Transcript of Lynn Wilson Interview
Ephraim, Utah
69 Machine gunner, 9th infantry div., Cambodia

Interviewer
Tell us your name.

Lynn Wilson
My name is Lynn Wilson. At the time, I had another first time, which I've had dropped. So I went by Ralph back then. But that's my dad's name, and we've had a lot of confusion through the years, so I gave it back to him. So I'm Lynn Wilson.

Interviewer
When were you born?

Lynn Wilson
I was born July 1st, 1948.

Interviewer
Where did you grow up?

Lynn Wilson
I was born in Salt Lake, but when I was still only four or five, we moved to where my mother grew up in Fountain Green. It's the north in Sanpete County, Utah.

Interviewer
You went to high school there?

Lynn Wilson
The high school was about 20 miles away. Mount Pleasant North Sanpete High School. Rode the bus. Then the last half of my senior year, most of it, there was several of us drove because we were taking a college class in Ephraim, Snow College. We was kinda hellions, so we were forbidden to ride the bus after a while.

Interviewer
You got drafted later than most kids.

Lynn Wilson
Yeah. My class, there was seven boys my age in Fountain Green. Six of us went in the military, and of that six, five went to Vietnam. Most of 'em got in when they were 18. I had a physical problem that prevented me from being drafted at that time, so I was just past 21 when I got drafted. Some of these guys had been overseas and come back. Honestly, they were angry with me for not having done what I could to get out of the draft.
There was a doctor, and I won't say who, that would write a letter for anybody to keep 'em out because he had been a surgeon in World War II. He was not a big fan of the Army. I was missing all of my friends, and I felt like I had a duty anyway. I was the oldest of seven, and it caused problems in my family, too, because I was working a lot of jobs and helping support the family. And there's still some resentment. We had a small cafe, so I worked there a lot. I kinda left the family kinda in the lurch. But I did send almost all of my money home.

Interviewer
What else would you like to add?

Lynn Wilson
I guess if I was to add anything, I would say that among the young men my age or close to it that had done tours in Vietnam, we're down to three of us. The other two, they don't want anything to do with me. One of them told me specifically not to come see him 'cause he says, "You remind me of things I don't wanna be reminded of." I've lost a lot of high school friends from various ailments that they've picked up over there. The Agent Orange thing has devastated my generation of young men that served over there. I have some effects from it, and I was only there a short time. Something like that, we had no clue. And even now trying to get any kind of help or compensation for it is like pullin' teeth.

They make you give up if there is something out there for ya. I've been through the process, and you eventually get tired and you give up. The other thing was I don't have any real childhood friends that served. And of course, I prefer to be around Veterans. The other thing was the people. After I came back from Vietnam, it's like I had a whole new education about what it was all about, but I came back to people that were as ignorant of it as they were before. I can remember getting home and going inside the little cafe we had, and one of the old farmers said, "Where have you been? I haven't seen you for quite a while." And I said, "Well, I've been to Vietnam." "Oh, that figures." They didn't care, and I was still using a crutch to get around.

I walked out of the cafe, got in my mother's car, was about to get into it, and then a kid a couple of years younger than I was who had managed not to get drafted, rolled an M-80 into that car. Him and some of his friends were standing there thought this would be a fun thing to do. There are too many in my opinion and in

my experience that for whatever reason, didn't serve–have no respect for the Vietnam Veteran. There has been a lot go on the last few years about finally making the Vietnam Veteran welcome back to the world.

And I had somebody ask me how I felt about that not too long ago. And I said, "Well, it's just too damn late." I've had to endure a lot of abuse from people that were supposed to be good people, highly educated, and even should've been my friends. But when they found out that I was a Vietnam veteran, you cannot believe the things that was said to me.

Interviewer
Like what?

Lynn Wilson
"Oh, you're one of them baby killers, one of those people that just went over there to murder civilians." And they think it's funny. Obviously, I don't. And it's caused me to withdraw from society. I live in my basement. I seldom even get in my car and go downtown. After that kinda attitude presented itself to me, I became a militant Vietnam veteran. I wear the garb, and everybody is pretty sure I carry a pretty big gun. I go lookin' for trouble. Anybody wanna say anything to me? I got a little patch that's got the American and Vietnamese flags, and it's red, white and blue, and it says, "If you weren't there, shut up." That's my attitude.

Interviewer
What is the town that you grew up in again?

Lynn Wilson
Sanpete.

Interviewer
Sanpete?

Lynn Wilson
County.

Interviewer
What was the town?

Lynn Wilson
Fountain Green.

Interviewer
I've never heard of Fountain Green.

Lynn Wilson

Well, it's kinda small. At the time I lived there, it was probably less than 300 people. It's the first town off the freeway at Nephi. You go east from there.

Interviewer
What was your rank in the Army when you left?

Lynn Wilson
Well, I actually ended up and joined the National Guard.

Interviewer
But when you left Cambodia?

Lynn Wilson
I was a PFC when I was in Vietnam, and when I got back, I got promoted to Specialist, 4th Class, E4. I got my two years in active duty, and about three years later, I joined the Utah National Guard. I was discharged from both on the same day in 1978 or 1979. The First Sergeant I had in the Guard promoted me to E5 the last day.

Interviewer
But when you were in Cambodia/Vietnam, you were Private First Class?

Lynn Wilson
Yes.

Interviewer
You're gonna go into infantry when you get in?

Lynn Wilson
Yeah. Everybody in the Army goes through infantry basic training, and I couldn't tell ya now how long it takes; somewhere around two and a half, three months. But those that are staying in the Infantry go on to Advanced Infantry Training. And just about all of us did. I was in Fort Lewis, and there was a few that went to the same AIT class as I had gone. So there's a little group of us friends that moved to AIT, and there's three or four of us that ended up in the same company in Vietnam.

It's been said that being in combat with somebody–I'm not the original thinker on this–but it creates a situation where you get closer to those men than you ever will be with your own brother. And having gone through all that training and then end up with one young man whose name was Jimmy Wilson, but he was up from Virginia. If I carried a machine gun, he was my ammo bearer, and I miss him horribly. I know he survived his tour, but he came away, I was told, with a severe parasitic disease. I haven't been able to find him.

Interviewer

What year were you in?

Lynn Wilson
'69.

Interviewer
Tell us your opinion of the war before going in.

Lynn Wilson
I have to admit that I didn't watch much television. My situation was that I worked and went to school. We did talk about it, but I had no clue where that place was really. I guess in these small towns in the middle of Utah, we didn't get involved in the politics much as kids. We had other things to do. Around '65 or so, a young man that was older than I was got killed over there. He was a Marine, and it was just kinda surreal 'cause it just finally dawned on me, "These people are actually getting killed over there," 'cause I did not watch television. I guess I didn't have a real good idea of what could happen to ya.

My unit was way down south. We were quite a ways south of Saigon. In the Mekong Delta, by that time, there wasn't a lot of activity. And after a week or so of being in the field, it was like a Boy Scout trip, except you got really dirty and that water was horrible. But it had been about a week, and we were going in a line, unfortunately following a small trail. I was second in line, and the kid in front of me, about 25 feet away from me, stepped on a small booby trap. There was a small explosion; it tipped him over. About ten minutes later, there was a helicopter there and made him go away. But to look at him, he didn't seem to have been injured that badly.

Less than a week later, we all got on our tracks and went to Saigon to see him in the hospital. The helicopter trip couldn't have taken more than half an hour, but by the time he got to the hospital because of what they did in those little booby traps, they had to cut his leg off just below the knee. The gangrene had set in that fast, and they couldn't save it. Then I started being more careful. As far as engaging the enemy, it was real sporadic and most of the time, if they could, they'd run away. There wasn't much activity in the Delta. And our first real experience through mine was when we started moving around and going to Cambodia. Then things got intense.

Interviewer
You're technically a volunteer.

Lynn Wilson
The training for that environment and the conditions of dealing with the enemy was lousy. You did OJT. You got told a lot. When we first got there, you went through some kind of class. They had a trail set up in a small area that had booby traps set up just to show what you might encounter. But it just wasn't

enough. When I first started going into the field, I had no clue. I didn't know how to carry my ammunition; I didn't know what to put in what pocket. You had to learn about the dangers the hard way, so to speak. A lot of people got hurt, and they didn't need to because like the good lieutenant I had, he knew where we were going, and he chose to transfer out of our platoon to be in charge of what we called the zippo track.

It was a track with a flamethrower on it. He knew that would be safer because it didn't venture out in the bushes like we did. Consequently, we got a brand new lieutenant that I felt bad for him right off the bat 'cause the first thing we did is take all his money away from him playing cards. You gotta break 'em in somehow. He was only with us two weeks when he got killed. I had a lot of people tell me I was lucky to get wounded and get out. But after I left, I tried to find out how things were going and I couldn't find out. That was amazing that in the hospital, you're totally isolated from the world. You don't listen to a radio; you don't see a newspaper. You can't call anybody.

So for about a month, I didn't know anything. By chance, I found out after I had gotten to the States, and I learned that the track I had been on, somebody decided to–well, I think it was a battalion commander–the area we went into, we ran into an opening in this jungle, the triple canopy jungle. It opened up, and there were rice paddies. There had been a village, and everything–all the obstacles, all the things that you would use for physical training. It was an NVA training camp, and the village had had their families in it. But the night before, they'd bombed that village to burn it to the ground, and there were a lot of civilians. Families of the soldiers had been burnt to a crisp, but you didn't see anyone.

You could feel the tension, and the group that I went in with, it was our three tracks and we had a company of tracks that were just drivers and gunners. I don't know what unit they came from. We had a company of tanks. There were probably ten or so of 'em. They made a defensive circle in those rice paddies, and they sent our three tracks with our infantry on them on a trail. It was really narrow. But they had a fall over recognizance or something. They could see it make a big loop and it came back in to where the rice paddies were. It was on that trail that we got ambushed. I got blew right off the top of that thing and found a hiding place as quickly as I could. When they got the fire put out and everything, they actually forgot to pick me up and they left me there. The bullets were still zingin' around.

I don't know if they was able to see me or not. I thought I was a dead man. But I got to lookin' around and there was some really well-concealed bunkers. After I left, the battalion commander decided that there was a need for high explosives instead of the plastic like the C4 we carried. He thought they needed to blow up bunkers. So they put three engineers from I don't know where and cases of TNT on top of that track. A week after I got wounded, it got hit by an RPG again. I

talked to a young man later that he had actually been sitting to the Sergeant Carpenter I talked about when he got killed. He said the explosion looked like an atomic bomb had went off. It just turned all those men into ant food.

Interviewer
You were left behind. How'd they see you?

Lynn Wilson
There was one more track coming along that trail, and they stopped. They knew I was somewhere. I seen it coming, and I exposed myself, and they stopped and grabbed me.

Interviewer
Were you in a lot of pain?

Lynn Wilson
I was in shock. The pain, I don't know. It was just like I was numb all over. I had shrapnel from my ankles to my ear lobes. I had a lot of blood. I had just a lot of little ones in my chest. That got the most attention, but the worst was in my left hip and lower legs. They didn't bleed a whole lot. The smaller wounds bled the most for some reason. I was in shock. I thought my leg had been broken, and there was a lot of pain in my hip, especially when I got up and tried to move.

Interviewer
How long was it before they called the helicopters in?

Lynn Wilson
We made it back to that defensive circle, and I got put on a stretcher along with quite a few others. Actually, it was like one or so in the afternoon when I got wounded, and I didn't get outta there until about 7:30 that evening because once the shooting started, that defensive circle we had set up, we were attacked from all sides. Actually, I watched two medevac choppers get shot down, and so they didn't try for a long time.

Interviewer
Did they give you any morphine?

Lynn Wilson
Got morphine immediately, and just to make sure I wouldn't take too long to get another one, I rubbed the grease pencil "M" off my forehead, so if I ran into another medic, I could tell 'em I needed some more. You think about stupid things at a time like that.

Interviewer
Do you remember much about the ride in the helicopter?

Lynn Wilson
I remember I was scared to death to get on it, but there was a lot of–we had Vietnamese Tiger Scouts. Every one of 'em wanted to get on that helicopter because if they got captured, they were in for a terrible ending. I was afraid to get on it 'cause I didn't know if it would be able to get back outta there. But the first ten minutes of the ride, we were right at treetop level going just as fast as we could.

I seen rockets and a lot of tracers comin' up at us, so the first part of that ride was absolutely terrifying. But bless those pilots, good grief. I had a chance to go to the school to be a helicopter pilot. I passed it up. I regret that, of course, now. They are some of the bravest men I could imagine because being shot down in a helicopter is just terrifying. I'd rather have my feet on the ground than get wounded or shot at. They were pretty defenseless.

Interviewer
When you hear a helicopter today, tell us what happens.

Lynn Wilson
Actually, walking up to the building, one of the medevac helicopters took off, and I have to go dead stop still and it just reminds me so much. It's the first thing I think about, and then I have to see where it is and make sure what it is.

Interviewer
What are the feelings that come up?

Lynn Wilson
Just the memory of especially that day I was wounded. I was lying on that stretcher, and I was counting. We had about 12 cobra gunships that were circling our area. They'd come down and unload a lot of ordinance shoot. Then they'd go up and get back in line, and we had F4's doing the same thing, F4 fighter jets droppin' bombs. It was intense.

Interviewer
So you had a lot of men around you.

Lynn Wilson
I've got a book about it, and they estimated that we were outnumbered eight or ten to one, but we had tanks. They had some pretty heavy stuff, too. While I was waiting to get medevaced out, I watched 'em destroy three tanks with satchel charges. A small group of 'em would get together with these bags of explosives. It was suicidal for them. They'd just pull a fuse, and it's eventually go off, but they'd charge one of those tanks and try to lay a satchel charge on it. Get right up on top of it and stuff it under the turret, and it'd blow the turret right off.

Interviewer
So you were lying there.

Lynn Wilson
So I'm lying there, totally helpless, and I was so scared. I was so frightened 'cause if they'd overrun the position, there wasn't a damn thing I coulda done.

Interviewer
Where did they take you?

Lynn Wilson
I went to an aid station first. I don't have any clue where it was. Then I got on another helicopter and flew to Thái Nguyên, which is a fairly large city close to Cambodia. I had surgery there that night, and then the next morning, they flew me to, I think, around Saigon somewhere and put me in a ward of wounded soldiers, none of whom I knew. They weren't even from my unit, so I felt kind of alone there because there was nobody there that was even --

Interviewer
Were there nurses there?

Lynn Wilson
The number of nurses wasn't equal to the task. That operation caused a lot of casualties, so they were overflowing. They had very little time to spend with each patient. I was in a wing that was a lot of wounded soldiers, but a lot of us had burns. I can't remember if it was two or three times a day they'd come and I can remember havin' all the skin on my arms and stuff peeled off, and then they put a–I remember the name it. They called it Sulfamylon cream. It was a white cream, and it cleaned your arms off, and you put that on, and it was just icy cold. It felt good for about five seconds, and then the pain would come up, and it was intense.

There was a time after there had been a lot of controversy about soldiers coming back with drug habits, so their use of pain medication was zero. So after the first treatment or two, it was a fist fight 'cause I knew what it was gonna feel like. I'd look around, and I had my arms burnt. But there was guys that their whole faces were burned off. After I got in Japan, they sent me to the burn ward, and it was just awful. I don't know how some of the guys survived it. I just don't.

Interviewer
You talked about drugs during that time.

Lynn Wilson
I only seen marijuana use. It was quite prevalent. I heard a little bit about other stuff. I'd never seen it; I never knew anyone that used anything else, but there were some–not a large percentage–but there were a few that got involved with

marijuana. Mostly people that didn't go out in the field. If we had someone infantry that was actually walkin' out there, if we had any suspicion that they were using anything, we'd get 'em out. You couldn't afford to be under the influence.

Interviewer
You get to Japan.

Lynn Wilson
I flew to Japan.

Interviewer
When you took off from Vietnam at last, even though you're suffering from burns and pain, how did you feel?

Lynn Wilson
Oh, I was glad to get out of there. I was glad to get my feet washed. I was glad to leave. When I first got to Japan, a doctor who seen me briefly told me I'd heal up and they could send me back. It put me in a panic. I really hadn’t had time to think about missing my friends yet. I seen that first doctor, and he just, "Oh, yeah. You'll be fine. You can go back," but it wasn't only a short time later that another one came along and said, "No. You're going home."

Interviewer
How'd you feel then?

Lynn Wilson
I felt a lot better.

Interviewer
What kind of music would they play?

Lynn Wilson
Rock 'n roll.

Interviewer
Were there any particular songs or groups?

Lynn Wilson
We had one while I was there, and they were a small group that did American rock 'n roll, but they were from Thailand and they had obviously memorized the words. But they really, really messed up the American language. They were cute kids, and it was a good break, but it was hard not to laugh, which you didn't wanna do that.

Lynn Wilson

They did a lot of Doors, Rolling Stones, a lot of anti-war songs. There's a particular group that did quite a few. But it was just good old '60s rock 'n roll, and I still like it.

Interviewer
You still like '60s rock 'n roll, huh?

Lynn Wilson
I have hundreds of records.

Interviewer
What are your favorites?

Lynn Wilson
I personally like all kinds of music, but I grew up on Country music and Western music, not the new stuff they do now. The old Nashville music: Jim Reeves, Eddie Arnold, Ray Price. I have hundred of albums still. I still play records. But I also liked rock 'n roll. Got a lot of Beatles.

Most of the records I try to collect, unfortunately, when the kids were playing 'em, they were hard on most records. And there's a lot of 'em you can collect the records but not the jackets because they'd take the jacket and tack it to the wall. When the folks would send 'em off to college, the folks would take 'em all down and throw 'em away. So I have a lot of records without jackets. The typical rock 'n roll of the era is the Rolling Stones.

Interviewer
So you're 21, and you have a lieutenant, and he's basically saying to you, "We're never gonna win this war." What did that do to your attitude and morale after that?

Lynn Wilson
It wasn't just that he told us. Everybody knew. A lot of guys would do anything to stay out of the field. I wore glasses at the time. I had my glasses stepped on one night, and I used it as an excuse to not go in the field, so I missed one of the number of days that they went. I couldn't stand it at all. But I had a pair of prescription sunglasses. They were useless at night. I still had the clinic's permission to stay out, but I didn't. The next time the tracks went out, I went with 'em.

But some guys will do anything to stay out of the field. I don't wanna call it cowardly, 'cause it wasn't. It was survival. You went into survival mode, whereas maybe in earlier years if you were out in the dark and ran into enemy or had them come close to you, you might have just fought it out. But at the time I was there, if you even thought there was something out there, if a battleship was

close enough, we'd call in the big stuff. The biggest we could call in, that's what we did first before we exposed ourselves to enemy fire.

Interviewer
Tell us about coming home, and where you arrived, and what time of day. What was the reaction?

Lynn Wilson
I can't remember the exact circumstances, but I remember that I was approved for a leave on a Friday. But it was kinda late in the day, and they said, "You'll have to wait until Monday." I said, "If I can get outta here, I'm gettin' out of here."

Interviewer
Were you in the States?

Lynn Wilson
I was in the States. I was in Fort Carson, Colorado.

Interviewer
Tell me about coming back to the States and actually touching down on the ground.

Lynn Wilson
Oh. It was the longest airplane ride in the world. It flew direct from Japan, and it was probably a 707, four engine jet, but the inside of it was–we were in the very bottom of the plane. The inside of the plane wasn't finished off. You could see all the ribs and the cables and all that. And way up in the front, at the top of a pretty good ladder, there was the cockpit. But it was a hospital plane. It took 18 hours. We took off; the sun went down; it came up; and it went down. We arrived, I think, in San Francisco early in the morning. It was cold, foggy, rainy, and I instantly caught cold 'cause I'd gotten used to that 110 degree heat. I didn't know where I was goin'. They didn't tell ya anything.

But the next morning I got on another plane, and it stopped, landed, and took off twice in California. I know that because of the first time we landed, they took patients off and brought some on. One of the people they put on that plane, he was on a stretcher. I was sitting in a seat by then. It was a machine gunner from another squad in my platoon. That's when I first found out. He told what had happened to my company and my platoon. That was the first knowledge I had of it. I was devastated to hear that eyewitness account. There'd been a lot of problems because, as I'd talked about before about the track being blown all to pieces, they brought in grave registration, and there were no bodies to collect. This young man told me that some officer in the battalion had decided that they should be listed as missing in action.

There was a literal revolt in the field because that would've been the cruelest thing in the world you could've done to those boys' families 'cause they'd have been an MIA forever. But of course, it wouldn't have went on that officer's record that he lost all his men because of a stupid mistake. But there was enough pressure put on that the chaplain got involved, and they eventually listed 'em as killed in action. That young man from Salt Lake, I talked to his sister a couple of weekends ago, and she told me her brother had gone to San Diego to pick up his body, and it was a sealed casket. They couldn't view the body. That young man that got on the plane with me that first told me about what had happened had told me what had happened to that young man, and it's a story I can't tell.

Interviewer
In 1975, how's your life?

Lynn Wilson
I had come home to Sanpete County. It was the economic armpit of the state, and I did get a job with the County Road Department solely because they had a Veteran's preference. I worked for them for two years. After I'd gotten out of the hospital in Fort Carson, they sent me back to Fort Lewis. Just by chance, I ended up, after a few months, getting volunteered for training for the military police. So I spent the last eight months of my two years–I'd scored the highest in the group I was in, so I got to choose my job. I chose to be a desk clerk, 'cause it rained a lot up there, and they were gonna close the post and make a lot of guys gate guards.

I didn't wanna do that, so I had a good job the last eight months. I got really interested in law enforcement and came home, tried to get into the highway patrol, but I was too short and too skinny. But my neighbor was a highway patrolman. We were really good friends, and eventually, he had retired and he was the mayor. He got me a job as City Marshall, and that was the beginning of my law enforcement career, so I spent the next 25 years in different police departments and sheriff's departments. Towards the end, it wasn't too good.

Interviewer
April 30, 1975, on TV.

Lynn Wilson
I was sick.

Interviewer
Tell me about it.

Lynn Wilson
It was after the last American troops have pulled out, and everybody watched 'em put that helicopter on top of that building, and hundreds of people trying to get up. And all those helicopters would land on those ships and just get pushed into

the sea. I thought, "What a horrible waste of humanity and materials, treasure." That's when I started studying the politics of the war, not just the individual battles or what technology of–I was always interested in flying–the technology of dog fights or the neat weapons.

I started studying the politics of how the US got involved in that. And of course, I didn't know it at the time, but I'd been having problems with PTSD many years before I found out what the problem was. But I was angry, and I was sick to my stomach. I just could not believe it because it just didn't take so little time after they pulled all of the Americans out that the place was overrun. It was like they were almost invited. The South Vietnamese military just weren't up to the task, and I don't think that they really put up much of a fight.