

Vietnam Era Memories: Gary Allison



Cara: Today is February 2, 2023, and we are interviewing, Gary Allison, who was born March 2, 1952. The interview is being done by Cara Vanderree through the Ashland City Library with the Humanities Kansas, in conjunction with the National Endowment for the Arts Big Read Project. Gary, you served in the Vietnam War. With what branch of service?

Gary: Marine Corp.

Cara: What was your rank when you left?

Gary: Corporal, E4.

Gary: What does "E4" stand for?

Gary: Enlisted Man 4.

Cara: And where did you serve?

Gary: I served all over Southeast Asia; Barstow, California; Okinawa; Camp Lejeune in North Carolina; but Barstow, California, was my last duty station and that was it.

Cara: How many years did you serve?

Gary: Two years.

Cara: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

Gary: Enlisted.

Cara: When was this?

Gary: March 19, 1972.

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Cara: What led you to enlist?

Gary: Fear. I didn't want to go in the Army because Walter Cronkite would state... every evening he would come on Channel Six and give a rundown on the war. Talk about all the individuals got shot, everything like this. I didn't want to go, didn't want to be listed that way, do something different with me. And so, when I got the notion, got scared bad enough, I just went ahead and went in to where I lived, a mile north of the Harper Ranch Headquarters against Day Creek. And I went in there and called the recruiter in Dodge City and explained to him what the situation was and that we were going to be working cattle that afternoon. He said, "Can I bother you?" I said, "Yeah, you can. Be fine." And he said, "We'll be down there." I said, "Okay, we'll be back there working cattle."

He showed up back behind there and Jim Harper told us to go ahead and get in the bunk house, but which worked as an office at that time. We went in there and they explained all the good stuff about the Marine Corps and all the bad stuff about the Marines and everything like this, and I signed up for two years. That's the biggest thing that drew me to the Marine Corps was the fact that it was I was going to get drafted anyway, which is a two-year deal. So, I went two years in the Marine Corps because I thought I'd be just in a better situation.

Cara: Was it?

Gary: That's a good question. I don't know. I guess it was.

Cara: Where were you living and you were 21 years old?

Gary: I was 20 years old at that time and I just decided I was getting old enough that I'd better do something if I was going to do anything.

Cara: Were you still living with your parents?

Gary: No. I haven't lived with them for a couple of years.

Cara: So why did you choose the Marines rather than Air Force or Navy or something like that?

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Gary: They had a history that stuck in my mind that was better than what the Army did, Navy or Air Force. I didn't really like to fly that well. And the Navy, I didn't get too wild about them because you get stuck out there in the ocean somewhere you would be in a world of stuff, and so I didn't want to go get out in the water like that. So naturally, the first thing they did when I got sent overseas, I was in a helicopter unit where you had to fly and was stationed aboard ship where you had to be out in the dad-gummed water. It was kind of a payback! One of those deals.

Cara: Do you recall what your first days in the service were like?

Gary: They were like a living hell. We got to San Diego in the evening, went out of the airport terminal, the sergeant was there and he picked us up, had us all get on a bus and we rode over to the Marine Corps Recruit Base and we fell out off a deal there and he said, "Get off here and get out on those yellow footprints." Because when you pull up to the Marine Corps deal, you park the bus and right here is yellow footprints all over the ground. We got on each one of those sets of footprints and stood there in that position till they ushered us in the room and had our hair cut-off. It was a whole different deal. They had clear down to their knees and it was so funny.

I could not believe it because Kenny and I had worked out at Syracuse for Young_____ Cattle Company. We had a guy there that just been out of the Navy for a little while and he was always jerking his head to the side, getting his hair out of his eye. So, we just set him down at the kitchen table and I just said, "Relax, enjoy yourself because while you're sitting there, we're going to cut your hair off. We're tired of you sitting there jerking your head one way or the other." We just took a pair of horse clippers and gave him a buzz. I could think of that all the time I was standing there in line waiting to get my hair cut off that night.

We got out of the deal getting our hair cut-off and they put us on the line and told us to go down through there and get new uniforms and everything like this. Utility jackets, they had all this stuff, boots, shoes, the whole deal. They told us to stick 'em in our duffle bags. Then we stood at attention and they escorted us off to these small Quonset huts. These Quonset huts were made for like 25 or 30 men, and there were like a 120 of us. So, we got in those little huts and made our beds and they informed us that those beds would be made the Marine Corps way. They showed us exactly how to do it and they said, "That's exactly how you're going to do this the entire time you're in the Marine Corps." That's the way we did it the rest of our time in the Marine Corps barracks.

But we got through that deal, I suppose it was about three o'clock in the morning when we'd finished and crawled in bed to sleep. Ten after 4:00, they were in there

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waking us up, telling us to get up, get dressed, and get out on the deck, and be out there in a position of attention. We got out there and got lined up and the whole deal. They took us to breakfast, we had a very early breakfast and then we... That was after we ran a five-mile course, just ran and ran. I hate to run like that, but it was a distance run and that was the way we had to do it. After we finished running that course, which was I suppose was probably 6:00 or 6:15 or something like that, we went over to the barracks and to the chow hall and they gave us each a metal plate and utensils, the whole darned deal.

They told you how you had to hold them up like this and sidestep down through the line and they'd put food on there and everything like that. Get all that stuff, get over there, set your tray down and stand there at attention until they told you could sit-down and you sat down and you ate and never said a word, did exactly what they said to do or they would beat the hell out of you.

Cara: Physically?

Gary: They did that many times and it was like, they'd get mad at you. They'd just have the whole unit come up around you and do an about-face and face outward and D.I. would have you right there and he would just beat the living hell out of you till he got his deal all worked off and then he'd have about them about-face and you'd get back in line and go do it again. Go through and do whatever you were doing. We did that for... well, boot camp was 13 weeks long. The army was five or six weeks and the Marine Corps let you know that they were the boss. We got through that deal and went through that situation, except when we went through the firing range and everything.

Cara: What kind of guns were you using?

Gary: The M14s were what we were shooting in boot camp, we used 16s when we got to Vietnam.

Cara: And the difference is 16 holds more?

Gary: The 16 is the 5.56 millimeter outfit and the 14 is a 6.72 millimeter outfit. The clip isn't near as large and they work better on automatics and stuff like this.

Cara: More advanced. Besides getting thumped on, do you have any other boot camp or training experiences that come to mind?

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Gary: Oh yeah, when we got up there, we looked in the ITR there were these outfits we had to crawl underneath the wire and they were shooting at you with 50 cal machine guns. You learned to keep your butt down.

Cara: Or they would shoot it?

Gary: Yeah. And we were scared to death. But we weren't really scared. We were just very apprehensive about what we were doing and we finally crawled underneath that barbed wire and everything like that and we'd be as close to the ground as you could find. We were going to try to stay alive as long as we could. They'd take us down running the sand on the beach next to the water and sometimes it would be in the water, sometimes we'll be out of the water. You didn't really know and it was interesting because they'd make you do things that you could never imagine you could have ever been able to do. But they'd just be wild, teach you different aspects of fighting and stuff like this. It's a good way to get your nose broken, but it makes your glasses fit better, because that way they don't slide straight down. I mean they go down till there's a lump and they stop right there.

Cara: How did you get your nose broke?

Gary: I've caught fists in the face many times.

Cara: During training.

Gary: During training, usually in the bar, but that was just fighting, having fun.

Cara: So, you were saying there were a few positive episodes.

Gary: Oh yeah!

Cara: You were telling me about playing ball for the lady who owned...

Gary: Oh yes, we went to... We got out of boot camp after 13 weeks of that hell-hole and we got orders for Camp Lejeune, North Carolina at Jacksonville, North Carolina. We got there the first night and we were supposed to check-in the next morning. We

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went down to find a beer joint to go to that night while we were messing around. And it just happened that we went into this one beer joint and this gal that owned the place, she came up to us (we was all sitting over there having beer) there was four of us, and she said, "Do you guys like to play softball?"

Actually, we did, just for the fun of it. That lady said, "I will give you all the beer you can drink for the amount of your time that you're here for school, if you would play ball for my ball team." So every night when we got out from school, we'd come at five o'clock, we take a shower and get everything done and get civies on and head down there for the beer joint and set in there and have beer or two and just go over there and play ball game. Just have a world of fun, we had fun! I loved it down there. It was great! I hate the place now, but at the time we were there, it was great. We were there at the same time they had North Carolina State Fair and everything like that. We went up to the state fair, did everything that we could. These old boys from Liberal, Gary Carpenter and Vance Freeman, didn't know how to do anything but fight. Come to find out, he was all-state fullback for Liberal High School when he was in high school. He was about 5.6-5.7, weighed 240 or 250. He was one stout individual. He was the honor man in my platoon when I was in bootcamp, got his dress blues and everything like that, of course they give you dress blues now. But they didn't then, it was interesting for an old farm kid.

Cara: Was it your first time to be out of Kansas?

Gary: For the most part, because I was raised on... born in Ashland, lived in Dodge City, Greensburg, Englewood. Grew up on the Grove ranch up north-west of Englewood and learned how to break horses and work cattle and do all this stuff. Did 4-H and did everything like that and just had a world of fun. I hated to leave there when we left there. But after eight years we left and came over here and lived up north of town, about two and a half miles, on my uncle's place and lived in town here for a while. Then we moved up there. We didn't like living in town. It's no place to be.

Cara: Do you have any other boot camp training experiences you would like to talk about?

Gary: Not really.

Cara: You enjoyed it while you were there.

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Gary: No. It was... when I said hell, I mean it was hell. It was hell on wheels. I mean, like when I was in high school. I went out for all sports and everything like this, got in stuff like that and I enjoyed it. In bootcamp, you're in worlds of physical labor, you're not playing games or anything, you're working for your life and it's a whole different kind of a deal, but it's...

Cara: Do you remember any of your instructors specifically?

Gary: Yes, when we started out, we had a white guy that was sergeant. We had him for a whole week or two and we had... The head guy was staff sergeant, gunnery sergeant, he was a big black guy and I had never worked around black people. We had Staff Sergeant Billbo. He was a small, smaller-type black guy and Staff Sergeant Williams. But we had 120 guys and when they said, "Do this," they meant to do this or get the living hell beat out of you. And I think there were probably 75 or 80 of us that graduated when the end of 13 weeks was up. The rest of them had gone over the hill and tried to get on airplanes. Because see, we were right next to the airbase or the airport in San Diego. You'd get over the fence at night and try to hide yourself on these airplanes, and most of them were frozen by the time they were found, and so they were...

Cara: 30% of the people who started out?

Gary: That part of it was not a good deal.

Cara: And a bunch of them died trying to escape.

Gary: Yes. A lot of them did and it was unreal. You'd have... like we had the "Fat Man's Platoon" that was overweight individuals that you could not believe tried to get in there. But these guys, they were singled out and that's how they were addressed, as "fat man." "You two fat men over here, get in line." And then you wouldn't see him again until... usually you wouldn't see him again. We had one guy in my unit, that graduated boot camp. He had been in boot camp for a solid year, a 13-week boot camp, and that's four boot camp stretches that he had been through in order to make it clear through. He was from Arkansas but he was so damn stupid. It was unreal. He was the type of individual, he'd pop-up and say, "Ain't we there yet?" I mean, he was a different type of individual. He was basic cannon fodder.

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Cara: And they wouldn't just kick him out for being ineligible.

Gary: No. They just, even though he was too stupid to make it, they'd keep him there till he did make it. It was a whole different deal.

Cara: How did you get through it?

Gary: I asked myself that many times; I don't know. I was active in everything when I was growing up, it wasn't that difficult for me. But some of those guys, they came back from the hill country in Arkansas or someplace like that, and they just didn't have any idea. They didn't know what it was to sweat. They'd find out. It would be after the first two or three days we were there; our jackets and our trousers were just basic white with sweat. They'd make you wear the same damned clothes till they got tired of putting up with you. They'd make you shower every night, but you had to put those same grungy clothes on and then you would come to the weekend or anything like this and you'd wash clothes. You'd be on a table like this, a concrete table with water spigots, and you'd have your clothes up there and you'd take your brush, take soap, get everything all, handwash everything, underwear, everything. Then you rinsed them out real good, hung them out on the line. You put clothes pins all around the bill of your cap, and that's how you'd get your clothes taken care of and everything like that.

That's how you'd do everything until you came to-- what was it they called it? I think it was the Third Phase. I think that's what they called it because your thirteen weeks was broke up and you had a third phase. That was your final phase because your 13 weeks was broke up into three phases. In your third phase, you'd send your clothes in to get them washed. It was a whole different ball game now. When they finally got to the third phase, they moved it out of the flop pads, you know, the motels, which were concrete sleeping areas. They were nice, really nice, I mean you spit-shined the floors. You did everything by hand, you were on your knees, cleaning space up and everything like this. I smoked at that time and every night, there would be a "smokers exit the room." You would grab a cigarette, bust your ass outside and stand there in line until they told you to light a cigarette and you'd light your cigarette, smoke that cigarette, field strip it and clean it all up and everything like that and they never even knew you'd been there. Then you went back inside. It was enough to make you quit smoking.

Cara: One cigarette? That was all you were allotted for the day.

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Gary: Yes, you really wondered whether it was worth it to smoke that cigarette, but at least it was something you could do that they didn't have control of.

Cara: You'd go outside for a little.

Gary: You'd go out there and stand in formation and smoke your cigarette and enjoy life for 15 minutes or so and then strip it all down and go back in the building...

Cara: And go to bed.

Gary: Go to bed, unless you had Fire Watch Duty.

Cara: What was Fire Watch Duty?

Gary: Fire Watch Duty was they'd have several individuals out of the platoon would be on guard duty for the entire night. I mean, you'd just be on duty for a couple of hours, and then you'd go wake this person up or that person whatever, and they get up and you'd go ahead and get some sleep yourself. That's just how that deal went.

Cara: How much sleep did you get?

Gary: Not enough. I don't really know.

Cara: But it wasn't eight hours.

Gary: No, we, well, we didn't have any watches, we'd get every bit of sleep that we could. We never knew how much that was going to be because you were only guaranteed one hour of sleep per night for 24.

Cara: For how long?

Gary: Hopefully, your entire duration.

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Cara: Thirteen weeks.

Gary: Yes, for your entire deal, but if you were lucky, you wouldn't be on guard that night and you'd get the whole night to sleep. Unless you were somebody like me that snored and I snored big time! The guy on Fire Watch Duty would come by and shake me up, "Roll over, you're snoring!" That's just the way it went.

Cara: So, your 13 weeks, the last part, you knew you were making it when somebody else had to do your laundry.

Gary: All right.

Cara: And what happened after you graduated from the 13 weeks from boot camp?

Gary: From there, we got maybe four or five days off. We came back here, came home. Then we went to our next duty station, which for us was school, which was at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. We were down there for six or seven weeks and we learn what the job was going to be and everything like that, which mine was grunt supply.

Cara: What does that mean?

Gary: I was supply man for ground pounders, grunt supply.

Cara: People on foot?

Gary: People on foot.

Cara: And a supply person, just make sure they have food and clothes?

Gary: No. A supply person, they turn in their requisitions for whatever it is they want, like new clothes, new boots, just anything that you need. You go to the supply person to see if they can requisition it and you learn all sorts of neat stuff.

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Cara: Such as.

Gary: You learn how to, when you need something, you find out how you can go about getting it, whether it's proper channels or not.

Cara: So, you horse-trade.

Gary: You've got to be a good horse trader to make everything work right, and apparently, I did do it right because I got two Meritorious Masts while I was in there.

Cara: Two pair of what?

Gary: Two Meritorious Masts. That's kind of honor. I guess that I received one in Vietnam and I received another one in Barstow, California, which was my duty station after I came back from overseas.

Cara: Which means that your men had everything they needed. You made sure of it.

Gary: And you learned how you learned how to buck the system.

Cara: And then the system gives you Meritorious...

Gary: It was fun. I really enjoyed that. I would like to have been able to do that when I came back state. There's just no way to do that unless you were in business for yourself, doing something like running Auto Supply or Napa Auto Supply, working in Montgomery Ward or Sears or any place like this, if you're in the ordering department, but you got to learn how to sweet talk these people.

Cara: Yes, and give them what they want.

Gary: Right. You might trade a couple of telephones for a new pair of shoes or something like that, you never know what you're going to do.

Cara: And you always have trading stock in the back.

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Gary: You always do, and if you don't, you'll get some, and everything works out real good that way.

Cara: And you have to know a lot of people.

Gary: You bet. That's something you can do if you have ever worked as a horse trader or anything like that, you find out how to pull a string.

Cara: Librarians do that too.

Gary: I don't doubt that a bit.

Cara: Because you don't have much.

Gary: Right, right, I understand that, but it isn't long until you figure out this is worth so much. This is worth so much. If I want this, I'll just have to give you so much of that. Make everything work right, and if you make everything work right, eventually you're going to have a place like this that'll take care of you and make things go, but you've just got to, you've got to know how to play it.

Cara: And be nice to everybody.

Gary: Right. You never pull a punch on any of them. Shoot straight. It was very interesting for me because they took me... I got the Meritorious Mast in Vietnam, which stepped me up with my pay grades. Like when you go from "E", I was E2 when I got over there, which was PFC, but you've got to go to E3 or E4 for anything like that. You've got to know how to pull this punch here and pull a punch over here and do this for that guy and everything like that and everything will work out real good. You've got to be in there so long before you get this promotion, or that promotion or anything like that. And if you have everything working right, like when we pulled out of Vietnam, they set us up a 500-man camp at Subic Bay in the Philippine Islands. They got everything ready, but the helicopters had mops that they pulled. These were mops that come off out of your bird. You'd drag them in the water, and they're electrical. You'd tie them to a generator and it promotes something to pull these mines in and blow them up.

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We had some in Hai Phong Harbor and places like that. They sent my unit to Hai Phong Harbor to take care of that situation. In order to do that, they had to keep me in the Philippine Islands to take care of that situation until they called me and said they needed me to bring this up to them personally. I was, okay, if you say so. I had to go get stuff loaded on a helicopter and flown up there and got everything given to them and got the whole deal all taken care of. Then we flew back to the Philippine Islands. Then, when they finished that deal in Hai Phong Harbor, they sent us to Okinawa, the team airbase, and we set up a helicopter unit there. The helicopter unit HM164 was a composite helicopter unit. We had Cobra helicopters, which we got only two out of Vietnam, Hueys, 46's, and 53's. They shot 50 caliber machine guns out of the 53's. A 50 caliber machine gun is one bad baby and M60's on everything else except the Cobras. The Cobras had 30 calibers. It was interesting for an old farmer kid.

Cara: You were playing with good toys.

Gary: Yeah! You're playing with toys that you'd only thought of and saw on TV, but you really got to go out and do that and had two chances in five of living through the first three missions. And that's what they told me the first day I was in that unit and which I thought sucked, because we did send a lot of people out and never came back with them.

Cara: Tell me again how you got in that unit.

Gary: They didn't have a grunt supply man in that unit and see the basic Marine Corps individual is a basic rifleman, a rifleman is the grunt walking everywhere and I didn't like that idea because I don't like to walk. So, they put me on a ship in a helicopter unit where they had to fly me everywhere.

Cara: But now you have air and water and you wanted land.

Gary: Yes, and I finally got some.

Cara: Where exactly did you go once you were assigned to... what is the helicopter unit called?

Gary: HMM164. Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 164.

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Cara: Where was this one based?

Gary: It was based out of Futima Airbase, Okinawa, but they were TAD to Vietnam. Temporary Additional Duty to Vietnam.

Cara: When about was this?

Gary: This was in '72. They'd been over there since some time in the sixties. They were there for troop lifts, medical evacuations, SAR missions and, I think one SAR mission is all we had when I was there.

Cara: What's a SAR?

Gary: SAR is Search and Rescue.

Cara: Okay.

Gary: And we were doing that with a B52 that got shot down over Hanoi, made it back to the drink and we were running up and down the gulf. So, they sent us over to pick the survivors up. That was the size of that deal.

Cara: So that was your job.

Gary: Yes, when I was in office.

Cara: And when you're in the office, you're hustling supplies.

Gary: Yes.

Cara: Do you remember what it was like when you first got to the helicopter unit?

Gary: I remember what it was like because I couldn't believe it. I left Kansas in a snowstorm. I got to San Francisco, some base about there, I don't even remember

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what base I was on now. They put us on aircraft to Okinawa. We flew into Okinawa. That's a long flight because we stopped off in Hawaii and refueled and went on to Okinawa. Then we picked up orders for 164LPH12, USS Inchon, which was floating off of the USS Okinawa on the Philippine islands. We went to Subic Bay and I came walking out Air Terminal and there were trees everywhere out there with bananas, which just blew my mind. I left a snowstorm to go into a situation that had bananas, monkeys everywhere. Monkeys were just living it up on this...The 500-man camp, which we got to stay in after Vietnam. We'd go get on our six-by to ride back down to work the next day. We'd have to have somebody go out there and clean all the poop off the back of the six-by, so we'd have a place where we could sit down.

Cara: Monkey poop? Okay, it stands to reason.

Gary: Monkeys everywhere! It was the darnedest thing I ever saw.

Cara: Your job, while you were there then, was to be a supply agent, and then what was your other position?

Gary: I worked as an aerial war gunner, and then, that was an added-on job with the supply situation and then I worked as a supply man till I got out.

Cara: So, you spent about a year and a half in active service.

Gary: I spent two years in active.

Cara: Two years, and that included your boot camp training. Were you put in a combat situation?

Gary: I was in combat all the time I was overseas in Vietnam.

Cara: When you said that only two out of five survived.

Gary: Two missions out of five was the limit, that was taken on average. It was not a good deal. I remember writing my brother, who was in the Marine Corps at that time, and he went in a couple of months after I did. He was going to school to be a

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helicopter mechanic and I told him a few of these things, to not waste his mind. He could see why. It was the way it is.

Cara: Do you have a couple of memorable experiences you would share?

Gary: No, you don't really want to know them.

Cara: You said that you were awarded a couple of citations for being a good supply person.

Gary: Yes, Meritorious Mast, both of them. One was in Vietnam and one in Barstow California.

Cara: How did you get them?

Gary: Just supplying. Getting the supplies they needed and getting everything ready to go. Like when I was in Vietnam, they had brought just duffle bags full of utilities to me and I had to sort all those. A lot of them had blood and all that crap on them that had been taken off of wounded individuals and stuff like that. I'd put those in one and the other, the stuff that wasn't messed up, you'd get them washed and issue them again. Which was just the way life was. But then, after I came back stateside, at Barstow, California, I was worked in a hot missile section, which was you had to have a very high security clearance to work in here. Apparently, the individuals that had been there to get their parts and stuff before, for those guys, weren't doing a very good job of it. They'd come in here and give me several of these 1348 order forms, for certain deals, and I'd find out how the heck to get them and where I had to go to get them.

Apparently, the individual they'd had before me hadn't been going and getting them. So, I got out of the area and got going. I was able to get stuff done and that made a tremendous difference. They were all happy, and as long as they were happy, I'd be happy. They had pool tables set up there and all this stuff just to break the monotony, because those guys were working with such high-tech stuff that they had to get away from the stuff, mainly, or they'd just go completely zonkers. Before I was there, I know they had trouble getting their parts and stuff, so they were going zonkers anyway because they'd go play ping pong or shooting pool, just something to calm them down. I guess I helped them get things done because they were doing a good job.

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Cara: And people noticed. While you were serving, how did you stay in touch with your family?

Gary: Write a letter.

Cara: Could you call?

Gary: I called them. My folks lived two and a half-miles north on a farm and I called them from Singapore. We went there for Christmas in '72. I was with six or seven other guys and we all got together and pooled our money and rented a hotel room, a suite, in the Singapore Hiatt. I called my folks collect and that gave a charge! My mom was working for Stockgrowers Bank and the guy that was there, I think Tom Brower, was his name, and he had done quite a bit with the service while he was in there. He was an officer of some type. So, Bob Hope put on his last Christmas show in Singapore. I can't remember what the name the ship was that we had, that it was on. All these honeys were running around there and everything like that.

It was very interesting, very interesting. Most of us were drunk enough that we didn't know what was going on anyway, but we had a lot of fun. I watched it on TV a couple of times, they were showing Subic Bay and Philippine Islands and I can remember that we'd be in there, drunker than all get out, and they're under martial law. So, it's 12 o'clock midnight, and you'd better be on the base, or you were in a world of trouble. You'd have to wade through the mud, about ankle deep in mud all the way down to the river. Kids, I mean little kids, five or six years old, and they're swimming in this, what we called "Shit River". We'd throw money over the rail of the bridge and these kids be swimming down in the bottom of that deal, getting that money. You couldn't believe it. People lived like that! I don't know what they do now. It wasn't quite the same place when I saw it on TV here a couple or two or three weeks ago. They had blacktopped the main stretch and everything. It was all mud when I was there.

Cara: But what was the food like?

Gary: That was all right. The Philippine Islands was the first place I ever had a BLT. I didn't know what they were, and I asked the old kid I was with, "What the heck's a BLT?" "Bacon, lettuce, and tomato!" I said, "Well, it sounds good." He said, "Well, let's eat one." So, he got one and I got one. My gosh, they're great! I paid for them with pesos. You've got to make the big currency change and all this noise, and then you'd have monkey on a stick, barbequed.

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Cara: There were enough of them to spare.

Gary: Oh, my. The OIC, Officer In Charge, Mickey Bradley. He was a first lieutenant, had aircrew bars and the whole deal. He would fly as a door-gunner and he was a first lieutenant! Now all the rest us were just peons, like privates, and stuff like that. But here he was an officer and the whole deal! He'd get up there and ride behind the machine gun. Mickey Bradley, I saw him in 1975. He called me from Liberal at the Thunderbird Motel. He called me, so I drove out there as fast as I could to see him and everything. We went to several bars and did a little drinking and messed around. He was a forest ranger. That's what he did when he was in civilian life. But he wanted to go back to Marine Corps life. So, he got a divorce and went back. Wife had had all that crap she was going to put up with since he was never there. So, he and his sister were heading east and he was going to go back to Washington to report in and do something. I don't know whatever happened to him. He was quite the guy. I almost brought my book with me, but I decided there's too much crap in there that didn't involve Vietnam, so I put it back down and decided to leave it set.

Cara: We can copy things that are about Vietnam and leave the rest, and if you have pictures that you might like to share.

Gary: Nothing, that... The pictures I've got... a lot of pictures of Okinawa and stuff like that, but I mean that's nothing that would be interesting. But I never really knew how difficult the fight for Okinawa was in World War II. Raymond Lunsford, the guy at Acres, he used to come out there to the cemetery when I was running the cemetery. He'd come out there and we'd be talking, he was with the Fifth Marines when they took Okinawa. He said you would never believe, never, you'd never know. I said well, I was there but this was 30 years after the war and I said, "I can only imagine the destruction that you guys must have had." And he said, "We lost something like 50,000 men just going on Okinawa." It was interesting, I really enjoyed talking to him about that.

You probably didn't know him, Gurney Winklepleck, he used to live down here on the south end the main, right south of Bob Fellers. There's a yellow house, he and his wife lived there till they died. Gurney Winklepleck, everybody knew him as "Wink". He talked about different things the he had to do in World War II. He was a Marine in World War II and he just... I'm glad I didn't get in there when they were doing all that landing stuff. I wouldn't have been a very good Marine.

Cara: Don't think it was ever easy. The next question is, did you have plenty of

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supplies? Well, you did. If you got them, what caused you pressure? What caused you stress while you were there?

Gary: Just not knowing whether I could get parts that I was needing for troops. Everything like this, because at night we could go up on the flight deck and take a jug of Scotch with us, get on helicopters, look through the windows and see the ark raids over Hanoi. We'd watch and drink another fifth of Scotch and go back down the quarters and usually just get in bed and go to sleep. That's how we'd get rid of stress. You'd take another drink.

Cara: How did you get liquor?

Gary: Well, you got it in the mail!

Cara: Who would mail it to you?

Gary: You'd fly into the different bases to get your mail.

Cara: You just go...

Gary: You'd go by the club, get you a jug and if you weren't going in that day, you might be able to find out who the pilots were and stuff and maybe buy them a jug while they get a jug.

Cara: Use your special skills.

Gary: Right. You learned your way of doing things.

Cara: Was there anything special you did for good luck?

Gary: Opened my eyes every morning. That was the only thing I could do.

Cara: You have talked about people entertaining themselves by playing powder ball, ping pong, pool, just something to take your mind off your job, which is really

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stressful, right. Was there anything else? You mentioned Bob Hope, which was really special.

Gary: You might be, you're 12 years younger than I am and you may have a list of that. Bob Hope may not, was he a big deal for you?

Cara: No, but I knew about him because he was in movies. It seems like he did Christmas specials.

Gary: Yes! USO shows and stuff like that. His last was in Vietnam and I saw it at Singapore, and that's the only one I saw.

Cara: There were others.

Gary: He did it every year. I saw the ones that were here in the States, but I never really thought that much about them, but after I got there I changed my mind.

Cara: Who were some of the people he had with him? He had great entertainers.

Gary: Fantastic entertainers! Anne Margaret was with him, I think. I really couldn't tell you. Joey... I can't even think her name. She was a good-looking old gal! Of course, then I was a young Marine.

Cara: You noticed those.

Gary: You're darned right, you noticed those.

Cara: The next one is: what did you do when on leave, besides rent five-star hotel suits.

Gary: We drank.

Cara: Is that it?

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Gary: Sometimes. We went to the State Fair in North Carolina. When I was in Okinawa, we... oh ho, there were several riots.

Cara: Who was rioting?

Gary: You don't know anything about that?

Cara: I don't know. What kind of riots?

Gary: Racial riots.

Cara: Where?

Gary: Okinawa. Oh, my God. No, the blacks had all got together and so they have riots against Okinawans and individuals like that. Out there at the top of the hill, coming up in to Fatima Airbase, you could look down through there and see the highway that ran down through there and be covered with lots of black people having fights and stuff. They were doing all their rioting crap. Those Okinawa police, they didn't care about anything and they just, they'd get on the microphone and say, "Hey, you guys welcome to Kent state, just level their weapons down."

Cara: Were these American servicemen? And that was okay?

Gary: It was on Okinawa country, so they'd better respect the Okinawan laws or they'd get their butts shot off.

Cara: I had never heard of this.

Gary: Well, this has happened. I was over in the E Club and this happened several times. These blacks would want to be starting a riot and stuff like that in there. You'd sit over there and take your drink and sit back in your chair and MPs would come through the door. And the blacks would all be beating out the other door and getting out of there. The MPs would run over there to the deal and Boom! "Halt." They'd shoot first and then they'd say, "Halt." That crap got shut down very fast because

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these guys were that way. They just wouldn't put up with that crap. It tends to cut down on your rioting individuals.

Cara: Thins them out, but, like your commanding officers, wouldn't put a stop to it before they lost people in their command?

Gary: I kind of imagine commanding officers just thought, "Well, that's just what happens." I'll tell you this, the fighting and crap that's going on around in the United States...

Cara: Could be stopped.

Gary: But there wasn't anybody going to stop it because they didn't know how to. These old boys over there. They do. They do know how to shut it down and immediately. You may kill three or four dozen of these individuals, but it stopped.

Cara: Did Walter Cronkite ever mention this?

Gary: No, I don't think he did. I don't know. Walter Cronkite just used to blow my mind. He was like the God of TV.

Cara: We believed him.

Gary: I know it. I know it. If I got off work at say a quarter to 6:00 or anything like this, I'd fog it home fast as I could turn to catch the last Walter Cronkite, 'cause he always ran from 5:30 to 6:00.

Cara: Yes.

Gary: He was interesting.

Cara: Was he telling the truth, as you saw it?

Gary: As I saw it? Yes. But his version of truth was a little sideways at times, I think.

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Cara: You want to get specific?

Gary: No.

Cara: Because he was the voice.

Gary: Yes, he was. He was the Man That Knew.

Cara: Yeah.

Gary: And he made it interesting. You didn't like to hear it, but that was fact. You just had to be able to pull your britches up and stand-up to it. But that's the way life was at that time. That was, you realize that was 50 years ago, 51 years ago to be exact.

Cara: Things have changed.

Gary: You were like what six and seven years old!

Cara: Yes, and my mamma turned off the TV when it came on.

Gary: Is that right?

Cara: She didn't want to hear it. So some of this is very new to me and probably some of this wasn't on TV anyway.

Gary: They've all got their norms that have to be lived up to. You can't put on everything.

Cara: Things you don't want the kiddos seeing.

Gary: No, you don't, but yet my first wife had three kids when we got married. They'd been protected. They weren't allowed to see the stuff, even though she was from

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Barstow. You had to be ready, because at that place, there was Marine Corps stuff everywhere and that was just part of life.

Cara: But it's a life a lot of us didn't know anything about.

Gary: I know.

Cara: You've told me a couple of things that in modern years sound kind of heinous, that that you would just shoot people who are running away, and I get it. I think the racial tensions were, I wanted to say, worse than now, but now that I think about all the riots going on during COVID, maybe nothing's changed.

Gary: Well, this deal, it's a crock of bull anyway.

Cara: But I can't change it.

Gary: I know that. Nobody can change what was done to us, but the individual that's up in the White House thinks he knows best.

Cara: Did anything happen that was funny while all this was going on?

Gary: Like what?

Cara: It sounds as though you're under a lot of pressure and you deal with it by drinking when you have time off, and I'm assuming you had to be stone-cold sober before you went back on duty.

Gary: Yeah!

Cara: Did anything happen with the people you were working with? That was just funny.

Gary: No.

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Cara: Nothing was funny. I got you. What did you think of any of your officers or people you were with? Fellow soldiers?

Gary: I thought some of the officers when I was in the helicopter unit, in Vietnam, why those guys got more than I'll ever think about having. Those pilots are something different now. Go down into an LZ, a hot LZ. My gosh, that's a difficult situation to be dropping your bird into, but they'd do it anyway. They were just counting on door gunners to take care of things, trying to work things out, which you couldn't do sometimes, but you could work at it. It was interesting.

Cara: Tell me what LZ means.

Gary: Landing Zone.

Cara: So, there weren't any safe landing zones.

Gary: Oh yeah, there were safe landing zone, but not very often. Usually it was a hot LZ. They were shooting at you. But then usually you don't have to worry about them too much, unless you're going in for a medevac or something like that. You've got medivac, sometimes you've got to run into a hot LZ.

Cara: So, you did this numerous times.

Gary: I don't know.

Gary: Did you keep a diary?

Gary: No. I've told you more than I told my mother, so you know what that was about.

Cara: Do you recall the day your service was over?

Gary: When I got out, I reported in over there at the Nebo area where the report area was. They came to me and said I had to be ready for formation and I said, "Okay." I went into formation and they ordered me my second Meritorious Mast and that was

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the size of it. From there, I just went to the tequila. They poured me on the train that night, 24 hours later, they poured me off the train in Garden City and my parents picked me up there. I was drunker than a skunk, and my mother was very mad. My dad said, "Been there, done that, and know exactly what your problem is." I wish I had never gotten out, until I retired.

Cara: Why?

Gary: I had a good income, but I spent 26 years with the city to get an income that when you pair it with Social Security, you have a nice income, but if you don't have one, the other one isn't going to do you any good. I see my brother Kenny. He's two years older than I am and he isn't getting to work, doing things he enjoys doing because he does them because he has to work. Me, I do things, I want to do. I just work out here for Carolyn Degnan. I go out there and get a horseback, go riding around. Whenever she needs anything done, she just gives me a call and I'll take care of it. That all started when I was at mowing out here at the old Duval Place, 12 mile corner, and Richard Degnan called me the weekend before he passed away and he said, "I'm not going to be coming out of here, so I'm needing somebody to take my place. Do everything out there for Carolyn." And I said, "Okay." So that's where I'm at. When she needs somebody, she just hollers away I go.

Cara: So, you get to be horseback.

Gary: Oh yeah, not very often, but I get a chance to, anyway. I enjoy being horseback. I get out there and cover some country, just messing around.

Cara: Your retirement is enjoyable.

Gary: Yeah, right, I enjoy my retirement. I mean, a very poor retirement from the city, but pair it up with a very poor social security and you've got a livable situation.

Cara: You said your parents went to get you. They brought you back here?

Gary: No, they were living in Liberal, so they took me out there and then Dad used Mom's car and I borrowed his pickup and came back over here.

Cara: What was it like when you just got out of the service?

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Gary: Nothing really different. I'd done cowboy'n all along. I knew what to do anyway. It was just a matter of going out building fence or taking care of cattle...

Cara: You slipped back in the groove?

Gary: Oh yeah, no big deal, I know there were a lot of these guys couldn't do it, but it wasn't anything for me.

Cara: Were you interested in going back to school after you got back?

Gary: No, not really, but then, after I had a tree fall on me in '76, I thought going to school and using the G.I. Bill to make a living would be about what I had to do.

Cara: So, you went back to school to do what?

Gary: Feedlot technologies was what I went to school for out at Garden City.

Cara: What does that mean?

Gary: Well, you learn all the different things that go on in a feed lot, like taking care of cattle, how to mix feed, scooping bunks out in the evening, and things like this.

Cara: Which feedlot did you work at?

Gary: I worked for a couple of them. I worked for Masters II, south of Garden City. I rode pens for them. I worked for the old Santa Fe Feeders, they used to be north of Sublette, five miles, at the intersection, northwest quadrant of the intersection. They had a real nice feedlot built up there. It's not there now. There's nothing to see that anything was there. Then Bobby Seacat, I used to work out there for him when I was in high school. It was just something to do.

Cara: But you like it?

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Gary: I didn't really enjoy it that much, but you could make a living. Cowboy'n out on the open grass is so much better, anyway you look at it.

Cara: Smells better too.

Gary: Yes.

Cara: Did you make any close friends in the service?

Gary: Oh, yes! I had to go over in '75 to see my OIC, Mickey Bradley and then in 1975, probably a week or two after that, after I saw Mickey, an old boy by the name of G.W. Blair down at Texas, he come drive'n in out at the Harper Headquarters. He came up and stayed a couple of nights with me. We drank a lot of beer and had good friends. Then friends over there in Liberal... See out of the three friends I had over there, one of them is alive. The other two were killed already. But after they came back, Gary Carpenter, he called me out at the ranch one night. This was in January of '76. He called me up and he said, "What are you doing?"

I told him what I was doing. He asked me where I lived at and the whole deal. He said, "Would it be okay if my wife and I came down to see you?" I said, "Yeah, come on down." He said, "It's doggoned far over there." I said, "Yeah, you guys plan on spending the night." Everything like that. I had four bedrooms at that house where we lived down there, so I wasn't worried about that. I asked him, "Do I need to go to town and buy the beer or are you going to pick it up when you come through?" He said, "I'll pick it up when I come through." He never did show up, never showed up, never showed up. So, I didn't have any beer to drink that night. But my mother called me the next morning, she was still living in Liberal, and she said, "I've got to read you an article that's in the paper this morning," and it was an article about Gary Carpenter got his head blown off.

There's no doubt in my mind that he was so wound up after he talked to me on the phone, that he got to playing games and got his head blown off. I never had seen his wife or talked to her anything like that. I've thought about it several times, going out there to see if I could find her. But I did drive out there one time when I was still working for the city. Janet Floyd married Randy Thompson. Both of them graduated high school here and I asked them if they knew where he was buried (Randy was from Liberal originally). He told me where he thought he was buried, so I went out there to see. I took the day off and went. I drove out and found the place where he was at and everything. He and I were good friends, really good friends. One of those deals. It happens.

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Cara: That's hard. Did you join the V.F.W.?

Gary: Oh yeah, I've been a member... See, that's kind of a weird deal. I started blowing Taps for them when I was in high school, a freshman in high school. So, I just kept blowing for them. Every time they called me, I'd run in there for them. Then when I got out of the Marine Corps and came back from Vietnam, I could join. The Vietnam veterans were not regarded as... since Vietnam was not a declared war, it's not a good situation. I'm not an active member anymore, but I used to be.

Cara: Did your military experience make you change your thinking about war?

Gary: No, not really.

Cara: Do you attend any reunions?

Gary: No, I won't. I mean, going to reunion, I would compare it to coming down here to give you this interview.

Cara: Once is enough. In retrospect, how do you feel about serving in Vietnam?

Gary: I would be very tempted to go to Canada. Because what did we gain? We didn't gain a damned thing.

Cara: Is there anything you would like to mention that I haven't asked you? Anything you want people to know about this time?

Gary: I want everybody to know that this damned defoliant crap, Agent Orange, crap like that, is something that should never be used anywhere, by anyone. Because that has ruined so many lives, like Raelene's brother Gary, at Lakin. Right north of Lake McKinney, I don't know if you knew where Lake McKinney was. It was between Deerfield and Lakin. But he lives right straight north of it about 300 yards, maybe a quarter of a mile. I think he probably is fighting with this Agent Orange crap like everybody else is. Doug Roberts is having to do it. I just never knew how many individuals were eaten up by this stuff. I just happened to make a comment to Doug Roberts one day, down here at the welding shop. He's fighting with the same darned

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thing I am. Like Warren Isenbart. He was a real good guy, but alcohol got him eaten up.

Cara: Too many people we know have cancer now.

Gary: Yeah. Just one of those deals.

Cara: Whether it was worth it or not.

Gary: Well, I didn't think I would make it to 50 years old, I'll be 71 years old here. Well, a month from today, I'll be 71 years old. So, I've lived a lot longer than I thought I would.

Cara: And you are cancer free and healthy now.

Gary: Yes, near as I can tell because they took. Zooni called me and said, "You are cancer free." He x-rayed at my lungs and everything and my lungs. I figured they'd be shot because I smoke. He said I'm good, so I just drink as much beer as I can and have fun.

Cara: Stay horseback!

Gary: Yeah, I love to get out a horseback. I sold my saddle in '80 after I got back from getting my back operated on and because Zacharias told me there'd be no more horseback riding or anything like that. So, I sold my saddles when I got back. If I wouldn't have, I'd still have it, could get out, ride. That would be so nice.

Cara: Sir, thank you for your service.

Gary: You are entirely welcome.