

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
STEVEN J. PIOTROWSKI
Infantry, 173rd Airborne Corps, Vietnam War
1996

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Piotrowski, Steven J., (1950-). Oral History Interview, 1996.

User Copy: 3 sound cassettes (ca. 150 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 150 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

Stephen Piotrowski, a native of Amherst (Wisconsin), discusses his service in the 173rd Airborne Corps during the Vietnam War and subsequent involvement in the anti-war movement. Piotrowski talks about his volunteer work with a Great Society program in the 1960s. He mentions his belief that the government would never squander resources on a war “if it wasn’t right”. Among other reasons for his willingness to fight, he lists his sense of duty and family history. After completing basic training at Fort Campbell (Kentucky), he attended Advanced Infantry Training (AIT) at Fort Lewis (Washington). Piotrowski speaks of the origins of his fellow recruits and characterizes race relations between the men. He describes the difficulties of airborne training at Fort Benning where he injured himself jumping. Upon completion of airborne training, Piotrowski worked for a battalion commander for four months before proceeding to rigor school. As his flight was landing in Vietnam during the ‘69 Tet Offensive, the airstrip was mortared. Piotrowski tells of his expectation to die in Vietnam and how this made him feel more peaceful throughout his tour. He details company-size search and destroy missions, which included walking through mountainous terrain until uniforms rotted off. He characterizes his relations with the indigenous people of the “highlands”. Piotrowski mentions fighting with the 532nd VC (Viet Cong) women’s brigade, the differences between the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) and the VC, and talks about the RFPFs (South Vietnamese National Guard). He discusses the prevalence of drug use, the effects of heroin, and the commonness of alcohol use in the rear. Piotrowski chats about “black shacks” (barracks with Black Power movement advocates) and the dangers of being in the rear. He speaks of the weaponry used, uniforms, jungle rot, and the jungle habitat. Piotrowski tells stories of being blown out of his bunk and a one-on-one engagement with an NVA 1st sergeant. The second half of the interview focuses on Piotrowski’s involvement in Veterans for Peace and Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). He speaks of the Dewey Canyon demonstrations, how the VVAW dealt with victims of post-traumatic stress disorder, and involvement in campus moratoriums. Piotrowski characterizes the differences between student protestors and the VVAW and the effect that VVAW had on everyday Americans. He reports on his jobs as a Disabled Veterans Outreach Person (DVOP) and County Veterans Service Officer (Portage County CVSO) and his involvement in the Highground Memorial in Neillsville (Wisconsin). He chats about the G.I. Bill, house loans, and accentuated suicide rates among Vietnam veterans.

Biographical Sketch

Stephen Piotrowski B. (1950-), served in the 173rd Airborne during Vietnam. After he returned home, Piotrowski became active in anti-war organizations including VVAW and Veteran’s For Peace.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1996

Transcribed by Mary Lou Condon, 2004.

Transcription edited by Damon R. Bach and John McNally 2007.

Interview Transcript

- Mark: Today's date is June the 25th, 1996. This is Mark Van Ells, archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. Steven Piotrowski of Madison, a veteran of the Vietnam War.
Good morning. Thanks for coming in.
- Piotrowski: Good morning.
- Mark: Why don't you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to your entry into the military.
- Piotrowski: I was born in Stevens Point, raised in the central Wisconsin area, grew up on a farm in Amherst, a little town outside of Stevens Point. I went to high school there.
- Mark: That's in Portage County?
- Piotrowski: Right. And basically what happened was, when I was a senior in high school I had applied for scholarships and all that sort of thing like everybody does. Everybody in my class who had applied had gotten this stuff back. Before the end of this year I hadn't gotten anything back, so I assumed I wasn't getting much of anything for grants or scholarships, and the only way I could afford college was the G.I. Bill. So I knew I'd be drafted within a year if I didn't go to college so I said, well, let's go in. And so, three days after I graduated from high school I was in the U.S. Army.
- Mark: That was 1968.
- Piotrowski: Mm-hmm.
- Mark: So, the Vietnam War wasn't this vague expression in East Asia somewhere, it was in the headlines every day.
- Piotrowski: Yeah.
- Mark: As a high school student, why don't you give me the high school student's perspective on the Vietnam War and what it meant to you.
- Piotrowski: I think it was kind of strange because I was real involved in Civil Rights sorts of things. Amherst has no minorities whatsoever.
- Mark: Polish?
- Piotrowski: Yeah. Actually, we're the majority in Amherst. The minority was Scandinavians. It's funny because that area, there's three towns: Rosholt, Amherst and Iola-

Scandinavia. Rosholt is almost entirely Polish, Amherst is split, and Iola is almost entirely Norwegian. So, we were about 50/50 there, but there were no minorities. But I had gotten real involved in it through Youth Council, which was an independent high school civic sort of organization.

Mark: And what's actually involved with that? I mean, not everyone did it obviously.

Piotrowski: No. It just was interesting. It started with the UNICEF programs because the Youth Council sponsored the UNICEF collections for Halloween and all those sorts of things. That's where I really got started and got involved on the state level and that sort of thing, met a lot of people, a lot of visits to cities, special minorities, and realized that a lot of my images of minorities was because I didn't have any contact with them. So, one of the things I did in high school was arrange a week-long exchange between Amherst and I think it was King in Milwaukee, one of the inner-city schools, where a half-dozen students from each school swapped for a week. And it was a real learning experience for everybody. But it was strange because I was real involved in that, generally a real social liberal, but I supported the war.

Mark: Now why was that?

Piotrowski: I think a lot because my brother was there, in retrospect. At that time my brother was there and I was still—those days, there's still a lot of "we wouldn't be involved in this unless it was right." And so I kind of had a dichotomy in the way I approached things because I believed that we were very unjust in a lot of ways in our society, but the war was something I kind of thought where we must be right.

I even went to a thing called Encampment for Citizenship, it was part of the Great Society programs under Johnson, and went to Kentucky for most of the summer between my junior and senior year and lived with people from all over the country, high school kids. We worked in hollers up in the building, helping them repair houses, tutoring kids, doing things like that, the regular Great Society social program sorts of things. And almost everybody there was opposed to the war. And even with that influence, I still didn't buy into it.

Mark: Did you express that or did you keep that sentiment inside?

Piotrowski: No, I expressed it, and we had some pretty major arguments over it. While I understood the arguments, I don't know, it's something in retrospect I really don't know why I was as strongly supportive as I was, other than I just—we wouldn't waste our resources that badly if it wasn't right.

Mark: As you mentioned, your brother was in service. So in 1968 when you finished high school, your brother was over there at that time?

Piotrowski: He came home about two months before I graduated from high school. He had spent 15 months there as a crew chief on bird dogs, and basically extended so he could get the early out of the Army. He came home for about two days and then had a job in Oshkosh and went off to his job and I saw him a couple times.

Mark: And what did he tell you about—or did he talk about it?

Piotrowski: Not much right then. When I was actually going in, he just gave the fairly routine advice of keep your head down, don't volunteer. And the best piece of advice he gave me was learn the rules because they'll work for you as much as against you. And it really did make a difference because I tried to understand how the Army thought and how they did things. And I was much more able to keep control of my life, I think, because of that.

Mark: Now there's a large Polish community up there, and very often Eastern European ethnic groups were associated with supporting the war. So I was wondering if perhaps your ethnic background had any relationship.

Piotrowski: I'm sure it did.

Mark: There's a term, I don't know if used here so much, but on the East Coast, the Catholic Church is often called the war church, very anti-Communist, and I was wondering how that sort of social milieu might have played into your—

Piotrowski: I'm sure it was part of where I came from. I had quite consciously given up on the Catholic Church about the time I was a sophomore or so in high school. I saw too many conflicts and too many things I couldn't buy into it. I hadn't given up on religion entirely at that point, but the Catholic Church itself didn't, but I grew up. I went eight years to a Catholic grade school, so I grew up with that mind set. I'm sure it played a part in it. I don't know that it was as conscious of a part.

This is '68. I went in just before the Democratic convention. In fact, I never knew anything about the Democratic convention until after I got out because I was in basic. You got no news. Then I went into AIT jump school and then overseas. And the military papers didn't cover the war protests. I distinctly remember in Nam seeing the article on the conviction of the Chicago Seven. And it was about this long, and it was about two column inches and it just said, you know, seven people, gave their names, were convicted of conspiracy to riot at the Democratic convention, and that's all it said. So, that's a period of history that I still don't know a lot about. And for middle America, the attitude towards the war really I think changed after the Chicago convention and the war dragging on after that.

I think Tet was a big turning point, but before it really crystallized, actually I still believe that middle America became fully turned around on the war when Vietnam Vets Against the War did their first march on Washington, when you had

thousands of veterans of the war going to Washington and throwing their medals back, America woke up and said something's real sick.

Mark: I'm really very interested to cover that. I just have one more thing about your pre-military life. As you mentioned, growing up in middle America, I'm curious about your view of Communism. Ostensibly anyway, we're supposed to be fighting the Red tide. Was it an abstraction for you then?

Piotrowski: Yeah. I mean, I grew up with the anti-Communist furor and stuff. But one of the things I did in high school was, in fact it caused me a problem later in the Army, is I had done a comparative paper for one of my junior/senior classes in a civics sort of course on Nazism and Communism. And what I came out of that is the radical ends are the radical ends, either way. They both have some good points in what their ideal world would be, they're so far from the mainstream thinking that—but Russia was the enemy, I know, and that sort of thing. But I don't know that I was going over to fight Communism, I was going more out of the sense of duty. My dad's a World War II vet, most of my uncles were and all that sort of thing. Service was part of the family history, part of what you did. I mean, it was a way of growing up, too.

And, like I said, I probably would have tried to delay it if I would have had the scholarship which, it turned out, four weeks into basic my mom sent me this thick envelope. I had a full ride to Madison. They don't let you resign. I probably would have failed out partying and got drafted anyway, but—

Mark: In retrospect. Yeah. Now, I went out to basic training about 15 years after you did, so I'm a little familiar with the experience. Why don't you walk me through your induction process. You had to report for a physical and get on a bus and go somewhere and do some training. Why don't you just walk me through that process.

Piotrowski: Well, because I didn't have the scholarships I went down and saw the recruiter and said, look, I want the G.I. Bill. I know I'm going to be drafted, can I enlist for two years unassigned?

Mark: To interrupt a second, I'm thinking of an Army recruiter in 1968 in the middle of a very gruesome war. Were there a lot of volunteers at the time?

Piotrowski: Yeah. Actually, in my unit I would say about 80% were volunteers, RAs, because we were an airborne unit, so that made a difference. But there were. Statistically, that's one of the weird things in the Vietnam War; well over half of the people were volunteers. An awful lot volunteered for the Navy or the Air Force or whatever, Coast Guard, to try and avoid being grunts in Vietnam. But there were. I think we're so, as a society, so much trained that service is part of it.

And, with the draft hanging over your head, it was either—a lot of people enlisted in order to get a little better job. My brother did that. He wanted to learn more about mechanics, so he enlisted right after high school to be a mechanic. And that's in fact, what he did for a number of years afterwards. He eventually got his college degrees and was, in fact, a plant manager, using that mechanical skill, but on more of an executive level. So, I think a lot of the enlistees were "forced enlistees," but an awful lot of people did, a surprising number.

Anyway, I enlisted for two years, got the RA number, which did cut back a little bit on some of the harassment in basic because you wanted to be there rather than being forced there. My brother had told me stories about basic before I went in and had convinced me it would be the most God-awful experience I ever had. And, because I came in expecting it to be so much worse than it was, it really wasn't hard. And I'd come right out of high school, a three-sport jock and all that sort of thing, so I was in much better shape when I got done with basic than I was in high school. But the physical part of it was easy, and I hadn't been sitting behind a desk for five years, as one guy in my basic company was, who really had a tough time.

Mark: Where did you go to basic?

Piotrowski: Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

Mark: And so it was already decided you were going to go into the airborne at that time. When was that decision made?

Piotrowski: It was made during basic. It was always intriguing. I always thought jumping out of an airplane would be fun. I didn't sign up for airborne. Once I was in basic and they asked, they come around, anybody want to volunteer for airborne? I said yeah, that sounds like fun. Because my scores were good, they had looked at me for OCS, but I was too young to qualify. I was only 18 and you had to turn 19 before you finished OCS, and I wouldn't have. And so, even though they had interviewed me for it, once they looked at the age they said no, you can't unless you want to stay in the Army a couple extra years and all that sort of thing. Right then I wasn't willing to stay in a couple extra years.

So basic, really, was pretty much a breeze. Not to mean it wasn't a grueling experience, but it wasn't as bad as I expected. And there was nothing in it particularly frightening or gruesome or anything else that I hadn't kind of expected to come around.

Mark: So, in terms of your actual military training in weapons and tactics and that sort of thing, why don't you describe some of the basic training things that you learned.

Piotrowski: I think the most unique thing was the bayonet drills, the rifle drills, the hand-to-hand combat. The shooting, I'd grown up doing a little hunting and stuff like that,

and they did teach me to shoot better, but that was a fairly natural sort of thing growing up in rural Wisconsin. But hand-to-hand combat and some of that sort of thing, there's things I think even today I would react because I was trained so well.

Basic, I don't know that they did that much as tactics as much as basic training was meant to change you from a civilian to a military mind set. It was much more group unity and being part of the military, all that sort of thing, the marching. We did a week's bivouac sort of thing, but none of the training in basic I thought was particularly realistic after the fact.

Now, after basic I went to Fort Lewis, Washington, for infantry AIT. That got much more into tactics and patrolling and how to keep yourself alive in combat, how to work with the fire team and that sort of thing. And that was probably much more useful. Even that was still geared a lot towards European theater. They did a couple weeks of Vietnam training there, but most of it was geared towards traditional European land war.

Mark: Now, basic training, it's a time when people from a lot of different regions of the country and different cultures get together. And in the Vietnam period, the National Guard and Reserve troops are also doing the basic training at the same time as you. Why don't you describe the make-up of your basic training cohorts.

Piotrowski: Because it was at Fort Campbell we got a great deal from the Midwest— Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, some from Minnesota. And then in our company there was a big chunk that came out of like Tennessee, Kentucky, Carolinas. I don't know if that was just happenstance that our company came together that way, but most of them were either from the four states right around us or the Kentucky/Tennessee/Carolinas area.

And my best friend in basic was the Black guy who lived or slept above me on the bunk, which he came from some tiny little town in the hills of, I'm trying to remember, Tennessee, Kentucky, and it was almost entirely Black.

I got sunburned the weekend before I went into basic. I had been up at our cottage and I got terribly sunburned. He had never seen somebody blister from a sunburn because his experience was all Black, and he didn't blister from the sunburn. And he couldn't believe you actually had your skin peel off from the sun. And it was just kind of bizarre. And I, coming from a small town with no Blacks around, it was just completely opposites. But thrown together, typical sort of Army friendship.

Mark: Well, see, that's what I was curious about. Now in 1968, it was a very tense year for race relations in the U.S. In a controlled environment like basic training, how did that manifest itself?

Piotrowski: I didn't notice it in basic. You were too exhausted, I think, to get into all that stuff. And maybe it was just that we didn't have a lot of the inner-city more radicalized; most were small-town kids. Regardless of race, they were small-town kids for the most part, and you didn't have as much of radical in basic. AIT either, it didn't happen. Now once in Vietnam, there was some back in the rear and that sort of thing, some things there, but during basic it was pretty much unnoticed.

We had a Black drill sergeant, and that may have made some difference within our company because some of the sister companies seemed to have a lot more tension in them. And I don't know that it was racial tension. Our company got along well. We came together as a group real well. Sometimes that happens, sometimes it doesn't. Where a couple of the sister companies, there are four of you training together, didn't. They just seemed like they were fighting among themselves rather than coming together as a unit. That's just I think circumstance, or maybe it's just bizarre perception on my part. I might have been wrapped up in my own little thing at the time, I don't know. But I didn't see it, and there was a couple—

The tension in basic was between the screw-offs and the people who were trying to get the job done. We had a guy who had gone through one of the military schools, the prep school military school, in the unit, and he was real helpful to teach us a lot of the stuff you needed to learn. He knew how it was done and we were able to learn a lot of the stuff that normally you had to spend hours and hours under the drill instructor screaming where he was inside the barracks teaching us this stuff. Hey, this will keep you out of a lot of trouble if you learn this. That sort of thing.

Mark: Were there draftees in your basic training?

Piotrowski: Sure. It was a mixed group. Percentage-wise I have no idea. I would guess about 50/50, but I really don't know. I know that one of the guys that was drafted had just gotten out of the hospital the weekend before, after about six months in the hospital after a major car accident, had medical records this high, but hardly walked and all that sort of thing. That's the way they were taking them then. And they did eventually release him because he was just unfit. But there were a couple people like that who just shouldn't have ever been passed through, but they were just assembly-lining them through as much as possible.

Mark: So they weren't all volunteers.

Piotrowski: No.

Mark: And I'm sure I don't need to tell you there were a lot of people who tried various methods to avoid military service. Once they got in and in basic training, were there some that you noticed from your own observations who were still trying to get out for various reasons? Malingering or shirking or that sort of thing?

Piotrowski: There were a couple. Yeah, there were a couple. But it wasn't a major problem at the time. Again, this is early, June of '68, so some of the really radicalization of the campuses—and they weren't drafting off the campuses yet. It wasn't until '69 and '70 that they really started drafting off the campuses. So, most of those people, that's where the knowledge of how to avoid the Service came was off the campuses, so most of those people being picked off the campuses weren't being picked yet. So this was still working class primarily. I'm sure even six months later there was much more of that.

Mark: So you went to Fort Lewis AIT and then you went to Fort Benning to jump out of planes.

Piotrowski: Yup. Still one of the best things I've ever done and one of the worst things.

Mark: Why don't you explain what that means.

Piotrowski: Well, it's still one of those moments in your life you remember. I remember exiting the plane, and when the chute popped, and looking around and my best friend from jump school, I was like second on the stick of 13 and he was last, and I yelled, "hey, Steve", and it was in a voice of about that loud. We were conversing over a half mile because there's nothing distorting it up there. We were about a half mile away from each other and we could converse in a normal voice. And you're looking out and it's just the neatest experience.

The worst thing because I found out about five years ago I broke my neck doing it too. Compression fracture of my vertebrae. On my fourth jump is a combat jump where you wear rifles, the packs, everything, ready to go into combat. And I slipped coming out of the plane, so I got caught in the prop wash and I did what's called a cigar roll. So I had a cigar instead of a parachute coming down, and I was almost the last one out of the plane. I was the first one on the ground by a long ways. And I did get the chute to pop right before I hit the ground, but I made the mistake of looking down instead of out to see where I was, and I didn't get into a good parachute landing fall and I hit really hard. It didn't bother me at all at that time other than my glasses shattered from the force of the impact. But, over the years I kept having more and more problems with my neck and shoulders and stuff, and finally an MRI showed a compression fracture from it. But that's the worst part of it.

In fact, I've been thinking about doing some skydiving, but I'm a little afraid because of the damage to my neck that if I have anything not quite right I could really hurt myself.

Mark: Airborne troops are a little more elite, I would take it.

Piotrowski: A little more gung-ho, yes.

- Mark: Why don't you describe the sifting and winnowing process, as they call it, as to who, compared to those you went into regular basic training with, the steps in making an airborne soldier. What types go in? Can you characterize it?
- Piotrowski: "Daring do," I guess is the term that's used a lot. It's two things, and I swear it's one of the reasons I'm alive today, but there's two things about people who go airborne.
- One is they're adventurous. They're willing to take a risk and step out of the normal line. Second is they're generally a little more gung-ho, so all through training they're probably a little more gung-ho, pay a little closer attention, do a little better in training and all that sort of thing.
- And during jump school, literally it's from like four in the morning until midnight every day of running. You don't walk during jump school for three weeks, other than when you're standing around in a line. If you're moving, you're running. It's so bad that I fell asleep running, that's how tired you are. And I did. In formation I fell asleep, and the only way I woke up is I banged into the guy next to me. I probably slept for ten minutes running down in formation. That's pretty tired.
- But, in that grueling, they tell you the first day, you want to quit all you have to do is step forward. We don't want you if you don't want to be here. And they were very true to that. They made you do all sorts of pushups when you quit, and you were out of there.
- Mark: Were there some who did?
- Piotrowski: Yeah. I have no idea about the actual figure, but I would guess a quarter of the original class dropped out before the final. And especially during the first two weeks where it's basically harassment and running and running and just this 18-hour day training. That's part of the purpose, to run you out of there. If you can't keep it up physically or mentally, they try and break you because they do expect you to be able to jump into enemy-held territory under fire and all this. They want you to be pretty tough by then.
- Mark: So, at what point did you realize that you were going to Vietnam?
- Piotrowski: Actually, from the day I went in I figured I was going.
- Mark: When was it crystal clear? I mean, when you get to be training for airbornes, I would imagine it—
- Piotrowski: Well actually, only about half my airborne class went to Vietnam directly. A bunch went to Germany. You could go special forces, different things like that. And I wasn't one of those that went directly to Vietnam. There was 13 of us got sent to Fort Lee, Virginia, for rigor school by mistake. It was a page of orders, you could tell from the number and everything else. And we got to Fort Lee, you've got to volunteer for Rigger School, parachute rigger, and none of us had.

What the hell's this about? And we went in to see him, I don't know, that's your orders. Go.

So we went home on leave and then reported to Fort Lee, came to Rigger School. They had no openings for us because the class was full. We were a mistake. So 13 of us got sent to F-Troop, the holdover company. And, for about four months we were stuck in the holdover because we had to wait for this rigor school to finish before the next one started so we could officially turn down the entrance into the Rigger School, which was a great time.

I became driver for the battalion commander, which was a training school, so I drove laundry trucks and jeeps and stuff all around the post for the battalion commander, who really backed up his drivers and kept even the First Sergeants off our butt. For somebody who had been in the Army six months, working for the battalion commander was really quite a treat.

But then, eight of us got orders for Vietnam, five got orders for Bragg. Two of those guys ended up in my company in Vietnam later.

Mark: Why don't you just walk me through your voyage, I guess, to Asia, from Fort Lee to—

Piotrowski: From Fort Lee I got a leave, came home, spent, I think, most of 30 days, but I'm not even sure how long it was. Close to that. And then reported to Oakland. When I got into Oakland, ran into a guy from my AIT company who was going back to Vietnam from emergency leave. I think he was with the 25th. He had been wounded twice already in the four months since we had left AIT. I knew two guys from AIT had already been killed, that I knew had been killed. I ran into this guy and he goes, oh yeah, it's not good. And he was going back after emergency leave. And sat around Oakland for a day or so waiting for a flight, finally caught the flight out of there. The flight over was pretty uneventful. We stopped in Hawaii long enough to smell all the flowers in Hawaii, but stayed right in the airport. And then, let's see, I think we stopped in Okinawa and Guam on the way over.

Mark: Now, is this a charter flight or is it a military flight?

Piotrowski: It's actually a civilian, I think it was Pan Am or Trans World or somebody like that on the way over. On the way back I know it was Tiger Airlines because it almost crashed on every landing. It did, literally. It blew tires and all sorts of weird things. But, on the way over, the flight was pretty uneventful other than I think everybody was sweating bullets not knowing what to expect.

We got to Tansonnhut and the pilot comes on and says, we're delayed. We've been told to circle the airport for a little while. And, if you look down, you can see the mortar rounds impacting on the landing strip, which was, hmm, I'm not going to live through this, am I. And I got there in Tet of '69, which was quite, actually, in some of my readings, was almost as bad as Tet of '68, except the

fighting was not in the cities, for the most part, it was out in the countryside. So I got there during the peak of the '69 Tet.

They were mortaring the airstrip as we came in. The barrage lifted, they landed, and they hustled us into the terminal. And at night they kept us on Tansonnhut instead of taking us to a repo depot. And they got hit that night and they woke us all up out of the barracks and showed us where the armory was and weapons and stuff and said, we're afraid they're going to overrun the perimeter over here. If they do, here's the stuff.

Mark: And what's going through your mind at this time?

Piotrowski: I'm not going to live. I really was. And perhaps a good thing because I landed expecting not to make it out of there. Any length of time I may have lasted was a bonus. I landed with the expectation I wasn't making it out.

Mark: Those are pretty deep thoughts for an 18 or 19—

Piotrowski: I was just 18 yet. Yeah, it was. It was scary and yet it was kind of peaceful. I mean, if you talk to people adjusting to a terminal illness and that sort of thing, once they accept that they're dying, they become much more peaceful about everything. And a lot of it was that way for me. It was just like, hey, I'm not making it, I don't expect to make it. If I do, fine. These are not good signs and let's make peace with yourself right now about what's happening. And so, from there I went to the repo depot and we spent a few days there.

[End of Side A, Tape 1]

Not real long, two, three days, and then got assigned to the 173rd, which was the only unit on jump status in Vietnam at that time.

Mark: Which was stationed where?

Piotrowski: When I first came in country, the main headquarters were still at Pleiku on K area. They did move them down to the Quinon LZ(??) English, LZ uplift a short while after that. I got assigned to the third battalion, which was detached from the 173rd and the assigned to task force south. And so they were down in a little town called BoLac, which is south of DaLat about 40 miles in the central highlands area. We were the only American unit. Our battalion had the largest AO of any battalion in Vietnam.

Mark: What's an AO?

Piotrowski: Area of operations, of any battalion in Vietnam and it was, in fact, larger than many division area of operations. It was mountain, open country, right on the Cambodian/Laos border.

Mark: And so you got there and you were the FNG.

Piotrowski: Mm-hmm.

Mark: We'll come back and I'll want your view of the new guy after you'd been there a while, but as the new guy how were you accepted? How were you treated?

Piotrowski: Actually, pretty good. I don't—let's see, how to talk about this. We did do a week of jungle school with the brigade at Anke and then were sent down to the battalion. When I got there, they had just come back in from finding what was at that time the largest rice cache found in the war. And they spent like three days doing nothing but loading rice on helicopters. So they got two, three days back in the rear stand down. So I got to join them in the rear, just as they came back. It was a little easier to be accepted by then because I had a couple days with them in a relaxed atmosphere before we hit the field. And I asked questions. And I wasn't afraid to, hey—they gave me all this crap. What am I supposed to do with it and the guys started helping me sort out what you actually take, what you don't, how you pack, how you don't, and what you've got to do.

Originally, when I got with the squad, they assigned me as assistant gunner and ammo bearer for the machine gun, which is that or the radio operator was a typical first assignment.

Mark: Why those two? Are they dangerous?

Piotrowski: Well yeah, they're both particularly dangerous and they're both very heavy. The radio weighs 25 pounds and the ammo weighs 25-30 pounds over what you normally carry. So, either one you work like a bull.

And so, after a couple days in the rear we hit the field. We went out on an Op and I just tried to pay attention to what was going on, listen to them, and do what I was told and that sort of thing.

After maybe a week, 10 days in the field, the guy who was humping the radio didn't like it. He just didn't want to do it, didn't like it. And he went to the squad leader and said he wanted to know if he could dump it on me. I said, I don't mind. I don't particularly like this machine gun. I know they know where I am with the machine gun. The radio at least you can hide a little bit. And so he gave me the radio and I was real comfortable with it. Radio procedures.

When I was in AIT, my actual MOS [military occupational specialty] was mortar rather than straight infantry, so one of the things you get an extra amount of training is radio call signs and calling in stuff. So I was just real comfortable with the radio right away, and that's why I became squad radio man after a week or so in the field. And after a couple more weeks, the CO calls me over and says, I've

listened to you on the radio and you really do a good job. I want you to be my radio man. So I became the company radioman after less than a month in the field, and that's what I did the rest of the time I was there.

Mark: In combat, your mission was to do what? Was it typical search and destroy or were you getting a little something different?

Piotrowski: When I first got there it was basically the company size search and destroy where you just kind of kept walking through, because we were in the tri-border area, and it was an area of some infiltration, but it wasn't a major route of the Ho Chi Minh. A lot of what we were trying to do, as I understand it, was to keep them harassed far enough so that they weren't able to infiltrate a major unit into the rice bowl along the coast from there. And so we just spent a lot of time just walking the mountains.

Mark: Looking for what? Anything?

Piotrowski: Anything.

Mark: So, on a specific mission, what did they tell you?

Piotrowski: Very little.

Mark: At the morning briefing you say you're going to do what?

Piotrowski: The morning briefings were nonexistent, literally. As just an idea of how we operated, the longest I spent in the field without ever coming to a base camp of any sort, I mean not even a little fire base, was 97 days. So they put us out there and said walk. And they'd re-supply us every four or five days.

Mark: And you're looking for what?

Piotrowski: Trails, enemy, anything that could be of use. I mean, we're looking primarily to search and destroy, to find them and fix them and destroy them. But, because we were in this low infiltration area, and part of what we were doing was protecting the area around BoLac, so there was a fairly major VC unit still in existence there. It wasn't NVA, but it was VC. And they were tough to pin down because they were the farmers, the soldiers, and they had hit us at their opportunity. And we knew they had a place where they would gather before this, but we could never find it. But we always were hit within the same general area. We knew we were close to it, but we could never find the damn place. But they'd also be out patrolling and doing different things, too, so we would catch them at times. And there was some NVA in the area, but not a major portion of NVA. So, we were just mostly harassing them, did some cordons of villages, stuff like that. But, from my perspective, it was mostly walking up and down mountains.

Mark: A typical day, actually not a typical day, but when you're out there, how many days is there fighting and how many days are you just walking around looking for stuff?

Piotrowski: In that area, I would say probably one out of four days did you actually have contact of some sort.

Mark: Of what type?

Piotrowski: It's usually real quick hit-and-run because most of the time what we ended up doing is having some sort of trail or something that we knew we were near them and trying to track them down and kind of chasing them. And so you'd hit their rear guards and stuff like that as they were moving around. So you very seldom—find and fix them, as they say, because you were just basically kind of chasing them around the woods, and they were chasing you around the woods at the same time. So it was a cat-and-mouse game for the most part.

And that was the first couple months we were primarily moved in company, at least platoon size but mostly company sized elements. And the company was fairly depleted in the field, so it was about 100 people. But after about two months, well, actually after two of our sister companies got overrun because they were just too big to be in that environment, they finally realized that we're much better off breaking down into squad size and doing saturation patrolling. And for most of the rest of the time I was there, that's the way we operated. The whole company would be in an area, but we'd basically come together once every four or five days, either in platoon or company size to get re-supplied, and then we'd split back up into all these little elements. And they had a much tougher time keeping track of us and we were much more successful that way.

We spent our nights on ambush instead of in dug-in perimeters and stuff like that, and made a lot less noise. Snuck around a lot more and got much more successful.

Mark: And what did you find out there. Other than actual contact with the enemy, did you find evidence of infiltration? Did you find weapons?

Piotrowski: Yeah. We fairly regularly found small caches of weapons. Like I said, right before I got there they found this huge rice cache, and it was huge. And weapons quite often. One of the sick things we had to do, because they could easily be weapons as well as graves, is dig up fresh graves and stuff like that. Most of the time they were fresh graves, and that was just a real bizarre thing. But, yeah, trails, a lot of times the stuff we found was evidence of recent trails. And this is also Montagnard areas, so we worked with the Montagnards and talked with them as often—

Mark: I was going to ask that, but just go ahead and cover this. This is an ethnically-diverse area, shall we say? The Vietnamese are in the lowlands, the Montagnards are in the highlands, and those two groups don't always get along, shall we say. You had contact with the Montagnards?

Piotrowski: Yeah.

Mark: In what sense and how helpful were they?

Piotrowski: They seemed to like the Americans at that point. I don't know if that changed or it was that particular area or whatever else, but they were pretty welcoming to us. Most of us were able to trade things for like their little—they wove these little things and what we used them for was headbands and leg bands, their little mountain ____ weavings that they used as decorative stuff.

We'd be welcome near the village. We weren't always asked into the village, but we were welcome near it. And they would tell us, at least they seemed to be telling us, if they knew there was activity around them and stuff like that because, my understanding from reading after the fact, is that the NVA did not treat them particularly well, and the VC did not treat them particularly well. The Americans were one of the few that did treat them pretty well, so they were pretty friendly to us for the most part. We didn't have heavy-duty contact because we didn't stay in one area that long. We'd just come on through and if we saw them there we'd make sure they knew we were there, which I'm sure they knew well before we saw them that we were there. But we'd make sure they knew we were there and talk to them and see if they'd give us any information. And basically bypassed the villages, for the most part, unless they invited us in.

Mark: But you did patrol in areas where there were Vietnamese villages as well. I'd like you to describe your reception into these villages, the peasantry and their place in the war.

Piotrowski: In this particular area the villages, while they weren't openly hostile, it was obvious they were still primarily VC sympathizers. They would allow us in if we were just coming through. They wouldn't harass us. They were very deferential to us and that sort of thing, I think because they knew we could blow them away in seconds and probably had other American units do that. I will say this for being in the airborne unit, that part of the gung ho-ness is paying attention in training. I think we tended to be less cruel than a lot of units.

Mark: Because you were better trained, do you think?

Piotrowski: I think so.

Mark: More disciplined?

Piotrowski: Yeah. While, when it came to the actual fighting, they were a pretty fearless group, but at the same time weren't as likely to just harass civilians for harassment's sake. But, at the same time in the same area, one of the units we were in contact with fairly regularly was a VC women's unit. And that was real strange because the first time we recognized that that's in fact what it was, we were going through a tea plantation and we could see these women working on the other end of the field. It was probably a hundred meters away. And we could see them working and they got their little knives and they're cutting tea leaves and working on the plants. And, as we get past them so basically our backs are turned to them, all of a sudden we start taking fire from them. And they had their rifles with them and they started laying down fire on us, so we attacked back. And they were this group of women. And this was, and after this intelligence confirmed that it was whatever, the 532nd VC women's brigade or whatever.

Mark: Thinking back to basic training, was there anything mentioned that you might run across a women's brigade? I mean, this is not what the typical American soldier is trained in.

Piotrowski: No. It was made clear that it was peasants, everybody was involved. Kids could be carrying grenades and all that sort of thing. But an actual—

Mark: You were taught this in training.

Piotrowski: Yeah. But an actual women's unit, no. The idea that you couldn't trust the Vietnamese at all was very strongly put in. And we did have a Chu Hoi interpreter with us most of the time. And, since I was with the command post as radio operator most of the time, I got to know him fairly well and he taught me more about some of those dichotomies within their society and how this has split families and all this sort of thing, just from talking with him over the time we were there.

But, no, I didn't expect to be fighting an actual women's unit. It didn't surprise me, on the one hand, but I didn't expect to be having them organized like a women's auxiliary or the legion except heavily armed. So that was kind of a shock. But eventually we did find their training ground and their base camp, after they wiped out or overran one of our sister company platoons. A couple days later we were following blood trails from that action and found trace of a blood trail in through what looked like dense jungle. We figured we'd just find a body buried a little ways off this trail and, as we got further off the trail, the more open it became. They had done this for a jungle base camp, but —

—But this wonderful job of theirs. There were actually roads into the tea plantations that were big enough to get carts and small vehicles in that formed a big triangle, probably a mile or so across. And they kept the edge of that triangle so thick, and they never entered on the same way, so there's no trails looking like it went in. And, once you got 50 meters inside that edge, the whole thing was

nothing but the top canopy was left. You couldn't see it from the air, but it was just a well-built base camp that was permanently occupied until we found it and destroyed that whole area. Nobody was in it when we found it, but there was a hospital room in it, the whole works.

Mark: That's interesting.

Piotrowski: And that slowed them down for a long time because they no longer had a safe place to gather. And that really did slow down the VC activity in that area for quite a while because they didn't have a place where they could gather and plan and bring their forces together and train. They, especially the VC, were very careful not to attack unless they knew they had a distinct advantage and had it well-planned out. And so that slowed them way down.

Mark: Now, in terms of the VC, this was after '68, so that was a little unusual to be fighting such a strong VC—

Piotrowski: Yeah. And I think that's partially because of where BoLac was. There was no major city there and no major concentration of American forces, so they didn't waste themselves like they did in most of the other areas. But, once we left that area, we hardly saw any real VC after them; a little bit when we were down at Phan Thiet. There was some in the—they had a name for the woods, but I can't remember what it was, but there was some woods outside of Phan Thiet that still had VC farmers sort of set up, but was primarily NVA.

Mark: Now, the American combat soldier didn't always have a very high opinion of the VC. What was your take on it as far as their combat prowess?

Piotrowski: I never thought anything but they really had their stuff together because they were so hard to find. And it may have had a lot to do with how—I got there the end of February, so I got to the company about mid-March. The 17th of April they wiped out a Bravo Company platoon and just overran them. And just because they did a couple little stupid things. It wasn't major errors, but they did just enough stupid to give them an opening. And a couple weeks later they wiped out another platoon from Bravo because of the same sort of thing. And so, my experience with them, they had their stuff together. The VC? No, I always thought quite highly of them. The NVA were superb troops, but the VC, for what they were—now, most of the Vietnamese troops I worked with, which wasn't that many, I wouldn't say as much.

Mark: I was going to ask about the ARVN. You had the chu hoi. Did you have much other contact with them?

Piotrowski: Not regular ARVN units that much. I mean, we brought in a real short time with them, but while we were on pacification from, what was it, November—no, it

would have been October/November until just before Christmas of '69 we were on a pacification program. There were RFPFs with us, the R-F-P-Fs.

Mark: These are like the civilian defense—

Piotrowski: The National Guard. Hometown National Guard sort of thing. And those, it was real close it was totally dependent on leadership because we had their captain, was just a goof-off, but their first lieutenant was one of the sharpest soldiers I ever met on either side anywhere. And the first lieutenant, when he was in charge, they worked hard and they did a good job. But when the captain was in charge, they were just useless. And it was strictly a leadership thing. And these are local, kind of drafted to protect the village sort of people. That may have made some difference in how their attitude was, but really leadership was the key there.

Mark: Now, as for American troops and the life of the G.I., in terms of morale among you and your cohorts, basically how was it?

Piotrowski: Well, I was there during the start of the draw-down and at the time Ho Chi Minh died. Two major events in my tour.

Mark: Right. And Nixon had become president by this time, too.

Piotrowski: He was president by the time I got there because I got in in February of '69, so he was already president. But the draw-down hadn't started when I got there.

When I first got there, again, it's an airborne unit and, like I say, I swear it's part of the reason I'm alive because people are a little more gung-ho. It wasn't a lot, it wasn't like we were super patriots or crazies or whatever else, but they paid better attention through training, they worked a little harder when they were in the field. They weren't as anti-Army and just as hostile. We worked right next to the 4th infantry division, which I swear the Army had a policy of directing a lot of their misfits to the 4th at times. And it just seemed that way because they were almost all draftees and there were just all kinds of problems with them in later years.

And when we took over areas they were in, they would have been, particularly one valley, the Crow's Foot Valley and Antelope Valley, they were combined. They were there for a couple months before we came in, and they were getting hit every night on their base camps, just about every night with rocket attacks and probes and just being hit. And they were losing people every day. Within a week after we got there, they stopped hitting our base camp and we had them pushed up on the mountainsides and could only get them to fight when we went up to get them. It's just a difference in units. I know that the people in the BoLac area referred to us as grasshoppers because we'd hop around so much they'd never know quite where we were coming from. So, just differences.

But the morale was pretty good until the start of the pull-out. Then there started to be a lot of attitude. I don't want to be the last one to die in this war. And it particularly got bad after Ho Chi Minh died because we were on pacification when he died. Now, we're protecting this village that's definitely friendly to the U.S. Ho Chi Minh dies and every flag in that village went to half staff. All the houses had flags then; they normally didn't have them. And they were South Vietnamese flags, but they put them on half—

Mark: So they put the yellow and red flag at half mast when Ho Chi Minh died.

Piotrowski: Yup. And that kind of just went, hmm, something doesn't add up here. So that became part of what—it didn't do much for morale. And I can see it when I look back. My mother had saved all my letters and I look back at it and I can pinpoint those dates pretty well because just the change in tone of my letters and that sort of thing.

But even at that, it was still we were airborne, we had a lot of pride. Most of our officers were West Pointers, which a lot of non-infantry people would come down on West Pointers. I think they were some of the best officers you could have. We did anyway. But also had good enough people in our rear so if we got somebody who wasn't good, and I remember particularly one lieutenant came out two days later, they had me call back to the rear and say, look, get him a job in the rear. He don't belong out here. And they had him out on the next resupply.

Mark: Now, in terms of the symptoms of the declining morale, again, you were in an elite unit so it's atypical. But it is your experience and that's why we do these interviews. Things like drug use and racial tensions and these sorts of things are normally seen as symptoms of the decline in morale. In your unit, out in the field as much as you were, did you see these types of problems emerge?

Piotrowski: No, not in the field. Not while we were actually in the bush. You depended on each other too much. We policed ourselves pretty well. When I first came in country, the first night I was in the field I was sent out on—well, first day actually. We had stopped late afternoon and they sent me out with this guy on a listening post. And he lit up a bowl of pot and I'm going, this is real strange. I'm too new to do this.

Mark: I assume you knew what it was.

Piotrowski: Oh yeah. But I was just too new to even think about it. I was still shaking. And he took a couple puffs off it and put it away. I looked at him kind of strange and he says, we don't use much out in the field, but a little bit to take the edge off to keep you from getting trigger happy and that sort of thing. And most people don't object. They just don't get stoned out here. And that was pretty much true. It wasn't much used while we were actually in the bush because, first off, the smell

carries like hell. But it just wasn't appropriate. Just like my best friend and I carried, he carried a fifth of, what's it called, Southern Comfort in his ruck.

Mark: Into the field?

Piotrowski: Yup. And every night we'd have one shot, just as a reminder of home, and we always kept it. That was something we did almost every night we were there. But that was it. No matter how bad the day was, we wouldn't have anymore. And, until we went on the pacification, which we just basically sat on these base camps for three months and did some patrolling during the day, then everyone was smoking like crazy.

Mark: That's what I was going to ask. How did it change in the times you were in the rear? It was much more prevalent?

Piotrowski: Yes. And when we came back on the stand-downs and stuff, yeah, everybody got drunk and stoned and whatever they could, just to cool their heels. But in the field there wasn't that much. And pacification felt like we were back in the rear because what you do is, during the day you'd go out on some patrols and at night you just sat at the base camps. And we weren't being hit by anything.

We had a 6:00 Charlie. Every night almost he would fire one burst from his AK from about a click away. He actually hit somebody by accident. He fired at our little base camp and there was another one that happened to be in line. The bullet dropped enough that it hit, actually it was a good friend of mine, in the arm and it shattered his arm. But that was the only person he ever hit. But almost every night at 6:00—they finally brought us out a 50-caliber to just answer him. So when he would fire we'd be sitting up there with a 50-caliber and fire back at him. After a few nights of that he quit.

Mark: In terms of the availability of the drugs and alcohol, was it a problem to get it?

Piotrowski: No. Pot was everywhere. And I really blame the Army for the heroin addiction and that sort of thing.

Mark: That's true, you were there during the—

Piotrowski: The crackdown started just before I left. Nobody had hard stuff at the time they started to crack down. As soon as they started to crack down, then it became prevalent because it's a whole lot easier to hide enough heroin to keep you high than it is to hide enough pot to keep you high. And it smells a lot less, all those things. The Army is to blame for the addiction that came out of there because the pot smoking did very little other than relax people and make them tolerate the experience. Heroin made them useless.

Well, for example, when I came home, it was 21 months after I got out of high school I came home. The week I came home, three guys from my high school class got drafted. All three ended up in Nam, two of them came back junkies. And nobody was coming back junkies when I was there because the crackdown started like a month or month-and-a-half before.

Mark: So this crackdown, why don't you describe the crackdown. Was it just on the heroin specifically or was it on drugs?

Piotrowski: No, it was we're-going-to-stop-the-pot-smoking-hippies-in-our-Army sort of thing. And that's when the heroin came out.

Mark: And what was involved in this crackdown? How did they police it? How did they identify who was doing it?

Piotrowski: They were doing inspection at all the gates, sniffing dogs and all sorts of different things. Again, we were in bush and it just wasn't a big issue with us. But, one of my good friends took an R&R in country to see a friend of his from high school who was down by Saigon. Got busted. They said, well, if you sign off on it, he had just made sergeant and he was going back to Fort Bragg, which is about the hardest post to be on stateside, they said if you sign off under Article 15 we'll bust you to E-4 and 50 bucks a month for two months and let it go. So he said okay, signed off on it. They busted him E-1, 100 bucks a month, and sent him to Fort Bragg as an E-1. I've never been able to locate him again. I figure he never reported. He's probably on the rolls as a deserter somewhere because there's no way to go through that.

But they just got real weird about it. My cousin was over at the same time and he had a rear job and he was pretty heavily into drugs at that point. And they were doing all sorts of good stuff, but all they did was live on this tower on a big base camp as a tower guard 24-hours a day. And when they started to crack down, all of a sudden all the hard drugs came out that weren't that available before that, even though they were really into doing a lot of different things. But it was more local, what do they call them, herbalist medicine was real popular in Vietnam. So there was a lot of herbal sorts of pretty potent drugs.

Mark: Much more available in the rear.

Piotrowski: Yeah. Yeah, much more so, though pot grew practically wild. The Vietnamese, NVA and VC, when they had their little farm areas hidden in the hills and stuff, they usually had some pot field with it. We burned them regularly and a lot of times lit them on this end and went down and sat on the other end while they burned. We really did do that once. The CO is going, why is everybody down on that end? Smoke's blowing that way. Oh, get them out of there.

[End of Side B, Tape 1]

Mark: Going back to the drugs and alcohol thing, there have been a lot of allegations, some pretty well-founded, that there was U.S. government culpability in the heroin trade and that sort of thing, but that's much different than directly supplying G.I.s with drugs. But the Army did supply G.I.s with alcohol, I take it.

Piotrowski: Yeah. I mean, our daily ration was one Coke, one beer. We never got the beer sent to us in the field. So it was kept in the rear, and when we came back for our stand-downs, boy, there was generally just the cow troughs filled with ice and beer and steaks. We had good people supporting us in the rear. I'm sure they sold off part of it to get some of the other stuff that we had a hard time getting, but yeah, it was there.

In the field, no. We wouldn't allow people to drink heavily in the field because— if somebody was stoned, they'll snap out of it when the shit hits the fan. But somebody who's drunk will not. And we saw it a couple times on pacification and it was just no way. We wouldn't tolerate it. If somebody had that heavy of a drinking problem where they brought booze to the field, they were sent back or dried out.

Mark: Did you notice an increase in alcohol use or abuse, as the case may be, after the draw-down started? Or did that stay pretty—

Piotrowski: No, because, again, we stayed in the field. Even on pacification that was a field assignment. We had these little base camps set up. There was less than a platoon on each one of these, and we had Ruff Puffs with us, but we had no supply system there other than the normal resupply. But because we weren't humping the boonies, we could keep all our C-rats. Like my best friend and I had our bunker hooch and we probably had 20 cases of C-rats built up because you just didn't eat that much when you weren't working that hard and that sort of thing. And we had more stuff sent from home, so we did have—and we had a couple bottles of booze stuck there and we had goodies from home that we were able to keep for a while. But once you're in the field you're carrying it all on your back. And water's real important. The weight of booze isn't worth it to most people, beer especially. You aren't going to carry a hump of six pack out in the field. Actually, most of us did keep like a can of beer just because every once in a while you wanted one. A warm beer tastes like shit, but it was sometimes just what you needed. But you just aren't going to carry it when you've got to carry five quarts, six quarts of water. The weight of it is just too much.

Mark: What about racial tensions? Again, in the field probably not so much?

Piotrowski: Yeah. It wasn't that bad in the field. There was some towards the end of my tour. I noticed there was a little more hearing from the blacks of how-come-you're-doing-this-to-me sort of thing. But we're all doing the same thing. It was pretty

hard for somebody to say hey, you're being prejudiced against me when you're all in the same mud. And we're humping the same ruck and doing the same thing.

I'm sure some of the officers were fairly racist and picked on some of the blacks and whatever that way, but it wasn't that obvious or that much of a problem in the field because you're just so dependent on each other for survival.

But, back in the rear by the time I left it had gotten pretty bad. There was the black shacks and all those sorts of things going on.

Mark: The black shacks?

Piotrowski: Yeah.

Mark: What's that?

Piotrowski: Usually most bases had them. It was a barracks that was taken over by the black power sort of group. And they wouldn't let whitey in there, that sort of thing.

And this is just a good example of how tight we were in the field versus what happened in the rear. Westie, my best friend and I, had gotten out of the field together. We got sent back to the rear. He had come over six months before I did, did an extension, his extension was up at the same time I was leaving, and he was going to do six more months in the PIO office for the brigade, public information office, because we had both been writing stories for hometown newspapers and they had picked up on that. So we came back to the rear together and I had about seven, eight days left in country, both of us, and he was just hanging around until he transferred over to the other office.

So we get back and the next day the XO finds us and says, look, I need you guys to guard a prisoner tonight. And so we go over to the place we're supposed to guard this guy, and it turns out it was the former squad leader of Westie during the first part of his tour, just about the time I got there. He had gone on R&R, got jumped by a bunch of white guys, beat up or got into this big fight, and he's the one who ended up getting charged. And so here was this black guy who had been his squad leader with our company and had been listed as a deserter for several months because, after this happened, when he got charged with it, he just took off and hung around Hong Kong or wherever he was for a few months before he finally got picked up again. And so he was up for big time punishment.

So we walk in and right away they recognized each other and they started talking. I had never really met him. I had met him, but it was so long ago and it was just real briefly where Westie had spent quite a bit of time with him. And they started talking and just, hey, and he told us what went down and all that sort of thing. And he said well, we're here as your guards. What are we going to do? And he says, you know, I'd really like to go over and visit the brothers over at the black

shack. Okay, sounds fine with me. I don't want to sit inside this building all night. So we took our rifles and took our prisoner and walked over to the black shack.

We get about ten yards from the black shack and this big guy comes to the door and goes, "What are you honkies doing here?" It was that sort of heavy-duty tension. We're heavily armed, they're heavily armed. It's not a good scene. And this guy goes, wait, wait, these are my field brothers, they're okay. Oh, is that you, whatever his name was, Russell. Yeah. I'm being held over there. They said they'd watch out for me while I'm over here. Okay, so the guy handed out a couple joints and we sat down on the sandbags and he went inside for about an hour. When we got done we walked him back over and sat there and talked, stayed up almost all night just talking with him and that sort of thing.

But the tension wasn't between us as field brothers, but in the rear it was heavy duty. If we wouldn't have been with him, we could have easily got our asses blown away that night.

Mark: So, as a combat soldier, what's your view of the rear? It sounds like it's not a very hospitable place.

Piotrowski: Quite frankly, other than you just needed to get back once in a while so you could have a shower or just whatever, clean up and get things reorganized and stuff, it seemed like every time I got to the rear something bad happened. The rear got mortared all the time. I'm trying to remember if this is accurate. I guess we did get mortared once while I was in the field, but in the rear it seemed like every time we came back in the rear area they got mortared. And mortars are just scary things. You can't shoot back. There's no target, it's just crap coming out of the sky blowing up all over the place.

Or something like this racial situation or some other bullshit thing, or there's some lifer asking why your boots aren't polished. You just spent 90 days in the field and you're going, don't have any shoe polish. That sort of crap. You just got so used to doing your job and survival and doing whatever you needed to do. It's what you get used to.

And the rear, if I had never gone to the field, and the field was real scary when I first got out there, but if I had never gone to the field, the rear probably would have been what I knew and would have been real comfortable for me. But I found it quite uncomfortable, other than for very short periods.

Mark: It was very uncomfortable, but did you think that perhaps what was going on in the rear was having an impact on how you were able to fight the war? Did you feel that they were undercutting your efforts or did it just not matter too much to you?

Piotrowski: It seemed like they were getting over and we were getting the shitty end of the stick, more than anything. We were the ones out there in the rain and the mud and the heat carrying an 80-pound rucksack and getting our asses shot at. They're the ones with the cold beer and the showers and whatever. And when we came back, we got harassed over the fact that we were these grungy field troops.

I ran into a guy, and it was funny because I still write to him once in a while, a guy I went to college with in Stevens Point. Over the same time we got talking one day and he was in the same basic area as I was except he was in a helicopter. And I said, oh yeah, we came through that base camp on, it was August. That was you? I remember that. You guys came in and got off the plane, our officers came racing out of the huts and said, don't go near those guys, they're crazy. Look at them. Because we had been in the Montagnard areas. Instead of military stuff we had all these bright Montagnard headbands and tie-downs. And we had been in the field for a month or more, so we're just caked with mud, rotting uniforms and junk. Just looked like shit. It used to always be one of our big fantasies to get lifted right out of the field and dropped back in our hometown and let them see us what their troops actually look like. Because we're all 18, 19, 20-year-olds and we literally lived in the mud for months on end. The only way we got clean at all is when we crossed the stream, a quick wash, that sort of thing.

Mark: Or during the monsoons.

Piotrowski: That got muddier.

Mark: I suppose that's true. I want to go back to combat operations for a minute. As a G.I. in the field, what sorts of equipment did you have? What were you issued? What did you find most useful? What did you find most useless? And one of the more famous images, whether or not it's accurate I guess we'll determine, is some of the uniform variations of mountain yard things and that sort of thing. But why don't you describe what you had out in the field.

Piotrowski: If we stayed in the rear for more than two days, we usually were able to get a good set of jungle fatigues and then get our name tags and CIB and wings and stuff and the unit patch on it.

Mark: But now are these the plain green ones or the camouflage?

Piotrowski: Yeah, plain. Never saw it. Every once in a while in our resupply you'd see a pair of camies in there, but no. Even though all the Nam vets in the parades wear camies, most of them never saw them until they came back to the States other than the LRPs. They were nonexistent, they really were. So they wore just plain green baggy jungle fatigues. If we were back in the rear, like I said, for more than a couple days, you'd usually go to the little Vietnamese shop and have them sew on all the patches on a good set.

And then, as soon as you hit the field, they started rotting off you, literally. I shouldn't say never, but once in a while they would send us out a complete change of fatigues for everybody. But generally you only got fatigues because they were limited as to what they could carry in helicopters for those that were rotting off, where they were ripped. They had to be beyond repair. And so, there were times where half of us were walking around with no crotches in our pants because the jungle rot's real quick. So that was our fatigue uniform.

Jungle boots. Always carried at least two pairs of socks, most of the time three. One pair you wash them at night, you stuffed them with cans, C-rats, and hung them off the back of the ruck to dry. And then they had a clean pair that night, put on a clean pair to try to keep your feet in shape. Foot powder was vital. That was the most important thing you had other than your weapon.

The M-16, we always carried—I almost always carried the M-16. Occasionally we'd get the thumper, the M-79 and the M-60. A couple of our point men had sawed-off shotguns because they were just more effective in the jungle.

Mark: The M-16 was controversial early in the war. By the time you were there—

Piotrowski: They had fixed the problems. They would fire with mud in it and everything else. I never had a problem with it jamming. It would jam on full automatic if you really were ripping through it. It would just overheat. But there's no point in—

Mark: I suppose that's typical.

Piotrowski: No point in firing on full automatic. It just went all over the place, except that you'd make a lot of noise. That's the only time I ever had a jamming problem is when we were just doing what we called mad minutes to fire up ammo because it was starting to corrode and stuff. And you'd just fire up as quick as you could, clip after clip after clip. But no, I didn't clean it half as often as you were supposed to and mine was actually rusty on the outside always because they didn't like it being shiny. And it never gave me any sort of problem.

Mark: In terms of resupply, how often were you resupplied?

Piotrowski: Typically four or five days. It could get as much as six. We went 15 days one time, which was very angry. It was during the monsoon and we had gone out and been on just normal operation, and they said, well, come up to this knoll and we'll resupply you there. And the fog dropped in and so they said, well, just hang there and we'll get you tomorrow. No big deal. Kind of a day kickback from humping. Two days went by, no big deal. Most of us had enough extras in their packs so that we were still eating okay. By the third day going by, we were getting pretty short. And they kept, you know, it's breaking over here. And finally, it was about eight days after we were supposed to be resupplied, I mean, we killed a couple monkeys and cooked them, finding which leaves were all tasty, and we

were getting really hungry and everybody was wiped out. Finally they said, we can't get into you. We walked off—we were only two clicks from a base camp that we could have gone to all this time. They just didn't want to bring us—we were really a pissed group. But normally it was four, five days.

The other thing that we got that I know a lot of units didn't at that time was we got LRP rations as well as C-rats.

Mark: And how are those to eat?

Piotrowski: They're the freeze dried. They're most like the modern—

Mark: Oh, space food.

Piotrowski: Yeah. They were freeze dried, LRP rations, real light weight and that's why it was developed, so they could go out on their ten-day behind-the-line operation and have food. But it was freeze-dried meals that you just had to add hot water to, and they actually were quite tasty. Then we got two Cs and one LRP for our normal supply. What we generally did was take the fruit and crackers and stuff out of the Cs, and there was usually one or two meals that you liked out of the Cs, and then took the LRPs. You really didn't, as much as we were working, you didn't eat that much. I went over at about 190 pounds and I came back at about 140 pounds. But that's also the heat and stuff. It just wipes it off you.

Mark: I was going to ask about eating and sleeping. Humans have to do certain things. What sort of arrangements do you make? World War II soldiers often had a shelter ____.

Piotrowski: Yup. We had our little poncho liner. Our poncho and poncho liner. And you could snap the two ponchos together and make a shelter or you could just use one of them and make a small shelter to keep the rain off. If it wasn't raining we didn't put them up because they just made noise and that sort of thing.

We had air mattresses issued to us. They tended to get poked full of holes so quick that we just threw them out most of the time and didn't even carry them because they were heavy and they usually didn't last very long. And they were noisy. So it was primarily just poncho liner, just scrape yourself out a little bit of a scrape and wrap yourself up in your poncho liner, unless it was really raining and then you'd try and put up a shelter half so you at least got out of the rain for the night.

But, like I said, after that first couple months we primarily spent our nights on ambush. I mean, literally this is a company command post. We had a medic, a company medic, three radio operators, a CO, and artillery observer. There's seven of us. And we would be in ambush with all these radios squawking and stuff. We weren't necessarily the quietest ambush, but we would just find a trail

and lay out along there and spent a couple hours on alert and put out your claymores and stuff like that. And the whole company was divided up that way, basically, in seven-to-ten-men squads and spread out over a couple click areas. And it really worked because they never knew where we were. They'd walk into us all the time in small groups. They would walk into us, but that's the type of war we were fighting.

Mark: We've pretty much covered sort of actual combat with the VC. You also had to combat the environment, I would imagine.

Piotrowski: Oh yeah. Lovely leeches.

Mark: Why don't you describe some of the natural hazards, I guess.

Piotrowski: Snakes and leeches. Two biggies. Well, mosquitoes. I don't react much to mosquitoes, so they never were a real big problem to me. Even now my wife and I go camping and she's ahhh, and I'm just, oh. She goes, there's six mosquitoes on your arm. So? They don't take much blood. So, mosquitoes didn't bother me as much.

Leeches were just a hell of a problem in a lot of areas we were in. They're land leeches, not water leeches like they have here. There were times when you would literally be the first warm-blooded in there for a while, and you would see them coming in herds at you. I mean, there was a time I looked down and I saw 20 of the things. And you'd walk through areas and you'd stop and you'd basically have to strip and use mosquito repellent and cigarettes just to burn them off all over the place. They were God-awful. I just hated leeches. But they were part of the environment.

And snakes. We had lots of snakes around. In fact, the day I was leaving the field I almost died. We were coming back, my last operation, I knew I was going back to the rear. I was on my way out of country. We stopped by this little stream to get clearance because the base camp was on the other side of the stream, so we lean up under the shade of these small bushes and all of a sudden a guy walks up to me and goes, don't move. Very carefully take your shoulder straps off your ruck because we were leaned back against it. Real slowly. I get them off and, now jump. I jumped and he just started racking at his ruck with his machete. There was a bamboo viper crawling across. They're known as the two-stepper. Literally you've got about 30 seconds after they bite you before you're dead.

Mark: You had venomous snakes. Are there constrictors and that sort of thing out there too?

Piotrowski: I can never remember if they're boa constrictors—yeah, they're boas. Yes, actually one time we stopped in the jungle. We'd been on patrol with the whole company, and we were just taking five, and everybody flops down and all of a

sudden, get up, get moving. And it's like, what's going on? Look above you. You look up in the trees above you and literally almost every tree had a pair of boas in them. And it was some sort of meeting ground apparently, and I still don't know if this is true, but this is what it was explained, that within certain areas they come to gather in mating season and basically an orgy sort of thing. There were probably 20, 30 boas in the trees above us, and some of them are big.

Mark: Time not to be there, I suppose.

Piotrowski: That was like, okay, I see why we're moving. Let's go. But yeah, there were all kinds of poisonous snakes and regularly ran into—we ran into a tiger. Stupid. We got resupplied one day and we were going to just move a couple hundred yards onto this hill and set up for the night because it was late afternoon when we got resupplied. Just get far enough away so they wouldn't know exactly where we were. And, as the chopper's taking off, all of a sudden the door gunner opens up and I'm monitoring the radio and I'm going, what the hell's going on. He goes, oh, there's a tiger down there we just took a shot at. Did you hit him? Yeah, I think so. Well, did you kill him? I don't know. Good. Get set up that night and we start hearing this movement in the bush and then started hearing this grrrr, you know. This tiger was wounded and spent the night looking for somebody to get even with. Fortunately, by dawn he left, but it never did attack anybody. But that's one of the scariest nights we had because I don't think anybody slept all night because he kept just—every time he'd quiet down and you started to relax a little bit you'd hear him again someplace else that you didn't hear him move to. If I ever found out who that door gunner was—

Other than that, I'm trying to think. We hit booby traps and punji stakes and stuff like that.

Mark: That late?

Piotrowski: Oh yeah. In fact, when we were on pacification it was awful. In our company alone we lost 40 legs in less than three months, and that was because the Navy had a barge of claymores break loose in the storm. They washed up on shore, the VC got to them before the Navy did, and guess who found them the hard way? We did. And it was just—

You could always tell when you were getting near something important to the Vietnamese because we'd start hitting more booby traps. And I think that's something the military never did learn. I mean, they tended to stay away from booby trapped areas; lost too many people. Well, there's a reason why there's all those damned booby traps there, because there is something they didn't want you to be at.

Mark: That's interesting, actually.

Piotrowski: Any time we've worked through the line of booby traps we always found something on the other side of it.

Mark: And were they easy to spot?

Piotrowski: No.

Mark: Other than someone bumping into one and getting killed or horribly wounded—

Piotrowski: Most of the time that's how you found them. We disarmed enough, I would say about 50% of them we disarmed, about 50% of them we tripped, and how many we missed that had been in the jungle long enough where they rusted shut or whatever—

Mark: I was going to go back and discuss the sort of weapons that the VC were using at the time and discuss what you had in the field. What sorts of weapons did you encounter? They had booby traps and—

Piotrowski: Primarily the AK-47 and the SKS were the two main rifles. And whatever their machine gun. We had a 3.72 mm, they had a 3.73, so they could use ours and we couldn't use theirs, that sort of thing. Same with the AK units. Just slightly different shells so they could—and I think the SKS was that way too. It used the NATO round, but we couldn't use an SKS round. Primarily that, and then there were the M-1s and all the old surplus weapons that they picked up over the years. Every once in a while when we were actually fighting the VC we'd still come across old French weapons. Those were pretty ragged, but it whatever they had they used. A lot of mortars. But, like I said, at base camp you always got mortared. Where I was I didn't see that many rocket attacks. Every once in a while, B-40s, and those were nasty. Those were more like a bazooka, so they had to be within range to fire that where later in the war they used the 122s or whatever they were, and they could stand off rocket attacks. We didn't have much of that.

In fact, one night we had a starlight scope while we were on pacification and saw this guy walking across the field and he had something on his shoulder. So we got the starlight scope on and sighted in rifle and we're getting ready to fire at him and he stops and he turns towards us, puts the tube on his shoulder and fires, and we fire about the same time. He hit us with the B-40 and we hit him, but a fair exchange, I guess, because nobody got hurt on our side and he never got up again.

Mark: So it's a lot of small arms fire. Still, the casualties seem to have been pretty heavy. In terms of getting the wounded and the dead out of there, how did that work?

Piotrowski: Helicopters.

Mark: The sort of aero-medical thing, it's become sort of legendary. As someone in the field, describe to me your perspective on that and what that meant to you.

Piotrowski: It meant those guys were going to be there no matter what was happening. And they would. Chopper pilots just were superb, almost all of them. Very seldom would you have a chopper pilot not come into some situation. And we didn't ask them that often to come into something that was that bad, but even if it was, the only question was, "Which direction was the fire coming from" so they could plan how they'd get in. If somebody was wounded and that sort of thing, dust off was there within 15 minutes max, for the most part. And that was only just because it took them that long to get there. Every once in a while it's a little harder to get a gunship once in a while because they were tied up somewhere or they just weren't armed and up and whatever.

Mark: So, in terms of evacuating the soldiers, it was pretty revolutionary.

Piotrowski: Oh yeah. I mean, all you had to do was give them an opening. If they had to sling them out, they slung them out; if they could land, they'd prefer that. We could chop down trees pretty quick with machetes. It's amazing. It's still amazing me how quick you can do that.

Mark: I'm looking on this list you filled out. There's no Purple Heart on there. You went there a whole year of combat and you—

Piotrowski: I got lucky.

Mark: Extremely lucky. I was going to ask about medical evacuation. You were fortunate enough not to have it.

Piotrowski: Nope. No, I didn't. As close as they came, I got blown out back in the rear. I literally got blown out of my bunk. The explosion was outside between the sandbag and the wall of the hooch. It was a wooden hooch. And the force of it threw me out of the bunk, but caught no shrapnel from that.

Mark: This is one of those mortar attacks you were describing.

Piotrowski: Yeah. And in the field I was in a one-on-one gun battle with an NVA first sergeant, it turned out, and I was leaned up against the post while I'm firing like this. There were three rounds in the post next to my head. I had splinters hitting me. I had dirt and splinters on my face, but no wound. If he would have hit me, he would have hit me good, but I won.

Mark: Now there's a term in Vietnam, "getting short." Your terms of combat service were very circumscribe. Why don't you describe how things changed, or maybe didn't change, as you became short. For example, your image of the new guys coming in.

Piotrowski: I was a little unique that way because, what I had done, I told you Westie and I went back to rear together. And he had extended already. I had extended for another 60 days because what we were going to do, we had it worked out with the XO to get each kid an R&R down in Hong Kong we were going to go. And then an in-country R&R because I had two cousins and a good friend from high school, and he had a cousin or good high school friend in-country, and we were going to take like ten days in country and travel around and see all these guys.

And so I was counting at 30 days. When I was down to 30 days I thought I had 90 days, so I never really got the short-timer syndrome. And they didn't tell me the extension got turned down until I was down to about 28 days, so I went from what I thought was almost 90 days to 28 days like that. So I didn't have as much of the syndrome. And then I got out of the field like two weeks later. Real short. It wasn't a major factor for me, just because of that.

Again, I think this has something to do with us being an airborne unit. We tended to try—a lot of units in stuff I read is how they ostracized the new guys and made them prove themselves. We kind of figured another body in the field, we'd better have them know what they're doing. If they didn't catch on, we threw them out. I mean, we sent people back to the rear. That's one of the things that was real good with company, and I don't know if it was true in the whole battalion or whole brigade, but my company in particular. We got somebody out, and after a few days could tell he was just a fuck-up, he was gone. We sent him back to the rear.

Mark: Now that's something—

Piotrowski: I gather, from what I read and stuff, a lot of them—our rejects could have been their average crew. I hate to say that because I had good friends who were with the 4th, but I swear there was parts of it that they literally did that with. But that may have been they had poor leadership or whatever. Leadership is a big part of it. I do think we had good officers.

Mark: So why don't you describe leaving. You're up in the field—there's this sort of stereotype, and in many cases it is true, that you go from firefight to front porch in three days or something like that.

[End of Side A, Tape 2]

Piotrowski: Mine was more like seven days. I was in the field, we had actually been in contact. Like I said, the snake tried to get me on the day I was coming out of the field. That morning we had been in contact. And we came back, got to the base camp, I stayed that night, got a chance to say good-bye to several of my good friends. Westie was my best friend for the whole tour. Because he was there before I got there and stayed after I left, we had hooched together almost the

whole time. He left the field with me, so that made things a little easier because he was the one I was super tight with. And a couple of the other people I was pretty tight with had left shortly before that. So I didn't have a lot of real close people when I left.

So we went back to the rear. I had expected to take an R&R that last seven days and then come back and process out of country. And that got screwed up so I just had seven days to kick back at the rear. And then I was able to catch a flight down and just went down to Ton San Nhut, actually Bien Hoa, not Ton San Nhut, and spent a day there, caught the flight out.

On the way back, I flew Tiger Airlines and, like I said, literally it blew tires on one landing, had an engine go out as it throttled down on the next landing, had some bizarre problem that it took them about 20 minutes to fix in the air before they could land, and the third landing, we didn't think we were going to make it home.

Mark: I don't know Tiger. Is that American or is that Vietnamese? Philippino or something?

Piotrowski: I think it's Philippino. It was one of the big charters. A lot of people I've talked to flew Tiger Airlines back. It was one of the big charters back. But did make it back, got to Fort—let's see, where did I process out? Yeah, Fort Lewis—

Mark: If I may interrupt for a second, when you came back, did they put some clean clothes on you and make you shave and all that sort of thing, or did you go back in jungle—

Piotrowski: Like I said, I had a week or so in the rear, so I had a chance to take some showers and get a good set of fatigues with all this stuff on them and that sort of thing. So I was dressed pretty well. I still had my original jungle boots, which had been replaced about two months before that because they just rotted out after a while. So it was my third or fourth pair that I had gone through, so they weren't as bad as some of them as bad, but they were broken in, though. And just had clean fatigues and just headed back that way. But I had clean fatigues with all the patches and stuff on it.

I got put in charge of the detail cleaning some room while I was waiting at Bienhoa. It was like, okay, I'm in charge? Let's get this done so we can all get out of here and go. And did it, whatever they had us do, and went back to Fort Lewis. It was President's Day, so they were half-staffed at Fort Lewis, so it took us twice as long as it should have because it was a holiday, and that kind of irritated all of us.

And I had gotten a haircut when I got back from the field because I had a promotion board. That was part of what I did. And I got back to Fort Lewis and

there was some lifer harassing me about my haircut. I'm getting out of the Army, and I know my hair is much shorter than anybody on the streets, I'm going to look like an idiot anyway, and this guy wouldn't let me out unless I got a haircut. So I kept going and getting in the back of the line. I went through four times and finally the fourth time he didn't notice me. I think everybody was doing it, so eventually the hair got a little longer or whatever. But it was still almost whitewalls. It was just a bizarre thing.

And I stopped in Salt Lake City to see a girl who actually was a roommate of Westie's girlfriend, but had been writing to me for about six months. And a weird thing happened there because we were in Salt Lake City at some part and we were up like on a hill, and there's all these hotrods and stuff, the local cruising spot, and some hotrod let off, revved and it started backfiring, and literally I saw tanks down there. It was like the first flashback I ever had. And I wasn't even home a day and I saw the tanks. I was, whoa, okay. And they didn't even realize what was going on at that point. But I went and spent a day or two with her and then flew back to the Stevens Point area.

They had built a new airport, the Central Wisconsin Airport, while I was gone. I didn't tell my folks that I was coming home because I thought I had the extension and I was going to surprise them. And so I get in there and I get into O'Hare and I get stuck overnight in O'Hare. So I've got to sleep on the seats in O'Hare. So then I finally called and said I'm going to be, the ticket says I'm flying into Wausau and I should be there at this time, so my younger brothers can come pick me up.

He goes to Wausau instead of Mosinee because the ticket said Wausau, and it's the new airport, which he didn't—so I'm waiting in that airport for an hour before he comes, figures it out and comes to pick me up.

Mark: Now are you in uniform?

Piotrowski: Yeah. Harassment? No. Actually up to that point no. Where I was in O'Hare overnight some guy came up to me, my age, long hair walking with a cane, and just looks at me and says, "It ain't going to be what you expect, man" and walks away.

Mark: (Unintelligible.)

Piotrowski: In retrospect it obviously was a vet who—and so I come home, and my brother picks me up, and while we're driving back he's playing tapes from Woodstock. I never heard any of this good shit. And the fish cheer comes on and we're driving down Stevens Point and I'm wow, I'm yelling out the window, give me an F. I think it's the greatest thing I've ever heard. That's the way I felt.

And so I stopped at the UW-Stevens Point union because my older brother, the Nam vet, was going to school there and he said, well, I have a test this morning so I can't pick you up, I'm barely making this class. So I'll meet you in the union. I walk into the union and people start laughing and yelling, ROTC, ROTC go home and that sort of crap. And they're laughing and stuff and I'm just looking around going, where the hell is the ROTC guy. Idiots. And then I realized they're laughing at me. I'm like, whoa. And I see the vets table. He told me where it was and what to look for and I see the vets table and I go over and, seen _____? Hasn't been in yet. Okay. My younger brother's still with me, so I take off, go downtown. We stop at a clothing store, I buy clothes, then I stop to see my mother at work. My folks never saw me in my uniform after I got home.

The next time I actually put the full uniform back on was about three years later for a homecoming parade for the vets 550 parade in Stevens Point. And by then I was probably 40 pounds heavier and my hair was down to here. Didn't look quite the same. But I did have all the medals on it.

Mark: So you're home.

Piotrowski: Yeah.

Mark: And you're completely free and discharged, cleared from the military.

Piotrowski: Yeah.

Mark: How much tape do I have left?

Piotrowski: Not much.

Mark: This is a good place to stop and continue some other time.

Piotrowski: That's fine with me.

* * *

Mark: It's the 18th of July and we're continuing our interview with Steve Piotrowski. And as we left off you had just come home and you're about to enroll in school at Stevens Point.

I know for a fact that you were involved with the VVAW and the Vets for Peace movement. How long was it after you enrolled that you started getting involved with that?

Piotrowski: Well, when I first came home, actually within a week or so of the time I got home, I had gone with my brother to a protest at the university. But he was with a group of vets counter-protesting the protestors at that time. And I kind of watched what

was going on and it was real weird to me because I was still in this—still there, actually, in a lot of ways.

And so that summer I started summer school at the UW, just taking a couple credits, just because I didn't have anything else to do, more than anything.

Mark: That was UW-Stevens Point.

Piotrowski: Right. Yeah, Stevens Point. I completed my schooling at Stevens Point, it was the only school I actually went to. And so I started summer school and hung around with the vets' club, and mostly they were into partying. Most of them were doing their readjustment, primarily into partying and that sort of thing.

About the beginning of my first full semester I saw a notice for a meeting to possibly form a Vets for Peace organization on campus. So I attended it and it actually turned out my cousin was there, who was another vet, and a couple other people I knew. And we just started talking about it and all of us felt pretty much the same way, that the war was pretty stupid. The other thing you've got to remember is that shortly after I got home the Cambodian invasion happened, and Kent State, and Jackson State. And a lot of my personal reaction at that time was, my God, I just got done watching kids be killed in Vietnam, and now they're killing them in the streets of the country. And it really freaked me out. I still, just the thought of that just scares me. And so I think that was a lot of what motivated me to become more involved and do something, because it was just so shocking to go from a war zone, where you expect people to kill and be killed, to come back to the States to find them killing your cohorts in the streets. And it was just bizarre to me. I had a real tough time with that, and that's I think a lot of where I got motivated.

Mark: Now, this Vets' Club you refer to, is that like a registered student organization type thing?

Piotrowski: Yeah. The 550s Vets Club, they actually formed—550 stood for the law that created the G.I. Bill after Korea. And that's who had formed it, the Korean Vets, on campus, and it continued right on through Vietnam and, in fact, continued until—I know there is still a small Vets' Club on the UW-Stevens Point campus and it's still called the 550s. But it was mostly a drinking club and party time.

Mark: And this Vets for Peace, this meeting that you went to, was this an organizational meeting or was there already a group?

Piotrowski: No, it was an organizational meeting. At least that's the way I understood it. One of the leaders was a guy named Chuck Rumsey, who was a professor at the university who was a Korean vet and taught—well, they hadn't started the peace studies courses, but he was in the process of starting a peace studies section at the university. And most of the rest were just students.

There was probably a dozen or so of us at this first meeting, and ultimately on the Point campus we probably had 50, 60 people who were involved in some manner or another with Vets for Peace/VVAW. At that time we didn't really know about VVAW. It was just forming around the nation. And I think that was kind of spontaneous, too. There were just an awful lot of vets who got back and just said, this thing is so stupid and we've got to do something, and we've got a certain credibility as vets. And it kind of became spontaneous when we found there was a national organization we could get information and help through. We started to tie together.

The Point group always was known as Vets for Peace on Campus because we registered that way as a campus organization. And then we were always Vets for Peace/VVAW in terms of the area because we also spread off campus, to a certain extent. It gave us a national tie-in, information and that sort of thing.

Mark: So, after this organizational meeting, how did things take shape? Was there a particular kind of vet that was going to be joining this group or some that weren't?

Piotrowski: Well, yeah. The ones who joined it or became involved in it were those that just were disgusted with the war and just thought it was stupid.

Mark: Was there a higher or lower proportion of combat veterans such as yourself that you could tell?

Piotrowski: I tended to think the majority of the people active in VVAW, Vets for Peace sort of things, were combat vets. But it wasn't exclusive one way or another, and there was no exclusivity. A couple of the people that were real involved in the Point chapter never left the country. They were in Service but never left the country. A couple had seen heavy-duty combat.

On the other hand, the 550s had the same sort of membership. They had everybody from heavy-combat vets to people who never left the country. Our connection was we were veterans and opposed to the war and interested in actively doing something to voice that opposition.

Mark: What was your brother's take on all this? Did he get involved with this as well?

Piotrowski: Occasionally. He would join us on individual events at times. But no, he tended to be most—well, he had gotten married and mostly he was a student and husband and had those sorts of commitments, much more than I. I was kind of a wild cannon at that point. Very wild cannon at that point, actually. And so we did some real, I thought, creative sorts of protests.

One of the things we did, and the cops harassed us about it, but we had printed up a bunch of leaflets and they had little drawings of the city of Stevens Point, using the ROTC offices as a base camp, as if they were firing. And then various places

like the recruiter's office or the armory for the National Guard and stuff that would be military targets. And then did our gun lines to the targets and short rounds and long rounds and just posted the houses. And it was just to drive home the point of how much destruction, collateral destruction, happens during a war and how much we were destroying the country of Vietnam just by trying to fight a war in a populated area. And some people got real upset when we put these posters on their door saying your house has been destroyed by artillery fire that was aimed at etc., etc. But it was real effective. It got people's attention.

Mark: I was going to ask what the relationship was between your organization and the community, not just the campus community, but as a whole, because you mentioned the issue of credibility.

Piotrowski: As a whole, as you know, at that time there were just massive divisions in society, and Stevens Point was no different. There was a group led by a guy named Jim Missy, who was a professor at the university, a totally-committed peace activist, a vegetarian, the whole ball of wax. And he's still that committed person. I still have tremendous respect for the individual, who every Saturday spent Saturday morning in front of the post office with a sign saying "Stop the war" sort of thing. No matter what the weather, nothing stopped him. He was there every Saturday.

He used to get booed and hissed by people going by. We'd join him every once in a while. And when we were there, there was a lot less reaction because people had a real problem with veterans are saying this thing's wrong.

My mother told me this after she died. One of my teachers in high school, who had been actually one of my mother's teachers in high school, been there forever, had talked to my mother on the street one day and said, you know, I never thought anything about protesting the war that this thing could be wrong. You know, country right or wrong sort of attitude. But Steve's been there and he feels it's that bad, there must be something real wrong here. I've been rethinking it and I've been reading a lot more, and there's something real strange about this. And I think that happened a whole with the country. I think until the vets got active in the protests and identified as vets, that the country tended to view them as college campus radicals and that label.

Mark: The protestors, you mean. Those that protested.

Piotrowski: Yeah. And self-interested, trying to protect their own butts from going and all that sort of thing. But when you had the vets, who had already been there and had nothing left to risk, throwing their medals back at the capitol and protesting in the streets in their wheelchairs, on their crutches, everything else, there was something in the middle class saying, wait a second. And we were the middle class. The draft affected—the majority of people in Vietnam, up until '70 or so, came from the lower classes. When we started hitting the streets—the numbers were much bigger than we were given credit for at times.

VVAW was growing by leaps and bounds. It was the only national Vietnam vets' organization until the Nixon administration did the Gainesville—what was it, Gainesville Eight, Gainesville Nine, whatever they indicted. And that more than anything busted us in terms of money. Just trying to defend that, it cost every cent we could raise everywhere. And ultimately we defended ourselves, but it was just all bogus. In fact, their chief informer was a friend of mine from Vietnam, a guy who went through jump school, and he was in the sister company in Vietnam. And he was pulled out—well, he got out of the field, I don't know if he was pulled out of the field, but he got out of the field because he was such a loose cannon then.

Mark: I want to come back to those sorts of things, but I wanted to explore a little bit more about the operations of the organization at the grassroots there. Many people viewed the protest movement against the Vietnam war as disloyal. Did you get a sense of that? What was your own take on that? Did you spell America with a K an all that sort of thing?

Piotrowski: No. No way.

Mark: Maybe we can just explore a little bit more about why the veterans were protesting the war. For what reasons?

Piotrowski: Well, I think everybody had their individual motivation. But most of it came from the experience of it. Like I told you before, while I was there Ho Chi Minh died and all the flags in the village that were supposedly on our side went to half mast. That kind of went, hmm, something's wrong. All those sorts of things combined.

By the time I got home, we were being withdrawn. Already the withdrawals had started. The Cambodian invasion happened right after that. And it was just this thing is just stupid and it just can't go on.

I know part of my motivation anyway, was the loyalty to my friends that were still there and trying to keep them from getting killed uselessly, because it had seemed pretty useless by the end of my tour. Not that we didn't fight as hard as we could because it was survival, but by the end of my tour the only thing you were fighting for was survival. There was no purpose to what we were doing.

Mark: So, getting active in the protest movement was a way of supporting people.

Piotrowski: In a very real sense, yeah. And, within VVAW there was a period, now the history of the organization changed in the mid-'70s because there was a takeover by—I can't even remember what they're called, but Communist-leaning sort of organization that took over the central office and, in fact, contributed to the destruction of the organization. But in the early period it was just vets coming forward.

And no, there wasn't America with the K sort of attitude. We had gone and served our country. We felt we had an obligation to continue serving it. I think most of us felt this was part of our service. It was an obligation to continue serving, but serve to educate the people to what was really going on. Because when you got home and you started reading the reports and what was being reported, it wasn't what was going on.

Mark: So, VVAW's relationship with the other student protest groups, like I think I mentioned before, I've never thought of UW-Stevens Point as a hotbed of activists. But there were some groups on protest and groups in the community protesting the war. What was your relationship to some of the traditional church peace groups, for example. SDS was pretty much gone by this time, I don't know that you would have had contact with them.

Piotrowski: There was an SDS organization on campus, but it was pretty small and pretty low key. We talked to them, but we tended to separate ourselves from them. And I've got to go based on a feeling of what was going on at that time, but I think a lot of it was that we didn't necessarily grant them any more credibility than the public as a whole did. There were too many people who had slogans, and that was the only idea they had of what was going on. And we were well beyond slogans. We were into the reality. And it was tough with a lot of these folks to feel a connection to them because there was a fair number of them that, quite frankly, were protecting their own butts. And that was their big concern. When they got out of college and they didn't get drafted, they didn't care anymore or whatever, where we weren't protecting our own butts anymore. We had laid them out already. While we talked to them and we coordinated some activities with them, there wasn't a real right coordination. The VVAW and Veterans Antiwar Movement stayed pretty separate from the general antiwar movement.

For example, in late '70 there was a march on Washington. Well, VVAW—I guess it was April of '71—VVAW led that march in terms of we started the beginning of the week with Dewey Canyon III. And that lasted all week. On Saturday was the massive march, and that turned out literally hundreds of thousands of people. But VVAW was there with 10,000 people all week. So there was a difference. And we did keep ourselves somewhat separate from the rest of the antiwar movement. And I think it was just we connected as vets. And being opposed to the war was part of that connection, where we connected with some of these people as being opposed to the war, but they didn't really understand why they were opposed to it, at least from our perception.

Mark: Now, you had come back by the time of the Sterling Hall bombing.

Piotrowski: I think that happened while I was gone.

Mark: It was August of '70.

Piotrowski: Okay, then I was back. Yeah, it did. That's right, it did, because the big event for me was the Cambodian invasion and the shootings and stuff.

Mark: I was wondering if the Sterling Hall bombing had an impact on your organization and activities.

Piotrowski: It scared us. And one of the things that was real about the indictment of the Gainesville Eight was, when we got together, oftentimes we bullshitted about how easy it would be to literally destroy this country's infrastructure. We have no protection of our infrastructure. I mean, even today, if you wanted to shut down the communications and stuff in this country it would take no more than 50 dedicated individuals and you could completely shut down this country. We have no internal protection. Our system is very vulnerable. And we would talk about things like that because that's part of what we learned in the war, how you disrupt something.

But I don't ever believe that anybody seriously planned any activity like that. We'd talk about it. The Sterling bombing scared, I think, most of us because, if that was a first shot fired, we were headed towards a real revolution. And what I don't think the people of the United States recognized is they had a trained army of revolutionaries that could well have joined. A good portion of them could well have joined the revolution and really known how to lead it and fight it. It never happened, which is fortunate for the country and for all of us because it would have been a mess. I think a lot of us, I know it scared me because we were angry enough that the revolution might have been the solution if things didn't start changing, if there wasn't some positive change.

On the other hand, the Sterling bombing scared everybody, and I think it stopped a lot of the direction to violence because, if they would have just struck the building and wouldn't have killed the innocent person, that would have been one thing. But when they killed an innocent person they became part of the problem, in my mind and in a lot of the people's minds. And war is not clean, and if you decided to go to war you go full scale and that sort of thing. It was a point where I think a lot of people made a decision not to go to war.

Mark: I'd like to get into the relationship between your chapter up in Stevens Point and the national organization. Did you have much contact? Like a traditional veterans organization like the Legion is going to have their post and their district and department in the national organization. I get the impression that the VVAW was much more loose, shall we say.

Piotrowski: That's being generous. It was an extremely loose organization because one of the things we opposed was a military structure. We were rebelling against that, to a certain extent. We had just spent a couple years to five years, whatever your time period was, in this very rigid structure, and we weren't about to subject ourselves

to that again. However, we also recognized the need for leadership and command and all this sort of thing.

And it was a very loose structure. When we formed Vets for Peace, we had heard after a while that there was this VVAW thing. And so we found out some contacts and made contact with them and started getting their national newsletter and contributing things to it and exchanging information. And then we had a couple state meetings. Generally they were campouts or meetings in somebody's house or that sort of thing where a group of people from the various chapters around the state came to gather. And you had the contact—

I attended a couple of national steering committee meetings that were held like in Chicago. I did attend part of the one that was in D.C. as part of the protests, but mostly, if they were within driving distance, we'd go down and be part of it. And they welcomed anybody who wanted to come. You could sit in and take an active role in the national steering committee. It was a steering committee rather than a council administration or something. It was just who was there. You helped set the direction. If you were interested enough to be there, they'd listen to you. And there were some off-the-wall people that we tried not to listen to, but there were also some extremely intelligent and well-versed people who had just really, really helped with some strong ideas to gather and plans and activities.

Mark: And so there was this national steering committee. But, at the grassroots level, how much of an impact did it have?

Piotrowski: The things the national did was provide us with information and better arguments, facts and figures and stuff like that, and what other people were doing to draw attention and that sort of thing. And you took that back to local and implemented whatever way was appropriate for your local.

So, the national steering committee set up Dewey Canyon II and IV and those sorts of things.

Mark: And then you'd go back to Stevens Point and say, we're going to have this march, you're all welcome to come along.

Piotrowski: Right. Yeah. And how can we organize? Can we get a couple vans to haul people out, etc., etc. And we did. We always made sure we had a presence at the national marches and that sort of thing. There were some ideas on how to do innovative—one of the things we were really into was guerrilla theater. So all of a sudden you appear in the middle of campus with no warning carrying plastic Mattel M-16s and jungles and all that sort of thing, hauling away prisoners or...

[End of Side B, Tape 2]

Mark: One of the things you really enjoyed was?

Piotrowski: One of the things we did that we really enjoyed was, Mel Laird was the Secretary of Defense at that time. He had been the seventh district congressman, which covered Stevens Point, and he had a Laird Youth Leadership Conference on the campus at Stevens Point. And it was primarily high school students. Well, he'd always show up for most of the day during this weeklong conference.

Well, we built a coffin, a wooden plywood coffin, and on the outside had total number of casualties: South Vietnamese, North Vietnamese, Americans, civilians, etc. And they kept crossing it out because the numbers kept climbing. And we followed him everywhere he went for the day he was on campus. And there was about 20 of us and we were carrying this coffin and marching. I mean, we didn't just straggle along, we were in cadence marching, half-step funeral march behind him everywhere he went on campus. While he was in his meeting we stood out in front with it, coffin showing, so the kids would come out and they'd see this and that sort of thing.

And it was probably unfair to Laird because I don't think he planned the war. At the same time, just like vets were symbols to a lot of the protestors of the military, he was a symbol to us of the continuation of the war. And it was very effective. I know the papers picked up the pictures of it and stuff like that.

One of the people, he lives down here now, who was there was on leave from Vietnam. He had just finished his tour with the 101st. He was back on 30 days leave and he was going back to some stateside base. And he was with us the whole time, and he was really pissed because he was just home. We had been home for years, or a year or two by then, and we were a little mellowed out. And what was so hard for me is the week I got home, three of the guys I went to high school with got drafted. All three ended up in Vietnam. Two of the three came back as junkies. They all kicked it and resumed their life, but the war, even though the numbers were down in terms of American troops, the war was probably more intense individual experience for those that were there after me because the attitude of the last one to die. And they were going over with that attitude. It was really a screwed-up situation. That sort of thing really motivated you to keep fighting to end it, to get us out of there.

Mark: It's just an impression I've always gotten looking at the literature in some of the artifacts of the VVAW movement. Nixon seemed particularly villainous in some of the posters and that sort of thing.

Piotrowski: He was.

Mark: I'm not sure if this is going to go anywhere, but I want to bring it up. What was the protesting veterans' view of Nixon? I mean, Johnson wasn't in the White House, he died pretty soon, so I guess that's probably the biggest reason why Johnson wasn't nearly so vilified, but what was it about Nixon?

Piotrowski: It was an honesty with Johnson, I think. He escalated the war, no doubt. And he made a deep commitment. He got us so deeply involved in it. But he admitted he was doing that. Nixon came into office with this secret plan for peace and then escalated the war. Just after six months or so he started withdrawing troops, but he escalated the war while he was doing it.

Mark: There's the Vietnamization, is what you're referring to.

Piotrowski: Yeah. Which really was an escalation of the war in terms of the individual combat units. The withdrawals were a farce in terms of duty or amount of combat that was going on. In fact, we got pushed further into the field during the withdrawals because somebody had to protect them. And there was less and less support. Ripcord, Hamburger Hill, all those things, some of the worst battles, Ashawl(?) Valley, all came after the withdrawal started. And they came because of the withdrawal. And they put us at much more risk.

Johnson's pursuit of the war, while it may have been, in retrospect, a wrong decision, it was done in a much more honest manner. And Nixon, claiming we were ending the war, ending the war, there were more casualties after he started ending the war than there were before. And yeah, he was a villain.

I don't know where it was, but I found an old briefcase or a folder, I guess it was a folder, in fact I think I donated it here, from VVA days, and they had had "Impeach Nixon" stickers that were dated from 1970. We wanted him impeached in '70 for lying, and eventually he did resign, but for reasons unrelated to the war. I suppose directly related to the war in one sense, but his ultimate downfall was for other reasons. But we really felt that he had lied to us and betrayed us as commander-in-chief.

Mark: One of the things about the VVAW that often gets lost is they were more than just a protest group. They were one of the first to bring up PTSD and Agent Orange and that sort of thing.

Piotrowski: Right.

Mark: I can see about '70, '71, the war is still going on, that's the main focus, but even before the Hanoi Treaty, I mean the Paris Treaty, what sort of activities, if any, were you doing at the local level in terms of what later became known as PTSD and Agent Orange and that sort of thing?

Piotrowski: Well, in point we published probably the first book on post-Vietnam syndrome. It was a compilation of articles from, well, Jay Lifton was one of the leaders in it, but from all sorts of sources. We compiled it, and through the University Press up there, had it published and distributed it to, I think—well, I know it went to all the universities in Wisconsin, and I think pretty much all the universities—we did a

couple thousand copies and sent them to almost all the universities in the country. And I'm not sure I still have my copy, but up until not too long ago I did have my copy of it. And it's historically interesting because it's back in '71, '72. It's the first articles about it, PTSD and post-Vietnam syndrome at that time and talks about exactly what it's recognized as now.

We did RAP(??) groups. That's one of the things VVA ended up doing as the war wound down and there was less and less protest. We focused more on wrap groups and helped find counselors, like in Stevens Point we found a couple counselors who were able to deal with veterans' issues and help them. And I know a number of folks that I know that weren't involved in VVAW to any extent used counselors we had found, and managed to keep their lives together during a time when a lot of people weren't, and ultimately became relatively successful. They got the counseling early before they locked into patterns of behavior that are almost unbreakable. So that was one of the big issues.

Agent Orange, we didn't, at that period—

Mark: That was later.

Piotrowski: Yeah. We didn't know much about it. We talked about defoliation as being just one of the ugly side-effects of the war, but didn't realize what was happening in terms of the health effects that were showing. But later, late '70s, in the history of VVAW, like late '60s, '68, '69, when it first started forming, through about '72, '73, it was strictly a veterans' organization. And then, after the Gainesville trial and stuff, there was the takeover period. And then it was gotten back by surviving VVAW members back in the late '70s, and then got focused again on things like Agent Orange.

It still exists as an organization. It's not very strong or very big, but it still exists and provides an alternative voice to a lot of the traditional organizations.

Mark: When did you finish school finally?

Piotrowski: '77.

Mark: So, you were in school, then, when the Paris Treaty was signed?

Piotrowski: Actually, I was out.

Mark: You must have left school for a while.

Piotrowski: Yeah, I failed out. I did too much protesting, too much drinking, too much partying, then was still readjusting. Literally I got home in March and started school in June and went for about two years. Was thrown out for my grades being

so low, allowed back in after a year and a half. I worked for a construction company for a couple years.

Mark: What I'm trying to get at is the reaction among protesting veterans of the Treaty.

Piotrowski: I still stayed in touch with them, still was involved. I was working down in the South and I just still stayed involved. We were glad to see the Treaty. I remember the night it was announced. I cried a long time because it was just such a waste. It was such a waste. Ultimately the Treaty got us nothing more than we would have gotten in '69, and that's the betrayal of Nixon.

Mark: Again, looking at some of the literature, there seems to have been a lot of mistrust of the Treaty. There was a suspicion that it wouldn't hold or that it was a sellout or whatever the case may be.

Piotrowski: It was. I mean, Nixon finally decided he had to get out in order to get re-elected. And so he took the terms that they offered. They offered Johnson those same terms. He took them and made it Peace with Honor or whatever. Yeah, Peace with Honor was his great term. It was a disgrace. It was a waste of every life from '68 on. It was just a total waste of them because there was nothing in that Treaty in '73 that they couldn't have gotten in '68 and ended in the very same way. We could've at any time said, we won, we left, and gotten the exact same thing. That is the betrayal of Nixon, and that is why he is so hated by at least a certain segment of vets.

I mean, there's a segment of vets I've known over the years who hate Johnson the same way, and he was probably President when they were there. They're probably the earlier vets. But not to the intensity that the vets that I know hate Nixon. And it's because of that. I mean, if he would've truly done a Peace with Honor and there would've been a chance of survival of Vietnamese and stuff so ultimately we could say it was worthwhile, it would have been a whole different thing. But, literally, those were the terms that were offered in '68.

Mark: So, after 1973, how did your activities change, if at all?

Piotrowski: Well, for me they changed because I got married in early '74 and I started concentrating on all those sorts of things, and then went back to school in the fall of '74 and got real involved in school. I did most of my effort then with things like philosophy, political science club, more normal student activities because the war was no longer an issue.

During the protest period, one of the things we did is, during the moratorium days, we took over classes. We offered ourselves as guest speakers to all the classes. There was days, moratoriums, where I did seven, eight classes in a day, just talked to them about the war experience. We usually did it in pairs so there

was a balance and we could keep an eye on each other and we didn't get cornered and hammered and stuff.

But, afterwards we had that offer and there were occasional instructors who would invite us in and say, well, we're starting to teach it as more history or recent history and helping people understand what went on a few years ago, and we'd like you to talk about it and that sort of thing.

There was really a gap, I would say, from '73 after the peace treaty things wound down, and there was a gap of activity until the early '80s when VVA, Vietnam Vets of America, started forming. But that forum, well, with a lot of the same core people that was VVAW, but a forum for a different reason. More the traditional need of a veterans' organization to advocate on behalf of Vietnam veterans and their unique situation.

Mark: Did you get involved with that at all?

Piotrowski: VVA?

Mark: Yeah.

Piotrowski: Yeah, while I was part of the founding national convention I was the first official state president. So yeah.

Mark: So you were in a position to know, then. It was officially founded in 1978, if I'm not mistaken.

Piotrowski: Incorporations papers I think were actually filed in '79 or '80, but yeah, right about then. But it was primarily Bobby Muller and a couple of his friends in New York needed a corporate structure in order to lobby for veterans' rights.

Mark: And what was your involvement in that and how did this organization get off the ground, at the grassroots again?

Piotrowski: Talking to people. That's the way it always happens.

Mark: So you must have known someone who knew someone.

Piotrowski: Right. At that point, in 1980 I think it was, I started for Job Service as a regular employment rep, but then also became the DVOP for them. And I don't know exactly how I got the information, but I had read a couple things about Bobby Muller in the national press. He was getting national press because of his activities in Washington. And I saw an article from Eau Claire about a VVA chapter forming up there. And I read the article, and it was an old friend from Stevens Point who was heading it up. And so I called him up and said, "What the

hell are you doing?" And he said, well, this—and he started telling me a little bit about the organization.

And the strange thing was, and this was '80, '81, Bobby Muller didn't want a membership organization. He wanted a private lobbying group where he could be the

[End of Tape Two, Side One]

man in charge and do his thing. But he also knew that he had no strength on the Hill unless he had membership behind him. And so it was this internal conflict for him and the organization because he wanted to be dictator for life, quite frankly. And that's not a slam on Bobby, that's his personality. And I still have tremendous respect for the man. It's just he is a bullheaded ex-Marine, is what he is.

He didn't really want a membership organization, but knew he had to have one, so he established this structure expecting nobody to pick it up. But there were all these vets out there looking for something to tie to. And so Al Jenkins in Eau Claire and I talked and I said, well, I know a few other guys who might be interested. So we called a state meeting for founding VVA. We got some people come out of Beloit, came up to our Janesville/Beloit area, some people from Rapids, Point, Eau Claire, Fond du Lac. I think there were a couple other cities represented, but those were the prime ones at that point. And within a matter of a month we had forming or active chapters in all those cities.

Mark: And so what was the attraction?

Piotrowski: None of us felt comfortable in the Legions, VFWs, etc., etc. While I was a member of all of them, especially as DVOP I felt it was important to at least have a membership so I could talk to him and that sort of thing. You just didn't feel welcome. You'd come in and they'd oh yeah, we got a new member here today, and welcome, and then they'd do this little applause line. But then, if you tried to do anything, no, we-don't-do-it-that-way sort of attitude.

Mark: Young man.

Piotrowski: Yeah. And we knew we wanted to do some things. And Agent Orange was starting to hit the paper pretty heavy and we were starting to be real concerned about that PTSD was a real issue yet because they hadn't even rated it. Some of this grew out of the DAVs RAP(??) group efforts. They had done the outreach effort.

And that's one of the other things we did at about the same time was formed a RAP group in the Point area, and it really turned quite successful. It really helps when people who are on the edge, and I stayed in contact with most of them, and

they've kept their lives together. And they were on the edge. A couple of them had already had cops called with suicides and that sort of thing. And that was real effective. And we were doing that, and VVA kind of spun out of those activities and we just started drawing people together.

That was neat for me because it had a lot of the intensity of VVAW because you had the same conflict. I mean, Bobby Muller was one of the leaders of VVAW, and he still had that same attitude. Most of the leadership, early leadership of VVA on the state level, were involved with VVAW before. And, while it didn't take an official antiwar stance, it was clear we were not going to be the traditional veterans' organization and support any military activity. In fact, one of the key things during our founding convention was we will support veterans past us, and we will not let them be forgotten like we were forgotten. But we will not take a stance on political non-veteran issues, the war and peace issues, military buildup, stuff like that, which is one of the things that turned off a lot of vets, too. The Legion, VFW because they make such a big deal out of military strength and peace through strength movements and stuff like that.

So, that was a clear differentiation. And it caused a real conflict within the organization because there were people who wanted us to be more traditional, but wanted to be a part of a Vietnam group because they were uncomfortable with the older vets. And, ultimately, it tended to be a little more, for lack of a better term, leftist than most of the vets' organizations. Though I think over the last few years, just aging and the aging of the organization and individuals, has brought it more to the center.

Mark: And growth, probably, too.

Piotrowski: Yeah. And it's become more bureaucratic. It looks much more like the Legion than it did when we formed, while I still think it's distinctly different and has an ability to take a radical stance on individual issues. Its structure has become much more that of the traditional vets' organizations. It's just part of the maturing process, I think. If VVAW hadn't been busted up by the Gainesville trial, it probably would have evolved into what VVA is today. It really would have.

Mark: When did you become the service officer of Portage County?

Piotrowski: In 1982.

Mark: How did that come about?

Piotrowski: Right place, right time; wrong place, wrong time. What had happened—

Mark: I think you had mentioned you were involved with civil service already.

Piotrowski: Yeah. I was working for Job Service at the time. And, when I started working for Job Service and doing the vets employment stuff, I did join all the vets organizations. I had joined a couple of them when I first got out and dropped my membership because I just felt so outcast from them. But I had rejoined them and attended occasional meetings. I wasn't active with them, but I did enough so they knew who I was because part of my job as DVOP was, disabled veterans outreach person is what it stands for, and outreach meant getting out to the vets organizations, to me. So I had attended their meetings and talked to them, and they knew who I was and that sort of thing.

And Portage County had two veterans' service officers at that time, two full-time people and one was, the CVSO one, was the assistant. The assistant did most of the work in the office, quite frankly. The CVSO was an old legionnaire who was retired on the job. His biggest thrill was doing burials. That was the big thing he was into.

Mark: World War II vet, I would imagine?

Piotrowski: Yeah. And assistant was, well he actually got out during the Vietnam period. He was a 20-year submariner and got out sometime during the Vietnam period. And he was really intense, really good, but he got caught doing improper in office, without going into details he was—

Mark: See no evil, hear no evil.

Piotrowski: It was in the court and stuff, so it's public record, but anyway he got canned because of this activity. And it quickly became clear to the county board that the CVSO did nothing, didn't know what he was doing, and he hadn't. So the guy covered for him all these years, did the work in the office. He did the Legion events and VFW events and burials and stuff, so he had a surface presence, so they asked him to retire. And so the job came open. But they were only going to have one person fill it because they didn't feel it was worth two people anymore. And because I had the memberships and I was actually doing—I have fairly good familiarity with vets' benefits because of the DVOP job, so when the interview process happened and all that sort of thing, I scored well on the tests, got interviewed, and it just worked out that I was selected. And I did that for about five years.

Mark: So, during the period you were the service officer up there, what were the major problems and concerns of veterans in Portage County?

Piotrowski: Well, the whole range of normal problems. At that time hospital access was much easier than it is today, and so we had a lot of people still going down to Madison and Milwaukee for routine treatment that nowadays they wouldn't even be on the eligibility list or be considered. And I did an awful lot with upgrading claims.

People come in and tell me they were a 10% rating and I look at stuff they had and they should be 30 or 50%. I did an awful lot of that.

And during that period was when the VA finally recognized PTSD as an official claim, so I did a lot of PTSD claims. And actually had a lot of fun with them because they didn't like recognizing them. And the rule clearly said if A, B, C, you have to grant it. And they'd turn them down and hammer them over again. We got an awful lot of claims through then.

Somebody who didn't have the background I did in terms of the early post-Vietnam syndrome would not have recognized, would not have been able to do it as easily. And just the whole range of things.

Mark: Just to interrupt for a second, Vietnam vets were the most recent generation of vets. Perhaps the PTSD was more pronounced to them, but did you see it in the Korean, World War II vets? Something that you recognized that perhaps others hadn't? Vets didn't even recognize it themselves.

Piotrowski: Oh yeah. And they didn't like admitting it, for the most part. But, there were a few claims like that that I did get through with World War II and Korean vets after talking to them.

I think one of my real strengths in the office was I would listen to them before I talked to them and find out what is really bothering them, what they were really after. And then able to explain how the system worked in enough detail so they had realistic expectations of what was coming down. And, while they may not have understood PTSD, they did know that they'd had nightmares ever since they got back from the war and that they were closed off from their family, etc., etc. And were able to put it together and explain to them enough of what PTSD meant that they understood why I was going that way. And did get a few of those claims through. Not that many because, again, they weren't that willing to admit it. And they'd learned to live with it over the years. But did a fair number with Vietnam vets and some with the other vets.

It was interesting. It was this whole range of things. And, at the same time, we were forming VVA and it was, for me, a real exciting time in my life. It just kept me real involved. Just a lot of people contact, primarily vets, who I'm most comfortable with.

But after about five years I found I was getting cold and hard to their problems. I was becoming somewhat uncaring about it.

Mark: A burnout kind of thing?

Piotrowski: I think so. And during this time I also got involved with the High Ground Vets Memorial Project. And it had grown to the point where we needed somebody full

time on it. And I was ready to change, and my wife had an opportunity to change her position, and it just all kind of came together, so I moved onto the High Ground for about five years.

Mark: I'll come back to that in about a minute. While you were a service officer, during that period, if I'm not mistaken, there was a big effort to cut state benefits at the time.

Piotrowski: I'm trying to think if it was then or just slightly later.

Mark: It was '85 or '86 or something like that.

Piotrowski: It was towards the end of the period, yeah. There was a fairly significant move to cut them. I've always had interest in politics and understanding how politics really worked and that sort of thing. So, yeah, I was involved in some of that.

Mark: I know the CVSO association lobbied against it. And a lot of those things were eventually restored.

Piotrowski: Yeah. And I also, because of the High Ground stuff, it was during that transition period, actually, a lot of this stuff happened. With the High Ground, I was able to take a more active role as a lobbyist for veterans' issues, too. A non-paid lobbyist, but I was able to free up the time to actually spend time at the capitol talking to individual legislators and that sort of thing. There were a lot of things going on that we had to fight back for.

Mark: So, what was the motivation to cut the benefits? Was it just parsimoniousness? Did they think they had an opportunity to do it because veterans' organizations weren't strong? And how did you—

Piotrowski: It was all of those things.

Mark: In your view, how did you convince them to restore the benefits?

Piotrowski: I won't claim credit for the convincing.

Mark: Not individually, but, as you mentioned, you—

Piotrowski: It's really a lot of one-on-one work. The legislative process is, clearly there are so many issues out there that nobody's an expert on all of them. And you get individuals going, well, this will save us a million bucks or whatever the dollar figure is on it, and we can certainly use that million bucks somewhere else, nobody's complaining about it, let's take care of it.

And, by going in and talking to them individually and pointing out that this program does this and provides this opportunity and that sort of thing, and this is

part of my hang-up with some of the traditional groups, were, it's owed to us. Well, what's owed to us? You've got to show that there's value to it, not just that it's owed to you. Especially on the state level because state didn't draft us. The state didn't put us under federal service. The state had an obligation to anybody who was in the National Guard. Their benefits that the state provides are really a bonus to the individual state veteran. And so, it's owed to us don't work. I think a lot of what happened is the World War II vets really had stuff handed to them on a silver platter because the World War I vets took care of them. And it was a good war. Everybody was behind it. Everybody was involved in it. It was a good war. All those things happened. They didn't know how to fight for it, for the most part. And, after the war, they had vast numbers of vets elected to the legislature at all levels, so they didn't have to worry about it. But, as those people started leaving, there was a new generation that didn't have that attitude that came in.

Mark: Or an understanding of the problems.

Piotrowski: Right. And then it was real easy to start cutting here, cutting there. Just little nicks. The death of a thousand cuts. And that literally was what was happening all over the place, both federal and state. It still makes me bitter that my G.I. Bill, when I started college, was only \$15 more than a World War II vet got when he started college. And he got room, board, and tuition.

Mark: And books.

Piotrowski: Yeah. And we got the \$125 a month. They got \$110 a month plus—I don't know about room and board, but tuition, books, and fees. And we got no tuition, books, and fees. Inflation was a bit more than \$15 over that period. They did raise it to \$175 the next semester, but still, when I graduated—married student, graduated from college, I was only getting \$340 a month on the G.I. Bill in 1977. That's outrageous. There's no way you could survive on that. But that's what had happened. In retrospect I understand how this all came about, but the reaction of most of the traditional organizations was just, it's owed to us, why are you doing this to us.

Mark: They couldn't make the case for—

Piotrowski: Right. They couldn't make the case and they didn't even know how to approach the legislature because they weren't veterans. We can't talk to those people, they don't understand us. Well, they will understand if you talk to them. But you've got to talk to them. You've got to take the time and corner them and talk to them and explain what's more than just you owe it to us.

And there was a group of us that did a lot

[End of Side A, Tape 3]

of work that way on a one-on-one level. And, ultimately, got the support and turnaround. Some of the things that happened with Moses and that sort of thing had personalities that were part of it and all that. It gets all sorts of strange other politics that came into it. But that's one of the things VVA I think can take a lot of credit for, motivating Vietnam vets to get legislatively active on the local level.

One of the things that we were really able to accomplish is convince our chapters to get to know their state senator, their state assembly persons and talk to them and make them understand we are people who have unique situations, and these things do help us and do provide an ultimate benefit to the community. And that's the way you work it.

Mark: In your view, what is the role of the state government? As you mentioned, it was the federal government that drafts you and arms you and ships you off to war. In your experience from veterans service, how would you characterize the impact of the state program? Minimal? Great?

Piotrowski: They're tremendous. One of the greatest programs we've ever had is the housing loan program. While it's got all sorts of restrictions and it's less useful now than it was then, like when I was CVSO, when I bought my first house under it, I got it at like 6.62% interest. Interest rates in the market at that time were about 9%. That's hundreds of thousands of dollars in savings, and it literally gave—without that I wouldn't have been able to buy a house at the time I did.

Mark: There is a federal home loan.

Piotrowski: Yes. But I just wouldn't have been able to afford the payments. I might have squeezed in, but it would have been really, really tough and tight. With this I had a chance to buy a house and start being part of the community. And it helped just tons and tons of vets get that first step in establishing a stable life. A tremendous program.

The economic assistance loan program was a tremendous help to me personally in college, and when I was CVSO we did so many of them because it's so helpful to people who are on the margins economically. I mean, they could consolidate bills and get one payment and get themselves back on the road to recovery. They can do all sorts of good things with it.

They fill a lot of gaps that the federal VA can't really address. The part-time study grant was tremendous for anybody who wanted to continue improving themselves while they were working because they could do it part time and get it paid back. And, as long as they completed the work for the school, they got paid back. It was just a tremendous program.

And it added to society. It wasn't just for the individual. It improved society because we had these better-educated, trained workers. We had homeowners, taxpayers, and all these sorts of things. And that's the approach we took with the legislature on all these programs is look, these aren't just giveaways. They pay you back. And you can clearly look, if you really take an objective look at all these programs, they pay back much more than they cost.

Mark: Did you find that veterans were aware that the state had programs at all? I mean, most vets know they have a G.I. Bill and maybe a home loan and the government will bury them when they're dead, but did they know that the state even had programs?

Piotrowski: Not a lot of them. That's one of the things I did a lot of outreach on. Somebody came in and that's when I was talking about, as CVSO I tried to listen first because a lot of times, when you start listening what they're talking about it is, well, I'm just being swamped with all these small bills and I can't get out from under. Well, where are you at? What are you earning a year and this sort of thing? I'm not prying into your life, but what do you earn? Get some basic. Well, you know, the state's got this program that you can—well, that could really help me a lot. I think if you took this bill and this bill and this bill and this one, you could put them all there and you would have one payment of \$50 a month instead of \$200 a month on the individual ones. It'll take you a little longer to pay off totally, but at 4% or whatever interest was at that time, you're paying a lot less total interest, and ultimately you're much better and have much more cash flow, if you just watch yourself and that sort of thing.

Used the hospital and grant fairly often for emergency cases and stuff like that. A lot of people, even the hospitals, didn't know about that. And one of the things I just made sure of was that all the medical facilities in the area knew about this. I got to the point with, like St. Michael's Hospital in Stevens Point, which is the only real hospital in the county, that part of their admission process was to ask, "Are you a veteran?" They would send me a list once a week of all the admissions. I'd just forward it down to the state. That way, if this person came in later and said, I'm stuck with this hospital and bill and got no insurance, the state got timely notification. Didn't use it that often, but it saved the butt of a couple vets that way because they did have timely notification. Oh yeah, he's on the list you sent down. That's timely, we got it, you can start working on it.

Mark: This might have been a little late for you, but do you recall the WisVet program at all?

Piotrowski: Yeah.

Mark: Either while you were on campus or in your own—

- Piotrowski: Actually, several of the people involved in VVAW on the Point campus became WisVet outreach people.
- Mark: I know a lot of people who went on to become CVSOs were involved.
- Piotrowski: Yes. I wasn't in it. I knew a number of the people who were Vet outreach people, but, yeah, it was a pretty effective program. It did reach—the campus vets weren't the problem because, through the 550s and through the—
- Mark: Various counseling things on campus they found these things out.
- Piotrowski: Yeah. But, the non-campus vets were really tough. And the WisVet program was really quite effective in getting out there and saying, hey Joe, I'm from the state and I'm here to help you. And actually providing them at least the information so they had some idea where to turn.
- Mark: Was there really reluctance on the part of Vietnam vets, or all vets generally, I guess, to open it up even, to approach a counselor or something like that about their benefits or to ask?
- Piotrowski: Oh, campus vets knew the G.I. Bill was their survival, so they did it. But so many vets, even today, don't want anything to do with the VA because it's part of the same structure that sent them to war.
- Mark: Well, see, that's what I was getting at. Is it mistrust, or is it I don't want to ask for a handout, or do they view it as welfare, or what?
- Piotrowski: Individually it can be any of those things. I think in general, among the Vietnam vets, at least until the last ten years or so that they're matured enough to have gotten over the pain enough to start back, and then the benefits aren't there for them, and then they get real frustrated. It was just, I burned the uniform when I came home and I don't want nothing to do with it again.

We had that attitude in trying to form VVA. There are a lot of vets who, no, go ahead and do this, but I want nothing to do with it. It was too painful and I don't want to deal with it. And, ultimately, a lot of those guys ended up going in for counseling, going and getting some other help or doing themselves in. They throw out the figures on suicide rates of Vietnam vets, and my experience is that those figures are under-counted.

When they did the Agent Orange program they were trying to do death certificates and stuff, well, we had extensive files. And one of the things, being a smaller county like that, we watched all the vets and kept track. We had all the discharges, so we kept track of the deaths. So we went back and found all the Vietnam vets who died at the time, and there was only a couple that looked like

Agent Orange deaths. But I was floored by the number of single car accidents, other quasi-suicidal things.

Mark: The potential for suicide.

Piotrowski: Yeah. And just the number of flat-out suicides. And the number of alcohol-related deaths that may not have been intentional in terms of suicide, but they were so drunk they shouldn't even have been walking, and they were driving at 100 miles an hour. That sort of thing. And this is back in the early '80s. It's just gotten worse since then as far as I'm concerned. Just the number of people that I know personally who have given up in that time is just amazing.

Mark: Two more things. Again, with your activities with veterans' service and veterans' organizations, I want to talk about the High Ground and then about your work with Senator Kohl and your involvement with the federal benefits these days.

First of all, High Ground. How did that all get started with your involvement?

Piotrowski: Well, so much of this stuff came together at the same time. The idea for the wall in Washington was coming out about the same time that VVA was forming. And a group of us, well, I was part, Moe Zien was one of the big organizers and Wetzel was involved in organizing the trip out to the wall dedication. And we put together this bus trip and took I think 250 people out on buses to the dedication. Now, that energized a bunch of people, and, when we got back, we tried to tell people how wonderful the wall was in terms of the healing and just what it could do for you. Painful, but how wonderful it would be.

And we got a group of us, primarily Tom Miller was the real kick-in-the-pants force behind getting it started, thinking about doing something on the state level. And so, at about the same time we're having our first real state convention for VVA, he was there and there was a group of about four of us that really sat down and spent a long time talking about it. And Tom set up the legal structure and we became the board of directors and started the process of building the High Ground.

What it became is nothing, anything within the dreams of what we thought it would be. Our original idea was a statue sort of thing, a memorial. We didn't really want just a statue, but a memorial in a small park somewhere. And then we decided, well, it really should stand alone, so we were looking for a place in the central part of the state. We almost had committed to Adams County. We had a couple locations in Adams County. That would have been real pretty and nice places.

And, when the board was meeting to take final consideration of the possible land places, Neillsville came in with the offer. And when I had dropped out of school I had worked for a silo company. And as soon as they showed the shot of the site, I went, I know where that is because there's a wayside with a tower right next to it.

And I built a bunch of silos up in that area. And, after working all day on the silos, we would stop at the wayside behind that tower because the view was so beautiful. A bunch of rowdy construction workers.

Mark: It was like an old fire tower or something.

Piotrowski: Yeah. And I just went, whoa, that is just one of the most gorgeous spots in the whole state. And you could see it just from the pictures. And they really put a nice presentation together. And out of the blue, it wasn't unanimous but it was close to unanimous on the board, that this was where we should be. And the land was free and it was more land than we were going to get in Adams, and there were no strings and all this sort of thing. So we were there.

And I just saw in the paper, the cop memorial here, they're not getting the money in that they thought they would. And we thought, when we announce this idea the money will roll in, we'll be able to do it in a year, that sort of thing. Uh-uh. No. And it took a lot of effort, a lot of time, and just a lot of—I worked for the High Ground for five years. And the most I was paid was 25,000 a year. When I finished my taxes each year I had over 15,000 in expenses. It was donated time, quite frankly. I traveled all over the state. Any VFW, Legion, AmVets, DAV, anybody who invited me to speak about it, I was there. I was all over the state. I think I know every little Podunk hall in the state. But I'd get \$50 here, \$100 there, \$25 here, and that sort of thing, and that's where an awful lot of it came from.

A lot of it, VVA was really the key to it because they're, being the primary Vietnam Vets organization, they really went out and raised money for it. But we would have never made it if we wouldn't have got the state grant because it took too much money to raise the money we were getting. And the state grant put us over the top and allowed us to do it.

It's frustrating because everything we did was donated. I was the only salaried person on staff and, like I said, over half my salary was donated right back in just expenses. And everybody else's time was donated. Out-of-pocket expenses were sometimes reimbursed, but most of that was donated. We get the initial bill, the statue up and the plaza building, and all of a sudden there's all kinds of people accusing us of ripping off thousands and thousands of dollars, enriching ourselves and stuff like that. Jealousy and all that sort of thing. It became real, real frustrating because we did it because we felt the need for it.

Most of us, it almost cost me my marriage. We had a real rough relationship for a while because I was just gone all the time and we had no money coming in. Almost everybody on the board, it just burned them out because they had to put so much effort and time and intensity and commitment to it to make it work, and then people were beating us up all the time. It got real frustrating.

But I think, ultimately, it's one of the best things in the country in terms of a memorial because it's much more than just a war memorial. It never was. It's a memorial to people, and people are so touched by it. I'm just amazed. My brother's ashes are scattered there. I think right now there's about 100 vets' ashes scattered there. We can't do burials, but people all the time request that their ashes be scattered there. We've had several weddings out there. People come.

One of the most touching things I got was a guy I knew in college, he was somebody I knew from the Vets' club, and actually was a close friend of my roommate more than somebody I was real tight with, but I knew him quite well, and I would see him occasionally, and I saw in the paper that he died. He had a massive heart attack and died about 40. I got a letter a couple weeks later from his wife and it said, I meant to write this before, but I didn't get around to it. But now that he died, I've just really got to tell you. He had never told his parents he had been in Vietnam. He was in the Navy. While he was in the Navy he was assigned a ship, but his ship was brown water. I did the brown water stuff. And he told them he was in, because it was just an APO address, he told them he was in the Mediterranean the whole time. And he never did tell them. This is 15 years later. His wife knew and I knew. I mean, I never realized he hadn't told his parents. And she said, he just would talk to me a little bit about it, but he wouldn't deal with anybody else with it. Some of his vets friends he would talk to, but nobody else. And he just really kept closed up. And I tried to talk him into going out to Washington to the wall and he just wouldn't do that. But his grandmother took him to the High Ground one day and she said he broke down and he cried for most of the day, and came back and he talked to me for the next couple days, just letting it all out. And he was a new person after that. He only lived a couple months after that, but for the first time in the ten years they'd been married, he had been smiling regularly and that sort of thing.

We get stories like that all the time. And it touches people in a very unique way. It's a struggle today to keep it going because it gets no funding from anywhere but ourselves. And people who volunteer and the magazine and stuff we do to raise money for it. But we are finally at the point where we're basically in the black, or near the black, instead of constantly—

Mark: As close as it's been, anyway.

Piotrowski: Yeah.

Mark: Now, I get the impression that veterans get involved with it irregardless of ideology. You mentioned Dave Zien, for example. Not known as a liberal, exactly. Is that true?

Piotrowski: Yes. Absolutely.

Mark: All the partisan differences and even views of the war go out the window?

Piotrowski: It's there to honor people's service and help them heal the pain and suffering. And it's not just for veterans. We've had enough people come up who, like rape victims or child abuse victims or whatever, that have come up there and have gone, this is the first time I've been able to open up about it and really let my emotions go. Personally I'm basically an atheist in terms of belief system, but it's a very, very spiritual place. It's got a unique ability to touch people. And it keeps getting better.

But, we keep getting criticized for all kinds of things. I'm no longer on the board of directors. After I left as executive director I was chairman of the board for a number of years, and finally I had to back away because you just put so much time and effort into doing something, just for the good, for the good it does, and you're constantly criticized. A lot of it's jealousy. I mean, like the local vets' organization want it to be theirs. They want to be in control of it. Well, if they're in control of it, then it becomes a VFW thing or a Legion thing or whatever. And it's not that. It's for everybody and anybody. And, in fact, their biggest core of supporters who regularly work out there and volunteer time and do things and stuff like that are probably not active in any vets organization. They're that 80% that aren't part of the vets organizations. And they're very loyal to the High Ground. Anything they do, and it's partially a sign of how much people care about it, anything we do we get criticized for. And it really is partially a sign of how much they care because, if it isn't what they feel should be done, well, it's my place. They feel a real sense of ownership to it. So it's neat, but it's so frustrating.

Really, by the end of the time I was there, I was so fed up with trying to deal with all the people who criticized all the time and just telling us all these terrible things. The rumor mills within the veterans' organizations would blow things way out of proportion. It got so frustrating it was just hard to deal with it all.

Mark: When did you hook up with the senator? Was this when you left?

Piotrowski: No.

Mark: You were involved in High Ground for a while.

Piotrowski: Yeah. I was still on the board at that time. Actually, I was working full time for the High Ground at the time I went to work for the senator. That's when I resigned my position on the High Ground. But, before he got elected, one of the things he promised us, a group of us veterans who had talked to him, was that he would set up a veterans' advisory committee and meet regularly with him. Even though it wasn't going to be one of his major committees in the senate if he got elected, he wanted to stand up for veterans. And so I was part of his advisory committee.

And the guy he had working for him who did veterans issues was in the Army Reserve, he got called up for Desert Storm, just at the time he needed somebody. And so he asked us on the advisory committee if we had any recommendations. I was getting pretty tired. I had been with the High Ground about five years and I was getting pretty tired and getting pretty broke from doing it. And so I said, well, I'd be interested, can we talk about it. And we sat down and we talked and this is what he wanted, and my background as CVSO made me well-qualified for it and all this sort of thing. And I knew him from the advisory committee and we sat down and talked about it, went through it, and I got hired for it. So then I resigned from the High Ground and went to work for the senator, and it was just a transition sort of thing.

Mark: How often do you meet with him?

Piotrowski: The senator?

Mark: Yeah.

Piotrowski: I talk to him at least once a month, either on the phone or in person. But the advisory committee tries to meet with him a couple times a year. Anytime I need to talk to him, he's available. It's one of the nice things about him is that he is available if you've got something you really need him for.

Mark: I imagine when he calls you or you talk to him, he's got a question about a bill on the floor of the House or something like that. From your observations, what seems to be going on in Washington as far as veterans affairs are concerned?

Piotrowski: So far they've escaped pretty well in this craziness that's gone on in the last couple years. As far as I'm concerned it's real craziness. I think the realization has sunk in to most of Congress that first veterans' benefits are not the cause of the deficit. They have not increased it any alarming rate. In fact, they have been decreased as part of the total budget. And to in any way point to them as a major cause of the financial problems we have is not justified.

There are all sorts of people who want to make adjustments to this, that, and the other thing, or have things that they want to see eliminated or changed. And there's always efforts going on. But nothing's really moved that far in terms of major or drastic cuts. But there's this constant death of a thousand cuts. Hospital care is much more difficult.

The system geared up, the whole veterans' benefit system, geared up for a national healthcare program coming into place. Well, that didn't come into place, yet they proposed all these changes that would flow them into it. And some of those changes are starting to happen, and there's no other system to back them up. So there's going to be some real disruptions over the next few years. But, in terms of the general scope of veterans' benefits, they're really not under attack in

the budget axes right now. In fact, Clinton's got to be given a lot of credit for increasing the budget over what's minimal necessary. And Congress, while they cut back on some of the increases, have not torched it like they could have and like some people wanted to.

Mark: And do you have contact with constituents?

Piotrowski: That's my main job. My main job is to do case work. I'm basically a glorified CVSO for the senator, is what it amounts to. And one real advantage is that, because I work for the senator, and what I do is in his name, I get a lot quicker response. And the big thing I can do for people is, I can't do the basic claim work because I just don't have the time or paper work or the resources to do it, but if they've got a claim in that's hung up for some reason, it just isn't moving for some reason or that something was overlooked or that sort of thing, I can get it a second look. I can get it moved in the system. I try, because I worked in the system long enough and know enough about it, I try not to push claims that are in the routine stage yet, they're still just processing through like they normally would. But where I run into somebody that's made the claim a year ago and it's just been hung up and they keep asking for trivial information or—after this many years of doing this sort of thing, you recognize quickly where there's a problem claim versus something that somebody's just impatient. So I'm able to shake a lot of things loose and get answers a lot of times when people aren't through the normal part of the system.

Mark: What seems to be the biggest concerns these days among veterans? Cuts?

Piotrowski: We get some of that, though I've got to give credit to the veterans' organizations for not panicking this time around, the last couple years, because they've recognized what they're facing is not near as bad as what's being done to a lot of other programs. And that, while they've got to protect, they can't go off the wall on them. No, that's not been as bad.

The biggest concern is hospital care because we've got the aging veterans, World War II vets. The biggest thing I hear is, well, they promised me I'd always be able to go to a VA hospital. I always want to say, I don't, but I always want to say, well, do you have that in writing somewhere? And nobody's ever been able to bring that to me. I've got to say, some of the benefit manuals are, shall we say, flowery written? The language is a bit optimistic because it does say, you may be eligible. It's just a numbers problem. And we've got this aging World War II population that's needed much more extensive healthcare. And it's not as readily available as they thought it would be.

Of course, the other side of that is we didn't have Medicare then. We didn't have those sorts of systems in place, so it's not as necessary. And that's the balancing act that I think a lot of veterans don't recognize. And it's unfortunate, if they were objective about it, yes. The VA hospital offers some unique things. And I

think they really should be continued offering unique things, but if we're going to look at this from national interests, and this is just my opinion, we should be looking at what does the VA do best. Spinal cord injuries, PTSD, long-term psych care, amputations, traumatic injury sorts of things. Those are the things they really know about. Prosthetics, they're perhaps best at. Less funding (??) them, keep them specialized in that.

You've got Medicare, you're got these other systems in place to take care of the more general aging problems and the more normal health problems. Let those systems do that. Let the veteran have the choice of going to local doctors or the VA for service-connected disability. Don't force them into VA-only treatment sorts of things.

Coming from Stevens Point, at that time fee basis was still real common—probably back on that, but it's real difficult for a veteran to drive 110 miles for routine care at a VA hospital. And then wait hours to get in because they're overloaded. Why should we be doing that? Why shouldn't we be paying a reasonable fee to a local doctor to do routine care? If they need major surgery or whatever, and it can be done cheaper at the VA, fine. But that's not acceptable to most veterans. I'm a veteran and I deserve the VA. It should be there for me. On an ideal basis I'd probably agree with you, but on a practical basis there are systems in place that weren't.

It's the same, the non-service connected pension on the federal level. Tremendous program for when it was established at World War II because an awful lot of vets coming out of World War II had PTSD, but it wasn't recognized and so it was not service connected, and they became "town drunks" or whatever. They lost their ability to function in society. Well, they hadn't worked long enough under Social Security to have any real benefit, so the non-service connected pension was a real bonus and a real aid to their survival. Now, most everybody's worked under Social Security long enough so the non-service connected pension, the income limits on it are so low that they don't get anything out of it. Why can't I get it? Well, you get Social Security instead. This was a program, and I can explain it to them, they may not be happy, but if you explain it to them a lot of times they understand what the difference is and that sort of thing. It's an evolution of society.

Mark: That brings us up to the present. Anything you'd like to add? Anything you think we've skipped over?

Piotrowski: Not offhand. It's been **[End of Tape Two, Side Two]**

Strange thing to be a veterans' expert after all these years because I never set out to be that. When I came back, I got upset with what was happening, so I got involved with the VVAW, and that led to a certain knowledge that aided me in getting into the Job Service and getting involved there. That led me to CVSO,

that led me to High Ground, that led me to where I am today. And I'm a philosophy major from school. It's not like I set out to be the veterans' advocate. There's this kind of a circumstantial thing that happened.

I think, I hope anyway, over the years I've aided a number of people. And part of it's aiding myself because, if there's one thing I know with my serious PTSD, it's the guilt trip.

[End of Interview]