Steve Featherstone
Salt Lake City, Utah

Interviewer

Could you just briefly tell us of your background and how you got into the service and some of the early days of your life?

Interviewer

Well, I was born in Salt Lake City and raised in a few different places – my dad was in heavy construction. We moved around when I was a little guy and I don't remember that, but we bought a house on Downington Avenue, 841 East Downington Avenue, and that's 1826 South in Sugarhouse. And when we moved there I was ten years old, and that's where I was raised, technically. But during World War II, a lot of the young men in our ward of age were drafted and went to war and one or two of them didn't come home.

But I was big for my age so when I was about 16 I was almost six feet tall and weighed 180 pounds and I kept thinking maybe I should go in the Army, but I was still going to school and so I didn't do that. But World War II, and being of an age where I looked at the newspaper every day and I talked to my friends about their brothers. And the seed was planted for me to be a soldier but I didn't do that.

I went to school, we were a very poor family and all of the boys, we learned to work early and we gave our money to our mother and we got by. And it didn't hurt any of us and everybody's successful and doing all right today. But I went to Utah State on a scholarship to play football and I didn't have any extra money so I had to transfer and walk on at the U. And I made the team but I didn't get to play at all because they were mad that they'd offered me a scholarship. And they said, "Well, you won't play."

But the next year I could've played but I wasn't able, and went to work for Clover Club Foods and I worked there and was doing quite well, I became a production manager. And one day I thought, I don't want to cook potato chips all my life. And I took off and I went downtown and went to the draft board at Fort Douglas and they said, "We can't draft you, you're too old and you're married and you've got a little boy."

And I did that for several months, I'd go down once or twice a month and always they said, "No." I was just writing my name and telephone number down, "If you ever change your mind I know that I'm supposed to be in the Army." You know, just a young guy saying, “I know I'm supposed to be in the Army.” And one day, the phone rang at work and they called me and I went to the phone and the lady at the draft board said, "Could you be here at seven in the morning? Two of our people have medical problems and they can't be drafted. If you come tomorrow we'll give you a physical and take all the tests and you'll have about two to three weeks before that, you'll either go to Fort Carson, Colorado or Camp Irwin, California. But you'll have about two weeks."

So I got down and I take all the tests, go through that. Spent a lot of time standing in lines and I wasn't patient then but I learned to be patient. And at the end of the day I'd taken all those tests and I let it be known that I wanted to go to Officer Candidate School and get a commission. So that was in the file. And at four o'clock they took us in a big room and there were folding metal chairs and a couple of tables. A couple of sergeants just told us to stand up, don't sit down, the captain will be in in a few minutes. And the captain came in and I said, "Well something's wrong about this feeling. I don't feel right about this." And we stood up there and they said, "Raise your right arm."

And they gave us the oath and swore us in as enlisted men in the United States Army. Four o'clock. And at six o'clock I was on a train headed for Fort Carson, Colorado. The same day so I couldn't go out and tell the company where I was going and my wife came and brought me some clothes and things and a little bit of money, $20 bill which I thought would do, and went to Fort Carson.

Well I went through basic training and I worked really hard because of the OCS thing. And we'd been there a short time and they had a meeting, three of us went over, and we were those that applied for OCS and we took some more tests. The Army General Classification tests and the Officer Candidate--you have to get minimum scores--and a psychological test.

And I have to chuckle because one of the questions was, "Who would you rather kiss, your mother-in-law, the SO, or somebody else." And I put "none of the above." And so I go see him and he says, "There are two or three of these you didn't answer." And I said, "They're stupid questions." I said, "They're stupid to me but I can answer any question you want but I'm not going to answer it your way and I still want to go to OCS." And so I didn't know what he was going to put down there. And I leaned back in that chair and waited a minute and he said, "Okay. They're stupid questions, I'm signing off, you passed the psychological exam." So I got to go to OCS. I left basic training two weeks early because the class was starting at Fort Benning, Georgia, for Infantry Officer Candidate.

Interviewer

What year was this?

Steve Featherstone

And that was in 1956. I went in in 1955. And so buck private--I didn't know anything but I'd had enough experience working to be a little more forceful than most of the privates. And I was older; I was 26 years old. And that was another thing against me. But I got to Fort Benning at night and Monday morning, to my surprise – because I was making $113 a month and I sent $92 to my wife and what little bit was left I used to what I had to have at OCS – they called us into the office and I was the first one in the line. They do a lot of things by alphabet. "Featherstone." So I went up to see the first sergeant, he handed me a sheet.

And I hadn't really paid attention but it was a set of orders and the three of us who were basic training graduates were promoted to Staff Sergeant E-5. And so my pay almost doubled. And it didn't mean anything because we were still officer candidates. We went through that and I had a couple of tough times where my company commander said I was too old and he kind of used me as an example and pushed on me and pushed on me. But he pushed me to an endurance limit one time and I barely got back to where he was standing.

And I reported to him and he said, "That will do, Candidate Featherstone but you'll never make it through this class. You're too old and you're only a private." And I said, "Beg your pardon, Sir, but I'm a Staff Sergeant E-5." And he said, "Yeah, that's just on paper." But then I looked at him and I was really mad and I looked him right in the eyes and I said, "Sir, if there are three people left in this company on graduation day and you're one of them, I'll be one of the other two. You will never force me out of this company." And I graduated and was commissioned.

That afternoon I went to airborne jumpmaster and qualified as an airborne jumpmaster. The jumpmaster helps with loading and control. And I got in that big airplane to jump out of it and I'd gone through all the other training in the 200-foot towers. And my turn came and they said, "Shuffle and stand at the door." And I get up there and turn and face the door. Now, they put their arm behind me, I thought, “How am I going to get out of this? I think I'll quit. It's 500 feet in the air and they want me to jump?” Well, I did jump because I was more afraid to be a coward than to jump, so I jumped. And we did eight of those. And I learned the jumpmaster stuff.

And five weeks later--I'd applied for flight school, five weeks later, in April or May, I went to flight school down at San Marcus, Texas. And I'd only flown a couple of times in an airplane. Once was to get to Fort Benning and once was to Idaho and back. But I looked at those airplanes and they were so small I said, "We're going to learn to fly those?" And we did. And after about a week, it just seemed that I was really adapted to it and I didn't have air sickness. I had an Air Force instructor who was very demanding, thankfully as I learned later. His demands on me made me probably twice as good a pilot as I would've been if I'd just passed the course.

And then we went to Fort Rucker where we got tactical training. I'd left Fort Rucker, went to my assignment at Fort Lewis, Washington. While I was there, I'd only been there awhile and I was still the 2nd lieutenant. My old battalion commander at Fort Carson when I was a basic trainee, he was a lieutenant colonel at the time, came up to see us. He was 6th Division Aviation Officer and our aviation officer, the 4th Division, he was there and he said, "Featherstone, I remember you." I don't think he did but he said, "I remember you," and then he said, "Featherstone, you're a good man. You were a basic trainee," and I told him that I'd won Trainee of the Month and Outstanding Soldier at Fort Carson.

He said, "Colonel Fox, get this guy in that special helicopter transition training course that's starting the first of July." So I did. And I was the only 2nd lieutenant in the class and we learned to fly the H-13, which is a little chopper like you see on "M.A.S.H. And then the H-19, which is a big four-wheeler--looks like a big pollywog and it'll hold ten people. And I was the only 2nd lieutenant, and a friend of mine went down there with me from Fort Lewis and we became better friends in the class. And he graduated fourth in the class and I graduated fifth.

And I said, "I can fly better than you, Bob." And he says, "I know, but I got better grades than you did." And he did, he got good academic grades and I got good flying grades. Fort Lewis became a surprise; I became an aviation maintenance officer and went to Korea from there. Came back from Korea--not during the war, it was over--and I became, again, a maintenance officer over there along with being a pilot. And I flew for the commander of the Yuan Yu detachment from that area, they're over 100 miles from Seoul, Korea. And he wanted me to fly for him and we did that for four or five days.

And I told my boss, I said I can't keep up with maintenance as apply and fly for the general. I go sit and wait for him three or four hours and then he cancelled the flight or we go up here and go there. I'd spend all day, I can't do that. So we got another pilot to take care of him.

I came home from Korea to a new assignment and eventually ended up in Germany. And in 1965 I went to a special meeting. We'd been there awhile, family was with me. And they called I don't know how many aviators. And we went to a meeting--it was classified-- and in that meeting they briefed us on a classified area and classified information. They said, "We have to pick three of you and we have all of your files, your 201 personnel files." And I was one of those picked, in fact mine was the first name mentioned.

Everybody else left and we had ten days later we were in Fort Riley, Kansas in the 1st Division. And I took the family there and my sweet wife, bless her heart, we had all these extra bags because we were allowed a lot of extra stuff. And I don't know if she would remember that but we had all these extra bags and she tied little red bows on every one of them so when we got to the airport, in the terminal, we could find all our baggage and get over to Fort Riley. And I took over there as a Project Officer to get things moved to the west coast. And then got on the aircraft carrier and went to Vietnam. And the 1st Division, first I flew combat missions.

Interviewer
And this was 1965?
Steve Featherstone
Yeah, it was 1965, and the first mission I flew was a small chopper, we had two machine guns. I'd done that in Germany, so I mounted some on a couple of ours and we had little hydraulic things that would work the mechanism. And I was flying and I saw something that looked like a light flashed in front of me, then another one. I said, "I think somebody's shooting at me." So I circled around and went back and climbed up and couldn't see anything so I got down at treetop level and I flew towards that area where I thought I saw that coming from. And then I dropped my nose and there they were.
A machine gun with four North Vietnamese or Viet Cong, you know you never could tell for sure. And they were shooting and I stayed down low because if you land--if you go by the trees they can't see you when you pass because they're in kind of a little spot--I circled around and went back and climbed up and then I dropped the nose and I dove in, right at them, fired the machine guns and I knew I was hitting right in that place where they were. And took off and went around again, went back and there were three of them lying dead.
And I shed tears all the way back to my base because I'd been trained to kill as an Army Ranger Airborne but when I actually did it I couldn't believe it. And on the way back I was shedding tears and it hit my mind—I'm thankful for that—it said, "Remember it was you or them. And it will always be that way when you're fighting an enemy. It's you or them." And I sobered up and reported what had happened.
And then I started flying Hueys in the combat missions, assaults, and so forth and was called to come down to the division. I had the good fortune at Fort Riley to meet the commanding general. He was a two-star general but he was to the information in my mind and as I remember, he was the first full-blooded Indian ever to make general officer in the Army. And he called me and made me the division aviation officer, which is an aviation planning special staff. I did that for a while and we had a huge combat assault with helicopters that I'd planned. General DePuy came in, guy about five-foot-seven or six, and he was a World War II veteran, a real brilliant, brilliant man. But he was meaner and tougher than nails. And one by one, he relieved everybody.
And as they left, the night before in briefings, he'd get all over that guy and the next day comes, "Hey Steve, I need a flight to Saigon, I've been relieved." And one night he did that to me and I said, "I'm not going down without a fight." Everything he said was generalities; he didn't give me anything specific. So I met him on his way to the helicopter and saluted, and I said, "I need to talk to you, General." And he said, "You've got about a minute, Featherstone." If I get relieved it's my career and if I don't, then I don't know.
So I said, "General, you did this and this and this, so you spoke in generalities. I can correct anything specifically you mention," but Colonel Solaire, the Aviation Officer for USRV, U.S. Army Vietnam was there, and said it was the best huge operation he'd ever seen. And it was the largest combat assault of helicopters in the history of warfare. And we had a–, 112 helicopters, of which 84 were Hueys, and that's the troop carriers. And then we had Chinooks that carried equipment and artillery, then we had scouts. And it was perfect timing, nearly, and so I told him that. And I went over the one minute, he said I could have one minute. And then he looked at me and he just glared at me for a minute. Then I saw a different look in his eyes and he put his index finger, pointing up at me kind of, says, "Featherstone if I make a decision can you make it work?" And I said, "Sir, I will be for you, the best aviation planning officer in Vietnam or anywhere else in the world." He said, "Okay, we'll see."
That night he called me, I gave my briefing and afterwards he said, "That was a very thorough briefing, Steve." First time he'd ever used my first name. Few days later he called me over to be his command pilot. And one of the things he said when I got over there, he said, "You're a Mormon aren't you? I've never seen you take a drink or smoke." He says, "You don't drink or smoke, anything like that?" I said, "No, I cuss once in a while," which I did, because I ran the airfield, it's part of my job.
And then I was sitting on a foot locker and he said, "I want you to be my Command Pilot. Would you do that?" And I'd flown for general officers before and I said, "Yes I will. I probably need a short check out; I haven't flown a Huey in about four months." And he said, "Can you fly that thing?" And I said, "Yes." And he says, "Don't worry about it. I called your battalion commander and he said you're probably one of the top two pilots in that battalion." But he said, "I want you because Mormons don't drink and I need a guy that's ready 24-hours a day, any day, any hour, any minute. I don't have to wait for you to sober or worry about it."
And so I flew for him and he was an interesting guy because he wanted to be involved. Every time there was a little battle here, little battle there--in our own units, of course, always. So one night we got a call and they came over and woke me up. It was about midnight, maybe a little after. And said, "We've got a unit under attack out west of Nui Ba Den," which was one of the landmark mountains to the northwest of Saigon, north and west. "And they're on a base on a mountain but west of that--and it's a blocking position but they have about 60 men and they're under heavy attack. And General wants you as quick as you can go," And I'd already started to put my boots on, my flight stuff, and grabbed my helmet and my rifle and headed for the chopper. And he said, "Wait, we're going to give you a ride," and Sergeant Major took me out.
My copilot was already there and the crew was there. And so I said, "I'll stand here and the minute I see the jeep lights." Norby Villetti was my copilot, greatest war officer I've ever known. I said, "Crank it up Norby, and the minute

the General gets here he'll get in." And as soon as he's strapped in, I take off. He told me where to go, had the direction and we headed that way. And I couldn't see anything except nighttime, it was really dark. I didn't see a moon or stars and I was flying sort of on instruments but I kept peaking and Norby would look ahead. And we got about the area we were supposed to go and we could see tracers going into this little mountaintop and explosions. And so I had called the company, the battalion had them send up four attack helicopters to try to drive the enemy off that side of that mountain so that we could get in there and pick people up that had been wounded. And they came up and so we were in there and the General said--he's the neatest guy when I got to know him--he said, "Steve, circle here and then circle the opposite direction."

And General Hollingsworth was with us, DePuy was a major general, two-stars, and Hollingsworth was Assistant Division Commander, one-star, and I'd known him at Fort Hood. But he had a patent type pistol, 357-magnum. So I'd circle and they were both over here and I'm sitting in front. And they were back there cussing and hollering and shooting and DePuy was shooting his M-16.

Go the other way and Alexander Haig was there with us by then, and he's more famous than all of us. But he would shoot and the door gunner would shoot, both door gunners would shoot on each side. And gradually the fire got down, especially when the Cobra's started shooting, the attack helicopters. We landed and it was a mess. But they only had a few men that had been hit so I said, "General we can take those people back and I can drop you off at Division and then I'll take them down to the hospital." He said, "No, we'll all go together." So we put them on board but it was so dark when I turned to take off I could only see a few lights, a little sprinkling of lights in the camp there. We took off and I turned to the south and we landed at the hospital.

Interviewer

Was Haig a general at that time?

Steve Featherstone

No, he was a lieutenant colonel.

Interviewer

So you had two generals and a lieutenant colonel?

Steve Featherstone

And a Captain. The General's aid was with, and I was a Major at the time. And a few years later--the funny thing about that was Alexander Haig is a four-star General and I'm a Lieutenant--I said, "Wait a minute. I got one promotion and he's gone from Lieutenant Colonel to four-star General." But he was a Rhodes Scholar and he was a brilliant man, and DePuy was the same. And it was my blessing on intercom as they would plan an operation and discuss it, I could learn from everything they said, they planted the seeds of knowledge.

And we went in to pick up this guy lying on his back in a rice patty, an enemy, dressed in black. He was a Viet Cong--we couldn't tell except sometimes the North Vietnamese Army would wear uniforms. And as I started to get in, the crew chief on my side said--and I'd make a steep approach and then as I landed all that downdraft and it would make him hide, you know? But he didn't do that I guess, and he said, "Sir he's moving, he's got something in his hand."

So I'd started to lift off and as I did there was an immediate explosion and I got a few little pin marks in the back of my neck. General DePuy was sitting here looking out and he didn't get a mark. But Alexander Haig was sitting in the troop seat looking out on the same way and he got hit in the forehead and the nose and on the cheek and he thought he was blind in one eye, and he was bleeding pretty bad. And so we got him back to a doctor and they fixed him up in the field place and then we took him to the hospital at Benoit. And General DePuy went in with him and I went in with him and when we landed to fix him at Phu Loi, I picked him up and carried him in and the doctor said, "We can only clean him up. We'll put some bandages but you need to take him to the hospital."

So we went to Benoit where they had a field hospital. And he got fixed up and General DePuy, he went there in the morning before we went out flying at night before we shut down. And he would go in and see him and I stopped going and I'd just stay in the helicopter and wait. And three days later, with patches here and there, little plaster things, Haig was in the back again--we were out flying missions again.

When I went back there the second time, I commanded a combat assault helicopter battalion. Infantry Branch had called me, I was a lieutenant colonel at that time, "We have a special assignment for you." And Infantry Branch said, "We've reviewed and the 101st Airborne Division has two slots open. One for an Infantry Battalion Commander, and one for Helicopter Battalion Commander." I said, "Well I'd like the Infantry Battalion," and he said, "Can't do it. You're an aviator and you have a lot of experience and a lot of background. You're going to command the Aviation Battalion and somebody else will get the Infantry Battalion." So I went to Vietnam the second time and it was a different thing this time.

Interviewer

What year was this?

Steve Featherstone

This was 1971, in June.

Interviewer
Okay the first time was 1965--?
Steve Featherstone
1965, I came home in September 1966, one year exactly. And General DePuy asked me to stay, he said, "If you'll stay and fly for me a couple of more months then I'll be going home." He said, "I'll let you go home and you can spend 15 days with your family then you come back and fly for me and when I go home I'm going to the Pentagon. I'll take you with me and your career will be set." And when I got orders for Fort Polk he said, "Well I know you're going to come with me."
"No," I said, "Sir, I have a thought about that assignment. I'd like to go with you and I'd like to help fly a couple more months but I think I need to go to Fort Polk." Well I went there and found that there was some special things that I could do for the church. He said, "I know, Featherstone. I know," and he didn't call me Steve this time. He says, "You're going down and you think the Lord's sending you there." And I said, "That's right." He said, "Look at your orders. I don't see His name on your orders." And I kind of chuckled too and he said, "But you go there but if you ever need anything, get to me and I'll get you the job and we'll get you going." I never did try to get anything from him, that's not my style.
But the second time I went there it was, you know, I had 922 men. Every decision I made for a combat operation, every decision I made when we'd go out to fly, people's lives were at stake and there was no more burden to be put on a man than to have 922 men. But not all of them are flying, some stay in the base camp, but you send out 60 helicopters with four men in each one to do an operation. And then you have your chopper and another chopper for backup and two to come along in case somebody gets shot down. They can go in and pick them up and bring them out, we leave the helicopters on the ground until we can get them safely out.
And we had a lot of those combat assaults and they were terrible.
And one night we had one out by Khe Sanh Valley, that's where the Marines took a real beating. And there was a helicopter left damaged, left on the runway at Khe Sanh. And I was going to destroy it, we were going out to blow it up and I got out there and I sent the attack helicopters with the rockets. I said, "Go back home, we're not going to do that. I'm going to leave this here." I wanted it to be a monument to those brave pilots that got killed coming in and out of here. And to the Marines that fought so hard trying to hold this place and so many of them got killed. And when I left, that helicopter was still sitting in the middle of the runway, one blade sticking up the air, the other one broken off. Full of holes but that was a monument to those men. We had a night mission for some people under attack and it was an outpost west of My Loc and Quang Tri, about 30 kilometers in the jungles. And they were on a hill and they were being attacked by forces trying to come up to get them. It was just a small group of people but they had some seriously wounded.
So I called and got my B Company commander, the Captain Dante Camia, he was my best company commander. And I said, "Get your chopper and three more and we'll go out and get those people off of that mountain." And it was nighttime and we got out there and the wind was blowing and his first chopper that went in couldn't land because it was so windy and the turbulence coming over that little mountain. And we had the cobras come up again but there was still some small arms fire. And so he couldn't land, I said, "Well take off and turn 90 degrees. Don't go in, come out the same way you went in and don't go straight ahead because they're shooting."
So then I said, “I'll go in,” and I went in and I set it up and I made a steep approach and I landed right on the helipad. It was kind of squishy because the wind was blowing and I was rocking around. As soon as I felt that I'd put the pitch down and the weight was on the helicopter pad, and we took six men out but the courage of those men that followed me in... unbelievable. Because the first guy said, "We can't do it." Well after I did it then Captain Camia called Simon Lancer and he went in and he got in and out and he picked up some more. And I said, "Give me the least hurts because I'm going to circle until we get them all off."
And we got 24 men off of that hilltop. The enemy was there; it was not the biggest problem. The biggest problem was probably 50-mile-an-hour winds coming into that hill and the turbulence. And then on takeoff, the helicopter was just bouncing. And I said just take off in a different direction, lower your nose and get your airspeed and then climb out and get above that turbulence. But we got them all to the hospital and only one of those 24 men died. And they would've died if we hadn't gotten them there.
I had another mission, it was a sad mission. My operations sergeant called and said, "Colonel Featherstone, you'd better come over to the operations center." And it was a bunker, it was dug down in and had sandbags. I went in and he said, "I've got the radio and we had a medevac chopper calling, 'Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!' He was going on a mission to pick some people up north. And now I can't radio him." So I got on the radio and called and I couldn't radio him. I said, "Call the chief of staff, call the G-3 Division on the radio and I'll get the chopper and I'll get the crew and we'll get out of here and we'll go find out what his mission was and we'll go get it and then we'll see if we can find him."
As it turned out, what he'd done he'd gotten into the clouds and he got out over the South China Sea, trying to find a way to get down. And you get vertigo, which is a special disorientation. You start descending and when you stop you think you're still going down. Your mind and body feels like, "I'm going down so I need to pull the nose up." And they went into that thing and the next day in the light the tail router was sticking about two feet out of the water and

the four crew members plus the medic were all killed in action.
We flew north and we couldn't see, it was all instrument. And my blessed little GS-3 guy, Captain Bill Hughes, said, "Sir, how are we going to get out there? We can't see to go up there and land." And I said, "I'll tell you what in just a minute." I thought about it, I said, "We'll go to Quang Tri and we'll make an approach," because they had an approach--we made an approach on instruments and when I got down to about 20 feet he said, "I can see the runway lights." And I looked up and I said, "Okay." On the way I'd told him, "Bill, plot a general heading from the north end of the runway to that base camp under attack," and they were about two miles from North Vietnam. So we couldn't make a mistake or we'd be over the border.
And so I had all kinds of nerves going on but the main was to find those guys and to haul those people out. If we didn't get them out of there, they would die. We got there and turned to that heading. And I said, "Bill, get on the radio for me," and I just kept flying. I said, "Tell them to flash their jeep lights in this direction towards the southeast just a couple of times and then turn them off. They did and we found them and I said, "Tell them flash them again." We landed, picked all the people up and the hard thing for me was to leave the other men there because they were within mortar range, they could get hit by North Vietnamese mortars, they were that close, and rockets and machine guns. But we left them there and we took those and bypassed our place at Camp Evans and went to Division Headquarters where there was a hospital and dropped them off. It was a MASH, it wasn't a full hospital. And I can't remember but in my memory all of those men lived that we took down there. Some were pretty badly wounded and we didn't have a medic so I had my Crew Chief, I said, "Hook your gun--"and it had a hook, you just take a machine gun and slap it there--"Come up here and see what you can do to help those guys." There's a first-aid kit in the back of the head of the Crew Chief on the back panel and I said, "Get that down and see what you can do to help some of 'em." We got 'em down there and unloaded 'em.
The best missions I ever flew were rescue missions to save people's lives. I probably had 35 or 40 medevac missions, and we weren't medevac, but if we heard the call for an emergency with a combat unit that had wounds. And when I was flying General DePuy, we landed and he went into the jungle and I had Norbert Villetti, I said, "Hold on to it, I'm going with the General." And the aid went, we went out into the jungle and they had some wounded. So I grabbed one of them and carried him out to this helicopter and the aid to camp brought one out.
And I don't know if Colonel Haig was there yet or not, I don't remember. But we got four more of them out of the jungle and one of our infantry units. General DePuy was tough, he could be meaner. If one of our units got in trouble and they were out of range for artillery, we couldn't do anything to help them. They were under attack, they didn't know where they were exactly and their map coordinates were not correct--grid coordinates were not correct. So the general was talking to him and he was going to relieve the guy and the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel said, "General DePuy, I'm his commander. It's my responsibility." He said, "That's right and you're relieved too." Just like that. But then you haul somebody wounded and he says, "Steve, take us right to the hospital," and he would get out and watch as they'd come out. We'd warn them and they'd come running out with the gurneys and put them on. And he'd stand there, put his hand on the head or the arm of one of the guys and tell them what good soldiers they were.
So I saw this side of him that was almost heartless, but sometimes you have to be that way in war. And other times I've seen him shed tears because some of the men were hurt so bad. We had one that was hurt so bad, half of his face was gone. I looked down and I just about got sick. We finished the mission and I jumped out and vomited. And General DePuy said, "You all right, Steve?" And I said, "No Sir. That look will be in my face forever." Little guy put his arm up around my shoulder and he says, "Mine too, Steve." He didn't live but we got him to the doctors and those were the missions I loved.
I loved to go out on combat assaults because that's where the glory is and that's where the big risk but with the General, they would go in and land and we'd go right behind him. And the first second would take off after they'd drop the troops off. We'd go in and I'd start climbing. He said, "Don't climb, stay down here." And we'd fly across and slow down and he'd wave down to the troops.
And when we came home from the north when the stand down, we moved everything out, sent all the helicopters to Saigon and I stayed north because the enemy was right there getting ready to attack. So I stayed with a few men that had to be behind. And we did what we had to do when we got stuff loaded on trucks, and we burned a lot of stuff. I violated an order from the Department of Army and I sent a lot of equipment and test stuff home. And CONEX containers, we just trucked it up and trucked it out of there to Da Nang. And so the helicopter came and picked me up and took me to Da Nang and I stayed there and we got all that stuff organized and shipped it home. Fort Campbell, Kentucky, the 101st Airborne Division, the commanding general had asked for me to come back there by name, because I was in the 101st at that battalion. But we were out in the hanger one day and one of the officers came down and said, "I've got some people from the Army Audit Agency here, they want to see what you're doing." And he went in and these guys looked around and they sad, "Where'd you get all this stuff?" And I said we brought it home. "Did you see the Department of Army order to destroy and leave all that stuff behind?" I said I did. "Yet you brought it home?" "I did."
And we brought CONEX containers full of tools and test equipment and spare parts. And we were in the hanger laying tools out, building general mechanics tool sets there. They have a tool set about so big for putting all their

tools in. And so the guy said, "Well we're going to have to write a disciplinary action recommend being conducted against you for violating an order. And I said, "You can do that. You can do that if you want, I'm responsible and I made the decision and we brought it home."
And I told one of my men, "Go see if you can find General Cushman." They did and he came rushing down and he listened to the whole story and I just stood there waiting and waiting. The Army Agency guy talked to him and handed him the paperwork. He said, "This is what he should have followed." And he looked at me and he said, "Why did you send that stuff home?" I said, "Sir, there's millions and millions of dollars' worth of equipment here. It's home, it's safe." I knew we could get it and I felt we would need that stuff when we got to Fort Campbell because they were rebuilding. And we did, and General DePuy said, "If you attack Colonel Featherstone, you attack me. And I'll fly to the Pentagon and I'll go see the Chief of Staff of the Army. I think you deserve accommodation instead of a reprimand."
And so they dropped it. But we had the stuff and then we put that together and I rebuilt the aviation group as acting Group Commander and then summer came in 1972 and a full Colonel came from the war college that was supposed to be the commander and I was his exec for a while. And then I got a call from Department of Army Infantry Branch and said, "You've been requested by name to go back to Fort Leavenworth."
I said, "I've been there. I was a student there; I've been on the faculty." "Well you've been requested to go back on the staff, a command request by a general officer." I said, "Well it's not going to help my career, he said, "Well it won't hurt because they requested you."
So I go to Fort Leavenworth and two weeks later, you know the new commandant at the college comes in, General Cushman from Fort Campbell, Kentucky. He knew me and he knew what I could do and he wanted me to be there so he could give me some special projects. And I did those for him and did well.
He was the kind of man he'd say to you, "Steve, be at my office at three minutes after the hour." If you were there five seconds early he wouldn't talk to you. If you were there one second late he wouldn't talk to you. I knew that so I'd walk down when he got there and sit in the commandant's office and I told this sergeant major, I said, "I know exactly how long it will take me to get here. When you see me come through the door you get on the intercom and tell General DePuy I'm here. And by the time I get to your desk I'll be exactly on time." And so he played that game and I played it with him.
And then I decided to retire because I had my first great-grandbaby, Steve's little daughter. Came out to be with them and I said it's time to go home. So I was regular Army then. I requested retirement orders and General DePuy flew out and surprised-- General Cushman had a dinner for us, and my wife and I were there. The next morning I knew he was going to do something, he had a command thing and the whole faculty came down to the auditorium and General DePuy came on and called me forward. And rehearsed my background with him and said some really wonderful things about me and presented me with the Legion of Merit which is a really high order, it's right next to the Silver Star in the line of how high it is.
When I came home I had lots of awards but the best one was the privilege I had to serve with the finest men in the world. And in a war when we came home we were hated. We came home and everybody, Vietnam War, they hated the soldiers. Jane Fonda went to Ha Noi and in a broadcast that was sent back to the states she said, "The American soldiers are baby killers." And we weren't.
And when we came home we were despised by our own country. Probably the most despised and disliked and hated Armed Forces units in the history of America--maybe any nation. And I had one incident and I'm not proud of this, but it's the last thing I'm going to tell you.
I was in O'Hare Airport wearing my uniform, I'd been home just about a month and was sent on a mission to Michigan and then back to Fort Campbell. And two guys came up to me and then a third came. And they were talking to me and bad mouthing me, I was wearing my uniform. And I had my ribbons on and my rank and all that stuff. And one of the guys came up and called me a few names and I was okay until he spit on me. And he spit in my face and spit on my medals. And I was standing there and the next thing I knew I'd hit him right in the middle of the face and he was lying on the floor knocked out. And his buddies, I said, "You'll be down there with him. You take care of him." "Well we're going to get the police." I said, "I'll stay right here. In 30 minutes I board my plane. I'll stay here until I have to board and you go get the police. It's all right with me." I never did see them again. And I never did hit anybody again so that's the story I have and stories.
It was a great privilege; I had the great staff, Bill Balcom was my exec. He spent day and night taking care of me. My SRE, Bill Hughes, was a wonderful captain, very brilliant young man. A West Point graduate but he had a dream like my dream to be a soldier. He wanted to be a doctor. So I gave him the best reports that a man could get, maximum everything and wrote him the best letter I knew how to write, recommending he be accepted. His application for medical school, I think Georgetown, somewhere back there. Anyway, he got into medical school and I got a letter from him and he said, "In two more years I'll be a doctor." And I wrote back to him I said, "When you get to be a doctor, why don't you apply to be a flight surgeon. Just think of the extra $350 a month you'll get from flight pay." I didn't hear from him so I don't know what he did.
But the men were so loyal. And we knew before we ever came home that it was unhappy war and we left those people, we deserted them. I had great friends, I have a lot medals that were given to me by the Vietnamese Army.

And we left them, the North Vietnamese were just on the border waiting to come across and we left for Da Nang and before we got there I checked. I went over to the operation I said, "Any news?" And they said, "Yes. Camp Evans," where I was, "has been overrun and all of Vietnamese have taken what equipment and when they ran out of gas they went in the jungles." They were trying to march their way 300 miles to Saigon.
Those were men that I put into battle and went in and picked them up and brought them out. And they were so gracious and thoughtful. We received a lot of awards and some of those I made sure that every man in my battalion got a Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry for Meritorious and Courageous Service, that they could wear that medal. I was just the Battalion Commander; they're the ones that did the job.
And young men today, and young women, who serve are accepted and loved and appreciated. I will never apologize to anyone for my duties in Vietnam but I will apologize for my leadership in Washington that brought us home without making sure we had taken care of our friends, and we did not. And that is something I carry here all the time. I honor my friends and my service, I'm thankful that as a boy I had a dream to be a soldier.
In my book, "One Soldier Story," I was a soldier, I am a soldier, I will always be a soldier. It was my privilege and honor and my dream come true, to be a soldier. That's it.

Interviewer

Were you saying before the North started heading south, part of your battalion were the South Vietnamese you're talking or were they just Americans?

Steve Featherstone

We flew 80 Hueys to Saigon and some other helicopters. And a few that were not in maintenance we destroyed. So there were about 40 of us still at Camp Evans, finishing up the work and getting out of there. And we went by down the road except the helicopter picked me up because I was the battalion commander. And we flew back and forth over that convoy until I knew they were safe. But the North Vietnamese Army was waiting to attack into the south. When they first got there, there were only a few people to attack because the Vietnamese had left. And what vehicles they could get they rolled and when they ran out of gas they just went out in the jungles. And I don't know what happened to them.
I knew one senior officer, full colonel in the Vietnamese Army that came to America, and he sent me a letter and he was back east and he was going to school and he needed some financial help. So I sent him a check as big as I could afford to help him, his wife and one little baby that made it to America. But I never did hear from him again. Did that answer the question?

Interviewer

Did the South Vietnamese--were they flying with you? Were they part of your battalion?

Steve Featherstone

No. They were infantry divisions of the Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division. And they were all infantry; they were combat troops that we flew into battle, dropped them off and then went back and picked them up. None of them were pilots. They had some down in the Saigon area that flew helicopters and you probably saw some of the news where they went out where the ships were and then ditched the helicopters so they could be picked up – and in fact all of those were Vietnamese pilots. But when we left Vietnam, North Vietnam became--after about four or five months, the most, best equipped, prepared army with military equipment including ammunition and rifles and machine guns and cannons that were not destroyed. Couldn't be destroyed, they didn't have the stuff to destroy 'em. And they took that and turned it against the south.
But the south capitulated so quickly that I had no idea what the losses were… but those were my friends. Little people, and you know there's nothing like a little Vietnamese because they're affectionate. And the first time it ever happened I was shaken, hit. One of my friends came up, lieutenant colonel in the Vietnamese Infantry came up, we just finished an operation. He came up and put his arm around me a little bit and then he took me by the hand like we was holding hands. Like a boy and girl would hold hands. And I said, "You don't have to do that," and he said, "Lean down." I leaned down and he kissed me on the cheek.
And we not only flew with them but they depended on us so much, and some of them learned to love American soldiers. And I'm sure that a lot of the Vietnam veterans have a same feeling of angst because of what we did when we left – it's always with you. And today I'm happy because our young men and women are being honored properly for what they do in combat in Afghanistan, Iraq--and that's a whole different war.
We flew over the jungles and when our guys got shot down we had to work out, get cables and drop down to pull them back out and destroy the helicopter on the ground. We couldn't get them out of the jungle pad. And a lot of 'em we destroyed because it was so much risk to try to save the helicopter and lose the men. I had to go in and rig it and the Chinooks would come in and pull them up. But we saved a lot of helicopters, pulled 'em out and saved 'em. But they were all turned over to the South Vietnamese in Saigon. Couldn't fly.
If, knowing what they knew, as a planner I would have had flat decks over there and had them all flown onto a flat deck, tied down, and bring 'em home and send them to a--there are lots of major companies. Bellhop Helicopter could have renewed those helicopters with equipment and engines, whatever they needed. And they would have been flyable again. But we lost probably six or eight billion dollars worth of equipment that went over to the North

Vietnamese. But that's just my guess.

Interviewer

So is that why we off'ed the carriers, dropped them overboard? Is that the purpose?

Steve Featherstone

They aircraft carriers didn't push them off, the Vietnamese would come around and get close to the ship and they'd nose it up and then roll it over. And then they'd jump out of the helicopter in the water and swim over and be picked up by the Navy. But the Navy, I don't think they ever had to throw any--I don't know anybody that--maybe when the Americans came out of Saigon they were flown to the ships at sea. They were not dropped off; they went out there and were landed or else set down on the deck. They have a landing pad on the end of some of the ships and it's big enough to land on but it's not an aircraft carrier. And that's how they got the Americans out of Saigon, most of 'em.

Interviewer

When you were evacuating these guys you were using Huey helicopters?

Steve Featherstone

Yes.

Interviewer

And there was a flight crew of four?

Steve Featherstone

Four. Two pilots and two gunners.

Interviewer

Each side and two pilots. And how many could you carry? How many could you take out?

Steve Featherstone

Vietnamese are small and we could carry 12. U.S. troops with their equipment weighed about 215 pounds each and we could carry six to eight. Eight was pretty heavy and if we knew we were going to have a big lift we would try and work out putting eight men in a chopper, we would cut our fuel load down by about 120 or 130 pounds. And then you're not carrying that fuel but you have to refuel a little sooner. But we always worked out how much fuel it would take to go to drop them off and go back and refuel again. Or pick up another load, but that was something I learned at Fort Lewis when we do operation with that old H-19. They had very little power so I'd only use a half a tank of gas because I could do all the mission and go back and have a little left for reserve. And I could carry eight to ten troops and most of the guys would carry four to five. Because I take the weight out of the gas tank but that's not everybody would do that and maybe they'd make a mistake and wish they hadn't done that.

But we had two gunners, both the crew chief and a door gunner. The door gunner was usually an infantryman assigned to the aviation unit and was an experienced door gunner with a machinegun. The crew chief was well-trained and he was also a door gunner. And the both of them, the riflemen would help with the cleanup of the aircraft and prepared it and turning it in.

It worked with the crew chief at night and they usually slept within about 50 feet of the helicopter. Not right there because we had one attack with mortars and one of the mortars blew up right near me and shook the ground. And I said, "Wow, I'm sure glad I'm in a foxhole." I'd hunched over and the next morning I went--finally they stopped and I went out and there was a mortar. It hadn't exploded, sticking in the ground on an angle like that. It was about eight feet from my foxhole. If it'd gone off it might have killed me or might not, but it didn't go off, so I don't know.

Interviewer

Were there many instances where the chopper would go into extract and get damaged by the ground fire?

Steve Featherstone

Yes.

Interviewer

And so they're just stuck there then?

Steve Featherstone

They were--we did our best to stop that by having our cobras would go down as they would land in the middle and the troops would move towards the middle of the landing zone. And then the Cobras would go down and start shooting into the jungle line. Not really close to the opening but close enough to try to discourage people, the enemy, from coming out. A lot of times we'd take rounds so I had some hit the tail end of my chopper and a round came up once through the floor right in front of me, up through the Plexiglas. But the only little scratches I got on my neck--all those missions and all the rounds that hit us and other damage, I had a lot of help. I was protected, twice over there.

So anyway, the heroes are the infantry men that go into the jungles and fight. And the heroes are the pilots that bring them back out. The combat assault is dangerous, but we had firepower. But when you're going to pick them up you can't shoot because you might be shooting your own men that are rushing to get into the helicopters. And so

you extract and pull them out and lots of times we'd go in and bring out maybe three or four helicopters loaded with the dead or with seriously wounded people and they'd go take off.
And the other troops would – because there was infantry troops back up to the landing zone – some of them keep firing into the jungle and keep trying to protect the landing zone. But it comes down to the last few and they have to get on and there's nobody to shoot but the door gunners. And they can't shoot; they have to be careful they don't shoot their own men running to get to the chopper. I didn't see much of that and I lost 12 helicopters destroyed and we did not in 29,000 hours of flying combat missions and combat support missions, not one man was killed in action.
But we lost two to the drug ring that were murdered by the drug people. You have to have justifiable cause before you can gather, inspect--it's sort of stupid to me but, you know I've used that word before. But I had my company commanders identify the harsh drug abusers and anyone that I thought or knew was dealing and they would come in to my landing pad and we had military police there and they would gather--and I'd get 30 of 'em together. And then the Chinook would come in, we'd load all 30 of them on there and we did that with five Chinook loads, send them right to Da Nang and that night they were on an airplane headed for the United States.
Then my problem was the Flight Surgeon said, "Sir, these guys are having a--it's killing 'em. They've used drugs so much that they can't deal with it." And I said, "Do the best you can and if you need something you do it medically to help them come down but we don't start them out again to be drug abusers." That was a real problem but my job was a combat mission and I had my exec do what he could and I helped with the drug problems. But you know what happened about that? When I interviewed my men that were drug users, almost 90 percent of them--every one of them started in college or in their homes and towns, and usually marijuana. Almost to the man they started with some lesser drug and then they get over there and they're using heroin and cocaine, whatever they can get their hands on.

Interviewer
Heroin and cocaine were plentiful over there, I guess?

Steve Featherstone
Yeah, well you could get a little bag with four or five caplets in it for a couple of dollars and back in the States that same thing would cost a hundred dollars. So it was cheap and they get bored. You know if they don't get to fly every single day, men get bored. So we had set up volleyball and this and that and the other.
And when I was a battalion commander, I had one of my guys moved over to the headquarters, he was a return missionary for the Mormon Church and he said, "Sir, I've got three people ready for baptism, what can I do?" And I said, "Come on into my office--" he was in there but just “Come back to my office,” which was in the back and I called the Sergeant Major. I said, "Call Saigon and get a hold of Major--" oh what was his name? Anyways, "Call him and have him send us up the paperwork on the next courier." And they sent us the stuff so we could do the baptism and make out the membership forms. I went out and I told the chef, I said, "We're going to need five sets of white clothing. White shirts and white pants, that's all." He said, "What are you going to do?" And I said, "See that erdilator?” It's a big round rubber tank about so big around and about that high and has little ladders so you can come up and look at it. I said, "We're going to climb up that ladder and we're going to get down in the erdilator and we're going to baptize these three men. And two of us are going to do that so that's why." He said, "Sir, that's drinking water." And I said, "Get some more stuff and pour in there to purify it. We're going to use it. Or drain it, whatever you want." So we did and we baptized three men. That was my greatest achievement was baptism.

Interviewer
They were Vietnamese or were they Americans?

Interviewer
No, they were Americans. One of those, Anderson, was my jeep driver. And a good kid, and he was baptized, I baptized him. And he called me at home one day and--I don't know how, they can find your number, and it was in the phone book. And he said, "Sir, this is Anderson, do you remember me?" And I said, "Yes. You're my jeep driver." And he said, "You baptized me." And I said, "I know that too." He said, "I have four sons and we already started. Each one of them now has a little savings account so that they can go to college and go on a mission for the church."
Now that's probably not part of what this is about, but so many good things came out of the bad. There were brave, brave men that did things that no human can look at that and say that was not bravery and gallantry of the highest order. And they come home disliked and hated but I see 'em and I wear that hat and I saw some in the hospital the other day. A guy with a hat like mine and it was all worn out and I went over and sat down by him and said, "What did you do?" And he said, "I was a field service guy." And he went up north and came up to Camp Evans but I never did know him. He was a specialist-4 and then they made him a sergeant E5. And they had trucks and they'd just do free old service work and I don't even know what that was, but when we talked he started to cry. And I said, "What's the matter?" And he said, "I never did get in combat but I saw a lot of it and I saw many wounded men and people wrapped up and down at Da Nang hauled out going back to America with bandages and going to a real hospital." He said, "I always wondered, where do these brave men come from?" And I said, "From little towns and cities all

across the nation. And from big towns and cities all across the nation. They are Americans, they are patriots and they love this country. And they did what their Commander and Chief, the President, and the top Army Generals asked us to do. We went to Vietnam. We fought a good fight. We could have won that battle but we weren't given the opportunity to do that because it was unpopular and they took us out." Jane Fonda and Joan Baez went to North Vietnam and entertained the North Vietnamese. And I'm using their names because they're the ones that had a lot of publicity and said bad things about the troops. But I never saw one man do anything evil or horrible. I saw them carry their buddies back to the choppers and put them in there and then go back and get someone else, under fire, and put 'em in the chopper. And then when there was too many in there they would back off and wait, under fire, so they could get more wounded out and healthy guys would go out last. So bravery is something we do because we have an opportunity. No one goes out and says, "Well, I want to be a hero today." Well, they go out and something happens and then they become heroes because they have to. And they become soldiers because they wanted to, or they were drafted in some cases, but once they were into it I didn't have one man ever that didn't show up for duty out of my whole battalion. So I don't have any more stories to tell and you've drained me of tears.

Interviewer

Well let me ask you a couple of other. Did you ever rescue individual guys like phantom pilots that had to eject--

Steve Featherstone

Yes.

Interviewer

--and were down there alone and trying to make it and the only way to get them out was a chopper?

Steve Featherstone

Chopper, yes. We did go in and pick up a man, turned out he was a New Zealander. His chopper went down, was destroyed, and we heard the call and I knew about where to go and we got over there and we saw the chopper wrecked and on fire. Saw a guy down there so we landed, picked him up. And I have a little plaque in my office where they made me an honorary member of what they call a Kiwi Air Force.

I have one from Korea, they made me an honorary member of the Korean Army and gave me a medal, first one I ever received, for evacuating people off the roofs of their homes down along the Haun River. And the floods had gone up, typhoon had come in and the floods had put them up on the top. And flew a little H13 through the storm and started pulling people off of the top of those roofs. One female adult and two children because the only weigh about 60 pounds. And my buddy and I got there and he got there, he had to land because he couldn't get through with the rain and the fog. So I had about a hundred people off when he got there and we finished them.

It says in the order, "Presented in Saigon by the President of the Republic of Korea, Syngman Rhee." Well I was presented by the Commanding General, the First ROK Army, down the road a piece from our airfield. And when I left I flew for him, he asked for me by name, four-star General and when I left he had a big dinner for me.

And it was interesting and I don't know if I've told my son this but I went down there and my partner and a couple other people, my boss was invited. They had a big dinner and a party and then they had a little dance thing and the Generals aid came over and he whispered in my ear and he pointed to four or five Korean young women. He says, "Take your pick." And I said, "I don't want any of them, I'm married. I have a family at home." General says, "Any one you want you can have." And I said, "No, thank you anyway."

And when I left, General Yue came up to our airfield. Every pilot leaving Korea flew himself to Seoul to come home because if anything killed him it wasn't going to be me, it was going to be himself. And he came up and he gave me a hug and says, "Remember when I talk you?" And I says, "Yes I do." And he says, "Oh I tell you, four-star general, you lieutenant. You first lieutenant." And I said, "That's right, Sir." And he was like, I think at that time when I was there, I was in my 30s and he was about three years older than me. "Oh lieutenant, four-star General. You Aviation Lieutenant." But he really liked me and treated me royal; it was very respectful when I flew for him. He was always on time, he didn't delay and he was always on time.

But that's going backwards but Korea was an interesting place, there were some real challenges because the weather and the winds and I was flying an L19, a little single-engine airplane, from Seoul, Korea, back to my airfield. And I was flying the General and I told him I couldn't take him back, the weather reports were bad. Low visibility and severe turbulence. And he said, "You will." And I said, "I won't." And he said, "You will." And so he got in the airplane and I said, "Sir I don't mean to be disrespectful but when you got in the back of my airplane now I'm the commander and I'm not flying you back to Yuan Yu." He looked at me and hit me with his hat on the back of the head, friendly, got out and drove back.

I was flying back the next morning and it was pretty turbulent. And I was flying up along a river valley and all of a sudden the airplane just flipped, almost onto its back, and all I could do was finish that into a split S and went down and climbed out. And I saw a sandbar so I landed on that sandbar, afraid I'd never get off again. But I waited a couple hours and then I took off and weather had smoothed out.

But flying is an interesting business. Somebody said it's hours and hours of complete boredom interrupted occasionally by stark fear. That's true, something goes wrong, the engine quits. I had had an engine quit on take-off in Korea and I had two full colonels and a major in the back of a DeHavilland L-20, and I got just about two feet in

the air and my heart felt that shudder and I said, "Whoops." And I pulled the throttle back and the engine quit. I landed, stop, stop, stop and we stopped, went off the runway out onto the grass and the propeller was pushed right up against the fence that would have taken us right down into the Han River. Pulled it back out, I don't know why, I guess I was scared, but they pulled it out, sent two jeeps out, picked us up, and then went in and traded airplanes. I said, "I'll be ready to take off again in 20 minutes." Took off again and had no problem.

Interviewer

Can you describe the sound of being in that helicopter and going in to rescue people and gunfire?

Steve Featherstone

Sometimes the only sound is the sound you hear in yourself. It's the sound of fear. You can see the tracers because every seventh round is a tracer and it just sparks up a brilliant color, brilliant light. And if you get hit in the helicopter you hear it go, "Plink, plink, plink." When that happens then you tighten up, you really tighten up. And the noise you hear is the engine and the router blades. When you start to land you change the pitch of the router blades and so they come up more and the hit the wind.

And when you hear a rescue aircraft going by, going down to pick somebody up, one of these that fly out of the University of Utah and out of the airport. When there's a lot of noise they've--because the blades have pitch in them link the wing and that's when you get the lift, but the turning motion makes them slap a little bit. And the noise you hear, sometimes somebody in the back, one of my door gunners say, "Look out Sir, look out. There's a guy shooting machinegun at us." And you know he's scared. And I said, "That's on the right side. I'm not even going to look." I just said, "Return fire, return fire." Make a sharp climb and climb out.

Fear is a funny thing but the noise you hear mostly is silence because it's a mission, we're prepared for it; we're trained for it. We do it but when the rounds start hitting your helicopter or somebody on board screams because they've been hit, then you hear the scream and you hear people hollering. When the troops get in they were hollering, "Hurry, hurry, get in." And that's a lot of noise because all they want to do is get in, get flat and get out of there. And so you hear them hollerin'. I can't describe an unusual noise except that one that's in your heart, it's just pounding. You can feel it pound sometimes.

Or if you pick up a wounded man that's hurt but still alive, screaming and crying for help. And when that happens it just tears your heart because you know you got a 30-minute flight to the closest MASH or even to the hospital. Bien Hoa, sometimes, we were even you know 60-, 70 miles north of Bien Hoa and that's where the hospital was in our area. The first time. The second time it was at Camp Eagle, they had a field hospital, and that was closer. That was only about 40 miles from where I was located. But up north, if you go out into the northwest then it's a little ways back to the hospital. And that's the most disruptive because it hurts. You don't have pain but it hurts to hear a man in the back of your chopper screaming for help, "I'm going to die, I'm dying, I'm dying!"

All you can do is fly a little faster, put it on the red line and go. So there's not a distinctive noise that I can remember except when you have mortar rounds landing and then you can hear the explosion. The mortar explodes like a canon round. They hit, explode and throw out fragments. And that explosion, when it's fairly close to you, is the sound of death. Because if they hit you, you're done. There's nothing you can do.

Interviewer

Did the crew wear earplugs?

Steve Featherstone

Yeah, some of them did. I didn't but they can and most of the crew chiefs do because they're around it so much. And a lot of ground crew people wore earplugs. I don't remember my crew--my crew chief and my door gunner. Bill Hughes didn't and when I flew for General DePuy, my Warrant Officer, Norbert Villetti, none of us wore earplugs. I think maybe the people in the back might have, I don't know. Because there's a lot of noise. The noise, that winding of that transmission when you're sitting back there, I can hear the noise and I can hear the engine. And I can hear the smacking of the blades. But I think my problem for that kind of stuff was that I had to have all of my senses. Sight, hearing and feel and whatever. I had to have that so I could be the most alert that I could be because sometimes within a second or two what you do or don't do could cost lives.

Interviewer

How many years did you serve when you consider Korea and Vietnam?

Steve Featherstone

All together I was in the Army 20-and-a-half years and I was in National Guard for ten months when I went to play football at Utah State, I was in the 115th Engineers. And then I got released from that but they waited almost a year, about 11 months, because I couldn't get to the meetings. I didn't have transportation and so I took a hardship notice and they kept me on the roster but I couldn't get down to Salt Lake to the meetings.

Interviewer

And you retired as a lieutenant colonel?

Steve Featherstone

Lieutenant colonel. I went to the Pentagon and went through it with my branch chief, General Arter, who was

brigadier general and was in Vietnam in the 101st when I was there. And I guess he went to the Pentagon and I went to Fort Campbell. But we went to the file and the branch coordinator, another Lieutenant Colonel had all the paperwork and my files up. And he said, "You know if you stay in you'll make a promotion to full Colonel, probably six to ten months." And then it turned out it would be longer, not because of anything I did, but they just weren't promoting that fast at that time.
But I never did stay in to find out if that would happen or not. But I look back once in awhile, I say something happened and if I had gone to General DePuy, he was the Vice Chief of Staff, a four-star General, at the time I had a little problem. And if I had gone to see him, he would have solved the problem but when I had a problem I either solved it or I lived with it. I just never did ask a general officer that I knew that would help me. And some would, General Cushman would have done it for me too; General DePuy, General Conway in Korea.
I didn't fly for him because I had so much to do but he got another pilot and they came in and the general I'm sure was flying and they landed and the nose went down and just flipped because he hit the brakes and landed on his back. And I was a maintenance officer so I went running out there with my jeep and I said, "We got to find out what happened then get everybody out." And they were already on the ground but I made some comment, I don't know what it was, but after that he was kind of cool towards me. I probably said, "Who is the stupid guy" --there's that word again-- "that did this." You know, wrecked an airplane.

Interviewer

When you didn't have a landing zone available did you ever hover over dense forest and drop those ladders? Explain that whole process.

Steve Featherstone

Usually when you have a jungle site where you can't get in, and you've got to go in, we had a cable and we could put a man on that and it had a weight on the bottom. And they can hold onto that and drop them down into a place big enough around for man but you can only put one at a time with that cable. And the ladders are worse because when you drop a ladder and there's no way to keep it from swaying, so when the weight gets on it the ladder swings up under the belly of the chopper as you climb up. But the Crew Chief will lie on his stomach and then put his arm out and as they get higher he'll reach down and help hold the ladder steady while the person climbs in the chopper. I've never gotten anybody out of the chopper with a ladder, we used a cable. And it would hold, my memory is 600 pounds safely, probably more. But you could get two men on there and you could rig it so that you had a place to hold and put your foot in a little loop and then you turn on the dial and it'll wind it right up, just bring the thing up. They come in about that close to the floor and so you have to reach out and help 'em, pull 'em in. But that was not anything we could use for mass but the pathfinders I had, we would put them in that way with their equipment, primarily chainsaws, and they would go down and cut the stuff down and then pull it out of the way so they could make a room big enough for a chopper to land.
But I've landed to rescue people and I've landed where my tail rudder had about two-foot clearance and I gave it that much because--and maybe a little more--because it's more delicate and it's more if you ruin that or the motor blades you're done. But then the rudder blade out front would be just clicking the trees. And then you get 'em in and you pick it straight up the best you can. I've never inserted anybody except pathfinders. And we used the cables. We put four of them in each helicopter and send the four pilots up--four choppers out. Sixteen pathfinders and they'd take chainsaws and cut and cut and cut and it'd take them awhile and we kept a couple of choppers circling with their machine guns so that if anybody came to attack they could protect them the best you can and try to get them back out. We didn't use that ladder or the cables.
And I picked up an Air Force guy one day and it was the saddest thing that ever happened to me. He went down; he was in the water in a river. We found him and I had my crew chief lean out, the other door gunner came over and held his feet. And he reached down he couldn't quite get him. He slipped off his hands. So I said, "Take off your pistol belt and make the loop and then let him grab the loop and then pull him in." He got him about two-thirds of the way in and that belt broke-- you know that's a tough thing. And he went down in the river and we could not find him. I circled and circled, I said, "I can't go back without finding him," but we never did find him. The crew chief jumped in the water to try and find him and swimming around and finally I signaled to get him back in. And we just have to go. But you can't save them all.

Interviewer

Thank you for your service to our country and thanks for coming up.

Steve Featherstone

It was an honor to serve and I'm grateful to present another side of the story of Vietnam. I hope that people will learn that whether the war is a good war or not, if our men are there, they should be honored. It doesn't matter what somebody thinks or what they say about it. If we're there, sent legitimately by our government and our military leaders, those men and women should be honored not treated like we were. And I'm strong and that just rolled of my back. But sometimes I feel bad because of other people. And I wear that hat I have that says, "Vietnam Veteran" because I'm proud I served there.
I don't care what people say about Vietnam War and Vietnam. I'm proud of what was done there and mostly I'm

proud of the men. And in my job with the commanding general and as a commander myself, I knew the kind of men that were serving in Vietnam. And they were just as good of soldiers as the Army ever had, maybe better. Because they fought in jungle terrain, they fought in torrential rains and monsoons. And they fought in the open. Anyway, thank you for inviting me to be part of this.