

Kenneth A. Sabo
Army
St. George, Utah
"Escalation"

Interviewer

So give us your full name.

Kenneth Sabo

Kenneth Allan Sabo, S-a-b-o.

Interviewer

Where are you from?

Kenneth Sabo

I was born in Portsmouth, Virginia.

Interviewer

And you grew up there?

Kenneth Sabo

No. My dad was in the Navy; we were moving around a lot back then. Actually my oldest brother was born in Denver and I was born on the East Coast and then my sister was born in Denver and my little brother was born on the West Coast. And then my littlest brother was born in Denver.

Interviewer

So your father was military?

Kenneth Sabo

Yup.

Interviewer

So was it decided you were going to go into military or how'd that come about?

Kenneth Sabo

Oh, when I was growing up I loved the shows they had on, "Combat" with Vic Morrow and "Sergeant Rock and his Howling Commandos;" and Sergeant Fury comic books and all that. Always just wanted to grow up and be a sergeant in the Army.

Interviewer

So were you drafted?

Kenneth Sabo

I quit high school in my junior year and enlisted.

Interviewer

What year was that?

Kenneth Sabo

'70.

Interviewer

You enlisted and what did you tell them you wanted to be? You had the choice, right?

Kenneth Sabo

Pretty much. I wanted to go to jump school. The main reason I wanted to go jump school is you have to be jump qualified to serve in Italy and I wanted to serve in Italy. After basic training they sent me to Generator Operator Repair School in Fort Dover, Virginia. Hated it. And then they sent me to Clerk School at Fort Jackson, South Carolina and I did a couple weeks in the Clerk School and the CO calls me in and says,

"You're doing terrible, what's the problem?" And I said,

"I hate this." He goes,

"What do you want to do?" I said,

"Put me in the infantry." And he said,

"Well I can't guarantee anything but I'll see what I can do."

And 12 hours later I was on a 12-mile road march with a full rucksack. And I just excelled; I qualified with every weapon that they had, expert, except the hand grenade. I'm left handed and the way they make you throw it, to qualify was really weird so I didn't get it out far enough for them. It's the only weapon I didn't qualify expert with.

Interviewer

You enlisted, of course you're aware of Vietnam; you're aware of anything going on when you're a regular kid. Did you have any hesitation about all that?

Kenneth Sabo

No. I don't know why. I just excelled at everything last time I knew and it's been many years of course, but I still have the record for breaking down an M-60 machine gun and putting it back together, time wise. I don't know, I just excelled at infantry and then I went to jump school and unfortunately got disqualified because of my knee. And then 30-day vacation and I was on my way to the Orient.

Interviewer

How'd you get to Vietnam?

Kenneth Sabo

I had a 30-day leave and then went to Oakland Army Air Base and was there for processing. And they put me on a plane; sent me to Alaska, refueled in Alaska and went to Japan, refueled in Japan and then went into Vietnam.

Interviewer

Was it a commercial airline?

Kenneth Sabo

Yeah, commercial airliner.

Interviewer

Where did you land?

Kenneth Sabo

Long Binh.

Interviewer

What time of day was it?

Kenneth Sabo

It was during the day, I don't remember what time it was but it was during the day because you could see everything going on.

Interviewer

What could you see going on?

Kenneth Sabo

I was blown away. I mean the smell and it was just - I wondered what the heck I got myself in for.

Interviewer

Describe it to us.

Kenneth Sabo

The heat was unbearable and you're instantly soaking wet from the sweat. And don't know what's going on, don't know anything. They put us on a bus and it had screens on all the windows and I'm going, "this is not a good thing." We're driving down the road and women are squatting and going to the bathroom off the bridges into the river. And I'm just going, "wow." I was just totally overwhelmed. Then we got to 93 Placement Center and processed us in, got us out of our dress uniforms and into jungle fatigues and I think either that night or the second night I was on guard duty at 93 Placement. It was pretty intense and pretty quick.

Interviewer

Did something happen that night?

Kenneth Sabo

No not really. Had a lot of flares going off during the night and had a lot of fights with the huge cockroaches but other than that it was pretty quiet.

Interviewer

You can't really believe your first few days in a situation like that, can you?

Kenneth Sabo

No it was just beyond comprehension.

Interviewer

When did you get attached to a --?

Kenneth Sabo

I was in infantry and so we were doing a lot of details then. Next thing I knew they called us up and said that a bunch of us were going to the 11th Army Cavalry Regiment because we had two troops that had been in a firefight and they had medevaced quite a few guys so they sent us to the airfield back at Long Binh. They trucked us to Cu Chi and then we checked in there with the regiment and then they put us on a Chinook for the field. There was like 12 of us. One guy had been there before, coming back off an R and amp;R, and everybody else was brand new in Vietnam. And we all had weapons, no ammo, and one helicopter going out. The Chinook dropped all our re-supply in a clearing and then dropped over and dropped us down. Just let us all out and took off, away it went, and we're all standing there looking at each other going, "Oh, boy." We had no idea where we were; there was nobody there, it was just an empty field. Empty clearing, we had jungle all the way around us.

Interviewer

So it was just a clearing?

Kenneth Sabo

We all had guns but we had no ammo and didn't know what was going on. We started hearing the tracks and the tanks coming and none of us knew what was going on. It was like a cartoon because you could see everybody just going down into the grass, trying to disappear. Because we didn't know whose vehicles they were. And of course in hindsight, all the ammo we needed was right there. We'd just got resupplied. It was our guys and so that's how we got dropped into the field.

Interviewer

What'd they say to you? How'd they come up to you?

Kenneth Sabo

They just drove in and started setting up a night defensive position and First Sergeant came over and got us and told us what platoon we'd be in. It was pretty intense.

Interviewer

What happened that night?

Kenneth Sabo

I got assigned to the 2nd Platoon and a guy that turned out to be my best friend, a guy named Stan Bills, kind of took me under his wing and I was out helping put out trip flares and claymores and stuff for the night. And I don't know what you were doing in the Army but in the Cav they set up a night defensive position and all the vehicles pointing out, kind of like the old stagecoach in the old days - in a big circle with the guns out. So we went out and put up the trip flares and claymore mines and all that stuff. And Stan starts rolling the wire back to the track instead of across to a tree or something. And I'm going, "What are you doing?" And he's going, "Ah, you'll see later."

And so I didn't think nothing about it and we went and had dinner, I was meeting everybody and getting assigned to a track and everything. It started getting dark and everybody's sitting around talking and pretty soon he walked over, grabbed that wire and pulled it. The trip flare went off and so everybody got started shooting, firing, and I thought we were under attack. And I'm going,

"What am I supposed to do?" And he goes,

"Grab a weapon and start firing. This is the fun part, man, there's nothing out there." He said, "We're just test firing the .50's; we had to clean it today, had to make sure it works." And I'm going,

"Okay this is what you normally do?"

And so yeah they never took the weapons apart to clean them until they quit working. And when they did, then they wanted to test fire them before they needed them. And so that's how I got broken in. Later that night we got mortared and we got mortared almost every night I was there.

Interviewer

What's that like for the first time?

Kenneth Sabo

It was pretty scary. And it's one of those you don't know whether you want to get in the armored personnel carrier or stay out of it.

Interviewer

What was the advantage for either?

Kenneth Sabo

Well that was what I was trying to figure out. I just felt like those were pretty big targets when I first got there and then I got to be where if a mortar - like at night we would close the back hatch but leave it open so air would get in there. But if a mortar hit it, it would detonate up there rather than go in. And so it provided protection. And of course when small arms, I wanted to be inside too.

Interviewer

What did they break you in at?

Kenneth Sabo

It was right away. I started out as a driver. Actually I started out as a gunner on the lieutenant's truck. When the driver DEROS'd back to the States, then I took over as the driver for the Lieutenant. It was like right away; it was the second or third day that we were out. Most of the time that I was there we were doing security for the Rome Plows and they just go around in big circles cutting down jungle. And then whenever they'd hit, there'd be traps or mines or bunker complexes, then they'd back out and we'd go in. They took some RPGs and so they pulled out and we got into a pretty big firefight. I can't remember, it was the second or third day and I just remember I spent most of that day, and that firefight, watching a hole in the ground. We had pulled up where we were and everybody was firing and everything and the lieutenant turned over and he said,

"You see where that looks like a ladder coming out of that hole?" And I said,

"Yeah." He says,

"Put your gun on that and keep it there. If anything moves just shoot there."

So I spent most of my first day watching a hole with a ladder coming out of it. And the next day when we went back in there, the same place, we found out that that ladder went down into the ground and they had a huge weapons cash down there. We found a pretty big bunker complex that day.

Interviewer

What's the noise like?

Kenneth Sabo

When you first get over there you don't know what you're doing and so I'm in uniform, sweating like a pig, and T-shirts and shirts, and then the flack vest and everything and steel pots. And the heat's unbearable, of course. After I got used to it, of course, it got down to 95 degrees and I was looking for a field jacket because I was freezing to death. It was amazingly hot. There's a lot to take care of and to learn when you first get over there and that's why they didn't want to have a lot to do with FNGs over there until they get the feel of it and know what's going on.

Interviewer

What's an FNG?

Kenneth Sabo

F-ing New Guy. They weren't real thrilled with new guys because new guys didn't know what was going on. We had one of those in the form of a lieutenant that did get some people medevaced.

Interviewer

It was a lieutenant?

Kenneth Sabo

Yeah. I soon became not his driver. I don't know, I just always thought I had a problem with authority and when I went to the PTSD program in Denver, a 13-week in-house program. My counselor, after talking to me for awhile, he goes,

"No you don't have a problem with authority. You have a problem with disrespect and stupidity. You have a very low tolerance for disrespect and a very low tolerance for stupidity."

And after thinking about it, that's pretty true. His dad was a General at Fort Hood and he thought he knew everything and he wouldn't listen to anybody. The standard operating procedure was officers don't get off tracks during a reconnaissance and force. He was forever jumping off the track, grabbing a rifle with no shirt and no flack vest, and just barging up a trail because they found something. He eventually tripped a booby-trap and medevaced three guys and himself. Me and him just never did get along. When I was his driver, the thing that made me not his driver anymore was we were in a firefight and I almost threw the track. I was going over some cut down trees and I almost threw a track and we were in a firefight. I pivoted and put it back on and he told me,

"Get out and put some track tension in that arm so we don't throw a track." And I said,

"I am not getting out of this track in the middle of a firefight."

And the equipment, of course, was substandard and it was so worn out. Couldn't get grease guns that work and so he wrote his dad at Fort Hood and his dad sent fluorescent, brand new, fluorescent blue grease guns for our platoons. And here I am with this fluorescent blue grease gun and he's telling me get out and put track tension in. I said, "not happening." So I wasn't his driver anymore after that.

Interviewer

There's the Huey and the Slick helicopter. Then there's the APC, Armored Personnel Carrier. Describe what an APC is.

Kenneth Sabo

APC is Armored Personnel Carrier and it's meant for a crew of two or three and then a carrier of a full squad of infantry. What the armored cavalry did, when they got them over there, is they adapted them and they started calling them A-Cav's. We put gun shields on the 50 and then two gun shields on the sides with M-60s. And the crew was four: the driver, a TC and two gunners. And that's what we lived in. We had the ammo lining up the sides of the track and most of the time where I slept was I had a medevac stretcher hanging from the A-Cav and that's where I slept. But the drivers hatch is only about this big and it drives with laterals. It goes back there and then it's all open back there. When they first got over there they were gas I believe and that's where the RPGs were going right through them and burning everything up. That's when they converted them to the diesel engines so they didn't burn up so fast or so bad. When I got there they were of course all diesels and the smell was terrible.

Interviewer

Tell us about the smell.

Kenneth Sabo

Even today I can't even drive behind a car or a truck that's a diesel engine without smelling it and getting sick to my stomach. Everything leaked and the engines all leaked and doing maintenance on them. And when you top off during the day, I got this big 500 gallon bladders that they hang from one of the track retrieval vehicles with a hose, just like a gas station, and you fill those up. And of course it goes all over. I've never been able to stand the smell of diesel after that. Either burning or regular gas itself.

Interviewer

How's the heat inside one of those things?

Kenneth Sabo

Oh it gets pretty warm in there. But the driver's hatch is open, the TCs hatch is open and the troop hatch is open during the day. Usually whatever it is outside it is inside. The right-hand gunner has to deal with the exhaust heat also. And so it blows out. I can't stand diesels to this day.

Interviewer

What does RPG mean?

Kenneth Sabo

RPG is a Rocket Propelled Grenade.

Interviewer

What does it do to an APC?

Kenneth Sabo

Most of the time it will punch a hole through it and then explode on the inside. You'll have a little hole where it goes in and then when it explodes on the inside it just tears everything and everybody up inside of it.

Interviewer

So you weren't exactly safe inside an APC?

Kenneth Sabo

No, not really safe. And that's why whenever we worked with the First Cav; they were always giving us grief about riding around in those targets. They'd rather be on the ground and after being in them for awhile, I'd rather be in the tracks.

Interviewer

What about mines?

Kenneth Sabo

There was quite a few but the ones we ran into were usually set up for anti-personnel. But we ran into a couple of big mines that the first lieutenant we had when I was over there and I was his driver, I loved him to death because he was a really good officer. And one day we were out on reconnaissance enforce and we'd just dropped off an ambush patrol of Army Rangers. He just told me to hold it up so I stopped and then he told me to go back and ride on double deuce and that's where my best friend was, Stan, and so I said, "I'm out of here." So I went and got back on the last track on the line. I don't remember who took my place but it wasn't ten minutes later they hit a mine and Lieutenant lost part of his jaw and got medevaced. My understanding is he lived and I can't tell you who took my place and whether he lived or died. That's one of my PTSD issues today. So that was not a good day.

Interviewer

Must be hard to think you missed it by that much.

Kenneth Sabo

Yeah.

Interviewer

When did you adjust to the point where you could operate?

Kenneth Sabo

Actually it was pretty quick. I was a good driver and tracked well and that's what any officer wants is somebody

who's going to track and so they don't hit that mine. Because they're never the first one in line, there's always somebody else and then you stay in that track from the track in front of you. And so you don't hit any mines. I did real well and I liked to drive. I've always loved driving.

Interviewer

What was your typical mission?

Kenneth Sabo

Most of the time I was there we worked with the Rome Plows. And the Rome Plows would just set up on a certain part of jungle where they think there's problems with the NVA or the VC, hiding there and setting up bunkers. And one will start and start plowing and cutting down the jungle and the next one would move over a little bit and the next one and the next one and they would just drive around and around and around until they cut that whole area down. Then there's no place left to hide. While they're doing that, we're set up in a blocking line and if they get any problems then they pull out and we go in. And that's what we did most of the time I was there.

Interviewer

What month did you first get there?

Kenneth Sabo

April of '71. I think I got there in March of '71 and stayed there until April of '72 when the second squadron came home. Our regimental headquarters left Vietnam with the other two squadrons in April of '71 and the second squadron stayed there for another year.

Interviewer

The war was changing rapidly at the time. Tell us how.

Kenneth Sabo

They're trying to get us uninvolved and the South Vietnamese Army more involved. And so we're doing a lot of training with different units that are coming in and learn how to do what we were doing. I've run into a lot of guys that said, "Oh, the war was over by then." No it wasn't. I lost some friends and it wasn't over then.

Interviewer

What were you seeing about the war from your point of view?

Kenneth Sabo

Most of the guys were pretty much, what a waste of time it was and why we were there was a waste. I was just young and naive and I really didn't care. I mean all I wanted to do was be a sergeant in the Army so I just did what I was told and did the best I could with everything I did. There was a lot of racial problems then. Not with me, I don't have a racial bone in my body, but there was a lot of problems with the races.

Interviewer

Like what?

Kenneth Sabo

I lost a really good friend because another sergeant wanted an all black track. And the kid that was on my track was black and he didn't want to go. They forced the issue and he ended up getting killed. If he wouldn't have gone over there I doubt he would have. Some of my best friends were black and Hispanic. I just don't have that problem. There were a lot. We have a reunion every year for the 11th Army Cav and not very many of the blacks show up and it bothers me. It still bothers me because I know I wouldn't be around if it wasn't for some of those guys. And I'd love to see some of those guys again. I wish they'd come out.

Interviewer

Did you follow the news at all?

Kenneth Sabo

No not a whole lot. We'd listen to transistor radios and every once in awhile they'd do the Armed Forces Radio. Most of the time, we spent two months in the jungle and then a month in the security for the artillery at the firebase. At one point the platoon would go in and do maintenance back in the rear but for the most part we were out where we couldn't listen to the radios. Of course no TV back then.

Interviewer

Did you see any press come by?

Kenneth Sabo

At times we had a guy come out from - well the article ended up in the Denver Post. He rode around with us for a couple days and he rode with us and did an article about me because I was from Denver and it was for the Denver Post. It was pretty boring at that particular time and nothing happened. And so he wrote his article was pretty much how boring it was. It was far from boring. One of the things that happened when he was travelling with us is we hit a tree and of course in Vietnam that's where the ant hills are. They're not in the ground, they're in the trees. Once you hit a tree with one of those tracks then all the ants come pouring down. They're big ants and they bite. It's usually pretty funny to watch because you've never seen full-grown men get completely naked in a hurry. Those ants bite and they bite hard. And that was one of the things that happened while he was on there so that's one of the things he wrote about - that we were fighting reds but they were red ants.

Interviewer

Did the mission changed? Were you training South Vietnamese?

Kenneth Sabo

We usually had some part of the Vietnamese Army with us, most of the time off and on. Because in the cavalry and they would have some of the infantry. So they would go in and they would check out the bunkers while we pulled security. And so we usually had at least some of the South Vietnamese Army with us. There's not a lot of trust but there's a couple of them that we got to trust that we knew we could count on.

Interviewer

What did you think of the Vietnamese people?

Kenneth Sabo

The only real people that I dealt with were the ones that were showing up just as we were leaving. And that was usually the kids and the mama-sans and they're going through our trash trying to find whatever they could get and use. I really didn't have a whole lot of dealings with the people. A couple of times went back the rear, was able to go back from the Bob Hope Show one year and so we got a little bit of dealings with people that cleaned the hooch's and stuff like that. Not a whole lot.

Interviewer

Tell us about the Bob Hope Show.

Kenneth Sabo

That was great. Only certain people got to go back, of course, because we were in the bush at the time. I don't even know how I got picked because I wasn't a favorite of the lieutenants. I got to go back and it was a great show. I actually got pretty good seats. I was pretty close to the stage and was able to get some good pictures of Bob Hope and some of the guys were there. It was humongous and massive, people everywhere.

Interviewer

How many GIs were there?

Kenneth Sabo

I don't know, thousands. There were thousands there. Like I said, I got real lucky because I was probably 20-, 25 feet from the stage off to one side so I really got some good pictures.

Interviewer

Were any of the girls on stage?

Kenneth Sabo

Oh yeah. There were a couple of really nice girls on the stage.

Interviewer

Anybody we'd know by name?

Kenneth Sabo

I'd have to think about that, I don't know. I was concentrating on one of them a lot. She reminded me of my high school sweetheart so I was watching her most of the time.

Interviewer

Is it strange going to a Bob Hope show and then coming back?

Kenneth Sabo

It really was. It was a hard night after that too because one of the guys that I arrived in Vietnam with and we got close and went to the field together, guys name was Perez. We called him Pizza, wish I knew his first name

because I'd love to look him up and find him. We were headed back to the hooch for the night and walked past the swimming pool. We all decided we were going to go skinny-dipping. So we climbed up there and we all jumped in the pool and nobody realized that it was an above ground pool and so one of the guys dove in, Perez dove in and broke his neck. So we pulled him out, got him to the medics and they said, I heard, of course we were still here and he went back to the States. They fixed him up and were able to relieve the pressure on his neck and his head and that he was going to be fine but don't know.

Interviewer

Was there a lot of daredevil play?

Kenneth Sabo

No. Most everybody was pretty serious about what we did. We tried to lighten the mood whenever we could and have fun. One of the things that Stan and I did, when we were in the last vehicle in the reconnaissance enforce, we're always running into signs that the Vietnamese put up. "Danger", skull and crossbones, "Don't Enter Here" and all that stuff. Stan and I got this wild idea, "Let's put up some signs of our own." So we started putting up signs, "San Francisco - 16,000 miles," blah, blah, blah. Just making up numbers and we'd tack it on the tree as we'd go by. We put up all these signs, never expecting anything, but we did a big circle and the lieutenant came back and found one of our signs and we go chewed out pretty good about it. It was funny.

Interviewer

Were you working with Air Support?

Kenneth Sabo

Yeah the 11th Cav had their own air platoon so we had air support most of the time. Still to this day love the sound of a Huey.

Interviewer

Tell us about that.

Kenneth Sabo

I struggle with some of these guys that say, "Oh Huey gives me nightmares," and blah, blah, blah. I don't know where they could possibly come up with that. A Huey was either mail, medevac, hot chow, getting us out of there, whatever, fire support. I mean I love the sound of a Huey to this day. I spent a lot of time going down to Fort Irwin, the National Training Center, outside of Barstow and that's where the regiment that I served with the Vietnams now and they training everybody. They were able to find one of the helicopters that we actually had when we were in Vietnam. One of the National Guard Units was getting rid of them and switching over to the Black Hawks, the Apaches or whatever, and they were getting rid of it. They did some research and checked the serial number and found that we had actually had that with us in Vietnam. And so now it's sitting at Fort Irwin, California. They have one of them down there that when you climb back into the tail section of it you can see where it was patched. The bullet holes were patched with Pepsi cans.

Interviewer

What was the biggest fight you were in?

Kenneth Sabo

We were set up in the night defensive position and we were getting mortared almost every night. We had the trip flares out and it was eleven o'clock or so one night and the trip flare went off. It was quite the shock to whoever hit the trip flare because they were just kind of like, "Oh man, what do we do?" And so we had a ground attack that night and mortars. Next morning we found nine bodies and a whole lot more blood trails where stuff just disappeared. It was pretty hairy that night. That was the night that my friend Stan took a .50 caliber round to the head right here. He went out, hit a rice paddy, came back and it was a tracer so we were able to see it. We found it and made a necklace for him but it came down and split his hair right where he parts his hair in the middle of it. And so they medevaced him that night.

Interviewer

What did you think? You were fighting North Vietnamese not Viet Cong right?

Kenneth Sabo

Both. That night when we had the ground attack, some of the bodies were in rags and some of them were in North Vietnamese uniforms.

Interviewer

What did you think of the enemy?

Kenneth Sabo

I don't know. Then it was just, "I'm getting shot at, I'm shooting back." Now it's a matter of they were just fighting for their country just like I was fighting for mine. And so I don't have any animosities towards them.

Interviewer

What's it mean to get short?

Kenneth Sabo

It's scary. Back then it was just a race for 365 days before you got back on the airplane and left. Most of the guys went on their own. In the beginning units were going over but after the units got there and they were just resupplying the units, then it was just individuals. You very rarely had people that you knew going with you or coming back with you. Everybody pretty much had their own race to DEROS and most people don't start counting the days until - there's no difference between having 320 days and 250 days, there's just not difference. But when you start getting short then you start worrying about, "What if I get hit before I go?" You just start getting nervous the closer you get to it and you know you're getting out of there.

Interviewer

What was it like as you were starting to get short?

Kenneth Sabo

It was not a big deal for us because the whole unit was leaving. When I was getting ready to go, my time was getting ready to go anyway. The 11th Cav was pulling out completely. And so they were going back to the States and being reassigned to Germany. It was just like everybody was going and so not a big deal for me. Most of my short timer calendar got filled in all at one time, when I was back to the rear before we actually shipped out. Just worried about not being out of there. And you worried until you were gone because we were getting reports in the field that people were getting - Freedom Birds were getting shot at, taking off, and so you really worried about it until you were out over the ocean and gone. It was pretty amazing when I actually got to get on that aircraft and get going.

Kenneth Sabo

The whole unit came back and I was pretty much into photography then so I got a lot of pictures. There was six or seven of us left the same day, in the back of a truck, and we brought all the vehicles back to the base camp. We were there cleaning up and getting everything signed over and what we were taking back to the States with us and what we were turning over to the Vietnamese. Then it was our time to go so we went and got on the truck in jungle fatigues and went back to 93 Placement Center where I came in at. They got us new khaki uniforms and put us on the bus. When we were going back to 93 Placement we didn't pull any details. We were all pretty much, "No we're short. You get some of the new guys coming in. We're not pulling guard duty." So we just sat around and talked and then they put us on a bus and took us back over to the air base. Got a lot of pictures of the plane coming in and the guys getting off. We were laughing at them and we got on the plane. It was pretty exciting.

Interviewer

Was it an airliner?

Kenneth Sabo

Yeah, it was an airliner.

Interviewer

Tell us about going up those stairs and getting on the airplane.

Kenneth Sabo

It was pretty exciting. I was finally getting to go home and I was ready. Got a little disillusioned. All the stories about how we lost the war and all that stuff. I don't remember losing any battle, I don't remember losing any war. There was a lot of grief about that. I was ready to go home. Of course all the stories about when we came back. A lot of people were mistreated; I wasn't mistreated so much as ignored, indifference. It seemed like the only two people that cared one way or another was my mom and my little brother.

Interviewer

Back to the plane. The door closes, what happens?

Kenneth Sabo

Everybody was pretty quiet until we were rolling down the tarmac and we felt the wheels lift off. Then everybody cheered. It was pretty cool.

Interviewer

How did your opinion change from the time you arrived to the time you left?

Kenneth Sabo

I don't know that I ever "didn't like" the Viet Cong, I was just there to do a job and I just did my job. I didn't trust anybody but then again I had trust issues anyway. And so there was like two Vietnamese that I got to a point that I could trust and one of them was a Chou Hoi scout and he was, of course, the enemy at one point and I converted him. He became a Carson Scout for us. He was a pretty good guy and I trusted him. And then there was another one that whenever we were in the night defensive position and were all relaxing and unwinding from the day, the ambush patrol we had put out got into contact so we had to go pick them up. We were getting ready to leave and I told this guy, "Don't let anybody get into my cooler." We'd made coolers out of artillery round shell boxes and they were lined with Styrofoam so we got Styrofoam in there and we'd get blocks of ice and we made little coolers. We'd just gotten our re-supply and we had pop and stuff in there and I told the guy, "Don't let anybody in here." We left and went out to pick up the ambush patrol and we came back, this little guy is sitting here on this chest and he's fighting four guys off at once to get into my cooler and to get pop and beer and stuff out of there. I kind of figured I could trust this guy so me and him we got along pretty good.

Interviewer

Your idea of the war had changed when you got there from the time you left.

Kenneth Sabo

I always wanted to be a sergeant in the Army and I wanted to go. I just always tried to do the best I could and it really didn't matter a whole lot or why, I was just doing what I was told. When I came back there was some trust issues of Orientals and blah, blah, blah and I just got to the point -- it took a lot of years on an individual basis if I knew somebody and I got to trust them it would be one thing. As a whole, growing up it was like, Pearl Harbor and Vietnam, I didn't trust Orientals. Eventually it eased and I'd go, "They're all just people and they all have their own problems. They may be different from mine but they're just people."

Interviewer

You mentioned having (inaudible).

Kenneth Sabo

Well some of them.

Interviewer

What was the quality of your officer? Was that an issue?

Kenneth Sabo

My first lieutenant was an incredible guy and I just loved him and respected him and would do anything for him. Like I said, he got medevaced and he left. And then we got this new guy and I don't think there would have been a problem except that he just wouldn't listen to anybody. We had some issues. I don't remember why I was back but I wasn't out with the platoon one day and we got this new guy in. Nobody wore rank over there, except the officers. Didn't know who this guy was from Adam, we're sitting there talking and he's asking me about ambush patrols and stuff and I'm going, "Oh, I don't go on ambush patrols." And we talked about why and everything. Turns out he's my new platoon sergeant. And the first time our platoon came up for an ambush patrol he said,

"I'm going," and I said,

"No I'm not."

He went and got the lieutenant and the lieutenant came over and he says,

"You're going on this ambush patrol." And I said,

"No I'm not." And they took me to the CO of the troop commander and he said, "You're going." And I said,

"No, I ain't." And he said,

"You're going to or we're going to convene a court-martial right here, right now." He said, "Why don't you want to go?" I said,

"Because he's not qualified. He's an idiot." And he said,

"Watch your mouth. That's an Airborne Ranger; he's qualified to lead you anywhere." I said,

"I wouldn't trust him to lead me across the street with a troop of Boy Scouts with him."

And they said I was going or else they were going to court-martial me. So I said,

"All right I'll go."

And sure enough, he gave the wrong grid coordinates for where we were set up and when they were test firing that night in our night defensive position, they were shooting right up our ambush patrol. And that's a pretty scary thing when you're getting your own 50's and 60's shot at you. Next morning when they picked us up and I got back to the NDP I got right to the troop commander and I told him straight out. I said,

"I told you he was an idiot and I'm not going on another ambush patrol ever." And I didn't. He was medevaced not too long after that anyway. He wouldn't listen.

Interviewer

How did people treat you, did they care?

Kenneth Sabo

No. Like I said, it was pretty much indifference. The only person that seemed to matter was my mom and my little brother. I've always been really close with my little brother, Don. And then my mom. My sister was off in the Navy

and she got married and my brother was in the Marine's and he got out and he was married. My mom and dad got divorced and so just nobody really cared one way or the other.

Interviewer

Did you talk about it with anybody?

Kenneth Sabo

No. My best friend from high school, we talked a little bit about it but he didn't get it and so we didn't talk much about it.

Interviewer

What did you think about the difference when you got home and Vietnam was still going? What did you think about what you'd seen versus what they were saying on the news?

Kenneth Sabo

Don't get me started on the media. The media, plain and simple, want to sell newspapers. That's all there is to it. Very rarely the truth comes out in print. On the news it's just --

Interviewer

How was it different? Was the news different from what you saw?

Kenneth Sabo

They made us all out to be horrible murderers and baby killers, burning villages and all that stuff and it just didn't happen. A few of those things happened and they were isolated. Just like the whole deal with that little girl that made the newspaper with the Napalm. It wasn't even Americans, man. But they swear up and down that the Americans did this. The Americans didn't do that. That was the South Vietnamese that did that. It wasn't even the Americans; we weren't involved in any way, shape or form. But the press made it out like we were. And just like the things that's going on now with Iraq and Afghanistan. The media don't tell the truth. They tell whatever they think is going to sell newspapers or sell whatever it is they're selling. I had a friend that was working in the Pentagon up until not too long ago. I've got all those guys at Fort Irwin that came back from Iraq and they are in constant daily contact with those guys in Afghanistan and Iraq because they train everybody. And they're getting minute on the spot reports. If something new pops up over there in Afghanistan, Iraq, these guys know about it at Fort Irwin and they are training the guys the next day about the new stuff. And so I know the stuff that's going on is not what the media is telling them.

Interviewer

It was like that back then?

Kenneth Sabo

Yeah. They're telling how terrible it is and how all these people got killed but they didn't tell about the good things that we did. Our medics would go to the villages and provide care for these guys. None of that stuff ever got reported.

Interviewer

What are some of the other good things?

Kenneth Sabo

We did a lot of building infrastructures over there. That kind of stuff just never got reported. We had medics going in and treating villagers and the kids and all that. Every village we'd go through, we'd throw food and stuff to these guys and C-rations and everything. We took care of everybody we could. It's not like we were running around just shooting people up over there but you would think we were listening to the press.

Interviewer

In 1975, you're watching TV and you saw the embassy. How did you feel?

Kenneth Sabo

That was probably part of the disillusion because we didn't do what we should have done. We could have won that war in a matter of months and not the years we spent over there. It just wouldn't have been that tough. Just like the original Iraq War. If they would not have told Schwarzkopf to hold, it wouldn't be an issue today. My biggest thing is if we could get the civilians out of war, the military could do a whole lot better.

Interviewer

Tell us about watching those images and how you reacted.

Kenneth Sabo

It was just really sad because we were over there and doing everything that we did for those people. And now it was all for nothing. It was just really sad. I had one of those, "Let's go back; let's get it done." I mean, do it right.

Interviewer

Describe your hooch for us.

Kenneth Sabo

Hooch? Well back on the base camps and all, they were pretty permanent. They were built of mostly wood and corrugated tin on the top and then sandbags all the way around. Netting mostly above the sandbags. Mosquito netting because it was so hot and help keep it cool and the breeze would blow through. Then they had the bunk beds and stuff back there. The night defensive positions we were in the tracks and then when we were with our engineers, and the Rome Plows, we worked with a couple different units. Some of them were Vietnamese Rome plows and some of them American Rome plows. We got to be friends with them and we'd have them dig out big pits for us and then we'd throw a tarp over top of it. Then we'd set up our cots and stuff down there. That's what we lived in. And when we were in our support bases, they had regular bunkers; all sandbag bunkers down in the burn that went around. And then sandbagged up and corrugated tin and then sandbag over the top of it. Those were pretty cockroach infested and rat infested.

Kenneth Sabo

Pretty much it was all in the rear and in the fire support base there were wooden stalls and they had 55 gallon

drums cut off and slit in the back. Of course there was that wonderful detail of having to burn that.

Interviewer

More.

Kenneth Sabo

When you're in trouble and really in trouble, that's the detail you've got. Grab the cans out and always and pour some diesel fuel in there and light it on fire and stir it until it's all burned up. It's just a horrible thing to have to do. I got stuck with it once.

Interviewer

What did you do?

Kenneth Sabo

Me and the lieutenant butted heads quite a bit and it involved when Perez was getting ready to be medevaced to the States. He sent word out that he would like to thank me for pulling him out of the pool and giving him artificial respiration. I told the lieutenant's new driver, Rusty, I said, "

When that chopper hits the ground tomorrow, I'm going to the rear and I'm going to say goodbye to Perez."

And the lieutenant was supposed to be in a meeting with the CO and Rusty told me,

"You'd better go through the chain of command." And I uttered a profanity and I said,

"No there's too many missing links in that chain of command." And the lieutenant popped up from behind the track and he goes,

"You'd better watch your mouth Sabo. It just so happens I'm part of that chain of command." And I went,

"No you're that missing link I was talking about." And so he wrote me up and gave me a Article 15 and I had to do the dirty job.

Interviewer

Tell us about the music.

Kenneth Sabo

We listened to music whenever we could. "We Gotta Get Out of This Place," they were banning that from being played in Vietnam because they said it was aiding and bedding the enemy. "We Gotta Get Out of This Place." But of course it was one of our favorites.

Interviewer

What is some of the other music that brings back memories?

Kenneth Sabo

Probably the biggest one when I was in Vietnam was a cassette my high school sweetheart and two of her friend sang Judy Collins "Both Sides Now." And the three of them sang it and put it on a cassette and sang it to me. I wore that tape out. There's three songs that really bring back memories of her and that's "California Dreamin'" by the Beach Boys and then "Both Sides Now" and "Jane". That was her name. A lot of Motown because there were a lot

of blacks there. I was always in the band in high school and so I just loved music.

Interviewer

What'd you play?

Kenneth Sabo

Trumpet.

Interviewer

Did you take it up after you came back?

Kenneth Sabo

No. Probably couldn't blow a note.

Interviewer

Tell us again about when you enlisted. What was your mind frame?

Kenneth Sabo

I was 17 when I enlisted. There was a couple contributing factors. One was I always wanted to be in the Army and two, my mom and dad were going through a divorce. I hated school; I was bored to death. My best friend and I were always getting in trouble and I was ditching a lot of school. Things just weren't good at home. I ditched a lot of school and the principal called up one day and said,

"Are you planning on coming back to school?" I said,

"Yeah, one of these days." And he said,

"Well when you do, bring your parents." I said,

"My dad won't and my mom can't. Can I bring a note?" They said nope and I said,

"Well then I guess I'm not coming back to school."

And so I talked to my parents and they both said they'd sign and so I went in.

Interviewer

Think of this 100 years from now and someone is look at this tape. What do you want them to know and understand about Vietnam?

Kenneth Sabo

I don't know that I understand a whole lot about it except that I was there to do a job and as far as I saw ever, we did the job we were there to do. The civilians and the press fought that war and if anybody "lost" that war, and I don't think we did, we weren't even there when they fell -- it was the press and the civilians. They don't know what's going on and they're not there. They can't see and so they just go with what they've got or what the press is telling them. We did what we were supposed to do and yeah, terrible things happen in war and war's a horrible thing. I could pretty much tell you all these guys that I know and all these guys that are in the military now that I know, they don't like war. They don't want to go to war but sometimes it's an evil necessity. Back then communism was a big deal and it was a bad thing. I'd do it again today if it arose. When 9/11 happened, you ask almost anybody, they'd

say, "Yup. Take me and I'd go." And of course by then we were all too old to go.

Interviewer

Anything else that we haven't covered?

Kenneth Sabo

I go in the "Run For The Wall" every year -- and that's another story of course -- but we had a PBS special done. A lady followed us for the whole trip. One of the things she asked me was, "What do you want the people to understand about Vietnam?" And the same thing still applies and that is I don't want them to understand because in order to understand they'd have to go through it and I wouldn't want anybody to have to go through that.

Interviewer

How is your hearing?

Kenneth Sabo

Terrible. I have two hearing aids at home but I didn't put them on. It's terrible. Everybody's telling me. My daughter's sitting over there and she'll tell you that she has to tell me two or three times some things and I'm going, "What? What? What?"

Interviewer

Why?

Kenneth Sabo

When you're riding along or driving along in a track on a reconnaissance enforce and all, and you hit a mine or find a bunker complex. And if .50 calibers open up close to your head or 60 machine guns are right there that close to your head in the driver seat; you don't have time if somebody is shooting at you to put in ear protection. You don't even think about it. That much noise, that close that loud, just does damage. Then of course that third month when you're in the fire support base, they go 24/7. And those big shells going off -- those guys of course know when they're going to be firing and so they have hearing protection but we didn't know and so there's just a lot of loud noise. That close and that often, you just don't think about putting in ear protection.

Interviewer

Did you celebrate a birthday over there?

Kenneth Sabo

Yeah. Well didn't celebrate it.

Interviewer

What happened on your birthday?

Kenneth Sabo

Don't remember a thing. I remember we celebrated New Years. I was sitting in a tent, I was in the fire support base, and was sitting in a tent and I saw -- they had all the tents raised up a little bit so the airflow would go in and it would be a little cooler. I saw a pair of legs walking across there and I went, "Oh, that can't be good." And squadron

commander walked in and handed a couple bottles of champagne and says, "Try to keep it down tonight," and turned around and walked out. Of course I didn't drink but the guys drank the champagne.

Interviewer

You didn't drink?

Kenneth Sabo

No. Didn't drink, didn't do drugs, don't smoke.

Interviewer

Did that give you any kind of advantage?

Kenneth Sabo

Had some disadvantages.

Interviewer

Like what?

Kenneth Sabo

I found out early when I was there, there was of course drug problems and alcohol problems. But I found out early that when the guys got to drinking too much and if we got mortared or into a firefight, they were pretty much worthless. They're drunk until they sober up but the guys that had been smoking marijuana, those rounds start going off and they're straight, they can help. So I started hanging out with the guys that were doing drugs because there wasn't very many, it was just me that didn't drink or do drugs. Every time I got on or off a chopper, they'd search me because they thought I was doing drugs. And of course they never found anything because I didn't do drugs. So it was a little bit of a disadvantage.

Interviewer

What did the others guys think about that?

Kenneth Sabo

I don't recall it ever being an issue. Everybody was always saying,

"Come on, take a hit." And I'd go,

"No, I don't smoke."

It never made any sense to me to smoke. When I came back from Vietnam, my best friend had come back, Stan, earlier than me, and I tried to find him when I got back and I couldn't find him. I looked for 28 years to find him and finally found him. Went right up to Washington to his house and he was walking me in his front door and the first thing he said -- he introduced me to his wife, he said,

"This is Ken Sabo. The only guy in Vietnam that didn't drink, smoke or do drugs or cuss." And I'm going,

"Well, I cuss every once in awhile when I lose my temper."

That was the one thing he remembered after all that time.

Kenneth Sabo

One of the things, as you know, the people in Vietnam wanted to -- there was a lot of talk about getting back from Vietnam, growing their hair long and riding across the country on motorcycles, is where that came from. I heard a lot of stories about that. And then their friends didn't get to go back and so these guys grew their hair long and got a motorcycle and they drove. Every year I go and "Run For The Wall" and it's a ten-day journey from L.A. to Washington, D.C., to the Vietnam Memorial. This will be my twelfth year. It's a multi-benefited thing. People get a lot of closure and get their homecoming parade and get their welcome home. During the "Run for the Wall," FNGs are a good thing. We kind of look out after them because they haven't been on it before and they're probably going to be going through some pretty emotional experiences between the beginning and the end when they get to the wall. There's a lot of guys that still have not been to the Vietnam Wall. They just can't bring themselves to go and I've dealt with a bunch of guys that have gone on the "Run for the Wall" three, four times and still not made it down to the Wall. They got to D.C. and then they can't do it so they turn around and go home and they still haven't been there. And so that's one of the things. I went the first year in 2000 and it was a good thing for me. And then I went two more years and decided I wanted to give back a little bit. So I got to be a road guard on the "Run for the Wall", and so I get to do the stopping traffic and blocking intersections and stuff like that. So I've got lights and sirens on my bike. And just every year help these guys go from point A to point B to get back there. A lot of guys struggle and it's a big help when they know that there's somebody there that's done it before and can put an arm around them and walk them down there. I go back and see my friend every year. We called him J-Bo but his name was Isadore Jenkins. I drop by and see him every year.

Interviewer

Thank you very much.