

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
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AN INTERVIEW WITH FRED OWENS

FOR THE
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INTERVIEWED BY
MARK BOULTON
ADAM FRYE

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TRANSCRIPT BY
ADAM FRYE

REVIEWED BY
TRAVIS WHITE
MARK BOULTON

BOULTON: This begins an interview on March 18, 2004 at the University of Tennessee, Department of History with Mark Boulton and ...

FRYE: Adam Frye.

BOULTON: With Mr. Fred Owens. And, Mr. Owens, ... as this is a life-course interview perhaps we could start off by ... you saying something about where you were born, where you grew up, your childhood, something like that.

OWENS: I was born in Edison, Georgia, [in] 1941. My parents moved from there to Tampa, Florida. My father was in the military at the time, and we stayed there in Tampa, Florida until he ... returned.... I went to high school at Middleton High School, all of my education was there in Tampa, Florida. I graduated in 1960 from Middleton High School, a five-sport letter individual.... My father passed away in 1955 at an early age in a truck accident. So, most of my childhood was part an adulthood also, because I ended up being the, uh, sort of like saying, the caretaker of the family up until the time I left for military service in 1960. I went into the military, took my basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, from there to Fort Hood, Texas. And at Fort Hood, Texas I had my first adventure in European travel in great big, old, Germany. Spent my first three years there in Germany. Was there in Germany when the Berlin Wall went up in '61, left there, went to Angola for about four months, from there to Fort Benning, as a part of the Eleventh Air Assault, while they were the Air Assault. Spent three months TDY [Temporary Duty] with the Eighty-Second Airborne down in Key West [during] that other war they say was not a war, you know, down there. And from there, uh, went to Vietnam with the First Cav., spent thirteen months with the Cav. I came back, spent another nine years in the military, got out in 1975, went back to school and got my degree.... Taught school for about four and a half years, took a job with the postal service, spent another seventeen years with the U.S. Postal Service, retired last February to a great life of running up and down the road. (Laughter) You know, my wife and I do that, and in between that time I'm a college sports official ... in Division One, football, baseball, basketball, volleyball. The only thing that I do right now is women's fast pitch and women's volleyball. So, that basically takes me up to where I am right now as far as my childhood.

BOULTON: Okay. It's great to have your life story, sort of, up front like that. Now we know kind of the direction to go. What are some of your earliest memories of childhood, of growing up?

OWENS: Earliest memories of childhood was, you know, standing in the first house that we stayed in down there in Tampa, Florida. And right behind us was what they call one of ... these old ponds and what they call lily ponds. And my earliest thing that I could remember was when I seen this great big brown animal standing up on the ground, and I'm trying to figure out what this great big brown animal is and, and when it opened its mouth and looked and—"Hey Momma there's an animal out there that's got its mouth wide open." Come to find out that was a hippopotamus ...

BOULTON: In Florida?

OWENS: And she was saying, “Whew. Goodness!” she said. And you could hear the noise all night long coming from the pond. But we didn’t even know that they were, that they were there. That’s early childhood memory things—the things that I remember that—really, my mother says that I have a very keen memory of my childhood. And then there was another incident where ... the streetcar broke down over the pond, and ... everyone else was scared. And my father he crawled up on the top of it and ... connected the lightning rods that was up on top of there and ... we just moseyed on across. So, I have good childhood memories of things like that, that went on in my life. And, like I said he, you know, he passed away at a very early age of thirty-five. And ... for me, it was what they call a crushing blow, because ... up until about five or ten years ago I didn’t want to have anything to do with mechanics. You know, if you had to do it, working on a car, had to do with a wrench ... [I] didn’t want to have anything to do with it, because it reminded me of too many of the things that we did when, you know, when he was living, and after that.

BOULTON: Could you talk about a little about your parents, maybe what they did, their backgrounds, do you remember how they met even?

OWENS: They met while going to high school, going to school. They grew up—he was from Dothan, Alabama, and she was from Edison, Georgia. And when you look at it on the map it seems like a great distance, but it’s not, it’s only about eighty-five miles between Edison, Georgia and Dothan. They met in high school and, you know, they would have these little buggy rides, ... these little train rides that goes in between the cities. And ... they used to tell us this little story about the trains that they had that ran between the cities. And one of the trains name was Dummy, you know I was saying, “Who’d name a train Dummy?” (laughter) you know, she said, “Well that’s what the name of the train was.” And they would catch this train and ride over to Alabama and ride back. And ... that’s how they ended up meeting ... with each other. They got married ... in 1938, and my oldest sister was born in October of ’39, and then there was actually ... twelve of us all total. And ... they taught us real good, they taught us real good. I don’t think I have any bad childhood memories of things that went on in my life, they were basically all positive. The only thing of it is that we were poor and we weren’t poor, because we lived off the land we had our own garden. Our father worked, and for a black individual at that time, which—he was a long haul driver, ... he was the only black truck driver in the state of Florida who was licensed to drive a—licensed really to drive a what they call pulling a double tractor trailer, what they do round here, and we’re talking about in the early ‘50s. And that ... ended up being his downfall, you know, driving back that night in the—got blinded in a curve and the back wheel of the second trailer, you know, flipped the first trailer and the cab and it just—the lumber just crushed him, you know, there in the cab, you know. So, we were taught very well about what it is that we needed to do, and things like that.

I learned a lot from my sister. I took very little mathematics in high school, even though when I got to high school I knew everything there was about calculus and geometry and trigonometry. And that’s because, you know, I studied the books that my sister had. At that time, the black schools didn’t have access to all these other books—the state of Florida was one of the only school systems in the state that bought ... books for black students. And all the other, all the other states the books were passed down from the year before. So what we got were new books which was on the same level as a white kids, but, you know, that’s still the separate but equal thing....

But we still—you know, you still didn't have access to the libraries, which the library system [now] is ten times as more viable than ours was at that time.

BOULTON: So, this was obviously a segregated school at the time then?

OWENS: Mm hmm.

BOULTON: When did that change? Do you know? Were you there during the transition at all?

OWENS: I was there at the initial part of the change, I was there in '53, '54 when we started the Civil Rights Movement there in Florida, I was part of that, up through the time that I got in the military. We were in '56, '57 in the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement, there in Florida. We were probably one of the three or four most proactive ... states, you know, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Florida. I don't know in which particular order you'd put them in, but figure that Alabama and Mississippi was the two most, the two most vocal. Tennessee and Florida was—you know, had their problems also, but we didn't—Florida didn't incur everything that the other states incurred, because Alabama was the most segregated state there was in the Union, you know, and Birmingham was the most segregated city there was. Everybody called it "Bombingham." (Laughter)

No, but we didn't find—no, we found out all these things as life went by, you know. But I remember the first time Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] came to ... Florida, and we had a ... demonstration, you know, there in Tampa. And ... that was one, one hell of a big turnout, you know, for that. We would stand on one side of the road to catch the bus, and the white kids would stand on the other side. And the way we encouraged them to participate is, we had the only drive-in and laundromat that separated the two communities, and it was on this side of the railroad (gestures) and not on that side of the railroad. So we took it to be that we own this drive-in, we own this laundromat, and ... we used to go there on Saturday mornings, early seven o'clock, you know, and make sure we got all the washers, you know.

BOULTON: Yeah.

OWENS: And the white kids would come in and say, "We need a washer," and, "Sorry about that, ... remember what happened this past week." "Well yeah, we was out there," you know, they did their spitting exercise, they did their name calling exercises, and all this other good old stuff, you know. So ... we let them have their little fill, we said, "Hey listen, you want to use this here Laundromat on a Saturday morning and not have a butt whooping? Now this is what you're going to have to do." "We can't afford to do that." "Oh well," you know. We did that ritual every Saturday morning 'til my mother found out why we was going to the laundromat so early on Saturday mornings. (Laughter) But we, we eventually won them over after a couple of butt whoopings, you know, that we gave them, you know. They would go into the lunch counters at Grant's and Newberry's and Walgreen's, and they would get seats, and they would give them up to us, you know. And ... that's how we were able to do a lot of things we did in the Civil Rights Movement. And you had to take these, take these kids that, that there wasn't any animosity between us, it was just that we were black and they were white, and they felt as though ... they had something, but when you look at it in society as it is, there was always a ... political bond

between the poor whites and the poor blacks. They always kept those two segments of the population fighting among themselves, even though we knew we didn't have anything, they always had a fight between the two of us. As long as we fought between us then, "Well yeah, we don't have to worry about those two they're black and they're white and they're fighting." But then you have the middle class whites who were sitting back and saying, "Well, we'll just enjoy everything as it is, because they're going to fight." ... And that's why we ended up having a lot of the poor whites participate in the Civil Rights Movement, because they were being ostracized in a way that we were, you know. So, it helped pan out in the long run.

BOULTON: Just, just to backtrack some ... what did your father do before he went into the military? Was he still a truck driver?

OWENS: No, he was a—you know, he picked cotton.

BOULTON: Okay.

OWENS: He picked cotton before he was in the military.

BOULTON: That was during the Depression, I assume?

OWENS: During the Depression. He was one of the few survivors from the [U.S.S.] *Arizona*.

BOULTON: Oh.

OWENS: He was ... a radio corpsman, he was ... caught, I think it was at level three [of the ship], level three or level four. And he was one of the few that was able to work himself all the way up, you know, to the top. Of that time, he said, never would he ever become encased in a place that he couldn't see the top. (Laughter) If he, if he couldn't see the clouds above his head, he said, he wasn't going to be trapped in a radio room like that. So that, and...now my mother she still has a picture that, you know, that she keeps in her front room that reminds us the fact our family goes back militarily all the way back to well, really you can say all the way back to the beginning of the time that we actually came, you know, our family actually came from France here.

BOULTON: Okay.

OWENS: To the United States.

BOULTON: Do you know when they came over?

OWENS: For better treatment they were, they were part of that Protestant group that came over in the late 1700's, early 1800's in the Irish movement that came over.... They're from a small village in ... St. Nazier, France. And ... I went back, I went there in '61, to the village itself and ... it's kind of weird when you walk into a village and you see your father's name, you know as the village name and ...

BOULTON: Yeah, because you father was named after the village.

OWENS: Yeah, he was named after the village. And when I did my family research, I found out that my great-great grandfather was named St. Nazier and his father's father was named St. Nazier. And that's how I was able to obtain all the documents relating to their movement from France into South Carolina, which they owned slaves there in South Carolina. And they then migrated across Tennessee into Oklahoma, ... marrying different tribes, you know, the Seminoles and the Cherokee, you know. And...my great-great grandfather served in the old 9th and 10th Cavalry. Part of the history of that still is in, you know, Cherokee and Seminole, because I went down to ... the Seminole Reservation and got the other documents that related, that related to my family as to when they married into the Seminole. And they've got a wealth of knowledge as far as documents. I mean, they documented every child that was born, you know, into the tribe, you know. I mean you name it, ... if you're related somewhere where the split came with the Seminoles and the Cherokee ... they have documents of all the individuals who broke with the Cherokee and the Seminoles, they have all that historical fact, you know, in the documents.

FRYE: That's amazing, wow.

OWENS: So, that—it's ... quite thorough.

BOULTON: So, your great grandfather, you said, was in the 9th Cavalry?

OWENS: Mm hmm.

BOULTON: Okay. And do you have any idea what he did? Where he was?

OWENS: He was a shoe man.

FRYE: All right.

OWENS: He was a horseshoe man. His father ... was a cavalryman there in the 10th Cavalry.

BOULTON: And when was this, roughly?

OWENS: This was in the late 1880's, 1890's.

BOULTON: Okay.

OWENS: He—I forgot which actual, which one—two of his brothers went with the Cherokees, and he and the remaining part of his family went with the Seminoles. We have, and we stumbled upon, that is, I stumbled upon, ...for the rest of the family in the genealogy search, because I was getting all these names within the families—the names and everything jived, but the birth dates didn't jive. They didn't jive, no, the months jived, but the date and the year didn't jive. And then I found out why. My great great grandfather added an "s." And the ones that went with the Cherokee did not add an "s."

BOULTON: So, Owen and Owens?

OWENS: Yes, Owen and Owens.

BOULTON: Yeah.

FRYE: Okay.

OWENS: So, when I put it in the computer with the information that I got from the Cherokee, the names go (gestures) whew! (laughter) boy, lookee here! Everything fell in order. So, like I said, it's...its really weird and unique, you know that you find out all this information. (Mr. Owens's cell phone rings). Don't worry about it.

FRYE: Okay, ... where were you at in Tampa, did you have a lot of friends growing up that you hung out with, or were even involved too in the Civil Rights Movement with you?

OWENS: We had a lot of individuals there; in fact, I had a lot of friends there with me in high school. In fact, a lot of those guys served in Vietnam.

FRYE: Yeah?

OWENS: At that particular point we had the—we had the largest graduating class there ever was at the high school in 1960, we had about 306, I think, that graduated. And, right now, there are less than fifty males alive out of that class. I would say probably less than that, right about twenty-five right now, because the last reunion I was at about six years ago, I think we had about thirty or thirty-five. And, like I said, my class got chopped up big time. As far as what happened in Vietnam—and one of our friends got ... run over by a personnel carrier there in Germany that I knew, but he didn't know I was there. I only made reference to him because I knew what his name was when it came down—no, not on the casualty list, but as being injured. And...when I got back home I went over, went round to his house to see him and ... his mother said he was in there, but, you know, something like that happens to you that's that traumatic they don't want to talk about it. And he sort of isolated himself, and that was the last time I talked to him.

But we were a close, very close knit, school. I mean, we were a very close-knit school...friends weren't that hard—you know, I was referred to—most of them referred to me as Slim, you know, at that time. Only thing was, I couldn't use the same number in basketball that I used in football. (Laughter) So, I had to ... change numbers. But ... I still keep in contact with about five or six of them. One of the individuals who was in the class, two classes in front of me by the name of Freddie Hires, he came—he enlisted in the service in 1960 also, but he went to Officer's Candidate's School, and sort washed himself out, and ended up in Germany. And it ended being a good thing because probably without him, I probably wouldn't have had the support that I did with the integration of the ... communities there in, in Germany.

FRYE: Oh, okay.

OWENS: And you would figure that you joined the service, everybody's all hunky-dory.... Everybody, no, no, you wear a green uniform and, you know, you go to Germany and everything is going to be the way it should be. Yeah, it ain't happening! You know, we went to Bamberg, Germany and Bamberg was one of the last, of the last of the Nazi strongholds there in Germany. And it wasn't that they were prejudiced against blacks it was the white soldiers who were prejudiced against blacks. We had a lot of guys there who was from Alabama, and Mississippi, and Louisiana. And they felt as though, you know, we were black and they were better than us, so they went out the gate they went to the right and we went to the left. And we—I think it was in '62, after, you know, I came back ... on annual leave, this had to do with before—after the Berlin crisis. And ... I came back and here's Freddie, "Hey Fred whatcha doing here?" And "Well, I'm in the company." (Laughter) "Okay, that's cool, that's cool" We sat and we talked and we went outside the gates that night and he said, "What're you doing?" And "I said, "Well we blacks over here, and whites over there." And he said, "No, no, no, no, no, we can't do nothing like that." But, probably without him to do that I probably wouldn't have did it, because all the rest of the guys in the company were just scared as they could be. We had a Catholic company commander ... from Boston, Massachusetts and ... when we went downtown that night and we said, "We were going over to the white side." And we got there, we had this little bittie—had this little bittie spat from some of the guys in the company.... And doing that, they called the MP's, and MP's came and picked us up. And they took us down to the MP house and had to call the company commander about one o'clock on a Saturday morning.

And he looked—got us out and he said, "Well, since you all got me out of my bed this early in the morning," he said, ... "I think we need to wake up the entire post." We thought—we thought he was kidding, so.... You know, he put us, about six of us in formation and we started to walk back and he started to sing Jody Cadence. And he said, "If you don't repeat, we shall run after we get back to the company." Okay, so we started repeating, repeating the Jody Cadence and as we passed the building the lights started to come on. (Laughter) And lights were coming on all over the place, you know, so ... that was real, that was kind of real interesting because after that it sort of broke the ice as to—you know, with some, with some of the white guys. Even though we trained with them everyday there was still that separation. I mean, still that separation, you know, of the two, we didn't—you know, we may have wore the same uniform, but we didn't like each other at all, you know, not one bit. That's just the way it was.

FRYE: What unit was this that you were stationed with in Germany?

OWENS: I was with the Second Battle Group of the Fourth Infantry, which was the Third Infantry Division.

FRYE: Okay.

OWENS: ... That division, Third Infantry division was was one of the most decorated units there was.... That was the Audie Murphy Division.

FRYE: Oh. Oh my.

OWENS: And he was in the First of the Fifteenth, and we were in the Second of the Fourth. The First of the Fifteenth was up on a hill and ... we had to listen to their mouth every day. And we'd just look at them and say, "Okay, that's okay, ... you've got those metal clips and ... we have the cloth tips." (Laughter) And we took pride in it because we, in fact, that is the only unit in the army, even today, that is authorized to wear cloth epaulets.

FRYE: Really?

OWENS: Only one in the army that wears clothes epaulets. Only one.

FRYE: Wow.

OWENS: And I still got mine.

FRYE: (Laughs). Wow, I didn't know that.

BOULTON: You were quite young when your father passed away, but ... did he ever talk about his military experience in World War II? Did that have any influence on you and your decision [to join] later on, you know?

OWENS: No, but everyone else—all his brothers, you know, whenever they were around they always talked about it.... And after I thought about my situation in Vietnam and thought about what he went through I understood why he didn't talk about it. If he was around his brothers he talked about it, but he didn't talk about it around us. And I think that's some of the same things that the Vietnam vet does the same thing. He—they don't talk to their families, but when they get around other individuals who were in the same theater who share the same interests they would talk about it, if they're not pressured.

BOULTON: Right.

FRYE: Right.

OWENS: You know, but he didn't talk that much about it ...

BOULTON: So, some of his brothers served as well?

OWENS: Yeah, all of his brothers.

BOULTON: All of them?

OWENS: All of them.

BOULTON: How many, in total, is that?

OWENS: Six of them.

FRYE: Six? Wow.

BOULTON: All six served?

OWENS: All six of them.

BOULTON: Were they mainly drafted?

OWENS: No, they enlisted.

BOULTON: Enlisted?

OWENS: They enlisted, he was—he was drafted. But all the rest of them ... enlisted. And his father's brothers served in the European theater in World War I. So, like I said, you know, it's a—it's a long, it's a long family tradition ...

BOULTON: Absolutely, yeah.

FRYE: Yeah.

OWENS: ... of military, you know, in itself. That goes up through my daughter right now, she—and probably, unless some of the rest of them volunteer she probably will be the last one that served. Because the rest of them ... don't want to have anything to do with it. My oldest son he was in, he was in for five years ... and he got out. But, you know, kids nowadays it's—it doesn't lead to a tradition, even though the family tradition of being in the military was handed down. But I don't—unless something really changes in the next ... five years, I don't think so.

BOULTON: Now, you say your father was at Pearl Harbor?

OWENS: Mm hmm.

BOULTON: He survived the *Arizona*, and he didn't, you don't—you never heard any stories about that day?

OWENS: The only stories I heard about were ... real minor in detail about ... him picking up radio signals, you know, from the Japanese and telling them, telling the commanders that, you know, he was picking up this Japanese traffic. You know, so what, you know, they must be way out, but we don't know—but when the bombs started falling, you know, in the short period thereafter, and that—that reminded me of this history special that was on a couple months ago about the mini-submarine that ...

BOULTON: I saw that, yeah.

OWENS: That was on, and they said they'd fired at one of the other Japanese mini-sub, you know, that came into Pearl Harbor, that they knew they'd hit it, but they didn't know exactly where they hit it at. And they, by their speculating on where they hit it, they eventually found it

and it's exactly where they hit it at. So, it wasn't as though no one didn't know the attack was coming, it's just that no one listened to what was being said.

FRYE: Right.

OWENS: It was one of those things, "It can't happen, never will happen." "Ah, no big thing, so what if your hearing traffic." "Well, we seen this sub out there," and "No, you couldn't have seen that sub." But when you get six guys that says they saw something and they fired a round at it and they say the possibility that they hit it and now they're saying, "Well, uh, they fired the first shot, they fired the first volley, the first offensive volley against the Japanese."

BOULTON: Yeah.

OWENS: So, that's, that's really neat.

BOULTON: And where else did he serve? Do you know?

OWENS: No, that just—he served in Pearl Harbor.

BOULTON: All right.

OWENS: The rest of his ... brothers, you know, served in, in the Pacific theater.

BOULTON: Okay.

OWENS: But he did his, he did his two years and he (laughs) and he, he got the hell out!

BOULTON: That's why you were too young to have any memory of him coming home, were you?

OWENS: Ah, no I can't even, I can't even remember that. All I know is—not walking in, I remember ... the duffel bags in the house ... that was about—I remember the duffel bags being in the house, I remember the boots being in the house ... and the uniforms in the house. But I don't remember ... anything else.

BOULTON: Well, your family—your father ... and your brothers as well, were they active in Civil Rights down in Florida?

OWENS: My brothers? My sisters and brothers?

BOULTON: And your father's siblings as well?

OWENS: Ah, no they weren't, because—not in the Civil Rights Movement, not from what I know, because I think the Civil Rights Movement really took off in the middle-'50s, early '60s it was a different era. My mother always said was that I was born before my time, and the reason why I joined the military was just basically to keep me out of trouble. Because she said that she

didn't want to bury me at an early age, which she probably would because I was a "radical" quote-unquote in the Civil Rights Movement. I wouldn't, I wouldn't take no piss, no crap off nobody, if you was KKK and you opened your mouth and you said the wrong thing, you got busted, you know, that that was it.

BOULTON: Yeah. Did that ever land you in any trouble?

OWENS: We had a lot of, we had a lot of trouble with, you know, with the KKK, but I—but no, but we looked at—our generation looked at it from the standpoint of, "You may have that robe on you may have that hood on, but you're the same as I am." You take that hood off, and you take that robe off and we'll whoop your butt! And that's ... the way we looked at it. And we challenged them, you know, hey, you know, you want to be a redneck we'll be a black-neck. You know, you think you can run in this neighborhood and do what you want to, we will challenge you to do that. Our territory ran from where we stayed there in, in East Tampa almost twenty-three miles all the way beyond where Busch Gardens is right now, where the University of South Florida and Busch Gardens is we, as far as we were concerned. In East Tampa the—the group of us that grew up that was nothing but palmetto bush open territory, that was our domain. And if you pushed yourself in that domain—because the railroad track ran through there, we didn't care, we went beyond the railroad track and if you infringed on our rights, we didn't care. But if you stepped on our toes, got a butt whooping. It was as simple as that. You know, but ... we didn't—I didn't see any of the generation of my father's brothers and sisters ... participating.

BOULTON: That's interesting, because a lot of the times you hear about ... soldiers coming back from World War II and because of their experiences fighting oppression overseas a lot of them came back and became, we hear, a lot more active in kind of Civil Rights things, but that, that wasn't your experience so much?

OWENS: Not that I, not that I, I seen or heard at that time.

BOULTON: All right.

OWENS: And I think, then again it could have been ... a lack of interest on my part, because at that time we were so hell bent on challenging the system, and we felt as though it was our responsibility to change the system. Even though some of the other individuals were older than us, that were demonstrating, and classes ahead of us, it didn't matter. Because what mattered to us was this was something that came along during our time, and if we didn't take care of it in our time, it wouldn't be taken care of. And I think that's why we did a lot of the things that we did. I think that's why we challenged the system in the manner that we did. And probably had we not challenged it in the way that we did, then the middle-'50s and the early '60s, it probably wouldn't have been achieved.

FRYE: That's true.... Those kind of events, kind of, push you to try to pursue the army as a way to keep out of trouble, or is there other reasons that kinda made you feel like you, kinda, needed to pursue the army?

OWENS: Well, that was one, but my older sister was in college and there was no way for my mother to have two or three in school at the same time. I could have went to college on a two-year scholarship, but I didn't want no two-year scholarship. Either I went on a four-year scholarship, or nothing at all.

FRYE: I understand.

OWENS: That's the way I thought about my self athletically, and everything else. And then military was the second option, because I had, per se, didn't have the remaining part of my childhood. I became adult at age fourteen when my father passed away, so all the responsibilities that he had, were on my shoulders. I'm the one who worked every day after school, went to practice football when no one else was out there to practice but me and the coach, and worked on Saturday, washed the clothes on Saturday. My mother worked, went to church on Sunday, went to school. A variety of things that, sort of, push you in that direction. I needed my own identity.

FRYE: Right.

OWENS: And that identity came by being a part of the military in itself. Had I not joined the military, [I'd be] probably in somebody's graveyard now pushing up daisies because of it. (Laughs) No, because of the things that I knew that—I was a left-wing radical in the black movement in that H. Rap Brown mold. I knew that I would have been somewhere where the radicals were. And that was one of the things that my mother was afraid of. She—because she knew, you know, I didn't take no snake off of nobody. I ... was always the largest, I was always the tallest person in the group, but I weighed less than everybody else in the group. And I would tell everybody, I said, "You may outweigh me, you may do everything else, but the last person that whipped my butt was my father before he died." (Laughter). I said, "Now if you think you're big enough and you're bad enough to put me down, you can put me down, but I haven't seen anybody to do it." You know.

BOULTON: I'll bet that's still true.

OWENS: Yup, still true. (Laughter) No, it's still true now you know, I'll challenge, I'll challenge any of them. I'll tell any of them, I said, "You may be young and you may whatever," I said, "But you all don't fight the way that we fought in the street." I said, "If you pull out that knife, and I guarantee you one thing, you'll have it in your throat before you, before you finish." I said, "Because I will not hesitate to kill you with it." And our philosophy was, "if you want to fight me you get your butt out there in the middle of the street, me and you, group put a ring around you, okay, best person wins whoever walks out of here and that's it." Kids nowadays don't understand what that's all about; they figure a gun, a knife, anything there is to inflict bodily harm is all there is. And our philosophy was you better come with the best, because if you don't you will go down right there in the middle of the street. And everybody will go to school the next day and "Hey!!!!" (Laughter) "Heard that you got the throw down last night, didn't think you'd be here." But ... that's the way life was. And that's why I tell kids today I'll challenge you on anything that you got out there, I don't think any of you that's seventeen, eighteen years old can whip my butt. I mean, that's just the way I feel about it, you know.

BOULTON: You mentioned going to church ... how important is religion in your family growing up?

OWENS: Religion is—at that time and still is, even though I had to readdress the issue after Vietnam. Religion was an integral part of the black family.

BOULTON: Your family was ... Baptist, is that right?

OWENS: Yeah.

BOULTON: Okay.

OWENS: It's so ingrained in everything that you do, every day, twenty-four seven, all your work, all your play, all your social activities, even growing up church was a part of your life. We had the only integrated church that was in the city, but none of our members would go to the other white congregations, you know.

BOULTON: You had a lot of white members in your church though?

OWENS: We had about seven white members in our church.

BOULTON: And everyone got on well, there were no ...

OWENS: Everybody got along just fine.

BOULTON: Yeah?

OWENS: But we had members in our, black members in our congregation who worked in white churches. Their daily job every day was to work and clean the church, but when they asked about coming to be a guest, "Eeeehh! Can't do stuff like that, can't do stuff like that." But that had always, that has always been an open concept as far as the black churches are concerned, I haven't seen even in the time that I was growing up, I have never seen a black church close their doors to a member of another nationality. If you walked in and you wanted to be a part of the congregation, you know, so be it. But it was just the reverse, and that's why they say Sunday morning is the most segregated day, ... you know, in the United States, and if you still—look around Knoxville in some ways it still is. It's changing, but ... it still would be there. And that's—you can look at, look at the black churches here in Knoxville, I mean, there are some white members in it, in the congregation, but you don't have that many black members that are an integral part of the white church structure.

Our church, the church that I'm attending now is non-denominational, and, in a way, we look for a church that would ... look at the values that I had when I was growing up. And come to find out that, the values that my minister taught me when I was growing up were the same values that are being taught now. And I look at my minister now and look at the one I grew up with, and I'm saying, "Oh boy," I said, "Both of you taught, both of them taught prosperity." But you

didn't have that many black ministers during the '50s and the '60s that taught prosperity in the black churches, it was always, "Go to the field, do what the masters say, wait for your salvation, and you'll get it in Heaven."

BOULTON: Even in the '50s?

OWENS: Even in the '50s. That's partly so even today. And that's why there is such a struggle in both the black and the white churches today, because they don't teach prosperity, you know.

BOULTON: Right.

OWENS: Within the Biblical concept of what prosperity is all about, they don't teach it. And ... it's just—it ... became an integral part of my life very young. I pushed myself away from it after Vietnam, because of what happened in Vietnam. And about seven years ago, you know, I went back to that concept of looking for something to give me comfort in the pain that I was suffering. And ... that's where I found it at. My mother always told me she said, "You can be mad all you want to, He had a reason for doing what He did." But for me it didn't make any difference, you know, He took all of my friends, "Well, He died for you." Well, that don't make no difference, He still took all of my friends that I had, these were people that I embodied that was a part of my daily integral life in the military. And He took them away from me. I said, "I think that's despicable."

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE-----

BOULTON: Before the tape ended there, we were just talking about religion. One thing we haven't talked about much, so far, is your mother and what she did.... What was her name and ...

OWENS: Her name was, her name was Georgia.

BOULTON: Did she work?

OWENS: She worked. She was the middle child of ten in the family. She was born and raised there in Edison, Georgia. In fact, she's the only living child, the only child that's living of that litter that's still left.

BOULTON: Oh.

OWENS: The oldest, her oldest brother passed away about two years ago, you know. So, she's the only one that's left. She worked after my father got killed. She didn't have to, but she figured that in 1955, '56 a black woman making about 3000 dollars a month in support payments and—the company that my, that my father drove for, Mr. Weekly, he offered me a job after I graduated from high school. And I told him, "Nah, I don't want to drive trucks." But ... he had a policy, he had an insurance policy on my father, and it—she drew 1500 dollars a month up until '83 or '84. Then they cut it back to seven hundred and something, but for a black woman to have that much security in the '50s, with ten kids, and didn't need to go outside her house to work ...

BOULTON: Yeah.

OWENS: But she did.

FRYE: Yeah.

OWENS: You know, so ...

BOULTON: All ten children still living at home then?

OWENS: Yeah, one passed away about six years ago. He was one that was born with spinal meningitis. And it was diagnosed by a white doctor ... in there in Georgia, in '52, '52 or '53, can't make up my mind which one it is. And...the only reason they took him there was because they knew he was a doctor, and he was the only doctor in the city, there in Edison, and my mother just happened to be up there, you know, visiting my grandmother. And when they took him over the doctor said, "I'm going to tell you what's wrong, but they're not going to let me put him in the hospital." They gave them a diagnosis, he gave them the medication, and told them the quickest and the most assured thing for them to do was to leave the next morning and when they got back to the hospital give the doctor the diagnosis sheet that he had wrote up. And that's what happened, and ... he couldn't—he was probably the most physical of the specimens that came out of the family, he wanted to play football, baseball, basketball, everything else but he couldn't do it because of the disease. And ... he passed away about five years ago, you know.

So ... my wife will look at it, and my wife tells me, "Yup, she's, she's a matriarch," you know. But she stands on eggshells and everything else when she has to talk to my mother and "Oh, goodness I'd talk to anybody else in the family, except talk to ... your mother." (Laughter) You know, she's just ... won't take no for an answer. And that's just the way she is, you know, she'll tell you what's on her mind and if you don't like it she'll say, "Sorry." That's the way I was brought up, you know, and that's the way it's going to be.

FRYE: Yeah.

OWENS: You know, but I think that's where I get a lot of my drive.

BOULTON: Right.

OWENS: And everything else from, you know, "Sorry but that's just the way it is," you know.

FRYE: Yeah.

OWENS: But we're—the majority of us in the family are like that, we don't take no for an answer. If there is a way that we can do it, we'll do it.

BOULTON: Do you remember what your parents' political affiliations were?

OWENS: They were both Democrats. Were both Democrats.

FRYE: So, ... why did they not let your brother go to that hospital in Edison? Was it a segregated hospital or was there any reason as to why?

OWENS: Same thing, you couldn't go to the same school.

FRYE: Oh.

OWENS: Same thing, they—same reason why they didn't treat—they didn't treat Dr. Charles Drew.

BOULTON: Did any of your siblings, brothers or sisters, go into the military?

OWENS: Yeah, my—my brother, my—Alfonso ... he served in the First Cav.

BOULTON: In Vietnam?

OWENS: In Vietnam.

BOULTON: Oh.

OWENS: He got there two years after I did. And then he went back in '71, I think it was, because I came down on orders and he—we both came down on orders at the same time. And ... they was going to actually force me to go back and the doctor said, "He can't go back." He said, "Why?" "Because he can't hear and he can't see." "Well, we don't have anything like that in our records." "Well, here it is, he can't hear and he can't see." And that's one of the things I'm fighting with VA now about. The hearing problem is fine we can take care of that. The sight problem—when I went in my eyes were crossed, but I—my vision was 20/10. They operated in '64, there at Fort Benning, and my vision became 20/400. My assumption was, because I had never paid that much attention to it, was that my vision was good, until I got wounded the second time in Vietnam. And the guys—doctor came to me and he said, "Sergeant Owens?" I said, "Yup." "Close your left eye." I said, "Okay." "Can you read what's on the wall over there?" "Hmm, no not really, why?" He says, "Is it blurred?" I said, "Yup." He said, "That's what I thought." You can't see. He said, "You weren't even suppose to be here in a combat zone." "What do you mean?" He said, "We looked at your eye chart, when you came in—your medical records," he said, "Your vision is 24/00." I said, "They told me it was 20/20." He said, "It's 20/400."

FRYE: Oh man.

OWENS: He said, "There was no way in the world that you should have been deployed." (Growls). (Laughter) You know, that was one more notch ...

BOULTON: Yeah.

OWENS: In the file, you know. You're trying to say, "Okay," you know, "Why did they do it?" "Well, you was a body, you was a sergeant, so they needed you so—so they took you right on over." You know, so okay. So, ... I'm still fighting them, fighting the VA about it, you know, today. And—but they're saying, "Well ... it was crossed." And I said, "That didn't have anything to do with the vision in the eye." I said, "Look at the operation," I said, "When they went in it was 20/10, when I came out I was 20/400." (Laughter) "Well, that didn't show up when you took your outgoing physical." I said, "Well, this sheet of paper right here says so from the hospital." You know, so I've been fighting that for almost thirteen years.

FRYE: How did you compensate, like, as through basic training and stuff like that, with your eye problem? How did you, you know, like rifle training and things like that? Did you even notice it then or was it something you were just able to get past, you'd grown up with it?

OWENS: Even though your eyes are crossed you can still shoot. You can still shoot just as well as anybody else.

FRYE: Oh, okay.

OWENS: There was no difference, no difference at all.

FRYE: Okay.... What are your memories really—of like basic training ... when you first went in the army, good and bad? Anything?

OWENS: (Laughs). Now that was basically—no, coming out of the Civil Rights Movement going into basic training was ... really an experience and a half. (Laughter) You know, it was like coming out, "I'm going to show these people, saying I'm a robust black person," you know. And the worst thing they did was made me squad leader. You know, made me squad leader, and now I'm a—"Sit you back on your damn butt," you know. And ... sergeant ran into me one day and he asked me a question he said, "What you going to do if one of them call you one of those names?" I said, "I'm going to bust they damn ass!" (Laughter) And he said, "They going to drum your butt right on out of the army." I said, "But that won't happen to me." He said, "You don't play to them," he said, "You have to walk your own drummer beat, because if you play into their hands," he said, "They're going to still be here and you're going to be on the outside." Oh okay, well sound pretty good, but it was...it was an experience, you know. Coming out of the Civil Rights Movement, being in the military, and for one time you had the power in your hand, you know, to make someone run up the road. "Run back, do push ups. (Laughter) That wasn't good enough, give me ten more push ups."

So, you got—that's, a little power in your hand, you know, and you walk in the barracks and ... somebody says something and the ... and the drill sergeant comes in, "Sergeant Owens, so and so and so and so, I need somebody to help with the policing outside." "Private so and so!" "Yeah?" "Get down here!" You know, so, you know, you'd get—it may sound weird in every sense of the matter, but it's, you know, you look at yourself and you say, "Now, how did I get myself into this situation?" You know, "Here I am a black person in here, there's only about eleven of us in the entire basic training company, and I'm a squad leader. And I can boss you all around and y'all can't do anything about it. Now how do you all like that?" You know, but it's

just, it was just a flip-flop and I think it taught me a lesson at that particular point that sort of set into motion what was to take place thereafter, you know. Left basic training, in what—Fort Hood I ended up being a squad leader, ... left Fort Hood, went to Germany on a first assignment and what do they put me on? They put me on a Browning Automatic, the old Browning Automatic weapon. And ... [I] ended up scoring higher than some of the guys who had been on the weapon for almost a year before I got there. Well, “Oh my goodness gracious, you know, what’s wrong with this guy? Well, he’s a young guy, you know.” But I learned to do things that other peoples couldn’t do that they didn’t want to do. And ... if you want to excel, you know, then you can excel. Or you can be the middle-of-the-road and I didn’t like being an in-the-middle-of-the-road person. You know, if you’re going to give me something to do ... then I’m going to show you I can do it a whole lot better than you can do it. So, that’s, that’s the effects of coming out of that situation into the military with the responsibility being placed on your—“Oh boy, look what I got, good, good, good. I know what I can do,” you know. But the Drill Sergeant said, “Nah,” you know, “You can’t do that.” So, you soon—you learn to understand that.

BOULTON: Just for the record, so that we can get it on tape, you entered the service in June of 1960, is that correct?

OWENS: Mm hmm.

BOULTON: Okay. Did you receive any kind of specialized training?

OWENS: No, nothing but infantry training. Only when I ... came back from Africa and went to Fort Benning as part of the Air Assault, I went through Airborne training and Ranger training, and jungle training as part of the force that was going down in Key West and Santo Domingo. Beyond that, there was no specialized training that we considered specialized training, like another language, or mechanics, or something like that. The only thing that remotely came anywhere near that was in basic training, some time later in basic training, I was offered an interview to go to West Point. I was one of three or four individuals that was interviewed. And then in '64, '65—'64 or '65, they offered me another chance to go to OCS, but they offered it up as a part of a quota system. I told them, “Kiss my butt!” (Laughter) I am not a quota.”

BOULTON: Right.

OWENS: “My record says I am not a quota, my record says that I qualified to go to West Point, with the scores that I initially took. So, don’t go telling me that you want to send me to Officer’s Candidate’s school as a part of minority quota. Minority quota, my butt, I don’t need it.” “Well you know, Sergeant Owens, you know, you would become a real good officer.” And I probably would have, “Had you not mentioned quota, I probably would have went ahead and did it.”

BOULTON: Yeah.

OWENS: “But I am not your quota.” And I just ... got up and left.

BOULTON: What were the people like around you in basic training, do you have any memories of them or ...

OWENS: Oh, we had a lot ...

BOULTON: Any incidents you remember from basic training that stand out?

OWENS: Oh, I remember basic training; I used to whoop people for fun coming in on the Dodge, Run, and Jump. You probably don't know what the Dodge, Run, and Jump is? (Laughs)

BOULTON: No.

OWENS: Dodge, Run, and Jump was ... an obstacle where you had to—had an obstacle, had about a ten-foot obstacle open trench in the middle that you had to jump over. And you had two, what they call, two openings on the other side that are separated, you know by what they call logs, and stuff like that. And I used to enjoy doing it because I just like excelling in showing people what it is that I could do. But what I found out in doing that was that people don't pay attention to where they have to go. They would, if you would look before you jumped in the obstacle than you could save almost fifteen seconds. Because when you're just running, you just run and you jump and you jump at this end (gestures) and you can't go in that end, you have to go in this end (gestures) because there's an arrow that says you have to go in this end. And I would pull out there and I would run, and I'd whoop around and come back, "All right, anybody going to beat Sergeant Owens' time today?" "Well, no he jumps across the trench." He said, "Well, why don't you all try jumping toward the arrow?" And everyone started to bring their time down a little bit, but they could never catch up with me because I had—I had got it down to such a science that I knew where to jump to. I would take one step in, one step out come back around and jump across the other side to the arrow. And if I did it three times I could, I could run the entire course three times through in less than a minute. And everybody else looked at me like I'm crazy, you know. But a couple of guys, three or four guys that was in basic training went with me to AIT, but I didn't have anyone from AIT to go to Germany with me. They all went some other place. Art Walker, and you can probably look in the Track & Field book and you can find Art Walker, Art Walker and I was—were competing against each other ... in what we called at that time, what we called the "Hop, Step, and Jump," which is now what they call the "Triple Jump." And ... he went to Hawaii, and I went to Germany. And ... he was the first American to jump fifty feet ...

FRYE: Wow.

OWENS: In the Hop, Step, and Jump. And I was the second American.

BOULTON: Really?

OWENS: To jump fifty feet. Had we probably went to the same place we would have probably competed head to head. I didn't compete against him again until '62, after the Olympic team came back from Rome. And ... Ralph Boston and their crew came over and ... we competed against those individuals there.

BOULTON: How did you, how did you measure up?

OWENS: Ralph and I had some, had some grueling competition in the, what then was the long jump. When Ralph came back here about ten years ago, and he spoke at one of our engagements, he walked in and he looked at me and (gestures) everybody—nobody knew what, you know, what he was pointing at and he walked over to me, to the table and he said, “I don’t believe the two of us [are] in the same place.” (Laughter) And ... they said, “You know this guy?” He said, “Yeah, I know this guy.” He said, “We competed against each other for almost ten years.” And when he got up to do the presentation and he finished up talking he said, “The one thing that you folks here don’t appreciate,” he said, “That’s people that you don’t know anything about, that man sitting back there at the table,” he said, “He pushed me to a breaking point, you know, in the long jump, you know, for three Olympics.” He said, “He should have made the Olympics,” he said, “But he didn’t,” he said, “But you know something,” he said, “I respect him, because he pushed me to get to where I’m at.” He said, “I never”—he said, “I won the first medal, which is a Gold medal, on my own.” He said, “But the Silver and Bronze, “ he said, “He was booting me in and out every qualifying heat.” He said, “I would come out there and he’d put up a time, he’d put up—he’d jump, you know, twenty-four, twenty-five feet and I’d come back and I’d jump him, I’d out jump him about six inches.” He said, “On his bad days, he’d jump twenty-three feet,” he said, “On my good days, I would jump twenty-four plus.” He said, “In the ’64 to ’68 Olympics,” he said, “He missed going by six inches, each and every time,” he said, “Those were bad days as far as he was concerned.” He said, “But they were good days as far as I was concerned, because I got selected, and he didn’t.” (Laughter) You know, so ... we had some, no ... we had some topsy-turvy, you know, track meets, all of them all over the United States.

BOULTON: And you got time off from the army or was that within the service that these took place?

OWENS: Yeah ... that was time that was given to you, you know.

BOULTON: Okay.

OWENS: I ran—I was on the All-Army team from ’62 up through ’67, except for the time that I was in, except for the time that I was in Vietnam. And when I went back to Germany, in ’67, I coached the USUAR track team. And we also had a German track team that was out there. And when I went—came back to the States in ’68 and didn’t make the team. The German coach said, “We can put you on our team, and let you go in.” (Laughter) I said, “They wouldn’t like that.” I said, “They wouldn’t like that if I beat one of them on one of my good days.” (Laughter) No, but it was, it was good, it was good sentiment, you know ... and I started to do it (growls). (Laughter) No, but ... it’s ... it was, it was real challenging.

FRYE: So ... you were in Germany when the [Berlin] Wall was being put up, right?

OWENS: Yeah.

FRYE: And so who did you feel about that at the time? What was the general impression going through your head at the time and all that?

OWENS: Well, when you look at it from the standpoint of what we were doing—that Saturday evening we were playing in the USUAR baseball championship, that Saturday evening. August fifth, August sixth, something like that.

FRYE: Yeah.

OWENS: We were playing in...Wartzburg, Germany...the first game of the USUAR baseball championship, and we finished the first game and we went out at eight, came back in around nine-thirty, ten o'clock that evening. And about four o'clock that morning, oh, about three o'clock, I guess about two-thirty, three o'clock that morning, you know, they sound what they call the alert siren, you know. Whether you was TDY or anything else, you had to get up and put all your stuff in the truck and go to the alert area and all that other good little stuff, you know. So, we got up and put all our stuff into the truck and all that other good little stuff and we went to the alert area and Sergeant Fletcher said, "All right, lets load up." I said, "What do you mean load up?" He said, "You gotta load up, we're gonna move out of here." Well, okay, okay, no big thing, and we go load up. So, we rode for about a couple hours, you know, it's just—we get into—it come daybreak and we didn't have—we had to pull the front part of the canvas of the truck off. And Sergeant Fletcher said, "Roll back the canvas, we need an air guard up." "All right Fred, you got that BAR, you got to get yourself up there for air guard." I said, "Y'all folks sure do suck on days like this." (Laughter)

So, we roll, we roll the front part, you know, of the canvas back on the deuce and a half and I turn around and look, "Hey guys, we're on the *autobahn*." (Laughter) "Sergeant Fletcher, what are we doing on the *autobahn*?" "Get up there, road guard." I said, "You mean air guard." "Yeah, get up there to air guard." And I gets up there, you know, and he said, "Put on your goggles too, because it's going to be cold." So, I put on my goggles you know, and we rode until about nine o'clock and we pulled into an assembly area, you know, to eat breakfast. "Sergeant Fletcher, what's going on?" "Well, we'll let you know when it's time." "We got, we got ... a baseball game at two o'clock today." "I don't think you'll be playing no baseball." (Moans) One of them kind of alerts, because we have had alerts over there that there may be something planned. That it's—what they do is play out situations, you know, that has to do with the East Germans, and the Russians, and everybody else.

We figured, "Ah this is one of those, this is one of them situations, you know, we gotta, we gotta go along with the game. We gotta do whatever. So, oh okay, no big thing ... we're gonna, we're gonna do what we have to." We eat breakfast and about twelve o'clock we load back up in the trucks and ... Sergeant Fletcher said, "Okay Fred, we want to have everybody to load your magazine." "Well, what you mean load the magazine?" He said, you know, "You need to load your magazine with live rounds." And I looked at him and looked at everybody else and I said, "What about them?" "Ah, don't worry about them." I said, "Why is that I get all of the nasty details, I got to be a road guard, I got to have live ammunition, I've got to have so and so and so and so this." (Laughs) He said, "Why that's, no that's the way this exercise is going." So, I look up there and we got ... these F-4 Phantoms that's flying cover, and I'm not thinking

anything about it, you know, they fly cover like that all the time, you know, when you're out doing exercises like that. So, we get up on the other side of Frankfurt headed up toward Norman's land, and it's about three o'clock in the afternoon, and we come to this first East German checkpoint. And I could see the command, see the command jeep because it must have had ten antennas on the top of it. And what he was telling the East German was that ... we'd been authorized to go through. And the East German was telling him through an interpreter that, "No way José, you don't go through." And he just leaned up against the tower, you know, and ... the commander picked up ... the phone and he said, "Give me the phone to Big Six." Who the heck is Big Six? "We're stalled here at checkpoint so and so...they will not let us move." And the next thing I heard the colonel say was, "The President said there are two Phantoms flying cover, when they bank out of the east that gate better be open or we will open the gate." And the interpreter told the East German guard what was said on the radio.

And he stood there just leaning up against, leaning up against the post with the old red barber pole just hanging down there, you know. And he told them, "Two Phantoms in the East, they will bank and they will start their roll, and if the gate is not opened by the time they are 3000 meters out, they will open the gate." He stood there, "Um, yeah." When they banked and rolled and flipped their wings and you see nothing but, you see nothing but the star on the top and they came down about 6000 meters out and they rolled again, "Ah, abababab ..." (Laughter) About a five second delay, that old red barber pole, (laughter) that old red barber pole went up, you know, and you could see those, those Phantoms come, I would say what, a little above treetop on—on top of that convoy. And you could read the lettering underneath the bottom of those bad boys when they, you know when they came across, that's just how close that was. That's just how close it was. And we didn't have no problem after that...

BOULTON: Yeah?

OWENS: Marched right on through, when we got—when we got to Berlin we knew something was wrong when we got to Berlin, we knew something was wrong. Because ... all of the American troops was out on the street, in—in their full gear. And ... we pulled up through, up to Brandenburg Gate and ... we were still on the truck. And they told us that ... we would man the center perimeter there at Checkpoint Charlie. Whew! "That ain't no big thing, we can man the center point, it ain't no big thing, we can do that stuff." But little did we know that the East Germans had their armor unit placed along where Checkpoint Charlie was, they had all of their armor almost on-line, almost on-line. "Hey, they got tanks out there," "Huh?" "Yeah?" "Well, what do you expect us to do?" "You all are going to be the center perimeter." I said, "Center Perimeter?" "What are we going to do with the tanks?" "Well you going to be right in the middle." And we turn around looking, here's the First Armored Division with their M-60's behind us. I said, "Oh my goodness, what in the world? You know if they fire a shot there is not going to be anybody left in the middle." I said, "We don't even stand a chance." You know, they put us in the middle, we took our little-bitty sandbags and stacked them all up, and it was like nine o'clock that night. All you could see was just the little peep eyes off the tanks, all you could see was just the little peep eyes, that's the only thing, that's the only thing that you knew the difference was—these were the East Germans in front of you and these were the American tanks behind you. That's the only—and that was less than 150 meters between the two.

FRYE: Oh, my gosh.

OWENS: That's how close we were, and I said, "Man this is—I ain't never been in a situation like this. Man if they say who wants to go home, I'd go home, I'd go home, you know ASAP." (Laughter) All you had to do was say, "Fred you want out? Yeah you can get out." But ... that was—I think I was probably more frightened of that situation than anything else that, up to that particular point in my life, to have these eighty pound, eighty ton monsters in the front and the back of you. And you know if something breaks out, you don't have a—there is no way in the world that you are going to survive, no way in the world. You know, if the round didn't get ya the deafness from the tubes were gonna rupture your eardrum and the machineguns, those fifty calibers were gonna eat right straight through those darn sandbags, so you didn't really—you didn't really have a chance, at all. So, the next morning, the East Germans pull their tanks back about, I say, maybe 12/1500 meters. And the American tanks didn't move, they just—they just stayed right there, right there where they were. The Eighth Infantry Division came in that next day and took our position, but we stayed there on garrison duty for almost two months. That's the first year that USUAR never played a baseball—or a series, the only time they didn't play a World Series that particular year.

But to be there when it was going up, you didn't have the foggiest idea what was going on...you see them put in the concertina [wire] and all of that stuff, and then nine months later they started construction, nine months later they started construction on it. But that Sunday morning was one hellacious Sunday morning. That's one of the other Sunday mornings that I don't forget. Along with the Bloody Sunday during the Civil Rights Movement, you know, those are Sundays that you don't—that you don't forget, just etched in your memory for the remaining part of your time. It—it becomes a part of you, you know, but that's probably as scared as I have been, you know, outside of being on that bridge on Sunday morning, and being locked into combat for seven days, that's probably as scared as I have been.

BOULTON: Were there civilians trying to get across at this time or was it just, just the two forces facing off against each other?

OWENS: Now what had happened was they ... they had shut Checkpoint Charlie down.

BOULTON: Right.

OWENS: And all, everyone all the East and West Germans would go between Brandenburg Gates, you know, between the cities. And that Saturday evening the East Germans shut the Checkpoint down, "Nah, you ain't going, nope." And nobody knew what the heck was going on. Nobody knew until, until that Sunday morning, "Well they shut the Gate down." "They can't shut the Gate down!!" "Well, they have." And that was—that was why they called an alert and ... we ended up spending, right at about three months there. About three months we spent there in Berlin.

FRYE: Yeah. So, um, what would—what did you really feel about like the Russians and the East Germans ... at this time? How did you—what was your opinion of them, you know, even before this or afterwards?

OWENS: I didn't—that was my first encounter with the East German Army and the Russian Army. We had had some individuals who had been on pass who had gotten into the illegal Czechoslovakian zones when they were on pass. And ... some of the commanders had to go pick them up, anytime you get into their zone and ... those polar lights come on at night, heh heh, you know, they could say "We could shoot you if we want to." No one, no one never got shot ... but that was my first encounter with them.

The only other encounter that I had with, you know, with any other group which was the, which was the Czechs was when we went and picked up—still trying to think of the name of the sisters that were actresses, the Czechoslovakian actress that came out in the '60s, I can't think of her name. We had to—they were at a safe house in the zone and ... we were detailed to go into the zone and pick them up out of the safe house. And in the entire period of time that we were in the zone we could see the Czechoslovakian soldiers walking as close as fifteen meters, you know, to the safe house. They weren't supposed to be that close because the safe houses there are about the same as they are up on the 38th parallel. There is a buffer zone in between the two, but they didn't care, you know. But that's the only other encounter that I've had and I can't, and I can't even think of her name, I can't even think of the name of the actress, she and her sister. We picked up out of the safe house, you know. And they—we don't know exactly, we don't know—I know they had been hiding there at least two or three days, but ... I don't know exact time, exactly how long they had been hiding in the safe house.

FRYE: Wow.

BOULTON: Where did you go to after Germany?

OWENS: I went to Angola.

BOULTON: What was your detail there?

OWENS: U.N. U.N. Peace keepage.

BOULTON: Okay.

OWENS: Did that TDY for three months with the U.N. forces there. Never want do that duty again...its just like putting your life out there and not being reciprocated, if you want to put it that way. I mean, you're just there and they decide they want to shoot you, they shoot you. And that's the only way I can describe it ... when they told me that (laughs) that I was going, I was going—my TDY period was up, it wouldn't be soon enough. Because I had looked at it up until that point, I said, "Here my mother is trying to get me out of Tampa in the Civil Rights Movement and everybody else in the world is trying to kill me!" (Laughter)

FRYE: Oh, my God.

OWENS: If they're not trying to kill me in Berlin, they're trying to kill me up on the Czech border, now they send me over to Africa and got on this here Blue helmet where everybody can

see me. And I'm a prime ... target because I'm black to begin with, and these crazy people over here will shoot anybody! You know, so I was glad to leave.

BOULTON: Yeah.

OWENS: No doubt about it, I was glad to leave when they said my three (gestures)—“Oh please put me in—just let me get out of here. Please let me get out of here, please let me get out of here.”

BOULTON: What were you physically doing there? Were you—was it guarding a base or just policing?

OWENS: We were guarding the more or less the ambassadors and just a couple of small villages and storage depots and food supply things that they had there, that's all it is. There couldn't have been any more than forty-five, fifty army people there and the rest of them were—you know, some was there from, you know, couple of the other countries—about, I'd say about 1500 of them, that were there, you know, total. But that was, that was wild and wacky.

BOULTON: Well, do you have any memories of that other than wanting to get out of there?

OWENS: Ah, as far as—no, because I really didn't go any place out of the concern. Not that I can remember, I don't think I went any place.

BOULTON: So, no interaction with the people there?

OWENS: Mm hmm.

BOULTON: And was there any combat or firefight, anything like that?

OWENS: No combat. There were, there were some skirmishes between the tribes that was outside of the perimeter. But ... nothing on the inside.

BOULTON: Did you have kind of rules of engagement placed on you as to how you could respond to any kind of attack, or anything like that, that you recall?

OWENS: Now that you mention it, I don't think that we did. We had a loaded weapon. I can't remember anyone saying directly what would happen if something happened, you know. They could have and I [may] not remember it because of the situation at hand, about it.

FRYE: Yeah.

BOULTON: And you went there directly from Germany did you?

OWENS: Yeah.

BOULTON: Did you fly? Was that air transport?

OWENS: We flied.

BOULTON: Okay. And then back to the States? Back to ...

OWENS: Back to Fort—I flew from there, from there to New Jersey. I took about forty-five days leave and my next reporting station was Fort Benning.

FRYE: And that's when you became part of the Eleventh Air Assault?

OWENS: Mm hmm.

FRYE: Was there any reason why you were put in that particular unit or did they just transfer you into it?

OWENS: They always wondered, now here's a drill sergeant, (laughter) and then they assign me to, to a signal unit on top of that? They assigned to Charlie Company 511th Signal, and I think it was Charlie Company; Charlie's a company, and Charlie's one of the two of them. And they assigned me to the 511th Signal. And ... the company commander asked me, "What was I, the drill sergeant, doing in a signal...?" "Well, I don't know, they sent me here." I went from there to Fort Jackson for a refresher course for drill sergeant. Came back they sent me to ... Sand Hill, which is another part of Fort Benning, the basic training portion of it. And ... that's where I, that's where I trained I had at the important time that President Kennedy got shot. I had one company that I was bringing back in that afternoon, and we brought 'em back in, and we're bringing 'em in, and the First Sergeant said, "We're going to do a stand down."

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO-----

BOULTON: Just before the tape ran out, you were telling us about November '63 and where you were when the Kennedy assassination took place.

OWENS: It was about thirty minutes after that, you know, First Sergeant McGinnety, you know, he called everybody, all of the drill sergeants to the, you know, to the orderly Room and he informed us that President Kennedy had been shot, and that the army was on full alert. "Well, what do you want me to do with the, with the trainees?" He said, "Well, we're going to put them out on the perimeter from the Company." I said, "Sarge, how can you put them on the perimeter?" He said, "No," he said, "that's where they're gonna be." He said, "Until we get—until we come off red alert," he said, "there won't be anybody in the barracks." "Okay, that's cool." So, we went out and we had all of the trainees alternating back and forth. And at that time we had—each one of them had a shelter half, and they married up with the other person and they put their—they put their tent up for the evening. And their tent up, their sleeping bag and all that other good little stuff and, I guess, it must have been about five o'clock when they lifted that.

They told us, they told us that, you know, Kennedy died. "Oh boy, okay, okay. Well, what we going to do now?" "Well, we're going to have to be, at least 50 percent alert tonight." I said,

“50 percent alert?” I said, “Nobody is coming in the base.” “Sergeant Owens!” “Okay,” so I go back out, I said, “Guys, listen, Kennedy’s been shot and he’s dead.” “Oh my goodness gracious!” “Well, no use to crying now it’s all dead, all dead and done, it’s nasty and it’s gross, but this is the way it is, this is what we’re going to do tonight.” “You mean we gotta stay awake?” “One person awake at all times, if I catch you asleep you’ll be on guard duty for the rest of the week.” You know, I said, “The best thing to do is to do an hour early and an hour off.” I said, “Because I know if you lay down in that sleeping bag, you’re not going to want to get up.” I said, “You’d lay on top of your sleeping bag.” We’re talking about—it hadn’t got cold there at Benning, in November, so it was still like it is out there now, about mild, mild autumn, you know. So, that’s the way it was. And that went on for two days that they slept outside, you know, in the tent area. And ... after the funeral [we] took everything back in, put it back where its supposed to have been, and we resumed the training from there.

Those—part of those individuals that were in that training unit went with me to... Kelly Hill, which was the AIT training unit. They shut down—after that, they shut down the basic training unit there at Sand Hill. And some of them went with me to Kelly Hill, I only had about, maybe ten of them that was in, in the Company that I took, took over up at Kelly Hill. At Kelly Hill we got most of the draftees that were from Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, California, Colorado, a few from Texas, few from Florida, very few of them from Georgia. That was in, that was in the company, and that was that mix of individuals that ... we had for the four companies. Everybody was basically—became so close in those four companies that everybody knew what was going on in each other’s lives for the duration of the period.

So, we got through, we got through AIT and most of the guys that were there in the AIT company was assigned to the company. They disbanded the AIT unit because Eleventh Air Assault was basically a test unit at that time, you know, “Hey if we get anybody else in they’re just going to have to come in, just going to have to learn the ropes, we’re not going to have enough time to train them.” So, that’s what we basically did, and I was to assigned to A Company, First of the Thirty-Eighth Infantry. And most of the guys I had in the training company went to A Company. So, we didn’t have to go through all of the training cycle.

We had some good times, we had some bad times ... we had—some time when we were supposed to get on a helicopter one morning on a training exercise and what they call just a God given blight, you know. We were ... ready to get on the helicopter. When a helicopter came in it was whisking black smoke, you know, when I say whisking black smoke, that is, when a helicopter comes it’s either burning clean or there’s a whiff of black smoke that comes out of the exhaust. And for some reason there is a whiff of black smoke that came out of the exhaust just before it landed, and my squad was ready to get on the helicopter, and just when we got ready to get on, the helicopter, just as we got ready to get on someone said, “No, we got a couple other squads from the other company that just went out that needs to go.” “Whew, okay, no big thing, you got, you got it, you got it.” It wasn’t fifteen minutes later that helicopter was down. Down, all nineteen on the helicopter. That helicopter and another helicopter had collided in midair because he tried—his engines stopped, he tried to auto rotate, when he tried to auto rotate he—which ever one of the pedals it was, it sort of flipped, and when it did he caught one of the other helicopters in the formation and it took that helicopter down. There was nineteen of them that was killed that day, on those two helicopters.

And we flew out after that, we set up in the woods that evening we set there and we talked about it, “Man, you know we was going to be on that helicopter?” And I said, “Yeah,” I said, “fate sure took over today didn’t it?” “Yeah, it sure did.” About that, ... in another incident we had, was we were doing a repelling exhibition for the Department of the Army up in Cheraw, South Carolina. And ... we must have had—and this was leading up to the final evaluation of if the Air Assault was going to become a concept. And then in Cheraw, South Carolina they had the spectator bleachers set up they must have had 500 spectators there from the Department of the Army and Bell Helicopter and all the other places there sitting there. And we’re doing a repelling demonstration and there were six helicopters that we were going to repel out that day. We started, we started out, we came across the trees at treetop level at about eighty-five miles an hour. Just flat out, eighty, eighty-five miles an hour, and the helicopters were supposed to—when they bank, they were supposed to come in from the west, west to east there in Cheraw where the bleachers were set up. And they were supposed to come in and they were supposed to just dip and go back and just go back up, because when you’re flying at treetop level at that speed you can, you can do that and go back up and not even accelerate. And when they did that—we were told to get on the struts, be on the struts hooked up ready to go at the point in time where the helicopter reached about 150 feet above. And when the guy said, “Off repel.” Out of the corner of my eye I caught the one helicopter, with this one guy who, when he leaned back, he went straight to the ground.

FRYE: Oh my God.

OWENS: He forgot to hook up his L-bar in the bottom of the helicopter. We had two guys killed that day, in the middle of a demonstration.

BOULTON: In front of all the spectators?

OWENS: Yup, you think they called, you think they called the demonstration off?

BOULTON: Yeah?

OWENS: They said, “You was a casualty of war.” We hit the ground, you know, the medics came they picked the rest of them up, you know, put them in, you know, put them in a chopper, flew them to the helicopter—no, flew them to the hospital. We found out later, we knew when they hit the ground that they were dead, there was ... no way they was gonna survive, you know, that fall with about a sixty-five pound pack on their back, we knew they weren’t going to survive it. And “Hey, we lost two more today.” “Oh well, that’s just the way it is.” But nobody in the stands batted an eyelash, nobody moved. Looked okay, whisk, helicopters gone, whisk, it was—that’s just, that’s just the way it was. That’s just the way it was. But there were, there were many incidents of, of a testing failure in ... the three years that we tested the Air Assault, you know. We lost helicopters, we lost guys, I think we had something like about forty-something guys killed in about three years of testing and development, I don’t know how many helicopters we lost. But there was just the necessity to do it, you know.

FRYE: Right.

OWENS: If you're going to develop a concept, you just—there were casualties, and they knew going in that there were going to be casualties, you know, in the concept. That's the way that was, but ... when we came back ... in May off that final exercise, we knew that our next trip was going to be Vietnam. I mean, we had fifteen days to clean up what we had to and on the 28th of June, [President Lyndon] Johnson said, "I'm now sending the First Cav. to Vietnam." Yeah, so what! We already knew it, you know, we already knew that we were destined to go to Vietnam. We knew in the next buildup the Cav. was going to Vietnam. There was no doubt in our mind, the army had spent all of that money with 517 helicopters sitting out there on the, on the golf course. There was no doubt in our mind that we weren't going to Vietnam. We had more helicopters than our unit, than they had in Vietnam.

BOULTON: You were obviously there at the very beginning of the ... development of Air Cav. What kind of things did they tell you about how Air Cav. was going to be used? I mean, what kind of scenarios did you go through where the helicopters would be the most effective? What kind of things were they training or teaching you?

OWENS: They weren't teaching you, it was a learn concept. (Laughter) It was a learn concept. Everything that we took to Vietnam was a developmental learn process for the three years or so we was at Fort Benning. If you were going to teach someone how to repel ... you taught 'em, when you are first—when we first started talking about repelling we didn't use gloves. "Well, how are we going to do it?" "Well we're just going to come that down that little bitty, shiny little rope." It's a bit crude but, it just burned your hands and we're coming down off the side of these ... walls that they build out of crossties, you know. And, aw, man, we were just skinning up the hands man, we can't keep that stuff, you know. So ... General Kinnard said, "Well, we gotta come up with a better concept, what if we use some gloves?" "Okay, we'll use some gloves." So, we tried the regular black gloves that we had after about ten or fifteen trips, you know. (Laughter) (Makes cutting sound) You couldn't use them for nothing, for nothing else. Well, we got to have some gloves that's going to be durable. They didn't have any so, they finally came—they finally got ... the heavy work gloves that we used and they worked out pretty, pretty good. And even though they were just bulky, and you couldn't do anything with them, and you couldn't fold them up and put 'em in your pocket, or anything like that. They was just bulky, you know, nasty, bulky, you couldn't do anything with 'em.

But our first repelling seat that we had was made out of a board, and what they did was when you came out of the helicopter ... your hand was underneath the board and you actually physically sat on the board and there was a knot that was at the end of the rope. So, when the board hit the end of the knot, you know, you just sort of "Pop." Just sort of, you know, hit it, you're gone. About three or four years ago we had—I met one guy named John Crowden, who was ... one of the guys that was with us there where we was going through that concept. And there was a couple guys from the—the Honor Guard unit was there, and he was talking to them, and I overheard them. He said, he was talking about the board, you know, and how they slide down it, I looked at him and I said, "What do you know about that board?" And I hadn't seen John since '64, and he turned around and looked at me said, "Fred Owens?" I said, "Yep." "I've been telling these guys about this board." I said, "What you tell 'em?" He told me, one of the guys looked at me, and he said, "He come telling me that you all used the board." I said, "Yep,"

I said, “Only peoples who knew about the board can stand up there and tell you about that board.” And he said, “You mean, he’s telling ...” I said, “He’s telling you the truth.” He looked at him and he said, “How stupid!” He said, “You gotta learn from some way.” He said, “We went from the board to the gloves that came all the way down.” And he said, “But nobody knew anything about repelling.” He said, “What we did was a learn concept.” And that’s what the Air Assault was all about, you learn helicopter warfare, you learn how to disembark from the helicopters, you learn not to turn to your right when you came off the helicopter, because if you turn to your right you walked into the rotor blades in the rear. And we had a few guys to do that.... So, everything that we learned it was not that they knew, it was just, “Oh, that’s something new, ... lets put that in the directives so we won’t do that.”

BOULTON: Right.

OWENS: So, “We won’t do that anymore.” So, all of the concepts that we learned, that was on the table ... we went through them. It’s like when we went on the final, on that final evaluation with the Eighty-Second, and parts of the other division, they outnumbered us by almost three to one, on that final exercise. But because we had helicopters, they couldn’t keep up with us. And General [Earl] Wheeler and the rest of his staff knew at that particular point, probably three days into the evaluation that there was no way that the conventional army that was on the ground, the Eighty-Second, could match us with the speed and the deployment that we had. We already knew that there was nobody that could match us, in the army, that’s going from point A to point Z. They would be at point C waiting to see if we were going to get there, and we would be at point G doing a counterattack behind them and they’d be saying, “Well, were did they come from?” “Well, they landed in that LZ in the back, in the back over there and they coming this way.” “Well, who are they?” “Well, you’re surrounded.” (Laughter) “You know, so you can either be destroyed or you can give up, or you can be captured.”

So, we knew what that particular concept, and how it was going, and how it was developed as quick as we did because we had guys who had came back from Vietnam who were helicopter pilots. Who told us, you know, “This is the way you fly in Vietnam, you fly at treetop level, you fly like a bat out of Hell, you fly seventy, eighty miles an hour if your going to stop you can stop, but this is the way you stop.” And that’s why you see ... in a lot of the army ... classified photo things that they have as far as documents, you see helicopters ... when they come in, they don’t come ... straight in, they always come in at an angle, when they come and they land. They come in at treetop level, they come in at treetop level, but before they hit the ground it looks as though the tail rotor is about maybe six feet from the ground.

BOULTON: Yeah.

FRYE: Mm hmm.

OWENS: That’s the buffer, you know, that’s the buffer on the ground and they perfected all of those techniques at Fort Benning. I mean, there were so many—there was things that we did at Fort Benning, people looked at us when we got to Vietnam, “How can you all do that?” “How can you all fly into a tight LZ like that?” We can get into an LZ twenty by twenty with a helicopter and the blades never touched a tree, you know. But people would look at us like,

“How can you do that?” That’s the concept that we developed, you know, during those—three years period of time. So, that’s—there’s a lot of things that people didn’t understand about the concept, a lot of things that people don’t even know today about the Air Assault. Those of us who was around there for the, for the full three years that we tested and developed it—which are very few of us now—we’re the only ones who can ... really explain how the concepts came about, why we did this, and why we did that, and I’m still not really at liberty to talk about some of the other things that, that went on, you know, some of the things still haven’t been declassified.

BOULTON: You mentioned President Kennedy and ... when he was shot. What was your opinion of Kennedy and the kind of idealism that he brought in to the early ‘60s, to the Presidency?

OWENS: Kennedy reinvigorated the American spirit of what democracy was all about. Probably, had it not been for Kennedy, I think a lot of things that was accomplished, socially and economically, in the ‘60s would have never been accomplished.

BOULTON: Right.

OWENS: Never. Some people don’t like the Kennedy’s because of the Irish hoop-la. But ... I respected him more in the sense of what he accomplished in the military, more so than I do [John] Kerry, in that respect of what he did, how he did it ... and how he cared for his men, you know. Kerry talks about what could have been and the other people that he served with, and stuff like that, but, you know, it just don’t shake my china-berry bush about what it was that he accomplished. When you try—and no, when you use, you know, your quote-unquote position to do things that you should not do, militarily when, you know, when your in Congress, when your in a foreign country ... flying out, flying in ... and expect me as an individual to quote-unquote support you for a cause that you think I should support you for, no. You have to go a long ways to speak—to beat John Kennedy. You know, in that particular sense ... I think he was probably one of the most humanistic presidents there were because of the contact that he had with the American public. And because he was Irish and he was looked upon as a minority, even though the family wealth that they had, I think that set him aside. And in the same breath, well, it’s just the same as the same breath because we have to go back and look at Andrew Jackson, you know, in the same sense both Irish, you know ... at what happened at New Orleans, you know. People look at me when I—pamper history like that and I said, “Sorry but that’s just the way, that’s just the way, that’s just the way it falls in.” You know, you just tell it like it is, you know ... you know so...I don’t think we would have—I don’t think we could have gotten to where we are or where we went in the quest for outer space without his vision. I don’t think we never would have, it may have been twenty years down the road, had he not envisioned that during this time, “We should do this.” Nobody had never thought about that.

BOULTON: Yeah.

OWENS: “We can’t, we can’t go to the moon.” “Yes we can,” you know, but that was his vision, that was his vision, you know.

BOULTON: Just now—this actually is possibly off the subject—but a Huey just flew by in the background there through the window, were they the helicopters that you used from day one for the concept? Was it always the Huey from early on?

OWENS: Yeah, we used a variety of Bell, Bell choppers, we used, we used what we used—what we called the OH-1, which was the—oh, what they called the open bubble type observation ...

BOULTON: Oh, yeah.

FRYE: Yeah.

OWENS: And then we used the, we used the UH-1D, UH-1E, UH-1G, each one of them was modified—each one of them was a modified version of the original ... helicopter ... that we used. The E and the G had more power than the others because when we got to Vietnam we found out that because of the humidity the lift factor ... came into being. When we first got into Vietnam we could barely lift out nine in the helicopter, because of the humidity and they had to re-modify the engines ... as time took it's place. So, it gradually got back to the point that it could—that the average helicopter over there could ... ferry eleven to thirteen fully-loaded combat troops. But when we first got 'in country,' six or seven was it. They didn't know that the humidity was going to take that much of a toll, you know, on the engines itself.

FRYE: Yeah, I didn't even know anything about that, that's cool.

BOULTON: Well how aware were you ... going through basic training and in the early '60s about the situation in Vietnam?

OWENS: I was aware. But you never thought about it. I remember what happened at Dien Bien Phu ... but, you know, it never became a part of my daily life at that time. I was aware that ... Eisenhower put advisors in there, I was aware that Kennedy had the option of not sending any more or increasing the toll that was over there. But I don't think it became of any paramount importance until about '64 when they had the, had the attack there in Saigon I think it was, that they killed those Marines. I said, "Man that thing's getting to be nasty around here now, you know." But you still don't think that much about it, but when they sent a brigade of the 101st and then they sent the 173rd and all of a sudden you got two strike units, 'in country.' And over a period of about nine months you going from about 35,000 to 85,000, "Hey look at this, a lot of folks there." So, we did become aware of it, when they told us that we were going to do that final test. And we knew if that final test was—even if we only got a sixty-one we knew that they were going to take that concept and put it in Vietnam. We knew that. So, it was just...just a matter of time, of when we were put there.

BOULTON: Did you have any opinion of Vietnam at that time? About whether or not the U.S. should have been there, or anything like that?

OWENS: When we left, we was winning. (Laughter)

BOULTON: At the time that you were going in. I'm sure your opinion has probably changed since then, but actually leaving just before Vietnam, did you have an opinion?

OWENS: We felt, and I felt at that time, that going into Vietnam was a good thing. And when we looked at it from the standpoint of our commitment, that is, our commitment as individuals to the Coun—no to the country itself, we're going to fight for democracy. "Oh, yeah okay, okay. We're going to bring democracy to Vietnam, yeah that's what we're going to do okay, no big thing." We didn't ask questions, we just did what was asked of us to do, it may have been wrong, but that's the way we saw it, that's the way it was did before, and before, and before, and that's the way the country was built. You didn't ask questions you just did what you was asked in order to keep democracy the way it should be. If you felt as though someone was infringing on that outside of the boundaries of the United States and you were called upon to do defend that or restore it, that's what you did. You didn't ask any questions, you just went and did it.

When we left Fort Benning we took with us 217 miniguns. In Vietnam in '66 they created aircraft they called "Puff." And in October of '65, General Kinnard came back to Washington, D.C., because Westmoreland would not let him put those miniguns up along the DMZ. And we were assured when we left Fort Benning that that was to be a part of our defensive strategy for the Cav., because we were going to cut the country in half. And Westmoreland said, "That's inhumane treatment." But what some people don't know is that General Kinnard walked in the Chief of Staff office and he told them that he was going to resign, "because you've taken out of my hands what you told [me] that I could use for security of my division, and now you're gonna tie my hands and tell me that you want me to do this with the limited number of resources that I got." He said, "It stinks." He said, "What do you want me to do?" "Do anything with 'em you want to, you can't use 'em." And ... one of the aircraft units out of Pleiku ... they were just, "Let's see what we can do with it." And ... they mounted six of them in the—on the belly of them and they were just out firing them. And that's how "Puff" came into being they said, "Man did you see that firepower?" "Yeah man, goodness." And it went whirr and that's putting a round every inch on the ground, and you take one of those "Puffs" it can cover a 1000 meters by itself, a 1000 meter grid wide with six of those miniguns in the belly. A 1000 meters wide, Westmoreland said, "That's inhumane treatment." I said, "You sucker!!" (Laughter) I said, "You see," I said, "We're supposed to be fighting the war, but you don't want us to fight the war the way it's supposed to be fought."

BOULTON: It's surprising to hear that from Westmoreland.

FRYE: Mm hmm. I never knew that, I never heard of him dealing with that situation at all.

OWENS: There are, there are things and phases of the Vietnam War that the American public will only hear from those of us who was actually there. Those of us individuals who were there right at '64, '65, '66, '67—after '67 it was a downhill spiral. Downhill spiral, you know, right about January '67, it became a downhill spiral. Guys didn't even want to even be 'in country,' they didn't want to go. They volunteered just because, uh, "There ain't nothing else for me to do I'll sail on over here." But for those of us who knew what was coming on, the same as those who have been out of the military all these years know what's coming off in Iraq, in the same ... manner. We know what's coming down the pike, I can look at it three months from now and

almost tell you unless the military establishment, the military leadership of the Southern Command changes there won't be that much change in Iraq. We see—we know the old military concept. We see and we know, because they do these things on a daily basis and we say, "Well, we know what's going to happen." You know, the bombing last night—yesterday morning was waiting to happen.

BOULTON: I guess, we should get on to Vietnam then.

FRYE: Yeah. (Laughs)

BOULTON: You were—was it June '65 you said that you were pulled up?

OWENS: Yeah.

BOULTON: Or when you found out about it? And where did you leave from, where did you disembark and leave the United States from?

OWENS: We left from Charleston, South Carolina.

BOULTON: So, you left on board a ship then?

OWENS: We boarded the USS *Rose*, the USS—it was three ships, I was on the *Rose*. We left through Charleston, down through the Panama Canal, stopped in San Diego. Next point of entry was Qui Nhon, South Vietnam.

BOULTON: How long was the crossing?

OWENS: Thirty-one days from Charleston, thirty-one days all total.

BOULTON: And was that just a troopship or did you go with the helicopters?

OWENS: No, troopships. The helicopters was on a flatbed that left out of San Diego... They were there about two weeks before we got 'in country.'

BOULTON: And how was the crossing?

OWENS: The crossing was fine to me, made money. (Laughter) Ironing uniforms for the liberty [leave] at San Diego, I had my pockets full and everybody was—everybody were coming out that morning and, "We may not be getting off." (Laughter) "Fred you told us ..." "I didn't tell you nothing!" "The man said you all going to have liberty, you all wanted the uniforms pressed, I pressed the uniforms." I was the only one on there who knew how to work the steam presser, so I charged everybody two dollars.

FRYE: You took their money?

OWENS: To press their uniforms, and I had a pocket full of money.

FRYE: Yeah?

OWENS: Ready to get off, “Oh boy, that Sarge!” And my uniform got pressed free because I was still...(Laughter) You know, yeah—but ... we got off in San Diego, you know, and we had ourself a ball!

BOULTON: Yeah?

OWENS: I think I must have—we spent money like it was going out crazy. And I got back on the ship, and I still had half the money that I had when we got off. (Laughter) That—should give you an idea of how much I made on uniforms, because there was everybody, what, 1100 and some peoples on the ship, and we found out coming out of the Panama Canal that, “Oh okay bring ’em on in here, put ’em in here, I’ll take care of them.” And that’s what I did for three days, press uniforms, two dollars a uniform. But ... we got ‘in country,’ and the very first evening we got ‘in country’ we were bailing out the puking buzzards, the 101st. God bless their little souls!

BOULTON: That very first evening?

OWENS: Very first evening. We got in, we got into base camp and they were post—they were supposed to be providing perimeter security for us to establish perimeter security. And ... they got hit real bad and, “All right here we go.” “What you mean here we go, we just got here?” “We going.” (Sighs) So, we got pulled up on the outside of the green line, which is the line outside of the secure part of the base. And ... we got sporadic fire, but ... it wasn’t anything, but just to be less than six hours of the ship and “ch-ch-ch” “Oh man. Goodness. These people just want me. Momma said she’s getting me out of this place so I could be safe and it ain’t safe, it ain’t safe!” So, you know—but ... we weathered the storm and ...

BOULTON: Where was your base camp? Which was one was it?

OWENS: An Khe.

BOULTON: An Khe? Okay.

OWENS: We weathered that—weathered that night, and we pulled security for about two weeks until we got everything established. And we went outside—we did outside perimeter patrols in the Happy Valley in the first operation. And ... in October ... we lost the first guy that was in the company on an ambush. He moved from where he wasn’t supposed to move from, went down to a streambed. We couldn’t fly him out that night because [it was] restricted, because of the restriction that they had for helicopters coming into an ambush site at night. We couldn’t ... cut back [an] LZ, which would’ve been an LZ beyond that extraction point if we were going to get hit—if we got hit hard enough the helicopters would have came in anyway. But being that it was internally ... they didn’t want to jeopardize the entire platoon to get one person out. So we couldn’t cut back an LZ. So, he died there on the LZ that night, which was the first casualty of the—of the company there which was going into the Pleiku campaign, about a week and a half

before we started into the Pleiku campaign. But I was always the point individual in my squad, always the point man, it was just something I did naturally, being the squad leader that was my responsibility, you know, and I was the point, I was the point man.

BOULTON: What was the date when you disembarked in South Vietnam? Do you remember?

OWENS: Do what now?

BOULTON: The date when you disembarked in South Vietnam?

OWENS: Ah, if my memory serves me right it was somewhere around maybe the 28th, 29th of August. We left ... Charleston the latter part of July; I know it was thirty-one days.

BOULTON: Right.

OWENS: We ... was pulling patrol up in, up in the Ia Drang Valley ... three days before the First of the Seventh had scheduled, and two days after the First of the Ninth got hit up at the ... rubber plantation when they got ambushed and ...

-----END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE-----

BOULTON: Okay, just before the tape ended there you were telling us about some of your early encounters ... there in South Vietnam.

OWENS: Just before ... we sent in a report that morning—it was sent into the brigade S-3, the operation reference to what we observed the three or four days we was up at the Ia Drang River. And ... they got—they [North Vietnamese] come down the mountaintop with these helmets on with these big lights on it, and that's how they transport all of their stuff at night, you know, they use these helmets going down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and you see boucoup lights all over the place. And ... they would stop and they would go out and ... we were sending in that morning—we sent it in as “an undetermined force,” you know, “in the Ia Drang Valley at this point,” but it was.... And we—they extracted us out of there about eight, nine 'o clock that morning, something like that, they extracted us out we were going back for three days rest because we had been constantly out for the last month and a half without any time off at all.... For some reason our company was always attached out to everybody else ... because we didn't, you know, we didn't lay down just—it was just the way that we did things, you know, we didn't cut the corners ... if we knew something was coming on.

So, when we got back in and pulled off our backpacks, we hadn't—I don't think we had even ... been there ten minutes and the bell went off, “What the heck is the bell going off for?” And ... Captain G[eorge Forrest], he said, “The 1st of the 7th has stepped into shit.” And I said, “What do you mean they've stepped into shit?” He said, “Those stupid assholes is up in the Chu Pong Mountain.” I said, “The crazy fools!” I said, “Didn't they get the, get the twitch report?” He said, “I don't know,” he said, “but somebody's ass is gonna be on the line.” Said, “Okay.” So, the word went out for everybody to load up and that, and in that short period of time, about half an hour, forty-five minutes, about half to three fourths of the guys—no shower, no nothing—

they was headed down to the—they were headed outside of the gate, all they wanted was a beer. (Laughs) You know, do whatever. So, he went downtown and rounded up everybody and ... they flew us into Pleiku that evening. And ... by the time we got into Pleiku about two-thirty, the First of the Seventh was getting their ass kicked all over the place. We flew in on the next to the last helicopter that evening, the last flight of birds, a platoon and a half of us. And ... the rest of them came in that morning, the rest of them came in that morning they walked, they walked in that morning, ... on the open side of the perimeter and that's where we found that Charlie had butchered the remnants of the [Herrick's] Lost Platoon on the backside.

BOULTON: Oh.

OWENS: And ... there was some things that we saw that for us, as Americans, you just don't, you just don't talk about it. It's just, it's just one of those things you don't talk about. And we walked all the way up to, to General [Hal] Moore's CP and they wanted to know, well, "Where'd you all come from?" "Well, we walked in." "Well, where'd you walk in from?" "Well, we walked in on the backside over there." "Well, who's over there?" "They ain't nobody over there." He said, "What you mean there ain't nobody over there?" And Sergeant Major said, "I need to go in there, I don't think you need to go over there." And he looked at me and he said, "That bad?" I said, "That bad." I said, "If Charlie realized that that was our last line of defense," I said, "You wouldn't be in this CP this morning." I mean that was out and out total slaughter about eleven, eleven guys, eleven soldiers and guys just butchered, you know on the east side of the perimeter. They brought in the Second of the Seventh, flew in that morning, the rest as part of us, the rest of them flew in that evening. And we got hit pretty bad that night. The second night there and we hit 'em. We did a frontal assault the third morning there at ...

BOULTON: Was this [LZ] Albany?

OWENS: No.

BOULTON: This was still [LZ] X-Ray, okay.

OWENS: We did a frontal assault there all the way out 'til about a couple hundred meters and we still hadn't gotten to the remnants, we still hadn't gotten to the remnants of the Lost Platoon, at that particular point. And just as we sat up there at the edge of the wood line we, looked up there and there was nothing but—I mean, as far as you could see, there was nothing but Charlie, Charlie, Charlie, I mean almost ten deep. They said, "Holy Shit!" And ... that's when, that's when the call went out for Broken Arrow, the first time it was a Broken Arrow. And ... it was just, it was unmerciful, unmerciful. Some of the guys got burnt, but when you look at it ... it was like darts out in front of you. You could see the napalm, you can smell it and it was as close to me as you, I mean if there was a tree it was sliding down it and all it needed was something to ignite it. And that's why you still wonder, that's why I wonder, I said, "Here I am, napalm is there, guys are here, guys are there, these guys get burned, those get burned, I don't get nothing." You know, but ... that went on for about thirty minutes when they called Broken Arrow in.

BOULTON: Can you—just for the record; can you explain what you mean by Broken Arrow?

OWENS: Broken Arrow is when a unit is in distress and is about to be overrun. It's a call sign that's recognized by all units and all aircraft within a given space in Vietnam. If you're—if an aircraft is on the way to—for a mission and it's within range of the Broken Arrow that mission is cut in regards as to where it is, the Broken Arrow missions take precedence over every other mission in Vietnam, okay. Therefore, you know, B-52's cut thrust, cut their bombing runs to, to North [Vietnam], they're coming out of Guam ... there were aircraft and we asked you know, "Where are all these folks coming from?" "Where do all these aircraft come from?" But that's the response that you get for a Broken Arrow; you're in distress, they know you're in distress, and the only way you're going to survive is they need to be there. That evening, one, two o'clock we saw made a line around the remaining part of the CP and what was left of the outer perimeter there at X-Ray and pulled in the remaining part of the Lost Platoon. And how they didn't get wiped out with the napalm, we will never know.

BOULTON: The Lost Platoon this is Lieutenant Herrick's? The one who broke the perimeter at the beginning of the campaign?

OWENS: (Nods) So, we still can't figure out how they survived, because they was out there on the knoll, and the aircraft were coming right straight across the knoll. And we thought for sure when we pushed the perimeter out to start counting bodies that—we thought for sure that it was going to include their body count. And ... for some reason they were still sitting out there on the knoll, still sitting out there on the knoll. "It's about time." "Well, I didn't tell you to run away." You know, so they'd been out there for two days, two days up on that knoll by themselves. You know, but that's, you know they—First and Seventh had about 80 percent casualties counting KIA's and wounded there at X-Ray. Seventy-nine out of about 430 that was actually killed, one hundred and eighty something plus that was wounded. I think when they pulled out of there that morning before we walked into Albany, I think it was only about twelve or thirteen helicopters that took them all out. So, that was what was real strange about when we seen, when we seen the preview of the movie [*We Were Soldiers*], when we saw a preview of the movie and me and George and Kirk were sitting at the table and...and they said, "We're going to see a preview of the movie." "Okay."

BOULTON: This is *We Were Soldiers*, of course, you're talking about?

OWENS: Yeah. And and when they showed the excerpt of when General Moore and Sergeant Major Plumley was there in the tent and they said, "Hal?" "Yeah." "What's the strength of the enemy?" "I don't know." And George looked at me and I looked at George, and Kirk looked at George and he said, "They got that shit right." (Laughter) He said, "They got that shit right." (Laughter) Well, but ... for us it was, it was a release that for some reason someone didn't get the information that was sent that morning. And—in the back of our minds we were saying, "Well, maybe, maybe we didn't send it to the right place?" But we got, you know, we got, we got a confirmation from the S-2, "Yes we got the information on the twitch, on the information of the patrol in the Chu Pong Mountain." "Okay." But that in the movie sort of gave us a sign of relief. So, I'm saying, "Whew." "Man, it was pretty bad up there they said." "Oh, yeah they got two divisions up there, you fool, why'd you go in there?" (Laughter) You know, so that was, that was a kind a release for us in the company to sit back and say, "Whew." Somebody didn't give them some information.

BOULTON: Yeah.

FRYE: Mm hmm.

BOULTON: Well, can you describe what it's like? Because I imagine it must be very harrowing, flying in, knowing you're going into a hot LZ, and what that felt like, and what you actually saw as you were going into the landing zone there at X-Ray?

OWENS: You don't think about—you don't envision it. The only way you—the only thing you can do is look at the guys that you're with and look 'em straight in the eye and says, "We will meet on the other side of the LZ, this is where we're going, and this is what we expect, we don't know what's there." You can't pamper the situation, you can't ... sit there and say, "Well, we—when we get off the helicopter this is going to happen," because you know it's going to be just the opposite of what you tell them, so you don't tell them nothing. When you get off the helicopter you got five seconds to hit the ground, wait for that chopper to leave, and haul ass for the wood line. That's your mission, your mission is to get to the wood line, it took us about twenty minutes to get to the wood line between the firefights and the hand-to-hand combat. From the time that we got off the chopper, got up and it was like, "Holy Shit." You could see the wood line, twenty meters away, but Charlie was at a vantage point because of the way of where the Lost Platoon was and there was no cover. I mean, the helicopters just came right in off the east-west corridor and Charlie had an open shot for every helicopter that came up that east-west corridor. And what they did later on was that instead of coming up the east-west corridor they fly the west-east corridor they coming back just the opposite way and banked themselves in and just scoot along, you know, [to] the LZ.

And ... they would tell you, "When we hit the ground you'd better pop, because when that helicopter bounce up, we gone." And that's it, and that's exactly what—that's exactly what they mean. That's about three seconds of pop, bang, because he's gonna get his recoil off the ground and when he's got that ... recoil off the ground you'd better have your ass out of there, otherwise you'll be falling on the ground before you know it, because when they get that recoil and ... he guns that throttle ... you'll hit fifty feet real quick like. And ... you got a twenty, thirty-pound rucksack on, you'll find yourself coming out there, you know, flat on your back. And there ain't no place for you to go, you know, you may as well say, "Oh my goodness, in my back." But you can't ... you can't prepare that much of anything coming into a LZ knowing it's going to be hot. You know it's going to be hot, and you just sit there and you just look at the other person and your eyes and his eyes tell you already that there is hell down there, and the only way we're going to get out of it is that we're going to have to survive it together. You don't have to say one earthly word.

BOULTON: What did you actually see when you got out of the helicopter? What was going on? What was the situation in front of you as you hit the ground?

OWENS: When we hit the ground the only thing you saw was smoke. We didn't know where the CP was, we didn't know where the NVA were, all we know is that the CP was somewhere in the general vicinity, west-east from the LZ coming in west-east on the helicopter, that's all we

knew. But with the open end of the LZ and it not being secure ... it was just a nightmare waiting to be happening. It happened, and there was—they didn't, they didn't have enough individuals when they went in, they didn't have enough individuals on the second lift, nor the third lift, nor the fourth lift. It was an hour, hour plus, hour and a half, hour an a half, two hours later before he had 85 percent of the individuals on the ground, and he still had another company that wasn't on the ground that came in on the lift before we did.

BOULTON: You were in close proximity to General Moore at the time, did you have much contact with him during the battle? Or did you see what he was doing at the ...

OWENS: No contact at all.

BOULTON: Okay.

OWENS: Except for when we walked, walked into the CP area about—just walking in and ... finding the guys on the outside of the perimeter, just completely chopped up. That was, that was my only contact with him during those four days.

BOULTON: And the weapon you carried, was it just the M-16?

OWENS: Yeah.

BOULTON: Okay.

OWENS: Had an M-16, two of them I think, no, yeah I had two M-16's at that time.

BOULTON: We hear a lot of stories, early on in the war especially about some of the problems the M-16's had. Did you ever encounter any problems? Or were there was ever much talk of ... jamming because of the conditions there at the time?

OWENS: Some of the other units had, that came in after us, and some even in the 173rd had problems, even though they were there. But we took the M-16 with us, but our main thrust of it was that we learned how the M-16 functioned on the ship. With the rest of them they had to learn how it functioned in battle. If it got whipped and dirty out there in the field ... you took it apart, your life was at risk. We knew coming in, because of what was told to us that if wanted that weapon to function properly, you don't put that much oil on it, you put just enough for it to function. Because when it gets hot the oil will—no the oil that's inside of the metal will expand and you don't need that much. We never had a problem the way the other units had, and I think that problem mainly had to do with their maintenance. That's the only thing I can say, we never, never had a problem.

FRYE: Did you and your men have to man the perimeter during the night at all, at X-Ray?

OWENS: Oh yeah everybody, you know. (Laughs) That was it, that was the perimeter, you know, if you wasn't on the perimeter, I don't know where else you could be. No, no that was it. That was, that was the perimeter, you know, the only thing that was inside was the aid station,

the CP, and half of the time that—Colonel Moore and the Sergeant Major was out walking the line. You know, so ... you didn't have a place to hide, you know, you were out there in front.

BOULTON: How intensive was the combat, I mean obviously it was very intense whenever the enemy attacked, but were they coming down constantly? Or did you have breaks in between? How often was the actual fighting going on?

OWENS: It sort of like a Chinese wave attack. It—you see them, and you don't believe that you see them, you fire and they don't fall, and you say to yourself, "Holy Shit, what's holding them up?" And right behind him is someone else with another weapon, so you're emptying a magazine hoping that somebody will fall before they get to you. We had Charlies stacked up around the foxhole perimeter, top of the foxhole, side of the foxhole, in the foxhole, guys who ended it in the foxhole that had been shot by the NVA. It's a scene you can't describe. It's right out of a World War II movie where you got waves and waves and waves of people that's coming at you and you see it, but you don't believe it, it's just like what the Chinese did to the Ninth Division in Korea, wave after wave after wave and you as an American soldier you're not accustomed to this. If you shoot someone with a .45 or .38 or M-16 you expect him to go down, but when these folks have hung around the mountains for four or five days and they all juiced up and ... they're toting their AK-47s ... if the upper part of his body is sheared off, he's still firing his weapon. Now what did that make you feel like? And you look at yourself and you say, "I don't believe what I'm seeing." But they're still firing, so it—it's an unbelievable sight that I didn't want to go back through again. But two months later, or two days later, put it this way, two days later, and two months later I went through the same thing again.

BOULTON: You were at Albany as well, is that correct?

OWENS: (Nods).

BOULTON: Now if reading the book [*We Were Soldiers Once ... And Young*] is accurate, by all accounts that was more intense and more higher than I think than X-Rays.

OWENS: Mm hmm.

BOULTON: You could talk a little about that perhaps? Well, did you go back to the base camp in between the two?

OWENS: Nuh uh.

BOULTON: So, you're there the full-time?

OWENS: There full-time.

FRYE: Yeah, you were the tail end of the column wouldn't that be right? Your company?

OWENS: We were, we were security.

FRYE: Hmm.

OWENS: For the Second of the Seventh. Anytime you were security you're at the tail of the column, but at the same time you have more freedom ...

FRYE: Responsibility.

OWENS: And responsibility than the rest of them. What drug, what drug Albany down was the, was the leadership. I know this is—people don't like to hear that aspect of it, but when you have a column that's moving, and your company commander stops that column because you got a prisoner and it's ten or fifteen minutes and you don't come back to that company and they say, "This must be a break." And they start pulling out their C-rations, they're starting to eat and all during this time our company is still moving. We're closing, we're closing in on the main column, we are unaware, we know something is going on up front, but we didn't know what it was. We know the commanders were called to the front, but that's all we know. So, we're still moving and I look at "purp" and "purp" looked at me, and we look up at the sky and I said, "Man, this is one helluva long walk in the sun." "Yeah, it sure is." I said, "Yeah, look like a perfect place for an ambush to me." And he said, "Couldn't be a better place." It wouldn't be ten seconds later, "Boom! Boom! Boom!" I mean, they walk every round, every artillery piece they had the column laid in, I mean a 1000 meters by a 1000 meters in an L shaped ambush. Our third platoon split the west side of the ambush almost in half. That was about two meters from Albany, they cut that part of it in half. And had they not cut it in half, and they got fire, it'd have been total annihilation of the entire column. And when the rounds started raining down all you could hear was, "Oh, my goodness, oh, my goodness, oh, I'm wounded, oh, I'm wounded," and then the rifle fire.

And I heard [Captain] George [Forrest] on the radio calling Sergeant [Fred] Kluge, "I'm on my way." None of the others commanders left, everybody else was sort of lackadaisical about what was to take place. When George got back to where we were, we were basically in a semi-perimeter, simply closed the column. And he said, "We got to close the entire column." "Well, why do we gotta do that?" "Because Charlie is on the inside of the column." "Holy Shit." So, inside of the column were pockets of fights, that's why we couldn't fire into the column, because had we fired into the column we would have shot everybody else that was inside. There were six or seven little battles going on inside of the column itself.

BOULTON: A lot if this was in elephant grass as well, wasn't it?

OWENS: Yeah. Very bad country. So, we ... took care of the end of the column and ... we could see Charlie in the trees, in the grass, and Sergeant Kluge said, "If it moves, shoot it." "Oh well, okay no problem with me." I mean we mowed that elephant grass to about stumps about like that. (Gestures with hands) "If it moves, shoot it, it don't make no difference." He said, "We can't go anyplace and they can't go anyplace." He said, "We can't go forward, because there's little bity battles on the inside." And we couldn't—that happened at about one, about one, one-fifteen, two o'clock, it was a walking massacre, a walking massacre. And we figured that we had went through the worst of times at X-Ray, and it was only beginning.

We ... pulled out, part of, you know, pulled out part of the guys that was wounded ...about five, six of them. I got [hit in the leg] just as ... the sun was going down a little bit.... George came around, and he looked at me and said, "How you doing?" "Okay." He said, "We need to put you on a helicopter." "No, no, I ain't going no place, not now." I said, "I've got nine guys over here, I've got one out there I don't know where, you know, what's happened to him, got one over here that's KIA." He said, "Who you got KIA?" I said, "[PFC Vincent] Locatelli." He said, "Shit." Locatelli was the youngest guy in the Company, and he said, "Okay."

So, about eight o'clock, after we sort of band-aided the column together, we got a call from—you know, George was playing around with the radio and got a—intercepted a call from Ghost 4-6. And ... he said, "We out here and nobody else landed, we don't know where we are, and ... we need some help." He said, "Where are you at?" He said, "We don't have the foggiest idea." He said, "How do you expect us to find you?" He said, "We can't walk around in the woods all night long, that Charlie is still out there." He said, "I know," he said, "They're prowling the woods." He said, "We can get a patrol together, but we have to come up with a way to get to where you are." So, George was going to lead the patrol and Sergeant Kluge said, "You don't need to go on the patrol." He said, "We can take care of the patrol." You know, George sort of told Fred, he said, "This is my company, I can go anyplace I want to." He said, "I know you can." He said, "But this is not a patrol for you." And George said, "Okay."

So, we took the patrol out and we weren't, we weren't—we were only 100 meters out before we ran into ... the first remnants of those that was outside, Lieutenant [Enrique] Pujals and ... about three or four of his guys that was laying underneath the bush, you know just cuddled up together in basically a fetal position. And he said, "Well," he said, "This is the only way we knew how to survive." He said, "Just wait here." So, we told them, "You got two choices: you can, you can walk back in or you can wait until we come back." He said, "I'll take my chances with y'all coming back." He said, "I ain't going through that line." And ... they devised a signal between—for direction, you know that every fifteen minutes ... he would fire his weapon, we'd get some kind of bearing on where they were. And ... when we got there, it took us about an hour and a half to—traversing around. And it was totally chaotic, there was, hmm, about fifteen or twenty of them there, half of them were dead and about eight or ten of them wounded. And ... we couldn't—we took seven or eight of them back and you know on the improvised litters that we had. And ... we left ... him and Jack, Jack Smith and a couple of the rest of them there because we just, we just didn't have enough manpower to carry them.

So, we came back in and picked up Lieutenant Pujals and ... on the way back in there was one of the reasons why Lieutenant Pujals didn't want to, didn't want a come back in and somebody opened fire and "purp" got hit. And the last thirty-seven years "purp" been looking around saying, "I would like, just like to know who was that SOB that fired that darn weapon, that, that shot me." You know, so it was just one of those things that—so, I went out on the helicopter that morning ... because George said, "If you don't, later it will look like it's turning purple." Yeah, I shouldn't have been walking on it but I did, no big thing.

FRYE: When did you get hit?

OWENS: I got hit at the, at the—about the initial part of going into Albany.

BOULTON: Was it shrapnel at that point or ...

OWENS: Yeah.

BOULTON: Okay.

OWENS: And ... the stench that morning was like—it was worse than what it was at X-Ray. I mean, you could take your hand and dig down six to eight inches and it was still wet with blood. And the sun was just coming, and it was a smell that we don't want to smell at no given time again. And that's why it's so hard for me to really see someone that's really not—if there's a little blood, fine well and good, if there's a bunch of blood that's spilled all over the place, uugh!, it's like, it's like, "Oh, goodness, please don't let this be something else." So, they medevaced me out that morning, and the company got back in a couple of days after, in fact, they got back—the company got back in the day before Thanksgiving. And ... I just got back that morning and ... [General William] Westmoreland came in that morning, "We want to thank you all guys for so and so and so and so." If I had had me a pistol, I would have shot him, that's the God's honest truth. That he can walk in, into what I call that arena with a clean uniform, and I've been out there in the bush, in the boonies, for seven days and six nights smelling like a skunk, and he wants to stand there and tell [me], "You all guys did a good job, blah, blah, blah, and blah, and we're so proud of you, blah, blah, blah." "Get the hell out of my face! You wasn't there, you was the SOB who was trying to tell Colonel Moore that he should have unassed the scene and leave!" That's just the way I felt about it, you know. When I told General Moore, and he said, "Fred ..." I said, "I'm just—that's just the way I feel about it, you know, don't come trying to reassure me when I lost my best friends, and you're sitting in your safe domain, and when we walk back you figure that you can walk in and say what you have to and jump on your own helicopter and you ride back."

(At this point Mr. Owens requested that the interview be suspended and continued at a later date due to a prior engagement)

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