Transcript of Gary Justesen Interview
Salt Lake City, Utah

Interviewer

Full name.

Gary Justesen
Gary Kent Justesen. J-u-s-t-e-s-e-n.

Interviewer

And where are you from?

Gary Justesen

I was born at St. Mark's Hospital on Beck Street in Salt Lake City.

Interviewer

And you went to high school where?

Gary Justesen

Cyprus High School in Magna.

Interviewer

And so you graduated from high school there?

Gary Justesen

I did.

Interviewer

And how did you end up in the Marine Corps?

Gary Justesen

Well, it was kind of weird. When I graduated from high school I was 17. So the day they had everybody go sign up for selective service, I wasn't 18. So I figured it will catch up with me somewhere else. So I graduated from high school, I enrolled here at the University of Utah the first year and worked at the theater department and was involved with the football program. And halfway through that year I sort of dropped out of college, you might say, and was living in a house with some guys and we were having a party one night and the police showed up. By that time I was 18. And there was a little beer involved. So they arrested us and the first thing the policeman asked for was some ID. So I gave him my driver's license. And he goes, "Well where's your selective service card?" And I said, "I don't have one." And he says, "Why not?" I go, "I figured you wouldn't miss one." That was probably the wrong thing to say. So from that point I was convinced it was a good idea maybe I just join and that would resolve any outstanding issues that might be about not having a draft card.

Interviewer

What year was that?

Gary Justesen

That was 1968 by that time.

Interviewer

So you chose the Marines, correct? Why did you choose the Marines?

Gary Justesen

Uh-hmm. I had a friend of mine I'd grown up with that was a little restless and wasn't really into going to college. And we were talking one day about the draft card deal and he said, "Well, I was thinking about joining the Marine Corps." I said, "Well that sounds like a pretty good idea." So we did. Not much thought about it. Just got to get this out of the way, let's go join.

Interviewer

And of course the war was going on. Did you think you'd go to Vietnam?

Gary Justesen

Well immediately it didn't really dawn on me that that's what would occur. You always have some fantasy about well, I'll get a different job, I won't be a grunt or whatever. But the day that I went in, it was 80 guys from Utah and they created the Utah Platoon and that was the group that I went in with. And we marched in the 24th of July Parade or 4th of July Parade, one of those parades. And at the end of the parade they gave us a manila envelope and herded us onto a plane, we were on our way to San Diego. As soon as I sat down on the plane I opened up this envelope and it took me a minute to figure out the acronyms, but right at the top of the page it was WestPac Ground Replacement Forces and I knew then that's where I was going regardless. Because the orders were already cut.

Interviewer

So where did you go for basic?

Gary Justesen

San Diego. The Marine Recruit Depo in San Diego so I was a Hollywood Marine, as they say. And I did basic infantry training in Camp Pendleton and then from there I did reconnaissance training, basically in Camp Pendleton, we went to several other places to do cold weather training and jungle training and stuff like that.

Interviewer

You became a radio operator. How did that happen?

Gary Justesen

I had a big back. When I showed up in-country, the platoon I got assigned to had just lost one of their radio operators. And the squad leader looked at me and said, "You got a big back, you can carry the radio." That was it.

Interviewer

So you went through all that training and when did you get your orders cut for Vietnam?

Gary Justesen

Like I say, they were cut the day I joined the Marine Corps. I mean I knew I was going, I just didn't know where or what I was gonna be doing, but I knew I was going.

Interviewer

Your training was in infantry?

Gary Justesen

Everybody in the Marine Corps is trained as an O-311; that's a rifleman. Everyone does that first. Then, depending on what MOS you qualify for, you go on to whatever other training would be applicable for your military occupation specialty, MOS.

Interviewer

And yours was?

Gary Justesen

Mine was O-311 period. You're gonna go be a grunt. So during basic infantry training school, on one Saturday morning, when everybody could take liberty, on the Friday they had announced that anybody interested in joining reconnaissance should report at 0-800 on Saturday morning to one of the mess halls. And I started thinking about it and I thought well I'm going to Vietnam so there's no way of getting out of that. I think it's a lot easier to sneak through the jungle with four or five guys than it is with 250 which is the size of an infantry company. So I volunteered for the reconnaissance part of it. And they spent that first day running us through some pretty intense physical exercises to see if you had the physical capability of performing the duties that they wanted you to do. And the following week I got accepted. Couple weeks later we had a week's worth of liberty and then I went back and started reconnaissance school.

Interviewer

And where was that?

Gary Justesen

That was at Camp Pendleton as well. We were based there.

Interviewer

So when is it you actually head over?

Gary Justesen

I got in-country on the 1st of February, 1969.

Interviewer

How did you arrive?

Gary Justesen

On a commercial jet.

Interviewer

Tell us about that ride. Was there anything memorable about it?

Gary Justesen

The trip from Edwards Air Force Base to Tokyo was pretty fun. We partied up pretty good and they loved us. Nobody cared whether you were 21 or not, the whole plane load was going to Vietnam so we had quite a bit of fun on that leg of the trip. We stopped in Tokyo and we were there for, I don't know, a few hours. And then we got back on the same plane with a different flight crew and I remember going up the step and going to the stewardess and saying, "I was kind like the life of party on the last leg," and she says, "Yeah, we won't be doing any of that now." So then we took off for Vietnam and you could hear a pin drop in the plane as we were headed to Da Nang.

Interviewer

What did you see when that door opened?

Gary Justesen

Well flying in was at dusk, it was after 6:00 p.m., or 1800 and that's typically when all the compounds would close down. Anybody outside the wire after 1800 was fair game. And we were landing about that time so it was getting to be dusk. And the thing that stands out in my mind was watching rockets blow up.

Interviewer

So the place was under attack?

Gary Justesen

It wasn't under attack. These were outgoing, it wasn't incoming fire, it was all outgoing. But you could still see and hear the explosions and it was active, I guess you could say. And then we landed and they herded us into a temporary barracks. We spent the first few days at Da Nang Air Base being processed into country and then being sent out to units.

Interviewer

So what happened to you?

Gary Justesen

Well, the first unit I got assigned to was the 5th MP Battalion, the Military Police Battalion. Why, I have no idea. But that's where they sent us. And you kind of learn in the service you train and prepare for all this stuff and then when you actually get into the operations area they send you where they need bodies, basically. And in the Marine Corps they'll send you anywhere, anytime they need 'cause that's just what they do. And so I reported to the 5th MP Battalion. I was a jeep driver and sat guard duty on the south end of Da Nang Air Base for three months and every week kept putting in another request to get transferred to reconnaissance battalion. Finally I got that request granted to me.

Interviewer

So you wanted to go out in reconnaissance?

Gary Justesen

Yeah.

Interviewer

And why was that? Because people don't know what it was like back then, tell us about why you wanted to do that?

Gary Justesen

Well it was really all about odds of survival in my mind. Before I left I'd had a kid that I grew up with, my buddy across the street, he got killed in Khe Sanh. And I had another half a dozen guys I'd gone to high school with that came back in body bags within three months and they were all in infantry units. And after going through training my opinion got stronger and stronger. Because the way the infantry would work, your chances weren't real good of survival, in my opinion, the way it looked to me. And I've always been kind of a gambler so I go well let's find something with better odds and a recon unit was really much better odds. 'Cause the organization of the recon unit was four-to-eight man teams and you were under a standing order to not make contact. We were really out there just to stoop and poop: look for signs of the enemy, follow 'em if we could, do prisoner snatches, those kinds of things. And it was always with a much smaller group of people that you just had a better shot of surviving because you weren't really there to make contact. So you'd paint your faces green, lower your profile and snoop and poop around, basically. Whereas with a radio with a whip antenna that stuck up probably wasn't the best of all odds but that was the bed they gave me so I laid in it.

Interviewer

So describe this radio.

Gary Justesen

It's called a PRC-25 or better known as a Prick 25–personal radio communicator. It was about, I don't know, 20-, 22 inches wide, maybe 24-, 28 inches high. Weighed about 35 pounds as I remember and it had a big battery in the bottom of it. That battery life was about eight or nine hours. So everybody on the patrol got to carry extra batteries for me. Because when we're in the middle of the jungle, when we'd go on patrols they would give us a no-fire zone. Basically that was usually one-click wide by two or three clicks high on the map. A click is a thousand meters–that no friendlies could fire in that zone without clearance from us and that's where our patrol route would go. And if we found something up near the edge of our no-fire zone, we could request an extension, go look into it. And the patrols were all, it depended, they were usually four to six days at a shot.

Interviewer

So tell us about getting to your first unit and going out on your first patrol.

Gary Justesen

Well, when I got up to recon, of course there was more orientation and training and this, that, and the other thing that you went through. And they assigned me to Alpha Company 2nd Platoon 1st Squad. And about two days later we went on our first patrol. And it was basically an ambush patrol and it was fairly close to the rear area, it was just

on the other side of Freedom Hill where we went. We went out on that for three days I think it was. And then from there it was just usually three to four patrols a month until we got close to Tet season and then we would go out more often.

Interviewer

Tet season? Why was that?

Gary Justesen

Well, because of Tet '68, everybody always assumed that around the Tet holiday was when the NVA would try to mount another attack like they did in '68. And so everything was on an increased awareness during that time. And whenever awareness increased, our recon patrols increased as well.

Interviewer

So tell us about a particularly memorable mission.

Gary Justesen

Oh, gosh, there was a lot of 'em. I think one, we had gone out, there were six of us on the patrol. And we were just trying to find–there was a unit called the Q-83rd which was a supply battalion for the NVA. And basically they were rice humpers, they would haul food around for the various regiments. And up in Elephant Valley they were known to work that area and that's where the NVA 1st Regiment was as well. So they sent us out. And I worked for a guy that was a staff sergeant under 21 years old, Steve Ferris was his name, pretty famous guy. And being a staff sergeant under 21 like never happens in Marine Corps, forget it. But Ferris was pretty smart and he was a great patrol leader. We always used to say about him that we would march to Ha Noi with him and drop a grenade every five yards to let 'em know we were coming and we all felt confident we'd make it back. And in the time I spent in Ferris's outfit, there was only one WIA in that whole time and it was him and it was on this patrol. And we'd gone out on a patrol and the first three or four days, didn't run into much. On the fourth or fifth day of the patrol we found very fresh signs, like within six or eight hours on the trail. This trail was active. So we cruised around a while until we found a good ambush spot. We set up an ambush and decided to wait. And we sat there for an hour or two. And when we'd set up an ambush we'd have our tail-end Charlie and our point man would be on each end. We had a string on a can and as soon as they would see someone, they'd wiggle the string. We'd been there a couple of hours and all of the sudden the string wiggled. I looked over at Ferris, I said, "Ferris, we got gooks." And as soon as we turned back around, here comes a half a dozen Vietnamese coming down the train. And these guys weren't rice humpers, they had weapons. And so we let them all get into the kill zone and then we sprang the ambush. As soon as we did, some of them got way down the trail this way, a couple of 'em turned around and started going back up the trail. And we started firing at 'em. I'm not exactly sure who hit the one guy, but we got one guy pretty good in the back and once he got hit he just started running. We figure, well he's gonna run up the trail and die somewhere. The other guy that got hit, he fell and was right there. The other guys went down the other way. So Ferris sent a couple of guys to go down the trail and chase the guys that got away. They went down a ways,

maybe 100 yards, 100 meters, didn't really see anything, so they came back. We got up to the guy that had fallen; by the time we got to him he was dead. So Ferris decided that we would pack everything up, take the dead guy and head up the trail and look for the other one because we figured when we found him he'd be dead. And in the meantime he had me call for an emergency evacuation. So we went up the trail, our point man, Fitzpatrick, saw the guy and the guy wasn't dead but he was shot up pretty good. So we applied first-aid, did a temporary structure so we could get him on. And by that time the birds were on station and so I'm talking to the pilot in the bird and told him what our situation was. And during all this ruckus, that's when Ferris got wounded. He got a piece of shrapnel in his lip. That's as bad as it got. But the bird hovered; the first truck came in and dropped a winch down. We got the guy on the stretcher and they winched him up into that bird, but there was nowhere for the birds to land, it was just way too dense. About 100 foot canopy on the jungle and there was nowhere to land. And we didn't want to take the time to hike to an open LZ because we just made a lot of commotion in the jungle on a very fresh trail, we're pretty sure that some of the bad guys are coming back after us. So the second bird came in and dropped a jungle ladder out of the bottom of the bird and what they do there is it's just a big aluminum ladder about 10 feet across or so, wire-rope ladder. And they drop it down and the bird hovers down into the bushes and the ladder falls on the ground. We all get on the ladder and snap in with a snap link and the bird takes off and flies us back to our area.

Interviewer

So did that all go according to plan?

Gary Justesen

Yeah, we all got back. Everything was good.

Interviewer

So you took these guys because you needed prisoners?

Gary Justesen

No, we didn't take them because we needed prisoners, but we didn't want to leave–first of all we didn't want to leave an enemy soldier alive laying there because we want to interrogate those people. And secondly, we just didn't want to leave a dead body lying there, so we took it with us. And some weeks later, I know Ferris went down to one of the interrogations to the guy who got shot up and they didn't really get much out of him. They got a little bit. They knew what his unit was and stuff, but nothing astounding.

Interviewer

Tells about other missions.

Gary Justesen

Well they used to send us every so often up to an observation post, an OP. And basically what OPs were on the top of a mountain in the jungle. Some of them would have fire support bases on 'em, but we were basically a radio relay 'cause PRC-25 wouldn't broadcast further than 20 miles and especially in dense canopy and high mountains

and all that kind of thing. So there would be radio outposts all over the place and that's essentially what this observation post was. But it was also, the couple that I went to–I went to a couple of different ones–were always located on fairly high active trails and we'd sit up on top of the mountain and watch for movement. And we had some mortars and stuff up there for defense and whatnot. On one we kind of shot ourselves in the foot a little bit. In all the bunkers around the edge of the hill at nighttime you were always ready to get hit. So you had munitions and stuff at the ready in case if you needed to use 'em. So like the .50 cals are always loaded and they were locked but they were ready to fire. You had magazines laid out so if people started coming over the wire, you had some munitions to deal with them. One guy had taken a LAW rocket and armed it and opened the tube and armed it. So all I had to do was pick it up and push the button and it would fire. And somebody else knocked the rocket off the sandbag and it fired into the ground. When it did, it exploded and one of the guys in the bunker got hit, plus it caught the bunker on fire. So it was like ten or eleven o'clock at night and this guy was hurt pretty bad so we had to get a medevac to come in and pick him up. Well as soon as you start running air operations at night, number one, the air wing doesn't really like running air operations at night unless it's real necessary. So they brought in a CH-46 to pick this kid up. And we had an LZ that was pretty secure. And they came and picked him up, we got the fire put out and then the rest of the night we were taking rockets all night long 'cause they knew where we were.

Interviewer

Tell us what it was like to be in a rocket attack like that.

Gary Justesen

It's noisy. You don't really know where they're gonna land. It's pretty frightening but you just kind of deal with it. Get down in the bunker and just hope like hell it doesn't hit you. There's really not much else you can do.

Interviewer

You're on recon, how many missions did you go out on?

Gary Justesen

I can't remember. I really don't.

Interviewer

Was it dozens and dozens?

Gary Justesen

I don't really know. It was probably 40 or so. I honestly can't remember.

Interviewer

How long did they last?

Gary Justesen

The patrols, like I say, they would go anywhere from three to five days on an average. I think the longest one I was out on was 10 days and we did a couple of no-fire-zone extensions because we were following some trails that looked pretty promising. And on that particular recon patrol we did locate–I forget who it was now–but we did locate

what we thought was a company-sized group of NVA soldiers and we called in air power on 'em and then turned around and got our ass out of there as quick as we could. Because there was a hundred of them or better and there was like five of us.

Interviewer

Did you wait around to see what was happening?

Gary Justesen

No. We corrected fire into the position and then we got the hell out of there. So as the Phantoms were coming in on 'em, we were headed the other way to get on a helicopter and get the hell out of Dodge.

Interviewer

When you were in-country like that, how fast does it take you to adjust? What were you thinking of things going on back at home with the civil protests and all of that?

Gary Justesen

Well you would hear about those things. I mean first of all your normal state of mind while you were in-country was you were focused on your job. You didn't have a lot of time to sit around and talk about philosophy. Wouldn't do you lot of good anyway, you're there so deal with it. And when we were back in the rear area, you'd get a little bit of free time in the evening but during the day there was always sandbags to fill and bunkers to dig and all that kind of stuff. So you were just there focusing on what you had to do every day. And sure, thinking about the girlfriend back home and some of that kind of stuff, but it really didn't do a lot of good to focus on those things because there wasn't a damn thing you were gonna do about it. So just pay attention to what you're doing and do what you're doing. Be reasonable so you can get your ass out of there. And everybody talked about when I'm gonna be a short-timer, you know?

Interviewer

Tell everybody what "short" means.

Gary Justesen

Short-timers, when you've got about 30 days left. And that's when you really focus and when you start going out on patrols and you've got 30 days or less to go, that's when you kind of have second thoughts. Because a lot of stories about guys that get in and they're dead in the first month or guys that are two weeks away from rotating or three days away from rotating and they get it then. And the jungle ladder story I told ya, I had 25 days left in-country when we were on that patrol.

Interviewer

So how many months were you in reconnaissance?

Gary Justesen

For my whole tour.

Interviewer

And how long?

Gary Justesen

Well I was at recon for a year, for 12 months because I did a three-month extension.

Interviewer

Why did you do a three-month extension?

Gary Justesen

Because they paid me. They offered me money and I took it. And they offered me 30 days of relief too, so I took that.

Interviewer

Where did you go on relief?

Gary Justesen

On that particular one I went back to Sydney, Australia. I liked it there.

Interviewer

Tell us about going to Sydney during Vietnam. A lot of GIs there, right?

Gary Justesen

Oh, yeah. When we went to Sydney, the two times I went there, you're on a civilian aircraft, Capital Airways had a contract with the government and that's who flew us around. That was the Freedom Bird that took me home and took me there and took me to Sydney, same airlines. And you'd get on this airplane that was full of GIs. Of course they made us all not wear our jungle utilities, you had to put on the uniform of the day, which depending on which season it would be khakis or dress greens or whatever. And we flew into Sydney and then they'd put us all on a bus or a couple buses and took us to the–what the hell did they call it? Sort of like an orientation center. Still a military place. And that's where you would get your hotel room and they'd list out all the rules of everything you weren't supposed to do while you were there. You were confined to the city limits of Sydney; couldn't go outside the city limits. You weren't supposed to go to Bondi Beach. There were certain parts of the city that they explained quite well that they didn't want U.S. servicemen hanging out in. So the first night, that's where we went was the place that you weren't supposed to go. On that trip, that's where I saw "Hair," I'd never heard of "Hair." I wanted to go to a theater, I wanted to go see a theatrical production and we went to King's Cross, was wandering around in King's Cross which is kind of like the Broadway district in Sydney and we saw this sign for the musical "Hair." And we went over and started looking over at the posters and stuff and I thought, "Oh, this looks pretty interesting." So I went in and that's where I saw "Hair" for the first time. After that show, getting to Sydney where there was actual newspapers that weren't published by the military, then you could start reading really about what protests were going on back home and all that sort of thing. And so that kind of got ya thinking, got me thinking at least, about is this just a waste of time? Are we just kidding ourselves? Are we really here to try and win? What are we really

doing? But when I went back to country, those thoughts sort of leave your mind a little bit. I mean they linger but you need to pay attention to staying alive so you can go home. So that's really the focus.

Interviewer

I thought it was amazing that you would be in combat one day and Sydney the next.

Gary Justesen

Well it's kind of a misnomer when you say "combat" verses "war zone," okay? Combat's been defined by weeks and weeks and weeks of tedious boredom interrupted by absolute mayhem every once in a while, and that's really what it's like. 'Cause when the shit hits the fan, it's amazing how well the training that you did for weeks and weeks and weeks before you went there kicks in. Because you respond exactly the way you were trained. Most people do. Those who don't, those who stand there with their mouth open looking around, they die. And that's really what happens. So when they train you – if you get caught in an ambush, what do you do? You run at the enemy shooting and screaming because they don't think you'll do that. And it works. It works.

Interviewer

Did you have to do that?

Gary Justesen

Only once. We got caught in an ambush and we just immediately turned and ran right at their fire and put weapons on automatic and just started spraying the area and they got up and ran. I was amazed. When I was first taught that in infantry school, I thought are you crazy? You want me to do what? You want me to run at the bullets? No. You're nuts. But at the end of the day that's the smartest thing you can do.

Interviewer

I read that the VC were trained to know to take out the radio operator first.

Gary Justesen

That's true. When you're in the bush you naturally want to disguise your rank. So lieutenants and captains, none of the officers wore their silver or gold jewelry, whatever. Everybody had black insignias so you'd have them on but you couldn't really see those things really unless you're right up close to somebody. Radio man wasn't so lucky. With the PRC-25 we had two types of antennas that we used on 'em. The one was called a whip antenna and it was basically this fiberglass thing that was like an extendible fishing pole kind of thing. And I forget exactly how long it was, but I want to say it was like 15 feet or so. And you would use that when you were trying to broadcast at quite a distance but you would never use it walking down through the jungle. Number one, it's gonna get caught on everything. Number two, it's very visible. And then there was another called the bayonet antenna which is an antenna that was probably, I don't know, four-feet long maybe, three and a half, that was sort of like a spring wire. Like the little black pieces of metal that hold bed springs together –

Interviewer

Coiled?

Gary Justesen

Well it wasn't coiled, it was flat. And it was sort of like that. And you could take that antenna and pull it down and strap it to your pack strap while you were moving. But then when you'd stop you'd have to get that in the air so you could broadcast and receive. And they would look for that. And that was what they tried to concentrate firing on. But, in reconnaissance, we were there not to make contact and so we were snooping and pooping all the time. So other than the ambush that we got into, we never really got shot at.

Interviewer

Can you tell us about that day of the ambush?

Gary Justesen

Well we were getting extracted the next day, this was the last day of the patrol. And we were on our way to a harbor site that was close to the LZ and it was getting dusk, sun was starting to go down. And we'd been on like a five or six day, pretty intense patrol and we were kind of tired and not paying attention and whatnot. And we were walking down the trail and we probably weren't probably more than 30, 40 meters away from the LZ and pretty close to where the harbor site was gonna be and we got hit. And the first guy that got hit was a corpsman in front of me and they got him in the head, he was dead before he hit the ground. We all hit the ground, some of us got up and ran at one arm of the ambush and they ran and we came back because a couple of other guys had gotten hit in the legs so we knew we had to get some first-aid on some people. But about the time we did that we started hearing more gooks walking around us and so we exchanged some fire over about an hour's period of time. And we must have got some KIAs out of that because they backed off and a couple hours later when it was really dark we could smell incense and that meant they were coming to pick up their dead. So we just stayed there huddled that night. I called out to see if we could get emergency extraction but they said no, it will be in the morning. So our choice was to stay there that night, harbor up as best we could and they would come in in the morning with reactionary forces and some birds to get us out. The longest night of my life.

Interviewer

Tell me about fear. Did fear help you stay alive?

Gary Justesen

You know, I don't know the answer to that question because sure, you were scared. Your senses are kind of on an edge. I never thought the jungle was that noisy at night and I'd been there almost a year and I heard more things that night in the jungle than I'd ever heard before. I think you're awareness just increases. I can't say fear really would describe my mental state at that point, I was just really aware and edgy. We had one dead guy on our side, we had two guys that were seriously wounded and we ran out of morphine pretty quickly because we just didn't have that much with us. So they were moaning and not in the best of spirits. The rest of us, we were just in a 360 perimeter, weapons loaded and ready to defend ourselves should anything come up. Nothing did. So it was more,

"What was that? What am I gonna do? Is he okay? Can we change your bandage?" You were kind of dealing with things in the moment. So fear hit the next night once we were back in the rear area. When you finally stop, your adrenaline stops, you have a couple of beers and you're sitting there, then you realize what could've happened and how you would've been powerless to stop anything. If they would've come at us with 20 people, they would've got us all. No two ways about it.

Interviewer

So how was that morning when they finally pulled you out?

Gary Justesen

Well first light, I got the first contact over the radio 4:30, 5:00 in the morning. Just barely first light, you could just see the outline of the ridges. And I got a contact just verifying our LZ grid coordinates one more time. So I pulled out the map and we verified the grid coordinates. And they said they were about 30 to 40 minutes out, but that one of us was gonna need to get up to the LZ so we could throw smoke so they could see wind direction and figure out where 12:00 was on the LZ. Everything in the military's by the clock, you know? And I remember thinking at that moment, I told the patrol leader he's gonna want to have somebody get up there with green smoke so they can come in. And three of us looked at each other and the obvious question is who's gonna go throw the smoke because it was still pretty dark on the jungle floor but the sky was starting to get lit up. And you just didn't really know that if there was another ambush waiting in the trees outside of the LZ area. But there was no way that we were gonna get out unless somebody went and through that canister of smoke so the bird could come in. Now on the birds there was a reactionary force on the birds to run security for our evacuation but you still had to be the one lone guy that went out there and popped the smoke. So the patrol leader did it. Nothing happened. The birds came in, there was two flights of birds. Two of them were filled with reactionary troops and then the other flight was for us. And we had two flights of Huey's that came along with them just in case something did come up we'd have some air defense.

Interviewer

So when you got home, that's when it hit you?

Gary Justesen

Yeah, the next night. Because that day was getting back and then there was a whole debriefing session on the whole patrol and a debriefing on the ambush and we had to go up to Division and talk to the C-1 guys and there's a bunch of stuff you have to do after a patrol that's just routine. But ours wasn't routine because we'd drawn fire so we had to have more debriefing. So basically I'd sit with one guy just like we are and the officer would just ask me questions and go over the timeline and then he'd go interview somebody else, another guy would come back and interview me again, so you tell the story over and over and over again just so they got a clear picture of what happened because they've got two wounded and one KIA out of that, they wanted to know what went down.

Interviewer

Back to the radio operator. There was a target on them?

Gary Justesen

Yes, as a radio operator you definitely had the bull's eye on your back. No two ways about it. Because the NVA, I didn't really see that many VC. We were fighting an army; we weren't fighting people in pajamas where we were at least. They were army guys too. They knew how this worked. They knew that if they could cut off your communications you were basically screwed. And even though we had backup, there's usually a backup radio on every patrol. There was always the PRC-99 which I think is ironic because that turned into the Motorola brick cell phone. That's what we carried around as a backup radio. It was green. It wasn't that fancy gray that Motorola marketed, but that was the phone. Basically warriors, Army, soldiers, Marines, whatever, combat is fought the same way. The objection is to reduce your enemy's will to fight however you can. And so if you can take away their communications, take away their food, take away their direction, take away their leader, anything that they can do to reduce your will to fight, then they win, you lose. And regardless of which side you're on, that's still kind of the same idea is what you're trying to do.

Interviewer

Explain what techniques you were taught to identify the NVA. The pajamas were the VC?

Gary Justesen

Well, no, when we're out in the bush we were looking for signs. It's much like if you were hunting. If you're hunting deer then you're out running through the woods looking for deer, you're looking for bark that's been eating off a tree, you're looking at tree limbs, the leaves are missing. You're looking at scrub oak that might have deer hair on it, you're looking for droppings, you're looking for footprints, you're looking for anything that is out of the ordinary. And earlier, when I mentioned we found a very fresh trail, the trail was so fresh that there was droppings that were still steaming. There were footprints that still had bubbles in 'em. Now I don't know if you've ever really walked through the woods when it's been raining and noticed when you stepped and you picked up your foot there was little bubbles where the ball of your foot was. I don't know if you've ever sat and watched how long it takes for those to go away. It doesn't take very long and that's a pretty fresh trail. So those were the kinds of things we would look for. We would also look for obvious evidence of maybe this was a harbor site. If there was a fire where they'd cook food or something. So you're looking for all those kind of pieces of evidence that there had been human traffic through here at some point and how long ago had that been. Now every time we went out of patrol, we were usually reacting from some other information, that's why our patrol route was assigned the way it was. And G-1, up at Division, would issue the patrol orders and they'd say we want six teams to go into these six areas and we're headed to this direction because we're following something. Now we didn't always know who we were looking for, but it didn't take too much to put two and two together that you were looking for the bad guys. So you're just looking for the signs. Where are they? Listening, smelling. Just trying to find out where they are. And then once you find out where they are, the next job was to determine how they were supplied; in other words, what kind of

weapons did they have. Did they look like they had been eating regularly? Did they have enough food? Were their uniforms and stuff in good shape? All those kind of things that you can see from a distance to determine the moral of what those troops were, you know?

Interviewer

You're not talking you're quiet?

Gary Justesen

You whisper and you do hand signals. As a radio operator I was one of the few people that ever talked.

Interviewer

How do you use that radio so that the enemy can't hear you?

Gary Justesen

You develop a few techniques. Get under your poncho, hide under a rock, talk softly. You develop some techniques.

Interviewer

Tell us about the jungle.

Gary Justesen

The jungle's a weird place. You won't find anything in Utah like this, I can tell you that for sure, because I've been around the mountains in Utah. Hot. Unbearably hot. Humid. Just, you can cut it with a knife. Can't take three steps without sweating. Lush as could be. Layer upon layer upon layer of identifiable plants. You had no idea what this stuff is. Insects and bugs that you'd never seen in your life. At night, the thing that was always kind of weird, and I learned to let this kind of be an ally, jungles, as leaves and stuff fall, they decay on the floor and as they decay they have a lot of phosphorus in 'em. So at nighttime the jungle floor is kind of like a day glow party you might say. I mean not solid but just bits and pieces of things that are decaying and it's phosphorescing as it's in that certain stage of decay. And you look at it and the first time it's like wow, what's this? Somebody got some weird chemical in there? My left foot's gonna fall off next month or what? But you learn to get used to that because when it's dark it's dark, you can't see your hand in front of your face and there's no moonlight coming in through the trees because the canopy's usually 80 or 90 feet above you and it blocks all the moonlight. So you look at these phosphorescing plant decay and you start studying and you figure out well I just got to study this pattern so if I can see something interrupt the pattern and not hear it, then I know something's there. What that something is, no idea, but at least that's what makes you aware of the movement if you don't hear any noise. So in some ways that was kind of an interesting deal. It was a little bit of an ally. But in the daytime, I saw some really gorgeous places. I mean some places that would just take your breath away, beautiful, the jungle. Absolutely beautiful. When it got to monsoon season, miserable. Never seen it rain so hard in your life.

Interviewer

Tell us about that.

Gary Justesen

Monsoon season is just rain 24/7. It just rains. And we actually, at one point in time, a typhoon was in our area. It wasn't right on top of us, it was probably 20 miles away down by Cam Ronh Bay 30 miles away. That particular day there were sheets of water coming down, that's the best way I can describe it. It was not drops, it was sheets. And it rained probably, in our rear area–our hooches were built on stilts and they were about two and a half, three feet off the ground. And the water was up to the threshold of the hooch. So it rained three feet. Not three inches or .3 inches, it rained three feet that day. It was unbelievable. I never seen it rain like that and it was just unrelenting and then the wind would start blowing. So instead of coming straight down it was coming sideways at ya. Being in the jungle was probably a little easier because the canopy would stop some of the water. I mean eventually it would all fall but it wasn't–man, like our rear area, it was brutal. You thought you were gonna get knocked down by it, it was pretty intense, it really was.

Interviewer

Some came down with fungus and things like that.

Gary Justesen

Yeah. It's a concern. Your feet never dry out, especially in the monsoon season, they just never get dry. So you're always taking care to–in your pack I'd always take a half a dozen pair of socks and a couple bottles of foot powder. So at night or at a break on the trail, you could change your socks and at least get your feet dry for a little while. You still had wet boots. Getting your feet dry was always a pretty good thing, it really was. But you were always wet 24/7. It was just the way it was.

Interviewer

So you're wearing a 35-pound radio?

Gary Justesen

Well my pack was ready for patrol, it would be as heavy as 90 pounds and as light as 70, plus your munitions, so plus your cartridge belt. So you carried about, I don't know, roughly between 80 and 100 pounds of gear all the time. And on each patrol you'd have to carry extra stuff, like guys would have to carry some of my spare batteries; I carried three myself. And the problem is is once you go through a battery you can't just throw it away. Put it back in your pocket and carry it home dead. We didn't leave anything in the jungle.

Interviewer

Tell us why.

Gary Justesen

That's how we were tracking them. That's how they would track us. Pretty simple. It had nothing to do with Earth Day. It had everything to do with staying alive. I didn't care if we left garbage in Vietnam, to be truthful with ya. It's probably a bad attitude but you took everything back with you, even your dead people. But besides the munitions that you would carry for yourself and there was usually a standing order of how many magazines and how many grenades and how many Willie Peters and how many green smoke and yellow smoke that you had to carry and so

forth. But one guy on a few patrols when I first started going, Sergeant Ferris, he liked to carry an M-60 machine gun; the rest of us carried M-16s, he liked the M-60. He was a big guy. So we got to help him carry his bullets. A few bandoleers of M-60 ammunition which is substantial, let me tell ya. We all had to carry two claymores; we all had to carry at least four pounds of C-4. So when it came down to carrying C-rations, extra socks, you took as little as you could because you were pretty loaded down with munitions as it was. And being the patrol leader, depending on where we were going we'd always have to carry maps. And then I was responsible for the whiz wheel, the decoder because that's how we got our orders. When I was talking on the radio we were talking a different language and you'd have to inscribe all that down and sit down and decode it all.

Interviewer

It was a whiz wheel?

Gary Justesen

Yeah, the whiz wheel was a decoding device that would change every 12 hours and that's how you decoded messages. So it wasn't like, "Hi, I'm over here, send me a helicopter." That isn't how you did that. You sat down and wrote it out in code in your notebook and then you'd get on the radio and you'd go, "Alpha, Lima, Bravo, Whiskey, 23 –" you know? That's how'd you talk. So you're talking code all the time.

Interviewer

So you were a team?

Gary Justesen

Yeah, it really was. As people would rotate out of country, they would change a little bit, but for the time I was there, there was only maybe in our whole squad–our squad was 12 guys–and when I was there we probably had four or five rotate out while I was there.

Interviewer

So how close do you get to these guys?

Gary Justesen

Pretty close. As close as you would in a frat house I guess. I never was in a frat house so I don't know. In kind of an odd way it was sort of like being in the Boy Scouts a little bit in terms of being around the same people all the time. Talk about everybody's girlfriends and things I did at home.

Interviewer

You were talking about being close to your buddies.

Gary Justesen

The fellow guys in your own squad, you were pretty tight with. But in recon, we're pretty tight with pretty much everybody in the battalion. I know one point there was a thing that kind of all brought us together a little bit. We had a battalion EM club, enlisted men's club, and then they had the officer's club. And in the enlisted men's club you could go there and they had a juke box and beer was 15 cents a can and you'd hang out, listen to the juke box,

tell stories, play pool, whatever. But our colonel closed the battalion EM club because it was getting a little too rowdy over there. So he would control the opening times of the EM club, we didn't like that very much. So over in Alpha Company, we had a supply sergeant, his name was Sergeant Feeley, Ed Feeley, smoked a cigar all the time, it was about that long, "Ar, ar, ar, ar," the guy would talk like that. I loved Feeley, Feeley was great. He was our company supply sergeant. And one day we're sitting around shooting the breeze and I said, "Why don't we open up our own damn EM club because the beer they sell us at the EM club, we're supposed to get two cans a day on this ration card anyway. So somebody's just stealing it from somebody else and selling it to us, so why don't we go steal it and we'll just build our own damn club. I know where we can get some plywood." Sergeant Feeley goes, "That's a great idea." So all of us in Alpha Company and some of the guys in Charlie Company, we started talking this up and go, "Yeah, yeah, we could do this. We could." So over a period of weeks, we went and procured building materials to build us a club. And Feeley came in with the crown jewel, he got the pool table. Still to this day don't know how in the hell he got that pool table but it got delivered in an Air Force truck, I know that because I helped unload it. But building or own EM club, and then after we got it built and open and our captain said, "Hey, that's great, that's fine," and he defended us to the colonel and said there's nothing in the rules that says we can't have one, and so we got one. And the colonel was curious as to where all the materials and stuff came from but nobody in 1st Recon Battalion was missing anything, so. Law of the jungle, everything was cool. Now that was a lot of fun putting that club together. And we got to know each other pretty well doing that because it was sort of a–I don't know, it was a diversification from our daily grind. And it was something that we thought we weren't supposed to be doing so it became enjoyable. I was in the Marine Corps after all; kind of known for not being straight-laced, you might say.

Interviewer

What do you think about how they portray the Vietnam War in the movies?

Gary Justesen

Well, most of the movies made about Vietnam, there's portions of them that ring true, you know? The movie "Hamburger Hill." There were some parts of that that were pretty realistic. Mostly the assaults up the hill, those scenes. The scenes with the guys going up the hill and then the gooks coming out of the ground from behind 'em and shooting 'em, that was definitely real. That did happen. Some of the other stuff, I mean–there were no round-eyed women anywhere near us at all. There was some women, Vietnamese women, down on the corner you could go see if you wanted. Never really got into that too much just because of health concerns. We did a fair amount of drinking, I will say that. There was a local rum called Manila Rum that tasted like kerosene but it got you nice and messed up. And we drank lots of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer that had been frozen and thawed out, and frozen and thawed out about a thousand times, but it still tasted pretty good when it was cold. They had special services where you could go play cards, play pool.

Interviewer

Did you go to a USO show or anything like that?

Gary Justesen

Yeah, I went to a Bob Hope USO show on Freedom Hill, that was an experience.

Interviewer

Tell us about that.

Gary Justesen

There was probably 50-, 60,000 guys there. Goldie Hawn, Raquel Welch, Les Brown's Band of Renown, Bob Hope. I forget who the other male comedian was. But seeing Raquel Welch and Goldie Hawn was enough. That helped. That helped. You know, and it was just a USO, it wasn't anything brilliant, but it was a great day off that day.

Interviewer

How far away did you sit to the stage?

Gary Justesen

Oh, I was probably 100 yards away or something. They set us down in units because you'd all march there in a unit and you'd all march back in a unit. That's kind of how you do things in the service. No wandering around on your own. And we just went over to the little flag that said, "Alpha Company 1st Recon Battalion" and that's where we sat. That's kind of how they do it. I think one of the ones that was the most memorable and most fun is everybody's heard of "China Beach," you know, they had a TV thing on about the hospital at China Beach. And that was pretty Hollywoodized because I'd been at the China Beach hospital several times and I never saw anything like they had on TV there. But at China Beach, that was a large area; there was a PX there, it was the biggest PX in Da Nang, and so it was always cool to go to the China Beach PX 'cause, you know, going on a shopping spree, man. It was fun. Get away from the war for half a day. But at one point our CO decided that we needed an in-country R&R as a unit and loaded us all up into deuce and a half's and took us down to China Beach and we spent the afternoons surfing, playing volleyball and barbecuing steaks. It was awesome and it was great. It was the entire day. On the way back, that evening is when ASP 1 and then ASP 2 blew up. That was Ammo Supply Point 1 and 2. In Da Nang is where all the munitions were kept. So big, huge ammo supply dump. And ASP 1 started blowing up and somebody was burning weeds in a ditch and the fire got away from them and got over into the ammo supply dump and literally blew it all up. And there were cases of mortars and Howitzer rounds and shit flying through the air. And actually, a case of something–I'm not sure if it was Willie Peter or what–hit one of the fuel dump bladders over by the airport. And these were bladders that were probably 30-feet by 60-feet by six-feet high full of JP-4, big neoprene bladders. One of those went up and that was pretty exciting. So Da Nang blew up all that night after we had our party. And the next morning, at roll call, the CO got out and he said, "I hope you guys had fun because look what you did to the town." He sort of blamed us for everything. Jokingly, I think. But recreation wasn't really high on the charts.

Interviewer

How about music?

Gary Justesen

Music all the time. Almost every one of us had a reel-to-reel tape deck.

Interviewer

What were people listening to? What were you listening to?

Gary Justesen

Chicago, Sons of Champlin, BB King, Beach Boys, you name it. Guys in my unit, we had not every state represented but a good cross-section of guys from Louisiana, I'd never heard Cajun music before till I went to Vietnam. Guys from California, guys from Chicago, New York, St. Louis, Texas. So there was all these different guys and that was one of the things you did when you got to country is the first purchase you made was a tape deck, preferably a TEAC tape deck, four-head unit, stereo. And a nice pair of Bose headphones. And so you'd go into the hooch on some days, there'd be 10 guys lying on the rack with 10 tape machines going and everybody had their headset on. So music for sure, that was huge. And we always got new music late. So when I finally rotated and came back home in 1970 and listened to the radio, there was a whole gap of stuff that I didn't even know existed. That was something I thought was interesting.

Interviewer

So it was mid-60s music, is that what you were listening to?

Gary Justesen

Yeah, I think the most current stuff we had was Chicago MTA; I think it was their third album or something. And that was the most current stuff that we were hearing.

Interviewer

And what BB King were you listening to?

Gary Justesen

Just various BB King stuff. There was a lot of traffic with people trading songs and stuff. So if you were over to somebody else's hooch and you'd listen to a tape and it was something that you hadn't heard or you didn't have, then you'd go grab your tape recorder and a fresh reel of tape and run up to their place and record it. So a lot of trading music back and forth. Music was pretty big. The radio wasn't all that exciting because it was just Armed Forces Radio Network and we didn't have Good Morning Vietnam channel up where we were. He was down South so I never heard of that guy until they made the movie about him.

Interviewer

How about marijuana?

Gary Justesen

There was lots of pot. It was available should you choose. It was not hard to find.

Interviewer

Was that a problem with guys on patrol or did you pretty well control that?

Gary Justesen

Well, it never was a problem for us. I think it was more of a problem with the grunts. Like I said, it's easier to get through the jungle with four to six guys than it is with 250. With 250 guys trying to be quiet is impossible. Somebody's pissed off and bitching all the time. When there's four or five or six of you or whatever, everybody knows that if one guy does one wrong thing probably all of you are gonna die. Not because they didn't smoke pot, because we certainly did in the rear area, there's no two ways about it, I'll admit that freely. On patrol, not even. First there's the smell. That will give your site away immediately. And the first thing you do when you prepare to go out on a patrol is you try to make yourself smell as neutral as you possibly can in any way you can. No cologne, no aftershave.

Interviewer

Deodorant?

Gary Justesen

Nope. Nope. Don't want any of that. All those smells transfer.

Interviewer

That's a good point. You can smell things in the jungle.

Gary Justesen

Very well. One of the things that when I was going through recon orientation for that first full week we didn't eat any American chow, we ate only Vietnamese food so you would smell like the rest of 'em. And that's kind of a life and death thing. You want to be very conscious about that.

Interviewer

Don't you have a body odor though?

Gary Justesen

Well in the jungle not really. Yeah, I guess you would. Everyone's hygiene's a little bit different. It's the way you smell is based on what you've eaten and drank. At times you would be sweating so profusely and it was just so hot that I guess you had certain body odor but you couldn't distinguish it from other jungle smells. There was no perfumes in there. There was no sweet smelling anything.

Interviewer

Any flowers in there?

Gary Justesen

Yeah, there was flowers in the jungle but they weren't like going into a flower store or anything like that where it's so wonderfully sweet. You'd run across smells in the jungle but what you wanted to do was not portray or have some human-produced smell that was very recognizable. Farting. No farting.

Interviewer

Were you ever wounded?

Gary Justesen

No.

Interviewer

You were pretty lucky.

Gary Justesen

I guess. In our unit KIAs and WIAs were almost nonexistent. When I was in 1st Recon Battalion for the time I was there, we had no one that died in our company. In Charlie Company, that's the corpsman that got killed on that patrol I was on, he was from Charlie Company. Charlie Company was the unlucky company; they had like a half a dozen guys get killed in like a three month period of time. So there was no real reason why ours didn't and they did. It's just combat's combat, you know? Some get out, some don't.

Interviewer

Did you meet any guys from Utah while you were there?

Gary Justesen

Actually I served in-country with a couple of guys that I went through boot camp with. There was one fellow, his name was Craig Russell, he's from Ogden. And we went through boot camp together and then after boot camp we got split up and he went off to sniper school. And later on he showed up at 1st Recon Battalion. We would go out with snipers and be security for the snipers and so I went out on a couple of patrols with Craig where he was the sniper and we were the security.

Interviewer

You were telling me about the ambushes and recon. How often did you do an ambush?

Gary Justesen

Well ambush was a pretty normal patrol order, especially close and around our rear area. And the division, in keeping their tactical area secure and defended, would always send our ambush patrols just outside the wire of the divisions' area and everybody had to do those and it was just when your time was next on the list, that's what you did. And you'd go up and you'd go out at night and you'd set up an ambush and you'd sit there all night. I did that on several occasions and never had anybody walk through our trap. So we would set ambushes. And then the one time we walked into the middle of an ambush that they had set. So ambushes were something both sides did and did it on a regular basis. When we would do FO work that you're referring to, Forward Observation work, we generally would either go out on patrol and get to a particular spot and then call in air strikes on that spot or we would do that from the observation post, the OP's, we'd do that same thing. And then a couple of times we had to go do what was called BDAs or Bomb Damage Assessment s and we would go to the Ho Chi Minh Trail after a B-52 run had come through and then we'd assess what kind of damage the B-52s had done.

Interviewer

Did you ever watch a B-52 strike?

Gary Justesen

Uh-huh. Not close. "Danger close" is a term that's used when you're in proximity of airstrikes. And there's lots of stories, especially from Vietnam; I think the most famous ones are from the Ia Drang Valley in '65 because they were danger close zero feet. I mean the helicopters were strafing NVA with our troops mixed in with them. But danger close was always, if you were shooting Howitzers or 106 recoilless rifles or something like that, you'd want to be 100 meters away. With B-52s and the 2,000-pound bombs, it was better that you were at least a thousand meters away just because of concussion. But when a B-52 makes a run–I forget the number of bombs on one plane, it's usually two planes were run–and when they come in and carpet bomb, they'll just take a whole section that's at least 2,000 meters long, maybe three, and just completely annihilate everything that's in there. I mean just completely annihilate it. We went on one BDA where they had run two planes through there. We went in a day after it had been bombed. They had some other air patrols go in there to see if they could catch any stragglers. I don't know how anybody can survive one of those bombs though. But we went in there and saw personnel carriers that we knew they had been personnel carriers at one point, but they were pretty unrecognizable as a vehicle after the bombs had hit it. It shakes the whole earth. It's amazing.

Interviewer

You said you were close to one?

Gary Justesen

Well you can be 1,000 meters away and the ground is shaking when those bombs are going off.

Interviewer

You were that close?

Gary Justesen

Uh-hmm.

Interviewer

So it's sort of a body shock rather than a sound shock?

Gary Justesen

Oh, no, there's sound waves too.

Interviewer

I've seen films of it. The air condenses with the shockwave.

Gary Justesen

Oh, yeah. Because what happens with an explosion is that it implodes first, then it explodes. And so what it does is it sucks all the air in this way, and then lets it back out that way. And you can actually see rings move through the

air.

Interviewer

What does it do to you while you're standing far enough away?

Gary Justesen

Well, if you're close enough it will take your ear drums out. Knock you over. It's a concussion wave, basically. It's loud. It will get your attention, no two ways about it.

Interviewer

Tell us about coming home.

Gary Justesen

Coming home was weird. On the way over we stopped in Okinawa and you left your sea bag full of stuff there so you had to go back to Okinawa and collect your gear out of storage. So they took us to Camp Hansen, in Kadena and we were there for three days. Of course they wouldn't give us any liberty; you're not supposed to leave the base. That didn't really work out all that well because we went over the wire the first night. I just spent 20-some-odd months in Vietnam and you won't let me go get a beer? So we kind of broke that rule, but we were there for three days. And then we flew back to the world and my plane landed at Travis Air Force Base. Now regardless of anything else in the military, when you go from one post to another, there's always processing time involved. You've got to keep track of everybody. And so when we went to Travis, we got on buses to go to a temporary barracks area so we could go through the processing, process ourselves back into the country and then we're gonna turn loose for 30 days worth of liberty. Landing was great. Getting off the plane was just so-so because it was still part of the military. There's no bands there, no girlfriends waiting, just another couple of staff sergeants to haul you somewhere else and fill out more paper. We got on these buses and they were taking us to a transit barracks but they had to drive off of the air base and then back into the air base and there was a lot of protesters as we drove out and they were throwing stuff at us at the bus and whatnot.

Interviewer

What did you think of that?

Gary Justesen

It kind of blew my mind. I didn't really quite know what to think about it. I was thinking to myself, well, okay, you don't like the war but I ain't got nothing to do with it. I didn't have any say. I didn't personally make myself go do this or whatever. It just didn't make a lot of sense to me. A lot of the other guys on the bus, everybody wanted the bus driver to stop and we all wanted to get off the bus and kick these people's ass and wanted to get violent. It was a good thing the driver didn't stop because somebody would've died. And when we got back onto the Air Force base again and got to our temporary barracks, the enlisted men's club was very full that night and everybody pretty much just drank their anger away. But it was after that night where I kind of realized that you're back, you've been spending all these months waiting to get back. Now you're back and you can kind of see exactly what it's all about.

Nobody really gives a shit. So you probably want to get your head wrapped around that and not let it bother you. And so that's what I chose to do but I had 30 days' leave, I wanted to get home. But at the time I thought I was still facing three more years of active duty so in my head I was like, yeah, I'd like to get home, I'd like to see some friends, I want to see my folks but I'm gonna take my time going home, so I hitchhiked home from San Francisco, spent four days doing that. That was kind of interesting. But I fully expected to go back to my duty station and I was mentally prepared to have to go do another tour because there was still three years left and I knew if I spent three years in the States I'd probably end up in the brig 'cause you could be disciplined, but if the bullshit gets a little too deep you're gonna break, you know? But, when I reported back to my duty station, it was like three months later or four months later was when they started the Vietnamization of the war, remember that? And when they did that, basically what they did is they pulled the entire 5th Marine Division out of Vietnam at that time and sent them back to Camp Pendleton and they started pulling parts of the 3rd Division out and sending them back to Okinawa which was their home base. So the Marine Corps had a problem at that point which was just the exact opposite of what they had four years prior when they were drafting people, because they had too many people. So they developed an early-out program that you could get up to a 13-month early out provided your pro-con marks were at a certain level and you had at least one combat ribbon. And I went running into the executive officer's office. "I qualify. I qualify. Get me out of this green machine." So needless to say, I didn't have to go back and do another tour. And because I'd kind of been mistakenly assigned to the 5th MP Battalion when I first went to country, they turned around and put me in the 5th MP Battalion when I got back. So I spent my last months at El Toro Marine Air Station doing the white Mickey Mouse gloves at the gate and doing a little bit of shore patrol, and then we would guard Air Force One when Nixon would come out to San Clemente to have a break or whatever he'd do. And that's where he'd park his plane is at our place and we'd have to guard it. And then I got out and spent about a month wandering around California and Nevada till I got home and then I came back to school here at the U.

Interviewer

When you saw in '75 pulling out of Saigon and the helicopters are leaving the embassy, what were your thoughts on that war?

Gary Justesen

Well, when I left there in '70, the handwriting was pretty much on the wall that there wasn't really much of a South Vietnamese regime or government or anything that was really gonna–win the war is not a good verb, I don't think because there was no way to win the war. There was no way to win against the North, there really wasn't. These people were pretty resolute and you know, we'd bet on the wrong horse, basically. But after having been there since–I think our first advisors went to Vietnam in '53 and we didn't really take over the war until '61 or '62. But we had advisors in there and CIA was in there as far back as '49, really. But in '53 we were helping the French a lot until they got their ass kicked at Dien Bien Phu in '57, I want to say. Is that right? It was just a mute point. In my mind, in '70 it was just like oh, okay. After Khe Sanh, after Hamburger Hill, and after Oklahoma Territory, Dewey

Canyon and some of those big operations that were happening while I was around there, those were the operations that were supposed to break the North's will, and it didn't. And, in a lot of those cases, especially Hamburger Hill, we took it three times and then just left. We'd take places and not keep 'em, we'd just leave and the NVA would come back. So the NVA's looking at us going like, "Aren't you guys here to beat us or win or whatever? Doesn't look like it. Just because you run us off of this place, we know you're gonna leave so we'll just wait for you to leave and then we'll come back and take over again." So the strategy was pretty stupid as far as I'm concerned. In '75 when they were finally getting the last of the people out of Saigon, I just felt sorry for the poor bastards who were there and I was hoping like hell they all got out alive. I mean really, because those last few years of the war, morale and discipline had gone to shit. Our command and control was not even into really doing much apparently because they were just kind of keeping the status quo and the NVA was already done as far as Chu Lai so they didn't have that much further to go to get to Saigon. And as we were backing off and it was the Vietnamization of the war and all that stuff, at that point, it was pretty apparent that we were, as they say, "di ma."

Interviewer

So when you saw those images on TV--?

Gary Justesen

You poor bastards, you should've organized this exodus a lot better. But you know, they were basically just thrown to the wolves. Well the thing that was hardest for me in watching some of that stuff is the Vietnamese people had to be left behind that eventually turned into refugees and either died or made it back here. Because we had made an impact on a substantial portion of that population that we had to abandon. And we did. We abandoned them. Not that there's anything right or just that comes out of a war, even one that supposedly the good guys win and the bad guys lose, whatever. There's all the other peripheral things that happen and lives that get ruined and people got to relocate and it's just weird. So for myself I think I haul a little bit of guilt around for that. I mean there is–I killed some Vietnamese people. And after you kind of go through something like that and you see 55,000 of us on a wall and you see all the guys that got hurt and wounded and maimed and lost their legs and this and that, and you walk away and you go what the hell was all that about? What did that do to–whatever you want to pick–what did that do to promote democracy or freedom? What was the point at the end of the day? In my current business, I have several Vietnamese employees. And to be honest with you, I first hired them out of guilt. I'm so happy that I did hire them because I got over my guilt to a certain extent, but I found some really great people and they're all in key roles in my company and I couldn't do things without 'em. So in that way there was something that–I don't know, small margin of satisfaction I guess. But you know, and they're all young enough, they weren't even born when I was there, you know? And then there's all these folks, some of my employees that go back home to Vietnam to visit their families and stuff. I've had a couple of guys that were in the Utah Platoon when I went in. I never served with them in-country, but we've hooked up since. A few years ago they were kind of pressuring me,

"We're all going to go back to Vietnam, come on, let's go to Da Nang, let's go take a look." I don't want any part of it. If you live for a certain period of time with the shadow that you're gonna die in the morning, I have no desire to go back and go through that again. I didn't want to poke the snake, I guess you might say. Because my memories of Vietnam are just when we were behind the wire we were okay, you couldn't relax, but you were okay. When you were on the other side of the wire, you just had to be alert all the time. And I just mentally don't want to go back there. Even though there's probably nothing to worry about, I don't think I want to go find out. I could be wrong.

Interviewer

Is there anything we haven't covered that you'd like to tell us about or state?

Gary Justesen

No. I think my biggest thing is what was the point, you know? It just seemed pretty absurd to me all the way along. Even though I have to say I had some pretty fun times and met some interesting people. Ironically, since I've been back in the world I've never seen anybody I served with in-country since I've been home. So it's just that little component, from 18 to not quite 21, that's what I did during those years. And I talk to people now that, "Oh, I'm 18 and I just don't know what to do," and I go, oh, man. Sit down. Let me give you a couple of ideas because all those years got taken away from me.