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## Oral History Project/ Jerry LaFave

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Student Interviews Name: Heidi Perez

Interviewee Name: Pastor Jerry LaFave

Time and Location of Interview: This interview took place in Pastor Jerry Lafave's office in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, November 23, 2015.

About Pastor Jerry Lafave: Pastor LaFave is the head pastor of the Spartanburg Seventh-Day Adventist Church. He was 19 years old when he was drafted into the army when he was 19 years old while he was living in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He was sent for training in Fort Knox, Kentucky in 1966 and sent to Vietnam in 1967. He was part of the B troop, third squadron, fourth Calvary, which was the mechanized unit with the 25<sup>th</sup> infantry division stationed at Chu Chi. He was severely injured during the war and had a life changing experience that led to him to the Lord.

Interviewer: Heidi Perez [HP]

Interviewee: Pastor Jerry [PJ]

HP: Hi Pastor Jerry! It's so nice to see you, so I'm just going to ask you a couple questions about um the war I'm going to interview on. The first question is, first things first, were you drafted into the army or did you enlist?

PJ: I was drafted.

HP: You were drafted.

PJ: Mmhmm

HP: So when we had talked before, you said the idea of being drafted clouded your thoughts. After you were drafted shortly after your nineteenth birthday, how did you feel?

PJ: (Clicks tongue) Scared, because there was a war going on and at that time you worried whether or not you would be drafted and possibly not come back home. A lot of young men were dying. So that created a lot of fear. We had to face that.

HP: Mhm. Were you devastated?

PJ: Devastated. No I wasn't devastated. You know this had been a tradition in American History for a long time that when you're turning nineteen you have to register and the possibility of serving in the military was very high and so it was something that I accepted my patriotic duty. I had to do it.

HP: Good, okay, um, did you feel like you were ready?

PJ: Yes ready physically, ready mentally, maybe emotionally that had to catch up. So there were things I wanted to do when I was graduating high school, you know you always don't know what you want to do, whether you want to go to school or not and they offered deference to people

that were going to college. And unfortunately for me, my father didn't have the money to send me away to college. We had a lot of children in my family and so it was a difficult decision. And not only that, I didn't like school at the time, so I had to go. (Laughs) When you're drafted you have to show up! (Chuckles again).

HP: That's understandable. So, um, where were you living at the time?

PJ: I was living In Grand Rapids, Michigan, the house I was born in.

HP: Wow.

PJ: (Laughs jovially) yeah.

HP: (Laughs with Pastor Jerry) your whole life!

PJ: Yes.

HP: (laughter falters away) so what branch did you choose?

PJ: I did not choose, they choose for you, you are drafted into the army. And if you enlisted, you can make a choice of another branch that you want to go into.

HP: Oh, I thought it was like when they draft you, you can pick between you know A B C and D.

PJ: No, they select all of that for you (laughs at the end).

HP: (Feeling quite dumb) Oh. Well which one were you selected into?

PJ: The army.

HP: The army?

PJ: Mmhmm.

HP: Okay (laughs) where did you serve?

PJ: I went to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for my basic training and after eight weeks of training, I was given a short leave to come home and then sent to Fort Jackson, South Carolina, where I learned to be an advanced infantrymen, one that is more proficient where you learn to operate more weapons, the things I explained to you in the email.

HP: Mhm, Great.

PJ: And then from there, do you want me to carry out? We went to Vietnam.

HP: Afterwards?

PJ: Yes.

HP: Okay, um, what was your rank?

**PJ:** I was spec 4, specialist fourth class. Okay? That's like a corporal, people used to think Private, Corporal, Sergeant. Spec 4 is a corporal's ranking. Okay?

**HP:** Um what did you experience in like the basic training or boot camp, whatever you called it?

**PJ:** Alright umm, when you get there it's a real shock, your leaving civilian life and suddenly your grouped together with a bunch of men you don't know, but you take time to get acquainted of course as you are developing friendships there and just one experience. We were all on this bus and we were taken over in the center, in the induction center, when you come in and they give your first set of clothing. So you start on one end and you're all talking to each other and as you start in going down the line, um people are shouting and screaming at you, you get over here, you get over there! And you're getting very nervous and upset underneath all that stress.

**HP:** Awh!

**PJ:** Yes

**HP:** That's awful!

**PJ:** And people are just yelling at you, and so you get your hair cut first. Everyone gets hairs cut right off, just cut it right down to the skin you know?

**HP:** Oh.

**PJ:** And you go through other lines, and they keep screaming at you. And the first thing they tell you to do is strip down naked. Totally naked. And you're walking through and they throw underwear at you and you put one on and put the rest in your bag. Then they throw socks at you. You put one on and put the rest in your bag. And then you go down the whole line like that until you have all your clothing, one set is on, and the other sets are in this duffel bag that you've stuffed. People are just constantly screaming at you so you get disoriented and they just make it worse. And finally when you come out the other side they tell you, you don't know anything about formations or anything, cause your just getting in and the sergeants are screaming at you to stand, (raises voice) "you stand here and you stand there". (Breathes in heavily) And you're just standing there looking around, you don't know anybody anymore. Everybody's hairs been cut off so you don't recognize anybody (Laughs).

**HP:** Ahh! (Laughs, but is horrified at the same time). That's so sad!

**PJ:** But that's your introduction (laughs again).

**HP:** Well I guess I see the point in that but that's so mean! That's terrible.

**PJ:** And there is training every day. You're up at 5 o'clock, I think that's when they get us up, and then you're up doing PE, the first thing you have to do before breakfast. So then you do an hour of that, it's about 6:30, then you leave the parade field where you are doing your exercises, and then they'd run you up to the mess hall. And the first couple of times, the sergeant will stand you right up at the door, you come in thinking "Oh good, I get to sit down and eat my breakfast."

Well that's not the way it works. You walk in and they hand you a tray and start screaming at you, "You get over there and get that food" You get the food and by the time you sit down, as soon as you sit down, someone is screaming at you, "get up get out of here!" So you got to eat and throw your tray into the place where they wanted to clean up. And then you're out the door and back into formation. So you barely get anything to eat, because the first couple days they made it really hard on you. After that, after P.T. we would go on these marches where we would run for two or three miles and then we would get to our destination might be, the rifle range where you can learn about our weapons, learn how to shoot the weapon. And then you had to qualify, in other words, hit the target. So many times, you know, you do it over and over and over until you qualify. So you did that and then we had to come back. We had some classroom experiences in basic training where they are teaching you about different kinds of warfare and also first aid. Somebody's wounded on the battlefield how can you assist them? Get the basic stuff for that. So it was between health, taking care of yourself, helping other people, learning to shoot your weapons. Learning how to lay certain kinds of mines. Physical Training is a big one though, they want to get you in shape before you go on anywhere else.

HP: Wow. I don't know.

PJ: And then when you're in basic training, then they decide cause of all the testing and stuff, they'll decided okay you're going to go here, you're going to go here, and people leave and go to different places for advanced training. And then I was sent here for more infantry training. Cause Vietnam War going on and they needed a lot of infantry men to go there.

HP: Okay, so was it difficult to survive throughout your basic training

PJ: (clicks tongue) No, it wasn't difficult to survive, it was difficult at first to adjust to somebody telling you every move to make, when to stand up, when to sit down, when to breath almost, you know? You had to kind of prove yourself to the other men too you know? Because there is always a unique blend of people that get together, and you're all sleeping together, and you're with each other the whole time in the barracks. It was challenging but you make the adjustment after you're all friends. Mostly. So you just adjust. You start feeling yourself becoming a soldier. You really do, mentally and physically.

HP: Wow.

PJ: They have a saying, that they send a notice to your parents. You send us a boy, we'll send you back a man.

HP: They said that??!

PJ: Mhm, and they still do. (Laughs)

HP; (Laughs) Wow well that's interesting, so you graduated private first class correct?

PJ: Yes.

HP: Okays so after that, why did you not think it was a good idea to enlist in military training school? If I read that correctly.

PJ: Well I didn't enlist because when you enlist you had to serve at least four years. And I didn't want to spend that much time in the military. Draft is two years. But the draft was much more, it was riskier because they put you in the infantry, if you enlist, you can choose your occupation and training you wanted to get which is smart thing. Really when I look back on it, I thought I should've enlisted. Chosen something that I could have taken as a career even after I left the military.

HP: Hmm, okay, sorry it's hard for me to differentiate sometimes. I've never really looked into this before. So, after Fort Jackson, you were sent to the advanced individual training correct?

PJ: That was Fort Jackson

HP: Okay, That was Fort Jackson?

PJ: That's right I had the Advanced Infantry Training.

HP: Okay well what did you experience in the advanced Individual Training?

PJ: It was quite surprising, because once I got there I was treated more like a soldier rather than a recruit. That was a big difference. If they look at you as a recruit, they're breaking you in and they want you to follow every order, and so they break you down first, so that you will comply with what they want, by the time you leave and go to another position, another post for more training, they respect you, to a degree. To a degree. Now even the sergeants and the noncommissioned officers, they treat you very well, they talk to you decently, and you know, much different attitude. But you still have to comply. I mean anybody who plays around still gets themselves in trouble. (Laughs) So that was different. The whole atmosphere then changed, the training was still very intense, only on a different scale. Whereas one place I learned how to fire and disassemble an M16 when I was at Fort Jackson, I could do a three Caliber machine gun and fifty caliber machine gun, grenade launcher, a rocket launcher, plus my M16, M21, handguns, forty-five, you know, so I was very proficient using all those weapons, we had to get so I could take them apart without seeing, blindfolded and put them all back together and make them work. I mean you're out in the field in the dark, you may not have a light, and you have got to fix your weapon. Whatever. And then we did a lot of night activity, mock battles, and you shoot blanks at each other, that kind of thing, but it just keeps warming you up to the idea of that and war tactics. How do you move, how does the squad move when your under fire, how do you enter buildings that are occupied hat your trying to take? They are training you very well on how to preserve your life to the best that they can.

HP: Wow, well so after that what was your final rank when you went to Vietnam?

PJ: Well I was a PFC then, so when I went to Vietnam it was spec 4.

HP: Spec 4?

**PJ:** Yes.

**HP:** Okay well what year did you arrive in Vietnam?

**PJ:** It was 1967. I was drafted in 1966 in the fall of 1966. By March, I was headed for Vietnam.

**HP:** Where did you exactly arrive when you got there?

**PJ:** At First I went to this place called Cameron Bay, which is up on the Coast, and northern South Vietnam. And from there all the men that arrived were assigned different posts of duty, I was sent to the 25<sup>th</sup> infantry division which is, had their base camp at Chu Chi, which was near Cambodia, and I was assigned in particular unit which was the three quarter cav. Third squadron, fourth Calvary. Mechanized units. We had tracks and had tanks in our unit, I was part of the infantry squad for that unit.

**HP:** Okay, so earlier, when we had went over it before hand, you said that the first you went to Vietnam, the first night you arrived on the first day, You said it was really dark and there was helicopter machine guns that were going off in the distance. How did you feel in that moment knowing that?

**PJ:** It was scary, it was really scary. I often tell a story in our plane that were flying on you know full of soldiers going to Vietnam, before getting there everyone I talking and joking and carrying on. And I think that was a way we were trying to soothe our fears you know? But when the pilot announced that we were getting ready to land at Cameron Bay, it just became dead quiet. Nobody was talking anymore. When we came in to land it was very unusual, there is no runway lights so you could not see an airport or anything. And this plane goes down and goes down ready to come in. And were getting close to the ground and you still don't see anything. And he runway lights come on, and the plane touches down and once the plane settles down, the lights go off and we had a jeep with a lighted sign in front of it that said follow me. And the plane just followed that jeep to where they wanted them to stop. And so everything is secure, trying to make it secure so you're not going to get fired on while you're getting off the plane. And when we left, I remember the attendant there that was saying goodbye and hope we see you on the return flight next year. And I thought to myself well that is a stupid thing to say! You know (Laughs).

**HP:** Aww! (laughs).

**PJ:** But as we all got off they are hurrying us up to get to another bus and the bus had screens on the side of the windows so nobody could throw a hand grenade in the bus while we were going down the road. But like I said, as soon as were coming out, that's what you hear. The thunder of the cannons in the distance, and you see and hear the helicopters off in the distance and a stream of red tracers coming down from all these helicopters. And so the battle is close, it's not far away, you know you're in Vietnam, you're in a war zone.

**HP:** Well, that's really scary. Oh man. So you mentioned you were part of the B troop, third squadron, fourth Calvary, which was mechanized unit of the twenty fifth infantry division?

**PJ:** You got it.

**HP:** Okay good! I've gotten everything else wrong (Laughs).

**PJ:** We called ourselves the super grunts. Yah, that was our squad. It was our own title we gave ourselves. (Laughs) and we had a little cartoon that looked, I drew it...

**HP:** (interrupts) You drew IT!?

**PJ:** I drew my sergeant because he as a little short guy always had a can a beer in his hand and always smoking cigarettes. So I drew him standing on some c-rations box with that on there, called the super grunt you know. So after that our squad became known as the super grunts. And I had to draw these all on the back of our flack vests. A flack vest is an armored vest to protect you.

**HP:** You drew all of them?

**PJ:** So I drew one everybody so we'd all were part of the super grunts (laughs).

**HP:** (laughs) Okay, oh wow that's funny. You were also known as the eyes and ears of the division as well?

**PJ:** Mmm.

**HP:** Um, so with that name, what was your job, what was the position that you had that gave you that title?

**PJ:** Well, the eye and ears of the division was what the three quarter cav. was called we had helicopter companies, in other words, some of the infantrymen were carried on the helicopters and into our battles, or search and destroy missions and some of us were aboard these tracks with mechanized unit, the plan was for soldiers to be months with the mechanized unit, six months with the air cav, all a part of the three quarter cav.

**HP:** Okay

**PJ:** Okay? And our mission was, to keep the highways open, so that supplies could get back and forth to the base camp. We were to out on search and destroy missions, sometimes we were called put to go out in the middle of the jungle, the iron triangle was one of the worst areas in Vietnam, it was highly concentrated with the enemy and we were in there many many times, the iron triangle, we get in there and find their base camps, disrupt them, kill them of course, and while we were there, the infantry squad in particular (coughs) would have to leave to the tracks, your just riding on those to get the battle on, and you had that armor plating that protected you from small arms and we would get in there, once we get in there then the infantry squad would call that to go out into the jungle and search where the tracks and tanks couldn't go. And whatever we found we would report it or bring more people in there and blow things up and do a lot of damage destroy food supplies, they would have lots of rice and bins made up into the trees



and would destroy that. Blow up their huts, blow up their bunkers, crawl down in her tunnels and see what was down there who was down there and blow those up. We were busy.

HP: Wow.

PJ: At night we got on ambushes, had very little rest, and then we could go out squads, would go out where we had been in the day time where we would see a trail or a signs of boats coming down a stream. Bringing in supplies, we'd find a good location during the day and at nights we would go back there and set up for anybody to come by so that we could ambush them.

HP: Well, wow.

PJ: And we did one more thing, it was called listening post. And under those circumstances two or three of us would have a radio, and we'd be sent out away from everybody else, a couple mile away from our equipment, cause when they circled up at nights, just like the old wagon trains, we'd circle up the tracks and tanks with all our weapons pointed out front and for protection at night and then the infantry squad's would go out and then we'd set up there an ambush or a listening post with only a radio and two or three men, and then we were under orders do not fire do not shoot just report what you see and if they came you were not to shoot and just be quiet and let em walk and just report. We had a squad walk by us we just had to be quiet and that way our squads out in the other positions would be ready to take action. Call in for an inner strike.

HP: Wow, oh okay this was in Chu Chi right?

PJ: Cu Chi (corrects Heidi's terrible pronunciation)

HP: Oh (laughs).

PJ: (laughs) that's it.

HP: Okay so did you were inside the tunnels yourself?

PJ: Yes

HP: You did?

PJ: One of the most frightening things you'll ever do.

HP: Going down the tunnels?

PJ: Going down the tunnel, you're crawling down there with a flashlight and very limited room to work and as you go on sometimes you come into an area, a room sometimes there are big rooms that they build underneath the ground, they have whole hospitals that are underneath the ground. And you find beds and bunks and mess halls where they make their food and training rooms, classrooms and their tunnels go everywhere you could not go very far and you find another tunnel, those tunnels were everywhere, the trenches everywhere, they could move their men through and supplies through and after the war Cu Chi the 25<sup>th</sup> infantry divisions base camp you'd go there today, and they will give you a tours of the tunnels that were underneath our base

camp that we never knew about. And when they started the Tet offensive, which is well known, a whole battalion of North Vietnamese regulars were under the 25<sup>th</sup> infantry's basecamp came out of their tunnels and made the attack on Saigon.

HP: Wow.

PJ Mhm.

HP: I think I remember my professor talking about that.

PJ: He probably did it. They were trying really hard to topple at that time, but they were stopped. But they came close to doing it but they were stopped.

HP: Um, so when you were inside the tunnels sometimes when I was reading about the tunnels, underneath Chu Ci (laughs) um did you ever encounter Vietnamese booby traps that they set?

PJ: Yea, one time I stopped one of my friends from tripping a wire that was attached to a hand grenade as they would put, I didn't encounter one of these, but during our training we were taught to watch out for pongee sticks which is bamboo that is sharpened very sharp and they would put dung at the end of these points so that if you were to hit it, you would get a terrible infection it would go right through your feet, they could scar you up pretty bad if you fell on one it would puncture you and go right into you, and so you had these very, they would make a hole in the ground and put these sticks in it and camouflage it, and if you were crawling in it you would fall right down through one, so there were lot of ways, lots of ways that they set these booby traps up to getcha but in the tunnels you were mostly worried about explosives. On one occasion my squad wen down under the tunnels and laid a charge, a blast of explosives down to cave it in and it came out and the length of the charge, the fuse that we put on it was timed for like two minutes time to get out before it blew up. So everybody got out and the charge didn't go off. And so we waited a little extra time and my sergeant said I'm gonna go back down in there. That's a foolish thing to do, don't that but he did with just a forty-five and his flashlight went down inside as we waited and waited and finally we could hear him shooting his weapon and he came flying out of that hole you know, he was saying it's gone, so between the time that the charge was lit and everybody got out, a Viet Cong or whoever was down in the tunnel, crawled under there and took the fuse out and took the explosives.

HP: Wow in just two minutes?

PJ: Yah and you see there was some really crazy things that they would do (clears throat). For instance, I remember seeing a five hundred pound bomb which is as big as this table that apparently was a dud, it was dropped and didn't go off. I remember seeing that bomb sawn in two with a hacksaw blade. (Eyes go very wide) I mean, who would be crazy and brave enough to do that?! But they sawed it in half and I don't know how long that would take, that's a very thick steel casing on it to get the explosives of two parts laying there in the field that they had cut it apart. They were so determined to and wiling to do stuff like that if we went out in an ambush and set out a claymore mine, which is another explosive with plastic explosives behind it with all

kinds of, what they call it, double up bar, it's a big pellet and they'd throw hundreds of them in the front, so if we would be attacked, we could trigger that and all that lead would go in the air and kill a lot of people at one time, so we put these out in front of use in our ambushes and sometimes in the morning, some of our squads would go out and those would be gone because they would see where would set up and crawl up, crawl up to where those are and take the wires off and steal them and then in the morning you had to be careful because they would set them up to get you and when you left in the morning, so you had to be on your guard constantly.

HP: Are you familiar with the term black echo that some of the soldiers describes when going inside the tunnels?

PJ: A black echo. No I'm not. Not heard that term.

HP: Oh, that's okay, it was just something I read I just didn't know if any of you, you or your friends had experienced that.

PJ: When you get in a tunnel it's just muffled all sounds are very hard to hear anything down there everything is muffled so I'm not familiar with that term.

HP: Okay, um, so can you describe to me a basic just general typical day?

PJ: They all changed, they were all different sometimes if were in base camp which we weren't very often, but if we were in base camp we would just be lounging around, there wasn't much for us to do. We had a mechanic pool and tracks but if you had something specific that you needed to be able taken care of we would be out there working on the track a little bit, usually changing supplies, making sure we had plenty of ammunition and hand grenades, fifty caliber and an M16, oh boy, shells, or ammo and then after that tracks was filled up, we would put food on it, enough food for a week out in the bush no water supply, but I was telling somebody yesterday that was just asking about that. I said I remember times when we didn't have enough water but we had cases of beer on board our tack. Plenty of beer, but no water.

HP: Isn't that ironic? (Laughs).

PJ: Yah it's a little ironic but that's what we had to do. Sometimes when we had a day off, but sometimes just getting a shower was a treat, you'd be out in the bush for a week and then you'd come in after crawling around the mud that you've been wearing he same clothes you've been wading in the water with and you get a shower that would be a real treat. Come back and crawl in your bunk and just get ready to go to sleep at night after being out all the time and an alarm would go off and we would have to go running out and get on our tracks. Somebody's been hit and needed help and run out into the jungle to go rescue them so you were busy all the time. One of the things I do recall is that you're just tired. Because you can't sleep much. When you're trying to sleep, you sleep with one eye open as we say and sleep slightly conscious you just never rally have that deep deep sleep, so your tired.

HP: So like you said with whole water and the food thing, I'm just curious what was a typical meal that you guys had?

**PJ:** (laughs) well we had, if you were in basecamp, they had a mess hall and would prepare a pretty good meal for you. We had everything from fried chicken to meatloaf and hamburgers and hotdogs. The typical menu like that. But if you were in the field, you ate c-rations then, they weren't as good as what they had today, it was in a little can and you could have lima beans and ham, or you could have a little beef stew and crackers, mine was always looking, they would have em in certain positions in a box, variety, and I was always looking for the ones that had fruit in them that I liked, so they'd start flipping the box over but I'd made sure I'd always watch what position that box was in and always get the ones that I want because they were all memorized.

**HP:** Okay, so you know with whole not getting a lot of showers, so the hygiene was pretty low as there was lot of infections and sicknesses that were around?

**PJ:** A lot okay? And I suppose if someone had allergies they broke out with that. Pretty bad, but I was going tell you about the food too. C-rations weren't the greatest, but if you wanted to heat it up, say you had pork and beans or some item you wanted, been better warm then cold, we would actually break off a price of what was called Plax axe, it was a plastic explosive and we would break of a little chunk of that stuff that the gov. probably paid thousands and thousands of dollars for that, for a little brick of it. We would break off a little chunk of that and when you light it, it burns just white hot and we would eat our sea rations like that, make it a warm meal

**HP:** (Laughs).

**PJ:** And then always in the supper time if possible, helicopters would come out and land we would have a hot meal there and you would have to go out one a time, run out and get a hot meal and get back away from the helicopter. It was risky, but they would do that, come out as often as they could and give you a nice warm meal for supper.

**HP:** Awh, that's sweet. Well here are some more serious questions I suppose, you said in the email it was hard to distinguish between the enemy, the actual Viet Cong enemy and the children and women and that kind of thing. So you mentioned a story of a women leaving a bomb in the laundry. Could you tell that story?

**PJ:** No, what happened was one woman, you see, they try to clear all these people and make sure they were safe to bring on base camp but of course you didn't know some of them had double lives and worked for the Americans during the day and at night killing people, maybe the same person that was working during the day was carrying a weapon at night was trying kill you. He got killed and she got killed and that's happened. On one occasion, um one of the guys in the unit, it didn't happen in my squad, but I read it. The boys would publish little newsletters on their units on what they were doing and how're they were doing you know, and I read a story in this paper of the base. One guy was out in the jungle had killed some Viet Cong and when he went up to the clear to gather up weapons, he saw his shirt, one of his fatigues, the guy was wearing one of his fatigues, he's out in the jungle. The Viet Cong is killed. This Viet Cong is killed, he's got one his fatigues on with his name on it, and the only way that could happen is that the people

on base, the Vietnamese would do our laundry. Okay? So you just take your stuff off and they bring it back to you, the only the thing that could've happened is if you're doing the laundry and pull a shirt out and give it to the Viet Cong.

HP: Wow that's interesting

PJ: So those kinds of things happened. So my point with that was you never knew what side they were on, they would act friendly to you and do things, give you services, but even on base camp they were keeping an eye open and reporting back, this is where they come with this supplies, this is where these weapons were, do you would have an idea where things were on base camp. And one time while I was there our ammo got blown up and none of us knew. How did they do that? How did they get past our security and everything to do that? Now we know, later, that is was because they had tunnels underneath.

HP: I heard that in church yesterday, so I thought that was, um, a story that actually happened to you, but um okay one second, so you and the soldiers were very aware of this, did you take extra precautions when you were around?

PJ: You didn't trust anybody. If you were out, your weapon was always at the ready, you were always keeping your eyes open and you could tell if things were a little more suspicious than others but there were always stories coming to us of when you're out on the highway doing patrol, and we did that too, your sitting there half a day you know, and not a lot to do, somebody be in the torrent and the tanks ready to fire and some would be o the turn on the tracks with the fifty calibers so they were watching the rest of us would be sitting around the track, probably on the shady side and people would come then, the locals would come and try to sell you things, things to eat, they had a game they'd play, a gambling game where there was a board that'd they lay out, it had, if I remember, it had a rooster and a scorpion and a snake and something else on these squares and you would bet your money on those squares and they would toss this die, and if you had it there then you'd win and they'd have to pay you, and so we'd waste some time gambling a little bit and try to gather some more dong, which was their money. And then people would come buy and sell things too, little stuff, being Americans you like your trinkets and you'd buy those from them and send them home to the family. Things like that. And worse. They were other things that were worse, that took place that I won't tell you about (Laughs).

HP: Okay, I'm sure there was (laughs as well) so did you see or were you yourself involve in any combat?

PJ: Oh yes.

HP: Lots of it?

Not lots of it, the common day you were still answering that question. You go from time of being relaxed, just siting on the tracks doing guard duty and the next thing you know, you're packing up and you're going out on an ambush that night. Even on base camp they'd drop you off and you'd come back the next morning and like I said, you get a call in the middle of night, or they

had big missions planned and you'd be out for a couple of weeks or a week and a time and your constantly going through the jungle and doing all the other activities I explained to you, but then all of a sudden your under fire! Now you've encountered the enemy and usually those fights were rather quickly. You fight for fifteen, thirty minutes, and poof! They've disappeared into the jungle and they're good at that. Catching you at a surprise, but it never bothered us much because we had so much protection that they didn't wanna challenge our fifty caliber machine guns, if you fire that you can cut down big trees with it I mean the bullets will just go right through it and we had a lot of fire power. We called in air strikes ahead of us. Nai Palm would go off and all fire from the explosion you know? We'd took care of most of the things we were up against but they were a lot of sniper fire as were doing our work, and bullets come flying by. People would shoot at us different occasions when we were going down a trail and we would surprise them sometimes. They would be sitting, one time we found some that were just sitting, conversing having a cigarette together. Four or five VC you never know what is going to happen. There is combat but the combat can be quick. It all depended, the units they are other guy that I know who were probably in a lot more combat then I was. They were shelled for forty days straight trying to hold down a position. And it could be very very bad depending on where you were. I had a lot of fire power around me and that was always comforting.

HP: I bet wow. Okay so how was there many casualties in your unit?

PJ: Well (clears throat) when I was there I think we had three that were wounded or killed. Okay? And it's always a sickening feeling, someone you just talked to and they're dead or someone you're mad at. I had that experience (clears throat) where I was mad at this fellow and exchanged some thoughts and about an hour later he is dead and you know it was a sickening feeling, it seemed surreal.

HP: That's sad.

PJ: We were under orders in that day, they wanted to know how many people you were killing, so from after a night battle or ambush you come back in the day time and they may have quickly buried the bodies and we had to dig the graves up and count the bodies. So we had to do that. Found out who was in those graves so they wanted a body count. That was very important we gotta know if we are being successful or not. I remember finding two bodies that had been decomposed after, I don't know how long, and I went back in there and found a soldier, an enemy soldier, laying and trying to be hidden, looks like they hid him behind a bush, I found two of them in their uniforms, flesh all one from their faces, right over their face, still had their hair, and flesh hanging off their arms, I mean those are sights you see, you know. And then the other men that came up and caught up with me thought it would be fun to play soccer with their heads. They were kicking their heads around playing soccer. And another was digging through his pockets, trying to find what might be in the pockets to keep, souvenirs. I remember pulling out a wallet and looking through the wallet and seeing a picture of his wife and maybe kids, so those are things that you don't want to have to do.

HP: That's horrifying!

**PJ:** But that's part of war.

**HP:** Soccer? Ugh (shakes head in disgust) Okay so you said you had several close calls would you mind sharing a few of those?

**PJ:** There were several things, like I said you know like the sniper fire I would be out in front sometimes. We'd lay out a, especially if the other guys were running tunnels and you'd try to go off to the side where they might come up and be there to attack them so as your moving in a long slowly through the jungle, trying to get out of sight, every now and then a bullet comes zipping by, okay somebody's in somebody's sights then you'd have to be careful with that so you never knew, another time when I was doing mine sweeping, out in front of our, we had like twenty-five tracks and tanks going into the iron triangle and I was chosen to be out in front of all them and be the mine sweeper to make sure any booby traps, land mines, would be all clear when they went in there and so as I'm doing that I'm finding a number of these land mines, the men would be probing and digging them up after I'd found them and this bulldozer engineer we had to cross the stream and it needed a bridge, we had portable bridges for it to be carried on top of tanks, once you get cleared they would drive up and the bridge would just kind of extended out, go down and all the tracks would be over that. Okay? Cross the streams and rivers like that. So I'm running this mine sweeper, and the engineers the ones who get the ground ready for the track tank to come out there after the bridge, pulled up alongside me saying you're going to slow and I said well be my guest, because we find a lot of mine heads, you go ahead. So he went by me and he lowered his blade to smooth the ground he pushed up a big bomb out of the ground which had wires running out of it which was a booby trap, if a tracker had got near there we were gonna blow that bomb up it was big enough that it would've killed a lot of people. And so it was right there and the guy on the bulldozer took off running and of course we were ordered to follow the wire that came out of the bomb to go down into the jungle and find out who might be at the other end of that thing. It didn't go off, so obviously it was either a dud or nobody was there. We got at the end of the wire and nobody was there, but had there been some body there. I wouldn't be here that bomb would've wiped out a number of us going off, but there were times, like I said, when we were going into a tunnel and that hand grenade that was there, we had an ambush that was ambushed, we had set up in front of this village we were protecting if they were to come, we were gonna get hit. And so we went out and set our tanks and tracks out around this village (coughs) and then the squads were sent out, our squad was sent out to go set up and then another squad wasn't very far from us, in the night not very far from us, they were hit with different colored tracers, theirs were green and ours were red and you can see the bullets coming all around us an then when we came back in the in the morning, got in our tracks to leave, people from the village had crawled out and put what was called a tilt rod mine in the ground, all around us and what that is, its land mine but the way its triggered is they put a branch in to the triggering system and its looks just like a stick growing up out of the ground and if you're not watching, you move your track and you tip over that stick and blows that mine up. And they did that from the village we were protecting, that's what I meant you don't know who your enemy is, surely there are good people in the village, but there are obviously VC, Viet Cong in the village, so we had that and I was aboard (coughs) I'm going to need to get up and get some water.

**PJ:** We were in the iron triangle again and we always put a tank in front of us because the tank has a lot of armor underneath it, so if they blow a land mine it will bow all the tread off but there is enough armor to protect the men inside, and so the tracks which are lighters armor would go behind the tanks and in one occasion in the Iron Triangle the tank hit a land mine and it had to be fixed, had to fix the tread, which they do right there you know? And we were ordered around that disabled tank in our track, and I was down inside and usually we would ride up on it, it was about as safe as riding inside cause if you had a land mine you could jump off and might stand a chance of living. But (clears throat) as I was down inside going around that tank our track just jolted, we had hit another mine and I jumped off out of there knowing that usually everybody dies when the mine goes off on a track but I jumped out of the hatch and smoke was billowing up out of the ground and I went back and looked and there was a very large land mine in the ground still smoking and only the center portion had gone off, just a small amount of the explosive had gone off, the rest of it didn't detonate which is amazing. And so I'm still here because that didn't go off and that was one really close call (clears throat) then another time we were going down the trail and as we got down inside the, we had seen the point man, which was my sergeant on that day, saw several VC sitting and again smoking, he passed word back to us silently giving us hand signs that somebody's right here. And we had brought with us that day some of the guys who had never been out in in a battle before, hadn't gone out on ambush or patrol or truck drivers. And so they wanted to go, he put them in the back of our squad, there was about three of them that were following us and when we made those motions that there was somebody right here, they got scared and started checking their weapons to make sure there was, around in the chamber, making some noise and I was way up at the front and I could hear them and I thought well the VC that are just maybe twenty yards in front of me can hear this as well. You can't really see because the jungle is very dense. There had to be a little opening that he walked on the edge and saw them and went back in so we, he asked me to run with him in that opening, we were just going to spray them with bullets, and as we ran out there nobody was there. They had heard those sounds. And from that point on we were receiving fire and we had to fight our way out of that one. But then I was wounded, you know that?

HP: Yes

**PJ:** Well I was again, I was in the iron triangle going down a rice paddy to check out some huts and they blew a claymore mine on us, and it knocked me into the rice paddy itself and I thought I was going to die. I got outta there and I don't want to go into all those details, but I was wounded. I had a wound in my eyes, my head, my legs, waist down, really riddled. Losing blood. And certain I was going to die, but praise God I didn't, the Lord spared my life and there has been miracle after miracle involved that followed up after all that.

HP: Thank the Lord, that's incredible. Wow, so after that, after that injury from the claymore mine was that the end of your serving the war or did you continue?

**PJ:** I had to be hospitalized at Long Bien where I had surgery there, and then from there I was sent to Walter Reed hospital, and I was at Walter Reed hospital from the end of July to December, six months. Five, six months something like that. Underwent surgeries and had retina



welded down in my eye, which was very experimental back in the time, and it was a miraculous thing the doctor told me there, it was a miracle I wasn't blind because, you know if I told you all these details we would be here forever! (laughs). But that event left me with shrapnel wounds from my waist down, including a shattered right tibia. It also included a very small fragment passing through my right eye lense and detaching the retina. The examining doctor at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C. said that it even appeared likely that the optic nerve may have been separated from the brain. He was more amazed that the serious injury hadn't left me blind. He stated, "You're very lucky to have had a good doctor following my injuries in Vietnam." He was very surprised to learn that I didn't have a doctor for my eye back in Vietnam. The only doctor to examine my eye did so after my complaining of seeing a black speck that appeared to be floating in my vision. At that time I was unable to get out of bed because of my condition and after simply looking into my eye with a flash light, he said that a thorough examination required the microscope in the clinic. He added, "When you can get out of bed, we'll put you in a wheelchair and do the examination." That didn't happen until I continued complaining about the eye after my arrival at Walter Reed. This was five weeks following my injuries. The most threatening wound caused from the claymore detonation was a gaping hole above my right eye. A fragment had broken through the skull carrying bone fragments from the sinus cavity into the frontal lobe on the right side of my brain. That injury could have taken my life, or at least, severely damaged my brain, and with it, the quality of my life. My neurosurgeon, Dr. Patrick, had informed me that I was being sent stateside after three weeks of recovery at the twenty fourth Evac Hospital in Long Bein and I would be leaving the next day. Those were wonderful words for me to hear; I was going home! But, not so fast. During the night I was awakened by a light flashing in my face and the firm grip of hands holding my head still. A voice behind the light said, "Hold still Jerry we have to reopen the wound above your eye." It was Dr. Patrick. He told me that I had a staph infection in the wound and they would have to place a wick into the wound to let it drain and that I would be receiving antibiotic treatments to take care of the infection. Of course this meant I wouldn't be leaving in the morning for the States. That was a devastating moment for me. But, after many antibiotic filled syringes I was well enough to be transported to America and the next stages for healing medicine at Walter Reed. (Sighs), this information is important in order for you to understand the next statement made by the examining eye doctor at Walter Reed. After hearing that I didn't have a doctor for my eye in Vietnam, he said, "I will tell you this, you got the right antibiotic for your eye in Vietnam otherwise you'd be blind! "I believe that the Lord used the infection of my head wound to save the vision in my right eye. No doctor was caring for the serious injury that could have made me blind. The medication, the antibiotic prescribed for the staph infection of my brain was also saving my sight. I received several months of medical attention, including retina surgery, deep-vein-blood-clot therapy, and rehabilitation at Walter Reed. At last I was given opportunity to enjoy a thirty-day convalescence leave. I returned home to Grand Rapids, Michigan. To be blessed by the healing and loving care of my family, which included, mom and dad and nine brothers and sisters. While there, my mother shared this story. She said, "Jerry you need to know that we were all praying for your safety." Now this was miraculous in its self because only my eldest brother and mother were faithful Christians. She continued, "Then we got a Western

Union telegram from the Dept. of the Army stating, “Your son, specialist Jerry L. LaFave, while entering a tunnel sustained a minor chest and head wound from a secondary explosion; repeat: minor injuries. No further information to follow.” We were very frightened and concerned for your safety and continued our prayers as we made further contacts trying to get more information. Sharon, one of my sisters, said she knelt by her bedside and as she arose to get into bed she heard a voice. The voice said, “when you see the scar on his face you will know that this is the boy I saved for you.” I was overwhelmed with emotion and hobbled on my crutches into the bathroom where I wept in repentance and renewed my commitment to Christ. I also committed myself to follow through with promises made during the aftermath of sustaining my injuries. I had promised the Lord that I would serve Him the rest of my life if He would spare me from dying in the mud of that rice paddy. He truly had heard my prayer and the prayers of my family. I didn’t know it at the time but, His plan would be to lead me into ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I was baptized in November of 1969. Through His grace and healing power I have known the love of my wife and children and enjoyed more than thirty years of ministry. Each day, my scars remind me of days of war and a life that was spared. I received several months of medical attention, including retina surgery, deep-vein-blood-clot therapy, and rehabilitation at Walter Reed. At last I was given opportunity to enjoy a thirty-day convalescence leave. I returned home to Grand Rapids, Michigan to be blessed by the healing and loving care of my family.

