

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
MICHAEL W. AIRD
Reconnaissance Platoon, Army, Vietnam War.

2007

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Aird, Michael W., (1948-). Oral History Interview, 2007.

User Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 120 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 120 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Michael W. Aird, an Antigo, Wisconsin native, discusses his Army service in reconnaissance platoons of the 101st Airborne Division during the Vietnam War. Aird talks about his family's military history during World War II, his awareness of the Cold War as a teenager, and a lack of discussion about the Vietnam War amongst his peers. After a year at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, he recalls his surprise at receiving a draft notice the day before classes started. Aird touches on basic training at Fort Campbell (Kentucky), infantry training at Fort Lewis (Washington), finding his training inadequate in retrospect, and, during a two-week furlough before deployment, attending the funeral of a friend who had been killed in action. He recalls flying overseas on a commercial airplane and, due to engine troubles, being diverted from landing at Okinawa, where his uncle had been prepared to take him off the flight for a year of temporary duty in Japan. Aird speaks of his impressions upon arriving at the replacement depot in Vietnam and his reaction to assignment with the 101st Airborne Division. Assigned to the 506st Regiment, 1st Battalion, C Company at Fire Base Currahee (A Shau Valley), he details going on a long introductory patrol in the mountains, adapting to the steep terrain and high humidity, and walking point despite having broken both his pairs of eyeglasses. Aird discusses building a fire base on Hamburger Hill (Hill 937) and hearing in his first letter from home that his grandmother had died. Sent on an overnight ambush at Hill 996, he recalls being told, "The good news is we landed on the moon, and the bad news is we're sitting right in the middle of an occupied NVA bunker complex and we've got to walk out." Aird tells of pulling rear security during the night movement out, getting temporarily separated from everyone when he fell into a bunker, and going four days without food because rainy weather prevented air support. Sent back to Hill 996, he talks about being pinned by machine gun fire, witnessing a soldier shoot his own toe off, having difficulty seeing the enemy because he hadn't gotten replacement eyeglasses, and being one of nine men remaining out of his thirty-five man platoon. Aird states the remnants of his platoon were formed into a reconnaissance team and air dropped into enemy territory at night. After spending four days right next to a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) bunker complex, he describes being discovered by the enemy, taking charge of the retreat after an incompetent response by his commanding officer, and getting wounded by a ricocheted bullet. He explains he arrived at a hospital in Da Nang during a power failure, so he was sent to the hospital ship *Repose*. Aird describes his recovery, receiving painful treatment for an old Achilles heel injury, and eventually getting sent back to his unit because the Navy personnel didn't know what else to do with him. He reports he was so angry after sixteen hours of KP duty in the rear that he volunteered to go back to the field with his company, where he convinced the medic to

remove some imbedded shrapnel that was rubbing against his rucksack. Aird discusses a month of covering the withdrawal of the 3rd Marine Division around Khe Sanh and “the Rockpile,” falling off of a mountain ledge, discovering a cache of NVA supplies, and hearing that a prisoner he had helped capture had “fallen out” of the helicopter. Voluntarily transferred to a reconnaissance platoon in E Company, he evaluates the quality of his officers and the differences between being in infantry and recon platoons. Aird comments on doing Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols, training to rappel down a rope ladder from a helicopter, tiger hunting, and scouting for NVA activity around Fire Bases Ripcord, Granite, and Catherine. Aird touches on water supply in the field, having health problems he suspects are related to Agent Orange, and a lack of recreational opportunities. He explains how the company clerk helped get him an under-the-table leave to Bangkok and, shortly after returning, getting his official R&R to Bangkok. Aird reveals why D Company was nicknamed “The Dying Deltas” and relates seeing the destruction of a helicopter he had almost been on at a landing zone supposedly secured by D Company. He reveals that until his last six weeks, he never thought he would survive his tour. Aird details a mission during which he reflexively shot a wounded NVA soldier rather than take him prisoner and another mission when Aird looked a soldier in the eye from eight feet away as Aird shot him from ambush. Aird recalls “getting pretty weird” near the end of his tour, telling off a commanding officer for wanting to redistribute ammunition, and refusing to go back into the field when he had only thirty-five days left. For two weeks after that, Aird states he was given bunker line details during the day and made non-commissioned officer in charge at night, so he didn’t get any sleep. He talks about escorting prisoners from Charlie Company to a court martial in Saigon and, on the way back, running into another soldier from Antigo (Wisconsin). Aird details nearly being arrested when he refused to get off a full plane heading to the States and being saved by an airline stewardess who let him sit in her seat. He discusses his homecoming, having deteriorated communication skills, and being assigned to the battalion S2 at Fort Carson (Colorado), where he felt unqualified for the office work he was put in charge of. After attending an NCO refresher course, Aird states he had nothing to do for his last six months. He touches on having zero interest in reenlisting, joining Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and getting into brawls at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point because “people were lining up to give you a hard time.”

Biographical Sketch:

Aird (b.1948) served two years in the Army, including duty in Vietnam from July 1969 to July of 1970. He eventually settled in Sun Prairie (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2007

Transcribed by Sheila Shambaugh, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2009
and Joan Bruggink, 2012

Checked and corrected by Joan Bruggink, 2012

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2012

Interview transcript:

Jim: October 22nd, 2007. My name is Jim Kurtz and I'm interviewing Mike Aird at the VFW Post 8216 in Middleton, Wisconsin. Mike, where and when were you born?

Aird: I was born January 10th, 1948 in Antigo, Wisconsin.

Jim: Okay. And were you raised in Antigo?

Aird: Well, I spent the first two, two and a half years in Elcho, is where my parents lived with my grandparents, and then we moved to—

Jim: That's quite close.

Aird: Yeah, it's only twenty, twenty-two miles, and then we moved to Antigo.

Jim: And is that where you went to high school?

Aird: Yes.

Jim: What year did you graduate from high school?

Aird: 1967.

Jim: 1967. While you were growing up, were there any veterans in your family or neighbors that had any experience that had any influence on you?

Aird: Yes, almost every one of my male relatives was a veteran of World War II. I think I only had one uncle who was not a veteran. My father was a veteran of World War II; he was a Sherman tank crewman. He landed on Normandy, not on D-Day but shortly thereafter and went through the, uh, campaigns, through until the end of the war. He was in the 32nd Armored Regiment.

Jim: And was he a driver or a gunner?

Aird: From what I understand, they traded off duties.

Jim: Okay.

Aird: He was trained as a driver, I understand that, but he was also a loader and a gunner and everything, you know. I think he had to be pretty interchangeable. He had three tanks blown up on him, I guess, so—

Jim: But he was able to survive in one form or another that whole time?

Aird: Yeah, he was wounded in the hedgerow campaign in Normandy, but it wasn't a serious one.

Jim: Okay. Did any of your relatives talk very much about the war?

Aird: No. Trying to get anything out of my father was really prying.

Jim: So you started high school in 1962 and that was really before Vietnam was any kind of a—you know, so did you have any awareness of the cold war or the conflict with the Communist Bloc or anything?

Aird: Oh certainly. I'm like most people at that time. We had drills about hiding under our desks from an atomic attack and, [laughs] you know, things like that.

Jim: As the Vietnam War progressed and you got to be a junior and senior in high school, was there any discussion about the Vietnam conflict among your peers at all?

Aird: There was a little bit, but very little actually for the consequences that we probably would have suffered. I mean, people really didn't talk about it and it really wasn't going that strongly at the time.

Jim: Was the draft an issue at the high school in Antigo, Wisconsin in the mid-sixties?

Aird: Oh, yes, very much so. Yeah, I didn't graduate from high school until 1967. I should have graduated in '66, but I was held back a year in elementary school because I have dyslexia and I had trouble learning to read. So a lot of my friends were in the class before me that graduated in '66 so it was kind of on everybody's mind, but nobody really talked about it.

Jim: When you graduated from high school, what did you do?

Aird: Well, I worked for the railroad as a brakeman—Chicago and Northwestern Railroad out of Antigo—and I went to college for a year.

Jim: Which college?

Aird: UW at Oshkosh.

Jim: Okay.

Aird: And then I tried to transfer to a different university and that's when they drafted me. [laughs]

Jim: What was your reaction when you got drafted?

Aird: Well, I, uh, you know, I was really kind of dumbfounded because I got my draft notice the day before classes started so I thought I was home free.

Jim: Um-hmm.

Aird: There was some discussion—I had thought about, prior to this, enlisting in the Navy and my father was totally, absolutely against it. He had a very, very, very, very, very low opinion of the military. And I had an uncle, my mother's brother, who was a pharmacist and he offered to give me the money to go to Canada if I wanted to. And I decided that, you know, I wasn't really in top—well, I was in top physical condition but I did have some problems with a knee and so on and so forth and I felt the last thing in the world I would wind up being was an infantryman.

Jim: Did your father say why he was negative about the military? Or is just that it was generally disjointed, disorganized and—

Aird: Yeah, pretty much. He had a brother who was a—retired as a sergeant major, command sergeant major out of the Engineering branch of the Army and I had an uncle who was married to my mother's sister who was a lieutenant colonel, retired, and one of my father's younger—my father's younger brother was a lifer in the Air Force, so there was a lot of military, but he just, you know, I guess with the amount of combat he was in and the experiences he had, he was definitely—

Jim: Well, did he advise you to take this money and go to Canada, or did he just say—

Aird: Well no, his opinion was that you owed allegiance to your country and although you didn't volunteer, if they drafted you it was your duty to go. But I'm sure he wouldn't have opposed it if I had went to Canada.

Jim: Okay. Where did you go to basic?

Aird: Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

Jim: And is there anything that stands out about that experience?

Aird: Uh, not so much. We had a very good drill instructor; I can't remember his name.

Jim: Was he a Vietnam veteran?

Aird: Yes, um-hmm. He was a staff sergeant, a black man who—but he was very, very good. He was a very good—

Jim: Did they talk at all about Vietnam?

Aird: No, no, they really didn't that much, no, not at all.

Jim: What weapon did you get trained on in basic?

Aird: The M14.

Jim: Okay. And when you completed basic training, what happened to you?

Aird: Then I was sent to infantry training at Fort Lewis, Washington.

Jim: AIT [Advanced Infantry Training], Fort Lewis. Okay. And is there anything that stands out about that experience?

Aird: Yes. I didn't really think that it was, as far as infantry training, that it was all that comprehensive and all that difficult if they're training you for combat in Vietnam, which they were, you know; ninety-nine percent of the guys in my AIT company went to Vietnam. I found it incredibly lacking. This is in retrospect, mind you.

Jim: Yeah. What weapons were you trained on in AIT?

Aird: Well, we were trained on the M16 but they exposed us to—we fired everything from a .45 pistol to a .50 caliber.

Jim: Did you feel you were adequately trained on the M16?

Aird: On the M16, yes.

Jim: When I was a platoon leader, the first time I ever touched an M16 was to shoot it at somebody, so that was different, so I'm always interested in that stint.

Aird: Yeah, that was the only part of infantry training that I thought was adequate was there.

Jim: What time of the year were you there?

Aird: I was there—let me see, I must have been there in April, May and the beginning of June.

Jim: What was the temperature condition like there?

Aird: Oh, it was beautiful. It was one of the driest and warmest springs they had had on history there. It was positively fantastic.

Jim: It wasn't really Vietnam weather either then? [laughs]

Aird: No, no.

Jim: After you completed AIT, what happened to you?

Aird: Well, I was given a two-week furlough and then shipped off to Vietnam.

Jim: The two weeks, I assume you went back to Antigo?

Aird: Correct, um-hmm.

Jim: What was the experience of going back there knowing you were going to Vietnam?

Aird: It was pretty much—the issue was pretty much avoided.

Jim: Had some of your peers been to Vietnam already?

Aird: Yes. As a matter of fact, I went to the funeral of one of my friends who was killed there when I was home on furlough, Joe Peterlick. But I had four friends from my previous life in Antigo and Elcho from high school who had been, by the time I got to Vietnam, who had been killed there.

Jim: How did that affect you?

Aird: Not knowing what I was getting into, I mean, it didn't add an element of joy or anything like that to it. But, you know, I suppose it added an element of reality to it. But aside from that—

Jim: Was it because you were young and it probably wasn't going to happen to you and that type of thing?

Aird: Well, it very well could be. I mean, I really—

Jim: Okay. I assume, then, that you left for Vietnam from the Pacific Northwest again. Is that correct?

Aird: From Sea-Tac, yes, Seattle-Tacoma.

Jim: How were you transported to Vietnam?

Aird: We were transported on a commercial freight airliner that they had converted. I think most of the passenger flights of personnel to Vietnam were done by freight haulers. I flew over there on either Tiger or Saturn Airlines and I flew back on either Tiger or Saturn Airlines, I can't remember.

Jim: Was the seating arrangement set up like an airliner?

Aird: I had only been on a couple of flights before that. Yeah, it was basically set up—it was a commercial airliner.

Jim: Yeah.

Aird: We were scheduled to land for a refueling in Hawaii and Okinawa and sometime between Hawaii and Okinawa we developed engine trouble, and by that I mean that one of the engines on the left wing broke loose.

Jim: That is a problem.

Aird: And it was—you know, you could look out the window and see it, I wouldn't say flopping around, but you could definitely see that it was moving and swaying.

Jim: So where did you land?

Aird: So they diverted us to Clark Air Base in the Philippines so that we wouldn't mess up the runways for the B-52 strikes at Okinawa. And I had my uncle, who was a lifer in the Air Force, was stationed in Okinawa at the time, and he was in an Intelligence unit and he had it all set up for me to be taken off the flight and spend a year temporary duty in Okinawa, but that didn't happen.

Jim: That didn't happen. [laughs] Did you get to see him when you landed there?

Aird: No, I didn't. We didn't land in Okinawa.

Jim: Excuse me, that was at Clark. I wasn't paying attention like I should have been. Did you know anybody on the airplane that you went over with?

Aird: I knew a couple of guys that I had infantry training with, but I didn't sit near them and—because you were—I don't know, you were told to sit in this seat when you got on the plane and that's where you stayed. Uh, so I really—I really don't—aside from the mechanical difficulties, I really don't remember much about the flight except it was an awfully long flight.

Jim: Do you remember the tension kind of building as you approached Vietnam?

Aird: I don't remember that now.

Jim: Okay. Where did you land in Vietnam?

Aird: I believe we landed at Bien Hoa.

Jim: Okay.

Aird: That was down there by Cam Ranh Bay, wasn't it?

Jim: Yeah. That would be a place a lot of—what was your reaction when you walked off the airplane to the country? Did you have any immediate reaction?

Aird: Well, walking from the air-conditioned plane out into the atmosphere there, it was like getting hit with a—oh, I don't know, you almost felt like you wanted to pass out because of the humidity and the smell.

Jim: So the smell was distinctive?

Aird: Well, the smell was of rotting vegetation.

Jim: Yeah.

Aird: I mean, it's very humid and hot and everything, as soon as it's—any vegetation, as soon as it's cut, it's decomposing almost instantly, so—

Jim: So then did you get sent to the replacement company?

Aird: We were sent to a replacement unit and we spent—I guess they call it, it was two or three days of climate familiarization or something like that. They took you out and ran you around and marched you around in the heat.

Jim: Okay.

Aird: And then every night we got mortared or rocketed.

Jim: You weren't given any defense responsibilities in the perimeter or anything like that?

Aird: No, no.

Jim: So did you know where you were going to be assigned?

Aird; No, no. I believe on the third day, uh, we had a formation and I can't remember what time of the day it was; it must have been in the morning, probably fairly early, they had us out there in a formation of some sort or another. There were quite a few of us and they just read out our names and what unit we were being assigned to and then by early afternoon you were on a flight to that location.

Jim: And who were you assigned to?

Aird: I was assigned to the 101st Airborne.

Jim: Was that unit in jump status at that time?

Aird: No, no. As a matter of fact, that's what I said to the guy after they read out who I was supposed to be assigned to. I went up to the guy and I said, you know, "There has got to be some mistake because I'm not jump qualified." And he just looked at me and laughed. He said it didn't make any difference. [laughs]

Jim: [laughs] So do you remember what kind of airplane you flew from Bien Hoa up north?

Aird: No.

Jim: Okay. Do you know where you landed up north?

Aird: I believe we landed at Da Nang.

Jim: Okay. And who greeted you there?

Aird: I'm not real sure. I don't remember a lot about it. We were trucked from Da Nang up north a way. Phu Bai was where my brigade was assigned to Camp Evans, which was outside of Phu Bai, which is northwest of Hue.

Jim: So you were trucked to Camp Evans then. And when you got to Camp Evans, what happened to you?

Aird: Then I reported to the headquarters or whatever. They had people there that, you know, met you at the plane and they took us to the brigade headquarters and they assigned us to a battalion and my battalion was the 1st of the 506th Infantry, and then you went to the battalion and they assigned you to an infantry company, and I was assigned to Charlie Company, 1st of the 506th.

Jim: Did you receive any in-country training by the 101st before you got to Charlie Company?

Aird: No. I went from the—I must have got to my company in the late afternoon and the next morning they flew me out in a helicopter to Fire Base Currahee, which was on the floor of the A Shau Valley and I joined my company and that was it.

Jim: How were you treated when you pulled into your new home?

Aird: I was treated alright, pretty good.

Jim: Do you remember, was the company pretty close to being up to strength?

Aid: They were at the time. I was one of the last. My outfit had been in the battle for Hamburger Hill and they had been pretty much—well, I won't say decimated. The 3rd of the 187th, which took the brunt of the fighting on Hamburger Hill was, you know, totally knocked out of combat strength. I think they only had eighty

men left in the whole battalion when they came off of it. My company, Charlie Company, 1st of the 506th, lost maybe forty to fifty percent of their men on Hamburger, so—and I was one of the last replacements coming in at that time so we were, that was one of the—well, that was the only time I can remember a company I was in being at what they considered full combat strength, which was, I think, thirty-five men in a platoon and about one hundred-five to one hundred-ten with the officers and medics and that, that was full strength and the 101st at the time was about one hundred-ten men.

Jim: Was there much discussion about the Hamburger Hill experience?

Aird: At that time? No, no, because there was the beginning of another big battle starting up at that time. It was the battle for Hill 996, which was—Hamburger Hill was a three thousand foot mountain and that was Hill 937. And then Hill 996, which was a three thousand foot mountain, was the mountain right next to it.

Jim: Okay.

Aird: And so once I got to my company, uh, they had been at Fire Base Currahee, which was our battalion fire base, for a couple of weeks at that time. And after I got there, within two or three days, maybe not even that long—well, probably about two days—they took us out on a patrol to kind of like familiarize the new personnel with, you know, the terrain and that. So they took us out, we walked off of Fire Base Currahee west into the mountains and—which was right on the Laotian border, literally on the Laotian border. I was probably in—

Jim: Laos?

Aird: —as a matter of fact, we weren't out in the bush two or three days and we had already wandered into Laos several times, so—

Jim: Sure. So on this patrol, this was an overnight camping trip?

Aird: Oh, this was more than overnight. This was four or five days, six days.

Jim: And did you have any contact?

Aird: We had sporadic, but the thing that surprised me so much about it was that we started walking up into the mountains and these were relatively rugged, steep mountains and the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] had steps, plank steps with handrails going up the steeper sides of these mountains. And I looked at that and I said to myself, "Holy shit, you're gonna be lucky to get out of this place." And nobody had even shot at me yet, but, uh—

Jim: What kind of food did you have on this first patrol?

Aird: We had C-rations. We were generally given a five-day supply of C-rations when we headed for the bush.

Jim: How much water did you carry?

Aird: We carried—you were required—they told you had to carry four quarts. Most guys carried between four and six. The newer guys tried to carry six because they generally needed more than the older guys, you know. The older guys—I was one of the oldest guys in the platoon, I shouldn't say it that way, but I was twenty-one years old. But the guys who had been there longer generally used less water.

Jim: So at night, what kind of a night defense position did you set up when you were out there?

Aird: They usually set us up in two-man positions in a perimeter which was—you either set up in a two or three-man position; most of the time it was two men because they wanted to have a larger perimeter.

Jim: Um-hmm.

Aird: So you could have more positions if you used just two men, but the problem was, is that, you know, after putting up with the extreme elements, the heat and the humidity and carrying a hundred pounds around up and down the sides of mountains all day, very few people, if any of them, could stay awake half the night. So most of the time, most of the positions, everyone was asleep. They had just fallen asleep, you just couldn't physically stay awake.

Jim: Right.

Aird: Three-man positions would have been better, but then again you can't tell them anything, so—

Jim: Did they put out any listening posts or ambush patrols in any of these?

Aird: Not when we were out in the mountains. I mean patrolling as a company or a platoon, we didn't do that, no. I think it was probably because of the terrain. You know, it was so steep and so—you know, the ridges, I mean they were just sheer, they were probably, oh, I don't know, they were probably fifty-, sixty-degree slopes.

Jim: Okay. So there wouldn't be any place to put anybody?

Aird: Well, basically, unless you put them down—

Jim: Down below?

Aird: —down the trails. Up off the trail or down the trail and what's the sense of that because, you know where they are coming from anyway.

Jim: Right, right. After you returned from this patrol, what happened to you?

Aird: Well, we went on that patrol and I really can't remember how long it was, you know. I mean it was—one of the problems I had was that the eyeglasses that they gave us, although there was nothing wrong with the eyeglasses, the frames, they didn't hook onto your ears real well, and by the time we had gotten back—I wore eyeglasses at the time—by the time we had gotten done with this patrol, they had given us two pairs of eyeglasses. Both of mine had slid off my face and broken and so I didn't have any eyeglasses.

Jim: So you couldn't really see what you were doing?

Aird: I could see a lot of green, uh, which didn't seem to matter to anyone, you know. I still walked point and I still walked slack and, you know, it just—

Jim: They had you walking point when you couldn't see?

Aird: Oh, certainly.

Jim: [laughs]

Aird: You see a problem with that? [laughs]

Jim: Yeah, as a matter of fact, I do.

Aird: You were nothing but cannon fodder if you were the point man or the slack man anyway, so it didn't make any difference. You couldn't see more than, I don't know, twenty, thirty yards at tops to begin with, so—but then they picked us up, you know, the 101st being air mobile at the time, picked us up by platoon and flew us to—there was an old Special Forces airstrip on the floor of the valley and they flew us in there and we were there for a couple of days and then they—because of all the shit they took for giving Hamburger Hill back to the NVA after they had spent all those lives taking it, they decided that they were going to go up there and build a fire base, so they sent us up there and they had a column—I don't know if it was a platoon or company of tanks—they had an engineering battalion or a company and they had some bulldozers and they built a road up the side of Hamburger Hill and that's the only time I ever worked with any armor in Vietnam. And we went up there and we built a fire base up on the top of Hamburger Hill. And we were up there—they told us to dig foxholes. You could dig a foxhole about eighteen inches and then you hit solid rock, so there were no foxholes. And we were up there for about maybe five days or so. On the way up there, I got my first letter from home. And actually, I got about five or six of them because they finally all caught up to me. And the first letter I ever opened

up was from my sister and the first sentence was, was, “Well, by now I guess you’ve heard that Grandma died.” So that was the first—

Jim: By mail. [Aird laughs] Were there any remnants of the North Vietnamese defense positions on Hamburger Hill?

Aird: Um-hmm. Hamburger Hill basically was an R & R [rest and recuperation] and a hospital, an NVA R & R and hospital complex, and what made Hamburger Hill so ideal for this was the fact that it had a freshwater spring at the top of the mountain and there was a spring and a pool of water. There were some remnants of the bunkers and things like that around.

Jim: You said it was tough to dig holes with those wonderful entrenching tools you get. Had they dug deeper holes and did they have tunnels up there?

Aird: They didn’t have tunnels. What they did was they built tunnels which were kind of like bermed and they built them out of logs and I won’t say sandbags, but you know, they used instead of sandbags, they used logs and they piled them up and then put them kind of like a log cabin only much smaller.

Jim: Sure. Did you feel kind of eerie being on top of Hamburger Hill?

Aird: Yeah, it was—I mean, it was eerie. I was relatively new there anyway; I had only been in Vietnam for probably two weeks by this time.

Jim: So then when you completed this, they brought up some 105s, I assume, to—

Aird: When I left, they walked us off and brought another company in and they were still just—

Jim: Still building?

Aird: They were still—they had the tanks up there.

Jim: Okay.

Aird: I don’t know what they had, whether it was 90 mm or maybe a 105, I have no idea. But then another company came in and we walked off Hamburger Hill.

Jim: Um-hmm.

Aird: Down into—and by this time—I’m getting a little ahead of myself. I’m getting a little mixed up. Somewhere in here we wound up back at Fire Base Currahee for a while and by this time Delta Company from the 1st of the 506th had made its first contact on Hill—**[End of Tape 1, Side A]**

Jim: Telling us about Delta Company.

Aird: Right. I don't know if this happened, if we wound up back at Fire Base Currahee or if this happened when I first got to Fire Base Currahee, but Delta Company had been in contact on Hill 996, around Hill 996 or something and had lost many, many guys. One of the things I did was offloaded about twenty, twenty-two, twenty-three bodies off of some helicopters from Delta Company. Uh, and so they knew that there was something going on on Hill 996, but they didn't know what, and I think a lot of all of this was preparation—like the fire base and that—was preparation for our assault on Hill 996. But anyways, I think they took—we walked off of Hamburger Hill down to the floor of the A Shau again, down to that airstrip, that old—I don't know if it was—I heard that it had been an old French airstrip and then I had heard that it was a Green Beret, and it was probably both.

Jim: Sure.

Aird: But we spent some time there, a couple of days, and then they sent us out on an overnight ambush up into the area of Hill 996 up on probably one of the ridges.

Jim: The whole company?

Aird: Yeah.

Jim: Okay.

Aird: And they flew us out to this area and it was supposed to be an overnight ambush and they gave us—they told us to leave our rucksacks, just bring your ammo and your weapon and they gave us one C-ration meal. Well, that night it started to rain, a big front, monsoon front moved in, and this was—well, I know what day it was, it was July 20th, 1969, because that's the day they landed the guys on the moon. And in the middle of the night, they sent out—there was the word that we've got some good news and some bad news. The good news is we landed on the moon and the bad news is we're sitting right in the middle of an occupied NVA bunker complex and we've got to walk out of there. And so we started—uh, we spent most of the night in this position where the ambush was and it was pretty ridiculous. You know, somehow I wound up with about a hundred feet of rope I was assigned to carry, and it was—our position was so steep, I had to tie myself to a tree to keep from sliding down the side of the ridge. And we spent about half the night there and then they decided to walk out, so we got up and we started the night movement, and by this time the company had split up and we were just operating as a platoon. And, uh, we started the night movement and I was pulling rear security and we were walking and it was so black you couldn't see your hand in front of your face, literally. And, uh, I remember walking and walking and then I tripped and I slipped and it was that gooey, slippery mud, and I slipped and I fell headfirst into a bunker but I didn't fit into the hole.

Jim: Okay.

Aird: I got caught about at the elbows into my sides like this with my feet sticking up in the air and I my head sticking into this bunker and I couldn't get out. And I was rear security and there was nobody behind me. And I struggled and struggled and fought and struggled and fought and eventually, and I have no idea how long a time this was, I eventually freed myself and got out. And I mean at first I didn't know if there was anyone in the bunker to begin with and then I thought, Jesus, there could be anything in here from snakes to, you know, or whatever. But I got myself out of that and it was a long time, I have no idea how long. Well, it seemed like an eternity, but I got out and everyone was gone because they didn't know I was missing. And I didn't know what to do. I'm just standing there in the dark and the drizzle and, uh, so I finally decided that well, we were walking downhill when—the last thing I remember is we were walking downhill, so I'll just start walking downhill. And I walked and I walked and I walked and I walked, and after a certain length of time—I have no idea how long this was; it had to be pretty close to an hour if not longer than that—I bumped into the guy who was in front of me and I started chewing on his bottom because I said, "Why didn't you stop everybody?" And he said, "I didn't know you were missing." And he thought that was the funniest story in the world and I was ticked off.
[laughs]

But we were out there for three or four days because they couldn't get us out because of the rain, you know. They didn't fly, you know, the choppers didn't fly in the rain in the mountains. So we were just out there and finally, on about the fourth day, the weather broke and they sent the supply helicopter out and threw a couple of cases of C-rations out to us.

Jim: So you went four days without any food then, basically?

Aird: Yeah, yeah. And they distributed them and I got the green ham and eggs, and I took two bites of that and threw the damn thing away.

Jim: Wonderful stuff.

Aird: [laughs] But then we—I kind of lose track of what happened by then. But then we, uh, you know, they must have picked us up and taken us someplace. And then we—and by this time they had been losing, there had been a lot of contact on Hill 996, so they decided they were going to have a battalion assault on Hill 996 and they sent us onto Hill 996, and I mean that was just horrible. I got—one time I got pinned down. I was walking point and I got pinned down in a little jungle opening by a machine gun. And we were walking down this—they went down and walking along this river bottom along this steep ridge, a couple of steep ridges, and I thought I was—I had only been there two or three weeks and I thought this is the dumbest goddamn place I can think anybody should be. And we started walking up the side of the ridge and we got ambushed and they had a—

the NVA had a machine gun at our point and I was the point man and I was laying down in this little jungle clearing which was maybe, I don't know, thirty, thirty feet in diameter and they had me zeroed right in and they just kept shooting. And I could feel the rounds hitting up and down the side of my body and in between my legs and, you know, and I just, you know, I just laid there scared shitless thinking, Geez, I wonder what it's going to feel like when I die. Because they had to be missing me by an inch or two. And I just couldn't believe that they didn't hit me. They must have fired two to three hundred rounds at me because they kept shooting. As soon as they stopped, I scurried back as fast as I could and got down to the river and I slipped down over the ledge and there was about an undercut of about four or five feet there and my lieutenant and the radio operator were hiding behind that. And as soon as I got down there, the lieutenant started jabbing me in the ass saying, "Get up there, you chicken shit, get up there." And I thought to myself, "You son of a bitch, you're hiding behind this berm; why in the hell isn't there room for me?"

Jim: [laughs]

Aird: I'm serious. I was pissed off, but I crawled back up there through that machine gun fire and, uh, and we had a couple of guys killed in that ambush.

Jim: So what you were doing is you were trying to go up this mountain at platoon size on trails and stuff like that. Was that the type of assault you were doing?

Aird: Pretty much. That's about all you could do. I mean, you know, the ridges were so steep and almost every ridge had a trail going up it and every trail, I mean there were just bunker complexes after bunker complexes after bunker complexes. They weren't all occupied.

Jim: Right.

Aird: But, you know, and that's all you did was you just walked up there until they shot at you. Like I said, the point man and the slack man were nothing but cannon fodder because—

Jim: Was there artillery support or air support when you were doing this?

Aird: Well, it was available, yeah. I don't remember getting a lot of artillery or air support on Hill 996, I really don't.

Jim: Okay.

Aird: I'm sure it must have been available, but—

Jim: How did the story end?

Aird: Uh, well, I don't know. When we went up, when we started up Hill 996, my platoon had thirty-five men in it. And, uh, and, uh, when all was said and done, when they pulled us off, we had nine men in my platoon left. I mean, I watched a guy shoot his own toe off. He just pointed this gun at his toe and I said, "Ah, shit, he won't do that." By God, he did. And I couldn't see anything; during this whole time, I couldn't see shit.

Jim: You didn't have your glasses?

Aird: Yeah. They'd be saying, "Shoot over at that bush. Can't you see it moving? Can't you see it moving?" And all there was was a wall of green.

Jim: So you hadn't got new glasses?

Aird: No. I don't know if they thought I was breaking them to get out of the bush or whatever, you know. It wouldn't have been a bad idea if I had, but that wasn't the case. But finally I told them that I had to have some eyeglasses and I had my civilian eyeglasses in my duffle bag in the rear and I asked them if they could, on the next resupply, if somebody could go into my duffle bag and get my civilian eyeglasses out.

Jim: Did they send them up?

Aird: Oh yeah, yeah.

Jim: So of these nine men left, the others were either KIA or wounded, is that—

Aird: Yeah, KIA or wounded. I suppose some of them could have, you know—I mean, who the hell knows.

Jim: Did you know anybody by that time in the platoon?

Aird: Oh, yeah, yeah. This must have been, by this time it must have been about the middle of August or so, so I knew, I knew most of the guys by then, in my platoon anyways. You know, I mean you pretty much stuck to your platoon and that was it.

Jim: Yeah.

Aird: So then they pulled us back to this airstrip again and they needed—and they were going to send three recon teams up to Hill 996 to try and locate the central location. And since my platoon only had nine men in it, they took the medic and the platoon leader and his radio operator out and they made the rest of my six man platoon—because the recon platoon only had two teams and they needed an extra team, so they made us the third team. And in the middle of the night, they—this must have been about the 15th of August or so—in the middle of the night, they

flew us in to this ridge and dropped us off and the helicopter just kind of swooped down on this open elephant grass-like ridge and they kind of slowed down and we all had to jump out in the middle of the night. And it was midnight, I know it was because I had a watch. And we walked off this little clearing and walked up into the jungle for about, I don't know, an hour, an hour and a half, and then we set up for the night. And right away at the beginning of—at the first light we moved out a couple hundred meters until all of a sudden we could hear NVA talking and so we stopped there and we set up. And it turns out that we were within probably about fifty yards of an NVA bunker complex. And so we reported back and they told us to stay right there. And we sat there for four days. Why, I'll never know. But you could hear these NVA talking and laughing and clanging their pots and pans together and cooking their meals.

And on August 20th, I know that because that's the day I got wounded, they sent out a water detail. And they had two or three guys—two guys, I guess, and they each had a bamboo rod with lots and lots of canteens on each end of it. And I figure, you know, by the number of canteens these two guys were carrying, there had to be at least a hundred of them up in that bunker complex because they had to have a hundred canteens among the two of them. And they walked right into our little perimeter. And by this time, one of the guys who got killed earlier was carrying an M79, so they assigned me to carry it after that. So I was carrying a grenade launcher by then. And one of the guys in my team killed the first guy and I shot the second guy with one of those buckshot rounds, but I didn't kill him and he crawled up into the brush back up a ways and started screaming back up to the top of the bunker complex there and—hell, it might not have been fifty yards. But he started screaming up to them and I tried to crawl up and frag the guy but I couldn't, the jungle was so thick I couldn't throw a frag. So then all of a sudden they just opened up the whole world on us. They must have repositioned some machine guns and there was so much lead flying around there that I couldn't believe it.

And so I had crawled back to my position by then and, uh, and, uh, we had a staff sergeant who was in charge of the team—I think his name was Clay—but he was pretty shook up at this point. And I mean they were really throwing the lead at us and he was behind this big tree that, oh, it had to be as big as two of those tables, I'd say maybe five, six feet in diameter. And he was sitting next to that, behind that, and screaming into the radio, “What should we do? What should we do? What should we do?” And, uh, this guy was—I probably shouldn't say things like this, but this guy wasn't really all that competent, although he was really the little pet of the CO, the company CO and, uh, he—and that's all he was doing is, you know, screaming into the radio, “What should we do? What should we do? What should we do?” And I crawled over there on my belly—and I'm a PFC for Christ sakes, I've only been in Vietnam six weeks—and I grabbed the radio out of his hand and I said, “We got to get the hell out of here,” and, you know, I said, “We just can't—they've almost got us surrounded now,” and they were moving out and positioning, you know, to get us surrounded so we wouldn't get out. And

there was this big, open jungle clearing that probably had been bombed out two or three years earlier behind us and I said, “We gotta get out of here and we gotta go that way because that’s the only way open. If we don’t go now, we’re dead.” And he said, “Yeah, yeah, you’re right, okay.”

So they started moving out and I had forgotten my ammo back where I was, so I crawled back to get my ammo and I turned around and they were all gone. So—then this was, I mean they couldn’t have been far, but it was kind of frightening. But they, uh, they, you know, so I just started loading my M79 and they are single shots, you know, with AG rounds and buckshot. And I was throwing some buckshot rounds into the jungle and shooting the AG rounds up into the tops of the trees to keep their heads down and that kind of, you know, slowed ‘em down a little bit. And I was moving backwards, sitting down and pushing backwards with my feet, moving back and moving back, and I bumped into this big rock that was behind me and I moved forward to get around that and at that time a round hit that rock and ricocheted into my ass, into my tailbone. It lifted me about a foot off the ground and I screamed, “I’m hit,” and they said, “Well, where are you hit?” And I said, “In the ass,” I said, “but I think I’m hit.” You know, I mean, it was numb, I couldn’t feel anything. So I moved, I moved forward and, uh, got around the rock and started moving back and I caught up with the guys and they looked at me and they said, “Yeah, you’re hit, but we don’t have time to treat you now.” Well, there was no medic anyway.

Jim: Yeah.

Aird: And so we just started going back, pulling back, and we’d relay back, and relay back, and relay back and we finally got to a point where we could stop and assess the situation. And by then we had some gunship support.

Jim: Yeah.

Aird: And they pretty much had the NVA pinned down there, so we could make our break. So we just turned around and ran like hell. And we got to the side of this ridge where we could see on the next ridge that there was this big opening of elephant grass and we got—and I, you know, I looked at the other guys and I said, “Well, can we get a helicopter in there?” And they said, “I think so.” And I said, “Well tell them we’re going to be there in ten minutes.” Well it took a hell of a lot longer than ten minutes, [laughs] but they had a helicopter there in ten minutes and then the helicopter stayed right there, just hovered right there until we got there, and he had to hover there for ten or fifteen minutes. The guy had balls that big around.

Jim: Was anybody shooting at him there?

Aird: No.

Jim: Okay.

Aird: No, but we got there and the elephant grass was so high that they couldn't get us; I mean, they couldn't land.

Jim: Yeah.

Aird: And the door gunner had to reach down, get on the skid and reach down as far as he could and we had to jump and he'd grab us by the arm and pull us up until we could get a hold of the skids and then we'd climb onto the helicopter and that's how all six of us got on the helicopter.

Jim: Wow. Then they took you back to where?

Aird: Fire Base Currahee.

Jim: Okay. So what happened with your wound?

Aird: Well, then they sent me to—they got me on—they had a Huey gunship, not a Cobra, you know, the Huey.

Jim: Um-hmm.

Aird: And they had one helicopter getting out of there yet that day and they put me on it, you know, and they flew me back to a hospital. I think it was some evac hospital around Da Nang.

Jim: Um-hmm.

Aird: And as soon as they got there, they took me into the hospital and as soon as I got there, they had a power failure so they couldn't treat me there, or they didn't want to treat me. I don't think my wound was as bad as they thought it was. But I mean, any time it's to the spine area and that—so they put me on a helicopter and flew me out to the hospital ship *Repose*.

Jim: Um-hmm.

Aird: Which I was on that for twenty-four days, I guess, which was kind of nice. You know, I mean, it was boring as hell. But hell, I can be bored.

Jim: It's better to be bored than scared. So you were assessed and they were treating your wound, and did they give you any kind of therapy or—

Aird: Well, they gave, you know, I mean, I had to have some therapy because they had to open the wound up and it was from just a little bit above the crack in my ass down into the crack in my ass. The round had splintered and I had all kinds of—

well I still do—I have all kinds of pieces of the bullet and rock and all that in there.

Jim: Um-hmm.

Aird: So they opened it up and then just let it close up by itself over a period of time. By that time I was trying to figure out anything and I had hurt my ankle pretty bad, my Achilles tendon in high school football, and I told them that I would like to have that treated while I'm on the ship. And they said, "Oh, sure," and I didn't hear anything for about a week and then one day they came in and put me on a gurney and shoved me into this little—it's just a ship, you know, everything is little—into this room and I said, "What are you going to do? What are you going to do?" And I had forgotten all about my ankle. And they came in with the biggest syringe you ever saw in your life with a needle that was half that big and they stuck that thing and they said, "Just look straight ahead." And I looked straight ahead and they shoved that needle up the back of my heel, up into my Achilles tendon and it hurt like a son of a gun and I—it really, really did. And they slowly withdrew it and shot that cortisone, I suppose it was, into my Achilles tendon. And I mean it really hurt. I could hardly stand it. I couldn't believe they didn't give me anything for the pain. And after they got done with that, they said, "Well, is there anything else wrong with you?" I said, "There is not a goddamn thing wrong with me." [Jim laughs.] Nothing. And that was that. So I learned not to complain.

Jim: Yeah. So did they say you were fit to return to duty then?

Aird: Well actually, the type of wound I had, the wound to the buttocks, was supposed to be a trip stateside, but I was the only—the guys who run the hospital ships were Marines because they were Navy personnel. I was the only Army guy on the ship and after they would do their rounds every morning, every other day, you know, when I started to heal up and that—and they were sending guys back to Japan and Okinawa and all of this stuff. And once they shipped you out, they couldn't ship you back in at this time, or they wouldn't; I suppose they could have. But I could always see them pull off in their little huddle and be talking amongst themselves, and they'd say, "Well, what are we going to do with him?" Because I was Army, they didn't know what the hell they were supposed to do. And finally, after about three weeks, they said—one of them said, "Well, I'll tell you what. Why don't we just send him back to his unit and they can do what they want with him?" Which is the worst thing they could do to an infantryman, because once they get their claws on you, they've got you. So that's what they did, they sent me back to my outfit.

Jim: Did they make any kind of a medical evaluation there?

Aird: Well, I reported back to my company and they said, "Okay, you're back, we'll send you out to the company," and I said, "Well, I'm supposed to go on sick call

tomorrow because they're supposed to do an evaluation." So the next morning I went over there and I came back and they had given me, it was two or three weeks light duty in the rear or something like that. Then they said, "What are we supposed to do with you?" I said, "I don't know." They said, "Well, go over and see this supply sergeant. So I went over there to see him and this kind of ticked him off. I don't know why, because for Christ sakes, I just got out of the damn hospital. And he said, "I got nothing for you to do." He said, "Go over and see this other guy." He was some sergeant affiliated with the mess hall. So I went over to see him and they put me on washing pots and pans on KP for sixteen hours.

Jim: That's real nice.

Aird: And when I got back from that, when I got back to the company area, I walked in to the first sergeant and I said, "You—" and then I was ticked off, too, and by this time I had lost all my inhibitions and I said, "You sons of bitches," I said, "if this isn't a crappy way to treat somebody who just got out of the hospital." I said, "You can kiss my ass." I said, "Tomorrow the company is going to be back in," and I said, "and I'm going back out to the field with them." I said, "I get treated better in the bush than I do by you bastards back here." And I was just screaming.

Jim: What was the reaction of the first sergeant?

Aird: I don't know, I just turned around and walked away. But the next day I went back out with the company, with my platoon. And I wasn't out there a day and I had some shrapnel close to the surface, and it was some sharp pieces of bullet and it was right where my rucksack would rub across at the bottom. And I went up to the medic, I said, "You gotta cut out that. I can't carry my rucksack." He said, "I can't do that, that's surgery. I can't do that." And I said, "Well, somebody has gotta do it, either that or you gotta call a helicopter in here and get it out." So the medic—so I pulled my pants down and the medic cut out two pieces of the shrapnel out there.

Jim: So did he give you any morphine when he did this?

Aird: No.

Jim: Was everything okay then after that?

Aird: Well, yeah. I still—I mean it was still sore and tender. I mean I had been cut open four or five inches. But I mean, yeah, I didn't have any problem with it at that time. So—

Jim: So what happened then?

Aird: So after that, we patrolled around the mountains, around the A Shau there until somewhere around the beginning of October or so. And this was—and at this time they were withdrawing the 3rd Marine Division from the DMZ and they were going to replace them with the 1st ARVN Division [Army of the Republic of Vietnam – South Vietnamese Army] and—but they didn't trust the 1st ARVN Division to cover the DMZ while the Marines were pulling out, so they sent my brigade up there to cover the withdrawal of the 3rd Marines, which we did. We went up to—they put us in up around Khe San and the Rockpile up there. Those were some Marine haunts.

Jim: Um-hmm.

Aird: And they were firing at us with artillery, you know, from over the DMZ and we used to get a lot of that from out of Laos, too, but artillery fire, but—

Jim: So how long were you up there?

Aird: Thirty days.

Jim: Thirty days.

Aird: And we went up there and I don't remember a whole lot, you know, about that. There was some contact that I remember, some fire fights. Pretty intense fire fights, actually, and some pretty intense artillery bombardments. But when we were up on the Rockpile, we were moving along this ledge. We got ambushed and eight guys from one of the other platoons had gotten killed and they moved us up and we were moving along this ledge and it only had to be about twelve-fourteen inches wide and we had to skirt it, and we had all our gear, our rucksacks and everything, and we were moving along that and we had to skirt around this boulder sticking out. And I got one foot and hand on each side of it and the next thing I remember is opening my eyes and seeing the top of the trees go by. And then the next thing I remember after that was waking up on the ground down below the ledge. I had fallen off the ledge, I don't know how. But I had landed on a pile of rocks about as big around as this table, which is about, I don't know, thirty inches, about thirty inches or so. And I could see—**[End of Tape 1, Side B]**—waking up and I started to move around a bit, and basically I was in shock. And, uh, the guys up on the ledge were saying, "Look, he's alive. Look, he's alive." So they sent the medic and another guy down to check on me. And they came down and by then I was kind of walking around in a daze down there. And the medic came up to me, his name was Fred Jones, he was from Fresno, California, and he says, he says, "Are you alright?" And I said, "Well," I said, "I don't know. I have no idea." I said, "My back and neck really hurts." And he just shook his head and he said, "Mike," he said, "if you had laid on the ground, they'd have had to medevac you. But you stood up," he said, "you fucked yourself." And that's exactly right. [laughs] So they told me to pick up my gear, we were gonna move again.

And by this time the rest of the platoon had worked its way down to the foot of this ledge and we took about—and we went about twenty yards and we found this big cave entrance. Well, it wasn't that big, I guess; it was a small one. It was maybe, you know, ten feet around or so and they threw a CS [tear gas] canister in there, a gas, and I'll be darned if an NVA didn't pop out of it. And he must have been left there to guard it, because there was a whole bunch of supplies in the—and this was October 5th because it says so in my yearbook because that's when we found this big cache of NVA weapons and ammunition and food that was in this cave. And they didn't even say thank you for me finding it for 'em, diving off that cliff.

Jim: I assume you stayed in the area to secure it so they could—

Aird: Yeah, we did for a few minutes—yeah, for a few days until we got it out; they brought a couple helicopters in and we loaded it on the helicopters along with the prisoner, and then about four or five hours later we got a call on the radio that the NVA had fallen out of the helicopter. [laughs] No way. They were probably questioning him and threw him out. I don't know how much truth that was, but—

Jim: Yeah.

Aird: So we were there, we built a couple of fire bases up there, Fire Base Shrapnel, which was named because we got artillery fire from across the DMZ every day on it. I thought it was kind of a dumb place to build a fire base if they could reach you with their artillery, but I guess they didn't ask my advice, so—

Jim: Then what happened?

Aird: Well, we were up there for thirty days and we were in and out of contact quite a bit, probably about every other day, every third day or so, because there were a lot of NVA around that place. But then at the end of thirty days they pulled us out because the Marines had pulled out. They pulled us out and we came back to the company area and I—you know, a couple of my friends said, "Well, the Recon platoon is looking for some volunteers. We're gonna go over and volunteer," and I said, "Not without me, you're not."

Jim: Um-hmm.

Aird: I said, "If I stay in this outfit any longer, there isn't any chance of any of us living through this." So we went over and volunteered for Recon.

Jim: So that was for a battalion Recon platoon?

Aird: Yeah, um-hmm, which was E Company.

- Jim: So did you get any briefing or training for that? Of course you were a pretty experienced soldier at this point.
- Aird: For four months, yeah, yeah. So no, we didn't get any additional training, no.
- Jim: And I assume you had a fairly experienced platoon leader?
- Aird: We had fairly experienced platoon leaders. Some of them were more competent than others, but they had, I mean they didn't—I shouldn't say that because that's another story later on. But for the most part we got experienced officers.
- Jim: So what happened with the Recon platoon?
- Aird: Well, we mostly worked in four to six man teams, and they'd send us out—
- Jim: For how long?
- Aird: On LRRP [Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols, (pronounced "lurp")] missions. Could be anywhere from, I don't know, five or six days to three weeks, depending on what our mission was and what they wanted us to accomplish. Now where I got the idea that Recon was safer than an infantry platoon was, I don't know, six of one and half a dozen of another. But, you know, at least in a Recon team you could make your own decisions and decide when you were gonna scat and when you weren't. And most of the time that's what you wound up doing was hiding and running.
- Jim: I would assume your mission was to find things, not to kill people?
- Aird: Oh, yeah, right. Well, every once in awhile we would get—and it's really amazing the number of officers we had, and I was in that platoon for eight months and I'll bet you we went through four or five lieutenants—well, platoon leaders—and we would get, every once in awhile, they would get—and maybe two or three company commanders—and every once in awhile one of these guys would get the idea that they were gonna go out and kill a lot of NVA and they would take the whole platoon out and go out lookin' for trouble. They weren't real popular when they did that because we kind of liked going out there and hiding.
- Jim: What were the experiences that stand out in your Recon platoon career?
- Aird: Oh, there is a lot of them. They trained us in—it must have been shortly sometime thereafter, they trained us in rappelling for insertion. For rappelling and for rope ladder insertion, which I didn't think was a real bright idea. And the way they trained us for rappelling, they had to show us how to tie the Swiss seats and, you know, and pretty much how to rappel, which they did over a two or three day period. But for rope ladder insertion, what they did was they didn't want to waste a helicopter for a mission, so they took us out on a mission, my team, and they

threw a three hundred foot rope ladder out of this helicopter and said, “Out you go, boys.” So I was the fourth guy out and the first three guys got down to the bottom and what they would do is, when the first guy got halfway down, the next guy would start, so you’d have two guys on the ladder at all times. And by the time you got down to the bottom they were putting another guy out. And I got down to within, oh, I don’t know, fifty feet, sixty feet of the bottom and the next guy was only about twenty or thirty feet down the rope ladder, they started taking fire, so they pulled that top guy up into the helicopter and were pointing at me to get down as fast as I could. Well, I’m moving down this rope ladder as fast as I possibly can and the pilots decided they didn’t want to wait around any longer, so they took off. So I’m two hundred-fifty feet down this rope ladder dangling underneath this helicopter and they—

Jim: Take off?

Aird: They took off.

Jim: So what happened?

Aird: I just hung on like—I don’t know what like. [laughs] But I just hugged that rope ladder as tight as I could and they just took off and I just, you know, I just said to myself, “Christ, I hope they don’t hit any trees or anything.” And they just mostly went up and away. And I don’t know how far they went, but they made this great big, swooping circle and they dropped me off about a half a mile from where the other three guys were on the ground because I was—it wouldn’t have paid for them to wait for me to crawl back up. And the other two guys from the team they just took back to base and they dropped me off because I had thrown my gear out; you weren’t gonna climb down that rope ladder with a hundred and some pounds of gear. And so I had to make my way over to the other three guys and we just went out on our mission with four guys.

Jim: Did you have a radio?

Aird: Oh, yeah.

Jim: Okay. Any other experiences that stand out?

Aird: Oh, yeah, there was a lot of ‘em. We went tiger hunting for four days once. They put us in an area—this was around Fire Base Ripcord and Granite and Catherine—and they put us in this area the NVA kept infiltrating and they kept attacking Fire Base Granite. And that’s where Captain Longmire got killed from the Truax-Longmire post. As a matter of fact, I met him over there. He was becoming a buddy of mine until he got killed. But they kept insisting that the NVA were moving into this one area and they weren’t. And they had put us in there for six days and we had checked out the whole area and there was no sign of any NVA moving through there at all. So they pulled us out and put us in another

area for four or five days, and there wasn't anything there. And then they picked us up from an LZ and they said, "Well, we know they are coming through that area. We're gonna put you back in there and you find out where they're coming back in." So they sent us back in there and we looked around for a couple of days and there was no sign of anybody in there. But there was a female tiger and two cubs, and so everybody on the team decided that they wanted to track this tiger, get themselves a tiger, which I wasn't too keen on because I was the point man and I didn't want to face a pissed off female tiger with an M16. And we tracked her for three or four days, never did catch up with her. I wasn't real keen on catching up with her anyways.

Jim: [laughs.]

Aird: But there were a lot of pigs in the area, which was probably what they were killing. And where there is a lot of pigs, there were a lot of leeches, because they must have lived on—there must have been a whole—I don't know if pigs have herds, but there must have been a lot of them, thirty or forty pigs in this group.

Jim: What kind of briefings did you get before you went out on these missions?

Aird: We just got—basically, they got—we would go in. The officers got the briefings and then they would come back and they'd say, "Well, we're gonna put you in this area." And everybody in the Recon team had a map and compass. I mean, everybody had to know what's going on. And they'd say, "We're gonna put you in this area, we think there is like the 29th NVA Regiment is in this area and we're gonna put you in here," and you know, "you try and pick up some signs of where they are moving or if they are set up in a bunker complex." It was around the A Shau, there was—every ridge had a bunker complex on it. They weren't—they were hardly ever occupied, but you never knew. You had to go in and check 'em out. And occasionally you would go in and you'd come across, you know, a fire still burning with rice still cooking over the fire. But there couldn't have been many of 'em, and then there were times when there was a whole bunch of 'em in it. But which story am I on? The tiger hunt.

Jim: Yeah

Aird: Well, we did that for about three days and then our mission was over; well, maybe four days. So they pulled us out and stuck us in another area and we just kept moving around and—

Jim: So how many days did you have between these long patrols?

Aird: Well, it could be, you know, they could pick us up and they would have a couple cases of C-rations. They started using these MRE [Meals Ready to Eat] meals by then. The problem with them was that they were dehydrated and needed a lot of water, so you had to be in an area where there was a lot of water to use 'em. In

the mountains where we were, there was usually a lot of water. The problem is that where there is water, there is likely a lot of danger, because just like we needed water, they needed water.

Jim: Um-hmm.

Aird: And if there was a good water supply there, there was a likelihood that if there were any NVA in the area, that's where they would be.

Jim: Did you have to treat the water?

Aird: No, we never treated anything, [laughs] which is probably why I have diabetes and prostate cancer and everything else, because they sprayed the A Shau Valley with so much Agent Orange that you could probably take a bath in it.

Jim: When you came back from one of these patrols, did you stand down for a day or two to—

Aird: Yeah, that's where we were going. They would either—they would take us—sometimes they would just have, you know, our resupply on the helicopter and just fly us to another mission.

Jim: Um-hmm.

Aird: And we would get our instructions over the radio, or they could take us back and we might spend a night or two in the rear and then they would send us out on another mission.

Jim: Did you have access to an NCO or an enlisted men's club when you were back in these areas?

Aird: We had a company club which was in there, but it never had anything in it. It was, you know, like the type of barracks they had over there, I don't know if you had—

Jim: Yeah.

Aird: You probably had the same thing. But it was just a building where they had some tables and there was supposed to be beer and soda in there, but there never was.

Jim: Were there any shows ever that you were familiar with?

Aird: I got to see about three or four shows. They had an Australian group, a USO group, come around and we went to see that, and about a half hour into the program they came and got us and said, "You got to come back, you're going out on a mission." That's the extent of my USO experience.

Jim: What about Christmas and Thanksgiving meals; did you get special meals for those?

Aird: I spent Christmas out in the bush.

Jim: And what about Thanksgiving?

Aird: I, uh, I think at Thanksgiving, I think they sent out—I think we were in the rear and I think we got turkey on Thanksgiving.

Jim: Um-hmm. Because all soldiers are supposed to get turkey on Christmas and Thanksgiving.

Aird: If you had turkey on Christmas in my team, you ate it out of a C-ration can.

Jim: Okay. [laughs] When did you go on R & R, if you did?

Aird: I went on R & R—I put in for R & R, I don't know, probably in November or December, and it was only supposed to be a couple of months. And by the end of April, towards the end of April, probably about the middle of April, I went in and we were in for a night stand down and I asked the company clerk what he had heard on my R & R and he said, "I haven't heard anything." And I said, "I've got to get out of here. You know, this place is—I'll be bonkers by the time—" And he said, "I'll see what I can do." And the next morning he came up to me and he said, "I haven't heard anything on your R & R," he said, "but I'll tell you what I'm going to do." He said, "I'm going to tell the CO you're in the rear and the first sergeant you're in the field." And he says, "I got orders for a seven-day leave for you here." And he said, "But you can't tell anybody. I'm just doing this, I'm not supposed to do this." Because he was—and I can't even remember the guy's name, but he and I got along really well and he really liked me. He was a nice kid. So I went off on my—and nobody was supposed to get a leave. A lot of times guys didn't get their R & Rs. So I got down to Cam Ranh Bay, I think they were flying us out of, but a leave was standby and R & R had priority. So I checked in at the airport there and they said, "Where do you want to go?" I said, "I don't care as long as it's not here. I want to be on the first plane I can get out of here."

Jim: To somewhere.

Aird: Yeah. And they said, "Well, we've got three openings on this flight to Bangkok. Do you want to go there?" And I said, "That's where I'm going." And so I got on the plane to Bangkok, spent a week in Bangkok, spent all of my money and got back to the company. And I was walking into the company area and the company clerk comes running out of the—

Jim: Orderly room?

Aird: And he says, "I got your R & R here." I said, "Don't tell me that, because I don't have any money." So, you know, well he says, "Well, you leave in three days for R & R. I said, "I don't have any money." [Jim laughs] And I had a lot of my money going in. I mean, there was no place to spend money. I mean, literally no place to spend money. I'd walk around with six or seven hundred dollars in my wallet and I was having half of my money sent away. And I said, "Well, can you give me that?" And he says, "No, I can't. I don't have access to that. You know, you can't get that until you leave. There is nothing." I said, "Well, can you send a telegram to my parents?" And he said, "Yeah, that I can do." So he sent this telegram to my parents for me and they sent me some money back so I went and I didn't want a lot of money, but I went on R & R again. I didn't have much money, but I wasn't in Vietnam.

Jim: Where did you go?

Aird: I had put in for Bangkok. You see, it would have been nice if I could have got on my first plane to somewhere else, but—

Jim: So you went back to Bangkok? Renew old friendships when you went?

Aird: Yeah, yeah. All my old friends were busy doing something else; I had to find some new friends.

Jim: [laughs] That's always the way it happens. What was the reaction of the company commander and the first sergeant, because you were gone there for about two weeks?

Aird: They didn't even know I was gone. Well, they knew I was on R & R, but they didn't know I was on leave. They didn't know I was gone at all. The company clerk just covered it up. He just hid it.

Jim: That was the advantage in having the company be in two different places.

Aird: Well, that was the—you know, in Echo Company you had the Recon platoon, you had the Mortar Platoon, and you had the Communications battalion, and the company commander would probably be out on the fire base with the Mortar Platoon or with the Communications platoon or something, you know, so they didn't know. So you could hide from 'em.

Jim: What was the reaction of your colleagues in the Recon platoon that you were gone for so long?

Aird: All the more power to him. A couple of the guys never even got their R & Rs, but they didn't begrudge the fact that you could get the heck out of there for a while.

Especially, you know, there was a lot of—in the spring, down in about March, April, May and June, there was a lot of fighting going on around fire bases Granite and Ripcord. As a matter of fact, Ripcord is one of the big battles that they talk about all the time now. But, I mean, there was a lot of—we lost, we were sitting on, I lost my whole, well the whole team, but three of them were wounded, but we were sitting on this ridge waiting to go in on another mission and this must have been in the end of January and somebody came up with the idea that—we had Delta Company, which was really a hard luck bunch of guys, and as a matter of fact, their nickname was the dying Deltas; they were just a bunch of—I mean, they couldn't do anything right. And somebody came up with the idea that they were going to take one Recon team and have them walk point for each one of the three platoons and Delta Company kind of liked to train them and to show them what to do. And this was not popular with the Recon platoon because these guys were a bunch of—well, they were nice guys but they were— [laughs]

Jim: They had issues.

Aird: Yeah, they definitely had issues. And we were waiting to get picked up to fly us into this LZ that Delta Company had secured and I was the point man on the first team and so that means I always went in on the first helicopter. And our lieutenant came up and he says—because we had all come together on this ridge at this LZ, all our teams, and to make this CA into this LZ while it was a secured LZ, but the lieutenant came up to me and he says, “I know the lieutenant from this platoon,” and this was a nice guy, this lieutenant, and he said, “We don't need a point man on the first helicopter because it's a secured LZ.” He says, “I'm gonna go in and then I'll have a few extra minutes to talk with my buddy here.” He says, “You get on the second bird where I would normally be.” So I said, “Yeah, well, fine, sure.” So they picked us up and there were three helicopters and they went into the LZ and we were all in a row and I was sitting in the door next to the door gunner and he taps me on the shoulder and I looked up at him and he goes like this and he started pointing down to the LZ and the first helicopter was coming in at the LZ. As soon as I looked up, the first bird blew up. Well, there was a first explosion and then there was another explosion; I suppose the fuel exploded on the second one. They must have got hit by an RPG [rocket-propelled grenade], but this was, you know, this was the dying Deltas. They should have suspected something when they're doing anything. And, and, a, the three guys—and I mean, there were bodies falling out of this helicopter and I thought, “Oh shit, my whole team is gone.” And there were three of them were killed, but two of 'em, three of 'em got blown out of the—well, two of 'em got blown out of the helicopter plus the lieutenant and they were all screwed up. They must have fallen a hundred feet. It had to be that far. And they were all screwed up, but the three guys got killed and—

Jim: You talked about a bunch of different deaths here. You talked about your experience of offloading multiple bodies and then all of this. How did this affect you, seeing all this death around you?

Aird: Oh, I just figured there was no way I was gonna live through it. I was just gonna be alive until I got killed; that was the end of that. I, honest to God, until, you know, probably about six weeks and until I had six weeks left, I never thought I had a prayer of living through that.

Jim: Did you communicate any of that with your family in letters?

Aird: No.

Jim: What did you tell them? Kind of the happy-face stuff, that nothing was happening?

Aird: No, everything's fine, yeah. It's raining today or the sun is shining today or—yeah.

Jim: When you came back from R & R, this was like in April or May of—

Aird: That was probably the beginning of May.

Jim: Yeah. You were getting pretty short. Did that change any way you thought about things?

Aird: Well, I'll tell you. The last day I spent out in the field, the last mission I went on was over Memorial Day of 1970 and somebody had come up with it. They had had, I think, two infantry companies off on a blocking force, as a blocking force on Fire Base Granite which was where Longmire got killed and I watched that firefight from one of the ridges out—I could see it, and of course I didn't know he was killed, I didn't even know what company was on the fire base at the time, but they had had two infantry companies out in these areas as blocking forces to try and intercept these NVA that were moving up to—and we're talking about battalions and regiments, and they never made any contact, they never found anything. And so they decide that they were going to take our Recon platoon, our three teams, and we might not have even had six men on the team. You know, oftentimes we'd go out with four or five men. I went out on one mission with three guys, me and two other guys. But they decided that they'd put us up as a blocking force out there, all eighteen of us, maybe. And we worked this area—and I'm gonna bounce. We must have been in this area for, I don't know, two, maybe even three weeks in there and they were resupplying us once, which means that the helicopter flew over and we'd say on the radio, "You're right over us," and they'd push everything out of the helicopter and it'd come crashing through the jungle.

And we got a resupply like this, we were set up along this river and we—and as the helicopter was flying away, they radioed back and said, “You’ve got a whole column of NVA not a hundred yards from you,” you know, in this direction; “what do you want to do?” Somebody from the rear must have been listening in, the battalion must have been listening in, and they said well we’ve got—don’t know what they called it—a flight of gunships on their way out there right now. So they came out and there must have been three or four Cobras and they shot the shit out of this, and what it was, was an ambulance column moving back from Fire Base Granite who had just got hit the day before, or the night before—this must have been about a day and a half after it—and they emptied everything that they had at ‘em and they were still moving through this area. So they gave us, I think they called it a battery 3 x 3, nine artillery pieces. And we called in this nine artillery pieces on these NVA, on this column here for, oh, God, it had to be a good hour. I don’t know how many rounds they put in, but they just blew the hell out of it. And then they told us, “Well, now you gotta go in and check out what’s going on there.”

So we went down there and we went into the area and it was a low river area. It was kind of like a valley but there were pretty big hills in the valley. There were mountains and then there were hills. And so we went up this—and we were walking in the river and we got to the conjunction of this other river and we went up to the right up this river and there were a bunch of trails all over the place. So we split up and each man took a different trail and we went up the ridge and I went up my trail and I walked about, oh, maybe thirty or forty yards and I peeked around this bush that was sticking out over the trail and here’s an NVA and he was bandaged around the middle, laying on a stretcher—**[End of Tape 2, Side A]**—on a US Army stretcher, and he’s laying on his side and he’s up on one elbow and he’s looking down the trail and he’s looking at me. And I’m, and I looked around and I said, “Well, what the hell am I gonna do now?” I really can’t take him prisoner. I mean, what am I gonna do with him?” I finally decided that, “Well, I guess I’m gonna have to take him prisoner.” I said, “I’ll go up there and I’ll give him some water and I have to pray to God that there’s no one else around there who’s gonna blow me away, because there’s gotta be somebody close if he’s sitting there on this trail.” And just at this time, one of the guys from my team comes up behind me and he taps me on the shoulder and I was so intense on watching this NVA that he scared the livin’ shit out of me. And I said, [in a whisper] “There’s a guy on the trail down here.” And he looks around the bush and he said, “He’s got a frag.” [fragmentation grenade] And he didn’t have a frag; I knew he didn’t have a frag. But I couldn’t stop myself and I just raised my weapon and I shot him. And one round went out and it jammed; it was the only time my weapon ever jammed in my life and I ejected the shell and I shot him again, a full burst. And I just turned around and walked away. But I couldn’t, I couldn’t stop myself. You know, it was like I was standing—and he didn’t have a frag. I kept screaming in my mind, “He doesn’t have a frag, he doesn’t have a frag.”

Jim: But you're trained to react to that.

Aird: There you go; that's right. So I killed this guy layin' on a stretcher.

Jim: So you said that this was your last patrol, so you had about another six weeks in country.

Aird: Well, this was I kind of backed up here a little bit. So then we pulled out and so we had made contact, so the other two teams and the lieutenant, we all came back together and we were gonna go into this area as a platoon, maybe about eighteen or nineteen guys. And we went up and we went up on top of the ridge, instead of going up by the river, we went up on the top of the ridge and started walking down and it was late in the day. And I was walking point again and all of a sudden I heard something off in the distance and I knew exactly what it was; it was a rifle butt hitting a piece of bamboo, and I don't know why I knew that, but I just knew that's what it was. And I turned around to Carpenter, who was behind me, and I signaled, "Did you hear that down the trail?" And he looked at me and he said, "I don't know what you're talking about." And I said, "Well, I heard something down the trail," you know, through sign language. And he said, "Well, I don't hear anything." So I moved ahead a little bit and I tried to get in position where I could see down the trail some ways and there was an S-shape in the trail and you really couldn't see anything. So I sat down on the trail and I waited, and I waited, and I waited, and nothin' happened. And I turned around to him and I said, "Well, I don't know; maybe I'm nuts."

And then all of a sudden you could hear off in the distance, you could hear some Vietnamese talking. And here comes an NVA patrol down this trail, about nine or ten men. They're walking down this trail and I'm at the head of an "S" and there is a little, like an arch of bamboo over the trail. And so you can't really see anything, so I just sat there trying to figure out what to do, and I decided that well, there's no place to go 'cause there was such a tangle of bamboo you couldn't even get off the trail. There was no way to get off the trail at all. So I sat down on the trail with my elbows on my knees and my rifle pointed down the trail and I just sat there and waited and waited and waited, and then finally the first guy popped up through this bamboo. And he's looking at me, and he's not—well, he wasn't looking at me then, but he's just walking along and he's got his AK47 and it had a full length stock and he had a sling on it that he had slung over his shoulder and he's just walking along, looking at the ground, and the guys behind him are all talking to each other. And this guy, he just keeps walking and I kept saying to myself, "Just turn around and walk away and I won't do a thing. Turn around, I won't kill you. Just turn around and I won't kill you." And he got from about me to that post, which is about six or eight feet away, and he was looking at the ground. Finally he was so close to me that he couldn't help—and he stopped and he was lookin' me straight in the eyes and I was lookin' at him straight in the eyes, and I could see his muscles in his arms start to flex as he was gonna raise his

AK, and I shot him fifteen times, on automatic. “Brrrrrr.” It was really surreal. It was like, you know, something out of nowhere.

Jim: What happened with the other guys in the patrol?

Aird: Well then the guys, my team was too close so they couldn't get any shots off, but the other two teams which were back up the trail and this was windy, a pretty windy trail, and they got in position and they opened up on the rest of the patrol and I kind of crawled off the trail as far as I could get, which was about twelve inches, and I pulled out a frag and I lobbed it over this arc of bamboo and I tried to hold it long enough so that it didn't have any fuse on it when it got there, but, you know, frags were kind of funny. They were supposed to have a six second fuse, but sometimes they would have five seconds, sometimes they would have eight seconds, and this thing must have had a few extra seconds on its fuse because these guys, as soon as I heard that frag hit the ground—and it was that close where, you know, I couldn't have thrown the thing ten-twelve feet—and they just took off lickety-split down the trail. Evidently everybody missed them and then the frag went off.

Jim: Let's get back now to your last patrol there. You have some time then after that in country.

Aird: Okay. Well, they put us in this area as a blocking force still; they still had us in this area. And I was sitting against this tree smoking a cigarette and this was one of the few times that I'd dropped my guard, and I was sitting there smoking a cigarette and all of a sudden I heard this round go past my ear and it couldn't have missed me by about an inch and then I heard the crack of the AK and I dove for the ground and so did everybody else. But it turns out that a battalion of NVA was moving up. And how this guy missed me; I mean, he must have been—well, he was probably excited and shook up like I was. But he missed me, but they were walking, they walked right past one of our teams which was only about, well maybe ten yards off the trail, and they were just hiding down there because there were so many of them. And so they gave us all the artillery they could come up with—well, there were three fire bases, they were all interlocking, our brigade. And they started calling in artillery and my team was assigned to go back to the landing zone and secure the landing zone so we had a way out of there in case we had to get the hell out of there like fast. So we went back to the LZ and I started pulling everything out of my rucksack that I could find, all the ammunition and this, and I had two—and by this time I was getting pretty weird—and I had two Claymores with five or six pieces of det cord and at night I would daisy chain in front of my—I was getting' pretty strange by this time. And I pulled everything out of my rucksack that I could find, all the ammunition, I had it spread out in front of me, and I had two Claymores out there and I had two white phosphorus hand grenades. I had seventeen frags in my rucksack; some of them were so old that when I threw 'em they didn't even go off. I'd have to throw like two or three hand grenades before one would go off, and I had about twelve hundred rounds of

.16 ammunition. And I was fried. I think I had five weeks left in 'Nam. One of the guys came around and said, "We need—" "well, they put this—we had—I guess I have to explain a little bit here. About in April we started getting some of these NCOs—well, I was an E5—but they had these guys that went to NCO school.

Jim: Shake 'n Bakes.

Aird: Yeah. But they had no experience. Well, we had three of those get assigned to the Recon platoon. And one of 'em was a staff sergeant because he was, he was the first guy in his Shake 'n Bake class or something like this. So they stuck me, they split up all the old guys, and most of the guys that I had gone through my tour with were gone now where, you know, I had been one of the last guys as a replacement for Hamburger Hill, so I was one of the last guys to leave. So over the past two to four weeks almost all the guys were gone and they had me out with these guys, and they were alright people but they didn't know what to do. And this staff sergeant comes up to me—and so they had me out on this team with this staff sergeant trying to teach him what to do and he says, "I'm redistributing ammunition; what've you got?" And I said, "I've got this stuff right here and if you touch one fuckin' round, I'm gonna kill ya, because I humped it, I use it. If these people want to go out in the bush with three hand grenades and four hundred rounds of ammunition, that's fine. But I'm not gonna bust my ass humpin' this shit and then have them use it. You touch one round and I'll kill ya." And he looked at me startled and he crawled away. But then when we got back to the—the next day after this, we went back to the rear for a night stand down, and the next day this guy comes up to me and he says, "Come on, we're goin' out on a mission." I said, "Fuck you; I'm not goin'." And he said, "Well, you gotta go." I said, "Fuck you, I do not have to go." I said, "You can court-martial me, you can send me to LBJ [Long Binh Jail], I don't care. I'm not goin'." He says, "Well, I'll go talk to the first sergeant and see what he says." I said, "Go on, be my guest." And he went in, and he comes back out and he says, "Well, the top says if you have under thirty days you can stay in the rear." I said, "I got thirty days. Fuck you; I'm not goin'." I had thirty-five days left in the county. I said, "I'm not goin'. End of discussion. I'm not goin'."

Jim: What did they do with you that month then? Just kind of have you around?

Aird: Well for two weeks they really fucked with me. They sent me out on bunker line details during the day and then they would make me full NCOIC [Non-commissioned officer in charge] of the bunker line at night, so I never got any sleep at all. And then after two days they kinda started to let up and then in Charlie Company they had nine black guys who refused to go out to the field and when they confronted them on it they shot up the company CP, the orderly room. And so they arrested 'em and convicted 'em and assigned them to a couple years at LBJ or so and they needed an E5 or higher with a .45 guarding each one of these guys to go down to LBJ. So I got to be one of them, and so I got down and I

asked them when they wanted me back and they said, “Well, if you miss your DEROS [Date Estimated Return from Overseas] that’s your problem.” [Jim laughs] So I went down, I had a couple of buddies from Antigo who were in ‘Nam and I looked one of ‘em up and visited him and spent some time, a couple of days in Saigon, just farted around.

Jim: So how did you get your orders to come back to the States?

Aird: Well, on the way back—I got a little story I’ll tell you, it’s not a bad story—but we were coming back from, I was coming back from that and we were on a 123, a C123, one of those two-prop jobs, and I was sitting on this—and they have four rows up the sides and down the middle and the guys sat facing each other; they were actually supposed to be paratroop setup for dropping paratroopers that way, but they used ‘em for transportation, and we were having engine trouble and one engine was dead and the other engine was sputtering and they wouldn’t let us land at Da Nang because there was a flight of Phantoms coming back in and they didn’t want to mess up the runway with our wreckage before these bombers came back in, so they had us circling there, and I’m looking at this guy sitting across from me, he was maybe three or four feet away from me, and I looked at his nametag. He was a first lieutenant and it said “Kretz.” And I said, “Well, I know a Kretz from Antigo.” And I looked at him and I said, “Did you ever hear of a place named Antigo?” And he says, “Yeah, that’s where I’m from.” [Jim laughs] And I said, “Well, I’m from Antigo too.” And he looked at my nametag and he said, “Oh, yeah, Jesus, how are ya? What’s going on? You look like you’ve been here a while.” And I said, “Yeah, I’ve got—“ well, I don’t know how many days it was; it wasn’t long. I said, “How much do you have?” He says, “I got eight months left.” [Jim laughs] He was in artillery and he was on some fire base down in the valley, in the A Shau.

Jim: That’s kind of neat. So did they have any kind of a farewell party for you in the company?

Aird: No. No, they didn’t for anybody.

Jim: So as you hopped the plane now, where did you fly back to then, to Fort Lewis?

Aird: We went down to Cam Ranh Bay. I flew from there to Cam Ranh Bay and then they were scheduled to—they had us on rows and we were getting rocketed; I was there for about two days, two nights actually, and we got rocked and mortared every night down there, which was no big deal. They weren’t anywhere near us, I didn’t give a shit, but it upset some of the REMFs [rear echelon motherfuckers]. But they had the last plane going out on July 6th, which was supposed to be my DEROS day, and they had us all in a line and I said, “Geez, I hope I get on this plane.” And I did, and I got up—and I got up and I walked in the plane and I got up to the rows of seats and all of a sudden this guy with a clipboard comes down right in front of me and says, “Well, that’s it; get off the plane.” And I just

completely lost it. I said, “Fuck you, I’m not getting’ off this plane.” And he said, “Well, you gotta get off, sarge.” I said, “I’m not gettin’ off this fuckin’ plane. This is my freedom bird. I’m not gettin’ off this plane.” He says, “You gotta get off the plane; there’s no more room.” And I started screaming and I mean, I just completely lost it, ranting and raving and screaming and pushing everybody I could find, and I’m not gonna get off this plane. And so this guy with the clipboard signals to somebody at the door who signals and they had two MPs down at the ramp, at the base of the ramp down there, and he motions for them to come up and they get up and they’re walking through the door of the plane and the stewardess ran over, pushed ‘em back from the plane. She said, “There’s one more seat; there’s one more seat. Don’t worry about it. He’s okay. There’s one more seat.” And she ran back and she pulled out—and they had these little webbed seats that they would use for take-offs and landings, they had to be in their little webbed seat, and she ran over and she pulled her seat down and she threw me in it and she strapped me in and she said, “That’s it.” So the other guys got off, I got to get on that plane. They’d of had to kill me to get me off—well, they wouldn’t have killed me, but they’d a—

Jim: They would have had a problem.

Aird: They’d have roughed me up. Sea-Tac.

Jim: So you got back to Sea-Tac; did you get out of the Army then?

Aird: No. I had six months left. So they issued us new uniforms and a little bit of gear; they didn’t give us much. So I took everything that I had from ‘Nam and I walked up to the nearest dumpster and I threw everything in it.

Jim: How did the last six months in the Army go?

Aird: Well, I went home for thirty days leave.

Jim: How did that go?

Aird: Well, that went alright. I mean, I was messed up, I really was. I was—

Jim: Did people see a difference in you?

Aird: Oh, yeah. You know, I had friends of mine that told me, four, five, six years later that I was really strange, and I suppose I was. But you couldn’t open your mouth because you didn’t know how to talk, you know. You didn’t, you weren’t—every other word that came out of your mouth was a cuss word and most of the time like when you’re out on missions and things like that you didn’t talk. You used mostly sign language, so your communication skills had somewhat deteriorated and so, you know, I don’t know how to explain it. It was definitely—

Jim: So when you got back into the bosom of the Army again, did they recognize that you had some issues?

Aird: Well, I was supposed to be assigned to—when I left Vietnam, I volunteered to go to Europe and there were three guys that left my battalion with me—they might have even been from my company, but they weren't from the Recon platoon—but they were both married and they both had children and they wanted duty in the States. And I, who was single, didn't want to go back to the States because I didn't want to be screwed with, so I wanted to go to Europe, I volunteered for Europe. Well, they assigned both of those guys to Germany and they assigned me to Fort Riley, Kansas. I got to Fort Riley, Kansas and they were prepping up, they had this big NATO operation that they were going to participate in in Germany and they had assigned too many people to the 1st Infantry Division, which was Fort Riley, Kansas, that they were already at a hundred and ten percent capacity and they couldn't take any more. So when I got to Fort Riley Kansas they reassigned me to Fort Carson, Colorado, which was wonderful. It was the 11th MIC, and I mean, that was just a wonderful place and they didn't screw with you much. And when I got to my battalion there they asked me what I wanted to do. I said, "As long as it's not the infantry, I don't care." And they said, "Well, we've got an opening in the S2 and an opening doing this morning report. You can have whichever job you want." And I didn't know anything about either of them. But I knew one was definitely an office job and I said, "Well, I'll take the S2 assignment then." So they assigned me to S2, which I guess when I was in Recon they changed my MOS from 11 Bravo to 11 Foxtrot, which was Intelligence, I guess. And so they assigned me to the S2 and when I got there there was a captain and a master sergeant and me and a Spec 4 that were assigned to the battalion S2. Well within the first week they transferred the captain, and the second week this master sergeant had a child who was very sick and needed some special attention, so they sent him on a temporary duty someplace to some facility where his son could get medical treatment, and they left me in charge of the battalion S2. Well, I couldn't even open the safe. [Jim laughs] Honestly, I couldn't. They gave me the combination, but I couldn't get it open. And our battalion had a staff sergeant who had a top secret crypto security clearance who was AWOL, bouncing bad checks all over the southwest, and they wanted this guy found and found now, and they expected me to do it. And every day the post G2 would call up; he had the foulest mouth you every heard. And he'd call up and he'd call me every dirty name you could think of and rip me up one side and down the other and, "You son of a bitch, you better find that goddam prick, you." And I would just sit at the other end of this phone with it about eighteen inches from my ear, listening to this, and I didn't even know what to say. I was, I had no—so when he would—and then he'd slam the phone down and the sergeant major was sitting—they had the big room and they had those six foot dividers in, but they didn't reach the wall, it was about two feet between the walls, and I had my desk and then I could look right over and here was the sergeant major lookin' on the other side and he'd be listening to this and he'd look over at me and he'd have a shit-eating grin on his face when the guy hung up, and this guy, this post

G2, was a colonel or something. And when I'd hang up the phone he'd just shake his head and go back to doin' what he was doin'. [laughs] I mean, I didn't; I was out of my element anyways. I had spent the whole time in the jungle, for Christ sakes, and I had only been in the Army for eighteen months, for cryin' out loud, and I didn't know what to do. So they assigned another NCO, some other, some higher one up.

Jim: Someone who was trained to do this stuff, I assume?

Aird: And they sent me to an NCO refresher course, which was about a three week, I think it was a three week course. And I went over to the three week NCO course and when I got back they had put my battalion or brigade or whatever it was on this assignment they called a garden plot, I suppose that was the mission name, but it was anti-riot control. I mean, you're talkin' 1970 and the war protests and civil rights protests and everything going on. So they had assigned my battalion to this and—but if you weren't part of it, if you weren't participating in the whole program you couldn't rejoin your unit until they came off of this, and this was a six month assignment. Well, I only had six months in the Army. So I just didn't have anything to do. So I had a barracks to live in and I would go eat in the mess hall but I had nothin' to do. Actually it sounds great, but it was as boring as could be. I mean, all your friends, all your buddies were—they would get 'em up in the middle of the night and load 'em on airplanes and—

Jim: Was there any discussion about Vietnam while you were on this assignment? Did anybody ask you about it?

Aird: No.

Jim: Any counseling or anything?

Aird: No. The only counseling I got was re-upping. They wanted me to—the sergeant major wanted me to re-up somethin' terrible.

Jim: It doesn't sound like you were too interested.

Aird: I wasn't. When I got out, they had a program and they offered it to me where if you were an E5 with combat experience they would commission you as a second lieutenant and I got a letter and they offered me this program and I pretty much threw it in the trash. I didn't pretty much throw it in the trash; that's exactly what I did. [laughs]

Jim: When you got out of the military, what happened to you then? [brief pause] Mike is handing me a picture with a beard, he doesn't have round glasses on, he looks clearly to me like he's from Antigo. I've seen plenty of people like you. [both laugh]

Aird: I went to college. I went back to college, to Stevens Point.

Jim: How were you treated in college?

Aird: Poorly.

Jim: And how so?

Aird: Well, most of the Vietnam veterans hung around together and it was pretty much from self preservation. That's where I met a few very close friends that I still have today, Steve Petrowski amongst them. He and I formed one of the two chapters of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War together. And I went to the UW-Stevens Point and, you know, people were lining up to give you a hard time.

Jim: How did you react to that?

Aird: Mostly with my fists. I was involved in many barroom brawls. Of course, I wouldn't back down from anyone. And I wasn't looking for trouble, but if trouble came lookin' for me I was more than happy to oblige.

Jim: Got ya. How long did you go through this stage?

Aird: Oh, must have been a good—I'm still goin' through it. [laughs]

Jim: We all are. But the Vietnam Veterans Against the War kind of died as a—

Aird: As a result of the end of the war, yeah.

Jim: Did you join any mainline veteran organizations?

Aird: When I first got out I joined the American Legion and I was a member of that for one year and I was treated so much like crap that to this day I will not join the American Legion. I am a member of the VFW and the DAV and the 101st Airborne Division Association and the Military Order of the Purple Heart, although they have evidently dropped me 'cause I never get any information from 'em any more, although I'm supposed to be a life—[**tape ends abruptly**]

[End of Interview]