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Schiebout, Bernie

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Northwestern College - Orange City

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Narrator's name: Bernie Schiebout
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Interviewer's name: Elise Scanlon
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ES: Okay this is Elise Scanlon and I'm here with Bernie Schiebout in his home in Orange City, Iowa. And the date is April 14, 2007. All right, so to get started let's start with a little of your early life. Where did you grow up?

BS: I grew up in a little town outside of Hospers called Newkirk.

ES: Okay.

BS: A little country village. My dad had the blacksmith shop repair shop there and that's where I was born in 1948. Went to school originally in Newkirk and then that consolidated with Hospers and Alton and became Floyd Valley High School. Grade school in Newkirk, junior high in Hospers, and high school was in Alton. I graduated from high school in 1968. Did not go on to college, got drafted right outside of high school.

ES: Okay, what was your family like?

BS: My dad and my mother both came from families by Sioux Center [Iowa] with farming. My dad came out of a family of 11, 2 girls and 9 boys. My mother came out of a family of just her and her brother. I have a younger brother that's 11 months younger than I am and I have a sister that's 4 years younger than I am. And that was the extent of our family.

ES: Can you tell me maybe a little more about your high school experience?

BS: Went to high school in Alton, Floyd Valley of course. Did some studying, wasn't really into studying. When I had the chance my junior and senior year I took half day classes at Northwest Iowa Vocational School in Sheldon. Half day at the high school every day and then a half day at Sheldon. I took welding classes back then; was not in any extracurricular activities. Back then we did not have things like golf, we basically just had basketball and that was the extent of our extracurricular activities. Had boys glee¹ and band and so but I was not in band, was in vocal music.

¹ Glee is often used as a name for a school chorus or singing club.

ES: Okay. Did the marines or any other military branch come to your high school and talk about the war?

BS: Not back then because the draft was active back then; so the recruiters were not too active because you were drafted anyways, unless you didn't qualify because of physical, or if you went on to college, or if you were getting married, or something like that. So no, the recruiting departments weren't too active back then because the draft was in.

ES: Okay, were you dating or dating at all?

BS: I was dating a lady back then. Yes, I was. It was hard for both of us, and it fell apart when I went to Vietnam. So, things you go through.

ES: How did you feel about the draft?

BS: I felt that it was an obligation to serve my country. My dad had been drafted in World War II² and my dad's brothers were all spent time in service and my listening to my dad and to his brothers and to other uncles and aunts talk about it, it was an obligation to serve your country for the freedom that we have.

ES: Had you heard much about the war prior to being drafted?

BS: Yes we had a lot of information about the war in high school because it started before I graduated. There were a lot of protests; the Vietnam War was very highly protested. And so there were a lot of debates about it. It was time to serve your country.

ES: Right, oh what were your views on politics and government at that time?

BS: Didn't really have much view on politics or government then. I took government classes in high school and studied and learned about the government; the different Congress and the Senate and the President and things like that. I never really had many views on it.

ES: Did faith in the church play any role in your adolescent and teenage years?

BS: Yes, the church, I went to church at Newkirk Reformed Church. Yes, the growing up in the church was very essential in my life, catechism, Sunday school had very good teachers back then. By going to the church you had faith in what was happening with the war in Vietnam. It had a very good influence.

ES: So you got drafted right out of high school?

² Conflict that involved virtually every part of the world during the years 1939–45. Those involved were the Axis powers—Germany, Italy, and Japan—and the Allies—France, Great Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, and, to a lesser extent, China.

- BS: Right, I got drafted. I graduated in 1968 from Floyd Valley. Had my physical notice before I graduated, went to my physical that summer in 1968 and passed my physical, had to report for duty in February of 1969.
- ES: How did you end up in the Airborne?
- BS: Never really had a choice. I went to Fort Polk, Louisiana for my basic and then stayed in Fort Polk. The rumor or story was back then if you went to Fort Polk, you were going to Vietnam because Fort Polk is in sort of a swamp country and Vietnam is a lot of the same, very wet and humid. So after basic I took infantry training right at Fort Polk. When you got your orders there, after getting out of infantry training, it said right there you were assigned to the 101st Airborne³ in Vietnam.
- ES: Okay. Were you in part of a unit then that was air mobile?
- BS: We were air mobile by helicopters, did not do any parachuting or anything, we weren't qualified for that, but helicopters did all our transporting of us. If we couldn't, if they couldn't land the helicopters for us to get out then we would repel down ropes, slid down ropes to get down to the ground.
- ES: Okay, one last question about early life. You mentioned that your dad and his brothers served in World War II. Did you have any of your other friends, from high school or anything serve?
- BS: I've had friends that served in Vietnam, had 2 classmates and then by going to service you meet other people from the area that you never knew before and they became your friends through the military experiences.
- ES: In the same unit or same division?
- BS: No, never saw any of them, no all sort of got put into different areas and different units and stuff like that.
- ES: So you mentioned you had basic training in Fort Polk.
- BS: Fort Polk, Louisiana.
- ES: What was that experience like for you?
- BS: It was sort of a shock. You know you go there out of a young person out of high school. You think you know the world and you are quite a man when you get out

³ The 101st Airborne is considered one of the premier U.S. combat units and is often called the "Screaming Eagles." In Vietnam, the 101st Airborne did serve in combat, but it did not conduct airborne operations (McNabb).

of high school. You learn right off right away you listen and you do what you're told and things go a lot better for you through basic and infantry training. And basic is like it says, it's just the basic training of the first stage of going into the military, trying to get the discipline across to you, taking orders, things like that.

ES: How did going through basic training make you feel about going to Vietnam?

BS: I don't think it really had a negative feeling on me, it was part of preparing yourself what to expect when you did go into a war zone or to conflict for your country.

ES: Did it make you more excited or kind of dread it?

BS: Not really more excited or dread it, just part of what's expected from you as a U.S. soldier.

ES: You said you arrived in Vietnam in July...

BS: July of 1969.

ES: Okay, where were you deployed to?

BS: I landed in Bien Hoa⁴ and then went through a few more weeks of training at Bien Hoa. And then was issued out weapons and full gear and then got on to cargo planes and took us up to Da Nang⁵, which is farther north, just south of Hue⁶. From there we were trucked to Camp Eagle⁷. I was assigned to company B, 2nd of the 502nd of the 101st Airborne so Camp Eagle was our home base.

ES: OK. I brought a map with me here. Could you point out, kind of?

BS: I'm trying to find Bien Hoa.

Wife: Here's Bien [inaudible], is that it? Saigon's there.

BS: There, right there. [Pointing on a map]

Wife: Oh yes, right there. That's it.

ES: Ok, and then you were...

⁴ Bien Hoa was a South Vietnamese city, capital of Bien Hoa province in Vietnam. It became a major U.S. air base and the headquarters of III Corps.

⁵ Da Nang was a South Vietnamese city and an important port in the Central Lowlands of Vietnam.

⁶ Hue was located in South Vietnam, about 45 miles south of the demilitarized zone.

⁷ Camp Eagle was a military camp near Hue.

BS: We took a couple weeks of training there and were issued our weapon and full gear and everything. And then from there we were taken with cargo planes to Da Nang, which is up here. And then from there we were taken on trucks to Camp Eagle which was just inland a little further from Da Nang, a little to the north here.

ES: Ok, so not quite up to the DMZ⁸.

BS: No, but very close to it.

ES: Kind of up there. Yes. Ok. What was your unit's mission up there?

BS: Our unit's mission was to try to disrupt the NVA, the North Vietnamese Army. They kept trying to want to push down and have a trail through here to get supplies and kept trying to move themselves further south into the South Vietnam to get control of it. Our mission was to interrupt their supply routes and to locate them when they built strong holds.

ES: So did you go out and do ambush kind of things?

BS: We were basically sent out for 30 days at a time, what we carried on our back was what we got. It was C-rations, and you carried everything on your own back and once every seven days they would drop us a clean pants and a clean shirt and a new pair of shoes because the clothes you had on for seven days. Your shoes after being wet for seven days were done for. They would bring us seven days of C- rations, which was meals in tin cans, that's all it was. They'd come in a cardboard box. So you learned real quick the C- rations you weren't going to eat anyway you punched holes in and destroyed and you only carried on your back or in your ruck sack which you felt you could survive on for seven days. Because you had to carry your own food with you and your own water.

ES: Were you issued water from... you didn't really drink the Vietnam water, did you?

BS: Yes we did. We were not issued water; they did not bring us water. We had canteens and you took water out of streams and you used iodine tablets to kill whatever was supposed to be in the water.

ES: From traveling some, they always tell you 'don't drink the water' but probably when you don't have a choice.

BS: Nope you don't have a choice. And then we were issued our malaria pills, which we had to take on a regular basis, because of the high rate of malaria in Vietnam.

⁸ DMZ, which stands for demilitarized zone, is a military term that refers to a combat-free area between two enemies. The Vietnamese DMZ reached about a mile on either side of the Ben Hai River and ran west to east from the Laotian border to the South China Sea (Langhals).

ES: Did any of you get malaria anyways?

BS: Some guys, I don't think were real faithful in taking their malaria pills, but I never had any problems with it.

ES: What did your specific job within your unit look like?

BS: When I got to Vietnam, they have what they called a point and a slack man. They are the front two men that walk ahead of the rest of the platoon in single file. And I started out walking slack man. Then in August we walked into an ambush and the point man ahead of me got hit and then I became the point man. So, you were the first one that did the walking, your eyes were the eyes for everyone else for booby traps, that kind of thing.

ES: So what was that like?

BS: It was... you learned to realize it's for survival; you had to concentrate on it all the time. There was no joking or horseplay or goofing off, you know, when you're up front. The point man walked with his weapon on full-automatic. The slack man walked with his weapon on semi-automatic. The point and slack man, their ammunition in their clips for their weapon, every other round was a tracer round. Because if the point man and slack man saw the enemy and started shooting, with those tracer rounds they would glow as they left the rifle, that way the rest of the platoon or the other men behind you could see what direction you were shooting at. Otherwise, it didn't do them any good; they could tell you were shooting but they didn't know what you were shooting at or what direction you were shooting. And a lot of times the point man, there was a lot of elephant grass and a lot of jungle, you carried a machete, and if you were the point man you had to do the cutting then your slack man carried your weapon also so that you could do the cutting through the growth and so.

ES: How about down time, like when you weren't out on your 30 day?

BS: Okay, we were out in the field for 30 days at a time, then we had to clear an LZ, a landing zone for the helicopters to pick us back up. Sometimes it was in the forest or in the mountains and then we literally had to blow away trees and cut down trees so they could land to pick us up. And then we got to go to the rear for 24 hours, before we'd get sent out on another mission or another assignment. So our time in the rear was not a lot.

ES: Tell me about some of the other people in your unit.

BS: You learned the other people in your unit, no matter what color they are or what nationality, we're all there for the same reason. When I became point man, I had a colored man that I trusted my life with, which I did because he was walking

behind me covering me. You're all there for the same reason; you learn to realize that we're all human beings. You're there to protect each other and help each other through everything.

ES: Do you remember any specific people really well?

BS: Well, this colored man that walked, that was my slack man for a long time, he was quite a guy, he stood about 6'6" or 6'8", weighed about 300 pounds. And he didn't carry the normal M-16⁹ rifle like the rest of us did. He hip-fired an M-60¹⁰ machine gun, that's what he wanted to carry and that's what they issued him over there. He was a big guy, strong guy. He was quite a man and he wasn't afraid if something had to get done, he wasn't afraid to volunteer to help or to help other people out.

ES: What about your commanding officers?

BS: Our commanding officer, I had one very good commanding officer over there, Captain Ackerman. He was very much down to earth. He come up the hard way through the ranks also, so he had started at the bottom, he knew what it was like out there. We had some commanding officers that came over there directly out of officer school out of the United States and had no idea what reality with war was actually like. They were going to push their authority, if you want to call it that. And then they finally started to realize they had to start working with their platoons or with their squads and their men under them if they were going to accomplish anything. You have, in the military, you have the same things you do here in the United States; you have your bad apples and you have your good apples. It's the same over in Vietnam when you're in service. You have the ones that are there to help the other people out and trying, and you have ones that are there just to try to goof off the whole time they're there. You had a lot of different types of military over there. You had your medical support groups in the rear, you had your supply support groups in the rear, so you had a lot of different types of groups out there. And they all support each other and try to work with each other for the same common goal.

ES: Do you still keep in contact with any of the people from your unit?

BS: I did with one man for a little while in Washington, D. C. but I haven't talked to him for maybe 10, 12 years. As I said earlier, I became point man, when the point man, we walked into an ambush and he got hit. I helped lift him on a Medevac¹¹, in August 26 of 1969. I never knew if he made it back to the States alive or not because when I helped lift him on the Medevac, his right eye was gone, his right ear and part of his right shoulder. My wife and me and 4 other

⁹ The M-16 was a machine gun commonly used in the war.

¹⁰ The M-60 was a machine gun commonly used in the war.

¹¹ Medevac, or "medical evacuation," is a term for the emergency evacuation of the sick or wounded from combat areas (Frame).

veterans and their wives, we went to Washington, D.C. with what they call a Rolling Thunder. That's held every Memorial Day weekend in Washington D.C., it's a get together of motorcycles and it's a ceremony at The Wall¹². Before we went to D.C., I got with some other friends and started talking about Lyle Stallerd [?], was his name. I had no idea where, I just knew he was from Ohio. We tried to locate him on the Internet and we tried over and over again and finally we entered in August 26 of 1969 and his name and his address came up. So I called him before we went to D.C. and talked to his wife, she didn't know if he'd want to see me or not. So on our way to Washington, D.C. she said, "Yes, you stop by." He and I spent a Saturday afternoon, a Saturday night and a Sunday together. I hadn't seen him since that date in 1969, so that was quite an experience. No, otherwise, people I served with over there, no, haven't really kept in contact with any of them.

ES: Do you have any stories about your combat experience that you want to share?

BS: Over in Vietnam, all the Vietnamese looked the same; you had a hard time picking out the enemy from the good people. You could have the same people that you thought that were the good people from the village doing things and at night you'd see them out in the dark being your enemy. So you had to be very careful about that. The experiences, there's a lot of experiences. Until somebody has to take another human life to survive, I feel people don't know what actual war is. It isn't nice to say but you learn the hard way; it's either you and your comrades that are there together, you know, it's hard to do the first time.

ES: What about your first experience with combat after getting over there?

BS: You learn real quick your first engagement with the enemy, you learn real quick that it's either you and your comrades, you know, you learn real quick where it's going. But through the proper military training, the infantry training and so in Louisiana and the couple weeks of training at Bien Hoa you're prepared pretty much with the right weapons, the right choices; the biggest thing is preparing yourself mentally for the first time. After the first time, your mental attitude changes.

ES: Is that when adrenaline kicks in?

BS: Yes, you can say it is adrenaline or it's the adrenaline of survival. Yes, survival is a big thing.

ES: Now were you involved in any major battles over there?

¹² Located in Washington, D.C. on the National Mall, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is commonly referred to as The Wall (Evans-Pfeifer).

- BS: Maybe not in any major battles that was recognized by the news media or anything, but yes, we were constantly in battle whenever we went out.
- ES: Did you hear at all, when you were there, about what happened in My Lai¹³?
- BS: No. No.
- ES: After you came back?
- BS: A little bit, yes. News media can get a lot of things out of proportion. Once news media gets a hold of something, then it seems to circulate and spread so fast.
- ES: What did you think about what you heard?
- BS: I'm going to stay sort of neutral. [Laughs]
- ES: That's fine.
- BS: There I've seen some military people do things over there they had no call to do. But I've seen some military actions that were done over there that they had to do and probably civilians would try to say, "You shouldn't have done that." We found out in Vietnam, even the children and the women can be your enemies and the American G.I. loves children and the Vietnamese started to realize that and they'd use children as sort of a bait for a trap. You know you start to realize that, and the sooner you realize that, the less Americans that got injured or killed. That's a hard thing to comprehend.
- ES: Do you have any really, kind of humorous stories from your experience that you can remember?
- BS: I don't know if you'd call them humorous stories or not. When you got back to the rear, you have to let your hair down because you are inside of the perimeter of your base camp and other people pulled the guard duty for you. So you sort of let your hair down. I know at my birthday then they had a big birthday party for my 24-hour stand down. You relax and things like that.
- ES: So you had your birthday over there?
- BS: Pardon?
- ES: You had your birthday over there?

¹³ The My Lai Massacre occurred in March 1968, and was brought to Americans' attention in early 1969. During the event, soldiers in one company killed between 175-400 unarmed Vietnamese men, women and children, committed rapes and destroyed property.

BS: Yes, December 2nd was my birthday so it was half way through my tour. Yes, then I ended up in the hospital in Vietnam with cellulitis¹⁴. That's an infection that gets in your body. By walking point I had a lot of cuts and scrapes, things like that, and when you don't shower or clean up for 30 days, then I ended up with cellulitis. I was puffed up and infected so bad I couldn't open my fingers to even get anything between my fingers and my eyes. I ended up in the hospital for a while. Then I had to stay in the rear after the hospital until my strength was built back up. Yes, you do things to entertain yourself when you're in the rear. You lived in tents, on a cot. I can remember there were times when we had shaving cream parties. Just start throwing shaving cream around and things just to keep yourself active and busy and things like that.

ES: Was there a lot of playing cards at all?

BS: Some playing cards, I never really got into playing cards. I enjoyed more by getting my mail from home. Not only from people I knew but back in Vietnam era, there were a lot of high school kids and college kids that got our names through the military and I got letters from basically all over the United States from high school kids.

ES: Cool.

BS: Thanking for their appreciation of us military being over there and things like that.

ES: Did you ever write back to any of them?

BS: I did write back to some of them when I was there when we had the chance. In Vietnam, I never carried more than, because you had to carry yourself and your own ruck sack on your back, so I never carried a camera. If I did write it was only on our 24 hours in the rear that I'd write.

ES: You wrote to people back home?

BS: Back home here, Newkirk Church had a lot of people from Newkirk Church that wrote me. People that were, I call them older more in my parents' age or even older than what my parents were. I had a lot of support from our local church at Newkirk. I had a lot of support from different schools in the United States, and classes would write us letters, things like that. That meant a lot over there because the Vietnam War was looked down on pretty bad by the public. There was a lot of protest over it. So when you got support letters, not only from your local people but from other schools across the United States, it felt more encouraging that you were doing something more worthwhile.

¹⁴ Cellulitis is an infection of the tissue just below the skin's surface. As Schiebout indicates, scratches and cuts can allow bacteria to enter the skin, leading to an infection (Rowland).

ES: You write your family then too?

BS: I would write my parents when I had the chance, which of course was once every 30 days, because you would get to the rear every 30 days. So you would try to write them as much as possible to let them know. Even if it wasn't much, just to let them know that you were still alive. I used to get some, I can call them care packages, from different people, maybe a coffee can with cookies in it or something like that. That always meant something too.

ES: I think I forgot to ask earlier, did you have any siblings?

BS: No, that were in the service in Vietnam?

Wife: No, like your brothers and sisters.

BS: Yes, I had a younger brother 11 months younger than me and a sister 4 years younger than me.

ES: But neither of them went?

BS: No, my brother, I was in the Vietnam at the time my brother got drafted. Back then only one family member had to be in the war zone at one time, so he got to stay in the United States at Fort Hood, Texas his whole tour, which my parents were grateful for. Because my dad knew what war time was like; he was drafted in World War II, he knew what war time was like.

ES: Was your brother excited about that too?

BS: About going to service?

ES: About not having to be in...

BS: Yes, I think he was, about not having to go to Vietnam.

ES: How did you understand your unit's mission?

BS: My what?

ES: Your unit's mission, what they're trying to do.

BS: When we usually got put into a new area, which was every 30 days, it was to look for the enemy and destroy what they had built or try to interrupt their construction of things. We found a lot of underground complexes, they were known great for having tunnels going down in the ground complexes,

underground hospitals, things like that¹⁵. They were known good for that. So that was our mission to seek and destroy. But by us doing that, we weren't always the ones that were seeking and destroying. You had to watch yourself very close.

ES: Do you feel that your unit was very effective?

BS: I feel we had a good unit, a good company, a good platoon. Yes, I feel we did very good and worked very well together. We had commanding officers, our company captain, things like that; and we all had the same understanding, we knew when it was seriousness, when you were absolutely serious or when there was a little time to slack off and relax a little bit.

ES: Were there ever any disagreements among maybe the higher ups?

BS: Not very quick, yes we did, we do have some disagreements. I was in a platoon and we had some officers or brass¹⁶ in the rear at Camp Eagle, that they sat back there and tried to tell us in the field and war zone how to do this and how to do that when it didn't make any sense. So you basically did your own thing to achieve the same object. The last thing our company liked was when they tried to send news media out to us. That was the last thing we needed was news media personnel to worry about also. We had enough to worry about our fellow people in our platoon, let alone news men tagging along trying to take pictures and trying to keep them covered.

ES: So they would send in photographers or reporters?

BS: Yes, photographers, things like that. We are in a war zone; we aren't playing a football game or basketball game. We're trying to defend our own lives and trying to find the enemy.

ES: Did you hear anything about the politics going on back home?

BS: Didn't hear a lot of that no, didn't hear a lot of that from back home.

ES: So nothing of the policy or anything about the war?

BS: No, no, not the time while I was over there. I didn't hear a lot of that.

ES: But when you went back?

BS: Oh yes. It's, yes, some people say it was a political war, some people say it wasn't, how do you actually know? We aren't the politicians, we aren't the president of the country making the final decisions. Us as normal citizens here in

¹⁵ The Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army strategically used tunnels during the Vietnam War. As Schiebout indicates, the tunnel systems were complex and often vast (DiMarco).

¹⁶ Brass is a slang term for high-ranking military leaders.

the United States, don't know everything what they make their decisions off. You have to have faith in your president and your country that they are making the right decisions, that's a big thing.

ES: So did you approve of the policy they were using in Vietnam? Or what did you think about it?

BS: Well, it was to stop the flow of communism into South Vietnam and of all the history books I've read in high school, when I did study, showed a lot of negative things about the communism around the world. So yes, the communism did have a negative attitude in my mind. This was basically to stop the communists into the South Vietnam, just like the conflict earlier in Korea, North and South Korea, that was the same thing. Yes, what we learned in high school and history classes, we're a free country and by studying about the communism, that wasn't a free country. We serve on to keep our free country, defend our freedom.

ES: Did your...you said before you went you didn't really have much view on government and politics.

BS: No, just what you read in your history books and things like that.

ES: Did that change at all after you came back?

BS: Some. You try to realize where the government's goals were on stopping the spread of communism and to keep our country as a free country. You sort of start, as you grow older and you've been through a situation that, you start to realize what we do have that is good in our free country. We take too much for granted in our freedom.

ES: There was something I was going to ask and I forgot what it was. [Laughs] Oh, what did you think of all the people who were protesting the war?

BS: It bothered me. The protesting of the war is one thing but not treating the Vietnam veterans right when they came back didn't set good with me. I had a prime example of it, when I left Vietnam; I flew into Fort Louis, Washington and then got processed back into the United States. There I was issued a dress uniform and then the plane was suppose to take us to Denver and then to Sioux Falls, South Dakota. We got to Denver and the plane going to Sioux Falls had mechanical problems. They gave us the choice of flying into Sioux City rather than Sioux Falls, so me and another man from Sibley, Iowa, that I got acquainted with on the plane, we decided to take the flight to Sioux City and our luggage and so stayed on the other plane to Sioux Falls. We didn't let our parents know our exact date we were coming home, and we tried to hitchhike from the Sioux City airport to Hospers and we were walking down Highway 75 and nobody would pick us up, they called us baby killers and all that, the Vietnam vets, there

was no way anybody would pick us up. That was on a Saturday afternoon and we were close to the old Bellas Hess Mall on 75 in Sioux City and the little bit of money we had, we went to Bellas Hess and bought a civilian pants and shirt. We threw our dress uniforms in a locker in the mall, and then we started hitchhiking and got picked up right away.

ES: Huh, you just left your uniforms at the mall?

BS: Yes, and then went back and picked them up later on. Then we caught a ride, the people that picked us up were going through Sioux Center, which is 10 miles from Newkirk, they dropped us off in Sioux Center and we started walking east out of Sioux Center on the blacktop and the man that I knew, who I had bought my first car from, seen us walking and he asked where I was going and I told him and he said, "I'll give you a ride home to surprise your parents." Yes, people were very negative and I think that was wrong to be negative against the veterans that were coming back. We were drafted, we did not have the choice at the time, but after serving over there and these people that were protesting, if they had been over there then they would realize too that it's for the freedom of our country to keep communism from spreading. But these people that were protesting didn't realize that.

ES: So what do you make of your time over there?

BS: I feel it was a very good growing up experience. In the way you learn there's all types of people out there. The ones that you think you can trust, the ones that you know you can trust, and you learn we were all put in this world together, no matter what nationality, what race. When you are put into combat zone in our platoon, we had all nationalities and all different races and you learned to all work together to help each other get through your tour of duty and come home back to the United States. It's a good growing up experience.

ES: Are there any things that you still don't understand or haven't been able to put a meaning on to?

BS: Yes, it's tragic to be in any war, the loss of lives that happens in a war. They talk on TV about the loss of lives but they always forget on TV the ones that come back with an arm missing or leg missing. They forget about those. I feel the wounded and the injured that came back don't get enough respect. I go to the VA hospital¹⁷ in Sioux Falls once every 12 months for a physical and when I leave there after spending a day there for my tests, I'm pretty humble. When you see what gets brought in there on wheel chairs and on crutches, and I can walk in and out on my own two legs and take care of myself. So many people forget about the disabled.

ES: Are they treated pretty well up there?

¹⁷ VA stands for Veterans Affairs. VA hospitals tend to the medical needs of veterans in the United States.

BS: At the VA hospital? I think highly of the VA hospital's medical care. They got the time to go over things with you, explain things to you. I feel very good about the VA hospital.

ES: I've heard, just from stuff that we've learned in class and some of the movies we've seen, some of the VA hospitals just were not very good to the patients there and kind of treated them as less than intelligent.

BS: Yes, and I think maybe part of that is because right now we are in a war time again in Iraq. The VA hospitals are so overloaded. They have got more than they can actually handle. They are trying to do the best that they can. But the VA hospital in Sioux Falls. I didn't start going there until 3 years ago, then I had another man that was a veteran and he asked why I wasn't going. I said there were more people that need it worse than I do. He said, well you're entitled to it. So I just go once a year for my physical, Agent Orange¹⁸ testing and blood work and things like that. Like I said earlier, when I leave there at the end of the day, I'm a lot more humble. I would like to see something done in our high schools where juniors or seniors in one of their classes where they go to a VA hospital and just observe for a whole day and realize what our military people have done for their freedom to be in high school. They would probably learn a lot by watching what goes in and out of those doors. And how busy they are, the hospitals, how busy they are. It would be very interesting.

ES: I think I have just one last question, have you seen any of the films that have been made about the war?

BS: About 4 or 5 months ago, dear?

Wife: Yes.

BS: I got a DVD from the American Legion¹⁹, it laid on the counter there, never opened it until about two hours ago. [Laughs] And I started to watch it downstairs, if you want to watch it with me you can. It's, I forget what the title is, "Vietnam: A Soldier's Story." If you want to watch it with me, you can. I just started to watch a little bit of it. I left it lay there for 3 or 4 months, I never opened it until now. I was going to throw it away when I first got it and I started to watch a little bit of it downstairs now, it's on a DVD.

ES: What do you think of it so far?

BS: So far there's a lot of truth in it. I maybe watched 5 to 8 minutes of it. There's a lot of truth in it.

¹⁸ Agent Orange was a type of herbicide, a chemical agent used as a weapon in the Vietnam War.

¹⁹ The American Legion is the world's largest veterans' organization. Many towns have local posts (Ohlbrich and Ross).

- ES: We've been watching some of the films like *Platoon*, *Coming Home*, and those kinds of things.
- BS: And like *M*A*S*H* and so?
- ES: Yes.
- BS: I do watch those as they are a comedy, and I enjoy the comedy side of it, *Hogan's Heroes*²⁰.
- ES: I haven't seen that.
- BS: That was when I was little. [Laughs] That was one of the first sort of comedy shows like *M*A*S*H* that came out years ago, *Hogan's Heroes*. Sometimes we have got a lot of MIAs²¹ still missing. And sometimes I feel that our government has sort of forgotten about our MIAs. There's how many thousand of Vietnam era that are still missing, you know, unaccounted for. And that's very hard, a lot of people, even the public forget about the POWs²² and MIAs that are still missing.
- ES: Yes.
- BS: That's something that bothers me. Like I said earlier, this Rolling Thunder thing is basically a motorcycle get-together of veterans to recognize the MIAs and POWs that are still missing, and they do that on Memorial Day weekend every year. They have a parade.
- Wife: You should let her know that it's all gathered at the Pentagon parking lot and if you've ever seen the Pentagon parking lot, you can't even imagine how huge it is and how many motorcycles fill it up. It was an awesome ride; it was awesome just to go in that ride and to see the people on the streets. It was amazing, it was very touching. And then you ride to The Wall and then they have you walk that Wall. That Wall is just amazing, I mean, it brings tears to my eyes today. It's just amazing ride.
- BS: Do you have a video of the ride?
- Wife: Oh yes, I've got the huge long one. It's amazing. And the respect at The Wall is awesome. It's just so awesome. And the people that, I mean it was to the point that there was so many people in Washington, D.C. and you know the street's wide and you could almost had to go single file practically with your motorcycle

²⁰ *Platoon* and *Coming Home* are movies whose plots revolve around the Vietnam War. *M*A*S*H* was a popular television comedy about the Korean War, and *Hogan's Heroes* was a sitcom about World War II.

²¹ MIA stands for missing in action.

²² POW stands for prisoner of war.

because there was just so many people that wanted to honor you, I should say honor the men that served in that war. I thought it was very, very, very respectful. It was just something else.

BS: And after the parade then we had a ceremony at The Wall with all the motorcycles.

Wife: All the wounded, I mean it was just amazing to see that parking lot, it's so huge and a motorcycle takes just such a little space. It took 4 ½ hours to get everyone off of the parking lot and through the parade itself. 4 ½ hours. It was awesome, they come from all over, and they come from all over.

BS: It was interesting.

Wife: Also, just to let you know, that when my husband was in the service, the bell that sits on our front yard is the place where his dad flew the flag every day.

BS: While I was in Vietnam.

Wife: While he was in Vietnam. That's why, you see his father is deceased, and we have that bell. It's the bell we wanted to keep and that's why you see that on our front lawn along with the POW/MIA flag. Because we still, there are so many missing men. The books when that traveling Wall comes around, the books that there are of all the men that are missing. I was with him when he went and saw this Stallard [?] when we were on our way to D.C. He had never met him and his wife and I had spoken before because I thought, "You know, they don't always know how they are going to handle this" so I called his wife up and I told her who I was and why I was calling because Bernie hadn't known what had happened to him. And she said, "Yes, I think they should get together, it would be good for the both of them." To see him and the scars that he has today, his eye's gone, and he had a glass eye that doesn't even hold it because the doctors that had to work with him didn't have the facilities or the proper equipment to handle his care at that time. They couldn't get him out of there in time to get him anywhere to get this. Now consequently he can't even wear a plastic eye or glass eye either because there is nothing there to hold it in his eye anymore. He didn't know at first if he wanted to see us but he did. I think afterwards he was very grateful that he had. It was tough. It was tough for the both of them to see him. But we were 18 miles from him, you just can't pass that opportunity up, you just can't. He's been looking for him for years and there he was. We were 18 miles from him. It was a good experience, a sad happy time.

ES: Is there anything else you want to share?

BS: The biggest thing is I wish that our citizens of the United States could have more respect for our veterans and what they are trying to do for the people of the United States' freedom. I think there's less and less of that shown all the time.

Respect for the disabled veterans that come back, but also we still should find answers for the POWs and MIAs that are still missing. That bothers me a little bit. People always ask me my POW/MIA flag, whether I was a POW or MIA. I say, "No, I'm flying that for the ones that are missing." It's interesting.

But you go through hardships in Vietnam, you lose, when you are over there your platoon is like your family, that's the only family you have for 12 months, it's the only friends you have for 12 months. To lose one of them, either by dying or by getting injured, wounded, it's one of the hardest things you go through. You are living there together in a platoon, in a relationship where you're there to survive and to help the other guy to survive and the other people to survive. One screw up or one error about one person can cost 20 to 30 lives real easy.

We had guard perimeters at night. We had some guys that never grew up, thought they could smoke at night while they were on guard duty. A glowing cigarette, a block away you can see that real easy. If you are trained right by that glow on that cigarette you can tell which side of that glow where you have to shoot where they're going to be standing. The Vietnamese were good at that stuff. They knew the Americans had weaknesses, and that was part of them. Not being strict enough and disciplined enough. They had funny things.

When it rained all night or it rained for a week straight, you laid down to sleep whenever you had a chance for 2, 3 hours a night, whether you laid in the water or in the mud. We didn't shower or bathe for 30 days, didn't cut your hair or beard or anything, just trimmed it with a knife or whatever. You'd walk the rice paddies and when you got out of the rice paddies you took your clothes off and took the leeches off your body, leeches as big as your finger. It was just part of reality. It was a good experience, good growing up.

I still have a very hard time. I don't go anymore but I used to try to go to memorial services on Memorial Day, that doesn't work for me. I have to stay away from it. My wife has found that out in the past. We used to try to go and I don't think I've been to one for 8 or 9 years. It doesn't work, I can't go to them.

Anything else?

ES: No, that looks like it's about all.

BS: Did you want to watch that DVD?

Wife: She can take it along if she wants to.

BS: All I did...

At this point in the conversation there is a glitch in the recording. It jumps ahead to the middle of a conversation. 55:11 minutes. The following might be a conversation about photos.

BS: Yes, and you were issued that photo album, our battalion always gave us that photo album, and if you had any pictures you could put it in there. The airplane that took us from Vietnam back to the United States we called it our "Freedom Bird." We couldn't wait until our Freedom Bird came in. He was a rear personnel. Here was another man who was rear personnel. Here I am again, here I told you about the shaving cream fights we used to have when we got to the rear. Here's a prime example, just for entertainment. Here we are again. We'd fill a bag with shaving cream and we'd just start swinging it around. [Laughs.]

Wife: Look how thin they were then, so skinny.

BS: I weighed 145 pounds when I come back to the United States. Here's the interpreter again with another man. Here they are working on the meal, what they called the meal. Here he is; that is what the seat looked like up front. Here's Charles McFarland again. Lonny, we always had to go through the garbage before we burnt it. Because sometimes what we had problems with, these workers that would come in to do laundry and things like that, they would actually put explosives in the garbage so you couldn't tell the difference between the enemy or the good people. So we always inspected things. Here's somebody taking a picture. Here are some of the guys loading up on a truck to go out on a maneuver. That's Lonny again. That's Gene DeBartolla [name unclear], the picture of the man here that was bleeding.

Wife: We used to keep in contact with him

BS: Yes. Here was one of our captains. That was his entertainment when he got to the rear, a guitar in his hand and a Bud. This must have been at Christmas time when we came to the rear, see the artificial Christmas tree up there. Leroy Ford always played the guitar for us. There's DeBartolal and that was Roy Adams going through some stuff.

Wife: Some packages, care packages. There was their bed.

BS: That was after when I got out of the hospital from cellulitis, I still had my band on, the hospital band. Couple guys on a stand-off. He's actually laying in his bed reading something. He's writing a letter to somebody. There's one time when I came in.

Wife: My goodness.

BS: Yes I was skinny, dear.

BS: You did what you could for 24 hours. You goof off for entertainment.

Wife: Well you didn't have much to entertain yourselves with. Read your mail. Twenty-four hours goes pretty fast.

BS: We would sit around and talk. These guys are all opening up their mail.

Wife: You have to read your mail. That's the only time you get a decent shower. What these women were, you have to explain what these women did.

BS: Yes, these are the women who did our laundry.

Wife: These were all their clothes. That after they came in, these are the women who did the laundry if it was worth saving. Lots of times it wasn't worth saving at all. Those were the kind you had to watch; like you said you had to catch the garbage because you didn't know what could be thrown in it. You didn't know if you could trust them.

BS: There was this man here that earlier had an M-79²³ grenade launcher in his hand. Here he is; he's going home. See it?

ES: Okay.

BS: That's his day of going home. There was another man; he carried an M-79 grenade launcher also.

Wife: Didn't have much to pack along, did you?

BS: Okay, here is what our sign looked like in front, 2nd of the 502nd. This was our motto, "They've got us surrounded, the poor bastards." The Screaming Eagles²⁴ were known as quite a fighting outfit, see. That was the sign we had out front. That was our emblems.

ES: Is this family pictures over here?

BS: This is my brother. This is my mother. This is my sister. This is my sister again by her friend's pick-up. This is my dad and my sister and my mother got cut off the picture. This is my sister behind my Vietnam plaque that I sent home to my folks, and I'm in the picture here and my brother is here. He was in Fort Hood, Texas.

Wife: He must have been going to prom.

²³ The M-79 was a grenade launcher used in the Vietnam War.

²⁴ See footnote 3.

BS: This is my mom and my brother and here's my dad again, my sister. And sorry to say that's the woman I was dating before I went to Vietnam, before I got my Dear John²⁵ letter. This is just a couple of pictures of Sydney, Australia that I got. This was our platoon flag, 2nd of the 502nd company B. And I didn't get much pictures because I didn't carry a camera.

ES: Yes.

Wife: That was just white. There's a Chinook²⁶.

BS: That's a Huey²⁷.

Wife: A Huey? Oh that's a Huey; oh I thought that was a Chinook.

ES: What's a Huey?

BS: That's just a single one. This one here with the two blades on top, that's a Chinook, that's a cargo helicopter. Where this is basically a fighting helicopter, there's a door gunner on each side and when they transport us we'd sit with 2 guys on each side with their feet out the door. That's how they'd transport us to different areas. I think that's it.

Here's some of the cleaning people that would come into the backs into the base, do laundry and things like that. They'd haul them in on trucks.

Here are pictures of when I first got home from Vietnam. This was Larry Mastbergen; I was telling you about, the other man that hitchhiked with me from Sioux City. This is Captain Geisler [name unclear], here's Leroy Ford, our guitar player at Vietnam.

This is a picture of my first wife. You spend 12 months away from civilization and you get a Dear John letter when you are in Vietnam. You went together for a couple years and were going to get married when you get home from Vietnam; you get a 'Dear John' letter. I just about re-upped in Vietnam and stayed there another 12 months but Captain Ackerman talked me out of it. So you come back to the States and haven't been with a woman for 12 months, haven't been in civilization for 12 months, and you fall in love with the first woman that you meet. [Laughs] Then you get married 5 months later. That didn't work out.

So I had my 2 children and Clara had her one daughter and we met through single parents' club. She was single for 13 years and I was single for about 5½ so now we have 9 grandchildren. Our oldest one is there, she's a senior at Roosevelt

²⁵ A Dear John Letter is a one written to a husband or boyfriend by his wife or girlfriend, telling him that their relationship is over.

²⁶ The Chinook was a multi-mission, heavy-lift transport helicopter.

²⁷ The Huey was an attack helicopter. It was also referred to as HueyCobra or Snake.

High in high school, engaged, and going to graduate this year.

Service is a good experience; the draft was a good experience. Our military depends now on recruiting and our National Guard. The draft was a very good experience, a good growing up experience. You learn to respect things more; you just don't take things for granted.

ES: All right. Thank you for sharing.

BS: You get very calloused. You realize that you want to come back to United States alive so you get very calloused. And sometimes maybe you do stupid things.

Wife: When we were first married, he had a bad July, very bad July. When we were first married, we got married in June and the first month we were married he just kind of like took a flip on me and it's like what's going on here? Only until then did I realize that he goes through a bad July. It's getting better but it was first tough when we were first married. His platoon was hit then pretty hard.

But that's tough, you know. You remember those times for him. I guess as a concern as a wife, my concern is Agent Orange that they had to deal with. They dealt with that. It literally killed everything, well what did it do to them? Now they are starting to see aftereffects of this Agent Orange, they are starting to die of lung cancer, leukemia, it's getting to be a cancer thing that's all of a sudden starting to now again seem to strike up when they hit a certain age. I guess that's a concern of ours.

BS: There's a man from Alton right now, same age as I am, born the same year and the same month, he was diagnosed with leukemia about a year ago. They traced it back to Agent Orange. I just found out yesterday, there's another man east of Hospers, he was in Vietnam, he's been fighting leukemia now for 6 months, and they've traced it back to Agent Orange.

Wife: Do you know what Agent Orange is?

ES: I think I have a vague idea.

BS: It was a chemical used over there by the military to kill all the foliage so that the enemy had less place to hide. It literally killed everything, trees, everything. Well, they would spray that and then they'd send the military personnel into the same area to check it all out. Well you were exposed to it right away by being in it. Back then they had no idea what it was doing but they are starting to find out in the last 12 to 15 years it has caused more problems with the veterans that came back. Now it's really starting to because a lot of us veterans are in that age group now of 55+, and I'm hearing more and more men that are coming down with things that are linking back to Agent Orange. So it is a concern.

Wife: Bernie has extreme back problems, yes my light's blinkering. Bernie has extreme back problems, and a lot of that stems back to the service. They did nothing but walk, walk and walk and walk and had to carry everything on his back. His back and his knees are literally shot. They are done for. He has to have them both replaced pretty quick.

BS: You carried everything in your own ruck sack, so that's why I said when we got C-rations you sorted out what you weren't going to eat and what you were going to eat. A basic ruck sack on a military on us weighed about 130 to 140 pounds. That's not counting your helmet and your weapon and your ammunition.

Wife: You carried that every day.

BS: Yes, it's survival, it's a good growing up experience.

Wife: And pretty young, fresh out of high school and in those days no one ventured, young kids didn't venture away from home. So for many kids psychologically they couldn't handle that. I had a very good friend that got really busted up real bad, Harv Vollink [?]. He's in really tough shape, very, very tough shape. My home town, there's a couple of them that died from my class.

BS: Drugs were a big thing in Vietnam. It was a bad drug thing there.

Wife: You kept yourself clean.

BS: The ones that couldn't handle it mentally turned to drugs and alcohol. Even after they came back to the United States, you had a lot of veterans that mentally don't get the right help to help them through it and they turned to drugs and alcohol instead. It seems like once they get hooked on that you can't hardly help them no matter what you do. Granted we used to let our hair down for 24 hours, but when it was 30 days out in the field it was all strictly business.

Wife: Well, you didn't have much to think about but in the next 24 hours you were going to do the same thing.

BS: Until... People in our normal civilian life think they've been through so many hardships. But like I said earlier, until they have to take another human life to survive, or to protect their fellow men, take another human life or until they have to pick up the parts of one of their good friends. And I mean literally pick up the parts, you walk and you pick the heart up here and you pick a hand up here. Our normal people in the States have no idea what war is like no matter what war it was. Just like Lyle Stallard [?], when I helped lift him on the medevac that day, I hadn't seen him until my friend located him before we went to Rolling Thunder. I didn't know if he was dead or alive. Yes, it's very hard and challenging mentally. But it was good growing up. Learn to respect things more. Anything else?

ES: Not that I can think of.

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