

Vietnam Veterans Oral History Project

Interviewee: Gene Sullivan, Army

Interviewer: Luke Aldridge

Date: October 23, 2024

Location: Media Learning and Research Lab, USC Aiken

Transcriber: Jack Shaffer

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LA: My name is Luke Aldridge. I'm interviewing Vietnam veteran Jean Sullivan, who served in the Army from 1965 to 1968. Mr. Sullivan, this interview will have four sections: your life before service, basic training, your time in Vietnam, and your life after service. So, let's get started with your background.

GS: Okay.

LA: Where did you grow up and what was your area known for?

GS: I grew up in Collingswood, New Jersey. That's about five miles east of Philadelphia. And just a normal middle-class upbringing. It was a community close to Philadelphia, of course, a lot of people commuted there. Normal education, played baseball, high school football, parks, recreation, and as a child, you know, we used to play in the street and our step ball hit the bat just, every day, kid next door type of activities.

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LA: Can you tell me about your family growing up?

GS: Sure. My father worked for RCA, Radio Corporation of America, based in Camden, New Jersey, where I was born. My mother worked for a department store chain called Bamberger's, and I have a twin sister. Went to school, did everything. And a younger brother who was not quite nine years younger than myself. And normal family, back then, I think we had one car. My father got a two-week vacation. Just go down to the Jersey shore, spend a week or two there. That was our vacation. And other than that, it was the days of what I would call Ozzie and Harriet. Nine to five, he would work Monday through Friday, home, having supper, and just a normal, average upbringing.

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LA: Do you have any memories of your father or other men around you telling war stories from World War II?

GS: That's a good question. I have, or I had, an uncle who was a B-17 pilot in the latter stages of World War II and he shared some war stories with us. Fortunate for him was that he came in towards the latter part of the war. So, the flak and the encounters that he had weren't as severe, but I do recall him talking about that. Another gentleman not quite related to the family was a Marine. And I think he got, he was struck, at Guadalcanal. He had a bullet wound, and it took him out of the war at that point. But, fully recovered, of course. They're the only real war stories that I can relate to. And, of course, as a child growing up, you had the World War II war stories and a little bit of Korea and so forth. You heard about that, but that other than that, that was my exposure.

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LA: Did you have a favorite World War II movie growing up?

GS: No, I mean, I can recall later, as a teenager, whatever. *The Great Escape*, Steve McQueen was that of the prisoners and in the war, in Germany, John Wayne and Guadalcanal or something in that. But that was the extent of it. Of course, Hollywood back then, they had their influence. And, of course, that's terribly misleading when you look at the war from their perspective as to actually what the war is and what you encounter yourself, totally different. But when they say that's Hollywood, it is Hollywood. Yeah.

LA: A lot of Vietnam veteran memoirs mentioned John Wayne as an influence on their expectations of war. Do you remember John Wayne that way?

GS: I do, as a matter of fact, I think it was we were still in the Vietnam War, and he played, a Marine colonel in *The Green Berets*, I think it was called. I remember him from that aspect of it. Again, when he was younger, as I mentioned, Guadalcanal and his appearance in that movie. And, of course, just like when we were children playing cowboys or Indians or whatever, that bang, bang, you're dead. And the bullet wounds were clean and all of that. It's totally different. And the chaos that's involved in a firefight. Is again, it's 180 degrees from what you think it would be. Yeah.

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LA: Before Vietnam, where did you go to college and what did you study?

GS: Well, after high school, I went to Rider College, which is, I'm going to say Trenton, New Jersey. And business was my major. In all honesty, I wasn't mature enough to handle that. My father at one point suggested that I join the service and then go to college afterwards. I said, no, no, thank you. I'm fine. Well, I wasn't, and I was being lured by fraternities and, being a business major, taking courses like accounting, you had to stay on top of it. If you got behind, it was very difficult to catch up. I found that out the hard way. And after a year, I was dismissed for poor

scholarship. After my time in service, I did return to college, and I went to Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana—prestigious school that I did very well in. I graduated three and a half years and was Dean's list the entire time. But it took that maturity, to make me fully understand, what a college education would mean.

LA: In your time before your service. Did you hear anything about Vietnam when you were at college?

GS: No. Coincidentally, when I did join the Army, it was March 8th, 1965, and that was the day that American troops literally stepped ashore in Vietnam. I didn't hear if a word of Vietnam. If I did, I wasn't paying attention and it was just background. But from that first day of arrival at the Fort Dix, where I underwent basic training, suddenly Vietnam was a word and I thought, where is that? And every day after that, it became something that I learned more and more about.

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LA: I'd like to move on to the start of your service and basic training now.

GS: Sure.

LA: Would you describe yourself as volunteering, being commissioned, or being drafted?

GS: I volunteered. I knew that, again, the draft was always there. And, being susceptible to the draft, I thought I had better options if I joined the service. And so, I wasn't quite sure what branch to go into. My father suggested that I find a branch of service that I could sleep in a warm bed at night and get three square meals a day, but as usual, I didn't listen to him and I saw a poster of a Army paratrooper, and I thought that would be very interesting. And that's what lured me to the Army in the Airborne.

LA: Did you expect to go to Vietnam?

GS: No. Again, it wasn't even a thought. I just thought I'd do my time, save, get some experience and then apply for the GI Bill and go back to school on that. Vietnam and what was going on there. Although I was starting to hear more about it, still had not registered, to me. During basic training, it was that basic skills that you're learning. How to break down a weapon, how to fire a weapon, some normal just marching, saluting, being responsible, how to make your bed, how to present yourself, and just responsibility. You had all sorts of a job to do, whether it was cleaning the floor or whatever it may be. You did everything back then. And of course, the first thing they do in basic is they take you and they take away your civvies—your civilian clothes—they shave your head, and suddenly you look like everybody else and they just try to break you down and then build you back up again. And it works. And that's what they did when I went to advanced infantry training after my two-month assignment for basic, that's when you start to get to get into more details. How to fire different types of weapons at that point, the M60 machine gun, the .45 Colt pistol, the grenade launcher, things like that. How to throw a grenade, how to prepare your web gear, all that. It just helped you become more of a soldier,

which my main occupation was going to be at that point. And escape and evasion, and some other details. You just got more involved in that, and you acclimated to those awful hours of getting up at, four in the morning and getting to bed at, eleven at night and little sleep and marching and all the running and physical training that went with it, yeah.

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LA: Did you know where Vietnam was before you enlisted?

GS: No clue at all. None. I think somebody said at some point, Asia or Southeast Asia, and I still didn't know where that was. I knew Korea, I knew it was over in Asia, of course, Japan and Europe, Germany and so forth, but nothing, nothing in detail at, at that point, yeah.

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LA: Do you remember anything specific about the last days before your service or the trip to base?

GS: No, other than my father wanted me out of the house. And just get on with your life and find something constructive to do. That was pretty much it. We, again I was trying to find myself, at this point I'm 20 years old. I failed at college. Went away to Key West, Florida to dig up bottles on the beach and sell them to tourists. And did some of that, but it just meandering at that point, trying to figure out what I was going to do and with the military giving you direction, that helped me quite a bit. But no, at that point, no, other than I was taking it day by day and that's about it.

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LA: How difficult was the experience of boot camp for you?

GS: Well, it's an adjustment because, up until that point in life, if something occurs, you say, I don't like it and I'm just going to do something else. Well, you can't do that. The one thing about once you go into the service, you've got a, you've got a contract, for whatever it may be, two years, three years or whatever it is, and you can't quit. So, you had best, make the best of it. My father would tell me many times, Gene, make the best of a bad situation, and there was nothing else to do. There weren't any other options, so you had to deal with it. And again, that's part of the maturing process and back, and I look back at that and the military gave you some bad days. They gave you a lot of good days and they forced upon you the maturity and responsibility that you needed. And I for that, I'll be forever grateful.

LA: Did anyone around you struggle with boot camp?

GS: You know, some did, but we were all in it together, so we ventured on. The only problem with boot camp, it was March, '65 [1965] and in southern New Jersey, it's still cold, It still snows. You're outdoors all the time. Your body again, for the lack of sleep or whatever, it starts to break down. Some people got respiratory infections and things like that. And you might be in a boot camp for 16 weeks. So, you didn't want to get into a situation where you're halfway through it

and you're sick and then you miss time because then you have to go all the way back and repeat it again from week one. So, people were trying to stay as healthy as they possibly could, and if they had something to just gut it out. So that was about it. Other than that, no psychological issues that I can recall. You just made the best of it and you didn't want to show any weakness to the drill instructor, because if he saw that, he's going to just make it all the worse for you.

LA: Could you tell me about the time between graduating from boot camp and going to Vietnam?

GS: Well, yeah. When I got to after boot camp and advanced infantry training in Fort Gordon, Georgia, I then went to jump school, as we call it, parachute School in Fort Benning, Georgia. That's, I'm going to say, 150 miles south of Atlanta. They have three big towers, and it's a three, three-week course that you go through there. Again, a lot of physical training and everything. The first you're learning how to parachute, you're learning how to jump, how to land. It's called—the various parts of your body, your ankle, your shin, your hip and your shoulder—hit, shift and rotate, I think it's what they try to instill on you when you hit the ground. And so the first week you're landing in sawdust, the second week you're landing on dirt, the third week you're jumping out of a plane. But—and it's quite a—that was when I really felt something of a true accomplishment. I remember my first jump and landing on the ground, and that plane was still overhead, and so I got from there to here. That's pretty neat. But that's what that was, but at that time, the war had moved up. And again, we weren't listening to television or anything like that. We just didn't have that availability. So, you got little pieces and the sergeants that were in charge of you would tell you a little bit about it and everything. So, in our jump class, I want to say was probably 1100, 1200 people in that class, it was big. And you had a lot of Army personnel, but you had UDT, Underwater Demolition Team. That's, that's the acronym for the Navy Seals, that's what they were before the Seal nomenclature came in and we, we worked with them, some Air Force commandos, and so forth. We were also going through jump school, some Marine Force recon personnel, all that. Well, I remember in our class, probably 800 Army personnel went to Vietnam right from there or they had a two week leave or something. Then they went, but 100 people they carved out for Panama and then 150, they took and they sent us to Fairbanks, Alaska. And you say Fairbanks, Alaska? Well, it was only 20 years post-Korean War, and they wanted to see how an airborne company, parachute company could do under Arctic conditions. And that was the main reason why we were there and Alaska was cold, desolate. Fairbanks, Alaska, in 1965 isn't what it is today, there was no pipeline back then, and it was just hard duty, cold, miserable. Around the holiday time the sun barely came out, if at all. It wouldn't come up until 11:00 in the morning and because of the ice fog of the cold—it's 60 something below—it was a fog and by 1:00 in the afternoon, it was dark again. So, imagine you have 150 young men in their 20s walking around in the barracks, what to do if you just merely tapped one another on the shoulder or whatever, a fistfight could break out. So, it was tough, anyway it was also redundant. How many times can you, break down your rifle, put it back together again, shine your shoes, this and that, and they had a—if it was warm enough and warm enough was 35 below, that you could go outside and they had a five mile ski trail, and we had skis that we would cross-country ski for five miles, again, part of the Arctic training. Other

than that, it was awful. And that is what propelled me to go to Vietnam, again at that point, once we're out of the training, we were getting the *Stars and Stripes*, that's the name of the newspaper that the military get. So, we were listening to and reading about Vietnam and learning more about it. And at that time, probably in early '66 [1966], it was, we were losing about 200 and 225 soldiers a week there. And some guys in our unit left early and unfortunately, we saw a couple of their names in the *Stars and Stripes*, but it didn't deter us. And finally, in July of that year, five of us left to go to Vietnam. Again, we had six more months to go in Alaska. And doing what we were already doing, and I just felt I'm in a war and what am I going to do with my life? And yes, it's dangerous, but at the same time, if I look back at my life and I didn't take advantage of this, would I always question myself, as an individual? And so that was one of the reasons that drove me to volunteer to go there. And five of us left at that time, and we ended up arriving in Vietnam in August of 1967. Excuse me, or 1966, excuse me. Yeah.

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LA: Okay. So, let's move on to your time in Vietnam.

GS: Okay.

LA: Did anything stick out to you about your flight to Vietnam?

GS: Not really, it was Tiger Airlines, as I recall. Now, we were using commercial planes at that point, I guess whatever we could to send over people at that point. I just remember we left Northern California. It was a nighttime flight so you try to get some sleep as best you can. We refueled somewhere in Japan and then on to Vietnam when I—when we got there, at Tan Son Nhut airbase or whatever, they put us on a bus and the first thing that struck me, two things. Number one, the bus had wire cages over the windows. And that, I felt was just to prevent somebody from popping a grenade and throwing it inside the bus. The other thing that struck me was the smell that you had. Vietnam, the best way I could describe it, smelled like a wet dog. You had this musk that was just there, and it permeated your clothing. But that was the first thing that struck me a little vignette, if I may, in the last 15 years, I think Sylvester Stallone was in a movie playing John Rambo, his character. And he was with some soldiers of fortune and I think it was in Thailand. And they're going up some river and some guy, another soldier of fortune—individual said, “this country, it smells like a wet dog.” And that excerpt was actually printed in a book, *Six Silent Men*, that I had mentioned. He read the book, he got that from it, but yes, it did. And it just stayed with you. You didn't realize it, but it just stayed with you.

LA: Yeah. What about the heat?

GS: Well, as you well know, the Georgia summer isn't the best here. The heat and humidity was difficult, and coming from Alaska, I didn't encounter that. So, I was used to that. But the heat was brutal, the humidity. The one good thing about the unit I was with, the 101st airborne, is that we were in a thick jungle setting, triple canopies. So, you get in that you're out of the sun, and the temperature could vary by almost ten degrees with being in there and in that shade, as opposed to being in the southern part of Vietnam, the delta, where it's more wide open and you

didn't have that protection, but it was something, again, you acclimate to, just like you would anything else. I can remember when we weren't out in the field, just being in the tent and the temperature's 110, 112 degrees and there's just no relief. There's no fans, there's no setting. We didn't have anything like you see in Afghan Afghanistan or Iraq where you had billets. No, we were just a tent and a cot. And again, out in the field, it was where you laid on the ground, that was where you were. You were where the ants bite and the leeches live and get on you. Yeah.

LA: What did you expect when you arrived based on TV or stories that you'd heard?

GS: I think I was, expecting the Vietnam people to be appreciative of the fact that that we were there, we were helping them to avert communism, to give them a better life. And when I was on that guard duty in Saigon, I saw young kids, children, five, six, seven years old, doing anything they can begging, looking for C-rations, anything they could get their hands on. Some older people were actually willing to sell their siblings for prostitution or whatever. It was disappointing. And I think that's when I began to rethink everything about what was going on there. I had a half dollar and it had the Kennedy bust on it. And I remember showing it that and I remember the kids saying "Kennedy. Kennedy." So, they knew something of America and what was happening, but all in all, I was disappointed with the reaction that I got. And eventually I learned they really just wanted to be left alone. They weren't influenced by this faction or that faction. Just let me do my work in the rice paddies or whatever it may be but just leave me alone.

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LA: Could you describe your first 24 to 48 hours in country?

GS: Yeah. A little bit bewildered, like anybody would be learning, learning where to go. Where's the latrine? Where it is. How do I get back from the latrine to my tent or whatever it is? What's my next assignment? You didn't know, day to day where you are going to be or anything, so you couldn't plan anything. I didn't even know what my address was. So, if I was going to write to somebody, what's my return address? Because I didn't know how long I was going to be there. And I knew they were going to be anxious to know where I was. And what was going on. So that was a little frustrating in that regard. But bewilderment more than anything.

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LA: Would you describe yourself as being in combat, in the rear, or something else?

GS: Well, after that guard duty, which was just that. Nothing eventful happened. But then I went up to the front, as they would say, and that's where I got to the 101st airborne base camp. And, just coincidentally, I was there when they were recruiting for LRRPs. Now you're going to hear that name a lot now. It stands for Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrol, LRRP. But we just pronounce it L-U-R-P-S, "Lurps." And they were looking for volunteers to get into their unit. LRRP's were a special unit, there were, four teams of six men, and they were long range recon. Everybody was a sergeant, which I was at that time. And they didn't wear helmets or standard military gear. They wear what we'd call bush hats, and they were all camouflaged and they

really looked the part and so that attracted me to them and I went through an interviewing process. At that time, they were looking for three, three people to fill positions, and I was one of the three that was taken. But at the forward base camp also had an orientation week at the same time. So, you wanted to understand now the basics of combat there. Booby traps in particular and what to do and how to conduct yourself, and it was pretty interesting. And again, more physical training, more running and all that that we did. But that's, but that's how I learned about the LRRP's and how I got into them at that, at that time.

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LA: How would you describe the people you served with in terms of economic background, race, or religion?

GS: We were all sergeant, some of them were what I, what we call lifers. They were anywhere from a master sergeant, sergeant first class, staff sergeant, E8, E7, E6 or a buck sergeant like myself. They were hardcore. Nice, yeah there was profanity and all that, but that's just part of the culture. You, most of them came from wooded areas, Tennessee, Georgia, the hill countries, Wyoming, Idaho, places like that, where they were taught to hunt and shoot ever since they were children. And they were the best in the bush. And you learn from them. But that's their economic background. Low middle class, I gotta say. Not college educated, but street smart and, the one thing about the military, in order to get it—advance in rank and so forth—you had to know your job and what you're doing. So, they all had the ability to learn, and their communication was fine. They didn't use the big words, but you understood them. Very much so. In terms of race. And ethnicity, we had, we had one Indian, actual American Indian, I think we had, three Afro-Americans, rest Caucasian. But break it down there was a, a couple of guys from New York that were there, and New York, Italian, like the language all their own. But we had a good group of people, and everybody got along. We were, there's a bonding that goes on in war and everybody, everybody covered one another. And you, you wanted to know them. You wanted to understand their movements, their reactions, and get to know them. But not to the point where you're going to be influenced by emotion. You had to guard against that because that sometimes leads to unnecessary things. But, yeah, they're all good people.

LA: Did you work alongside any women, either Vietnamese or American?

GS: No, no. The only time I saw women were, I did come down with malaria, towards the end of '66 [1966]. And so my experience with nurses, just being taken care of was, in the hospitals, and every once in a while, when you came back to the base camp, they had, there was a name for them, but anyway, Red Cross, women were there, young women. And I give them a lot of credit for their courage to be over there, even though it was a base camp. Nevertheless, you could be mortared. But they were there, and they were very caring and anything you wanted to do, you want to talk or this or that or share a cup of coffee or something. It was, it was very nice, but that was that was really the extent of my involvement with any females.

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LA: How did living in Vietnam and meeting Vietnamese people affect you?

GS: Well, that's a very good question. Also, the again, my exposure up until that point was, I just knew Americans and American people, the Vietnamese were very kind, an honorable people. They, they somehow adopted to learning, English, which is a difficult language to learn, of course, but they found a way to communicate and were always respectful. And for the most part, we tried to return that respect. The, and if nothing else, the old standard, hand signals or whatever, or using something that you saw, if I wanted a beer to hold up a beer and mention that or whatever, it caught their eye, but no it was just trying to find a way to communicate with people like that. And it worked very well. And I think there was, there was a mutual respect there. Yeah. I don't think we had any, any issues in that regard.

LA: What do you remember about Vietnamese children?

GS: The poverty, and how they had to deal with things, you know, unlike the children that we knew, they weren't getting an education. They were, you know, a lot of it was that red dirt or clay like we see around here. They—that was their life—they would do menial jobs at the age of three. It was it was their own way of survival. You know, we go to the market and stock up for the week, they're on a day-to-day basis and the water and whatever else they do. So, I mean, that was an adjustment. It was there. We were aware of it, but at the same time we had our jobs to do. So, we didn't dwell on it. We just moved along. But in retrospect, thinking about it now, yeah, that was they were in the background, I guess.

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LA: Do you remember any distinct animals during your time in Vietnam?

GS: Well, they were—first of all, everything seemed to be hostile there from the ants that would pinch you, to the scorpions that were there, to the snakes that you had, that were prevalent. Might be too strong of a word, but they were there, and you had to be careful of them. And I had an encounter with a king cobra. These little bamboo vipers that are as skinny as the pinky and maybe eight, ten inches long, but their bite could kill you in 30 seconds, highly dangerous. And amongst, they call them bamboo because that's they, they were in with bamboo and they matched the ground, so it was very difficult to, to find them. But snakes were an issue. You had tigers, I saw one in the darkness, and it's, it startled me as much as it startled him. And he—off he went. And just stray dogs, as I mentioned and cats. But that's really it. I think once we—out in the field—we found an elephant print. And now where did that come from? I have no idea. But four men could stand in that one footprint, which I thought was amazing. But other than that, we relied on birds and monkeys. Because if a foreign individual, could be an animal, it could be a man, they would grow silent and, if not, they would be chattering away. So, if we were in an area and we could hear that chattering, we knew that the enemy wasn't there when it got quiet. We knew they're coming.

LA: You used the chatter of the birds and the monkeys?

GS: Yeah, exactly. So, for instance, if we were being inserted into an area on a mission and it it's. Well, we always did this at dusk, so you had about no more than a half hour once you were inserted, to find cover, bed down for the night. That means if the, if the enemy, the North Vietnamese or the Viet Cong, were thought you might be being dropped into an area. They couldn't locate you because it was dark. And at the same time, once you got in, you didn't know if it was going to be a hot area, if they were there or if they weren't there. And once you got in and the six of you were leaping out, from 10 or 15ft, you hit the ground and you made a beeline for the jungle, the dense foliage. And then the helicopter would fly away and you're waiting for normalcy to reoccur. But your heart is beating so fast it's interfering with your hearing. But once the chatter starts to return and you hear the monkeys and you hear the birds, then you realize it's safe. And that's when we moved out. And to find a safe haven to bed up for the night.

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LA: Did you experience any culture shock in Vietnam?

GS: No. I mean, their values were different, that their dress was a little strange. Not so much the men. The men would even wear dark slacks and a white shirt, I mean, and this is in urban areas, and the ladies would wear dark slacks and a type of garment. I forget the name of it that flowed down. They all looked attractive in what they were doing, they presented themselves very well. And then in the rural areas where you had to get around and do everything, the men wore basic khaki shorts and some sort of a shirt or a top or no top at all. And the ladies, loose clothing, as I recall, hair pulled back, they ate this beetle nut. It was, and I couldn't tell you why they did it, but it turned their teeth black. And a 30-year-old woman would look like a grandmother at times. It was, it was strange. They didn't sit in chairs, they sat down, they squatted, and they had, they used a long pole with, a tripod, at either end. And that would used to carry things. So, they weighted it at either end. It would be super, super heavy, but they found a way of once it got put on their shoulders and people would help them pick it up. And as you moved along, you sort of danced with it in a sense, and that going up and down, you didn't fully feel the weight of it is genius. And they were able to, that's how they moved along with things.

LA: Yeah.

GS: That's, that's pretty much the culture changes that I noticed there.

00:43:46

LA: Did you personally encounter the Viet Cong?

GS: Yeah, I did. We were in an area once, and we were being sniped at. We had actually counted, captured two, Viet Cong and we loaded them into a helicopter and got them out for interrogation. And we continued on with our mission. I thought we would have been extracted, but they wanted to continue on anyway. Late in the day, we stopped and went off in this area, but there was a trail there, and I was told to go out and—out to trail and make sure nobody was coming along. And as I did, everybody else began to bed down for the night. They had their last

meal. So, I'm out there waiting. They had these huge anthills, they could be easily ten feet high and they'd been around for centuries there. They weren't active, but they were just these huge mounds. And I'm sitting on a side of that, and I'm starting to get annoyed because my five teammates back there seem to have forgotten about me and I haven't eaten yet, and I still wanted to bed down my gear, too. So, I foolishly put my rifle next to this tree, and I'm trying to catch their attention. Like, you know, I want to eat, you know, and for them to see me. And all of a sudden, I heard a branch or a stick break behind me, and I just froze, and I slowly turned. Now I'm camouflaged head to toe, the face paint on, green, brown, and everything and I slowly turn and no more than ten feet away. If that, is this VC [Viet Cong]. I remember him distinctly. He had black shorts. He had a long sleeve khaki shirt on shirttail out, and he had what was a German Mauser at his hip. And I looked, I didn't blink, I did nothing, I just froze because the—my rifle's here and if I went to get it, that movements going to. So, I just looked at him and remember, keep your mouth open a little. If you do, you won't blink. So, I, I did that, I'm watching him. And then I see his eyes dance around and I realize he doesn't see me. And I'm there and there's some foliage in between us, of course, but he doesn't see me. Anyway, he moved on slowly, and I'm thinking to myself, please, guys, look and see what's happening. Anyway, he, as he's going on, and his back has turned to me, now I'm reaching slowly for my rifle. I pick it up, I have it, I go, aim like this, and I squeeze and the trigger's not moving and I realized I had it on safety. Oof. So anyway, I slowly was moving it because if you go click, click to full-automatic, he's going to hear that. So, and all of a sudden, one of the guys in the, just away from me, sneeze and he couldn't get his hat over his mouth enough. The VC turned around, rode away, to me. At that point, I had the rifle and he made a dash back that way, and I fired, but there are some trees there, and I must have hit the trees because he was still running and behind him was another guy coming up with a carbine who I didn't see. My back was turned to him and that was my first encounter, as close as it was. And again, it was my fault. I could have got myself killed for, for my error of doing that. But that's one of the things about war and combat. So anyway.

00:48:04

LA: Are there other encounters you'd like to share?

GS: Well, the—we've had other times, again—I, we've captured some and another time we were in an area and it was a very dangerous area. So, they put two teams in and one team, we got in there, one team went out and they ended up capturing a nurse. And it was on the run. Now, they had left their packs with us. Our packs were 75 pounds heavy. So, we had their packs, they're there, they're running I was the RTO [Radio Telephone Operator], the radio person at that time. They radioed, radio to us that they were evading, the North Vietnamese that were chasing them and where they were going, and we tried to give them coordinates to a landing zone to get to. We fired up, we had a chopper coming in to get them, and we had an F-4 Phantom coming over, which is unusual that happened. Anyway, I provided the radio. Now, normally, anytime we give out coordinates, we do it, in a coded message because of the sense of urgency I circumvented that, and we just went with the coordinates. Well, evidently somehow, they figured out where we were from that. They got it they were, our group was picked up with the nurse, went back to basic, at the same time we were there with the packs. We can't move

because we can't carry two 75-pound packs. So, we just stayed where we were. The next day they were coming back in, and while we're waiting there for them, we had a new guy with us, and he was out on the OP, outpost, and all of a sudden, we see a Vietnamese scout go down this trail, which was about 30, 35 yards away. And we, we all laid low. And then another guy came down shortly after that, which meant the main body was still coming. And we looked around for this new guy. Martin was his name, that's all I can recall. Anyway, the team leader said, "Sullivan. See if you can find Martin." You know, because we were concerned, where is he? So, I went out looking around for him. And as I'm going out there looking for him, all of a sudden, all hell breaks loose and, you know, when Trump was the, that assassination attempt where he talked about the bullets whizzing by his ear. That's real. And I could feel that and you felt that first before that sound of the rifle of the bullet, and I hit the ground. Boom. More gunfire came in [Unclear] rolled to this big type of oak banyan tree, got behind that. And the bullets were just flying into that tree. For a second there, I didn't think I was going to have any tree left the way it was taking out these big chunks of bark, it was a 30 caliber that they were firing that was a doing that, anyway it was coming right by my, and I couldn't even turn to fire my weapon because it was that close. As Martin shows up, I told him to get down. I came around to the other side to get up peek and then, fired off a burst, and they again, back to me. And then they started to move forward. I'm going to say there was probably three dozen, two, three dozen of them. The good thing was that the other four guys off to the side, the flank, they had no idea about them. So, when they made their charge, they all fired and hit a number of them. They again pulled back right away and scurried out of the area because they didn't know what they were in at that point, thank goodness. But hearing them charge and being pinned down like that, what little hair I had on my head was standing straight up, I could tell you that. And that the fear that, that, you know, how do I prevent this charge from happening? And I, I saw my life come before me at that point. That was probably the most dangerous encounter that I had. Anyway, then the team leader, I'm beginning to think he doesn't like me, because then he told me to go out and check on the blood trail that was there, which I did. And now I'm going out and I'm thinking I've got a magazine in my gun, in my rifle, my M16. If I find them, you know, how many rounds can I get off? Excuse me before, they came after me. But anyway, found a sandal, big blood spots like that. Which tells me I know one was mortally wounded, and a rice sack. Now, anybody with a rice sack that's there, that's everything. That's everything. Rice. And it's a that's what they do. They eat that all the time and that was it. So, if you drop that, you're you have no substance. So, I knew we had a couple kills there. Anyway, two other guys, the unit that came out the day before it came in and two of them came up and we traced a little more, and then they, there wasn't any trail. They moved off the trail. So, we were that far, too far out to engage any further. So, we just pulled back at that point, grabbed our gear, moved out to another area and that was it. Yeah. Other times, where I've been a team leader, a mission, I've seen them from a distance and call it in artillery and everything, but that was, and we had another encounter where we had shot a North Vietnamese lieutenant that was a little chaotic and his intestines were hanging out and everything, and, was a real mess, and all you could do was take some water poured on it, keep it, moist, and put a loose bandage on him. We got him out. But I don't think he made it. We got into the medical tent but he looked like he was in pretty bad shape, and they're pretty much the encounters. Other later, we had other units that were, I think April of '67 [1967]. We had more kills in our 30-man unit than a battalion did. We were we

thought we were invincible. And then subsequently, in May, we lost two teams in no matter of weeks. And suddenly we weren't so infallible. And we tried to come to the aid of one team that was pretty well decimated. But base had another idea, and they told us to stay where we are, and they got help on the ground. But it made us realize that we're vulnerable, and, yeah, they were they were just some of the encounters we had there. Yeah.

00:56:15

LA: Do you remember seeing Agent Orange being sprayed?

GS: I didn't see it being sprayed, but I saw the effects of it. How it the, the foliage and what it does and everything. I remember walking through an area of that, and it might have happened, A weeks or a month beforehand. And it was. It told me I was in the wrong area, because if I'm not hiding in foliage, I'm not where I need to be. So, we got out of that area, but I was surprised at what it does to that. I've also, later in life, had friends who've died of Agent Orange, and some subsequent cancer that it can do. But Agent Orange was used, a fair amount in the Central Highlands, it was used a lot in the Delta more And I can't tell you why, but. But it was. But it was, the line companies use that quite a bit. And again, being in a recon unit, with minimal personnel, we didn't, we didn't find ourselves as that wasn't part of our area of expertise.

LA: Were you concerned at the time about Agent Orange?

GS: No. I, you know, it was only in—a couple years later that I heard more about it. Again, I was there in 1966, 1967, and we were still building up into the war. It didn't plateau out until '68 [1968], '69 [1969] and then '70 [1970] and then decreased from there. So, it was used, but it wasn't used on an everyday common basis. I remember was it, Robert Duvall, who said, "I love the smell of napalm in the morning" or something like that? I mean, some of these Hollywood movies were just, they were interesting. Yeah.

00:58:39

LA: What were some of the ways you coped with the war?

GS: Well, you we didn't when, we didn't know when our next mission was. And so we had to be ready all the time. You couldn't relax. The ask anybody who was in Vietnam, they know exactly how many days they have left in country. Every day. I, it might be I've got 180 days in a wake up. Might be 120 days in a wakeup or whatever. But they always knew how many days, and it was just getting through that day, whatever it may be. And you had missions, five-day missions or whatever. You, you didn't like to think of that. You know, it was too far out to do, but you wanted to get through it. That's all. There is nothing to look forward to. Just other than surviving the next day. That's in our job. That's all, that's all we could look forward to. But when you were back and you knew you weren't going out for a few days, you could relax, you could have a beer. And you, you made the best of that. Again, be in a special in a special unit and being held in high regard. Ice was a premium in, in Vietnam. So, the medical tents always got ice, and they would be flown in from the ships offshore. The helicopters would bring them in. And so, the

hospitals and the food services would get their ice and we would go down to the mess tents and see what we could scrounge up and everybody liked the LRRP's. So, we'd get a bag of rice in these waterproof bags, quick, bring it back, and we would dig a hole almost the size of this table and then put the bag of ice in there, take a case of beer, at the time, and pour that in there, in it, and then put it in a hole and cover it up. So, it was only a small hole like this bowl or less that you could stick your hand in and pull out a beer. And the sun kept—the bin filled in with dirt—you had no sun on a beer, so it always stayed cool. That was our refrigerator and that's how we, so we look forward to little things like that, little days. We all had these specialized knives that—like Rambo had. They were Randall knives, and we'd play mumbly-peg or something like that. Little games like that that just kept you busy. Obviously, you had to do first things first, make sure your rifles clean and this and that and always have your pack ready because you'd get an order like that. But that's, that's what we did. We just, I, just little enjoyment, things like that. And we, we all bonded. And it was, it was wonderful. Yeah.

LK: Did you regret volunteering after you got to Vietnam?

GS: I questioned that because, again, I had a choice. I could have volunteered for the draft. I didn't know that at the time and do two years rather than three. So, I volunteered for a three-year enlistment. Then I volunteered for the Army Airborne to be a paratrooper. Then I volunteered for Vietnam, and then I volunteered for this LRRP's, which was considered the most dangerous assignment in Vietnam. And then after I'm in it, I'm thinking did I just go one too many here? So, I remember reflecting on that all in all, it worked out and it was the right decision to make. But did I question my sanity at that point? Yes, I did. The LRRP's were, we were special and I guess there's about five of us today that still are alive and we talk about things on occasion. Holiday time and whatever. And—but we were all Recondo ranger paratroops. So, we were highly skilled in what we did. We relied on each other. And, again, early stages of the war and that's our time, they didn't have the intelligence that, the Army didn't, where you just blindly send 1500 men into an area and say, well, they're here somewhere. Go find them. No, like anything, it's time and money. So, instead of sending 1500 men, send six. And that's what we did. So, six of us would be off here, another six here, another six here, another six here. Five days. Find them, find their movement, find their—how many, where they are. Is there a base camp nearby? Track them, if necessary call in artillery on them if you think that's the case, or the most dangerous aspect, try to capture one. And that was our job. And, again, we were, we were special. Years later in the war come post Hue when they had the Tet Offensive that's when they changed assignments and LRRP's weren't used anymore in 1968. But those early stages, it was special. History is yet to really find us. It will at some point. But that was our, that was our job. But volunteering, yeah it was a special thing. Matter of fact, for every person that was in the LRRP's, you put in nine months, you're getting a Bronze Star. And that's what we, that's what we did. Yeah. Look back. Don't regret it. No, I was lucky and fortunate.

01:05:36

LA: What was the most memorable friendship you had during your time in Vietnam?

GS: Well, it's unusual, I have a friend, had a friend that I knew for years. We met in 1960. We were on, high school football team, he came from one region, I came from another. We ended up playing on the high school football team together. He was the star halfback. I was the offensive end and defensive halfback. And we, we had a bond. He went to one college, I went to another. We both realized that didn't work. We joined the Army together, got all through basic advanced infantry, airborne. There was no guarantee after that. But somehow, we got sent to Alaska together, and we ended up volunteer for Vietnam and going over there together and we actually got into the LRRPs together. He got sent to a line company, but after a couple of months, we found him and got him into our unit, and he was my rock, and I was his. And we literally fought back-to-back together. After college, we ended up, or after the service, we went to college at Butler University and graduated from there. And at that point, we drifted, I went the corporate route and began a career. He, he decided to, he still had a little more adventure in him, and he went off to Europe and actually became a cruise ship captain. Unfortunately, we talk about cancer post-Vietnam, and it took his life a couple of years ago. But good guy. But he was, he was my rock. Yeah.

LA: What was his name?

GS: Bruce Redmer. Good man. Solid, and I think he had a lot to do with who I am today. Yeah.

01:08:05

LA: What was the most beautiful thing that you saw in Vietnam?

GS: You know, it's a beautiful country. I remember again, when you're in a helicopter and you're high up in the air where they can't shoot at you and looking out at the scenery. I mean, it could have been Hawaii. It's magnificent. And I just remember the palm trees, some of the settings, even in the deepest of the jungles, there was one place with a little waterfall that was nearby in a rushing stream and there was a couple of Vietnamese hooches that we came upon, homes and, I thought, wow, what a beautiful setting this is. But it can be beautiful. And then, some of the urban areas and so not much, but it is matter of fact, I'm going back to Vietnam, in February of next year with a group of people and I've heard so much about how it has changed for the better, and I'm looking forward to that. But, you know, I had a French culture before we got there and, yeah, it, it they did a nice job. And I have a lot of respect for them and their way of life.

01:09:36

LA: Who did you write to or receive letters from when you were in Vietnam?

GS: Boy, anybody who would write back. I just, it was funny. I, certainly my parents, my sister, I had two grandfathers at the time, high school buddies. That was pretty much, that was pretty much it. I made a conscious effort. I didn't want a girlfriend, and I, I dated before, but I didn't want to have that distraction when I was there, I didn't want to worry about, you hear about these Dear John letters and so forth. I didn't want any part of that. So, I was carefree in that regard. But anytime you got letters, it was wonderful, and of course, when you sent a letter, you

just wrote on it and I think in the postmark section, you just wrote free. You know, where you put a stamp, you wrote free, and I'm trying to recall now on the letters that I got if if they had to pay postage, I imagine they did to some, to some APO [Army Post Office] or something, somewhere to get it there. But I would get little gifts and stuff like that. Now it's, it's funny, being in the LRRP's, when I got there, I was the youngest person at that time in October of '66 [1966]. And I so, saw all these LRRP's, these men, hardened guys, going around, they had a gold earring through their left ear. And I said to this fella that I knew from Alaska, I said, Fred, what's that all about? And he said, it's an old Mexican saying, for good luck and no harm will come to you. And so and so Rodriguez, his grandmother sent it. So, all the LRRP's adopted, so I said, does that mean I'm getting a gold earring? And he said, yeah, yeah, I said Oh, boy. So anyway, an hour later, somebody comes in with a bottle of Australian whiskey. I took a couple slugs and they took a needle, and they punctured my ear and put a little string through it and the blood hardened that. And then, the next chance I got, I went into Tuy Hoa and got a gold earring. So, and had a picture taken in a shop in Tuy Hoa. I sent a photograph home to my mother. Well, the next mail, I got a thing of lipstick. She sent me lipstick and I said, no you don't understand, but it was just a funny thing at that. And it was, during that time, of course, soon as we left Vietnam, that earring left. But that was different. Yeah, yeah.

01:12:57

LA: Do you remember any American TV shows or songs from your time in Vietnam?

GS: Yeah. What was the name of it? *Rawhide*, Clint Eastwood. There was another. it was a World War II thing. It was a half hour thing that went on. What was the name of that? About an Army squad in Germany, trying to remember the name of that, senior moment, forgive me. It was just a one-word thing they called it. I remember that because, again, when you're in a hospital and I put six months in, six weeks in with malaria, what it, you know, after your initial treatment and everything to make sure your spleen doesn't burst. You're, you're pretty much in recovery until it's out of your system. So, whatever, you sit around and you watch movies, so it, in the evening, when they're not taking your blood or whatever, you sit on these benches and they have a little movie screen, and you're, you're watching a movie. So, whatever it was, that filled our time and what we did, and I just remember watching some of those shows that we had there. Other than that, you didn't trust me, even in the forward base area, they didn't have movies at night. You couldn't. You didn't have any illumination at all. You couldn't take the chance. But hospital areas you could. They were pretty well fortified so you could. Yeah.

LA: And you said the show is *Rawhide*?

GS: *Rawhide* was one of the shows that I remember that I think it was Ward Bond. It might have been the guy that and Rowdy Yates—Clint Eastwood, he played that character. As a matter of fact, even when I got to Tokyo on my RNR [Rest and Recuperation], I turned on the television in the hotel and I was so excited. They got *Rawhide*. I see him riding up and he rides up, and all of a sudden, he starts to speak Japanese, and it was, so disappointing. But, yeah, yeah, that was, yeah, there were, there is some, some of the ones I remember it was in the 60s, but again, we didn't have access to that. And being in Fairbanks, Alaska, you didn't have really TV there yet. I

remember watching a 49, 49ers football team, but all the games were delayed three weeks. So, if I'm watching a football game, it had been played three weeks ago, now that was it in 1965. Yeah.

01:15:51

LA: What was your most expensive or frequent purchase at the PX [Post Exchange]?

GS: You know, where did we have—we didn't have a PX. In the base camp you had a PX, we only got to the base camp twice a year. I think I, for the money that we were making, and I'm trying to remember, I think, I was a sergeant E5, so I had my base pay, I had my combat pay, I had my overseas pay, and I had my jump pay, and I think I made \$3,200 that entire year. Oh, yeah hazardous duty pay was another one. And that was that was it. So, I think we took maybe 25, \$30, and the rest was sent home. Use it for it to get a haircut, which is, I just remember they used a lime to clean your hair. Squeeze of lime and lime juice in there to clean your hair and cut it down to almost a buzz cut. And I'm trying to remember if you were in an area that you could buy a beer or whatever in a forward base or whatever, we got these Red Cross packages and they had things. Beer we had to buy. I know that. But a case of beer was \$2.50 at that time. So, it, that was about it. I couldn't remember what else we'd do. Every once in a while, you'd put something in the mail for Mother's Day or send your mother five dollars or something like that to do but that's—that was it, yeah, no big expenses. Although we did, yeah, one time we—the Randall knife that I said that we carried, again, it was just like Rambo had, and that cost \$150 back in 1966, I think. Yeah, and it's worth over \$2,000 today, but yeah, that was, that was quite a that was a big expense, I guess.

01:18:19

LA: That's the end of my service questions. Would you like to talk a little bit more about your role in reconnaissance?

GS: Well, it again, just to have an understanding because a lot of people think of, we weren't infantry. I never wore a helmet. We wore camouflage or in time if the area was going to be open, we, we wore black pajamas and we used, the camouflage had like, a sand color. So, we would try to give more of a Asian look to ourselves and changed our hats to a green, bush hat and with our, green, kerchiefs that we wore, we almost looked like Vietnamese from a distance. So, we went out like that, but, again, we were there not to engage, but to gather intelligence or again, if that meant capturing one, fine. That was pretty much it. But when we were pretty much, we were escaping evasion or we weren't there to encounter, we didn't have the armaments to do so. We all carried m-16s, we carried about 230, 40 rounds of ammunition. We carried a .45 shoulder holster, M79 grenade launcher with the stock cutoff, front sights cut off, three fragmentation grenades and a white phosphorus we called a Willie Peter. That gave you a smoke cover for escaping. And our knife, and a block of C4, which is used for detonation, if we needed to blow out some trees to create a landing zone. We did that. And we had a claymore mine that we all carried. So, when we, at night, when you were out, you could set up your claymores to give you a little protection. If there was a, if they really discovered you, and rations

two meals a day for five days and you put them in a sock, tied it off so it wouldn't make a noise. I carried 14 canteens because you didn't know what you were getting there depending on the time of year. Monsoon, you could cut it down a little bit, but otherwise, those blue lines you saw on your map weren't, weren't there, they were dried up riverbeds. So, all that ends up with 75 pounds on you. And when you're hovering in and you're again, you're, you're high up. And our area of operation could be two miles out. It could be 25 miles out. And so, you're up high about 3000ft. And last mile and a half, two miles, you drop down and the Central Highlands were all ridges. So, we're one side of the ridge line. And then as you're coming in the last half mile, you come over to your side of the ridge line and you're at treetop level. They can hear you, but by the time they hear you, they can't get a shot off because you've already passed. And then once they get to the landing zone, you're leaping from that helicopter ten feet or so and you're hitting the ground with that weight on you. And when you're 21, 22, you can do that. But it catches up with you. So, I have two artificial hips, I have an artificial knee. If you talk to the remaining guys that I know, they've all had knee replacements, and it's just part of it. You deal with it later in life, but so you're in and you're in for five days, and again, you never talk. I couldn't have a conversation with you out there. I'd whisper or hands and eyes, that's, that's what we did. We actually took pills to prevent us from defecating for five days. If you had to urinate, you laid on the ground and rolled over and did it so the splashing sound wouldn't be there. You learn to distinguish between a two-legged animal and a four-legged animal. You learn how to move through the bush so that you're not breaking branches. How you can glide through, the expression "stay alert, stay alive" was never more important. Listening, listening. That's what you did. And everybody knew they were depending on one another 100%. And when you went out on these missions, not every team would go out at the same time. So—but when your turn came and people were there, you just didn't leave. They all walked down with you. You got in a truck with your gear. Deuce and a half as they called it, they would come down to the landing pad, the helicopters there, you get in less orders are given, two guys inside a helicopter. The other two were sitting just like you and I are, with our feet out the door there. And as the helicopters lifting off and you look to the guys that are there with you, not a word is said. That's it. And still emotional to me today, but that's your sign. And the bravest men I ever knew. Yeah that's, that's the LRRP's and that's what they were. Yeah.

01:24:26

LA: I'd like to talk now about your post service life.

GS: Sure.

LA: What relationship in your life was most changed by your service?

GS: Well, maturity and responsibility first and foremost, and I learned that I could do things that I never thought I could do. So, and I learned not to quit and persevere. And it helped me in my professional life as well. So, it just and just learning, and understanding and just the maturity that that went with that, I think is what it did. You know, when you come back from Vietnam and remember, for every guy that was in the bush, every soldier, there were ten people in a support position behind him. So, when some people say, well, I'm a Vietnam veteran, I get it. But were

you a Vietnam combat veteran? There's a difference. And not to belittle those that didn't, happy they were there, did their job and so forth. And if you're in grace and registration or the hospital or some other things, you might have some PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder]. And we understand that, but it's understanding that. So, I when I came back, I still had that adventure in me and it was getting that out of me. It took a while to do so. I was still that bravado and you had to be careful not to engage in a fight or something like that. It took me a little while to throttle back. I'm going to say, but that's, no, the, the maturity and responsibility, you know, over my high school buddies that went to college and did their thing and got out, they, little carefree, but they didn't know the meaning of what life and death could be. And so I think it gave me an edge up on things. And when they talk about, oh, I'm going to go hunting or I'm going to do this or so—no, I've done that. I'm not interested. You want to go bear hunting? I'm not interested. I, I faced the most dangerous animal there was. Man. Yeah, yeah, that's, that's it.

LA: You mentioned earlier that your dad encouraged you to enter the military. How did your relationship with your dad change when you got home?

GS: I think he had a respect for me and he could see me over the years, evolve into, a successful businessman and, again, college graduate and marry, settle down, have a family and so forth. He saw me grow as an individual. And, yeah, I, he was in the Coast Guard in World War II. So, understanding my job and the 101st airborne was a known entity. And held in high regard in World War II, so being part of that, you know, 25 years later and I think he, he had a good deal of respect for what I was doing. Yeah.

01:28:01

LA: Did you know any antiwar veterans?

GS: You know, in college, Butler University, Indianapolis was actually a very conservative school. And this is '68 [1968], '69 [1969], '70 [1970], '71 [1970] at the height of the war and everything. There was a small contingent of protesters there, and it was pretty much a let them do their thing, that's fine. I remember, in my latter part of Vietnam, it was June of 1967, and we're out and we had, a major from intelligence come out in the field with us. We were always wary about officers in, in the field, especially if they were getting short in their days there because we felt they were metal hunting and looking to take unnecessary chances which endangered all of us. And this, this person, his name was Jan Lahamidou, and he was actually my company commander when I went through advanced infantry training at Fort Gordon. And never really knew him, he would show up for roll call or this and that and see him out there. Anyway, we started talking on this one little break. Or when I say talking, whispering. And I said to him, sir, where are you going after? Because he was a major at that time. "Where are you going after this?" And he said, "I've got a real cushy assignment. I'm going to be, heading up an ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] unit at a midwestern university." And remember, this is June of '67 [1967] and an assignment in an ROTC unit is a three-year assignment. So, I said to him, what, "what university would that be?" He said, Kent State University. So, he was there when that happened. And, unfortunately, when responsibility comes, there's a big umbrella. And he got caught up at that. I don't know what happened to him, but it couldn't have been good. So

that was that's it. I will say this about Butler University, I couldn't tell from my professors where they stood on the war. It wasn't mentioned in the classroom. It just wasn't, and it would have been interesting. But in today's world, how they would have reacted to that back then. But you didn't, you didn't. I couldn't tell if they were Republican or Democrat. And that's all changed now. But, at the time, no, I didn't have that. And, I will say this, the influence of the war and the back then in the field, I have a pamphlet. That was, we would find them out there. They would drop in different places, and it. I forget the exact verbiage, but it was, "lay down your arm American G.I., lay down your arms and come over to our side. You'll be treated with respect and blah, blah, blah." And that sort of stuff. And there was one that I didn't keep, and I'm sorry, I didn't, but it was a picture of a group in Haight-Ashbury in the San Francisco area of protesters. And obviously it was propaganda they were using for us at the time. And what our thoughts were at that time and they were evolving. But that was, but at that point, I was back. I just, I wanted to get on with my life. And I wasn't about to participate in either, either way, with that.

LA: So, you saw propaganda of an antiwar protest?

GS: I saw propaganda in, in pamphlets that they would drop in Vietnam. The, the North Vietnamese and the VC would drop, trying to change our minds about it. There was a, you may have heard of Hanoi Hannah I don't know if you have or not, but she's a real person. And we would fix up our radios in the forward base area. And you could, you could get her and she would say, "American G.I.'s [Government Issue], you lost 40 battalions today." Of course, that's crazy. But she just knew that, you know, you should think about surrendering and coming to our area and stuff like that. That was the only exposure we had. When I—other than that I didn't have any, when I came back in country, when I got back here, I pretty much again put on my civvies, or I still had six months to go. Once I finished service, got out of it. I didn't get involved in anything. And some of the demonstrations, primarily in college campuses, as you will recall. No, I mean, there's certain people and my feelings about the war have changed, they have, it was unnecessary. The Gulf of Tonkin incident was so wrong, and Lyndon Johnson was so, so, so mistaken in his judgment and who is being led by to do that? I mean, he's, he's ultimately responsible for that. But it was just an unnecessary war, as Iraq was with the weapons of mass destruction. And we just have to find a way to be absolutely certain about whatever we commit our, our citizens, our American men and women to do. That all has to change. And I think it will. But you have people like in the war, like a John Kerry, the former senator also ran for president. I have nothing but disdain for him. He, his whole career was built on a lie. He was a Navy officer. He was on a ship offshore, again, Harvard graduate, but felt that he, in his own right, was letting his time go to waste being on that. And he heard about the swift boats. So, he put it in the papers, and he got assigned to a swift boat. Now, swift boat was going up and down the Mekong Delta had a crew of about six people on board, and they were there for interdiction, contraband, whatever it may be. And yet he, he somehow, in the space of three months, somehow received three Purple Hearts one day, of sick time, three Purple Hearts, and he got a Silver Star because he shot a person on the shoreline. A soldier went up there, finished him off with the rifle that he took with him. And, to this day, will not release his naval records. But made a point of attacking every soldier over there is, misguided baby killers. And, for that, I'll never, never forgive him.

01:36:26

LA: How did you interact with the VA [Veterans Affairs] in the years after the war?

GS: You know, I guess in '72 [1972], I was working in the New York metro area, and I had strep throat, and I wasn't making a lot of money back then, and whatever my medical coverage was, I really couldn't afford it and I figured, oh, I'm a vet, let me go to the VA. And I spent, and that was in the Bronx, probably not the best choice of places to go to. Anyway, I spent the entire day before I got some sort of—wasn't some penicillin, but it was something else that I got, and it worked. But I had to spend the entire day there and go through all the red tape, and I said, I'm never going back again. Well, fast forward to here and I guess it was about 3 or 4 years ago. I'm talking to another vet, and he mentioned going to the VA for some help, and he said, they're really good. You ought to give them a try. And I did, and I haven't looked back. I think the Veterans Administration is fantastic. Now, it may not have been 6, 7 years ago, but they see everybody on time. You will be seen within 15 minutes of the time of your appointment. And they adhere to that and try going to a private practice and doing that. So no, I'm very impressed. I've had a number of procedures done, and I have nothing but "A" marks for them.

01:38:13

LA: Who since the war have you talked to about Vietnam?

GS: Not many. I mean, my wife knows about it, my children know about it, my high school buddies, of course they know about it, some of the guys I golf with know a little bit about it. Vietnam, many experience experiences there, unless you're a fellow veteran, it's very difficult to articulate that, to make them understand what you're what you're doing. There's an Air Force colonel near me, and there's a bunch of them in my neighborhood. And learning about it, LRRP. But he thought I was just an infantry guy that went out on ambushes at night. No clue whatsoever. And I tried to explain it to him a little, to give him an idea of figuring he might have a better idea. Nah, it didn't work. So, I don't I don't go into great detail about it, you know, even in my work for, all the years that I was in the relationships I formed with people and so forth, very few people knew that I was a Vietnam combat veteran. I didn't want to have them question that. On my résumé when I graduated from college. It said, besides Butler University, U.S. Army, 1965, 1968, honorable discharge period and hope they wouldn't ask me anything more about it. Because I didn't feel that anything would be gained on my part from doing so. So I just, I didn't, but that's—other people know. They know I served in, whatever—friends, cousins, nieces, nephews—they don't know the details. And I just got tired of trying to explain. So that's all.

01:40:38

LA: Have you been to The Wall in DC?

GS: I have. I've got friends on that wall. It's impressive. You know, about it, how it goes down and you'll see high school kids where they're, they're on a class trip or whatever and there's running around the grass, whatever you call it. Once they start that descent, the chatter stops

solemn. And it, again, it gets very emotional. But you do, and a friend of mine who also served different unit, different time, but he said, Gene, he said "there's a thousand stories a day that could be told right there." And you see flowers or trinkets or whatever it may be. Things of remembrance left there, the stenciling of the name, all that. Yeah. It's, and it actually, you know, it really does. It's impressive. Yeah. I, a few years back, a few years, 20 years ago, I had a wedding in France, high school friend, his daughter was getting married there. And after the wedding, we went to Normandy. And to go through the cemetery in Normandy. All those years later, you get the same result. And I think that'll always be there for the Vietnam Memorial. Yeah.

LA: You mentioned earlier that you were planning on going back to Vietnam. When are you going?

GS: Going in February of 2025, along with two other couples.

LA: And where are you planning to go?

GS: Well, we're going to start, in Singapore, and then we're going to go to Hanoi, Hanoi to, Hue, Nha Trang, Saigon, and there are the Cu Chi Tunnels that are right in that area. That'll be our Vietnam experience. And then we'll move over to Cambodia and then Thailand and depart Bangkok. But I'm not expecting, well, we'll see how it's all changed. And again, it's a beautiful country, and I'm sure they've made it even far better than I ever knew it to be. But we'll, in Hanoi, I think the Hanoi Hilton is on the, on the list, places to be. And I'm sure we'll have people say that, you know, this is what we did to defeat the, and America and everything, and I'm not going to engage in any back and forth there, my only response is it was a war our country chose not to win. And so, we had the means. We just didn't execute in that matter and so be it. And in a way, I'm glad we didn't. A lot of lives would have been lost and a lot of destruction. So, glad it's over. Yeah.

01:44:23

LA: Well, this is my last question.

GS: Sure.

LA: Do you have a favorite book, poem, or movie about Vietnam?

GS: I'm not a poet. There were excerpts of different movies, but there's not a Vietnam movie yet that I can find it, that got it, got it 100% correct. Little parts of it, that you had, and just the little, little things in Vietnam, if you were there, you knew it. If you're going through the elephant grass and you're on point and let me tell you, if somebody says, take the point, I get your attention because you're the first guy out and you're—everybody behind you is your responsibility. Not only are you looking, you're—in where you're stepping and all that stuff. The little things, so, you go through the elephant grass. Yeah, you get a paper cut. Well, grass can cut you that way. So, you wore a black leather glove on your left hand. And if you went through that and your other hand is on the trigger of your rifle, but you, you wouldn't see that in any. Even the statue in

Washington, the three, Vietnam, or veterans there, the soldiers, one guy is wearing a m17 gas mask on his hip. I never saw a gas mask there. They didn't have them, it was unnecessary. They didn't use them, but somebody didn't get the memo when they did that statute. You didn't. So, there's not a specific movie. But little excerpts here and there. The book—I like *Six Silent Men* because it's real, and I know it's real, and I know every there's no B.S. in that. What they said and Ray Martinez, who I trained, and wrote the book, what he said is, there's no pork chop in there, it's it's the real thing.

LA: You mentioned *Rambo* a couple times throughout the interview. What are your thoughts on those movies?

GS: I have seen some of them. Yeah, and I, again, unrealistic. Just—it made for good theater. No, no. None of that, no.

LA: All right. Well, that's all I've got. Thank you very much, Mr. Sullivan.

GS: Luke, thank you.

LA: Fantastic interview.

GS: Pleasure to.