

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
STEPHEN D. SAUNDERS
Infantry, Army, Vietnam War

2011

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Saunders, Stephen D. (b. 1947). Oral History Interview, 2011.

Approximate length: 1 hour 2 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Stephen Saunders discusses his Vietnam War service with the 1st Cavalry Division, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Battalion, Company C in the Bong Son plain, his return to civilian life and going to school, and keeping in touch with the 1st Cavalry over the years. Saunders outlines his basic training and joining the airborne infantry at Fort Knox (Kentucky), his AIT at Fort Gordon (Georgia), and Army jump school at Fort Benning (Georgia). He then explains what it was like arriving at Camp Radcliff in An Khe, being received by his unit, and his first experiences in Vietnam. He discusses what pony teams were, and the pony team that he joined. Saunders describes how the insertion process worked and what life was like out in the field. He discusses the feeling of leaving the squad to return to the States and his last year in the service. He then explains what it was like coming home and trying to return to a civilian life after being in the war. Saunders ends the interview discussing remaining in touch with the 1st Cavalry Division Association and why he didn't join any veterans associations until recently.

Biographical Sketch:

Saunders (b. 1947) served with the United States Army from 1965 to 1968, serving overseas from 1966 to 1967. After being discharged he went to law school and practices law in Elkader, Iowa.

Interviewed by Rick Berry, 2011.

Transcribed by Lorelee Brumund, 2015, and Charles Bellinger, 2016.

Edited by Jennifer Kick, 2016.

Abstract written by Jennifer Kick, 2016.

Interview Transcript:

Berry: History interview with Stephen D. Saunders, who served with the United States Army, Company C, 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, during the Vietnam War. This interview is being conducted at the Wisconsin Veterans' Museum at the following address: 30 W. Mifflin Street, Madison, Wisconsin, 53703, on the following date: September 2, 2011, the interviewer is Rick Berry. Okay Steve, can you tell us something about your background and your life circumstances before you entered military service?

Saunders: Yes, I was raised in Brodhead, Wisconsin, south of here about thirty-five miles, middle class, small town upbringing in the 1950s; two brothers, one older, one younger and two younger sisters. Little bit of a farm background, grandparents had the farm and experienced that with like, they did in the Depression. Typical upbringing of the time, our heroes were the John Wayne types of the movies, Davey Crockett was big, "Gunsmoke", all that, boys were boys. I went to high school there, my wife and I both did, we were in the same class, and got into some trouble, nothing serious. I had a ideal childhood, would trade it for nothing. I graduated and went straight into the army.

Berry: So you—did you decide to enter the Army, for what reason?

Saunders: Well, like I said before, I kind of had a wild air and was not, not suitable on campus at the time, didn't know what I wanted to do, and a couple buddies and I decided to join the Army when we were seniors in high school. Kind of BSed with the recruiter out of Janesville, and I wanted to join the paratroopers, so that's what my buddy and I did. And we didn't think a lot about it, just thought "heck, it's only three years" and I kind of had a feeling things were coming down the pike.

Berry: So you enlisted, obviously—

Saunders: Yes, for three years—

Berry: Rather than being, being drafted. How and where did you enter service?

Saunders: I entered service in, well in Milwaukee, and then I took my basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky, and I joined for the airborne infantry, which is not hard to get. Then after basic training I went to Fort Gordon, Georgia, for—they had an airborne infantry course and we trained, and I think we were about—some of the first troops to train with the M16. Then, in, we were—my group was scheduled to

attend Army jump school at Fort Benning. For some reason, I assume because it was full, we didn't go to jump school and they sent us directly to the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. There were still two brigades there—

Berry: But this was after you earned your Airborne—

Saunders: No!

Berry: Before! Before.

Saunders: And which was difficult because we were some "Legs" [Lesser Effective Ground Trooper] and non-jumpers here in the 101st and they didn't like that, and then in a couple months they sent us to jump school, over Christmas of 1965 and then I went back to—I entered a unit in the 101st Airborne Division. There were two brigades at that time at Fort Campbell, one brigade was already deployed to Vietnam by that time and I was—remained on a line company in the, in the 101st Airborne until—May of 1966. I went on leave and then I went to Vietnam.

Berry: If you reflect back a little bit on your basic training, were there any parts of that that were unexpected as far as what you kind of thought it was going to be like when you went in?

Saunders: No, not really. It wasn't unexpected and I, you know, was young and full of it at that time and it's probably what I needed in a lot of respects and I—I found that there was something about when I got to, like jump school or the 101st, there was—it was a very strict discipline and I've always kept that with me some. I mean there were no excuses, there was just no excuses. We were—when the guy with some rank, who was at that time older, and good chance he'd been in the Korean conflict, I don't know, I always never questioned it—they had our minds.

Berry: And that close sense of discipline in the 101st, do you think that was associated with being with an Airborne outfit, as opposed to—

Saunders: Ah, part of it was, yes, I think part of it was, and the old, how I characterized, hard core heart of the Army, at least the ground Army, was that old NCO [non-commissioned officers] ethic and you know, and my, my buddies like me, in the same situation, young privates kind of—they had a way of instilling that aspect and that character, that, in us, I think it's always stood me in pretty good stead. There—you know, I went to college and on and I've never had better instructors

than I had in the Army, for some reason, you know, they had a way of—they had a way of teaching everybody something basic that you never forgot.

Berry: Did you make any lasting friendships in, during your training?

Saunders: I made close friendships and the group of about a hundred of us went through Airborne Infantry AIT, we all went to the 101 Airborne together and were close, we went—went to jump school together, we went, returned to the 101st together and we all went to Vietnam together and many of us ended up in the same division and it was, there was a One Airborne Brigade at the First CavTech [air assault division as the 1st Air Cavalry Division].

Berry: First Brigade at First Cav.

Saunders: And we were all in that Brigade and a lot in the same battalion, five of us in the same company, but you know, I have tried and tried to contact just one of those guys since then and I never, ever could.

Berry: How—explain how a unit from the 101st ended up being deployed to Vietnam as part of the 1st Cavalry—

Saunders: Okay, what, what happened there was we—the units that we were in, in the 101st Airborne at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, did not go as a unit, from the 101st to the 1st Cavalry Division. They—the Army did what, what they call it a "levy", a "troop levy" and they would levy so many bodies out of the 101st, or so many privates or whatever, to go to Vietnam as replacements, so some would've ended up in the 173rd, some would've ended up in the 101st Airborne Division over—the 1st Brigade over there and most, or many, went to 1st Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division. And the reason I know that is when, when our company had a formation in the mornings, six o'clock in the morning I suppose, the first sergeant read there's been a levy and the following are on orders for Vietnam and he'd read all our names that were levied out of the Company, there were twenty of us, and he would say which Division, so that's how you'd—we didn't go as a body.

Berry: Where did you join the 1st Cavalry Division?

Saunders: Ah, at An Khe.

Berry: At An Khe.

Saunders: Mm-hm.

Berry: And of course, the 1st Cavalry Division had three brigades, but as you mentioned only the 1st Brigade was Airborne.

Saunders: It, it was at that time and it was—it remained Airborne officially until, I think the cut off was about December of 1966. We still got some Airborne guys in, but I know they didn't get jump pay, we did. We never jumped in Vietnam.

Berry: What specific unit did you join in the 1st Cav?

Saunders: Ah, Company C, 2nd Battalion of the 8th Cavalry.

Berry: And that'd be the 8th Cavalry Regiment, then.

Saunders: Well, they didn't call it a regiment then, it wasn't regiment then, it was the 8th, they just called it the 8th, the 7th or the 5th, and I don't know how that gets into the tactical organization—

Berry: Certainly. The nomenclature would be the 2nd of the 8th.

Saunders: Yes, yes, correct.

Berry: Okay, and tell me about your, your first arrival in Vietnam. Did you fly into—?

Saunders: We—yeah, we flew commercial airlines to, out of Fort Dix in New Jersey, to Vietnam and arrived in Ton Son Nhut Airbase in Saigon. I remember taking a bus somewhere, oh, Camp Alpha, I guess, it was a re—replacement depot like a big POW camp, and—for a day or two—and then we caught a "hop" out to An Khe on a, I think a C130 and landed at a place called the "golf course" which was the airbase at An Khe headquarters, the 1st Cavalry Division called Camp Radcliff. Without an "E". And went to our company area there was six or eight of us, ten of us, perhaps, replacements and our company at that time was participating in Operation Crazy Horse so we were in the rear area, it was all tents, and dirt and mud, the company street, for three or four days until they came in off the operation.

Berry: Was your base camp at Camp Radcliff?

Saunders: It, it was. That was the division rear area—we spent very little time there, hardly any the whole year, I don't know, maybe a couple weeks there, for different reasons.

Berry: How were you received in Company C when you arrived, were you welcomed and—?

Saunders: Well, it, it, of course, the first couple of days we were on, you know, on detail, all the dirty details and we were issued our equipment, this is something that I remember very specifically, the only members of our company that were there other than the replacements was the—was the cavvie [??] like the supply sergeants, company clerk, first sergeant, and we had to draw our gear and our weapons, and we went down to the supply tent, there was a creek behind that tent, that ran through the base, and he gave us our gear and I think he kind of, took kind of a perverse glee in that but we—much of it was bloody, had been, you know, recycled gear from guys who had been hit—some of it was pretty messed up. There was a pile of, you know ammo pouches, and a pile of "butt packs" [canvas fanny packs with a plastic window for a name and suspenders which attaches to the rear of the pistol belt] we called them, some helmets, and we had to draw the gear, "help yourself" and go down to the creek and wash the crud off it, and that was poignant, put it that way.

Berry: So you essentially were issued used gear then?

Saunders: Oh yeah, mhm, and weapons—we never had a chance to zero the M16s. And then returning to your question, our—then the company came back to the field, for us. At that time they were operating a few weeks or a month at a time and then they would come back for—to the, to Camp Radcliff base camp for a few days and then go out and that all changed, but when they came back, I remember looking at those guys, they become my very close friends, and thinking "Holy shit." These guys stink, they look awful, you know, raggedy and they cut their hair with safety razors, and you know, you know what they look like in the field—they'd been in combat operations and they were, you know, they had jungle sores and they, they just—it was—I just remember it quite well. However, being the new guys, we were—I, I always felt we were welcomed with open arms. 'Cause you know, many hands make light work, and they were glad to get replacements, let me tell ya, yeah.

Berry: When your unit deployed to the field from base camp at Camp Radcliff, did you go out as a company sized unit or a battalion?

Saunders: I believe—I, I believe that the first time, and, and this is where I lose it, because my world was my platoon and my thought and we were—if, if our platoon was at one point there could have been twenty other platoons out there or none, I didn't

really know that. Being a young private, and they never clued us in on anything, I didn't always know if it was the whole company, at that, I think it was primarily as a—at least as a company maybe as a battalion. But, our world was really the, the tribe I should say, was the platoon and let me give you an example of that. I thought about after that, when, when they were back, maybe it was the first or the second night, there was a beer hall there and they had some beer, you know warm beer and it was a low ceiling and it was wild—anyway, they—we went back to the, to these tents, and there's ordinance laying around—I wasn't comfortable being around live grenades and all that, you get used to that. But anyway, that night, there were either rockets or mortars coming in. So they had to get up, most of the guys were drunk, and get the gear on and go down to this creek that I was telling you about—that's where they were supposed to go—and everybody was drunk and anyways, the, all the VC—I, I suppose it was VC—wanted to hit was the golf course. And they weren't anywhere near us, but the rockets or mortars were hitting the air base, the golf course and all the guys were cheering every time one would hit because the air force or the rear areas the guys were getting mortared! So that's all we cared about, was the tribe, kind of—

Berry: Of course, the, the golf course was more than a fixed-wing range—

Saunders: Oh yeah it was everything.

Berry: The largest heliport in the world, that kind of thing.

Saunders: Oh yeah, historic. The division had over four hundred helicopters, I understand—

Berry: The 1st Cavalry Division had something like 425 helicopters assigned to it. Now, when you deployed to the field, is that the way you would go, would be in helicopters?

Saunders: Generally, yeah, oh yes. We had, we had a convoy once too, through Pleiku, or somewhere on the back of a deuce and a half trucks, and my, my memory is foggy, I know we went through a Korean area, but otherwise it was on foot or helicopters.

Berry: And these operations were mainly to the west of An Khe out towards the Pleiku area?

Saunders: Yeah, and I'm not even sure, it seems like we were all the time in Binh Dinh or Bong Son, ah I don't know, if Bong Son is a part of Binh Dinh, I used to know.

Berry: Yeah, it is.

Saunders: Is it? Okay. That's—

Berry: On the coast.

Saunders: Yes, Bong Son, the Bong Son plain. And then we were near the Chu Phong mountains near Ia Drang I guess that's west of An Kh—

Berry: You spent most of your combat operations in the Bong Son plain, then?

Saunders: Well, a great deal of it, and I know the latter part of it was the Bong Son plain as I remember, and then—and early on it was more a mountainous, what they call mountains; it's very—seems—I called it highland jungle.

Berry: Let's see. You might describe what a combat assault, an air mobile assault was, how that worked for the guy on the ground?

Saunders: All right. We would do—sometimes we would do many in a day, and other times we would go days and days without 'em. But we would—there would be one or more helicopters—sometimes many helicopters if they were going in on a company assault, or insertion of patrol with a full-bore combat assault we would be—I'm guessing six to eight guys on a Huey with their combat equipment, there would be a door gunner in each door, pilot, copilot, and often the landing zone would have been prepped by artillery fire for a period of time, and then as we—as we were—as the troop ships we called “slicks” were coming in—at that time they had gunships which were Hueys then; this was before the Cobra. Never saw a Cobra. Gunships with M-60 machine guns on the skids, and then they had rocket launchers; and they would come in on our flanks, and provide fire support as we were going in to the landing zone.

Berry: Yeah, that's the way it worked.

Saunders: Yeah. And it wasn't always—sometimes we didn't get that preparatory fire; I don't know if they didn't suspect it to be a hot LZ [Landing Zone] or what, but it was just—it got to be really routine for us.

Berry: Well, actually, the purpose of the artillery fire was twofold: One was in case the enemy was present in your area; secondly, the artillery into the landing zone before the first lift of infantry would have a tendency to set off any booby traps that might be in the area.

Saunders: Oh! Sure!

Berry: We were often concerned about—

Saunders: You bet!

Berry: —booby traps for the infantry. And the helicopters that you were in on these kind of full-race combat assaults would land as a group in the landing zone—

Saunders: It depends on the type of landing zone. That did happen sometimes, and I'm sure if that was possible, that was ideal, but many times you could get one in barely and one out, and those guys could fly those things, and sometimes it seemed they chopped their way in; I mean, it was tight. We—sometimes you'd get one ship in at a time, two or three and then—that was with a Huey, but we also did with CH-47 Chinooks. It was a different type—you know, we may be inserted on the ground with those at times, but we had occasion to use what we called the Jacob's ladder; there was a roll-up steel ladder that they—

Berry: Like a rope ladder.

Saunders: Like a rope ladder out of the rear ramp of the CH-47 stabilize, and we climbed down the ladder. Kind of hairy, but that's what they did; maybe blow a little hole through the jungle and go in that way.

Berry: So in a typical assault, you would be inserted—say, a company-sized unit into a landing zone, and then how long would you operate in that area before you would come back?

Saunders: Could be a matter of hours; could be a matter of days, or weeks. And again, you know, it's real fuzzy, time is—what happened there was like a noteworthy moment when it's kind of sucking in all the surrounding time, like all that surrounding boredom, and stuff I didn't think about, so, uh—but a common, I think, misconception is that we never walked, we rode helicopters everywhere, and let me tell you, that was not the case. I mean, we walked the ground.

Berry: You were probably—were you not returned to your base camp by helicopters also? You didn't often walk—

- Saunders:** Sometimes, but the base camp then was—I think we started—I think it was the brigade—It was LZ English, and then we had other LZ's—I mean, it got to where they just—we was left in the field, and we came back individually on R&R, and we just—The unit stayed in the field, basically.
- Berry:** Okay. Were you, kind of briefed on what was gonna happen on one of these combat assaults before you went on them, so—
- Saunders:** Not very much. At that time I think the guys had training later but very little. I think I had something on that in the 101st; we had training one day on insertions when I was in the States. But then they just told us what to do, well, I mean that—
- Berry:** Did they do things like tell you about problems with walking into a tail rotor, for example, on a Huey?
- Saunders:** Yeah they did. And I don't think I had to be told, but, but that did happen and you bet. Or when a Huey would land on a slope or a hillside, keep your head under the—but not very much. I know, later on, that division had training for new replacements, sort of in-country briefing on these little things. We didn't have any of that; we learned that in the field.
- Berry:** Okay. Tell me about the relationships with your fellow soldiers in combat, at the squad level, and also higher.
- Saunders:** Mokay. Very—by and large, you form very close and deep friendships, which I later came to realize were deeper than I ever thought would be possible. You get closer than you do to your childhood friends, siblings. You have a lot of—you have twenty-four/seven together, you talk about home, cars, women, family. You vicariously know their family. And you're young men and you have fun. I mean, everything's fun, and everything's funny, and you can do anything for recreation. And then you dislike some people too. But what you learn real fast is who you can depend on and who you can't; and everybody knows everybody's capabilities, and strengths and weaknesses. Yeah, you get very close.
- Berry:** Now, how about the experience of losing a friend?
- Saunders:** They're the same. Yeah, they're the same. Very difficult. Very difficult. And you know, when you'd lose 'em, you know, when they were killed, obviously—it's strange, even when they're wounded, it's almost the same because they're gone,

you never see them again. You don't say goodbye; they're just hit and they're gone. And that's—

Berry: Did you think all that much about what was going to be happening in the near future, for example, when you're getting ready to go on a combat assault, and you're getting ready to board the aircraft? Did you think about what might be coming and how you were gonna react to it, or did you just kind of experience it and take it as it came?

Saunders: Nope. No one thought about it. But it gets to be routine, almost. In the movies you see these guys with the port arms sneaking around the jungle, teeth grit, you know, you don't do that, you don't—you can't be on alert all that much. But before a big air assault if they're expecting something, or a patrol or something that happens. You'd think about it, you worry about doing your job, you know I probably didn't think about it near as much as I would now, because you're young.

Berry: And we talked a little bit before the interview started about a pony team?

Saunders: Yes.

Berry: And how that operation worked, could you explain that from your standpoint?

Saunders: When I first arrived there, our company had what was called a pony team, which consisted of, I believe six, or eight guys from the company, dependable guys that would operate on their own, and it was sort of like a long-range patrol company—excuse me, a long-range patrol squad for the company, which—a company was probably—in the field, was anywhere from fifty to seventy-five guys or less, you know, the actual numbers of rifles in the field. But anyway, this pony team would operate outside of where our company was operating, and they would make all kinds of contact, I mean they could move faster, quieter, everything, and they were making a lot more. Anyway, I wanted to join the pony team, and I was the next to go on there, well then they—about that time they disbanded the pony teams, and they started sending out three-man—they called them pony teams, but they were—they didn't move; you were sent out, three men, to observe a given area, and you only moved a couple hundred yards a day, just to find a new hiding spot, and you observed a trail junction, for instance, or a stream bed, for a period of time, usually not less than five days, and called in artillery or whatever, and just reported what you saw, so that—obviously, the theory being you can cover a wide area; they got eyes all over that way, and that's what we did.

Berry: But you, I would assume, tried to avoid contact with the enemy.

Saunders: We were told not to make company—excuse me, contact, and didn't have to tell us twice.

Berry: Could you explain the insertion process that was used to that? And I might comment a little bit, having flown there.

Saunders: Yes. And I'm happy to talk to somebody that's known about that. But let me tell you about one I—a very noteworthy one I was on, in about December of '66 or so. The—a master sergeant from our battalion came down and I guess told our platoon leader that they needed a pony team. So long as you're taking out a pony team, me and two guys, so I was an E4. So three of us, which had one radio, one guy had an M79 grenade launcher, and the other two of us, we had M16 rifles. But anyway, we had a few minutes to get ready, and get issued some C-rations for, I believe about five or six days; first thing we did was ate everything we could, kept a few cans that we wanted and threw everything else away, but anyway we got ready to go, and they had—they sent us in, uh, with a complement of three Huey helicopters; we were on the first helicopter, the three of us.

Berry: These were three Slicks, right?

Saunders: Three slicks; there were no gunships. And, uh, we were in the lead and there were two in trail. And we flew the contour—we flew very low level on the way there. I think we were about ten miles from our base camp. I don't know; we were still within artillery range, but the extremes of artillery range. And we were on the first ship, and then when we got to the landing zone—and I couldn't identify it, we relied on the pilots for that. We being the first Slick, they set us down right away; we hopped off—I mean that helicopter was hardly on the ground, we hopped off, and he went right back up. And by that time, the two trailing Slicks had passed, and our, our ship, our Slick—when he came up after leaving us off, he was in trail; he was the third Huey in line. So it would appear, then, to anyone except that was looking right there in the immediate LZ it would appear that there were three helicopters flying by. There would be less chance of identifying where they inserted us, or if there was any insertion at all.

Berry: Yeah, that's the way it worked. From the standpoint of the pilots, the way that worked was that you would go out the day before, and in coordination with the infantry you would choose the landing zone that you were gonna use, 'cause the guys that were gonna be inserted need to know exactly where they were. The ideal landing zone would be fairly small, so it was unlikely to be booby-trapped—

Saunders: It was.

Berry: —but then would have terrain features around it that would be elevated, and you would get in that loose trail formation, just as you mentioned. You'll need aircraft with a pretty good flare. You often didn't actually set down in a landing zone; we would come to a hover, and have the infantry jump out. And the reason we didn't set down is we didn't want the sound of the helicopter to change.

Saunders: Yeah, we jumped out a number of feet.

Berry: And you would sit there at a hover and look up through the top of the aircraft, and you—when you saw that second helicopter, just saw the front of the second helicopter, you'd make a maximum performance takeoff—

Saunders: Okay.

Berry: —and get into the back of that line. Of course the whole purpose there is to try to insert the lurking long-range reconnaissance patrol team, or pony team, in a way that the enemy doesn't know they've been inserted, because there's only three to six guys involved—

Saunders: Yeah, we had three.

Berry: —and that process worked. I personally flew I don't know how many of those—five, six, whatever—but far as I know we were never caught doing that. From the standpoint of pilots—very challenging from a low-level navigation standpoint, and also very challenging to make sure you found the exact right landing zone that the infantry were expecting so they knew where they were when they got out of the aircraft. And after the insertion itself, we would usually go back to the home unit, the home base of the infantry unit, because that period of time for an hour or so after the insertion was where you'd be real concerned about whether or not the enemy had noticed what happened there.

Saunders: M-hm.

Berry: And if that small team come into contact, then you'd want to go out and get them out real quickly.

Saunders: You know, I might add on that, comment on what you said, now there were—there were—there was high ground on—this was in a bowl, in this valley, and there was high ground on both sides, I mean a ways out, but we were also inserted fairly near dusk. And that, obviously, where the Slicks put us down was not where we were gonna stay. We moved out, and I think we moved, gosh, a long way to get up to that high ground, where we could look—observe this valley. And the only people there—it's kinda deserted villages except for—but what you were saying about the reason for that method, it evidently worked, because as I was moving up to the high ground to where we were supposed to be, we moved through a base camp area. I mean, there were bunkers, there was laundry.

Berry: You mean an enemy base camp?

Saunders: An enemy base camp, and it was very eerie. So anyway, they didn't spot us, at night anyway.

Berry: Okay, have any other comments you'd like to make about the combat experience? How about kind of daily routine about eating, and sleeping, and that sort of thing?

Saunders: Well, I can—let me just tell you about this particular pony team. We were out there—

[Break in recording][00:31:34]

Berry: Okay, Steve, you were talking to us about pony team again. Could you continue?

Saunders: Well, talking about the lifestyle, this is just, I guess an example—I guess were there about five days; we were on high ground and we moved—we were ordered to move down to where a trail joined a stream. And we sat there, and it rained or drizzled every day. And I mean every minute of it. We weren't dry ever, it was cool, I had on a—I had an Army sweater on; a guy in our platoon, close friend who was evidently—eventually killed, but he stole us a bunch of sweaters; where he got 'em I don't know, but we all had these GI sweaters like you see on M*A*S*H, and they were invaluable in the highlands. But anyway, it rained every day, your skin peeled off—you'd scratch your skin, it would come off—you didn't think of wearing underwear 'cause that would rot off, we didn't have showers, we didn't launder our clothes, dry socks was a rarity, our feet turned green and yellow and smelled accordingly, they got pitted on the bottom from walking. We were in bad shape; we had jungle sores, crotch rot, and those were the ones of us that were healthy. We sat out here in the rain for a number of days,

we had cigarettes, I saved—we ran out of food because they extended our operation, I think it was three days, and believe it or not, somebody asked us if we wanted to get resupplied, which would have meant a helicopter would have had to hover over us, I guess, and dump off some food, and we said “No, thank you.” So we were out of food for like three days. I had a can of peaches I was saving for a morale builder. But anyway, we got jumped by some North Vietnamese. So that became—and the radio operator had some kind of a lung—he coughed; we had to muffle his—we would—he would start hacking. Anyway we got jumped by some North Vietnamese, and we were hiding from them one night, and he would start hacking that hacking cough, you know; he'd do all he could to muffle it, and we took a poncho liner, which is a light nylon blanket, open it up, and we would jam his head down into the poncho liner, kind of suffocate him to muffle the coughs. And then it got funny; we got giggling about it, we'd have to—and then everything's funny, and so anyway, that's kind of the lifestyle. It was rough, and then we slept on the ground, and there were bugs and snakes that we didn't hardly think about; mosquitoes, of course; centipedes; people had jungle rot, fevers. I think it had to be—to have 102 fever before you could be medevac'd or anything, it might have been more than that; as I remember it had to be 102 if you weren't bleeding.

Berry: Okay, you're talking about really Spartan way to live obviously, for a while—

Saunders: Yeah, ate C-rations.

Berry: What kept you going through all that?

Saunders: Well, wasn't any choice, you know. They got the—you didn't want to straggle. Yeah, it was—do what you have to do. And you carried a lot; we were very tired all the time. And I remember that; we were young, and when we got there we were in decent shape. But we got to be in terrible shape; I mean, you can endure a lot, but I lost twenty-five pounds. I went over there weighing 165, come home about 140. You get very tired, and we had to carry really heavy loads; we humped mountains, we went places you wouldn't—I don't think a human has ever been before. It was—we were bone tired all the time. And then you had to stay awake all night a lot of times.

Berry: And how about when you came out of the field? How much time did you have to recover before you would go out on another operation?

Saunders: When I first got there, like I said, they would go out, I'm guessing at thirty days at a time or a fixed time like that, and then come back and then, you know, decompress, and have a couple of days, get some beer. We didn't have any dope then—you always hear about smoking dope; hell, we didn't smoke any dope either. I mean, we had to be alert. I didn't even really know about that. So I was there early on, I guess, but then as time went on, we never got any breaks. We would—when we did come back, we had to be on what they called the green—we came back to An Khe—that's the division in the rear—I think once, maybe twice, but when we did, we were on perimeter duty on what they called the green line; there was like a twenty-five mile perimeter of concertina wire and guard towers around camp Radcliff, and we would man that. It was a little better, 'cause we could take showers and stuff, and then we'd run patrols during the day out of there, and then once in a while we would return to—as I remember it was LZ English, it was a forward base for the brigade, I believe, but we were always on a reaction course. Maybe we would stand down for a day or two—

Berry: Rapid reaction.

Saunders: Rapid reaction course. And then we'd get called out, and let me tell you, they just left us out there, pretty well, unless you went on an R&R—and we had a lot of trouble; we had guys cracking up, 'cause there was no breaks. I mean we had some serious stuff happen there, 'cause of that. The Army rides a good horse to death, and they rode us to death.

Berry: And for the benefit of the listener, LZ English was a pretty good-sized area.

Saunders: Yes.

Berry: Hundreds of acres in size, and it was located in the Bong Son plain on the coast, and was kind of the base camp, 1st Cavalry Division East.

Saunders: Okay.

Berry: My particular helicopter company was stationed at LZ English, so after we would make assaults with you guys out in the Bong Son plain or in the hills to the west of the Bong Son plain, we would return to LZ English and that's where we would park the aircraft and that's where our base camp was. So did you spend time when you were in the Bong Son plain—did you have a base camp at LZ English then, or—

Saunders: Well, we probably had a company forward there; I think each company had something; we never really spent any time there. We probably had some supply sergeants there; it seems like they had a few tents there. I don't know. I don't think that—it's kind of clumsy.

Berry: Hey, how about R&R? Where did you go on R&R?

Saunders: I went on R&R to Bangkok, Thailand the first time—you were supposed to, when I got there, get one in-country and one out-of-country R&R. We never got an in-country one, but we got down—our platoon got way down in numbers, and I don't know how it worked, but when I was a short while—within a month, I suppose, or two—of rotating to the States, more R&R's came up. So I got a second one to Taipei, Taiwan.

Berry: So this would've been spring of '67?

Saunders: M-hm.

Berry: Okay.

Saunders: Wished I'd have never gone, though.

Berry: Pardon?

Saunders: Best friend got killed when I was gone.

Berry: Awful. Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to mention about your direct combat experience?

Saunders: No. I don't know; I could go on all day and then—I haven't talked about it much over the years but written about it a little bit. I was a machine gunner for a long time there; M16 machine gunner—the only thing I ever felt like I knew what I was doing. Then I became squad leader, I carried the radio a few times. We all jack-of-all-trades, but it was very harsh. We didn't have—like you see on the television; that wasn't—it wasn't Iwo Jima, and it wasn't D-Day, and it wasn't the big protracted battles; it was meeting on a trail, an ambush—over within minutes, everybody's down or everybody's up, and booby trap here, sniper there—patrol. Not too many big ac—few, kinda where you could see everybody else, and a lot of artillery and jets, but mainly it was like hunting, I guess.

Berry: How did you feel when you left your squad, you knew you were going to DEROS, you were heading back to the States?

Saunders: It was unbelievable; that was one thing that's in your mind is, "How many days you got left?" That's how you identify guys, you know: He's got—you know, you knew each other, how many days you had, or when you were going; that was your status symbol, and the fewer days you got left in country, kinda your cred went up.

Berry: How did you keep track of that? Did you have a short-timer's stick?

Saunders: I had a short-timer's calendar. Had a little calender, mark 'em off. And the key was, it's like when you're on the exercise bicycle, not to look at your watch, so to speak, to get more time in; you let some days go, so you can mark several days at a time, and that's another interesting thing, you know. At this stage in life, a year, five years, is nothing. When I was in Viet—time is relative, and when you were in the field in Vietnam, a year and forever were about the same. Time stood still. I mean, that year, and you came back to the States, and everybody said, "Oh, where've you been?" you know, and the whole world's different, but it's only a year. But it's a long one.

Berry: It's a long year, isn't it?

Saunders: Oh boy.

Berry: Okay. Where—if that finishes what you'd like to say about the Vietnam experience, where did you go from after Vietnam? You had how much time left in the service after you left Vietnam?

Saunders: Well, let me tell you one other thing about—

Berry: Okay.

Saunders: —leaving the field. I remember that very well, because that—my time was up. That's just a—it's just a—such a release, you know, you finally leave. And the last day, we had a patrol, a platoon patrol, it was in hours, whatever, and I was leaving the field, back to base camp on the next helicopter slick that came in bringing us food, I think. And I thought "Well, here we go, it's the last patrol," you know, and you're always, I don't know, and you get superstitious, or you know, it's the last one, and so, Sergeant Lacey Watts—who I just saw a few months ago—he said,

“Saunders, just stay here.” “Okay” so I didn't have to go. When—and the chopper never came. I don't remember if the weather was bad, or what; that chopper didn't come, and they came in a number of hours later off the patrol. And my very good friend, who was from Wisconsin here, was our medic, and he had a .45 pistol on his belt. And I was sitting up against the rice paddy dike—which was probably two, three feet high—just sitting there, and as he came in off patrol, he said, “Well, Steve, I see that you're still here,” and he took off his pistol belt, and threw his .45 down, threw the belt on the ground next to me. He had fired his .45 on patrol, and he had a round in the chamber, and he didn't have it on safety cock. It discharged, and it went into that dike about a foot from my gut. And so, anyway, when I got out of there, I was glad to go, but you know? You didn't feel right leaving the guys, either; it was bittersweet, bittersweet.

Berry: Bittersweet is a good way to put it. Kind of nice to go home, but you're sorry—

Saunders: Man, that was the hardest part of the whole Vietnam thing was coming home. And I don't mean just leaving there; I mean coming home here.

Berry: Tell us about that; what—now, this is after you left the Army, or you—

Saunders: No, I still had a year to go after I got back, and—which—I was in a couple units in the States here, I went to the riots and everything; but anyway, when I came back, of course I wasn't nineteen yet when I got back here; I couldn't drink legally, I had a fake ID that a buddy I got, a clerk's job, got me a genuine fake ID to crank the year back, but I didn't know how to think. I mean, you know, now I can see it all, but I couldn't at nineteen, looking forward; I didn't know, as we used to say, whether to shit or go blind. I got back to the States; my girlfriend, who's now my wife, picked me up at the airport—chain-smoked cigarettes, put the ashes on the floor of the car, stupid things like that; took about—when I got home—I don't know how many baths before you don't make a ring in the bathtub anymore.

Berry: So, this was like a thirty-day leave back to—

Saunders: Yeah, yeah, that's right. I think it was thirty days, and it was just hard. I mean, you know, it was just hard to know how to act; my mother—I had some problems with my mother; she'd wake me up and I'd just come at her, and had her on the floor once. Just crazy stuff like that. Couldn't sleep in a bed the first night; slept on a picnic table, on my grandpa's picnic table—You know, just crazy things like that, and you don't really—you are—the whole world is the same but it's so different. It's just hard to—

Berry: Did you receive any help from the Army with respect to what you might expect when you came home, or—

Saunders: Absolutely not.

Berry: Yeah, that's the way it was with me, too.

Saunders: It's real different now, thank God, but no, absolutely not. And then I, you know, reported back to the 101st. I was in a rifle company when I came back then, for a year.

Berry: So you spent your last year in the service, then back with the 101st?

Saunders: I did. I went down to Fort Campbell, the 101st, and at that time, you think of the 101st, and then later, then, I was transferred to the 82nd. As a real strack[??], ready to deploy units, and, man, they were—it was not the case, 'cause they were basically—and 'specially the 101st was a holding area for guys that were either going to Vietnam or coming back from it, and waiting, doing their time to get out of the Army, you know, and release them in the infantry companies. So—and they were so under strength it was really hard to do any meaningful training, and of course we had a bad attitude about trying to play war games, anyway, and we still jumped and all that, but, you know, it's kind of hard to play war games after we've—were in the war. And I remember one night in the 101st I had CQ; I was a buck sergeant then, and it's called charge of quarters, you're the guy that stays awake all night, and checks the barracks, answers the phone, and makes sure the weapons are secured. But I remember going through the platoon base where all the troops were sleeping, and it sounded like a zoo. All the guys who been to Vietnam were screaming and having nightmares and crying, and I thought it was funny at the time—you know, you can see the humor in it—but it's kinda pretty sad. But yeah, and then I went to—I was in the 101st, and we had some kind of alert for the—it was shortly after the Arab-Israeli War and we were on the ready—a company—to go, somewhere in the Far East—and didn't deploy, of course—And then in July, or—about July of '67 they deployed us to Detroit when all the race riots were going on in the country, went to Detroit for two weeks. And then I went to the 82nd Airborne, and well the Kennedy and King assassinations happened; we were on alert for that—couldn't go anywhere; were locked in the barracks. Then we deployed to—and this is interesting—we deployed to Washington DC, and I believe October of '67. There was the Candlelight March on Washington for the Peace March, and they—I don't know; they were expecting

something, so they had at least a brigade of us from the 82nd deployed to Andrews Air Force Base near Washington DC, and they had all the Huey helicopters lined up right there all the while. And we slept right on the tarmac for—it seemed like a week or ten days, just ready to deploy us into the Federal Triangle area and all the monuments. But anyway, what I was going to tell you, is they had a map of where we were all supposed to—gonna deploy to once we went out. And I had a machine gun squad to—I was a weapons squad leader, I had two M16 machine guns. And they told us where we were gonna dig in; they had an overlay on the map with these crayons, and drew us in, and they said, “Saunders, you're going to dig your guns in here.” And anyway, it was on the White House lawn. [both laugh] And I went back and I told the guys, “Okay, guys, this is the final perimeter!” Of course, we didn't deploy; it was all BS and we knew it was. [both laugh]

Berry: That's a pretty classy landing zone.

Saunders: Yeah, that's what I thought.

Berry: Okay. How about you're actually—your discharge from the Army. How did that come—was that at Fort Dix or what?

Saunders: No, it was at Fort Bragg.

Berry: Fort Bragg.

Saunders: Yeah, at Fort Bragg. And the sergeant came to Madison. I came to Brodhead and worked for the summer and came to school here in Madison.

Berry: And when you came back home, from your military service, what was that like? Were you welcomed by your fellow citizens, and Brodhead and so forth?

Saunders: Yeah, your family and your buddies were still here, not a lot of them were in the service. Just like nothing happened, you know? That's what they thought, but it took me a long time to figure out what happened. It was like the memory voodoo or something; you just kinda block it out and try to make up for lost time.

Berry: M-hm. So how did you do that? How did you make up for lost time? What did you do—

Saunders: Well, I got, I was—I got married, and I got married when I got back from Vietnam, so my wife spent maybe[??] the last year in the Army. We came to Ma—I worked for the summer, came to Madison, and I started undergraduate here in August or September of '68, freshman year, and then I went to school here for four years, and then I went out to Creighton and went to law school for three years.

Berry: What did you study at—

Saunders: Here, it was a political science major and a German minor, and of course during that time, there was the Cambodian invasion and I think in 1970, and there was all kinds of campus unrest at the time, and that was kind of confusing to me—well, not really confusing, but—oh, gosh, I don't know—upsetting, or it was just ironic, you know. All this unrest was going on in a heart of learning, and I just felt—I mean, it saved me; I buried myself in the books, and I didn't do anything social; I didn't—you know, I wasn't any of that. And the campus activities I was a freshman, but I was twenty years old and going on about fifty, the way I felt. I mean, I got into the books; I didn't talk to anybody. I didn't join any clubs—

Berry: Did you make any effort to advertise the fact that you were a combat veteran, or did they ask you, or—

Saunders: Absolutely not. I mean, you didn't—you didn't say anything, you know, and you—I don't know; I always thought, jeez, I wasn't that bad, and I started remembering some stuff that really did happen. Because we did everything individually; we didn't go over as a unit, didn't come back as a unit—everybody's experience seemed to be individual. And you came back so fast you were in the field one day and two or three days later I was in my mother's living room. But it was—and I was glad I came to college. I mean, it was very saving; I wanted to learn, get on with life really bad.

Berry: What sort of career did you get involved with after your school?

Saunders: Well, I went to law—then I went to undergrad here, and it was my goal to go to law school, and it was competitive at the time because that was another draft deferment I believe, at the time, and I ended up going to law school; I was accepted out at Creighton and I went to—at Omaha, Nebraska, and I went to school there for three years, and then I moved to where I am now in Iowa, northeast Iowa, and opened a practice, hung out my shingle, kind of, and been there, practicing, ever since, kind of semi-retired.

Berry: So you retired in the same town in Iowa that—

Saunders: I'm not retired; I'm still working half-time, so to speak, and I'm still there living in Garna—a town called Garnavillo, Iowa; which is about seven miles from the Mississippi and near Prairie du Chien, and work in a town called Elkader, ten miles away: small town.

Berry: So you're kinda semi-retired now, as we speak.

Saunders: Yeah. My wife's retired.

Berry: Were you injured at all in your military service?

Saunders: No, I wasn't. I was really lucky; I didn't catch malaria, I mean, I'm just lucky. I didn't—I was there, I was about—I was in the field about as—about as long as anybody in the company, all kinds of close things happened, and I'm just very lucky.

Berry: How about rewards or citations? Are you comfortable talking about those, or—

Saunders: I got the same thing we all got. It's kinda, you were there, you know, the parachute badge—combat infantryman badge; Vietnam service; Vietnam campaign with two stars, I think they call them, or clusters—what's the other one—national defense; air medal; bronze star; you know, the marksmanship stuff. They just didn't do awards, much, you know, you got—in fact, we had to—if you wanted them, you had to buy them, as I recall. [Berry laughs] Later, when you got back, I think somebody sold them to the Vietnamese—I don't know; we didn't—

Berry: Well, actually, I think—I think there's a mechanism where you can get a complimentary issue—

Saunders: Yes.

Berry: —of all the awards that were on your DD2-14; all the badges, and—

Saunders: Well, you know, incidentally, this is about mid '80s. I got a box in the mail one day, unsolicited, and it was all those awards [laughs]. So I don't know what happened there, but—

Berry: Have you continued for this long period any of the friendships you made while you were in the service?

Saunders: Yeah, I have. And I have—I started—I totally forgot about it, or I don't know what I did; I just didn't deal with it for about twenty years. Man, I didn't even really know what happened. It all kind of—you just got these sorta like phantom memories of stuff, and did it really happen? Could that have happened? And then you had these weird dreams, and—and, you know, you're getting on with life, so that's not your focus; your focus for Vietnam was back there, and then in the mid '80s, I got really, before—pre-Internet—and I just got really compulsive about finding out some things, where these guys are. One, my very closest friend, we had stayed in Kaise [sp??] a matter of a day's drive away, and we stayed in contact. But there were all these other guys out there. Whatever happened to them, and where did they go? And you don't even get their addresses when you leave, you might not know their whole name. But anyway, in 19—about '85—I started writing to Washington DC, to casualty centers, and things like that, and veterans' entities, and ran some ads in some newspapers out east, and did a lot of things, and found out—found a few guys, found out where some were buried, and never had much luck looking for families, contacted a—got a hold of a father of a friend that was killed—in fact he died—he was in a coma for five years, but anyway, they didn't wanna talk about anything, and I respected that and, uh—and then, it just kind of built, and we would find one guy, and then find another. Anyway, the upshot was that in 1990, in Washington, DC, they had the fiftieth anniversary of the formation of the paratroopers, and I thought “Alright, this is—we can get together under the auspices of this, this thing.” And so, anyway, about five of us, six of us got together, the same company. Met there in DC, and all the guys from Easy Company, Band of Brothers, they were there then, before they were famous, you know all those guys were still young; they were about our age now. And they had Vietnamese Airborne there, and all these guys from World War II; it was their last hurrah, and we marched down Pennsylvania Avenue and all. Anyway, what I was telling you is, I got together with these guys. And what was so—it was just emotional as hell for me, because we sat around in that room, you know, and we started talking. And there were some of these little shards of memory, and these weird things that—it couldn't happen. And then somebody else would bring it up, and we were trying to find out just what happened. And the important thing about it to me was that it validated that this stuff really happened. Some of this stuff really happened. He saw it, and he saw it. He might have been on the other side of that, but it was a relief in some respects, 'cause I wasn't crazy. This stuff—a lot of this really happened. And some very weird things, but we validated each other's memories, and that was really important to me. And then

I—we stayed in touch and then, about five years ago we started going to the 1st Cavalry Division Association meetings, and meeting up with guys, you know. And even though you didn't serve with a guy, you know, you know his story if you were in the same situation.

Berry: Wasn't there a meeting of the 1st Cav here recently in the Twin Cities or someplace?

Saunders: Yes there was; I went to that. In Bloomington, last year. June of 2010, yes. I went to that, and then this year I went to the 8th Cavalry one, down in Fort Bank—Columbus, Georgia, and we went to the drop zone and all that; it was smaller, but—basically, I get together with five or six other guys, and—and this past May, our medic, the guy that threw the .45 down—was the first time I'd seen him since '67, and that was powerful. And he was fine, you know, it's just—I don't know where the time went, but—but you know, the thing about it is interesting; I hadn't seen this guy for, what, forty-four years, don't think I'd talked to him on the phone; I think we'd started e-mailing; we'd just got in touch a few years ago, and he came in, you know, and it was like maybe forty-five minutes at best—I mean, you're plugged right in again. Same frequency, so to speak.

Berry: And have you joined any veterans' organizations, VFW or anything like that?

Saunders: I never joined anything. I got thrown out of a veterans' club here in Madison in about 1969 or '70; I went—I stopped—it was on the lake here, going on the—not Lakeland Drive; I can't think of—where the bike shop used to be. But anyway, there was a veterans' club there, and of course, the Legion and VFW was for World War II guys, we thought, and I was just a kid; I wasn't a veteran, really, in their eyes. I'd been in Vietnam, but that wasn't the same—so anyway, I stopped in there, I think I had a Saturday class or an exam, or something, and I just stopped in there for a beer. Quiet beer, and there were some guys, Korean veterans, I think, and boy, they didn't want me in there at all. My ass was out of there, right then. And right then, I never joined anything. My neighbor was in the 82nd Airborne in World War II, and he came to the—on a membership drive once, and I joined the Legion briefly then. So I never belonged to anything other than the Cavalry Division Association, until last May. I—in Brodhead, guys I went to school with when I was a kid, you know, they're all—they're pretty active in the VFW I thought, You know, I've been a freeloader of this stuff too long. So I joined. I joined the Legion, the VFW—Oh boy, I just—I finally did it! I swore I never would, but I did.

Berry: Did you find them more welcoming than forty years ago?

Saunders: Yeah! Oh, sure! ‘Cause they were us now; we’re the old timers. But I, I’m not active, but I’m, you know, I—they can have my—I got part of the role, I guess, but—

Berry: Okay. I guess, looking back as a whole, how do you feel about your military and your war experiences? Could you sum that up? That’s kind of a tough question.

Saunders: Yeah, it’s kind of, it was the defining part of my life. I think about it a lot.

Berry: More now than you did forty years ago?

Saunders: Yeah, yeah, probably; I go to sleep thinking about it, I wake up thinking about it, and I wake up in the night thinking about it, and I zone out thinking about it. I try not to think about it, but I think about it a lot. I think about that as much as I think about my kids sometimes, and it’s—I don’t know why it is, you know, I probably put it where it should be, but it’s—on the other hand, it’s always been kind of a source of strength, that you draw on. I don’t know why, it just has been. But yet, there’s—there’s a part of it that sets you really apart from everybody else, and I know—well, I’ll just say this right now: If you kill another man, it makes you different, even if he’s trying to kill you. And I wouldn’t—never used to be able to say that, but it sets you apart, and I don’t care what kind of a room you walk into, or the context; you feel like you don’t belong. And that’s, that’s how I feel. I’ve always felt that way, except when I go to those reunions.

Berry: Thank you, Steve. Is there anything else you’d say, or—

Saunders: Uh, yeah.

Berry: Go for it.

Saunders: You know, we weren’t welcomed much when we came back, and I never asked for anything. I got—I feel, yes, mean what I feel about my experience, and here’s another thing I feel: It was harsh and it was dangerous, but I thought it was damn cheap rent for the privileges and the opportunities that this country, this state gave to us. I always felt that way, and I still do. It was cheap rent, and I’m glad I paid it.

Berry: Well, you’ve paid your dues.

Saunders: Thank you. So have you.

Berry: Thank you, Steve.

Saunders: Yeah, thanks, Rick. Privilege.

[End of Interview]