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Interview
Gary Rafferty
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Interview conducted by Lenore Fenn
Videotape length 177 minutes

INT: Tell us who you are, and a little about your background, where you grew up, where you went to school.

GR: My name is Gary Rafferty. I was born in Lowell, Mass., but I grew up mostly in southern New Hampshire. I'm the oldest of two children. I have a younger sister. My father was a World War II veteran and served in North Africa and Sicily, Italy. I came from a generation of men whose fathers and uncles had all served in the military, and I grew up in a different era with different values than we have now. I enlisted in the Army in 1969, just out of high school, because of my draft classification was… I couldn't go to college, and daddy was a poor guy, so college wasn't an option, and so I figured I'd enlist. The tale grows muddier after that, I guess.

INT: Did you have a political point of view at the time you enlisted?

GR: Yes, I was in favor of the war through high school.

INT: Congruent with your family?

GR: Right. It wasn't until I was actually in the military and had an opportunity to talk to other veterans who had served there—they were cadre—that I began to get a different view of what was happening in Vietnam.

INT: So you volunteered after graduating from high school?

GR: Um-hmm.

INT: And how did your family feel about that?

GR: Well, I joined when I was seventeen, so they both had to sign for me to go in. I was brought up in an Irish-Catholic family, so there wasn't a lot of demonstration of feeling, and my father was an alcoholic.

Ostensibly, my idea was to be patriotic, but there was a lot more to it than that in retrospect. I think my father was proud that I had entered the service and went to Vietnam, and I think he felt it would bring us together, but I don't think it did. I think it brought us further apart.

INT: Where did you go for training?

GR: Originally I entered the service to be a helicopter pilot, and I took my Basic Training in Fort Polk, Louisiana, and then I started primary helicopter school at Fort Walters, Texas—that was in November or December, 1969. The military had decided they needed [fewer] pilots than they had previously planned on and brought larger numbers of South Vietnamese cadets to the United States to train. Those of us that had enlisted to attend Warrant Officer training were rapidly washed out. Because they required less numbers of pilots than they had foreseen, a company of Warrant Officer candidates would start out with probably a hundred, a hundred-twenty, and finish with a dozen. Those of us that were washed out were assigned whatever duty the military needed us to do, because our contract for enlistment only called that we went to [that] training, not that we graduated from it. So I went from there to Fort Sill, Oklahoma for artillery school, and then in May of 1970, left for Vietnam.

INT: Was there a title to the specialty that you came away from artillery school with?

GR: Yes. The code is 13E20, and it's Field Artillery Operations and Intelligence Assistant. That's the title of the job, and the job really could be almost anything from Forward Observer to Fire Control, and any other related thing that needed to be done.

INT: Was there discussion about the war? Were there protests around the place where you'd been trained? Were you aware of anti-war sentiment at that time?

GR: I trained in Oklahoma so it wasn't the hot bed of sedition in the 1970's, but I slowly became aware that there was a different viewpoint on the war, and I think what primarily made me start thinking was when I talked to the veterans that had come back, not the officers or the senior non-commissioned officers, but the Corporals and the buck Sergeants, who had actually been there.

INT: I don't want to get ahead of your story, but when was that that you started talking to the men who had come back?

GR: I'd have to guess and say it was August, September, October.

INT: Before you went?

GR: Before I went. Yes, 1969. So, that's when my personal questions began to surface, was during that period of time, and think I left for Vietnam…I'm not sure what was really going on.

INT: What were they saying?

GR: I tend to remember the more colorful fellows, and there was a Corporal who had—and I just remember his first name was Jake; I don't remember his last name—and he used to wear rose-colored granny glasses. Much to the annoyance of the First Sergeant. I remember the two things he said. I asked him what Vietnam was like and he says, "Kid, Vietnam is like a three-ring circus, and there's nobody in charge." Then the other comment that he made that I remember is, he said it was like a bad acid trip. I didn't know what that really meant at the time, but I look back and it was pretty prophetic what he had to say, and I think it was that comment more than any official explanation or…because it was more real to me, even though I didn't quite understand what he meant.

INT: How did you get to Vietnam?

GR: I left from Logan, and there was a big snowstorm, and I was a day late.

INT: Were you alone or with friends?

GR: No, I was alone. My family brought me to Logan and I left from there and had to transfer planes in Chicago in order to get to Oakland.

INT: Was it a commercial flight?

GR: Right. Went in uniform on commercial and it was May 5th, 1970. It was Kent State[1]. When I got to Chicago I bought a newspaper. Some fellow in a business suit asked me when I was transferring planes if I'd shot any students that day, and I didn't understand—because I hadn't read the newspaper or anything—what was happening until I got on the plane and opened a newspaper in Chicago. So it was quite a bizarre leaving. It's hard to remember the flavor—history doesn't happen in a vacuum, and there was a certain flavor to what was going on, and I really believed at that time that there was going to be a civil war in the United States. Here we are in the nineties, it sounds kind of far-fetched, but I think if you remembered back to that time it wasn't that far-fetched at all. It wasn't a fun time to travel in uniform. I can remember that.

INT: Do you reflect any ambivalence about whose side you were on?

GR: Yes, I was feeling like there was going to be civil war and I was stuck on the wrong side. So that was the leaving anyway.

INT: Where did you go? What was your particular role, your responsibilities, your job experiences?

GR: I went to the extreme northern part of Vietnam along the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone]. I was in A Battery, 2nd Battalion, 94th Artillery, and during the first part of my tour I did…I was kind of a restless soul; I was never satisfied doing one thing. I would always try to get a lateral transfer to do something else. I drove a jeep for an intelligence officer, which just amounted to I was his chauffeur, and I worked in a battalion fire control center.

INT: What is a fire control center?

GR: Basically you have the forward observer in the field with the radio, and he would call back to a fire control center with the coordinates that he wanted to hit. They would figure out the proper elevation of the guns, the direction, the powder charge, and all these other computations that needed to be made to make all that happen, and then they would talk by telephone to the gun crew. They would tell the gun crew what setting to put the gun on in order to do all that. Fire direction control is what they call that, and so I worked at the battalion level until September—I got there in May. Then in September I went from there to a battery level, which is a smaller group, and worked in that fire control from September until January of the following year, January, 1971. During that time we operated in an area south of Da Nang called the Khe Sanh Valley, and with the Marines. Then in January we left to go to…well, we were told it was a three-day raid, and it turned out to be a three and a half month operation. I left for what amounted to—*was*—a Laos invasion, and it's kind of like a footnote in history now. I guess most people remember Cambodia. That's why the Kent State protests [happened], but most people don't remember the Laos invasion. The military probably doesn't want to remember, because it wasn't very successful from a tactical point of view. There was different things that happened on the way there that pretty much…soldiers are a suspicious lot, and they believe in omens and…

INT: What was the morale like? What was going on?

GR: Everyone looks at Vietnam in the seventies and says, well, the morale was poor and somehow the troops were to blame, and I think they've got the cart before the horse. I think the leadership was lousy and the morale suffered as a result, not that the morale was lousy and that the leadership suffered. The military kind of turned from leadership to management and I don't think you can manage people to their deaths. I

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[1] At Kent State University on May 4, 1970 National Guard troops fired on an anti-war demonstration

think you have to lead them, and "Vietnamization"[2] was an avowed policy of the United States government. Those of us that were in the field…I mean, withdrawal was happening all the time, and so it became a very—I don't know the word—I think the hopelessness was what I remember the most. The men I served with weren't fools. And no one wanted to be the last one to die in the war, and that's basically what we'd been asked to do. Plus there was the type of fighting that went on in Laos.

Vietnam is seen as a guerilla war with peasant farmers by day and guerilla fighters by night. People lose sight that the war lasted ten years and that the tactics and the organization changed drastically in that period of time. In Laos we were fighting North Vietnamese Regular Army units, and they were equipped with artillery and tanks and guns. They were at least as well trained as we were. So my war in Laos, on the border of Laos, was much more conventional than guerilla, and it did not take place in populated village areas. It took place in the middle of nowhere, basically. One of the things about the Laos operation was…in Cambodia when the Americans and South Vietnamese advanced, the North Vietnamese retreated and left. The Viet Cong retreated and left large numbers of supplies that were captured, but that was the bottom of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and they could afford to do that because they knew that the supply line was safer further up. But they allowed us to do that in Laos. We were really…that was the funnel, and they couldn't…tactically. They changed their tactics, and while the United States expected them not to do that. They initially retreated, but then they reinforced and the number of Americans and South Vietnamese that were allotted to this operation was too small. We basically got our asses handed to us. When you look back at the fall of Vietnam, the seeds of that defeat were really in the hills of Laos. The cream of their

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killing four students and wounding several others.

[2] Vietnamization referred to the U.S. military's policy to have the South Vietnamese Army play a larger role in the war.

Army was decimated in Laos. So, while it may have been a strategic victory in that period of time—1971—in the long run [it] was the beginning of the end. Those of us that were there saw that the South Vietnamese were not going to be able to stand up to the North Vietnamese in a slug fest. I think the morale just kind of plummeted at that point from where I sit.

My particular battery didn't lose that many men because we just reverted into part gopher, and dug deep. We were there the longest at the border at the place called Lo Bao, but there was a lot of other. That was the only place that our battalion had ever operated altogether, and there are other batteries and units that took a lot of casualties in Laos. We were in artillery and we were fighting artillery duels with the North Vietnamese, which is kind of like a gunfight except you use cannons instead of small arms. On the eighteenth of March when we were withdrawing, our sister unit was almost wiped out. The fighting was quite intense, and more conventional than not.

INT: When?

GR: I'd say probably from the middle of February until the 18th of March.

INT: And then?

GR: And then we went back to Khe Sanh and then back towards the coast, and then I went home from there.

INT: While you were there did you see a difference in attitude in support groups who were on… and between officers and men? Were there any conflicts?

GR: Towards the rear there were race problems, but as you got closer to the fighting that would go away. The military was kind of focused on the marijuana problem when actually the heroin problem was going whacko. I guess it was easier to conceal, and it was easy to buy, and it kind

of fit in with the general decline [and] hopelessness that everyone felt. When I think back and I get to the feelings of Vietnam, not just the events, it isn't so much the fear; it's just the weariness. After a while I just got so tired I didn't care any more, and it's beyond physical tiredness. It just grinds you down to dust. It really became a question of endurance, whether I would make it till I got home. Like most American troops, I did; I kind of stumbled across the finish line. And while that kept the number of psychological casualties down and the military could claim success, it all came home to roost later on—what they call post-traumatic stress disorder. But you know, it's easy to talk about the funny times, and I think a lot of times comrade veterans have a tendency not to talk about the things that broke our hearts, and that's a mistake, because it gives the wrong idea. The funny things are what you wake up from in the middle of the night, and so when I talk about the war I kind of force myself to talk about the things that broke my heart, because that's the essence of the experience, not the funny times.

In Laos we used to do police call with empty sandbags and we'd pick up pieces of our own men, and we did that for a month. We used to put the bodies in a metal trailer, along with the sandbags full of pieces, and for a lot of years I had forgotten what happened to the bodies. Every day or so they'd come and move the trailer and put another one there, and we'd fill that one up. By the time that Laos had come I had ten months in Vietnam and I had pretty much decided that I didn't trust anybody. I didn't trust anyone to stay awake when they were supposed to stay awake, so I would stay awake every night on guard duty alone in the hole. This is in the middle of nowhere; there's no lights; there's no nothing, and about an hour after it would get dark every night, you could hear the rats come out, and they'd climb up in the trailer and they're feeding on the bodies. That's what the Laos border was like. That's what propelled me to come back and join

Vietnam Vets Against the War. There was no altruistic idea; there was the reality of what I had been through, and what the fellows that I left there were still really going through, and the charade of "Vietnamization" is really just a sick joke. We understood that, at least I understood that. Sometimes cynicism works well, because they used to come around and tell us that that[3] wouldn't hurt you, and don't pay any attention to the planes, and I think I was exposed, but I did my best to limit my exposure. I wouldn't stay outside when they sprayed. I tried not to drink from running water that wasn't purified or passed through a filter, and basically I didn't believe them by that point.

INT: What exactly were they saying?

GR: They would say it wouldn't hurt you and figured anything that was killing trees was entirely good. But I think I had pretty much established that these people had gotten me into a situation where I was killing people I didn't hate, basically, for people that I did. So my not trusting them, I think in the end, somewhat worked out. I tried my best to limit my exposure. I do believe I was exposed, but I remember they had a… On the anti-smoking campaign at one time in the military they were telling us that smoking was bad for our health and in my cynical point of view I thought that was kind of funny.

INT: Did your colleagues buy the propaganda?

GR: I don't know. It's been said, and I think it's true, that a smaller unit of men will adopt a personality. I was in A Battery, and we were the social misfits of the battalion, and consequently our ability to believe propaganda was probably the lowest of the three batteries, but our fighting ability was probably the best. All the goody-goodies went to B Battery and they got almost wiped out to a man in Laos, and C Battery was everybody else, and they took pretty heavy casualties, too. But I would say that my

[3] "That" refers to Agent Orange or other defoliant spraying which was done by airplane.

colleagues were seventeen, eighteen, nineteen-year-old boys who learned the hard way who to believe and who not to believe. I don't think the anti-smoking campaign made much headway with us when compared to the dangers of shrapnel and rockets and mortars. It seemed kind of silly to us that they would be worried that we were smoking cigarettes, but that's kind of where the military was at that time.

INT: Can you describe what that involved?

GR: Well, that's the other thing that—what changed in those ten years was the weaponry. Our weapons were eight-inch and 175 millimeter heavy artillery. Their weapons was 152 millimeter gun howitzers, and the operation was so poorly planned that we arrived at the border of Laos with no sandbags and no beams and no material to build bunkers. When we arrived in the convoy, there was a bulldozed spot in the jungle that was to be home sweet home. Artillery was falling long and short, that's what they called bracketing, and that's a technique in the artillery that if you can get one round to land long, and one to land short, then you know that the target is between that two elevations. It's called zeroing in, and we got on the radio and asked them to lift the artillery fire, and they said, "It ain't ours. It's North Vietnamese." So basically we set up in an area that [was] already zeroed in. This is kind of technical, but that's the nature of the beast—the difference between a gun and a howitzer is the speed of the projectile and the [trajectory], so a gun howitzer's speed, the speed of the shell is much faster than a howitzer and it hits the ground going much faster and penetrates much deeper. We found that you could not build a bunker that would survive a direct hit from a 152. So what we did was dug smaller bunkers as deep as we could, and not put too many men in one hole, because if you took a direct hit you were history. Part of my justified anger, I feel—you know, the history book says planning at core level was substandard, and what that meant was we arrived at the border with no

sandbags and no beams. If you're going to build a bunker, you've got to put something on top, and you've got a lot of weight when you start building the sandbags, and if you don't have beams you can't build adequate bunkers. And that's basically what happened.

When we first got there we thought that two layers of logs and two layers of sandbags was adequate. I had a friend whose nickname—of course we had nicknames—his nickname was Tennessee, and I'm assuming that's where he was from. He was in a hole adjacent, probably ten feet away from a hole that took a direct hit, and was knocked unconscious and also smothered when his hole collapsed. After that he dug a hole probably eight by eight and at least twelve or fourteen feet deep. I remember being afraid to jump into it, because I was afraid I'd break my leg, and then once he got to the bottom he dug sideways.

INT: And these were to be shell bombed?

GR: Yes. He went out in the jungle with the chainsaw and one of track vehicles and dragged logs. He was from Tennessee so he knew Abe Lincoln log-splitting techniques, apparently. He dragged logs back in and split them lengthwise and laid them over a hole and then built a big crib out of sandbags and dirt and put big rocks on top of the sandbags to try to get around the detonator if it did hit at the surface of the sandbags rather than penetrate to a deeper level. So some of the fellows carried digging to an extreme, I would say.

INT: Did it work?

GR: It did in his case. I used the other technique of digging one hole very deep, and tried to be microscopic, with the idea that an eight-by-eight hole is easier to hit than a two-by two-hole. That worked, too.

INT: So, you were in a hole where you didn't have room to lie down or to crouch?

GR: I had dug a separate hole to sleep in. Ironically, they rarely fired at us at night. They would mostly fire in the daytime when they could see well, because they had us zeroed in. It was to the point where the ammunition for us had to come in by truck, because it was much too heavy to lift by air. It came up the only road that we had to this place, and so when the trucks would arrive we'd start taking and coming, and it was like a routine after a while. It would be foggy in the early morning, because we were in this mountainous area, OBG area. Just like in New Hampshire or someplace the fog would form in the morning and cover the ground so they wouldn't usually shoot until about nine o'clock until the sun came up and started to burn the fog off. Then if helicopters came to re-supply or trucks came to re-supply, then we'd get hit for sure. They had us zeroed in, so any movement above ground would usually draw fire, and the road became nicknamed Ambush Alley. It was supposed to be a highway, but it was really like the most miserable dirt road you could ever find in your life. I have a copy of the unit history and it's just amazing to read how creatively cryptic the military can get when it says that during the last part of March—the history says that—the road became impassable for thin-skinned vehicles. In English that means that anything but a tank wouldn't make it up the road, but that's the military's way of disguising what it was like. The food was lousy and there was no showers; there was no nothing, and you just lived in the ground in a hole. I ran across a photo a couple of years ago, and it was hard to tell where the dirt ended and the men began, because we were all—we were told it was a three-day operation, so I only brought one set of clothes. In the end I didn't have no knees, no ass left in my pants. We were dressed in rags, and we were the same color as the dirt, and the vehicles were the same color as the dirt. We had perfect camouflage. All you had to do was not move and they couldn't…so we were filthy. It

was incredible to look at that photo and remember how primeval it really was.

My job was really to work in fire control and I mostly pulled guard duty. The other thing was because I had been to helicopter school I had a good idea of how the pilot would want to approach to evacuate the wounded. He'd want to come into the wind, make a steep approach if he could, to limit his exposure to ground fire. My best friend was the medic. I would usually go pop smoke so the pilot could tell where we were, and confirm the color of the smoke so he'd make sure he wasn't sitting down in the middle of the North Vietnamese unit, and then come into the wind and land. We'd prepare to put the wounded fellows on the helicopter before. All the while all this is happening, of course, the North Vietnamese artillery is adjusting, trying to hit us and the helicopter. So a lot of times it became a race to see who was going to win it. I got into the rescuing business in Vietnam not so much later on, and it's what my real 13E20 operations and intelligence—that really didn't mean crap. You did what had to be done, and that's kind of what I gravitated towards. That was all to come full circle later on in civilian life. But I think I kind of stumbled and sleepwalked my last month or so there.

INT: Did you sleep?

G**R:** No, you don't sleep too well, generally, and if you do, you sleep in the day. I was lucky to get four hours a day. In that atmosphere if you get ninety percent on a test you figure you did okay, and you'd be congratulating each other. But in Vietnam if you get ninety percent, somebody died, and a lot of times the people that died weren't the enemy, they were your own. When you add in the everyday grind of police call and evacuating the wounded, running fire missions, and staying up at night and holding guard duty, and maybe catching a couple hours in the morning when it's foggy before they start the whole circus once more, it's no wonder

that mistakes got made. That's when the combat veteran knows the reality of the situation versus someone else's idea of what it might be. It's a three-ring circus and there's no one in charge.

I'm able to look at it a little differently at forty than I did at eighteen. The whole operation was a zoo. It was poorly conceived. There wasn't enough troops. It was based on the premise that the Vietnamese would retreat and they didn't cooperate, and then it was covered up. I remember Richard Nixon on the radio speaking of the great victory in Laos, and I remember throwing my radio into the jungle, a little pocket radio, because there wasn't… I don't know what he was talking about, but it wasn't where I was, and the political double-speak—it really came home to me there in Laos. The other real kick in the groin was I was a nineteen-year-old and they had the draft lottery; it was the first year of the draft lottery, and the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper that we used to get ran the numbers of the lottery for your birth date in the back, when I had ten months in Vietnam. My number was 254, so I would have never got drafted, and that's my kind of luck, anyway. I remember that, too.

I left my particular unit on the ninth of April when we were pulling back from the border and went to like a holding company to transfer back to the States. You basically left alone, the same way you'd come in, and you might meet two or three people from other units of the battalion, but you didn't leave with friends or anything. By the time I left I had a couple of people in the unit I cared about. I think there's a natural constricting of the circle of compassion in combat. You start out with some kind of altruistic idea that you're going to [bond with] anybody that's an American, and then pretty soon it's anybody in your branch of the service, and then pretty soon it's anybody in your company or your battery, and then pretty soon it's anybody in your section, and then pretty soon it's two or three people, and then pretty soon it's yourself. I don't think that has to do with

your goodness or evilness as a person. It's a natural constricting of how much energy you have left over to expend on other people. One of the things that they pointed out to me in VA—I went through a debriefing program, combat debriefing—and he said it was very significant that I dug a hole alone at night, because it showed that I had already reached the point of constriction—normally you'd dig it with someone else; you'd pick one person in that unit, and I had already gotten to the point where I didn't do that—so psychologically I was already withdrawn to that pinpoint. After we left the border I remember very little between the middle of March and the ninth of April. I don't believe we were in heavy combat at that time, but I had pretty much burned out, and so there's a lot of days and weeks in there that I don't really remember what happened. I have a copy of the unit history and it kind of jogged my memory, but I don't really remember. I remember a couple of incidents here and there, but nowhere near the time line that I had before that period in Laos at the border. There's just kind of still shots and snips of motion picture memory that I have of that last period of time.

I've read a lot since then and it has to do with combat fatigue, but I didn't understand that at the time. I came back by commercial jet and until I had gone through combat debriefing I had forgotten that. I always thought I went straight home, but I didn't. I had a friend in training, advanced training, who had gone to Vietnam approximately the same time as I had, and he had shot himself in the chest. I went to visit him in the VA hospital—and I want to say in Wisconsin, someplace in the upper middle part of the country—before I went home. Kent State was the leaving [time] for Vietnam, and the return was on Good Friday, and I was discharged on Easter Sunday, so those of us with a Catholic background… I'm not sure there's not some symbolic message in there somewhere. I went to visit him first before I went home. I didn't tell my parents that I was coming, I just

showed up. When I went through my letters—my father saved all the letters I had sent from Vietnam—you can tell the level of combat by the amount of letters, not so much by what's written, but by the frequency of writing in between January and my discharge I sent two letters home, and prior to that they wouldn't…

INT: How [well did they know what you were] experiencing in Vietnam?

GR: Not very well. Part of the denial was that if I could just get out of there I'd be all right. We talked about this in veteran's group and it seemed to be two ways it went—either you told them everything, or you didn't tell them anything. I took the latter. I didn't tell them anything, really. There was one letter from the border that said, "You wouldn't have believe this whole operation," and it was a real farce, and that some day I would tell them about it, but I never did.

INT: Wow.

GR: I just think I was overwhelmed by it. I wouldn't have known what to say. It took me twenty years to get dribs and drabs of it back, and it was too raw then, too close to the surface. I arrive home and then my father wants to take me down to the American Legion and introduce me to all the old boys there, and man, I don't want no part of that shit. And you know—it's taken me a lot of years to figure out—I was really angry at him, that he didn't have the courage to come out of the bottle long enough to tell me about the rats, you know, where he'd spent three years in combat. I think there's a generation of men that sat on the bar stools and sent their sons to war, knowing better. Right or wrong, *my* sons know what the war is about, and I might make a lot of mistakes [but] I'm not going to make that one. I think that's one of my lessons from Vietnam is to care enough to say what hurts, instead of playing the game with the good old boys.

INT: So you didn't [talk with them] about the war?

GR: Initially I didn't…I probably didn't talk to them too much about the war until about 1989. During the Gulf War I talked a lot about it, and that coincided with my own denial of how significant what I had gone through…but that all played out again.

INT: About the South Vietnamese, what were your interactions with them and your impressions?

GR: I'm trying to think of one interaction. We used to have this observation post on the very edge of the Demilitarized Zone. It was on a firebase on A2. It used to be near Con Thien but then they changed it. They wanted to confuse everyone as to where it was, and they called it A2. We were in an old French cement tower pillbox thing that stuck up on the edge of the DMZ. If it hadn't been so ridiculous it would have almost have been comical, because the South Vietnamese would raise their flag in the morning—and the North Vietnamese had this gigantic flag, probably four times the size of the McDonald's flag—that they would raise on the other side of the river, and then there was cease fire at that time. You couldn't shoot across the river, but you could shoot halfway across the river. A2 was a hot place. You'd always take a lot of incoming there, and we had this—they've got a word for it, I don't remember, this thing on a tripod and it had a laser range find, which was hot shit back in 1971, and big binocular things on it or something—we used to watch the DMZ. It was like that area of the DMZ was low brush, kind of like Oklahoma with rolling hills with low brush; it wasn't triple canopy jungle or anything. One day we see these three North Vietnamese soldiers bebopping across the DMZ, and they're got hats—you know, pith helmets—and packs and rifles, and I mean these are uniformed soldiers. We had previously…this had been using American artillery, and if you fed their coordinates from the range finder into the computer you'd get first round hits; it would be known then as adjusting high, low, left, right, up, down, so they have a chance to run around like

chickens with their heads cut off, and an order had come down from the gods above that we were to call the Vietnamese artillery unit at the base and have them do this mission. So the Lieutenant says to me, "Well, this is what we've got to do" and I said, "Oh, this is going to be a real horror show, there's no way. This is what we've got to do." So, he calls them on the crank telephone, and gives them what they call a polar clot, which is another way of directing artillery fire instead of a grid coordinate. On a map you say, from this known position 9,000 yards in a certain direction, and they're supposed to be able to figure out where you're talking about. So I lean over the edge of this parapet, probably thirty feet off the ground. I'm leaning over and I'm watching the two gun crews come out to grab 105 millimeter artillery pieces, so they all come out there and they bang on this empty casing like bing-bing-bing, and they get they get the crews out there and they grab the—and the river's in front, and the Vietnamese soldiers, and the North Vietnamese are off to the left so the two guns are pointed this way—he grabbed the split trails, and they pick it up and the wheeler gun is like this and they dig them in, and they load the guns, and I says, "Lieutenant, you better come over here and check this out. I'm not a mathematical genius but there's no way those two guns are going to hit the same point." So he runs over to the edge of the parapet and looks and he goes, "Holy shit!" So he runs back to the phone; he's screaming into the telephone, have them check the azimuth way. In other words, the guns are laid in a certain magnetic direction to start with, and he's screaming, "Have them check the azimuth!" Boom, boom, both the guns go off. One of the rounds goes over the river and blows up one of the houses on the shore there which they had by the big McDonald's flag—and this is not a real village, this is like the perfect people's village—and it blows up one of the houses. Direct hit. They couldn't have shot better if their lives depended on it, and of course, the other round misses the three Vietnamese by several

thousand yards, and explodes. Of course they look up now, and I'm watching through these binoculars—dawn comes to Marblehead—they see the puff of smoke from where we're observing them, which was a stupid mistake, because you could have fired from somewhere else and they wouldn't have had a clue that it was us watching them. Off come the helmets and the pack and the guns and it's lickety-split for the river, and by the time we got the South Vietnamese straightened out they had swum halfway across the river and we couldn't shoot anymore. That was supposed to be the crack South Vietnamese First Army Division that was later decimated in Laos, by the way. So, I didn't think too highly of our …and at the time I had a—for lack of a better word—a racist point of view, and that circle of caring included only Americans to start with, and then it constricted itself after that. At forty years old that seems a little racist, but that's where I was at the time, and this example… I'm sure there's many other veterans that had wonderful experiences with the South Vietnamese, but largely we didn't trust them. That was kind of the ironic thing of Vietnam, that you knew what to expect if you hit a North Vietnamese unit, you know, the shit was going to hit the fan. Yet South Vietnamese was always kind of a question—are we going to fight today or not?

INT: The difference?

GR: It's the difference between spending one year in combat and a lifetime. We spent one year in combat. If we made it, then we made it home. They spent their lifetimes there. I would tend to be a little more cautious if I had a lifetime of combat too, but at eighteen I didn't.

INT: Were the North Vietnamese [good fighters]?

GR: Oh, yes. Well, they had three million dead. I'd say that's a lifetime of combat, and they were good soldiers.

INT: [Inaudible question]?

GR: It was to me in my experience, but a lot of other veterans think there was a difference, some don't—whatever. I always tell people I'm just speaking of what I went through and what my experience is. Anyone that has to say I'm speaking for six million other people doesn't have much of a story to tell from where I sit. Three point two million people served in Vietnam and 11,500 nurses, and women served there. There's a lot of unwritten novels out there, and no one is any more valid or invalid than any other, and I just speak [of] what I went through with the authority of someone that had been through it, and not an imaginary authority of speaking for people who are not here. I didn't have much use for the South Vietnamese.

INT: When you came back to this country did it seem different?

GR: Oh, boy, didn't it ever seem different! I left to the peace sign and I returned to the power fist in the late sixtiesn and everyone was giving each other the peace sign. In the seventies it was power to the people; militancy had grown; stridency had grown on both sides. And I think the hopelessness of…people were just sick of it, whether they were hawks or doves or anything. There wasn't much of a demilitarized zone between the two. People had just had it with the war. They didn't want to hear about it, and they didn't understand. I don't think either side, the hawks or the doves, ever separated the war from the warrior. They all talked a good game, but there was damned little understanding and tolerance for anyone. I think that's one of the tragedies of the whole situation, the lack of tolerance. I didn't have a clue about combat fatigue or post-traumatic stress or any of that. I remember getting invited to a rap group, and I told them I didn't need that. [Laughter.] It seems funny now. I've spent a couple of thousand hours in them in the last four or five years, but at the time I had just come back, so I wasn't ready to delve into that too deeply.

INT: How did people react to you?

GR: Indifferently. The hardest part for me was the official indifference, not so much the individual indifference. Like a lot of fellows, I wouldn't go near the VA because they represented the government or the military or the things I had tried to get away from, and yet at some level I thought at first that certainly there was something wrong. I didn't understand what was going on. I remember like going to the unemployment—no "employment security," that's what the government calls it when you don't have a job, you go to employment security; that's double-speak—and I remember telling them I felt like a square peg in a round hole, and I didn't understand what was going on. And she said, "Well, I don't think that has anything to do with your ability to keep or hold a job." Then the crowning achievement of employment security was when I finally did go to them—I got out in April, and I don't think I went until September or something—and they said, "What can you do?" So they give me this form to fill out. "When was your last job?" I put U.S. Army, Vietnam. "Why did you leave your last job?" I put poor pay and hazardous working conditions. They didn't think that was very funny at all. They said, "What did your job entail?" and I said, "I walked through the jungle with a radio and dropped artillery shells on people's heads, or I can evacuate wounded, or I can dig a mean hole," and they didn't think that was very funny either. Finally—they were mystified as to what to put me down for the classification of worker—so finally they put down construction laborer. The next week I get this card in the mail. It says you have to go to these places for a job. So they send me to K&D Wood Products in Salem, New Hampshire. What do I know? I get in the ole' Volkswagen bug and fire it up and head to Salem and drive up to the address, and walk in and he sees the car and he looks at me and he says, "Come out back and I'll show you what we make," and I went out back, and they made coffins. I went ballistic and went inside and pronounced in a loud voice, "What kind

of a moron sends a combat veteran to a casket factory for a job!" That's the kind of treatment that I remember. Not so much the individual—I mean, I could understand the people being burned out; hell, I was burned out from the war. But from where I sat, the very organizational system that had sent me there was not smart enough not to send me to a casket factory for a job—that's the part that cut me the deepest. A lot of fellows that talk about they were spit on—and that never happened to me—but that's an official "spit-on" from where I spit, and I think it's a lot less forgiving than an individual action.

INT: What did you do?

GR: Eventually I took a job sanding speaker cabinets. I lasted about a year, and then I joined the Fire Department, and it seemed like a good idea at the time, and it was. I spent eighteen years there. The first ten weren't too bad. Great adrenaline, and it was mostly fire fighting in the first years, and the first fighting I liked. It was physical and it was demanding. I wasn't claustrophobic at all. I was part gopher. I wasn't claustrophobic, so the mask and the heavy equipment, that didn't bother me. The paramilitary type officer thing—pfft!—that was popcorn. When they were all running around like chickens with their heads cut off, I couldn't understand what was wrong because no one was shooting at me and nobody was dropping artillery shells on me. Since learned that my level of fear, my yardstick, is three feet deep, and most people panic around eight inches—so that in many ways stood me in good stead during those years because I was a pretty cool customer, thanks to the military. Unfortunately later on we got into doing medical emergencies, and that's [when] the Beast started to raise his head, and this started to look vaguely familiar. I didn't make the conscious connection between loading the ambulances and loading the med-evacs until probably—I had an inkling in 1985, but it was probably 1988 before dawn came to Marblehead and I said, whoa! And then I didn't

understand what was happening emotionally. I was having all these feelings that were connected to overseas, and having them and on duty at the Fire Department, and the decline in leadership in Vietnam was being raised and in the Fire Department. I became a union radical, naturally enough. [Laughter.] I wound up filling ambulances. Basically I exchanged uniforms, and wound up doing the same thing, being on guard, picking up the pieces. I had built a wall up around myself in those years, and it wasn't until later I understood about post-traumatic stress and combat fatigue or whatever you want to call it, and I picked up where I left off in Vietnam at the end. I kind of picked up mid-stride, not remembering the fugue states and having big waves of emotion come over me I couldn't understand, and the simplest calls were difficult. I remember seeing this thing on PBS one year—this was before I really had a clue. It was about Albert Ball who was a World War I fighter pilot, and the man who acted this out had only two props, and one was a cane, and one was a chair. He used the cane and chair to simulate the cockpit where he'd sit and talk about…and he said that there was three stages the person went through in combat. He said in the first stage when he was flying he'd forget to switch fuel tanks, and of course they didn't have instruments to speak of, so he'd have to remember which way the wind was blowing and how much fuel and how much time he had and how many rounds each gun had, and all of it seemed very complicated, and it didn't fly very well, and a lot of men were killed in that first time. Then he got to the second phase, and he said in that phase all this came easy. He didn't consciously think about where he was or how much fuel or how much time, and he learned how to fly well, and he killed many men that were in phase one, he realized. But he said in phase three all the fear that he had felt in phase one came back, and he said he would forget things, and he said even the simplest tasks became difficult, and it really struck me that at the end when you're having combat fatigue, that's it in a nutshell,

that even the simplest tasks become difficult. Things that wouldn't have bothered him before began to bother him, and Albert Ball was eventually killed. That's pretty much the way it went, both in Vietnam and in the Fire Department for me.

INT: How have you connected the concept about being in a group and getting the perspective…were they different?

GR: They were very much different. When I returned from Vietnam, I was just outraged. I couldn't believe that we were being sacrificed for nothing. It was still inside of me a belief that if they really knew what was going on, they wouldn't let this happen. I returned the tenth of April and was in Washington seven days—I think less than seven days later—I met some veterans in Cambridge and they got me over to VVAW, and here was the first place that somebody understood the confusion and the fascination with buildings taller than one story (because I'd been in a place where there was no buildings that were taller than one story). It was all like Disneyland, and yet I remember a jackhammer went off one time in Cambridge and I was in the ditch before I could blink. And these were the only people that really understood where I was coming from.

INT: What was that returning like, and how did you…? Did you sit down and talk in a group or…"

GR: No. Mostly they talked one-on-one. I remember that there was a fellow, Robert J. Lifton, who has since become an expert on post-traumatic stress, asked me to fill out a questionnaire and become part of his pilot group, and I declined. I filled out the questionnaire, but I didn't become part of that group, and now he's one of the foremost authorities on post-traumatic stress, so I missed the boat there, too. I think it was on a personal level that I kind of didn't want anything else…in talk, right. And then because living at home with mama and dad just wasn't cutting the mustard.

INT: What was that like?

GR: Well, not only that. I came back to my room that I had left from high school, and there's all that stuff that had been so meaningful, and it didn't mean anything. It was like returning to a stranger's room. I just couldn't… It was, like, schizophrenic; I felt like I was in someone else's room, and, largely, that person died in Vietnam. What was left had come home, and was quite different.

The other thing that always impressed about VVAW was the democracy. I don't mean the kind of hokey democracy; I mean, everybody got their say. If there was a meeting, everybody got to speak, and they didn't care if it took us twenty-four hours to make a five-minute decision, by God, everybody got their chance to speak. That seemed real important to me after Laos, after watching people die from following stupid orders. B Battery was ordered to line up in the road under observed artillery fire, and they did it, and those of us in A Battery refused, and we lived and they died. Somehow it was very important for me that everybody's opinion got listened to no matter how. God knows, we had our nut cases too, but everybody got to speak, and then the group would make a decision, democratically, one man, one vote, one person, one vote, and that meant a lot to me at that time because that's the essence of democracy, plus it helped me deal with the frustration of nobody wanting to talk about Vietnam, nobody wanting to do anything about it. Hell, it was like being back there, except nobody was shooting at me, and the comradeship, the tiny parts of them, the tiny slivers of goodness that were present overseas, the comradeship, the listening that was still there. So I guess I kind of transferred it over, and where I had only been gone a week or two, it seemed quite appropriate. I felt right at home. Hell, this is what I had left, and given the level of violence, I wasn't afraid of the police. What are you going to do, break my head? I mean, most of the time we had a pretty

good relationship with the police. We'd have a liaison and they're going to arrest us, then fine, put our hands over our heads and away we go.

I connected with them on a real base level. I didn't have a clue about post-traumatic stress or combat fatigue until probably 1989 when I really crashed and burned and wound up in the VA. By then they had figured out what it was, and I met some people there that are very good. Like any organization, they have their duds and their good ones too, and I was fortunate enough to meet some very good ones, curious enough to dig deeper into what I got. I mean if I had VD or something, I'd want to know all about it. Once I figured out I had this psychological disorder, I wanted to know what it was all about. Sometimes the media portrays it as a get-on-top-of-the-building-and-shoot-everybody kind of thing, and really it's a disorder of emotions, not even a disorder of intellect. It's the inability to connect emotion with the events, and so that's why I can talk about the rats in a straight voice. The emotions never stuck to the event, and that's kind of the down side of the post-traumatic stress. You walk through life like it's somebody else's. Everything recorded before this camera, but there's nothing…what can compare with that experience? I don't think anything can. The only thing that matters is life and death, when you think about everyday events in your life and how much it really has to do with life and death—powerful little. It's like you end up sleepwalking through your own life, and it feels very alienated. The alienation of coming back is just a carry-on through all the years, and that's the primary feeling that I have. Post-traumatic stress syndrome is [being] a stranger in a strange land. Things that other people think are important, funny, are just very unimportant to me. It's hard to connect on a real level. So the knowledge of post-traumatic stress and combat fatigue came much, much later. [Laughter.] I feel like a social misfit you can count on in a crisis, and [the VVAW] were real. They weren't phony. I didn't [see] any pseudo-hero. I

didn't hear anybody bragging about their exploits. Everybody treated everybody with respect, but everybody knew it was the wrong place to bullshit, because you could be blown off. In the Civil War they called it "seeing the elephant." We'd all seen the elephant, and it lent a certain quality to the relationships you had there. And whether or not you agreed with VVAW or any other veterans organization, the people that spoke had earned the right to speak, and I think that's why the administration hit it up so much, and they couldn't discredit us; again, we'd seen the elephant. I think its openness—we had met the enemy and he was us.

INT: How did your parents react to…?

GR: Well, daddy was not a happy camper, I can tell you that. My mother was pretty tolerant. I was living at home, so I didn't really worry too much what they thought. I was doing what I thought was right, and I might not have done it—we might not have done it—smoothly or tastefully [laughter], or tactfully, but those qualities of smoothness, tact, and taste don't have much to do with combat soldiers, and we did what we thought was right.

INT: How did you describe the…?

GR: I never ran for an office in the VVAW or held a position of authority or… Like in the service, I was just another trooper, but the primary goal as I saw it was to bring the fellows home. Enough is enough. By 1971, I mean, who was fooling whom? Vietnam was a house of cards, and it was held together by the bodies, and that was the truth of it as we saw it, and there was no honor in sacrificing more and more, and it's like gambling on a losing night. It becomes a compulsion, rather than a reason to continue something. It was about losing face. You always think the Orientals don't want to lose face; well, they can't hold a candle to us. My motivation was to bring the fellows home. We forget that with Nixon, these are the same people who were eventually indicted in Watergate, I

mean, who were running the country, the dirty tricks boys and in the end… [Laughter]. VVAW had pretty much passed by the boards, but in the end when you're right, you're right. The people who were running this government were sleaze balls, and at some base level we knew it. One of the things that combat gives you is you get a bullshit meter to detect a cow fart at six miles, okay? When you go to Washington you hear these clowns talking about honor and we knew it was crap.

INT: What about Communism?

GR: What about Communism? The other side of the coin was that from where I sit, the North Vietnamese weren't much better than we were; it was just a big meat grinder. The war itself, the whole process of the war was just a big meat grinder, depending on whose hand was turning the wheel. I didn't get a [sense] of what the peace movement felt [it was] doing was [saying] if the United States is wrong then it must mean— through simplistic black and white childlike thinking—that the Vietnamese or North Vietnamese are right. Not necessarily. I think the VVAW's focus—although history has tended to distort it to make it a peace movement—was really a movement to bring the soldiers home, and it would have had a lot less to do in the…I don't remember anybody ever embracing the Communist philosophy. We had all fought against those people and we knew that they were a pretty harmless group, but what does that have to do with continuing our involvement in the war? It's the same argument that we get involved in all over the world; if there's a bad guy somehow we're supposed to be there to take care of it, and I think it's a cuckoo argument. There will always be that. It really doesn't have much to do with us, if we're honest about it. There were a lot of charges that we were Communists and there was a few flakes from the Progressive Labor Party in the organization, but they were considered flakes by the majority of us. Although their viewpoint would be heard it certainly wasn't the

viewpoint of the average fellow in the VVAW. Our message, if you will honestly listen, was more moderate than it was radical. None of us were for overthrowing the government and setting up the American Liberation Front or some of this crap. It was pretty simple—we wanted to stop the war and that was enough. That's pretty much where I came in. I knew what I had left and nobody was going to tell me it was different than what I had been through. I'd seen the elephant and you weren't going to convince me it was a mouse.

I remember in Washington we'd do guerilla theater and different things, and there was always a care that it didn't get out of hand. It was explained that there was a code phrase that if—because we didn't understand what flashbacks were, but sometimes some of us had them—and so there would be a code phrase that said, "Okay, brother." If someone said that to you, it was a code phrase to back off, that we understood at some level that sometimes the emotions of what you were doing were so reminiscent of what was happening overseas that things would get out of control. So it was always drilled into us if someone touches you on the shoulder and says, "Okay, brother," that means that you're out of control and it's time to back off. There was a deep caring at a personal level for each person who was going through this, and at the same time we did do some powerful things. The effort to discredit VVAW was a measure of how effective we really were, and what could they say to us? Deny that we were veterans? I don't think so. They tried it and it didn't work very well, and everybody pinned their discharge papers on their shirt one day just to prove that we were all veterans. [Laughter.] You could look at that group and tell me they weren't veterans? Give me a break, I mean, Who was shitting who? I can spot a combat veteran at two hundred yards, whether he's got a three-piece suit on or jungle fatigues. There's a look; you're not the same after you've seen the elephant.

INT: Describe that look.

GR: [Sighs.] They used to call it the thousand-yard stare, and I usually can tell if I look at another vet, and I don't think someone else can tell, but I think I can to some degree. You can be dressed in your polo shirt with a little alligator there, and sorry, it's just a disguise, and I know it.

INT: It's like someone's being somewhere else…?

GR: Yes. That's a pretty good description. There's a certain look that you get, and it is partly being somewhere else, and it's just the way it is, and they used to tell us—that was the famous saying—"Well, just put it all behind you." I'll tell you this: You can put something like that behind you, and you put it in the place you're most vulnerable to it, because you don't put an enemy behind you, he'll grab you right by the throat. When you go through something that traumatic, it really has to be in front of you. It's doesn't mean you have to be totally occupied by it or in it all the time, but you have to be conscious of it all the time. Denial is just put it behind you, and then you tried to deny Vietnam for how many years? The Persian Gulf, it's all behind us? It is all behind us and it's got us right by the throat, and the more they protest that it's all gone, the more that it's really in our face. I figure the Ten Year War is probably the most significant war in American history, and it's the most denied thing. It's like an addiction. It's just denied. The basis of it all was denial. And I guess they didn't like us so much because we wouldn't deny it.

INT: [Inaudible phrase]?

GR: I don't know the official dirty tricks, the Committee to Re-Elect the President Campaign, but there was a lot of talk about we weren't veterans, or, you know, it was only a small group of fanatics, and the same Nixonian majority, the silent majority arguments, and whether or not that's true is open debate. Phfft. We were who we were when we spoke on what we had gone through. I personally believe that, just like other peace

movements later found out through the Freedom of Information Act, there were infiltrators, and we pretty much knew who they were. These are the people that would advocate violent things generally. That was generally a tip-off that these were plants, because if you'd been through an experience like the one we'd been through, you didn't want anything to do with violent confrontations. Generally the people that would scream the loudest and be the most strident were looked upon with jaundiced eyes because it was felt that that was a true informant would generally try to do that, lead you towards a confrontation that you couldn't win, and it was senseless. Anyway, most of us had been through senseless confrontation, and weren't going to buy that. I think [there] was a lot more subversion than was generally acknowledged, and that just kind of goes with the territory when you're dealing with the Nixon boys, and it was the mood of the government at that time.

INT: How did you hear about the…?

GR: Through one of the fellows that said they were going to Washington.

INT: Did you go there with other veterans?

GR: Yes, I did. I went with some fellows from New Hampshire. I went and talked to the Representatives and Senators from New Hampshire and, whew, a lot of Stone Age characters.

INT: How so?

GR: There was Norris Cotton, you know that guy. He had a piece of New Hampshire granite for a brain. The only one that I thought listened was Thomas McIntyre who was a Democrat, and ironically he was defeated in the next election, but the rest of them were—what a sorry group. It was incredible.

INT: What were their responses?

GR: Most of them didn't want to see us. Those that did, they did get their press people to take a picture of them with the "subversives" and then they'd have a meeting to go to, or they wouldn't believe us, so thought we were Communist-inspired, and so…

INT: [Inaudible phrase]

GR: No. They didn't generally try to lecture us; they generally tried to avoid us. [Laughter.] We didn't look like the lecturing types, I don't think, but it was just another disillusion from where I sat. There was a part of me at nineteen that really believed that if they thought this was a mess, they'd do something about it, and what it come down to was politics, and you've got to support the President. That same old, same old. That's just the way it was. And so Washington was just the first.

INT: Then what happened?

GR: We camped out on the Mall and…

INT: How were you treated?

GR: People were generally friendly. I was surprised. Sometimes you'd get somebody honking the horn and yelling, but mostly people listened to what we had to say. That was what impressed me the most about Lexington, too, was we had a camp—a bonfire or something—one night. and we were sitting there talking and the people—a claque of veteran and civilians that really wanted to know what was going on, what we had to say—this is an un-denial of what was going on. Maybe that's what irked everyone the most about the peace movement, was the un-denial, that when you're in the middle of something like that you want to deny it, and you don't appreciate somebody reminding you constantly that this is sick.

INT: Is there anything [inaudible word]?

GR: I think a lot of people misinterpreted when we threw the medals over the fence. They saw that somehow as unpatriotic. From my way of looking at it is we had earned the medals; they were ours, and they were no

longer anyone else's. They'd been presented to us. Our point was that all that—you know, Napoleon said, "When such baubles on them bled," and they are baubles and they're not worth one human life. That's what we were saying, and somehow that all got mis-translated—and whose medals were they, anyway? They were mine. I threw mine over the fence, and it was powerful stuff. And it was fine. I wanted to say something, but when it came time I couldn't find the words, and it was anger, and it was alienation, and it was outrage from…that was my feelings, and I'd been back only a week. Whew! All of that was percolating underneath the surface, and I really didn't have a clue what was going on, psychologically or emotionally to me, but at the march-in…there was a big peace march a week later…later in the week? (I have a terrible memory.) It was one of the largest ever. I'm not saying the VVAW was the only one that did it, but I think there was a general turning by the seventies. People were saying, hey, enough is enough! And you know, that was the message.

INT: How did you hear about what was happening in Lexington? How did you hear about it? How did you get up here?

G**R:** I heard about it from some of the fellows in VVAW.

INT: Were there buses coming up?

GR: I had a Studebaker mail truck that was broken more than it ran, but that's how I used to get around. I think I drove for two years without a license and never got stopped. I drove to Concord and then…

INT: And then what happened?

GR: Like I say, this is—I have a lot of memory loss in the…there's parts—I remember the march. It was hot! I remember it being very warm for the walk.

INT: Did you end up spending the night in Concord and then walking to Lexington?

GR: Yes.

INT: And then it was hot?

GR: Yes.

INT: How had you been treated?

GR: Not too badly. We knew that you were going to get some people that were not supportive, and it was Memorial Day, so feelings were probably pretty raw on everybody's part. We expected if there was jeering, then we would keep our colleagues under control, and people…that was the thing about that level of tolerance that you don't see generally. People were welcome to their own opinion, and they had a right to not like us or like or anything in between, and very non-violent. I remember it as being mostly positive.

INT: [Inaudible question]?

GR: Yes. And water and every now and then we'd take a break in the shade. I think I had a sleeping bag and I had the helmet that I still have. This is the authentic war souvenir helmet. And it's got all the graffiti on it that it had in Vietnam, and one still shot [photo] that showed me in the helmet, and that was ironic—I had brought the helmet here.

INT: And you were wearing the helmet and fatigues?

GR: Yes. And fatigues and jungle boots.

INT: And that's what you had with you?

GR: Yes. And I remember having a sleeping bag or something, and a plastic gun, a plastic M-16.

INT: So, it was similar to what you had in Vietnam?

GR: Exactly right. That's why it fit so well. It's why VVAW felt so natural; it was just an extension of that other experience, except I didn't have to pick up the pieces.

INT: What was the network? How were people communicating?

GR: It was mostly word of mouth. We weren't the most organized group in the world. We'd do mailings and stuff, but it was a community

thing and everybody hung out together, and I remember Timmy and some of the other fellows. Later on I had rented my uncle's farm in Dunstable, Mass., and so there was a greater sense of community in that organization than anything I've felt since. I suppose it was partly where I was at, and partly where they were at, but it was something special.

INT: What was the "guerilla theater?" What was expected?

GR: The idea of guerilla theater was to show what a sweep would be like, a search and destroy, or interrogation, and made people realize that this was what was happening overseas, whether they wanted to see it or not. It was to bring home the reality of what was happening, and I'm not saying we always did it smoothly or nicely.

INT: How did you set it up? What happened?

GR: I remember that there were certain people in charge of doing that, and that you could participate if you wanted, and you didn't have to if you didn't, and it was very democratic. You had your option if you wanted to do leafleting or you wanted to do nothing; we weren't a terribly disciplined group. It was great.

INT: Did you participate in [inaudible word]?

GR: I did in DC, but it was real hard, because I had only been back a week, and then I kind of laid off of that afterwards.

INT: What was the reaction of [inaudible words]?

GR: I remember having like a walkie-talkie where we could talk if there was any trouble. I pulled guard, the same thing as Laos. I mean, I had a walkie-talkie, and if someone was on the march, if somebody, "Watch out, it's rowdy up ahead," or if somebody is not feeling well and we had a Land Rover or something we used this like an ambulance and so it was more… Plus when they arrested us at the Green we knew they were coming, and then we woke everyone up, so that there would be no…you know, you wouldn't be surprised.

INT: …communications?

GR: We had a loose-knit but an effective communications system, and also it was to make sure that things didn't get out of hand on our part either. This is part of the lessons that the group had learned, and that the peace movement itself had learned, was to have a close liaison with the police, so if you were going to get arrested, everybody knew it and it wasn't a big surprise. That way you could keep things under control. The object is if you're going to get arrested, you're going to get arrested and there's no sense having a riot, and that's more of the way we looked at things. It was funny, until I had seen that still shot I had forgotten about the walkie-talkies, and that is more or less what I had done, but that fits the pattern too, the Laos pattern.

INT: Was the guerilla theater effective?

GR: I think it was, but it was strong stuff. A lot of people were offended. We were offended. [Laughter.]

INT: What did you do?

GR: We would do different things. Sometimes we would put people in the line. In Washington we put people in line waiting to see the Museum of Natural History or something, and then a group of us would come through and pull those people out of the line and start interrogating them in front of the people. I don't mean beating them; I mean yelling.

INT: These were your own people?

GR: Yes, these were our "plants." These were our people we put in line to show the other people in line what the Vietnamese were going through every day. "Where's your ID card?" "Where are you from?" And people were very offended. This is what was happening every day for real in Vietnam. A lot of strong stuff. Some of the fellows in Washington spilled blood on the—it was colored Kool-Aid or something—on the steps. They said it was symbolic blood, and they said they almost got killed by the

news media, because as soon as they seen blood the camera guys almost ran them over trying to get a close up, and they said the most dangerous thing in the protest, it was the rabid news crews out for blood.

INT: Let's go back into you're approaching Lexington. What kind of people joined you on the Green?

GR: There was all kinds of people. There was people from the peace movement; there was a lot of what I'd called civilians in my military way of thinking. I remember there was a big meeting at night when we were talking about what was going to happen, and this was kind of like normal, every night. I remember there was one night that we had a bonfire. I think that was before we came in the town, and there would be a meeting every night. We would talk about what was going on, what we wanted to do, different ideas. The democracy really kind of worked.

We had one [meeting] that night on the Green, and it was all about [if] we went to sleep on the Green, then we were in violation of the law. So part of the talk was about, what are we going to do? Are we going to stay up? Could we stay up all night? They really can't arrest us, because we're not sleeping on the Green. It seems funny to think of that, but that's really—the democracy was to look at all possible ways of doing things, and then making a decision, not to be strident and say this is the way we're going to do it. We didn't have leadership that came down and said—they wouldn't have lasted five minutes—saying this is the way—somebody would have fragged[4] them—this is the way we're going to do it. It was all about community decision; it was all about, this is what we want to do, and do we want to make a statement? Do we want to get arrested? Is it really about sleeping on the grass, or is it really about the war? I remember the turning point in that meeting [when] one veteran stood up and said, “Look, I don't know about you, but I'm going to sleep. And if that's against the

law, then they can come and arrest me," he said, "but when you come down to it, the only place I ever slept illegally was Vietnam". And that was the turning point of the meeting, and then we all voted, well, let's go to sleep and get arrested. That's the way I remember it now.

INT: What was the mood on the Green? Was it effective or fearful or people were forthcoming [inaudible phrase]?

GR: I don't think it was fearful. I mean, you're talking the majority of the veterans have all seen the elephant, and what were they going to do, arrest us and put us in jail? Nobody was going to get shot, and I don't think it was fearful. There was a certain sense of anticipation that this was going to happen. When was it going to happen? About the logistics of it. Sometimes there would be some drinking, and we wanted to make sure that nobody was drunk. Yet in the pure democracy it was like you'd say, "Hey, don't get loaded tonight because we're probably going to get arrested," but by the same token in a democracy you have a right to make a fool of yourself if you want to, so it was a… even the security and the networking of communication wasn't a strict you-won't-do-this, you-won't-do-that kind of thing. It was more about agreement.

INT: Were you aware of the use of dope?

GR: I wouldn't know anything about that. [Laughter.] I'm sure that it was in liberal use, and if it was around I probably used some myself, but that was a Vietnam trademark. We always felt that democracies meant you could do different things if you wanted to. So I'm sure there was a liberal use of various gray clouds floating across the Green, but that's what liberty is all about really. Nobody that I remember was drunk or impaired to the point where they did irrational things. I think it was the general mood of somewhat anticipation, and I wouldn't say fear, but—what's going to happen next? We were willing to deal with whatever happened next, and

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[4] "Fragging," a term used in Vietnam, meant the assassination of an officer by his own troops, usually by

we get the feeling people in the town were willing to deal with whatever happened next, and that made all the difference in the world to me. It wasn't a thing that we somehow invaded town, like the 101st Airborne and took over things, but rather that we were invited into town and the townspeople themselves were willing to make a stand. That's the big difference from South Vietnam. Ostensibly in South Vietnam you're being invited to help them defend the country, and then you find out. Wrong! Not! Then you come here and you find out, wow, these people really do care, and they're willing to go into the slammer with you. And we're saying, whoa! You know, this here is a different picture than the one that's been painted out, and it gave us a lot of hope, and [we] realized that it wasn't just the veterans, that the peace movement was the people, just the civilians—the moms and dads that got led away was what really impressed the hell out of me.

INT: Why do you think that [the arrests were made]?

GR: Beats me. Ain't my job. If I had to suppose I would think it had to do with fear; it had to do with their feeling that their authority is somehow being compromised by people sleeping on the grass, which just kind of shows you how petty authority complexes can get. I mean, if they really let them, what was the harm? They let us sleep on the lawn, we'd have marched on the next day. What was the big deal? But it was about rules, and it was about people who said these are the rules, and other people saying, you know, rules are of best use in the total absence of brains. What difference does it make if we sleep on the lawn? We slept in Vietnam for a year, or tried to sleep, illegally, and yet we're going to be arrested if we sleep on the grass, so I don't really know what their concerns were. Somehow there was a sense that if we were allowed to do this, well, what would come next? I don't know, maybe we'd want to sleep somewhere else.

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a grenade (“fragmentation’).

I don't understand what their concerns were, and really at that point I didn't really care if they were going to arrest us, just let us know and we go to jail. I was footloose and fancy-free. Hell, I don't even think I had a girlfriend back then. I'd just gotten out the service. I didn't care. If they were going to arrest me—whatever.

INT: Do you have any specific images of the arrest of the townspeople or the vets, or how was this handled?

GR: I think initially it was handled pretty well. I remember they woke us up. I remember sleeping, and somebody woke us up and said they're going to come in about twenty minutes, so pack your bongos and get ready to move out. Everybody would roll up their sleeping bags and get ready. Then I think the buses came. They were pretty discreet about how they did it. They didn't flood the place with six thousand police, as I remember. There was a small number and we all kind of like, "Oops, you want us to get on a bus? We'll get on the bus, no problem." And then we'd put the hands on the head, and we'd all call ourselves POWs, and we get led away. I was one of the first couple of people to get arrested before the lights came on, and he took all the photos, so that initially it was somewhat dark before the big lights went on and you could see good, because as I remember it, it was the middle of the night. I don't remember exactly when, what time.

INT: Three AM.

GR: 3Three in the morning, yes. See, so it was darker. It was initially very dark, and I remember the policeman had this big…with the motorcycle helmet there in case we decided to hit him with a plastic gun or something. I don't know. Anyway, he come over and put my hands—you know, I had my sleeping bag—and put my hands on my head, and I remember him leading me to the bus and he's apologizing to me. He said, "I hate to do this," he says, "but it's my job. I have to do this." And then here's the irony. My whole story is loaded with irony. Here's the irony of this fellow

explaining to me that he had to do this because it's his job and I'm back from Vietnam two months maybe. Like I don't know? Like I wouldn't have a clue that it's his job and he has to do it whether he likes it or not? I mean, come on, huh? But I remember the apology when he said, "You're under arrest, and I'm sorry I have to do this." So he led us on to the bus. I remember at one point before the lights came on somebody threw a bottle, and it missed by a wide margin. It missed everything, and the veterans in the crowd turned on that guy. As I recall the police saved him from a beating, because that wasn't going to be tolerated, and we didn't want things…things were touch and go. That was just before the lights came on, when you could actually see what was going on. It was much better once the big lights go and you could actually see what was happening.

INT: Can you remember if that was a vet or a civilian?

GR: I have no idea who it was, but I do remember that the only tense moment was when that happened, and it was all of us turning on whoever had done that from the crowd. And it was the police going over and arresting him, really for his own safety, because we didn't put up with that crap. We didn't want anything like that to happen. We didn't have any use for it. That was one of the things about DC. I remember in DC some fellows showed up with motorcycle helmets and a two by four, and I says, "What the hell is that for?" And he says, "Well, that's when the police come to arrest us." And we said, "You're out of here," and we gave him a not-too-kind escort right out the door, because we weren't into that, and lookit, talking about military fellows, you ain't going to win that war, you know? You're not going to win that way, and that was the general mood, to control not only the interaction with the police, but anybody else. There was a lot of people like the "plants" that we knew wanted to cause trouble, and then it would be that we all peed on the law, and desecrated the place or something—it would be a set-up, and we didn't want that to happen. And

everybody loaded us on the bus. I remember being initially somewhat downcast because it's the only time in my life I've ever been arrested, and then everybody started clapping, and the buses pulled away and they took us to a town garage or something. And they put us in the…

INT: The town barn.

GR: Yes. They put us in a town garage, and boy, did we have fun in there, because all the doors were on electronic buttons, and it was like…I don't remember, there's rows of doors where they used to put the trucks. We go to one end of the building and push the button, and the door would come up. The police would all run down that end of the building, then we'd go down the other end and push the button, another door would go up, and nobody would try to escape, but the police would be running back and forth trying to guard all these openings. We'd wait until they got one closed, and then we'd push the other door. Then we had low crawl for food races, where we'd pretend we were crawling on the ground under barbed wire and that they give us food, and we'd beg for food, and try to humiliate them into feeding us, because I remember they didn't want to feed us or something, and then finally one of the leaders of VVAW comes out with a little bullhorn and says please don't do this, they're getting tired running from door to door. So we laid off, but it was general mischief, I guess you'd classify it.

INT: Were you hungry, or had you been fed?

GR: We'd been fed by the community, but this was like three in the morning and I don't think we got to court until, I don't know, noontime or something, and so we were hassling them, "Hey, if you're going to arrest us, we want some food!" And of course, they've got a couple of hundred people here. They're not going to send to McDonald's or Dunkin' Donuts for breakfast. Right. It probably would have broke the budget or something. Eventually they took us all to court.

INT: And you never had conversations with the [townspeople]?

GR: I remember I talked to some lady who had three kids and she got arrested, and then of course there was all…they had ladies from the peace movement. It turned into a festive occasion, and here we are arrested. It was like the tension of the moment was gone. We'd already been arrested, and we were all in the room, and it's like a frigging picnic—except we ain't got no food. So we're hassling them for food, see, and let's make it a real picnic, and I remember going to court, too. We went into the court, and it was something about nine dollars bail or something, and most of the guys… I think it was nine bucks or something. We were released on personal recognizance or something, and of course, most of us didn't have much money, and they took up a collection. I think all the townspeople put up the money to get us all bailed out on personal recognizance. I remember the judge wasn't bad at all. He didn't strike me as being a real strident guy. He was probably worn out by the time I got in there. I don't remember going in the first group. I think the charges were later dropped or something. I don't remember any of us having to go back to court or anything—either that or we didn't go. When we came out of the courthouse all the townspeople were there, clapping. Hell, that's the only welcome home I ever fucking got, to tell you the truth. You know? In an ironic sort of way.

INT: I take it that [inaudible phrase]?

GR: I wouldn't doubt it a bit. I'm sure there was a group that volunteered to clean the Green. We fellows had all been in the service, and there would be a group in charge of food, and we'd have granola in the morning. Oh, man, I'd feel like horse-y eating that stuff… when you have a foam cup and a spoon and the instant milk in the cup and then somebody would go around with the basket and collect all the cups and the spoons, and it was a hell of a group, and I don't doubt a bit that it was…I'm sure

that somebody thought of that ahead of time and it was all part of the thing we had discussed the night before, and it was just the nature of the beast. We were like that.

I'm in veterans treatment groups with veterans from other wars. In fact, one of the fellows is World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, and I ask him what—he's a fellow that's got experience that I don't have—and I said,, "What was the difference in your eyes." He was a Sergeant, and he said after World War II the feeling was we won. It's over. He said after Korea the feeling was, it's over. He said, "But Vietnam never ended; it just went on, and on, and on." And I think that's one of the differences of the Vietnam War is it did.

INT: Just go on and on?

GR: Right. And I think there is still no sense of completion, and I think how it was different, the men were younger. The average age of the World War II veteran was twenty-six. That's how old my father was when he was overseas. The average age in Vietnam was nineteen. At twenty-six your character is a lot more formed. You can go through traumatic stuff, and I won't say it doesn't affect you, but it has a different effect than it does at eighteen or nineteen, and the disillusionment that a young man feels is expressed in a different way than a middle-aged person. I think that the age had to do with the ability of the veteran to speak out, plus what went on was at such variance with what was being told. We get arrested for sleeping on the Green, and yet the war is illegal war, it was saying: What's wrong with this picture? We were just young enough and naive enough to think we could make a difference. That was true in Vietnam, and I think that was true after, and I think we did make some difference. I don't think you can quantify what, but I think there was a lot of factors and the intense alienation we felt with the nation and with the government had to do with our ability to speak out. If we hadn't have felt so ostracized, we wouldn't

have felt the need to speak out. You could write a book on the differences between those wars, and some people have.

INT: [Inaudible phrase]

GR: I was really impressed with the level of public of support we had here on the Green, because I think that's something that had been missing in some of the other actions, and Washington is such an impersonal place anyway. It's a place of monuments, and it's hard to get a feeling that there's any community there at all, and yet in this area we just got that sense of kindred feeling in the sense that we weren't the only ones that were outraged. We weren't the only ones saying, "Enough! It's enough!" Whether it was the ideal of what we were doing, trying to do, in Vietnam had anything to do with the reality of it any more; enough was enough. That's what I came away with from the Green, that the sense of community was strong and touched us all in place, because most of us had come from small towns, and at one time had a sense of community. That's part of what was lost in those years, was a sense of individual responsibility and community, and that's one of my outstanding memories.

We had a bonfire one night. We had a meeting, and one of the veterans, his name was Timmy, and I think his last name was O'Brien, but I can't remember. Timmy had been an interrogator. Timmy was half loaded, drunk, and he'd almost passed out, and then he'd wake up and he would say what they had done to the prisoners, and here's these people in the community, and we're saying "Timmy, Timmy, come on man. Are you saying it's the truth?" "I'm telling you the truth," and the people had tears in their eyes, but none of them left. That really impressed me. Timmy cut no corners. He was saying what had happened, and probably because he was half drunk he could get it out, and yet the people instead of rejecting us or rejecting him, put the focus where it really belonged: The Beast, the war itself, and what it does to all of us. That's one of my outstanding memories

of the whole thing, and I was kind of like apologizing, saying "Jesus, Timmy, come on," and we're saying to the people, and they just have tears in their eyes, and it wasn't a rejection; it wasn't "Tim, you're a bad person for having done that." The focus of the rejection was where it belonged, on the war itself and what it had done to all of us, including the people that stayed in the States, and that's something that veterans often forget.

The war was traumatic for people here, and not in the same way—it's apples and oranges—not in the same it was traumatic for us in combat, but it was traumatic to watch the six o'clock news every night. One of the fellows I know is a cleaner that saw his son killed on the six o'clock news. It was traumatic in different ways than it was for us in combat, but it was trauma just the same, and it's not fair to compare the two and say one's worse than the other. Each person went through their own traumatic experience, and it's like we finally got the focus where it belonged, and it wasn't about communism and capitalism. It was about war itself, and what it does to decent people. That's the bottom line. Sometimes I talk to high school kids and I say you can't go to war and stay the same. If I opened the cesspool and ask everybody to jump in there, no one would expect to come out without shit on them, and yet we have this expectation that somehow we're going to go to a meat grinder like that and not be affected by it. I feel sad for people that weren't affected by it. I've met some. I can't imagine going through something that horrific and not be affected by it somehow. If the message that I give is anti-war, that's the experience I had and I'm not going to give a false message. Other people might have different experiences and come out with different messages, but if I tell the truth about what happened to me in Vietnam, it can't come out any other way but anti-war and anti-violence. I don't think it's a mistake I spent eighteen years trying to help people after I spent one year trying to kill

them. I think that's where it's at, and it's the message—my message is anti-war, and it always will be until the day I die.

There's a [story] about one writer who was killed in 1916, his name was Tom Kettle, and he said if he lived he was going to speak out against the war until he died. He knew what modern artillery was like and he had seen what it had done to simple men, and I can echo those same words. He was killed in 1916, so he didn't get to say those things, but now that I'm older I look back in history and the message has been here all the time. Every generation of veterans tried to speak the truth. Some succeeded and some didn't. The fellows in World War I are the ones that I really get a lot from, because they left an idyllic society—America was going to make the world safe for democracy. They went to the hell of the trenches like we went to the hell of the jungle. We left Kennedy's notion and Johnson's notion of a Great Society, and came back profoundly disillusioned. I think there's a great similarity between the two generations, and the poets and writers after World War I write remarkably similar stuff that some of the poets and writers from Vietnam write, and it's brutal. It's right there, and if you care to look back you can find that message, but it's well-hidden. It's not the message they want to tell you.

INT: How was [the message you give to others]?

GR: I go to schools; I say the best thing you can do is go to the library. Destroy your TV. It's matter of self-preservation, and go to the library and read. And if you take the time to look, the message is there. It's not the popular books; it's not the Rambo, but the message is there if you take the time to look, and part of the education of all the wars and what it does to everyone. It's easy to see one as a victim and one side as the aggressor, and in some cases that's true, and in other cases it's mutual brutalization. Vietnam was different than World War II because it was a revolution and a civil war, and that's the two nastiest kinds of war there are. If you look

back on the Spanish Civil War or any revolution, you're going to find that particular brand of war is particularly violent, and each outrage by one side is outrage. It's a contest to see who can be the worst, and these things are done by men who are no different than we are. It's the situation that changes what's permissible and what's not permissible, and Vietnam was different. Martin Luther King said we added cynicism to death, and that's part of what Vietnam did, that certain cynicism in doing that and knowing it was for nothing. That was the saying in Vietnam, " Damn, it don't mean nothing." People were smart enough to know that, and there's been a lot of mythology since then about what it meant or didn't mean, and there was no fooling our staff. We knew it didn't mean nothing, whether we lived or died. And when you get older you realize in the cosmic scheme of things your life doesn't really amount to that much. But when that message comes home at eighteen to nineteen years old, it's profoundly disillusioning. Nobody should have to grow up in three seconds, and then serve the sentence of all those years in between—you know, disillusioned and emotionally empty.

When I go to the high schools I always ask the kids, I say, "How many people are willing to die for their country?" I'll get quite a few hands, and I'll say, "How many people went to spend the rest of their life in wheelchair?" And I'll get less hands. I say, "How many people are willing to be psychologically impaired for the rest of your life?" No one will raise their hand. I put three numbers on the board: 1:3:5. That's the ratio—one killed, three wounded, five psychological casualties. And I tell them the odds of that happening is exactly inverse to what you think. The odds of you being a psychological casualty is five times greater than being killed, and yet the worst thing you can think of is to sacrifice your life. I draw a pyramid, and I draw a line with the sign up here, and I say, "This pyramid is the cost of war, not in dollars, in human terms. It's just like an iceberg;

the large cost of the war is hidden from view because society doesn't want to look at it. And the top of the pyramid is the number killed." I put fifty-eight thousand Americans and three million Vietnamese. That's what society kind of grudgingly acknowledged as the cost of the war. Then I put three hundred thousand seriously wounded, and that's where the line ends. So if people want to show you what war costs, they'll bring you to the VA hospital and show you the fellows that lost their limbs, or they'll bring you to the cemetery and show you fellows that lost their lives, and I said, "What's underneath is more important and it's bigger. It's not more important, but it's bigger, and there's a broader base to that cost: fifty thousand men broke down psychologically in Vietnam; more than fifty-eight thousand—the same number that were killed—more than that have committed suicide since they returned. There's a half a million to a million and a half of us with post-traumatic stress disorder. It's a life-long psychological disability, and it will always be there. Then you've got the families of all those people: the mothers that lost sons, and the fathers, the sisters, the brothers, aunts, nephews of all those people, not just the dead, not just the wounded; all those people, all the divorces, all the kids that have part-time fathers, all the nurses that don't want to have children." And I said, "That's the real cost of the war, and until we start looking at that we're going to play this little game where we only look at the top part and say how terrible it is, and the top part is terrible. But there's a much broader cost to war than what society and people are willing to admit." And I talk about combat fatigue when I talk to them. I say, "Look, in 1948 they did a study. They knew that thirty-five days of continuous combat in World War II in the European theater, ninety-eight percent of the people there would show signs of psychological breakdown. They knew that. They've known that for a long, long time. War grinds you down. It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor, black or white; it has to do with how

much trauma you see. If you see enough, it will do you in, and that's the truth of it. Instead we have John Wayne movies; we have all this crapola that only weak people break down, and then when people go there and something happens to them, they look at themselves ostracized from society when in reality it's a normal occurrence that it's there, to be expected. But that's not the message that our society and society in general want to perpetuate, but it's the bloody truth, and part of my speaking out about the war, you're going to get the truth. If you don't want the truth, don't ask. It's talking about the rats, and it's talking about the (pieces), because that's what it's all about. It's not about the parades and the medals and all that crapola, and they didn't like the VVAW because we told the truth, and so be it."

INT: How did [that go over]?

GR: A lot of them are pretty stunned, and it's very hard for me to get to the level where I can talk about what happened. It's very disturbing. It bothers me for a long time, but if I keep one of those kids from going through something similar to that, then it's worth it from where I sit. Just the response from high school age kids is more human than any response you're going to get from any adult, because they're more able to look at that situation objectively rather than having all the baggage from the men—either they served or they didn't serve, or they didn't want to, or they did want to, or whatever. There's all that right or wrong emotional baggage from all those years that colors the viewpoint of what you're trying to say, whereas the kids are coming at it from an entirely different perspective. Although some of the contemporary films… they want to know if that's life-like. I always tell them, "Well, if I can get you in the theater and make you go without a shower for three months, and rain on you, and you were sleeping in the mud, and you're listening to the rats, and scared to death every minute, and then I showed you the film, maybe you'd get a sense of

what it was like." But in America we have this cuckoo idea that if I see something on TV, then somehow I have an inkling of what it's like, and that's the big lie. I watched my wife give birth to two sons. I'd never say I gave birth. There's a big difference between doing it, and seeing it—even seeing it with your own eyes and being there, and having it happen to you is an entirely…

INT: Did they ask a lot of questions, or are they mostly passive?

GR: They usually ask a lot of questions, at least initially. I have them write down the questions—the teachers have them write them down so that I can look at them, and the boys all want to know what weapons I used, and the girls want to know if I got laid. [Laughter.] But the fascination with the weapons is very scary to me. Somehow we've made this technological leap and it doesn't matter what you're doing; it matters what you're doing it with. That's really scary from where I sit. But when I get done talking, when I talk the truth—I talk about the rats—there is stunned silence in the room. I use the school as the example of the shrinking concern. So you start out with the school and you're concerned; then it's everybody on the second floor; then it's everybody in the classroom; pretty soon it's only people in your row, and pretty soon it's just you. I try to make it real to them and put it in a context that they can understand, and they're much more objective about it than any of the others.

INT: The question of the POW issue. This is a sticky wicket, any way you look at it. I guess most people always ask—do I think there's POWs alive in Vietnam?

GR: I don't have a clue, if I'm honest with you. I have to ask, could I live twenty years in a jungle? I have to say, probably not. And were there POWs left behind? I believe there were. There's an excellent book: Kiss the Boys Good-bye, by Monica Jenson Stevenson, which outlines exactly what happened. The prisoners were a stumbling block to Henry Kissinger

and the boys, so we just left them out and left them there. Sounds like Henry and Nixon to me; I don't know, but I'd like to think not. But my experience in Vietnam taught me that what they say and what they do is generally two different things. So I don't know if there's prisoners there. I don't have a clue, if I'm honest with myself. I think there was once, and they… It's well known, if you were an enlisted man and you were captured you were killed, as you didn't have any information worth them keeping you alive for. The brutality to its prisoners wasn't one-sided; it's part of the nature of civil war and revolution and war itself. Anybody who was captured in Laos and Cambodia was written off anyway, because we officially didn't have a war there. That was all about politics. Like I said, there's been some good stuff written. Now, as a stumbling block to relations, some folks contend that the POW issue is about not normalizing relations. My normal cynical view about normalizing relations has more to do with people making money than it has to do with reparation. If there is a normalization, it will have to do with making money, just like most of the other decisions in this country have to do with opening that market up, having clothes or something manufactured there by people for pennies an hour. That's my cynical view of it.

INT: And what's your feeling about the MIA [missing in action] issue.

GR: The Vietnamese lost three million dead, so they have a lot of people that went MIA and POWs are unaccounted for. It's part of the nature of the process, and we're not going to like it, but that's the way it is, and there's a lot of other issues that… This POW issue, my heart goes out to everybody that has a POW or MIA relative. In many ways there's a couple of million of us that are prisoners of this war whether we're here or there. But there's a lot of other things that aren't discussed—the flag wavers, and they know who they are, who largely avoid service. It's somehow become the next generation of go-getters, and they used this issue like they misused

this issue for a long time, and some of those that wave the flag the most, when it was their turn to go, let somebody else go. This is just my cynical view, another example of how they will twist what's going on. I believe men were left behind. Absolutely. Whether any of them are alive though, I don't know. They can dig up all South Vietnam and find bones. Like you say, there's plenty of other issues about health care for veterans, Agent Orange treatment, things that aren't spoken about. That's even true of the Gulf veterans, a lot of them are having serious health problems, but nobody wants to talk about that either. So the flag wavers—they're all for you when you're there, but when you come back it's a whole other story. That's true of almost any war probably in the ages of war.

INT: …your poems?

GR: This poem is called "The Dream" and it's one of my latest works. It's still a work in progress, but it's a recurrent dream that I have:

Yellow smoke vomits from earth
Chopper descends and my feet stumble me past the door
gunner's lipless grin
One bone hand grips machine gun, the other gestures hurry
Fear roots my bowels to the nylon seat
I stare at the metal decking gauged by stretcher legs worn
smooth by boots
Only these faint marks remain to show the passing of men long
dead
The pilot turns his head, raises his tinted visor, neatly spider-
webbed by a bullet hole,
Giving him a third eye
Sockets remain where eyes once were
His death-rattled voice asks, 'Where to?'

This one's called "No One Talks About Ghosts," and I wrote this when Bosnia was the rage—well, sending troops to Bosnia—and this is really an address to those men who would potentially serve there:

Young men think war is adventure, courage, and heroism
Old men, too fat to serve talk about moral imperative

Send boys where they wouldn't go years ago
Adventure?
Foreign lands are mere introduction to eerie recesses of your own mind
There stored scenes beyond words will lie dormant
Till years later death, divorce, age, or betrayal stampede them
Wisdom?
That's terrible secrets. To come home more follows always a shadow just behind
Courage and battle outweighed by valor needed to live on through nights too long for sleep
If scrolls of dead faces whose dimly lit stares accused can be called sleep.
Through days trying to hack out some reason in survival amid land mines,
Common sites and sounds that bring dreadful daymares you alone see
Heroism?
To carry dead friends, ghosts, inside your head the rest of your life,
Which is why no one talks about ghosts."

This one's called "The Vietnam Vet."

Will we ever know who we really were?
Not some image of sullen warriors full of blood lust
But only young men who to save a tiny portion of our sanity and souls
Retreated into ourselves so deeply and stayed so long that we didn't know how to get out;
Frustrated, trapped, forced to view life without a motion
Like watching everything through the lens of a giant camera a foot thick
Able to see, but not touch
Able to view but not feel
Not some hard man of stone
But only a person who tried desperately to shield from view a broken hard within
Shattered, despite all efforts.

This poem is "Tour Guide in Hell." It's quite long; one of the very first poems I ever wrote, and it's more story than a poem: "Tour guide in hell—Vietnam—Spring, 1971."

You ask what was it like, well, to try to make you understand
You'll have to take a little tour of hell.
Don't worry; I promise to take you back.
After all, as your tour guide it's my job.

First you have to go back 20 years and travel some 15,000 miles
Which you will, no doubt find difficult to even imagine
But for me it's the blink of an eye, or a real nightmare, whichever comes first
Back to the 'Nam to a little hellhole called Lo Bao about nine miles west of Khe Sanh
Which is exactly in the middle of nowhere
I could take you elsewhere as there are no shortages of hellholes, especially here
But to give it to you properly, I prefer to travel one that I know too well
Second, I almost forgot. You're not an observer here
This hellish tour requires participation: Yours
Too late to change your mind now, because here we are
What's that noise you ask when it's incoming artillery?
Good. I like the way you hunker down as the shells come scream-tearing in.
Remember: Think small. After a while you will, automatically.
It may, or may not have help
A truck enters the gate somehow unaware of the salvos coming in
It seems quite impossible, but you'll get used to it.
Get used to everything going wrong. It does in every war.
And instantly the truck takes a direct hit.
A distinct sound, a mixture of explosion-rending metal and screaming men,
Which will stay with you forever.
You go to help, which you probably wouldn't do if you weren't such a dumb ass
Crossing the area as best you can, taking cover between salvos.
Remember: Think small.
The truck looked like it's been hacked to pieces by mad Mongolian hordes,
And the men look worse.
You see a man missing both legs and an arm.
You use your belt on one stump and his on the other.
Racing with fumbling fingers to stop the squirting red life pumping out
And by the time you get to his arm he's dead
You lost the race, pal.
As you stare into his blank eyes you feel your soul,
Or at least a part thereof
Being drawn up with his
Rising not in a malevolent way, but like kids going to the corner store
Holding hands with the dime your father gave you pressed deep in the other hand
Happy to be going; almost skipping along; so glad to be gone

Then, as if your father called you back
Saying you can't go to the store now, maybe after your chores
The medic, Doc Felt, presses a yellow smoke grenade in your hand
And shaking you by the shoulders says, very father-like,
Get ready for the med-evac
And reluctantly you part hands with your soul mate, damn you Doc,
Saying with your eyes that no words are necessary between souls,
Good-bye my friend, God bless.
And you return letting a small piece of you go with him.
Hell is better off without you anyway.
As you see the Huey now on its way in like some fragile metal insect beating the air with its wings
The shelling increases now as the NDA see it too
Amid the swirling yellow slope Doc directs you to one litter
Then you run in that peculiar crouch; you feel something bumping your leg
Looking down you see the almost severed leg of this man hanging by a thread of flesh
With your own hand, though it feels like someone else's.
You put it back in place, as if you could somehow make it whole again; please, dear God
Into the chopper he goes with some other
Then amid the roar of the engine in the incoming, which is close now,
Think small; they rise up, up
Later you watch the blood-red sun setting over the escarpment
Somehow obscenely beautiful as it illuminates the poncho-covered bodies lying on the truck bed,
As it sinks slowly in the west, but your spirit has already set.
The next morning while the fog thinly covers you, and before the incoming will begin
The First Sergeant lines you up for Police Call,
Only instead of pieces of paper and cigarette butts, you pick up the shattered pieces of men.
As you stumble along with your sandbag half-filled with horror, you see someone's pet dog running joyously along
With the happiness only a dog could have at finding a treat in its mouth,
Which is the shattered forearm of a man.
In your fog, you lift your rifle and riddle him with a full magazine,
Totally without feeling, except the tear running down your face
Not sure if you're crying for those men, yourself, or the fucking dog
Time to go now; you see I told you that I'd take you back, after all I promised.
What about them, you ask, those 100 year old young men with hollow cheeks and vacant eyes,

Filled only with the thousand-yard stare; sorry, they have to stay here.
Oh, they'll go home too, most of them, at least someday,
Or at least the shell that is their body will.
Their spirit? Well, that's another story.
You see, you've only had a short tour; they're here for the long haul.
It's like the words of that song by the Eagles:
'You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave.'
So, here we are, back to here and now, and safe and sound, or at least safe and not too sound.
You take care now. Have a nice day.

This next poem was written during the Gulf War, and I title it, "To A Young Man in Arabia."

I saw you at 2 AM one night, while I was an insomniac prisoner of your war, as well as my own
As I watched your eyes through the camera lens, that unblinking eye into your soul
I see your fear so vividly, I can even taste it, that familiar gunmetal flavor or sheer terror
Others who have not known war don't likely see it as I do
Oh, don't mistake, my friend, I mean no disrespect
For fear after all is a soldier's only full-time companion besides his weapon.
I am fearful for you, too, because I know, as you will soon learn what lies are waiting for you like a living Beast in the cold desert night
Its tracer-green eyes unblinking, bullet teeth sharp, shrapnel fangs jagged, razor wire claws catching as it waits patiently
Ever-ready to devour you body, heart, and soul, licking its maw deliciously at the thought of eating all your hopes and dreams
As it delights in hearing the screams of dying, which have the same teeth-grating pitch as the teacher's chalk used to occasionally make on the school blackboard
And the sound of it wedges itself firmly to the very depths of your soul.
Even for those who survive, nothing will ever be the same for most will succumb to the most-feared silent weapon:
The psychic bullet
Plowing its way through the gray matter of your brain, as surely, if much more slowly than a copper-jacketed bullet with damn near the same effect
A kind of walking lobotomy in which all the events of your life, significant and otherwise

Pass like a motion picture played in the vacant theater of your mind
You'll soon learn to squirrel away a teaspoonful of your soul for future reference and count yourself lucky to save even that from the ravenous Beast
At some point, sooner rather than later, you will become of sheer necessity the Beast itself
I am death, the destroyer of worlds, and you will know the terrible secret that they would never believe, that the Beast lives inside us all
When you return home to the tattered yellow ribbons about as faded as your spirit will feel
They will give you a fine parade, but no job and tell you welcome home, though you'll never afford a real home of your own
With full veterans benefits to a VA hospital system already largely dismantled
And you damn sure better be grateful, because by God, they're calling you all heroes
After all, heroes are so much easier to live with than victims
Because once they make you a hero, they never have to answer the victim's cry of anguish asking why.

This poem was written—and it's untitled—after the troops had returned home from the Gulf War.

I am glad for you young troopers, spared and home alive
You had perhaps a quick glimpse of the Beast, peering like a child at a horror movie through fingers half covering your eyes.
Maybe some got a good look, caught in its stare just long enough to make it hard to shake the image, Jesus, what the hell was that?
Fortunately, most escaped its view entirely, thus avoiding the certainty that in more time, through an evil metamorphosis you would become the Beast itself.
Mercifully, you need not be haunted by our nightly specter show of old and dead friends in various stages of dismemberment
Because my young troop is to be fixed in the Beast's baleful glare is to become frozen in time and emotion, until there are no tears or hope only red anger and black despair
Which brings with it a clarity of vision and a hollowness of soul I would not wish on a dog.

I'm glad your mothers will get their sons, your wives their husbands, your children their parents, and that you will not be as we are:
Eerie shadow people like mere pencil tracings of our former selves.

INT: [Inaudible.]

GR: To a writers' workshop and I met a Vietnamese Vietnam veteran, who fought in the same place and time that I have and the place we fought was called Lo Bao, and I entitled this poem "Lo Bao Veterans."

You told me that in Laos you led a donkey.
Oh, how I envy you.
In Laos I was led by donkeys.

This is a poem called "Wrestling the Beast," and I still need to do some work on this. Part of the post-traumatic stress is the self-destructiveness of the disorder, and that's what the Beast is really about. "Wrestling the Beast."

Weary of struggle, I won't concede defeat and fight on
Fatigue, bone-deep, overruns even fear. I can say it's the medication, but it's not, but down to life and death, the Beast and I
Stripped of uniform and disguise, I'm tired of this urge to form my mouth in the perfect circle of a shotgun barrel
I'm tired of the beauty of bridge abutments
Now we are each other without a blink, determined not to give an inch
I hope to hold out one day more.

This poem is "Rules for Survival Marmota Monax Sapien." It comes from a photograph I've since lost that showed us in the border, and we're all the same color as dirt, and our uniforms and our skin and the dirt all matched. They made me think of woodchucks, groundhogs, and the Latin name for groundhogs is Marmota monax, and I added sapien, because we were woodchuck men. These are rules for survival.

Though deep in Mother Earth's womb,
Sapien lies there mixed with the smell of roots and turned-soil.

Fight to protect your hole from the others
Dig. Deeper is always better
Peer cautiously over the edge of your mound
Keep still and alert often
Your eyes and ears cocked for the cry of danger from above
Wait before emerging; be sure danger has passed
Emerge to bask in the morning, but always on the edge of your mound
Be quick to the earth
Hide in the far recesses; be as the soil: Happy in the darkness, alone in deep hiding
Signal after danger has passed; help your mates
Press compresses to their wounds
Pray that the metal not enter your hole and explode, rending your flesh to pulp.

This poem is called, “Long Time No See.”

What's new? Still in the Fire Department?
What am I saying? The truth, as in No?
Explain twelve psych admissions, whose endless nightmares, whose theme runs along the lines of name that corpse?
Tell them the line between Vietnam and the Fire Department became invisible, and I couldn't tell the bodies apart without a scorecard?
A battle-hard son-of-a bitch, I could spit out a mouthful of vomit
The last deposit of a soul checking out, and not miss a beat on the CPR rhythm and blues chart
Now I watch “911” throw things and tears run down my face
Doing CPR those last years required I have four hands: Two to do the job, one to hold the ghosts off, and one to keep the emotions away
I did so many heart attacks, every restaurant I go to I expect to meet a flashback, some gray-faced specter lying on the floor who'd gurgle, ‘Oh, yes, Lieutenant, I remember you’
Vietnam's dead closed ranks with those from 15 years in the fire service, came up out of the ground and grabbed me by the throat
Friend, I've gone from credibility to craziness, traded competence for compensation
A bagman, I paw through the dumpster of my life, searching for a shard of soul.

This one is called “Parts,” and the subtitle is “Emergency Medical Service.”

I just had to try harder, make it okay, give more effort, compress that chest an extra half-inch
Force a little more air into their lungs, always just a little more

After a while feelings crept in, as shadows do at day's end, slowly growing longer
I'd look at them and I'd know in my heart, no matter how hard I tried or prayed, they were going to die
Plodding replaced hope; I was on the end of conveyor belt full of body parts, whose endless rolling dumps them in my lap
What am I to do with these bodies? I'm a pall bearer for several hundred dead, and I'm tired of carrying them
Some were just parts; finally I wished they'd just die; just die and get it over with
I can't do nothing for parts! How many ragged breaths? How much blood do you have left? Why don't you die?
And they did. Each death carried a part of me below, until I got to the boy that gave me the whack, a mental coups de grace
Funny though, the little things I remember: The hand tugging on my sleeve asking, 'Lieutenant, are you all right?'
I couldn't help you that day, young man, as you sat shattered in a puddle of your own blood
I still wake at night remembering your body in my hands and the feel of human mush
It was never the same after that.
Oh, I kept on for two and a half years, but I was walking wounded, putting one foot in front of the other
I was gone, and worst of all, I knew it
I don't know their names, yet each is printed in my brain
I carry them there, still looking for someplace to put all those parts
I need to pick up some of myself I put down along the way, so I'd have room to hold them in my mind while they died.

This poem is called "Disability Decision," and it relates to the VA and waiting after a hearing for the verdict on whether or not your disability is approved or denied.

Each day I go to the mailbox and wait for the verdict
Ironic, those guilty of the axe murder of my soul sit in judgment of me, their victim
In the perfect logic of bureaucracy some pencil-necked geek, who never heard a shot fired in anger
Will strive to find a paragraph, a sentence, a phrase, to show some improvement in my post-traumatic stress
How does a murdered soul improve? Are there some signs of life on a monitor screen?
Some blip in a previous straight line showing its return to life?
Does it assume a zombie's walk and some VA Dr. Frankenstein cries out with joyful madness, 'It's alive! It's alive!'

Their quest is not to find a reason, merely an excuse
The question has never been one of fairness; those who strummed the system like a banjo now sit in my judgment
They remain proud of their service in the Public Affairs Office
This they say without shame, which they reserve for me
Who are they to judge me? There are other who have earned that right
I see them every night when I close my eyes, in the days when my thoughts wander, always to back there
But not these paper men with numbered hearts, whose lives contain all the meaning of margin on a piece of paper
When religious zealots come to the door asking if I have a personal hope for salvation, I shout 'I do!
Praise God, and thank you, Jesus, I have a hope for personal salvation: I hope God hates bureaucrats!
You see, brothers and sisters, hell will be full of bureaucrats, fuller than the ranks of the Illinois National Guard during the Vietnam War
Fuller than all the country clubs; fuller than a rich man's belly at a thousand dollar a plate fund-raiser dinner
Zealots invariably beat a hasty retreat at this point; see, in my heaven there's none of this manila folder crap.
Jesus goes down the line dressed as a Medic in blood-stained jungle fatigues and the thousand yard stare
Pulls each and every one of us who are soul-murdered out of the line
We get to go to heaven, not because each is so very worthy; it's just that hell is full up with bureaucrats
Sorry, there's just no more room. Jesus—yeah, Jesus was a non-vet; Satan was a bureaucrat
But in the meantime, I go to the mailbox each day, waiting to be judged by those guilty of the axe murder of my soul.

END OF INTERVIEW