

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JAMES A. KURTZ
Platoon Leader, Army, Vietnam War
2002

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Kurtz, James A. (b. 1940). Oral History Interview, 2002.

User Copy : 3 sound cassettes (ca. 140 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy : 3 sound cassettes (ca. 140 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract:

Kurtz, an Appleton, Wis. native, discusses his experiences as an officer during the Vietnam War with the 18th Infantry Battalion of the 1st Infantry Division. He talks about participation in ROTC at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, commissioning as a second lieutenant in the Army Reserve, and attending platoon leader training at Fort Benning (Georgia). **Kurtz** describes Fort Benning including training facilities, social issues in the south, and decision to serve in Vietnam. He describes the trip to Vietnam; bomber activity at Guam which lead to the feeling of going into a war zone; and his first impression of Vietnam talking about the heat, smells, and humidity. He comments on his orientation in Vietnam, learning to identify combat veterans, and the Army promotion system. He characterizes his base camp as constantly under enemy fire and describes its tents, sleeping accommodations, and mess hall. **Kurtz** relates providing security for an Engineering Unit and his first experience with combat. He reflects on the psychology of combat, Viet Cong tactics, and the vulnerability of officers to enemy fire. **Kurtz** was transferred to battalion staff as an adjutant and talks about his duties including the time when his helicopter was shot down. He provides a sketch of officer and enlisted relations, the political nature of the South Vietnamese Army, and the different types of wildlife soldiers had to contend with. He recalls several incidents when people in his unit were killed, seeing the Bob Hope USO show, and investigating senior NCOs. **Kurtz** details the relationship between the Army and the Vietnamese people talking about how almost anyone could shoot at the soldiers, relocating entire villages, and buying and relocating graveyards. He touches upon Agent Orange use, "Arc Light" flights, serving on a court martial, military life, and return to the United States. **Kurtz** describes the abrupt transition to civilian life, beginnings of anti-war sentiment in Madison (Wisconsin), shutting out his experience "like it never happened," and feelings of futility when Saigon fell. He talks about joining the Veterans of Foreign Wars, returning to Vietnam on a veteran's tour, and the healing effects of that visit.

Biographical Sketch:

Kurtz (b.1940) served with the 1st Infantry Division during the Vietnam War. As a platoon leader, **Kurtz** experienced combat as well as the problems associated with a leadership role. **Kurtz** was honorably discharged from service in 1967 and settled in Madison, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by Gayle Martinson, WVM Archivist, 2002
Transcribed by Alis Fox, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2006
Transcription edited by Gayle Martinson, 2006

Interview Transcript

- Gayle: This is an interview with Jim Kurtz, who served with the 1st of the 18th Infantry Battalion, 1st Infantry Division during 1965 to 1967. This interview is being conducted at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum at 30 West Mifflin Street, Madison, Wisconsin, on the following date: October 7, 2002. The interviewer is Gayle Martinson. Tell me about your background and life circumstances before entering military service.
- Kurtz: I was born in Appleton, Wisconsin, in 1940, lived in West Bend--moved to West Bend, Wisconsin. My father was a vocational agricultural teacher there through 1951 and then moved to Madison in 1951 and have been a lifelong Madison area resident.
- Gayle: Okay. A little bit about your education.
- Kurtz: Okay. I graduated from Madison West High School in 1958 and entered the University of Wisconsin the fall of 1958 at a time that ROTC was mandatory for—[interruption by telephone loudspeaker] Unplug that telephone over there I think. At the time I entered the University of Wisconsin at Land-Grant Colleges all males were required to spend two years in ROTC, and I spent my first two years in ROTC. And there were two officers in particular that were very influential. One was a Major Harry Mueller (ph), and the other was a Captain James Wilson, both of which had served in Korea and were both highly decorated, and they believed that the only way to be in the military was to be in infantry. And when it came time for me to decide whether I wanted to go on for the next two years they were paying 90 cents a day at that time to be in it and a pitcher of beer cost 75 cents, so it seemed like a pretty good deal for me to, you know, go on to ROTC. Went to Fort Riley, Kansas, between my junior and senior year with the 1st Infantry--or summer between my junior and senior year where the 1st Infantry Division was stationed at that time in Fort Riley, Kansas. So that was my first brush with the 1st Infantry Division. I graduated in 1962 and went on to law school. I got commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant when I graduated, and I went on to law school before I went in the Army, and I graduated from law school in 1965. The Tonkin Gulf Resolution happened in August of '65, and I was called to active duty in September of 1965 to go to Fort Benning, Georgia. And at Fort Benning, Georgia, I had to go to infantry officer basic; and my permanent orders at that time were for Fort Benning, Georgia, at the infantry school. The infantry officer's basic was an eight-week course where you were supposed to learn a lot of different things on how to be an infantry platoon leader. When I graduated from that infantry officer's basic course, I was assigned to the basic training command

at Fort Benning, Georgia, where the 1st air cav left in July of '65. And there was much residue of people who didn't travel with the 1st cav, that being people who had less time in the service that they didn't want to bring back; and there was also a lot of people who served as advisors in Vietnam before that were involved in it. And I was a company commander of two basic training companies, each of which had 500 people in, and we had drill sergeants and all of that, and I was responsible for supervising the training of these two companies. And I served from November through April, November of '65 through April of '66, as a basic training company commander, and I was then--left Fort Benning on May 1st with orders to go to Vietnam in June of 1966. While I was at Fort Benning I met a couple people who I subsequently served with over in Vietnam and also attended a party where the captain who assigned all the lieutenants in the Army and I had a chance to visit with each other, and I talked with him about my options and I asked him if it would be possible to go to Vietnam and then complete my tour at Fort McCoy. And he said no, I got a better deal for you than that; if you'd go in June, you can get out of the Army if you come back to the United States with less than 89 days to serve. So that's what he did. He set me up with orders to get back to the United States with 89 days left to go in the Army. And he said that I can assign you to a specific unit, which was actually the 1st of the 18th Infantry, the Department of Army Headquarters. So that's how I ended up in the 1st of the 18th Infantry.

Gayle: Okay. I wanted to go back a couple of places. You said these two people, Mueller and Wilson--

Kurtz: Yes.

Gayle: --were an influence to you. I mean, you were required to go into ROTC. So here was some point at which you decided that this would be something you wanted to pursue?

Kurtz: After two years you had the option of dropping out or going on to get a commission; and I decided, you know, because these guys were really very neat individuals that--and people were basically getting drafted at that time, too. So it liked like a good option to me.

Gayle: Okay. So your motivations for that were what? Discuss some of what the motivations were.

Kurtz: Well, although my father was not a veteran, I had an uncle who was involved in the Bataan Death March who was still alive at that point and another uncle

who was in the Marines who fought through the Pacific, and this was at the height of the cold war, and basically I thought that there was an obligation to give whatever time the government felt, you know, for military service.

Gayle: Okay. All right. And then had you-- If I missed this, had you finished school then? You had graduated?

Kurtz: Well, I graduated--

Gayle: Before you left.

Kurtz: Well, I graduated as an undergraduate in history in 1962 and was commissioned at the same time

Gayle: Okay.

Kurtz: That was part of the graduation ceremony at that time because they graduated quite a few lieutenants at that time because a lot of people went on to ROTC.

Gayle: Okay.

Kurtz: Unlike now. And then I went to law school just because I wanted to get that out of the way.

Gayle: All right.

Kurtz: But I was obligated-- I was commissioned as an infantry officer, and when I went on active duty I was given the option of going into the Judge Advocate General's Corps, which is a legal corps, if I'd be willing to sign on for seven years; and I said no, I wasn't interested in that, I'd take my two-year obligation.

Gayle: Okay. So at somewhere along the line you decided you didn't want to stay in the military when you were discussing your options later?

Kurtz: Yeah. Really there was never any intention for me to be a career person and all of that. Before I left Vietnam they gave you plenty of opportunities to stay in if you wanted to, and I just wasn't interested in doing that.

Gayle: And do you have any recollection of why you weren't interested in it?

Kurtz: Well, I had been trained as a lawyer. I wanted to get back to Wisconsin.

Vietnam wasn't the most pleasant place to be, and it looked like, you know, people were going back for multiple tours, which most people who stayed in did, you know. And so that just was not an appealing option to me. I would have liked to have been in the Army in peacetime just to see how it was because I think there was some real interesting things about it, and I would have liked to have gone to Germany, but I wanted to get back to Wisconsin.

Gayle: All right. You jumped ahead, so let me take just a second—

Kurtz: Okay.

Gayle: --and see if I wrote it down.

Kurtz: Okay.

Gayle: So you-- All right. You enlisted then basically.

Kurtz: Well—

Gayle: It would have been treated as an enlistment.

Kurtz: Right. I mean it was a voluntary—

Gayle: Or a commission.

Kurtz: Yeah. It was a voluntary act to go on to the second, third, and fourth year of ROTC; and the consequences of that were that you got a commission and you had a two-year obligation for active duty and some time for the reserves, which they never really chose to--you know, to require that.

Gayle: Okay. And then rather than basic training you had an officer's basic training?

Kurtz: Basic training, which was basically they tried to teach you some basic leadership skills. They had a Vietnamese village set up there; and there was a battalion stationed at Fort Benning that their job was to act as aggressors, basically to emulate the Vietcong. I mean, it was kind of funny because they were all mainly Caucasians and Negroes and Hispanics, didn't look anything like Orientals and all quite a bit bigger. So they were to train you on how to be a platoon leader, and the training wasn't as good as it could have/should have been because that post was in turmoil because they took the 1st air--when the 1st air cav left they had the ability to pull people from all different positions at Fort Benning, which is a big base, but the 1st air cav

had like 20,000 people in it.

So I mean it was quite a drag on the personnel. So coming in right after that they weren't staffed as good as they could have/should have been to give the training, and that meant that there were some things that probably didn't--well, I know there were some things that didn't happen, like actually firing artillery, which you had to do, calling air support, and things like that that subsequently you had to do when you were in Vietnam.

Gayle: Okay. Was the Vietnam village an accurate--after you went over there, was that an accurate—

Kurtz: Oh, it was pretty accurate. The vegetation in Georgia is very different than Vietnam, so I mean-- The one thing that was the same, the soil, they had red clay just like in Vietnam. So you had the same color mud but—

Gayle: (laughs) Okay. So, did you have any memorable instructors or buddies or--when you left?

Kurtz: Not really. It was so transitory. I mean, I made a few friends that you ran into; but it was just kind of a very solitary experience because after the eight weeks I lived in an apartment off post with, you know, some people that just were in the like circumstances. You know, we never really kept up with each other; and one of the guys I saw in Vietnam, the others didn't, and a couple of them didn't go to Vietnam that were-- And I've never lived out of Wisconsin before; and living in Columbus, Georgia, is quite a bit different than living in anywhere in Wisconsin and particularly at that time where-- This was when the Freedom Riders were going down there, and having Wisconsin license plates on a car wasn't necessarily the best thing to have. And one of the people I knew was a Notre Dame graduate that graduated from Notre Dame with a guy whose father--who was really kind of equivalent to Herb Kohl, our present Senator. He owned a lot of grocery stores around Birmingham, Alabama. And we drove over one weekend, and I was followed by sheriffs all the way from the Georgia boundary to Birmingham because I had the Wisconsin plates, you know, and had the crew cut and everything like that. But, you know, we were probably cleaner than some of the Freedom Riders. But they were very concerned about the fact that I was from Wisconsin; and ultimately we stopped there, they asked me what I was doing, and I told them, and they left me alone.

Gayle: Okay. Well, that's an interesting side. I mean, do you have any other interesting stories about that time period when you were there, the Freedom Riders?

- Kurtz: Not really. I mean, it was just--just very different living in the South and, you know, dealing with people you've never dealt with before--I mean, it was at a time before television really homogenized the country--and to deal with people who went to college in the South because military has always had, you know, kind of a predominate caste towards Southerners and all of that. And I'm a big football fan. I went to see Auburn play one football game, and it was quite a bit different experience than at Camp Randall. It was more like what Camp Randall is like now. Back then Wisconsin football didn't sell out as many people, and it wasn't as big a deal as in the South. I mean, in the South it is a very big deal.
- Gayle: Okay. Now, you were--how old were you when you went down there?
- Kurtz: Oh, I was 22 when I graduated from college, and I was 25 when I graduated from law school. So--
- Gayle: So you were older.
- Kurtz: Yes.
- Gayle: Okay. What did you do for recreation?
- Kurtz: Played golf, drank beer; and we worked, oh, gosh, 14, 16, 18 hours a day. So there wasn't a lot of time to really do anything, you know.
- Gayle: Uh-huh.
- Kurtz: And we went to the officers' club and, you know, listened to people who had been in Vietnam tell some of their war stories; and, you know, some of them were obviously not completely true and--but they were all interesting, you know, all of that.
- Gayle: Okay. Were you able to go home to Wisconsin for leave at some point?
- Kurtz: I went home over the Christmas holidays, drove up to Atlanta, flew standby to Madison--you know, we went to Madison/O'Hare--for about three days. And then the only other time I came home was when I had the 30-days leave before I went to Vietnam. And that was a little bizarre because I came back--and I played baseball and softball most of my life--and I ended up playing on the teams I played on the year before for the month of May; and then I was gone, I didn't play anymore because I wasn't in Madison anymore.

- Gayle: Uh-huh. So how were you processing this whole Vietnam thing? I mean, it sounds like you were all geared from the time you went down there, you knew you were--
- Kurtz: Yeah. It was kind of a foregone conclusion. And actually when I--my wife and I were talking about this, because I knew her at that point, that I really was interested in going. I thought that this would be a great adventure, and I had taken some French as an undergraduate knowing that Vietnam might be a place-- you know, it was one of the hot spots, you know, and all of that and there might be an opportunity to go there. And the Orient has always interested me. My immediate family members that had served in the military had gone to the Far East, and so I was very interested in those cultures and had done some reading about the Buddhist culture and all of that, some of the stuff like that, and studied the first French war and also what was going on in Malaya, which right after World War II there was an insurrection that was sort of like that and, you know, with the Bay of Pigs happening and the Belgian Congo. There was a lot of these kind of smaller wars happening that very much so--it was very much in the news, and I thought that that was something I would be kind of interested in until I really got involved in it.
- Gayle: Okay. So was your interest then in kind of the great adventure? Did you have political feelings about this too, stated or unstated?
- Kurtz: I was very anticommunist. I didn't really approve of General McCarthy. I thought he treated people very unfairly, but it was a time when the Communist movement was regarded as kind of like al Qaeda is now, I mean very similar to that; and I grew up after World War II where, you know, people hated Nazis and all of that. Going back to West Bend it was kind of interesting. The church that my parents belonged to was a German Lutheran church, and half of the church services even after World War II were still in German; and the town was so German that there wasn't, you know, some of the negativism about German people that there are in other parts of the country.
- Gayle: Uh-huh. All right. Now, we are back to talk about going over to Vietnam, but do you have any other stories or any other feelings or anything that you want to say before we—
- Kurtz: Not really.
- Gayle: Okay. All right. So why don't you talk about how you got there.

Kurtz: Well, when the day came to leave Madison my parents drove me to the airport. I said good-bye to them. My mother was very, very upset about the whole thing; and I thought it was kind of a big adventure until I got down to O'Hare and had to change planes there and I started thinking, well, I'm going to be gone for a while and it is also a chance you might not come back. And landed in San Francisco, and there were a lot of people in similar circumstances. We all traveled in uniform because then you'd fly a lot cheaper, you know, because you'd be on a standby basis. So we pooled the taxicab to--from San Francisco International Airport over to Oakland where there was an Air Force base that you flew to Vietnam on commercial air carriers. I mean, that was kind of the beginning of it. The people who went over with the first units went by ship mainly, and that's the way they moved people in World War II, but a decision was made that they needed to get replacements there quicker, and it was more to me. So they chartered airlines. I mean, there was airlines that that just principally was their business, was transporting people. And you reported to a place and they checked your name off; and you were told only to bring some summer uniform, some khaki uniforms, and an overseas hat and one or two changes of civilian clothes and nothing really else other than personal shaving items and stuff like that and a book or two if you wanted to do that. You know, you didn't bring your golf clubs, tennis rackets, and scuba gear necessarily. Although-- And I had bought a Colt Python pistol in Madison. You weren't really supposed to do that, but people that I had talked to advised that it would be, you know, a good idea to have your own weapon that you wanted to. And this was a .357 magnum that used both .38 ammunition and the .357. It was interchangeable, and that ammunition was readily available there. So--and the military didn't care that you did. You just weren't supposed to do it. They never checked it. And when you got on the plane they issued you a big duffel bag with a helmet and uniforms and stuff like that, and it kind of occurred to me it was kind of silly that they didn't really check to see if it fit you or anything like that, and really what it was all about was they had the two-bag rule like they do now so everybody that got on the airplane had one of these things and you just stowed it and you never saw the bag again. It was just the way they moved a lot of, you know, clothing items, underwear and stuff to Vietnam on these airplanes. And we flew from San Francisco to Honolulu to Guam to Vietnam, and really—

Gayle: No layovers?

Kurtz: Well, just to refuel the airplane. You could get off and stretch your legs a little bit, and it just never really occurred to me how long that was.

Gayle: The flight—

Kurtz: Yeah.

Gayle: --to get over there.

Kurtz: Yeah, you know, to get over there. And in Guam we landed at the Air Force base there, and there were B-52s there, and, you know, that was kind of the first I realized that maybe you were getting into, you know, something that was a little different. And they actually had guards watching the people on the airplanes because evidently some people tried to go AWOL in Guam that-- You know, I mean that was--never crossed my mind that I wanted to do that, but I was just kind of wondering. Then we flew into Saigon. We got there around midnight, and we got off--they opened up the airplane to get off and it was--I got to the top of the steps of this airplane, I said, "Oh, my God," the smell and the heat, I mean the humidity. I mean, it was--it just smelled terrible, and it was so hot. I mean, you know, this is at the coolest time of the day. You know, it was between 12:00 and 1:00, and they—

Gayle: What was the smell? Can you—

Kurtz: Yeah. It was human waste basically and diesel fuel burning because that's how they treated human waste on military bases. They burned it. You know, and then just the smell from the jet engines and stuff like that because at that time Tahn Son Nhut Airport was approaching being the busiest in the world and later did become actually. There is planes going all the time and the noise, I mean just-- They processed us in, and there was--on the plane that I was on there was I think about 20 lieutenants, and they called all the lieutenants over to the side and said we don't care what your orders are, you are going to the 101st Airborne Division, because they took heavy casualties the day that we left San Francisco. And it was when Captain Carpenter, who was the lonesome end at West Point, got the Distinguished Service Cross. His company nearly got overran. Carpenter later became General Westmoreland's aide. And so they needed to replace all these lieutenants; but they said, Kurtz, you're not going because you've got Department of Army orders to go to the 1st Division and we can't change it; and that's--was kind of the thing that told me, well, this guy that got me these orders really did have some clout. And so I--these other guys, they just shuffled them off to where the 101st Division was. They didn't really process them there. They took them there. And I went to a place called Camp Alpha, which was kind of like a big outdoor dorm. They had a section for officers and a section for enlisted men,

and I was told to wait there until somebody from the 1st Division came to get me. And there was some kind of a screw-up like there often was, and I spent two days there not knowing a soul, nobody coming to get me, you know. I thought, well, maybe they just forgot about me and I'm going to spend 365 days in this not-so-nice dorm, but it was still nobody was really shoot'n at ya, and there was some PXs [post exchanges] and stuff around there, and you'd look around the air base a little bit; but you was just told to stay close by until they come and get me. Well, then they came and got me. And there was probably a deuce and a half doser, the two-and-a-half- ton trucks that they use for transporting people. They picked us up, and we drove to Dian, spelled D-i-a-n, which was the 1st Division's--subsequently came to be the headquarters was there, and it's north of Saigon. And we were driving through this country in this truck. We didn't have weapons, and you were--you thought that everybody is going to try to kill you because the buses had screens on it to keep grenades from coming in the windows and stuff like that; and when we went there we didn't have weapons and, you know, I was kind of wondering what was going on, but we didn't have any problems. We drove out to this place out in the country, which was just raw land that they took and made an American base out of with an airstip and everything like that. And then they had a four-day orientation course where, you know, they told you about Vietnam customs, and I was issued an M-16 The first time I ever saw an M-16 was when I was there and we, you know, fired them; and I was familiar with the M-16 machine gun and some mortars and stuff like that but--and M-79 grenade launcher but never fired the M-16 And we didn't have adequate cleaning supplies at that time, and the things didn't work very good if they weren't clean; and so, you know, talked about that and all of that and then got through that and was sent to--

Gayle: Now let's wait for a minute. Let me ask a question, a couple questions.

Kurtz: Sure.

Gayle: When you went over, you went over with officers and enlisted people.

Kurtz: Yes. It was on a Boeing 707, whatever-- It sat well over a hundred people, and that was all military people, but--and they had civilian women stewardess on it. So it was just like flying commercially, and they had, you know, meals and all of that.

Gayle: So what would be-- Can you characterize some of the conversation that was going on, or were you sitting with people, were you--

- Kurtz: Nobody I knew. I mean, I was all alone and there was nobody-- Some of the enlisted men knew each other because what seemed to happen is that they'd go through basic training and advanced infantry training together, they'd get their 30-day leave, and then they marry back up where they left the country so they then knew each other. I didn't know anybody on the plane. Nobody was really much in the mood to talk. It was really very, very lonely from that standpoint.
- Gayle: Okay. So people were pretty quiet, subdued?
- Kurtz: Yeah, yeah, quite a bit different than coming home, I mean from that standpoint.
- Gayle: And then you said that when you went to Guam you got the first wave of feeling that things were really different—
- Kurtz: Yeah. I saw B-52s taking off.
- Gayle: More activity going on?
- Kurtz: Right, right.
- Gayle: And how did you feel about all this? Were you—
- Kurtz: I said, well, it's begun. And those B-52s do serious stuff. I mean, I didn't really appreciate how serious they could do it until later in my experience.
- Gayle: So did you feel some of this great adventure still or--
- Kurtz: A little bit. A little bit. I mean, I--
- Gayle: Some other feelings coming in too?
- Kurtz: I said maybe--I'm starting to think maybe I bit off a little more than I could chew. I mean, it's great to sit and think about adventures when you are sitting in a chair in Madison and talking about it and reading books where, you know, the rubber hasn't hit the road yet, but I mean it really--getting off the airplane in Saigon was--you know, you get these smells that the Orient is, you know, famous for and just the heat and all of that and seeing the jets taking off with bombs on. You know, B-52 the bombs are all internal; but at Tahn Son Nhut you saw F-100s and F-4s, you know, taking off with bombs underneath the wings and, you know, stuff like that, and all these guys are

doing-- and you could see flares.

[Side 1, Tape 1, Ends]

- Gayle: Okay. You were talking about your first impressions and the flares and the danger in the perimeter.
- Kurtz: Yeah.
- Gayle: All right. Oh, when you went over in the truck then--
- Kurtz: Yeah.
- Gayle: --were you with a bunch of enlisted personnel too?
- Kurtz: Yes. I was the only officer.
- Gayle: Oh, okay. Were you responsible for them in such a way?
- Kurtz: No. There was some specialist fourth class who was the truck driver and the sergeant who was with him that came to get us and followed us, and of course the badge of honor was that if your fatigues were heavily faded and all that that meant you had been around and so experience meant more than rank in any way, you know. So you were very attentive to anybody who looked like they had been there for a while.
- Gayle: Were there other ways that you could tell if they had been there besides the faded?
- Kurtz: Well, in an infantry unit absolutely, yes, because people didn't have potbellies. They would be--almost look emaciated to a degree, very tan or sunburned depending on their complexion and all of that, and because you really never got enough to eat and the heat just, you know, took so much out of you that you lost a lot of weight.
- Gayle: Okay. When you were talking about the M-16 rifles, did the enlisted people--had they had experience with the M-16s?
- Kurtz: Most of them had because they had them in their advanced infantry training. I mean, they received twice the training I received actually because I got the eight-weeks training and then when I was a basic training company commander there was no training for me there other than the interpersonal

skills and being a baby-sitter for a thousand people, you know, some of which weren't familiar with-- We had some people who didn't know what a bathroom--indoor bathroom was. You know, some--the hill people from the South had never seen indoor plumbing and never had seen snow, what happened to snow, down there. So, I mean so you had some things that--but no training for the person as an officer for the responsibilities that you were going to have later.

Gayle: Did you have the physical part of the training as an officer?

Kurtz: There was physical training. You had to go through obstacle courses and all of that, but there was no-- at this point there was nothing, your know, real arduous like there would be for Airborne training or Ranger training. They just--it was just a lot of long hours and some physical training but nothing all that difficult.

Gayle: Okay. So I interrupted you. So maybe if we could resume your stream on--

Kurtz: Okay. No, no. That's fine. Basically after we completed the in-country orientation somebody came for me in a jeep and took me to the 1st of the 18th Infantry Battalion, which I was assigned to; reported in to Major Bard (ph), who was the commander at that time. He had been there for a while, and he wasn't there very much longer after because his tour was up. And I was assigned to Charlie Company, the 1st of the 18th Infantry, the mortar platoon, which I said, "Now what in the heck is this?" because I had never really fired mortars and I didn't-- You have to have some skills in geometry really to figure out--said, "Well, don't worry about it because we don't use mortars. It's just another platoon." You know, so I said, well, that's better than being-- But I was carried as a mortar platoon leader. We just left the mortars back at the base camp and carried rifles just like everybody else and the machine gun. So it was actually a fourth platoon. That's the way subsequently that most of the infantry units ran, is that they had artillery all over the countryside so mortars were only used in fixed base camps and stuff like that because you didn't carry them around for a lot of different reasons. And I was taken by the--introduced to the company commander, the company commander who had come over with the 1st Infantry Division when they came over by boat--and they got there like in September of '65, about the same time I got in the Army--and introduced to my platoon sergeant; and that was when I really realized maybe I was in over my head because all of these people had been there for, you know, six months or more. You know, there were a few replacements but basic--and they had just come in off of a difficult operation and looking at-- You say, what is this guy going to do to us? I mean, he was a fair person, not particularly suntanned, a little pudgy;

and this is the scrutiny. And I was lucky enough to have a platoon sergeant who was a World War II veteran, and he was a New Zealander who had enlisted in the American Army for whatever reason. And I told him what I was about; and I said this is what I know, this is what I don't know, you tell me how I can help you, because this guy had functioned as a platoon leader for about a month. I mean, this guy knew a lot more about it than I did. And the other lieutenants, you know, there was, you know, three other lieutenants that were platoon leaders. They were all very experienced, and they were helpful but distant because I really hadn't walked, you know, in their shoes and hadn't experienced what they experienced; and they had had the luxury of training together at Fort Riley before they came over, you know, so they all knew each other. And that was the thing that struck me as my tour went on, how different it was as replacements all came in as individual parts, and sometimes you hit it off with people, sometimes you didn't, but you didn't develop any close relationships because, one, that person might be dead tomorrow, or they might just get transferred or whatever, and as officers you had some responsibility, you had to keep a little more distant because you had to make decisions on who, people, were going to go out on night defense positions or listening posts, who is going to walk point on patrols and stuff like that and you couldn't have anybody believe that you were being favorite to anybody. And my problem was even compounded a little bit more. I was a very senior 1st lieutenant at that time because by federal law you can only be a 2nd lieutenant for five--three years rather, and I was a 2nd lieutenant when I was in law school and I got promoted to 1st lieutenant at the same time I graduated from law school. I mean, it was just the time was up there. It had nothing to do with graduating from law school. So--and that was a time when the Army really needed lieutenants and captains, and the promotion time to captain was about 14 months as a 1st lieutenant and then you became a captain. So--and the Army is very rank conscious to the degree that they will not let somebody rankwise be in a position they shouldn't be in no matter how little or--experience they had. And so as platoon leader we were in the base camp for several days before we went out on some operations, and what you usually did on operations is you'd either leave depending on where you were going by helicopter out of your base camp where they'd come and pick you up or they would take you by truck to an airfield that would handle C-123s or C-130s that would fly you, you know, 80 miles or whatever distance it was to another airfield where they would take you by helicopter to wherever they wanted you to go, you know, and because the helicopters just can't-- Well, to fly a hundred miles in a helicopter, you just didn't do it. You flew ten miles in a helicopter or something like that.

Gayle: Describe your base camp a little bit.

Kurtz: Well, it was a big-- This was at Bear Cat, which is east of Saigon on the road between Saigon and Vung-Tau, and it was a Japanese air base in World War II; and we did some exploring there and, you know, not that the French used it and all that but we found a bunker with Japanese ammunition and then we blew up. But it's a big, square area with roads just like on any American military base anywhere, you know, very rectangular or square, depending on what it is, with roads laid out; and each company had a tropical building, orderly room subsequently, or when I first got there it was all in tents except for the mess hall was the first building that they built for the company so that you could eat. And it was on a concrete floor with wooden louvers, blowing screen, and a metal roof. And they had showers that they put water in in 55 gallon drums, and towards the middle of the afternoon it was a good time to take a shower if you could because the water would be warm from the sun. The bathrooms were 55 gallon cans cut in half, you know, like an outhouse; and those enlisted men had the opportunity of burning. When they got filled up you put diesel fuel in and light it on fire and burn it, and it was a wonderful smell. And you lived in tents. You had wood floors that were basically pallets. I mean, they were the pallets that they brought stuff over on essentially, is what it was, and they used that. So you didn't walk around in your bare feet because they were pretty rough and all that. And this base camp didn't have any snakes or anything like that. The other--some other places you had some real problems with snakes and stuff like that that were-- There is like 200 different poisonous snakes in Vietnam and all different kinds and that. So that wasn't a worry there where it was in some other places. And the officers lived in generally two-men tents. The men lived in squad-sized tents, which would have 12 people in it.

Gayle: So did you feel relatively safe in the camp or was this--

Kurtz: No. I was starting to get a little worried because they shoot artillery all night, which was they called H and I, harassing and interdiction fire, just randomly shooting out in the countryside just for whatever reason. And once in a while you'd--there was people-- On the perimeter was a big berm with bunkers in it, and people would shoot periodically at night either because they thought they saw something or just for the hell of it, you know; and until you got kind of used to that you didn't have-- And there was--you'd get mortared periodically, later rockets. I mean, what they would do is they, the VC, would come with either a 60 millimeter mortar or an 82 millimeter, which is a Russian mortar, and shoot two or three rounds at you and then leave, you know, so that you could never pick it up with anything. They'd just do it for, you know, to harass people. Gayle did you already-- You'd had some encounters already

with Vietnamese.

Kurtz: Yes. I mean, the Vietnamese local population in all of the base camps, they had cleaning people and they did kitchen work, like washing dishes and stuff like that. The cooks were all American, but unlike a peacetime Army or something like that you did not have very big KP details of enlisted men because we are over there to do something else other than to do that. I mean there would be a few that would get put on that if they were on light duty, or if there were some discipline problems they might get that opportunity; but the enlisted men, guard was more of a--guarding the perimeter was more of an important duty. So we had Vietnamese come on the base at first light and leave before the end of the day. They weren't permitted to stay on at night because some of them obviously were VC and--

Gayle: So what was your reaction to the Vietnamese that were on the base?

Kurtz: Really I just kind of accepted that they were there. I mean, you know, somebody had made a decision that that's the way they were going to do things; and not being an enlisted man, they really didn't do anything that I wasn't otherwise accustomed to, you know. I mean, you know, they were just there as kind of a necessary adjunct to, you know, getting—

Gayle: You didn't have to be wary of them?

Kurtz: No.

Gayle: Okay. All right. Well, I think I interrupted you again, so let's go back. You were about to go on your first—

Kurtz: First mission.

Gayle: --mission.

Kurtz: And basically what we did was--and this was kind of an interesting thing for me--was we drove to Bien Hoa, which was a French Air Force base, and we went on C-130s or C-123s, I can't remember what, but driving through the air base you saw like up at any--at Volk Field where they've got these airplanes that are obsolete, you know, sitting on standards to look at-- had World War II vintage American planes with French markings on yet because this was a French airfield and--I mean it was an American airfield. It was actually a Vietnamese airfield, but it was run by the Americans. So you'd get out, and we didn't know where we were going. We'd get out of the trucks by the

airplanes, and you get on the airplanes, and it isn't like you had to strap yourself down or anything like on commercial travel. You just had these webbed seats that you sat in, and some people had to sit on the floor. And we took off and went someplace up-country and landed at an airfield and got out; and we were told, okay, now what you are going to do is you are going to go out here and secure. The engineers were building an airfield, and it was in rubber plantation country; and you had-- These engineers were going way in the heck out by themselves, and they had had a couple engineers killed the day before we got there by snipers, and our job was to push out beyond where they were doing the airfield and they were going to clear land on both sides of this runway so that there wouldn't--people couldn't sit in the bushes and shoot at the airplanes. And so we spent three days patrolling around there and just kind of making sure that--and that ended the problem when we got there with our company with, you know, the engineers getting bothered. Then there was a battle called the Battle of Min Than Road, which was a road between the rubber plantations up in plantation country; and they took us out. The armored cav was coming down. These were tanks and armored personnel carriers, were running a mission to try and get ambushed because they had gotten ambushed and hadn't expected it; and we were to come in and try to do some flank security or take out a regiment of Vietcong that were there. And so we went out and, boy, that first day was the worst day of my life as far as, you know, took a long hike carrying about 60 pounds of stuff; and because I was a senior lieutenant-- One of the platoon leaders had gotten sick, so I was--had two platoons; and we didn't have a-- On the ground generally the company would have--depending on the situation would have a forward observer for artillery and usually somebody to talk to--that forward observer usually, you know, had communication with what they called FACs [forward air controllers] flying up in the air, to forward air controllers to control jets. And we started taking some fairly heavy fire, and basically we needed air support, and there was--we weren't all that far away from Bien Hoa where they-- And they had F-100s, which were really created right after Korea to be interceptors but they were using them as fighter bombers. And the company commander told me to call air support; and I said, "Well, gee, I've never done that before." And so he said, "No, you got to do it." And so what I did was I got on the radio, which was I told him what the situation was. I said I know where I am, I know what direction I want you to come from, I can't tell you anything other than that. And he says, "Well, you let me handle it," you know. And what you did for confirm locations is you'd pop smoke, different colors. You know, you had smoke grenades and that would-- And the Vietcong would start popping smoke when they saw it too, you know, so that it would be very confusing. So you'd--

Gayle: Did you have different colors though?

Kurtz: Yeah: yellow, green, red.

Gayle: But they had the same colors?

Kurtz: Well, they'd capture it, you know. And so what they would do is they would start popping smoke all over.

Gayle: Try to pop the same colors though?

Kurtz: Right, right. Yeah, yeah.

Gayle: Okay.

Kurtz: And I popped the smoke, and the guy saw it, and we identified then--you know, physically he saw where we were; and then some other smoke popped and all of that. And he said, okay, we're going to--how far away do you want this? And we were using napalm. And I told him, and here comes these F-100s screaming down this valley, and they let go of these canisters, and they're--oh, God, they're bigger than this table. And they started going end over end, and they dropped them behind us; and I said, oh, boy, did I screw up here. And you just kind of go kind of, you know, like a place kicker wanting to get the ball to go over the uprise. And it landed right where it was supposed to land and not because of anything I did good or bad but other than knowing where I was, which is really the critical thing, to know where you were. And this, you know, took out probably a company of Vietcong where the Army come in. The smell again was just horrendous when you get flesh burning with napalm. And so we kind of cleaned that thing up, and then we were then sent into a rubber plantation. It was kind of contiguous to this. It was this fairly rough country, and rubber plantations are about as frightening a place as I've ever been because they're like big orchards. They are planted--you know, the trees are planted linearly, and you can see a long ways away. And what we were there doing, they were getting ready to do a harvest--and, you know, I still to this day don't understand what we had to do with it because these were still French rubber plantations. And anytime we would put a bullet in a rubber tree the government paid a premium to the French for that, you know, which was very offensive to a lot of us. And going through the rubber plantations, you know, it was to--because the VC hung out in them. Because they have very heavy canopies you couldn't see through the--you know, from the air you couldn't see through the thing; and our radios never worked down there because of the latex and it was like an insulator. So anytime you wanted to use a radio when you were in a rubber plantation you

have somebody climb a tree with an antenna to get up to-- You know, and you are talking about 18, 19, 20-year-old kids, which is not much of a problem for them to climb a tree but it could be dangerous if the bad guys were close by because they'd start shooting at somebody who would do that because they knew exactly what we were doing. And they weren't all that well maintained at that time, so there was a lot of low shrubs in there and stuff like that and, you know, some drainage ditches. They could be very dangerous. And they could shoot at you from a long ways away, and it was difficult because it's confined to figure out exactly where they were shooting at you from. So we would shoot at each other, and then you couldn't really necessarily determine if you shot anybody. And this was at a point yet where we weren't as obsessed with body count. I mean, they were very interested in it; but later we would risk great to go out and count how many people we killed, you know, I mean because that was--it was kind of like keeping score, is, you know, how many did you get, you know, and all of that. So then we went back. We hung around out there for a while and then we went back to Bear Cat and—

Gayle: Can I ask you some questions now?

Kurtz: Sure, sure.

Gayle: Okay. Well, so now you've been involved in combat.

Kurtz: Yes.

Gayle: And so you must be having some feelings going on here, some new thoughts, new--

Kurtz: It's very dangerous, people shooting at you, never know 360 degrees where you're going to get shot at. So I was scared but never really believed I was in any danger because-- You know, I don't know who told me this, but it's okay to be scared but not to be--you know, be really fearful so that it freezes you because that's when you're going to get hurt. You're going to either get hurt yourself or you're going to have other people that you're responsible for get hurt. I mean, it's okay to be cautious and scared, but you can't let it be the overriding thought. You just got to believe it isn't going to happen to you, you know. I mean, that--you got to be extremely cautious and all of that. And the impression about how vicious the people we were fighting could be, you know. And there was times that we were set up at night and you'd get into some kind of a perimeter, and what you'd try to do is get some terrain or you'd dig a hole. We weren't doing that as much as they did later, is digging in

every night, because you didn't have to. But sometimes at night they'd come and you'd think that they were on drugs or something. I mean, they'd just keep coming. They'd just keep coming, coming, coming. And the only way you could do it is to kill them, you know. And if you got into a situation where they got in close, they were really very serious about this, this was not a game anymore. I mean, you know, any thought you had of that, it's just not a game. So very much self-preservation, you know, and you really only thought about what did you have to do to survive, you know. And it was harder from the standpoint of being an officer that you had to worry about yourself but your job was to worry about everybody else, and you had to make sure that-- You usually had two radios, and make sure that the persons that had the radios--and sometimes I carried it, sometimes the platoon sergeant carried it and you had an RTO [radio telephone operator], and sometimes you had--just depending on, you know, what you were trying to do is the prime target was the guy with the antenna because the antenna is sticking up, you could see it, and then anybody that was around that person because that was usually an officer that was around—

Gayle: Oh, okay.

Kurtz: --around them. So it made you much more vulnerable before, you know, when you were just moving and all of that. But what we would do is we wouldn't have the antennas in when we were moving. You know, we'd have them just strapped to the side and you'd put them in when you wanted to use the radio.

Gayle: Oh, okay.

Kurtz: And sometimes you got in trouble for that because your reception wasn't all that good and the colonels that were flying above would get irritated that they couldn't talk to you. But, you know, particularly when you are in the rubber or near rubber you could always use that as an excuse, you know, that the radios just didn't work very good and that. But it got to the point where I really decided that I didn't want to be a hero and, you know, I would rather be something else other than a platoon leader. You know, and I had, you know, many different experiences, and I was a platoon leader for about two and a half months, and I was terminated from that because of my rank. I was within about two months of being promoted to captain. And in a battalion there is four different slots. There is S-1, which is administration, personnel, discipline, and communication with other units and stuff like that; S-2, which is intelligence; S-3, which is operations; and S-4, which was supply. And they made me S-1 because our units never were together. I mean, sometimes you'd

take--companies would be in three different parts of the same, you know, area in Vietnam but you could be 20 miles apart; and so there was a need for the battalion commander to have different communication with these people. And you didn't always use radios. You used sometimes people. So when I became the adjutant I did an awful lot of flying. And I didn't realize I got a whole bunch of air medals just because every time-- Somebody kept track of these things because of the hours you spent in helicopters and flew in these what they call loaches [LOH - light observation helicopter] or roaches or helicopters, which never appealed to me because you are really vulnerable. You sit in this glass bubble, and they shot at you a lot when you were flying over these things. So I mean, a couple times we got hit, but it never really occurred to me that you could get shot down because I didn't want to believe that. And one of my uncles had been a prisoner of war, and that's one thing I didn't want to be. I mean, I was more worried about being a prisoner of war than being killed because if you get killed then it doesn't make any difference but if you are a prisoner of war that can be pretty bad; and it was for the ones that actually did get captured in the South because they drug them, you know, all over the countryside with them, kept them in bamboo cages. And, you know, we'd seen--as we went through base camps you would see those bamboo cages, which were not very good.

Gayle: So how did the--you then had your enlist--the people that you were commanding or the platoon. Now, were you-- How was that relationship?

Kurtz: It was pretty good. I mean, basically I made an effort to talk to all of them. There was not many white and Anglo-Saxon Caucasians, a lot of—

[Side 2, Tape 1, Ends]

Gayle: You were talking about your relationship with your—

Kurtz: I mean, basically they didn't love officers; but the officers that lived and, you know, went on hikes with them out in the field, generally if you treated them decently they treated you decently; and you tried to explain to them as much as you can what you were doing. The frustration was that you generally never knew where you were other than, you know, we were by the Michelin Rubber Plantation, or that and why we were doing anything. I mean, that was I think one of the things I would be most critical of the military, never really told you why you were doing something. You know, what was the real objective other than just to go out here three miles and look for something or look for--you know, look for a base camp? But, you know, how does this fit into the great scheme of things? And, you know, that probably is why there

was a lot of difficulty with the Vietnam War, is that it just wasn't like, you know, World War II where you move forward, you know, you could do it on a map. You'd come to the same-- You know, in the time that I was a platoon leader we had been to many places many different times, and then, you know, while I was still in the battalion, which was for seven and a half months, you'd come to these places time and time again and you'd take casualties, retaking, coming in and take, and it was really pretty hard to understand what this was--you know, what sense it was. And really ultimately, you know, after you found out that what our game was was to see how many people we could kill. You know, it was, you know, a war of attrition. That's what it was all about. And what the enlisted men appreciated is people that had respect for their lives because they weren't very interested in dying over there. They all wanted to go home and all of that. So you could be successful if you treated these people like they were people, you know, that had needs and wants and all that.

Gayle: Okay. I kind of diverted you again. You were talking about the rubber plantation experience, and I think you were going to move on to another combat experience, if I was not mistaken.

Kurtz: Well, basically at that point what I--my combat experiences would be we had in our battalion-- At this time there was a gentleman by the name of William DePuy, who was the J-3, which was the head of strategy for General Westmoreland, had come to the 1st Infantry Division in July or August of '66, and he was the big proponent of search and destroy and the attrition and all of that; and he visited all of the different battalions. And the battalion that I happened to have been in had-- There is 37 officers in a battalion, 23 of which were West Point graduates or generals' sons or a combination there of both. So these were all kind of the royalty of the military, and he relieved all but four officers in our battalion, and I was one of the four that didn't get relieved. I mean, he just came down and he just found this unacceptable, that unacceptable. And getting relieved in combat to a career officer is a--that ends your career, I mean fairly or not fairly. One of them-- One of the guys that got--was General Stilwell's grandson, the guy who was big in China in World War II, and his father was a general that--and so it was a very traumatic time; and then people are kind of walking on eggshells and with the other officers that came in wondering, well, why didn't you go. I mean, I was just an ROTC guy with a big mouth that seemed to keep it shut at a few of the right times anyway. And I had many opportunities to be a company commander during this time, which I didn't feel I was qualified to do. I mean, it was not even really fear. It was like the experience I told you about, the calling the air strikes, had to call some artillery, which was much worse

because you wouldn't get any help on that. And, I mean, so I just didn't want to-- And then, you know, just the basic tactics of moving-- It's very hard to move people down State Street, no less when you are out in the woods or out in the rice paddy or I mean the very different terrains to--you got to know where you were at all times, how to use the various equipment, how to maneuver people. And I really had no experience doing that, you know, just not well-trained in that. I mean when I did it I was fortunate never to have made a very bad mistake, but there were times where for a couple days until they could get somebody I would be in charge of a company, you know, and just all of a sudden you would be--get a call from the colonel, he wanted you to go over here, and he's standing there and he says, "Well, you got this here," you know. Now so you go out and you do this and that and, you know, whatever. And that people--I mean, people started knowing who you were in the battalion. After you are there for six weeks or so you become accepted as not really a total new guy but you're still--people are skeptical about you and all of that. So-- And then later that kind of, you know, bothered me, you know, all along, is was did I do enough, you know, kind of the jolt. I mean I could have--probably could have been a company commander for five or six months. You know, that's basically what the rotation was on company commanders, six months, officers were. And you were only typically in an infantry battalion for six months and then they gave you a different job somewhere else, and that wasn't your choice or anything like this. But I ended up staying for just about eight months for a lot of different reasons, you know, that I was-- Kind of funny, one of the interesting things that we did was I got to know Al Haig, who was later Secretary of State, and he was a battalion commander. He commanded the 1st of the 26th Infantry, and we worked together quite a bit with that; and I would be sent over there to discuss things and, you know, the things that you didn't want to discuss on the radio about, really what is your field strength. I mean and that was always the concern, is how many rifles you put in the field when you went on the walk. A company is supposed to have 180 people in it, but when I was there we seldom had 100 that we put in the field, you know, because people were wounded, sick, on R and R, you know, which everybody that was there got to go to someplace in the Far East or to Hawaii for five days as part of their tour, and they had some in-country R and R for enlisted men. And so you would always for that reason have questions of field strength, and then there was a question of capacity of these people too. I mean, good commanders understood that just because you had 100 people didn't mean you had 100 people. It made a lot of difference on, you know, what their skills were, how long they had been in the country, a lot of subjective stuff; and that's a lot of what I got involved in, is exchanging information back and forth between units on that. Another-- You know, you said you wanted to hear a few stories.

A couple kind of interesting things happened at a place called Loknin, which is up at the head of Highway 13, which we called Thunder Road because there was a lot of ambushes on this road. It was a road that runs from Saigon north up into Cambodia; and Loknin is about eight miles from the Cambodian border. It was a capitol of the Vietcong towards the end of the war, and in fact they left--the Vietcong delegation left from the airstrip that we built there just so they could say that they left from Vietnam. I mean, they flew by small plane to Cambodia or somewhere like that and then flew on to Paris from there. But we were set up in the rubber plantation right next to the airstrip, down at one end of it. The airstrip was on a hill. It was kind of like Hamilton Street here in Madison. You'd land on one end of the-- If you had an airplane on one end of the airstrip, you couldn't see it on the other end. I mean, it was a hill on like that, and it was just because that was as flat a place as they could get. Well, I was--just got there from somewhere and went down to the battalion area, and I come walking around this corner around these trees and a tiger jumps out of this tent, and it made-- So the tiger came wandering in to our area--I mean, there was no berms or anything like that--went into this two-man tent, scared the hell out of the people that were in there, and there goes the tiger and just went out and kind of wandered out down and kind of like a house cat, wandered out through the rubber plantation.

And when we were up there we were--we did a lot of patrols right on the Cambodian border because it was suspected that the Ho Chi Minh Trail came in there, and it did. And we saw elephants out in the wild, which was-- At that time there were quite a few elephants, and they used some of them for transportation. The ones I saw was a mother with two young ones, and it was interesting to see, got kind of run off into the jungle. But up there you had a lot of trouble with snakes too; and that's one of the reasons you wouldn't dig in too much, because you'd get snakes in these holes. They like to live in the holes. So, I mean, it was kind of a Hobson's choice between getting down where you might not get shot at or getting in a hole where you'd be just as dead getting killed by a bullet as a bite of a snake because-- We had one situation where I was walking through the woods and the radio operator was behind me, and I went to reach for a hand piece and it wasn't there and the guy was on the ground. The snake had bit him in the neck and killed him. He was dead.

Gayle: Immediately?

Kurtz: Yeah. He was dead by the time he hit the ground.

Gayle: Oh.

- Kurtz: It was a bamboo viper. It was just really very poisonous. I mean and that was kind of a horrible experience. I mean, what can you do? I mean, it could have been me just as easy as that person, I mean just from the standpoint of the snake chose to drop or you disturbed a snake because they would hang by their tail. They are really a small, little snake, hang by their tail from a tree or a bush or a shrub or something like that.
- Gayle: Now, you said you were only a platoon leader for two and a half months.
- Kurtz: Yes.
- Gayle: And then you went into—
- Kurtz: I was an S-1 battalion adjutant but—
- Gayle: And this was more the casualty discussion?
- Kurtz: No. That was when I was in G-1 at the Division Headquarters.
- Gayle: Okay. But you were out in the field for eight months.
- Kurtz: Yes, yes.
- Gayle: Okay.
- Kurtz: And so basically that was-- I just wasn't a platoon leader, I was with the battalion. Sometimes we'd go for hikes with them. Sometimes I would be back to base camp to arrange for getting replacements. They'd send me down to Saigon to try and steal people, you know, to come in off the plane and stuff like that, you know, or to protect people that we knew that were coming in off the plane because there was stuff like that happening all the time where people would come and try to--because you'd always want to get as many people as you could get.
- Gayle: So that when you first came then, 101st, when they took all of them were they stealing those people or—
- Kurtz: Somebody made a decision that they were going to go there because they just lost them all. So I mean usually-- I mean so that was an unusual situation that one unit took that number of casualties, they had a real need for that number of lieutenants. But what will happen is the military is a lot of self-help stuff and they'd said, okay, let's go down, we need this, whatever "this" might be,

and whether it was equipment or building materials or people. There were people that were kind of scroungers. And one of my jobs were-- I really was not very successful in stealing anybody, but I didn't have--never lost anybody either, you know, from the standpoint you'd find out when these people were coming in-country and you just wouldn't let them sit at Camp Alfor (ph) or-- 90th replacement Battalion men came up to Bien Hoa later. You wouldn't let them sit there. You'd go get them right away so that you got them under your control, and so that was really a pretty important job for the battalion commanders. And then you'd have base camp security. You'd have responsibility for defending whatever area there, and there'd be often situations where I would be the ranking individual where there was 50 or 60 people there, you know, whether it's a battalion aid station or supplies or something like that, and then you'd be responsible for that. And actually I saw as much or more action doing that and flying around like I did than when I was a platoon leader because you'd be so isolated when you're in a platoon. And, you know, Vietnam is a relatively big country, and when you're out walking around in the country either you'd run into somebody or you wouldn't, you know, unless there was some--you know. So, you know, and after a while then you got into understanding your field craft and all of that. And, yeah, it's dangerous, but it's dangerous walking across the street in Madison too. I mean, the random things that you can't do anything about were always there; and, you know, there was booby traps and stuff like that, but it was just-- You know, moving around and stuff like that was what really made you vulnerable, was moving, you know.

Gayle: Did your feelings towards the Vietnamese change any time since when you first came and as—

Kurtz: Didn't care very much for the South Vietnamese Army because they were very unreliable. I mean, just they'd never do--at least in the experience that I had with them. Later in the war there were some very good units I understand, but anytime they got involved it was screwed up. And General DePuy didn't want to have anything to do with them, and in a way--I mean, to a degree it made us safer, but it made sure that we weren't going to be successful because I mean ultimately the success would be whether or not they would be a sustainable force and they weren't. You know, they just-- A lot of the military was very political. I mean, General Thieu was the--or, excuse me, General Ky was the President when I was there, and he had a battalion of paratroopers that, you know, was kind of his defense, and he had a Huey helicopter with purple carpet in it and he sat in and it was kind of like a throne. You know, it was kind of interesting. He was a very flamboyant guy; and you saw him around, you know, quite a bit. And when I was there they had the election for

the Constitutional Assembly, and they had the military go out and they made everybody vote, you know, and but they couldn't vote for the VC. But, you know, so it was kind of a hokey deal. They shut the whole country down--it was in September of '66--to vote that day. You know, so it was-- And so the military was kind of more political and not so good, and they weren't very respectful of their own people because they didn't pay them very well, you know. So they would be stealing stuff. And again a lot of the families as I later learned had people, not unlike the American Civil War, on both sides. When I was back to Vietnam a couple years ago I found--we met a guy who was a Vietcong province chief, and his family had eight males in it. Five of them were VC and three were ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam], you know; and one of them--the ARVN guys all are living in the United States now. They were pilots in the South Vietnamese Air Force, and they were able to leave the country before they had to go to reeducation camps and stuff like that.

Gayle: Okay. Do you have anything more to say, or should I go on to something else?

Kurtz: Yeah, go on to something else if you'd like.

Gayle: Okay. Well, one of the things, did you have any memorable--something that stands out, a memorable story or memorable people or some kind of thing that happened that stands out in that time period for you?

Kurtz: Well, probably the thing that made the biggest impression on me was a guy by the name of Fred Victoria, who was a platoon leader when I got there, and he went on to be the recon--actually he was a recon platoon leader. And that was kind of the elite of any battalion, and he and I got to be quite good friends; and he was scheduled to get out of the Army on November 22nd, 1966, and he was killed on his last operation in Michelin Rubber Plantation on the 18th of November. You know, so I mean--and he was a guy that really was just a prince of a person, and he was out on his last patrol, and I wasn't all that far away from him when he got killed, and this really hurt. And then, you know, by the fact that his father wanted to know why it had happened; and they sent the letter, you know, through channels to the battalion commander, and I had to answer the letter. And he just shouldn't have been there, I mean at that point. He should have been pulled out of the field; and I mean it was partly Fred and partly the battalion commander, who-- I mean, Fred was very good in the field and all of that and wanted to-- We were looking for a base camp, and he wanted him to find it, and we walked right into a rubber plantation and nothing you could do.

Gayle: So they typically throw people out of the field or—

Kurtz: Yeah. When you're-- I mean, his situation was really unusual from the standpoint that I said typically people were in infantry battalions, maneuver units, for six months, and he had been there for his entire time, you know; and that was very unusual and-- although it was fairly typical of people that were in recon platoons because they spent six months in a regular platoon or whatever it was and then they wanted them to do this because they got to wear, you know, the tiger fatigues and they didn't have to wear helmets. So, you know, it was kind of a macho deal and all of that.

Gayle: Okay. Have we covered this--your first eight months?

Kurtz: Well, pretty-- I mean, we could talk about the Bob Hope Show, which was--but that was kind of neat. I was scheduled not to be there; and I was really disappointed because Bob Hope was kind of an icon, you know, from growing up, what he did in World War II and what he did, you know, in Vietnam and Korea and all of that. But it was-- On Christmas Eve there was supposed to be a cease-fire and there wasn't, and we got out-- We were scheduled to have the duty on Christmas Day, but they pulled us and sent us out that night, and we went out and floundered around and shot at each other a little bit and all that kind of stuff. And then we came back in at first light and they said, well, seeing that you guys had to do that you don't have to pull it today. So I got to go to the Bob Hope Show, and that was really kind of neat to see him and, you know, the musicians they had and all of that. That was really a very pleasant experience. And then after that, about several weeks, it came time they wanted to move me out of the battalion because I was taking up valuable space for people-- You know, there was a lot of this ticket punching going on; and, you know, people wanted to be in infantry battalions who were career people because it looked good on their record. And here was a guy that, you know, they really asked me, "Wow, are you going to want to stay in the military?" And I said, "No." Well, you know, "You've got all this valuable experience that, you know, would really look good on your resume," and you know, all of that. And I said, "Well, I want to practice law in Wisconsin. I don't think none of this is going to help me." I mean ultimately it helped me a lot just from the, you know, personal, people skills and all of that but-- And I got a flat offer, the permanent company commander's position or to go to G-1; and I was tugged a little bit but I said, no, I think I'll just go to G-1 and give somebody else a chance. But again, I mentioned to you before that--just kind of latent guilt feelings about, well, maybe there'd be some people alive today that if I'd have taken it, was I

good enough or, you know. And the guy who replaced me as a platoon leader was killed a week after I left the platoon.

Gayle: Was he new?

Kurtz: Yes.

Gayle: Oh.

Kurtz: But it was again kind of a random event. We were operating in the swamps. It was called a "Run Sot" Special Zone where the Saigon River snaked up to Saigon. Saigon is, gosh, maybe 30 miles - 40 miles from the ocean, and so the boats would all come up to Saigon through this. And the Vietcong were operating down there ambushing these ships with rocket-propelled grenades and stuff like that. And they were in a boat, World War II vintage landing craft, and it got hit by a mine and he was killed. And if I'd have been there I'd probably have been the same thing, you know; but I wasn't there anymore. You know, so you get those things, you know, why him, not me, and vice versa and--

Gayle: So do you think about those at the time or--

Kurtz: Yeah, yeah, and even more later, I mean because there was just so much going on that it was very hard to be introspective. I mean, I was fortunate in that I really never was very bored when I was there until I got to Division Headquarters because there was always so much going on. I always had to go here or there or whatever and didn't really have a lot of control over where I went, but I didn't get a chance to sit around very much. So--

Gayle: So you went to Division Headquarters.

Kurtz: Yeah. And there I was in the G-1 section, and my job there was casualties. And I was on some court-martials because I had some legal experience, and they had brought over-- They cleaned out the military prisons to bring them over as replacements, and that was really a poor idea because most of them ended up going back to military prison, you know, because of drugs. I mean, drugs were not a problem like they were later in the war, but they were readily available. And my job was to at the end of the day get the casualty reports from all the units in the 1st Division.

Gayle: So this was the whole 1st Division?

- Kurtz: Yeah, the whole 1st Division.
- Gayle: Which is how many?
- Kurtz: Well, twenty--16,000 people. I mean, there was nine maneuver battalions like I was in and an armored battalion and artillery. You know, that's roughly what it was constituted. So I had to check with all of the battalion headquarters, and I had had some experience with that because I'd have to call those in when I was in the battalion, you know, so--you know. And there was tremendous pressure not to have Americans killed and to kill a lot of Vietnamese, and you'd get these colonels and sometimes generals want you to change the numbers; and I said, "How can I change the numbers?" and they don't mean anything. I mean, this guy is out here, he knows what he had happen. Well, he said, "You go out and tell him to count again." And I said, "Well, I don't think that a captain telling a colonel to go out and count again is going to work," you know. And so there was a lot of tension on that about, you know, what the tote board said, you know, and how many--and it was always hell to pay if we took more casualties than we gave out.
- Gayle: Now, you said earlier that there was--that later on there was this focus on the casualties. So this is what you were referring to.
- Kurtz: Yeah, yeah.
- Gayle: And you said that people would risk lives to count the Vietcong that were killed.
- Kurtz: Yeah, because basically there seemed to be a mentality--and I'm no evidence to say this but, you know, subsequent reading too--was that the battalion commanders and company commanders are rated based on their kill ratio, and it was very good not to get American people killed and very good to kill a lot of Vietnamese. And then the question was were they combatants or not too, I mean from the standpoint that-- And you had situations where it was very difficult to tell who a combatant was, and what really drove this home again was on my second trip to Vietnam recently at a place called Albang where there was a battle with the French and there were two 1st Division battles there, and I had gotten shot at there a little bit. They had a picture of a VC soldier with a rocket- propelled grenade launcher with a woman and two children standing behind him passing him ammunition, you know, and that--I mean, that was their own portrayal of the war; and that was a reality that we had seen, you know, where you'd see women and children. For example, in one community where we were for a while on a rubber plantation the village

barber was taken off the wire right in front of one of our bunkers. I mean, this is a guy that had-- I had never gotten a shave since then. Where this guy had shaved me at 11:00 that morning and at 11:00 that night he was dead. He was attacking our position. He was a local VC militia. He was a captain, you know, but he was a barber, you know, during the day and he was obviously getting information, you know, from all of that. So I mean, there was a lot of at least—

[Side 1, Tape 2, Ends]

Gayle: You were talking about the barber who was barber by day and Vietcong--

Kurtz: Vietcong, you know, local commander, and he was a captain as we found out later by some documents that were captured and all of this. So he controlled a bunch of people and all of that. So it gives you some context. And you know what happened with Senator Carey, you know. Did he kill innocent citizens or not, or civilians or not? You really-- You have to be there to know and understand. I mean, I don't know what happened in his situation. I know that there were times that women and children got killed and they were combatants. There is other times when they weren't.

Gayle: So what does that do to your trust level?

Kurtz: Just when you were out of-- I know of no situations where-- I mentioned before that there were, you know, locals that tended bar in the officers' clubs, worked in the mess halls, cleaned buildings and stuff. There was no incidents that I know of, at least in my personal experience, where there were any problems there; but you get out of the American compound, there were risks there. I mean, there were situations like you go somewhere by land in a jeep, what we would do is fill up the back of the jeep with sandbags because a situation where a kid--you slowed down, a kid came up and dropped a hand grenade in the jeep, which is-- kind of ruin your day if this bounced out, you know. But, you know, so they would be doing that, and you'd be going down the road and somebody'd take a potshot at you and you'd find out it was a kid or a woman. So, you know, how do you--you know, gets into this whole question of there isn't much morality when somebody is trying to kill you, you know. I mean, it gets pretty personal and you try to, you know, deal with that. But then there were situations where like in the Operation Junction City where there was kind of a famous statement that came from a captain in our division that said, "We have to destroy this village to save it"; and this was a village that I went back to again and it has all been rebuilt. But we took and moved a whole village, took all the people out of it and moved them to

another place and made most of them that weren't enemies already enemies because the Vietnamese are very much attached to the land. They love their land. They are ancestor worshipers. They worship their graves. I mean, that's another thing I got involved in, was buying graveyards, which when I think about it now is probably as offensive a thing as I've ever done, is to-- We would come in and buy the graveyards and remove them for airstrips and stuff like that, and it really ticked them off. We'd pay them a few bucks, and they really didn't have a choice. You know, we either were going to knock them down and pay them for it or just knock them down.

Gayle: And so would they remove the dead from the grave?

Kurtz: Sometimes they did, sometimes they didn't. I mean and sometimes-- I mean, this is a very old country, and you might not find any bones there at all. They are all decomposed. But they had these red, laterite gravestones, you know, they made out of kind of like cement. I mean, it's like a red cement. And you'd get involved in battles there because they would be used either as a defensive position by us or a point of ambush by the VCs. So there was a need along roads or a perceived need to clear everything back, and that's where they used Agent Orange. We went through rubber plantations not knowing the real dangers of pesticides at that time. The stuff would be dripping on you. I mean, they had these C-123 airplanes rigged. They're a two-engine transport rigged to spray, and the Forest Service uses that same configuration right now as aerial tankers for dropping water, but they're using pesticides. And there is, you know, a lot of people that-- So I'm fortunate. Me and my family didn't have any problems that could be traced to that, but other people I know had birth defects and stuff like that. A lot of birth defects over in Vietnam, the Vietnamese people that got exposed to this. It got in the water supply, and very bad stuff. And but the whole-- You talk about the trust thing. This was about eliminating vegetation along roads that people used back a long ways. You had big bulldozers called Rome plows that would knock down rubber trees, and we had to pay for all those French ones and stuff like that. And it was very difficult to walk through these things. And I guess one other thing I forgot to mention before about B-52s about what damage they did, one of the things that we'd do is after-- They'd have what they call these Arc Light missions where they'd come into a suspected VC area with four or more B-52s and they'd drop these bombs. And the closest I'd ever been to one was about a thousand yards, and the ground just shook, and the noise is just incredible, you know, when these bombs go off. I mean, it just--you know, it is kind of like the mad minute at rhythm and booms except louder; and you didn't want to be closing on it because, you know, we had some of the bomb fragments dropped out our way a little bit because of the distortion in the

patterns. But then you'd have to go in and walk through these things with all these trees standing. I mean, you couldn't move. And then that's-- you know, that's another place that they'd want to check for bodies and stuff like that, you know. So then you'd go back and you'd have a negative finding any bodies. You say no. You got to go back because we know there were people there, you know, and they got hit by a thousand-pound bomb. It kind of ruins your day, you know, as it were. So--

Gayle: One of the things, I was given the impression when you were talking about your work back with the casualties, is kind of the career mentality within the officers.

Kurtz: Oh, yeah, very much so. And that's what made it real sure that I was not interested in, you know, staying around any longer than I was obligated to because it seemed so counterproductive to do this that wasn't true and accurate. And then at the Division Headquarters the last month or so that I was there they brought sod in and they had green grass sitting out here in front of the Division Headquarters, and they had some people mowing the lawn and they were sprinkling it; and one of the big jokes in the military is you always have rocks around the parking areas and some general officers like white rocks and some like rocks that aren't white rocks, you know, just a natural color. And I saw this when I was down at Fort Benning where some of the senior enlists there, the NCO sergeants, they had rock dumps where they'd keep white rocks and natural-colored rocks, and depending on what the commander wanted they'd go get 'em, you know. Which would really be a joker is if the infantry color is blue that they would sometimes have to have blue rocks, you know. So I mean you get that kind of mentality, like that makes any difference or-- So I mean it's just really stupid.

Gayle: So how long were you doing the casualty?

Kurtz: For the last three and a half months that I was there. I mean, I got involved in doing some investigations. They had just started investigating a bunch of sergeants. They have a club system for enlisted men that-- Part of the 1st Division had been in Germany; and they came over from Germany and what they were doing, they were skimming off the slot machines and stuff like that. The Sergeant Major of the Army, Wooldridge, ended up going to jail. He was the Sergeant Major of the 1st Division when I was there, I mean a very impressive looking guy. And I don't know if you saw that movie "We Were Soldiers" with Mel Gibson. Well, the guy that played the Sergeant Major in there was just exactly like Wooldridge, you know, that same kind of very impressive guy. But Wooldridge was a crook, and I had started the

investigation on that, and there were some allegation that they were-- 1st Division had base camps in four different locations, some of which were 60-70 miles by road away from each other; and they bought trucks. They had Japanese trucks that carried the supplies because they couldn't put them on because this had nothing really to do with the military. They'd get ambushed, and they'd never destroy the trucks. It was like they'd take the stuff off the trucks like they were paying the VC a toll.

[Break in audiotape]

They'd take the stuff off the trucks like they were paying the VC a toll, you know, and it was, you know, very strange. I mean, they didn't give them any weapons, but sometimes there was medicine and stuff like that that got lost. I mean that's when people started thinking, well, this don't make any sense. They'll blow the hell out of trucks and stuff like that but they just--maybe they'd give them a flat tire and that would be it. So it was very strange. It would have been kind of fun to ride that all through to see if they could really establish that that was what was happening. I mean because I just never had any contact afterwards to know, but I mean there was good reason to suspect that that was what was going on.

Gayle: You mentioned about the taking everyone out of prisons. That was a one-time experience?

Kurtz: Yeah. That was some kind of--and this happened in '66 when-- I mean, these were all people that had had military training, and I don't know if they were offered voluntarily the opportunity to go to Vietnam or not, but they sent those guys over on ships and very few of them were good soldiers. I mean, they were just--there was a reason why they were in a military prison, and most of them ended up in LBJ. That was Long Binh Junction, and it was a great big base camp, and it was called the LBJ Jail; and, you know, of course the President was L. B. J. at that time too. And they had a big prison there, and I don't know if they ultimately shipped them back to the United States or what they did with them.

Gayle: But you dealt with court-martials on that?

Kurtz: Some. I defended a couple and was not successful and shouldn't have been successful, and then I sat on several. There was a couple homicides that I sat on as-- They have a board of officers that vote.

Gayle: Okay. Let me ask a couple of questions. Did you have anything that you did for good luck or anything you brought over for good luck?

- Kurtz: Not really. I had this pistol I brought with me, and I ended up--it got hit by a mortar round, I mean by--a mortar fragment bent the thing. I sold it to somebody because I really didn't want it. I didn't think it brought me any good luck particularly. I bought a Swiss Army knife that I still have that, you know, I just think about that from the standpoint that I carried it every day I was ever in Vietnam, on both trips. But, no, I'm not very superstitious. So I didn't.
- Gayle: And you said you were wounded?
- Kurtz: No.
- Gayle: Oh, I thought you meant you were.
- Kurtz: No, and I was lucky. I was in a helicopter that got shot down once and got bounced around very hard, and then this mortar fragments hit-- If I wouldn't have had this pistol--and maybe that was a good luck charm--I probably would have been wounded in the butt; but, you know, it hit me, knocked me over, but I was--
- Gayle: So, you were in a helicopter that went down?
- Kurtz: Yes.
- Gayle: Well, how long does it take it to--did it go down?
- Kurtz: Down too fast. Basically we were up--thank God we were up high enough that they can autorotate down. I mean so basically got hit by .51-caliber machine gun bullets, took out the hydraulics, and we were able to go down like that. And the damn colonel that was on it with me, he got a Silver Star; and he didn't do anything but he got a Silver Star for getting shot down. The pilot didn't get anything, who did a wonderful job of saving our butts.
- Gayle: Do you have time to think when that's happening?
- Kurtz: No.
- Gayle: No.
- Kurtz: No. I'm just very grateful that the pilot knew what to do because a helicopter, you know, unlike an airplane doesn't have any ability to glide. The only thing you can do is if you're high enough and the rotors will kind of act to slow you down and somehow--I don't know how they do it, but they come down like

this and then just land. Because when a helicopter lands they-- when it's under full power it'll be very similar to like an airplane landing where they back the engine or reverse the engines, when, you know, you land a jet or something like that; and the same principle coming down, they'll reverse it and then they'll set you down. A good pilot, you really never know that you've been sat down.

Gayle: Did you have-- You had R and R?

Kurtz: Yes. I went to Hong Kong.

Gayle: You went to Hong Kong.

Kurtz: And I met some Australians there that I knew. There was an Australian unit battalion that was operating very close to where we were when I was first in the country and a platoon leader, and I got to know some of these guys, and it was just a coincidence that I ran into them on the street there, and we went out and had a few drinks together obviously and all of that. And the day I left Hong Kong was when the Red Guard riot started, and the people that came on the plane that I went back to Vietnam on had to stay in a hotel the whole time they were there because of these riots and because Hong Kong was British controlled then and they had all these Communists from China there and mainly where the rickshaw men and all the great big guys--they came and just raised all holy hell. And in Hong Kong there was a Red China store that was really off limits to Americans but we went to it anyway, but you couldn't buy anything. You know, they were selling like tiger skins and elephant tusks and all kind of Communist propaganda material that if you wanted it and stuff like that, but it was kind of interesting to see what they were--I mean very much of a capitalistic type thing. But you couldn't bring any of that stuff back.

Gayle: Did you write to people when you were in—

Kurtz: Yeah. I wrote my parents, and those letters you might get some day.

Gayle: That wasn't the reason why I asked.

Kurtz: But--

Gayle: What did you find that you wrote about? Did you have a hard time writing or coming with things to say, or did you have to be introspective at that point?

Kurtz: Wasn't particularly introspective or particularly truthful. I mean, I didn't feel

that it would be useful to tell them really what I really did; and I tried to keep a diary a couple times. It just never worked out. Every time I'd start it I'd fall in a river or something like that and it'd get, you know, all messed up or you'd get caught out in the rain; and it's just not a good place to have paper during the rainy season.

Gayle: So you got letters though too?

Kurtz: Yes.

Gayle: And what did they mean to you?

Kurtz: They were nice, and I got a few tapes from home. It was nice getting that, but it was better in some ways not to have them because then you didn't think about what you were missing. I mean, it was just better. And you missed something, that was a plus and a minus. It was 365 days, and you just had to suck it up and do it. I mean, you were there and you didn't have any-- no matter whether it was a good or bad decision to go there, the reality was that you were there and you just had to think about how you were going to do it, you know, like one day at a time.

Gayle: Uh-huh. What was your food like?

Kurtz: It was pretty poor. You know, one of the things when I was out in the field, I don't like chicken to this day because the only hot food we ever got was chicken; and on Thanksgiving and Christmas they did have turkey, and that was generally, usually pretty good. I mean, they'd have real turkeys that were--you know. The C-rations were kind of marginal. I mean, I learned to appreciate Tobasco sauce and stuff like that. I mean, you'd get, you know, some of these more experienced soldiers that knew how to, you know, cook a little bit with these spices, and you'd sometimes make a stew by dumping them in a helmet and cooking it on C-4, which is an explosive that you can light on fire but it doesn't explode; and that was used as kind of a heat source. So you always carried along that for both, you know, blowing stuff up you wanted to blow up or for cooking. But the food wasn't very good, and once in a while you'd eat on the local economy, and you always paid for it because the sanita--I mean just-- The bread was great. The Vietnamese French bread was great, and that was okay to eat, but anything else was pretty dangerous to eat just from the standpoint of getting intestinal problems.

Gayle: Did you have-- Aside from your Hong Kong, did you have occasions to go into town or, you know, what—

Kurtz: Well, no, I never had any leaves but got into Saigon some because anywhere you went you flew and nothing would leave for up-country after 3:00 because it gets very dark quick and, you know, in the tropics like that, and so if you could time it either purposely or otherwise you could get marooned in Saigon overnight, which was never a bad deal. And so, you know, I did, you know, because again I was so mobile. I got to Saigon a fair amount because if I was going from one base camp to another the best way to go would be to hop a helicopter to Tahn Son Nhut and go to the operations shed and find out when a plane was going to where you needed to go, and if you didn't abuse it nobody ever really said anything if you stayed overnight in Saigon. So you'd get to do that periodically.

Gayle: What did you do for your off time or recreation?

Kurtz: Well, there really wasn't any off time to speak of. I mean, I read some--you know, books were available--and drank beer, you know; and beer was fairly readily available when you were not out in the woods. Sometimes they would bring it to you out in the woods, but it was always warm, and warm beer isn't particularly good.

Gayle: Okay. I think what we should probably do is talk about your leaving. Did you have anything that you wanted to say that we may not have covered about you there?

Kurtz: Not really. Leaving was just all of a sudden it was kind of like a dream world. Your day came. You got your orders. You went to Bien Hoa. You said good-bye to whoever you knew or cared about, and most of the people I knew or cared about had been gone already, and you hung around there for a day or two. They gave you some shots, and you got on your airplane, and you were really happy when the wheels were up, I mean. And, you know, people wouldn't stop talking, you know, until you told someone to shut up, you wanted to sleep, you know. And flew all the way to McGuire Air Force base with them stopping over and all of that, and that was a bizarre experience because I stayed there a couple days and I stayed with a guy that I was both in officer basic and while we were in Vietnam he was in the 1st Division too, he and his wife; and I had to prove that I was not a basic trainee. I mean, I was a captain. I had some awards and, you know, some ribbons on and a CIB [Combat Infantry Badge], but yet the MPs didn't believe I wasn't a trainee because evidently-- Fort Dix was a basic training base. They had people trying to sneak off the base all the time posing as officers. So that was kind of bizarre.

- Gayle: Okay. So you arrived. Where is McGuire?
- Kurtz: That's near Newark, New Jersey.
- Gayle: Oh, okay. So you were at McGuire. Then what happened?
- Kurtz: Then when I got out-- And they never told you anything other than good-bye and gave you some money to get home on. I got on a plane at Newark, flew to Chicago, flew to Madison, got off the airplane. My parents met me there. That's really the last time I had the uniform on. It wasn't-- People looked at you real bad when you came off the airplane here in Madison and was expected to be completely normal, like it never happened.
- Gayle: So what do you mean people looked at you real bad? You got that right away essentially?
- Kurtz: Yeah, because I had a uniform on. I mean, once I took the uniform off they never knew. I mean, it was just-- Even then the antiwar stuff was starting, you know. What is this guy wearing a uniform? You just didn't tell anybody that you were involved in it or anything like that. I mean, some people knew obviously, but you sure wouldn't do it now like you can tell people and, you know, people don't either care or really one way or another, whereas then that was a real negative.
- Gayle: Did you anticipate this?
- Kurtz: No. I guess having grown up in Madison I was not completely shocked that it happened, but it kind of--I was kind of proud of, you know, this; and I found that the only way that I could process it really was just to forget about it completely, I mean, just to--and that-- You know, in the Army I think that that's where I really fault the military. You can't advise anybody how to live in Madison, but they never did talk about, you know, how do you deal with these things. You go from one day people shooting at you to three days later-- I mean, it wasn't my situation per se, but I mean there is other people that in less than a week you've gone from living in a hole, monsoons, and all of that to sitting in a bar in downtown Madison or, you know, whatever. You know, that's supposed to be normal.
- Gayle: Did you have any indication that it was--that the war was becoming controversial while you were there?

Kurtz: Not really because the news you got was all--it was all, you know, controlled by the military, although I did have a subscription to the "State Journal" sent to me, and you know, you'd get them in lumps and stuff and you could see what was going on here. I mean, it wasn't anything like in '69, you know, but you could see, you know, there was a lot of teach-ins, you know, protests and stuff like that.

Gayle: What did you think about that?

Kurtz: Well, I didn't know what to think about it because, you know, I guess I've changed my mind a little bit. I just thought there were some people trying to get out of some things, but I've got complete respect for anybody that really believed what they believed. You know, whatever it was that was okay with me. A guy like Clinton was the guy that bothered me that said he didn't--you know, that he really wanted to participate in the war but he didn't want to participate in the war. I mean, that kind of conduct was very (unintelligible) to me. In my wife's family there was-- I'm really one of the few people in my high school class that was a Vietnam veteran, and her brothers--she's got four brothers, none of them went in; and I've got friends that didn't go in, you know, for a lot of different reasons. So-- and now it is kind of different because some of them kind of regret they didn't have my experience to some degree I think. You know, you see some of that. And then you could just see that when I went back the second time to showing pictures, you know, who was interested, who wasn't interested and, you know, kind of why, you know. To me it don't make any difference, you know. It's just like any other trip somebody took, you know, the second one, you know. You either want to see my pictures of glacier or you don't want to see my pictures of glacier, you know. It don't make no matter.

Gayle: Okay. What did you do when you left the service?

Kurtz: I corrected-- They had a thing called "Summer Problems" at the law school; and Jim McDonald, who was a professor I had when I was an undergraduate and he was a World War II vet, hired me in February before I left to be there in June to correct these papers. So I was really grateful for that. So it gave me the summer to kind of goof off and look for a job. And I took a job in Chilton, Wisconsin, in private practice; and within three weeks of being there I wished I was back in Vietnam because Chilton was kind of a dreadful place. I shouldn't say that, but it is very conservative, very-- It was not the right place for a person who was single who, you know, just needed to let off some steam. And I came back to Madison and worked for the legislature for a year or a little more than a year, and then I went to the Department of Natural

Resources. And my mother was wondering if I could ever hold a job because, you know, three jobs in three years, you know, so to speak. But then I stayed at the DNR until now. And early in the DNR experience I did a lot with the conservation wardens and got heavily involved in the riots from the standpoint of working with our wardens on, you know, freedom of speech issues and stuff like that; and we went to planning sessions. And you had a picture up there of the National Guard guarding the Capitol and all of that, and our wardens were very much part of all of that too.

Gayle: The wardens—

Kurtz: Because that's police power. You know, they were on State property. They were protecting both on campus and up at the Capitol, and that was-- When I sit and think about it, I mean it was a very busy time and all of that, but I never thought of the context of that. They were really protesting something that I had been involved in and had a lot of--because as I said I really never thought about even being a veteran until 1982 when I went to Harvard to a management course and in filling this thing out they asked if you were a veteran. That's the first time I ever really got asked because, you know--and I never thought about joining any veterans' organization. I never did until the middle '90s; and about that time you started hearing something about Agent Orange, you know, and because the system picked up the fact that I had been exposed-- **[Side 2, Tape 2, Ends]** --to it somehow. And so I had to fill out documents, and my wife was really concerned about that, and we had had one child that—

[Break in audiotape]

Gayle: Okay. We were talking about a little bit of the Agent Orange concern.

Kurtz: Yeah.

Gayle: But what-- Did you have any difficulties adjusting? I mean, it sounds like you didn't make use of very many veteran benefits. You had already been a student and so you had been through all that.

Kurtz: I tried--I looked at-- I had saved enough money, because there was nothing to spend money on in Vietnam, to buy a down payment on a house, you know. So I had enough money to do that when the time came. And, no, I mean--and I think it ultimately gave me some problems in the '80s and '90s and really kind of led to the fact I went back to Vietnam, is that I never processed any of this stuff or grieved about some of the things; and I was a very angry person

and didn't really know-- I mean, I just understood in the last two - three years why I was so angry. In the '70s and mid-'80s or so I was just--I didn't like myself and a lot of things, and it was because I kind of put this, all this--I mean, this is the biggest thing that had ever happened to me and it never happened to me, you know. And I really was-- You know, when I was out at Harvard at this management--it was for training midcareer government executives, and Harvard faculty was seated with guys that were involved in the Vietnam War; and I did everything that I could do to pick a fight with them about, you know, a lot of different things; and I was the only Vietnam-- There was like a hundred people in this course, and I was the only Vietnam veteran, and I gave them--I was a jerk. There is just no question in my mind. I was an absolute jerk, although some people didn't think I was but—

Gayle: (laughing)

Kurtz: But I was certainly a jerk to those people.

Gayle: You said you had gone back to Vietnam. I mean, at what point did you decide that this would be something you'd need to do?

Kurtz: I mean, when I-- I just decided that there was something that got left there and I needed to find out what it was, and about-- I had had some neck surgery in '96, and I had some time to think, and I said I got to get out of this thing. My wife really started encouraging me to. That's about the time I joined the VFW, and that was very-- I mean, I joined the VFW because I wanted to have some people that had some experience, and the group that I joined just by accident had a lot of people that were in the same part of the country that I was, you know, so we got to talk about rubber and walking through there and the heat and, you know, told a few lies but not many, just talked more about the environmental conditions and stuff like that. And there were some things that I wanted to see on the ground again. Did I make a mistake or-- You know, and I was fortunate to get a tour that the 1st Division had which went to everyplace but Bear Cat, and you couldn't go to Bear Cat because that's a Vietnamese Army base, you know, so that you can't get on it. And going there, I mean, even though I was much older and in poorer shape, one of the guys on the trip was a captain when I was there. He was a company commander. In fact, he was going to come to see me tomorrow but he had a tornado hit his house so couldn't come to see me, which I was disappointed. But got a chance to talk to a couple people that had very comparable experiences, and it just kind of ended it. I mean, it kind of like-- You know, it's still an experience to me. It don't bother me that much anymore, and in fact I even get bored reading the books once in a while where I was kind of

obsessed for about eight or nine years.

Gayle: During the--

Kurtz: Well, from about from 1989 until I went. I went in 2001 actually. So I was obsessed a little bit longer and all of that, and I had never really looked-- I've got quite-- I shouldn't be telling you this either. I've got quite a few slides and stuff like that that I never looked at until just before I went to Vietnam, you know; and it was kind of--you know, some of it was kind of interesting, particularly interesting to me because I wanted to compare what I was going to see to what I had seen, and some of it was just the same and some of it was very, very different. And, unfortunately, I had never had a camera with me when I was out walking around in the woods and in the rubber because that would have been interesting, but I got some of the pictures of some of those places, you know, on the second trip, you know. So that was really good, you know.

Gayle: So did you come to some insight about this, or was the act of doing it just the--just the healing part?

Kurtz: I think that was part of it and then also the insight. I mean, it really took me until then to say I don't care what a person's position about Vietnam was just as long as they are honest about it. You know, I'm not mad at anybody because they didn't go, and I've reconciled to the fact that--probably and this was the best thing, is that I did the best I could, you know, because I was always worried did I do enough, you know, not that I thought that I was going to win the war or anything like that, but did I let anybody down, did anybody die because I didn't do more and, you know.

Gayle: Because it would be hard to know--to evaluate that.

Kurtz: Yeah. But what it did was-- We don't have any heat around here like they have there. I mean, just to sit and think about it at the end of the day, because I did a journal when I-- I shouldn't be telling you that either; but I did a journal on this trip, and at the end of the day I would sit down and think about that and, you know, you'd sit and think about you're pretty tired and you went to some of these places and say, look, here I was in an air-conditioned bus and, you know, I'm tired and my judgment isn't always that good. So I mean, it told me that the environment took such a toll on you without even, you know, worrying about getting shot at and all those other things, you know. I mean and the Vietnamese people were very gracious. I mean, I liked them a lot better the second time than I did the first time. And I mean virtually

everybody my age is dead there; and there are very, very few people that are around 60, you know, because they either are in the United States, they were ARVN and fled, got forced out of the country. And those people that are that age and 60--between the age of 60 and 50, the VC all lived in the jungle, and it took such a toll out of them they all died. You know, either we killed them or just medically they couldn't survive.

Gayle: So you said that you were--that you came to accept whatever people felt about Vietnam.

Kurtz: Yeah.

Gayle: That was what you were angry about before?

Kurtz: Well, partly that. I mean, nobody gave any recognition, and really I didn't deserve any recognition, I mean just that that's what, you know, I to a degree wanted to do. I mean, I think it would be accurate to say I was a volunteer to go over there. I mean, I don't think when it is all said and done I would have had to go one way or another, you know, just the way the cards played, but--and that it put me in a context of the fact that the 1st Division is something I'm very proud of. I had gone-- They've got a really fine museum down in Cantigny outside of Chicago in Wheaton, and I'm one person that's part of the proud tradition, you know; and that made me feel a lot better too, you know, just that-- There is guys, you know, like at Normandy, you know, Milo Flaten--I don't know if you know him or not. I mean, he did a lot more than I ever did, you know, and that was because he had a chance to do it and I didn't. You know and I mean that's part of the way things are too, you know, that you kind of got to play the hand you're dealt.

Gayle: What did you feel about when you were dealing with the protesters the whole time? You were in Madison. You came back—

Kurtz: Yeah.

Gayle: --right a couple of years before all this thing.

Kurtz: I basically like I said didn't even think of myself as being a veteran. I was just in a policing function, you know. It was part of my job in order to—

Gayle: Different compartment.

Kurtz: The compartment. I mean, it just never really, you know, computed. I mean, the only times it really computed before '82 is when Sterling Hall got blown.

As I was sitting in my living room you could feel the shake on the east side. And then when Saigon fell that was kind of--I mean, just the feeling of futility when--you know, all of those people that died and for, you know, a result that wasn't, you know, very good. And then when I went back the Vietnamese really don't need it. They are doing just fine without us, you know. And that kind of gets you into, you know, why we intervene in all these different places, you know. Like I'm not too whippy on what we're doing in Iraq because I don't think we've got an end game plan, you know. You know, you need to have a plan. If you're asking people to put their lives on the line, you need have a result that you're trying to achieve, which they sort of say they do there, but what you are going to do if you achieve it because we aren't going to be able to run Iraq. I mean, it's just that simple. We couldn't run Vietnam. We're culturally so different. We just can't do it.

Gayle: Okay. You had told me a couple of other things that you wanted to talk about. I think the cab delivering the death notices.

Kurtz: Oh, when I was down at Fort Benning that was--really the movie "We Were Soldiers" really drove it home about how horrible that was. I mean, the cab drivers were having to deliver the death notices to soldiers' wives; and, you know, it struck me as very bad. And when I read the book and then saw the movie it just-- you know, how we could be that insensitive to people that they're doing something for us.

Gayle: And then you've alluded to it before or throughout, but you had mentioned specifically that you felt you were poorly prepared as an officer.

Kurtz: Yes, and partly this was my fault. I mean, we went down to-- In 1966 I was at Fort Riley for six weeks. That was kind of like basic training, just getting to know what the military was about. Then when I went to the officer basic, which was an eight-week course, really was given no experience moving 40 men through the woods, calling in air--you know, what do you do in these situations and stuff like that, no real training on operating with radios, stuff like that. So I mean I'm not dumb, so I could pick things up, but it sure would have been nice to do it.

Gayle: Uh-huh. Okay. When you look back on all this, what sense do you make or what did it mean to your life and—

Kurtz: Well, like I said, other than the family it's really the central event in my life, you know, and everything is kind of a bench, and that's why it was so horrible not thinking about it for so long. I mean, it made me successful in the practice

of the law because it taught me the interpersonal skills that you need to do and some compassion and all of that for some things and then also to be very ruthless too in a way from the standpoint there are some things that if I don't really care about I'm a real jerk now.

Gayle: Do you have anything else you wanted to say?

Kurtz: No, I don't think so.

Gayle: Thank you.

Kurtz: Well, thank you.

[End of Interview]