

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
STEVEN F. PECKHAM
Mortarman, Marine Corps, Vietnam War.

2007

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Peckham, Steven F., (1948-). Oral History Interview, 2007.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 75 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 75 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Steve F. Peckham, a Madison, Wisconsin native, discusses his service in a mortar unit of the Marine Corps during the Vietnam War. Peckham touches on enlisting in the Marine Corps as a high school senior, boot camp at San Diego, and specialty training with 81 mortars. He comments that they stressed teamwork at boot camp and physical training in infantry training regiment. After a leave at home, he talks about receiving orders for Vietnam and the effects of the war on his high school class. Peckham recalls the festive mood on the commercial flight to Okinawa and a rumor that they might be sent to Korea instead, due to the North Korean seizure of the *USS Pueblo*. After arriving at Danang a week after the 1968 Tet Offensive started, he recalls his first impressions of Vietnam, assignment to a mortar unit in the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, and going right to work near Phu Bai doing minesweeping. At Hue, Peckham comments on the constant enemy activity and missions in the city. He recalls running across a Vietnamese boy who had been wounded in the stomach and getting him medical treatment. Sent to Quang Tri, Peckham comments on being the new guy, getting stuck in the mud after jumping off a helicopter, his field equipment, and a funny incident during a mission when a new major tried and failed to jump over a creek. He talks about being sent to Hill 558 and Hill 881 to support troops at Khe Sanh, spending a day in Khe Sanh for dental work, being overrun by rats, and celebrating the 4th of July with a free fire zone. Peckham details the chaotic withdrawal from the area by helicopter, retrieving dead from Hill 689, getting air support from Douglas AC-47s, seeing a friend get shot, and nearly being hit by an airdropped supplies pallet. Peckham talks about duty at Con Tien and Phu Loc, food, going in on the buddy system, and his reaction to a letter stating his cousin had died in a car accident. At Phu Loc, Peckham touches on duty at the Fire Direction Center, R&R at Taipei (Taiwan), feeling unwelcome in Vietnam, only staying in touch with one Marine buddy in the States, and lack of debriefing when he was shipped back to the States. He mentions the Marines' stealing equipment from the Army, marijuana use, and an increased racial divide amongst troops in the southern part of Vietnam. Peckham talks about his homecoming experience at the San Francisco airport and at home in Wisconsin. Assigned to Camp Pendleton (California), he states he was so bored that he volunteered to go overseas again and served the rest of his time with the Military Police in Hawaii. He tells of going to a "Welcome Home" march in Chicago and seeing veterans openly smoking marijuana in the parade. Peckham explains why the onset of the Iraq War prompted him to join the Middleton VFW.

Biographical Sketch:

Peckham (b.1948) was in the Marine Corps from 1967 to 1970, including serving in Vietnam from January of 1968 to February of 1969 with Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment. He currently resides in Middleton (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2007

Transcribed by Telise Johnsen, 2011

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Transcribed Interview:

- Kurtz: Today is January 11, 2007. My name is Jim Kurtz, and I'm interviewing Steve Peckham at the Middleton Sonny Simon VFW Post 8216.
- Steve, when and where were you born?
- Steve: When and where? Madison, Wisconsin, September of 1948.
- Kurtz: Okay, and did you grow up in Madison?
- Steve: Uh, my first nine years were in Madison.
- Kurtz: Okay. And then what happened?
- Steve: Moved to Middleton, out to the burbs.
- Kurtz: Okay. And did you attend high school—?
- Steve: Middleton High School--graduated '67.
- Kurtz: Middleton High School. And when you were going to high school did you have any awareness of the Vietnam War?
- Steve: Sure [laughs].
- Kurtz: Was there discussion about it, or did you think it was ever going to affect you one way or another?
- Steve: We were in Madison. It was all around us. [Laughs]
- Kurtz: So you're talking about the protests and all of that, and then it was on the news, and all that.
- Steve: Yeah.
- Kurtz: Did you have any relatives that were veterans or neighbors who had participated in the war already?
- Steve: My dad had been in World War II.
- Kurtz: Okay. And did he have any strong feelings about military service?
- Steve: We didn't discuss it.
- Kurtz: What did your dad do in WWII?

Steve: He was a navigator, pilot.

Kurtz: In the Air Force, or--?

Steve: Army Air Corps.

Kurtz: Okay. What kind of planes? Do you remember?

Steve: They did training on the B-25s and B-29s.

Kurtz: Okay. When you graduated from high school, what did you do?

Steve: I went right [laughs]—I signed right up. I signed up while I was still a senior in high school.

Kurtz: Okay, so you signed up for the Marine Corps.

Steve: Absolutely.

Kurtz: And is there a reason why you joined the Marine Corps?

Steve: Because I was really lousy in high school. My grades were probably “D” average [laughs]. And I knew that if I didn’t sign up, there were going to draft me anyway. So I figured I’d sign up for the best. I was going to go anyway. So I figured I’d just get the best training I could.

Kurtz: Okay. Some of us would say you-- [Laughs]

Steve: Oh, I made the right choice.

Kurtz: [Laughs] We won’t get into the discussion we had before about the merits of the Army and the Marine Corps.

Steve: So, did any of your classmates sign up for the Marines, too, from there?

Kurtz: I went in on the buddy system with two guys.

Kurtz: Okay. And are they still around, or did they--?

Steve: One’s dead and one’s still around.

Kurtz: Okay. Where’d you go for Boot Camp?

Steve: San Diego.

- Kurtz: And what was the reaction of your parents when you signed up for the Marine Corps?
- Steve: My dad says, “What are you trying to prove?” [Laughs]
- Kurtz: [Laughs] What about your mother?
- Steve: She—I don’t know whether—she was glad to get rid of me. [Laughs] “Get out of the house.” [Laughs]
- Kurtz: Is there anything that stands out about your Boot Camp experience?
- Steve: Oh, man!
- Kurtz: The reason I’m asking this, I’ve interviewed one guy that had this guy that does mail call on television was his drill sergeant, you know. So did you have any, you know--or Elvis Presley or, you know, something--.
- Steve: Ah, the whole thing stands out. I mean, I remember everything, like--. I never thought of it like that, “What stands out most about boot camp?” Probably what the Marine Corps teaches about how you all start out the lowest thing in the world, which is whale shit [laughs]. And they make you work as such a cohesive unit. You know, they stress the, “You’re not one.”
- Kurtz: Right. Uh huh.
- Steve: You’re just part of one.
- Kurtz: Were the drill sergeants Vietnam veterans, did you know?
- Steve: Yeah. We had four. I think they were all non-vets.
- Kurtz: Did they talk much about Vietnam during Basic Training?
- Steve: Not in Boot Camp, not in Basic. But in—oh what’s—ITR [*Infantry Training Regiment*]?
- Kurtz: No, in the Army it’s ATI [*AIT?*], Advanced Infantry--.
- Steve: Yeah, ITR in the Marine Corps. They talked about--I mean, they’d say, if we were on a forced march and it was raining, if we went up a hill and were sliding in the mud, if we went off to the side, they’re like, “You’re dead. You’re in Nam, you’re dead. You’re off the path, and you’re—,” you know.

They gave us more--ITR was a lot more physical, yeah. Because boot camp was more getting into your head about--it was physical, but it was also mental about, you know, just lose the chip off your shoulder, you know, to everyone.

Kurtz: Okay. So did you have your advanced training at San Diego also?

Steve: Pendleton.

Kurtz: Okay, yeah. And did you get leave between Boot Camp and Advanced Training?

Steve: We got—yeah. Uh, after Boot Camp we went right to ITR. And then we had, then it was Christmas. And so—no, we went right from ITR into BITS, Basic Infantry Training. [PAUSE]

Kurtz: Okay, when we paused the tape briefly we were talking about ITR and, what was the other thing?

Steve: BITS, Basic Infantry Training Specialty.

Kurtz: Okay. And what was your specialty?

Steve: Mortars, 81 mortars.

Kurtz: Mortars. And what was your job on a mortar crew, or were you trained on the whole--?

Steve: You're everything.

Kurtz: Okay. And after that, were you given leave?

Steve: Yeah.

Kurtz: And did you have orders for someplace when you went on leave?

Steve: What do you mean? I just went home.

Kurtz: Oh, you just went home. But, I mean, did you know what your next duty assignment was?

Steve: [Laughs] Nam. [Laughs]

Kurtz: Okay, so you had--that's what I was asking. Yeah, so you had orders for WestPac.

Steve: Yeah, oh yeah. We knew.

Kurtz: So, was there any discussion in this training session about Vietnam?

Steve: Well, actually, at the same time, we were in—discussion in--oh, in the training, in Basic Training?

Kurtz: You know, the guys that you were being trained with.

Steve: We knew we were going. Everybody knew that we were going.

Kurtz: Was there any reaction to the fact that you were going to Vietnam, or was it just expected?

Steve: We were all volunteer Marines. We knew what was going on. We had signed up. Everybody had signed up.

Kurtz: When you came back to Middleton, what was your family's reaction, knowing that you were going to Vietnam when this leave was over?

Steve: Just took it like—I don't know.

Kurtz: They really didn't say anything about it?

Steve: Yeah. There wasn't really a lot of discussion.

Kurtz: What about your friends that you hung out with in high school?

Steve: They didn't want, they didn't, a lot of them were--[laughs]. A lot of them just didn't know why it was happening. They didn't know what the purpose was. They knew why I was going. They knew of my life, and they knew what I, you know, just--.

Kurtz: At this point, did you know any other people from Middleton that were going to Vietnam or had been in Vietnam?

Steve: Well, yeah, the two guys in the, that went [unintelligible]--. Oh, come on, our class, the class of '67, we suffered heavy casualties.

Kurtz: Now, have you got a guesstimate or--?

Steve: At least five of us died in Nam. Not to mention the ones that--. One buddy went to Canada. One of my best buddies went to Canada. One of my best buddies got caught in Colombia smuggling dope. So we all—the war made us all scatter. [Laughs]

- Kurtz: Uh huh. Okay, so your family didn't say much, and nothing much was said in the community. Were there any protests going on in the Madison area when you were home?
- Steve: No, it was December and early January, so school was out, and it was cold.
- Kurtz: So, where did you report after your leave?
- Steve: Back to Pendleton.
- Kurtz: And how did you then go from Pendleton to, I assume, Okinawa first?
- Steve: Yeah, Okinawa first.
- Kurtz: How did you go?
- Steve: We flew out.
- Kurtz: Okay, on a military jet or military plane?
- Steve: Yeah, big—yeah--. Oh no! No, to Okinawa it was commercial. It was a commercial flight. We had stewardesses. That's right.
- Kurtz: Okay. And did you know anybody on that flight?
- Steve: Everybody that I had been in Basic Infantry Training with.
- Kurtz: Oh, okay, so you had some acquaintances there.
- Steve: Yeah, yeah. There were a lot of guys from ITR and stuff.
- Kurtz: What was the mood of the people on the plane?
- Steve: Actually, we had a stewardess say--because we were partying, we partied; everyone was having a good time going over to Okinawa--and we had a stewardess say, "You know, the Marines--." She could tell we were Marines, she said, because when Marines go over, they were partying. And when they came back, they were all quiet.
- But the Army, when they went over, were real quiet. And when they came back they were happy [laughs]. The stewardess knew the difference.
[Laughs]
- Kurtz: Do you have any observation about that difference?

Steve: Oh, absolutely [laughs]. I imagine the Army had a lot of draftees in there, too. And they probably opposed the war and were just caught up in the whirlwind. You know, and they just, probably, didn't know. But the Marines, we had all signed up. We were--.

Kurtz: So you knew what you were getting into.

Steve: We knew what we were getting into.

Kurtz: So, what happened when you got to Okinawa?

Steve: Uh, actually, before we had got to Okinawa, when we were in Staging Battalion, before we left Pendleton, the *Pueblo* happened.

Kurtz: Okay.

Steve: And we didn't know if we were going to be going to Korea or Vietnam. And we had an old gunnery sergeant going over with us, and he says, "Listen, you guys, I've been to Korea and I've been to Nam. You don't want to go to Korea." [Laughs]

Kurtz: [Laughs]

Steve: He said, "It gets cold there." [Laughs]

Kurtz: So, was this just the regular military rumor-type thing?

Steve: Yeah, oh yeah. Because we didn't know, you know. I mean, all of a sudden we've got people captured out by Korea, or in trouble. Yeah, and we're waiting to go to war anyway, so--. And then Tet happened.

Kurtz: Okay. I know that. So I just want to kind of split this off, though. You weren't issued any equipment in California that would have led you to believe that you were going anywhere but to Okinawa?

Steve: Oh, no, no, no.

Kurtz: Okay. So you were going to go to Okinawa.

Steve: We had our orders, yeah. We were on our way.

Kurtz: And were you going as replacements or as a unit?

Steve: [Laughs] Oh, no, we were just individuals. As soon as we got there we were scattering to wherever they—patchwork here--. No units, though.

Kurtz: Yeah. So when you got to Okinawa, that was right at the time of Tet '68.

Steve: Yeah, yeah.

Kurtz: And, what was the reaction in Okinawa? Is it kind of a Chinese fire drill there?

Steve: Well, it's like, "Well, we can't send you guys out right now, because we can't land." [Laughs] "We try to land, you guys are dead. So--."

Kurtz: Okay. So how long did you spend in Okinawa before you could move to Vietnam?

Steve: Oh, it was probably around a week.

Kurtz: Did you get any special training when you were in Okinawa, or had you had the training that you were going to have?

Steve: No. Just learned how to roll dice and play cards. [Laughs] Just to sit around waiting. They didn't have any plans for us to sit around and wait, so--.

Kurtz: Yeah. Okay, so, when you finally did go to Vietnam, how did you get there and where did you go to?

Steve: Landed in Danang. It was a military plane--.

Kurtz: It was a C-130?

Steve: Yeah, took us into Danang.

Kurtz: And what was your first impression, when you stepped off the airplane in Danang, about Vietnam?

Steve: Oh, it was probably the smell, probably the smell. It was something like I could never, ever remember smelling in my life.

Kurtz: And have you smelled anything like that back in the United States?

Steve: Oh, yeah, right [laughs]. Not yet.

Kurtz: Okay. What about heat, noise?

Steve: Just the, it was the, just *loud*.

Kurtz: Was there a lot of activity at the airfield where you landed?

- Steve: Oh, sure, a lot of activity going on--jeeps and trucks going, diesel trucks going all over the [six bys?].
- Kurtz: Were there military aircraft going out on combat operations, too?
- Steve: Not around the airstrip where I was.
- Kurtz: Okay.
- Steve: I didn't see any helicopters going out. Not that there weren't any; I just can't remember any.
- Kurtz: Okay. Did you go to a replacement company, or a holding company, or something like that?
- Steve: I went right up to "One-One" [1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment].
- Kurtz: Okay, so they gave you orders when you got to Danang for One-One? Is that how that worked?
- Steve: I can't remember how it was. I can't remember when we found out we were going to One-One.
- Kurtz: Okay. Where was One-One at that time?
- Steve: Uh, Phu Bai.
- Kurtz: And Phu Bai is up near Hue, isn't it?
- Steve: [Laughs] That's where the rest of them were. [Laughs] That's where we were headed.
- Kurtz: And so did you spend much time in Phu Bai, or did you go out in the--, you know, when you got to--?
- Steve: Oh, yeah. They put us to work. You know, patrols, mine sweeps, a lot of mine sweeps.
- Kurtz: And was that because Phu Bai was on Highway One and connected with Hue and all that?
- Steve: Oh, yeah.
- Kurtz: How were you received when you got there, being a newbie?

Steve: Oh, a rookie, you know. You're still shitting green shit, you know, [unintelligible] shit.

Kurtz: Yeah. Did they give you some tips on the things you should be concerned about?

Steve: Naw. [Laughs] Not that I remember.

Kurtz: And were you assigned to a mortar unit?

Steve: Yeah, right away.

Kurtz: Right away. Did you carry the mortars with you on patrols?

Steve: Well, not when I first got there. No, you don't take it. We did the guns when we were on operations.

Okay, when I first got there--. Because half the guys were up at Hue, and then half the guys were still down at Phu Bai, because that's just the way they--. They'd always split--. What we did was, we had four sections with two squads in a section. And each section was assigned to Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, or Delta. So each grunt company had two squads of mortars with them.

Kurtz: How many tubes would that be?

Steve: Two each.

Kurtz: Okay, so there was four tubes to a company.

Steve: Yeah.

Kurtz: Okay. So what were your basic duties in Vietnam?

Steve: To start with?

Kurtz: Yeah.

Steve: Just got a duty to--.

Kurtz: Did you stay in the Phu Bai area, basically, initially?

Steve: Oh! Well, no, I went pretty much right up to Hue. After a couple weeks I went to Hue.

Kurtz: Were things settled down some in Hue when you got there?

Steve: Actually they weren't. It wasn't as bad as, well at the--. I mean, the Citadel had already been taken. And they hadn't crossed the river yet. But we were around MACV [*Military Assistance Command Vietnam*] Compound. There were people going out in the daytime. There were civilians going out in the daytime. So they must've known that the VC, or the NVA, had backed off, or something.

But they were still around, because we'd still have gunshots and firing all the time, you know. And then we had the guard duty at night, where you knew things were going on. People were, you know--.

Kurtz: Did they probe you or just shoot at you, harass you, at night?

Steve: Oh, there was always rockets and mortars coming, going everywhere [laughs]. You never know where they were going.

Kurtz: Did you have your mortar tubes with you up there?

Steve: Oh, sure. Yeah.

Kurtz: Did you do any firing right in the city?

Steve: Oh, yeah. There were missions, yeah.

Kurtz: And what type of targets were you--?

Steve: Well, whatever. Well because our FOs, Forward Observers, were with the grunts, and if they were--. You know, our FO calls back, "Hey, we got a bunch of gooks up in this one block. We got sniper fire coming at us." So we'd get our guns out and—well, the guns were always set up—but, I mean, we'd have a fire mission. It'd be fire mission.

Kurtz: Did you fire much illumination, or was it mostly--?

Steve: Oh, a lot of illumination. Those were the heavy ones to carry, too. Oh, God! [Laughs]

Kurtz: How much heavier were they than the high explosives?

Steve: They were just enough to notice. [Laughs]

Kurtz: Okay. And did they bring the ammunition to you by aircraft or by truck, helicopter?

Steve: No, 'copter. Well, in Hue it was truck, yeah.

Kurtz: And on a typical night up there, how many rounds would you go through?

Steve: Uh, in Hue, probably, I don't know. I don't know how it averaged out, because some nights, a couple nights, there weren't any—any missions—or daytime, you know. And then, all of a sudden, there'd be a bunch. It's hard to say: five, ten, twenty.

Kurtz: How were you being fed up there?

Steve: C-rations [laughs].

Kurtz: And did the mail come when you were there?

Steve: God, I can't--. No, I don't think we got mail in Hue that I remember. It was all waiting for us at Phu Bai.

Kurtz: So, how long did you stay in Hue?

Steve: Uh, probably less than a month.

Kurtz: What were your impressions? I mean, Tet was really a big deal in the press and all of that. What were your impressions of it?

Steve: [Laughs] Well, it was war. It was war. There's no--. I mean, one day we had moved our—after they had gone across the river, we had to move the guns, we had to move our command post, or whatever. And we set up, and we were just getting guns set up. And this little kid, he was probably five or six years old, cutest little guy, came up.

And we were just making, you know, trying to, like, if we would have had a ball we would have been playing catch, you know, something like that, just trying to play with him and stuff. He kept saying, "VC," and he'd go, "Whoosh." And then he'd move his arm across his belly. And we were, like, "Why are you doing that?" He says, "VC, whoosh!" And he'd move his arm across his front. And we lifted up his shirt, and here he had wounds on his stomach, and they had used cotton, like, uh--.

Kurtz: Gauze?

Steve: Well, yeah, but, yeah, kind of like something out of a pillow or something-

Kurtz: Yeah, okay.

Steve: --and scotch-tape. And that's how they had patched him up. And I says, "Oh, my God! This little kid's going to get infected."

And just as we were doing this, there was some company was walking by our post. And I says, "Hey, where's your corpsman?" And a guy comes over, and I says, "Look at this kid," you know. And he opens up his shirt, and he says, "Oh, man! We got to take care of this," you know. And that was probably one of the most touching moments I had there, you know, helping out that little kid. And the corpsman takes him by the hand, you know, and the little kid waves at me as he's going away. [Laughs]

Kurtz: Did you have any other contacts with civilians in Hue?

Steve: Uh, yeah, but I don't want to say about it. [Laughs]

Kurtz: Okay. There was reputedly a fairly big massacre in Hue of citizens. Did you see anything, any evidence of that, or anything, where you were?

Steve: No, I didn't see that.

Kurtz: Okay.

Steve: Because I gather it was done before I got there.

Kurtz: Did you have any contact with the VC directly—prisoners, or anything?

Steve: Well, you know--. Oh! Oh no, no. Not prisoners.

Kurtz: So, I mean, they were shooting at you, and you really didn't see them or anything like that.

Steve: Yeah, right. Those snipers always—snipers or rockets, you know, you don't see them.

Kurtz: Was Tet the biggest event that you participated in when you were in Vietnam?

Steve: Nope. [Laughs]

Kurtz: Well, why don't you kind of give a narration of what your high points.

Steve: Okay, because after Tet, we went back to Phu Bai kind of to regroup, get a couple more troops in to make up for our losses.

Kurtz: Were you no longer a new guy after--?

- Steve: Yeah, pretty much. Yeah, yeah. You're always a new guy to anybody who's been there--.
- Kurtz: --who's been there longer.
- Steve: Yeah, yeah. And then anybody that comes after you, they're always the new guy. They'll always be the new guy. Right. [Laughs] And anybody that comes after them, they're just newer. [Laughs]
- Kurtz: Yeah. [Laughs] Uh, so, after you got refitted at Phu Bai, what happened?
- Steve: Khe Sanh. [Laughs]
- Kurtz: Khe Sanh. Tell us a little bit about your Khe Sanh experiences.
- Steve: [Laughs] Gunny[?] says--because some of the guys, I mean, the guys that were already there when I got there had, had been through the shit in Hue. And we get back to Phu Bai and have a couple, you know, probably a couple weeks of layoff, you know--still more mine sweeps and patrols and stuff.
- And Gunny[?] says, "Well, guys, you know we got a bunch of brothers up at Khe Sanh. They're in some trouble." [Laughs] And he says, "Well, that's where we're going." [Laughs]
- Kurtz: Were there many incidents in this road clearing stuff that you were doing the two weeks or so that you were back?
- Steve: No, it was just—the incidents were watching the kids beg for food and just, I don't know. No, there wasn't a lot of action there.
- Kurtz: Okay. Well, how did you get to Khe Sanh?
- Steve: Oh, convoy.
- Kurtz: So you went in by convoy.
- Steve: We didn't go into Khe Sanh.
- Kurtz: Where'd you go?
- Steve: We went to Quang Tri.
- Kurtz: Oh, so you went up to Quang Tri. So you didn't get to Khe Sanh yet at this point.

- Steve: Right. Actually, I was only in Khe Sanh one day.
- Kurtz: Okay. So Quang Tri, which is on the coast--.
- Steve: I had a filling. I did [laughs]! I walked to Khe Sanh from five-five-eight (558)--not by myself [laughs].
- Kurtz: Is that right--to get some dental work done?
- Steve: Yep [laughs].
- Kurtz: Well, was your tooth pretty sore?
- Steve: It *was* sore. I thought, "Oh, good. I'm going back to Phu Bai or Danang." And they said, "No. They got a dentist in Khe Sanh." [Laughs] I go, "you got to be kidding." **[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]**
- Kurtz: You had gotten your tooth fixed, and I assume--.
- Steve: No, I hadn't gotten, no. I haven't been to Khe Sanh yet.
- Kurtz: Okay, so let's go to Quang Tri.
- Steve: I'm still a month or so away from Khe Sanh or Quang Tri.
- Kurtz: Okay, so you went from Phu Bai to Quang Tri by convoy, is that correct?
- Steve: Yeah.
- Kurtz: And were there any incidents on that convoy, any ambushes or anything like that?
- Steve: Uh, not that I remember.
- Kurtz: Okay. What happened when you got to Quang Tri?
- Steve: When we got to Quang Tri, we went to--. I think we were on an operation, a mini-operation, before we went to Quang Tri. I'd have to look it up. I've got kind of a photo album of sequence of events. We went on a little mini-operation where there was, you know, there was snipers' fire.
- Oh! Yes, we did. Before Quang Tri we went on an operation over by the South China Sea. And these helicopters--we've got--what were the helicopters, the ones that looked like a teardrop, P-38s or something?
- Kurtz: Oh, those loaches, L-O-A? No.

Steve: I don't know.

Kurtz: Well, that is not important.

Steve: Anyway, anyway, we've got three or four rounds, mortar rounds, on us, our guns, face plates, the gun tubes, the bipods. So everyone's got their own assigned part. And they take us and drop us over a rice paddy. We jump out. I jumped out [laughs]. I was over my knees in mud. I couldn't move [laughs]. I couldn't move.

And the gunner on the chopper's going, "Get out of the way! Get out of the way!" [Laughs] I says, "I can't move." Other guys are jumping off too. They're pulling on me to get out of mud. We're pulling other guys out of the mud [laughs]. But that was just a little—.

Kurtz: There was no bad guys around to enjoy your--.

Steve: Actually, it didn't take long, though, because we did get sniper fire later on.

Kurtz: You were talking about all the stuff you were carrying. Did you carry a personal weapon also?

Steve: Oh, yeah. You had the M-16. Only the squad leader and the gunner of the mortar got forty-fives [.45s]. But they took their M-16s too. [Laughs]

Kurtz: Okay. So, after this operation, nothing much happened on this operation other than getting caught in the mud?

Steve: Not, really. Yeah, there *was* a good one on that operation. Let me tell you. We got assigned—I can't remember which company we were with. But they had a brand new major, a brand new major. We were under fire, so we were going to take up a flank so we weren't attacked from one side.

And, so we're following this brand new major from the States, and we came up to the creek [*interviewee pronounces this: CRICK*]. [Laughs] We came up to this creek. And it was, oh, probably about seven feet wide. And the major looks around, and he says, "Oh, how are we going to get on the other side of the creek?" And this guy, "Buzzy" from Sheboygan, he looks at the guy and he says, "Heck, we're Marines! We can jump it."

So this major [laughs], thinking he's Superman, he goes and takes a jump, and he lands about two feet from the other side. [Laughs] He's up to his waist in water, and we're all laughing. You know, here there's gunshots all around, and we're laughing our ass off at this major.

- Kurtz: What was his reaction?
- Steve: “‘Uh, I guess I’m not an invincible Marine’.” [Laughs]
- Kurtz: [Laughs] Is this guy from Sheboygan still around?
- Steve: I don’t know. “Buzzy,” Buzaides[?] was his--if anybody out there ever hears of--I don’t even know what his first name was. Buzaides[?] from Sheboygan.
- Kurtz: Anyway, so after that operation--.
- Steve: Then we went back to Phu Bai for a couple days. And that’s when the Gunny[?] said, “We’re going to Khe Sanh to bail these guys out.” And we were *all* excited about that! [Laughs]
- Kurtz: I’m sure you were. So, how did you go from Quang Tri to, uh,--?
- Steve: Quang Tri, I think then we went to the Rockpile, which was the next stop to Khe Sanh. And then from the Rockpile, we were helicoptered to five-five-eight (558), Hill 558, which is real close to Khe Sanh.
- Kurtz: Okay. And did you spend any time at the Rockpile?
- Steve: Couple days probably, couple nights—I don’t know.
- Kurtz: On the convoy on Highway 9 between Quang Tri and the Rockpile, did you have any ambushes or any problems getting there by truck?
- Steve: I can’t—. No, not that I remember.
- Kurtz: Okay. And what was your assignment at five-five-eight (558)?
- Steve: Mortars—set up the guns.
- Kurtz: And did you have already preplanned concentrations, or--?
- Steve: Well, we were with Charlie. Charlie Company was on 558. Delta Company went to six eighty-nine (689), and Alpha and Bravo were on eight eighty-one (881). So that’s how it was. Some of the guns were on 689, some were on 881.
- Kurtz: Were you replacing another unit that had been there?
- Steve: Well, yeah, we must have.

- Kurtz: So you must have had, then, the benefit of whatever target information that they had.
- Steve: Oh, yeah. Oh, sure. All the grids and coordinates, and everything was laid out. I mean, we weren't—this wasn't the first time we were on 881.
- Kurtz: Yeah. What were your duties, or what was transpiring around the Khe Sanh area when you were there?
- Steve: Oh, rockets, mortars, you know, guns. We always had missions.
- Kurtz: Were they going after the hills at the same time they were going after Khe Sanh?
- Steve: Yeah [laughs]. Yeah, because we wanted, because then we kind of divided up between 881 and 689. We kinda didn't have anybody on--. I can't remember, unless the Army came in on 558 after we left.
- Kurtz: What month, about, are we talking? Because the First CADS[?][*containerized ammunition distribution system?*] came in May and June.
- Steve: Up there?
- Kurtz: Yeah.
- Steve: Well, that's what we're talking about, because I did my July 4, '68, on Hill 881. Because we were getting ready to leave, and July 4th we had a free fire zone. Everybody was just shooting off. We were shooting illumination rounds like crazy. The sixty mortars were [laughs] shooting sixty. And the guys with all the, you know, fifty caliber—everybody's shooting them.
- Kurtz: So, this is like Rhythm and Booms. [*Big July Fourth fireworks show in Madison, Wisconsin*]
- Steve: Oh, absolutely! [Laughs] Yeah, because there wasn't any air cover there, but it did get—881 got really hairy [laughs] when we started to leave-- because we *were* the last ones there.
- Kurtz: By "hairy" what do you mean?
- Steve: They just threw everything they had at us. The 689 had just about got wiped out, Delta Company.
- Kurtz: So, did you walk back out, or--?

Steve: Oh, no, no. We were, we were, we were surrounded.

Kurtz: So, but how did you get out, I mean, helicopter?

Steve: By the grace of God. Yeah, it was, yeah. Because 689, Delta Company, just about got wiped out, so we had to go over. Then we went, you know. It's like, "Okay, you're the only ones left." [Laughs] "You got to go over to help them out now."

And then the VC, or NVA, it was NVA, it was more than NVA. Because we had a pile of dead bodies that were—and these guys were Chinese. [Laughs] They knew that someone—I don't believe it was more than—it was, I mean, people that knew saying, "These guys aren't NVA. These are Chinese." And one was an officer.

Yeah, leaving 881 was—I never ran so hard and fast, and so slow at the same time, getting out.

Kurtz: Were you carrying part of the mortar?

Steve: Oh, absolutely, yeah, plus rounds.

Kurtz: Where were you running to—towards back to Khe Sanh?

Steve: Back to the helicopter.

Kurtz: Okay, back to the helicopter. Okay.

Steve: Yeah, when it came in, because we're firing, we're shooting off the hill-- because the helicopter can't stay there for a very long time [laughs], you know.

Kurtz: Yeah, yeah.

Steve: I actually thought our helicopter would take a hit.

Kurtz: Uh huh. So were they mortaring the area, or did they shoot--?

Steve: Everything, everything.

Kurtz: So after you got out of 881 area, where did you go?

Steve: Six eighty-nine (689), because we had guys, we had Marines outside the wire that were dead, and we don't leave our dead.

Kurtz: Yeah.

Steve: So, we had to go over to 689 and get our guys.

Kurtz: Can you describe that experience?

Steve: Well, yeah. We were really glad to get off of 881 [laughs], because the rats were taking over anyway. The rats pretty much pushed us off the hill, more than the gooks [laughs].

Kurtz: How big were the rats?

Steve: Well, I didn't see any really super-sized rats. There were just so many of them, you know.

Kurtz: Yeah. So 689 is waiting to pick up the dead bodies of their dead Marines.

Steve: Yeah, well, yeah. But that was a couple of nights of hell, too. They had come in the wire one night.

Kurtz: Can you describe—? What did they do? Did they come with the bugles like they did in Korea, or do you think they were under the influence of drugs, or--?

Steve: Oh, I don't know.

Kurtz: Did they come in pretty hard?

Steve: They were just determined, yeah.

Kurtz: They came in real hard.

Steve: Yeah, I think there were just a lot of them. That's more my take on it.

Kurtz: They come in firing full bore with their AK-47s?

Steve: Well, I wasn't on the side of the hill that they came in on. But I know they were right outside the wire where we were, too. So [laughs] we had Puff. Puff, Puff, Puff was--. Oh, God! Thank God for Puff [*Puff the Magic Dragon*].

Kurtz: For people that don't know what that is, that's a C-47 [*aircraft*] loaded with a Gatling gun. And some of them had 105 Howitzer in there that provided protection for units at night that were in difficulty.

Steve: They sure did [laughs]. Because of Puff, we couldn't shoot the mortars, either.

Kurtz: Yeah.

Steve: You know, we couldn't fire the mortars at night. So we were just--.

Kurtz: So you were just sort of infantrymen then.

Steve: Well, yeah, yeah. We stand there watching, because there was just constant illumination, too. I mean, it was lit up like day.

Kurtz: Were they dropping the flares out of Puff to keep--?

Steve: They must've. They must've. I can't remember.

Kurtz: So, during the day did things tame down a little bit, or did they--?

Steve: Well, yeah, except for the time I was talking to my buddy. And all of a sudden—we're talking, and we're looking at the dirt kick up coming up the hill [laughs]. And all of a sudden he's turning around, because he just got shot [laughs]. And he's spinning around. And there was a .50-caliber out in the bush, you know. They just shot and sprayed the hill and got him instead of me.

Kurtz: Oh, my! Oh, my!

Steve: Yeah [laughs]. Yeah. So then I'm yelling, "Corpsman!" Then the next day, some lieutenant carrying some—we had some incoming rockets, I think, and hearing him, was yelling and screaming for his legs [laughs].

Kurtz: So you said you were acting—did I hear you right--acting as a corpsman, too?

Steve: Oh, no. [Laughs] I *yelled* for a corpsman. I yelled for a corpsman [laughs].

Kurtz: Okay. I didn't hear that correctly. Did you get re-supplied at all during this time?

Steve: Water.

Kurtz: Water. How did they get the water to you?

Steve: Helicopter, big platter[?]. They'd call them platters[?].

Kurtz: What about ammunition?

Steve: That's all we got, ammunition and--. That was another thing. That first night when we, we had increments on the--. We had to get ammunition in there. So a helicopter came in with a huge pallet, or two pallets.

And the increments on the mortar rounds, the ones that we tore off— because each round, each HE [*high explosive*] round, had nine increments on it. And, well, we were tearing off all the increments, because the more increments, the farther it goes. Well, we didn't need these rounds to go flying out too far [laughs]. And we were tearing off the increments.

And the helicopter, because it was dark, they didn't know where--. So we had a pile of increments, and we looked--. And I'm trying to light this; I says, "Okay, I'll go light it. I'll go start it, so they have an LZ," you know. And [laughs] I couldn't get that thing to light for me. And all I can see is this helicopter. And I looked up, and here's this pallet coming right at my head [laughs].

Kurtz: Oh, my!

Steve: I just rolled into a trench. It landed about five feet from me [laughs]. I thought, "Oh, man! Here's another time I'm dead."

Kurtz: So, that's a real parker[?] fact. You're liable to get squashed. Were these increments pretty much inert, or was it just wet, or--?

Steve: Well, they're like little packets of gunpowder, you know.

Kurtz: Yeah. I mean, because that could be kind of dangerous too, you know, if you get them all--.

Steve: Oh, yeah! So? [Laughs]

Kurtz: So, it was a dangerous field.

Steve: It's the lesser of two evils, here.

Kurtz: Okay, so how long did you stay in the Khe Sanh area? I mean, is there anything else that stands out in your mind in the Khe Sanh area?

Steve: Well, that's probably what I remember most, is up there, up in the hills. It's the freshest memory that I have.

Kurtz: Okay. Do you see any--? Do you belong, like, to the Khe Sanh Association or--?

Steve: No.

Kurtz: There is a Khe Sanh Association.

Steve: Really? I did not know this.

Kurtz: Yeah. And there's a chaplain in Milwaukee by the name of Ray Stubbe that was the guy who founded it. He was on the Khe Sanh Fire Base itself. So maybe I should put you in touch with him.

Steve: Well, I made it there one day. [Laughs]

Kurtz: But, I mean, the whole hill area, that's what he regards as a whole.

Steve: That was Operation Pegasus, I believe. Was it?

Kurtz: Yeah. The thing about Pegasus is when the Army came in to bail the Marines out.

Steve: [Laughs] When we said, "Okay, Army. It's okay now." [Laughs] "Bring your equipment in. We'll steal it when we leave."

Kurtz: [Laughs] After you wound up your time in the Khe Sanh area, where did you go then?

Steve: A place called Alpha Three.

Kurtz: Alpha 3, what's that?

Steve: That's seven hundred meters from the DMZ [laughs]. Well, we went back to—or did we go back to Quang Tri right away, or did we go out to Alpha Three? It's up by Con Tien—Con Tien, Alpha 3, and Charlie 2, because then they split up our mortar platoon there, too, because Charlie Company was one place. Alpha and Bravo were another. And what was left of Delta--Delta really--we lost our, pretty much, Delta Company on 689.

Kurtz: How long did it take to get it built back up?

Steve: Probably before we went back to—where'd we go? After—well, we ended up in Phu Loc, south of Danang.

Kurtz: Well, let's stay up at Con Tien. What happened up there?

Steve: Just the incoming, incoming every day.

Kurtz: Did you guys patrol into the DMZ?

Steve: We didn't. We were on the guns, so we stayed in the compound there.

Kurtz: And you were getting fire from heavy guns from North Vietnam.

Steve: It was mortars and rockets. Yeah, it was mortars and rockets.

Kurtz: Yeah. And did the NVA infantry probe there, Con Tien, or was it just the guns--?

Steve: No. We didn't get attacked like that. It was just harassment to us.

Kurtz: Okay. So, how did you eat there? Was it C-rations again, or did they have hot meals for you?

Steve: Oh, it was C-rations. There weren't any hot meals.

Kurtz: What about shower facilities and all? Did they have--?

Steve: Quang Tri. That was the only—yeah.

Kurtz: So, did you get any time off, like, to go back to Quang Tri?

Steve: [Laughs] Riiiiight! No, no.

Kurtz: So this was more than a forty-hour-a-week job.

Steve: This was, yeah. It was over a hundred days between seeing a woman. I never even saw a woman for over a hundred days. I remember that.
[Laughs]

Kurtz: So, how long did you stay in the Con Tien area?

Steve: Probably a month.

Kurtz: Okay. Then is that when you went down below Danang?

Steve: Yeah, yeah.

Kurtz: Okay. And how did you leave there, by convoy again, or--?

Steve: I think we did. Yeah, we trucked down to Quang Tri and then--. Yeah, we pretty much trucked everywhere from there. Just getting up to the hills was a--.

Kurtz: Are you tired?

- Steve: Yes.
- Kurtz: Uh, my interviewer [*interview-ee??*] here is yawning more than he should. Uh, basically, did you have any trouble driving on the roads? Were you harassed at all by the NVA or anything like that? Mines?
- Steve: No, nothing that I can remember--just the villages and the smell--.
- Kurtz: Were you getting mail from home at this time?
- Steve: Oh, yeah. It wasn't that often. My mom wrote every day.
- Kurtz: What were you telling them in the letters that you wrote back?
- Steve: I was giving them soft soap. [Laughs] "Don't worry. I'm okay. Nothing's going on here. It's boring." [Laughs]
- Kurtz: Yeah, well, that's a fairly typical thing, anyway. Uh, were you getting information back about what was going on in Madison? There were some pretty heavy-duty protests.
- Steve: Actually, my—oh, Madison! I don't know, I can't even remember where I was. It was either after the Khe Sanh area or Con Tien. But my mom wrote a letter saying, "I don't know how to write and tell you this, but I feel you should know that your cousin Johnny was killed in a car accident." And I'm like, "Geez, too bad," you know? "Sorry." That's when I knew something was affecting me. [Laughs]
- Kurtz: Something's very different.
- Steve: Yeah, something's very different.
- Kurtz: Were you with any people from Wisconsin other than this guy from Sheboygan?
- Steve: Yeah, my buddy--I'm on the buddy system--he was in Charley Company while we were on that operation around Khe Sanh. And he was with the grunts. They were on patrol. They had gone on a—I don't know where they had gone—but they were setting up for the night, and the guy that he was digging in with was clearing a space with a machete and cut Ralph's hand. Ralph came home; couldn't use his hand. [Laughs]
- So here I am, I'm stuck there. Ralph and the other guy went in on the buddy system. He was with a radio company. You know Blankenheim?

Kurtz: Yeah.

Steve: You know Jim Lehan[?]?

Kurtz: Yes, I do.

Steve: We went on the buddy system together.

Kurtz: In fact, I've interviewed Jim, so--.

Steve: Yeah. Did he mention me—about the fact that I talked him into going into the—[laughs]?

Kurtz: No. I'd have to go back into my--.

Steve: He did. He still says it. We have a reunion, a high school reunion. He's like, "I don't know. I can't believe you talked me into going in the Marine Corps." [Laughs]

Kurtz: Well, you know, we've all got our faults, and whatever.

Okay, so what happened when you got down to--you said it was Phu Loc?

Steve: Yeah, Phu Loc, south of Danang. I don't know, I think it was about twenty miles south. I couldn't ever find it on a map.

Kurtz: Well, Phu Loc wouldn't be on this map. It's not big enough. Okay, so, what were your duties down there?

Steve: Visit the whorehouse once a week [laughs]. It was a lot safer, a lot less--.

Kurtz: So, were you doing more with the civilians there?

Steve: No, we'd just pass the time, filling sandbags, burning shitters[?]. Actually, by that time I had more seniority. So I was up in the—uh, FDC?

Kurtz: Fire Direction Center.

Steve: Yeah, Fire Direction Center. So I was kind of a squad leader.

Kurtz: What rank were you at that time?

Steve: E-3.

Kurtz: E-3. I'm going to turn the tape. **[End of Tape 1, Side B]**

Kurtz: --Phu Loc a little bit. And how long were you there?

Steve: Until, probably, till the end.

Kurtz: Okay.

Steve: I came home from there.

Kurtz: Did you get to go on R&R when you were in Vietnam?

Steve: Yes, I did [laughs].

Kurtz: Where did you get to go?

Steve: Taipei, Taiwan.

Kurtz: And did you enjoy it there?

Steve: Oh, God! [Laughs]

Kurtz: At what point in time did you go, in your tour? Was it--?

Steve: I probably had a couple months left.

Kurtz: So this was after Con Tien, and--?

Steve: Oh, yeah.

Kurtz: And was that your first choice, to go to Taipei, or what was--?

Steve: Yeah, it was. Actually, it was.

Kurtz: Okay. So the word was out that was a good place to go.

Steve: Oh, yeah, yeah. I had a staff sergeant, I think. He just drooled whenever you mentioned the name. [Laughs] He loved it. In fact, he was on a second tour, and he had been there three times. So, [laughs]--.

Kurtz: He liked it.

Steve: He liked it. "You got to go to Taipei."

Kurtz: So, what were your feelings as your tour wound down?

Steve: Uh, I wanted to get home. But I really liked these guys, and I miss the guys. I had some good friends.

Kurtz: Have you stayed caught up, I mean, stayed in touch with some of them?

Steve: Just one, just one.

Kurtz: And who is that?

Steve: Bobby Saur [*sounds like 'sour'?*].

Kurtz: And where's he from?

Steve: Birchwood, Wisconsin, "Bluegill Capital of the World." [Laughs]

Kurtz: Is that right? And so, is he still around?

Steve: He's in, uh, Mississippi. He's working for Wal-mart. Well, he stayed in. He was a lifer. And he got out a gunny[?].

Kurtz: So, do you go down to see him once in a while in Mississippi?

Steve: Actually, his sister lives in Madison. So, when he comes--. He doesn't get here very much, because he was raising animals down in North Carolina, or something, I don't know. I talked to him Christmas Eve. [Laughs]

Kurtz: Well, that's good.

Steve: Yeah, yeah.

Kurtz: When you were in Vietnam, did you have any opinion about the war?

Steve: You know, you'd go through the villages, and they didn't want us there. I mean, it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure that out. We could have left any day, and the place would have been just the same as it was the day before we left.

Kurtz: Did you know what our mission was, or what we were trying to accomplish?

Steve: No, I didn't have a clue.

Kurtz: Do you think anybody that you served with had a clue on what was going on?

Steve: Well, one guy, he wanted to smash me in the mouth because I said, "Well, let's get out of here," you know. And he's going, "Hey, if there's a mad dog coming down the street, you stop it at the gate. You don't wait till it

gets to your door.” And I says, “Where’s the mad dog?” [Laughs] And he says, “Get out of here or I’ll pop you in the nose!” [Laughs]

I says, “Where’s the mad dog?” It was the big Red Scare, commies!

Kurtz: So, when you completed your tour, how did you get back to the United States?

Steve: Uh, what do you mean?

Kurtz: Well, did you fly, take a ship? Did you go to Okinawa?

Steve: Well, actually we flew. The first stop we made, yeah, we went to Okinawa right away. First stop, yeah.

Kurtz: And what kind of debriefing did you get there, if any?

Steve: “See ya.” [Laughs]

Kurtz: You still had some time to serve.

Steve: Yeah, I had two and a half more years to go, yeah.

Kurtz: So, did you think you were going to go back to Vietnam at that--?

Steve: I saw, when we were in Phu Loc, how we gave up on 881. And I think--. Well, the Army came in by Con Tien, because we stole them blind. [Laughs] I remember that.

All we had in charge of us at Alpha-3 was a sergeant, a Sergeant Rucker[?]. And this guy was a stoner, and he was in charge of us. So, what’d we all do? Whenever someone went out in the village or on a patrol or something, it was, like, “Okay, bring back some good weed.” [Laughs] And they did. So what’d we do? We’d sit around playing cards. When we weren’t on a fire mission, we’d be playing cards and getting high. [Laughs]

Kurtz: Was that pretty typical with all units over there that you knew of—using the weed and stuff?

Steve: Oh, yeah!

Kurtz: What about the infantry guys?

Steve: Oh, yeah, yeah. You could have--geez.

- Kurtz: Was there racial--?
- Steve: Everybody got high.
- Kurtz: Were there racial differences?
- Steve: Yeah. Sure there were racial differences.
- Kurtz: Did any of them get ugly, or--?
- Steve: Not really. We had a black guy named Christmas, and we'd always sing, "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas." [Laughs]
- Kurtz: I bet he didn't like that.
- Steve: He'd get a little irritated. I guess when we went south--. Now that you mention it, when we were up north, there really wasn't a division. A few of the Southern boys had their opinions, you know, because they were rednecks and that's how they grew up. Hey, the black guys were just as prejudiced against the white guys up there, you know.
- Kurtz: Sure.
- Steve: I mean, not up there. But when we moved south of Danang, it pretty much divided. But my best buddy there was from South Carolina--I mean a black guy from South Carolina—Hanson. And it was, like, we shared our bunker.
- There *was* more of a divide there, especially with some of the others on the other side of the--. Because we were in a huge compound, and we had guns set up on all four corners. And so we really didn't see our other mortar guys that much, unless it was over at FDC or work parties that we got in or something like that. Yeah, it was more of a divide down there.
- Kurtz: Yeah. So, when you came back to Madison/Middleton, how were you received?
- Steve: Oh, the first night back, I stayed up all night in the Unicorn drinking Jack Daniels with Norm Gene[?], the owner. [Laughs] "You son of a bitch, I never thought I'd see you again." He says, "What are you doing here? I was never going to see you again."
- Kurtz: Which is now Paul and Cheryl's on Hubbard—or, Parmenter, that is.
- How else did--, I mean, was anybody negative about your experience, or--?

Steve: Well, first when we left Okinawa, we went to Japan. There was a blizzard [laughs]. We had a big layover in Japan. Then we flew to Alaska. And then from Alaska we flew to San Francisco, and that's where we had gotten our orders to report in thirty days, or whatever.

Kurtz: Yeah.

Steve: And so we had to wait in San Francisco in the airport. I wasn't with anybody in San Francisco that I had been in Nam with, but I knew maybe a couple of guys that I had gone through training with. And we were burned out.

We sat in San Francisco's airport, and the people walked around us like we had the plague, man. I'll never forget that. I'll never forget sitting in San Francisco's airport, and these people just looked at us like we were lepers. And you could see that, walking down, they deliberately went out of their way to stay away. And it wasn't--you know San Francisco, the reputation it had, and all that—but I could see that happening in any town, any city, any airport.

Kurtz: Were you treated like that back here?

Steve: Nah, not really, because my friends were all glad to see me. I really can't say that--. You know, some people that I didn't know well, that knew I'd just got back from Nam, especially the guys my age, you know, they were, like, "Who the fuck you think you are?" It was that attitude towards us. Or maybe it wasn't, so much, but that's what I picked up. That's what I picked up.

Kurtz: So, did your family have anything in particular to say to you?

Steve: Uh, no. My sister was glad to see me. She's nine years younger and, you know, when I left she was in fourth grade. So, you know, she was glad to see me. But she knew I wasn't the same person. I wasn't the same person that left. Her big brother was like someone took a part of him, or something.

Kurtz: Uh huh. So, what transpired--we won't go into any great detail—but is there anything that's significant transpired in the balance of your Marine tour?

Steve: Well, probably, but that's a surprising--uh.

Kurtz: You had a significant amount of time left. Were you ever on orders to go back to Vietnam?

Steve: No. Actually when I went to Pendleton, and it was pretty crowded, they didn't have anything for us to do. We were in an infantry training company or whatever. And the Marines were winding down. So we didn't have a lot of guys to train that were going over.

And so they had to find things for us to do. It was boring as hell, you know, on base. I had a hell of a lot of fun off base. I probably figured I'd better get out of there before--. So I put in for Nam again. And our top sergeant comes and says, "You know the Marines are cutting back in Nam. So how would you like to go to Hawaii instead?" [Laughs]

Kurtz: [Laughs] Boy, a lot of people would have killed for that choice.

Steve: I says, "Okay, let me think about this. Okay!" [Laughs]

Kurtz: [Laughs] Sounds like a workable plan.

Steve: They didn't tell me I was going to be a goddamn MP, though. [Laughs]

Kurtz: So that's where you completed your Marine--was in Hawaii as an MP. Did you like being a cop?

Steve: There were good parts about it, and there were some bad parts about it. [Laughs]

Kurtz: So, were you tempted to stay in the Marine Corps at all after--?

Steve: Not a chance. Not a chance.

Kurtz: Not a chance. So, when you came back, you went to work for the Post Office fairly quick after that?

Steve: Pretty quick, yeah.

Kurtz: Right, okay.

Steve: I did a year in school and, uh, I wasn't ready for school again.

Kurtz: How do you assess the Vietnam experience on your life? I mean, you said that you were a changed person. Was that a change for the better or the worse in your mind?

Steve: Aw, I'd never trade it for anything, you know. What I know, I mean that's my master's degree. [Laughs] In thirteen short months I got a master's degree, maybe even a Ph.D.

- Kurtz: And do you think that--so basically you think it was a positive experience on your life?
- Steve: Well, I have to, I'm not going to blame everything that happened in my life on that.
- Kurtz: No.
- Steve: Yeah, it was more positive than negative, you know, other than being [laughs] shot at.
- Kurtz: That's annoying, isn't it?
- Steve: That's a little thing that got in the way, you know.
- Kurtz: So have you been to any Marine Corps reunions or anything like that since you--?
- Steve: The, uh, march in Chicago. Chicago had a "Welcome Home." When was that--'87? No, '84, '85? [1986] It was the first traveling Wall. And I saw a few faces there that I remembered and talked and reminisced and got high. Yeah, we got high in the parade [laughs]. And the cops didn't do a thing--in fact, there were two guys, two Marine vets walking with us, and they were smoking a joint. And they says they were both cops. [Laughs]
- Kurtz: [Laughs]
- Steve: And they were smoking a joint. And I says, "Come on, guys, there's cops on the corners here, you know." And they: "That's okay. We are." [Laughs]
- Kurtz: I know you belong to the Middleton VFW post that we're sitting in. When did you join that?
- Steve: Not till Bush invaded Iraq, that son of a bitch. [Laughs] I joined when he was rattling his sword before we went.
- Kurtz: Okay. And why did that trigger--?
- Steve: Because I'm not going to let--, because I know what these guys are going to get coming back. I wanted to make sure they know. [Laughs]
- Kurtz: Okay, so you joined because you want to share your experiences with the people that are coming back from Iraq?

- Steve: I want them to share their experiences with us.
- Kurtz: Okay.
- Steve: And then so we can help straighten them out, you know. Like, after the parade's over, buddy, and you find out wife was not all faithful when you were gone, and--.
- Kurtz: Yes. Is there any reason why you waited so long to join the veterans' organization?
- Steve: Yeah. I just didn't think that--. When we came home, they didn't want us. Uh, Butch Bruening[?], you know Butch Bruening[?].
- Kurtz: Yeah, I know him.
- Steve: He tried to talk me into joining. He says, "We need you younger guys." But he was an awful nice guy, and he had been in Korea. So, you know, he had his own issues too. I think he wanted us to join so he wasn't--you know, the World War II guys all: "We *won* our war," you know. He tried to talk me into it, and I said I just didn't think the World War II guys wanted us around too much.
- Kurtz: Yeah. I would agree with you on that. We've covered a lot of ground, Steve. Is there anything we haven't covered that we should about your Vietnam experience or your attitudes towards how it's affected your life or anything else?
- Steve: No, the one thing we skipped over quick was, uh, after Nam I did go to Pendleton before Hawaii.
- Kurtz: Yeah.
- Steve: And I got to be real good friends with a Mexican in our unit. And he had family in LA. And we started going up to his—it was his aunt in Los Angeles. And we started going up there during the weekends. And it was a mixed Black, Mexican neighborhood. And the next neighborhood was all Black, and they called that Watts.
- Kurtz: Uh huh.
- Steve: And I had such a feeling of family with these people. It was really--. And the Black people that got to know me, they didn't trust "whitey." [Laughs] But it was a different feeling because, coming back from Nam, and then seeing this in Los Angeles, USA, yeah, it was like, "What's the

difference? What's it all about? Why, why, why?" You know, why is there fighting there, fighting here? I just, "Why?"

Kurtz: It'd be great if somebody knew the answer.

Steve: Yeah, yeah.

Kurtz: Be a good note to quit on, I think. Thanks much.

[End of Interview]