Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Gary Cummings on the 21st of April 2001 at approximately ten minutes to nine. We are in the International Cultural Center. This is the Vietnam Center Conference and Counterparts reunion. Sir why don’t we begin with a brief discussion of your early life? If you would tell me when and where you were born and where you grew up.

Gary Cummings: I was born in New Jersey, grew up in New Jersey.

SM: What year was that?

GC: 1946.

SM: 1946. Where in New Jersey was that?

GC: Bernardsville, New Jersey.

SM: You stayed there all you life growing up?

GC: Yes, sir.

SM: What was the population size there?

GC: Currently, Bernardsville is about 7,000.

SM: How large was it when you were growing up?

GC: I don’t know I didn’t do the census. I’d say probably about 5,000.

SM: How many kids were in your graduating high school class?

GC: Oh that’s a good number. About 110.
SM: Kind of a small community. Was it a community where everybody kind of knew each other?

GC: Oh, yeah. Went to school with J. Giles.

SM: The J. Giles?

GC: Yes.

SM: Wow.

GC: Meryl Streepe too.

SM: That’s amazing. O.K. Did you know both J.Giles and Meryl Streepe?

GC: Yeah. Didn’t know they were going to be famous.

SM: Was you family from there originally? Has they spent a lot of time in New Jersey before you were born?

GC: My mother did. My father was from New England. They met somehow during WWII, when he ended up moving to Bernardsville.

SM: He served in the war?

GC: He was with the 101st in WWII.

SM: Did he talk with you very much about his experiences?

GC: Yeah.

SM: What there did he serve in? What do you remember him telling you about his experiences during the war?

GC: He was pretty proud of what he did. He was with the 101st. He went in on D-day, although not typical 101st. He went in by landing craft. His outfit was supposed to go break through and link up. He did the drop into Holland and obviously Bastoigne. He was with them from D-Day right to the end of the war. He got two silver stars. The whole experience on it. I had copies of press releases and things. He was mentioned in several press releases and some of the things that they had to do. He ended up platoon sergeant. I remember him even telling me that they went through lieutenants real fast. They offered him at one time a battlefield commission. He said no. I’ll run your platoon for you, but I don’t want the commission.

SM: Did he say why they went through lieutenants so quickly?

GC: They got shot.
SM: Did he talk very much about the specifics of combat and what that experience was like for him in Europe?

GC: Not really. There are certain things that I think he kept to himself. My father was the milkman, back in the time when people used to get home delivery. I used to have to go with him on the weekends and help deliver milk. It was sort of a unique thing as a kid that you get to spend that time with your father. He talked about a lot of things. He always had his stories. He talked about friends he knew.

SM: Did he have a lot of friends that served with him in WWII that he maintained contact with?

GC: Through the 101st Association. Yeah, he did.

SM: Is your dad still alive?

GC: Yes, he is.

SM: Did he see the movie Saving Private Ryan?

GC: Yes, he did.

SM: Have you talked with him about that at all?

GC: He felt very uncomfortable about it.

SM: About the movie?

GC: Yeah.

SM: Did he say why?

GC: The realism of it.

SM: For him it was very realistic? Have you ever talked with him about I guess in WWII they still called it shell shock and how that affected any of the men in his units?

GC: With one exception. I remember him telling me one time and it frightened him. He found himself one night walking around with a .22 rifle. Had no idea why he did that. He described it as some type of flashback. Other than that he didn’t have any posttraumatic stress syndrome or anything else. He did say he had one uncomfortable night. Where he just didn’t know what the hell caused it or anything else.

SM: How about wartime issues? Not necessarily shell shock for himself, but dealing with soldiers that made one of the things about WWII, they stayed there for the duration and so they had tremendous accumulation of experience typically. By the end of the war, they had been there for almost a year and a half if not longer. I was just
wondering if he had talked as a platoon sergeant about men under his control having
problems?

GC: I’m trying to think whether he didn’t mention it or whether he specifically
said he never saw any of that. I believe that he didn’t see that. He didn’t have any
problem with any of his people. In fact, I think he attributed that to the fact the 101st was
an elite outfit or something. They had their rendezvous with destiny. That just didn’t
happen.

SM: What about the Battle of the Bulge? Did he talk much about that? Was he a
participant in that?

GC: Yeah, he was. In fact, he had to give a talk to a civic group about the Battle
of the Bulge. Like anyone that’s in a battle, they don’t always know what was going on.
I went out and researched it for him. I told him all about the Battle of The Bulge so he
could then relate that into his story. He talked about that. In fact I can remember I told
him I concluded the thing at such and such a time a tank commanded by Lieutenant So-
and-so broke through and the siege was over. That was the end of the stuff that I had. He
was telling me that he then continued talking to the people. I don’t know where he’s
going with this. He said but we didn’t know that. He said he was on the other side of the
Bulge. They were holding an intersection, a crossroad. Through the fog the next
morning, they could hear a tank coming. He’s just telling the story. A tank’s coming, it
stops, it’s coming closer again, it stops. He told us, they had one bazooka round and that
was it. Dad said, ‘I told my people that when it gets a little closer, we’ll fire the round
and we’re going to leave. There’s nothing much we can do. It comes a little closer,
hatch opened. I heard ‘God damn lieutenant; I don’t know where the fuck we are.’
That’s when I knew that we were relieved.’

SM: That’s amazing. Did he participate in any of the liberation of the camps
either POW camps or any of the concentration camps?

GC: I believe that the 101st was involved in the liberation in one of the camps, he
never talked about that. He talked more about the fact that they were into the Eagle’s
Nest. At that point, the war was over in Europe. He ran an EM club. I guess he was
named to run the EM club. The other thing that he told he that after the end of the war is
he was in the 327th Glider Infantry. He said he’d never go in in the glider again. Of
course, the rumor was that the 101st was going to spear head the drop into Japan. He
got out and took jump training in France. He said if he was going in again he was going
to jump in. He wasn’t going to go in in another damn glider.

SM: How many glider flights had he made, do you know?
GC: Only one [in combat]. That was in to Market Garden. D-day he didn’t go in
by glider. He went in by landing craft.

SM: So, he was slotted to be one of the people to be dropped into Japan?
GC: That’s the word they had. I don’t know what the Army intended.

SM: Did he ever talk with you about he dropping of the bombs in Japan? The
Hiroshima, Nagasaki, atomic bombings? A subject that has become more controversial
in recent days.

GC: I think he probably said he was just as happy that they dropped the bomb
and that he didn’t have to go into Japan.

SM: As you were growing up, how much of an impact did your father’s stories
have on you, in terms of your decision later to go into the military?

GC: It had enough of an impact that I felt that was some obligation that I had to
do. He was very proud of the fact that he’d served. He served well. When Vietnam
came along I didn’t look at it right, wrong or anything else. It was just there was a war
and that’s something that you have to do.

SM: Did you have uncles and other relatives that also served in the 2nd World
War that you also talked with?

GC: My father had two brothers. One was an Army Air Corps MP. He never left
the States. My father’s older brother was a Marine in the Pacific. He lived out in
California, so I never really talked to him too much.

SM: Do you have any brothers and sisters? Especially older siblings? Older
brothers?

GC: I have a younger brother. I did. He died.

SM: I’m sorry.

GC: And a sister.

SM: When you were in high school were there any particular subjects that you
enjoyed? Did you like sports that type of stuff?
GC: Played a little football. Not well. Probably my favorite subjects were history. I liked history.

SM: You mentioned earlier, that you had about a year of college after you graduated from high school and went into the service. Did you enjoy that year?

GC: Not really. I wasn’t ready for college.

SM: Was there anything about college that you did like, but again you didn’t necessarily want to stay for that particular moment?

GC: At the moment I really wasn’t interested in college. That was expected where I came from. The high school was all college prep. Everyone was supposed to go to college and everything else. I went to college; my heart wasn’t in it. Quite frankly I was too immature at the time.

SM: What led you to the Army? Was it your father’s experience in the Army?

GC: Actually, when I realized that I wasn’t going to be going back for a second year at college and sooner or later I was going to get drafted, I figured I am going to go into the service, get my head together. What I really wanted to do more than infantry, I wanted to take Warrant Officer flight training. At the time I had my pilot’s license. I was a skydiver. That’s where my head was and I went and tried to enlist for that, passed all the tests, the physicals and everything except for they gave me a color vision test. Like 10% of the males, I’m colorblind. No problem I figured. I have a statement of demonstrated ability from the FAA. They said NO way. So, I enlisted in the infantry. I figured well, I am going to do this anyway, might as well do it right. Enlisted and asked for the infantry. Quite frankly, because I had very good test scores, I was afraid that if I got drafted I’d end up in some type of support unit or something like that. I really wanted to do it the right way. I said, ‘Might as well do it.’

SM: Had you ever even considered the other services? Maybe Air Force, Marine Corps?

GC: No, because what I really wanted first, was flying. The Army was the only one that would give you flying without college. The Army wouldn’t give that to me either.

SM: Your pilot’s license, how long had you been a pilot?

GC: Not too long. I was 18. I was 16 when I got my license.
SM: I take it was probably just typical small aircraft, Cessna, whatever?
GC: Right.
SM: Tricycle gear or tail draggers?
GC: Originally on Piper PA18 is the super cub, which are tail druggers. Cessna 150s, 172s, Cherokees.
SM: How long had you been jumping?
GC: Since I was 15.
SM: What got you into that?
GC: Curiosity, if you will. One thing was, I have and I wouldn’t say it’s a fear of heights. I have a fear of being, what I thought was a fear of heights, it turns out I have a fear of being near the edge of anything. It was something I really wanted to do. My father was qualified as a parachutist in the Army. It was exciting and aviation related. That’s where my head was. I really wanted to fly for the airlines at sometime. That never worked out. It was all just part of the aviation experience. I was in the civil air patrol in high school. That was cool. We used to get excused from school to go search for airplanes. That was down before they had the locator beacons and everything.
SM: How many jumps did you make?
GC: Just 10.
SM: Ten. From what altitudes?
GC: You know I forget now. I’d say about 7500 feet.
SM: These were all basically; you were pulling your own chute? These weren’t static line jumps?
GC: Yeah. The first three jumps were static line jumps. That’s what they did back then. Then after that you could gradually increase your free fall.
SM: Did you jump after that?
GC: Nope.
SM: Never again?
GC: No, never again. Got a little smarter (laughs).
SM: Was there a particular reason you didn’t want to jump again?
GC: Yeah, I was afraid I was going to get killed. Matter of fact, one of the people that were involved with training me, died. I said, you know why am I doing this?
SM: Did the chute fail to open?
GC: It either failed to open or he failed to open it. No one was ever real sure.
SM: When you on these types of jumps did you have an altimeter? A portable altimeter so you could look up the altitude?
GC: No.
SM: In regarding your flying, as you were learning on a tail dragger, did you ever get problems with ground loops or anything like that?
GC: No. No. You’re thinking of the steerman. That was famous for the ground loops.
SM: Yeah, but tail dragers in general. If you’re not careful and you have a bad crosswind.
GC: No, I never had that problem.
SM: Did you fly much after your pilot license phase as a young man?
GC: Yeah. I did for a while after I came back and had a job and everything. After a while it just got too expensive.
SM: I assume you learned to fly tricycle gear as well?
GC: Yeah.
SM: When you first entered the military in 1965, late ’65 I guess. Of course the Vietnam war was pretty much in full swing. The Gulf of Tonkin incident occurred the year before. Marines had been introduced in March of ’65. So, had you talked much with your dad or with other people about some of the issues concerning the war? Some of the politics behind the war?
GC: No, there was no political discussion or anything. Quite frankly my father didn’t want me to go in. Actually, I think that in the end he was proud that I did. He encouraged me not to get involved, mainly because there was a war on. I think that’s a father thing.
SM: Right. How about your mom? How did she feel?
GC: She never said anything one way or the other. I don’t think she wanted it, but I think she saw herself as the stoic mother.
SM: Supportive?
GC: Yeah.
SM: If in no other way, silence?

GC: Yeah.

SM: How about although maybe not discussions about the war, how about discussions about other rather volatile political events, like the assassination of Kennedy? Do you remember when that happened?

GC: Absolutely, I remember when that happened. There was never any discussions or anything on it. I don’t ever remember having any political discussions, one way or the other on anything, closest I can remember my father ever talking about politics, he supported Barry Goldwater.

SM: OK. Good enough. Do you remember the Cuban Missile Crisis the year before Kennedy’s assassination? What was the tenor like in New Jersey? What do you remember most about that crisis?

GC: That we were on the verge of a nuclear war. I don’t know if that really sank in. We were the United States of America; no one was going to push us around. We were going to kick ass and take names, I guess. I look back at it historically, I realize how dangerous a situation that was. I don’t think I realized it at the time.

SM: When you first entered the service, what were your impressions? When you got off that bus in Ft. Gordon, Georgia?

GC: Actually, basic training was at Ft. Dix, New Jersey.

SM: You did go to basic in Dix? What was your introduction there like?

GC: Bewilderment (laughs). I don’t think we were in Kansas anymore.

SM: How were you treated?

GC: Treated like everyone else, which was you know the shock. I was just determined that I am going to do what I’m going to do. I’m not going to get into any trouble. I’m going to graduate and go on and do what I’m going to do.

SM: Were the instructors, drill instructors that you had particularly vocal? At this point in ‘65 it’s kind of the transition period for the services where they can be somewhat abusive, verbally and other ways. At the same time, later on.

GC: They were never physically abusive. Verbally, yeah. They’d get in your face and they were good at it.

SM: How did you handle that the first time that happened?
GC: Basically by not moving.
SM: What was the most challenging thing about basic training for you?
GC: It was more physically active than I was used to. A lot of running. Not a lot of sleep. I remember that too.
SM: What kind of weapons training did you receive?
GC: The basic training was on the M-14.
SM: Did you enjoy that part of basic?
GC: Actually, I liked rifle marksmanship. I never had shot a weapon or anything before. They tell me that’s what they’re looking for. I did well. I qualified expert. Apparently I had no bad lessons to unlearn.
SM: You had not fired a weapon prior to your Army service?
GC: No.
SM: Your dad didn’t have a gun in the house?
GC: No, because after that incident with the .22 he got rid of everything.
SM: How about other training aspects, the basic training. I know it’s all really just the fundamentals of soldiering. Was there anything else that you found particularly enjoyable?
GC: No.
SM: Did you think that your basic training was adequate, prepared you for what you had to do next either in your advanced training at Gordon or later on at Vietnam?
GC: Yeah. They did a good job.
SM: Were the facilities adequate for the task as well.
GC: Yeah, In think so.
SM: I’m sorry. Were you going to say something else?
GC: I was going to say Ft. Dix was, I mean they had the modern brick barracks and everything else. When I got to Ft. Gordon they had the old World War II barracks and the coal fired furnace. That was the shock.
SM: The new barracks, the brick buildings that you had training in. In particular the barracks. Although they were new had they still constructed them so that you had a lot of manual labor involved. You know, cleaning, waxing the floor?
GC: Oh, I learned how to use one of those floor waxes. There’s a skill that you can always get a job later with.

SM: Yes, sir. What kind of targets did you fire at for marksmanship?

GC: They had the, I think they called them kill targets. They were silhouettes. They were mounted so that they would come up and when a bullet struck them they’d go down.

SM: They were like a man silhouette? Human silhouette?

GC: Yes.

SM: They weren’t the round targets.

GC: They were waist up silhouettes if I remember right.

SM: Was there anything particularly memorable about your basic training? Any incidents serious, humorous or otherwise?

GC: No. I can’t think of anything. Certainly there was nothing humorous about it.

SM: Bizarre humor perhaps or kind of a misuse of humor, but just coping mechanism. Humans tend to find things funny that are not necessarily really funny. It’s a way of coping.

GC: I really don’t remember a lot about it. I couldn’t tell you the name of one person that I had basic training with or advanced training with. I just sort of put it on automatic pilot and went through it.

SM: Were there any real screwballs? Anybody who had a hard time coping with basic training and the rigors?

GC: I get confused because I can remember a lot of screwballs, but that came later when I was a drill sergeant. I don’t particularly remember anything about anyone in particular. There’s always some people that had a harder time coping. Couldn’t keep up in everything. I remember the drill sergeants would get on their ass and probably remember I’m glad that’s not me. I just want to be right here in the middle.

SM: How about group punishment?

GC: They had that I guess. I figured that they were going to do it anyway, they were just looking for someone to blame it on.
SM: Did anybody require any additional or special training? GI showers, blanket parties that kind of stuff?

GC: They used to talk about that all the time. I don’t ever recall that happening.

SM: Did anybody wash out? Anybody that just couldn’t cope?

GC: Yeah, I think there were. In fact, I think there was at least one attempted suicide or something that got someone well, again, sometimes I confuse that with later. We had a lot of attempted suicides when I was a drill sergeant. There was a couple people that had some problems that went away. Don’t really know what their problems were.

SM: How did people get along in your platoon, in your basic training platoon?

GC: Pretty good. There was always the difficulty of dealing with lots of different people. Not knowing how people react and take things and everything else. You learn to deal with that. Like I said I couldn’t even tell you the names of any of the people that were in my room.

SM: Was it a diverse background or mixture?

GC: Oh, yeah. Certainly. That was my first experience of interacting with Blacks, Latinos, I came from Bernardsville, New Jersey. The closest thing we had to a racial minority were the Italians.

SM: OK. Did you ever witness any kind of tension amongst different racial groups?

GC: No.

SM: No fights or anything?

GC: No. About the only thing I can remember was cooperate and graduate. That was the theme of basic training. We’re all going to get along. We’re all going to help each other. When you did things that you had somebody that was falling behind. People were expected to help them and we’re all going to get through this as a group.

SM: What were the biggest differences between your training at Ft. Dix and Ft. Gordon?

GC: Well, Ft. Gordon was specializing in infantry. We did more on tactics. Obviously more weapons training. The machine gun. The M-79. the.45. The M-16, which was new. We took training on that. The barracks and waking up in the morning
and honking up that black phlegm from the soft coal. We had what they called Vietnam
village. I think it was at least one week, and I think it was two weeks of training that was
supposed to be designed for Vietnam. It was obvious that everyone in this graduating
class was going to go to Vietnam. We weren’t training for Europe, which is how the
Army normally trained in advanced infantry. We were training for Vietnam.

SM: Were many of the drill instructors in your basic training Vietnam veterans or
any?

GC: No.

SM: How about in your advanced training?

GC: Even in the advanced training I don’t think so. At that time, there was no
American troops that had been inserted other than MAC-V, that would have completed
their year and come back. I don’t know for sure, but I don’t recall any of them being
Vietnam veterans, a lot of Korean Veterans.

SM: Did they talk a lot about their Korean War experience? How about in
advanced training? Did they ever relate stories that were object lessons, that kind of
stuff?

GC: Not that I recall.

SM: In your advanced training, when you were introduced to the M-16, what did
you think?

GC: I thought it was neat gadget. It was almost like a toy. I remember even the
instructors were sort of disdainful of it. They were the old school, the M-14’s the right
weapon and all this stuff. They would demonstrate it, but I got the feeling that it was a
change that people didn’t think was necessary.

SM: Was yours stamped, the plastic stock was it stamped? I understand the early
models were stamped Mattel. Was yours?

GC: Stamped Mattel?

SM: Yeah. Was yours?

GC: No.

SM: The toy company. Which actually did manufacture, I understand, the
stocks.
GC: No, I don’t. I remember the joke was that we wanted to get the Mattel stickers and out them on the stock.

SM: But you never actually saw any stamps?

GC: No. These were the early models that didn’t have the bolt assist.

SM: They didn’t have a good flash suppressor and they didn’t have the forward search. They had the three prong?

GC: Yeah, they had the three prong on the muzzle end. There was no the bolt assist, wasn’t on the side.

SM: How much did you work with that, with the M-16 in advanced training?

GC: No more than the other weapons that they qualified you on. We did the M-14 on automatic and the M-16, that was just added. We did the M-79, the .45, the M-60 machine gun and the M-16.

SM: Which of those weapons was your personal favorite?

GC: I liked the M-16 for it’s accuracy and certainly you could control it better on automatic. The M-14 was a son-of-a-bitch on automatic.

SM: Did you think that that would be the weapon you would be issued when you go to Vietnam? Were you told that in your advanced training?

GC: Yes. Turned out it wasn’t. You’re all going to Vietnam, that’s what you’re going to be using.

SM: The M-16?

GC: Yeah.

SM: How much did they emphasize the importance of keeping it clean?

GC: They always did. I don’t know that they realized that they had that problem that was eventually fixed by chrome plating. In training they always talk about you always keep your weapon clean and everything.

SM: You’re talking about the chrome plating on the interior of the receiver groove?

GC: Yes. Which I don’t understand any of that. I understand there was a problem with the M-16 caused apparently by pitting. When the bullet would expand, the extractor wouldn’t take it out. That was supposedly fixed by chrome plating the receiver.
SM: Did you personally have any difficulties with that weapon when you were training with it at Ft. Gordon?

GC: No.

SM: Never had any jams, misfires?

GC: No. Not that I recall.

SM: When you trained with it at that point at Ft. Gordon did they have the blank ammunition? Did you train with blanks and stuff like that?

GC: No. I take that back. The only time I used the M-16 at Ft. Gordon was on the range. When we trained, when we did the Vietnam village and everything that was with the M-14s. We had the blank adapter for the M-14s. So, the M-16 was a familiarization type thing. The actual weapon that we carried when you did tactics and everything was the M-14.

SM: Did you ever have any problems with the M-14?

GC: No. Never had any problems with the M-14. That always worked.

SM: Did you do bayonet training on both weapons?

GC: Just on the M-14.

SM: Why not the M-16, do you know?

GC: For one thing I don’t recall doing bayonet training in the advanced infantry. Maybe we did. I only recall doing bayonet training in basic training and that was certainly the M-14.

SM: Did you have much hand-to-hand combat training after basic training? You were probably introduced to the rudiments in basic or were you?

GC: In basic training I remember they taught us what they called quick kill. Which was going for all the vital points and all that stuff. I don’t recall any of it in advanced infantry training. Of course I don’t recall a lot of things.

SM: How about live fire exercise, not range firing and qualifier familiarization but actually simulating patrol going to a particular point and having the pop up targets and stuff like that?

GC: I remember we did the thing where you’re supposed to crawl under the machine gun fire. Other that that the only live fire other than the range was, this was a range too, was advancing by firing maneuver. Where you’d start with two people under
cover and one would lay down a base of fire, the other one would get up and run down
range ahead of you and take up a position. Then he would start firing and you would
have to run up. The idea being to keep down a base of fire. You’d have to advance and
you’d be down range of someone that’s shooting. That’s probably the most realistic
training that they had.

SM: The fire and maneuver?
GC: Yeah.

SM: How about the three to five second drills, stuff like that where you would
dodge side to side. That kind of stuff. Just basic infantry tactics. I’m sure those were
emphasized pretty heavily?
GC: Could be. I don’t really recall. The other thing I do recall though is we did
some training with BB guns. I don’t know whether it lasted. The idea was they had
metal plates and you had a Red Rider BB gun as I recall and they would throw the metal
plate up. The idea was to take the BB gun and without aiming, shoot it. It’s like teaching
instinct type shooting. The idea was to see if you could just bring it up with your arm.
Basically at the hip and hit the silver dollar or whatever it was. I don’t know whether that
was an experiment or whether it ever became part of the training, but I can remember
doing that.

SM: That was at advanced training? That’s fascinating. How did you do at that?
GC: Not well.

SM: How large was the plate that you were supposed to be shooting at?
GC: I said it was a silver dollar, but it was bigger than that. It wasn’t the size of a
dinner plate or anything.

SM: pretty small. About the size of a skeet maybe?
GC: Probably.

SM: Speaking of skeet shooting, did you have any shot gun training or anything
like that?
GC: That’s right. Yeah, they did. They used some type of skeet shooting come
to think of it.

SM: What did you find most challenging about your advanced training?
GC: Trying to stay warm in Georgia during one of the coldest winters they ever had. I ended up getting frostbite for God’s sakes. They just had a real cold winter. We had to do the survival escape and evasion type thing where you had to go to through the swamp. We were breaking through ice. This was supposed to be the Vietnam village. We had ice and snow on the ground. The only thing cool about it was I can remember coming down a trail in file and the word gets passed back, we’re going to get ambushed. Well, how do you know? Well, we knew because all the TV cameras were set up down there. We’d get ambushed and everyone would go charge at the TV cameras.

SM: Were these TV cameras that the Army was using just to get training footage?

GC: No. They invited the press. When we went through it apparently we were the first infantry-training unit to go through what they called Vietnam village. This was in December of ’65. I guess they started one there and I think they started one at Ft. Polk, Louisiana. As I understand it, we were the first so we were on TV and had photographers there. Probably didn’t get a lot out of it because of all the publicity.

SM: You’d find that distracting?

GC: Yeah. It guess it was, it was fun.

SM: One thing that I haven’t heard you mention yet is heavier weapons. In particular mortars. Did you guys receive training?

GC: No. I was in 11 Bravo. There were an 11 Charlie, which was I think they were the mortars. The 105 recoilless rifle. They were different groups. I didn’t train on the mortar or the recoilless rifle although people in our training company did. They broke you down by what your MOS was. I guess while they were training on those, I was probably training on the M-16.

SM: In terms of your tactical movement you mentioned just a moment ago going ranger file or single file down a trail, did they go over other tactical formations movement through the woods wedge formation stuff like that?

GC: No. Not that I recall. They did a lot of work on ambushes and reacting to ambushes and training you for ambushes and everything else. None of which I can really remember. They had a box ambush and an L ambush.
SM: What was your reaction to ambush strategy? What did they emphasize?

When you walk into an ambush what were you supposed to do as an infantryman?

GC: As I recall, we were supposed to fire an attack toward the ambush. Again, as I recall the training was what you don’t want to do is stay in the ambush area. The enemy would have picked that out as the place they would want you to stay. What you want to do is get out of that ambush. They taught you at the time, the way to get out of it was to attack toward it.

SM: What did you think about that?

GC: Made sense to me. I was 18 years old. What do I know?

SM: It didn’t seem counter intuitive? The thing to do maybe not to rush toward the enemy but to get away from the enemy?

GC: As I recall, we’re talking about almost 40 years ago now, as I recall, they were saying what you want to do is close with the enemy.

SM: No, not what they were saying, but what you felt? Or what you thought personally?

GC: I felt that what they were telling me made sense.

SM: The training that you received in the Vietnam village, you said that lasted a couple of weeks is that right?

GC: I think so.

SM: Again, the instructors that were on site at that village, it would seem to make sense that someone would have Vietnam experience?

GC: Yes, they did. Certainly, there were some instructors there that were rangers. I don’t know how much combat experience that they had. They seemed to have a better idea.

SM: How about advisors? Former advisors? U.S. military advisors coming over?

GC: I don’t recall any of them being there.

SM: During that training did you also receive instruction on Vietnamese cultures and Vietnamese society or was it just what a typical village looks like and what you do?
GC: Nothing about the culture or anything. They had the village and I remember they would have punji stakes and booby traps and try and show you that. Certainly nothing about the people of Vietnam or anything else.

SM: How did they refer to the Vietnamese people?

GC: I don’t recall. I know what you’re probably looking for is Gooks or.


GC: I would imagine that they used some type of derogatory term. Gooks probably comes to mind.

SM: They didn’t use VC or Viet Cong?

GC: Yeah. VC, VC and Mr. Charles. Which indicates to me that someone there must have had some experience in Vietnam.

SM: The scenario that you discussed previously where you were going down this trail, single file and you knew where the ambush was, because that’s where the cameras were. Did you receive instruction that in real combat in Vietnam the last thing you want to do actually is walk on a trail?

GC: I don’t recall that. I know certainly for training purposes you had to be going where they wanted you to be going. It was obviously a trail. It wasn’t much of a jungle either. A big pine forest.

SM: In terms of you just talking again about maneuver and movement in what might be an enemy controlled or hostile area, did they talk much about, you shouldn’t be on roads you shouldn’t be on trails. These are the most likely avenues of approach to a location so that if an ambush is set up it’s going to be probably someplace like that.

GC: I don’t recall that. I recall a lot of emphasis about maintaining distance apart. I recall that they wanted at least ten yards apart and silence. That was the big thing. Even when you went to a chow line out in the field they would emphasize ten yards apart, spread out, one grenade would get you all and that type of thing.

SM: How about in terms of, you mentioned silence, noise discipline. Did they talk about things or ways that you could make your equipment more quiet so that when you’re moving you don’t make as much noise?
GC: Yes. In fact, if I remember right, we were encouraged to tape our dog tags together. They didn’t have the rubber silencers or whatever it was back then. You taped the dog tags. There was emphasis on being quiet.

SM: Did you do much night training?

GC: Yes. Certainly some night patrol type stuff. The evasion course was at night.

SM: During the night training did they emphasize or discuss issues about light discipline or things like that?

GC: Probably.

SM: The evasion course that you took there, how long did that last?

GC: That was just a couple of days. Various things about eating fruits and nuts and berries and chickens. The whole thing was you were supposed to get from point A to point B without getting captured. Of course you all got captured and went to the POW camp.

SM: How did that go?

GC: That was for want of a better word, a cluster fuck.

SM: OK. How so?

GC: It was cold. It was wet. Quite frankly, I think everyone wanted to get captured and get the hell out of the damn swamp.

SM: Did they give you incentive to not get captured? Did they offer you any kind of incentive?

GC: There was some kind of incentive if you didn’t get captured and I can’t remember what it was.

SM: You mentioned berries and nuts and chickens, did they actually give you live animals to take with you so that you would have sustenance? Or did they just give you the meat?

GC: We weren’t out there long enough that we had to go forging for berries and nuts and everything. You had a class on how to cook a chicken. Others on identifying edible plants. It was sort of like a shortened survival type thing.

SM: You weren’t actually given a chicken to kill yourself? OK

GC: No.
SM: Regarding the Vietnam village training what do you remember most about that in terms of the village setup? Did you find that it was? Later when you were in Vietnam was it realistic at all?

GC: The looks, if you will of the huts and everything had a realistic look that was sort of familiar. This was Georgia. I ended up in the Mekong Delta. There is nothing similar between Georgia and the Mekong Delta.

SM: So just the geographic representation would be so different?

GC: Yeah. The dirt was different.

SM: Was there anything that they could have done do you think, or anything that they could have changed to make it more realistic for your training? Or did they do the best they could with what they had?

GC: I would imagine they did the best they could with what they had. The problem is I didn’t end up going with an American unit. So, my whole experience is different. My experiences were with the ARVN. Among other things I went to a different part of the country than was intended. I don’t know what they could have done to make it more real. Probably put out more ducks and chickens running around in the village. I remember that every village we went through there was ducks and chickens.

The ARVN would come in one side of the village and then come out the other side of the village everyone would have a chicken or a duck stuck in their shirt.

SM: Is there anything else that you recall from your advanced training that was important for you later when you found yourself in real combat?

GC: No. I can remember thinking of combat as like the John Wayne type of thing and every thing. The first time we came under fire I realized that the Lieutenants hiding behind a tree and I was hiding behind a rock. Certainly I didn’t get up and charge wherever the shooting was coming from.

SM: So that ambush training, later on did you find that?

GC: I was never actually ambushed.

SM: Was there anything that when you found yourself again in combat was there anything you found yourself thinking boy I wish they had covered this better? Or boy I wish I had received more training on that? Did you ever find yourself lacking?
GC: No. You’ve got to understand I wasn’t in that much combat. I don’t ever recall even seeing anyone that I was actually shooting at. It was just bullets are coming from that direction and we’d make bullets go back in that direction. After a while every thing would stop.

SM: When you finally were on the plane going to Vietnam did you feel pretty comfortable? Did you think that you had been well prepared for what you might encounter?

GC: Actually on the airplane going over to Vietnam I was thinking back to the personal typing class I had with Ms. Bennet. I was trying to remember the keyboard. I was thinking maybe this is wrong. Maybe I want to see about a company clerk’s job or something. I found out that most company clerks in Vietnam could type a hundred words a minute. I don’t know how fast I can type, but certainly I didn’t have the training for it.

SM: When did you find out when you were going to leave to go to Vietnam? When did you get your orders?

GC: Right from advanced infantry training. Like the week before you were going to go. I think we got a one-week leave or something went home or something and then went I don’t know where. I don’t even remember where I reported back to. I can remember we went I guess it was from Ft. Gordon and we went to Chicago and then to San Francisco or Oakland Army terminal. Flew over to Vietnam, ended up and this is my favorite story so we’ll tell it here. Ended up in Tent City Alpha, which later became known as Camp LBJ. At the time it was Tent City Alpha outside of Tan Son Nhut. I’m there with everyone else basically hanging around with my finger up my butt and some sergeant came along and decided that I wasn’t doing anything. He took me down to Tan Son Nhut handed me a mop, ended up cleaning offices all afternoon at Tan Son Nhut airbase. It was some type of T-detail that they had. Bring me back at night another sergeant grabs me and says Cummings your missed shipment. Well, I’m new in the Army but I know you’re not supposed to miss shipment. Turns out that I was supposed to be going to the 1st Cav. 1st Cav come down to glom on everyone and I wasn’t there to be glommed on to. They said I guess they’ll probably come back and get you tomorrow. Meantime overnight, I guess MACV has a need for a couple of 11 bravos. I didn’t go to the 1st Cav, they put me on a bus and sent me over to MACV headquarters, did some type
of orientation, put me on a C-123. A couple days later and flew me down to Bien Hoa
Airfield. I was met by some people from advisory team 60. I went over there where I
was on a security detail. The first couple of months we’d guard the perimeter, check
vehicles into the perimeter. Run convoys, that type of stuff. They started an advisory
team for the Recon company. I take it was kind of new at the time. Normally they only
had advisors down to battalion level. They were doing advisories for a company level.
They had Lieutenant Shake and Sergeant First Class Parker and neither one of them were
so inclined to carry a radio. So, they looked around to find someone that looked strong
enough to carry a radio. I was more than willing to do it. I ended up the R.T.O. for the
Recon Company.

SM: Did you get a break between advanced training and leaving for Vietnam?
GC: I think a one-week leave.
SM: I assume you went home?
GC: Yeah.
SM: Did you have many discussions at that point with your dad about combat?
What you might expect to see?
GC: No. I think that he felt his experience was with conventional warfare. Even
then we knew that Vietnam wasn’t a conventional type thing. I don’t think that he felt
comfortable enough. The obvious thing, keep your head down. That type of stuff.
SM: On the trip over what was it like in terms of in the aircraft with the guys you
were going over with? Was it kind of quiet or raucous? What was going on, on the
plane?
GC: Even then for the most part most people going over, well first of all we were
at Oakland Army terminal. The night before of course they told us don’t leave the base
or anything. We all did. We all went into San Francisco. The attitude is what can they
do to me? Send me to Vietnam? Got back, they loaded us onto a Boeing 707. I’m
reasonably sure it was chartered by Continental Airlines. I hate Continental Airlines.
Back when Continental wasn’t a regular carrier. They were like flying tiger and that
stuff. It was a 707, six across. There was two overworked flight attendants, stewardesses
back then who basically put the seatbelt sign on from the start and kept it on. All the
way. They had engine trouble. We had to make an emergency landing someplace, I
think Midway, but I don’t know. They fixed that and we ended up going into Vietnam.
There weren’t a lot of, when you talk about raucous. It was still a rarity, basically having
privates. There was lot of people on the airplane that had obviously been in the Army for
a while.

SM: Was there much talk about the fact that you were going to Vietnam and stuff
like that? Was there much talk on the plane amongst all passengers?
GC: Not really. The main thing I remember about that flight is they had
headsets. You could turn on different music channels.

SM: When you arrived in Vietnam what was your first impression? What do you
remember most about them opening the doors and you getting out of the plane?
GC: Certainly had the impression that we were going to be landing at Tan Son
Nhut and might come under mortar fire or something. Instead we were met by someone
in khakis. Marched us over to some terminal where we were eventually put on a bus to
Tent City Alpha. It was very organized. Certainly not the instant combat that we thought
we were going to be coming into. I remember the pilot made very tight turns, very tight
descent into Tan Son Nhut. I imagine because they didn’t want to come under fire. I had
never been on airplane, big or small, that made that type of descent into an airport.

SM: As a pilot that got your attention?
GC: Yeah, that got my attention. I didn’t think that 707s were supposed to be
doing that stuff.

SM: When you got off the aircraft or even when you were still in the aircraft
could you hear any gunfire or anything like that?
GC: No.

SM: What were the buses like that picked you up?
GC: They were school buses with no windows, but screens over where the
windows were.

SM: Did that catch your attention at the time at all?
GC: It made sense. I think they said something about that the idea was that they
couldn’t throw a hand grenade in there.

SM: How did that strike you?
GC: It made sense to me. We had the feeling that even at Tent City Alpha we’re going to be attacked in our sleep. We had no idea what was going on in Vietnam at the time.

SM: When were you issued a weapon?

GC: MACV issued me a weapon. I had a weapon when I boarded the C-123 to go down to the IV Corps. I had a weapon at that time. That was an M-14.

SM: Did you receive any briefings while you were at Tent City Alpha?

GC: N. I got briefings at MACV.

SM: When did you first encounter Vietnamese people?

GC: Aside from once I went to MAC-V you were free to wander around Saigon. Right from the start.

SM: What did you think of the Vietnamese people you had interactions with from the very beginning?

GC: In Saigon I was a complete stranger. I had no idea what the hell was going on. I liked the Vietnamese people. I worked with them more than most people. The only real reaction I can remember, they explained to me that as soon as I set foot in Vietnam I was automatically a PFC. I went out and found a store in Saigon and bought stripes and had them sewn on. Big deal.

SM: When you arrived in MAC-V and received those briefings what did they cover most? What do your remember about them emphasizing?

GC: For the most part they weren’t real interested in briefing me. They were interested in briefing officers and everything else. They were talking about the pacification program. Some things about the history of Vietnam. The country, the people. I can remember them talking about the country being occupied by the Chinese and the Vietnamese beat them 1,000 years ago or ran them out of the country. Just how poor the country was and their theories. The theory was the Viet Cong would come in and force the people to give them rice and everything else. We were there to try and liberate them and give their land back to them. Which I later found out that the VC would come in and they’d take 10% of the rice crop. People didn’t mind that because the absentee landowners couldn’t come in and take 90% of the land crop of the rice. They didn’t teach us that.
SM: Interesting. When you were on the plane and you get to Vietnam during this very early stage in your experience what did you think the United States was trying to accomplish in Vietnam?

GC: Prevent the domino theory. Absolutely. We were there to fight Communists and stop the spread of Communism.

SM: That was very much ingrained and believed by you and your fellow soldiers?

GC: Absolutely.

SM: This will end the interview with Mr. Gary Cumming on the 21st of April. Thank you sir.

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Gary Cumming on the 22nd of April 2001 at approximately 10:00. We are in the Southwest Collections/Special Collections Library in the Vietnam Archive Office. Sir, why don’t we go ahead and discuss quickly your experiences after your initial introduction to MAC-V and what it was like going to your first post? Describe that position for us?

GC: They gave me cab fare as I recall and told me to get out to Tan Son Nhut. They have some type of little shack out there where they coordinated rides, if you would. I was told that I was supposed to go down to Vinh Long. They put me on, I think I told you it was a C-123 the other day, I might have been wrong. Some guys were talking back at the Conference and indicated that it was probably a Caribou with Australian pilots. I don’t know. I got a ride down to Vinh Long. Got off the airplane and there were some people from advisory team 60. Going down about once a week, they’d go down and get some JP-4 for the helicopters, bring that back, pick up some stuff at Vinh Long and any replacements that were coming in. As I recall, there was someone else for the team, I don’t know who it was that was there and they picked us up and drove us to the compound in Sa Dec. Which was an interesting compound to say the least, it was on an island in the, I always thought it was the Mekong River; it wasn’t the Mekong River. It was, bear with me a second, I can’t remember the name of it now, I’d have to see a map or it will come to me later. The compound was outside the city of Sa Dec. Ninth ARVN division headquarters was there. We had a little section of it. The TOC was an old French three-story colonial type building and everything, surrounded by water.
That’s where we had the team headquarters. My job there for a while was, in fact all the
time I was there, that was my job was a security detachment. We would do things like,
run the convoys to Vinh Long, do the perimeter. The Vietnamese were supposed to be
doing the security. That they did, but we were also out there doing the perimeter. I think
they might not have thought that the Vietnamese were staying up all night. I don’t know.
That was part of our assignment. Filling sandbags was a big part of our assignment.
They used to say on the 7th day the Lord rested and the infantry filled sand bags. That
was one of our assignments. I did that for a while. Along after about three months in
country they started up an advisory team for the Recon Company. I’m given to
understand that this was kind of unusual. I think advisors were only down to the
battalion level. But for whatever reason they came up with the idea of having an
advisory team for the Recon Company. That consisted of a Lieutenant Jack Shake and
Sergeant First Class Bernie Parker. Those are about the only two names I can even
remember. I guess they both decided that neither one of them were about to want to be
carrying a radio around so they looked around for someone dumb enough to carry a radio
around and that’s what I did.

SM: Let me ask you a couple of quick questions about your time with the
security detachment. First of all when you were based and helping with the perimeter
guard and things of that nature, did you get probed very much? Did you get many
contacts with the Vietnamese?

GC: No.

SM: They never really approached your perimeter?

GC: No. It was a little hard to approach our perimeter since you had to swim.

SM: Right. But it wouldn’t be impossible?

GC: No.

SM: How about any kind of artillery, mortar, or rocket attacks? Anything like
that?

GC: No.

SM: Just to make sure that we clarify what month and year was it that you
arrived at that particular location?

GC: That was January in 1966.
SM: January ‘66, O.K. While you were working there with the security detachment did you have a lot of interaction with the Vietnamese people? With the Vietnamese ARVN soldiers that were on perimeter and stuff?

GC: No. Quite frankly they were up in towers. Our job was to walk the perimeter at ground level. We did have contact with certain ARVNs that were involved there was Ha-si Than who was the interpreter, a couple of others that would have involvement with us, mainly because they could speak English. Usually anytime we went somewhere usually had those people with us. Those people you got to meet. Later on in the Recon Company I made friends with a couple of the ARVNs. Especially the medic. The medic took a liking to me. He used to sing me lullabies at night (laughs). I think the medic was a little strange. I liked that because just like the American Army medics are called Doc. The medic was ‘Bac si’, which is doctor.

SM: Did you have any dogs to help you with perimeter work?

GC: No. Funny. We didn’t have a military dog. We had Rex, which was a yellow mutt who disliked the Vietnamese very much. The story was, this apparently happened just before I had gotten there, they had a barracks for recruits on the Vietnamese section of the island. Supposedly they took in a recruit who was a VC who brought in explosives and wired the explosives to the electrical light. Then left. Of course, when they came in the morning and threw the light on, they blew up the barracks. The story is that Rex was standing outside the barracks when that happened then and didn’t like Vietnamese. I don’t know. We spoiled Rex rotten. Used to get complaints from the Vietnamese counterpart keep the damn dog away from his soldiers because I guess Rex wasn’t too friendly with them or something. Of course we always we figured that was because they were trying to eat him (laughs).

SM: Speaking of that, did you ever witness them eating dogs, because that is part of Vietnamese cuisine?

GC: I’ve been told that I have eaten dog. I didn’t watch them prepare it. I asked them what it was and they all laughed and eventually told me that it was dog. After that I just stopped asking what I was eating.

SM: OK. How did the Americans in this particular sight in Sa Dec, how do you spell that do you recall?
GC: S-A-D-E-C, but I don’t know where you put all the little.
SM: Ok. How did you all get along there at Sa Dec with the Vietnamese?
Besides the dog?
GC: Pretty well. They didn’t come in the American side of the compound unless they had certain assignments. So, there wasn’t a lot of interaction with them.
SM: What was the primary purpose of the compound from the American side?
GC: That was team headquarters for the senior advisor to the ARVN 9th division was there as were some of the battalion advisors. As opposed to we might talk to some people that were with the RF and the PF and they lived in the compounds with them. The advisors lived in the American compound and then met with their counterparts and went on operations with them. In addition to that there was an administrative section for doing whatever they do administratively. There was the tactical operations center. There was a large signal detachment there that no seemed at least no one as low as I did knew what they did. They had to do with microwaves and secret messages and all that stuff. All that we knew was they were a bunch of air-conditioned trailers, which we thought was kind of cool. They went in there and did their stuff.
SM: How many American were a part of that detachment?
GC: I don’t know. I am going to say probably about 50.
SM: How about the Vietnamese Contingent?
GC: I have no idea. We didn’t go down to their compound or anything. That was division headquarters. They also had units scattered all over the place.
SM: Any interesting events occur while you were working? Either one of the convoys? I imagine on convoys you might be subject to attack?
GC: You might be subject to it, but it didn’t happen. Thank goodness too, because my principle assignment when we ran a convoy, we had a jeep. They have a bar mounted in which we put a machine gun in it. It wasn’t the M-60 machine gun. It was the old Browning 30. You used to ride, sit on the spare tire that was mounted on the back and you ride hanging on to the machine gun. There wasn’t any device with it to take it off and put it on the ground. You were expected to fire it from up there. I figured that wouldn’t be the nicest place to fire it from. The other thing I learned on convoys, I told you that we used to get JP-4. We had a, I guess it was a 500 or 1,000 gallon fuel truck.
You know like what they deliver home heating oil in. We used to drive that down to Vinh Long and fill it up with JP-4 and drive it back. When the helicopter came in and if they needed refueling we could refuel it from the truck. Once in a while, I’d drive that, that’s where I learned the rule of the road in Vietnam. The only rule of the road in tonnage. If you outweigh them they’ll get out of your way, but only at the last minute because they’ll play chicken.

SM: Wow. How about incidents involving wildlife? You had the dog, but what about snakes, insects?

GC: My kids asked me about that the other day. I never once saw a snake. I never once had a leech on me. I know that there were leeches there. I used to watch the Vietnamese take them off of each other and roast them. I made a face like that too.

SM: OK.

GC: No tigers, no monkeys either.

SM: No tigers, no monkey ok. Is there anything else you want to discuss regarding your time at Sa Dec?

GC: With the Recon Company.

SM: This was at Sa Dec as well?

GC: Yeah, the Recon Company operated out of the team 60 compound. What I would do with that, I still remained with the security detachment henever they had an operation I was let go from the security detachment to go with the Recon Company. That’s what basically I did. I carried a radio around. The Recon Company, I guess I’m making an assumption here, is that we went in first. Again, I never knew where the heck we were going or what we were doing or anything else, but we’d go in basically several ways. Sometimes they’d airlift us into an LZ and then we’d go do our thing. A lot of times we went with the M113s. The armored personnel carriers, which I had never trained on anything. Probably just as good. Because the ARVN didn’t use an M113 the same way the American Army did. They all rode on top. Inside they’d have the chickens and the goats and the ammunition and everything else, but everyone rode on top of a 113. Typically they’d take them into the objective and they’d stand off about 200 meters from the tree line or something, basically Recon by fire. They’d light up the tree line and then we’d get off and we’d attack through the rice paddies under the .50 cal fire into the tree
line. Then they’d do whatever they were going to do. They usually figured that when we
got to the village, if no one was there they were all VC. The village was a VC village,
which seemed to be license for them to help themselves to the chickens and ducks and
everything else that was left in the village.

SM: What did you think about that? Did you think that was an appropriate
conclusion? Or correct conclusion or just a convenient one?

GC: I thought it was a convenient one. When we did get to a village if there were
people in then what they were doing was looking for the VC. Best I can tell, there
argument was if there’s only women and children in the village, must be VC because all
them men are out hiding or something like that. They’d get rather forceful with their
interrogations and questioning and looking for weapons. They probably didn’t make a
good impression on the countryside from the government. I remember the Lieutenant
telling me that we had strict orders, not that I would have gotten involved with it anyway,
not to interfere with the ARVN method of interrogation. Basically, I came to see that the
real purpose of having advisors to the ARVN is that Lieutenant could call in dust off
artillery, helicopter gun ships. We were the method by which they could get support.
Other than that I don’t think they did a lot of advising.

SM: How aware were you of the political military system in South Vietnam?
Especially with regard to conscription? Did you know that, just like we had the draft,
they had the draft?

GC: Yeah. I think when they found someone young; you know of draft age, they
invariable glommed onto the guy. I don’t know exactly what they did with it, but I think
the idea was you’re either VC and you’re a prisoner or you’re a draft dodger. Either case
you’re coming with us.

SM: I don’t know if you were ever privy to conversations between the senior
advisor, the lieutenant the senior NCOs and the Vietnamese counterparts. Of course,
another reason that young men may not be in a village is they may have been serving in
ARVN. If they weren’t serving in ARVN then they had been sent to hide, so they’re not
conscripted. They may not be VC. Do you know if that was ever raised as a possibility?
GC: Yes it was. But it seemed to be up to the Di Wee to be making that decisions about
what’s going on there. He made the decision for whatever way they wanted.
SM: Did you ever go into a village that they determined although there aren’t any young men; it’s a friendly village?

GC: We went into some villages where we ended up buying stuff from the villagers, so I presume that we assumed that that was a friendly village. The ARVN lived off the land. It wasn’t unusual to see a line of ARVN going into every temple and had a cooking pot on his back. The idea the people had left the village, then they were all VC and they would help themselves to it. If people were there and deemed friendly at least they would buy rice and they would buy chickens and everything else.

SM: About how many operations would you say you went on with the Recon Company?

GC: Probably about 15-20.

SM: On those operations how many times did you actually make contact with an enemy firing at you?

GC: Probably about 5.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and describe, if you feel comfortable doing so, describe your first contact where you’re going on one of these patrols and they’re actually firing at you?

GC: It wasn’t very exciting. The first time, basically we were walking across a rice paddy and started getting sniper fire, fifty-caliber sniper fire off from the distance. Quite frankly there wasn’t a damn thing you could do about it. Except that we eventually took cover in the, you can’t even dig a foxhole in the rice paddies, but they have the dikes that come together at right angles. Everyone would take cover behind that. Eventually they called some gun ships to suppress the area because it was certainly out of our range. Basically after a while the shooting stopped. That was the first one. Any other times that we did it the shooting would start and eventually everyone would point in one direction and everyone would start shooting back in that direction. After a while the shooting would stop. One time, as I said, we actually attacked a tree line undercover. There was some shooting coming back on that, but I was never involved in any of the engagements that you read about in books or see in the movies or anything. You know like the Ia Drang valley and heavy foliage and real close contact. There wasn’t a lot of real close
contact probably because you couldn’t sneak up on a damn thing in the Delta. Shooting
was usually more at a longer range.

SM: Did the unit, the Recon Company, did they ever recover enemy killed or
take any enemy captures?

GC: Oh, yeah. Yes. We had captured VC or at least they claimed that they were
VC. Recovered weapons and there was some body count. As I recall, I think listening to
the Lieutenant talk about it, when you’d have a body, more than one group would count
that body. Certainly the Recon Company would count the body, but also the helicopter
groups that came in, they would count that body. Sometimes I think the same body got
counted by more than one group.

SM: When you say the helicopter group is this Vietnamese or American?

GC: They were Americans. In the Mekong Delta at least when I was there, there
were three divisions, 7th, 9th and the 21st. They had aviation support from American
helicopter units. Certainly out of Vinh Long I don’t know if there were others anywhere
else. There was a battalion of slicks, transports and a gunship battalion. Which wasn’t
the Cobras that they had later. They used the UH-1B. They had the rockets mounted on
the side and eventually the M-5 grenade launcher and stuff like that. Many guns, mini-
gatling guns or something were mounted on it. They would provide support for the
ARVN. Presumably that’s why we were there is to arrange for that support.

SM: Were you ever there as an RTO, I would imagine that you might have been
close to some of the interrogations of those prisoners, so you could radio back
information of that happening?

GC: Yeah, I witnessed some of the interrogations. We were told not to interfere.
Some of them I remember very vividly. They had the prisoner his hands were tied and
they actually shot at him with rifles. I think they hit him in his ear. They didn’t kill him
or anything. They would take prisoners and tie them behind a M-113 and drag them
through the rice paddies, wet. Which I presume is kind of like keelhauling. All this we
were told not to interfere with that. In fact, I think the Lieutenant was probably torn, not
even wanting to be involved in watching it, but certainly that was done. These were
interrogations and eventually they’d call in the helicopter and pick up the prisoners and
take them back to wherever they take them back to.
SM: Do you know if during any of those interrogations, Vietnamese civilians witnessed the treatment of those personnel?

GC: I don’t think so. No. There were just the ARVN.

SM: As Americans we’re always taught, and as American soldiers we’re trained that we have rules about engaging in war and once a person is captured there are certain tenets that we’re supposed to abide by the Geneva Courts, in particular. Of course when you were in the military, as today the Code of Conduct is heavily enforced in terms of if you were captured and the treatment that we expect as POWs in the event that we’re captured. What did you think when you witnessed those types of interrogations as an American soldier and as just a person?

GC: To be honest, I was curious. I really couldn’t believe that they did this. Now I’m a police officer, so I know about interrogations and what you’re supposed to do and what you’re not supposed to do. I always felt it was a classic example of why we have the Miranda warning now, the right to counsel and everything. Certainly any confessions that they got out of these people were coerced to say the least. Like I said though, I was curious about it. But it was sort of a morbid curiosity I guess. I didn’t think it was right. The attitude was we’re not to interfere with this. This is their war. I don’t think they even wanted an official report made that this was going on. I think everyone was aware of it, but I would doubt seriously that anything was written down in writing making a complaint for example. The Di We is allowing this to happen, I think that was just done. It was probably expected that if we or any of the ARVN were captured they’d probably receive no better treatment.

SM: Did witnessing that affect your opinion of what the United States was trying to accomplish in Vietnam at all at the time?

GC: Yeah. That’s the problem, you try and remember at the time and then compare it with things that you learn in history later on. I don’t think it changed my mind about what we were trying to accomplish at the time. I think I told you, I went in with the idea yeah we’re helping the Vietnamese but we’re really helping ourselves because we truly wanted to stop the spread of Communism. Communism was a bad thing. I know you were asking me before what I learned from my father about this, I learned this in school. I had history and civics and everything else growing up in the late
‘50s and early ‘60s. We were taught Communism was a bad thing. I just thought what we were doing was right. For all the wrong reasons maybe.

SM: Even though this is jumping ahead and it’s you looking back over a significant amount of time, as a police officer now and the experience that you have now, in terms of interrogation and in terms of trying to get as accurate a picture of what someone has done and to get them to open up to you and tell you exactly what has happened, what is an appropriate interrogation technique? Does physical coercion or mental coercion enter interrogation that can be effective?

GC: Well, I think mental coercion figures in and I think that’s what people try and do in interrogations. I mean I’ve been a cop for 30 years. I think the days when they used the rubber hoses were long before I was a police officer. I don’t know military wise, how to do an interrogation. You’re looking for certain things. I think what they were looking for is where are the weapons hidden, where are you? Where will we find the rest of you? Military type intelligence, what unit are you with? Presumably when they got sent back to some place else there were people that were more capable of doing those types of interrogations. I got a feeling that this was probably the Vietnamese idea of a field expedient to get important information now, not later. Where were we going with that? You asked if I had a better idea on how to interrogate them, no I don’t.

SM: Well, as you looked at that in Vietnam, what did you think in terms of how would you try to get someone to talk? Did you ever think that maybe there’s a better method than dragging them behind a 113?

GC: I probably did, but actually what really I thought is I don’t speak the language so I can’t interrogate them beyond ‘Bao Nhiêu Việt Cộng Chết,’ How many VC are dead? That’s about it.

SM: In terms of interrogation techniques that you have employed yourself over the years over your career as a police officer, have you ever had cause to interrogate someone who was in organized crime? Where very similar incentives may be in place? Loyalty to a larger group and the fact that there may be repercussions if you talk and things of that nature? How would you approach someone like that today?
GC: I wouldn’t know how to interrogate someone like that. I’m a small town
cop. Normally, I’m dealing with the fact that we have some evidence on you and I’m
using that to try and get you to work a better deal or something.
SM: I think your point is well made. There is a difference between military
interrogations and law enforcement.
GC: I’m going for the conviction. They’re going for the information.
SM: Right. Why don’t you go ahead and describe if you would, your
relationship with ARVN medic, who used to sing you lullabies? Was that on operations
like that?
GC: Yeah. I think he was just sweet on me. He was just always around, very
friendly. I didn’t have a real counterpart per se. So, it sort of became the medic. He was
my buddy.
SM: Did you witness different aspects of Vietnamese culture, which we as
Americans would view as being very foreign, very strange?
GC: A lot of handholding. I never understood that. They explained that they’re
just friendly.
SM: Was there anything else in terms of your interaction with the Vietnamese
Recon company and your daily interaction when you were on operations? Just the
different things about Vietnamese culture that struck you, things that you saw personally?
GC: Didn’t spend a lot of time in houses or anything with them. I don’t know. I
was going to say communal dining but I guess we all do that. How they prepare their
food.
SM: The communal setting is very shared. We have individual plates and
individual servings that we get especially in the military. Whereas, their setting is.
GC: For example the most common meal, is they’d cook up rice and everyone
would have their little bowl with them including the Americans. You’d take the rice out
of a communal pot and then they would have some meat, vegetables or something else
and you’d take that out of the pot, put that on it, pour some broth on it. That was your
meal. The big meal was what we would call lunch I guess. The afternoon meal. Then
would always have the siesta is the wrong word for it, but everyone would stop fighting
or stop fighting or stop doing anything from around noontime to maybe 3:00. Maybe this
was unique to the Mekong Delta, I don’t know. It was a sensible thing to do. It got hot.
The ARVN and presumably the VC had enough sense to stay the hell out of the heat in
the middle of the afternoon. You know mad dogs and Englishmen. We would have
whatever operation we were going to have usually was in the morning then they’d
basically break for lunch and the siesta. Then might go on to wherever you were going
for the night and that would be about it.

SM: Did you personally enjoy eating Vietnamese food?

GC: After a while. I was a steak and potatoes boy. The first time we went out on
an operation, they’re making all the dinner and everything. Looked at that and I said, I’m
not hungry. Looking around for the C-rations. Well, we don’t get any C-rations. MACV
you got paid per diem to live off the land, buy your food and everything else. Next day I
said smells pretty good. Give me some of that (laughs). It’s funny, to this day there are
certain vegetables I won’t eat. They’re all the vegetables I had to eat when I was a kid.
Yet I’ll eat just about any of the Oriental vegetables. This is all stuff that I never ate until
I was grown up and for whatever reason, I’ll eat that type of vegetables. You still can’t
get broccoli in me.

SM: How about Nuoc Mam?

GC: Oh, yeah. Nuoc Mam went on everything. It was an acquired taste, sort of
like Tabasco sauce.

SM: You mentioned that dinner and night operations. Did you go on many a
night operations?

GC: Not many. Basically most of the operations were just one-day operations,
some of them were two. Usually two day operations consisted of moving into a position,
staying the night and then continuing on with the thing the next morning.

SM: What was the longest period of time you were away from the compound in
Sa Dec?

GC: Three days.

SM: What would you estimate was the largest enemy force you encountered on
one of those operations?
GC: They tell us, and I can’t remember the one where we had some type of running fight with them around the Seven Sisters Mountain. There was a battalion-sized thing. Never concentrated or anything.

SM: Did your unit, the Recon Company ever take fire from heavier weapons like RPGs or you mentioned the .50 caliber sniper rifle or sniper fire that you received? Sustained fire? Artillery?

GC: Nothing sustained. No artillery. Get some mortar fire.

SM: Were there any significant losses by the Recon Company?

GC: No.

SM: Did they take any casualties?

GC: Yeah, we did. We did take casualties. Knock wood, no Americans. I don’t know whether they lived or died. They went out. They weren’t people that you really knew. Never took real heavy casualties. The Vietnamese were very careful about that from what I can understand. It was good if a Vietnamese commander had a body count, but it was worse if he had his own body count. It was almost a coordinated dance, I think in cooperation with the Viet Cong. I think that comes more from history then. Actually observing or knowing what’s going on. I don’t know that a lot of times the Lieutenant would get his orders to try and make his counterpart take his Recon company certain places where the Recon company guy probably had his orders that he wasn’t supposed to be going to. There was a lot of bantering. I don’t know what the word is. I know the Lieutenant would give his orders to try and get them. I remember one time there was information that there was VC on the other side of some river or canal or whatever the hell it was. The Lieutenant trying real hard to convince the Di Wie that we’ve got to go over there. The Di Wie basically yesing him to death, but not going.

SM: So it was always delicate negotiation between the two?

GC: I think they were probably both under orders. The Lieutenant’s getting form his commanders what you’re trying to get them to do and the ARVN commander probably has his orders probably coming from two people that are standing next to each other back at the TOC. Who are probably yesing each other to death too.

SM: The enemy that you did have contact with and the Recon Company contacted? Typically VC or combination of VC and PAVN?
GC: As far as I know they were all VC. I don’t know that we had any contact with PAVN or at least any bodies. I think that the word was that they had that the VC battalions had PAVN advisors just like the ARVN battalions. To my knowledge at least when I was there in 1966, we were fighting the Viet Cong, not the PAVN.

SM: What time period covered your time going out with the Recon Company?

GC: probably April to November.

SM: Of ’66?

GC: Yeah.

SM: During that time period the weapons that were captured and things like that, do you remember what they were? What kinds of weapons?

GC: Mostly what we called Chicoms. They were the bolt action with the folding Queenie bayonet.

SM: Like SKSs or AK-47s?

GC: No. I think they had captured some AK-47s but the most common rifle captured was the Chicoms whatever the Chinese use in the Korean War, I think. That style. Of course, recaptured American weapons. They used the M-1. At that time, the ARVN was equipped with M-1s and carbines. I traded in my M-14 for an M-1 carbine. There was no ammunition resupply for an M-14. They just didn’t have that. They used the old Browning .30. As did the Viet Cong I guess.

SM: I should have asked this earlier when we were discussing what you witnessed in terms of interrogations and the instructions that you and your American counterparts/ fellow soldiers received not to interfere. At the time, did you or the NCOs and officers that you worked with ever talk about whether you should or shouldn’t interfere? Did you all agree that you should be the policy or did you think that maybe the Americans should have been a little bit more proactive?

GC: I didn’t have a lot of thought on that. Certainly I had a lot of respect for the Lieutenant and if it was good enough for him, it was good enough for me.

SM: Were there any other interesting events or operations? Anything memorable concerning your time with the Recon company that we haven’t discussed yet?

GC: More memorable are some of the things that weren’t the combat type situations. I was very impressed we would go with the M-113s a lot. Of course, the
Delta area is very muddy and everything else. I was very impressed with how they would maneuver. For example, when they wanted to cross a canal, it was a lot of work. The canals had steep banks. Usually what would happen it would almost be like a tank trap? They’d get down in it and they couldn’t get back up or something. What they would do is they would take out an anchor and you have to understand I’m not an armor guy or anything so I don’t know what they were doing. Basically, they would set the anchor wench to that, then they’d hook up all the other tracks one to the other and like a train, once you pulled one out then you’d use that one to pull the next one out. It could take you quite a while to cross a canal or something.

SM: How deep were the canals that they were crossing like that?

GC: They weren’t that deep. It was more a matter of deep in terms of water, but they would be deep in terms of the sides. So, that you could get down in there and basically not be able to get back up again, short of doing the wenching stuff and everything. I remember one time they were crossing a wider stream or a river or whatever. They could float, not with a lot of freeboard, but they could apparently swim through the water. Of course, we all ride on the top. One time they start shipping water or whatever they call that and they were telling us everyone runs to the front and then everyone runs to the back and then finally just jump the hell off.

SM: they didn’t use the skirts? The waterproof skirts that would allow them to go a little bit into deeper water but not take on water?

GC: Quite frankly I don’t know what they were doing?

SM: They never had rubber or plastic tarp like skirts that went around the top of the vehicles, the 113s.

GC: No.

SM: That would be recognizable.

GC: Yeah, I think it would.

SM: Did any ever sink completely?

GC: No.

SM: Did they ever lose any vehicles?

GC: NO, I don’t think so. Again that wasn’t my unit or anything.

SM: While you were there.
GC: I just thought it was amazing riding around in a 113, everyone riding on top of the damn thing.

SM: Anything else?

GC: I did things with the ARVN that I had never done in training or anything else. You know, air assaults. I guess was all kind of new at the time. I don’t know how the Americans did it with the ARVN on an air assault. Some people would ride inside, because they were so small they could get more ARVN in there than you could get Americans in there. They’d be riding hanging out the door with their feet out the door. Helicopters never really set down as I recall, they used to just come in, slow down and hover and everyone would just start jumping off. You wanted to get out in a hurry because as they were jumping off the helicopter would start coming up again. Last man out usually had a little further to fall.

SM: Did anybody ever get injured? Broken ankles or anything?

GC: No. Not that I recall.

SM: No Americans that you served with on those operations were injured?

GC: No.

SM: How about back in the compound?

GC: One guy got hurt real bad on a traffic accident. No one that I served with got medivaced for wounds or anything that I can recall. Even back on the compound there were very few enlisted men. You didn’t have a lot of people to socialize with. Jack Shake of course, was the only officer that I socialized with, if you will. I never really knew that many Americans down there. Certainly there was only the three of us in the Recon Company.

SM: Were there any Vietnamese civilians in Sa Dec, the village or whatever, near the compound?

GC: Oh yeah. Sa Dec was a fairly large town. That’s where I got the picture taken. Some photography shop in Sa Dec.

SM: What size of a Vietnamese town would you recall?

GC: It had several paved streets running up from the river. In terms of population, I don’t know. Wasn’t as big as the town of Vinh Long. It certainly wasn’t a hamlet.
SM: Were you authorized to go in and socialize?

GC: There was a bridge on the island into Sa Dec; I can remember one time in
with some of the guys. We got a little toooed up. If you talked to anyone that was in
Saigon and maybe some of the other big cities they had the cyclos, the motorized with the
cab in front. Well, in Sa Dec and maybe the smaller towns they had I want to say 75 cc
Japanese motorcycles with a cart behind it. That was the taxi type thing. We got
drunked up enough that we rented two of those and put the drivers in the back. We ended
up racing through Sa Dec (laughs).

SM: Were they scared, the drivers?

GC: We paid them enough, they didn’t care.

SM: Were there any rules given to you about your interaction with the
Vietnamese and the civilian side of Sa Dec? Were you told you can’t do or shouldn’t do
certain things?

GC: There were places that we were told that we weren’t supposed to go to but
other than that.

SM: What kinds of places?

GC: We don’t want to get into those type of things, certain social clubs.

SM: Where certain services were provided, is that what you mean?

GC: Of course, I wouldn’t have done anything like that. We were allowed to go
into, there were bars. Go into town and do that. Didn’t do that a lot.

SM: Were there American MPs that were in town that were kind of monitoring
American activities?

GC: No, not in Sa Dec. At one point along the line they got MPs in Vinh Long.

Of course we were going down to Vinh Long like once a week. One time along the line
and they wanted to see our military driver’s licenses. Of course, we didn’t have any. So,
after that the senior advisor wrote us up military driver’s licenses. Put everything on it. I
think I’m licensed to drive a tank.

SM: O.K. When you did go to Vinh Long on those trips did you spend any
significant time in the city itself or was it just passing through?
GC: We would only go to the Vinh Long Airfield. Other times and other
assignments and everything I would go to Vinh Long. There’s some nice restaurants in
Vinh Long. Didn’t stay in Vinh Long other than the convoy when I was with MACV.
SM: What was the longest time you stayed outside of Sa Dec in another city like
Vinh Long or anyplace else?
GC: When I was with MACV, I take that back. About every month or so we
would take a convoy up to Saigon. That might have been about three, four days, maybe
five days. We’d go up there and we’d escort the convoy. The convoy was going up for
resupply and everything. We’d do that and that was always an interesting trip through
the countryside. You had to take ferries and climb different routes when bridges got
blown up.
SM: How long would it typically take you to go from Sa Dec to Saigon?
GC: You could make it in one day.
SM: There and back?
GC: One day up, one day back and then whatever time they needed in the city for
doing whatever they were doing.
SM: When you’re saying resupply, basically you would take up empty vehicles
and bring back supplies?
GC: Yes.
SM: How many vehicles per convoy?
GC: Actually I’m not sure. That one we would do in conjunction with the
ARVN. They would be going up to Saigon too, for whatever they were doing. There
was a fair amount of trucks and jeeps.
SM: How about for Vinh Long? How would it take you to get there?
GC: Vinh Long you could drive just down the road, 20 clicks or so. We’d go
down there and pick up whatever we’re picking up. Mostly JP-4. That was down in the
morning and back in the afternoon type thing.
SM: In Sa Dec did they have a Vietnamese police force there?
SM: How about Vinh Long?
GC: Yeah, Vinh Long had White Mice. And the Quan Cahn. The QC. The military police.
SM: Is there anything else that you’d like to talk about with regard to your time in Sa Dec that we haven’t covered yet?
GC: That about covers it. I told you there wasn’t a lot of real exciting things.
SM: All those times you were on convoy you guys never got hit? Ambushed?
GC: Took enemy fire?
SM: You would just keep going and no one ever got hit?
GC: Yeah, we’d take enemy fire. Nothing that we’d even stop for.
SM: You get ambushed one night, road ambush at night. I have no idea where the hell it was. We were driving at night and a vehicle hit a land mine and came under small arms fire from a village. We returned fire like hell. Basically, that’s probably why I didn’t think of it. Basically a lot of civilians got killed. I know that the attitude was I have a hard time with this, the attitude was, well, it’s their fault because they should have told us that the VC were there. In fact, as far as I know I don’t think we even recovered a VC body.
SM: The need to rationalize. When did that happen in terms of your time in Vietnam? Was it late?
GC: Right about in the middle of it.
SM: In the middle.
GC: I have a real hard time with dates or even times or sequences.
SM: That was a longtime ago.
GC: As I said here, things flash in to my mind. I remember the first time I was in a monsoon. It just popped into my mind. You could see it coming. You’re down here in Texas where you have the plains or something. Well, the Delta was a lot like that. It was just flat and you could see forever. You could see this dark rain and you could watch it come. It would just come and rain like hell for an hour and then go away.
SM: On the island did you have problems with flooding during monsoon season?

GC: Yes. That and there was some strange type of bug that came out in the wet season. You couldn’t go anywhere without stepping on the damn bugs. I don’t know what they were, but they were big suckers.

SM: Were they flying bugs or ground bugs?

GC: Ground bugs.

SM: But they weren’t poisonous or a hazard?

GC: No. Just a pain in the ass.

SM: O.K. Was that the previous incident that you discussed concerning the small ambush at the village? Was that the only mine incident that you had on your convoy? Did you note that you never hit other mines?

GC: No. That wasn’t one of these Saigon convoys. This was with the Recon Company.

SM: O.K. So, it was one of the track vehicles that tripped a mine probably. Did you guys have more than just track vehicles with the Recon Company?

GC: This was a truck. As I recall we were going to a night bivouac, where we were going to have an operation the next morning.

SM: So, that was a Recon company night movement?

GC: Right.

SM: You didn’t have convoys at night did you? Only daytime convoys?

GC: In terms of going to Saigon or Vinh Long that was only daytime.

SM: You guys never hit mines on your way to Saigon or Vinh Long or coming back?

GC: Nope.

SM: And were never ambushed?

GC: Nope.

SM: Wow.

GC: I do know that made it a point of driving down the middle of the road. That’s where that tonnage stuff came in. No one wanted to drive on the shoulder of the road, which was more likely where you’re going to have a mine. The road to Saigon was
for the most part paved. So, presumably you would see that a mine had been placed in
the road. At least, presumably you would.

SM: You were on that duty all the way through until you left in April? What did
you do?

GC: No. I transferred. Which is a whole other story. I don’t know whether
we’ve got time to go into that. I eventually went to 13th pathfinders, which operated out
of Vinh Long. That was a rather unusual assignment because pathfinders of course are
airborne MOS and I wasn’t. I was familiar with the Delta and at the time, they felt that
was more important than being airborne. I was supposed to go to Okinawa for jump
school. Just basically for shits and giggles. That’s when they had discovered that I might
be a hemophiliac. Did I tell you that? I didn’t tell you that story?

SM: No.

GC: I was with the pathfinders.

SM: Well, this is a pathfinder story?

GC: Yeah.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and discuss, when did you leave Sa Dec? Was that
November ’66?

GC: Probably around November. I extended my tour of duty. Transferred to the
pathfinders and got a 30-day leave with transportation to anywhere in the free world. SO,
I went home for Christmas. Then came back and served with pathfinders for a while.

SM: Why did you extend?

GC: To get the transfer.

SM: You wanted to transfer to the pathfinders?

GC: Yes.

SM: You wanted to serve with them?

GC: Yes.

SM: how did that bug bite you? All of a sudden you wanted to go to he
pathfinders?

GC: It was on one of the trips to Vinh Long. Basically they were out recruiting
looking for people that would want to transfer in. Sounded like a neat thing to do. So, I
arranged to extend my tour and doing that I could ask for a transfer, which got approved.

I went down to Vinh Long. They operated out of the airfield.

SM: Now, what did you understand the pathfinders did?

GC: I understood what they did was basically at one end load troops into the
helicopters and at the other end they would go in and set up the landing zone where the
troops came into. That’s basically what they did.

SM: So, with the pathfinders you weren’t acting in an advisory capacity?

GC: No.

SM: You were acting as a pathfinder?

GC: Right.

SM: O.K. When you transferred in November of ’66 you never went through
any type of training or anything like that to become a pathfinder?

GC: On the job training.

SM: OJT.

GC: It was sort of like what I had done before except you carried two radios
instead of one.

SM: Why two radios as a pathfinder?

GC: Because you were coordinating with a lot of different ground units,
helicopter units and everything else, it was just easier instead of switching frequencies
back and forth to have two radios.

SM: Before the pathfinder unit, what was the morale like in the MACV
compound, amongst the American personnel you worked with?

GC: It was good.

SM: Besides going into Sa Dec what did you do for recreation? Did you have
radios, TVs that kind of stuff?

GC: We had radios. Alcohol was the drug of choice. In fact, one of the signal
guys Phil Burchette, used to call him Phil Birdshit. He could play the guitar. It was the
West Texas country type of guitar. He used to sit around at night and just play the guitar
and everyone would get half drunked up and try and sing country and western songs with
him. Me from New Jersey.

SM: What kind of radio programming did you listen to?
GC: It was probably what do they call it?
SM: Armed Forces Radio?
GC: Armed Forces radio Network. The other thing too now that you mention it.
We used to get movies sent down. Favorite movie was always the beach party movies
with Annette. Typically they would send whatever movie they were sending down and
they would also have tapes of *Combat*. The TV show *Combat* or *Batman and Robin*.
They would have a one-hour movie of two *Batman and Robin* ones or one hour *Combat*.
Then there would be whatever movie they had.
SM: Was that a frequent occurrence? The movies?
GC: Yeah.
SM: Besides the beach movies with Annette who else was in those typically?
GC: Frankie Avalon and Eric VonZipper (laughs).
SM: Was there any other movies that stood out in your mind that you saw in
Vietnam? I didn’t know if *MASH* was released when you were in Vietnam?
GC: No. *MASH* was later. No. Not that I can think of.
SM: Now, the *Combat* what did you guys think of that show? Because that was
about war and what it was supposed to be like in war, how did that pan out with what you
guys were witnessing?
GC: Wasn’t like anything that we had. They did a lot more fighting.
SM: The contact. What kind of contact did you have with home in terms of the
letter writing?
GC: Just letter writing I can remember one time up in Saigon I stopped at a USO
club. At that time I don’t think you could call. I don’t think they had telephone service
out of Vietnam. In any case they had this thing where you could call home. I made the
call or whatever it was through the MARS. The Military Affiliated Radio System or
Something. Long story short I never got through. Someone called up my parents and
said they were from MARS and delivered a message or something. The idea was
supposed to be that you could have a radio link and then dial in. But it didn’t work out.
SM: The letters that you received from home, was there much discussion of what
was happening on the home front, what was going on in the U.S.?
GC: No. The antiwar protests weren’t as big a thing in 1966 as I understand it. There was starting to get some antiwar sentiment and everything. It was still sort of popular, war. At least in Burnettville, New Jersey. I don’t know about the rest of the world.

SM: You mentioned going to the USO. Did you ever go to USO shows?

GC: I saw Anne Margaret dancing on the back of a flat bed trailer. That was in Vinh Long. Never saw Bob Hope or anything, met Roy Rogers and Dale Evans. They came out to Sa Dec as did Arthur Godfrey. Archie Moore. Archie was the light heavy weight champion of the world. His thing was he went around and we had a guy that was Golden Gloves at Sa Dec and he’d go around with Archie Moore. Archie wouldn’t hurt him or anything and that was the thing that Archie Moore would do. There was no name USO people that would go around and do things.

SM: How important was that to you? The other Americans?

GC: I thought it was a nice idea that these people would take their time to come and do this. With the exception of Anne Margaret dancing on the trailer. Some of the no name USO shows were nice because they had American women. Which was nice, even if they were no names or anything.

SM: How about Army services did they provide much support to you out there in Sa Dec? In the libraries and providing you with newspapers and magazines and books, that kind of stuff?

GC: I want to say we got *Stars and Stripes* and there was some English language newspaper that was published over there that we got from time to time, but it was a civilian newspaper. I can’t even think of what the name of it is now. Nothing that I recall from the library.

SM: *No Life, Time, Newsweek, Playboy.*

GC: I used to get *Playboy*. My father took care of me. Every month I received first class mail, which was like three months ahead of when everyone else got it. I got the latest issue of *Play Boy* and four sticks of Pepperoni. Use to pile that in an envelope and seal it up and mail it to me.

SM: It was never through a military installation or anything? It was something your dad did for you.
GC: Yeah.
SM: You said alcohol was the drug of choice? Typically was it just beer or did you guys have access to hard liquor?
GC: You had a ration card and I can’t remember. You could buy all the beer you wanted. There was a limit on hard liquor that you could get. There was a little tiny PX if you will at the compound that would be opened up every once in a while. Someone would be sent down to open it up and sell stuff. The major thing in it was cigarettes. It was very important when you’re working with the Vietnamese to have plenty of sale from cigarettes. That was their drug of choice.
SM: Were there any other drugs that you were aware of used by American soldiers in the compound area you were in?
GC: Not that I’m aware of. The Vietnamese used to smoke those Ruby King Cigarettes. They used to put a stripe down there in a little jar. They used to run a stripe down the side of the cigarette and smoke it. They told us it was menthol. Not knowing any better at the time, I accepted that. I’m reasonably sure that it was hashish or liquid hash. They told us it was menthol. I certainly didn’t smoke any of those cigarettes.
SM: What about opium?
GC: I’m unaware of it. Even among the ARVN. I’m unaware of it.
SM: How about marijuana?
GC: Marijuana was available. I didn’t see a lot of abuse or anything of it.
SM: This will end CD number one of the interview with Mr. Gary Cummings.
SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Gary Cummings on the 22nd of April, this is CD number two. Why don’t we go ahead and discuss your time with the pathfinders then? What was that transition like for you?

GC: Certainly with a lot more Americans because now I was stationed at Vinh Long airfield. Other than that it was basically just a job. We’d go out and typical I usually didn’t know here the hell I was going or where I had been. The helicopter pilot would insert us by air into the landing zone. Basically we’d set up the landing zone, contact the helicopters when they’re coming in with the troops. Advise them of any particular ground conditions. Sometimes there would be firing into the LZ. We didn’t do much about that ourselves because there was only a three-man team. We would have contact with the gun ships that would be in the area and basically tell them where it appeared the fire was coming from so that they could suppress it. We’d advise the pilots of basically the best approach. Sort of like a mobile air traffic controller. Then depending on the situation we’d get on the last one and sometimes go back. Or sometimes we’d stay with the unit and arrange for their pickup at the end of the day. That was with all ARVN troops. Still no American troops down there.

SM: So, your path finding was for you were finding LZs and coordinating the air Assets for ARVN soldiers to come in? Did you ever walk into these LZs or did you always fly into the LZs?
GC: We always flew into them.
SM: You’re principle duty was as RTO, you carried the radios?
GC: Yeah, basically.
SM: Did you ever do anything else or was that your only thing?
GC: That was about it. Made a lot of different LZs. One was the same as the other.
SM: This was always in the Delta region? These landing zones?
GC: Yes.
SM: So, there was no need to use daisy cutters or other munitions to clear out those?
GC: No. I’ve seen pictures of pathfinders up where the principle job of the pathfinder was to go in with a chainsaw and clear out landing zones. In fact, quite frankly, I never really saw much of a need to have pathfinders where we were. It was a job. Basically you’re landing in a big rice paddy. There was nothing to clear. They had it. The only other thing is you got to wear a cool black hat.
SM: How many path finding missions did you participate in while you were there do you recall?
GC: I couldn’t tell you. It was like loading coal.
SM: It was frenetic, I mean, you guys did a lot?
GC: Did a lot, but how many I don’t know. Good thing about it was usually a 9-5 job if you would. They did all these things actually I lie if it’s 9-5. We used to go in, it was usually dark whenever we’d go in. Usually we’d be back at the airfield by night.
SM: Were these one a week or a couple a week? How frequent?
GC: Probably about one a week.
SM: During your down time when you weren’t out conducting the actual path finding mission to bring in these soldiers and the air assets, what did you do?
GC: Obstensibly we trained. Quite frankly we didn’t do a hell of a lot. That was a pretty decent job.
SM: When you say you didn’t train, what did you do if you didn’t train?
GC: You know what? Mainly just hung around, went into Vinh Long a lot. You took care of equipment and we basically ended up doing some carpentry work and
building our own little office and stuff like that. It was sort of funny while I was a
pathfinder sort of, I wasn’t really a pathfinder. The other people on the team were all real
life pathfinders.

SM: How did they treat you?

GC: Oh, good. I couldn’t tell you the name of a single one of them. That just
how is it was. I did that. I didn’t do it for all that long, because then I ended up, which I
started telling you before I got medevaced, which sounds like I got wounded. What
happened is they discovered that my brother was a hemophiliac and that being hereditary
sent word through the Red Cross that I should be checked to be sure that I’m not a
hemophiliac. That’s not something they normally check you for when you go into the
service. Basically they took me to the dispensary at Vinh Long where the medics there
decided the best they could figure out, they cut me and see whether I stopped bleeding.
Actually they did clotting times. Apparently I was outside of the norms on their clotting
times. They sent me to Saigon. Saigon did some more tests, which were mostly clotting
times and everything. I remember they pierced my ear in one test. I don’t know why.
They sent me to Japan, which did more tests and decided something’s wrong with this
guy. They sent me back to Wilson Army hospital in Ft. Dix where they did some tests.
They finally sent some blood to Walter Reed and I don’t know what Walter Reed did
with it but they said there’s nothing wrong with this man. The doctor came to me and
said we’re going to send you back to Vietnam. I only had about three months left on the
extended tour. I only extended for six months, I said well I know I got sometime left, but
wouldn’t think that you’d send me back. He said well you were only there for three
months, I said no Doc. I was there for a year and three months. He said you know that’s
right. How would you like to be a drill Sergeant here at Ft. Dix? Sure, why not? So, I
ended up a drill sergeant at Ft. Dix (laughs).

SM: What month, that was April of ’67?

GC: Might have been May. By the time I got back to Ft. Dix it was probably
May. I was probably about 30 days bouncing around the hospitals and everything. I
came back and we left Japan in a C-141 Starlifter with real wounded people in it and
everything else. Landed in Elmendorf Alaska. Where it was my job since I was
ambulatory to get off the airplane and buy cigarettes for all the wounded people. I’m running around Elmendorf, Alaska in jungle fatigues.

SM: During your pathfinder experience, what percentage would you say of the LZs you worked on were hot?

GC: A low percentage. Other than some sniper fire most of them weren’t. There was one LZ that was fairly hot. The ships took fire. Nothing got shot down. It was hot enough that the lead helicopter pilot I think got the silver star and all the other pilots got the air medal with a V going into it. We didn’t get anything because we weren’t flying anything. That one was probably the only really hot LZ.

SM: Did your pathfinder unit ever take casualties during your duties?

GC: Nope. Not a one. Again we usually were just a three-man team when we went into the LZs.

SM: So, it was you, the RTO and who else?

GC: The Lieutenant oh and one other pathfinder a sergeant.

SM: What would you carry with you as weapons?

GC: I had the M-16 then.

SM: What did you think of that?

GC: Didn’t get to use it that much. I thought it was an o.k. weapon. I trained on it in basic training. I do remember this was interesting there was a lot of discussion at the time about the problem with the M-16s. I didn’t experience that particular problem or anything. We had heard that there was a lubricant out that was supposed to be real good for the M-16, but that the Army wouldn’t use it. There legitimately was this lubricant out. We wrote to the company to see if we could have some sent to Vietnam, we’d be willing to pay for it. Sure, enough it was sent for and it was paid for. They sent our money back. It was paid for by a VFW group, that I guess had heard of it and I guess they said if you get any requests send it out. They sent us a box of the cans of the lubricant, can’t even remember the name of it or anything with a note saying VFW post such and such had paid for it. That was kind of interesting. I don’t know whether the lubricant was any good or not. It was just one of those things that you heard about. Everyone heard this is what you got to get. The Army won’t let you have it, but this will fix you up.
SM: Was there anything else that was similar in terms of equipment where you guys wanted something and it was kind of hard to get your hands on?

GC: No. The pathfinders traveled light and certainly we had enough radios.

SM: When you were a pathfinder and you were going into these LZs in the Mekong Delta region did you ever encounter anything other than again Vietcong to your knowledge?

GC: No. I was going to say for the most part 1966 was still kind of early in the war. If the People’s Army was down in the Delta they weren’t very obvious about it. In fact, I don’t even know if PAVN was down there at the end.

SM: How much had you heard about the trail, the Ho Chi Minh Trail while you were there?

GC: I read about it in the military papers. But it wasn’t a big thing as I recall. From what we knew or at least believed is the supplies were coming in through the Mekong River and I guess Cambodia, coming in that way. Which was the job of the RAG people. I think they heard them talk. I think they were big on interdicting that type of stuff.

SM: Did you yourself have conversations with anybody that had witnessed a significant amount of resupply activity during your time there?

GC: No.

SM: Is there anything else you want to talk about with regard to your time at Vinh Long with the pathfinders?

GC: No, I think that probably about covers it.

SM: Now, when you came back to the United States during this testing for hemophilia and what not. What did you encounter in the United States? What was your first impression upon arriving back here?

GC: Well, I didn’t have the experience if you will of people being met at airports by protestors and everything else. I came back in sort of non-traditional way, landed at McGuire Air Force Base. That was different. Obviously I was in the Army and going home for another year and people knew I was in the Army. I don’t think that I advertised or made it clear that I’m in the Army. Certainly when I went home on weekends it was in civilian clothes which is kind of nice being at Ft. Dix and being able to come home
weekends. While I was in the Army I met the woman I married. I didn’t have a big thing
with the anti-war protestors or anything else. I can remember one time after I was out of
the Army, probably about 1969. There was a group of people claiming to be Vietnam
vets against the war. That did a march. They marched a bunch of roads in every town
they’d come to they’d execute villagers and put on demonstrations. Actually, some
reenactments of some of the things that the Vietnamese had done to their prisoners except
they were claiming the Americans that were doing it. What I remember most about that
is my father was livid. It never was about Vietnam with my father. It was about this is
America and you don’t do this thing. He was out there; I guess he was probably about 50
years old or something trying to pick fights with these guys and everything else. He
found a big American flag and he’s out there holding it up and yelling at them. Probably
a little upset, I was supportive of dad but I wasn’t out there taking part in the anti-
demonstration. In fact, it was sort of a little embarrassing. They went on their way and
that was about it. It got to the point where I got tired of the Vietnam War. I wanted to
see it over. I’m not happy with the way it ended with us abandoning the Vietnamese but
I was in favor of pulling the American troops out and supporting the ARVN and letting
them decide the fate of their country. I know it was to the point Nixon had kept
promising to end the war and I woke up on election day and checked the newspapers and
the war wasn’t over and I went out and voted for McGovern. I could see the public
getting tired of the war. It was on TV every night. I still thought though that most of the
protestors were protesting. I thought of them more as cowards then truly opposed to the
war. I will say I had no respect for the people that went to Canada to avoid the draft. I
knew of several people that went to jail. I could at least respect those people. They had
the courage of their convictions. They were truly opposed to the war and were willing to
go to jail to do it. I never have thought too highly of the ones that went to Canada. I
can’t even remember which president pardoned them all. I wasn’t happy with that. I felt
mad. That’s your conviction; you’re going to go Canada, fine live with it.
SM: What did you think about the Vietnam veterans against the war?
GC: I didn’t believe them. My feeling is that these guys were phonies. But I
don’t know. I’ve never joined the Vietnam Veterans Association. I’m in the VFW. I
never joined the, what is it? Vietnam Vets of America?
SM: The VVA.

GC: I probably never joined them because I probably associated them with the Vietnam Vets against the war. That’s probably an unfair comparison, but I never joined them. I never thought too much about the Vietnam Vets against the war.

SM: When did you join the VFW?

GC: In the ‘80s and quite frankly the only reason I joined that was because my father joined it and wanted me to join it because we’d be like a father-son deal in the same VFW post. Since then, I’ve probably attended maybe a half a dozen meetings.

SM: When you got back were you able to talk about your experiences with your father?

GC: Yeah. I didn’t have a hell of a lot experiences to talk about.

SM: How did he receive your combat experience and what you talked about? How did he react?

GC: Supportive. If I had a story he certainly had a story. He had a hell of a lot of stories. It was something I didn’t need a, is the word catharsis? I didn’t feel the need to have to talk out any problems or anything. Hell, I didn’t have that big a problem. So, it was just something he and I had done. I think he was pleased by that. That there’s a sense of duty that you were supposed to do something like this. He did it and I did it. Fortunately, my son doesn’t have to do it.

SM: Was he a member of the VFW already when you came back to the United States or was he a member later?

GC: No. He joined later.

SM: Had you heard?

GC: That’s only because they hadn’t started a post until that time. When they started the post they recruited my father. He basically recruited me.

SM: From your experience at your VFW post were veterans pretty much treated equally, regardless of the war in which they served?

GC: Oh, yeah. In fact they were very supportive of Vietnam veterans. Certainly at that time. When the hell did the Iranian hostages come home?

SM: That was right when Reagan took office in 1981.
GC: I think the VFW had started after that, but that was part of the thing. I noticed right after the hostages came home is when the public started saying basically first of all why are we making such a fuss about the hostages that are coming home? What about the Vietnam Vets? At least where I lived. I remember the Rotary club went out of its way to find all the Vietnam Vets in the Somerset county area and invited us all to dinner. In our honor. It was just a nice thing to do. Like I told them it was the first time anyone had ever bought me a drink because I was a Vietnam Veteran. People, at that point the public started changing their perception. Certainly by the time Gulf War came along. It had been to the point that we’re not going to blame. If we’re dissatisfied with the government’s actions in a war, we don’t blame it on the soldiers. Vietnam was blamed on basically the soldiers because we were the easiest people to find and blame it on. As a result, and I think it started with the hostages coming back, people started redirecting their anger at maybe where it belonged. With the government or with policies or whatever. To the point in the Gulf War there were people that were openly opposed to our involvement in the Gulf War. There was no one who failed to support our service people over there. Everyone was supportive of the soldiers. I think that’s the progression out of Vietnam into today.

SM: How important do you think President Reagan was in that transition? Of course, he started to talk about these issues as well. Do you remember any of that?

Being proud of America’s service.

GC: Actually Jimmy Carter started some of that I think. I think Regan was the part of the moving proud of America, proud of our service people. Yeah, I think he probably had a lot to do with it. Regan could convince anyone of anything. That was his strong point.

SM: What would you say is the makeup in terms of percentages of the VFW post that you joined? In terms of WWII veterans and Vietnam War veterans, earlier in the years that you participated?

GC: I really don’t know. First of all, probably only gone to a half dozen meetings. I know the current commander of the VFW post, because I coached Pop Warner football with him is a Vietnam Veteran, a former Ranger. I don’t know what the
make-up though of the whole post is. The few meetings I go to seem to be attended more
by the WWII and Korean Vets than the Vietnam vets.

SM: As you went through that experience joining the VFW and being a member
of the police community and what not, did you encounter a lot of Vietnam Veterans that
you could form friendships with and talk about your experiences?

GC: There’s not a lot of Vietnam Veterans from the town I came from. Because
I joined the post with my father, he wanted me to join. I didn’t join the post of the town
that I lived in. There’s probably more Vietnam Vets in Bridgewater than there are in
Bernardsville. Every once in a while I bump into someone I went to high school with and
a couple of them are Vietnam Vets.

SM: A couple quick questions about your tour as a drill sergeant. How much had
changed, from the time, of course you were in basic training to the time you were a drill
sergeant in basic training?

GC: They were much more; they were a kinder, gentler Army. The one thing I
remember most is if a parent wanted access to their child, they got access to their child,
if their child claimed to be mistreated or whatever. When I went through if my parents
had wanted to see me in basic training they wouldn’t have been able to find me. A lot of
times during the training we would have to pull a trainee out of what he was doing, go
over and meet with his parents who were down to see him. That was the only other thing.
I’m trying to think we’ve put through a bunch of Chaplains through and abbreviated a
basic training course so they could have a feel for it. It was like a two-week modified
basic training. Mostly we taught them how to swear (laugh), taught them all the dirty
Jody cadences. Had a lot of attempted suicides. They were all people trying to get out of
the Army, I think through that. A lot of people that would take an overdose of pills, but
make sure that someone came down to tell you. They’d do an overt act. To the point I
remember the company commander telling them that if you’re going to do a suicide
climb up to the third story of the barracks and do a swan dive. I get any of these
halfhearted attempts, I’ll court-martial you. I remember one night I had a cleaning detail
at battalion headquarters. I’m supervising while they’re cleaning it up. One guy comes
running out and said that a private in the back had drank cleaning fluid. So, I grabbed the
cleaning fluid, I grabbed the trooper, I throw him in my own car and I drive him over to
the hospital. Take him into the emergency room; give the doctors the cleaning fluid and
all that stuff, they came out about five minutes later. They said yeah, he drank cleaning
fluid all right, it was liquid soap. They said he’ll be all right, but he’s going to shit for a
week.

SM: About how many suicide attempts were there would you estimate?
GC: At least one a cycle. None of them were successful. They were all a cry for
attention. Except that I don’t even think they were crying for attention. I think they were
looking to get discharged.

SM: When you say, one a cycle, do you mean one per platoon? Or one for your
platoon per cycle per group that you had to go through?

GC: One per company. Not per platoon.

SM: One per company?

GC: Yeah.

SM: Per class that went through.

GC: Right.

SM: One per company per class? I remember you saying that there was one in
your platoon that tried to commit suicide? Or was that somebody else I spoke with?

GC: No, that was right.

SM: Maybe it wasn’t so much higher?

GC: Maybe the reason I though that it was so more is that was one and now I’m
doing one a cycle. I can remember more incidences. Maybe per capita nothing to had
changed.

SM: Again, none of them were successful?

GC: No.

SM: How about incidents where trainees just lost it, got out of control, maybe
tried to get in a fight with an instructor? Anything crazy like that?

GC: One time, one guy came at me with the butt of a rifle. Basically what he did
was he swung it like a baseball bat, which was easy enough to block. I knocked him on
his ass, then got him up. I never reported him or anything but I made him practice the
right way to do it. I probably brought it on myself. I’d been riding him a little hard and I
think he just lost it. I think I realized that I was probably was as wrong as he was.
SM: Were there ever incidents in your company where an instructor did go too far? That you remember?

GC: No. The one thing I can remember Sergeant Jett. Sergeant Jett had a unique demonstration; he had no feeling in several of his fingers. Basically, he said it was a result of some one that had screwed up and dropped a short round or something. He had some nerve damage. Anyway, he had no feeling in some of his fingers. He used to get on trainees once in a while for not doing their job right. His common lecture was you screw up you’re going to get someone hurt and with that he’d pull out a B.I.C. lighter and he’d hold his hand over it. He’d get a terrible blister out of it and everything, but the demonstration was I can do that because people like you screwed up. It was a vivid demonstration you know? (laughs)

SM: Yeah, wow.

GC: No. I didn’t see anyone abusing trainees or anything else. We did have and it’s just a story. We had a company of Puerto Rican National Guard coming through. Our field first was Sergeant Carlos Quinones Cruz, whose first job in the Army was a muleskinner. The trainees always used to give us that no comprende. You give them an order they don’t comprende. We’d be running the over to Sergeant Quinones to translate. He finally called them all together one day, I guess he started out in Spanish switched to English and explained to them that they all spoke English. He knew by law they had to take English in school and he wasn’t going to tolerate any more of this no comprende. Sure enough when we finished the cycle there was never a language problem after that.

SM: Oh, wow. Had anything in the curriculum changed since you had gone through basic training? In terms of weapons training, familiarization for Vietnam, things like that?

GC: No. Basic training was the same. It was right down to; I don’t know how they do it now. It had all the stuff that you were supposed to learn. Then at the end you had Proficiency Park to test your knowledge. That hadn’t changed since I went in. Of course it was only maximum three years differences. It was all the same, just a little kinder and gentler.

SM: Were you told as instructors, as DIs that you weren’t supposed to curse at trainees anymore or was that still in fashion?
GC: We weren’t supposed to hit them. I don’t think cursing at them was disallowed.

SM: Was the kinder, gentler part just the fact that their parents could come visit them and that kind of stuff?

GC: Yeah.

SM: Did your commander make good on his promises to court martial people that tried to kill themselves if they didn’t do a sufficient job?

GC: No.

SM: Were there any trainees court-martialed or given Article 15s while you were there?

GC: Not from my platoon, but there might have been. I know we had some desertions. In fact, I remember having to go for whatever reason, they told me I had to do it I guess, because he had been from our company. I had to fly out to Ft. Collins, Colorado and pick someone up and bring him back. You know handcuff the whole nine yards. They give you a .45 like this guy is the most dangerous criminal in the world. Of course, back then there was no problem bringing weapons on airplanes. Brought him back and luck would have it we got back real late at night. No way I was going to try and get this guy checked into the stockade, so I brought him back to my barracks and handcuffed him to my bed. Made him sleep on the floor (laughs).

SM: Were there any other disciplinary issues that you had to deal with as a drill instructor that you recall?

GC: Not really, usually yelling.

SM: Front leaning rest.

GC: Yeah. That type of stuff. Then we got toward the end of my tour and I didn’t have a real good attitude. I’d come out in the morning; I’d pick someone out and ask them how many days I had left. If he didn’t know the number of days he got push ups.

SM: Did you have to go through DI school, before you actually became a DI?

GC: No. I actually washed out of a DI school. I was there, I was a sergeant. I learned drill-instructing OJT, like I learned everything else in the Army. They sent me to
go to drill instructor school, which was supposed to be voluntary. I just had a case of the 
attitude and I wouldn’t play along I eventually got bounced out on demerits.
SM: How would they issue demerits?
GC: You’d have an inspection in the morning. Invariably my boots would never 
be spit shined, they’d only be brush shined. Ropes on your uniform, that type of stuff. I 
just didn’t care.
SM: At this point did you know you were not going to make the military a 
career?
GC: Yeah.
SM: What were your aspirations at that point?
GC: Going in I had wanted to go with the airlines and everything. Obviously the 
color vision problem.
SM: When you were getting ready to leave the military what were you 
aspirations?
GC: I knew I was going to go to work for Bell Telephone because they had 
Project Transition. They had civilian employers coming out looking for, giving you the 
tests and everything else and offering you employment. My aspiration, come out and get 
a job. Which I did. I had a job with Bell telephone for a while. Later with Prudential 
Insurance. Then I got a job at the police department. I liked that one.
SM: The police department?
GC: Yeah. I used my GI bill, went out and got a Bachelor’s degree, having 
flunked out of college on the other side of the war. Got my Bachelor’s, got my Master’s.
SM: Criminal justice?
GC: Actually the Master’s is in education. The Bachelor’s is in Criminal Justice, 
like all cops.
SM: After the war, or more appropriately after you got back to the United States 
and after you finished your tour in the service, a lot of significant things occurred. Well, 
first when you were still a DI I suppose, when you were still a drill sergeant you had the 
TET Offensive in ’68. Do you remember when that happened? Do you remember what 
you heard about it? What you thought about it? What did you think basically over the
years? You know from '68, '69, '70 as things started to unfold, we started pulling out, what was going through your mind as a Veteran?

GC: The TET Offensive, when I first heard about it, the way the papers played it up was that it was a significant defeat for American soldiers and the ARVN. I was still in the Army. Their take on it which has come to be more accepted is that it wasn’t a defeat. It was quite frankly, a temporary set back, but a failure for the Vietcong and PAVN. I think that was probably the straw that broke the camels back on supporting the war in Vietnam. People were saying, why the hell are we here, it’s never going to end. If there is any success out of TET on the North Vietnamese part is it probably broke the spirit of the country to support the war.

SM: How did you feel? Here you were, you served in country?

GC: I don’t know. About supporting the war or about TET?

SM: About supporting the war. You said psychologically it seemed like this broke the will of the people of the United States. Were you among the people whose spirit was hit hard?

GC: I didn’t believe the American Army could be beat. I didn’t stop supporting our efforts. I don’t think I ever stopped supporting our efforts, I think I just go tired of it. To the point where I thought it was getting kind of useless having so many Americans get killed for what now, doesn’t seem to be such a good idea. I think I stopped believing in the Domino Theory. Probably cynically started thinking that all were doing is supporting the big industry in the United States. Dow Chemical and munitions manufacturers and everything else. This is just good business, but it’s a hell of a thing to lose lives over. I didn’t want, I think the word they used was, peace with honor. I think that was a big thing. I wanted to see it over, but I didn’t want it to be perceived as if we lost. Actually that’s how it was perceived, come to realize right now looking backwards. As far as I can tell the ARVN had the will to fight that war and possibly win it. Probably win it if we had supported them logistically. After Watergate and Ted Kennedy got his way. I didn’t realize it at the time. Looking back at it, you can see what happened. Now, I’m more embarrassed not that we lost the war. I’m embarrassed that our country went back on our word to the Vietnamese. I blame Ted Kennedy. Then again I’m from the East coast so I love blaming Ted Kennedy.
SM: What did you think of Nixon’s Vietnamization Program?
GC: To have them take over the war? I thought that was a good idea. Especially coming from an advisory capacity. That’s what our job was, was to try and help the Vietnamese fight their own war. In a lot of respects, what I did in Vietnam was what we were supposed to be doing in Vietnam. Johnson is the one that brought in the American troops and said step aside boys; we’ll show you how to do this. When we got the Vietnamese to the point where they could do it that was a good idea. I thought.

SM: What did you think about the Paris Peace Accords, of 1973? Do you remember when that happened?
GC: I remember being upset that they couldn’t decide on a damn thing. They couldn’t even decide on the shape of the table. I thought that was stupid. If you’re going to be there doing the Peace Accords. I guess I didn’t like all the politicking that the North did with that, basically jerking us around. I think they realized though that we as a country, wanted out. They jerked us around enough until we’d agree to just about anything, which apparently we did.

SM: What did you think in April of 1975 when Saigon fell?
GC: It was more an amazement. I didn’t have feeling at least at that time, that we had let the Vietnamese down. That we were the cause of it. It was a surprise because quite frankly I thought at the time Vietnamization was going pretty well. Then all of a sudden it went to hell in a hand basket. Certainly I remember the pictures of the helicopter on the Embassy roof. The reports of the fighting in Saigon and everything else. It was more surprise than anything. At that point, we weren’t really involved in it. I didn’t think of it, as the American Army didn’t get beat. We didn’t lose. Maybe we didn’t win, but it was just another story. A lot of the people at the Conference especially the one that did many tours with the Montagnards and certainly the ARVN groups are rather emotional about it. I wasn’t nearly as emotional about the fall of Vietnam as a lot of them. It was just something in history.

SM: When you returned to the United States did you see a lot of the coverage? Did you watch the news a lot?
GC: Oh, yeah.
SM: Did you see a lot of that combat footage that was always sent back? Was that a daily occurrence for you that you saw what was going on in Vietnam in the news?

GC: Sure. It was on the news every night at 7:00. What did you think about that how did you feel about seeing that constantly?

GC: You sort of get numb to it. As I recall, a lot of the reports were critical. I didn’t like that because I didn’t think that they were supportive. I thought that the coverage should be more like the newsreels in WWI, which were always upbeat and supportive. That’s just something new. God knows it’s probably even worse now, with the coverage that they have. Although I like the way Schwartzkopf snookered the press in the Persian Gulf War. I wouldn’t say I watched it every night because by then I was working with the police department and working a lot of night shifts. I didn’t watch it every night come to think of it. It was certainly on there with Dan Rather standing out there with his flak jacket on.

SM: What were the most important things you took away from your Vietnam experience?

GC: Probably the fact that I served. I don’t know if that answers your question right. The thing I am proudest of is the fact that I served. There was something right, wrong, and different that my country wanted me to do and I did it. So, if I’m phrasing it right, what I took away is the fact that I served and did my job.

SM: Pride.

GC: Okay, yes.

SM: In what ways did your Vietnam experience shape you? What ways did it mold you to who you are today? What important ways?

GC: I don’t know whether Vietnam did as much as just the Army did it. I think it just changes how you approach things. I think just dealing with the chickenshit that is the Army affects your outlook on life, Vietnam or not. Probably in more ways, I was probably lucky that I went to Vietnam and not to some place like Germany where they were real strict, because I probably would have gotten court marshaled if I had to be in the real Army. I had a pretty good Army career where people didn’t really bother me a lot.
SM: Was there anything in particular that helped you later on especially when you became a police officer?
GC: You know, you’d think so. No. I can’t think of anything except that maybe police academy was probably a little easier having gone through basic training and other experiences. Then again, 1971, when I went through the police academy, probably 95% of the class had been veterans, at least veterans, if not Vietnam veterans. So, everyone was in the same boat there.

SM: What would you say is the most valuable lesson we can take away from the Vietnam War? Individually, as a people, as a nation?
GC: I think we want to examine our reasons for why we’re going to do anything. I think when we got involved in Vietnam, probably for the wrong reasons. I think we want to have a better idea not only as a country, but as the people of a country, why we’re going to get involved in something. You know, the Persian Gulf War, I think is probably a good example of that. Even though we said we were doing it to liberate Kuwait, we were doing it for oil. As long as you know this, and this is sufficient reason then yeah. We said we were doing it to stop Communism and to help the people of Vietnam. I don’t think that was the real reason. I’m not sure what the real reason might have been. Probably, like anything else, probably has to do with trade. We don’t want a country to go Communist, because now we can’t trade with that country. I don’t know the real reasons. Maybe the real reasons were stopping Communism. I think we want to examine why we’re going to get into something and make a conscious decision that yes, we want to get involved or no we don’t for these reasons. I think some of the things that were done in, is it, Mogadishu?

SM: Somalia.
GC: Somalia. Weren’t thought out. We’re going in for humanitarian reasons but I don’t think they were thought out well enough about whether we really should be there or not. Lessons learned maybe we out to examine these things and not act emotionally all the time. That make sense?

SM: Anything else you’d like to talk about today?
GC: No. Except maybe directions, and I think I got those.
SM: O.K. Well, I’ll go ahead and conclude this. Thank you very much. This
will end the interview with Gary Cummings.