



Oral history interviews of
the Vietnam Era
Oral History Project

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**William “Bill” Frelix
Narrator**

**Mica Lee Anders
Interviewer**

**November 28, 2018
Wentworth Public Library
West St Paul, Minnesota**

Mica Lee Anders -- **MA**
Bill Frelix -- **BF**

MA: This is Mica Anders. I’m conducting an interview today, Wednesday, November 28, 2018 with Bill Felix. We are at the Wentworth Public Library in West St Paul, Minnesota. This interview is for the Minnesota Historical Society Vietnam Era Oral History Project. Thank you for braving the snow that’s falling and coming out to meet with me today.

BF: Mm-hm.

MA: I appreciate it.

BF: Yes.

MA: Could you start by stating and spelling your full name?

BF: My full name is William Frank Frelix. They spell William W-i-l-l-i-a-m, Frank F-r-a-n-k, Frelix F-r-e-l-i-x.

MA: Thank you for that. And will you tell me your date of birth and where you were born?

BF: My date of birth is 5-26-1941. I was born in Wesson, that’s W-e-s-s-o-n, Mississippi.

MA: Mm-hm. And tell me about Wesson, Mississippi. What was that like, when you were younger?

BF: Well, my grandmother had a pretty good spread of land.

MA: Mm-hm. What was her name?

BF: Her name was Nola Smith. And she had a lot of acreage and it had a sandy bottom creek, freshwater, that ran along the back of it. And that was the old swimming hole for us kids. Now, after—and I was born there. My parents immediately moved to New Orleans though.

MA: Mm-hmm. What were your parents' names?

BF: My dad was William Frelix, my dad, they called him Willy and my mother was Verna Frelix. Maiden name Smith. That was her mother who had the farm.

MA: Okay.

BF: In Mississippi. And when Dad—Dad worked as a stevedore down in New Orleans on the ships and he broke his foot and that's why we moved to Minnesota. Because my mother was raised here in Minnesota and she met my father when she was home one summer (laughs).

MA: Oh no (laughs).

BF: That's how that came about.

MA: What brought your mom up here, if her mom was still down South?

BF: Well, what happens is that my mother's mother's sister, her aunt, worked for a wealthy white family in Mississippi. And in those days, with no air conditioning, lot of the rich white people in Mississippi had homes on the lakes in Minnesota. Up in White Bear Lake is where my aunt's rich family would summer. Because the breeze would come off the lakes and so every summer my aunt would come up with the—with the people that she worked for, and one year she just decided, I'm not going back.

MA: Oh wow.

BF: So historic—Historic Pilgrim Baptist Church, you've probably heard of that.

MA: Yes, in the Rondo neighborhood.

BF: So she was friends with a lot of people who went to that church and that's how she stayed in Minnesota and got started. Started working here in Minnesota. And she was a very industrious person, so she met another industrious man, and they began to buy property.

MA: Wow.

BF: At one time she owned most of the property along Larpenner between Dale and a lot of the property between Dale and Rice street.

MA: Oh my gosh.

BF: And so that's how our family started—got up there, because of my aunt Babe.

MA: And then your mom came up to be with her for a while?

BF: She came up and went to school here. She graduated from Washington High School in St Paul. That summer she went back, that's how she met my father.

MA: And ended up back in the South (laughs).

BF: Yeah, back in the South. And then when he hurt his—when he broke his foot, she had to come back to Minnesota, with me and my brother. So that's how—how that happened.

MA: So, how old were you when you came up here?

BF: I came here, originally I think it was 1943. And so I was about two or three years old.

MA: So you were really young. So this is what you mostly remember.

BF: Yeah, well up until the time that they got their divorce. And then, that's when I—we went back, me and my two brothers, I don't know—do you know Reverend Harold Frelix? Have you ever heard of him?

MA: Uh-uh, I haven't.

BF: He's a pretty prominent minister down in Nashville, Tennessee.

MA: Okay.

BF: But I'm--Clifford Frelix's the oldest and then there's me and then Harold Frelix, the minister.

MA: Okay. All boys.

BF: All boys. So we went back and stayed with my grandmother while they—they ironed out their differences. And finally we came back and for the most part we—we were getting, you know, a little older, so Mom said, "Hey, you need to be living with your father." And so that's what happened. We stayed with Dad.

MA: Okay, so tell me about life in St Paul when you were growing up.

BF: (Laughs). Well, we were--before my parents divorced we would've been considered upper middle class no matter what color you were, you know. Dad was very—like I said he was very industrious too. So he had a trucking company and he's also a railroad man. And my mother did—she worked in hospitals and stuff like that. So we had a beautiful home over on Victoria—it was right where the freeway goes through now. Right on the corner of Victoria and—between Saint Anthony and Rondo. And Dad, a farm boy and the hard worker that he was, he stuccoed the home, he put up a white picket fence. Because it was on two lots.

MA: Oh wow.

BF: So he put a white picket fence all the way around our property and it was really gorgeous. But uh—and all the black homes in that neighborhood, from Dale coming down Saint Anthony, those were wonderful, beautiful homes.

MA: Yeah.

BF: And well taken care of.

MA: Absolutely.

BF: But yeah, that was the way things were before the divorce. And then the property splits and all that changed a lot of things.

MA: Always do.

BF: And then my dad got remarried and started another family. So then that's—I've got three brothers and a sister from that. My mom had no—didn't have any more children.

MA: So that makes eight of you total on your dad's side?

BF: Seven.

MA: Seven, okay.

BF: Six boys and a girl.

MA: Wow.

BF: (Laughs).

MA: Wow. So you said your dad was a railroad man. And I know he's actually done an oral history project as well, but what did he do for the railroad?

BF: He was a Pullman Porter. And his words to us, all of us other boys, were don't be a Pullman Porter.

MA: Oh wow.

BF: You know, it's a well-paying job, you know they made a lot of money, especially during the war years. But he said that you were disrespected, mostly by the Pullman Company. I don't know if you know the story of the unionization of the Pullman Porters?

MA: I do.

BF: You probably—oh you do? Okay. So it was a lot of denigration that took place for the employees.

MA: Right. So, tell me about high school.

BF: High school? Well—

MA: Where did you go?

BF: I went to Mechanic Arts High School. I was an honor graduate. I was on National Honors Society. And couldn't get a scholarship—academic scholarship. As a matter of fact, I wanted to be an engineer and I was told that the counselors at Mechanic Arts—I graduated in '59, and they told all of—there was, I think, about twenty or thirty black kids in our class. And most of them were honors students, believe it or not. And—but the counselors were telling us oh go get a factory job. I said, nah I'm not going to go to a factory.

MA: No, that didn't match your education or your ambition.

BF: So, anyway, I don't know if you—you knew Barbara Ballard?

MA: Yes.

BF: Barbara was in our class.

MA: Oh okay.

BF: And she also was an honor graduate.

MA: Of course.

BF: And they told her the same thing. Ah you might try secretarial work, you know. I talk to her all the time, laugh about it.

MA: Oh my gosh.

BF: But yeah, that's where that went. But otherwise, the—my experience at Mechanic Arts, if my parents had stayed together, I would've ended up going to Central. And Central, at the time, they warehouse students. Because it was so crowded, they were holding classes in the hallways and all over the place. And those kids, because of the way it was so chaotic, they came out undereducated.

MA: Right.

BF: But at Mechanic Arts, the classes were small enough so that, you know if you were taking College Prep courses like I was, you couldn't (skate?? 10:07), you know.

MA: Right, they would've noticed.

BF: And I had classes, I had teachers that were—they just held your feet to the fire and said hey, you know. And so I talked to kids that graduated from Central that never wrote down a term paper.

MA: That's hard to believe, if you make it all the way through high school.

BF: (Laughs). Yeah right.

MA: (Laughs).

BF: Never done a research paper at all.

MA: Wow.

BF: But anyway, at Mechanics it was just the opposite. But even though the guidance department was—but the teachers. The physics teachers, my math teachers, and all those. Right on.

MA: Yeah, so they didn't have any—they didn't discriminate between the students?

BF: No, no, as a matter of fact, I had the same Trigonometry, Geometry, Algebra teacher for all through. And her favorite words were, "If you sit there like an Egyptian mummy, that's the way you're going to be graded." (Laughs).

MA: Wow, I love it.

BF: So she was a—she expected a—you know, expected you to do things. I worked very hard and on whatever—on original solve of the Pythagorean Theorem. And they said somebody else had done it similar to that before, so I didn't get an originality thing for it, but I had the satisfaction of doing all the research and knowing that I could do it, you know.

MA: Yeah, absolutely. That's no easy task to undertake. So you wanted to be an engineer, where did you—where?

BF: Well, I was—

MA: Like what were your thoughts on that?

BF: Well I started out going to the University of Minnesota Institute of Technology. But I was immature, I had a nighttime job working at the taxation department and, you know, my parents couldn't afford to pay for it, so I would work and do it that way. But I don't know if you've heard of Harold Vander?

MA: No.

BF: Okay, when he became Governor of Minnesota, all the college kids that had those jobs working over there at the taxation department, filed—doing files at night? He got—when he got elected, he paid all of his political cronies off with our jobs and fired all of us, and he gave them, you know, big titles and lots of money.

MA: Right, right. But left all of you guys with no job.

BF: Right, so everyone moved on and I did the best I could through it. My—me and another kid, named Glen Beechum, which is another family here, you might know some of the Beechums. He and I decided that—and Floyd Beechum too, Reverend Floyd. We decided that, hey, we're out of here. So we (laughs) we got us some bus tickets and we headed to Washington D.C.

MA: Oh my gosh, how old were you?

BF: I was eighteen-nineteen. Yeah, nineteen. We went to Howard and we got I can't remember—Carth, yeah Congressman Carth. We called Congressman Carth up on the phone and told him that we need some jobs for we're going to college. And he said, "Oh, yeah okay. Well," he said, "I'll get you a congressional appointment to the Post Office."

MA: Wow.

BF: Which you have to pass their test and all this so, we moved down there and we told the people at the Post Office and southern crackers like you would not believe.

MA: (Laughs).

BF: Congressman Carth told us to come down here and can you administer the test to us, and so they said well you can take the test, but we've never heard of a congressional appointment to the Post Office.

MA: Oh no.

BF: So you're just—get in line. So we took the test and we—I went right back to my apartment and I called up Congressman Carth and he said, “Go back there tomorrow morning at eight o'clock. Get in the Post Office at eight o'clock in the morning tomorrow.” So I hit the door at eight o'clock. “Mr. Frelix, would you report to personnel please.” (Laughs).

MA: Wow. So it worked out.

BF: Yeah, it did, it worked out good.

MA: What happened to your buddies?

BF: Same thing. All three of them. All three of us.

MA: Nice.

BF: And I don't—do you know Sherry Muzingo?

MA: I know the name, I don't know her.

BF: Well Sherry and Maudeen Rice, she was the head of the NAA—the Urban League, in D.C. She was there. They were all—Maudeen and Sherry were already going there.

MA: At Howard?

BF: Yeah.

MA: Okay.

BF: So we showed up and that's that.

MA: So tell me about how you just show up at Howard. Did you enroll before you got there?

BF: Well yeah, we sent the paperwork.

MA: Okay just checking. (Laughs).

BF: (Laughs). We did make an overnight visit before going there. So we were home for—I'm trying to think—Glen and I were home for Easter. That's when we decided to join the marine corps. We weren't going back to school.

MA: So how long were you at Howard then?

BF: One year. And then we—Easter, we joined the marines and they gave us a fourteen day delayed entry and we took the test, Glen was very, very intelligent too. And so they said, you guys can—you want to—they said, do you want to be fighter pilots? I said, yeah, we want to be fighter pilots. So they said, well you have to sign up for twelve years. I said, no. Especially after I went through boot camp, I said no, I can't do that.

MA: What made you decide the marines?

BF: Because the lack of discipline on my part—both of us, we said the same thing. I'm totally undisciplined. You know. So I need discipline in my life. And so the marine corps, so they had several programs there. The one was, like I said, the fighter pilot program. The other program was the National Scientific program where they send you to college and they pay for it and again they want twelve years out of you. So I said no, I'm not going to do that. (Laughs).

MA: That's a long time.

BF: Yeah, so we both, both of us ended up being just—we stayed in for our initial tour. Which we didn't think would include Vietnam, but it did.

MA: Right, so what year was it when you joined?

BF: '63.

MA: Okay, so stuff was just kind of starting in Vietnam.

BF: Well, yeah. What was happening then was the Green Beret were going down, training some of the loyal troops in Vietnam. And that was a big thing. But by '65, things started really—because I was stationed at Camp Pendleton at that time, in California, and they cleared the base.

MA: Wow.

BF: And that's a huge military base. And we—we headed all over to Okinawa for additional training and straight south.

MA: Did you know that's where you were headed?

BF: They gave us the orders when we got to Hawaii. So I knew, I knew—we left California, I had more than a strong indication that we were going in to Nam. So. That was in '65.

MA: Okay. So before we get down that path too far, I just wanted to know, what were your parents' reactions to you deciding to just join the military and join the marines?

BF: They (laughs) my dad, to be perfectly frank with you, my dad said, "You're not going to waste any more of my money." Because you know, like you said, you're undisciplined and you're not doing what you're supposed to do. So he was perfectly okay with it. My mother, because my younger brother Harold had joined the marine corps too. And so she wasn't too pleased with it because she, you know, two sons in a meat grinder like that. She wasn't happy about it.

MA: Yeah. What were your other two brothers doing at the time?

BF: Okay, my oldest brother Clifford, he had just gotten out of the army. And so he told me that it was a bad idea. But, you know, (laughs) what are you going to do, you know? When you're at a certain age in your life and you know, instinctively you know that something has to change drastically. And that's where—you know, I knew I had to make some strong changes.

MA: Yeah, yeah. So you did.

BF: Yeah. I did.

MA: So from Camp Pendleton to Hawaii, from Hawaii to Okinawa.

BF: No, yeah, yeah we stopped off in Hawaii just to—as a—we never even got off the ships. And we went to Okinawa, northern, northern part of the island for training. And they we made

a—you ever seen these movies when the marines, they throw the nets over the side of the ship and you crawl down on these landing crafts? That’s exactly the way we landed in Chu Lai.

MA: Wow.

BF: Took small arms fire coming in. And light small arm fire, ain’t nothing heavy. And then—

MA: So that was your welcome to Vietnam

BF: Yeah, and there was a black coxswain that was driving the landing craft. And you know, he asked me, because by this time, you know, I’d been in the marines for a little while. He said, “What are you going to do when I get you up on the beach?” And you know, that was such an odd question to ask. And I really hadn’t thought too seriously about it, you know. I was, you know, do what you’re trained to do. We’re going to clear the beach. You know, do what we got to do to get off of there and seek cover. Which—that really made me think about it. You know, because I had thought about a lot of stuff on the way over, and I asked God, is this really what you put me here for? Am I supposed to die in this place? You know, that was a question I asked. And when that black coxswain asked me about the landing, I said, yeah, this is real, you know. And it was the most glorious day you ever seen in your life.

MA: Wow.

BF: The sea was like blue glass. And just as still as could be. And you know, you never would think that what was fixing to happen—and when navy ships, troop ships arrive on a scene, it’s the most noisy thing you can think of. Because they got all of these winches draw and people screaming about orders and stuff like that.

MA: Yeah.

BF: So all of this beautiful scene, with this perfect glass sea, all this noise and screaming and—just unbelievable.

MA: The contradiction.

BF: Total.

MA: Yeah.

BF: That was a test.

MA: So that was day one.

BF: Yeah day one.

MA: So what did you feel?

BF: In terms of?

MA: You're there. You've got this—you have to get off the ship. Did you guys end up clearing—did you do what you thought you were going to do?

BF: Yeah, we cleared the beach and we went to—they had a staging area for us and we went to the staging area and I've never been bitten by so many mosquitos in my whole—bugs in my whole life. Because it was—you know, you're in a—sleeping outside, and with one eye open all the time, so (laughs). Yeah, that was my introduction to Vietnam. And then we operated—that was in Chu Lai and we operated Chu Lai to Da Nang, and we settled in and mostly kept the big Da Nang air base. We made sure that that was secured at all times. So that and the surrounding area, so out to Monkey Mountain from there was where we mostly operated.

MA: Yeah. Did you have a sense of what your orders were going to be? Like what your specific job was going to be, when you got there?

BF: Oh yeah, I knew what my—yeah.

MA: What did they say?

BF: Well I was trained in ground radar.

MA: And what does that mean?

BF: Okay, ground radar. You have two specific types of ground radar. One is countering mortar, where in the radars are set up so that if you get a mortar attack, the radar sensed incoming and they can extrapolate forward and extrapolate backwards and tell exactly where the mortar's likely headed and where it came from.

MA: Okay.

BF: So what we could do was, by the time the radar—by the time the enemy launches a mortar, you could pretty much put one in your back pocket. And since most of those people

weren't as—you know we weren't terribly sophisticated, compared to nowadays, but a lot more sophisticated than they were.

MA: Yeah.

BF: So that was the counter mortars. The seismometers were just little ground detection movement things that you plant around so that if there's any movement in the ground you can sense it. And then the third detection device was people finders. And what that is is a ground radar that you set up and could crank the range gate out wherever you want. Now the range gate was about a bucket and it was about ten yards wide. And you could do a 360 degree sweep and if anything moved within that ten meter range, you could pinpoint exactly who—what—you know, you get to place, because it's all here, you could tell if it was man, animal, or if it was a group of men, by the sounds. And since you know the coordinates, put one on them too. And so that's—that was my training. And so, when we would—whatever we would set up, that's what we would do.

MA: Okay.

BF: You know, and then you've got the night patrols, and make sure that any indigenous people, you don't want to—you don't want to hurt anyone unnecessarily, but at the same time you don't want anyone hurting you. So there's a lot of that too, there's friendlies and there's unfriendlies, you know.

MA: Right.

BF: Later on, we'd encounter Sayese and Chinese troops. That would come in. A lot of that was never reported, but they were in fact.

MA: They're just there.

BF: And with the Viet Cong. With the Americans we had the Korean troops who were very good, Australian troops, and New Zealanders.

MA: Okay. People don't talk about much, about any of that.

BF: No, they don't. And a lot of Canadians too. But a lot of the allies who were there, who were really good allies.

MA: Tell me about life on—where were you staying? Would you call it a base? What would you have called it?

BF: Yeah, we had a—we were primarily operating out of Da Nang. On the outskirts out from the airfield. And at that time, Da Nang airfield was the busiest airfield in the world. And so it was incumbent on us to make sure it stayed—to make sure there was no sneak attacks and nothing like that. So there was concertina wire around everything, do you know what concertina wire is?

MA: I don't.

BF: See those big roles of wire like they put around buildings? You've probably seen it if you've seen military movies. They put that big roles of wire out and then around a place they're trying to protect from insurgents.

MA: Okay, yeah.

BF: And then they plant what they call claymore mines around it too. Claymore mines, it's like a half of a lemon or something, the way it's shaped, and the projectiles go that way.

MA: Okay, away. Okay. But tell me about your life on base.

BF: My life? Well it was a combination of going out in the field and calibrating machines—compute—calibrating radars back at the base and going on patrol and guard duty. That's about it.

MA: Yeah.

BF: Glen Beechum, that's my friend I told you about, that went to Howard, well, and then there was Bobby Edwards, my first cousin. I had no idea Bobby was down there until one day I was—we had to go out and do something—it was patrol, probably about 12 or 15 people in my patrol, and I seen this guy in the barrage. I said doggone, that looks like my cousin over there. (Laughs).

MA: Oh my gosh. (Laughs).

BF: And so, I went over there, and he turned around. I went over and I smacked him upside his head because he'd done that to me before. And he turned around and he was ready (both laugh)—

MA: Right, because he was in a whole different mindset.

BF: Yeah, and so--I told him where my tent was, you know. And I also, because, it was funny, because that same day, earlier I had seen Glen Beechum, and he was on his way to Bangkok, see. For R & R. So I told Glen, I said when you come back through, bring me a fifth of Jack Daniels. (Laughs). So he did even better, he brought me a typhoon fifth of Jack Daniels, which is about twice as big as the ones we get over here.

MA: Wow.

BF: And so I told Bobby about seeing Glen and that Glen was going to do that, see. And so Bobby came over to my tent, and man we had a St. Paul party. (Laughs).

MA: Aw that sounds fun.

BF: It was great.

MA: Yeah. I bet it was nice to see familiar faces.

BF: Oh yeah, it was wonderful to see that. Cause the first time I had seen Bobby was—my cousin—was over on Okinawa, we had trained on Okinawa. And I had come into this little village that had a place in it where black troops would go. You know, because they did kung fu like we—and so I was—

MA: How'd you find out about that?

BF: They got all sorts of sergeants, you know, that had been to Okinawa before. And they'd tell the young guys what to do and how. Where to go. Where the black folks are. Where the people that like black people are. And so. It's funny because in that little town, the town was called Colza, in Okinawa. We became very good friends with the navy guys on the ship, okay? And so, they came and when they had—after they dropped us off on Okinawa, they went down to the Philippines to get some repair work done on their ship and then they came back and they were going to go back and pick up another load, but they stopped off in Okinawa on the way, you know. And so they came looking for us, you know. Our friends—and they made a mistake, and there's—like I said, racism was all over, you just couldn't escape it. So they made a mistake and went where a lot of these white guys hung out. And boy boy boy, they—they gave them—tore their uniforms all off of them, beat them. You know, so, it was terrible. But anyway.

MA: Wow.

BF: When they found us and they told us what happened to them, we said, okay, you don't have to put this in the (unclear) book.

MA: Got it all taken care of.

BF: Well yeah, we took care of it. And you know, and so I went to—like I said, again, the older soldiers, older marines, would tell us, you know, this is a good place to go, so. I was sitting there and I had just ordered a pork chop sandwich, my mouth was ready for this sandwich, you know. Somebody came up behind me and slapped me upside my head. I didn't know Bobby was over there, see. And he hit me and I was just ready, I turned and was getting ready to say oh shoot, oh naw, and there he was laughing, you know. So I couldn't wait to get him back.

MA: (Laughs). When he wasn't paying attention.

BF: Yeah. We had a good time, though.

MA: Tell me more about some of the racism. Because coming from St Paul, you know, you told me earlier about some of the things you've experienced or not experienced in St Paul.

BF: Sure.

MA: How did that compare to the military?

BF: Well in the military, you know, there's a lot of southern people. White people in the military. And they've got—you know, they bring some of their same things in there. So when you encounter that, you have to be—stand up and say, hey I'm not going to stand for it, so. Because believe it or not, the day that I—November 22nd, 1963, I was changing to a new duty station. And so as soon as I walked in the door at my new duty station, there were some white southern guys in there and they were saying, "That's what that n-loving gets for all the stuff he's doing to help the niggers." You know. I said, "What did you say?" I walked in the door, I said, "What did you say?" He said, "That Kennedy, that nigger loving Kennedy got shot today." And I didn't let him get no more out of his mouth, I snatched him right off the top his bunk, and we went to it. And so then, like I said, there was about three other like-minded people in the quonset hut, and so it just so happened that this guy, this black guy from Cincinnati was walking down the Platoon street in front of that hut and he see me in there scuffling with all of these—he said, "Well do you need some help?" I said, "Can't you see!" (Laughs). You know, we took care of that too. We became close, really close friends after that.

MA: Yeah, yeah.

BF: And so, you know I—because I had been traveling from Camp Pendleton to San Diego so I didn't know Kennedy had gotten shot.

MA: Right.

BF: And so here I walked in the door and asked what these clowns are saying. What—what did you say (laughs)? It's crazy.

MA: Which is their president, too. Which is interesting, because in the military, right?

BF: Yeah. I—I encountered some of that stuff sometimes, it was crazy. But I—you know, a lot of times I just let it go. You know. But then some of it you couldn't. It was just weird.

MA: When you were in Vietnam—just sort of quickly on that same topic before I go back—was it different? Or the same? Some of those issues.

BF: Well, believe it or not there was a core—a body process took place. I think it all had to do most with the fact that you had to trust somebody, and so—a lot of this stuff they let go. You see things that—here I'm going to show you something, you've probably never seen a picture like this before. You probably—all the stuff that they show you is—a movie, you never see a black man doing nothing good in Vietnam. These—that's original.

MA: Oh wow. For official use only. Tactical trends and training tips. Right on the front.

BF: But in all the movies they make, this guy here, see that little scared boy back there?

MA: I do.

BF: This is—this is the real deal. That's what happened. And both the outfits were like that.

MA: Yeah. Why do you think that was?

BF: Well, the—the—I just notice that black men have this leadership quality. And you see it when you get a bunch of them together, like it training? It just swells to the top. And the true leaders, the people there that have a will and a know how to get things done, they just rise to the top. And that picture there shows exactly, that's the way. But you—like I said, all those movies and stuff they made after—

MA: They don't show that. No cause he has a confidence about him in this picture, and the guy behind him, not so much.

BF: That's right.

MA: So, when you were—when you were not on duty, what did you do? What did you do to entertain yourself?

BF: Well, there was a—if you had a radio or tape, something, you could do that. And then we had always you could work out and exercise and run, you know, do stuff like that. That was basically it. There was no TV. No stuff like that. But the—your day was pretty well taken care of. You had something going on all the time. Back at the shop, where those radars had to be calibrated, you want to make sure that the ones you were sending out to other people, that they were—they needed to be—I often, I had nightmares to make sure that I wasn't—that anything that I touched was going to work properly.

MA: Of course.

BF: I don't want. Even after I left Vietnam, coming home, I thought about that too. I said I hope the guy that I trained in, and you know he had gone to the same school that I did, but still when you get there, it's a whole totally different. I had told him exactly what needed to be done and how to do it. But you do have to stand right on your game, you have to be there. Because you could be court-martialed if something happens like there's a major breach and you get somebody, you got a whole company of guys out there counting on that radar surveillance to make them safe. And you get somebody that breaches the—the support system and comes in? Somebody's going to get burned for it.

MA: Of course, of course.

BF: You know, if they prove that it's—if they find out it was due to the radar equipment not working properly.

MA: Yeah. You say that all the training you got is so different from once you actually get there. Can you talk more about that?

BF: Well, it has to do with the fact that, you know, when you're getting technical training, most of the time, in a peacetime situation, everything is orderly and the shop and stuff where the equipment is, they've got older marines in there, and there's a certain hierarchy. Well when you get out in the field, when it's really wartime, most of the high ranking people are back, you know, they stay either in Washington D.C. or they stay (laughs) they're not out there.

MA: Right, right.

BF: You know, so then very quickly, because I got promoted to corporal and that's what I was when—all the time I was there. They offered me a higher rank to stay in, but I said no, I'm out of here. But yeah, that's what you see out there. Corporals and below that are actually doing the work that has to be done.

MA: What would you say, sort of based on what you're saying, the average age of people was, in country?

BF: In country? Oh about 18, 19, up to about 25.

MA: That's very young.

BF: Now a lot of the command people were older, but they weren't really out in the field, you know. They were mostly back behind. The people that are actually walking patrol, and out there manning those people finders, are two man packs so you ain't going to see too many old people out there hauling that. No. A lot of the terrain was in that wet terrain, rice paddies, no. So.

MA: So it was all younger guys.

BF: Yeah, mostly, and yep.

MA: Tell me about patrol. Tell me about that a little bit.

BF: I'm gonna—I'll tell you a little bit about it but I can't tell you more than that.

MA: A little bit.

BF: Well, what happens is that you want to make sure that you're aware of what's going on out there. So the only way you can do it, you have to get up, put boots on the ground and actually get out there. And when you're on patrol, there's—you know, usually a squad. Squad size about 12 or 14 people. And usually you have that broke down into, you got three fire teams. A fire team is made up of four people. And so you got, of the squad, you got a squad leader and each of those fire teams had a fire team leader. And so that's how the—you know, that's how you go about the business. Now you want to make sure that—because that terrain was, you know they had punji sticks and they had—that was their big thing, they'd put these poison tip bamboo shoots in holes. You know, stepping around a hole and you'd fall down in there and get impaled with that. So you had to be very careful about that. But other than that, that was it. You go out there and wreck an order and come back and report on what you seen.

And most of the time, you wouldn't encounter—you wouldn't have a full out fire fight with the enemy. But it could happen. And a lot of—see the difference between the way that terrain was and the way like the fighting that took place in Iran and Iraq and stuff like that, is that they used armed personnel carriers. But a lot of the Vietnam stuff, you know, was you out there on foot. So a lot different. And it wasn't built up like a—you know, you're in the bush and you're in rice paddies and stuff. It wasn't built up like the wars in Iraq and—you know, it was different. And scary.

MA: I believe it. You guys would go day and night?

BF: Mm-hm. Yeah you'd be out at night and you'd be out at day, yeah. But it—it, you know, like I said, you know, the situation was different because a lot of places we went, you know if they had a road we could ride what they call a six-by.

MA: Okay.

BF: But if it wasn't that, you humped it. And there was a lot of helicopters, too. That's how I screwed up my knees, is the helicopter situation, because they—when they were coming in, a lot of times they don't come all the way down. So you might be ten feet up in the air and when you've got a pack on your back—

MA: Oh my gosh.

BF: It's a lot of stress on your knees.

MA: And you just jump.

BF: Yeah. You had to do it.

MA: Would they just fly you to a certain location, say, this is where you are?

BF: Mm-hm.

MA: Yeah.

BF: And one incident where I was a—we had the people finders and so the Commandant of the marine corps, back in D.C., eighth and I were in this but you know they were big high brass people. So they came up with this new people finder radar that they wanted to test and so it was supposed to be totally solid state. You know, it had a mostly transistorized, no vacuum tubes in it at all.

MA: Oh wow.

BF: Power tubes in it, but no—

MA: Should be smaller.

BF: But they—you know, and they wanted to test it. So they asked me what I'd—I said sure. And so this one guy—high ranking guy. You know, he had a pearl handle pistol on him and he had (laughs) and I said, “But you can't come with me.” (Laughs). He looked at me like, who are you telling me what I can do, you know. I said, no sir, you can't. (Laughs).

MA: No.

BF: He got took up all this snuffling and--you know.

MA: Not dressed appropriately.

BF: Ah no. He came out there like he just came out of a parade field or something you know.

MA: (Laughs).

BF: It's crazy to me. We had—we had—so they brought that new radar, piece of radar equipment out there, but they never did bring a—you know, we tested it, it worked pretty good. They never brought probably the real deal out there. We still had these old ones when I left.

MA: Do you know if they sent them anywhere else or it was just kind of—what happened?

BF: Well I don't know. I think that he's—that guy, that brass guy—had to go back and report back to the Commandant of the marine corps how it performed in the field and, you know, it was satisfactory. And it had some advantages of the one that we had because the old one sometimes that it was a heat factory. Because they'd get so hot because they had a lot of tubes on them—

MA: Of course.

BF: As the power to them and the environment was real hot and so it had to shut down and sometimes you needed it to be able to keep going. But that's the way that was.

MA: What seasons were you there?

BF: Ooh. Let's see, monsoons, hot (laughs) and arid. Every kind of—it never snows there, of course.

MA: Right.

BF: But they do have the monsoon season.

MA: What was that like? That's something that I'm sure you never experienced before.

BF: It's like walking and somebody was pouring buckets of water straight down, constantly. I mean everything is wet. Your pockets, every piece of equipment you've got is wet, so yes, it's quite the thing.

MA: Wow. How long does that last?

BF: Seems to me, I think the monsoon season lasts about three months. Two or three months. Because—

MA: That's a long time.

BF: Yeah. It was a lot of time. But that's, you know, the way it is. The Pacific is like that. When we were on Okinawa, they have monsoons and it—you seen these movies, that storm that came through and they had everything—the wave came up and just wiped everything? Well on Okinawa, all the buildings were made typhoon and wave proof.

MA: Okay.

BF: So they've got—you won't see any real high military buildings there. And they've got shelters and all kinds of ways that they try to make sure they're proofed to build there. Okinawa—of course Vietnam was totally different because, you know, we didn't have the big buildup as far as building stuff. It was strictly a bush country, you know, mostly.

MA: Because it was different.

BF: But now, I understand it's a lot different now.

MA: That's what they say. It's built up.

BF: Because people go there for vacation now, so.

MA: Yeah, yeah. So you're in the middle of sort of all of these things happening in country. Did you have a sense, or were you getting any news from home, about what people at home were hearing about what was going on in Vietnam?

BF: Not much. Not a whole lot. But what I can tell you is this, that when I came home in August of '66, my dad was coming down the steps. I got there about 5:30 or 6 o'clock in the morning, he was coming down the steps to go to work and he spoke to me as though I've been seeing you every day, almost. And he didn't realize, he had no idea, of what I'd done, had to do, of what I'd seen. But he spoke and he said, "Ah, got to go to work," and he went to work. And that was odd. And my stepmother was getting ready to go to work and she said, "Oh would you drive me to work?" and she gave me a grocery list. She wanted me to go grocery shopping. (MA laughs). And so I sat there and I couldn't—you know, it was just weird. And so I, you know, I took her to work and I went up to the Midway shopping center and war protestors were up there. And I still got my uniform on.

MA: Oh my gosh. Because you just got home.

BF: Yeah, just got home. I had a little scuffle up there, you know, because they were blocking the door. And it was just—that was really the first time that I paid attention to the protesting situation. Because we, you know, like I said, we didn't have television or anything over there so I didn't get a lot—here a lot of events stuff that was going on.

MA: Yeah, yeah. Did you have much correspondence with home?

BF: Yeah I did. My biological mother, bless her heart, she wrote to me all the time. Telling me how (unclear) be and everything. Didn't have any girlfriends, they all dropped me (laughs) so—

MA: When you went to go find yourself in the military? (Laughs).

BF: Yeah, so that—and that was okay. I don't blame them, they got to get on with their lives too because they had the same, you know, everybody's got the same thing when they're young, you have to find out where the firmament is, if you can. But yeah, my biological mother, she wrote me almost two or three times a week.

MA: Wow. Was that helpful?

BF: Very helpful. Especially she was, she was especially helpful during boot camp. Because you needed to have somebody to just kind of let you know that things are still going okay, you know. Because the training was rough and the drill instructors, they tell you that they're your

friend, but they're not your friend (laughs). So and in a war situation, yeah, that was one thing I looked forward to. When they had mail call and I got a letter from my mom.

MA: Yeah. Did you write her back often?

BF: Not as often as I should. But I did write her. And a lot of times it was a hurried note, but I did the best I could. And sometimes, you know, you just—the mood—you couldn't be in that frame of mind, you know. I did think—I thought I was going to survive. I did think I was going to live. The first time we got hit, I didn't—I wasn't—you know, like I said it was almost that scene getting off of the ship. It was just noisy and all kinds of stuff. Noise going on around you and some of the people that had experience were not what you would think that you would get—they didn't show the kind of leadership that I thought that you should show in a situation like that. Especially when you got a lot of young guys that had never experienced it before. It became almost like you were on your own, you know, you survive this thing yourself.

MA: Which isn't what you would expect.

BF: No, but I'll tell you one thing, when I first got there, I did if somebody had had experience, I listened to them. And I didn't make a whole lot of new footprints either. When we'd be out walking, going on patrol or whatever, I tried to make sure that it looked like it was safe to walk there. If I could see it. At nighttime you can't tell anyway, but in day time I was very careful. And then pretty soon I got to the place that it was old hat. I could, you know, you start feeling like you're bulletproof a little bit.

MA: When you've survived a few things, yeah. How long were you there, total?

BF: About a little over a year.

MA: Did you know when you got there, how long you were going to be there?

BF: (Laughs). Mica, I'll tell you, they held me over there, convenience of the government, after my time was up. So, no, I didn't know what. I knew that they could extend you like that, but I didn't know that would happen to me. And after I had done the 90 day extension, I came back to the tent for the first sergeant that I had done every day of it. I asked him, I said, I told him, "I've done the extension," and he said, "Well we don't have any orders for you to go back to the United States." And they were getting ready to go on Operation Utah, Texas, one of them. And I said, well, and he said, "Saddle up." And so I went back and by the time I got back to my tent, he sent a runner over to my tent and said if you could get to Da Nang, at the air base, you know, I think I had about a three hour or four hour window. And I said you ain't said nothing but do it (laughs).

MA: Absolutely.

BF: And so I—believe it or not, I had gone to Taiwan for R & R and I bought this elaborate reel to reel tape recorder and I was going—you know, ship it back home. Well he told me that if I could get to Da Nang and so that guy that had a cot next to me, I said, “Hey, want a tape recorder? You got it.” You know, anything that I couldn’t get in my sea bag, I left. I said, you can have it. And then when I went to, you know, you got to go turn in those grenades and your armor and your guns and rifle and your pistol and all that stuff. I did that so fast it was unbelievable. Then they didn’t have a vehicle going to Da Nang, I got—I threw my sea bag on my shoulder and I hit the road.

MA: Wow. You said, “I’m ready. I’m past ready.” Phew.

BF: Yeah I got to Da Nang, I got to the airfield. And this is the other thing that blew my mind, was when I got to Da Nang, I had to check in to the place where the air force people slept. And you know, course you’re going to leave the next morning. And so I was just checked in and they said well, if you come down to where we have our breakfast—really like a restaurant—and I walked in there, and you know, it’s just like being back at home in the United States. You sit down and a little Vietnamese lady comes and takes your order, and they had—they had bacon and eggs and fresh milk and coffee. I said, “Is this the way the air force is? If I’d have known that...” I couldn’t believe it. I sit there and I have a nice breakfast, and you know, they come around and pour your coffee. I said oh my goodness, you know.

MA: Little did you know.

BF: No, didn’t had no idea that nobody fought a war like that. (Laughs).

MA: That’s what everybody says—if you’re going to go, join the Air force.

BF: It’s uh—

MA: What had you been eating the whole time?

BF: Oh we had K-Rations, C-rations, and every once in a while they’d have some nice for us. But mostly, you know, eating that crazy food, you know.

MA: Yeah. Not bacon and eggs, served to you.

BF: And you know, if we had eggs, it was always that powdered constituted stuff. This was fresh eggs. (Laughs). And milk, the same way, you know. If we had milk it was powdered milk, you'd mix it up, you know.

MA: Yeah, with the water.

BF: But over there, at the Air Force, everything was just like it came out just like you'd think you were back in the United States.

MA: Wow. That's such a contrast, and you hadn't even left the country.

BF: Yeah. So at Da Nang, and then when the next morning we got up, you won't believe this story. They shot two of the engines out of the plane when it took off. Got two of the plane engines either just got shot off or—and so they circled, made two circles and came back and landed and we had to stay there another day. I thought the plane was going to go down because it was a Pan Am.

MA: Oh wow. Which is definitely not how you arrived.

BF: No. Flying back first class.

MA: Wow.

BF: Yeah, that was great. So we stayed there overnight and the next day they got another plane in and we took off.

MA: Yeah.

BF: And went to—I think went to—went to Hawaii first. No, went to Okinawa first. And then went to—because I had to go back to Okinawa to get what they called your whole baggage, you know, your stuff that you left there. So I had to go get that. Ended up back at Santa Ana—Santa Ana, California.

MA: What was it like to arrive back in the U.S.?

BF: It was beautiful. But, Mica, they had—who were—they were processing our—some of our replacements in the next barracks over, where some of the old salts like me were coming in. And some of those kids looked so young and so fresh and I said man—I felt—it almost made cry just looking at them. Because I knew that they were going into a meat grinder and it was just—it broke my heart, really. But nothing I could do about it.

MA: Right. I wonder if they thought that about you guys, when you were on your way over?

BF: Yeah, there was people that—old people that—older marine s and stuff knew that we were going to be tested. But just those young guys, because they looked like they were about 17 or 18 years old. I said this was just too bad. Can I show you something?

MA: Yeah, absolutely.

BF: This is—1960, this is our—our—

MA: Yearbook? 1963.

BF: Mm-hm. And that's Glen, that's my buddy Glen Beechum. And that's me.

MA: You guys happen to even be on the same page. (Laughs).

BF: And uh—

MA: Is it weird to look at you like this?

BF: Yeah. It is (laughs) it seems strange to see me like that.

MA: Mm-hm.

BF: You can tell I got a beautiful suntan. This guy here, J.C. Paul. Let me show you him in the—there he is. He's from Dayton, Ohio.

MA: Oh.

BF: And he and I bonded and this tells a story of J.C. He's a Medal of Honor winner, do you know what that is?

MA: Wow. I do.

BF: And, course he didn't survive, but I felt because he and I used to just talk, you know, and you're not supposed to talk when you're training, at night. The drill instructors—but we would—head to head, you know.

MA: Mm-hm. In the bunks.

BF: And he would tell me about his aspirations and what he wanted to do and all that stuff, you know. And he's just a nice kid—young kid from Dayton, Ohio and he had—you know, he wanted to be successful in the marine corps and he wanted to go back home and you know, marry and have a family. And he didn't get a chance to do none of that. Absolutely none of it. But when you read this, knowing what I know about him, this is exactly what he would've done.

MA: Wow. So he was just that kind of person? Yeah.

BF: He, like you said, he didn't have to stay back and let other people try to survive. But he did. He volunteered. And he could shoot. He could flat out shoot.

MA: Yeah.

BF: And so he—and I know he took a lot of people with him. He took a lot of the V.C. with him. But every time when I looked at my children and I got back and my wife and my children, I always thought about him. The fact that he never got a chance to have none of that. And even when my children were doing things (laughs) that I didn't want them to do, I could still love them and just say, "We're going to change that."

MA: (Laughs). Yep. We're going to modify that.

BF: He was—that was my friend.

MA: Watch this for me, will you. Watch this for me. Okay, hi.

BF: You got your money in there, right?

MA: Oh yeah. So how did you find out what happened to him?

BF: They told us down there in—I don't know if you know, did you know Dr. Crutchfield? You know his wife Pat Wilson, Pat? Okay, John—her brother was down there with us.

MA: Oh, okay.

BF: He got killed the same—around the same time as Paul. And so they told—they let us know, what's going on. And so yeah so when I got back, I asked around. I had to find out everything I can and anytime I get a chance to talk to somebody about something, I'm going to memorialize him. Because, you know, there's a lot of people—when I came back I became a sales marketing specialist for Ecolab.

MA: Okay.

BF: And so I encountered a lot of crazy racist white people. You know.

MA: I believe it.

BF: And one of them was one of the guys that was also—we worked on the same team, marketing and sales. And he was from Arkansas and just as nutty as he could be with that race stuff, you know. And I used to tell him, I said, “I don’t know how you skated going to Vietnam because a lot of people got drafted.” Like Trump should’ve been drafted but he wasn’t. But you have a whole different outlook on life because you don’t have enough experience, you know. I told him about J.C. Paul, I said, if you knew J.C. Paul, you’d have—because he, J.C. Paul, didn’t have a prejudiced bone in his body. But I said you’re different. I said primarily because you know it’s a little Arkansas hillbilly stuff that you’ve gotten and you never have experienced anything.

MA: Right, never been anywhere.

BF: And so, I tried, even after I retired from Ecolab, I tried to stay in contact with a lot of the guys, you know. Because he was my trainee, I trained him in. And so I had lunch with him about two months ago and he’s come telling me something about Trump being the greatest president that we’ve ever had, you know.

MA: So he hasn’t changed much since all that time.

BF: No. So I said okay, I got to let you go. I wish he could have met J.C. Paul because he would have seen what the real world is like.

MA: Yeah. You always wonder, you know, how all that equals out.

BF: Yeah. Yeah, it’s—see, I’ll tell you Mica, I’m of the opinion that some people have privilege that they don’t realize they have. And they base their whole thing on the fact that other people are who they are because they don’t have the drive or—you know. They don’t realize that when you start a race, a fifty yard race, and you start twenty-five yards ahead of everybody else, quite naturally, you should win.

MA: Right.

BF: And that's where a lot of people in our country are, you know. All this stuff about angry white men and stuff like that? That's nonsense. They ain't got nothing to be angry about. Because I knew a lot of—when I came back from Vietnam and came back from the service, there was a lot of people that, you know, were doing things that they shouldn't be doing. And if you were white and you did it, all you had to do was put on a new shirt and a tie and cut your hair and you were good to go. But if you had papers, bad papers, like a lot of young black men did, and for the same things that the—you know, you couldn't do that.

MA: Right, because now you were dishonorably discharged. Or you had some of those other things. Yeah.

BF: That's right.

MA: Yeah and that follows you around.

BF: Forever. They say that, you know, well after you do your time you can get yourself back here, but lot of times you can't because every place you go, what's your history, what'd you do here? Saw you had a felony here or something, you know. I guess it's not supposed to come up, but it does.

MA: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. So really quick I want to talk about what happened when you came home. You came home, you worked for Ecolab. But there's something that happened between Ecolab and coming home.

BF: Oh yeah. (MA laughs). A lot of, lot of stuff happened in there. My boy Glen and I, you know, we started two companies. One of them was quite successful, I don't know if you've heard of Messenger Service Incorporated. Did you? Okay, we had—at one point we had around fifty trucks and it was quite successful, but we had a situation where we had the SBA loan and all of our receivables were actually held as collateral for our SBA loan. So any growth we had would have to take second place, you know, to the collateral they had on hold. We actually outgrew ourselves. We grew to the point that we needed more working capital, we couldn't get it.

MA: Right, because of the loan.

BF: Yeah, and so our growth killed us.

MA: Ironic.

BF: Yeah, it actually, our growth killed us. And we were on par to be—actually to be, because FedEx started the same time we did (laughs) which is—

MA: Crazy.

BF: And we were doing better than them. But anyway that's the way it happens. So that was one of the things I got involved with. A couple other things we had. We had a few gas stations and a few things like that too. We had quite a few different jobs—enterprises we started.

MA: So it sounds like the entrepreneurial and ambitious spirit you were talking about in your father and your mother's auntie, it sounds like you got some of that as well.

BF: Yeah, I think that rubbed off on me and, you know, I guess that's why I was really successful at Ecolab, when I think about it. Because I have the same type of spirit. You know, they told me when I—after Messenger Service went bankrupt, I didn't have a job. My wife had finished nursing—St Mary's.

MA: What's your wife's name?

BF: Will—we call her Willow, now. Her real name was Teresina. But she likes to be called Willow. And so she had finished St Mary's and so she was working in the medical field but I didn't have a job. And so one day I was over cutting my grandmother's—my step-grandmother's grass in St Paul and she says, "Billy, where are you working now?" (Laughs). I said, "Grandma," I'll tell you, I thought I was well-connected. Because I knew Byron Kashawn in NIR over at 3M and I knew—I worked for Control Data when I first got out so I figured, you know. I didn't get—nobody would respond, nobody would send—my resume was poison, I guess. You know. My grandma said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well Grandma, I'm looking for a job but you know, right now, I really don't." And she said, "Well, honey I got one of my Eastern Star girlfriends who works for Ecolab, Economics Laboratories. And they're looking for black salesmen." I said, "Well what's her name?" You know, so that's how I got the—went to work for Ecolab. And I went down there and she gave me a test and she said, "We never had anybody score this high on this test before." I said, okay, I'll take the job. (Laughs).

MA: Exactly.

BF: Yeah so, that's what happened. And then I stayed with them for thirty years. And I retired.

MA: It works.

BF: Yeah.

MA: So, you joined the marines to find some discipline. Did you find it?

BF: Oh yeah. Discipline plus. The first night, when we got there, you know Isaac Rolands? Did you know him?

MA: No, I know the Rolands name but I don't know Isaac.

BF: Okay. Well me, Glen, and Isaac were the three musketeers. We arrived at San Diego boot camp together, okay? And so they make you stand on these yellow footprints. Have you heard of this before? I don't want to bore you.

MA: You're not boring me. (Laughs).

BF: When you get there, and you get there about 12 o'clock at night, they got footprints on the pavement. They're made in position like you're standing in the position of attention and you've got to get on those footprints. And so we got there, and they picked us up at the airport and the sergeant picked us up and he said—real friendly guy, just as nice as—he said, “Oh I'm going to stop here and I'm going to get myself a cup of coffee, you guys just, if you got a cigarette, light them up.” I said, man this marine corps is going to be easy.

MA: Oh no. Little did you know.

BF: So when he came out of that café after he had his cup of coffee, he was a changed man. I mean he was ranting and raving. I said man, this guy is crazy. And so he takes us over to San Diego to Hood depot. They've got these yellow footprints on the --and he says get on those footprints and don't move until I tell you. They don't tell you it's going to be two hours later before they tell you to move. So there you are, 12 o'clock at night, tired.

MA: That's your welcome, to the marine corps.

BF: Yeah, that's your welcome. And so I go and they finally said, okay, you're slimy, dirty civilians. Get in there, you're going to take a shower. Ice cold water. They take all your clothes from you, they got a bucket full of what they call your entry level stuff—soap, toothpaste, shaving cream. So you get that and they give you some fatigues, clothes to wear. And then they, after harassing you for a couple hours, then they say, okay, go to bed. And two hours later, they're in there tearing up the place, making noise, screaming and yelling. I really thought that I had dreamt all this stuff and it was a nightmare and I thought it was my brother Harold waking me up anymore. I was—I was, you know.

MA: This can't be real.

BF: Yeah. And so Glen said, "Man you better get up." Rolands said, "Hey Frelix, you better get up." And finally that drill sergeant came in and said, "You better get him up." Because I was still kind of groggy, you know. So I finally got up. That was my introduction to the marine corps. Wow.

MA: Did you wonder what you had got yourself into?

BF: I did and it really came full circle that Sunday because Harold, my brother Harold, was a couple, few, little bit ahead of me in boot camp. And so they marched us over for the the Protestant church. And I see my brother's platoon walked in there and so I'm happy enough to see Harold. So as soon as he let us stand at ease, I ran over there, broke ranks like, "Hey Harold," he looked at me like, are you crazy.

MA: Both of you in trouble.

BF: Yeah. And so I'm thinking. I'm saying my brother has even joined the crazy platoon. He's just as crazy as these other people, you know. (Both laugh). And so that was the way it went. It was weird. And they have the—you know, they have the mandatory church. You got to go to church.

MA: Off you went. That's crazy. So you have a wife, you have some kids?

BF: Two kids.

MA: What are their names?

BF: William Jr and Jamie.

MA: And where are they? Where do they live now?

BF: Billy lives in Eagan and Jamie lives in Cottage Grove. And they both have mortgages to pay (laughs) so that's what I usually talk to them about, is how to manage their money, you know. And do what they got to do.

MA: Yeah. Do they know much about your time in Vietnam?

BF: I told them some. Not a lot. I did tell them some.

MA: Did either one of your kids ever have aspirations to join the military?

BF: You know something, they never said it. I think Jamie at one time considered it. But I don't think—Billy, I don't think he ever wanted to go to the military. I told them—I did tell him that, if you want to go, you want to consider, you know, what you can get. What kind of prearrangement you can get as far as a contract that guarantees what you want before you sign. But he never did it. I wouldn't have pushed the marine corps on him. He wanted to—you know, we had a strong conversation about it beforehand but, you know, he never really chose to—he never did.

MA: Yeah. Yeah, but if they'd wanted to join something?

BF: Yeah I'd tell them perhaps the air force might be the best way to go. (Both laugh). Might be the best way for you to go because what my—the way I contrasted it, I told you about the cafeteria stuff, the food and all that stuff. That was a big eye opener to me. And another one was that we had M14s. And I seen air force police with AR15s and we still had M14s. And the AR15 was a lighter, perhaps—I heard it had a lot of jamming problems, but it was a much lighter and flexible weapon.

MA: Right. To be carrying around. Yeah. It's funny how all of that works.

BF: Yeah. But the Air Force, to answer your question, if they said military I would certainly say you might want to consider the Air Force.

MA: Yeah. Are you glad you joined?

BF: Well, it—I got what I needed out of it. Now when we were in boot camp, the drill instructor would ask us, did we know where Vietnam was? I said no, I didn't. And he explained, and I remember the movie I seen with Nat King Cole in it where he was a soldier with the French Foreign Legion in a place called Indochina, which is Vietnam. And then it came back to me and he said well before your tour is up here, you'll be down there fighting in Vietnam. And that was the first time I heard anything about Vietnam, to speak of.

MA: Couple of last questions. One of my questions was, so a lot of the stuff about Vietnam, you know, everybody talks about '68, and all. Sort of what happened during that phase. And you were already home by then. What was that like, to be home, having already been there?

BF: Well, I found out about the Gulf of Tonkin being a lie. And I know that that was the reason we were supposed to be there, because one of our naval ships had been attacked in the

Gulf of Tonkin. And we found out that was a whole big lie and then everything—the house of cards just collapsed, you know. I think that basically, you know that happened with Johnson, L.B. Johnson had to withdraw from running for reelection because, you know, everything about Vietnam was a lie. So that was a terrible time, because if you remember, Bobby Kennedy right behind Martin Luther King and it's—it all started in '63 when President Kennedy got killed. So it was just—it was just. You know, then Malcolm X. You know, you go right down the line, you know. And it was a leadership vacuum in the country. And a leadership vacuum in the black community. So, you know, it was really a bad time.

MA: Yeah, yeah. Do you see any parallels to anything that has happened more recently? To stuff that happened when you were in Vietnam?

BF: Yeah. The people who profit off of military buildups are constantly lying. During the Iraq—the attack Iraq like that and destabilize the Middle East? It was just a lie that was put out there by the military industrial complex. The people that make money off the wars. And if you look at it, you see the same thing happening again now. They're itching—Barack Obama, who was very wise not to go jumping into Syria. You know and they were egging him on, trying to get him to go in there, too. He said, you know, he made one tactical error when he drew the red line. Remember the red? He realized, he's smart enough to realize that, you know, saying that was bad. We don't need to be going in there, killing off our young men anymore.

This man that we've got for president now, he's not the brightest person. And he—I don't know what's happening with Korea, and I don't know what's happening with China. And what's happening with Russia. But there's some kind of craziness going on there. Because you know, the—he threw all of our allies under the bus. Every one of them. And he got up there on stage with Putin and looked like a little kid seeing—a deer with car lights on his face or something. He was scared and—oh my goodness, then he turns right around and all the people that really have been our allies all along, Canada, including Mexico, man, you know the way that he's handling that is—you know. Horrible. But you asked me if do I see any parallels, yeah, I do. Because you know, the same people that profit off the war, they're trying to get this idiot to do something stupid.

MA: Yeah. It's kind of scary.

BF: If I was a young person, I don't know what I would think. Millennials, you're a millennial, right?

MA: I'm right in front of them.

BF: Are you? Okay well you know, they have a—more of a worldview than people that came before them. And so consequently, they're not so apt to fall into the trap of okay, he's pushing his nationalistic thing, you know. I think these millennials, most of them can see through that. And I hope they can. So we'll see.

MA: Yeah. Well, before we turn off the recorder, was there anything else you wanted to say or anything you had in mind that you wanted to make sure we talked about before we end today?

BF: Well, I just wanted to say, that like I said, my military experience was what I needed at that time in my life. I needed the discipline. And one of the things that I see now is that there are not a lot of avenues that are available for young people, black or white. Sometimes when they need just to have a chance to grow. Considering that their whole world is changed. I wish there was, but it's just not like that anymore. So consequently a lot of people, when they come out of high school, they're on a trajectory to go to college and be successful. But a lot of people aren't quite there yet. They need to have some place where they can have a leveling off time, you know.

MA: But it doesn't exist the same way.

BF: No, not the same way.

MA: Well, I really want to thank you for your time and telling me your stories today and you did not bore me, I know you were wondering about that. (Both laugh). I enjoy it, every time. So thank you for your time.

BF: Thanks for asking me, Mica.

MA: Absolutely.

BF: My wife has heard some of the stories, and she gets bored sometimes. She goes, oh I think I've heard that one.

MA: It's good to tell them to somebody new. I appreciate it, thank you.

BF: Thank you.

End of Interview