

Interviewee: Steen, John
Interviewer: Jack Sigler
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Sigler: Good morning, Mr. Steen. You understand that this interview is being recorded?

Steen: Yes, sir.

Sigler: Okay, fine. Let's talk about your experiences with Casper Platoon. Let's start with how you got into the army and how you got assigned there.

Steen: Well, I was going to Arkansas Tech and I went a year and a half, sold all my books for gas, and I got drafted two weeks after I dropped out school. Then I went down there, and they said if I went RA, which is an extra year, I'd get to do something besides ground pounding.

Sigler: This was when?

Steen: 1967, I think.

Sigler: And RA – regular army, right?

Steen: Right. So that's what I did, I went RA and went to Aberdeen Proving Grounds for aircraft armament.

Sigler: Did they give you your choice of branches?

Steen: No, your choice is army, but you just get different choices of what you want to do. No, they didn't give you much choice there. They just tell you to bring three pair of underwear, you know, report to the reception. I don't know why you got to bring three pair of underwear [laughs]. That was it.

Sigler: So you went to Aberdeen.

Steen: After basic, yeah, I went to Aberdeen.

Sigler: Where did you take your basic training?

Steen: At Fort Benning.

Sigler: Fort Benning, Georgia.

Steen: I was already there, so I went ahead and went to jump school.

Sigler: While you were at Benning.

Steen: Yes, sir. But it paid an extra \$55 a month, that's the main reason. So I went to Proving Grounds for 18 weeks to learn how, you know, put mini [??] guns and stuff on helicopters and fix them and all that. And then it wasn't long we got orders to go over there. I was with the 82nd Airborne then. When I got over there, they put me with the 173rd Airborne. They just sort of change you around, you know.

Sigler: Your original orders were to the 82nd?

Steen: Yes, sir. That's where you do all your jumps and stuff anyhow. And then it wasn't long, like I said, I got — and I was ready to go. You know, I mean I wanted to go. You want to do something, you know what I mean?

Sigler: This was what? '68 then?

Steen: Yes, sir, about '68. And like I said, when I got over there, filled sandbags for about two weeks. I said, "Man, this is good training." It's kind of weird. It's a heck of a note, but I'll have a good war story to tell my grandkids — I filled sandbags the whole time I was in Cam Ranh Bay.

Sigler: Is that where you were — the brigade was then? Cam Ranh?

Steen: Cam Ranh Bay — that's where they had you with the 82nd. Real secure place. Didn't even seem like a war or nothing there, you know, at the time. Then I got orders to go to the 173rd, to Bong Song. It's called North English. It's kind of right in the middle of Vietnam, you know, little bitty place. And it was kind of — that was the 173rd Casper Aviation. You know, I found out real quick that we got some brand new guns off — mini guns off a crash ship, and they said it was less paperwork, you know, just throw them in the ocean, than to recover them and put them on another ship. I always thought, what a waste of money, all this good stuff. But I guess you got all that red tape, transferring it. I don't know.

Sigler: Was this when you were down in Cam Ranh Bay or after you got up to the —

Steen: I got to Bong Song. I didn't do nothing in Cam Ranh Bay but fill sandbags. That's about it. But anyway, then I started door gunning, and that's pretty much where I stayed the rest of the whole time.

Sigler: What kind of aircraft were you on most of the time?

Steen: It was a UH-1B, pretty much standard helicopter, with just two M-60s, you know.

Sigler: That's the Huey, right? We amateurs know it's that, at least.

Steen: Yeah. It was a good helicopter. And you got to fly with a lot of different people. And then sometimes you fly on what they call a Loach – a light observation helicopter. They just have a machine gun on a bungee cord.

Sigler: A machine gun on a bungee cord?

Steen: Yeah, it hangs there, you know, where you don't have to hold it.

Sigler: Literally on a bungee cord?

Steen: Yes, sir.

Sigler: What, an M-60 or —?

Steen: Yeah, just a standard M-60. They were good weapons. [in reference to comments made by interviewer] I never saw a .50 on a helicopter over there because it shook so bad. I did see a navy ship that had rigged one up on some like big heavy duty truck shocks or something, you know. I know it would have shook that poor thing. I've got a .50 caliber now, you know, single shot –

Sigler: Oh, the sniper rifle.

Steen: Yeah. And I do a lot of shooting here – I live out in the country. It's just a good, fine weapon. It makes a lot of concussion, but it doesn't kick at all, you know, it's so heavy.

Sigler: Yeah, it's so heavy, and the recoil mechanism is really pretty good.

Steen: I just love to shoot it. Anyway, I found out – well, since I did a lot of repair anyhow, you know how to clean one in a minute. But those barrels would just get white, you know, when you'd fire them so much. If you had a little lever there, you could just flip it and drop the barrel and put another one on, you know. Because after they turned white, they were pretty much shot, you know, and they weren't accurate or nothing after that, you know, they got so hot.

Sigler: Now you're talking about the M-60?

Steen: Yes, sir. You know, it shot like 750 rounds. Most time, most guys, if you're gunning, you know, you got to have something to go by. You know, you got to shoot way ahead

of your target. And at night when you've got nothing to do but sit there and look at the stars, most guys like me would – you had a big box that held 1,000 rounds, every fifth round was a tracer, you'd take all the regular rounds out and make it all tracers, which wasn't too good on the barrels. You know, they gave you something good to – a base point, you know, to see – if you didn't have sand or something to shoot it where you could see it bouncing, you know. And there was a little buffer inside that -60; it looked like a little shock on a motorcycle or something, little spring-loaded buffer. And the little secret was if you just slid it out and put two pennies (or some guys put a nickel – if they had a lot of money) behind it, and it would make that spring a lot tighter and it'd shoot off about another 50 rounds. So you'd get about 800 rounds a minute, which was a good little extra.

Sigler: That's a very very high rate of fire.

Steen: Yeah, and it probably wasn't too good on the weapon.

Sigler: Did you carry extra barrels on the aircraft?

Steen: Yeah, we had some extra barrels. But there wasn't much to them things.

Sigler: Go back a minute and you were talking about an M-60 on a bungee cord. Without a stand or brace or anything, didn't you have a terrible time firing it and holding it, with the recoil?

Steen: No, there's not all that much recoil to it, really. But no, you can hold it about like a weapon then. It's just a real good weapon. It had two big things in the back to hold on to, but some of them didn't, you know, some of them just had a stock where you just hold it. But you wasn't going to shoot a whole box.

Sigler: Those were basically rigged that way in the observation helicopter, right?

Steen: Yeah. He had a mini-gun on there too, but he always wanted a gunner — well, you need somebody to watch the other side, too. That was such a small ship you couldn't have but one gunner; you couldn't have a crew chief.

Sigler: Right. Actually, the full crew was only about three people, wasn't it?

Steen: Yeah, and it was a real fast little helicopter, you know, but it made a little like a buzzing, like a bee. You could sneak up on somebody with it.

Sigler: Now a lot of those little helicopters were used for command and control, so when you were flying those you were flying battalion commanders and such like.

Steen: Yeah, but it seemed like most of those battalion commanders wanted five or six

people. They wanted to be on a big ship where they had a lot more authority to boss people around. I know every time that was my experience. You know what they say, RHIP. They sometimes abused it a little bit, I believe.

Sigler: What kind of missions did you fly?

Steen: You just had a variety of things. There's no set deal, you know what I mean? Somebody was in trouble, you went out and helped them, or somebody was down, you went out and picked them up. You might fly to somewhere just to get some parts or some supplies. Just all variety of issues.

Sigler: So unlike your normal aviation battalions, they usually have fairly fixed missions, you had a whole range of things.

Steen: Oh, yeah. And you'd have some night missions. Just depended on what was going on, I guess. But you stayed ready the whole time. It would make time go by a lot faster.

Sigler: You as the gunner, you were primarily returning ground fire?

Steen: Ah, yeah, and then you'd clear an area, you know, before you landed. You know, half the time you didn't know what you was even shooting at; you just put down a lot of fire. Somebody was shooting at you. But then sometimes they'd have somebody located. You know, you could fire that area up. Somebody shooting at you, you're pretty much going to keep your head down, you know. Didn't take long to learn that.

Sigler: Did the platoon lose many helicopters to ground fire?

Steen: There was a lot of them that took a lot of rounds. But you know, a helicopter can take a lot of punishment. I met one guy that came in and changed, in one day, five helicopters; get another one and took off. I mean, they were pretty well shot up. Unless the hydraulics is just shot plumb out, that thing will just keep going. It's just an amazing machine, you know. You got a lot of aluminum on there, so it's not really – unless you took a round in like your tail rotor or something. Yeah, you could hear it when it hit the main blades. It just sort of whistled like a bullet hold. Then you knew you was taking fire and didn't know it.

Sigler: They never had – unlike similar problems in Iraq now – they didn't have either short range ground-air missiles or rocket propelled grenades, the things that have been causing us trouble in Iraq with helicopters.

Steen: I don't think they had the sophisticated kind, but they had plenty of weapons. A lot that I never even knew about till I got back. I guess Russia kept them in pretty good supply. I know at night we'd get a lot of those little old — they call them a bottle rocket. Little bitty thing but they was always shooting up there on our landing pad, trying to mess those helicopters

up. Like a little short range – like a little bitty mortar or something. But it still had a lot of punch to it. Constantly, all night, you'd be running to the bunker or something, you know, they had some culverts out there with sandbags and they'd want you to crawl in them things. After a while you'd just get tired of it, you know, "forget it."

Sigler: This was back at your base?

Steen: Yeah, the base camp. We just had like these tents – I think they held about 20 guys, and they'd push some dirt all the way around it with a dozer, you know, like a big berm, and then you put some guard stations around it. Yeah, after a while you just figured, you know, it's your time —. _____[??] took a risk, you know what I mean?

Sigler: But actually the Viet Cong could get in close enough to the airstrips and such to give you trouble?

Steen: You know, they got hootches all the way around the — you know, supposedly friendly people, you know. But heck, them dad-gum guys had tunnels everywhere. Besides, you never did really know who was all that friendly, you know what I mean? At night he might change completely, you know. You know, I've thought about that a million times. I don't think we were ever going to win that war, because that was their country and you know, they're fighting for it. I think you're going to fight a whole lot more, and more serious than we were. It's kind of funny. I'm a preacher now, Southern Baptist preacher. Me and my wife went over there about — I don't know, it's been about three years ago now, and we did some mission work.

Sigler: In Vietnam?

Steen: Yes, sir. I always wanted to go back, and I was scared to death. But it was like a new world; it was like a new generation, anyhow, and acted like nothing never even happened. I was just hoping nobody recognized me. I kept looking for big holes and — I didn't even see a hole. I know we bombed over there more than they did World War II. And it's just amazing. Those people are like ants and you know, man, they could fix anything by hand. You know, they dug rivers by hand, you know. It's just amazing what they could do. And I don't have any hard feelings against any of them. I know for real somebody – if we were fighting for our place, we'd be fighting a whole lot harder, you know, if the Germans were over here and something, than the Germans would be. And I noticed when I went back over there, you know, preaching's against the law over there. You know, everybody's Buddhist. And you know, if you think about it, if you were brought up a Buddhist and your daddy and mama was a Buddhist and your grandma, all of them, more than likely you're going to be a Buddhist. It's just hard to try to convert somebody. But anyhow, there was one little Baptist church there that they allowed. It opened like six in the morning because it got so hot in the afternoon.

Sigler: Where were you, up in the north?

Steen: It was called Ho Chi Minh City now; it was Saigon. And worked all around there. And I went to a bunch of little villages, you know. I thought it was so amazing – there was some little boys fishing in a creek there, in a little barn ditch like. I carried a bunch of eagle claw hooks in my billfold all the time. I gave those little boys some hooks and you'd have thought I gave them a palace or something. You know, a lot of them had never even seen a white man. You know, they look at you so weird. But here they are fishing with a piece of wire and you give them a hook, you know. Man, that was something. I left almost – I didn't have to worry about bringing nothing home, because we were almost naked. You know, I didn't even have a watch. You couldn't give away Bibles, because the worst part is, they would really incriminate those people for trying to change. They were communists and they don't want them to change anything.

Sigler: There's still a lot of resistance against Christianity there.

Steen: Yeah, but they're a lot better off now being a communist country than they were, you know, when they weren't. One thing I really thought was neat was you go in some of those little villages and a guy would offer you a Coke that you know it's probably took him six months, you know, to get a luxury item like that, you know. I mean, the poorest person here doesn't even know what poor is compared to these people. I think a man living under a bridge is pretty rich compared to the majority of those people. It just shows you how — and you hate to take it, but you really —

Sigler: You don't want to offend him by turning down his hospitality.

Steen: But I mean, they'll offer you fruit, you know, right off their trees right there. What was real neat is how they honor their parents. I mean, we got a lot to learn from these people. Here we shuffle them off to some nursing home, but there's no such thing there. They honor their parents; they stay right there in the family till they die, and then they're buried right there in the yard. They're not buried in some cemetery 50 miles away. I like they way they give — it learned me a lot of lessons, you know what I mean? A lot to learn from those people. Just basic things you don't even think about.

Sigler: What made you want to go back?

Steen: I just always had a yearning to go back like that. I just had such a guilty conscience. Maybe there was something I could do —. I knew the Lord would forgive me, but I sure didn't think those people had.

Sigler: And yet you didn't find any anger or resentment?

Steen: No. And when you're talking about 17 million people in that one little town, you know. I mean, Arkansas's only got 2 million.

Sigler: When you were there serving there, had you ever gotten down to Saigon?

Steen: We went there one time to pick up some stuff and you know, look around. And at that time it was a real safe place. In fact, it was an in country R and R. When they went there, they said you don't need to carry your weapons. Ha, ha. Forget that rule. I'm not falling for that old trick. And when I got back, I was always about half – I wanted all the guns I could have. You just want to be prepared for anything.

Sigler: How much change did you see in Saigon between — well, what?

Steen: Oh, night and day.

Sigler: That's almost 40 years, isn't it?

Steen: Yeah. I mean, it's just —. I ran into one fellow there, I guess he suffered from that Agent Orange, you know, bad shape. And he was kind of a hostile guy, but I couldn't blame me a bit. Majority of the people, they were just extra nice. You're going to have a few outlaws, you know. In fact, I got one convert, and the one I got was the one that was hauling me around on his motorcycle. You can't hardly rent a car. If you're in a wreck over there, you're in bad trouble, you know what I mean? You may be there six months trying to get out of court. So it's easier to get around to let somebody drive you. I rode on the back of a motorcycle and the boy took me everywhere. He was the one I ended up getting converted. I always thought it was so neat. Here I've been going to all of these places and looking at the back of this kid's head. I said, "Maybe he'll grow up to be a Billy Graham or something." I thought it was so neat; he said, "I see you're a teacher. When I die, I want to go to the sky." I said, "This is your lucky day."

Sigler: Do I have a deal for you.

Steen: That's right. That sure made my day.

Sigler: How about the language? Did you ever speak any Vietnamese when you were there?

Steen: Well, I did know a little bit, but it wasn't the kind of stuff you want to talk about. There's 85 dialects in Vietnam, so you don't have to go but maybe six miles and you're in a different little speaking place. We think it's something here, you know, to go from a Yankee talking funny to a southerner talking funny. But boy, up there, that's a lot of different dialects. I guess it just sort of shows you how probably each little clan came from, you know, like the McCoys. They grew up that way.

Yeah, I think about that place a lot. Sure think about the different guys. But I don't know what makes such a close bondage.

Sigler: How many people when you were there asked you or found out that you had served in the country with the American military?

Steen: I don't think any. You mean when we went back? No sir, I don't think any did.

Sigler: And you didn't make the point?

Steen: No, I don't make the point. But they pretty much know, I believe. Some old coot walking around, you know.

Sigler: Did you meet many of them who had —?

Steen: I met a couple. This one fellow especially that —

Sigler: That didn't like you.

Steen: Well, no, he did. He didn't hold any hard feelings at all. It's just kind of funny. And they don't get none of the benefits that we get now. Just put out to pasture there. We went to that big NVA cemetery, and there's not one, not even one, South Vietnamese graveyard. They destroyed all of them. Wasn't one marker. That's kind of sad, you know what I mean. They were so pretty, those NVA – they had little pictures on the tombstones of the guy, you know, what he did and this and that. Really a neat looking place.

Sigler: But they destroyed them all?

Steen: Not one South Vietnamese, you know. I guess some people knew, unmarked, where they were, but that's kind of sad, you know.

Sigler: Let's see, you were there from —?

Steen: I got there in June of '68, and December 17th of '68 is when we were in that bad helicopter crash. Went to Camp _____[??], Japan.

Sigler: Mechanical failure or enemy action?

Steen: It was enemy action. The whole ship started spinning around and around. They lost the tail rotor. I had a lot of shrapnel. It was all over me, so I'm pretty sure —.

Sigler: So ground fire, the rotor went out, and the aircraft went down.

Steen: It starts spinning – well, the main blade, I think it gets going fast. I think that's when atheists even start believing then, when you're going down.

Sigler: So you were obviously hurt in the crash? You said you'd taken shrapnel from the ground fire.

Steen: Well, whatever it was they shot, you know, to hit that tail. I always thought maybe it was a .50 caliber round, you know.

Sigler: What kind of an aircraft were you in? The light observation or the —?

Steen: The Huey. We were bringing back some wounded. Several guys, I guess, _____ [??] in difference directions. The air force is what came in there and got us out. I was sure thankful for that. I said _____ [??] landed right on top of a Vietnamese hospital, under the ground, you know, of all places.

Sigler: Then what? One of the air force search and rescue?

Steen: Yeah, those Pedro – yeah, they're made for that. They've got a whole lead bottom like, you know what I mean? They can take a lot of rounds. I think they said they had three shifts, that a couple of them had to go back they took so many rounds trying to get us out. Couldn't land; they just dropped rope and you know, saws and all that stuff.

Sigler: So they got you out —

Steen: They got everybody out, even the pilot that was just trapped in the seat. He was there for a long time. I stayed there with him; me and him were the last ones to leave. In fact, I saw him at the reunion. It sure was a good sight to see a fellow like that. He kept his cool. He was upside down in that helicopter, you know, hanging in that seat; couldn't get out. Still kept his cool.

Sigler: Did the helicopter go down upside down?

Steen: Well, when it crashed it was upside down. You know what I mean? The whole front was bent upside down. When you're trapped in that thing, you're pretty much in it, you know. But boy. In fact, the one guy that showed up first was one of the wild guys from our platoon. I don't even know where he came from, but I guess he heard it on the radio. He was just one of those guys that you want on your side, you know what I mean? But he was also one of those guys that would never make it in civilian life. You know, the good and the bad. You know what I mean. But boy, I sure was glad to see him that day. I always thought that fellow ought to got the Medal of Honor, you know, for being the first one down there, coming down on a rope and helping us out. But I found out later that it was about three weeks after that he got killed. He was a gunner, too; he got killed in a ship. _____ [??] Frank Cannon. I saw his name on the wall when we went up there to Washington. It was neat.

Sigler: Frank Cannon.

Steen: Yeah, a red-headed crazy guy. Been there like, I think already three terms or more. He wouldn't going to leave. I think he had his mind pretty much made up. But anyway, I'm sure glad there's guy like that. But they don't have a chance in civilian life, you know, after they've lived like that. I know when I got back, the only job I could get was frying hamburgers in the Minute Man. You know, putting that little paper hat on instead of that paratrooper hat. Feel about an inch tall when your friends come in there.

Sigler: You said they sent you to Japan first.

Steen: Yes, sir. Camp _____[?]. Real nice hospital. Then they send you to the closest hospital to your house; that was Fort Polk.

Sigler: Then discharged after that?

Steen: No, I could still get around. You know, stuff started healing up. I had a real bad messed up knee. In fact, I got a whole new knee the other day from the army. But I was an instructor that last year. You know, back at Maryland, for those kids going over. And of course, I lost my jump status; I didn't get to jump any more. I wish after every war they'd just let you go home. Instead of hanging around doing some trivial little Mickey Mouse stuff to go to parades with some old retiree. You know, you ought to get to go home. I mean, you've done your deal, and let you go. They kind of act like it when was all over, just go back to what you were doing.

Sigler: It sounds like when you got back home, you didn't get much of a deal.

Steen: No, you don't. It's a sad deal. You feel like the world owes you something. One day you got authority to even take somebody's life, the next day, you're nothing. If you think about it, who wants to hire a dad-gum door gunner? Not a lot of jobs. _____[?] on my part anyhow. Wish I had did something I could have used.

Sigler: Obviously that's not something you could use a lot in civilian life.

Steen: Or even an infantryman – what's he going to do?

Sigler: When you came back, you went back to Arkansas again?

Steen: Yes, sir.

Sigler: How did people feel about the war and about you there? [comments about living abroad not transcribed]. But I'd come back, and you'd get the resentment from the college kids and things like this.

Steen: Oh, that was the hippies and love generation. I don't know. I always was kind of glad I missed most of that. That wasn't my deal.

Sigler: But when you got back, you didn't run into much of that?

Steen: You're going to run into some of it. But mostly I think they just got tired of it and acted like there wasn't even nothing going on. No big deal. I had a friend there in the hospital, he'd lost almost all of his foot. He thought, boy, this is going — we were sitting there in bed, side by side. He said, "Boy, I really think this is neat." "What are you — have you lost your mind?" He said, "Yeah, you know, I'm going to be like a war hero now." I said, "When you get about 60, you're just going to be an old crippled man. Nobody's going to give a hoot what you did or how you even lost — they don't even want to know." You know how people are, ask you how you're feeling and all. Majority don't. I tell them at church, if you tell somebody how you really feel and they don't care, and tell them that you really fouled up, they'd think you deserved it anyhow [laughs]. My grandma, that was the first thing you never asked her, "How are you feeling?" Because boy, you're in for a 70 minute — you know.

Sigler: Okay, can you think of anything else that happened while you were in Vietnam or while you were in the service that you want to tell me about?

Steen: I don't reckon. You know what I mean? It was just a lot of things. But you hope nobody else has to do all that kind of stuff. You know, I think it was General Grant that said, "War stinks." It does. I mean, there's nothing pleasant about smelling a dead person. You know, taking the lives of somebody. Not like shooting a squirrel. Nothing good about it. I think some people maybe can handle it a lot better. I imagine they got a better way of hiding it. But you know, most kids that were brought up in a church like me, boy, if you kill somebody, you're —. I think it's got a lot to do with your upbringing.

[philosophical discussion about war and killing not transcribed]

End