Ivan Van Laningham
Salt Lake City, Utah

Interviewer
Can you spell your name for us, please?
Ivan Van Laningham
Van Laningham. V-a-n. L-a-n-i-n-g-h-a-m.
Interviewer
Ivan. I-v-a-n?
Ivan Van Laningham
Yes.
Interviewer
Where are you from originally? Where did you grow up?
Ivan Van Laningham
All over the Midwest. My father was a farm manager and he worked for a company, (Dohnts?)(00:51); I believe they're still in business. And they had a policy of moving farm managers every single year. So my family moved every year up until about 1958 when he got fed up and went to work for a different company. So I was born in Evansville, Indiana.
Interviewer
What year?
Ivan Van Laningham
1947.
Interviewer
So your life before the military, what were your dreams like?
Ivan Van Laningham
Well, they were contradictory, probably pretty much like any other young adults. I had managed to get into computers and I wanted to work with computers the rest of my life. At the time, working in the computer field was pretty different from what it is now, very different.
For one thing, you were expected wear a suit and white shirt and tie. And one of the first things I did when I went to work for the Commercial National Bank in Peoria was I went out and bought myself a trench coat just like the other guys who worked there with me. And that was in 1965 when I went to work there. So you could say that at least one of my dreams at the time involved joining the establishment.
Interviewer
Talk about how you came to be in the military?
Ivan Van Laningham
Well, sometime when I was in high school my mom started warning that there was military involvement coming down the track. I paid no attention. But when I got out of high school and went to work for the Commercial National Bank she was busy doing research on the roots of the Vietnam conflict. And so as soon as I went to work for the bank she started saying, "You really need to go to college and get yourself a deferment so that you don't get drafted." And she pushed and pushed and after six months at the bank, I left and went to college; Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Illinois if you're interested.
And there I met my first wife. And after only two quarters, we ran off and got married. And then we ended up in Bloomington and then from there we ended up in Chicago after about a year after that. And I didn't get a college deferment but we did try to get pregnant. And Mom, the whole time was still researching Vietnam and what was going on over there.
Interviewer
Was there a deferment at that time for men with families?
Ivan Van Laningham
There was a college deferment. This was in '67 and '68. And there was a college deferment and then if you had kids. There wasn't a deferment for being married, but there was if you had kids so that's why we were trying to get pregnant. But the draft board just basically seemed to overlook me until I'd been working in Chicago, still in computers for a year or so, and then I did get drafted. And I was a little older than most draftees. I would've been 22 because I was drafted in '69.
And I got out to Fort Bragg, North Carolina and the recruiting sergeants there – I had already thought that I would be looking at schools. Because you know, the last thing I wanted was to go infantry. And so I talked to the recruiting sergeant at Fort Bragg like the third day of being a draftee. And he said, "What are you interested in?" I said, "Computers. That's what I've gone to school for, it's what I worked at. I'm really good at it." "Well the Army doesn't

really use computers," he said. And he said, "However, we have this great school in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. And he opened up this binder with all the color pictures and the nice barracks and things like that and he said, "I think you'd really like this. It's electronics. It's not computers but it has a lot to do with electronics and communications. And the nice thing about it is that almost none of the graduates from this school go to Vietnam." I said, "Oh, okay. Sign me up."

So I signed up for the extra year that it required. Because draftee, it was two years. If you became RA, Regular Army, that was three-year active duty commitment. I get out to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey and the very first hour there they had this orientation in a big field. And a fellah gets up on a soap box in the middle of the field and he says, "So your recruiting sergeants probably told you that nobody from this school ever goes to Vietnam. Ninety-nine percent of our graduates go to Vietnam as soon as they get out of our schools." So I thought, "By-golly, if I ever meet that recruiting sergeant again, I will have words with him." But you know.

Interviewer

So what did you find out you were going to do in Vietnam?

Ivan Van Laningham

It was a communication school and what the job was over there was to maintain what they called long line circuits. It was microwave line of sight relay all up the down the country to enable company commanders and other people to stay in touch all up and down South Vietnam; the Republic of Vietnam. And supposedly company commanders anywhere in-country could pick up phones on their desks and if they had the clout, could pick up the phones and talk to President Nixon. In practice, they never did because they didn't have the clout and Nixon wouldn't have listened anyway, but that's another story.

Interviewer

You said you protested the war. Talk about that. And what did your mother say?

Ivan Van Laningham

My mother said, "I told you so." When I was living in Chicago and working for Motorola, the draft board had sent me notices to have me go for physicals back in Peoria or in St. Louis. And so I went to the physicals but of course that made me worry. And that of course was when there were tons of protests. I mean this was 1968 and Martin Luther King had been killed, Bobby Kennedy had been killed and the Democratic Convention was just on the horizon.

Now I remember driving through the ghetto in Chicago on my way to work and seeing buildings that looked bombed out from the riots after Martin Luther King was killed. And about the time I start noticing stuff like this – you know, because I really paid very little attention to news. I thought Mom was just, oh, well, it's no big deal. But with the draft board breathing on my neck and all these other things happening, that's when I began to realize there are protests. And one of the things my wife and I did at the time was we went downtown to a part of Chicago called Old Town and we talked to basically counselors who would talk to you about what your options were if you were faced with the draft. And those involved basically either resisting or going to Canada. And I just decided I wasn't going to do either one of those things. I couldn't have faced jail and even though I was convinced that the Vietnam War was an illegal war and we shouldn't be there, I like living in the U.S. way too much to go off to Canada. And besides they had worse winters than Chicago there and that's pretty bad. And while we were downtown talking to these counselors, we saw posters advertising marches and the counselor even said, "You ought to come and join in with the protests." So we did that.

We went down two or three Saturdays and marched in protests. And that was overwhelming. Before we did that, I had no idea that there was so much anti-war sentiment. But to be in the midst of thousands and thousands of shouting people – and all of them with a common purpose – that was overwhelming. Wow.

You know, it's a cliché of course, but the times did seem to be changing, you know? But in the end, when I got the draft notice it was almost expected. And I just thought, I don't want to go infantry but I think what I'm gonna do is I will go in – and I knew enough about what the process was to be able to say I'll talk to 'em about schools, maybe I can get back into computers or stay in computers.

Interviewer

When you were in training and getting ready to go the Vietnam, what are your fellow Vietnam soldiers talking about? Do they agree or disagree with you?

Ivan Van Laningham

When I arrived at Fort Bragg, it was late at night, it was like ten or eleven at night. And they just dumped us into a great big room, all of us draftees. Most of us still had our hair. And there was nothing to do so I pulled out my book, "Catch-22." And I hadn't read very much of it. So I'm reading "Catch-22" and in a roomful of hundreds of other draftees. Guys came through, "We need volunteers to work on KP. If you work KP then you get off tomorrow and you don't have to do all this stuff that they're gonna do and it will be really great for you." So we said, "Oh, sure." Four or five of us said sure, we'll do KP. So in there we're in all-night KP, I'm reading "Catch-22," and I began to

suspect towards the ends of the night, that we weren't going to get what had been promised to us. So I said to the other guys – and they said, "Oh, yeah, we know that. They're gonna screw us." And that's exactly what happened. We told the sergeant in charge of us in the morning, "We've been on KP all night, we're supposed to get some sleep here." "I don't believe you. Fall in." We all knew at that point that that's how it was gonna be in the Army. It wasn't just me. And people looked at me and said, "Oh, you're reading 'Catch-22,' it's a great book."

Even when we were actually in basic training, everyone I talked to, it wasn't just me that thought this is not a legal war, we shouldn't be here, this whole thing should not be going on. It was everyone I talked to. In basic in Fort Bragg, half of the company that I was in was from Chicago and so there were people like me, there were hippies, there were art students. I remember one guy sitting there on a Sunday afternoon in the four hours we didn't have anything to do and he was sketching. And I said, "What are you drawing?" And he held up the picture and it was the lions in front of the Art Institute in Chicago. And I thought, "Oh."

And the other half of the company was mostly black and from Washington, D.C. So we had a number of rational incidents. One Sunday afternoon, again, supposedly, we didn't have anything else to do. I was reading. I looked out the window and everybody in all the buildings around were just pouring out and starting to beat on each other. And I said, "Oops. I'm not going out there."

The drill sergeants broke it up very quickly but then of course we were all punished for that. I don't know what it was but like we lost an extra break or something like that. I mean there really wasn't a whole lot they could do to us in basic training that was gonna be worse than what we were already undergoing.

Interviewer

Tell us about getting to Vietnam. How did you get there?

Ivan Van Laningham

By the time I got to Vietnam I was pretty used to being in the Army. I'd spent six months in my school at Fort Monmouth. And we had a leave and then I flew out to Fort Lewis, Washington. And at the time, you traveled standby. You, yourself probably remember this. You could go standby for a reasonable fee and you would actually get where you're going roughly when you wanted to get there. So I flew standby. And it was American Airlines and they said, "Oh, we just happen to have a spot in first class, would you like it?" Duh. So that was a very nice thing. The stewardesses were very attentive and that's the only time I've ever flown first class.

I flew in the day before and I spent my last night in the continental U.S. in the YMCA at Tacoma. And I went out into Tacoma in the evening and found a book store and it was the Fox Bookstore. And the guy who owned the place, Charles Hugo Fox, asked me about my life, asked me where I was going, all this stuff. And then brought me – I forget what he got me to drink – and we just talked for a couple of hours. And then he took my purchases, packaged them up and sent them back to my home for me for free. So that again was something very nice. The next day I got on a stretched L-1011. It held something like 600 people. And of course you have to wear your dress greens or other dress uniforms to be on these flights; Flying Tigers Airlines.

And we stopped Alaska for refueling, in Japan for refueling and then from the Tokyo airport we flew to Cam Ronh Bay. And unlike landing in Tokyo, there were very few lights. And unlike in the earlier years, we didn't have to have our weapons to get off the plane, we just got off. We got off, walked out onto the tarmac in Cam Ronh Bay. I consider myself to be from Chicago where we have some of the nastiest coldest weather in the world and summers are no slouch there either; you know, 99 percent humidity and 100 to 105 degree heat. Well, I left Chicago in 20-below weather. I get off the plane in Cam Ronh Bay and it is like walking into a solid wall of heat. Just rolling over you. It was just phenomenally hot. And we're all jet lagged.

We get off the plane and they say, "Welcome to Vietnam." And I'm thinking I have never been so hot, I have never sweated so much in my whole life. Is this what it's gonna be like the whole year? So we get into formation. The guy says, "All right, you're all jet lagged. What you need to do now is sleep. There are some huts. Just march over, find yourself a hut. Sleep. And when you wake up come to breakfast. The day after, there will be a formation." And I thought this is the Army, this is not how they do things. They don't give us recovery time for jet lag. But they did. But of course those huts were really something. You know, they were in sand. There was nothing there but sand.

Interviewer

Let's talk about that contradictory element.

Ivan Van Laningham

While I was working in the computer industry and wanted to be part of the establishment, basically; at the same time, it was the '60s. And there were communes everywhere, free love was everywhere. When we went to Old Town in Chicago it was like Haight-Ashbury only in Chicago. We often talked about just opting out completely and seeing if we could join up with an alternative community someplace.

But I have to say I kept thinking, "Well that probably means I would have to do something like farming." And my dad was a farm manager, I know how much work it is to farm. It's just a hellacious amount of work and no way was I up for that. So it never came to anything but talk. But, you know, it was the '60s. Of course I found out that marijuana and I did not mix; it made me terribly paranoid. The dropping acid and stuff like that, that never worked for me, so I drank instead.

Interviewer
So you're heading toward these sand facilities.
Ivan Van Laningham
Yeah, the barracks that they told us to go catch a nap in weren't really barracks, they were just huts on sand. And the way that base camps were built in Vietnam was first the Army Corps of Engineers would Agent Orange everything. And then bulldoze everything and take it down to bare, bare dirt or sand in the case of Cam Ronh Bay. So there were these huts, ramshackle huts just perched on sand and there were bunks all right, but they were just mattresses that thick on springs. And they were full of sand and they were full of bugs and nobody cared. We fell asleep and we slept for like eight or ten hours and got up.
And the mess hall was in continuous operation for people who were just coming in-country for the first time. The next morning they got us together in a formation and looked up our records, found out where we were supposed to go. From there I went to Saigon and in Saigon they said, "Okay, you're attached to the 369th Signal Battalion and you're going to go to a place called Fantiet. I bounced up and down. And the thing was they say, "You're posed to be in Fantiet. Get there." So you pick up your duffle bag and somebody drives you in a jeep out to Tan Son Nhut Airport, because it was Saigon's airport. Still is. And you get on a plane, a U.S. military transport and go to where you're supposed to go.
Except no flights were going there. So what I had to do was say, "Okay, what's the closest you can get me to Fantiet?" "Well, I can get to you Nha Trang and maybe from Nha Trang you can get there." Well, from Nha Trang, okay, you have to go to Da Nang. Now you have to go back, all the way down to Vung Tau which is way the hell south. And from there, back to Saigon. And so I bounced up and down the whole country for three weeks before I finally got to Fantiet.
Interviewer
What are you seeing? What are you thinking?

Ivan Van Laningham
I'm thinking, "Am I gonna be a nomad the entire year in Vietnam?"
Interviewer
What are you seeing of Vietnam?
Ivan Van Laningham
I'm seeing mostly airports and I'm sleeping in airports. Because you know, most of the places are small, they don't have bunks for overnight stays. This is the Army and the Air Force, they don't cater to wimpy stuff like that. So you just sleep in the airport on whatever is available. A couple of times it's just a concrete floor. That's it. And I remember coming into one place, it might have been Nha Trang, and we were coming in on a C-130. And that was another thing, on C-130s, they didn't have seats. They had racks.
You just kind of backed up to the wall and hooked a seatbelt over you and you sort of stood and leaned against the curved wall. And it was for parachuting out. You had these safety things you could jump out. What do you need seats for? This is the Army. But I remember looking out the windows in a C-130, out the windows and everywhere I could see outside the base camp were craters. No vegetation. Just bare dirt or yellow grass that was clearly dead. And then craters. Some with puddles in 'em; everywhere, as far as you could see. I think that might have been Nha Trang but I'm not sure.
Interviewer
So you finally get to your base?
Ivan Van Laningham
Fantiet. A really wind-swept little place. It's mostly notable for being where they make fish sauce. They make the best fish sauce in Vietnam there. So the whole place stank, it smelled like rotten fish because that's how they make fish sauce. And we had several cook outs because since the ocean was there, we could go down to the harbor in the mornings and pick up stuff fresh off the fishing boats. And then we would have cook outs. And that's where I first learned to like fish sauce because we would have cook outs and sometimes we would have really interesting marinades; one of the guys was a bit of a cook. And I'd think, "Wow, this stuff really good." Stank up the whole place, but it was really tasty. And all that fresh fish, it was fabulous.
After I'd been there… it couldn't have been a month and a half, they decided, okay – this is all part of Nixon's Vietnamization – we're going to turn Fantiet, the facility there, into a training school for the Vietnamese; the Vietnamese troops. And so they said well you're too much of a newbie to be an instructor and that's all we're gonna have here so you have to be transferred someplace else. And as I was putting my stuff in the jeep to be taken to the airport, a limousine drove up and Melvin Laird got out.
Interviewer
Explain who Melvin Laird was.

Ivan Van Laningham
He was the Secretary of Defense after McNamara. And so I got to see Melvin Laird. Got in the jeep and then I drove away. They took me to the airport. And that time it was just one flight. They put me on a helicopter and I went from Fantiet to Cu Chi just like that, one trip. So it was not a repeat of the three-week odyssey.

Interviewer
Tell us about Cu Chi and what you did.

Ivan Van Laningham
Cu Chi was the second biggest base camp in Vietnam. Long Binh had about 60,000 people stationed there. Cu Chi had 20- to 25,000. The reason it was so big was because it was the home base for the 25th Infantry Division. They called themselves Tropic Lightening and their specialty was ambushes. They sent out ambush patrols every night and then they came back to the base camp every day. And our facility was supposed to help keep all those commanders in touch with the MACV in Saigon and Long Binh; Military Assistance Command Vietnam. So MACV headquarters was in Saigon, but the generals that were supposedly running the war – those guys were all in Long Binh.

And Long Binh was so big that it even had a country club just for general officers. There were places on that camp where you could see signs that said "Parking for general officers only." They had a steam bath, they had restaurants. Cu Chi was not as big. We had one restaurant and it was so-so. The detachment where I was, we had a total of about, I think 20 people. And we were split into our RF section – Radio Frequency guys – they're the ones who were responsible for the actual microwave part. And then the other section was ours where we monitored the communications circuits from the DCO.

There were other dial central office. And they had other secure circuits, digital circuits from various secret facilities on the camp and we bundled all those circuits up, sent them to the RF guys and they're the ones who shot 'em on the microwave. But what we did was we monitored all these circuits all the time and watched for degradations in quality or for components to go bad. Most of the time though things did not go bad and so we didn't have a lot to do.

Interviewer
Tell us about the music.

Ivan Van Laningham
Well, there were two guys in the room next to mine who spent all their spare money on stereo equipment from Japan. And they played their music really loud. We would sit up on the bunker and watch the war which was happening on Tay Ninh Mountain a few kilometers away. And they would have the music going on their stereo. The only trouble was that they only had three albums. So they had this $5,000 stereo system and two of the albums were: "Bridge over Troubled Water," and Led Zeppelin's "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida." So we heard a lot of those two albums.

I forget what the third one was, they didn't play it nearly as much as those two. So I didn't have a lot of variety in music at Cu Chi. If went to the EM clubs for shows or something like that, you would have things like The Animals playing, "We Gotta Get Out of This Place," which was like the anthem for everyone. If you went to any club, anywhere in Vietnam, sooner or later you would hear that.

Interviewer
Can you talk more about that song?

Ivan Van Laningham
Everybody felt that. It's what we all felt. We were 10,000 miles from home. Whether we were Hawks – and there were great many a Hawks there – or whether we were left-over hippies or just people trying to get by, everyone there felt this was not where we were supposed to be. We gotta get out of this place. At the same time, after I'd been there like six months or something, I began to realize that I liked Vietnam. It was completely different duty than being stateside. It was, for at least the support troops, it was a much more relaxed experience than suffering inspections every week or putting starch in your uniforms all the time.

You might think it was always hell just because you're in a war zone. That's not true. If you weren't out there in the paddies, if you weren't out there fighting for your life, you can have a good situation. I had one of the best. I was really lucky. I had one of the best situations you could have. I lived in a two-man room, we had flushed toilets, we had hot showers. I worked in an air-conditioned building. So for 12 hours a day I could get out of the 110-degree heat. Two or three time as week, at least, we would drive from Cu Chi to Long Binh to deliver dispatches, pick up things, dispatches and orders and new personnel.

And so I would take pictures on the trip, I would take pictures in Long Binh, I would take pictures of our compound. And the more I saw of the people, the more I realized this is a great country. And I think we are here under mistaken assumptions. This is a civil war. It's not something that the U.S. is supposed to be involved in. And pretty much everyone that I talked to believed we should not be there. And that was even the people we called lifers who were basically Hawks. They're the ones who wanted bomb Ha Noi into the Stone Age.

But even they would let slip, we shouldn't be here. Even though the people welcomed us with open arms because

they just loved Americans – even though we were welcomed like that, it was not where we were supposed to be. We changed their society just in ways we just don't have any comprehension of.
We didn't know what we were doing there; we didn't know how we were changing that. We didn't know how we were changing the society. Look at us. We were bigger. We were arrogant. We just assumed that our way was the right way and we acted like it. We assumed that was the right way. And yet the Vietnamese said, "Well, gee, we love you." And part of that was I'm sure economic because we came over there and we spent money like mad.

Interviewer
What did you think of the average GI?

Ivan Van Laningham
I think the average GI was a lot like me: Didn't want to be drafted, didn't want to be there, saw no reason for us to be there, no reason to be in the Army. And not one reason in the world to believe anything our superiors in the military said. We would stand and parade, we would listen to the speeches, we would listen to these pep talks by the top brass and so on, and none of us would believe a word of it. We just knew it was all lies. They were just there to serve their own interests and they didn't care one bit about the troops. We know that. We all could see that.

Interviewer
Was it difficult to perform and do a good job if you didn't care?

Ivan Van Laningham
Again, it's complicated. Unless they drank so much or smoked so much dope or did drugs or whatever, to be completely out of things, most guys were just trying to do their jobs. And many of us did see that it would be a lot easier for us to do our jobs if the people in charge didn't screw up so much.

Interviewer
Can you give us an example?

Ivan Van Laningham
Probably not anything concrete. Even in Vietnam where we thought it was really good duty, I mean if you weren't out in the field. We still had unnecessary inspections, we would have silly rules and regulations coming down. One of the things that we just really didn't understand was why were the little towns off limits? Why were we confined to our compounds and not allowed to go down there and mingle with the Vietnamese?
Only if you were lucky enough to be in big cities like Saigon. And there were plenty of times when we had to pull somebody off of our regular duty and send them down to the motor pool because the rules set up by the top brass was you had to do a certain required maintenance on your jeep or on the deuce-and-a-half. And even though you don't have anybody qualified to do that, you had to do it. And we just couldn't think why don't we just wait until something goes wrong when we don't have the personnel who are qualified to do this? Just lots of little bitty things.

Interviewer
Were you seeing television or newspapers from home about the war?

Ivan Van Laningham
I didn't see any papers coming from home, but we got "The Stars and Stripes" every day. Now, "The Stars and Stripes" was of course a military paper and some things never got in the newspaper. And we also saw AFVN – Armed Forced Vietnam television. But what they ran was things like Star Trek reruns, the original Star Trek. I really believe that one of the reasons that the original Star Trek was so popular was because at almost any hour of the day you could go into the break room, turn on the TV if it wasn't already on, and there would be Captain Kirk.
It gained most of its popularity after the Vietnam War. But there was lots of that. As far as the newspapers went, like I said, "Stars and Stripes" was a military newspaper. We did know about Kent State, when Kent happened. That was on the front page. But when I was stationed in Cu Chi in August, a Donut Dolly, a Red Cross volunteer, a woman named Virginia Schwartz was murdered. I didn't know about that until years after I had left. I didn't know about it because it wasn't in the newspaper.

Interviewer
You have this whole world you're missing back home and what are you hearing from back there?

Ivan Van Laningham
I was terribly homesick but at the same time, I would look out and think Vietnam is a gorgeous, gorgeous country. I would like to know more. What you heard from back in the world depended on who you were writing to. So I heard stuff from my parents and from my wife and that's mostly who I wrote to. Every once in a while I would write to my grandparents but that's mostly when I was getting from. Most of the letter writing was done between me and my parents and my wife.
I remember being in Cu Chi and one time Mom wrote to me and said, "The Viet Cong have tunnels underneath Cu Chi and one of these days those VC are going to come boiling up out of the tunnels and kill all of you in your beds." And I wrote back and I said, "Oh, Mom, you and your conspiracy theories." And of course years later I found out sometimes conspiracy theorists can be right because indeed, the Cu Chi base camp had miles of tunnels underneath it. But Mom knew that in 1970.

Interviewer
Did you participate in any USO shows or did you go on leave? How did you recreate?
Ivan Van Laningham
Well, mostly we recreated by sitting up on top of the bunker and getting totally blotto. There were, like I said, restaurants in both Cu Chi and Long Binh, we went to those whenever we went to Long Binh. We always stopped at the (Lon Phun?)(55:28) Restaurant because they had great food. And that is where I learned how to use chopsticks. In Cu Chi, our compound was located directly next to an EM club and they would have shows probably once a month and we would always go over for the shows which were great entertainment. We were always happy to see scantily-clad women, and the shows usually provided scantily-clad women. And we did that.
Some of us went to a rifle range, believe it or not, on Sundays when nobody else was using them, just to keep in practice. And all the bigger base camps had special services so there would be libraries. You could do correspondence courses, you could learn how to develop film, you could do other crafts. There were special services people stationed at, like I said, all of the base camps where you could do things like that.
Interviewer
You're on this compound and it's relatively safe. Were you aware of incoming wounded, what battles were going on? How did you feel about being a support person and talk about the GI.
Ivan Van Laningham
I was not in a position to see incoming wounded or anything like that. As you said, we were in a very safe location. Cu Chi was very safe. The whole year I was there I think we took one incoming round and it was a rocket that hit on the perimeter during the day. I even managed to get a picture of it. But that was it. The hospital was in a completely different section. We would see helicopters come in and we knew some of those were medevac choppers. But as far as seeing any wounded, no. We were never in that position.
How I felt? I was very glad not to be in combat and even though it cost me extra time in the Army which I just hated, I still was very grateful to not be out there – even on the fire bases where the artillery guys were – those were pretty safe even though they were small areas. But it was still riskier than where I was. I was incredibly grateful to be there and I was conscience of being lucky and being safe. As far as how I felt at the time, what I can say is we didn't really think about it very much. The only time it really came to my consciousness was when I went to a leadership school and everybody in that school, in my class, was infantry or rangers.
And so they were guys who were used to spending their nights out in the field, in the paddies, waiting for VC to come by and then setting off the ambush. These were guys who risked their lives every day. Going to this leadership school was a vacation for them. And what I remember is I just had the most intense respect for these guys because they were unlucky enough to be out there, but they weren't crazy. They were guys just like me, trying to do their job.
That's all they wanted to do was their job and they didn't want to have contradictory orders, they didn't want to hear any philosophy or anything. They just wanted to go out there, stay alive, do their job, and come home safe.
Interviewer
Are there any thoughts you'd like to express how you feel about the war?
Ivan Van Laningham
Vietnam was a gorgeous country. Saigon was… it was a beautiful city. And I wished that I could know more. At the time I remember thinking, I would like to know more about these people. I would like to know more about this country, the history. At the same time I was tremendously homesick. Now, after I got out of the Army, I did not pursue any of that, I just let it drop for years and years and years. And I wish now that I had pursued it then when the memories were still fresh, when the things that impressed me about Vietnam itself and the people I met there. I wish I'd pursued finding out more about that country.
Interviewer
Did you bond with certain friends?
Ivan Van Laningham
We had two ARVN personnel, military personnel who were stationed at our site; Sergeant Nai and Sergeant Vinh. And Sergeant Nai and I actually became fairly close 'cause Sergeant Vinh was a very cool dude; he wore mirrored sunglasses. I liked him, but I don't know, Sergeant Nai and I resonated. He was very mild guy, he was only in the military because that's the only thing that was allowed for him. And we would talk. I would take slides.
And so whenever I came back with a fresh crop of slides he and I would sit down and we would go over the slides and he would tell me, "Oh, yeah, that's this, that's this. This is an orphanage, those are scouts." Things like that. And when I wasn't drinking and I was talking to Sergeant Nai, probably some of the best times I had there.
Interviewer
Tell me about the time you failed to write to your mother.
Ivan Van Laningham
I had let too many days elapse before writing to my mom. And this had actually happened before, but just not in

Vietnam. My parents' Congressman at the time was Bob Michael and he was a Republican. I was not a Republican. I've pretty much always been a Democrat. Bob Michael did things for my parents, and one of the things he did was when Mom called him up and said, "My son is in Vietnam and is not writing to me," he got on the phone and I came back from a trip to Long Binh, got out of the jeep and my sergeant hollered across the parking lot, "Van Laningham! Write to your mother!" So I sat down and wrote to my mother.

Interviewer

Anything else you want to share?

Ivan Van Laningham

I could tell one more funny story if you got time. I had a friend there whose name was Max; I don't remember his last name, but I called him Max-No-Difference after a character in a science fiction novel. So one night, Max-No-Difference and I went out and we got drunk. We got really drunk. We got really, really, really drunk. And I'm driving around in our jeep on Cu Chi. And I had just, a couple of weeks before been at this leadership academy and so I'd gotten a promotion out of it, I was now a sergeant. And Max and I got really drunk. And we were driving around probably at one or two in the morning in the jeep and we got lost, as drunks often do.

So I pulled up in front of something and I started to back up 'cause it was blocking our way and Max said, "Wait a minute, that's a trailer." And he said, "It's a trailer with stuff in it." And I said, "It's a trailer. Well, let's hook it on the jeep, we got a trailer hitch." And so we did. We stole this trailer. Finally I made it back to our detachment, I parked the jeep and the next morning I go to work and I'm thinking, "Maybe I forgot something." So I'm standing there and all of the sudden the door to the building flies open and our sergeant says, "Where did that trailer come from?" And I said, "Oh, I knew I forgot something." And he yelled at me. And then he and somebody else went out there and started digging through this stuff. Because on top, it was just a bunch of mess trays but he wanted to see what was in it.

After a while he comes back inside and he says, "Van Laningham, you're forgiven." And I said, "Why is that, Serge?" And he said, "Because underneath those mess trays were 14 cans – 5-pound cans of coffee." And coffee was one of the hardest things to get. You could put in requisitions for more coffee for your coffee machines and they would give you coffee machines, but they would almost never give you coffee. So I was forgiven even though. What we ended up doing with the trailer, first, they said, "Paint some funny numbers on it, change the numbers. We don't want this trailer getting back to us. Maybe we can just sneak it into our inventory."

So I started to change the numbers on it and then our sergeant said, "No, take it out someplace and dump it." Well, I remember the bomb range on the leadership academy and so that night, Max-No-Difference and I hitched up the trailer to the jeep, went out to the leadership academy and parked that trailer in a ditch where if they did not notice it in the next few days, it probably would've gotten blown up by guys practicing their explosive skills. So that was one of the "boys will be boys" stories.

Interviewer

Thank you.