

Veteran: **HILDENBRAND, Jr., Tom**
Service Branch: **MARINE CORPS**
Interviewer: Garcia, Melinda
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Transcriptionist: Terry Moore
Highlights of Service: **Vietnam; Sergeant; Radioman; Involved in Tet Offensive; Good description of actual combat experiences**

Interviewer: I want to thank you for letting me come into your home to do this interview. Is it alright with you to tape this interview?

Veteran: Sure, that's fine.

Interviewer: Please state your name, address, and telephone number for Lee College purposes.

Veteran: My name's Tom Hildenbrand. My phone number is 409-737-5021. The mailing address is 6111 {tape cuts off} Isle, Galveston, Texas 77554. I'd like to also thank Melinda for giving me this chance to talk to her, and thank Lee College for having this program kept alive, because I think it's very important for the young people of this nation to know about people that have been in the military not only in the Vietnam era but mainly World War II. Korea was important, but to me World War II was the most important war that this country has ever fought to preserve what freedoms we have. It's important that every person in this country realizes that, and not forget it, because our freedoms can't be taken for granted, and our freedoms are not free. They've been paid for and paid for dearly with lives.

Interviewer: What prompted you to go to Vietnam?

Veteran: I graduated from high school in 1966, and went off to Alvin Jr. College. I'm originally from Galveston, and I graduated from Lamarque High School. I transferred in 1968 to Stephen F. Austin College in Nacogdoches, and stayed there for a short time and decided that I didn't want to stay in college any longer. Vietnam, to me, was kind of a mystery at that time. I had seen it on TV. I had always planned on going into the military, even if I graduated from college. I

was going to do my part, or my duty, for this country and go into the military. My father was in the Navy in World War II, and being born in 1947, I was raised around a lot of military-type talk. So, it was always in my upbringing that we kept the military in our minds. In 1968, I left Stephen F. Austin and came back home and decided to join the military.

Interviewer: How old were you?

Veteran: I was 20 years old. My dad talked to me and said, “What are you gonna go in?” I said there was only one branch for me, and that’s the Marine Corps, and he said, “Oh, my goodness.” He was in the Navy and went to boot camp right across this little slip where the ships come in and out from the Marine Corps boot camp in San Diego, California. The Navy was there and the Marines were on the other side, and he used to tell me he would wake up in the morning hearing the Marines yelling and screaming and hollering going through boot camp, and he says, “Man, I don’t know what them guys are doing.” But I told him that was the only branch for me. My dad has all the respect in the world for the Marines, because he was aboard ship around many of the islands that the Marines were fighting for in World War II—Iwo Jima, Guadalcanal, Tarawa—he was there and saw what the Marines did. In fact his ship transported Marines to these islands, and he saw all the wounded, and those that died were aboard his ship. So, anyway, that’s why I picked the Marine Corps. I joined in May of 1968 in Galveston, Texas, and left for San Diego shortly after for boot camp. Went through the ten weeks (at that time they had cut back boot camp by a couple of weeks because of the war effort in Vietnam), which was a fun experience and something I wouldn’t want to go through again, but it was very rewarding. It’s got a lot of purpose in it, and you can probably ask any Marine that’s been through it. It’s mentally challenging as well as physically challenging. They try to break you down and treat you like the lowest person on earth, but there’s a purpose in it, and I knew that. It paid off later. Went through that, then went through ITR Training, which is Infantry Training Regiment, which was at Camp Pendleton, up the road from San Diego. Spent a month there, then went to what they call BITS, which is Basic Infantry Training, and we had our specific MOS’s, which is your Military Occupation Specialty. Mine was an 03-51, which means dealing with the 106 millimeter

recoilless rifle, the flame thrower, demolitions, 45 caliber pistol use, and the 3.5 rocket launcher, which was kind of eased out of the basic infantry unit, because it was too bulky and the ammo was too heavy to carry. That was my basic MOS, which was still a “grunt.” An infantry grunt is basically a rifleman. After BITS, I came home on twenty day leave, and then went back to Camp Pendleton, and with my MOS we were held back from going to Vietnam at that time, which was around December of 1968. We were held back about a month, because they didn’t need our MOS, so we waited at Camp Pendleton for about a month and went through what they call staging. Staging is a two week course and is the last training you’d get before you’d go to Vietnam. That involves the best replicas they can put up to simulate what it’s like in Vietnam with grass huts, rice patties, etc. Plus escape and maneuver things if you’re captured, how to live off the land, and things like that. As I found out later, it’s OK, but it’s not the real thing. So in January of 1969 we got our orders to ship out for Vietnam. We boarded a plane and left from an Air Force base in California (I forget the name) and flew to Anchorage, Alaska, and refueled. At that time, it was about thirteen below when we landed. We were all kind of hot on the plane, and when we went back by the door they opened and it didn’t take us time to leave the door—it was real cold. So, we took off from Anchorage, and about twelve or thirteen hours later landed in Okinawa. That was the initial landing point of all Marines going to Vietnam. We stayed there about three days, and then they gave us the orders to load up and go to Vietnam. The flight from Okinawa to Vietnam was roughly an hour or an hour and a half. We landed at the Danang airbase, which is in the northern part of Vietnam, about a hundred miles south of the DMZ, the demilitarized zone, which is the 35th Parallel, I think. We stayed there for about three days until we were assigned to a battalion. We stayed in tents while we were in Danang. In January, the weather conditions were about ninety degrees with high humidity, because the monsoon season had just ended, and it was starting to warm up again. When it came time for us to be transported to our battalion, we loaded up on trucks, which they called 6-bys, and rode down about twenty miles to a regimental area. This area was a pretty big size for an area over there. It had a commanding officer that was a colonel, who was over the regiment, and we were assigned to companies when we got there. I was assigned to India Company 3-1, which was India

Company 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines, and started off there. From the first day, we all lived in tents, and there wasn't enough rifles or Vietnam utilities (the clothing we wore) to go around. We didn't even have a rifle for three days. The second night there, the lines were hit by "gooks," or the VC, and we were all in trenches with nothing but grenades and bayonets. We had no rifles. So, we'd throw grenades every once in awhile, but they were hitting the wire in different places—in front of the tanks and down by the mortars. It was a long night. When the gooks hit the wire, we were all asleep in this tent and I had my boots off. That's the last time I ever took my boots off, because I couldn't hardly find them, it was so dark. I scrambled around trying to get 'em on and get out there in the trenches. That passed, and that was the beginning of the Tet Offensive in 1969—the religious Vietnamese time. About the third day, we finally got some rifles and clothing to wear. The reason we got it was because of guys getting wounded or killed. We got their equipment—sad to say, but that's the way it was. We started running patrols and ambushes out of the regimental area for probably a month. After that time, they moved the 3rd Battalion to Hill 55. From that hill, there were four companies that were in the battalion. There was India, Keelo, Mike, and Lima companies. Those were the four basic grunt companies that would work different areas off of that hill. In each of those companies, there was three platoons that would also spread out and do different things in different areas.

Interviewer: How many men were in a platoon?

Veteran: In basically all Marine companies, there were approximately 90 men to a company, which was, by the book, undersized. Normally, there's 120 or 130 or so, but we were always undermanned and never had enough people. In each platoon, there was probably 30. You also had a mortar platoon, and it was like a separate little group. They had 60 in it. You also had the artillery support from the hill itself and air support—jets, helicopters. Off Hill 55, which was in about February of 1969, we would do our ambushes and patrols. There was a fair amount of contact with the enemy—a lot of shooting. There wasn't a whole lot of people killed and wounded during that early stage—January and February—in our company as well as the battalion. It wasn't too bad. We stayed there until

March of 1969. In April of '69, we moved to another hill called Hill 37. On that hill, which was approximately ten miles away from Hill 55, we started working another area with patrols and ambushes, and also what they called operations. Hill 37 meant it's 37 feet or meters above sea level. We were on Hill 37, which was in an area that was real volatile—very hostile. It had a place called Dodge City, and was given that name by a previous Marine before I got there. It was a big area, and if you know your American Western history, there was a lot of shootouts, and that's what it was. When April came, we were on a big operation called Pipestone Canyon, and we were out there for quite a few weeks. We hadn't really come into much fighting. Booby traps, sniper fire, but nothing major. So they decided it was time to go back, so we all headed back in. India Company was leading the way, and we went through a jungle-type area and came out in the rice patties, and crossed a little creek. As soon as we crossed the creek and were on the other side, the shooting started. Naturally, we got on the radio to find out what's happening, and the company behind us who was sweeping in behind us (either Mike or Lima), they told us that the gooks came up out of these holes and were shooting. So, we all crossed the creek again and went back through these rice patties. There was about a hundred of us on line moving across this dry rice patty, and we got within twenty yards of this jungle area, and they opened up on us. Almost immediately, out of 90 guys that were on line, about 40 of them were hit and down—just that quick. So, we continued to return fire and throw grenades and got the situation under control, and the Medivac choppers started coming in so we could get our dead and wounded out of there. I don't know how much detail you want, but the guy on my left was hit in the leg, and me and another guy were dragging him out, and as we got closer to the choppers the gooks were coming out of these holes shooting and throwing these tri-coms, Chinese grenades. One of 'em blew up maybe twenty yards from me. I watched it blow up, and there wasn't much to it, and it didn't hit me or the guy I was with, so we got this guy on the chopper and out of there. But we stayed there the rest of the day, and we called in Phantoms, which were jet fighter planes to come in and support us. They were coming in so low and so close dropping these bombs in front of us, I could see the pilot's face. He was so close that he was just barely above the tree line. It was very loud, and you can't even think with all the

shooting and explosions going on. That lasted for the rest of that day. When Mike came, everything kind of settled down. When sunlight came the next day, we went in, and there was 125, if I remember, dead gooks that we drug out. They were protecting an underground hospital and communication area that they had in the tunnel. They were big on tunnels. That's why they were hard to find. They were also excellent at camouflage. But the tunnel rats went in there and found all this stuff, and then bodies everywhere.

Interviewer: Was it like a hospital in there?

Veteran: Yeah, it was an underground hospital and an radio communication area.

Interviewer: Did ya'll take any prisoners?

Veteran: No prisoners. I'm not saying we killed them indiscriminately—they were just dead when we went in there. Every time before we went into these hole, we threw lots of grenade, so they may have been killed at that time. We didn't get three Marines that were killed out on the chopper, because the choppers were taking too much fire and had to pull out. So we carried these three guys out, which was about five miles back to Hill 37.

Interviewer: Was it normal for ya'll to take the bodies.

Veteran: Oh, yes. We never left a Marine—never—you never do that, unless everybody is dead. Never do you leave anybody behind. Eventually they were flown home and given a proper burial. That was a very, very bad firefight—it was very awesome. I came out of it unscratched—I don't know how—just lucky, and I didn't get hit. In April we stayed at Hill 37 and continued to do the basic daily routine for a grunt, which was patrols, ambushes, or night watch somewhere on the line, or the perimeter. You got about four hours sleep, if you were lucky, every day. Naturally we ate C-rations out of cans. That's all we had, because they didn't bring us any hot food, except on a few special occasions like Christmas. We drank whatever water we had and put the little iodine pills in it, if you wanted to. They tasted terrible, so I didn't use them very much. In May we went on another operation. There was intelligence that told us the gooks were in this village, which happened to be just a little bit north of the regimental area

where I came in to join India 31. We had another big shootout there and lost not as many people, but ten or twelve and then numerous wounded. I was hit at that time with a little piece of shrapnel. Luckily it wasn't bad. I pulled it out and it was gone and I didn't even need to go to the hospital. That was another big engagement we had with them. Tanks came and kind of blew the area away as well as Navy fighter planes. After that we went on routine-type stuff—patrols and ambushes with really not a lot of significant things happening for about another month. Then we went in to an area called Charlie Ridge, which was a mountain down there. We were on an operation up in the mountains and took sniper fire and lost one man up through that. We got two gooks out of a cave, and just to be realistic and tell you everything as it really was—in Vietnam, as well as here with dope and other things, marijuana was a legal cigarette over there for the people. I was so naïve where I came from about marijuana and any other drugs that I didn't know what it was. I could smell it in the air at night, and all these other guys knew about it and told me, but it really stunk to me. They pulled out two garbage bags full of marijuana out of this cave, and a lot of the guys were grabbing it and putting it in their pockets. I asked what that stuff was, and they told me.

Interviewer: So, what happened to these two prisoners?

Veteran: They were dead. They were shot—not executed, though. They were shot in a shootout. That was basically the whole trouble we had in the mountains. Later on after I left, I heard they had some big troubles in those mountains from guys that were still there that I knew, but I had left before they did. After that, we moved to a hill called Hill 22. This is the last hill I was on before I rotated out. We did the same thing off of that hill—patrols and ambushes, but we were there during the monsoon. When the monsoons hit, brother, you've never seen any rain like it. If you could have shot a straight line out, we had about five or six feet of land showing on twenty-two meters high, so you could say the water was sixteen or seventeen feet deep—it rained that much. Everything looked like islands out there.

Interviewer: Were you in the dry area?

Veteran: On top of the hill. We weren't dry and were having to live in holes. Water would run in there, and we'd eat and sleep in the mud, and you couldn't stay dry. I had ringworm bad—everybody had ringworms. The corpsmen, who were our doctors (they were Navy personnel), would give us this purple medicine to put on, and everybody had purple spots all over their face and body. It didn't cure anything because it was weak. I wrote home to my momma and told her what I had, and she went to the drugstore and sent me some medicine that cured it, so I passed it around as long as it would last and that helped. It's not all bad over there, though. There was a lot of funny stuff, and I'm probably leaving a lot of stuff out.

Interviewer: Well, tell me some of the funny stuff.

Veteran: We were out in an area one day and had tanks with us, and we had a flamethrower tank. Before we set in for the night, he burned back a bunch a bunch of jungle type area so we'd have a fire going. We were, naturally, sitting up on guard duty, and all of a sudden we heard a bunch of screaming and hollering. As dark as it is over there, you can't see anything without flares, so somebody popped a flare, and there was a black guy that was hollering and screaming, and on his back was what was called a rock ape—those monkeys, like chimpanzees. This monkey was jumping all over his back, and we all laughed and got that monkey off of him. They're called rock apes because they live up in the little hills, and they do throw rocks.

Interviewer: Did it bite, or was it attacking him?

Veteran: What I had heard was that one of the patrols had come upon some of these monkeys and had either shot at them or done something to make them mad, and they came back that night. They're pretty intelligent the way it sounds, so they jumped on this guy, or whoever they could get hold of. We all laughed about it, and he wasn't hurt. There was also a time when we were on an island called Gunalli(sic) Island—there was a big river that made the island. We were all out there in the river bathing one day, swimming and joking, and all of a sudden from the other side of the river we started getting shot at. Nobody got hit, but the sides

of the river wall were high, about twenty foot, and we were all scrambling up the side of the wall—all of us naked and trying to get out of there. Finally, our guys came over there and started returning fire, but it was kind of funny. We got out of there, and we was all muddy and dirty.

Interviewer: Would ya'll go into the city, or were ya'll in such a remote area that there wasn't a place you could go and drink and play games?

Veteran: Never. I'm glad you brought that up, because we, as grunts, were always out in the bush.

Interviewer: Which was like a jungle?

Veteran: Jungle, rice patties, mountains. There was not bright lights anywhere—no cities. Little vills (villages) here and there, and they had kerosene lamps—there wasn't any electricity. We were never close to Danang, which had electricity, because it was a big city. Saigon, which was way south, was where the Army was. We were twenty-four hours a day in the bush, for the most part, until you got R&R to go on leave for a week, or an in-country leave, which we had one and went to China Beach. That was a three-day in-country liberty, and we went to the South China Sea on the coast and got to kick back and lay down.

Interviewer: How often would you get these liberties?

Veteran: One time for in-country and one time for out of country. I took an out of country R&R to Japan and stayed there for a week. Got to see Tokyo and Yokahama and talk to some people, and just party over there.

Interviewer: Were you married at the time?

Veteran: No, I was single. When I was in Vietnam, I was twenty-one when I landed, and when I left I was twenty-two years old. I was one of the older guys when I left. Most of them were eighteen, nineteen, twenty. You had to be young and in shape. The packs you hump were sixty, seventy, or eighty pounds of gear. You had cross bandoliers that looked like Pancho Villa, and that's what we carried for machine gun ammo. Two-hundred rounds, and every man carried it unless he was a radioman, which after April 5 (the battle I told you about) we had radiomen

that were killed, and they asked who would want to be a radioman, so I volunteered. I humped a radio from that point on. We carried a lot of gear—food, clothing, ammunition, water—you humped a lot of weight, plus mortar rounds, machine gun ammo, a log (which took the place of the 3.5 rocket launcher, with a light fiberglass tube that fired a rocket). Everybody humped one of those that wasn't a radioman. Another funny experience I want to tell you about is that the gooks had a what we called an RPG, it was like a rocket launcher, and we had a prisoner that was taking us out to where he had his weapon buried. We went out as the patrol, and I was carrying a radio at that time and humping it for our company commander, who was right beside me. We were standing there in this open area, and one of the villagers came out and told us, "Don't go out in this area here, because it's booby trapped." So, we said, "OK." There was a little river there, and two of our guys took this prisoner across the river to get his weapon. They had just gone across the river, and all of a sudden out of this tree line about a hundred and fifty yards, I saw a puff of white smoke. I hit my lieutenant and you could see this rocket coming, and it hit probably ten yards in front of me. It skipped, and I raised my leg, and right after I pushed my officer away it went right under my leg and it never did blow up. We were really lucky, and laughed about it later. We didn't have a big fight there, but after we shot some rounds they were gone.

Interviewer: What kind of booby traps would they set?

Veteran: Normally they were trip-wire with grenades, or undetonated bombs that we might have dropped, or artillery rounds that didn't go off. They would set 'em up and rig 'em with explosives, so when you tripped this wire, it would detonate it. They also had what they called pungee pits, which was hole dug in the ground just about big enough for your foot to step in, and it had bamboo spikes in it. It was mainly to wound you—it wouldn't really kill you—but it would put you out of commission, and that's why after we started learning about the pungee pits, they redesigned the jungle boots that we wore to have a steel plate in the bottom of it to help protect it from penetrating through it.

Interviewer: Would they lace those bamboo sticks with any poison?

Veteran: Usually buffalo manure.

Interviewer: What would that do to you?

Veteran: It would make you sick, and if you didn't get treated quick enough, you'd get an infection. I've never heard of anybody dying from it, but I've also found pungee pits that had metal bars with a piece of wood in there, which was probably worse than the bamboo. They were notorious for homemade Claymores that would have shotgun pellets and behind it was C-4, which was an explosive with a curved front. It had an electric detonator that you'd run back thirty or forty feet. When you aimed this thing and fired it, it sets off the explosive and throws all the pellets out. The gooks would do all they could do with explosives, and they'd put glass, metal shrapnel, fishhooks, nails, etc. We were on Christmas Island, and they'd put them in these little rice patty berm walls, and one of our patrols stopped where there was a favorite swimming hole of ours. They stopped there, and the gooks were in a little gook cemetery behind these headstones, and they detonated it, and it killed four of our guys and wounded two. I was on radio watch that day, and the man that was trying to call in a Medivac was wounded, and was having trouble, so I grabbed an I.V. and ran down to where they were and threw it to the corpsman and got the radio and called in the Medivac choppers to get the guys out. That was pretty bad, because I lost a real close friend on that day. The guy who was on the radio was hit on his arm—he had a fishhook sticking in his arm and also a little down his leg. He made it OK, though. Another funny experience happened when we first moved to Hill 22. There wasn't anything there but a hill, so we had to build it up—put out the barbed wire, the consentina(sic?), the trip wire, the flares, everything we did. At that time, which was in November of '69, they had come out with a big canister-type weapon that shot teargas, they call it CS gas, but it just makes your eyes water. As we were setting it up, we were getting fire from a vill down below us {END OF SIDE A} {SIDE B BEGINS} ...to try to stop the shooting. He forgot to remember which way the wind was blowing, and he fired this stuff and it started shooting these balls out. It shot 48, I think, and there was a big cloud of gas that blew right back

in to us. We kind of scattered out as it came by, and all of us had eyes watering and everything. Luckily there wasn't anything major down there.

Interviewer: I know you would come into close contact with the Vietnamese. How were you able to determine who was friendly and who was the enemy?

Veteran: You couldn't tell. They were farmers by day and enemy by night. They'd be out there in the rice patties planting rice and doing what they did, and then even during the day they might shoot at you from out in the field. We had patrols that were shot at from villas, and we'd run out there to them, and call out artillery, and just blow the villa away the best way we could. Then we'd move in and take over and try to find what we could.

Interviewer: When you would go in there, was it all men or was it women, too?

Veteran: Oh, yeah, It was women, babies, old men. You never saw too many young men, because they were more or less forcibly drafted by the VC. It was always, women, children, and old men in these villas. We would do what we had to do to secure the area and check it out for weapons, which we did find a lot of. When we found them, we'd herd the people in to a retaining area, more or less, to be interrogated and checked out.

Interviewer: Did you interrogate the women as well?

Veteran: Oh, yes. On Christmas Island, the incident I told you about where the homemade Claymores went off and killed four people, that island was divided. One half was the Buddhists and the other half was Catholic. They had a beautiful Catholic church on the side we were on. It was Oriental, naturally, but it was nice. On the Buddhist side was where the bad guys were. We sent out a patrol and caught the people that detonated that Claymore and brought 'em back to where we were staying at this pagoda. The next day, Vietnamese intelligence showed up and interrogated 'em through torture. They put 'em on a bench and put a rag over their face and poured water over it, and they more or less tortured the information out of them. It was two teenage boys and a young woman that were responsible for doing that. I say torture—as far as I know, they were the ones who really did it. The next thing I know, they're taking them out of there, and I heard later they

shot 'em, but we weren't there. It's funny, because Vietnam, in the dry season, is so hot. We don't have mosquitoes compared to Vietnam—there's just loads of mosquitoes. It's 110, 115 degrees in the daytime, and then at night it may cool down to 80-something or the 90s. We had some cream they gave us, but I still have some little scars. I learned you don't put that cream in the creases, because the humidity would split your skin and open it up, and it would never heal while you're there. When the monsoons came, I have never been colder in my life. Laying out on an ambush in the rain during the November-December timeframe in northern Vietnam just freezing to death. Just shaking uncontrollably.

Interviewer: How long were you in the trenches? Was it like days, weeks at a time?

Veteran: A year. I was there one year except for one week for R&R in Japan and three days in-country at China Beach.

Interviewer: During the monsoon season when you were in the trenches, what would you be doing in the trenches when it was raining?

Veteran: We'd be sleeping in it. One night I woke up with water up to here. There's no way to get out of it. There's nothing else you can do. We had no facilities. You were out there on ambush, and you did what you had to do, so you lived amongst the elements.

Interviewer: So you were there a year?

Veteran: Yes. I came home in January of '70.

Interviewer: I heard a lot about Agent Orange. Were you exposed to that?

Veteran: Yes ma'am. We were in the area where they sprayed it. I didn't realize they were doing it. I never really saw the planes doing it, but I was in the area. I don't know of any ill effects that I have from it. I've got a healthy daughter, and I don't know of anything I've had problems with. I didn't know I was in the area they sprayed until many years later. I was also around leper colonies where there was still active leprosy in Vietnam, but we were inoculated for that stuff, so no one I ever knew got it. I made a lot of good friends through that experience, and two years ago I started locating some of them through the Internet, and located

my CO again, who I carried a radio for for quite awhile. He's a hell of a man. He's a lawyer in San Diego, California, and through a 1st Marine Division reunion that was in San Diego and meeting other Marines that were in our battalion, an officer I met has connections to find these guys, and he found him for me. I called him and didn't get anything but an answering machine, and I said, "Skipper, if this is you, this is Tom Hildenbrand, the old radioman. If this is you, call me at this number." It wasn't ten minutes and he called back. It's very emotional seeing these guys again, and we've met twice since then, along with other guys. One guy is missing a leg, and I didn't know it had happened to him. He left after I did and got shot, and he went through lots of years of trouble with that leg and finally got it amputated, but the guy got his act together, went back to college, and is now a practicing chiropractor in Hilo, Hawaii. It's a remarkable story. He's a hell of a man, but all of these guys are. In fact, one of the guys I'm still with is still active in the Marine Corps. He got out when he came home, went back to college (he's from Ohio), and when he graduated from college he always wanted to fly choppers, so he said, "I'll just call the Marines and see what I can do." Well, with his active duty time taken off of his age, they said, "OK, you can come back in," and he did. He went back in as a second lieutenant and went to chopper school, and is now a lieutenant colonel in Yuma, Arizona. He's the XO (executive officer) at Yuma Airbase, about to retire this June or July. He's got thirty years now. We've all been together with him and his wife. They're wonderful people, and I want to be there when he retires. We've also got another guy that's not active now, but he stayed in and he retired as a sergeant major, the highest enlisted rank you can get, and I'm proud of both of them guys. When we have our little reunions, it's a wonderful thing. In fact, I contacted one my best friends last year, who lives in New York, and got him to join us in Las Vegas, where we had our last reunion, and it was incredible because me and him were so tight. Another funny story with him was when we were sitting on top of Hill 22. When you weren't on patrol or ambush during the day, you were filling sandbags, and I have filled many a sandbag, and you build up your bunker and hootches, and things like that. This buddy of mine and I were sitting in his hootch, and I think we were drinking a beer, and I had a grenade in my hand. You know the old John Wayne movies where they'd stick them in their teeth and

pull the pin? Not these—you're gonna lose teeth if you do, because these cottar pins that hold the pin down are pretty stiff. So I straightened it out, and I was telling Paul (that's my buddy), "I want to make this thing easy where I can get it out quick," because you have to really twist them. I was messing with it, and all of a sudden the pin came out, and I was holding Paul took and left the bunk, and left me holding it, and he peaks around the sandbags in the door, and I said, "Paul, what are you doing? I've got the thing, I'm holding it." He said, "Put that pin back!" {Laughter} I said, "Alright," and I stuck it back in, and everything was fine, but it was comical to watch him take off. He was gone just that quick!

Interviewer: How many seconds would it take before it explodes?

Veteran: If you let the spoon go and it flies, that's what triggers the det cord to hit the blasting cap. It's about five seconds, but it's the longest five second you're ever going to have. April 5th, I carried five grenades, and as soon as the shooting started, I hit the deck and returned fire, and started grabbing these grenades and throwing them—just kind of spreading them out. I got rid of all five of my grenades before the first one blew up. I didn't think they'd ever blow up! I said, "Come on!" And finally they blew, but it's not like you see in a lot of these movies where as soon as they hit they blow up. It's not like that.

Interviewer: Do you watch a lot of war movies?

Veteran: Yeah, I still do.

Interviewer: I've watched *Saving Private Ryan*, and that was a really intense movie.

Veteran: I saw it here at the house because my wife wanted me to see it. I could talk or say anything after it was over, because it was the most realistic thing I've ever seen. It was THE MOST realistic movie about combat I've ever seen in my life, and I said, "I'll never watch this movie again—never!" It took me back thirty years, and I said, "This is incredible. What they're doing here is so realistic." *Pearl Harbor* was, in a lot of ways, realistic. I didn't like a lot of the flight scenes where the zeros were right there between the ships. That's "Hollywood." But the computer animation that showed the bullets hitting, is so real and so close that that's what I want every American to see, and let every American know, 'you

don't want this, and especially on this soil.' If we're going to do any fighting, we'll do it off of this soil, because the horrors of war are terrible. You can't even describe it. You look at them movies, and if you feel strong about how it hurts, then that's what it'll be like. I don't want it to cause people to be crazy warmongers or anything like that, but war is no good. After the fact, the only reason I say we shouldn't have been there is because of the way we fought. We fought it as a wave action. You go in there, secure an area, and then pull out, and the gooks would come right back and we'd have to go fight them again. We should have been moving north to Hanoi in North Vietnam—that would have been the right way to do it, but we lost a lot of people because of the defensive action. That's my only regret about Vietnam. The people in this country need to understand why they have their freedoms, and that's mainly because of the World War II era that gave us that—me included. My dad was in the Navy, and I have all the respect in the world for all the men and women who were in World War II, because we wouldn't have what we have today without them. So many sacrifices that we'll never know about. Vietnam? OK, we might have done a little part to slow down communism, but it was nothing like World War II. But if you look at the statistics in every way, Vietnam was the most dehumanizing, if you want to use that word, to the military man than World War II, because we never had a break. They weren't constantly being shot at and harassed like we were in Vietnam, and some of them got to come home, but we had to stay there. I'm not taking anything away from World War II, because when they had the island battles they were usually very bloody, very bad. But Vietnam was the mental, day-to-day for one year solid, except for the week of R&R, but it was just the mental anguish and the living conditions—just everything about it. You just lived like the lowest thing on this earth. You were always dirty, always wet, jungle rot—my feet just had skin falling off of them—things like that that are a day-to-day thing for a solid year. In comparison, Vietnam was very hard on the military man that was in the field.

Interviewer: Do you talk to your daughter about your experiences?

Veteran: Yes, and at one time my daughter wanted to join the Marines, but she has a baby, and I said, "You need to be with your baby. I admire your wanting to do that and

nothing would make me prouder, but you've got more responsibility." So, yes, I've talked to all my children. I have three step-children, and they all know where I stand, and they know where I come from. They've turned out to be well-disciplined, responsible young people. The oldest daughter is married, the next oldest is married and has a good job as a process technician, the other boy is in college at North Texas State, and my daughter is going to college in Galveston, and working. I'm proud of all of them. I hope through whatever I've taught them they pass it along to their children, because this country can go downhill fast. We don't have, in my opinion, enough patriotism. After 9/11, my heart felt better when I saw the flags coming out, but I don't want us to forget it. If we forget this quick, it's going to be on this soil and in our streets, and it's close to home now.

Interviewer: I do thank you again for your time and letting me interview you in your nice home. If I need to do a second interview, would that be OK with you?

Veteran: Yes ma'am.

Interviewer: Any last words for Lee College history students.

Veteran: Again, I want to thank you. I don't know if you were given my name arbitrarily or if you picked it out.

Interviewer: It actually was given to me by my history teacher.

Veteran: I feel honored for you to be here, and I feel honored that Lee College is doing this. I wish at different times I had stayed in and made a career out of it. I came real close to doing it. Another little funny story is me and my buddy Paul were fixing to rotate back home, and this top sergeant we had tried to get us to "re-up" in the Marines, and we were fixing to get out. I spent two years in the Marines, and he wanted us to re-up for four more years, and we said, "What will we get." He said, "You get another stripe and a choice of movie stations." I was a corporal when I left Vietnam, and that would have made me a sergeant, an E-5, and I was just under two years at that time, which was a real good rank for two years in the Marines, so I said, "OK, Paul, what do you want to do? Let's stay in. I know what I want to be." He said, "What?" I said, "I want to be a D.I., a drill

instructor,” which were the bad boys in boot camp that taught you everything. He said, “Yeah, I do, too. Let’s go to Paris Island.” He was from New York, and he went to Paris Island, which is the Marine boot camp on the East Coast, and I went to San Diego. They called us Hollywood Marines when we came through San Diego. I said, “No, I don’t want to go to Paris Island. Let’s go to California.” “No, I don’t want to go to California; I want to go to Paris Island.” We never could agree on which place to go, and that’s the only reason I didn’t stay in the Marine Corps. If we had agreed, I would have stayed in, but we didn’t. I’m not bragging, but I got two medals while I was over there. One was the Navy Commendation medal with combat “V” for something I did during one of the shootouts. My CO saw it and gave me this medal. One that really honored me, not for myself but for my parents, I had gotten out and come home, and I got a letter from the Galveston Marine base recruitment people, and said, “We have a medal here for you.” I said, “Oh, you do?” They said, “Yeah, and we’d like for you to be here on such and such date.” So, I went down there with my parents and sister, and there was four Marines in this office, and boy, they came out and did all the military stuff, and I stood in front of the desk while this captain read this citation. My parents were over there listening. That was the Navy Achievement medal, and it had combat implications plus the professionalism that I did with the communication area. My dad couldn’t be a Marine, and he was just so proud, and that’s one of the good moments I had with the military that he was a part of. I went to college after I went home and got an associate’s degree and ended up at Exxon Refinery in Baytown. I’ve been there ever since.

{TAPE STOPPED—END OF INTERVIEW}