Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Teodoro Gutierrez on the 8th of October, 1999 in the Southwest Collections Building interview room at approximately twelve o’clock noon. Mr. Gutierrez, would you start, please, by giving us a brief biographical sketch of yourself?

Teodoro Gutierrez: My name is Teodoro Gutierrez; I work for Excel in Plainview. I have three kids, my wife, and I have worked for Excel for fifteen years now. That’s about it…

SM: In 19…well could you give us a brief sketch of when you decided to join the Marine Corps, how you came to choose the Marine Corps as the service that you joined, when you went in, and your initial training, basic boot camp.

TG: I was going to drop out of high school a little before February 19th. I think it was about two weeks before. I was dropping out of high school because me and my dad had got into a conflict about me racing cars. He didn’t want me to race. Military was giving their tests, and they were giving us the military test and that’s when one of my teachers who grew up with me, was my teacher for about two or three years, asked me if I would take the test and I told her that I really didn’t want to ‘cause I didn’t think I could pass it. So she kind of finally talked me into it, and I took the test and I passed it. And I always wanted to be a Marine but I didn’t think I’d qualify for it. Took the test, I passed it, and he asked me if I’d go to Plainview to take another test, and I went and I took it. Then I went to Amarillo and took it, so by February 19th of 1974 I had joined the Marine Corps. That’s when I decided, you know, I went in, my records show I went in on February 20th. I had just turned 18 on February 19th so at that time I didn’t have to have my father’s permission because he didn’t want to sign for me to do it but finally he decided to. I joined the Marine Corps. I went to San Diego, California for boot camp. It’s mostly hard
training back then, the corps, the Marine Corps was hard. They called it hard corps. It was pretty hard to get through. We started with 80 people that night, 80 recruits what they called them. In the morning we ended up with 75, some left during the night. We kept losing them and gaining them all the time. People all the way through the Marine Corps because it was pretty hard, not everybody made it. Back then they’d send you the motivation or they’d hit ya, and I thought that was kind of rough after the experience I had being in the Marine Corps. I learned to accept that what they were doing was right. Because it took a lot of patience and a lot of time when it really came down to it. You had to have a lot of guts and the ones that didn’t make it, I don’t think they would have made it the way things looked. I learned later on in life, I thought I was mistreated and all that but I’ve never been treated like that. I’ve always told my wife that Marine Corps ain’t what the hard corps used to be. They should have kept it the way it was because I always keep up with the Marine Corps and I know, keeping up on the history of it and all that and I’ve noticed that in Desert Storm that they didn’t prove to be as rough and as tough as they used to be. They never, the whole time that I was there, we were always taught to never run or anything. They were losing a lot of stuff and I had talked to some guys who were in Desert Storm and they said that the Corps had changed in ’75 and, I don’t know, my wife gets mad because I keep up with a lot of the corps. I enjoy it, I still love the Corps but it ain’t the Marine Corps I used to know. So, after I graduated from San Diego I went to…came home for ten days and I went back to Camp Pendleton, they sent me in a little corner called Saint [?] in Camp Pendleton, I went to ITS, that’s Infantry training school. I was there for a month and we had to run places. We hardly ever got to ride on trucks and all that, we either run or walk but we walked anywhere from five miles in between classes to get our bodies into shape to carry all that weight. We had a lot of weight we had to carry and they were pretty tough on us and they drilled us pretty hard but they were on, you know, you learned, it just became normal, you walking and carrying all that stuff, it wasn’t that hard. So after ITS I came back for 20 days then they sent me to, after I left home, I went back to Camp Pendleton and I was there for, I’m going to say 30 days and then they finally sent me overseas and I ended up in Okinawa with the 2nd Battalion, [4th Marines] 3rd Marine division, and I was with Echo company. Then I got there in I’m going to say September/October of ’74, they were just barely picking up the battalions, we were all coming in out of San Diego some of us were fresh out of boot camp, some guys had been there longer. And I noticed most of our sergeants and our staff sergeant and our gunnies in the
company were veterans, Vietnam Veterans, especially our captain. He had medals, boy, he had a lot of medals on him. Battalion commander, 1st sergeant, the one that’s right under the 1st...the battalion commander, he was, I think they all were highly decorated Vietnam veterans. I later found out that our captain was Recon, Force Recon, and he was something else. Some of the sergeant were right there beside him, they were real highly decorated and that helped us I think a lot during the Fall of Saigon and missions we had pulled because they knew what to do and what to expect out of us and which ones were capable of doing it and which ones weren’t. When I got there the company was just building back up because some of us, we was getting there some would come back home from overseas. I met some guys from San Antonio, quite a few of them were from San Antonio. Some were from Texas, quite a few from Texas but mostly from San Antonio and I met a lot of the guys from Oklahoma, New York and all that. Well we finally became a company, when we became Echo Company 2-4. When we got there, for some reason, they told us about, they had a big, a raider company at that time. I had never heard the word raider or didn’t even know what it was. I later found out the raider company was the company that would have to over show to be able to carry the load of the end. The best company in the division. So when we start taking the test against the other companies and all that to end up with a raider company we finally won it and when we did we had special training other than the other guys. We had rubber boat training and at first we didn’t even know how to get on those rubber boats. We’d see them flip, being thrown, for two weeks and that was before we even went afloat because we had to have that company to make raids if we needed them, or be able to work with the Navy Seals to lead us. The whole company at that time was tried as a company. If we want to become raider company, we had two weeks of rubber boat training which was going night and day, day and night. They were working us hard because they said we had in more than two weeks we had to know how to pull the rubber boats, handle them, and be able to swim. And I was a non swimmer so they still pushed us. They didn’t care because they wanted to make sure they had the right men and the right equipment to be able to pull whatever needed to be done. So we went through that kind of training and then on December of ’74 that’s when we got our orders to go on ship and then they put us on what they call [LSD the Peorra] float and we ended up...the rest of the battalion which was hotel, golf, and fox all ended up on the Okinawan, which was a carrier and us being the raider company we ended up on the Peorra which was a flat bottom boat, it was a small ship. They put us separate from them because we were the raider
company and if anything needed to be done we would be the ones to do it. That time our company was holding about 500 men strong and we went from, they picked us up and from Christmas we were in Hong Kong, we were in Hong Kong. We had a bad habit of doing things wrongly, racing and jumping over fences and all this and that. Just a little before Christmas Eve or something we had gotten paid and there was a 17 year old boy who was the youngest man in the Marine Corps in our company at that time. There was two but I don’t know who the other one was, I knew who he was. Somehow we got drunk and we ran across this eight lane highway which you have four going one way and four the other way and there was a fence in the middle. We ran across it and as we did five of us made it across it but somehow he got his pants caught and he fell over and a car ran over his head and killed him but that was because of our dumb mistakes. We always drank and we were always getting into dumb stuff. Our battalion was pretty close and we were always getting our company in trouble because of our fighting, which is quite a bit of a training. They want us to work together, fight together and that’s what we were doing. That’s where all this commotion came about, from our fighting and drinking. He got killed, well he died that morning. The buried him at…they brought him over, they brought him from overseas and they buried him and that morning…a little before New Year’s we had taps for him on ship and a lot of us were crying and hurting because he was a real good friend and he wasn’t even supposed to come with us but he didn’t want to leave the battalion, he wanted to stay with the company and he had to have his mother sign some papers to be able to stay with us which he did, but I guess that was part of being in the Marine Corps and the infantry. Our training was hard and we had a bad habit of always wanting to fight the British and whoever we could fight, even the Navy. We were always getting into fights with the Navy, the Air Force, the Army, anybody we could…our captain and our battalion commander took quite an ass chewing but I guess it was part of them knowing what it was like to be in the infantry because they always knew we was always going to be in trouble and they somehow took it instead of giving us office hours and stuff like that they kind of yelled at you, slap you around a little bit and tell you to settle down. You learn to respect these people because they sometimes didn’t want to treat you like a baby, or wanted you to act like a man and they were pretty hard on us. When it came down to where they needed us to be tough and hard we came around because of the way they treated us and the way they acted was that they never treated us like little boys or nothing. They were real hard, and I hated it for something I know now. I understand why they had to do the
training they did. After we got the…we ended up in the Philippines, that’s when, we were in the
Philippines and we took jungle survival which was a two week course where they send you out
with a pound of rice and two canteens full of water and a machete and that’s all you had for two
weeks to live on and we thought we was going to be smart so we all put apples and fruit and
pieces of cake and all kinds of stuff we could get out of the cafeteria and put it in our pants and
our shirts and they found out that a lot of us gained weight as soon as we came out of the
cafeteria so they made us strip because in infantry school, I mean, infantry are hardly around any
women or anything so they made everybody strip down to their, I mean, just strip, completely
strip and they took I’d say about two carts full of food that we had all tried to hide away from
them and they said no. They made us strip and as we went past the captain he would hand you
your pants, your shirt, and your machete, and your canteens of water and your pound of rice and
that’s all you had and he said that’s all you can get for two weeks. So that’s part of your training
in jungle survival. You’re going to go out there and learn how to do it or you’re going to starve
to death and you’re going to be quite a few pounds lighter when you get back. So they took us
out for jungle survival for two weeks we were out there chasing down monkeys, javelinas,
whatever we could find, and we used bamboo to cook our meals with because we didn’t have no
plates, no nothing. Then we find out that as long as you use the bamboo and cook water in it it
would work just like a pot or anything so we learned to survive. That’s where I got my jungle
survival training courses was in the Philippines. We found out there’s…that in the jungle what
you’re doing it’s like a store. Just know what to get, what to eat, what to use for medication,
they make sure that we knew quite a bit of that stuff. So after that, we was, I think, we had just
barely gotten back when our ships were called out to sea and they didn’t tell us why or nothing,
but they said we had to go out to sea. So we went out to sea, they took us out there for about a
month and we went to Guam and we worked on churches and stuff like that. Went there for
about a week or two and then they finally send us back to the Philippines again. When we got
back to the Philippines we were learning amphibious landings. We would land on these islands
and all that, get our stuff down coming off the ships, coming off the amtracks and making sure
not to shoot each other because we did a lot of lot of fire and one of the times one of the M-60’s
got too hot and started firing on its own and these guys were running across and it almost killed
them but since the sergeant, staff sergeant knew what was going on so they grabbed it and
pointed it down at the ground and it came pretty close to killing some guys, they knocked them
off the hill and all that. Oh man they came down the hill scratched up, cut up and they was
yelling and hollering, and the lieutenant commander said, “Calm down,” you know, “it was an
accident.” And they finally looked at the M-60 and noticed that it had misfired on its own so
they didn’t put anybody…they didn’t get anybody into trouble because the guy was trying to do
the best he could. So we did, and then they took us up a mountain called seven steps to heaven.
We climbed it for about two days before we were called back down and then we had to go out to
sea again so they put us out to sea. And that’s when we stayed out there for about 120 days at
sea and it was a little before Easter, or that Easter night that we was all asleep and they told us
that we could sleep in, that we didn’t have to wake up the following day and I remember that
because the staff sergeant came up there at some time in the morning, it would be after 12
because I went to sleep at least a little after 12 and our gunny, no, our staff sergeant went over
there and he told me, “Get up, Gutierrez,” he says, “The lieutenant wants to talk to you.” And
then I looked over there and I saw the lieutenant and I said, “Well he’s right there, if he wants to
talk to me all he has to do is tell me.” And he said, “Get up and shut up.” And I kept looking at
him and I said, “Well let me wake the next guy,” and he said, “No, you shut up, get up and shut
up and get upstairs.” And that” when I noticed that the staff sergeant, the sergeant and
lieutenants were all carrying pistols and I asked him, “What’s going on?” and he said, “Just shut
up and get upstairs.” He said, “We’re pretty concerned people and we don’t want you talking
about much, just shut up and get upstairs.” And we was going upstairs on top of the ship, I
forget what they call that. We were walking up there, one of the guys kept telling…we kept
asking each other, “What’s going on? What’s going on?” and as we was walking out we noticed
that some of the Navy and some of the Marines were wearing their rifles loaded. They had their
magazines in, they just kept telling us, “Shut up and get upstairs.” And we get upstairs some of
us were wearing underwear, some of us just had a blanket over us and they told us to get
upstairs, they wanted to talk to us. I was wondering what was going on. When we got upstairs
we saw the company commander and the captain of the ship and captain of the ship said, “All of
y’all just stay in a group, as soon as everyone gets up here we’ll talk to you. You can talk
amongst yourselves but keep it down and we’ll talk to you as soon as everyone gets up here, and
that’s all you need to know.” They kept us up there for about 10-15 minutes until they got
everybody they wanted up there and that’s when the captain said, he says, “I’m going to give you
three chances. You either back out or that’s it.” And one of the guys asked “Captain, can we ask
you what this is for?” And he said, “Nope. All I’m going to tell you is the second time, you can
back out and you won’t be considered a coward or nothing. We just want you to leave. We
don’t think you can handle it.” We kept looking at each other and everybody kept telling each
other, “You go first, you go first,” and nobody wanted to go, so finally on the third time he said,
“Oh, this is the third and last and final time, and I’m only going to give you one minute.” And
he says, “Right after that minute, nobody’s moving.” So we all sat there, stayed there staring at
each other and finally pulled his pistol out and he said, “From now on, whoever moves or
anything or tells anybody what’s going on up here, not even the Marines downstairs are
supposed to know what’s going on with y’all, y’all have been specially picked for missions that
will be classified and after you get out of the Marine Corps you won’t even know about, they
won’t even believe you if you tell them.” So we didn’t even know what they were talking about
and he said, “Get back downstairs, go get your stuff, and we’re going to put you in another part
of the ship by yourself. You as a 48 man detail will always be together. You won’t be able to
communicate with your friends very much, you’ll talk to them every once in a while but y’all
going to sleep together, eat together, and do everything together. That’s a 48 man detail. From
that 48 man detail we’re going to break you down to squads, and every squad leader will be in
charge of each squad then we’ll break you down to 4 man teams, which is a fire team and from
there on you’re going to be learning your missions, you’re going to be taking it to the theatre
you’re going to be looking at film, you’re going to be able to do this on days and nights, not even
being able…to go on land or nothing. You’re going to have to learn it by looking at it, trying to
remember what it looks like and what’s going to be harder is when and if we have to go in at
night. So it’s up to y’all to learn what you’re doing, keep up with yourselves, and if anything
goes wrong y’all have to be left behind. So in other words, if we have to leave anybody behind
and can’t get anyone else, you’ll be the ones we leave behind. And your chances of coming
back, there will never be a chance. It’s just like flipping a quarter,” he said. He said, “You’re
specially picked, we think you can pull these missions off, they’re going to be hard, and the other
Marines might be coming back where you guys are going to have to stay back and finish it off.”
So that’s when they picked this special 48 man detail and we had…from then on we started
sleeping together, we kept going to different types of theater room, we would cut down
a…where I ended up with four of my friends and we were trained on rubber boat training, we
kept that up, we kept exercising, we kept trying to always remember the maps, the night…
pictures and stuff they showed us so we’d be ready. We didn’t know what we were going to do or what we were specific for, it was just stuff that they had…they didn’t even know themselves or something, they wouldn’t tell us. And then when eagle pull was the first one in Cambodia, they woke us up one morning and told us that, to get ready, we were to be on stand-by. So we got up and it was raining, and we waited and waited out in the rain and nothing happened so they called it off. So finally here comes another day, finally they told us to get ready and it was a nice hot day, they made us sleep on our packs, we had to stay out there and wait and wait. Then before we knew it Cambodia had gone through, hotel company had gone through and pulled them out. But there was something special because that night we later found out that for some reason or another we had drifted away from the other ships. There was about 20 something ships and for some reason we had kind of drifted away from them where they were always kind of keeping them together. We never did really find out why they let the ship drift away or whatever but there was something peculiar about it because we knew we were supposed to do something that night but since the mission Eagle Pull during the day they backed off on a deal and some of the guys and some of them said that we were supposed to really gone after some POWs, something went wrong or something happened like that. They didn’t let us go, they held us back. Either the Navy Seals didn’t fire when they were supposed to, or something else went wrong. And they held us back and they never did tell us why we were there or, and then they said, “Well still after this we thought we’d go back to our platoons,” and they said, “No, you still stay together as a 48 man detail.” So finally a few days later we went back to the Philippines. We were there in the Philippines for about 24 hours and then an alarm went off in the city calling everybody back on ship, so here we go back on ship. That’s when this, we went out and sat in the ocean for a long time and then finally the deal on frequent wind went down and they told us that we had to get ready because we were fixing to pull off some missions and that they were having troubles at Saigon. The airport had been blown up, two Marines had been killed, and for us not to expect to be coming back because things were getting pretty hard on the ground. They might have to have some people on 12 buildings that were 2-3 miles apart and they kept taking us in there day and night, trying to get us to remember the buildings because each fire teams had to take one building. They came down to that and try to get out of there and try to get as many people as we could out of there. They had a lot of missions, we had to try to keep it in our heads, we had a lot of stuff we had to learn. It was hard, they were working us
night and day. Our sergeants, I think and our corporals made the big difference because they
were combat veterans and for some reason they tried to keep their goals and as we got closer to
having to do what we had to do we kept noticing that some of the guys they kept pushing on
them harder and try to break them from being scared, but they came up and they did finally take
us in. We were called in and we were sent to the compound at first, and there’s a lot of artillery
coming in, a lot of people getting shot at, a lot of fire was going on, everybody was going crazy
so they finally told us to go back to our platoons. I ran back to my platoon and we ended up
making a big circle around these helicopters. These helicopters would land in the middle and
people would rush them. And as we was laying there one of the guys laying next to me…some
artillery had come in, he said his ass was hurting. And I said, “What do you mean your ass is
hurting?” And he says, “Yes, my ass was hurting,” and I said, “What do you mean?” He says,
“Just look at my God damn ass, it hurts,” so I looked over there and I said, “Well I don’t see
nothing wrong,” and then all of a sudden I saw a little red spot started getting bigger and bigger
on his trousers, we wore blue [means green] trousers back then, we didn’t wear the camouflage,
and he says, “Look here at down my trouser, it stings,” and I started looking at them and I yelled
for the corps man up and the corps man said, “Hell no, I ain’t getting up, you look at him.” I
said, “Well, he’s bleeding on this side man,” He said, “Yeah, ask the other guy on the other
side,” he said, “What’s he doing?” He said, “He’s bleeding on this side, too.” And then the
corps man said, “Drop his pants!” And I said, “Hell I’m not going to drop his pants here!” He
said, “You drop them or he’s going to keep hurting, we can’t get him out of here till we know
what’s wrong with him.” So he turned around sideways and the other guy unbuckled his trousers
and all that and I pulled them down and kind of looked at his butt and then he was leaking from
both sides and right down the middle of his butt and I told the corps man, “It looks like whatever
went through went clear through him.” And he said, “Well look at your…are you hurt? What
about the next guy to him?” And I said, “No, nobody’s hurt.” Somehow whatever it was had
just missed everybody and just got him. Let’s see, either we were in the circle…and then we
asked, I asked the corps man, “What do I do?” and he threw a weird looking Band-Aid at me
and told me, said, “Stick this between his butt and wrap it around his cheeks and pick him up and
put him on the next helicopter out.” So me and this other guy right beside him picked him up,
put him in the helicopter. When we was putting him in the helicopter, it was full of kids. Babies.
They were anywhere from, I’d say, at least a year old to maybe 3-4 year old kids. They were
crying, yelling. What was funny was that this guy, he knew he was hurt and he knew he had
took up room where they could have put 2-3 more babies and he couldn’t even sit down and he
picked up 2 kids and he wrapped them and he said, “I’ll carry them.” And he carried them out of
there. And he was hurting. But he wouldn’t let go of them. That’s the last we saw of him till
later, about 2 weeks later I guess that’s when I saw him again. Anyway, he got out of there and
he said, “Well, I’ll see you guys back…”

Side 1, Tape 1 ends.

SM: So the action you’re discussing at this point, this is taking place in the Saigon
Embassy compound…

TG: Yes.

SM: …and this is your, this is the complete contingent of the 48 man detail?

TG: Well, yeah, they had put us back, like I said, with our platoons because the squad
didn’t need us right then at that time and they were having a little trouble holding the people
back and they threw us back in with our platoons and we was with them till that guy got shot and
I’m going to say a few minutes after that they called up for the 48 man detail and they told us to
get together and get ready to leave because we was getting out of there and we thought we was
going back on ship and they sent us to the Embassy. That’s when we went into the Embassy
because the Embassy was about to be overrun so they sent us over there to help keep the crowds
down. That’s when Sergeant Prinitup, you could say he became the platoon commander because
he’s the one that took charge of the 48 man detail. Well we hit the compound, we came in on a
helicopter and we landed and they told us to take the walls and make sure that people didn’t
come over, and watch out for sniper fire and artillery and small arms fire, they were being hit
pretty good. So they cut us down to fire teams. Sgt. Parker took over then and he told us that we
had a certain area that we had to take care of. So we stayed like that most of the day. We
kept…they had trouble that one time. I’m not sure, one of the high ranking people in the
Embassy went back outside and then he, he didn’t come back when he was supposed to and they
were going to send us out there to go get him, and the 48 man detail was specially trained for
stuff like that so we was going to go out there and get him and as soon as we was already formed
up and ready to open the gate to go out there and go get him they said there was a limousine, a
car, coming up and that’s when we just kind of made a big old wedge to make the car come in
and as we was doing that I’m not sure what happened but some got down, I could hear it between
the hollering and the people that something had gone wrong and I’m not sure if it was that they put a…they threw a baby on his bayonet or he cut a baby or something, something happened anyway and he had blood all over his hands and his rifle and all that. Something happened to his bayonet because we had bayonets, we could push people out of crowds and make the, so we could let the car come in. When it came in something was happening because I remember that Sgt. Prinitup or one of the sergeant, I’m not sure if it was Sgt. Prinitup or somebody pulled up right beside him and cocked his .45 and he said, “You move you son of a bitch and I’ll shoot you right here cause you move and we’re all dead.” So that guy just held his ground, he was crying, you could tell. You could hear somebody crying and couldn’t see what was going on because I had to make sure I was doing my job. We was closing back up, and we was closing back up there was 3-4 guys, men that had young kids about the age of...what happened, really, I don’t know. I just saw that one of them was full of blood on his hands, his rifle, and he grabbed his rifle and threw it on the ground as soon as we got back into the Embassy walls and the sergeant went over there and told him, “You better pick that damn weapon up, I’m going to make damn sure you’re thankful we’re still alive,” he said, “because if you hadn’t done it they would have killed every last one of us would have been overrun,” he said, “You pick that thing up and you make damn sure you don’t ever lose that weapon again.” And so they got into it for a little bit and then they finally took him out there and talked to him and calmed him down, but he’s crying because he said that could have been his son or daughter or whatever, you know. I didn’t see what happened but I mean, he was hurt. And the sergeant kind of watched him, hoping that he’d be able to hold on and finish it out but then after while we heard some of the other Marines that were right behind him or something that had kids the same age that, you know, were crying and hurting because it could have been anybody’s kid that could have been hurt. But then they finally calmed him down and they sat him down and the night was coming through and we hadn’t ate since we left and they were needing food because we hadn’t ate in about [18 hours]...it was getting dark and they finally said that they picked, I want to say, about 8 of us and we had to go out on the Embassy walls, on the Embassy walls close to about 2 blocks down into an empty building we thought was empty to get some C-Rations, what we call meals that they have for us in little boxes. Sgt. Park was in charge of that mission, he took us out there and he said, as we got to the building and we all kind of wondered would there be any Viet Cong or anybody in there to shoot at us, he said, “Well it’s too dark and we can’t see in there.” We tried
to decide should we throw a grenade in there or what should we do. And that’s when Sgt. Parker
decided, “Well, one of you is going to have to go in.” He said, “Well Gutierrez, I guess you
finally volunteered.” And I said “I ain’t volunteered for nothing!” And he said, “Well you’re
going in.” So he told me to go on in and then there was another guy right behind me and as we
was walking in he said, “Make sure that you don’t touch…if you touch anybody else besides the
person behind you, you fire at them,” because we couldn’t see, the lights were out and
everything and we finally got to the boxes that we were looking for and he said, “Well, I hope
there’s enough for us because we won’t be able to get anymore, get two or three of them and
let’s get the hell out of here!” So we just grabbed about, grabbed some out of there and went
back. Later on we were about half way there when there was an explosion in the building and
we said, "Well we must have been pretty damn lucky cause someone…” We walked back into
the building and as we walked in there some of the other guys had already raided a restaurant in
the Embassy and they said, “Man y’all went out there for nothing. We already ate.” We said,
“What do you mean you already ate?” He said, “Go on in there and fix you some eggs, we just
busted the restaurant open.” They already did, so we might as well get in there and eat it. So
some of the guys when I went in there said, “What do you want? A hamburger? A coke or what
the heck you want?” They had already raided the restaurant at the Embassy and they were just
having a heck of a time. There was one guy cooking hamburgers. They said they’re going to get
it so we might as well get it. So we started eating and finally we were shifting off, so I went
back out there and I was out there for a little while and they said, “Hey Gutierrez, did you get
you any weapons?” I said, “What do you mean weapons?” They said, “Hell the FBI and the
CIA are just throwing their weapons away and they said we could have them if we wanted
them.” I said, “Hey, that’s great!” So I went in there and got a pistol, it was a .38 special, 25
caliber, and a 357, no, a…it’s a 4 something magnum and I thought I’d bring them back and I
took them back, I held them, I had that plus my ammo and I kept that all day and all that night
and I said, “Well I need any extra ammo I’ll just keep these.” So I took those pistols, I took my
M-16 and a bunch of other stuff I had. We kind of just walked around during the night watching
for sniper fire and all that and then we was, this lady, I don’t know if she was British or what she
was, she said she wanted to go over to the building and I said, “Lady, are you crazy?” And we
asked the sergeant, “Hey, is this lady crazy or what? She wants to go all the way over to the
other side of the building.” I said, “Hell, ain’t nothing up there but Vietnamese! What the hell
does she want?” He said, “She’s a reporter and she says she’ll be alright.” I said, “What do we
do?” “Let her over the wall.” “You sure?” “Yeah.” “Alright...” So we just grabbed her and put
her over the wall like she wanted to. We told her, “You sure?” And she said, “Yes.” So we let
her drop to the floor and she left and we didn’t see her after that and we was kind of looking
around to see if we could see her, you know, and I’d say 30 minutes later all of a sudden we just
saw a big old line up around the building, you know. We had noticed there’s a little, sort of like
a little Toyota or Nissan out there, we looked back out there and nothing there, just a big old
hole. Artillery had hit it. We had run around and as we looked on the wall we had noticed the
shrapnel and everything. We just got lucky and got out of there on time or something because
that shrapnel was all over that wall. So we kind of moved around and talked for a while and then
some of the guys got lucky and they got inside the building because they told them they wanted
to watch the building on the inside. One of the guys said he was messing around and he found a
briefcase or something and tried to open it and somehow he got caught and they told him that it
was the whole payroll for the Embassy. And he said, “Man, if I had kept my mouth shut!”
Laughing about it, you know, joking around. We kind of stayed like that through the night and
then we started...they told us they wanted us, if any of us knew how to hot wire any cars and we
asked them why. They said we got to get lights on top of that building because the Vietnamese
took these lights out, our electricity, we’re out of luck. So we’s trying to get these cars hot-wired
and put on racks so we could shine the lights on the top of the Embassy. We got some of them,
we couldn’t get all of them because some of them were kind of newer but the older ones we
could kind of work on because some of the guys were pretty good at it. Got some of them
started and ran up the ramp and got them where we needed them and lit up the night, you know.
These helicopters were coming in. So we stayed around like that and I guess until sometime in
the morning and they said that we were going to get pulled out and we didn’t get pulled out.
Then later on we found out that night, it was about 12 o’clock or something that everybody else
had left and we was left behind. I said, “What the hell are you talking about?” They said,
“Yeah. Hotel, Fox, and all these, they’re gone. We’re the only one’s left on the ground, even
Echo company, the rest of Echo Company’s gone.” I said, “Hell, what the hell are we going to
do here?” They said, “Well we just have to wait.” So we waited, waited, finally came time
when they called us all to the wall again because I was about...I wasn’t getting sleepy, I was too
scared I guess. I was looking for some of the walls and one of my friends came over and asked
me, “What’s wrong Gutierrez?” And I said, “I don’t know, man. Those son of a bitches done left us behind.” And he said, “Well, maybe we’ll get lucky and get the hell out of here.” And I said, “Well hopefully we will.” And we noticed there was no helicopters coming in for a while, we didn’t know what was going on because talking was going between the sergeants and the corporals and all these other ranking people and I was a PFC and we didn’t know what was going on. So we just kind of kept it like that during the night. I know it was pretty close to morning, a little before sunlight Sgt. [?] came over there and called the 48 man detail together and said, “We need for all of y’all to get around this building, we’re fixing to try to run through the Embassy.” And he said, “As we tap you or call your name, we want you to run into the building.” So we got into a wedge sort of deal and you know, we had the people they started to come over the fence and then Sgt. [?] said, “Gutierrez,” and I told my friend, I said, “So long, sucker, I’m getting out of here!” At least I thought I was, that’s when Sgt. [?] told me while I was going past him and he grabbed my shirt or my flack jacket and he said, “Come here!” And I said, “What do you want?” And he said, “Give me two of your magazines.” And I told him, “I already got one in my rifle. I don’t need two more.” And he said, “Give me two of your magazines.” So I gave him two of the magazines and he taped them together where I could flip one over and put the other one in and then he said, “You’re going to stay right here beside me.” And I said, “What the hell for? You said whoever!” And he said, “Just shut up. Just stay right there.” So I stood there, I didn’t know what was going on. Then I noticed it was getting less and less Marines out there and finally it got to the part where they told the Embassy Marines and the CIA and all them to go ahead and left the rest of the 48 man detail out there and that’s when Sgt. [?] says, “Gutierrez, it’s going to be up to you. You either get out of here alive or we all get killed.” And I asked him, “What do you mean by that?” He says, “You’re going to have to be able to hold those people up by yourself.” And I said, “Hell there’s too many people out there, I only got 60 rounds!” He said, “Well you’re going to have to make every one of those count.” I said, “What do you want me to do?” I said, “There’s kids out there, people out there, women and children!” He said, “It’s up to you, either shoot up in the air and if they don’t stop, you’ll have to shoot at them.” So when they started backing off finally we got enough down to just a few that’s when it all broke loose, all shit broke loose. I shot in the air and I told them to stop, I was yelling and they wouldn’t stop and they started coming at me and I just opened up on them, and I don’t know how many rounds I got off in the crowd, I finally flipped my magazine, shot
the rest of my magazine, I was running backwards shooting and running at the same time.

There’s this little deal out there and I was trying to jump it because of the ammo and the weight I had on me it was too heavy and I couldn’t get off the ground and I hit the sidewalk real hard and that’s when I felt something grab my…grab me by my flak jacket and haul me in. By the time I stopped I had already hit about halfway through the Embassy building on the floor and it had been Sgt. [?] and some other guy who grabbed me and threw me in there and closed the doors and I felt something hit my back and I didn’t even know what it was. In fact I didn’t even know what it was until that…we’s fixing to run into the elevator and they said, “Are y’all coming?”

And we’s fixing to run into the elevator and then we all got into the elevator and they said, “Hell no, what if they cut the electricity? We won’t be able to get out there!” So we all ran back out of the elevator and up the stairs and there was 11 stories and we was running, and I had a lot of weight and I never did figure out how in the hell I got up there with all that weight I was carrying, I was running and running, I kept running all the way to the top. That’s when Sgt. [?] said, “Gutierrez, I thought we had told you to get another flak jacket?” I said, “I did!” “Well that one’s got a big rip in the back.” And I never did know what caused it but I knew that before I fell or before they pulled me in something hit me in the back and I guess it was either a bayonet or something tried to cut me and the flak jacket kept me from getting hurt. When we got up there I hadn’t noticed what I had done; I had, you know, it was happening so fast, so quick, I didn’t even stop to think what I fired at. I was hoping I didn’t hit nobody but then when I got on top of the Embassy, one of the Marines that knew I was the last one, he was standing beside me and he said, “Gutierrez, come here. I want to show you something.” I was going over there, I’m not sure if it was Sgt. Parker or Sgt. [?] said, “Don’t go over there, Gutierrez. If you see that you’re going to remember it for the rest of your life. Don’t go over there.” Said, “Why not?” I asked them, “Why not?” He said, “You know what you did.” I said, “I didn’t mean to do it.” He said, “Well you did it. It’s part of your job anyway so just let it go. Don’t go over there.” For some reason I just couldn’t keep myself from going over there and I went over there and there’s…a guy said he had counted at least 20-30 people on the ground. I knew I had put them there because I was only one that shot. That morning, there was kids, women, children, and every since then I’ve felt like a coward because I ran out on them. Those people deserved to get out of there because they were part of the…some of the people who had worked for our government and our government had turned and run on them. Every since then I’ve hated those
pictures that I let you see. I don’t know, I just don’t like them. I guess my wife or anybody
knows it. I can’t even read them, I just really try to get rid of them. I told her as soon as it
happened what I needed [?] her. She said, “No, I’m going to keep them for the boys [?]. I don’t
want to see them around the house.” According to them I’m supposed to be a hero, I told her I
don’t feel like one. I feel like a coward running out on those people. And they told me that was
part of my job so I’ve had to live with that every since then. When I got out of the Marine
Corps, well, before I even got out of the Marine Corps I got into trouble because I was drinking a
lot. I got into trouble in the Marine Corps before I even got out and I got sent to the brig for 6
months. Somehow our 1st sergeant knew that I could almost take anything he threw at me so he
told me, “Gutierrez, go through this deal and you’ll get out in 3 months.” I went through it. And
I told him, “Since I’m out here I want the hell out of the Marine Corps.” I said, “This ain’t the
Corps that I used to know.” He said, “No, it’s changed. You need to get out of here.” So I went
through the course, I made it. After that I didn’t lack much getting out of the Marine Corps, I got
out. Before I…when I came home, before I went to Camp LeJune North Carolina I got in
trouble with a DWI. I had trouble sleeping so I just drank myself kind of to death. And when I
came back and went to North Carolina, my drinking kept going. I had trouble with my drinking.
Over there I got into trouble again. I got sent to the brig for messing up a sergeant’s car. I got
out of the Marine Corps and got two more DWIs for drinking. I just…I was having trouble with
my mom and dad because they wondered why I drank, they said, “Before you went into the
Marine Corps you hardly ever drank, now all you are is a drunk.” I said, “Well, that’s only,”
because I was only sleeping 2 hours a night, drinking the rest of the time. Anytime I could get
any money all I want to do is buy beer, liquor, and just stay drunk. I just couldn’t sleep like I
told her. My mom and my wife, me and my wife got married and then got divorced because I
couldn’t…we were expecting our first child when I was getting a divorce because I couldn’t take
it. She said she couldn’t live with me because I just drank and drank. And I told her that’s the
only way I could sleep, I can’t sleep. I remember which year was it I went to the VA and asked
them what was my problem, back then they didn’t know what post traumatic stress syndrome
was, or something, they denied me help or anything so I just kept drinking. I started having
trouble with my daughter and she had to go see a psychiatrist because for some reason I’ve never
been able to get around my children. I love them, and I support them, and if anybody touches
them I’ll help them but I can’t hug them, I can’t really be close to them. I can’t, I guess, be like
They want me to be. My grandchildren, it’s different. They kind of hate that because most of my love goes to my grandchildren and I can’t even touch them. I told them, “I love you, but I can’t...for some reason I can’t touch my boys or my girls.” A few years back they diagnosed me with post traumatic stress syndrome, which I’m being cured for now. I have to take medication, and my wife hates it because I’m always having to take drugs, always having to...she asked me, “Can’t you even live without it?” And I said, “Hey, at least I’m not drinking. But I guess I’ll have to live with these drugs for the rest of my life.” And she asked my doctor and he said, “Well, that’s the best we can do.” She said, “Well at least he’s a little calmer.” She said, “I wish she wouldn’t have to take medicine, but if he have to I guess that’s the way it’ll be for the rest of his life.” And she said, “Well at least it’s better than him drinking, so...” I think I’m getting along with them a little bit better. I still have problems and she hates it when I look at films on Vietnam and stuff like that because for some reason it seems like I’m still there. I always told her, “If I ever get a chance I’d like to go back and see what it’s like now.” And she says, “You’re crazy.” I tell her, “No, I think. I’d like to do that one of these days.” But I don’t know if I ever will, will or won’t go back and see what it’s like now to what I saw then. A lot of my friends, which my sergeant and all them said that it’s no place for nobody. It’s hell. For what little part I lived in Vietnam, I’m kind of glad I didn’t really see that much but then at the same time I kind of feel like a coward because there’s some guys who gave their lives and I don’t think people really appreciate what they did. I’ve gone to see the wall when it was in Amarillo, and I went looking for those guys that I knew had gotten blown up that night. I try to forget. Nobody forgets, it’s too hard, it’s too...just something that you’ve got to live with for the rest of your life. It’s kind of hard for my sons especially, but the day they read those papers they finally got it. I forget how many years of trying to get them. I felt like I guess I was lying because I couldn’t prove that that was...I knew what happened. Until I got these papers and finally I got them and they read them and they said, “We understand, dad.” And I said, “Nah. Just leave it, forget it.” So they’ve only seen them once and I told them that’s all they’re going to see them because I kind of want to forget about them.

End oral history interview #1

SM: This is Steve Maxner conducting oral history interview number 2 with Mr. Teodoro Gutierrez on the 8th of November, 1999 at approximately 2:10 in the afternoon. Southwest Collections Building in Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas. Mr. Gutierrez, if you would,
please, tell us about your expectations upon enlisting and whether or not you anticipated going to
Vietnam or was that something that was something of a surprise?

TG: Well, really it was kind of a surprise because really all I want to do was drop out of
high school. I had a teacher, Ms. Barnes, she had become…well, she was my teacher for about
2-3 years, I’ve known her for a long time. Then she became the counselor for the school. I was
going my books out of my locker to drop out of school, it was February ’74. She asked me if I
wouldn’t mind taking the tests, the military tests in October. “I don’t think I’ll pass it, I don’t
think I have enough education.” “Well it won’t cost you nothing to take it.” I said, “Okay.” So
I went in there that day, they were about ready to start taking one when I was getting ready to
check out of school, I went in there and I took it. I didn’t think I passed it but I did and they
asked me what branch of the service would I like to go in and I told them if I ever did military
service it would be the Marine Corps. So that’s when I really got interested in it and I didn’t
think I qualified high enough to go in, but according to the recruiter he said, “Well I think you’ve
passed it. You qualify. What do you want to go into?” I said, “Really infantry.” He said, “Are
you sure?” And I said, “Yes.” He said that’s about the only thing I could qualify with my
education because I was only half way through the 10th and I was having trouble going to school.
So when I, he said, “Okay, you’ll have to go to Plainview and we’ll test you one more time to
see if we can’t get your score higher.” And they tested me again and I did score high enough,
and finally they sent me to Amarillo to take my physical. I took my physical and I passed and at
that time the law was coming in where all you had to do was be 18 to be an adult and my father
didn’t want to sign so he sat there longer for a while. Then my birthday was coming up,
February 19th would be about 2-3 weeks later. A week before I turned 18 he finally decided to
go ahead and sign and he signed and told me if anything happened to me it wasn’t his fault. I
said, “Hey, it’s not your fault anyway.” So that’s when I decided to go in and I did join and on
February 19th I left for…my sister went and dropped me off, I believe it was on a Sunday. The
19th was on a Monday that year and I spent the Sunday with them. Then they dropped me off at
the bus station, I caught the bus to Amarillo and then in Amarillo I stayed there. I took some
more tests, physicals, and stuff like that, got ready to go to boot camp. And on the 19th they
finally sent me off to San Diego when I had just barely turned 18. I arrived in San Diego that
night which was really on the 20th because that’s what…I think that’s what my record showed. I
ended up in San Diego on the 20th but that’s the reason I joined. Me and dad weren’t getting
along too good and I kind of didn’t want to stay in school. But I always wanted to be a mechanic but I couldn’t afford to go to school, I mean, go to college and stuff like that. Dad had promised me if I learned how to be a mechanic and fix my car I could race it and I did. Fixed it up, had it running where I could race it Amarillo but he finally backed off and that’s what caused us to get into a big argument. I joined the Marine Corps thinking that Vietnam was over according to history of what was going on, you know, and everything had been turned over and it was over with, so. When I joined I didn’t even think I’d end up in Vietnam, I thought maybe some other place because that…I wanted to be an infantryman so…and they said that I was…cause I only enlisted for 2 years, they didn’t think I’d even go overseas! But as soon as I enlisted I somehow…got in on February 20th. Boot camp, that’s when it started, which I thought was…at first I thought it was…I never been through nothing like that. I mean, even when me and dad had problems I never had, you know, seen nothing like that. They were rude, they cussed at you, they kicked you, they…it didn’t matter what they did. Because they said all they promised you was one meal a day, one hour sleep, and that’s all you were going to get if you acted up, if you did stuff like that, which I thought at that time was rude and I didn’t see no need to it. As the training went on and we learned what we were supposed to and we noticed that there’s always some guys for some reason have trouble listening and when they’d pick up stuff we’d all have to pay for it. And he said, “You work as one, not as individuals. You work as a team now, not as individuals.” And they kept repeating that to us and they told us that from the time we get off that bus there were going to be our mother, our father, our sweethearts, and nobody to fuck with them and they didn’t hold back, the would tell you what the heck they wanted to! As far as language wise, they could kick you and do anything to you as long as they didn’t kill you I guess. A lot of them thought it was rude. We saw one guy that was beat up before we just barely got there, we hadn’t even got our haircut. Finally he told me, “You’re bullshit’s over with.” That’s the reason I got all beat up, because I answered back probably to them. I told them no nigger was going to tell me what to do and I got beat up. So we finally got our first haircut. The training started, it was hard. I went in weighed in at 125 pounds, 32” at the waist, that was in February the 20th. I think it was May 16th or something like that when I graduated, I was weighed in at 180, 28” at the waist. So I had gained weight but I had lost weight. I lost waist size. They told me that that’s the weight they wanted me to keep because I was able to run my PFT and I was more better. I could run faster, better, I could do my PFT which they
depended on that. Being physically fit to do the stuff. So they wanted me to stay at that weight, and from the time I’d be in the Marine Corps for the two years I’d have to keep that weight and keep the 28” waist. I wouldn’t be able to gain no weight on my waist. I could gain weight but not on my waist. So every so often they’d check us to make sure we’d stay on that weight and we got to Okinawa. In infantry training school we noticed it was harder. Instead of walking we would run. We’d always walk and run to classes and sometimes they were 2 miles, 3 miles away, it didn’t matter. We had to get there and if we were late we were…we’d have to run. If we were early, we’d walk. They made sure that you were physically fit and they pushed you and pushed you to your limits. Some guys couldn’t hack it there. They’d have blisters, they’d just say, “Pop it. Get it over with. Let’s go; we ain’t got time to be messing around.” So they were pretty hard on us. At first that’s what I thought but as time went in through the Marine Corps, I learned, you know. I thought, “Well, this is just a bunch of bull shit,” you know? But as you go through what they used to call the old corps, it was pretty hard. I kind of got attached to it because after a while I picked up rank and I saw things start happening. I could stay out drinking all night and be able to run a 10 mile run with out even budging, it wouldn’t even budge me. And I’d be drunk. And by the time I got through running the 10 mile run I’d be sober. Now at one time they clocked me, I had come in at 3 in the morning and reveille was at 4. I was just barely getting to bed and they woke us up and they made us run, and it was cold. And I ran a 10 mile run and I ran it within an hour and something, about 28-29 minutes. So they thought that a lot of us were in shape because of that. I noticed that every time they had us together they always competed, they always made sure. They wanted to know which were their fastest guys, which were their best guys. They always wanted to know…they’d send you out on patrols on your own. They’d send guys after you trying to pick on you, pick you up, try to see if they could find you and stuff like that. I noticed they kind of kept watching me. Because of my height I was pretty able to…easy to hide around stuff. They couldn’t find me sometimes, they would almost step on me before they knew I was there. But it was because of the training that they had given us at ITS, more than we had to have in Okinawa and our staff sergeant was on of the DI’s with the battalion I was with and he was the staff sergeant and some of the guys that were in the other platoons and they pushed us pretty hard. I think they…at sometimes I thought they were cruel. When it came down to the nitty gritty I think they were...at first, when you, the things went on in Vietnam, what went on, it didn’t hurt us that weren’t married as much as it did the
guys that were married. I think it did hurt them because of their kids, knowing that they had kids that age and they were leaving them out there and all that. I don’t know, I don’t think I’d ever want to go back in the Marine Corps again without the training I had, physically, mentally. Mentally I think was one of the problems because they beat you. They wanted you to chicken out and they tell you right to your face, “You coward, you faggot. I want you to chicken out. If you ain’t man enough, get out of here. We don’t need you in the Corps.” Some guys would say they’d rather be a faggot than get out of the Corps, and they wouldn’t. They kind of kept on. I think when it came down to the nitty gritty mentally we were higher because they said they don’t want no robots, they wanted a…there was a certain way they said that and I’ve always kind of stuck to that, you know. I’ve always told my kids they didn’t want robots, they wanted men to lead, physically fit, to serve their country which they…I think they did a pretty good job of it at first. When you go into the Marine Corps and you don’t understand what’s going on but when split seconds count, I’ve learned that…I don’t think the Corps, what I saw in Desert Storm and all these other things that have gone on, I told my son, “Man, the Marine Corps has gone to shit,” because they shouldn’t have lost that or they shouldn’t have done that, or… because they always told us, “If you’re going to run you’re going to get shot in the back so just stand there and fight and hold your ground and at least get shot in the front, don’t get it in the back.” I’ve noticed that the Marine Corps isn’t the same. I’ve talked to guys that served in Desert Storm and they told me the stuff they did, they were in the Marine Corps and I told them, “Man, that’s a bunch of bullshit. You ought to know better never to run because they’re going to shoot you in the back. Either way you go you’re going to die so you might as well die taking some with you than die alone,” you know. That’s why I think they pushed us, so I think that when it came to where I have to do what I had to do I didn’t stop to think about it till…I don’t think it hit me till about a month, 2 months after. We had gotten out of all this stuff and then I started to think about it and I really sat down and thought about what I had done and it finally started bothering me. Even before I was out of the Marine Corps I was having problems drinking. I couldn’t sleep at night. The guys said that I would yell at night, screaming, sometimes it would wake me up ask me what was wrong and I would tell them nothing. And the guys that had been there with me at the last minute said that “He’s going back everytime he does that, he’s going back. That guy’s…” I asked him, “What are you talking about?” He said, “That’s what happened when we went over there in Vietnam, he just keeps going back.” Back then I don’t think they knew what post
traumatic stress syndrome was, so I don’t think they really helped me or really knew what it was
so I just kept drinking and drinking till I started getting in trouble in the Marine Corps. I didn’t
get in trouble in the Marine Corps until I came back to the United States, but as soon as I came
back on vacation I got a DWI. I thought I was pretty lucky because the patrolman that arrested
me had already read about what I did in Vietnam and stuff like that and he was kind of leaning
on me and I got lucky so the judge let me out on a Saturday instead of on a Monday because he
knew I only had so many days left to stay home. They were pretty lenient on me, they were
alright, they…but I didn’t, at that time I didn’t know what was wrong and the judge asked me,
“Are you going to drink?” And I said, “Yes sir.” He said, “You know I could keep you in jail?”
And I said, “Yes sir.” He said, “If I turn you loose?” And I said, “Well that’s the only way I
could sleep.” I told him. That’s the only way I can sleep. He said, “I understand.” And that’s
all he said. I said, “Okay.” And he just let me go and I got lucky. So I went home. He kept my
license and he said, “You can pick up your license next Friday.” I thought he was going to, you
know, take my license away but he didn’t. He just…Friday when I went in I said, “Sir, I’m
going to leave Sunday,” he said, “I’m going to give you your license back. Have you taken care
of it with your probation officer?” And I said, “Yes sir,” and he said, “What did y’all fix up?” I
said, “Well, he told me to send the money, just keep writing the ledgers and that was it. And
about the time my probation would be up, I’ll be out of the Marine Corps.” And he said, “Well,
just take care of yourself. See ya later,” and I said, “Okay.” I was on probation for the last 6
months I was in the Marine Corps and when I got back into the Marine Corps I got back into
trouble again because of my drinking. I was getting to be hard headed. The only ones who
really knew what was going on was the guys that had served with me, they kept telling the new
captain, he was one of these captains that what you call the ‘New Corps’ that went to shit, and he
said, “Nah, he’s just acting this and that.” Even some of the lieutenants that had served with me
in Vietnam that were with Echo Company, or Hotel, or as far as the 2-4, they knew something
was wrong with me. Not just me, there was quite a few of them who had problems. They
wouldn’t pay attention to us. It’s like they said, they didn’t know what was going on, it was
just…so a lot of us were…I was thinking about going back in but that was when one of the
lieutenants that I knew from 2-4 said, “It’s not going to be worth it. They ain’t going to reenlist
you.” Because they, I guess they knew something was going on or something. They just kind of
wanted us out because we did love to drink and fight but they said, “You train a pit bull, he’s
going to fight. That’s all he’s going to know how to do.” So that’s the way we were trained, that’s what we knew how to do. But the new lieutenants, the new captains that were coming up, they didn’t know nothing about what the Corps was, the ‘Old Corps’ was. They kind of wanted to get rid of the ‘Old Corps’ and bring in the ‘New Corps’ and we weren’t meeting their standards and that’s when a lot of us, that’s when we decided, “Well, we’re out of luck,” where we thought we was going to make a career out of it. It’s changed. So we started, as soon as our time came up, we all started getting out.

SM: Do you keep in touch with any of those guys you served with in Vietnam?

TG: I’ve kept in touch with two that I know of, I’m trying to look the other guys up, but they’re…some of them don’t even want to…they’ll talk to you and all that, but they don’t want to remember what went on over there, they kind of…I know one of them from Lockney, I asked him if he’d sign a paper for me because I was having trouble through the VA to get some of my compensations and stuff, I still am. He said he didn’t even…he said, “Just leave it alone,” and I said, “Well that’s my problem, I can’t leave it alone,” and he said, “You know I’d back you up in anything else, but I can’t. I want to forget about that war,” he said, “I don’t even want to think about it anymore,” and I said, “Well it’s up to you. I just thought I’d ask you.” He said, “You got anything else you need, you call me,” and I said, “I will.” So we’ve kind of kept in touch. Then another guy from O’Donnell that was with Hotel Company, he’s doing alright. He’s got cancer and he’s…we keep up with each other every once in a while, talk to each other. I kind of keep from going over there with him because he still likes to hunt and stuff that we like to do and he has friends that have big old pastures and we like to go out there and kind of be alone, just bumping around, remembering the good old days. Because he has cancer and he can’t go very far and he starts having problems and I kind of stay away from him because that’s what I’ve really gotten into since I quit doing. I find out what’s wrong is hunting and my wife gets mad because I get out in the wilderness and it feels like I’m home and she can’t understand why and I say, “Well, that’s the way it is, that’s just the way life is.” But I get out in the wilderness and it’s just something, I like being out there alone. Have my rifle with me. It kind of reminds me of what I was doing, you know, it’s home. That’s all I’ve got to say. So she doesn’t understand. We’ve kind of had our problems about our marriage and stuff like that but like I told her, hey, my friends told her, he said, “You don’t know what he’s been through, so…you’ll never understand.” So I guess that’s what it is. Having problems with what I saw, what I did, I don’t
know, it’s kind of hard to explain. It’s something I didn’t expect in the Marine Corps. Like you could say, you expect to do something but you don’t know what the results are going to be later on and that’s what I’ve found and been having trouble with for the last 28 years or better. Having been able to cope with my fears, I guess you could say, whatever it is.

SM: When did you first go to the VA?

TG: I went to the VA back in ’70…I’m going to say ’78 or ’79. Back then they denied that it wasn’t service connected. They denied a lot of things because they didn’t know at that time what post traumatic stress syndrome was, but I had had a rash that I had had since rubber boat training that we had been training but they said that wasn’t related because they couldn’t find no records or nothing about it. So I left it alone, I didn’t even bother the VA anymore and my wife kept telling me, “Well, ask for this,” but I don’t want nothing to do with the VA. I just said fuck them, you know. And that’s the way I left it for a while. Then finally I started having trouble with my…well me and my wife have always had problems with our marriage because of my drinking, I had…for some reason I’d say the first 2-3 years I got out of the Marine Corps I could only sleep 2-3 hours and that’s because I was drunk. But once the beer and liquor wore off I’d wake up. I couldn’t go back to sleep and I’d have to walk around and start drinking again just to calm down, you know. And I kept that up for a long time and me and my wife ended up getting separated for about a year and I kept drinking, I kept doing stupid things, I think I had about 3-4 wrecks, and rolled cars over, did a lot of dumb stuff. My mom kind of wondered, “I don’t see how you haven’t killed yourself yet with all the dumb things you’ve done,” I said, “Well, I guess somebody don’t want me, huh?” She got mad and slapped me because I made a joke out of it. For some reason I didn’t fear death. I kind of learned to accept it. I always said if I lived or died I didn’t much give a shit anymore, I just…so that kept going on until my daughter turned about, let’s say about…it kept going on for about 15-16 years, something like that. Me and my wife would stay together, we’d get separated, we’d stay together…for some reason she kept hanging on. I think my daughter turned, I think, 15 or 16 and things started happening again. I kept drinking, and she had problems.

SM: Okay, so you’re daughter started having problems and that’s when you started seeking help through the VA?

TG: No, we had to take her to a deal called Long Term in Plainview. You don’t call them psychiatrists, they have another name for them. This company Excel that I work for have
their own people that they want us to go through, so after this guy Gutierrez who was born in the Philippines, me and him had a little…’cause I thought I was…they weren’t accusing me of nothing but they thought that maybe I was trying to misuse her or something or stuff like that, you know. They were pretty careful about what they were talking about. It didn’t upset me or nothing. That’s when they said, for some reason they asked me something about my history and I skipped Vietnam and that’s when my wife told them, “Nah, he’s not telling you the truth.” She doesn’t speak very good English but the guy, since he’s Filipino, he understood a little Spanish, so he asked my wife, “What are you talking about?” “He was in the Marine Corps and he kind of wants to skip that.” And that’s when he said, “Why do you want to skip that?” And I said, “Well, it doesn’t have to do nothing with this bullshit.” And he said, “Oh yes it does,” he says, “I want to hear your part about that,” and I said, “No, you ain’t going to hear nothing about it.” We kind of got into a little argument and finally my wife and him got me convinced to talk about it. Now, when I talked about it he noticed my voice changed, he said, “No, is something wrong with you?” And I said, “I told you shut the fuck up,” it wasn’t none of his business. He said, “Have you ever tried going to the VA?” And I said, “Fuck the VA, VA don’t give a shit about nobody.” And that’s when he said, “Well, you need help.” And I said, “Bullshit, I don’t need help from nobody!” So I told him, “You just take care of her and to hell with me,” you know. He said, “Huh uh, I ain’t going to do that,” and I said, “Well that’s your problem. They ain’t going to take me to no classes or anything.” I said, “You help her and my wife. That’s it.” And somehow my wife and my father got me convinced to take another course and when we did they suggested that why wouldn’t I talk to the VA? I said, I told them, “Alright, I’ll give it a try.” So I went back, I didn’t want nothing to do with the VA, they denied me I would say 2-3 times. I really didn’t care about it anymore, in fact I didn’t even know that they had found out what post traumatic stress syndrome was, so that’s one of the reasons I didn’t want to go back. Then I decided and I went back. When I did go back it’s when I talked to this guy, Frank Reyes and he said that just by the way I talked as soon as I started talking about Vietnam my voice changed. He said, “You do have problems.” He said, “Well we’ll have to run tests on you,” and stuff like this and that. I said, “Well I’ll see what I can do about taking off of work,” and he said, “No, you can take medical leave,” and stuff like that and I said, “Well, I’ll see.” So he set me up to come up here to Lubbock and get some tests run on me. When they were running some tests they did diagnose me with post traumatic stress syndrome and they also found out that
there’s…they’re kind of watching my liver. They don’t know what’s wrong, it’s got something in there that’s giving me problems. It’s a little spot in there and we don’t know if it’s going to stay or it’s going to get worse. We need to keep an eye on it. So every 6 months they’re bringing me in and checking my liver, checking my weight, my cholesterol, stuff like that. They ask me how is my temper and my temper really hasn’t changed that much. As long as I take these pills I’m alright but I hate being on pills all the time. Like I tell my wife, I get tired of it, you know. I guess if that’s what I gotta do, I gotta do it. But I’ve been a little better off since I quit drinking, I’m on about my 3rd or 4th year now without having a drink, so I think I’m doing alright. I’ve kind of enjoyed it not having to drink like I did, you know. Every once in a while I still have my nightmares, but I’ve been able to cope with them a little better. I think I’ve worked a little bit better with my family trying to get along with them. Things are changing, it just takes time.

SM: So do you think the VA takes better care of people now?

TG: Well compared to before…

SM: You’re first experience was kind of negative and it seems like now they are more helpful.

TG: They are trying, it seems like some are trying harder than others. I mean, it’s like basically, what happened to me, it’s hard because I waited too long. I lived with the problem too long. When they diagnosed me with post traumatic stress syndrome, one thing I was real glad about was Danny Lara was Hispanic because my wife asked him, “Well, will he ever change?” He said, “No. He’s lived with it too long. There’s really no cure for it. The only thing we can do is give him pills and it’s just like if he was drinking but it’s the only thing that will calm him down so he won’t get rowdy or stuff like that.” So she said, “So he’ll never change?” and he said, “Oh he’ll change.” They were trying to give him a compensation and we’ve had troubles and just today I found out that we have another problem that we have to go back and have to redo this all over again and it’s just one thing after another. Like they said, there’s been guys who take up to 10-13 years. He says, “You guys don’t deserve this, but what can we do? That’s the way the government is. They’re still trying to deny y’all that right. The thing I like about it is they’re trying. I think some of them are really trying as hard as they can, but they make mistakes, so. I kept telling my wife, “Well I might learn to live with it, I’ll just try to do my best and make things work.” But I do have a different attitude, yes. You know, like some of it, and
some of it is just the federal government the way things have to be done and the way they want things done, so we have to live with that. And I think they are trying as hard as they can, they do make mistakes, and when they do it costs us, so. But I’m getting along with them. I have problems, you know, when I have problems I can call them up and they’ll try to get me in one way or another, or get me my medication. There’s one time they pulled me and my wife up for a whole week because I was getting my headaches and I was having problems and they worked with me. They really did, I was real happy with them. I guess I’ve kind of learned to live with it, you know. It’s changed. Things are changing and maybe, hopefully, for the best. But I think if I work at it hard enough it should be where we can work this out because he said I’ll never go back the way I was. Maybe I can change enough to even live with myself. That’s what we’re working on right now and it’s kind of hard. Especially people who don’t understand what went on or what we did, you know. So it’s been pretty hard, it’s been…I don’t know every time I have problems there’s something I can’t think about. Like training and stuff like that, that helped a lot, you know? A guy talked to us, told us that I started to think, you know. It could be worse. It kind of keeps me going, you know? Get along with my wife a little bit better, my kids, and then hopefully my grandchildren. That’s the reason I decided to do this, because they couldn’t understand what it was or what was going on to now.

SM: This concludes interview number two with Teodoro Gutierrez.

** Mr. Gutierrez would like to include a special thank you to his nephew, Armando Manjares who helped him with the review of this transcript.