

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
DAVID F. KIES.
Infantry, Army, Vietnam War
2002

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Kies, David F., (1944-). Oral History Interview, 2002.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 90 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 90 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

David Kies, a Platteville (Wisconsin) native, discusses his Vietnam War military experiences. Kies attended one year of Vennard College (Iowa) before starting work for American Airlines in Chicago. He mentions being drafted into the U.S. Army in October 1965 and completing basic training before attending jump school at Fort Benning (Georgia) in 1966. After a two week vacation, Kies went to San Francisco before his flight to Vietnam. He mentions being issued an M-16 rifle in which he had no training, and being assigned to an anti-tank unit. Kies describes a typical patrol in the anti-tank platoon, supplies they carried, and method of transportation. Kies volunteered to join the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry and he talks about the outstanding leadership in his reconnaissance unit versus his previous company. Kies describes the two parachute jumps from a C-130 in Vietnam. He speaks about a typical night in Vietnam on reconnaissance staying awake on Benzedrine. Kies talks about rice paddies, C-rations, policing booby traps, tropical heat, monsoon nights, his unit's high casualty turnover, and a one-time fly-in of steaks and beer from the base camp. He discusses a typical recon night of dreading snakes, scorpions and leeches in the trenches as well as enemy sniper fire. He details the misery of never having clean clothes or boots and pulling your uniform off like "dead skin." Kies talks about the patrol leading to a claymore mine explosion resulting in his double leg amputation. He discusses events surrounding his evacuation from Vietnam and antics they pulled while recovering at Walter Reed Hospital (Washington D.C.). Kies discusses the camaraderie of his recon platoon and convalescing at the Middleton Hospital in Madison (Wisconsin). He mentions the few surgeries to "stabilize the (leg) stump" before he was sent to the Veterans Administration Hospital in Milwaukee (Wisconsin) for permanent artificial limbs. Kies discusses finding out he was mistakenly listed as "KIA" on the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Wall in Washington D.C. and attending reunions around the country. He concludes by saying after his hospital discharge, he went back to college in Platteville and has recently attempted to reenlist.

Biographical Sketch

Kies (1944-) served with the 173rd Army Airborne before volunteering for Recon in 503rd Infantry and became a double amputee during the Vietnam War. He attended the University of Wisconsin-Platteville and also worked as a draftsman after his discharge.

Interviewed by James A. Kurtz, 2002.

Transcribed by Michael Chusid, 2005.

Transcription edited by Daniel Birk & John McNally, 2007.

Kurtz: And we're interviewing David Kies – K-I-E-S – on the west side of Madison. Dave, could you tell us what year you were born?

Kies: I was born in 1944 in December.

Jim: December of '44. And when did you graduate from high school and where?

Kies: I went to school in Platteville – Platteville High School. I graduated in 1963.

Jim: Okay. What did you do when you got out of high school, Dave?

Kies: Out of school. I went to college one year.

Jim: And what college was that?

Kies: That was Vennard College, it was in Iowa. It was a small school in Iowa. I lasted one year, and thought: this was not for me. So I went to work for American Airlines in Chicago at O'Hare.

Jim: And what were you doing there?

Kies: I was a clerk.

Jim: Okay. And then what did you do after working as a clerk for American Airlines?

Kies: I was drafted when I was a clerk [laughs].

Jim: Okay, when were you drafted?

Kies: October 1965.

Jim: Okay, when did you enter the service?

Kies: In October.

Jim: Okay. And where did you go for basic training?

Kies: I went to Fort – oh, let me think – I went to Fort Knox for basic.

Jim: And that's in Kentucky?

Kies: Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Jim: And how long was your basic training?

Kies: Two months.

Jim: Two months, and did you go to any schools then after basic training?

Kies: Just -- was it seven, eight weeks AIT? -- I went to Fort Polk, Louisiana.

Jim: Fort Polk, Louisiana. And then after that, what did you do?

Kies: After that, I think I came home for a month during Christmas. If I remember right. And then I went to Fort Benning to jump school.

Jim: And how long was jump school?

Kies: Another two months. Two months, two months, two months.

Jim: Okay. When you completed jump school, what did you do?

Kies: I was given a little two-week vacation, and reported to San Francisco to be shipped over.

Jim: And did you have orders for a specific unit?

Kies: 173rd.

Jim: And where was the one -- This was in 1966?

Kies: April of 1966.

Jim: And so you had orders for the 173rd, and they were in Vietnam?

Kies: In Vietnam.

Jim: And you flew from San Francisco to -- What part of Vietnam did you come in to?

Kies: Came into Tan Son Nhut, which is south, as I recall: pretty close to Saigon. And then I reported to Bien Hoa, which is pretty close to Saigon as well.

Jim: Okay. What time of day did you get into Vietnam?

Kies: It was afternoon. I remember that. And it was all totally strange. And I was taken -- I was trucked right out, you know, in the back of a cattle car, right out to the 173rd.

Jim: And did you have any impressions about the heat, smell?

Kies: Lot of smells of diesel fuel, I remember that. At the time I didn't smell any, you know, locks yet, like I did later. It was hot, and I remember seeing my first M-16 -- that was the thing that impressed me most. I had never seen an M-16 before.

Jim: So you were not trained either in basic or in AIT or airborne with an M-16?

Kies: No. All M-14.

Jim: So you got to the 173rd. Their base camp was where?

Kies: In Bien Hoa.

Jim: Was it near the airfield in Bien Hoa?

Kies: Yep. The air force is on one side, and the 173rd on the other side of the airfield.

Jim: And how many troops were in the 173rd, about?

Kies: It was only a brigade. Totally. They came from Iraq. I want to say about a thousand. Totally. That was four brigades – four battalions.

Jim: Okay. And were you assigned to a unit immediately, or did you get some in-country training before you were assigned to a unit?

Kies: No, I got no in-country training. I think we moved out the next day. I was in infantry. And they assigned me to an anti-tank platoon.

Jim: And what was your rank?

Kies: At that time I was probably a two.

Jim: E-2. And were you issued an M-16? Or did you carry an M-14?

Kies: No, an M-16 right off the bat.

Jim: Were you given an opportunity to fire it before you went out on an operation?

Kies: Yeah, just to see how it moved on you, you know, pull the trigger.

Jim: Okay. So how did you get to wherever the location of your operation was?

Kies: We normally went by helicopter. In fact, I would say 99% was by helicopter, and the other 1% was by convoy.

Jim: Okay, and when you went by helicopter did you leave from the Bien Hoa airbase or did you leave from other points?

Kies: Right from Bien Hoa.

Jim: And how long – or how far out from Bien Hoa would you go?

Kies: Oh, it might be ten minutes, it might be forty-five minutes. Hard to say. Seems to me there was a lot of circulating, a lot of maneuvering, but, no, it wasn't like three or four hours.

Jim: So you're talking now – the distance was measured in time, rather than miles, basically. And what was the countryside like around the Bien Hoa base?

Kies: Rice paddies. That's the thing I remember – the first day I was there I remember – the second day, I should say -- the rice paddies, and the burms on the surrounding hills, keeping the water in. There is some hills, but they weren't the biggest hills, you know. Up north, they were bigger hills.

Jim: Ah, when you went out on operation, what did you carry with you?

Kies: Just an M-16.

Jim: M-16.

Kies: That was it. And, well, of course, at that time just M-16s.

Jim: What was the base load of ammunition you took?

Kies: Not too much. Not too many clips. You know, I've been thinking about that since that time, and I really don't recall if there was a supply person there with ammo, because we didn't carry a whole lot of ammo.

Jim: Did these clips – how many shells did they have in them?

Kies: Twenty. Yep.

Jim: Did you shoot them with twenty, or did you have less shots?

Kies: We used to make banana clips, so we put two clips together with duct tape. Another use for duct tape. And they jammed, because they were homemade.

Jim: Did you have adequate cleaning supplies at that point?

Kies: Yeah, I did. Everybody had a rod, which came in handy. Stuck my – the barrel of the rifle with the butt a few times, and –

Jim: What else did you take with you on a typical operation?

Kies: Food, water.

Jim: How many canteens did you carry?

Kies: Just two.

Jim: Just two?

Kies: Two plastic. C-rations. We carried a few Sterno, and that was about it.

Jim: And how long was this first operation that you went out on?

Kies: That I don't don't recall. I don't think it was long – it was only three or four days and that was it.

Jim: And in this anti-tank unit, you operated basically as an infantry unit –

Kies: Right.

Jim: -- that was anti-tank in name only.

Kies: Right. Name only.

Jim: Okay. So how long between operations were you back at the Bien Hoa base camp?

Kies: It seems to me that we were there no longer than a couple of days, and then we were out again.

Jim: What would you do in those couple days when you were at the base camp?

Kies: There was always some construction to do – went to town a few times, not a whole lot. And that was about it. I know we built the guard shack and put down what they call the PSP or whatever the heck –

Jim: Do you do work on bunkers on the perimeter and stuff like that?

Kies: Yup. A lot of clean-up.

Jim: Did you clean fields of fire or something?

Kies: Nope – that was all taken care of.

Jim: What were the quarters like at the base camp?

Kies: Um, they were half-tent, half-hooch, you know. Corrugated sides with screens, corrugated roof. It seems to me it was a like half-tent. It was a strange situation. And right out the back door were the V-trenches that were full of snakes and scorpions and so on.

Jim: What were the V-trenches there for?

Kies: To dive into when there were incoming rounds.

Jim: And did you experience incoming rounds in Bien Hoa?

Kies: No, but I do recall the first night I was there, the Australians were right across the street from where I was, and I was not aware of that. And they had their big – it must have been 16-inch guns. I don't know [laughs]. It was artillery. Giant artillery. The long, long guns. And those went off in the middle of the night. And I hit the floor. There was no way I could have hit the V-trenches. Too scary.

Jim: What were the floors like?

Kies: Just a wooden-like, rough sod – 1x12s.

Jim: Okay. In these V-trenches you were talking about, did you see snakes and scorpions in them?

Kies: Oh, yeah. They weren't used very much, to tell you the truth. Everybody avoided them. But they were cleaned out every once and a while.

Jim: Right. So when you went out on a typical operation, what time of day would you leave?

Kies: Seems to me, everything was in the morning. When I was in anti-tank. It changed later on. But we all went pretty much at the same time, and then we split up.

Jim: And would you leave from the airbase or did they have helicopter pads at your base camp?

Kies: It was right in our base camp, yeah. We had nothing to do with the airports across.

Jim: And what kind of helicopter did you go in?

Kies: They were all Hueys. A two-door, four-door, long, short, both.

Jim: And did you fly with the doors open or closed?

Kies: There were no doors.

Jim: There were no doors.

Kies: There were no doors. Sit with our feet on the rudders, and the chopper would tilt up, you know, and nobody ever fell out.

Jim: Did you ever sit on your helmets?

Kies: No. [Laughs.]

Jim: Different story.

Kies: Different story.

Jim: So when you would go out, how were you told about the missions that you went on? Was it your platoon leader, your company commander –

Kies: It would have been my platoon leader, right. With a name and where we were going, and that would have been about it.

Jim: And would you have an objective given to you, you know, in these things?

Kies: No, not really. It was a very loose net operation. In fact, my very first platoon sergeant in anti-tank was a mess sergeant, so that's [laughs] how organized this was.

Jim: How did the mess sergeant end up being a platoon sergeant?

Kies: I have no idea. He was so out of shape he shouldn't have been in the service. He had a pot belly, and his body was totally covered with tattoos.

Jim: When you landed in these things, did you land in rice paddies, fields, roads?

Kies: Seems to me that when we were in anti-tank, we were treated pretty gingerly. We landed mostly on a road or in a field.

Jim: And then what would you do?

Kies: And then just follow, you know, follow the platoon sergeant, who I don't really think knew what he was doing.

Jim: So you didn't have an officer platoon leader, you just had a platoon sergeant at this point?

Kies: Right.

Jim: Is there anything that stands out in this time that you were in this anti-tank platoon, operating as an infantryman?

Kies: I guess I'd have to say the disappointment I had in my unit at that time, because we had a general – and I can't remember his name at this time – who would fly around over head all day and watch us and at night would come down and expect his hot meal to be on the table in his tent. And our job was to dig his foxholes. And sometimes it was like stone, you know. He was kind of short on his temper, you know, if his foxhole didn't fit his head right. And that was the extent of our job. I saw no reason to even do that job, but –

Jim: Now did the general stay out in the field with you? Was this a position he'd stay at?

Kies: Yep. He'd stay.

Jim: Would this be with a platoon or company or a whole brigade?

Kies: No. This would just be with probably part of a company. Sometimes the whole company would go, sometimes part of a company.

Jim: So how many officers were in the company?

Kies: I have no idea.

Jim: Did you see officers very much at this point?

Kies: There were a few. I saw a lot of second lieutenants, lot of second lieutenants. A few captains, no too many first lieutenants. As time went on, I saw more officers, yes, but at first, no.

Jim: Did you have any contact, you know, with the enemy at this point in time?

Kies: In anti-tank, no.

Jim: How long are you in the anti-tank platoon?

Kies: Probably three months.

Jim: So that would put us into July of that year. Now what were the weather conditions – was it dry or raining?

Kies: If it was dry, I don't remember it. I do remember the rain. I thought I'd never camp again.

Jim: So it rained a lot and did it rain at a fixed time every day?

Kies: During the monsoon season, I guess it was, it would rain – You could see the clouds roll in across the horizon. It seems to me that it always rained just before we went to bed. Just before dark, so we were cold and wet all night.

Jim: So for a Wisconsin boy it was still cold in the tropics?

Kies: It still wasn't as miserable as Fort Polk. [Laughs.]

Jim: I've heard that from other people. So you said you were in the anti-tank platoon for about three months. Where did you go from there and why?

- Kies: Well, like I said, I didn't see much sense in what I was doing, and so the recon platoon was right next door. So we knew everyone in recon. And there was a high turnover in recon.
- Jim: Why was there a high turnover in recon?
- Kies: Because the job effectively –
- Jim: I mean, was this casualties, sickness, people going –
- Kies: Yeah, casualties from being out front, with everyone else. Of course, we were all the immortal types – it wasn't going to happen to us. Although we saw the bodies coming back every day. So, I don't know, there was probably three, four, five of us, maybe, who said we wanted to go to recon, so it wasn't long. And took our pillow and went to recon right the next door.
- Jim: Now were these people that you just met in the unit in Vietnam, or did you have training with them either in basic training or in AIT?
- Kies: No, these are all complete strangers.
- Jim: And you were just kindred souls and decided to go somewhere else?
- Kies: Yes, that's right.
- Jim: And you were allowed to volunteer and go into recon, I mean, that was not a problem?
- Kies: No, recon was always looking for volunteers.
- Jim: Okay, and how many people were in the recon platoon?
- Kies: I think there was about 33-34, I want to say.
- Jim: And what kind of leadership did you have there?
- Kies: Excellent. A total reversal of before.
- Jim: And what rank headed the recon platoon, and is there any people there that kind of stand out in your mind?
- Kies: Yeah. Leadership in that platoon really stands out in my mind. The platoon sergeant – it's a strange story – was a major in the reserves here in the United States and volunteered for Vietnam. Got over here as a major and said: I want to be an NCO. So they made him a staff sergeant.
- Jim: What is a staff sergeant – E-6?

Kies: So he became Sergeant Powell, instead of Major Powell, and he was the greatest guy in the world. In fact, I just saw him again this summer. He was just like – he looks like he did then, he was full of life, and just –

Jim: You saw him this summer. Where did you see him?

Kies: In Coco Beach, in Rio, at my 173rd reunion, just the guys I was with. This is from '66-'67.

Jim: Okay.

Kies: And we had a great time. But his leadership was outstanding, just outstanding. And then there was Colonel Siegholz, who was the colonel of the 2nd Battalion.

Jim: 2nd Battalion is what? Is there another number that goes with it?

Kies: 2nd Battalion of the 503rd. And he was an outstanding guy. In fact, I saw him too. He's 83 years old right now, and I hear from him – he writes me letters. He remembers the day I was injured – he picked me up. Just a great guy. He and his wife both. And then there were some – a general, General Dean, General Walsh, who were good guys, and it was really – It's kind of ironic, though, when I was in anti-tank, I didn't know any of these people. But being in recon – of course, down and dirty – I got to know all these people. They were visible there. When we jumped, the general was the first guy out of the plane.

Jim: Now "jump". Did you actually go out there, shoot jumps?

Kies: Two.

Jim: Could you describe those?

Kies: One was sort of normal, I think 1250 feet.

Jim: What kind of an airplane?

Kies: You know, I can't tell you. What would they use?

Jim: Was it a two-engine or four-engine?

Kies: I think four.

Jim: It would be a C-130.

Kies: C-130. Never really knew my planes. Didn't jump out the back, jumped out the side. We had to go through jump school again. Over there before we jumped, because it had been so long.

Jim: And what kind of terrain did you jump into?

Kies: The first one was very prairie-like, long elephant grass. There was a village down below. The general actually went through somebody's roof, being the first one out. There were a lot of thermals, so instead of coming down, you might come down and a thermal would get you, and you'd go back up. But that time we weren't in great danger – it was like a practice jump. The second jump, I think, was like 500 feet, and that's very low. If your chute doesn't open instantly, you're on the ground. No casualties.

Jim: What kind of plane did you jump out of there?

Kies: Same plane. We always had the same kind of planes.

Jim: And was the enemy at either of the sites you jumped at?

Kies: I remember the enemy on the second jump, but it still wasn't considered a combat jump. Right after I came home, they did have a combat jump, where everybody got a little Bronze Star and their badge. I missed that by a month. Maybe a good thing.

Jim: Yes. Now did you see any advantage in jumping out of an airplane as opposed to getting to the position by helicopter?

Kies: I never did. [Laughs.] I think it's maybe a prestige thing or – I don't know. I could see it one time, [unintelligible].

Jim: Well, could you describe a typical day in a recon platoon.

Kies: Actually, it was a typical night.

Jim: Okay: Typical night.

Kies: It would start before dusk. We'd be swept in three-man groups. As a group – as 33 or 34 of us or whatever, we would go around in the afternoon and evening, we'd decide where we were going to set up at night. Set up ambushes. So just after dark, we'd go back to that designated spot and set up our booby traps and, you know, wires, trip wires, flares, claymores, that kind of thing.

Jim: What's a claymore?

Kies: Claymore mine? It's a mine that's made out of bakelite. It's hand-detonated with a cord, blasting-cap – wait until someone's in front of it, blow it off. You can put a leaf in front of it, disguise it in many ways.

Jim: Did you have your position marked on a map, so you could get support from either mortars or artillery?

Kies: Yep. We were always in contact. That was good.

Jim: So you had a radio with you in addition to –

Kies: Yep, an RTO that the platoon sergeant – We were all 30 some of us very close quarters. But then after we settled for the night, we would break off into our two-, three-man groups. And some of those nights were pretty long. We got fed, no, given Benzedrine to stay up all night, and after the sun came up in the morning, that's when we do our sleeping. Maybe two or three hours and that was it. So it was somewhat strange, but it was – I loved it. It was fun.

Jim: Problems with insects?

Kies: Oh, yeah. The worst insect would be – maybe it's not an insect – the scorpion. I remember lots of guys getting bit by scorpions. Especially, I think – and I don't know why they would have had their boots off, but some guys took their boots off. I don't recall taking my boots off. And if you didn't check your boots, you'd probably have a scorpion there in the morning. [Laughs.] But some of these guys really got pretty sick. They got swelled up –

Jim: Did they have to be evacuated?

Kies: I don't recall that part, but I think in one instance – I do remember – I think the guy probably was evacuated. But we would sit there all night in our positions – either in the listening posts or in observation posts – and we'd be wired so if anyone came down the trail – we'd be on near sections of trails which we had set up, and we'd probably average one a night. One Viet Cong, running messages. Because they didn't have radios.

Jim: What would you do when you saw this runner?

Kies: He was usually killed. Either that or, once in a while, interrogated. Captured and interrogated. We had an interpreter with us.

Jim: And was the interpreter American or Vietnamese?

Kies: Vietnamese. So that's – like I say, at the time I was thinking cowboys and Indians. And I kind of liked it.

Jim: Now, you said there were thirty-man unit went out in three-person pods, or whatever it is. Were you out on the perimeter of the company or were you just out in the country somewhere?

Kies: Yup. We were just out by ourselves. Recon was by themselves. We had long-range reconnaissance, short-range reconnaissance and – I don't recall ever knowing which we were, because we didn't know where the main body was.

Jim: So that you would be moving completely independent of the main body, as far as you knew? And during the day, then you'd come back to wherever you gathered at night to rest up? Is that what you'd do? And then have another mission the next night?

Kies: Yep. Keep going.

Jim: Would you be moving overland, or would you be moved by helicopter?

Kies: This would all be overland now. Once you land by helicopter, it would have been by foot.

Jim: How long would these missions take?

Kies: Up to forty days. I think the longest was forty-four days.

Jim: How often would you be resupplied?

Kies: I think maybe every couple days. Some helicopter would drop us some food. I did go a week one time with no food.

Jim: What did you do about water?

Kies: Creeks. Iodine tablets and those old muddy, murky creeks going down through the jungle.

Jim: Did anyone ever get sick from the water?

Kies: No. I never recall anybody getting sick. And we usually carried just a couple days C-rations with us, but that platoon sergeant, Sergeant Powell, was pretty well connected. And I remember him calling in the chopper one day when we were running out of food, and he said, "I'll be back in a couple of hours, boys." So he came back in a couple of hours, and he had a palette full of beer and steaks. This is out in the middle of nowhere. So he knew someone to get us beer and steaks.

Jim: Were the steaks cooked or did you have to cook them?

Kies: Oh, no. They were raw, we had to cook them. They were excellent.

Jim: Now did you get changes in uniforms? Other stuff like that? Boots?

Kies: No, keep the same uniforms, same boots. I remember the uniforms – you'd give a little tug and they'd pull right off your body, like it was dead skin – they were rotten, absolutely rotten. Sometimes we'd jump in the river, just to wash them off. Change socks maybe once a day – try to. No underwear.

Jim: Why didn't you wear underwear?

Kies: You'd have just one more thing to keep wet and next to your body.

Jim: Did you have any trouble with leeches?

Kies: Yep, leeches, crossing streams. You always came across leeches.

Jim: What did you do to get rid of the leeches?

Kies: Cigarettes. Use cigarettes or lighter fluid – Zippo lighter fluid.

Jim: How did you cook the C-rations that you had, or did you eat them cold?

Kies: Well, the beans are great cold. Sterno was the way to cook them. And you could make a canister and it would last quite a while. And they were small, light – no problem carrying those around.

Jim: What was your favorite of the C-rations?

Kies: I loved the pound cake with the fruit cocktail. I can't remember any meat that I really liked. [Laughs.]

Jim: The beer that the chopper brought out – was that cold? Do you remember what kind it was?

Kies: Swanlager.

Jim: Swanlager. Outstanding. And where was Swanlager from?

Kies: Australia. See, we were attached to the Australians, so that's probably where it came from.

Jim: Probably from base camp.

Kies: Yes.

Jim: Did you have any major contact with the enemy in the recon platoon, before we get to your leaving?

Kies: There weren't any – a whole lot of major fire fights. There was mostly sniper, interference with their messengers – that kind of thing. It wasn't until after I left that they really got their butt kicked.

Jim: Did you have snipers with you in your recon platoon?

Kies: I remember a few, yeah, right. I couldn't tell you their names. But I do remember snipers being around.

Jim: Did you get any better training on the M-14? You mentioned when you came in-country you had none.

Kies: No, I don't think – it was just, carry on.

Jim: And what load of ammunition did you carry when you were on the recon platoon? The same as when you were in the anti-tank platoon?

Kies: M-16, we were loaded up with claymores, grenades –

Jim: How many hand grenades did you carry?

Kies: I don't recall right now. Probably about four.

Jim: Fragmentary and concussion, both?

Kies: It was the old Second World War, whatever they were.

Jim: Did you carry any different colored smokes?

Kies: Yeah, for the helicopters that came in. And I do remember that there were no rifle slings. You know, the lighter, the better. No ponchos, no lighter, no rifle slings, no helmets – nothing that would make any noise.

Jim: What did you wear on your head if you didn't –

Kies: Baseball hat or nothing. A few guys had berets, but generally nothing.

Jim: Did you wear a regular fatigue also at that point in time?

Kies: Yeah, the original with the buttons on the outside. The good ones.

Jim: Let's see. Is there anything else you should tell us about your experience in the recon platoon?

Kies: Um, no, except the guys in recon platoon are probably a lot closer, you know, than the normal grunt.

Jim: Before we get to the other part of it, you came to 173rd in April of 1966, which was roughly a year after the original troop came over. Did you have any exposure to people who came over originally with the 173rd?

Kies: Yep. They came from Okinawa in 1965 the year before. There were still a few around.

Jim: And how were you treated by those folks?

Kies: Great. They were obviously in charge, and they'd let you know it. But they were good guys.

Jim: And they taught you -- they'd take you under the arm and they didn't treat you poorly or anything?

Kies: No, no. It was all -- a lot of camaraderie.

Jim: And so then you were in the recon platoon for about six months, is that right?

Kies: About six months, right.

Jim: And we're just about at the end of this tape, so I'm going to stop.

[End of Side A, Tape 1]

Jim: The date is December 17th, 2002. Dave, could you tell us how you ended your career with the recon platoon, you know, starting out at the beginning of it and what happened, if you would please.

Kies: Ah, the beginning of the end, you mean?

Jim: Yes. The beginning of the end.

Kies: It was a Sunday morning about -- I can tell you exactly: 7:20 in the morning on a Sunday. Nice sunny day. We were right on the Cambodia-Vietnam border. In fact, I have conflicting stories if we were in Cambodia or in Vietnam.

Jim: Were you north of Tay Ninh or what? I mean, were you by the parrot beak, or do you know --

Kies: Iron triangle. Which is close to the parrot beak, right?

Jim: Right.

Kies: As far as towns, I don't know. We never saw a town.

Jim: Was this as part of a mission that you'd been out, and you'd been dropped off somewhere else?

Kies: The three of us were there. One of kids -- there were three of us in my little group -- went to police up our booby traps from the night before, and there was Eric Zoller -- and by the way I never knew Eric's name: I always knew him as the Greek.

Jim: And how was his last name spelled?

Kies: Z-o-l-l-e-r. His mother was actually on the “I love Lucy” show: she was one of the people on “I love Lucy.”

Jim: Neat?

Kies: And I didn’t realize that until later either. And the other kid with us was dropped in the night before. Just before sunset, he appeared from someplace. A new recruit in-country.

Jim: Okay, so was he brought in by helicopter?

Kies: No, I don’t – Well, he must have been, because we were out.

Jim: And he was brought to the platoon as an entire[?], being then assigned to your group?

Kies: Eric and me took the night. And so we were policing up our booby traps, and claymores and string wires and all that stuff in the morning, and all of a sudden I can remember Eric – We were walking on the trail: there was Eric, I was probably about twelve feet behind Eric, the new guy is behind me. And all of a sudden I can remember hearing the “Boom!” Went up in the air, tried to get up and I couldn’t get up. And I looked down and one of my legs was gone. And the other one was totally broken. So –

Jim: What was the “Boom!”

Kies: It was the claymore. And thank God for me – I was like two feet ahead of the claymore when it went off.

Jim: Whose claymore was it?

Kies: It was one of ours, but – and this is kind of a muddy issue too – the Vietnamese used to unload our ships, so they had as much of our stuff as we had, so – [Laughs.]

Jim: From the Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese, and then it went on the black market? I mean, the Viet Cong didn’t unload our ships.

Kies: Oh, sure they did. Yeah, but we didn’t know or care, obviously. But it could have been one we planted the night before, they could have turned it around. But they were there. They were like the Native American Indians – they were very cat-like on their feet.

Jim: But this was not one of the claymores that your group of three had? You had picked up somebody else’s.

Kies: Right. So it went off – it cut me right off below the knees. It went ahead, because at about 100 feet the claymore is only about – the pellets – the claymore is full of C-form,

which is plastic buckshot – ours are the good ones. Theirs had screws and glass and bolts – everything. Ours only had buckshot or metal fragments of some kind. And so at a hundred feet out, it's only seven feet off the ground. If it's aimed right. So it killed Eric, cut me off, and the new kid behind us – this is what I heard later – had his eardrums broken, because of the concussion. So I guess I was one of the lucky ones. It could have been worse. I got one little piece here in my nose – shrapnel. I got a lot of shot in my legs, but -- So they took me back – they called a helicopter.

Jim: Who is they?

Kies: They had a medic. We always had a medic with us.

Jim: So there were four of you then, actually?

Kies: No, the medic – There were three of us, but the other two groups were around –

Jim: So they heard this going on, so you were going back actually to your rally-up position –

Kies: Right, right. To regroup for the day. So –

Jim: What was the terrain like around here? Was this rubber plantation country or jungle?

Kies: That had to be close, too. It was mostly jungle, we were along a river, and we could have been right here in southwest Wisconsin, as far as terrain.

Jim: Was it an open area? Do you remember how you were evacuated?

Kies: Yeah. The medic threw smoke. He put – I don't know if it was a Lucky or a Camel or something – he put it in my mouth, said, "Here." To kind of make me happy, I guess. [Laughs.] Took my belt off, put it as a tourniquet on one leg. And he put another tourniquet around the other leg. Gave me a shot of morphine, and I said, "Give me another one." I was totally unconscious all this time. I said give me another one. He said, "I can't." I said, "Give me another one." And then he did. And they threw the smoke to get a helicopter, and – I found this out later – the only helicopter in the area was my colonel, Colonel Siegholz's helicopter. And the pilot of his helicopter said, "I can't come down – this is the colonel's helicopter." The colonel said, "Get this thing down there – we're going down." So the colonel came down and picked me up. So I was back in the hospital in, like, twenty minutes. To a MASH hospital.

Jim: A MASH hospital. Do you know where that was?

Kies: It was probably around – it wasn't Bien Hoa yet.

Jim: Tay Ninh, maybe?

Kies: I don't know. No idea.

Jim: Okay.

Kies: So they – I can remember they – One leg was gone, so they stopped bleeding there, and the guy leaned over me and said, “We have to take the other one off.” And so he did. And that was it until I got back to – took me back to our base, we had a hospital at Bien Hoa.

Jim: So they took you from that MASH hospital –

Kies: Back to my base. Then from there – I stuck around five days, I guess.

Jim: Okay, were you visited by any of your comrades?

Kies: Oh yeah. They all came. And I wrote letters to my folks that day and a few of my friends back here.

Jim: What were you told about your condition?

Kies: That I was going to make it. That was about it. So I had a lot of faith in them. I guess, you have to, right?

Jim: Yep.

Kies: I mean I had faith in the back of my shoe. [Laughs.] That was a PFC. So I had a lot of faith in these guys. I knew some of the doctors and dentists who had been over there, and they were great. I didn't know these particular ones, but in general.

Jim: So you were in the hospital in Bien Hoa for about five days, and then where did you go?

Kies: Well, I have to digress here a little bit. My insurance man back home in Platteville was an ex-general. First World War, Second World War. Old Scott Cairy. Tougher than nails. He'd walk into the governor's office here in the Capitol.

Jim: Is that C-a-r-y?

Kies: C-a-i-r-y. He'd walk straight right into the governor's office in the Capitol past the secretary and she'd be saying, “You can't, you can't!” And of course the governor'd say, “Come on in, Scott!” They all knew him. Deafier than a bat – had a great big old hearing aid to hear with. Put it in his pocket, you know. So he wrote a telegram to the Pentagon and told them to get me home, 'cause they were going to keep me over for a while. So the next thing I knew, I was on a plane to Japan, where I got rolled in the hospital. [Laughs.]

Jim: Tell us about that.

Kies: Well, I don't know if that was an everyday occurrence or not, but the Air Force was running – It was an American hospital in Japan, and I guess that they would shoot you up or dope you up and roll you.

Jim: By roll you, you have money with you?

Kies: Money, I did have – I did keep my watch, but I lost money I had on me, which wasn't much, but –

Jim: Before you left Vietnam, they gave you a chance to take some of your small personal effects with you?

Kies: I don't recall that. I did get some things back. But I didn't get –

Jim: So you just had the money on you that you had when you went out on the operation.

Kies: My watch and whatever money I probably had back in the hooch. I think they stuffed the other – they put it in the billfold. I got my jackboots back, I got some underwear and socks back, I got some uniforms. But I didn't get my 9mm rifle that I had captured and things like that. I got an old radio that I captured, which I've since lost. I only stayed a couple nights in Japan – then I was off to Walter Reed. But that ride home was terrible. I remember it.

Jim: What kind of a plane – I mean, what –

Kies: It was a big one: C-130, I think it was.

Jim: Well, okay, was it a hospital plane?

Kies: Yeah, strict hospital. Litters three high. But there were guys gurgling on their own blood, it was just – it was a terrible experience. Just, like, really bad.

Jim: And did they have adequate medical staff on the plane?

Kies: Yeah, they had a lot of nurses. I do recall the nurses were not – some of them were in, like, class A uniforms. They weren't in white, which I thought was a little strange at the time. So I went back to Walter Reed, then they pensioned me back here.

Jim: Walter Reed – that's in Maryland, I believe? Washington, D.C., Maryland.

Kies: Yep. Washington, D.C., Maryland.

Jim: And how long were you at Walter Reed?

Kies: Let's see. I was there from January, let's see, that was about the 1st of February, until – I can't remember, it was springtime, so probably March. Maybe – I can't tell you exactly.

It wasn't summer yet, but they have an early summer there. I think it was March. And they wanted to do a new articulation on me, which means they disassemble your knee, and they get rid of the bottom joint, so you just have the top joint. And one evening a resident came to me and he said, "I know where you're going – don't let them do it. They'll fix you up where you're going." And this guy turned out to be from Dodgeville, Wisconsin, this resident. Piggalula [?] was his name, I believe.

Jim: Do you know how to spell that?

Kies: [Has trouble with the spelling.] But it's in the Dodgeville phonebook. Coincidentally, I bought his grandmother's house when I moved to Dodgeville. [Laughs.] So anyway, I came back to Madison to the VA hospital. I should tell you about getting out of Walter Reed.

Jim: Before you do that, did you have artificial limbs at that point?

Kies: No, no. Nothing.

Jim: You were just in a wheelchair?

Kies: I was just in a wheelchair. And they did a couple surgeries. I remember the guy – old Mr. Norse, an old black guy. He would wheel us as we came in – like, the next day – he would wheel us out onto the sun porch – we were in Ward 35, which was an open ward in Walter Reed, all amputees. He would wheel us out onto the sun porch and close the doors, and he had probably about twenty bottles of peroxide. Hydrogen peroxide. And he'd start pouring it on our legs or wherever, the panties, because the bandages have actually become of us, you know, soaked our blood, and they just – And I'll never forget the pain of that. Him taking that -- Heard the screams coming from that sun porch open all the time.

Jim: So the purpose of this hospitalization was to get the stump to stabilize, is that -- ?

Kies: Yeah, right.

Jim: Okay. Now tell us about leaving Fort – I mean, Walter Reed, unless there's something else you should tell us about.

Kies: I'll just tell you about the general I encountered on the way out. Overall, the care was good there, and we had such a great time. That's a whole different story. Books have been written on how bad we were there, 'cause we were like the first group back.

Jim: Well, tell us about that, 'cause maybe people might want to know about that.

Kies: Well, my friend Ralph Perkins just called me last weekend. His father, I believe, was an ambassador to Panama, and Ralph and I became friends in Walter Reed. He lost a leg and [?], so we were somewhat ambulatory, because we could be in a chair. You know,

we would do things like put soap in the fountain out front – the big fountain out in front of Walter Reed. We'd try to run the gate past the MPs, and one of the bearings in my wheelchair froze up just as we went by, so I went around in circles. They'd take us back. We'd sit out front and salute the officers with our left hands, and they would like know something was wrong but not quite what. And just kind of destroyed the inside of Walter Reed. But we were – Well, Ralph and I were probably the older ones. I was twenty-two, and he's like 61 today, so he's an old guy. [Laughs.]

Jim: Was he an officer?

Kies: No, he was not an officer. I don't think there were any officers on our floor. But some of these guys were so, so bad. And then there were ramps – Walter Reed is full of ramps, and we'd race. And at that time it wasn't like today. There must not have been an OSHA around, because doors would open up into this ramp. So here we are racing, side by side down the ramp. Someone would open the door – with a brick wall at the end. It was just total chaos. Total chaos. So anyway, I went to leave – I got my orders to leave. I was coming back to Madison.

Jim: To the Middleton hospital here?

Kies: Right. To the Middleton VA hospital. So I had my plane ticket. I was in my class A uniform in my wheelchair. Wheeled into the general's office to – All I had to do was sign my name to my DD-214, I suppose, or some form. And he said, "Your hair's too long. Go get a haircut." So I had to go get a haircut. I remember all that so distinctly. [Laughs.] So down to the barbershop, got a haircut. We go back to the general's office, and he let me sign my name and I was out of the service, so it was kind of harassment right to the end.

Jim: Did you come back to Madison in uniform?

Kies: Yep.

Jim: And how were you received or who met you when you came back to Madison?

Kies: My folks met me at the airport. I just saw a picture of that the other day someplace. My folks met me at Truax, and then, let's see, I was taken by ambulance to the back door of VA, and I can remember being wheeled in there – it's now, I think, urgent care down by admitting – and I was wheeled in there, I was on a gurney, and I was just laying there. And this guy walked up to me with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. He was in a three-piece suit – black pin-striped suit, rather dapper guy – with a cigarette in his mouth and, like, an inch of ash on it. And he started whipping back my sheets and poking at me and I thought, "Who's this guy?" It turned out to be my doctor. Smoking in the halls of the hospital. [Laughs.] He always had a cigarette, always – he was a chain-smoker, at work. In the hospital. Nicest guy in the world. Zine Rogers was his name. Dr. Rogers. But so it was between Dr. Rogers and a Dr. Okagami, I think his name is, from the University Hospital.

Jim: Do you have a clue how you spell Okagami?

Kies: No. But I could find out. 'Cause one of my orderlies who was there then is still there. I just saw Schmidty last week.

Jim: If you could do that, it would be helpful.

Kies: I could do that. So he was an Asian doctor, actually, but they did, I don't know how many – three or four surgeries on me.

Jim: What was the surgeries – again, to get you –

Kies: Just revisions, revisions –

Jim: To get them to receive.

Kies: Yep. You know, working with the bone and the skin and all that. And it wasn't long and I had some prostheses that were pretty crude at the time. I always accused them of making them for a horse instead of me. They were like twenty pounds a piece. And now they're, like, four. So they've come a long ways. But I had good experiences at the VA, I mean, I have nothing but praise for the medicine, the VA here in Madison. And like I say, Schmidty is still there after 42 years. He's started making sixty.

Jim: So you've been having general maintenance over the years on your prosthetics at the VA hospital?

Kies: What was the question now?

Jim: Your new legs have been maintained and upgraded over the years?

Kies: Yep, I have my choice of where I want to go. There're all private concerns that are like manufacturers. I used to go to a place that – I've gone to about three places. I used to live in Milwaukee. I went to Milwaukee. I went to a place here in town. I really wasn't happy. And I found another place here in town that was another little Asian guy, little Chinese guy, and I can't remember his name [Jim whispers: "It's better not to."]. So he made his legs, and all of a sudden they stayed on themselves – there were no belt or big -- The other ones were just so cumbersome: the back was out. And these things are great! And I still go to the same place – he's long gone, he died. So the VA's treated me very well. I go through a pair of legs about every two years. These I've had for about three: I'm due for new ones. You know, they're not cheap. But every time I get a pair they're much improved.

Jim: Now have you had any experiences with veteran reunions?

Kies: Yep. I didn't get invited to any for, what, 33 years,

Jim: Is there a story behind that, Dave?

Kies: Yes. [Laughs.] Yes, my name is on the Wall in Washington by mistake.

Jim: How did that happen?

Kies: Well, we're dealing with the government. I think there were 34 mistakes out of 58,000, so not too bad. Probably not bad at all.

Jim: So you were reported as KIA?

Kies: Yup. KIA. I have a little star back with my name, saying I was killed in combat. And Eric Zoller is there, the one who was killed, right there on the same panel as I am.

Jim: Did you figure out how this mistake was made?

Kies: Nope. Never did.

Jim: Was it made because the colonel took you out, rather than through the regular bookkeeping?

Kies: That could have been. That very well may be. So they thought I was – Except a lot of the guys I was with saw me, but I could have died after.

Jim: So how did they figure out – the people in the 173rd figure out that you weren't dead?

Kies: Well, thank god for the internet. Had a friend of mine – Jerry Hassler from Franklin, Tennessee – was just retiring, you know, as an insurance agent.

Jim: He was not in the 173rd?

Kies: Yes, he was, he was. He was a friend of mine there. He was going through the white pages on the internet and found my name, and said, hey, I'm going to call name. He was pretty close, because he called my son. In Platteville. Because he knew I was from Wisconsin.

Jim: So he was in the 173rd when you were there?

Kies: Yeah, same time, same place. He wasn't on the RTO, but he was like in a risky job. But, ah, little blond kid. We've all changed. So he called me. And we talked for quite a while. And within the next couple weeks, I got all these calls, just like flooding out. 'Cause my wife would answer the phone and say, "There's some old guy on the phone for you." [Laughs.] 'Cause some of them sound pretty [?]. Yeah, they do. They've had a hard life. And, you know, there's everything from guys who've really been down on their luck to guys who have been very successful, like – There's probably maybe eight or

ten that called me. And so I've been having these reunions all the time. And that particular year, it was going to be in Rochester, Minnesota. Well, it's a two-hour drive – how could I not go, right? So I went there, and I met Skidmore, whom I hadn't seen. And Skidmore told me, "I've got to tell you something." He said, "Something's been bothering me for 33 years. I picked up one of your legs, put it on the helicopter with you." [Laughs.] He said, "That's bothered me." So that helped him. And he's – you know – he's unemployed, he has an eye out, he has a lot of medical problems. So it was good to meet people like that. And as I walked in the room to register, on the screen – it was all computerized, and they were making name badges. And on the screen, right ahead of me where I was, it said: "Marcus Powell." That was my platoon sergeant.

Jim: Okay.

Kies: So I'd never heard -- I didn't hear from him. So I knew he was there, and I – oh, God, I have to see him. So it turned out to be just great. I mean, just great. That was the whole 173rd reunion.

Jim: Okay, what year was that?

Kies: Ah, let's see, that must have been 2000.

Jim: Okay.

Kies: I missed the next one. I went to this year's in Chicago, and I went to another one, a smaller one, in Coco Beach in the year 2000. That was great. There were a couple little fights, you know. Guys that had too much beer, or whatever. [Laughs.] But overall it was just great. And Rochester, back in 1966, adopted the 173rd Airborne.

Jim: Now that's why the reunion was there?

Kies: Right. And they're so active. They have scholarships up there. I belong to that group now. Though I don't go to their meetings, because it's so far away. And the whole town was – it was just absolutely great, you know. Colonel Siegholz was there, whom I hadn't seen before, and but where I really met people was this summer at Coco Beach. That was a closer bunch.

Jim: And that was like the recon platoon? Or your battalion?

Kies: That was our battalion, but it was only guys – actually it was our company.

Jim: Okay.

Kies: Mostly. They didn't kick anybody out – if you wanted to come, they let you come, but it just the people from '66-'67, so it was a very small group: there was probably about a hundred of us. And we just – absolutely great..

Jim: Has somebody really taken the initiative to put this together?

Kies: Thank God for retirement, because the guy who put it together was getting close to retirement – Schmitt was his name. Lou Schmitt. He was our RTO – our radio operator. And his business right now is putting on seminars for travel agencies, things like that. So this was a piece of cake for him. You know, he has a crew – he put the whole thing on. It went out without a hitch, as far as I know. No fights this year. No, it was just a great time. That was this last July.

[PAUSE IN RECORDING]

Jim: After you got out of the hospital, what did you do? I mean, after you got legs and discharged from the Madison VA hospital, what did you do?

Kies: Okay. I worked – I was enrolled in school back at Platteville. In the meantime, I worked as a draftsman for what's now Johannson's Garden Center. Chuck Johannson also had a building, parking center building [?] he was selling. So I used to draw the facades of buildings and the blueprints, though I did not have a license or anything. At that time you went through – And then I went back to school in Platteville and tried to reenlist.

Jim: Tell us about that. Reenlist in the army?

Kies: In the army. I enjoyed the army. I really did.

Jim: And this was without two legs?

Kies: This was without two legs. And I thought, you know, I could have a desk job. And I thought – and I still believe: everybody should go to the service. If you're in a wheelchair, there's a job for you. If there's a job on the outside, there's a job in the service, without a question. So I tried to reenlist – I went to the recruiter down on Bonson Street. And this recruiter had a drinking problem. [Laughs.] Which he got out of boredom, right? [Laughs.] So I took the battery of tests, and he didn't detect anything wrong with me as far as – you know, he should have, because I wasn't walking real good at that time. And he should have – Of course, there were no computers, so he couldn't just look me up to see why I was discharged. So I took the battery of tests, and I – I think he went some place, I can't remember where. And it wasn't long, and he was fired. He was out of a job, because he was – [laughs]

Jim: How did they detect that maybe you, you know, weren't physically qualified to be in the military at that time?

Kies: I don't know. It wasn't him. Someone else detected it. [Laughs.] He was totally oblivious to whole thing. I mean, this guy was like smashed all the time. Don't recall his name. He's been long gone by now. I always thought that was kind of funny. But I did – I liked the service. I always made easy rank in basic and AIT. I was a little bit older – there were a lot of seventeen-year-olds. At that time, if you got in trouble, the judge

would say, "Do you want to jail or do you want to go to Vietnam?" And of course they would say to Vietnam. And so they were seventeen-, eighteen-years-old. And I was twenty-one, twenty-two, with a year of college. A year of college in the service at that time was, like, you were a holder for a level which was good for me. 'Cause I usually had my own room and acting sergeant and all those things. So that was great. I really loved it – I had a good time. And so I tried to re-up.

Jim: Is there anything else you'd like to discuss, Dave?

Kies: Uh –

Jim: Okay, well that will conclude the interview.

END OF INTERVIEW