

GEORGE WHITEHOUSE, END OF WAR '71 – '72

George: My name is George Whitehouse.

Speaker 2: Look at him.

Producer: You got to look at me. We're going to have a conversation. Ignore him if that's possible.

George: I don't know. My name is George Whitehouse. I entered the Army on December 2nd, 1970. [I was 00:00:18] trained in field artillery and arrived in Vietnam October 15th, 1971. Served with the 101st Airborne Artillery Unit supporting 101st Airborne and served with the 196th Light Infantry Brigade. Then in the [end 00:00:38] from June 15th to August 15th, served with what was called Task Force Gimlet, which was the last US ground combat unit in Vietnam.

Producer: What was your education? How did you end up in the military, particularly towards the [battalion 00:00:53] of this war?

George: I was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania. My parents are from Scranton, Pennsylvania. I actually grew up in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, which is about 50 miles south of Scranton. I went to high school there.

April 1st, which is my birthday, 1965 was my 18th birthday. That's the first time Vietnam came on my radar screen. Couple of things happened that day. I got a letter in the mail of acceptance to American University in their class of 1969. My father came home. He was overjoyed by that. I really wanted to go to school in Washington. He cautioned me that I might not graduate in 1969 because there was this thing called Vietnam that I had never heard off.

Two weeks earlier, the Marines had landed in Da Nang and that got on in his radar. He also reminded me that day that I just turned 18, which meant I had to go register for the draft. That's when everything came together and started my story [in 00:02:10] that I realized that, because I was still in high school, being 18, that I had a deferment. When I registered to go to college, I would have a deferment for my education for eight straight semesters as long as I stayed in college.

I started thinking I was glad to have that deferment, started thinking how unfair it was, a lot of reasons [that 00:02:38] made my high school class [inaudible 00:02:40] couldn't or didn't have the money, I didn't have the interest to go to

college. They were exposed in the draft. Also, there were probably a lot of folks who didn't want to go to college but went there to stay out of the draft. It was a strange situation. I remained down here in Washington and would get letters, unfortunately, now and then for my parents with news clippings of high school classmates of mine who were serving in Vietnam and who had died in Vietnam.

It all started becoming very real to me. Some of my best friends were Vietnam. My brother ended up leaving college and ended up in the Army and ended up in the Vietnam. It became very real. Here at Washington where all the protests and things like that, so it was a very real time.

It's funny. A young guy how long a year means because I certainly could have enlisted. I could have gone to OCS. I could have enlisted in the Navy which was four years and the Air force. All of that seemed like a long time to me. I graduated from college, I had a degree in Accounting, I was working in a job that I liked and wanted to continue as a career. I was studying for the CPA exam. I was taking some graduate courses. In the end, I just kind of succumb to the draft and that was it.

Producer: Even after you got your degree, you graduated in AU and then they actually did draft you ...

George: Yes.

Producer: After ...

George: Once your deferment expired, it was a very confusing time, too, that I can't even remember all the dates and times but at some point, they did change things with the draft for the good. Over the years, it used to be if you are married, you couldn't be drafted, if you have a kid you couldn't be drafted. The deferment was more education-wise than it was, actually, some more like college classmates. You could go on to Peace Corps. You could become a teacher. Certain teaching positions got you a deferment. If you want to teach in the inner city and teach Math, they needed Math teachers, you'd get a draft deferment.

A lot of people did that but what they did in late '69 or '70, they came up with this draft lottery, which to me was a lot more fair [and basic 00:05:25] to what it [said 00:05:25], when you are 18, the year that you're 18, you're exposed to the draft. You got a number and you know what your future was going to be. You knew you're either going to get drafted or you knew you weren't. It was kind of fair all the way round because if you knew you weren't, prospective employers knew you weren't, see you're more likely to get a job. A lot of us who graduated from college, you had this hanging over your head. People aren't going to want to hire you because they knew you're eventually going to get drafted.

It was funny because you ended up in basic training. There was no middle ground. There were a bunch of us who's educational deferments had expired. We were like 22, 23 years old, 24 years old, or whatever, and then a bunch of 18-year olds. It was like nobody in between because this lottery happened when all these kids were 18 and you were older so that was a kind of different time period

Producer: This war was beginning to tear the country apart. Where did you fall in that continuum?

George: I was not one of the protesters. What I saw could have affected me either way but I took the view, I had seen a number of my high school buddies died there. I had a brother. In 1971 a lot of the big protests were happening. That was when the Cambodian invasion happened. That's when Kent State happened. I was still in Washington. I didn't end up in the Army till December of '70. I saw a lot of that. My brother was in Vietnam. A lot of my friends had served there. I took the other view. I wasn't a protester. I saw it all but I really wasn't.

Producer: Did your family have any military history?

George: My father served in World War II. All of my uncles who were military served the World War II. I grew up in this neighborhood of the Leave It to Beaver, Father Knows Best, 1950s where all of my friends' fathers had served in World War II. That's what you did. They belong to the VFW or the American Legion or whatever. It was something that, I thought that's what people did.

I ended up getting drafted, lucky to some extent because for all it's worth, the army actually did, gave you test when you went in. I can remember the six weeks of basic training in this big long line, [PNW 00:08:28] Whitehouse at the end of the line, all of us going in to the company commander basic training [and him 00:08:36] telling everybody where they're going next and these guys coming out. 11 Bravo, Fort Polk, Louisiana, that's what they needed. There were all these young 18-year old kids and fair enough, that's what they needed. When I went in there, he was confused.

He's like, "Ha! Are you going to Fort Sill. You're in the artillery fire direction. I don't even know what that is but don't screw up in the next couple of weeks and you'll be a lot better off than the rest of this group."

Producer: Just the mere fact that you now had a college degree when you walk in there. Don't they just automatically say, "Do you want to go to office candidate?"

George: They did over and over again. Like I said, that extra year seemed like a lifetime for somebody like me, [what he already 00:09:21] started is a career and what

[he 00:09:23] wanted to be and didn't want to, that a year isn't that long a time but it seemed like a long time to me.

Producer: Tell me, why is it, it was three years as [opposed 00:09:34] to two?

George: Yes, so [inaudible 00:09:36]

Producer: Tell me that the reason you didn't want to go in OCS and explain that because my voice won't be on this and I want your voice say everything.

George: Over my career or in earlier career in the Army or career in basic training and advanced training in artillery, I don't think week went by where they were approaching people that were college graduates trying to persuade them to sign up for more time to go to OCS. They needed junior officers. They needed lieutenants desperately. To do that, you had to sign up for one or two extra years. You were going to end up in Vietnam anyway. That's why they wanted you.

I really didn't really have an interest in spending an extra year or two in the Army. I did lock out. I ended up in Fort Sill. It was artillery fire direction. I locked out because math scores, I had high math scores. I'm an accountant. Artillery fire direction, it's all math. They need people that really know and understand and can deal with math. When I arrived at Fort Sill, Oklahoma it was completely different then. For [decks 00:10:58], everybody in my platoon were 22, 23-year old, college graduate, math or engineers. We were all identical. It was incredible.

Producer: You found a bit more comfortable in that setting?

George: Absolutely. Then every week, they were trying to persuade us to the advanced training and Fire Direction was eight weeks. Every week, they were after us to sign up for OCS and none of us would. Toward the end of that eight weeks they came to us and said, "We've got another possibility for you. It won't mean having to extend or enlist for anymore time. It's NCO school, a non-commissioned officer, pretty much the same as OCS, a couple of weeks shorter, you know? You'll be an E-5, which is better than going to Vietnam as an E-3, you know? You'll be in the States for three or four months longer."

Almost all of us said, "Yeah, why not?" We ended up going to this group who went to this NCO school, which was very good for us.

Producer: [crosstalk 00:12:14] you come in as a staff sergeant or something? What's the rank?

George: E-5, buck sergeant, I guess. Yeah, an E-5, which is as NCO, which means there's a lot of things that you don't have to do like KP and guard duty and things like that. You got a little bit more pay. Pay wasn't an issue. You'd really not get much at all anyway. But it was good, it was a very good experience. I got to be with these guys for a lot longer time.

When we graduated from that school, it was evident. During that school, I think was telling you earlier, in March of '71, whispers and rumors started spreading about this Fire Base Mary Ann. It's a massacre. We didn't know what a fire base was until the week before because they had a simulated fire base there. They're like, "This is where you're going to be in Vietnam, on a place like this. Here's how operates."

Then there's rumors and whispers and then all of the sudden, these issues of Time Magazine start circulating April '71 of this massacre with this fire base that gotten ...

Producer: Tell me what happened at fire base.

George: In retrospect, it looks like as the war wound down, there was less and less alertness, less and less preparedness, more blacks, less leadership from above to the point where this fire base was attacked by sappers at night, overrun, 30 men were killed, 60, 70 were wounded. It was one of the biggest tragedies of the war that period of time because there weren't that many people dying.

Here it was. We're hearing this. That got our attention that this was serious business. When we graduated from NCO school, we were expecting on graduation day. They'd have orders to Vietnam and [went 00:14:34] and started wondering, "Maybe we just won't get to Vietnam."

We all got orders to places on Fort Sill. I was like an assistant instructor in artillery school, out on the range, helping the instructors to teach people how to direct artillery fire and how to use a compass and map reading and all that skills that I'd learned.

Then one day, I bumped into one of my buddies and he said, "I just got a orders yesterday." I then I ran to another one, "I just got our orders yesterday"

I got back to my barracks that night, there's a note [that said 00:15:12], "Come to the orderly room. Go down there. Here's your orders. Report to, you know, you get were like a 30-day leave and then report to Fort Lewis Washington, October 7th," something like that.

I'm not sure what we felt because we weren't sure. I think at that point, I'm trying to think back whether we were really conscious how much a drawdown was going on as far as we were concerned because of this Fire Base Mary Ann that we had heard about and stuff like that. I think we still thought there was a hot war going on there and that they really needed us. It became evident we had to leave. We go out to Fort Lewis Washington. They issue us all our tropical clothing and then we stand in formation three times a day, waiting for our orders, movement orders or whatever.

In every formation you're calling off people's names and ranks and changing their orders. I was thinking, "What the heck is going on here, you know," and thinking maybe they're going to change our orders too. I don't know how long it was but it seemed like four or five days we were there, kind of in a limbo.

Then one formation they said, "Okay. Your orders are here. Be out of your formation at midnight or whatever time it was, with all your stuff. You're gonna be transported by bus and then by plane, whatever."

We were [led 00:16:52] to those final phone calls home and we were gone. I don't know how long it took but it's a long time and we arrived in Cam Ranh Bay some air base near there. It could have been Bien Hoa but we arrived in Cam Ranh Bay which was the big replacement depot that most people came in through, most people left through. It was starting to be monsoon season but in the south, my impression was the monsoon season wasn't in the south at that time of the year. It was hot. It was dusty. We reported to this replacement depot, half of which was guys coming in and half of guys going out. That's the way it was set up but really, my impression was, it was like 10 to one going home. [There weren't 00:17:42] many of us coming in and the other impression was most of these guys going home, they didn't look like any soldiers I'd ever seen in the States. There was something different.

Producer: What did they look like?

George: Kind of rag tag, used and abused, undisciplined. I don't want to talk down about it was a shock to me. They took us because we're E-5s and made us, at different times go in, do what they call special police, SPs, not MPs, SPs. They had a thing on your arm. They gave you a billy club. They gave you special hat. You're supposed to go patrol or police this area where these guys going home who were all kind of unruly, happy to be out of there.

It was kind of a microcosm I think what was going on back here. You could tell it was big drug problems that I hadn't seen in the Army in the States. There were big racial problems that I haven't seen in the Army in the States. It was pretty scary to I tell you that truth. That was my first view of Vietnam. What the hell is

going on here? We were there to get orders to where we were going and the same thing. It seem like quite a time that we waited formations three times a day, read peoples orders, and we were there.

Finally, we are all altogether. The whole group there, like 30 of us who had gone through training together. That was the good part of [about 00:19:26] going over. Most guys went over by themselves. I went over with all these guys I've been with [three or 00:19:30] six months. That was really good for me and for everybody else.

Finally, they issued this orders, almost all of us 101st Airborne. There was a big map on the wall of Vietnam and headed where all of the units were.

They're like, "Where the hell are they? They're going, "Holy crap! They're like in North Vietnam," because they were like all the way to the top. Not that there was really [inaudible 00:19:54], not that there was any difference as to where you were, just seemed like what? It's probably not the place you want to be.

Some of the guys got orders for the Americal Division. Some got orders for the First Cav Division. Before we even shipped out, some of those guys' orders were changed to go to 101st, to find out later that the Americal would stood down or was in the process of standing down, so they weren't going to send somebody there. Then the 1st Cav was in the process of standing down. They weren't going to send somebody there. Most of the guys that were with me, I believe at that point in time, 101st Airborne was the only combat division left over there. It was a big group, probably 20,000, 25,000 men. I would suspect in some areas of the country was probably like that.

When we ended up 101st, we were still performing a combat role. We weren't supporting anybody. It might not have been as aggressive as it had been in the past. I can explain that as we go along but we left Cam Ranh Bay, flew to Da Nang, changed planes in Da Nang, and ended up in Phu Bai-Hue, which is where the 101st was headquartered and had just beat the biggest typhoon that ever hit the country called Typhoon Hester. You could look it up but it was incredible. It might be the biggest typhoon that they've ever had since either. It was gigantic typhoon. It's like a hurricane over there. Incredible amounts of wind and rain. We were in transit. The war pretty much stopped because it was raining 15 inches a day or something I think. It was really ...

Producer: How long did it last?

George: Really bad days, just absolutely days. It was the beginning of the monsoon season then too, so I left the sun down south in Cam Ranh Bay. I don't think I saw the sun. I think Christmas day the sun came out for an afternoon and then didn't

see the sun until I went back down to Da Nang in the beginning of February. It just rained, overcast. It's hard for people to understand but in the mountains it's actually cool too. It was cool, rainy, overcast, really bad, and we, from there, went to a place called Camp [Evans 00:22:30], which was farther north, which had been the base camp or home for one of the brigades of 101st, which was a big camp.

You could tell it was becoming a ghost town. That's where they have what they call Screaming Eagle Replacement Training Center where that was the same country training for a week where they proceed to try to scare the crap out of you. You'd learn a lot of stuff. They were the kind to proceed it, which they did, all the various snakes, critters, and stuff [and all 00:23:05] what the enemy does and show you all this stuff and take you out on a simulated patrol and all that stuff and [acted pull 00:23:09] real guard duty and everything. You start being [inaudible 00:23:17] to the fact this is real. This is not play. We're not back at Fort Sill.

From there, back down, we've got assigned out to war, whatever units we were with. I was with two of my friends. I said, "Oh, you're with this 1st and 321st Artillery Battalion. Get in that quarter-ton truck over there. Just drive, it'll take you over to their headquarters."

We get it and we go over there and we ask the guy. We're typical college kids. We said, "Where is the NCO Club?"

He said, "It's right there."

We say to each other, "We'll see you there at 5:00." I said, "I'll see you there at 5:00," because they were going up to headquarters battery and I was going to our Alpha Battery. I go to Alpha Battery within 15 minutes.

I'm told, "You're gonna be on the supply chopper out to Fire Base Arsenal, whatever."

I never saw those guys again until four months later. I was out on a firebase and I don't know what they normally did. It was the westernmost defenses of Hue-Da Nang. Prior to that, they've been out A Shau Valley, which was next out in [a pass 00:24:34] that is loud. There was really no Americans. There might not even any ARVNs west of there. It was more of a defense of the area where the enemy could launch rockets or mortar into the base of Hue and Phu Bai where the air base and where all the assets were.

I was on an artillery fire base. We fired all the time, supported the infantry. The infantry would never go anywhere outside of our range we had. In Fire Direction,

you got guys who are on the firebase who compute the data, communicate, or kind of the brains. We also have more men out in the field with the infantry to adjust fire and do stuff like that. We're out and about, a lot of that.

There was some contact but usually it was stuff at night. You hear noises or see lights or stuff like that. There was no real heavy duty contact, a lot of firing firebase in our fire base. The one I was on the most it was called Arsenal. Toward the end, I would say, in December and January it was like the most northern, western US fire base in the country.

Consequently, any VIP who came in the countryside had yet to go there. They had set up special Conex or shipping container that we used all over the place for stuff. They had a double bed in there and a painting on the wall and a rug and all that crap because the Secretary of the Army came and stayed out there. Actually, I didn't know it, understand about it until later on. Admiral McCain, John McCain's father, Christmas Day, he showed up there. We had no clue because here's this old guy in a funny-looking uniform. It's like, "Who the hell is that guy?"

Producer: This is early [crosstalk 00:26:45]

George: This is December. This is Christmas of 71.

Producer: You just arrived?

George: Yeah. Actually, I ended at the field in November 1st, ended up out on that firebase, I think, either October 31st, November 1st.

Producer: How big the guns were [inaudible 00:27:02]?

George: 105 mm Howitzers was what I worked with most of the time, whichever is smallest artillery piece, [crosstalk 00:27:11]

Producer: What was the range?

George: 7, 8 miles, something like that. They're usually used for close-in support of troops. The whole artillery process over there really is, for the most part, is support the infantry maneuver units. What happens is every night when the infantry, late afternoon, when they're ready to bed down and what they would call Night Defensive Position, NDP. The artillery liaison with the infantry in the field would pick out potential enemy approaches and get the map coordinates, call them to the firebase, and then firebase would fire in those targets so that if at 2:00 in the morning, there were lights, movement, anything, the observer out there could say, "Get me around 200 meters up over target 3." [He'd 00:28:11]

already have the data. You didn't a lot of that so you'd have to fire in those targets every evening.

Producer: Were you pretty accurate?

George: Yeah. The artillery is accurate. The only thing that makes it inaccurate is you have to have an absolutely known location of the target, which today is easy because they've got GPSs and laser rangefinders and everything. Back then it's a map and compass and sound of flash bang. It was a lot harder but it's accurate. You can put first round hopefully within 50 meters and usually that accuracy is the weather, more than the weather or the ammo, a lot of ammo, or something like that might affect it. 50 meters is going to kill 50% of the people within is what a round will do.

As soon as I got to 101st, one of their brigades, I think November 1st, one of the brigades stood down and went home. Then, I think, at the end of December, the other brigade went home.

Producer: A brigade is 4500 men.

George: Yeah, at least. That went home. I just left the 2nd Brigade who I was there. Infantry Brigade has within it, an Artillery Battalion, which has usually three batteries. That's what was left there in January with 101st, more that I can tell. We pulled off that hill. Actually, what happened was an ARVN artillery battery took over position next to us on the hill. We left that hill third week of January, I think, back into Phu Bai probably, although I'm not sure.

Because the end of the war, when you kept reports, the Army keeps all kinds of reports and they usually [file them 00:30:26] with the next highest authority. When you're the last one there, it's like no last higher authority to [file them 00:30:32] with. My guess would be that my battery probably fired the last round of 101st because the division then went home. Some of the men that weren't transferred and the men that weren't getting out of the Army went home to Fort Campbell with the division. I ended up because at that point it was like I don't even know why but I know guys that were in my class that went over there with me, that were assigned 101st ended up going back to Fort Campbell with them. I didn't. A couple of us didn't.

I remember my battery commander, thanking me and whatever, and saying I'd got these borders be transferred down to Da Nang which is about 30 miles farther south. I didn't know that but reading back but this drawdown is going to happen, come hell or high water. If you read all the reports back, this drawdown was all political thing. It was not a military thing. It was a political thing. I ended up down to Da Nang. The only thing that was left was the 196th Light Infantry

Brigade, which had been one of the three brigades that had been part of the Americal Division.

Americal had Gone home in November left that Brigade there. That mission was defense of the Da Nang Air Base which is a very important asset. Initially, for a month, we asked about types of weapons. I was with a 155 mm Howitzer battery. The only one left in Vietnam [towed 00:32:29]. These are big guns.

For the guys who work in the crew are those guns. It's a brutal job because these are big guns. There are bigger guns but they're all more mechanized. Ammunition is loaded automatically and traversed mechanically. These are big guns, 100-pound round manhandled. What the approach was then, I learned down there was, because we had so few artillery fire bases, they would have what are called artillery raids.

They would go. They take two guns, four guns, different types of guns and go out to [abandoned 00:33:11] firebase bases for a day or two. It had all these preplanned targets and you'd go out there and just shoot. They keep [loading 00:33:22], bringing ammo in. They probably took an infantry platoon or something out there. For a month, that's what I did with this unit because they really didn't need me to be their Fire Direction chief because they already had one. That's what I did.

Producer: How are the targets like?

George: All intelligence, probably mostly phony. You didn't know. Back then, technology wasn't what it was today. They had all these sensors and they had to use a ground surveillance radar type things and these guys would always pretend that they could tell that this were for enemy out there. One of them was carrying a bag. One was a man, one was woman. You just knew that it could be a bunch of monkeys or there was a whole bunch of troops in the open or whatever and you'd go out the next day and it was like a waterfall or something. I think a lot of it might have been human intelligence from the ARVN or the political, no one were, the trails are, and meetings might happen, and stuff like that.

What happened was it came on my radar. I think at that point, so late in the war, they had no more R & Rs. They just had this in-country R & R. The major came to me, like the end of March, and said, "Hey, George. You never had an R & R. We got a couple of slots for an in-country R & R. It's in Vung Tau, which is this French resort [down 00:34:59] by Saigon. Why don't you go? It's going to be your birthday, April 1st."

He knew it. I couldn't say I was kidding April 1st. I said okay. I went down there. Coming back was April 1st. I think it might have been the Easter Sunday, April

1st. I was in, must have been [Tan Son Nhut 00:35:17]. I'm not sure what air base it was but getting a flight back up to Da Nang.

The guys were saying, "You're going where?"

I said, "Back to Da Nang."

They're like this [big 00:35:30] offensive started up there. My first thought was, "How the hell could we conduct an offensive? We don't have that many people up there," was my thought.

Then they said, "No, no, no."

The enemy has come across the DMZ in tanks. There's this big offensive, whatever. They're like, "Are you really gonna go back up?"

I said, "Well, [inaudible 00:35:57] really wanna go back up there. Yeah. That's where my unit is. I have to go up there I got up there."

Got up there. There weren't that many Americans. Like I said, all there was up north. There were America's up north but there weren't any ground combat units. Da Nang had the only ground combat unit, the 196th. They initially, probably the second week of April, said a brigade and one of our artillery batteries up to Hue-Phu Bai. It's funny because everybody said there was a top secret radar and radio station out there that they had to defend it.

I kept thinking, "If it were so top secret, I mean, why would I know about it?"

Anyway, this unit went up there for that period of time. Actually, that offensive started March 31st April 1st, there weren't any Americans. The only real Americans up there were Marine Corps advisors to the South Vietnamese Marines. A lot of brave guys risked their lives. It was really the South Vietnamese Marines that eventually [belonged to that 00:37:14], along with US air power.

The weather took monsoon season going away and having weather to be able to attack along this stuff. Three free fire bases I was on until the end of January, by the middle of April they were in enemy hands. They were gone. The [ARVN news 00:37:39] that had been there had fled and left the equipment and everything, so the NVA ended up with a lot of our artillery pieces and stuff like that.

Eventually, it was just a combination, I would say. I love the Marine Corps but I hate to give them credit because we always built our morale because the rumor was there's 5,000 Marines of the coast here that are going to land here if we need them. That got us thinking that ...

Producer: That troop, was that true?

George: I'm not sure. I think it might be. I think that that could've been a rumor because in the end, from what I can tell, that really saved us because the North Vietnamese thought that they were 5,000 Marines. They thought the plan was to attack high way up in North Vietnam, so they withheld two or three of their divisions from that fight. If they would have employed those divisions, that would have been 1975 instead of 1972, probably would have been over. That's my impression. Despite the fact that this big offensive was going on the, drawdown continued. That infantry battalion that was up at Hue-Phu Bai came back down to Da Nang the middle of June. The 196th Brigade went home. That offensive was still going on but they weren't going to employ our troops.

At that point, they left this infantry battalion and artillery battery called Task Force Gimlet. The 1st, 321st Infantry in the Bravo, the 382nd Artillery behind to defend the air base basically out on a fire base west of the air base defend what they call the rocket belt.

Da Nang was called Rocket City because they really wanted to hit Da Nang with rockets, and they did. They hit Da Nang a couple of times a week the whole time I was in that area. That air base and that surrounding area got hit by this 122 mm rockets. Our mission was to stay as far west out in that area so that they tried to deny them, that opportunity [to align 00:40:22 those rockets up and launch them up out in that area. That's where we were.

Then at the same time, we still proceeded to do a number of these artillery raids where we take two guns and go to a lot of different abandoned fire bases. The NVA, they were afraid of our artillery. They knew the range. To be able to go out of sight our normal range would keep them off guard. Still, they continue to remind us. The only time any place people could die and in many cases it was not by enemy. On July 7th, four guys were killed and probably 10 wounded in our artillery accident from my group.

Producer: What happened?

George: Adding one thing wouldn't have done it but the combination of the troops on the ground, misidentifying where they were, which was very easy to do, particularly being in an area hadn't been in the past with maps that were probably outdated. Ammo was not the best at that point in time. We had bad weather.

Artillery uses meteorological data to adjust [for 00:41:48] weather. Artillery units always have met weather station that gives us data every day. If weather is really changing, they'd give us data even more often. That weather station went home

with the brigade so there wasn't that. It was outdated ammo. There was a bad weather storm. I'm going to [work grounds 00:42:14]. I was there. It was tragic. That's what happened.

Years later, I saw this photo of Jane Fonda on an anti-aircraft gun in Hanoi. The caption on the photo was dated July 7th, 1972. That was the day these four guys died and in five weeks later we went home. It was a week before we went home. The guys went out. We're still going out on patrols. Guys were wounded with booby traps. That was it.

Producer: While this was all happening, these [inaudible 00:43:03] peace talks were going on. Did this seem like a [inaudible 00:43:07] that point in time?

George: Yeah. We really didn't know about it. You go back then and there wasn't any Internet. I don't even think that we got back then toward the end of the war, we didn't have a whole lot of anything. We didn't have stars and stripes. There was a TV station in Saigon but I think that might have closed down. A lot of stuff closed out. There had been a big PX called Freedom Hill in Da Nang. I never saw that. That had closed down.

People that were stationed in Da Nang talked about a lot of these things. Now Da Nang had become, they kept saying it was the busiest air base in the world because with this drawdown, we're playing games. You weren't counted as being in a country if you weren't there at midnight. They would fly these transports out of there every night back to Thailand, and then planes and fighter, and all kinds of stuff, assets all for that base. Then every morning, they'd all be coming back in again. That was a very busy air base.

Producer: B-52s, this Operation Linebacker II to resume bombing in the north and that happened right after [crosstalk 00:44:36]

George: [crosstalk 00:44:36] the offensive. I'm not sure that we did. I'm sure higher-ups did. I was an E-5. I probably had more communication than a lot of people because for a couple of months when I was in Da Nang, I was in the battalion of Fire Direction, et cetera. I was the chief NCO in charge of that, which controlled all of the artillery fire out in all of [Vi Corps 00:45:05] because there wasn't anything else left there. In that bunker was the brigade, the general [had his cell 00:45:15]. You heard a lot of stuff, more stuff than you would if you were out on the fire base or whatever, that's why I knew a little bit more about what was going on up north with the offensive.

You had to come back home and read stories about a guy like John Ripley who was a Naval Academy grad, Marine Corps guy, who single-handedly blew up this bridge in Dong Ha. Incredible story, incredible feat of strength, of courage, and

basically stopped the offensive because these tanks couldn't get across this bridge at Dong Ha. I didn't know about that until 10 years later.

I've seen this Admiral McCain, come up there at Christmas time and talk to us, all of that. I saw him I saw him stand out in the, the wire northern part of the base looking north all by himself. I didn't have a clue, then [we 00:46:11] come back and 20 years later you read, of course, that was John McCain's father. He was in charge of the whole war. He was an admiral. That's as close as you could get to his son on Christmas Day in 1971. Then you look back and say, "Oh, yeah. I was part of that, you know? That was him."

I actually go into the US archives to reassure myself that I wasn't dreaming. The records are there because they had this daily trouble. Admiral McCain arrived Admiral McCain [departed 00:46:42]. That was him or Stanley Resor, secretary of the army arrives.

I think I participated in the last shot with two other units, which really didn't really mean a whole lot. It just meant that we wouldn't have to stay around for another week and clean all of this equipment and stuff. It didn't seem that we knew it was the last shot until they started breaking down. On that day, all those news crews showed up with their cameras and there were reporters and everything.

Then we started thinking, "Maybe this could really be it."

The troops out in the field had to ... I can't remember if they extracted first or not but anyway we fired virtually all of our ammo. We had like a 21 gun salute, all the guns firing, everything, just making a lot of noise.

Producer: What was the date of that if you recall?

George: August 10th, 1972, it was Hill 260 which was just out west of this ridgeline that was west of Da Nang, which was a fire base that we'd been on. It's a fire base that had been there for a long time but we'd been on there the last two months. We fired out over this valley. They call it Happy Valley typically [I'll assume 00:48:07] because nothing happy ever happened in it. It's typical GI. Over the top of this other abandoned fire base, Fire Base Linda. Last round was a white phosphorus round, 200 meters up over the top of this fire base. Then closed it up and then came back into Da Nang.

We had the ceremony, stand down ceremony right next to a place called Red Beach. This place is called Camp Swampy I think. Anyway, it was like a little parade field right in Da Nang, right near the harbor, right next to Red Beach, where the Marines had landed March of 1965. It's where we departed from. We

were around there probably four or five days cleaning stuff up. Then they'd packed us along a C-130 down to Saigon or down south somewhere and back in the States. [inaudible 00:49:19] in Oakland for a day. I was out of the Army. That was it.

Producer: The ARVN troops holding off [Hanoi 00:49:27].

George: I really didn't have that much confidence because during that Easter offensive, the word was cut and run. Also, just the fact that during that offense, first all of the people fled, the civilians and the troops fled from Quang Tri down to Hue. It filled up that town. Then all the people in Hue as the enemy started approaching, they all fled down over [to Hoa Vang 00:49:59] passing to Da Nang. Da Nang just swelled with people. You could see all these people who were desperate.

A lot of them have already experienced what had happened in 1968. They feared for their lives. You could see fear in people's eyes just trying to come down that road. A lot of them were ARVN soldiers. Now the ARVN Marines were different. I think they stood and fought in incredible situations. A lot of them, they're just totally overrun. They really did.

Producer: Did you ever reflect on the fact that these NVA were Vietnamese, the ARVN were Vietnamese. How is it that one group, one army of the same people can be so ferocious and another group can be so timid and ineffective in the field?

George: I think it's just like anything. We did the hard work for them so they didn't have to do it. I think when we left, I think a lot of history shows that we left them for two years. They did a pretty outstanding job considering we weren't there at all. In fact, the last two years, '71 and '72, I think they did a pretty outstanding job. Except for that offensive, I think they did a pretty outstanding because they actually did go back and recaptured a lot of that ground that was lost in the offensive. Without our ground troops, we were able to provide air support to make that happen. They went into back a lot of that. They were able to hold the country for a long time.

Congress started passing the bills and not funding them. Then they didn't have any bullets. They didn't have any ammo. They didn't have any parts. They didn't have anything. Whereas Russia and China doubled down and kept supplying the North. They didn't have a chance. We didn't lose. We left. That's what we did.

I was in a train station a couple months ago. This Vietnamese woman sat down next to me and we started chatting. I said I had been back there five years ago.

She said, "Oh, you were there early during the war?"

I said, "Yes."

She said, "Why did you leave?"

I said, "You know? If we didn't leave, we'd probably still be there." They'd let us do the hard work. That was our fault. That was our military fault, I think initially.

I think when Abrams got in there in, whenever he got in there, '69. I forget when Gen. Abrams got in there. That's when the war turned because he really did get into this Vietnamization. It seemed to me that had worked. I think the other thing they did was really beefed up what they call the Rough Puffs, the Regional Forces. They were more like their police in all the outskirts, villages. They really empowered those people and trained them so that they could protect the villages. They were defending their own village and their own family.

Producer: The NVA came [roaring down 00:53:27] from the north [like 00:53:29] all the way to Saigon.

George: I wasn't surprised. In fact, no part of the story really is ... My dad was there when that happened. He was there. He was working for the USAID in Saigon in 1973, in 1974, and 1975. In fact, he actually had my mother over there at some period of time. He was there until he was on the last US commercial flight, Pan Am 1 or whatever it was, that left there a week before it fell in April 30th of '75. We're keeping a close eye on what was going on there, so we do [inaudible 00:54:17] towards it.

Producer: Was USAID CIA?

George: No. He was a tax guy. You can't believe that up until a week before the country fell, they were trying to help these guys [into 00:54:26] better [taxes 00:54:27]. I think there's a lot more important things we could have been spending our time. Like I said, they weren't giving them aid but they were giving them this kind of aid. I don't know what that ...

Producer: How worried were you with your mother and father being over there [crosstalk 00:54:42]

George: Toward the end, yeah, we were worried about it. In fact, he actually didn't get home until after it fell because he flew to Bangkok and somewhere else. Then my mother was here in the States [inaudible 00:54:57] she flew in somewhere. We were actually getting phone calls because he was working with the Vietnamese civilians. We were getting phone calls from a lot of his friends seeking our support because Dad already got out of the country and we're looking for sponsors. My dad sponsored a number of Vietnamese families.

Eventually, once he got back here, got them over here, it was a big resettlement camp up at Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania. He helped the number of people up there.

Producer: Most of the ones that were resettled, were they bureaucrats or were they military or both?

George: I didn't know any military. Most of the ones [inaudible 00:55:38] to my dad were bureaucrats and worked in the tax department or worked here, a family of somebody, one of the guys was actually a veterinarian but his wife had worked in the tax department with my dad. That's what most of them where. Most of the ones, I know plenty of them, that didn't get out that had been in the Army or in the civilian area and it was horrible. I don't know how many of them died.

Producer: The big fear was that the North was going to basically kill [or just 00:56:09] murder anybody that had cooperated with the Americans.

George: I think a lot of people, I don't think they intentionally went out put guns to the heads of a lot of people but they put them in those camps and starve them to death. When I went back five years ago, we had a guide, [Song 00:56:24], who was my age. I call him the Forrest Gump of Vietnam. He's actually my age. When we met, he tells us, and he's from Da Nang and he's a high school teacher and a tour guide. He told us the story of Da Nang.

He said, "My senior year of high school, the teacher said come dressed up tomorrow. There's gonna be a really great event that we're gonna take you to." He said, "That was US Marines landing at Red Beach, so we all got dressed up and these big guys came ashore and whatever. And then when we were ..."

Producer: That was March 8th, 1965.

George: That's right. So he was like me. I was a senior in high school. Then, when we ended up touring down in Saigon with him, he took us to what they call Reunification Palace, which is the old presidential Palace [inaudible 00:57:22] the tank going through the fence there.

I said, "Where were you when that happened?"

He said, "I was standing right over on that corner."

I said, "What the hell were you thinking?"

He said, "I thought I'm a dead man."

He was like the lieutenant in their Air Force or something like that. He wasn't really high up. I forget the exact numbers. I said, "Well, what happened?"

He said, "I was in a re-education camp for nine years."

Producer: I'd heard that based on the value of the person's position was how long you ended up spending in a re-education camp. 9 years it was pretty [crosstalk 00:58:03]

George: He was an officer in the Air Force, so I guess he was there for a while. I said, "What was that like?"

Basically, he said, "You know, there are a bunch of young punks beating us up, starving us, you know, and all these Marxist propaganda, uh, on and on and on and on." He said, "It was horrible." He said, "But my brother was in for [inaudible 00:58:25] 13 years."

I said, "Why was that?"

He said, "He was a slow learner."

He just got a sense of humor. He's brother got out and is in California, will never go back. [Song 00:58:38] is there and [Song 00:58:41] is actually, he lives there and he's actually come to the States a few times. This is somebody that Jan [scrubs as used 00:58:48] when we toured work over there.

Producer: Interesting.

George: It is interesting.

Producer: I would imagine the brother in California that had never returned, he wouldn't return because it's a communist nation and he still might be.

George: They're afraid, absolutely. My barber [inaudible 00:59:08]. He's Vietnamese. He's a couple of years younger than me but he served. He's probably a private in the Army. He was younger. He was in Da Nang when I was in Da Nang. We talked about stuff all the time. He was in a re-education camp for six or seven years. He still has a father there. He's got most of his family there. He would never go back.

Producer: The re-education camps had finally closed I trust.

George: I think so. It's interesting.

Producer: 30, 50 years ago [crosstalk 00:59:37]

George: It's very interesting to go back. I know Jan for a long time. They're always bugging me to go back. Jan is going back. My brother and I always had always said we'd go back sometime but we never made time to do it. Our wives had no interest in it. They felt like that had taken so much away from them when we were there. It was going to be my father's 90th birthday and he had been there.

I was like, "What do you give a guy who's gonna be 90, who has everything? I was getting this last email, phone call from Jan's gal saying, "This is your last chance. Jan really would like you to go back. Barry McCaffrey is going. This guy, Peter Holt who owns the San Antonio Spurs, he's a veteran. Some other well-known veterans are going back. He really like you to go.

I thought, "I'll fix him." I said, "Yeah, I'll go but I want to take my brother and my 90-year-old father."

I thought they won't call me back. I tell you, I got a phone call before [I hit 01:00:39] that said, "That's a great story. Are you really serious, George?"

I said, "Yeah. I can try and do that."

That's what we did. It happened so fast because it was in November and we went over there January 10th, so we had to scramble around.

Producer: Your 90-year old father handled the 20 hours in a plane to get over there?

George: My dad is amazing. We got over there and these women, they were four, five, six women. A couple of guys took their wives. There were four women who had lost husbands or brothers and they were all hovering around my dad. "Now, make sure your medication, make sure you keep some of this and some of this, make sure."

He reaches into his pocket. He goes, "This is the only medication I take, Centrum silver."

That's all he takes. He's completely fine. In fact, a lot of the guys still joke about that they couldn't keep up with him. He didn't have a problem at all about going back there, fly into Hanoi, looking down, and landing at the airport and seeing flag, getting off the plane. My brother and I were walking down the runway. Come around the corner and here's this Vietnamese Army soldier there with his uniform on, staring at you, chills go up your spine. It's like, "Oh, you're really doing this."

How the hell they're gonna feel about us in the north? We bombed the hell out of them. In the south, we left them. We get on the bus and drive on this highway, not much of a highway but a highway. You notice all of these light industrial parks that are all Japanese and whatever, Canon, Olympus. They got all their stuff there.

We stopped at a toll booth and this guy, Jerry, a friend of mine, who's now a friend, whom I just met going there. We're looking down and [there were 01:02:40] four guys there collecting the toll. It's a socialist [bank 01:02:44] work. Then you hit the first stoplight and every corner there's people with brooms.

We went to Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum, which is a whole other story. They must have this parade ground in front of it that's the size of must be 10 football fields. It's gigantic grass parade field. They had dozens of women with coolie hats on, with scissors cutting the grass. There is no lawn mower. That's a real socialist society.

Whereas, when you go south, it seems like they haven't gotten the word. There's Mercedes dealerships. There's Kentucky Fried Chicken. There's everything, hotels in Saigon. You can be anywhere in the world, Da Nang, China Beach, which was the old R & R center, 95th Evac Hospital, five star Japanese resorts, casinos. Greg Norman has an 18-hole golf course.

Producer: Is there any trace or evidence of the war?

George: The only trace I saw, but they are very protective. If you're taking pictures of any of their military facilities anywhere, which mostly are facilities that they'd taken over, so it's hard to even tell. When we're up around Hue-Phu Bai, I know that was Camp Eagle or we flew in to Phu Bai from Saigon into that airport. That used to be the air base. It's hard to tell but across from there was Camp eagle. There's a military base there. That's kind of where we were.

You could look out and you could see these mountains 10 miles out south where the fire bases had been where I was on. You can see them out there. Down in Da Nang, there was what was called Marble Mountain Airfield which was a Marine helicopter base. That they didn't [inaudible 01:04:50] and ball stuff were there but it's a driving school. Now they have cars parked in there but you know that that was there. We didn't make up.

We spent a couple of days in Hanoi. We did all these meetings. General McCaffrey spoke of a number of places at a university. You could tell the students didn't have any questions about anything controversial. They talked about global warming and stuff because you could tell they felt that they were

being observed. It's probably funny because I thought we were going to be with their veterans.

I'm thinking, "Oh, it's like the BMW or something." These were all generals and stuff like that. They had their speeches. One general was funny, Barry McCaffrey who is no surprise why this guy has gotten where he is. He's one bright guy, one intelligent speaker, [was fast on 01:05:58] to speak. He started naming the names of a lot of famous Americans who had served in. They call it the American War, the Vietnamese there.

There was a John Kerry, Bob Kerrey, all of them. He said John McCain. The general jumps, "[Stop 01:06:16] John McCain," he goes. "When John McCain ran for president," he said, "We had polls over here as to who we wanted to win. And wanted John McCain to win because he lived here once."

We were like, "He lived here?" I don't think he would have called it living but they have a monument to him by this lake where he had crashed. There's this monument there. They give it towards the Hanoi Hilton but the whole tour is really slanted toward being a French jail and what the French did to them. I can appreciate that and all the stuff about us or our POWs playing ping pong like it was a great experience but interesting. 75% of the people weren't born during the war and they seem to have forgotten about it. They really are interested in American culture and stuff like that, both the north and the south.

Producer: What it meant to your life?

George: It meant a lot to me. It's a major part of my life. It's amazing because, first of all, I was able to reconnect with these guys that I served with. First of all, most people that served over there, you really didn't make a whole lot of friends because guys came and went. It wasn't like a whole unit went over there. We served together at training, went over.

I was lucky, first of all, in Fort Sill I spent 6 months with guys that had a lot in common. I got to meet a lot of their wives because they were there when we were training. I was able to reconnect with those folks in 1997. 25 years after we left, I found some of my old stuff and with the Internet I was able to track down a lot of people. We had a reunion which was great. Now we have a reunion every year. It's become a very important part of my life. The Vietnam Memorial has become very important part of my life. I think that's probably the most important thing because prior to that, many of us never really made the point of letting people know that we were Vietnam veterans. I know I never really did.

Producer: [crosstalk 01:08:39] because you're embarrassed or ashamed?

George: You just didn't know what reaction you're going to get. When you came back, they certainly didn't put it on your resume. Jan build that wall. Many of us met down there. It was like, "Well, he's just like me."

It became a lot easier for me to deal with and then you started seeing whether there was a press who changed. Prior to that, I don't think you heard about Vietnam veterans. They were always the crazy guy who killed 20 people. In the end, was like you found out he used to tell people [he was 01:09:15] a Vietnam veteran. He never was. I mean that's just what the way things where. It seemed that [they're 01:09:23] got to be more positive notation or press on people that were Vietnam veterans. It may just you want to be more proud of that and gave you a place to go.

I lost the number of people there. I don't know where they're buried. I'll be able to go back there. That's like a cemetery, that's where they are. That's been very important to me. Actually, going back was great. I wasn't sure it's really helped my dad. I think it's improved my dad's life. He's still alive. He's 95, he'll be 95 next week. He met all the Vietnam veterans. He's like he's one of the Vietnam veterans now. He comes down here all the time now from Pennsylvania on Veterans Day and Memorial Day to go to the wall.

Producer: He was World War II [veteran 01:10:20].

George: He went to World War II, to go to the wall.

Producer: He likes his own memorial too. [inaudible 01:10:24]

George: Actually what's happened there is the gal who actually led the tour for Jan to Vietnam and did 11 times. Holly Rotondi actually left the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and is now the executive director of the World War II Memorial. She just loves veterans. She has, in that role, had my dad participate in every ceremony he could at the World War II. He was able to reach their Memorial Day, on Veterans Day with Bob Dole with other people. He just made in the part of that usually on Veterans Day, Memorial Day.

In fact, this past Veterans Day that was past Memorial Day was the 10th anniversary World War II Memorial. We had him down here for the dedication of World War II Memorial. We had a reunion. Our whole family got together on Memorial Day and brought him down for that dedication. That day and Holly head him participated in it. Again, his 95 years old, 94. We took the Metro down to Farragut North. We walked from there to World War II Memorial. Spent two hours there doing all that walk from there to Vietnam Memorial. Spent three hours there doing the ceremony, doing all that walk from there back.

Actually this is Veterans Day. Walked back to National Press Club because John McCain was speaking there. We got him there so he could meet John McCain and did all that. This was a 15-hour day. He was up the next morning before we were.

Producer: You got his gene, so you got a long life ahead of you.

George: I hope so. It's become important. I don't dwell on it. One of the things that I enjoy doing was helping veterans when I can. I've learned some of the ropes dealing with the VA. I have to say, most experienced there have been fine with me. I haven't had any issues. Many of these guys you've interviewed enough to know, a lot of them have some serious issues and really do need help. They need help but they also need help dealing with the VA so they can get help.

Every guy's issue was different. Some of them don't want help, they don't want help with the VA. They got frustrated with the bureaucracy but all don't want to deal with bureaucracy because they think it's like the Army. I spent a lot of time trying to help a lot of these guys when I can or when it's possible. That's added a different dimension to my life.

The reunions, a couple of units I've served with have nice reunions [as 01:13:26] 196th Light Infantry Brigade. That's a unit that was unusual and that they were formed in Fort Devens, Mass. in '63 and they all went to basic training. They all formed at one time. They went to basic training together. Then they went out to their advance training and they came back. Then they trained at Fort Devens. They were there as a unit for a long time. Then they put it on boats to go to Dominican Republic [declare 01:13:54] some rebellion there in '66, changed their orders and they ended up in Vietnam in the summer of '66.

Then after a few months, the army realized they had to start integrating other folks into that unit or the whole unit was going to go home in a year. The group that went over there, trained together started an association many years ago and [it's 01:14:18] guys who'd served in it from '63 to '72. They're the boat people that we call them who went over on boats.

My group, I'm the kingpin of that group who were the last to leave. We meet every two years and tell war stories, have a good time. The Internet has helped us.

Producer: George, I want to thank you for sharing your stories with us and we thank you for what you did.

George: Thank you.