Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m conducting an oral history
interview with Mr. Gary Blinn. Today is June 24, 2003. It’s approximately 8:40 am
Central Standard Time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas in the Special Collections Library
Interview Room on the campus of Texas Tech University and Mr. Blinn, where are you
located this morning?
Gary Blinn: I’m in Norfolk, Nebraska.
RV: Norfolk, Nebraska. Very good. Sir, let’s start with some basic biographical
information on yourself. Could you tell me where and when you were born and a little bit
about your childhood and growing up?
GB: I was born in Valentine, Nebraska not far from the Rosebud Reservation and
I grew up as a cowboy as a kid, which was in retrospect, fairly interesting in terms of
work in Vietnam.
RV: So when you say you grew up as a cowboy, what do you mean by that?
GB: Well, we actually lived on a working ranch. I was the only kid in my grade in
a one-room schoolhouse.
RV: Oh, wow.
GB: And there was nothing to do but to work with the animals and the hay field.
RV: Okay. What were your typical duties on the farm? What did you do?
GB: We had Black Angus cattle and raised them. We had a few horses and mostly
though, for kids, it’s the low-tech things like mowing and raking in the hay fields and just
taking care and tidying up on the ranch.
RV: How many siblings did you have?
GB: I had only one sister and she was seven years younger.

RV: Okay. Did she work with you as well when she was old enough?

GB: A little bit but I was sort of the big brother and so in reality, no, I was the one who did most of the work.

RV: Well, tell me about your schooling. You said you were the only one in your grade in a one-room schoolhouse.

GB: Isn’t that something.

RV: That’s incredible.

GB: It was a [six kid] one-room schoolhouse. We had a lovely teacher named Flo Conners. We had twins in one grade and no one in one grade. And consequently, she just simply didn’t have time for us and so she left bookshelves out and was very encouraging. And the predictable result then was we got a very uneven education. A young man will pick up science and math books but skip spelling books.

RV: Right. So you were encouraged to do a lot of reading by this instructor.

GB: Absolutely. That’s about the only thing you can do on a ranch. As a matter of fact, ours had no real electricity. We had a wind charger which is like a big battery that would run a very small light bulb in the evenings and we had no running water.

RV: Wow, okay. Did the ranch ever get running water at some point and electricity?

GB: Yeah. Later it did. They had something called REA and they had real electricity then just about the time I left.

RV: Right, the Rural Electrification Act. Very good. What are your memories of post World War II America? You were born in ’44 and you go through kind of the resurgence of the United States and the boom into the ‘50s. How can you describe that time?

GB: You know, as a young person, I’m shocked sometimes as I look at the pictures of where we lived after we lived in the ranch, you know, in tiny little houses and I had a caring mother and a caring father, but we were excruciatingly poor when I look at the pictures. I’m always a little bit amazed and yet, of course, as a child, you don’t pay much attention to that.

RV: Did you realize how poor you were as a child?
GB: I don’t think so. I always had friends and most of my friends were about the same economic status as I was. It wasn’t until we moved to a city that I realized how ignorant I was. The very first morning they had singing and the kids knew Do Re Mi and I didn’t even know notes had names. In country school, we just stood up and sang the “Star Spangled Banner”.

RV: When did you move to the city?

GB: I moved to the city at about junior high.

RV: Junior high school.

GB: Yeah. Just finishing sixth grade.

RV: Which city did you move to?

GB: We moved to Norfolk, Nebraska.

RV: Okay. How large is that city?

GB: It’s twenty-two thousand people.

RV: So that was a fairly big change for you and your family?

GB: Yeah. I should be careful. There’s twenty-two thousand now. It was probably smaller then.

RV: What was the transition like for you? How did you do?

GB: Coming from a ranch was a bit odd and you felt socially inept around other kids. But again though, I don’t think that economically I felt that deprived. There were a few kids that we knew had a lot of money but there were also quite a few that didn’t. There were many kids that lived in houses much like mine.

RV: Did your father leave the ranching business and transfer to some other kind of business?

GB: Yeah. He had just been on the ranch. It was my mother’s father’s ranch. My father had a chance to buy a wholesale beer distributorship. So we moved up here. There were actually a few minor moves in between, but this was really the big one.

RV: Okay. Describe to me your junior high and high school experiences. What was that like?

GB: Junior high, I was lucky because all of the sudden I had a couple of teachers who realized that apparently I was a better student than I thought I was and encouraged me strongly in math and science and I just blossomed. I never did learn how to spell.
Maybe that accounts for why I became an engineer in the end. But it was nice to have encouraging teachers and really began to feel that maybe you weren't just struggling at the bottom of the class, but you could be up at the top where before my grades were something of a see-saw.

RV: In the math and sciences, you took to that and the other stuff you had trouble with?

GB: Yeah. It wasn’t really that I was inept, it was really just that I hadn’t practiced them for so long. In country school, for some reason and perhaps just the oversight on the part of our teacher, we didn’t do writing exercises and reading. We didn’t do writing and spelling, I should say. We did a lot of reading.

RV: Okay. So, your favorite subjects, math and science.

GB: Yeah. And one of the nice things about Norfolk was they had a chapter of the Civil Air Patrol and my father had been with General Patton start to finish in World War II.

RV: Really?

GB: Yeah. And he was just an enlisted guy but the war was always part of our family and he still had his fatigue jacket and things like that.

RV: Tell me about that. How much of an influence was his service in the 3rd Army with Patton in World War II on you?

GB: He had real admiration for Patton. I think I began to understand just how important friendships are because he had—I mentioned in my book, that he talked of Renner and Mother Saltsgiver and others who were in his tank almost with the reverence of a little boy, just really deep caring. A couple of times when I was younger, we went on road trips up to Minnesota and other places just to visit Dad’s war buddies.

RV: Was there anybody else besides your father that served in the military?

GB: Oh, yeah. My uncle had been captured at the Battle of the Bulge and he was a POW for quite a while, not quite a while I guess. That was really toward the end. But it seemed like quite a while, I guess, to my aunt. As a little kid you don’t fully understand. I was born in ’44. So I knew he’d been a POW. My two other uncles too, were in the Air Force. One was in a bomber that crashed and so he was pretty beaten up. And my uncle on my mother’s side was a Naval enlisted guy. He had pictures that he brought back from
the Pacific, the old funny eight millimeter movies and slides and things, you know, of Kamikaze hits to his carrier and things like that.

RV: So you saw all this as a kid and heard these stories as a kid.

GB: Exactly.

RV: How much of an influence was it then for you? You know, you go actually to the Naval Academy? How much of an influence, as you got older, was this upon your decision to go into the service?

GB: I think it was a big influence. I joke in my book that at one point my dad said more than once, my dad said, ‘Gary, you can be anything you want. Just promise me you never go armored.’ It made me of course bite my tongue when it was time for me to raise my son as far as giving him advice. But when I was very young, I shattered my left elbow and it was repaired by an Army bone surgeon. For some reason, I had both of those things. I had a keen interest in medicine and a keen interest in the military, but especially the Army.

RV: In high school, did you continue with the math and sciences inclination?

GB: Absolutely. I continued with the math and science, continued to be interested in Civil Air Patrol. Getting stick time when you're only a thirteen or fourteen year old in a C-119, we flew out to Lowery Air Force Base, did the summer things that Civil Air Patrol kids do. And we had a very active chapter with an old bomber pilot was the head of it. And a young man who had flown a strange aircraft called a Scorpion. And they were based out of Iceland so we also had an early jet jock as two of our instructors.

RV: So you did quite a bit of flying then.

GB: Yeah. As a matter of fact, I failed to mention my grandfather had a Piper Cub and on the prairie it’s not unusual for a lot of the ranchers to have aircraft and to fly back and forth. So, yeah, I was around airplanes from the time I was a little guy.

RV: From your experience in the Civil Air Patrol, were you leaning towards the Air Force or something else?

GB: I thought the Air Force was a lot of fun but I really had much greater respect for West Point than I ever did for the Air Force Academy. And I think its mostly just because in those days it was history and tradition and the Air Force Academy was just
being built at that time so it was really more ignorance or the fact that it was new more
than it really was a strong bias.

RV: Were you into sports in high school?

GB: I was kind of a little guy and I was slow so I wasn’t very good at basketball,
but we used to play intramural hockey. I was a great swimmer, sort of a natural at
swimming and did running. I used to play football when I was in junior high and early
high school. But then as you can imagine out here in Nebraska, when the big farm kids
come, you know, you're overweighed by hundred pounds or more (laughs).

RV: Yes, sir. So what led you to the Naval Academy? Tell, me about your high
school experience and your decision to go.

GB: I had pretty much decided that I wanted to study medicine and I was going
back to my grandfather’s ranch working every single summer in the hay fields. So I’d
spend the whole summer out driving a tractor out in the blazing sun in massive hay fields
and raking. One year I came back and a friend of mine said, ‘How would you like to be
an orderly for the National Guard?’ I said, ‘Gosh, tell me more. He said, ‘Well, believe it
or not, the National Guard takes one young man up to Fort Ripley, Minnesota every
summer and all you do is just odds and ends. You know, you shine shoes, run errands,
and the butter bar lieutenants pay you five dollars a week and the first lieus pay you ten
and the captain pays you fifteen a week and on up the scale.’ But he said, ‘You know, at
the end of the summer you’ve made a decent amount of money.’ I said, ‘Gosh, that
sounds a lot more interesting than being in the hay field.’ So I went Fort Ripley.

RV: What year, what summer was this?

GB: Probably, I would guess 1960 or ’61. The Red Bull division from Nebraska
was just nice guys but mostly farm kids. It was just a ground pounder group. But I just
had a grand time out in the woods and lots of mosquitoes and I could get most of my
work done by noon. So then I’d go off on patrol with these guys and learn about setting
up ambushes and all that. They thought I was just, very often they’d say, ‘When did you
join?’ I’d say, ‘Oh, no. I’m just here for the summer. I’m just doing this for fun.’ And of
course, that brought rolls of laughter because they couldn’t believe anybody would be out
in the woods for the fun.

RV: Right. How did your parents feel about this?
GB: My dad was pretty open-minded. He had a small beer company. It’s pretty ‘inappropriate’ I guess is the best word for young people to work in a beer company besides washing trucks and a few things like that so he didn’t mind. The officers and the enlisted guys just treated me great at Fort Ripley. A year later when I put in an application to West Point, we had a U.S. Senator, kind of a heavy fellow named Carl Curtis. I went and introduced myself to Mr. Curtis at a little function and I said, ‘Senator, I’m here to ask for an appointment to West Point.’ And he said, ‘Why do you want to go to West Point?’ I said, ‘Well, because I like Army life, sir.’ And he looked at me and said, ‘How would you know?’ I said, ‘Well, just ask me. You want to know how to field strip an M-1 or how to set up a BAR or how to conduct small [squad] tactics?’ I said, ‘I can tell you.’ He looked at me for a second. He said, ‘You really know that?’ I said, ‘Yes, sir. I’ve practiced with an 81 millimeter mortar and know the whole thing.’ He just turned to his aid and he said, ‘Take down this young man’s name.’ And it was pretty informal in those days. And of all things, we took an exam to become postmaster instead of the SAT or ACTs and believe it or not, I scored, I don’t know, second or third highest. So I didn’t get my first choice. I got my second choice, which was the Naval Academy.

RV: What were your grades like in high school?

GB: Pretty much all As.

RV: So your second choice was the Naval Academy.

GB: Yeah.

RV: How did you feel when you found out that this is where you’d be going to Annapolis versus to West Point?

GB: You know, I’d already been accepted to pre-med.

RV: Pre-med where?

GB: At Creighton University in Omaha.

RV: Okay, and that’s what you had said you wanted to do, to go into medicine?

GB: Well, yeah. It intrigued me. But one of the things that I left out was that my family life was just a bit stormy between my mom and dad. They were divorced and I wound up living with my dad at about this time. And you know when a young man is fifteen or sixteen years old, just independence becomes so vitally important. Because of that I thought, ‘Well, I could go to med school, but I’d be dependent on my father for
money for the next seven years or so. Alternatively, I could go to Annapolis and be
totally free.’ That was really the tipping point.

RV: That sounds like a very mature decision to make at that age.

GB: I suppose so. When I got to Annapolis, I was almost surprised with the plebe
year program being so juvenile. And in our first summer at Annapolis, we had a—

RV: This is 1962?

GB: Yes. We had a speech by Admiral Rickover. And Admiral Rickover said,
‘You will leave this institution less mature than when you came in.’ And there were
guffaws and four years later I really believed that. The plebe system, the hazing, the
inability to make real decisions made it a cat-and-mouse game of abiding by the rules and
then trying to figure out how to break them as if we were in a grade school boarding
school. So I always regretted that it wasn’t a little more like the Naval War College, a
little more thoughtful and reflective. So, yeah. I felt like I was probably, because I had
been from a divorced family and my father was a workaholic, I always cooked supper
myself and always worked, went to school, and [thus I] found some of the things a little
bit difficult at the Naval Academy because I was more mature.

RV: Describe your first year at the Naval Academy. What was it like for you?

GB: The system itself I think was fatally flawed. I’m encouraged that they’re
making some changes now. I still question whether we need a Service academy. I think
they’d do better as something like a mini war college for people who had gone to college,
gotten their degree and then come back when they're O-3s or so. But that’s just my
opinion. But I was in the 20th Company with a fellow named Major Love. He was just a
Greek god. He was the closest thing to Achilles you could imagine. I think other than my
family, Major Love was my first real mentor. He truly is a personal friend still. He’s fit,
in good shape, living out in California. And I almost get tears in my eyes thinking of him
as a father figure, as an example.

RV: So this was a very powerful influence upon you when you first arrived and
grew through the plebe system?

GB: Almost too much because you’ll probably ask next, ‘Well, if you were
interested in the Army and came out of the Naval Academy, why didn’t you go Marine
Corps?’ And I honestly didn’t even feel I was up to the standards of being tough enough to be a Marine.

RV: Really? Why?

GB: I’m sure I was. I’m sure I was good enough to be a Marine, but I never felt that way.

RV: You thought at the time you weren't good enough for the Marine Corps, but looking back, you think you probably were?

GB: Absolutely.

RV: Do you regret the decision to not go to the Corps?

GB: You know, I’m not sure, Richard. I still believe they're the best, but I think if I regretted anything, it’s that I didn’t fight harder to go to West Point. I think I could have been a good Airborne officer. The Navy was fun. It was interesting but I never had the same feeling as I think I did West Point and Airborne.

RV: So you still have a love for West Point with you even today.

GB: It is impressive. I really think in terms of there being only two Service academies, West Point and Annapolis. But as far as professionalism, I still have higher respect for West Point than my own school.

RV: Is that reflective of your experience at the Naval Academy, of what happened?

GB: Yes it is.

RV: Looking back at those four years at the Academy, what comes to your mind’s eye? What do you think and what do you feel most about that time?

GB: I think most about that time of the camaraderie of the fellows in my company. And they were a very diverse group. We had one young man, plebe summer in my room, who had never shined his shoes. His maid had always done it. He was from Scarsdale, New York. Then I also had an orphan from Sun Valley, Idaho in my group. And the third person was really strange one. He was sort of a hippie before his time, a musician. And when asked, ‘who is Admiral Mintover, Admiral Mintom [should be Admiral Kirkpatrick], Tom said, ‘Why, he are the cat what runs this place.’ (laughs) And at that point, I thought, ‘Well, I’m certainly more professional than at least a couple of these guys so I’m probably going to make it through the Service academy.’ But the irony
is it was the orphan and I who were the two that left the Navy and the one who’d never
shined his shoes made it a career and so did my friend from Tennessee who said, ‘He are
the cat what runs this place.’

RV: (laughs) Interesting. What were the academics like there at the Academy for
you?

GB: They were good but they were very structured. And as you know,
engineering in those days was the required curriculum. And consequently, I think I had
the sense of being at one of the finest schools in the nation and having some of the best
teachers. At the same time, there weren't many truly thought provoking classes. There
were more ‘memorize this and learn how this venturi tube or Bernoulli principle works,’
or, ‘here’s an air foil, or here’s a hydrofoil.’ So, I think I got a good solid math and
science background, but it wasn’t an intellectual approach that’s more platonic, where
you realize different people can have different opinions and I think that’s an important
part of the curriculum, that it should be.

RV: What about history and particularly military history? Was that emphasized
there at the Academy?

GB: Absolutely. My book—well, no. I’m sorry. I have to be careful. The real
professional issues weren't emphasized as much as they are at West Point. Annapolis is—
if I were to draw a spectrum I’d say West Point is a true trade school and Air Force is a
true college and Navy is someplace in the middle. But I had the feeling that at Navy, we
didn’t really learn the practical things. We didn’t learn about as much as I would have
expected about the forthcoming war and a lot of it was in laboratories doing experiments
but very little of it was in the real world. I did however, because I was an honors student,
take a class called Philosophy of War from a professor named Professor Russell and he
was just a—in Japan they’d call him a ‘treasure.’ An instructor who just had impish little
eyes and got on the floor and would lay out the great battles of Caesar and Alexander. I
pay homage to him several times in my book, Confession to a Deaf God.

RV: How much did that lack of focus on what you were just speaking of affect
you after you got out of the Academy? How much were you hurt by them not including
those kinds of things in the curriculum?
GB: I think quite a bit. Now, I went to flight school first and because my eyes were bad, they washed me out. Then, I went to a destroyer. I think if I would have [gone] straight to flight school, I would have—well, I did have an advantage in terms of just aerodynamics and things like that. But, the advantage of the Naval Academy over colleges is, I think, microscopic when one really becomes an O-1 so I wonder whether it’s worth the cost. Now, having gotten into Vietnam, there was absolutely nothing that I learned at the Academy that was of value. And I saw a number of things that were violated. You know, a number of things that Caesar or Alexander or others would have said were totally improper.

RV: Do you want to discuss those now? What kind of things were lacking?

GB: Well, I think Alexander is probably my favorite because he’s the one who is a conqueror. And Alexander, as you know, would go through a village and say, ‘What’s the worst thing here?’ And the people would say, ‘The taxes.’ And he’d say, ‘Alright, bring out the tax collector.’” And he’d kill him and then he’d start over again and say, ‘Alright, now, we do have to collect taxes, but we’ll do it under my tax person and we’ll do it appropriately.’ So Alexander really understood what winning the hearts and minds were. And it’s inconceivable today, but his army of occupation as it moved East grew because people volunteered to join Alexander’s army rather than leave a trail of destruction and having people hate him. I felt that our reach out programs and winning the hearts and minds and things like that really weren't very well understood. There was also the whole difference of being a person who occupies space but the moment they leave the space, it goes back into enemy hands. But the parallel with Hannibal was something one couldn’t overlook.

RV: Did you ever talk about that with your superiors in Vietnam?

GB: In my book I think you’ll see that the very first superior was an absolutely worthless alcoholic and I had to disguise his name and a few other things. I need to be careful on this but I was really shocked at the lack of leadership and so oddly enough, in Coastal Division 13, they tried to keep the CO out of the base and away wherever he would be and the number two and number three guy actually ran it. That was the first point at which I realized that there are three different aspects of this war. One is winning it and then others just want to serve their time and get back. And there weren't very many
people who were really interested in winning it. And if we focused on winning it, then the
next question was, ‘Well, we really do have to assume that these soft “touchy feely”
things are important?’ We have to somehow make these people feel that capitalism
makes sense; that Communism probably isn’t best for them. But in fact, there was no
evidence of that, that capitalism works very well in a more developed country, but for
farmers in the rice paddy, they didn’t have enough money that it mattered one way or the
other. I really regretted that we didn’t have more of a political savvy about it all.

RV: Tell me what you understood in 1962 when you went into the Academy and
then in ’62, ’63, ’64 before you graduated. What did you know of American experiences
in Southeast Asia and why the United States was involved there?

GB: Practically nothing. You would think that Street Without Joy by Fall and
books like that would be required reading at places like the Naval Academy and it was
anything but that. As a matter of fact, I had to special order Chairman Mao’s Little Red
Book and Marx’s Das Capital because they weren't available.

RV: Really?

GB: Yeah.

RV: Did your professors know that you were ordering these books? Was this
discouraged?

GB: Yeah. I ordered a Russian book or a Russian magazine called Red Star or
something and they sent me a note saying that no, it wouldn’t be available to me. The
Navy did.

RV: What made you so aware of wanting to study the ‘enemy’ at such a young
age?

GB: That’s just absolutely the first fundamental is to ‘know your enemy.’ It was
shocking to me that we talked about the great threat of Soviet Russia and Khrushchev I
think was the one face to face with Kennedy at the time. And yet at the same time, there
wasn’t a single course at the Naval Academy that discussed such a thing in any depth. I
wanted to know. What did Castro feel and what did Che Guevarra write and so on?

RV: So you had to explore on your own and get these answers on your own.
GB: Absolutely. And I guess now, as we’re talking, I realize, you know, my bent was probably toward more of the political officer side, the psy war part to me was given lip service but in reality, we really were terribly inept at it.

RV: Tell me when you graduated in 1966. We have our troops over there really for the first time in mass. What were your feelings about the war at that point?

GB: During the Naval Academy when the Tonkin Gulf incident happened, we were at flight school. We were just down in Pensacola and so we cheered and felt that the U.S. was almighty. I don’t think any of us really thought about the battering that the French had already taken or any of the other historical aspects of the little country of Tonkin or how it related to China. During the course of Vietnam, there was some concern that maybe the war would be over before we graduated and so some of us asked if there would be a way for us to graduate early. We didn’t really care about the bachelor’s degree. We just wanted to get a commission and get over to the war before it ended.

RV: Was that you? Did you feel that way?

GB: I really did. I was saddened that a number of people at the Naval Academy weren’t. They were the ones who wanted to go in the antisubmarine warfare aircraft and things like that. I thought the purpose of the Academy was to develop warriors and therefore one hundred percent of the Academy would want to go. But having read The Long Gray Line [By Atkinson] I realized West Point was much the same. That there was some people [who wanted to sit in] a missile silo. I guess that also, Richard, as you would say, partly a mark of maturity, too. As guys get a little more thoughtful and fall in love and other things, why, maybe it’s to be expected.

RV: Yes, sir. So, in August ’64, you guys were, ‘Okay, yeah. We’re gung ho now. We’re going to this.’ And there was the thought amongst your friends there that the war would even be over with before you got out.

GB: Yes, sir.

RV: That’s incredible. So that’s ’66 when you graduate. How did it change from ’64 to ’66? What were your feelings upon graduation of what was happening in Vietnam?

GB: Well, I think upon graduation the class was silent on the issue of who wanted to go and who didn’t. There were some who said they did but the ones who didn’t want to go were really just quietly saying, ‘Well, gee. I hope I get a destroyer in the
Mediterranean or something.’ For service selection, it’s based on class standing.

Obviously most of the guys who went Corps knew exactly what they’d be doing. Most of the guys who went Navy Air figured that they would be there but there were a few who went Navy Air expecting to be antisubmarine or something else.

RV: And you chose Navy Air, correct?

GB: Right.

RV: Okay. Tell me about that experience. You said you were washed out because of your eyesight. Did you not know this beforehand that your eyesight was not that good based on your flying with the Civil Air Patrol?

GB: I did. And I knew that—I wore glasses part of the time at the Academy and I was able to sort of barely, barely squeak by with a flight surgeon who winked a couple of times and I had already checked a couple of other people and got this particular flight surgeon that was a little easier. So, I got the front seat and when my annual physical came up, it wasn’t such a friendly flight surgeon again, and he said, ‘Son, you can't see worth a damn.’ I said, ‘Well, I know but I can fly. I’m number one in the class.’ And he said, ‘Not after today. So at that point they wanted to put me in the back seat as a radar intercept officer or bombardier navigator and I said, ‘Oh, hell. If I can't drive one, just give me anything over in the Tonkin Gulf in the South China Sea.’

RV: So you asked for it?

GB: Yeah. I asked for something back over in Vietnam and that’s when I got Operation SEA DRAGON, destroyers that were in gunfire against North Vietnam.

RV: Tell me about the transition.

GB: It was actually a very good one and our first skipper was a lovely guy named Captain Kent. Knowing I was from the Academy, he gave me two divisions. They had some young officers there out of OCS who had nothing. They were assistants to one division head and he made me in charge of both missiles and guns so I had two jobs.

RV: Where did you board the ship actually?

GB: I boarded it in the Philippines. It had just left Hawaii and had just gotten there.

RV: So you flew to the Philippines. Is that correct?

GB: Right.
RV: Tell me first, you sound, looking back at this, you sound like you’re pretty gung ho about going into war. Had you thought about that fact that you were actually going into a war zone?

GB: Absolutely. This is going to be a predictable metaphor, but I felt almost like a surgeon who’s been trained to do surgery. I’m sure that if you ask them, they’d say, ‘No, I hope people don’t get sick.’ But deep down, that’s the only way to practice the craft. So, I thought, ‘Well, gosh, you know, I’ve been interested in fighting since I was a little kid. This is a chance and maybe the only chance you have in your lifetime.’ So, no. I really felt like we should be professionals and we were trained to do this so therefore it’d be a shame not to do it.

RV: Tell me what your family thought about you going over to Vietnam.

GB: My mother, by this point, was in fairly poor health and she was drinking heavily and so I’m not sure how she felt at all. In the case of my dad, there was just this somber sadness I think that would be fairly predictable, Richard, of a father who’s been in combat and then sees his son do the same because it’s also difficult to translate.

RV: Right. When you flew out, where did you fly from, the West Coast I take it?

GB: Yeah. I flew from San Francisco and that was one of my favorite chapters in the book where I talk about the transition of leaving. I just laid around a girl’s apartment and read newspapers and slept. And you would think in the last couple of days before you left for Vietnam you would be out partying and doing things and I just didn’t get into it.

RV: Why not?

GB: I’m not really sure. I think I almost felt like I was going on to something more important and going off to hear Janice Joplin or something was trivial. And in fact, as you’ve heard so many times before, after Vietnam life really was a footnote. Many of our normal experiences really do seem trivial compared to that.

RV: So tell me about the flight over to the Philippines.

GB: That’s a good chapter in my book. [At this point, G.B. proceeds to talk about his second tour of duty inbound flight] As we’re boarding, one of the old salts turned to one of my younger guys and said, ‘Got your ticket?’ And he frantically slapped around looking for it and everybody started laughing. It was a good flight but as we approached Saigon, the helicopters were working one particular section of Saigon with some rockets
and all of the sudden there’s this sobering thought that you look out this little window of,  
‘Well, this is just like the movies. My God, this is real war.’

RV: You were actually witnessing this as you flew into the country?

GB: Yeah. And then the second thought was, ‘Holy smokes! If this is Saigon and  
it’s supposed to be the safest place, and there’s a helicopter over there sending some  
rockets into this neighborhood, this isn’t a good sign of how it’s going to be out in the  
boondocks.’

RV: So tell me, when you landed in Saigon, what was it like?

GB: Well, that again is one of my more interesting chapters because of all the  
crazy things. They dropped us off and to get to our next flight, we had to walk past graves  
registration where all the cadavers were out and I said, ‘How stupid can you be?’ You’ve  
got brand new kids to country. They’re wondering what’s going on and the first thing  
they see is this cordwood of body bags out on the tarmac waiting for the next freedom  
flight to go back. So I think that was the most shocking. Eventually, we caught a little  
Caribou flight and go to down to Cat Lo, Vietnam in the middle of the night.

RV: What were your impressions of Vietnam the country, your first impressions?

GB: Oh, stunningly beautiful, great. You become a little more like an animal, of  
course, in combat, so your sense of smell is heightened. Your eyesight is keener. I read an  
interesting book by a travel writer who said, ‘Traveling is like falling in love because all  
you're defenses are down and all of your senses are up.’ Well, travel to a combat zone is  
sort of travel cubed. So it really is true that all of these things become much heightened in  
awareness.

RV: Let me ask you. When you get into Vietnam, did you understand what the  
purpose of the American military was in Vietnam? What was the United States trying to  
accomplish?

GB: That’s a great question. I could understand our having bases and our having  
occupied areas that were safe for the Vietnamese, but I really couldn’t understand  
whether we were making any progress with the Viets themselves being on our side.  
Obviously we had a few interpreters that were with us that were just great little guys but  
when you’d go into villages and see murals painted of ‘Die G.I.’ and aircraft being shot  
down and boats being sunk and people being strung up, you said, ‘This runs awfully
shallow. We don’t really have a commitment on these people but they're in the traces trying to do the same thing we are.’

RV: So did you understand the Domino Theory or the larger picture like that?

GB: We were taught the Domino Theory and I know that there was certainly a legitimate reason for it happening because of what had happened in East Europe. But in Asia, it wasn’t really clear to me how Red China or the others were going to effect one country after another. Mostly I was just saddened by their poverty, that these people as we talked high faluting economic theory, they just wanted their little rice bowl and their hooch to be left alone.

RV: Did you get that impression immediately or was that something that you came to over time?

GB: I don’t know. That’s a tough question because now looking back I have that feeling, but initially, I think I had sympathy for the Vietnamese. But in riverboats we really didn’t interact with as many villagers as you would think. We’d stop and every now and then do a medical program or something like that but our contact or just walking among the villagers, day and night was a lot less than the grunts and the ground pounders.

RV: Right. Overall, how would you rate the morale of the American troops and your comrades in arms there when you first arrived?

GB: I think the guys were upbeat and they were cohesive. One of the amazing things of course, about Swift Boats, Patrol Craft Fast is that they were manned and officered by some of the finest guys in the Navy. Almost everybody there, it was their second tour. And the people in our group, we had Tad McCall. His dad was governor of Oregon. We had John Kerry who was Harvard [Error: Actually Yale] and interested in running for Senate, which eventually he did. We had a number of guys from Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, the service academies and it was pretty unusual to find people who had come from schools that weren't really absolutely first rate. I was truly impressed with the quality of people.

RV: Lets talk about Operation SEA DRAGON before we get into your experience down in the Delta. Tell me about when this began and what your duties were and where you were and what you did. [The interview now returns to the first of the two tours of duty in-country.]
GB: I was gunnery and missile officer. As you can imagine, in those days, the
tartar missile was pretty crude and it was really intended to shoot down other ships or
aircraft so it wasn’t of any use against a land target. It couldn’t discriminate. So, in
theory, I was in charge of missiles. We just had a couple of missile shoots that were of
mixed success. So the real issue was the five inch 54 guns. They were wonderful
weapons except for the fact that they had a mysterious ability to blow up every now and
then and the Navy was unable to trace the cause of it. So, there was a bit of angst of my
gunners and everybody in the whole ship because these entire turrets would just blow up
unexpectedly. Later they traced the problem to defective ammunition where the primer
hadn’t been pushed in far enough. In my book I tell about that and that gave us a lot of
relief. But the war, the war was fascinating because we would go in against the shore
batteries and fire against them and they would fire against us so it was just like an old,
you know, gunfight at the O.K. Corral.

RV: Can you describe briefly for those who will be listening to this in the future
what SEA DRAGON’s purpose was and where you actually were?

GB: SEA DRAGON’s original purpose was to stop the interdiction of logistics
going from North Vietnam to South Vietnam and there were really two parts to it. One
was in the North and then the other was in the South. The northern part was supposed to
stop any ships coming in and out of Hanoi headed down south. Then the southern part
were to interdict any ships that had gone that far. In reality though, it worked so well that
the Viets started moving all of their supplies on the Ho Chi Minh trail deep inland to the
west and consequently SEA DRAGON segued into shooting up targets that were in the
first five miles of the sea coast of Vietnam. And on the seacoast there were a number of
fortified guns. Sometimes eight or nine of them would shoot at you at the same time. And
they were bunkered and on the shore so you can imagine that they were camouflaged,
hard to see, and bunkered. And we were out there like a little sitting duck. But it was just
grand fun. I mean, we’d fire and we’d see the explosions thirty or forty seconds later on
the ground and then we’d see muzzle flashes from the coast and know the time of flight,
again, was thirty or forty seconds before the flashes would start coming around us.

RV: Now, how can you describe it as fun? For folk listening to this in the future
and reading this in the future who have never been in combat and I often hear that, that
it’s exhilarating fun, it’s heart stopping excitement in combat. How can you describe it that way looking back at it?

GB: I think we’d all been to movies as kids and in my day it was cowboy movies or war movies were the most popular so your first reaction in a firefight is, ‘Gee, this is just like the movies.’ And then you realize, ‘My gosh, this is real.’ But the adrenaline is pumping so high and I don’t believe I have ever been afraid in a firefight but I’ve always been busy. So you are so incredibly busy doing things but at the same time, so incredibly acutely aware of what’s going on. And it was really kind of a boyish fair fight in this kind of almost an artillery duel between our ships, which was moving and shooting and theirs, which was stationary, hidden, and shooting back.

RV: Did you think about death?

GB: No, not really. I guess because I had not been particularly attached, there was a wonderful girl that I had left at the Academy and I told her I was just going back to Vietnam and probably would just volunteer for two or three tours back to back, that she wouldn’t see me again. So I didn’t really feel attached to my family or anything else.

RV: Why is that?

GB: I’m not really sure whether it was upbringing or being a cowboy and sort of a lonely guy to start with or what. But I’m sure it was much harder on the guys who were married or deeply in love or something else and usually you don’t think about getting killed.

RV: When did you actually join Operation SEA DRAGON?

GB: I’m not sure. It would have been some time about the summer of 1963. But I’m not certain that’s exactly the day. I’ll look it up in my cruise book.

RV: Right. And when you graduated from the Academy, you ceased on SEA DRAGON or did you continue?

GB: Well, no. When I graduated from the Academy, I went to flight school and I got SEA DRAGON by accident. I didn’t know about it. I just asked for any ship over in the Tonkin Gulf.

RV: So this is ’66.

GB: I’m sorry. What did I just say?

RV: You said ’63.

RV: No, no problem. And where exactly were you deployed off the coast?

GB: We worked north of the demilitarized zone all the way up to Haiphong and back again. And we just patrolled that area sometimes in the company of a cruiser and sometimes by ourselves.

RV: What was the name of the ship?

GB: The ship was the Benjamin Stoddert S-T-O-D-D-E-R-T. And she was a DDG, a guided missile destroyer number 22.

RV: How long were you actually on board the Stoddert?

GB: I think it would have been eight or nine months and then she got dinged up a little bit, nothing meaningful.

RV: I was going to ask that. Did you ever incur any damages from the batteries?

GB: Not terribly seriously, just shrapnel and a few dings here and there but not anything too meaningful. While I was there though, I had the chance to watch the Nasty boats on the radar and they penetrated some of the rivers in North Vietnam and made insertions and extractions of SEALs and things like that. So I was very impressed with them. I hadn’t seen the Swiftboat because they only operated in the South but I had heard of them. So when the ship was going back to Pearl Harbor, it was going to get refurbished and it would be in dry dock for about a year. While we were still en route, I volunteered to go back to small boats and asked if I could be skipper of a Nasty, which is the boats that went in the North. Instead, I got a Swiftboat. Again, second time here, I got my second choice, a Swiftboat.

RV: Tell me briefly about life on board the Stoddert. What was it like for those eight or nine months?

GB: We had a lovely captain as I mentioned, Captain Kint. The executive officer was a nice person and the weapons officer was Mr. Gunderson and he was also just a saint of a guy. So, even though I was just an ensign/JG, it was fun living in boy’s town. We had great shore leaves. We were in Sidney, Australia and Hong Kong and of course the Philippines a couple of times.

RV: Tell me what your opinion was of Lyndon Johnson.
GB: I think we were somewhat apolitical about it all. We were saddened that we weren't moving along faster and getting more done and at that point many of us were beginning to wonder if the war could be won. And I guess in retrospect, it's sad to see that there were people in Washington who already realized that the war couldn't be won that early.

RV: Now, you realized that at the time that there were people in Washington questioning it?

GB: Yeah. It was a bit odd because you know, the *Stars and Stripes* just gave upbeat news and so did Armed Forces radio. But of course, we all got *Time* and *Newsweek* and one guy even had *The Congressional Record*.

RV: Now, you said you guys were apolitical but yet you also said that you were starting to question whether we could actually win the war. So you were actually questioning the prosecution and progress of the war in '67 and '68.

GB: Yeah. Now, on SEA DRAGON it was a little trickier. But once I got into Swiftboats then you could really see how little was being done.

RV: Because you were in more contact with the population and actually had your feet there in the country in South Vietnam?

GB: Yes, sir. When you're on destroyer off North Vietnam, you can mark off targets destroyed. But you really, after six or eight months, just as many guns seemed to be shooting at you as were before. So you can say you got secondary explosions and did this and that but the harsh reality is the enemy is still snapping and biting just as hard as they did at the start.

RV: How different was it versus being on board the ship off the coast and not seeing your enemy and then being on the river and seeing your enemy, being able to have contact? How different of a war experience is that?

GB: That’s a great question. You really feel antiseptic and I’ve always wondered how pilots felt as well because obviously they did some pretty hairy chested stuff and took a lot of risks, but at the same time never really knew what Vietnam was like. I think we were all envious when we had a couple of people from our ship get off at Da Nang and do some joint work and reboard because they had been in country and had a sense of what was going on.
RV: So you guys never actually deboarded in Vietnam.

GB: No, never did.

RV: Sir, why don’t we take a break just for a moment?
Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Gary Blinn. Today is June 26, 2003. I am again in Lubbock, Texas in the Special Collections Library interview room on the campus of Texas Tech University. It’s about seven minutes after 3 pm Central Standard time and Mr. Blinn, let’s continue. Let’s transition to your time down in the Delta on the Swiftboats. Tell me how you actually received and obtained that assignment.

Gary Blinn: The U.S.S. Benjamin Stoddert was on her way back into dry dock and she was going to go through some fairly major repairs after that many months on the gun line and also it was just time for it. So, on the way back, I sent in my application and asked for Nasty boats, Patrol Craft Fast, first, or I’m sorry. They were called Nasty boats. Then, Swiftboats, Patrol Craft Fast was my second choice and I got my second choice.

RV: Can you tell me why you actually wanted that? You were out there off the coast on Operation SEA DRAGON and then you’re going to transfer to a totally different area and a different assignment. What made you want to do that?

GB: I think for a young guy who had just gotten sort of an adrenaline fix on North Vietnam and saw some of the war at a distance, I was eager to get back in country, see what it was like first hand and have—obviously for a young O-2, it’s a lot of fun to have command of your own boat as well.

RV: Yes, sir. So tell me what it was like down in the Delta. Where were you stationed and what was your base camp like?

GB: Our first post was Cat Lo and it’s not very far from the Mekong River mouth, one of the mouths of the Mekong and Cat Lo was basically just some small Quonset huts surrounded by about an eight or ten foot concrete fence and we had about ten boats stationed there and then we also had a LST that was based right at the tip of Vietnam and we used it for a mother ship and because it was a mother ship, the guys would be, about four different crews would be off on patrol down in those zones and four others would be aboard the LST for twenty-four hours and then boats would come in, rearm, refuel and go back out again with a fresh crew.
RV: You said your base camp was basically a walled compound. How many men were inside the compound?

GB: I suppose of the swift boats, there were about eight or ten crews and those are five people each. But we also had a small detachment for security as well. So, in general, though, I would guess there probably weren't more than two hundred people in that whole complex.

RV: Were you required to walk guard duty or was that someone else’s assignment?

GB: That was somebody else’s. We probably averaged pretty close to twenty-four hours on duty and then twenty-four hours off.

RV: Okay. Could you describe what a typical day was like for you?

GB: Sure. We would be assigned a section of the seacoast of South Vietnam and normally those sections of seacoast would have two or three river mouths coming into them and we would stop and search various junks to see if they had any contraband and then that took most of the time. Every now and then we’d get a special request from the Navy SEALs that they wanted an insertion or an extraction. So we’d be on duty with them. And the SEALs usually left one person on our boat because as you know, they very often didn’t actually speak on the radios in those days. They just keyed the mike and you could hear the quiet time. So they would very often use their own codes and they would have one of our SEALs on our boat and he would say, ‘ Okay, let’s go in and get them,’ and we’d know exactly where. We also then did psychological operations, going up and down the rivers asking for Chu Hoi, for people to turn themselves in. Then occasionally a MEDCAP kind of a program where we’d go in with a doctor or two and see what we could do for a little village.

RV: So some civil action type things.

GB: Yes, sir. And that was basically the extent of it. However, as I mentioned earlier, as coastal interdiction became less important both in SEA DRAGON and down in the South, then progressively we got more and more missions that just involved going up rivers and sort of looking for trouble. In my book I call it shit magnets, you know, where we’d call in ahead, make sure we had air cover or at least aircraft that could respond and
we’d just go up until we got shot at and at least that was one way to find where the bad
guys were. But looking back, it was a pretty crude and inefficient way to do it.

RV: Could you describe the actual Swiftboat for us? What did it look like? What
kind of armaments did it have and what was the crew?

GB: It was a sweet little boat. It was fifty feet long. It had two GMC V-12 diesel
engines so you had twin screws and the hull was aluminum. Now the PBR is thirty feet,
the Patrol Boat River and it’s made from fiberglass and actually has hydro jets. In our
case, we had real screws. We drew about another foot and a half of draft more than a
PBR but nonetheless, we were able to duke it out a little better because we had twin 50s
up in the gun tub that was right on top of the pilot house. We usually had a single .30
caliber in operation at the front and then at the back we had an 81 millimeter mortar with
a .50 caliber mounted above it. Then everybody carried a weapon. So it was pretty
common for the skipper and probably one other person to carry like an M-79 grenade
launcher.

RV: How many men were actually on the crew?

GB: We had the skipper and then we had a crew of five so you had an engineman
who manned the after gun. You had a quartermaster who was actually at the wheel most
of the time, a radioman who was in small arms and a gunner who was up in the gun tub
and a boson who also ran small arms and then the sixth crewmember under the skipper
was the Vietnam interpreter.

RV: And you were the skipper?

GB: Yes.

RV: Tell me about how you led the men and how you interacted with those guys
on that crew. You’re obviously doing very dangerous things in a very uncertain area of
the country. How did you form your leadership pattern?

GB: We had trained together as a tight little crew in Coronado, California and that
really helped because we knew each other well and we knew the boat inside and out and
Coronado was very thorough. Everybody was cross-trained so the enginemen knew how
to operate the radios somewhat and most of the exercises we did in Coronado were
remarkably realistic. Everybody who was an instructor had been previous Swiftboat
personnel in country. And when we got in country, we were already a pretty tight,
cohesive little group. Obviously, though, once you pull away from the dock, then we could strip off the normal uniform and most of the time we were in an olive drab t-shirt and really a swimming suit because you were wet all the time. So jungle rot on your toenails and things meant that you just really couldn’t wear shoes. And bare feet were a lot stickier on the deck than shoes anyway. So most of us just went in an OD t-shirt and a pair of swimming trunks and occasionally, if it was really a hot area, then we’d go ahead and put on a flak jacket but that was about it.

RV: What kind of weapon did you carry personally?

GB: I liked the M-79. That was my favorite. It was a sweet little thing and as you know, it shoots a golf ball sized grenade and it was really good for the elephant grass and for the areas that were hidden and since most of the rivers, are—when I talk about a river, these are really narrow, almost more like canals. Matter of fact, some were so narrow that we would go up them backwards so we could get out faster. So you’re talking a river about as wide as a normal street.

RV: Let me ask you about daytime and nighttime ops. Which did you prefer?

GB: Daytime was boring. Nighttime was exciting. The radar on the swiftboat worked remarkably well so I think I probably preferred nighttime. The thing I disliked the most were ambushes where there was a fairly bright moon and psychologically and again, this is in Confessions to a Deaf God but psychologically, you know that your mind is playing tricks on you because in a full moon night, you feel that you are totally visible but you still feel like you can't see. And obviously the other guy can see about as well as you can but when you look down at your hands or your weapons or your wristwatch, they seem to be illuminated almost by the moonlight, which is scary. When it’s pitch dark, then you assume neither of you can see. But the interim was always a little more frightening to me.

RV: How did you first experience combat on the boats?

GB: We took small arms fire usually from fairly deep elephant grass along the sides. So, it was often innocuous. You might be shot at before you even knew what was happening because the engines were fairly noisy. One of the problems with the GM engines was that they were noisy and then the exhaust made a flapping sound that was a metal thing over the exhaust. So we’d take fire there. We took a little fire once in a town
and that was an odd thing because you could hear the bullets going past you but at the same time you knew that since it was allegedly a friendly town there wasn’t much you could do.

RV: Was this when you were on foot or actually in the boat?

GB: On the boat and I should say in the harbor is a better way. Occasionally we would beach the boat and go on foot but we never got into a firefight doing that.

RV: Were you ever wounded?

GB: No. I was never wounded and brought the boat back just fine. Inkybite 97, our call sign was Inkybite and I had the 97 boat. Inkybite 97 was sunk about six weeks after I left country.

RV: Really? What happened?

GB: It was a rocket propelled grenade I believe and really sad because we loved that little boat. We took good care of it.

RV: Tell me your impressions of the enemy. What would you say, first of all general impressions and then perhaps strengths and weaknesses of the enemy?

GB: I think almost everybody would say without hesitation that Charlie was just a gutsy little guy. We were in admiration of his courage and when we would get a KIA and when you saw the little rice pouch and the few pieces of goods that he carried with him and a remarkably little amount of ammunition, it was just amazing. We had a sapper attack one night while the boats were parked and the little sapper who was an engineer who tries to—a sapper is a phrase used for people who were engineers who tried to blow up fortification things and these guys were trying to swim under water with baby nipples in their nose and you said, ‘Oh, my gosh.’ You know, to plant a limpet mine on a swiftboat. And we killed one one night with a concussion grenade. But in the end, Charlie managed to plant a couple of limpet mines on a tanker and sank a tanker right in the harbor. So, they were effective and it was always a puzzle when we got the prisoners, as you know. Your interpreter does his best but in the end it wasn’t unusual for us to turn them over to the Vietnamese and it was almost like we weren’t really sure what was going to happen to them in the hands of the Vietnamese but it was probably better not to think too deeply on that.
RV: Tell me about some of the operations you were in. You said you interdicted. How would you actually go about interdicting and stopping a junk?

GB: Okay, sure. A normal fisherman you can watch on the radar and he’ll have his little basket boat out and a couple of lights and he’ll just be stationary. But if you saw a boat zipping along the coast, you would approach him with the lights out and then suddenly illuminate him with a search light and shout, ‘dung lai,’ which is ‘stop’ in Vietnamese. On that command he would stop and as the little boat rocked alongside, you’d throw over a line so that one of the fishermen would hold it while one of your people jumped down into the boat. The boats had planking that went across the bottom, normally only eight inches wide and let’s say three feet long. And so you’d pick up a few of those, look underneath, check them with the flashlight and they’d show you a few fish and if they had nothing, why, it was not unusual for us to give them an orange or an apple or something and our Viet interpreter would thank them and wish them good fishing.

RV: What did you sense their attitude to be toward you? Were they aggressive, were they passive or were they indignant to be stopped?

GB: It really varied. I’d say probably passive was ninety-eight percent of the time and every now and then when you found ones that just looked a little too young or a little too hardy to be fisherman, they would be a little more surly and obviously we’d have to go deeper into them. Fishermen actually start from, gosh, from age three on those boats. So they almost have prehensile feet. Their little feet are almost as wide as they are long, you know from standing on those tiny little boats rocking back and forth. You can almost look at a Viet and tell if he’s a fisherman or not just by whether his toes are splayed out like a duck.

RV: What other kind of operations stand out in your mind when you think back in your mind’s eye, what do you see? What incidents come to mind?

GB: In my novel I have two or three things. I think one is just the smell of it all you really began to become much more like a policeman and it was hard to describe what made you feel that certain things were more dangerous than others. But some were simply stupid. In one case we got asked to provide protection for the battleship New Jersey. Obviously that was something close to a joke. The New Jersey asked us to sit between them and the shoreline.
RV: Your one small boat?

GB: My one small boat, yeah, while they fired a 16-inch gun over the top of our head. So they had like twenty-seven hundred people in the crew and we had six. And they literally blew the windows out of our boat. But very frequently, we’d get somebody from a magazine or a newspaper. For example, one wanted to go on patrol in a hot area and so we ran them up there and got shot at. Of the people who were injured, sadly, many of them were friendly fire and in my book I list one where we transited under an Air Force operation and they opened up on us at almost point blank range with quad 50s and it was the middle of the night. Obviously it was somebody that just wasn’t up on the right freeks. [Frequencies] That was probably one of the—it’s hard to judge what’s more dangerous than something else. But that was definitely one that was a pretty tight situation and it was just amazing that there wasn’t more damage done.

RV: You described your attitude during Operation SEA DRAGON that the combat was almost exhilarating and very exciting. Did that change? Did your attitude change once you got down in these smaller rivers and these canals and you were commanding the boat and your men were under you and you were directing where they were going and the situation you’re getting yourself into and the fire that you could be taking. How did you deal with all this personally?

GB: That’s a great question because in the book I mentioned one person who was killed and I was thinking about his CO and thinking he just took chances that he didn’t really need to take. And it was at that point that I realized that I was changing from trying to win the war to just trying to get my boat and my crew back safely. And I think the one year tour really made a difference in our psychology because unlike World War II where they knew they’d come home when they won the war, we changed from trying to do a great job and trying to win the war to almost all of us psychologically, eventually drifted over to the point of ‘is it worth trading one of your crew member to kill one VC?’ Would you even trade one for ten? These kids are calling you the ‘old man’ even though you’re only twenty-four years old, but you really do begin to look at some of those nineteen year olds as if you’re far more than just five or six years older than they. I think that’s a very penetrating question because I’d be the first to admit that at least by midway through my tour I was tired.
RV: Mentally and physically?

GB: Exactly. It’s almost like a narcotic. You get so tired that you know you’re not thinking crisply. You’re neither awake and you’re never asleep really. So the net result is there’s a period where you’re just sort of going through the motions but you don’t really have the same fire in your gut that you had earlier.

RV: You think it was a mistake, this one-year tour that the government implemented for the Vietnam War?

GB: Well, I’m not sure. I think after one year most people were just burned out. But on the flip side is, I understand how in World War II, the guys were certainly burned out after a month or two after Normandy and so I imagine we’re just a little softer than they were but they really were the greatest generation. I think my favorite book is Jonathan Shea’s book, *Achilles in Vietnam*. There he talks about the importance of bringing units over in a group and bringing them back as a group, about having a collective objective and a lot of the little things. Like in my book I also mentioned that we had a new kid that got shot through the kidneys and he just died immediately. And we just zipped him up and put him in a body bag and called for a Medevac to get him out of there with. When you read *The Iliad* you see that these guys anointed the bodies in oil and they mourned them and all of that and I think psychologically that really was better for people to have a service and to show appreciation than to just get them out of here.

RV: Did you ever get to take any R&Rs?

GB: Yeah. I took a wonderful R&R in Sidney but I was just so tired that I actually spent about half of it sleeping. But the people in Australia were just lovely and then in my book I tell on my kid sister’s birthday on May 10th in 1969, we were in a pretty heavy firefight. That was one where the naval advisor to the Marines, to the Viet Marines, they had made an intrusion of just a sandy shore and were going to go inland and they got ambushed. They walked right into a battalion or so of enemy. So they were pinned down on the beach and there were two of us, two boats that went in to pull out this sort of ragged, I’d like to say half a company. It really was bigger than a squad or two but not much. But they had two lovely American advisors, the Old Man and Red Dog and I’m afraid—it’s a little funny but I don’t even know their real names. The Old Man was a mustang and Red Dog was the redhead JG that always had a grin. So we went in to
pick up those guys and in the process got most of their Vietnamese Marines out or all
those that were alive or wounded, we got them out. And it was a pretty heavy firefight
and when we got back to the shore, back to the base, our skipper, a man named Paul
Dodson who was also just a prince of a guy but he was just tired. He looked at us two and
we were his most senior swiftboat skippers and he said, ‘Guys, you’ve only got a week to
go. I want you to get out of here.’ And he gave us an extra R&R to Hong Kong. And we
said, ‘Gee, skipper, we still have three or four more patrols to go.’ And he said, ‘No. I
want you to just take an extra R&R and get home,’ which was really sweet of him. And
so we went to Hong Kong and we’re at the Hong Kong Hilton smoking a cigar and
having cognac and it was the first time we realized, his name was Larry Stoneberg, in my
book I call him Badger, but Badger and I just looked at each other and I guess, that’s the
point at which you just about cry because you say, ‘We made it.’ All we had to do was go
back to Cat Lo and pack up and jump on the Freedom Bird.

RV: Before we get to your transition back home, tell me about life at base camp.
What did you do for entertainment? How much contact did you have with home and
news of the United States and all of that?

GB: The magazine subscriptions arrived nicely. People skimmed the *Stars and
Stripes* because it didn’t really have very much meaningful news but as you know *Time
Magazine* and the others carried it in quite a bit of depth. They were pretty good with
movies at Cat Lo. We’d put up a couple of poles, bamboo poles and stretch a sheet across
them and the most memorable movie we saw was *Fay Dunaway* and we just really truly
enjoyed watching movies like that. I have to admit that occasionally they were kind of
simple ones like *Beach Blanket Bingo* which was just Annette Funachello and girls
jumping around in swimming suits but that was fine with us.

RV: I’m sure it wasn’t a problem.

GB: No. But the original *Thomas Crown Affair* with Steve McQueen was
probably the most memorable movie we saw. In Cat Lo we got none of the high-powered
stuff like Bob Hope. But maybe once every two months or three months there’d be a little
Filipino singer who would come but there was a fifty-fifty chance you’d be out on patrol
and miss it.

RV: How about contact with home, letters and tapes and any MARs phone calls?
GB: I tried MARs once and it didn’t work very well. My mom didn’t write to me. She was an alcoholic and when she did write to me she had just bad news and I told her I just couldn’t handle anymore bad news, that if she didn’t have something nice to say, to not write. So she didn’t. My dad’s a pretty quiet person so I got an occasional letter from him but it was fairly brief. My sister was in college and I’d have to say she wrote on occasion but nothing particularly meaningful. In my case, I was somewhat cut off from the real world. I’d been in love with a girl and told her to go find somebody else. I got very little mail. But some of my crew got quite a bit and yet on the other hand, a couple of my crew members were married and were constantly worried about their wives being back stateside alone and things like that. In the end, I think it’s probably better to be single if you’re in combat. I know it is.

RV: Tell me about the relationship you had with your men there and people there at base camp at Cat Lo. Did you ever witness any race problems?

GB: Absolutely not. There was never a race issue that I came in contact, nor was there ever any drug issues. Partly I think that was because we were an elite group. We had all volunteered and when people are on your boat, your life literally depends on them and you have the same appreciation if you’re on the 97 boat or the 39 boat or the 45 boat. You know, you know that that crew is every bit as good as you but sometimes there’d be a new kid and so you knew that they needed a little more protection. But we respected every crewmember on every other boat. I don’t think that we had any problems at all. I know we didn’t with race. With drugs there was basically none. But alcohol, yeah. There were a couple of guys when you had twenty-four hours off would drink a little too much the night before and would be a little slow the next morning.

RV: Okay. Tell me about the Vietnamese civilians. What was your impression of the indigenous people?

GB: We had the sweetest lady who cleaned our hooch. Her name was Ba Cuc. Ba Cuc was just a little chatter mouth and I have her in my book and tell about how if there was a microscopic pin hole in a shirt, she’d hold it up and ask if it could be surveyed and she’s stick it in her purse. One day I asked her, ‘Where’s your husband, Ba Cuc?’ And my Vietnamese was pretty bad. And her English was pretty bad and so she said, ‘Sat,’ which is kill or dead. She said, ‘Sat’ and tipped her head back with her mouth open. So,
that was all I found out about Ba Cuc’s husband. But I think between kids and nieces and things she was always happy to have t-shirts or whatever we could give to her.

RV: Did you think that the United States, when leaving Vietnam, looking back at your experiences with the Vietnamese civilians, with the Vietnamese military, were they capable of defending their country themselves? Did they need the United States there?

GB: I have a chapter in my book where I talk about the macroeconomic issues and capitalism and Communism and things. But yeah, they have a rich and deep culture. They have, spiritually they’re deep and their family love is just patently obvious and their courage is without question. I don’t think they needed the United States to sort out where they were going to go and some political scientists say that in some cultures, a dictatorship may be inevitable. People may not be educated enough to be ready for democracy at certain stages in development. But, I wished them well when we left. I was very hopeful that even after the north had succeeded that they would come around and realize that they just had to have interchange with the rest of the world. So, twenty-five years after I left, I took my son and my wife back. We went all the way from Hanoi back down to my old base at Cat Lo. And every place we went we were warmly received. It was very, very rare that we had anybody look at us with a sullen look. In the war museum, my wife was looking at an exhibit and a tear started to run down her eye and a Vietnamese woman who was working in the Vietnam War museum came over and patted her on the back and said, ‘Oh, that was a very long time ago.’ Which, I thought was really sweet. That was twenty-five years after I’d left so that was 1994. I kept telling my son, this country with sixty or seventy million people really has potential. And the sad thing is, much like Cuba, their bureaucracy and their economic system has really precluded meaningful growth. But I think almost every Viet vet who’s gone back, it’s been a healing experience.

RV: How did you actually leave Vietnam? Was it a civilian flight or military flight out?

GB: It was a civilian flight. Actually, we had to wait an extra twenty-four hours. There was a mortar attack the night before that dinged up the runway pretty badly. But they got it fixed and we got on the freedom bird and when the skipper announced that we were feet wet, I thought, ‘What an interesting thing to go from a combat zone to the
South China Sea to finally an ocean that’s named for peace, the Pacific.’ Then all of the
sudden, I realize, ‘What am I going to do next?’ And although I had orders to the
Pentagon, I made up my mind that I probably should volunteer to go right back to
Vietnam for a third tour because I could do it and I could get my crew home safely but I
felt fearful for the inexperienced new kids and their lack of knowledge, and so like an old
veteran cop, I felt that I could do things much better than any of the younger guys and
when I mentioned that to a Buddhist American woman, she said, ‘Oh, you have a very
big ego.’ (laughs)

RV: Interesting.

GB: I thought so. But I was feeling guilty for abandoning the other crews that
were still in country.

RV: How long did that stay with you?

GB: Oh, it’s still with me. Deep down I’m confident that my boat wouldn’t have
been sunk if my crew had been on her, that we could have gotten out. I really feel that my
crew and I could have done a better job than any of the new people that came after us and
it may be arrogance. I don’t know. It’s a strange mixture of professionalism and
arrogance but also there are so many things that can't be taught. So just like a cop who
works a dangerous beat in the ghetto, you know, how do you tell people how you smell
for a bad situation?

RV: This is in May 1968 when you came home, correct? Is that right, 1968?

GB: ’69.

RV: ’69.

GB: Yeah. I did ’67 to ’68 on SEA DRAGON and ’68 to ’69 on Swifts. Then I
did have to do one year in the Pentagon and I got out in July of 1970.

RV: Tell me about when you came home from Vietnam as far as did you have any
problems at the airport and how much did you talk about what you had done overseas?

GB: That’s a hard one because San Francisco airport I didn’t have any problems
but I just felt like an alien in this strange country. And I could tell that people could,
persons knew just from looking at us because, my God, our skin was just burned and black
from it and my old girlfriend almost cried when she looked at me because she thought I
looked ten years older.
RV: Did you feel that age? Did you feel like you had aged that much?

GB: Oh, yeah. Oh, absolutely. When I got home, I mentioned in the previous interview that my father was with General Patton. I went to our house and I laid out some of the awards and things that I had gotten in Vietnam and he just looked sad [gets choked up]. You kind of think, ‘Well, gosh. He’ll be proud or pat you on the back or something.’ But he just looked sad and kind of quietly walked away.

RV: Why was he sad?

GB: I think, its almost unexplainable, but you know, you can think about your own son and say you're happy that he would do something that he wanted or that he was professional, but to think about coming reasonably close to losing them or to think that they had gone through something that I think psychologically would change them for the rest of their life, the Spanish have a word for it. It’s a little different than sad. It’s a bittersweet sadness. They use a word called ‘triste’ and it really was triste. I think my dad had seen so much combat that it was something that he really wouldn’t wish on anybody else. Obviously I lied to him in my letters. I said things were reasonably quiet. But he knew. He had a TV. He knew what we were doing.

RV: Were you ever able to talk to him about what really happened there and talk about the war experience and what Vietnam meant to the United States and to you?

GB: No. I really wasn’t with my dad, but he honored me when I was back about ten years later. He had been in Hinrik Himmler’s home. [Head of the German Gestapo] They had occupied that. And he had Margo Himmler’s stationary and he had a sword from the home and some other things. And a sword collector came to see if there was a chance that that would have been Himmler’s own sword and it wasn’t but Dad really, that many years later was still terribly emotional about it. And as I talked to my relatives, my aunt who’s only about six years older than me, said one time when I was playing as a little boy and she was in high school and I was just sort of out in the back playing, they were having dinner and a guest at the house said, ‘You have a very nice son, Bob.’ And my dad probably said without thinking, ‘I killed German boys as good or better.’ You know, toward the end, the Germans really did. They [had] pre-teen kids fighting. I think that that probably changed the way he looked at me. I know it did. I certainly know it changed the way I look at my son.
RV: How much difficulty did you have transitioning from Vietnam to the Pentagon and then out of the military?

GB: Oh, the Pentagon was absolutely horrid. They were silo sitters. They were fat asses. You’d look at the chest of a Navy captain and he’d have nothing but gedunk medals. And so one aviator walking by with a couple of medals from Vietnam had far more rank than the admiral I worked for and I found myself just breaking everybody into two; those that had been in combat and had been shot at and those that hadn’t. And I guess to some extent, that’s never really changed.

RV: I was going to ask you if you still do that.

GB: Yeah, I still do. I have either intense friends or ‘other people.’ But every now and then there’s somebody who isn’t a Viet vet who breaks through the shell and becomes really trusted, but I know deep down that the guys in Cosron 13 and Cosron 15, [Cosron = “Costal Squadron”] the Black Cat Division, I would give my life without thinking. There wouldn’t even be time for the signal to get up to your brain and go back. It would just happen. And I’m not sure that would happen with anybody else. Obviously, your family. And going back to these reunions are just absolutely priceless. I’m delighted we had the internet to put it all together.

RV: How much did you talk about your Vietnam experience at the Pentagon and then after in civilian life?

GB: In the Pentagon, only with other people who had been in country and sadly there were only five or ten percent who were like that. Then I got appointed to Harvard Business School and I went to Harvard Business School and once again, in each section of seventy people there would be about five Viet vets and we were a little brotherhood that really cared for each other. And we all did remarkably well. And then I went to a major bank and got posted overseas so again, what I realized at that point was that I didn’t like working in head office because it reminded me of the Pentagon, just a lot of paper and bureaucracy but being posted to Brazil or Panama or China, I was back on an independent command like a little Swiftboat.

RV: Interesting. And has that continued throughout your life post-Vietnam?

GB: Exactly, yeah. I still like a small operation. I had [hate] communication and so I’m one of those people who won’t carry a cell phone and I hope to throw my watch
away and it won’t come as a surprise to you that there were many times when we’d just
turn our radio off and operate independently. It was really all sort of a function of
adrenaline. I mean, if you’d had three boring days, you might go in and deliberately look
for trouble going up a hot river. And on the other hand, if you’d been beaten up a bit, you
might turn your radio off and just park off shore and rest. Two things that I think are
probably worth mentioning; first, I began to be appreciative of the Buddhist religion and
the lifestyle there and I found as a title of my book, *Confession to a Deaf God* I raged and
cursed against God because I couldn’t believe in a benevolent, omnipotent God because
that wouldn’t let those things happen. So I became a Buddhist.

RV: While in Vietnam or after?

GB: Well, I think I was edging toward it but later when I got back to the U.S. I
started reading Buddhist magazines and Buddhist writing and went to a couple of events
where I chatted with Buddhists and one year I even took a vacation and lived in a
monastery in Thailand. That was helpful. A second thing, psychologically, I was talking
to a psychologist one day and I said, ‘This may sound funny, but I just turned fifty and
I’m having more thoughts about Vietnam than I did back when I was thirty and forty.’
And without hesitation, the psychologist said, ‘Oh, absolutely count on it.’ And I said,
‘What? I thought you were going to tell me I was going crazy.’ And he said, ‘No, not at
all. This is commonly what happens that people when they turn fifty, things get more
mellow. They’re less concerned about house payments. They’re not raising kids. They
don’t have a dog. They don’t have yipping at them, a puppy. They don’t have *Star Wars*
and all the other things, toys to play with with the kids and you have time then for your
brain to go back and say, “Let’s digest a little of what we’ve already seen.”’ And I said,
‘Gosh, thanks.’ And this happened to be a Jungian psychologist and so I got more
interested in Carl Gustaf Jung and Jung says one of the reasons Jung split from Freud is
that Freud thought that everything that happened when you were young and much of it
was sexual and it all created this big trajectory for the rest of your life. And Jung said,
‘No, I think the more important thing is not abnormal psych. I’m interested in people at
mid life and I think the key is balance.’ And so the woman who has been a good girl and
a good wife and a good mommy and then suddenly says, ‘I think I want a Harley.’ And
the husband says, ‘What in the hell are you thinking about?’ And Carl Gustaf Jung would
say, ‘No, that’s predictable. It’s balanced.’ I really said, ‘Okay, that’s neat.’ Because if I’d been doing certain things for the first half of my life, I studied engineering and I was a naval officer, why not try to write and do something different and that really was very helpful. And then the third thing was a VA psychologist one day was talking. When I was talking about writing, I’d been asked to talk either about my trip back to Vietnam or about memoir writing whenever there’s a Vietnam reunion here in our state. And so I was talking about that and one day there was a VA psychologist talking and he said that post traumatic stress isn’t something like having the flu or not. He said, ‘It’s almost like depression and yes, to have it, there are certain medical criteria and you have to qualify in five or six different categories of maybe ten.’ But he said, ‘You all have a bit of it and it doesn’t hurt at all to skim through a PTSD book and see some of the exercises that are useful.’ For me, when I hit on writing, I thought, ‘Boy, that really is it.’ So at that point then I started taking a couple of creative writing courses at our local college and found that each time I wrote a chapter, I remembered two more and I’d wake up at two in the morning with another character saying, ‘Tell my story.’ And so in my book I had to disguise his name. But, you know, when McDermott got a fourth of his head blown off and we’re all holding him down talking to him, McDermott is just one of those who came to me at two in the morning and said, ‘Tell my story.’ So, it really was a good exercise, Richard, and by chopping it into these little chapters, they fit very well.

RV: Yeah, I noticed that your book was, the chapters are brief and it is choppy. Is that a reflection upon your experience there in country?

GB: Absolutely. You know, I think almost everybody, when they talk about memoirs of childhood or whatever, its little flashbulbs. Its snapshots rather than a continuum like a novel. But, the other thing that was really helpful in breaking it into mini chapters of only one or two pages was that I could also, when I woke up I’d write the chapter that fit but I had earlier outlined several others that I remembered. So if I woke up after a good night’s sleep or part night’s sleep and everything was going well, I could turn to a chapter that was factual or upbeat or happy or funny. And on the other hand, if I woke up in a pretty serious sober mood, I could write about somebody getting killed or hurt or something tragic happening.

RV: Would you say that you have experience posttraumatic stress disorder?
GB: No. Not at all in the clinical sense. But like depression, I mean, I’m not clinically depressed, yet at the same time I think Churchill called it his Black Dog. Every now and then we have a period where we’re that way. So, I think there were several aspects of it like inability to trust other people, inability to be around noisy and messy situations. I can't go to like a high school basketball game. Fourth of July I just button up the house and put in a good movie. And so I recognize that these are just little pieces that sort of attach themselves to you like a tick or something that you probably never get rid of, but they certainly don’t impair the way you live, you know, except for if people ask me to go to a Fourth of July party or something. But, no. They don’t really intrude on my life much at all. But they do affect, I think how I live, wanting sunlight. I don’t know if I told you but I built a house. We had moved from China to our little town just based on a house that was for sale and the price was right but sadly it was only two blocks from the hospital so the Medevac helos really bothered me. I’m sure every vet will tell you just the sound of a helicopter makes you freeze for a second. So on balance, I guess that I’d recommend that Viet vets do skim a PTS book because some of the exercises are really good. One for example that comes to mind was ‘quantification.’ You know, if you felt guilty for somebody getting hurt, then the next question is how many other people were on duty and exactly? So then you start breaking it down until you realize, yes, you are guilty for somebody getting hurt but it’s one percent or 1/20th or something. It’s not one hundred percent.

RV: Tell me what your thoughts were at the time and thoughts now on the antiwar movement.

GB: You know, I don’t really even know. On the anti war movement, my sister was at George Washington University and she was protesting. While I was in country, I thought they were basically traitorous. But the time I got to the Pentagon, I realized there were a lot of people in the military who weren't doing their best to win the war or volunteer[ing] for it or fight it. I had questions of whether it was directed correctly because in country we wondered, ‘what the hell’s happening in the big picture?’ and when I got to the Pentagon, they didn’t know. So at that point I realized where there’s nobody at the helm. I think a lot varied. Obviously I giggled on the [Washington D.C. Vietnam Memorial] mall when I saw the bumper sticker that said, ‘I’ll forgive Jane
Fonda when the Jews forgive Hitler.’ I really believe that. Jane still just bothers the hell out of me. Yet, I have to confess, I pop in a tape of Joan Baez and enjoy Joan’s folk songs and I know Joan was probably in exactly the same camp. She just wasn’t as obnoxious as Jane Fonda.

RV: Tell me how you felt in April 1975 when Saigon fell and the war ended.

GB: It didn’t surprise me at all but I really felt badly for the Viets who had been our interpreters, for people like Ba Cuc or for the Viet Marines who had worked well with us. I didn’t tell you on the May 10th incident where our advisors got pinned down, it was pretty clear that there had been some infiltration into their group because it just couldn’t happen that they would be ambushed with such precision and so well if their own group didn’t already have some bad guys in it. So it was pretty clear that there was rotting from within in the Vietnamese military structure. So A, I wasn’t surprised. B, the North was more determined to win the war than we were. But basically I just hoped that it would result in few civilian casualties. I shouldn’t say civilian, I mean a few friendly casualties.

RV: What would you say was the most significant thing that you learned there personally?

GB: I think there are people who are capable of doing a good job in combat and people who will never know. There are people who deep down know afterwards that ‘Yes, I have courage.’ But it’s also an incredibly humbling experience. So, you realize that the same guy who has a Navy Cross is also much more aware of his frailties, much like, as I mentioned, going through POW camps where they tell you that they can crack you and you do a good job holding up but realistically you know that you couldn’t withstand it forever. My eyebrows went up. [When] About ten years ago I was at the National Archives in Washington D.C. and they had a temporary exhibit of important documents from history, so you know, the surrender documents in Japan and things like that. But one of them was this little study that had been done of winners of the, I believe it was the Silver Cross [Silver Star] in World War II and they asked, ‘Do you consider yourself more brave or less brave than the average person?’ And the average Silver Star [gets choked up] winner said ‘less,’ which just brought tears to my eyes because you know, I got a Vietnamese Cross for Gallantry and a Bronze Star with a combat V and
some other things. And I guess if anything, it makes me aware of the fact that the things I
did in Vietnam, I was busy, I wasn’t brave and it only lasted a few minutes. So when I
see a grade school kid in a wheel chair [gets choked up], I know that he has bravery ten
thousand times more than I do. It’s certainly one of those subjects that deserves a lot of
attention and yet at the same time, when we’re raising our kids, Richard, there’s
absolutely no way that we can really teach it.

RV: You have to experience it perhaps.

GB: I think so. Without question, I have a lot more admiration for people with
cerebral palsy and things like that.

RV: Have you been to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C.?

GB: Yeah. I go every time I’m in Washington. I get to Washington about once a
year. I usually stop over at Union Station and pick up flowers for the guys I knew
personally who were killed in Vietnam. So I put six or seven flowers under my arm and
then I always pick up an extra one and that’s in a chapter of my book called Maggie,
which is probably my favorite chapter actually.

RV: Why?

GB: Well, it’s about a kid sister and you know, [gets choked up] she lost her
brother and her parents were just too hurt to talk about it. I worked at a big bank and I
didn’t know that she’d even had a brother who was in Vietnam and so sometimes when
we’d work late, Maggie would ask me questions about Vietnam and one night, just out of
the blue, she asked me about LRRPs. I said, ‘My God, how did you know about LRRPs?’
And she said, ‘My brother was in one.’ I said, ‘Oh, my God.’ Then she told me her
brother had been killed. I realized, you know, I had been answering her questions about
Vietnam almost flippantly, you know, just sort of easy, kind of bravado I guess or
carelessly, but not sensitively, had I known. I guess on reflection I realize that was
probably why she asked me because she knew that I could tell her without trying to,
without pausing to think, ‘How can I put the right words for this young girl who’s lost her
brother?’ So in my book I always bring an extra flower for a Warrant Officer Lukens and
I say [gently sobbing], ‘Your kid sister loves you.’ I guess the only other thing about the
Wall, Richard, is that I always go at night.

RV: Why do you do that?
GB: Well, in the daytime there are tour buses and you can see that when you watch the tour buses stop, you can see that maybe three or four people at the Wall are parents or are children or vets, three or four more that were vets, but most of them are just sort of there to look at it just like you would the Lincoln Monument or something else. But, if you go in the middle of the night, the only people there are Viet vets. And maybe it’s partly because we remember Vietnam in the night so much more than the day. And it’s also really holy then. It’s not just a busy monument like it is in the daytime. It’s a holy spot. You kind of go into the grave with those guys when you go down. And then at night, my gosh, when you come up the other side, there’s a beautiful white Washington Monument with all the lights on. So, yeah, I think there is something really different psychologically about the Memorial at night than there is in the day. And I always go over to the nurse’s one because the Medevacs were just wonderful. They gave a sense of comfort and obviously the Slicks did too. The gunships, we had Cobras and the Cobra pilots were really brave guys. I think we all have admiration for the helicopters. But now when we look back on it, when we hear them we know the only time you heard that whop, whop was when things were bad. So there are no good thoughts that come with a helicopter. But in Vietnam, that was just a good feeling so when you look at those nurses looking up, it really means something. And I think the fact that it’s both whites and blacks together makes a big difference, too, because we all know that race wasn’t important for most. I can't tell. You’ve done interviews all over so maybe it was other places, but at least in ours, we were all brothers.

RV: What did the United States learn from the Vietnam War?

GB: I’m not sure. I think we learned that we had to reevaluate a lot about the military and so right after Vietnam, believe it or not, being in riverboats was not considered a ‘career enhancing position.’ So, I could have bored holes in the Atlantic in a destroyer and probably moved up the line just as fast. So there was a bitterness and a disgust almost with the lack of appreciation for the warrior within the Navy. But I think slowly that changed as Admiral Crowe and some of the others took over, that suddenly having some meaningful stuff on your chest or having volunteered for some sticky positions really became more important than being a politician. Slowly the Navy really became much more professional and I was just delighted with the improvements up until
the Clinton Administration when of course, the military and the executive didn’t talk very
much. But now that Clinton’s gone, the military people just feel like it’s a breath of fresh
air that they’re again appreciated.

RV: What do you think about the movies that have been made on Vietnam?

GB: Most of them are absolutely terrible. But I think *We Were Soldier Once and Young* was very, very good. *Apocalypse Now*, which is the riverboat one was pretty
hokey. But the reality of using it as an archetype where you say, ‘Don’t take this as
reality,’ but it really was like Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and we really did have some
people who lost it, who became too—to fight a guerilla properly, you almost have to
become partly a guerilla yourself. So the Marlon Brando character who played Kurts in
the book who became the best elephant killer ever, however he lost his humanity, that
was a real story. So I think if we take it as a surrealistic trip, it’s really pretty good, not
unlike Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse 5*.

RV: What would you tell the young generation today about Vietnam—high
school or college kids who basically the 1960s and ’70 is ancient history? What would
you tell them about that war?

GB: I would tell them that America has to be remarkably careful about which
battles it can get into. I really believed Pat Schroeder when she was a Senator when she
said, ‘We just can’t be the 911 number for the world.’ I really believe the Americans,
because we don’t travel very much, are remarkably ignorant of the cultural milieu around
the world. So we have a tendency to judge almost everything if it’s not democracy or
capitalism, it’s wrong. And I think we have to say, ‘No, you know, there are some places
where tribalism, where animism—even our American Indians haven’t bought into
capitalism for example.’ So I think we have to be more sensitive and culturally aware.
We have to be open and willing to trade. And we do need friends around the world. I’m
one of those who’s remarkably cautious on the Middle East because if this war has been
going on for two thousand years and it’s five-sided, American simply will be stuck in
another quagmire.

RV: Mr. Blinn, is there anything else you would like to add to our conversation
today?
GB: Not at all. Just to reiterate that I think writing, at least in my case, was remarkably good for the soul and when I took creative writing at night, I found that the young people, and by the way, we Viet vets are perfectly welcome in a community college to audit a class. And you walk in and you’ll find these young people, a nineteen year old girl with a knockout body and a nice smile and you think, ‘Oh, to be young again.’ And they start telling their story of ‘When my brother went through drug rehab…’ or something and tears come to your eyes. So you realize there are a lot of tough stories out there but you also realize that it’s very, very therapeutic to put it on paper and in my case, I just kept putting it on paper until it became a book. But even if it’s just small for a memoir, I think your kids and your grandkids someday will find it priceless.

RV: Well, thank you very much, sir. This will officially end the oral history interview with Mr. Gary Blinn.

[Gary’s Book, *Confession to a Deaf God* was published in 2002.]