Wynn Covieo
Ogden, Utah

Interviewer
Give us your full name.
Wynn Covieo
Wynn Roy Covieo.
Interviewer
And where are you from?
Wynn Covieo
I was born and raised in Ogden, Utah, where I still live.
Interviewer
Did you go to high school there?
Wynn Covieo
I did, yeah. I went through grade school, high school, and also Weber State College.
Interviewer
And you went into the Army in June of 1969. Were you drafted?
Wynn Covieo
I was. Right. June 11th of '69 is when I entered the service. I'll never forget the day that I was driving a truck, for the *Standard-Examiner* at the time, and I pulled in the parking lot and my mother was sitting there in the parking lot weeping. She had opened my draft notice. And so I'd gotten my draft notice that I was headed into the service.
Interviewer
Were you expecting to be drafted?
Wynn Covieo
No, because I was in college.
Interviewer
And you didn't have a deferment?
Wynn Covieo
I had a deferment, but I was more interested in shooting pool and chasing girls than I was in going to class. But I didn't have had good enough grades, I felt that I did but had withdrawn from a couple of classes and got incompletes. That's what caused me to get my draft notice.
Interviewer
What did you feel when you got that draft notice?
Wynn Covieo
Shock to begin with. I had other intentions. With the culture that I was born in, I was prepared to go on a mission for the LDS Church. And at that time, there were quotas that were given for the number of missionaries that could go out of a ward, and I was one of the older ones so I had a good chance of going. But that totally changed my plans. I would've had to have moved someplace in order to fulfill that. But I really wasn't too apprehensive about going into the Army. I felt that it was my duty, if called to serve, to serve.
Interviewer
You went to Fort Ord, California right?
Wynn Covieo
Correct.
Interviewer
What was that like?
Wynn Covieo
It was interesting because it's the first time I'd ever been on an airplane. When we flew into California, we were immediately met by protestors; the hippies of the generation were outside the gate, and so there was a lot of protesting going on.
But from the time we boarded the bus to go into the reception centers, or reception station, it was just constant inundation with screaming and yelling and direction and profanity and other demeaning behavior. And so they started to get control of you from the time you stepped on the bus.
Interviewer
Which was worse, the protestors or the first days of basic training?

Wynn Covieo
Protestors really didn't bother me. I didn't pay much attention to that. But the basic training really wasn't hard, either. It was quite easy for me because of the physical condition I was in at the time. But I had kind of a different way with dealing with stress than the average person – it was through humor. And so sometimes I would go over the line with the humor part of it and get myself in trouble for trying to deal with the stress of being in the military. But there were a lot of experiences during your training cycle that made my life interesting.

Interviewer
And you know you're going to Vietnam.

Wynn Covieo
No. I didn't at the time. We went through basic training, which prepares you -- which everybody who joins the Army has to go into basic training – and it teaches you the basics. You know, they do a lot of drills and getting control of you is what they're doing. And you learn how to shoot a weapon. And then from there you go to your advanced individual training.

Well, mine happened to be advanced infantry. And that was an indication that we're going to Vietnam, but at that time, in '69, there was discussions of drawing down the war. You know, the war had become very unpopular and the protesting had increased. In fact, we had orders for Germany, my unit, which I was disappointed in, because I was not made to be in the military even though I was a very good soldier. I mean, I was very good and excelled in almost every area. I didn't want the career military lifestyle.

And so we were told that we were probably going to Germany. I called home and told my parents that I would probably go to Germany, and my mother especially was thrilled to hear that. Well, a few days before we were to go home on leave, 30-day leave before we were to go to our next duty station, our orders were changed, and we were going to South Vietnam.

Interviewer
What did you feel like when you heard that?

Wynn Covieo
I really wasn't too worried about it. You know, my mindset was such that I knew I was gonna come home. Of course, I hadn't experienced war, you know, so I didn't know the travesties and how difficult it was going to be. But it was a little bit of a shock. But I was ready. I was ready to do what I was supposed to do.

Interviewer
When did you arrive in-country?

Wynn Covieo
November. I can't remember the date; 9th, 11th, something like that. We arrived in Bien Hoa, South Vietnam. Flew out of Oakland, stopped in Guam, then into Bien Hoa, South Vietnam. And I remember the captain of the airplane stating that if you have any incoming mortar rounds or artillery, there's a big ditch alongside the runway, that if we experience that, get off the plane and get in the ditch.

But the first thing I remember, which I felt was interesting, was that as soon as they opened the door to the plane, the humidity and the heat was so overwhelming. To go from Utah, where there is no humidity with just moderate heat in November, it just almost smothered you.

But as we started down the stairs, we started to receive incoming mortar rounds. And so we panicked and everybody scrambled and got in the ditch and just waited it out. We didn't of course, but the Army started to return fire. The buses rolled in, and they loaded us and took us over to a place called Long Binh, which was the incoming reception station where we received our in-country training. But it was interesting. The buses had bars on the windows, and I asked the question, "Why are there bars on the windows?" I was told it was to keep the enemy from throwing grenades into the bus as it went by.

So then we went into what they called the reception station, or the SERT's training, in that we were going to the 101st Airborne. It was the Screaming Eagle Replacement Training, or whatever the term was. And the thing was, is that I wasn't jump-qualified. I didn't go to Kentucky, you know, to learn how to jump out of an airplane. We got in-country and they assigned us based on where there was a need for replacements.

Interviewer
So you're a straight leg going into an airborne unit.

Wynn Covieo
Mm-hmm.

Interviewer
Is there a problem about that?

Wynn Covieo
No. In fact, I felt very proud to be even assigned to the 101st, you know, because of the stellar reputation that it had throughout history. The 101st Airborne, especially during World War II, was recognized as one of the most prestigious.

The thing that gave me the biggest concern was that we weren't gonna be attached to the 101st in Vietnam; we were considered the -- our unit patch was the Currahees, which means stand alone, so we were off all by ourselves in comparison to where the rest of the 101st was, up north. And we were told to get ready to see a lot of country because we were in what was referred to as an air mobile unit, which was, if there was action, they would pick us up by helicopter and drop us into where the fighting was taking place.

Interviewer

Do you remember your first mission?

Wynn Covieo

Well, I guess depends on your definition of mission, there was harassment fire going on all the time. When we were in Long Binh, we were assigned the first night to a bunker along the perimeter, and they really didn't tell us what to do during that night. And it was just kinda, like, you know, "You, you four, you take care of this bunker all night, and somebody's gotta be awake all night long." Well, we hear small arms fire. We don't know whether it was inside the compound or outside the compound, or what we're supposed to do when we did. But that was the first time when we actually received incoming fire.

Interviewer

Did you think you were prepared?

Wynn Covieo

You learn fast. You learn very fast. They gave you P-training, what they referred to it as, when they tried to teach you how to walk point, how to be a slack man, etc. Walking point is the person who walks in front of the rest of your platoon or squad and is the live bait, I guess you might say. They are usually 20-, 30 yards out in front of everybody.

Interviewer

What's a slack man?

Wynn Covieo

A slack man is one who walks second. He's, the second person in line. Typically you'll have a point man, a slack man, a radio, telephone operator, a rifleman, M-60 machine gun, then your platoon sergeant. And then it just goes back from there depending on -- usually they'll stick your leadership in the middle of the unit to shelter them, I guess you might say. But that only lasted a short time once we'd get in a fight.

But to answer your question regarding the training, I and others felt that the P-training they gave us in Vietnam was not adequate to what we were going to experience when we got sent out to the field. Nowhere near adequate. I mean, we found out that a lot of the people that were providing the training had never even seen combat. And the ratio of the number of people actually in Vietnam, I don't know how many millions were sent over there, but, like, it's one in four hundred or something like that, that actually saw combat. The rest were support services.

Interviewer

You did 30 air-mobile assaults; is that correct?

Wynn Covieo

Well, they call 'em combat assaults or CA's, where they will pick you up by helicopter and take you into a hot landing zone, typically, or into an area where intelligence has said that there's enemy activity. Between the two units, I was in the 101st for eight months, and then got sent over to the 4th Infantry Division, because of, they said, "a lack of resources to do their job," was what the excuse was. I'm not sure the total number, but it's over 30. Typically, the Air Force receives what's referred to as a distinguished flying cross for the time you spend on bombing runs or providing air support or whatever it is. Well, in the Army, those of us who were in an air-mobile unit received air medals for the number of combat assaults that we made. So I earned two air medals, one in the 101st and one in the 4th. But I never really did count but it was over 30 that we actually were picked off one mountaintop and stuck somewhere else.

Interviewer

Talk about landing in the hot landing zone.

Wynn Covieo

It's a thrill. The first couple of times it's it's terrifying, because you're coming into a hot landing zone and you're receiving incoming fire, and you got the door gunner of the helicopter blazing away with the machine guns. And we had, at a point in time, learned how to ride the skids. You know, there are skids on helicopters that they land on. And those of us that were up on the front, we would actually stand on the skids so when they hit the ground, we were off and running, you know, to get cover. Or we were firing as we went in. In fact, sometimes the helicopter could not get down low enough to where they could land, and you had no choice but to jump.

I remember one instance where we were on a hillside and it was just too far too jump. And, of course, the helicopter is vulnerable hovering on this slope of a hillside, and so it's get out or get pushed out. And so you'd jump, but the elephant grass there was probably about eight to ten feet tall, and the first guy jumped, he disappeared.

So you'd just go, you know, and hope to heck that you don't break something. Some guys would break an ankle or get hurt falling down the hill. But you just learned to jump and roll when you come in. And sometimes the helicopter

would come in and they wouldn't stop or wouldn't hover. They'd come in low enough and slow enough, you jump, like I said, jump and, and run as you come in for the landing.

Interviewer

What are the guys saying to one another on the way to a landing zone?

Wynn Covieo

Usually it's too loud in the helicopter to say things, but you're watching to see what's going on, on the ground. And sometimes you can see people moving, be it, you know, friendlies or Viet Cong or NVA. So you know that soon as you hit the ground, if you're gonna get into it. And it just depends on where you go. You know, sometimes you're on a mountaintop, sometimes you're in a rice paddy. Sometimes they've blown a landing zone with explosives big enough for the helicopter to land in a triple-canopy jungle. But it's an interesting experience.

On a side note, one thing I remember is, we were coming in and the helicopters had to make a steep banking turn. Well, we used to sit with our legs hanging outside the helicopter, so there'd be three guys in each door. It depends on how many member of our squad or platoon are in it. And I remember just the weight of my rucksack or my pack starting to push me out of the helicopter. I thought I was going to fall out until the guy next to me grabbed me and pulled me back in. I could see myself falling about a thousand feet.

Interviewer

Did that ever happen?

Wynn Covieo

I never saw it happen, but it nearly happened to me one time. And I'm not a big fan of heights as it is anyway, so --

Interviewer

Tell us about fire support bases and what it's like to be there.

Wynn Covieo

Prior to being sent out to what's called a fire support base, we were stationed at a place called Phan Thiet, which is down south, where the Tet Offensive was -- there was a big battle that took place in 1968. And when it was time to go out to the fire support base, which was called Chu Kuk if I'm not mistaken, they flew us up to a place called Ban Me Thuot. And from there, we went by truck to the fire support base.

Well, that was when we first got sent to the field. And the fire support base, it is typically on a hill or a mountain. It just depends on where it's at. This just happened to be a hill, which was above Highway 21, which was one of the main supply routes in Vietnam. And it also overlooked a village. On the way to this fire support base the truck we were in broke down. And so there was six of us including four new replacements in the truck to join the company that was guarding this fire support base.

Typically what happens, your fire support base has your artillery guns, your 155s and 105s and your bigger guns, and they provide fire support missions for battles that are taking place. Well, you have to have somebody guard the fire support base, and typically an infantry unit is supposed to do that. So anyway the truck broke down and they said, "Go out in the bushes a little ways and stand guard and be careful because just up the road they made contact yesterday or in the last couple of days, and there was a big firefight because the village is known to be Viet Cong." And so we split up, the three or four of us that was there and provided security.

I walked out and I didn't know which way I was supposed to be facing. And I thought, “Well, I'll face to the outside.” But I kept hearing noises and talking towards the road. And I was hoping that was the driver and the radio operator, you know. But when they finally got the Jeep running, or the truck running, they yelled and told us to come back in. And it's one of those things where you just don't know --'cause you can't see anything. The undergrowth is so thick and you're always on guard. Your senses are such that you always aware of every sound you hear, you think it's the enemy.

So anyway, we come back in, and drove to the fire support base and assigned to our company and our platoon. I was assigned to Third Platoon, which is on the west side of the fire support base. You had a bunker assigned to you, which was a hole in the side of the hill, which was surrounded by sandbags and covered over with empty ammo boxes just so you had a roof. And that's where you spent your time 24 hours a day.

On the second day or third day we were there, I had the early shift of guard, so it was just before the sunset. I either wanted the first one or the last one. 'Cause for me to get up in the middle of the night and keep awake for two hours was next to impossible.

So anyway, I took the first shift and I'm sitting there and I'm looking over towards the village, it’s just getting dark and you can see the cooking fires and, you know, the hooches of the villagers, and I see this flash. And it was probably two hundred yards, two hundred fifty yards away, maybe a little bit more than that, and all of a sudden I hear this swishing noise of a mortar round coming. I had never heard a mortar round before, and so I just kept watching and kinda ducked down. And the next thing I know, it explodes right behind me up on top of the hill, which was, maybe fifty feet to a hundred feet, whatever it was, away. And then they started lobbing more mortar rounds. Well, I carried what was called the M-60 machine gun, and so I had just met this company, and my platoon sergeant, I couldn't even remember his name, so I took off running to tell them I know where the mortar tube is at. And he says, "Well, take it out and give us a line of site," on a machine gun, every fifth or sixth round or whatever is

called a tracer round. So we opened up on that site. Then our artillery and our mortar units starting lobbing 'em in on the target.
In fact, one of the rounds they fired at us hit the mess hall, or I guess it's called a mess hall. The place where they cooked food for people on the fire support base, and it hit a fuel container, probably a 55-gallon drum, and started a fire. But other than that, there were no injuries. They weren't very accurate with mortars. Well, sometimes they were, but --

Interviewer
So at that point you were still a new guy.

Wynn Covieo
Brand new.

Interviewer
Were there nicknames for new guys?

Wynn Covieo
We, we were called lots of things. Cherries was one that we were referred to. But there's a lot of derogatory names like FNGs, which is F-ing new guys. And I don't know if it's more of an initiation, but I took offense to the fact that here we were over there, and we had joined in with this group of people. And, you know, some of 'em had been there eight months and some of 'em had been there four months but they chose to use these derogatory names. But we soon realized that the new guys got all the dirty jobs. You know, if it's not burning human feces to get rid of it or pulling guard or walking point or whatever it is…. But that became the norm or the standard of the new guys. You had to earn your wings, you might say. But the new guys, there wasn't a lot of value placed on 'em.

Interviewer
What's it like to sleep on a fire base?

Wynn Covieo
The fire base wasn't too bad because we would build kind of a bunk, out of the empty ammo boxes, that the ammo came in for the big guns. And, of course, all you had was a poncho and a poncho liner, but you had a roof over your head so you had some kind of a shelter. So that, that wasn't too bad on the fire support base.

Interviewer
What about the noise of the guns?

Wynn Covieo
Deafening. Deafening. In fact, they would be right above your head, and they would get multiple fire support missions called every night or during the day and it was so loud you couldn't hear for days afterwards. You know, just because, like I said, the noise was just so, so loud.

Interviewer
Did you learn to sleep with that anyway?

Wynn Covieo
You didn't sleep. I mean, even when you were asleep, you were still awake. You know, being new there, it took time before you learned how to do that. But you'd surely be wakened up. In fact, I startle very easily still today after this many years. And I think that possibly it could be one of the reasons why is because of those guns. So any loud noise, I still react to it after all this time.
But yeah, sleeping was an interesting thing. But when we left the fire support base, it kinda changed things and the dynamics as to how we lived. We slept on the ground wrapped in a poncho and poncho liner. Once we'd finished our stint at the fire support base and they rotated another platoon or a part of a company in, we got sent to secure a bridge, which was being blown up all the time. And it was on that same highway. It was a couple miles down the road. And so we'd build bunkers out of sandbags on each end of the -- there was a big culvert, probably eight-foot tall -- you know, 'cause when the monsoon rains would come, they would really come down through those streams. But we had to secure that bridge.
And that became an interesting situation, because from there, we would go on patrols during the day. Send one squad out, you know, which it might be ten men, and go patrol different areas, and then at nighttime, we'd send another squad out on ambush. But the bridge itself became a point of contention, in that we had a lotta free time to do nothing, so we played cards inside the culvert or just -- we had people on guard all the time, day and night, but it was kind of a lazy man's job for a period of time.
And our leader at the time was career military. And I shouldn't say most of us, but a good share of us, were draftees, and then others had enlisted. But we kind of had the same attitude, 'cause you had the enlisted that were promised all kinds of things and exotic places they were going to go, and they're alongside of us, you know, in a culvert in the middle of South Vietnam.
And so I'll never forget, our Lt. told us one day that we're getting too lazy and the next morning he wants us up on top of the bridge to do physical training. It's called PT. You know, and PT training in the Army is where, every morning in when you're in your training, you get up and exercise and run and get in good physical condition. Well, it

was insanity because you're an open target up on top of this bridge doing side-straddle hops and push-ups and all this stuff.
And I won't use the terminology that a few of the old-timers used, but they said, "We're not doing it." And so that determination that was made was that no one's gonna do it other than -- well, then a few did. The next morning he wakes everybody up and he says, "All right. You got fifteen minutes to get up on the bridge and we're gonna exercise." Well, of the platoon, which was about thirty of us, maybe six got up there with him and the rest of 'em said, "No, we're not gonna do it." And he made all kinds of threats with Article 15s, and, "It's a direct order. I'll court marshal you," and everything.
And of course the response in Vietnam at that time it was -- the culture of the military was changing dramatically to where orders weren't being followed and they were more concerned about survival versus search and destroy. You know, we were surviving to go home. And so they had a way of making their points.
And I'll never forget that night -- it's called a claymore mine, and it is a mine that is used -- it's an anti-personnel mine to where it has a detonator that you put in it, and it's about the size of oh, eight and a half by eleven, but it's shaped like a horseshoe. But anyway, the old timers took a claymore mine and stuck it under his well -- had a poncho liner for a pillow. But they didn't stick the detonator in it, and then they'd run the firing cord back to the electric firing device that you squeeze three times and it blows. And when it blows -- the whole front of it's filled with little steelies, little steel marbles. And it'll take out 180-degrees everything in front of you.
Well that's the first time I really saw the dissident behavior of those who would do what they had to do in order to make a point. And I thought to myself, “I don't want to be part of this. I don't want anything to do with it.” Well, when he found it before he went to sleep he was of course quite angry. And he wanted to know who did it, and of course no one was gonna say a word, you know. Because the, the mindset at that time was, is that you've gotta be very careful, especially with some of 'em. Some of 'em became very hardened. The combat, what they experienced. And the more they got involved in the problems that existed with the direction that was given from higher up it was jeopardizing their life, and they had their own ways of dealing with it.

Interviewer
How were you dealing with it? Because you're changing, aren't you?

Wynn Covieo
Yeah, unwillingly. Because I was always one that dealt with things through humor, and I would try to make a joke out of it or I was somewhat of a smart aleck. And so what you had to do was measure what you wanted to participate in or be a part of. You know, and I was worried sick they were gonna kill him. And fortunately, they didn't. Well, the message got across and he changed his attitude somewhat from that point on, when he found out that a few of these guys were serious about what they were doing.

Interviewer
Talk about the race issues.

Wynn Covieo
Well, the black power movement in the United States at that time was growing leaps and bounds. And there was always this misconception that -- and I don't know if it's a misconception, that the number of blacks that were sent to Vietnam in comparison to the whites was considerably higher, but percentage wise, I don't believe is true. But the problem at the time is that, during Vietnam, especially the draftees or the people who went to Vietnam, it got to the point where you have a lot of people who come from urban areas that they had criminal records, and their choice was, “you go in the Army or you go to prison.” And we saw a lot of that.
And the blacks we had -- in my own squad we had three of them. Julius Wingate III; very educated, from North Carolina, exceptional young man. John McClure; couldn't find a nicer man. And then one we called "Sugar Bear," and his name was Willy Ezzelle**.** When we were together in the field we were best friends. But when the groups would get back together when you'd go in for a stand down, it's called, for two or three days, then the problems would escalate, especially with the drug use. And it wasn't just the blacks, but there was racial tension, just like there was in the United States. It spilled over from the United States into Vietnam and it got progressively worse. In fact, in Long Binh, they had what's called the Long Binh Jail. And I don't know how many hundreds of people they locked up, the biggest percentage of 'em were supposedly black. But they had the big revolt at Long Binh Jail where they actually rioted and ended up killing white people with shovels. But it just depends on the circumstances and the situations. But there are some people that their behavior in my mind was considered normal.
The way that you dealt with an individual if you had a problem is you attack 'em, you beat 'em. And I was afraid. When we go back into a rear support area, I was actually afraid of them. I mean, coming from Ogden, Utah where we had, like, two minorities in elementary school and -- well, until high school. But we didn't have to deal with racial tension and racial problems. And so it was an eye opener for me. But there's other instances, where it got worse, that I was fearful. But even at Long Binh the desertions and things like that, it was bad.

Interviewer
Tell me about the desertions. Were there people that just disappeared?

Wynn Covieo
Uh-huh. We only had a couple, and that was when I was transferred to the 4th Infantry Division. They just weren't around the next day, and they had gone somewhere, went to Saigon or whatever. You know, they weren't gonna fight anymore.
There were boycotts -- there was units, especially, like, when we went into Cambodia, that we had, like, from the Americal Division and others, they just said, "We're not going." They sat down. They didn't get on the helicopters. They didn't go.
But desertions were very common. Towards the end in the '70s, the military structure had lost control. In the '60s, 1963, around there, it was the best army that there ever was. And by 1970 it was in total disarray.
Interviewer
So you saw all sorts of drug use going on.
Wynn Covieo
I did, but not really to that extent -- when I was in the 101st, there was limited amount when we'd come back in for a stand down. It was limited, you know. But when I got into the 4th Infantry Division, it was out of control. It was everywhere. And that was another eye opener, you know, 'cause I wasn't exposed to it in the circles I ran in when I was living in Ogden, Utah. And that got progressively worse, especially in the 4th Infantry.
Interviewer
Why was it so different in the 4th Infantry?
Wynn Covieo
I think to the extent of who was using it. It was everybody.
Interviewer
You said that officers were using drugs.
Wynn Covieo
Correct. Right. Your leaders were part of it. In fact, I had an instance in the 4th Infantry, when I was first assigned to that unit, they didn't know me. And I always went by the name of Red because at that time I had red hair. I was on guard one night and I could smell that they were smoking marijuana in a fox hole on the other side of the top of the hill that we were set up on. I had to go get a guy over there to tell him, “It's your turn for guard.”
Well, I'm working my way through the trees in a triple-canopy jungle. It's so dark you can't see a foot in front of you. And then he can hear me coming, and they said, "Who is it?" And I said, "It's Red." Well, I can hear him lock and load around in his M-16. I'm thinking, “This guy's gonna shoot me.” Of course he's high on drugs but we finally got that part worked out where he knew who it was.
But some would fall asleep on what's called a listening post or an observation post. Out from the top of the hill where you would set up your night defensive position we would send out a LP or listening post, which would be a hundred yards or so away, or an OP or observation post. They would be out there away from the main platoon and you'd only communicate by radio. And we would call up to check on 'em and got no response. We figured either they had been killed or they're snoozing. Well, so we'd have to send somebody out in the middle of the night to go find out what's going on and they'd been using drugs and were sound asleep. They were supposed to be our first line of support, you know, if you got the NVA moving down those trails, 'cause they moved at night.
But anyway, just in regards to that, I got to the point where I feared for my life to where I went to the company commander and I said, "I need to get changed to another platoon or something like that," but he didn't want to hear about it. He figured since I was getting close to the time when I was gonna be leaving, my year was gonna be up, that I was getting a little paranoid-- but that wasn't it at all. So I wrote a chaplain, a chaplain whose name was Wayne Kuehne, who lives actually down in Utah County right now, and said, "Hey, I need some help getting assigned to a different unit. I don't want to be a part of this." And so he wrote to him, but nothing every came out of it. I just had to deal with it.
Interviewer
Tell us about short time.
Wynn Covieo
When you're short, that means you have less time left in country. You know, when you first get in country they usually say well, you got 165 days and a wake up and you're on the bird back to the world. That's what they referred to America, “back to the world.” Well, I would send short calendars back and forth. I'd draw a picture of Snoopy or something and break it down in 30-day segments, and then I would send the letter and Mother would scratch out the days. And then when I'd send it back I'd scratch out more. It was a of tracking and showing progress of the time you're doing.
But when you're short, you try to do everything you possibly can. You've made it eight months or nine months or ten months and you've got a short time left to go, and the last thing you wanna do is be stuck on some stupid detail somewhere that you've survived that long to where you lose your life the last couple of days. And that happened, not frequently, but it happened. We had one major battle that we lost quite a few guys that -- several who were

short.

Interviewer

Tell us about that battle.

Wynn Covieo

It was probably the most significant one that still haunts me today. We went from that bridge security and we're told that there'd been a lot of enemy activity seen in an area around Hill 474. When you have reference to a Hill 474, that's actually 4,740-feet above sea level. So, all in numbers, they're called hills, but they're a mountaintop to designate, and it's designated by elevation.

So they picked us up by helicopter and flew us into a village near Hill 474. And as we come around the back side of Hill 474, we flew across the top of a village, and we could see people with rifles scurrying, running into the jungle. And so we landed and of course took up a defensive position. And it was my whole platoon so there were about 30 guys. Maybe close to 40. We set up and then we sent out a couple of patrols. We engaged the enemy on a couple of different instances which was just a short -- you know, usually it was harassment fire. They'd see us coming, shoot three or four rounds and take off.

Then you'd track 'em and see if you could find where they went. And it was just a game of hide and seek. And you'd go after 'em. But then we went from that village destined for Hill 474, which was about a half mile away. And this is another thing, at that time in the service the way that General Westmoreland told everybody back home of the success of the war was on the body count. And so what you had was a body count where they could say, “Okay, today the United States killed 1100 of the enemy and the U.S. only lost a 110, and so we're winning the war.”

Well, so the body count became paramount to everything. And so we would do anything to get a body count. And to the leadership, not all leadership, but to some leadership that was all that mattered. And so we became, again, I mentioned it before, the bait in order to get the body count. We would move to an area on a search and destroy mission. We'd get fired up, maybe lose one or two guys or they'd get hit and then we'd call in the air support and just bomb 'em to the point where you ended up getting something.

But anyway, on the way out of this village we came upon a grave. And because of the desperation for a body count to show that your leadership was doing their job, I had to dig up a grave. And it was a fresh grave. You could tell because in a jungle the undergrowth will take over real quick. Well, there's just a mound of dirt and so we had to dig up the grave. We got about a foot into the grave and the stench was just so overwhelming. The bodies had been possibly two or three days. They called back to higher up, and they made the determination to add it to our body count because no one else had taken credit for it. So we took count for two kills.

We moved about another hour and a half, maybe two hours and sat down to take a break. We had just found a trail on the bottom part of Hill 474. You usually take a break about once an hour, depending on how steep the terrain was because you're all packing about 65 to 100 pounds on your back. And so you've gotta get some rest and get water in you and those who smoked needed a smoke break. And, well, we sat down on the trail and our point man, who was named Robert Mitcheltree who I'd come in-country with -- and this was on January 19th of 1970. I came in-country with him in November, and was in the same barracks and Phan Thiet.

He lit a cigarette and stood up and walked around a big boulder, a big granite boulder and they shot him multiple times with an AK-47 and he drops dead on the other side of that boulder, and then all hell broke loose. We were down on this ravine, and it was an enemy we couldn't see. And then they starting lobbing the chicom grenades. And, I mean, everything -- just everything around you was exploding. And so you're returning fire at an enemy you can't see, because they're up in the rocks.

And we're scrambling for cover, trying -- you know, guys are getting shot around you. And I had the M-60, and I couldn't get in a position, so I just slid the machine gun on top of the rock and just started firing in a direction we thought we could use it. We kept trying to get to Mitcheltree, you know, to get him out from behind that rock. But every time we'd get within inches of him, the same thing, they'd open up with AK-47 or light submachine gun or rocket propelled grenades. But the RPGs, the rocket propelled grenades were so strong that they would hit the trees above us and just blow the tree in half, and it'd land on top of you. And it was just, like I said, for hours and hours we were trapped in the bottom of this ravine.

Well, we finally got some air support with the helicopter gunships, and it forced us -- it was able to force the enemy back enough to where we slowly worked our way out of it. One of the interesting things was is that with the helicopter gunships the enemy knew that if they got close enough to us, the gunships couldn't fire on 'em. So instead of moving and running away, they'd come closer to us and hide in the bushes. And so the gunships -- we finally pushed 'em back and we worked our way out of this ravine.

It took us probably an hour, hour and a half to get out of the ravine to the top of the mountain. And we set up there on top of the mountain and stayed awake all night as they continued to work on those areas with the gunships and jetfighters. But then the next day we needed to go down and get Mitcheltree 'cause we weren't gonna leave his body behind, you know. That was our policy. That was America's policy. You never leave a fallen warrior or comrade… behind. You go get him. So it was my squad that was selected to go. There was 42 of us, I believe, at that time in the platoon.

As we started down the mountain about half of the platoon stayed up a little bit higher. We also set up an ambush

behind us, because in Vietnam they were following you all the time, the Viet Cong or the NVA. So we set up an ambush, and then we went about halfway down the mountain. Most of the platoon stayed there. We dropped our rucksacks and just took our weapons and enough ammunition so we could move quickly and get Mitcheltree and get him outta there, and took a poncho to carry his body.
We got about halfway down towards Mitcheltree and all of a sudden we hear small arms fire up on top of the mountain and we knew that they had blown the ambush on the NVA or Viet Cong or whoever was following us. We slowly worked our way down to Mitcheltree, there were five of us by then going after him. The same thing happened, we crawled around this big granite boulder, and as soon as you reached out to grab his foot to drag him out from that position he was in, all hell broke loose again.
We exchanged fire and we were soon running out of ammunition. We only had one option, and that was to get out. And so I provided fire cover with my machine gun while the rest took off running. Well, they ran parallel to the mountain and then made a turn to go back up the trail that we had come down on, and by that time I'd caught up with 'em. You know, we were beating feet to get outta that place, because we didn't wanna go through what we did the day before, of four and a half hours of fighting in that ravine where we wouldn't last.
When we got where we made the turn to go up the trail they had taken a claymore mine that was in Mitcheltree's pack and set it up. And when we made the turn they blew it. Well, fortunately, they had it turned backwards or up the trail so all of the, the projectiles, these little steelies went in the opposite direction. But you still get flack from it. And me and a guy named John McClure, we made the turn on the trail at the same time and it knocked us both to the ground. I was on the left and he was on the right, and this is what the strange thing is to me. Well, it's not strange, but it knocked us both down, but the shrapnel went past me and hit him. I wasn't scratched other than a little bit of dust on me. But he took the shrapnel in the neck and in the side, and we jumped up and took off.
We ran up the trail and met up with the rest of the platoon, and then moved from there back up to the top of the mountain. Well, as we approached the top of the mountain, alongside the trail were the dead Vietnamese, they were NVA based on their uniforms. And at that time there was enough frustration within the ranks with our own men that a couple of 'em, they decided that they're gonna -- I mean, they're dead and they decided they're gonna cave their skulls in. So they boot-stomped their heads or used the butts of their rifles and desecrating their bodies, which I couldn't handle.
And so I stopped 'em and, and got accused of being on the side of the enemy. And tried to explain that it had nothing to do with being on the side of the enemy. I said, "You know, they're just like you. You know, they're young men, they're boys sent here by their government and we've got no business in mutilating their bodies." And that really bothered me. Really bothered me to see people do that. They were normal young men that would never, ever consider doing things like that but the rage that they felt after losing your friends and, you know….
But the battle for Hill 474 went on for over a month. And we called in all kinds of support. Other companies in the 101st, air strikes and whatever it is. But we had walked into the headquarters of the 22nd NVA Regiment. And by the time it was all done, we had killed 101 of, I think, was the number if I'm not mistaken of the NVA, and we had lost 20-something. But by the time that the -- we -- my platoon – which I think it was 42 of us at that time – walked off that mountain, there was 18 of us left of the 42 that were either killed or wounded.
Shortly thereafter, I had been sick for a period of time and was getting sicker by the day; just massive flu-like symptoms. And our combat medic, his name is William Kenneally from Massachusetts, Marblehead, Massachusetts. He still lives there. And he called in a medevac helicopter because I thought I was dying I was so sick. And he called in and told them he said, "I've got somebody coming in," he says, "And he's got all the classic symptoms of malaria. You've gotta get to him quick." I can't remember the correct term or the type of malaria, but it attacks the brain. And my fever was, 105 fever when I went in. And so anyway, I went in for medical treatment, and they fiddled around there for weeks trying to figure out what I had. They couldn't ever get the malaria detected in the blood and sent me to the hospital in Cam Ranh Bay. But eventually, I went back out and joined my unit.

Interviewer

Were you relieved to be out of combat during that time?

Wynn Covieo

I was, other than the fact that we had gotten to the point where, because of the harassment that we felt that was levied on us, because we were the infantry, we got all the dirty work. And our platoon leader, Lieutenant Peters, was such an exceptional man that instead of search-and-destroy, we were search-and-evade there for a while. But we actually felt safer, to a degree, out in the jungle. We had enough control over it, but we didn't like the idea of the tower guard.
You come back in after just -- yeah, we were out one time for 69 days, you know. No bath, no shower, change of clothes. They'd fly your food out, C-rations in a can. But we were just beat. We had guys holding their boots together with electrician's tape because the sole had come off. And just a lot of things to where it was time to go back in. But when we got back in, there was the same old routine of, okay, we had to have the tower guards to guard the parameter while all these rear support people partied at night. And that's what they did. Or they, you know, visited the brothels or, you know, whatever it was. But not all people did that, but a good share of them did. But we had our own way of dealing with that, also. We kind of harassed 'em. We would get in the guard towers at

night and in the mess hall, a group of people would get in there and start doing the drugs and turn up the music and dancing all night and partying. And since I carried the M-60 machine gun, each one of the guard towers around the perimeter, especially on the one side closest to where the mess hall was, we would say, “Okay, at midnight” – you know, because we're stuck in this tower and we can't participate in anything. We come out from the jungle thinking we're gonna get a little rest, and we're right back in the middle of doing all the dirty work. And so we decided – “at midnight we're gonna start lobbing grenades and shooting the M-60s and the M-79 grenade launchers out into the parameter, out into the bushes across the wire and start screaming, ‘incoming.’” *(Laughs)*
And so at midnight, we opened up and started yelling, "Incoming," just so we can see 'em scramble like ants outta the mess hall, headed for cover. But it really wasn't right to do that, but that was our way of dealing with the nonsense of what we were subjected to.

Interviewer

You went over a very patriotic man, and came back with a lot of problems that you said it transformed you. What was the tipping point for you?

Wynn Covieo

Seeing my friends killed, I think. There was one other instance, shortly after Hill 474, where a kid named Bob Besch from Three Rivers -- anyway, Minnesota. I can't remember its name -- where he's from. But it was stupid decisions made by leadership that got him killed. But you spend eight months with a guy, you know, day and night, and you get to know about him – his family, his girlfriend, you know, where he's from, how he was raised. And you depend on them and they depend on you for your life.
And I'll share that instance with you, is that we came down into an area we'd heard of more enemy activity. Well, we came down off the top of the mountain, and this was in March. Anyway, we came down off the mountain, and the platoon set up on top of a hill or a knoll that had a tree right on the very top of it, and they figured that'd be a good place where they'd get some shade 'til the sun goes down. But it was, again, my squad's turn to go on ambush. And so we went about 200 yards down the trail maybe, and set up an ambush.
And you want to get your ambush set up just before it gets dark. And when you set up an ambush, you put out trip flares, and you put out claymore mines, and get your position set up in case someone comes up the trail and trips the trip flare or you hear 'em coming. And just before it got dark we hear this thump of this mortar tube, and it has the distinct sound. And the mortar tube is, is that you drop the mortar round down the tube, and it comes out. Well they're lobbing mortar rounds in where the rest of the platoon is, up on this hill. And they had just started digging in up there, getting their foxholes.
And we had set up an ambush and the rules of the ambush is, is that you don't disclose your location no matter what. You know, you're there for the duration, for the night. But my squad leader at the time, we were so close to the mortar tube that he got on the radio and he started screaming -- he panicked, he actually had a nervous breakdown. And he panicked and said that, "They're all around us. I can hear 'em talking. I can hear -- I can see 'em." You know, and he just went crazy. Well, we had to shut him up really quick because he was screaming into the handset of the radio. And so we stopped him from disclosing our location and I can't remember who got on the radio and said that, “We know where the tube's at. We can't see it 'cause it's so thick.” And they says, "Take it out." So I just opened up the machine gun, and everybody fired in that direction, which stopped the mortars from being lobbed in where the rest of the platoon was at.
And we waited and, sure enough, here they come. And we waited until they were close enough to where we blew the claymore mines, you know, expended the rest of the ammunition and took off running. We had taken our rucksacks with us, our packs with us, because we knew the rest of the platoon was gonna follow and meet us there the next day. But we decided we had to get out of there because we'd run out of ammunition. And so we left everything and took off running up this hill. I don't know how far it was. A couple hundred yards anyway. But it was uphill.
But our squad leader, he decides he's putting his rucksack on. And he gets way behind us, and he gets stuck between the trees so we have to go back and get him. And so anyway, we're running as fast as we can move, and by this time we're in pretty good physical condition based on our youth and the fact that we're carrying all this weight. But the last about 20 yards, I was unable to walk, so I got on my hind end and slid up the mountain and pulling the gun behind me in order to get back up to where the rest of the platoon was. We moved around the side of the mountain that night, just after that happened, so we could get some cover and away from that tree that was their aiming point.
But we got around the other side of the mountain, and our company commander -- in fact, he was from Salt Lake City -- named Captain Robinson, which was kind of ironic. I don't know where he lives now, down in Texas, I think, or somewhere. But he called us over, and our squad leader was just out of it by then. He had lost it.
And so he comes to me and he says, "We'll take the squad back down and set up another ambush." And, well, he's as close as from me to you, and I couldn't even see him. That's how dark it was. You're in, like I say, a triple-canopy jungle, and it's so dark. And I said, "You want us to go back down and set another ambush up on that trail?" I said, "I can't see you. How am I gonna find our way back down there?" You don't use flashlights, you know. I mean, we could've done it, but we finally convinced him that we weren't going to.

Well, move the story up a little bit to where we went back down to where we blew the ambush. And all of our gear was still there untouched. But we found what's called a pith helmet, which is a helmet worn by the North Vietnamese, and a couple of -- we call them Ho Chi Minh sandals. They were sandals made out of, that the sole was made out of a tire, you know, rubber tire. And so we knew that we had gotten something when we blew the claymore mines. And then we found where the mortar tube location was at, but we found no bodies.
But from there we moved down into a village, which was probably quarter-mile away. Maybe not even that far. And when we got into the village, it was nothing but women and children. And that told us right away what we were dealing with was a Viet Cong village 'cause there were no men -- and so we asked -- we had a scout named Phat. We had another name we used, but I can't remember his last name. But he went into the village and interrogated the women, and they kept claiming, “Well, they've gone to town to buy supplies,” or whatever it was. And we knew better than that, you know, just based on our experience by then. And so they finally says, “Well, there was another portion of the village about a hundred yards away,” that it was just probably another family and was part of that same village.
In that our platoon leader, Sergeant Faulkner, was in no condition to do anything, they just medicated him, and they says, "Take the squad and go check out where this other portion of this village is." And what it was, was just a dried up rice paddy that you walked across. It was like walking across a football field to a tree line. Well, I had reservations from the very beginning of walking across that dried up rice paddy. And so Bob Besch -- Thief River Falls, Minnesota is where he was from, it just came to me -- he was walking point. And by that time, I had always walked slack man 'cause if we hit anything, I didn't want to be eight, ten men back then have to work my way to the front with a machine gun, so I walked second. And then we had a radio operator and then two other riflemen, so there was five of us.
And we got within, I don't know, 20 yards of this tree line and they opened up on us. And they hit Bob. He was, like, ten steps right in front of me and hit him once in the forehead and in the chest and killed him instantly, and he just dropped right in front of me.
And we hit the ground and returned fire, but it's the same thing. You're shooting at an enemy you can't see. And so we just kept firing. And then the platoon got behind us, you know, hundred yards back, got into a position to where they could help provide some fire cover. But another miracle, just like when I got knocked down by the claymore mine, is that the rounds from the AK-47 they were shooting were actually kicking dirt in my face. There was no place to hide. You're just lying on the ground. And nothing ever hit me. Dirt got kicked in my face, but it is all that happened.
And so anyway we finally get helicopter gunships on station, and they're flying by and firing the rockets and their mini guns. And we look up and there's a door gunner on each side telling us to move back, and so the third pass we jump and run back to where the rest of the platoon is, those of us who were still alive. And, we called in more air support and we evacuated the village and we destroyed everything. You know, we burned everything to the ground or had the bombs being dropped on it.
But the thing is, is that when you walked back through that village knowing that you'd been set up, the anger that you feel from losing people, losing your friends, you know, for no good reason. And again, we were not exposed to the politics of the war, what was taking place in the United States other than newspapers sent to us. But the rage and the anger that you felt, there would have been guys who would've been more than happy to go in there and kill everybody in the village. Fortunately, that didn't happen.

Interviewer

Was there an occasion where you actually saw the enemy face to face?

Wynn Covieo

Oh, yeah. Well, I'm fortunate, because I never actually saw a person and drew down on 'em and killed 'em. But another instance was, is we were on a resupply day on top of a mountain and we had cut a landing zone for the helicopter, got resupplied. And when Americans get resupplied, especially with C-rations, which are terrible to eat, you take what you want, you throw the rest off in the bushes. And nine times out of ten, you've got the Viet Cong of the NVA who are following you will come and go through your trash afterwards.
So we start down the mountain and we get about a half hour going down the mountain, and it had been raining. It was monsoon season. Been raining so hard. And two guys slipped and fell and slid down the mountain. One broke his collar bone, and I think the other one broke his arm. So we had to turn around and come back up.
And as we come back up to go back through the area where we had been resupplied, the guy walking point gave us a hand signal and we all hit the ground. And there they were going through our trash. They told me to get my gun up there, you know, because that's the fire power. And so I sneak up -- you know, slowly work my way to the front, and they say, "Just get ready, 'cause when we give the word, everybody open up." Well, of course they want the M-60 machine gun to open up first, and so I moved up in position, and here they were going through the trash. I pulled the trigger on the M-60 and one round fired. One single round fired. And then, of course, everybody else opens up. My gun jammed, and had never happened before. But it jammed.
And they took off running, and we saw one who just jumped over a tree stump that we had cut down with a chainsaw for the landing pad. And we'd hit one 'cause there was a blood trail, but this other guy jumped over, and

he was hiding behind this stump. We were standing right above him, and this is another thing that bothers me is that he wasn't wounded and they said, "We got one hiding here. What do you wanna do?" And, of course, I felt that he should've been taken as a prisoner of war. Well, the direction was to kill him, so they did. Same thing. Eighteen or younger boy sitting there and he could have been captured but it was the body count, so you killed him. So you saw instances like that.
And I had another instance of the same way where we had been moving all day long and we were being followed and we could see 'em. 'Cause we got on a hillside, and then we'd come back down around a corner and we were up there tearing our guns apart and getting 'em oiled and cleaned. And there's a piston in an M-60 machine gun that if you don't put it in right it becomes a single shot instead of a machine gun. And they told me, they said, "Red, get your gun down here." He says, "There's a group of 'em coming." So I hurry and jam my gun together and put the dang piston in wrong. And I get up there and "pow," one shot. That's the first mistake I ever made with reassembling the machine gun. Well, everybody else opened up and they hit the ones that took off running.
But I never actually personally saw another human being and shot and killed 'em. But I shot an awful lot of ammunition. And like on Hill 474 we killed over a hundred of 'em. But I feel fortunate that I didn't have to experience that -- lotta fighting, lotta killing.

Interviewer

Describe counting down the last days.

Wynn Covieo

Well, of course again, it was referred to “going back to the world” or “the big PX.” That's what it was always referred to as “going back to the world” or “the big PX,” was going home. Or catching the freedom bird. And of course you're excited, because if your time is up, you've done your year. And so you spend a lot of time in measuring to what extent, what risks you're willing to take.
And a lotta times they would send you in two weeks prior to when it was your departure date, and so you would start your out-processing, and they figured you'd done your duty and that was enough. But the apprehension of just that time of waiting and knowing that you have one month left and the countdown continues. And two weeks left and then you've got -- all of a sudden you'll find -- I don't know if you ever watched the movie *Platoon*. *Platoon* – there are so many parallels in that movie that I experienced. But there's one instance where it talks about going out on ambush, and I can't remember who the actor is. He's on -- oh, he's -- what's the name of the television show?

Interviewer

Charlie Sheen?

Wynn Covieo

No, not Charlie Sheen. It's the one that's on the -- oh, the hospital show. Suds, or -- oh, what is it? Anyway, it doesn't matter. Anyway, he's in the movie and he talks about, he's not sending out his guys because his two guys are gonna go on R&R and this guy's short and whatever it is. And, and the comment was made to Charlie Sheen is that -- or to William Dafoe, he says, "You've got the fresh meat, buddy. You send your guys out."
Well, that was one thing you hoped you never had to happen is that someone would say, “Okay, even though you've got two weeks left, you're going on ambush tonight or you're gonna go down in a tunnel or go in a cave,” or whatever, you know. You're always worried about there'd be some order given that would really set you on edge. And there was a question you asked before about the stress part of it and how you become callused.

Interviewer

Along those lines, what advice would you wanna give the new guys coming in?

Wynn Covieo

Well, you didn't really have much opportunity to interact with them, with the new guys. When they actually come out and assigned to the field, assigned to your unit, that's when you had an opportunity to talk with them. In fact, I still communicate with a guy who was my assistant machine gunner today; lives up in Oregon City, Oregon on Ogden Avenue, if you can imagine. Named after Peter Skene Ogden, which is kind of an interesting note. But when he came in-country, it's the same thing. You're taught all this stuff, but you really don't know.
But you listen to the old-timers, and that's the way that you learn. Because officers were rotated in and out so fast, the way that Westmoreland ran the war in Vietnam was that we, as enlisted, are the non-commissioned. We were out there for a year. Officers were out there for three to six months, so there was this constant rotation of officers. And the reason why is, is that they had to have combat experience in order to qualify for promotion. So it was a promotion machine. And it was such, such an odd thing. And so you really had to count on the experience of the old-timers. And most of the time, the majority of the time they were good people, you know, and just like you. And just tell them you to pay attention and listen.
Some guys would come in -- especially we would have, we'd call 'em shake-and-bakes. Guys right out of NCO school and they'd been to ranger school, and they knew everything. They knew everything. In fact, this Sergeant Faulkner that had the nervous breakdown. He knew everything there was to know, but yet he didn't know a thing. And he wouldn't listen to reason, 'cause he was in charge and he was the squad leader. And we had another one, this Captain Robinson from Salt Lake that said, "Okay. According to the book, it says that when you get through

with your C-rations you smash your cans and you dig a hole and bury 'em or you hide 'em under rocks. That way the enemy won't know that you've been there."
Well, when you think about it, you've got 40 guys that have slept in an area about as big as this room, and they've urinated and defecated all around the area. They've taken all their garbage and thrown it in the bushes. They've chopped down trees to hang a hammock. They've dug holes for a foxhole, and we're supposed to smash a can and hide it so they don't know that we've been there? Well, they know they've been there because they're watching us the entire time.
And so a lot of these shake-and-bakes, the NCOs -- that was one officer. But we had trouble with this Sergeant Faulkner from the very beginning because he wasn't willing to listen to reason. In fact, he and I had a little bit of an altercation where I wanted to walk slack because I, that's where I wanted to be. He says, "According to the book you're gonna be fifth in line." And we had a disagreement, and I walked slack. But he was a good guy, good intent, but he had this ego about him that he was in charge and you're to do as you're told to do.

Interviewer

If you could give advice to someone coming in, what would you have said?

Wynn Covieo

Pray. No. And that, too. But no, seriously. You've got to listen to those who have the experience. You know, our objective was not -- we knew the war was not gonna be won. There was no question the war was not gonna be won, you know, especially how it was being fought. But just listen to those who have experience and so you can go home. And that was the whole objective. And again, that's what it was. But listen to the experienced men, 'cause they're in the same position as you, other than they've been there for eight months.
And again, in the 101st Airborne, we had, probably, the best unit there was. But 4th Infantry Division, when I got transferred over there, that was night and day difference. So it's really hard to come up with a specific thing you could say. But there's a lotta ways you can do things and you're a young man, eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old. You know, and half of 'em are brain dead anyway at that age. You know, they haven't learned about life.
And it's a real big growing experience for you, you know. It's the same thing like we started out this conversation with. You know, my intent was to become a missionary. Well, half the time they send people on missions and they're not effective whatsoever. They come back and they've grown up. It's a maturing process. But you have to listen to reason and a lotta times you have to question as to whether or not in your own mind this is gonna end your life or if you'll follow directions blindly. And some of the directions I followed blindly, and I wonder if I had challenged our leadership, to follow the tree line instead of walking up across that dry rice paddy, if my friend, Bob Besch, would still be alive today. If he would have had grandkids by now. And, you know --

Interviewer

Talk about the term "fresh meat."

Wynn Covieo

Well, it became evident from the day we arrived in-country that you got all the less-than-desirable jobs and you were expendable. You were expendable. Especially when you got out into the field, out into the jungle, and you were assigned to your unit, they would take a person who had no experience at all at walking point or going on an ambush, and usually they would pick the young guys that just came in, the fresh meat. And that's what they were referred to, or the FNGs, you know. And assign them these tasks, that you needed experience.
And like I say, most of the time you got that, but the young guys, they were just given any dirty job there was to do. It didn't make a difference what it was. And even when you go back, when we first came in-country back to Long Binh or Phan Thiet, when we first got assigned to the 101st. You've got clubs these guys have built, NCO clubs and things, and they pick all the brand new guys who were there fifteen minutes, “You're on guard.” And you go out there and sit in that bunker and keep a lookout, and if you see anything shoot it. It was crazy.
And the idea of the -- instead of fresh meat, it's almost like we were bait. You know, that we were sent out into an area and knowing that we were going to make contact with the enemy. There was no question we were going to, based on intelligence reports. But half the time it was the young guys, the new guys that were the bait so we could get this body count. And once we made contact -- the nature of the war changed as it went on. You'd make contact with the enemy, you'd call in the helicopter gunships 'cause they really started to take a prominent role. But that initial contact, you lost people.
And like I say, even though you knew 'em, it was so impersonal. You became callused. You asked me that question earlier. I went in probably the most patriotic person there was. My images of the war was my father was in World War II. And you came home a hero. You came home someone that society respected and honored, and you wore that uniform proudly. When I came home, it was a total different, total different circumstances. And those who were available to me prior to going to the war were off to college and they were no longer there. And the stigma of just being a Vietnam veteran was sometimes more than you could take.
I remember flying into Fort Lewis, Washington. And by the time the guys got from the plane to the restroom, they had torn off their uniform and thrown it in the garbage. And even, even me, when I came home that in order for me to fit in, I felt, I had to change. I changed my whole appearance. Grew my hair long, grew a beard. Of course, at

that time it was acceptable. I've had a beard now for 37 years. Maybe I'm still in hiding. Well actually it's longer than that. It's 40 years. But in order to feel like you fit in, you went to where you felt comfortable.
And then I became something that I despised while I was over there, through self-medication and doing things that really was totally against the way I was raised and the way I wanted to be. And even with the Veterans Administration. The Veterans Administration was so indifferent towards us. With my malaria, I came home on leave from Christmas from Fort Hood -- for Christmas from Fort Hood, Texas and got so sick again -- this is after I was home from Vietnam -- that I ended up spending ten days in the hospital at Hill Air Force Base with another full-blown malaria attack that, it's one of those things where they pack you in ice to get that fever down before it does brain damage, you go into convulsions and seizures.
But even then, the stigma of Vietnam was such that they thought that I was a drug addict and they put me in a cell. I was over in the corner with a blanket wrapped around me sitting next to a radiator. And this was during December. And between the nurses and the doctors they thought, “Well, maybe we better stick him in this room. There was no door knobs and the bars, and it was humiliating.
But it definitely changed my attitude, and then I had some more problems with the Veterans Administration, and I went back multiple times, even one time at 1:00 in the morning 'cause I woke up in a sweat and having a real rough time. And drove down to the VA at 1:00 in the morning and they said, "I'm sorry. We can't see you until the clinic opens at 8:00." Well, with malaria, you gotta get the blood drawn. And, and I vowed to never go back and I didn't until recently, and which I'm glad I did. Other than the fact that because of Agent Orange, I have come to discover that I have a lot of medical issues now that I wouldn't have found out if I hadn't had the encouragement to go back to see 'em.

Interviewer

Were helicopters a lifeline for you?

Wynn Covieo

The sound of a helicopter coming was something you always looked forward to, because it was either a resupply, or it was air support, or it was to extract somebody to get 'em outta there, get us outta there and move us to somewhere else. But helicopters, without the helicopters in Vietnam it would've been next to impossible to accomplish what we did. I wouldn't say there's too much dependency on a helicopter, but the helicopters were ones that -- especially in a jungle warfare. You know, without 'em you couldn't have done what we did. In fact, I still today -- I live by the McKay-Dee Hospital in Ogden up near the mountain, and that life flight helicopter, every time it comes across echoing off that mountain it's just in my brain that, “It's that helicopter coming.”
But helicopters were amazing, especially the, the helicopter gunships and the air support that was provided. I was in a helicopter once that was shot down, and -- I mean we didn't need a crash landing. We were still okay. But without the helicopters and the helicopter pilots and the door gunners and -- but they were freedom birds, was what we called 'em, you know. In fact, I was looking at pictures the other day that -- lifting a friend of mine from Ogden, Utah into one -- 'cause they couldn't land -- about ten feet in the air to get him in -- when they was sending him home.