

Veteran: **BURNITT, Donald**
Service Branch: **ARMY**
Interviewer: Smith, Tonya
Date of Interview: March 30, 2002
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Transcriptionist: Terry Moore

Highlights of Service: **Vietnam; Sergeant; Helicopter Master Mechanic/Crew Chief; Involved in many combat engagements; Seriously injured in battle; Received Purple Heart, Bronze Star, and Silver Star**

Interviewer: ...and I am doing an oral history report for the Vietnam War, and we are in the home of Mr. Burnitt on Saturday, March 30. You know that you are being taped, right?

Veteran: Sure.

Interviewer: Can you tell us your name and the military branch you were connected with?

Veteran: I was with the Army aircraft. My name is Donald L. Burnitt.

Interviewer: What was your rank?

Veteran: I was a sergeant.

Interviewer: What time period or duration were you with the military?

Veteran: I was with the military '68 through '72.

Interviewer: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

Veteran: I enlisted.

Interviewer: What was your motivation to enlist?

Veteran: They had come to our school and told us if we wanted to get into a special program, like I wanted to get in helicopters, I could join and I'd be guaranteed to get into that. If I had been drafted, I'd have no choice—I'd be going into the infantry unless I had scored exceptionally on my I.Q. test, then they'd give me a choice.

Interviewer: Did you know when you enlisted what you wanted?

Veteran: Yeah, I wanted to be in helicopters.

Interviewer: How did your family feel about your enlisting?

Veteran: My family didn't care. They were getting rid of me.

Interviewer: What was your training like?

Veteran: I went to thirteen weeks basic, where they trained you about what the military's all about. All the hand-to-hand combat, all the weaponry, and discipline, and then I went to an eighteen-month course in helicopter mechanics, and that was my training. Then I went straight to Vietnam.

Interviewer: Where were you stationed during your training?

Veteran: The first few months of basic training were in Ft. Polk, Louisiana, and the other nine was at Ft. Rucker, Alabama, and then straight to Vietnam.

Interviewer: Did you specialize in any one aspect of defense?

Veteran: I specialized strictly in helicopter mechanics. When I got over there I was a master mechanic. When I got out of my classes, they made me a crew chief and that meant I kept the chopper flying, clean, and military safe. I made master mechanic at school.

Interviewer: That's great. So, does that include any special training in weapons?

Veteran: No, not in weaponry, but they did train you in basic training in weaponry—automatic weapons and machine guns. I was a sharp shooter in basic. I was expert in rifles and pistols.

Interviewer: What was your target when you were practicing?

Veteran: My target was just a plain target—practice targets.

Interviewer: Did they have them moving or stationary?

Veteran: Some. In basic, you practiced on moving and stationary.

Interviewer: And how far away would you be on the range?

Veteran: Three-hundred foot at the most.

Interviewer: Is that just standard?

Veteran: When they trained you on shooting rifles. Machine gun would be a hundred foot just to see how good you could handle the weapon. My expertise was helicopter mechanics. I was master mechanic. That meant I had to keep the turbine engine completely mechanically safe all the time and the chopper mechanically safe all the time where it could be depended on at any time of battle, and only lost three from being shot down.

Interviewer: Three helicopters?

Veteran: Yeah, I went through three helicopters, and they all got shot down.

Interviewer: After you were finished with your training, did you feel like you were well prepared for your job?

Veteran: Sure I was. I was very agile in protecting myself, and I picked “agile” because I wanted to come back home alive. I was prepared to do anything it took to get me back home.

Interviewer: And then you said right after your training you went to Vietnam.

Veteran: They had a great demand for helicopter crew chiefs in Vietnam. They had a shortage, and they even had a shortage of pilots because they didn't have a great lifespan over there. I chose that field because I liked flying helicopters. I learned how to fly a helicopter in two weeks. One of the pilots after I got over there, he thought I should know how to fly, and so he taught me how to fly, and it took me two weeks to master that dude. And he said “it'd mean your life or death,” and so I took him serious. And so I learned how to fly, and it saved my life a few times.

Interviewer: When you got to Vietnam, were you allowed to mingle with the civilians?

Veteran: Right at first we weren't. We were mostly in what's called preparedness for the difference and change in being in war and being in peacetime. And they prepared you by how the people would treat you over there. And they tried suicide.

They'd do anything to get you. They'd send their kids in there with bombs on them, and the kids would blow themselves up. The first few days you were in-country there, they talked to you all about the diseases and how people were, and they gave you a whole bunch of shots where you could fight malaria, because the mosquitoes were real bad over there.

Interviewer: What was your attitude toward the civilians since you didn't get to...

Veteran: I had no...they were just different people. I just went over there with the knowledge that I'd be over there protecting the people in South Vietnam from a life of slavery, and that's what I intended to do—do my duty where you let slavery run rampant it'll take charge everywhere else, and that's the way I thought America should do.

Interviewer: What did your daytime duties consist of?

Veteran: I was scheduled to fly every day, and my duties were to make sure there was plenty of food on the chopper and water, and make sure the mechanics were the best, and make sure that everybody's got everything they need. Make sure their weapons are shooting right. Make sure the chopper is ready. My daytime duties were about 24/7.

Interviewer: So you didn't get to sleep very much?

Veteran: Not very much. Slept with one eye open and on the run. That sounds like exaggerating, but it is like that. You sleep very little, and that's why every six months they give you three month in-country R&R where you can release some of the tension. But it doesn't help. It helps by a very little bit, but it does help a little. I didn't take no in-country R&R. I just stayed in there and kept on... I leaned mostly to whiskey, and I took care of my tension that way and kept on going.

Interviewer: Was there any of your duties that you liked or disliked?

Veteran: I disliked the VC. When they started shooting at me, I disliked them. But as far as the people, I didn't dislike the people, but I knew what I had to feel to keep myself from being killed. A lot of people called us baby-killers over there, and

that was true. A lot of times we did have to kill babies in order not to get killed ourselves. They'd send them kids in there, and they'd send young women in there because they knew Americans have a soft heart for young women and young kids, and they'd send them in there, and they'd blow themselves up. Sometimes they'd come in there in the middle of the night in your hootch, and they'd be all wrapped around with bombs, and they'd set themselves off and kill people, and it was done over and over. And so we were having to kill babies and young women for that reason, and only that reason. The press picked up on that and made it look the wrong way. I came home for six months in the first of '69, and I seen what the people were doing, and man they treated me real dirty when I came home, because they didn't like us. People didn't like us in '69 for fighting over there. They didn't think we shouldn't be over there. Americans thought we weren't supposed to be over there, and in a way we should have been, but in another way we were fighting against communism, and I thought that was something to do.

Interviewer: What did your nighttime duty consist of?

Veteran: Nighttime duty was to get the chopper and the men ready for the next day. That meant getting the food loaded on the chopper, getting the chopper cleaned up and mechanically safe because it required changing oil in all the gear boxes. But my duties were the same all the time. I mean my duties were being prepared for the next day. Our next day might be life or death. We might have to go into a place where no one else can go to pick up our men that's wounded, and they say the first 80 helicopters there were all dangerous, but I'll tell you what, I've been in places where they wouldn't go. We'd go in there and we'd get men that were wounded real bad and bring them in and save their lives. I remember one time we went into a landing zone, and this one guy had his whole side of his neck blowed out right where that main artery is, and I had to hold his neck to keep him from bleeding to death. My hand turned plum blue holding him—it was a two-hour drive to the nearest trauma first aid. He had taken a bullet right here, and it took all the side of his neck out, and I held his neck. And he got shot right when he was loading another wounded up there on the chopper, and he got shot. And we took off out of there, and we got some of the wounded out, and this guy here

he got shot right when he was getting on my chopper. And I seen it, and, boy, blood run all over me and everything, because it was a main artery in his neck, and I reached over there and grabbed his neck like I was choking him to keep him from bleeding to death. And that's what the traumas were over there.

Interviewer: Were you flying while you were holding him?

Veteran: No, I was the crew chief—the mechanic. I sat back there where them guns are. I have a gunner on one side, and I had the gun on the other side. I only flew in an emergency. If my pilot got killed, I would fly then. If we were going to a place where we knew there was going to be lots of enemy contact, a new-pilot would get back there on my gun and I'd take his place in the co-pilot's place, in case one of them got shot—in case the pilot got shot. Many cases I saw when we'd get into a place like, that new man would freeze up and wouldn't do anything, and I'd be stuck there in the middle of hot fire and get shot myself, and so I'd always be available. 'Cause a lot of time you'd have to pull that man that got shot out of the spot before you can even take off because he's got his leg wrapped the _____, that's the middle stick, and that's what takes you off. The power just pulls you up, but you also have to adjust the angle of the blades where it'll take off straight, especially if you've got a load on. And so that was my everyday chores.

Interviewer: Did that man make it?

Veteran: Yes, he did. He made it. He didn't bleed to death. It was good two-hour drive or flight to the nearest Red Cross or hospital. They've got the Red Cross over the hospitals there, and that's how some of the times were over there. And sometimes you'd be the only one that was able to fly the chopper and have to get everybody else out to safety to survive. It was our everyday chores. Somedays all we had to do was lie around and analyze other places to go while we were waiting for the last crews to put down before we went and picked them up and moved them to the next spot. And sometimes that was just an all day chore just riding around and picking up where the communists were moving and everything. And that's what I did over there.

Interviewer: Did you have a curfew that they made you...?

Veteran: No curfew. You see that on TV, but them places were like a lot of your Air Force and few of your Army like in Saigon they had bases right there on the edge of Saigon, they had curfews for them, because after nighttime, that's when the communists would come in and operate, and VC would attack people that would wander off from a crowd. You never wanted to go out into the city without two or three with you, because you're vulnerable. And we had to carry our weapons with us all the time. Every single place we went, we had to have our weapons.

Interviewer: Church, too?

Veteran: Sure did. You were vulnerable everywhere over there, because they had no holidays like we had for like on Sundays. Their Sunday wasn't a worship day for them—they were Buddhists, and they worshipped...I don't know what their schedules were, but they didn't worship like we did. But we were armed all the time. No matter where we were over there, they all looked the same. And poor peasants over there, they might not have no shirts on, and it was cold enough to where you had to put a coat on. Or you might have 125 degrees in the shade, and the only time it got under 70 degrees was when the rains came in the monsoon season. The wintertime was solid rain—three months. I've got some pictures somewhere of it raining. Looks like real heavy fog. And you've got to get out there in them jungles and fight in that weather. We had to fly in that weather. Dangerous—highly dangerous.

Interviewer: What were you permitted to do with your free time?

Veteran: Anything, but I didn't have free time. The free time I had was fixing them choppers. If it wasn't my chopper that needed to be worked on, we'd get together and work on the other choppers. We had to be ready for the next day. We flew every day. The only time we really had any free time was if the choppers got all shot up, and you had to go to the main mechanic shop to get precious kind of work—machinery work—and we had to go there and work with them. But you'd have the evening time. And our free time we'd go to the PX and get drunk.

Interviewer: That's what most people did?

Veteran: Yeah. You wrote letters to your family. Over there they required you to write. I was in the hospital three months over there, and my family wasn't notified, and they thought I'd been killed because I hadn't wrote them no letters in three months. So I got to where I could write, and then I started writing to them and told them what had happened. My job was not a free-time job. You had to be ready all the time—even in a minutes notice. The ground crew came in contact with the enemy at nighttime, and you had to be ready to go and throw flares out of your chopper where they could see at nighttime to spot each other. They had these big old huge flares that were six foot long, six inches in diameter, and you had to throw them out of that chopper and ignite them where they could have light on the ground. You had to drop them under two hundred feet, and then you were all lit up. You know you can see past the light, but your were all lit up there and everybody could see you and you could be easily shot down. But in my profession or job over there you had to be ready all the time. And I didn't choose to have any free time—I wanted to be ready all the time. That's what saves your life. If you're not ready you can't protect yourself, and I wanted to be ready for anything.

Interviewer: You said that you could write home with your family. Was that the only kind of contact you had with them?

Veteran: They had what they called a MARS phone. Back then it was the early day cell phone, and it was only in the big cities over there—the big bases. Very seldom you got to go to them, but when you did get to them you called home. Like in Saigon, they had a big base there and you could use it. When you there you could call, but it was very limited on how long you could talk.

Interviewer: Were there restrictions on what you could tell your family?

Veteran: They had restrictions, but you weren't held to them. They censored your mail—they'd go through your mail, and if you were sending any pictures, you weren't allowed to send no pictures home of any kind. I lost a lot of my pictures, because I was bringing some home in a cigarette carton and they found them. I had a lot—well, you wouldn't they were good pictures—but I had a lot of pictures that

really showed what went on over there. They were Polaroid pictures, and they didn't have to be developed by anybody—they developed themselves. And they didn't want you bringing home anything that showed a lot about how cruel it really was over there. I can tell you that we were really cruel, but it had to be done because it was either that or lose our lives. I remember one night I killed 285 people with my machine gun, and when they went in there they found one man alive in the attack. They were attacking our POW camp where we kept the prisoners, and this one guy said, "We all had our can openers in hand, because our big people from the higher orders came down and gave us lots of dope, and said there was lots of food in there; all they had to do was go in there and take it. A lot of us didn't even have guns. We were expecting it to be an easy take." And they were attacking us, and I had one of those special machine guns on my chopper that shoots a thousand rounds a minute, and my job was to protect the base. And that was how it was really cruel. I mean we were put in a cruel position because of the cruel leaders they had over there. They had no value of life. They would send a small child to do a man's job in battle, and this child was forced in there because his family was in severe trouble. If he didn't do it, his family would be killed, and that was really the case. The VC would come down—the commies—they'd come down and get all the young men, and they would force these young men to fight by punishing the family. They would take a child and punish it real severely, and if the boy didn't do what he was told to, they slowly destroyed the family.

Interviewer: They would torture them?

Veteran: Torture them—yeah. And I've seen some of the torture that went on. They cut their little arms, and that child would be just wallowing around in its own blood. They didn't kill. When they were forcing these young people to fight for the communists—and these were South Vietnamese young boys they were coming down and getting them, and threatening that they would destroy the family if they didn't fight for them. So you can see how terrible and cruel it was. We were cruel, because we were put in a cruel position to protect ourselves. Our original job down there was to police the country to get all communists out that were suppressing the country and trying to turn it into communist. And it was really

cruel, because you could go into any city over there and it smelled like open sewers. Worse than that, it smelled like open septic tanks. It would actually turn your stomach when you'd go into the cities over there, because the people were forced into such slavery. The young girls were used as prostitutes—forced to do that by the communists. They would force them young girls—they'd put dope and razor blades inside their body and send them out and sell them for prostitutes. You know what I'm talking about don't you? And that's how cruel they were. Anybody that thinks communists are right and they could live under the rules, they'd be sadly mistaken, because I've seen how them people lived over there, and I really fell in love with the people. I would have done anything for them. And a lot of our people that died over there had the same feelings. I knew how I was, and how I fell in love with the people for that one reason—because I'd seen what torture was really like. And it really hurt my feelings when I came back to the United States and the American people would treat us cruel because we were forced to do such a cruel job to keep communists from overcoming. Hey, there's a lot of people over there! Right now, I tell you what, our biggest trouble right now would be Korea. We shut out a lot of what the Korean War was about, but they were really done worse than the Vietnamese were, because they were forgotten completely, and didn't {END OF SIDE A}

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Interviewer: What was your attitude about the war?

Veteran: I think I've already expressed that. I loved the people, and I thought it was right that we should have been over there.

Interviewer: Did you think the other soldiers that were there, that they felt like the cause they were fighting for...

Veteran: I think they were, or they would not have fought and died like they did. Every man that goes over there has got the same feeling as I do. It was just a small minority that had differences. I know one time it seemed like the blacks were the low minority over there, but they were killed just like any other person. They were against the cruel situation and that it happened. But I think when every man gets over there and sees how it really is over there—how the people are

wonderful people. The people themselves are wonderful and friendly people, but they were suppressed and we were trying to make a change for them. They say we lost the battle, but we didn't go over there to conquer the people. We went over there to keep out communists, and I thought we did do that one job.

Interviewer: And so the South Vietnamese were good to you, and they supported you being there.

Veteran: Sure.

Interviewer: Did they treat you like you were a hero?

Veteran: No, you don't expect nobody to treat you like a hero. That hurts your feelings, especially when you just come out of battle. You didn't want to talk about heroes. I was just doing my job.

Interviewer: Did you have any good memories of that time?

Veteran: The only good memory I have is that we flew so many hours, and it seemed like people in the small villages knew that, because they appreciated the protection, because the communists were so cruel to them. They'd go in and steal all their food. These people would scrape the bottom of the barrel trying to make us some food. The meat might be cat, it might be dog, it might be monkey, but they dug the bottom of their pots and got us something to eat out there, because they knew we were flying 24/7. For some reason they knew it. And we'd land out there, and you've seen on TV where all them kids attacked choppers, but it wasn't always like that. Sometimes those people would bring food up to us, and we'd eat it because we were hungry. We didn't have no home cooked meals—we were eating C-rations all the time, and half of those C-rations came from World War II. They'd been canned up since World War II. But I found the people were real generous over there. I loved them, and I didn't mind being over there, even though it did cause me lots of pain. I take lots of pain pills to this day.

Interviewer: What was their food like? Was it flavored well?

Veteran: Yeah, they had peppers they growed, and they were flavored real good. It might be dog meat, it might be monkey, but it was good because you were hungry.

Sometimes they'd have an old wild turkey in there, and it tasted great. But the fact was they showed how kind they were because they knew we were trying to do something for them. The people, though, really treated us real good. Now you had a lot of your communists, and you had a lot of them that were soured by the country that had been there before, but you had that everywhere. Any country you go to, you're gonna have people that don't like you, but I found over there that a lot of the people in the villages, they loved you. They treated you real good. They'd give you anything they had to make it comfortable for you, because they knew you'd been in that chopper all day flying around. Sure we'd go in there and give them food—we'd give them anything we had, because some of them would be hungry...they'd be starved because the communists had come in there and gotten all their food that they'd grown. You're talking about people that don't have a freezer, they don't have stuff like we've got. They were still living in the days when you had to put your food in the root cellars to keep your vegetables from rotting, and you had to cook your food a certain way to keep it from ruining. And they'd cook rice, because rice was easy to keep. They ate a lot of rice, and I ate a lot of rice, too over there. Sometimes that's all you had to eat over there. The people were good people. I really liked the people. When I'd run into people that were the real people we were fighting for, they treated you like kings. They'd bring you food; they'd bring you anything they had. They'd even bring you something to wash your face with, because you had grime on you all the time. You didn't take a bath every day like you see on TV. Just them guys back there that's out of the war, but on the bases where they didn't come into contact with the enemy every day. They were just shelled every day or every night by bombs, but they still had the comforts of homes—a place to sleep at night and food out of the mess hall, and a total shower at nighttime. And so that's how it was over there.

Interviewer: How did you feel about General Westmoreland?

Veteran: I had no contact with him. All I know is he ruled over a bad war, and he done the best he could with the situation that we had.

Interviewer: What about your commanding officer?

Veteran: I had no problem with him. As long as you done your job and done it with excellence, he was fine. If you weren't doing your job, weren't doing your part during the war, you'd hear from him. He'd call you into his office and either reprimand you or reward you, whatever. They done it, and it was fair.

Interviewer: How did you feel about President Johnson?

Veteran: He was a liar. I fell into the same groove that everybody else did with President Johnson. The protesters, they thought it was a political war, but I think things just got away from him, to tell you the truth. It might not have run the course he wanted to run, but I never had no real persecution of the man. I knew he was a liar. As far as his part in the war, he done what he had to do, because he's got to answer to the people just like we do, if not more. We hadn't walked in his shoes, and until you walk in a man's shoes, that's the only time you can say you didn't like what he done or something.

Interviewer: What did you think of President Nixon?

Veteran: I think the same thing of him.

Interviewer: What did you think about the television coverage of the war?

Veteran: I thought it was terrible. I thought they only took the shots that excited the people that watched the news. People go for the gory stuff. The only reason people like events like bull riding is because they think they might see somebody get hurt personally, and that's what the news dwelled on. I think the news coverage in Vietnam was very misleading of how it really was.

Interviewer: While you were there, did you suffer any injury?

Veteran: Yeah, I have a Purple Heart. I was temporarily paralyzed for six months. I got shot and got wounded real bad. I had every bone in my body dislocated—broke my hip.

Interviewer: Wow. Was that all in one accident?

Veteran: Uh-huh. I got shot at other times, but when I was temporarily paralyzed I got my main rotary shot off of my helicopter, and I fell three hundred feet.

Interviewer: You just fell?

Veteran: Yeah. You don't have no blade to turn up there, because it was shot off, and your whole helicopter falls. We were three hundred feet off the ground. We were coming out of a landing zone with a ship full of men. We were moving them around for a better position to fight the enemy, and when we were coming up over the trees, my main rotary got shot off, and we fell, and everybody got killed except for me. I was just a ball of meat when they seen me. Now I have arthritis in everything, and it's paralyzing me again.

Interviewer: That's what your pain pills are for—the arthritis?

Veteran: Um-hum. I take Percodin, and need to go take some more right now—I'm starting to hurt again.

Interviewer: Do you want me to stop?

Veteran: No, we'll get through with it.

Interviewer: OK.

Veteran: I take Percodin and Morphine all the time—four times a day. It's even worse when these storms come in.

Interviewer: The change in the weather?

Veteran: Yeah, the change in the weather hurts me big-time. Puts me in that bed.

Interviewer: Did you suffer any illnesses or sickness while you were there?

Veteran: I caught influenza while I was over there, and that's about the most diseases I caught over there. I caught no other diseases.

Interviewer: You were vaccinated for pretty much everything?

Veteran: Yeah, and I wasn't sexually living over there either, so I didn't catch any kind of venereal disease. I seen guys that did catch venereal disease, and sometimes the communists would send women in there and they would make sure they had the disease so they could give it to the military. It was all planned. Everything was cruel under them. We were only cruel when we were made to be cruel, and then the spotlight of the news coverage—that's what they dwelled on. That's why the people in the United States didn't like Nixon, because he was having to send our men over there to protect the men we had over there, because we had a shortage of pilots for helicopters, we had a shortage of mechanics, infantry. You can't do the job if you don't have enough men. We suffered a lot over there, because we had to do the job and we did it the best way we could.

Interviewer: Were you well fed while you were there?

Veteran: I had plenty of C-rations over there. Sometimes I'd have turkey on Thanksgiving—sometimes.

Interviewer: And you had plenty of supplies?

Veteran: Yeah, we had plenty of supplies.

Interviewer: How were you treated when you arrived home?

Veteran: I believe we've already mentioned that. We weren't treated very well when we got home. They called us baby-killers.

Interviewer: But, not your family.

Veteran: No, not my family. I have six brothers and sisters younger than me, and none of them thought that.

Interviewer: You mentioned that you got a Purple Heart. Were you awarded anything else?

Veteran: I have six combinations for valor. I have the Bronze Star and the Silver Star and the Purple Heart.

Interviewer: How do you feel about our military now?

Veteran: Oh, I would love to be able to go over to Afghanistan myself. I'd love to get back into it where I could protect my country.

Interviewer: Really?

Veteran: Oh, yeah I would—in a heartbeat. If I was able and healthy. Because they need helicopter mechanics and pilots, and I was one of the best.

Interviewer: If you were in good health, do you think they would take you back right now?

Veteran: I'm really too old. They cut you off at forty. Now if came down to a shortage, they'd probably take me if I was healthy, but I don't see that.

Interviewer: How do you feel about our government now?

Veteran: I think our government is operating real good in order to be what we are. We're a freedom-loving people, and I think the 9-11 attack was an eye-opener for a lot of people. In order for us to keep on being free, we're going to have to fight for it. And I'm ready right now—I've got all the weapons I need, all the ammunition. If I'm attacked here at home, I'm ready. I'll give my life for freedom.

Interviewer: Thank you for your time.

Veteran: OK.

{END OF INTERVIEW}