

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with

RALPH A. BECK

Helicopter Pilot and Crew Chief, Marine Corps Air Wing, Vietnam War.

2002

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**Beck, Ralph A.**, (1945- ). Oral History Interview, 2002.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 41 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 41 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

### **Abstract:**

Ralph A. Beck, an Adell, Wisconsin native, discusses his Vietnam War service as an aerial gunner in a Marine Air Group and as a crew chief. He mentions receiving his draft notice a few days after he enlisted in the Marine Corps. Assigned to Ky Ha Marine Corps Helicopter Base (Vietnam), Beck talks about flying troop lift and resupply missions in a UH-34D helicopter, evacuating Marine Recon units, transporting body bags, and extracting a body from a helicopter crash. He portrays the emotions aboard the helicopter when a Recon unit was successfully evacuated. Beck touches on moving to Phu Bai and, after a thirty-day leave at home, extending his service tour. He sketches the besieged Khe Sanh Air Strip and talks about his duty as a crew chief there. He describes living in underground bunkers for two and a half months and being under fire every day. Beck states that incoming aircraft were like magnets attracting enemy fire. He recalls sleeping with his flak jacket on, using the buddy system whenever he went anywhere, and using an M-1 bayonet for a variety of things. Beck mentions interactions with the Seabees, food, morale, and using talcum powder for hygiene after the shower was destroyed. He tells of putting out a fire on the runway while under attack and reflects, "You always looked at the next guy's job and say, 'Oh, you're nuts!'" Beck describes an odd occurrence when he was trying to run for cover and his legs would not work correctly. He speaks of seeing a C-123 shot down while circling around to land at the base. After leaving Khe Sanh to join Marine Air Group 39, Beck relates a lingering fear of being outside and getting shelled while at an outdoor movie at Quang Tri. He discusses duty at a small outpost called LZ Stud, which was infested with rats. Beck reflects on the positive effect of the Marine Corps on his personality and on the waste of life during the war.

### **Biographical Sketch:**

Beck (b. October 2, 1945) served three tours of duty with the Marines during the Vietnam War. He achieved the rank of Sergeant and was honorably discharged in 1971. He had a career in law enforcement, including being a Sergeant of Police with the Fox Point Police Department (Wisconsin), and eventually settled in Grafton (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by Laurie Arendt, 2002

Transcribed by Richard Laska, 2007

Corrected by Channing Welch, 2009

Corrections typed by Erin Dix, 2010

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2010

**Transcribed Interview:**

- Ralph: Today's the 11<sup>th</sup> [?].
- Laurie: March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002, I'm in Grafton, Wisconsin with Ralph Beck. He is a Marine, Vietnam veteran. The only other person here is myself, Laurie Arendt, the interviewer. There is no relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, except that this is for the Ozaukee veterans book. Your rank when you left was Sergeant?
- Ralph: Yes.
- Laurie: And you served in Vietnam?
- Ralph: That is correct.
- Laurie: Ok. Now we can keep going.
- Ralph: Ok, like I said, I, after getting out of training, I arrived in a Vietnam in June of 1966. I was assigned to a helicopter base called Ky Ha, which is just north of Chu Lai, which was a major airbase for Marine Corps at that time. I was attacked—well, it was called crash, fire, and rescue. It was basically—crash was for, mostly aircraft, you know, the aircraft down/aircraft burning. Also some might say a fire department was quite a bit more than that. For the first seven—no, sixteen months or so, we were in a very secured area, and I mean, [heavy static on tape] we really didn't know what was going on. During that time I flew as an aerial gunner with one of the squadrons, and which was another thing I forgot. It was probably because I was able to get my air crew wings and—
- Laurie: What for?
- Ralph: And I had 163 missions in the short time that I was flying, and so, I was proud of that.
- Laurie: Good.
- Ralph: That was with [phone rings] they call them UH 34D's. They were small helicopters, and I probably got a picture of one of those, and we did mostly a lot of re-supply troop lifts, RECON extractions, and I can remember one time we were going in to pull out a RECON team and all I could see—these guys coming—high-tailing it through the brush, and all they were saying, "We love you guys!" And we always had one bird—one chopper went in, and there was always a chase [unintelligible]—a chase plane they called it that stayed up above in case if something happened with the one on the ground there was another one to go in.
- Laurie: Okay.

Ralph: Or give it some support, and I can remember the guys come running through the grass, and as they were getting up to the door, and all you do was grab 'em by the back of the neck and just pull 'em in—in a—the object was to get in and out as fast as you could, and yeah, that was—I enjoyed the flying part, but there was a lot, you know, was a lot—we did a lot of different things. There was a lot of re-supplies, and we pulled a lot of bodies out, a lot of body bags in the morning—the big fire-fights at night, and I remember one day I think we—I worked—the one I was on alone took out like seventeen people in body bags, and I recall one time we were going to an area and we started taking fire, and they figured it was like from 50 caliber, but the shooter was not that good a shooter, not a good aim. So they were away from our—but you're looking—these tracers were going past us, and their tracers—they looked like softballs.

Laurie: Really?

Ralph: I mean, they were so big, I mean, you look at it and you think it, and you know that there's four bullets between every one—

Laurie: Yep.

Ralph: Of those tracers coming.

Laurie: Yep.

Ralph: But—so that was, my time basically down at Ky Ha.

Laurie: Okay.

Ralph: In December of '67, the Marine Corps moved us all north to a place called Phu Bai, and that's P-H-U with a capitol B-A-I, and Chu Lai was C-H-U capitol L-A-I.

Laurie: I have that.

Ralph: Okay.

Laurie: Did—what does that mean? Did you know what that translates into?

Ralph: No, I was just—

Laurie: Cause they sound so similar, like it might be—

Ralph: Yeah, I know, maybe this, maybe it's—

Laurie: Oh, okay.

Ralph: That was the name of their cities—

Laurie: Like Grafton or something.

Ralph: Yeah, Grafton.

Laurie: Ok.

Ralph: And anyhow we moved out towards north of Da Nang toward—closer to the DMZ and during the time that I was over there, normal rotation was thirteen months. But if you would extend for six more months they'd send you anywhere in the free world for thirty days of free leave. So when I was at Ky Ha the first time I was there a year, and then I went back home here to Wisconsin, Adell, for thirty days—

Laurie: Oh, you're from Adell?

Ralph: Yeah.

Laurie: Oh, ok.

Ralph: And then—yeah, my wife's from Random Lake.

Laurie: Oh, my father-in-law lives in Adell.

Ralph: Oh, he does?

Laurie: Yeah.

Ralph: Big Adell! Huh?

Laurie: Oh, yeah [laughs].

Ralph: And, so then when I went back in—it was like November or December, in that fall we moved north, and, then I had extended for another six months so then I came back in 1967 [cough] for thirty days right over Christmas. Was able to see the Ice Bowl game of '67.

Laurie: Oh, okay.

Ralph: And went back in the early part of January. When we got back to Phu Bai they asked if anybody—they needed some replacements for Khe Sanh. I had no idea where Khe Sanh was, and I had absolutely no idea what I was getting myself into, and the first thing I knew—you know when we were flying in, it didn't look any different than any other outpost. I mean there was an outer perimeter, there was an inner perimeter, they had an artillery battery there. They had a runway. It was a short runway, and the runway was made out of steel sheeting, and the Seabees would install it [cough], and would just plain—they'd level the ground, and they'd—it was a matting, and they had interlocking sheets, and they'd slide 'em

all together. That whole runway—in fact in here, we’ve got a picture of it [flipping through paperwork]. This is what --that’s the runway.

Laurie: Okay.

Ralph: That’s all interlocking sheets. It wasn’t very long. It was simply just long enough to get a “bird” onto it and off again. And, so anyhow, might—when going in there, as soon as the helicopter sat down all I could hear the crew chief who was saying, “Get out, get out, get out!” And I was hardly out the door and I think there were one or two other guys with me that were moving up—they had replacement for something because anybody who had to get up there simply, you were at a rear base, and if there was a helicopter going up there that’s the one you get ‘er goin’ and you’re on it, and I got off, and the next thing I could see this guy come to this bunker. He’s waving, “Get over here!” you know, and in we went, and I soon found out why. Any airplane or chopper on the ground was just like a magnet. We’ve got hit—it was never a question of, you know, are we gonna get hit today. It was simply a question of what time are we gonna get hit today and how often do we get hit today, and it was—I guess I look back—I would not trade the experience for anything. We had like fifteen guys that lived together underground for almost two to two and a half months and never had an argument, but as we go through [?]-when we got there we had this—first, most—and I’ve got quite a few pictures—but most of the—there wasn’t a building standing above ground.

Laurie: Really?

Ralph: If it was a building that was above ground, it had been blow up. Everybody was living underground. Even the guy—even like on the trench lines all those, the grunts, they’re all in bunkers on the lines, and you used to sit out there, and I mean you had your stuff you’re doing during the day, but they had their radar up there because they had a small tower, and I got a picture of the tower here. This was the tower. This was our bunker—

Laurie: Ok.

Ralph: Above ground. Here’s the tower. This is kind of what Khe Sanh looked like.

Laurie: Ok.

Ralph: I figure—his first name is Willie. I don’t know what his last name was. He was—we all called him “Tower Flowers”—

Laurie: [Laughs]

Ralph: You know, the guys who worked in the tower, okay—

Laurie: That’s funny.

Ralph: When the C-130's or the C-123's would come in they would have to have a guy in the tower, and Cubby was in the tower, and this here was the front—she took a rocket right on the back steps. Cubby had about five pounds of metal, they figure, in his rear end. I mean, he lived, but he just blew the tower down, and the guy down inside here, he got pretty well banged up by shrapnel, and I mean this was an everyday occurrence. So it was one of those things that you just never knew. I mean, you spent most of your time if you're outside always near someplace to run to, and you spend as little time outside as possible 'cause there really wasn't any point in being out there. I mean, we had our line duty and we had our runway duties and things like that, but it was a, it was a unique experience.

Laurie: Yeah.

Ralph: You know, I look back—I'm really proud of the fact, I mean, that for some reason that I, you know, just by happenstance I ended up at that outpost during this—

Laurie: Really.

Ralph: This time period, you know, and like I said, it wasn't that I knew what was going on. I had no idea what Khe Sanh was or anything, and then—but it was different, and a couple of experiences. When we, when we were living above ground in what would be called "The White Elephant," the big bunker, everybody had kinda like a bunk berth, I guess, a bed frame, and I don't know where they got it from, but they were in there anyhow, and they had the little thin mattress. We called 'em the "gook mattress" about this thing we'd fold it out—

Laurie: [laughs] Uh-huh.

Ralph: And when you slept, I mean, you always slept with your clothes on—flak jackets on, I mean, you never—that was the way, and we had—we felt pretty secure in there. I mean it was a pretty good-sized bunker with a lot of stuff up on top. The way bunkers were designed when they're above the ground they'd have—the walls are very thick. They'd have like sheet metal up on top, and then they'd put a couple layers of sandbags and then an air space and then more sandbags with the idea that if a rocket came through it would detonate in the air space.

Laurie: Yeah, okay.

Ralph: And so that was kinda the idea, but I came in from wherever I had been, and I just laid out on a crack, and I—

Laurie: This is still at Khe Sanh?

Ralph: Yeah, this is at Khe Sanh.

Laurie: Okay.

Ralph: Yeah, this is all Khe Sanh.

Laurie: Okay.

Ralph: And when I laid down, I always carried on my flak jacket I had an M-1 bayonet that I had acquired somewhere along the line, and the thing—I mean, I used that for everything—the C-ration cases for snapping the wires off, I mean, it was just one of those things where it was very handy. It's like having a pliers or something—very handy—

Laurie: Like a Swiss army knife?

Ralph: Yes, a very handy tool to have with you.

Laurie: Okay.

Ralph: And what I didn't know as I laid down, that that bayonet had fell through the springs, and a very good friend of mine—he's from Antioch, Illinois—a guy named Greg Zemenek. He had the bunk next to me—him and I were partners. If he had to go somewhere, I'd follow him twenty-thirty feet behind him. If I had to go somewhere, he'd follow me—

Laurie: Was that standard to do that?

Ralph: Yeah, we always had somebody—you always would pair up with somebody, and so anyhow, all of a sudden you hear this, "Whoomf, Whoomf," and the stuff's startin' to come in, and the dust is startin' to shake loose from the ceiling in this bunker, and everybody jumps up to get out and go to the underground, and I jumped up and I had my whole bed hanging on.

Laurie: Oh!

Ralph: You know? He goes—I hollered at Zemenek—

Laurie: [laughs]

Ralph: "Get this thing off my rear end!", you know, and he's trying to get that bayonet, you know, and we looked at it after that and we laughed, but, and it was—we were the last two guys out of that bunker, you know, but—at other times you'd like—yeah, I don't know, every day, like I say, it was never a question, fog was our best friend.

Laurie: Okay.

Ralph: As long as there was fog we knew we weren't gonna get hit because they could not see us or the base, and therefore, you know, they weren't gonna waste a round shooting blindly either. But I used to always think that, you know, like these C-130 pilots or 123 pilots, you know, [unintelligible] that they had a pretty decent job. I wouldn't had wanted to been one of those. Every time they'd come into



that base they must have thought that it was deserted 'cause that there wasn't a person above ground.

Laurie: Wow!

Ralph: You know, everybody just waiting because when that "bird" hit the runway—and they would never shut down. If they'd come in the runway—like this an area—they'd drive in like—they'd come off the runway like they'd turn in a parking area—they'd roll right in there. Anything in there that was gonna go got shoved out the back door. Soon as they got round up, back lined up on the runway, they were gone again. I mean, they never shut down, and they never stopped, and once they hit the runway, that's when you would expect, you know, we got a lot of rocket and artillery fire.

Laurie: Wow.

Ralph: And there was three of 'em—one was hit be—right before I got there—a fuel bladder's hit. That went off to the side. When I was there we had another, I think C-130, that went off the runway that was hit, and—

Laurie: It had to be just ideal targets 'cause they're so big.

Ralph: Oh!

Laurie: You know?

Ralph: We always called 'em—they were like magnets.

Laurie: Yeah.

Ralph: They were like magnets. Soon as they—you know, I mean, you know Charlie he could sit out on the hills, and he could see this plane coming as well as we could.

Laurie: Damn sure.

Ralph: You know, all they had to do is line up. I'm trying to see if—[papers rustling] they had those—there's the picture I got. Well, anyhow. It's here. There's a picture in one of these magazines. That's a CH-53. Ok, here's the one that went down just before I got there. That was basically a C-130 with fuel bladders.

Laurie: Oh.

Ralph: Where is he? Sergeant Joe Kahi from Hawaii. Joe was a—he was really a neat guy. Staff Sergeant—

Laurie: So you knew him?

- Ralph: Oh, yeah. Staff Sergeant Kahi[], he was our senior NCO then. But [shuffling papers], I don't know. Must be in this here one, the other one—but here's a picture of that helicopter, and, yeah, right here, that's us. He had just started to lift off, and here you can see the seats yet.
- Laurie: Yeah.
- Ralph: And they took a round, a mortar round or something in a pylon[] section, and this got like big eight massive blades going—he just cleared the cockpit out—just took the pilots right out.
- Laurie: Uh!
- Ralph: So that was kind of like our ammo dumps, you know. We ended up, you know basing it there. You had to try and extinguish those. One night we got called—the artillery battery was on fire, and so we get these, we had these big trucks like this, and they'd, you know, have a couple hundred gallons of water, and we'd go down there—and I mean this is dead of night, like ten-thirty, eleven o'clock at night, and this thing is burning, and this is down at the end of the base, and the base, like I said, isn't very big, and we get down there. As soon as we get down there, shortly thereafter, they start taking mortar rounds. There's, smaller wooden—you know, you can tell the difference between a rocket, artillery, or a mortar, and I can remember—we ran into—like myself, there were three other guys, and at that time I was a crew chief then. So, in up there it didn't really make a difference who was who, you know, you all did the same job.
- Laurie: Yeah.
- Ralph: But anyhow, we're up there, and all of a sudden, we started taking rounds, and we run, we jump, and grab the flap, and we jump in this bunker, and I can remember these guys sitting in this bunker and air battery would say, “What youse guys doing out there?” I mean, if we're trying to put the fire, they said,—“What are ya's, nuts?” You know, but that's when everybody's, I mean, idea, you know, you always looked at the next guy's job and say, “Oh, you're nuts!” You know, when the runway would take a round or hit, the Seabees would get out there with their Caterpillars and shove the plating out and stick another one, and we would think they were nuts.
- Laurie: Uh-huh.
- Ralph: You know, and I mean, they're out there driving around on this runway and everybody in the hills could see 'em, and, so [laughs] anyhow, you know it just—everybody had their job to do, and everybody did their job. One of our things in the morning that we'd always have to do is basically get out there, and we had to walk that entire runway for shrapnel. Because if there was any shrapnel on there and something did try to land—
- Laurie: That would be nasty.

Ralph: Then you'd blow a tire.

Laurie: Right.

Ralph: And that's the last one you wanted. That would—that "bird" on the ground would have blown a tire because they couldn't get off and you knew what was coming after that.

Laurie: Yeah.

Ralph: But, it was—and I looked it up once, and I can't—it was either February 20<sup>th</sup> or the 22<sup>nd</sup>, somewhere's, that two dates—that base they figured took over 1500 rounds that one day, and we thought, they—everyone when they'd come in they'd say, "We're on red alert!" Which means, they figured that we were gonna get hit with ground troops on the lines.

Laurie: Okay.

Ralph: And that never happened, but the problem we had there was, you know, being more or less like an inner perimeter, if they ever broke through the line, you got your guys coming back, you know, it really—it was a good situation that it never happened because, you know, you got your [unintelligible] guys in front of you, and yet, what are ya gonna do?

Laurie: Right.

Ralph: But, I, that's one just distinct thing that day because we thought, "This is just gonna be done. This is gonna be"—and there was no way in the world, that they could have got us or anybody else off that base. I mean, they couldn't get any planes in. At the end, the C-130's and 23—they wouldn't even land 'em. They were starting to use skid drops where they shoved these sleds out.

Laurie: Yeah.

Ralph: You know, and left the sleds fly because they—it was just too hazardous this—to put 'em on the ground, and we didn't even want 'em on the ground. You know, and then, by July, the base was abandoned and that was it, but if for whatever purpose, I mean, that was just one of those that during that Tet Offensive, for some reason, that base was just picked as a target I guess.

Laurie: Did you ever find out why you weren't hit with ground troops? In hindsight, did you ever find out?

Ralph: Maybe they didn't have—we had, the 26<sup>th</sup> Marines were up there, on the lines, and also ARVN Rangers, and the ARVN Rangers did a pretty good job of holding their line.

- Laurie: Okay.
- Ralph: You know, but we could—we could actually—from, I got it here on—as we were there, maybe they didn't have enough—you know, maybe they were [unintelligible] who—you know. I got one here, there's two, one right out there—we could actually from our line see the trench lines going in.
- Laurie: Oh, let me see that.
- Ralph: They were digging trench lines in a zig-zag fashion, and we could actually watch the daily progress. One day we got—when we were living underground after the engineers built everybody underground bunkers, we were under, and one day down here comes this corpsman. He's got his stethoscope, and he's listening to the walls. We're thinking, "What are you doing?" And he said when the artillery, artillery when they line up they've got aiming stakes, and anyhow, one day one of the stakes started to shake, and they found that they were undermining the base. So now they're going through all the underground bunkers to see if they could hear anything.
- Laurie: Oh!
- Ralph: But you know, we were quite a ways in, but I mean our base was more than a half-mile long, quarter-mile wide. That was probably, you know, I mean, it wasn't very big.
- Laurie: Okay.
- Ralph: You know, and—
- Laurie: So what were the underground bunkers like? I mean, describe 'em to me.
- Ralph: Okay, it was probably ten feet wide and maybe eighteen feet long, and then on each side they'd have, built-in like bunks maybe three high. You never wanted the top bunk.
- Laurie: Uh-huh.
- Ralph: [laughs] You know, but we didn't—I think we had like—in our bunk, we had fifteen bunks, and I think we mighta had—well, we had a couple guys in cargo in with us. Oh, they mighta had at the most ten or twelve in there, so and one guy was a mechanic, and that was but—you know, but—I mean, I got—they were just big, very thick timbered, they engineered it, and it was quite a ways underground, and then they'd shove a lot of stuff on top. They'd put false roofs on, and at one point in time we had one of these that was all blown up, and we simply shoved it over there with a forklift and dumped it over on top of our bunker.
- Laurie: Okay.

- Ralph: Because it was just something else to be hit before—you know, if it would [unintelligible] detonate a round, at least it's not going to come through the bunker. But, and then, you know, in [unintelligible] I was telling one of the guys at work last night I was in the Air Force Reserves now.
- Laurie: Uh-huh.
- Ralph: There was one day that you could always hear in the hillside, you'd hear a "Thump!"—and you know, almost 'til you started to time it. By eleven o'clock in the morning for some reason we started to get hit eleven in the morning, and you're sitting there and all of a sudden, you'd hear, "Boom-Thump-Thump!" And now you knew three were coming, and then you hoped you heard the whistle because if you'd hear the whistle then it was over your head and gone. And we were out working on our equipment, and all trucks and everything with equipment were put in what they called revetments, and we had like three fifty-five gallon drums stacked one on top of the other, and then they're all filled with dirt, and then you back your equipment in there between—and each one had like a stall, and we started getting hit [clears throat], and myself and a guy named Dan Decato, from Canton, Ohio, and a mechanic were stuck underneath this darn truck, and under the truck I was fine. You know, we sat in there, and think I had a cigarette.
- Laurie: [laughs]
- Ralph: Sittin' there just waitin'. I mean, we smoked—everyone smoked a lot.
- Laurie: Oh, yeah.
- Ralph: And there was a lull, and we decided we're gonna run back to the bunker, and I got out in the open, and I couldn't run.
- Laurie: You couldn't?
- Ralph: I never—Decato in panic—I could see Decato, and he's hollering, "Come on back!" I'm going through all the motions. I mean, my arms are going, my legs—and I just wasn't getting [unintelligible] like the whole world went into slow motion on me.
- Laurie: Wow.
- Ralph: I just—I never—I could never, I mean, I got there eventually, but it was just like I have no idea what happened.
- Laurie: That is very strange.
- Ralph: I just couldn't run. You know, I'm doing everything to—I'm doing what I'm supposed to run. I'm just not moving across the ground.

Laurie: Oh.

Ralph: So, anyhow that was just—that was one of ‘em, I think—

Laurie: Wow.

Ralph: One of the weird ones. And there were some good times. You know, we had this—I said this guy, Greg Zemenek. Every night, out of our C-rations, we would always save—like, we always had—say we wanted “tea and crumpets”—we’d take our cookies—

Laurie: [laughs]

Ralph: Out there, and we always had a little thing of coffee or tea, because there was nothing else—I mean, there wasn’t any, you know, there wasn’t anything like milk or anything.

Laurie: Yeah.

Ralph: What was in your C-rations, that’s what you had, and you made do with that. So, every night we’d sit in our bunk and we’d have tea and crumpets.

Laurie: [laughs]

Ralph: And, I mean that’s kind of our enjoyment for the night.

Laurie: So tell me—a couple—these are like, I guess, follow-up questions. You said you had no idea what you were getting into when you got there. Obviously, Vietnam is much different than, like, was it, Operation Anaconda?

Ralph: Yeah.

Laurie: And that you don’t—you didn’t really know. I mean, what—did rumors come back to you where you were about what was going on, or?

Ralph: No, what I meant was, I—when I volunteered to go up to Khe Sanh, I had no idea that Khe Sanh was under siege.

Laurie: Oh, okay.

Ralph: In the Tet Offensive, you know. I think we all kind of knew what Vietnam was about and their different areas, and, you know, in the south part, like the Army and a lot of that was down along Saigon. I mean probably most of the Marine Corps had no knowledge of down through the delta and stuff, [unintelligible] way down there. We were all up in the upper area which was called the I Corps.

Laurie: Okay.

- Ralph: But, no, that's what I meant by that because—
- Laurie: Oh, okay.
- Ralph: Like I say, when we flew in there, it looked like any other base until the helicopter hit the ground, and they almost shoved you out the door, and they were gone before you got halfway across the runway.
- Laurie: Okay.
- Ralph: You know, nobody drugged their feet there.
- Laurie: And then my other question, like, how you said “tea and crumpets”—what was the mood like there among you and the other guys that you—would—
- Ralph: Good.
- Laurie: It was good?
- Ralph: Yeah, we—very close. Like I said, we lived underground—probably ten or twelve of us lived in there for at least a month and a half that I was up there. They started, you know, people get pulled, and I got pulled out of there probably end of March, early April, and I—there was never an argument between anybody. You—
- Laurie: Yeah, you said that, okay.
- Ralph: You depended on each other, you know, and the point is, there was nothing to argue about. Nobody was going anywhere. Nobody wanted to go anywhere. The last thing you wanted to do is—we had one guy that was in with the—they were in with the tower crew and stuff. I remember he got hit with shrapnel, and they went—they took him over to—what they had an underground sick bay area, and the doctors patched him up, and they wanted him to fly back down to one of the main bases. He come, he come back with us. It was more dangerous—ya figured, I'll take my chances here with the wound than I will getting on that airplane.
- Laurie: Yeah.
- Ralph: Or the helicopter out there, but, and he was [unintelligible] you know. When you were there [coughs], it was always like—you're always looking for a place to go, a place to hide, and that stayed with probably every one of us for awhile. I can remember going back—when I finally got pulled back out and went down to, what was called Quang Tri. That's Q-U-A-N-G, T-R-I.
- Laurie: Isn't that a province?
- Ralph: Yeah, Quang Tri Province, and that was—

- Laurie: I—when I was in college I specifically took a class in Viet—the history of Vietnam War, so I kind of remember some—
- Ralph: Okay.
- Laurie: Of the things you're talking about.
- Ralph: Yeah, see, when that Tet Offensive—here is Quang Tri.
- Laurie: Mm-hmm.
- Ralph: I gotta open up [shuffles paper]. Then you probably—then you heard of Hue.
- Laurie: Mm-hmm.
- Ralph: City of Hue. That was a citadel.
- Laurie: Yep.
- Ralph: Hue, okay. Quang Tri, we're up here in Dong—that's where Zemenek by the way, and then, yeah, you got a big old spot—Khe Sanh is right there.
- Laurie: Okay.
- Ralph: And, so this was back—by then I was attached to Marine Air Group 39 and I went back there—and it was almost two months—I was afraid to go out in the open.
- Laurie: Really?
- Ralph: They—at the base during night [unintelligible] while they'd have—Quang Tri being a fairly large airbase, and quite a big perimeter on it, you know. It was fairly safe, I mean, you didn't really walk around with your rifle during the day because, you know, it was secure, and a lot of the perimeter around that [coughs]. But, when I got back there they went to outdoor movies, you know. I could not get myself to go out in the open, and it took I bet ya over two months, and the first night I went with a guy—a guy named Benjamin Ham, from Whitsett, Texas.
- Laurie: Isn't that neat how you can remember all these people's names?
- Ralph: Yeah, and Benny Ham, he decided we were gonna go. So we went to the outdoor movie and gol-[?] if we didn't get mortared, and just about the end, we started taking mortar rounds and the next thing I knew, I'm in the drainage ditch and this big concrete pipe, and that was the last time I ever went to a movie, and even when I'd come back to the states and—I spent twenty-eight months in Vietnam. I came back in October of '68. It was October of '68, and I was assigned at Camp Pendleton to the air wing at Camp Pendleton, and even then—I mean, by then you weren't afraid of going anywhere—



Laurie: Right.

Ralph: You know, every time you hear this banging—this you always, like the turtle, you stick a certain—like, you're trying, to make yourself as short as possible. But you know in the actual things, that now are all in the past, but you look back at 'em, and I said—the—the stuff that you remember is really not any funny stuff, you know. I can remember [unintelligible] a Chaplain Kelly. He was a Captain Chaplain. There's also a chaplain, a Ray Stubbe, who was a chaplain in Wauwatosa, and I even met him, but he wrote a book called "Valley of Decision," and he was up there, but he was with the, more or less with the infantry, and, there was one time we could actually see the infantry had one out on a—for whatever reason was assigned going out, supposed to go out maybe, probably 100 meters, to check it out, and they ended up with a very bad firefight and hand-to-hand combat, and they couldn't get—the ones that could get back, couldn't bring the other ones back that were left behind.

Laurie: Oh.

Ralph: And they come a couple days later they were able to get out there, and they brought 'em back and they had them [unintelligible] that stunk so bad, because all their, you know, when they're sitting laying in the sun and they were all bloated then. Where they got shot was gangrene all through 'em, and we were on a pad when they were bringing 'em in, and it was just—I talked to guys in graves registration—I don't know how they ever handled that stuff, because I mean, it was just miserable.

Laurie: Wow. So when you were out there—when you were in Khe Sanh, did you actually sleep? I mean, did you—were you able to get sleep, or was it more of exhaustion and then you were able?

Ralph: I think—

Laurie: Or did you get—I don't think you ever got used to it, but did you develop a tolerance to—

Ralph: That was simply the way it was.

Laurie: Oh, really?

Ralph: You know, that just—you know, you're—

Laurie: You adapted.

Ralph: Going to get hit every day. It wasn't a matter of time, you know, when it was—or if we're gonna get like I said, if you would everyday seeing you're gonna get hit—some days it was worse than others. But, once we were down like in our bunkers we felt pretty secure.

Laurie: Felt really secure.

Ralph: You know, we were down in our hole in the ground, and I think there actually it was kind of peaceful.

Laurie: Okay. Was there electricity in the bunker?

Ralph: Yeah, they had electric lights.

Laurie: They had lights—

Ralph: Yeah, they had a generator. We did have a shower.

Laurie: Underground?

Ralph: No, it was above ground, but that took a direct hit so that took care of that.

Laurie: [laughs]

Ralph: Yeah, we didn't have it for very long either. We took a makeshift barrel, and it had some kind of a burner we stuck in it and a pipe with couple holes that we could turn off, and it was a short lived shower. **[End of Tape One, Side A]**

Laurie: Okay.

Ralph: So, therefore—we had—you know, they always had like talcum powder?

Laurie: Mm-hmm.

Ralph: Powder showers, you know, “swoosh.”

Laurie: Oh.

Ralph: And that's [unintelligible]. Well, I mean, that was it, but—

Laurie: Good. You think of anything else from your notes?

Ralph: I don't know. Yeah, I don't think too much more in Khe Sanh 'cause that was up to two and a half months then went back to Quang Tri and then they had another outpost that opened up they wanted some volunteers, so myself—[Approx. 5 sec. gap in tape]—called LZ Stud, and that was a very small outpost with just a dirt runway on there, and for whatever purpose, but—there was—we were out in the middle of actually nowhere, but we never really got hit bad there at all. I mean, we'd get a couple mortar rounds every once in awhile, but it was nothing like that, but, there—one thing about Khe Sanh, we didn't—the rats wouldn't even be at KP. We had more rats at this Stud—there was in three nights when we caught twenty-eight rats we counted.

- Laurie: At that new outpost?
- Ralph: Yeah, I mean, they'd run over you. You'd be laying in your bunk they'd actually be running over you, and nobody really minded the rat for being a rat, but nobody wanted to get bit by this rat, but—
- Laurie: So there were no rats at Khe Sanh?
- Ralph: Well, I figure—
- Laurie: Very few [unintelligible] faced you [laughs].
- Ralph: I think they were scared away [laughs].
- Laurie: [laughs]
- Ralph: You know, I don't know—I'm sure we've probably seen one or two, but there was nothing like the rats we had at LZ Stud.
- Laurie: Okay.
- Ralph: I mean, every time you set up a outpost, and you've got garbage, I guess you got rats, you know, and they just come. But, you know, as I look back at it. I—well, there's this saying, you know, one time—a guy asked me once, he said, "Are you the way you are because you are a Marine, or were you a Marine because of the way you are?" And I said, "Well that's simple," I said. "I had this personality, so the Marine Corps, they just fine-tuned me."
- Laurie: [laughs]
- Ralph: "And I think they did a great job." But there is something about, you know, being the smallest branch and the camaraderie, but I think every serviceman, no matter what branch he's in, I think has a real good right to be proud of his branch of the service. I mean, in the Marine Corps, there are no former, actually everybody is just still always a Marine, but—
- Laurie: Well, I, write for a living and I interviewed George Watts, you know, the china guy. China—
- Ralph: Okay.
- Laurie: And crystal, and I just had to do like a personality profile on him. This was, oh, October, November when I interviewed him—November, and he had a little lapel pin, and it said—it had the little American flag, and it had the Marine Corps flag, and he's very genteel in his interview chair and I said, "Mr. Watts, were you a Marine?" And he said, "Yes, I am."
- Ralph: Ah!

Laurie: And I said, “Okay, this—I just have to ask this question.” “Marine, china, and silver—wasn’t there kind of a transition issue for you?”

Ralph: [laughs]

Laurie: And he said, “Oh, my first day back at work I broke three goblets, and I felt like such a klutz,” and he was in World War II, and he’s gonna be in the book, so that’s very cool.

Ralph: Okay. Yeah.

Laurie: But it was so funny to see this, you know, this elderly old man.

Ralph: Yeah, how many people, you know, what they did with their life after.

Laurie: Yeah.

Ralph: I read Tom Brokaw’s, you know, *Our Greatest Generation*—

Laurie: Uh-huh.

Ralph: Very interesting book, and I just finished—I got for Christmas, it was *Chicken Soup for Veterans*, excellent.

Laurie: So did Ron Kuta!

Ralph: Yeah.

Laurie: [laughs]

Ralph: Yeah, that’s right! Excellent book, you know?

Laurie: Okay now, say that sentence to me again, “Are you this way because—the way you are because of the Marines” or what’s the other way around?

Ralph: Okay, I’ll give it to ya. It’s right—

Laurie: Oh.

Ralph: I’ve got the quote right up there.

Laurie: Oh, okay, good. Now that kind of leads to a couple other questions of mine. Did you—now, were you drafted? Did you enlist?

Ralph: I enlisted. I was gonna get drafted. I enlisted like on a Friday, and I got my draft notice like on a Wednesday, you know.

Laurie: Oh, like the next Wednesday?

Ralph: Yeah, I mean, this was, this was not a great secret [laughs], that you know, everybody was gonna either—you were gonna go whether you wanted to or not, so this was—I had a choice, and—

Laurie: So, did they actually draft people into the Marines, or was that all volunteer?

Ralph: No, I got a very good friend of mine—used to be in Fox Point in the police department, and he went to the Treasury Department. He got drafted, and they go, “Army, Marine.” He ended up being a Marine.

Laurie: Oh, really? Okay.

Ralph: They assigned him to the Marine Corps. Now, you know, I signed up so I—he was in for two years, and then I was in for four years.

Laurie: Okay.

Ralph: Now, the people that got drafted, being sent to the Marine Corps ended up in the infantry.

Laurie: Right.

Ralph: Or what we’d call it, the grunts.

Laurie: Right.

Ralph: You know, I had a choice. I signed up to get Air Wing, and because I liked—you know, at one time, I had a private license for flying.

Laurie: Really?

Ralph: But, so—I liked the Air Wing, and so I signed up for that. You know, looking on, I guess you look back at it, and it probably even was a big waste. I mean it and accomplished nothing.

Laurie: Vietnam?

Ralph: Yeah, in ’68 and ’69, with ‘em when we lost both of those—people right now at Washington seeing, you know, you look at the wall and there was a guy, John Gannon, that I used to hang around with in Plymouth High School in the hallways of high school, you know, he’s on the wall. One of the people, that we knew from Random Lake, Gene Bobby Dietrich, you know, he’s on the wall, and you look at 15,000 people there, and you just wonder, what could have they done? You know, what could they have contributed to this country, you know, had they not ended up dead, you know, and—

- Laurie: Wow, yeah, I—what's his name? I forgot his name. The guy that helped bring the wall to Port.
- Ralph: Oh, I know, he's from Port Washington.
- Laurie: Yeah, Chuck Ellmauer. He—his picture's gonna be on the back of our book.
- Ralph: Okay.
- Laurie: Because, I—this was the hardest—I've got—I can turn this **[tape clicks]**.
- Ralph: Okay, when I started, he was on—there was two types of fixed-wing aircraft that were coming to Khe Sanh. C-123's had two prop engines, and they'd use some jet boosters on the wings to get 'em out fast.
- Laurie: Okay.
- Ralph: And lift out higher. He was coming in on one of those C-123's—coming back in again, and at that time they had a small like a Piper Cub with a South Vietnamese spotter pilot, and for some reason he moved in to hit, and he got into the runway position first, and they had to wave the C-123 off. He went around, and he got shot down on his going around. There was forty-eight guys in there.
- Laurie: And he was on there?
- Ralph: Yeah, he was on there.
- Laurie: Did he die?
- Ralph: Yeah, they all went down.
- Laurie: Oh, my.
- Ralph: But, and the other thing, once they were off the edge of the base, I mean, there was none of us out there.
- Laurie: Right.
- Ralph: You know, that all belonged to the North Vietnam or the guerillas out there, so I mean, there was nothing—I mean, I think it was forty-eight people—oh, yeah, the other forty-eight men were missing and presumed dead.
- Laurie: So, when American soldiers were killed—I know that they took hostages, but when they were killed—is this kind of a gross question? Did they leave the bodies alone, or did they take them, or how is that, was that in the war?

- Ralph: I don't know because I was never really was off the base. When I flew, as a gunner, you were still always going into—other than medevacs, we had to drop right down in, and pull 'em out.
- Laurie: I was just thinking about that because we saw *Blackhawk Down* and how they took the soldiers [unintelligible].
- Ralph: Yeah, I haven't seen that. They say that it was very realistic. I think, the thing is you always [unintelligible] you bring everybody back, but I mean, obviously if everybody got brought back, you wouldn't have 2,300 missing.
- Laurie: Right, right.
- Ralph: You know, more than 2,300 pilots got shot down.
- Laurie: Right.
- Ralph: So, I mean, but you—and then there's some of them, they take a direct hit there's nothing left to bring back.
- Laurie: Right.
- Ralph: I mean, you can't find the guy when he no longer exists.
- Laurie: Yeah, remains no longer available.
- Ralph: You know, so it's a—I mean, that's just a terrible part of a war that there's always some that you always wonder, you know, I mean, but there's some that simply—well, we had one guy that—a round landed right near, out by the runway, out by the bunker, and this guy who suffered a concussion, it just almost split his chest open. I mean, he was dead—you could kind of just see him flutter, the heart just fluttered. I mean, you know, that's even—I mean—you know, those types of people make it back because they're there, but if he would have got a direct hit—
- Laurie: There'd be nothing left.
- Ralph: I wouldn't have found the guy.
- Laurie: Shoes maybe.
- Ralph: You know, so I mean that happens quite a bit. We got sent out one night, a chopper went down and they wanted to retrieve the bodies. The one had gotten out, but the other one was still was with the helicopter. So, they took us out, myself, there was two others—there was two or three of us went out, and they airlifted us out—it was a night, and the grunts were out there, and they put a perimeter around, and this thing was still burning, and then we had to go in and basically try to extract that body out, and I was going up to the guy, was—we always called him “Pancho”, but his name was Cecilio Guevara[?].

Laurie: Well, I can see Pancho [laughs] as the other alternative.

Ralph: Yeah, Pancho was more easier than Cecilio, and we get up there, and, the guy's legs were off, but it was just charred and all I could remember seeing this arm, just like this. I knew, as soon as we grabbed that arm, the thing was gonna come off.

Laurie: Ugh.

Ralph: You know, we grabbed the arm, and that thing was solid as a rock. We could have dragged him all over. I remember the grunts looking at us, and you know, 'cause they took a bunch of grunts out with us to put out a perimeter, and they asked, "What are we going out there for?" We said, "Well, we gotta go and try to get that guy out." And there was another case, "Well, were you guys nuts?? You know, I mean, the thing's on fire and everybody can see you standing there. You know, and they're off following in the shadows. But I mean, that's just one of the things that—that was the job, you know.

Laurie: Did you find that hard to get accustomed to, or do you—did you have the personality and nature going in that you were able to kind of separate yourself from like all the horrors of war?

Ralph: I think—and I've still got that personality. When we, like, you know, in law enforcement, you take these, like, personality type things.

Laurie: Right.

Ralph: You know, like all these goofy little tests, you know, and I can remember when I was up in Cleveland with an LTC one time when another guy from our department had just made Sergeant at that time too. We had just made—I had been one for a couple of years and, they give you—and I had always come out the taskmaster. No matter what it takes, the job's gonna get done, and that's me. Whatever it takes, the job will get done! So, you set other things aside and you do it.

Laurie: Yeah.

Ralph: That poor Ty[?]. He was just a [unintelligible]. That's just where he just was at that time. He didn't want to be a sergeant, they made him a sergeant. He was just surviving from day to day. He [unintelligible]—he left and went up to the Menasha Police Department.

Laurie: Wow.

Ralph: Because he just didn't like it, but—

Laurie: Because I—



- Ralph: That's just my personality, I mean, the job will always get done.
- Laurie: Yeah, because I, God, I have a hard time of keeping it together during a Memorial Day parade. But like, blood and, like [unintelligible], that doesn't bother me. I don't, I don't have a reaction to it.
- Ralph: No, it's like my job—not so much here, but I spent four years with the California Highway Patrol before I got hired with Fox Point.
- Laurie: Really?
- Ralph: I mean, we'd have accidents out there, I mean, half—all those people, you know. The speed limit was 70 and they're all going 85—
- Laurie: Oh, sure.
- Ralph: And 100, and, I mean, you get one—I mean, you get some really—some bad fatal accidents and it's just—you just do the job.
- Laurie: Yeah.
- Ralph: You know?
- Laurie: And, I don't know if it's just my nature—[loud clicks on tape but no pause; topic changes]
- Ralph: We were gonna take shrapnel, and we started to take rounds in the base, and we take off running. I said, "Come on, Adolf!" And we're goin', and we jump into what we thought was a bunker next to the runway, and it was called a parapet—it was—it was filled up with 105 rounds for recoilless rifles, but they set that area away. If they needed rounds they'd go and get them because you don't to have the rounds—a whole bunker of rounds right next to the gun.
- Laurie: Right.
- Ralph: And take a direct hit— and you've nothing but a big hole in the ground.
- Laurie: Yeah.
- Ralph: You know, it's just stuff like that, that all of them were out there, and I mean, we had no problem running.
- Laurie: Right.
- Ralph: I mean, we ran very fast that day, and yet this here—I come out from under that truck, and I don't know.

Laurie: I don't know.

Ralph: Just couldn't run, and I don't know whatever happened, you know. Like I said, that was the only experience, that was the only time other than fear of being in open spots.

Laurie: Yeah.

Ralph: After awhile, I mean, you're just always looking for a place to—if something, you know—you're not really consciously looking, but it's always on your—

Laurie: But you've been conditioned to do that.

Ralph: Yeah, it's always in the back of your mind, that, you know, you're constantly eyeballing around, you know, just in case something happens, you know, where am I gonna go. You always had to have a place to go.

Laurie: Well it's even, like as a parent, and your daughters are grown, but like, I'm so conditioned to watching for my daughter when I go in public that when I go by myself, I'm still looking around for her. When I'm in the grocery store or—

Ralph: [coughs]

Laurie: You just get conditioned to.

Ralph: Yeah.

Laurie: A way of life.

Ralph: You're always looking.

Laurie: Yeah.

Ralph: You know, I mean, I find myself—once I was in church, you know, and I'm just—you know, and that's what I do on my job.

Laurie: Yeah.

Ralph: I'm always looking.

Laurie: Yeah.

Ralph: You know, you're looking this, and looking—you're always looking, you know.

Laurie: Yup. Yeah.

Ralph: People are probably looking, "I wonder what he's looking at?"

Laurie: [laughs] He's not paying attention [laughs].

Ralph: Not looking at anything, you know? Oh, yeah.

Laurie: Were you at church yesterday morning?

**[End of Interview]**