Roy Bloebaum
Salt Lake City, Utah
Elite Paratroop Rescue
Staff Sgt. E5

Interviewer
Give us your full name.

Roy Bloebaum
Roy Drake Bloebaum.

Interviewer
And where were you born?

Roy Bloebaum
St. Charles, Missouri.

Interviewer
And what was your life like before you went into the military?

Roy Bloebaum
We were poor kids growing up in housing projects, all packed together. 'Cause you know, the history of World War II and afterwards, there was hardly any housing so we were all packed into an area called (palterrace?)(00:42), which were army barracks that were turned over into apartments. And it was a fun time. We had a lot of kids to play with, it was the baby boom.
We had fun childhoods. We didn't have TVs. We were brought up to play in the American Legion bands and go to VFWs with family and families played pinochle at night when they got together and it was a simple time. Most of us didn't even have TVs or even radios.

Interviewer
Did you come from a big family?

Roy Bloebaum
There were four in my family but the Bloebaum family's quite large in general. Yeah, I think I have like 21 cousins and we were all close and networked. Had a commanding grandfather. When he said we were gonna have a family reunion, it wasn't a question, you just came. That's the way it was. But it was a good time. There was plenty to do and play. Always something going on.

Interviewer
So you grew up not a wealthy kid.

Roy Bloebaum
No.

Interviewer
You indicated earlier that you might not have had good grades in high school.

Roy Bloebaum
That's true.

Interviewer
You were just a rambunctious kid?

Roy Bloebaum
Well, a lot of it was, again, the mindset we had growing up in the '50s and '60s was it you had got a high school degree, you get out, you get a job. There was a major manufacturer, McDonnell Aircraft, where a lot of people worked back then. It's now Boeing. It went to McDonnell to McDonnell Douglas; now Boeing owns it.
And most of us just dreamed of getting out of high school, going over to McDonnell's and living happily ever after like our parents. Most of our parents retired from McDonnell with pensions and it was kind of like your life dream, that was your dream. Like for example, I'll bet you less than ten percent of my high school class went on to college. Now it's almost flipped around, you know, 90 percent are on their way or trying to get to college. But that was kind

of the mindset of the time, especially coming from a family where your father struggled to get out of high school. My mother was a war bride and she got pulled out of school in seventh grade to work in the factories in England because they needed the soldiers at the front. And she never did get a high school degree although she was a very bright woman, read a lot. Took the license practical nurse exam by reading the manual and passing the test and worked as a nurse all her life. But she never had any formal education beyond seventh grade because she met my father in the service, they married and she came to the United States with him after World War II.

Interviewer

Tell us about this big decision to go into the Air Force.

Roy Bloebaum

Well, as I said, I was an underperformer in high school. I went to automotive and diesel training because I thought it would be fun to work on cars, or diesels. We had a neighbor down the street that was doing pretty good in that profession.

After I finished training technical school, no one wanted to hire me and I had a friend come by and said, "Hey, have you heard about the buddy program in the Air Force where we can go through basic training together?" And I said, "Let's join." My father protested because he named me after his first cousin, Roy Smith, who was killed in World War II. And he went down and got an instant loan for a thousand dollars and told me to go to college. And I said, "No, I'm joining the Air Force." He said, "No, you can't do that." And I said, "Yeah, I can, I'm 18, I can sign up. I don't need parent permission." So I signed up for the Air Force. And they said they were going to make me a jet engine mechanic so I was all excited.

So when I got into basic training you go through this process of what job you're going to be assigned to. I forget all the acronyms, I think it was MOS or something like that. They made me a fireman. And I can remember crying that night; I never wanted to be a fireman, I never thought about being a fireman and the Air Force made me a fireman. My grandfather had always said, "Whatever you volunteer for, try and be the best at it." And so I tried to be the best fireman and I got promoted ahead of everyone. And they said you can cross train now. And I said, "Great, I'll go be a jet engine mechanic." I went up to the base exchange – and by this time being a fireman gave me this idea about the thrill of saving a life. And I hadn't had that concept.

Interviewer

Had you done that as a fireman?

Roy Bloebaum

I had worked on a couple fires, yeah, at that time, but you're always on the flight line, or we did structural one side. We did flight line on the other incase an aircraft went down and you're out there trying to get the pilot out. And it just became an exciting idea to save a life. And so when I was up at the base exchange I read this article about William Pitsenbarger who had just won the Air Force Cross in Vietnam. He went down.

The Army was in a big combat situation, their medic had been killed in a big firefight and they were having trouble hooking up the basket to get it raised up. And he went down to help 'em and decided to stay and they found him in the morning killed. He'd spent the night taking care of the wounded and helping pass around the ammunition, and getting involved in the firefight. And they found him slumped over an Army soldier, basically killed, and he'd been killed through the night. They've upgraded him since to the Medal of Honor. He's the first and only pararescue man to this day that has won the Medal of Honor.

There are, I don't know how many numerous ones have one the Air Force Cross now, which is the second highest medal. But it inspired me, when I started reading about it. So I went back to the fire chief and said, "You know, I'd like to try this pararescue thing, see if I could cross train into that. So they sent me to Hickam Air Base which is out of the Oakland area. And there were 12 of us to be screened. The rest of the group was being screened right out of basic training. The 12 of us were cross trainees. I was the only one selected out of the 12 to go into the training and which I explained earlier was like first you go through Army Jump School in Fort Benning, Georgia.

Then from there we went to Navy SEAL scuba training in Key West, Florida. Then from there we went to POW survival training in Spokane. And then from there we went to medical training in Wichita Falls, Texas, Sheppard Airbase. Then from there we went to pararescue school where you start putting it together. You parachute into trees, you parachute into the ocean with scuba gear on and all the time with medical kits and whatever. Specializing in various ways to get anywhere in the world to rescue a pilot or an air crew and learning how to use all of this specialized gear.

Also you went through goat school, learning to do cut downs and things that would be normal procedures, tracheotomies that you might need to do in a combat situation. And then after they interrupted our training to go to Ranger school in Dehlonega, Georgia where we learned mountain rescue techniques, mountain climbing techniques as well as we started learning a little bit more about munitions, C4, how to use that, and then grenade throwing; things that aren't common to Air Force.

And then the Green Berets chased us around for a week throughout the forests. Getting to certain points without getting caught; consequences for being caught, learning evasion. Then from that, we went back to pararescue training and put it all together. And then we got our assignments. Some of us got assigned directly to helicopter

training for Vietnam and the rest were sent out to various stations around the world.
Like I got sent to Guam and that's where we parachute out of C-130s. And our mission there on Guam, it was called a duck butt. The flights were coming out of Hawaii and on their way to the Philippines and Vietnam. And we would head out towards Wake at two or three in the morning, get about halfway there, turn around, and then if there was a problem with one of the aircraft and they had to eject, we might have to parachute in, take care of the pilots until we could get picked up by the Navy or friendly.
Then we also were involved with Apollo rescue. We worked in three-man teams for that. The pararescue men would work, what they would do is the first pararescue man out was to get downwind of the capsule, capture the capsule and then release his reserve shoot. There's a hook that trailed and then the reserve shoot would open up and work as a big anchor. Then the other two pararescue men would jump in and they would drop the collar and grafts and then we'd put that around the capsule. We were prepared to go anywhere in the world in case a pilot had to make an emergency landings outside of the regular drop zone to capture the capsule and maintain it until we could get picked up by friendlies.

Interviewer
So did you actually do an Apollo?

Roy Bloebaum
We were involved with Apollo 7, yes. It was an exciting time. I mean you're 20-, 21-year-old doing this kind of work, it's fantastic. And then after that, because I was a cross trainee I could've gotten out of the service, I was done with my four-year commitment. But the excitement, I felt incomplete. So I volunteered for Vietnam and so did my brother, he was in the Army at the time.

Interviewer
You know about Vietnam and what's going on, you're aware of everything?

Roy Bloebaum
No, we weren't. No, we weren't. That's a false. That's a false premise.

Interviewer
You see what's on the news?

Roy Bloebaum
Did you ever look at Armed Forces news?

Interviewer
Tell me.

Roy Bloebaum
It's propaganda. My son was in the Marines, he just got out and we were in Japan and we're watching his TV, you've got Rush Limbaugh, you've got a lot of stuff that's framed. For example, when I'm going through training for a year in pararescue let's say, I don't stop. When in the hell do you get time to read the paper? You don't know what's going on. You're focused on getting through your training. You didn't go to sleep at night, you passed out you're so dang tired.
And then you get to Guam. Again, we're on an airbase. We had to sneak off base to see "The Graduate," they wouldn't show it. One of my buddies said, "Hey, have you heard of 'The Graduate'?" And I said, "No, what's it about?" He says, "It's this really cool film my brother wrote me a letter about." We get Matt Helm on base, you know which was the Dean Martin movies and that kind of stuff. We didn't get what was going back on in the United States. And then of course Vietnam, again, you're back to Air Force radio. Sure, we got the football games and messages from the President and the whole pit, but also in the military you're trained to be apolitical, you do what you're told.
So there wasn't really much going on as far as the information most of us got about what was going on back there. At least in my group we never discussed things about protests and things that were going on. It became quite a shock when we got out of the service to see what was going on. Because that is really key that people don't understand about the Vietnam veteran.
You have to frame our experience in the World War II experience. We're kids growing up, as I told you earlier, most of us and families just making it, and you hear about the wonderful things, you've been to the VFW, you played in the American Legion band, you're patriotic, everybody appreciated what everyone did in the war no matter what they did.

I had, let's see, my father, my uncle, two aunts were all in the military. My mom was in the military, that's how they met. You're very patriotic. And pararescue men in general are very highly decorated group and you almost think you're gonna come back home and people are gonna appreciate that. And to come back and start your first day in college like I did and the first thing you're wondering is, "How can you tell the boys from the girls?" 'Cause they've all got long hair. And you're starting to look at the faces to see a little hair growth on the face.
Being the first college member in my family, and that's what everybody was starting to do, you had a good GI bill –

go to college and I walked into the history of China. Now, I didn't know you could pick your classes when you went to college. The nuns had assigned me history of China introductory to algebra, a lot of introductory courses, again, based on my poor grades, before I could get to the next level. And they were talking about Vietnam and I thought, oh, this is cool, I'll be able to discuss that. And there were discussions about baby killing and these radical thoughts going on about things that I didn't experience. So I raised my hand and one of the students began to accuse me of things like that and being so wound up, I hadn't been back from Vietnam over 24 hours but my mom said, “You better get up there 'cause the nuns have a rule that if you don't have 100 percent attendance you can't get an A.” So I said, “Well I'd better get up there,” and I was already a week late when school was starting.

Well, I proceeded to do what the normal GI would do, I jumped cross the aisle and started pounding the hell out of the guy. Fortunately two Marines that had just gotten out, pulled me off, took me to a bar and got me drunk and said, "You know what, Roy? No one gives a shit about what you did over there, so get your hair growing out and start blending in and find out what's going on." So it was a big shock. Not that I expected a band to meet me at the airport and thank me for my service, but I sure didn't expect that.

But as time went on, I soon realized that the body politics, a lot of the students especially, decided that the war wasn't worthy and there was reasons and rationale for why we shouldn't be in Vietnam, and this helped me to better understand what was going on, and that this is what the body politics should do; protest if they don't believe in the war.

The gap in it was the fact that they were taking it out on servicemen who were doing the calling of the body politic and what the Commander and Chief had instructed them to do. We now bridge that gap in our country. That's why soldiers coming back now from Iraq, Afghanistan and the first Gulf War were all appreciated. It's still a missing link for a lot of Vietnam veterans though because I know after the Gulf War they tried to blend the celebration with Vietnam. A lot of my friends who are Vietnam veterans, it doesn't bridge the gap for us. Now for me, I'm past it. I've learned to think past it and appreciate what's the body politic.

In fact, the body politic disturbs me now in that there's no reason we should've been in Iraq. But quietly it went on. Might be time to get out of Afghanistan. Quietly the message doesn't come out. So it swung the other way. And why? What's the common denominator? You don't have students being drafted. They don't have to worry about coming up with reasons to get out of the service. I had friends that came up with more ways to get out of the service during the Vietnam era than you could count. That was fine with me, that didn't demean what I did or those who served did. But it helps frame the history.

You can't just jump to Vietnam without starting with the experience of World War II because we were World War II kids, you know? We're the baby boomers, this was our war. So it was philosophically a growth process for most of us. And as we were talking earlier, I wore this suit and outfit for a reason. I don't want all Vietnam veterans to be framed as the guy who wore the fatigue jacket, who was bitter.

A lot of us are professionals, a lot of us have thought through it professionally and framed it into the history. For example, Regan gets credit for the fall of the Wall in Berlin. That's isolated. You look at the Cold War, it was our economy against the Russian economy against the Chinese economy. We were fighting Chinese weapons, Russian weapons, Russian technology. They went broke, we didn't. It was all part of the process of ruining the Communist economy. We were part of that, okay? Should we still have been in Vietnam? Was it part of the domino theory? Yes, it was. Here we are manufacturing goods in Vietnam now, having economic entanglements with Vietnam. You can go to Vietnam now and they like Americans in Vietnam. It was all part of a big kaleidoscopic process. We served. We served well.

I bawl like a baby in front of the Vietnam Wall. There are men I served on that wall that did not get the life opportunities I got because it was taken away from them and they deserve to be honored for that. To take that honor away is wrong. And I hope we've grown past that as a society because these were good men fighting for the right purpose under extreme conditions to save other lives. That's the model of pararescue: That others may live. And to this day that remains the motto. There's no question about going into a combat situation to save another airmen's life.

Now it's broadened, they go into extract SEALs, Special Ops, Green Berets. It's no longer just pilot-focused. They even go in with them. I'd be shocked if there wasn't a pararescue unit that extracted that Navy SEAL team when their helicopter went down. We'll never know the combat operation of that for years to come, but I'll bet you they were involved.

Interviewer

Let's get to your experience in Vietnam. You volunteered for all this training, and you're going to Vietnam. Tell us your experience and your first days there.

Roy Bloebaum

Well, again, after Guam I think I mentioned that the thrill of being involved in saving lives was engrained in me now. And I had a good friend who I went to his internment at Arlington just a year and a half ago who was my roommate on Guam. He said, "Hey, Roy, I'm going to Vietnam." I said, "Well I'm going too then."

And so we went through helicopter training, he went to the larger helicopters, the HH-53 and I was with the HH-3E – both called Jolly Green Giants. And you learned to network with your pilots, co-pilots, engineers who lower you.

You learn machine gun training. And then also, I forgot, you go to the Philippines some more for jungle training, survival training, and then off the Vietnam. And you arrived in Vietnam and...

Interviewer

When did you arrive there?

Roy Bloebaum

I can't remember the exact date but it was in early '69. And I was there all of '69 through...

Interviewer

Where were you?

Roy Bloebaum

It was actually in Nakhon Phanom, it's actually the northeast most part of Thailand. And it's the closest helicopter flight to bombings in North Vietnam and bombings in Laos. We would stage out of there and then maybe what you would do is there would be bombing raids going on in various areas and we'd be in the area for hours upon hours just flying in circles. And the reason you did that is because the first 24 hours were the highest probability of extracting a pilot alive and not getting them captured.

So you were out there ready at any time with two helicopters – low bird, high bird – flying around, and you would pre-designate who was gonna be low bird or high bird. Because the way the combat mission went, once the low bird went in, if it got shot out, the high bird trails it because your next mission is to rescue the low bird crew, okay? And then if the low bird mechanically was secure; no one was hurt, then the high bird became the low bird and the low bird now became the high bird. And this could go on several times, if they had to chase going to the low birds, follow it in because it might not make it back or it got shot down, you get a new low bird/high bird team.

And this was all being coordinated by what they called crown, which was C-130s, which is like an on-flight air controller. Then you had O-1's, O-2s, I forget the exact designation, spotters. And then you'd have A-1Es, these are planes that could fly fairly slow, low down on the ordinance and they would lead the helicopters in. You'd have one in front, one in back and two on either side just laying down ordinance until you got near where the pilot was, and then of course they'd have to break off and then it was you and the enemy getting the pilot out. And that was kind of the procedure for rescue.

If the pilot, as I said in one of our earlier discussions, was okay, you just lower the penetrator, he jumps on, you hoist 'em up and you get out as quick as you can. If he's injured, the pararescue man goes down, pre-designated – you have two on each crew – one manning a machine gun, one manning a different machine gun. The one closest to the hoist would be the one that would go down. Once it went down then the flight engineer took over that machine gun so you could keep constant fire, suppressive fire. And then if you got stuck on the ground then you were there to help try and hold them off until you could get enough suppress fire to get out with the pilot. And that was the standard mission protocol, I guess you could say.

Interviewer

So tell us about a mission that you remember particularly where this all happened. How many missions did you do?

Roy Bloebaum

Well, I can't remember the number. We were out flying on the time.

Interviewer

Dozens?

Roy Bloebaum

Oh, yeah, at least that. I can say the thing I can remember was it was called Boxer 22; it was the most intense mission in the history of Vietnam. A pilot and his navigator were bombing in the Laotian area and it was actually a North Vietnamese depot and heavily fortified. And it took us three days to get him out, the navigator.

The navigator landed on one side of the river and the pilot on the other. And on the first day, the emphasis was to get the pilot out because the North Vietnamese were closing in on him, they wanted him bad. And the mission went on all day, we were the last one to go in, it was getting dusk and we got shot out, we didn't even get close.

But you've never seen fireworks like this. The whole theater had stopped. If you were a pilot – Army Air Force, Navy, Marine, and you had a load of bombs and armorment, you were in line to drop. Everything in the theater had stopped to rescue these two airmen, these two pilots. But sometime mid-morning, the next morning, the total count, I remember 16 helicopters went in and got shot out. We lost two pararescue men. I don't know who else, and other aircrews that were wounded.

But mid-morning I want to say, the Vietnamese got him, the pilot. Took him to the edge of the river and shot him in the head. Dragged him back into the jungle. They just found the body, I want to say a year or so ago, his son did. And it was honored.

So now it was time to try and get the navigator out alive. So now everybody was really pissed off. We wanted this guy out alive. And finally they started dropping the CBU-54 which is a gas. I think it was against Geneva Convention but they did it anyway. They started suppressing the fire and then I heard the story there was this one anti-aircraft weapon that kept just blasting us. It was back in a tunnel and finally one of the first laser bombs went

up the tunnel, blew it out, and made it easier to get the navigator out. And we got him out on the third day.
Now I wasn't the crew that got him out, but if you were the scene in "Top Gun" where all the crews and crewmen – everyone landed back in Nakhon Phanom and every pilot that could land in that airbase landed there if they could get a spot, because it was gonna be the biggest party that you could imagine. And the flight line was just filled as far as you could see whether it was maintenance people who deserved credit to aircraft refuelers, ordinance people; everybody deserved to be a part of that celebration. And it was a fantastic time.
It was a joyous time, although it was also sad; we'd lost people trying to get these out and we were angry about what they did to the pilot. But that was the most intense air rescue mission in the history of Vietnam. I can't remember even the timeframe, I want to say it was getting a little bit close to the Thanksgiving timeframe, because the navigator came back to celebrate New Year's Eve with us, it was a great time.

Interviewer

Describe to me what you'd be doing on a typical mission. Headphones on, you're on a gun. And you have to go into that jungle on a line. Tell us about that.

Roy Bloebaum

It's intense. It's absolutely intense. Your heart is pounding so hard, you're trying to capture your breathing. And you've got to figure a way to calm yourself, to focus on the goal. And then you get your heart rate back and check. You get your breathing back in check and you start paying attention to what your mission is; staying focused on your mission. Responding to your training almost robotically. You have to do that. You can't get cerebral.
Anybody who's been in combat knows there are moments where you make decisions and they're instantaneous and you hope they're the right ones. But sometimes they are, sometimes they're not.
It took a wonderful nun that taught us when I was in college. She came into our student lounge one day and said, "Why are you kids taking drugs?" And I hadn't done any drugs and I said, "Oh, Sister, I think it's because we're struggling concerning the human predicament." I thought it was a nice BS line. Very next semester she had a course she was teaching called "Confronting the Human Predicament." It was a brilliant course, everyone should take it. If she'd written the book to outline that course she'd be a millionaire.
But her first statement in the first class was whatever decision you make it's the best decision you can make at that time. And we argued for a week that that was wrong. You can always make a better decision. Well, in hindsight you can always look back and make a better decision but you couldn't make a better decision than you made at the time.
So eventually once that was pounded into us and we understood the philosophy and theology behind it, it was like, that makes sense. That makes sense. And that helps in a lot of retrospect of decisions that you might have made wrong in combat or decisions you made to do this or that in those situations. It takes away a lot of guilt because you know that that's the best you could do at that time with what you're trying to process.

Interviewer

Give us an example of a decision that's wrong or right.

Roy Bloebaum

Well, in it was more a situation where I couldn't agree with a particular approach that a master sergeant, Paul Jenkins, was making. And he came over and took over from me – I guess there was only about a third of the time left that I was there. And I don't know whether I was just too dang stupid and young and stubborn to accept that what I'd been in charge on was now being taken over. And I was resistant to what he was trying to affect.
Before I left Vietnam he took me to the airport and he said, "Sergeant Bloebaum, you have all the pieces to go all the way wherever you want to go in life. You are an exceptional individual." And it shocked me that he said that. We saluted which normally enlisted doesn't do to each other.
And I was in college my first semester and the nuns called me. They said, "You have a phone call from Vietnam." And I was in class and I thought who the hell would call me from Vietnam while I'm in class? And it was one of my pararescue men who I served with who was still there and he said, "Bloebaum, I'm here to call you to tell you that Jenkins is dead." And I go, "No! He had a wife and four kids." He said, "Yeah, he got shot down and him and Michael Dean were both killed."
I can't tell you the guilt I felt. I was bawling like a baby. And what's even more ironic than that is my son was a starter for Judge Basketball. Now that was 1970 that he was killed with Michael Dean. And they hadn't recovered the aircrew.
And my son, Judge Memorial got invited to the All Catholic Invitational Tournament in Maryland. I want to say it would've been 1996, ' 97? And I got the pararescue newsletter that day. They had just found the aircrew and had recovered their bodies and were burying them in Arlington. And we go to Maryland for the tournament and they got finished with it fairly early and the coach said, "Let's stop by Arlington." Go to Arlington and there standing on their grave, it's fresh. They had just been buried. And I didn't realize they bury the whole crew in one common gravesite with their names on it. I was bawling like a baby. I felt, again, so humbled that what he had said to me as I was leaving the service, how much it meant to me. I wanted to apologize for being a pain in the ass. But then fortunately, again, I knew he understood where I was coming from as I grew older because I was critiquing him and

resisting him because I thought there was a way I knew was the best way.
And again, Sister Mary Pierre's lesson about those were the best decisions I could make at the time. Other decisions in combat in those moments, I can't go back over those. That's too intense. It's way too intense. I now teach med students, grad students, undergrad students and I have no tolerance for them giving me an excuse, because we learned in Navy SEAL training, you find sympathy between shit and syphilis in the dictionary and all my students can find it there. And I tell them, “You know what? There's an 18-, 19-, 20-year-old over there in Afghanistan and Iraq right now making a life and death decision. They're no older than you or younger than you and they're making decisions. It's time for you to step up.” And they appreciate that.
I give them a leadership talk and what I've learned at each of those levels of training I went through. And they know where I'm coming from, that there's no sympathy. If you tried your best and it didn't work out, I have no problem with that. I have no problem with you coming to me, showing me obstacles. But if it's an obstacle you can get over, you will not get me solving your problem. You're gonna go back and solve your problem. That's the way we grew up. That's the World War II generation. Framing it in World War II, look what they went through, they grew up in a depression. They got nothing. They get a war handed to 'em, they go to that war, they win that war, they come back to an economy that's imploding because it's framed in a war economy. They've got to convert it to peacetime economy. They did all of that, we saw that as Vietnam children, baby boomers growing up. We can't forget that. Tom Brokaw had it perfect: They were the greatest generation. And we're part of that generation and we get to pass that on. And the only misstep in Vietnam, again, as I said earlier, coming back, not being appreciated was one thing, but being told you were the problem was catastrophic. But again, understanding the political process in the long run was helpful. It helps you work through it.

Interviewer
When you were there, were you married? Did you have a girlfriend?

Roy Bloebaum
No. I'd been engaged four times, it was cheaper than getting divorced. I was single. I had first gotten engaged to a colonel's daughter, and when I got out of pararescue training she was supposed to meet me in my home and she didn't show. Never did find out the reason why but I was so anticipating it that I broke off the engagement.
And then I met a gal in Australia but then I was going to Vietnam and I was going to go to college in Australia after I got out, but then I wanted to go home. And another gal in college and broke that off; she did that. I didn't think women could break off engagements, I only thought the guys could. But that was a good life lesson too.
And then I met my wife when I was a dean at a small college. The nuns that had me in that small junior college hired me back to be an assistant dean. You can do that with a bachelor's degree in a junior college. But then I also applied for a Rotary International scholarship. And I was blessed that there were 60 of us going for this scholarship and an Air Force general had just retired and he was the head of the selection committee for the Rotary scholarship. I walked in, had excellent grades in college and he says, "I see you were a pararescue man?" I go, "Yes, sir." And we got to talk about Vietnam and pararescue and the whole bit," and I thought, gee, that interview was easy.
And about a year later I got notification I'd won the award, I could study anywhere in the world. I picked Perth, Australia at the University of Western Australia because that's where we staged out of for one of the Apollo missions. We were there for 18 days, that's where I met the young Australian girl. And I picked that university campus because it was beautiful. I had no other rationale for going there other than they spoke English and I could get a degree in anatomy and physiology.

Interviewer
Were you in Vietnam during the moonwalk?

Roy Bloebaum
Yes, July 20th, 1969.

Interviewer
What were you doing that day and how did you feel having been part of the Apollo program?

Roy Bloebaum
I was occupied with the war. It became real important to me when Bob Hope brought the first man on the moon...

Interviewer
Neil Armstrong.

Roy Bloebaum
He brought Neil Armstrong with him that Christmas time. I got to see Bob Hope twice, once on Guam for Christmas and once in Nakhon Phanom for Christmas. And Neil Armstrong was part of the troop. And Neil Armstrong got up and gave us a talk about the GI Bill, that he took the GI Bill after Korea and how it helped him and that we needed to use that opportunity. And again, it was inspirational, and it was a joy getting to see him and Bob Hope and all the group. It was fantastic.

Interviewer
Do you remember what you were doing that day of the moon walk?

Roy Bloebaum
No. Again, we were occupied with the war. I know somewhere along the process it became more to me later, but during that time, you know, as special as that was and as important of an accomplishment as that was, and it impacts me how brilliant it was to this day, at that time, no, it was focus on the war, for me and my guys. We may have said something in passing, I don't know.

Interviewer
Tell me about some of your friends, and the things they did that impressed you when you were there.

Roy Bloebaum
First thing you find in elite groups is you have a very highly spirited group of individuals and if they get bored they get real mischievous. And so you're always jacking each other around, causing each other problems and having fun though too, with it. Like my first week there they slipped a boa constrictor in my bed with me, I about flipped out. That was not fun as far as I'm concerned. A lot of things to keep it light.

A lot of things we liked to do like after you rescue a pilot was fun. They'd invite us to the officer's club which was very special for the enlisted and you'd sit in the bar and drink scotch. They liked scotch. And you could take your shot and throw it against the wall and they had a big target and a huge pile of glass, they didn't clean it up from all these celebrations of rescues and missions. And that was always fun.

A lot of times there'd be a drinking contest with the pilot; who fell over first, he'd want your beret, you'd get his flight cap. And we had flight caps all over our hooch. We had ways of giving them just enough drugs so we'd have the edge going into the drinking contest. But we have flight caps from all over from rescues. That was kind of our emblem of success.

Interviewer
Is there a particular mission you're proud of that went well that comes to mind?

Roy Bloebaum
You know, I'd say Boxer-22. I mean I was intimately as part of it as anyone was. I can remember, I guess it was the first time, weed crews from Udorn, Da Nang, Nakhon Phanom, all in Nakhon Phanom because again, it was the closest base. And we were sitting around saying what we would like if we were to die tomorrow, what would we like before we died tomorrow. And it was kind of funny what came out. Most of the guys wanted a kiss from a round-eye because they'd been sleeping with hookers. Fortunately I was a good Catholic boy at the time.

But I found that interesting that a passionate kiss from a Caucasian meant a lot to the guys. I remember what I wanted but that is most profound thing I can remember. And it was heartbreaking when Dave Davidson got killed. I didn't know him real well. He did play on our softball team, which was another story.

Interviewer
Who was Dave Davidson?

Roy Bloebaum
He was a young 18-, 19-year-old pararescue man that got killed on the back of the aircraft. He had talked to us that night about how he could get married now. He had a girlfriend in early high school, the parents wouldn't let them get married. And that he was going home soon and that he would be able to get married now. He had parental permission. And he got killed when a mortar hit the back of the aircraft and killed him. That was quite heartbreaking. He talked about he was looking forward to having sex. And of course everybody gave him crap about that, but it was sad that we lost him.

Interviewer
How many men did you lose?

Roy Bloebaum
While I was there? You know... keeping count's hard. You go by names, you go by the names that bring faces to you again. Paul Jenkins, Mike Dean, Charlie Doug King, I can't remember some of the names of flight engineers or whatever.

After a while, you know, my last three months there, my commander had to call me in and force me to write my parents because my parents were freaking out, they hadn't heard from me. And I'd gotten into some mindset that if I didn't write them and I got killed they wouldn't miss me. So my commander called me in and made me sit down and write a letter to my parents because he'd been contacted by the Red Cross. So you get in different, weird mindsets. Don't know why. Must be something to it, I guess. And that's how I remember it.

Interviewer
Do you ever see any of your friends from that time?

Roy Bloebaum
You know, I went to my first pararescue man reunion last year for the first time. I've seen some that have come

through to see me periodically here in Salt Lake. I had one that I saw, Jon Hoberg, who I mentioned earlier who said, "Well I'm going to Vietnam," and I said, "Well Jon, I am too." That was heartbreaking. He had a mission where we think drones are the hot new thing, well, we had them back in Vietnam.
Another part of our mission, which I forgot to mention, is when they got down they would send pararescue men to get the black box out. They didn't want the Vietnamese and the Russians and the Chinese knowing the codes for the different drones. And Jon was going down, the hoist was on the ground to get the drone, helicopter got shot down and a part of the blade blew off the left side of his face. And they had to use a rib for his jaw. He always had his eyes slightly offset.
And I didn't realize until he died that he really had PTSD. He became very isolated. He'd come through and he'd say, "Yeah, I'm coming up to see ya," and he wouldn't show. A lot of times you know, when you'd go out to eat, the food would drizzle off his mouth. He couldn't feel it because this side of his face, he lost his facial nerve.
And it was ironic, one of the guys we served with, (Mort "Catfish" Goodwin?)(55:30) on Guam had died from Parkinson's. And I called him about three weeks before he died. And Jon was a big computer nerd, a good engineer. He went through ASU and lived down in Phoenix. And a quirky guy, I really liked him. One night he came in and he was doing psycho cybernetics and trying to make things move in the room with his mind. It was funny to watch. But he learned Japanese, Thai, Chinese; he could pick up languages very well. But he'd wake me up in the middle of the night and say, "Hey, give me these words." And I'd go, "Jon, it's the middle of the night."
But anyway, he liked ballroom dancing which I didn't know. But he turned his living room into a ballroom. He wouldn't go out, the women had to come to him to dance. When I went down, I didn't see his house when he'd turned his house into a ballroom, or that living room area. Me and a buddy went down, I didn't have enough travel funds, I was a young professor, maybe about 15 years ago and the meeting was in Phoenix.
I called him and I said, "Can we stay with you?" The house was a complete mess, he never got married. Very good-looking man. He said he missed not being able to kiss and feel the kiss. I remember that story. He said, "What the heck, the sex was great." But the house must have been 20 different colors of paint. He had all this pararescue men buddies over and they couldn't figure out what they liked best so they just tried a little bit of everything. Anyway, we slept on the floor.
What was so amazing about Jon is he always knew you better than you knew him. He'd spend the whole time somehow immersing you in your life. Maybe kind of a way of protecting him from knowing too much about his life. But I was the first guy he called when he was in Wilford Hall. I was in college and my buddy drove me down to see him as he was recovering from the mission. But when he died it was tragic because again, it was just serendipity. Three weeks before he died he wrote my phone number down because everything was in the computer locked. And to this day we don't know what happened. He was opening the freezer door and the guess is that he banged his head with the freezer door, stunned himself, fell to the ground, cracked his skull and bled out. He laid there for three or four days, I don't know the exact timeframe before one of his dance partners hadn't heard from him, got the police to open the door and there he was lying on the floor dead.
So his sister came and she saw the phone number, didn't know what to the do and decided to call it and it was me. And it was Karen Hoberg. And I said, "Wow, Jon finally got married, huh?" And she said, "No, I'm his sister. Jon's dead." I said, "Oh, my God." And she said, "Well who are you?" I said, "I'm Roy Bloebaum, I served with Jon in Vietnam and in Guam." She said, "Well, he's been dead, he had to be cremated because he'd been dead for four days. I was thinking about spreading his ashes around Phoenix." I went, "Oh, God, don't do that." She said, "Why not?" I said, "He's a very highly decorated Vietnam veteran." She said, "He is?" I said, "Oh, my God, did he never talk about what he did in Vietnam?" She said, "Not much." I said, "Oh, that's amazing. He's eligible to be buried in Arlington Cemetery." She said, "You're kidding me." I said, "No. Let me get on the phone line and call the president of Pararescue Association. Don't do anything." Because I can't remember the names of the guys, the pararescue him who lived with him and knew him in Phoenix.
So they get a hold of this guy named Mike, I still can't remember Mike's last name, I didn't serve with him. He said, "Oh, my God, we didn't even know Jon was dead." And they rallied around Karen. They have deal called The Last Drink where they send $250 to the family to have a wake at a local VFW and I flew down for that. And she had no clue, the family had no clue what a hero this guy was.
This is a lot of common I think in veterans, period, in all wars. How it's hard to talk about missions and what you did, how you served. And I think it's even more so for a lot of Vietnam veterans. There's still that sigma. But I was also there for his internment in Arlington. And it's a beautiful process. He deserved it. And when I get to go to D.C. for meetings I get a chance to stop by there.
It's harder to go to the Wall than it is Arlington, to be honest with ya. I don't know why. But it is. I guess it's that on the Wall you're not only seeing the ones you lost, it's just overwhelming to see how many were lost, how many lives were cut short. It's tough. It's real tough. But he was a very special individual who I believe, again, even I don't quite know the whole story of PTSD, but you can see how he, over time, became more and more and more withdrawn.

Interviewer

You spent thousands of hours in a helicopter.

Roy Bloebaum
Yes. And a C-130.
Interviewer
Does the sound of a helicopter bring anything back to you now?
Roy Bloebaum
I can tell a helicopter coming when most people can't. There are the affects of the helicopter, starter to have hearing issues but I'm too vain, I haven't had my hearing checked. I guess I should. My wife says I need hearing aids and I just thought that just comes with 36 years of marriage, but I guess I got to go check into it.
Interviewer
Does it ever bring back memories when you hear a helicopter?
Roy Bloebaum
No, I think I go into denial. I just identify it as a helicopter. I don't flashback much to it. Again, a lot of it you keep to yourself. I don't know even know why I'm disclosing so much I am today. I think more than anything because the one message I wanted to get out was framing how the Vietnam veteran felt this World War II experience with your parents, how people were jubilant about this incredible accomplishment, how it made us patriotic as kids and then the shock of it coming back and not necessarily seeing parades or anything, but the complete contrast that you would not expect. Why it was such a huge, huge process we had to work through because it was framed like this, but it went like that. And I don't know how many Vietnam veterans I've spoken to that had a long time to struggle to work through it, you know?
Interviewer
So would it have been different if you'd had that World War II homecoming experience?
Roy Bloebaum
Oh, yeah, sure. We'd have felt like we had been exceptional, we had served a purpose that we'd been over there for. I mean we can't take a minute now – and I'm part of it – when I see a soldier, if he's in line with me and behind me, I slip the cash register 15 bucks or 20 bucks and say, "Pay for his," and walk out the door, tell him thanks for serving. I see the servicemen.
My own son just got out of the Marines and we tell him how much we appreciate that service. It's common fare right now and that's the way it should be. That was not common fare after Vietnam. But again, you grow through the process. You learn that the body politic figured out.
There's a great movie to see called "Hearts and Minds," a 1973 war film where you got Ho Chi Minh writing a letter to President Eisenhower. "We want our country, get the French out of here. Would you help us?" We were so paranoid about the domino effect that they would become a Communist country. I mean even China now, communisms a party. They have a certain theology, philosophy, but they're turning into capitalist economies. It's like capitalism's winning. They had to go that way, even Russia knows they had to go that way to build an economy to sustain their people.
So you look back at it and you know, we didn't need to be there, we could've been a completely different history if we would've tried to cooperate with the Vietnamese.
Interviewer
April of '75 when we left Vietnam, it was on TV.
Roy Bloebaum
I remember it.
Interviewer
Were you watching?
Roy Bloebaum
You bet I was. I can remember when Da Nang fell. I was on Easter vacation with my fiancé. She'd gotten sunburned pretty bad down in Florida and I said, "You better not stay in the sun too long." She said, "No, I'm one-sixteenth Cherokee, I don't burn." Well, she did burn.
So we started spending some time with milk baths – which I learned in survival school – in the room, watching TV. And when Da Nang fell I knew it was over because if you can't defend Da Nang you can't defend anything, because that air base had a perimeter that was huge. You could see the enemy coming whereas jungle warfare, jungle fighting, most of the time you saw muzzle flashes, you didn't see the enemy, you're shooting at a muzzle flash. It's shooting at you. And to let it get overrun like it did in just a few days.
I remember saying to Lois, "This war is over." If the South Vietnamese cannot defend Da Nang they can't defend the rest of the country. And it went like that after Da Nang, if you remember.
And then the chaos of trying to get the Americans out... One of the ironies of it all is I've had two Vietnamese girls working in my lab. I still have one right now and they were all escapees; one was actually was a boat person. The one currently, she was my assistant. Tam, the current one, she was born and raised in the United States but there's still family.

It's funny, you know, a lot of times Vietnamese will say, "You dinky dau, GI." You know what that meant? I thought it meant number one. So I said, "Tam, your family speaks Vietnamese?" She said, "Yeah." "What the heck, when the Vietnamese were saying, 'You dinky dau, GI,' what did that mean?" She says, "It means you're crazy." That's fantastic. They were probably right. "You dinky dau, GI." I don't know how many years I had to wait to learn that one, ' 69 to 2011.

Interviewer

So what were your feelings about that moment and watching that on TV when the embassy fell?

Roy Bloebaum

Disgust. Disgust that we had fought that long, gave them superior technology and they didn't have the guts to fight? What the hell were we there for? That's what scares me now about Iraq and Afghanistan. How do we really know those people are gonna stand up and fight? We keep hearing over and over again, we're training 'em, we're training 'em, we're training 'em. Well it's not in their culture.

If I had to bet that when we pull out of Iraq or we pull out of Afghanistan, that they don't go back to their tribal ways. I mean look at the Arab Spring, it was gonna shower democracy. It's already going into secretarian wars, the Shiites versus the Sunnis versus the Christians versus this, versus that. It's so tribal.

It would be that way in this country if the Civil War hadn't won. The United States, we'd have the confederacy, you'd have Zion. The Mormons came out here to set up their own country. And that's fine, that's what they wanted do, they probably would've been if the Civil War had been lost. But we're unified by a television and in that work of communications now. Do they have that in Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria? What tribe system gets to the top and controls it.

Interviewer

If there's one thing you want to speak to fellow Vietnam veterans, what would you want to tell them?

Roy Bloebaum

You know, guys, you hold your head high. We went through more crap than any returning service group in the history of our country and we deserve to hold our heads high. We served because we were asked to serve, we executed because we had to, and we deserve all of the accolades of any other war fighter in any other war, and it doesn't take a parade or a big party to know that. It's in your heart, that's where it belongs.

Just like other veterans, they had to pray, but it had to stay in their heart to be validated and we have that. We don't need parades. We have each other. We still talk to each other.

I just met a veteran just yesterday, a construction guy who is doing some work on the VA. He was spit in his face by a little girl. Went over to the parents and they were hippies. He said, "You know, you need to have your daughter not spitting in servicemen's faces." And the hippy said, "We don't mind 'em spitting in your face." He said, "Well I mind being spit in my face. I can't discipline that child but I can kick your ass, so if you don't train your daughter to be respectful, or at least leave us alone I'd appreciate it."

And he was a Ranger. He never served in Vietnam but he was a Vietnam veteran, you know, during that era. But he was in the airport with his blouse, pants, you know, we used to have to travel like that. I don't know if you remember, we had to put on our dress blues and travel. And now they can travel in civvies or they can travel in their combat.

Interviewer

If there was one thing you want to tell the younger people today about the guys who didn't come home.

Roy Bloebaum

You know, as a veteran, you carry two things with you about them. One is the guilt... that you got the life you did and they didn't. And the privilege to have had the life you had that they didn't. And that they did this, at least all the ones I knew, out of service to their country without second thoughts about political issues, right or wrong, we did it for each other. We did it for the mission. We did it to save others and that all the politics, whether we should've been in Vietnam or not, that that's the core soul that you have to hang onto and let the other crap roll off your back; because as they say in "Full Metal Jacket," the other crap don't mean nothin'.

And that's the main message I'd give my fellow Vietnam veterans and that we're not all the guy in the fatigue jacket protesting and screaming. We're all professions, we've all made other contributions throughout our careers and the stereotype is wrong. That's what I'd like to say to them.

Interviewer

Can you declaratively state that if the returning veterans had been treated like the World War II veterans than things would have been better?

Roy Bloebaum

If we would've had a more respectful, dignified homecoming, I believe that a lot of the psychological trauma that some Vietnam veterans still carry with them would've been lessened or even eliminated. I also believe that some of the struggles like I talked about earlier with my friend Jon Hoberg. I know Jon carried a problem with that.

When they had the Gulf War parades they said it was also for the Vietnam veterans. I know that didn't ring true to

Jon, it didn't ring true to me. It was like... too late. And it wasn't framed properly. That framing I keep telling you about, the World War II frame that we had in our minds, what the picture should've been like. Yeah, it would've made a big difference to a lot of Vietnam veterans, I believe. And I think it would've been an easier integration back into society for the average Vietnam veteran and it would've led to a lot less bitterness that some still carry.
So, yeah, you know, I'm not sure – I use the parade concept metaphorically – I think just feeling appreciated would've been enough. I don't think that we've had to have been on a float down Main Street.
Like recently we had Iraqi War veteran, Dawn Halfaker. She was in "USA Today" and went back to California and I met her. She lost her arm. And my research is to develop prosthetics to go up the bone so that all this limb loss that's occurring in Afghanistan and Iraq, they can snap a prosthesis on and load the bone instead of these sockets. Well, Dawn had a big parade in her hometown.
Or like that Jessica – I can't remember her name – that was rescued out of Iraq. Big parade. I don't think we needed that. Just, "Hey, guys, great job. I believe we shouldn't be there, but you know, we appreciate what you did over there. It was what you were told to do and I'm sure you did a great job. Thank you." That isn't the experience most of us had. But no, confetti, all the other crap, that's fine. It lasts a minute. But I believe it would have been a lot less psychological trauma, a lot less complexity in the average serviceman's life.
And I know this 'cause one of the things that's sustained us through college, most of us, is we migrated together as Vietnam veterans and we would share our stories and the fun stuff. A lot of us have never talked about our combat, it was all the goofy stupid things we did. But it was that brotherhood bond, you know? We would play softball together, beer ball together, things like that. We still are friends and that comes from the Vietnam bond. Yeah, that was our comfort, really, was each other, more than the social aspects around us. Did that help?

Interviewer

Can you describe the actual rescue mission and what you would do on that mission?

Roy Bloebaum

Well, I can describe what goes on in the helicopter first. There's the chatter going on between the pilot and the sandy pilots, crown, the communication with the pilot on the ground. It's very intense. You're hanging on every word. You don't know if you're gonna be deployed to go down the hoist or whether you're just gonna help suppress enemy fire. Somewhere along the line the communication comes that they're gonna need a PJ on the ground. You're a low bird and you've been selected that day for the one to go down the hoist. You start preparing your AR-15, your .38 millimeter pistol, might grab a few grenades. Make sure you have water in case you're on the ground a lot.
The most important thing is water in a jungle because you're sweating like crazy. You look at that hoist and you know you're going down it. And you're starting to tense up. As you approach... you man the machine gun and you open up and you're just laying it down everywhere. You don't aim a machine gun, you just let it fly – left, right, up, down, left, right, up, down – just keep shells moving away from ya. Time to get on the hoist. Well, the helicopter goes into hover. You're on the hoist. There's the noise of the helicopter hovering and you're descending. And it seems like forever. The hoist doesn't go down as fast as you want it to and you're riding the penetrator and you're trying to sight the pilot. And once your sight him, you goal is immediate first aide because that's what needed to keep him alive. Stop the bleeding. Is the airway open? Whatever.
You're flashing through your first day of training. If it's just a broken something, you grab him, carry him, and get the hell out of there and get to the penetrator. If you need to suppress fire 'cause it's coming your way you've got to do that. You grab him, you run to the hoist, you hook yourselves up. You fire away – more indiscriminately than anything. And as soon as you clear that tree line they don't wait for you to get in the helicopter. They want to take off. You know, you don't want to sit there as a sitting duck too long.
Then the flight engineer and maybe the other pararescue men grab you and swing you in. Release you down on. Pick up the pilot, you put him on a cot and you start cutting clothing if you want to see if he's wounded somewhere. I lost track of time where you thought the pilot had one injury and found out he had two others. 'Cause you treat the one.
It wasn't until I became professor of orthopedics and I had to go on ground rounds. And you hear about... They have what they call quality assurance now, it's called. And you hear a resident getting scolded because this guy came in from a traffic trauma, a car accident, and he had a broken ankle and maybe a busted tibia. And he took care of the ankle and the tibia and they found out the next morning he had a broken wrist, he had a broken this, he had a broken that.
And they'd taken care of the obvious, what the patient was complaining about, but they hadn't done a complete thorough history. And I found out that we did that a lot. We didn't know. Of course, if we got him back breathing and not bleeding, basically with a chance to live, that was all that we were concerned about.
There was a physician there as soon as you landed and we felt we'd done our job. But it was interesting to find out sometimes that, "Whoa, you mean he had a broken forearm too? We didn't know that." Or humorous, whatever. We'd just shrug it off. We wouldn't feel guilty about it. I mean, heck, we got him back alive, that's all that counted; that was our bottom line.
Now I think pararescue men are better trained to look for more if you got time. I mean hell, if you don't have time

you're in the middle of a shootout then get him out, get out alive, get him out alive, worry about that stuff on the helicopter when you're on your way back. But again, we were trained as best you could train at the time and now they're much better trained than we were. They're magnificent young men.
We were fit, incredibly fit, but now these guys are incredibly fit and there's not a one of them that's not a sculptor. They do weights. We didn't do much weight training. They have specific weight training routines now. These guys are not like these muscle man magazines, but you could do surface anatomy on all of 'em and identify ever muscle group without a problem. They are amazing human specimens now. I'm proud that I could be part of that history but these guys are amazing now. They're great kids. They have to give five years.

Interviewer

Do you ever talk to your old friends?

Roy Bloebaum

Yeah, my last reunion, I told you I went to a reunion, it was down in Tucson, so we went to the pararescue. I couldn't believe the equipment they have now. Once they get them on the helicopter all they can do, heart rate, everything, telemetry's back. It's almost like an advanced EMT, talking to an emergency room doctor now and they're doing things on the plane to better save the men in the field before they lose 'em, before they get back to the surgery or the emergency room.
The fact that the whole Army is starting to capture that model... I just read in the news a few weeks back better training their medics to be more trained like the pararescue men. Although what they're doing now is amazing, they're saving 96 percent of all wounded. Vietnam I think it was 72. World War II was 56, one was 44. So it's gradually improving, the on-field care.

Interviewer

Describe that stereotype that you were describing, the guy in the fatigue jacket.

Roy Bloebaum

What do I think about the guy in fatigue jacket? Well, I understand where he's at and how he probably got there because of the reception. He wanted to bring attention to the fact that he obviously was upset and felt betrayed about his service in Vietnam. Whether it's because the politics weren't a good reason for us having been there, or whether because the reception when he got back. I don't have a real judgment of him because how he perceived his experience is how he perceived his experience.
What I was more upset about was how the press was framing that this is representative of the average Vietnam veteran coming back and it wasn't. It wasn't. And what do I feel about him? He's in a place where he needed to be, I don't know what I'll put him there, but that was his place. For the press to frame it that way, to present it that way, was a misrepresentation of the whole. It was superficial. That was my feeling about it.

Interviewer

Some of these guys have said that fragging was real, there was this rotation of leadership in combat and that they didn't trust new guys coming in.

Roy Bloebaum

You know, in any organization, I don't know care whether it's military or veteran affairs, University Of Utah, you're gonna have concerns about how things are managed. I mean where does "SNAFU" come from? Situation Normal All F-ed Up. We had an acronym called "DILLIGAFF" – Do I Look Like I Give a Flying Fuck? That won't make it on TV, I'm sure. There's a lot of acronyms we had. But you know, you're always gonna have guys that in any organization or any situation that don't like being there or think there's a better way or it's all messed up, it could be done better.
You know, we were such an elite group with such an elite focus. There was a bit of that. I talked to you about how I had my friction with Sergeant Paul Jenkins. But if you believe in the chain of command, that the stripe above you is the final word, that's the way it is. Again, in some respects when the chain of command breaks down, it's like any organization. It becomes more and more dysfunctional.
I'm sure that a lot of combat veterans experienced that; the chaos of combat, the chaos of a new guy coming in, taking over, thinks he knows what he's doing first time in-country. You may have had a good captain that got it. Get a young captain that thinks he knows what he's doing and you're not comfortable because this other captain got you through more.
Same with helicopter pilots; we had some that could make a helicopter dance and land on a dime. We had others that when they came in for a landing you thought the landing gear was gonna come up through your ears. You just worked through it. That's what you have to do. You know, that's just common base, human nature. You're gonna have guys who can always look back and say, "This is the person that I admire the most, and this person was an idiot." That's military, departments of orthopedics or biology or bioengineering, it's just human nature.
What makes a big difference is if that decision, which is obviously wrong – in fact, when I talked about Pitsenbarger earlier, what I heard is that the reason he didn't get the Medal of Honor in the first place until years later is that there was such a screw up that went on with that platoon, and the bad decisions that were made, that the Army were holding up the award of the Congressional Medal of Honor because of all the embarrassment about the many bad

decisions that were made in that situation.
But the Air Force didn't give up, they made sure he got it. And it was almost three decades later before they upgraded it, but they finally upgraded up to the Medal of Honor. So yeah, life and death decisions, someone making a bad mistake in those situations or panicking, leading to problems and more complications, yeah, those... no one knows how they're gonna act in combat until they get there. To go back and reflect on it, you make the best decisions you can at the time.

Interviewer

Did you also rescue the South Vietnamese Air Force guys? What was their role?

Roy Bloebaum

You know, I'm not an expert in this, I can assure you that they weren't involved in air rescue missions because they were highly specialized. As I started to explain earlier, you had spotters, you had the A-1Es who were working with the crown, coordinating all of this onsite, commanders. I mean it was complex but beautifully managed. Almost like you could imagine a conductor with a large symphony orchestra making it all blend; when it worked, it was beautiful.
My understanding of the South Vietnamese Air Force is mainly they gave ground support. If they knew the North Vietnamese were in an area or the Viet Cong, they helped lay down ordinance in those areas, probably mostly for the South Vietnamese fighters. But we never had any involvement.
The only outside involvement we had, which was exciting, for a while is we had two Coast Guard pilots that came and were with us on station for three months. And man, compared to the Air Force pilots, they could make a helicopter dance. They had far more experience with the helicopter and we couldn't wait to go on missions with those two guys.
I remember one, when we came back from a mission, and they blindfolded each other and they said, “We're gonna land this thing blindfolded.” And I said, "Hey, guys, you got people in the back here." They said, "No, no, we're gonna show you, we're gonna land this thing." I swear to God that thing glided to a perfect stop. It was amazing. So I guess they had more helicopter time than most. I don't know what the difference was, but it was different. And they could make it through things that we didn't experience most of the time with our Air Force pilot.
Now I'm gonna get in trouble with Air Force pilots for that one, but maybe it was just these two guys that were that exceptional, but they were amazing in the way they handled a helicopter.