 Pete Koense
Sergeant E5
Army
Special Forces
Payson, UT

Interviewer

Tell us your full name.

Pete Koense

My name's Peter Koense.

Interviewer

> And you were born--?

Pete Koense

I was born in 1949. I was in born in Holland in a little town south of Amsterdam, called Utrecht.

Interviewer

> And your family got here--?

Pete Koense

My family ran away from the war and we immigrated here in 1952.

Interviewer

> And you grew up where in Utah?

Pete Koense

I grew up in Provo and I went through elementary school, junior high, high school. And it was my parent's hope and dreams that I would marry my high school sweetheart and they wanted me to go on a LDS mission. And when I talked to the young lady, we both agreed that neither one of us wanted to go. So with that realm I decided to join the military. Since I got my selective service card my number was two. So I thought if I would enlist. I had the options of going where I wanted to go.

Interviewer

> For those who don't know, tell them what a lottery selective service is.

Pete Koense

It's kind of like a bingo game as far as I was concerned. You were always the center square and when Uncle Sam said you were to go, you were to leave to serve your country. And you really didn't know when you were going to leave. You had generally a knock on the door or a letter saying you were automatically drafted.

Interviewer

> But you were selected through a lottery?

Pete Koense

Yes.

Interviewer

> And what did you think about that system?

Pete Koense

I was quite upset and so that's why I enlisted. I went down to the military office and they said, "Well, if you enlist we can give you a better realm of going someplace where you're going to be. That way you won't get drafted and then in that situation we'll tell you where you're gonna go." And I fell for the routine and I went ahead and enlisted. Yes, it was a nice forethought at first.

Like I say, I first went to Seattle-Tacoma, went through basic training. I went through AIT which is Advanced Infantry Training at Fort Ord, California; learned how to be a telephone operator and installation for switchboards. From there I received my orders for Fort Benning, Georgia. And that was a crash course because of the Vietnam conflict, I was there only eight days, went through a crash course of learning how to jump off of 90-foot towers and how to jump out of a C-141 at about five-, to ten thousand feet. And from there I was shipped automatically to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey where I learned how to run radios and to learn how to use encrypto gear. And from there they shipped me to the wonderful place I thought they had intended me to spend the rest of my service, it was in Berlin, Germany. I was there for quite a while, I'd say maybe about a month or two, I got to go on a leave to see my family in Holland, met a few of them.

Then when I returned back to Berlin, one morning we woke up, the air raid sirens were sirening and we all went down to the formation like we're supposed to do when the sirens went off and found out that the Russians had invaded Czechoslovakia. Within a 24-hour period I was back on an airplane along with three other compadres that I had ended up in Berlin with and we were on our way to JFK International Airport. And from there I went on leave, was supposed to go on leave for 30 days but I terminated that early and only spent a week at home.

Then I went to Seattle-Tacoma, got a brief training there on jungle training which was about a week's worth and then I ent to Cam Ranh Bay. When I got to Cam Ranh Bay they shuttled me over to an artillery unit which was Battery B6 of the 14th Artillery. And when I showed up there they looked at me and looked at my orders and ripped my paperwork up at that place and they gave me TDY orders which are temporary duty papers to another unit which was attached to Kon Tum, Vietnam for the 5th Special Forces. And when I was given the opportunity of going on convoy they gave me one rifle and one clip. And while we were on our way on convoy, the convoy was attacked. And that was the first time the realization had finally hit me that I was in a killing zone.

I had a flashback of why did I come here? Why was I put into this? And of course I used my clip in a very big hurry and there were other people around me that were defending the sides of the roads and we got back in our vehicles after the skirmish was over and headed to Kon Tum city. When I arrived in Kon Tum the strange thing about it was

was the officer that I met there was a Captain, his name was Peter Krommenhoek.

And when I met him I looked at his name--I saluted him of course and gave him his recognition--and I looked at him and I said, "Where do I know you from?"

And he says, "I'm from Salt Lake City."

Come to find out that he and I had spent some years in our teen-age years and elementary years here in Salt Lake City at 24th of July Dutch get-togethers. So it was kind of a blast from the past. And then he told me where I was gonna be headed and around the corner came my Executive Officer from Berlin.

And I looked at him and he looked at me and I said, "How'd you get here?"

And he says, "Well how come it took you so long to get here?"

And I said, "What am I doing here?"

And he says, "Well you have an assignment, just do you job and you'll be okay."

I told him, I said, "Well after that conflict on the road I don't know if I'm gonna be okay."

Anyway, I was given a flight by slick, grabbed my rucksack and headed on the chopper and we flew into Ben Het. Ben Het is on the tri border; it's roughly 12 miles from Cambodia, and 11 miles from Laos. Initially it was supposed to be a listening post and I was unaware of that. When I landed and then when my equipment showed up along with some people that were in my charge, I ended up with a three-quarter ton with an RTO rig which is a Radio Teletype Operator rig. And I ended up there with an AN/PP-5 and an AN/10 which is a ground-to ground radar unit and an air-to-ground radar unit. And our sole purpose was to monitor the Highway 512 which was the Ho Chi Minh Trail. And basically that's where it all began.

Interviewer

> Tell us about the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Pete Koense

The Ho Chi Minh Trail was the main artery bringing every down from Ha Noi. It wound in through Vietnam, around through Vietnam, and through Cambodia and then through Laos. And they moved most of the stuff there at nighttime, not during the daylight. And it was our main job just to monitor what was coming down the trail, who was

coming down the trail. At that time the military decided to bring us up some support and they brought in the unit that I was supposed to be attached to which was B Battery the 6th of the 14th Artillery, they brought in three 175 Howitzers one eight-inch Howitzer. And right along with that they brought in two M1A dusters which are the old 40-millimeter pom-pom guns that are matted on tracks as a backup. And immediately I began to get a little bit skeptical about what we were doing there. Of course being attached to an A244--I was the intermediary person that went between the artillery unit and the A244 team plus the radar unit but the RTO rig. And that's when they started firing missions from the U-175 and 80 Challengers. All the missions that were going were headed into Laos and they were headed into Cambodia. At that time we were told not to say anything about the direction they were firing on. So basically the missions kept going on for quite some time.

Interviewer

> So you were firing over the border?

Pete Koense

Oh, yes. They were definitely firing over the border. That information has been released now as of 2007 that all the fire missions of this particular unit was firing across the border. Occasionally they would fire in reverse direction when Dak To became involved in a few skirmishes as well.

Interviewer

> Tell us more about the Ho Chi Minh Trail, how busy was it? Why was this so critical what you were doing?

Pete Koense

We were getting Saigon, we were getting Kon Tum and the major military installations, the information needed, as far as troop movement--how many troops were going down the trail. We would make the communications with the teams that were sent out, the A-teams and the MACV-SOG teams. And they would radio the information back to us and we would radio the information back to the proper authorities all the way down to Saigon as well. And the troop movement was quite heavy for quite some time and we, like I said, many, many units. All troop movements, we never encountered any vehicular movements, horses and carts and that. And the radar units that we had attached to us were good enough that they could see the actual position of the people and about how many you can count right on the position.

Interviewer

> How many were coming through in a day and night?

Pete Koense

It varied, it really did. It seemed like some nights there was just literally thousands of 'em and then you'd have a break for a day or two and then there'd be a couple hundred float through and then all of the sudden there was an influx moving towards the north of us. We could also track to the north as well, they were going around us. So we were basically watching everything around us, we could swing in any direction. Accurately we could monitor between 30 to 50 miles is basically what it was. And the 175s and the eight-inch Howitzers were accurate within

anywhere to eight to twenty-one miles. And so their strategic point, they could knock out any time that they had to, the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Interviewer

> So was the enemy aware you were there?

Pete Koense

They were aware. The CIDGs, the Montagnards that were supporting the 5th Special Forces there on the fire base, among those we had enemies inside the wire, and it worked both ways. We had people on the outside as well.

Interviewer

> Tell us about the Montagnards.

Pete Koense

They're fabulous people. I have much respect for those people. The Montagnards, we dealt a lot with. As we had a conversation earlier--the Mongs were a little bit further to the north, we'd had some dealing with those in Cambodia but the Montagnards were tremendous people. I have the deepest respect for those people. As long as there was a dead GI lying on the ground there, they would stay. They had their families with them. They had babies born there on the fire base.

The one thing they didn't do is they didn't trust the ARVN forces, that's the South Vietnamese forces. They made an agreement some time ago that if they were to come into the Special Forces camps and support the Special Forces that the South Vietnamese forces were not to be allowed into the camps. We had many run-ins with the ARVN forces; their lack of discipline and there was a lot of problems. And so out of respect to the Montagnard, the ARVN forces were not allowed to come into the complex. Understanding that our nearest support base was Dak To, it was roughly 21 miles to the east of us. And it was a dirt road, they called it a main road but it was a dirt road. And the ARVN forces were to keep the roads swept of mines, keep security on the roads.

We had many problems with that as indicated in many of the articles that I have. It got quite bad. We'd have to sweep the roads sometimes ourselves. And we had a mine sweeper but you know, when you're walking down in front of a jeep with a mine sweeper it's quite tedious when you're expecting the South Vietnamese forces to assist you because that was a part of the job that we, as the United States forces were there was to keep this country safe and keep the communists out. But they weren't doing their jobs, that's the way we felt.

Interviewer

> They would attack your base?

Pete Koense

Are you talking about the ARVNs? Yes, they did. Right in the height of a situation, for some strange reason we received numerous rounds from the 155s one day and that was a part of the problems we had with the

Montagnards, yes. When you say were we attacked, yes, we were attacked by our own forces, by accident, as they had said. As far as the NVA, yes. When they became aware of our situation and what we were doing and the fire missions that the 6th and the 14th was bringing havoc on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, we stepped up the fire missions and because of the amount of troops that were getting by, they decided it was time to start slowing that down. And we were a big threat.

And it got to the point where we had quite a large number of units around us and it was very evident with the patrols that the A-team had sent out to take a look at--and I got to fly out a couple times out towards Angkor Wat which is across into Cambodia. And you could see the NVA forces moving under you and being shot at and it was quite understanding that Ben Het was an extremely large threat to them. So large that we had closely between 3,000 and 5,000 NVA regular troops, that were around us at one time. And we had two battalions of hard-core NVA. There's a difference there. The regular troops are just like the ARVNs were, they're there to do their fighting and they did their job. They're hard-core NVA, they would generally get quite inebriated on pot or alcohol or rice wine or whatever and it they were quite a strike force themselves.

And then when we found out that there was two companies of sapper units around. These are highly technical people and I have a lot of respect for 'em because they dug under the wires. And they set satchel charges. They would come into the camps and they would blow up ammo dumps as we had blown up a couple of times. And things got quite hot and hostile there for quite a few months. And it was coming to a point where we definitely knew that they wanted the camp.

And after much consideration the 1st Field Force and the 5th Special Forces finally made it known that we needed a little more support. So they brought in the 2nd Battalion 6th Artillery Unit which is a self-propelled 155 unit which sat on the North Hill. You have to understand there are three hills at Ben Het: the Center Hill, the North Hill, and the West Hill. And what basically happened was the 155s were taking care of the troops that were out close. And the thing about that is that they finally realized that we weren't going any place.

And one night, it was quite early. I got a phone call off the field phone and one of radar operators called me up there and he said, "We have a problem and a situation."

So I went up and I looked at what they had on the screen and they were quite a ways out, I'd say, oh, about 30 miles away, and we could see the tracks coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. And I called the Di Wee from the camp which is the Montagnard captain for the CIDs and I also called the A-team commander, Lieutenant Lanai and they came down. And of course they knew a little bit about the radar but they weren't too well advised with it. And

we explained to 'em what we had and they called up their support commands and yes, they'd heard that there were some tanks in the area but they weren't poised for us.

And as I told both the commanders, I said, "They're coming at us. They're coming straight for us."

They had roughly ten tanks and I'd say six, eight, PCs. And the Executive Officer that I had in Berlin was also stationed with me there at Ben Het. And he concurred. He said, "They're coming after us."

And so they made some more calls to the MACV-SOG unit which is a Special Operative Group and they confirmed that the tanks were coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They had advisors and they had people out there watching. And the next thing I knew they were coming at us. We had called back to Doc To which is 20 miles to the east of us and asked for support and they sent a company of our own M1 tanks and they positioned those tanks up on the West Hill. And that night they heard the tanks coming and they couldn't believe it--just like we couldn't believe it at first. The next thing I knew it was getting extremely hot and heavy and we'd already been shelled the previous days with 82 millimeter motors for roughly a month and a half on a continuous basis--"softening up the camp" is what the NVA was doing. And they we were really surprised that the tanks were coming after us.

When they got, coming down the highway at us, they were well-organized people, I have to admit. In listening to some of the other comments on other tank battles in different wars, these people did their homework and they positioned them in such a position they knew exactly where our tanks were. And they fired on one of our tanks first. They killed the tank commander and one of the other young men on there. That disabled one of our tanks of the 1st of the 92nd.

Well, on immediate response, of course, our tanks opened up on 'em and it was just a literal tank battle from one position to the other. At the same time they were sending in sappers to the North Hill and these were like I said, self-propelled 155s. And this particular unit wasn't on guard that night very good, they didn't have very many people out for patrol out on their perimeter. And the sappers got in, blew the fences up and they knocked out two of the 155s.

You have to understand the NVA are not stupid people, they're just like us, they're very well-versed individuals. My main commanding officers were worried that they would get in the particular tanks, which we call 155--and turn those loose on us. Their casualty rate was at 80 percent; they'd lost a lot of men. And there was eight of us that had to go across and we took a doctor with us over there because of the casualty rate. And we had to go in between the barbed wires, down the road and open up the barbed wires on both sides so we could get through, realizing we

could be attacked at any minute. In the meantime the tank battle was going on, we're going across the hill with just a handful of guys, and four of 'em were my guys. I was quite concerned. When you're 19 years old and you're responsible for 11 other young guys, my adrenaline was really going.

When we got to the other side where the North Hill was, we had Montagnards with us as well. They had walked up the sides of the road and they immediately encircled the area. And there was a lot of gun fight going on. There was a lot of wounded lying around, U.S. artillery guys. And it was a sad sight; it was a very sad sight. Some of them, they were still sitting inside the tracks and eating their lunches or having a beer. Some of 'em were playing cards knowing that it wasn't a very good position to be in for them. We secured the perimeter and we stayed there. The doctor worked on the men, got them ready to go on a medevac and we put them on the back of my vehicle, couple of 'em, and I took a bunch of 'em over to the helipad, the first run couple over. Went back down, took over some more.

And about then dusk was coming up and the tank battle was still raging at this time. It was total chaos. We had Puff the Magic Dragon up there, we had Spook up there. Puff the Magic Dragon is a very sophisticated Minigun mounted on an old military-styled aircraft that could fire thousands of rounds per second. And it just sounded like a big burp. And they were literally peppering every place they could possibly pepper, the sides of the hill where the NVA were coming, trying to get through the wires.

And about my third trip I got across the road and got down towards the helipad and out of the clear blue sky the back end of my truck got blown up. I had an 82 millimeter hit my vehicle. We have four-wheel drive on the vehicles, I put it into four-wheel drive and got these guys to the helipad. And then I took and went back to my hooch because I wasn't feeling too good at that time. So I kind of took a reprieve to check to see how things were going at my hooch, see if everything was going all right before I could get another vehicle to go back across. In the meantime, most of my men were out of the hooch and doing perimeter work on the west side of the hill where the NVA were. So it was a very busy night.

But like I said, it was a multi-task unit operation. This is the thing that people real didn't understand, there were many units involved in this. There was a lot of sayings in the past, since 2007, that it was us that did the job, it was the 1st and 92nd that did the job. It was a multi-unit. If all of us hadn't communicated together, if Ben Het would've been overran--if Ben Het would've fallen, the country would've been cut in half. It was the largest battle in Vietnam and the only tank battle with Russian T-97 tanks, T-96 tanks; there was two different kinds, one was amphibious and one was a hard-core artillery type of a unit. And a lot of people didn't know that either but now that they've done their history. They brought the vehicles back in, the damaged ones and brought 'em back into the camp and it was

amazing to see a Russian-made tank sitting in a U.S. military installation. It was really something else.

Interviewer

> How long did that battle last?

Pete Koense

Right around 196 days. And I'm talking--they softened us up first with mortars, 82 millimeter mortars. They through close to 8,000 rounds of mortars at us, softening the hills up. The only way we had supply was is from Caribous which were C-131s and we had Chinooks that came in and C-141--they called 'em grasshoppers. The only way to get stuff into us was by way of air, the only way. And the only way you could get into that place was by air. They took out the airfield completely, it was completely demolished. They literally pepped it with 82 millimeter rounds. Our facility was pretty well destroyed as well. We'd take the radar units down at nighttime; we'd take the antennas down in the daytime so that they couldn't use 'em as aiming posts. They hit the main communications bunker for the Special Forces a couple of times during that period. They'd also hit our mess hall about three times. The sappers hit the ammo bunkers on three different occasions. Our motor pool that was right behind my camo bunker. I have photographs of those they destroyed all the vehicles there. They were hit by sappers. So all in all it was quite the thing. I've talked to quite a few guys now from Hamburger Hill and they were quite upset when they found in 2007 when the CIA papers were released that Ben Het was one of the biggest battles of Vietnam. And it was due coming that we finally got the just information. But it was mainly they kept it all a secret because of what we were doing and why we were there. It was quite an operation.

Interviewer

> After the tanks had been destroyed, was the battle pretty well over by then?

Pete Koense

It was noisy for a couple of days still, they still kept throwing 82 millimeter mortars at us from different positions. We had roughly 150 arc lights which are B-52 bombers dropping 500-pound bombs all to the west of us within about four to five miles away from our fire base and you could literally feel the rumbling. It seceded and quieted down, I'd say within about a week, week and a half, it finally settled down. Like I said it was quite the ordeal.

Interviewer

> When did you finally leave Ben Het?

Pete Koense

A week after. I went back to Kon Tum which is just south of Ben Het, it's a major province, capital. And I had some other assignments that I had to fulfill. My own men didn't know what I was doing. In between battles and in between days I would fly with some Montagnards and with a 1st Lieutenant and we would go from different places, different landing zones, different fire bases, we'd do some resupplying. And my job wasn't over. My men were split up. Most of them went to Dak Pek, which is just north of Ben Het. And that became quite a battle zone as well. I felt pretty bad, to this day, that my men were going to another battlefront. Two of 'em went home wounded and a couple of

'em did make it out okay and there was one that was KIA'd and that disturbed me. I felt like I had basically, I would say, left my men unprotected. I was responsible for those guys for quite a long time and then they were just basically transported to someplace else with different units and they had no idea what I was doing behind the scenes.

I did a lot of manipulating with getting things to different units. I showed up at a couple of different places in tiger-striped uniforms with a sampan hat into different places. Our helicopter wasn't marked, we had no dog tags on. I'd have six, seven Montagnards and a 1st Lieutenant. He's the only one that would have an insignia on. But we dropped into quite a few different places. We resupplied a couple of different units, we did some hit-and-miss contacts. It was an experience for a 19-, 20-year-old as I was getting into a 20-year-old that I had no realization what we had gotten ourselves into over there. And I finally left country and I had really drunk really extremely bad while I was over there.

Water was unavailable, especially at Ben Het. When they flew supplies into us, we generally got either beer or more beer. So you were raised on pretty well beer. The water would explode when it hit the ground so there wasn't much availability to water unless you liked poncho water. So I was an alcoholic when I left Vietnam. Very hard-core. Special Forces are well known for their being able to find the good hard stuff and we traded stuff for it so I was a very hard drinker.

When I came home I came in through Seattle-Tacoma again, and the plane was one of the biggest transport planes that was contracted by a private organization, Flying Tigers, if I remember that's who that was. It was one of the biggest transports for civilians. And there were 450 of us coming off the airplane. And you'd have to understand we're all pretty hyped up and they gave us drinks while we were on the plane and they fed us. So we were pretty pumped up coming home.

And when we got off the plane there were protesters there to the likes of I didn't understand why. How come? What did I ever do? And then when they started calling us names and spitting on us, there was nothing that the police could do, the militarily police could do, we literally took the fence down and went after protesters. And they literally got beat-up quite bad. Of course none of us got beat-up. But after we got through we just went, "Why us? Why are people treating us like this?" And we just really couldn't understand why it was like this. I mean here we'd seen our own friends, a lot of our comrades put into different situations and we were put in different situations and then we come home treated like this.

And I thought well, it's just in the big cities, you know? Everything will be okay when I get home. I got home to

Provo and it's a nice quiet town, home of Brigham Young University and it's quite LDS inversed and I thought, "Oh, I'm safe now, I'm very safe."

I got the biggest rude awakening in my life. The first weekend I went down to the store and bumped into some of my old friends that had already gotten married. They wanted nothing to do with me. They shunned me. I'd call some of 'em on the phone and they'd hang up on me. And I just didn't understand why. What's going on? Well high school friends you think well, they just moved on, they have their own lives. And I went to church, I being LDS, nobody at church would talk to me. It was really disheartening. And one of my half brothers, I call him a half brother, I went through high school with him and he was in Vietnam the same time I was. And he came home two weeks after I did, he was in Saigon.

And he'd come over to visit me and he says, "What's happened?"

And I said, "I don't know. I just came home from church and nobody would talk to me at church."

I went to my own brother to try to get some help. He is an MSW in psychology and he didn't want to talk to me. He sent me to a place, what they call Wasatch Mental Health. Those people have no idea what to do with PTSD. It was like I'd slapped them up the side of the head and they just didn't understand.

They just put me off, says, "Well you'll just have to deal with it some other way."

So I climbed in the bottle. Stayed in the bottle. Married my first wife and had five kids with her. I was an alcoholic. And subsequently she divorced me. I got remarried again--still drinking very heavily. I was using the alcohol to subdue all my memories, stop my nightmares from all that I'd seen and all that I'd done over there. Kind of like an anesthetic.

And eventually I met a young lady that I'd known for a couple of years before I divorced my first wife and we got to be friends. Come to find out she has PTSD, the same thing as I do from a different type of a situation. So we started talking and communicating. At this time it was about the late 1980s. And my sister got involved with me and my present wife that I finally married after I had said I would dry up.

They put me in the VA Hospital. I spent a lot of time in the psychiatric ward there, not just trying to sort my problems out in the '90s but also getting control of my drinking problems. My liver was shutting down, my kidneys were getting bad, I was a total wreck and my PTSD was overtaking me. And it's taken quite a few years, it definitely has.

And while I was laying in the VA Hospital over here in Salt Lake, one morning I had two gentlemen that showed up there and identified themselves as two United States Federal Sky Marshals with papers to have me deported.

And I took my hearing aids out that the VA had given me and I said, "Let me check the batteries in this. You're gonna deport me? How do you figure?"

"Well you're not an American citizen and you don't have any 201 files."

And I said, "What?"

"As soon as you get out of the hospital here we're sending you back to Holland and deport you."

I laid there in bed and I was angry. And a psychiatrist came back out and said, "We'll take care of this, we'll take care of this."

And I said, "You didn't hear 'em, they're gonna deport me because I did my job. I served my country."

How could you possibly do that to somebody that serves your country? I don't understand this. Made a phone call and my sister made a phone call to Senator Bennett, the older Senator Bennett. And I worked for him when I was in high school, he knew my parents. He made a phone call down to the immigration bureau and I got a stay of execution, I guess you would say, till I get my papers all straightened around. And when I got out I went down to immigration and he had gone down there with me. And they had done a lot of digging to see what happened to my paperwork and apparently there was a crack that I had fallen in.

When my parents became citizens in 1960 I was not included in that crack. So what they did was is because of Senator Bennett, they gave me my citizenship papers on the spot. And so I was automatically made a U.S. citizen which was fine. But still I had to prove that I had 201 files, that was another problem. Little did the government know that I had pictures and I had maps and I had some paperwork that I had stuffed in my pants and I brought home with me. I also sent a lot of 'em home from Australia because you couldn't trust the military to send 'em from Vietnam 'cause they were being confiscated for some reason.

So when I went on R and R to Australia I sent a lot of my pictures home and they made it home. So when we had a hearing at the Federal Building when was at the Bennett Building at that time, they brought in two G2 officers, one was a Captain and one was a Lieutenant. And there was a panel of people sitting there going through what

information they had and what they were saying was contrary to what I had in front of me and I lost my patience and my PTSD had taken over again and I was throwing things and they gave us a few minutes to settle me down. And they had left the room and my attorney laid out all my information, he had me make copies of everything, had them notarized rather than giving them the originals because we had been told that they would take my copies and keep 'em and I wouldn't have any proof. So I did exactly what my attorney had instructed me to do, had copies made.

And when I showed 'em all the pictures and all the paperwork that I had and all the maps I had, they said, "I guess we've made a mistake."

And I said, "Fine. I'm not lying but the two gentlemen that just left, they lied."

"Oh, well they get immunity because that's a part of their job."

I was really upset that our military would do something like this. Had no idea that you enlist into a service for your country and they would do this to ya. And I've lived with this for years and years and years and to this day I still live with the nightmares, the night sweats, of waking up knowing what I'd done and what I'd been through and the way my country had treated me.

But I have a different mission now. Yes, it's a mission for me to get better but it's the same thing to the service men who are coming home now, that they're not kicked in the teeth, that they're not thrown down the wayside. Because so many of them are having the same problems that we were with the PTSD. I've got some neighbors that are in the same situation. Their wives have divorced 'em. They've been beating their wives.

And people here in Utah are oblivious that this is actually happening. It's happening to our servicemen now. The Bosnian men, the Desert Storm guys, the Iraqi guys, the Afghani guys. The same exact thing is happening to them now and we're oblivious here in Utah. Then I found out, talking to an old friend of mine down in Texas, the same thing is happening down there. Yeah, they get big bands and everything to bring 'em home and everything, but when these bands are all gone, these poor guys are having the same thing we were with the struggles, the nightmares. It's really deep inside of us and it's something you just can't turn off. There's no way. I know this, I live with it. I've lived with it now for 41 years. And I don't think it will ever end until the day I'm put in the ground. That's the way I look at it.

Interviewer

> Isn't it an irony that if you weren't a citizen you wouldn't have been drafted?

Pete Koense

When you're raised in a country, when you're going through a school system, to be patriotic, to stand and raise your arm up and to cross your heart; and your parents have moved over here from a country that was war-torn, and they've seen their families hurt and killed; and they come here for the land of freedom, it's mindboggling. I just don't understand why we were treated like we were, and sometimes we still are. About a year ago I had a young man that hated me so strategically. I went through high school with him, his mom and dad were quite rich and they were uppity-up in the Church. And because I was a lower-class individual, I was an immigrant, I was treated like crap. They actually thought we were Germans at one time. My brothers got in fights with him.

But this young man, we ran into him, my wife and I, my present wife. And we were at Macey's in Spanish Fork and the guy came over towards me and all of the sudden you could see the tears going down on him. And I had no idea who he was. And he started to cry and he said, "Do you know who I am?"

And I said, "No, I don't."

You've got to realize 41 years, that's a long time. That and my mental state of remembering people is getting worse.

And he said, "I'm so-and-so. I've been trying to find you to ask for your forgiveness for the way I treated you."

And he sat there and he cried right there in the store. He says, "Will you forgive me?"

And I said, "I never hated you. I treated you like a regular person. But I forgive you."

And he just went back with his wife and family. He's a prominent businessman in Provo and he was ashamed. That's the first time somebody's actually come up and apologized. I had to go out and sit in my car. It was heart-wrenching to think that you're put through something like this and your country treats you like this.

Am I bitter? Yes, I'm bitter. I'm very bitter. I don't know if I'll ever get over my bitterness. Some people say , "Well what happened if you had to do it all over again?" I'd go to Canada because of the way I've been treated. It's very hard to be called a baby killer, a drug addict, an alcoholic. It's disheartening especially when you've got kids that you had with the first wife and you can't go out and visit 'em because you're an alcoholic, you're a bad influence. It's slowly turning around, they're finding their dad isn't so bad after all. But it's that many years I've missed with my kids all because I went to help my country. It's very hard.

Interviewer

> Did you ever keep in contact with any of your men?

Pete Koense

I have a daughter with my present wife that's 15 years old and now a part of high school. I hate the Internet; I've seen what the Internet can do. And she needed the Internet to go through her high school tests and classes and everything so I bowed to letting the Internet come into my home.

And as I started looking on the Internet I found the real unit that I was with and I started searching for these guys. One of them died in Chicago in a wheelchair, he got hit by an automobile. I've got one that is in Texas. He was my second in command, he's just outside of Austin, Texas. He has diabetes from Agent Orange and he's very bad off. I've got one that's in North Carolina, he's the Dutch kid that communicated with me on the radio and on the telephone, he spoke Dutch as well as I did and we used the language on the telephones and the radios over there in Vietnam to confuse everybody. He has his legs amputated. He has congenital heart disease because it's related to Agent Orange.

I have one young man that's in Florida. He committed suicide because he couldn't handle it. I communicated with his wife about a year ago. So it's not just me. It's all my guys. The two guys I communicate with, they ask me, they says, "What were you doing over there? Why were you gone so much?"

I said, "It's a long story. I had another job to do while I was over there and that job's haunting me constantly."

So I sat down and wrote 'em a letter, giving him a little bit of information at a time, trying to ease their pains and sorrows because I wasn't there 99.9 percent of the time. I'd been hounded with my first marriage and into my third marriage by a man that was a part of an S2 operation for Special Forces in the SOG unit out of Saigon. He tried to hire me on many occasions to go South America to be a mercenary. And somehow every time I moved he could find out my phone number, he could find out where I lived. And all my wives have talked to him, it was no quiet kept secret. He basically was trying to keep track of me to see if I would enlist to go down there.

The military has their own secret network, I'm not stupid to that, I was a part of that network. I did things that I regret. I did things that if people over here would actually find out what we did over there in Vietnam, it would surprise them. The same things are happening in Afghanistan, I'm not stupid. I have a lot of friends that are still in the service. But I was just put in the position where 18 years old, 19 years old, and you know if you don't do your job you're gonna come home in a body bag. I cared about myself, I cared about the 11 guys that were under me.

I told 'em, I said, "You don't drink, you don't smoke pot when you're out doing your job. If you do I'll send you home." I had that power to send somebody home. I did send one man home. I regret it to this day. He came home and he committed suicide. He'd served an LDS mission. He had two kids that he'd never seen before and two

weeks after he'd seem 'em, took a .38 and killed himself because he couldn't deal with it because I sent him home with a dishonorable discharge. That's very hard for me to deal with because I had to put the lives of my men out there knowing that this man could destroy them if I had to send him out there.

Interviewer

> So you associate with some of the new veterans. Can you talk about that?

Pete Koense

We have a group in Utah County, it's a veteran's group and we're trying to get other veterans in, not just Vietnam veterans, all the new guys coming home. We need them to come in. We had a young man in Payson that came home from Iraq, had a nice family and his wife came home one day and found him, he'd committed suicide. Very staunch LDS people.

It's telling me that it makes no difference who you are, these kids need to come in. They need to sit down and talk with people. They are under a lot of stress, I know they are. I've worked with a couple of 'em on some federal jobs that I've been on and to see them shake and to see them talk, you know they're in trouble, you've been there, you've done that. They say there's nothing wrong with 'em. When you find out that they're beating their wives or beating their kids you know there's something wrong, you know they're not right. That's why we're trying to get them involved with us. We don't want 'em just thrown into a psychiatric unit; we want to help these guys. That's our main mission. They're brothers to us. We care about them. We know what they're going to be in for down the road. We've been there, we've done it.

But here again, it's our mission to help them out, they can't see the light yet. I feel bad for 'em, I felt bad for the family that lost their dad. And I ran into those kids at school one day. My daughter had a project for the high school in Payson High School and she had Christmas cards that she wanted to take to the veterans at the VA Hospital. And she'd gone through all the elementary schools and the two junior highs and the high school over in Payson and got Christmas cards for these veterans.

And I'd gone to a couple of the elementary schools and this one little boy come up to me and he says, "My dad was in the war and he came home and he killed himself."

And it was just like somebody hit you up the side of the head with a baseball bat. How would it be to have a little boy come up and say that he came home and saw his daddy dead? I mean it's supposed to be Happy Valley, what's happy about that? Then I clashed with the VA on that. I'm always clashing with the VA. The VA and me do not get along together. I'm a cocklebur in their side. They didn't want to accept the Christmas cards.

So I made a phone call and a good friend of mine, Andrew Wilson, made a couple of phone calls and it just so happened that there was an inspection team coming in from Denver and they didn't want to hear the noise about a veteran bringing some Christmas cards up to give to the veterans at the VA Hospital. So they finally conceded to let my daughter bring 'em up.

What's wrong with bringing Christmas cards to a veteran's hospital and handing them out? Are we so tied up in bureaucratic crap that we can't give a veteran a Christmas card? A 15-year-old girl. Is our society so messed up in bureaucratic red tape that they can't come up and give 'em a Christmas card? What have we developed into? It doesn't make sense.

Interviewer

> You were talking about Martha Raye, about some experiences there you had with her. Can you tell us about that?

Pete Koense

Our Christmases over there were really raunchy at Ben Het. They were horrible. Our Thanksgivings, they tried flying food into us. Well so much for flying food into us. We had received information that they wanted to bring a USO group of people into us. But because of the situation and because it was so bad there, they didn't want the USO team to come in there. This young lady, Martha Raye, she flew in on a helicopter with somebody. She wasn't supposed to come in. She came anyway. This shows you the gratitude of the love that some of these movie stars have for the U.S. servicemen. They're going over to Afghanistan now, but she was so personal. She would come up and hug ya, you know? She didn't care who you were, whether you had mud on ya or anything. She'd come into the hooches, she came into the mess hall, what mess hall it was. She was very upfront with everybody, she wanted to stay there for a while. And everybody was telling her it's not a safe place to be.

She says, "I just had to be where you guys know that we care about what you guys are doing here."

Now that's pretty special. That's extremely special. And when we took pictures with one of the officers with her, that's a special thing for somebody to go out of their way and fly into a hot LZ what we called 'em, when the rounds are coming in and she cares enough to come visit ya. You don't find people like that. Nothing against the news media, but you know they blew things out of proportion many times while we were there.

Interviewer

> So the media came into Ben Het?

Pete Koense

They attempted to. They snuck a reporter in on a chopper, he came in on a medevac chopper. And he took some footage and a couple of pictures. I don't know how he made it out alive to tell you the honest truth because I was in

the know when things were coming in, when things are going out as far as radio communication was going on.

And after it kind of settled down, about mid-point, before the tanks got there we had General Abrams show up one day with President Thieu, they came up to the fire base because there was articles in "The Stars and Stripes" saying that we were being used as bait for the whole situation as far as the North Vietnamese attacking us and taking us over, they were got giving us food, we weren't getting supplies into us. And so they flew in out of the clear blue sky and they had this beautiful shiny Huey with a beautiful chrome front on it. It looked like somebody had polished it until you could see your face coming from miles and miles away. He had a barrage of gunships fly in with him. And it was the rainy season, it was just mud up to your neck. And they brought him up to the fire base from the helipad and they walked around the camp and they had an Army reporter there taking pictures, you know, this, this, and this.

And I told my guys, I said, "Okay, everybody stay in the hooch. This isn't good."

And lo and behold, just about the time they got up shaking everybody's hands they started throwing 82 millimeters at us again. Well guess who was running tail? General Abrams and President Thieu. They were running like you couldn't believe.

I told my guys, I said, "See? Just when you least expect it."

Yeah, we got some supplies in, but I think they finally realized that we were in dire straits. I mean when you lived on Schlitz beer and black-labeled beer that was induced with formaldehyde, you really wondered what is the military doing? A lot of us made jokes that they put formaldehyde in it to preserve the beer.

One of the other guys popped up and said, "No, that's so they don't have to embalm you when you get back to Cam Ranh Bay, you're already embalmed." That's pretty strenuous. It's pretty rotten.

Interviewer

> Do you have any idea what's happened to Bet Het today?

Pete Koense

I have pictures of it. It's totally awesome. The hill is completely overgrown. All you see where the airstrip used to be is just a dirt piece of road. And off where we used to get our water to the south and to the east, there's a river right there, a small one where we got our water from. There's now houses there with electric light poles and telephone poles. And you look at the other pictures on the website and there's where the command bunker used to be and there's where the North Hill used to be and it's all grown over and it's just astonishing.

Interviewer

> What thoughts go through your head when you see that photo?

Pete Koense

I wouldn't want to go back there. There's no way. It's okay to see it on a piece of film but it brings back too many memories, I wouldn't want to go back there. It's amazing that they have come a long ways and their technology has grown stupendously. There have been many people that say, "Well if you could go back maybe this would ease your pains." I've lost too much there. I lost my hold adulthood there, growing up.

Interviewer

> Have you ever run into any of the enemy?

Pete Koense

Over here? A few years ago we were building WordPerfect down in Utah County and there were two Vietnamese people that were doing the bookbinding on one of the presses down there. And I could tell they were Vietnamese. And I really don't like talking Vietnamese and I walked over to 'em and I asked them if they were, cautiously, and they said they were.

And I said, "Were you in the city or were you out in the country?"

And they said they were out in the country. And I said, "Then you just me Montagnards."

And their eyes went as big as silver dollars and they said, "Yeah, we are."

They're very cautious.

I said, "Are you being so cautious is because you got over here and you're afraid of being found or something like that?"

And they said, "We just don't want to talk about what happened over there."

They basically were right about the same age as I was. Their memories are just as bad as mine. Like I said, the Montagnards are stupendous people, I wish we could've brought them home instead of all the south Vietnamese people. They would give anything for ya. I have deep respect for them. When you see 'em now being over here, they're scared. It's a big different world for them over here.

Interviewer

> Did you work with any CIA when you were there?

Pete Koense

We were never in Cambodia and we were in Laos. You know that as well as I do. And until 2007 when they had to finally release everything, yes. The one gentleman that tried to recruit me to go down to South America, that was my contact. We had many communications from the MACV-SOG units that were crossing Cambodia and as well into Laos. We had contacts with some Canadians as well, Canadian service. And basically what it was, it was a multi-unit type of a situation. There was every operation that you could possibly thing of between the CIA, the SOG units, the Special Forces teams that had all sides on inside those units. It was a conglomeration of a lot of people that knowing what was going on there and they didn't want getting out. And it was just scary to know that you're a part of it. I got setup is basically what I tell a lot of people. I got trained in this, I got trained in that, I got trained in this and then to be hurled into this, in the middle of it. I just had no fathom. I was a stupid kid, I was 19 years old, I had no realization of what was actually coming down, actually what was gonna happen.

Interviewer

> Can you explain what a hooch is?

Pete Koense

A hooch is a slang terminology. I'll give you a whole sheet of terminologies of the slang that we had over there. It was the place that we lived in, you were huddled in; it was your safe haven. You made sure it was safe when you built it. The hooch was built out of beams of wood and some of it was anywhere from 8- to 12-inches thick and 14-inches wide. And then the top of the hooch was put with what we call PSP, they made the same thing for landing strips. It was an interlocking metal. And you put that down on top of your hooch, you put sandbags on top of that, then you put another layer of PSP on top of it as well. The whole concept of a hooch was if they were shooting what they call 82 millimeter motors. What we were in for, they couldn't shoot rockets at us because of our position, we were up on a high hill. They were ineffective to us. With a rocket you have to have a direct shot at us. With a mortar round they would lob it in. It was shot out of a mortar tube. When it would hit the top of your hooch, it hit the first round of PSP, it would detonate. And all that was left was pieces and bits of metal, what we call shrap metal. And they wouldn't make it through the next layer of steel. So that's basically what a hooch was.

Interviewer

> Can you tell us about shooting into Laos and Cambodia?

Pete Koense

When they'd come down the Ho Chi Minh Trail with their troops, what they would do is they'd get into a certain area and they would clump and get ready to go down in a heard like down below us, down toward Kon Tum or down towards Saigon. They would literally gather into large groups or they'd go around us. They were going to get into Dak Pek or they were going to go over towards Dak To; they would go in groups. And the team that was out had grid maps, we all had grip maps. And we had what they call an FDC, a Fire Direction Control center. And these 8-inch and 175s were grid mapped and they'd had azimuths on their machines, on their guns. And we had a center point in the fire face and they would line them up and they could tell exactly what azimuths to put those on. And

then they'd fire the first round out there on the grid line. One of our teams would be out there and they'd call in for the fire. The first round would be just to see where they would hit. And then that team, what they would do is they would adjust accordingly. And the NVA knew that after that first round they were in deep doo-doo because by that time the second gun was already locked onto that position, already setup. And so they would just fire back and forth, the 175s. You'd have one load, you'd have another load. But most of the time they were on the other side of the border in groups. And so what we were trying to do is stop them from infiltrating down further down into Cambodia and Laos.

Interviewer

> Explain why we weren't supposed to be firing into Cambodia or Laos.

Pete Koense

They were neutral countries, supposedly. They were supposed to be neutral. And the NVA basically wasn't supposed to be crossing over that way either but that was the way they'd function, they'd cross over and try to get around us that way. Our fire base had a long reach into those two countries because we were 11 miles one direction and 18 miles from the other direction so we could literally interrupt their whole path of coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail when it was finally decided we needed to start wiping 'em out. And that we did.

Interviewer

> So the irony was they legally weren't supposed to be there and we legally weren't supposed to fire at them.

Pete Koense

Exactly. If anybody asked us, we were never firing west. That was a known fact. We were supposed to be supporting the eastern slopes behind us which is Dak To. Dak To was sitting up on a very big plateau, it was a main center point, Dak To was. And we were supposed to be supporting their rears coming from Cambodia in that direction. Well the NVA had to come past us before they could get into Dak To. So all we were doing was protecting ourselves is the way I looked at it. But then again, the number of troops that were coming down that trail, I don't know why we weren't firing earlier. But they rebuilt it just as fast as we were knocking it down. That's how vigorous the NVA was. You could go in and literally blow the road up and the next day they'd have it rebuilt. That's how fastidious those people were and how convicted they were. They thought they were actually doing their job and we were the bad guys, of course which we were according to them. But we were basically trying to protect the people behind us. Dak To was a strategic point.

Interviewer

> What was it like to go from Berlin right into the jungles?

Pete Koense

Like I said, that first convoy, it was like somebody had hit me up the side of the head with a baseball bat. I've never been shot at. Yeah, we'd gone through live fire at basic training where they were firing M60s above your head that were roughly maybe a foot or two above your head, but when you're seeing the bullets hitting along side of you, it's

a wake-up call. When you defecate your pants you know that you may not make it through. Reality has finally struck you.

And it's just like that Warrant Officer said to me, lying along side of me, he said, "You better start shooting or you're gonna go home in a body bag."

Reality really hits you hard. Berlin, it was a show place. We had rubber bullets and the East Germans had real ammunition. It was the same with their tanks. They had live ammunition and our tanks had rubber bullets and I'm going, "What are we doing?"

Okay, we're defending the city that's been part of World War II for hundreds of years and all of the sudden it's just scary.

Interviewer

> What was it like to step on that plane to get out of Vietnam at last?

Pete Koense

I thought we were gonna come home and we were gonna actually be embraced. I'd watched war movies when I was a kid. Everybody came home, they wore flags, they went down the streets of New York City and everything. I thought we were gonna come home and we were gonna be accepted as not necessarily war heroes but at least, "Thanks a lot for doing this." It was just like... it was unreal. It was a nightmare. What did I ever do to you people? I just went over and did my job.

Interviewer

> What were you thinking when you read about the anti-war movement at home?

Pete Koense

We heard very little out where I was at. We had AFVN but the AFVN gave us little information. Yeah, we heard tidbits of this and tidbits of that that there was protests here and protests there but it wasn't the magnitude that everybody here was involved in. We had our own music out there and we were isolated, basically. I think I was the only one that had a TV set there. And it was just a small little TV set and it was black and white and it was an AFVN TV station that we got and they just showed older movies and there wasn't any news. Very little news that I got. Yeah, we got news that Marble Mountain got hit, Saigon had got shelled, the bigger cities got shelled and that's basically what we heard. And we had the weather report. "Oh, it's going to be rainy today and it's going to be more rainy tomorrow followed by rotten rain and more stupid rain," you know? We didn't hear about United States as far as the weather reports or anything, no.

When I went to Australia on my R and R, yeah, I heard they were protesting but I didn't think the magnitude was

that bad, I was trying to tune a lot of things out. I was too busy enjoying myself, trying to get my seven days of relaxation, drinking lots of beer and enjoying myself in the nightclubs, and enjoying girls. I just didn't listen to TV when I was there in the hotel room. I wasn't in there; just enough to change clothes, get cleaned up. And people there didn't treat us as if we were warmongers. We had Australian troops there in Vietnam. I didn't see any protests there. If I did I must have missed somethin' because I was downtown Sydney.

Interviewer

> Can you describe the physical nature of jungle living?

Pete Koense

It snowed twice while I was there, that was the biggest thrill we ever had. We were in the Central Highlands and it actually snowed twice and it was quite interesting, I thought. That's kind of different for us and we went out and had a snowball fight. But when it rained there, of course rain was followed by more rain which was followed by more rain and the mud and the muck and the mire was so deep. It wasn't rocky where we were at, it was nothing but mud and jungle. The fire base itself had been cleared by the engineers.

There were three hills and they literally had been cleared with bulldozers. And also the North Hill and the West Hill had been bulldozed so it was nothing but mud. And you didn't ride around in jeeps, you muck and mired with mud up to your knees. And it was just a job getting to the mess hall, it was a job getting back to your hooch. And the fire missions that the 175s had, they had railroad ties that they had flown over and they'd made paths in the railroad ties and they would pivot on those. And if they didn't have that there's no way the 175s could get around, there's no way.

The jungle down below us, well, after they got through spraying us with Agent Orange, which we didn't know what was going on over there--we were never informed to stay in the hooches, nobody ever told us, nobody told anything about that sort of stuff. The foliage was sprayed all the way around the camps to kill all the vegetation, it did a good job. We had a kill zone of 250, 300 yards away from us and it literally killed everything. How did we know it was gonna kill us too? We had no realization because we had a stream that was just outside of the fire base there that we were getting water from to wash with. We'd fill 55-gallon drums with water and we'd wash in the water. We didn't know that this was being sprayed on us, we didn't know it was in the water system. We were oblivious to that.

Interviewer

> Tell us about the heat of the jungle.

Pete Koense

Have you ever been to Georgia? You could walk outside and you could be already showered and you'd walk out the door and it would hit you in the face. You were just sweating, literally sweating. And you'd walk across the other side of the fire base and there'd be a cloud come over and it would pour like you wouldn't believe so you were all wet

again. And 10-, 15 minutes later it was so hot you would just literally dry out. So you didn't have to do many clothes washing because it was dry before you knew it. The humidity was that high.

Interviewer

> What about the noise of the jungle?

Pete Koense

A lot of people say we didn't have monkeys over there. That's not real. We had monkeys over there. We'd go into Dak To which was behind us and they had monkeys. There were a lot of snakes there. We were warned to stay away from the snakes as well. Watch your rucksacks, watch your boots when you put your boots back on. Same thing on the fire base, they would get all over. A jungle was a jungle. It was just like you could walk into a black curtain and you had no idea what was behind the black curtain. It was that thick. That's why we had machetes. That's why the Montagnards had trails, they knew exactly where they were going. They still had to use machetes because the jungle grew that fast during the monsoon season. It just sprung right back up again.

Interviewer

> Tell us about the noise of battle.

Pete Koense

That's why I wear hearing aids. The 175s, the compression rate on those was so great it was unreal. There were many times we'd go out and we'd have to run communication lines out to 'em, two wires on a roll and you'd roll it out to the 175s. And if you were in the wrong place at the wrong time and they were firing and you weren't paying attention, the compression rate is just humongous, just enormous. The 175 and 8-inch howitzers, their pro-Joes stood at least three to four feet high depending upon what kind of a round you were sending off. The bags of powder were anywhere from 50-pound charge to 190-pound charge. They'd put the shell in there first and then the powder would go in behind 'em and then they'd have a firing pin and it was about this long. And they'd pull the firing pin and it would project it. But the compression rate was unreal and that's why a lot of us were deaf. They'd fire over the top of your hooches or you'd be running out to that end of the fire base.

And like I said, the compression rate was unreal. Just very loud. When the dusters would start firing the M148s, the old pom-pom guns that were on the old battleships, they were met on tracks. Very meticulous pieces of equipment. They would fire back and forth. If you're a World War II veteran, they'd fire 'em back and forth and they were breach loaded from the top, they'd load the shells up and everything sixth round was a tracer round so they could see where they were shooting at. They were very effective. They had different kinds of rounds as well. They had HE rounds, they had Mullet Buster rounds, it was very impressive. The machine gun fires, we had one mounted on our vehicles and when we'd sweep the road we'd have to use 'em.

And you didn't have ear plugs over there. That was uncalled for. Yeah, you put your fingers down your ears, yeah,

that's gonna do you a lot of good. The compression rate of an M60 was quite loud. And your driver's driving at the same time you're firing. We had a 90 recoilless rifle, an old military style that we'd found, confiscated some place. And we had canister rounds mounted on a three-quarter ton truck. It was breach loaded. It would only carry so many rounds because the rounds were humongous. And we'd always carry a bunch of those in the back of the truck and the front end of the truck would just lift right up off the ground but it was very effective. And the back end of it, the noise was just enough to rattle you lose. 90 millimeter's pretty strong. It really surprised me. The same with the tanks that we had over there. The tanks would fire while they were driving down the road. And they were firing over the top of our hooch when they were going out over the NVA tanks--they were firing at 'em. Those guys were very good tank operators, ours were. I think our military forces there at Ben Het were one of the best put together groups of men that I've ever seen. These guys were good. The tank drivers were tremendous, they were something else. More than I'd ever seen in Europe. I was quite impressed with these guys. Of course they had to be impressive because they would drive through four-abreast going through a jungle and anything in front of 'em, they just drove right over the top of. And it was really mindboggling to watch them go across that air field running after Russian tanks.

Interviewer

> We'd like to know what years you were there.

Pete Koense

Are you talking officially as far as when I was there or unofficially when I was there?

Interviewer

> Officially when you were there.

Pete Koense

Officially I was there '68, '69.

Interviewer

> How about unofficially then?

Pete Koense

I wasn't there. That's what my military records indicate. I mean it was a fictitious unit that we were assigned to, okay? A244 first didn't even come into reality when I was first over there. I think as high as they went was A241 or 40, I don't remember what it was. But A244 really wasn't there until quite a while after. We were just there, the Special Forces were just there, the team was just there.

Interviewer

> What was the name of your fictitious unit?

Pete Koense

A244. It was A-team and the number is how many units there were in Vietnam.

Interviewer

> And you were officially attached to the 5th Special Forces?

Pete Koense

I was TDY'd to the Special Forces through the 1st Field Force Group is what that all assigns to.

Pete Koense

The SOG units were exactly the same way. They would operate, black pajamas, striped pajamas, sampan hats. I don't know if you've ever seen sampan hats, they're made out of bamboo and everything, in the banana leaves. It wasn't unusual to run into another group but you were very cautious because you really didn't know who you were running into. The communications as far as that end was concerned was very vague at times. We had too many frequencies that we were all running on. That was a problem that we had in the first part. We got that ironed out. The thing that bothered me was is we'd gone over to Angkor Wat you can look it on a map, it's over into Cambodia. It's a French colony, Buddhist monastery is what it is. And we had ran into a company of NVA and we captured 'em. And along with them was a CO.

And everybody, when we called and radioed back that we had a CO, they said, "You don't have a CO."

And I said, "Yes, we do have a CO."

And the Dutch kid that was radioing back to me back at Ben Het says, "The old man wants to know is he white or black."

And I said, "He's white."

We had a lot of guys that went to the other side. This is something that a lot of people didn't know until 2007. They didn't like the way that Vietnam was going. The CO terminology was Conscientious Objector; they went to the other side. They were spying on us for the bad guys and people had no realization. That wasn't in the newspapers but it was in the reports. I can understand their situations, I really could.

When you're fighting something that is very not understanding to you. When you're over there, when you first get there many times we'd have to call and ask to shoot at somebody that was shooting back at us and I'm going, "Wait a minute. What do you mean I have to call and ask if I can shoot?"

That was the first mission that I was on. I was being shot at and I'd called up on the radio and said, "We're being shot at, can we return fire?"

From that day forward I never called back up and asked to return fire. I was told by the Di Wee that was there, the CID commander there on Ben Het, he says, "Don't ever call up and ask to shoot. If somebody's shooting at you, you return fire."

But we were indoctrinated when we were back in the States; you have to call and ask to return fire. What kind of terminology is that for your troops?

So here again that's why I was saying, when we were being shot at for the first time on that road, I was looking for somebody to call in say, "Hey, can I shoot back?"

And that's when the Warrant Officer told me, he says, "If you don't shoot back you're gonna go home in a body bag."

It didn't click into me that somebody was actually shooting at me to kill me. And I was confused, I was in a state of confusion, I had no realization that I was in deep doo-doo.

The armorment that we used, a lot of people, went I got to Kon Tum, the armor sergeant said to me, he said, "Give me your M16."

I said, "I got to have something to shoot with."

And he says, "You don't want an M16."

That was the time they were having lot of problems with the M16s over there.

He gave me an M1 and he says, "Here's 14 banana clips with M1 rounds," and he says, "You can get those any place you need to get them at. We have those up at the fire base too for ya."

The M16s were unreliable over all, very unreliable. There was a big controversy about that, I remember that. And when I got to Sea-Tac, that was my first concern is I'm gonna be handed a rifle that really wasn't shooting well and I'm just going, hmm, what am I gonna do? I didn't worry about that, I thought I was gonna be in the base camp, nice and quiet someplace.

But come to find out that wasn't the case. M1s were very well-built and we filed down the trigger pin on 'em so that

we could use them fully automatic and that's what we relied on. And that's pretty old tech knowledge in reference to new technology.

We had a lot of problems like that. Special Forces resolved those problems. We had the means, we had the technology that if we need it, we would go get it. If I needed something, I was dressed up to the 5th position. Many times I was a 1st Lieutenant. I'd go into an armorment place or a motor pool and I could drive out of there with anything I needed. I had fictitious paperwork. I came out many times with generators, mess hall equipment, different vehicles that we needed and that's how we got our first helicopter. Our unit wasn't supposed to have a slick. We procured a slick from Pleiku. I had somebody that knew how to fly a helicopter, we just went down to the end of the runway and we flew it out of Pleiku. We got it back to Ben Het, found some odie green paint and painted it. No numbers on the helicopter.

Interviewer

> That was a Marine helicopter, wasn't it?

Pete Koense

I don't remember. But that was our main thing is Special Forces, if we needed it, we could procure it. We were notorious for that. The only one war movie I could even stand to watch was John Wayne, "Green Berets." That was as close, within proximity. If you needed it, I could get it for ya. And it wasn't over written like "Rambo," "Apocalypse Now." I didn't go to those shows, I didn't dare go to 'em. That would put me right back into being at Ben Het and I couldn't handle that.

War movies were not in my line of watching. I came home, I was recluse. I did not go to gatherings with people. I was afraid to get in the middle of people, I was afraid to go to movie houses, afraid that somebody would come up behind me and slit my throat. Would I go to grocery stores? No. I wouldn't go to grocery stores. Christmas shopping, I didn't do Christmas shopping. I still don't do it to this time. My wife does all my Christmas shopping for me. And the only time I go to a movie house is maybe on a matinee, first showing maybe at ten o'clock in the morning where I know there's only going to be one or two people in there.

I'm an on-guard guy. I'm still living with a knife next to by bed and I still sleep watching where the door is and I still patrol my house every night. I don't sleep at nights. I'm a very high-alert. Vietnam veterans are. A lot of the guys at work made fun of me many, many times. They'd drop something behind me and I'd swing around, hit 'em in the face with something. They finally learned that you don't do that.

My wife has learned that--all three of my wives learned that right off the bat. You don't grab a hold of me and try to shake to wake me up. I've hit my wives quite a few times waking up. My daughter was dating a kid, from my first

marriage, and the young man had came upon the back slope of the house that we owned and I climbed out the window in my underwear and took him down. And if my first wife hadn't have stopped me I probably would've killed 'em. That's how alert that I am.

I take it very personal when somebody invades my privacy. And you learned like that and you're trained like that, you can't get away from that. I don't care who says that they can get away. When I married my third wife, she had two boys from a previous marriage and we had gone to a church function and there was a fellow that got up in church and he was speaking about how Vietnam veterans are way out of hand. He'd spent some time in Vietnam and there's nothing wrong with him and he has a perfect marriage, he has five kids. And he went on and on saying that us Vietnam veterans ought to stop being a bunch of crybabies.

And I thought, "Oh, this guy's confused, isn't he?"

Come to do some checking on him--we were living in Spanish Fork at the time--I had a friend that lived around his neighborhood, come to find out the police had been to his house many, many times. He'd been investigated by Utah State Social Services because his kids had come to school, been banged around with a bloody nose and his wife had been beat a couple times.

And I'm just going, "And this guy's hiding from something? Yes, he is."

He lied right through his teeth, I could see it. And that's why I worry about these guys that are coming home now. I care about these guys. They're like brothers to me. That's why when we were talking earlier, you and I, Cheryl had introduced me to another gentleman that had called me. I was very standoffish, that put me on guard on the telephone. I'm on-guard. Somebody calls me at nine o'clock and wants to talk to me about something? Wait a minute. When you called me, you introduced yourself and you told me who you were, that you were a part of a Special Forces group, that turned me a little bit to the "on" position. We're very defensive and we don't trust people. I don't trust my bosses at work. I've work would one guy now for the past eight years and that's the only guy I can work with. I don't trust anybody else. We're very vigil as far as that's concerned.