Kim Sawyer: This is Kim Sawyer conducting an oral history interview with
Frank Gutierrez in the Special Collections Library on January 24th, 2001 at 1:25 in the
afternoon. This interview is part of the Lubbock Area Vietnam Veterans Oral History
Project. Mr. Gutierrez, can you tell me a little bit about your early life? When and where
were you born?

Frank Gutierrez: I was born here in Lubbock and except for my military service,
I’ve been in Lubbock all of my life. I went to Lubbock schools, of course, graduated
from Lubbock High School in 1967. Of course that was the war was going on already. I
was 17. Some friends of mine decided that they were going to volunteer for military
service, so I didn’t want to be left out, so I persuaded my father to sign for me so I
volunteered for the Army when I was 17. Immediately after graduation we were off to
boot camp to basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana. So basically speaking, from
graduation on, I wasn’t around here. So, my 19th birthday, I’d just turned 19, and that’s
when I was assigned to go to Vietnam. So, I spent most of 1968 in Vietnam. I came
home Christmas Eve, 1968 and finished out the balance of my military obligation at Fort
Sill, Oklahoma. They tried to get me to reenlist, but there’s no way.

KS: So you volunteered before you graduated from high school?

FG: Yes. They had what was called delayed enlistment, and all around me, my
cousins, my friends, they were getting drafted. So, volunteering seemed like the
reasonable thing to do because they were going to get you one way or the other. So, in
being that my friends were also volunteering, it seemed like a good thing to do. Plus, I
have an uncle who was my role model, who if it were not for him I probably would not
have even thought about joining the military. But, he had been in the Army, he came to
Texas Tech, and I wanted to follow his lead and be like him. So, it wasn’t difficult for
me to consider joining the Army because I liked him and the way he was and I wanted to
be like him, so it seemed like the logical thing to do at the time. I suppose that if I had
known more about what was going on over there, the reality of the war, I may not have
been so eager to volunteer. But, I think that I was determined to go there, voluntarily or
under conscription. One way or the other, I would have wound up there. That was just
my mentality at the time, best that I can recollect. I wasn’t scared of the potential of
going to Vietnam. It’s just that it was something that I felt like I had to do.

KS: How closely had you followed events that were happening there while you
were in high school?

FG: Well, being in high school, not very much except what I managed to catch
on the evening news. Because some of my cousins were over there at the time in about
’65, ’66, that’s the only reason that I knew there was a war going on. But, as far as
having an in depth awareness of the war, I was very naïve; let’s put it that way.

KS: What was your family’s reaction when you told them your plans on
enlisting?

FG: My father did not want to sign for me, but eventually he did. As parents, I
know that they didn’t want me to go because the war was going on, but I was thinking
more about myself than what they were thinking. So, it didn’t bother me at all that they
were opposed to my volunteering before the service. Now I wasn’t volunteering for
Vietnam, I was just volunteering for military service. They didn't like it.

KS: What made you choose the Army?

FG: Because of my uncle; I never considered any other branch as far as I could
remember. Maybe if my friends had decided to join the Marine Corps, I may have joined
the Marine Corps. But, the peer pressure was what guided me for the most part as to
where to go. Plus, at that time, the schools were allowing recruiters to go in and make
presentations to the students so that it was as a result of a presentation by a recruiter that
we talked about it and the other guys, I think the other guys were a year older, so that
they didn’t have to have their parent’s permission, so that they were going to go and
volunteered, and I wanted to be with the, part of their group. That was the reason that I
felt like I wanted to go.

KS: Do you recall any of the presentations that these recruiters gave, what the
content or what kinds of things they said to students?

FG: Probably recruiter jargon in order to get people interested. Like I said, I was
very naïve and as far as what they were saying to persuade us to volunteer, I don’t
remember because it was mainly the peer pressure that was compelling me to volunteer.

So, whatever they said, it worked for me.

KS: Did they mention Vietnam at all?

FG: Well, no. They didn’t mention it. As far as I remember they didn’t mention
it. If they would have mentioned it, I don’t think that would have discouraged me from
wanting to consider volunteering. What I liked was their appearance. They were in
Class A uniform. They were very professional in their presentations, and I liked that.
That had a lot to do with it. On the contrary, I suppose that if there had been a veteran
that would have come in and would have said, “Don’t join. There’s no direction to the
war. There’s guy’s getting killed every day in different ways,” I may have thought about
it differently. If I’d had a veteran that said, “They’re spraying herbicide over there that’s
going to effect you in years to come,” maybe I would have thought about it. But, nobody
was saying anything against the war at that time. I’m sure they were there because I
knew some of the guys had been in Vietnam in the early ‘60s, on up until 1967 when I
volunteered, and they were coming back. But I suppose that because everybody was
being criticized, ostracized by the general public, that they withdrew, and they weren’t
saying anything. They should have because I think that they would have convinced some
of us not to go. I know you understand that within the Latino culture there’s a certain
machismo, you have to be a part of this military service and it’s part of being a Latino, a
Mexican American, you have this macho attitude about weapons, about being in a war
situation. It was already part of my attitude to be like that. So, it wasn’t difficult at all to
get in there and do what I was supposed to do.
KS: So after graduation, you immediately went to your basic training or did you have a little time?

FG: Things changed. In my senior year, I flunked government. So, my commitment to the Army was to go to basic training right after graduation. Since I didn’t graduate, I had to stay behind and complete the course. Immediately after I finished the summer school of course, I was on my way to Fort Polk, Louisiana. So my friends were already a month and a half ahead of me, and they were going through basic training in Fort Bliss, Texas in El Paso and I went to Fort Polk. So, we lost track of each other there for a little while.

KS: Could you tell me a little bit about your basic training?

FG: It was rigorous. I enjoyed it, because it was everything that I expected, being yelled at, being cussed at, physical activity, the training, learning how to march, learning how to salute, and military code, Uniform Code of Military Justice, so I enjoyed that. Thinking about it, I think it was the discipline that I enjoyed because everybody was on the same page. The instructors were very professional. They were all Vietnam veterans and so they knew what was going on. As a matter of fact, in my basic training, there was a man by the name of Howard Scoville. He was my drill sergeant and he was very, very professional, and they would tell us, “This is the way you’re going to kill Charlie, this is the way you’re going to do things in Vietnam, and this is what Charlie’s going to try and do to you, so you need to be aware of this. Well, Sergeant Scoville was so dedicated and so gung ho, he went back to ‘Nam and he got killed. His name is on the wall, and years later I researched my year book from basic training; out of the 200 or so guys that I trained with, I think it was 25% of them got killed, and his name was also on there. He believed in it, and he went back, and he died over there. Howard Scoville. If you ever have a chance to scroll through the names on the wall, he’s on it.

KS: Could you describe your typical day in basic training?

FG: Up at four o’clock in the morning, do the four S’s; are you familiar with that?

KS: No.

FG: Shave, shower, shit, and shine.

KS: Gotcha!
FG: It was either physical training, running, and then breakfast, or vice versa. I
don’t remember exactly, but we ran and did physical training, and then classes during the
day and then more physical training. As we got into the different levels of training and
then on to the weapons training and things like that, there was not a dull moment.
Basically speaking, training was professional. The food was plentiful and nutritious. The
drill instructors, I guess you could say at that time they were mean. But, they had a job to
do and that was turn us into soldiers and they did the best to train us. I owe a lot to those
guys because eventually we wound up using the training that they put us through. It was
rigorous. It was consistent. It was with everything that we were going to experience in
Vietnam, everything in mind that we were going to have to know in order to survive.
That was the main thing.

KS: You mention that most of your instructors had had experience in Vietnam.
How much effect did that have on you and your fellow soldiers? Did that make you want
to really pay attention to what they were telling you?
FG: Yes, yes, because it was coming from guys who had been there and they
knew exactly what was going on. I think that they wanted us to know these things
because they wanted us to survive, and that was the whole point of the training was to go
over there and win the war. So, they did their best to teach us. They wouldn’t share
bloody details. I remember that very clearly. They wouldn’t share any bloody details or
any kinds of battles. They just would grill us on the physical training and the importance
of following orders and the UCMJ [?] concentrated on that. But as far as actual war
stories, I don’t remember them saying anything about that, and I can understand now
why. They didn’t want to share because they might persuade us not to go through that.

KS: What were you and your fellow soldiers, what were your thoughts and ideas
knowing that you were headed to Vietnam? Did you know at this point during basic
training that that’s…
FG: Well when you’re running and you’re training and you’re doing physical
activities and the drill sergeant is saying, “This is what you’re going to do to Charlie, this
is where you’re going to kill Charlie,” everybody was trained for that. At that time, this
is 1967, about 90 to 95% of the guys that were training were going to go. We didn’t
know. We knew that the possibility of going was very high, but we didn’t know for sure so that all the training was designed for eventually winding up in Vietnam.

KS: Anything else you would like to add about basic training? Any incidents that stick out in your mind? Any problems with discipline with any of the recruits?

FG: No, no. The guys that I trained with, about 250 of us, we didn’t have any discipline problems. We had a few that were stragglers that had been drafted and just didn’t want to be there, but eventually they got in line. They had this thing called recycle, that if you didn’t meet the requirements or if you didn't meet the minimum, if you didn’t meet the minimum requirements, they sent you back to start the training again. With that in mind, very few soldiers were strikers so to speak. So, they got with it and they didn’t want to be left behind because we would be sure that they would know that they are holding us up. I suppose it was part of the psychological aspects of the training that you trained as a group and you go there as a group. It was teamwork.

KS: After basic training, where was your advanced training?

FG: I did advanced training in Fort Gordon, Georgia. Let me see, now. I did advanced training there in Fort Polk and then I went to an additional month in Fort Gordon, Georgia and finished that in December of 1967 and received orders to go to Vietnam and went home for two weeks with orders to report to Oakland, California. So, I went home for a couple of weeks. At Fort Gordon, I remember that in the last days before graduation, everybody got drunk; the whole company got drunk. MPs came in and threatened us, officers came in and threatened us with getting recycled. I don’t know what triggered it, but I do remember that everyone was having a party and I think because we’d just gotten orders to go to Vietnam and at that point we just didn’t care about the consequences. We had this big party and I remember that the MPs went out and the staff officers went out and they yelled at us for a while. That was it. Everybody went home eventually. They didn’t do anything. I suppose that under the circumstances, they expected us to do something because it was about 200 guys and getting orders at the same time to go to Vietnam. We knew that there was a high probability that we, it was a sure thing once it came that we were going, I guess that we felt that we needed to party for a little bit and get it out of our system.

KS: What about weapons training? What kind of things were you trained on?
FG: Basic training was small arms. I trained with an M-14 and got to throw a
 grenade a couple of times. Basically that was it in basic training, learn how to use the M-
 14. When I got to Vietnam and then I was there a couple of days and I was assigned to
 an infantry unit and once I got to the infantry unit, the 25th Infantry Division and I was
 assigned to a line company and as soon as I got there I was issued a brand new M-16.
 Right before we got to ‘Nam at Fort Gordon we got some training on the M-16 right
 before we graduated, so we did get some training on that, and that was it. The rest of the
 weapons I learned on the job in Vietnam.

KS: You mentioned you had I think two weeks before you went to Oakland to
 depart. What was that like before you went as far as interactions with your family, with
 your friends?

FG: I don’t recall too much of it. I did have a girlfriend at that time, and I made a
 mistake and got engaged if I remember so that once that was done, I was not so eager to
 go to Vietnam because I found her. So, I wanted to be around her. As a matter of fact, I
 wound up reporting a few days late to Oakland, California as a result of that. But, I will
 say that the letters from her and then the thought of coming home to her just kept me
 going. So, as far as that’s concerned, some good did come out of it even though I got
 dumped after I came back, so that was part of the process. I think she was a year older or
 two years older, so she was more mature. She may have known what she was doing,
 though.

KS: You mentioned you were a few days late reporting. Were there any
 consequences to that or was that…

FG: No consequences. I don’t know if you heard this before, but the mentality of
 veterans at that time was what were they going to do, send you to Vietnam? That was the
 worst thing you could do to anybody, so there was no reluctance to get off track for a
 while because you were still going to go. So, there was nothing. Nobody said anything.
 I showed up and got processed and within two or three days I was on a plane to Vietnam.

KS: Do you recall what month this was?

FG: This is January.

KS: January?

FG: January of ’68.
KS: January of ’68? Were you on a commercial charter?

FG: Yes. They were flying out of Travis Air Force Base.

KS: How many people were on that flight estimated do you think?

FG: 350 guys. Oakland, they called it Oakland Army Terminal, huge hangers with rows of bunks and it was thousands of guys there processing, some to go to Vietnam, some coming back from Vietnam. So, it was a 24-hour a day operation there in Oakland. You couldn’t go anywhere because of processing and inoculations and issuing jungle fatigues and equipment, some training, very minimum training. Mainly it was just a hurry up and wait situation. I was there three days before my flight came up for a flight to Bien Hoa in South Vietnam.

KS: You mentioned inoculations. Do you recall what they were?

FG: Malaria.

KS: Malaria and those types of things?

FG: I remember that. Brand new jungle fatigues, brand new boots, baseball caps, that was it.

KS: Did you have any contact with the people that were returning from Vietnam?

FG: No. Strangely enough, there was a vast difference, like night and day. They didn’t want to talk to us, we didn’t want to talk to them. They’d aged, and the same thing happened to me a year later. We were going over there, pink skinned, light skinned, and they’re coming back dark and burnt. There was a vast difference. I suppose guys coming back, they just wanted to go home. They didn’t care for socializing or spending the time with a green soldier about what was going on over there, so as far as I know, there was no interaction with guys coming back.

KS: What was the atmosphere like on the trip over there? Were people nervous?

Did you talk about things, what you had expected?

FG: Very quiet. Usually GI’s are rowdy when you have 50, 100, 150 guys, very rowdy. But, from what I recall it was very quiet. It was a commercial flight, stewardesses on board, and when we got to I think it was either after Hawaii or after the next stop the stewardesses were not there and male stewardesses and I found out later because they weren’t letting any females into Vietnam because of the danger. It was strange. When we noticed that, [?].
KS: They didn’t mention it, you just noticed?

FG: Just noticed there was no more stewardesses, just guys. That was in the wake of something.

KS: So you arrived at Bien Hoa?

FG: Yes.

KS: Could you talk about your first impressions when you stepped off the plane?

FG: I’m sure you heard. We’re stepping off the plane, feeling the heat, and the smell; the smell, the heat, the activity, trucks, planes, helicopters going back and forth. Bien Hoa was a very safe area so that there was, as far as I recall, very little noise, very little combat noise. Upon arriving in Bien Hoa we were put on buses and the buses had screen wire on them and of course right away that says, “Well why do they have to have screen wire on the windows?” To keep grenades out in case they were being thrown in, or to keep guys in from jumping out of the bus. So, it worked both ways. Little by little we started seeing those things, that there was a war going on. But, Bien Hoa was relatively a safe area.

KS: So where did the buses take you?

FG: They took us to a place called the 90th Replacement Battalion there in Bien Hoa. You go in there for processing, more shots, the dos and don’ts of the country, what to do, what not to do, and I remember very vividly the signs that said, “Stay alert, stay alive,” all over the place. The barracks were long. We called them hooches. They were long and there was hundreds of guys being processed and it was located on a hill. The guys coming in country were at the top of the hill. The guys coming home were at the bottom of the hill. So, it was a vast contrast because guys at the top of the hill, brand new fatigues, and the guys at the bottom of the hill, scuffy, scruffy, long hair, bearded, tanned, boots that were almost suede like because they’d been there for a year or two years, who knows how long they’d been there. There was quite a difference, and again, they didn’t talk to you.

KS: You mentioned they gave you the dos and don’ts. Do you remember what kinds of things they discussed?

FG: I suppose it was the military propaganda, that we were guests in the country and things like that, that you’re supposed to have respect for the people, and that was it as
far as I remember. I know they give us some handouts of the country. Yes, I remember
now that we were guests in this country and their customs and traditions, their culture is
different from ours so be respectful and mindful of the people in general.

KS: Were you given any specific information about Vietnamese culture or
language or anything?

FG: No. I didn’t get any, just mainly the processing. I was there I guess three
days and every day we would have formations of everybody that was there. Trucks
would come in, deuce and a halves, and there would be names called out, and the
sergeant would say, “The following are going to the 1st Infantry Brigade, the 25th Infantry
Division, the 1st Cav, 4th Infantry Brigade, 9th Infantry Brigade.” So, I was trained in
field so I was under the impression that I was going to go to some rear area. But, I was
on my third day they called formation and, “The following personnel are going to the 25th
Infantry Division,” and my name came up and that’s when I panicked because I wasn’t an
infantryman, and I told the sergeants, “I’m not infantry,” and they said, “Get your ass on
that truck. You’re out of here.” Once you’re there, you’re cannon fodder, you have no
choice. I was assigned to the 25th Infantry Division and they trucked us, about 20 guys.
We went through Long Binh, that’s the place where the 90th Replacement was at. We
went down Highway 1 through Saigon and then up towards to the Cu Chi base camp.
That ride was so interesting, it was a cultural shock, because the way the country is set
out, the buildings, the people, motorcycles everywhere, bicycles everywhere, the dress,
the women. I got to see a little bit of the French influence on the architecture there. That
was only the outskirts of Saigon. Then we went on through Cu Chi base camp and Cu
Chi was, as far as I remember, was a very dusty place. See, now we could see the
activity, helicopters flying over head, machine gun towers, concertina wire, barbed wire,
just a lot of heavy weapons all over the place, tanks at the entrance to the base camp, so I
started realizing that there’s a war going on. Of course this was during the day, and you
could hear artillery going out at that time. It was a kind of slow day. So, we got assigned
and reported to the brigade headquarters. Then from there we were assigned to this
infantry battalion and I wound up in Headquarters Company of the 2nd Battalion, 22nd
Infantry, and as I got into it…well, while we were there they said, “You’re being
assigned to the Wolf Hounds.” That was the name of the unit. When I got there I
discovered there was a crack outfit that was heavily into combat. They’d had many
skirmishes with Viet Cong and North Vietnamese, and had a reputation for being a force
to deal with. It was some wild times.

KS: Now you mentioned you had been trained to be a field wireman?
FG: Yes.
KS: Could you explain what that is exactly and what you did?
FG: I had picked that because I felt that it would keep me away from the combat
but I was wrong, because field wireman, if a whole battalion or whatever sized unit is
there, there’s always what’s called a TOC, a Tactical Operations Center, and from there
you’re running wires to command posts from the different companies. So, that was my
job.

KS: Communications?
FG: Yes, communications and of course I was trained in using the radios and
setting up the communications. Whenever the battalion moved, we were one of the first
ones in there to set up the communications and then once we did that, we were regular
infantry. So, we had two jobs. I was wrong about my training. But when I got there, I
enjoyed it because it was US Army. I was in base camp approximately two weeks.
During those two weeks we became familiar with the area. We went through what they
called jungle school where they familiarized you with mines, booby traps, and different
snakes, insects, and familiarized you with a helicopter and mode of travel for the
battalion and I think we went through a week of that. Mainly for those weeks we sat
around, sleep, eat, and then one day sergeant came in and said, “Saddle up, we’re going
out to the field.” So, they started handing out grenades and that’s when we realized this
was the real thing. When you give 19 year olds four hand grenades and 200 rounds of
ammunition each, you’re going somewhere. So, it was quite a shock but at the same time
it was an adventure. So, they took us out. They had what they called resupply convoys
and in formation they told us, “You’re going out to the field,” and that meant going out
with the rest of the battalion on operations. So, in the afternoon, early afternoon, we got
on a truck that was going out and resupplying ammunition, food, water, and the battalion
was located somewhere in the rice paddies and as we got closer and we could see the
perimeter had sandbag bunkers around it and there was a battery of 105 millimeter
Howitzers, artillery, and it was a helicopter pad. It was during the middle of the day, hot, and got assigned to where we were at, right in the middle, tactical operations, and got assigned sleeping areas, of course the ground. So, we got settled in and then it just so happened that there were some patrols out and the patrols started coming in and then the gunfire started. As soon as it got dark, there’s artillery going out, firing coming back in. We’re just there. I think there was like two other new guys, we were just terrified. We didn’t know what was going on, we just hear the artillery going off and gunfire coming back in, all night long. In the morning, the patrols would come back in and everything was calm. It just so happened that it was our first day, I think it was our second day, that some what they call Eagle Flights, search and destroy missions, they had gone out on helicopters and they were waiting for the helicopters to come back in, and for some reason two of them crashed just as they were landing in our area, and it was terrible because there was squads on those helicopters and as soon as the blade hit, guys knew what was going to happen and he started running, dropping whatever they had. They just started dropping it. The ammunition from the machine guns started going off. Whatever ammunition’s on there started going off. So, we hit the ground and nobody could move for about four or five minutes because of all the hot ammunition that was going off. That was my first day. I got a taste of what was going on on the very first day. Then the next day we moved to another area. We did what was called…by a Slick, a Huey, Huey helicopters, we moved to another area, set up search and destroy missions from there. Little by little I started getting more and more familiar with the day-to-day activities. Mainly during the day it was just hanging out. There was nothing to do except you could sleep, stay out of the sun, and if there was a village nearby I remember we’d often wander off into the village and visit with the Vietnamese, or just doing things we were not supposed to do. During the day, it was quiet and rarely in my first few months, rarely did we have any kind of activity. It was at night. Most of the combat was at night.

KS: If I could back up just a moment, could you describe your living conditions at Cu Chi?

FG: We lived in, I think they were about 20 by 30 hooches, just lumber. Half of it was lumber, and then the other half was screen wire, tin roofs. They had maybe ten cots. That was it. I think we had lockers, foot lockers. That was it, nothing else. The
showers were across the street. They were huge containers for water, and no hot water of course. It was just a square building, and these tanks were on top, and you had four, five, or six outlets. So you were walking around in a towel and some sandals to take a shower; that was it as far as showers. We did have showers. We had a mess hall with hot food; not the best, but it was hot. We got fed. We ate, there was not doubt about the Army feeding us when at base camp; out in the field, it was different.

KS: How safe did you feel on base?

FG: Well, got to the point where, and this is going to be Tet of ’68, we had a lot of attacks during the day. At any time you could get mortared and you would have to run to the bunkers and hope you didn’t get hit. There were a lot of guys that got killed during the day because of mortars. They were using them, and we’d get a lot of probes into the bunker when the Viet Cong would come and try to get into the wire and get into the wire, so we were right on top of them so it wasn’t necessarily [?] come through the wire because they would come up in holes because of the tunnel system. That’s what made it particularly dangerous because we never knew where they were going to pop up. We often wondered how things happened in the night and we never saw what was going on, guys getting their throats cut. Nobody ever knew where these guys were going to come from.

KS: People on base, this was happening?

FG: Yes, quite often. They were in there, so they knew exactly what we were doing. We knew that there was a tunnel system, but we didn’t know how extensive it was. My understanding is, and I think it’s in that book that you’re reading, that one of the high level commanding officers killed some Viet Cong popping up out of a hole right into division headquarters. They were there. As a matter of fact, I found out later that the Viet Cong were calling in direct fire into the base camp, inside the base camp. So, they were inside the wire so they knew exactly what was going on. They knew exactly what [?]. The first day of the offensive, the ammo dump went up; tremendous explosion. Then, I remember that we were activated and went out as what they called a reactionary force because Tan Son Nhut in Saigon was getting hit and we were 20, 25 clicks or kilometers from Tan Son Nhut. So, some of our units went into Saigon in the middle of the night. Then, a couple of days later, my unit went in for clean up. So, I think we
stayed there a couple of weeks and then we went out to some other area, I don’t know. See, that’s why I’m very vague on details. I was just part of a huge military force. I never knew exactly where I was headed at any one time, and I didn’t care, because the main thing was trying to do my part to stay alive and to do my job as a communications guy, and then at night be out there pulling guard and making sure the Viet Cong come into our area. That was quite hairy.

KS: How much did you know about the tunnel system? Was that discussed, or was that something that they told you about prior to you getting to Cu Chi?

FG: Yes, they pointed that out in the jungle school that there was a tunnel system, but of course at that time we didn’t know how extensive that was. We just knew we kept hearing things. It goes all the way up to the Cambodian border and it goes all the way to Nui Bao Dinh, the black Virgin Mountain the highest point in that area. That’s all I remember hearing about. Of course you’ve heard about tunnel rats, guys going into tunnels. So, we had numerous tunnel rats, but we never knew exactly where or how extensive or where the entrances were, the entrances were, we just didn’t know. I didn't know. It doesn’t mean that I didn’t want to be there.

KS: How long would your time out in the field last? You mention that you started out by going on resupply missions. Did you have a set amount of days you could spend out in the field? Was it consistent?

FG: No. Sometimes we were gone for a few days, sometimes weeks, sometimes months. But, most of our time was spent out in the field on operations as part of battalion search and destroy missions. So, it varied from a few days to months before we came back into the base camp. It all depended on how the operations were going or if the officer decided that we needed rest. To me it seems like periods of rest were more of a reward or morale booster because there was no rest. You hardly ever got a full night’s sleep. If you slept, you slept two hours at a time out in the field, two hours at a time at most because you constantly were on watch. In base camp you got to sleep a little bit longer because it’s more secure and because there’s constant lookout for mortar fire and patrols going in at night so it was a little bit safer in base camp, although some of us preferred – I preferred – to be in the field because you were more in control of the area. I know I liked being out in the field as opposed to being at base camp because base camp
was, especially the infantry units, we were always getting hit with mortar fire. And, I remember that our area was a target for rockets, for 122-millimeter rockets. They were Russian made rockets they were firing; powerful. They did some damage to us. I remember they hit an infantry barracks and a few guys got killed. There was a reason a few of us preferred to be out in the field because of the Viet Cong using the rockets on us; where they came from, I don’t know. I know that the mortars, I know that they would bring the mortar tubes out of the tunnels, pop off a few rounds, and then they’re gone. By the time we got permission to fire back, they were already gone. So, it was chaos. To an extent, it was chaos. We just didn’t know. It was frustrating I remember. It was very frustrating because we didn’t know where they were at, how many of them at any given time. That’s how come in the Tet Offensive of 1968, there was over 1000 Viet Cong that were in one place at one time. They got slaughtered by the three quarter Cav, an armor unit of the 25th Division. They went into Tan Son Nhut and just annihilated them because they were in one place at one time. That was the mentality, that if you had an opportunity to make contact, heavy contact, then you went all out; fighter-bombers, artillery, just all out, because it was payback time.

KS: Could you describe, you mentioned that when you were out in the field, the activities seem to take place during the night, is that correct? What was your typical day like? How would you start the day? Did you receive briefings on what to expect?

FG: I didn’t, we didn’t. I’m sure the sergeants did and people in charge. We never did. I never did. I just followed and did my job. The routine was once at first light, if there’s a cook, the cook would fire up the little stove and scramble some eggs and people would eat scrambled eggs out of a paper plate. Otherwise, it was C-rations. Then, you just try to sleep because the day’s going to be hot and then you’re going to have to face the night again so you don’t know where they’re going to send you or if you’re going to be on the bunker line or in the bunker. You just never knew. So, you tried to sleep as much as you could during the day. We’d use our liners, blankets, camouflage blankets for cover and just try to sleep because it was precious because at night, you didn’t want to be sleeping and sometimes you couldn’t sleep. It got to the point, Kim, and I remember this very clearly, most of the time we had an artillery battery, four guns, four 105s and they were constantly firing. It got to the point where I could actually sleep
during the firing missions, and it didn’t bother me. Of course it didn’t bother the rest of
guys but it didn’t bother us to have this constant boom, boom, just of outgoing fire.
When it was incoming, of course it was different. It got to the point where we were so
exhausted, we’d just sleep during firing missions and it didn’t bother us.

KS: Did they give you ear plugs or any kind of protection for all of the…
FG: No. In training, yes, you had earplugs. Over there, I don’t remember
anybody having earplugs. It would cut loose and it was so exciting that you didn’t even
think about the noise. The noise was tremendous. Whenever there was ground fire, it
was tremendous. It effected me. But, as far as something like that, thinking about it, you
just cut loose, just bear with the noise. Of course you’d be numb. The thing to do was
keep your mouth open so you wouldn’t get your ear drums busted. That was key. But,
that was fun thinking about it, being under fire and firing back, it was exciting. Of course
we were scared, but if you weren't scared it was foolish not to be scared. But, all of us
were scared; not cowardly, but just scared because you know what is out there. Years
later I found out that we’re in the middle of the North Vietnamese Army, so that kind of
bothers me now because at that time, we never knew how close we were to those guys
and that’s how come my friend Balentine, he filled me in on that, and he told me that we
were in the middle of the North Vietnamese Army!

KS: Did you ever see the enemy?
FG: I didn't. I saw them dead. I mainly saw dead Viet Cong, never…well, the
ones we saw and that I remember seeing alive were always running. As far as
actually…I never did. None of us mainly did, live ones, because my involvement was
mainly at night, so I never was actually able to see, and didn’t want to, because there was
so much noise and so much fire power that was being used. Then, for example, if they
were attacking us, they would always count on the gunships, the helicopters, and they
would do a job firing their mini guns and artillery, firing point blank. So, whatever
wounded there were would be taken off or whatever casualties were inflicted on them,
firepower has a tendency to blow up a human body into a bunch of pieces. There was
nothing. So, some of the times they would take their dead. A lot of times we’d just have
to come in and clean up the place, mass graves and things like that. The only live Viet
Cong I ever saw were the prisoners of war, what they called the Chu Hois.
KS: I wanted to ask you, what was the procedure or protocol for firing? Would you have to call and get permission if you were fired upon, or how would that work out?

FG: In the base camps, yes.

KS: Or out in the field?

FG: In the field, it was different because if you saw something, you just cut loose. That happened a lot, and again, it was mainly because we were so tense. So, if you heard something and you saw some movement, you cut loose, call in artillery, cut loose with grenade launchers, and then wait until morning to find out if there was anybody there. There was a lot of unnecessary rules and regulations. I didn’t feel it was very lax. One thing for sure in the field, safety was first and foremost because you wanted to make sure that the firing was not your own guys. We had a lot of friendly fire, guys getting killed by our own guys, and it was just trying to conduct operations in the dark and trying to get accurate grid coordinates, and for firing missions in the dark, it’s very difficult, so guys got killed by our own gunfire.

KS: What kind of precautions were taken to avoid these kinds of things?

FG: Making sure that who’s going out on a patrol, knowing exactly who’s where and what, when, signal flares. A certain color meant you coming in, a certain color meant you going out, so those were the extent of the safety precautions. We had some very good, very good squad leaders and officers that knew what they were doing. I was just an infantry guy, a private 1st class. I was just a rifleman. The guys that were there longer, had been there for a while, they were experienced fighters and they loved it. So, they would always look out for us because they knew more. I was there a year and I was with the infantry for eight months. So, the heavy fighting was being done by the guys that had already been in there from anywhere from six months to a year, so we had a lot of good fighters who knew what they were doing and they would make sure that the rest of us were safe. I’m very grateful for guys like that because they’re fearless, very good, knew what they were doing, and they inflicted some heavy casualties on the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese. I know this because over the years I’ve tried to keep up with what happened and I’ve been in contact with guys that I knew that presently…there was one guy, we were friends there in Vietnam named [?]. As a matter of fact, he came to Tech and got his Ph.D. in psychology and was working with veterans in the VA hospital
and in Waco. He was able to fill me in on a lot of these things that happened. He was a little bit older. He’d been in Vietnam longer. He’d been in combat longer. I saw him here and over the years he’s filled me in on some of the things that happened because it’s a haze as to what happened because it may sound strange, but seeing movies about Vietnam helps me to understand more because you’re one small space. You can’t be out looking. You’re not aware of what’s going on. So, seeing it from a different perspective you understand what’s going on, and all the noise, and all the commotion and all the yelling the screaming and you don’t know, and you don’t want to know. It was very…like I said, by watching these things, one movie in particular gave a lot of insight. It was Platoon, because of the reality of that movie and seeing it at that level. It helped. My role was just doing my best to do my job and fire back when fired upon. I didn’t know what was going on. All I could see was the firepower, and it was awful.

KS: What was your friend’s name, the one that you mentioned that got his Ph.D.?
FG: Fernando Garza. He’s from Corpus Christi and he may still be at the VA in Waco, Texas.

KS: You mention that you were more focused on what was happening with yourself and with your unit. Were you a bigger picturer of things as far as the politics?
FG: Didn’t know didn’t care.
KS: Didn’t care? Was that standard among…
FG: Yes, yes, because it all keeps coming back to the warnings, stay alert, stay alive, and that was it. You had to. Things as simple as falling asleep on guard duty could get you killed. You had to, because if you wanted to make the enemy…the veterans, the guys that had been there longer or had had more combat experience, that was what they kept stressing, just stay alert, you’ll make it home. Just do what you’re told to, don’t take chances, don’t take a risk unless you absolutely just know that you have to. Otherwise, do your best to stay alive.

KS: Out in the field, or even back at base, did you have any time off so to speak?
FG: Drink beer!
KS: Drink beer?
FG: And I mean that, because that was an outlet. That was a way of unwinding. In the base camps, I know where we were at, we had an enlisted men’s club where we would go and listen to rock and roll music on the juke box and do our best to forget about the war. It was always plenty of beer. Beer was .25 cents a can.

KS: Was that American beer?

FG: Yeah. No, it was .15 cents a can in MPC, Military Purchase Currency. They were always well stocked. On occasion a band would come in. On occasion they would put on a film outside for us to watch. Otherwise, that was it because it was just if you had free time. As far as entertainment, that was the hang out at the EM club, drink some beers, and listen to rock and roll music, and wish you were home, things like that. That’s one thing that stands out in my mind is the music.

KS: Any bands in particular or songs that you can think of?

FG: Of course the Beatles were prominent. Some how the music fit in with Vietnam. For example, the Animals had one called “We Got to Get Out of This Place,” “Strawberry Fields,” Otis Redding, “Sitting on the Dock of the Bay,” things like that that just brings a lot of memories about actually being there in Vietnam, James Brown music, of course the Rolling Stones, Steppenwolf, “Born to Be Wild,” you can just hear it blasting all over the place, and of course there was the radio station out of Saigon, KFBM, that was very popular that we all listened to because it was all rock and roll music. You’ve probably seen or may have heard about the movie, “Good Morning, Vietnam?” That is true. I don’t know if before they started playing rock and roll there was classical music and all this other music, but all we heard was rock and roll because that’s what we wanted to hear. So, every day you could hear radios just blasting.

KS: Did you listen to it out in the field as well?

FG: Yes, you weren't supposed to! I remember radios being confiscated, especially at night, obviously, bring attention to yourself or let the enemy know where we were at. Transistor radios were not allowed in the field. But, in base camps, you could just hear the stereos blasting all over the place. It was fun to listen to all the music coming from all over the place, and of course the blacks had their own music. But, generally speaking, regardless of background, we all listened to rock and roll, [?] rock and roll [?]. So, that music brings to mind a lot of memories, listening to it now. Like I
said, “We’ve Got To Get Out of This Place,” reminds me about the replacement station in Long Binh where there’s three or four or five hundred guys in one place, all brand new, and we don’t know what our destiny is and we’re listening to this music and the song fits, “We’ve Got To Get Out of This Place,” if it’s the last thing we ever do. There’s some other songs that remind me, and I’ll think of the names as we talk.

KS: What about USO shows? Did you have an opportunity to see any of that?

FG: Let me see. Well, we had I think they were Filipino bands that came out in our EM club I think twice. They entertained us real well. In the bigger base camps, they had better shows. I remember in Long Binh when I got there, at the EM club there was a group, and this musician imitated James Brown to a T. I mean, exactly like James Brown, so that was very exciting. He had everybody jumping up and down. They were good. Bob Hope I missed because I had gotten my orders to come home and he was doing a Christmas show in Long Binh and that’s where the 90th Replacement Battalion was at so that I almost didn’t get processed to come home because of everybody being at the Bob Hope show. This was on the 23rd of December, and I was on my way home. So, there was a slow down of processing, but we got out of there right on the 23rd and the show was going on. But, I could only see the crowd. At that point I didn’t care, I just wanted to get out of there.

KS: You mentioned Long Binh. You were at Cu Chi and then you moved to Long Binh?

FG: Yes. In the summer of 1968 I was with my unit. We were out in the field somewhere. We were in this nasty place. We couldn’t fill sandbags because the mud and dirt was just mud, caked mud, and the reason I say it was nasty because it was jungle and we just moved in, and over the communications system my name came up and they said, “The following enlisted men are to report back to Cu Chi, to Charlie Charlie,” and my name came up. So, I got on the helicopter and I went back to Cu Chi and in the next day I reported to battalion headquarters and they had like 200 other guys that they had come in from different units out of the division and we got on trucks and went back to Long Binh to work in an ammunition dump. I think as best as I’ve been able to piece it together that there was a lot of casualties during the Tet of 1968 there at the ammo dump and there had been a lot of guys that got hurt, so we were replacements to work in the ammunition
dump. So, I wound up in it was called the 3rd Ordinance Battalion down in Long Binh. The facilities were a lot better. The work was hard because we had to be loading and stacking and tending to the ammo dumps, high explosives and all that, which I did not mind because in comparison to being out in the boonies, working in an ammo dump to me was all right. Then, when my platoon sergeant found out that I had been in an infantry unit, he assigned me to ride shotgun on convoys back to Cu Chi to a place called Tay Ninh so that I was running ammunition back to Cu Chi, back to the place I had been. This is were my friend Terry Balentine comes into the picture because when I went through, I remember the convoy stopped in Cu Chi and our destination was Tay Ninh. Tay Ninh was the base camp and had units of 1st Cavalry and our convoy had to stop in Cu Chi because there was a fire fight on the highway and we could go any further. So I went back to the area I had been in and the battalion I had been in and it was deserted, and the guys that were there told me that everybody had been activated because they had been ambushed and 150 guys killed in one whack, several wounded, so that everybody, everybody, cooks and everybody had been mobilized and sent out to the field. This was in the summer of ’68. When I visited with them and then I went back, made it back to Tay Ninh, dumped off the ammunition and we rode the convoy back to Long Binh, I worked there and then my platoon was assigned to go to Tay Ninh to work in the ammunition dump in Tay Ninh. It was about 50 miles from Saigon right on the Cambodian border, right next to the Black Virgin Mountain so that there was a lot of activity there. It was a smaller base camp, and so we were busy. We were providing ammunition to the cavalry units, all the other infantry units, and then at night we were tending to our own bunker line. It was a lot of heavy fighting going on at night, and on the mountain there was a lot of fighting going on. We’re right next to it. We used to sit back and watch the war, watch the shooting from the top to the bottom, and from the bottom to the top, fire coming in. It was exciting. Then we had our own bunker line to protect. We were busy every day, the gunships were busy everyday. There was some heavy fighting going on. That went on for the balance of my tour. This was September of ’68, yeah, September of 1968 is when I went to Tay Ninh and I worked there September, October, November, and December of ’68 I got my orders to come home.
KS: What were your responsibilities? You worked in the ammo dump. What kinds of things did you personally do?

FG: My job was to keep track of what was actually in we called them pads. Towards the end of my tour I was assigned to blow up stuff. We collected obsolete ammunition, artillery shells, smoke grenades, all kinds of ammunition. We’d collect that, load it up on trucks, and then take it out into the jungle and unload it, pile it up, and then put C-4 charges around, plastic explosives around it and blow it up.

KS: Was that standard practice to destroy ammunition?

FG: It was done because we were providing ammunition to the enemy because [?] but that was SOP for the Army at that time. Plus, the Army didn’t want to take chances on an artillery shell blowing up in the tube or the smoke or anything blowing up in somebody’s hands. So, the best thing to do was just take it and blow it all up. So, I did that for the rest of my time. I worked with what was called an EOD specialist, ordinance something specialist, that that was his specialty, handling high explosives. So my job was to be a part of the group that would load up the ammunition and then we’d take it out into the jungle and stack it very neat. He and I were the last ones. He pulled the fuse and jumped into the jeep and ran back into the base camp. By the time we were back into the wire they’d close the gate and turn back and watch our explosions. It was huge explosions, colorful because of all the different kinds of smoke grenades and different ammunition that was going off. That was our job.

KS: Were there ever any accidents in handling the live ammunition? Were you really concerned about your personal safety? Did you have specific…

FG: There was no time. There was no time. I mean, mind you I’d been in an infantry unit and for me this was relatively safe rather than being with the infantry unit. Guys in the infantry, you were in a war situation because if somebody, the Viet Cong would sneak in on occasion, throw in a mortar on an ammunition pad and the whole thing goes up, but that never happened. I was there until the very last week or last night in Vietnam, there in that hill so I never knew what happened. We got hit, and I left the next day. But as far as to the best of my knowledge, I don’t remember anybody getting seriously hurt. There were some guys hurt when we were all in one place at one time. Of course the ammunition falling off the truck and crushing a civilian. I remember some
guys were trying to change a flat on a big truck and the pressure ring blew off and blew
the guy’s head off. There were things like that. One time they were in the tunnel system
and they ordered a flame thrower and the colonel was going to test it and he strapped it
on and somebody was mess ing with the belt and the belt came off, so there was liquid
gasoline spraying all over the place, and he came down on his rear end. Fortunately
nobody was smoking at the time. So, there were things like that. As far as somebody
 getting shot accidentally, not in my unit, because everybody was very careful. In
thinking about it, we didn’t have accidents, guys shooting somebody else accidentally or
gun going off, it just didn’t happen because we were always very careful about it. Just
imagine, 18-19 year olds with heavy weapons and all kinds of different firepower. You
had to be extremely careful. You had to pay attention to what you were doing because it
was your own life and those were the guys [??]. So, we were always very careful about
what we were doing because it was bad enough having to deal with the elements and
getting sniped at which happened very often, that we didn’t want to increase the
 possibility of getting killed by our own mistakes, so we were always very careful.

KS: Was there any incidence of racial tension that you observed?
FG: Oh yeah.
KS: Could you talk a little bit about that?
FG: There was of course the black power movement. In the field we didn’t have
racial tension. There’s no such thing as racial tension in the field because everybody’s
armed, everybody’s on equal ground. You have to get along because if you don’t, your
own guys would blow you away. In the base camps is what I remembered, not in Cu Chi,
the 25th Infantry Division. I saw it over in Long Binh. There was a huge military depot.
That’s where I saw it more because there was more blacks and there was more soldiers,
more support units, and you may have come across this before, at the height of the war in
’68 there was half a million troops, but only 50 to 55,000 were actually in combat. So
everybody else was in the rear areas. Racial tension that I saw, well, I didn't experience it
personally because being of Mexican background, I fit in with the whites and with the
blacks. So, I never was exposed to any kind of…I knew that it was there. I knew that the
blacks were very hostile, especially when Martin Luther King was assassinated in April
of ’68, especially hostile. As far as them actually doing something, we just knew it was
there, the potential for riots was there, the stockade was full. They called it LBJ, Long
Binh Jail. It was full of guys that were there because of drugs, killing somebody, killing
a civilian. I heard, but I haven’t come across anything about it, but I heard that there was
a riot there in 1968 where the guards actually turned the machine guns on our own guys.
I’ve never heard anything else. I remember that there was some talk about that in 1968 at
the stockade. The stockade was very dangerous because of the dope dealers and all the
different people. They just didn't want any part of the war and they preferred to be in
prison than fighting. Have you come across anything?

KS: I’ve not, but that’s something that can be looked into. That’s interesting.

FG: Yes, because it did happen, and racial tension was there but it was not in the
field to the best of my knowledge and experience, not out in the combat areas. It just
didn’t exist because there was no…it just didn’t exist. You could be right next to the
black guys and the white guys, and everybody was your friend, everybody was your
brother, because you had to be because you’ve got to deal with the enemy, you’ve got to
deal with your buddies. So base camps, I remember there being some hostile situations
but nothing that you could say that was a riot; not during the time that I was there.

KS: You mentioned drugs. How prevalent was that? You hear stories as far as…

FG: I think that that’s been taken out of context because sure there was pot in the
field, but as far as heroin, cocaine, I never saw anything. I only heard about it, and I
knew that a lot of the guys that were in Long Binh at the penitentiary were because of
drugs, and as far as that stereotype of drug-crazed Vietnam veterans, it’s a stereotype. I
didn’t see any of it. I know that there was a lot of marijuana. That was more of an outlet,
more of a recreation thing. As far as the other stuff, it existed, it doesn’t mean that it
didn’t exist, but as far as it being a problem, I don’t think so because I didn’t see it.
Maybe it was available at bigger base camps or at rear areas, but it was happening. I
know guys were sending marijuana back in their personal belongings. For example, I
remember one guy [?] sent them home, [?]. I just wanted to get out of there. I never
messed with it, didn’t care for it. It’s bad enough being there, and then to complicate it
with something like that, I just was not interested.

KS: How often did you correspond with friends and family back home?
FG: Weekly. I tried to write as much as I could. I didn't write as much as I
wanted to, but I got plenty of mail and that kept me going. My girlfriend wrote two or
three times a week, my parents wrote at least twice a week, and different people write. I
would write as often as I could, just maybe at least once a week. It wasn’t a priority. I
didn’t want to worry my parents. That was the thing. I didn’t want to worry them
because I knew that they were seeing a lot of things on TV and we were in some bad
situations but I didn’t want to compound their stress by me telling them about what was
going on, so I tried not to share or say anything, just the usual, “I’m okay, everything’s
alright, how’s the family,” and there was nothing about, “So and so got killed, we were
ambushed,” nothing [?]. I was to the point that my information would indicate that, “Do
you want your family notified in case you’re wounded,” and I said, “No.” Wounded,
why should you…if I’m killed obviously they’re going to find out, but not if you’re
wounded. Why complicate it, because I knew that they were worried and I just didn’t
want them to be even more concerned about what was going on; not that they didn't care,
but it was bad enough me being there. Now that I’m older and now that I have a family
of my own I understand where they were coming from, and they must have been a bundle
of nerves. That’s how I know my mother was.

KS: Were you wounded in Vietnam?

FG: Well, my hearing was effected by a mortar round. I cut my hand during a
mortar attack. No, I came close to getting shot a lot of times, mortars nearby, but never
stopped a round. Gosh, I remember many times being out and just hearing the rounds
going over your head, zipping by. Many occasions we knew that they were shooting
directly at us because we were either on top of a bunker and somebody would take a shot
100 yards away or 200 yards away and I knew it was shooting at us. You could hear the
rounds going right by us. So, no, I was very fortunate, very blessed, not being hit. I was
always near where rounds fell, mortar rounds especially, and always near the rounds that
were coming by or stray rounds, it was common, every day thing, so you get used to it.
You get used to crouching. You learned not to make yourself a target because being out
in the rice paddy and the jungle where snipers could see you, so you just try to be
camouflaged at all time and try not to stand out so you wouldn’t make yourself a target.
KS: What was your opinion of your leadership, the American leadership, more directly in the field? Did you find your tactics were successful or adequate? Did you agree with the way things were being…

FG: I wasn’t in a position to disagree, but the one thing we did agree on as soldiers was that there was no goal. There was no end to that. Of course later on you find out that’s where we failed, having a direct mission of winning the war. We were just trying to comply with was it Kennedy’s policy, and then Johnson and then Nixon, and of course there’s the argument that says that we were perpetuating the war by corporations that were wanting there to be war to be making a profit off the ammunition and all the things that come with having the war. I don’t know, but I do know that one of the things that I believed in at the time and firmly believe in right now is patriotism; my country right or wrong. I firmly believe in that. I know at that time that our mission was to fight communism. Communism, per se, still exists, but socialism doesn’t, and that’s what we were fighting was the Russians, the USSR’s goal of dominating the world with socialism and we stopped it in Vietnam. It may have taken 20 years, but we stopped it. There is no more USSR. There is no more aggression of that nature as was experienced in Vietnam, as was experienced in Afghanistan. It doesn’t exist anymore. So in that regard, we did our job. It took a while, but that was the mission as far as I remember. That was the mission, to eliminate and to fight communism. At that time I didn’t know that there was a difference between socialism and communism. In my mind, they were all communists. But like I said, we did succeed as far as that’s concerned.

KS: Did you have access to any American newspapers or military newspapers while you were in Vietnam?

FG: Sure they were there, but I didn’t have any interest in them. Gosh, that’s a good question, because I don’t remember. I think maybe a few times when my parents sent me the Avalanche-Journal. Stars and Stripes, I know that it was provided to us and I know that we had to know what was going on in Vietnam. One thing that we shared that we did keep up with, that I remember keeping up with, was the siege of Khe Sanh. They were under siege, and that could have happened to anybody. The only reason it didn’t happen in our base camp was because we were so close to Saigon and because the Saigon-Tan Son Nhut air base was there and so there was a lot of fighter-bombers there.
Khe Sanh was in the middle of a valley and was surrounded by a valley so that the North Vietnamese were bombing them with artillery and heavy guns. See, where I was at, we didn’t have to face that. The highest, to the best that I recall, the highest firepower that they had using against us was the rockets, and that was it. I’ve heard some guys say that there were some tanks, that the North Vietnamese had some tanks down in Tay Ninh. They knew that to be true. But, that was the extent of their firepower that they used against us.

KS: You mention early on that while you were out in the field at times when you would venture out to the surrounding villages, how much contact did you have with Vietnamese civilian population?

FG: I found it, for me, it was interesting because as a child I made several trips to Mexico and being in those villages reminded me of Mexico to an extent. I liked hanging out because I wasn’t white and I wasn’t black so they accepted me more readily than they would accept other GI’s. They were very polite, and they would share their food. To get away from C-rations, they would go eat with them. The military officers frowned upon that. They didn’t want us to fraternize with the civilians. We just would go in the villages, especially if it was a small village that we knew that there wasn’t any Viet Cong around. Danger was all over the place, but if we could reason that we would be okay then we would hang out, spend some time over there, try to communicate as much as possible, and that was it. The thing that I think that may have reduced fraternizing with the Vietnamese was the fact that they didn’t want to take part in the fighting. The South Vietnamese Army was the sorriest ever. I’m sure that maybe at one time they fought or wanted to fight, but I never saw it. They were hanging out and partying and drinking beer while we were going off to do the dirty work. In that sense, we despised them. I don’t remember ever establishing a close relationship with the male Vietnamese. I think the only one that I ever established a close relationship with was with a guy that had been a Viet Cong and was one of our advisors, one of our scouts. Otherwise, I despised them simply because they didn’t want to fight for their own country; I just couldn’t see why not. Of course now we know different.

KS: Was your unit involved in any civic action projects?
FG: I know that the medics would go into the villages and offer minimal medical care to the villagers and peasants. That was it. Because of the way the war was going, because we couldn’t trust them to provide anything, that’s just the way it was. It was their fault because of the way they treated us. On many occasions we’d find people that worked on the base camp, we’d find them out dead on the jungle after a firefight. They’d be cutting our hair during the day and then trying to kill us at night, so that was hard to deal with. Other than that, I had to deep, very deep hatred of Vietnamese and it took me a long time to get over it and it took me a long time to even accept them as a people. It was part of the training. Remember what I said earlier, training was, “This is how you’re going to kill Charlie,” and sometime in the late ‘70s I was working on a program that was after the war ended and there were refugees coming to the United States and I wound up working on a program and we were tending to some clients who were Vietnamese. That was hard to deal with because at one time I thought they were trying to kill me, and now here I am trying to provide services to them. So, I had a very difficult time. But, [?] because they’d been in Saigon, and I accepted that.

KS: What do you remember most about combat, about being out in the field?

FG: Gosh, the level of excitement. Sure, it was frightening, but it was exciting. It was very, very exciting, the epitome of being [?], especially if you get out alive because it was so many…there’s no set pattern to combat. There is no set time, there is no predictable outcome. Plus, the nature of the war, the style of the war, guerilla warfare, we had superior firepower, they had their often times obsolete weapons. So, we had them outgunned so that in my role, as a soldier, it was more being right in the middle and watching fighter bombers come in and drop bombs, helicopters coming in and just blowing up the villages and artillery, Air Force gunships, they called them Snoopy, they had many guns on them. They would come in the night. B-52 bombings, we had a lot of that where I was at. So, whenever large groups of Viet Cong would get together, North Vietnamese, I knew they were there but I never saw them. There was a saying, “Spend artillery like a millionaire.” In other words, lay out 100, 200, 300 rounds. The whole idea is to blow them away because frustration of not being able to see them, not being able to have some solid contact…the unit I was with was very famous for taking care of their job, wasting Viet Cong. We were very good at it, and the Viet Cong respected our
unit, and we respected them. But, ours was a very difficult job because we were on the
route from North Vietnam to Saigon and in thinking about where we were at and
knowing now that we were in the middle of the North Vietnamese Army sends chills up
my spine because we were right in the middle of it. They chose not to attack until [?],
and that’s after I had left. That’s where some of the guys that I’ve been in contact with,
that’s what happened was it wasn’t Viet Cong, it was North Vietnamese soldiers. For
me, it was oh, just Viet Cong.
KS: Did you come in contact with any wildlife, insects or snakes? Was that ever
a problem out in the field?
FG: Any what?
KS: Wildlife, any problems with snakebites, insect bites?
FG: Not me, I saw them.
KS: You did?
FG: There were a lot of snakes and insects. I never got bit, but they were there.
We would see them. We knew where they were at and we would see them. You can’t be
squeamish in the jungle. You have to learn to wake up with bugs crawling over you,
things slithering around. It was a part of being there. As far as I know, there was some
tigers. Of course there were monkeys all over the place. Other than that, I didn't see any.
I know we shot a lot of water buffalos because they’d be out roaming around in the night
and we didn't know it, so we wound up blowing up a lot of the water buffalos and
monkeys, dogs, things like that. But, they were there.
KS: What about insecticides? Did your unit use insecticides?
FG: We had bug spray. We had mosquito repellant that didn't work. That was it.
KS: What about Agent Orange? Did you…
FG: We’d get sprayed with that. The area, virtually all of South Vietnam was
sprayed with Agent Orange. Do you know why they called it Agent Orange? The barrels
that they were shipped in had an orange ring around them, so therefore there was an
Agent Orange, Agent Blue, Agent Green. Agent Orange was the main herbicide that was
sprayed in the area that I was at. One time the Department of Defense sent me a letter
saying that I had been in an area where there was 22 million gallons of Agent Orange
sprayed. We’d see the helicopters flying around and this mist, planes going around and
spraying stuff. We didn’t think about it. So, we were breathing the spray, and when
you’d go in the jungle you could tell that it was dead. It was a defoliant. But, we were
never warned about it. There was no precautions about being around Agent Orange, or if
they were spraying for us to cover up. Nobody ever said anything.

KS: You mentioned a letter. When did you receive this letter from the
government?

FG: Sometime in the ‘70s.

KS: So it was after your service?

FG: After my tour because then there was an empty…the military’s being
accused…veterans would complain about physical ailments, saying that it was directly
related to the spraying of the herbicides. So then, after a period of time, the Department
of Defense started sending out letters to – I know I got one – stating that you were in this
area, and this area we sprayed so many million gallons of Agent Orange. So, I know that
I was there. I remember breathing that stuff and being in it whenever it was being
sprayed. The opinion of the VA right now is that if you set foot in Vietnam, you were
exposed. As to the extent, it all depends on where you were at, what you ate. They’re
still hurting from that. One of the biggest problems I understand right now is that all the
ordinance was left unexploded in the jungle, since it’s been 30 years, 25 years since the
war, whenever there’s an unexploded shell that explodes, it stirs up the chemicals in the
ground so that the effects are still being felt. Over the years, I’ve read articles about the
medical problems that they experienced and birth defects and things like that. I know
that I was exposed and I presently am going through the Agent Orange screening at the
Veteran’s Administration for regular physicals and checkups. There’s been some guys
that have been awarded disabilities because of their ailments, but it’s very difficult to
prove. It’s very difficult to get a pension, a disability rating out of there because you
have to be dead. So, it’s a terrible situation, not only for the government but for the
soldiers.

KS: Is there anything else you would like to add about your time in country?

FG: Well, in country I was just a regular soldier, no heroic adventures. I was just
doing my job. I know guys that did do a lot of heroic things and perform well under
combat. But, it was a time that was complicated. I’m sure it was complicated for the
whole country, not just soldiers. I know that sooner or later, there had to be a major
conflict of ideologies, and that’s what happened in Vietnam. The goal was to eliminate
communism and we took care of that job, socialism now as we know it. But, one thing
that I am interested in and hopefully I’ll be able to provide you some more data later on
because I haven’t heard anything about it, is there was a place in Fort Sill, Oklahoma
called the Special Processing Detachment that was a processing center for guys that had
been AWOL from Vietnam. We know that there was a lot of deserters, we know that
there was a lot of AWOLs, but Fort Sill, I know because I was there and that’s where
they had the stockade and the stockade was full of people that were AWOL, either going
to Vietnam or coming back from Vietnam. I know that there was some…what did they
call it, oh God, I remember because I was there. One time a group of GI’s got together
and put together an underground newspaper called the Fort Sill Daily Pig.


FG: And it was articles against the war, articles against the Army. It was put
together by some guys that were by the clerks at the special processing detachment and I
was involved in it because I helped staple and I helped to distribute them out, and as a
result of that I wound up getting transferred. There were some guys that were convicted
of subversive activity, and I never heard anything else about it. I estimate that there was
maybe 40-50 guys involved. I know that I was singled out because I helped to distribute
them in downtown [?] and I was arrested the next day by the MPs and I was transferred
out of that unit into another unit, and the leaders, the ring leaders of the whole thing, they
were transferred. One of them was convicted, some of them were busted. The whole
thing was broken up, and there was never any mention of it again.

KS: What year was this?

FG: ’69, Spring of 1969, March of 1969, in Fort Sill, Oklahoma. It was called
the Special Processing Detachment.

KS: You left Vietnam in December of ’68?

FG: ’68.

KS: ’68, and you went back to California?

FG: No, I wound up being in Fort Sill.

KS: Okay, that’s where you came directly after?
FG: Yes.
KS: Okay. How were you treated when you got back to the United States?
FG: Well…
KS: Do you recall any demonstrations for instance when you got off the plane your first day back?
FG: I got back at night to Oakland. There was no one. It was the middle of the night so there was nobody around. We got processed through in the middle of the night, so I didn’t see anything, even when I came home. People were just in different…of course there were no parades and there was nothing. I was just glad to be home. But, once I was here a couple of days, I noticed it. I remember some of my friends who I graduated from high school with said, “I haven’t seen you for a while!” “Yeah, well, I been in the war.” Then some of my friends that graduated afterwards, they were volunteering or they were being drafted to go to ‘Nam. I didn’t do anything to try and stop them or to educate them or to make them aware or to caution them about Vietnam because they were going to go either way. One friend in particular, when I came home I was partying and I ran into him and he told me that he was on his way to Vietnam, and I said, “Good luck.” I didn't say anything, and he wound up losing his leg over there. So, it was just nobody wanted to talk about it, so eventually I just wound up withdrawing and socializing with other veterans, and eventually there was about 15 or 20 of us that would get together on occasion because nobody else cared about the veterans or what we’ve been through or what we were experiencing. As a matter of fact, there was a lot of us were having difficulties in trying to get a grasp on our role in Vietnam, especially after 1975 when the war ended, and technically it was a loss. So, there was a lot of us that were having problems trying to make some sense out of the whole thing so that we wound up forming a group at the local Veteran’s Administration. I think at one time we had, oh gosh, groups of 15, 20, 30 guys that would meet weekly at the VA. From there it grew to…I think now, what happened was that all that data that was being gathered by the Vietnam Veterans that work for the VA, he was indoctrinating it and providing it to the leadership of the VA to where eventually there was some need for treatment and need for vet centers because the way that guys were having problems with drugs or alcohol, [?]. That took a long time to take hold of, to be recognized so that our getting together
informally helped a lot of guys, and at the same time it helped the veteran’s
administration to understand that there was a need for authorized treatment of soldiers
that were PTSD, shell shocked, and it’s still going, it’s still going. There’s a lot of guys.
After every one, there’s casualties. Now there’s World War II veterans that are coming
out with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Korean War veterans, they’re coming out. So,
there’s lots happening. With respect to the veterans and their own PTSD, it depends on
the level of combat and depends on the level of what you did, how you did it, how you let
it effect you, how determined you are to continuously be a survivor or even now be a
survivor of those memories of Vietnam because they’re not always pleasant, and it’s
something that won’t go away. See, this is what I learned from my friend Fernando who
is now a psychologist. He says, “Don’t even try to forget, man, you’re not going to
forget it. It’s there. Enjoy it, and the thing you have to enjoy is the fact that you’re alive
and there’s a lot of guys that are dead. Don’t even try, because it’s not going to work. I
know. I studied this thing, I majored in psychology, got my Ph.D. in psychology. It’s
something that’s always going to be around and veterans are always going to have to deal
with it.” So, I enjoy it and I try to do my best to let others know about it. I’ve been
wanting to come over here and share some more because Dr. Reckner encouraged me and
some of the board members. I wanted to open the door so that other guys like my friend
Terry, I’ll get some more guys to start. What would be interesting, Kim, would be to see
if we can get this one particular unit’s history for there to be some record of it because I
can only provide a small part of it. But, if you manage to get enough guys just from this
one unit, then there will be something to put together from what happened in this
particular time. I suppose one of the strongest messages that comes out is that regardless
of what our roles were in the war, what we may have experienced, some of us are
successful, some of us are comfortable. Sure we think about it, sure we get up in tears
whenever we hear Taps and see the flag going by and things like that. It’s important for
people to know that because it’s going to happen again. Case in point, the Persian Gulf;
complete opposite. Half a million troops at one time, start the war, you get the support of
the whole country, and you win it. You take care of the job. Vietnam was completely
different. They built up to half a million troops in 1968. Making the tour of duty a year
was a mistake because you’re taking experienced, seasoned veterans and sending them
home without any kind of deprogramming, if you will. How can you expect to win? In the first place, there wasn’t a goal in mind. I don’t remember ever being told that the war is going to end by this day, once we take care of this we’re going to go home, nothing. I mean, it was just a day to day thing with very little in terms of direction from Washington. The politicians, whatever they were doing, was not for the benefit of this war. The career soldiers were not doing anything, they were doing it for their own political reasons. I know that there’s a lot of research that has been done since the war, and there are some more things that have been said and written about clarifying the mysteries of Vietnam. This place is going to be a critical part of the truth about Vietnam because there’s a lot of things coming out of here. By bringing all sides into discussion, it helps, it helps. One thing I do like about Dr. Reckner’s direction is that he wants more input from the soldiers, individuals. That’s part of my goal is to get more guys to participate. There’s a lot of heroes here in Lubbock, Texas. You wouldn’t believe the kinds of things they went through. My role in Vietnam was very minor. Some of the guys that I know were actually wounded and got 100% disabilities from getting shot six or seven times, or losing both legs, losing a leg. They just never talk about it. They don’t think about themselves as heroes or anything or any kind of special person. They just hang out, collect the pension [laughs]. When I told them, “Go to the Vietnam Center. Help them!”

KS: I meant to ask you about your time in Oklahoma. Could you tell me a little bit more about the newspapers and what prompted you to be a part?

FG: Peer pressure.

KS: Peer pressure?

FG: By then I knew that the war was not going. Since I got out of line…the public demonstrations were taking place. I was not anti-war; I was more anti-military. In other words, I had come to the conclusion that if the leadership of the military wasn’t behind the soldiers, then this rotating troops was just going to continue and there’s not going to be an end to it. Plus, we had more sophisticated thinkers that would reason these things out, and knew and had a better grasp of what was going on. I was very naïve still, even after Vietnam. I was very naïve. But, there was these college graduates that were
more aware of the politics of the war and were more determined to see an end to it. So,
in places like Fort Sill, Oklahoma, it took a hold because…

KS: This is Kim Sawyer continuing the interview with Frank Gutierrez on disc
two. It is February 5th, 2001 at 1:05 in the afternoon and we’re in the Special Collections
Library at Texas Tech. Mr. Gutierrez, could you start by talking a little bit more about
some of the veteran’s activities, recognition activities that you were involved in, maybe
late ‘70s, early ‘80s?

FG: The first event at the national level that I attended with some friends of mine
was the dedication of the Wall on Veteran’s Day 1982. It was very…at that time,
veterans were just starting to be recognized. I had returned here to campus to finish up
my degree because I had dropped out in the middle ‘70s and didn’t finish my degree, so I
was back on campus and in the Fall of ’82 I was in my final classes and noticed that [?]
friends there was virtually nothing available on campus relative to the war in Vietnam.
So, we became concerned. As a result of the interest, ongoing interest in Vietnam and in
veterans after the war, we found out that there was going to be a dedication of the Wall.
Of course we’d been keeping up with the project from the very beginning and we
traveled to Washington to be there on the day of the dedication. We drove, I myself with
three other veterans, disabled veterans, 100% disabled, combat wounds. One of them is a
paraplegic, so I made arrangements to take time off from my classes and turn in some
assignments so I could go because driving over there, it’s at least no less than a week and
it takes three days to drive to Washington. So, we drove over there. It was very exciting
because it was the first time that there had ever been a national…it was the first time
national attention had been directed to Vietnam veterans, and from the very beginning
you could tell that this was a major event because it was called national for one. So, we
checked into the hotel and started to look around and being curious, we had arrived at
Washington in the middle of the night, we decided to go to the mall where the memorial
is at and look for it. There were some guys there and we asked, “Where’s the Wall?” Of
course it wasn’t lit and we almost fell into it as a result of there being no lighting. It was
a very moving occasion because this was the first time…we were the first ones to see this
thing. So we looked around with flashlights and we couldn’t actually find any names
because there were some people, some volunteers there, but there were just too many
people at that hour in the morning to find names so we just left it until the next morning.

Part of the events of course had to do with a parade. I’m sure that you heard that there
was no parades for veterans and veterans seemed to harp on that a lot and insisted to there
being no parades, and this is true. So, this was the first one, at the national level, that had
the interest of veterans. There was several hundred thousand veterans in that place and of
course there was reunions and all the major infantry troops had their reunions. I went and
signed up for the reunion with the 25th Infantry Division and wound up marching with
them in the parade. One of the highlights of the whole thing was meeting Master
Sergeant Roy Benevides, the last Congressional Medal of Honor recipient. He was in his
glory at that time because Regan had just bestowed a medal to him. We ran into him
there at the memorial and being from Texas and being Mexican-American, we
immediately became a group and so we hung out. It was a very exciting experience
because he had the attention of everybody, and since he had just received the medal after
a 20 year battle with the Department of Defense or the Army, because of the time that
had transpired since the actual deed and not being able to locate witnesses and documents
so that it had taken that long to get it. He was very popular as a veteran. Like I said,
there was generals and colonels and high ranking officers going down Washington’s
streets and they would see him and they would stop in the middle of the street and they
would get out of their vehicles and they would go up to them and hug them and salute
them and do an about face and they’re gone. Many women would go up to him and hug
him and kiss him on the cheek. They were overwhelmed by his presence. That was quite
exciting because by being around him, the attention rubbed off on us. So, and of course
the reunion, and what makes the reunion so special at that time is because the parades
that we never had and being with the veterans of the 25th Infantry Division and actually
being in a parade down Constitution Avenue was very, very exciting to say the least, but
at the same time we could see that people actually did respect veterans and did want to
recognize veterans at the time. We were overwhelmed because we had not seen this
before. We had been ostracized, ostracized and castigated all along for the political loss
of the war, and it was quite moving. So, we went to the parade and wound up at the
memorial and the whole division marched up to the memorial and saluted it and then we
were dismissed, so we hung out there for three days I think, just hanging out.
KS: Did you catch up with old friends?

FG: Yeah, and I found out about guys that had died that I didn’t know anything about, so that was a major event in my life because many of the guys that were there had not been in touch with anybody since the war, so we were very excited of course but we were also very proud of the fact that we were survivors and we were there to honor the guys that didn’t come back. That was the main thing. I think I mentioned at that time already there was talk of the three soldier statue that eventually was dedicated in Veteran’s Day of 1984. We also made the effort and spent money out of our own pockets to go and to be there for that event because it was also going to be a get together on a national level. So, we traveled to these things, and mainly for my friends and myself, it was mainly a cathartic…

KS: At least! Yeah.

FG: Yes, because for so long we’d been wondering…one of the mistakes that we made […] and in the end people were very much opposed to us as veterans, not that we cared that much. It’s just that traditionally veterans are always recognized, and Vietnam didn’t work out so veterans were blamed for that. But as I said, being around in the middle or part of a reunion, several thousand if not hundreds of thousands of veterans, is the greatest, one of the greatest feelings that there is because we all took part in something that we believed in. We all took part as a result of our belief in the country and duty and honor and all those good things, and we believed in it, and it took a long time in coming but we eventually got the recognition that needed to be bestowed upon the veterans. After the ’84 dedication of the three soldier statue, by then there was already discussion of the fact that New York City was having a ticker tape parade and that happened in May of 1985, and we traveled over there and drove…

KS: From Lubbock to New York City?

FG: We rented a van, and decided to go, and saved our money for [?]. We just rented a van and just went. Of course we stopped in Washington and there was a lot of guys that were there and they were also going to New York City. So, we drove to New York City and we checked into the Reunion Hotel and it was probably, well, on the level of a national event it was very significant because it was New York City. In the past, the veteran’s parade had been there after World War I, World War II, and I think Korean
Veterans got it. I know the Persian Gulf people did. This was something that is special from New York City because you march from the parade staging area was at Battery Park in Brooklyn, so units were marching across the Brooklyn Bridge into Manhattan into what they called the Canyon of Heroes, so it was very exciting because it was confetti and trash being thrown from windows. There were piles of confetti and different streamers and paper that they’d already thrown from the guys that had been in front of us. So, it was estimated that there was almost a million veterans in the parade, and of course along the sides there were several thousands if not millions of people. But it was an experience because this was New York City!

KS: Did you march in this one?

FG: Yes. I think I was with my…with the state, I think it was with the State of Texas because we all stuck together. Let me think. We did march with it, and we did go with the state because my friends were there. We went through there to Manhattan and New York City was dedicating it’s Memorial there in Manhattan at Cadman Plaza they had the memorial. They call it Living Memorial where it’s inscribed with the actual content of letters that were exchanged between veterans and family members back here. It’s situated there at Cagdman Plaza where the buildings, the skyline of…and it was packed and there was a fireworks demonstration, and it was a party. It was a party! I think a year after the New York event, in June of ’86 we went to Chicago where they had also a reunion and events for veterans there, and that was also very exciting because equal number of veterans. They hadn’t been to Washington or New York or anywhere from the Midwest, so Chicago was their event and it was also a very moving experience because of the quality and the content of the parade. The people in general, very, very patriotic and very recognized veterans today. That was also an event. I did manage to take a good group of photographs and slides that I still have. After the ’86 event, Houston had an event in Memorial Day of 1987. My understanding is that they have them every year, but this one was what they call the Great Texas Stand Down and Reunion in Houston, and it was a good event because we hung around with more Texas veterans. There was concerts, there was reunions. It was a great event. We also ran into Sergeant Benevedez again. He was the Parade Marshal. He had him up on a pedestal.
So, we got to visit with him again. As a matter of fact, he’s been on the Tech campus several times.

KS: Oh he has?

FG: Yes. He died two years ago. He was on campus the first time I think in the early ‘80s. We had invited him to come and speak at a veteran’s function and he came in and brought on the campus. I believe that the president of the university at that time was Lauro Cavasos and so we arranged a meeting between the president of the university and Sgt. Benevedez, and he also spoke to the ROTC classes. They went bananas when they saw him because I presume that in their military history and then the Medal of Honor recipients and him being the last one and him being there, to him it was an honor and they recognized it. They gave him a speech. He also gave a speech to the Rotary Club that we took him to. Overall, let me see, Houston and then Los Angeles had an event. I think it was 1988. They also had an event in LA and we drove up there and spent about three or four days there. I suppose that the reason we go to these places is to party as veterans. All the veterans come because there has been plenty of tears shed, there’s been plenty of sorrow, there’s been plenty of tragedy that has happened to veterans, so these events are more for enjoying than for grieving. I mean, sure guys get to reminiscing in memory of the guys that were killed over there, but for the most part we all benefit from it because we were together and we can…well, it’s an outlet and we can see that there’s other veterans that have also experienced some of the same things and are still experiencing them. As far as the memories of Vietnam, the fact that we hold it dear in our hearts just won’t go away. It’s not going to go away. Being that there’s places like the Vietnam Archive now, it links up all of these different things and it’s important because we get different historical aspects of the war itself, veterans and post Vietnam and veteran’s experiences after Vietnam. That was the last time I was at a national event as far as veterans are concerned. No, I lie! When the women’s statue was dedicated in ’93 Joe Gallindo and myself, we flew over there because it was only two of us. So we flew over to Washington to be there for the Vietnam Women’s Memorial Project and of course Glenda Goodacre was the designer of that. She was the woman of the hour in Washington, and thousands of ladies were there. It was a good event. They kept looking for guys that they’d patched up. That was the interesting thing because many of them
had not been to a national event since the war, so for them it was an event to come out, come out of the closet so to speak, because there had never been a national effort. So they had their parade and they had their parties, their reunions. My friend Joe, being a paraplegic, he was always being stopped, “Where did you get Medevaced? When did you get stateside? Which hospital were you at?” These were the women that had served as nurses that were asking these questions, and as a matter of fact, they did come across some guys that they treated. So, it was quite moving because they had assumed that these guys had died and started describing or relating information that only they would know so they found each other again. It was quite moving. The parade was special because the saying at the time was, “Welcome home, ladies!” So there were thousands of them; I don’t know exactly how many, but there was a lot of them. They had their parties. They had one party called, “From the Delta to the DMZ, rock and roll from the ’60s and ’70s.”

KS: A lot of fun?

FG: Oh yeah, a lot of fun! So, that was the last time I went to a national event.

Of course locally I belong to veterans groups, the American GI Forum, the VFW, and I’ve taken part in some of the events here at the Vietnam Archives. I’ve gotten to know Dr. Reckner and I know several of the board members, and one of the main reasons that I am involved and want to participate is because of a lack of veteran’s participation. Many veterans, I don’t know how many veterans you’ve talked to, but some veterans just don’t care to let anybody know what they experienced, and I don't blame them. But, they’re there and I’ve got some friends that little by little feel sure that they’ll be contacting you. I’ll give you names so that you can contact them, and I’ve asked them that they need to because everything else is there. We’ve even been at the same table with our former enemies. So, we need to get the veterans to start contributing and putting their stories in there because there are some hellacious stories that local veterans have that need to be a part of this center. So, I’ve been doing that, and those copies that you gave me about the project, I’ve been circulating them.

KS: Good, good.

FG: Yes, hopefully you’ll get some calls. You ought to hear some of the things these guys say. They just don’t care, and say, “What the hell! Don’t talk to me about it. What do I know?” Look, you went through a lot and you experienced a lot and people
need to know what you went through and what you feel. It’s important because they’re attitude. It’s not a bad attitude. A lot of it is survivor’s guilt. A lot of it is downright mad because of the turnout; well, not necessarily mad, but very much aware of the role in Vietnam and the historical importance of Vietnam as far as US history is concerned. They’re especially tolerant of draft dodgers and the Clinton types, the Jane Fonda’s. I know you’ve heard about the fact that veterans just do not appreciate or want anything to do with Jane Fonda or her husband, Tom Hayden, because of his position on the war. So there was a great dislike of those that chose not to serve or found some way to avoid military service, which leads into my other interests is the minority veteran interest. My experience was that most of the minorities, most of the Mexican American soldiers that I ran into were in the combat units, many in Vietnam. To the best of my knowledge, let me see now, Texas had something like 2,500 killed in action, total. Out of those 2,500 there were about 450 that were Mexican American or Spanish heritage, which is almost 25% of the total killed in action; very important. At the time, we were only about 10%, 11% of the population. The point is, we over represent the casualties. We’ve always...well, not always, we’ve always represented the casualties in high numbers, and part of it is because of the loyalty that we had for this country and the patriotism, and the good things that have transpired as a part of military service. The main thing that I can point out that the veterans were responsible for was the civil rights movement in Texas. That was initiated by the American GI Forum in 1949. At that time, veterans were coming home from the war and were looking for opportunities to become mainstream citizens, and many of their encountered barriers or biases based on race or some other bias. But, the main thing, the event that caused the American GI Forum to come forth was that there was a World War II KIA by the name of Felix Longoria who was denied burial in an Anglo cemetery I believe in Three Rivers, Texas. Well there was a doctor by the name of Hector Garcia who had been a medical officer during World War II, lived in Corpus Christi, and took issue of the fact that Private Longoria was denied burial in the cemetery. As a result of that, the event caused for him to reach out to other veterans to organize and approach the lack of opportunities for Hispanic veterans. They did a magnificent job of taking issue with several things in the ‘50s and the ‘60s that brought us to this present situation that we have, the Voting Rights Act that was implemented in
1964 and along the way they’ve always been a part of the Civil Rights veteran’s
movements. Had it not been for them, as a group, we wouldn’t have the numbers of
elected officials, especially down in South Texas and in the valley, veterans that actually
participated in different wars that have become elected officials that continue to promote
patriotism and service of minorities. The black experience is something that is very
vague. I don’t know if you’ve noticed that. It’s very vague as far as determining exactly
how many blacks participated and how many were killed in action. It’s always been a
mystery because other than having their actual personnel files, there’s nothing that
indicates race. With Hispanics, it’s less difficult because of the name. You can
distinguish between Puerto Rican Hispanics as opposed to Mexican and Texas Hispanics
because of the name. Puerto Rican names are usually hyphenated, and they also have a
lot of Anglo names in Puerto Rican communities. They’re easier to distinguish, plus
there was a lot of black Puerto Ricans. That’s something that’s pretty vague. Hopefully
at some point the Archives can have some input on that because there was a lot of blacks
that served.

KS: I wanted to ask you, you spoke about all the different events that you went to
in the early ‘80s and on up. What do you think changed in American society? Why were
Vietnam veterans all of a sudden getting more recognition that they didn’t have as soon
as the war was over? In your opinion, what do you think?

FG: Well, because we wouldn’t go away. They trained us. They trained us to be
patriotic. They trained us to expect these things from our nation and our leaders and we
held them accountable, and that was it. If the veterans, for example, had not
protested…if the Vietnam veterans against the war had not united and taken to the streets
in Washington D.C., that war would have gone on for more years. It wasn’t that
veterans didn’t want to go to Vietnam or didn’t want to take care of their job, it was just
that we lacked the leadership and we had too many rules and too many red tape involved
in getting the job done. I think that veterans are directly responsible for having put a stop
to that war because it came to a point where just that’s it. Then, the lack of recognition
caused a lot of veterans to be even more rebellious and caused them to be even more
becoming indifferent to what was happening in society, to be associated with anything
that had to do with it’s political process, local community events and things like that. I
think that...well I know for sure locally emotions were triggered off when in 1980, when
was it that the Iranian hostages were returned? Reagan had just beat Carter. This was
1978? They’d been held prisoners in Iran in Teheran for more than a year, and then they
were released. Reagan was the president. Carter was the president? It was ’82? The
hostages were coming back and they got a parade. A lot of veterans got mad because
they said...they got caught, and they’re getting recognition because they got caught,
simply because Vietnam veterans didn’t get any recognitions. They were somewhat
upset because of that. So, locally, actually we had a demonstration at the Federal
Building.

KS: Here in Lubbock?

FG: Yes. Whenever that happened, I think it was ’82, we had a demonstration
because of the lack of recognition of veterans by US government, and at that time, we
were trying to establish more services for veterans through we had to initiate letter
writing campaigns and different veterans organizations in order to get a vet center, for
example, over on 34th Street, and in order to extend the social services that were being
made available through the local VA’s. The veterans here, as a result of the veterans
coming together and demanding and requesting these services, eventually we had
different departments established to handle the veterans. That’s when the post traumatic
stress disorder started to come in the picture. It was after it was officially recognized as
an awardable pension related to combat. So good things started coming up and it was
directly as a result of the veterans taking issue and become elected to public office,
becoming elected to the higher-ranking positions of veteran’s organizations like the
VFW, the DAV, the American Legion. So, I think in a nutshell, veterans just got tired of
all the negative aspects of Vietnam and just said, “Look, I’ve got to have some closure.”
So, we raised money for the memorial, it was a private venture all their awards. But, one
thing for sure, Kim, is veterans, they may not show how much they care, they may be
different, but I know that from what I’ve seen in my experience, veterans, Vietnam
veterans especially, are some of the most loyal, dedicated, brotherhood. There’s no
question about it. Sure, there’s been other wars, but Vietnam was just different because
of the way it came about and because of political defeat. Having been a part of it makes
it just a different kind of place in history. From where I’ve been, I don’t think the
veterans, it’s not so much the parades per say but it’s more the fact that yes, we have come home and we have been accepted and we are apart of the military history of this country. It wasn’t our fault that the war turned out like that. Generals themselves, I’ve heard them taking responsibility for things they failed to do and things that they did to us that they should have thought about. For example, the spraying of Agent Orange and not telling us about it. From what I’ve read, generals [?] that it was a carcinogen and they deliberately sprayed veterans. So how do you expect veterans to feel after having gone through that? Military machine almost falls apart. Leadership is very slacking and morale was very, at some points, low because of the nature of the war, the way it was being prosecuted. It was being in the middle of it, it’s frustrating not to be able to take some action, like they did in the Persian Gulf. In Vietnam, you had half a million by 1968. it took 10 years to build it up to that number. In the Persian Gulf, it took five months to get half a million troops and then they just whooped the hell out of the country, and the war’s over.

KS: Do you think any of those decisions were based on things that had been done in the past in Vietnam, maybe lessons learned?

FG: Plus it was the Vietnam veterans that were in charge of that war, Schwartzkopf and Colin Powell. They weren't about to do the same thing as had been done in Vietnam as far as sending soldiers in there without a specific goal in mind and without the support of the people. That was the beauty of the Persian Gulf was that the whole country was behind it, and the people that were assigned to prosecute it by Colin Powell, they were combat veterans and they knew exactly what they had to do. One thing for sure is that they knew that they had access to the firepower that was necessary to put a stop to the threat of Saddam Hussein and his forces. They didn’t finish the job. They didn’t get rid of Hussein and we have to live with that. I think that was the history of Vietnam. Nobody wants to repeat it. Nobody wants to…well, for veterans of course we have to accept the fact that it was a political loss, the only war that this country ever lost. Politically and militarily, we know that 90 to 95% of the battles we won, casualties inflicted and all that. But, I think this country changed to where, well, on this campus we found it necessary to have a demonstration and then several years later a friend of mine was teaching history here and invited me to speak to her class on Vietnam. So, I showed
some slides and did a presentation; as a matter of fact, I did about three or four student
groups. One time I spoke to I think it was a history class, a monster class, and we got a
standing ovation for the things that we shared.
KS: What time period was this?
FG: About ‘86; late ‘80s because Yolanda, her name, Yolanda Garcia, we’ve
known each other since we were kids and she came to Tech and got her Ph.D. in history
and is teaching in the Dallas area. For me, it was a lot of fun to be able to share some
thoughts, but I was quite surprised when they stood up and gave us a standing ovation. It
was myself and two other guys that spoke, and they got up and gave us a standing
ovation. I said, “God, this is great! Thanks!” It makes you feel good because you’ve
done something worthwhile and they appreciate it. Moments like that is when the loss of
the war, whatever personal sacrifices we went through were worth it because you come
into a classroom and share that with kids and come away feeling good and they come
away having learned something, it’s worth it. So in that sense, that’s why we do these
things to learn. You help to eliminate that void that’s often found because of the lack of
veteran participation, the lack of personal histories from veterans that are necessary in
order to make this whole thing complete. You had the generals, you had the admirals,
you had the academia, the academics involved with politicians and all that. But, in any
war I suppose, the job isn’t done until the infantry goes in and sweeps up and cleans up
and takes names, in any war, and I think that’s what’s happening with the Vietnam War.
All the other ones are coming together. Veterans sharing more of their feelings and their
thoughts. It’s hard, mind you. It’s very difficult, especially when dealing with the ones
that didn’t make it back. But, remembering the individual sacrifices and what others did
and what we did collectively, you have to accept that because that’s what it means when
you raise your right hand and you swear that you’re going to uphold the Constitution of
the United States, that’s what that means, win or lose, right or wrong; my country right or
wrong. That’s what that means. I got a kick out of the Persian Gulf, the reserve guys that
were complaining because they had to leave school to go and fulfill their commitment in
the Persian Gulf. Man, that’s what you’re paid for; bye! That was a lot of fun because
there was nothing you could do. You had to go. But, it ended quickly and I think one of
the reasons was because the ranks of soldiers were filled with people, soldiers, men and
women from all levels of society, every kind of background in America was represented so it seems to be in order to avoid the turmoil, the possible turmoil in America, it was decided to put an early end because you can just imagine, gosh, if we only lost 58,000 in Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, the possibility of high numbers of casualties was there and that was everybody’s worry. Fortunately we got out in less than 500, something like 430 or 440 killed in action. So, I think that part of it was because we had all elements of society involved as opposed to Vietnam War. It was class, blacks and browns, poor whites from Kentucky and the South doing the fighting and others were getting deferments and going to school and figuring ways of staying out of the war. There was a lot of that. But, I don’t hold it against any guy that found a way to avoid service. I can agree that it was hard times. I can agree that maybe this was just their way of handling it was just to run away from it, avoid it all together, but there was a lot of guys that paid the supreme sacrifice. I think for everybody that’s necessary to point that out for everybody, regardless, because for example, as a veteran, how can I be overcritical of those who didn’t serve if what we’re doing here is for everybody and when it comes to the classification of being an American citizen, we’re all equal regardless. Sure there are some problems. Sure we have some long-range solutions that are in the picture, but at the same time this is what it’s all about to be in this country. Having been in Washington…have you ever been to Washington?

KS: A long time ago.

FG: Having been in Washington with hundreds of thousands of veterans at one time is what it’s all about, and that’s where everything else is insignificant; that’s what it’s all about. As long as that happens, [?]. As a minority I have to wave the flag because there are some people that can’t accept the fact, or can’t accept allowing others equal access to everything that this country has to offer. Some people have a problem with that, and it’s their problem. Being patriotic and insisting on voting rights, civil rights, what have you, veteran’s rights, and waving the flag, you get a lot more done just by simply having that flag and standing under it. Somebody asks, “Well why are you doing this?” “This is it, right here; need I say more?” So, that’s why the movement of veterans after World War II, the movement of Hispanic veterans after World War II is very important because men were paying the ultimate sacrifice on battlefields in Europe and in
the Pacific. Afterwards, they started thinking, “We’re a part of this. We paid our dues, and we’re a part of this,” and gave rise to the GI Bill, housing, all kinds of good things that everybody should have. As far as being a veteran, a Vietnam veteran, I wouldn’t have it any other way. I think there was a question in your questionnaire, “Would you do it again?” I’d do it differently, and if I could keep somebody else from having to go through the experience, definitely. I think most veterans would do it again, but would do it differently. See, that’s the main thing. Yes, we would, but…

KS: But.

FG: Under different rules, and that’s the main thing because in talking with different veterans, and I agree with them, that it just wasn’t approached right. It just was not. There’s the argument about corporate America wanting to prolong or leading the war in order to stimulate the economy and there’s some validity to that. Bankers have been known to encourage the military intervention in places like Nicaragua for example when they sent the Marine Corps in there to stabilize the country because Standard Food Company needed to have a secure area so they could bring bananas to the United States, so they sent the Marines in. There’s so many different things. But, I think the beauty of Vietnam, if there is such a thing, is the fact that people will continue and will not allow themselves to get into this mess like that. It was a mess. It was definitely a mess, not only for America, but for the Veterans. It’s still going on. This place right here, it still goes on. There’s a lot to come, I think. What else do we need to talk about?

KS: I just wanted to ask you, did you find that other Hispanics that you served with, did they mostly volunteer? You were talking about patriotism being instilled as a value in families. Did you come across that?

FG: For any Latino culture, you have this machismo thing about being in the military. I suppose its part of anybody’s culture. But, for a Latino culture, it’s especially important, and it’s especially important here in this country because it’s probably your only opportunity to let this country know that some of them may not welcome us as readily as others would. But, by the very fact that we have served this country, that allows us…we’ve earned the right, let’s put it that way, we’ve earned the right to see these different things. We’ve earned the right to feel this way. It’s important for young people within the minority community to realize this because were it not for the veterans,
than we would not have been able to have a successful come forth of things like voting
rights, things like civil rights. But, being that we were actually in the trenches, actually in
combat, actually upholding the beliefs of this country, gives us even more standing if you
will to be a part of this culture. Veterans, in that sense, veterans are extremely important.
Now if we could just harness all that energy at a much better time. The veterans are so
opinionated. You get a group of five, ten veterans, you’re going to have a fight and
you’re going to have some disagreements. That’s the beauty of this country that that’s
just the way it is. But, on the other hand, I remember we were in a hotel. I think it was in
New York City, or Washington, I don’t know. I think it was Washington because the
donut dollies, Red Cross girls had just started coming out. [?] because you remember
them from another time and what they did, and just having them around that was so
special. But, one of them said, she said…she was in the middle of a bunch of veterans
and she said, “I feel so safe!” “What do you mean?” “I feel so safe with all these guys,
all these heroes, all these guys that protected us, all these guys, I feel so safe.” “I suppose
you should.” There was a comment…comments like that are extremely important
because, well, one for example that I experienced in Washington in 1982, it was the
dedication of the Wall. Washington was at it’s best, meaning law enforcement personnel,
everybody was at their best welcoming Vietnam veterans, and veterans were also at their
best because this was something we never had before. But, I heard some comments
about being right there in front of the capital, because years before veterans, in protesting,
had thrown their medals across the fence at the White House and just dumped them. But,
I overheard some guys that said that, “There’s enough of us here that if we really wanted
to, we could take this capitol,” and it was a chilling thought because it was so true. But,
that’s not what it’s all about for veterans, taking over the country, even though there was
enough there would have been some…like King of the Hill. You take the hill, you take
the capitol, and you’re it. That’s just the way, it would have been a coup de etat, and
there was conversation that we could take this place, right now, we could take it, just by
doing what they taught us what to do, we could take this place. It was just the thought!

KS: I wanted to back up a little bit. You mentioned you were a student at Texas
Tech in 1970. Is that correct?

FG: Yes, ’71-’72.
KS: I just wanted to learn more about the anti-war protests here on campus, the political climate during this time as far as students.

FG: Tech had no political climate as far as I know because it was very conservative, very apathetic, let’s put it that way. But, that doesn’t mean that people didn’t have anti-war feelings. The best of my knowledge, I don’t recall that the students themselves actually had an anti-war protest. I don’t recall. I do recall that there was some outside elements, non-students and students and minority students that organized the anti-war march that we held here. As far as I remember, there was only one.

KS: Were you present at that?

FG: Yeah.

KS: Was it on campus?

FG: Yes.

KS: Would you describe it? Do you remember where it started?

FG: I believe it started down Broadway and came up Broadway to Memorial Circle and had a gathering at Memorial Circle with banners and flags, of course, and, “Stop the War! Stop the Killing!” things like that. But, I think because Tech is mainly a conservative campus, you’re not going to get that. It still is, which is good. But, it was critical at the time because other campuses were experiencing some extreme violence and some very chaotic events that took place in the war. I suppose liberal campuses, I don’t know if you’d call it that, but here at Tech it was very subdued. Veterans that had served early ‘60s, middle ‘60s, late ‘60s had blended into the student population and they just wanted to get a degree and get out; I know because I was one of them. I remember some guys that were students that graduated that were drafted when they were graduated. There was one that I’m hoping will call you or give you his name and you can call him, but he graduated…let’s see, he grew up in Levelland, went to South Plains College, transferred into Tech, graduated 1968, got drafted, and went to ‘Nam. Let me give you his name. His name is Elyseo, E-L-Y-S-E-O Solis, S-O-L-I-S, 747-0151. As a matter of fact, I saw him earlier before I came over here and he told me [?] that I was going to give you his name, because he also has an interesting situation. Oh, the anti-war movement; very subdued. It was mainly minority students that were taking part in this thing because it was mainly minorities filling the ranks of the combat arms. So, the more sophisticated
students, the ones that were paying attention to what was coming out, were deducing that, “Hey, we’re paying a heavy price for this war and we need to get the hell out.” That was the reason that the minority students were in an uproar. I remember my friends being so opposed to the war, but I just didn’t care. I was just so glad to be out of the war. Going to school, it just didn’t phase me that they felt so strongly about it. I think I mentioned earlier that we agreed about the protesting and demonstrations going on over here, and then over there, and we just read about it and we’d say things like, “Well let them come over here and protest and see what they do!” It wasn’t going to happen and we didn't care, and I think that that’s still the attitude of some veterans. They care about the fact that they served, they care about the country, but they don’t necessarily care about talking about it or taking steps to be able to assure themselves that at some point they have an opportunity to make it part of this place. That’s the challenge for the Archives I believe, is the linking up the war with the veterans. I know that the board of directors has some good representation, and I know that they’re always encouraging veterans to come in. I don't know if the campus scares them or just the whole thing, not that it turns them off, it’s just that it’s difficult for them to get a grasp of the fact that historically it’s important. I’ve heard some veterans comment that, “Why didn’t they care then? Why didn’t they do it when we were younger and coming back and things were different?” So, that’s the controversy. The controversy goes on.

KS: Well is there anything else that you wanted to add about any of your experiences?

FG: No, I’ll think of some more stuff. I wanted to give more than a political effects of Vietnam. I’ll save that for later. I do want to spend some time in bringing in those notices, fliers, and different things that I kept. Feel free to call me, Kim, we’ll talk.

KS: Okay. This concludes the interview with Frank Gutierrez. Thank you.