



Ridley Eagle Chief Interview
Salt Lake City, Utah

Interviewer

Give us your full name.

Ridley Eagle Chief

Well, at this point I changed my name to

Ridley Eagle Chief

. At the time I was in service, Elliot Ridley.

Interviewer

Where are you from?

Ridley Eagle Chief

I'm from Neola, Utah. That's my original home. But I moved to Neola from White Rocks.

Interviewer

Tell us about your life growing up.

Ridley Eagle Chief

I grew up on a farm and ranch. My dad had a farm and ranch operation with cattle and horses. And that's where I grew up most all my life.

Interviewer

And where did you go to high school?

Ridley Eagle Chief

I went to Union High School in Roosevelt from '61 to '64. And then that's where I spent my high school in Roosevelt.

Interviewer

So how did you end up in the Army?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Well, that's a pretty tough question. At the time I enlisted in the Army, but I was in jail at that time. So I told the judge, "What can I do to get outta here?" And the judge said, "Well, there's only one way you can get out." He said, "You go into the service, and that's the only way you can get out." I said, "Okay. Just go ahead and do whatever you need or contact somebody to come in and pick me up." So two days later, a sergeant recruiting from Salt Lake here came in and got me. And he picked me up and I spent the night down on State Street. They used to have a hotel for all the people that needed to go to the service and to go to that one place. I can't remember the name of the name of the hotel. But there used to be a Chinese restaurant right on the bottom. So then the next day we went down to Murray, and that's where we get our physical check. And no, we was down here, it'd be close to that federal building. It's a big building there, so that's where we went in and signed in. And they took us in the back and they took a physical exam then.

Interviewer

So you signed up for three years?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Well, I signed up for two years. But I kinda was still married at that time, and the sergeant said, "Well, you probably can go in for two years." I said "Okay, "instead of for four years. So I went two years. And so I passed my physical, and the next day we flew out from Salt Lake to California, Oakland. And from there we went to Fort Ord, and that's where I spent my basic and AIT.

Interviewer

What year was that?

Ridley Eagle Chief

1969, May 14th. That's when I entered Fort Ord, on the 14th of May '69. So that's where I spent my basic and AIT.

Interviewer

So Vietnam had been going for quite a while.

Ridley Eagle Chief

Yeah. Vietnam started clear back in the '60s, '61 on up. And during that time, my brother was in the Army in '63. So Vietnam is on for quite a while.

Interviewer

So did you have any feelings about Vietnam?

Ridley Eagle Chief

During that time, they asked me, "Where do you wanna go?" I said, "To Vietnam."

Interviewer

Why?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Well, pretty complicated to say, but they knew I had to go to Vietnam—with my problems I had, which was myself. So that's why I volunteered for Vietnam.

Interviewer

Tell us about getting to Vietnam. How did you get there?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Well, after AIT, I got my order papers to go home for one week and be in Oakland, California the following week. And that was November 17th I went home and reported back to Oakland, California.

Interviewer

Did you have some sort of ceremonial blessing when you went home on leave?

Ridley Eagle Chief

During that time when I was getting ready to go, when I got home, my uncle came over and gave me a protection, like, a medicine. And he told me, he said, "You always wear it with you all the time." So he gave me a small protection. And that's what he said, "Just have it with you all the time." And so I did.

Interviewer

Tell us about how you got to Vietnam.

Ridley Eagle Chief

We spent in Oakland, California on that one base where there were over ten thousand troops ready to go just in

that one area in Oakland. Recruit. That's where they had all the guys who will be sent over, they spent in that little place there. So they figured around over ten thousand ready to go over. So I spent there about four or five days, and from there, order was to ship out. And we went to Oakland Air Base and got on an airliner. So we flew over. And the first stop was in Anchorage, Alaska. From there, Hawaii, Japan; Japan straight into Vietnam.

So I got there in Long Binh, Vietnam. So we all got out and they put us in a hooch. And the next day we had to report in. And we spent day, they will give you orders of where you'll be going, what unit you'll be going to. And my order was going to 84th Engineer Combat Unit. So we were there on the 24th. That evening, we get on a C-47 to fly pretty close to DMZ, 18-engineer unit headquarters that's nearby DMZ. Anyway, so we're ready to get boarded on a C-47 and mortars start coming in, hitting around the base and some right in the airlines, C-47s. And all the guys that I was with, as that mortar started hitting all the way around, it goes by, they all scattered, running around and all that on that flat airstrip. Me and my one guy, we were going to the same unit, so we both took off, but I said, "Hey, let's stop here." He said, "Why?" I said, "Look at it. They just hit and run us. It's not coming close. Let's just stay here. If we go way over there, then you might be right in the middle of it, so let's just wait here."

We didn't have no rifles, nothing. So we just stayed there and everything calmed down and everybody came back and got on the C-47 and flew north from Long Binh. So we came in on that headquarters of 18 Big A. The next day, there was a Thanksgiving Day. I spent my Thanksgiving on the 18 Big A Engineers. So we went down, ate turkey. They had a big dinner for you. So that's how I got there. The next day, we got orders to fly south again to Qui Nhon. So the next day, well, we got on a helicopter, then we flew south. And from there, there were some guy, lieutenant, come and got us at Qui Nhon. Now, we came in board with us on a chopper, we flew to Chu Lai on a helicopter. From there, we reported in to the 84th Combat Unit. So I met with the captain during that time. His name was Davis. And he was a black guy, black captain. And he kind of our reporting, then lieutenant came. So the captain told the lieutenant that he'll be in your unit, in your squad. Said okay. So the lieutenant and sergeant came. Then the sergeant came and said, "You'll be the 2nd Platoon." I says, "Okay." So I got all my stuff and gear and went into the hooch and found a bed. All the other guys were around. So from that time on, I was in the 2nd Platoon. And he told me that, "You'll do minesweeping." I said, "Okay, fine." I didn't hesitate or say no. I just went along with it. From that time on, from November, every morning we'd do minesweeping seven days a week. Get up there before the convoys start moving back and forth on the Highway 1. The 2nd Platoon do that mine sweep that morning.

Interviewer

How would you mine sweep?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Okay. When we got there, there was about seven of us would get on a small half-ton truck and we would head out at least three miles to the area that we would do our mine sweep. And then I got some of the pictures that I took in

that area. And when we got there, hadn't had a sergeant tell us what to do, what to expect. And he said, "Well, you go ahead and do the road on your right side, and another guy will do it on the left side of the road on Highway 1."

Five guys were scattered out on the rice paddies a good 200 yards out. And there's a railroad track on the left-hand side that goes all the way up to Qui Nhon. Then when we were doing our mine sweep, we were looking for a string of wires, either be buried underneath the gravel, the road and string out covered. They said, "You won't find any landmines." There was too many people traveling back and forth that morning. So they said more or less that you will find mines buried or dynamite buried somewhere. He says, "But you gotta find that wire lying out." So we go up two miles up the road and come back. The 1st Platoon were building a small bridge. So when I come back, I usually get on a post or stand guard or get on a truck with my M-60. And then I just sit where those guys are doing their mine. When we got there and we were still picking up bodies, small piece of body, a sergeant blew up.

Interviewer

Was he part of your unit?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Yeah. And I guess he moved the rocks, and that was a mine there. And he clicked it some way and then he blew up. So every now and then they said you will find a piece of body of that sergeant. They said, "Let us know. Then we'll put it in a bag."

Interviewer

Did the enemy ever attack you?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Oh, yeah. The time that we made that one mine sweep that one morning. The first week of December we done a mine sweep and we came to this one bridge where they were doing that bridge, put a big culvert there. So five of us had came off from the railroad track and meet them on that bridge there where the culvert is. And the two guys on the road, two guys close to that road there, we all got together. And we just kinda talked for a few, laughing around. And from there, we went north. It was the same thing. I got on that railroad track, and we all came back to the same area where we were doing that, fixing that bridge. So I got on my 60. They're all working. And this one guy had to use the restroom by the creek. There's a creek where we're doing our bridge. He just went over there and used the restroom. And then he happened to look down and seen a wire across that creek. Then he didn't hesitate or start moving fast because at the end out there, somewhere in those brushes is Charlie waiting for us, ready to (inaudible 19:08). And he just turned around and came over to me first, just kinda talking. But he said, "Wires lying across the creek." I said, "Okay." I told him, I said, "Don't move fast." Just laughing, and go over there and tell him. I said, "I

can barely get on a truck then." So he did. He went over and told the other guys, and pretty soon digging where the mine was, we didn't know. Coulda been underneath my truck. We didn't know, but we just hit here and there. I got on top of the truck with the 60. And the sergeant knew, too, so he called, called in there's a mine across the creek and laying west.

Within seconds there, two tanks came in north and south, twin 40s. They turned against that creek bed all the way over. They were shooting all the way along the creek, boom, boom. We opened up with our 60s, and they opened up, too. They don't know where we're shooting, but I just went along the creek shooting along the creek. And finally the captain said, "Whoa, cease fire." So from the tank crew, they sent two guys out. They would do the sweep along the creek. They went a good mile and a half along the creek bed, and they came back. And they came to report. They said they found a blood trail up the creek. So they said he was kinda bleeding heavy, so we don't know if he was from the twin 40s or gunshot wound or what, but he was heading up the creek. So they turned back, and he might be waiting for them up the creek somewhere. So that was it, and no fire from down along the creek on us. So I figured that he made it out somewhere. And well, I'll kinda go back. We were doing mine sweep and picking up the body parts. This one guy on the rice paddies, he was going along, and pretty soon he tripped, went down holding the rifle like that. And he went down into the rice patty mud. He felt something. What is this? He grabbed it. It was the sergeant's head. Boy, that kid, he went berserk. They had to ship him out for pulling that sergeant's head out.

Interviewer

So you're a full-blooded Ute, correct?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Oh, yeah. Well, not quite. My blood degree is some part Cree from Canada. My great-great grandfather was from Canada. Last name was Larose. So he came down and married a member up here in Fort Hall. Married a lady, had three sons. And from that time, year, I don't know. But they came here on this reservation and they enrolled here.

Interviewer

Were you treated differently for being an Indian in Vietnam?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Well, sometimes yes and no, you know. But just changing my name just from my wife's mother. That's how I got Eagle Chief.

Interviewer

Yeah. But I mean your friends in the Army, did they treat you differently?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Well, after I got there, from Captain Davis, we were doing an inspection. So we all followed out and doing an inspection of this. Eleven of us do an inspection. Captain Davis checked each one of 'em, and it's just like the captain would go down and we'd stand at attention like that. And he came by, eyes straight. You can't look at 'em, you know, the service rule. What they do is stand at attention. So he came by. I seen him corner of my eyes, and the guy next to me checked him over. Then he came right in front of me, looked me straight in my eyes, and I didn't look at him. The he kinda went down. Then I had my protection here, my fatigues in a box. Then I found a plastic wrapper, 'cause if I go back out, I don't wanna get it wet or rain. So I put it in a box and wrap it with plastic. And it was showing here. He asked me, he said,

"What's your name?" He called me Indian. He said, "You're an Indian." I said, "Yes, sir." He said,

"Well, what do you have in your fatigues pocket on your left side?"

Then I kinda hesitated to tell him that. Then I said,

"Sir," I said, "That's my custom that they gave to me for my protection, sir."

He asked me,

"What is it?" I said,

"Well, it's more like a medicine that was given to me, and I was told to carry it with me all the time." So Captain Davis looked at me. He said,

"Well, you go ahead and keep it with you right there where it is. If anybody say anything," he said, "You let me know." I said,

"Okay, sir."

So that time on, I always had that protection in my fatigues. And even the guys that I know, they call me Chief. Even my sergeant, lieutenant the same way. And my sergeant got to know me. I never hesitated to not go on mine sweep where the others, they'd say, "No, I don't go today."

And I went day before, and another group will go the next day out of 25 of us. So they'd take turns. They had a few black guys in. They told the sergeant, said, "I'm doing no mine sweep."

So the sergeant didn't say anything. Well, the first time he said,

"Why?" And some of the black guys said,

"I really don't have to do nothin'." So the sergeant said,

"Well, okay." And sometimes he'll say, "Chief."

That's all he ever says is Chief. So I knew I had to get ready and go. So I did. Got my stuff, rifles, M-60, all my gears that I had. Then I'd go out and get ready to go. Mount my 60 on that truck, ammunition, hand grenades, few explosive landmine things and dynamite. Not very much. And away I go. Then I'd get on a 60 going out. And even though that I volunteered, you know. Lieutenant was the same way. "Chief," or they'd just look at me like that. Or

looking at him and he'd come like that. So I know I had to get ready again. So I never said no or never said I don't wanna go. I just get ready and go. And that's how the guys respected me, even the black guys, and just do my part and go out all the time.

Interviewer

Talk about how your medicine protected you in your barracks.

Ridley Eagle Chief

That probably was the reason why. Me and my buddy named Jerry. He drinks a lot, you know, a few beers. And finally, I went out PX with him, had a few beers with him. I was kinda feeling good. But he was kind of a little more kinda drunk. And right at midnight they closed the PX down, and we were walking back from the PX down this road to our hooch down here on the west side, come down and over that trail. We were coming down, and all of a sudden you can hear the mortars coming in. And the same thing, hit all the way around us and he said, "Let's go, just take off over to the foxhole." Same thing,

"No, let's just stand here." He looked at me and he didn't say anything.

"Let's just stand here." I said,

"They just hit and run us." So we just put our arms around each other. Oh, probably last a good maybe five minutes. So whenever we were standing there, then you can hear it on the ground. And he said,

"What is that?" I said,

"I don't know, but he hit something over here."

And everything quieted down. Then we look, stand. I said,

"Well, let's go to sleep." So we went to the hooch and went to sleep. And we got up early, about 6:00, and we were going to PX and get something to eat. While we were going over there, we see all these guys around by the gas tanks, diesel tanks and the big tanks. I said,

"What's going on?"

So we went over there. Then we got there, there was a B-40 on the ground nearby that tank.

Interviewer

What's a B-40?

Ridley Eagle Chief

It's the small mortars that came from Charlie, like a B-80, B-40, maybe 105. And they're different size. A B-40's about 40 millimeter, about that long. B-80's a little bigger. 105's bigger. So more or less, this one came in and hit the gas tank and hit the ground. It didn't go off. So I told 'em, I said,

"We were over there just a few feet from that B-40." I said,

"If that hit that tank and went off," I said,

"We'd be gone and hit the ground and exploded." I said,

"We'd be full of shrapnel," I told 'em. I said,

"Maybe we wouldn't be here." That's all he said,

"Aw, man."

So we just forgot about it, and I don't know what they did. Maybe they took it somewhere and destroyed it.

Interviewer

Tell us about being a door gunner in the helicopters.

Ridley Eagle Chief

After six months with the 84 Combat Unit, I told my sergeant or lieutenant, I said, "I'm getting tired of this."

And by then, we was ready to ship out north. Then I said,

"I'm getting tired. I need something to do." I said,

"I'm getting tired of doing this, standing guard," and I said,

"I wanna do a little something different." Then he said,

"Well, you don't have qualification on being door gunner, and you gotta have tests on a 60." And he said,

"That's the two more important things." He said,

"But you gotta pass your test, so many seconds, to do fieldstrip M-60." So the sergeant said,

"You can't do it."

"Yes, I think I can do it."

So he called the other guy in Nha Trang. So he field stripped it. The sergeant told me, he said,

"What him. When they fieldstrip them," he said,

"I want you to put it back." I said,

"Okay." He said,

"Well, time won't matter at this time, but as long as you put that back, all the parts back together and fire it."

So I was watching him, and he said,

"Now it's your turn. Put it back. Start now."

So I got all the parts, put it together and put the barrel on, receiver. Then I fired it, you know. No shells in it, but I just pulled the trigger. He looked at it. Everything was all in. And he called the headquarters in Nha Trang, 1st Aviation.

So we made arrangements for marines to be there. So we went over there. So I checked in and same thing, they gave me a test on the M-60. And it only took a good maybe ten, fifteen minutes. And they said,

"Okay," they said, "You're qualified."

And then from there, said,

"Well, you have to wait a couple more hours." They said,

"We'll fly." They said,

"You'll be on that Huey helicopter over there with another door gunner." They said,

"You'll be on the left side."

So we waited and I got on, I strapped down by the M-60. But I was kinda on that bottom wheel of the helicopter. I stood on it. But I kinda set back on the 60 as I hold on to the 60. So we went, took off, two choppers. Went back to the west into the jungle area. Then from there, we flew treetop level, then received enemy fire. Yeah, the door gunner kinda over the radio, he said,

"We know where it is."

So they had the pilot turn around. He said,

"We'll go back the same route. When we hit close to that area where you see the enemy fire," he said,

"You open up. Just open up on the bottom."

And we had a chopper that was behind us, so they did the same. So we just made that one turn down, fired and continued west. So we spent mostly about two or three hours out there trying to receive enemy fire. Then we came back, and they said,

"Well, get your papers ready, you're qualified." Even them, they called me Chief. For some reason we never got hit, you know, enemy fire didn't even hit the helicopter.

Interviewer

How many missions did you fly?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Two. I'd fly two mission, then I'd stand by. And some of those people were sent back. That's when some of those 1st Aviation were returned back home. And from there, I went to Qui Nhon and I kinda waited there, too. So there's two mission. I fired that first day where we get qualified, and two days later we went again. And from there I went to An Khe, Pleiku with the 4th Division. But I stayed in that compound.

So I just kinda doing the same thing, kinda mine sweep. I never received my wings at all. Well, kinda go back to the mine sweeping when I first got there, there's five of us. I took the railroad track. And there was a hand grenade on the railroad track. I told the sergeant that there's a hand grenade on that railroad track tie. So I had to go back, hit that road and come back onto the road, straight across where the hand grenade is. And we were kinda talking about it, sent somebody over there. And they said,

"No," they said,

"Maybe there's a mine nearby before you hit the railroad track." Then they said, "Well we can do it and destroy it."

So they got the grenade launcher, 49, put a shell in there, tried to hit that grenade and let it go off. We done just maybe six, seven rounds, try to hit that hand grenade. I said,

"Maybe there's nothing in there, you know, to explode from the shrapnel from the 49." Then they said,

"Here, Chief, you try it." So I did. But I came pretty close from those guys. And the other guy, he was kinda a little short guy. He got it.

"Let me try it." And the other guy ready to come home grabbed his face.

"My face. My face. I'm hit." And during that same time, I got hit. But I feel pain, really deep pain. I went like that and I grabbed, you know, like that, and bleeding. So I grabbed like that. And my hand was still in pain. I was stiff like that. I just turned around and went to the truck. And that one guy, he said,

"Who else? Who else? Anybody got hit?" I didn't say anything. Then he looked down on the dirt. He says, "There's a blood trail. Where's it coming from?" He looked over towards me and said,

"Is that you, Chief?" I said,

"Yeah." By then, my hand was kinda—and I was rubbing my hand, kinda bleeding. They all came over and the lieutenant came in and said,

"You guys go in and go see the medic." They took us in. Major checked us out and said,

"You'll receive your Purple Heart." Then I said,

"With that little thing?"

Another major in the surgery room in Qui Nhon, well, he said the same thing then. But the major at the base, he said that. And another guy had shrapnel in his jaw. He was ready to go home in three more days. So he went home with the Purple Heart. But I went to Qui Nhon, an emergency room, kinda where they do the operation. A lady, captain lady, and a doctor major, they said,

"Well, we send you in there and get x-ray." It was of my arm. So they did. And the major got that x-ray chart and put it in a lamp like that. Then he came over to me and said,

"You're hit with shrapnel, yeah." But he said,

"It entered here," he said,

"It hit that bone." Went clear through my elbow. He said,

"That shrapnel is sitting right here." Then he asked me, he said,

"You wanna have surgery on your arm?" I said,

"Well, I got no choice." I said,

"You're the doctor." Then he said,

"We have to go down there and cut your arm clear down to where it entered."

He said, "We gotta clean that blood trail along your main bone there." He said, "We gotta clean all that out." He said,

"You like to have a big scar?" I didn't say anything.

"Up to you." Then he kind of said, "Hold on. I'll be back." Then he came back. I guess he talked with somebody. He said,

"The way I look at it," he called me Indian, said,

"The way it is," he said, "The shrapnel blows," he says,

"heat, like hot." He said,

"When it entered and it came up this way and settled there," he said,

"I think you might be fine without the surgery." He said,

"The metal is hot." He said,

"I don't think it will affect your arm, but if it does," he said,

"You let us know." He said,

"Well, what happened when you got hit?" I told him my arm twisted like that. And he said,

"If anything goes wrong," he said,

"You might have a problem with your hand, or down the road." I said,

"Okay."

So I went, got on a chopper, flew back. So maybe it was my fault, not saying yes for the Purple Heart. I thought it was just a small thing. But now when you really look at it, it means a lot.

Interviewer

Is the shrapnel still in there?

Ridley Eagle Chief

I came home on emergency leave on November 17th, extend one month to December, get early discharge from Vietnam, from the service. So I came home on emergency leave. They said,

"Your report duty was in Fort Dugway." They said,

"After 30 days you report to Dugway Proving Grounds."

They said they were gonna do the physical checkup and everything. And so after 30 days, I report to Dugway on the 30th. So I spent one night on the 31st. On the seventh day, I went back and they did a whole checkup. They had a paper that I got hit for shrapnel. Then they took x-ray again. Then a lieutenant said,

"Well, look at your shrapnel. Traveled back down to where it entered." He said, "Right now it's right here." He said,

"Do you wanna take it out or keep it for a souvenir?" I said,

"I don't think there is nothing wrong with the arm." He said,

"Looks like everything's all clear." And I said,

"Oh, maybe I should just go ahead and keep it for a souvenir." He said,

"Okay."

They done my hearing test. They told me, said,

"If you don't pass your hearing test," they said,

"You won't be discharged."

I lied there, too. The little bing, you know, and you have to say yeah. I was like I need to get outta here and go home, so I cheated there, too. The reason for my hearing loss, I fired a Twin 40 Duster. I was on the gunner on that tank, volunteer. And I got pictures of those guys that were getting ready to go for the night. On the gunnery place, they put it up. And one night I just went back down towards Qui Nhon. They call it Ambush Valley. It's a 12-mile road up the mountaintop to Pleiku. That's where the French soldiers were wiped out, 1959 and '60. As you go up that mountain, you can see stones all the way up to the top. There were maybe over 1500 was wiped out. So we were on the bottom with the two dusters and a small compound. Korean units were south of us. And a sergeant came around, asked me if I wanted to volunteer to fire the gun. I said, "Why?" He said,

"Sometimes my crew get a little crazy drinking." He said,

"They can't even handle it." He said,

"I don't want them to get on that duster and fire the wrong way." I said,

"Okay, I'll volunteer." He said,

"By 5:00 I want you to come back and get in the gunner hole to fire." I said, "Okay."

So I did. And that evening, the two tanks were one was firing 175 rounds, who will be firing all the rounds. So we did, boom, boom, boom, working the whole hillside. After that I helped 'em clean it out and retime it on the Twin 40s. You had to retime it 'cause if you don't retime it, that other shell will come down and hit that pin, you've had it. 'Cause the five-round clips goes down. Another guy will feed 'em, put it in just like that. And one night, maybe 1:00, sergeant came by. "Hey, Chief, let's go."

So I knew where I was going. And I said,

"What about the other guys?" He said,

"They all passed out." He said,

"Now, get in that firing hole." So I did. During that time, I forgot my earplugs. I'm sitting there and got ready. The track men were on to it left and right. I'm a gunner, elevation. And two guys there from the other group. Then he said,

"If I say 'fire' then it means fire certain degrees, crank it down in elevation."

He says, "Now fire."

I couldn't say anything. I forgot my earplugs. So I stepped on that kinda like a gas pedal. First round, all that pressure. You can feel it, all the pressure. Oh, my ears start ringing, but I still firing. And halfway through I was okay. But those first two rounds with that pressure, made my ears ring.

Interviewer

Tell us about how the Montagnards treated you.

Ridley Eagle Chief

Oh, okay. We were down in Tuy Hoa we went to some community building north of where we do our mine sweep. The 1st Platoon there fixed the culvert. There's a community where the road that goes down in their homes around the east side. The same thing, I was on guard. And each morning there's a lady comes up. Really nice-looking lady. And she'd go by and she'd look at me. And I was looking at her, too, you know. She was pretty. Had one of those Vietnamese kinda like a gown of really fancy material, dressed up. Went on for about a week, and we went back up Monday morning. Same thing. She would come out, same time, same way. And I was standing there and I was kinda looking at her. And she stopped and looked at me. And she came over and said,

"Are you Indian?" I said,

"Yeah." Said,

"Where you from?"

She talked pretty good English. And I said,

"I'm from Utah." I says,

"I'm Indian from there." And she looked at me and she said,

"Can I touch you?" Didn't say why; she said,

"But I'd like to touch you with your permission."

"Okay. Go ahead."

She put her hand up, my face, she touched me like that. My hand. And looking at me and, you know, just my hand and my face. She said,

"I always heard about the American Indians." She said,

"I'm a school teacher."

"Oh, yeah?" I said,

"You're a school teacher?" She said,

"All my kids are in that building there." She said,

"All these kids read about the American Indians. They've got books about the American Indians." She asked me,

"What are you doing here after what the cavalry's done to the Indian people?" I said,

"Well, time changed." I said,

"Most all of us are volunteers."

I said we were here to maybe help the United States, what's happening. She said,

"Oh, okay. But I still can't see why you're here for the United States with the American troops."

Then we discussed. She said,

"Tomorrow you guys will be here, too?" I said,

"Yeah." She said,

"Tomorrow you wanna come down, meet my family, eat with us?" I said

"Okay."

So I told the sergeant that next morning that, and she came. She wasn't dressed up, just regular clothes in black slacks. She said, "Let's go down here and visit my family, my folks."

So I followed her down. We were talking. And got to her folks and they bowed, and I just went like that, too. And her mother said,

"Eat."

So I looked at it. It was a bowl and you dip out of their bowl. So I can see some fish into that bowl falling out. I said, "Well, I guess it won't hurt to try it."

So she gave it to me. And there was a bread right there they dry out in the sunlight, and I got a little piece of that.

So I got the spoon and I put some in my mouth. Fish like that comes from the rice paddies are bigger, so they boil the whole thing. So I got it. I ate it. But it was kinda spicy. Like, most of their country eats spicy. Koreans the same way. Japanese probably the same way. They said,

"What's wrong?" I said,

"It's kinda a little spicy hot," I said. She just laughed. So I just ate a little bit. They said not to eat anything because there's some (worm? 1:00:15) that you would get. Affects your body, anyway. I can't remember the name of it. So she took me back where I was, my unit. Then we're all coming home. The following week we went back. I never seen her, time that she always walks up. And maybe on the third day some girl came by. And she came straight over to me and said,

"You knew this one."

She named her name, but I don't remember what name she was. She said, "Right after she had met with you and the parents, on the same night as the Panthers came in, took her and her parents." And she said,

"None of them returned."

The Panthers, they called 'em, is from the jungle over there, fighting guerillas, Charlie, VC. But they are on the Panthers unit. Said they came in the village and they took her and the parents. And she said they found the parents, but they were all cut up and killed, both of 'em. The girl, the lady, they don't know where she's at. They must have took her somewhere and do their thing, I guess. That was the last time I seen her is that time I ate with 'em. I was thinking after that, well, maybe it's my fault for going down there and just visit with them. Somebody in that community probably told on them that I was there.

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Interviewer

When did you get home?

Ridley Eagle Chief

When I got home, I went home to my parents at their home. I'd never gone anywhere into the public until one day my dad asked me if I can drive for them to town and they will get some groceries. And I said okay. So we went downtown. Then it was pretty close to noon and my dad wants to eat, and my mom said we would go to the restaurant and eat. I said okay. It was right at noon. There was quite a few people. They put us on the north side, and there was quite a people there, most all that restaurant packed. So my dad got hamburger steak and my mom, I can't remember what she had. But my dad always ate hamburger steak. So I just got a regular hamburger. Then they brought us food, and all of a sudden you can hear boom, you know. Then from there, I was underneath the table that fast after hearing that boom. I was underneath the table. By then, I looked like that and some of these white people were looking at me. In my mind I have to think fast. I just start looking for something. Then I got up. I was embarrassed. But during those time, in the '60s, a jet fly over with the atomic boom. It kinda shakes the building a little bit. I was underneath the table.

Interviewer

What happened to the medicine you carried?

Ridley Eagle Chief

I still have it. I put it away. I still pray with it. They said you can use it for prayers or whatever. So I put that away. And my aunt was with my uncle the first time I came home from an emergency leave. He passed away in March. And after I seen that white owl. I was on a guard post that night. A white owl came, sat on a pole right in front of me. And I said,

"Oh, no."

That means somebody passed on. A messenger sent that owl that something was happening back home. So I knew somebody passed on. The following day, they said,

"Are you ready to go home for emergency leave?"

So I went home for 30 days. From that messenger, a white owl, like that, flew and sat there. I prayed and I said I hope it's none of my family. So it was the guy that gave me the medicine, my uncle. He passed on. And I stayed 15 days there. She talked to me. She said,

"I had the dream." She said,

"I seen you out there." She said in Indian,

"Your enemy was around you." She said,

"They can't see you. Where it is cloud-like." She said,

"You were in the middle. You will be able to go through and the enemy won't see you."

She said, "Even though that you're around, they won't see you, but I can see them."

Sometimes I sense, smell. I can smell 'em.

Interviewer

You could smell the Viet Cong?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Yeah, the people from there.

Interviewer

What was the smell?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Each person have odor, so you can smell their odor. Whatever they smoke or use something, odor, or maybe from their sweat or what. 'Cause I don't smoke. But drinking, yeah.

Interviewer

Being an Indian, did going to war mean something to you?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Yes. All the Indian tribe have a value. And the old people say if you go to battle, engage your enemy in a foreign country, foreign soil, and you come home, they honor you. You're high up here as a combat veteran. They said you can do the things that some don't do. And I know that that's what she told me after I got home, my aunt. She said, "You can do whatever you want to do." More like authorized, like a better, or whatever, or a blessing or whatever. She says you can do that because you're a combat veteran. She said you're way up there. Most of the people that are serving the Stateside, they're down there. They're serving the state, not engaging the enemy. That's how she put it.

Interviewer

Tell us about your headdress.

Ridley Eagle Chief

Well, the war bonnet here, only one can wear this war bonnet is combat veterans. You engage your enemy, and that's why you're allowed to wear your war bonnet. In my way and their tribes are pretty close to the same, but different meaning. And her mom said, "You have a right to wear this war bonnet because you've been in combat."

And the colors, what it is, that's the way it is. I have it made that way.

Interviewer

This is the colors of Vietnam.

Ridley Eagle Chief

Yeah, Vietnam colors. And sometimes red feathers if you were wounded in combat. One of these feathers will have red paint on it. That means you're a combat veteran wounded in action. And somebody will look at you with that red feather. That means they know you've been wounded.

Interviewer

Do veterans dance or anything like that in pow-wows?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Well, sometimes the pow-wow is for the public. You know, people get together, different tribes. And a long time at a pow-wow, the veterans always leading. They have more authority than the regular people. The pow-wow, what we have pertains to the veterans. So the veteran can do what they want to do, but it's always for the veterans. You have authority, sun dance, pow-wows, any other ceremonies that they have, and you're always recognized as a veteran. And when the feather drops to the ground, the veterans are the only ones to get together for veterans. They'll sing a song and pick up that feather, more or less that you pick up the feather as a wounded veteran fall to the ground. And which one of 'em will pick it up will say you will pick it up. Then before the song ends, we'll come in and one guy will receive the feather and pick it up, and then kinda clear it out. And the dancer that dropped the feather will give it back to them. On my side, we'll keep it. I can keep the feather. But it's kinda generous. Eagle feathers are hard to get, so you return 'em back and the feather will come back alive, have a life.

Interviewer

Did you receive any other messages in Vietnam besides the owl?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Just the message I received that morning. But when the owl came on my guard duty, I knew something was wrong. And that's the only time I ever seen anything. I know there were some birds around, but kind of hard to believe a white owl land right there in front of me. But I see an eagle, too. Eagle, maybe their eagle from there flying. I look up in the sky, I can see him flying. I blessed myself from that bird. Some of the guys said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Look, there's an eagle up there. He's giving us comfort or a blessing." I said, "That's why I ask him to bless

me while I'm here."

Interviewer

Do you still think about Vietnam?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Not quite often, but sometimes I maybe go back in my mind. But I don't think about it. I wanna forget about it and learn myself I'm not over there. It's like the time I went underneath the table. I had to help myself. I'd kinda sit there thinking I can't be doing this. I said I gotta help myself some way. You know, you're home now. Even though I do that every now and then, I learned from the atomic boom, it just shocked right through my body. I just sat there not moving. And I said I gotta forget about it, learn myself, a certain boom or whatever.

Interviewer

Does the sound of a helicopter bring any of that back?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Sometimes it does, you know. Riding or going on the treetop, I see that in my vision. But I hear that, or making turns it'd be a little more louder, then come back.

Interviewer

Did you know the feelings of the United States people on Vietnam, and how were you treated when you came home?

Ridley Eagle Chief

How did I feel about it? I don't feel no way. Even like that girl said, what I'm doing there, why I've been there, said, "Why are you here with the United States?" And I don't feel no way towards Vietnam. I don't. And I don't hate 'em. I don't have nothing against 'em. It was a time that we had to do our duty to be over there and come home. And sometimes I recognize some people here, or sometimes I call one mama-san, you know. She come over and said, "We're here in the United States and people don't wanna hear the mama-san or papa-san." So I said okay. So I don't feel no way towards Vietnam. I don't hate it or anything. I just done what I needed to do for myself and for the people, the country, all that.

Interviewer

Why do you think the other guys in Vietnam were so upset, drinking and doing drugs?

Ridley Eagle Chief

Well, I know that day after that incident with the mortar came in, the next day I thought about myself and a few times that we could have been overrun. I was thinking well, Charlie's out there all lining up, and thinking to myself I don't wanna engage the enemy when I'm drunk. I said I've gotta do something with myself. I figured I shouldn't drink if something like this happen. And I did, I never drank. There was a lotta drugs there that come in. My buddies, they buy 'em, marijuana. It's just going right there around the hooch. I don't bother, though. But the other guys, they pick 'em and dry 'em and smoke 'em. And that's how, to myself, some of the guys that said,

"You're number one within your cell."

And New Year's night we got called to our foxholes, and looking clear out to the rice paddies you see Charlie's there running back and forth in the starlight scope. Oh, I don't know, how many. Over a thousand. And that compound we were on, 101st Airborne were wiped out, overran. The siren went out. I got my 60, my rifle, all my band layers, my pistol belt, put it on. I got all my magazines in there, a few bandoleers for the M-16, four belts for the M-16. I put 'em on. I ran out to the foxhole. These other guys came, my friends, and says,

"Can I borrow a couple of magazines from you?"

"What?" I told him,

"No, thanks." I said,

"You're my friend." I said,

"Before you came out here, you knew the siren went out. You grab your rifle, all your ammunition." I said,

"Look at them. They will overrun us." I said,

"This ammunition's for me. I will stand and fight." I said,

"Just stand right beside me. I'll take care of you."

Interviewer

What happened that night?

Ridley Eagle Chief

That night, it took about almost two hours there to see the Charlie's way out about a mile and a half, going back and forth. They had those torch light, you can seem 'em through the starlight scope or barely see 'em with your vision. We had four tanks, twin 40s, and two of 'em came over here, and there'd be three 40s here. They'd start opening it up. You can see their flares going out. From the ocean by Nha Trang, you get 60 miles over the mountain, they fire, too, from the ocean. You can see 'em blast from the east side. You can hear the round going over and start hitting 'em. I don't know. Maybe there were two ships out there on the ocean, beach, Nha Trang. So they fired. You can see the big flash, you know, over the hills. Lasted about an hour. During that time, I didn't fire my weapon. I figured if I start firing now and get all the stuff on the 60, and you gotta clean it out fast. I didn't wanna do that. But he did.

He fired a few rounds out there. He asked me, he said,

"How come you're not firing?" I said,

"If those guys come closer I will open it up." I said,

"I don't wanna be cleaning my gun." I said,

"I'll use it at the time if I need it." He said,

"Okay." He just sat beside me then. So they never attacked because we're maybe from the (inaudible 1:26:35) that we have and from the ship from the ocean. So after that they kinda cleared out. Took almost all towards the morning. They never came.

Interviewer

Is there anything we haven't talked about that you would like to talk about?

Ridley Eagle Chief

That's all I wanna say, if somebody can help me get my Purple Heart. And I'm trying to contact the guys I was with, with their stories, and they can help me with the letter that I was a mine sweeper. And I don't know if one of 'em might know if I got hit. But they did know that I talked about it 'cause I got the shrapnel in my arm. And recently this coming year, a medicine man, I went for help. There was pain in my back. He was a Navajo guy. And he looked me over through the crystal. And looking in the crystal he said,

"There's something back here in your back." He said,

"What do you want me to do with it?"

So I gave him money to doctor me. And he did. He said,

"This thing in your back look like a shell. It's about like this."

And I let him go ahead and take it out. But some of the x-rays at the time I came out in my back, there's always a bullet. Like, even the doctors told me, they said, "What do you got in your back, a bullet in your back?" They said, "The x-ray shows that it looks like a bullet."

I didn't pay attention. So he doctored me and draw it out from his mouth, a fragment. He said,

"It hit you, went clear to the back." The same time I probably got hit here. Maybe all that big pain I felt. But anyway, it went through me and to me back. So I still got that for evidence. And through the VA to try to get a checkup and get benefits from 'em. Some kinda distress.

Interviewer

PTSD.

Ridley Eagle Chief

Yeah. So I talked with them, and I let 'em know how I felt. Even maybe sometimes still today kinda bothers me. But like I said, I gotta help myself. And I went and seen 'em. They denied me. They said, "It's not part of your duty that you get that."