

Sir, let's begin with your name and could you spell out your last name.

Mr. Velasquez: My name is Johnny Velasquez.

What was your rank during the time you served in Vietnam?

Mr. Velasquez: Sergeant First Class; E-7.

Was that through the whole duration?

Mr. Velasquez: I was promoted to E-7 while I was in Vietnam on my first tour.

What did you start off as when you were in Vietnam, E-6?

Mr. Velasquez: Staff Sergeant, E-6.

What unit did you serve with?

Mr. Velasquez: I was Bravo Company 2/502nd. My second tour I went back to Bravo Company 2/502nd until I got wounded for the last time and then I wound up with snipers and I taught a class at the; I can't recall the screaming eagle...SERTs. It was the reception training center when new arrivals come into Vietnam. I was teaching a leadership class there. That is what I wound up doing until I went home.

A little bit of background; before you joined the Army what type of schooling did you get?

Mr. Velasquez: I was born and raised in San Francisco, California. I went to school there and I got my Bachelors Degree while I was in the service.

What type of background were your parents?

Mr. Velasquez: My parents; my father was a medal analyst for Bethlehem Steel and my mother was a house wife.

Any brothers and sisters?

Mr. Velasquez: I have six brothers and two sisters and I am the oldest.

Any military experience that your brothers or sisters had?

Mr. Velasquez: I had two brothers that were in the Marine Corp during the Vietnam Conflict.

With what was happening in Vietnam were you pro US involvement in the war?

Mr. Velasquez: Yes I was.

Could you explain further?

Mr. Velasquez: Well, first of all let me say this. I did 10 ½ years in the Army.

That would be previous to Vietnam?

Mr. Velasquez: Previous and to the end. I was discharged in May of 1972. During that time I was; well I come from the old school and it was God country and my country right or wrong. Talk about Philosophy my views have changed somewhat during and after the Vietnam Conflict. I don't know that it changed that much but it did change a little bit. I was wounded four times over there, twice for each tour that I was in Vietnam. I did see some things that I didn't agree with, but for the most part, yes I was pro military.

So you enlisted?

Mr. Velasquez: I enlisted. I enlisted the day John F. Kennedy was voted into office on November 7, 1960.

So you actually took a skills and an IQ type test for induction in the Army?

Mr. Velasquez: Yes I did.

What was your job in the military in your unit?

Mr. Velasquez: Well I was supposed to go to missiles and that is what they assigned me to. I was adventurous, I wanted to go Airborne. I wanted to become a paratrooper. There wasn't any room for that if I wanted to stay on active in an airborne unit so I changed my MOS to Infantry.

That also led to when you were teaching snipers; or you weren't teaching snipers you were part of the snipers?

Mr. Velasquez: I was part of the sniper team in Vietnam.

Oh ok. Where did you do your basic training?

Mr. Velasquez: Fort Ord, California.

Fort Ord, California. Back in the early 60s what was your basic training like?

Mr. Velasquez: It was pretty vigorous. As a matter of fact I just saw a documentary not too long ago; I believe it was on 20/20. It may have been one of the documentaries on the television programs about how basic training was. I watched it and I commented to my wife, I said, "You know there are some of the things that haven't changed but overall, I felt this is my own personal opinion, I felt that basic training back then was a lot more vigorous than what it is today."

Basic training back then you would feel prepared you more for a war type situation than you would say now?

Mr. Velasquez: I don't know that it would prepare me for a war situation. I think what it prepared you for was self discipline and just to get on with the military life if you will. It prepared you for that because I think in our generation and I only have to deal with that. Our generation was a lot more stricter when it started changing in the 60s. I came just as that generation in the 60s started to get in. I guess I was part of that too but I wasn't home. I was in the military.

Previous to Vietnam what types of places did you serve in?

Mr. Velasquez: I served with the 101st Airborne. I went to jump school at Fort Campbell. I served with the 101st 3/187 and the 502nd. Then I went to Germany and did a stint in Germany. I came back to Fort

Campbell because they wanted to start a training center there and I became a drill sergeant there at Fort Campbell. We did basic training and I trained recruits there in basic. That was part of the Cold War until I left for Vietnam but the division went back to the division, back on jump status in mid 1967 after I finished with the drill sergeant; my commitment, and then I went to Vietnam with the division.

How did you enjoy your time as what you would say a teacher as a drill sergeant?

Mr. Velasquez: I look at that experience as very rewarding; very, very rewarding. I remember the men, the young boys if you will, coming in and greeting them at the reception station and being with them I guess it was a period of 8 weeks at that time. I can't remember. I think it was 8 weeks. I watched them mature during those 8 weeks into soldiers, if you will. I think the biggest enjoyment I got from training young men, because women didn't serve then. They were WACS at Fort Aniston, Alabama; that's where they were. The best feeling I got was the parents coming up to me and thanking me for turning their boy into a young man.

Before you went to Vietnam did you participate in any stateside or overseas maneuvers before going to war or did once you touch down you were just straight into combat?

Mr. Velasquez: Well, I did some maneuvers with the 101st when I went back with the division from being a drill sergeant. It really wasn't much. We did some jungle warfare training and then I had gone down to Panama at jungle school and did that training so I was pretty much familiar with....

Was that a mandatory thing before you went?

Mr. Velasquez: No, that was volunteer.

You obviously joined the unit before you arrived overseas. What was your thinking the days leading toward going overseas to fight in the conflict?

Mr. Velasquez: One of the biggest feelings that I had was being such a young man and I believe I was about 23 years old. Actually I was an old man when I go there at 23 but I was going over there as a platoon sergeant and they told me that I was going to get a rifle platoon. I had this enormous responsibility that I was going to have for my people, my platoon, and the responsibility of me making the wrong or right decision that may cost some lives. That really carried me. I thought about it and I said, "My God that is an awful responsibility for somebody my age. I'm just too young to have that responsibility." But I got kicked in the butt and said move on. It's yours, you got it, you assumed the responsibility of accepting that rank and that is what you are going to do. That is exactly what I did. I think overall now after my second tour there is no body in my platoon that was killed. I have had them wounded and some seriously wounded. Some lost limbs but I never had a man killed. To that day I thank God Almighty that he granted me my wish. I tell you right after 1968 I was transferred to the 199th light infantry brigade because of the DEROS problem; DEROS meaning everybody can't leave at the same time so you are going to have to transfer people around. I probably saw more combat with that unit than I did with the 101st during TET. During TET I was with the 101st in 1968. That was one; I guess you got baptized right away.

So you were there during the TET offenses?

Mr. Velasquez: Yes sir.

Even though it's a little further ahead what was that situation like when you were there?

Mr. Velasquez: Well I remember we were up by the Michelin rubber plantation and we were told we got a 72 hour stand down, it was a cease fire. That night we saw the rockets coming into Bien Hoa Air Force Base and we thought that maybe it was a celebration for TET or the Chinese Lunar New Year or the Asian Lunar New Years. Then we were told to get our stuff ready that we were going on a night eagle flight. The choppers were coming to take us in and that Bien Hoa was being hit and we were going to go down there and extract the enemy. From Bien Hoa which is approximately 25 miles north of Saigon; we moved from Bien Hoa into Saigon and we were doing city street fighting or building fighting.

How long did that last?

Mr. Velasquez: That lasted probably about a week and a half or two weeks.

In all that time in that sort of combat what was your biggest fear, in you dying or your men that were serving with you?

Mr. Velasquez: You have to understand that any man or any person is going to be prejudice to a certain extent. Sure I wanted to survive. You have got the me syndrome. It's me first. But after you get over that it's, well wait a minute, its if I am going to survive I have got to have my men survive. Yes it was I pretty much knew that I was going to get killed. I pretty much knew that. That was a far gone conclusion. My next step was to make sure my men were alright. My platoon leader was hit and I became a platoon leader and we went on from there. Yes, I cared about my men but I didn't show them a lot of compassion because I had an old Command Sergeant Major, and I am not going to mention his name and he will be here at the reunion, I remember him telling me. I asked him one time, I said, "What's it like?" He was in World War II, Korea, and he was on his way to Vietnam. He said, "Boy, I tell you what! You keep your men pissed off. That is the first form of leadership. You keep them pissed off. When they aint got nothing else to do, you make them tear that bunker back down and build it back up because I guarantee you when you get into a fire fight they are going to be ready!" and they were.

Even though they might have had maybe a problem with you they still find that respect for you?

Mr. Velasquez: They still had that respect; they would come to me with their personal problems. I was fair. That is the first thing you learned in leadership. You are fair with your men. Make sure you take care of their needs and anything else works out by itself.

What kind of equipment and arms did you train with or did you operate in combat with?

Mr. Velasquez: Well we had a rucksack that was probably about 75-80 pounds that we used to carry. Even though I was a platoon sergeant platoon leader I wasn't required to carry that but then again that is part of leadership. You have to understand that. If the men see you carrying that they are not going to be complaining all that much about themselves. They do complain that is part of the process but hey if the old sergeant can do it so can we. So I carried. I carried the rounds for the machine guns and stuff like that and carried the extra grenades and the extra C4 Claymores and my personal stuff which didn't amount to much but we did.

What type or rounds did you have to carry?

Mr. Velasquez: 7.62 for the M16.

None of the bigger; I'm trying to remember like the cal's and all that.

Mr. Velasquez: 60 caliber machine gun, we had that. I was in the heavy weapons platoon. We had mortars, 81s. We carried those plus the mortar plates. They were pretty heavy. It was a pretty heavy rucksack. Understand what we wore was just a pair of pants, socks, boots, and a shirt and a towel. We didn't have any underwear. We didn't wear undershorts and we didn't wear a t-shirt because of the humidity. In Vietnam, especially in the III Corps area which is the Mekong Delta area, it was anywhere from 95 to over 100 degrees every single day every day of the year.

In fact one of my questions later on was how did you deal with weather conditions especially in the Vietnam area? Were you guys prepared for that?

Mr. Velasquez: Well when you first came in country you couldn't get enough water. You were drinking water like; I mean you were just drinking it as much as you can. It would take you about a month to become acclimatized. After that month I would be lucky if I drank a canteen or canteen and a half of water a day. The reason I drank that much water was because I knew my body had needed it. I was sweating it. The towel was a good source of keeping the bugs off of you and keeping the sweat from rolling down your neck so you wore it around you. It was a necessary part of your equipment that old OD towel. It may have stunk. The only time you washed it was when you crossed the river but you wore it.

When was your first combat experience? Was it the TET offensive or was it previous to that?

Mr. Velasquez: Well it was a couple of minor fire fights. We ran into so many enemy activity in some of the villages, I don't remember which, but that TET was the major. When I was transferred from the 101st and went to the 199th we had all the way up until June, July. It was almost an endless type of combat situations.

How big was the perimeter area that you covered? I know that you said 25 miles outside of Saigon but were you particularly in that area or did you just move around there?

Mr. Velasquez: We would move in what they call a III Corp area. You had the I Corp which was up in northern Vietnam; you had II Corp which was in Central Vietnam, and III Corp which was in southern Vietnam. That covered from the II Corp from Pleiku I believe all the way down into the Mekong Delta. In the Mekong Delta you had nothing but that was your big rice producing areas. You did have a lot of Viet Cong hamlets; Viet Cong sympathizers in those hamlets. We did a lot of what they call search and destroy missions back in those days.

In fact later on I will probably ask about civilians but how did the civilians take to the American soldiers?

Mr. Velasquez: Well it is hard for me to express how the civilians felt because when I encountered a civilian probably 99% of the time was out in the field in the villages. How would you feel if I go into your hamlet and start searching your house without a search warrant if you will or looking into your private things in your hamlet, or in your house? Sure you wouldn't like it! I don't know that they ever were Viet Cong sympathizers or rallying for the government of South Vietnam. They probably just wanted to be left alone by both factions. We ran into many hamlets that had stored ammunition and weapons from communist China that we knew right away that they were Viet Cong sympathizers and we would take them or if we have the evidence that there is an abundance of rice; more rice than that village needed. So we knew that that was Viet Cong food.

How did others in your unit react to combat?

Mr. Velasquez: You mean the first fire fight that you ever were in or how did they react overall?

I guess you could expand on maybe the first time and then as time went on how they dealt with it.

Mr. Velasquez: Well, my first time; my uncle who was in World War II in Europe and he told me, "You know your first baptism, and I'm using his words, your first baptism of fire is going to make or break you. But remember this, because somebody doesn't want to react because you are scared or yellow or afraid, that is a normal thing that a person is going to encounter. It may take you a few seconds but you are going to wake up and you are going to get to it." I remember we hit an ambush and all of a sudden machine gun fire started. We hit the ground and I don't think; if I could have gone underneath the Earth I would have don't that but I couldn't get any closer to the ground than what I was. I said that the next bullet was going to hit me in the head. I noticed that the people that were around me were looking at me, "What you going to do Sergeant, what are you going to do?" That is when I broke my spirit. I'm not a hero but I did what I had to do. Afraid, yeah; we were all afraid! Every day that we were over there we were afraid. Hell aint nobody wanted to die. I saw a lot of them die.

Was there at times a lot of stated confusion with our men compared to their men where people are just shooting and just running around frantic?

Mr. Velasquez: There were a couple of situations like that where the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese; now the North Vietnamese you had to understand was regular Army as we were. The Viet Cong were civilian in South Vietnam. Later on in 1968 I guess at the start of TET is when the North Vietnamese really started coming in and fighting along with the Viet Cong. These were well trained individuals. They would stand there and fight whereas the Viet Cong would snipe at you and then run away and you couldn't find them.

Okay that's good to clarify. The Viet Cong were actually civilians?

Mr. Velasquez: They were civilians; South Vietnamese civilians. The National Liberation Front; that was their organization in South Vietnam. They were Viet Cong communist sympathizers of North Vietnam. Their ideal was to have North Vietnam as one and they agreed with North Vietnam so there was a little...from what I understand.

So you considered them what you would say more dangerous because they could probably mix in with...?

Mr. Velasquez: Well that is what I was going to tell you in the first part when you asked me that. When you are dealing with civilians; in Vietnam and especially in a combat unit you are dealing with the enemy a majority of the time. A lot of times you are in a free fire zone. Anybody caught in that area its shoot to kill and then if they were alive afterward you ask questions. I was kind of leery about that. That was kind of one of the things that made me open my eyes a little bit. Here was an old woman one time and I got, if you want to hear that, she came out from the village and it was a free fire zone. I was told, well, any volunteers to go get her, to shoot her. I said, "I will take care of it." I didn't want to shoot her. I didn't want to shoot her. I knew what she was out there for, to get food for her family out in the field. The vegetables were growing. Anyways I didn't shoot her. I popped a few rounds there but you don't know who the enemy is. They were all around you. This is the first time; you have to understand, not the first time, but the biggest time that the United States was involved in guerrilla warfare. I mean previous wars you had a front line. You didn't have that in Vietnam. I mean we could go down to Saigon and a little kid could be riding down the street and lob a grenade at your jeep and you are dead. So you didn't know the enemy. My philosophy was you trust no one in Vietnam. If they were Vietnamese I didn't trust them. It kept me alive.

But you learned to shoot first and ask questions later?

Mr. Velasquez: No, no! You had to get a great deal of common sense in what you were doing out there.

I didn't want to state that that is what you did.

Mr. Velasquez: No, no, no, no. I understand what you are saying. You had most of the men get out there. When they got to Vietnam they were anywhere from 18 to 21 years old. They were just fresh out of high school. Some out of college and got drafted. The majority of the infantry that were in Vietnam were not volunteering for infantry. They were assigned infantry because that is where they were needed. These kids, boys, 30 days in country out in the bush grew up and had a mentality of a 35 year old man after one month in country. That is how fast we grew up over there. Yeah they had a lot of common sense. A lot of them didn't want to be there. I think the vast majority of the soldiers didn't want to be in Vietnam. Then you had some dissension within the ranks; the blacks because Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated in the United States and here they are in Vietnam. "Well what is going on here?" Mohamed Ali was drafted and he rejected the draft. His thing was, "I never done nothing to the Viet Cong, why should I go over there and fight them?" So we had a lot of dissension starting but now that is where the leadership had to really work and calm that situation down. Drugs, yeah; drugs were prevalent over there. You can get a vile of Heroine that may have cost them \$5 over there back in the old days, and it would probably cost you \$85 here; probably \$1000 today I don't know. That is the way it was. That is the way life was in Vietnam. You had some good, you had some middle and you had some bad just like I guess in every combat situation; every war. That is my only war. You had a lot of lonely periods where people were down and when it came up to where you had to do something they didn't want to go and you kind of had to force them to. If I can give you my loneliest time in my life probably in my life as of today was being in Vietnam during Thanksgiving and Christmas; specifically Christmas. I don't think I could ever get any lonelier. Everybody wants to be with their family during the holidays and here I am in the jungle. Nobody gives two shits about you.

How many Christmas' and Thanksgivings' did you spend over in Vietnam?

Mr. Velasquez: Two. I had two separate tours in Vietnam.

Your free time and how you spent it, did you already have your; were you already married then?

Mr. Velasquez: Yes, I was married before I went to Vietnam my first time.

How did you spend that free time that you got away?

Mr. Velasquez: Write letters and think about my children, my wife, my family, my mom and dad, brothers; you know, just how it was back home and how nice it would be to be back home. We didn't call it home back then. We called it the world because home was the world.

In fact I don't think I caught it at the beginning, how many children do you have?

Mr. Velasquez: I have three; two sons and a daughter.

Did you already have them all before you went?

Mr. Velasquez: I had two sons when I was at Vietnam my first time and my daughter was born in between my second tour.

(Switch tapes)

We got to talk while we were off camera with ____ so would you say that area was your toughest battles?

Mr. Velasquez: No, no, the second tour in Vietnam I would have to say was pretty light as to 1968 down in the Delta. I think all of Vietnam during 1968 was pretty heavy combat; all of it. But in 1971, when I got there in the 1970s, September 1970, it was starting to wind down. Units were being disbanded and people were being sent home early. Unfortunately I was not that lucky. I did a whole year.

Did you, yourself, have trouble dealing with combat; loss of appetite, sleep, and all that?

Mr. Velasquez: During or after?

Actually both. How about during and while you were there and maybe after.

Mr. Velasquez: There was one situation, May of 1968. We ran into three North Vietnamese regiments that were dug in, in this one village. We were told to go to the fire base that was on the other side of the village but go through the village which took us two weeks to get through that village. That is probably the only thing; well I'm not going to talk about that too much. It bothers me in the fact that the North Vietnamese were leaving because they had run out of supplies; the North Vietnamese that were still alive. This was like at 3 o'clock in the morning. I grabbed an M60 machine gun trying to wake up my machine gunner. Every 5th round is a tracer. Now these people that were leaving were about 100 meters from us and you could see them if you were lying down looking up at the treetops you could see them moving. They were not running but they were walking at a fast pace and kind of crouched over. They weren't crawling. I used that machine gun to kill as many as I can. I can't tell you how many I killed. But to this very day it does bother me and that is as far as I am going to go to that.

With your unit, how was your unit cohesion at either time that you were there?

Mr. Velasquez: In 1968 when I first got there you got to remember that the division had just gotten over there so they were rough, ready, and willing to go. After a few months it starts to stick to them "What am I doing here and why do I got to do this?" We did a lot of operations at a place called the Black Virgin Mountain. It's in the Tay Ninh Province I believe in the III Corp area. In the Black Virgin Mountain area it was like the North Vietnamese owned the middle of the hill, we kind of owned the top of the hill, and we would always progress to go up on top of the hill and we would have to fight our way. They would leave and come back. We were probably 3 miles or less than that from the Cambodian border. Back then in 1968 we would get fired on. We would get artillery fire from the North Vietnamese or mortar fire from the North Vietnamese from the Cambodian side, but we could never fire over there. It was forbidden. In 1969 we invaded, finally, Cambodia but I wasn't there. That was kind of demoralizing to a lot of the troopers. They can fire on us but we can't fire on them. A lot of the men were disgruntled because they felt that their hands were being tied to fight this war. I believe a lot of our leaders hands were tied in fighting this war because, the theory was, the politicians were running the war and not the military. So why are we there? Why did 58,000 men get killed over there? For what? I don't feel that we lost Vietnam. People will tell you that you lost Vietnam. The first time we lost a war I don't feel that we lost it at all. It was the way that we were told to operate.

So as a group, because of the disarray that was happening around the unit as a group coming together wasn't as close?

Mr. Velasquez: No, in 1971 when I went back to Vietnam for my second time I had no comparison at all to 1968; absolutely no comparison. The men, all they wanted to do was go home. They didn't want to fight. They were there just to be there. If they had to fight it was to keep themselves alive and go home.

But I got to say this, the 101st, as proud as they are, back in World War II kept up that spirit. A lot of that spirit was there. Sure there was a lot of grumbling but if they had to fight the 101st was there to fight. They did a lot of battles.

How well was your unit supplied during combat?

Mr. Velasquez: It was, I would say, above average. We may not have gotten three hot meals a day and we never did and we never expected that. We had our C-rations. We were lucky to get one hot meal a day and that was our night time supply ships; the one bringing supplies at night time or in the early evening and we would get our hot meal then. It was like when we went in for a 72 hour stand down back in base camp, I always looked at it as the last dinner or the last supper because who was going to be missing the next time you had a 72 hour stand down? Some guys weren't going to be there. Value of life meant nothing to us. Value of life meant nothing to us, the infantry, because you knew that the next time you jumped on that chopper to head out for the next mission somebody was going to die. We had that in mind so value of life meant nothing. That is the way we thought.

I was going to ask, did you lose a close friend in battle?

Mr. Velasquez: I lost several close friends in battle.

Do you want to answer a question because I was going to ask how you dealt with the loss or would you rather stay away from that?

Mr. Velasquez: Well I've lost Lloyd Trippet, he was a platoon sergeant; an E-7. He was probably a couple of years from retirement. He kind of took me under his wings being as young as I was. He was killed with a machine gun. Richie Carnes was his second tour back there and he was killed on his second tour. There's a lot of; Ackerman, he was killed. I kind of feel, although I know I am not, that it was fate. But I kind of feel responsible for this guy Ackerman getting killed because I outranked him. I took over the platoon and he went on the Cav unit and his armored personnel carrier that he was in was hit by an RPG rocket and he was killed instantly. I really feel bad, even today, and when I went to the wall at Vietnam he was one of the first ones that I looked for. So yeah you feel, you can't help but feel when your friends were killed over there and even not your friends. I remember one guy coming up to me last year and saying, "You know I remember one thing you did and I will always remember that. We were just getting there and this one team went out on a mission and they were gone about 30 minutes and one of the guys was killed. They brought him back and you put him in a body bag and you made the sign of the cross." He said, "You know something Johnny, I will never forget that!" I said, "You remember that?" He said, "Yeah I do!" I never knew the kid. I remember his name and who he was but I never knew him. But yeah you feel a personal loss. I'm sure that World War II people have theirs and the Korean have theirs but there is something like a special bond with Vietnam Veterans because of the fact that we weren't really; the general public of the United States didn't really accept us. You didn't really want to wear a uniform when you came home when you were on leave or something like that or you were traveling. You kind of wanted to travel in civilian clothes and be sort of incognito because of the comments that we would get and the stares we would get.

For me personally asking you, why do you think the country felt that way towards the soldiers when it was really a government problem; you would think a higher up government problem? You know when they are talking about soldiers because the soldiers are being told what to do anyways.

Mr. Velasquez: This is true. I think the philosophy in the United States changed with the young kids that were going to college and didn't even have to go to college. They were taking that moral stance as, "Wait a minute, we are the people, and we are the government. Why are we over there? Why are we there

supporting another government that's corrupt? Why are we there?" So there is where the demonstrations came in to being started at the colleges and continued to spread out throughout the country. Even though we were soldiers like you said, we went over there to do a job and what we were told to do. We did it honorably. How would you feel if you were there in combat and all of a sudden you see a newspaper or you might see a television where you see the American flag being burnt or somebody carrying the Viet Cong flag and you are there detesting that flag because that is your enemy and you see the people back home. This brought a lot of dissension of troops in Vietnam. What the heck are we here for? What's going on back home? We were kept, not away from, we got the news. We knew what was happening. But we were kind of like in our own world, in our own shell. Think of when you left country, you got your orders and you are in your jungle fatigues and your jungle boots that are still slimy and all messed up from walking in the jungle and everything and you still got your stinky; you were lucky if you got a change of clothes, to catch that plane in Bien Hoa or Tan Son Nhut or Cam Ranh or Da Nang whichever you were going home in and get off the plane. Where I did, what is the Air Force Base in California, Travis Air Force Base and get off of that and all of a sudden, I'm not saying me because I was still on active duty, but here are guys that are getting discharged and say 24 hours after they arrive in country they are home back in USA town USA and all of a sudden what is going on? It's peace and quiet and two days before they were fighting in the jungles. There was no psychological training for them. Nobody for them to talk to, to prepare to get out of the service. There is where you had a lot of problems. Understand this, and I am on this I can't remember his name, but he wrote a book called *Stolen Valor*. I read that book and he went after guys who claimed that they were Medal of Honor winners and Purple Heart winners and they were in Vietnam when in fact they were in Okinawa. They never went to Vietnam. He exposed them. One of the things that reporters were asking him because he was one of the guys in this state here with President Bush when he wasn't even Governor then, but they dedicated the Vietnam Memorial here in the state of Texas. The reporters came up and asked him, "We would like to interview, can you point us to some Vietnam Veterans?" He pointed to a lot of people that were wearing business suits that were Vietnam Veterans and he said, "No, no, we don't want to talk to them. We want to talk to those guys over there wearing fatigues." He said, "You know probably half of those have never been to Vietnam. If you look at the statistics approximately 90-95% of the Vietnam Veterans who came back to this country are very successful in whatever field they chose to be in. They are not the "unfit" soldier who came back to this country and started on drugs and started killing people." Sure we've got some but I don't think it was that big of a deal.

For yourself how were you able to deal? Did you have to go to see a psychiatrist or psychologist?

Mr. Velasquez: Well my wife says, "You know you are a dummy. You jumped out of a fire and into the frying pan." I became a policeman in San Francisco which I still am. I'm getting ready to retire in a couple of years. I dealt with it in my own way. I think the policeman as far as mentality is probably the same as a soldier's mentality. You know you are macho and you can solve your problems yourself because you are out there solving everybody else's problem. Me being a platoon sergeant I am solving my men's problems. Now as a policeman I am out there solving the public's problems you know, so I can solve my problems. I don't think it hit me until about 20 years later; 23 years later. I met a man in Vietnam who was coming over here at his reunion. He told me he said, "You are going to live. You are going to make it." This was in 1967, no 1968. He said, "I am so confident that you are going to make it here is my dog tags. You give them back to me when you get back home." He lived in San Jose and I live in San Francisco which is 50 miles away. I had them in my footlocker for a number of years. Finally one day, 23 years later, I finally, I looked him up on the police computers which I shouldn't have and I found him and I started typing up the letter. It took me about the 20th letter. I said, "The hell with it let me type it up and get rid of it!" So I typed it up and sent it and he got a hold of me and we have been like brothers ever since. He is here now. His name is Hank Cisneros. I wouldn't know him if he walked right by me. He was a young man then and you know we are up in age now. So we just started crying and started hugging. I used to walk with my wife and I said, "You know I wished I could tell you a lot of things but I

can't." I started opening up to people. I think with that and being with the 101st Airborne Division Association here, talking to people that had been there and done that and can relate to me has been therapy for me. I don't know that I ever needed a psychiatrist. My wife would probably tell you yeah but no. I was able to deal with a lot of my problems myself but talking to other people that would understand what I was saying was therapy for me.

His name was Hank Cisneros?

Mr. Velasquez: He was in the 199th light infantry brigade. Right after I got transferred to the 199th from the 101st.

Actually was one of your dealing processes, you said you went back to Vietnam....?

Mr. Velasquez: The second tour, two years later.

Oh so you haven't been there, I'm just talking about since....

Mr. Velasquez: Oh have I been back to Vietnam since the war?

Yes.

Mr. Velasquez: No. I did two combat tours in Vietnam.

For a minute there when you were talking I thought there was a hint there that you had gone back on your own years later.

Mr. Velasquez: No. Some people have gone back to Vietnam and I don't know that I want to go back simply because too many bad memories there. I don't know if I even have any good memories. I'm sure I had a few good memories. I know I have. The bad memories are overwhelming. I don't know that I ever want to go back.

How did you take care of your personal hygiene while you were there in terms of showers and shaving?

Mr. Velasquez: Well, I got to tell you, you took care of it the best way that you could. You got enough sufficient water to brush your teeth and shave every morning. When you were out in the boonies, you didn't. It's like if you crossed a river you put your hand down on your personal parts of your body and started washing yourself in the water while you are still clothed and you get out of the river and you go. Sometimes if you were by a river and you were not on an operation we would jump in the river and swim to clean yourself off. There was one point that was right after Vietnam. When I was telling you that we would come in for a 72 hour stand down every month if possible. There was so much going on that we didn't go back for 5 months. The last three months that we were out there in the field we only got enough water because we were in triple canopy jungle. The only water we got was resupplied to us was for drinking and brushing your teeth. We didn't shave for three months. We didn't get a haircut for three months. We weren't bathed for three months. If you had extra socks and you could get them you got them otherwise you wore the same socks for three months and the same clothes for three months. There were starting to rot off of you. We came back from the 72 hours stand down and we looked like planet of the apes. That is how we looked and we stunk just as bad. To us we didn't stink at all. Right after that I went on R&R. I met my wife in Hawaii at Fort DeRussey. I couldn't get enough showers and every time I took a shower dirt would still come out of my skin. She walked right by me three times. I had to say, "Lillian here I am." She couldn't believe how skinny and how dark we were. A lot of that was dirt from the 5

months there. Trying to keep up hygiene, you did the best you could. You have to understand, you were out there and you didn't have all the facilities.

While you were in the field, where did you usually sleep? Was it more in the open?

Mr. Velasquez: Always in the open. In the open in the jungle, you made your own area to sleep in.

Was it under the stars?

Mr. Velasquez: Sometimes and sometimes it was in the bush. It didn't matter if it was raining or not. You slept in the rain and tried to make yourself as comfortable as you could.

Did you have tents?

Mr. Velasquez: No. We had what we called a camouflage blanket that we would use. It was a nylon type thing. It had strings on each end that you could tie on to branches to kind of give you a roof or something like that that you could sleep under. You also used that as a blanket. But again it was warm enough that you really didn't need a blanket to sleep under.

What was your impression of officers in your command?

Mr. Velasquez: For the most part the officers were outstanding. They did a good job. You have to understand that some of the younger officers, 2nd and 1st Lieutenants and Captains, they were kind of like in the same situation as I was that they were still in the learning process. They were young. They did the best they could. Overall I think they did an excellent job.

I'm just looking through the questions because some of this has been gone over. Actually since you already said it, you said that you were wounded four times. Can I ask how you were wounded?

Mr. Velasquez: One was a bullet and the other three was shrapnel.

Oh ok. Where did you get shot?

Mr. Velasquez: In the head, hand and the back of the leg.

How was your medical treatment?

Mr. Velasquez: I remember my first one when I got hit here in the hand and I thought I was going to lose my hand. I got dusted off. Do you know what dust off means? Helicopter, a medical helicopter that would pick you up; those are dust off choppers. They took me to the 24th Medical Evac which was in Vietnam. My first time experiencing that was "Wow, this is really something!" As soon as they got you off the chopper they were all ready for preop if you needed an operation. They had a team of nurses there. They would start cutting off your boots and start with the scissors cutting off your trousers and as you entered the building you were already butt naked. The next team was washing you down where you were hurt and they would start shaving you in the pubic areas and just start shaving you getting you ready for your operation if you needed an operation. Of course my hand was the one that was injured at that time so I didn't get shaved or anything. As a matter of fact they did start shaving me. I remember one doctor or nurse said, "No he doesn't need it down there. It's just his hand that is hurt." But they would check you out. The praise for them you just can't praise them enough. The medical team from the chopper pilots that went out to go pick you up to the medical team that worked in hospitals all the way in country, I can't praise them enough. They were there.

From all your wounds how long would you say that you actually spent at the hospital?

Mr. Velasquez: About a month with this hand injury. That was the longest.

That was the longest and then you were back out with the unit again?

Mr. Velasquez: About a week or so.

Did you earn any medals for your combat actions?

Mr. Velasquez: I did.

Any in particular or were they....?

Mr. Velasquez: I got the Silver Star, Bronze Star, Air Medal, Army Commendation, four Purple Hearts and all the others that go with that I guess.

This question is actually about the enemy but were you impressed by the qualities of the enemy in terms of their leadership skills and tenacity?

Mr. Velasquez: The North Vietnamese I was because the Viet Cong I really couldn't comment too much on them because they were kind of like civilians. Paramilitary is what they were and they were being supplied by the North Vietnam government. But the North Vietnamese were regulars and they would fight you. They had combat missions just like we did and they would carry them out to the T. They were just as tough as we were and they were just as scared as we were. I captured a North Vietnamese Lieutenant back in 1968. He was going to give himself up but he said out loud that he wouldn't give himself up unless I would disarm myself and go out and pick him up. My Captain said, "No, you are not going out there unarmed." We were getting this through our interpreter, what they call a Chieu Hoi. A Chieu Hoi we called a Kit Carson Program; they were our interpreters. We always had on with each company. He said, "Well I will back him up if he wants to go out there and get him. Otherwise we will kill him." He had his hands up so I knew he wasn't armed. I said, "Okay, tell him I will go pick him up." I went out, picked him up, brought him back in and he was just shaking. I'm sure that he was indoctrinated that "if they catch you they are going to torture you, they are going to kill you, but torture you for days before they kill you." I'm sure he had that in mind. It was about three hours later when he began to relax and knew that he wasn't going to get killed. All he heard was a big lie. We treated him good and he gave us an enormous amount of information. My second tour in Vietnam I was up at Camp Evans. I was just coming back from chow. We had just come back from a sniper mission. This Vietnamese guy was walking right by me. I looked at him and he looked at me and he told me in English, "I know you from someplace. Yeah you look familiar." He said, "I'm not from here, I'm from Hanoi but I was captured down south." I said, "Wait a minute." I started giving him dates and everything and his eyes got big and he said, "You are the one that came out to get me." I said, "I'll be damned!" This actually came out in the Screaming Eagle magazine which I still have a copy of. What a small world, going back for the second tour and running into this guy. This guy worked at the SERTS, Screaming Eagle Training Center. What they do is they taught the new people who were just coming in country how snipers worked. He was teaching them how he would get under the concertina wire and blow up whatever he had to blow up and get out real quick. He was an instructor there for the new arrivals in Vietnam. What a small world that was to come into something like that.

You mentioned about SERTS, what types of training did you actually....?

Mr. Velasquez: I taught a leadership course to young sergeants. I think it was a weekly course; a week course. I taught them everything about becoming a leader, being a leader. How to be a successful leader is what it was.

How long did you do that before you left?

Mr. Velasquez: Oh, not too long; probably about three or four months before I left. I was an instructor and when I came back from Vietnam the first time I went to Fort Polk, Louisiana. Since I was already a drill instructor they wanted to use me as an instructor at the drill sergeant academy at Fort Polk, Louisiana.

(Change Tape)

Looking at history or the big picture do you feel that you made a difference even though Vietnam was considered, I'm not saying we lost, but a lost cause?

Mr. Velasquez: That's a pretty tough question to answer if I made a difference. No one really knows if you made a difference per say. You would probably have to look at yourself as an individual as did you make a contribution or did you make a difference? In that case I would have to say yes. In what areas? Well I don't know I would have to think about it. But yeah I made contributions.

Do you feel that the US should have been involved in Vietnam?

Mr. Velasquez: Well, we are going back to the old philosophy now that back in those days we had to stamp out communism and if you didn't do it, it was going to be in your back door one day. It became real clear when Cuba became communist. Being that I am Hispanic, I'm not Cuban, but I have some very personal things regarding Castro, which are not good. I'm very much for throwing him out but then again I always have been. I have been waiting for him to get out of office since 1959. Yeah I thought we should have been in Vietnam. To answer your question I thought we should have been in Vietnam. I thought it was the right and moral thing to do at the time. I guess if you were to ask me today I might have a little bit different answer but then again I consider myself from the old school. I'm conservative in many ways. I view good things as good and bad things as bad. Don't give me any excuses as to why you did bad things. Maybe I might accept it once or twice but I'm not going to continue to accept it. I believe my upbringing is my philosophy today.

Let's go back to war situation. Does war seem real when you are in it with all the death and destruction around you?

Mr. Velasquez: Oh definitely. I can remember watching war movies and you would hear the bombs going off and all that. Yeah it is, it certainly is. I can remember being probably about three miles from an ammo dump that was hit. That actually burnt up all the oxygen even three miles away. It was an enormous ammo dump in Long Bend. All the oxygen for about three seconds was gone. You couldn't breathe. The sounds of war is real. It can't get any real. You do know. People say, "That is not really much of a difference." But you know when you have an AK47 bullet coming across you. There was a difference.

How did you deal with that with you know fire coming your way?

Mr. Velasquez: You never dealt with it; well you dealt with it but you never accepted it.

You didn't really have enough time to really think about that.

Mr. Velasquez: When you become under fire, maybe not the first, second, or third time, but your instincts as soon as you hear a round pop off you are on the ground or you are doing something that is going to make you survive. I'm a heavy sleeper. I'm a heavy sleeper today and I was a heavy sleeper before I went to Vietnam. When I got to Vietnam your mind sort of changed. It changes the way you live and you adapt to it. I'm not going to tell you I slept with one eye closed and one eye open but I was a very light sleeper and I didn't snore. I'm a heavy snorer. I didn't do that. So there you go, individuals will change. They will adapt to any combat situation. It's inevitable that they are going to do it.

What positive will you take away from your Army experience in serving with the 101st Airborne Division 502nd?

Mr. Velasquez: The positive things that I took away?

Yes.

Mr. Velasquez: I left the Army with sad, sad feelings. Understand I spent 10 ½ years in the Army. I wanted to serve 20 years plus or whatever but understand the situation with my family and I had a big decision to make. People were telling me, "You've got your whole career ahead of you. You're an E-7. You made it in four years. You are going to be up for 1st Sergeant in another year or two. Why don't you stick around?" It was the whole nine yards. "You will be Command Sergeant Major one day." I'm sure I would have been. I had to look at my family and really they come first. My children didn't really know me because I devoted so much time to the Army. I had to give them some time. The biggest accomplishments that I can tell you leaving the Army is that I was very proud of what I did. I didn't have any bad feelings about the Army. I was proud of the Army and I was proud of the 101st. I could sit there sometimes at home in my office and look at the patch of the Screaming Eagles and be proud of it. I think that once you wear that patch, the 101st Airborne Division, that Eagle, I don't know of anybody that could say anything bad about wearing that patch. Once you wear it you are proud of being a Screaming Eagle. When I first joined obviously it was airborne; all paratroopers. We were all on jump status. Vietnam changed that. It changed war concept quite a bit. We became Air Assault. I was kind of ashamed to say the 101st Airborne Division Air Assault. What is going on here you know? This is Airborne. I look at it today and it's one of the most dangerous divisions this world has to see and the most powerful combat division. It's a proud division. I even walked Fort Campbell last year and talked to a lot of the young men. They were very proud to wear that Screaming Eagle patch. I got to tell you that esprit do corp is still today as it was when I first joined the 101st. Esprit do corp for the Army I still carry that proud tradition and I hope it continues.

That was my last military question. Lastly I just want to ask, after you were done with the war and after you left the military after your 10 years, you from there joined the San Francisco police department?

Mr. Velasquez: I joined the San Francisco Sheriff's Department first because the police department wasn't yet accepting applications. Three years later they did and I got into the department. I think the first six months I was in turmoil. I was so Army(tized) that everything I ate, slept and drank was Army. Everything around me was Army. I said, "What did I do I made a terrible mistake. I got out. I should have stayed in." As I'm progressing into the police department the thoughts of the Army started becoming less and less and less. It's never left me. My wife will tell you that the Army has never left me. It is still there.

When did you join the sheriff's department?

Mr. Velasquez: As soon as I got out, three months later, I think in 1972.

1972 and next year will be your 20th year?

Mr. Velasquez: Yes it will. Since I went into the police department three years later I have three more years to go.

Okay and you will go into retirement?

Mr. Velasquez: I think I earned that retirement.

With your family, your three children, what are they doing now?

Mr. Velasquez: Well I have a son who is auto painting. He is a specialist. He lives in Milwaukee. He goes to Europe two or three times a year to pick up new ideas and he goes around to countries selling these ideas. I have another son who is a highway engineer up in Redding, California. My daughter is living in the same town of Livermore that I am in. She is in Business. I have five granddaughters and one grandson and I am very active with them.

With your wife, just a housewife?

Mr. Velasquez: My wife she got a job for _____ Baking Company when I went to Vietnam. She stayed home the two tours that I was there back in San Francisco. She stayed with her folks. She took a job just to keep busy to keep her mind from going stale if you will. She retired from there three years ago. She is retired and she is home now waiting for me to retire.

You have been married for about 35 years?

Mr. Velasquez: No, this December will be my 37th year.

That should be about it. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about?

Mr. Velasquez: No, I would want to congratulate all the men and women of the 101st Airborne Division and I want to tell them to be as proud as I was when I was a member of the 101st and keep up the tradition. I know they are. I know they got certain missions going on right now. Certain units are in Kosovo. It made me very proud to see George Bush there, President Bush, and I saw the 101st logo on the back where he was speaking. They are doing a good job and my thoughts are always with them.

Thank you very much sir!

Mr. Velasquez: You're welcome!

(End of Tape)