interviewer: What was your feelings toward the civilians? Did you feel like you could trust them?

Veteran: Some of them, yes, and some of them, no. But if you were going to trust them, they had to earn your trust, because you just didn’t know who to trust because they all looked alike. They all looked alike over there—the enemy and civilians.

Interviewer: Explain how a normal day went for you. What time did you get up, and what kind of duties did you have?

Veteran: Well, if you’re talking about in the combat zone you’d get up before daylight. Everybody gets up, and you got your K-rations or your C-rations, you eat your breakfast, and of course you’re dressed by then. Shave if possible, but most of the time that wasn’t possible. There was many a guy, and I was among them, you didn’t have a chance to brush your teeth, because the water was so valuable you didn’t want to waste it brushing your teeth. We didn’t shave very often. I went sometimes thirty days without shaving. Then I would get up with the company, and it was our job as a company to search out and seek the enemy—try and make contact with them. Of course contact meant a battle, and sometimes there was lives lost—sometimes there wasn’t, but a normal day was just to go out and see if we could find the enemy. In the summertime, it was so hot that about 10:00 in the day everything you had on would be soaking wet with sweat. That evening, when it come time for us to shut down for the day, we’d set up for our location for the company, and then there would be one last patrol to go out and make sure the enemy was nowhere near us that night when we set up for the night, and then you’d have your supper. Of course, during the day we stopped long enough to eat dinner, but there was no hot meals. The only time we’d have a hot meal would be
every three days when they flew in our supplies, and they’d bring us a hot meal out then, and that’s the only time we’d get a hot meal.

Interviewer: What were your views on the enemy?

Veteran: I felt sorry for them, because they were ignorant of the real facts of life, I think. I know this is probably what they trained or taught from childhood up, but I don’t believe in reincarnation and they do, and that’s a sad thing, because you go into a war and you think, “I can give my life and then in reincarnation I can be brought back in another life.” And of course you and I know that as Christians that’s not so, and so they were just throwing their lives away for nothing. A good example of that is we found a guy that inside his arms and inside his legs were all burnt—no other marks on him. Come to find out they were using him to hold a rocket, when they fired a rocket. Of course the fire from the rocket would kill him. The concussion of that rocket would kill him when it took off, but that’s how stupid they were believing, “OK, I’m doing this for my country; if it kills me I’ll come back.” Well you and I know that was a waste of life right there. Like I said, I felt sorry for them, but we had to put a stop to communism somewhere, and that was one of our ways to stop it.

Interviewer: Do you have any other memories that would stand out?

Veteran: An odd one, but funny now (it wasn’t then), I was asleep on my air mattress—that’s what we got to sleep on; we had to roll it up and put it in your backpack. Now, I’m asleep on my air mattress and I always slept with my weapon right beside my right side, and about 4:00 in the morning, one of the enemy soldiers comes by our camp and opens up with an A-K-47. That is one of the weirdest alarm clocks I believe I ever had in my life. Scared me so bad I turned over on my stomach and spun around three times before I could find my weapon—that’s how bad it scared me. Of course I found my weapon, and now I can think back on it and laugh about it, but back then it was pretty scary. I guess when my buddy got shot, I’ll always remember that. The guy was from Oklahoma and was shot on July 2, 1970, and he was shot twice. That really hurt me. I’ll always remember him, because he and I was real close. We’d went through all the training classes together—everything. We were just best of buddies, and when he
I didn’t think he was gonna die, because all he got was shot in the knee and then he got shot in the side. But when they got him to the rear to take care of him, he died on the operating table, so that really bothered me that I’d lost a friend like that. He was probably the only one person that I got real close to while I was over there. All the other memories I think of them as just a job, but those two stick out more than any of the others.

Interviewer: Once you returned home, how were you treated?
Veteran: I think I was treated well. I know there was some of the guys that weren’t, because I know it’s in the books where they talk about we didn’t get the parades and all those kind of things like the World War II veterans got and World War I veterans got, and all that. I didn’t ask for that. I didn’t want it, because I felt like the whole time I was in Vietnam I was doing something for my country. My country has always been free, so that’s all I wanted. They don’t owe me nothing. My country doesn’t owe me anything. I owe the country, and I always think of that saying from President John F. Kennedy, “What can I do for my country?”

My family is so close, you know that, and that’s why it was so easy for me when I got back. Of course everybody was wanting to see me and all this kind of thing, and I felt like I was the center of attention and I didn’t want to be the center of attention. But it was easy when I got back. And I think another reason it was easy for me is I’m a Christian and I believe in God, and I always had a saying. I smoked back then, and I carried a cigarette lighter, and on that lighter it said, “God is my co-pilot,” and I think to this day that’s the reason I came back alive is because of God.

Interviewer: Now how do you feel about the war?
Veteran: Well, I think the war served a purpose. I hated to see some 55,000 men lose their lives in Vietnam for the simple fact that I think if this war had been fought in a correct way instead of the way it was, we could have done much more than what we done. Instead of stretching it out over twenty years, or whatever amount of years it was, it wasn’t necessary to spend that much time there. We had enough soldiers in Vietnam at one time to stand shoulder-to-shoulder from one end of the country to the other wiping out everything in our path, and the war would have
been over. But we didn’t do that, because it was a political war, is what they called it. We were trying to prove a point to another country, and we were going to sacrifice guys to stop your communism, and we could have done it in an easier way—a much better way, I thought. So my thoughts on that is that we just fought it wrong. If we’d had smarter leaders—I’m not one for picking on President Nixon, but when I went into Cambodia, the enemy knew probably a couple of weeks in advance before we even went into Cambodia that we were coming. So we had a leak in our higher-ups somewhere really, really bad, and I think that really stunk. When we went into Cambodia we could have done a lot more damage that what we done if they didn’t know we were coming. But my son I don’t think will ever have to fight in a war, and that’s one thing I’m thankful for. Maybe we delayed it enough. I know there was Desert Storm, but Desert Storm was a more modern-type war. Very few foot soldiers were used. In Vietnam, you go into a jungle war, it’s tough. It takes a lot of foot soldiers to solve the problem, and I hope Afghanistan doesn’t turn out to be another one of those, but I think we’re fighting this one a lot smarter than we did Vietnam. Let’s hope so.

Interviewer: Do you have any other thoughts, or is that it?
Veteran: No, I think that’s it. I think it made me a better person. I know it made me a better person, because when I come back I appreciated a lot more than I did before I went. We take a roof over our house for granted. It wasn’t that way over there. I guess one thing that stuck in my mind more than anything else, and it wasn’t even in the combat zone, we went to this dump. G.I.s are wasteful, and we was carrying a lot a food to the dump that nobody would eat—some of it had done turned bad. We carried it over there, and there was a pit dug in the ground with a dozer. You back up, and you dump all the stuff in that pit, and they set it on fire to keep the civilians from jumping in there and getting that food, because it’s bad food. But I still seen them jumping in while it’s on fire and throwing out food. That’s how bad it was for them. We’ve never had it that bad and probably never, ever will. That’s why that left an impression on me that I’ll always remember. Like I said, I felt sorry for the people. Communism does some bad things for people. It’s never been good for anybody except for the immediate leaders. They’re the ones that profit from it—not the general population. That’s
why we in the United States go with a democracy, and thank God for that. And other than that, that’s all I can remember.

Interviewer: Thanks for your time.
Veteran: You’re welcome.

{END OF INTERVIEW}