



Steven Duke
Specialist E-5
Door Gunner
Army
St. George, Utah
"Escalation"

Interviewer

Give us your full name.

Steven Duke

Steven Lee Duke.

Interviewer

Where are you from?

Steven Duke

Right now, I'm from St. George, Utah.

Interviewer

And you more or less grew up here?

Steven Duke

Yes. I've been here since 1962.

Interviewer

You went to high school here?

Steven Duke

Yes. I went to high school here and in Hurricane and in Tropic, Utah.

Interviewer

What kind of a kid were you?

Steven Duke

I think I was a fairly normal kid. Done most of the things that other kids did. I had a good childhood. My mother and dad were divorced, and my mother joined the church, and so we moved west and have been here ever since.

Interviewer

Tell me about how you got into the Army.

Steven Duke

Well, I got married in 1969, and when I got home from my wedding, I had my draft notice in the mail saying that I was to report within the next five days. I went down and enlisted and done what they called a 120-day delay, and I got to stay home for 120 days. Then I left and went to Fort Lewis, Washington, Fort Benning, Georgia, for aviation training, and then from there I went to Germany, and then from there I went to Vietnam.

Interviewer

Did you select aviation?

Steven Duke

Yes, I did.

Interviewer

Why?

Steven Duke

It was something that I wanted to try, something that I wanted to do. At that time, I wasn't really thinkin' about Vietnam or anything. It was something I wanted to do; I wanted to try and do that as a career, a helicopter mechanic, aviation-type mechanic. I was good with mechanic work and stuff like that, so that's kinda why I took that field.

Interviewer

When did you go in?

Steven Duke

I think 1969.

Interviewer

Were you aware of the war?

Steven Duke

Yes. My older brother was over there in '68 and '69. Shortly after he came back, I went over.

Interviewer

Did he have any opinions about the war that he had shared with you?

Steven Duke

Not really, because he was Stateside and I was actually in Germany at that time. So we didn't really get into the politics and stuff of it. We grew up to believe that we were supposed to do what we were supposed to do for the military and for our country, and so I didn't think about it one way or the other.

Interviewer

So tell me how you got to Vietnam.

Steven Duke

We flew over, and I come into Cam Ranh Bay, which is far up in the north. And we got in there, oh, late one evening, and as soon as they brought the bus out--and the bus had bars on the windows and everything, and they were probably an inch square--I said, "I think I've been dropped into the wrong place. This is not really where I wanna be. This doesn't look really good." And I asked somebody. I said, "Well, what's the bars for?" They says, "Well, we gotta drive downtown to get back to other part of the base, and that's to keep people from throwing hand grenades in the window." And I thought, "Oops. This is not good." And so it just kinda went from there.

Then we processed through there for a day or two, and then I ended up down to Saigon, actually down in the Long Bien area. I had a friend of mine that I had went to high school with, a kid by the name of Dave Merrill that was actually over there at that time. So I found out what company he was in, and I give him a phone call, and he come down and we kinda pulled a little bit of shenanigan. I was in a formation, and he walked up to the First Sergeant, and he said, "I need a man for a detail." And he said, "His last name is Duke." And so they had me fall out, and they said, "Well, go with this Spec 5 here. You're on a detail for the next day or two."

And so soon as we got outta sight of the company, he gave me a raggedy old shirt to put on 'cause he didn't figure we could get out of the front gate with a brand new clean set of fatigues on. They knew I was a newbie 'cause I was wearing new clothes. We were downtown Saigon in a matter of five or ten minutes, and it was quite a learning experience right after we got there. We went over to Long Bien over at the base where he was stationed, had supper, watched a movie. They had a big screen set up and they played movies on certain nights, and it just happened to be one of the nights that they were playing a movie, and we watched a movie, and stayed in his barracks, and the next day, he took me back. I flew out later that afternoon and ended up down in Can Tho, where I spent the rest of my time with the 307th Aviation Division.

Interviewer

What did you see?

Steven Duke

Oh, I guess it was just like any other city. It was a pretty good-sized place at that time, other than it was all oriental people. They all had their funny little hats on, kind of like an upside down funnel. He was telling me that you had to be careful riding around downtown, especially if you got in on their motorcycles or you were walking. They'd come by with a razor blade and cut your pockets to see what would fall out of them: money, whatever. You just kinda had to be careful.

We were in a three-quarter ton military vehicle with doors, so we didn't have to worry about it that much. He was in supply, so he was down there all the time, going from one base to the other one, picking up parts and everything. So it was nothing to him, and he'd been over there for almost a year. It was a little nerve wracking for me, but I believed him. He said, "Hey, we'll be fine." We went and toured around and done like GI's do. Try to stay out of trouble; do the best we could do with what we had. Then I went on down to the 307th Aviation Division.

Interviewer

Where was that?

Steven Duke

It was down in the heart of the Me Kong Delta, they called it, down in Can Tho. That's about as far south as you can

go without going into the ocean. It's dry probably six or eight months out of the year, and the other half, you can set your watch on a rainstorm. Three o'clock in the afternoon, it would start raining. One o'clock, there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Between one and three, the clouds would roll in, and sometimes you'd get a half, three quarters of an inch of rain. Then it'd quit 'til the next day. And you had the rainy season and the dry season.

Interviewer

Tell me about the rainy season.

Steven Duke

That was it. It was every day for almost four or five months straight. And then during the dry season, you wouldn't hardly get a drop of rain, anything. Everything would dry up and stink. The Vietnamese people, they never had a lot of money.

If my memory serves me right, we had a mama-san that done our laundry, made our beds, shined our shoes, washed our clothes and everything, and I think it run us \$10 to \$15 a month. She would work for five to seven GI's a month. She was rich. She was one of the well-to-do people. We didn't wanna do it, so they let 'em in and let 'em do work, and so we got it done.

Interviewer

Tell me about your unit. You flew how many missions?

Steven Duke

I had about 230 - 240 combat hours is what they call it. Some of 'em would be longer than others. I don't know how they break it down, but we had about 240 combat hours.

Interviewer

What did you do in particular?

Steven Duke

I was a door gunner on an H-Model Huey, which is a Huey helicopter. The H-Model was just a little bit bigger than some of the others. It had a little extra door, kinda like an extra cab on a pickup. It had one little extra door in it. Other than that, they were basically the same size. It was classified as a gun ship.

We had a .60 caliber machine gun on one side, and I flew with the battalion commander, and nobody's gonna tell him that he couldn't have it, so he put a side-mounted mini gun on the other side. It wasn't authorized, but who's gonna tell him that he can't have it? So we had one, and it would shoot 3,000 rounds a minute. It would be out of ammunition in 30 seconds 'cause we just couldn't carry that much with us. He just wanted it 'cause it looked cool. What do you say? He wanted it; we put it on and went from there.

Interviewer

Tell us about your first mission.

Steven Duke

We were out flying, and we done command missions. We would be the command ship, and we'd have gunships that would go down and we'd have the loaches, which is a real small chopper. You would generally have one door gunner hanging out on the skids, and they would go down at treetop level and try to draw fire. When they would draw fire, then there would be another gunship close by.

The plan was to watch and see where the fire was coming from, and then they'd shoot rockets in there and kinda blow things up and try to take care of the enemy. Or if we went out and happened to find bunkers or caves that they were storing ammunition in or we figured they would store ammunition in, they would drop Napalm. Then after they'd drop the Napalm, then they would shoot rockets in there. And if you heard an explosion and then a secondary explosion, then there was something in the cave. There was ammunition, rockets, whatever because there would be a secondary explosion if there was anything in it. If not, well, that's the way it goes.

Interviewer

Tell us about your first mission.

Steven Duke

I don't remember that much about it. We were out on some sorties, and they started shootin' back at us. And our tracers were kind of a reddish orange, and theirs was green. And here we saw these green things coming back at us, and the thing you gotta remember with tracers is in between each one of those green specs you can see is four or five rounds that you don't see. They haven't got tracers on 'em, so you don't know where they're goin'. You can see where they are, and it was a little nerve wracking.

Then a month or two later, we were out doing a command ship, and the guy on the loach got shot. He got shot right through the middle of the thigh, and it went up through his thigh and out through the side of his leg. They bandaged him up a little bit. We were kinda sittin' up there high enough that we were out of everything, and we were listening to the NAV radio. I was listening to Wolfman Jack out of Saigon. He was one of the broadcasters at that time, if you remember who Wolfman Jack was. We were listening to him, and then all the sudden, that guy keyed the mic when he got shot and it kind of brought us back to the war. We were up there kind of outta harm's way, so to speak, and were listening to the NAV radio. They used it for navigation, so if you were flying to Saigon, you tuned into the Saigon station, and the arrow pointed in the direction you were supposed to go.

We were just listening to it, and all of the sudden, he keyed that mic, and it was the most blood-curdling scream you ever heard. Then we had to go down and pick him up and then take him to the hospital because the loach had got hit, so they weren't able to take him down. So it kinda brought us back to our senses, and we got a hold of our guns, and we sat down. They shuffled him in there real quick and we took off and took him back into--I don't remember now where we took him, but we took him into a hospital. We found out later that he did okay. It went

straight through. It hit the fleshy part of the upper thigh area and missed any bones. Didn't do him any good, but it didn't do him a lot of major damage.

Interviewer

Tell me about some of those. Do you remember any individual mission?

Steven Duke

There was one that I don't know whether my brain has kind of wiped it completely out. We had a long mission one day, and we lost three or four birds, and we picked up an air medal with a "V" Device for bravery above and beyond the call of duty. There's not a whole lot of that day that I really remember. I've talked to the psychologist, and he said, "One day, it may come back to you; it may not." He says, "Your brain has gotten rid of it for some reason or another." He said, "There's something traumatic there that you did or you saw." That's the only real major one that we got into.

Like I said, they told us a lot of the things that went on that day in the set of orders that we got for it, and very little of it do I remember. I remember the starting of the mission; I remember a couple of the birds got shot down, and we were running cover for 'em, and I remember the end of it. And then they come and they said, "Well, okay. You need to sign here, here, and here," and we received the ribbons. But there's not a lot of it that I really can put a finger on. I'll have nightmares about it, but a lot of the nightmares never make any sense.

There wasn't a whole lot that we did that was really earth shattering like a lot of 'em did. I've got a lot of friends in my group that are combat Veterans. We'll sit back, and we'll talk about it occasionally, but they don't talk about it very much at all. I've got a friend of mine that was with Charlie Company, the First Cav from up around Bryce Canyon area, that he doesn't talk about it much anymore either. He just doesn't wanna relive it, and I mean he was out in the bush. He walked point for six months and come back alive. I was there. We done our duty. We done what we were asked to do.

Interviewer

What did you have to be aware of in the things you were doing as an individual?

Steven Duke

Well, you had to be observant, even when you were on the base. They wanted you to be observant because we got into a firefight one night on the base, and we didn't do a whole lot of anything. The people that was on guard duty that night, they shot an individual trying to come through the wire. In the morning, they we went out to retrieve him, and it was our barber. He was cutting our hair and shaving us in the daytime and sneaking back in through the constant wire at night as a NVA. You never knew it. There was no way you could pick 'em out.

They taught you to watch and see if anything looked out of the ordinary, like somebody walking from a building and

counting their steps. From here to here, it's 14 steps, and from here to here, it's this many steps. Then they would guide rockets back in that night because they knew where things were laid up, and they could set their coordinates from there. So many feet from here, and you get a forward observer that says, "Okay, this rocket landed here. You need to be 40 feet to the left." So you move it a little bit, and he says, "You're right on target," and then you just start peppering it. But you had to kind of watch for that.

To this day, I could be driving down the road at 60 mph and see somebody walking on the side of the road. I ask my wife, "Do you see that guy?" "What guy?" And it's something you never forget. It stays with you for a lifetime. After I got back out, I spent 12 and a half to 13 years in the Utah National Guard. We went up to Fort Lewis one time, and I was walking in front of a military deuce and a half, which has a diesel engine that's loud. And I was about three steps in front of it, and it was ten, eleven o'clock at night, and I heard a bolt close on an M-16 rifle. We were walking into a mock ambush, and I ran back, and I told him, "Flip your lights on and let's get outta here. We're going into an ambush."

And so he hit the gas, and shortly thereafter, within the next 15, 20 minutes, we got to where we were going, and a captain come in. He said, "What was the last vehicle that come in here?" And they said, "Maintenance was." They come over real quick, and they said, "Who was walking in front of that truck?" And I said, "I was, Sir." He says, "Why did you bolt and run?" And I said, "Let me ask you, Sir. Which one of you closed the bolt on an M-16?" And one guy raised his hand real sheepishly and said, "It was me." I said, "I heard that bolt close." He said, "There ain't no way you could've heard that bolt." And I said, "You don't ever forget something like that, whether you're in combat or not." I said, "I knew that that was a gun bolt closing, and I knew what to do about it. And that was get out of the way." You never forget that when you're in a combat zone.

Interviewer

As a door gunner, you're sitting on something?

Steven Duke

You're sitting on a chair, except that it's webbing, and you have what we called chicken plates. They were bulletproof vests. At that time, they were big and bulky, and they were probably about a half-inch of body armor, and they were solid. They weren't to where you could bend 'em or anything. They were solid, and they were heavy. We wore one of those, and then we sit on the other one because naturally, most of the time, we were flying up quite high.

So they would shoot at ya, and it would be from your rump to your knees. So if you sat on one, most of our rounds come up through the bottom, and anything that come in up level high, the other one would protect you. And then like I said, you sat on the other one, and that protected the main part of your body because most of 'em was

shootin' straight up at you from the ground. Or they would let you go by, and then after you go by, then they start shootin' at ya, and they're almost on a straight up angle. So that's why we would sit on one and wear the other one.

Interviewer

What else are you wearing? What else are you doing?

Steven Duke

At that particular time, you've just got an M-16, and you kinda keep it at the ready. You're just sitting back there, and if you're not doing that, while you're on the ground, you're a mechanic.

Interviewer

So have got an M-60?

Steven Duke

You've got actually a .60 caliber machine gun, and they have 'em mounted two ways. You've got one that has a pedestal that comes out of the floor, and you actually bolt it on. And all you're doing is holding it straight out up or down or left and right, and it has a stop on it to where you can't shoot the pilot and the copilot, and you can't shoot the tail off because when you get excited sometimes, you may swing it too far.

So those have a stop on 'em. Some of the others are mounted on a cable, and so you just kinda keep it from moving left and right and forward and back. It's got a belt drive, and as it shoots, it just feeds the bullet out, throws the casing out on the ground.

Interviewer

You've got a helmet on.

Steven Duke

Yeah, you have a helmet on, but the helmet is strictly for communicating with the pilot and the copilot. It was strange. Vietnam was an entirely different situation. There was a lot of times that we would take a Vietnamese Regular with us that was on our side, and he would tell us whether or not we could shoot at somebody. He would say either friendly or non-friendly. If he said they was friendly, we couldn't fire at 'em. If we got fired at, we had to get permission to shoot.

The Colonel told us, "If we get fired on, you start shootin', and as I'm asking for permission to fire, if they say no, when we get outta harm's way, I'll tell you to quit. Until then, keep shootin'. I'll take the flak for it, but you just keep shootin'. You look after me, and I'm gonna look after you," and he did. I flew with a guy by the name of Lieutenant Colonel Bonifacio. He lives somewhere back East. I've never tried to find him.

I've got a friend of mine that I flew with in Vietnam that I haven't seen since '72, and later on this month, I'm gonna go visit him. And I haven't actually seen him. I've talked to him on the Internet, but I haven't seen him since '72.

Interviewer

How are you gonna feel when you see him?

Steven Duke

I don't know. This is gonna be quite an experience. I actually got back in touch with him about three years ago. I needed some information from him on a claim that I was doing. I talked to a friend of mine, and I said, "Don, I need to find somebody." He said, "Well, that shouldn't be too tough." I said, "Well, it would be for me." He gets on his computer and says, "What's his name?" I tell him, "Kerry D. Hill." "Where'd he live?" I said, "Bethel Springs, Tennessee." He said, "Is he about 60 years old?" And I said, "Yeah, that's about what he would be."

Still lives there; ain't never left. Been there all of his life, basically like I have right here in the St. George area. He's still in the same hometown he left from in the '60s. He gave me a telephone number. I called him, and talked to him, and his wife answered the phone. She said, "May I ask who's calling?" And I says, "Well, I don't know if you'll know me or not, but this is Steve Duke. I flew with Kerry in Vietnam." And she says, "I really think I know you. We talk about you at least once a week. We have wondered what you're doing and how your family's doing." I said, "Well, we're about to get reacquainted."

We've stayed in contact since then by telephone. He's on Facebook and my wife's on Facebook, and she chats with him quite often on Facebook. I pick up the phone. I'm not one of them that does computers and types everything out. If I wanna talk to somebody, I pick up the telephone and talk to 'em. I'm not one of the people that type it out.

Interviewer

Tell me a story about you and Kerry.

Steven Duke

Well, we worked on the plane, and it was kinda funny. This one here don't have anything to do with work, but the Colonel and the Sergeant Major, wherever we went, they went with us. They decided one day they were gonna go to Saigon, and so we flew to Saigon. And while were up there doing whatever they doing, they said, "Well, before we do it, we're gonna go to dinner."

So we went into this Chinese restaurant, and I looked at the menu: bird's nest soup, and sweet and sour, and this and this. I thought, "What in the devil is all of this stuff?" The Captain beside me, he ordered this, this, and this. Then the lady says, "What are you gonna have?" And I said, "Hey, that sounds good, what he had." And Kerry says, "Yeah, that does. That really sounds good. We're gonna have what he has."

We had no idea what we was gonna end up with for food. What made it humorous was when they got done, there

was seven or eight people, and the gal brought the ticket in, and it was several hundred bucks. And give it to the first guy, and he looked it and he said, "Boy, I ain't got that kind of money in my pocket." And he handed it to me, and I says, "I don't hardly make that much a month."

We finally passed it all the way around, and it ended up with the Colonel, and the Colonel was gonna pick up the tab anyway for it, but he just thought it was funny the way everybody passed the ticket all the way over to him. Like I said, it was a pretty good chunk of change that we had went in there, and it was a nice, fancy restaurant. We ended up with bird's nest soup, and I didn't dare ask 'em what was in that; and sweet and sour pork, and rice, and everything.

They kept bringing us this stuff, and I was gobbling it down, and the Captain nudged me, and he said, "Duke, you don't have to eat it all at one time. They're not gonna take it away when you get done with that tray." I thought, "Well, all right. I'll slow down then." But I figured when they got that one done, they was gonna take it and bring us something else, so I was getting it down in a hurry. That was one kind of humorous deal.

Interviewer

Did you fly in the same helicopter?

Steven Duke

Yes, we flew in the same bird every day. We kept track of it; we done maintenance on it. We changed the oil, done minor repairs on it, and when it went into the shop for major repairs, we went with it and worked on it.

Interviewer

And did your friend fly in the same helicopter?

Steven Duke

Yes. He flew in the same helicopter with me.

Interviewer

So you guys really were so close.

Steven Duke

Yeah. We lived in a barracks together. There was two of us to a cubicle. We were in the same cubicle together, and we spent the better part of a year over there.

Interviewer

From when to when?

Steven Duke

From '70 to '71 is when we were over there. I don't remember the exact months in '70.

Interviewer

So about 12 months?

Steven Duke

I got what they call an early out. This was winding up pretty close to the end of the war, and they would say the 307th Aviation Division is coming home today. Well, they didn't tell you exactly truth. The 307th Aviation Division was coming home, but if you had 90 days or less, you got to come home. If you had 91 days and more, you went to another unit, and somebody else from another unit got in the picture.

And they showed 500 people coming home, and they were all supposedly from the 307th Aviation Division, or the First Cav, or whatever it happened to be, but they weren't. They were just people that was rotating out of country anyway.

Interviewer

You're in an interesting position 'cause you're in a headquartership.

Steven Duke

Yes, I was in the battalion commandership.

Interviewer

In Vietnam, I've heard some criticism because you're just developing a new way where it's a new war; where a commander can actually look at the ground and tell everybody how to behave.

Steven Duke

Well, I thought that the Lieutenant Colonel done a very good job, and he kinda had his hands tied, like I said, because he had a Vietnamese officer that was over him. So if we had that guy with us, we did different than if he wasn't there. 'Cause if he was there, the Colonel didn't make the decision. The Vietnamese officer made the decision, so it kinda took it out of his hands. But when we didn't have an observer with us, he made the decision, and he made it for his benefit. If somebody was shootin' at us, we shot back. And then if we couldn't get permission when we got outta there, like I said, he said, "Hey, quit firing. We didn't get permission to fire, so quit."

That's a little bit strange that if somebody's shootin' and tryin' kill you, you're not allowed to shoot back until you get permission.

We talked to some of the guys that were flying gunships at night, and we'd get a mortar attack, and they would tell us, "We have visual on the mortar attack. Can we fire?" "No." We have to get permission. They would check. "Well, there might be friendlies in the area. You can't shoot." So they'd have to turn and go back to the base. Iraq was a lot the same way. I visited with some of the guys from the Triple Deuce coming back, and they said it was a lot that way.

Interviewer

So you're in a headquarters helicopter. It must be really toe down.

Steven Duke

It is. And like I said, the one guy got shot, and he didn't blink an eye. He said, "We'll be down and pick him up. You wait for a medevac, and the man may die." He didn't blink an eye. He says, "We'll come down and pick him up off the ground, and we'll take him back to get first aid." He told us, "Get on your guns. Get ready to go." He says, "We don't know what we're gonna get into when we get closer to the ground."

They were keeping their heads down at that time because they had already shot one down. We picked him up and then dropped him off at an air base, and the medics met us out on the field and they come and got him. You have to make the decisions that you make, and then you've gotta live with them. Some of the things that happened: the lower officers get blamed. It doesn't matter who made the decision; it goes down to the lowest officer on the ground: the First Lieutenant or the 2nd Lieutenant that's down on the ground. He's the one that ultimately pays for it. If it was a screw up, and kinda like My Lai Massacre. That's exactly what happened. He was the lowest officer they could go down to, and he took the brunt of it. He didn't make that decision on his own. Somebody else made that decision but they covered their butts.

Interviewer

This is late in the war, and you're still terribly worried about civilian casualties.

Steven Duke

Yeah, they were, and you don't know what a civilian is. You're the only one that's got a uniform on, and the guys that you're shootin' at are dressed in regular clothes: regular pair of pants, shirt, hat. And the only time you'll know that he's the enemy is if you see him turn and point a gun at you; point an AK-47 at ya; an SKS; whatever he might happen to have because you can't look at him and tell. Now the NVA Regulars had a uniform on, but down south, we never saw that many NVA Regulars because most of 'em were Vietnamese people that they had recruited or they wanted to be in it, one or the other.

Interviewer

We see that famous movie, "Apocalypse Now." Tell me what it's like or not like.

Steven Duke

By that time, I had been to a military function, and I was out, and I was back into the Guard. One of the guys I was with said, "Let's go see that." I didn't know anything about it, and so I went and seen it. And if anybody's ever seen it, the part that really got me was they're going up the river, and they come to a turn, and they're going into an ambush, and I can see that ambush just as clear as day. I could see 'em moving in the jungle, and I was right on the edge of my seat. I could see 'em moving. I knew they were gonna get shot at.

And just about time they started shootin', my wife screamed, and reached over and grabbed me, and I come up with closed fists, and just stopped about a quarter of an inch from the end of her nose when I come to. I just about put her lights out because I could see it. There was nothing I could do about it, but being in uniform, it put me right

back over there. And then when they started shooting, it scared her, and she grabbed a hold of me.

I come up and that's the last one I've ever watched. If it has anything to do with Vietnam, I don't watch it at all. It's not worth it to me. It brings up old nightmares and I won't sleep for sometimes a week if I watch that stuff. If it comes on, my wife says, "Duke, you'd better change the channel. You know what it's gonna do."

Interviewer

What about the helicopter scenes?

Steven Duke

That brought back some memories to me when I would see 'em flying. Even to this day, I'll hear a Huey goin' over and start popping, and I start looking around for it. Where's it at? I can hear it. I can hear it comin' in somewhere. I get to listening, and okay, it's comin' in off of my right here; it's comin' in off my left, and I try and find it.

And once in a while, it'll trigger a few things. I'll hear music from the late '60s, early '70s and it'll trigger things that I listened to while I was over there. It'll trigger nightmares for me. There's a number of things that will do it: music, some noises. I don't do good with loud bangs, firecrackers, stuff like that; bullets going off and I don't know they're shooting.

That's another thing that really bothers me really even to this day. You never, ever get away from it. You always remember it. It's something that that's the training you went through, and that's what you remember. There's nothing you can do about it. I mean you try not to dwell on it. I look at the way the soldiers are coming back today, and it just makes me as proud as I can be. I stand tall; I go to all of the events. I'm retired now, and I'm active in the Disabled American Veterans and I help take care of Veterans and get 'em the benefits that they deserve. A couple of them, while I was still working, helped me get the things that I needed. I'm trying to give back to them now.

Interviewer

How did you hear the music?

Steven Duke

When we would go into the barracks, we would have music playin' in the barracks. We'd listen to the navigational radio. If you hear an old program on Wolfman Jack, he's an old broadcaster out of the '60s and the '70s, and he happened to be in Saigon. I'm trying to think of the movie, "Good Morning, Vietnam." That's what I think of when I see that movie or hear him is Wolfman Jack.

Like I said, we would listen to the radio while when we were flying. If we wasn't busy doing anything or we was goin' from here to there and there wasn't anything combat related goin' on, we'd listen to music. You hear songs from the late '60s, early '70s, especially in rock n' roll. I was listening to rock n' roll then.

Interviewer

Do you remember any particular songs?

Steven Duke

I really don't. I can't think of any of 'em. I know as soon as I walk out the door, I'll remember half a dozen of 'em. But right now, nothing pops into my head. But I still listen to it today, to old time rock n' roll.

Interviewer

Did you have any VIPs that you shuttled around?

Steven Duke

Oh, yeah. We shuttled around VIPs. We would have dignitaries come in, and we'd have some reporters come in, and they'd wanna fly around with us and look around and see what we were doing. On those days, they'd almost have to watch it with a pair of binoculars 'cause you didn't wanna get close enough that one of 'em might take a round 'cause then you're gonna be in trouble.

"You guys took your VIP out today and got a bullet hole in 'em?" Now that's not good. So they were not supposed to be that close to the action.

They just had to fly around and say they'd been there and done that. We would fly sometimes nurses and stuff. We used to fly a couple of nurses. The Colonel and Captain decided they wanted to go to dinner one day. So we flew to Saigon and took 'em to dinner. They handed us 20 bucks and told us to go find a hot dog somewhere and be gone for about three hours. There was things like that that you got into.

You went to sometimes a lot of meetings that the battalion commander would have to go over here to a meeting or somewhere. But it didn't matter where you flying in-country, you flew over the jungle, and there could be somebody getting ready to shoot at you at any given time. So you kinda had to stay alert anywhere you were flying in-country, whether you were going just for an outing or something. It didn't matter.

We used to fly, and when you would fly through an area, you would get on the radio, and they would ask, "Is there any artillery in the area?" And they'd come back and they'd say, "No, you're clear to fly through the area." And we were flying to Saigon one day, and you could see the 105 on the ground out the window, and you could see the poof of smoke where it was landing, but you didn't know what kind of an arch it was going. So they said, "Well, no artillery in your area," and they called back and they said, "Well, we can see the gun shooting and we can see the bullet going off." He said, "You either go back or you fly through and hope for the best." And they said, "Open the doors. I guess all we can do is hope it goes straight through out one side and out the other one." And we didn't know whether to go up or down, so we stayed on the level we was at and made it through. But you didn't know what to expect from one day to the next.

Interviewer

Tell me about becoming a short timer.

Steven Duke

You get a lot more vigil about things you do and you don't wanna do the shorter you get. You generally had a walking stick or something, and you started putting notches on it about a week after you got there. A lot of people wouldn't start until they were six months. If you were a die hard, you would start putting a notch on there every day. They called it a short timer stick when it was completely full of notches.

And I got down to 90 days, and then I happened to get in on the deal with the 307th Aviation was coming back. They were pulling them out of there, and I went in to see the Colonel one day, and he said, "Duke, I'm gonna give you a 90-day drop." And I said, "Good deal." And he's says, "I'm gonna take 20 of 'em back." And I said, "Well, that still ain't a bad deal. I'll take it." And he says, "What I would like you to do is bring the colors back for the 307th Aviation Division, and you and the First Sergeant"--they had to have one NCO and one Senior NCO. No, he was a Captain and I was the NCO. So they had to have an Officer and a Non-Commissioned Officer bring the records and the colors back.

So after everybody left, we stayed behind and brought the records and took it into Saigon. We got ready to leave, and we were getting ready to board the plane, and they said, "Well, you guys will have boarding pass number one and number two. Boy, that's high up. So if anybody gets bumped off the plane coming home,"--for one reason or another, if somebody had a serious accident at home or something, they would start with the last person that had the boarding pass, and they would get bumped, and they'd catch the next plane. They said, "If anybody gets bumped after you guys, it's the pilot and the copilot off the plane that's flying it that would be bumped."

So they wanted us to bring 'em back and wanted us to be there, so we had boarding pass number one and number two. And we had a ceremony at Fort Lewis when we got back. A 32-passenger bus is all they had, and they said, "Take this man to the airport. He's waited this long; he's heading home."

Interviewer

What was it like when you got home?

Steven Duke

It was really different. My wife was here and my kids. My one child was here, and it was really strange to be home. And the strangest part about it was they asked us to change out of our military dress greens before we left the base and get into your civilian clothes. And it was tough. Here we was over there fighting for our country, and they didn't even want us wearing our uniform. They called us baby killers, and that was one reason why they said, "We would prefer that you got in civilian clothes, and then nobody knows who you are." I said, "Well, okay." That's what you figure, and so we did.

I packed up and come home. There wasn't any fanfare, nothing. I stepped off the plane and my wife and son was there, and that was it. I went home. You've got to learn to get over it, and I don't blame 'em now. I still choke up when I talk about it. If you stay bitter about it the rest of your life, all you're gonna be is a bitter old man. So I've just kinda had to put it behind and see that it never happens again. That's what we've tried to do with the troops returning home from the Triple Deuce, and all of the 140th, and the medical department here. You see that it never happens to another batch of American soldiers.

Interviewer

In '75 when you saw the images on TV, can you tell us what you thought?

Steven Duke

That was pretty tough. We watched some of the programs, and I watched an H-Model Huey like I flew in, they landed it on a ship, and they didn't have any more room for it, so they pushed it over. I thought, "Look at that. That's pushing a quarter of a million dollars worth of money there. They just pushed over and dropped it right in the ocean and made room for more people." I understood why they did it, but it was pretty tough watching 'em throw those planes into the ocean like that. You watched the video of Saigon falling and I thought, "All of this for basically nothing. We lost all those lives, and they come in, and they took it over anyway."

That was the part that got me was if they were just gonna let it go, why didn't we just leave a lot of years before then? That was the part that really made me angry. It wasn't so much that they done everything that they done, but there was all of those thousands and thousands of young men that died for what we figured was nothing 'cause they didn't gain anything. They actually lost and gave it back. That's kind of the way I felt about it.

Interviewer

If you were gonna train young men today to do what you did, how would you do that? What would you tell them?

Steven Duke

I was with the Triple Deuce, which is an artillery unit down here. I got out when I got my back injured. It was pretty tough seeing those guys leave, knowing what they were gonna go through and how much it was gonna probably change their life. I talked to a few of 'em, and one of the things I told 'em is look after yourself because nobody else is gonna look after you as well as you will. Take care of the rest of the people in your command and in your Howitzer or whatever else. But look after number one, and by all means, keep your head down.

We would joke with 'em and everything. We would tell 'em, "Don't be like a turkey lookin' over a log." That's the one that comes home over somebody's shoulder because he hears a noise and he pokes his head up. That's the turkey you shoot. I said, "Keep your head down, and keep your mind about you, and take care of business and you've got a good chance of comin' back." Guard units are a little different than active duty units. The commanding officer of

that Guard unit may know every single wife and family member that he's taking over there with him, and he's the one that's gotta come back and tell 'em, "So-and-so didn't come back." I honestly believe that the Guardsmen look after each other a whole lot more than your regular active duty personnel that don't really know the person that is fighting beside of ya. And I think that means a lot of difference.

Interviewer

So you tell a soldier what exactly?

Steven Duke

Do what you're told to do. Do it to the best of your knowledge. And when you come back, hold your head up proud no matter what anybody says, and tell 'em, "You done your absolute level best of what your Commander in Chief told you to do. Whether your politics agrees with the Commander in Chief, that man is still your boss. And the boss ain't always right, but he's always boss." That's what a guy told me years ago.

I tried to live by that when I was working. I didn't always do it. I got in trouble quite a bit, but I always knew it. The boss ain't always right, but he's always boss. So that's what the military teaches you. You don't think about something. If an officer tells you "Do this," you do it because he's got a reason for what he's telling you to do. You may not know it at the time, but he's got a reason for what he's telling you to do.

Interviewer

Have you been in a helicopter since?

Steven Duke

Yeah, I have. I've been in it a few times. I was up to Camp Williams with the Triple Deuce, and I was going on range guard duty. I had to go out on the range, which was about three miles away, and so they took us out on a helicopter and dropped us off. The ironic thing about that was they dropped us off on the wrong hill. This was on a Friday, and then Saturday morning, we were supposed to be off.

So we was supposed to be out there Friday night and then Saturday morning, they was supposed to come pick us up. So Saturday morning got there, and it got quiet, and they quit shooting. About eleven o'clock got there, and nobody come to get us. So the kid that was with me, I said, "Hey, I don't know about you, but I'm walking to town. I'm gonna find out what happened."

It was about two miles to town, so I walked down into town and walked up to house and asked 'em if I could use their telephone to call Camp Williams. So I called and got the unit, and the First Sergeant said, "Duke, where are you at?" I said, "Well, I'm downtown. I got hungry and I decided to walk to town." He says, "The pilot that dropped you off went on leave for the weekend, and the new pilot didn't find you. You weren't where you were supposed to be." And I says, "Well, I'm still not. Send somebody to get me, and I can take the guy back out and I can show him

where the other guy's at."

They had discontinued the leave and they were starting to search for us 'cause they had no idea of where we were at. We had one quart of water, and we'd been out there for a day and a half and one supper meal. Finally, my stomach got the best of me. I was going to town after somethin' to eat.

Interviewer

So what was it like to step into that helicopter?

Steven Duke

It was a little different, especially when you heard the whopping of the wings of the blades when they start to take off. It doesn't really affect me that bad. I can hear 'em and I'll look around. I can ride around in 'em occasionally. I have to keep it in my head of what I'm doing and where I'm not at. And I think that's a lot of it.

I had a guy tell me one time that you've gotta figure out how to get out of the jungle, and if you can't figure out how to get out of the jungle, you're gonna live with it the rest of your life. And that's basically what he was saying, you've got to try and figure out somehow to put it off into the back part of your brain and try and not dwell on the things that you can't do anything about as often as you can. So that's what they try and teach us to do, but it's tough.

Steven Duke

Good question. If they happened to be in the chopper with us, we knew where they were at. If they weren't, I couldn't really tell you where they were at. I don't know whether they were in a back office making that decision. I really don't know. All I know is we had to get on the radio and get permission sometimes to shoot back at 'em.

Interviewer

Well, if they're in the helicopter with you, what do they look like?

Steven Duke

They were a Vietnamese officer generally. They were a Vietnamese officer that was South Vietnamese, on our side.

Interviewer

So things are winding down. What are the GI's saying to one another during this time?

Steven Duke

Oh, most of 'em are not really that concerned about it. They're concerned about getting home to their wife, their kids, their loved ones. They're like most any other, I would imagine, any other GI that was back in World War II or Korea. They try not to get involved in the politics of it. They're over there doing a job, and they're trying to come back.

Interviewer

At home, there were all of these protests going on. Were you isolated from that?

Steven Duke

I wasn't necessarily isolated about it. I just kinda had to learn to keep my opinion to myself. One guy said that he would rather go to Canada or he would chop off his arm to keep from going in the service. And I looked him right in the eye, and I said, "I'll swing the axe for you if you want me to." And he said, "That's kinda rude, isn't it?" And I says, "Well, you didn't do much better as far as I'm concerned. You live here and it is not free, but you wanna go to Canada and then come back after everything is done? Something is wrong with that picture."

Freedom is not free. That's what I think about today when the other guys are leaving, going somewhere. They don't wanna go, but they're doing what they're told and they do what they feel like they need to do.

Interviewer

Did you celebrate a birthday over there?

Steven Duke

I celebrated a birthday, and my oldest son was born while I was in Vietnam. He was born on the 21st of December, and I keep telling my wife he was born on the 22nd because in Vietnam, it was the 22nd when he was born and it was the 21st here.

Interviewer

How did you get the news?

Steven Duke

The Red Cross called me and notified me that my son had been born.

Interviewer

Did you do anything special that day?

Steven Duke

No, it was during work time, and I didn't even pass out cigars that I can remember. One day over there was just about like the next one. Occasionally, we would take off on a Sunday and go to church if we wanted, if we didn't have anything going. We had a small LDS branch there.

Interviewer

Tell me about that.

Steven Duke

We had a various number of people from different states; a couple of 'em from Nevada, a couple of 'em from Arizona. The copilot that I flew with was from Idaho, and he was a dis-fellowshipped Mormon. He never did say what he did, but for some reason, he said, "I deserved what I got."

But I figured one day, he would probably get back in the church because he read scriptures, and you did not want to get into a contest with him as far as scriptures, Bible, or anything 'cause unless you knew what you were talking

about, he'd put you to shame. And he told me a couple of times, "Duke, if you wanna go to General Conference in Saigon, you let me know. I'll find you a ride from here to Saigon."

Interviewer

There was a General Conference in Saigon?

Steven Duke

Yeah, the General Authorities would come over there and they would hold a general conference in one of the chapels there in Saigon. I went to a couple of 'em while I was over there.

Interviewer

How many people were there?

Steven Duke

You'd have several hundred soldiers, and the majority of 'em were soldiers. You'd have 2- or 300 of 'em that would come in from various places that would get permission to go on a particular Sunday. I went to two while I was over there.

Interviewer

How long would it last? What would be going on?

Steven Duke

At that time, you would have been in the center of the base, so you were as safe as you could be if you were in-country. I don't remember now, but one of the General Authorities, one of the top, Seventy or Quorum of the Twelve, would come over and speak.

Interviewer

Was it a good moment to have that?

Steven Duke

It was good. If nothing else, it kinda got you out of it for a few hours and you didn't think about it. You showed up in your military fatigues. Everybody looked exactly the same except for the guys talking, they were in suits and ties.

Interviewer

Did it surprise you to see that many LDS people there?

Steven Duke

Not really. Vietnam is a pretty good sized place, so you would have a lot of people that would be over there. You've got LDS people all over the world, so it really didn't surprise me to see that many. We had a few USO shows that come in, and you got to see some of those.

Interviewer

Tell me about USO shows.

Steven Duke

I never saw any of the big measure performers. We saw the Playboy Bunny of the Year. They have the 12, and then

they have one that's picked. She come over with one of the USO tours and was signing autographs and things like that. A few other minor-type celebrity people that come over there, and they were pretty good shows. It was a little dangerous to get that many people gathered together in one location, but we never had any major problems that I can remember.

Two days before I got to Saigon in Long Bien, they had a new batch of recruits that had just come in, and they were at their first formation, and six of 'em was killed with rockets the first day they got in-country. When they told us about that and where we were going down to there, I thought, "This is not real good." It's the luck of the draw. You're in the wrong place at the right time. That's all I can say about that one. I don't know whether it was a planned attack or whether they just logged a couple of mortars in, and that's where they hit.

Sometimes, you never know. It's a hit and miss. You set out there beyond the perimeter, and you set it up, and you say, "Okay. We'll maybe hit somethin' here." So you lob six or eight mortar rounds in; you grab the tube; and you take running before somebody starts lobbing 'em back at you. And that's what they would do. They would shoot a few in and then they would run back to wherever hooch they'd come from, and you'd never see 'em again. They'd never be there long enough to get a pinpoint on where they were at.

Interviewer

You said you got into trouble.

Steven Duke

Well, we did a few things that we weren't supposed to do. Nothing major. We would sneak out and a few things; never got into any serious trouble. We snuck out and was off doin' a few things we weren't supposed to be doing, and the Colonel decided he wanted to go flying. Well, he couldn't go without us. Wherever he went, we went, and so we kinda got chewed out for that.

Then the First Sergeant one day sent us out on guard duty, and the Colonel wanted to go flying. So when they went out and come and got us, the Sergeant Major talked to the First Sergeant. He says, "These guys will never be put on detail again. Do you understand me?" When the Colonel's ready to go, he's ready to go. He doesn't wanna have to be looking for his two helpers. So that was kinda nice.

We never went out on guard duty or anything again after that. He would give us 15 minutes. The copilot would know that we were gonna leave at a certain time, and so he would call the unit that we were in, and we was within two or three minutes of where we parked the chopper. And it was our job to go down and get it ready to go, do part of our preflight inspection, untie the rotor blades, put the guns on, get the ammunition out, and everything like that.

Interviewer

Was there a problem with drugs and alcohol?

Steven Duke

Well, they always told us if you didn't want to use marijuana, don't breathe in the barracks. And I'm not really being facetious about it. It was heavily used in the area where we were at, and it was very, very cheap to get. Hashish, they would buy it and put it in a box of something that somebody was shipping home, and they'd have \$4- or \$500 invested in it, and it was worth \$50-, \$60,000 street value in Chicago. It was very easy to get. There was quite a few people that was using drugs.

Alcohol was pretty heavy. I had a Sergeant that was just down the bay from me that run the officers' club. And I don't think he saw a sober day while he was there. He'd fall asleep at night with one drink in his hand and if he didn't spill it, he'd start with that one and drink the next one. He was able to work to around it 'cause all he did was took care of the officers' club. And everybody else done his job for him. He just had to go check in occasionally and see if everything was running. It was. It was quite prevalent. Would they get away with it today? I doubt it because that was part of the '60s and '70s era. It was, I guess, tolerated a little bit more.

There was one company that had a full field inspection in a combat zone. I mean footlockers, shined boots, everything. Two days later, a grenade went off in the commanding officer's barracks. His good luck, he wasn't there, but they made their point. A combat zone is not a place to have a full field inspection. You're there to do one thing, and that's combat.

Right, wrong, or indifferent, the troops got the point across to him, and they never had another one. He was transferred out. And you hear stories about people would want a promotion, so somebody would get shot in front of 'em in the back. I never saw any of that, but we heard the stories of it. You've got a Sergeant, and you're a Corporal, and you wanna make Sergeant, well, one way you do it is get rid of the squad leader. You heard that, but I never saw it. I'm sure it happened.

Interviewer

Is that where the term fragging comes from?

Steven Duke

Yeah. Friendly fire was another one that they didn't talk a lot about, but a number of people got killed with friendly fire, just like I used the example of the artillery round. We could see it goin' off, and we could see it landing, but where was it going in between? Now if we'd had been hit with it, we'd have been a casualty of friendly fire. I guess that's part of being in a combat zone. You're gonna have some of that. You hope it's by accident and not by purpose that they wanted to get rid of somebody.

Interviewer

As a door gunner, what does it smell like? What does it feel like?

Steven Duke

You're burning kerosene, which is aviation fuel. It's just nothing more than a high grade of kerosene, so you would have a real high temperature smell occasionally because the wind would swirl, and it would come in. You could smell gunpowder at times. You could smell sulfur from various different things. You would have oil smells because everything is greased and oiled.

You would have a sweat--so to speak--smell because you would get into some of those tense situations, like when the guy got shot. You'd just have sweat glands that opened up, and you get that smell in your nostrils. You would have things like that, that it would depend on what you were doing.

Sometimes, when we would land and they would have a meeting, we were parked right next to a 105. The wind would drift over you, and you could smell that powder burning off of there. When you'd take off and fly, it would come back through the hairs in your nose. "Where's that coming from?" And then you'd remember you had an artillery shell goin' off down there beside you. They used to scare the heck out of me when they would go off.

If you were on the base, you would hear an artillery round going out, and there's a difference between one going out and one coming in. One going out makes a bang. The one coming in makes a whistling sound, kind of a whirring sound. And it is amazing how fast you can be awake. You can be dead-to-the-world asleep, and you hear that whirring sound of that shell coming in and you'll be awake just instantly.

One of the first mortar attacks that we had, I'd only been in-country a couple of days. I had a mosquito net to keep the mosquitoes off of me. Somebody hollered, "Incoming!" and I bailed out of that top bunk and was on the ground and in the bunker. I got back to the bunk, and I tried to crawl back through that hole that I had just come out of, and I could not get back through that rascal. I had to un-tuck the bed to get back into bed. So I kinda shot out of it like a rocket when I come down through there. And I had never heard incoming, but somebody run into the barracks and hollered, "Incoming!" And that was something that you did not ever play with it. Somebody would beat your brains out if you come running in and hollered "incoming" and there wasn't anything going on. That's a life or a death situation. It wasn't anything to play with.

Interviewer

As a door gunner, tell us what you're seeing.

Steven Duke

You would learn to watch. You would learn to be hyper vigilant. You would really be keen on a lot of different things. I can catch things out of the corner of my eyes that my wife will never see or somebody else will see. I can see

something a hundred yards away, and I'll say, "What's that moving?" "What are you talkin' about?" "Well, right there dead in front of us. There's something moving."

And you never really get out of that because you would, if it was an LZ, which is a landing zone, they would say, "Well, we're gonna go down in an LZ and drop troops off," for example, that were going somewhere else, infantrymen. They would say, "Okay, suppress the tree line," which meant start shooting as we get down close. Start shootin' the tree line so that if anybody's in the tree line, they're gonna keep their head down while you're dumping people out. And then when you would get ready to take off, you would really watch that tree line. You couldn't fire anymore because by the time you got out of there, the people you just dropped off was running for the tree line, so you didn't wanna get them in trouble. But you would really watch to see if anything moved.

Interviewer

So you developed a hyper-acuity?

Steven Duke

Yeah, and you don't lose it. Right now, riding a motorcycle, I am going all the time. My head is going constantly, lookin' for things coming in or out of my area. You kinda have to drive for everybody else riding a motorcycle.

It was the same way over there. If you wanted to come back alive, you had to help look after number one. And then you were also trying to look out for the other three people that flew with you all the time. There was at least four of us that went all the time, and most of the time when there was five. There was the pilot, the copilot, the left gunner, and the right gunner, and generally the Sergeant Major. The two of us was the only ones that really had a weapon out. They would carry a side arm, and then they had bulletproof seats, and then side armor that slid up in front of them that would protect 'em from the side. Then we had the armor that we wore and then the one we sat on. They were expecting us to take care of 'em.

Interviewer

Did you ever lift up that armor you sat on and see?

Steven Duke

Yeah, we looked at it occasionally. We only had two holes that went in, and they never come up through where we were at, either one of us. I did not have it as bad as an H-Model door gunner that hauled troops. Those guys were taking bullets all the time because we only took troops in occasionally because we flew with the command ship. So it was a little easier duty and little less stressful.

I think the life expectancy of a door gunner, when I was over there, was about a week and a half just because of people shootin' at ya. Most of those guys was running, and they would either run one of two places: at treetop level at anywhere from 50 to 80 knots, or 2- or 3,000 feet in the air, or 1,000 feet in the air because you're a smaller

target at that height, and on the ground, you're a faster target. So you have to be really good to hit somethin' going 70 mph. If you're not, you didn't wanna fly anywhere in between because you were a real slow moving target and they had a better chance of shootin' and hitting ya, naturally.

Interviewer

Either you really--

Steven Duke

Yes. And I mean right at treetop level, you could almost reach down and pluck the top of the palm trees off as you go by. That's what I mean by treetop level. You're right on the deck. And I remember we had to drop this one Vietnamese officer off and the Colonel and them didn't go with us that particular day. They sent somebody else, and this guy was a maniac. He did what they call the "hammerhead" and you drop the nose of the helicopter and then you pull the stick back and it really takes off fast and you can pick up a lot of fast forward momentum. You do that right 'til you get to the trees, and just before you hit it, you turn it and go straight up and that's why they call it a hammerhead. Then you go just straight up in the air, and it just leaves your guts right there at the top of the tree because you just instantly turn and go straight back up.

These guys was maniacs, and we had done that a couple of times. We went over to drop this guy off and about 30 feet from the ground he said, "I've had enough," and he jumped. I told the pilot, "Don't worry about dropping any lower. He's already bailed I guess he'd had enough of your flying. He was ready to get out of here." So he just dropped the nose back down and away he again.

But you get some of those people that were hotshot pilots that try to see what they can do, and them's the ones that'll get you into trouble sometimes because if it happens to hesitate for a second, you just ate a standing row of palm trees. They don't do real good when the go through the motor.

I had about 30 minutes on the controls, and basically what they were trying to do is if one of them or both of 'em got shot or one of 'em could handle it a little bit, we were to take the other seat and try and get 'em back alive, and that's basically what they were doing. They weren't trying to make pilots out of us. They just figured that if we ever get into a situation, one of you two guys ought to be able to maybe see if you might be able to keep from killing us and land this thing. We never had to. But it was highly unethical, but what most GI's do, it's unethical anyway.

Again, they were looking after number one. They wanted to come back. If they didn't get killed, and we were the only thing that would get 'em back to wherever we needed to get help, that'd be better than nothing. And I guess if we smashed the chopper, so what? They'll get us another one.

Interviewer

Adrenaline when you're shooting--

Steven Duke

That's a tough one. That's why, right back in the beginning, I said the mounted guns had stops on them. They had a left stop, a right stop, an up, and a down because when adrenaline sets in, and somebody is shooting at ya, and you go past 'em, you're just liable to shoot yourself down because you sling that thing back around and without thinking, you're shooting right back at the tail or you're shooting up and the rotor blades hit.

And a thing about the helicopters, you can't bail out of a helicopter. If it's going down, the only thing you can do is hope the pilot can try and stop it before it gets down because if you bail out like the one guy did--he dropped down straight underneath it. But if it's falling real fast, it will fall faster than you will fall. So as you jump straight out, you're gonna stop momentarily, and it's gonna come on down. And if the blades are still turning, it's liable to cut you in half. And that's why they said you never try and bail out of one of 'em when they're goin' down.

They do what they call an auto rotation, and they flatten the rotor blades out, and you fall to a certain footage off of the ground, and then you pull 100 percent pitch, which tries to pick the helicopter back up, but it hasn't got the power. So all it does is basically puts on the air brakes just like a jet engine when they reverse the thrust. Then you only fall from ten feet, and that's why it's gotta be gauged perfect because if you start that at 50 feet, now you got 30 feet. You're gonna get going that much faster before you hit. They practice it.

I don't remember what the footage was, but just before you get to a certain footage, then you crank the pitch up and it kinda stops it. Then it falls, and then you're only falling from 10 feet in the air. It doesn't tear it all to heck. It just kinda bends the skids.

Interviewer

You've got a safety belt on, don't you?

Steven Duke

No.

Interviewer

So you're just hanging onto that helicopter?

Steven Duke

If you haven't got a hold of the gun, you'd have your arm around a post that is in there holding the seat up. No, you don't wear a safety belt or a seat belt. The pilot and copilot had a seat belt on, but we never.

Interviewer

So you're being tossed all around.

Steven Duke

Yeah. You're just kinda sittin' there holding onto it, and if it gets bumpy, you just kinda hang on to whatever you can.

Interviewer

What if the helicopter does one of these?

Steven Duke

Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. Sometimes they'll tell you that they're getting ready to make a turn. If it's a maneuver that they're trying to maneuver around something or they see some bullets coming, sometimes they can't tell ya. You may smack your head upside something. I guess if you fall out, you fall out. They might come back and get ya; they might not.

That sounds a little facetious, but it would depend on the situation of what they were trying to get out of. It's kinda bad, but we learned a long time ago over there that if that chopper goes down, we would carry a pistol, or I had a .45 caliber grease gun. It looks just like a regular grease gun that you'd grease a car with except that it's got a barrel out one end of it.

The Colonel told us one day, "Duke, we're not gonna tell you what to do, but we can tell you one thing. You will not be taken capture. You do not know enough for them people to worry about dragging you all over South Vietnam to get you back to the North. I'm telling you, if it was me, the last bullet would be for myself because you do not wanna be captured by these people." He was basically saying if you can't do anything else, shoot yourself. Because we were not high enough rank to know anything for any kind of intelligence. We kinda done what we were told.

At that time, we were E5s. We didn't have any maps; we didn't have any major information that would help the war cause. He just basically said, "You do not wanna know what they do with prisoners they don't need." And that stuck with ya. So it kinda spooked ya if you got into a situation that you got into a firefight or something and you thought maybe you were gonna get shot down, you worked a little harder taking care of them two in the front seat. That's the honest to goodness truth 'cause you had to look after them.

Interviewer

When you came home, if you had been treated with a little bit of respect, would that have changed anything?

Steven Duke

Oh, I think it would've changed the whole outlook on things. For example, at Fort Lewis, Washington, where I was at--I went into Seattle Tacoma Airport--if they hadn't told me to take my uniform off that I had just barely had tailor made to fit me--'cause when I come back, I never had a set of dress greens. We had to go to this retirement ceremony, so when we landed, they called us out by name. We went through customs. I cleared through customs in two minutes. Normally takes you half a day to clear through customs on a full plane like that. We cleared through in a matter of a few minutes.

They took me over and they done some measurements. Sit over here, 30 minutes, we'll have your uniform tailored to fit; give you a brand new tie, shirt, everything. Then I had some civilian clothes with me. After the ceremony was over, that's when they said, "We would recommend you putting your dress greens in your duffle bag. We'll see that your duffle bag gets loaded, and you just wear whatever you got." I said, "Why?" And that's when they said that they were not getting the reception they were getting. If you happened to run into hippies and people that were protesting, they said it could get pretty ugly. And they said, "You may get through the airport and you may run into people that wish you well, but it's not normally happening that way."

Interviewer

This would've made a big difference.

Steven Duke

Oh, absolutely. It would've made a whale of a difference. It may not have made me the person that I am today because "The Star Spangled Banner" goes off, or "The Pledge of Allegiance," or a flag goes by, I stand up, salute the flag, and wait for it to go by. I spend quite a bit of time with civic groups, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, retiring flags, showing 'em respect for a flag, how to burn it in reverence. I did one yesterday, as a matter of fact. We did one out to Purgatory, out to the fair grounds.

A bunch of us guys were out there, and they asked us to retire some regular American flags. It gives goose bumps to you if you're patriotic at all the first time you ever see a flag being retired. We do 'em for the Junior ROTC down here at the Dixie High School. The cadets, you don't have to tell 'em to be quiet. As soon as we start, you can hear a pin drop.

Interviewer

Tell us about the medevacs.

Steven Duke

Now the medevacs are an entirely different breed of cats. I'm not sure I would have done that. You're going in there with a big red cross on the top and the bottom of that thing, and you have no guns, nothing. You have no way to protect you whatsoever. You are hoping and praying that the guys on the ground shootin' at you are gonna by the Geneva Convention and not shoot that thing down. That's kinda why I say that. They did not have armor; they didn't have anything. They were just more or less God was lookin' after them.

There was a number of 'em that got shot down. They did not believe in the Geneva Convention. That thing's against us; we're gonna shoot it down because if it gets down there, it's gonna pick up the wounded soldiers, and if they get better, they're gonna be shootin' back at us. And that would be their attitude toward it. They'd shoot 'em down. They'd knock 'em down right out of the sky.

Interviewer

So you had a high regard for those people?

Steven Duke

Oh, absolutely. Those guys, we said, had some big you-know-what, big cajones that would volunteer to go on those medevacs. You would have people that helped 'em, and then you would have just a crew chief that flew with 'em. Those guys got shot at all the time, and they weren't able to return fire like we was. At least we could start shooting a few bullets down there and get 'em to hold their head down.

And a lot of times, they would take one of us with 'em. They would send a medevac ship out, and then they would send a gunship out with it so that if somebody did start shootin' at 'em, we could return fire and we could make 'em put their heads back down and do what they're supposed to do. But those guys didn't. They didn't have ways to protect themselves.

Interviewer

Did they save a lot of lives?

Steven Duke

Yes, absolutely. Like I said, those guys were picking up infantry guys and stuff like that all the time. Those guys would fly into some of the biggest battles you ever seen in your life to try and get somebody out of there. They would do their best to get any wounded soldier out of there that they could get outta there, whether they took bullet holes--we saw some of those things shot up like you would not believe. You wouldn't think they would even still fly, and they got 'em back.

We looked up to them guys very highly. The medics and those kind of people put themselves in harm's way all the time. If you were on the ground and you were a medic, you had a gun and you had a pistol. But when you got on those birds, you didn't have anything like that to protect you. So those guys, we put kudos out to them and we tried to take care of 'em really well, as well as we could. Anytime we seen 'em, you'd give 'em a slap on the back and tell 'em good job and you go with it.

It takes a different breed, to me, to be a fireman, policeman, or an ambulance attendant. A lot of those people live on adrenaline, and a lot of people that got back from Vietnam afterwards were adrenaline junkies for a while because you're living on the edge over there, never knowing when you could get shot and killed. All of the sudden one day, they say, "It's over. It's done." Now what do you do to get you through the day? You've been living on this adrenaline for a year. And all of the sudden, they take it away from you. It's like taking cocaine or something from you. You've gotta find something else, so you get a fast car or motorcycle or something that will keep you right on the edge of living or dying.

They've done surveys on that of Vietnam Veterans, and they said for a number of years, they lived right on the edge afterwards. Some of 'em would be killed because of that, because they lived on the edge. They were looking for that adrenaline rush that you would kinda get when you were in a combat situation.

Steven Duke

We had a guy come to the American Legion and speak. It was on the History Channel. His fighter squadron and wing that they did the (du-dio?)(01:43:44) on. And one of the movies that got me was "Saving Private Ryan." Have you seen that one? There's a lot of actual footage that is actual footage when they come onto the beach.

Interviewer

How did you feel watching that?

Steven Duke

That one bugged me. That one bugged me to death. I kind of had to put my head down and wait for a few minutes until it got into the movies a little more and then I could see that it was a movie. I can watch World War II; I can watch the Korean movies. To me, it's a movie. It's shoot 'em up, bang-bang, kind of like watching a Western.

Like, geez, you can't do that. You can't hold two .60s in each hand and shoot. You laugh at it. But "Apocalypse Now," "The Deer Hunter," and some of those, I just don't watch 'em. I've never seen some of 'em. I have no desire to see 'em. And after seeing "Apocalypse Now" I wish I hadn't. It brought nightmares back for a long time.

But you just got to learn to live with it and you learn what to stay away from and that's a lot of 'em. I don't watch documentaries. Some of them, like this one wouldn't be too bad, but watching some of your full-blown documentaries with actual footage and stuff of it, nu-uh.

Interviewer

Thank you.