

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
TIMOTHY J. KUBACKI
Helicopter Crew Chief / Door Gunner, Army, Vietnam War
1996

OH
468

Kubacki, Timothy J., (1949-). Oral History Interview, 1996.

User Copy: 1 sound cassettes (ca. 85 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Recording: 1 sound cassette (ca. 85 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

The Minneapolis (Minnesota) native discusses his Vietnam War service as a Helicopter crew chief and door gunner with the 4th Infantry Division serving in the highlands area of Vietnam. He talks about his decision to enlist in the Army against his parents' will, his anti-Communist feelings, and running away from home to enter service. Kubacki provides a sketch of basic training including tough treatment by drill instructors, classroom training, and helicopter training at Fort Rutger (Alabama). He comments on the plane trip to Vietnam, smell upon landing, the cheering of troops waiting for a plane on which to leave Vietnam, and bus ride to Pleiku. Stationed at Buon Ma Thuot, Kubacki details his first combat experience including the challenges of night fighting, the noise of continual gunfire, and the terror and adrenaline the comes from combat. He evaluates the aftermath of a combat experience, commenting on the quick aging of young men, loss of human empathy, and taking on a survival only mentality. Kubacki touches upon race relations, suicide attacks, helicopter combat, fighting at Que Son, and the attitude of combat veterans toward new arrivals. He mentions drug and alcohol use in the army, interactions with ARVN soldiers, and anti-climatic arrival in the United States. Kubacki describes his readjustment to civilian life comparing the things he was able to do in Vietnam to the things that were illegal for a 19 year old to do in the U.S. Serving at Fort Eustice (Virginia) performing office work described as "chicken shit," he touches upon the attitudes of combat veterans toward stateside service. Kubacki comments on the war's continued influence on his life including excessive risk taking, drug and alcohol abuse, and ruining his marriage. He also touches upon his opinions of the Persian Gulf war and membership in the Vietnam Veterans of America.

Biographical Sketch

Kubacki (1949-) served with the 4th Infantry Division in the highlands of Vietnam. He served "in country" for a year and then stateside. After the war he settled in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1996.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs staff, 1998.

Transcription edited by David S. DeHorse and Abigail Miller, 2002.

Mark: Okay. Today's date is February 19, 1996. This is Mark VanElls, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this President's Day morning with Mr. Tim Kubacki of Minneapolis/St. Paul area of Minnesota, Brooklyn — I'm sorry.

Kubacki: Brooklyn Park.

Mark: Brooklyn Park. I was going to say Hills and I didn't think that was correct. Minnesota, a veteran of the Vietnam War. Good morning. Thanks for coming down.

Kubacki: Thank you.

Mark: Thanks for driving down. I've driven that stretch and it's nice but it's a long drive sometimes, too.

Kubacki: Yeah, I'll be hitting the road after this.

Mark: I suppose we should start at the top as they say. Why don't you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to your entry into the military.

Kubacki: Well, I was born right in Minneapolis, Minnesota. We lived on the northeast side. It was a Polish part of town. The grade school I went to, Catholic grade school, I even taught Polish and English. Then I went to Dealasel (??) High School. Got out of there, began taking a computer course, didn't like it, thought I'd go off and join the Army.

Mark: What year did you finish high school?

Kubacki: '67.

Mark: So, as an 18-year-old high school graduate you, I suppose, were aware of the war in Vietnam at the time.

Kubacki: I had been for quite a few years. I can remember being a young boy about 13, 14 in my pajamas in front of the TV set catching clips of Special Forces advisors over there and saying, "Gee, I hope that war don't end before I can get there."

Mark: Why was that? Why did you think that?

Kubacki: Well, brought up, you know, after the World War II people and they made war look pretty glamorous. After all, it was the only good war. And brought up on John Wayne movies, Combat on TV with Vic Morrow, and McHale's Navy. They made it look either glories or fun.

- Mark: Now, how common do you think your attitude was among other high school age boys at the time?
- Kubacki: I think it was pretty common. Basically, people were divided in two groups. The ones that were against the war and didn't want nothing to do with it and other ones that were, thought it was glory and fun. I can remember going down on a plane to basic training thinking to myself, having this apprehension and thinking to myself "Well, wait a minute. I like hunting, shooting, camping. What could be more fun?"
- Mark: As you mention, you were fairly closely in touch with your ethnic heritage. You mentioned that you spoke Polish and those sorts of things. Do you think that had any sort of impact on your view towards the war and towards the larger Cold War in general?
- Kubacki: Yes it did. It had, you know, a cultural thing where, you know, we came from a stable family and it stayed together, and loyalty to country and God, religion, all the basic American presents.
- Mark: And of course, Poland at the time had a Communist government. It was the Communist insurgency in Vietnam. Did you think of it in those terms? Did you view it in those terms? I realize that might be kind of deep for a 17-year-old high school kid but I'm interested in how your ethnic heritage may have played a role.
- Kubacki: Well, I did. I felt Communism had to be stopped there. I did believe in the domino theory, that if they fell, other countries would fall, if they, you know, Communist monster was spreading itself across the globe. I never delved into it very deeply but, you know, I believed those things.
- Mark: Yeah. So you graduated high school as you mentioned in '67.
- Kubacki: Right.
- Mark: And how long was it until you entered the service?
- Kubacki: It would have been November of '67. The same year.
- Mark: So it was right after.
- Kubacki: Yeah, partied on during the summer and had a good time, started up that computer course, couldn't really hack it. One day instead of going to school, I went down to a local recruiter, enlisted in the Army.

- Mark: As I'm sure you're well aware, a lot of young men at the time evaded service or sort of actively resisted going into the service. Were you aware that other young men were doing that sort of thing? And as someone who is volunteering, what was your take on all that?
- Kubacki: Well, it wasn't, the anti-war activity and draft dodging wasn't real big yet. It was just coming up in the news and stuff. You know, there wasn't a great anti-war resentment just yet. See, this was still prior to '68 Tet, you know. Only by months but it still was. And so I felt, you know, those guys that were trying to avoid the draft were disloyal to their country. You know, you're supposed to serve, you have an obligation.
- Mark: So you went in. You volunteered, went in. I went to basic training. It was probably 15 years after you did. I'm sure some things changed and some things didn't, but I'd like you to walk me through your steps in entering the military. Your induction process, from the recruiter all the way to and through basic training.
- Kubacki: Well, I had a friend that left high school, and we went to a nice high school. It was a rather prestigious parochial school. And he left after eleventh grade to go join the Army and he became a helicopter door gunner with the 1st Cav. So I thought that sounded pretty darn good. So when I went down to the recruiter I asked to be a door gunner on a helicopter. Well, that was fine with him. They had plenty of call for those. Had no thought about taking a technical subject, you know, or something like that. No thought of getting any decent schooling out of the Army. And so he signed me up. I never told my parents. One morning instead of going to school I went down to the federal building and disappeared into the Army. Basically, ran away from home. They were shocked. They were pretty sorry I did that. But I knew it would be against their will. They wanted me to continue on with school and stuff.
- Mark: Why, I was going to ask why you think that would have been against their will. They wanted you to continue on with school.
- Kubacki: Continue on with school.
- Mark: Was your father a vet, by some chance?
- Kubacki: No, my father wasn't, but nearly all my uncles were World War II veterans and so on.
- Mark: So you sneaked off to the Army.
- Kubacki: Exactly.
- Mark: I'm sure they put you on a bus and sent you to Iron Wood or some place like that?

Kubacki: Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Took a plane. Like I said, I was a little apprehensive but that was soon, turned out to be very real. Yeah, I thought, boy, this isn't any fun at all. They, first you spend a few days in "reple-depple" before they gathered a company or something and sent them into actual basic. You got your issue and everything, your hair cuts. But then out of the blue one night they got you up about midnight, rushed you onto a bus where the meanest son-of-a-bitchin' drill sergeant in the world was sitting. They drove a little ways to the other side of the camp where your basic would be and that guy got off and there'd be three other drill sergeants there and they start banging on the sides of the bus yelling, "Get up, get up, get out of there, get out of there, move it, move it, move it!!!" And back then there were, every other word was a swear word. They had no qualms about hitting the enlistees, calling them, you know, low names, maggot, faggot, whatever.

Mark: And did that sort of treatment last throughout your basic training?

Kubacki: It just, yeah. It slowed up the further in you got but they were on you like stink on shit. The first night, right after they put us in formation, I didn't fit in. I was in between guys. It wasn't where I could line up. They had me fall out, do 30 push-ups in the back. Well, after I was half done he said, "I couldn't hear you." So he's screaming at me. So I had one drill sergeant, two drill sergeant, do 30, then run back. Didn't run back fast enough. Didn't throw up dirt when I ran back. Come back, do it again. Finally, I got back in formation with everyone, we went to our barracks, we walk in, the drill sergeant threw his hat on a bunk and continued on. We all got a bunk. Well, his hat was on my bunk. I tried to toss it on the bunk next to me but that guy wasn't having nothing to do with it and tossed it back. So I went and walked up and gave it to the drill sergeant who must have been about 5 foot 4, but a wiry sucker. He just chewed me up one side and down the other for touching his hat. He had the bill of that hat bouncing in my face as he was screaming at me. And that was just my first few hours.

Mark: Um, what sort of training did you do in basic training? How much proportion classroom versus the rifle range and that sort of thing?

Kubacki: I was surprised at how much classroom they actually gave you on first aid, CBR, Chemical, Biological, tear gas, compass reading, stuff like that. But an awful lot of time was spent down at the range. We trained with the M-14 rifle at that time. It wasn't until later after AIT that I went through jungle training and learned how to operate the M-16 just before shipping out.

Mark: Um, as I recall basic training, it was a pretty good mix of people from all across the country. I had traveled a little bit before I went into basic training but even I was kind of amazed at the diversity of people coming together in basic training. Was it the same type of thing for you?

- Kubacki: Yes. There were guys from Michigan, guy from New York, Blacks, Whites, Hispanics. Of course, it was all male.
- Mark: Yeah. And how did this group of people all get along? 'Cause there can be cultural tensions, as we all know. And in basic training, a little different environment.
- Kubacki: All in all, we got along quite well once we realized you had to pull together as a team to get anything done and to not get your butts kicked every night, you know. Unless you like doing lots of extra busy work and getting screamed at, you rapidly learned that no matter who you were or where you were from. You're just people to the Army.
- Mark: So after basic training you went off to some AIT—
- Kubacki: Fort Rutger, Alabama.
- Mark: Advanced Individual Training?
- Kubacki: Right. I went to Fort Rutger, Alabama for first fixed wing maintenance and then rotary wing maintenance courses. At that time they had no separate MOS for door gunner. You were aircraft mechanic, and then you just got assigned as a door gunner, and then worked your way up to crew chief.
- Mark: How long did that training last?
- Kubacki: Uh, I'm not sure. Four to six weeks each, the fixed wing and the rotary wing. Then they—
- Mark: Now—I'm sorry.
- Kubacki: --then they rushed you through. Well, at the end you fired the M-16 machine gun from a tower 'cause they assumed you'd be a door gunner or something. And then you had about three days of jungle training, learning about booby traps, trip wires, mines, being ambushed, and you're familiarized with the M-16.
- Mark: I would imagine that the disappointment at this point it was a little more amicable by this time.
- Kubacki: Well, now you're thought of as a soldier and, yeah, it was a lot calmer and a lot better. You still had to be ship-shape and do all your saluting and "yes sirs" but you were treated better. Food was better.
- Mark: So, how long was it between Fort Rutger and Vietnam?
- Kubacki: My 20-day leave.

Mark: That was it?

Kubacki: Yup.

Mark: And you were off.

Kubacki: That was it. Went to Fort Ord, California for a couple of days and took off for the war.

Mark: Why don't you describe your trip to Asia. You took off from Fort Ord.

Kubacki: Fort Ord. I think we stopped in Hawaii for a couple hours, and then I believe the Philippines, then the next stop was Vietnam.

Mark: What sort of plane did you fly? Was it a charter or was it a military flight?

Kubacki: It was a charter. It was a civilian charter.

Mark: So you had stewardesses and the whole business.

Kubacki: Uh hum, right. It was one long flight. It was about a 24-hour flight.

Mark: Was that how you expected to be going off to war? With the stewardess and the comfortable, relatively comfortable airline seating?

Kubacki: Not at all. It was one smoky airplane, too, because that time nearly everybody smoked.

Mark: Uh huh.

Kubacki: Especially soldiers.

Mark: So where did you land in Vietnam?

Kubacki: Landed in Bien Hoa, outside Saigon and my first night there we got mortared. Stayed there for another three or four days before our assignments appeared on a bulletin board outside. When I saw I got the 4th Infantry Division, my heart just sank.

Mark: Why was that?

Kubacki: I thought the recruiter does lie. I'm supposed to be in aviation and here I got with a ground-pounding grunt unit. Well, it turned out they had their own aviation battalion and that's what I was eventually assigned to.

- Mark: So you spent a couple of days at Bien Hoa. I'm interested in your initial reactions to Vietnam. It's a very different country than the United States.
- Kubacki: The moment you got off the plane the heat, the humidity, and this unusual smell hit you. The smell was always there until you left. You got off the plane, it was a group of young soldiers that looked old, with worn out clothes, waiting to go home. They were cheering and whistling and you're walking past them in your bright green uniform, you were the FNG [Slang term for a newly arrived soldier in Vietnam, literally translates into fuckin' new guy].
- Mark: Now, they were getting on the same plane that you're getting off of to go back.
- Kubacki: Right.
- Mark: These sorts of scenes are sometimes legendary among Vietnam vets. Did these guys give you any advice or try and scare you or anything? Or were they just too busy cheering?
- Kubacki: They were too busy cheering. There was a few comments, you know, about the FNGs and this and that but it was cause for apprehension. Then you got on a bus that had chicken wire where the windows are supposed to be and you'd say, well, why is that? Well, that's so if they throw a grenade, it bounces off and doesn't come in the window. Oh, I feel a lot better now.
- Mark: You were going into a war zone. These sorts of things hadn't occurred to you?
- Kubacki: You didn't expect that it was going to be every minute of every day that you had to be protected or have your caution signs up. You expect a war to be front lines, fluid movement but, you know, you expected there to be rear areas as well that would be relatively safe.
- Mark: Yeah. Um, just one more thing about this. That smell. I mean almost every Vietnam vet I've spoken with tells me that it smelled. Do you have any idea what it was?
- Kubacki: I assume it's just something to do between the humidity and rotting vegetation. I don't know. Maybe it's the fish head soup they cook up.
- Mark: Um, so the 4th Infantry Division was stationed where in Vietnam?
- Kubacki: It was stationed out of Camp Anari (??) outside of Pleiku which was a very hostile area.
- Mark: Yeah, it's way up in the highlands.

Kubacki: Right. I've since talked to people that have come to this country from Vietnam and they'd say, "Oh, yeah, we were by Da Nang, or something. Where were you?" and I'd say I was up at Pleiku and they'd go, "Oh, we never go there. Bad place."

Mark: And so describe how you got settled into your unit.

Kubacki: Well, left Bien Hoa in the back of a military transport where you just sat on the floor of it with a whole bunch of gear rolling to the rear of it when it took off and rolling to the front of it when it landed. Got to Camp Anari, landed right there, and assigned to another "repple-depple" for a few days, they took you out and you were familiarized again with the M-16. Other than that you did trivial chores until you got your unit assignment. And someone just strolled over from the aviation battalion and got me, brought me there. Being a new guy, plus with all the other new guys, they were rotating in quite a few at the time. Now it's just shortly after Tet '68. Heard all the stories from the aged Spec-5, E-5s now. Guys that were 19 ½ but looked like they were 30.

Mark: And what were these stories?

Kubacki: Well, they were telling how down at Buon Ma Thuot they were down to two guys in a flight tower shooting straight down, how one of the gun ships came, had 37 different holes in it and it was still flying 'cause they had to keep it flying 'cause they were just, you know, working out their guns 24 hours a day.

Mark: Did you think then, and looking back, do you think now, that these stories may have been embellished for your benefit? Or did they seem genuine? It was a rough time.

Kubacki: Yes, it was. Tet was tough, particularly next to the Cambodian border like that. It was one of the exits for the Ho Chi Minh Trail. I'm sure every, you know, it's like a fishing story, I'm sure every soldier embellished it a little bit but they had a pretty rough time with it.

Mark: So how long was it before you actually got into combat?

Kubacki: Well, first you spend a lot of time filling sandbags 'til your arm's almost stretched off, and the sheer boredom, and a lot of manual labor. Then you got into maintenance, helped on the aircraft. I can remember the first time going down a flight line to clean the blood out of helicopter from a guy taking it through both knees and prepared a bullet hole. That was like my first time to see blood. Went on various, riding shotgun on convoys, miscellaneous duties like that. The first time I experienced combat I had went from maintenance to armament and I was real good at sitting a rocket pods for the rocket site, so they called me down to Buon Ma Thuot to take care of our ships down there. One of the senior crew chiefs wanted me. It was, we had like, I forget what you call it but part of your company was down at Buon Ma Thuot. We had a

field first sergeant that was a Spec-5. Out company commander was a W-2. We lived in tents and ran a small unit out of there. Well, one night I was pulling guard duty on a perimeter when a trip flare went off. The guy, who was just a Spec-4 that was senior in the bunker, told me to fire. I fired, shot somebody, somebody went down, a figure. It was twilight. After that all hell broke lose. There was, it went on all night long. There was lots of flares being dropped which makes for a real eerie moving shadows 'cause they're all small suns and they're floating down on parachutes. We fired up thousands of rounds. The bunker I was in, we had an M-60. It took a round and hit the bi-pod causing the M-60 to fall over on its side. Well, we braced her up with some sandbags and kept her going. We knew we had to keep her going. About this time I figured they were going to try to knock out the automatic weapon in my bunker so I moved to the outside of the bunker and laid on top of it and was firing figuring if they tossed grenades or a satchel charge in there, it would just blow me off the top, you know, wouldn't get killed. I can remember out of the corner of my eyes, I was firing, my hot empty brass was going down the back of a guy's shirt next to me. He was wiggling around but he wasn't stopping firing either. Eventually it gets surrealistic and what I remember most is what you never get out of a war picture or anything else, is the noise. The noise is so horrendous, it's just unbelievable, and then you've got to think and concentrate under these conditions.

Mark: Unbelievably loud.

Kubacki: Oh, unbelievably loud. It's just like nothing, you know, way worse than fireworks or thunderstorms. It's just unbelievable and you have all the tracers flying, and you'd have mortars going off, grenade launchers. Our officers came up behind, they were firing their grenade launchers, who weren't flying drug out their M-60s from the door guns and brought them on line and were firing. It got to the point where I was, the peak excitement was so bad, so scary that all I wanted to do was lay down and go to sleep. But I knew that if I laid down and go to sleep, I might not wake up in the next morning, or the guy next to me won't be waking up. I had to stay on line and, you know, keep putting out the rounds and do what I could. At one point, when it calmed down for a little bit, I went back to my tent to get some more ammo that I had there and here an expended piece of shrapnel had come through my tent and landed right on my bunk. It was a large piece. It was obviously American. They were like computerized. The shrapnel was a lot worse from American rounds than the Chinese which were pretty crude. I still have that piece of shrapnel to this day. But after, you know, re-arming myself, I headed back out there. It was real scary. It was peak excitement and adrenaline rush that you could never get again.

Mark: You had been in the country how long by this point?

Kubacki: About three months by then already.

- Mark: And in the aftermath, what's the, how does this change the thinking of the idealistic, young kid from Minneapolis?
- Kubacki: It ages you in a hurry. All of a sudden there isn't any right or wrong, there's only your personal survival. You don't have the empathy toward a fellow human being any more that you once had. Now they're just a thing, a thing that's trying to kill you, do you harm, something that you must kill before they do hurt you.
- Mark: That's the enemy.
- Kubacki: Right.
- Mark: Um, do you have perhaps a different view of your fellow American soldiers?
- Kubacki: Well, I had, we were always tight. You'd always stick your neck out for the next guy, you'd always help him out, and he'd help you out — when you're out in the field. Back at base camp you might have petty feuds or something. Blacks and White might not get along as well back at base camp, but out in the field nobody was Black, nobody was White. You were all in the same boat and everybody helped everyone else out to the max, gave their all. The only thing that changed was I could see other people either getting close to the edge where they're about to go nuts or I could see how they lost a lot of humanity where they got to be cruel, things that way.
- Mark: Now these sorts of attacks, how often did they occur? These sort of attacks on your perimeter.
- Kubacki: Just off and on, depending on where you were. I hopped around a lot because shortly after that I got my own aircraft. Then you might be at a small fire base one night or back at base camp, and Camp Anari (??) was relatively large but even still suffered continuous rocketings and probes on the perimeter, sappers would get in the wire, blow things up.
- Mark: So it was a constant problem then?
- Kubacki: Yes, it was. Any time that we got rocketed, too, the helicopter crews would have to run down, get in their ships, take off, and try to find where the rockets were coming from and strafe the area trying to stop it. So you'd be running down there while things were going off.
- Mark: Now, when you weren't defending yourselves from these kinds of attacks, you did become a door gunner in a helicopter.
- Kubacki: Right.

Mark: What was your mission out there? You get up in the helicopters, where would you go? How often would you go there? And what were you trying to do?

Kubacki: There'd be different missions all the time. Company A were slicks. They'd haul troops and they just had a door gunner and a crew chief. I was in Company B. We had gun ships which were slowly being phased out for Cobras. They were Charlie model Hueys, they carried a door gunner crew chief, two mini-guns which fired 2,000 rounds a minute each, and two rocket pods. Now our job was to cover the slicks. They'd be inserting LURP [Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol] teams or something or just some infantry. We'd cover them. Or just go out and help if a fire base was being hit and overran. We could be called up for just about anything. Flying convoy cover. I remember one interesting time flying convoy cover. There was a road from Pleiku to the coast and it was the only way to the coast. It was between two large mountain passes and was excellent for ambush. We were flying cover on these guys, would come down low on the deck right over the trucks to give them a good morale boost, and then we'd go back up the sides and see what's going on around the top of the mountain, and back down. Well, I noticed this white checkerboard — white green, white green — on both sides the top of the mountain. I asked the pilot what that was all about. Well, apparently when the French were abandoning Pleiku, they had to travel through that pass and they were pretty close to annihilated by an ambush. Those were all French Foreign Legionnaires buried standing up, facing France, and the lime was the white. It was really eerie.

Mark: I'll bet it was. Um, so how often would you be up in the air?

Kubacki: Daily. The length of time would vary, depending on the missions and what you were doing but you could easily have three or four missions in one day. In May of '69, by now I was a crew chief so I was in charge of the ship — door gunner is in charge of the guns and the gun systems. My company commander, Major Hannen, I think was obviously looking for some action, wanted a nice Distinguished Flying Cross or something, he heard there was some trouble up in the Que Son. Turned out to be Hamburger Hill. I flew for three days, 18 hours a day. We'd eat C-rats in the chopper, we only came back to refuel and rearm. It was a scene from hell. The napalm, the heat from the napalm was so hot I swear the soles of my boots were melting to the floor of the helicopter.

Mark: In the Que Son Valley.

Kubacki: Yes. They'd pull us back and you'd see the sky raiders come in with the napalm and jets come in, then they'd let us go in again and we'd strafe and light up the area. It was just a continuous change between artillery going in, napalm, and planes going in, and helicopters coming in low trying to support those troops. Coming real low. We can be picking branches out of the skids. I could see the dead and wounded laying on the ground. I saw 101st Airborne

guy was still alive, his intestines were laying next to him but he was still alive, medic was working on him. A lot of wounded lying up. Those guys really took it bad.

Mark: Was that, let's put it this way, how was air combat different from the ground combat?

Kubacki: It was another thing that was based on your personality 'cause you'd get infantrymen that thought, boy, that'd be the life for me, get out of this mud hole and be in the air. Then they'd try it and they'd think, boy, I'm in an inverted foxhole. There ain't no tree to hide behind and, you know, they wouldn't like it either. And I, on the other hand, was glad I wasn't doing all that walking and humping. I enjoyed being in the air, I liked small, high places. It didn't bother me being in that big open doorway. You're required to wear what we called a "chicken plate" anyway, which is an armored front piece on your chest. You couldn't take off without it. They'd give you an Article 15 if you didn't wear your "chicken plate."

Mark: And in terms of air combat, were there any specific incidents that stick out in terms of particularly heavy combat or anything like that?

Kubacki: Well, there were—

Mark: Hamburger Hill. That stands out in my mind.

Kubacki: Yeah, that was the worse I seen it. Otherwise there was a number of minor engagements and there was night time engagements. I really didn't like those because it was, you didn't want to strafe your own troops and it was hard to tell. A guy pops smoke at dark, in the night, it doesn't help much. It was hard to tell where you were going and mostly I'd go by what the pilot would tell me. I'd open up with a string, he could see where my tracers were going and he'd tell me left, right, up, down, and then I dumped until, you know, when I finally got to the area he wanted it at night. Otherwise during the daytime it was much easier. I could see where either rockets or the mini-guns were going. I could, once we got close enough to the deck, I could see my rounds kicking up dirt. I could tell what was going on. Then we'd stand on this pylon, the gun systems, and fire around underneath the ship to cover our ass on the way out. We had a 12 foot monkey strap hooked onto us in case we would just flat fall out.

Mark: Is there any such thing as getting used to combat?

Kubacki: Uh, no. You always have an unusual feeling, an apprehensive feeling. You'd break out in a cold sweat. It's, uh, but it does lead to an adrenaline rush that you wish to recapture. That's why a lot of Vietnam veterans end up sky-diving, riding Harleys, racing cars, being police guys and joining the SWAT team.

Mark: Trying to recapture this sense of excitement or anything to get the adrenaline going.

Kubacki: That adrenaline rush again, yup.

Mark: Now, when you first came to Vietnam, you used the term “FNG.” I’m unfamiliar with what that term is. And as you got to be in Vietnam for awhile you got to see your own batch of FNGs come through. When you study the Vietnam War, one of the things that comes up constantly is the rotation of troops and how it affects unit morale and all those sorts of things. What was your personal experience with the rotation? Did you feel it was a hindrance to morale? Did it not make much of a difference in your particular experience? And your, basically, just your insight on that rotation or personnel.

Kubacki: I think if you could have been rotated as a unit, no matter what the size, platoon, company size, whatever, it probably would have been better, would have made for more cohesive fighting unit. This way you constantly had new guys coming in and the experienced guys going out so when you first got there the experienced guys were about to leave. They didn’t want to have nothing to do with you. They didn’t want to be around you ‘cause you can get their ass killed as well as your own. They didn’t want to get to know you so it’s like anything, you put a name on something, you just personalized it. In case you got killed they didn’t want to feel sorry for you. So you have your experienced ones not sharing a lot of their experience with you and they’re leaving. You have your new ones stumbling around and the guys in the middle trying to stay away from them, too, so they don’t get their own butts in any trouble until they finally, you know, get their sea legs and show that they’re going to survive.

Mark: So as a new guy coming in to a combat unit, what’s the toughest part?

Kubacki: The isolation. ‘Cause not only, you don’t have a clue to what’s going on, this is all brand new to you, you just came from stateside and never been in a war before, and you’re isolated also from what would have been your friends, you know, advisors.

Mark: And after you’ve been there for awhile, what was your view of the new guys coming in?

Kubacki: Well—

Mark: Your own. I can only ask what you felt.

Kubacki: Yeah, ‘cause there for like six months I was still plenty amiable to them and we’d try to help them out and stuff. But then you grow hardened and start to stay with the older guys. Then finally you’re getting short, 90 days and less,

you're getting short, close to leaving. You want to be real careful. In our unit, a lot of infantry units, if possible, they would send a guy back to base camp when they got short, especially 30 days or less, something like that, so you'd run less of a risk of getting killed or injured and send and FNG to replace him. In our unit, since we flew, we flew it 'til the day we left. I flew the night before I left to go to Cam Ranh Bay to get the big silver bird back to the world. We were attacked that night. It was at night. Ran down the flight line, got in my ship, cold sweat to hell when it happened, and we went up and expended our rounds.

Mark: So when you're that short did you find yourself avoiding the new guys? I mean, did you do what those before you had done?

Kubacki: Yes, yes. I didn't share any of my expertise with them and didn't get to learn their names. It was just somebody else filling some bunks.

Mark: And do you think you, well let's put it this way, how careful were you as you started to get short? As you got shorter and shorter, did you become more careful and more careful?

Kubacki: Yes, you would. You'd wear your flak jacket a lot more. You're always required to wear it if you went into town and carry your weapon with you anyway but now you have more of a tendency to wear it any time you're close to the bunker line or doing different deeds. If you had a group of FNGs filling sandbags, why you might be wearing your flak jacket while they were doing it. So you're more cautious, didn't fly any more than you had to.

Mark: You were there during a fairly interesting time. It was the changeover between the Johnson and Nixon administrations. It was, you know, public opinion towards the war started to change. I, of course, can only ask for your perspective from your experiences there, but in terms of soldiers' morale, how was it when you were there? And did you notice any changes in morale in those around, and perhaps your own?

Kubacki: No, I had no clue as to politics at the time. I can't imagine any 19-year-old that does have any in depth understanding of politics at the time. But the troops themselves, you're right, it was an exciting period. We were changing from the Charlie model gun ship, you know, which you could relate to — like the World War I bi-plane — over to the Cobra gun ship which just had a pilot and co-pilot and was much sleeker and faster.

Mark: Which they still use today if I'm not mistaken.

Kubacki: Yes, they do. You know, that big open doorway, all that was old fashioned, you know. So it was real interesting. A piece of history. But as troop morale, troop morale generally was quite good. Once in awhile someone would tend to get close to going off the deep and cause a few problems.

- Mark: You mean psychologically? Off the deep end.
- Kubacki: Right. Right. Just the pressure I suppose. And they'd require a little counseling from a platoon sergeant or something and everyone else would give them a little space. But all in all, morale was good. And though there was a lot of pot smoking going on and alcohol use, you'd get free beer out in the field, free cigarettes out in the field.
- Mark: This was courtesy of the U.S. Army I take it.
- Kubacki: Right. And even back at base camp, cigarettes were only 14 cents a pack and beer was real easy to get. Pot was always easy to get wherever you went in that country. It didn't do anything to hinder morale. Eventually after I left, apparently they had a problem with heroin and stronger drugs.
- Mark: Right. Nineteen-seventy was—
- Kubacki: But I didn't see any use, no use of heroin while I was there at all. Occasionally the laced joint with opium but nothing as severe as heroin. So they were still a good fighting group when I was there.
- Mark: Well, people didn't discover marijuana in Vietnam. I mean, it had been in the United States, too. So some GIs go smoke some weed, was this an unusual sight for you? Or was this something that perhaps you might have seen back home.
- Kubacki: No, I hadn't seen it back home. I couldn't get it in high school. I had asked about it before. I could get a pint of lime vodka or something before the school dance but there was no marijuana available at that time. Not where I was. Apparently out on the Coast or something, in California, or even D.C., but not in hometown USA here. The first time, it was at the end of basic somebody smuggled in a joint, which I didn't have any of. It was the first time I ever smelled it or was close to it. It wasn't until Vietnam that I saw the use of marijuana smoking. It was kind of a drug war, drug related war or whatever, the soldiers using drugs. A lot of marijuana was smoked. The medics had no problem with giving you amphetamines or diet pills when you're out in the field and were beat, tired.
- Mark: 'Cause it perked you up, keep you going.
- Kubacki: Right. Even in our helicopters, in the first aid kit we had methamphetamine tablets, little tin-foil package, they were called stay alert tables, or stay awake, in case you got shot down so you could stay up all night and keep on the move. So it was pretty prevalent.

- Mark: The long-term consequences of that sort of thing hadn't dawned on you or most young soldiers I take it.
- Kubacki: Apparently it hadn't even dawned on the military in general at that time. It wasn't until that problem appeared with heroin.
- Mark: Um, now, as you mentioned these sorts of things didn't seem to affect fighting capability.
- Kubacki: No, not, you know, just the pot and just the beer. It, you know, we came from families, everybody was used to Dad drinking beer and like I said you get a small bottle before the school dance and everyone was, morale was still good and they still fought good as a unit.
- Mark: Especially coming from this part of the country I suppose. Um, another indicator of morale that people often point to involves race relations. You suggested earlier there was sometimes a little bit of tension there. In your own experience, back at the base camp and up on the lines, perhaps you could tell me a little bit more about race relations in the military. I mean, you were there when Martin Luther King was assassinated if I'm not mistaken.
- Kubacki: Right. And, you know, the Black Panthers were just starting to become big, and Black Power, and this and that. Well, back at base camp I had Black friends but they would warn me don't go down to the EM Club after dark 'cause the Blacks were pretty, Enlisted Men's Club, but pretty much owned that after dark. And there were hostilities and occasional fights that would break out between Blacks and Whites, or Puerto Ricans or something like that. But like I said before, out in the field there was no color barrier there whatsoever and you could count on that man. It was kind of strange but you learned to live with it, you know. Went about your business when you're in base camp and when you're out in the field you could trust everybody and get along well.
- Mark: Now, as someone who's actually doing the fighting, I'm sure you were well aware of the fact that you were pretty much a minority among U.S. soldiers there.
- Kubacki: Correct.
- Mark: A lot of guys who were stationed at Cam Ranh Bay or whatever—
- Kubacki: Yeah, out of 10 guys, 9 were support and 1 was in the field.
- Mark: As someone who's actually in the field, what's your view of the rear with the beer and the gear and all, whatever that phrase was? What's the front line's — if you could use that term in the Vietnam War — what's the combat soldier's view of the rear echelon troops?

Kubacki: Well, it varied from soldier to soldier. I went there idealistic and wanted to get in the action. Before I could get a helicopter and I was doing odd jobs waiting my turn seniority-wise, I volunteered for a lot of overnight patrols, ambush duty. I must have been insane! You know, had no idea what I was getting myself into. Getting inserted in the dark, in the middle of nowhere, 12,000 miles from home. Like if I got separated I could find my way anywhere. Anyway, I did these things because I wanted to. I wanted to get in the action. It was before I knew what the action was like. Before I realized there was no glory to war. Before I could realize the insanity of war. I didn't view the guys in the rear with any animosity. But on the other hand, pulling convoy duty, getting some of these grunts out of the field. Pull them out of some small place in the middle of nowhere and have to take them through Pleiku back to another place or something. They looked filthy and they had real bad attitudes. They didn't care for people in the rear. It was another life-style. It was different from theirs. They were tight as a group and they, you know, didn't care for the other people. Especially like Air Force people but they loved them when you called them in. But Air Force base, hell, they'd have flush toilets. Army base, you never saw a flush toilet for the year. Lucky to get, you know, cold shower.

Mark: One last thing in terms of morale. One of the enduring images of the war sometimes is the soldier with the peace symbol on his hat and that sort of thing. One of the things that keeps the war very controversial today is the anti-war movement and the divisions it caused in society. As you mentioned, you weren't very political, at least at this point in your life, but did you have some indication of what was going on back home? And did you have a particular view of it while you were there?

Kubacki: Uh, while I was there I didn't particularly think much about it. You were really cut off from the news a lot. And we'd have a senior sergeant or something describe the peace symbol as a chicken foot in a circle, you know, and laugh about it. Mostly a guy would wear a decoration like that or something just to bug the lifers, the career soldiers. It's not like we're real serious about it or had any deep philosophical thoughts about it. But after the war I felt I had every right in the world to give my opinion on the war, having been there. And I felt these other war protestors didn't. They didn't know jack to talk about. You know, they weren't there. You know, they can protest it but don't get in my face. I was against the war once I left. I was against the war because of the way the war was being run. We'd have a cease fire over Tet or something, the enemy could move troops and supplies. We couldn't fire on them, even if we could see them unless we were fired upon first. For New Years we went and punched all our rockets off over the Cambodian border just in spite of this, you know, truce 'cause you know, it would really screw us over.

Mark: Yeah.

- Kubacki: There was a lot better ways that war could have been fought and that's why I was against it 'cause it was costing American lives for no good reason.
- Mark: I want to come back to the post war period but you mentioned something that I want to bring up anyway and we might as well go with it now. And that involves restrictions, combat restrictions on soldiers. **[End Tape 1 Side A]**. This is another one of the controversial things about the war. You mentioned some of these restrictions. Why don't you describe a little bit more about the ways in which you were restricted from waging war, you know, how that may have affected the outcome I suppose.
- Kubacki: Why it just led to a lot of frustration among the line troops. It was a real burr under the saddle for the career soldier as well. There'd be different cease fires or different areas where you couldn't fire into, and the enemy could re-supply, move troops. They could actually be visible from time to time and there was nothing you could do about it without really getting your butt in trouble unless you could do it in some covert manner.
- Mark: Did that happen?
- Kubacki: Uh, well, once in awhile. One time we caught three dinks walking along a trail and we were pretty sure they were humping stuff for the enemy so we swung around and the pilot told me to give them a burst and see what happens. I fired a string of machine gun shells alongside of them, they took off, and then we rolled in and destroyed the area. I don't know what he wrote up for expenditure of ammunition but he was a senior warrant. He had his ways.
- Mark: Now, in terms of the enemy you were fighting, again, you were there during sort of a transitory period in the war. Was it mostly Vietcong? Was it mostly NVA? Or was it a mixture? Or could you always tell? Who was it you were fighting exactly.
- Kubacki: The VC were pretty much destroyed by that time after the big Tet. It was regular NVA regiments, well equipped, well trained, good fighters. Like I said, they'd even attack bases as big as Camp Anari (??). They'd send sappers through the lines, they'd do a lot of damage blowing up buses, jeeps, trying for the aircraft but we had to fall out and right away protect the flight line and most of them took off and got out of there. So, yeah, they were well trained, well equipped units. They were good fighters. Right from the North.
- Mark: You were, of course, near their supply lines. That's why you were there of course.
- Kubacki: Yeah, trying to plug it up. We even had tanks come across from the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a couple of light Russian tanks. And then all of a sudden we got these certain rockets that were armor-piercing assigned to our unit though that

was very minor, that was unusual. They were trying to take Tan Hiep, a Special Forces campout. They tried real hard a number of times but we always stopped them.

Mark: And you indicated that you thought they were formidable opponents? Formidable fighters.

Kubacki: Yes, they were. Formidable and very elusive. That's what they really had going for them. The amazing thing is we never lost a single ground engagement. American troops never lost one. You know, the enemy always quit and faded away back into the jungle. They never held anything for more than, you know, a few hours at best.

Mark: Now, that part of Vietnam, again, it's kind of an interesting part. I'm sure you're well aware that, but most people aren't, but Vietnam actually has a lot of different ethnic minority groups and that sort of thing.

Kubacki: Yes, they do.

Mark: And up in the highlands is where that's particularly prevalent. Why don't you describe the sort of landscape of that area in terms of its ethnicity and how that related to the war.

Kubacki: It was mountainous with a lot of plateaus. Back in the hills lived the mountain yard people which were backward compared to the regular Vietnamese. And the Vietnamese felt toward the mountain yard, they treated them as a minority they didn't like. Much as early in the century the American Whites treated Blacks. They were just treated bad. Anyway, they often helped on our side. They were friendly toward the Americans and were often used to find enemy caches and different things like that. Special Forces groups often went out and tried to fortify their little villages and help them out with weapons and training, too. But those are the poor people that would suffer from the NVA coming in there and killing their chief in front of the people and, you know, telling them not to help the Americans.

Mark: Were they much of a factor in terms of fighting North Vietnamese, from your perspective? Was it just nice to have them around and were glad you're helping but they're not much of a factor? Or were they important in waging that war?

Kubacki: They were important, mostly for information. They were good fighters. They really hated the Communists. They were perfectly willing to fight and die. So they were good fighters but as a fighting force they were too small to be effective. So they mostly were important for the information they could help us out with and the different ways they could direct us and help us through the mountains or things like that.

Mark: The South Vietnamese, the ARVN, did you have much dealings with them? And what's the American soldiers' view of the ARVNs?

Kubacki: The American soldiers that I knew viewed the ARVN soldier as a wimp, partly because it's their culture to hold hands and do things like that which, you know, we view poorly. But also we did not believe them to be very good fighters. They would not stay on line as long. They would call, you know, for all kinds of support way before it was necessary, and generally we were always pulling their ass out of the fire. So the American soldier didn't have a high value for the average South Vietnamese soldier.

Mark: And did that have implications then for the American soldiers' view of the Republic of Vietnam, South Vietnamese government?

Kubacki: I'm sure it did. It's amazing the American troops fought as well as they did and maintained their morale as well as they did with their view of the South Vietnamese soldier and the South Vietnamese government. After all, the populous, too, never gave you anything. You know, they're always selling you a bottle of swamp water coke for a buck or something. Nobody was welcoming you like a hero coming into Paris in World War II. They were always trying to get a buck off you, if not pickpocket you. So all in all, you didn't have a very good opinion of the civilian population or their fighting men. And there you were stuck. But the Americans kept their morale up, mostly taking care of themselves to make sure you and your buddy got back home again.

Mark: Um, if you think of something else from your in-country experience we can come back.

Kubacki: Sure.

Mark: But perhaps it's time to get you back on that big silver bird. Is that the term that you used?

Kubacki: Yeah.

Mark: Describe your going back to the States. As you mentioned, you were in combat just the night before.

Kubacki: Yeah, it's amazing what they did to us. When you're in combat like that, especially for a full year, you develop your own language, you know. Swearing was a big part of it. Hard to overcome when you were back at the dinner table with Mom and Dad. And there was words for everything. FNG—

Mark: BMF.

Kubacki: --the world, yeah. You know, you go back to the world. You didn't go back to the United States. The big silver bird took you back, you know, and not the Boeing. So anyhow, I finally got out of there, said goodbye to about three, you know, guys that were still senior that, you know, had come in-country with me or shortly after me. Flew on military transport into Cam Ranh Bay. Was there, didn't get rocketed or mortared there for once, and spent two or three days. Got shook down to see if I was bringing any contraband back.

Mark: What were they looking for? Weapons or drugs?

Kubacki: Yeah, both, making sure you don't have any drugs or captured weapons you're trying to sneak back, or American weapons. They were very prevalent. I mean, I bought an M-3 grease gun from the first sergeant of A Company for \$35 and played with that for a couple of months before I traded it off for a grenade launcher. I mean there was all kinds of, you slept with an automatic weapon every night. There were weapons and grenades everywhere. It would be easy for a guy to throw them in his duffel bag but all that got searched. I had a canteen from a bunker I was in that got hit by a sapper. That canteen was all tore up and I kept it was a souvenir and they took that from me, some new guy working at Cam Ranh Bay. And the Spec-5 that was, you know, obviously a month away from going home, that was his boss that was overseeing this big line of people getting shook down, said, "Oh, let him have it." First they asked me why and, you know, I told them. I explained it was a souvenir, you know, was really in combat and the senior guy said, "Let him have it. It's destroyed. It's no good as government property now anyway. It can't hold water. Just let him have it." I still have it to this day. But this punk was going to take it away from me. I couldn't get over it. A lousy, blown up canteen. Anyway, they shook you down pretty good. They didn't have the piss test yet for drug abuse or anything else and had just gotten venereal disease like a week earlier when I was partying in a bar, a Korean bar in Pleiku 'cause I was going to go home soon. So I didn't dare tell them because they would have kept me there so I had to wait until I got home, Minneapolis, and go down to General Hospital and get a couple of shots of tetracycline. Then I limped around like a wounded veteran after that.

Mark: But you managed to elude the authorities in this case.

Kubacki: Yes, I did. Yup, you learned to elude a lot of different things. Came back, flight left. I don't remember now, I think we stopped like in Japan, it was like a northern route. I know we stopped in Anchorage, Alaska. And then finally Fort Lewis, Washington. Got in there like 2:00 AM. Now the Army gave everyone that came back a free steak. That was it, that's all you got for your, so I stopped at 2:00 AM, went to the mess hall which was open 24 hours a day, got my free steak, ate it, before I left to go to the airport to try to catch my ride home. That was it. That was all you were going to get for having been there for a year. I was going to eat it. Twenty years after that date, I left my

wife and children at home, went to a steakhouse alone, and ate another steak. I don't know why, I just had to do it.

Mark: Come around full circle or something.

Kubacki: Yeah, it was closure.

Mark: Now, you enlisted for two years?

Kubacki: Three. Regular Army was three years, draft was two, so I was a three year man.

Mark: So you got, you came home but you had some military duties left if I'm not mistaken.

Kubacki: Sixteen months left.

Mark: Um, where'd you go, and what did you do, and how did that go?

Kubacki: Well, first, coming back home, you know, like I told you I flew and fired that M-60 the night before I left to go to Cam Ranh Bay and then after a brief stay there, 24 hours I was back in the States.

Mark: So within 36 hours of combat you were back in Washington state.

Kubacki: Yeah. So I went from being paid by the government to shoot little people, and in being charge of a half million dollar aircraft, and being able to drink beer, smoke cigarettes, own guns and automatic weapons to being a nobody on the street that couldn't purchase a handgun 'cause I was too young. Couldn't buy a drink at a bar because I was too young. Couldn't vote because I was too young. Nobody showed you any respect because you're in the military and I got married and I had to have my parents sign for me because I was still a little boy. Now this is just unbelievable after going through all this and then popping back up on the block. Your friends from high school are still the same idiots going to beer parties, driving around in their fast car.

Mark: Camero or whatever.

Kubacki: Then I come back. I went over there 155 pounds lean, I come back 118 pounds and my skin looked yellow from taking malaria pills and being out in that sun. It was just a hell of a cultural shock. You know, you weren't used to no one giving you any crap 'cause everybody had a gun. You're used to being in charge of things. Now you can't even be in charge of a crescent wrench for crying out loud. Couldn't find a job if you wanted to.

Mark: Why was that do you think?

Kubacki: Well, there was a recession going on at the time and everybody else got the jobs while you were away, pal. So, yeah, it was just a real mind-bender coming back, especially that quickly. You know, you had no one to talk to, all of a sudden you're home on the block. You can't, you know, be saying, "Pass the fuckin' salt, Mom." at the supper table.

Mark: But I'm sure you were glad to come home.

Kubacki: Yes, very much.

Mark: These sorts of things—

Kubacki: So you're real happy coming home and the world, like, isn't happy having you come home, is the feeling you got. Plus I came home, it was just before the 4th of July, someone threw off a string of firecrackers, I was ready to dive under a picnic table, you know. You're like jittery and stuff.

Mark: In terms of sort of, I don't know if we can use the term "deprogramming" yourself from a combat mentality, the Army was no help in that sense I take it.

Kubacki: None.

Mark: No counselors or any of that sort of thing?

Kubacki: None, zero, zip, nadda.

Mark: Get your ass back to work?

Kubacki: Yeah. Yeah, I had a 30-day leave and then I left to go to Fort Eustice, Virginia and finish out my 16 months there.

Mark: What did the Army have you do to finish off your time?

Kubacki: Well, I got to Fort Eustice which was a big aviation base. They had an excess of crew chiefs, they had no need for you. Obviously had no need for door gunners.

Mark: Yeah.

Kubacki: Right. So they had to fit you in wherever they could. I got stuck in Officers' Personnel doing paperwork and typing, which I hate. I'd rather be outdoors or something else. And there was no, they didn't give you an early out break or anything like that. They kept you there to the last day. They didn't give you any training for civilian life. And no counseling.

Mark: Now, a lot of vets did have problems during this sort of period between combat and discharge. Bad paper is the term if I'm not mistaken, if they got in

trouble. How frequently, I mean I assume there were other combat vets there. As you mention, sort of left over door gunners. Did you have discipline problems there?

Kubacki: Yeah, yeah. Guys wouldn't put up with chicken shit stuff, you know. They had it, they're fed up with it. They pulled their, what are you going to do? Send me back to Nam? That was what they'd always say, what are you going to do? Send me back to Nam? You know. What are you going to make me do, sleep in the rain? You know, been there, done that, give me a break, you know. I don't want to put up with your chicken shit, bullshit, military stuff. Leave me alone, you know. Get my job done.

Mark: Did guys in fact get booted?

Kubacki: Oh, guys got busted. Sometimes they'd get, you know, dishonorable discharges. Guys were carrying around a heavy attitude. You know, they just didn't want none of this.

Mark: Now, I take it you managed to stay in relative control? I didn't look at your discharge.

Kubacki: It's honorable.

Mark: It didn't look unusual so I just, I figured you at least managed to stay out of trouble. Did get discharged.

Kubacki: Yeah. You know, I did my job. Ended up getting discharged. But it wore on me in ways I never new. I, you know, I would cheat on my wife. I would, mostly because it's exciting, you know, trying not to get caught, and things like that. I would do drugs. I would, eventually I started drinking heavy, you know. And as life went on I did the other usual things. I went skydiving, you know, I bought myself a Harley, drove too fast, had a severe, I was doing over 100 with police chasing me, hit a car. Lucky to be here.

Mark: These are in the—

Kubacki: Post war years.

Mark: Like how long after the war though? When you're driving 100 miles an hour, is this like within five years?

Kubacki: Nope.

Mark: Ten years?

Kubacki: Nope. Seventy-nine.

Kubacki: So anyway, it increased in ways I'd never realized or felt, you know. It started out small, you know, like chasing around on my wife so my marriage didn't last too long, to doing drugs, to drinking constantly, to when I could afford a Harley, got a Harley, and then skydiving. Yeah, it was just you do these things to just go for that adrenaline rush and to punish yourself. You'd have survivor's guilt, you know, why I live and someone else died. And you had this feeling send us back again and let us finish that job because the public thinks we lost it, you know. To this day I argue with my kids' teachers and stuff. You know, you lost the war and that's it. No, the Americans won every battle they were ever in in that war. Then the politicians pulled the American troops out. Then the South Vietnamese Army was crushed. But as long as we were there, we didn't lose that war. And we weren't losing it as long as we were there. The enemy always suffered heavier casualties. It's a real sore point with me.

Mark: And you're not alone in that either. Now, how long after the war did you continue to have these sorts of—

Kubacki: Self-inflicted wounds.

Mark: --adjustment problems. I'm not quite sure that's it. Um, like five, ten years down the road?

Kubacki: It's a lifelong thing. The war stains you for the rest of your life. I never sleep good. It's something that stays with you period. I can see why so many Vietnam vets, more have died after the war than died during the war. I can see why. Like I said, it kept increasing. The biggest thing was when I had this severe motorcycle accident with the police chasing me, going in excess of 120. I was all busted up. In the hospital for six months and stuff. Lucky I made it out of that and still be able to walk. Then it started to dawn on me, about the self-destructive behavior. And you carried this attitude, you know. Someone would cut you off in traffic, you know, you'd pull around the corner and follow them. If anyone got in your face, all of a sudden, pooh, there's nothing but, no right or wrong. Just a matter of survival. You were explosive. You were a walking time bomb. So another combat vet where I work was blown out of an armored personnel carrier. He was a driver. He recognized these things, or his wife recognized them for him, and contacted a Vets Center. And he could tell, you know, I was the same way and he talked to me about it. Ended up going down to the Vets Center and talking in group therapy for two years, which was pretty good, it helped a lot. You're in a group with other combat veterans. It wasn't any of the other—

Mark: The Vietnam Era veterans?

Kubacki: Right. Was no Vietnam Era veterans or Vietnam veterans that didn't see combat, you know. It was guys you felt good being with. And that went quite well, that helped.

Mark: This was how long after the war? How long was it 'til you got help in this sense?

Kubacki: Oh, somewhere in the '80s.

Mark: So, I mean, you'd been out for awhile.

Kubacki: Yes. Oh, yeah, it's, you know, I'm still carrying around a lot of self-destructive behavior.

Mark: You're a little older now, of course.

Kubacki: Yes, I am. Forty-seven now.

Mark: And how much do you think that tempers this self-destructive behavior? Or does it? Get older, you get a little mellow. It's not just that they can't move around but it's that they—

Kubacki: It's only been recently that I've gotten mellow, like the last year, year-and-a-half, where I've started to mellow. I still have a lot of self, I still drink too much. I still smoke a pack and-a-half a day. I keep telling myself I've got to quit. I've quit 100 times, you know. But one of these days it will work out. If I don't blow my heart out first. But like I said, it's something that really stays with you. There's no glory to war. War is so horrible I can't believe that it continues on to this day. That's really what amazed me after being through it, is why in the hell does this ever happen again?

Mark: Um, on that theme then, your reactions to the war in the Persian Gulf. I guess it's been five years now. As you watched those events, or perhaps you didn't watch those events. I suppose I should just open it up more generally. What was your take on that whole—

Kubacki: I was all shook up. I got close to a panic attack. I've seen other Vietnam vets get them, too. I've never had one but I got close. My heart rate was up, my pulse was up.

Mark: As a result of the Persian Gulf.

Kubacki: As a result of the news coverage of the, I could see the impending war, you know, because they started the bombing, you know. These troops are going to go in there soon whenever the bombing started.

Mark: I have actually heard World War II vets who've spoken before.

Kubacki: They felt that same way?

Mark: Yeah, the same way.

Kubacki: Oh, yeah, that was right close on the point of an anxiety attack, you know. So when they, I can't remember if it was when they started the bombing because I knew war was imminent, or when they started the land battle. I think it was when they started the land battle. I took my family out to eat and I told them it was in honor of the soldiers and we prayed, and I'm not a very religious person at all. In a church a handful of times since the war because I felt abandoned by God and country. I just remained at this peak anxiety level until finally it showed that, you know, we had crushed them and suffered almost no casualties. It was a great relief for me. But, you know, just knowing that war was going to happen again, you know, and not understanding why human beings would ever do that to each other again after seeing it. I guess that's what leads to those attacks. One thing I didn't want to bring out—

Mark: That you didn't want to bring out.

Kubacki: That I didn't want to bring out. This is from the Gulf War. This is dated 1991. A friend of my wife sent me a little soldier's prayer, a little note that says, "Hi Tim. You've been on my mind lately because of all the soldiers returning." And this is from the Gulf War. "Many of us hope you, a Vietnam veteran, will know that we are also celebrating you and what you did to protect us in the Vietnam War. I found this little thank you prayer card. I'm sending it to you. God loves you and so do we. Hugs and kisses." So she sent me this little plastic card and it says, "A love note to a veteran. This is a love note and it's here to say, freedom would be lost without you today. As we fly Old Glory, the Red, White, and Blue, we will never forget the sacrifice and all you've gone through. The battles, the scars, the suffering, the pain has helped our country it's freedom to remain. You're never forgotten. Remember God cares. You're in our thoughts and also in our prayers. Carry this card with you, look upon it each day knowing you're remembered in a very special way. I thank my God upon every remembrance of you." Now this just touched off in me an outpouring of feelings. It's like she, the only people that ever welcomed me back was my mother, my father, and a couple of months later some Navy veteran who had the sense enough to do that. So on one hand I can count the numbers. So this is someone welcoming me home and it's I don't know how many years after the war.

Mark: And did that, was that good? Did you appreciate that?

Kubacki: Yes, I appreciate it.

Mark: I was going to ask if it's too little, too late.

Kubacki: No. It was unexpected. It caused me to be overwhelmed with emotion. I wrote back, "Dear Gail. I've never been so touched. As an actual combat veteran I spent 365 days in that sweat and stench of that unforgettable hell.

Returning to the world, old buddies on the block hardly knew I left for their life remained unchanged. But in the Nam, a day was a week, a week a month, and that year was an eternity. An eternity that never had a good night's sleep or never a comfortable place to relieve yourself, or to shower, no quality food, never a good meal. Our days were the same. Never a weekend or even a Sunday, no Christmas, Labor Day holidays were none. No birthday, no vacation, just days of filth, stink and boredom with occasional hours of peak excitement that you couldn't stand and didn't want that went on and on, endlessly. The dreams are inescapable. Real war has no glory. It's so ugly and horrible it never ceases to amaze me that it still occurs. At best you become a survivor, you develop an attitude, what can you do to me? Make me sleep outside? Walk in the rain? Send me to Nam? You become hardened. Upon returning home I can count the number of people who welcomed me on one hand. And I will never forget you and it was very thoughtful and kind of you to think of me and send me your note and card. I will always treasure the envelope's contents. I am proud of it and I've put it in with my old war album to save for my grandchildren. After all it's the only written thank you I've ever received. You'll never know how out of the blue you made my day. It was very special to me. God will smile on you always. Have no fear. I know you didn't want to hear all this but I couldn't help pouring it out."

Mark: She sent this back to you?

Kubacki: No, this is my rough draft.

Mark: You kept a copy of it.

Kubacki: That's why it's hard to read. I wrote a nice one to her. But, you know, I had all these bottled up feelings, you know, as late as the Gulf War.

Mark: And as something like Bosnia goes on, for example. I mean, Haiti, Bosnia, there's thousands of these things it seems. Um, do you find yourself avoiding the news? And if you do in fact watch it and keep track of these events and excursions or whatever you wish to call them, as a combat veteran what's your reaction to them?

Kubacki: Well, I try not to dwell on it too much. I don't watch the news specifically to pick that stuff up. I was against sending troops to Bosnia, American troops. You know, supply the other side with arms, let them have their own little civil war. That's what Vietnam was, too, a civil war. What was the other one before?

Mark: Oh, Haiti.

Kubacki: No, Bosnia.

Mark: And Lebanon, Grenada. I mean there are lots of them.

Kubacki: Yeah, I know, all kinds of them. Fortunately, most of them were small, little wars, weekend wars. I mean, I've said to other vets, "How do you get yourself a war like that? Had more trouble at Cub Scout camp last summer than those guys are having." Jokingly, of course. But those short, little ones, they haven't bothered me too much. The Gulf War, the build up to it and the size, you know, the sheer size of it, really developed rapid heart beat. And I'm sure it would if I, you know, was watching any of the other ones.

Mark: Let's go back to the early '70s again. When you got out of the service, finally got discharged, and you spoke earlier about employment. When you got back out, what did you do?

Kubacki: I applied to I don't know how many places, you know, like 50 handwritten applications. I stood in line that wrapped around a block to put in an application for like they were going to take 26 and had 6 openings. So the police came and broke us up because there were so many of us they were afraid, you know, something might happen when they said, "We're taking no more applications." I eventually used the GI Bill. Only way I could come up with any money. I tried to go back in the Army, too. They didn't want me.

Mark: Why not?

Kubacki: They felt soldiers were already much more better educated that were coming along than my, you know, early '60 education. So I ended up going to school on the GI Bill and working at the college.

Mark: Where'd you go to school?

Kubacki: It was in Ransey, Hennepin Junior College and I worked in the gym picking up jocks, towels and stuff for, you know, a buck-seventy-five an hour or something, besides the GI Bill money I got.

Mark: And what did you study?

Kubacki: I was going for a degree in biology, though I never finished it. I worked for, I went to college for two years, and finally gainful employment started opening up. I worked in a factory and then I had taken the test for the Post Office. I finally got called for that. I've since made a career out of the postal service. And all these jokes about disgruntled postal employees are quite funny.

Mark: Oh, you think they're funny?

Kubacki: Yeah, you got to laugh them off 'cause there's a lot of Namies in the Post Office and stuff.

Mark: I know that there are veterans preference for government jobs. In this state anyway, and in the federal government. Was that a key for you to get that job? I mean, did it perhaps attract you to that job? Or was it a factor in you getting it? Or was it just the way the cards happened to look, in the drawing?

Kubacki: Number one, I was putting in applications everywhere. I put in applications for at least three different police departments, too. And I got called through all their different forms of testing, physical testing, written testing, I even went in front of a board, and I was all set to get hired by the Minneapolis Police Department, the Brooklyn Park Police Department and then that's when came crashing down on us that they had to hire Blacks and minorities. So they ceased all hiring period and then just went on hiring Blacks and minorities. So I lost out there. I had in for the fire department. I had in for other places. I had in for the Post Office. Well, finally, they called. My veterans preference certainly didn't hurt me. You know, it added a few points. And I switched from being a city carrier to rural carrier. At that time, and with my high test score and my ten point preference, there was no one else they could offer the job to. They had to offer it to me first. So that was kind of a good feeling.

Mark: Yeah. And you've managed to stay gainfully employed ever since.

Kubacki: Yes.

Mark: In terms of veterans' organizations and reunions and that sort of thing, you mentioned you had developed sort of anti-war frame of mind. Did you join a group like the VVAW or anything like that?

Kubacki: I had contact with the VVA, Vietnam Veterans Against the War. I still have a couple of their old pins. And they were nice enough to get my teeth taken care of for me 'cause I was unemployed at that time after the war. Had a big hole in a back tooth.

Mark: So they covered the dental bill or something?

Kubacki: They had friends. I wouldn't doubt they had friends through STS and stuff like that. They were pretty close-mouthed but they took care of me. And that was fine with me. I didn't want to know nothing too much anyway. And they sent me to a dentist that was on their side so to speak, after hours, and he did it for free. You know, he took care of me. He was sympathetic to them and their cause.

Mark: Yeah. When it came time to like joining, first of all, did you even, was the VVAW a group that you signed a membership card or whatever?

Kubacki: Nope.

Mark: Did you attend the meetings and rallies and that sort of thing?

- Kubacki: Not really. I hung out with them on some college campus, I can't think of which one right now, and just made friends with them lightly. Helped them sell some buttons one time and that's about it. I was just moving on. I wasn't, I was just moving on. I wasn't going to college there or something which would have kept me there and kept me involved with them.
- Mark: Um, now groups like the VFW and the Legion had been long established by the time you got home and discharged and everything. Did you join either of those groups or any of the other sort of mainstream, I guess you'd say?
- Kubacki: At the time the VFW frowned on Vietnam veterans. They didn't think that was, you know, they thought we lost the war. They didn't think it was much of a war. It wasn't anything like their war. Of course, they also were pretty much shitting on Korean War veterans, too. They didn't do much for those guys either. I have a very close friend that's a Korean War vet. You can obviously tell he had PTSD. He had like 20 DWIs in the '50s and stuff. He was on Olau (??) when the million volunteers came across. He was in the Indianhead Division. Yeah, he's lucky to be alive. Anyway, so the VFW wasn't a very accepting place at the time, though I was proud and wanted to join the VFW instead of the Legion, you know, because I was a veteran of a foreign war. I wasn't just an era vet or something. And eventually after years passed I did join them.
- Mark: For what reason? Because of that?
- Kubacki: Yeah, mostly because of that but I didn't do any, have any involvement with the organization. I didn't do anything. Didn't even really go in there and drink or nothing.
- Mark: Has that changed over time?
- Kubacki: Yeah, it has. It has now. I joined the VVA, Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 470 in Anoka. And we're a very active but small group in the community.
- Mark: What's the attraction of that group as opposed to the VFW?
- Kubacki: Because not only are they Vietnam veterans, most of them are combat veterans. A lot of Purple Heart guys, a couple of Special Forces guys. The kind of guy I can relate to. We're supportive of each other. If anyone needs help, we go out of our way to talk to them and try to help them out. We're helping out one right now financially because he's got heart problems. Out of the blue that came on him. And we're active in the community. We carry a large flag, like the size of the Perkins flag, wearing our jungle fatigues and boony hats and we put on our glory bars. But, you know, we look like scrotes out of the jungle. Well, that's it. We want to do that. The guys are wearing

their Vietnam blouses and some VFW guys made comments like, “Oh, the insurgents are here.” Well, that did it. Now our whole uniform is, you know, we found the jungle pants, we found the jungle blouses and the boony hats so we’re going to look the way we were when we did it and what we did, and we’re not afraid, you know. We’re going to show our pride.

Mark: I get the feeling you sort of in spite of this VFW comment. Is that a fair statement?

Kubacki: Uh hum. They just help prodded us to show our pride, you know. We do a lot for food shelves and different things in the community. Plus it’s just fun being with other combat veterans you can relate to. We do parades and usually we get a pretty good acceptance at parades. We have ones that are more favored than others but we get standing ovations, people clapping, people saying “Welcome home,” people saying “Thank you, job well done.” All things we never heard back when we came home.

Mark: Right, I was going to ask. I mean, how has your perception of the public’s view of your service changed over time?

Kubacki: Well, the silent majority is finally showing that they did care for the Vietnam veteran all along. They’re finally standing up saying it, you know, telling you “Welcome home” which they never did back, you know, in the early ‘70s or late ‘60s. Yeah, I see the public perception to be, you know, one that they’re glad for us. Now they’re glad that we’re coming out and showing ourselves as well so they have the opportunity to do this for us. But initially, the first parade I was ever in, my friend Bob, the guy that gone blown out of the APC that talked me into counseling at the Vets Center, he invited me to a parade downtown Minneapolis. And I thought I’d do it for the hell of it ‘cause I could put my kids on this truck they were pulling and it would be exciting for the kids. So we’re standing in the lineup, this was a different VVA unit. He was bouncing around between a couple of them and I wasn’t interested in joining but I thought it would be fun to try this parade. So getting ready to march and he says to me, “Well, what do you think?” Well, I, “I think we should march like this, giving the audience the finger.” Yeah, I still had a real bad attitude at the time. And he just laughed. And we went through the parade and, you know, a few people here and there applauded, there was a little kind recognition. I felt quite differently after that. And then like five more years passed and I joined the Anoka Chapter and the people are way more welcoming to the Vietnam veteran. You know, people will stop me, too, after the parade and say, “Yeah, I saw you in the parade and I waved and hollered but, you know, you didn’t see me.” and I’d thank them and stuff. It’s therapy, both for us and for the public.

Mark: Do you think as Vietnam veterans, you’re starting to get the recognition similar to the way the World War II veterans had gotten it? I mean, do you feel like you can finally stand on equal terms with these guys?

Kubacki: Not even close, not even close, but I feel we are finally getting some recognition. Not all Vietnam veterans are crazy, you know, portrayed in a bad light. That's another reason why we're active in the community, to show the good side of the Vietnam veteran. It's not just the side they get out of Hollywood movies or something else like that.

Mark: I guess that's pretty much all I had. We've gone through my standard line of questions. We've covered employment, and psychological adjustments, and organizations. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Kubacki: Well, I'm just doing this off the top of my head.

Mark: That's all we can ask. Actually, it makes it much more spontaneous rather than having it be rehearsed.

Kubacki: Yeah, it does. No, there's nothing I can think of offhand.

Mark: Okay. Well, again, thanks for driving down. Eight hours? No, it's not that far.

Kubacki: No, no. It's about six.

Mark: Um, I appreciate it.

Kubacki: Thank you.

[End of interview]