Sterling Poulson
Air Force
Centerville, Utah
"Escalation"

Interviewer

Give us your full name, please.

Sterling Poulson

Sterling Sessions Poulson.

Interviewer

And you were born where?

Sterling Poulson

I was born in Salt Lake City on September 21, 1951.

Interviewer

And you went to school where?

Sterling Poulson

Well, I was a foster kid so I was adopted when I was two in Hawaii by a military family, and so because my dad was in the Army, I went to, let's see, three different high schools. And then I graduated from North Thurston High School in Lacy, Washington and then immediately went in the service, so I didn't go to college out of high school. I went in the Air Force.

Interviewer

What made you come into the service?

Sterling Poulson

Well, it was either get drafted or volunteer, so I decided I wanted to be a meteorologist, and the Air Force would be the way to go. I knew I couldn't be a pilot because my eyesight wouldn't allow it. So I joined in high school, actually in a program they had called the Delayed Enlistment Program. Then I joined a month before I graduated from high school. And then after I got out of high school, it was off to basic training after 30 days, so in July of '69 I was in San Antonio at Lackland Air Force Base.

Interviewer

I went there, too.

Sterling Poulson

Yeah.

Interviewer

It's an awful place.

Sterling Poulson

Yeah, yeah, I've been back since. In fact, I went back--since I'm in the Air National Guard still, and we went down there to see some of our guys that were graduating from basic training, and it's completely different now.

Interviewer

Really?

Sterling Poulson

Completely different place.

Interviewer

I was in Barracks 10, Area G10.

Sterling Poulson

Those buildings aren't even there now.

Interviewer

Really?

Sterling Poulson

Yeah, it's all brand-new buildings.

Interviewer

Near that water tower...

Sterling Poulson

Yeah, the old buildings.

Interviewer

Before we get into that, tell us about the draft. People don't know what the draft is and why it would force you to enlist.

Sterling Poulson

You know, in looking back, I've wondered this myself, actually, because I really didn't understand the draft. A high school student, you don't really understand the draft. You just know that you're going to get a number and you're going to go in the military; that's kind of what I had in my mind. And of course the recruiter who came to the school painted a picture of you don't want to just get a number and get drafted into the Army. But I kind of agreed with him because I'd lived in the Army with my parents. It wasn't a bad life, but it wasn't what I wanted to do; I was interested in the weather. And so I didn't really understand the draft. I didn't really have a feeling about the draft, but I knew I didn't want to just take a chance, so I enlisted.

Interviewer

Tell everybody about what we would watch on television with this draft. The drawings, the numbers, do you remember?

Sterling Poulson

I don't, and once again it's probably because I was a little disconnected from it. I remember it vaguely, but I don't remember it making an impression on me.

Interviewer

So, you go off to basic training and you go through various training. What did you become in the Air Force?

Sterling Poulson

Well, when I enlisted, and my dad swore me in because he was in the Army. He's an Army officer, as I mentioned, but they told me I'd be a meteorologist. Cool. So when I got to basic training, I got my orders out of basic training to go to tech school. I was going to be going to school to become an Aerospace Ground Equipment Repairman. Acronym for that is an, "AGE Repairman," Aerospace Ground Equipment Repairman. And I'm, like,

"What is that?"

What is aerospace ground equipment--I had no idea, and it certainly wasn't meteorology. I could spell that, and it wasn't the same. But, you know, at that point, I really didn't have any choice, so I went off to school at Chanute Air Force Base, Illinois and learned that basically what I was was learning how to repair the support equipment for aircraft on the ground: air conditioning, electricity, lighting, stands that they worked on the airplane with, the B4 stands, B5 stands, all these stands; little generators, motor generators that provided electricity to the aircraft, so that's what I was. I was a mechanic, basically, and I actually enjoyed it. I thought,

"Well, this is kind of neat,"

because I enjoyed working on cars anyway, so now I enjoyed it even more, and I learned a lot more about being a mechanic than I had otherwise known, so I kind of enjoyed it. I did well, and then when I graduated from school four months later or so--oh, and by the way, one of the reasons I really thought joining the Air Force was a good idea was because I probably wasn't going to go to Vietnam since I wasn't a pilot. Well, I got my orders out of tech school, and it was to go to Cam Rahn Bay, Vietnam, and I thought, wow, this just isn't turning out the way I thought it was going to turn out, and so 30 days leave at home in Olympia, Washington, and off I was on my way to Vietnam.

Interviewer

Tell us about arriving. Did you go by airline, or did you go by military...

Sterling Poulson

They had a commercial contractor that was flying us over there called, "Flying Tiger Airlines," and they were all DC stretch eights, and that's what they took us over in. I went to Yakota, Japan first to refuel, and then we flew from Yakota to Cam Rahn Bay. I remember getting off the plane on the tarmac at Cam Rahn Air Base and it was so hot. I had never experienced that really--I mean San Antonio, Lackland Air Force Base in July was pretty hot, but it wasn't anything like the Vietnam humidity and the tropical heat, and I just thought a year of this, this is going to be unbearable. And we got in these barracks. They had no windows. They had screens, you didn't have closed up barracks because it was just too hot, and but when I left there 13 months later, I was actually sleeping with a

blanket. So your body adjusts and you acclimate and you get used to where you are and suddenly you realize that you're not so uncomfortable after all. But that was the big thing I remember was the heat getting off that airplane and just couldn't imagine being there for that long.

Interviewer

This is 1970?

Sterling Poulson

1970, mm-hmm, would've been March of 1970.

Interviewer

So you began working in Cam Rahn Bay, but from what you told me you started going around many, many places.

Sterling Poulson

As a mechanic or Airspace Ground Equipment Repairman, I was assigned to the 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron, and their mission was the 0-2s and the 0-1s, which were little, like, little Cessna's, if you can picture something in your mind, like a single-engine small plane that flew about 100-, 120 knots at top speed, and the 0-2s were a little bit bigger. They had a propeller in the front and propeller in the back and the twin tails. And then they, later in my stay there, the OV-10s came along, and they were turbo propped, a little bit faster planes. And so my job was to support the forward air controllers, which was what they were. And what is a forward air controller? Forward air controller flies out in these little planes, and they were communicating with someone on the ground, and the person on the ground would say,

"Okay, the enemy is at this location."

And so they'd give them coordinates, and then they'd shoot this smoke rocket into the jungle, sometimes canopy-two, canopy-three jungle, and that defines the thickness of the jungle. They'd fire these rockets, these smoke bombs in there. And so then the F4s would come in behind them, see the target markings, and that's where they would drop their armament was in those areas. And of course the little forward air controller guys were making a path out of there as fast as they could so that they wouldn't be in not only the line of fire, but that they wouldn't receive enemy return fire for their deed. But on the ground our forces would require communication. Well, in order to have communication, you've got to have electricity. So they had these little skid mounted generators, motor generators and just gasoline driven; it was like a little Volkswagen engine, four-cylinder, air cooled, horizontally-opposed engine mounted on these skids, and that's how they would power up their radios. So my job was to go out and make sure these things worked, and a lot of times it was just an inspection to make sure that everything was working, but most of the time it was to fix something like a leaky cylinder, or a magneto would go out, or some part would need new points or something to make it work better.

So I had this little parts bag, and I had a tool bag. And I would sometimes travel by jeep, sometimes I would travel by helicopter to get out. Sometimes I would fly in a C-7 Caribou to get out to the location and then make the repair and then figure out how to get back. And a lot of times it wasn't like you were on orders, and you were going to

report to here, and then you were going to report to here; a lot of times it was just, well, I've got to get back to Cam Rahn Bay, so next available transport that I could get on, I would fly back, and sometimes I was not too far away. Sometimes I was quite a ways away.

Interviewer

You must've been around some air strikes and things like that, and you must've seen a lot of interesting things.

Sterling Poulson

You know, I did, and I don't think there's anything that I saw in Vietnam that I didn't take as educational and interesting. Number one was the people, and this was something completely foreign to me. I mean you talk about a foreign country, this was, you know, going from Lacey, Washington and growing up, yes, in the military, but always in the United States, and then going to someplace like Vietnam was just a culture shock and completely foreign to see how people could live, and yet they were happy, seemingly. They had their daily life and routine and whatever they were doing, but it wasn't anything like I had ever seen in my life. And I think that being able to travel around the country, having a jeep accessible.

I remember one time we took at trip by road down to a place called Bien Hoa. I remember another time we drove up to Nha Trang. I flew all over the country in C-7 Caribou's and C-130s. I remember a place called Da Lat, which was actually a place where there were pine trees. It was up in the mountains, a lot higher elevation, and very pleasant weather conditions, not so pleasant living conditions. I stayed in an Army barracks while I was up there, I was sleeping one night and this big thud hit my bed. And I startled, looked up, and there was a big rat that had fallen out of the roof of the building onto my bed and it was huge. It was a huge rat. And there were rats, just strange things that you weren't used to.

There was a lot of sadness, though, in the war. And fortunately I wasn't exposed to a lot of that, but when I was, for example, in Da Lat, the little kids would come in selling Chiclets, the little gum, for those of you who don't know what a Chiclets is, it's these little square pieces of gum in these little boxes, and kids would come and walk into a crowd of people and sell Chiclets, and they'd have these satchel charges hooked to their bodies, and they would just explode in the middle of a crowd. And sometimes it would be in the middle of a crowd of military people that this would happen. So the communists used their own people as weapons. When I was in Da Lat, this actually happened. I didn't witness it with my eyes, but it created a mass panic in the Army unit there and everybody was suddenly in bunkers and on the defensive rather than just the daily routine. There were constantly alert sirens, I guess you could call them.

And at Cam Rahn Bay, everyone had to take their turn on guard duty, perimeter guard duty. And I remember the MACV Rules of Engagement where you'd go out and do a night on one of the posts around Cam Rahn Bay, but you couldn't do anything if you thought you saw an enemy. You had to radio in to get permission to shoot the enemy. Well, as soon as you keyed the mic, they knew you were there, you knew they were there, and so it was kind of an interesting battle. There wasn't a clear-cut way of defending yourself unless you hit that radio and called in to the

person on duty and say,

"We think we're being approached by someone. Should we do anything?" So, they called it the MACV Rules of engagement. I didn't care for those hours on duty out in the middle of the night on those outposts, but everyone had to do it. They called it security police augmentees and everybody had to take their turn. Plus you were working seven days a week, 12 hours a day. There wasn't a day off, so to speak. Everybody got R and R. So, you know, you did see sadness, you knew you were in a war. There was constantly, in the middle of the night, the sirens would go off because of some attack, lobbing missiles or mortars into the base. And they were always aiming at the fuel storage tanks and so couple of times they hit.

I was a designated driver for a bunch of guys to go to the NCO club because I really didn't consume alcohol. So I would always drive these big deuce and a half's, and everybody would pile in, and we'd go to the NCO club. I remember the 7-Up cans and the Coke cans; they weren't aluminum at the time. We had to clear the rust off of the top of 'em before we opened them up because many of them were corroded and rusted by the time they got to us.

Interviewer

Tell us about some of the forward air controlled experiences. What is an air strike?

Sterling Poulson

One thing that Vietnam was different--a lot of people actually saw the beginning of the Gulf War on CNN. I mean I remember that clearly, and everyone does, people were glued to their TV sets. You saw the tracer bullets behind the reporters, and some of the video you saw was just hundreds of square miles of sand. You could see anything out there. And satellite technology. We didn't have that kind of technology then in Vietnam. You didn't have the kind of technology where you could look down and see that there was a line of enemy tanks 20 miles ahead of you. You couldn't see that. Why? Because it's a jungle; Vietnam is a jungle. And the military realized that pretty quickly in that battle and so they used something that I'm sure you've heard of in the cancer world, which is Agent Orange. And Agent Orange would kill the foliage on the trees so they could see better. So the forward air controllers, to answer your question, they were kind of the eyes of the ground. Our forces on the ground knew where they were, they knew where they were, and they knew where the enemy was pretty much. And so when they would discover an enemy stronghold or an advancing column, they would radio the forward air controllers and say--well, the F4s are flying much faster, of course, and they would drop the Napalm or the bombs or whatever they were going to drop. So they didn't have time to really pinpoint anything when they're flying at that speed, but they could see a column of smoke or a marker in the jungle. They could see that, and so that's what the forward air controller's job was, was to fly right into the enemy, fire a smoke rocket into that target so that it was clearly visible to the fighter jets coming in to drop the armament behind it. And that was their job. Crazy. I mean when you think about it, it's crazy because these little planes weren't escape planes by any means, and they were certainly targets, slow-moving targets, almost worse than a helicopter because with a helicopter you could do much more. You could do a lot more to get away than you can in a fixed-wing airplane that's flying 80 to 100 knots.

Interviewer

Could you describe that for us, what it was like to have an air strike hit something?

Sterling Poulson

It was like the end of the world. It was complete destruction. It was complete fireball. It was hell. Fortunately, I was never in the middle of that, but it was hell.

Interviewer

Tell us what the men were talking about in the war, how they felt about it.

Sterling Poulson

The language was different then. I don't think I ever remember anybody saying, "This sucks," because that's kind of a newer term. But I don't remember anyone really talking about anything except how many days they had before they could go home. I do remember that clearly. Ninety days and a wakeup, 70 days and a wakeup, you know? Yeah you were there and you knew what your job was. Sometimes you didn't really know what your mission was, but you knew what your job was. I really felt bad for the Army because they were literally out there in the middle of those fireballs and the hell. We weren't there. I was there out in the jungle but I was protected, I was safe, I think. The Army took good care of me whenever I showed up at a forward location to fix something. But you saw the stretchers.

Interviewer

You must have also seen a lot of things at Cam Rahn Bay.

Sterling Poulson

The hospital there was huge. It had a huge hospital, so helicopters were constantly flying in and that's one of the ways that I got around the country was because we had that huge hospital there and it allowed for some transportation, but you didn't always like what you were flying back with.

Interviewer

Tell us about Cam Rahn Bay, the size of it.

Sterling Poulson

It was huge. I remember how huge it was because it was like a city. Large runway, had to be able to handle the largest aircraft possible. It was the easiest way to get supplies into the country. There was also Saigon but Saigon was a little more difficult at times to get in and out of, when I was there anyway. And so Cam Rahn was used as really the supply route to get everything in country. And so there was a lot of planes, and I mentioned that security police augmentee, we'd sit out there at night and watch the planes come in from the stateside and then planes leave, you'd see the Flying Tiger leave, and you'd know that those are guys going home. But it was a hub, it was a very busy place. Like I said, the hospital was really very modern for that time. It was set up to be a place where people could go for surgery without being transported to stateside of somewhere else. It was very, very modern for that time. And they had a lot of facilities there to treat the wounded and to treat the regular--I mean if you were sick,

you could just go to the hospital there at Cam Rahn Bay. It was very convenient. They had a dispensary, they had all of that. That was a fortunate thing. And that was really in my opinion--and the fuel storage area was huge. So those were really the three big things, the supplies coming in, there was a big fuel storage area and the hospital was huge there, and it was right on the beach. So a lot of soldiers would come to Cam Rahn Bay to actually take a few days off because they could go out on the beach. They had a military beach there they reserved and protected and guarded so guys could go out and just lay on the beach and swim in the ocean and do whatever. And they also had a MARS station there which is where guys would come and call home, over. It was a radio. It was a radio, but you'd,

"I love you, Mom. Over."

And they'd have to say the same thing coming back, so there was a lot of that. We had a MARS station which was really huge, and you could call home. Wasn't very often you could do that, but if you scheduled it you could get on and talk to your parents on the telephone.

Interviewer

Did you ever go to a USO show?

Sterling Poulson

No.

Interviewer

Why's that? We'd see this stuff on Bob Hope.

Sterling Poulson

You know, they'd come to Cam Rahn Bay, and then they'd go off in-country. They'd go to Da Nang or Nha Trang or some of the places where the guys really needed it. Like I said, Cam Rahn Bay was kind of a in-country rest stop, and so people would come there to rest, but the entertainment shows kind of just went on to the rest of Vietnam. Didn't ever go to a USO show in Cam Rahn Bay.

Interviewer

Let's talk about weather, Vietnam. You wanted to be a weatherman, now repairing small engine planes, yet you must still have this passion, so tell us about the weather in Vietnam.

Sterling Poulson

Well, it's kind of neat because flying around in-country; I saw a lot of thunderstorms, tropical rain. And while I was there, we actually had a typhoon, which was coming right toward Cam Rahn Bay. In fact, we had to evacuate all the aircraft from Cam Rahn Bay to other places because of the--we call them hurricanes here, but there they're typhoons. And so we experienced a typhoon. But a lot of my slides are pictures of clouds. Sorry. I was, like,

"Whoa, those are big thunderstorms."

And so that was a fun thing for me, and I did enjoy experiencing the tropical rainstorms and thunderstorms, and there were plenty of 'em.

Interviewer

Tell us about the rainy season in Vietnam, what that did to us there and how that influenced our military, what the rainy season was.

Sterling Poulson

Well, the rainy season was miserable. Not necessarily on the coast or in our barracks, but for the inland--it's very mountainous; Vietnam is a very mountainous country. And so lots of rain would mean flash flooding, and you say flash flooding in a jungle, yeah, but you never really knew it was coming, and so there would be flash flooding. It increased the disease because of the mosquitoes and just living in the wet conditions constantly for four months or five months at a time, nothing would really dry out. Your clothes wouldn't dry out. There was a lot of mold. We experienced that even in Cam Rahn Bay. I mean you just couldn't dry anything, the humidity was so high. And so that gets a little irritating. There was a lot of, can I say, a lot of fungus and jock rot and things that were just miserable because of the wet conditions. You couldn't dry anything, so you'd put it back on and there were problems with that. And militarily I don't really have a clue. I was too young to know what the weather was really doing to the strategic planning of the war, but I do know that the guys were miserable when it was raining.

Interviewer

How much rain would come down? People don't know what a rainy season is here.

Sterling Poulson

No, you can't compare. It's hundreds of inches of rain in some of the mountainous areas, 60-70 inches of rain, over 100 inches in some places in the mountains a year. Very, very wet. I think the real problem wasn't necessarily the rain, it was the humidity and the high humidity. We're talking about dew point temperatures of 80 to 85 degrees. That's an incredible amount of water in the atmosphere.

Interviewer

Compared to Utah.

Sterling Poulson

Our dew point temperatures run 30 to 40 degrees, and in the summer if you get a dew point temperature over 50 degrees you're going to have a thunderstorm in the afternoon. So just imagine, if you've been to places like Puerto Vallarta, that's comparable. The jungles east of Puerto Vallarta are very comparable to Vietnam-type weather; very high humidity.

Interviewer

I understand there was such a demarcation between that rainy season and for the rest of the year.

Sterling Poulson

Offshore winds, onshore winds, that's difference. And so once the offshore winds started, things would be very pleasant. Humidity went down a little bit, and it wasn't too bad. But during the rainy season, I enjoyed it, but I didn't enjoy the after effects of it. I had the same physical problems with the high humidity that everybody did, I think.

Interviewer

I knew a guy who caught some kind of fungus.

Sterling Poulson

Yeah.

Interviewer

He came home, he couldn't bathe.

Sterling Poulson

Fungus was terrible. It was terrible. And some of those funguses you couldn't get rid of, they were serious.

Interviewer

I knew a guy that couldn't bathe for three years after he came home in order to kill it. So, you're writing home. You're in contact with your family, and tell us about that.

Sterling Poulson

I'm sure my mom was worried about me, and I actually this morning was looking for her letters. I have all the letters from my parents when I was over in Vietnam, and there was always the feeling of support in the letters, more of telling me what she was doing and what her and my dad were doing than anything else and not really, just, "Hope you're doing well."

I had a girlfriend while I was in Vietnam. She was at the Y, and we didn't end up getting married, but she would send me little care packages and it would take about four weeks for those to arrive, so sometimes the contents of the care packages weren't exactly what you thought they were going to be. I remember I had a reel-to-reel tape recorder, one of those old Teac reel-to-reels, and I had some reel-to-reel tapes of The Moody Blues and Bob Dylan and Tammy Wynette. And some of those crazy songs still roll around in my head because we'd listen to that. Lots of rock and roll music, Paul Revere and the Raiders and the Rolling Stones. The one thing that I don't really talk about Vietnam because for some reason I escaped it, was the drug problem. It was everywhere but I wasn't really aware of it. I wasn't really aware of the drugs. Nobody ever offered me any drugs. And so other than the continuous briefings that we got from our commanders about drug use, I never really experienced that. And when I talk to other Vietnam veterans, it was a huge problem, but for some reason I just never was in that mode, so I was never aware of it, and I thought that was odd.

Interviewer

I'm curious about what were your thoughts on the war. Were you counting down the days?

Sterling Poulson

I didn't have a political view about the war. That may sound a little odd as well, but I didn't understand it. And I think I was in the same boat with the majority. We really didn't understand what it was we were trying to accomplish there. Yes, we were trying to stop the advancement of communism. We were trying to stop the advancement down the Ho Chi Minh Trail into Vietnam of supplies and weapons.

And I remember one particular flight that I took on a C-130. I had a friend of mine who was a pilot. I still remember his name, Captain Bell. And he allowed me to go with him on one of their missions to Cambodia, and I actually have pictures. And we flew into this small dirt runway, red dirt in the middle of the jungle. It was a very scary approach because it was a short runway, but those C-130s are just amazing airplanes. I respect that airplane probably more than any other airplane ever built. As we were flying into this little runway, there was these white clouds of anti-aircraft fire going on around us as we were landing. That was pretty weird. We got on the ground. We didn't shut off the engines, but there were palates full of weapons and captured stuff from the communists that were in Cambodia feeding that stuff into Vietnam. And these Army guys had been in Cambodia for about 45 days, all piled on into the back of our C-130. The stench was unbelievable because some of them hadn't showered in days, some of 'em weeks. They piled into the back of our airplane, we threw off a palate of supplies and closed the doors and got out of there--barely stopped. I mean literally we were there for five minutes and took off again. We did one of those assault takeoffs where you just pour every piece of power into that airplane that you can and literally jump off the runway and back into the sky we'd go and then you'd start seeing the little white smoke things off to the side of the cockpit. And that was really the only time that I thought this war is huge and maybe there is a reason why we're trying to stop all this stuff because you saw it sitting there, all these captured supplies that were sitting on this runway waiting for more C-130s to come in and haul it out of there. But then you kind of had an idea, okay, we're trying to stop the communists from coming in here and taking over Vietnam, and then you think, but why? It's how many thousands of miles away from America? So you really didn't understand it, and the bottom line is I didn't understand it. And then when I came home, I realized that nobody here understood it, either. They didn't like it. They didn't understand it. They didn't understand why we were there. There was no welcome home party, except for my girlfriend. That was it--and my parents. It's like Vietnam was just, we were just going over, coming back, going over, coming back, planes full of guys going over and planes full of guys not coming back.

Interviewer

Tell us about your coming home, by the way. Processing out of Vietnam, how do you do that, the process?

Sterling Poulson

You pack your duffle bag, and you go through your little paperwork that you have to check off for the supply. You turn in some of the supplies that you used only there, and the rest of the stuff, your personal stuff, you shoved it in your duffle bag. They threw it on a palate. You went and waited for the airplane to load, and that was it. There was a medical, I think the medical thing was the biggest deal. They wanted to make sure you didn't have some venereal disease. If you did, you couldn't leave yet; they had to cure you. A lot of guys would get sexually transmitted diseases. Some were not curable and so they were in a little bit of a quarantine. But I think that was the big thing, was getting cleared of any sexually transmitted diseases so that you could go home. And other than that, it was just routine processing.

And while I was there, I actually went to school. University of Maryland had some classes there. They had

classrooms, and I actually took a couple of courses in Vietnam, college classes in my spare time. But they had little portable classrooms, and so the University of Maryland was there. There were opportunities to continue your education, which I did. And so that was kind of an interesting part of that, too. But coming home, we went back the same way, back through Japan. And I left my Argus camera sitting in the terminal there in Yakota and as soon as we took off, I realized I didn't have it, my dad's camera. It was my dad's Argus camera, so I don't know if it's still there. No, probably not. But I remember leaving it there, and it was really kind of funny because all the pictures I took over in Vietnam, I took with this camera, this Argus 35 millimeter camera. It was kind of like leaving that chapter behind. I left my camera there. I brought the pictures home, and that was starting a new chapter when I got back to McCord Air Force Base.

Interviewer

We watched on TV the fall of Saigon. Tell me about your feeling about that when you saw that.

Sterling Poulson

What a waste. What a waste of humanity.

Interviewer

We actually had one of the helicopter pilots, a South Vietnamese Colonel, he was landing, had to ditch his helicopter. And he lives here in Salt Lake City. There's quite a Vietnamese community here.

Sterling Poulson

It all seemed for naught at that point. It's like okay, why did it end like that? It just got out of control. It's been interesting to see some of the interviews of some of the people that were in charge over there. In recent years, you've seen some of those on TV, but there was so much sacrifice of American soldiers. And you watch our helicopters falling off of ships. Wow. Sorry.

Interviewer

What was your age in '70-71?

Sterling Poulson

Let's see, I would have been 19.

Interviewer

You were 19 and 20?

Sterling Poulson

Yeah. Well, I would've been 20 in '71, so I was 18 and 19.

Interviewer

But you went in in March 1970?

Sterling Poulson

Mm-hmm, so I guess I was 19. What was that? 19? I didn't turn...I was 19 the whole time I was there, I guess. Oh, wait a minute. Let's see. I was born in September '51, so I was 20 in September of '71. So I was 19.

Interviewer

Nineteen, and you're fixing leaky cylinders one day, and then you're being transported by helicopter. And you mentioned briefly that bodies came back in the same helicopter.

Sterling Poulson

Injured.

Interviewer

What did it feel like to see these bodies, young boys come back? What were your feelings then?

Sterling Poulson

"Am I next? Is this going to happen to me?"

That's what you're thinking. You don't know these people. And you see some of the injuries, they were horrible, the burns. They were just...fighting for their lives, and you just thought,

"Is this what's going to happen to me?"

What else does a 19-year-old think?

Interviewer

Did you have anything to give you peace of mind?

Sterling Poulson

I did attend the LDS services there. I played the organ for those. We had a lot of friends, people you worked with 12 hours a day and seven days a week. I remember my boss, Jimmy Luker, he was from the South. And I remember another guy, Mike Harrison. In fact, I've actually hooked up with him couple of times since Vietnam and even went to his house in Texas when I was down there once. But you develop very close friendships with people and you just get through it. It's all a blur, really, when you think about it. I mean you look back, and it's what, 40 years ago? And it seemed like a long time then, but really it wasn't very long when you think of all the things that happened there and why you were there, and it just went by very quickly.

But, oh, there were some funny things that happened that were entertaining. One particular time I was--and like I said, I was kind of assigned a jeep and because we were mechanics we had to keep it up. You know, you take care of your own jeep. So I had to change the U-joints on my jeep at one point. And I was lying underneath it and didn't think,

"Okay, when you disconnect this driveshaft and take those U-joints off, this is going to be a freewheeling vehicle."

So it ran over me. It ran over my leg while I was lying underneath it. It didn't injure me much except an abrasion that bled a little bit, but it was just funny because the guys never let me live that down. This is the only guy they knew that ran over himself with his own jeep, changing the U-joints on the driveshaft. But we had fun. We played games and listened to music. I did get drunk once. New Year's Eve. I drank probably a whole bottle of champagne, and I walked out of the barracks, and we had these big concrete walls, literally, around all the barracks, kind of like what you see along the freeways now, the big slabs of concrete, but they were set-in concrete around us. And so I was drunk, and I walked out of the barracks and ran into one of these walls and split my toe wide open. So I was

walking around with my toe bleed, and I think it was a Saturday night, I don't remember. But one of the guys from our little LDS branch saw me walking through the sand with my foot bleeding and I was completely plastered, and he didn't really say anything to me. He just kept walking. And then at church on Sunday he says,

"Did I see you walking down..."

"No, couldn't have been me. It couldn't have been me."

But, you know, there was a lot of understanding and a lot of--and, like I said, I wasn't an alcohol consumer, so the guys I was with, we pretty much emptied out a couple of bottles of champagne and I didn't even know what I was doing. And I'll never do it again. I was very, very sick the next day, and I had a very sore foot for about a week. So there were some funny things, and then you'd kid each other about it for the rest of the time you're there.

"Did I see you walking..."

"No." "Was your foot bleed..."

"No. Nuh-uh."

So just one of those...

Interviewer

How did you respond to the anti-war sentiment?

Sterling Poulson

I didn't respond to it. I didn't. I kind of came home and I was still in the military so I immediately went back to work. I was stationed right there at McCord Air Force Base. I lived at home with my parents and life went on. And like I said in the beginning, my experiences in Vietnam, I never looked back at them and said,

"That was horrible. I wish I had never done that."

I look back at it as one of the greatest learning and growing-up experiences of my life. Yes, there were horrible things that happened there, but I didn't ponder it. I didn't internalize it. Probably because I was never actually in the field of combat being shot at by the enemy. And I think the people that have that problem and have internalized it had no other choice. I mean they were watching people next to them die. I didn't have to do that in the Air Force, I was protected a little bit from that. I knew it was going on, and like I said, when I'd get on these helicopters and see what I saw, I just couldn't even imagine what those Army guys had to do out there. I couldn't even imagine having to do that. And so when I came back, it was just like I had 30 days leave, and I went back to work and kept on fixing engines and did what I did.

And eventually I got selected to go to Washington, D.C. to work in direct support of Air Force One, and so my career continued and I didn't look back. I didn't feel sorry for myself. And in no way am I saying that those who did shouldn't have because I'm not in their shoes. I don't know what they felt in their heart and in their soul or what horrible things they must've seen, so I can't say that, "Well, why didn't you just pick up yourself and get on with it," because I'm sure that that was not possible for them. But it was possible, thank goodness, it was possible for me to just move on like it was another day of work when I went back to work.

Interviewer

Anything else you want to share with us?

Sterling Poulson

I remember seeing Mount Rainier flying home, and you could see it way off in the distance, and that was one of the greatest--you could see Mount St. Helen's, and I could see Mount Adams, I believe it is, and then Mount Hood. We were high enough and far enough out I could see Mount Hood, Mount Adams, Mount St. Helen, Mount Rainier, and I knew that was home, and I was almost there. That was a great feeling. I was coming home.