Rick Miller
Platoon Leader
"**Breaking Point"**

Interviewer
Tell us how you got into the service and your early life.

Rick Miller
Thanks for having me here; it's an honor. I don't get a lot of chances to speak about Vietnam, in the early days nobody wanted to hear anything so this is comfortable. I grew up in Pasadena, California and graduated from high school in 1965. I wasn't the greatest student in school, mostly C's and B's. I did a lot of surfing and snow skiing and waterskiing and worked a job. But Vietnam was starting to hit pretty hard and my parents were both in World War II, neither one of them went overseas. My father was in the Army Air Force as a tail gunner on a B-17 and my mom was in the Navy in La Jolla and they got married in their uniforms at the end of World War II. That picture was always up on the mantle. I guess when the Vietnam War came along, I was an art student, first year college in a community college, with really no direction, this war came along and I knew I would be going.
Actually, I got mononucleosis my first semester in school and had to drop most of my classes. And the draft board heard about it and they started getting a hold of me. So I went and beat them to the punch and I volunteered and joined with a buddy. We never saw each other again. You're supposed to join on the buddy system and go through the basic stuff but we got separated right away. I entered as a helicopter mechanic and I went through that schooling, mostly to find out that I was going to end up as a door gunner on a helicopter and I wasn't so happy about that. So I volunteered for Officer Candidate School and went through that; and Ranger school, only to end up in the infantry which was probably worse than a door gunner.

Interviewer
Tell us a little about basic training and where you took it.

Rick Miller
I took it at Fort Ord, California, right on the coast. Beautiful setting but they ran us to death and did the usual nine weeks of training. And spinal meningitis was going through the Fort at the time and we had a lot of restrictions because of that. It wasn't so tough for me, I was fairly athletic and the training wasn't so hard. And right after that I went to Fort Rucker, Alabama to train as a mechanic and door gunner on helicopter.

Interviewer
How long was that training there?

Rick Miller
I went through a couple of schools, each about nine weeks long. And one thing they convinced me that I didn't want to do that was all the KP that I had. Towards the end of that I applied for OCS, and I also applied for Flight School; I really wanted to become a helicopter pilot more than anything. And I did really well on the written exam to get into Flight School, so well that I scored the highest ever in the 3rd Army, and some General called me to his office and gave me a certificate and everything and they promptly lost my application and I didn't hear from them again until halfway through my tour in Vietnam so I never did go to Flight School because part way through Vietnam I didn't want to go back. So I had a mixed bag of doing all that.

Interviewer
Where'd you take OCS?

Rick Miller
That was at Fort Benning and that was a six-month long school. And that was pretty tough; all the beginning stuff, spit-shining not only your boots but the floors and keeping everything so neat and learning to eat square meals. And square meals are actually where you eat like this and sit on four inches of your chair and there's tape behind you. You can only look at the guy across the way and sit on a little four-man table. You had to be quiet. I got caught eye-balling, I guess talking to my neighbor guy once, and had to write a 4,000-word essay on why I didn't want to do that. It had to be type-written and all my buddies and I stayed up all night typing whatever we could find in any kind of manual. But it was good training.
After that I went through Ranger School and I think that was probably the best training I had going into Vietnam. That was physically very demanding. That was also at Fort Benning, first three weeks, and then Dahlonega in Northern Georgia and then Eglin in Florida for the last three weeks. I lost 25 pounds in nine weeks' time, it was fairly rigorous but it was excellent training. Once I got to Vietnam, that kind of training made the physical part of Vietnam easy. The emotional part was much more difficult.

Interviewer
Tell us about that Ranger training.

Rick Miller
The first three weeks were at Fort Benning and it was up at four o'clock and a lot of physical training for a couple of hours and then breakfast and some classes. Ranger School is a leadership school and learning to patrol being out in the mountains there daily. After the first week or so, it was less classroom and more just in the mountains around Georgia. And then the next three weeks were up in Dahlonega, Georgia at a little camp up there. And we were out all the time, averaging a couple of hours sleep a night. And patrolling and rock climbing, up there we learned to climb rocks and repel and repel the stretches off of 100-foot cliffs in the middle of the night. And after that we went to Eglin Air Force Base down into the swamps down there. Did a lot more patrolling and once again a couple of hours sleep at night. It was quite physical.

Interviewer
You came out of there as a 2nd Lieutenant.

Rick Miller
After that I stayed in Fort Benning, Georgia and ran a rifle range for basic rifle marksmanship for recruits. My mind says nine months; I think it was more like five months of doing that, running a rifle range. I was quite proficient with any weapon, and another Lieutenant and I were developing a quick-draw, Annie Oakley style of shooting, where we would take BB guns and shoot from the hip on aluminum disks thrown in the air. You could hear them hitting. This was a program we were developing and trained recruits in more of a quick draw instead of the standard prone position of firing. Because everything in Vietnam, they were finding out, was shooting from the hip.
In Vietnam you're either ambushed or you ambush somebody, and that's about all it is. And when you get ambushed you just start shooting. You don't have time to get down on the ground. So we developed that program there. And then after my time there I received orders for Vietnam and had a 30-day leave. And I had gotten married during that period to my high school sweetheart. Then December 7, 1967 was my 21st birthday and the next day I drove up to San Francisco and on the 10th of December I flew to Vietnam. So I was fairly young for a Lieutenant, quite young.
Right after I got to Vietnam I went through some more training over there and was assigned to my platoon just before Christmas, 1967. I went right out into the field and the first few weeks in Vietnam was fairly easy. I didn't realize it at the time, my Commanding Officer, the Company Commander that I reported to--and most of the operations were company size, seemed to hate my guts and tried to ride me into the ground literally, trying to get me to crack and having me do things personally like dig up bodies, that was one of the first things I remember doing in Vietnam. And he had me do it, fortunately, I got somebody to help me because it was booby trapped and ended up half a body in a plastic bag and we had to examine it for papers and that kind of thing. So for the first almost month, this Captain was riding me really hard and I guess I did okay towards the end of January, 1968. One night we set up our positions and he called me over and he cracked open a bottle of Drambuie and got a couple of glasses, out in the middle of the jungles, and gave me a shot of Drambuie and after that I was part of his team, I guess. And that turned out to be a cornerstone of his team and the 2nd Platoon, my company, became his main unit and we did everything. The other platoons didn't seem to do as much.

Interviewer
What reason did he have for riding you so hard?

Rick Miller
Maybe it was my age, maybe I'm not a big commanding kind of person. And I think for my own safety, really. He wanted to either break me or make me, and I guess I survived. Early on I found that I had to rely upon my men and work with them and be a part of the team in the platoon. And I did everything that they did. I walked point a number of times to see what walking point was like. And that's one of the most horrific jobs in Vietnam. Out there alone, leading, and checking for booby traps. If anything happened I was the first guy killed. So I tried my hand at that; I was out on listening posts. I did everything. I wielded a machete at times--we could only make a hundred yards in a jungle all day and I was out there doing all that. So I did everything.

Interviewer
You're doing the same thing as your Non-Commission guys?

Rick Miller
Regular enlisted men, yeah. There was no difference after awhile. The orders came down through me but we all did everything together.

Interviewer
Where were you stationed at this time?

Rick Miller
This was northeast of Saigon in the rubber plantations. Our main camp was at Bearcat, I guess that's kind of

northeast of Saigon near Tan Son Nhat, Long Binh area. So we were kind of in the semi-jungles there and also in the rubber plantations, both overgrown rubber plantations and existing.

Interviewer

And your job was just to go out on patrols during the day or at night or both?

Rick Miller

The basic operation for me in all of Vietnam was search and destroy during the day. Out on patrol all day long and then we set up ambushes at night or just defensive positions at night, with listening posts. Every night out on these positions, we were always in two- or three-man positions and one person was always awake at night. So you never got much sleep in Vietnam. Now and again we'd come back to a base camp which wasn't much and every couple of months we'd go back to the big base camp, Bearcat or Dong Tam, and get a shower and maybe sleep on a bed and be indoors. But basically we were out there all the time. So that kind of takes me right up to the end of January, on January 31st, the Tet Offensive hit. And we were out at night in a position and we were called back in, which was very unusual. Up to then I hadn't seen much action, we'd been ambushed a few times and sprung a couple of ambushes and a few people hurt. But in the middle of the night on January 31st the Tet Offensive hit and we were--

Interviewer

Give us some details on running into booby traps and stuff like that, before the Tet Offensive.

Rick Miller

The first ambush that we hit we were in old rubber which was kind of tall trees; it's almost tripled canopied with bushes that are 20-, 30-feet high and we're going through them. I can't remember, we had three Platoons, we were all kind of spread out and we got hit towards the front. And I guess that I had never been fired at like that before, this was maybe the first week in January. All I did was hit the ground and I remember looking at ants.

All hell broke loose for maybe 30 seconds, and guys are hit and we're shooting back. As a platoon leader it's not my job to hit the ground like that but it was over in a flash. A couple of 1st Platoon guys got hit and so we set up a position. We also tried chasing down the ambushers and there was a blood trail, we followed it the best we could, hoping we didn't get re-ambushed following that, which they often did. And they brought some medevac helicopters with long cables with force penetrators on them and hauled these guys out. I remember lying on the ground thinking these are the luckiest guys in the world, they're leaving; they're getting out of there. They did come back, I didn't know that ‘til later, but they were out of the war and out of harm's way at least for awhile. And we got ambushed a couple of times like that, fairly minor.

You ask about booby traps and that kind of thing, and yeah we found minor booby traps. When I was on point I never found anything but my guys would find hand grenades that were wired up as a booby trap. We tripped a couple of those but they were older and they went off and there were some minor injuries but nothing really horrific. So my first month up until the Tet Offensive was minor and I was beginning to think this was not so bad. It was pretty easy. Back in our base camp, our battalion base camp at Binh Son rubber plantation, there was always one company there and there was some minor bunkers built up sandbags that you could kind of climb under to get out of the rain. But you couldn't sit up; they were only about this high. That was about all we had there. We had a building where some hot food was prepared. We came back there one night a week or a couple of nights a week. And we got hit one time while we were there. Some guys, Viet Cong, tried to come in through the wire and we were able to stop them and kill them. But nothing major happened there. I remember scorpions this big and I've got some pictures of scorpions about that big. Black ones, jet black, that were running around. I remember some of the geckos running around and how dirty it was and the smells. As far as action, just not much happened my first month there.

Interviewer

Take us up to that Tet Offensive.

Rick Miller

Yeah, middle of the night we got called back to this rubber plantation, our headquarters there, and put on trucks. We remember going out that evening and I remember seeing people in villages around. When we left the Binh Son rubber plantation and going out for a couple of days, I remember seeing people celebrating the Tet--New Year's--in their yellow clothes and maybe doing some dancing and music in little villages.

But we got called back and put on trucks and taken back to Long Binh, where we arrived about dusk in the morning, or near there. My memory is not perfect on any of this stuff. Long Binh is a huge insulation with probably 20,000 people. Within a part of that is a 2nd Field Force headquarters and I think General Weyand was there and he was the one that had realized that this was going to happen and was already calling back a lot of the troops that Wesmorland had sent out. We got loaded onto helicopters and flown into a village early in the morning, right next to this 2nd Field Force headquarters, a place called Widows Village where the widows of the South Vietnamese Army, dead soldiers of widows, were moved into this village.

The VC had come in, in the weeks before the Tet Offensive, and built bunker complexes and other fortifications within this to launch an attack on the 2nd Field Force headquarters. They launched this attack in the middle of the night and an armored unit was called in to set up blocking along the road. We were flown in, in the morning, to clear

this village and this is where my platoon was put, right in the middle, the 2nd Platoon, and the others on the flanks. We marched through this village and it took us all day to clear the village, fighting hooch-to-hooch, or mostly grass hooches and some other, more built up buildings. But the backside of this had some more concrete buildings and it took us all day to go through this village, fighting bunker-to-bunker basically.
We had rocket ship support, gunships--rockets from these gunships, I don't mean rocket ships from outer space or anything. We swept through this village and cleared it; by afternoon we had it cleared and we'd killed about 50 VC and we had only taken one casualty. One of my guys, Smiley, had been shot through the mouth and that was my first casualty as a Platoon Leader. I remember coming around a building later in the afternoon and encountering him and he'd been shot through the mouth, blood and everything, it was horrible to see one of your guys like that. We got a medevac and got him out of there and we finished clearing the village.
The last part was the hardest part; we had a few guys that just really couldn't get them out of their foxholes on the far side of the village. And eventually a few of us had maneuvered and got in there and had killed them. We killed about 50 and we just staked them up like cord wood that day. It was kind of horrific and already sprinkling lime on them and then getting deuce and a half trucks to load the bodies on and dispose of them.
That was the Tet Offensive for me; it was kind of horrific fighting all day with villagers in there, wounded villagers. I remember coming into one hooch, an elderly man had been shot through the head and his daughter was caring for him. Just not much I could do, I got him medical help but I'm sure he died. And the VC were just using them as shields throughout the day. But for me to take only one casualty was just remarkable for the amount --

Interviewer
These VC, they were from North Vietnam?

Rick Miller
No, no they weren't.

Interviewer
They were just local people from the South that were sympathetic to the --?

Rick Miller
Right.

Interviewer
So they could have been villagers themselves, or part of it?

Rick Miller
Right. But Widows Village was basically widows. There were no men except older men, more my age these days. Grey-haired old men without teeth but there were no young men in this village, except VC. They weren't exactly local; they were probably from within five, ten miles. But they had been infiltrating during the day for a couple of weeks, building up this village to launch their attack.

Interviewer
What were you doing before?

Rick Miller
That night we spent in a blocking force nearby this village and just watched all the American armor come in. All night long just tanks, and I've never seen so much military. It's what you envision World War II being like. Westmorland had sent all the troops and everybody on the outskirts of Vietnam, thinking that the whole country was going to get attacked where it had been attacked internally but Viet Cong instead of by the North Vietnamese Army. And so all the armored units and everything were moved back into the main bases. I just remember seeing all this armor all night long.
The next day we were moved to an entirely new location just south of Saigon, about five miles south of Saigon. You could see the outskirts and buildings and everything. We were moved and we were moved into a location where the 101st Airborne was and we took over their area. And they were moved out, flown up to the DMZ. And we set up a brand new base camp there and within nights I was sent out on patrol and ambush. Within nights of that was the first successful ambush that I was involved in.
A couple of miles from Saigon, maybe three miles outside of Saigon, set up a position we were in ambush and there was a road there and I was right on the road with a machine gunner and my RTO, my radio operator. And along came three North Vietnamese people, Army guys in their uniforms. I initiated the ambush and we blew them away from about 30-, 40 feet. We rushed right out to them and set up further security and we took their packs and checked everything for documents and that kind of thing. One guy we could not find the wounds on him and searched everywhere and finally found one little pinhole in his armpit with no exit hole, but yet he was dead. It was the weirdest thing.
I took that guy's wallet and stuffed it in my pocket and I don't know why I kept it, it's against Army regulations. I carried that wallet for awhile and finally got it back to my main base camp and into a locker and eventually took that wallet home and did not open it for many years. I still have that wallet. Later found out that that guy was a 1st Lieutenant, Lieutenant Lakh Minh, and he was brand new in-country, newer than I was. He was from North Vietnam

and he was regular Army. He had pictures of himself in training and all his ID and everything; it was all sealed up in plastic. But that's another story, and I could talk more about that later on.
After that we moved our position slightly and set up a new fire support base, basically for our Battalion and with one company of about a hundred people there all the time. And the companies rotated out of there and I was largely not even in this fire support base dagger. From then on the whole war changed for us. Not only did we move into the rice paddies, out of the jungles, and it was the strangest thing having all this open country around you. Being in the enclosed jungles and the rubber plantations to being out in this. We were all freaking out at first, open country where people could watch you for half a mile, a mile, two miles, away. But all our encounters from then on were regular Army, North Vietnamese, NVA. We rarely saw VC anymore, none of the local people, we moved right into heavy duty contact regularly.
And on the 13th of February, so this is a couple of weeks after the Tet Offensive--and it seems like forever--my platoon ran into heavy contact on the morning of the 13th. It was out in the rice paddies but these people--and I use words that are probably inappropriate these days--but these Gooks, these North Vietnamese guys, were well entrenched. And they caught us, we were not in an ambush area, but they had a huge area and we were right in it, probably 50 feet from what turned out to be their bunkers. They badly pinned my platoon down and we were taking casualties left and right and I was calling in artillery and the gunships and it was all we could do to get back out of there. I took a whole bunch of casualties and we were calling in the medevac.
By the second time the medevac was in and we were loading -- and these medevacs, these guys were just, the pilots, were just crazy to come in. A hundred miles an hour just rice paddy height and then just come to a stop. And we'd load the wounded and the bodies on and by the second time this guy came in, it was so slick with blood that we threw one guy in there and he went right out the other door. And the guy that I was with, Kunkel, was badly wounded himself, he and I just laughed about this. Right in the middle of all the bullets and we just had to laugh about it. It's just black humor at the time.

Interviewer
When these helicopters come in, would they land on the rice paddies?

Rick Miller
A foot or two or five feet above.

Interviewer
So you would throw your wounded --?

Rick Miller
Right. With all the water, I mean with the router coming down and water splashing everywhere and you could see the helicopter being hit with bullets but you couldn't hear anything anymore because of the helicopter. But I ended up, I don't know exactly how many casualties that day, but there were quite a few dead and quite a few wounded. And Kunkle, who was one of the guys that kind of attached himself to me, he was always around. He and I were the ones loading all the bodies. He got hit really hard that day and I remember watching him tumble when he got hit, he was trying to run down a dyke to withdraw a little bit. And he got hit from behind, got hit in the back of the head with a big piece of shrapnel. He got hit in the back by a B-40 rocket, small shrapnel, and he got hit in the arm by AK and he was the one after that helping me load the helicopter. That's just one of the most horrific memories I have of watching this guy get hit like that.

Interviewer
How many men are in a Platoon?

Rick Miller
I went out that day with 33 people, platoon's supposed to be 43-44 people and I was never up to full strength, I had about 33. The only letter I wrote about any action was right after this and I wrote my father exactly what happened, it was like a 20-page letter. And I don't remember so many of the details other than reading this letter later on, but I had 33 men that day.

Interviewer
And how many of those were killed or wounded?

Rick Miller
I'm not sure exactly the number that day but I wrote after the next day I had ten killed and ten wounded, so I had 13 left and I'm not sure that's accurate. That's what I wrote my father, I don't remember exactly. I can't remember the names; it just kind of goes away.
We were able to eventually withdraw and the next day my whole battalion went looking for this unit, obviously a large unit, and Charlie Company landed in this area and they got ambushed. And this was a huge ambush area, probably a quarter mile across, and Charlie Company went in with about 100-110 guys and they were so badly ambushed and then they sent my company in after. And because my platoon had been hit so hard and my platoon was the last one to go in and we went in with three helicopters.
And for some reason the pilot landed us between the good guys and the bad guys. And we didn't know where we

were, it's just chaos when something like that is happening. Already there's all this artillery coming in and gunships hitting an area and I couldn't tell where the Americans were but I knew that by the fire I was very close to the North Vietnamese. And it turned out to be a regiment, 900 NVA that day that were ambushing all of us. And we were 50 to 100 feet from them when we came in.

My helicopter was the first of the three that came in and they hit my helicopters that came in and my machine gunner and door gunner got hit and fell out at about 50-75 feet in the air and the rest of us jumped out. I could see that the pilot was already slumped and the door gunner next to me, right behind me, was already hit. I presumed the pilot was hit and we jumped out probably 50 feet in the air and the helicopter didn't make it, it went all the way to the ground essentially. It just shot out of the air and I remember seeing it crumple and the tail router coming around and the blades going this way and that. The other two helicopters landed short and got in there. We gathered the best we could, I probably went out with more than 13 men that day, they probably gave me some more, I probably had 18 or 20. And we found our wounded, I found my machine gunner and his assistant, and I remember trying to patch them up.

We were being shot at and we were in rice paddy water and we had little dykes, burms, we were hiding behind and they had so much fire power, the NVA, they could shoot this down. We had to keep moving and I was dragging this one guy, the assistant machine gunner. He'd been shot and I didn't realize it shot*through* the chest, so I was patching him up on the front side but only to realize that he had a second chest wound and he was breathing the paddy water through his back. He was not doing well.

My radio operator, he was trying to figure out where the Americans were, what was going on, and if anybody had seen us come in. We couldn't figure it out. I could hear the Americans and I could kind of tell they were probably 200 meters away. Right after he's figuring that out and trying to make contact, he gets a transmission that the FO, the Forward Observer for the artillery, who was my best friend at that time...was a Kilo, he was killed. And then the radio was shot out and we had no more communication.

It took us about three hours for me to get my platoon together and to low crawl and get back over to the Americans and make sure that they didn't shoot us as we were coming back in. And by nighttime we had pretty much subdued the NVA but there was another all-day operation and we slept with our dead. And this one guy whose chest I was trying to take care of, it was probably five hours before we got a medevac out for him and the other wounded. And I just remember just holding his hand and trying to keep him alive and help him smoke a cigarette. But he was grey and he did make it, I got a letter from him.

And I slept on a little dry patch that night next to the body of the FO who was killed, Lieutenant Osborne. The next day we encountered a little more but we cleared the area and found out they had concrete bunkers and everything and they more or less disappeared. I mean we killed a lot of 'em but they had so much. And the documents we captured and the prisoners we captured confirmed that it was a regiment and they had about 900 guys there. And that was the unit that I had encountered the day before. That's what I remember as Valentine's Day.

Interviewer

So you were outnumbered almost as ten to one?

Rick Miller

I have no idea. Yeah, probably. We had probably almost 200 guys on the ground by the time we got everybody in there. That's less than ten to one. But we had fire power they didn't have. We had the Vietnamese Air Force supporting us that day and their old A-1s, dropping 250 pound bombs, 500 pound bombs and we had gunships and artillery and we threw everything we could at them. It's noisy; a battle is so noisy you can't hear anything.

Interviewer

In World War II, the Commanders went off and write letters home to the parents or loved ones of the deceased. Did you ever have to do that?

Rick Miller

Yeah, that's further down the river. I can jump ahead and answer that question; I did have to do that.

Interviewer

Give us as much detail as you can.

Rick Miller

I told you I was young, I was 21 years old. But I guess I was good at my job. I got very good at ambushing and I had lots of job offers to work in Operations Offices, S-3 shops, in higher up organizations both Brigade and in the Division. I turned them all down and I stayed in the field. By July '68 we had run out of captains to command companies. I was just a 1st Lieutenant, 21 years old, but they gave me full command of a company, my Bravo Company. A couple of the captains, one in particular, in the middle of a firefight had run off and got relieved. Another got relieved and I was put in as a Company Commander with 155 guys in my --.

Interviewer

As 1st Lieutenant they didn't give you a Captain's badge?

Rick Miller
No.
Interviewer
How many are in a company?
Rick Miller
Well it's supposed to be about 155 and I had about 140 to 150; out in the field I had about 100 guys. And I never saw the guys back in the big base camps that were in my company: the cooks and clerks and my company XO, Executive Officer. And right then we had been assigned to the Navy to act as Marines and live on an LST ship on the middle of a river the size of the Mississippi, the Nga Bay, and we would patrol in what we called Tango boats. We'd go up the rivers and they'd drop us off in these 30-foot boats that had the front that dropped down. We were just like the operators of Marines, but I was company commander then and we were still fighting pretty hard. I don't remember any of it, I was company commander for about three months and I've lost the memory of all that. But I do remember a couple of things.
I remember taking over the company on top of the deck of this ship and my voice cracking like a 16-year-old kid, when I was trying to give orders. And then I do remember writing letters home to the parents of the guys that died. We would go out five to sometimes 12-day operations off this LST ship and then we'd come back for a night. The guys would get chow and watch a movie and sleep down in the holds of the ship where they had 'em stacked seven high. And I had a nice place--and Kunkle, the guy that I kept with me the whole time in Vietnam, my enlisted radio operator, he slept on the floor of my room and I wrote letters to the parents. And that was hard, really hard. What do you say?
Interviewer
These weren't the swift boats that we hear about that John Kerry was on?
Rick Miller
I don't know exactly what a swift boat is but the swift boats were more like an attack boat. And the Tango boats were either ragtop or hardtop; you could land a helicopter on top of the hardtop.
Interviewer
So your entire company was on that?
Rick Miller
The platoons could each get on that, I was with a platoon and you'd go out with three or four of these Tango boats. And then there would be a couple of other boats that had a lot of fire power on them, like 105 Howitzer flamethrowers and that kind of thing. But our boats had 50-caliber machine guns.
Interviewer
Did you stay in the river or did the guys get out and walk on banks at times?
Rick Miller
They would take us way up-river somewhere and turn into the bank of a small river, hardly wide enough for this boat to fit in. Turn and drop the plank and we'd be in the mud and we'd go out and we'd be gone for five to 16 days. And a few times we got ambushed on these. But that is another thing that I do remember, one of the ambushes that we encountered I remember a rocket going by my head and I could feel the heat of it. I'd like to say it burned me but I'm not sure that's the truth. And but yeah, the plank goes down we've got to get out. And we got out and it was just a handful ambushing us that day but we're stuck in the mud.
It's mud 18 inches deep and we can't maneuver and we're taking casualties and finally it's down to one submachine gun and we can hear it and we know that this person has us pinned down. We finally get one of the other big boats to maneuver a flamethrower that can shoot a flame of this jellied petroleum stuff out, napalm kind of stuff. It would shoot this out 100 feet and it shot out and finally subdued this machinegun.
And we went out there, a couple of us, and in this little foxhole was a young girl. And she had this weapon--this is hard. And I could speak enough Vietnamese and I asked her name and she was black, burned. I mean she was just about dead. And then I asked her how old she was and she said 16. And that was hard just seeing this kid, not that I was much older.
And when you cross that line in life, in combat, killing another person, to me that's been the hardest thing for me to live with. And seeing this young gal has stayed with me. So I don't remember much as a company commander. We went through some horrific times. August 24th, my guys tell me what we did and I don't remember as a company commander. It just became so horrific that I've just –
Interviewer
You'd travel along these rivers and then get out and go on patrols for 16 days?
Rick Miller
No, 5 to 12 days. Twelve days made the news in the little Stars and Stripes newspaper, about a long operation being out that long. We ate C-rations; we'd get three of these little boxes a day. We'd get enough for a few days and we'd get dropped some water. We usually ran out of food and water. We'd drink water out of the urns that we could

find in the villages. We were not well supplied at any time. And you can't believe that a state-of-the-art Army, American Army, and a platoon is supposed to have two machine guns and I can remember at one point my second machine gun failed and I had no machineguns and they wouldn't give us any more.
I flew back to the base camp and commandeered a jeep and got some fake paperwork and drove up to Saigon and got five machineguns and came back and flew back out to the field with these five machineguns and passed them out among the company and kept two for my platoon, two brand-new machineguns. Another time the soul of my boot came off and it took me three days to get a new pair of boots. And we couldn't wear underwear, couldn't wear socks, they'd rotted off. We had a shirt, we had pants, we had boots and a helmet. And some of the guys had ponchos, other people had poncho liners. I had a little rubber jacket. And monsoon season came, you got wet, we were out there. I wrote home one time saying it rained ten inches last night. And we were just out there. Dogs had better sense to get out of the rain than they would let us do.
And so these 5- to 12-day-operations, the physical part that I learned in Ranger School was easy for me because we were stripped down to basically nothing. We had ammo and we had our basic weapons, you know not in the best condition. The M-16 was okay. I tried carrying an AK-47 for a while but that didn't work out when I used it one time and the Americans that were flanking us thought I was the bad guy and they opened up on us. I stopped carrying the AK after that.

Interviewer
You weren't trying to get any territory? You were just going to engage the enemy?

Rick Miller
That's right. And we'd go back and go through areas again. And the only way I remember that is I threw my compass away as soon as I got down to the rice paddies, I always knew which way north was and I still do in a building. But I always knew where I was on a map and I was at this one place and I realized the second time I came through there I was off about 300 meters from where I thought I was the first time. I thought I was on this little kink in the river but I was in the next kink in the river. So that's how I remember that we swept through areas again and again.

Interviewer
Some of the guys had compasses and you used didn't?

Rick Miller
We knew our way around. And if you didn't, anytime you became engaged, like you were ambushed, the first thing as a platoon leader and there was lots of things I had to do as a platoon leader when the shit hit the fan. I'd have to call in artillery, so I'd have to give a six- or eight-digit coordinate right off the map as fast as I could. And then I'd call in a spotting round of white phosphorus, a Willy Peter, 100 feet off the deck. And from that, then I could move it around but I would call it in on a specific spot. And I was usually almost right on the money, I was close enough that I could always see the white phosphorus and adjust the artillery from that onto the target. I had to always know exactly where I was. Getting picked up later on was the easy part.
So the time we spent acting as Marines with the boats, the boats would meet us some place and pick us back up and take us back. Most of the time it was helicopters would come and pick us up so we would get moved around by helicopters. They could find you pretty easily out there. That's another technique that we often use, the helicopters would come to pick us up but they wouldn't pick us all up. We'd leave a platoon and they would sneak out. They'd come pick us up in the evening and this platoon would sneak out for an ambush position. And the VC would think we'd all left and that was an easy way of setting up an ambush and that's how I often operated as a platoon leader. Setting up ambushes like that and then ambushing.

Interviewer
In those days I remember they had body counts and the way Westmoreland knew if we won or loss was how many we lost and how many they lost. Did you guys have to keep an accurate track of the VC that you killed?

Rick Miller
Yeah. We would always report, have to report, bodies. We really didn't inflate it, we just counted what we actually could count, we weren't too concerned about that. But we would see blood trails that we would report and I found out later on that they would count the blood trail as two dead or five dead or whatever. And I think the body counts got inflated all the way up the chain of command kind of deal, I don't know. I know that the last month or so of my tour in Vietnam, I worked in a forwards operation position. I'd have to write morning reports and that was part of it, writing what the body count for the day was that we'd send up from battalion to brigade and so on. So I could see it from that viewpoint too.

Interviewer
Was there one colonel or somebody that you had to report to that kept track of you and that you were talking to all the time? Or was it different guys?

Rick Miller
Well yeah, we were in a battalion and we had a colonel that we reported to. But the Operations Officer in my last

month of Vietnam, the S-3 was a Major and he was one that I directly reported to. The staff would go to sleep at night and I ran the battalion at night, I'd be up all night. I pulled a 12-hour shift every night and then do some stuff during the day, act as headquarters and Company Commander and other things during the day. But I ran the battalion as Assistant S3 at night. And then in the morning I'd write a morning report: how many people we had in the field and our status of food, ammunition and all that. And I'd turn that in every day; that was called the Fat Cat report. And also during the day I was the liaison officer between our battalion and the next unit over outside our division, it was the 199th Light Infantry Brigade. And I would have to go report to him, the One-Star General there, on what our activities would be and then bring his activities, what he was going to do for the day so we could mesh pretty well along our common area of operations. The last month the Operations Center that I worked in was way out in the middle of nowhere so I was still kind of in harm's way but I was --

Interviewer

What does RTO stand for?

Rick Miller

Radio Telephone Operator.

Interviewer

You worked a lot with them?

Rick Miller

Yeah, as an officer I didn't carry my own radio and there was a guy that always carried it for me. As platoon leader I had one RTO that carried the one radio that worked within our platoon and could report to the company on this one radio. And it was a box about this big with an antenna that went up and weighed about 25 pounds. He was always with me and you had to have a good RTO to be successful because they took over directing a lot of things when things happened. I don't know if I'm supposed to use language like "when shit hit the fan" but it did hit the fan a lot and you needed a good --.

Interviewer

Can you recall the most dangerous times you've had; maybe you've already told us. And give us as much detail as you can.

Rick Miller

I've never had that question asked. People find out I'm a combat veteran and you hear the trait question, "Did you kill anybody?" Nobody's ever asked me and that's good.

Interviewer

Was there stuff between Valentine's Day and the Tango boats?

Rick Miller

Yeah a whole bunch of stuff. It wasn't every night, but we were very successful at setting up ambushes. We'd go out every day and we wouldn't find a lot, sometimes we'd get ambushed, never that bad. But we would set up ambushes along the little streams for the sampans to come along. And one of these ambushes I remember quite well and it was one of these deals where the whole company was picked up in helicopters and my platoon was left behind, just in the bushes kind of near a river, and we had a quick smoke and ate and then as it got dark we moved into ambush position.

Not long after being in position along came a little sampan, a little boat, and it had a motor on it which was unusual, and it was coming up the river and coming right on our side. And as platoon leader I usually sprung the ambush and I did this time and I remember this first guy--there were three guys in this boat--and I remember this first guy and I opened up on him. And in my nightmares, I remember opening up on him and he's eating a bowl of rice and he's just sitting in the front of the boat eating. And in my dreams I can see up to his chin and his bowl, I can never see his face. And that haunts me; it's killing that haunts me. I don't know what he looks like.

A couple funny things happened. We blew all three away and there were no other boats. We had lookouts up and down the stream that was probably 50-feet wide. And we got the boat and these guys were all shot out of the boat and underneath this guy that was eating the rice bowl was a rifle. I grabbed that rifle and carried it around and eventually I got this rifle back home and I still have that rifle. I keep it under my bed. I don't have ammunition for it. But I don't know if this helps with the nightmares or not but I've got his rifle.

And the other funny thing about this is all the times when you spring an ambush you move. After you spring you get out of there and this just seemed like the most ideal place and it was still early so I kept my guys there. They came back and ambushed us. And it was the only time that I was ambushed like that; it was the only time I stayed in position. Fortunately nobody was hit, but we were cleaning up the next morning and I guess they still knew where we were and a sniper from across the stream took some pot shots at us and hit me in the leg. That was the only time I was shot over there. I had incredible luck; all the times were near misses or near hits, whatever you want to call it. I got hit and it knocked me down. Not that big of a deal, they wanted to evacuate me but I wouldn't. And so I

got a Purple Heart out of it but it was no big deal, just shot me right through the inner thigh. Got much higher I would have done a little more damage that I would've been upset about.
But I stayed out in the field and that was something like March 11th, I can't remember exactly. And then a few days after that I had been asked to get out of the field for this job and that job--but a few days after they did pull me out of the field, March 15th. And they sent me to an ARVN unit in training up in Xuan Loc. ARVN is a Republic of Vietnam Army. And I was in training with them for a number of weeks but a couple days after in my platoon--and I consider them very much mine, taking care of them--they had brought the Mortar Platoon Leader over and let my platoon be led by this Mortar Platoon guy that didn't know what he was doing. He took them into an ambush, something that I never did, but they got ambushed and a couple of guys were hit and wounded.
Childers got hit in the chest and I heard the stories so many times from my guys that I can visualize it but I didn't see it, I wasn't there. Childers, a hillbilly, took a rocket, a B-40 to the chest and he had a purple smoke that went off. And he had a claymore mine in his backpack, his ruck, and that went off and hit the guys behind him and a bunch of guys were wounded. There were a bunch of them that had my platoon pinned down and my machine gunner, DeVore, got out there and laid down a base of fire so we could retrieve the bodies the best we could, except Childers was still out there. And then DeVore went out further and subdued everybody. He ended up getting the Medal of Honor. So that was the kind of guys I was with. I think there were 50 Medal of Honors in Vietnam, something like that. This guy was from Southern California like I was, DeVore. In our downtime a few of the California guys would hang out and talk about surfing and all that and he was one of them. He was a quiet guy but sure tore up his family afterwards.

Interviewer
How close did you get to your men?

Rick Miller
The Army has “The mission comes before the man,” and I never believed that, and soon saw that they could not win the war, so the men always came first. But yeah, we did the mission; we did it really well. That's why my platoon was used so much; we always did a great job. I guess after Valentine's Day when the FO was hit, I wrote home, like a 20-page letter describing the whole thing and at the end I said I just wasn't going to make friends again. I kept people at a distance and I had to, I think, for my own emotions. I kept one guy with me almost my whole tour, this guy that I eventually made my radio operator, my RTO, and towards the end I made him my jeep driver and this and that. We served the whole tour together essentially, Kunkle. Even he I had to hold him at a distance.
And coming back from Vietnam – God, it was a struggle leaving. I didn't want to leave my guys there, my 2nd Platoon. And it was hard leaving Vietnam just a real love/hate--finally getting to go home but feeling like I was letting my guys down by leaving them. In the years after I had all these nightmares of trying to save people only to realize I was still trying to bring my guys home. And this is a little off the exact war, but 1988--I hadn't heard from anybody and so this is 20 years after--and I knew that Kunkle from a little town outside of Pittsburgh called McDonald and I was a violin maker and I went back east at a violin making convention. And I had a bunch of instruments in my car, cellos, and I couldn't ship them so I was driving. I was driving across Pennsylvania, southern part, I-70 or something, and I remembered Kunkle.
Story goes back a little further but this violin-making convention was in Silver Spring and one night some of the other violin makers after dinner said, "Let's go see the Vietnam memorial." I'd never seen it, they didn't even know I was a Vietnam Vet and I never admitted it to anybody. We went and saw it and it was pretty upsetting. I didn't really look at it; I went straight to the books to see if I could see who came home alive and who didn't. I found a few of my guys on the wall but that night I woke up screaming. And then it was a couple of days later when I was driving across I-70 and pulled over and got out a map and found McDonald, Pennsylvania and drove to the little town of a couple thousand people. I pulled into the Gulf gas station and got out the phone book and here's a Kunkle and called him. And he lived a couple blocks away and he had me over and I spent the night.
That was the beginning of probably a pretty unusual journey for most Vietnam veterans. He and I started hunting for people and found some others and found other people that had found some of the other people. And then found one guy interested in organizing some reunions. And I went to the 1992, ten-year rededication of the Vietnam memorial and found a few more people and shortly after that we started having reunions. These days I'm in contact with about 40 or 50 of the people I actually served with in Vietnam. It's unusual. And actually the next reunion is here in Salt Lake this summer, in June. And Kunkle's going to have all my platoon in my backyard for a barbeque and that's going to be a little hard.
And I say all this because you asked me if I got close to the guys but in talking to these guys, and thinking that I didn't do a good job in Vietnam because I lost so many guys, they all said I did a great job and how crazy I was in the field, just taking care of 'em. When the shit hit the fan I didn't go down, I got up and ran around and took care of business. They called me their fearless leader. So in a way I held them off but had to take care of them, had to keep them alive and get them home.

Interviewer
It sounds like you did a good job.

Rick Miller
Well, I don't know. I know quite a few people on the wall.

Rick Miller – Part 2
Salt Lake City, Utah
"**Turning Point"**

Interviewer
Did ranger training prepare you for Vietnam?

Rick Miller
I think I was well prepared. I was well prepared physically. Ranger school was pretty tough. I lost 25 pounds in nine weeks there. And it was rigorous. We were averaging a couple hours of sleep a night, you know, much like Vietnam. We patrolled all night long. We get airdropped down in Eglin Air Force Base, in the swamps down there. We airdropped our C-ration supplies and then went into a swamp where we couldn't get it. So we were eating berries, and we killed a couple of snakes. One we ate raw and one we cooked. So we didn't have a lot of food there.

So the physical demands of ranger school, I think, really prepared me well for Vietnam. But I think the hardest part of all that is the emotional part. Vietnam was emotional. It was not physical. You forgot about all that stuff. I probably said that one time I went almost three days without a boot. The sole fell off. I couldn't get resupplied. And you hardly even noticed those kinds of things. Yeah, and I lost as much weight in the first six months in Vietnam as I did in ranger school. I was down to 125. And my RTO said, "If you get any skinnier you're gonna fall out your asshole, Sir." And I don't know if you can put that. And I got way skinny. And the physical part, you just forgot about it, but it's the emotions of trying to stay alive. And then certainly the emotions of killing other human beings. That's the hard part that you're not prepared for at all.

Interviewer
And the loss of your own men.

Rick Miller
Certainly. That was kind of, I guess, expected. And you see a hawk swing down and get a bird and the other birds fly out for a minute and then they're right back. Certainly I had some tough times with that, but that was expected. But to blow away another human being, you know. And much of our training is to dehumanize the enemy. And that was easy with all the slang words that we had, you know, gook and slope and slant-eye and all that. And they were smaller than us and that kinda thing. So to dehumanize the enemy, but you capture some and you see that they're scared kids like us.

Interviewer
Tell us about the term "gook."

Rick Miller
I don't remember where I first heard it. Maybe in basic training. But certainly when we got to country, I mean that's all we called any of them, both friends and foe. And we had other names, slope and slant-eye and all this stuff. And then we had certainly terms for Americans, round-eyes and that kinda thing. But just that same kinda thing as kraut or Jap. It has a derogatory meaning really. And there's a couple of good books on this. Colonel Grossman wrote a book called "On Killing," and it's that whole process of training military people to dehumanize and kill the enemy easily. But I think it was certainly easy in Vietnam because they didn't look like us, they were smaller, you know. They just didn't act like us. I mean, we couldn't talk to 'em or anything.

Interviewer
When were you there?

Rick Miller
December '67, December '68. Early December. I went over three days after my 21st birthday, and I came home on my 22nd birthday, and that's a birthday I don't really remember at all. I was flying somewhere.

Interviewer
You were a leader. Why did you stay when you had the option to leave? What was so important to you?

Rick Miller
My guys. That gets a little hard, tough emotionally. It's more the emotions. There's a certain bonding that occurs in combat, and it goes beyond much of anything that I can express today. You know, I'm married and kids and all that, but there's a bonding that still exists today among my guys. And I was talking about this exact thing when I was a company commander in the summer of '68.

At the end of three months I went on R&R, and then I came back and I didn't have a job. They replaced me with Captain Taylor, who after a couple weeks essentially fired one of my lieutenants. And that lieutenant was crying that he was leaving his guys. He would do anything to stay with his platoon. And I felt like we had a cohesive unit. We worked well. We did our job. We took care of each other. I was comfortable with my guys. They took care of me. They watched my back. But yet we all did the job. We did the job really well. And I don't know, if felt like maybe I

wouldn't feel as safe anywhere else. I certainly didn't feel safe on the big bases when we were back.

Interviewer

Why didn't you feel safe on the big bases?

Rick Miller

I was more comfortable out in the field. I don't know. I could control everything and it's a matter of control. And maybe that's part of it. You learn to live with these guys, and you can predict everybody's movements after a while. And there was only one thing, you know, combat and staying alive, and then eating, sleeping. There was not much, but everything was predictable. It was simple out in the field, really. The sun went down and you set up ambush and you did your job. And the next day the sun came up and you wandered around, search and destroy missions. And it was black and white, and it's life or death. And I was staying alive. I don't know.

Interviewer

You were 21. Had there been anything else in life that had prepared you for this?

Rick Miller

On a surfboard in high school? No, absolutely not. I'd never even seen a dead person in my life. Never even seen an open casket in a funeral or anything when I went. I just lived a happy-go-lucky life. And I was so naïve, so young. I don't know. Nothing prepared me for it emotionally. And I think that's what I talk about best today is the human cost, the human elements involved in war and combat 'cause we all are just people trying to do some sort of job. And it's pretty horrific at times, but we're still just people, and we were kids.

Interviewer

How did you think of higher command?

Rick Miller

We didn't know much about the bigger picture. And you asked how well used we were. When I first arrived in Vietnam I was a platoon leader right away, right out in the field. And my company commander just rode me right into the ground. He made me do everything personally. We came across a body and he made me dig it up personally. Fortunately, I had a guy help me 'cause it was booby-trapped. And we took out the lower half of a human wrapped in plastic that had been there for a month or so, and it was pretty rank. But he made me get out and chop into the jungle. And so I was used really hard.

And then the Tet Offensive came. There's people from the 42nd Mec Unit trying to get the Presidential Unit Award for this these days, and it was their biggest event. And my company was landed out in front of 'em and had to sweep and do the actual combat, and they were a Mec unit lined up blocking. And my platoon was put right in the middle. And from then on, my CO, my company commander, always relied on me and pushed me really hard. And then same thing when I became a company commander. It was just a bravo company in the middle of everything, doing all the dirty work. And I'm not sure why. I guess we did a good job. But these days, I've been in contact with some of the veterans that I actually served with. And our company XO, who was a first lieutenant, Lieutenant Pollard, I've talked to him over the years and just talked to him last weekend, and he knows all the details of the big picture. What operations we were on, where we were going, what we were trying to do. And I had no idea, and I've gotta say I didn't care. We lived day-to-day and just trying to do our job and stay alive.

Interviewer

You were a newlywed, too, right?

Rick Miller

I was. I was married September and three months later I was in Vietnam. And my wife got an apartment in Santa Barbara and went to school at University of California Santa Barbara for a year and worked in a plant nursery. This is off the track, but she talks about the time she came home from work in the late afternoon and sitting at her kitchen table and she had a big picture window. She was up on the second floor. Two Army guys get out of the car in their dress greens, and she sees 'em walk up to the building and she can hear 'em on the stairs. And they walk across the window and stop at the apartment next door. And that's what they do, send two guys out to notify the next of kin. But that wasn't me, fortunately.

Interviewer

Talk about the letters you had to write to parents.

Rick Miller

I didn't say how they died. It was fairly brief. I don't remember much. My words were just something like he was valued and I'm sorry for your loss, our loss. But I don't ever remember saying small arms fire or mortar or anything like that. It was just a paragraph or so. And often I would just scribble it out on a piece of paper and send it back to the XO and he'd type it up and sign my name and mail it off. And I don't remember much about that except for a couple of times. Fortunately, unfortunately I don't remember much of Vietnam. Much after February, after Valentine's Day for me and into March, after that I don't remember much. In fact, I don't really remember anything. I remember taking over the company on top of an LST deck top.

Interviewer
You were in Riverine.
Rick Miller
I was Riverine then. We were Riverine acting as Marines living on a ship and we'd go out for several days at a time upwards of, you know, 12 days. We'd go out for three to five, sometimes 12 days out on ragtop boats, like a 50-foot boat with a landing plank in the front. And they'd land us and come back a week later and pick us up. And then we'd go on the big ship for the LST for a night. And then back out at 3:30 the next morning or whatever.
Interviewer
Were you counting down the days like everybody else?
Rick Miller
Double-digit midget and that kinda stuff? Well, certainly. But that was really hard. I was torn up leaving my guys. The last couple of months I was assist in S3 in the battalion operations center, which was way out in the field, you know, a few sandbags around the tent and that was about it. But I still had a closeness to B Company and especially 2nd Platoon and tried to watch over the platoon leader that had taken over my platoon, Lieutenant Whitmarsh. I still knew half the guys in the platoon. And that was hard leaving the guys. I don't know if I talked about this, but leaving Vietnam, they sent out a helicopter for me. About the 4th of December I was scheduled to leave the tents, and left on the 6th. But they flew a helicopter out for me, a little Loach, little two-seater. So I put on the intercom.
The guy flew me all over. He said, "Hey, you wanna take a tour of where you've been?" And so we looked at this area and that area. It was really pretty cool. I'm talking to him, I found out he was best buddy of a guy from high school. We tried to call him and couldn't reach him. And then that night at the barracks in the big 25,000-man base for Division, Dong Tam, it was mortared. And I could hear the incoming. I could tell where they were coming. I could tell where they were going. And I don't think I had any clothes on. I got up outta bed and grabbed my cigarettes and a cold beer. I went out to the porch, the upstairs porch and watched all these guys run all over the place. They were just scared to death. But I just knew I was safe. And I went home the next day.
Interviewer
How did you go home?
Rick Miller
Northwest Airlines with these cute stewardesses and that kinda thing and food on a tray in the air conditioning.
Interviewer
What was it like emotionally getting on that plane?
Rick Miller
I think I was just numb. I was just numb. I didn't wanna leave. They tried to twist my arm to get me to re-up, but I couldn't do another tour as company commander. I couldn't have another infantry company. It was just so hard. I'm just 25 and had a 150 guys. I just couldn't do it. Does that make me a wimp? I don't know. But I was anxious to get home. I was anxious to get back to the world. I was anxious to eat regular food and sleep in a bed. I didn't sleep on sheets 20 times in Vietnam, maybe a dozen times. Most of the time I was just on the ground.
Interviewer
Did you have to decompress when you came home?
Rick Miller
No such.
Interviewer
Really?
Rick Miller
I flew into Travis, but it was foggy so the flight was diverted to San Francisco Airport. Got off the airplane and there's my mother and wife waiting for me. And my mother said, "Welcome back," gave me a hug, and she hopped on another flight and went home. And I drove off in my little Volkswagen Bug with my wife. And I didn't get a mile on the freeway before I headed over in the bushes scared to death and she had to drive, and I had to hunker down. I don't know. Is that decompressing? And we had 500 miles to go to get to Southern California. I don't know. I'd never gone that fast in a car in a long time.
Interviewer
What did you think of the anti-war stuff?
Rick Miller
I realized then that Americans were blaming the soldiers. Why don't they go protest the president or our congress or their senator or whatever? I just didn't understand that. I wasn't a dope-smoking baby killer. I didn't do any of that. I didn't smoke dope and I'm sure civilians got killed, but I didn't fit that mold, and I didn't understand it, and why they were trying to blame it on me.

But I guess I couldn't grow my hair fast enough. I bought a pair of jeans and washed the heck out of 'em and I embroidered 'em with all this hippy stuff. And I didn't have any money, the Army hundred dollars 'cause I'd taken too much leave. So I went out and bought some blank leather for a belt and I made some sandals outta leather and tried to look like a hippy, and grew a mustache really long. But I didn't fit in like that, either. But I forgot about it. And then I started seeing all of the protests on the TV and that kinda thing.
And I had no contact with the guys that were still there that I knew. And that was the hard part. And maybe I was afraid I'd see 'em on TV. I turned off the TV. And kind of a funny thing, about the only program I really watched besides the news was "Hawaii Five-0" and it's now back on with new actors. But that was the last time I watched TV.

Interviewer
Talk about surfing after coming home.

Rick Miller
I didn't.

Interviewer
Did you try to bring back your old life?

Rick Miller
I didn't. I tried to move on as fast as I could. I needed a job. Vietnam had made me a very serious person. And ever since then I've treated everything as life and death, you know, and just black or white. I needed a job. I applied at police academies. It was too far out. My brother-in-law got me a job at a Caterpillar dealer, administrative assistant. And maybe I talked about that. I applied there. And this was like two weeks after I got out of the Army, so I'd been home from Vietnam about four months, but just back into civilian clothes. But he interviewed me and he looked at my application. He thought it was great I was in the Army. I was an Army officer. But he saw Vietnam there and he took a marker and blacked out Vietnam. He didn't wanna know. He didn't want anybody seeing that. He hired me. I never said anything. But that's how I was treated. My parents, both veterans, never asked me about Vietnam. My wife never asked me about Vietnam. Nobody did. I couldn't bury it fast enough. I couldn't move on to serious life fast enough.

Interviewer
Did you watch the fall of Saigon?

Rick Miller
I didn't know anything about it. I didn't get a newspaper. I didn't get TV. Didn't listen to the radio. I was isolated. You're giving me this incredible look.

Interviewer
Most of the vets watched the helicopters leave Saigon.

Rick Miller
I didn't see that. I didn't watch TV at all. I knew a little bit about that in the coming months. Somewhere I had heard that the 16th Arvin Division was the last unit still fighting in the months before, northwest of Saigon. And that was a unit that I had spent five weeks with doing training. The middle of being a platoon leader they took me out for five weeks and sent me up to a MACV unit to train the South Vietnamese Army soldiers. And I sometimes lived with 'em and sometimes lived in a compound. But got me to know the people a lot better.

Interviewer
Tell us how you believe the war affected your life.

Rick Miller
It has different ramifications. The good thing about Vietnam, it's made me very comfortable in my skin, as the French would say. I'm a survivor, you know? Throw me off a cliff and I'm gonna somehow survive. You put me in any situation and I'm gonna be a survivor.

Interviewer
And what was the negative?

Rick Miller
Well, it totally changed my life. I get out and talk to people about Vietnam, about war, and some people would consider it anti-war activism. I don't know. I get out and I talk to people about the cost of war, and the cost of war to individuals like me. And when you go out into combat and you kill another human being, you've stepped across a line that you can never back away from. I mean, you can't ever re-cross that line and become a normal person anymore. It changes you entirely.
The first person that I know that I killed—and I've never quite stated it that way—was early February right after Tet. I'd been in a number of firefights before that, but we moved from the jungles and rubber plantations down into the Delta. And we moved there a number of days and we set up an ambush in an area. And my machine gunner, his assistant, and me set up a three-man position on a little road and three North Vietnamese come walking down the

road and I initiated the ambush and blew 'em away on the machine gunner and everything.
And we ran up to look at their bodies. And it's kinda funny – one of the guys, we couldn't find any wounds on him. And we even took off his shirt and found one little pinhole in his armpit, but he was dead. But one of the guys had a wallet that was right there, and I took it and I put it in my cargo pocket, and I never turned it in. It was against all the regulations and everything, and I guess he became an MIA because, I mean, his death was never reported.
And, you know, you take things from bodies, mostly handguns and belts and red stars and that kinda thing. But we also take all the papers and wallets and everything and we turn it in for intelligence. But I kept the guy's wallet. And I never looked at it. I brought it home. And I'm not sure if I talked about this before, but these three dead North Vietnamese guys, their bodies were there. And a couple days later we were told to set up a new firebase right there. We had to drag the bodies off down the road, and they started stinking after a number of days and then getting bloated. And we got some diesel fuel and we tried to burn 'em to get rid of 'em. And I'm sure I talked about this before, about the doctor that came along and cut the head off of one of those.
But I've got the wallet of one of those guys and I've kept this wallet. And, must be 19 years ago. I'd looked at the wallet a little bit, but it had some sealed envelopes inside, plastic sealed envelopes. And I finally got out a pair of scissors. It was my tenth anniversary, and I don't know why I was doing this on my tenth wedding anniversary. But I opened up one of these things and I pulled out the paper. And I could read enough Vietnamese that it was this guy's 40th birthday. It was just weird. And there was identification for a second person tucked inside there. But I've carried his picture around, before and after picture of what this guy looked like in uniform up in North Vietnam before he came down, and then the burned bodies. Maybe he's the headless one. I don't know for sure. I mean, you lose track of all that.
But I've got a little shrine in my house with stuff, and I've kept his wallet there. I also found a little stone Buddha head in a blown up pagoda or Buddhist temple. And I stuck that in my pocket and brought that home, and I keep those things together along with this guy's bonds, this guy that I killed. I think he was about 26, something like that. He was a lieutenant like me, just fresh in-country, hadn't been there long. I could relate to him. I don't know. It just stayed with me for a long time. Just one big effect, coming back, and this relates to what you were talking about earlier, and that's coming home from Vietnam.
I came home from Vietnam, and within a year or two I started having these nightmares. I'd have these nightmares every night of saving guys, saving guys, car accidents, drowning. I did save a guy from drowning in Vietnam, got the Soldier's Medal for that. I don't know if you've ever heard of that. But I'd have these nightmares, you know, just saving one person after another. Car wrecks. And these continued for almost 20 years, and I just never understood it. Then one day up at the VA I was talking about this, and I realized that I was still trying to bring my guys home. These accident victims that I was saving represented my guys home. I'm still trying to save the guys that I'd left in Vietnam and still trying to bring 'em home. You know, when you become responsible for somebody else's life in a very intimate way like that, there's just—I took on some responsibility that I didn't realize was gonna last a lifetime.

Interviewer

Is there a trigger that brings back memories for you, like helicopter blades?

Rick Miller

I moved into the house that I'm living in 17 years ago. Right at that time, the National Guard in Utah was doing away with their Huey helicopters, and thank goodness. Because up 'til then, they'd go overhead now and again, you know, fly. And I had some pretty hard flashbacks concerning these helicopters. I'd be outside, the clouds would be a certain level and certain color and grayness, and a Huey would go by and I'd be back. And I wouldn't know where I was or what was going on.
But a Huey has such a particular sound. This is something you probably wanna edit out, but the old joke, the Huey was an Italian helicopter 'cause it went "womp," "womp," "womp." But it does have a very particular sound, and especially in Vietnam. They were using some big blades on those things. But now and again I still hear a Huey. The forest service, if there's a fire about somewhere the forest service uses Hueys. And I can tell the difference between, like, a Bravo model and Delta model and that kinda thing. I used to get pretty upset at these helicopters flying overhead 25 years ago. If I had a rocket launcher I'd shoot it at 'em. But there were just regular people in 'em, but I just felt compelled to get rid of these things. It was really hard for a while. It would slam me with Vietnam unexpectedly and I don't like being outta control, ever.

Interviewer

Describe the conditions in Vietnam.

Rick Miller

I remember once or twice flying on a helicopter. Most of our flights were fairly short so we were at low altitude, you know, five hundred; a thousand feet sometimes. For longer flights we'd be up to 3,000 feet. I remember looking out and thinking that it was pretty, and it was kind of a weird thought, just out of place. But I remember thinking that once or twice. When I think of Vietnam, when I think of the places that I was, the things that happened, I always put a compass orientation on it. It's the weirdest thing. I mean, I still have that compass spinning in my head. I can tell you which way north is most all the time. But every recollection that I have has a compass orientation. And I can tell

you the compass orientation for that thought. I mean, it's probably north or southwest, and I can tell you about 4:00 in the afternoon, the way the sun was shining, no clouds. And it was pretty. It was really neat.
And I guess I had time to think about that because we were up so high and probably weren't gonna get shot down. And nobody's gonna take any pot shots at a helicopter 3,000 feet in the air. And so I might've had a certain amount of safety. Most of the time flying, I never thought about that because you're watching for what's up ahead. You've gotta get a lay of the land instantly as you're going in. You're watching for the bad guys running around. You're trying to see where the good guys are and make sure the pilot's getting you to the right place. And you've got a million things going on as you're flying. 'Cause I didn't know where we were going. I mean, I could tell about where we were going and I was told where we were going, but the exact location I wouldn't know within a mile where we were going, so I had to watch. I had to watch really hard and absorb all this critical information, which it was not beauty.

Interviewer
What does Vietnam smell like? What does it taste like and feel like?

Rick Miller
Certainly – it depends on where you are – certainly there's a certain amount of rot wherever you are. I mean, they get so much rain there. I rode home one night from one of our little firebases, Dagger, that it rained ten inches last night. Tremendous amount of train, so there's a lot of vegetation. And humidity. It might be 100, 110 degrees, and certainly that in humidity. And then the people living. They lived without electricity in all their villages. They cook with dung and some wood and that kinda thing. I mean, it's just powerful smells that you just don't smell here.

Interviewer
I remember the smell of cigarettes.

Rick Miller
Mm-hmm. Their cigarettes were different. The French smoke a cigarette. It comes in a light blue package. I can't remember the name. Oh, I can't remember the name of the cigarettes, but it's a very pungent cigarette smell. And our cigarettes are much milder. But for the most part, you know, we'd get out on an ambush or something like that there was no smoking for us. But now, again, they'd be out there smoking a little bit and you can catch whiffs of that.

Interviewer
I remember the smell of aviation fuel.

Rick Miller
I do somewhat. It wasn't a big deal to me. I wasn't around it much when they'd swing in with their helicopters and we'd jump on and fly a little ways and get back off. It wasn't at a big base where they were refueling or anything. I trained as a door gunner and crew chief on Hueys before I went to OCS, so I was around helicopters and fixed wing before I went to Vietnam.

Interviewer
Talk about walking point.

Rick Miller
When I walked point I was just off north, going that direction. I can feel that through the rubber plantation.

Interviewer
Did you get a sense about booby traps?

Rick Miller
I only walked point, that I can remember, once. I might've done it a second time. But I wanted to do it. I wanted to experience it because I was asking guys to go out there, and some guys volunteered. Some guys were really good at it. I don't profess to having become proficient at it. Certainly, everything shut down in my brain except the sensory input. Yeah, smells played a big part all the time. And off one side we could smell a cooking fire. You can smell human beings. They ate different food than us, so I'm sure we had our smells. And cigarettes.
But I think more important to me on point was certainly visual with hearing because things got quiet that day, and the birds and animal life just, like, disappeared. And that's spooky when things get really quiet. Maybe they're getting quiet because of us. Usually not. And that's spooky. That's scary.
And then visual. I mean, you could have a guy in full camouflage with a weapon ten feet from you that you can't see. These were overgrown rubber plantations with second and third-story canopy essentially with rubber trees at the top. And we had to hack our way through sometimes, and you get lazy and start following the trail, which never good. But we did it some. But the visual thing, they're going to set up booby traps. Some of 'em are old booby traps, you know, rusty wire. Some are brand new that they hear you coming, they're out there setting up booby traps. You're on that trail. You're gonna be on that trail 200 yards down.

Interviewer
How do you hear people when you're in battle?

Rick Miller
You don't through voice command, certainly. You can do some through radio. And it didn't matter. Sounds no longer mattered because it was a horrific sound. I can remember on Valentine's Day, I rolled over on my back for just a brief moment. And there was a small tree right near me, and it was only ten-feet high. But it was windy. I didn't even know it was windy. And the leaves were all just blowing hard. I couldn't hear that at all. We had small arms fire, automatic weapons. There were about 900 of them. We weren't firing back much.
But we also had the old World War II aircraft, the A1E's, which the South Vietnam Air Force was using in support of us that day. Jets are loud, but these are louder. And their flight pattern is a lot different. Jets are much lower and longer, and these things come from overhead just straight on down. And you hear 'em for a long time coming right at you. And then all of the artillery and we had some gunships.
So you can't hear anything and you begin operating automatically. When we'd get ambushed, I was up running around putting people in position. You gotta get your machine guns pointed in the right direction. And so I would either low crawl, run or whatever to a machine gun position and get him firing on what I could see. So there's no oral commands. There's just none of that when all that's going on. And an ambush much last two minutes, it might last an hour. It might last all day. And everybody's gotta do their job. Somebody's screaming for a medic. You can hear that usually. And I guess we reserved our voices for that as much as anything. I don't know. I've never thought about it. Yeah. We'd have to gather out wounded and dead, get everybody helped.

Interviewer
You had a special relationship with one of your guys, Kunkle. You said before that you made a point not to get close to guys because it was too hard for you emotionally. But Kunkle has always been around. What was it like seeing Kunkle for the first time 20 years later?

Rick Miller
It was strange. I had no idea why I was hunting for Kunkle. I didn't know what I'd find. I didn't know if I'd find him. And then when I did, I guess I was in shock or whatever. I just didn't know what to do. I don't think I shook his hand or hugged him or anything. There was nothing like that. It was just somebody I had to find, and I can't explain that. I like to tell you I didn't get close to people after Valentine's Day for me, which would have been nine months of being in Vietnam. But in a way, I was close, deeply close to a whole bunch of people. But I still held 'em off. And I held Kunkle off, but Kunkle was just rifleman when I got there. But somehow we'd have these meetings and he wormed his way into my life or whatever. He just would make suggestions or talk or whatever, and a few months into Vietnam for me, I needed an RTO and I took him on.
Being an RTO is a tough job. You're always shot at. I think I had three different RTOs in Vietnam, and Kunkle got three Purple Hearts and the other two each got two Purple Hearts. I mean, it was not easy and I'm not sure why he did it, but he did. And the reason I chose him was just his ability. When we're in the firefight, he's gotta be on the radio. He's gotta be doing all the initial calling in of artillery and everything, and taking over my job initially if I can't do it. And he did a great job at that. So I kept him with me. And my last couple of months after I was moved up to battalion headquarters, I kept him with me. I had him as my Jeep driver and as my assistant.
I was the liaison between the 9th Infantry Division and the 199th Light Brigade. I went and briefed a General every day, among my various jobs. And Kunkle went with me and helped me prepare the reports and do all this stuff. But he was kind of a wild guy. I can remember one time we were having a big inspection out in the middle of the field, and he refused to get a haircut and I had to cock my .45 and march him to the barber, literally. I didn't fire it. I'd probably never hit him if I did fire it. And I know that he got busted in rank once over there. And I don't know what he was doing all the time. And another time, the little booklet, the 199th's SOP with all the codes and everything, and he took it because we needed one. And he turned it back in and forgot to sign it back in and ended up on a VC body three days later. And he got taken to court over that and I pulled some strings and got him outta that. But he was a good guy. But I still don't understand my relationship with him.

Interviewer
You recently had a big reunion in your backyard. Talk about that.

Rick Miller
I found Kunkle in 1988, the summer after visiting the wall for the first time. And after that, we started hunting for guys, and we'd find a few. In '92 we went to the rededication of the Vietnam Memorial, a ten-year reunion in Washington, D.C. I was too scared to be in a room by myself. I slept on the floor of his room. He and his wife were in the bed and I was on the floor. And we intentionally met up with a couple of other guys there and found two more. And we began finding guys. And then we found this guy that wanted to have a reunion of our whole battalion and he hunted for more, and it just kinda branched out.
And there's, I don't know, three hundred of us from my battalion, 4th, 39th that are on this list. And every other year we get about 60 or 80 of 'em together. And of that, I know about 50 of these guys, and 20-some-odd them came to the latest reunion that we have every other year and it was in Salt Lake City. So Friday night I invited 'em all over to my house, the guys that I knew, with their spouses and a few others. I invited a couple local vets and head of the PTSD unit from the VA. I invited 'em all over to my house for a barbeque last Friday night, I guess it was. I'm losing

track of time. But yeah, six days ago. It was just wonderful. A dream come true, really to get all my guys together again, seeing these guys.
And for a couple of 'em it was their first reunion. The platoon leader that got sent to another battalion right after I quit being a company commander, he was there with his wife, Lieutenant Shae. You're a deer in headlights your first reunion. Don't know what to think or what to do. And boy, he had a wonderful time. And his main event when I was company commander, it was August 25th, and a couple of other guys there I knew had been through the intensity of that incident. And I got them talking. They can begin processing a lot of that stuff. So I think the processing is an important part. Knowing that we did a good job, that we took care of each other, did the mission, that I did a good job.
I think that's probably one of the main things for me is I felt all this guilt, shame of being a Vietnam veteran, the guilt of not getting my guys home. And I felt like a failure as a platoon leader and company commander. I did the job well as far as the Army mission but I didn't get everybody home and felt like a failure. And then to hear these guys tell all these stories about me. I don't remember much Vietnam. They tell me these stories and what a great job I did. And I guess maybe it's a little bragging, but how fearless I was in combat running around, and living a very charmed life. The only time I got hit I was standing still. I got hit by a sniper. I got hit in the leg, but no big deal. But all the running around I did and all the chaos, never got hit.
But I guess I did well taking care of the guys. And they wanna come see me, so that says something. So it's wonderful having this reunion, having this barbeque in my backyard. And I think it was great for the local veterans and Dr. Steve Allen of the VA to see what I call the real deal. I know that every one of these guys was in Vietnam and they were all in combat. I know what they did. And look at 'em today. They're all pretty normal people. We've all had our struggle.
The VA says only 11 percent of Vietnam veterans have PTSD, but 90 percent of my guys do, you know. So I know who doesn't have PTSD, all the fat cats back in the big bases, the typists and clerks. And great they had those jobs and I'm envious. But the ones of us that were out in the field, we struggle with all this stuff. And I think it's good to see that even though Vietnam veterans struggle, they still can make it through life. And none of these guys are long hair, hippy dudes with camo fatigues on or anything. These are all regular people with wives. And one guy had seven grandkids with him, and that was fun. I got 'em on my trampoline and we set up a little bean-bag toss for these kids. It was really family, and it felt good to have all this happen.

Interviewer
What do you tell the kids when you speak at schools?

Rick Miller
I think the first thing is certainly, “It's not what you see on TV.” It's not all this Rambo macho stuff. It just isn't. And you're gonna be scared. If you're out there, you're gonna be scared shitless. I'm sorry, I had diarrhea for three months, literally. And the second thing is, “There's a huge human cost,” and that's what I like to say. People are gonna die all around you and you're gonna take the chance of dying or maybe get shot. Civilians are gonna get killed.
In Vietnam we killed 900 to 1.1 million people in the country. And in Iraq today, 400,000 or something like that civilians. So we go to war to stop this dictator from killing 10,000 Kurds and what do we accomplish? Kill another 400,000. I mean, there is a huge human cost to going out and taking care of our oil, stopping communism or whatever banner flag we're waving that day. And we have to think carefully, I think, before we go out and send our young men out.
I'm not anti-military. I'm pro-military. I think we need a strong military to protect this country. I think we'd get run over if we don't have that. But I don't think we need to be world police, either. I think that often the military's abused in its use around the world. So if you go to war and see combat, you're gonna come back very changed. And it's not a macho thing.

Interviewer
Tell me how do you find peace?

Rick Miller
Well, peace means different things – peace within your surroundings or peace within your head, and there are certainly different aspects of both those. I try and set up a peaceful atmosphere around my house, and I often don't go anywhere for periods. And that's fine. I'll be 65 this year and retiring, and just make a nice house and couple of dogs and a bird and a cat. And my kids are all grown up and moving along, and that's peace.
I have found that extreme exercise will calm down the Vietnam chatter in my head. I go out and run a lot. I've trail run a whole bunch in the last ten years. And you go out and run 50 miles in a day and your heads not gonna be chattering much of Vietnam, I'll tell you. But it's temporary. And then you're tired when you get home and you sleep well that night 'cause you're so tired. So that's peace. That helps, balances all your chemicals in your body, too, all the exercise.
And I think it does me good to get out and talk to people about Vietnam. I think that brings a sense of peace to me to let people know that it's not easy being in uniform. And I think that the secondary message there is we have to

take care of the troops coming home today. They're gonna be struggling just like me. Their situation is different and maybe their circumstances physically are a little better, sleeping under a roof on beds and all that. But still been in some hard times, and they're gonna be struggling. So if I can reach out and help these directly or let people know what it's like for me, so we have to take care of the vets today. So I think I'm doing well enough that I can then reach out.

I think it took me years to get to that place where I felt like I was doing well enough with Vietnam screaming in my head where I can reach out and talk to people. And is that anti-war? I don't know. Yes and no. I'm against the war that we had recently in Iraq. But it is a fact, and let's take care of the troops coming home at this point.

Interviewer

Anything else you want to share?

Rick Miller

No. You mentioned that you wanted to go through my photographs with me, and that brings up more in me. Initially coming back from Vietnam, I just forgot everything. And then ten years after, I started gathering my photos, and I put 'em in an album. And really, that was my repository of memories. I'd see these and that's all I could remember. And then I wrote a book about Vietnam in about '93 of everything I could remember. And that's kind of another repository. And going through the pictures, just talking about the guys and that kinda thing. I see pictures. And this guy did this in Vietnam, but this is how he turned out to be. Also, that wallet I talk about. I brought it with me today. It's in my pocket. This guy's pen is in my pocket. I don't know. I felt like bringing it. I didn't necessarily wanna get it out, but I just felt like bringing him along. My psychologist, Dr. Allen, says I got a relationship with this guy in this wallet. And sometimes I talk to him, you know? I don't know. I guess that's about it. I don't know. There's so much more to be said.

Interviewer

Are politics a part of your message?

Rick Miller

No. It's not politics so much. War, anti-war. And it's had a different affect on all of us. Some of my buddies that I served with, some of the guys in my backyard, very much right-wing, conservative Christian people that are pro-war, pro-military. And that's their experience, but he's still my buddy. So it had a different affect on us. But I would say by and large, we don't want our sons gone, particularly. Not in the climate today.

Interviewer

All of you don't want your sons gone?

Rick Miller

Right, right.

Interviewer

Even the conservative, pro-military guys?

Rick Miller

Well, they didn't go. They're in their 30s now. And my son is young. He's 17. And he got something from the Marines last night. So he filled out the card and everything and put it on my wife's desk in her mail to see when she came home. "Oh," she said, "Don't let my son go! Talk him out of it," and everything. But I don't think my son would go. Just listening to the terror stories, my son knows. He watches the movies and does the Xbox and kinda it's not that. He knows it. He sees the real deal. Just the physical training, you know, drop and give me 20 push-ups, dying cockroach position. Pull ups before you eat chow and all this really a lot more hardcore physical stuff before you even go, that would be hard on a lotta people.

Interviewer

This is reality, these are real stories. Kids need to make that distinction between video games and the realities of war.

Rick Miller

There's two other brief things. As you do these interviews, how do you know it's real? How do you know that I'm real? And this is the part that's really upsetting to me. I know I mentioned the one guy, standing in my driveway, to you, that wrote a book that is probably not real. Is he gonna be here in this seat telling his “story”? I don't know. How do you do this today? How do you interview me and know that I'm telling the truth? And one reason I wanted you to see and come to that barbeque was because these guys all saw me in Vietnam. I saw him. This is the truth. This is the real deal.

I went to the vet center in the early '90s. I don't think anybody was real there, you know? Their stories didn't make sense to me. They didn't use the right terms. Maybe a few of 'em are real. I get up to the VA. I know the guy sitting next to me is lying. How do you tell? But it was small things. He was really there, but he doesn't have to say the things he's saying. I've got it on paper what he really was and he's not telling the truth. How do you do that in these interviews? And that is one reason that would hold me off from doing an interview. I don't wanna participate in something that isn't real. Make an oral documentary, but does it document the truth or some guy's made-up story?

And that's deeply upsetting to me. There's a whole bunch of fake Vietnam veterans out there. You haven't seen my DD214. You haven't seen any of my papers. And that means you haven't seen anybody else's. So how do you know? And I guess that's one reason I still hide as a Vietnam veteran today because I don't wanna look like one of those fake guys. I don't want to have anything to do with those guys. That's why I had trouble going to the VA at all. They don't thoroughly check people out at the VA. And there's fakers up there. You can read the book "Stolen Valor." It talks all about this kinda stuff, you know, fake medals and all that.

Interviewer

Why do you think guys lie?

Rick Miller

They wanna seem like heroes. And I'm no hero, so I don't wanna be like them. I don't know. There's a certain prestige or people look up to you if you've been in combat. And so I don't talk about it a lot. I don't talk to people. Yeah, I go out to some of the schools and talk to 'em. And initially I wouldn't even give 'em my name, you know? I've lived in the same house for 17 years now. I don't think anybody knew I was a Veteran until I got a Purple Heart plate. There's two women that live across the street from me, they've been there two, three years; they didn't know I was a veteran at all until I told 'em I was gonna have this barbeque. It might get a little wild in my backyard, which it didn't. Pretty calm. The guys are all getting pretty old, I guess. But I could be as wild as anybody. I drove a motorcycle through a hotel atrium, a Harley at one of these reunions once. Got a little tanked up there.

And along with this, what is the face of a Vietnam veteran today? I mean, who are the veterans? You look around and you can't spot 'em in a crowd. And I think that's an important element of what you're trying to do here. I don't know who you're filming or what they look like, but at my barbeque when I had 20-some odd vets, they don't look like Vietnam veterans. They're regular Joe Doe's. And I think, “What is the face of Vietnam today?” And I think that's something I think needs to be expressed, who the Vietnam veterans really are, and especially the combat veterans, the ten percent of us that went through that. Who are they? What are they doing today? How did they survive? What are the rates of PTSD? How much of a burden are Vietnam veterans on the VA system?

These days, I get free medical and I get a lot of other benefits. I'll tell you off record, or even on record, I don't care. But that's one reason people wanna be Vietnam veterans, the benefits. But if you're gonna do a documentary, you've gotta put a face of what it's like, of what a Vietnam veteran is today and what he's been through. Not his experiences in Vietnam, but the 40 years since. What have they been through? And I don't know if you're capturing that. I've been married twice. Vietnam wrecked the first. I've been in groups. One guy was married five times. Every one of 'em divorced at least one. Two, three marriages, four marriages, you know. This is a Vietnam veteran. I hope you can capture some of that.

Interviewer

We are capturing all of that. Talk about your life after the war.

Rick Miller

I certainly had struggles with drug and alcohol. I mean, just the escape. I did some dope after Vietnam. Not in Vietnam, but after Vietnam just to escape. You were talking about escape. I learned to escape Vietnam running really hard all day long, but you could get the same thing through dope. And for 20 years I was drinking too much. And at night just to get Vietnam outta my head so I could go to sleep. And then I got pancreatitis really bad and in the hospital. And got it a second time and I quit drinking for quite a few years. But almost every guy is AA or alcoholic. And that's just the escape, trying to get it out of our head. I don't know. That's probably enough. I don't know. There's a lot more to talk about.

Interviewer

Explain lying there looking at the sky.

Rick Miller

Yeah. I didn't have a connection to the moon. I didn't know much about the stars. I knew some of the constellations, but I did know Orion. Orion was up high in the sky when I got to Vietnam. He was the winter giant. He was way up there. But sometimes at night I would see him. It was generally clear at night. And he'd be up there, and I'd be thinking that people back home could see him. And he was really my only connection back home. I got letters from home. My wife wrote me every day. But those were just pieces of paper and this was something real. It was around me. It was right there. It was all the time.

And he was just marching across the sky so slowly. In the summertime you really didn't see him. Just up there at dawn or dusk. Barely in sight. But he was my only connection. He was a warrior. And I don't know, he just went across the sky. And I was hoping I could get home. I still look at him. Still look at him today and think about those times watching him. It's not something people can understand really. I don't know. A silly little thing like that… just some stars up there that could be such a strong connection to back home, the world, we'd call it.