RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARVIN APSEL

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

KATHRYN TRACY RIZZI

NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY
MARCH 20, 2019

TRANSCRIPT BY

JESSE BRADDELL

Kathryn Tracy Rizzi: This begins an oral history interview with Marv Apsel, on March 20, 2019, in New Brunswick, New Jersey with Kate Rizzi. Also present is ...

Gail Apsel: … Gail Apsel, his wife.

KR: Thank you so much for coming in and doing this third session of your oral history.

Marv Apsel: You're very welcome. Thank you for inviting me here.

KR: In our first two sessions, you discussed when you were wounded and when you won the Purple Heart and also when you won the Combat Infantry Badge. I was wondering if you could tell us what happened when you won the Bronze Star.

MA: Sure. In Vietnam, there were long periods of time, or seemingly long periods of time, where the things that you did, patrolling and servicing your weapons, was quite routine and often boring. But then again, there were times interspersed between those long periods of quietness that erupted into strong activity and chaos. It seemed like chaos at the time. Even though we were trained to respond to situations, when it was actually happening and it was not practiced, you basically performed instinctively, yet took advantage of the training that you had. Sometime during the year that I was in Vietnam, I was on a mission which started out like any other mission. The days were very hot and we were all very uncomfortable, but we were continuing to survey and reconnoiter the area, when, all of a sudden, in an instant, we found ourselves in an ambush, an ambush in what we used to call triple canopy jungle, very thick, tree-like, vine-like vegetation that made going even a few hundred feet very difficult. Yet, in those types of terrain, we were vulnerable, and on this one occasion, we were very vulnerable and came under an attack, a surprise attack. During that sequence of events, we tried to establish a perimeter in which we could defend ourselves, and we did so. In so doing, not knowing where the direction of fire was coming from, it seemed to be coming in from all directions, some people were wounded.

One of the main things that is not only instinctive but sort of part of the *esprit de corps*, so to say, is that if somebody was wounded, you would attend to them as quickly as possible. So, I, at that time, was a staff sergeant and had responsibilities to defend and to have the men, with the appropriate weaponry, return fire for not only protection and safety but to extricate ourselves from this situation. There was one fellow, his last name was F., I believe he was from New Mexico, and he was a recent addition to our platoon. So, while he had been with us for a week or two, he was not what we would call a seasoned individual. In any event, F. was wounded, he was incapacitated, and, at that time, we had to fall back to a position of seemingly more safety, and I assisted in carrying F. out of that area in what was a term known as a fireman-carry type of position. I got him to an area protected by vegetation and mounds, and we eventually called in an air fire mission to lay down fire in the area in which we perceived the attack was coming from and that was it. Then, we called in a helicopter, after having cleared out an area for that helicopter to land, and it's interesting to know how that is done. Sometimes you would have to take hand grenades and apply them to the trees or the vegetation to create an area, an opening, by which a helicopter could hover or land and take out the wounded people. So, that's what myself

and the rest of my platoon did when the attack had ended. F. was wounded and taken back to the rear area. His wounds were of such a nature that he did not return to our platoon.

Oftentimes, wounded individuals would receive care at either a local base camp or a more sophisticated base camp, depending on the nature and severity of the wounds, and, if need be, they could be transported by plane to Japan, for complex surgeries or care. Some of those individuals were then transported to places like Germany, where they would have extended rehabilitative care. Those actions on that day were performed by everyone, I'll use the word routine, and according to training and protective instinctive reactions.

Obviously, someone observed this, and it may have been another officer, or another non-com, reported it, either verbally or in his report, to higher ups. Lo and behold, I'm notified later on that I am receiving this medal, so that was, essentially, the story behind the Bronze Star. There is a narrative that comes with the medal that basically describes it as for meritorious services in the line of fire in a hostile environment, or words to that effect, and that is how I was awarded the Bronze Star.

I think I had told you, I had also received a Purple Heart for my own wounds that were received during a similar type of ambush. That ceremony, I may have spoken about it, was conducted out in the field around Dau Tieng, in the outskirts of a small little village base, in which there were some Quonset huts, and we would return to this Dau Tieng area for resupplies. One day, the captain assembled a group of four or five individuals who had, in the past, previously been wounded, and had recovered sufficiently to continue their efforts in that theater. We lined up and without any fanfare or anything, each of these individuals, myself included, were given the Purple Heart. I believe those were for wounds that I sustained in my shoulder area and private sections of my body, basically, through an ambush and from shrapnel. [Editor's Note: Dau Tieng Base Camp was an Army outpost in Binh Duong Province in South Vietnam.]

Then, I took that medal, here I am in the middle of nowhere, and I was able to put it in a package, a small package, and put it in the mail and send it to my brother, with instructions that [said], "Gary, I received this medal. I have no place to put it or hide it. I'm certainly not going to carry it with me or let alone wear it." So, I sent it to Gary with a note that said, basically, "I'm all right. I'm really fine. Please hold this and do not speak of it to my parents."

Early on in our military career, I think just before I got to Vietnam, we were asked to sign a document that said, "In the event of wounds to you, do you wish to have the Army notify your next of kin, your parents, your wife, or whatever the situation might be?" My declaration was not to do that. So, I was being consistent with my wishes not to have my parents notified of any wounds, with the exception of any fatal wound that might have occurred. Obviously, I would want them to know about that.

Only after I returned home did Gary, my brother, return the medal to me, and then I told my parents what had happened. That is the story of the medal. The other medals that I received were the Air Medal for combat assault from helicopters, I think I received it before I left Vietnam, also the CIB, the Combat Infantryman's Badge, and regimental citations that were also, I think, given to me upon my departure.

KR: When you were wounded, did you tell Gail, through letters or tape recordings, that you were wounded?

MA: Absolutely not. No, like I said, I was consistent in my desire not to tell anyone, but sending a Purple Heart home in the mail, in a little package, to my brother was the only exception that I made, and it went with an explanation as well. But, no, I would not tell anybody. I tried to protect my parents to the extent that--I may have spoken about this before--I once had bridge duty, there was a small bridge over a small expanse of water that we had guard duty for. Basically, in that area, there was a little bit of a base. I made these tapes that I would send home to my parents telling them that, essentially, I had a sweetheart position, "I'm very safe and I can't believe my luck in that I got this position here. I'm sitting by the water. I'm just relaxing and it's almost like being on vacation." But every once in a while, unbeknownst to me, there would be ordinance exploding in the background, something being shot off, which I was probably unaware of. It's something akin to living under a train station and not hearing the trains anymore. They're there and the sounds are there. You become unaware of them but others are. It was not until I actually came home and heard those tapes again that I realized I could not mask the sounds of a military sort of pseudo-base, and I thought it was kind of strange and a little humorous, but that was the situation that occurred then. So, I did not tell anybody about the wounds.

GA: Do you still have your tapes?

MA: I have to [look]. They're in the basement.

GA: Did you find them?

MA: Yes, I probably do have them, although the tapes were never transferred on to CD, and so after fifty years, I would imagine the quality of the tape material is less than the best. It's something I've always said I'd eventually get around to doing but haven't found the time.

GA: We were going to re-record it or something like that.

KR: Is it the reel-to-reel type tapes?

MA: Yes, on a couple of small spools.

KR: Right.

MA: The quality of that material has probably disintegrated. It's somewhere in my basement, and then again who has a tape machine to even play it?

GA: Yes.

KR: When we are off the record later, I will tell you what my dad did with his old reel to reels.

MA: All right.

GA: It's interesting to your story, being on the other side at home, Channel Five News always had, at the end of their program, those who were killed in Vietnam. So, everybody's attention was always on what names were going to come up or where you were because it was a nightly thing. Every night, they would put it on Channel Five on the news.

MA: It's interesting knowing about friends who were in the service, and the only way I got my information was through mail that may have been delivered while in-country. Then, again, the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper, which I did not receive on a regular basis, occasionally, if we did come into a base camp for a stand down, one, two, or three days, where you had an opportunity to attend to your cuts and scrapes and problems, to get the new, fresh, clean socks and maybe new gear, and have maintenance performed on your weapons, things of that nature, then we would have the opportunity to read a *Stars and Stripes* newspaper.

It was unfortunate that it was through that newspaper that I saw my closest friend, Steve, who I knew from the neighborhood and had gone through training with, NCO School with, was killed in action in an area more north than I was situated in. That was devastating to read that and unexpectedly to see something like that in the newspaper.

In a similar paper, I remember seeing a fellow that I had gone through training with, in AIT, advanced infantry training. His name was Amular, a German-American boy, who was awarded the Silver Star for actions out in the field, in which he silenced an NVA position by using nothing more than his knife. It was a very vicious, very difficult thing to read, but, as I read it, I remembered Amular as being one tough kid and I probably wasn't surprised. He had that ability to do something--it's one thing to shoot your weapon at a distance and hit somebody or something. It's another thing entirely to have a weapon in your hand and kill somebody in a hand-to-hand situation. So, the *Stars and Stripes* delivered information to us all.

Occasionally, we had a transistor radio available and we would hear some music and some news from back home, but I'm sure that it was highly pasteurized, should I say. I can't imagine, knowing what I know today, that being out there, we would learn about the full extent of riots and the turmoil that was happening in the late '60s. But there were things that were happening, like astronaut Neil Armstrong landing on the Moon. I remember that happening and hearing about it on either the radio or reading it in *Stars and Stripes* magazine. I'm very proud of his accomplishment, not only for humankind but for the United States. We were very proud that that was happening. So, those were the types of stories you were more likely to read in the *Stars and Stripes*, rather than a detailed accounting of more vicious types of activity. [Editor's Note: On July 20, 1969, American astronaut Neil Armstrong became the first human to walk on the Moon. Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins constituted NASA's Apollo 11 mission.]

KR: What are some of your other experiences from your time in Vietnam?

MA: Experiences in Vietnam. We've been taping for a long time, so if I'm repeating myself, please, just bring it to my attention. [laughter] I think I talked about, I'm not sure, C., who was

walking point, found a booby trap on a tree, and shot at it to disarm it, and was wounded by the shrapnel, suffered a hole in his chest. I believe I spoke about that situation.

Did I speak about G.? Well, sometimes we would have missions in which we were placed or interspersed along a long section of roadway. It could be a dirt road that was used for convoys, and depending on the nature of the convoy, if it was a very important convoy that needed to go through this particular area, security would be put in place. So, the security, basically, were positions of three to four men and a position that was separated by maybe a half a mile, thereabouts, along this road. We had, basically, the job to make sure nobody was coming along to place bombs or ordnance in the roadway. We had to keep the area clear. They did allow foot traffic, and basically the inhabitants of the surrounding areas, from the villages, would go up and down these roads. So, you needed to be vigilante, and we were told to be vigilante. We had orders to do that.

There was one NCO, who was in charge of one of these positions, who had allowed vendors to come on to the position to sell their wares. Usually, they would be selling sandwiches. They'd have loaves of bread, open up a can of sardines, pour the sardines out on the bread, and it was a hero. It was, quite frankly, very tempting, because what we were eating were C-rations, which were scrambled eggs and ham stuffed in a can, and the prospect of having a hero and sardines with some flavor to it was kind of enticing. In any event, G. was caught with people on his position and he was caught by a captain or a major coming down the road in his jeep, and G. was brought before the other men and summarily stripped of his rank. I believe at that time, he was a staff sergeant and he was busted down to a private. The officer just ripped the stripes off of his uniform. So, G. became a private without any responsibility and just another member of the platoon.

Strangely enough, later on, I don't know, I can't remember what period of time, we were in a fire fight scenario, again, and somebody saw G. on the ground lifting his leg up into the air and receiving a bullet wound through his calf, fracturing his leg. G. referred to it as his million-dollar injury because he was taken out of service--and we did not see G. again.

Strangely enough, after I had returned home, about six or seven months later, I was now back in school and G. shows up at my door with another fellow. I believe he lived in the Detroit, Michigan area and was traveling up and down the East Coast and needed a place to stay, so he stayed at my house. Look, the actions that he did were wrong, against the orders, yet he was the type of guy that, within a combat situation, was dependable. He was also built like Charles Atlas, so just his physical presence was helpful. I won't call it inspiring but somebody of that physical capability stood apart from everybody else. He was wandering up and down the coast, stayed for a day, and that was it. I never heard from him again. He was wandering. I don't know how his life turned out. So, that was that one situation. I think I may have told you about the quicksand. I did tell you.

KR: Yes.

MA: There are times that I remember as being some of the most depressive periods of time, and when orders were received and you had to traverse an area, you followed the captain or

lieutenant's orders. While we can't blame them for some of the things that happened, in this one instance, taking us through a terrain that was filled with quicksand or a sort of a lake of such heavy mud that you could not move your legs forward, it was oppressive, because the heat of the day was so strong and water was at a premium and there was no place to sit. You had to keep your arms above, at the shoulder level, and this substance was above your waist. So, it was very difficult to move. It was so arduous that--I think I've probably relayed it in the past--it's the closest time I ever came to saying, "I just want to give up and fall into this abyss over here." But I didn't. We survived that situation, but there were days like that.

When I think about the roughest days, besides the loss of life and everything, the physical difficulties that crossing a terrain like that would have were very difficult to deal with. But there are times--I think I may have spoken before about--running out of water or being in an area where the wells or the water was contaminated, and having one case where a couple of Hawaiian individuals knew what bamboo was. A guy from Brooklyn, New York doesn't know what bamboo is and, let alone, know that it has moisture in it, but they were able to show us bamboo, strip it down, and suck on the fibers to give us some moisture and nourishment that was not contaminated. So, there are obviously positive things that would happen.

I do remember, obviously, the stand downs, because the stand downs were periods of times, for two or three days, where you'd go to the rear area after being out in what we call the boonies, for a couple of weeks or more. It was during that one little session that I was informed that I was being promoted. I was being promoted from a sergeant, E-5, to a staff sergeant, E-6. From a buck sergeant to a staff sergeant and having rank given to you in that manner, over what was a little over a year, is quite interesting to think about. Most individuals in the service would go through years and years of service before they were promoted from one position to the next, and here I was, entering in February of 1968 as a private, E-1, and here I am, a little over a year later, a staff sergeant, E-6.

In any event, there was a formality. I had to get into my uniform, clean my clothes, and go before a panel. The panel consisted of a couple of officers and a sergeant major, and they would ask me questions, and one of the questions that was emblazoned in my mind was, "What is the motto of your unit?" So, I said, "Sir, my unit is the 1st of the 27th Infantry, of the 25th Infantry Division, and the motto is '*Nec aspera terrant*.'" He says, "Correct, Sergeant Apsel. Do you know what that means?" I said, "Yes, sir. It means, 'No Fear on Earth.'" Then, the next question, which I may have hedged on, was, "Do you believe that?" I said, "Yes, I believe that," but I may have had my fingers crossed, because I had experienced lots of fear on this Earth. A little later on, I was notified that I was promoted, and I was given more responsibility in that company. So, those are the things that I remember and that I choose to remember.

I have pictures of our men in a stand-down position over a couple of days. There was a small compound that may have been a building that some dignitary in that area may have owned, or a wealthy individual may have owned, because we were in the area of a lot of rubber plantations, most specifically the Michelin Rubber Plantation. [Editor's Note: The French tire company, Michelin, established the rubber plantation in the Dau Tieng District in Binh Duong Province in South Vietnam in 1925. During the Vietnam War, the Vietcong and North Vietnamese staged operations from the plantation, and as a result, it was the site of much conflict with American

and ARVN forces. After the Communist takeover of South Vietnam in 1975, the government seized and eventually nationalized all of Michelin's plantations in Vietnam.]

In this compound was this home, and there was a swimming pool. Part of the stand down was, if you chose, to go swimming, and I don't know if we had swimming suits, so we made due with what we had. I do have some pictures of that that I'll share with you. So, there were moments of laughter and camaraderie and joviality, and there was time to talk about individual's lives and what they did at home and about their families, and, obviously, their girlfriends, and what they planned to do when they returned to "the world," the real world. Some people were going to go back to school. Some people were going to find any type of job. Some people were going to travel. Every day, you'd look up at the stars in the sky, and say, "Geez, somewhere these same stars are being seen by people at home, and that's where I want to be." For the year or so when I was in Vietnam, I craved to be home again, I'll tell you.

I may have told you a story that when I did get home, it was, obviously, a wonderful experience. I was flown to the San Francisco area, northern San Francisco, and I got off the plane. Everyone else coming off that plane kissed the ground with the reception band that was playing. We then were taken to an area where we would get out of our fatigues and given a uniform and then a place to go eat. Instead of eating, I tried to find a phone to be able to call home, to let my parents know that I was safe, I'm on US soil again. So, I did find that phone and missed the meal. I understand that the meal was a steak dinner that they basically gave to you. So, I missed it, but I did get my phone call in.

I remember now getting dressed in a uniform that I had not worn for a very long time. I put on the uniform with its full regalia, the citations, the stripes, and then I was admonished by a senior NCO or officer, because the golden little buttons that are on the lapel, one with crossed rifles and the other one that said "US," apparently, the crossed rifles were facing in and they should've been facing out. So, he was taking me to task for not having it appropriately situated on my uniform. Obviously, my personal thoughts were, "What a f-ing asshole this guy is." Maybe a couple of days ago, I'm in some kind of jungle, and this guy is criticizing me for not having the crossed rifles pointing in the right direction. Now, in retrospect, I understand that you needed to make your transition back into the home country military and attend to the requirements of uniform and general posture. So, that was that. I was in San Francisco. Then, I flew down to LA.

GA: That's Los Angeles.

KR: Yes.

MA: Yes, I flew down to the Los Angeles area, where I had relatives. I had one relative, Barry, who is married to Pam, who I called and he was able to pick me up at the airport and take me to his house, and I spent a few days with them. The Army had also given me a ticket to fly home to my original induction point, which was Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn. So, it was a ticket back to JFK Airport.

GA: You went to the cabin.

MA: I did during the three or four days that I spent in California, in Southern California, with Barry and his wife. Their family and extended family had a cabin up in the mountains, and so I was taken up there. I was able to spend a day or two up there with family and sitting at a table with people who are using utensils to eat and eating food that's not out of a can. It was the first sign that I was back home and what I used to call civilization. At that time, I did try to call Gail. I did call Gail, and we had a little conversation. I can't remember, it'll come back to me, I'm sure, but it was a special conversation.

Then, I flew back to New York on the red-eye. I got into Kennedy early in the morning, maybe seven thirty, eight o'clock, and my family was there. I previously told you about the experience I had on the airplane leaving California, sitting next to an individual who requested to have his seat changed, because, obviously, his politics were against the war and he felt that he could not sit next to a person in the military. So, it's also part of my education as to what to sort of expect coming back home. But I did come home and I was very happy. My parents, family and Gail were at the airport, and we drove home.

When I got home to Brooklyn, 1546 41st Street in Brooklyn, adorned over the front of the house was a big banner that said, "Welcome Home, Sergeant Apsel." Throughout the course of the day, friends came by to visit and reestablish our bonds. However, two or three days later, our house was robbed. The house was robbed, and, basically, the items that I had stored away or sent home, gifts for my parents, my sister, my brother, for Gail were stolen. When the police came to do their thing, I told them the story and they said, "Yes, this happens quite often because there's all these displays of welcome home and these criminal types know that you're bringing home stereo equipment, tapes, camera equipment, et cetera, and it's sort of easy pickings for them." I was obviously very angry because here, the place that I had longed to be, back home, the area of safety that I dreamed about was also vulnerable to the way of the world, so to say, crime. Interestingly enough, the police officer came in to talk to me, basically took the information down, and he said, "If they come back and if you should confront them, if you should take actions that results in their demise, make sure it happens not outside but on the premises, so that you could claim self-defense." Those words seemed to settle into me. I said, "Is a police officer giving me instructions on how to circumvent the law? Is he telling me that it's okay if you take action?" I've just come from that life, and I'm trying to distance myself from it. That was it. So, I came home.

As I may have told you later on, it was the first week maybe in January or so, but within two or three weeks, I was back in school. I was back and enrolled at Long Island University. The difficulties I had were that loud noises caused me to become very startled. One time, a next-door neighbor had a nine-year-old daughter who came up behind me and took her finger and pointed it into my back, and, instinctively, I just turned around and hit her, on her arms basically. So, loud sounds startled me. I think we were in a department store and somebody dropped a tray of money, and I would go down on the ground. So, I was now accustomed to, I internalized those actions of self-defense, and they included, when you hear a loud noise, you get down right away, and when you're touched, physically, you sort of react. It took obviously a long time, I don't react physically that way now, but when I do hear loud sounds, even to this day, there is a momentary shiver, a response that I have. So, that's from Vietnam.

KR: How much did you talk about the war, right when you got home, within the first year of being home?

MA: Yes. Many of my friends were, during the period of time that I was in Vietnam, were in school. So, they were basically in the anti-war movement, for the reasons that they held at that time. However, they were still friends, and, to their credit, the bonds of friendship superseded the political positions that they took. I don't believe, from my closest friends, I received any derogatory or negative feelings. I think they viewed it as, "You've gone through a travail of sorts and you've survived, you've come out," and they knew that my plans were now to become more mainstream, obviously. I learned from the experiences that I had. I used them, not as a reference to point out deficits in myself, but more of a positive feeling that I had accomplished something and I could do anything I want. So, yes, they wanted to know about the Vietnam experience and, quite frankly, maybe I spoke about Vietnam in less detailed terms. Of course, I was not prepared to speak about the more devastating experiences that I had had in Vietnam.

GA: I also think we had seen pictures on television, so we weren't going to ask questions. The things you had sent home, the letters we had gotten, it wasn't like John Wayne or anything; it was the real pictures being sent home.

MA: I must say that even the letters that I wrote back to them were milk toast compared to what the actual experiences were. I was not prepared to write about those things back to my family, not to my friends, or even any other relatives. The only ones I would maybe speak to were people in-country. Last time, I basically highlighted a letter from my close friend, Steve P., who was killed in Vietnam, and may have spoken about or read parts of the letter, either on tape or off tape, in which he is in a situation where he is going to terminate an individual, an NVA combatant, who he has seen. At the time, he was filled with a lot of bravado, and we had been drinking the Kool-Aid to a certain extent. The person he would have been today, or the person I am today, would not have taken actions like that. I truly believe that. I believe somebody with more life experience would have dealt with that situation differently.

I am proud of certain things that I did, decisions that I made when I was in similar types of situations, upon losing many members of a platoon, I may have mentioned, through an attack. In those days, after that attack, the remaining men, who were very angry, when they captured an individual in a tunnel, their inclination was to terminate that person. I interceded during that situation and took the information off of that person and called in a helicopter to have him extricated from the area back to the rear area, where he could be interrogated for information, and the documents that he had on him would be more useful. I somehow related to whatever rearing practices my parents had engaged in or maybe the person I was; I was not going to go out and terminate a life because of some bad experiences that we had. So, I actually looked at something like that. Look, the whole situation was difficult to be in at any one time. I mean, I knew that people were trying to kill me, end my life. I was going to protect myself, but, yet, decisions needed to be made and, in those instances, I think I made the proper decision, things that I can live with today. I think many of the situations that returning soldiers have are their conflicts that they have with actions that they've engaged in, albeit through the results of forces that were applied to them, experiences that they were having, and the training that they had, as

opposed to somebody who could sit in safety and view those potential actions with a little bit more critical assessment, so to say. Yes, experiences in Vietnam.

KR: I have a few follow-up questions about your service in Vietnam.

MA: Yes, sure.

KR: When you were engaged in battle, would you know if you were fighting against NVA or VC? [Editor's Note: VC refers to Vietcong, South Vietnamese guerrilla soldiers allied with the North Vietnamese. NVA refers to the North Vietnamese Army.]

MA: So, the VC, traditionally, were in the black pajamas garb, and the NVA were North Vietnamese Army, North Vietnamese regular, or in a tan type of uniform. They both used similar weaponry. They used the AK-47 rifle that had a distinctive sound to it. If we had intelligence reports that a certain contingent of NVA were in the area, obviously, we knew that, but most of the time, I would say, we were engaged with VC, those people who were either in black garb or in the normal garb of the day and were just part of the VC operation. Many times when there were KIAs [killed in action], like I said, maybe they would be in that black pajama garb, or maybe they would be in shorts and a shirt, some type of garb that was indicative of the garb that most people wore in the area. So, you had to rely on intelligence.

One time, we had a position, and a fellow on the position fell asleep. I woke up seeing that he was asleep and looked over the logs, or whatever I was behind, and saw the point man of an NVA regiment, or contingent, coming forward. Our eyes met. He had a rifle. My rifle was not on me. It was a foot or two away. He probably could have shot me, but that would have, in retrospect, alerted everyone along the line to open fire and identify that this group was coming. So, he chose to move back. Unfortunately, we had claymore mines in the area, and while I think he got out of the area, those claymore mines were exploded. I don't know how many men we were, maybe we were twenty men in different positions, maybe three or four positions or five positions. A regiment, or a large contingent, would be no match for us, so hopefully the claymore mines caused them to move to the rear. It also did result in an air mission that we were able to call in. But, strangely enough, the person who fell asleep on guard duty, he would have alerted us to what was happening, was dealt with in a very sort of private manner among the other people who were left vulnerable on the position. They kicked the shit out of him, and falling asleep was not something you were supposed to do.

The use of grass or marijuana, which was prevalent in Vietnam, you could pick it up in any hut that was there. It was all around, and people smoked it. You could not really curtail it. The rule that we had was, "When you go back on stand down and you have the two or three days back there, if you want to drink beer, you want to drink booze, you want to smoke, I don't care what you do, it's fine. You want to let your hair down, that's the time for it, but when we leave the compound area, you've got to be ready to go. Too many people are depending on you," and that was the rule. You leave the compound area, you're alert, you're ready. You're not going to be smoking out in the boonies.

There were very interesting ways people would smoke, when they were back in the rear area. They would take an M-16 rifle, open up the breach, they would put the grass near the chamber, light it, and hold the barrel against their mouth, and use it as a pipe. Given the properties of grass, and its propensity to alter your mind, that's an experience I did not want to have, looking down a barrel of a rifle while smoking, but some people did.

When we left Vietnam, I remember standing on the tarmac, with our duffle bags in front of us, and one of the last things the Army did before we were able to get on to the plane to take us home, to take us finally home, was to have these German shepherd dogs, basically, go down the line sniffing us and the bags. One of the people that had been in my company, a guy by the name of O., had one of these dogs stop at his duffel bag, and he had, I don't know, a pound of something. He had a large quantity in his duffel bag. He thought he would be able to sneak it home. So, basically, they got him, and he was taken out of the line. He did not go home with us that day. He was given something called, an Article 15, which was a punishment type of thing. The punishment was you're not getting on that plane. [Editor's Note: Article 15 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice is a non-judicial form of punishment that allows a commanding officer to discipline a subordinate without going through the court-martial process.]

So, strangely enough, months and months later, O., a very smart guy whose father was some type of official, political type, came and had dinner at my house with my parents, and we sort of got a little chuckle out of that experience. They kept him three or four days, maybe a week, and then they eventually sent him back with an Article 15. Article 15s, which was a punishment, usually could be a reduction of grade or loss of pay or a few days in the brig, but it was like getting a ticket, a traffic ticket. But the feeling among the men was that, "You've sent me to Vietnam. What the hell could you possibly do to me now? You're going to give me an Article 15? Fine, give me an Article 15." That was sort of the feeling with regard to Article 15s in a combat environment, all right. But, once again, it was almost a little glimpse that you're going back to the real world and there are going to be rules and regulations. People are going to challenge you on where your crossed rifles are on your uniform and they're going to make sure you salute the right person.

Basically, in Vietnam, you did not salute the people out in the area. Even your insignias were camouflaged. You didn't wear bright yellow bars to indicate you were an officer or bright yellow stripes. You wore a pin or a camouflage pin, because you didn't want to identify yourself or a senior person capable of making decisions to the milieu, to the people out there, who could identify that person as an integral person. We were told that there was a reward system in the NVA or among the VC, that if you got an officer or a high-ranking officer or somebody with authority, your reward would be substantial. I don't recall what rewards there were, but there was a lot of stuff like that.

There was a lot of mind games that we played out in the field. In situations, people would carry decks of cards with fifty-two ace of spades. Somebody around there said, "The ace of spades is an indicator to the VC, or North Vietnamese, of a bad omen or a curse or whatever." So, if there was a KIA, somebody would throw down an ace of spade, or put it on their forehead. That was sort of the stuff that people thought about. But there are a lot of superstitions and things like that.

I may have told you when I went on R&R, rest and relaxation, to Bangkok, that the first few hours was an orientation about things that you could do and can't do. If you're talking to somebody, do not get close to their face, they're intimidated by that. Do not cross your legs with the sole of your foot facing an individual, because that's a sign of being disrespectful to them. There were things of that nature that seemed to be more prevalent in that part of the world. I know when we think about white, the color white, a woman becomes a bride, she dresses in white, but I think white over there was compared to death. So, you didn't wear anything white, not that I had anything white to wear. There are instances like that that you had to be aware of. What's the next question? [laughter]

KR: Now, you have talked a little bit about this, but I want to ask you about contact that you had with civilians and if there are any recollections that you have.

MA: Contact with civilians. On rare occasions, I would be sent back to the rear area for something, to deliver important pieces of information. I think I told you, one time, there was a field officer who called me and gave me some information and had a Cobra helicopter come in to fly me back to the base, to basically convey this information to whoever. It was so important that he didn't want to risk putting it over the radio, and so he has a non-commissioned officer take this information back. So, for me to rejoin my company, it took a couple days, and so I had to stay in the rear area. [Editor's Note: The Bell AH-1 Cobra is an attack helicopter that entered service in 1967.]

I noticed that in the rear area, for every one person that was out there fighting, it's estimated that there were probably six or seven people in support, the people that did maintenance and people who cooked food and people who did the human resources and ran the newspaper. The people in support lived a sort of interesting lifestyle. They were back on the base. They had little Quonset huts with beds. They slept on a mattress and they had an NCO club, or they had a place where at night they could have a beer or two. They also hired individuals from the villages to come in to do housekeeping, more chores, clean this, clean that, whatever chores that needed to be done. Those individuals had to leave the base by sundown. They could come back in the morning for the entire day, but they had to leave. Some of those individuals were secreted in the area and they were kept overnight for some situations. They had sex with some of these people. What can I tell you? It was obviously against the rules and the people who were engaged in that risked punishment, but that did happen.

Did I know of any people? When I was in a position like the bridge duty, that I actually was on there for a week or so, I would see vendors who came by selling these sardine sandwiches or selling whatever. So, they would sit and talk, and they actually wanted to be where you were because you had money to give them. I don't think we had dollars; we had some type of military script, whatever it was. Maybe some of us did have some dollars. That was very sought after. You could pay for whatever you wanted, but they would accept any type of money. So, that's what I had. When I went on R&R in Bangkok, I did hire a vehicle and a driver for a week, so I was able to talk to that individual.

But did I have contact with people? Occasionally, we would have medical missions, where we would bring a doctor or somebody, a health professional, into an area and set up an area where people could come into to receive care. So, my interaction with the people was limited. I didn't have a lot. I mean, it was maybe the health professional or nurse that was talking to them or providing a service. So, I would say very, very limited. I can't say that I had a lot of dealings with people. [Editor's Note: The Medical Civil Action Program (MEDCAP) was a program in which American medical personnel treated Vietnamese civilians.]

The people that I would have contact with would be with ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] troops, the South Vietnamese troops, occasionally mercenaries, people from Australia, who would be there doing missions. Basically, I think I told you, we would be eating C-rations, and they would be eating rice and chopping up a snake that they found. They would cut it up, and they were eating that. At that time, my gastronomical inclinations were not such that I would engage in that eating. [Editor's Note: During the Vietnam War, over 60,000 Australian military personnel served in South Vietnam.]

KR: What you described, providing medical services to civilians, that is called MEDCAP. What else do you remember about the MEDCAP-ing missions?

MA: So, they would set up a little tent in an area, we would provide security, and they would come in, usually with a child. Individuals, the language was difficult, at times, to understand, and they were pointing to the stomach or what have you, and it fell under the purview of the medical person. What we would do, sometimes, we had a little piece of candy and things like that, the kids were there, we would hand that stuff out. We were out in no place and, like I said, our conversations were among ourselves and really not for them. But they did have care. I really don't have strong recollections of what was going on inside the tent.

KR: Who were the medical personnel?

MA: So, we had a medic. We would have maybe a couple of medics, who would be giving first aid. There may have been somebody akin to a nurse, who had some rank, and so that person would be giving care.

Getting care was difficult. I mean, most of the time, we took care of ourselves. I mean, the scrapes and the bruises, infections, the medic was the person who we accessed to give us the creams, or the ointments, or this and that. It was also the medic who sometimes would document situations for the Purple Heart. If you had shrapnel, if he could deal with it, he did. I have this finger--basically, you can see how it's stitched back on, because I had a ring on and it caught on the door of a helicopter as I was jumping off, so it ripped it back. The medic basically stitched that up. So, he was our primary medical caregiver. Unless you had a toothache, you'd have to wait until you went to the rear area, unless it was really so bad that the officer decided to have a chopper come in to take you back. You'd wait until the stand down, during that period of time, you could seek medical care for whatever ailment that you had. People did not want to go to the dentist in Vietnam, because their actions were to pull the tooth rather than fill it.

GA: What if people got sick?

MA: So, when people got sick, we took care of ourselves. I mean, basically, if you got sick, obviously, you're probably sent back. I mean, most of the times it wasn't like I'm running a fever. We took malaria pills. We took some pill that we took every day, and there's one pill we took once a week. There was one pill you put in your water to clarify the water. That's why I asked for the Kool-Aid in all my letters. So, the most common medical problem was the runs. I mean, to have a solid bowel movement was a dream. You're using leaves or whatever to wipe yourself. You got this little packet with your C-rations that had some roll of toilet paper, a few sheets of toilet paper.

Strangely enough, I was reading one of the letters last night. My mother wrote to me, "You know you've been writing to me on toilet paper." I used to take the toilet paper and roll it out and write my little letters because where am I going to get paper? I'm in the middle of a jungle; the only paper I had was toilet paper. She said she complained to me because the paper was leaking through. [laughter] She couldn't make out all the words because of the paper. I said, "You should be thankful I sacrificed a good ass wipe for you to have some message from me." [laughter] So, paper.

KR: That toilet paper has held up for fifty years. [laughter]

MA: No, no, well, right. You know something, like I said, those letters, I haven't gone through all of them, but I'm wondering if some of those letters contain toilet paper. That'll be very interesting, yes, very interesting. So, there was that little bag, and you had, I think, some matches and maybe a book of matches or a toilet paper and whatever, salt and pepper. Yes, that was it.

KR: Could you tell that things were heating up along the Cambodian border, because soon after you left, the United States expanded the war to Cambodia? [Editor's Note: American and South Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia in mid-1970 to target Vietcong and NVA forces operating in the country. It is commonly known as the Cambodian incursion. President Richard Nixon announced the Cambodian incursion to the American public on April 30, 1970.]

MA: No. So, I was on missions on the Cambodian border. There's no red line showing this is the border and this is Cambodia and this is Vietnam, but what was happening was that combatants from Cambodia were coming across this border and wreaking havoc in the villages in Vietnam. So, one of the missions that I had, along with our company, was to situate ourselves along this so-called border, and when individuals would come in or try to extricate themselves, we would engage them with firepower, engage them with air missions, or call in missile strikes. If it got really bad, they had B-52 bomber missions. In those situations, we were told in advance that there would be a B-52 strike, and we had to dig in and they gave us enough time to create protection. When a B-52 strike happened, it covers miles of area and there's shrapnel that's just flying all over the place, and so you had to be sort of below the surface of the ground and so we would do that.

Did I go into Cambodia? Who the hell knows? [laughter] I mean, I had a map and I had a compass and I had coordinates. If you're over there and you're supposed to be over here, I'm

sorry; you got caught in what they used to call a free fire zone. A free fire zone basically meant that this is an area, and after a certain time, there is no movement in that area. Any movement in that area subjected you to contact. We had these things called Starlight Scopes, at that time, a very sophisticated piece of equipment. In fact, I think I may have mentioned, the standing orders were, "If you look like you're being overrun, one of the first things you should do is destroy the Starlight Scope with a grenade. Don't let this piece of sophisticated equipment fall into somebody else's hands." [Editor's Note: Starlight Scopes were the first generation of night-vision devices used by the American military.]

So, we would use a Starlight Scope--we had a sniper, who was given to our unit, and that person had the Starlight Scope and he would scan the area. If there was movement, he would engage the movement. Did I know I was in Cambodia? No. Only later on did I learn about the Khmer Rouge and the atrocities that Pol Pot and individuals like that were committing. Did I see the large areas of skulls that were in that area? No. But, at the time, the reason I was doing it is because there was a border and people were either coming in or going out, and my unit would catch them as they came in or catch them as they went out. So, that was that. I didn't particularly like the area because it was highly vegetative. [Editor's Note: The Khmer Rouge, or the Communist Party of Kampuchea, took over the Cambodian government from 1975 to 1979. Led by Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge carried out genocide that resulted in the deaths of between 1.5 million and two million Cambodians, or what constituted nearly one quarter of the population at that time.]

There were certain areas I did not like in Vietnam. I did not like the Michelin Rubber Plantation. I think I told you, to this day, when I've bought new cars or tires for my cars, I sort of refrain from having Michelin tires placed on my car. It's sort of a reminder of that, and there were ambushes on those rubber plantations. I mean, miles and miles of trees in lines, with these pots absorbing the white gooey stuff that was coming out of the trees, difficult to move in, a lot of tunnels, and things like that, where people could secret themselves, and it was difficult areas. There were casualties taken on in places like that. We did missions with sometimes other individuals, with Marines. Every time we were in this coordinated mission with this Marine contingent, I just knew that somebody was going to get hurt over here because, as a group, they were more, I would characterize them as more …

GA: Aggressive?

MA: … Aggressive. That's a good word, aggressive. I'm a guy from Brooklyn. I mean, I'm a draftee, I'm doing my job, but I want to go home. At some point in time, that thought comes into your mind, "What are we fighting for?" You can tell me through indoctrination, especially at the NCO school, you could talk to me all day long about the Domino Theory and how communism is going to take over Indochina and the Philippines and places northeast, south, and west. Here I am, a nineteen, twenty-year-old guy that, at that time, was not as sophisticated in worldly matters as maybe most of my friends. Like I said, to some extent, I drank the Kool-Aid, but, as time goes on, there's a certain reality that started to invade my thinking, "What is this all about? What's going on here? I'm losing friends." I would say, "Is this really worth it?" [Editor's Note: The Domino Theory was a Cold War theory that shaped American foreign policy. It was a belief

that if one nation in a region of the world became communist, the nations around it would fall to communism as well. It was used as a basis for U.S. involvement in South Vietnam.]

KR: Why would your unit do these joint missions with Marines?

MA: That's a decision from another pay grade, so to say. Maybe they needed more personnel, more men. Why would they have mercenaries with us? Maybe they had special skill sets that were needed for work that was beyond from what we were told. So, I don't know. Maybe they thought that information was going to be captured and that information could be analyzed or identified by these people. I think I told you once that we had a film crew following us, two or three days, on a mission, and basically, they were sort of waiting. I said, "They're waiting for something to happen. I don't want anything to happen." We were at crossed purposes, to some extent. I'm not looking to engage in combat and risking the lives of other people, but maybe from their perspective, it made the news. They were looking for a story. I don't think they ever really did any human-interest stories. The only way we got information back to the world, not only the vanilla-toast letters that we might be sending, might be through individuals that are going back home, "Could you call this person? Deliver this message?"

KR: Where did you do these joint missions with the Marines, and what happened?

MA: It's over fifty years, I gather. Look, we did a lot of work in Cu Chi, but I believe those missions were probably a little bit more north and may have been on the Cambodian border, but I can't recollect. After a while, a lot of the areas, they just look--a jungle is a jungle; triple canopy is triple canopy. If you can't see the sky, I could be here, I could be there. We were in an area, not only Cu Chi, but an area known as the Iron Triangle, which was a very difficult area to traverse, hilly, Tây Ninh, Núi Bà Đen, places like that. But, like I said, it's so long ago, I just can't recall. [Editor's Note: During the Vietnam War, the Vietcong operated an extensive network of tunnels that extended from the Cu Chi district, northwest of Saigon, to the Cambodian border. The Iron Triangle was a 120-square-mile area in Binh Duong Province, just north of Saigon, that was occupied by the Vietcong during the Vietnam War.]

KR: When men in your unit would be wounded or killed in action, how would you and the other soldiers cope with it?

MA: Well, when people were killed in action, they would deliver these black body bags, and some of the most difficult things were to go out in the area and try to find body parts to put into these bags. How difficult to see somebody bleeding, to lose their intestines, to be shot! You know, the men would take their bullets and they would etch an "X" on the top of the bullet. It was, I think, a 7.62 mm bullet that went into, I believe it was, the M-16. I think that was the caliber. By putting an "X" on it, carving it in, when it went into an individual, it would go in as a small hole but the bullet would open up and, at its exit point, would create this big gaping hole and it was disgusting. I can't convey to you what the effect of not only seeing that but smelling that was like. The smells of burning flesh or decaying bodies, it's not something you want to revisit. I mean, that was very difficult. Did it have an effect on individuals? Yes, it did. I told you about the VC that they caught in a tunnel, coming out of a tunnel, and what they wanted to do. Yes, that's just days after losing a lot of men. There's anger, resentment, and the potential

for physical action that would end that person's life. It would become frustrating, and there were so many reactions. I had one fellow, R., a guy from the Chicago area, who from a base camp, after having gone through days of whatever turmoil they were going through, had to go on a mission. He laid down on the floor, threw his weapon down, and started throwing a temper tantrum, "I'm not going out. I'm not going out." So, here's an individual I have in my platoon, I may have told you before …

KR: Yes.

MA: I said, "R., take a few minutes, compose yourself," or words to that effect. I'm sure I was not that eloquent, but I told him, "You're going out. We are going out and we have a job to do and we're going out. So, stop wasting all your energy, jumping on the ground. We're going out, so you've got ten minutes to get normal." So, yes, there were reactions, definitely reactions, so on a scale, do you want to commit heinous activity? Or do you just want to get out of this area?

I remember I had one individual who shot himself, shot the last digit of his finger off. I think I told you about that, L. He got out of the area, because he had a wound, but they told him that, "You didn't take off two digits. You can still shoot with your second digit, pull the trigger." I don't know if that's true. Whatever. They didn't send him back. Yes, he was a California type of flower-esque child and had had enough. People talk self-mutilation. Did that happen? Yes. I had an individual who requested another individual, on a stand down, beat the living shit out of him, so much so that he was bloodied, fractured eye sockets, so that he would be taken out of duty. He could not take any more of it, and so he paid this guy from Louisiana, big guy, blonde hair, moustache, whatever you paid him to do that. I think, obviously, when it came out after the investigation, they both were charged. But, yes, actions happened, sure.

I'll tell you one thing I remember, I think I've told you, occasionally, a helicopter would come in, and there would be some minister, priest, reverend, a religious person who would come down and conduct an impromptu service. No matter what discipline or what religion you were a part of, you gathered in that circle to hear some words, meaningful words, that tried to help you get through what you were doing and deal with your emotions. So, like I said, there was that one time I did ask that religious person, I was conflicted, that sometimes I would have an individual who was dying before me, and because of their religion, I know there are things like Last Rites, or you can hear the last confession. I said, "I'm not even of that faith. What do I have to be aware of? What can I do?" and I'll never forget these words--I think I mentioned it once before in temple--his advice to me is you listen and heed the following, "What you do is be human, be human." I always remember that. I mean, rules, regulations, here's a man who's about to leave the playing field, and if you can give him some solace in those last moments, by listening to his last words, do so; you're human. You don't need the vestiges of a formal religion, no matter what it is; just listen to him and be human. Did those things affect you? I'm sure they did, yes, I'm sure they did. I mean, they're indelibly marked on my mind. I still remember those times, yes, even after fifty years or so.

KR: Do you want to take a quick break?

GA: Sure, I want to go to the bathroom.

KR: Yes.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

KR: We are going to conclude the interview today and continue with another session. Marv, thank you so much. Gail, thank you so much.

MA: Thank you so much for listening to me and coordinating this and asking me very pertinent questions. It's been cathartic for me as well. Thank you very much.

KR: Okay.

----------END OF TRANSCRIPT----------

Transcribed by Jesse Braddell 4/1/2019
Reviewed by Zach Batista 10/9/2019
Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 4/1/2020
Reviewed by Marv Apsel 10/13/2020
Reviewed by Zach Batista 11/16/2020
Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 1/14/2021