



James Valdez

Specialist E5

Army Infantry

Salt Lake City, Utah

Interviewer

Give us your full name.

James Valdez

My name is James A. Valdez.

Interviewer

And where are you from originally?

James Valdez

I'm originally from New Mexico. It's a little town called Sebola, New Mexico.

Interviewer

How do you spell that?

James Valdez

S-E-B-O-L-L-A. New Mexico.

Interviewer

And you grew up there?

James Valdez

No, I didn't grow up there. I grew up here in Salt Lake City.

Interviewer

You go to high school here?

James Valdez

Went to high school here in Salt Lake. Graduated from West High School.

Interviewer

What year was that?

James Valdez

1967.

Interviewer

And what was your life like before you went in the Army?

James Valdez

Well, it was tough but it was fun. We grew up sort of poor, but we always seemed to have money in our pockets.

We sold papers, my brother and I. So it wasn't a bad life.

Interviewer

And how did you end up in the Army?

James Valdez

I was drafted.

Interviewer

How did that happen?

James Valdez

Well, that was before the lottery. What happened was everybody who wasn't going to college was probably sure to be drafted. Even though once I got to Vietnam, there must have been 17, 18, maybe 19 college graduates in just my platoon. And usually those were folks that their college deferment had run out of 'em and they finally ended up in Vietnam. But I moved to California and I started college. My dad wanted me to start college – that's where my dad lived. And I started but many of the classes were – they didn't have enough students so they simply terminated the classes. So one thing I recall is sitting in class when Martin Luther King was murdered. I was sitting there and when I left class, it was LA Harbor College which is a junior college, I believe, in Wilmington, California. But from Wilmington you could see Watts – and that's South Central LA, now they call it South Central LA. And you could see it. You could see it burning. There were riots and then it was all on the news and that sort of thing. So, I didn't have college anymore, so I knew sooner or later I was gonna be drafted. I stayed there and worked for a while and then came back home to Salt Lake and waited to get drafted. Worked here until I got drafted. And I got drafted April 2nd, 1969.

Interviewer

What happened to you? Did you report somewhere?

James Valdez

Yeah, they just sent me a letter that said to report to a recruiting station that I believe was south Main, close to 4th South. And I and a bunch of others reported there and we were taken. I don't know if we were allowed to go home or not. I think we may have been allowed to go home and then the next day we were shipped to California.

Interviewer

Where did you go to basic?

James Valdez

Fort Ord.

Interviewer

How long were you there? How long was basic training?

James Valdez

I'm trying to remember. I think basic training was at least eight weeks, maybe nine weeks. And at the conclusion of

basic training they generally give you what job you're gonna have and mine was 11 Bravo. Do you know what 11 Bravo is? That's infantry.

Interviewer

Tell us what 11 Bravo means.

James Valdez

11 Bravo's infantry. So from there on I went to Advanced Infantry Training, AIT it's called. And that was at Fort Ord also. And that was a little more intensive.

Interviewer

How did you finally go to Vietnam? Was it by airliner? How did you actually go?

James Valdez

Well, after I finished AIT, everybody waited for their orders as to where they were going to go and my orders were for Vietnam, which I expected, as did everybody else that was in AIT with me. And, yeah, they flew us to Vietnam. I think I had a little bit of a leave, not much leave.

Interviewer

Was it an airliner you went on?

James Valdez

Yeah, it was an airliner, big airliner.

Interviewer

What was that like, going to Vietnam?

James Valdez

Well, it was a long ride, one of the longest rides I ever had. I think what's most striking about that is when we landed we could look out the windows and we could see what the country was like. And then even more striking than that was when they opened the doors and you first step out, it was like you're stepping into a sauna because I think it was about 112 degrees and the humidity was real high. So you took a breath and that hot air went into your lungs and it was different.

Interviewer

Where did you land in Vietnam?

James Valdez

In Bien Hoa, I believe. Bien Hoa or Long Binh. I think the airport's in Long Binh. And the first base that I went to for a little more jungle training was in Bien Hoa.

Interviewer

How long did it take for you to adjust to the climate?

James Valdez

Well, it was pretty tough; it always was down in the lowlands. Eventually, when I got to my unit, we were in the

mountains all the time and we all much preferred the mountains to the lowlands. But the lowlands are full of mosquitoes, very hot. And then a lot of the time, during the monsoons it was always wet. We were walking through two feet of water half the time.

Interviewer

So were you assigned to the 101st?

James Valdez

I waited for a while, I think it was at Long Binh. The only person that I had gone to training with were in Long Binh. His name was Allen Udink who has since passed away due to injuries from the war. But me and him were the only two that knew each other over there. So every day you waited for an assignment and they'd just simply call out names at random and tell them where they were going. Unfortunately, we didn't go together. He went to Americal Division, I went to the 101st. And I think what they told me is – in fact, I hadn't thought about this for a long time – you're gonna ship out. So the guys assigned to the 101st were probably corralled and sent to certain billets and then the next day or even the same day we were shipped north.

Interviewer

And where was the 101st at?

James Valdez

Well the 101st was in I Corps which was up north. It's closest to the DMZ. And did we land in Da Nang? No, we didn't go to Da Nang. We went on a C-131, I think, and we landed at a couple bases before we landed at my eventual home base. It was called a home base even though we were up in the mountains all the time, but it was Camp Sally is what it was called.

Interviewer

And you're a new guy. How do they treat a new guy?

James Valdez

They didn't treat ya bad. They knew that you had a lot to learn. And one of the other things that struck me is that it was also a firebase. So what would happen is when the big guns started going off, it first it scared me because I didn't know if it was incoming or outgoing. Thereafter I learned it was outgoing. But you know, even now, to this day, when I hear fireworks and I hear the big booms of the fireworks, that's exactly like outgoing to me. So it kind of makes me kind of happy inside. Because it's nice to have outgoing instead of it coming in.

Interviewer

So tell us about what it's like to get broken in. What do they start you out doing?

James Valdez

Well, they sent me right out to the field. I think I may have been on the base there in a little platoon shack for a day or two. They kept telling me, first they tell you, "You're going up north, you're going up north pretty soon." And you

know, you wonder about that. And then when you get to your destination, Camp Sally they say, "You're going out in the field. A day or two you're going out in the field." And then finally they took us out in the field. Everybody treated me well when I was out there. My first job was carrying ammunition for the M16 machine gun which I didn't like very much. So as soon as RTO came up, they asked me if I wanted to be an RTO and I said sure.

Interviewer

Tell me what RTO means.

James Valdez

An RTO is a Radio Transmission Operator. You carry the radio and you help call in air strikes, you do everything, communicate with other platoon leaders, communicate with the captain's RTO. And what the RTO does is basically carries the radio. I carried the radio for the platoon leader and he was a lieutenant.

Interviewer

Why did this appeal to you?

James Valdez

Why did it appeal to me? Because they told me I'd get a jump in rank as soon as I picked up the radio, which I did. And in addition to that, it wasn't as heavy as carrying that ammunition for the machine gunner.

Interviewer

How long before you saw action?

James Valdez

Seemed to me like it was only a couple of weeks that we started shooting at people, is what it was.

Interviewer

And this was what time of year?

James Valdez

This was in September. In September of 1969. I arrived in Vietnam probably the first of September, 1969.

Interviewer

What was it like? Do you remember your first action?

James Valdez

Well, what was the first action? It really was inconsequential. It was just noises we heard or something, started firing over in that direction. The thing about Vietnam, what was striking, it was so beautiful. It was really like a paradise on earth, at least the countryside was. But you always had to be constantly aware. I think the first action was we got mortared and all we did is we heard the "shoop, shoop, shoop" which is the mortar rounds dropping into the cannons. And then somebody who was more experienced than me said, "Mortars!"

So everybody had to take cover and hide. Half of them didn't explode. Half of 'em were duds. A lot of the ammunition that they used were duds. And what they would do is hit you. I think they were 60 millimeter mortars. They'd fire those off and then they'd pick 'em up because they were like mortar cannons and then they'd take off. And cannon isn't the proper word for it. I can't remember –

Interviewer

Tubes?

James Valdez

Tubes. Exactly. Tubes.

Interviewer

So you're making new friends?

James Valdez

We all got pretty friendly there, I think. We were all out there together, camping out together all the time so everybody was fairly friendly with each other. There was no animosity out there in the field. There was some hidden animosities that came out when we came back in, but not out in the field.

Interviewer

What kind of animosities when you came back in?

James Valdez

Well, there was a lot of racial tension, I think. And I didn't quite understand it, but it was really, how would you call it? There was racial tension, that's all, period. Different cultures. People didn't understand other people's cultures. People thought that everybody should act like them, so. That's the sort of racial animosity that I encountered. It was probably ignorance now that you look back.

Interviewer

How long did you have to serve in the field?

James Valdez

I served in the field until I got wounded and that was about January 5th or so.

Interviewer

Do you mind talking about when you were wounded?

James Valdez

No, not at all.

Interviewer

Tell us about that day.

James Valdez

Well, on that particular day we went out to pull security on some engineers and they were building a road to a firebase. Usually the firebases, the only way you could get there is usually by helicopter because they were up on top of hills. But they were building a road to this firebase. I think it may have been Rakkasan, but I'm not sure, I can't remember the exact name of the firebase at this time. Anyway, the engineers had sort of camped out and set up – we called it set up – on a little knoll. And that little knoll had high ground all around. So we were immediately

apprehensive because we knew that wasn't good because if there's higher ground around you, they can shoot down on ya, drop mortars in on ya.

So we went in and we started securing and we immediately dug foxholes because we were concerned. We didn't often dig foxholes; usually we slept on the ground and that sort of thing, didn't have a need for foxholes. But we knew that we were gonna do that, so we dug foxholes and then lo and behold, the next day they brought in 11 Charlies. If you know what 11 Charlie's are, those are mortar people. So they brought them in and they brought in several, it looked like pallets of rockets for the 11 Charlies. And they piled them up there on that little knoll too. So we knew that something was gonna happen.

On that night, something happened to some engineers and they got stranded up the hill with their Caterpillars, I think one of the Caterpillars broke down. So we were gonna send out a squad to at least secure 'em or go get 'em. And I was gonna go with 'em, you know, I was gonna take the radio. But I stepped off the berm and twisted my ankle so they sent somebody else. I think I kept my radio, they sent another radio man out there. And that night it was probably the only night the entire time that I wasn't at the base camp. I took off my boots. And then lo and behold, it was that night or the next night that they started shooting rockets. And I think they were shooting the rockets that the pile of mortars so they knew if they hit those that they could blow up the whole hill.

So out of my foxhole I started shooting in the direction that the rockets were coming from. You could hear the rockets whizzing right by ya, and luckily they weren't very good shots because they missed the mortars. And I gave away my position because of the flash and somebody from below my foxhole berm threw up a satchel charge. Well, the enemy, not somebody, it was one of the enemy, threw up a satchel charge and it blew up. It didn't make it over the berm but exploded just on the other side of the berm.

So it blew up all this dirt and flash and everybody that was in that foxhole – I think there was only one or two other guys in that foxhole with me. So it hit me in the face and gave me flash burns to my eyes, popped my eardrums. A big hunk of dirt hit me in the face and at first it fell back into my hands and I thought it was a rocket. So I threw it back over. But now that I think about it, it was probably just a big hunk of mud, but it was hot from the explosion. And my eyes swelled shut and I couldn't see the rest of the night. One of the other guys was wounded a little worse, I couldn't see how he was wounded but he had some shrapnel, I believe, in his shoulder. And the other one, I think, was okay. Nobody died which was good.

Interviewer

Was the fight still going on around you?

James Valdez

The fight went on all night long, all around me. And in fact, we called in gunships and they came. You know, we got support quickly, real quickly. And that evening, they even medevaced out a few people that were wounded worse than me.

They asked me, "Do you want to go? You're not that bad."

And I said, "No, I'll stay, I'll wait till morning." So I stayed and waited till morning but they took out a few guys."

Interviewer

And your eyes, were they beginning to open after a while?

James Valdez

They didn't begin to open until I was gone and in a hospital ship.

Interviewer

So could you see out at all?

James Valdez

I couldn't see anything. And then on top of that, they were packed full of dirt and almost swollen shut. They cleaned 'em out at the base and then they sent me on to the hospital ship. I was on the hospital ship within a day

or two. In fact, within the next day that they took me out of the area. They first took me back to a little medic area, can't remember what it's called now at this point, but it's the same as a TV show that we used to see about the Korean War.

Interviewer

MASH?

James Valdez

MASH, a MASH unit. That's what it was. And then the doctors cleaned my eyes out. They said well we're just gonna send you over to the hospital ship so that they can check your eyes to see how badly they are.

Interviewer

Were you concerned?

James Valdez

Well, I was concerned to an extent, but I never did feel that I was gonna be blind. What happened was the medication for the next few months, they gave me, caused my eyes to dilate and everything was real fuzzy but I never thought I would be blind. I always thought that my eyes would heal.

Interviewer

Can you describe what it felt like to lying there and hear the sounds? Were you in pain?

James Valdez

No, I wasn't in a lot of pain. My eyes were swollen, there was some pain, but it wasn't – you know, how when you get hit in the head your head's buzzing. That sort of thing. And my eardrums had popped so I didn't hear a whole lot. And in fact, the other guys in the foxhole just told me, "Stay down, just stay down, Valdez. Don't worry about it. You just stay down." They treated me pretty good.

Interviewer

Again, tell us what you're hearing.

James Valdez

Well I'm hearing a lot of gunshots. They called in air support, they also called in artillery, so there was artillery hitting all the way around us. That's the way you set up artillery. You probably know that from Special Forces. So there was artillery going on, there was gunships going on, there was a lot of firing going on. But I think they hit us and disappeared quick. But they came in and took me out the next morning and it was the third platoon sergeant came in in a loach. He was the pilot but he was there and in fact he carried me out of there. And he said, "Don't even try to walk, I'll just carry ya over there." So he carried me to the loach. You know what a loach is? It's a small helicopter. They flew me out and then he carried me over to the MASH unit once we landed over at Camp Sally. I wasn't as heavy then as I am now. I only weighed about 110 pounds then.

Interviewer

When you got to the hospital ship, did they tell you to go home?

James Valdez

No, no. I was on the hospital ship for some time. And what I remember is my eyes had finally cleared up and I was starting to see but it was all fuzzy because of the – I'm thinking because of the medication. It could've been because I may have had detached retinas. I'm not sure. I'm not sure what it was. For some reason I thought I had damage to my retinas although I've had a detached retina lately and I know the procedure to take care of that is quite different than what they did.

And one day they came and told me they were shipping me over to Japan. So I went to Japan. On the way to Japan they had me on oxygen, I guess, because of the oxygen levels can affect your eye sight if you have, I guess, wounds to your eyes. But I remember one day in Japan, and after I'd been there for several weeks, if not a month, a doctor came over to me and he said, "Valdez, I'm gonna save your life. I'm gonna send you home."

Interviewer

How'd you feel?

James Valdez

Well, I felt pretty darn good. I felt great. I felt great. I knew guys that had been wounded and went back. I knew Marines, friends of mine, that I grew up with that had been wounded and they sent 'em back. So I felt great.

Interviewer

Were you writing home at this time? Were you communicating with your family?

James Valdez

Well, I don't think I could write a whole lot while I was in the hospital. I couldn't see. I couldn't see well enough to write. During the time I was in Vietnam, I was communicating with my family and with my wife almost on a daily basis.

Interviewer

And how long had you been married before you went to Vietnam?

James Valdez

I'd only been married since June. I got married in June, went to Vietnam in September.

Interviewer

That must have been really tough.

James Valdez

It was tough. And I had a daughter that was born while I was in Vietnam. I didn't hear about her birth for about five days. I heard about her birth around December 5th or so, and she was born November 28th.

Interviewer

How did you find out?

James Valdez

They sent me a cable, finally sent me a cable. At that time we were pulling security for another firebase over in Phu Bai and the reason I was at that firebase is because they had sent me back to the rear because I had jungle rot all up and down my arms. And so I was trying to get that to heal and that's where they sent word that I had a child.

Interviewer

Tell us about jungle rot. Tell us about what happens to you.

James Valdez

Jungle rot is simply a little scratch or a sore that you get on your arms, hands, or fingers and then it begins to fester, number one, because you're filthy all the time. Over there, you don't take many baths, and the baths you do take in the hills is usually in a river or something. And then the humidity. With all that humidity you can't scab up and heal. So once I got back to a firebase, all I needed to do was take a bath for a few days and clean up and it started up healing quick. The body heals very quickly.

Interviewer

This was a very interesting time in Vietnam, 1969.

James Valdez

If was. We had missed the Tet Offensive but there were a lot of guys, old timers, we called old timers, that had been down to – what was it called? Not My Lai but another area where the Americal Division had gotten into a lot of problems. So we heard war stories from them about how people were getting killed left and right and that sort of thing. And how even lieutenants and that. One guy told me a story about how his lieutenant just put his head up over a berm to look to see what was going on and got shot right in the head. So we had heard a lot of that. Luckily I didn't have to see a whole lot of that, although some of what I seen was enough to last me. And it's still with me.

Interviewer

Was there a particular big fight that brings to mind, or a particular battle?

James Valdez

No. When I was there, we didn't have big battles like that. We just didn't. At least that was my service. That's why I said that I didn't go through half the stuff that a lot of guys did. And I'm thankful for that. I'm thinking that maybe somebody was helping me out up there. I've always been blessed. I think I'll continue to be.

Interviewer

What were the guys saying? How did you feel about the war?

James Valdez

Well, we thought it was ridiculous that we were out there. It was a general feeling that this is ridiculous the way the war was being conducted, was ridiculous. That it was simply a way for people that were spending a lot of time in the service to get their combat experience and achieve higher rank. Half of them didn't know what they were doing up there. When I first arrived there, the company had this captain that was like a mad dog. He wanted to get into every little scrape he could. He just loved it and would send out squads as decoys, as bait, so that he could get into a bigger skirmish there. He didn't last long. But he knew what he was doing, he knew how to read maps, he knew where to take us, he knew how to deploy us, that sort of thing. Then they sent out another one who wanted his combat – I'm trying to remember what the exact name is.

Interviewer

CID? Infantry badge?

James Valdez

Well it's that too. But there's a way that career people can also achieve rank by having combat experience out in the field, and field experience. So they sent him out and he didn't know what he was doing. The guy that was running the entire company was his RTO, his radio man. His name was Garcia. He was running the whole company. He was telling us where to go, he was deploying everything because this guy didn't know what he was doing and he was a light colonel and didn't know what he was doing. So he ran the company up until the time I left, I think.

Interviewer

So tell me what else is going on. Did you guys have any chance to recreate? Did you listen to music?

James Valdez

Well, we listened to music but that was back at camp when we were able to get back to camp. Some of the guys knew other guys that were rear echelon people that had music and that sort of thing. We listened to music and they always had movies. They always had outdoor movies for ya at the camp. But the rear echelon people didn't really like it when we came in because we came in all rugged and already to – you know, I guess it was sort of like cattle driver's coming into town, that's what it reminded me of. Coming into town. They didn't like it that much and they were glad when we left. But we'd come in for what they'd call a stand down. That's two or three days to get new clothes, get new boots, get new equipment and that sort of thing. Clean up a little bit and then go back out. One time they sent us for a stand down at one of the beaches, they called it Coco Beach. And we were there for about three days or so and then we went back out in the field.

Interviewer

Did you have much contact with the civilians?

James Valdez

Well, we weren't allowed to go into the villages. The 101st Airborne wasn't allowed to go into the villages. Even though I was in Vietnam, I never did taste Vietnamese food until I left Vietnam and came back here. But we'd go through the villages. We'd catch a ride, we'd have to pull our patches off. For example, if we wanted to go over to Camp Evans when we'd come in for a stand down then we'd have to take our patches off, hitch a ride with one of the trucks and go into Camp Evans.

Interviewer

Why was it so critical that the 101st not be recognized like that?

James Valdez

Well, simply because they didn't want us in the villages, it was off limits to the 101st. At least the ones in Camp Sally. If you know where Camp Sally is, it was right across the river from Hue. So the destruction of the Tet

Offensive and the Battles of Hue were still on there. And I simply think that was probably the reason is that they didn't want to risk GIs getting killed in the villages. But we had to go through to get to Camp Evans because Camp Evans was on the other side.

Interviewer

Were you taken by helicopter often?

James Valdez

That's the only way we traveled. We almost always went out by helicopter. And then the helicopter would drop us off somewhere and they'd give us an assignment, go up that hill. Come down that hill. Or they'd take us to a firebase to secure the firebase or to do patrol around the firebase, that sort of thing.

Interviewer

Do you have any reaction today when you hear a Huey in the air?

James Valdez

I don't see any Hueys anymore. That's the problem. These new helicopters, they don't sound like Hueys. But I do. Yeah, I remember. In those days I used to love to fly in Hueys. It was fun to me. I don't really like to fly much anymore in anything. But, yeah, we used to sit there with our legs hanging out. And a bunch of us. And the Huey would make a turn like that and I guess the centrifugal force would hold us in even though we looked like we were looking straight and looking at the ground. You probably know that. You probably been in Hueys before.

Interviewer

You were married and your wife's pregnant. How old are you?

James Valdez

Probably... well, it was in 1969, so I probably just turned 20.

Interviewer

So your first baby, too, right?

James Valdez

Yes.

Interviewer

Talk about fear and what were your thoughts when you first really felt like I'm in a war and I'm afraid.

James Valdez

Maybe I don't remember, but I think the Army teaches ya to turn fear to anger. And on top of that, the training on top of that just kind of makes you do things in an automatic way. I don't know that I had fear, other than a little bit of anxiety and elevated alertness. I think when I was afraid was when I thought they were gonna send me back. That's when I felt fear. But I don't think I was ever afraid out there. Now there was a time one time when I was pulling guard – because we'd have to pull guard all night long – that are heard noises and it wasn't fear, but I was

ready to start blasting away. Because I was at the machine gun position. I was ready to start blasting away.

And another guy that was with me, I woke him up and he said, "Don't worry about it. It's not nothin' up there."

Well we couldn't see. Sometimes you couldn't see your hand in front of your face.

And he said, "It's the guy behind us."

The guy behind us was stirring in his sleep and it got into my mind that somebody was crawling. We had enough weapons over there that we could take care of ourselves if we had to, you know, so long as we got the jump on 'em. I thought.

Interviewer

So you're in a real jungle area at this time.

James Valdez

It was thick jungle, triple canopy jungle sometimes.

Interviewer

Can you describe the jungle for people?

James Valdez

Well, depending on where you were at, up in the jungle. If you were there where the trail had already been patted down – and we could tell that because we could walk up on it and see where they'd been going. And then sometimes you could even still smell 'em going through there. And that put us on higher alert, put us on high alert and we knew, and we could tell. We had a scout. We could tell if they'd been there recently or not. One time we came upon a place where they just finished cooking. As soon as they heard us, they took off; even left some of their rice balls there

So we knew we were gonna have some problems there. And in fact, we did. We ran into one and our scout killed him. The others ran off. But we knew they were gonna come back. So we were all on high alert. The problem is that we started getting ready by calling in fire support and that sort of thing. And my lieutenant had miscalculated where we were at. He didn't read the map right so when we called in a test fire, it was about three or four clicks away. And you know what "clicks" mean. Three or four clicks could've been about a mile, two miles away. So we were in more of a panic then. Not in a panic, but we were concerned. We thought this guy doesn't know what he's doing.

Finally, we figured out where we were, although we didn't do it until the next day. Luckily we didn't get hit that night. But we had a body there and that was something else. And some of the guys relished in it, I'm sorry to say. They took pictures next to the body and that. And that was the first time I'd seen anything like that so it shocked me a bit, you know, to see somebody dead. And to have 'em pull out his wallet and see pictures of his children and that sort of thing. It's something I'll never forget.

Interviewer

I would like to know more about the cultural differences of the men. We've had some Native Americans that talked about it. But they were treated kind of exotically. They were revered.

James Valdez

They were. We revered 'em. Yeah. Well I think because it seemed to me they instinctively knew what they were doing. Yeah. I remember one little guy in another platoon, he was a Native American from Oklahoma. He used to carry an M-60 machine gun and he knew what he was doing. But the machine gunner in our platoon, he knew what he was doing too. He was a black guy named Watson, Charles Watson. And the other machine gunner was another black guy named Charles Watson. And as soon as something came up, they were up there. They were up

there.

Interviewer

Two guys named Charles Watson?

James Valdez

I'm sorry, the second one wasn't named Charles Watson, he was from Mississippi and his name escapes me at the time, although I really liked him a lot. But in every platoon you have two machine gunners and Charles was one and the other black guy was another one. And as soon as we hit anything, they were up there on the forefront laying out a base of fire. Charles ended up getting hurt because they were blowing an LZ and he got too close to the explosion. And the other guy, I don't know what happened to him. After I left Vietnam, I watched "The Stars and Stripes" a lot to make sure none of my friends were in there or to see if any of my friends or any of my platoon buddies were in there.

I think the cultural differences were, you know, some of these guys from California – and one particular guy, I don't know why he had animosity. I guess they just didn't understand the way other people acted and that sort of thing. And I think I was one of the only Latinos in my platoon for some time. In fact, I think I was the only one. No, there was one other one and then there was another guy that I buddied up with that came from California. But it was as though they were pulling strings on me.

"Well, who are you gonna hang out with? You gonna hang out with the blacks or are you gonna hang out with the white guys?"

I said, "Who am I supposed to hang out with?"

But there was a guy from Chicago who would talk about the problems that he had in Chicago with black people and this and that. And then a lot of the blacks didn't like the way they were being treated either. So that didn't really surface out in the field but it did surface when we went back to base camp and everybody started grouping. And I didn't group too much because there wasn't too many Latinos there. So I'd go between groups but I'd hear the animosity between the groups.

Interviewer

How did that happen? You're watching each other's backs in the field and then you come back and group? That seems very high school, but you guys were young.

James Valdez

Yeah, we were just kids. Kids with guns, and frags, and LAWS, and M79 grenade launchers. We were deadly. Give a kid a gun. And we were ready. And there were times there when I felt – especially times when I got hungry, I was itching for some action. And I think about it now and I'm wondering why. But I think it's just your age and immaturity.

Interviewer

You mentioned "frag."

James Valdez

Hand grenade. Hand grenades.

Interviewer

Some people talk about the officers and incidents where officers weren't liked and maybe they met an accident.

James Valdez

Yeah. I didn't see that happen. I know that people started saying you better get this guy out of here because he don't know what he's doing in the field. In fact, our platoon leader, they took him out and they gave a field grade promotion to a sergeant that was there, made him a lieutenant and he knew what he was doing. He was pretty good at what he was doing. And he was what we called a "shake-and-bake" sergeant. You know what that is? Do you know what that is? A shake-and-bake sergeant are people that they – I don't know how they pick 'em in basic training or AIT, but they decide well we're gonna send this guy to NCO school, send him out to Vietnam to be a leader. And they don't necessarily train 'em that well. They don't necessarily know what they're doing. This guy did. He was from Chicago. I'm trying to remember his name now. I don't know. But he knew what he was doing. And then the lieutenant, they sent him back and gave him a promotion to captain. He thought it was because of the good work he did.

Interviewer

Do you ever watch Vietnam movies?

James Valdez

I do. I do some.

Interviewer

What's your impression of the films?

James Valdez

Most of 'em are mostly hokey, but one that really struck me was a combat scene in "Dead Presidents." Yeah. Although it's still hokey. But that got, I think, the combat and the tracers right. And you've seen that and I'm sure you have.

Interviewer

Talk about the noise and the confusion in battle, in a firefight.

James Valdez

Well there is a lot of confusion because people start yelling and then lieutenant starts yelling commands and wanting you to do this and do that. So there's some confusion in there but I think for the most part, because of your training, you have at least some intuition as to what you should be doing. But, yeah, it's very confusing. And then there's all of the smoke and inability to see. And like I said, I'm fortunate that I didn't get involved in a whole lot of real ugly gory stuff like some of the stories that I've heard from other friends that have been in Vietnam.

Interviewer

Did Vietnam change you?

James Valdez

Absolutely.

Interviewer

How?

James Valdez

Well, number one, I grew up. And after Vietnam I decided if I can do this, I can do anything. And up until that point, you know, even though Vietnam was sort of an adventure in my life, it was really a growing up process and really I think politicized me. Although maybe I was fairly politically sophisticated before that, but I decided that I needed to know more about the politics of stuff that gets people killed.

Interviewer

Talk more about that.

James Valdez

Well, as far as I'm concerned it was just a commercial venture and we were the guinea pigs. They didn't care. They really didn't care if we got killed. Look at all the people that died in Vietnam. For what? For what? There was nothing accomplished. Once they got there, I don't think they had any intention of ending the war, they just wanted to prolong it. It was a commercial venture. When we went into Camp Evans, you could see that. You could see with all the little supply compounds they had. They had one compound there that looked like it was about five acres inside with nothing but pallets of beer on there. And then other equipment, all the money that goes into Vietnam. And we were expendable. I was very angry when I left Vietnam. I didn't think they were serious about winning the war, I didn't think they did anything to act as though they were serious about winning the war. And Vietnamese and Americans were dying for nothing.

Interviewer

So when you saw on April 30th, 1975, we watched on TV the fall of Saigon and the helicopters leaving the embassy. How did you feel watching that on TV?

James Valdez

Well, I thought it was about time and that it was a shame that now that they had gone over and indoctrinated all these Vietnamese that there was a good chance that they were going to lose their lives because they were on the wrong side. Although I don't know if they did. I'm sure that there were massacres and that sort of thing. And I'm frankly surprised at what I see on television now, the way the Vietnamese people treat Americans and former GIs going back to Vietnam. I'm surprised that there's all that forgiveness. I've wanted to go back; in fact, I was planning it for while. I haven't right now but I'd love to go back.

Interviewer

What would you want to do?

James Valdez

At the very least enjoy the beauty of the country. It's beautiful. And maybe try to go places where I had been. Hue, I'd like to go to Hue. Maybe Saigon, although I never did like the surroundings around Saigon that much. I'm sure

it's much better now. See if Camp Sally or at least the remains of Camp Sally are still there, Camp Evans. Eat some of the food.

Interviewer

Tell us more about basic training and the people there. What was the feeling back in 1969?

James Valdez

Well it was sort of us against them. Us against the lifers is what it was. You know, we were there. And there was a lot of strangers but there were good people, all of them. And there were a lot of folks that came from Salt Lake that I knew as a kid that were in the platoons. I was in the big cement billets that they had down there at Fort Ord. I went back to see that about ten years ago. Fort Ord's now abandoned and the billets are still there. They had barracks, also, old wooden World War II barracks. Those are all gone. When I was in basic training I was in the billets and then when I went to infantry, AIT, Advanced Infantry Training I was in the barracks. I think we all got along pretty well. We had to. You had to. And despite all the bad things that I think about the Army, you know, there was a reason and a rhyme to it all. I think they taught us to work together because we'd have to do inspections all the time and that sort of thing. And so we'd learn to work together to make sure the billets and the barracks were clean before we left. That had to be done before we left to go train.

Interviewer

Tell us more about us against them.

James Valdez

Well, us against them – we didn't have much respect for career military people and we especially didn't like the drill sergeants because they weren't doing anything. Of course they were training us, but you know, the way that they would train us, we didn't like it. Although in the long run, it may have been good for us in that it helped us group together, at least in mind and spirit. And us against them. Me and several of the guys, there was this – what was the officer training candidate that was there that we used to just love to show him up in terms of running and every else, so we kind of smiled and tried to show him up everywhere we ran, acting like we weren't tired and that sort of thing, and tried to tire him out. So in that respect it was a unifying thing. It unified us all even though there were a lot of different cultures and that sort of thing there. You learned about those. There was a Japanese guy that was really a good guy. We'd learn something about his culture. And other guys, guys from Tennessee, guys from the Appalachians. Good people. Good people, just young guys, just like us.

Interviewer

Were you aware of what was going on with the war protests?

James Valdez

Yes, absolutely. I was glad they were going on. I was glad that Jane Fonda went over there. I think her going over there helped stop the war as far as I'm concerned. She's never received any commendation for it, at least not in

the mass media. But I think if it weren't for people like that, they'd have dragged us into that thing for 20 years.

Interviewer

Can you talk again about the protesters and why you supported them?

James Valdez

I supported the protesters because I think they were helping to end the war.

Interviewer

That must be tough to go to a war that you're against?

James Valdez

Well, I suppose it is. I think that they've changed things now in the military so that they can control that a little bit more. Now they've got an all volunteer Army. The other problem is that now what they're doing is they're making these guys do – what do they call it – deployments. I can't imagine going over there and hoping to make it out by the end of your deployment, hoping to stay alive by the end of your deployment only to come back and say you're going back. I think that's preposterous. It's ridiculous. And the warmongers don't care. You know, Dick Cheney. It's ridiculous.

Interviewer

Going to college. There seemed to be a division between those who were drafted and those who didn't. Were you one of those who absolutely didn't want to serve?

James Valdez

No. I knew I was going to serve. I always knew I was going to serve. All my family's always served, good or bad wars, they've always served. There's been in every single generation of my family we've served.

Interviewer

We've had vets who have had really hard troubled lives. What is it about you that you could move on?

James Valdez

Oh, I don't know that my life's been any better than theirs. I don't know. If could've been my upbringing. My upbringing, we were pushed to succeed. And even though I may be a success, I may be a failure. Who knows. I don't know. I don't know that I'm any more of a success than anybody else. I know that there's a lot of GIs that have had some terrible, horrendous experiences and that could be the reason. I don't know. Maybe my experience was want nearly as bad or as disabling as theirs.

Interviewer

You had a father who was in the war?

James Valdez

My father was in World War II. My grandfather was a World War I vet, my Grandpa Sanchez. And my Grandpa Valdez, he was also in World War I. And then above that, I've heard from my father that some of my great-grandparents were even in the Spanish-American War and served in the Pueblo Rebellion. My brother was in the

service, we sent in after he finished college; he was a captain. I have a nephew that was in the Marines. I have another nephew that was in the Navy. I've got brothers-in-law that were in the Army; many of my family have served and they continue to do it. Even though my nephews, when they were going to go in – two nephews. One of them went to Afghanistan, he just got back, and one of them was in the Marines in Iraq. And I advised them both not to go. But they went anyway, so it doesn't matter. My children haven't gone, I'm sure my grandchildren will go. Some will. That's just part of, I guess, our family. We probably look at those pictures of guys in uniform and decide, well that's for me too. Just like maybe a kid in a ghetto; sees that one of his relatives has been to prison and figures he's gonna be prison material also. I don't know.

Interviewer

When you returned, any trouble getting right back into the system and your marriage and your life?

James Valdez

No, I didn't. I immediately went to college. In fact, I asked for an early out so I could start college. I got a 13-day early out and I think I was discharged on March 17th of 1971, and I immediately started college. So I just got right into it as soon as I got out. Started working and worked my way through college, and raising my family as best I could, being gone all the time.

Interviewer

And was Vietnam part of your daily memory?

James Valdez

Yes.

Interviewer

Can you talk about that?

James Valdez

I was bitter, I was very bitter. I felt like my government had just tried to kill me and didn't care if I was expendable or anybody else was expendable. But, I reaped the benefits of the GI bill. I'm no longer bitter at the government. I don't think it's the government itself, it's the people running the government. It's the corporate influence on our government. And I was angry, too. I went to the hospital because they told me you're gonna have to have your eyes checked often because of the wounds to my eyes. And I had other problems with my ankles and they didn't treat me very well, so I never went to the vet's hospital again, until 2006. Now they treat me great. They're great. I think it was the times. It was just the times. Vietnam vets weren't treated very well, even though they were over there. And I don't think it was the protest people that didn't treat vets well, it was the entire system didn't treat Vietnam vets very well. But they do now. So I'm over all that bitterness. I'm over it. I'm skeptical about any of these other wars that the powers that move government get us into.

Interviewer

Did you keep in touch with any of your friends in Vietnam?

James Valdez

I didn't. I tried to. I learned of my friend, Udink's death after he died. And then I hadn't realized that he – we used to write each other when he was in Americal and I was in 101st Airborne. And I didn't learn till he died until I ran into his cousin who was also a lawyer. And he told me. So I wrote his parents and they wrote back and indicated that he had been wounded in Vietnam, was a paraplegic and at some point just gave up. I've tried to locate other friends that I was in Vietnam with, but I can't seem to find 'em, even on the Internet. I just wanted to make sure that they come out okay.

Interviewer

Anything else you want to say to your children, grandchildren, about the war?

James Valdez

Well, you have to be leery about what the government drags you into. And it's not necessarily the government, it's the powers that push the government. This Iraq thing, I believe has been ridiculous from the start. The Afghanistan thing, I think is also to a large extent – I know they were looking for Bin Laden and they made Bin Laden the big bad boy, but you know, I don't think we should be over there, putting our sons in harm's way for corporate enterprise.