

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANK W. MARSHALL

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and

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MOUNT LAUREL, NEW JERSEY

JUNE 26TH 2013

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Nicholas Molnar: This begins an interview with Frank Marshall on June 26th 2013, in Mount Laurel, New Jersey with Nicholas Molnar and (Sean Ferguson?). Today, (Sean's) going to be leading the interview. For the record, can you tell us when and where you were born?

Frank Marshall: I was born February 2nd 1949, in Philadelphia.

(Sean Ferguson?): Can you tell us about your early memories in Philadelphia?

FM: I grew up down North Philly, the Italian Section, off of Broad [Street] and Erie [Avenue] in the 11th [Street] and Ontario [Street] section of Philadelphia. Grew up, went to public school. Went to Dobbins High School, Dobbins Tech [Murrell Dobbins Vocational School], took up plumbing. Hung on the street corners all my life. Graduated, bought a '65 [Pontiac] GTO. I worked since I was eleven years old. Had good work ethics, and just partied and had a good time growing up.

SF: Could you tell us a little bit about your parents?

FM: My parents. My father was of Italian descent there. His family and all from Italy. He grew up in Scranton, Pennsylvania. My mother was from Philadelphia. My father came down and lived with his sister who lived around the corner from my mother. My father met my mother as teenagers, they hung out. He went to war. He joined the Army and was stationed at Pearl Harbor with the 25th Infantry Division when they got bombed. The company he was in, I think it was F Company, 25th Infantry. Their barracks got bombed when Pearl Harbor got bombed, and he left there. He went to Guadalcanal and some other islands and he caught malaria, and was discharged. After he was home, in 1953 I think it was, some of the men in his company, one was James Jones who ended up writing *From Here to Eternity*. That book was supposedly a fictitious story based on true characters. The people he wrote about that were in the company said that it was probably about seventy percent true. The character [Private Angelo] Maggio, is from New York. He was the only one that kept the original name. Everybody else he changed the names on. (Stewart?), they him the name Prewitt in the book. My father was the original bugler in the company. He ended up being replaced by (Stewart?) who they called Prewitt in the book. He was the boxer that came in, and the movie was basically about them. My father was all through the book and then the movie. My mother, she was from German descent, her family was all Germans, and she became a seamstress and designer of wedding gowns for a big firm in Philadelphia there. We grew up together. My father also played music. He was a guitar player, and he had his local bands in Philadelphia that played the local area. Some of the bands that played the local night clubs with him were Bill Haley and the Comets, and my father's band broke up, and a few of them became The Comets with Bill Haley. [Editor's Note: Bill Haley and The Comets were an iconic rock band that played the song "Rock around the Clock."] Then I got drafted.

SF: Before you mentioned going to Dobbins Tech. How did you choose to go to a technical school?

FM: I wasn't much of a--I wasn't into college, or I wasn't into school that much. I went to the public schools and I didn't want to take any academic subjects or anything, I wanted to take a

trade, so I went to Dobbins. I took printing, ended up in plumbing, and graduated as a plumbing graduate.

SF: What got you interested in plumbing?

FM: I took a lot--like I said, I wasn't much of a person in school. I had a lot of jobs. I was a pin boy in a bowling alley. I was a paperboy. I worked in a beer distributor since I was eleven years old sorting bottles, and then on the trucks. I didn't know what I wanted to do and when I went to high school, I took the first year--you had options to take and I think it was three different trades you could try out, like a trial period. I took baking, electronics, and printing. I loved printing. I liked printing the most. I started out, but I wasn't doing that well in electronics in my tenth year, and I ended up taking the plumbing field. In high school back then, if you didn't do well in one or you failed in one, you went into the other. So, I ended up in plumbing, and I graduated there as a plumber. Worked about six months or so in the plumbing field, but then I went back into printing. I started running printing presses, and doing a lot of graphic works and different things in the print shops until I got drafted.

SF: Can you tell me a little bit more about the experiences you had in those jobs that you picked up?

FM: Yes, when I was hanging out in corners as a little kid, the bowling alley was right behind my house and I loved bowling, so we were always hanging out in the bowling alley. As teenagers, young, they would let us set the pins for them. I don't know if you're familiar with the old pinsetters, when you were a pin boy. The guy throws the ball down, hits the pins, you have to jump into the alley and pick up the pins, put them in the tray, pull the lever, and it resets the pins, and you had to duck when they hit it. If they're a fast bowler, the pins would flew all over, so you had to duck so you didn't get hit. My grandfather had a beer distributor across the street from where I lived, and I would sort cases on the weekends and after school I would sort beer bottles for him in the cases. I did that. I was a paperboy in the mornings; I would deliver papers. I worked in a grocery store on the corner, sometimes after school, making some money. So, I was always working to make some money. I enjoyed working because it got me what I wanted. I enjoyed buying the comic books, the Lionel train sets. Then, like I said, I got out of high school. It was 1967 I think it was, the end of '66. Probably 1967, I bought a 65 GT0, and that's what I rode around the hot shops, drive and park hamburger shops, and we were cool.

SF: What were some of the things you did for recreation?

FM: I wasn't much of a sports person. I never played much sports. The guys on the corner all had their football teams and baseball teams. We used to play stickball, halfball. I was more into hanging on the corner with all the girls and guys, and going to parties, and hanging in different neighborhoods, going to dances. I was more into that than anything else. So, when everybody else went to play sports, I would be hanging, you know with the girls on the corner. We had a big corner. Our corner down at 9th [Street] and Tioga [Street] there, where we hung out, there was probably fifty, sixty people a night there hanging out, kids. It was pretty good, nice corner.

NM: I just want to jump in. I wanted to ask a little about--you mentioned that your father had served in the military. Did he ever talk about any of his experiences when you were younger?

FM: Not at all. He was glorified with the book. Everybody knew it was about him. His name was Friday throughout the book, and everybody knew he was friends with James Jones. James Jones came to our house. When they got bombed--as I said he was the original bugler, and then he picked up the bugler when cavalry charge--instead of the bugler call, when he--they were getting bombed, that was true. Then he went into Guadalcanal, and some of the other islands there. He laid the telephone line for communications. That was his job. But he never talked about anything, even when he was with his guys and some of them would get together, Prewitt/(Stewart?). They wouldn't talk to me much about it. When I got drafted, I went into the military, I got my orders for Vietnam, [and] I came home on leave. My family wanted to have a party for me before I came home for Vietnam. My father was totally against it. He did not want me to have a party. He said when we come home, we'll have the biggest party you ever had, but you're leaving for Vietnam. He understood. I had just lost my cousin. I left for Vietnam in October '69 my cousin was killed ... in Vietnam on my birth date February 2, 1969. So, my father was like pretty down. He just didn't see any--when I come home we would have a party. When I came home, he threw a gigantic party.

NM: I just want to follow up a little bit with something you talked about in your childhood before we move on. What neighborhood in Philadelphia did you live in?

FM: Tioga.

NM: You mentioned that it was primarily Italian?

FM: Our section was Italian, German. It was mixed but it was basically Italians. Our Lady of Pompeii Parish--everybody went to Our Lady of Pompeii. My family was all Catholic. I was the only Protestant in our family. When my father married my mother, she was Lutheran from the German family. So, my father just went with that, and we were raised, the children were raised Lutheran. So, I went to the public schools whereas half the people in the neighborhood were my relatives because my father's family was pretty large. We were all related basically all throughout the neighborhood. Whatever block I went on, there was my aunt, my cousin, or so forth.

NM: You mentioned that your cousin had been in the military and he had been killed. I wanted to ask a little bit about kids in your neighborhood. Were a lot of them drafted or did they join the service?

FM: No. There were few that I hung out with that did go into the--that joined. Most were drafted. There was a couple that went into the Marines. They wanted to go into the Marines before they got drafted, and then a lot of them got drafted but most of the crowd I went with, very few got drafted. Deferments, college--a lot of them went to college, so they didn't have to go into the military at that time.

SF: So, who were some of your friends who went with you in the neighborhood?

FM: I only had--I was drafted, me and [Anthony Brazilio?] were drafted at the same time. He was the only one I was drafted with, that I left with, and we went through basic [training] together, and he did not want to be in the military. He was one of them guys who just didn't want to go, and he got a deferment during basic training, he was pulled out. He got discharged, medical discharge. So, that was the only one that I went in the military with at that time. There were others that went in around me. The only one I lost in there that was close to me was my cousin Charles "Chicky" Gibelterra. Like I said, the rest of them, we had quite a few wounded. When they came back home they were wounded, got out of the military, or stayed in the military, and then came home.

SF: How did you feel about being drafted?

FM: At the point, it was beginning of December of 1968. My best buddy Bobby knocked on my door at about six o'clock in the morning on a Sunday morning. [He] said, "My father just got into the National Guard. Let's go." At that time, you couldn't get into the National Guard or the Reserves; it was very hard. He had some connections and got us in. He says he's got our name down and all we had to do was go down there. I said, "No, I'll take my chances getting drafted." He went and signed up and got into the reserves, and two weeks later, it was between Christmas and New Year's, I got my draft notice. I left January 14th 1969. I said, "So, what? The war is narrowing down and I'm pretty fortunate. I've got a good life. You know, everything's working good for me. I'll get over it. Nothing will happen to me." I went to basic, and then I went to advanced infantry training. I went to basic at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Then I went to Fort Dix for infantry training. I said, "Oh, this is going to be a breeze," because Fort Dix had the reputation of being pretty easy. Then, after I got out of advanced infantry training, they gave me orders for NCOC School, Noncommissioned Officer Candidate school. They drafted me into that. They would make [you] go through the training, couple of weeks of ranger training, and then come out a sergeant, go to Vietnam as a sergeant, and lead the troops. It's not what I wanted to do. The story was that if you went to NCOC and if you failed, they sent you to Germany as a dog handler. I said, "That's pretty good." So, I went along and I figured I'd fail and go to Germany as a dog handler and I'd be fine. It didn't happen that way. I failed the last week because during the ranger training, I wouldn't walk on the pole and dive into the river. I'm afraid of heights and I can't swim. So, I said, "This is good." I walked back down the telephone pole. I climbed back down it and I said, "Okay, I guess I fail." They said, "No, you passed everything else, you'll go through." I said I didn't want to. So, then, I kind of failed on some other things, and ended up coming out a Spec [Specialist] 4. They gave me orders for Vietnam. I said, "I thought I would go to Germany if you failed." They said, "No, we stopped that already a couple sessions ago, or whatever." So, that didn't work out for me. That's when my luck started to go downhill. Everybody told me so long as I didn't get with the 101st [Airborne Division] over in Vietnam, I'd have it made, because the war was winding down; it was 1970. So I get to Vietnam and I get assigned to 101<sup>st</sup>. I get assigned all the way up north. I got put with the company, the battalion that was doing all the fighting. So again, my luck started running out, and from there is where I went.

SF: You covered a lot of stages in your deployment. I'd like to go back to a couple.

FM: Sure.

SF: Could you describe your daily routine at basic training?

FM: Fort Bragg basic training--when I went to basic training, it was getting early every morning, running, rushing, going through weapon training, going through all these set ups they had about Vietnam. They were trying to teach you jungle training, which I'll tell you about later, which I didn't think was any good. Anyway, as I went through that training, I was with guys that basically mostly were draftees, and we did the same thing all the training, and the classrooms. I went through the training. I skated through. I passed through everything just as, "Yeah, okay, nothing was going to happen to me. I'd be okay." I really didn't pay attention to the training as much as I should have. Then, they sent me to Fort Dix for advanced infantry training, and basically the same thing there. You get up in the morning, you train, you run, you'd be [in] bivouacs at night. You did the shooting, the weapons, the running. Everything you did was to train you for Vietnam, jungle warfare, search-and-destroy missions, you'd have mock villages, and everything was basically flatlands and how they trained you for that, with the weapons, throwing grenades and all that. I went through that, and then I went to down in Fort Benning, Georgia the NCOC, that was about the hardest training I went through. That was very good training, That was hard training, but again it was jungle warfare and villages, and what you were going to do, and more weapons, and then helicopter rappelling. We did more of that there, and again that was basically my training.

SF: You mentioned Fort Bragg and Fort Benning in Georgia. Were there any difference between that and Fort Dix in the north, compared to the south?

FM: There was a big difference in Fort Dix. Fort Dix was more lax, more easier, wasn't as rough. Like they say, Fort Polk [Vernon Parish, Louisiana] was one of the worst. The harder the training--you know, some people had it real hard in their basic training or infantry training. [Fort] Dix was on the little bit lax side.

SF: I understand you became an M79 grenadier. How did you choose to be a grenadier?

FM: I didn't choose it. When I went to Vietnam, I got to Vietnam and again--when I got to Vietnam, it seemed like all the training that I had was completely different than where it was. They sent me up north and I went through a couple weeks of P-training [preparatory training] they called it, with the 101st Airborne, where you did a lot of rappelling because that's mostly what you do with the 101st up north. The helicopters would fly you from mountain to mountain, and then as I went through--I got done [with] that training, then they sent me to--I had the M16 and about a hundred and some pounds on my back. They put me on the helicopter to go out to my company. As my company was landing on a hilltop out there in north--up above Hue, it was up near the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone], close up that way outside all mountains. My helicopter was landing and as I looked out, they guys around the perimeter of the LZ [landing zone], long hair, beards, muddy, dirty. It was something I saw from Vic Morrow in the *Combat Mission* [Editor's Note: *Combat!* was a television series that took place in the European Theater during World War II.] I mean the TV series. It was the most horrible feeling I had at that time. Landing, I'm a new cherry [slang for inexperienced soldier], and I'm all clean with all good

fatigues, and I look at these guys and it scared me. I said, "I don't want to be here." But [I] got off the helicopter and they grabbed me and threw me off the side of the LZ at the ravine and said, "Just look over that way. Just keep your eyes focused across the ravine, and if you see anything let us know." The next helicopter came in with more new guys. That helicopter was landing on the LZ, the skids must've got caught in underbrush or somehow the helicopter started to go un-level. You have two guys on each side the helicopter. The two on the one side, and then the cherries were both on the skids on the outside. The two on one side fell off the helicopter as it was starting to be un-level. They jumped off. That set the helicopter--it didn't stabilize and it just flipped almost to the other side where the other two fell off the helicopter. The blades going this way, up and down, sliced all four of them into pieces. That was my first day in the field. I was sitting on the ravine with my back to where the LZ was. I heard a thump and then I felt something hit me in my back and threw me right into the ravine. It was about a four foot drop. I looked up and it was somebody's head and a two-quart canteen right where I was sitting, so one of them hit me in the back. They cleared the helicopter. The helicopter was all crashed and couldn't fly. They had to get that out of there, but we had to go around and pick up all the pieces, the flesh and the bone, everything from the trees. That was my first day in the field. So, I was not happy. So, as we left that, we left the perimeter and walked down the hill and set up somewhere. It was late, so we had just set up for the night, not even all the way on top of the hill. It was muddy. It was raining. We had it set up about halfway up the hill, and that's where we stayed for the night, and I could hardly walk because everything in my rucksack wasn't packed right, because I had too much stuff. After that, the next morning, we got up and walked again, and I'm sluggish. I've got the M16 and I'm not walking real good with all that weight on my back. So, we did that for about two, three days. They wanted me to walk point. I think it was the third day out there, and they said I could walk point. As I'm walking point, I have the M16 and I'm walking point and I have no sense of direction at all. So, I couldn't follow the directions. Even if they pointed me on a map, I still didn't know if I was going north, south, east, or west. I mean, you spin me around, I don't know where I'm going. So, the squad I was in, they turned around, they said, "Well, we need a new M79 guy. We need somebody to carry the M79 grenade launcher." So, they took the 16 and gave me an M79. From that point on, I became the grenade launcher for my squad. I would stay about fourth or fifth man back all the time. So, I was happy I wasn't walking point and I was carrying the M79 grenade launcher. The first time I was in combat, first time I got fired on, which was within a short time from that, we had a sniper shooting at us. I got down. Everybody got down and I was like, kissing the ground, and I could hear the bullets hitting the trees around me and the leaves and everything else because it was massive jungle. They yelled "Send the 79 up." I was so scared, I started to pass up the 79. You got to understand, I was a kid from the corner and I don't know what I'm doing. I didn't think. I'm scared. I don't think. Then, I started to pass up the 79. Well, they all looked at me like I was some kind of idiot and nut and start cursing at me. Because I have to bring the 79 up. So, I went up to the front, and I fired a couple of rounds into the bunker complex and different things that was there. That's how I got the M79 to answer your question.

NM: Can I just ask a question? Where is this initial LZ you were talking about? Where are you located in Vietnam? I don't think we talked about that.

FM: So far when they--my first flight out to the field was out not far from the DMZ. It was way up north. I think it was right outside Quang Tri, if I'm not mistaken. What we were doing is the

Marines were up there. At that time, they were pulling the Marines. The monsoons were coming. This is in October of 1969, so beginning of November. The monsoons were coming in. They wanted to tear down all the firebases that the Marines were all on. I think it was Firebase Sandy. I'm not sure everything, particulars, but once they wanted to tear all them down, we were doing that and we were cleaning up the area. So, it was somewhere around Quang Tri, maybe right below that. I'm not that familiar with where that area was at that time.

NM: These initial patrols that you were going on were outside of this firebase?

FM: No, well the firebases that you'd be tearing down might be on this hill over there, but we were walking up and down mountains. Our job was to patrol the mountains around there, and then they would take us to that firebase at a different time. There might be another company or another platoon on that base at that time, tearing it down or we'd be up and down the mountains, just walking up and down. We'd get up in the morning, walk down the hill, and up another hill, and we'd stay there for that night. Then we'd move on to another one, another location. Then, they would take us to the firebases that were abandoned now and we'd just make sure they were all cleaned up and no ammunition or no nothing was around on them. Then, the helicopters would pick us up to take us to another location. And we did that until the monsoons were--until they were fully in force in there, because once the monsoons came the helicopters could not fly in that area. You couldn't get the cover you needed.

SF: What did you begin to do as the monsoons came?

FM: We went down to the flatlands outside Firebase Jack. Firebase Jack was right outside Phu Bai, and it was between Phu Bai and Hue, and it was on the flatlands. It was called Firebase Jack and we spent there all of January. We were right there January and a lot of February. That was pretty much fun. We'd go on--they'd take us from there. They'd take a squad out and you'd walk for a while around the while. One squad might go out, or one platoon might go out and stay the night out in the bush, and you could see where the mountains started from Firebase Jack. It would be all flat, but you could see where the mountains started and went up. It was beautiful country. We had an LZ cutting team from there, and we'd go out and cut LZs on top of hilltops, and make LZs. They would drop us in by rappelling us in, and each guy would have a different piece of machinery, either the chainsaws or the axes and everything else. Then you would drop down and cut that. During that time there was one guy that didn't get off the D-ring quick enough when the helicopter started taking off. He thought he was under fire, and he took off real quick thinking that ... was off his D-ring connection to the rappelling rope and he wasn't. They took off and he smacked into every tree. He broke every bone in his body, and of course he was taken out, and still alive, but I never heard what happened to him.

SF: What were some of the longer marches or patrols you took?

FM: The most you took was if you walked all day. You might walk for four or five hours. Very rarely it would be longer than that, because once you got up in the morning at six o'clock in the morning then you would have your route and which way you were going to go, whether it was up or down the mountain. I mean, it was a lot of hard walking and it was a struggle, because you've got 110 pounds on your back, and you're walking almost straight up mountains. Then



you get to the top of that mountain and if there wasn't an LZ, you'd have to walk to another hilltop another day to get extracted out. So then, they would take you to another area. Why what we were doing, they would just put into areas and see if we made contact, basically.

SF: Can you tell me about some of the times you did make contact?

FM: When I got there, like I said, October, the first day that the helicopter crashed, maybe the next week or two we were in a firefight, a sniper shooting at us. November and December, I don't think I saw any contact at all. It was starting to get pretty easy. Then, we went on to Firebase Jack. A couple of guys hit some booby traps or whatever else in their platoons or whatever else. I never saw anything, came into anything. Now, I'm really lax come February/. We're leaving Firebase Jack. We went out in the field in the mountains again for another week or two. I'm getting pretty lax. You know, this is fun. It's all right. We're pretty safe, not realizing that the monsoons were over. Then on March 12th, they flew us back into Camp Evans in Phu Bai, and took us to the helicopter pad. There must've been a hundred helicopters around. Hueys, Cobras, phantom jets. We could hear them dropping B-52s off the ridge. We knew we were going to have a problem here. We were going someplace hot. We didn't what know what we were [doing]. I didn't. I didn't pay too much attention to where we were going. I was only a spec-4, the lieutenants and sergeants and captains knew where they were going. What our mission was, was to fly right outside the A Shau Valley, right off of where Hamburger Hill was. [Editor's Note: The Battle of Hamburger Hill was fought from May 10 to May 20, 1969.] Hamburger Hill was in May of 1969, at the mouth of the A Shau. It was a disaster. We were going one year later in March of 1970, March 12th. We were going to open up a firebase on another hilltop off Hamburger Hill. We were going to go to Hill 902 to open that up. As we were flying in, it was foggy, rainy, misty; the cover was terrible, so they diverted us onto another hilltop. I forget the number of the hilltop. It was later--the hill was going to be Firebase Ripcord. As we landed, my helicopter landed about--I was probably the third or fourth helicopter in. There was green smoke out, which meant it was the first few went in friendly. Then, as mine was landing, the red smoke popped. That meant we were getting hit. It was a hot LZ. As we were getting off the helicopter, mortars and RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades], machine gun fire running all over the hill from the enemy. Two of the guys on the side of my helicopter went to the split between the rock on the bare hill. As they were running over there, I was laying on the ground looking for a place to go; it was a bare hilltop. They yelled at me to, "Come over here! We've got room for you here!" As they said that, an RPG hit the rock and the two of them got hit, wounded. I dropped my rucksack, went over with everybody else, grabbed them, and threw them onto the next helicopter that was coming in. As I did that, my rucksack--and I carried an M79 with--I had an M79 vest with all the ammo in the vest. As I dropped my rucksack, my vest went with the rucksack. I still had the M79 on my shoulder. Picked them up. One of the guys helped--I helped carry one of them onto the helicopter. My sergeant came by and just grabbed me by the neck real quick, the collar, and said, "Come on. We're going down the hill." My squad went down to take out the machine gunner that was over there. As we were ran down the bare hill, the machine gun was shooting at us. We were swerving, and it's all bare and everything else. We laid down, got under some trees and rocks and different things, and set up to knock out the machine gunner; we can see him as clear as day. As I got down, and I broke my M79 to load, I don't have any ammo. All my ammo was up on the top of the hill. Everybody looked at me. Of course I got called every name in the book by the guys in my

squad, which we all laugh at now. So, I had to run back up the hill to get my ammo. As the machine gunner was shooting at me, and everybody laughs now because all they said all they did was saw all the 51 [caliber machine gun]--he was hitting. You could see the dirt as I was running up, how close he was to me, but he didn't get me. I ran back down and loaded my M79. At that time, the Cobras and the loaches [a light observation helicopter] were in and marked the target and they knocked them out. We then went back up to the top of the hill, and regrouped and left the hill that day. Then, the next couple of days, we worked that area. That was the beginning of [Battle of Fire Support Base] Ripcord.

SF: Excuse me. Can we pause?

FM: Okay, guys. I'm ready.

SF: So, I wanted to ask a few follow up questions about what we just talked about. Before you mentioned seeing the older guys on your very first day and being shocked. What were some of the relations you had with those guys, as the days went on?

FM: That was the first I met them, and after I got to meet them, these guys were--a lot of my company was on Hamburger Hill. So, a lot of the guys were veterans, combat veterans, saw what happened, went through a lot of contact, lost a lot of guys. So, I was the cherry. I was the new guy, because their company was down to a minimum. They never rebuilt strong after the Hamburger Hill incident, and most of the people left at that time. So, when I went, my company Alpha Company, was in pretty low numbers, and we got a lot of new guys, but I was one of the first newer guys. So, I was the cherry coming out to veterans, combat veterans. So, they were kind of rough. They were the greatest guys I ever met. I mean, eventually once you get to know them, but at that time, they didn't want to get friendly with anybody, they were always afraid of new guys because you have no experience, you're scared, you really don't know anything, and when you go out with these guys that you're in contact or whatever else, they kind of treat you rough at first, not wanting to get to know you, not wanting to get to know your feelings, who you are. This went on for about a month, every time we start getting new guys, and all through October, November, the company was loaded with, I'd say probably over fifty, sixty percent newer guys. That was a blessing because all us newer guys got to know each other, and then by March, by Firebase Jack, we got very friendly with everybody. Everybody seemed to unite because we're all on a firebase. So, we got to know everybody pretty closely. Then March 12th started Ripcord. We were pretty seasoned, but not a whole lot of combat veterans in us--firefights, few little incidents, but nothing big like March 12th. That was the start of it. We became very close. We were the old (head?) now, from October to March. So, when we get cherries, we could be that way with the cherries, but we weren't as harsh because we weren't experienced like the guys that we went in. They went through Hamburger Hill and lost a lot of guys. We're going through monsoons, firebases, stand-downs. So, we're kind of more easier on the new cherries that were coming in.

SF: Did you become close with any of those new recruits?

FM: The new recruits that we got there together with, October through March, became very close, because every day we were out in the field. We didn't spend much time in the rear, except

for Firebase Jack, on the firebase. Six o'clock in the morning, as soon as the sun's up, you're up. You're making coffee and packing up to get ready to make a move. You walk to the next spot. You never stayed in the same night position more than one night. So, you're with these guys then you walk with them, and then you break with them, and then you have lunch, C rations and you figure out how you're going to cook this or how you're going to cook that from a can. You had a lot of down time in the afternoon, you sat there in the field. You'd play cards, you'd talk, you write letters. You get to know each other and you get to know people. They're family. You get to know what they do, how they think, what type of person they are. It's like, you might have a friend today that you might have, you work with, you see eight hours a day, but you really don't sit and talk to him for eight hours a day. You might go out and go to a bar, and have somebody you sit and drink with every night for an hour or two. You talk, you laugh, you say, "Oh, this guy is great," and you have a good time, but when you're with somebody twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, beside each other, depending on them in case you get into a fight, the whole nine yards, your whole perspective of that person and how close you become with them is something you can't experience. Once you get into combat with these people, it's a whole different situation how close you are with them. What you see with them, how they protected you, how you protected them, you get a bond that'll develop the rest of your life. So, we became very close, and then when we had new guys, we'd laugh, we'd tease them, joke with them or if some weren't going to make it, we were so close now, that we knew--we had one guy came in and snored every night. Well, he wouldn't stop, so we set him into the rear. He went back to the rear. I'd say, "Well, if I knew it was that easy, I'd snore every night," but that's not the case. You get to know whether a guy's going to make it or he's not going to make it, and you can't take that risk of being with somebody. Nobody ever did any drugs while they were with us. My guys did a lot of drugs on Firebase Jack. It was pretty safe. After March 12th, nobody did any drugs out in the field. Nobody did anything out in the field that might be harmful, because now we know we're in the stuff, and after March 12th, as I get into that, then you'll see why.

SF: What were some of the things you guys did for down time?

FM: There wasn't much you could do. On the Firebase, you were pretty secure. You had guard duty, different things all the time around there. We never had any down time in the field. When we're walking up and down mountains, I mean the only down time we had is like the afternoon when you might just be sitting there. You always have somebody on guard and outlook. Somebody's always in a section--you're in a perimeter, somebody's always watching what's out there. Somebody else might be in here, you might be cooking some C-rations or some food, or talking, writing letters. That about basically [it]. The only thing you could do is what you have with you at that time to sit there, and you're sitting there. You're not running around. You can't take a walk. There's not much you can do at all. Sometimes it gets pretty boring, but you like that idea of sitting there and relaxing for an afternoon, because you know you're going to be pulling guard duty all night, because you take shifts. You'll have three men to a position. One takes two hours, the next one takes two hours, and then two hours, and then two hours. You split up the time maybe twice, and you're getting ... for that guard. You learn a lot of people will not sleep all night. I was one of them guys that were afraid to sleep at night, because I'd be afraid that the other guy on guard might fall asleep. A lot of people were like that. So, I'd sleep--in the afternoon, I'd take my naps. When we're settled in the afternoon before it gets dark, I'd sleep a

few hours, and to this day I still do that. Every day I've been home, I try to take a nap in the afternoon. When I was working, I'd come home and sleep a couple hours and then I'd go out all night. That's another story.

SF: You mentioned people used to write back home. Where there any people that you kept in touch with?

FM: All of my sisters, my mother. I would get letters every day. Well, whenever the mail came. Like, we'd have drop-offs. The mail would come out usually about every three days. We'd get food, mail, new clothes, whatever else that we can. The helicopters would come in and drop that off wherever we were, if we were at an LZ. So, then you get your mail, and you read your mail, and I had a lot of friends and a lot of family at home that would write me letters, and I would answer them all. I would write and then send them out on the next helicopter that came in. We would get our mail and put it on and send it back home. So, we got a lot of mail, and we'd get a lot of boxes from home, food etc., packages. When you're sitting around with the guys in the afternoon or whatever and if you got your (scarf?) packages, you had to carry wherever you got. So, you tried to make sure when you were getting package from home, that they weren't heavy and that that it was something you could eat right away or share or whatever else you want to do. Can't be anything heavy because you just couldn't carry it. So, my mother used to send all kinds of good stuff and we used to share it. So, one day, the guys turned around and we decided to vote the mother of the year. We sent my mother a letter and said, "We're so thankful for your packages. Our squad is voting you mother of the year for your food, etc., packages. This is Tommy Aguon. 'I like the rice pudding.' Joe Evans, 'I like the crackers,'" or whatever it might be. Then, my mother was so proud of that. Then, she knew what to send everybody, and we'd start getting packages all the time for what everybody liked. So, it made my mother proud, and made us all happy because we were getting more of what we liked.

SF: Did you often collaborate to do things like that?

FM: Oh, yes. We used to send the food companies, like the guys that made the pudding, Betty Crocker, General Foods and all them, Tabasco. We used to send them letters. "We love your product. We're in the field." And send them a picture of us with their product and, "Could you please send us some samples or something." They'd send us cases of pudding, cases of food. We'd have bottles of Tabasco they'd send us. Yes, we did a lot of--you come up with these ideas. I mean, you're sitting there, you got to think of something, keep your mind off everything else. It's like going on a camping trip with your buddy, couple of you go on a camping trip into the middle of the mountains. You've never been there, but you know you got everything you on your back and you're going to be out there a couple of weeks, and you can't stay in one spot at the same time, and that's what it's like. Except that there might be someone shooting at you this time.

SF: Did you have a relationship with the people that lived in the towns nearby?

FM: Never saw a civilian. There were no towns, no villages, nothing up in the mountains where we were at. So, I never--the only town I ever went through was on a truck, a cattle truck one

time when we drove up to Firebase Bastogne. We went right through the city of Hue on a truck, but we didn't stop and I never interacted with any towns or villages my whole time there.

SF: What did you think of the Viet Cong, the Vietnam soldiers?

FM: Well, I did not fight the Viet Cong, the VC. The only people I ever fought was the North Vietnamese Army, because where I was at, there were no Viet Cong; there were no villages. The North Vietnamese Army had taken over the whole north and the A Shau Valley. That's how they came down. So, anybody I would see in the mountain where we were at and where we were walking, if anybody went by us and we had no knowledge of it, we'd shoot them, because they were enemy. We didn't have to call or do anything. As long as we knew there were no American troops around us, we would fire. On March 12th, our lieutenant--we were out at night bivouac that night we got hit on March 12<sup>th</sup>, the hot LZ, we had to move out and when we set up at night, there was a lot of confusion at that time. I'm not sure of the complete facts. I got different stories from it, but the bottom line is one of the guys in our platoon--it was nighttime and he was told to go out and get one of the--something to do with the claymore or the clip that went on the claymore or detonator, that it was still out there and he had to go out there and get it. He went out there and got it and he was a new guy. He went out there. He walked in front of somebody else's position and the lieutenant and grenade launcher was right there. The grenade launcher said to the lieutenant, "There's movement out there." The lieutenant, "Fire. Nobody should be out there, just fire." As the grenade launcher pulled the trigger, he saw the person stand up and saw that it was one of us, but it was too late and it hit him. He got wounded pretty bad. He was laying out there, but we had contact all around us. We couldn't go out there and get him. At that time, the lieutenant wouldn't let nobody go out to get him, to bring him back into the area. So, he stayed there all night long and then the next morning they went out and got him. He lived, and we still get together now, but that's what happens, because nobody should be out there, and it was a mistake that he got out there and nobody knew he was out there.

NM: When you first get to the hill that's eventually going to become the Firebase Ripcord, are the men in your platoon helping actually construct the base?

FM: What happened was, we were going to land, secure the firebase. Once you secure the firebase, you might be the company that's going to surround the perimeter, the infantry company. Then, you bring in the combat engineers, and the artillery, and the engineers start building everything on the firebase. It's a pretty big hilltop and you're going to set up all the artillery and the guns. So, you have the infantry company that's going to protect the hill. You have the artillery guns and their companies on there. You have the TOC [tactical operations center], the headquarters, and the engineers were building all this stuff. They had bulldozers brought in, and built up a nice fortress. The infantry company will go around and put barbed wire around it, but what happened was my company goes in, so we did not secure the hill. We had to fight around the hill and we walked around the base of the hill for the next couple of days, and other companies came into the area to try and see how much activity was really out there, and the NVA were very well put out there. They had a lot of guys out there, a lot of enemy. So, there were different companies that tried to open this hill. On April 1st, Bravo Company came up the hill. That was the April Fool's Day assault. They came up the hill trying to open it that day, and did not open it. April 15th, Charlie Company went up, and finally got on top of the hill

and it were secure enough that they started bring in all the artillery and everything else, and that's when they started to build up the Firebase Ripcord on April 15th.

SF: What were some of the interactions you had with the other companies?

FM: None. Very rarely did I work with any of the other companies. In fact, there was only a couple of times--later on, in late July I think it was, on [Hill] 805, one of the companies had [a] problem at night. They got hit going up a hill on one of the hills, and we were on the side of the hill, so we helped them out. Very rarely you'd be with another company, other than the artillery or who was ever on the firebase, if you were on the firebase. Alpha Company, my company, was very fortunate, if you call it fortunate, not to be on the firebase. The only firebase we were ever on was Jack. Then we went to [Firebase] Bastogne for a couple of weeks. [Firebase] O'Reilly maybe a week or two, but Ripcord--I was only on Ripcord maybe one or two day. That was it.

SF: What was the process moving between those firebases?

FM: Well, they always moved you around the different areas. In other words, if you had a hilltop over here, a firebase on one hill, a different firebase on another hill in another location, the firebases are there to support the line companies, in case the line companies get into contact. The line companies are all in the fields, in the valleys around the bottom of the firebases. You will have different companies rotate where they're going to be, and that was what we were doing. We'd rotate around O'Reilly, or we rotate around Bastogne, or we rotated around Ripcord. Now, after March 12th we were basically--most of the time, we were around in the Ripcord area of operation. So, we'd be down in the valley or the base of Ripcord and work that area around there. We did that for a long time. We were working in there--when I got hit--when we got hit on March 12th, that night, I went right to our CP [command post], the guy on the radio, and I said to my RTO [radio telephone operator], "I want to get out of here. I'm due for an R&R. What do you got?" He said, "Well, you're in for Sydney, Australia." He says, "But we've got no openings," because that was the hottest place to go. So, I said, "What is open?" He said, "I got Taipei." I said, "When can you get me out of here?" He says, "I can get you out of here in a couple of days and you can go." I said, "Do it." So, by April 1st or April 7th, I got my R&R and I went away for seven days. I lived up because I knew we were coming into some heavy shit. So then, I got back from R&R. We had lost a few guys while I was away, because we're in contact at least once a week or so. June 8th we got into contact and they called me up because the new guys, new cherries were on the M79s, and a couple of guys that were on the M79s weren't as good as I was at this time because now I've got a lot of practice of running up and knocking out the enemy. So June 8th, we got hit as we were walking up a ridgeline. It's starting to get dark and they called me up. There was other platoons ahead of me, so I went up from the rear and I ran up the trail. I see the enemy gunner there, and I took a shot and I knocked him out. The lieutenant said, "Okay, everybody fire now." I said, "No. You can't fire because there's trees and it's getting dark, and somebody is going to hit one of these trees and if you hit it too close, the M79 has to go twenty five meters before it'll go off. If it hit something at twenty five meters it's going to go off." I said, "These trees are within that range. It's going to go off. Somebody's going to get killed." As I said that, the lieutenant said, "No, fire." I said, "Okay." He said, "Well, then you just fire." [I] said, "All right." I fired, I hit a tree, and the shrapnel hit two of my guys and myself in the back. So, I got wounded at that time on June 8th. I went in

the hospital for about three days, got done [with] that, came back. The two guys that got wounded got sent home. So, I came back. Then during June, we got into some other heavy contacts here and there. Then July, first of July the firebase was starting to get hit heavy with mortars and RPGs. We were starting to see more and more contact. We're walking around the valley and the hills, and we're seeing NVA walking by us, and we're shooting them left and right. They're all around us. We know that we're surrounded. I mean, we knew we're in trouble. They were all around us. How can they not be hitting us? We can't figure it out. Finally, we're walking, and we walk right into a wire line and we tap the wire line because we see a phone line going across it. We get our interpreter that's with us and he sees, he listens and his face goes white. He says, "We're in between two base camps of NVA. We're smack in the middle of them. They're sending down guys to check out the wire." Well, before you knew it, we set up a trap for them on the line, to see where he comes, and I'm right there and I see this big, looked Korean or whatever. He was a big guy and he came walking down the line and we shot him up, but we had a trap for him. But the bottom line is we were surrounded at that time. So, we get the word back to the rear and they figure we've got to get the heck out of that area. Now, the base is getting hit real bad. All the companies around us are getting hit real bad. We're being hit all the time. They're going to extract us. On the morning of July 22nd, we are going to move out, say to the east. We start walking down the side of the hill, and we get a call to come back because we're going to walk the other way and they're going to extract our company. Now, on the hilltop, only two platoons could fit on this hill at once, so second platoon was out, they had moved back on top of the hill now. My platoon was first platoon as we were moving down. Third platoon was on the hill. As we turn around and we're going to come back up the hill, first platoon is coming back, second platoon's going the opposite way. They're going to take us to the nearest LZ and lift us up, and get us out of the area, and then evacuate the firebase. As we turned around, we walked right into them. We had seventy-six guys. We turned around and as soon as we heard--the second platoon walked right into them, start shooting, we heard the mortar tubes going off. We dive off to the sides of the hill to get out, to get in cover. Before the last mortar that they dropped on us stopped, they were on top of the hill. They had four hundred NVA, and we had seventy six, on a small hilltop that couldn't even fit a company of guys. I mean you couldn't fit everybody on the hilltop. We fought them all day long. Our seventy-six guys fought 400 NVA, very close situations. At the end of the day, we had six guys left that weren't wounded or killed. We had fifty-six wounded, fourteen dead. The only thing that saved us was we were calling in the phantom jets to drop 250-pound bombs up the side of the hill, to get them coming up the side of the hill. The last one landed right on top of us, killed one of our guys, with a concussion, lifted the rest of us off the ground. I was hit three different times in that one day. A satchel charge blew up in my face as I was tending to a medic that was down. I rolled back down the hill. I start going back up the hill and I got hit in the arm. I went down, medic grabbed me up. I started going up the hill again, and I got hit in the leg with shrapnel. At that point, I couldn't even walk and one of the guys carried me up the hill. Once everybody got up to the top of the hill, we waited all night long. We were petrified that if they came back that we'd be dead. They did not come back that night. We had all the--the ships that were in the water, *Jersey* and all them that were on the coast, the big ships, they were shooting illumination flares over us all night long. The canisters from the illumination, once they popped, were coming down and dropping right on top of us. We had no idea what we were going to do. Delta Company was in the rear at that time. They're tried to come out to get us, but they couldn't land on any of the LZs because they were all on fire. The NVA or whatever had set all

these things on fire and nobody could come in and get us. The next morning, [as] soon as sun up, we heard the helicopters coming in. Delta Company landed on an LZs off of us, walked over to us, blew up every tree on our hilltop. Every tree they hit with RPGs, they wrapped C4 around them, just so the helicopters could come in, and then they threw all the wounded on the helicopters. Then they got on the helicopters and we got out. At the same time they were evacuating everyone off of the Firebase Ripcord, as the NVA were running up the hill. I ended up in a hospital for six weeks over there. I had two weeks left. Then I went back to the rear. After that, that's when I get out of the military. At that time, they sent me home, I only had three months to do because I was already in extended through the NCO. I came home October 1970, took off my uniform and that was it. So, I lost thirty-two guys that were beside me. Out of the whole March through July, I lost thirty-two of my friends, close friends. The Battle of Ripcord, total, in the month of July there were seventy-six Americans killed. In the entire battle, March 12th to July 23<sup>rd</sup>, we lost 252, something like that. Total of 252 that we lost, Americans. Thousands were wounded throughout the whole time. Came home. Well, that's up to the end of my Vietnam story.

SF: I'd just like to ask a few follow up questions.

FM: Yes.

SF: You mentioned tending to a medic. How did the roles change during that day for everyone?

FM: When we got hit, on that morning, we scattered off the hilltop. Everybody was separated, our rucksacks were on top of the hill. It was one big [clusterfuck]. It was a clusterfuck. We were disorganized. Our captain was down here. Second platoon was over there. Third platoon and first platoon were mixed in between. We had guys laying on the top of the hill, wounded. The NVA came on top of the hill before we could even get off it, but they were shooting the wounded in the head. They were shooting at us, and we were shooting back at them. So, I got lost, basically. Well, what happened was, when I scattered I had my M79 and I can't shoot close with my M79. I had shotgun shells and everything else, but I don't know who I'm going to hit. I've got different guys running here and there. I don't know who's running where. I look over, as I'm trying to find somebody, I see a medic lying down on the ground, Danny Fries. I ran over to him and he was still alive, but in pain. When I ran over to him, just as I got to him, I saw an NVA soldier right in front of me and he lobbed a satchel charge down on to us. I saw it rolling down the hill. It hit the medic right in the back and blew up. As it blew up, it blew up in my--I got burnt in my face and rolled down the hill and the medic was still there. It didn't kill him right away, as far as what I can hear. Some other people said they saw him after that still moaning, so I don't think that initially killed him. At first I thought it did, but it didn't. He was dead later. So, that's how the first time I got hit on that day. Then we regrouped. When I rolled down the hill, I rolled into the CP with my captain. As I was standing with him, an RPG hit us, and went right through his neck and out the other side, a piece of shrapnel from that and he still continued talking on the phone and doing what he had to do. It hit a couple of our guys down there. Satchel charges, RPGs, everything was going off all around us. Finally, we're trying to regroup. We lost our radio contact. We had four medics; we lost three of them. All different guys were getting together from all different squads. Second platoon was still trapped over there. They were doing their own fighting on the side of the hill. We're up on the top doing our



fighting and the CP and all were down here trying to regroup us. The captain and his RTO [radio-telephone operator] and the FO [forward observer] were calling in airstrikes and cobras, and all the fire power. They did a hell of a job on that to get us out of there.

SF: I'd also like to talk about the things that happened just before Ripcord. Can you tell me what you did on your R&R?

FM: It's X-rated. [laughter] Basically on my R&R, that's what any GI does. I went To Taipei, Taiwan. As soon as I got off, I bought a--they have the girls there for you, and you pay for the girls and get as many as you want and whatever you want to do, and that was the time I had. That was basically it. That was my date. We went out to dinner, to shows, and she would get a--

NM: I have a few follow up questions regarding your time. I'm just trying to get a sense of where your unit is operating is in the valley around Ripcord? In relation to everything, this is happening around the valley, on the hill, that whole area?

FM: It was total mountains. Okay? Ripcord was on the highest mountain and you have all the [smaller] mountains around there. You were right off of Ho Chi Minh Trail. It was right over to the other side, in the mouth of the A Shau Valley. The NVA were trying to come down the Ho Chi Minh Trail with their supplies, and they would come through. If they had the Ho Chi Minh Trail, they would walk right through that. We had the Ho Chi Minh Trail covered. We could bomb them on that. So, they would come off the sides and down through the mountains. What they wanted to do was stop us from setting up firebases on the hilltops there, and get our men without any support. So, we had different companies in our battalion that worked around Ripcord, the area, to stop the NVA from coming through. That was our mission, but it's the mountains, it's large. They had tunnels that they built over the years and years and years. They could walk through these tunnels. We would end up walking on top of the hilltops, smaller hilltop, off of Ripcord, and set up the night there. They would be in the tunnels right underneath of us, they wouldn't make a move or do anything until we left. So, all throughout that area, they had hundreds of tunnels, caches, hospitals, everything was underground, and we were walking right on top of them.

NM: From what I understand, just reading a little information on the Ripcord website, were the helicopters that were extracting you under fire?

FM: No, not on [ours]. Alpha Company was extracted. Delta Company came in and they threw us on the helicopters. When I got on the helicopter, my whole time in combat, my whole time in the battle, the whole time I was in Vietnam, I was scared, numerous, hundred times. I was scared, petrified. I was never as scared as I was when they threw me on the helicopter and the helicopter had to lift up and go away, because knowing that all they had to do was take one shot, knock that one helicopter down. They could've came up and killed us all, because the hill was so small. We had no--they could've attacked us, right then, came up four sides and just overran us with a downed helicopter on the hill. We have no idea why they never did that, but that was the only thought in my head as my helicopter was lifting, how scared I was. Why they never came up and finished us off the night before, nobody knows. Why they didn't knock us down when the helicopters were coming in, can't understand it. I just had no idea. I'll never figure it

out. Nobody will. What they did was they ran from us, and went over to Ripcord, and took everything they got in the area and attacked Ripcord. By the time the last guy was off of Ripcord, evacuated off of there, they were on top of the hill, hundreds of them. As the last helicopters were lifting off, they saw all the NVA on top of the hill. It was like something you see out of a movie. It was something unbelievable. How lucky we were.

SF: When you were extracted how many were left? How many Americans were left?

FM: Out of seventy-six of us that was there that morning, there was only six that weren't wounded or killed. There was fourteen dead and fifty-six were wounded. Out of the wounded, most were wounded pretty bad. There was only about a dozen guys that could fight, that night that we left.

SF: Did operations at Ripcord continue after that?

FM: The next day, the 23rd extracted everybody out of the Ripcord area, and they just bombed the hell out of it with B-52s and everything you could think of in that whole area. That hilltop was literally, and I can show you some pictures before and after. The hilltop was literally--the whole top was blown off from the bombing. So, did they ever go back? They were in the area after that year, months later and stuff, before the next monsoons. But then eventually, they had to get out of there. The NVA overran them.

SF: If you don't mind me asking, what was the hospital recovery like after that?

FM: What they did is--the media was banned from covering this battle. They did not want the media or the public back home to hear [about] this battle. It's a lot of controversy over the Hamburger Hill battle. If you remember or knew anything about it, when Hamburger Hill happened, the public went crazy and protested. It even went into Congress and onto the floor of the Congress whether to stop the war because of the atrocities of Hamburger Hill. The 101st did not want that on their record again, another disaster like Hamburger Hill. Ripcord was ten times, twenty times worse than Hamburger Hill. They did not want the media or anybody to know about it, so the media was banned from covering any stories, and taking any pictures. They were taking the wounded, which was not just my company it was the guys that were on Ripcord that were getting hit and wounded. Flying back into Camp Evans, when they flew into Camp Evans, the medics, the doctors, everybody was on the helicopter pad. They would take so many wounded. They were seeing where the wounded wanted to go. They were sending them to different hospitals all over Vietnam. They were sending them to hospital ships. They did not want a cluster of wounded all in one hospital because it would have just went crazy. So, they sent them all [to] different hospitals. I ended up going to the 95th [Evacuation Hospital] in Da Nang. After Phu Bai--I went to the one in Phu Bai, the 85th. Then I went to the 95th, after a couple of days. They stitched me up and cleaned me up, and operated and then sent me to the 95th in Da Nang. Then after that one, they sent me down to the 483rd Air Force hospital on the Cam Ranh Bay. The first two hospitals I don't remember too much of them; they were like Army barrack hospitals. It was just like an army hospital, doctors coming in, people running around, and everybody wounded and everything else. When I got down south to Cam Ranh Bay, and into the Air Force hospital, I still couldn't walk or anything. I was still bedridden when I

went in there. There were American nurses, American doctors. Well, they were all American doctors, but this one had nurses, just friendly and clean, and the mattresses were thick, home-style mattresses. It was like I was back in the United States. If I would have been passed out or unconscious between the other ones and there, I would've thought I was back home. I mean, it was just unbelievable. It was on the beach. What happened after that is I stayed there a couple weeks, and then when I got walking, they said I could go to the cafeteria. When I got out and walked to the cafeteria, walked into the cafeteria--I was never in an Air Force hospital before. I was never in any other than a mess hall. It was like a cafeteria. It was like I couldn't believe. They had a hot buffet and a cold lunch. It was just incredible. So, I stayed there and I stayed in Cam Ranh Bay, a couple weeks down there. Then a total of six, seven weeks later, I went back to the rear. While I was down [in] Cam Ranh Bay--when I first got hit, I called home. I don't know if it was Phu Bai or Da Nang. [I] called home to let them know I was wounded, but it wasn't fast enough that the government had sent a telegram to my mother. Somebody had delivered a telegram to my mother. The telegram said, and I still have it, "Your son was wounded in Vietnam and is in an ambulatory condition." Not thinking clearly, whatever else, she's just taking that ambulatory as amputating. She called her Congressman that she went to school with in Philly, Joshua Eilberg. She was friends with him, and she called him and said I was wounded. Can he check it out. He says, "Yeah, that's what we do." He sent a liaison in Vietnam to look at me. So, during this time, they pull my records. He tells my mother it's the third time I was wounded. Okay. I was wounded June 4th and July 22nd. I was wounded three times then, but, it's only counted as one wound. Then, June 4th was one wound; that's twice. They got me as getting shrapnel on March 12th or whatever else. I never got awarded for it, but I did get treated for something in there. [Joshua Eilberg] tells her, "It's the third time he's wounded. He's not supposed to be back in the field." Now, the liaison went up to my company officer at the CP there at the barracks, and he told him that I have two weeks left, but since we don't have nobody in Alpha Company, I'm to go back to the field with the company with all the cherries. The liaison then tells the guy, "No. He's hit three times. This is it. He's not going back." At that point, my top, the sergeant who commanded the rear, at that point got pissed off because I had political pull from the States saying I didn't have to go back to the field, that I was not to go back to the field. I had two weeks left. I two purple hearts, two air medals, a bronze star with a V [for valor], a bronze star. Two weeks left in country. I just spent all that time out in the field. They got pissed because I got political pull. They put me on shit burning detail for two weeks. I had to burn shit in the latrines for two weeks because I had connections. I'm not to go back to the field. I'm glad I didn't. My guys that were left from Ripcord through the remainder of their time were totally--there was only a dozen of them left in the company. They were totally burned out from Ripcord. They couldn't take it any more. They sent them back to the field. They did everything they could do to get back into the rear, because they just couldn't take it no more, and then they go out with a bunch of new cherries and start all over again. They turned to drugs. They turned to anything they could do. Some of them got lucky, got rear jobs. They transferred this one here and that one there. I was so pissed that they would even think of doing something of the sort, but that's how it was. It's a horrible fact to how somebody can treat you. The worst part of it yet, and I might be getting out ahead of you here, but the worst part of everything, the whole nine yards, is what I went through, and what everybody that was with me on Ripcord went through, you come home, you're out of the military, and for forty years, thirty years until the year 2000 when a book was written called *Ripcord [Ripcord Screaming Eagles Under Siege, Vietnam 1970]* by Keith Nolan, they couldn't tell anybody--they could tell anybody

they wanted about Ripcord, but nobody would believe them. Even Vietnam veterans never heard of Ripcord, would not believe them. They think you're talking stolen valor. They think you're lying, you're bullshitting, because it's never told, but it happened. Ripcord veterans had to live with this for a long time. They're just not Vietnam veterans that came home, they're Vietnam veterans that came home that were in one of the worst battles ever in Vietnam, and nobody wants to hear it because nobody knew about it. That's what's disgusting.

SF: Could you tell me a little bit about your experiences coming home?

FM: My experiences when I came home, I got off that plane, I got [in] at the airport. I saw the protesters and all that stuff going on. I didn't want to be bothered with anything. I took my uniform off, didn't talk about Vietnam, didn't tell nobody about Vietnam. I didn't think I had a problem. I went back into the printing firm, because that's what I loved. I had good work ethics before I went in the military. When I came home I figured I just pick up where I left off. I started printing, couldn't do it. I was out every night partying, drinking, just doing everything that I wanted to do. I didn't care about anything. I just went out all night long and partied. I'd get into parties that last until six o'clock in the morning. I lost my job, the first job I had. I got another job printing, and lost that. Got a job driving a truck, lost that. Got a job roofing for somebody. That's the easiest job in the world. It's the hardest labor, but it's like you don't work in the rain. You don't work in the snow. If you don't show up, they get somebody else. I eventually opened up my own business, [a] roofing company. [It] became one of the largest in the city. It was like a great roofing company. I was making money hand over foot, but I ended up drinking it away, partying it away. Everybody said I had a problem; I didn't think I did, but I did. I just didn't care. I didn't cope. I got in contact with the Ripcord veterans. In 1985, we had a reunion, bunch of us that was together in Alpha Company. It made the papers down Seaside Heights. Somebody came along and said they saw it and they were starting a--he was from Bravo Company and he was starting up a newsletter for anybody that was in Ripcord. He was looking for guys in Ripcord. I got involved with him. We planned the first reunion. We had a dozen guys in 1986. I stayed involved with them ever since. I lost a couple of years there because of my partying and the way I was, and everything else. Then, finally I just stopped drinking, cut back, all that stuff. I retired and bought this house. I'm not rich. I'm not successful. I'm comfortable. I get by on what I get on my pension. That's about it.

NM: Well, certainly have a follow-up questions. First I want to thank you for sharing your personal experience with us. I had some questions about something you brought up. You mentioned your roofing company. Where was your roofing company based out of?

FM: Philadelphia.

NM: Okay.

FM: It was in Philly. I worked for a couple people through the union or through different shops that needed a roofer. I became very good at what I did. Then a friend of mine said, "Why don't you start your own business, because everybody's making so much money in roofing." In the '80s it was simple, late '70s. I had also went to hairdressing school and I became a hairstylist in the '70s. In '74, '75, the movie *Shampoo* came out--Warren Beatty, and he's picking up all these

girls. I was a real whore. I mean, that's what I wanted to do. I did that and I worked in the shop for about a year or two, but in between, I was working roofing, so I could make some money to go out, because I wasn't making that much in hairstyling. I eventually got out of hairstyling and opened up a roofing company with my buddy. We turned that into--I was running three crews a day. He left because he wanted to go into a pizzeria and it was too much work for him. When we started, his name was Incollingo. We couldn't use that name because nobody could recognize it or spell it. My real name, my real Italian name was Mascioli. My father's real name is Mascioli before he had it changed when his grandmother came over. They dropped the "I" and made it Marshall. Well Marshall's too medigan, too American to make it--the roofing company. [Editor's Note: In Italian, "medigan" was used by Italian immigrants to describe non-Italians] Everybody liked the Italian contractors, so we figured we'd stay with the Italian and we're Italian heritage, we go with what we got. We couldn't figure [it] out and one night, we're riding around and he said, "How about Rizzo? He's the mayor." I said, "Okay." So, we used the name--we took Rizzo Brothers Roofing, and it became pretty good. We were doing a lot of business and that's how that worked. He left because it was too much work and then I kept the name. Before you know it I'm running three, four crews a day and the money's coming in, and I'm partying, and I'm not paying attention to the business. I had a rule. The business had to be good. You can't cheat anybody, and it had to be straight, and bah-bah-bah. We continued on like that, and got a good reputation, made good money, but I was out partying spending all the money every night.

SF: How did you decide to move on from the roofing business?

FM: There was a lot of problems at the time. Work was getting slow, it was the late '90s, the unions were having problems. I was tight with the union, but the government came in. There was a lot of different problems within other companies, and fighting, and different things like that, and a lot of illegal stuff going on, and I didn't want no part of that. I just said, you know--I was dating this girl--I sold my business to somebody else and I went to work for another company for a while, and with him, I did all this estimating and stuff, but it was still getting too hard. I started dating this girl from New Jersey that was in real estate and I got into real estate in Pennsylvania. I didn't like it over there and I was going to quit that. She talked me into coming to New Jersey because its all different in real estate. So, I said, "Okay." So, this was in--what was it, '99? I said, "OK." I came over to Jersey. I loved it and I became very good in real estate here. I was always in the top percentage of the best agent. I did a lot of business and I did very well and I was very comfortable. I was renting a place, and then five years ago, I decided to buy this house. I hit sixty-two and I retired.

SF: Where in New Jersey did you move to?

FM: Mount Laurel. I was right down the street on Hartford Road. Well, I rented a condo over here in New Jersey. I came right here to Mount Laurel. I got the job in real estate in Mount Laurel. I got the condo in Mount Laurel, and now I bought the house in Mount Laurel.

NM: You mentioned when you came back from Vietnam, your dad said he was going to throw you a party.

FM: Yes. When I came home--a couple days after I came home--I came home whatever day it was during the week, I guess, and we rode down through the old neighborhood, and saw some people there, my grandfather, and everybody and said hello. My parents had moved up to the northeast while I was in the military. I told you my father had a band, and he used to play music and all that. Well, he had his band members come up, in the backyard of their home--the neighbors all had flags out, had banners out, "Welcome home." My father just said, "This is the party." I'm home and I'm out of the military, and his band was playing music all day, and neighbors and all my friends. They had over three hundred people coming in and out all day long. It was a great party. It was a great welcome home. People say they never got welcomed home. I can't say I didn't get welcomed home. I can say that my family welcomed me home. Nobody else did. My family and friends and everybody, but after that, that was it. I was home. That was it.

SF: Did anything in your neighbor seem to change when you got back?

FM: My neighborhood was going downhill and that was because most of the people had moved out. It was getting less and less of a better area, as the years went by, but in the few years I was gone, it was like it just changed into--that was it. Everybody had moved, the Vietnam War, the protesters, the way the world was going in the '70s, it just took a big change. From the time I went in, growing up, until the time I came out, seemed like everything around me had changed.

SF: I understand that you stayed in Philadelphia with your roofing business. Did you change locations in Philadelphia? Did you move to another neighborhood?

FM: I stayed local. In other words, when I got out of the military, I moved back home. I lived with my parents for about a year and a half. Then, I rented an apartment in northeast Philly. Then, I left there and went into a town home with a buddy. Me and him rented a place, but it was just new built. We only stayed there about six months. I left there. I went into another one I rented. I rented all my life. This is the first house I ever owned. So, I moved around the northeast for quite a few years, and then, when I sold my business, before I moved to Jersey and worked for another roofing company, I moved to Bensalem, Pennsylvania, which is only on the outskirts of Philly. I lived there for a while, and then I moved to Jersey.

SF: You also mentioned that you went out and partied a lot. After you got back, when did you decide to stop doing that?

FM: Yesterday. No, I'm kidding. [laughter] I slowed down when I moved to Jersey, let's put it that way. As long as I was in the Philadelphia area, I was always going out. Daytime, nighttime, bars, bars. dance bars, all kinds of bars, you name it. I did everything I could. I didn't have a problem drinking like I said. My friends thought I did, but if I was out, I was drinking. If I was home, I wasn't drinking, but I just liked to--I took advantage of it when I was out. When I came over to Jersey, I was dating the one girl for a long time. I was hanging out at the one bar. I'd go there and I was still doing the same thing basically. Then, finally, I just said--about five years ago when I retired, I just said, "That's about it." First of all, I can't afford it no more because it's very expensive. The driving laws had been increasingly worse and I'm in a relationship for about the past year and a half now. Very nice girl, has two teenage daughters, seventeen year old

twins. I see a different life. My friends, they all laugh at me now because [laughter] it's like they did all that when they were younger. Now, they're all retired and it just worked itself opposite, if you know what I mean.

SF: What is it like now, having a steady relationship, with a woman who has kids?

FM: It's different, but I'm enjoying it very much. I get along very well with the two seventeen year olds and it's comfortable. I feel very comfortable in my life right now. My bills are paid every month. I don't have a lot of money, like I said, but my bills are paid and I don't have any pressures on my mind. I live Vietnam everyday even to today. I will always live Vietnam. It's something that will never go. I saw a lot of combat and a lot of people die. I do have nightmares, not as much now as I used to, because then I'd be too drunk and I'd go to sleep. It's something I'll never forget. The only thing I do appreciate out of that whole experience is the bond I have with the fellow Ripcord veterans that I get together with all the time.

NM: I just want to ask a few follow up questions, especially since you're so involved with the Ripcord Association. Did you keep in contact with some of your fellow servicemen when you returned home?

FM: There was about five of us. Four or five of us that have always stayed in contact. When we got home we'd get together, go have a drink or something. They were from New York, Pittsburgh, New Jersey. What happened was, we'd stay in touch for a little bit and then you'd lose touch. Then, in 1985, we all got in contact again. We'd stay in contact, but maybe for a couple of years and maybe not. Maybe a couple months. You drift in and out, and then once 1985 came and we got together, and then we got together with the other guys and start locating more guys that we know, it seemed to become every year we would get together at a reunion or every couple of years. It just got better and better, until finally it grew into what it is. It's like a brotherhood that you'll never lose. Now the guys, I talk to them every day almost. We talk all the time.

Nm: On of the things I neglected to ask earlier, because you had alluded to that you thought the war was winding down, you weren't really worried about being drafted or anything like that. Did you follow the war and what was going on at all?

FM: Nope. Before or after you mean?

SF: Before.

FM: Before, no. I couldn't have told you anything. It didn't phase me even though everybody else is telling you you're going to get drafted, or you can't do this or that. The only time it affected me was before I got drafted, I told you the history, and then I went into the printing. I left one printing job to go to another. That was a very good printing job. I was at a corporation. I went for a smaller plant and was running the shop myself, and then they closed that up. I went back to the other place, the first printing place I was working for. They wouldn't hire me back, because I had left. If I would've stayed there, they would have took me, and when I got drafted, paid all the stuff to me and guaranteed my job. But since I quit, now they were very careful who

they hired because they would have to pay them and keep their job and everything else. I was too close to the draft. That was a problem for a lot of veterans. A lot of people back then, if you were close to the draft, it was very hard to get a job.

SF: Did you follow the war after you got back?

FM: Nope. I didn't even know--I paid no attention to it at all. I didn't want to hear nothing about it. I didn't care. I did not follow it. They built a wall in Washington; I paid no attention to it. Now, I do and everything else and after that, I got involved, but before then, very little attention.

NM: This is just a quick follow up but, you mentioned that you have sisters? You have siblings?

FM: I have two sisters, yes.

NM: Older sisters?

FM: One is a year and a half older, one is five years younger.

SF: I wanted to ask a question about the Ripcord Association. How has your involvement in it changed since 1985?

FM: Big. I've always been involved in it. In 1985, there was Chip Collins, John Mihalko. They had started a newsletter. They're the ones that had really started it. I came on board. They called me and said they got in touch with my Captain, Chuck Hawkins and they were going to meet, if I wanted to meet with him, and we set up a date. There was four of us that met in Parsippany, New Jersey. We went there and met and planned the first reunion. So, it's my captain and then Bravo Company, Echo Company and me. So, four of us planned it at John Mihalko's house. From there, they were doing the newsletter, doing everything, and I was just there. Then finally, I took over the newsletter. I never had [anything] to do with setting up the reunions, but everybody has their part. It's volunteers. It's just a group of guys that get together and still to do this day. We're up to eight hundred members no, eight hundred and some members. There's no charter. There's no organization as far as presidents or commanders or any of that. It's just a group of people that get together. Every year, it's more organized than any veteran's group out there. Everybody that comes to our reunion, never seen anything like it. It's like the biggest family reunion I ever saw. The [camaraderie], how everybody gets along, it's just great.

SF: You also mentioned before the interview that someone was going to be playing your role in a movie. How did you get involved in a movie?

FM: They wrote the book about us in the year 2000. That's the first anybody ever heard of Ripcord, but nobody still knew about it. From there, different people wanted to do documentaries and movies. National Geographic did a story. I'm on National Geographic, in the *Inside the Vietnam War*. I'm in the third hour. Temple University started a documentary for Philadelphia Vietnam veterans. They interviewed me. They heard my story. They decided to



do a full story on Ripcord. It's still in the making. They're just [doing the finishing touches] now, *The Ghost of Ripcord*. Fantastic. It's good enough for HBO. It's fantastic. The one guy that rescued me, Freddy Gilbert, he was in Delta Company that rescued us. He lives in a Maryland and they work at this government plant, or whatever else--GSA [General Services Administration] or something. Freddy Gilbert served twenty-some years in the military. Not once did anybody mention Ripcord to him, did he ever mention Ripcord to anybody else. Never met anybody from Ripcord, in twenty seven years in the military. He was at an airport in [Las] Vegas, with a 101st hat on. Somebody says, "I just read the book about you guys." This is about six years ago. Never even knew about the book. Him and his wife looked it up on the Internet, found our organization, joined us, we welcomed them like crazy. He's one of the guys that rescued us. He works with this guy that's producing movies. Said, "Now Freddy's talking about Ripcord all the time. In fact, he never shuts up about it." But this producer hears him. He said, "I'd love to do something on you guys." We had a big event here in New Jersey, at Prospectors [Steakhouse & Saloon] one night, a news press release, press party or whatever else it was. He's been working on this movie. We've had our doubts. We've had our fights. We've had different problems with him. We stopped supporting him, because he's not telling us what he's doing, where he's getting his info, and where he's going with it. Don't screw with us. You want to do a movie, I'd be honored to have you do a movie about me, but it ain't going to be no *Rambo* movie. Freddy Gilbert wasn't a Rambo. I'm not a Rambo. You're not going to have me running up the hill winning the war. Bottom line is, he didn't give us what we wanted so we've been a little angry with him. This has been a year and a half he's been working on it now. He's finally put out that he's going to do some shooting down in Louisiana and Maryland about it. Got me even more madder. Bottom line, I just got off the phone with him last night. We had a long discussion. It seems that he's back on the right track. He's going to get me information that I need of what he plans to do, where he's going. I want it in writing, and we'll be right back on track with it. So, as of last night, it looks great. I'll get the support from the association again for him, if he communicates with us and he's going to tell us. You cannot make a movie about a Ripcord battle without talking to any of the Ripcord people. If you don't talk to us, you're not going to know what happened. You're not going to portray the movie right, I don't want no *Rambo* movie. So, after last night's conversation, it seems like he's on his way to make it work, and we're hoping for the best.

NM: I want to give you the opportunity to add anything to the oral history record, either about your time growing up in Philadelphia, your time in the military, or your career afterwards. So, if you want to add anything to the record, now's the opportunity.

FM: No, I think I covered everything I can think of. I'd just like to say that you guys are young, and your interest in what you're doing for veterans of all wars, let alone the Vietnam War, I think is more appreciative than you will even understand. I don't think you understand. I think you enjoy doing this. I think you like what you're doing. I can see you like what you're doing, but you don't understand from the hearts of the veterans, how much you're helping us by doing what you're doing. So I myself would like to thank you, and appreciate all that you're doing.

NM: Thank you, Mr. Marshall. With that, we'll conclude the interview for today, and thank you again for having us.

SF: Thank you very much.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 11/2/2014

Reviewed by Frank Marshall 11/22/2014

Reviewed by Molly Graham 12/17/2014