

NICK PREVAS ARMY LT. END OF WAR '70 -'71

Nick Prevas: Nick Prevas. N-I-C-K P-R-E-V-A-S. Army. During the Vietnam era, I served on active duty from June of 68th, until April of 71. The Vietnam period of time was calendar year 70 January to December. The unit in Vietnam was the 4th Battalion of the 3rd Infantry Regiment which is called the Old Guard.

It's part of the Old Guard which is the same regiment at Fort Myer Virginia that does the Tomb of the Unknown, and the Presidential Guard, and those things, they had 2 Battalions in Vietnam and I was assigned to the 4th, as an infantry platoon later. I grew up in Baltimore Maryland, my mom was a widow from World War II.

I never knew my dad, he actually died when she was carrying me. I grew up in Baltimore, went to school there, went to military school in Leonardtown Maryland, Southern Maryland a place called Leonard Hall school for 3 years. 6 to the 8th grade, and then back for high school Calvert Hall College in Baltimore.

Then started community college, married young at 19. I always had a calling to go into the military try to get a commission and possibly even have a career. My problem was being married, trying to finish college, and qualify for either staying in ROTC, or qualify for OCS without a degree, it was tough sledding.

The Vietnam War was kind of an inconvenient truth during that period. It was going on, I didn't ... I was prepared to go if I had to, if it's not I mean objective. I enlisted in '68, have been married 2 years, my wife understood that's the deal, soon as I was able to, I was going to go.

Took a chance as I enlisted infantry man that would get qualified for OCS, and I was able to get it. I went through Fort Benning, Georgia. OCS, 68 to 69 graduated in May, and was commissioned, then served state side until it was time to go. I actually came down on orders for Korea originally. I thought, "Well that's an 18 month separation." Korea is not terribly interesting to me.

I have gone through all this training and I'm at the razor's edge, I probably really should go. I called the Pentagon branch, the manager is up there and they were a little astounded "Really you volun-?" I said,

"Yeah, can you change my orders?" I cut a deal, I said I want jump school, and jungle school, and so they granted that, the orders came down, and never changed, I was on my way to Vietnam.

Well the jump towers at Fort Benning were right across the street from our OCS residence building our barracks. We would constantly see the trainees going through jump school and whatnot. To be an elite force, to have an elite qualification. I just felt was good to have. Jungle school was a very practical 3 weeks in the Panama Canal Zone, that really, what orient you towards as close as you could, jungle situation, survival all that kind of training.

The 2 were ... I felt a real plus, I felt fortunate to get those schools, and then on to Vietnam. They served me well too, it just I think it gave me beside OCS an edge of a little bit what to expect, and of course in the airborne you never quit, you never say surrender, you drive on, you press on.

That was good motivation. In Vietnam it was straight leg infantry, the 4th or the 3rd was a conventional infantry outfit, it was after Vietnam I was assigned to the 82nd Airborne, for just a brief period of time. Little over 23, 23. Second Lieutenant. We went to the replacement depot in outside of Saigon.

I think it was Benoit, near Benoit little north of Saigon. I believe it was the 90th replacement depot, and you spend a couple of days to like process you and decide where you're going to be assigned. You fill out what we call the dream sheet, the army always gave you months.

The 3 places you'd like to go the most, and so it didn't matter, you went where the need was the greatest, I came down for the 23rd Infantry division also known as the AmeriCAL. I didn't know yet what unit I was going to be in. They were in the Northern part of the country, what's called I Corps in an area called Chu Lai.

They said, "Well load off, and get you out of here as soon as we can. The airfield was hit yesterday, we don't know if we could land yet." But we got in OK, then we spent a week in orientation school. "School" kind of an orientation acclimates you to the heat. Also the series of briefing, and I don't think it was rank specific, I think it was all new replacements coming into division went through that.

Then they had representatives from each battalion we'd give a little feel if they'll grant it, come with us, and here's why. A lieutenant gave a spiel

on the 4th of the 3rd up in the Central Highlands. That just rang a bell with me, and then ask for it, and I got that assignment.

Guys put down 101st Airborne, their dad's at World War II have been in that, other units of notoriety, airborne units, the big red one, 25th infantry division. Not too many were opting for AmeriCAL. I think I put down 101st Airborne, and I forget the other 2. AmeriCAL is where I was needed, and that's where I would sent.

It worked out OK, it worked out OK. The 4th of the 3rd was great. It could have chosen a lot worst places or been, put in a lot worst organization.

Producer: [inaudible 00:06:50]

Nick Prevas: Kind of a drawn out. It's like I'd rather get to my unit, and get acclimated there. Been waiting so long for when that helicopter is going to land on a forward firebase, or in the field and meet my guys, and "OK now, you're in charge." We had a lot of briefings about how to do that, because you're coming in as a platoon later, and the officer, which what these, many of these guys have been there, 10, 11, 12 months. They know what's going on.

I resigned myself to listen to them and let them know that I was there to learn as much as to lead them. I brought skills they needed but they had a lot of skills I needed. If we could team this, we also had a gain or confidence in their trust. You can have all the jump wings on, and stuff and rank insignia.

Until they know who you are, and how you really going to operate. Once you have that trust, it work. Some people are unsuccessful whenever establishing that, but I think most do, and it was kind of like let's get this over with, we all want to kind of get moving on to where we're going to be and get going with this thing.

A week or so later that day came, and they didn't have a ... I didn't relieve another platoon later, they had a sergeant who was running things, and he was more than happy to say, "sir. You got it, it's yours." Tell me what, tell me what questions you have, you're in charge. It was no problem at all, they were very welcoming and it ... We didn't bond immediately but, it was a non threatening, non adversarial atmosphere.

They were more or less glad, that somebody was there. Also give them some representation, up above. Because you're moving both higher headquarters, as well as the unit now it was then about 16, 17 people by

table of organization, infantry platoon. I was supposed to have about 43 people. We only had maybe 16, 15, 16, the most we ever had was 21 or 22.

We never had, we're never full strength. At that time, Vietnamization had just started. They were draw units, units were being redeployed back to the states. People with still time remaining on their tour were reassigned up to other units. Clearly, the political decision was to start turning this over to the Vietnamese, South Vietnamese ARVN Forces.

Yet the workload, didn't diminish. You still have the same amount of ground to cover, and the same amount of responsibilities. It presented some challenges, not the least of which is you should have 2 machine guns, but you can only carry one with the ammunition. Yo couldn't carry enough radio batteries, they were big and bulky.

The guys were already going in with 60, 70 pounds how much more could you put on them in that heat. You relied on helicopters a lot, to bring stuff out. That couldn't always reach your getting. Then water was always, specially in the highlands, there wasn't always streams where you could refill your canteen, you had to make sure you had enough water, you wouldn't last long without it, especially in that heat.

It was, it was. At first it makes you feel kind of ... At first we operated as a company. Company is 4 platoons, in a company, small company command post headquarters, company commander being a captain and a field for sergeant. They would deploy the platoons out you go here, you go there patrol, report back, radio back, or setup an ambush or whatever you're supposed to do.

That went on for about the firs 3 months. At night we would come in and establish a night log or as they called it or defensive perimeter. You have them 3 or 4 platoons in a circle, and you felt more secure unless your small platoon was out, setup as an ambush some place. Which is a harrowing experience to lay there all night, and the hopes are in the mission to have some enemy come through.

That's quite a ... You never get used to that.

Producer: You remember the first one you get?

Nick Prevas: Yeah, I do, I do. The hardest thing is staying awake, guys are tired, they've been humping all day, they've been in up and down hills, cutting brush, thick jungle, and weight on their back. It's almost impossible to keep

everybody awake, or quiet, things rattle, things make noise, the opposing forces were pretty savvy. Even our odor, even you had to be careful about the mosquito repellent that would give off an odor, if you didn't use mosquito repellent, then there's a tendency to itch all night.

It's just a miserable situation, and then always thought with a lot of tension, do you hear a noise or something? Anytime there's gun play involve, things can turn around very quickly and go sour, and wrong or you're 15 guys out there, and you don't get 5 or 10, 30 that come through, you're like the dog that caught the bus.

OK, now you pop this ambush, what are you going to do with this? I mean it's a big force you can easily be overran, it turned back on you. It happens to other people, not to me. It's fortunate. After about getting about, getting back to your earlier question the first 3 months. We got a new battalion commander, and he was well experienced, have been combat veteran World War II as well as Korea and previously in Vietnam and employ a technique called saturation patrolling.

What he says, no more large company formations, that we need to get platoons actually split up. You have 15 guys, you'd have 3, 5 man teams. In other words dispersement out to cover a much broader area. One of the first problem is, when I have 2 radio, one group was left off to do it's thing, with no radio communications, radio was everything in Vietnam. It was in medivac, resupply, I'm in contact, I need artillery. I mean if you're operating out there, without a radio, it's pretty thin stuff.

Then to coordinate to come back and to rejoin them, you have to do it by daytime specifically, because they might have their claymore mines, and things setup. If you have no way of talking to them, you need to really trust and rely that they're going to have those things disarmed, that you're going to hit their ambush, to reunite with those guys. Saturation patrolling was a little harrowing.

The other thing that produced a lot of anxiety for me was, being so small if you did run off, against [inaudible 00:14:46] force. You stood pretty good chance of getting, if not annihilated, caught up pretty badly, unless until help could arrive. It took some time later really after Vietnam to comprehend maybe a little slow in the uptake.

That's exactly what an infantry platoon does, your kind of dangled out there. To see what's out there, and "Developed the situation." You are expandable, then depending on what you hit, and what hits you. Higher headquarters decide, "OK, how or what are we going to send in

reinforcement. Can we contain this enemy? How will we annihilate them?" You hold what you have, until this battle is over.

Then the other thing was always casualties and wounded, time is of the essence on that, and the fear that might not be able to get those back in time and treat them. If they're cut off from you to reach them. Those things weighed heavily on my mind always, just being so small, and so far away from anybody that could reach you or reinforced you was kind of a constant concern.

It was, it was, we went from losing about 3 or 4 of the battalion, 3 or 4 maybe 7 a month killed to 0 killed. Some wounded and sizable number of enemy, are treated. It was very effective, it was but if like everything else, it came out at a sizable risk. Again you never knew what you were going to come up against in the same operated predominantly in the self and along the coast.

Producer: Your MVA up there is ... Are they [crosstalk 00:17:01]

Nick Prevas: Where we were very small, and in some cases individuals. We didn't say any large formations up there, company or battalion size. Once in a while, we get intelligence or higher, we get intelligence that a force was seen, or spotted moving through, when that air lift us to block them, and somebody else was going to try to engage with them.

Most of the time that didn't work out, or they had already dispersed or whatnot. It was a lot of small things, and then possibly supporters who were growing rice out there, who were not supposed to be there. In some cases, it's just eking out a. In other cases, actively supporting the North with food stops and way stations, and medical assistance and things like that, and cache's where they would keep ammunition and arms.

We've find a lot of explosives, weapons, ammunition, stuff like that. It was a tedious thread through kind of a lot of patrolling, a lot of humping, but then even after the saturation patrolling other elements of the division, up and down that area of operation, we're so engaged especially North of July.

They have to leave their areas over near the coast, and that's when we were brought from the central highlands, to the lowlands to box off them, or to take over where they left off. A very different war for us, up and down mountains, triple canopy jungle, to villages, highly densely

populated, crowded, of course always Viet Cong infestation farm by day, Viet Cong by night.

You can't sort out who's who. You can always expect to get hit, almost any every night, if not day time too. Just a very different learning curve for us. From the large higher op point of view, that made sense. I mean if you got a battalion out there with load or medium contact, and other units, or in the thick of it, you move those guys in, that's what they did.

That was by the summer, in the summer of '70s we were in the lowlands there, and patrolling, and learning. First I was ... My platoon was plucked out as an individual platoon. This was kind of a weird situation, made what they call under operational control, OPCON to another whole battalion.

Not from a company 2, or company but from a company to a battalion. The mission was to support engineers and land clearing along South China sea, something called the Battalion Peninsula. Heavily booby trap, bamboo. Some scrub vegetation and whatnot, unextended artillery, ordinance rounds, anything imaginable, the skies had wired up. I don't know exactly why, I've read some of the history on it.

The Marines when they landed in 65' came in further North. I don't know if they were booby trapping to possibly prevent more Marines when we're coming in. It was a heavily VC infested area. As a matter of fact, the villages of My Lai. Where the My Lai Massacre took place, were a little further North, of where we were sent.

It was a long time, enemy controlled area. The engineers were with bulldozers, and what their job was to blow the stuff up, and get rid of it. We tagged along as their security, not so much in the demolition phase of it, but at night time, in the event of a ground attack, you need an infantry there, to back them up. We did that for a month, then rejoined the battalion and then the entire company moved into low lands and we did in the latter part of the summer.

Yes, started out in what I thought was the central highlands away from all that, and whatnot and wound up very much apart of all that. Actually probably a little harder, had I started there day one, that would have been my baptism of fire and my learning curve. You have to put away your other skills, and learn this real quick. We used to joke about the time to get into war so-to-speak.

Which the majority of troops in Vietnam were putting up with dense population, VC, villages, and a close relationship. If you can keep distance, you have options and maneuverability if you're thrust, and you're surrounded tight you also have to be careful about friendly fire, hurting other friendly or innocent civilians, that was always a concern to me too.

Last thing you want to do is shoot the people that you're trying to protect, that closer you are, the more difficult that becomes. It actually turned into a much larger operation, I was never really briefed or given to understand what we were going to be getting into. Yeah I didn't even understand, what how they were going to land clear, and what our role. I know we're supposed to be security for them.

The rest of it just ... We're helicoptered out of the central highlands to our brigade area. Formed up there, and there are gooseneck trailers, and large trucks, on this are extremely large, the largest caterpillar bulldozers I think known to man, with large room plow, 2 combat engineer vehicles which is an M-60A1 Main battle tank set it with the demolition gun and blaze.

I'm looking at the stuff and saying, "Real life infantry." We're not even mechanized infantry. How do we fit in with all? I mean these guys are loaded for bear, and we're just [inaudible 00:23:46] sacks and M-16. That results also a psychological operations team there with loud speakers and what not to try to calm the residence, and maybe even convince the enemy to come over Chieu Hoi they call it, surrender to Watson, stop fighting.

There were bomb sniffing dogs, a dog unit and explosive ordinance demolition, EOD team there. What the bulldozers couldn't get, these guys would go in and blow them up themselves, jumping ahead of minute, in one case one of the sergeants on that team, was a little over [inaudible 00:24:20] he was rushing. He wasn't waiting for things to be properly cleared. Charged into a hooch or a small house, and was blown in half.

He came out in 2 body bags, that was a shocking experience. I mean it's how you actually see that, and it ... The engineers had their, they knew what they have to do. Nobody really was in charge to the overall operation. The engineers were moving almost what they knew to do, and the other elements would confer with me and talk to me primarily because the engineer platoon later, wasn't too interested and mixing it up with anybody else.

The psychological ops, the EOD, the dog guys would check with me. They didn't have overall command of the situation. That was never spelled out to any of us. Somebody should have been designated, as overall in command of this.

Producer: The colonel have [inaudible 00:25:26]

Nick Prevas: Yes, but he didn't do it, and his staff didn't do it. It was happening in his area, but he didn't own the engineers, and my platoon was just under his operational control, or he presumed maybe he presumed that one of the other obviously would just take charge. Finally the lieutenant, the other lieutenant and I struck an agreement, and we kind of worked it out.

We got by without it, but we paid a price early on in that ... I didn't have a map. Every time I ask for one, I was told you'll get it at brigade, I asked the brigade, you'll get it up the road, or you'll get it later, or a chopper will bring it out. The first night, I didn't even have a map, to pinpoint exactly where we were, and we got hit by a mortar, and I had 11 wounded that night, thank God, nobody killed.

That was "Our baptism of fire" my awakening so-to-speak as a young lieutenant ... Peninsula, on the beach.

Producer: Close to this, are you on the beach South China Sea?

Nick Prevas: South China Sea, beach of the South China Sea. Quang Ngai province of Vietnam. A few scattered villages, I think we came across My Lai 6 and 7. The massacre took place I think at 3 and 4 further North. There were some villagers there and whatnot. What they were doing there, how they made a living I don't know whether they forge, or drift wood, or bamboo to make charcoal, or to cook with. Whether they fish along that ocean, I'm really not sure, but they worked on an intermingled.

Not real heavy, mainly impossible to everybody because of the booby traps. The first night, I guess the engineers have probably done this before, and they accept the work right away. The first thing was getting their equipment off the tractor trailer transports, and then starting to operate and then came back and they had large compressors, very loud large compressors. Air blowing with compressed air, there are filters cleaned of the sand whatnot, was just big critical thing to any kind of machine operating out on the beach.

The ground where we were setup was hard clay and rock, which was good for them to do their servicing and whatnot, not defensible terrain

for us, and not really something we could dig in with our small and little trenching tools. I remember seeing [inaudible 00:28:15] black smoke, as mortar round started to land.

Viet Cong knew we were there. They didn't really care whether I had a map or not, they saw us, we were ... I mean you couldn't, it wasn't like up in the central highlands where we have a lot of camouflage on, and fully [inaudible 00:28:30] helmets, and we're kind of being sneaky. This was out in the open, big arm so-to-speak.

They know exactly where we were, and they drop those grounds right in, I don't know far 6, maybe 7. That kind of ... It was shocking to see my guys, bloodied like that and how helpless and defenseless we were. Not really blaming that on the army, or the brigade or that battalion or anything else. I learned that a hard lesson, first you make sure you've got what you need for yourself and for your guys.

I started speaking up, and rub a few people the wrong way, but they brought out more stuff the next day, overhead coverts, and sandbags and barbwire and ...

Producer: Did you speak to the colonel?

Nick Prevas: Yeah, not immediately I was on the radio to his staff that night, and kind of get blown off a few times, and then I kind of pushed it, and the operations officer a major came on, and he was a little [inaudible 00:29:41] he listened, and then him and the colonel came out the next day, and the battalion commander said, "Who in the hell is this lieutenant?"

We had never met, and so we ... He was kind of preachy, and you need to do this, and you need to do that. I'm thinking, "Well if I have the materials, we could. If I had a map it would help." I made my point, of course I have to be respectful, but we got what we needed and we got a hard education a hard lesson learned, all the guys came back within a few days, they got patched up, and nobody was permanently or seriously hurt.

I count my blessings for that, I take responsibility for that shortcoming, and when you see people suffer because of it, it hit home for me, I'm sure it would anybody. I learned a tough lesson, just because you're assigned to something doesn't mean the whole army is going to stop and cater to it. The army is a ... You kind of pushed ... It's like any bureacracy.

If you need to get something done, you need to push and assert yourself to assert myself in a way.

I've been with the platoon long enough where I could push them in certain ways and not be offend them or create a hostile situation like show me the extra batteries, show me the machine gun ammo. Well, "[Gotti's 31:25] got it. "Show me Gotti." "No, Ray's got it." "Ray and Gotti here now." Get the ammo, he's right he used to call me [Papa Lima 31:37] for platoon leader, sent out like alphabet PL.

Being the old man anyway at 23, Papa Lima. "You're right, Papa Lima we got to go get ammo." Starting to assert myself, not only up but also down to make sure not to hassle these guys, but to make sure we equipped properly, and we're going to function properly. They understood, they got it, they get hired, physically tired, emotionally tired, it's human to get sloppy and whatnot.

If you get sloppy, in that kind of situation, you pay a price. Then I got ... During that operation, a platoon sergeant assigned a very good staff sergeant, career staff sergeant, Sgt. [Rotafor Haze 32:29] from South Carolina, a fabulous guy, and very helpful and supportive of me. He would work with me to drill down and make sure our squads were doing what they're supposed to do, and equip the way they needed to be.

Just not doing stupid stuff that would either mess up the mission or put them in jeopardy. It began to kind of gelled and work for us after that, in a better way. I think it all went back to just finding my voice and feeling comfortable with that and doing it in a way that was effective.

Not overbearing or combative, but effective. In the late summer, the battalion commander who was a hard charging guy, said there's no leave or R&R for officers, forget about it. [Roger Pows 33:30] you're not going anywhere. I'm not, I can't spare any officers, you're not going anywhere.

I'm going to have to pick some company commanders and I need replacements for battalion staff. It was between myself, and a good buddy named Marcel [Latchery, Francy Latchery 33:50]. We were platoon leaders together, we came in at the same time, and he needed an assistant operations officer at the battalion and they needed somebody to take over company C, that command and at the last minute, they felt they could spare a few R&R.

Latchery went on R&R. I come into the company, as acting and grim was very pleased and said, "I think I'm going to keep you there. Then at the

last minute decided now, I'm going to give, I need you as battalion. Latchery is going to take command of the company." What I did then, was stayed on the forward firebase that we called San Juan Hill.

After Teddy Roosevelt Rough Riders which was 3rd Infantry regiment back then. My job was to be the daytime duty officer for all the deployed units to keep the battalion map to keep every location plotted to keep constant situation reports coming in, to prepare the staff journal log of the battalion, every, every hour by hour every event who is located where their calls for desk off, where their engagements what was going on, to call for helicopter support, from higher headquarters from brigade because we didn't have organic helicopters we always have to ask for that.

Or even a fighter aircraft, jet fighters, artillery support, and then you always had to clear grids because if a company is in contact in one place, and needs what we called the world brought in to help them, we have to make sure that wasn't going to decimate another unit who is close by, you have to ... What's called clear grids.

That was about probably an 18 hour a day, 14 hour a day job and then a night guy would take over, get a few hours sleep. Did that for the last 3 months. It wasn't really a rear job, it was still a forward firebase. That was a big growth thing for me, that really was to go from what I have been doing to that kind of responsibility and to see a much bigger picture not only platoon company, but an entire battalion in the field and to stay on top of it.

Because the ... Our battalion commander or my boss, the operations officer, or the intelligence officer would ask any minute, what's going on? They just get back from some place, and come in, the tactical operation center needed an instant briefing and they want a full run down and want to see the map.

You could visualize on the map, "OK who's where, and what's going on. They needed that real time, all the time." That was a growth thing for me. As I moved along then by the fall, that became my job.

Producer: You're really down to more like 500 ...

Nick Prevas: 4-500.

Producer: Still a large unit.

Nick Prevas:

Was large, yeah. On occasion we would link up in the field, with a ARVN company, or battalion. The lock for them, while they attack or they would block for us while we attack, or they would patrol the West we would patrol the Eastern tribe what's called the Pinzer action, it was always based on kind of, if the intelligence hard intelligence was hard to come by. Always in Vietnam, the enemy "enemy" let them call adversaries were pretty good, and it was in their neighborhood. They knew how to engage when they wanted to, and fade away when they wanted to.

We spent, the American army spent a lot of time patrolling, and a lot of expenditure manpower and effort to try o pin enemy down. Early days, I read where they had, they caught large formations, battalions and regiments and were pitched battle. With American firepower, they were so overwhelmed and decimated they changed their tactics, it became much smaller.

I know I talked earlier about the lowlands, and I remember one day, back in July me and my platoon 15 guys, and we're out on a patrol, and we're hit a severe thunder shower, real hard, lightning, and thunder, and I guess we had any sense we would have honker down some place. Somebody told us to stop, didn't really think that much about lightning strikes, but so we're be entering, come across this small village, grass, huts, grass, and mud hooches, and fats grass roots.

Any small little not a river, but a stream running alongside of it, and it was empty and that was kind of an eerie thing why all of the sudden clear out, and there was still evidence of people that have been there, cooking fires, warm pots, things like that. I'm kind of in the middle and half my guys are forward of me, and I hear a commotion in the front.

Said, "Oh, God we hit something." "OK, let me get up there, and find out what's going on and whatnot." They stuck their nose into a hooch, a little hut, and in there was a North Vietnamese major, we found out who these people were later. A Vietnamese tax collector, and they had a large, they were squatted down over a small little wicker table.

The tax collector was actually blocking off the money, and the coins to this North Vietnamese major. He was well trimmed, sharp military haircut, young well built. The Viet Cong tax collector was probably not old, but he look older and a gray, and a beard. We immediately took them prisoner and blindfolded them, and then the first thing that hit me was, "OK, we got to get these guys back to where we can get them on a helicopter." We were 2 or 3 kilometers away from the company, I want to make sure we don't get hit on the way back.

They probably got friends in the area, so the guys want to make a B line straight arrow, and I said, "No let's follow the river. I want to keep our backs to the water. I don't want to be surrounded by terrain. I want to keep one side of the water." I know nobody can hit us from that side.

Took us a little longer, but we made it. I'm not sure I can claim brilliance it was just intuition. We found out later who they were a North Vietnamese major, and a Viet Cong tax collector, and where it came back from brigade, "Bravo, good job, they got a lot of good intelligence out of those guys."

To take enemy captive, is a whole different experience. Everybody is desperate, those guys are looking for the first opportunity to escape. If they can kill you, or get your weapon, or just get away from you. They'll do what they have to do. They realize their life is not going to be pleasant in captivity. In our case, we did not have handcuffs, or wrist ties or anything like that.

It was handkerchief, and towels, and whatever we could find that bind them together. Maybe if we found some quarter rope. Should we have been equip better? Yeah, but day to day, you're not expecting to take prisoners, and then now you've got them, I'll never forget the glare of content, by that nature.

He was, I came forward, and I guess sold a bar on my hat, realized, "OK this is the guy in charged." He kind of looked at me like "You're what's taking me ..." I kind of felt a little inadequate. I thought "Well pal, I got a job to do. Whether you're impressed or not, it doesn't matter. You're my prisoner." I was glad when that was over, and we got them back.

That's the kind of stuff that just happen, unexpected, and you got to be ready for it. There was never a great deal of the confidence in the army, some units were very good, and they had good commanders, and they were pretty squared away. Most were rag tagged, lackadaisical They had carry cooking pots with them, live chickens, they didn't carry C-rations or LRP rations like we did.

They cooked fresh, it was their country, and their life it kind of like I guess would smile a little bit. Are those guys are really serious? I mean with all this paraphernalia, but of course on our hand, on our side we were well equipped, and well supplied. That wasn't necessarily true to them.

You never felt like you could really count on them. There were Koreans there, South Korean units. Those guys really, really hard charging,

squared away and well disciplined, and well respected by everybody, especially the opponents. If you tangled with the South Korean unit. Those guys were not going to back off under any circumstances.

Getting to your question, the ARVN, there was no. Not a lot of confidence I don't think any of us really felt like they're going to step up. Of course we didn't know them, from our vantage point in 1970 where we were, how corrupt the government was in Saigon, how really lack of control it had over the countryside, it really didn't extend itself, in unified country with loyalty and support.

That it was just, just anecdotally from what we could see. The thought was, this is ... We're not going to be victorious militarily here. We don't see the political equation, or the economic or the social that's going to rush in here and firm this country up. It's probably at best going to be a stalemate.

Let's not get anybody killed unnecessarily, we still have a job to do, and nobody is going to shark on the job, but nobody is under the belief that we're going to be victorious like World War II. It was kind of a maturation process. North Vietnamese Army. At that point in time, serious army, professional army, an intent army.

Not in strength, or in force that was formidable, where they in Laos, or Cambodia, or still up North, regrouping, waiting. I know everybody all that, opponents got hit pretty hard, with the Tet 68. We learned later, after we left, followed the war, in the eastern offensive 72, there were large formations trying to cut the country in half. That's central highlands, they had for years, tried to infiltrate across there.

During the period, we were there the MVA was not a formidable force, it was the local VC that were I think the most effective down in their villages, where they live and operate. Try to get everybody back, alive. Again, I don't mean to imply that anybody shark the mission. You didn't have a choice, orders are orders.

You had to go where you were told to go, and do what you were assigned to do. If you do that, lackadaisically you put yourself at great risk. You still have to be serious about what you are doing, and not play out but do it for real, but not trying to have a false bravado, or false enthusiasm or a delusion that, well I don't know whether the rest of the country is deteriorating but we were going to be victorious right here and right now.

This isn't just, this not going to work. It wasn't really an anti war thing, it was just a reality thing. I think most people realized that, at the time, at every level. Because they were pulling so many US units out so quickly, we read and heard, about whole areas of the country, and we thought for ourselves, we have to abandon whatever we were doing in central highlands, backup guys in the lowlands. Well when somebody came back to the central highland, might have found company up there.

When your numbers are cut, you feel like pretty quickly.

Producer: You said.

Nick Prevas: It's far above our pay grade to challenge any of that. I took the job as the air operation's officer. Then about a month later, they had a slot, and felt they could spare me for a week. They didn't have much notice, I don't know if I got a telephone call to the wife, or had time to write or a letter, I forgot the arrangements.

I said it looks like I'm going to get it. She was kind of ready to move if word came that I could. I was living in a bunker on the firebase on the hill. It was a bunch of ammunition crates, and a cut, and a couple of uniforms, so I stowed my stuff, and when the day came gone on a chopper to go back to brigade, and then went my way up to division and then I guess I'm not sure where the bird, where we left from to fly out of country to Hawaii.

It might have been back down around Saigon, maybe Benoit Airbase, down there. Meantime she's flying from Baltimore to Hawaii. Everybody is still a little like you never know what the last minute they're going to turn a flight around or know something happened, and you're going back, you're not going.

That was a great fear, she's going to be stuck in Hawaii and wondering. The army did have a list of who is coming and when you're expected to arrive. I mean there was a place she could check in, but you hope that wasn't going to happen. The first thing we did was hooked up, and they gave a little briefing and some advice, and there was a R&R Center right on Waikiki beach that was a reserved beach if you want to use it.

Then the Hilton Hawaiian Towers, the Rainbow Towers were there and we booked a room there, very nice. It was real nice digs, in 1970. Linda said that we want to see any other Island, and I said, "No, this is enough for me." I'm not interested in their version of jungle as exotic as it might be.

I said let's rent a cart, and we rented a Cutlass convertible. Used it one day, just drove around the island, one of the car just sat. There was a lot of catching up to do. We've been apart 9 months, 10 months, she had lost a baby, while I was there, and then a lot that had happen to me about wounded, and getting malaria and a lot of it going on, I didn't write about all that back home to her.

We had a chance to talk, and shared her my Purple Heart, and my Bronze Star medal. I remember her sitting on the edge of the bed, softly weeping. That was a tender moment, it really was. I said, "I'm really ... I think I have a pretty good chance to making it now." In the operation center, I'm not engaged in day to day combat. She said, "You're going to make it, I know you're coming home." She said, "I know about these things."

It was nice, we spent some time on the beach, some times sightseeing, sou-veneering. We left on enough [Feetnote 52:39]. We left enough Feetnote. It was OK, you still have to face going back. When I got back, that the tie in had jump again, and it was up in the divisional area in Chu Lai, it was like "OK, find them what are they doing? What's going on. Go to work, get back to work immediately." It was always busy, always a lot popping.

Producer: What was the bronze star for?

Nick Prevas: In another ... I'm back to July, in the lowlands. We had been on the company, was operating as a company, still operating as a company. My 15 guys had been assigned on an ambush one night, we're out all night, and it rained, and nothing. We were tired, and irritable, and hungry, and whatnot.

We were making our way back, across an open rice paddy. The company we called in, and they said, "Just setup where you are, you're close enough setup where you are." The village is going to have elections today. We need ... Our company's mission now to secure the village against VC who may try to upset the elections. Myself and my radio operator, setup under a palm tree.

I wanted to read some mail, and enjoy a can peaches which were you carry those for weeks, for the right moment to enjoy. Those were great, can peaches. The rest of the platoon, was maybe 100, 150 feet away along a bamboo thicket. All of a sudden, rifle fire opened up. What it was was a classic meeting engagement, we had setup right next a Viet Cong,

or North Vietnamese army, I'm not quite sure who they were organization.

The thicket was dividing, my platoon from theirs. It's a classic 2 units stumbling on to one another. They stood up to see who we are were, and my medic instinctively just picked up his M-16 and dropped on of them. The firefight broke out, meantime myself and my radio operator were trying to get back this 150 200 feet to control the situation, and we get pinned down.

That was a harrowing moment, we were bracketed by grenade launcher. M-79 grenade launcher. Probably US in Viet Cong hands. A lot of US weapons wound up in Viet Cong hand. It's a 40mm grenade launcher. Bracketing means 1 round over you, 1 round short, over short and it walk them in, until bingo. Your first instinct is to get up and run, but you can't get up and run because 2 guys look after you with automatic weapons fire pinned down.

It's the classic pinned and bracketed situation. I remember filling the dirt as these things were hitting, hitting my back and my helmet. I remember thinking what to protect, do I try to protect my growing, or do I try to get my hands up over my head. I don't want to be brain damaged either.

If you're going to get killed, you're going to get killed, it's not much you can do there. I remember praying real hard, the radio operator called for artillery, and I said, "Don, they're not going to shoot it. They're not going to shoot anywhere near a village. We're pretty thinned here."

It was not anything our guys could do, they could maybe shoot at these other guys, but they couldn't see him. 2 of us were, were in a pinch, in a bind. They did shoot artillery, we heard it coming in like, it's sounds like box cars, it sounds like railroad cars coming in, it just makes a heck of a noise and landed some distance in front of us and apparently broke up that formation, and ended the firefight and higher headquarter decided that I was to be given credit for that.

The credit really goes to my radio operator, I tried repeatedly to get him an accommodation, but and I did I was successful getting him something. That was again, completely unexpected situation. It wouldn't have mattered had we been a little more or had I been a little more diligent or engaged.

We didn't know they were there, it was just a chance, bumping into each other, and then whoever is the quickest on the draw, is going to prevail.

Producer: Did you finish the peaches?

Nick Prevas: No, they got tossed. I think I did creamed a letter in my shirt. Halfway across that rice paddy. Halfway across that rice paddy, when we got bracketed and pinned that was kind the end of the peaches. That was on the lay and clearing operation when we were getting mortared almost every night, for 26 days, 26 nights, it was the last night before, we were to be relieved, by another infantry platoon.

The engineer stayed, but another infantry platoon would replaced us. Just pretty like clock works between 7:00 and 8:00 we could expect them. They started landing, but we were smarter, the engineers had dug us up, a large what's called a birm in the sand, the fighting positions we have overhead, steel covered, and well sandbagged.

You'd keep that pace maybe 2 or 3 days, and then moved further up the beach we'd build a new one. I immediately reported then on the radio that we're taking incoming, and what are you taking, well best we can tell probably 82mm mortar, and how many and from what direction, and they're looking at a map, and trying to figure is it's getting dark, and then a 1 drop, it could have been 30, 50 feet away.

I heard it come in, it's just a thump, when it detonated, and I'm still talking on the handset, calling in, calling for what's called counter battery fire. Figuring we kind of knew where they were probably shooting from, if the artillery could break that up, we could put an end to it.

Then I look down and I just had some blood running down my hand, could have been a lot worst, fortunate, fortunate. There's no John Wayne stuff, there's no Rambo stuff. You count your blessings for everyday over there. Also saw some things that disturbed me a lot, we lost some guys for what's called friendly fire, mistake, errors. When I hilltop very narrow ridge line, that same summer in another part of the area.

They plotted some defensive artillery fires. Misplotted and then they would fire, harassing and intredicting fires all night long. If an enemy formation was coming at you, they didn't know what was going to explode, when and where at any given, you'd pick logical roots of advance and whatnot.

Every so often artillery would shoot, well something must [misplotted 1:00:49] and there was a direct hit in a foxhole, 2 guys were just blown to bits. Again my platoon was out on ambush that night, I remember coming back in the next morning, it was pretty gruesome situation. Then another

situation where a platoon was coming back from a night patrol, and radio to make sure the claymore mines, claymore mine is a composition B, 750 steel balls, and a shape charge.

That sets off like a little portable radio and they're pretty gruesome and they can be activated to your electric layer by a handheld device, a defensive kind of a thing. The mines are in, and they radioed a couple of times, and were finally told one of the officers got on and said, "God damn it. You were told, it's clear, get your ass in here." Boom, first guy was cut in the half, the second guy, his legs blown off, and we could hear the screams through the jungle. It was blood curdling, and then you find out the next day what happened.

That hurts, that hurts when it's mistakes and we're doing this to ourselves. That left an impression too, and it's like "What is this really all about. It's bad enough when you lose guys, in an engagement with the adversary, but to lose them because of our own mistakes, and whatnot."

That affects everybody, it's a morale booster. Disappointing, disappointing, of course Nixon had gone through Watergate, he was out of office I guess Ford had taken over. There was no stomach for it anymore, congress had cut our funding. You think about not only our sacrifice, and hardships and what I personally went through but what I saw my guy.

What touches you more, is what your people or your buddies go through, but yourself is secondary. You look at the others, and you see their toil, and their sweat, and their wounds, and their hardship and their hard work. I thought about, how many other units, I mean how many guys and the body count was 58,000 it just kept going over in my mind, what for?

I know firsthand, what it is to lose somebody. I didn't lose my father, but I grew up without him. I saw what it did to my mother, it was not easy for her. It's not just, "OK the guy is dead, and he goes to Arlington. There's a family, and price is paid over years." It's something [inaudible 01:04:00] shallow about that, and it angered me about the country, that how do we get into these situations and then we're so cavalier about ... Well, OK.

It was a mistake we're out of it. Should we at least have done more for the Vietnamese government, and the ARVN Forces. Even if it's fine, I understood. It was their war, always was their war. It was time to get out, but to cut off all funding, and air support, and whatnot, and then to let it end in such ignominious defeat, an embarrassing defeat and I also

worried about those few people left back at that embassy. I mean will they make it out before it closes in.

Kind of sadness, and disappointment. Again, no one ever expected to end victoriously, but to end the way it did it was like just, "Just miss this, let's forget about it." Something else that bother me over the years, was a nagging issue about MIA, and POWs. Did we really get everybody back.

We know there were people on accounted for, and I think of the total number of 2000 or so. It foiled down into 600 questionable cases off which were maybe 300 or 400 hardcore cases where we had pretty good information, at least that's what I've read, and talk to people and heard that they were known to be alive, in '73. The reality that there was no way to get them.

Are you going to lose a 100 guys to try to find, if you can even find 20, 30, 50. How will you get them out, will choppers, more choppers get shutdown trying to get in. I mean there's a reality part of this. What bothers me the most is I don't think our government was ever really open and honest about all that, all that stuff was classified.

Even when I was on duty, in 1990, 1991 I talked to some people and intelligence and said they work the problem from Korea. They worked it from here, they worked it from their highly classified. Of course the American people didn't get the full story, it was sealed up tight, that bothered me a lot.

I thought there's something worst than being KIA, it's missing in action. Where my wife wouldn't had gotten back a body bag. Those things were real disappointments.

Producer: I want to thank you for what you give.

Nick Prevas: Thank you, Kev. Thank you I appreciate the opportunity. If nothing else, it's ... I was ... My guys voice then, and I hope I am today, they're the ones that really take the barrel that those guys did the heavy lifting. I'm happy to have the opportunity.

Producer: Thank you for coming.

Nick Prevas: You bet.