Larry Strait
Marines
Ogden, Utah
"Escalation"

Interviewer

Give us your full name.

Larry Strait

My name is Larry Joe Strait.

Interviewer

Where are you from?

Larry Strait

Well, originally, I was raised in Dallas, TX.

Interviewer

How did you get into the military?

Larry Strait

No, I enlisted.

Interviewer

How old were you when you enlisted?

Larry Strait

I was 16, and I went in on June 30, 1964 on my 17th birthday. I was sittin' in the MCRD San Diego.

Interviewer

What made you do that? What were your interests before then?

Larry Strait

Mostly sports and of course, girls. But I wasn't goin' anywhere. There was somethin' missin'. My father was a World War II Marine from the Pacific. I looked up to him. I always wanted to be a Marine, so he signed the papers, and I went in on my 17th birthday. That day I was in San Diego. So I celebrated my birthday that night on a bunch of yellow footprints in MCRD San Diego.

Interviewer

How did you end up in your profession?

Larry Strait

Well, they did a series of testing that you do to find out where your interests are and what you're capable of. I tested well enough to be a combat engineer. I was 1371. I did that, and I was thankful I wasn't gonna be a grunt, an 0311, 'cause all they did was hump hills. I thought, "Well, a combat engineer, that sounds good. That must be something better to do." So I went to Camp Talega and Camp Pendleton there, and then I realized that all we did was we learned demolitions. I was explosives. The next thing I knew, I was attached to a grunt unit, so it didn't really

change anything. I was still just a glorified grunt.

Interviewer

Did you see Marines in the movies at all? Did that impress you?

Larry Strait

Sure, like everybody else, I used to watch John Wayne, and the "Sands of Iwo Jima," and Sergeant Stryker, the whole thing. I knew that I wanted to be a Marine. I wanted to follow my father's footprints, and I was very proud of him though he never talked about the war. He did four years in the Pacific, so he never -- all I knew that he had quite a drinking problem and he was tryin' to forget it. But still, I idolized him, so I wanted to be a Marine, so I did.

Interviewer

You toured Vietnam when you went in?

Larry Strait

No, Vietnam wasn't even on the radar. When I went in '64, they issued us a M1 Garand Rifle. Two weeks later after we cleaned 'em, they gave us the M14, so we hadn't even heard of Vietnam. And then that September, I went home for 30-day leave and came back, and then the scuttlebutt was coming to bat. We had some Marines come back as advisors and then we started to hear about Vietnam. That was early 1965. And then we were deployed in June of 1965. And I had to wait 30 days to go in-country 'cause I was too young. You had to be 18 to go in-country. So I stayed on board. We were on the USS Valley Forge, and went from Valley Forge to Iwo Jima. We made raids up and down the coast of Vietnam.

Interviewer

These were amphibious raids?

Larry Strait

No, we only made one big amphibious raid in July of '65. We were the first troops to land. The girls met us on the beach with flowers. We thought we were gonna get shot. It was a nice welcome. But prior to that, we used UH-34 helicopters off the flight deck and we'd make raids up and down the coast.

Interviewer

How did you feel about the war at that time?

Larry Strait

Of course, everybody was scared because you come out of a LSD flat bottom ship on board antos and track vehicles. You knew when the gate dropped that it's gonna hit the fan, and that's what we anticipated. We were geared up. We took the fear and turned it around and used it. When we hit the beach, it was a big relief, but we were still scared because you didn't know what was goin' down.

Interviewer

This is so early in the war.

Larry Strait

Yeah, we were the first major troops to land there.

Interviewer

How did it progress and how did things change?

Larry Strait

I don't know. I just had a small part to do with it. I didn't think it was any change. We were all gung-ho about the situation. They trained us to do a job, and we were doing it. I didn't see any change in the early part of the war. We didn't start receiving draftees until '66, and then you could see the change because we were all volunteer. And then of course they were drafted. The only ones that had a gripe were the guys that were drafted. The rest of us were there because we wanted to be there. We went from learnin' how to beat the Viet Cong at their own tricks until the fact that they knew that we knew it. And then we took over the situation. But we beat 'em at their own game.

Interviewer

That early?

Larry Strait

That early. We never lost a battle, but there was always touch and go: ambushes, sporadic 30-second flashes of combat. So it wasn't a major thing until the '60s, later.

Interviewer

What was your first real combat?

Larry Strait

I had loaded a bunch of C4 onto a M274 Mule. I can't remember where I was drivin' it to, but anyhow, we got in there, and I had carried a M279 grenade launcher called a thumper. I was goofin' around, sittin' there, and I dropped the sights up. The next I knew, somebody shot the sight off the front of the thing. A 274 Mule, you're sittin' out in the open, just you and the steering wheel and a thousand pounds of explosives behind you. So it's kinda hairy, but I knew right then that things were real. And then once we unloaded the 274, we started pickin' up body bags and puttin' 'em on the Mules and haul 'em back to the collection point, fly 'em out.

Interviewer

Tell us about what your first impressions of the Viet Cong were.

Larry Strait

Well, I thought they were very disorganized. Of course, I had learned later on why. They were individually supported out there. They were doin' their own little thing in the small groups. There was never a big unified "Viet Cong." It was just small groups of two or three men. I didn't think a lot about 'em. I thought of 'em as just like dogs, so I didn't bother to kill 'em. It was like shooting a dog. When you lose a fellow Marine or something like that, it took a big impact, but when you shot that, you were happy. That's what you were trained to do, so you were doing your job. I

guess I would say I was insensitive to 'em. I didn't respect 'em. To me, I thought they were cowards. If you wanna fight, let's fight. Let's get it on. We had an underlining pact that there would be no prisoners and we would take no prisoners. There was no quota given. We knew that if we got captured, we were through and we're done. So you might as well just fight and get it over with.

Interviewer

Had there been other examples of somebody had been captured and you saw what happened to them?

Larry Strait

Yeah. Oh, yeah. We had Operation Harvest Moon. It was a big one in July. And we were in a place called Happy Valley. We went in there, company size. The Valley was like a horseshoe, and we were supposed to land on the top of the ridge, but because they had bamboo stakes and booby traps up on the ridge, they landed us in the Valley. The first wave came in, and I was on the second wave, the UH-34 helicopters. When you came in on the second wave, everything was nice and quiet and calm, but we didn't realize that they had mortars and machine guns set up around the ridge. And when the second wave hit and we got out of the helicopters, all hell broke loose. And they had us zeroed in; they had us to right. So the only out was the opening of the Valley, so we made a movement toward the Valley. There were people dying left and right and wounded, but you could only carry so many people. You can only help who you could help. So we carried 'em out, and then later that night, we were lying in the rice paddies. We used to take our KA-BAR and strap it to our hand and stab it in the rice paddy so you wouldn't go underneath the water and drown 'cause you had the whole night to spend there. And at night you could hear 'em.

Interviewer

So you were an engineer?

Larry Strait

Yeah. A combat engineer.

Interviewer

Booby traps?

Larry Strait

Right.

Interviewer

And you had to take care of those?

Larry Strait

Yeah, booby traps and bunkers. I carried regular equipment, and then I carried a 40 pound pack of C4 satchel charge. And then I carried the blasting caps over here on my left side and an amo pouch in case they shot me, it wouldn't hit that. The C4 wouldn't go off, but the blasting caps would. It was a little different. I enjoyed it. Blowing things up, I still do it today. My squirrels have a hell of a time at my place 'cause I'll do some black powder and set a little trap for 'em. I was good at my job.

Interviewer

How long were you in?

Larry Strait

I did three years.

Interviewer

What did you see change in those three years?

Larry Strait

From the gung-ho to the "What the hell are we doing here?" to "Let's get the heck out." It kinda progressed that way. Some of the other guys may have, but we didn't have the dope problem. We were too wired tight for that, so we didn't have that much down time. When you came back, you were glad to get a shower after a week or so in the field. You used to get two beers when you got back, and it was hot beer, usually. It was Schlitz. So we'd take a straw and put it in and drink the beer that way because you get the biggest, quickest buzz in the sun drinkin' that beer. There was some fun, too. Then one night, we stole the commander's jeep, and we were gonna head to Saigon and China Beach. We got about five miles down the road and the MPs stopped us and sent us back home. It was good. What are they gonna do? Bust me? I was only a Private at the time, so they weren't gonna do anything to me. Surely, they weren't gonna send me back to Vietnam 'cause I was already there. I didn't have anything to lose.

Interviewer

Did you disarm booby traps?

Larry Strait

Yes, I did. I took out Chicom grenades.

Interviewer

Tell us about some of those booby traps that you faced in the field.

Larry Strait

Well, you go across the trail that's got a taunt or loose wire, and you trace the wire out to the connection point, and then you go back to finding the grenade. Usually, they've stuck 'em in a bamboo shoot, and then when you come along, you'd trip and pull it out and pull the pin. It would set it off. So I disarmed it. Usually, I turned around after I disarmed it and gave it to the guy who wanted it, usually some Lieutenant. I'd see him shaking it. But you had to learn to check for secondaries.

Interviewer

What's a secondary?

Larry Strait

Secondary, usually they put a 155 shell underneath it and primed it with a block. So when you set off the booby trap, it set off a 155, so you had a secondary explosion that would wipe out a lot more than just you and your

teammate. We ran in four-man teams.

Interviewer

Did you run ahead of the regular troops to find these things?

Larry Strait

Sometimes, we do. We'd do trail searches. We'd do mine detectors on roads, looking for IEDs, but we just called it booby trap. You learned to look for wires and misplaced vegetation. If you got a bush on the side of the road and there's no other bushes around, obviously there's something wrong, so you pick up on those things. Or the grunt unit would call us out and say, "Hey, we've got this booby trap. We want you to take it out." A lot of times, we just blew things in place. We just primed a quarter block of C4 and put a 30 second to a minute fuse on it and took off and blow it in place. But there came a lot of places you couldn't because it was right there in their CP. The gooks would slip in there and put a booby trap right by the command post, so you'd have to take it out. They were good about breeching our wire.

Interviewer

But you didn't have any night vision things back then.

Larry Strait

I never saw any. The only night vision I had was just my two eyes. But you become very acute.

Interviewer

You must start really having a different kind of focus if you're looking for booby traps.

Larry Strait

You do. You look for the unordinary things, things out of place. You always try to emphasize on the troops, "Don't walk on the beaten path." There's a reason there's a path there, and it's to attract you. Because it's the fastest route to your point, but it doesn't mean necessarily it's the safest route. That's where most of the guys got it. They were in too big a hurry to go, and then that's what happens. You look for those. You become very sensitive to it. It's just like everything: your sight, your hearing, your senses. You could smell a gook -- I shouldn't say gook probably, but you could smell 'em 'cause of what they ate. And before we went on patrol, we kinda ate the same stuff so when you were out there, you all kinda smelled the same.

Interviewer

How long would be out for a patrol?

Larry Strait

Well, it would go from three days to a week, a week and a half, depending upon what the operation was. But they'd attach us to different units. One day, we were supposed to be out there for half a day, and it was raining so hard, a monsoon, that we couldn't get back out. So we had to walk 18 clicks to the coast to get out.

Interviewer

Tell people about a monsoon and what it's like in Vietnam.

Larry Strait

A monsoon's like gettin' under a real nice shower. Constantly rainin' hard. And at nighttime, it's freezing. But during the daytime, it's 115, 120 degrees. Then you're sittin' there with a rubber poncho, and you're sweating to death underneath it. You're tryin' to think about the mosquitoes and what not. Probably the most miserable time you could think of. I would say it's pretty intense. It just kept raining like, sheets of rain.

Interviewer

How long would it last?

Larry Strait

Days.

Interviewer

What would happen to your equipment?

Larry Strait

Oh, you'd have to just try to keep it oiled down as much as you can. But we didn't carry supplies. We carried what we had on us. We had our cleaning kit, three C-rations, and they were supposed to last us for the day. And we were there for a week, so we were eating wild onions and bananas. I won't eat a banana today. I've eaten so many wild and raw bananas and coconuts. We captured a Viet Cong hospital, and they had just finished dog rice, and they had dog and rice. And we ate that rice and dog.

Interviewer

Tell us about capturing that hospital.

Larry Strait

It was an accident. I was with a recon unit this time, and we were supposed to recon order this one area, and it was supposed to be a base camp. They had a VC hospital sat there. They came upon it and called us up, so we did a search to make sure 'cause a lot of times, they booby trapped everything -- an ammo can or whatever -- 'cause they know that we're inquisitive; we wanna find out stuff. The hooch, they'd booby trap the steps that you'd walk on. So we'd check it out, but they had just set up this, and they D Dee'd 'em out because there was still dressings lying around. The steam on the rice was still hot, so they had just left. It may have been a small detachment, but there was enough in there. There was 18 of us. We checked it out, and it was good, and we scarfed it down. We left 'em an Ace of Spades card and left.

Interviewer

Tell them why the Ace of Spades.

Larry Strait

I don't know where that came from. We used to get these decks of Ace of Spades. They'd send 'em over to us in a deck. We'd been known to put an Ace of Spade on the dead gook as a calling card. I don't know what the significance of it was. It was our call sign. Here we are. We've been here. They used to call us hell dogs. We had a

million piastre reward on a Marine. If you shot and killed a Marine and bring him in, you'd win a million piastres. Not win, but you'd gain it. Or maybe two buffaloes, or whatever their currency was. So we had a bounty on us, that if you catch one -- they called us green-faced giants. They thought that we had to kill our mother become part of the Marine Corps. That was the word, which we obviously know that's not true. We all love our mothers.

Interviewer

Did you encounter North Vietnamese?

Larry Strait

Not until later. Every once in a while, we'd get one. One night, we shot a Russian advisor.

Interviewer

Tell us about that.

Larry Strait

A big 6-foot blonde-headed guy. I don't know what he was doin'. Obviously, advising the -- but there were more NVA at this time. '66, we started seeing more NVA more regular. They were a better-trained unit; you respected them more because they would stand and fight. They wouldn't shoot you and run or jump back in a spider hole. There were there to meet you.

Interviewer

Other things started changing. You were from '65 through '67?

Larry Strait

I was there in '66. October of '66. Then I left and went back to Force Troops in Camp Lejeune, and my kid brother went over there 'cause you could only have one family member at a time. He came over. I'm sayin' he came in at about September, and he was killed in Kason in '67 in the Marines. Yeah, there were more NVAs starting because the Viet Cong, I figured that we broke their back because you rarely ran across the Viet Cong anymore.

Interviewer

Tell us about your spider holes.

Larry Strait

I didn't have enough courage to go into a tunnel. I didn't I'm sorry. I wasn't gonna do that, but we had people that did. A spider hole is just a fighting position that's covered with a bamboo lid, and they'd pop up and shoot you in the back, then drop down and you can't find 'em. We got smart to that, too, because we imported dogs. And usually, the Doberman Pinschers would find 'em, and then we'd just log a grenade in there and make his day.

Interviewer

Things are so early, you're actually developing methods while you're there.

Larry Strait

Sure. The thing you have to realize that we're 18 years old. We had a train up, but we've never had any rehearsal on it, so we had to take it and learn what we had to do. We didn't come in and there was a unit there to say, "Hey,

this is how you do it." We had to go in there and find out how to do it. What we did, we passed that onto the new troops 'cause we came in as a unit, where they came in as individuals, replacements. You learned their methods and how they were thinkin'. You could just look at a hillside and say, "Okay, wait a minute. How many bunkers are there? 'Cause a lot of times, you can't see 'em. They're that well camouflaged that you can't see 'em. Then of course, you know your point guy, this guy's find 'em for you, or they're gonna find him first, and that's how you do it.

Interviewer

Tell us about what it means the point.

Larry Strait

When you're walking point, you know that everyone behind you is relying on you to find the contact. That if you do find the contact, you know that you've got a good chance of getting wiped right out because you're the first guy they see. Your senses even increase higher because you're watching every leaf, every tree. You see movement or somethin'; then you're aware of it. You can hear better. I think that's why a lot of Veterans have a hard time when they came back because you take that intensity of looking for things and trying to observe things. Then you come back to the world, and you don't have that. You're not on that high that you had because of the fear. And as I said earlier, you take that fear, and you turn that fear around, and then use it to your advantage. Sure, you're scared. You'd have to be out of your mind not to be scared. But you use that fear. But point, if you go down a path or a trail, you have to be wired tight. That's why I could never see what they had the problem about drugs and alcohol, 'cause we didn't have that problem. You couldn't dare. You wouldn't want your buddy on your left or right to be in that situation. So it wasn't that prevalent all the time.

Interviewer

Did you have any leave?

Larry Strait

Well, six months into country, you're eligible for R&R. I wanted to go to Bangkok, 'cause I had all these fabulous stories about all these chicks. But when it came up -- I took one to six day, I think it was, to Okinawa, back to the Rock. Camp Hansen and Kim Village, and I guess I put 24/7 for six days. What's the word I'm lookin' for? Fun.

Interviewer

Exuberance.

Larry Strait

I was over exuberant. I went over there with $600 and came with fifty cents back. I didn't drink; I was just havin' a good time. They used to call me Cherry-san. And Cherry-san is the guy that you knew a lot about women, but you didn't have experience. So the Mama-san knew that if you were a Cherry-san, then she'd take you under her wing. So I used to play that card all the time, Cherry-san. I used to tell 'em, "Oh, I'm Cherry-san." You got over all the time.

Interviewer

First troops that actually used helicopters.

Larry Strait

Yeah, other than Medevac or something like that, we actually set the stage for the deployment of helicopters. And these are old grasshopper lookin' helicopters, UH-34. And we went off the Iwo Jima and the Valley Forge. We made raids. We were a raider battalion, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines. And we made raids up and down the coast. We'd go in, like I said, for two or three days. It depends whether it was a squad movement. It would just depend. Or it was a company, whatever the movement was. But usually, we'd go in and we'd breach the beach and check for booby traps and find the right gradient so they could land their Amtrak's and LSDs.

Interviewer

They weren't armed then, were they?

Larry Strait

Say again?

Interviewer

Helicopters weren't even armed at that time.

Larry Strait

I think they had 60 gunners on both sides. It seems to me I remember seeing 60 gunners and I thought, "What a nice job." You gotta a clean ship to lie onto, and they're always in and out. The greatest thing that a person could hear in Vietnam was a whoop whoop of rotor comin' in.

Interviewer

Tell us about that.

Larry Strait

Well, you've been out in the bush for a week or whatever, and you knew you were getting out. So they'd do a faint left on another LZ and they'd come and get you on the other one. You just loved to hear that sound comin' in 'cause you know you were getting out of there. So every Veteran remembers that. Even today, if I hear a Medevac up there where I live in Ogden, you hear that chopper comin' in, and it throws you right back 40 years ago, when you were hearing that Medevac comin' in 'cause you knew you were gonna get out of there. That you made it through that day; that you survived. There was a lot of times in the bush and in the jungle grass where you couldn't see 20 feet in front of ya. And I told myself I made a promise that I wasn't gonna die over here. I'm not gonna die here. So that just reinforced it when I heard that. That's the rescue. That's getting you out of there so that you could live another day. I loved to hear a helicopter comin' in. So I see the news channels and the Medevac up there at McDee Hospital, I love to hear that. And actually today, it's the same thing 'cause they've rescued somebody else. So the dust-off is still there.

Interviewer

Tell us about your buddies that were in that unit with you.

Larry Strait

I've got a friend of mine, (Ala Madixson?)(31:48). I haven't heard from in 40 years, and I found him on Facebook one day. He was a big 'ole blonde kid from Toledo, Ohio. He used to get upset on me all the time 'cause I used to call him Rabbit 'cause he had these two front buck teeth. Big 'ole blonde, blue-eyed kid. Rabbit was good people. Corporal Beetle, he was from Boston, Massachusetts. He did the same thing one time. He was working on a booby trap, and it went off -- a bouncin' Betty, and it took his legs out. I have a picture at home of the people that I went through in our platoon. I'd say out of the 40 or some-odd people that probably half are dead. People died from different reasons. Probably one in four engineers was wounded or killed.

Interviewer

That's a hard thing for an 18-year-old kid to see.

Larry Strait

Yeah, it's kinda hard when you look into the eyes of a dead -- you look at 'em, and they're like they're sleeping. And you look in their eyes, and there's no soul. It's empty. And you put 'em in that damn body bag and --

Interviewer

What was some of the jargon you had in Vietnam?

Larry Strait

Well, outside of the Marines, you're either a Hollywood Marine or you're the other one.

Interviewer

What's the difference?

Larry Strait

Well, we're the best. Hollywood versus Camp Lejeune, Paris Island. We led the way; they just came later. Of course, they're still Marines, but you pick up certain things. When were first over there, kids used to chase alongside the trucks. "You buy this," or "you number one," all the time. You'll see it was on newscast one time, too, the early days of Cronkite. The kids would follow the Marines. They'd show pictures of it. You know how most kids will say, "You're number one."? Well, we taught all the kids to say, "You're number one!" And you'd see a newscast. All your kids are flipping you off goin' down this street. They'd be tryin' to sell you Cokes, cigarettes, and whatever the case may be. You had certain names: Victor Charlie, VC; Gooks; Slopes; the regular Marine stuff jargon. Remps; Reatulon; Mothers. Mostly, it was a tight unit. You learned things.

Interviewer

Tell us about the civilians.

Larry Strait

Yeah, we started, actually -- not me, but of course, our – we started which is called search and destroy operations,

where you went through a village, and you searched the village. Search and destroy operations, where you went in and searched it and try to see if there's any catches of arms and ammunition and food supply. If it turned out to be a hostile village, then we'd burn it to the ground, shoot all their livestock. In fact, I got fined one time for shootin' two buffalo with an M60 machine gun. The buffalo would charge me. I was on a rice paddy, and they turned around and charged me, and I shot both of 'em with a 60. They charged me $100, $50 apiece for the water buffalo, which I thought I was only making $126.50 a month or whatever the heck it was. And I thought that was kinda unfair. The buffalo had to be VC, 'cause they were charging me. My commander thought that was funny, but he still fined me. And the farmer was happy to get the money.

Interviewer

You don't know if these people are your enemy or if they're just people?

Larry Strait

Well, there was only one way to find out. They all wore black. They all looked alike. The good VC is the one that didn't shoot you in the back when you went by. But he was the same guy that probably came out at night and you had to fight later. So you just really couldn't tell. But in general, we liked the people. We went in the village, and we loved the kids, and that's why I never could understand they said we were baby killers. We never did any of that kind of atrocities. We were there to win their hearts and minds, you know? Our whole mission there was to befriend the villagers because we needed the intel. We knew that Charlie was comin' in there using 'em and taking their kids away and putting them in danger quite a bit.

Interviewer

I've heard that story before that they would blackmail villagers.

Larry Strait

I didn't have a lot to do with that, but I've heard the stories you have. They'd take the kids hostage or somethin' like that and tell the people, "Hey, you have to get as much intel about the Americans as you could." But most of 'em were actually pretty receptive to us. They knew that the big guns were comin' in. But our fallacy right there is that we didn't stay and protect 'em. We talked a good game, but we didn't follow up on it. So how can you go in a village and befriend this village, and then you move out that night and VC come in and kill 'em? That was very discouraging. You go back to the next village, and they've been wiped out. But we weren't in politics. We're just a grunt like everybody else. I did what I was told to do, and my conscious didn't let me do anything that I didn't think I wanted to do. I never killed anybody that didn't deserve killing. I never shot an innocent person in my life.

Interviewer

When I was in, we had this term "being short." Had you developed that term?

Larry Strait

Yeah, well, everybody had it. From the day you got there, you had a calendar.

Interviewer

Tell us about that.

Larry Strait

When you get there, you have 365 days. So a lot of guys would tell the guys, "You ought to start counting backwards, that you've been there 22 days, 'cause you got a long way to go." You knew that eventually, your number's gonna get down, and then hopefully in the last week or two that you'd rotate back and you'd get out of there after the year. The short guys that were low on their calendars, in the teens, we'd try to not take to the field because they'd been there long enough. So everybody had a little calendar they walked around with, and they were crossing that day off. They knew exactly when they were supposed to get out of there. Become a short-timer was; you were a salt. We called salt was you were experienced; you'd been there a long time, and you knew what was goin' down. The funny about it is when the new guys came in, they wanted to fit in, so they'd trade their brand new jungles for old jungles, so they looked like they'd been there a while. But we were happy to take the new ones 'cause our stuff was trash anyhow. So you could always tell the NFG 'cause you'd run around in these salty-lookin' uniforms, and you were strutting it 'cause you had a nice, clean uniform for a change.

Interviewer

The new fabulous guy.

Larry Strait

Yeah, the new guys. You could tell 'em. They were so bleach white that you could tell that they hadn't seen a day of sunlight.

Interviewer

Did you uniforms change from the time you got there?

Larry Strait

Not really. We still had the OD green. When we first went over there, we had a utility uniform. It was green. You wore it inside your pants. When we got there, we got the jungles, the jungle uniform. Later on, as we got a little more specialized, we got a tiger uniform, tiger-striped. I guess I carried that uniform for 30, 40 years. It finally just fell apart. We're talkin' about this Veteran's Day comin' up this year in Ogden is the Vietnam Veteran's Parade, so we're thinking about everybody getting a set of OD greens and all march together as a unit again. That was about it. The weapons were the same: M14, M60, .45 caliber.

Interviewer

Have you ever gone to a USO show?

Larry Strait

I saw two people. Bob Hope wouldn't come to our area because it was too dangerous, which is unusual. But we had Hugh O'Brien -- oh, I can't think of that girl's name. It was Nancy Sinatra and it was a blonde-headed girl. I can't think of her name, but she was hot in the day. It'll come to me in a minute. I got to see those from a distance. It was

kinda funny. They kept the Marines in the back and they had concertina wire set up. They had the Marines here, and they had the Army, and they had the Air Force. I guess they kept the calmest guys up front because we'd have probably tore that stage up.

Interviewer

Tell us about Nancy Sinatra.

Larry Strait

There was a big deal between the Army and the Marines. The Army had a radio relay station. We were set up perimeter around them in Phu Bai. We had these speakers. Well, they'd always play the Barry Sadler Green Beret song. But we'd come back with Nancy Sinatra, "These Boots are Made for Walkin'," and we'd back and forth. We'd be playin' that song. That was our big deal there. It was good to see 'em, yeah. Of course, I saw General Westmoreland.

Interviewer

Tell me about that.

Larry Strait

That was interesting because he came into our firebase, and I've never seen a more squared away, starched, pressed uniform in my life. Our stuff was just rotten, and this guy comes off the plane, and his uniform was just starched perfectly. Big eyebrows, I remember that, and his hat with all the stars on it. And he told us how good of a job were doing there. We kept saying, "Man, who is this dirt bag?" We just couldn't believe that somebody comin' out had the gall to come out in our AO, especially an Army guy, and had that crisp uniform on. I mean I just couldn't believe it. I wondered where he got that pressed at. It was so starched. I'll bet you that helicopter had an air conditioner in it 'cause I'd just never seen anything that fresh in my life. He was interesting. You could tell he was a man in charge. He was in charge of the theater over there. He said we did a good job and he was very proud of us.

Interviewer

Did you see any news people, any photographers, any reporters?

Larry Strait

No, I never did. Ever. Not even combat photographers. Not that I was aware of. I don't know if they just didn't want to come out that far or what. We were kinda way out there in the boonies. We had a little placed called Hill 881. We were surprised that the monkeys even came out there. It was so far out in the middle of nowhere. It was right next to the border.

Interviewer

Did you and your dad exchange letters while you were serving?

Larry Strait

No, my family -- I don't know why -- I never heard from my family, ever. I called him one time. We had that radio

relay thing that the Army had. You could go in there. I called and talked to my dad one time, but then I did find out he watched every TV, every news story, hoping that he never saw me, but he was lookin' for me. I'm just one of 200,000 people. I don't know why my family never wrote. I have letters from my brother who was killed in Kason. I've got his letters at home where he wrote me just before he died. It was the same thing, wondering why people weren't writin' him. I that you sense when you're -- maybe not when you die, but you know that you're approaching. I could read it in his letters. The only people that I got letters from were women. I got a lot of women. KLIF in Dallas, Texas, released the names of all the troops, the Marines in Vietnam or whatever. The women used to write us letters all the time. Girlfriends didn't last long because they thought it was unjust and it was politically incorrect, so you'd get a lot of "Dear John's." You'd see guys getting 'em all the time. But these chicks used to write all the time, and I had about 15 of 'em that I kept writin' all the time, everything. When I got back, I visited all 15 of 'em, so it was a good reunion in that regard.

Interviewer

I heard some stories about Dear John. Tell us about that.

Larry Strait

I didn't have anything in particular. I just know that some guys got 'em, and their girlfriends, even their wives were caught up in the turmoil back in the States. You could tell, and you really did have to watch 'em. I had a medic that got one, and to get out of there, he shot himself in the foot with a .45 so he could get out of there. I forgot about him. That's what you looked forward to, goin' back. I didn't have anyone back in the States, so it didn't really bother me that much. But I could imagine what the impact would be when your girlfriend writes you and said because they can't support you any longer, and that's what you're there for. Everybody has to have a dream or reason to make it. You take that reason away, it was like him being wounded because now he's incapacitated, basically 'cause he's got a mind job going on in his head.

Interviewer

You guys were aware of the social turmoil at home?

Larry Strait

Not until the late '60s, like '66. We were more scared about goin' home because we heard guys getting shot wearing their uniform. So when we came back out in '66, we landed in San Francisco. They told us to make sure that wherever you're goin', get that uniform off. But that's what you lived for, to go back. You were happy to go home and proud that you made it. You had your little two or three ribbons.

Interviewer

How'd that make you feel when they told you to take off your uniform?

Larry Strait

I was pissed. You're walking through the airport there in San Francisco, and there's girls walking by, and they're lookin' at your uniform, and they're cussing at ya. They had little bags of dog shit, and they were hitting you with dog

shit. Yeah, it kinda messed with your mind a little bit 'cause all you wanted to do was go home to your family or whatever the case may be. There was a restaurant that I saw. They had a sign on it. It said, "No Marines or dogs allowed." We looked at it for a while. We didn't go in. We just went on about our business, but I'll never forget it. "No dogs or Marines allowed." So yeah, I guess that's what started it. Here you go. I couldn't even buy a beer. I was only 19. You had to be 21 in California to buy a beer. I couldn't even buy a beer for Christ's sakes. I've been through a year of combat, and I couldn't even have a beer. Not that I really wanted it, but it was the idea. But that's the way it was. There's no exceptions.

I flew home to Dallas, Texas, and my dad took me out to the ranch. We got a case of Old Milwaukee beer, and we sat out in the pasture on the back of the pickup truck. This is the first time my father ever told me. He says, "I know what you've been through, but remember this country doesn't owe you a damn thing." That's about it. That was the homecoming. You visit your kids that you knew back in school, but you had nothin' in common with them. It was just like you were still a young kid, but you couldn't relate to him because you'd been through too much already. You couldn't talk to 'em about what they wanted to talk about. If you're lucky, you found another Veteran you could talk to a little bit about it. But your whole thing is to get it behind you and go on. I guess that was it. That was the homecoming.

Interviewer

Can we talk about PTSD and all the guys?

Larry Strait

I think the whole thing is, like I said, I'm doin' this interview not because of me. I'm just one of many. I'm doin' this because the country just dumped us. They put you out there, and they said, "Hey. You know, forget the war. We don't owe you a thing," just like my father told me. You had to go out and start civilian. We didn't understand why 45 years, we went through divorces and 23 jobs at one time. There was something missing. The government says, "Well, there's nothing wrong with you." I remember the days they sprayed the Agent Orange out in our fire zone. They sprayed it, and we got soaking wet. Three days later, everything was dead in front of us. But everyone said, "No, don't worry. It's not gonna bother you." Well, if you're killing all the foliage, what are you doing to us? But then we didn't know. We're young kids. We didn't know anything different. And the VA, of course, they turned you down. They said, "There's nothing wrong with ya. There's no reason why you have skin cancer on your face and your kids have got small disorders. You have diabetes and you have ischemic heart disease." What I'm trying to say is the other Veterans, sure. There's a problem going on here. There's too much suicide, especially the new guys comin' back from Afghanistan and Iraq. There's help out there. We all suffer, my friends, all from PTSD. We have our support group that we're trying to deal with it that there is help out there, and we know that you need it. So if I can help somebody else realize that yeah, we do care, that there is help available. You just gotta come in. Quit keeping it to yourself. That's what we have our group here. Through the VA, we have a PTSD group that we meet twice a month, and then we have breakfast's on our own the other one weekend, so it just makes us feel better that we

have our fellowship. That's about really all I have to say.

Interviewer

Do you think about the war every day?

Larry Strait

Yeah, I do. Certain things that pop up. I think mostly the nightmares and the friends that you've lost. It's a little easier now because I understand why I always felt I'm a loner. I don't really have friends. I'm a friendly guy. I'd talk to you because you were a Veteran, but I may not talk to that guy sittin' back there with a camera. I'm sure he's a nice guy, but I don't have anything in common with him. I'd go up the bat for any of these guys behind you because I understand 'em. They're brothers. That's all there is to it. We're gonna keep this together; we'll have it together until -- like the War II Vets. It'll never go away. It's something you're gonna carry with you until you die. But just how you gonna live? What quality of life are you gonna have? You wanna just be like a little vegetable and sit in the corner and wait 'til you die, or you gonna get up and do something and be an active part of society? That's all we want. We just wanna be like you. We didn't do anything wrong, and that's the big stigmatism, that we were wrong. We did something wrong. And we've carried this for 45 years. We didn't do anything wrong. We did what our country asked us to do. Nothin' more, nothin' less.

Interviewer

When you were at home and you saw on TV the helicopters evacuating in '75, what did you think?

Larry Strait

I was ashamed. I was in disbelief that we would actually abandon these people. We sold 'em a bill of goods, and we went over there to protect that, 58,000 people died for it, and now all of a sudden, we're gonna pull up because it's an unpopular opinion? It was a ten year war. I felt ashamed that we did that to those people. They didn't deserve that. We abandoned those people that we swore to help, and yeah, we've gotta carry that. This is a big embarrassment for the country. If we'd done the same thing to those people in Iraq, if we left those troops and just pulled 'em out, then what have we done? It's all for naught. There's 58,000 people on that wall that died, and then, here, you're gonna pull out? I think there's not a one of us here that wouldn't have gone back in again if it would've made a difference. Sure, I'm ashamed of it. That's a black day in American history.

Interviewer

Thank you, Larry.