

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JAMES BLANKENHEIM
Radioman, 5th Marine Regiment, Vietnam War

2003

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Blankenheim, James, (1949-). Oral History Interview, 2003.

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

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

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 93 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

James “Jim” Blankenheim, a Middleton, Wisconsin native, discusses his Vietnam War service with the 3rd Battalion of the 5th Marine Regiment as a radioman serving in combat situations in Vietnam. He talks about enlisting in the Marines shortly after graduating from high school, training at Camp Pendleton (California), training for jungle operations, arriving in Danang (Vietnam) during the Tet Offensive, and assignment to the Headquarters and Supply Company of the 5th Regiment. Blankenheim touches upon the equipment he and other Marines carried and evaluates the M16 and M14 rifles. He recalls being sent immediately to Wei (Vietnam) as part of a blocking force. While holding a bridge, he tells of the Marines demanding a toll from an Army convoy in the form of beer cases. He details his role as the radioman and forward air controller, touching upon calling in helicopters for medical evacuation and ordering air strikes. He touches on the different sorts of aircraft. Blankenheim describes life in a combat situation including nightly road patrols to prevent roads from being mined, dangers of moving at night, spotting booby traps, and the differences between combat in movies and actual combat. He gives a detailed account of the fighting at Phu Bai where his unit found an enemy base camp and fought for thirteen days; by the end only thirty-eight men of eighty in his company were not killed or unable to walk. While travelling through some rice paddies, he recalls someone setting off a daisy chain booby trap. Blankenheim comments on being ambushed, fire fights, getting hit by shrapnel which destroyed his radio, capturing a gun on Hill 310, and rest and relaxation in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia). He touches upon missions in Laos and An Hoa (Vietnam) and the difficulty of identifying the enemy when in villages. He discusses his return to the United States, surprising his family with a visit, and realizing how much effect the war had on him. Speaking of his stateside duty after the war, he describes being a guard at Portsmouth Brig (New Hampshire) and Quonset Point (Rhode Island). Blankenheim talks about meeting his wife at a Marine Corps Ball. He reflects on the quality of officers, his opinions of protestors, keeping a low profile until joining the Wisconsin Vietnam Veterans, and attending reunions.

Biographical Sketch:

Blankenheim (b.1949) enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1967 shortly after graduating from high school. He served in Vietnam, was honorably discharged in 1970, and eventually settled in Madison, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2003.

Transcribed by Emily Johnson, Volunteer, 2008.

Abstract edited by Susan Krueger, 2010.

Interview Transcript:

Jim: November 29, 2003. My name is Jim Kurtz conducting interview and the person being interviewed is Jim Blankenheim of Madison, Wisconsin. Jim, could you tell us where and when you were born?

Mr. B.: Well, I was born May 18, 1949, uh, actually at St. Mary's Hospital here in Madison. But my parents lived in Cross Plains at the time so the first two years of my life I grew up in Cross Plains. From there we moved to Middleton and that's where I spent the next 16 years of my life.

Jim: Did you go to high school in Middleton?

Mr. B.: Yes, I did. I graduated from Middleton High School in June of '67. And actually went in the Marine Corp right after that in August of '67.

Jim: So, entered Marine Corp, and why did you go in the Marine, did you, were you afraid you were going to be drafted?

Mr. B.: No, no, I enlisted. I guess there's two reasons. I suppose I might as well say that anyway. At that point, my father made a comment to me one day that he didn't think I'd amount to anything. And of course, a lot of kids heard that from their parents, that we were motivated enough to suit 'em. So I went to find out what branch of service I could enlist in and the toughest one I could find was the Marine Corp, so I figured to prove my point, the Marine Corp would do dandy. Now two other friends of mine from Middleton, Steve Peckham and Ralph Granger also were going to go in the Marine Corp and they talked me into joining them on what they called the "Buddy System." Steve and Ralph signed up for four years, I signed up for three and what ended up happening is they got out in two and I had to serve the full three because of my MOS (Military Occupational Specialty), which was a radio operator.

Jim: And, what was the number on that MOS?

Mr. B.: 2531. Field Radio Operator. Uh, the only time I actually spent any time with these guys was in boot camp that's the last time I saw them. When we got out of the service, Steve was out, he was working for the post office and Ralph got killed in a car accident right after he got home from Vietnam.

Jim: So, when did you—where did you go when you entered the Marine Corp?

Mr. B.: Um, I'm actually one of those Hollywood Marines you hear about where all (unintelligible) sunglasses, I went to San Diego. MCRD (Marine

Corp Recruit Depot) in San Diego, California.

Jim: And, how long was your boot camp there?

Mr. B.: I believe it was eight weeks that we went through boot camp. And from there you were shipped to, what they called, ITR Infantry Training Regiment. Which is where you get advanced Infantry training.

Jim: And was that where? At San Diego also?

Mr. B.: Actually that was at Camp Pendleton. Actually an area called San Onofre and, uh, then we were given a couple weeks leave and when I came back—or actually we got our orders out of ITR which all of us, all three of us got West Pack for our orders and then we came home on 20 days leave and uh, when I went back I had got an MOS of 2531 and the other two guys were mortar men, so I went to radio school at Camp Pendleton.

Jim: And how long was that?

Mr. B.: I believe that was—either four or six weeks I can't even remember now how long it lasted. During that you had a lot of radio training, we were all school trained and stuff. For the first, up till the last week I guess it was, I was first in my class and first in your class meant you would get to go to Cherry Point (North Carolina) instead of Vietnam. So you had the option of getting out of Vietnam and going to Cherry Point. The last week, I had an exam I got three wrong on it I think and ended up second in class and so I went to Vietnam. (laughs)

Jim: You went to Vietnam.

Mr. B.: But the irony is, that the guy who went to Cherry Point ended up in Vietnam as I was coming home so as I saw him coming in country, I had to think to myself I don't know if I got the worst end of the deal or not.

Jim: It was over for you.

Mr. B.: Yeah, I was goin' home and he was just getting there. I at least knew I lived.

Jim: Right. Did you meet—did you have experiences in this training experience that you'd like to relate? You know--

Mr. B.: Uh, well, I the irony I suppose is that most of the guys that I went through radio school with ended up with me in Vietnam in different areas and stuff. One of my best friends ended up with the 9th Marines up at Kaison

(Vietnam) when I was up at Wei (??). So when I went on R&R later on ironically he ended up on the plane with me so we ended up spending R&R together. We hadn't seen each other since radio school.

Jim: Ok, where did you go on R&R?

Mr. B.: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Jim: Ok.

Mr. B.: I had been holding out for Australia. But I'm up on a mountain someplace and hadn't eaten in three days and they came in with a resupply chopper and said, "Well, we have an R&R, do you want to take it?" And I said, "Get me off this mountain, anyway you can." (laughs)

Jim: Ok. Maybe we'll talk a little more about that when we—so when you completed radio school, did you have orders directly for Vietnam then?

Mr. B.: From there I went to Staging Battalion they called it, which was more intense training for combat and jungle training. You had POW camps where you had to escape from and you had to learn to orient to your—as they say nowadays—but had to learn to read a map and compass and find your bearings and stuff and get back to friendly lines. So they gave you a little bit of chance of seeing what that was like and, uh, again, going through jungle situations, ah, ambushes and things like that.

Jim: Where was this training?

Mr. B.: This was in, ah, this was also Camp Pendleton, a place called Las Pulgas.

Jim: Ok.

Mr. B.: And I think just about all the Marines from all over when to Las Pulgas before they went to Vietnam. As a last bit of training, anyway then from there straight to Vietnam.

Jim: So, then, did you have any leave before you went to Vietnam?

Mr. B.: No.

Jim: So you went straight to Vietnam?

Mr. B.: I went, yeah, I had uh a weekend that I had off before we went and ironically, I got to see my aunt and uncle who were out in Century City. It was brand new they had just opened it up out in Hollywood. And they were there for a convention and I got to spend a couple days with them.

And I lived like a king for a couple of days there because everybody knew I was going to Vietnam and everybody treated me like, uh, well they were sending me away so they gave me a good time. A good send-off anyway. From there I went straight over anyway.

Jim: How did you go, by boat, airplane?

Mr. B.: No, we went by airplane. I flew Continental Airlines from I believe we flew out of El Toro, from there to Hawaii, we had a twenty minute stop in Hawaii, then to Okinawa. And then we spent four days in Okinawa getting additional training and from there right into Vietnam.

Jim: What kind of training did you get in Okinawa?

Mr. B.: Okinawa was mainly getting familiarized with the area and stuff. And, you know, it was mostly basic stuff, it really wasn't combat training because we'd had that before, but it was just acclimating us, I think to some of the warmer climates and getting your last shots or whatever that you needed to get, stuff like that.

Jim: Di—were you assigned to a specific unit at this point in time?

Mr. B.: Uh, not until I reached Vietnam--

Jim: Ok. And where did you enter Vietnam?

Mr. B.: Uh, I flew into Da Nang. And once I hit Da Nang they moved us into quarters (??) pretty rapidly and, uh, I was assigned to the 3rd Battalion 5th Marine Regiment. And from there I was sent straight out to them. Couple other guys that were in my radio school also went with me, we ended up spending the tour most of the time, anyway--

Jim: So, you received no training in country before you got post--

Mr. B.: No, they talk about, you were supposed to get two weeks of training in country but I never got it I went straight in because it was pretty hot at that time.

Jim: So, what-when was this that you--?

Mr. B.: This was the first week of February '68.

Jim: What was happening the first week of February '68?

Mr. B.: (Laughs) The Tet Offensive had just gone into full swing and there was a lot of casualties and they needed a lot of replacements so there was no

time for training. That's why we had to go straight to a combat unit. The unit I went to was H&S Company and with the (unintelligible) Battalion 5th Marines--

Jim: What is H&S?

Mr. B.: That's Headquarters and Supply. So what that is, that's where most of your, uh, actually it isn't just Supply that's in there or Headquarters people it also includes all your tactical groups. Uh, your artillery F.O.s, your 81 mm mortar F.O.s, Forward Observers, and your Forward Air Controllers are all out of there plus your gun sections for every company, had uh, comes out of H&S. So, H&S really comprises a lot of combat units inside of it but (clears throat) they're not really normally designated--

Jim: How big was that, company then?

Mr. B.: Company itself? I guess I really don't know 'cause I never really had a chance to see an entire formation of the company, 'cause we were always attached to other companies. So--

Jim: So, how many Forward Air Controllers were there in--?

Mr. B.: There were four companies: Mike, India, Kilo and Lima Company and then H&S Company was the fifth one and each company had two Forward Air Controllers with it. Uh, one would be what they called the "actual" and the "assistant." The assistant, of course was the new guy, and he got to carry the radio which was a PRC-25.

Jim: PRC-25.

Mr. B.: Ok, and uh, when he became trained, then he became the actual and they'd give him a new assistant to train to do the same job again. So they try to rotate these guys anyway through your tour. Or guys would get hit or whatever. I actually carried the radio almost the entire time I was in Vietnam because either my actual would get hit or when I got an assistant he'd get hit so I just ended up humping the radio myself.

Jim: And how much did that radio weigh?

Mr. B.: Oh, (laughs) I think one time we weighed my pack with batteries, five canteens, smoke grenades, the radio, ammunition and three day's chow, I think the pack was over 80 pounds.

Jim: Ok. And what kind of a weapon did you carry?

- Mr. B.: Uh, when I first got in country I carried an M-14. And then, we were given M-16s. Then later on I was given a .45 because it a lot harder—or it's easier to handle a radio with a pistol than it is to carry a rifle and the radio and stuff at the same time.
- Jim: Had you received any training on the M-16 before you got one in Vietnam?
- Mr. B.: No. The first time I ever saw an M-16 was in Vietnam. And, I think we got to fire a couple clips through it and that was it and that was our FAM fire Familiarization--
- Jim: That was my experience too. (laughs)
- Mr. B. (Laughs) Very, very short training. And ironically the M-16s that we got were the Army rejects. Because, I don't know if you recall the weapons, how they progressed, but there was no push around or anything--
- Jim: Yes.
- Mr. B.: They jammed all the time and they had the little three prongs on the front to twist the barbed wire with and the thing is, every one of us wanted our M-14 back the first week we had it. It's just nobody trusted 'em 'cause they'd jam on you too easily--
- Jim: Did you have adequate cleaning supplies with them?
- Mr. B.: Uh, not really but then again, most of the time you were in the jungle so getting the equipment you needed was pretty hard to do. So, I mean you kept it as clean as you possibly could for the very reason that you couldn't trust it if you didn't. So, uh, there was, every time you'd stop somewhere, break down there was cleaning weapons. Some guys would be on guard while the others cleaned and then you'd rotate and cover each other that way if it'd been in (??) anything.
- Jim: Ok. So where physically was the, uh 5th Marines in February of '68.
- Mr. B.: Ok. In February of '68, uh, the 5th Marine, ah, 3rd Battalion 5th Marine Regiment it was the battalion that I was with but the Battalion was at a place called Phu Loc 6 it was a place just south of Da Nang—
- Jim: Can you spell that, maybe?
- Mr. B.: Phu Loc? P-H-U L-O-C.
- Jim: Just like it sounds.

- Mr. B.: Yeah. Phu Loc 6, which was a little village anyway, south of Da Nang. And when the battle at Wei started, we were sent up to Wei immediately. We were actually one of the blocking forces outside of Wei. Uh--
- Jim: How did you get to Wei from--
- Mr. B.: They actually, uh, trucked us in, uh we rode in trucks, got on the outskirts and they unloaded us out of the trucks and said as soon as we set up, they told us there was movement going on fourteen clicks away. And they, there was somebody sneaking in trying to attack anyway from another side. So they had everybody load up and march fourteen clicks, which is fourteen thousand meters. And, we no sooner got there and we got hit and there was a fire fight and a few wounded and stuff, we Medivaced them out. And as soon as we got them Medivaced out, dug in for the night. They told us, "Saddle up, you're goin back." 'Cause now there on, now that we've heard they're going back the other way. So we humped them same fourteen clicks all the way back again. About halfway there, we were so beat we could hardly walk--
- Jim: Did you take your holes with you?
- Mr. B.: (Laughs) You wish you could. But anyway, I remember we were marching down this rice paddy and all of a sudden the CO (Commanding Officer) said, "Stop." We stopped and split up on the trail and went either side of it and sat down and they gave us one hour break. Well during that hour, of course, I think everybody fell asleep, 'cause they were just dog tired. But, uh, at some point somebody said, "Saddle up." And we got up again, on the trail we went, so in twenty nine hours we walked twenty eight clicks.
- Jim: That's a lot.
- Mr. B.: So, it was a lot of movement, in (unintelligible)
- Jim: On, uh, when you trekked up, did you go on highway 1?
- Mr. B.: Yes, we did.
- Jim: Were you harassed at all when you were—by snipers or anything like--?
- Mr. B.: I don't recall any sniper fire on the way up or any firing on the way up there. Uh, it may have been that too much was going on in other places where they had all their men situated.
- Jim: Was the road mined at all or anything like--?

- Mr. B.: Uh, they would travel down that every single day with mine detectors and stuff and uh clear the mines out and that so I don't recall us having any problem with that. In fact, at a point later on, we ended up being the road security so we had to go up and down it and actually we did, uh, what they call, for those that remember the old show "Rat Patrol" we actually had our own rat patrols with a jeep, an M60 machine gun mounted on it, uh, a guy with an M79, and a machine gunner with him and they would travel up and down the roads at night to keep the, uh, guys from mining the roads and stuff, so. Nobody wanted that detail. (Both laugh)
- Jim: Uh, so, wh— can you describe what happened during your experience, really your first experience with Tet, did you get into the city of Wei or were you a blocking force?
- Mr. B.: We were a blocking force, we actually never got inside the city of Wei. Uh, we were always on the outskirts and from there we moved back down to bridge security at that time, I guess. They pulled us out of there and put us on a bridge called, uh-Langk-um, not Lang Com, Troy River Bridge and we guarded that for a while. Uh, I remember one time we had an Army convoy coming through with supplies and as soon as they hit the edge of the bridge the Marines jumped up and said this was a toll bridge. (Both laugh)
- Jim: What was the toll?
- Mr. B.: The toll was seven cases of beer! (Both laugh) To which the Army took the case and threw them into the river. (Jim laughing) And said there's your toll and I think it was seven or eight Marines went off the bridge anyway, we think we lost 2 cans of beer. (Laughs)
- Jim: Well that's good for you.
- Mr. B.: But we did get 'em anyway and let the convoy go, we didn't care. (Jim laughs) That was some of the fun we used to have.
- Jim: Could you describe what your job was as an air controller in Vietnam? I mean, in action, and tell us, you know, who you communicated with and then what kind of aircraft you were using and stuff like that?
- Mr. B.: Oh, as uh, because I was a radio school trained radio operator they were automatically used for forward air controllers. We also became the Comm officer for the company at the same time. So you were filling roughly a Second Lieutenant's billet with a company because it was so short-handed on officers that that's how they worked it. But a forward air controller was responsible for anything that flew. That would be any aircraft whatsoever be it helicopter or fixed-wing. So if there was a Medivac or a resupply

with helicopters, you'd be in charge of it. Anything that came in to your area of operation would be under your control, uh, if there was an air strike to be run, you'd be the one running the air strike. I called in air strikes using A-4 Skyhawks, F-4 Phantoms, uh, F-10-- what were they? F-105s, Air Force. I even had some Corsairs flying with ARVNs in 'em on a couple of battles--

Jim: Were these propeller-driven—?

Mr. B.: Old Corsairs from World War II, to see the sight of a Corsair flying through the air and seeing a jet pass it, you have some concept of what happened in World War II, I guess it was surprising that more didn't get shot down because they looked so slow when they were flying after watching a jet come by that—

Jim: Were there any Skyraiders?

Mr. B.: F-8 Crusaders—

Jim: No, the A-1D, uh (both talking at once)

Mr. B.: Oh yeah, uh, the uh—

Jim: I think it was A-1—

Mr. B.: No, it was A-6 Intruders. I used A-6 Intruders. And A-4 Skyhawks—

Jim: That's another propeller driven plane—

Mr. B.: Oh, we didn't, no, the only, the only, these were all jets, the only propeller planes I actually saw were the Corsairs ("Corsairs" said together) and that, like I said was in one battle.

Jim: What about gun ships? Like the—

Mr. B.: Huey gunships? I used Cobras on rare occasions. Huey Gunships CH-46 Sea Knights, CH-47 Chinook Helicopters from the Army for Medivacs, uh, troop movements would be in a CH-46 from the Sea Knights that the Navy has and the Marines have and then I used, uh, the gunships usually flew protection for Medivacs when I'd run a Medivac out on a Huey Slick.

Jim: Did you have any "Puff the Magic Dragon" that we had--?

Mr. B.: Oh yeah, yes, the code name back then was "Spooky"—

Jim: Spooky.

- Mr. B.: I used to talk to Spooky. I had C-130s come over that I dealt with, with flair ships. I had, I think the Spooky was a C-47—
- Jim: Yes.
- Mr. B.: --with those guns on the side anyway and I'd use Spooky at least two times, if not three times over there. I had one guy of mine, one of my troops anyway, got wounded from ricochet from a hundred-seventy-five yards away off of one of those when it was spraying the terrain anyway.
- Jim: Did you use them at night?
- Mr. B.: Yes.
- Jim: Could you describe what it looked like?
- Mr. B.: (Laughs) Well, I could tell you that you would expect to hear the rounds going off like a machine gun but you don't, it gives a sound like a (Buuuh) it was just a buzzing sound like a bee sting coming through. And that buzzing sound, you could see a red line from the plane to the ground, a continuous red line. And the irony of that is that, I guess, that every fifth round was a tracer and you were only seeing the fifth round come down and that was a steady line, so, there was a lot of bullets being put out there.
- Jim: You like red tracers better than green, I bet.
- Mr. B.: Oh! (Laughs) Yeah. (talking together)
- Jim: What does a green trace—
- Mr. B.: The enemy was the—green—what did they? The enemy used a green tracer, and we used red tracers so when you got into a firefight at night and the tracers started flying, you started firing where the green tracers were coming from.
- Jim: When you had air assets above you, who did you talk to, people in the formation or was there another controller up in the air? A fac— (unintelligible)
- Mr. B.: It depended. I actually carried what they called a PRC-93 with me, which was a handheld unit that I could actually talk to fixed-wing directly if I needed to. A lot of times, though, what you did was you had a either a gunship, would be flying over and you'd use him to talk to the fixed-wing and you'd talk to the gunship or you had an A-O, Arial Observer , who'd

come over and he'd be flying a Bronco or, what was the other one, trying to think of the plane now. A single-engine prop—

Jim: Yeah, Cess--(unintelligible)

Mr. B.: Spotter, yeah, it was like a little Cessna anyway, but the spotter planes anyway. What you would do is—You would be the relay between the ground troops and the wing.

Jim: Did it make any difference whether you were using Air Force, Marine or Navy aircraft?

Mr. B.: No. Whoever happened to be in the area when you needed help would divert to your location, anyway, to give you assistance. Your job as a forward air controller was to mark your target so they knew where to fire. You had to mark the Friendlies to let them know where the Friendlies were so a lot of times what you'd do is you'd fire what they called a Willy Peter round, or a white phosphorous round, to mark the target and you'd pop a smoke on your position. Now one of the things you learned for Medivacs, when you ran a Medivac and also for air strikes was, the first rule was you never said what color smoke you were popping, because the enemy constantly monitored your radio. So, if I were to say I was popping a red smoke, they'd pop a red smoke and I'd, they'd try and draw the aircraft to the danger zone. So what we did was the term "pop a smoke" came up and what you'd do is, "I'm popping smoke" and then you'd have the helicopter or whatever that was coming in to your aid tell you what color you popped so they could identify you. Today, I guess they all use GPSs and everything else so that isn't necessary. But what I wouldn't have given for a GPS in Vietnam (laughs).

Jim: Could you describe the terrain around, D--, excuse me, the Wei area?

Mr. B.: Up around Wei, the areas we were in was all rice paddies, it was all flat area out near the sea there. But as you went farther inland you ran into mountains and I mean there was some steep mountains over there. The highest I think I ever went up was 1500 and some feet off the ground level anyway. We used to identify our base camps by hill numbers, so it'd be "Hill 10", "Hill 57" so that would be the point on the map or the height, elevation, the altitude on a map that's how you'd identify your base camp or where you were going.

Jim: Could you describe how you traveled through rice paddies?

Mr. B.: (Laughs) Spread out. You see some of these movies of people showing troop movements and we were never that close together. I mean, I just, I watch these movies these days and I say, "You guys are crazy to walk that

close together.” Most of the time we were spread out probably fifteen to twenty yards apart anyway, so that there was no way that a grenade would get two of ya.

Jim: Did you have much trouble with ambushes or booby traps in rice paddies?

Mr. B.: Uh, there was a lot of booby traps. The ambushes, usually, the one thing I hate is going out at night. I mean, that’s the most dangerous time to be moving anywhere. Even to this day I don’t like going out at night. But in combat, that’s when you get the ambushes. They’d be laying in the dark and you’d be going down a rice paddy and there’d be either a command detonated um, mine go off or a booby trap would be tripped and with that the whole tree line would open up on you. And you’re just caught out in the open with no where to go.

Jim: Did you walk on dikes very much?

Mr. B.: Actually yes, we did. A lot of times we’d walk on rice paddy dikes, but again, my company got extremely skilled at spotting booby traps. And we would stop the column at—we were actually pretty well known for that.

Jim: Ok. Ah, where did you mar—Did you stay with the company commander or platoon leader or were you kind of in a command group when you were out on operations?

Mr. B.: Generally, I would be with the command group, with the command post anyway. I’d be with the CO and because again, being the senior radio operator, I was also the Comm Officer so I had to maintain all the radios in the company. On occasions I’d go out with the platoon on a patrol or something like that but that was more of a rarity because, again, they needed to keep some of the commander/logistic people up in the command post. So I was always, they always referred to us as the “Infamous CP group.” (Both laugh) We were always the guys who were behind ‘em, except in my company a couple of times we were on point and didn’t know it. So, I had a CO that tended to like to, was a little gung-ho and he’d get out going and he didn’t care if his troops stayed up with him or not he was going. There was at least twice in my time over there that we found all of our back up was behind us instead of in front of us. Couple of times we got caught off guard.

Jim: That’ll happen. Ok now, after, Tet is ’68, where did your unit go?

Mr. B.: From there we went back down to, oh, I’m sorry, they moved us to Phu Bai, which was just south of Wei—

Jim: And that’s P-H-U B-A-I?

Mr. B.: Right. And that became our base camp for a number of months anyway and that's where we went on bridge security and stuff. Down the lines and that, we would patrol, have rat patrols and stuff going down the roads.— (unintelligible) to keep it clear. And then in May of '68, they put us on a three-day patrol. I mean, to give you an idea, this was supposed to be just a simple patrol. We were told we could leave our flak jackets behind and our helmets cause it was just up the hill, down the hill and out. Three days was all we were going to be out. We took three-days rations and we just traveled light. Ironically, it turned into thirteen days and we were surrounded for five of those days. My company started out with eighty plus men and when all was said and done, after they rescued us, we had roughly thirty-eight of us walking, wounded. The rest were either killed or wounded.

Jim: Can you describe the engagement with the—

Mr. B.: What happened was they, they have estimated the force we were up against was over 800. We found six mess halls that could seat a hundred guys per mess hall in the base camp that we hit. What happened was we were, again on this short patrol, went up the side of a mountain, got to the top and we could either go east or west. If we had gone east we would have missed it completely. But because of this huge granite rock, we decided to go west instead. Went up over the top of the peak and our point element found this base camp right there with guys, had their laundry out, they had bamboo piping for water and stuff. They had a regular plumbing system there. Bunkers with trees that were probably eighteen inches in diameter, where the trees were used for their bunkers and stuff. Again, we didn't find this out until later, but when we first hit 'em, anyway, we opened up on 'em and they started firing back and just the whole jungle erupted with gunfire. Our CO, for better or worse, got us online and the entire company opened up on them. We were firing 3.5 rocket launchers at point-blank range. The enemy was everywhere and firing at us from all sides. We finally created a perimeter around ourselves, it was probably fifty meters in diameter and that perimeter was all we held with the rock behind us anyway. For that we held for five days.

Jim: Did you get resupplied at all?

Mr. B.: They couldn't get to us to resupply us because the fire power—fire was so sharp. We were on a finger of a hill, and on that finger anyway, the NVA [North Vietnamese Army], these were North Vietnamese Regulars also, these weren't Viet Cong. They were on one side of the finger and we were on the other side of it and of course, then they surrounded us. But the helicopters would try to fly in and kick ammunition and food out the doors as they flew over and they ended up shooting down three helicopters

trying to resupply us with ammo and stuff. And of course as they were flying over they would kick it out and if they kicked it out too late it would go over the finger and into the enemy's hands. Even some of the ammo they gave us didn't get to us, it was getting to the enemy. Like I say, it was about a 100 degrees over there anyway and I tell you the bodies I had to lay next to for those five days, you just can't get that smell out of your head. That was probably one of the worst battles I was in over there. There were others, but that was the worst—

Jim: What kind of air support did you get?

Mr. B.: We tried to run airstrikes, but the canopy was so thick that the bombs were going off in the tree tops. And they had to put delayed fuses in them to get them to work. And it was so close that we were calling in airstrikes within fifty meters of us. You're running 250-pound bombs, normally the rule of thumb was for every pound of a bomb, you want to be one meter away. So for a 250-pound bomb, you want to be 250 meters away, we were running those within fifty meters of us and we started taking shrapnel and stuff from that. Then we started calling in artillery. We ran artillery day and night for those five days, anyway, just to keep them off us.

Jim: I'm going to turn the tape over **[End of side one]** You were describing the use of artillery in this battle. Could you describe what kind of weapons, artillery weapons were used and was there Navy gunfire involved in this?

Mr. B.: There was no Navy gunfire but we were using 175mm cannon from the Army. We would use an eight inch track and eight inch stationary gun in placements. Not eight inch, 155s. 155s were being used, 105s from closer base anyway. But the majority of it was 155 Howitzers.

Jim: And artillery was more effective than the air support?

Mr. B.: Yes, because they were shooting up air—air support was getting shot up as it tried to come in. Like I said, they figure there was close to 800 of them. So they had plenty of fire power coming out of there.

Jim: So they probably had anti-aircraft weapons in this base camp?

Mr. B.: They had 'em, but they moved those out as they, actually what ended up, is they ended up retreating and as they retreated they'd pull them out. What they ended up doing was, after five days, they were able to get a reinforced battalion in to come and get us anyway, and when they finally came in, you never saw anybody so happy. Our first Medivac chopper got shot down, the second one came in, we blew an LZ [landing zone] we had to wrap sticks of C-4, plastic explosive around all the trees and stuff and I

swear those engineers were wrapping a stick for every inch of diameter they were putting a stick—

Jim: How big were the trees, about?

Mr. B.: Oh, these trees were huge. Some of these were probably eighteen inches, twenty inches in diameter.

Jim: And how tall?

Mr. B.: Oh, uh, probably forty feet, I guess maybe. Thirty-forty feet. I mean, they were so thick the canopy was so thick you couldn't see the sky. I mean it was dark all the time, practically. So it was a pretty dense area. At one point they, being the junior man at the time and the assistant radio operator, I got the short straw to go get water. They had me crawl out on my belly with ten canteens and I'm cussing every guy that owned a metal canteen. I had to crawl on my belly to a pool of water outside our lines and the pool of water wasn't more than three feet in diameter and I had to fill those canteens and then crawl back in again. Unfortunately, there was a fire fight going on over my head. There was a rock above the pool and as I'm filling these canteens they open fire and I don't know if it's my guys giving me cover fire or if they just took incoming but the rounds were flying everywhere and I'm just scared. (Laughs) You can't be any more scared.

Jim: Was this spring-fed pool?

Mr. B.: Yeah, it was a spring-fed and it run down the mountain. So I was filling up right at the base.

Jim: So that was about the only good thing about it, there was water available.

Mr. B.: Well, yeah, but that water wasn't inside of our perimeter. (Laughs) That was the bad part.

Jim: That was the bad part.

Mr. B.: Eventually we were able to enlarge our perimeter when we got some reinforcements. Then we started moving out and as we moved out, we found this base camp and the base camp was roughly two clicks long. So you had 2,000 meters of base camp and, like I said, there was six mess halls that could seat 100 guys per mess hall so this was a huge base camp.

Jim: Did they have a hospital there?

Mr. B.: Uh, I don't recall one, but that could have been in the bunkers. There was some bunkers there—

Jim: Ok, could you describe the bunkers that you saw there?

Mr. B.: The bunkers that I saw were covered by, the logs were at least twelve inches in diameter, maybe more and they were staked across it with dirt and stuff on top of it. The entire complex was totally hidden from the sky because of the canopy and stuff that was around it. So, some of these bunkers, we had engineers that would go in and blow these bunkers as we went through. And I don't remember how many bunkers we blew. I don't know how long it took us quite a while. Well, it took us another – what would it have been the thirteenth?— it took us four days to get out of there.

Jim: To clean the place up.

Mr. B.: Right. And to get off the mountain. Because when we finally got off the mountain we came out in the rice paddies down below Da Nang and as we came out into the opening, Hill 55, which was a Marine Corp base, opened up on us with artillery because they thought we were NVA coming into the paddies. And fortunately for us the CO of that battalion was with us, he was the battalion commander that came and rescued us and he called 'em off before they it us. They opened up with beehive rounds. (Mr. B. coughs)

Jim: Can you describe what a beehive round is?

Mr. B.: A beehive round is, I'm trying to remember what they used to call those little—there's little darts inside of it—

Jim: Flechettes?

Mr. B.: Flechettes, yes. And the artillery round would go out so far then it would explode. And when it exploded all these little flechettes, or these little darts, they looked like miniature darts, would just fly out so it'd be like a thousand beestings coming out at you. So it was used to, when you were being overrun, or whatever, you could use that to take out a massive group with one shot.

Jim: When you were out did you shoot artillery too or just--?

Mr. B.: I was trained to call in artillery, 81s and airstrikes. Yeah, every forward air controller or forward observer was required to know how to do each other job just in case something did happen. So we were all cross-trained in the equipment and stuff.

- Jim: When you were shooting artillery you couldn't use air, is that right?
- Mr. B.: Right. If I wanted to run an air strike, I had to keep artillery out of the area because they'd pick off a plane coming through the area. You generally didn't run both at the same time, but you could run 81s and artillery at the same time. And that was done more than once.
- Jim: What happened after this little event?
- Mr. B.: Ironically, I told you my birthday was May 18th, I turned nineteen years old on May 18th in a little village—actually, what happened was when we came out, the helicopters flew us back up to where we started from on the original part of that patrol; gave us three cans of beer a piece, steak and eggs for breakfast, it was three or four hours on the beach, loaded us up on trucks and moved us out and put us on another operation. So you figure, here's a company whose normal tactical operating strength is 200 men was only thirty-eight and they put us on another operation called Allen Brook that started the next day for us, anyway, south of Da Nang. All night we rode trucks to get to south of Da Nang and when we got there the temperature they said that day was 128 degrees in the shade. We moved out and there was no water. Ironically in the rice paddies you couldn't find any drinking water. We were only an hour out into it anyway when I had seven heatstroke victims come up and they laid them in the shade to take care of them. While they had them laying the shade, one of them rolled over and tripped a daisy chain. And the daisy chain went off and wounded another four Marines that were trying to help with the corpsmen and wounded.
- Jim: So this was a booby trap?
- Mr. B.: Oh, yes. It was a—a daisy chain is a series of grenades or booby traps in a series. So you trip the first one and it sets them all off down a line. So what the idea is, the first person trips it and it catches all the people behind them. In this case, it was one of the wounded that did it. We ended up Medivacing those guys out and then Allen Brook was another nasty one. We got caught in a J-ambush, a J-shaped ambush that pinned us down and we lost a few guys in that one and had to pull them out and some—
- Jim: What were your tactics when you got involved in an ambush?
- Mr. B.: The first rule of thumb was lay down a base of fire. And, depending on who you were up against, that could be being done to you also at the same time, so that makes it very hard. And what that would be is anything that you—you would fire automatic weapons a foot off the ground. Anything in that zone, a foot off the ground, is going to catch a round. So if you

stuck your head up somebody was going to get hit in the head. And you did this to the enemy and I'm sure that's what they did with us when they were doing it. This ambush anyway, we poured the fire into it and got them to finally back down. Most fire fights didn't last very long. I think probably five-ten minutes if you were lucky—I should say yeah, if you were lucky (laughs), but in that time-frame there'd be thousands of rounds expended.

Jim: Could you describe the noise?

Mr. B.: Oh, it's deafening. I mean, anybody that's ever heard a round going out has no concept of what a round coming in sounds like because the round breaks the sound barrier when it's coming. And so you get this loud crack that so loud it's deafening anyway. And in a firefight you've got thousands of rounds coming past you. I mean, I've heard bullets go by my head just by the cracks and the whizzes that goes by you. Shrapnel going by. I remember a lot of it.

Jim: Were these situations pretty chaotic?

Mr. B.: Most times, it starts out chaotic, because most ambushes take place the enemy isn't more than probably fifteen feet away from you when they first start shooting. So the point man generally doesn't make it. He's gonna be catching the first round and he's got no where to go and he has very, very little warning. Most of our guys that walked point either carried shotguns to be able to spray the area or they carried M-16s on full automatic. I mean there was no safety required. If anything happened, you had a split second to move. You learned to have very, very, very fast reflexes.

Jim: Did carrying a radio make you more of a target than you would have been otherwise?

Mr. B.: (Laughs) Oh yeah. More than once I actually had machine gun bursts come by me where I could see the rounds either hitting the ground or hitting water when I was in a river. I had one in a river one time, I was crossing it and I watched a round hit on either side of me as it hit the water, the only luck I had was as he sprayed I caught between the two pat— pattern of the rounds anyway and I went underwater. Once I had a mortar round land probably five feet away from me, maybe less. A mortar round should have killed me at that range. But the irony was that it was the first time we'd ever had a tank in Vietnam, that I'd ever even seen one. And this tank was alongside of me, when he was going up into this village we heard the tube go off. I heard that "thump" as it goes out and then you get this hissing sound as it's coming down. And as I hear the hissing get louder I'm looking for the lowest spot and the lowest spot I could find was the tank track. So I dove into the tank track and when I hit the tank track

the round hit. And I felt this tingling in the heel of my foot and the corpsman yells, "Anybody hit?" And I'm goin', "I don't know, I feel this funny feeling." I look down and here's this piece of shrapnel stuck in the heel of my boot.

Jim: Oh wow.

Mr. B.: And I'm goin', "Wow, that was close." But no marker, nothing there. So I took my radio off and when I took my radio off I saw where the rest of the shrapnel went. My radio, my pack, everything on my back was shredded with shrapnel. It had saved my life. So I wanted to take that radio home but they wouldn't let me. I had to get a new one. (Both laugh).

Jim: Right. Can you describe some other operations that you were on that you'd like to --?

Mr. B.: Ok, in August of '68. There was an F-4 Phantom that had gone on an airstrike mission and got shot down by an anti-aircraft gun that the NVA had, or the Viet Cong had up in the mountains. And it was a hill called Hill 310 and the uh, battalion CO took command, anyway, and our company was sent to go rescue, or not to rescue but to capture this weapon so that it didn't knock anybody else out. And apparently they had been trying to take this hill for three months and I think it was the 7th Marines that had been trying to take it for three months and had not been able to take it and had suffered a lot of casualties. So they decided to have the 5th and the 7th go in after it and after I think the third day of patrols and stuff we walked in past it, went behind it and came down the ridge from behind it and they came up the frontal assault from the one side. When the fire fight started, anyway, we actually captured the gun.

Jim: What was it?

Mr. B.: It was a 12.7mm anti-aircraft gun or, roughly, a 50 caliber. And it had the armature covers and it had the circular sites just like you'd see aboard ship or whatever on an anti-aircraft gun. We captured the gun, it was in a pit. What they had done is they had dug a trench around this little mound, so the gun sat on the mound and then you walked around the trench to rotate, like a turret. About halfway through the morning of that day, a mortar tube opened up on us from a hill just below us and we started taking incoming mortars. Well, one of the gunnery sergeants—er, staff sergeants in my unit had been a gunner on a battleship and he jumped on that gun and pulled it out of the pit, faced it down into the Hill 52 below us and just opened up on it. And shot up the whole top of the hill with that gun and silenced the mortar tube, to keep them off us. In taking that hill, we ran airstrikes for a couple of days and, I told you about it being how many meters away, we were running 500 pounders at seventy-five meters away, uh, bombs on this

hill. When we got done Hill 310 was Hill 292, I mean there wasn't a blade of grass standing. There's actually been articles, there's an article on it in Vietnam Magazine and there's also one in Leatherneck Magazine about that battle. But we've got the pictures. My company captured that gun.

Jim: What kind of planes carried 500 pound bombs?

Mr. B.: Uh, boy, I'm trying to remember what I ran that day. There was as many as seven flights, which is two jets per flight. I had 'em stacked up seven high and as fast as one would come in the next one would drop in behind it, carry another load and drop again. So we just kept running them continuously. I'm not sure if it was the 105—the F-105s or if it was—if the Phantoms carried that or not. I think—

Jim: I think Phantoms could carry 500—(unintelligible)

Mr. B.: Yeah, I think it was the Phantoms, or I don't know if the A-6s did, but the A-4s were carrying 250s. They used to have what they call—we used to get run in and I'd call it a "snake and nape run." And a "snake and nape run" was 250 pound bombs, snake-eye bombs, and napalm canisters or Delta nines and Delta fives. What that would be is, they would come in and the way a snake eye worked is it was like a daisy, it would come in as and the jet came in, it was the Phantoms that were carrying those, because as they'd pull out the bombs would be dropped. They'd be so close to the target that they'd have to slow the bomb down so that it didn't go off while the jet was over it, it would blow the jet up, too. They had little chutes, or not chutes, but fins that would pop out and that's why they called them 'snake eyes' and they'd open up, slow the bomb down so the jet could get out. They'd drop maybe five of those at a crack as they'd come through and take out a whole tree-line.

Jim: Are there any—where did your R&R fit into this tour?

Mr. B.: (Laughs). I was holding out for Australia, okay? So that was *the* R&R to get and I wanted to get it really bad so I held out for nine months without applying for R&R and finally I was the senior man and the next one to get wherever I wanted to go, but ironically I was on an operation called Maui Peak. What had happened, we had walked up onto a plateau and on top of this plateau they opened up on us with mortars and bracketed us with them so we were pinned down. We were pinned down there for five days on top of this hill. They couldn't get Medivacs in or anything and they brought C-130s in to give us ammunition and food, on palettes they kicked out the back with parachutes and because of this plateau being up on this mountain, we got to watch the stuff fly over the side of the mountain down into the valley down below us. We didn't get any of the resupplies either. Well, after four or five days, they finally got a Medivac chopper in to take

some of the Medivac wounded out and when it came in they said they had an R&R for Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, did I want it? Well, on top of that mountain, I would have gone anywhere so I took Kuala Lumpur, anyway, within a week, the guy in the rear got the one to Australia and I'm going, "Uh-huh, uh-huh."

Jim: That's the way it always works.

Mr. B.: It *always* works that way. Anyway, I got an R&R in Kuala Lumpur and got a chance to see the country and bought some pewter and stuff over there.

Jim: So when you came back from R&R, how much time did you have in country left?

Mr. B.: That was November and I ended up leaving in March of '69 so I had still another three or four months yet.

Jim: Anything stick out in your mind in those three or months?

Mr. B.: (Laughs.) Christmas of '68. (Laughs.) Tet of '69.

Jim: Why don't you tell us a little bit about each of them?

Mr. B.: Well, Christmas of '68, I was on operation Taylor Common. By then, I had been to-- I'd been moved to Kilo Company. I was with India Company on Maui Peak 'cause their CP had gotten blown up. So they had to replace a lot of the people. So I transferred from Mike to India.

Jim: What was that operation again?

Mr. B.: Which one? Maui Peak?

Jim: No, the one that you were in Christmas of '68?

Mr. B.: Oh, Christmas of '68 was Taylor Common. I think that's when Taylor Common started. There we were, actually little beknown to a lot of people we were in Laos. (Laughs.) Back when they were even talking about going into Cambodia, we were already in Laos. And right on the border anyway and we were trying to stop stuff along the trail and that. We were up in the mountains up there, anyway, then for Christmas they pulled in the troupes because of the quote "Cease-fire" for Christmas. Of course, as in all past stuff, they rocketed us that night on Christmas we took incoming rockets. This was when we moved to Anhoa south of Da Nang, that's A-N-H-O-A. We were down at Anhoa when they started taking in rockets. They

mortared all around us, anyway, and finally, they had actually shot the wing off a C-130 that tried to land there—or take off from there, I guess. Ended up, it laid there for three months on the airstrip, they couldn't get it out of there. Then in, uh, well, Tet of '69 anyway they came in and they blew up the ammo dump in Anhoa. Now I was down to only a few days left and stuff when they blew this ammo dump up and I believe it was in late February that they did this—

Jim: Was this an infantry ammo dump or was it--?

Mr. B.: This was an artillery ammo. It was a huge ammo dump. We had, ah, 155s and eight inchers that were there in the—on the end of the runway. And when they hit that ammo dump, it blew up everything. The concussions were so loud, or so strong anyway, that I was laying in a, on a cot inside of a tent, oh I must have been probably 500 meters from where the ammo dump was, at least, and the concussion of the explosions out of that blew me out of the rack. When I got up to go back to the rack, I look and here's a piece of shrapnel right through the rack that I'd been in and stuck in the ground. So, if I hadn't got blown out of it, I would have been there when this piece come through and it would have killed me. I was down to like ten days left in country when this happened and I'm just thinking, "I wanna live in a bunker for the rest of my time." But, they were talking about going on another operation they wanted me to go out again and I'm lookin' at them goin' "No, I don't think so." (Laughs.)

Jim: So they let you take a pass on this last?

Mr. B.: I got to take a pass on my last ten days. I had run radio section stuff or whatever in the rear but, you had to work that but, that as far as I had to go. Then the day I was supposed to leave, they told me I was going out on the first C-130 that was coming into Anhoa in three months. So I had a chance to fly on a C-130, so I'm standing out by the edge of the runway waiting for this C-130 to land and I could see it coming in and as it comes in, three rockets follow it in. And it just touched down and took off again, it never even stopped. These rockets hit all around us. I went back up to the hooch and I said, "I'll go out on a helicopter I don't care, just get me out of here." So I ended up going up to Da Nang and when I got up there—one of the things I didn't tell you about was forward air controllers, there was guys who would be officers from the Air Wing that would be assigned a 100 days on the ground with troops and they would rotate these officers so that they had a chance to see what it was like to be on the receiving end of these bombs they dropped and what happens when they miss. This one particular captain I had, his name was—oh boy, Captain Gibbs. And Captain Gibbs was a gunship pilot. He told me that if I ever rotated home I should stop by Marble Mountain, which was the Marine

Corp air station up there and he'd show me a good time. Well, I caught that (unintelligible aside) – can you stop for a second?

Jim: Sure.

Mr. B.: --to Marble Mountain. Well, I had just come out of the bush so I had long hair and everything and I didn't have a haircut or look like an officer. But I got up there and he said, "Take off your rank and anybody asks you who you are, you're Second Lieutenant Blankenheim in from the bush. And I got to use pers-the Colonel's personal sauna, ate in the officers mess, got a chance to drink with the officers and stuff and had a great time. So my last night in country was probably the best night I had. (Laughs.)

Jim: Could you describe the contact you had with the Vietnamese people?

Mr. B.: Oh, I used to—we used to—I used to eat with them. I mean, we'd be in villages and stuff every so often or we'd be going through a village and we'd sit with them and talk with them. It's funny, how you look at things twenty years later, let's say. At the time, of course, you didn't trust anybody. You didn't know who was enemy, who was friendly. The night-- I told you about the ammo dump blowing up-- we killed our barber in the wire. So he had cut my hair that day, that night we killed him for bringing a satchel charge in to blow up the ammo dump.

Jim: Same experience I had.

Mr. B.: Yeah, I tell ya it was weird. So, you never knew what would happen, anyway. I can remember one village we were in. We would give--the kids would always say, "You souvaneh me cigarette G-I I, I fill your canteen." Well, we gave them our canteens and they filled the canteens and of course, here we are talking about the operation that we're on and what we're going to be doing and that. And this kid comes up to me with the canteen and he hands me the canteen and I pull out the cigarette. I hand him the cigarette and the kid look at me and goes, "Thanks a lot, man." That perfect English came back and I went, oh my gosh. We were all looking at each other going, And we've been talking about what? So that was one of the things, anyway. I used to sit, in some of the villages, what we would do is we would open our C-rats up and we'd bring it to the table and the Vietnamese would bring whatever they were eating to the table and then we'd just sit there and eat with them. I'd have heartburn for three days after, but boy, I mean, the food wasn't that bad. It was strange, I swear they put whole minnows in there and stuff like that. You'd have little miniature sharks and looked like blades of grass they were putting in with the food.

- Jim: Did you see any real overt hostility or were they just kind of—I mean you were talking about, maybe they were kind of spying on you.
- Mr. B.: Right.
- Jim: But when you walked into a village did you see they were really hostile and they wanted you to leave?
- Mr. B.: No, not really. I mean, I don't recall anything like that. There was only, they were cautious I guess, but most of the time, they seemed friendly enough to us when we would be through there. Of course, I was always in a company-sized sweep, too, it was never in a platoon-sized sweep. So when we would walk in, there was a lot of Marines around so it wouldn't pay for them to try anything. And, I mean we found weapons caches and things like that, or we'd find a rice net. And there were times when we would burn the stuff that we found, anyway, and get rid of the guns and weapons and stuff so they couldn't be used against us.
- Jim: Uh, did you pretty regularly find weapons caches in villages?
- Mr. B.: They'd be hidden, I guess. Most of our contact, ironically, was in the mountains. We would be in-- we would find base camps up in the mountains. And that's—that was all totally hostile then. But in the villages, I don't think we found all that much.
- Jim: But there weren't—were there many villages in the mountains?
- Mr. B.: In the mountains, oh I never saw any villages in the mountains at all. All the villages I saw were in the rice paddies. And so they'd be all down in the flatlands.
- Jim: Are there any fellow Marines that stick out in your mind that you'd like to—that you served with over in Vietnam that you'd like to describe?
- Mr. B.: (Laughs.) Yeah, I guess one of them would be “Dirty Dan.”
- Jim: Tell us a little bit about Dirty Dan.
- Mr. B.: Dirty Dan Hiddenite. I don't know how many Silver Stars he's got. But this guy was probably one of the gung-ho-est Marines I ever saw. He's the one that captured that anti-aircraft gun. He actually went in there—he killed two soldiers, captured the gun, chased one down a hole, he had one guy holding—now this guy was six foot five he had somebody holding onto his legs while he crawled inside the hole to get one of 'em out of there that went inside the tunnels and stuff. And he pulled 'em out anyway and another one took off running, he ran after 'em, he didn't have a

weapon anymore. I guess he was out of ammo or something. Here he is, chasing this Vietnamese over the hill, anyway and this Vietnamese has got a gun and is not firing at him. He's so scared by him yelling and screaming at him that he took off running and he finally caught him and brought him back up the hill.

Jim: Was this a career marine—(unintelligible)?

Mr. B.: Yeah. Actually, he made Gunnery Sergeant in four years. In the Marine Corp.

Jim: That's pretty good.

Mr. B.: He was—and all of it was meritorious. I mean this guy was pretty impressive. The irony of the whole thing was that he could hardly read or write. And he worked in S-2, which is intelligence. This guy could—this guy was, well, some guys are made for war, okay, and he was. He read sign, he read everything well enough that he could understand what was going on. He might have trouble writing a report but he definitely could understand what was going on and he knew where the dangers were. This guy would be in a compound or something and all of a sudden he'd disappear. He'd be out in the jungle lookin' it over to see what was going on. I mean that's how silent he was when he did things.

Jim: I'm gonna stop it here—

Jim: --Interview with Jim Blankenheim on December 29, 2003. So Jim, you had a good time your last night in Vietnam. So how did you leave Vietnam?

Mr. B.: Well, like I say, when I left Vietnam, we flew out. I flew to Okinawa. When I got to Okinawa—

Jim: Was that a military aircraft to Okinawa?

Mr. B.: No, actually, it was Continental Airlines. Yeah, I flew Continental both ways. And when I got to Okinawa, they told me that I couldn't keep the clothes that I was wearing, that they had to be taken off. Well, most of my stuff was captured gear so they took away all of my—I had an NVA hammock and I had a NVA pack and all this other stuff—North Vietnamese Army and they took all that stuff away from me and told me I couldn't go home unless I had a uniform. At which time they told me that all my uniforms were burned up in a fire they had in Okinawa in '68. So here I am with nothing to go home with and no way to go home so it took them four days to get me a uniform made that I could go home with. They finally made me a uniform and when I got the uniform I was allowed to fly

home. When I got to LAX, or actually I flew into El Toro, when I got to LAX, I flew United Airlines and they said “The Friendly Skies” and I want you to know they were very friendly to me. They found out I was coming home from Vietnam and I sat in first class all the way to Chicago. And I must have been, the age requirement up wasn’t 21, because I was so blasted by the time I got to Chicago that I was pretty well looped anyway and I had to catch a flight to Madison. Back in those days no flights went to Madison after nine o’clock so I ended up spending the night on a couch, or on a chair I should say, in Chicago. The next morning, I caught a flight out of O’Hare into Madison and that probably is one of the more emotional days because I didn’t tell my parents I was coming home. I was afraid was going to get killed before I got there so I didn’t want to get their hopes up. So I had a friend of mine from high school pick me up at the airport and take me to see them. Well, I caught my father completely off-guard. My father is not the type, or was not the type, to be emotional or show emotion and that, and when I walked in the door and he saw me, he was so off-guard or caught so far off-guard that he gave me the biggest hug I ever got in my life. And no matter what else he did to me terrible, he bought himself a free ticket for the rest of my life, or the rest of his life anyway from that moment because he showed some, that he really did care. The rest of my family was in church and so my buddy took me over to the church, anyway, where they were at and as I came around the corner a guy got hit by a car right in front of the church. Now, I had not realized how cold I had become over there until I saw this guy laying in the street. He had a busted leg, the bone was sticking out and it was pretty bloody and stuff but it was just a broken leg. And, in my eyes, he was what I would call a “routine Medivac.” And so, I looked at him and I looked at my buddy and said, “Ah, he’s a routine Medivac. He’s okay.” And I start to walk away and this buddy of mine looks at me in shock. He just couldn’t believe my attitude or the way I was looking at it. And it’s like, What’s your problem? It’s no big deal. Up until that moment I hadn’t realized what being in war had done to me. I walked inside the church, anyway, and there was my family sitting there and I caught them all by off-guard. The minister when he was giving his speech, looked down and he said, “Some of us are lucky we have family home.” And I mean, I’m the only one in March with a suntan (laughs) in the whole church. It meant a lot to my mom and my stuff and my family and it meant a lot to me to be there. That day, I went and played basketball with a buddy of mine, that same buddy anyway. We were playing basketball across the street from, in Middleton anyway, and on the other side of the street somebody lit off a string of firecrackers. And this buddy of mine jumped, looks over and he says, “Did you hear that?” Looks over and he can’t find me anywhere and here I am laying on the ground next to him. I was totally out of it. I mean, I just, I couldn’t believe it, it was just like being in combat again. And so, it took a long time for me to get out of that and get away from that stuff.

But anyway, the reward that the United States Marine Corp gave me for surviving Vietnam was to send me to Twentynine Palms, California.

Jim: Ok.

Mr. B.: We used to call it "Twentynine Stumps" because it's in the middle of the Mojave Desert, sixty miles from civilization and it was like as lousy a spot as I could figure to go to. So I'm there six days and I said, "How do I get outta here?" And they said they had an opening in Clarksville, Tennessee. Well, I thought that was close to home so I'd do it. So, it was a Navy base and I'm goin', "Where's the water?" So I went to Clarksville Base in Tennessee which turned out to be a top secret base right on the outskirts of Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Now that was probably the best duty I ever got in the Marine Corp. **[End of Tape 1]**

Mr. B.: --our own swimming pool, our own PX, our own bar, the whole bit. It was just terrific, and they closed it three months later (Laughs). I shoulda known. So then they gave me what they infamously call the "Dream Sheet." And I got the Dream Sheet you get your three choices of duty stations where you want to go, so I put, and I of course know better about how to fill one of those out. But at the time I thought, you put down where you want to go. And I put down Glenview Naval Air Station in Chicago, Great Lakes Naval Training Center, or Quantico, Virginia as an instructor, radio instructor, for officers' candidate school. They gave me the Portsmouth Brig in New Hampshire (Jim laughs). So I caught the biggest brig the Navy has and the toughest brig they've got. And I was there three months and I said, "How do you get outta this place?" Cause I, it just drove ya nuts, I mean I'd have a squad bay of forty prisoners and these were murderers, rapists, embezzlers, you name it. It was the dregs of the service. Most of them got what they called "Six, six and a kick," six months bad time, six months prison time and then a dishonorable discharge. The rest of either went from there or straight to a federal penitentiary. These were some pretty cutthroat guys, anyway, and all you had was a key and a whistle (Laughs), when you were in a squad bay with forty of these guys. They used to take milk cans and cut off the bottom of them and use them for butt kits for cigarette butts. And you'd be walking through there in the dark with a flashlight and one of these would come flying through the air and you'd have to worry about getting hit by them. So I asked, "Where can I go?" They said, well, there's three choices. I could either go to Athenai, Washington, DC, which is where the silent drill team for the Marine Corps is, and that sounded pretty good. But I had to have two years left and I only had eighteen months. So then the second choice was Iceland, I could go to embassy duty Iceland. Again, you had to have two years. Every weekend, you'd get a pass to go to Norway or Sweden or something and that didn't sound bad. But again, I only had eighteen months. And the last choice was Quonset Point, Rhode Island,

which was a Naval Air Station where the Wasp and the Intrepid, the two aircraft carriers, used to come there in all the time. I ended up going there and taking that job, anyway, as Marine barracks again. I'd been doing Marine barracks, so that was no big deal. Again, that was another classified base. So I had, by then I had a top secret CRYPTO-clearance so I could do security work. Ironically, that's where I met my wife. I went to the Marine Corps Ball and three years in the Marine Corps I only got to go to one Birthday Ball. And that Birthday Ball that year, she went with her father, and she was there with him and I was there with, shall we say, a blind date that somebody set me up with. And I ended up falling for my wife and we were married six months later. We've been married thirty-three years now. So, it was one of those ironic things, her father was a Marine and her mother was a Marine. Her father was a DI [Drill Instructor] at PI, Parris Island when she was born. So she was actually born at Parris Island. She knew the Marine Corps she knew what she was getting into. She told me that night, she had my number that my number was up right then. (Jim laughs.) I was so drunk I didn't know it. (Jim laughs.) It took me two nights to figure out. The second night I went and took her out for a date.

Jim: That's great, that's great.

Mr. B.: So, after that, that's when I got out of the service was that year. '70 I got out of the service.

Jim: Ok. So, you got out of the service in '70 and I guess there's a couple questions I'd like to ask and then just ask you to summarize anything. Did you have any impression of the officers you served with in combat in Vietnam?

Mr. B.: Well, there generally was two kinds of officers that came over there. Most of them were Second Lieutenants, so we called them Butter Bars or whatever. But what happened was if a new officer came in country and the first thing he did was ask a Sergeant what was the right thing to do, chances are he was going to last a while. If the first thing he said was to *tell* a Sergeant what to do, and that he knew it all, chances are he wasn't going to make it. I mean, most of them, they were into this "Let's charge." They'd just been studying at some military academy that told them this is the way you fight a war. And Vietnam was like no other war we'd ever fought so, you couldn't play by the rule book when you went into battle there or getting caught in an ambush or whatever. So most of the smart ones knew to ask questions and not just jump at what they thought was the right answer because it could end up getting them killed. So, I had this First Lieutenant that I'da gone through anywhere with. Yet I had some other officers I wouldn'ta gone anywhere with.

Jim: Sounds pretty typical.

Mr. B.: Most of them got killed that didn't know.

Jim: What was your—sitting here 2003—what was your impression of the Vietnam War and your role and people who went and didn't go and—

Mr. B.: Well, I got a real problem with people that didn't go. But, the protesters, I guess probably were the most-- the ones I had the hardest time with. Because, I don't know if you recall the moratorium in Boston in 1969, they had a moratorium there and the Boston Commons was completely overrun with people protesting the war and stuff. That had to be the day that I had to go through there in Dress Greens in a cab. It was gridlocked, no traffic could move or anything and here I am in Dress Greens, in the middle of this protest, people spitting on the cab, calling me a baby-killer and everything else. And I'm sitting in the cab thinking to myself, "You're doing this for me, right? Why are you doing this, if you're doing this for me?" That's the one problem I always had was that, they'd always said they were doing it for the veterans, to get them out of Vietnam and stuff like that. But who did they do it to? It was the same people they said they were trying to help. I was there in Quonset Point when they had the Bobby Seale and the Chicago Seven trial. The whole East Coast went on alert. They flew in a battalion of Marines from North Carolina up to us to bivouac in our area just to stage for that thing, just in case there was an uprising. Two weeks before I got out of the Marine Corps, there was a bomb threat; that they said they had a bomb planted on the side of the Intrepid that would blow a hole in it. Well, if you realize how big a bomb it would take to blow a hole in a ship that size and sink it, you can imagine what it's like to be out there, ten minutes to midnight and they say it's going off at midnight and the EOD [Explosive Ordnance Disposal] guys from the Naval Explosive Ordnance Department is standing there going, "When you find it give us a call, we'll come get it." And you're thinking to yourself, "Yeah, you're off on the end there." If it goes, I'm gone, 'cause it was going to blow that big a hole. My last two weeks, and right before it, that's when Sterling Hall got blown up, and I'm thinking to myself, "I'm gonna go home now and somebody's gonna kill me at home." After all I've been through, I'm gonna get blown up, try to go to the UW and get blown up. It, uh, there wasn't a whole lot of happiness for me when I got out. I kept a pretty low profile on the fact that I was a Vietnam vet for a long—

Jim: How long did you keep that low profile?

Mr. B.: Till 1991. I didn't really acknowledge it to anybody or anything until I met Wisconsin Vietnam Vets. And, what I always wanted and what happened, finally, was our government apologized for mistreating us and for blaming

us for the Vietnam War and stuff. In other words, they finally took acknowledgement for the things they did during that war. And I guess that's all I ever wanted was an apology. And that's when I got it, too. Wisconsin Vietnam Vets, I've been with them ever since they're, they've kind of gotten me to come out of my shell, let's say, I finally started telling people that I was a Vietnam Vet and that I was a Marine. I was always proud of being a Marine but Vietnam has been a sore subject. I remember telling kids now, when I go to high schools and stuff and talk to them, that if they had fought World War II like they made us fight Vietnam, World War II would still be going today. And that is, if we went into France, then went into Spain, then went into France again, then went into Germany, then went into Italy, then back into France, that's the way we fought over there. You'd take a piece of property. You'd hold it for a couple of days then give it up. You'd leave, the enemy would come back in, take it again. Then you have to come back two months later and take that same hill. And guys died every time you did it, so to me it was such a waste.

Jim: So, I think my last question then is really, the Vietnam Veterans, they gave you kind of a healing experience with people that you had something in common with, is that—

Mr. B.: Yeah, that's probably what I like the best about it. I have since now, on the Internet and that's probably the biggest thing, is I've found the guys I actually served with over there. And I've been to four reunions now with these guys and every time we go a new guy shows up. But we get together and I mean, that one battle I told you about, there's four of us—actually there's ten of us now that are really, really tight that, when we go to the reunion and stuff, we go with everybody, but the ten of us stick to each other pretty tight because we did once and we still do.

Jim: Is there anything that we haven't covered that you'd like to cover, Jim.

Mr. B.: Uh, no not really. I got out of the service because my wife asked me to, but I didn't want to. I would have stayed in, I was ready to ship over and she talked me out of it. But she had more experience with, I guess, than I did, she had eighteen years (laughs).

Jim: Sounds like a smart lady.

Mr. B.: Yeah.

Jim: Well, thank you very much, Jim.

[End of Interview]