

Interviewer: I have the privilege to interview former Command Sergeant Major Robert Nichols about his experiences in Vietnam. He's also a County Commissioner in Montgomery County and the head of the Fort Campbell Historical Association, Foundation I'm sorry. And has a 31 year or 32 year career in the Army depending on how you count it, 31 or 32 that's still a very long time. I noticed you were, are you from West Virginia originally?

Nichols: Yes

Interviewer: And you were born in 1952 and you went into the Army in 1969 so that essentially means you were 17 at the time, is that correct?

Nichols: Correct, I turned 17 on the 23rd of January and on the 31st of January I was in basic training.

Interviewer: That fast? Were you able to graduate in that time or from high school?

Nichols: I took the GED test before I entered the military so I would have a high school equivalency thereof and it helped me so that I was able to attend different universities depending where I was assigned. It kind of poked me into an academic arena that I wasn't really thinking about.

Interviewer: Obviously you were highly motivated, obviously you knew what you were doing. Or at least you thought you knew what you were doing. Obviously you weren't feeling worried about being drafted at this point. So you're a volunteer?

Nichols: I have an RA number.

Interviewer: Do you know what your motivation was? Can you think back to 1969 in January and why you would be motivated to do this? I mean you don't make these decisions lightly, no one does. Tell us a little bit about what went into your decision making process.

Nichols: One of the things that if you roll back the clock that was on the nightly news, it was the first time that America got to see the war as it evolved. And one of the things that would flash on the screen was the number of casualties and the different footage of the fights. And I had a cousin that was killed in Vietnam in my neighborhood area we had soldiers that were wounded and came back that were really effected. On a personal side you know from my motivation, everyone in my family had served in the military.

Interviewer: That was sort of my next question. You had sort of an immediate family connection.

Nichols: I am a member of the Sons of the American Revolution. I have eight patriots that means of the twelve possible grandparents, eight of them served in the American Revolution.

Interviewer: Wow

Nichols: And each generation each of the times our country went into conflict, my family served. My family served in the War of 1812 all the way through. So I would sit around the fireplace listening to the stories of what my uncle did in Germany of what my grandfather did early in World War I. All of those kinds of things you listen to because you were proud of them for serving our country. On sad note my mother and father slip and because I was older I was working on my grandfather's farm in Chesapeake Ohio which is across the River from Huntington West Virginia, and it was hard work. I had to quit playing football because I had chores to do. And I had reached a point that I knew I didn't have the funding to go

to university to Marshall. One of my best friends Mike Blake, we played football together, was killed in the Marshall plane crash. He got the scholarship and I didn't okay. So I went in the Army and I was sitting on ____ Support Base Dragon Head when I read the Stars and Stripes and saw his name on the list of football players killed at Marshall. And he got the scholarship, he was a better player, and here I am today survived Vietnam and several other conflicts. And that's probably the reason because I didn't have the funding to go to university, I had an opportunity to escape the farm work and I excelled when I went in the military. Excelled in basic training I made the top ten percent and was promoted.

Interviewer: Where did you go for basic training?

Nichols: Fort Gordon Georgia. Our barracks was a POW camp at Fort Gordon. And our barracks at the end of each, one story building and most of it glass windows because that's how they did the prisoner camp, had potbelly stoves. And being from the farm and of that era I could keep everybody warm keep the potbelly stoves going. And during inspection I knew how to clean it and maintain it and I was very athletic. I did very well on the physical fitness tests and I could shoot, I could shoot very well. And those are kind of the things that put you in the top percent.

Interviewer: Did you hunt as a child?

Nichols: Oh goodness yes. Pawpaw would issue me three 22 rounds and I had to bring back two rabbits or a squirrel and a rabbit, something. And he was very selective so I got it, I didn't want to get whooped by Pawpaw.

Interviewer: And I gather you had 20/20 visions or you did maybe back then?

Nichols: I did, I have a little difficulty now I use my glasses when I shoot. But I was I did quite well in the turning aspect in advanced promotion. And the thing that broke my heart is after advanced individual infantry training I was still 17.

Interviewer: Oh see that was my next question.

Nichols: And you don't go to combat at 17 you've got to be 18. So there were seven or eight of us, I think there were eight of us that were 17 in my graduating company. And we were assigned to BCT Committee Group, Basic Combat Training Committee group. My first job in the army was three nights a week working on the infiltration course at Fort Gordon Georgia learning and shooting as basic trainees would go under the infiltration course I'd shoot the M60. Therefore, I got to know the gun pretty well. That made a difference for me in Vietnam. One by one as we got within about 90 days of your birthday orders would come in for your assignment to Vietnam, everybody went to Vietnam. And as the November timeframe came around orders came down of 69 and I found myself heading out to Vietnam.

Interviewer: Did you look forward to this?

Nichols: Oh it's everybody it's all you wanted to do. You had to get in the fight. And back in those days because I was a PFC, Private First Class, the people assigned to BCT Committee Group were guys like us who were not of age which was such a small number but it was everybody that returned from Vietnam usually had to serve six to ten months before you finished your two-year enlistment. And that is who worked in the committee groups that run the ranges and kind of was the cadre that was doing that. In those days we still had to sign in and sign out for pass and if you didn't make it back before midnight you got in trouble. And in those days in the military if you got in trouble then you got your discipline and you

would lose a stripe, but the stripe stayed within the company. And I was one of those fortunate people that when an E4 stripe specialist was available they had a promotion board and I went to Vietnam as a specialist. Freshly 18 years old going to Vietnam and it was pretty interesting because you don't wear any rank you don't wear any stuff, your uniforms are clear. And what was funny about that after I had been there about three months I got a promotion to E4 because they didn't know that I was already an E4. I had to tell the person I'm already an E4 I'm getting paid see here's my leave and earning statement, I'm already an E4.

Interviewer: Do you recall what your weekly pay was as an E4?

Nichols: I don't know what weekly pay was. Monthly pay I think it was like 76 or 78 dollars a month is what we received and with combat pay, I'm thinking

Interviewer: So that would have been twenty something dollars a week roughly speaking?

Nicholas: Well I know when I made sergeant with combat pay my \$218. Sergeant pay in Vietnam with combat pay and other stuff that's what I was getting. But the rest all of the money went in the bank except for about 20 bucks.

Interviewer: You certainly weren't getting rich.

Nichols: We were everything was given to us you know all the incidentals, hygiene items, your food, you didn't want for anything.

Interviewer: It's interesting because we did an interview with a professor on campus who was drafted and he tried in fact kind of hard to get out of being drafted and it didn't work. And so his attitude at the time was, because he wanted to do graduate school he had enjoyed his four years of college deferment and wanted to go to graduate school but they wouldn't continue his deferment, that was fairly standard. So he was dreading the decision that they were going to send him to Vietnam but they still sent him to Vietnam. And he was there a little bit later than you well maybe roughly the same time because I think he was drafted in 69 he was drafted 69 and I think he went there in 70. So that's not so different from when you first went there.

Nichols: The thing that jumps out at me as I think back on Vietnam which is a long time ago. Is arrival in country at Bien Hoa and you're herded into spaces and it's depending who received the most casualties of which division you went in. And my assignment was the 25th Infantry Division, and off to Cu Chi I went. And I was assigned for the second time to the 14th infantry to go _____

Interviewer: Is this Cu Chi

Nichols: It's a base camp, division base camp.

Interviewer: Is it near the Parrot's Beak

Nichols: Yes

Interviewer: So essentially it's not far from the Mekong Delta?

Nichols: It's a little north yeah. Parrot's Beak and Angel's Wing, it's funny you say that. The first big operation I went on was the incursion into Cambodia. I had written my girlfriend, now my wife, and what I would do, I'll show you a letter, on the outside of the envelopes they gave us I would put a little

dot as to where I was at. And this one letter she received she thought I was, had made a mistake because I had put a dot in Cambodia. So I had already been in Cambodia and she received the letter when the President went on TV and says I'm now ordering troops. We had already been there for a bit. And that was pretty, I was a fairly fit young man however, when I arrived in the bush I had my nice clean M160 all my stuff and the first thing that happened was people who were going on R & R, seven-day R & R if they had a special purpose weapon, it was handed to you. So I received a 79 humbird. Now I had trained on it, I knew it, but he took my M16 and all my ammunition and got aboard and left to go on his R & R and I was given an ungodly amount of weight. That you know each 79 round is a half a pound okay and I was given, it was a half a pound, and I was given 40 rounds of H.E. and all the special purpose ammunition, the buckshot, the smoke, the lamination. And it was like four claymore bags which is a space that you can put rounds in. And we had to do a lot of moving and that hurt me. I was the F & G, the new guy and I was carrying things that I was not accustom to or prepared for. And my first couple of weeks in the fight in Cambodia, I was like a pack mule. Besides all the normal stuff I was carrying, all that ammunition was just unbelievable.

Interviewer: I noticed that you, in the title here display the things I carried. Of course I suppose you've read the famous book _____ haven't you?

Nichols: Yea

Interviewer: And it occurred to me that that's a good metaphor here for, it's a good metaphor for the difficulties that the average soldier faced that civilians don't even consider.

Nichols: You're focused on what you eat, what you can carry okay and the water that you have to carry and your ammunition. That's your world. As an infantryman that is what you have and it's a lot. And we didn't have the body armor, we didn't wear flak jackets you know. All we had was our old steel helmet and the weight was a heavy weight. That's the thing that sticks out with me. And in that place, we were in a fight and the machine gunner for wounded. Now as I told you, one of the things that I knew how to do and did it well was the M60 machine gun and a platoon has two of those. So when the gunner got hit Murphy was his name, I was able to get to the machine gun and I carried that machine gun for seven months.

Interviewer: Was that lighter than the other or?

Nichols: It was easier distributed. Everybody in the platoon carried 100 rounds of ammunition for you. The assistant gunner carried 300 rounds the ammo bearer carried 300 rounds, and you carried 300 rounds. And as I showed you on my pack, because of the jungle and the rain and the moisture, you had to carry the bulk of your ammunition in a can. You know mine and the ammo bearer's and the assistant gunners 200 rounds in the can and then you have the cardboard canvas thing to carry 100 rounds. And everybody carried it in a center rear pouch of their rough sack. Everybody, except for the RTO and the _____ everybody. So when you were in a fight you had sustaining ammunition that would help the platoon.

Interviewer: Well but of course you're helping the platoon at the same time, defend off the enemy I mean. One hand washed the other doesn't it?

Nichols: Yea

Nichols: And I carried the M60 until I made sergeant.

Interviewer: This reminds me a little bit of talking to World War II Vets who had to carry the Browning. Which was another bulky, heavy, you know awkward and they hated it but

Nichols: The M60 is a 23 pound club if you can't make it work. In the jungle that's a lot. And the thing that I was more comfortable with but the thing that those who have been in the jungle in the fight, don't have a timid person carry the M60 or someone who can't carry the weight. You don't have someone carry that that's not reliable. And I received a couple Bronze Stars

Interviewer: I saw that

Nichols: For valor in the fight and it's simply because everybody's trying to get you and you're helping the platoon.

Interviewer: And a Purple Heart too.

Nichols: Yea I got hurt one night yes sir.

Interviewer: I mean it's a very impressive record. You served two tours there?

Nichols: The fall of 70, the 2nd brigade of the 25th was being deactivated. And because I had you know part of a tour remaining they took all the soldiers of my brigade in the 25th and we went as replacements, in country replacements, to the First Calvary division. Because they had received a lot of casualties and they needed trained replacements. Because we were at the stage of our country in 71 trying to figure out how to shut this thing down.

Interviewer: That's right, disengage, deescalate.

Nichols: And instead of putting FNGs, new people, into critical units they relocated seasoned troops. And that's where I was assigned to A Company First CF, First Calvary Division.

Interviewer: So you were in country from the fall of 19 what 69 until sometime in 1970?

Nichols: I was I turned 18 in January 70, that next month February is when I went to Vietnam, I returned in March.

Interviewer: Of 71?

Nichols: Seventy-one right. That's when I got, if you saw some of the pictures, you see March 71. That's when I took the film and got it developed, when I got back.

Interviewer: Makes sense. Did you know that you were headed towards the infantry? Was that

Nichols: It's all I wanted to do, it's what I wanted.

Interviewer: Did you take the, what do they call it, the Asvab? Did they call it that back then?

Nichols: I had a pretty good score. My GT score was 124 which means I could have chosen anything I wanted. But I wanted to be where the fight was. I couldn't be on my terms at second string.

Interviewer: Okay, I respect that. I do have to ask though and this, I asked Dr. Browder this and I've asked a couple of other people this. And you know this is long ago and far away. Did any politics of the

era touch you in the sense that you were critical of the war or you thought to yourself, is this really worth it or anything along those lines?

Nichols: No, that only exposure that I had to the politics and the anger of the war or the politics of the war was when I came home. I wasn't treated very badly at the airports. I did nothing wrong, I volunteered and went and fought you know the things I'm supposed to and I was treated very badly. I didn't get that. You've got to understand I'm an 18 year old punk who was fearless and who was, climb a mountain okay. And when you're 18 years old and you're fighting the fight, your focus is on fighting the fight. And you come home and you have these folks your age or older and they're grumpy at you, you don't get it. I didn't get it, not till years later. When I came home from the Gulf War as the First Brigade Sergeant Major of the 101st and we had the parade in Nashville and the parade in D.C. that was my welcome home. Okay there'd been a lot of other makeup welcome homes but that was really the welcome home for me when I came home from the Gulf War because our country got it right. See our country was mad at the soldier in Vietnam okay. Today they are not mad at the soldier, they are mad at the politicians' or the people that created the condition. You know if there's someone who's grumpy about something. But today I think that we've learned a lesson that you cannot have bad feeling towards the person that gives you the right to protest, the right for free speech, the right to make a decision. How can you fuss at a person that gives you the right to do that?

Interviewer: No, that makes a lot of sense of course. But we're talking in retrospect and at the time it wasn't seen as clear as that.

Nichols: Oh I that and you only get that with age and stepping away from it and looking at the big picture.

Interviewer: And so you wanted to go even dreamed of it. That means you wanted to be in Vietnam.

Nichols: Yep

Interviewer: That means that, did you feel that you were well trained when you got off that plane to get into the fight to do what you needed to do?

Nichols: I think that from what I was asked to do, I was exposed to nothing I had not been trained for as an infantryman. We had all of the training for the night defense the night ambush, the movement, the weapons. The only thing that, and you can't replicate it, is the privation of not having. There's nothing like starving, there's nothing like not having food because of bad weather. And you're on the side of a mountain okay or you're in a forest that there's no food and there's bad guys around. You can't, the privation is hard you know there's no replacing that. And learning how to deal with, and you only learn that from exposure and experience of what food you keep. Our resupply was every third or fourth day because that's all an infantryman can carry. And our supply, they did it very well they gave us a case of c-rations, that's 12 meals, and six lerps which is a special meal. It was dehydrated and you put water boil water you get a special it's really _____, it's the long range reconnaissance rations. So we had 18 meals to pick from for three days or four days. And you know you always took the crackers and cheese and peanut butter and the meat. You know you took the good pieces you took all the coffee and everything. And what was special for me, I didn't smoke I never smoked but every ration had cigarettes in it, so I would hold out the c-ration cigarettes to trade for peaches, pears, you know I got the little extra eats. My waist back then I was little you know I showed you a picture, my waist was 28 inches back then. And

I used extra small short britches. Because you know you're humping and the oldest man in our platoon was 25 and he was the staff sergeant and platoon sergeant. That was the oldest man, it was not you know old people you couldn't do it you just couldn't do it.

Interviewer: There's a book about written by a veteran of World War II and he titled this "The Children's Crusade." Because as far as he was concerned it was the same demographic. It was 18 to 22 year olds overwhelmingly. And then of course a few in their mid-twenties but otherwise, you know very very young men.

Nichols: To tell you a very good example about food, give you a couple of good examples here that stick out in my mind. I tell this story to family and veterans and I've been asked to do many footlocker counseling about my exposure of my 31 years plus nine months experience in the military you know. And being a command sergeant major for 15 plus years that's half my career as a senior enlisted guy. So I have a pretty good connection with our troopers. And one of the stories I like to tell is when we were on what we call stand down, we'd go to a place called Dinh Tuong that's where the brigade was. And it's outside of Ninh Binh. Ninh Binh is the big black virgin mountain which is adjacent to a Mitchilan River plantation. And our four nights and five days in stand down, we'd come back about once a month. And you'd zero your rifles and you'd get a chance to rest, sleep on a cot, sleep comfortably and you know. But we always got mortared you know the 122 rockets and the mortar it was just crazy all the time. And part of the stand down one of the nights you'd have to go out, we'd always have an ambush outside the gate. You'd go out and if you got replacements kind of get them trained up and get set. And we hated it because we missed a cot. But we'd come back in and we'd always be able to have a hot breakfast. Now when I say a hot breakfast its eggs to order, as many eggs as you want, bacon and ham, a loaf of bread, and milk. You know you'd get a big quart of milk I mean that's special okay. And anyway, we're in line to go in the mess hall, they were just getting ready to open and we were getting mortared. Now the mortar was coming in probably 400 yards away that's where the rounds were impacted. And everybody scattered everywhere but our platoon, we stood there in line, we were going to eat breakfast. Okay and we're watching the four duce guys mortars doing kind of like battery shoot you know going through the drill and our platoon sergeant, Sergeant Sline, kicks open the door and says come on in here. And he got another sergeant and stuff and they started cooking eggs. So the mortars happening over about four or 500 yards away and the four deuces were watching them do counter mortaring and our infantry platoon because we were on ambush and we wanted to eat were in line to eat. Can you imagine you know, we don't give a shit, we're ready to eat.

Interviewer: Sure okay, feed me feed me.

Nichols: And they had it all ready to go so they were just cracking eggs and I wanted a cheese omelet so he's cooking up me about a half a dozen eggs making an omelet and bacons already cooked. I'm throwing in on my plate, had these big aluminum trays is what we used back then. And you'd go down the line and you'd get yourself a load of French bread and put under your arm and get yourself a couple quarts of milk and you go over and sit down and you're eating your eggs, bacon, milk, and bread you know. And the mortar stuffs still going on but we didn't care.

Interviewer: Speaking of mortars, I've seen a lot of photographs where practically every building had sandbags.

Nichols: Around the bottom, yeah.

Interviewer: And even on the roof in some cases.

Nichols: _____ was a tin roof, a screen up to the side, and then we had sand bags or mortar boxes filled with dirt around the bottom part. That was our hooch where we slept. And each platoon was given two of those barracks, the company was given so many barracks because it rotated as each of the companies and the battalion rotated, that's where you would go.

Interviewer: I'd like to get back to the chronology of things. You arrive in country at Yen Wang at the airport?

Nichols: Yes

Interviewer: And you get on trucks and they take you where?

Nichols: In caribou and they flew us to Kuchi.

Interviewer: Oh okay so you were already in helicopters basically?

Nichols: A caribou is two engine small C-130, it's an aircraft. And they flew us in.

Interviewer: Like a piper cub, something like that?

Nichols: Kind of but a bit bigger. You know what a C-130 looks like?

Interviewer: Yes

Nichols: This is like half the size of a C-130 they call it a caribou. And they flew us into Kuchi, we got off in Kuchi and then we were further assigned down to company battalion level. And that's division replacement is where they sent us. And then when we got into division replacement we had to go through it's called Cherry School there for training for a week, indoctrination of the country. And you would have someone from your battalion come and check in with you, see you and that's where they did their you know sizing you up as which battalion you'd go to and which company you'd go to.

Interviewer: And this is where your machine gun training came in handy?

Nichols: Well you were given an M16 and you zeroed it. One of the graduating things the night before was you'd go outside the wire on ambush. You know the chances of having any contact was null but it was get the new guy acclimated to the sights and sounds of the jungle.

Interviewer: And it must have been terrifying.

Nichols: There were some pretty smart guys that were there. We had some pretty experienced people taking us. But I was excited, I wasn't really scared, I was you know scared, excited half a dozen of one or the other to me. I was ready to get with my unit.

Interviewer: Could you tell simply by meeting people or talking to people any distinction between those people who had volunteered and the others who had been drafted?

Nichols: No

Interviewer: Everyone was essentially the same?

Nichols: You knew the difference when they called off your number. A US number means you were drafted and a RA number means you volunteered. And a lot of times the internal chatter between guys was, you're a lifer because you volunteered. You know or you're a draftee, I'm out of here as soon as I can, that kind of attitude.

Interviewer: The oral history course, one of the book I assign was written by a guy named Arthur Whitlock and he was definitely a draftee and he couldn't wait to get out. He had some really interesting stories to tell but the contrast with that and someone with the 101st it was an Italian last name, Bachman, does that name ring a bell?

Nichols: No

Interviewer: He was a veteran of Hamburger Hill and he wrote a very good book about that. And you know he was a professional, he was clearly you know this is what he was doing. The other guy was simply being assigned.

Nichols: We fought for each other, what we did we did for us there. You've probably heard this cliché but once you're there you're doing it for the guy left and right.

Interviewer: Yea

Nichols: You learn everything about him, the guy left and right. It was devastating when later on when I was a sergeant squad leader nine men in my squad, five of us got wounded at night and they couldn't get us out until about mid-morning the next morning. It was a bad day for all of us and some of the proudest time, I didn't get anybody killed but nobody ran, everybody stayed, everybody fought and they were wounded. These were NVA that were coming at us. They watched us setup the night parameter and they were going to try to overrun us but they didn't.

Interviewer: Someone was telling me there was an earlier version of night vision back then. Did you have any exposure to this?

Nichols: Starlight ____ the tube, you would hold it, it was heavy extremely heavy and you could see. You could mount it to the rifles but we did not. You could mount it to the M16 but we did not. We had a couple in the platoon, the batteries were we would go through a battery fairly quickly but we had night vision. Night vision was very important for the evening.

Interviewer: Were you at all aware that, you know you're talking about offensive operations here. I'm a little surprised because I'm thinking of offensive operations as sort of beginning to wind down. You know these long lurks for instance, I was under the impression that the 101st for instance stopped doing them at about 1970 because the 101st was associated with offensive operations and by 1970 most of the 101st was back at home. But your experience was very different.

Nichols: Oh no we were going after them. We were going after them every day. It was interesting when I was with the 25th helicopters were important and then the later part of my tour when I was in the 1st calv we flew like every other day, we were in a serious hunt. Pink teams and red teams would have orders to fly low, ____ high, they'd take fire to find it and then use us to go we'd be waiting at ____ fort base Dragon Head. And we called them mini calvs, that's a term they used, and when they found contact they'd fly to where the contact was, every day. And then we'd stay there and finish out the patrols and ____ back. It was still a fight in 71.

Interviewer: You were fairly close to what was called the Hachiman Trail.

Nichols: Yes and we were literally on it when we were in Cambodia. When I was with the 25th we were.

Interviewer: And were you aware that what your purpose was to interdict the supplies? The flight line that supported the North Vietnamese?

Nichols: Yes, we burnt a lot of rice and supplies, ammunitions. The sad thing is we had stacks and stacks and stacks of ammunition and supplies and rice and one day we got word to leave Cambodia and we tried to destroy as much as we can but we didn't destroy it all. A political decision was made for us to leave Cambodia and that supplies would come back to haunt us in the future. But there was so much we left behind. We just couldn't destroy it we didn't have enough flares we didn't have enough magnesium grenades to burn all of that stuff. And it was a lot Dr. Zieren it was a lot.

Interviewer: Did you ever encounter any of the bearers? The people who were tossing the stuff on their backs and walking down the trail?

Nichols: The answer is yes we engaged a couple ambushes that was alfalfa, they called that an ambush. They would have bicycles that the frames were reinforced where they could carry heavy loads. And they would push the bike. And alfalfa is a claymore mine setup with a trip wire that we were observing. And their patrol would hit the claymores and it would devastate them it would kill every one of them. And then we were able to go in and finish off what needed to be done and destroy the supplies. Two separate we did that that I was involved in.

Interviewer: I suppose they told you in advance that you were going to cross the border and were going into Cambodia. Is that correct?

Nichols: Yes about five minutes before we got on the helicopter.

Interviewer: Did this strike anyone as daring, exceptional, extraordinary at the time?

Nichols: The things that my platoon the guys in the platoon that had worked Parrots Beak and Angels Wing area was they would chase the NVA, NVC up to the boarder and not be able to chase them across the river. No they're in their space and they're going after them and they were so happy they were able to do so.

Interviewer: Well this is where the, from the prospective of the field, obviously you see an opportunity essentially for some payback in a sense.

Nichols: It was, yes sir.

Interviewer: I don't want to sound crude here but that's part of what's going on. If you see an enemy constantly being able to cross into and international boarder and disappear that's certainly very frustrating. But of course from the civilians prospective back home going into ___ and Cambodia seemed like a widening of the war. The perception I'm going to start by how different the perception was.

Nichols: From our prospective we were simply crossing the river and going after them where we couldn't go before.

Interviewer: And the border made it made no difference what so ever. But that's not the way it was perceived back home.

Nichols: That's probably the reason that one day we got up and instead of finishing destroying the supplies that we had captured or discovered we were told to go to the _____ on out.

Interviewer: Well of course this action is what lead to campus demonstrations, what led to killings at Penn State. I mean you know I have very mixed feelings about Richard Nixon, he was certainly a brilliant man and a _____ foreign policy expert. But if you're elected to end the war and then it's perceived that you're widening it, the civilians are not going to be happy with that.

Nichols: All of that was invisible to us in the jungle.

Interviewer: I'm sure of course it depends on your perspective I don't question that for a minute.

Nichols: We were, when you're at war you're not at war for a little bit. When you have to put a wounded friend on a helicopter it's not good and you're in the fight. I don't know how else to say that. You're in the fight for _____ its forever. So you don't restrict the guy that's pulling the trigger in a fight.

Interviewer: No of course, I understand.

Nichols: And you know guys like me who have both my children, I'm so focused on making sure my children understood. Both of my children in case you don't that, finished their doctorate.

Interviewer: I knew your daughter had.

Nichols: My daughter had and my son. My son, my son's a scientist in California and my daughter is in Memphis. And education is important and one of the things that they would see their father have two or three books on the nightstand and my last 30 or 40 minutes every night was reading.

Interview stopped and restarted.

Interviewer: Okay today is May 21st and we're doing a second round of interviews with Robert Nichols a Vietnam Veteran. And he was telling us a little bit about his motivation to join and volunteer and to seek out his duty in Vietnam. I'd like to ask you about the distinction that we briefly mentioned at the end of the interview between rear echelon personnel and people such as yourself who went on these long range reconnaissance patrols. And the reason I find this fascinating is the lurps strike me with the same sort of force as something I know a little bit about from reading mainly the trench raids in the First World War. Imagine your commander telling you in the First World War you and half a dozen other guys go out into no man's land you know, crawl around under the barbed wire at night and grab a German soldier and drag him back to our lines so we can interrogate him. It seems to the level of danger in an operation like that. I can't even imagine and the level of danger that you experienced in going on these three or four day patrols with nothing but the tools that you had with you. It seems to me strikes me as the same sort of level danger the same sort of level of, Oh my God could I really do this? What's your impression? What's your reactions?

Nichols: There's two armies, the army today and the army yesterday. And why I say that, I served for 32 years I reached the highest enlisted rank for about half my career as a Command Sergeant Major in the infantry. There's the folks that do the fighting and the people that so the supporting. The army today has a much more _____ arms integration you know to enhance the fight verses what it was during my

time. In my time you had infantry men, you had some mortar men, and that's about it. You might have a couple three FO's at the company level but not at the platoon level. And the only other non-infantry men in your platoon was a medic or medics okay. You had what was on your back and you had your mission whether it's a reconnaissance, a search and destroy, or an ambush. That's kind of the three things I did my time in Vietnam. I carried the M60 machine gun for about seven months until I made sergeant then I was squad leader. Those are the fellows that did the bulk of the fighting and the dying. If you were not an infantryman you were not in the bush, you did other duties. You had asked me a question about the racial divide and the issues with the white and the black soldier. My platoon in 25th when I got there there were four black soldiers in the platoon of 25 to 29 was the field strength. We had more assigned, we had people in the rear on R&R or sick or injured but field strength was around 27 to 29. And having that many people in the platoon and four black soldiers is not a high number okay. But when you get in a fight and you get two of those four black soldiers injured that's a high percentage, extremely high percentage. And so because unknowing to us it was making headlines in the news at home how the black soldier is getting wounded and killed at a higher rate but it's a percentage thing not a number thing.

Interviewer: That's not accurate either is it?

Nichols: No sir

Interviewer: That's not accurate representation of what was really going on.

Nichols: And I'll tell you what upset some folks. His name was Mike Murphy he carried the other machine gun in our platoon and another guy his name was Dale I think I can't remember. But anyway, they were black soldiers and they were taken out of the field because they were black. And they were working with the first sergeant responsible for mail and to the mail ___, and they hated it. But they were taken out of the field after about six months because they somebody made a decision at the higher level that we weren't going to have any more black soldiers wounded in our unit because we had a high percentage. Percentage not number okay. So our platoon went from having four black soldiers to zero so you're not going to have any black soldiers killed. And they hated it because they wanted to be with their friends. And the felt that they weren't doing their part. But we told them you served your time you know get us the mail, help us out. They did things extraordinary for me when they came in because they understood what we were going through what we were experiencing in the privation of not having okay. And that's just my own little take. Now there was incident where we did get a new replacement which was extremely racial, I'll just say it like that. And our platoon, we were at ___ support base ___ and we were being loaded up on tracks and tanks to be delivered to a point we were going to go on patrol. And this young lad wasn't going to go, refused the order to go. Turned his weapon onto the lieutenant said he would shoot him dead, he ain't going. And I'm sitting on the side of the tank with my M60 across my lap and the young lad was standing there and I had to go testify at his court martial at LBJ. And the prosecutor asked me would I have shot him? And I said well, all I did was move my legs the M60 was pointed right at him and if he would have shot the lieutenant I would have shot him dead. That was my testimony in the court martial. And I would have done it if he would have pulled the trigger and not thought another thing about it because we're Americans. He had a problem of going out because units that were coming in had taken casualties and we were going to go out and we were expecting to take casualties. So he didn't want to go. That is my exposure to the black soldier of my short time in Vietnam.

Interviewer: We had a graduate student who wrote his thesis about fragging and it turns out it's not exactly what people thought it was. It wasn't there wasn't nothing political about it and so the racial dimension was almost sort of by no means the most important factor. It had things to do with training, it had to do with resistance to authority, it had to do with grievances. But any event he wrote a really nice thesis it talked about this and he a number of fragging incidents did have a racial dimension but many others did not. So you can't pin it all on that, that's only a portion of the story. And I was really surprised he came up with a really different narrative on what fragging was really all about then the narrative most people have learned. In any event it was really very interesting I thought, I learned something in the process.

Nichols: No experience or interaction or anything like that happened during any of my time in service in Vietnam, any of that kind of stuff.

Interviewer: Okay let's get back to this long range reconnaissance patrol stuff. Do you recall the first time you did this?

Nichols: Sure do

Interviewer: And what was the experience like?

Nichols: We had to do about a three click move, that's three kilometers. We setup an ambush on a well-used trail and that was used by the NVA. And my very first ambush we initiated the ambush. It was quite violent the seven or eight silhouettes we ambushed were all killed. The claymore mine did most of the damage because that initiated the ambush.

Interviewer: So they tripped this trip wire and

Nichols: Well these were command detonated.

Interviewer: Okay

Nichols: Yeah so it was up close and personal. And the squad leader took himself and three people out. My job was keeping ammunition in the air it was the handheld _____.

Interviewer: This was at night?

Nichols: Yes at night. And keep illumination up so they could see as they checked everything, secured the weapons, and then we pulled off into an ORP and then a team went up and did a continued search after daylight.

Interviewer: And what was the tipoff that they were there, was it sound?

Nichols: They were walking on a trail and the first guy that saw them was the squad leader with the, I believe it was called a PVS utility, the ole heavy duty starlight, the big heavy duty one. He got to see them and got everybody set and ready.

Interviewer: And he was sure that they weren't sort of random people walking the trail or something like that?

Nichols: No, they were bad guys from our prospective. You can't miss the pith helmet and AK, it was that close.

Interviewer: I did a little reading over the weekend about claymores and apparently if you're at some distance the greatest impact would be on the extremities. If it's up close and personal, it's going to rip a body to shreds. Is that a fair description?

Nichols: Each claymore has I don't know around 700 plus double ought buck in it and opposition C4 is the explosion that sends them in the direction. And you never send out a claymore by itself, it's usually a direction towards the enemy and then one left and a right with a bit cord. And you'd have three or four sets of those out. It covers a wide area, we covered a good 50 meter spot and the artillery, if you were standing or walking on the trail and we ambushed you, somebody was going to get something. And a little funny part of it, that was my first ambush and by the way, _____ was Cambodia.

Interviewer: So we could almost date this to May 1970. Mid-April early May 1970.

Nichols: That's, yes sir and the interesting thing was in the same general area the next night the other squad went out and we stayed with the platoon and they had no contact. Then we went out the next night and one of the guys had fell asleep, was snoring and our squad leader made more noise whipping that boy's ass. I never had to worry about going to sleep again or even think about going to sleep and making noise. To this day Robert G. don't snore. Because that could have, if you could imagine if that would have happened on the first ambush you know we would have all been in trouble. And that's something, you don't go to sleep and the young lad had such a trouble of snoring no matter what he did he was made a truck driver or something, he left he just couldn't do it, he had a problem. But you couldn't make any noise you have to have patients. Have to let a mosquito bit got to let you know no slapping or banging, no noise.

Interviewer: How did you cope with the sort of local phono snakes, spiders, centipedes?

Nichols: I hate snakes. The worst thing that we dealt with was the leaches.

Interviewer: Leaches

Nichols: Oh my gosh leaches we so bad. A couple of areas we were in you could you know do the rock sack flop take a break and you could sit and you could just watch all around the leaches coming at you. And we would make sure we tucked and tied our pants leg in and did wraps and everything like that and checked each other all the time. Leaches were bad.

Interviewer: And apparently crossing streams or any body of water was particularly bad.

Nichols: Yes and we had a lot of trouble with fungus and our feet powder and they gave us a lot of fresh new socks. I don't think I ever got a single pair of washed socks, every pair of socks I got was new that was given to us. All of our underclothes t-shirts and socks and no body wore any drawers. And you didn't turn in your clothes after you wore them you rubbed out of them you know you just wore them out and you got new ones.

Interviewer: On one such occasion did you, on one of these adventures, long range reconnaissance patrols, tell me about your Bronze Star. Well the first one I should say.

Nichols: The first one I was an M60 machine gunner at _____ and we got ground attacked. And we got mortared and RPGd real bad. One of the things we would do, what _____ base is is a circular berm that houses a battery of artillery the howitzer with there the 102. And that is what

supports when you're out on patrol. And a platoon would always secure, be in secure of the _____ support base usually with the company CP there and then two platoons out working patrols and things out of the support base. You'd always be within artillery range.

Interviewer: And these were usually elevated positions weren't they?

Nichols: Usually but Berg was not, it was in the Michelin River plantation outside of Dau Tieng. And the French had been there, Michelin Tires _____ the reputation you know. Part of support base Berg when it got hit was our platoon's rotation turn to be there. That's where you got extra water extra food, you had a bunk there to sleep in you know but you were a sitting duck. And we got hit from three sides of the base and it was a deliberate ground attack and the bunker what you would do you'd put some chain link fence you know ten, fifteen feet out in front of the bunker and what that would do, if it didn't detonate the RPG it would catch the fins of the RPG you know it would hit the bunker. And it was a good long fight. There were a couple of guys in the fight with canon crews that leveled the guns and fired the _____ you know the _____ rounds. And a couple of guys got Silver Stars the Company Commander got a Silver Star. During bombardment when the guys were coming pretty close I did not retreat to the bunker I stayed out and fired my machine gun and continued during the whole fight and that's why I got the Bronze Star for Valor.

Interviewer: And from your perception of things this was the right thing to do because it put you on the cutting edge essentially, they were vulnerable to your machine gun and they would not have been otherwise?

Nichols: Yea there were bushes and grass and stuff but there was nothing to stop them and they were getting pretty close and we had a couple of guys hurt. And everybody, you know when you're getting mortared it's very unlikely there's going to be an assault right away. That was the cover, they were coming. And until everybody, because you can't hear too well you know with guns going off howitzers going off and mortars hitting all over the place. It's hard for the leaders to get you know people out of the bunkers and up in your firing ports and everything.

Interviewer: Did it ever, did you ever wonder what their motivation was? Because they took tremendous casualties the ration the kill ratio so to speak 10 to 1, 15 to 1, 20 to 1?

Nichols: It was unbelievable and they continued to observe our far base. We would put out alfalfas, claymore mine with an automatic ambush with a trip wire at all of the corners, the junctions and we had two or three of them go off every night because they were trying to get up and get more observed. I mean they were trying they weren't going to give up and I don't know the big picture I don't know the enemy unit and all of that I was just a trooper. But we would go out and check you know our squad would have to go out and check the different corner tree lines and stuff and we were able to collect a few weapons almost every morning. The thing that was surprising was the numbers. Their motivation well they didn't like us being there for sure. I suspect that with Dau Tieng and the villages around it and the folks around it I suspect there was a pretty good supply of _____. And Berg was a pretty new support base and I think we were interdicting their supplies a little bit.

Interviewer: So you were an irritant and they wanted you out of the way essentially.

Interviewer: That's my guess.

Interviewer: Were they still using the body count measure when you were there?

Nichols: With rifles yea.

Interviewer: Well the reason I ask is because

Nichols: I think that was a common thing all during Vietnam.

Interviewer: Craton Abrams had replaced Wes Moreland by the time you arrived and just wondered if he used a different metric for judging progress something other than body count.

Nichols: I don't know, all I know is what we did you know. And the mornings after we would go do sweep and collect weapons. And there was normally someone there and they would have folks they'd bring a bulldozer, dig a trench and they would have other folks come in and do the mass burial of the NVA and the BC.

Interviewer: It must be pretty grave.

Nichols: It was a bad day at the office is the only way to say it you know. But that's what, and you know I told you early on, that's the two different armies. You had the army that was there and did the business and the one that brought you the food. I don't know if we were able to do a recording about when we came back to Dau Teing in the mess hall. Did you guys?

Second Interviewer: You were just mortars were landing and you were just going to try and eat chow.

Nichols: It was interesting and shortly after that

Interviewer: This was the Thanksgiving meal right?

Nichols: No this was after farce _____ Berg, our battalion had rotated into Dau Teing. And each platoon was given two barracks of two squads, a squad on each side. And had cots and the sides of the walls were screen you know and they had tin rooves and sandbags and mortar boxes kind of on the bottom. And of the time we were back was usually about four nights, five days and one of those nights you had to go pull an ambush out of Dau Teing for security. And we had come back in and we were hungry you know we wanted to get some real food out of the mess hall. And we're lined up in the chow line waiting for the place to open and siren goes off and mortar starts impacting you know four or five hundred yards over there and just kind of worked walking it up and we didn't move, we were in chow line. Everybody skedaddles and we're ready eat and it's way over there for us four or five hundred yards that's quite a way. So we went in the platoon sergeant squadron started cooking eggs and so we ate breakfast. And we're getting ready to leave and the cooks come back and everybody comes back and we had messed up their grill and we've dirtied everything, it looked like we had breakfast.

Interviewer: And _____ what's important about that.

Nichols: Well you look back on it and say, "Why did we do that?" We got eggs and bacon and milk and bread. Getting a quart of milk was a pretty big thing. You didn't get any, it was good milk. The air force would bring it in for us.

Interviewer: What was your second Bronze Star experience?

Nichols: I was a squad leader and our squad

Interviewer: So you're not carrying a machine gun anymore?

Nichols: No we were I was with the First Aid, first cad. And we were selected to go with the PRU, that a perpetual recon unit of the South Vietnamese Army and we were on a mission with their district commander, I don't know berg colonel or somebody. The reason they wanted Americans to go was wherever there are Americans there will always be close air support on call, medevac is always big stuff. And they were going on their raid of remission and it was a quite lengthy patrol, quite lengthy walk. They didn't want any helicopters or anybody to know they were coming. Pretty long walk and pretty good fight a lot of South Vietnamese got hurt. None of us got hurt bad at all but we were able to call the support, the Americans were there. There was, a platoon sergeant was there and a captain an American captain. He was he was a Special Forces guy. The PRU is a handpicked group of South Vietnamese soldiers that are not the regular army. Anyway, I got the unfortunate call to do somethings and myself and my squad we did our mission and got out fairly easy. And they did not get the bad guys they were going after, we didn't get them. And we had to do a pretty 7K force march out of the area to get picked up because of the foliage, the jungle and stuff. This was right at the Cambodian border.

Interviewer: So essentially you were

Nichols: I was kind of up toward the San Bay area.

Interviewer: So there was danger essentially in every direction.

Nichols: Oh yeah we were out by our self.

What was you impression of the ARVN or of other Vietnamese units, you mentioned the Prudential Force.

He fought when Americans weren't around, he fought when the Americans were present, he did pretty good. My personal experience is he didn't do so well when Americans were not present. I don't think that they trusted their officer leadership very well because most of them are not highly trained. And the one thing I have not told you, we had what we called _____ Carson Scouts in every squad. Ours was _____, we had two that was with us. Both of them were captured the Tet Offensive. One was an NVA Captain and one was a NVA Lieutenant, they were officers, NVA officers. And they entered into the Chieu Hoi Program and they were like the scouts, they were able to tell us like the American Indian would tell the Frontiersman about how to do things, how to track, how many it was looking at the ground, what unit it was, what type of _____. They were a wealth of information and knowledge. But we all knew when we left they would be no more, they would be executed. Because when NVA come through and the south of _____ fell, all those people were executed.

Interviewer: I asked Dr. Browder about his experience with the ARVN and the South Vietnamese Units and he had no combat experience with them so his experience was a little bit different. But his impression was that, it was his responsibility to hand over facilities to these people as the Americans were being withdrawn. And he thought some of them did an okay job with that and others of them were basically thieves and scavengers. And you couldn't really tell in advance which sort of unit you were going to run into. Some of them did okay, others not. He was sort of diplomatic about not saying too much but I got the impression that he didn't have a great deal of respect for them. And perhaps not for their motivation either, you know the same way that you're talking about. That's interesting.

Nicholas: It's all about the leadership. If they had a good commander that made sure they got their pay and they didn't skim a percentage of their rations and it's a very corrupt it was a very corrupt time. Anybody that had served in Vietnam realized after they had been there a couple of days just how corrupt everything was, everything.

Interviewer: Did you learn any Vietnamese when you were there?

Nichols: Not much.

Interviewer: Did you have much contact with the Vietnamese civilians when you were there?

Nichols: Just the _____ Scouts and about once a month we'd come to fire base, it's the fire base and fire support base is a smaller base. The fire base would house like a brigade headquarters. And we'd come back to the fire base where we had like a little PX kind of thing and that's the only time, about once a month you know and when you're there 12 months there's not opportunities that you're going to interact with civilian folks. We did have a few encounters with villages, a couple of them were not so pleasant. You know when you're taking fire and a couple of people gets hurt from a village and you're in the middle of a rice patty, what do you do? You know you can't move you can't do anything. So one of the techniques was having solid tracer belts of ammunition and if you shot some of the tracer bullets in the roof, a thatched roof said thatched roof burns. And if that's where the bullets are coming from because you don't know where civilians are you don't know where the ___ are, you don't know where nothing is. But if you burn down the building then you're not killing any civilians and you're not hurting anybody but you're stopping the shooting. That is what we did a couple of times. And we got a couple of guys hurt coming up on a village like that. And it was real bad because you're kind of in the open, there's nowhere to go except the patties where the waste and the facies' of the dikes and stuff, nasty.

Interviewer: I'm sure

Interviewer #2: Did you ever have one of those moments where it's like why did I do this?

Nichols: Why did I turn left instead of right?

Interviewer #2: Did you ever like question your motives for joining or at any point in time in Vietnam like I could have maybe been somewhere else you know? Did I have to be so gung-ho to join the infantry?

Nichols: We were so, all of us, were so focused on finishing out turn, our time, and coming home. That was key finishing our time. And I'll tell you we were there doing it for each other and helping each other, not for any other cause. And if you've ever been in a place where somebody wants to end your existence, you'll do everything you can to stop that and to help the guy to your left and to your right. Very hard! And the reason you know when I received a call and they were building this part outside of the base here they knew I was a Vietnam Veteran and I was a Brigade Sergeant Major here. And they said Robert we've got to do a Vietnam Memorial here would you think about and do some words or do you know, and that's how my poem came about. And it's very short, sweet, and to the point but it sends a very strong message.

Interviewer: It does no it does.

Nichols: You want me to read it?

Interviewer: Go right ahead. That's a great idea because I read it but you know I just glanced at it so it would be effective if you could read it because you're the author.

Nichols: And these words are in stone, they're in granite. It's right out here outside the base which is pretty neat. And that park has a little memorial monument from each one of our country's wars from 1776 the American Revolution all the way through the current fight. And they have selected a veteran that served or someone that had served and used the words that he had written at that time or my case, someone that lived in the community and did this. And here's what I wrote that's on the stone out there.

We were a brotherhood of men and women that stood on something that no one can give and no one can take away, our honor. Courage was contagious. We stood and fought with each other when our country forgot how. The sacrifices we made must not be forgotten as we forget our friends who we carried from the field or left behind they are and will be forever young in the mind of the Vietnam Veteran.

The honor of the veteran that served in Vietnam nobody can give you the honor of serving and nobody can take it from you.

Interviewer: No that's right.

Nichols: Nobody can do it. And we stood for each other and most of us veterans are still to this day so hurt by what our country did to us when we came home.

Interviewer: Can you hold that thought because I'd like to come back to that?

Nichols: Okay

Interviewer: And while I'm thinking about it, I'd like you to give us a brief tour of the stuff that you have in your personal possessions that you had in Vietnam and perhaps say a word or two about what function they had. It should be absolutely clear I mean obviously C rations obvious but some of this other stuff isn't obvious at all. So would you be willing to do that?

Nichols: Sure! What's in this display case are the different rations that was available to all of the soldiers during my time. And the C rations, one of the things that we would get on resupply day and you had to carry rations for either three or four days. We would get a case of rations which were 12 C rations and six lurps which was a special mean that was dehydrated, you had to cook water and mix the meal. And this is just a sampling of all those different candy bars and cracker and primary meals. It might be a little hard to see with the camera. One of the things I'd like to show you that we did we would take a fruit can and you would have coffee and coco in your meal and use a cracker can and use what we call a church key a B52, and create a little stove and we would get heat tabs on resupply day. And put the heat tabs in there and you'd boil the water cook your coffee. It worked pretty cool. And this is how I carried mine. This is an M16 carry pouch but I carried an extra one. That's the rations you can see the different kind of meals and such and that was very important. One of the things that we would do is after resupply everyone carried one or two AK bayonets and after resupply, because you can't carry everything. They give you a case of C's and 6 lurps during my time. And what you didn't use you'd dig a hole within your platoon and you'd have to spike the can so that the VC and NVA could not use the rations for themselves because nothing was backhauled. And you destroyed the extra rations that way.

And our army did not have anything for trip wires, for flares and claymore mines and security right. But they would give us an orange tit bay which is not going to work in the jungle. Even if you tried to paint it black or green the paint chipped off eventually. So what we would do was use the AK bayonet and when it would go in the ground it was very sturdy and stable. We would use this to secure the trip wire to the next bayonet and it was very functional. And everybody had it because every time you were able to take a bad guy he had an AK or a SKS and you took their bayonets.

Interviewer #2: Did you have a favorite meal out of all of those?

Nichols: I loved the chicken and rice and the beef and rice and the beef stew and the chicken stew and the lurps, they were awesome. All the others, I kind of liked the, they have ham slices, beef slices, and pork slices and I would cook those with my bayonet, sear them a little bit, and put cheese on it and that's how, that was my primary meals. They had a couple of really big cans of spaghetti and beans and meatballs and beans and franks but that was a big can and it was heavy. And everything is about weight because you carry food, water, and ammunition very little of personal stuff. And this is just a quick

Interviewer: Someone was telling me that can peaches were a real premium that a lot of people really liked the canned peaches.

Nichols: I didn't smoke but I kept every pack of cigarettes that came in C rations because I would trade them for peaches and pears. Because you hang on to the cigarettes and eventually the guy who smoked wanted cigarettes and you could trade. We had to carry insect repellent, foot powder, and things like that. I was an M60 machine gunner and you always carried extra connect O rings. A lot of times you'd get ready to pop a smoke grenade and then they'd say hold the smoke and if you didn't have extra. A lot of guys pulled the grenades and they didn't keep the pin, you always have extra pins. Pocket knives and church keys and can openers. This is the knife that my grandfather gave me. It's pretty neat it's a key wire and I carried it around my neck, kept it sharp. It was in my foot locker and I brought it out. Two port canteen, one port canteen, there's some pictures here of me that I sent you digitally that you can look at. This is a map and compass that I used when I was a squad leader. I kept it and put it in a box when I left when I got a couple extra. And this is around Dau Tieng not too far Tai In and it's got the big black virgin which is an amusement park today in South Vietnam or Vietnam, it's pretty neat. This are something special. All of the letters we had had the county and this is one of the type letters that I would mark and my future wife in college at Marshall University. I marked a little dot on the map where as close as I could where I was at and she got one that had a mark in Cambodia and she thought I had messed up. And she had had the letter for about two or three weeks and then the president went on TV and said he'd allowed the troops to go into Cambodia, heck we'd done been there forever.

Interviewer: I see soap and toothpaste and a toothbrush.

Nichols: Yes these are the ones I had. Now what's pretty special this is before zip lock baggies, this is before any of the things that we have to keep things

Interviewer: Dry

Nichols: Yeah well this is a chew hoy message. But what it's really designed to do is carry M16 magazines to keep them dry. Well no infantry man would put there magazines in a plastic bag. But they'd give us hundreds of these things. Dr. Zieren, they are perfect to put your toothbrush, toothpaste, soap in you're not them everywhere. Everybody knows that the issue insect repellent always leaks, you've got to have

it in something. So this chew hoy bag and it's telling see chew hoy. Telling the NVA or the VC to surrender, bring this and surrender and you'll get food and free passage. That's my hat that I wore. I was given the camouflage one when I left and never wore it, put in my bag and left. And you can see this picture of me sitting on a hammock, that's my hammock.

Interviewer: That's the country bag.

Nichols: From the service yes. Yep

Interviewer: And this is the Calvary

Nichols: First Calv that's the first calv and the 25th.

Interviewer: Is there a lightening style have lightening is that the 25th?

Nichols: That's the 25th it was originally based out of Hawaii which is still today. The rook sack is still rigged like I had it when I when I put it in the duffle and sent it home. The five quart canteen, very heavy. But this is how I carried it with the one quart canteen snapping. This is a McGuire rig but mostly what that was for was to carry and move things in our resupply stuff.

Interviewer: And you said you that was as much as 100 pounds?

Nichols: Yes sir, you've got think here is where I carried my 200 rounds of ammunition in a can and that M60 ammo is pretty heavy. And if you look how much does five quarts of water weigh? Then another quart of water, on the other side was my trenching tool and then you'd carry your rations and the only creature comfort is an extra t-shirt or two, socks, and a poncho liner just like this rolled up in a poncho. And that's it. And you can see the hammock because when you're up in the mountains and the leaches were so bad you have to get off of the floor of the jungle or you're smothered with leaches. It's really bad. And it's just kind of a quick snapshot of some of the stuff that I had. And when you come out of the field three days before going home you get to go back to your _____ and secure your stuff, pack up a couple of duffle bags and whatever you put in it that's what you get to bring home.

Interviewer: Did you bring home any souvenirs?

Nichols: Other than my kit no I didn't really want anything you know. I was ready to go home.

Interviewer: Yeah of course everyone was.

Nichols: You've got to realize I had just turned 19 you know. I was a 19 year old buck sergeant who had spent a year in combat and coming home. My future wife was at Marshall University I didn't have the grades, I didn't have the scholarship like a couple of my friends did. They went and played university ball at Marshall University and died on the plane crash and I went to Vietnam.

Interviewer: And here you are.

Nichols: And here I am. My wife was at Marshall when all that happened.

Interviewer: Did you have could you drink water that you could find there by disinfecting it with those chemicals and stuff like that?

Nichols: We had to. That's all we had. We would get water resupply

Interviewer: I mean six quarts of water isn't very much is it?

Nichols: No when a large portion of the food that you have is dehydrated, and that's some of the best food. So you've got to sacrifice something. And one of problems today is my body doesn't like iodine because that was the water purification tablets back then and you know water with high iodine content makes me ill today. That's how you did it you put the pills in the streams, you had to be real carful. We've got all kinds of elevated ways to get resupply of water billets, collapsible jugs, we called them donkey dicks. They were big huge thick balloons about six feet long you know would be lowered to us throw over your shoulder and it's kind of like a bandana as such. An easy way to try to carry water for resupply into the canteens. But the vast majority of water you drink is from the streams. You don't have a choice there's just no choice.

Interviewer: Did you ever have you know severe diarrhea or anything like that?

Nichols: We all got sick at one time or another. We all took malaria pills, every Monday we got the big orange pill. The medic would come out and make sure we took the big orange pill and then every day we took the little white pill.

Interviewer: My father was in World War II and he had Sulphur tablets for that kind of it was an anti-malaria measure.

Nichols: We besides carrying the ammunition and the grenades and all the other stuff you know it was just it is a lot of weight. You know my waist was like a 28 inch waist back then you know when you're an 18, 19 year old, you're a young guy.

Interviewer: How much did you weigh do you remember?

Nichols: Oh 130, 132

Interviewer: That sounds like my brother, he was a 28 to 30 inch waist he was very thin.

Nichols: But we were invincible. You know this first brigade guy standing to your right he was invincible. Nothing was going to happen to him, nothing was going to happen to me we're invincible. But what I'm dealing with right now is Agent Orange poisoning with problems that's I've got medically as an Agent Orange casualty.

Interviewer: Did you eventually get a disability rating?

Nichols: Ninety percent

Interviewer: Ninety percent, that's very appropriate, ninety percent. Why don't we sit down and you can tell me about your experiences after upon returning because I know that is something that you're keen to say something about.

Nichols: I didn't know what I did wrong.

Interviewer: Okay so let's get a time here. You would have come back then

Nichols: March 71

Interviewer: March 71 alright.

Nichols: I got married April 7th of 71.

Interviewer: Okay

Nicholas: I was back a couple three weeks before I got married.

Interviewer: And did you fly back?

Nichols: Yes

Interviewer: And did you fly into Oakland?

Nichols: Yes we came it's amazing. We left in jungle fatigues. Got to Oakland and you're herded like cattle through different stations and all and everybody had to get a uniform. And the uniform that we were given they called a khaki uniform, a tan kind of short sleeved uniform. And they had to you know sew our patched and stuff on.

Interviewer: As opposed to the field green?

Nichols: Yeah right it's the dress uniform.

Interviewer: Okay

Nichols: And we were given the opportunity there at that replacement place, people were coming and going, to get something to eat. And here I'm 19 years old coming back from Vietnam and I couldn't buy a beer. I wanted a steak and I got a steak but I couldn't buy beer. My first exposure in a lot of things negative said with a group, because we were in a herd. You fly on a long flight across the Pacific back and you know you didn't serve with most of those guys but they were all in the same place going home. And it was just what did I do wrong? Well when I get my tickets and flying back to Huntington West Virginia and there were folks that really were angry at anybody in uniform. Like we had done something wrong.

Interviewer: In the airport?

Nichols: Yes

Interviewer: Was this the San Francisco airport?

Nichols: Yes and then we stopped somewhere like Dallas or somewhere and then we didn't get off the plane there. Then went into Charleston West Virginia and changed planes into Huntington. And everywhere it was like we were stinking or we had an odor about us or something. People just shunned us. It was disheartening. I didn't have anybody come up and confront me and want to fight me or anything like that. There was some leave my space kind of thing, go over there somewhere.

Interviewer: And of course this is a common story. Many people experienced things very much like this and of course it was a real slap in the face because not only had you served your time and lots of other people hadn't. But your friends may not have made it to come back and they made the ultimate sacrifice as opposed to the civilians who didn't do anything.

Nichols: Yeah you know fast forward a couple years there and know we had amnesty given to all of the Vietnam Veterans who went to Canada. You know we had a president that forgave everybody. It was

bad time in the country's history said the war shouldn't have been fought but it was fought. And you know all of the reasons you know hind sight.

Interviewer: There were actually two stages there. The first stage was forgiveness for the people who evaded the draft. The more controversial move was forgiveness for the service. People who were actually in the ranks and managed to get away into Canada or Sweden. Of course that was more controversial.

Nichols: Not good

Interviewer: Yeah and ____ was carded. I want to say the first one was four if I remember but the second one was ____.

Nichols: And the thing that is hurtful for guys like me is they get more recognition in our history for opposing something that the elected leaders asked the citizen to do. The citizen that went forth and did what the elected leaders asked us to do are treated far worse and different in our history than those that opposed it and were forgiven.

Interviewer: Don't you think that this changed? Don't you think in the past ten years, fifteen years, something like that?

Nichols: Our country is not mad at the soldier anymore.

Interviewer: Well for starters not mad at the soldier anymore and secondly a recognition that some of the soldiers from Vietnam coming home the soldiers were treated was wrong, bad, inappropriate, whatever term you like. And I also get a sense that there's I'd even go a step further and say there's a sense of ____ we screwed up we did the wrong things, we're sorry I guess.

Nichols: You see that in the actions of all the Chambers of Commerce and all of the communities and counties all across the state of Tennessee and Kentucky that I know about and participate in. They're trying to make it right. Annually they do special things for those who call themselves Vietnam Veterans and they have expanded that to call it the Vietnam Era Veteran you know. And it's a move to make sure we never make that kind of mistake again.

Interviewer: And I think a sort of atonement for past sins on the part of the civilians who I can't make excuses, I'm not trying to make excuses. I don't know it never made much sense to me this sort of as you certainly heard the baby killer rhetoric. What exactly does that mean? I think it was episodes like ____ that poisoned the kind of atmosphere and it was a president like Richard Nixon who was clearly dishonest and ____ in his dealings with the American people. And somehow or the other that stain rubbed off on the average soldiers with no justification what so ever.

Nichols: Right

Interviewer: But it did.

Nichols: And it took 25 years for those that served that did not stay in the military literally hinder service. They got on with life, went to school, did whatever they did. Those of us that stayed in the military because of the experience and building up what we call the bad army, the old volunteer army the ____ army, the bad army. We didn't have equipment you know worth maintaining we just didn't have it. Building up our country's skillsets to go forth. And then being in our army and validating what

we took three generations to fix was the Gulf War. You just can't imagine the flexing of our muscle that our country did and the number of troops that deployed in defense of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and what happened. And the very few casualties that took place and the destruction brought forth. We made some terrible errors, all of us that served said, I personally stood about 30 kilometers from Baghdad and there was nothing between me and Baghdad. Why didn't we finish why didn't we fix this and a generation later you know good, bad or indifferent. Good decision, bad decision it happened.

Interviewer: What's the old the antique store rule you break it you fix it. I think that was part of the motivation in 1991. We don't want to break it and we certainly don't want to have to fix it.

Nichols: Well the thing that I deal with everyday today as a county commissioner here in Montgomery County Tennessee is my service to our country you know has me stand out a little bit amongst the other commissioners. As you can imagine I'm quite outspoken about certain things and it's troubling that everybody had forgotten 9/11 and what happened. The reasons things are happening today is because of that. This is not something invented or it's think about this, how many children in school today knows what 9/11 is and what happened in New York? Who knows that what happened at the Pentagon of our school children, who knows that? I teach

Interviewer: We saw this in our class, our freshman and sophomore class you know they were children if they were even born at the time and so it means nothing to them. And that's very unfortunate.

Nichols: And we've got to do a better job of teaching our Millennials which is going to run our country very soon. We've got to do a better job of that. And those of us who are still carrying the torch and we want to hold it high okay from the Vietnam Veteran to the citizen today, of why service to our country is important. And honoring those that did carry the torch that they don't forget. There's a lot of ancient history that has been forgotten about how you treat your veterans is how your country will survive.

Interviewer: I've another question that might be a little different from what we've been talking about. And that is, PTSD and Agent Orange as legacies in an unfortunate way of the Vietnam War. How much exposure have you had to veterans whose lives were so disrupted their psychological demeanor was so disturbed that they clearly needed help and very often didn't get any help? And of course you could say the same thing for Agent Orange that for a long time the VA simply resisted the notion that there was any potential impact then only slowly but surely did they come around to the notion that yes indeed exposure to what amounts to dioxin is a terrible poison and it's going to have long term consequences and many people are going to suffer. What would you say about those two impacts?

Nichols: Well I'll start with Agent Orange because I'm a casualty of that. In fact last month I had surgery, cancer on my leg and the surgeon said I'm only the second person that's he's seen to have this kind of cancer on my leg and it's because I was an infantryman in Vietnam in between Dau Tieng and Thien when the caribou was spraying that awful stuff. We were pulling security along the road and walking through the foliage of where that stuff was sprayed. Now is that how it happened? I don't know, nobody knows but the only other person he's had surgery on the leg from that was another Vietnam Veteran. And the other if you look at the Agent Orange problems, if you look at the top five I have all five and that's one of the key reasons besides being wounded is my 90 percent disability. It is primarily from Agent Orange. The thing that most of us who served in Vietnam I won't say avoid, we try to help but this stereo typical Vietnam Veteran homeless guy on the street sitting on the corner. And most of those guys, I don't know this but it appears that that group are the one primarily that would be suffering from

or had problems adjusting coming back. I'm just so thankful that I adjusted well. I had a new marriage, shortly after a daughter that stabilized me and I was faced what am I going to do. I was offered \$7600 to reenlist for six years and I said where can I go and stay the longest? They said Alaska. Went to Alaska and I think that was my therapy because everything there is real. The hunting and fishing the training, climbing mountains, skiing. That's where I fell in love with the army and decided to make the military a career because I didn't want to go back to Vietnam but I didn't want to go work in a coal mine either.

Interviewer: No

Nichols: The only decent paying job for a veteran was working the coal mine or the river and there were waiting lines for people to get in those jobs and I just wouldn't want to work in a coal mine. So and I knew I wouldn't make the money to raise a family with the wife in college. I took her out of college and we went to Alaska.

Interviewer: I've known people who have gone to Alaska and just loved it there just loved it.

Nichols: It is the best kept secret in the American military. It is a wonderful assignment because everything you do is real, it's hard to explain. There's no simulation when you go train to climb a mountain you climb a mountain. Okay when you go down a river you down a real river. When you go hunting you hunt for real you know. And I got to spend four and a half years of my life there, I loved it I loved it.

Interviewer: Let me back up a little bit. You mentioned being wounded can you give us a brief version of how that happened? What was the circumstance? Obviously how serious was the wound?

Nichols: The night that I left the bush, I was a squad leader a nine man squad. The NVA watched us move in and setup, we setup in a platoon like defensive perimeter. We dug in, got setup and the position was my squad had three positioned forward and two back you know a W position. The platoon CP was higher that hill was a little higher and we were down a little bit lower. And the NVA had decided that our platoon was a platoon they were going to hit that night. And our nine man squad five of us got wounded. I had curled up and went to sleep in, they you would sleep in the back of the hole then you could go right in it and there was total security. And the RTFs stayed with me and the NVA was able to get inside the trip flair and they threw a satchel charge a grenade or something. And he was leaving and tripped the trip flair is how we knew because we saw him running off. And then once the grenade or whatever it was went off we got a volley of RPGs and that's how most of us got hurt. But we all stayed and fought they got evacted the next morning. Most everybody was shrap metal and stuff like that.

Interviewer: No fatalities though?

Nichols: No, I was hurting. It's like someone took a hot poker and poked you a few times. It hurts and it burns and the medic got us some morphine but we couldn't get out until the next morning. They had to cut a place and the man would bring down a _____ and get us out. They took care of us and the first sergeant kept us back for like I don't know I was out of the bush probably a total of three weeks, three and a half weeks. The company came in for stand down, that's how I linked up with them. And party hardy everyone's glad to see each other and drink a lot, two three beer.

Interviewer: It's too bad you didn't land in Ohio because in Ohio you could still get three two beer.

Nichols: Its funny today you try to tell that to someone. They don't do that.

Interviewer: No they don't do that anymore.

Nichols: But there was a difference between three two beer.

Interviewer: Yeah that's right. But when I lived in Iowa you could drink at 19. And then in the 80's the federal government imposed a rule, if you wanted highway dollars it had to be 21. And so those variations were lost fortunately. I never saw that I mean it took a lot of effort to drink three two beer to be impaired. I mean you could do it in theory. You'd pee a lot exactly. It wasn't really a threat too much to anybody. I have some recollections of that.

Nichols: You know I can be at home or be somewhere out to dinner with family or doing something and you smell something or see something or hear something, your mind goes back okay. And you could be eating something and you hear that sound or that song you know and you drift at just what you didn't have. I mean simply listening to a pleasant song and having a good cup of coffee or a steak or a drink a diet drink, they had diet drink back in those days, you know pop what we called it, it was Coke or 7-Up or you know Pepsi or something. Those things still happen to me today you know and more so when I've got a couple conflicts that I've had up to the point. The Vietnam Era is still dominate.

Interviewer: It was your formative experience as a 18, 19 year old.

Nichols: Yeah

Interviewer: It would make sense. Is there anything that we haven't that I haven't asked you that you know that you would like to include for the record sake or you know to get something off your chest or because you've always been thinking about this and you've never had the opportunity to express it? I mean is there anything? I know I'm putting you on the spot.

Nichols: The biggest thing was for me was the support of the family. I think the guys that had trouble adjusting coming home they either didn't have family or they didn't adjust coming home very well and the family didn't have open arms or they didn't let it go. You need to understand something, that man right there's been in combat. He understands when I say let it go. You can't continue to fight the war, you can't continue to disagree with somebody, you can't hold a grudge. You know because someone decided to not raise his hand, and he should have when his number came up you know that was his choice. Will I ever sit and have dinner with him? Never! But you've got to let it go. So many folks have never done that and they are bitter today. You've got to let it go. You know our life is so short here.

Interviewer: And who are you hurting in the end but yourself.

Nichols: Well I see it every day. As a command sergeant major in an infantry regiment, when we deployed in the Gulf War I think my brigade had 27 Vietnam Veterans. They were all senior noncommissioned officers or officers, every one of them. And they had let it go and they were fairly adjusted and they were a rock for the rest of their soldiers. Okay, today because everybody has fought, you know I did a year in Vietnam. There are soldiers who have eight years combat time. You can't compare that, you can't compare what I did to what they have been exposed to. They go in and eat hamburgers and milkshakes for supper, sleep, get a shower, get up the next day and go on patrol and fight their ass off on a convoy or something. Out for two or three days and come back. How do you adjust? Oh by the way, you skype or Facetime with your family or your wife. I mean we had mail so the things that men and women are exposed to today, I can't relate to. Of what they are exposed to and

adjusting and all of us need to pay more attention to the veteran today. In ten years it's going to be you know when this thing is done it's going to get worse of those who have troubles adjusting. Dr. Zieren it's going to get worse because it's different.

Interviewer: Yeah it's different.

Nichols: For the World War II veteran to come home, the greatest generation fought the fight okay. The great soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division were there for you know three and a half years but they spend you know 100 plus days in combat. So they were in combat or out not in combat. In Vietnam we were there 24/7 except when we were on stand down and you were still subject you know. This stuff is different these guys are subject 24/7. Just different.

Interviewer: Well you could toss Korea in there too because they had their problems adjusting too when they came back.

Nichols: Yeah but guys like you sir and Dr. Browder and Austin Peay they help make a difference by what you are doing today. Helping and making sure there are outlets for people that need to talk, share their experience.

Interviewer: You know as a matter of fact, I'm glad you mentioned this. I have tried and not succeeded in getting a small grant from the National Endowment from the Humanities. And this last version was the closest that we came. We were actually not that far away and rather than focus on Vietnam I think I'd like to do something with Iraq and Afghanistan and the Gulf War in general. And construct this as a kind of training people to be oral history interviewers and then finding people willing to talk about their experiences. Because I think that's, talking about your experience is a great way of sort of normalizing them. You know and I don't mean that in a negative way I mean you know you've thought about your Vietnam experience, you've had conversations with people. You know you've drawn certain lessons and maybe some of these guys haven't been able to do that up to this point. And so what I'd like to do is work on my proposal and make it a little more veteran friendly because that's what it's supposed to be. It's supposed to be something that veterans can find attractive.

Nichols: With no penalty.

Interviewer: With no penalty of course, absolutely.

Nichols: I say that because a lot of folks don't talk or share because, what's your hidden agenda.

Interviewer: Yeah, we've run across that. But I'm not trying to tell anyone to say anything you know. I'm interested in your experience. And I think if you're going to do oral history that's the way you have to approach it. It's not that any interviewer would have a hidden agenda. I mean God forbid that they do have one but they're not supposed to. And that's part of my job to make sure that they don't. But anyway, I'll let you know. The application is due in there is a preliminary one that's due in September and then the regular application I think is due in November. But I'll be in touch and maybe I'll show you what we've done so far and then you know I'd be happy to have you look at it and make suggestions.

Nichols: Okay sure

Interviewer: And you know maybe we could figure out a way, I don't know where we'd do the interviews. You know getting on post is a little more difficult. But we'll figure something out.

Nichols: The space that you're at right now if going to be like this for about three years until they finish raising the funds for the new museum.

Interviewer: Right

Nichols: And this space is always available for you and it's not that difficult getting a pass to come on and most veterans or those who are currently serving and this is kind of user friendly. A soldier breaking away from his unit and coming here would probably be more receptive around army stuff than a classroom to be honest with you.

Interviewer: Yeah that makes sense.

Nichols: Just as an old soldier giving advice.

Interviewer 2: It's easier.

Interviewer: Hey I'm not opposed to that.

Nichols: And you know my connection with the oral history project and the sponsorship that we do, I'll help in any way that I can.

Interviewer: Alright, I appreciate that. Well is there anything else?

Nichols: I don't have anything.

Interviewer: It's noon, I thought that we could