



Gary Campbell

Sergeant E-5

Marines

Squad Leader/Platoon Guide

American Fork, Utah

"Escalation"

Interviewer

What was your rank when you left the war?

Gary Campbell

Okay. I was a Gunnery Sergeant E-7 when I left the Marine Corps after 13 years. And then I went into the Army.

Interviewer

How about Vietnam?

Gary Campbell

And when I was in Vietnam I was an E-5 Sergeant. That was what you called a machine gun section leader. I had two sections of machine guns that I was responsible for. But when we lost people later on, I become the platoon guide, then the platoon sergeant for a short time.

Interviewer

Where were you born?

Gary Campbell

American Fork, Utah.

Interviewer

You were raised there, too?

Gary Campbell

Raised there 'til I turned 14 and moved to Orem.

Interviewer

Tell us how you got into the Marine Corps. Did you have to volunteer?

Gary Campbell

Yes, I did. I was a high school junior, actually. I wasn't doing very well in school. And I don't recommend this to young people today. Please, stay in school by all means. And I was going nowhere. And I went into the post office

and was looking through the information on the military and saw a picture of a young Marine in a dress blue uniform and I was sold. I wanted to go into the military. I was 16, and I went home and talked to my parents about it. Then, you could get into the military at 17 with parent's consent. And mother and dad didn't think I was heading in the right direction. I wasn't really doing a lot in school. And they agreed. I took the test and the physical when I was 16, and on my 17th birthday I raised my hand and took the oath and became a United States Marine.

At that time, I was the youngest Marine in the Marine Corps that day because that's as young as you could enlist. There might've been others in there, but they had been in there fraudulently. But I was at the time the youngest Marine in the Marine Corps. I was in Marine Corps basic training on my 17th birthday, that night. Got in there late at night and I was by myself 'cause I got off the airplane and they picked me up. Before I knew it, I was standing on some yellow footprints in front of what they called the receiving barracks at attention, and a DI who was just going up one side of me and down the other. I shook probably worse than I shook now. And I was thinking to myself, "What the hell have I done?" And from there I went on, and I stayed 26 years in the military. I feel the military made me who I am today. It was the right choice for me at the time.

Interviewer

Was that Parris Island?

Gary Campbell

No. Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego, California. Everybody east of the Mississippi goes to Parris Island. Everybody west of the Mississippi goes to what we call "Hollywood Marines" over at San Diego.

Interviewer

What year did you enlist?

Gary Campbell

October 27th, 1960. I was 17 years old. That was my birthday.

Interviewer

And there was no such thing as Vietnam at that time.

Gary Campbell

There was not, no, sir.

Interviewer

Tell us about how you got to Vietnam.

Gary Campbell

Well, after basic training I was assigned to an infantry unit at Camp Pendleton, California. It was actually a Golf Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. I had to think for a minute. I've been in a number of units and sometimes they start coming together. We were only there training for about five months, and then we went to Okinawa. They rotate you to Okinawa for a year. And over in Okinawa we did training in the Philippines, a lot of training in Okinawa, cold-

weather training in Japan, and that's all before I was even 18 years old. As I stayed in the Marine Corps I missed home at first terribly, but I got to love what I was doing, and I came to have a great appreciation for serving my country and being in the Marine Corps.

I love what the Marine Corps is and it was just something that I needed. I needed some structure in my life. I come back from Vietnam and went to another infantry unit at Camp Pendleton, California. This time it was Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines. And we trained there at Camp Pendleton for a number of times. I went home on leave a number of times, and got a Dear John letter from my girlfriend, which I kinda was hurt for a little while but you get over it. And about that time the Cuban Missile Crisis broke out, and they threw my battalion on the USS Iwo Jima. There was another battalion in the regiment they put on planes and flew 'em directly into Guantanamo Bay to reinforce the naval base there.

We boarded the USS Iwo Jima. It's called a LPH-3. It's a landing platform, helicopter. Quite an experience. Went down the West Coast through the Panama Canal and become a part of the blockade for the Cuban Missile Crisis. At the time, we didn't really know what was going on. Probably people at home listening to the news knew more about it than we do. So all we knew is all of a sudden we was on a ship and on our way, and throwing our backpacks on and helmets and rifles and there we go. And we'd become a part of the 5th Marine Expeditionary Brigade where we helped stop and made sure no more missiles got into Cuba and stopped the Russian ships and so on and so forth.

After that was finally secure, we had the opportunity to visit Pole Liberty in Puerto Rico; Kingston, Jamaica; and then in Panama and Panama City on our way back through the canal. So about that time, I had turned 18. And so before I was even 19, I had been to quite a few countries between the Far East and the Caribbean. Came back to Camp Pendleton and had the opportunity to go to a special school called Mountain Leadership School. That's a pretty tough school. I won't really get into it, but it's where they send some of their NCOs. By then, I was a Corporal. And decided at that time I was gonna stay in the Marine Corps, but I wanted to get out of the infantry, and I had heard of a place called Marine Barracks, Lake Mead Base, Las Vegas, Nevada. It was a very top-secret base; most people didn't even know it was there. You worked directly for the Atomic Energy Commission. They had what they called a very secure area where they stored stuff that I'm not even sure what we were securing. But I was part of the Marine Barracks there. Our duty was security for the base. And I decided to go there 'cause it was only a four-hour drive to home. And so I went there and I spent two years there and enjoyed it tremendously 'cause we'd get three-day weekends every month, and that was a time to head home and visit parents and family. And I had a girlfriend back there.

And then I got orders to Quantico, Virginia where I went to Quantico, Virginia in the Marine Corps. It's where the FBI Academy is. It's one of the major bases in the Marine Corps just outside of Washington, D.C. But while I was in Las Vegas I met a girl. And when I used to stand sentry duty out on the gate, these young high school girls would come out late at night and keep us company, and got to know her. She was of the same faith I was, and I went to church and visited her and started dating her. And got orders for, like I said, Quantico, Virginia, and I was gonna go to Quantico, Virginia and get settled and go. She wouldn't let me leave without her. And she just graduated from high school in June, so all of a sudden in July I was married and heading for Quantico, Virginia. I was supposed to have been there for two years, but Vietnam broke out. And all of a sudden, after six months there as a military policeman, I had orders to Vietnam. My wife was pregnant with our first child. At the time, I recalled back when we was overseas the first time in what we called the FMF, they have Fleet Marine Force. There was always the battalion Marines floating around the Pacific for emergency purposes, and we did that for three months. This was back in 1961.

And I recall having some classes on Vietnam back in that time, thinking where's Vietnam? What's this place all about? Why are they giving us background and the history of Vietnam? And it was back then in probably '61, '62 we had advisors there, apparently but most of us had never heard of Vietnam. But when I got my orders for Vietnam, that all come flashing back to me, the particular classes on ship. Took my pregnant wife back home and got prepared to go to Vietnam. It was a real tough thing to do at the time 'cause my wife was pregnant. I was gonna leave before the baby was born. And my brother and sister decided to go with her and take me back to Camp Pendleton and drop me off and spend a little time with me before we shipped out. Got as far as Las Vegas. Stopped there to visit some of my friends that I was stationed with. Got a call from my mother that my dad had had a terrible accident. He was a brick mason and his scaffold went in and he had compound fractures to both legs and they didn't know if he was ever gonna walk again. So we turned around and went back. And I remember my dad lying in the hospital and it was the hardest thing in the world for me to leave. I didn't know if my mother was gonna make it 'cause I was going to Vietnam, my dad couldn't walk. They didn't know if he was ever gonna be able to walk. My wife was pregnant.

ut as a Marine, you do what you have to do. And I was in the Marine Corps. I had orders. I had no choice. I had to do what I had to do. And so after I knew my dad was at least gonna survive; they drove me back to Camp Pendleton. I spent a month there training with my unit, India Company, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, a unit very dear to my heart. I was a machine gun section leader, entails two squads. I was a sergeant, a young sergeant. And we trained. As much as I could, I'd get off and go see my wife and spend some time with her. I remember that last night as I was lying in bed snuggling up to her and touching that big belly, how tough it was knowing I was leaving the next morning. The families that were there, we said our goodbyes and climbed on the bus. It ripped my heart out as

I drove outta there. And my wife was crying and my sister. And big old tough Marines sitting on the bus, there were many of us crying, tears coming down our eyes. Didn't know what to really expect, none of us had been into combat.

Got onto USS Pickaway, and they shipped us off to Okinawa. Took 30 days to get over there. Pretty rough 30 days 'cause you're so homesick. You so wanna go back to your wife and your kids, and I didn't have kids but I had one coming along. And got in Okinawa and went to a place called Camp Schwab. We spent a month training there, and then they sent us to the stupidest place in the world you would think, to Japan, for cold-weather training right at the foot of Mount Fujiyama. Cold-weather training? We're going to Vietnam. Why are we going to cold-weather training? Well, the U.S. government has a contract with the Japanese government that they have this little base just below Mount Fuji. They have to have so many troops there at all time in the training mode. So we went there for a couple of weeks. Got back on a ship, went to the Philippines. Trained in the Philippines there at Subic Bay, Mindoro, getting us ready to go to Vietnam. And then in June we were off the coast of Vietnam. We was in what they call the SLS, Special Landing Force. There's three ships, one with helicopters, one with a couple of company of Marines on, and another ship that called a APA, a troop carrier with two other companies of Marines on, and then you had the LSD, which is one that opens up in the back and you can float the heavy stuff off, and it's called the Special Landing Force. We're there prepared to go in anywhere they need us. It was kinda what you call a sparrow hawk. If those units get in trouble, we're on our way. Some of us down the nets, like I was, and some of us in by helicopter coming in by sea and the others getting behind the enemy as kind of a hammer and anvil effect.

We pulled two operations off the SLF Operation Deckhouse One and Operation Nathan Hale. Didn't see much activity. A little sniper fire. But the attitude started being if this is war, this ain't so bad. And then went back to our ships. And then early July Operation Hastings was the first major operation up in the demilitarized zone. That's the line between North and South Vietnam. They had learned that the 324th B Division of the North Vietnamese Army, the regular Army troops, were infiltrating into the South, and sent the Marines up there to stop 'em. It was a very bloody July for the Marines. That was on Operation Hastings. We was sweeping areas and getting a little fire.

Interviewer

What year were your orders to Vietnam?

Gary Campbell

At the time, I was at Marine Corps base, Quantico, Virginia.

Interviewer

What year was that?

Gary Campbell

Me and my wife didn't have a honeymoon. We put two sleeping bags together and camped across country. And that

was in July of 1965. And I got to Quantico and they made me a military policeman, and I was in charge of 12 other guys. And got on base housing and was just enjoying life together as newlyweds and getting used to being married. And she got pregnant, and that was in July of '65. And then in January, just before Christmas, actually, December '65, I got orders to Vietnam. I shouldn't have. I was supposed to be there for a while.

Interviewer

So you were in Vietnam '66, '67?

Gary Campbell

Yes.

Interviewer

Did you have the M-14 or the M-16?

Gary Campbell

We had the 14. Marine Corps was the last one to get the new weapons. The Army, they always give them the best first. We do more with less. Don't wanna hurt your feelings. That's what we think, anyway. And so I had the M-14, okay. Later on I got the M-16 and I'll tell you a little about that.

On the 22nd of July, we found ourselves on a Ridgeline up close to the DMZ. We were running short on water and rations. Had a little sniper fire, nothing very serious. We decided to come off the ridge and followed the streambed down to where we could get a helicopter and to get resupplied. Big mistake. We come down the streambed. That particular day, my machine guns were the third section, so we was assigned to the 3rd Rifle Platoon. And that platoon, my platoon was in the point that day. And we was coming down the streambed, and as I come around the bend, we could see some North Vietnamese soldiers bathing or swimming in the creek, and we pursued 'em and didn't go too far. Didn't realize it, but they had automatic weapons set up on each side of that canyon. And so we come down the streambed, they opened up on us. Everybody in front of me went down in the streambed, either killed or wounded. I dived behind a big rock, and a gentleman by the name of Rodney Westcott, he was one of my troops, dived behind the rock with me. And we still remember the bullets zinging over our head and hitting the rock. But most importantly, hear the screams still today and the moans in the streambed. We laid down a field of fire and was trying to get two of our squads to go up each side of the canyon, around to get behind the automatic weapons to wipe 'em out. I remember another brave Marine by the name of Corporal Richardson sitting there was this 3.5 rocket launcher, firing it trying to drop a round in on where they were. And it was pretty hard because it was just before dark and it started raining, and that clay was slick, and trying to get up them jungly hills and around was terrible.

Well, all of a sudden, Rodney, 18 years old, one of my guys, I guess he couldn't stand to hear the screaming and the crying in the streambed and he felt he needed to do something. All of a sudden, he jumped up and started

running out where they were. I reached up and I grabbed his boot to try to hold him back, but it was slick and it slipped out of my hand. He run over and grabbed one of the wounded guys, trying to pull him over to safety, and all of a sudden I heard him scream as they opened up and they riddled him up the front. And that scream, as it echoed up the canyon, and I still hear it at times, as he died, dropped dead in the streambed. Seventeen years old, had a girl back home; used to read the letters to me, and I used to help him write letters back. And I said 17, I'm sorry, he was 18. Can't be 17 in combat. But he was one of my guys. That's the first one I lost, and it was a tough time.

Finally, the squads up behind were ready to destroy the positions. It was dark now. We had eight dead Marines in the streambed in front of me, about 10 wounded. The enemy was all around us. We were surrounded. We needed to get up to the top of the hill and get our wounded up where we could get the helicopters in to get 'em off the hill. Miserable night. We had to leave our dead. Couldn't do much with them at that time. Trying to drag our wounded up the hill, and take two steps up, slide back three. A long, long, long, night. Finally got at the top of the hill and we still couldn't get a helicopter in. It was too dark and too much firepower going on. We were surrounded and we was afraid they was gonna overrun us. They called in, in my mind I think it was the USS Missouri, naval gunfire off the battleship. And I'm telling you, if you wanna hear anything so deadly in your life, it's just hearing them big shells fly over head thinking they're gonna land right on you, kissing the ground and hoping for God you're gonna live through the night. We had the corpsman with our wounded trying to take care of 'em, and sometimes that ground just thundered and rolled. And it was a long night.

First light they took off, they left. The enemy left 'cause they knew it could get close air support and other things in at that time. So our first objective was to get the helicopters in and get our wounded to where they could get taken care of. Our next objective was to go back down into that streambed and recover our dead. Well, we had had pretty good training and in Okinawa, and they taught us about booby traps and things such as this. So we got down to where our dead was. I didn't go down, but the patrol that went down there, the rest of us was secure up on the hill. They got down there and they found that our dead had been booby trapped. They had taken grenades, took the pin out, put it under their arms and secured it so if you moved the body, it'd go off, you know. Fortunately, we discovered it and we finally got our dead up on top of the hill and we got their bodies out. That was the 23rd. From that hill, we regrouped and went down into a little area where it was a base camp for the North Vietnamese, and found a lot of supplies, medical supplies, rice, a little bit of ammunition. But they had taken off. In that particular little base camp, we got resupplied, licked our wounds, tried to get ourselves back together.

I remember they brought helicopters. Funny, the little things you remember. I remember they brought a helicopter in, and off that helicopter, they brought us some Hersheyettes. Do you know what Hersheyettes are? Most people don't. You know what M and Ms. are. Hersheyette is just like an M and M but it has an "H" on it, and that's put out

by the Hershey Company. And I remember it was so good to taste it. It's silly, of all the things that happened to remember that. And they brought in these things called Chuckles. They're six or seven little jelly bars. There's a black one, a green one. And I remember sitting there with my best buddy enjoying them. And we had made up some rice that we'd captured into some bamboo, and we finally got a can of beef spiced with sauce, C-rations. We mixed it in with that rice. To this day, that's one of the best meals I've ever ate. I go to the Sizzler sometimes and I order steak, and I get rice with my steak. I'm back in Vietnam right there that day. And I don't know why I'm telling you that. It's kind of a silly thing, but it's just something I remember.

So on the 23rd we put ourselves together. Our objective for the 24th was to go up a hill called Hill 362 to set up a radio relay station so that battalions could keep in contact. Next morning we started up that hill, and we just was going straight up the side of the hill, straight up the side of the hill. Second Platoon was in the point this day. My platoon was 3rd Platoon, we were in the last of the column with the people we had lost. As we was going up that hill, we hit the top of the hill and there's a trail running across the hill, and we made a turn to the right. As we started down that trail, we run into some North Vietnamese soldiers with backpacks carrying 82-millimeter rounds. And they took off, and we kind of were pursuing them. And as we was going, I could see con wire stretched all along the top of that hill, and I remember turning to my guys saying, "We're heading for crap. Be ready. We need to slow down, find out what's ahead and what's going on."

But we didn't. We were pursuing 'em. I don't know how to show this except for my hands. We come up this hill coming across the top of this one. There's a saddle here with another hill over here. The enemy was entrenched on this hill. Had all their 82-millimeter mortars zeroed in on here, all their automatic weapons in the thing here. We got to the top of that hill, and when my platoon hit the top of this hill, the lead platoon was down in the saddle and that's when they opened up. They had us zeroed in bad. Everybody down in here, the 2nd Platoon, they were hit and went down in the saddle. In this saddle, there wasn't a lot of jungle like on the top of the hills. And then the mortars come in on top of us, and we were just trying to run for cover and run for protection. It got so bad down here, we was trying to pull our troops us to set up a hasty defense on top of the hill so we could all try to stay alive until we got some help in there. These guys down here was trying to kick 'em up the hill, the NCOs.

We had to leave dead and wounded, and that's the hardest damned thing in the world to leave your buddies. But you're gonna have more killed if you don't. So we were doing the best we could to get everybody up on the hill, to get set in a hasty defense so we wouldn't be overrun. At the bottom of that hill the mortars were coming in. And had a young man by the name of Denny. He was another of my guys. Lawrence Denny. He was one of my machine gunners. He kind of panicked, started hollering at me, "What should I do? What should I do?"

I said, "Denny, get over there behind the tree and just keep an eye out the front and lay down a field of fire. Stay alert."

About the time I got that out of my mouth, a mortar went off. Picked me up like a ragdoll and just slammed me to the ground. Ripped a hole in the side of my leg. Didn't even realize I was hit 'cause all I knew was I couldn't breathe. It just sucked all the air out of me. And I was getting up trying to run for cover, trying to breathe. As I looked over to the left, Denny was laying face down on the ground. And I always remember the look in his eyes as he pushed himself up and looked at me, blood pouring out of his mouth and ripped his throat open. He fell face down and died. Eighteen years old. Again, never got to grow up, feel the love of a good woman, be married to her, have children, watch them grow up. He gave everything. Everything he gave. Absolutely a hero. And I think that word is used too, too common nowadays, hero. I hear 'em call great athletes heroes and this person hero and that person hero, and I think to myself bull. If these people are heroes, they gotta come up with a much better word than hero for the guys I served with. Athletes are great athletes. Some of 'em are even great role models. But they get paid millions of dollars for what they do. They gain a lot. These guys I'm talking about, they got nothing. They gave up everything. And so that's kind of a little sidetrack, but that's something that's always kinda bothered me.

As dark was falling, we tried to dig in the best we could. We put in a guy that could fire a weapons with a guy that couldn't who was wounded. We were running low on ammo. I remember crawling around from site to site 'cause I was sergeant. I was expected to watch over and keep track of what was going on with my men and see what they had. And the rounds were constantly coming in. you could hear 'em leave the other hill. Poof, poof, poof, and you know three mortars are on their way. What they do, they walk 'em across the top of the hill to try to cover the whole hill. And these magnificent men I served with, these men that weren't wounded in the hole with the guys they were trying to keep alive, when they'd hear that they'd throw their bodies down on top of their wounded buddy. And the first one would go off, and the second would go off. And each one of 'em was walking closer to you, and you'd think the next one was right on your head.

Bad part about it is the next morning when we finally got the hill secure a little bit, we found some of our Marines dead with the back of their head taken off with a mortar round, his body draped over the body of a wounded comrade. All night you could hear 'em out there making noise. If they knew how bad they had chopped us up, they could've overrun us. We, as NCOs, was crawling from around the perimeter saying, "Don't fire at noises. Don't fire at noises, 'cause they could see how thin we are." We had plenty of grenades. "Throw the grenade down the hill." First light they backed off. The problem was in the middle of the night these guys down here we couldn't get to, they come off the hill, went down to where our dead and wounded were and stab 'em with a bayonet or kick 'em. If they flinched or made a sound, they shot 'em in the head. I remember later as we was loading the bodies on the

helicopters seeing the holes in the heads. There was a guy named Bernard. I can't remember his first name. I'm sorry. Bernard, he was laying down there with his stomach ripped open, literally holding his guts in his hand. And he were laying there next to another wounded Marine who was moaning, moaning. And Bernard could hear him coming off the hill.

And Bernard says, "Shh, play dead. Play dead." He couldn't, the poor guy, he was just in so much pain. Bernard played dead.

They come down there. They heard him and they shot him in the head. Bernard, looking at his stomach, he looked like he was dead, his guts hanging out. And he just played dead. They stuck him once and they took his watch off his arm, cigarettes off the pocket. Rolled him over, took his wallet out of his pocket. Took his M-14, his weapon, and left him for dead. When they left, he started crawling back up the hill, literally holding his guts in his hand. If they heard somebody coming down the hill, they'd roll of to the side and play dead.

First light we heard him yelling. We sent down a patrol, brought him up the hill. Bravest most courageous man I know. While we're waiting to try to get a helicopter in to get him out, he told us what happened. When we got the first helicopter in, he was one of the first ones we put on. I never seen him again. I never knew if he lived or died. Thirty years later in 1996, one of the guys in our unit put a reunion together, took time to try to locate us all. And I walked into the reception room. Haven't seen my buddies in 30 years. There he stood, Bernard. He was alive. He lived through it. I literally broke down and cried just to see him.

But anyway, that was Hill 362. Finally, when we got the hill secure, they was trying to send a relief column up to is, K Company up to reinforce us. Most of the enemy is over here, and the enemy is over here, and they were getting ready to assault the hill to finish us off. There's a guy named Richard Pittman. Richard Pittman, when he went to try to join the Marine Corps, knew that he couldn't get in if they knew that he had a bad eye. So he went down, 18 years old, took the physical. And when they did the eye test they said, "Cover one eye and read." He covered it and he read it.

They said, "Great. Cover the other eye." He covered the same eye. Read it. Never got caught. Got in the Marine Corps. He was the Lance Corporal on that hill that day. When they were coming up to finish us off, 'cause we hadn't got help there yet, Richard grabbed a machine gun from a dead machine gunner, went charging down the hill to try to stop the assault, John Wayne style as we called it, 'til he run out of ammo. He grabbed a M-14 from a dead Marine, continued the assault 'til it was shot out of his hand. And the last weapon he grabbed was a AK-47 of one of the dead, North Vietnamese soldiers, 'til he ran out of ammo, come back up the hill. But his withering fire had

slowed 'em down. They stopped to regroup. And from my understanding, when he come up the hill, and I believe this is the way it was. There are a lot of things that are fuzzy and stuff. I don't wanna say anything that's not true. But the story is he had a bullet caught in the cartridge belt, in the buckle of his cartridge belt. A bullet had went through the helmet, penetrated the front, hit the back inside of the helmet and spun around his head. That was the only thing that was wrong with him.

After Vietnam was over, he was at Camp Pendleton, California and he wanted to reenlist in the United States Marine Corps. He was a sergeant at this time. He had to take a reenlistment physical. Went down to take the reenlistment physical, tried the same thing. Didn't get away with it. They would not let him reenlist. It broke his heart. He was a Marine, really wanted to stay a Marine. They sent him back to Stockton, California where he was from. A year later there was a knock on the door. Roughly a year later. And it was two Marines telling him that he needed to report to Washington, D.C., that the President of the United States, President Lyndon Johnson, was gonna aware him the Medal of Honor for his actions on the 24th of July 1966. So he put his uniform on, reported into Washington, D.C. President Johnson pinned the Medal of Honor around his neck and said, "Sergeant, is there anything I can do for you?"

He said, "Yes, sir. I want back in the Marine Corps."

He said, "Well, why aren't you in there now?"

"They wouldn't let me reenlist."

"Why not?"

"I'm blind. Not all blind, but problems with this eye. Almost blind."

"Did you have that problem when you was on this hill that day?"

"Yes, sir." He winked at him and walked off.

He went back to Stockton, California and about something like two or three weeks later there's another knock on the door. Two United States Marine Corps recruiters saying, "We don't know what's going on, Sergeant, but we've got orders directly from the President of the United States to put you back in the United States Marine Corps."

And he went back in. Spent another 26 years, basically the same time I did, and retired the same rank I was when I retired eventually from the Army as a Master Sergeant. Two years ago, I had the privilege to be invited back to Stockton, California where they was naming a brand new elementary school after the town hero. And there was about ten of us guys that was on that hill that day that went back, and we was part of the program as they introduced him and named this new elementary school the Richard Pittman Elementary School. Sometimes I wonder how many other of us might not have come off that hill on our own two feet if it wasn't for Richard being able to get in. Sometimes as a recruiter, had to turn many people away that I thought could still have made outstanding soldiers, sailors, Marines, but they wouldn't let 'em enlist because of some physical problem.

Once we got the hill secure, they dropped chainsaws down to us so we could cut the jungle out, try to get our dead and wounded out. I have some pictures of that over here. A lot of the guys off the choppers were combat photographers, and we was a little disturbed with 'em 'cause we was trying to take care of our wounded and our dead and get 'em on there. But now I'm glad because I actually have pictures of what went on on the hill. And it frustrates me in a way 'cause I do talk about it, but it was 'cause of that promise I made, and I'm glad I have the evidence to show 'em. But we got all our dead and wounded off the hill, and then there was a few of us that stood on the hill, still with the blood of our brothers.

We'd wrapped our dead in ponchos, and when we picked the ponchos up to load 'em on the helicopters, blood would run outta the ponchos down on our shirts. And we'd actually pick up parts of bodies that had been blown up by the mortars. We put our wounded in one little spot so that we could get 'em outta there when we could finally get a medevac chopper in. Unfortunately, one of the mortars hit right where they were. One of 'em was named Kittle, he was another machine gunner. He was there wounded; should of lived through his wounds. But he was just blown apart; another young 18-year-old. We got all our dead and wounded off the hill, and some of us that was wounded, like myself, we still had to walk off the hill because we had had so many casualties.

The 22nd we had eight killed. On that hill, we had 26 killed of the 180-man company. Somewhere around 70-80 wounded. It was a terrible casualty rate. We'd killed a lot more North Vietnamese soldiers, but it didn't feel like a victory. It was too costly. I go to the wall often, and at the wall Panel 90 where most of my brother's names are. And one year I took my oldest daughter that was born while I was in Vietnam. I never thought I was gonna see her a number of times. This is one battle. I can tell you three, four others. Couldn't take all my kids, so I took her. And I went to that wall the first time, and I took a picture. I've got a copy of the picture over here, I'll show it to you later. It's a picture of my company. It was taken in Okinawa before we went to Vietnam, it's got all my guys on it.

And I'd wrote on the picture, "You are not forgotten. India Company, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines." And I walked up to

the part of the wall where my guys are and I put the picture down, backed up, rendered the proper salute. A group of girls over here seen me do it. They come over and they picked up the picture and they got me talking. I'd touch a name on the wall, tell 'em about the guy, show them his picture and how he died, how young he was, how he never got to be a father. Those that were fathers, how they never got to go back home and see their children and give that wife of theirs a last hug. As I talked and told about each of these guys, the crowd grew bigger and bigger and bigger. Every time I tried to stop and walk away, they wouldn't let me.

As I looked around, these girls, these young girls, tears were just coming down their eyes. It touched me tremendously to know that they had some feelings about my guys. Finally, when I did get away, as I was walking away they applauded me.

I said, "Don't applaud me. Applaud my guys on the wall, those that gave their all."

Two chaperones of the girls walked over to me, and they come up and said,
"Mr. Campbell, we need a hug."

I said "Well, why's that?"

They said, "Because you're an answer to our prayer."

They said, "Well, an old man like me will never turn down a hug to a couple of pretty girls. Come here." And we hugged. And I said, "Well, what do you mean I was an answer to your prayer?"

They said, "We've had these kids here in Washington, D.C. for over 10 days trying to touch their hearts, trying to make them to understand why they have the freedoms they have, why they'll be able to go on trips, why they'll be able to go to school, why they have what they have, and this is the first time I've been able to get through to 'em. We wanna thank you."

And I tell that story because it warms my heart to know that others had some feelings about these guys that I have feelings about. We have reunions every three years, and nobody can understand the bonds that we have as we've sat together and talked about it, and to talk about each guy. And the first reunion was so unique to me.

I've been telling these stories to my young kids, my kids and my grandkids for some years, and sometimes they didn't seem like they were real, that maybe I was making 'em up or they didn't maybe happen the way I thought

they would. Once I got there, sitting down with the guys and hear them tell the same stories that I was telling, it made me feel verified, everything I was saying. Made me realize I wasn't crazy. That's really the way it was. They talk about the fog of war, and sometimes you say did it really happen that way, was it really that way? And the dear Lord did a couple things for me, and yet I get frustrated about it. I only remember little spots, little things about them two days in July. It's like He wipes a lot of the bad out of my mind. And so when I get with these guys and we talk about it, it frustrates me terribly. I wanna know. I wanna know what I was doing and where I was. And they tell me stories, and then little flashes will come back and little things will verify. This one guy, I walked in, first reunion. His name was Webber. I couldn't remember him really, if you wanna know the truth. But he come up to me and he put his arm around me. He says, "Sergeant Campbell, I'll never forget what you did for me that day."

"I did? What did I do for you?"

He says, "Once we got dug in on the hill and we was trying to just keep alive for the rest of the night, you come crawling up to my hole and found that I'd lost my weapon in battle. And you crawled away, and a little while later you crawled back and gave me a .45."

I said, "Webber, you got the wrong guy. I don't remember that." He said, "Sergeant Campbell, it was you, I remember it and I've always been grateful. I tell my grandkids about you." I don't say that to pat me on my back. As terrible as war is, there's things that come out of there that mean so much to you. Another guy come up to me, his name is Corporal Houghton. Hadn't seen him in 30 years. First thing he said to me, come up and put his arm around me and turned to my granddaughter and says, "I want you to know that your father is the ones that kept us good."

I said, "What?"

"Kept us good."

I'm LDS. I tried to do the right thing, set the right example. And you don't know how it's affecting others around you. When we first got in that first battle, everybody wondered how you do it. 'Cause for some reason 'cause I'm a Mormon, they think I'm like Sergeant York or someone that don't believe in carrying arms and protecting yourselves.

Interviewer

How was Vietnam different from what you'd learned?

Gary Campbell

I returned to Vietnam two years ago. Amazing experience. Two years ago I returned to Vietnam. It was an amazing experience. Let me say a couple things I'd like to say because I like people to have the right idea. I was in one fire fight. I don't know if I wanna get into it, but I'll just roughly tell you about it. Most fire fights, like on the hill or in the streambed, you're usually shooting at a hedgerow, a tree line. As terrible as a battle is, when the fighting's over you don't really know who killed who. You understand what I'm saying? I went through one incidence where that wasn't the case. I was on Operation NAPA, and two enemy soldiers come up the trail. We'd set in for the night. I was in a hole with a guy named Leonard. He was asleep in the hole and I was on watch. All of a sudden, I could hear some whispering out in front of me. Confused me because nobody had told me about any patrols we had coming in or any listening posts out in front of us. And as I listened, it got louder, I could tell it was Vietnamese. I reached up and I grabbed Leonard's leg to pull him down into the hole. Our hole wasn't very deep because we was trying to dig a foxhole when we set up on this hill that night. And we ran into stone rock, so our hole was only about this deep. And because we had spent so much time trying to dig our hole, we did something we shouldn't have. We never cleared a field of fire out in front of our hole. Never cut down the bushes and a lot of the other stuff. You wanna have a good clear field of fire within grenade range so they can't hide in the trees or in the brush and throw grenades at you. And about the time I could tell it was Vietnamese, I grabbed Leonard's leg and tried to wake him and pull him up into the hole. And then the rest of it happened so fast. The moon was so bright. Earlier, I looked at my new Seiko watch that I had just gotten. And even though it didn't have an illuminated dial I could tell what time it was, so it's embedded in my mind, 20 after 12. But all of a sudden, as I grabbed him to pull him in the hole, two faces was in the brush in front of me shining off their faces. Just as clear as day I can still see the faces. At the same time, grenades went off, bullets started kicking up. I had my M-14, and I emptied my M-14 to where I could see the faces. Then all of a sudden I heard scattering and running and yelling. Everybody around me had nothing going on, and I hollered, "They're out there. They're out there. Be alert." Something like that.

I can't remember exactly what I said. And nobody could hear anything. They said, "What's going on with Campbell? He's lost his noodle or what?" Didn't know it when I'd opened fire, shot one guy in the forehead, the other one in the stomach. The one in the stomach run down the trail. The one that was shot in the head died immediately, and he had a 9-millimeter sub-machine gun on him. These are Viet Cong. They hate to lose a weapon of that magnitude. All night they was trying to get back up to that weapon, I'd hear 'em, we'd exchange fire, and it was a long night. First light it got quiet, and I turned to Leonard and I said, "I'm gonna see if anything's down there." I stood up on the pear pit of the foxhole. You know what a pear pit is, where you stir it up. They were throwing a grenade, and it had landed on the pear pit, hadn't went off. This gets into a little bit of a religious nature because I feel that the dear Lord protected me for some reason. I'd had a special blessing before I left home, and to me, and still to this day I look at all my kids and I say maybe that's the reason why. I don't know. But it hadn't went off. I sunk to my knees shaking and called DOD over and they blew it up. When they got looking at it, the pin was still just barely in it. If

somebody had blown on it, it could have probably set the grenade off. After I gained my composure, I walked down the trail, and I still see him to this day. He looked so young. So young. He had pictures in his wallet of his family and his kids and his wife. I couldn't look at it. I couldn't. Some of the guys were taking pictures of him, I didn't want a picture. And they told me about the other one down the trail. It becomes so personal. So much different than shooting at a tree line or a hedge or anything else. I knew it ended these young people's lives, and I knew they had families, families that wanted them home as bad as I did.

And it's taken me years to kinda deal with that. I talk about it 'cause it helps me. And I don't know why it helps me. I don't know why I can talk about things and tell these things when other veterans, they keep it all bottled up in 'em. It's like my mission in life is to tell about these things, to tell about these young guys, tell about how young they are, tell about what they gave up, tell about their families, tell about how hard it is to go. Even in our war today, these young people that have to leave. I know how hard it was when my son left, had to leave his three children and his wife. And watching them cry as they're getting on the airplane and saying goodbye. As I'm driving home, my little four-year-old grandson says to me, "Grandpa, we have to go back to the airport tomorrow to pick up my daddy," not knowing and understand his daddy's gonna be gone for a year and maybe, always in the back of the mind, he's not coming home. I wish people could just every day think about these young people that are over there. It's not easy. I don't care if you get into combat or not. You're away from your family, your kids, your wife.

I tell kids when I talk at high schools and tell 'em some of these things I'm telling you, "What if your dad was leaving in the morning and he was going away for a year. And it was off in the back of your mind, you know he's going into a combat area and he may not come home."

Well, this is what's happening in our world today, and we need to take time to remember these young. They're the bravest, the greatest generation. You've heard that before in World War II, and I really believe that; that was my father's generation. But these kids today, they're all serving because they want to serve, not because they're forced to serve. They're all volunteers. That wasn't the case in my war. In my war, there was many of us forced to be over there through the draft. Now, I'm not saying a draftee couldn't be a good soldier, but many of 'em weren't. Many of 'em brought down morale and didn't wanna be there and let you know it and so on and so forth.

That brings up a point about Vietnam that I get so, so, so frustrated about. I cannot watch a movie on Vietnam. I cannot. I get so frustrated with 'em and I just wanna throw a brick through the TV or whatever I'm watching. Most movies on Vietnam, because it was an unpopular war, Hollywood hated us, the high school, the colleges and the demonstrations and everything that went on there. And all wars before Vietnam -- World War I, II, Korea -- they made a movie on the war and the people in it and the soldiers, they were the heroes. That wasn't the case in

Vietnam. They made us all the bad guys. Made us look like we all burned up every village we seen and we raped women and killed kids and flagged our officers and we were all drug heads. That is so, so not what it was. So, so not. Not where I was there, anyway. Not in my unit. I never seen or ever raped one woman. I never seen it done. I never seen one kid shot or killed. I never seen one person in my unit use drugs. Maybe it was 'cause it was early in the war. I don't know. But we wouldn't allow it.

That guy in the hole with you, your life depended on him having a clear head. And so what I'd like to say to anybody that happens to see this, believe half of what you see in these movies today. I get so frustrated about 'em. Most of 'em are a dishonor to those of us that served there, particularly those that died there. And the only movie on Vietnam I'd recommend you'd see, and it's a true movie, was this latest one out, "We Were Soldiers." That's very, very realistic. It's a lot like my unit. We trained together before we went over. We went over as a unit instead of individual replacements. You could see 'em notifying the families at home of their loved ones lost. We had a unit cut off just like they did, couldn't get down to 'em until the battle was over. That's why I go around to a lotta schools and talk about Vietnam. I want people to know what it was really like, not what you see in the movies.

Interviewer

Talk about PTSD.

Gary Campbell

PTSD is real. I think there's a few that take advantage of it, but you're gonna have that wherever you go, whatever you do. But I don't really have that big a problem with it. I get a little compensation for it because I went in, talked to the VA. But in general, I cope with what I went through pretty good. And most of the guys I work with and I see at these reunions cope with it pretty good. Sometimes people get the idea the Vietnam vet is some kinda weirdo, that they're all on drugs or been on drugs, that they're homeless out on the street, they don't hold jobs. That is so unfair. That's so untrue.

I read a study somewhere where they did a little thing on that, and as far as being employed, being successful, being productive good citizens, we're ahead of most people. And I can't give you the numbers, there was a place that I'd read it. And I don't like the perception a lot of people have of the Vietnam vet. When I went over there, I know I went over with the idea of serving my country; I was doing what I needed to be doing for my country. I'd been in the Marine Corps for six years, I'd been training for this. It was time for Peter to pay Paul, or whatever.

And back then the idea was if South Vietnam fell, next would be Laos, next would be Cambodia, next would be Thailand, the domino effect. And so we went over there to do the honorable thing. And I sometimes get frustrated about Vietnam. I get frustrated about the Jane Fonda and some of the others that have no idea what went on. One

thing that really frustrates me is we pulled our last troops out in '73. Our first troops went in in '65. Pulled our last ground troops and everything out in '73. Eight years. That's a long war. And it went on before then, before ground troops went in.

In '75, two years later, Saigon fell. When Saigon fell, millions of people were slaughtered. Between Cambodia and South Vietnam, three million people were slaughtered or missing or never found again. Not one demonstration from the Jane Fondas of the world. Not one. Yet they did everything in their power to make it so we couldn't win the war, to rob of us our victory, to prolong it. People don't understand sometimes, young college kids particularly. And I shouldn't say this, but when they changed the voting age from 21 to 18 I thought it was a mistake. I think some people in high school and college just don't really know what's going on in the world. They're persuaded too easy. They go out and do their demonstrations simply because their buddy's doing it, it's something to do and it's the popular thing to do.

Well, when you do things like this, you've gotta realize the responsibility that goes behind it. You can't sit around and think that the enemy don't see what's going on. And when they see the demonstrations in the high schools, when they see the riots on campus, when they see our senators and that yelling for us to get out, it emboldens 'em, it encourages 'em. It tells the enemy we can't beat 'em on a battlefield, but if we prolong it long enough, they're gonna win it for us at home. And that's what most of us believe at home. 58,000-plus men, some women, died in Vietnam. 58,000. Do I feel it's for not? Yes, because we didn't succeed in what we were doing.

I particularly felt that way up until I went back to Vietnam. Got on that plane and was going back. Got on the plane in Hong Kong. Ten of us were going back to pay respects to our fallen buddies after 40 years. There was a Vietnamese flight attendant on there. When he heard we was on there, he come back and he couldn't have treated us with more respect and love. Thanked us for what we had tried to do. And that's the one thing he told me;

He said, "It wasn't all for not. We learned a lot from you Marines and soldiers and sailors who went over there. You know, in the South we have a much better standard of living, and it's because of what we learned from the Americans, than they do in the North. And the North is starting to realize that and starting to do a little more of the capitalism stuff to the north that we're doing in the South."

And he says, "It's because of that."

And I didn't know what to expect when I got there, and they treated us with such great respect. Got signs, "Welcome back." Went into some of the villages that we'd protected 40 years ago. This one village, very primitive,

they lived in bamboo huts up on stilts, had nothing hardly. They heard we was coming and they spent two days cleaning up the village before we got there. When we got there, they made us sit down and wouldn't let us set up our base camp, 'cause we was setting up a base camp 'cause we was trying to get back up to Hill 362 and down in the streambed where we wanted to do something in these battle areas where we could pay respect to our brothers. They treated us with great respect. We took stuff in for their schools, volleyballs and the nets and the supplies for the schools, and they greatly appreciated it. They invited us, each one of us, if we wanted to stay in one of their huts with 'em. We felt a little uncomfortable about that, so we all stayed together in that base camp. But they actually invited us into their very primitive homes.

That night they brought out a bamboo mat and spread it out. And they didn't have much, but they brought out dried fishcakes and rice cakes, and three great big jars, big jars with 10 bamboo straws sticking out of 'em of the homemade brew. And they had the chief and all the elders on one side, us old Marines on the other side, the whole village gathered around. They built a big fire and it about killed us 'cause the humidity was terrible. Certainly didn't need a fire. We had forgot about how bad the humidity was and how it was. But they had the old elders of the village sucking this stuff down on one side and the old Marines sucking it down on the other side. Because of my faith I wasn't. I was taking pictures of it. They were singing songs to us and everything else. It just warmed your heart.

The other village, this schoolteacher invited us into her home, and we wore their stuff. And it was just amazing. As we was going from place to place, I was walking through rice paddies on the docks. Oh, man, the memories that come flying back. Forty years ago, we was walking through them rice paddies, weapon in hand, watching for booby traps, looking out for ambushes, couldn't enjoy the country.

This time we went over there, as we was walking across them rice paddies, instead of a rifle we had our cameras in hand just looking at the beautiful countryside and it was an amazing experience. Had a little old lady coming running out to me, and in broken English she says, "You back. You back. You back."

And she told me that 40 years ago in that village she and her mother used to do the Marine's laundry. I was in another village walking through, and this old guy come up. He says, "Long time. Long time."

Come to find out, him and his dad, they used to clip the Marine's hair that was guarding their village. And it was just amazing to see 'em. And we wanted to take pictures. We had took one when we was in Vietnam 40 years ago of the kids that we fed and took care of and protected their village. And like I says, it was just the opposite from what the movies try to tell you. We fed 'em, we protected 'em from the Viet Cong. Our corpsman and medics delivered

babies and took care of 'em. And that's the way it was.

But the communist government wouldn't let us take the pictures of them 'cause they was afraid, I'm sure, that we had a picture of somebody they'd drug off into the jungle and shot after the war was over, and they didn't want that. We'd wanted to put a memorial up in the different battle areas where we were to commemorate the guys who had lost their lives there. Again, the communist government wouldn't let us do it. So what we'd take, and I've got a picture over here, we'd taken pebbles out of a stream, and on each of these pebbles we'd put the guy's name, the date of his death and where he was from. And as we got to these areas where we were, we just dropped the rocks with their name and stuff on it.

But it was an amazing trip. It really was an amazing trip. I love the Vietnamese people. A lot of guys from Vietnam say, "Why in the hell do you wanna go back there?" I don't know, but I did, and it was so healing for many of us. But the main reason was to pay respects to our brothers that didn't come home. And it was a great experience.

One more thing I wanna tell you about Vietnam. In Vietnam, it was a different type of war. My unit was based around Chu Lai. We was out on the outer parameter protecting the airbase. And you got a bunker every so often, and you got two Marines in it usually, sometimes more depending on what's going on. And one of you was on watch all the time, and the other, he's writing letters home or eating or trying to get a shower in the makeshift showers or whatever. But there's one on duty at all times. Every third night you have to go on a patrol. And this is the terrible part about this, have to go on a patrol.

See, after dark in Vietnam, a lot of people didn't know this, there's a curfew. And everybody knows that they stay in their village at night. If they're wandering around from village to village or out somewhere at night they're considered the enemy 'cause that's when the enemy moves from village to village, taking sons, taking food, setting up ambushes. That's when they do all their movement. And you probably know this. You've been there. So at night we set up ambushes out in front of our lines and everywhere else, and anything moving at night is considered the enemy. If somebody walks in the ambush, you spring it. Then you'll run back to your main lines. Next morning you go out and check. Usually, you don't find any enemy, maybe a dead water buffalo or maybe nothing or whatever. And by the way, if you find a dead water buffalo guess what we had to do? Find the owner of that water buffalo and give him \$500 'cause his family would starve to death without their water buffalo. And it was part of the Vietnamization program. You want 'em on your side. Because a lot of times you don't know who the enemy is, when it's the Viet Cong, until he takes a shot at you or walks into one of your ambushes.

The North Vietnamese Regular, which is your other enemy, you know 'em when you see 'em because they're in

uniform. The Viet Cong, that's not the case. They live in the villages. And even the village, if they know that these are the bad guys, they won't let you know who they are unless you convince 'em you're there to stay. 'Cause they know as soon as you leave and they pointed out the bad guys, they're dead. And it's so hard to convince 'em you're there to stay to protect 'em when you got what was going on in the United States, pulling us out, bringing us home, riots in the street. And so it just prolonged the war in my mind. And a lot of this is my opinion. And so you have to convince 'em that you're there to stay.

But we set up these ambushes. Even if it was raining you can't even take your poncho out with you because you sit in the ambush. You've gotta be absolutely still. Rain hitting on that poncho can give your position away. And you sit out there all night just trying to stay awake. And you do this every third night. You hated 'em. The one night we sprung an ambush and we took off back. Went back out the next day and there was two VC, and one of 'em was the barber from our village. The barber. What better way to get information, huh? Sitting there cutting number one GI's hair. "You number one GI." Cutting your hair and talking to you. So it was a different war, but it was a war I think could have been won if we'd have stuck together as a nation. And that's the way I feel about the war we're in now. If we stick together as a nation, it'll shorten it and save lives instead of embolden and encourage the enemy. And again, this is my opinion.

Interviewer

Why is it difficult for other Vietnam vets to tell their story?

Gary Campbell

I don't really know how to answer that question, but I know what you're talking about 'cause most people don't have any concept of what Vietnam was like. Most people have wrong ideas of Vietnam. When I got off the plane, there was no crowds there meeting me and clapping and welcoming me home. I got off the airplane and there wasn't a soul there, not even my wife. She didn't know I was coming home. But I do remember what we used to call flower kids or something there as they'd come in the airport, give you the old V sign. And most Vietnam vets hate the V sign. World War II it was the victory sign. For the anti-war demonstrations in Vietnam, that was theirs. That wasn't ours. And they went on college campuses. I come off of one as a recruiter, and they didn't have any respect for you. "You was baby killers, you was warmongers." It was the attitude of the country at the time. And actually, some people, when they come back were ashamed they'd been there, unfortunately. I wasn't. I looked for opportunities to tell what it was really about and to tell about my brothers. But maybe it's because of the promise I made, and I meant it.

When I come back, I had to talk about it because I was on recruiting duty. I was going into high schools and college campuses trying to get people to join the Marine Corps. And these folks knew without a doubt if they joined the Marine Corps they were going to Vietnam. And they wanted to know about it and I had to talk about it, and I did talk

about it. And I wish I had all the answers. I don't know. I know this. When we get to our units and are together, you get Vietnam vets together, they do talk about it. There's a bond. I don't know what it is. Particularly with the guys I was over there with. I look forward every three years, and there's less of us every three years when we have our reunion. We had our first reunion in 1996, 30 years after, and we still have 'em about every three years. What is it, about, God, our 45th or something coming up. You lose track.

Interviewer

You said you had a story about M-16s and M-14s.

Gary Campbell

Yeah. Well, I loved my M-16. My M-16 saved my life another time. There's three other battles I was in I haven't even brought up to you. But it was my weapon. I loved it. When I first went in the military, the Marine Corps, I was carrying an M-1. That's how old I am. Went in in 1960, they give me the M-1 and the old Browning automatic rifle and the old 30-caliber machine gun, and that's what we carried. The first time I went overseas that's what I carried. '62 when I come back from overseas, they took our M-1s and give us the M-14, and I loved it. It's got a silly clip that you got your thumb caught in all the time, M-1 thumb, and it only had eight rounds. We had a magazine that'd hold 20 rounds. When you're in a battle, the more rounds without having to change the better off you feel you are.

I loved the M-14. And they gave us the M-14 in place of the Browning automatic rifle and the M-1. Every fourth M-14 was fully automatic to take the place of the bar, but the other three were boom, boom, boom, semi-automatic like the M-1. And then they took the old 30-caliber machine gun away and gave us the M-60 machine gun, which was a much better weapon because you could change the barrel so much faster. If you're being assaulted, you know, you put so many rounds in that barrel it gets too hot. So you have to take that one out and put the new barrel in, and that was such an easier job with the new M-60. And I was in Vietnam, most of the Army had M-16s, but we had M-14s. Just before I was coming home, I came home in April of '67. About February, they plopped this toy in my hand and they called it the M-16. Your M-14 had a wood stock, felt like a real weapon, you know what I mean? And the M-16, it was kind of the plastic thing. And it was lighter. You could carry more rounds because it was a smaller round. It was easier maybe to get through the jungle 'cause it was a little smaller. But we just didn't like it. And they never really gave us any familiarization with it before they give it to us. One day you had the one, and the next day you had the other. And in our minds also, the M-14 could get pretty darned dirty and still function. Them first M-16s that come out, they get a little dirty and raunchy and they'd malfunction. We had more malfunctions with 'em. I understand they corrected that problem years later, but that's the way it is.

Interviewer

When those helicopters were coming out of Saigon, where were you?

Gary Campbell

I was what you call a reenlistment NCO. I was a gunnery sergeant in a Marine Corps base, El Toro, California,

Marine Corps Air Station. I had hopes that Saigon would not fall, but absolutely figured that would be the case. I had thoughts of what's gonna happen when it did, 'cause I knew there'd be millions slaughtered. I had mixed feelings, actually, 'cause it was nice knowing none of the other guys were going over there. It'd be nice to come home victorious, and that wasn't the case. In fact, my grandkids sometimes ask me, "Grandpa, how come the only war you fought in is the one we lost?"

I'd say, "What are you trying to tell me there, guys?" So I fooled around with that little bit.

Interviewer

So were you watching it on TV like everybody else?

Gary Campbell

I can't remember. I can't remember. I wished I could. I can remember watching on TV as the prisoner of wars were coming out of the airplane.

Interviewer

What did you think about that?

Gary Campbell

I had a friend, name was Jim Littler. He was a helicopter pilot when I was in Quantico, Virginia, I was the MP. And we become close friends. He was in my branch there and we home taught together. He had two precious kids and a wife. And when I left Quantico, Virginia heading for Vietnam, he was headed for Pensacola, Florida learning how to fly helicopters. When I come back from Vietnam, I stopped at Marine Corps Air Station El Toro where he was a helicopter pilot. He was getting ready his unit to go over and so he wanted to talk to me about the war and things, and we had dinner and we talked, my wife and my new baby and his children. He wanted to be a jet pilot, but he wasn't able to be one; he was a helicopter pilot. I said goodbye to him. I went on recruiting duty up in Boise, Idaho and six months later I got a telegram from his wife telling that he had been killed. He was in a helicopter and it was taking a recon unit in, dropping 'em off, inserting 'em in. He dropped the unit off and got halfway back to Chu Lai when he got a frantic call. They were surrounded, about ready to be overrun. He turned that helicopter around and went back in to try and insert 'em out. Landed the chopper and got 'em all on board and got about 100, 200 feet in the air and it exploded, went to the ground and burned. Killed 'em all. His wife was telling me by telegram and he's buried in the Punchbowl. You know what the Punchbowl is in Hawaii? That's where he's from. Brought the body home and they wouldn't let his wife look at him because he was in pretty bad shape. And she said she always regretted it because it just really didn't sink in. She says that she was sitting there watching the prisoners of war come off the airplane, she was waiting for her husband to come home. And when he didn't, that's when reality really hit her, and she had the hardest time. Her name was Sherry Littler. His name was Jim Littler. And it was a joyous occasion watching them come home. I just wish more of 'em had been able to.

Interviewer

Could we talk about Agent Orange? When and where were you exposed? And what was it really like to be a ground pounder?

Gary Campbell

A lot of pride. I'm very proud I was an infantryman in the Marine Corps. That's the Marine Corps. Everything else is to support that infantryman. Agent Orange, you asked me where was I when I was exposed to it. I don't know. They just tell me I was exposed to it 'cause I was up in the DMZ a lot. See, normally, like I says, you're on the parameter. You're on the parameter and there's two guys to a bunker. And every third night you go out on an ambush, and then you come back in and fill in the lines again. And it's just an old routine. It gets old and bad. And you live in bunkers.

I've got some pictures of 'em over there. You can occasionally go down the hill behind you, and they have a makeshift mess hall, and get a hot meal, get a hot shower. You can't do it every day, but you can do it. But then about every, I don't know, sometimes every couple of months they go on what they call an operation. I went on six major operations. When you go on an operation, they take your unit off the line, and then the other units kind of fill in the space. And you go out on the offensive instead of the defensive. You're going out in their territory. You're going out where you're probably gonna get into battle. And usually you're out there anywhere from two weeks to 30 days. That's where the action is usually taking place. That's when you're looking for the enemy. You're on your search and destroy. You're trying to find the enemy to kill 'em. That's your job. And then after that's over, they bring you back to the lines and you fill in your bunkers again, and you're kinda back where you regroup so you're not being shot at every day, you know what I'm saying? Get pretty dirty out there. When I knew I was going on an operation, I'd write my wife, send her a letter, says, "If you don't hear from me for two, three weeks, don't get too upset. We're going out on an operation." It was a lot different war than the war today. These kids nowadays talk to their parents on the Internet daily and so on and so forth. Ours was only mail and it was usually two or three weeks old by the time we got the letter.

So I wrote and told my wife I was leaving. It was on Operation Hastings. And you don't get any mail for a while and you can't wait to get back to get your mail. Well, when Operation Hastings and our company went into battle, you can see the headlines over there. In the news and in the paper, "Marine unit almost annihilated," and it put my unit down.

My folks knew what unit I was in. And it was on the news, and when they heard this they all come to my house, my mother and my wife, even an old girlfriend, and neighbors, just waiting to hear what happened. They was all at my house for a good week when a staff car pulls up in front of my house. It about killed my mother, and everybody started screaming 'cause they thought, oh, he's coming in to tell us I was dead. And he come in and he seen and he started yelling, "No, no, no. He's alive. He's alive." And he knocked on the door and brought in the telegram

telling them I had been wounded and my shape and everything that I was in.

But a lot of times you don't know Agent Orange is around you. You just don't know. It's a defoliagizer. I can't tell you when I was in it. I can't tell you when I was exposed to it. I don't know. I just know by the military records and by the units, they know where you were and what time, and they tell you you was exposed to Agent Orange. I don't know for sure if Agent Orange is causing all of my problems. I do have Type II Diabetes. I got it late in life. The VA automatically assumes it's because of Agent Orange. I do have PTSD, and there's not a day that goes by that I don't think about Vietnam. I do dream about it. I have bad dreams sometimes. I do well. I'm not a nutcase. The shaking that I have now, in my mind it is from Agent Orange. Haven't been able to prove it yet. They're still trying to determine that through the VA. If I had Parkinson's, they'd recognize it. Well, this isn't far from Parkinson's, I'm sorry. And so I just think there's some connection there.

Interviewer

Did you watch Agent Orange be deployed?

Gary Campbell

Never seen it.

Interviewer

Tell us what it's like to watch an airstrike.

Gary Campbell

Particularly, I could tell you one. We was on an operation, they called it a rough rider. A rough rider is a convoy going from one place to another. I don't know why they do 'em. To me, it's so stupid. Route I ran from Chu Lai to De Nang, coastal highway, main highway. And occasionally they'd like to do a show of force and run a convoy down there. I don't know why they'd do it 'cause they can go from one base to the other by helicopter or by boat down the sea. But they wanna show the South Vietnamese people we're there. We're there. And they called 'em rough riders, 304s, and they have these convoys. And this one was just before I was supposed to come home, and I thought if I'm gonna get killed, I should've been home a month ago, this is when I'm gonna die because I should've been home a month ago, but I was still waiting for orders and a ride home.

Put us on this convoy and they sandbag all the trucks, okay. And they got troops in the back of the trucks facing outward, and you got sandbags all over 'em, and you got a machine gun on top of the truck and you're going down there. You feel absolutely like a sitting duck. People hate rough riders, as we called 'em, because it's a very short road, thin road; it's about a one-lane road. And they drop off into rice paddies on both sides. So the rice paddies go out for a few hundred yards to the tree lines where the enemy can hide. And you're sitting ducks sitting up on this dyke driving down there.

And this particular one we got ambushed. They blew up the first truck. The sandbags don't do you much good. The driver and everybody was killed. And normally when you hit an ambush like that, you take off through what we call the killing zone. You hit it and get the hell outta there. We couldn't because the road was blocked with the blown-up truck and the rice paddies dropped off; we couldn't get off the road. We had to bail outta the trucks into the rice paddy, and that was a hell of a note. And you're sitting down there kissing the mud, trying to return fire and then you're trying to hide behind the dyke. And you can see where they're firing from, and you're just pinned down. And so we're trying to lay down a field of fire so we can get the truck outta the way so we can get outta there.

One of the best things you can see at a time like that is two Huey's coming in to give you support with their gunships going boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, shooting where the enemy is so that you can get the truck outta the way and jump back on them trucks and head back outta that killing zone. There was about four or five times I remember air support coming in right out in front of us. And you see 'em coming in. I can't really say I seen a lotta that, but even just flying overhead, it gives you that feeling of security because you know if they're overhead, the enemy is less willing to engage you.

And you just loved to see Puff the Magic Dragon. Puff the Magic Dragon is a Huey helicopter with rockets on it. Puff. And when they'd fire 'em, there was just kind of a puff of smoke. Puff the Magic Dragon. Have you ever heard the song "Puff the Magic Dragon?" It was big during that time. Here comes Puff, Puff the Magic Dragon. And you felt so much securer when you had them around you. You didn't feel so vulnerable. And it didn't happen all the time, but it was nice when they were around. And at night when you're out on an operation and you've been sweeping all day looking for the enemy and you've been trading fire with the enemy, and it's nighttime and now you settle in for the night in what you call a hasty parameter. And all of a sudden, you can hear that little airplane up above. It's not a helicopter, just a little light plane. And they're out there dropping these flares all night so you can see way out in front of you. And that gives you a warm, secure feeling 'cause now you can see what's out there. You've got these big rice paddies out in front of you and fields, and you can't see anything. And they just drop these little flares out of these airplanes, and it's a good feeling. I didn't see a lot of jets. I know of a few times when they come in close air support and dropped, but the main thing we dealt with was helicopters and Puff the Magic Dragon, and also the light little airplanes that come and drop the flares.

Interviewer

How old were you when you came back from Vietnam and became a recruiter?

Gary Campbell

Like I said, I went in the day I was 17. I went to Vietnam when I was 21 years old.

Interviewer

What year were you a recruiter?

Gary Campbell

I was a Marine recruiter from '68 to '71.

Interviewer

How did you convince new recruits to go to Vietnam?

Gary Campbell

There's just something about the Marine Corps. People wanna be Marines. It's just like people wanna be in the Special Forces. And there's young people that wanna serve. There just is. There's a lot that don't and a lot that make it hard to do. But we didn't have a hard time recruiting in a certain sense. You gotta remember, during that time you got a draft going on, too. The draft pushes a lot of people to enlist. They say, "No. I don't wanna be drafted in the Army and just stuck whatever they want. Instead of being drafted, I'm gonna go down and join the Marine Corps."

That was one of the big selling points. You can be a Marine. You don't have to be drafted in the Army and fill a foxhole. Well, low and behold, they still filled foxholes in the Marine Corps, but sometimes you don't emphasize everything. You know, you just try to do what your job is doing, is putting people in the Marine Corps. And sometimes I'd get heckled at a high school, but it wasn't ever a problem for me. It wasn't a big problem for me 'cause I had been there. I knew what was going on. I knew what the war was about. I could get a heckler once in a while, but I'd just say, "Hey, guy, I've been there. Let me tell you how it really was. By the way, I don't want you in my Marine Corps. You wouldn't make a pimple on a good Marine's ass."

That's what I felt like. And I would use that sometimes if he got out of hand. And so I really didn't have a heck of a lot of problem when I went to a high school. And I told 'em like it was.

I says, "If you go in the Marine Corps, you're probably gonna spend a year in Vietnam."

You know what the hardest part about recruiting was? Burying some of the guys I put in when I first went on to recruiting. Facing their parents and firing this rifle and folding up a flag and presenting it to the next of kin. 'Cause that happened. People I had put in earlier. And I remember that. I was there for three and a half years. We buried some of the people we reenlisted, and it was always a toughie. Sometimes we wouldn't take the recruiter with us to the ceremony because we was afraid it would cause some hard feelings. But more than ever, we'd get a call. "Is Sergeant Campbell there? Can you have him down here?"

They'd tell you how much they love you, that they didn't have the hard feelings sometimes you was afraid they was gonna have. But I enjoyed recruiting duty.

Interviewer

Talk about the dog tags you found.

Gary Campbell

Well, this is 40 years later when we went back to Vietnam, me and my 10 buddies. And we was going through this one village, and you gotta remember, there's 10 of us. I'm the only one from Utah, okay. Only one that's a member of the Mormon Church, LDS Church. All the others from all parts of the country. We just met in L.A. and flew out altogether. I'm going through this village, and this old gentleman comes running out hollering at me. He runs right up to me, not any of the others, hands me this dog tag. And I look at it, and on it, it says "J.R. Miller, U.S. Marine Corps, 5991962, blood type; O, religion; LDS."

And a chill just went through me. You know how many dog tags have LDS on 'em? Very few. Mostly Catholic, Protestant, Baptist, so on and so forth. In my mind, it was like I was meant to have that dog tag.

And I looked at it and I said, "Can I have this?" And they like to sell 'em because it's how they make a little money. And so I gave him some dong for it and took it. And sometimes you can get some that they make up just so they can make money. This isn't one of them. And them guys over there, the Vietnamese know nothing about LDS or some of these other things. And I know it's a guy that served there that was a member of the LDS Church.

So I decided I was gonna try to find him. I haven't really tried very hard. I've just been so busy. But I did check the wall. His name isn't on it, so I know he didn't get killed over there. And so I had the thoughts of getting with the church record division and see if I could find a J.R. Miller somewhere, and to check with the VA. And I did a little research, but not what I'd like to. I'd like to find him and give him back his dog tag if he's still around.