

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JOEL GARB
Army Nursing Corps, Vietnam War
2004

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Garb, Joel, (1945-). Oral History Interview, 2004.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 78 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 78 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Joel Garb, who grew up in Benton Harbor, Michigan, speaks of his experience in the Army Nursing Corps in Kon Tum and Saigon during the Vietnam War. Garb recalls enlisting in the Army and the racist education given during basic training at Fort Knox (Kentucky). He describes the atheistic and compassion-based reasons that led him to enlist in the medics, train at Fort Sam Houston (Texas), and extend his time to become a practical nurse at Letterman General Hospital (California). He talks about flying to Vietnam, being struck by the heat, and his assignment to the Gladiators helicopter assault company at Kon Tum. Garb describes his duties helping with sick call, making sure the defecation got burned, handling medical emergencies, and extra work serving drinks at the officers' club. He recalls learning what rockets sound like and speaks about periodic bombings of his base. He describes treating a soldier who had been severely wounded in an explosion. Garb discusses his friendship with Pham Khue, a Vietnamese private, with whom he shared a motor scooter. He describes the mountain yard villages, their weaving, and the racism they faced. He talks about transferring to Saigon to do renal dialysis at the third field hospital and mentions that of his forty-four patients, forty-one died, many due to infection. Garb talks about usually being out of uniform, teamwork in the Army Nursing Corps, avoiding drinking the water outside the base, and listening to "Come Together" by John Lennon on the rooftops at sunrise. He talks about an issued Smith & Wesson that he never used. He highlights his friendship with Vietnamese colonel Pham Van Lieu, who at that time was advisor to the 7th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division. He tells of a finding a lieutenant colonel crying after a mortar attack destroyed a hangar and several helicopters, and Garb declares he had more respect for non-commissioned officers than for commissioned. He states Vietnam had a positive influence on his life. Garb mentions flying into Fort Dix (New Jersey), reveals he did not talk much about his experiences after the war, and details why he did not join the VFW.

Biographical Sketch:

Joel Garb (1945-) served in the Army Nursing Corps during World War II. He is a founding member of the Madison chapter of Veterans for Peace and is currently on the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Foundation board of directors. He resides near Black Earth, Wisconsin with his wife, Susan.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2004.

Transcribed by Mary Lou Condon, 2006.

Abstract by Susan Krueger, 2008.

Interview Transcript:

Kurtz: December(?) 11, 2004, and my name is Jim Kurtz, and I'm going to be interviewing Joel Garb. Joel, could you tell us when and where you were born?

Garb: Born in South Bend, Indiana, July 9, 1945.

Kurtz: And did you grow up in South Bend?

Garb: No, I went immediately to Benton Harbor, Michigan, where my mother and father were actually living.

Kurtz: And is that where you grew up, in Benton Harbor?

Garb: I grew up in Benton Harbor, Michigan.

Kurtz: And did you go to high school there and all that?

Garb: Yes.

Kurtz: Okay. And what year did you graduate from high school?

Garb: 1963.

Kurtz: Then after you completed high school what did you do?

Garb: Well, I tried some school and I tried some work, and that was for four years, not doing very well at either of them. And then I went into the Service in May of 1967.

Kurtz: Were you drafted?

Garb: No.

Kurtz: So you went in Service May of 1967 as an enlistee, is that correct?

Garb: Yes.

Kurtz: When you were, in this four-year period of time, you know, after you graduate from high school, did you have any knowledge of Vietnam and the like?

Garb: Well, sure. Sure. I read a reading, of course, and I'm sure seeing things on TV, but reading. I read a really good book on the history of Vietnam that concluded in 1965.

- Kurtz: Do you remember the name of the book?
- Garb: *History of Vietnam*, Cahan(?) and someone else. I forget, what was the rest of the question?
- Kurtz: Did you have any opinions about what was going on?
- Garb: Yeah, I thought that the war was wrong. But then I wondered, well, why was the, but then, you know, there was a lot of popular sentiment and governmental sentiment for the war, so I wondered how to deal with that. And so I, since I was someone who couldn't stay in school and couldn't hold a job, I decided to go in the Army and go to Vietnam and find out for myself, which, of course, was a really dumb idea.
- Kurtz: Did you have any parents or relatives or neighbors that were veterans?
- Garb: No. No. And if anything my parents were against the war, and against the war in general but against this particular war.
- Kurtz: When you went into the Army, Joel, where did you get your basic training?
- Garb: At Fort Knox.
- Kurtz: Fort Knox, Kentucky, right?
- Garb: Kentucky. Louisville, Kentucky.
- Kurtz: And did you have any impressions in basic training? What did you think about basic training?
- Garb: Well, basic training was pretty awful for me, both physically and mentally.
- Kurtz: Were you treated any different because you were an enlistee or didn't that make any difference?
- Garb: No, I don't think that made any difference.
- Kurtz: Did you have any -- meet any people that stood out in your mind in basic training?
- Garb: Oh, many. Many. Of course, I'm sure I could conjure up the memories of my drill sergeants. I probably had three and I can picture them all now, if I tried hard or if someone reminded me. Certainly Sergeant Pugh made a impression on us.

Kurtz: Was it positive or negative?

Garb: Well, I would say that it was negative in the sense that he told us how you couldn't tell the enemy from the friendlies, the friendly from the enemy in Vietnam, so you had to beware of everyone, that little kids would throw grenades at you, and as well that we were dealing with Gooks, not Vietnamese or people such as ourselves.

Kurtz: So they were inferior.

Garb: Well, I certainly think that we had a racist education in boot camp, not just from good ol' Sergeant Pugh. And, of course, you'd have to learn to have some compassion as well about people that, you know, were just forced into this historical process and not knowing any better and having to deal with fighting and killing other people.

Kurtz: Is—you don't have to answer this question if you don't want to—your philosophy about killing, war, and all of that, is that a religious-based thing or is it pacifism?

Garb: Well, in a way I don't -- I'm an atheist, but there are some people that say you can be religious and be an atheist. The atheist that I am and the Jewish upbringing that I have, and the sense of right and wrong that I got from that Jewish upbringing, and what I've read about Christianity that I find of value, you've got to believe that that's a good idea, Thou Shalt Not Kill. So that's -- yeah.

Kurtz: I understand. Thank you. Now, after you completed basic training, what was your next training assignment?

Garb: I enlisted to be in the medics, which I soon found out was a bad idea because I have very flat feet, and I had a lot of trouble with my feet in basic training, so I tried to get out of further duty that involved a lot of walking, and in basic training tried to get into the explosive ordnance disposal unit because they said that they went around in jeeps. But then I went to Fort Sam Houston for twelve weeks, twelve very nice weeks.

Kurtz: You were trained to be a medic there, is that right?

Garb: Trained to be a medic there. And while I was there the opportunity came to become a practical nurse by going to forty more weeks of school in the Army and extending so that you would have two—was it two years? No, I had to extend five months to get into that school, but I'm not sure how they figured that.

- Kurtz: But they wanted you to be a nurse for something more than a year in the military.
- Garb: Yes. So maybe it was two years after that because then I spent nineteen more months, and I got out almost five months early.
- Kurtz: So where did this practical nurse school—?
- Garb: It was at Letterman General Hospital in San Francisco at the Presidio.
- Kurtz: That's a pretty nice place, isn't it?
- Garb: It's a wonderful place.
- Kurtz: That's Letterman?
- Garb: Yeah, L-e-t-t-e-r-m-a-n Hospital built around 1906 that took casualties from the wars in the Pacific before World War I, and of course World War II and Korea, and Vietnam when I was there. It was a two-story hospital with ramps so that the casualties and wheelchairs could get around the hospital easily. Ramps throughout the whole hospital.
- Kurtz: What was your impression of the training you received there, Joel?
- Garb: It was great. It was great. Though their impression of me wasn't quite the same. My impression of them was, that the training was very good.
- Kurtz: Do you care to share why they didn't have a great impression of you?
- Garb: Well, I was told because I was outspoken about my feelings about the war and other things, and apparently suspected of dealing in drugs. I guess, you know, how does the game work where you whisper in people's ears, and by the time it gets around to the end of the table you're dealing in drugs.
- Kurtz: Understand. Did you have any people there that made any impression on you?
- Garb: Oh, many. Many, many people that I love to this day.
- Kurtz: Did you stay in contact with any of them?
- Garb: I'm in contact with one of them and hope to see him early this year. Just wonderful friends.
- Kurtz: Was this a fellow student?

Garb: Yes. Yes.

Kurtz: When you completed your training there, then what happened to you?

Garb: I went to Vietnam.

Kurtz: Before you went to Vietnam, did you go home for leave or anything like that?

Garb: Yeah, I believe that I did.

Kurtz: Does anything stand out there?

Garb: No. I would have to be reminded of that trip home, and right now I don't recall.

Kurtz: That's fine. Sometimes that was a big event for people and sometimes it wasn't. So when you went to Vietnam, how did you get to Vietnam, by boat or plane?

Garb: By airplane.

Kurtz: And did you know anybody on the plane that you went over?

Garb: Not a soul. I was surprised. Well, except I had been sick, so I didn't go out probably the same time the others did.

Kurtz: And was it a commercial plane?

Garb: As opposed to?

Kurtz: To a military.

Garb: Yeah, it was a commercial plane.

Kurtz: Where did you land in Vietnam?

Garb: Well, I'm not sure where I landed. I can remember that it was very hot.

Kurtz: Any smells strike you when you got off the plane?

Garb: Well, it was dusty, and I just remember the heat. And after a few hours, when they were trying to make us fill sandbags, I snuck off and had to lie down because the heat was just overpowering. And also, a line I remember we were in and there was like a cage, a floor-to-ceiling cage,

between us and on the other side Vietnamese. And of course that was because they weren't dressed like anyone I'd ever known or anything I'd ever seen except in pictures. And they didn't speak English and we didn't understand Vietnamese, and I believe they were mostly women.

Kurtz: And they were working?

Garb: Working, maybe having lunch.

Kurtz: When you got in did you go to a replacement?

Garb: When I got there, I think I came in at Nha Trang. Somehow I got to Nha Trang where the 17th Aviation something-or-other was, and then we took a Chinook [helicopter] up to Pleiku to a battalion, the 62nd Aviation Battalion. And then a few days later I took a Huey [helicopter] to Kon Tum, which was about fifteen miles north of Pleiku to a company, the Gladiators, an assault helicopter company on the outskirts of Kon Tum.

Kurtz: So you were assigned to this helicopter assault company?

Garb: Yes, to the dispensary.

Kurtz: And what was your job in the dispensary?

Garb: Well, I guess to wait around, to help with sick call in the morning and to wait around in case there were emergencies.

Kurtz: And emergencies with the incoming casualties?

Garb: Yes.

Kurtz: And this was a responsibility for this helicopter company that you were medical support for, is that correct?

Garb: Their responsibility was basically to bring soldiers and equipment from bases to the field and back again, I take it.

Kurtz: Yeah, yeah.

Garb: I don't know, I never went on a trip with them and didn't really want to. Perhaps in hindsight I should've, but it seemed a bit dangerous.

Kurtz: Yes, it was. It was. What was your typical duty day like?

Garb: Get up early and maybe go eat.

- Kurtz: Did you have any detail?
- Garb: No, I really didn't have any details except, as I say, for sick call. And sick call was very sparse. So in the dispensary there were two other -- a sergeant and a private, and a doc. So if you think that I didn't have anything to do, you can imagine that the doctor had even less to do. And the two people that were there when I got there had been in the famous '68 Tet and were about to leave. And were still pretty darn upset about what had happened when the enemy had gotten into the compound and killed some people.
- Kurtz: So they were unhappy. They got into this compound at Kon Tum, where you were working, and killed—
- Garb: That's right, in the '68 Tet. And the compound was much smaller at that time, too. At any rate, there was sick call in the morning, maybe some type—of course there was venereal disease, so there were shots to be given. And then the rest of the day was spent going around talking to people and speaking with people in the compound. And one of my jobs was to make sure that the Vietnamese person hired to burn the shit did his job. That was one of my assignments.
- Kurtz: And could you describe burning the shit for people that don't know what that is?
- Garb: Well, you cut a fifty-gallon drum, is that right?
- Kurtz: Fifty-five.
- Garb: Fifty-five, thank you, in half and you place it under the seat in the shitter, and you shit into the half a drum, and then at sometime in the day someone pulls that out, mixes it up nicely with apparently kerosene—I never knew exactly what—and sets it on fire, burns it down enough and slips it back in.
- Kurtz: That's important that people know what that's all about. When you got to the unit, how were you received?
- Garb: Mui(?). Mui was the name of the ship.
- Kurtz: How were you received when you came into this unit, particularly when you say that there were two people that were there during Tet?
- Garb: Well, when I got there—I remember the day, the afternoon—I had flown on my first Huey ride from Pleiku, and I had flown down and we came in about five thirty, and I went over to the dispensary, and the private that

was working in the dispensary was actually up on the roof. This was a, I don't know, a Quonset hut, and painting a red cross on the roof. And this was punishment for calling, for making fun of the doctor.

So I remember I went up on the roof and we were talking, and he said, you know, I had heard that they got a lot of rockets. It was called Rocket Alley. And out off the edge of the company, maybe a mile or two, the helicopters that were coming back were shooting their rockets in an apparent free-fire zone, and they were making very loud explosions I thought. I said, "Man," I said, "is that what it's like when a rocket comes in?" And then we got down and, just as we were going in the door of the dispensary, there was a crack of lightning. It could've been fifty feet away it seemed to me, and he said, "That's what a rocket's like."

Kurtz: But it actually was lightning?

Garb: No, it was a rocket. A crack like lightning.

Kurtz: Oh, I'm sorry.

Garb: No, my fault. No, this was the dry season, one of the dry seasons, or the dry season for the year.

Kurtz: So what month of the year was that, roughly?

Garb: Seems like that would've been November or something.

Kurtz: November of?

Garb: November of '68.

Kurtz: Were you treated as a new guy or were you accepted right away?

Garb: One day about a week after I had been there someone ran into the dispensary. I was sitting there and they said, "They're bringing a guy in that got his arm blown off." So I grabbed a package of 4x8s.

Kurtz: What are 4x8s?

Garb: Gauze, and a couple Ace bandages, and I followed him out. The truck was coming in, and in the back of the truck a guy was lying against the back, I forget, a small quarter-ton truck or something like that. People were around, I pushed my way in, and he was lying, there were some bandages under his arm, and I lifted it a bit and I looked and I saw that it was bleeding very badly. So I put some more gauze on it and wrapped it very tightly with—

Kurtz: The Ace bandage?

Garb: With the two Ace bandages. Then I ran back to the dispensary and I grabbed a box of what I thought was tubing and some albumin, and I ran over to a helicopter. They were loading him on a helicopter, and I looked at the tubing and it was a box of Band-Aids.

Kurtz: Oh my.

Garb: So I ran back to the dispensary and I got the tubing and I ran back and got on board and they took off to go to Pleiku to the hospital. And I talked to this --I got the albumin running—

Kurtz: What is that now?

Garb: It's plasma replacement. And I propped his feet up and I told him I thought he was going to be okay. He was on a stretcher then. We went down to Pleiku, and a couple people grabbed the stretcher and I started to run in, and they called me back and pulled me onto the helicopter. I got on the helicopter and I never saw him again. The next day the first sergeant said, "I heard you were a tiger yesterday." So after that no one bothered me.

Kurtz: Oh, that's good. So no one bothered you or harassed you. What did you think about the situation in Vietnam when you got there and when you left? I mean, you were there from what, November of '68 through what?

Garb: June.

Kurtz: June of '60—

Garb: '70.

Kurtz: June of '70. And things changed an awful lot during that time. What were your impressions?

Garb: Well, I didn't see things change. That was one of the dumb things about my thought that I would find out something about Vietnam. You really don't get much of a view of Vietnam as a soldier. And so, to me, in the nine months that I was in Kon Tum, I didn't see any change. It seemed horrible, sometimes casualties would come in. I knew that we were surrounded.

There was a point when there was a battle in Dak To, another fifteen miles up the road, and it was reported in *Time* magazine that the Vietnamese colonel in charge of the troops at Dak To would come down in the morning in his helicopter and fly around and give orders, and then

go back to Pleiku at night. Then I heard that, or we heard, that a 122 rocket had pierced the Company command post and killed the first sergeant, among others, and that they had shot a Cobra out of the air. That was as scared as I got generally, although we did get rockets.

Kurtz: Frequently?

Garb: Well, there were some times we would get them every night. After like the first day I was there, after the helicopters would come in and land, we'd get two rockets. That would happen time and again. Most of the time they missed, flew over us, and most of the casualties were people that were bumping into things running to the bunkers, fortunately.

Kurtz: When you were in Kon Tum, was there an EM [enlisted men's] club there or any special entertainment?

Garb: There was an EM club there. I never went to that. There was also an officers' club where I worked serving drinks for a number of months.

Kurtz: Did you get paid extra for that?

Garb: I got paid extra for that. I finally got kicked out. The officers got tired of listening to me. I guess I was supposed to listen to them. But I remember

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Kurtz: I wasn't paying attention and the tape went off. You were talking about your experiences working in the officers' club.

Garb: A particular experience, we would get a rocket, I wouldn't hear the rocket until it blew up, and then I would take the bottles off the shelf and put them on the floor in case—

Kurtz: Another rocket came?

Garb: A rocket came close enough to knock them off because I didn't want to have to clean it up and so on. We always got a second rocket, so I knew when one was coming and I thought I could get the bottles off before the next one came. Then after that the tanks in the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] Engineering Company next door to us would start firing after the first rocket hit, and that was always helpful and hopeful. Just to hear them firing gave you a sense of security.

Kurtz: What were your living conditions like at Kon Tum?

Garb: Again, we lived in the dispensary on cots.

- Kurtz: And how was the food?
- Garb: Well, you know, it was Army food. It was fine, edible. Uh, edible.
- Kurtz: Now, you said you stayed in Kon Tum for nine months. Did you have any good luck charms or anything like that while you were there?
- Garb: No.
- Kurtz: Did you have any contact with Vietnamese locals there?
- Garb: Early on when you're in the medics you get to ride around town in your ambulance. So early on—there was an ARVN hospital nearby and they had the only x-ray machine—so early on I went over there, and I met an ARVN private there who had been in the field and suffered from a grenade and was now -- and could type, so he was now working in the hospital. And he and I got to be good friends. I bought a 50cc Honda and we would go out to the mountain yard villages. Sometimes we would go to the homes of the people that were working on the base for us—the woman, Do Ti Tope(?), who worked in the dispensary, and her sister and others. And then we would go out to the various mountain yard villages and find out what was going on.
- Kurtz: So could this soldier speak English?
- Garb: Yes, he could.
- Kurtz: So, and he could talk then, to these people, and you could talk back. Did you socialize with him? Or you were there for medical reason?
- Garb: Unfortunately we didn't do—what did they call it? Med Camp or something?
- Kurtz: Yes. Right.
- Garb: We didn't do that. I tried to get these lazy doctors to do that, but again we must have compassion.
- Kurtz: So it was social?
- Garb: At one point we, Pham Khue, the man I'm speaking of—
- Kurtz: Do you know how to spell that?
- Garb: P-h-a-m K-h-u-e was in engineering school, so we decided that we would build a—if you ever see the mountain yards, when they weave they sort of

tie the strings up to the house, and they sit on the ground and they pull this thing back and forth, a very seemingly primitive way. So we decided to make a loom, and so he designed and had a loom made in town, and we took it to the refugee village. But they preferred the old way, though they liked the little—there was a way he had little machines to wind the yarn on, and they really like that, but the loom was, the last I heard, a bit too much. So it was foot-driven, you know, you'd push on the foot and then flip the thing through, and then you'd push on it instead of finding your way back and forth.

Kurtz: Was this dangerous in any way going out to these mountain yard villages?

Garb: Possibly, I don't know. I thought I heard a shot one day. But we were told not to go back out there. No one knew what I was doing except Pham Khue and I. Sometimes, you know, the Americans, us, the other Americans would shoot off in the direction of some of these villages, just shoot. I don't know for what reason. Just to -- I don't know for what reason. So that would've been dangerous to be down there, but fortunately I wasn't. It was only on Sundays that I went down there.

Kurtz: So you had a day off on Sunday?

Garb: I had seven days a week off. But yeah, right, I could actually -- you're right. I could actually leave the compound on a motor scooter and take four or five hours.

Kurtz: That wasn't frowned on to have a motor scooter?

Garb: Well, I didn't have it. Pham Khue kept it so he would come and pick me up and we would—of course there was this racism. Perhaps it was, but I tell you, after that incident with that guy, that explosive ordnance guy that blew himself up, really, no one really disciplined me in any way. I walked around in Ho Chi Minhs—

Kurtz: Now you're talking about the sandals?

Garb: Yes. And out of uniform. Of course, everyone was out of uniform.

Kurtz: So you're kind of like a character from MASH?

Garb: Well, I wouldn't say I was a character from MASH. I'm sure they wouldn't say that either.

Kurtz: Is there any other experiences at Kon Tum that we haven't talked about?

Garb: Oh my gosh.

- Kurtz: I mean, obviously we haven't got time to talk about nine months, but is there anything else that stands out in your mind?
- Garb: Well, again, many, many—can you hone down your question a little bit?
- Kurtz: I mean were there any people other than the people you worked with directly and this Pham Khue that you became friends with that stand out in your mind?
- Garb: Oh, sure. Sure. I had many, again, many great friends. One guy was just a mechanical genius. He was trained to work on trucks, I guess, but when he got there he became the head of the engine fixing, the engine whatever-it-was for the helicopters. He used to fix farm implements in some California valley, so he went from that to fixing helicopter engines.
- Kurtz: So you just had a good time talking to him and you had stuff in common?
- Garb: Yes, we did. We did. So yeah, I miss that guy a lot.
- Kurtz: So you didn't remain in contact with him after the war?
- Garb: No. Alas, no.
- Kurtz: Going back to these mountain yard villages, you mentioned refugee camps. Were these mountain yards that had been resettled near American bases?
- Garb: Yes. Both. Both. The refugee camps, but there were still some—
- Kurtz: Some villages.
- Garb: Villages close to town, I guess, that were resettled.
- Kurtz: And did you notice any tension between the Vietnamese and the mountain yards?
- Garb: Oh yeah, the Vietnamese were—you know, you don't notice, just little things. Although Luc(?) Pham Khue would go out with me to all these places, so he was pretty, he was a Baha'i, so he was pretty special. You know Baha'is?
- Kurtz: No.

- Garb: Baha'i is a world religion. So for him he liked it. But sure, I know that the Vietnamese looked down in a racist sense on the mountain yards, unfortunately. So much racism.
- Kurtz: Now what I want to do is jump to Saigon, your next duty tour. You were in Kon Tum for nine months. Why did you leave Kon Tum?
- Garb: Well, because I wasn't doing anything. And I heard that there was what was called a dead-end ward in Saigon, a renal dialysis ward, the only two machines in Vietnam that we knew of, of course. Maybe the northerns(?) had them, but I doubt it though..
- Kurtz: So what you did is you transferred out? You volunteered to transfer out?
- Garb: I went down there and I asked them if I could come down, so I had to extend six months.
- Kurtz: And this would help fulfill your commitment as a practical nurse for the two-year commitment.
- Garb: Yes, except, as I say, they let me out early. So I was actually committed for like forty months or forty-two months or something, and I got out at thirty-seven months because I got out early from that.
- Kurtz: Was that because they were reducing the size of the Army at that point?
- Garb: Well, they were at that point. I believe they were talking about that. But I think when I came back I only had four months to go, so they probably said what's the point of sending him anywhere. They could have, I guess, if they'd wanted to.
- Kurtz: So how did you get down to Saigon?
- Garb: I flew down to Saigon from Pleiku in, what, a 131?
- Kurtz: A C-130?
- Garb: C-130. Yeah, that was amazing.
- Kurtz: Now, what were the differences between Saigon and Kon Tum in your mind?
- Garb: Oh, completely, completely different because Kon Tum was a very small town on a river, a beautiful river. A beautiful town on a beautiful river surrounded by little villages and mountain yards. And Saigon is a very large city. Everything that large cities have.

- Kurtz: Where did you live when you were in Saigon?
- Garb: I lived in a barracks close to the third field hospital, which was just across the road from one of the entrances into Tonsonhut, so quite a ways from downtown.
- Kurtz: And the third field was by Tonsonhut because they brought casualties in by air?
- Garb: That may be right. I don't know, that may be right. I don't know why. I never saw casualties brought into the third field hospital.
- Kurtz: There wasn't casualties?
- Garb: Oh, yeah, it was full of casualties, but I don't know how they got there.
- Kurtz: So what was your job at the third field hospital?
- Garb: My job was to take care of the wounds and do renal dialysis for a small group of soldiers who were so traumatized by their wounds.
- Kurtz: So they needed to do this renal dialysis for people that had physical trauma, is that what they—
- Garb: Yeah, most of them were shot in the kidneys, most of them were shot all over and their kidneys had stopped. So they were really, if it hadn't been for the helicopters, I suppose they wouldn't have lived off the field, most of them. But because of -- so the down side of the medical system where we got people out of the field real fast was that some of them—and we're seeing that in Iraq now, although in Iraq they say although there are many less deaths, the injuries are worse. And that was the same here. I had forty-four surgical patients, and forty-one of them died.
- Kurtz: Give me those numbers again.
- Garb: Forty-four surgical patients, and forty-one of them died on the ward. One more died, I guess, by the time he got to Japan.
- Kurtz: And that's because they were so traumatized.
- Garb: Yeah. Actually most of them, many of the deaths, were because of the result of infection.
- Kurtz: And that's just because of the living conditions they had before?

- Garb: It's because of getting shot out in the field and having very dirty wounds and not having, apparently, I don't know, maybe the antibiotics to cover some of these. And so they would get sicker and sicker, and they would die.
- Kurtz: How were you received when you got down to Saigon to the third field hospital?
- Garb: Good. It was a great place to work in spite of we would work twelve-hour shifts. In the Army Nursing Corps, which is something I found out at Letterman, there's this great sense of teamwork. I never worked in that great a spirit again, not as an LPN [Licensed Practical Nurse] in civilian life and certainly not in other things as a civilian.
- Kurtz: Did you feel any danger when you were at the third field hospital?
- Garb: No. No. Sometimes when I was in Saigon I thought it was dangerous, but never in the hospital. And there really wasn't any time to think. There was no time to think about that.
- Kurtz: So when you were in Saigon, if you had some time off you'd go downtown or something?
- Garb: Well, of course. Yes. I was all around Saigon. And you'd have twelve hours off just as you had twelve hours on, so when it was time to go—
- Kurtz: Did you make any friendships with local Vietnamese?
- Garb: Another little story.
- Kurtz: Okay, good.
- Garb: Of the medical patients that came in, which there were ten during that nine years—during that nine months. It seemed like nine years, maybe. One of them died, so nine of them lived.
- Kurtz: These are Vietnamese?
- Garb: Mostly Americans. Many Americans who for various reasons getting sick on the water, things like that. There were two Vietnamese. One was a colonel who came in in a coma, and I thought that he was the colonel that was from Dakto. So when he woke up I started questioning him, but he wasn't the colonel from Dakto. And it turns out that he was very intimately involved in the history of Vietnam since 1945, and he was in opposition to the regime, and there were rumors that the reason that he was as sick as he was because he was poisoned. They didn't figure out why he

was sick. But after he left the hospital he moved down to his mother's, which was just a couple blocks away from the hospital, and he sort of took me into the family. And I would go down a couple nights a week and talk with him. I met historical figures and all sorts of people.

Kurtz: Have you got this colonel's name? Do you remember what it was?

Garb: I do, but let's just call him—his name is Phong (??) Pham(??) Van Lieu. L-i-e-u. And he's prohibited me from speaking Vietnamese, so my pronunciation is not very good.

Kurtz: So he could speak English?

Garb: He spoke English. He had been trained at Fort Benning.

Kurtz: So this isn't his real name.

Garb: That is his real name. I don't think he would mind because he just finished three volumes of his memoirs.

Kurtz: So he's in the United States now?

Garb: He's in the United States now.

Kurtz: Are you maintaining contact with him?

Garb: More or less.

Kurtz: So he's obviously a well-educated man and all of that.

Garb: Yes. Also he had been in the anti-French resistance since he was in high school in 1945. And when the Communists started to take over in Vietnam he left and went to China, and then when the Communists took over in China he fled back to Vietnam and worked in the Army of the southern Vietnamese and tried several coups. He was the head of the Marines and head of the National Police at different times. But now when I met him he was sort of—he only was a colonel where all these people had passed over him and were four- and five-star generals. And he was at that time the Vietnamese advisor to the 7th Cavalry, and that was why he got in the ward, I believe, because they pulled strings.

Kurtz: So that was the 7th Cavalry, 1st Cav. division, right?

Garb: Wasn't that the one with the big yellow pants?

Kurtz: Yeah. Yeah. So he was an advisor to the 7th, to the American unit.

- Garb: Right. And the general that was the, because that general came into our ward while he was sick there. He was really on his deathbed until they got him dialyzed. So he did all these things. He introduced me to people, and one weekend he took me to Vung Tau and met his family. And then when he came to the United States, I met his family down in Illinois. Then I lost track of him 20 years or so.
- Kurtz: Did he come out in '75?
- Garb: Yeah. Yeah.
- Kurtz: How did you reconnect with him after 20 years?
- Garb: A Vietnamese friend of mine found him. I went down to visit him a few years ago.
- Kurtz: So do you communicate with him now by letter or e-mail or something?
- Garb: I call up every now and then. He's mad at me because I'm not in favor of the Iraqi war. And even more important, I don't want us to attack China.
- Kurtz: Well, that sounds like a healthy relationship that he can be mad at you and you can still be friends. So you said you met a lot of historic figures, politicians and the like?
- Garb: Yes.
- Kurtz: Are there any names that you remember that stand out?
- Garb: Well, I didn't meet a famous monk once (both laugh), but I waited around for him for an hour. And I met someone from—his mother was a Buddhist, so she wanted me to meet someone from Ceylon(?), and I met that man. I met people that I don't remember. I met an author of books, *A Spy Called Z28*. Those are sort of the highlights, but I met some other people.
- Kurtz: So did you get a chance to eat the local food?
- Garb: Yes.
- Kurtz: What did you think of that?
- Garb: Oh, I love Vietnamese food. Just had some last night.

- Kurtz: You mentioned before that many of the people that were in the hospital had problems with the water. Did you drink the water on the local economy?
- Garb: No. No, but I may have had some water at his house, so maybe I did. But I would never go out and buy water.
- Kurtz: Were they using bottled water then?
- Garb: No. I don't remember any, so it might've been out of the faucet. No, I didn't want to do that.
- Kurtz: So what did you drink instead of water?
- Garb: I must've had water in the hospital. You're saying in the—
- Kurtz: When you were out did you drink beer, pop, wine, tea?
- Garb: No, I probably didn't drink very much unless I was on base. Yeah, I did have hot soups, but they were cooked. But no, I was—it probably wouldn't have hurt me, but I was a little wary of drinking the water.
- Kurtz: Is there anything else that stands out in your time in Saigon?
- Garb: Oh, Saigon was just great. Many, many things stand out.
- Kurtz: Did you go to the zoo?
- Garb: I went to the zoo, of course. That doesn't stand out. I'll tell you something that stands out is after working nights—so we'd work days, then we'd work nights and switch back and forth. You get seven to seven and you get off and we went down and we had some fried eggs—sort of making fun of the Vietnamese—and then maybe half a dozen of us, we'd go up on a rooftop, and that city would be just waking up, and we'd have a joint and we'd listen to "Come Together" by John Lennon. It was sort of the archetypical, somehow sums up Saigon in some way.
- Kurtz: What rank were you?
- Garb: Spec. 5.
- Kurtz: Let's see. I think going out it's kind of an assessment of your experience with Vietnam, then bring you back to the United States, if there's nothing else we should talk about in Vietnam.
- Garb: No. Okay.

- Kurtz: What was your impression of the country Vietnam, the terrain, vegetation, climate, smells?
- Garb: My impression, you mean describe it or how did I feel about it?
- Kurtz: How did you feel about it?
- Garb: I loved Vietnam, almost everything about it except I still don't understand the killing. And I still love it and I'm aching to go back.
- Kurtz: You have not been back?
- Garb: I have not been back.
- Kurtz: Did you find the country beautiful?
- Garb: Yes, the country and the people.
- Kurtz: You said you liked the Vietnamese food and the Army food was okay?
- Garb: Yeah, it was edible. I have a high tolerance for institutional food.
- Kurtz: Did you ever carry a weapon when you were in Vietnam?
[End of side B, tape 1]
- Kurtz: The interviewer again was derelict about watching when the tape goes on, and you were talking about the Smith & Wesson that you had in Kon Tum.
- Garb: Oh, yes, the Smith & Wesson that I had wrapped in some cloth, and it was in the drawer, and I hope it wasn't loaded, but—
- Kurtz: Is that one you brought into country?
- Garb: No, that was issued to me. I never shot it, and it was never shot while I had it. I wouldn't even let people touch it because it leaves finger marks on the bluing, so it was more an artifact to me than an any sort of defense. It wouldn't have done me much good, I'm sure.
- Kurtz: And then you didn't have a weapon when you were in Saigon.
- Garb: No.
- Kurtz: What did you think of the leadership that was provided you in Vietnam?
- Garb: You mean—

- Kurtz: Like the people you worked for directly.
- Garb: Well, I think that Birds(?), Private Birds, general sense of the doctors and how sort of pitiful they were, and those were sort of my commanders in Kon Tum was correct that they—I remember once, at least I remember one guy came in from another unit into the dispensary and asked for a doctor, and the doctor was standing right there, and Bird said to him, “Well, we don’t have one.” So I sort of, I don’t know, that’s probably, I should think a little more about that and be more compassionate. And then I remember one night in Kon Tum, a Tet, the next Tet, that they, from about 300 they said yards out, they torpedoed 122s at our hanger and compound, and they blew up the hanger. They blew up about eight helicopters and they dropped some mortars in, apparently. My sergeant said he was, he claimed that he was hit by a piece of a mortar and it woke him up when we were attacked that night. And he said it was a gas mortar. I remember I had a gas mask on and I was going out looking to see if anyone was hurt. And there was the lieutenant colonel sitting on the PS—what was that stuff called that the helicopters landed on, PSP?
- Kurtz: Yeah, PSC.
- Garb: Is that right?
- Kurtz: Yeah. It’s a metal sheet—
- Garb: You have a corrugated metal, sort of.
- Kurtz: Right.
- Garb: And he was sitting there crying. And I came up and he ordered me to take my gas mask off. And then apparently he was awarded. So here was this huge disaster, like eight helicopters destroyed, and all of them, you know millions of dollars, the engines and the hanger and everything, it was just like burnt to the crisp. And he’s sitting there crying, and later he gets some sort of a bronze star or something for going out the next day and reconnoitering to see how they did it. At any rate, at least that was the—and so I didn’t think much of them apparently beforehand, and that just strengthened my prejudice. Now, again, the first sergeant I think I had more respect for the non-comms than the—the non-comms, what does that mean, non—
- Kurtz: Non-commissioned officers.
- Garb: Non-commissioned, thank you, than the commissioned; than most of the commissioned. In Saigon, that is again the case, although the doctors—

let's see, there were doctors. We were really commanded by RNs who were officers, and then by a staff sergeant. And that guy was the most wonderful supervisor I had in the Army. He taught us, he set a great example, and he was just great.

Kurtz: Did you understand what your mission was in Vietnam as opposed to what the military's mission was?

Garb: What my mission was?

Kurtz: Yeah.

Garb: That's a funny question. You mean according to me?

Kurtz: Yeah. Did you know what you were supposed to be doing, what Joel Garb was supposed to be doing?

Garb: No. I've never known what Joel Garb is supposed to be doing, to tell you the truth.

Kurtz: So that has nothing to do with the military.

Garb: Yeah.

Kurtz: Were you adequately trained?

Garb: Yes, for the most part. There was one time when we had six guys come in on a helicopter who were wounded, and I wasn't adequately trained for that.

Kurtz: Nobody could be, I don't think.

Garb: Well, I didn't do a good job.

Kurtz: What did you think of your military experience in Vietnam?

Garb: My military experience? Well, I didn't have much of a military experience in Vietnam, again being a medic, but that was one of the most, perhaps aside from my childhood, the most formative. That and being in San Francisco are the most formative times of my life, I think. I realize now and then that I will never get over Vietnam. I wasn't in danger or anything, but it's such a sorrowful thing.

Kurtz: Do you have any flashbacks or anything like that yet?

- Garb: No, I don't think I've had flashbacks. I'm very, I think—for instance, I have a close friend at work who's Vietnamese. We go out to lunch once or twice a week. We see each other two or three times a day and talk. Last night he and a man who was a Vietnamese man who was a lieutenant colonel and a Vietnamese man who teaches chemistry in town, and a Vietnamese monk that I had been working on his English with him, and a Vietnamese nun, and a woman named Dr. Judy who goes to Vietnam and helps, a public health doctor. The six of us, seven of us had dinner together. So Vietnam is in my life most of the day. As I said, my friend had written his memoir—
- Kurtz: Has it been published yet?
- Garb: Oh yes, yeah. And my friend at work just got the third volume. He reads them, they're in Vietnamese.
- Kurtz: So this hasn't been published in English.
- Garb: No, but it's published here in Vietnamese. And so I was leafing through the third volume, which takes place after '75, after Colonel Lu(?) comes to the United States, and I was leafing through. There were a lot of pictures, pictures of his family and things. He tried to start a guerilla war against the Communist regime.
- Kurtz: When did he try to do that?
- Garb: In the '70s and early '80s. There was a little guerilla war, a very little bit of a war. So this is the story about that, sort of this last episode in his life.
- Kurtz: Did he go back to southeast Asia?
- Garb: He did. But I haven't read it, so he just intimated to me one time that he had been back and had to go over from Laos. And as I was leafing through it I saw there was a picture of his wife, and it just made me cry to see her again as she was. She died probably in the mid-'80s when she was here. And it was so sad and it made me think about the whole thing. The whole thing is so sad to me.
- Kurtz: So obviously it's a fair statement to say that Vietnam has had a big impact on your life.
- Garb: Oh, yeah.
- Kurtz: Would you say it's positive or negative?

- Garb: Oh, I would say that it's positive, yes. I would say that it's positive. I guess I'm lucky in that way probably.
- Kurtz: Okay, we're just about done here. You tell me so many interesting things that you get me out of order.
- Garb: Sorry.
- Kurtz: No, that's no big deal. So when did you come home from Vietnam, and how did you come home?
- Garb: Oh, let's see. We flew and flew, and I ended up at Fort Dix, for some reason.
- Kurtz: I can tell you exactly why. That's the closest to the Midwest so that when they pay you to go home it's cheaper. Because I came out of Fort Dix, too.
- Garb: Oh, did you really?
- Kurtz: Flew all the way from San Francisco to Fort Dix, flew over Chicago. I said, why didn't you just dump me off in Chicago? So that's why they did it. That's where I got discharged also. How were you received when you got back?
- Garb: I do believe that people, and I do believe today that many people, don't want to talk about it. So I think, in reaction to that, I sort of didn't want to talk about it either, even though my experiences are good experiences, I would say.
- Kurtz: So when you say most people don't want to talk about it, that's if you go down to a PDQ and said I want to talk about Vietnam?
- Garb: No, people that I knew. People of my family and friends. Nobody said, well, what happened there? No one really said that to me.
- Kurtz: That's very common.
- Garb: So then I figured, well, I guess they don't want to talk about it. So for a long time it was, probably with many people, it was whirling, grinding around inside of me.
- Kurtz: So when was there a change because obviously we've been talking for the last hour or so about this, and been talking about it very freely. When did you feel you could start talking about it?

- Garb: Well, only when people asked me. You're interested, Bill was interested. I tell, too, about different things to my friend at work about it. I've told my wife about different things. I have pictures, I have sixty, eighty pictures of Kon Tum and of Saigon.
- Kurtz: I would get shot now if I didn't ask you it. At some point would you be willing to donate the pictures to the Museum? What they would do is they would copy them and return to you, and you could do this through Bill would be the easiest, to do this?
- Garb: Sure. Would they give me one of the copies?
- Kurtz: Yeah. Yeah.
- Garb: That'd be great. I didn't know that.
- Kurtz: Because what they'll do is they'll put this in the file with the transcript and the tape of this interview.
- Garb: That would tell a lot.
- Kurtz: Yes.
- Garb: Now, okay.
- Kurtz: So I'll have Bill talk to you about that.
- Garb: All right.
- Kurtz: And boy, I'm going to get a gold star from the people at the Museum.
- Garb: All right, cool. They're great pictures, if I say so myself.
- Kurtz: Okay. I think really two last questions. Are you active in any veteran organizations?
- Garb: Now, I'm in Veterans for Peace, driven there by George Bush and by my feelings about this war and most wars.
- Kurtz: So is there a reason why you have not joined American Legion, VFW, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Vietnam Veterans?
- Garb: Well, there's no Vietnam Veterans Against the War anymore, I don't think.
- Kurtz: That's true, they're out of business.

- Garb: Somebody quipped that this was—what is this?
- Kurtz: This is a VFW post.
- Garb: VFW. We call it Veterans for War. I don't like to drink, so that's number one. I don't like to socialize in bars.
- Kurtz: Most traditional veterans' posts are like that. And the record should show that we are sitting in a barroom, but no beer.
- Garb: Let the record show. And I guess I feel that I would want to talk about things, but I feel like the way I see the military and war would be significantly different. And maybe I'm wrong, maybe this is just a big stereotype than people who sit around as Veterans for War.
- Kurtz: It's very mixed here. World War II guys are very much what your stereotype is. The Vietnam veterans are kind of split, you know, on this very much. And there is some discussion about this in a fairly sensible sense. I mean, there isn't anybody sitting here telling war stories about running through the jungle and shooting people and stuff like that.
- Is there anything else that you would like to talk about?
- Garb: You said two things.
- Kurtz: The other thing is can you get me any names of people?
- Garb: Right, we'll do what we spoke of.
- Kurtz: And then this Dr. Judy would be very interesting, too. If you could put her in contact with me because she's going back there and—
- Garb: She told me last night that she had been there, this is like the 93rd time she's returned to Vietnam since '78 when she first went there.
- Kurtz: And she's a Wisconsin person. That would be very interesting to understand why she's been back so many times and what she thinks about it.
- Garb: Okay.
- Kurtz: Good. Thanks.

[End of interview]