



John B. Andres Jr.

**Vietnam War
U.S. Army**

**173rd Airborne Brigade
B Company 1/503 Infantry**

Sergeant E-5

John B. Andres Jr.

**Veterans
History
Project
Transcript**

**Interview conducted
September 25, 2018**

**Niles-Maine
District Library
Niles, Illinois**



Niles-Maine District Library District

Veterans History Project Transcript

Veteran: **John B. Andres Jr.** Rank: **Sergeant E-5**

Branch of Service: **US Army** Theater: **Vietnam**

Unit: **B Company 1/503 Infantry, 173rd Airborne Brigade**

Interview Date: September 25, 2018

Place: Niles-Maine Public Library
Board Room

Equipment: Philips Digital Pocket Memo Recorder
Canon camcorder

Interviewer: Neil O'Shea
Transcriber:

This Veterans History Project interview is being conducted on Tuesday, September 25th, in the year 2018 here at the Niles-Maine District Public Library. My name is Neil O'Shea and I'm speaking with Mr. John B. Andres, Jr. Mr. Andres was born on December 23, 1947 and now lives in Chicago but I understand that his daughter has just moved to Niles. Mr. Andres learned of the Veterans History Project through

our veteran group at Dunkin Donuts which meets every Tuesday here in Niles. (Veteran's words)

And Mr. Andres has not only kindly consented to be interviewed, but he is a patient man. He was among the first people to respond to our invitation to interview for the Veterans History Project. The Library of Congress is anxious that we record the memoirs of service of our Vietnam generation, the last of the citizen-soldiers for posterity so we're delighted that he has come in here today.

It's a pleasure to be here. (Veterans words)

We're going to follow a series of questions that is recommended by the Library of Congress. Sometimes you answer some of them in response to a previous question.

The first question is when did you enter the service?

I was drafted in January. I went in on January 30 of 1968.

Did that come as a big surprise?

No, I knew I was getting drafted. I was 1-A, just waiting to go. Everybody was going at that time. Everybody was getting their draft notice, waiting, waiting on the mail. I got my letter on January 4th, 1968. There it was and they told me to come down there on the 30th of January to 615 West Van Buren St. and start the process.

And how old were you at the time you went in?

I was 20 years old.

What had you been doing before you were drafted?

I was a printer, working as a printer at a print shop in the neighborhood, just learning how to do the printing stuff, getting a start on my job career.

What high school did you attend?

I went to Schurz High School.

A bulldog!

Yes, I went to DePaul Academy for a year and then I transferred over to Schurz and finished my high school education at Schurz and graduated in January of 1967 and then got drafted in January of 1968.

Were you an only child?

No, I have a twin sister and a younger sister and a younger brother. I was the only one involved with the military.

Was there a tradition of military service in your family?

My dad served in World War II and my uncles.

So they would have understood.

Yes, oh yes.

And were they also Army people?

I did have an uncle who was in the Navy but most of them were all Army.

So if you knew you were being drafted, and you were, you didn't mind being drafted in the Army?

No, I knew I was going to go. It was "let's just get it over with." Get it over with and get two years done with and continue on with your life.

So what were your first days like in the Army?

The first day I got down there My dad kept telling me, "Don't worry about it. There's nothing to it." We left the house in Logan Square at 5 o'clock in the morning. I was supposed to be down there at 6 and we pull in front of the Induction Center about 5:30. My dad didn't say anything on the way down there. And I looked over to him, and he was crying. It kind of took me as a shock. Have you been lying to me? What am I getting myself into? And he said, "Just go ahead and do it and don't volunteer for anything. Just do your job." Those were his words to me. I got out of the car and went into the induction center.

I got into the Induction Center; my last name began with "A." I was processed right away. From 6 o'clock in the morning until 7 o'clock that night I dumped the urine samples in the sink all day long. That was my first day in the Army and I'm going, "Boy, this is not a good start for my first day. I don't like this already." But it was quite a day.

At this time, things are hot in Vietnam.

Tet was just starting up. There were no cellphones. I didn't hear any news about it

We left the Induction Center that night. We all got on a bus. January 30, it was not real cold, rainy and overcast. They took us out to O'Hare and we got on an airplane and flew to St. Louis, which was an hour and 45-minute flight. The we got on a bus that took us to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. You check in there and stay with your little group. They mess around with you all night long. You got play the Army stuff, harassing you, getting you ready for Army life.

And then the following morning you went to the Mess Hall. They fed you. Then you got into your groups and then you met your Drill Instructor. You're going to your company and

Was he a nice guy?

He got off the bus. He was a character. He came up. He was pretty "strac-ed (well-turned-out)" He got up there and said, "Gentleman, I want you to know my name is Sergeant Bernard Heistan. Right now there are maybe approximately, anywhere between 45 to 60,000 troops here at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri I am the baddest mother-fucker here."

Was that true?

It was true. That was the first thing he said to us. And then he introduced himself to us and then we went to our barracks and he told us what he expected of us. How we were going to work things. We were in the new back barracks which was pretty nice. We had rooms of, with I believe, eight guys to a room. And it was all alphabetical order. So I was with Aplanack, Anders and a couple of more A's and couple of "B's But there were eight guys in our room in Basic Training. So you kind of "Well, you're here and so you might as well make the best of it". You started meeting they guys, "Where you from?" "What neighborhood?" "Where's that?"

Mostly from Chicago?

Yes, mostly Chicago.

Was that the first time you were ever away from home for a lengthy period of time?

Yes.

Everybody got to know each other and it took maybe a couple of days and then you went down and took some tests. Then they fitted for your clothes and you started getting to know the guys. And then on the third day, they took everybody down to get haircuts. They cut all your hair off. And everybody looked different so nobody knew who was who. You had to learn everybody all over all again.

They broke you down first of all. They wanted to let you know you know that they were in charge and your feelings did not mean a thing. But they got ready you for the discipline, and it was all games as I look back on it.

So you were in pretty good shape?

I was in great shape. I could run all day long. There were some kids there who weren't. They got picked on. They were scorned and pulled out of line, picked on. They were the road guards. Every time you would go in formation and walk along and march. And every time you came to an intersecting street, the sergeant would call out "Road Guards, Posts!" The Road Guards would go out with signs and stop traffic so you could go through the intersection and it was always the fat guys because they had to do all the extra running all time. But you learned to live with it. The weather was, Missouri was cool, not as cold as Chicago in January but it was cool.

Was the Basic Training six weeks?

Yes, six weeks and that was just to get you used to Army life. It had nothing to do with what you were going to later on. Then after Basic Training you were picked on. I don't know how they picked you – if you are going to go to Artillery, Infantry or Signals Corps...

I've always wondered about that.

It was a random crap shoot I guess. I'll never forget the night it came down when we were getting ready to find out what our MOS was -Military Occupational Service. First thing, they read off the guys going in the Infantry. I wasn't on the list.

Did that feel good?

Oh, my God, I was in heaven. I was, "Holy Smokes." I went down to the PX and stood in line for an hour to use the telephone and I called home. I told my mom and dad, "I didn't get picked for the Infantry. I missed it. They didn't call my name."

The next morning, we had another formation. My name was in Infantry, going down to Ft Polk, Louisiana. "Andres." I was number one on the list. It was kind of disheartening. But when I got drafted in January of '68. World War II didn't last that long. They were already talking about downsizing Vietnam, Peace Talks and that. And thought I'll never get to Vietnam. It will be over before I even get there. That was my attitude so I got the Infantry MOS. I went down to Ft. Polk, Louisiana which was worse than Vietnam to tell you the truth.

It was terrible, down in the swamps of Louisiana. It was hot and humid and bugs. And they were constantly harassing you. The officers, sergeants and your NCO's (Non-commissioned officers), your drill instructors. You would go through your training and you were taught your basic infantry tactics. Nobody knew what they were doing. It was six weeks of bullshit. They were teaching the basic stuff. If you didn't know it before, you didn't learn anything down there.

It was time to graduate from AIT (Advanced Infantry Training). And I thought Vietnam is right around the corner and I'm not trained well enough to go to Vietnam.

Whoah!

It hit me then, you know; I'm probably going to go there." So I went to my 1st Sergeant and I said, "I'm not well trained enough to go to Vietnam. Is there anything else I can do to get more training?"

What was the reaction to that judgment you were rendering on the quality of your training?

I just told them the truth, and he says, "Well this is the way we do it here." This is the way it is. You go to Basic Training. You go to AIT and you go to Vietnam." And that's what these guys were doing. They were going six weeks of Basic, six weeks of AIT and then you were off to Vietnam. You got a 30-day leave and you were off to Vietnam with just that much training. So I went to my first Sergeant and told him, "You know, I don't think I'm well-trained enough to go to Vietnam. What recourse do I have? And he told me, "I'm looking at your records here you did pretty good on the aptitude test so you qualify if you want, you can go to NCO School" The only thing was if you went to NCO school, you had to volunteer to go to Vietnam. I was going to Vietnam anyway so I might as well get the extra training and go over there as a Sergeant rather than a PFC.

If you hadn't asked...?

I wouldn't have known that option existed. So I signed up to go to NCO School, went to NCO School which turned out to be the best thing that I ever did. It probably saved my life. It was intense training. I learned a 100 times more than I did at AIT. AIT was just fun and games; it was just stupid, little run around and play Army just like you did when you were a kid.

NCO School, I went to classes during the day. You sat there for eight hours. It was drummed into your head. You got to know, got the feeling how an infantry squad worked. What they wanted you to do. I learned how to read maps; that saved my life, ten times. I was a pretty good map reader. You had to call in artillery. You had to know where you were at all the time. It was really beneficial to learn how to read a map.

Was that also in Louisiana?

That was at Ft. Benning, Georgia. I went to Ft. Benning for NCO School. NCO School was 12 weeks. And then, the training was excellent. They covered everything. They showed you what to do. Everybody took their turns taking the squad out. And you ran the squad for the day. You had to go out, and they would have mock battles and you would have to perform and you were in charge of the squad. It taught you how to survive fire fights, how to call in fire strikes, when had to call in artillery. It was intense training. I think that if everybody would have had that much training, there wouldn't be 58,000 names on that wall.

The thought occurs to me that if you could have taken some lessons you received in NCO training and built them into Basic Training whether it would have improved performance.

Kids were going over there not knowing anything. And when you got to Vietnam. You were nothing, an "FNG," (f***** new guy) They cared about if you got killed the first two, three days You were lucky you got out of Vietnam. That's the way everybody felt. Nobody came up to really be your friend.

So you complete your 3 months in Fort Benning; is that where you got assigned to the Airborne?

The day we graduated from NCS School which was 50 years ago yesterday. We had a formation out there, and the guys in Airborne School were standing out there. And a guy came up there and said, "OK, this it. Anybody want to go to jump school? Then stand in this line over there. If not this is your last chance."

So I'm standing there and a couple of guys came up, "Come on Andres, let's go to jump school." I said, "Are you guys crazy? Are you nuts?" "Come on; lets' go to jump school. We've been together this long you're not going to turn your back on us now. Let's go to jump school."

My first thought was, well maybe I can luck out, break an ankle, break a leg, that will keep me out of Vietnam even longer. I was only in it for two years and I've already spent a year in training. So the longer I could put Vietnam off, the better, but it never worked out.

By now Vietnam is looming larger...

Vietnam is right there. I'm on my way to Vietnam. I knew then ,the Tet Offensive. The war was picking up.

This idea that you're "fng." Did you know that before you got to Vietnam?

No, that was afterward.

But that wasn't so much the case in the unit I was assigned to.

We finished NCO School. Then we went to jump school which was three weeks. That was in Ft Benning, Georgia. Jump School was a mile away from NCO School. And at that time you got travel pay – six cents a mile from where you are going jumping. This is a U.S Treasury Department check for six cents! That

was my travel pay to go from NCO School to Jump School. I never cashed it. That's why the economy is so screwed up.

So I got to my jump unit and again we were all together. Jump school was a little tougher. The physical training was intense. The first week was ground week. First week was PT (Physical Training), running, and PT and running and PT and running – that's all you did. That was it.

The second week was tower week. They had mock towers. They showed you to exit an airplane, how to fall and roll, do plfs, parachute landing falls. Taught how to use your 5 points of contact. You hit with the balls of your feet, your calf, roll onto you hip, up your side, and up to your shoulder and up on your feet again. That was your plf: five points of contact. They drummed that into you; you practiced that all day long.

And then in tower week also you went up the 34-foot tower and there was a mock airplane door. You'd hook up to this airplane door with the cables going out the airplane door. And you would jump out with your parachute harness on and you would slide down the cables to get your body position right coming out of an airplane because the old propeller-driven airplanes that they were using at the time, if you came out all helter-skelter, the propeller blast would catch you and flip you all around and then when your parachute deployed you would get your feet caught in the risers and you would get all tangled up and that's how guys got hurt. So everybody paid attention in these classes; there was nobody sleeping in these classes. So they taught you how to come out in a tight body position. You count to three, then you could feel the jerk - that was your parachute opening and you would slide down the wires and you would do that seven, eight times a day. The when you got that down, you graduated to the 250-foot tower.

Now the 250 foot towers were like the ones at Riverview, - the old parachutes at Riverview. But these you went in actual parachute and this thing came down and picked you up in the parachute and pulled you up and unlike Riverview, when it hit the top you weren't tethered to anything. And I was more scared of the 250-foot tower because everybody had horror stories about guys slipping their chute the wrong way and crashing into the tower and getting hung up in the tower – but it was all horror stories. You just paid attention to your jumpmaster and you'd get to the top, and you'd get in. They'd hook you up. You'd come down. You would sit there for a second. You'd feel it. The jumpmaster would go "OK?" you give him the thumbs up and it would start pulling you up. And on the way up he is talking to you through a megaphone. And he's going "OK" according to which way the wind is blowing and which arm of the tower you're on, prepare for a left parachute landing fall. If you wanted to go left, you would pull down on your left risers. You'd get 4 risers going up, two on each side and you'd grab both of them and pull them into your chest. What that would do, it would cock the parachute and let the air out and when the air was going out this way, it would push the parachute that way. So if you wanted to go away from the tower and the tower was to your right, you'd slip to your left; it was very easy. You got away from the tower and you just floated to the ground. And they had the dirt down there so churned up that you could land on your head and not hurt yourself. It was pretty soft. So that was just to get you used to being in an actual parachute. And I did that maybe twice. I don't think it was any more than that.

And then the third week was Jump Week. On Monday morning you got up. It was "Go down to the airfield. Get your parachute." And you went into a big room, like a big Quonset hut, and they had tables up maybe twice as long as this one here. And they were all packed with parachutes. You would go through and grab your parachute and you would grab your reserve. Then you would run to the end and walk out the door. And at the back of the room, going out the door, they had a big sign up there. It said, "Our work is fully guaranteed. If it doesn't work, bring it back."

So that first day you got your parachute and you got into a cattle truck and they took you out to the airport. We were jumping from the old C-119s, the old "flying boxcars" at the time. They were out there all revved up. Then your jumpmaster takes care of you. You're putting your harness on; you're putting your parachute on and everything. And you got your static line. These are all static line jumps and you are holding your static line, and it was time to get on the aircraft. You start walking over to the aircraft. The crew chief on the plane, the Air Force guy, would motion you on the airplane. Everybody would get on the airplane with their stick number. They called it a stick. Every jump maybe 20 guys on the outboard and 20 guys in the inboard, on each side of the plane. You went in there. You were sitting there, and now the plane starts taking off down the runway. And now everybody has the same look on their face. "What the fuck I am doing here?" And I went, "Oh, my God," I'm thinking, "You've done some stupid shit in your life, but this is topping it all."

You get up to cruising altitude. All military jumps are 1,250 feet. The jumpmaster stands up, and they open up the jump doors on the side. You can see the outside of the plane then. Jumpmaster gets up and says, "OK, Hook-up." And the cable running across the plane, you take your static line and hook it onto the cable and then turn to the right to the back of airplane. Then it was "Check equipment," so you start checking your equipment. You cable make sure your parachute is on right. Is done the guy behind you is checking the back of you the parachute and everything and his next command is to sound off with equipment check and then it's "OK, OK, OK" so everybody's checked on that and then you're the first guy in line And the jumpmaster says go stand in the door." And then the first guy goes over and stands in the door Then you sit there and wait for the jump command. Then you're standing there and the whole world is going by and you're in this little door. And then his command comes out, "Jump!" and "Jump" and "Jump." Everybody is standing in the door and you are just doing it automatically then following. As soon as that guy goes out the door, you're next.

Nothing to unhook?

Nothing to unhook As soon as you're there, you're gone. The static line, when you jump out of the parachute, it deploys your parachute. The static line stays in the airplane. It deploys your parachute so you when you get 15 feet away from the aircraft, it pops your chute out. You always went out in a tight body position. You went with your knees together. Your feet pointing down. You would jump out and you start floating back and you could see the aircraft and kyou could see the aircraft and just about that time your 'chute would pop and you could feel the pop.

Then you check your parachute. Make they're not twisted. Fully deployed There are guys on the ground talking you through everything. The first couple of jumps, "The guy with the malfunction, pull your reserve." And everybody would be pulling their reserve. They would be scared to look. There would be reserves popping all over the place. The rough part about pulling your reserve is that it would get tangled. Your main so have to pull it down. As long as your main stream was open You were good.

What's the reserve, a back-up?

It's your back up parachute. It was right on your

And you would activate it?

Yes, it had the ripcord on there. You would have to pull that to activate your reserve. As long as your main chute was open you were good to go. And then the guy on the ground, they had smoke going so you could see which way the wind was going. You would slip in the opposite operation and that would slow

down your air speed because would slip into the wind that would slow your air speed. And all of my jumps I could have stood up, but you had to hit the ground and do a plf. So after you did your first jump

You got a day off 11:30ish. You did you two other jumps. Then you're starting to think I can get hurt doing this as you go along. It gets tougher and tougher. And on the fifth day, the last day, you did your equipment jump. You had all your equipment your ruck sack, your rifle and you would get all that stuff. And you could hardly move with all this stuff on. And it was just a relief to get out of that aircraft, to get all this weight off of you. That was the blessing for that jump. But as soon as you got out there and the chutes deployed "Everybody is yelling, "I'm Airborne! I'm Airborne! I passed this thing." That was the accomplishment That was pretty cool.

I imagine that if you look back on the accomplishments of your life, that would be one of the top things you

Oh that was A Number – One – graduated from Jumps School. When they put the silver wings on your chest. That was pretty special. Didn't realize it until then but that was really a special moment.

Here's a silly question, it doesn't matter how tall you are or what your weight is to be in airborne – that's not a criterion to be in airborne?

No. But there was on my second jump. I was the second guy in the stick I jumped out of the airplane and everybody else is and I got stuck in an air pocket. I'm hanging up there and the whole damn aircraft is down below me. And I'm going "Oh, My God, I'm not heavy enough to bring this thing down! But once I got out of the air pocket I was fine. That what's the jumpmaster told me. All five jumps that I did in jump school were no problem at all. I used my training; did what they told me to do. And everything worked out fine.

So now you are a paratrooper you can do your strutting around.

You've got the silver wings.

The basic parachute wings.

Then you got to home ...

I got to come home for a leave and then because I was an NCO graduate, now I had to do my on-the-job training. And my on-the-job training was down at Fort McClellan, Alabama.

After my leave at home, I went to Ft. McClellan. Then all you do is you get a squad and you take the squad through basic training. You're in charge of the squad. So for another six weeks that's what I did down there

And did you follow the manual or did you try to use any of your insights?

Yes. I went by the book. You'd go out to the rifle range; show them how to lock and load. How to sight in on a target.

Were those M-14s?

Yes, M-14s at that time. You'd take your squad out and show how to set up an ambush. And then, if you got ambushed, how to react– using all those infantry tactics. I never thought you had to go to school to do infantry. I thought it was just a fire-fights shoot them up, bang-bang, but there are methods to it. Then I finished Ft. McClellan, Alabama. This was now just about a year into the Army. So then I got a month

leave to come home. So I come home and this is about December of 1969. Now during this time that I was in Basic and AIT, Martin Luther King was assassinated. Bobby Kennedy was assassinated. Turmoil convulsed everywhere. The Chicago Convention was going on. This think called Vietnam was looming over my mind. I am going to war. The night that I left for Vietnam. I had my buddies take me to the airport. I didn't want to have my mom and dad take me because I didn't want to go through that.

We had an apartment over on Spalding Avenue in Logan Square and I'm thinking, I'm tying my tie. How do you do this? How do you tell your mom that you're going to war? So I went out, and I said, "I'll see you guys." And my mom goes, "Be careful." So then I am going to Vietnam. I go from Chicago to Oakland, California, an Army base there. I got to San Francisco, next day I went to the Army base in Oakland. And you check in. Your plane is leaving tomorrow at 6 am. You're flying to Vietnam. So I got on a commercial airline and you take off the for the "Neverland." We stopped first in Hawaii. We went over there on Flying Tiger Air Lines. I will never forget it. It was all guys going to Vietnam. It was pretty quiet. Our second stop was in Japan. And then we stopped in Guam. Then the next stop was Bien Hoa Air Base in Vietnam.

When we came into Vietnam, you could drop a pin on the plane. No one said a word. "OK, gentlemen, welcome to Vietnam." And the plane landed They got you on those jeeps that had chicken wire all over them so you couldn't throw grenades in there. They were playing games with us, just fucking with you. It wasn't that dangerous there but they made you

You would to go a formation in the morning and a formation in the afternoon. At the formation in the morning they would have a manifest out there. "OK, Jackson, Johnson" Balthasar you guys are going to First Infantry Division. These guys are going to the 9th Division. These guys are going to the 25th Infantry You guys are going over here to whatever unit was in Vietnam, the Americal. They were all getting assigned.

So I was there for 3 days and my name was never called. And that 3rd day, the morning formation, my name was called off "Andres, Step in that line there you're going to 173rd Airborne Brigade." I didn't know what the 173rd Airborne Brigade was. I had never heard of it. So I went over to the 1st Sergeant and I gave him my orders. I said, "Andres, US54826148, I'm going to the 173rd Airborne. And the Sergeant sitting behind the desk was looking at my papers and he looked up and said, 'Buck sergeant, I hope, you paid attention in that fucking NCO School of yours!' And, I said, "What is that supposed to mean?" "What the hell is the 173rd Airborne Brigade." So I went and got on the Caribou. It was a small version of the C-130. And I was the only guy on the aircraft. I flew up to LZ (Landing Zone)-English I was the only guy. I got off the plane and they told me that you're going to Bravo Company, 1st Battalion. That was approximately 20 miles south on Highway One. It was at LZ-Uplift. That was my unit.

Now how do I get down there? You just go out on Highway One there and you thumb a ride. That was it. That's how you got to your unit in Vietnam. You didn't have a weapon yet. You weren't in your company area yet. You had nothing. You go down to the road. There were convoys going all the time. "I'm going to Uplift." "Jump on!" You'd jump on and go in. I got into Uplift, met my 1st Sergeant, gave him my orders. He said, "OK, the whole company is out in the field." You'll go out. I think tomorrow we got a resupply going out." You got clean clothes. You got C rations. You got mail. He says, "Be down at the helipad in the morning and you'll go out. I went down to arms room. I picked up my M-16 rifle, my ammunition, the other stuff that you would need. "You don't need any underwear; you can't wear underwear out there anyway." You just get crouch rot out there. Throw your underwear away. Socks, make sure you carry extra socks. They gave you your canteens, your gear, you get all the equipment. The

next morning at the helipad I got on the helicopter with mail, rations, the ammunition, and took off in the helicopter.

Now I'm seeing Vietnam for the first time, the time in the light, you could see the hooches, the palm trees, the rice paddies, the jungle, the mountains in the distance. Now you're in the shit. We're going out, in the air maybe 30 minutes. You start coming down, losing altitude. You can see smoke in the distance, and it was purple smoke to guide the helicopter in. You can see all the guys are waiting for the helicopter to come in; the whole company was there. The helicopter comes in. It lands down there and one of the guys bringing the helicopter in I was in NCO School with. I got off the helicopter and right away I had a friend which was I knew somebody. I can't tell you how that made me feel. So we went over and renewed our friendship. And then I got assigned to 2nd Platoon. I met my lieutenant. I met the guy who I was replacing. I was in 2nd squad. The guy was from somewhere down South, Tennessee or Mississippi. I think his name was James Pigue; You get together. You get to know the guys, "OK, this is Joe. This guy is from Tennessee This guy is from New Jersey." A couple of guys you hit it off with real quick. The you settle down for the night in your logger site and you spend your first night in the field.

Are you in a tent or a Quonset hut?

No, we never had nothing. We had our poncho liner. We had our air mattress – that was it, but we never slept on an air mattress because they made noise. We were in a big company area in a logger site you could put your air mattress out.

You're Airborne but you are not anywhere a field or a plane?

There was one combat jump made in Vietnam. That was in made in 1967 by the 173rd. It was useless because of the extensive jungle, and the terrain was not suitable for airborne operations. But to get to the 173rd you had to remain on jump status. I got paid an extra \$55 per month and you never had to worry about jumping.

On one of the first days, we went out to learn how it worked in Vietnam. So the 2nd Platoon went out on patrol. My squad was leading it and I was now paying attention to this guy who was leaving in a few days. He is ready to go home and I am taking over his squad. So I am learning from him. This is Sergeant Pigue. We walked into a village. The village was probably a 100 meters long and at the end of the village there were guys down there in uniforms. And I go, "Hey look there's some GIs down there." They weren't GIs; they were North Vietnamese soldiers. And all of sudden everybody starts shooting and they take off because I gave them the warning. They knew we were there. One guy comes up to me, from New Jersey, and he was Sergeant Bruce Colby. He was Spec 4 at the time. Colby comes up and he says, "Andres, you better stick around with me for a little while otherwise you ain't ever going to see Chicago again!"

They always told me they wore black pajamas. I didn't know they wore regular uniforms so that was my introduction on my first patrol in Vietnam. Then a couple of more patrols we went out on. We walked into a couple of villages and found a cache of weapons. We found some SKS' s, Soviet single-shot rifles, like a carbine and some AK47s We found some weapons and we came up on another one and there was a tunnel complex and in the tunnel complex there was a piece of ordnance that was buried into the ground. So I called to the rear to my Lieutenant, "We got something up here and I don't what it is." It could have been a 500 lb. bomb for all I know. I can't see the whole thing. He says, "Wait a minute; we'll come out." He concurred with me and he said, "We better not fuck with this. Let's call in the EOD team." So they called in the EOD team to the tunnel complex. The EOD team was putting down in the tunnels to render them useless to the Viet Cong or NVA 55 gallon drums of powdered CS gas into the tunnels down there

Then they put the charges in there. They had this tunnel complex filled in, maybe a block in area. They called out, "Off to the back!" and they did the whole thing and they call out "Fire in the hole." BAM! They hit the charge on this thing. And it was like an explosion I never heard before. The ground shook. And then I look up and there was shit every in the air. I mean there were pieces of rocks and 55 gallon barrels were flying through the air. And I went, "Holy Shit!" and I hid behind this tree. Then I hear this guy yelling, and I turn him around and it was Pigue. He got hit in the right leg, in his calf with a piece of metal off of a 55-gallon drum. It hit him in the top of his calf and it peeled his whole calf right off. It just flopped open like a piece of meat. I called over to him. I put it back on him and I grabbed his first aid bandage and I tightened it up and just then the wind shifts and we start getting hit with the gas. Everybody is crying. I grabbed him and threw him over my shoulder and we just start running. You didn't know where you were going, just get out of that gas. We finally got far enough away where the gas was ineffective. We sat down and washed our eyes out. Pigue had all this gas from the CS powder in that open wound and he was dying. So we called in a dust-off. They came out, got him, took him away and that was the last time I ever saw him. He was gone and now it was my squad. I had the squad.

The ordnance, or mine or shell whatever it was that blew up that you came across. Was that an American?

It probably was American. They used it for a bobby trap at the beginning of one end of the tunnel. It was pressure-detonated. It was probably a 105 round. But I didn't know that. I wasn't an ordnance expert. I only knew it was an artillery round. It could have been bigger – it could have been a 500-pound bomb for all I knew. I wasn't going to take any chances with it.

So then the next day you took your patrol out again and the way we did it in the 173rd. You went out. Your squad was five men. It was you, your RTO, Radio Telephone Operator – you had a radio with you all the time. You had a grenadier who carried the M79 machine gun and two riflemen. You went out and you did patrols. Now if you had a patrol in the morning, you took your patrol to the area. You talked to the lieutenant who told you, "this is where we want you to take your patrol. You looked on the map. You had your reference points on your map so you knew where to call in fire from. You picked out your reference points. You would take your patrol out in the morning and if you didn't hit anything, nothing came out of it, then you came back into the logger site in the afternoon where the platoon was at. You come in and the other squad would have the afternoon patrol. Then that night you had ambush.

I hated ambush. Ambush screwed up my whole day. You would go out on ambush. You would walk out just about dusk as it was getting dark. You would go out with your five guys and you would pick your ambush spot. Try to look for a heavily traveled trail. You would have to have some cover back here where you would hide. OK. This is where I am going to set my ambush up. Now you go and find a rallying point, where if you have to blow that ambush, you just take off and get to your rallying point. That's where everybody goes to get mustered up so you know you've got everybody. You never wanted to fire your rifle in an ambush because they could see your muzzle flash, and they knew where you were at.

You would go back. It would get completely dark. You would go back, find that spot, where you set your ambush up. You would set your claymore mines up. They look liked, they always reminded me of a polaroid land camera. They had a sight on them. They were maybe that long, that high. They had 2 stakes, feet on them that you pressed into the ground. And they had a little sighting mechanism on them just like on a camera you looked through. And you would sight it on the trail. It was full of C4 explosives in the back. It had a back blast so you couldn't have it pointed toward you. You had to have it pointed away from you and down the trail. You would put one at each end of the trail. Then you a cord on it and you

would drag the detonator back to your position. And you would sit there all night with the detonator in your hand. And if you heard someone come along you would wait until "they're in my kill zone. Let's blow the ambush." I blew two ambushes the whole time I was there. But you never knew if there was one guy walking into your ambush or 301 guys walking into your ambush.

It was kind of hairy out there. You were there with 5 guys.. You were within artillery support. But you were far enough away at night from our guys that they weren't going to come and get you. You had to get back to your rallying point. If you blew that ambush, you got to your rallying point. You didn't want to go back to your logger site because those guys are all fired up. You just have to lay out there all night long until you could come back in the morning and let them know that you're coming back in.

I would hate ambush. If I had ambush, it ruined my whole day. I'd be on edge all day long.

How many times a week would you have ambush?

It got the point where we had it every night for a while there.

The first couple of times. I would be sitting there. This guy Coley would always come up and says, "Andres, what's a matter with you? And I'd say, "Fuck, I got ambush again tonight.

He'd say, "Come on man. That's what you get paid for. Besides, remember when your mother used to tell you 'Don't go out looking for trouble?'" He says, "Well, your mother's not here so c'mon we gotta go look for some trouble." That's how he explained it to me.

So you're out there through the night.

Through the night, And you would take turns sleeping,

So the sun comes up and there's no ambush.

You would pick up your Claymore mines and take them back with you. You never left anything behind for the enemy. Never. You would also put out a couple of trip flares. First, to let them know somebody is coming in. The flare would go up and burn.

A wild animal never set anything off?

Yes, every now and then it would. Every now then they'd hit a trip wire.

Would that be a deer or water buffalo?

I never saw a deer. I saw a water buffalo. I saw a leopard, a black panther. I saw a couple of wild pigs. Maybe one or two snakes. It was strange because you would have explosions going off all the time. You had guys getting into fire fights. You go on patrol and hit a NVA patrol and there'd be a fire fight. For the most part, all the animals were gone; they didn't hang around.

The bugs were terrible. Sitting out there at night on ambush You would sit there. Do I hear something?" It's completely dark, completely quiet. And then mosquitoes are in your ear and you're trying to and then "Dammit, I think I hear something. And I always that they were going to hear my heart thumping. Or I was going to shit in my pants. It was that scary.

Did you have any infrared weapons?

No, they were just starting to bring them out there. They had a starlight scope you could look through and just from the illumination of the stars you could see somebody walking. We took it maybe one time. It was big and bulky.

So this is really intense!

Oh yeah. Your asshole was only that big all night long.

Did you get an R and R or a break in there somewhere?

No, you did this until it was your turn to go on R and R.

I went on R and R in September so it was nine months before I got R and R and we were in the bush all the time.

They tried to get us back tin to Uplift once a month. You would go back in and get clean clothes, get a shower and otherwise you would clean up. You would go into a village and every village had a well. So you'd wash up the best you can. It was tough getting washed. As soon as you got washed, that's when the mosquitoes killed you. It was better to stay funky. Nobody used that scented soap because they could smell you. Everybody used laundry soap. You didn't use after shave lotion. A couple of guys had smoked a pipe. You never smoked a pipe out in the field because you could smell it. And we also refrained from smoking cigarettes also. I was a cigarette smoker at the time over there. But you learned to do without.

Could you get a beer to relax?

No. The beer would come in sometimes. You got resupplied every three days by helicopter. Mail would come out. C-rations would come out.

So you're eating c rations?

All the time.

Were you losing weight?

No, they were pretty good. You learned to eat pretty well over there. They had LRRP rations, freeze-dried meals, they were pretty good.

When you say LRRP

L-R-R-P - long range reconnaissance patrol. It was freeze dried. You would boil water, pour it in the package. They call them MREs now – meals ready to eat. You just add hot water and they had spaghetti, beef and rice, chicken and rice, chili con carne which no matter how long you let them soak them beans never got soft, never. You could let it soak for 2 days. Those beans never got soft. So guys would be sitting there picking the beans out before they poured the water in there.

So you got mail from home then?

The mail came out every three days and then your mail would go out on that helicopter.

No censoring?

No and I used to get quite a bit of mail. I had a real good girl friend back home and she would send me stuff all the time – send me a care package with pepperoni in it. And my standing order to my mother was all the time was just send me a bottle of open-pit barbecue sauce and a raw onion at least once a month

and that would supplement my c-rations and my lrrp rations and dress them up a little. I learned to love tabasco sauce. The c-rations were just little tin cans and you pop them open; you'd make a little stove out of a used-up can. You would put a little bit of C-4 (composition 4, plastic explosive) which burned real hot, real bright. C-4 would boil a canteen cup full of water in about 8 seconds. You heat up your food and they had heat tabs too – a chemical, tab about that long. They were purple and you'd break off a piece and you put your canteen cup over there and heat your water up. And that was it! That was the way you ate. Everybody was in the same position. Nobody had it any better than you did. You slept in the same mud. You dealt with the same bugs.

The injury suffered by Sergeants Pigue, was that worst casualty you experienced?

No, we had a few guys killed. I'd say the year that I was there the amount of time I spent actually shooting at someone and they were shooting back at me was maybe 15, 20 minutes, that was it. You would be scared for five days straight and nothing happened, and then just seconds of complete horror for as long as it took until they killed you or until they broke. You were on patrol all the time and you would run into a squad of them walking along. Then all shit would break loose.

They would be the uniformed?

Most of the time we dealt up there with North Vietnam regulars, we didn't have too many Vietcong by us. We were up in the mountains in the Central Highlands. And they were coming in from Cambodia and from Laos.

Were there Montagnards?

We had Montagnards with us. They were very good fighters.

Was there any pot?

Oh yeah, you could get pot anywhere.

As a Sergeant if you saw anyone smoking pot, did you say anything?

No. There was a time and a place for everything. If you wanted to get high, you wait until you get back to the logger site where everybody is around. You don't do it in a five-man unit. Everybody knew the rules and those were my rules. You want to smoke pot You wait. I mean I smoked a joint with these guys when you got to the rear. You loosened up a little bit.

Did you have any disciplinary problems with anyone?

It was winding down. A couple of guys, most of the time it was the black guys and I couldn't blame them. These guys were still getting dogs sicced on them back home and they couldn't get jobs. They were dying every day just like you and me.

And there was one incident one time. We had a guy in my squad. His name was King. He was from down South somewhere; I don't remember. And King started to become a radical in the Sixties there. He didn't want to get a haircut. He wanted to let his Afro grow out. And I said, 'King, come on man, you got to get a haircut.' He says, 'Fuck, Andres, this is the way a black man wears his hair and I'm a black man' I said, 'OK.' This went on for a while. He got worse and worse as we went a long a little more vigilante, a little more radical. So finally, we went back to Uplift one time so now we're in the brig secure area. And I went to my 1st Sergeant. 1st Sergeant Yatzee was a World War II and Korean War veteran and now he's in Vietnam. And he was a mountain of a man. This guy was 6' 8." I mean he was huge, an old hard-core

paratrooper. And he was an E-8, and I went up to him. I said Top, "I'm having trouble with King. He's got all this radical bullshit, and he won't get his haircut. I tried to get him to get his hair cut but he won't. I can't get him to get a haircut." "OK, he says, "bring him over to see me." So I went back to the company area and I said, "King, Top wants to see us." So OK we walk into Top's office and Top says, 'What's the matter, King? I hear you're having problems out there?' And he says, Well, Sergeant, this the way an African man wears his hair, and I'm an African man so this the way I'm going to wear my hair." First Sergeant looks at him and backs off and he goes, "OK, that's fine. If you want to be an African man, go ahead. You don't have to get a haircut." Now my jaw dropped. "Holy shit, Top is turning back on me!"

"So, OK, you're dismissed." And just as we got out the door. Top says, "Oh, King, if you're going to be an African man, you're going to be an African man 100%. So I want you to turn your weapon in and you go down to the mess hall and get yourself a bone or something make a spear out of it or something because if you're going to be an African man you are going to be an African man 100%". King got a haircut later that day. But he was ok.

But we were out on patrol one night. He was going to get out of the field. The whole platoon was in the logger site, and King went off to the side and he found a couple of rocks, pretty big rocks that were next to each other and they had a little cut-out section in there. And he took an M-30 grenade, that was the baseball grenade. It was a pretty powerful grenade. He popped the pin and threw it in there and stuck his fingers in there. He was going to blow his fingers off to get out of going in the field. It took his whole arm off at the shoulder. We hear this explosion. We're running out. King comes back running into the logger site, and his arm is gone. "I fucked up. I fucked up!" Well he got out of the field. He got his wish. He didn't have to spend any more time in the field, but he lost his arm. So that was the last I saw him.

He must have been terrified to do that.

Yes, there were guys out there who were shooting themselves in the foot to get out of the field. It was a terrible, terrible place and you were scared to death all the time. You're 19, 20 years old. You're scared to death. You don't know what's going to happen. You see a couple of your buddies get killed.

So you're counting the days?

Oh, you're counting the days all the time. Oh yeah, "I got my calendar here." We counted the days; there's every day of 1969 crossed off. And the further you got into because I'll be really pissed off. And it didn't make any difference whether you had 6 months left or two hours. You had to do the same thing every day or 2 hours.

I was supposed to go to Kuala Lumpur. Kuala Lumpur was supposed to have anti-war rallies there so they decided to send everybody to "OK, you're going to Singapore." Singapore was a pretty nice place. I'm glad I went there. I got to see the city. Here is my boarding pass to go to Singapore, airline passenger ticket, baggage check. When we got to the hotel, I was staying at the Serene House. And ma ma-san had all the girls there I didn't want to get one of the really cutesy, cutesy girls because they were probably with 300 guys. I would take one that was with 3 guys. So I'm sitting in the bar that night and these guys got the girls and took off. There was me and one other guy in the bar. So I went over there and started talking to him. And it's getting near to closing time and I says, "C'mon, you want to get a girl?" And he says, "No, "I'm just going to sit here and have my beer" I said, 'What's the matter. You don't have any money? I'll get you a girl. I'll give you some money. He says, "No, don't worry about it." So, well anyway, I went and got my girl. She was real nice. She was a school teacher. And I said, 'What are you doing this job for?' "I'm a single mom. This is the only way I can support him." She was very nice. The

other cutesy girls had the guys spending money on them; they were buying them dresses, radios, and watches and stuff. She never asked me to buy her anything. We did a lot of talking. She spoke perfect English. It was nice to talk to a girl. She was very nice. So I had a week, seven days in Singapore and she took me to all the places.

She took me to Tiger Balm Gardens. Tiger Balm is that ointment that you can buy here and put on. Well they sell it here. They had a big amusement park over there with no rides. It was all oriental figures. You would walk through and there were statues in there. It was like being in Disney World. She took me to a restaurant one night. It was called the Paradise Restaurant. It was out on the South China Sea. We were sitting there eating I had lobster. I had shark fin soup for the first time in my life. I think the whole bill was \$24 for the two of us. I was kind of like waiting for Dorothy Lamour, Bing Crosby and Bob Hope to come in, the Road to Singapore. It was just like that.

So now we're going back to Vietnam. You get on the plane and you got your uniform on. So I'm sitting on the plane, sitting in a seat and the guy who I tried to buy a girl for comes walking on the plane. He's got his uniform on, and he's a chaplain. And I said, "Father, you got to forgive me." He says, "Don't worry about it, son. I got a kick out of it." And here I had to try to buy a priest a piece of ass! That was a highlight moment there. Singapore was nice and then it was right back to your unit and right back to ambush out at night. That was it. And you didn't know if you were going to back. I swore that I was not going to back to Vietnam with any money so I spent it on everything. I gave my girl, I think, a hundred bucks. Just here, I had a good time with you thanks for doing everything. It was a fun time. You were out of the war for a while but it was always in the back of your mind. "You got to back."

We got back in September. The worst day in Vietnam was the day that Bruce got killed. Bruce the guy who told me, You better hang with me or you're never going to Chicago again." Bruce taught me everything: how to survive in Vietnam, how to pack a rucksack, how to fold your socks, how to carry your canteens, how much ammunition to carry, how to do everything – he taught me how to survive Vietnam. At night when you would pull guard, we always pulled guard together so we wouldn't have to be alone. We'd be sitting there, and his back would be to mine, and it would be completely dark out there. And we got through the night, every night like that.

One day we can into a new area. We walked right along the South China Sea. There was a village, and I took a patrol down that afternoon and Bruce stayed back. I took a couple of guys out. We had to go into the village to get some water. So when we get into the village, there was a trail that branched off. I took the trail down to the right. The well was over here so I went and got water, no problem, I had four guys with me. We got water; we filled up the canteens and brought the canteens back. The next day they wanted to go and get some more water, but we had ambush that night, and I was tired and Bruce says, "I'll take the patrol out. We'll go and get water." I said, "Bruce, I am tired." He said, "Ah stay here; we'll be back, don't worry about it." It was only 50 meters outside from where we were staying at, where the village started.

The day that I went to get the water there was an old woman and she was watching me as they always did. That day Bruce took four guys out. Instead of going to the right, Bruce went to the left and he got ambushed. And I'm laying back there and I can hear the small arms fire. Radio comes back, "Hey, we got ambushed." You could hear the pow, pow, pow-pow, pow-pow. It was probably two of them. They had a Claymore out there. They popped the Claymore mine that they probably stole from a GI. They fired them up a bit and they took off. Right away I heard the rifle fire. I didn't have shoes on. I had had my pants on, that it was it. I didn't have a shirt on. I just grabbed M-16 and took off running and I got down there. I get up to the thing. And Smitty from Florida was laying on his stomach when I got up to him. and he had a

hole in his back. And I said, "You, OK?" He says, "Yeah, I'm OK, but you better go check on Coley." Coley was up on point. I walked up a little further. And I get up to Bruce and Bruce was laying on his right side. And he had the M16 between his legs. He only had two months left in Vietnam. And I said, "Come on man, you're getting too short we gotta go" stuff. And he didn't say anything to me. I grabbed him and pulled him over and he was shot in the head. I had him in my lap and the whole back of his head was leaking out. That was my worst day in Vietnam. I came back and called in for dust-off. A helicopter came in and I put him on the helicopter and it was the last I ever saw of him.

Now since I've been back I've been to his gravesite in Freehold, New Jersey. I've conversed with his family members. His mom and dad were divorced. He was raised by his aunt. I've talked to her. She has since passed away. I talk to his step-brothers. I still hear from them every now and then. This was July 7th, that was the worst day. When I put him on that helicopter and that helicopter took off, that was my best friend. I never felt so alone in my life.

Then you got to the same shit that night. You got to take a patrol out. You got to go on ambush that night.

And now the next worst time was Sergeant Lao who was the guy that I was in NCO School with. We were out for a couple of weeks and we didn't hit anything, we didn't have any contacts. So they thought the 2nd platoon is out there fuckin' off; let's bring them in." They were getting mortared every night from the mountains behind LZ Uplift so it was ruining their beauty sleep. They called us in on Halloween night. We had a formation They told us what was going on- "we keep getting mortared from behind the mountains every night. We want you to take 2nd Platoon. We want you to go out there and flush these guys out We're tired of getting our sleep interrupted at night".

So we drew straws to see which squad was going to push point. Joe had 1st squad. He pushed point. I drew the second shortest straw I was the 2nd squad back We left Uplift at midnight. It was maybe 3/4s of moon - well to see with. We had about a quarter of a mile to go to get to the foothills. And we walked over to the foothills of the mountains. We started up the mountains that night. And that's Joe Lao who I was in NCO School with. We're sitting there the night before we left. I said, "Come on now, this was November 1st. Joel was scheduled to go home for Thanksgiving and we're talking and I say, "This might be your last trip out there." He goes, "Yeah, it could be." I said, "Well, we're in good hands." He says, "Yeah, don't worry about it." He says, "Andres, I got point Don't worry about it." So we walked all night long up this mountain. You had a platoon with you so you were making some noise. So they knew we were coming. Moving that big at night, they knew we were coming. Well anyway, we walked all night long, didn't hit anything. And just when it was starting to get daybreak, just as you could start to see something. There was an explosion. His point man stepped on a pressure-detonated 105 round, He was a Black guy. The 105 was an American artillery shell; it was one of ours They bury them in the ground with the firing mechanism face up, and they put a firing pin over it like that so that when you step on it you detonate the round. When I got up to him, he way laying there. His right leg was gone to here and his left leg was off at about here. But because of the flash from the 105 round, it seared everything. He wasn't even bleeding. He was in shock. The medic got up there and we got him taken care of.

And then I'm walking around and you couldn't hardly see anything after ... and I see a body laying off to the side and I pull him over and it was Lao. Joe, he had a hole in his chest about this big - a piece of shrapnel hit in the chest. Me and the medic got him breathing. We put a poncho around him. You could hear his chest losing air. The helicopter came in but he died on the way to the aid station.

If you had drawn the shortest straw that might have been

It probably would have you been, but you never know ... There were times that I don't know how ... When we were in the mountains we were on patrol one day was behind and I was pushing point and it thick brush and I had said, "Bruce, let me push point for a while, give you a break." He said, "OK." So I started off and I was gone maybe not 5 minutes. I grabbed this bunch of vegetation and I pulled it away. And right where you're sitting, this far away, there was a North Vietnamese soldier sitting there with his rifle like this. I was far enough away where I couldn't lunge at him. My only conscious thought was I didn't want to see myself get shot so I did this number. I did one of these. I hear a click and a rifle shot. And then I went, "Hmm, I'm still here" and I turned around and he was arched back like this and the whole top of his head was gone. Well, the click I heard was ... he was more sacred than I was and didn't have a round in the chamber and when he pulled the trigger nothing happened. I would have been dead right there if he had a round in the

So who shot him?

Bruce, behind me. I'm sitting there shaking like this, and I went, "Holy Shit." And Bruce said, "Andres, you're going to have see them a little faster than that."

There was another time we were out on patrol. I went with the 1st platoon because we were going off in helicopters there was a company of NVA in this village that we had to flush out. We were going to be the pushing force. The blocking force was going to be on the other side. My squad went with them. Me and my RTO, because they didn't have enough room on our helicopter, we went with the first platoon which was the pushing force. We get up there and there was maybe a 100 meters across the rice paddy to the village. I'm up walking this rice paddy. There was a squad on the left of me and a squad on the right of me. Me and my RTO and a couple of other guys are up on this rice paddy so we're above a little bit higher than everybody else. And just then we get hit with a crew-served weapon, a machine gun from the village. So I call down right away. Now I'm lying there. I got my feet toward the village. My RTO is next to me. I'm lying there and these rounds are hitting all around me. The dirt is hitting me in the face I'm afraid to move. If I do, I'm going to get shot. I'm lying there. It's going "BING, BING" the rounds are hitting all around me. And then finally he stops shooting. Now whether he ran out of ammunition or his gun jammed. We never returned fire because he had us pinned down. I turn around and I say, "Mac," who was my RTO, I said, "Mac, you OK?" He goes, "Yeah, Andres, I think I'm OK." And then all of a sudden my leg was wet. I went, "Ah, fuck, I'm shot in the leg." I could feel it. My leg was hurting. I said, "Mac, get me a medic up here; I'm hit." He calls back and he wasn't getting anything. His radio wasn't doing anything. I said to Mac, "Did you change that battery in that radio?" I grabbed the radio on his back and when I pulled it. He was hit four times in the radio. He had the radio on his back. There were four rounds in the radio. I went, "Mac, are you sure you're OK?" And he goes, "Yeah, I think so." Just then another couple of guys came up to me. I said, "I think I'm hit. Get the Medic up here." So the Medic came up. He rolls me over, looks down and all of sudden. I'm lying there and I go "Doc, don't even tell me how bad it is; just fuckin' bandage me up and get me out of there." And he starts laughing and I go, "What are you laughing about?" He says, "Andres, your leg is OK but this orange is fucked." I had orange in my side pocket and they shot the orange in half. So that was another close call.

The radio man was he ...

The radio man was OK. The radio saved his back.

He was being fired at with

probably a 30 millimeter machine gun, a Chinese-made weapon

This area where you're doing this very systematic, repeat surveying, on patrol, what strategically was being accomplished?

It's letting the enemy know that we're there and they cannot come in and use this area to build up their strength. They couldn't muster up any more than five or six guys because we'd see them right away with so much air support and helicopters running around. We had so many patrols out there. We were saturating the place with patrols. We caught a guy one time. The 173rd had a reputation of ... they were cutting off ears of gooks after they were dead. And we caught a guy one day. He was a courier. And we had our Kit Carson scout with us and he read the guy's instructions and they were going miles out of their way so they wouldn't have to come to our AO (Area of Operation) because they were afraid in their Buddhism religion that if you lose part of your body, you don't go to heaven so they were afraid they were going to lose their ears so they would not fuck with us.

Sometimes it was inevitable, you would stumble on them

And that was something an American soldier would have done?

Yes. It happened. My Lai could have happened every day, everywhere because you were in a firefight. you walk into a village. There was nothing there but old men, old women, and little kids. There were no Army-age kids there. So you knew all these people knew everything. They knew what was going on. You couldn't walk into village and not know who is there.

War is terrible. It's just terrible and the first time I saw a guy cutting an ear off, and I wasn't into that stuff. The first couple of times I seen it, it was just killing me. I couldn't sleep at night. I had to go talk to the chaplain. I said, "Father, I'm a Catholic kid from Chicago. I shouldn't be doing this shit." He told me, "Look Andres, when you become an infantry soldier this is all part of it. You can't just go murdering people, but use your mind, use your intelligence and you'll get through it."- which I did. After Bruce got killed on July 7th, I did not care. I did not give a shit. I wasn't leaving until the following January. I still had half of my tour to go yet.

You had a full year in the combat area?

I was there all the time. We were in the field probably 89% of the time. We got to the rear area very infrequently. We were in the field all the time.

You never thought of making a career of the Army.

No. I was drafted. I just wanted to do my two years and get out.

You weren't interested in analyzing the training you received and you're a good officer

a non-commissioned officer

I did that just to save my ass.

there was no chance

No, in fact I had a West Point graduate Lieutenant. We never got along. He did things the wrong way. He called artillery in on us one time because he couldn't read a map. And thank God I was watching him, I went, "Sir, are you sure that you got this right?" He goes, "Yeah." "Have 'em pop smoke a round in there and that smoke round landed right there. If that was an AT round, he would have killed all of us. So me and him never got along good.

Now it's getting down time where I'm getting ready to go home and he wants me to take a patrol out. He says, "There's a regiment of NVA up in the mountains." He says, "Take your 5 guys and see what you can find out."

I told my guys, "Look, we ain't going to go fuck with no regiment." So we're going to go and hide and spend the night out there. We'll tell the guys on guard that we're going be out there. If you hear something, don't fuckin' fire us up. We're going to be out here." So anyway he got wind of it. This was in December so he gave me an Article 15 – a disciplinary action where you lose a stripe. You lose some money. So December 2nd I had to go to Colonel Anthony Herbert in the Rear Area.

He was a famous guy?

He was a famous guy. He wrote that book, *Soldier*. He was the C.O. down there at that time and I went down to his office. And I had just gone before ther board to get another stripe. I walked into his office and he says, "Andres, I've got orders here for you for Spec 4 and I got orders for E-6. What do you want? You're pick." I said, "Sir, I got a month left in the army. I don't fuckin' care. You pick it. He says, "OK, Specialist so I was busted. But my last paycheck was for E-5 so I never got nothing.

Would it have made a difference that last month which stripe you had?

No. It didn't mean anything. Spec 4 is just a patch on instead of Sergeant but I did the whole time as a sergeant – that's what I count myself. OK, fine, big deal.

But the men you decided not to take out that night, they must have appreciated ...

Oh, of course, they did. Yes. My job was to get everybody back alive. I was using my brain. I wasn't Audie Murphy. That could be somebody else. That wasn't me. I just got there to go there and go home and that was it. I had already seen too many guys get killed. There weren't going to be anymore.

So I had about 2 weeks left and I had a shoulder injury, and I had my shoulder in a sling They brought me to the rear and I was on the bunker line. On the bunker line, we were hiding down there, the short-timers who could get out of the field for a couple of days., so I'm getting ready to go home. I am down on the line. Now I'm sitting down there one night and I'm hiding you're not getting me out in Vietnam no more and all of a sudden I see a little light come in there. And this guy walks in and I look and I thought it was Ho Chi Minh. I thought they sent Ho Chi Minh after me. And, "Oh, shit! It was Carlos Saladino. "Andres, what are you doing here?" Picture what he looked like! 50 years ago.

Yeah!

And I went, "Oh My God, you scared the shit out of me!" And he goes, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I'm going home. I'm leaving on the next plane. I'm hiding. I saw him maybe one more time and then that was it. I got home and went down to the Company Area.

And going home was another treat too. Got to the rear and I had to get from LZ-Uplift maybe 30 miles to Phu Cat Airbase. So now you have to turn your weapon in to your company clerk. Alright you pick up your records, to go home to get on the plane, yoyo got your travel records but they take your rifle away from you. And you have to go down Highway One for 30 miles. I was stowing grenades in my pocket. I was loaded up. I went out to the road again. "Hey, I'm going to Phu Cat." C'mon, sure we're going that way, gett on! And that was it. I got to Phu Cat Air Force Base and I took a jet down to Cam Ranh Bay and did my final paperwork down there. And then it was "Bye Bye Vietnam." When that plane got off the ground and everybody started yelling and screaming and cheering, that was pretty good.

So then I got home here it was January. It was probably 80 some degrees when I left Cam Ranh Bay. When I got here, it was like 15 below. I got in here at 5 o'clock in the morning. I was one of the first guys processed. I was out Guy comes up "OK, you're finished with the Army." and he called me up. "Sir, Mr. Andres, you're done with the Army. Thank you for your service." I went to SEATAC (Seattle-Tacoma International) Airport in Seattle, Washington. I got on a plane, came home, I landed in Chicago. I got in here. It was about 6 o'clock in the morning.

I took a cab home from the airport and it was cold and I had a \$20 bill that I had in my wallet for the whole year - that was for the cab-driver that took me home And it was a black guy. He pulled over to my apartment on Spaulding Avenue. And I gave the guy 20 bucks. I said, "Here's \$20. This is for you this has been in my wallet all year long." He says, "Man, oh c'mon. I know where you've been. You don't have to do this." I said, "Believe me. It's got you name on it." So I gave him the 20 bucks. He took off.

I get out of the cab and I walk in. I lived in a basement apartment on Spalding Avenue and you walk in the door way and you press the bell and there was another door here and then you'd walk walk right into my apartment. So I rang the bell. Now my dad was home and he thought my brother had just left for work, and "Jimmy forgot something," and was coming back. I go over to the door. He opens the door and I'm standing there and he kinda knew about when I was coming home. He's standing there going "Ah, ha ha And I go "Pop, open the door. It's freezing out here." And that was it. I was home. That was the end of it.

Your family was glad to see you. Did you have any difficulty adjusting to civilian life?

Yeah, everybody did. I still sleep with the light on at night. I still wake up with a start when there's a noise. Yeah, it was difficult getting used to it.

Could have you used the G.I. Bill or some version at that time?

Yeah. I went to school for a couple of weeks, but I wanted to go to party. "Fuck this, I'm going to go and have fun." I Got my old job back became a printer again, was gainfully employed. I was never afraid to talk to anybody about Vietnam. If you wanted to hear, I would talk.

The gal who wrote to you.

I saw her. We broke up after that.

The lady you married. She never saw you in a uniform back in the day?

No. When I took my uniform off. I never had it on again until the Welcome Home Parade. Carlos called me up that night out of the blue. I had seen him two or three times maybe in that 25 years. He calls me up that night and says "Let's go to the parade tomorrow" I said, "Nah, I don't want to go to no parade." So he went to the wall downtown, it was at Olive Park that night. Olive Park was named after Milton Olive who was in the 173rd So he goes down to Olive Park that night and he called me up that night and he is pretty emotional And he says, "Will you do me a favor? Will you do it for me?" I said, "OK, for you I'll do it." So we went downtown together. When I got out of that car and we saw everybody, that was the big healing process. To hear those people say thank you after all those years. It was therapeutic. It really was. I ran into a bunch of guys that I served in Vietnam with, seeing old buddies and

Was that beginning of more regular communication...

That's when I got involved with the veteran stuff. We started the chapter here for the 173rd.

And does the 173rd still meet?

Yeah, we still meet, but now we're all dying off.

Where do you meet?

We change the venues all around the city here. We meet once a month. Now I haven't been to one of their meetings in a while. I go maybe 4 or 5 times a year, just to see the guys and that. But then I go to Kokomo every year, a big Vietnam Veterans reunion down in Indiana and this was the 36th Anniversary this year. I've been to 30 of them. And this year I really noticed how old we are getting. The numbers were down and the guys who are there can hardly move. It's like the old Civil War guys you saw going back for their reunion.

Then with the healing process I reached out and got hold of Bruce's family. I found where he was buried at. I went to his grave. I got in touch with Joe Lau's family. His family was kinda weird. Now Lau was from Minneapolis. His dad was a Protestant preacher. He was a minister. One day there was a blurb in the 173rd newsletter. "Did anybody know the circumstances of the death of Sergeant Joel Lau on November 1st, 1969?" I answered the newsletter. I talked to this guy. "I was with Joe when he got killed." Well," he says, "his mom and dad are still living. Do you mind if I give them your phone number?" And I said, "No, by all means."

So one day I was working at a print shop out in Wheeling, Illinois and I get a telephone call. "John Andres?" And I said, "Yes," "This is Mr. Lau." I said, "Mr. Lau, glad to meet you." He says, "Look, Me and the wife were driving through. We're on vacation and we're not too far away from you. Do you mind if we come by and talk to you?" And I said, "Sure come on by." So we talked. He came over. We met each other and we had a good conversation. He was very bitter about having his son die, especially with a couple of weeks left. He said, "The last time I talked to him. I went out and put a down payment on a house. The next day I got a letter that he was dead. It crushed me. And another thing that I'm pissed off about is that his death caused my one son to become a drug addict." He says, "Vietnam fucked up my whole family." So we said good-bye. I said, "When I get home tonight. All the pictures I had of Joel I'll put them in an envelope" and I send them to him.

I never heard back from him. Now whether he was mad at me or he was pissed that I survived. But as the years went by and every year on the date of his death I always put a remembrance on Facebook. A couple of years ago I got a telephone call and she goes, "Are you the guy that every year does the remembrance on Joe Lau?" I said, "Yeah that's me." She says, "Well, I'm married to his brother." And I said, "Oh, really?" "Do you mind if I talk to him because no one ever knew the circumstances." He called me that night on the phone. I told him, "If you want to know the gory details, I'll let you know what happened. And he said, "Yes," And then I told him the story about meeting his mom and dad. And he said, "John, don't take that personally My dad was a tyrant, none of the kids liked him. The reason Joel joined the Army was to get away from the old man. And that's what his dad blamed himself for. And he hated everybody. So don't take that seriously. He hated everybody. It wasn't just you." So that made me feel a little bit better. I still talk to him and now it's coming up, November 1st, the anniversary, 49 years for him.

Have you been to the Wall?

Several times.

And the Honor Flight? Is it coming up?

It's coming up. And I've signed up for that.

I went to the Wall on the 45th Anniversary of Bruce getting killed. And I went to my wife, and I said, "You know what? It's 45 years for Bruce I'm spending the night with Bruce again." So I went down and got on the Amtrak train, took the train to Washington, didn't even get a hotel room. I went down there. I sat at the Wall. It started getting dark. I went and talked to the guy at the wall, told him what I was doing. "I want to spend another night with my buddy." And he said, "It gets pretty dark down here." He says, "Yeah, nobody will fuck with you." Just go sit down there. The police will come by a couple of times to check." I went down, sat down there by his name on the wall. About 2 o'clock in the morning, I start getting tired so I rolled over in the grass I pulled my poncho liner over me and and I fell asleep. Then all of sudden I hear some noise and there two bicycle police coming down the mall so I just kinda stayed there. They just rode by and never saw me. And I plan on doing that next year for his 50th when I'll go back again.

I sense we're coming to the end of the interview. There are always two question we'd like to put to the veterans.

How do you think your military service and experiences affected your life?

Well, the one thing I always tell everybody is that it taught me how to appreciate life. When I came back from Vietnam, that was it. Every moment I wake up, every day, every time I look at the Grand Canyon. Wherever I go on vacation, I got Bruce's poncho liner. He comes with me on every vacation. It makes me appreciate life.

That's a powerful lesson.

It is. I mean I knew this guy for six months out of my life. And he made that impression on me.

Mr. Andres, how do you think your military experience influenced your thinking about war or about the military in general?

Well, I think they should bring the draft back. I think everybody should have their stake in the game here. And I think it would benefit all these crazy kids now, going around. It was great training. I don't know if I'd ever do it again. I don't know if I'd want my grandson to do it. But I'm proud to say that I'm a Vietnam Veteran. And it was great training. And I met some great guys.

That's it.

Well, thank you for a wonderful interview and for sharing the combat experiences.

It's always good to talk about it. It's therapeutic. Like I say, it was the worst of times, but God damn it, it was the best of times, too.

Thank you for service

Thank you

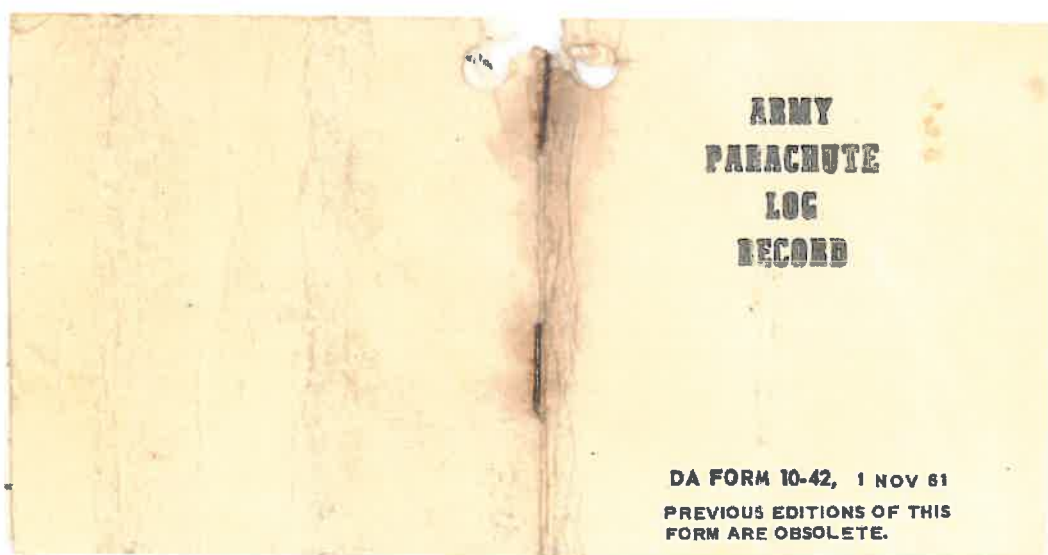
Reader's Note: The following three pages contain scans of items provided by Mr. Andres to illustrate his interview and an illustration of a claymore mine.



Mr. Andres.



173rd Airborne Patch



JUMP, INSPECTION,						AND REPACK DATA			
DATE			BAG NUMBER	ROUTINE INSPECTION	JUMPED OR DROPPED	REPACK	PACKER'S NAME	INSPECTOR'S NAME	UNIT
DAY	MO.	YR.							
28	8	68	26275		32		Shannon	Wick	173rd
8	8	68	55328		33	1	Barstow	Wick	173rd
21	8	68	55383		34	1	Wick	Wick	173rd
2	9	68	1315		35	1	Medison	Wick	173rd
16	9	68	1243		76		Wick	Wick	173rd
9	10	68	16095		37	1	Felton	Wick	173rd

With pride, Mr. Andres shared his Army Parachute Log Record Booklet.



Jungle



BATH TIME

FRAZIER (DAP)



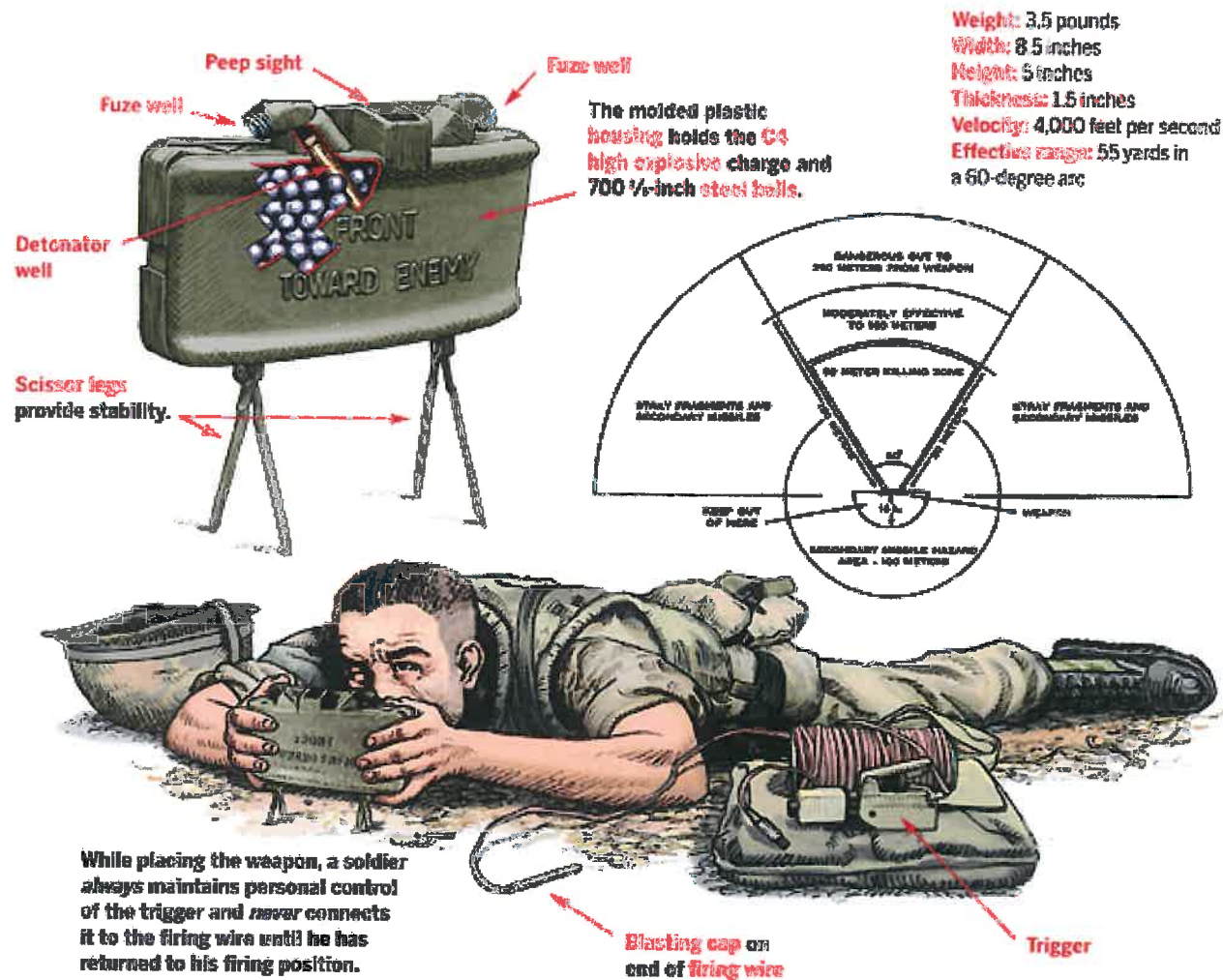
May, 1969 Mr. Andres

This picture was taken by Bruce Coley. Mr. Andres can be seen seated in first row at far right with rifle. Joel Lau is standing to the left of the top post.



Easter 1969 far from home

Claymore mine in Vietnam



<http://historynet.com/wp-content/uploads/image/2012/MH/09%20SEP/HandTool.jpg>