

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

LOUIS MCNAIR

Rifleman, Army Airborne, Vietnam War

2015

OH
2023

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2023

McNair, Louis (b.1950). Oral History Interview, 2015.

Approximate length: 310 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Louis McNair, a native of Freeport, Illinois, discusses his service during the Vietnam War in the US Army with Alpha Company, 3rd Battalion, 503rd Airborne Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade.

McNair talks about his life growing up as an African-American in a small town in the 1950s; his high school attendance while living in Indiana after the death of his father; the Job Corps, and attempt to get a GED in Michigan; the "fast life" lived after returning to Freeport. Although he received a draft notice in September 1968, as a working and expectant father he received a six month deferment. After receiving advanced infantry training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, "Little Vietnam," McNair volunteered for airborne assignment. A two day leave to see his son turned into a month's AWOL in October 1969. Remanding himself he was imprisoned at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, and subsequently sent to Fort Lewis, Washington, and put on a plane for Cam Ranh Bay, South Vietnam.

McNair matriculated through jungle school at Landing Zone Uplift, his home base from January 24, 1970 with the 3rd Battalion, 503rd Infantry, Alpha Company, 173rd Airborne. He speaks of walking point, of being a rifleman in a hunter-killer team. Most of his time in country was in the field. He references a friend from basic that had been killed right before he got to LZ Uplift, and upon whom President Obama had bestowed the Medal of Honor more than forty years later, and voices his anger over the death of comrades, and the frequency of funerals attended. Running throughout is his commentary on the deadening effects of combat on emotion. When he went AWOL-more than once-he found the escape and evasion skills the Army had taught to be as useful when eluding military police as with the enemy. He speaks of encounters with South Vietnamese prostitutes, remarking on the close proximity of GI-frequented brothels and Military Police compounds; and remarks on the regularity of local women selling drugs, and of officers who looked the other way. He relates friendly encounters and hostile ones, but avers that he did not participate in the name-calling, and even physical abuse, of some GIs against the populace. In camp he witnessed a racial divide and harassment. McNair comments on the habits of the South Vietnamese Army.

McNair decries the unmanliness he sees in present-day society and opines that Vietnam led to a loss of direction, certainly for him at the time, as reading about protestors in Stars and Stripes was demoralizing, as was his growing sense that the troops had no leadership and that he lacked the will to fight an unoffending people. McNair was sent to a psychiatrist. Disobeying an order to leave his bunker and go into the field with his fellow soldiers, he was arrested. Imprisoned in a

shipping container, he yet was returned to the field. McNair, against orders, sought to find his company rather than return to the rear when again deemed that he lacked control. The Army considered him burnt-out due to his rage; he was taken to Qui Nhon and forced to board a plane home. He describes his forty-five year battle to clear his name of a dishonorable discharge.

McNair served prison time in the 1980s, survived a gunshot wound, moved to Racine, worked six years at Johnson Wax, lost his job and was homeless. In 2006 he won his dishonorable discharge case and received partial service-connected disability, allowing him to access the VA system, and leading to an official diagnosis of PTSD. Full disability was granted in 2012. McNair talks about his use of art as therapy. A childhood interest renewed, he got his associate's degree at age 45. He credits his Vietnam experience with giving him the perseverance to achieve it.

Biographical Sketch:

Louis McNair (b. 1950) served in the US Army with Alpha Company, 3rd Battalion, 503rd Airborne Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade. He was 'in country' for eight months and four days in 1970. After leaving the service he pursued an art degree, painting and drawing helping to combat his PTSD. He resides in Racine, Wisconsin.

Archivist's Note:

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript.

Interviewed by Helen Gibb, 2015.

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2016.

Reviewed and abstract by Jeff Javid, 2017.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of McNair.OH2023_file 1]

Gibb: Today is Wednesday, November 18, 2015. This is an interview with Louis McNair who served with the Army Airborne during the Vietnam War from March 1969 to September 1970.

McNair: Nineteen--September, yeah. 1970.

Gibb: This interview is being conducted at Louis's home in Racine, Wisconsin. The interviewer is Helen Gibb and this interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans' Museum Oral History Program. Okay. So, I'm going to start where we normally start which is just if you want to tell me a bit about your background: where you grew up and that sort of thing.

McNair: Okay. Okay. I grew up in a small town, Freeport, Illinois. I was born March 8, 1950. We lived on the poor side of town, but I couldn't tell because we had stores, three or four stores, a huge Coca-Cola bottling plant. We had a park right up the street that had those trotters? The trotter horses, you know, that they sit and they-- there was a mile track. They had that. They had a lake, ice house, I mean, skating house, a big softball diamond and a concert shell. They had concerts on the poor side of town. Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus would come there every year. It was right up the street. I could step out in the street and see the circus one block away. We could watch them set up and everybody went and just watched them. So, it was like--

My school was right up the street, Taylor Park, and they were instrumental along with my parents in teaching me the things you need to know which, sadly, I don't see them doing nowadays. They teach you to think. If you didn't go to school, they would come to your house and say "Why isn't Louis in school?" And if you didn't have books, they would say "Don't worry about that. You got to be in school." They'd give you shots. The teachers would always tell us "You have to learn to do this, so you can. You have to, so you can." And I always remember that. You have to, so you can.

My fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Lincoln--she was related to Abraham Lincoln. She was like this huge woman and she was--They would work with you and I couldn't see the board because I didn't know I was nearsighted and neither did my parents. So I could read but when they did the--[telephone rings] That's me.

Could go anywhere. If you needed a job--My parents--Everybody I knew had a job. This Mr. Carter drove a truck for Guyer

Calkins Wholesale. My father worked at a German supper club. He started out as a pinsetter in '27 and he worked his way up to what I consider to be a chef because he ran everything. Lawrence Welk used to come there. It was like three thousand members. These German businessmen. They had no black members but that wasn't important. These were doctors, lawyers, and everybody knew my dad. And "Hey, Joe!" We would go there Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and he would set everything up.

This club was so fantastic. I would go. My brother didn't really get it. We would come in. They had a bowling alley downstairs and they had this--I have a few pictures I managed to save. They had a mezzanine, a ballroom. Like I said, Lawrence Welk used to come there. They had this pig on the table with an apple in its mouth. Yeah! They're partying. They would--my dad had the hat on and the double-breasted thing and he was like there, attending all these functions because he had to be there. He knew how to run everything. They would call him up and "Hey, Joe." He'd get to say something. And this is like in the fifties when segregation was, I never knew what it was. I thought everybody got along. It's just you're different color than me, your hair looks different, you know. Like that. But he would take me there and they had this balcony that went around the mezzanine and a hat check girl at the door at the little thing. I mean, these guys knew how to live.

[00:04:56]

But after every event my father--You know, you got three thousand people, plus we're cooking too much meat and steaks and shrimp. He didn't bring lobster home--we didn't do that--but chicken. And it was all wrapped up and it was hot when he brought it home in this box. He'd have food for the dogs and then a big box for us. Then he'd give my neighbors. "Hey, take this. We're not throwing this away." This is the kind of community I grew up in. They cared about the citizens.

For a small town, it was real progressive. They had independent, what do they call it, entrepreneurs? W.T. Raleigh did all these, manufactured all kinds of stuff, worldwide. He had, like, fifty plants worldwide. They had Furst-McNess which did farm stuff and medicines for cows. Union Dairy is still there. All the dairymen were together. This place was absolute heaven growing up because you could go anywhere--Taylor Park, Read's Park or Krape's Park. Golf courses. I was never told "Hey, what are you doing here, you little--" There was none of that. You could go anywhere.

To high school. We had Freeport Junior High and Freeport Senior High. You're all going to school together. It was just--You didn't question. You just went. In the fifties they closed down all the small rural schools and brought the kids in to Taylor Park. And we just thought "Well, they live in the country so they ride a bus." They were bussing because they closed the schools but it wasn't a big deal. It was like, we all go to school together. When you went to high school, I think

they tried to have a little troublemaker, but that--Get out. Go home. If the police saw you walking, if the police saw you walking during school hours they would stop you and say "Where are you going?" And if you were not with an adult, "Where are you going? You need to get in the car. We're going to take you to school. We're going to call your parents and we're going to find out what you're doing walking the street." It was like that. You see people now walking the streets just aimless, pants hanging off of them, looking crazy, threatening. You didn't have that. So, you're in high school and I made it to--

In '64, my father had a--something happened with his heart and he told me, "Son--" They sent my brother and two sisters to stay with my sister in Indiana. That was the first time I had been around, not around my brothers and sisters. [There was] just my mother, my father, and me. And the dogs. And he said "Son, if I go back to the hospital I'm not coming home." And I thought, what are you talking about? You're always here. He's sixty-four now and I'm like fourteen. And so--he would teach me to do, like, how to take care of my house. You do the furnace like this. You cut the grass. You feed the dogs. And, of course, you do what your mother says because if you don't, well, you know what she's going to--

He never chastised us. It was mother, my mother. But she was right. She showed me how to cook, how to take care of myself, how to act like a man. I was very hard-headed. I would drink her beer up at, like, I was about, I'd say nine. I'd get in her beer. I know where it's at. I'd smoke her cigarettes when she went up to the store. And then she'd come back and there's cigarette smoke in the house. The beer's been opened. She can smell it and she'd ask me "Have you been in my beer?" and I would lie to her and say "No. I don't know what you're talking about." And, of course, well--but she was so--I think I got my creativity from her,

Because we had this big yard and we always had everything. We had dogs. We all had toys and bikes. And she was fun. A mother that was like--she didn't play but if she told you to do something, you'd better do it. I'm going to tell you and don't have me tell you again and then she'd just--Like one of those missiles, those guided missiles. I saw this scooter that had the big wheels like that and I wanted it. "I want that. On TV, yeah." She said "You don't need that. Shoot, you don't even know how to have fun." So I had these skates. She said "Where are your roller skates at? Probably tore them up, didn't you?" I said "No but I've only got one." So she took it apart. She took a two-by-four about this thick and she nailed one part on this end and one part on that end and then she made this, nailed a piece of the front and then put this thing on it. We was like "I don't want to play with that." She said "That's all right. I'm going to play with it." And she gets on the sidewalk and she goes down the sidewalk and she's smiling. She was always laughing. And then she came back up and we're like "I'm not playing[?]? Mama's crazy." Then she turned around again and did it again and you could see her face. She was just like a kid. By the time she came back the third time we were jerking at it and jerking at it and oh--then we were playing with it and then we just took it around to the front of the house and she just went on in the house and did her

housework and drank her beer. She was always at home. Always. We lived by a river and in the spring she'd take us kids and my grandmother. They'd go down the tracks and pick wild greens and she'd get wildflowers. Of course, we'd tear them up but I remember her doing all of this.

It was just wonderful. I was in heaven. The world was like--The whole world was like this. And then, like I said, by the time I was fourteen and then a year and a half later in September '66 my father died. She came home and she was crying. She said "He's gone. He's gone." She was never the same after that. She was just--I would catch her crying. But I had to go to school in Gary, Indiana for some reason that adults know that sixteen-year-olds don't know. So I went to Gary and stayed with my sister who was just like my mother. [makes sound] She's eighty-something now.

[00:12:48]

When I got to Gary, Indiana, I knew something was wrong the first day I went up to register. They had burnt the office up with all the school records, most of 'em. I thought, this is strange. You don't want your parents to know that you got bad grades and you didn't pass. I think they're going to find out. But they didn't. And I sat there for about--I think I was there about seven months. I came home in April because there was just this huge--April. The weather gets warm and just--up to a hundred, two hundred people would just--[howl] This family against this one. And I thought--people would walk the halls and they were obviously "I know that guy" so I'm up there by the tavern, just walking the dogs. "You look like about thirty years old. What are you--?" Just walk the halls. Teachers didn't say anything. They would smoke marijuana in front of the school and drink at lunch time. You could stand across the street and watch them. Nothing was said. And I thought--I had no books this entire time. The one I did have I had to read on with this--I was in the ninth grade I think. Yeah. Something like that. Eighth grade? I don't know. I was sixteen I know that. So, it was--I was reading with this--they said "You have to read with a person." And in Freeport we always had, you had your own books. Right through high school you got your own. I was reading and I read this and I read that and the person that--I went to turn the page and the woman said "Hey, wait a minute. Where are you going?" "What?" I said. "I'm going to the next page. What are you talking about?" I said "I'm done. Where are you at?" And she pointed and she was like halfway down the first page and I was already done. And so I thought, this is odd. And then I turned the page and the page was missing. Oh boy. This is a joy. So I just sat back and the teachers they didn't say anything. And it was like--I think this was Life Class 101, the beginning. I got out of there.

I wound up in Job Corp in Battle Creek, Michigan, to try to get my GED because I had learned early in life that you have to have, you have to graduate if you want to be something. This was the teachers from grade school. It's right there, right there. That got closed down. I think I was on my third test. And then they had

riots and just what they called 'background checks.' They didn't do it. They had thieves, thugs, murderers in the Job Corp. I got mugged. I got robbed by this guy and he didn't even try to hide his face. He had a big crescent wrench. He said--he was reaching under my pillow--"Shut up before I hit you!" And he punched me. And I got mad, because I didn't grow up fighting, so I thought "Why did you hit me?" So I ease out the bed and I was talking to him. He has a big wrench. And I'm like--so I started talking loud. He runs out. The FBI eventually catch him. They close it down.

Now I'm back in Freeport. That was a disappointment. I was--I didn't know what to do. The Vietnam thing was there but it was, like, *just there*. Right there but I didn't see it. Then I was changed somewhat as far as a teenager. I'm more like-- [snaps] Yeah. I'm like that now because my--Freeport seems odd. I've been in this fast life. I used to work for my brother-in-law who works for Joe Louis the boxer. He had a milk company. And we would be in Chicago or Gary and whoa! In the sixties? Well, you see Gary now it's like Beirut. It's nothing. And so when I came back I had this, I guess you would call it, a new sense of the world. That there's something bigger than--and I couldn't really--I didn't know what to do. So I wound up, me and my nephew, who I was very close to, we got these two sisters pregnant. So I said "I better get a job." So I get a job. And then the Army says "Hey! You know what? Since you're not in school and you haven't been paying attention to us and we're going to get you if you're not in school." They said "Let's go." But I said "Wait. Whoa, whoa." This was September of '68 they wanted to take me and I would have been in a mess. But I said "I can't go." I just told them I can't go right now. They said "What do you mean?" I said "I can't go right now. I got stuff I got to do." So he said "Okay. We'll give you a six-month delay" which they did then. And then I forgot all about it. I'm like "Yeah--" and I'm working and trying to take care of my son who was born in October '68. And then the girl said "You're running away." I said "I got drafted. What am I supposed to do? Go to Canada?" I said "It's cold up there. Canada?! That's running." Remember John Wayne and stuff? You don't run. You face it.

[00:18:40]

So I wind up in Fort Polk, Louisiana. They called it "Little Vietnam". They made a movie about it, *Tigerland*. It's in the swamps. And, let me tell you, it's infantry school and so you go through that. The guy I was in basic training with, he was like "Yes sir, drill sergeant. Yes sir." And he did everything by the numbers and I thought "What's with this dude?" But then I decided, well--It was something about him. I got to listen to him. So he was--they made him squad leader, put the patch on him with the sergeants because there was something in him. He was a nice guy once I got to know him. We would go through this stuff.

I think it's ten weeks basic and then they're watching you and whatever you do, your scores and how you perform and how you follow rules. They signed me up for advanced infantry training [AIT] which I thought everybody took; but they

don't. They just--the ones that score high, we're putting them in the next one. So they had us take a forty-five caliber pistol, M-60 machine gun, you know, the Rambo gun, that one, the M-14 rifle, the M16 and I could just--they would do this. Take it apart. Take it apart. And they're talking to you and telling you to feel this and that. Little things like "Rub your thumb over that. You'll feel a little nipple. That goes back that way. That's the firing pin. You put it in backwards it won't fire." So they said--and you're timed. So we're going--then they say "Okay. Blindfolded." I said, "Is this guy kidding?" But they weren't. They were "Put the blindfolds on and don't peek." So I'm like [makes sound] and he said "Don't move once you get it set up. Just sit there." And I could do this. And they said "The reason you're doing this is when you get to Vietnam, it's going to be pitch black. You're going to have to--if your weapon jams, there's no flashlights. You can't see your hand in front of your face. You have to do this all by touch and sound." And I could do it. And you didn't think you could but if you listened and you did what they said--

And so I wound up in AIT [Advanced Individual Training] and *Tigerland* and it's like, oh, they really--if you make it this far, you're good material. So they said "Who wants to go airborne?" "I do, I do, I do." And my friends, two or three of my friends "We're going too!" We're like "Yeah! We're tough." So we go to Fort Benning, Georgia and I'm in--anyway, if you walk from here to there, you've got to run. You can never walk.

After that I came home. Yeah, I came home. And then it dawned on me because I had been in Fort Lee, Virginia for parachute rigger school which is to learn how to fold parachutes, which I realized--well, actually I'm evading the Army now. I'm playing their game but I'm very good at it, which is what they taught me to do. They teach you to be evasive. They have a course called Escape and Evasion. And you get that in your last part. And if you're a screw-up, wait till we get you out here. And so they give you this food, raw chicken and stuff, and you have to fix your own food and then you're doing all this and it's just tense all day. And then they walk you down this fire lane and you go into this--it's evening. You go into the swamp. You can go anywhere in these little things that you want but they're in there waiting for you and if they catch you, they're going to beat the crap out of you, especially if you're a screw-up. So I'm like "I'm not getting caught." And so we came in. There's a crowd of guys bunching up and they said "Don't bunch up." People are talking and I said "I can't do this." So it's like this now. It's just shadows and you're in a swamp. And so I broke away. These guys are making all kinds of noise so I go hide in this clump of weeds. They said "There they are!" and the guy ran right past me. Then, another one was standing and since I was just laying, I didn't move, didn't breathe or nothing. They said "There they are" and they caught them. You could hear them up on this camp. So I went on my way because I got by myself. I was with one guy and then he broke off this way and I went that way. This is what you're supposed to do. You can't be in a pack. And you could hear people screaming. I mean, they were up in the [inaudible] and you're captured. They said, "This is what's going to happen to

you.” They were breaking arms, jaws, nose. They were there. And you have to be able to get through the swamp which is like this lane. You can’t go past these red lights. You shouldn’t see them because you shouldn’t be that close to the edge. That’s their--They’re waiting for you to try to sneak out. That’s the firing range over there and there’s creeks and gulleys and snakes and all kinds of stuff. But you just block that out. The ground would light up with the fluorescent moss. You could see snakes going past. It looks like a light blue powder and you could see people and they look like black--they look like shadows. And then you’ll see a snake.

[00:24:54]

But I just kept going and I finally came through. And so you know when you get there because you’ll see these lights. If you made it this far then you go to report to the barracks. I was like--my mind is just--I’m brainwashed by now. I’m just doing whatever. I think military but I don’t even know it. I don’t even know this.

So I wind up in, back home, and I said, “I haven’t got to see my son.” She really was pissed off at me. I almost went to jail because I tried to see him and this guy tried--he pulled a knife on me. One of my schoolmates because she was going into the hospital. I’m like “What?! I just want to see my son.” And then the police came. My sister just happened to be walking by and said “What are you doing? Leave him alone.” I was backing up. This is the same cop that I sucker punched. Me and my friend. He didn’t even recognize me. I sucker punched him. I thought that was funny. He didn’t even recognize --so he wasn’t a threat. When he started up on me and I’m backing up and going across the street, this thing starts which the Army has already put in me. It starts clicking. I’m getting over here and then I stop. I’m like “I’m going to knock him out” because the police only went around one at a time. So I’m going to drop his ass, drop his ass. But then he went on and then I wound up realizing that “I got to get out of here.” But I didn’t have any money. I was broke because they only gave me like forty dollars a month in the Army.

Gibb: So you had some leave time before--

[00:26:39]

McNair: Yeah, but I just stayed over. Oh yeah.

Gibb: How long did you have?

McNair: A couple of--I had like a few days but I would have went to Vietnam around November, and I said “Nah.” The street thing came in. Me and my nephew were both home, both AWOL, both drinking and partying and taking pictures and laughing about everything. I don’t care. Because that’s how we were anyway. The little street thing in Gary. So, eventually I turned myself in. I was like twenty-

eight, twenty-nine days AWOL or something. I didn't have any money so I called into this police station and turned myself in and they put me in a federal cell and then the MPs came and got me and took me to Fort Sheridan in Chicago. And then they put me on a plane and sent me to--What is that name? Oh, they sent me to Nam, but that one part that I missed is when I was in Fort Lee, Virginia. I told them I quit. I quit the Army. They said "You can't quit." I said "I'm not doing this program because you're lying to me." The first time I realized that they would lie to you. They said "When you get in here you don't have to do this, you don't have to do that. You're in class. You're going to be a corporal" and all this crap.

And then the sergeant was a drunk. Some of the Vietnam veterans and stuff, I was in the building with them and the guy came back. He was--he said "We keep the barracks-- looks like glass." You walk around the edge of it with your socks on. You don't put any cigarettes in the butt cans. You just keep it and when you get up in the morning and you fall out and then leave because they'll come get you for detail. But my first sergeant, staff sergeant, he was a drunk. He would wake us up at twelve midnight thinking it was 6:30 in the morning. And he's standing out here and he's drunk as Cootie Brown and I'm like--and so we found to evade him.

But I was in Fort Lee and I would listen to--I would devise schemes not to go so I could be gone all day. I was sick. Ooh, my elbow. Anything. So then they put you on sick call and they gave us these pills. Wow, what are these? Take one and find out. So I took one and I was like "I think I'll go listen to me some music." So I was sitting in the barracks, writing down all these songs that Tony Bennett was singing. Nat King Cole. Frank Sinatra. I meant--I'm like, "Man. This is cool" because I grew up with that music. And so I'm like--and then my time there was up. It's time to go to Nam. So I told my--

Gibb: How long were you there? In Fort Lee?

[00:29:40]

McNair: It was during the moratorium. I remember that. The moratorium. They had the big one in October and then I came home. Yeah, and that's when I stayed. I stayed and then I turned myself in and they took me and sent me to a brig in Fort Sheridan and then from there they just sent me to Fort Lewis, Washington. I was standing next to this colonel and I was looking at him like "Okay. I know the insignia. So what?" I just looked at him like--I still ain't got it. I'm a soldier when I'm over here but I'm on a bus now. I'm on a bus. I don't have to salute you. I'm holding on. I'm not going to do that.

So I get there and then I'm in Fort Lewis and I see my friend, Jessie Brooks, who I used to run the streets with. He was from Chicago. He was pretty quick. He was one of those Chicago guys. He was pretty quick. But he's in the Army as was a lot of my other friends. They weren't ducking and talking about "get whitey" and "I'm not doing the white man's thing." We were not doing that. We weren't

brought up like that. This time is served. So I'm talking to him and it starts one of these snow showers and I'm looking around for this mountain that they're all yelling about. Rainier. I said "Ain't no mountain. They lied." Then I come out the next day. The sun is shining and [I] turn around and it's like, bam! There's this huge--

And the next thing I know, I'm on a flight. It just went dull after that. I'm on this flight. I think it was Flying Tiger. I didn't like that name. Where's TWA at? You know? Pan Am? And so we get there and we fly from Seattle-Tacoma to Hawaii. We're in Hawaii? Are you kidding me? Ain't this where those hula girls and stuff are at? Man, it's Hawaii. Forget everything just--So we said "Let's go downtown. Why not?" Me and another one of my friends was there because he caught the flight behind me. "Let's see the town for a hot minute. We going to Nam. We going to Nam." So we still had like six or seven dollars. That looks like a gate. We start walking. "Hey! Hey, you guys. Where are you going?" "Hey, Sarge." "Hey Sarge? It says 'MP'. Where are you going?" "We going downtown." He said "I don't think so." So I won't use his exact phrase. He told us to get your [pause] back over there because you'll be getting out of here in the next couple of hours. And I'm like "How can you do this? I'm a soldier. I'm going overseas. I'm going to fight." "You go on back over there." So we tried to get something to drink. "No, you're not getting anything." I mean, we couldn't get--I don't know if we got beer or nothing but they weren't--they're like "You guys aren't getting anything." They herded us, they kept us in this building because they see what kind of a little rowdy crowd they've got here.

[00:33:16]

And the next thing I know, I'm on this flight. I wake up. I'm in Guam. But before I land it's like somebody turns up the steam. Before we even land it's like "Oh man! What the--" Then we land on this Guam and don't even get off the plane. We're not even--"You guys are not even--Don't even think about it." So they just kind of like--we were sitting there like cooking. Then we took off again. And then I remember they said Cameron Bay. I was asleep most of this time because there was nothing else to do. So we came in and it's just pretty, gorgeous, white sand.

And here we are, and we're all--I looked around and I'm like "I'm in Vietnam now." So I look over here and I see this huge rock, like those rocks in the John Wayne pictures with the Devil's Canyon or Monument Valley." And I'm like "But it's got green on it." And you see little white--and I'm like "Wow. Hard to judge size." So up on top there was a little building. I said "That's pretty high." So the next thing I know I'm over here and I see my--"Hey, Louie." And I see my friend, Jessie. "Man," I said, "I told you I'd beat you over here." It still ain't sunk in. I don't know what he was doing. I know I'm a soldier. And so they gave us some toothpaste and said "Go brush your teeth" and this and that and "do it right" and it was like a combination of sand and toothpaste. Nastiest tasting. And I'm like "This is, this is--I got to get some real toothpaste." So I'm walking and all of

a sudden I come around this building and I look and there's this little woman coming up toward me. I remember her body was going like that. And she had this hat on, right, this little conical hat, black pajamas, and she had this pole with this stuck on it. She was just--I couldn't have carried it. She was just walking. Slow. This little frail thing. She was just--never missed a beat. And everybody was like "Oh, so that's what Vietnamese look like." I always called them Vietnamese. I never called them "gook," "dinks," "slopeheads." I just couldn't get that part because in my upbringing you don't call names. The "N" word is--Man, no, we don't play that.

[00:36:02]

And then it was like [makes sound] and then it kind of goes, it fuzzed out. It fuzzes out because there's nothing really happening until they put you on the trucks. Now you're going to your destination. So we get on these trucks and we're all combat loaded down and we don't know what's going to happen. We go up the coast and the smells--and I'm looking at, what is this red dust? There's a convoy of trucks with all these soldiers and we're like--half of them Vietnamese. They these little umbrellas and--[knocking] Yeah? Now?

Okay, so I'm like--now it's this--you didn't notice it. I know I'm not in the United States and I'm here, but it's like you went through this like jello thing and suddenly everything is surreal. It's not--because I've never seen this before. What are these people, these smells, these sounds? Jets flying over and diesel fuel. Boom! You hear guns going off and it's daytime.

We finally get to my--it was about forty miles, maybe fifty miles away, maybe a little more. We get to this place. They say "You're going to go to jungle school first and get acclimated." And so I wind up in this place called Landing Zone Uplift. They say "You're going to be with the 3rd Battalion, 503rd Infantry, Alpha Company." So I'm like "Okay." But nothing is real now. Nothing is--you're just like--got this--it's not real. It is but you all your senses are like going crazy. Then they stop. Then they just--And so I'm like--

We stay there like a week and they take us out around the camp. Two hundred guys at least. And "I'm going to kick ass here. We going to tear this place up" because I've got a rifle and everybody else has got one. I got all these bombs and bullets on me and I was like almost a sharp shooter. I tried to hit everything that I could because I loved rifles from a kid. Gene Autry. Roy Rogers. John Wayne. I've grown up with this on TV. This is in my head. This has made me ready to go into the service to serve. All of these Army pictures, '53 Korean War started, I was three years old. That's all that was on TV. You could buy a hundred soldiers for like fifty cents. I would just get them and burn them and make all these war plans. And I didn't know I was being indoctrinated because of what I saw on TV, to believe. But it was quite natural. This is America. I'm not a black American. I'm just an American and this is America. That's where I'm from.

So they sent us up to--it was right down the road. And then they sent us to this huge place. It had an artillery battery over, a little ways over. Not far. And then they had this huge, one of those lights that they have in World War II? Those big spotlights? They had one of those--a fun "Mister Sunshine" we called it. And then we were down here and there was a main highway coming through. There was some Special Forces people who I've learned to stay away from. They were quite odd. They had like human skulls in their room and they smelled funny. And they always sat in the dark and smoked weed and they were like--I touched, picked up this head and they said "Don't do that. Put that down," and it was a real person's head. And it was in there and they had a cigarette in its mouth and a camo on the head and all that. And I'm like--and I found out later--I had a friend. One was from my hometown. He was with the--I remember it was Echo, Seventy-fifth Rangers. And the Seventy-fifth Rangers were with us. They would do these four-man recon things, which was odd. I thought--and my friend was named, his name was English. Last name was English which I always remember because there was an L[anding]Z[one] English north of us in Bô `ng Son which was like Kandahar [Afghanistan]. You didn't go there. You just--it was V[iet] C[ong] from--They were just nationalists [or National Liberation Front; operating in South Vietnam and Cambodia against US and South Vietnamese government forces] I guess you call them. They were like--Binh Dinh province, Bô `ng Son, Binh Dinh province. You really didn't go up there on our little excursions, GI excursions. "Let's just ride up," which we would do all the time.

[00:41:23]

I learned how to do that. Just get on the truck and act like you're supposed to leave here. And you get on a truck and you just kind of hang on and look at the guy like--and you just leave. Just right in front of him. They taught me all this stuff. Just hide right in plain sight. And I would go out to this little village of Phù Mĩ [South Central Coast region of Vietnam] and sit with--There would be warrant officers with the chopper pilots. You would have maybe a lieutenant, sergeants. "We're going down to the ville." "For what?" "To kick it." "Okay. I'm going too." So my point man and the guy that taught me everything took us down there. We were smoking reefer and drinking--they made Coca-Cola for us and [makes sound] spritzed it up. I met Monique and Kim. Monique was, she was just this very serious Vietnamese woman who had black pajamas on. Everybody listens to her and she raised her shirt up and showed me three bullet holes. She's not a rice farmer. Okay--[inaudible] come down and relax and then the MPs would come down there and try to shoot up everything. So we got tired of that. So we started shooting back. Yeah. We're not doing anything and they made us--they let us jump in this--They said "The MPs are coming." They would line the kids up for like a mile. They just standing along the road. You think they're begging. They're not. They're signals. "MP! MP! MP!" and before the MPs can get there the GIs got a chance to hide. So they told us, "Down in here!" So we get in this hole and they were going to kill us. There's like eight of us down in there. They

could have threw a grenade in, but that wasn't the purpose. We're here to get your money, sell you marijuana or drugs if you want them. No girls. Sorry, Charlie. Not here. It ain't happening. Same thing in Balsa [??]. We went up there and the MPs chased us and were shooting at us. We were running through these--people's gardens. They were quite pissed off. This old lady was like, she had this garden hoe and I was running. There was barbed wire like this to keep people from walking in it and I'm running through it. And she [makes sound]. I'm like "Whoa." We ran back and--we just ran a pattern. That way and then that way. We don't know where we're going. It's jungle. And then we came out down the road and there's this GI standing there like--and so we're just standing there like this, like it's a bus stop. Just standing on the road, not supposed to be there. We catch a ride back. We don't go back there but I think I went back one more time and these ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] soldiers--

Me and my friend Ben, who I have never seen again, we were talking to these girls. They had these sandbags and they were awesome, these women were gorgeous. And they were talking, la-la-la-la. I don't know what she's saying. A little English. Thinking I might get lucky but not really because something--up here everybody is like staring at you. So I'm like, "Well--" These guys bust in and they start knocking the girls around and screaming at them. This guy pulled this bag down and it was full of weed. They had sandbags up to the ceiling. Marijuana. What the--? And then he does the dumbest thing. He turns, and me and Ben are sitting there smoking weed. Must be a family problem. I don't know. We weren't doing anything. He kind of locked and loaded on us. So we like "Oh, really?" And it was a standoff. "What you going to do next?" [makes sound] And I'm like "Yeah. Right." And so we said, "I think it's time for us leave." We didn't go back up there. That was not a place.

[00:46:00]

I think from--it was always a nationalist stronghold. They never had a problem with the people here. They were strongly Vietnamese. We got the hell out and they--you didn't go up there. So we quit going there. And then, with Monique and Kim, that was like four miles away. They would come into the camp and do work. And Monique would constantly be doing this. Always. And Kim was with her.

Gibb: Looking around?

McNair: Looking around. They got them in there and they're supposed to be cleaning up the garbage and they sure are. They're cleaning up all right. And they're like--but you don't notice it. I didn't because this is their country. We're the ones that don't belong here. And then shortly thereafter we got hit. Mortar rounds. [makes sound] Of course, they weren't around. I thought "Wow. Hmmm--" By now I've been going out with a squad which is like nine or ten men.

Gibb: Okay. So, yeah. Tell me which base you're at at this point.

[00:47:19]

McNair: Uplift. That was the Uplift. That was my home base. That's where I was stationed. I was supposed to be there a year. I came in January 24, 1970 and my friend--remember I told you about him that I met in basic training? He was just up in my area. And he got killed a week before, exactly one week before I got there. But he had been soldiering big time. He had a couple or two or three medals. I look on the TV a couple of years ago and President Obama was calling his name. And they showed--I looked on the computer and I said, "Oh my god. It's him." Sloat. S-l-o-a-t and I never heard that last name. But he got the Medal of Honor just a couple of years ago. Donald P. Sloat. And he died on a grenade to save his buddies. I said I always knew there was something special about him. That's why I listened to him. If you're not trying to be anti-Army, which you shouldn't be here if you're not going to listen because they're going to mess you up. You're going to get messed up. I just--it sent a shock wave through me because I never saw--I met my cousin who lived behind me all his life, I met him in Vietnam when I was on one of my little excursions in Qui Nhon [coastal city in Binh Dinh Province, Central Highlands, South Vietnam]. I would just get in my truck and just ride. I'm trying to get away from the war now because stuff is--I've been out a couple of times and it's kind of hairy because only ten guys go out.

Gibb: Okay, yes. So put me through what you were assigned to do?

McNair: Okay. I was in the regional rifle squad. I'm a rifleman, basically, but my designation was hunter-killer team. But I had no idea of this. I thought everybody went out in groups of ten, but they used to go out in two hundred. A whole company would move. You see on the newsreels? The whole company would be moving when they did these big attacks. We were not doing that. The strategy, as I found out years later, every year we had to change strategy. Kind of like with this ISIS thing going on. You got to change it because they're changing. They can't stand up against B-52s. They can't do it. They can't deal with us head-on. So they had teams of four. And we would track each other. We would do this all day long. Three and four days. Cat and mouse. They would be like from here to the parking lot down up under you. You went in the mountains. And basically we sat up ambushes. We're loaded for bear. We got Claymores [M18 anti-personnel mine that when command-detonated sends out a shotgun spray of metal balls], machine guns, grenades and we're good. And they're good, too. But one morning they were coming this way and somebody spotted them. And we would be in these mountains, in these little valleys where the water is at. And they'll live right next to a stream and dig right into the side of the mountain and put these bunkers. Huge. You can't even see them until you walk up on them, and they're right there, and then you're dead because they're looking right at you and generally you're coming up a hill. We went to get some water and they were down there.

[00:51:10]

Because the first day nothing happened and the second day we went to get some water but they were down there getting water, too. It's in the morning. It's like "Hey, move over, buddy. Yay!" And all hell broke loose. And so I dropped down and I heard this guy running. I didn't quite get to the streambed but it was deep enough that a guy could stand under it like this and you couldn't see him. It went like this and then it dog-legged this way and it went that way. And so he's running and I'm laying there thinking "Should I shoot? Should I not shoot?" But my first instinct is "Don't shoot because you don't have a target." You don't know where they're at. You can only see like maybe right to that table.

Gibb: How far is that?

McNair: Right there. It's just--

Gibb: Like a couple of feet?

McNair: Yeah. That's it. Everything's green. We're in the mountains and so you have to use your, of course, your sight and your smell and your hearing. That's what you would use. You could smell them. They would cook fish and rice. And, God, whoooo--And the stronger the odor, the closer you are. It lingers after they're gone. And so we find these bombs and stuff. And I go up the stream after this guy. I said "Hey, where are you going?" I said, man, probably waiting a couple feet on the other side of--it was a little thing went over like that. And so I came back and I was--I sat down for some reason, right in the middle of the trail that we'd just walked up and pushed off into the bush. I set my weapon down--which I learned to keep it, always keep it with me--and I heard "tink" and I looked up. All my friends were back, like about six feet away, and I'm sitting out here on the trail. Woops. Mistake. Never sit on a trail. So I start to roll like this and everything goes in slow motion. Then my friend, one of the two point men, he automatically goes this way. Then there's this tree like this and this guy is up under it. He saw him go under it and he's up on top and he's telling him to come out, come out. "Drop your weapon and come out." He had been there a while. The guy came out with what they call port of arms. It's a fighting position like that. You're getting ready to turn and shoot or--And he just [makes sound], stitched him, just chopped him to pieces.

[00:53:51]

All this time, I had got my weapon and I laid down because I remembered the stream pattern and that you could stand up under it. So I started laying down this fire in case somebody popped their head up. But I can't see. I can't see twenty feet away. So on the other side of the stream I almost shot the medic because he's in a hammock. They said don't put hammocks up because you should be on the ground unless at night. And so Doc is laying back and the bullets that I shot went that far over his head. Just--He said "Yeah, man. Some bullets came flying." I'm

like “Oh, really? [inaudible] You’re lucky.” So we look at this guy and he’s like fifteen years old at least. He had black pajamas and he’s laying in a stream and he’s dead. I had no emotion whatsoever. None. I said “What are we going to do with him?” They said “Leave him there. They’ll be back.”

So we sat right there. We put these booby traps, mines, out, anti-personnel mines. They’re about this thick and about that big and they will just really--seven hundred ball bearings. They can do a job on you. And the little thing is like this, a little gorge. So they got one here and two this way and there’s a little hill and then there’s brush. So you couldn’t run that way. And you set this trip flare. When it goes off it pops and it blinds you because it’s so bright. And you just, for a minute--and then the guy is sitting there [makes sound] and you’re done. There’s no running. And so there was a [makes sound].

I was sitting there talking to this guy. I used to call him “old man.” He reminded me of my father. I used to call him “old man.” He was on guard duty. He was on guard duty. And he let go and nobody fired a shot. Then in the morning we looked. There were his three friends. They came back to get him, to pick the body up and move it. His leg was missing. One guy--They just had these black, soot-like, all these holes in them. And his leg was gone and his foot. And the faces just “Aah!” like they felt it for an instant. And I still had no feeling. None whatsoever.

And I know the Army had did this. This is what we’re doing to you and you’re going to get good at it. I said “What should we do with them?” They said “We leave them. Let’s go.” These are the two guys, the point men. The guy, one of their names was Johnny Allen, Junior, and he picked me out of formation in the first week I was there. I would notice, they were standing over there and they’re not in formation sometimes. They’re just standing there like big-time shot callers. We can—and then he said “Private McNair. Come here. You look like you’re a strike true.” And he asked me did I smoke weed and I said no. He said “Do you want to try some?” I said “Why not? I’m getting shot at. What the hell? I can’t get whiskey. I can get beer but I can’t get whiskey. It’s in the same building.” And so he told me, he showed me something. That the officers--we were smoking marijuana, long joints like this, about the size of your finger. Bong Chong [??] Bombers is what they called them. And you smoked that and whoo. you’re kind of like mellow. It would knock you out because in the state you’re smoking them like that. I see this guy coming and his helmet is flashing. I said “Oh, it looks like a lieutenant colonel or some big shot.” So I try to hide mine and he’s like--And the guy goes right past us. Just don’t notice us. He said “They don’t care about you.” He said “The next one will come by” because we’re standing at operations headquarters. We’re standing right there. Two black guys just like we’re waiting on a bus, smoking weed and nobody said a word. Officers coming and going. And he said--The next guy came by and he didn’t even look at us. It was a captain. Didn’t even look our way. I know you saw us coming up the road because there’s two black guys standing there like they’re waiting on a bus with these long pink

things in their mouths. You know what it is. They didn't say anything. He said "Do what I tell you and you might make it."

[00:58:50]

So he taught me how to listen, how to walk, what to do with my nose, what to smell, what not to do. You got to get this within the first thirty days. You've got to get it otherwise you're in trouble. I used to walk, try to walk point with him but I've got glasses so they're steaming up and I can't see and I'm doing this. So this guy comes in named Sherman P. Davis. We called him Sugar Bear Pondy [??]. He was from Washington, DC. Prettiest--His skin was like Hershey's Cocoa. The chocolate? It was just dark and smooth and he had the whitest teeth I *ever* seen in a black man. And he would always smile. Always. He wound up walking point and I said "Well, what's--" I didn't think nothing of it. And they wound up walking up on an ambush and I wasn't there that day. I used to blame myself but I'm not, I wasn't supposed to be there. You know, the fighting spirit. Dice is dead. Dice is like--He's gone. He got it right after my birthday. We were out and you just become this family, you're like nine or ten guys and then a sergeant and you're—

Gibb: The same guys?

McNair: Yes. The same guys unless they get killed. The same guys. And so all you're doing, you're up and down on these hills. You're constantly, constantly--There is no rest. Your mind is [makes sound]. You're just waiting. Waiting. Stop. Listen. It's quiet except for the birds and you moving around. We came down this--We went into this place and I don't know where it's at because once you get in the helicopter and they take you out--We went to the face of this valley. Once you get in it and you're flying over these trees, you don't know which way you're going. They do. But you don't. Why? Because you don't need to know where you're going. So just shut up. You know what to do. So you don't argue.

[01:01:27]

So we landed and we came down this, started down in the jungle, down this ravine. And I catch a whiff of fish and rice. So we're coming down and then it gets funny. It gets real spooky like because everybody is like tipping. And you can feel people's eyes just--And then we come around, the guy comes around and all of a sudden [makes sound] it just breaks open. It's just [makes sound] and that's an AK [-47 semi-automatic and automatic assault rifle]. Ours is pop, pop, pop. It pops. You can tell the difference so whoever shoots first might have the advantage. So I'm laying there like this because I can't see anything but the guys behind me. Then we come around and then we--They were sitting there eating, these two soldiers. We found maps. We found a uniform that was from the laundry. Hello! One-Hour Martinizing. These guys have got it going on. It was in plastic, clear plastic, and it was a gray uniform. I'm like "Whoa. Whoa. Who are

we fighting?” And then we found all these maps of our camp. All this ammunition. And the captain says “We’re going to go down and come back up tomorrow” and everybody was like “Oh, Captain. Number one rule: keep the high ground.” There are all these bunkers we’re finding. Old bunkers, new ones. And so he said “No.” He was cool, though. Bill Welch was okay. He said “We’re going--” because he was out there and he was up front and he wasn’t in the back “You guys go that way.” He wasn’t doing that.

[01:03:23]

So we go down and we sit down at the base of it in this scrub brush, kind of relaxing. And then they said--I looked around. I guess night had passed. One thing I noticed, too. Time, my sense of time. It’s either day or it’s night. There’s no--It’s 3:30. Where you got to be at four? See, you just lose that. And people don’t understand. It’s gone.

So I was sitting there like this, relaxing. I just happened to look to my right and I seen Dice. I seen a guy named Red. He was from Madison and I never knew his name. He just had red hair. He was supposed to be going home. He shouldn’t have been out there but he’s caught up in this killing thing. And Allen and Aldris [??], the two point men. I said “Hey, where are you guys going?” They said “We’re going up here to check the thing out.” I said “Let me go with you.” They said “Okay.” I said “Let me go get my weapon.” So I turned to get it and they just took off. “We ain’t got time for you.” That’s four guys. And then I’m like “Dang, they didn’t even wait on me.” See? It’s--you’re not getting it. It’s not about you, Louis.

[01:04:50]

So all of a sudden it’s [makes sound] and without thinking I grab my [M]-16 and ran straight toward that hill, that path we had just come down. Shooting is going on and all I know is I’ve got to get from here to there. I need to get up there where I can see them. And then I dropped down and I started crawling. And all this--It goes like that. Everything goes--you don’t hear nothing. You know what’s going on. You can smell this gun powder and then--It’s funny you just get tunnel vision on everything. And then I’m crawling and I catch this little glimpse out of the corner of my eye and it’s a pin. A green and silver pin sticking up in the middle of the trail. What? That won’t work. That’s a bomb. I thought it was a mortar round which probably would have killed everybody but they missed it going up. So I’m crawling. And it’s crazy because I hear this shooting and I look back and I see these little gray faces. There were three more soldiers right behind me. I just pushed the dirt back and pointed. “Do you see that?” and my leg had come up like this. I was crawling and my leg stopped like right there. Two more inches and I would have hit this. It was a break-off pin. It just breaks off and it [makes sound]. That’s it. They had stuck it in the ground overnight because they knew we were coming back up. They knew our routine.

So I crawled some more, about another six feet. There's another one. I push this back. And then I'm listening. I notice there's no shooting. I'm looking and I see this bunker. It's just a black hole, about like that. It's a gun port is what it is. And the guy is yelling at this "bunker on my right, bunker on my right!" I see it. So I think I popped some rounds in it but I don't remember because I had to get up the hill. I got up there and I turned and I saw Chief and I saw Allen, John Allen. And I looked. There was a foot sticking out. I said, "Oh--" I went to look and they told me, Dice, he came around the corner and the guy must have been waiting on him in the bunker.

Killed him. He was an Italian guy and he was always--Everybody was so young. Like, I could be with this guy back on the street. It was like that. It's wearing you out. It's eating at you. You don't even notice it. You've still got this mind set. "I'm just nineteen." That's how you're thinking.

Gibb: Was everyone else a similar age?

[01:08:02]

McNair: Yeah. Eighteen, nineteen, twenty. Because I turned twenty on a hillside in Vietnam. My sergeant, he looked like Bluto that guy on *Popeye* that's always after Olive Oyl. He looked like him. Sergeant Phil Mescalero. And he was like-- And I said "Bluto," but I didn't call him that. And he said "Happy birthday." He had this pound cake C-ration and he stuck a match in it and he said "Happy Birthday." And I said "How did you know?" He said "I know all my men's birthdays" and then he walked off. I never saw him again. And that so--hurt so much because I was just with Dice and we went down to get some water. And now, within a few days, he's dead.

And so they said, "We need somebody to check this bunker out" and I said "I'll do it." Just [snaps fingers] like that, and so I just get this .45 and I go down in this bunker. I don't know what--It was just *Twilight Zone*. I'm in there and I'm like-- and then I see this room that's taller than--I'm five-nine and you can stand up in it without having to bend over. I peep around the corner, there's another room so I jump on this side. And I'm just doing this out of instinct. And then I see there's a room in the back. I said "Well, you know, two out of three ain't bad. [Laughs] I'm not going any further. They probably slipped out the back." You know, "get you again." I'm not--because it could be a bobby trap back there. They would have snakes and things. They would have all kinds of little stuff that you wouldn't see that was right there. Little thin wire. Grenade.

And so I came out and then I was like "What just happened?" You know? [Snaps fingers] Turn it off. Just like that. [Snaps fingers] Turn it off. And then you check out the stuff. Then we go through the, you know, set up the perimeter and look around. And nobody's saying a thing. Nobody's crying. Nobody's--they're just--

It's just steel. You can hear people's heart beat and everybody's looking away. And then [makes sound] we're gone again. Off somewhere else. *That* one I remember.

Like, when we were going--They have these exotic-looking locations, like a movie set from--It looked like New Zealand or something--because it was this valley. You're walking through the jungle, then all of a sudden [makes sound] there's this panorama of--and there's this huge mountain. It's lime green. It's got these finger ridges coming down and they're lit up by the sun so they look yellowish against this lime green. Then you've got this gray down in the middle and you can see this and it's just like it goes on forever.

[01:11:15]

They said "All right. Keep your eye on that mountain right there." [makes sound] He said "Look at two o'clock and you'll see who did that." And there's these three little silver dots, B-52s, way over here that hit here. They're like six miles up. You didn't hear them. The mountain just went--it just turned black. Looked like Mount Saint Helen's going off. And the ground was like [makes sound]. But I'm invincible. That took care of them. So we walked out across this rice paddy and you noticed these bomb craters. They're filled with water and fish and they're deep and you can see down. They said "Be careful because if you slip in there you better be able to swim." It's probably twenty or thirty feet deep. We finally get over there and now it starts raining. We climb up this--We're going up. We're going up. And you can't see the sky. You just see green up here because it's so steep. And you're going and you're going and then you get to this little slope and it starts getting lighter. And then you get up on the top and it's probably about ten feet wide. You can look down both sides. It's gorgeous.

You can see, being an artist, I see the beauty in this. You can see for like ten miles in any direction. Up these valleys. Then you get this sliver of the river. You can see it. Sometimes it looks like a black line or if you turn that way with the sun setting it looks silver. We're up there and mostly it was just hunt, hunt, hunt. And then something would happen. But you don't know when.

But you're always pumped up, which is killing you and you don't even notice it. It's "get ready, get set" and you're just wound up. I didn't know that was going to affect me. And so it would--I was up there and I was, I started, I was laying down and I was looking and I said "God, these clouds are beautiful." Blue sky and it was just clouds. I went to sleep. I was laying on these rocks. We didn't know--You just don't know. You just go. You get up, you go. You're going this way, you're going that way. And I got up in the morning because we came there at night. We came in the evening and then we just laid down. I couldn't really see that you had--Actually it was about maybe four feet from the edge of about a two-hundred-foot drop there. But you just, just do it. Just go. And so I'm laying there like this and I said "Well, another day." I'm looking up at this sock hanging in a

tree. What's that doing up there? Hey, what are those things crawling on it? That's not a sock. That's an ant nest. It's like about this big around and about that long and it looks like a sock with a ball in it. It's these huge, red ants right on the back of the tree where I slept with my head like this. They're going up. I thought "If that would have fell on my face last night I would have been--" I looked at one of them and they had these huge pincers. Big-headed ants. I don't know what they are but I wouldn't want one of them to bite me. And they sting, too. They sting and bite. They can hold on and just sting you. I probably would have went off that edge and, you know, you have this [makes sound].

[01:15:30]

Then you start packing up and getting out of here. You know. I'll be glad when we leave from here. Then we went somewhere. It's like, sometimes clouds would roll in and you've been walking. You have no sense of time whatsoever. You don't know where you're at because it's mountains over here, mountains over there, valleys. And so we set up on this little flat like plateau thing. And they said we're a blocking force.

So across the valley, maybe about a quarter of a mile or so, a half a mile? I don't know. You can't tell the distance because it's just green. There are these helicopters flying and they look like wasps. Just flying around like that and they [makes sound]. They're loading and they're lighting this spot up. Of course, it's on the side of a hill. That's where we're at. And then there's artillery. We're standing there "Yay!" They must have did this for like a half hour and then the grass catches on fire. We don't see it right away until we look down later on that day. It's coming this way but it's going to stop. No, it's not. And it just burns right up the side of the mountain. It's coming up the mountain. A grass fire. The grass is about that high but it's fire. It's coming. We're like "Man, what's going on?" "Hey." You know, we're stupid. Let's shoot it. That will make it go out. And then "No." And it comes up and it goes right over us. It was burning. We were hopping around out in the open trying to stop this fire and everybody's laughing. We're insane! And then it goes on this side. And I'm like--

And then there are these, the fog from the ocean. You can see it coming up the valley like somebody pulling a blanket. And it just came and it kept coming and it kept coming. And it came up the side of the mountain. And it rolled past our feet and we couldn't see our feet. It was cool. Creepy. Then everybody was standing around. All you could see was fog. With these guys--It looked like we were all standing on clouds. Everybody was quiet. And it went down and it went away.

And then we went somewhere else. Walking. You had this [makes sound]. Everything goes [makes sound]. Then, the next thing you know, you're in another area. It's something's going to happen. I guarantee you. So they tell us we're out here in the scrub bush. You don't--There's this helicopter again. It looked like it was--They're Cobras is what they are. They're real skinny and when they turn

towards you they look like a wasp. You know, with the little thing flying around. He was circling around. And they said “That guy is looking at us. He sees us down in a scrub bush. He doesn’t know who we are.” So he circles and then he starts his little run. And so they had to call him off because he was coming in and the people that he was after was on the next ridge. We didn’t know that. He was dipping his flight path, getting ready to fire. So we waved him off and somebody called because they were watching him. I said “That guy is circling. He’s looking at us.”

Later that night I’m sitting there and you don’t have time to even think about that. It’s just “I’m here and it’s dark.” I look over and I hear this [makes sound]. “What the hell is that?” I see this red line going like this and it’s a C-130 cargo plane. They got this mini-gun and it’s just, it’s a red line from the barrel tip to the ground and it looks like a red whip going like this. They’re just tearing this area up. These are the people that they thought we were. I think it’s a bullet every--like if there’s a square foot? It’s twelve bullets in it. There’s no ducking. You cannot--They’re going to get you. It was like “He almost got us, you know. What have we got to eat?” You don’t--You just turn it off. It’s not--It didn’t happen. It didn’t happen.

[01:20:30]

So we come back in and we’ll come in and I’m going to show you how instances will happen. This is around May. April? These guys came in and I was already quite messed up in the head, because all your normal feelings? They’re just gone. I’m walking around and I pinch myself one morning. I said “I’ve died and went to hell.” And I stood there and I watched. The heat was [makes sound]. It was shimmering. And I’m seeing all these people. They look like ghosts. I’m like “Am I alive?” I had to pinch myself. I went and got something to drink. Some beer. That’s all they’d let me have.

Then I went back to my bunker and there was this guy there. “Who are you? This is my bunker. I’m Bunker 9. This is where I think I just made that my home,” because I’m not really listening to the officers any more. I’m really not listening. I’m going out and when I come in, leave me alone. I’ve done got like this now. I’m just really--I lost a few friends by now. The guy—English--the ranger guy, he’s dead. He was--He picked me up one day. He said “I’m going to show you.” He used to call me--I call him--He called me “Junior” and I called him “Super Junior” because he was like six-foot-something and like--And he was sharpening this knife. And I said “Man, why every time I see you you’re sharpening this knife?” He said “So I can cut somebody’s throat.” And it was like--He said “Give me that paper” and he went [makes sound] and he just sliced it in half. I said “Oh, okay.” So he said “Lay down. I’m going to show you something.” He was lifting weights. He was a radio man and they cross train. He said “Lay down” and he picked me up. He said “Put your arms across your chest and I’m going to pick you up.” And so he grabbed me by my belt buckle here and here. He went like this [pause] and he just held me up there like this. And then he put me down.

Gibb: [inaudible]

McNair: Yeah. He told me “Junior, you need to stop smoking that stuff. It’s driving you crazy.” He didn’t smoke weed. I said “Ah, maybe you’re right.” [makes sound] I said but--What can you do? You see these people and now I’m attached to them because I see the kids all the time and I know Monique and them and I see how we’re treating them. When they do come into camp to get medical aid some of the ranger guys throw tear gas down in the little building that they’re in with the officers.

This lady came and she had a gash in her foot like that. She must have been seventy-five, eighty. She didn’t make a sound and she was pointing to her foot. They were stitching her up and somebody threw some CS gas in there. That kind of pissed me off. So we went and got our weapons and said “You think that’s funny? Do it again.” And then now there’s this tension which I just noticed between--within the GIs. There’s tension here because some people enjoy treating these people like dogs. Some people don’t. But you can’t do anything.

Going to the garbage dump. I get on the truck with my point man. It’s right across the street, going up this hill. Nothing--There’s a big unit up here. There’s big guns over there and there’s three thousand soldiers in this base. Nobody’s going to mess with us. We’ve got helicopters, tanks. They’re not messing with us. They’ll throw rockets at us but they’re not going to charge. This kid is running along the side of the garbage truck. Eight, nine years old. Little green underwear; no shirt. And there’s this old mama-san [woman who runs a geisha house]. No teeth. She’s like--They’re following the garbage truck. The kid is running along beside it and my friend, who shot the guy that was going to shoot me, is like “Yeah.” [makes sound] Like that kind of a look on his face. He’s from Birmingham, Alabama. A straight-up Southerner. And so the black guy that he was with, they was both from the same home town. A couple of his teeth were missing and he reminded me of a redneck because he talked “Well, yeah, well, you know, these bastards, you got to light a couple of them up.” And so the kid is running beside the truck and he’s looking at the tire and he’s trying to figure out a way to get--If I could step on that tire just right it will pop me up. I could get a grip and come up in the truck. So he’s watching him do this and when he gets up there he takes his, flips his rifle around like a golf club and whacks the kid here. Knocks him off the truck. He falls down and I’ll never forget the look on that kid’s face. He just looked up and the white meat was showing in his knee. I wanted to shoot that guy right then but I couldn’t because he was on our side. Plus I know him. Things like that really bothered me because of my upbringing but I didn’t know what to do.

[01:26:23]

When we’re in the field, I’m in the field. When somebody gets killed, they’re just dead. You don’t mourn. I went to a funeral, like, [pause] no less than once a

week. People like—Sometimes it's one body, sometimes it's four. We were in the base and we had this spot where everybody would go. It's inside the camp and all the guys would smoke weed and drink and just "Hey. Hey. Hey." Playing The Temptations and Motown and we are rolling. Nobody's going to mess with us. On the other side of the camp they got the Confederate flag. Lord have mercy, I'm not going over there. They didn't mingle with us.

Gibb: There was like a racial divide?

McNair: Yeah. But me being the way I was brought up, I didn't see it until I seen that flag. And I noticed they never come over here and we never go over there. We just stay on this side of the camp and they stay over there. It wasn't any--They didn't want to be around us. We ain't being around each other. And then, we were sitting there and we were partying, laughing, and I remember a guy named Smitty and Winters. Their squad had been wiped out except those two. They had bandages on and Smitty was obviously nuts. Winters was in love with Monique, the VC [inaudible] woman. "I want to marry her." You're sitting there and you're like, Temptations, la-la-la--They said "Do you want to stay--You can stay here tonight, man. You can crash here." I said "Nah, I'll go back" and sleep in that little hole they've got because I wasn't going to the bunker. I just kind of wandered over that way.

I hadn't really picked out Bunker 9 yet as my permanent residence. So I get up and when I went to bed I was like "Man, this is a shitty environment. I got a big hole in the floor, one bare bulb, and I'm laying on the floor. Man--Well, I'm in Vietnam so--" And then [snaps] turn it off.

So I get up in the morning and I'm going to see what they're doing and I get my stuff and I walk over to the--It only has like half a side. I looked over at the building and it disappeared. Boom! Straight toward it. Straight toward it. It just went [makes sound]. Just disappeared. Oddest thing. And then I got there and it was levelled. Winters was wandering around. He'd already went through one massacre and now he was just dazed. And Smitty was--The building was flattened. Nothing. Just like that. There's peace one minute, then it's just [makes sound] and it stops. And you don't have anybody that you can hit. You got this-- [makes sound] Just swallow. Just push it down. And each time you do that, it's notching up. It's going to notch up until eventually I got numb.

So I wound up on the bunker because I didn't go back there. I'm on Bunker 9 and I said "It's safe out. Maybe--" Because somebody, one of the people that was in there, were marking us off. From the road to the building. The girls would be along the fence and I remember this little girl said "Hey, GI. Hey, GI. Come here." She tried to hand me this little thimble, white thimble of dope. She said "Hey." What? Are you giving it to me? What is this? She said "Ummm, good dope." Really? She's about eight or nine and she's peddling it. I said "I don't think so, honey. Here."

I lose a friend to that. Paco. He didn't go out with us anymore. The dope got him. Heroin. It was like ninety-eight percent pure. He was gone. He got a cold, it turned into pneumonia. He was shriveling up and he died.

[01:31:16]

And you had this going on in between when you go out and somebody gets killed or there's nothing, which is the worst part. When nothing is happening. You're just looking and looking. Go over there and go right over there. Okay. Now what we spotted was what looked like graves. So dig them up. What?! Are you kidding? Dig them up. Who is that saying this up in the helicopter? Why don't you come down? He's flying around and says it looks like graves. It probably is. There were like three graves. I think that was the people we shot. So they had us dig them up which I thought was gross. And I'm digging and I'm like "We're out in the open." "Here." And the people are using us as bait all the time. You don't get it. You're just doing your job. So I dig down and I see this bag. I said "It's a bag there." They said "Dig him up." Okay. So I hit this bag and [makes sound] whew! It stank so bad I forgot what--I just stopped smelling. And I see this leg here. I say "Yes, it's a body in there." They said "Now dig up the other one." I said "I don't think so. I don't think so. I think they're dead. I think they're very, very dead." And then we moved off. You have these episodes like that and then in-between there's nothing. There's just this twilight area until you [makes sound] "Now I'm in the bunker."

Gibb: How long were you out on missions for?

McNair: No time. I mean, you go out. You're out or you're in. I mean, you're out for maybe three or four days.

Gibb: Okay. Yeah.

McNair: I would say three or four. But you really do lose track of time because--you're out--You're here. This is where you're going to be until somebody gets shot or you kill somebody. Then you can get to go back in. Yeah, that's how it works. Either one of y'all gets shot so we'll know where they're at. They're everywhere. What do you think? Or you kill them and--It was madness is what it was.

Just slowly, every day, you're slowly losing your humanity. You're going insane. You have no way to release this and then you get back in the rear and your own people start harassing you. I'm on the bunker. I'm with this guy, Louis W. Cox. And he was with the 4th Infantry. They were getting ready to invade Cambodia. I didn't know that. I noticed all this 11th Armored Cav[alry Regiment] is here and the 4th Infantry. I said "What are you guys doing here?" "I don't know," he said. "I don't know." This is the way he talked. "I don't know. They just told us that we had to come here." He was from Ponca City, Oklahoma. I thought "Geez he talks

funny.” And I said “Well, look. This is my bunker and you can sleep down here and I’ll stay up on the top. How’s that?” And I was just uneasy about him being in my area because, see, I had staked this out now. I told this--It was a major who came snooping around one night. I was tore up. I mean, I’m on bonds[??] duty. We’re in the stand-down, in-between going back out. So you try to drink and try to relax any way you can.

So I would stay away from where the officers were, the nut heads that would have you, put you on shit-burning detail which is what you have to do. And then you got to watch the Vietnamese. Why are you letting them in here if we’ve got to watch them? You know. And they would be giving us marijuana cigarettes and we give them food and stuff. And their soldiers, the South Vietnamese soldiers, would work from nine to five. I said, “We’re not going to win.” I had a friend named Ty and he was packing up all these C-rations. He said “Oh, Ty. Oh, Ty go home now. Ty very sick.” I said “Man.” I looked at this watch I had. It was five o’clock. “Oh, Ty so sick. Mama-san, Ty sick. Mama-san sick. Baby-san sick.” I said “Everybody’s sick today. We’re going on a big mission tomorrow. Ty’s going home. He’s not going out with us. He knows something is going on.” You see? It’s creepy because you learn these little cues if you’re watching. Ty packed his stuff up and the last thing I saw Ty was walking that way. Away from us. I mean, they catch the bus. And I just stood there like “I wish I could go home like that.”

And then, of course, I think somebody in the other platoon got hit pretty bad when we went out on that operation. They came in that night. I think they went out ahead of us. I remember there was like all these choppers at night. What’s going on? I think they went out first. I think it was Bravo Company. And they got chewed up real bad. Of course, now it’s night time and everything is just black. I know how you can see at night but you can. I’m wandering around. I see these choppers coming in so I’m going over here to see what’s happening ,because we was all brothers. I walked out to the aid station and I’m like “Oh my god” and I seen them rush these guys in. There was a red light in there because it’s night so they had the red light on.

[01:37:50]

And I went in there and it was like *Apocalypse Now*. It was blood everywhere. They had these guys slapped up on these tables. They were cutting on them and opening them up and hanging bottles. There’s a guy here, there’s a guy there. There’s blood like--it’s just slippery with blood, just everywhere. And the red light made it look worse. And the doctors were like [makes sound] just like I wasn’t there. I thought I was dead. They were just like moving like [makes sound], hanging bottles and [makes sound]. And I’m standing there and I’m looking at this guy and he’s shot up. They’re ripping his clothes off and I have no emotion. None.

Then I just faded on out. And then I go somewhere and just try to go to sleep. But what I found out is that I never was asleep. You can't sleep after you keep doing the stuff we're doing all the time and you're always on. I didn't know anything about PTSD. You're just on.

I still wake up sometimes. I hear the slightest little noise. But it's not as bad as it used to be. Anyway, Cox, me and him got to be kind of close. I watched him deteriorate. He kept saying "I'm not going home. I'm not going to see my little girl again." He showed me a picture of this little blonde. She had little curls. I thought "Awww, she's so cute." I forget her name. He said "My wife, I'm not going to see her again. I don't think I'm going to make it." I said "Man, stop talking like that." His hair started getting longer. He didn't shave. He was drinking beer all the time and smoking weed now. He said "I ain't going to make it." I said "Stop it." His name was Louis W. Cox, like my name Louis. And then one day he was gone.

That's what I hated because you can't get close to nobody. They're gone just like that. And it's odd. It's like "Wait a minute. I was just talking to him yesterday, an hour ago." He's gone now. Gone where? And sometimes they'd bring the body back and sometimes they don't. They take them somewhere else. He got killed when they invaded Cambodia. I was real angry at that. Because I didn't think-- because he was in my space. I thought that's so stupid. We never fought or nothing but I thought, I thought now I won't see him again. It was--I don't know. I don't know.

I remember I was at the bunker before he left. We were really drinking our beer. We were laughing all day. Nobody came to bother us. Leave the troops alone when they're in from their missions. Leave them alone. They don't have anywhere to go. You really don't want to be messing with them because they're walking around and they always keep their weapons. They don't turn them in. We've always got them. I got my grenades. I got everything I need. Leave me alone. We were out there and we were really—just, we must have had two cases of beer. Hot beer, not cold. Not cold. We just [makes sound]. Ha, ha, ha, ha. Smoking weed. Somebody they said the colonel is going to be coming around or some jerk-off is coming around tonight. I said "For what? We're all here." So somebody heard--I had passed out. I heard somebody coming up on *my* bunker. *Bunker 9*. Please, don't come up here. So I was on the floor and I have this .45 in my hand and I'm, like, shit faced, okay? I don't care. It's hot. Sweat's just rolling off me. "Soldier! Are you asleep?" I just went "Who are you?" and I stuck it right in his face. I just stuck it. I said "Who are you?" "Soldier, are you asleep?" I said "Who are you? You better identify yourself." "Are you pointing a gun at me?" I said "Yeah, I am." "What's your name?" And I told him something. It doesn't matter. But I had it right in his face. "What do you want?" I'm pissed off. "What do you want?" "Well, I'm going to get your name and I'm going to find out who you are." I said "I don't care. You don't come sneaking around on Bunker 9 and asking me questions." I said "Man, what time is it? It's dark. Go! Get out of

here!" So he went back down and he went away. I never saw him again. He never came back to that bunker again either.

You don't do that. You don't know what's going on. We didn't just go to other people's bunkers. They have to invite you over there. I don't care if it is an Army base. You cannot just come over here. You got to be invited.

Gibb: How many of there were you on the base?

McNair: It was a brigade, so about--I'd say around maybe fifteen hundred. I'm guessing. Maybe fifteen hundred. But there was another base. Like I said, we had these huge artillery guns, one seven fives which, when they would go off, it would be like [makes sound]. It would shake. And if you're in the chow hall and they went off--they were only like a quarter mile away--you would, like, "I'm getting out of here." Because you don't know, is it a--What is it?

There was a unit up on top and then there was another base north of us, [LZ] English, and then there was an air base, Phu Cat, where they had the jets located at. So we were pretty well protected as far as like--I didn't know that they were-- We had[n't] heard about Tet. I didn't know that. I just know that when we go out it's just a squad and it's limited context. You don't know--I'm just totally different. I'm not--I've got my weapon where I can quick draw. Automatically. It stays on me all the time. I've slimmed down. I don't carry a whole lot of stuff. I've got just what I need and a little bit more ammo. I've got my food. I know how to do this. I know how to conserve my water. I'm in it. I'm good. And when something happens [slaps hands]I go right there. But you can't keep that up and then come back to the rear and the sergeants are harassing the black troops at times, coming into the barracks. "What is that smell?" [makes sound] "What are you doing in there? What is that smell?" "It's reefer. Do you want some?" "I'm going to get you. You've got to put that out." And these guys are from the south. The guys I know, these guys are from the north. What are you talking about? You need to get out of here. So we're playing the Temptations and thinking about [inaudible; singing] and we ain't trying to hear no redneck. His nose is like that. And his face was just red. And he was sweaty and he had this box haircut and his squinty little eyes. And I hated him. He said "I'm going to get you, McNair. I'm going to get you." I said "Get me for what?" He said "You're a yard bird." Oh, now you're calling names. What is a yard bird? I never heard that. Well, he would come and eventually, by this time, I don't know, I'm pretty well gone [??]. After my two friends got killed I just kind of went to pieces.

[01:46:45]

I started really looking at the way they're treating these people. The missions are all backwards. We're not doing anything. We were on this hill last week. Now we're right back on it again. We're coming around the backside. We were flying out to a mission and the guy said "That's where Dice got killed." And I looked.

We were in this chopper and I remember they had a jet coming in. An F-4. You can't even hear them. They just [makes sound] out of nowhere. I'm watching this guy dive like this. It's like a big, gray bird and he drops this bomb and then there's a helicopter and he's dropping these fifty-five gallon drums of--He's got a thing up under it. A bag of six, seven, eight of them and then he just lets them go. I thought "Oh, he lost his load." He's dropping it down there where Dice got killed and they're right back in that bunker complex. Then he drops this flare behind it and they go whoosh. Then this jet comes in. We came back around about a week or so later and there's just this brown scar on the side of a mountain. And I said "That's where Dice got killed." From the air it looks different.

And then we were going somewhere else. There was no connection between nothing. It's night. It's day. You're fighting. You're not. You're walking. You just totally--It was a nightmare dream type, not real but you know it is. You see things. It's beautiful. You're out here. You're up on the top of this mountain. You see bananas and coconuts. And then you come down out of the hills and you walk through this village. They've got pineapples. Of course, you've got to get one. [inaudible] "Leave it alone. That's mine" and I'm like "Well, sorry but I'm taking it. I've never had a pineapple like this." Then we walk out to the road and go somewhere else.

There was no connection. You couldn't connect to anything because you're constantly moving and you don't know what's really going on at all. Then this guy's dead and you almost got killed. And then we're going over there and that guy that was sitting with us last night drinking beer, he's dead. And for what? Then you come back to the base and these jackasses are--This guy, a black guy, he was a fat pig, too. He was. They were overweight and he said "They're sending him out with you." "For what?" "Oh, so he can get some time in the field. It looks good on his resume." Uh, we don't want you with us. No. You're a clerk typist. You're a lifer. You've been in like forty years. You drink beer all day. You're overweight. And you're going out with us? What are you doing to do? He had us--We moved and we set still and then just before night he had us move maybe from here to the middle of the parking lot for no reason. Why are we doing this? And he's drinking beer all day. He tells us "Go walk over there."

[01:50:45]

Gibb: This is while you were out on--

McNair: Yeah, patrol. That's where we--We were always out until we come in. And that's when we try to party and get the crazies out. I think I was out there--I spent eight months and four days. Most of that time was in the field. I didn't want to be in the rear. Just stay out here. But there is no time. It's day or it's night. And that doesn't work in your head. They can't. And there are moments when you just [inaudible] quiet, you know. And rituals like making coffee or eating or cleaning your

weapon or sitting out on the listening point, post, where you just go down about fifty feet away from everybody else and sit there.

It's odd because there's this trail that's about as wide as that. You're looking. Somebody could come around that sucker any minute. They just diddy-bopping through the jungle. They don't know you're there. Light them up. We came down another time and we came out to this jungle. Then it got down low and we went out across a rice paddy and then we came out on the vehicles, these tanks. And they were backed up in the trees. We thought "Hey, guys! Yeah, hey. We're going over there." So there was a big open field with a little hill, probably no taller than this building. We were walking out there and they're looking right at us. We don't go to the hill. We go to the left of it and get in the bush, you know, get out because it's open. You don't want to be in the open. I'm sitting there like this and I'm talking to this guy. I said "Could I get a cigarette?" "Sure." So I put my foot out like this and reach to get the cigarette and then I bring my foot back and there's rich, black, soft dirt. I hear boom! Wham! And the hill just goes [makes sound]. I don't know why the guy fired. I have no idea. But where my foot was when I sat down, a piece of shrapnel off the shell, the tank shell--because we dug it out--it was about like that and it went [makes sound] right directly over my footprint and sunk in the ground and it was smoking. I just sat there and I looked at the guy. He was just--and we didn't say nothing. [inaudible] He said "Let's see what it is." I know what it is. It almost took my foot off. It was about this thick.

Gibb: An inch or so thick?

McNair: Artillery shell. It just went right--If my foot, or if I had been standing there, it either would have took my leg off--If I'd been like that it would have cut me in half but my foot--I had just got the cigarette and it was back like that. It was no farther than that in front of me. These kinds of things drive you nuts. What just happened? And you can't explain it. He shot but why did he shoot? It almost got me but it didn't. It almost took my foot off. So we dug it up and it was smoking. It was razor sharp. Shaped like that. I said "That's because of the shell bursting." It was in the ground and we dug it out. Then we just sat there and looked at each other. Didn't say nothing. What can you say? You just keep that in.

Then we just kind of like--[makes sound] They said "Make sure you have your iodine pills in the water." The water we got from over there looks stagnant. It didn't look good but we need some because they're not going to bring us any. The guy didn't do it. Nobody wanted to do it. We found marijuana that had gotten wet and somebody just threw it away. It was hanging on the--the little straw bushes were only this high--like Christmas ornaments. We're laying there like this and I said "Man, you ever see a tree with plants like this? They look like icicles." Dude said "Man, yeah. What is that? What's in all them envelopes? Find out." It was a bunch of them. They would bring us drugs. They would send drugs out to us. Yes, we had connections.

Gibb: How?

McNair: They would get them on the guys that load the chopper. Somebody would get the dope, put it on there. "We need some artillery shells. Feed them first![??] Food, we need food. We're starving." So they come out and you're on this hill and they'll just kind of hover and throw it out the other side of the chopper. A canister about this tall. It's enough for everybody. With mortar rounds going. They kind of dropped it off real quick because you have to turn your back like that when the back blasts. So me and Ben went down, big Ben from Atlanta, we went down the side of the hill and got our supply which is one pack. Don't take it all. It's not for you. So we got it and we was sitting back and we would puff. People thought we were high all the time but, no, you're not. You're out here. You can't smoke all the time. You can smoke when somebody says smoke. Who? The head man. The point man. If he's smoking, you can smoke. If he ain't smoking, you better put that out because you can smell a cigarette a long distance.

[01:57:44]

I remember it was always in a twilight in the canopy. These twinkling, through the trees. The leaves would be--And the light would look like little stars. It don't look real. It's green and it's twinkling and it's a white light. Down on the floor it's just soft. The ground is soft and you can't hear. And everything is muffled. When I was looking up at these plants, I thought--I said "Man. Hey." And then I noticed that everybody was sick. Because they didn't take their pills. They're like "Oh man." And so it was me and this other guy. I forget if his name was Ben. We said "We better go sit on listening post" because these guys are bunched up. And we said "You go over there." Well, they can't come that way because the tanks are over here so we've got to go the opposite way. "Let's just sit down here." These guys, they should have put the pills in their water. It just had them doubled over. We said "Roll some of that shit up." So we didn't have no papers so we took the marijuana and, you know, ground it up, and then we put it in a cigarette. We was like "Yeah, man. When I get home--" And that's when you just drift off and you total fantasy but you know what's going on. And you're sitting there. I got a clear shot. "Well, he can't see me but if he comes up that way--" You're just listening in case somebody comes. And you just sit there. And that's when you can just dream about home. And then somebody will like--You might sit there four or five hours. We didn't go anywhere. Mostly our job was to hide-- not be seen out--sneakiness. That was our brand, sneakiness. Because they had teams, too, trying to find us. Like four-man teams they were. So that's what we mostly did. Just sneaky, but very, very deadly if we catch you. No questions asked. You're dead.

Gibb: You took no prisoners at all then?

McNair: No prisoners. That boy, that fifteen-year-old boy? We told him to come out. "Drop your weapon." He was speaking Vietnamese so I know he knew what he was saying. He had been there a while. He didn't do it. He came out like this and

when his shoulders came, you could see where he was red [??]. He shot him all across here. He was just laying there like--I was "This is a teen! He's like fifteen!" No, no prisoners. None. The base--Some of this stuff I didn't know and I was following it for a year. They had the 172nd MP detachment up at LZ English. Any prisoners that we did catch we sent to them. Torture. Murder. They documented it.

I got the books. I found them in Milwaukee at the airport. I couldn't believe this. That's when I found out what my mission was, my actual mission in Vietnam. Because they never told us. Just get a gun and go fight. They never said "Well, we're going to go up here and we're going to neutralize this area and we're going to take down." We weren't fighting like Viet Cong. We were fighting NVA [North Vietnamese Army], the guys out of the north? The professionals? We didn't know that but I kind of suspected that they--When I saw that uniform, um, I don't think that's an enlisted man getting his shirts done at the laundry. I think that's an officer. But they were very, very hard to find. But they weren't trying to be found. They were backing up. They hit you when they want to because they couldn't--Tet [Offensive; a surprise attack of North Vietnamese People's Army and the Viet Cong against the South Vietnamese Army and US forces; began January 30, 1968) hurt them. And in '70 it was a lot of these little unknown battles going on. Knock off a couple of GIs, kill ten over there, throw a rocket in there. It was like that.

Gibb: Did they take any prisoners on their side? [inaudible]

McNair: Well, no. Not down where we were at because it was like--If you got up near--Let me see, I Corps is North Vietnam and then I Corp, DMZ and then I Corps. We were in II Corps, right below. The Marines were north of us. That was the place that I don't think I would have wanted to be there. It looked like a moonscape. Some of the places where artillery had been, it was like, "Where am I at?" Really. You could smell this cordite and you could smell death, too. It smells sweet. I don't know why. When we were fighting one day, when Dice got killed, it smelled--You know the gunpowder but I guess it's the blood. I don't know. It's a sweet, a unearthly smell that comes. It just--And it will get your attention. That kid that we killed, when I sat down for--

[End of McNair.OH2023_file 1][Beginning of McNair.OH2023_file 1]

McNair: --minute, just before, I remember I looked over and I ran my hand across the ground and it was wet. I look at it and it was like—I thought I saw blood. It was dew but I looked and it was like my hand was covered with blood. That's when I looked at them and that's when everything started like that. Slow motion. And it was over like that. Just quick. I just kept going, getting stranger and stranger as the time went on after July. I'd say I was probably a wreck by July. From January to July. They got killed on the seventh. I remember that.

I was pretty angry by then. I wanted to kill everybody. I wanted to go out and just--If I could just get my hands--Just one good kill. But I didn't get to kill anybody. Well, I had a chance but--We were doing this night movement which is extremely nerve-wracking to say the least. You wait till it gets dark and then you start walking but you have to hold onto the guy's belt in front of you. You're walking like this. There are no lights. You have to be quiet and you have to walk like that.

Gibb: Small footsteps?

McNair: Yes. I remember we were walking and they said "Two steps to the left." He said "On my mark" which means that you step up where I'm at, take two steps to the left. Don't let go of that guy. If you have to get his hand, do it like that. And I heard this hissing noise. [makes sound] Pay attention to what you're doing. Pay attention. Then we moved and then he said "Last man" and then we just laid down. We didn't even get over here. You just laid down. You just drop where you're at and go to sleep. Well, you're supposed to be on guard duty but I'm taking that as go to sleep because I can't take it today. I can't. I'm just totally exhausted.

I would try to stay up but then the thoughts start coming. The crazy, unreal, is-this-happening-yes-it-is, yeah-he's-dead and yeah-that-happened-to-him. So you're kind of like "This is going to [inaudible]." And there's nobody to talk to about it. We didn't talk about it. Just don't talk.

Gibb: Did you have contact with people at home? Did you have letters or anything?

McNair: Did I have--Wait a minute. Did I have what now?

Gibb: Letters. Were you in contact with your family?

McNair: Yeah, but after a while, you see--I took some pictures but after a while letters--I might get one if I'm in the rear but we're out humping and it's nasty. The letters might get wet. Do you feel like writing? Not really. What am I going to tell my mother? Well, yeah, we just shot eight people today. My friend just got his head blown off. You know? You can't tell anybody. Some people get letters. We liked the boxed care packages from home with the food in it and the cookies. That was happy. When my girlfriend left me I didn't get any more letters from her.

Gibb: While you were out in Vietnam?

McNair: Yeah. Before, I was in Fort Benning, Georgia at Airborne's jump school when I got her--She told me I had another son and that he died. I said "When?" She said "Oh, a couple of two or three weeks ago." I said "Really? Why didn't you tell me?" She said "I didn't think you wanted to know." And she called me all kinds of names. I remember that night because that was always on my mind, that I

couldn't provide for her and I lost her and I never see my son. It was a rainy night in Georgia and that's where I was at. And it was that night. It was raining and I got this horrible news and I just went back across the field. I remember there was a little phone booth lit out there and it was raining. It looked like a scene out of a movie. I guess that was the artist coming through. I don't know. And it was that lonely little bulb that said "telephone." I called her and she gave me this impression like I really don't give a shit about you, ever. She had wrote me a letter to that effect. Then she sent me a picture. My brother sent me a picture of my son. I can't describe it because it was just ugly. It was a nightmare.

People think--I see people walking around now and they're whining about every-- The guys, to me, seem so unmanly. What is--Sometimes I watch TV but I got find a good action movie, something with some real men acting. Not this. I said "No wonder these people--." They see this around the world and that's what they think of us. The image that we project out of Hollywood--which is not us--but the black guys with their pants hanging down, tearing up their own community. [makes sound] and all that. The police shooting black folks for look like no reason and all this and all that and all of this and all of that. I said that's why these people--Not to impose my morality on somebody, but we kind of lost it. We kind of lost direction after Nam. Society got caught up, too, and the way you treated us when we came home.

Because I was like--when I had to--I started going--They had me, arrested me. It's getting pretty close to the end. They sent me to the psychiatrist. They don't just send me to the psychiatrist. Something's wrong with McNair. They knew this. "He's probably been out. He's been here a while now. A lot of people in--" Fifty guys in nine months, eight months. That's a lot. That's about one a week. And then all the people in-between. He's going to these funerals two or three times a week out of respect. He's probably pretty well shot up. They sent me to the psych. I don't know what he was saying. It was a black guy. He was a major. I don't care if you're green. He was talking to me and I had my 16 and I was sitting in--I wouldn't even look at him. I don't care if you are a major. Who cares?

[00:07:47]

This is my attitude because this is all wrong. I had to make this decision. This is all wrong and that hurt me. I can't do this anymore. I can't fight these people. They haven't done anything to me. We don't need to be here. You'd hear guys talking and I would read the *Stars and Stripes* about protestors. Immediately throw that away. But I don't have the will to fight anymore because I don't have any leadership over here.

Gibb: How much did you know about the protests? Just what you were reading in *Stars and Stripes*?

McNair: Yeah. I saw that a couple of times and I'm like "Let me use this to wipe my ass on. I'm not--I don't know what these people are talking about. Hippies? Hippies? What the hell is a hippie?" [inaudible] any hippies when I get home. I didn't read that. I'm in Nam. I'm fighting for my life. My friends. I've got Vietnamese people that I care about that—they're in danger. And I can't do anything.

That's the--I can't help anybody. That's what pissed me off. From the time of the kid on the truck. That helplessness. I can't do anything. The guy in the, laying on the bed, getting surgery. I can't do anything. I can't help Cox. I can't help Dice. But I'm out here every day. I can't do anything. That will wear your ass down. You strong but then everybody--You could see it. You could see it on the guys.

We're trying to sit over here and have a party one night on Bunker 13. Let's go over there. And it's like twenty-five guys out here. We got flares but we're using them as firecrackers. [makes sound] We're lighting the place up and we're drinking and smoking weed and [makes sound] and we're letting go. I guess the major and the captain and the MP said "That's got to stop, fellas." We got the big boom boxes. We are Motown down. [imitating music] And they're like "Hey!" Everybody's packing. I'm not. "What are you talking about?" People are just drinking and [makes sound]. People are scared. They want to go home. They lost friends. They don't believe in this no more. What am I even doing here? What are we doing here? And, yeah, we were asking them questions. You know?

[00:10:33]

Then we read about GIs flipping over and going to the NVA side. I saw that and I said "I'll never read *Stars and Stripes* again." And I couldn't. I think they caught that guy, too. Garwood or something.

They sent me to the psychiatrist and I just refused to talk to him. He asked me something. I'm not listening to you. I saw this water buffalo. I thought I'd like to blast that sucker. I had my 16. The door is open. I ought to just shoot him. I just want to kill something. And I don't know what the man said to me. I looked at him like "Whenever you're done talking, I can get out of here." They were sizing me up right then. I should have been discharged with a medical. He's through. He's done. Of course, I don't know this. I'm fine. You're just pissing me off. Leave me alone. I just want to be left alone and go out here and do my job and get revenge for my friends. Now I'm on the revenge kick. You're no good there. They told me, they eventually cornered me--the same guy with the nose. I know his name, too. Sergeant Burkaloo [??] and McDonald. They said--The same one that said "I'm going to get you." And he was after me that whole time. Anything he could do. He told me to go out to the field with my troops one day and I just didn't feel like fighting that day. I just don't want to go. So I said "I have VD." "You do? Well, you better get over there to the medical clinic and get checked out and bring it right back here." I said "Bring what back? Bring the VD back here?" So I went over there and I missed a movement. I didn't feel like fighting any

more. So I went to Bunker 9 [laughs], my hotel room, and he got kind of pissed off about that. He gave me "failure to obey a direct order," a lawful order.

They were pretty pissed off about that. I didn't care. I got my 16. What are you going to do? So they tried to get it away from me. They set traps for me. He comes down--He'll come down this way today. A little trap. We'll catch him. We'll ambush his ass. But I always had my 16 and I'm not scared and I really don't want to be bothered with you and yes I will shoot you. So I was walking and he said "Private McNair, halt in your tracks!" or something to that effect. And I said "Yes, Sarge. What's wrong?" He said "I'm placing you under arrest." I'm like "What?!" I said "Man--" He said "Troops, take him." And I turned around and there's two little white guys, skin just as pink up here. They just got there. They ain't even got a tan yet. They're shaking and their crewcuts--They're sweating. Their hands are by their 16s, I mean their pistols, and they're shaking. And automatically, without even knowing it, I had put my hand on my 16 and I started to bring it up. I'm like "You know what?" I said "No, we're not doing this. No." So I started backing up and I'm bringing it up. I said "Don't do it. Don't do it. If you pull that, I'm shooting you." And there were two of them. They were shaking. I just said "Man, what is you doing?" Now he's after me. He's been after me. He just can't catch me because I'm in the field all the time. The next thing I know somehow they caught me. I don't know.

[00:14:34]

They had the captain talk to me. "Are you going to soldier for me?" "What? Why--Soldier for you? See, nothing's making sense and no I'm not." I told him I was but I'm not. Not really. I just want to get in his office and get out because I'm just ready to--I don't want to hurt you, Cap, because you was with us but this fat bastard over here and his buddies--I never seen them in the field with us and he's always picking on somebody. He just goes right to the black guys. We try to ignore him and now he's zeroed in on me because it seems like half the people I'm with are dead and gone. I don't really have any buddies any more. And, it's kinda like, I don't know. Maybe I was just tired.

I mean I'm like--The next thing I know is I'm under arrest, again, and they're taking me down to this metal box, a Conex. You know, those shipping containers? Those babies. Five by eight. I'm really kind of--I don't care. I don't care anymore. So they put me inside. He said "You're going to Long Binh prison [US military stockade in Southeast Vietnam tomorrow; known as "LBJ," Long Binh Jail]. I'm going to see to that." I said "Yeah, we'll see about that." So he walks off and this black guy is standing there and the door's open. I'm sitting in there--Hell, the door's still open. I said "Hey, bro. What's happening?" "Nah, man. You want to smoke a joint?" and I said "Hell, yeah." So we're smoking a joint and I said "You know what? I need a drink. Mind if I go down to the PX?" He said "Go ahead."

So I just diddy-bop right on down, walk out the--They didn't even close it. He said "But be back before evening because I've got to lock you up." [laughter] So I go down and I'm sitting at the PX. I'm throwing it back. I can only get beer because if you were a sergeant you could get whiskey which is right through that door right there. They cuss me out and try to get my black ass away from there. We don't want you around here because you don't have enough rank. I'm over there and I'm eating these steaks that they were using. They had this diesel fuel. I can't say they got the fire started with it but you could taste it on the meat. And so you drink more beer. So I staggered back to my cell and then I looked. I seen some--I said "Are these prisoners behind me with the cots and the tents folded up and the little sheer nets hanging down?" And they're in over there and they're eating good. I didn't even get nothing to eat today except some beer and a greasy steak. And I was like, I said "Man, I don't know what I'm doing no more. I don't know what the mission is. I don't know. My own people are after me now. I don't have--They're out to get me but I don't know what to do. I don't want to hurt you but I'm afraid that I will if you keep on."

[00:18:00]

At morning I heard this chopper coming in. This major or somebody came down there and asked the guy what was he doing and, you know, questions. I'm sitting there. Then he told me--showed him some papers and he just shook his head. Like "No, he's not going anywhere. No. No, this is all wrong." And then he told me "Get out of here." This major. Okay. "Get back to your unit."

And then I wound up in the field. I wasn't acting right out there. It was not the same thing I was when I came in January. I was totally--just, I want to kill something. I want to kill somebody. I don't care if I die. I'm going to hurt somebody very bad. Just let me--If I could just see. It's all this rage and I couldn't direct it at--And then they told me I had to come back in on the next chopper. I'm "Okay." I didn't want to be in the rear so I went back out on a chopper that I could--trying to find my company. I think I made it once. Then they were looking for me in the rear. He's supposed to be here. He's out there. Indicator. Something's wrong. People are trying to get from out here to--and you're out here and you keep coming out here. So he's done. He can't fight anymore. He's lost it. He's burnt out. He's seen too much. So they put this guy, these white guys, two young white guys--They said "You're going to such-and-such a place in the morning in the jeep." "Okay." I'm looking. Where's my 16 at? I don't have it anymore. They took me down to Qui Nhon, which is about forty miles away. They don't know I know this town because I had a girlfriend down there. We all had little girlfriends down there. But she was so pretty. I stayed there like three days. I don't know what she was saying. I was singing Vietnamese songs. I don't know what in the hell--We was smoking weed. They were giving them shots. I was laying up in these silk blue pajamas. I don't know. I was just having the time of my life. The MP compound was right across the street.

Gibb: When was this in your service? Was it earlier on?

McNair: Yes, it was--Like about--When I had been sneaking down there. I would slip off just to get away from the war. I went to Qui Nhon and I got off this truck. I saw these airborne jump boots with the shiny toes and I'm like "Damn! When this truck moves I'm in trouble." Then this little arm--and I'm like "Whoa." Prettiest thing I ever saw in my life. Her name was Kim Long. She just grabbed me and ran back. We went down this little thing and then got inside. And I looked down, there's three or four stories. GIs in there with jeans on and surfer clothes and brothers with hair out to here. I'm like "What the hell?" She told me to come on. So we went in there, went upstairs. There's a bunch of girls and I'm like "Hey, wow." And they was just pretty. So then me and her was just like--I don't know what she was saying. I know what I was thinking and so we did that but I didn't pay. So Mama[san??] told me "You know, you got to get out of here. You've been here like a couple of days now. Two, maybe three." I think I was there like two days. You just lay up in the whore house with all these women around giving you food and you got on pajamas and you're out of uniform. And so every time we would have sex she would take me downstairs. And it's dark. There's no lights like this. Then she told me to squat down and then she put this bucket in this well. And I'm not thinking. I'm thinking--I'm just lost. I still have her picture somewhere. She was just so beautiful. I'm squatting there and she's dipping this bucket down in this well and I'm looking at it but it ain't registering. I'm thinking the water is warm. It's not. It's ice cold. They don't have showers. And then she throws it on me and I'm [makes sound]. And then she washed me off and we went back upstairs and had sex again. And then she did it again. And I'm still--Are you stupid? She said--And so I'm sitting there like--and I'm smiling and she's dropping the bucket. And I'm like "Yeah, you know, baby [inaudible]" [makes sound] And I said "No more sex. Too cold." [laughter]

Then I got out and I was shocked. The image I remember besides her, it was three stories and there were GIs with their clothes hanging out. They were living there across the street from the MP compound.

Gibb: How is that possible? Were they on leave or--

[00:23:59]

McNair: We're not supposed to be in a whorehouse.

Gibb: Right.

McNair: Yeah. [laughter] That's what I'm saying. You get this--What's going on here? How they can be over here? Are they AWOL like I am? Even if you're in the Army, you can't be over there. You got to be on the base. You get these What's

Because what's really going on here? Is it the privileged few? These are boonie rats like me. These are privates.

We went to the Korean hotel and there were--of course, I'm AWOL again. They never caught me. They never did. I was so good. They had taught me too much. I could just get, walk right past them and go right out the gate on the truck. The troops that--The convoy comes by in the morning or you get a water truck. I would get off in villages I have no idea where I'm at. None whatsoever. It's night time. Me and a friend were in the back of the water truck. We got off and it's hazy looking. I don't even know where I was at. We're blurry-eyed from drinking and weed and no sleep. I'm like "Yeah." We're trying to--We go in this little house. They're usually right outside the base. This woman [inaudible] talking and I don't know what she's talking about. You know, I'm "Where are the girls at?" You know? That's what we're here for. So we're just talking and the guy I'm with is drunk. He's drunk and I'm trying to be--I got a little focus because you can't be out here drunk. So she tells us that the white mice are coming, the Vietnamese police. Little bitty guys with little white gloves and [inaudible]. She says hide. She tells us to climb up in the ceiling. We get up there and this guy is drunk. I'm pushing him up in there and he's up there [inaudible] and he starts doing that. I'm like--This guy is like reaching up. He's on this thing and he's reaching up in there. He ain't trying to find me. You know I'm in here. You can smell me. And he touches my pants leg. Okay. Then he goes and he goes away. You get all this stuff like this. I'm trying to get--I'm nuts is what it is because I don't know where I'm at. I was caught--

The first time I went AWOL I really just wanted to see the countryside. I wanted to see just how far I could go before they stopped me. I got to Qui Nhon again. That's where I ran into my cousin. I didn't even know who he was. I was standing there talking to him. I was raised with him. I had these dark glasses on. My hair is reddish from the dirt and I've got this rag that says "Vietnam" across there. I'm talking to him and I said "Where is the showers, the steam showers, at? Where can you go to get a sauna and a massage?" "Oh, you go right over there." "Oh yeah?" So we talking. I went down there actually to see some of my friends--I remember now--who had got ambushed. I think it was Bravo Company. They said they got chopped up pretty bad. I went down to this--I forget the name of it. It was an evacuation hospital. The lady, Lynda Van Devanter wrote a book [*Home Before Morning: The True Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam*] and she was at the hospital. I used to go down there. It's a big hospital in Qui Nhon. I was trying to find some of my friends. That's why we would go AWOL sometimes. "You're not going anywhere." "Oh, yes I am." I want to see them. So we just [makes sound] and just catch a ride. It was the coolest thing when you're riding forty miles along the coast. It is just--I still--

I can listen to songs from the sixties and it takes me right there. I am like--The movie just rolls but it's all good now. It's all good because I understand that I did a good thing. I was never ashamed, but I didn't understand what my part was,

what we were doing in 1970 as far as like this war is going to stop. It's going to stop. I was never mad at the hippies because you've got something to do. As long as you don't spit on me or do nothing like that, you can be a hippie as long as you want. I just think you're a damn coward because you don't want to go. You're getting deferments and this and that and then, yeah, so you're just a little cock[??] is what you are.

My focus was survival the whole time. Even when I was going AWOL? I'm practicing my escape and evasion skills. I'm honing them, fine tuning them. You're so stupid you don't even know what I'm doing. You had to take your unit patch off, which I hated because I loved my unit patch. You had to take it off and the name tag didn't mean anything because you were wearing the dead guy's clothes anyway. They never gave us--McNair's got twenty-two pairs of jeans. No. Whatever you can find in that pile over there, that's what you're going to be wearing. I honed this and I was learning about human nature, really. Hate. Deceit. Treachery and all these things. I was always being philosophical about it but I didn't know.

[00:30:04]

Them lapses in the jungle when you're just sitting there. That's--Thinking way up here type of questions. Pondering stuff. It ain't like "Man, I wonder who my girl with?" Shit, my girl been gone. I'm wondering "what are we doing?" Okay. See, my thoughts they'll jump around like this but when I told you I heard this hissing sound when we were moving that and this hole? It was a well. I got up in the morning and I said "What was that noise? And why did he say 'step to the left' too?" I looked and there was this old, broken-down well. It was stones in there. I remember they said, well, cobras hiss and they get inside the wells. They get in the little crevices and they'll catch the mice or whatever. They stay down there where it's cool and then they come out. But it was [makes sound] a hiss. I'll never forget that. It was deep. If I'd of fell in, I would have just fell in. It wasn't built up. It was crumbled. That morning when I went to see and I was standing there and then I turned and I walked a couple feet that way and I heard [makes sound] behind me. I whirled around. Automatically I brought my weapon up. There was this old Vietnamese guy. He looked like Ho Chi Minh. He had black and then a little hat on and a cane. He made me think of Moses. The staff. And a long white beard. I thought Moses but then this voice said "Kill him." Just as plain as day. "Kill him." We taught to do silhouettes [snaps] that quick. Identify the target. But it was an old man. All my training was kicking in. It would always kick in. [makes sound] I could have shot him. I could have tore his butt up but I didn't. I just looked. We looked at each other and then I looked over at this village because we were in the palm trees and in the shade. I saw all these little kids playing and laughing. It was in the morning. It took me back to my childhood [snaps] just for an instant. We used to get up in the morning and run around my yard. That's grandpa taking his morning walk. He lives here. This is his land. He just looked at me. We didn't say a word. I'm so glad I didn't shoot him because I could have. I

went back and told my friends. I said “We got to go because Pops is going to tell.” Yes, he is. Bad grandpa. Bad grandpa. And then we moved on.

The rest of the day, short of an occurrence, it’s just, you’re just floating. You’re just floating through this green place until you land somewhere and something happens. Otherwise there’s no connection between me. After we left there that night and we left to where we went again, till I wind up in this place. And this is like [makes sound] and my thoughts is always jumbled like that. You try to connect something and to make a connection all the way but you can’t. You can’t. If I write it down I can only write when this happened and then when this happened.

[00:33:51]

I got a book and I got all my friends’ names from January until September ’70. I got all their names and how they died. People from jump school. People from basic training. I look at it. My airborne sergeant, Sergeant Gaddie [David Gaddie, Jr.??]. I say “He was in jump school with me.” You’d be in there with officers. You could be in there with officers and everybody the same rank in jump school. I got this list. I got it by accident. In the military, people don’t understand that they don’t always--They’re not what you think that they are. They got these rules and there’s people who like to [makes sound] “I’ll just do this like this” and I don’t know what happens to them. They’re in there too long. I don’t know. I asked for a daily report and they sent me this--I was trying to get my discharge changed because eventually they railroaded me out

Gibb: Tell me about getting out.

McNair: Well, here’s what they did. They took me--A guy I was in the field with, TC, he walked up to me and he was supposed to be going home pretty soon. He told me “Mac”. He said “It’s time to go.” And I said “Go where?” He said “You got to go home. It’s time for you to go home.” I said “Yeah.” He said “They’re dead and you can’t bring them back and it’s time for you to go home.” He said “You’re going to either wind up getting killed or messed up or you’re going to get somebody hurt.” He said “Because they’re gone, Mac. You can’t bring them back by staying.” He said “Don’t say nothing else.” He cocked his .45. He cocked it. He said “If you run, I’m going to shoot you” because I would run off. I ran off from these two little white guys before. I said “Look at that naked lady” and I jumped out the jeep. I did it twice. I went back to the base and I’m walking around Bunker 9. But I didn’t go to Bunker 9. I just kind of floated down. Just kind of off, kind of nuts. They took me and he said “You have to go. I got your papers and everything.” He said “They’ve been looking for you. They’re going to get you. You got to go home.” He said “It’s time to go home, Mac.” So I got in the jeep, just me and him, not nobody else. And then it was like somebody hit me with a hammer. I just got numb. I didn’t want to go. It was driving and we was talking about this and that. He said “I got a wife and two or three daughters back

home.” He said “If you run, you know you going to get me in trouble. You’re my prisoner. I’ll be charged with that. They’re going to screw me up. Take my pay and all this and that.” He said “You know how it is. You know how they’re doing us over here. You know how this war is going. They’re out to get us, the soldiers, now. They’re blaming everything they can on us. Soldier escapes.” Well, bust him in rank and send him home in disgrace.

[00:37:43]

So we were riding and then we finally got to, I think we got to Qui Nhon. Yeah, the big airport. He said “Come on.” He didn’t handcuff me or nothing. He said “Come on.” He said “Mac, get on the plane.” I was looking around and I wanted to cry but I couldn’t. It’s like the tears were coming out but they was dry. I looked that way and he said “Mac, I swear, if you run I’m going to shoot you.” He said “Get on the plane.” So I went to the plane and I was waving “Okay, man, I’ll see you.” He was standing there with his hand on it. He stood right in front of the door. I stuck my head back and I went [pause] and I peeped around and he said “I swear I’ll shoot you.” [laughter] He said “Sit down” and then they pulled the door up and the last thing I remember was the plane tilting to my right and I looked out the window and it was rice paddies. It was so beautiful. The sun was kind of shining on them. It was this green patch quilt. Green and yellows and the sky reflecting and the plane tilted like that.

And then [makes sound] it went away. And then I was just sitting on this little cargo plane. From that point on I was just like I got cotton in my ears. All around me. I get home and I don’t know nothing. I walked up and this guy asked me where I’d been. A school mate. I said “I’ve been in Vietnam.” “Oh yeah?” So he gave me a ride home. Just like “Oh yeah?” “Yeah.” I was numb. I didn’t know nothing.

Gibb: Did you fly back?

McNair: Yes. [inaudible; overlapping dialogue] Yeah, I just remember getting on the plane and leaving Vietnam and after that I don’t, I was--I’m in normal company now but I’m by myself. I don’t know anybody on this flight. I’m like--It was like I was in this box and I was screaming “Help! Hey, hey, everybody. Something’s wrong with me” but I couldn’t say nothing. I’m just like--So I just shut down. Then I woke up. I think I got a shot. No I didn’t. I didn’t drink nothing. I didn’t want nothing to drink. I hadn’t drank for them whole eight months and four days I was over there. Then I got to--I think we got to Seattle and somebody had a bottle. I said “Shit, I’m home now.” We had this Crown Royal and [makes sound]. I took a shot and man I was like “Whoa.” I hadn’t had a drink in--I wasn’t a drinker before I went. I didn’t get high before I went and I didn’t do drugs, I mean drink, before I went.

I get home, a few months later, I get this paper saying they kicked me out of the service. And "What?" They gave me a choice. You can either sign this paper now as is or you're going to Long Binh prison, Long Binh jail, and receive a bad contact or dishonorable discharge. I'm like "Whoa!" I'm looking up now these white guys, these six white guys sitting there and they've got all this big brass. A colonel, lieutenant colonel, and I'm like "Hmmm. Don't look good for old Louie." [laughter] It don't look good. They're just like Stonehenge or something. Just like--Just writing and I'm like "Shit." Then, at the end, I noticed a familiar face. Oh, that's Sergeant Wayne Bear Foot. He was in my jump school class, too. What's he doing--And they said [inaudible] but I couldn't have a lawyer. This is the agreement. You sign this undesirable discharge for the good of the service. Oh, is that for the good of the service that I did? I never understood that. Then they put unfit for military duty. So if it's for the good of the service that I served that this will be wrote down as good or because I'm unfit for military duty because of what the psychiatrist--I'm trying to put this together but they're saying "Sign the paper." "Okay." But I thought "Let me read this over." See? Sergeant Bear Foot went [pause] "[inaudible] Sign the paper." He went--because they were all talking to each other like that. At the end, they just had him there as a witness out of my company. That he was a witness because none of these people--They had the shiny stuff on. They were the ones. I'm putting you in jail is what we're going to do. So he was like "Sign it. The Army signed. Get out. They're going to get you. They'll screw you big-time." Then he said--pulled me over and he said "That'll change in six months." Sure. So I signed it. [makes sound]

[00:43:47]

It didn't change in six months. Took me forty-five years to get that changed and I'm not sure that--They've still got some papers they sent me that says I didn't get a good discharge. But I'm getting all this money. I get one hundred percent service-connected disability which I didn't get before because I had a bad discharge. I went and got these people out of Connecticut and they changed it. I fought them for all those years. I just wouldn't quit. Everything the Army taught me I used against them. Tracked their ass down, get his information, don't quit. Attack, attack, attack. Get information. Attack. Don't be worrying about the strength. Just go at 'em. And I won. First it took me--It was 2005 or 2006 when I got seventy percent. It just took that long. But I wrote my case. I was homeless and here and I was just on drugs. I was a mess and I was like "Oh man, wait a minute. I can't think." But I just kept going. I had a job for six years at Johnson Wax. I just kept--I was still in this limbo thing going on. "Oh man. Why am I-- Oh, I'm crazy. I've got--"

Gibb: Was this right after you came back from Vietnam?

McNair: Well, when I came back from Vietnam it was like I didn't know nothing. I couldn't get a job because I kept putting down I got a dishonorable discharge. I didn't know not to do that. They had files out on us. They had spin numbers,

separation numbers behind your name. It's on that paper over there. And this-- Employers had lists which were illegal when they looked at your discharge since they didn't go. They could get you for bedwetting, alcoholism, anything. Anything. They go all these numbers and they were telling people to--This is a fact. They would take guys in the office, a little guy that just got in the Army. "Here, take this and these lists here. These guys, this box right here. Put any one of these numbers in here you want. I'm going and lay down." And so you could wind up with a discharge--See, I didn't have a lawyer. They probably would have said "Well, if he's unfit for military duty he should get a medical discharge and not be treated like this after all this time and service." Twenty months out of twenty-four? No, I'm a good soldier. I'm in combat for eight months. What are you talking about? I've got all this specialized training.

It got even worse once I got home because the PTSD started catching up with me. The drinking. The [makes sound] nightmares. My mother is "Why [inaudible] with all that noise up there, boy?" I'm waking up soaking wet and I'm screaming and I don't even remember any of it. She said "All that yelling. What are you doing up there?" "I just had a nightmare." What is she talking about? I don't remember screaming. And then I started isolating myself. I would sit up like I'm talking to you and somebody would be--I would just talk. They said one day I talked for eight hours straight. Never stopped. I don't remember that. I have no recollection of that. And I would black--Just riding in the car and I'm not in that car. I'm in a helicopter. I'm still in Nam. This movie is running in my head just as plain as I'm looking. I see the car going down the street but I'm not there. I am here. These eyes are here. I'm somewhere else. I couldn't relate to nobody. I didn't have any money. They had a blacklist on me.

[00:47:52]

I'm losing it and I know it and I'm just falling apart. Piece by piece. It was like-- and there was nobody that I could talk to. Not my brother. Not my mother. Nobody. I'm home but where am I? And I realized I have this journey I got to make. I got to make it home because I'm not home. And I would just kind of sit up and my window would face west and I would sit there and I'd be like [makes sound]. I would cry. Uncontrol--Just cry. Just start--And shaking.

I thought "I've lost my mind." My family noticed it was something about--I know my mother did because when I was little I was always the kid that was running up to the park, stealing her beer, doing something. What is wrong with you, child? I'm no child, Mama. Like that. But I was twenty years old and I wouldn't leave the house. I would sit there. I loved my mother so much but I was so ashamed that I couldn't do anything to help and my father was dead. She never pushed me but I was just--And I know she knew something was wrong. This is the one I used to have to whip his behind all the time and make him stay in the yard, in the house. He was always [makes sound]. Where is that child at? Now I won't go anywhere and I'm twenty. I didn't drink. I didn't do drugs before I went over there. Then I

come back here and all these hippie people and these hip-ass black folks, I couldn't relate to them.

The women I could but they wanted nothing to do with me because I wasn't working. I don't want to take care of you anyway. I was in this world of all these nightmares. I used to try to--I don't even remember that. It was just--It was ugly. I would sit in my room and just shake. I couldn't go nowhere. Or I would get up and I would just walk. Just go down by the river and--I say "Where am I at?" I don't know. I stopped talking. I would sit there in the living room with my mother watching the TV and I was screaming as loud as I could at the top of my lungs "Help me, Mama! I don't know where I'm at. I'm lost." And I could not say that. And she was right there. I was just--I'd say "Mama, I'm going upstairs" and I'd go upstairs and try to go to sleep. But I wouldn't sleep at night. I'd be up and then I started doing this stuff.

[00:51:17]

I started painting because I couldn't relate to nobody. As the years rolled by I became more and more violent because of all the stuff I done suppressed. I would drink and I found that if I drank I could talk. I could actually "Hey, what's happening?" Yeah, I'd like to knock you out. I hope you don't start nothing. Like that. I'm like "Whoa. What is that? That ain't me. That ain't me." I had to suppress that urge even though you probably need your ass whipped a couple of times. Somebody needs to hurt you.

I couldn't relate to the guys at all. All this stuff, football and all the things that the guys was doing. Then I would think about my friends that's dead and the ones they gave their life for me and the ones that ain't here now, they family felt. And I would be increasingly--I don't know how to say it. I had no respect for them. You haven't seen anything and you haven't done anything and you haven't risked nothing. You got a wife. I can't find a wife. Nobody wants to deal with an old, broke Vietnam veteran who's nuts. And that was the perception. I had looked at TV and then I started realizing this is what they're telling them on TV. It's them crazy Vietnam veterans. It hurt my feelings. So I withdraw some more. But I paint now. I'm drawing and I'm painting. So I kind of keep my head up but I'm like, "I see you over there. Don't even think about it" and I'm constantly--I'm like that now, to this day. It doesn't go away I found out. It's always going to be there. And I say in this day and age, shit, I'm doing okay. People aren't acting right. It just took me all this--Things started--They didn't make sense.

I got shot by my nephew's first cousin. We grew up and went to church together. Something happened to him and I don't know what it was but he was weighing around about two-sixty-five and I was weighing about a hundred and twenty wet. I was drinking pretty heavy at that time and we got into a little something and he went and got his gun and I went back to the car with him and he wound up shooting me. I was within four feet of him. He said "You don't think I'll shoot

you, do you?” And I said “I don’t give a fuck what you do.” [makes sound] He shot me as I turned away and it went through this lung and this lung and it nicked my heart and hit a rib and it split and a piece come out and another piece went down and tore my intestine and landed in my stomach. I said “Shit. He just shot me.” I was going back to the car with him to get the gun. I was trying to understand. “What are you talking about? I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re angry about what? And you’re making me angry because you’re threatening me.” So the Nam stuff is like [makes sound].

Gibb: When was this? How long was--

McNair: This was, had to be, let me see. My mother died in '80. It had to be in--I went to prison [laughter] for almost killing a man in '81. I got shot in '86. So I'd been out sixteen years.

[00:54:56]

Gibb: All this stuff was still going on?

McNair: Yeah, and I had no idea. I would read stuff and I was steady filing papers with the VA and they weren't answering. I was still on this journey. I saw myself on this epic--It took me a long time to figure it out. It was a biblical thing that had occurred in my life. If I didn't acknowledge that then it was all meaningless. I was just lucky and I don't believe in lucky. I believe there's a God and things happen for a reason, some of which you'll never understand. Don't worry about it. I've got this covered. I've got this. When I got shot--I turned myself in after I almost killed that guy because he said something about my mother and she was dead and I felt so rotten. I hit him with a beer mug and smashed it. I could have killed him but I just meant to hit him. I turned myself in. I said “Something is wrong with me. There's something deeply wrong with me.” I turned myself in and I thanked the state's attorney when I got out because somebody is either going to kill me or I'm going to kill somebody and then I'll get shot and--I was--I remember I seen the guy that shot me. I was sitting at this garden center and he went past and I started [makes sound] hyperventilating. I broke out in a sweat and it was just running, just like that. I never had that happen. I said “I'm going to kill him.” I said “God, you better take this hate out of my heart because you know I'm going to kill him.” He didn't even see me. He went back to the car. I said “You know I'm going to kill him, don't you?” And I would have got him. I said “If you'll just do this for me, I'll try.” I tried to apologize and he stuck his tongue out at me. He wound up dying before I did with--I think he went crazy. I think something might have been--An aneurysm? I don't know. He wasn't the same kid I knew. He was very mean and hateful and I don't know. He was going blind and smoking crack.

But I just kept trudging on. I said “Wait a minute. Something good has got to come out of this.” I've been out sixteen years and in all that time I've never had a

sound, sure piece of money coming in. But now I get this SSI check. Oh, wow, hey. That was in '86.

Gibb: What's the SSI?

McNair: Supplemental Security Income. Like if you get disabled for some reason. I got shot.

Gibb: Okay.

McNair: They didn't want to give it to me but I got it anyway. And it wasn't much but--I started gardening and I was doing okay and then a friend of mine came over with a girl and she said "Do you want to try some crack?" I said "I don't want none of that. Shoot, girl, no." She said--I said "How much does it cost?" There's that dangerous Vietnam thing coming in. Let's go to the ville. I got on crack. My house, it was falling apart anyway. We had it like eighty years in the family. Maybe it was older than that. And I was the only one, the sole survivor taking care of it. I was holding on and then things were coming at me. I say spiritual things was coming. You got to get out of here, Mac. You can't stay in this town. You got to go. This is your journey. You're not going to stay here. You think you are and you love this house but the gas is leaking, the roof is leaking, the electrical sockets--There's water in front of your bed in front of the electrical socket. The furnace don't work. You don't have no heat. You're on crack. You got to get out of here." The roof is caving in. If the city would have known I was staying there, they'd have condemned my house.

[00:59:23]

Then I left and came here. I didn't want to but I said I'd been here in '74. I tried to live here for two years. I started working. I lost my job after six years, the longest job I ever had in my life. Johnson Wax. Six years. And I'm like "Whew. I'm glad that happened." Then I wound up homeless and I wound up--This church, we founded a homeless shelter, Halo, that's still going. I spoke on that and it occurred. I thought "Wow. Thanks" because I was homeless for the first time in my life. I was only there for a hot minute but the Halo, which I thought "Remember? The little halo around your head? I got your back, Louis. I got you. It will come to you. Just got to bring it to you slow. I don't want to scare you with this. Because it's me. The good lord is doing this. You'll see down the road as you--You know. Got to bring it--Can't just hit you with it." I would have probably flipped out. "That man is crazy."

So I went to Milwaukee, homeless. I wrote my papers up when I was homeless. I kept everything, too. I kept it. I just kept all the papers. All my writings. Then I started seeing stuff, like "Okay, Louis. You can see this now." Yes, it was me that

stealing. It was me. And you know there ain't no luck and no, no, no. We're not doing that. Say it. The good lord protected me. Forty years. Then I opened this book up. The Book of Job. What? I don't want to read this. I couldn't put it down. I started reading it. I never read a book and my father was a deacon in the church. I knew all about church. I just never had time. I read it, the entire book. And that's when I lost my job and became homeless. Then I thought back and things started--I won my case. Seventy percent which was twelve hundred and twenty some dollars a month.

[01:01:56]

Gibb: What year was that?

McNair: This was 2006. So from '76 all the way up to then. But now I get to see the psychiatrist. I got a psychologist friend. She's talking to me. I was going to a psychologist when I was homeless. Talking to some of them like "Yeah, watch out, buddy. You writing bad reports about me, talking about you think the PTSD is in remission and all. What?" But I didn't find out until my lawyer found out and he cussed him out and I got somebody else. I couldn't get in to the VA yet until I won my case.

So once I got in I started talking to Doctor Kinsman and we talked for, oh, a while, a few months. She suggested that I go to the psychiatrist. Oh boy. The last time I had a psychiatrist I got kicked out of Nam. So I'm just going to kind of--I said "You just going to put me on them pills, ain't you? I can't do that." I was reluctant but I finally gave in. Then, what's his name? Is she in Milwaukee? She's from the--Has one of those East European accents and, it's like, yeah, she's cool. She started talking to me and walked me through this and I'm spilling my guts and stuff is getting--Layer after layer after layer and then I put it together. I have to tell somebody what happened because there's a lot more in there. All this stuff happened to this little kid that used to watch the circus come to town and always wanted to be an adventurer. I didn't want to be a basketball player, baseball. Forget you. I want to go down the tracks and hunt rabbits or shoot some birds or something. Do something dangerous. And, sure enough, my life got to be dangerous. I lived out this dream and when I would get through doing this dangerous stuff as a kid, what program--I could look at the sun on Saturday and tell you what time Disney Land comes on. "I got to get home. It's getting ready to come on." I could look at the sky and tell. If it's right there, I got to get out of here. I stopped whatever I was doing and go home and watch Disney Land.

What saved me years later when I couldn't relate was my drawing. When I started drawing. I would draw from--I would start at nine o'clock at night. I had a nine-volt transistor radio. They don't even make them no more. I would go upstairs and I had a pencil, typewriter paper, ink pen and some little watercolor things for kids. Tempera paints in grade school. I would sit there and I would draw. It would take me away. I would draw until--I would listen to this station out of New York.

Bleecker Street. Jazz station. I love jazz. And I would play it till I couldn't get it anymore in the morning. It would go off around five. [makes sound] Then I would go to sleep. And I kept doing this. I noticed that I started selling some pictures.

But I was still locked out until I got here and then I see my--I was on crack when I got here and alcohol. I was in bad shape. I was getting four hundred and ninety-four dollars every two weeks from my job. It would be gone before Monday. I'm smoking up West Hell [??]. I'm going [makes sound] "Baby, you--" I was with these women. I didn't love them. I don't really like you. Wait a minute. This ain't right. Something's wrong with you, fellow. You know? This Nam stuff is following you. And until I got to that psychiatrist and understood that all this is a result of all of that and had you been brought in earlier, you probably could have lived a normal life. But you was out there for forty-five years, Louis.

I just got my last one, the other thirty percent, which was a big one. Because I couldn't work because of what they did. I got that in 2012. So from '70 to 2012 to end that case there. Then I said "Well, now I can resume a normal life." But all this bad stuff, this experience--I found out one day, I was in basic training, and I was in there with these Lakota Sioux and it was the DeSertia [??] brothers, Clifton and Byron. "Bad Milk" and "White Face." I said "Those are Indians. Those are Indians." And they looked like--One of them--the DeSertia brothers looked like twins. They looked too young to be in the Army. You know they don't have facial hair really. And Bad Milk had, just like his name. Like he got some bad milk and he had this kind of face like that. White Face was just hard looking. I found out one day, I was--I never saw them again after basic. You probably can't imagine that feeling. I never see these people again. Never. I don't know. I want to go back to Vietnam but it's too much water. I'm afraid of all that water. I just don't want to--I want to write them a letter and tell them I'm so sorry for having participated in that government mistake. We had no business there.

[01:08:28]

It took me years to figure that out and to be able to say that. We just--I read all this history. I got *Time* magazines from 1956. I got fifty-some volumes that I bought from the library to lock in--When I read it, ah, I can remember that. I remember what I was doing in the Army then. That's the only way I can kind of remember. So I've got them in my closet. I think I've got fifty-some volumes. And I just have to have them. But it helps me remember what, all the stuff I was--The times I come through.

I'm at the library because I was working on my case. In the summer of '71 I started writing because I figured out that the Army had really--You didn't do what you said you was going to do. I remember you told me this: that no matter what happens after I take this oath, that you would always take care of me. No matter what happened. And you didn't do it. You turned against me. But you said--So you have to do, to me, you have to do what you say you're going to do. A man got

to do what he say he's going to do because if you don't, you can really mess somebody up. Especially if they put some effort--I mean, you asked me to go. I didn't ask to go. Just like the guy said on Rambo, "You asked me to go. I didn't ask to go." And it's true. So I went. And being black, at that time, man, Dr. King and everybody, Muhammad Ali, man, forget that. But I said no. I'm not going with that line of thought. I'm going to think for myself. I'm black. So what? Some people is pink or orange or whatever but that ain't got nothing to do with it. It's in here. This is what counts. So I took the chance and now my friends that didn't go are in pretty bad shape a lot of them. You just had a stroke, you're fat. You're "Oh, my hip" and you didn't do anything. You didn't go in the Army. You didn't go to college. You didn't stay with your wife. You didn't treat nobody right. So look at me now. I get about eight hundred bucks a week. Just enough. Just enough. You know?

And I'm good because all that time that I was going through this, on this long journey, by myself it seems, that I know--I used to read this poem all the time and I didn't get it at the time. "Footprints." That one where when you fell I picked you up and it was only one set of tracks. That's when I carried you. I didn't under--I used to look at that and I didn't understand what it meant. It was like, this terrible thing that happened was not just you, Louis. It was the whole world changed between Vietnam and the United States. Now we're trading partners. It was a big mistake. You changed history by participating in this. This won't happen again. You won't draft nobody no more. Now you got to be trained. Now they got all these knuckleheads running around. I have a solution for them but--[laughter]

To this day, I feel special. I did this. I was involved in this. I have a book back there I'm reading. 1965. I'm fifteen. I'm reading *Time* magazine. Vietnam. I didn't see it coming but in five years, Louis, you'll be over here. I didn't see it. I'm like "Oh, wow. I think this is worth telling. As much as I can." As much as I can to tell somebody. Who gets to do this? Who gets to live a life? You want to be an adventurer? Okay. I'll put on an adventure all right. Let me see what I've got for you, Louis. Here. There you go. Catch you at the end. Catch you in forty-five years. Who gets to do that? My friends are still in my hometown. "Hey, man. What? You still here? Man, where you been?" It's a long story. Forty-five years. And I get to do what I want. I get to do that. I get to do that. That's going to my daughter. I get to do all that and I did this all the way around thing. I get to start here and then you go all the way around and you get back here and then you get to go off in the direction you want. You ever see this picture they show it sometimes? It's a cartoon or movie. This guy--"Aaahhhhh!" He goes off the cliff. And then the camera holds there and then you see this-- [pause]

[01:13:53]

Gibb: [laughter]

McNair: This hand come up like that? That was me.

Gibb: Grabbing onto the edge of a cliff.

McNair: Yeah. They hold it there and you don't see it and then it comes up. That was me. That's what I did. I can't describe how--I was like in a foreign country in my own hometown. Nobody really close. I wanted a family. I couldn't keep a family. Women--I just had problems. What are you talking about? But my generation, everyone was gone. I'm dealing with this new breed and the ones that I should have been with are married or gone. I'm still looking for them. They're not there, Louis.

Gibb: Did you have much contact with other Vietnam vets when you came back?

McNair: In my hometown. My nephew. Jessie Brooks. James Self. My brother-in-law John Allen. Jimmy Johnson. Herbie Taylor. Cecil Taylor. All the people I grew up with. They all went. I got to go. We just went. If you were from Freeport, you just went. They enlisted. I was drafted because I was somewhere else. [snaps] That child was crazy. You know? I wasn't exactly in tune with what everybody else was doing. They playing basketball, I'm not. That's stupid. I fell out in the sixth grade. That's stupid. I can't play basketball because I can't dribble. They told me to do like so-and-so did and I couldn't. I had asthma. I can go play in the woods and play soldier and chop down trees and make a fort and do adventure stuff while y'all are over there [makes sound] with all that. I ain't doing that. I can't see anyway. I didn't know I couldn't see. Look like y'all are bigger than me. But I'm fast. I can beat you running. Although I had asthma but I could beat you running. [makes sound] It was only in the fall that I would get sick. In the springtime I would just run. I did it when I got home from Nam. I got up one morning and, like I said, there's a mile track up the street from my house. It used to be a beautiful park but not anymore. I started running. Just like Forrest Gump. And I just ran and I ran and I ran. Every morning. Just running. I didn't know why. I would get out there and I would be looking for mountains. I'd go back in the weeds and sit in the bush in the park and just sit back and I'm back in Nam. This is where I'm at. I go along the riverbank and I'm just camouflaged. I'm hidden. Nobody sees me. I walk the entire length of the riverbank. I might be gone four hours, just walking in the woods by myself. I was trying to figure out "What am I looking for?" I'm trying to find my friends. I'm trying to go save them again. I'm trying to make it--If I could just pop--I'm in this dream state, okay? Maybe if I could do this [snaps], maybe I'll just snap out of it. Maybe I'll be there with them and help. But it just got to be--It was wearing me down and I couldn't do it. I couldn't get up no more. Nobody to talk to.

[01:17:57]

Gibb: So you didn't get to discuss what you felt and thought with other veterans at all?

McNair:

I wasn't allowed to get any help because the VA makes that--And there weren't any programs in 1971. There were these storefront things but I think what I need here is I need--I went to a lawyer. A couple of them. I told them my case. They just looked at me. The VA rep in my hometown, he said "Oh, you again? What do you want?" This is what I got. I said "I'm going to kick your ass" under my breath. "I want to kick your ass but I don't want to go to jail." And he would just discourage me. Just go on. You just might as well just forget it. It's over and done with. Just go on with your life. And he was Richard Miller. [makes sound] Oh, I wanted to hit that man so bad but I stopped going. There was nowhere to go. I would get sick. Doctors wouldn't see me. I'd have to beg people for money or just suffer and eventually I had to have my teeth what was really bad. But it was just bad. There was nothing I could do. Like I said, I was at the library and I'm reading this book. It said the Dull Knives--Lakota Sioux, the Dull Knives of Pine Ridge. I said "Pine Ridge. That sounds--Lakota Sioux? That's my friends." So I was reading this book because I'm down there every day. And I'm reading it and I come across this sentence and I dropped. I started shaking. I said, "No, this--"

My friend who I had seen in basic training. Byron. Clifton. His name was Byron. The FBI had shot him when they had, I think, the Wounded Knee thing going on in the seventies. The Indian reservation. The FBI agents shot him dead. The thing about that, what made them special, was I read in a book that their great-grandfather was Black Elk who was there when they kicked Custer's ass. The big time chiefs, that was their grandfather. So it's like, wow, there's that special group of people again. So I read this. And it said he was dead. It hurt me so bad because now--This is how I would find out my friends are dead.

A guy I was in Gary, Indiana with, went to school with. He actually sucker punched me over this girl. I didn't know. They sat me up. It didn't matter. Billy Rogers came to my house one night out of nowhere. Remember that thing? Just come out of nowhere. He was with my friend's sister, Earline Chester. Pretty as-- Oh boy was she pretty. And she knew my sister. They were sitting in the driveway. I walked up to them and I said "Do you remember me?" He said "Yeah" and I guess he thought I was going to jump on him. I'm like "No." So we was drinking. My mother was gone so we were like [inaudible]. You know? He goes to Vietnam and, of course, he dies. I never see him again. I only saw him in school at sixteen and then I saw him again and then he was gone.

My friend Darryl Hurt. Went to Edison High School with him. He's a door gunner. I look around. My sister tells me "Yeah, you know Darryl Hurt is dead." I ain't seen these people. What? Yeah, got killed in Vietnam. There was no connection with where are these people. We didn't know. I went over there. I went by myself basically and come back. Now it's all so--I'm so proud. I'm so proud that these people that I got a chance to be with these people to know them. These are what real men and people who really care about somebody other than they self--you sacrifice. If you're a mailman--You know. Everybody can't be a fighter. We need mailmen. We need cooks. We need truck drivers. And we need

soldiers. At that time, for me to do my job it took ten other people behind me. Ten. Just ten. All the way down from a doctor, all the way down to the mailman.

I think at the time that we were fighting, when I was fighting, there weren't that many people doing what I was doing. But you think because you don't know that you have this--We've got a million people in the field. [makes sound] And you know fifty thousand, sixty thousand, maybe seventy actually shooting at somebody. But you don't know that. They don't tell you that. You don't need to know. Just go do your job. And that's amazing.

[01:24:05]

Well, I can see why they wouldn't tell you but at the level that they were deceiving us and the public, at the time--It was just Nixon and all that and it wound up with all that crap and Henry Kissinger and secret papers and bombings. What the--? Oh, is that the wind? Yeah. I think it's a story that--Actually I've got pieces in my book that I'm writing. Sometimes they come back and sometimes--I was crying the other day. I haven't did that in a while. When Obama was talking about the veterans, and I ain't cried in a long time. But then it just came over me. I finally got to see my daughter. My daughter went with me. I got to see the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. I got to see it. I remember when they started. All the controversy. Really it didn't make no sense to me. Why are they always treating us like this? They just "These people, those people." And for all that time to go--I was just like "Well, as long as don't nobody just say nothing to me, okay." I had my boots when I came home. I remember I had them in the closet.

I had my uniform. I would look at it. And it still has dirt on it. I never cleaned it. I just left the Vietnam dirt right on them. Right there. I finally got there. It was a couple of years ago. I felt so proud when I saw their names up there. What they had gave up. I'm sixty-five now. They was like nineteen or twenty. They gave up so much. And I said I got to at least try to write a book or tell somebody about these people. They weren't baby killers. We never did none of that. We was always in the jungle except on my excursions. [laughter] We were always out. We never ever went into a [platoon leader Lt. William] Calley thing [1968 massacre at South Vietnamese hamlet of My Lai] killing all these--No. We went down the ville and it was party time. And I said [inaudible], how many guys just gone now?

I see these Iraqi guys coming back. At the VA I can spot them. Just look at their eyes. They're just like--And people told me, well--They said "Why you looking so crazy?" They used to ask me when I came home. I didn't know. I had that thousand-yard stare, that blank looking away and talking to you, "huh? what?" Gone, in an instant. I see them and I try to--I sent like this Thanksgiving dinner. It cost like two dollars and four cents. I always send them five dollars to Milwaukee. Milwaukee Rescue Mission. I always send them five bucks. And the paralyzed veterans and disabled veterans, I send them something when I can. I bought some coats. I saw this kid right up here at the corner the other day. A little girl. She was

about seven. She was as thin as hell. Leotards on, shaking. Little thin summer jacket on. Shaking. And that breaks my heart. It just makes me think about them little kids in Nam. How they would just be, just in the streets, just aimless. Look at these little--Big ass, two and a half ton trucks rolling past. Little kids here. Just walking. Some of our drivers--[makes sound] And sometimes they do things over there that they shouldn't be doing and you see that and you can't do nothing. It happens so fast. [makes sound] Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha. I went out to Goodwill and bought a little boy's coat and two little girls' coats maybe, and some hats, and took them over to this church downtown.

[01:29:27]

Because I always think back to Nam. I couldn't do nothing for these kids. And they were just in the middle of this bad, bad situation. I mean, you know, I didn't even know their little names. They just "Hey GI!" And always--[makes sound] There you go. Where'd he go? But they're in a war zone. I saw this time--We was on one of my little afternoon sabbaticals again and we was on the truck. It was a lot of GIs on there. We used to pull in perimeter patrols, security, calling it security. Well, whatever. We're out here because we're loaded. The truck, we got to this village. Pretty large. [inaudible] It was crowded and in the streets and the trucks had to stop. The little kids, always the little kids, never the adults--"Hey GI! Oh. Chop-chop, come on." And do you know what the soldiers did? Instead of take--All they wanted was something to eat. If you do like this they're going to come up and get it. Take the damn can and throw it over there. They'll go get it. They'll get away from the truck. What do they do? They pick it up like a brick and they start throwing it on them like that. Hitting them with these big fruit cans.

And see. I'm supposed to be the good guy. I'm John Wayne guy. I'm supposed to be the good guy here and I'm seeing this. You don't want to fight. You keep seeing stuff like that with your own people doing this. You don't want to be around that. You don't want to be a part of that. Then one day you realize "Louis, here's the big picture. Here's you and here's them and here's all of you guys multiplied by--So, yeah, you're the bad guy, Louis. You guys are the bad guys." I'm brought up to think that the United States we're the good guys. We beat Hitler and all this and that, right? Stopped the Koreans, right? Not this time. And do you know what that does to you? When your image is shattered? [makes sound] You're not. You're in something bigger and deeper than you ever would have thought of and your life is on the line, buddy. That's right. It's on the line. And you don't know what's going to happen. But you can't leave. You could get out.

I could have got out of the Army. I could have did something stupid like knock that sergeant out. But I'm not doing that. I'm not doing that one. I'm going to do my duty the best I can and then they kicked me out. But I made it. I made it. I go places now and I'm just proud. All that time, what is it? Adversity builds character or something like that? I said "Oh, I get it, Lord. The Jews wandered for forty years and so I had to wander forty-five because I'm black. Is that it?"

[laughter] “You’re just doing this to me because I’m black.” [laughter] No, I had to put that in there. [laughter] You’re just doing this to me because I’m black. [laughter]

[01:33:27]

It started to make sense, all the stuff that I went through. It would come back and it would always be on a biblical thing, little note. Ding! Forty-five years they wandered, Louis. Forty. So you can do forty-five. [snaps] It started to make sense and I had this sense of who I am again. I’m an artist. I’m a veteran. I’m a good person. We all make mistakes. It ain’t a mistake unless you keep on doing it. When you stop, you got it. You got it. That’s just character. That’s in your resume. You did all this. Look around at the people who never tried to do nothing. See? And then you can put--Now let’s see. Oh, yes. You can move up here, Louis. You’re entitled to this now. Well, they’ll just have to go down there because they didn’t--Remember that guy who always used to want to be a pimp and a hustler and beating women up? Well, he had to do fifteen years in prison and now his gut’s sticking out to here and he just had a stroke and he doesn’t get any money. He doesn’t have any good memories. He’s still in Freeport looking crazy. They never did anything. I said “Well, geez. I don’t know.” It’s been a long, eventful journey, right? It’s not over. I get to start all the things I thought I missed when I was in my twenties. This is where you start living, Lou. This is where you--

All of those people, most of those people that you saw that were getting married and all this and that, they didn’t even treat their wives right. They didn’t. And they don’t have them anymore. Some of them are even dead. But now you get to-- They counted me out a lot. “Aw, he’s crazy. He ain’t going to be nothing.” But now, I’m sitting up and I’m king of the hill. Yeah, I am. Why? Because of what you did. You kept fighting. You never quit. You held onto something you believed in. That’s why you went. Because you believed in “I don’t like bullies.” But you were lied to, Louis. As were all of you. You were lied to. And this is what happens when you don’t keep your word. You ruin people’s lives. Especially when it comes down to matters of like, one nation and another nation, and you’re just sitting here and you’re just--Old men rattling their sabers get young men killed. You got to do something with these people. What they are is they’re crazy people. Not the Islamists and ter--They’re just--there crazy people have come out because they perceive the civilized, industrialized country as weak because we’ve got all this stuff and we’re not paying attention to people. I said I don’t see Saudi Arabia or any of these people asking these people to come on in. I have strong feelings about that. Yeah, I was in the United States but we ain’t supposed to be doing jack shit but taking care of the people here and being friends with our allies. Make sure everybody’s in agreement. Okay. But this world policeman? No. Didn’t we get in trouble with that in Vietnam come to think of it? It’s all these things now.

[01:37:44]

I used to lay down when I was little. Go out in my yard and lay down. We had one street light and we got that way back in Lord knows when because it's on the poor side of town. I would lay there and look at the stars. Just look. I would say "What if I could go up there?" I would project. I didn't know what I was doing but I would say "If I could go--This is the earth and I'm going to put myself over here and I'm going to look back and it will look like that. But what if I want to go over there? What if I want to go way out there where that one planet is and then look back? How big would we be? Saturn. We'd be kind of small. Look kind of big now. What if I got past that and the sun was kind of just a dot and you couldn't see the earth?" I would think like when I was a kid like, "What if I go way out there till the sun just looks like another spot of light? And then what if I went and I couldn't see the sun--Are we alive at that point?" Always kind of little variations of it. With Nam, did I go through that? It's deep. Was I there? Did I do that? I watched a lot of movies to try to catch up. It seemed like reality either it was up here or I was lagging and I didn't quite, wasn't quite--I got to catch up to real time. I can't seem to--oh, that passed me by. Wow. I got to keep going. It was like that. It's constantly in my head what I did. I'm like "Wow. I wonder how many other people think like that." Like, did I do that? Did that really happen? Yes, Louis.

But sometimes I watch the documentaries and I be trying to find me or one of my friends. I'm just looking and I'm--Was that him? I stop it. Or I look in the books. For years I did this. I was always reading the paper, always looking at magazines, trying to find my friends. I didn't realize they're gone. I just kept hoping I would see a picture of them and it would say he just got shot in the arm. Some of them I don't know what happened to them. Like Doc Morales. Sergeant Waki from Guam. Balliben [??] from--he was from Guam. He was like--this guy was like this tall. We would dress him up like a Viet Cong soldier and he would walk in front of us. He could walk right up on them before they knew it and [makes sound]. Looked just like them. Unless you looked at him and he said something. But it was too late. We had little tricks we could do like that. Sergeant Waki was taller. He was about my height. W-a-k-i from Guam. [inaudible] met Guamanians? And then I wonder what happened to them? They were with us and then they're gone. That's what I hate. They're gone. Where did he go? Where did they go? Is they dead? I don't know. It makes me want to go find them.

[01:42:29]

I want to fly to Guam one day but I say it's too much shit going on with these bombs on airplanes and that water really bugs me more than anything. If a bomb goes off you're dead but I'm thinking I don't want to go down in--That's a long way--I'm scared of water. I don't like a lot of deep water.

I almost died in Nam. They took us out on a mission and then they called it off. "We're sending you to Sky Soldier Beach." "Oh, that sounds nice." So we get

there and it's like a fenced-off area on a beach. Just some old snow fencing. And this guy is "You won't go past that." And no--What? And "Don't go over there to that village." How come? "Just don't go." They had these little hoochie mamas down on the beach and they said you can't go messing with them. They had, I swear, a fence that was like a rope. And they said "You cannot cross that rope." But they're over--They're right there and we're right here. And you see the absurdity of it. Did you bring these women here for us? But you say don't do it. Don't go over there.

So we're drinking beer and barbecuing and these women are over there in these little cardboard shacks and you say don't go. So we stayed there four days. It might seem like it don't make no sense but we're going on a mission and you called it off and then you bring us over here and you say don't do this but you put it right there in front of me. Okay. And then we go but while I'm there for, I think I was there like four days. It was a pretty big one. Maybe a hundred people I guess. I'm in the South China Sea. Wow. Clark Gable and stuff, right. I'm in the South China Sea. This is the TV and the movies where they'll be doing the shanghai pirates and stuff.

So I decide that I'm going to get in the water because it's the South China Sea. So I get in there on an air mattress. The man told us "Be careful" because if you get on an air mattress and you go out, the salt will eat the glue and if you can't swim you'll drown. Of course, I'm drunk by now and I don't care because I'm like so. I wake up and something says "Wake up, Louis. You're floating away." So I'm going out and I look back and everybody's about that big. Whoa! I start paddling in, catch a cramp and fall off. Oh, charley horse. I look down and grab the air mattress. I remember when I went out you could see the bottom. It was sandy white, greenish white. You could see the bottom. Now it's just green as far down as I--I'm screaming for help and everybody's laughing because they think I'm playing. "Help! Help! I'm drowning." I'm not playing. I can't swim that well. I don't mess around because I get cramps. So my friend Keith Evans, from basic training, he knew I couldn't swim. He went to jump school. He knew I couldn't swim. So he jumps in and [makes sound]. He swims out. He said "Just relax" and he does the life-saving thing. He's bringing me back and as soon as my foot hit the sand I did a roll [makes sound] and slipped out from under him and ran up the beach shaking.

Do you think that was enough to teach me to stay out of the water since you can't really swim? Oh, I'll just go get another beer. I just won't do that again. Shades of when I was a kid. Oh, you just won't do that again. I get some flippers and a mask. I know what I'll do. I'll swim parallel to the beach. That ain't no fun. I can see all these little fish. So I start swimming out a little bit. Then I had this brilliant idea to dive down as far as you can go. Hold your breath and dive straight down. My head was going [makes sound]. I soon stopped and turned around like [makes sound]. That wasn't such a good idea. [laughter] And I was like, geez, maybe I need another beer. You know, get this water out of my lungs or whatever. My

head is killing me. It was just the pressure. It was just [makes sound]. I should have learned at school but obviously you weren't paying attention that day to the water pressure and stuff.

Some people said "Let's get in a boat and go fishing." I said "I'm not getting in a boat. You guys are drunk." So they got in a boat but they were fishing with grenades. They were throwing them in the water [makes sound] and then the fish would come up—concussion. But the guy dropped one in the boat. He was drunk. It's lucky he didn't pull the pin. I could see them. Suddenly I seen the boat coming back real quick. They told us what was going on. It was surreal stuff going on like this. And then here come these--I'm sitting up here--I say--Well, maybe I can--You know--It's hot. These little crabs come out at night. They just come [makes sound] out of the dirt like whoa! And I'm from Freeport, Illinois. We don't have crabs coming out of the ground at night. And then you could hear this [makes sound], the ocean because it's a sand dune. And then I'm on this side so I had to get out--That ocean breeze. And these little crabs. [makes sound] And I'm like "This is creepy" but after enough beers you go to sleep.

[01:49:07]

So I wake up and I see these Vietnamese people coming down. It's about the last day. Coming down the beach and they're picking up something and I don't know what it is. I'm not afraid of them now. They're coming right towards--Like three of them. I said "Well, I'm going to get in the water." I rush out with my flippers on and the face thing. Dive in. I see this huge jellyfish. It must have been this big. Doing like this. It was right--If I hadn't of went like that it would have hit me in the face. They were picking them up and eating them. The Vietnamese were eating them. And I went--I knew it was a jellyfish so I started backing up real quick. Real quick. Backstroke. You know? I was swimming that day. [laughter] I got out of the water and then I looked around and there were jellyfish everywhere. The people were--That's what they were picking up. They were in the water but you could see right through them. And I thought "Jellyfish? Hmmm. Let me put on my thinking cap. Something about jellyfish that you and jellyfish don't mix." So the guy said "Everybody got to get out the water" because there were some big ones like this. Looked like jelly. And the man said leave them alone. "They'll sting you." And I said "That's it. Jellyfish sting. So I ain't messing with them. I'm a black guy but I ain't messing with it. Can't eat it? Leave it alone." So this white guy "Ha, ha, ha." I said "Oh, we've got a clown over here." So he takes a stick and he jabs it and he throws it in the air, playing with it. I said "I'm getting away from him." He does it again to another one but just as he gets it up here it rips open and hits him right here. He goes stiff and he just went [pause] and was shaking on the ground.

It ain't the--It's the little things over here that are going to get you. The little man. The little time. The little wire. The little scorpion that got me on my backpack. It got hit by a scorpion. It's the little things. They had to call off a mission to bring

me in. My arm was just on fire. It's the little things like that that would get you over there, that was constantly--They're there but they're like not--You know, I'm like--I'm over here. But you just learn to just ignore it. Ignore the fact that what you're doing, not what you're doing, but where you're at. These people are going to kill you. They'll ride by on motorcycles. I've never had--I think the Ku Klux Klan would give me a nicer look than what they did. They would like ride past you. You could feel the [makes sound]. They were like--give you the dirtiest look. Like "I'm going to kill you if I get a chance." Two guys. And you could just feel it go right up your back. They always had a white shirt on and these little black trousers. The gang. [laughter] A gang, yeah.

[01:53:03]

You would see that. Constantly, constantly. Always, everything about you at that time, especially if you was one of the grunts like me, boonie rats. You was constantly on. I don't care if you came in, you had this look about you. The Vietnamese people knew what you were doing. They could look at your boots. They're not black and green. They look like camouflaged, tannish-looking, suede-ish looking leather. You look like you're killing people. You could see it. Some of them would like [pause]. You know. And then others were like [pause] "Um hm. I know what you do." You had these things around your weapon. You had this warrior look. I'm not going to go shave. There was no point in that. No. I've got this rag around my head that says Vietnam. I've got these dark glasses on. I look a hot mess. I'm going to kill you. And they knew.

[01:54:14]

But I didn't want to project that. But that's what you are. That's what you projected. I would try to talk to them. Never called them names. Never mistreated them. I felt so bad about being there. You know? I just felt rotten. They were like [inaudible]. What are they saying? What the hell are you--? And they'd get so embarrassed. They would get embarrassed so quickly. Like, you know, you can't sit with the bottom of your feet toward them. I didn't know that. But I would try to learn as much about them as I could in those little brief moments.

I was on one of my little river cruises. I went and I stayed too long at this intersection. I was looking at this pretty young girl. She reminded me of my girlfriend from a distance. I was thinking "Boy, I like her." But at six o'clock, everything, the roads close and nothing moves. So I'm standing there and it's getting late. Un-oh, it's too late to go anywhere. Where am I going to stay? No problem. I've got a gun. But I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to "Let me in your house!" I would just ask this guy. I looked around and this girl was standing behind me. Hey, she's been standing over here all day. So I was like--I don't know what they was saying but the man told me to come in and eat. He motioned "eat". So I gave him my M16. "Here." What the hell? They've got me now. They're going to poison me or they're going to kill me. Just enjoy the meal.

[laughter] You know. I sat down and he had his, these little kids. The first thing I noticed was these little kids. They were like “Ah, it’s time to eat.” They were sitting there with their little green GI-issue trunks on. Where did they get those at? You know somebody’s giving it to them. The old man’s got on green Army O[live] D[rabe] green. So they’re giving, we’re giving them, they’re getting it. They’re either stealing it or we’re giving it to them. But they got it.

I don’t know what he was giving me. The meat was real red and it was spicy and had little vegetables in it. I sat down. He put the weapon in the next room. “Hey.” I’m sitting there in this house and the sun is coming down like that. The kids is backlit. I’m looking at them and they’re just laughing. They’re just having a ball. It’s evening time. I look off in the distance and I see these monks with these orange-colored robes on in the distance at this temple. There’s two of them and they were coming down. That was one of those [makes sound] and nothing bad happened. Then the girl came in and I was talking about “Yeah [inaudible] sex and this and that.” Young guy. Nineteen or twenty. So she said “I don’t know about that” but she did it so nicely. She told me that she was pregnant. But I didn’t understand. She had this, it was a chicken heart. She had it tucked between her legs. She said “Oh, baby san, baby san. Oh!” Then she showed me this chicken heart and I went “Oh, now I get it. Okay.” So I just laid down beside her and we slept. And I thought, that was nice. Don’t take--That’s a war crime.

[01:58:27]

See, I wouldn’t do stuff like that. I got up in the morning. [makes sound] I got to get out of here. I’m due back at the base. But I forgot to take my weapon. I just left it there. Just left it. Walked off. A walk in the park don’t mean nothing. I can pick it up later.

I get back to the base. I’m strolling around. “McNair’s always got his weapon. Where’s your weapon at?” Who did I run into but Mr. Piggy. “Where’s your weapon at, McNair?” “Uh--” “And where you been anyway?” “Uh--what?” I never would answer directly. “What’s the matter?” “I want you out here in formation this evening and you better have your weapon with you.” I’m like “Okay. All right. I can do that.” I walked off, ignoring him, not even paying attention. I’m not the only one that’s not--You strutting around there saying things, “I want you--” and I’m not listening to you. I’m going over here. Right over there by that beer stand. I said, damn, I got to go get my weapon. But how I’m going to get out? I got to get out the gate again. I get so tired of tricking these people.

I walk down there. I said “Let me see.” Get on the water truck and catch with just one driver so you can sit next to him. So I get in there and I say “Man, I got to get to Phu Cat.” “Okay.” Every morning the trucks would go, pass by the convoy. Every morning just like clockwork. I get there and I get off and it’s a big air base there anyway. These guys are living like--They got Bermuda shorts on, ten-speed

bicycles. They got the golf shirts on, the white tennis shoe with the little white socks coming up to there. I went in there once. Me and my friends were totally pissed. We had all this jungle stuff on plus our--And they told us "You can't come in here." "Really?" I said "I just want to put my 16, my weapons--" They didn't have weapons. "I just want to put it here and then we're going to the bar and drink and then we can come back." Ain't nobody in here. He got all the bed [inaudible]. "No, you're not sleeping in here and I mean it. So just pack up. You're not going to stay in here." I said "Okay."

I went and told my friend. This guy's got an M-60 machine gun. Bandoliers on him and these three or four other guys got grenades and stuff. We come in there. He said "Is this the building we're staying in?" and this guy looked up [laughter] and he was shaking. He said--And he rolled his stuff up and he left. He said "You can stay anywhere you want. Anywhere you want." So we went down to the air base and they had this little Vietnamese band playing. These were the highlights of my time when I wasn't fighting, I am cutting out of here with the quickness. Catch me. I got so good I'm telling you. I could just walk right out, get right on that truck and just straight there. Be gone a couple of days. They never even noticed. They never marked me down because they didn't care.

[02:01:55]

They said we're making too much noise. [makes sound] We got bottles stacked up to here. We got two tables. We are really--We're just having a ball. Then we left. That was one of those times when, like, I had been there so I knew where I was going. I knew where Phu Cat was and I knew what was down that road that way. But they had all these--I didn't know at the time what they were using but it was Agent Orange. It just strips everything down. They had boulders at least the size of that dresser or bigger. But distance will fool you because it's like a thousand of these boulders. And they're actually little caves. There are caves up there. But there's nothing. It's just a stark, gray--It's like that color. Like that. And it's in front of you. It's from here to there. And you have to do like that to look up.

You stare at it. You can't get close to it but the size will fool you. Some of the boulders are the size of these houses but they look like that. All these different little--And so once you come out of there and then you get back up on the main road where I was at with this young lady, and I'm standing there trying to figure out where's the man at. I thought he stood here all the time. No. Maybe--Where's she at? And so I'm standing there and I'm like I'm just standing there. A lone GI, black GI, standing there. All these people around me. I don't know who is who. Don't care. I'm just standing there. Then this little tap comes on my shoulder. I never [makes sound]. No.

[End of McNair.OH2023_file 2][Beginning of McNair.OH2023_file 3]

McNair:

--too stupid for that. I'm ready. Just kill me. I don't care. I look back and he said-- He goes back in the building. He comes back out and hands me my M16. It's as rusty as hell. I said "Thank you" because he could have sold it. He could have did something. But, see, I'm learning all the time. These people don't hate us. They just don't want us here. They want to make their own decisions. But too many people are involved and they have to fight you back because they just want to decide their own way. But people won't let them. They keep trying to come and "We're going to help you" but then you try to muscle them and they don't go for that.

I got it back. It was rusty because of the humidity involved. I oiled it up. Just squirt some oil on it. They said "Man, where you been with that thing?" I'm like "Man, you don't even want to know." So I'm riding back. I get back just in time for evening formation. Just under the wire. [makes sound] I'm in formation. I haven't done anything wrong today [laughter] or yesterday. And I have. I've broken the law several times. We're not supposed to be in the Vietnamese villages. You're not supposed to hanging out with the Vietnamese. You're not supposed to be around them. But you do it anyway. Who didn't? We're trying to get to know these people. Something wasn't right about killing 'em. Okay. I know we're at war and when I'm out in the field I'll blow your brains out. But you start getting to see that they were people and their kids laugh. All kids I found out, just realized it then, all kids' laughter sounds the same. I don't care what nation. It's all the same when they're kids. When they laugh it's all the same. It just dawned on me that day.

All this stuff kept [makes sound] assaulting my senses. Every time I'm in, I'm trying to kill somebody one minute. I'm creeping around at night. I'm over here, fighting this jungle this and somebody got shot and somebody shot at us. And then it's quiet. And then I'm down and so I got to get away. I got to get out of here because I know what I'm going back to. And I know what's capable. I mean, I'm ready to kill you. Somebody's going to get hurt. And the whole scenario. So I would slip off. I would just leave. Any chance I got. Sometimes. Not like every Friday I'm out of here. [laughter] No.

This world. These two worlds I was living in. I'm in this crazy one and then I'm in an even crazier one. When I'm in the town and I'm doing stuff I ain't supposed to be doing, I had no fear. It was just so--It was like a movie. Like romantic. I didn't know at that time, yeah, that's how teenagers--They do dumb stuff. And this is the ultimate dumb stuff you're doing but you're doing it for the right reason. But you might get your leg blown off.

IK decided I'm writing. I've so many papers over there in that trunk. I'm starting on this one section on my book. I want--I don't want it to go away. I want to leave it behind. Somewhere. Some pieces. Something. I don't know where my friends are. I know the ones that are dead. I know how they died. I know what day they died. And I kept that but I found it by accident. By accident I found most of this

stuff. I say “Mmmm--Maybe this serves a purpose. A higher purpose for this. Maybe I should leave something behind so somebody will be like--” I think that we just kind of--

You see my story ain't like blood and guts like that. [makes sound] No. I don't really want to be there in '68, '67, when they was kicking our ass. Didn't really want to be there. Could have. Providence says “No, you're not going, Louis. You'll go later.” Just a year's difference. '68, Tet, all the big operations. Had I went a year earlier, like going in the Army in '68, I might not be sitting here. More than likely. But I read all the books and the records and the way the big battles were teaming up. They got it all on film. They didn't film us. Why? Because there's only a few of you guys out here doing this little dirty work. But overall they was still killing people. Still [makes sound] one today, one tomorrow. While you killed four of ours, we killed two of your friends. It's like that. It was just so--Till you just became--You know? Just--You just took a breath. You ate. And I was just numb. Looking around. Mostly I was just enjoying the scenery or talking to somebody. It wasn't that Hollywood [inaudible] stuff going on. It really wasn't. It was people sitting around writing notes, writing letters, cleaning their weapons. Mostly quiet. Mostly quiet. And then it's “Let's saddle up.” And then you go out that way. You just slip on off.

I just have to--Before I get too old, I want to leave a record so somebody will know. Who knows? Somebody somewhere will read this one day and say “But he made it. After all of this, from this idyllic childhood that was perfect in imperfect times. In the fifties. In this town. For all this, he went on his path, it went like this. And then it went up and then “Whoa!” down, he's whoa. That's the thing, Louis. You're going to get out of here. Valley of the shadow of the death and all that. And, yeah. So I can say “Yeah, been to the mountaintop” like Doctor King. I've been to the mountaintop. I'm not worried any more. You know, I have something to tell.

I lost my son but I found some things you can't do nothing about. If you don't know your children then you have no--You might try to reattach but you have to do this within a certain amount of time or it's just not there. Like my son is born in '68. I don't know him. I mean, I talk to him. I've seen him. I've seen when he was little for a minute. Talked to him when he was older and a few years ago I was talking to him. We don't even--He doesn't know me. It used to hurt until I realized she took him away from you. There was nothing you could do. The war came between you and a lot of other families. This is what happened. It's not just you. And it just [makes sound] and so there's nothing you can do about that.

[00:08:32]

Gibb: Does he know about your experiences in Vietnam?

McNair: I tried to tell him but he told me he don't want to hear no more of that Vietnam shit. Because when he moved to Minneapolis not to crowd--He watches the Army people crowd, the people to rival with, they were [snaps] hustlers and show boaters and pimps and players and he grew up around that. And that will ruin a child quicker than anything. It's a false image of a man. And then you become a little criminal. And you don't have the manly things it takes to care about a woman. You see her as a sex object or somebody to control or somebody to use and that's not what--no. You don't--

My father was always home. He went to work and he came home every day. Sunday he went to church and he came home. He didn't "We're going to Ab--" No, we're not. We're going home to be with my wife and children. And this is the kind of stuff that I grew up. All these little bricks made this foundation around me that I was on that I think saw me through over there. I just couldn't not fight. I mean, I ain't trying to win the war. I knew better than that. I'm not doing this one.

But I'm here and I'm going to do the best I can. But I got to think. Just because somebody say "Go over there and do that." No. But I wasn't alone in that thinking. I read a part in one of these books that the Navy personnel who were the fighters, fighter jets that were bombing and some of the bombers--I didn't know this--that they were throwing a monkey wrench in the gears so the planes couldn't take off. But you never heard that. The bombers, I'm just not going to bomb these people any more. I don't see them. I'm just dropping these bombs. But I know what these bombs are doing. And then one day in the war, I think around my time, '69-'70, it started to go [makes sound]. It started to tick back. Like, wait a minute. Hold on. People just started, like me, questioning what's going on here. You're not going to have me--This is something on the big old scale where you got to make a decision. You're talking about taking somebody's life. Perhaps losing your own. Killing an innocent person just because--You got to question authority. I was good at that. [laughter] And come to find out in the end, I was right. You kicked me out but I won my case. I got my money. We're friends with Vietnam now. What sense does that make? It makes sense to be friends with them. We could have been friends with them from the beginning. Ho Chi Minh was over here talking to us. I got it back there in the book. He was talking to you. He was working in New York saying "Hey, look at here. Why don't we do this?" But they wouldn't do it. That mind thinking at times. These old stodgy old men. [makes sound] The segregation people. [makes sound] No. Can't do that.

And you see what it cost. Look at all them lives. I don't know if you've ever been to the Memorial ["The Wall," Washington, D.C.]

Gibb: [inaudible]

[00:12:32]

McNair: Yes. It took me all those years to get there. I thought I was going to cry. But I was cried out. I was so glad to be there. And Bruce Willis in that movie, *In Country*, that's the name of the movie. I must have watched it and he was acting weird. I kept watching it and kept watching it and then I started seeing symbols in there that related directly to me when I--Of course, I didn't put on a sarong but the small town and the little girl running down the road. I said "That's me running. That's me running in the morning, running around the park." I only ran around the park at like six o'clock in the morning when nobody was there. I didn't really want to--Wasn't trying to be in that thing they were doing [inaudible]. "Let's jog." Really? I don't think so.

And the building, the house that he was living in was falling apart. And all these symbols came across so strong. I can look at them now, stop the frame and say "That right there represents to me this has been my life. This is what--" And it was a symbol. It's right there. I don't know how to say it other than it was like a revelation when I looked at that movie.

And then he went and they said "Yeah" and then they was walking up the street and he said "Yeah. They say it just kind of comes up on you." And I remember that line. And when I got there I came down and I think I walked the same path that he was walking in the movie. And I looked and there it was. And I just went straight toward it and I just got tingles. Oooh. [pause] Give me a minute.

Gibb: Do you want me to--?

McNair: No, that's okay. That's okay.

Gibb: Take your time.

McNair: And I just miss them so much. Yeah. I just miss them. They were just laughing all the time, you know? We was always laughing. Danger. We wasn't there. We all had each other. We were always laughing. The sun was shining on them. And everybody had a smile on their face. It just was strange. When you get on the hillside and the sun would be shining on them and I would be looking at them. I can see Davis, Sugar Bear's teeth. He's smiling. Sitting on the ground. His chocolate skin. The guy, the white guy, Chief. He always had this little spitting tobacco kind of Southern, real Southern guy with the squinchy eye and "yeah," with the tooth missing. The whole eight yards.

[00:16:09]

I mean nine. And then Mario. Real quiet. I just remember Mario. He was like, I think he was maybe Puerto Rican. Dark skin. Short, dark hair. And Doc Morales, my buddy. [laughter] Yeah, Doc used to give me, gave me some pills one day. I said "Man, I'm tired. I'm fucking tired." He said "Yeah, me too, man, but shit. I want to take a break here." And he said "Hey, you nervous?" [laughter] I said

“Hell, yeah.” He said “I got something for you.” [laughter] And me and Doc Morales was friends from then on. He gave me this little pill. Shit!

Gibb: What was it?

McNair: I don't know. [laughter] I don't know. I know it was good. I had no fear. I was quite aware of what was going on. It just relaxed me. And we was humping. He had a huge pack which extended above his head like this with all this medical stuff in it. He didn't, they said he didn't have to carry a weapon. He said “Shit! I'm carrying something.” So he had a .45. I think he had a .45 and a 16. He was Frank Morales. And he had this moustache. Doc Morales.

I was close to those guys. Marvin Brown. Tall, lanky. He was from Louisiana. Baldwin, Louisiana. That's where he said he was from. And my father was from Louisiana so we hit it off pretty good. He was a tall, lanky, smiling always smiling. All these guys would smile. They just seemed like “We got a job to do. Let's do it. We'll do it with a smile on our face.” And he was a [M] 60 gunner, the Rambo guy. And he would talk big shit. He really would. He was a Black Panther. I said “I was, too.” Of course, affiliated, no legal registration. You don't go around signing that kind of thing. I am a Black Panther and down with the United States. I got out of that because I saw that that wasn't going the right way. He was wild. He was tall, lanky, and he had that, he carried that gun like it was another arm. He could just--and him and Doc Morales came to me, I was in Happy Valley on one of my sabbatical leaves. [laughter] They came and told me that my friend, my two friends were dead. They knew exactly where I was at. If they knew, I wonder why the Army didn't know. They came and said “Yeah, Davis and Allen are dead. They walked up on an ambush” and I just went to pieces. I didn't know what to say. There's nothing I could say. They said “Man, they been looking for you.” “Yeah?” Said “Let's go back” and when we went back nobody said nothing. Nobody said anything about it.

But, like I said, after the first thirty days you didn't care. You really didn't. If you really had your eyes open, in the first month you could see exactly what was going on with, you know. You're in a war. This is ugly. It's the calm before the storm thing. And if you didn't see that, well, this ain't basic training no more. This ain't jump school. This ain't AIT. This is the real deal. But you just had to kind of like build up. You building up, you building up and then [makes sound]. And then it stops. I don't know. Just something happens. Something bad will happen but it's [makes sound] over in a second. Or [makes sound] and then it's quiet. I don't know. I don't know. I just miss them. So much. Not a day goes by I don't think about them. What they could have did. And I'm here and they're not. And I don't understand that. I just don't. I don't know what to say. I guess that's it. I just miss them. I'll always remember them. I just tell people they were not bad people at all. I never saw, except that thing with the rifle butt and the canister and I guess you have that. I don't know what was going through their heads.

People do that in war. They do stuff like that. You don't know they going to do it but they do it.

[00:21:50]

Okay. Wow. That long?

Gibb: You have a lot to say and that's absolutely fine. [laughter] I don't know if you want to take a pause or something. I was going to ask you about your art work.

McNair: Yes, you can do that. You can ask me about that.

Gibb: I'd love to know how that--what that--how, you know--

McNair: Yeah, we can keep going. I can keep going. I can keep going. It's like I say, it's something that's always in there. It's always in there. Wait a minute.

[inaudible] focus was my art because I could do this and I felt empowered for some strange--Vietnam but when I got to doing my art I was somebody else. I'm not this person that was in this hell hole. This picture here, I want to show you. I did this one.

Gibb: So [inaudible] people can't see on that but if you could describe what [inaudible; overlapping dialogue]

McNair: Yeah. There's a man and a woman with a--This is a canvas I have in the back. It's about six feet tall. And you can see the edge of it here. And there's a man and a woman. This is like '74 when I did this. And I just was drawing and I saw this cartoon and I thought, wow. It's a black guy with a helmet on. So I just started drawing with pencil. And then this one, see, there's an edge right here. This is the thing. This is 1974 and it's one of the few pictures I have left from then. And this one here is another picture. It's on the edge also. And all this here is fabric that I draped over this one. I draped it over as you can see right here. If you look at the edge. There's the edge. And this is my doorway coming from the outside in. There was a light shining so I just draped all this fabric over all these painted objects and I just--I thought the fold in the fabric, I love that.

I like a man's suit that's got a drape to it. When he sits and crosses his leg and it will drape over. I found out about this when I was working on my associates degree. I finally got it when I was forty-five years old. Associates in science and fine arts. But I just laid that on the floor. It's like in the hallway. I draped it over and I stood up and I took it with this--just a regular little camera. And then I took it down to the--this guy, he's passed away now, Brad Heron [???]. He had an art shop and he had this huge computer that he put the digital thing in there and it spit it out on canvas. He said it will last a hundred years. But that's the only one that I ever got and then he died. And he did all these frames. My instructor, Denise,

when I was in the class for three years, we would pick out frames and then he would take us down to his shop. It's no longer there. He would do all these--he would show me how to frame and do all this stuff and mat and I was really--and then we had a couple or two, three art shows. People would try to get my art work. I won't sell it to them. I'm like "Nah." [laughter]

Gibb: Tell me about the art classes that you went to.

McNair: Oh, it was a veteran-sponsored, veterans program for artists. They supplied all the--it went on for three years. They funded it and then the money ran out. But it didn't matter because once I got in there I was in an actual studio for the first time in my life. I was in a studio. I wasn't in a class. It's down by the lake. Let me see. I want to show you something here. This one. Okay. That picture I bought. It was already framed. I just painted over it and then I had absolutely no idea of what I was going to do. That's generally how I start off. So I put a color on there. I like that, yeah. You know, put a color here and put a color there. And it just came out like that. It just came out like that. I don't know. I said I like steps. I seen this, I think it's one of Leonardo da Vinci's. It's a staircase and it's coming down. I saw it in my art history class. It was just flowing. It was so beautiful. It looked like it was melting. And I always remember that it had this curve to it so I'll put a step in there, in my pictures, a lot of times.

[00:27:11]

I just do something like that. And then I took this fabric and cut these--writing, penmanship and I like to look at French letters. The way the French language, when I look at it, at those little lines, they're dancing. They're music to me. I'm like "Wow." I don't know what they're saying. I don't care. The way--the letters, the form of the letters, I like that. I realize that I like a line and color because it dances. So I'll use charcoal, paint, fluorescents. I'll just do--just start and then color the whole thing over and do this and do that, work this and it might not make any sense to somebody but it makes absolute sense to me. I don't like to do something just like you see it. I figure photograph if you want it like that. Why paint it just as it is? Why don't you break it up and abstract it to where, well, oh, I--you think you see but you don't. Like that. It's just--break it up.

That was about three or four, maybe six pieces of paper. Two in the middle. I just took one group of o--I put some black paint out of the tube and white paint and then I took a spatula and just drug it over like that. I said "Wow, I like the way that blends right over that." And then I just kept doing it and then I cut it up and rearranged it. And then I got all these images and I said I'm going to put it on a black--I think that's what I have--a--I think that's a black piece of like poster board. And then I picked out the colors and the mat to go around it and the frame. And the lady told me it cost like a thousand dollars. I said "Really?" I thought, "I'm not getting this." But she said "But you are in luck. It will only cost you three hundred because you got it in--it on sale." So when I frame that up, it makes

me feel like when I have a show. I'm not into selling. I have some ideas where I'd like to--I hope that picked up my voice. That one up there, that one in the middle, I'd like to transfer that to like a design on a bed sheet or a towel. That's why I keep 'em.

And that one there. That's another one that it could transfer on over to a bed sheet or dish towels or pillow cases. And I think like that. When I do this it makes all that Vietnam stuff worthwhile, meaningful; because that's when I started painting, after that, when I just said I got to find something. And so, since I couldn't express myself verbally like I wanted to, I would do it. But I didn't have any classes. I just kind of did it. I'm just going to draw and I'm going to put paint on here and I'm going to do it like this because I don't know how. I wasn't in college. By the time I got to college--that was like '78 and I got my G.E.D. [General Educational Development; a high school equivalency test and certificate]. Let's see, I got my G.E.D. and my friend, may he rest in peace, he was a fool. He was a fool. And he wound up a fool's death. But he said "They're paying us to go to class. They gave seventy-five dollars every two weeks to get your G.E.D." So I went and I got my G.E.D. because I remembered my childhood. "You have to, so you can." I remembered what the teachers--you have to go to school so you can make something out of your life and you can deal with problems if you can think stuff out and you can read and you can think, you can comprehend.

[00:31:47]

And so I went. Then I went into Highland Community College in Freeport and I was working on it and working on it and I finally got it. I was twenty-four when I started and it took me twenty-three years to get my degree because of all the ups and downs. The Vietnam thing was [makes sound]. You know, bam, and no money, and [makes sound] oh, socko, alcohol and [makes sound] and drugs. You know. I don't know where I'm at now.

But I just kept coming. I just wouldn't quit. I stopped, then I went back. Out of that program, the head of the math department, the head of the English department, the president of the college, my mentor, husband and wife English teachers--and they said "Louis, you know we gave you--did you take a test when you came in here? A placement test?" I said "I don't know. I'm just here. I'm going to college." And they said "Well, you know, you never gave your placement test. You were just here like you said and doing well." And so they looked around and they said "Well, your counselors kind of jacked you around." I don't know what he was thinking. Maybe he was losing his mind. I was supposed to go to Northern Illinois University. I got this check for seven thousand dollars to go to class for a semester. It had my name on it and I'm like "Yeah!" A check with my name on it? So I got down there by--within two minutes of class starting. They said "You can't enroll. You can't go to school because you don't have any Algebra." Algebra class? I don't need no Algebra. I'm an artist.

So I argue with the president of the college because they tore the check up and sent me back home. I was supposed to be graduating and I didn't and that's what pushed me into the drugs. I told everybody I was graduating and I wasn't.

So Ms. Anderson told me "Here, we tested you on the placement test, on these scores. You took the test and you're at your first year of baccalaureate level of education and you got a G.E.D. How did you do this?" And you know what I said? "Well, I just read the book. Remember I'm reading all the time?" I said "I just read the book. I did the lessons like they say. Go home and study. In class, take notes. And that should get it but then you do a little on the side." And she was "Hmmm. That's kind of odd." They said "Well, where did you--" My art history teacher asked me "Well, where did you do your formal training at?" I said "Freeport Junior High." And she was like "Oh, my God." She said "No, Louis. I don't think you understand what I'm saying. Where did you have your art training at? Your formal art training?" I said "Freeport Junior High." She said "You didn't go to the art schools in Chicago?" and I said "No." She said "Well, how do you know all this stuff?" I said "Because I read the book. I got art books. I'm doing my homework. I'm in here." I think I was thirty-eight and my classmates was like twenty. It was one of those things that I didn't get to do because of Nam but I got a chance to do it anyway. You just pick it up and just keep going. I was smarter than the kids that were graduating which really knocked me off my feet. They would ask me "How did you get a B?" "Uh, I studied." "Can we study with you?" And they're like eighteen. "If you want to." "What did you do?" I said "I read the chapter, took down the notes in the class, and did what he said. And then read the notes in the back of the book and--you know? And then you be ready."

I had--I think a 3.7? Yes, about a 3.7 grade average and a B plus. She said it's odd for a person not to--to quit school at sixteen, dropped out and not come back. I said "I just kept reading." That's all you got to do. You just read. Read, read, read and it will tell you to go here, there, and you can go look at it. If you can't count, well, you're in trouble. One dollar, five dollars, ten dollars, twenty dollars, fifty dollars, a hundred dollars. That's all you need to know. If it costs two hundred dollars you need two of these. You got it? If it's ninety you get ten dollars back.

That was my education. As I say, I was forty-five when I graduated. Then I didn't see any need to pursue any job opportunities. I said "Sorry, Charlie. I'm not listening. I'm not--" You can be a commercial artist. A commercial artist? I can't do that. I want to be--And then they said "Well, you're a fine artist and you do these five different things and you're good at it. I didn't know nothing about nothing. They said you can--I hadn't used any of these tools. Never. I didn't have any money. I had a ink pen, typewriter paper and some tempera water color. I think I still got that picture. I don't know. A lot of my stuff got lost. It was a drug--[makes sound]--drug years. You lose stuff when you come up, you know, move around. You lost it. But I thought if I lose it and then I can write about it--I lost like thirty years of my work which is a couple stacks about that high. But they got

lost and it just devastated me. I thought I would never--what am I going to do? And then this voice said "Saddle up. Let's go. Let's do it again. Start some new ones. You can write about that later in your book about what you lost." And that one is one of the few left. That one with the man and the woman with the red hair? That one was in '74. That's one of the few remaining ones left. I got some old, old ink drawings. Seventy-two. But most of them--I had to learn, because that was so dear to me, that when that happens I could relate back to Nam. You have to keep going. You cannot stop. Yes, it's going to kick your butt. It's really going to hurt you. But I hold them dear. To me, it's a level of achievement.

People always talking about "Oh, well." My nickname is like Bubby which my grandfather gave me. But I'm Louis now. Bubby was a little boy and he was quite the idiot. Little mannish little bastard. Just always doing something. So you don't want him around at sixty-seventy, forty-fifty. You don't want to see that guy. He causes problems because he doesn't think. He does but he's thinking the wrong way.

When I--my family never really understood me. I was odd. My mother used to ask me "What kind of child are you anyway?" And I said "I'm your child, Mama" and she would just "Get away from me" because I just thought--I never did what the other kids did. I would do stuff. Like they say, you're always doing something but it wasn't what he was supposed to be doing.

[00:40:15]

You're breaking windows. One Sunday you break three thousand dollars' worth of windows because your father tells you to stay in the yard. Then you stomp out and go break three thousand dollars' worth of windows at this factory. Your brother gets caught and he tells everything and you're the last one to get caught, Louis. The police are on this side of the woodpile and you're over here and they're looking for you and you're going around like that. Evasive action. Military stuff, I know. This is true. I'm not making this up. [laughter]

And so I kind of--when I got to the art, to the level where the art is, like that, that came by accident. I was cleaning my paintbrush and I didn't have nothing to wipe it on. So I wiped it on the easel that I bought. It was gray. And I wiped it on there and then I kept on wiping the brush on there. Then I noticed "Hey, this is kind of cool." Like this. And I just kind of wiped it on there. And this was thrown out. I just started doing that. And it just came out like that. But each one of these pictures--well, I can't go over there now. Each one of those little sections on that easel, if you take a camera and you zoom in, it's a separate picture. It's hundreds of separate pictures on there. And when you blow 'em up to a certain size and put them in a group you have this effect. So I'll do stuff like that.

It makes the Vietnam thing seem like--I wouldn't do that. I did this. I wound up where I'm at now, which is like--it's like hitting a lottery or--I don't know about-

-I'm not saved. I don't do that thing. I just say it's God and then that's it. People in the church will tell you lies. I found that out the hard way. So I don't have time for that because then people get in arguments over religion. "Well, you people are--damn them" and then you got the people with the torches, heading for the castle, looking for Doctor Frankenstein and all that shit. [laughter] And you don't want to go there. [laughter] You know? You just don't. They get you trapped up in this building and then they start throwing torches at you. Eventually you burn. And the townspeople go about their business.

So I just kind of keep my art like--it's very close to who I am, because I couldn't speak. I couldn't talk to people. I didn't realize that--I'm not better than somebody, but you're not on my level. I'm reading encyclopedias, dictionaries. They sent us home with dictionaries in grade school. Here, take this home with you. What is it? It's a dictionary, Louis. You can read. Okay. Take it home with you. They didn't throw them away. They gave them to you. And my sister had one so I got one. I remember it was a little soft green color and one was kind of like a beige color. And it was a dictionary. And I took it home gladly. I got a dictionary! And I read it. I think at an early age I was aware of--I wasn't aware that people--I thought everybody was the same. I thought everybody had what I got. Everybody eats. Everybody can read and do all this. Way down the road I figured out "Oh, wow. Louis, no. It's just you." But I'm supposed to be poor and not know nothing. Oh well. Somebody's lying because you know quite a bit. It's got you where you're at. All the stuff that you learned early in life that just goes with you. If you don't learn anything, you stumble along the way. Sometimes you fall down and you can't get up. Sometimes you get run over. Sometimes you get sidetracked. But you better know how to get back on the right path because if you don't? [makes sound]

So that's where my art--I just had an idea the other day for that canvas there. Actually it's for me to paint on. I want to stretch out--I want a large canvas, about--actually I think it's a piece like this but it's muslin and it's about ten feet and it's enough to cover that wall. I might use that one over there. I know--I don't have a--I can't put a frame around it, you see? I have to think about these things. I can't put a frame around it and make it stiff because I can't put it in the car when I'm taking it somewhere. So I have to leave it loose and flexible. So I have to put this gesso on the back so the paints and stuff won't go through and get on the wall and just won't eat the canvas up.

On the top I can just--it won't--the paint and stuff won't go through. It stops it. But it makes the canvas--I mean, it turns the little muslin, thin as it is, it makes it more pliable and durable and I can roll it up. That's what I did to that one. I took it off the frame and I just roll it up. I had this idea. Some months I don't do nothing. And then other months I'm just work, work, work, work, work, work. Ideas, ideas. Two or three canvasses at once things. And I don't know what I'm doing but I know it's going to look good when I get done. You just go, go, go, go, go. When I do that everything that I went through is worthwhile. I'm not--I don't

feel I'm a failure. I don't think I did nothing bad. I came from a bad situation better off than a lot of people. Some guys just didn't make it.

[00:46:50]

They came back and they was just like--I think the country really did us a disservice by just--in the end they were blaming us. Baby killers. Oh yeah? I'm glad I didn't hear that because I would have went off. I'm black so I really don't want you calling me names. I got enough names on me as it is. And I was, like, a militant. So I probably would have--twenty years old? I'm getting ready to do something [inaudible].

So when I came home--I remember I got to Chicago and this guy said something. "You're still in the military" and I'm like "Man, if you don't get out of my face. I'm out of here." I was by myself, though. I was by myself. And then, when I do this art, I don't feel alone at all. It's like, like this armor. Kind of like ammunition. A booby trap. Not a booby trap. It's a--I don't know. What's the word I'm looking for? Like a--some kind of a--it's a perimeter. This is where my stuff starts. Right here. So when you cross over that you're in my territory. I know what I'm doing over here. You can do what you want over there. This ain't a trick.

A lot of times--like that one over there in the corner--I won't frame it up because it's too stiff. That one back there in the corner. But I can just pile them up. I got stuff stashed in this cabinet here. There's stuff under my bed. Those boxes you see back there? They're art work. That box. All my pictures are in there. That chest is full of pictures. Of course there's stuff right there. I just keep--I don't want to get rid of them. When I--I think my daughter will get some. I'm not going to sell them because people get tired of them and then "I'll put it in the attic" or worse yet put it in the basement and then it's going in the garage and then it's going on the curb. Not for my work. I'm going to donate it to some university and tell them "This is what I want you to do." And I think they'll take it because a story will be behind it.

And my book, I'm just working on that but sometimes I got to stop, stop because it gets to be too much. The Nam thing. I started--the last thing I was writing about was Cox, the one that got killed in Cambodia. I just stopped just before his death, writing it. I just stopped and I come to realize that's your brain telling you, you know, you have to wait. I still don't want to go there. Because I remember his hair. It was curly and sandy. And this little scruffy beard he was growing. And he talked funny. And his name was Louis. And he had a little picture of his little, blonde, Shirley Temple-haired little girl in his hand. And he would always look at it. And he would just look at it like that. I would just sit there. He was just me and him. Wasn't no other guys around.

He didn't hang out with the guy from my base camp. It was just me and him in the bunker. And I started getting close to him. I don't know. I had this strange feeling. It wasn't good. You know? I hated that. I remember that one. That's one time I remember I had a bad feeling about him. Because it just looked so like--he kept saying "Louis, I don't think I'm going to make it." Don't be talking like that. But--he's all right.

But this art--yeah, people try to get it away from me. They try to trick me out of it. And I'm saying "No, I got tricked into doing some art work for somebody" and [inaudible] "I don't want it!" What? Oh, you don't want it? It's good. This was like Peter Max in the seventies with all them yellow submarine-looking cartoons? I would sit up there and I would study. I would get newspapers. The Chicago newspaper was the best newspaper to look through the ads--the advertising--because of the drawings. Lord and Taylor. I used to love--I still love their drawings. I used to look at 'em in the *Time* magazines when I was a kid. The Sunday paper. "Disneyland" [reference to 1954-1958 television series with subsequent iterations?]. I thought cartoon--when I saw Disney--the cartoon, I just went nuts. This has got to be--I must have died and I must be somewhere else. I couldn't believe that they had a cartoon. What is a cartoon? I don't know but it's right there and it's moving.

[00:52:24]

And Walt Disney just shook me. I would sit there--my mother loved it because I would be quiet. For an hour, he will not move. He will not leave from in front of the TV. He's stuck right there. And as soon as it's over [makes sound]. All right, Buddy. Sit it down. But it was in the evening so I couldn't get away. Six o'clock. Five to six or--I think it was five to six. I'm very--my art means a lot because it's tied in, it's tied in with my life. It's so pre-Vietnam. And all the shows: *Tomorrow Land*, *Frontier Land* with Disney. That was the show. For me it was like--cartoons is one thing on Saturday mornings but they were drawing these. This is what this man did. I mean it was so--he was talking to me. He was talking to Louis Charles McNair. You're going to be an artist. This is what you like.

My mother had a piano but wouldn't nobody teach me to play it. So I tried to cut the legs off. When she was in the kitchen I was chopping on it with this little knife. She couldn't see me. [makes sound] Because I wanted to play the piano. I loved to hear piano. I love--we had a grade school teacher. Miss Hurd. She had silver, blue-silver hair and these glasses and she was--had the--she was one of the best--I think she won one of the--she was like number two in the state for her handwriting, cursive handwriting. She used to come and we'd all go down to the gym. Everybody's going to the gym. And she'd come in there and she'd play a violin. Oh, what is she doing? And she was [imitating violin] And it--I mean, how many black kids get to see somebody--the tavern's right up the street from me. The winos are standing there. I know you. You're Mr. Cuz [??] and you're drunk all the time. Get out of here, boy. You know. How many people get to, you know,

see this and you're supposed to be on the poor side of town. But it never soaked in.

I saw this lady with a violin standing in front of me playing her ass off. I'm sorry. She was just going. And nobody said--it was mostly little black kids because we were on the east side. Mostly but it was a mixed neighborhood but it was mostly--seemed like mostly black. I don't know. It didn't matter. Those things stuck with me from childhood, with these childhood experiences. How to have order in the school. You didn't do this. You didn't do that. Oh, Lord, you better not do that. You just--it was order. I remember the sixties came around and I was in sixth grade and used to have this black teacher, Mr. Banks. He's still living. A black teacher. Okay. I thought, what's so big about that? It's another teacher. You know. I'm thinking like this now. I don't care if he's green. It's a teacher. [groans] And he's black. He probably knows just what I'm thinking. You see? But he was--I heard about--I remember Laos, because L-a-o-s, the spelling, Laos. That's a strange name for a place. I wonder what the people are called. Laoses? You're going to be over that way in a little bit, Louis. Give it about ten years. See? I didn't--it's right there. And then there was a show on TV, "Soldiers of Fortune" [1955-1957; reruns]. French Foreign Legion ["Captain Gallant of the Foreign Legion," 1955-1957?]. Loved that show. They're mercenaries, they're in Vietnam. This show was on around, I don't know. I don't have any idea. Not connecting the dots because I'm a kid and I'm just watching that. It didn't hit on me until years later that all this was being pumped out, propaganda-like, showing French Foreign Legion. Wow. I remember all that stuff because the community, the level of care that my family had, and then my individual which was--I was being guided. But you have to, at some point, break away. Even to say "I don't want to do that, Mom. I don't want to join the Boy Scouts." Why? Because they don't give me the hatchet. I was in the Cub Scouts but that didn't last because I thought they were supposed to give you a hatchet when you come in. You get the knife or hatchet of your choice. Not wait and earn it. I said "I don't get that part." Yeah, I didn't get that part. So I dropped out after a couple of days. That didn't work. [laughter]

[00:57:59]

All these things. I could see 'em. I could see my home town. I can remember the light. I guess it's something to do with what makes you an artist. I can remember--I can, like, close my eyes or even have them open and see the light in the evening when my father would come home. I remember the sky would be this bright blue with white clouds and then it would be pink like those clouds I had on there. Pink like. And he would sit in front of the house. And after a storm, you know, when the sun's over this way and it's shining. He would sit there in the yard. And I remember the sunbeams just coming through from across the street and just shining. And he'd just sit there and read his paper. He was the calmest man I ever met. My mother didn't cuss. As a matter of fact, I didn't hear anybody cussing

when I was coming up. I picked that up when I got around people my age in the streets. The four-letter variety of words.

But my mother? Alcoholics wouldn't--the people that were drunk? They didn't curse around kids. Can you believe? They just didn't. They used--you'd come and they would [pause]. "Boy, you better get from up here. Your mama know you up here?" You know. They didn't do it. And so all this--I think I brought all that into the war and it just kinda got shook up and shook up and ripped apart and then I had to get out and put it back together. The only way I know how to do it was through that. And so I like photography--I'm going to get a camera eventually because I like, like that. Those black lines, the blackness of the trees is just--and the little twist and turns. I love that.

But I want to--I'd like to photograph it because I see it different. And when I do that I'm happy. I am. I'm really happy. When I go to a show, I'm kind of like--I always ask them "Do I have to sell my work?" Because they said I have a show coming up but I'm not--about to do something for you to sell. Okay? Because you're not selling you what I got. This is my beginning from the end, from where I was. So I'm not giving you this part of my life. When I give something to sell, and believe me, you're going to pay. So that will stop a lot of people. Hold it. How much? That's right. [laughter] That's what you have to--because if you don't value what you do, then nobody else will either.

What if the Vietnam vets had just went on away in the corner somewhere and accepted what everybody said? Then it's like "Oh, my god. There's one poor--Oh, poor Vietnam veteran." And I just--that would--no. No. I mean, I never saw myself as a hero but I used to ask people "Was you there? All right then." If you weren't then you need to shut up. You can ask questions but you mustn't judge a vet because--no. That took a lot. From two years it took me forty-five to remedy that. [whistles] I know some people didn't make it. Some of my friends didn't live that long. Died in their thirties, twenties. Shit. So I'm just glad that this is--I never thought that somebody would do this one day. Ask us anything about--

[End of McNair.OH2023_file 1][End of Interview]