

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE  
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AN INTERVIEW WITH FRED OWENS

FOR THE  
VETERAN'S ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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MARK BOULTON: This begins part two of an interview with Mr. Fred Owens on May 19, 2004 at the Center for the Study of War and Society at the University of Tennessee. This continues an interview that was conducted earlier ... [with] Adam Frye, but Adam is unfortunately unable to be with us today. So, we are going to continue with Mr. Owens from where we left off in the previous interview. And in the previous interview we just talked about the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley, November of '65 and what your kinds of feelings were when you got back to base camp, and when General Westmoreland arrived. Could you say a little bit more about kind of the mood in the camp and people's attitudes after they got out of that battle, ... coming down from their experience in that battle? How were people reacting to it all? Do you remember?

FRED OWENS: Well, you have to remember that these were guys who had been out, some of us had been at least, almost two weeks into this particular campaign. And to be thrust into battle for roughly six or seven nights with no sleep and—most people really wouldn't understand how you feel on the inside. For someone to come into your base camp, come into your own territory—even though he is the commanding general, and say some of things he did in regard to, “what a great job you did,” and everything else, but he wasn't there. A lot of the guys resented him coming into the area because of what had transpired between some of his staff and General Moore at X-Ray. And we resented that, you know, to the point that when he came in—now we respected him, but if you asked any of the guys there after the fact that he'd left, it was like, “I wish he hadn't come.” Because, there wasn't anything really that the individual could say to soothe our nerves and to give us comfort. The only comfort we were giving was to the other individuals who were actually there with us, those of us who survived both X-Ray and Albany. My take on the matter was getting the hell outta of the base camp, because my feeling was ... I didn't want him around, you know. He didn't show the respect to those other individuals who were there. He was only interested in the numbers that were produced. You know, win the battle ... sure he placed, pinned ... some Purple Hearts on some of the other individuals who were there. But for those of us who were recovering from wounds, we could care less. You know.

BOULTON: So, were you hospitalized as a result of injuries or were you still walking around the base camp quite freely?

OWENS: I was hospitalized for two days. I got back the day before the unit came back, which was a day before Thanksgiving. And I was there about a day before they returned. About fifteen, sixteen of the rest of us that were there. Individuals who'd been ready to ship out, you know, who were wounded also. But we didn't, we didn't even know that the individual was scheduled to be coming. And when he showed up—when we were told the next morning that he was going to be there. It was like, “So what?” You know, he's the commanding general. He can show up, but, no, we didn't have that much respect from the standpoint of the things that had transpired during the battle of both X-Ray and Albany.

BOULTON: Do you remember the names—I'm sure you do—of the people around you in your company, and could you say a little bit about them, the people that you went into battle with? What they went through as well? Did they share a similar experience to you or ... is there anything particular of them that you remember?

OWENS: Most of them did, but you also have to remember that over 80 percent of my company were draftees, except for the NCOs—as myself would have been—roughly almost five years—basically 80 percent of the company was just basically U.S., some R.A.s. At this particular time during the battle, we were sharing a lot of the thoughts because when you put individuals through basic and AIT in the way that I did you get to understand what they mean personally to you. These are individuals that you put through training for seventeen months, and all of a sudden because they don't fall in that six-month domain that they can't be sent home, because you are going into combat. They went to Vietnam. Most of them when they got to Vietnam they were under their six-month countdown as far going home, but, you know, of those individuals in the company we lost twenty-two, of those individuals who was in the company.

A lot of them still share some of the same hostility. You know, we get together once a year sometimes two or three times a year, depending on how many reunions you go to. We sit and talk about things ... how they survived. Why did some of the other individuals—didn't survive, you know, in the company. Captain Forrest is by far ...

BOULTON: Is this Captain George Forrest?

OWENS: Yeah. Everybody referred to him as Captain G, you know. But he is by the far, what they call the glue within the company. What you look at—what a company commander is all about. He came into the company about a month after we got into Vietnam. And he was the only black company commander there in the brigade. So, he had ... big bird, as we say, on his shoulder as being the only black company commander. And he wasn't totally trained in the mobile concept. But he picked up those ideas, you know, quite readily. We had our first casualty on or about the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October, which was a week before we got into the Pleiku campaign. And this individual was killed at an ambush site, and it broke his little heart. We lost an individual that we knew we should not have lost, but those are the circumstances.

We look at him as being a double recipient of the Medal of Honor. When we say double recipient, that's what he did, both on the ground for the company and what he did for the other battalion that we were providing security for. When you see a commander of that stature walking around, especially a company commander with, you know—two silver stars with devices, you know, you ask yourself, why don't he refuse it? Now he could have left the company to receive the Medal of Honor, but his take was those that he brought, he'd much rather see them all the way through. And that's what you call a company commander who was an NCO of company commanders, who relies on his NCOs. If you read most articles in most of the magazines about why he left the headquarters where he had the company commanders, when the ambush occurred at Albany, his take on it was he was more secure in his own NCO surroundings. That was his domain. If he made it back there he knew that he was going to be protected in the same manner that he would protect everyone else. 'Cause he made a decision, a comprehensive decision, to ... go into a saddle formation, which is a horseshoe formation to seal off the end where Charlie would be unable to penetrate into the column.

BOULTON: So, it was his personal decision to actually join up with the company?

OWENS: Yeah, ... he could have stayed up there, but when a company commander knows where the rounds are coming from, and he knows that that's in the general vicinity of where his company is at, his first concern was his company. He could give a crap less about who else was there. His concern was that he had 111 guys who very well, possibly could be in trouble. And he needed to be there in order to secure his company and make sure we had the leadership that ... he could provide. You talk to most anybody there in the company [and] they would talk about Captain G like he is a God. General Moore talks about him like he, you know, was one of his sons also. But it's just that—he was the only individual to provide the leadership on the ground, communication on the ground at Albany that no one else knew how to. You know when you get a company commander who directs medivac choppers in, whose directing squads from other battalions as to where they should go, those are born leaders, those are—you can be taught leadership, but there is a difference between taught and being a born leader and seeing something that needs to be done, and taking immediate actions, which is what he did. Guys can tell you stories about how here are bullets dancing around this guys feet ...

BOULTON: He is a man of some stature as well.

OWENS: Yeah. And he's directing helicopters in and medivacs in and not even paying attention to what is going on. When you look up the two silver stars, you look from the standpoint—in the same standpoint of the discrimination that could have been placed against blacks and other minorities in other wars. But he had an option. And his option was, "I didn't want that. Give me my men, and I am satisfied with whatever I got. But I will not take whatever it is you are giving me."

BOULTON: You mentioned discrimination. What was the ethnic [and] racial mix of your company? And was there any tension that you perceived? Anything you experienced personally?

OWENS: In our company? No.... From the time that I joined back in the March of '63, up to the time that we went to Vietnam, it was about 30 percent black, about 65 percent white, and then you had the other mix of minorities. We didn't encounter those type of prejudices that were reminiscent to other wars. It's like I had said before, I had the opportunity in '64 to go to OCS, but I refused to go to OCS because of the premise, you know. They wanted to send me as a part of the minority quota. And I don't go to anyone's school as a part of minority quota. I feel I am just as qualified as the other individuals concerned. So, I turned that down. And I would have been still a part of the Air Assault in that deployment that went to Vietnam, you know, when we left. Even though I would not have had all of the skills all the other individuals had. Right now, there are very few minorities that we see every year up in D.C. at our annual gathering. We generally have—maybe 3 percent of the gathering is black. We don't know where the remaining part of them are. We have attempted to contact those in our—my company, which we keep a pretty up-to-date list. It's like any other Vietnam vet, if they don't want to be found ... they are not going to come out of the woodwork. They will only come out when they decide too.

But your performance in Vietnam was based on just that. It didn't have anything to do with the color of your skin. We have noticed, I have noticed that after '67 or '68, you really had some crisis between the blacks and whites in Vietnam. And if you look at the figures, most of your

black Vietnam veterans would volunteer to remain in combat units, you know, versus some of the white guys. And then you had a white lieutenant fresh out of OCS going to walk into a company trying to tell any individual what to do. And it's like ... being the master and the field worker. That type of concept again. You may be white, and you may have those lieutenant bars on, but I've been in the field and I've been working. Until you show me that you can do the job, and that you can attain the master status. You fall in line just like everyone else. Most of your officers, they didn't understand that concept. But if you look at it, it was ... the reversal concept of what slavery was all about. And those guys would rather frag a lieutenant, or frag a captain, you know ... to ensure that either they got home or someone else in the company got home. And you had a lot of the officers who that were fragged in '68, '69, and '70 because they didn't want to listen. They felt as though they were officers and that you had to respect them. Sure, you respected them, but you had to earn your keep. And if you didn't earn your keep, and you tried to push, you pushed in the wrong direction.

BOULTON: But early on, around '65 then ... was a racial harmony time?

OWENS: Yeah, it was like—our concept was that we knew what the consequences were. We knew how the other individual in front of us, or beside us, was going to react. We knew, basically, if that person got in trouble, you bleed one color and that is red. The color of your skin didn't have anything to do with why I went out and picked you up on the battlefield. I picked you up on the battlefield because you were my brother. It didn't have anything to do with the color of your skin. It didn't have anything to do with how smart you were or anything else. Because if that had been the case ... when Captain G asked us to go out on the patrol that night at Albany we could have looked at Captain G that night and said, "How many black guys are in your squad?" "Well, I don't know." "Well, if you don't know, why should I go sacrifice my life to go out there and pick up the rest of them?" Our point in question was, you have a patrol out there we don't know who they are. We know an approximate number, where are they. Where are they at? We didn't have to go. It wasn't something that was demanded of us to go. We put our lives at risk because they were our brothers and they were on the same battleground that we were on that same afternoon. There was no escape. We knew they were out there. We knew we had to pick them up. We knew we had to go. So, there was no second-guessing.

BOULTON: Going back, just to get some type of indication of camp life, ... you mentioned that you got back a couple days before Thanksgiving. Do you remember that Thanksgiving meal? Kind of, what it was like?

OWENS: No.

BOULTON: No? Oh.

OWENS: Because it was raining. It was raining like hell. I can tell you that I ate something. I couldn't tell what it was. We were more at home with other things that we had gotten from other individuals that we had written to.

BOULTON: Did you receive a lot of things from home? Care packages, that type of thing?

OWENS: A lot of them from individuals we wrote to. The City of Chicago adopted our company—in fact we were the first company to get what we called an icemaker. Everybody would run down, “Let me get some ice cubes.” “No you can’t get no ice cubes.” They talk about the Chicago connection, because we had about four guys there from Chicago. And Mayor [Richard J.] Daley, bless his little soul—they can talk about him and all the other things he didn’t do, but at least we wrote him, and the guys asked him for an icemaker. And he sent us a huge icemaker, only one of its kinds that we got. He sent it over by freight.

BOULTON: That’s got to be a nice thing to have.

OWENS: Oh yeah, it was nice. We saw very little of it, because we were in the field, but we got a lot of care packages from a lot of the schools over there in the states, in the field. Those are a lot of the things that kept us going when we were out on patrol, because when you are out on patrol there are—you got C-rations and things of that nature. But you threw out the heavy ones, and you kept the light ones. You kept the spaghetti and meatballs, and ham and lima beans, and things like that. You toss out ... the jam and that stuff, because if it gets hot and you open it up, it goes ‘whoosh’ up in the air. So, we didn’t worry about that, but ...

BOULTON: How often did you go on patrol?

OWENS: Well I will put it like this, ... we were in—and we got there in August of ’65 and went on patrol that night with the 101<sup>st</sup>. We were, basically, on patrol roughly 95 percent of the time that I was there. I remember being on, what we call the green line, twice between August and October.

BOULTON: What was the green line?

OWENS: The green line was the outer perimeter of the base camp.

BOULTON: Okay.

OWENS: One of those times, we pulled what we call ... a patrol up on Highway 19, up on the pass was one of those times, you know, for the truck convoys that were coming through. But beyond those two times—I can remember we pulled ... actual guard ... the other—the number of times I was actually in base camp was about three times. Don’t even know what downtown An Khe even looked like.

BOULTON: Really?

OWENS: Because I never got the opportunity to go. The morning we came back in from patrol behind the Chu Pong before the First and the Seventh went in, we had been out for nine days. And we weren’t even in base camp three hours before we were back on helicopters heading back out again. So, you know ...

BOULTON: That's surprising to hear, because a lot of testimonies that I've heard and books that I read about, these memoirs that kind of thing, they often say there was a lot of down time, kind of, hours of boredom in between. But it sounds like you were busy all the time.

OWENS: We were busy mainly—I think we were busy mainly because of the new concept. No one had—the other thing that you have to remember about the camp, we had an entire II Corps area, which was all the way from sea to jungle, well, actually from Qui Nhon all the way back over to Laos and the adjoining countries over there. So, when you take in the area that we covered, ... it was nothing for a company to be out for nine days, come back in for one day. And you think you are going to be out for one day and, “Hey listen, you got to stay out for another three days, you know, because the other company has....” I can't even remember ... the number of times that I slept ... on a cot.

We came in the first night, first couple nights we put up a cot in the tent. Can I remember how many times I slept in that cot? No, because I can't even remember one time that I slept in the cot. I can't even remember a time that I took a shower in base camp. The only time that I can imagine that I physically took a shower was at the hospital when I was wounded the first time and the hospital when I was wounded the second time, when I went on R&R about two months before I was out of country. But to remember physically taking a shower in Vietnam, no I can't remember. I can't remember.

BOULTON: It sounds like you had a baptism of fire, obviously going into the Ia Drang was one of your first encounters. What were the patrols like after that generally?

OWENS: After that, I can't really describe, because we came out from the Ia Drang. We was down for three weeks, approximately three weeks, but we were pulling patrols up on Highway 19. We went from the Ia Drang into the Bon Song campaign. And we had Bon Song One and Bon Song Two?. We came in, and they came back in base camp the day before Thanksgiving. And only about—my memory serves me about the ... about the 20<sup>th</sup> of December, somewhere between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of December, we headed for Bon Song. We stayed in Bon Song almost two months. No one likes to talk about Bon Song. Bon Song, in some ways, were worse than the Ia Drang because of the number of replacements that we received and the number of individuals that we lost. I mean, there was no training time. I mean, you came in and two days later—we gave them patrol techniques up on Highway 19, and a couple weeks later you are in a firefight for your life. You tell 'em to move, and—the three guys I lost in my squad in Bon Song on the first encounter, you tell them to move, they didn't move. We picked them back up there on the ground; you know, a couple hours later in the same spot—I don't even know the name. That's ...

BOULTON: Was that typical, that kind of rotation?

OWENS: At the outset, yeah. Because when you lose—and you have to remember in November and December, First Cavalry lost 50 percent of the individuals in the division. We went into the Ia Drang we had 111 individuals in our company, normal size 160. When we came out of the Ia Drang we had forty-one people. The rest of them KIA's or wounded. We never got past 125 in the company. Most of the other companies never got past 125 or 130. So, in

actuality, you were always operating three platoons instead of four. I can remember in the Ia Drang that we got overrun twice in one day. We didn't lose anyone, but we got our weapons platoon, what we called the heavy machine guns, they got overran one afternoon. Turned around that night about six o'clock they got overrun again. You know, the Bon Song campaign was—you don't want to say a travesty, but it was worse than the Ia Drang, because of the extended period of time that you were out there.

BOULTON: Could you say a little bit more about that, because I'm sure people reading all this might not be certainly as familiar with it as the Ia Drang, in terms of, when it went on, that kind of thing, what the patrol was doing?

OWENS: You mean, in terms of the Bon Song campaign? The Bon Song campaign ... was, sort of, in some ways, the same way that the Ia Drang took hold. It was a NVA stronghold. The Marines were in area initially, and they got their butts kicked out, got chopped up pretty bad. And they said "No big thing, we got—the big Cav. can come in." "Uh, okay." So, we went in head strong, two brigades. Our first assault in the Bon Song we lost more helicopters in the initial assault in Bon Song then we did the entire Ia Drang campaign. We lost eighteen helicopters in one day. That's from the rocket fire and that stuff. And that's why in some ways, we say the Bon Song campaign was much worse. We lost more guys from helicopters colliding with one another, helicopters crashing—not to say we didn't lose the numbers on the ground, which we did.

There in the Bon Song campaign, the territory and the ... terrain was twice as worse as what it was in the Ia Drang. You had hills, they would drop you off in the wrong place, you had to climb up this mountain and back down the other side. We had artillery that was dropped in the wrong location. You know, these were things that when you are going to an area for the first time, you think you know what the coordinates are and after you're dropped and move out. You find out that you were dropped in a different location. Artillery was left there, you know, with the artillery crew. They couldn't do anything. But we were dropped into two or three different locations in the valley, what they called "the horseshoe." And in this horseshoe, this is where Charlie knew we had to come through. They were laying in wait, and they knew that was the only avenue that you had. So, [we] got one step smarter than Charlie, we climbed up the backside of the mountain, and we ambushed from the backside. But those who came from the front side, you know, Charlie Company, First and Fifth, they lost quite a few individuals.

I lost some good friends there in the Bon Song campaign. I got wounded the second time on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February, and I found out—what was it, thirty-three years later, two of my best friends got killed two days after that, but I never knew it. And I happened to see this individual's wife, you know there in D.C. Something said something to me to say something to her, and my conscious said, "no." I am glad my conscious said no, because my first question out of my mouth would have been, "Where was James?" And he got killed in an ambush, three days after I got wounded the second time.

BOULTON: How did you get wounded?



OWENS: In an ambush, at ambush site. The second time I got shot in that little ole finger right there. Between the trigger guard, not really supposed to have it has the doctors say, but eleven years ago—no ten years ago at the dedication at the women's memorial, I ran into the nurse, you know, that nursed this little finger back to health. It was right there underneath the CNN camera, and we were just talking and she asked me some questions. And I said, "Yes I was at Qui Nhon," and "Yes I was so-and-so." And she asked me what kind of wound, and I told her. And she said, "Thank you," and she hugged me and we shook hands. She said, "Your finger seems kind of familiar." And I said, "Yeah," and I said, "I spent three and half months out because of that finger." And she began to relate to me what was did, how it was done. And we just stood there and cried. She said, "People wouldn't believe what I told them about your finger, and how we patched it back together." And we stood there and cried a little bit more. It was sobering to see the individual, because you never expect to see the nurses in that surrounding. But that was one day that you were glad to see that individual again, because they understood what it was that you went through.

Like I said, the Bon Song campaign, it was horrendous. Most of us don't like to talk about it. There was an article in the *Vietnam Magazine* about two years ago written by one individual in my company who was a replacement. And I had related those events to ... my counselor about three months earlier in regards to the Bon Song campaign and what had transpired. And I went to Salem for therapy, and I came back, and I walked into the Vet Center, and Ron Coffin in there and he looked at me, and he said, "I got something here you need to read." Flipped the magazine at me, and I said "I'll read it when I get home." He said, "No, you need to read it now." And he opened the page, and there it was in black and white, and blue and white. And he looked at me and he said, "Had you not told me that story, two or three months ago when you was in Salem and if you hadn't related that story to me three or four months down the road, I probably wouldn't believe it." He said, "You and I know we didn't know anything about this being published." And I know the guy stays in North Carolina, I've been trying to get a hold of him the last couple of years. Almost to the ... dotting the I's and the T's in parts of the story was almost word for word. You could take out words, and add words. It was almost exactly—it was like I'm living this entire story back over again.

BOULTON: It, basically, was describing what you had been through?

OWENS: Basically what I had been through. The same story, the same bombing raid, the same river that the engineers had to dynamite, because there were so many NVA bodies in it. When they talk about a river that runs red, and you had to use dynamite to unstop it because of the bodies that had gathered—that had washed down, the NVA bodies—and the engineer battalion had to blow the bodies, and it created a duct and the water couldn't go anyplace. You are right, that was just how bad it was. I didn't describe it in the fashion that it was in the book. I just made mention of the fact there was an over abundance of bodies in the river, and the engineer battalion had to blow the bodies out in order for the water to ... But he went into the other details of how it was blown up.

And I read the story, and I said only those of us that were there can understand it. And when I went to see the movie *Black Hawk Down* that was the first time that I actually ducked in the movies, because when they fired the fifty-sevens, it made me realize that this is where I lost

those three guys. Because we talk about that NVA are not—and everyone else is not supposed to use fifty caliber rounds against human beings. But when they fire those fifty-sevens at us, which was buried in the wood lines, was where I lost those three guys when I told them to move. That was an eye opener when *Black Hawk Down* came around, because when the jeep rolled around the corner and fired point blank through the wall. Pop! My eyes popped ... I didn't stand up in the movie, but it made me realize that this is what happened. That was part of what I had put back in my mind that I didn't want to know that happened in that particular campaign. And in this article, he talked about the fifty-sevens, of how they were embedded in the wood lines and I'm saying, you know, how much more detail do you need? Bon Song One and Bon Song Two was a real bloody [fight] that lasted right at two months.

BOULTON: And were you there the full two months?

OWENS: Pardon me.

BOULTON: How long were you there? The full two months?

OWENS: I was there up until the 15<sup>th</sup> of February; they came out of there in March of '66.

BOULTON: Were you there all the time or were you transferred out?

OWENS: That's where we were embedded. We were embedded there, you patrolled there. There was no such thing as base camp. You were constantly on patrol 24-7. There was very little down time at the time. If you slept at all it was within the comfort of the squad, and the comfort of the platoon. I can't even remember sleeping, but I know I probably did at some point in time. When you are on patrol all the time, you don't remember when you slept. You don't remember when you ate. Those of us that served in Vietnam our alertness for one day, was equal to almost a month of what a World War II veteran, or a Korean veteran actually experienced. They had—what you want to say, they had breaks in between; walk someplace, and you may or may not worry about if you are going to get attacked. But there your guard was never down. Your guard was up 24-7. So, when we speak about our internal clock—and it's like me going to bed at eleven-thirty at night and awake one o'clock. I might go back to sleep and sleep another fifteen minutes, but I'm awake for the rest of the day. Because at three o'clock is when Charlie is most apt to attack you. And I still get up and I still check my windows, I check my doors upstairs and downstairs, peek out the curtain. It's an internal clock. Even though I know I am not there, but in actuality I am still there, I'm still there in that time warp. And no matter what happens the counselor will tell you that the time warp will remain with you. It goes away and it comes, but that time warp, it never changes. It changed your entire system set up.... I don't know how, and I don't know why, but it changes your entire system set up. World War II and Korean War veterans, their time set-up wasn't changed that much, because they weren't exposed to the day-in and day-out rigors that we faced in Vietnam. We knew at three, three-thirty, four o'clock in the morning Charlie was wide-eyed and bushy tailed. And we had to be wide-eyed and bushy tailed if we were going to survive. And, I think, that's—for those of us, the veterans that are—the veterans that made it back that have psychological problems, it's just something that we have to deal with on a daily basis.

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BOULTON: Now you had mentioned that you did go on R&R, albeit very briefly. Where did you go for that, do you remember, and when was that?

OWENS: I went to the Philippines. If I can remember, I think that was in June or July of '66, right after I came back, out of the hospital.

BOULTON: So, you were there from February 'til June in the hospital?

OWENS: Yeah, mm hmm. It took almost three months for them just to try and control the gangrene, you know in this finger here. They had to—had gangrene set in.

BOULTON: Were you airlifted out once you had that injury, or were you still in the field for a little while after sustaining it?

OWENS: No, they medivaced me out that same, same day. But because of the—what do they call, a man-made cartridge—and it had—I don't know exactly what it had—they described what it was, what it had. It had some type of infection on it. And I was in the hospital for about two days before they realized how bad the finger actually was, because they had operated on it and it just swelled right back up. And they wanted to know why. And they gave me the IVs and whatever other shots it was. It just swelled up just that much more, and they put the stitches in it to close it up one day, and the next morning it was just the same size again. So, they washed it out, cleaned it out and one of the doctors there from Wisconsin who was there, he said, "Tell you what. We're going to put a stitch a day." And they ran a free flowing bottle of IV and eleven stitches in this finger, and he put notch in them. A stitch in every day. If the gangrene sets in at any particular point in time before we close it up, pop, we have to cut it off.

You know, so this was my liberator. It still has one pellet in there that was embedded in the bones, and it is still in there. But got out of the hospital, and at that time the Philippines had opened up. And we were one of the first groups to go to the Philippines. We spent ten days there. Nice ten days. Drank some of that San Miguel brewery stuff. We had ... got a chance to meet some pretty good people. The guy that owned the San Miguel brewery ... we stayed there at his mansion, you know, the four of us did. They told us when we got there that we weren't to go to certain [areas] that was in the Philippines. But, you know, we being G.I.s we are going to go where they asked us not to go. Those are the places we wanted to go, but they ... (laughter) but they didn't want us to go there. They referred to it as "the Red Zone." "Oooh, Red Zone, whooo, that's pretty good, that's where everything takes place." And we went there.

I got back right around the later part of June of '66. I hung around the company there for about a month after I got back. And First Sergeant Johnson said, "They got the statements from the doctors that I could not go back out into the field." And he said, "You are going to be here at least another five weeks." And three days before I was scheduled to rotate out, the battalion went back out into the Ia Drang. And just the mere mention of that name at that time, sitting there listening to the radio at night, listening to the gun fire ... totally sent chills up and down

your back, because you know what they are up against. You know that you can't see no more than about three to five feet in front of you, because the elephant grass and everything else.

And, I think, the night before I got ready to leave, the company got hit and the new first sergeant was in and he asked me if I wanted to take up, take three or four of the new guys on the helicopter. And I looked at him, and the guy who was sitting in the company tent, and when you can look in their eyes, and they can hear on the radio what's going on, you know, their eyes are saying "Please don't take me, because we can hear the shooting and we can here the people saying we need a medic." And I said, "First Sergeant, I got less than twenty-four hours, if you think that I am going to chance myself." I said, "Nuh uh, no way am I going to chance that." But they went back in. They got cut up pretty bad on the second trip back in there.

BOULTON: Had you got close to many of the people in your company during your time there?

OWENS: The first group, I got too close. And ... you may not mean to, but when you spend sixteen months with guys that you put through basic and AIT, and you break bread with them, you go out partying with them, you see them get married before they go to Vietnam. you tell them what to expect, although you didn't know that Vietnam was in the mix at that time—these are some of the things that you use for survival. And a lot of the things I taught some of the guys I found out personally. What happened to us when we went into Berlin and things like that, and what happened down at Santa Domingo. So you try to instill in them, you know, "These are some of the things that you need to understand if you are ever in combat." And you get real close to these guys, and when President Johnson said that we were going to Vietnam, it was like, "Okay guys listen, we are going to Vietnam. Make sure all of you come back alive." As I have talked to my other counselors over the years, they said, "You can't guarantee that." I said, "I thought I could." Being a squad leader, that was my job to let them know that they were safe. It was my job to let them know that they were coming home. At that time, little did I know that you can't guarantee that type of—that guarantee don't exist in combat, because there are so many circumstances that can go wrong....

BOULTON: If you could go back now, say '66 or '67, what are some of the things that you would tell someone going in there to keep them alive?

OWENS: If I had to go back to that particular point, me being in that same situation, I don't think I would have told them anything different, because of our closeness. If I had to do that today ... with what's going on in Iraq it would be, first of all, you have to take care of yourself. You have to take care of those around you. You cannot guarantee that person at the end of the line that he's going to walk back in this door. You can say to him that in so many ways, "If we go into combat whether you are wounded or whether you are killed. I'll ensure that we walk back out together with your body or without," basically the same thing that that General Moore told us going into the Ia Drang. "We will go in and we'll all return as one." That's the only guarantee that I could give anyone today. We can't guarantee them that their life will be spared, because today's conflict is so similar to what went on in Vietnam. The only thing is that they have urban city fighting. We have village fighting. Which in some ways is the same thing. You are fighting individuals that will come out of tunnels, they came out of tunnels in Vietnam. You

have concrete buildings over there, you had huts in Vietnam. You know, the similarities are the same, the fighting are the same. The only thing is the structures are more of a fortress.

BOULTON: Recently of course, we heard about the Iraqi prisoners [in the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal]. Were you involved with the capture of any Vietnamese prisoners, or were around that at all during your time there?

OWENS: Oh, we captured some.

BOULTON: Do you recall how they were treated? And what kind of protocol was there?

OWENS: We didn't do ... things in the nature that is going on in Iraq. When we captured a POW on the battlefield going toward an objective, we attempted to extract information that was pertinent to what's going on, on the ground at that particular time. It's like what happened to Second and the Seventh at X-ray, had they extracted the information and utilized it versus taking the POWs to headquarters and bringing the commanders forward to try extract information from the POWs—instead of getting what you can and keep moving, when you stop a column in the middle of a march.... And we were in the back. We were constantly closing up, and we never saw individuals sitting, as some of them said, they were sitting. And, I think, at that particular point when the NVAs saw the column close in the fashion that it did, and the other part of the column wasn't moving, that was their signal to launch their attack there at Albany. We never know why the column stopped, because we didn't have access to that information.

In the last few years, we have learned that guys said, "Well we were tired." "We were out the same amount of time as you were. In fact we were out a week to ten days longer than you all were. We were dead tired too. But we still took enough time to sacrifice ourselves to go out on patrol to get some of your guys who were cut off." But when you look at what is being extracted from the POWs on the battlefield, we never ran into that type of problem. We only had about four or five individuals that we actually physically captured on that ground that we turned over you know, for interrogation.

I had the—you want to say the 'honor' of guarding Lieutenant [William] Calley part of the times he was there at Fort Benning. He related to us some stories that had occurred at My Lai that when they look at how it was did, you were following orders from higher up. And when you look at what is happening in Iraq, you can't sit and say that it started at a lower level and worked itself up. I was looking ABC News last night. They talked about the same thing. This guy stationed in Germany and he was a part of MI detachment, and the army was trying to muffle what it was he had to say about MI detachment, and where the information came down. So, that being said, the little peons on the ground can't do anything unless they get confirmation from someone above them. Whether it's a E-7, E-8, Lieutenant, Colonel, Brigadier General, Secretary of Defense, no. Somebody, in my opinion, you know, opened up a can of worms and figured that they could extract and get more information by using illegal tactics that didn't comply with the Geneva Convention.

And I still say today, that I still don't believe that whether these individuals in the pictures, you know showing themselves off, or when you look at them, most of them are posed pictures.

Yeah, maybe they should be punished, but I don't think they should be punished in the fashion of being court-martialed, because there is always someone above them who knows why it was did. And, like they always say, 'the General always get polished.' They are going to slap you on the wrist. "We are not going to promote you. We are going to let you retire," but that is not available to us enlisted folks. We suffer the consequences if you are a middle grade officer. It's the same as the, what—the major that was—that they wanted to court martial for his treatment of POWs, even though what he did was correct. "Well, we will let you stay around for twenty years, but we don't want you to do this." But he was protecting his men. But that's not available to lower grade NCOs and lower grade enlisted folks. I have my, I have my own ideas about what happened, you know in the penal system there.

It's that we never—that type of treatment never occurred on the ground there in Vietnam in—it's like, [John] Kerry has accused other individuals at other particular times about other atrocities, and that he may have participated. Opening up a can of worms that—you don't really want to go there, because some of these guys will say we are going to cut off your head and the foot will follow. And there are things that we know that happened that, regardless of the circumstances, we won't talk about it, because it jeopardizes me personally. It jeopardizes the operation that we were on personally. It jeopardizes my well-being, as well as those who operated with me.

BOULTON: It is entirely understandable.

OWENS: Yep.

BOULTON: I certainly want to return back to guarding Lieutenant Calley. Could you say perhaps a little bit about what it was like in the hospital, I mean you spent a lot of time there? What was the care like? What were the surroundings like?

OWENS: Oh, the care was tremendous. You get opportunity to really help in the daily activities of the hospital itself. Once I obtained some stability there, you know with my finger, those individuals that were being—the wounded that came in from Bon Song. I was able to help some of the nurses. In fact, I even learned how to give out shots. "Okay, this pan here is the morphine, when they come in, anyone that we send to you gets one shot." "Okay." So, I learned how to be, I learned how to be pretty good at giving shots. Daily routine included getting up in the morning—some of the same things that happen in a normal hospital.

BOULTON: Where was the hospital that you were at, I forgot?

OWENS: Qui Nhon. They didn't medivac me out to Japan or any one of those other places, I imagine because I had so much time left, and I think they were concerned if the finger was actually going to heal or whether they were going to have to amputate it. And so, that's my take on why they didn't medivac me out, because there were other individuals there who has wounds were less serious than mine. They medivaced him back to the States, back to Japan, back to Hawaii. I'm still left there in the hospital. Daily routine, doing my little ole thing, writing letters you for some of the other guys who couldn't write letters. Learned how to write left-handed while I was there in the hospital.

But the daily hospital routine of getting up in the morning, having your breakfast, ... helping the nurses in anyway you can. You know, you get a chance to learn a lot about the nurses and the doctors, the care that they gave. The guys over there, you can't even put a price on it. I think that is why a lot of the guys care so much about the nurses and doctors over there. Because you know they were there for them when they needed them. It didn't make any difference how bad you were hurt, how little you were hurt. You received the same type of care. They were there with you through thick and thin. I've seen nurses who knew guys were not going to survive through the night. I have seen them sit there and talk to them. I've seen them write letters to individuals families after they had been—three, four, or five weeks after that individual passed, and they would write letters to them, to the families. And then you had the “Doughnut Dollies,” and the Red Cross girls that came into the hospital, and they'd bring things in, these care packages. You would enjoy them the best way you can. I have nothing but praise for those nurses and doctors who served in Vietnam. Half of us, you could probably put—60 percent of us who got wounded on the battlefield would not have survived had it not been for the helicopters and the nursing.

BOULTON: You mentioned you have had trouble sleeping since—did that happen immediately ... or was that more when you came home and started to readjust?

BOULTON: That more or less started after I got out of the service. And as you talk to a lot of guys, that's when most of this starts. And I think it was when—as long as you are in the military you are around individuals that you are a part of, that you were—that you can relate to, that was in those units. But you also had another rigid schedule that you had to abide by. You was up in the morning, you had PT, you went to the field. That type of training. So, you were doing something every day. So, consequently you could sleep. And, I think, in my case I probably never paid that much attention to it until after I got out of the military. I didn't pay that much attention to it, until really, I would say, early part of the '80s that it started to become a problem. I used to drive long haul, and I used to wonder why it was that I could drive sixteen, eighteen, twenty hours and it didn't bother me. And as I got into therapy in the early parts of the '90s, they began to tell me why it was that I couldn't sleep. “Well, tell me something else.” “Well, what does it even look like.” “Well, when do you wake up?” “I am generally up at three or three-fifteen.” “Do you go back to sleep.” “Very rarely.” You know, so it is just a routine, because you don't have any other activities that become a major part of your daily life.

Even right now, even when I was working for the post office, I would still be awake at three-thirty, four o'clock in the morning. Didn't have to be at work till six-thirty or seven, but I was awake. And I could go for hours on end, and it didn't bother me. I could work 24-7 and it didn't bother me. I could work, you know, three or four days continuously, sleep one hour and it was like a slept for a whole month. And I would be right back out there the same thing day-in and day-out. Now it's like it doesn't bother me whether I get one hour of sleep, or three hours of sleep. I don't sleep during the daytime, and I very rarely go to bed before eleven-thirty or twelve, you know. Most of your other Vietnam veterans don't go to bed before then. I just—we don't.

BOULTON: Did you get on a plane coming home?

OWENS: Yeah.

BOULTON: How do you think that you changed personally from when you got in until you left? Not necessarily how it affected your life afterwards, but just you personally when you got on that plane? Do you think you were a different person and how?

OWENS: Coming home?

BOULTON: Yeah.

OWENS: I wouldn't have the foggiest idea. The only thing I do know is when we got to California and we processed through, the first thing they told us was that if you were going outside to catch a plane, "We suggest that you do not wear your uniform." Well we just—because they are demonstrating outside the gate. "Well, so what, they are demonstrating outside the gate?" "Well, you won't like the type of demonstration that is going on out there." "Well, we are going to keep our uniform on anyway."

BOULTON: That was as early as '66 that that was going on?

OWENS: That was in '66. Yeah, so when we walked outside of the gate, we found out why. You got spat on, you got thrown stones, and all that good little stuff. We finally made it to the airport. I don't know if I related this to any other part of the interview but ... there was also an airline strike going on at the same time. We couldn't get a flight out. We sat there for almost two days. And I walked up to the counter, and I asked the girl when we could get a flight. And she said, "You are on stand-by." "Yeah, we are on stand-by." "Nothing, the only person, people that are actually flying is people who are first class, and employees and dignitaries because we've got a backlog." "What do you mean by employees?" "Eastern Airline employees blah, blah, blah." "Well I used to work for them." And she said, "Where about?" And she said—she checked her little bitty computer and checked the other little stuff. "We can't find you anyplace. What's the name of the airport?" And I told her. She said let me check it. So, one of the other airport managers there, he said, "I know that airport in Tampa, let me check and see." And he found out that I worked for almost nine months before I went into the service. He said, "Where are you coming from?" I said, "Coming from Vietnam." He said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I am going to Tampa." "Well, we think we can get you on." I said, "I got four of my other buddies that need to go too." "Well, we can't...." "Well, if they can't fly, I ain't going to fly." It's that if you take care of me, I will take care of you.

So, Major Brown and myself and the other three of us, they got us a flight out and went into Dallas. My flight went from Dallas into Miami, and they were going to Atlanta. And that was the only time that I could remember things being different. 'Cause the flight was scheduled to go into Miami and they stopped in Tampa to let me off. And people wanted to know why they were stopping in Tampa. And he said, "We have a former employee that coming back from Vietnam and we are going to make a special stop blah, blah, blah." And so, I got off, walked through the terminal and everybody was looking to see who I was, and they wanted to know. No, I am coming back from Vietnam. "Well, where is the plane going?" "The plane is going to Miami." "Well, is it going to pick up anybody?" "No, they just dropped me off." (Laughter) That's the



only time that I could even remotely remember [anyone] thanking me for what happened in Vietnam.

BOULTON: Well, how did the protests make you feel?

OWENS: How did the what?

BOULTON: How did the protests make you feel when you heard about them?

OWENS: It—the protesters were—and I think at what you really look at with protesters with the ending of the movie *We Were Soldiers* when the guys are pushing one of the other buddies through the airport terminal there at the end of the movie. Here you have a war going on that you may not agree with. And at that time those of us who was in the military you know, we just did what was naturally right, which was right in our own self. We didn't question. You know, they said we had to do it, you know, we did it. But you also had to remember that during that time there was the Civil Rights Movement going on, and that was nothing but chaos and turmoil. And we are talking about early parts of the war in '66 and '67. I mean there were demonstrations every day. If it wasn't against the war it had something to do with the rights of the other minority groups that was going on. So, they took it out on the soldiers returning from Vietnam. They felt as though we should not be there. My president said I had to go, so we went. When you look at it in that fashion, you can look at the Iraqi war in the same sense. I don't think you will ever have that magnitude of demonstrations on the street.

BOULTON: Certainly not against the soldier, it seems, now. It looks like Vietnam sort of ...

OWENS: They, I don't think they would physically abuse the soldiers like they did those of us coming back from Vietnam, because of a lot of circumstances. Soldiers coming back from Vietnam, we were totally abused or totally disrespected. There was no sanctuary that we could hide behind. And I think because of that, of the demonstrations, and the way we were treated, that's why we hid as long as we did. That is why we didn't speak our minds, because of all of those things that occurred in the demonstrations. I have always talked about the Vietnam War. But I don't think I talked about it the first fifteen years like I have the last twenty-five years. You know, from about '76, '77 up to now. '78 was probably a turning point for me because of some things that happened to me at Fort Benning. I ran into some of my other friends there and we got into a scuffle about some things that happened in Vietnam, mainly had to do with some battles and things like that. And I just told them, "I don't want to have anything else to do with it. My life is so and so." And they said, "Well, one of these days you are going to have to wake up and face it." "I don't have to face it, not me." And after that I started to hemorrhage at the scene of not sleeping very well, having flashbacks, waking up in a cold sweat, fighting myself in bed, when there is no one else in bed, standing up in the middle of the bed imitating firing. And I'm saying, "What in the hell am I doing." And you are looking around to see if there is anyone else in the room. And you sort of quietly sit down and ask yourself what is happening to you. And I think between '78 and '91, '90 it really took its toll on me. It really took its toll on me. I was in and out of jobs, even though I went back to school and got my degree ... it still took its toll on me. And until I got into therapy in '91, you know, it's as though night and day between the two. You just have to want to do it. If you don't want to do it you will either end up on

drugs, end up in the bottle, end up on the street, you know, wherever. You know, basically most of your vets end up in at—either in a homeless shelter or something like that.

BOULTON: What was your personal experience then of homecoming, in terms of the reaction you got from friends, family members, your community when you got back in Tampa? What were their opinions of the war? Did they treat you differently? Anything like that?

OWENS: Nuh uh. Homecoming? Nah, there wasn't no homecoming. I walked in my apartment when I got home from Vietnam. And it was like "We are glad you are home. Where are we going? When are we going?" And that was about it.

BOULTON: People just didn't want to talk about it?

OWENS: That—well you have to understand in the black community at that time, there was no such thing as there was a rush to talk about anything. It was like, "At least he made it home." Some of the rest of them came back in a box. My mother found out I was wounded ... on TV on a Sunday morning, she was getting ready to go to church, that's how she found out. That's how she found out. My first wife was never informed that I was wounded. In fact, she was never informed that I was wounded the second time either. You know, so ... consequently I never told her I was wounded the second time. And when I told my mother I was wounded the second time, she went bonkers. "Well, nobody told me either." "Well, I am sorry mom, but that was it." But there was never any discussion at no time about the effects of the war.

Even when I got to Germany the company that I was assigned to, they looked at me as though I was one of those haunted heroes because I was one the first individuals in the company that came back from the Vietnam War. Consequently being an E-6 in the company, everybody said, "Go see Sergeant Owens, he can tell you." "I can't tell you anything." "Sergeant so and so, in going to Vietnam—go see Sergeant Owens, he can tell you what's going on over there." "I can't tell you what's going on over there." I said, "I can only tell you what happened to me." So ... in the military it was totally different. It was though you were the great liberator coming into the company and you are going to tell these individuals what they are going to be up against. And ... you are going to sort of guide them in their daily steps as to how they can survive in Vietnam. You can't tell anyone how to survive in Vietnam. Even though I told the individuals prior to that that I could get them back. That question never came up again, never came up again. I don't know why. The only time it ever came up again was in therapy when they asked me what did I tell my squad members. "I told them I was going to bring them back." "You can't guarantee them that." "Well, I thought I could." "Nobody told me before that I couldn't." "Well, you can't do that." "Well, you tell me and explain to me why." And they said, "The odds are too great." And I said, "When you love someone, when they would do the same thing for you and sacrifice their life for you," I said, "You will guarantee them that." I said, "That was a covenant that we had between us." I said, "I think that is one of the reasons that many of us survived what happened at X-ray and what happened at Albany. They are my company." I still say today because that company was put together by NCOs that put them through basic and AIT, sure we lost twenty-three out the company, but I think we only lost those twenty-three and we lost seventeen in an ambush. I said, "Had it not been because we showed them how the extract themselves out of an ambush that entire company, that entire platoon of thirty-three could have

been killed but that's a learning factor in an ambush. When you don't hit, you don't get wounded. You wait until it's quiet. You back off as far as you can go. You crawl. You find a high point, and if you don't see anything. You wait there at the point until you are picked up by the some in the platoon you are in. If no one picks you up in the platoon, you do your escape and evading to a particularly point where you can make contact with your unit again."

That's what happened to our third platoon. They lost all of their NCOs except for one. But everyone that survived, everyone that survived that ambush, I put them through basic and AIT. Some of the others that got killed, every one of them that survive got their survival training through me. A part of me was there and a part of me was not there, you know, in that respect. But you don't—that was something that was never talked about. Coming back from Vietnam, not even coming back on the plane, not even amongst us even there at the airport. I mean it was just a quiet domain. You didn't talk about it.

BOULTON: What did you do immediately after coming home?

OWENS: What did I do what now?

BOULTON: What did you do immediately after coming home?

OWENS: After I got home, I think I basically sat in the front room—there was some other things, some personal issues that was going on with my other wife that she didn't know that I knew was going on. Though issues became a part of real issues down the road that was part of the reason we ended up getting a divorce.

BOULTON: Actually I don't think I asked you about that previously. When were you married the first time?

OWENS: I was married in January of '64 to my first wife. We had one, two, three, four kids and adopted her daughter from her—that she had had before. But I had found out that she was unfaithful during the time that I was in Vietnam and she didn't know that. And what she had did was ...

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

OWENS: I went up to the doctor's office, and I told them what it was we need to do and where we was going. He said, "Okay." He said, "we'll get the shots for you, and we'll call you back." "All right." So, he called us one afternoon, and we went up. All of—I had two kids at that time. They walked in and got their shots, and she got hers. I got mine. And ... he looked at her and looked at me. And he said, "Where is the little one?" And she looked at me, and I said, "I don't know." But little did she know, that I already knew that she had an abortion. But she didn't know that I knew she had an abortion. Being that he was a family doctor and he treated her, he didn't know she had an abortion. He was under the assumption that the baby was born. And, ah, when we got back at the house, she looked at me rather strange. And that was never discussed, because in her mind she figured that he had made a mistake.

But the flip side of that is about seven years later it came back to haunt her, because we were there at Fort Benning and we were having some marital problems and the question of children came up. And I had an affair with another—as a matter of fact, I had an affair to the same woman I am married to right now. And she said, “I want to let you know that yes I did have an abortion.” And I looked at her and I said, “I know.” And her eyes got that big. And she said, “How did you know?” I said, “The family doctor told me. You don’t remember a word that the family doctor said?” I said, “When we walked in there to get our shots,” he said, ‘Where was the other child?’ And when you got home, you didn’t mention anything else about it.” I said, “I already knew before I got home, because my mother told me that you were heavier than what you normally would be.” And she said, “Oh.” And things ... went downhill after that, and we ended up getting divorced.

Diane and I ended up getting married and—however long we have been together now. In fact, when we look at it—we look at it from the standpoint that we’ve been actually together since ’73 from that standpoint. Even though we didn’t get married until ’86. We’ve got one son by this marriage. She’s my lifeline. She put me basically where I am today far as saying “Hey, you are either going to do one or the other. Either we are going to have a family or we are not going to have a family. Either go in therapy or don’t go in therapy.” So, I am thankful for her for that part of life that some guys may say they push you, but sometimes you have to pushed if you expect to gain anything out of it. And I think that I have gained a lot out of it, out of the last twelve or thirteen years, about myself and my well being. Had it—had I not took her up on it, like I said, I don’t know where I would be. I’d probably be divorced, living some other place, probably not even sitting here doing this interview. I don’t know, that is hard to say.

BOULTON: One thing that struck me recently, I was reading an interview with General Wesley Clark and he said that he had to change his church when he got back from Vietnam one time, because he didn’t get a very good response from them over his service. Was the religious community, the church community positive or a—a positive experience for you coming back in terms of their attitude towards you?

OWENS: Really to tell you the truth. I turned my back on the church when I got back.

BOULTON: Really?

OWENS: Because ... of the same thing that I discussed, about taking away my friends. I lost a lot of friends in Vietnam. I mean, I lost ... out of the 243 that got killed in the Ia Drang, I probably knew a 195 of them. And that’s a lot of people to lose in a battle. I lost probably that many or more in Bon Song. So, in a period of six months, I lost about 450 people that I had known over a period of three or four years. And I asked myself, “Why is He supposed to be the savior. Why would he want to take that many friends away from me and leave me stranded?” I didn’t want to have anything to do with God. Nothing! You couldn’t sell me a million dollar ticket to go to church when I got back, even though I was born and raised in the church, served in the church all my life. You couldn’t give me a ticket to go to church, because I didn’t want to have anything to do with it, because He took everything away from me.

BOULTON: What point did you feel that change coming on?

OWENS: After I came back from Germany. But before then I knew I was angry, but I didn't know what I was angry about. I was angry because I had no one else to talk to. Even when I was in Germany, I sheltered myself. I didn't have that much contact with anyone else. I ran an NCO club, but I had very little contact with anyone else. I segregated myself. I picked and chose who I wanted to talk too, and who I didn't want to talk to.

BOULTON: When were you in Germany?

OWENS: I was in Germany the second time from '66 to '69. If you wanted to be a part of me, I had to invite you in. If I wanted to exclude you and didn't want you to be a part of my social well being, I totally put you out of reach. That's, you know, totally it. There was a, Major Madigan, who was there in Germany with me. He was of the lieutenants in the company back when I first went to Germany back in 1960. And ... he had been to Vietnam. And I have seen his wife one day at the commissary. And I said, "How you doing Mrs. Madigan" She said, "How are you going Fred?" She said, "I told my husband that I'd seen you the other day." "Yeah I had seen him over at the company with his helicopter wings on." "Yeah, he is pretty proud of those wings." "Yeah, yeah I know, I know." One day he caught me up at the bowling alley. And he walked up behind me. He said, "Sergeant Owen." I turned around and looked, "Good evening sir." He said, "I know you think I have been evading you." I said, "No, not really." "I know you think I am." I said, "No not really." He said, "You are just like I am." I said, "How is that?" He said, "I have lost so many friends, I don't know who is my friends now." And that struck, that struck real, real heavy bone and we sat and we talked about how many people he had lost because he was the XO of one of those helicopter companies over there. And we sat and we talked, and I said, "Yep, I think that is the very first time that I realized why I was doing the things the way that I was doing them."

When I came back from Germany it was like, "Religion I don't want to have anything to do with it. Don't put it in my face. Over, finished, done! You may have given up your life for everyone else, but don't take all my friends away from me because I have nothing more to depend on." And when I said that, I understood what it was. I had come to depend all of those friends within that close knit body of guys that we depended on all the time. We depended on each other so much that when one fell along the wayside. We all suffered. And I even see it now when go to D.C., because we still cluster together.

And we had one guy who had been away for thirty-eight years. Last year was his first trip to D.C., and his wife called me on the phone. And she said, my husband's name is Amaya. I said, "His name is Sabas Amaya." She said, "Yeah." I said, "Dark skin Mexican-American about 155 pounds." She said, "Add forty pounds." She said, "You described him right down to a tee." I said, "When you have been with someone in that capacity for as long as we have you don't forget what they look like. I don't care if it's a hundred years down the road." She said, "But Fred he is doing this, he is doing this and he is doing that." And the odd thing was that he worked for the post office. And I said "Okay, I said when he gets to D.C. this is what is going to happen. You are going to amazed at his transformation." She says, "Nothing can't change his transformation, he does this...." I said "There is a reason ... why he does it." She says, "He does this..." I said, "There is a reason."

When they showed up, they heard my mouth and came running. I went out and I greeted them. After four days of being there in D.C., she got back home and she called me on the phone. And she said, “You know something he needed those four days.” She said “The transformation that he has gone through in the two or three days that he’s got home. It is unbelievable. I could never get him to take time off from the Post Office.” She said, “He got home that Monday. He called them Tuesday, said, ‘I am not going to get back ‘til Friday.’ And I said hallelujah.” (Laughter) ... She said, “I couldn’t believe the things that you told me that he was going to do.” It was as though he never left anyone after those thirty-eight years. He walked in. He looked. He saw. He saw the same guys, not in the same manner that he had left. The same guys who have grown old the same way as he has, but he has never been in contact. And we sat there, and it was like a light bulb came on. And we sat and we talked and she sat over there. And she looked at me, and she knew me, and I said, “See there ... this was what I was trying to tell you on the phone.” There is a ... closeness and togetherness among us that’s unlike anyone else. He was a lost sheep. I mean he is a fine sheep. And that is the same way with religion.

BOULTON: You did eventually come back to the church?

OWENS: Yeah.

BOULTON: When did that take place?

OWENS: That happened in ’94.

BOULTON: So, that was a long period, almost twenty years.

OWENS: There was a long period in my life—goes right back to my wife again. She said, “I am going to church, whether you want to go or not. I am going back to church.” (Nagging sounds) “Okay.” So we went to church. Found a little small church that we was going too. And ... it was okay for a while. And by that time the therapy that I was in had taken root. I went to Salem, took my first trip to Salem, came back. There are some things that had happened to the church. My wife said, “I think it is time for us to move on.” And she told me basically some of the things that went on, and I said, “Well, okay.” And so ... we left there and went to the—we went visiting, and one of my friends that was there at the church thinks that—“You need to go to this church.” And he told me—I said, “Name sounds familiar.” I just couldn’t put one and one together. We went there that Sunday morning. I said, “Oh no!” The same church that one of the other girls, Carrie Wagner, had been trying to get me to come for the last three years. I walked in the church and, all of the kids “Yeah, here is the umpire!” She looked at me and she said, “You got more friends here than you think, you know.” I said, “Yeah?”

BOULTON: This is from your softball umpiring isn’t it?

OWENS: Softball and basketball. And the kids, “Hey mom that’s the umpire right there. That the referee over there.” I said, “Goodness gracious!” And then to top it off, the minister gets up and as many times as I had seen him in the gymnasium I had assumed he was a teacher. And he introduced himself as the minister. I said, “Wait a minute this can’t be right.” Now, I’ve been

coming on doing these school games for the last two or three years and not one time did he mention that he was a minister. In all the conversations that we had, he never mentioned he was a minister. So, we came back that night, my wife said, "I think we have found ourselves a home." I said, "Okay pretty good." And then we became partners and joined the church.

And I went to, back up to Salem. And I was up there when the [World Trade Center] towers went down, and I came back home. And his wife was there in the coffee shop one evening after I came back. I was off in a daze, and she looked at me and she said, "Is everything okay Fred." I looked at her, and I said, "Yeah." It was because my mind was totally on something else. And later on, about a year or so after that—he had a back problem and he asked for—you know, she was ministering at night and she asked for those who wanted to be prayed for to come down front. I said, "Okay," I am standing back there my wife went up there. I am sitting back there praying up a breeze. Didn't hear a word nobody was saying. I was off into places that I didn't even know I could be off too. And one of the ushers came over and he touched me on the shoulder. And he touched me again. I remember somebody touching me twice. And he said, "The pastor is talking to you." And she pointed at me. I said, "Okay." And after the service came—Diane said, "Where were you at?" I said, "If I told you where I was at you probably wouldn't believe me. I was off in a land beyond this land and other land that I never seen before." And she said, "I would probably believe that because you don't realize how loud Pastor Moore was trying to get your attention." She said, "I was wondering who she was talking too."

And I think it was Memorial Day a couple of years ago, it may have been last year or a couple of years ago, Pastor Ed called me up and—it was 2002, yeah 2002, he called me up on the podium and he said, "I know you got something to say." And I said, "Oh my goodness." He gave me the microphone and I said—well I told them about the experience with Pastor Moore. And I told her, "Do you remember the day that I was in the coffee shop and you ask me was something wrong. And I told you no." And she shook her head, and I said, "That was a lie, because there were so many things that was going on in my mind that even I couldn't comprehend it." I said "What I didn't understand was that how bad I was hurting inside because of what happened to one of my friends that had gotten killed in the towers." And I said, "And the other thing is when you pointed me out the night when my wife was up there. I was off in a place that I had never even seen before, okay." I said some things that I never even thought I would ever say being in a church like that.

And then before that I found out that he was a Vietnam vet and he was a helicopter pilot. And I think because he was a helicopter pilot we bonded as quickly as we did. Because the two of us had something in common that I had not found before in a church. And we sat in his office one day and we prayed and we cried. And he said, "I don't think I have cried like this before. And that put me at different level as far as my faith and my religion is to where it is today." And we have a ... pretty close relationship the two of us do. For that reason, I can look back and look things squarely in the eye now and understand ... why I am being put in situations, and why I am being asked to do some of things that I am doing now.

Yeah, He took them away from me, but at the same time, he gave me something that I didn't realize that I did have and that was the gift of making other people understand what the war was all about and what I felt about it, and my relationship with them. We have taken people to the

[Vietnam Veterans Memorial] Wall and showed them how to heal themselves of their wounds, of their loved ones. And basically, I think that's what the two of us are meant to do at this particular point, you know, to share that with everyone else and be able to tell them that, "Yeah, it is okay that you hurt. But don't let it hurt you the way it affected me, you know. Give a little, love a little and things will be fine. You just—it took me a long time. It took me twenty some odd years to understand why I do today the things that I do." Alright, I was saying, it took—the last twelve years have been the happiest twelve years of probably my whole life because of being in therapy and doing what I do that comes naturally, you know, with the school kids, with the college kids and the other church activities and things like that. That has become my lifeline, you know, my lifeline to society. That is what I do best.

BOULTON: If we could return—you mentioned your period guarding Lieutenant Calley at the time. When was that and where?

OWENS: That was at Fort Benning, in '73, '74.

BOULTON: So, it was after the court martial then?

OWENS: Yeah—No, that was during the court martial. That was during the court martial.

BOULTON: Did you spend much time with him?

OWENS: Spent a lot of time with him. He didn't, he didn't really want anyone else guarding him except for those individuals who had served in Vietnam. Although he didn't get all his—some of the rest of them were not Vietnam vets, but he felt more comfortable with those who had been in Vietnam who could understand his plight and what he was going through. And we had some ... long conversations about what had happened at My Lai, the fallout between him and Captain Medina, and why the other commanders didn't want to speak up in his behalf. Only the NCOs ... and some of the enlisted individuals spoke up in his behalf. Why they didn't let certain individuals testify who had knowledge. Why they kept a couple of enlisted individuals out of the picture and not letting them testify, because you know they could attest to the conversation that occurred between ... some of the commanders on the ground....

BOULTON: Without betraying any confidence, do you feel comfortable discussing any of that? Or would you rather not?

OWENS: I'd rather not, because ... some of those individuals are—and I couldn't tell you whether or not all of them are still living right now, but when it goes back above the company commander, which goes right back to the situation that we have in Iraq. You know, ... little doggies don't do too many things unless they've been instructed too. (Laughing) So ... some of those things that we talked about were really—there were things that could make or break any case. You know, he got out—even though he was sentenced and it was overturned, and all that good little stuff, and that kind of stuff, and went on to lead a pretty good life, married to a girl there in Columbus, Georgia who had been taking care of him. I have all the respect in the world for him under the circumstances and like I said, just the lieutenant, just the lieutenant. You



didn't hear anything else about anyone else being prosecuted, just a lieutenant. Who was following the orders of other individuals.

BOULTON: And he clearly felt that he was being made a scapegoat as well at the time?

OWENS: Yeah!

BOULTON: What was his general attitude towards that? His demeanor about the whole thing?

OWENS: He was upbeat about the whole thing, even though he was under great pressure, you know, there. When he come back from being in court all day long, he would go and take a shower and get something to eat. We would come in six or seven o'clock and we'd go back in there sometimes. When—I would be there from six in the evening to four or five in the morning, but he felt comfortable. He could go to sleep and not feel threatened, and not feel as though someone was going to stab him in the back. He felt that comfortable around certain individuals and we could mind his privacy. I won't get into that, because, you know, that would really create some furies about some things. I will leave that as it is.

BOULTON: Save it for the book.

OWENS: No. Yeah! (Laughter) But—I can put that in a book and walk with that. And I think that he would probably like it.

BOULTON: Did he ever try and justify the whole My Lai thing or did he feel the need too?

OWENS: He told his point of view, of what the orders that was given to him by the on top, and the middle person, Captain Medina. "I can always call that name," he said, and told—you know the orders that was given to him and his platoon within the company? What most people don't understand is there were other parts of the company operating in the same area. So, you know, his platoon gets singled out. And he gets singled out as an individual for supposedly those atrocities that no one else was supposed to have handed down. So, when you look at the facts of the story of how it happened.... Those of us who were in Vietnam who can read between the lines, we understand very well how it happened. Do you try and cover your backside and—you are always going to leave something open. And they figured once this was done, and once they pointed a finger that ... it would be all taken care of. And it wasn't taken care of. And pardon my French, but you don't take an individual like that and make him an army scapegoat for things like that that happened in the Vietnam that were constantly happening all over the country. It was the same thing with this unit from the 101<sup>st</sup>. They went on a killing spree, and these individuals stated it went all the way to the top of the line of the White House.

BOULTON: Is this that Tiger Force thing that came out last year?

OWENS: Yeah. It goes all the way up to the White House. And had this reporter not dug it all out, and then come to find out, oh yeah, we just slapped those folks on the hand at the White House. And yeah, it was investigated, but so what.

BOULTON: It was covered up at the very top levels.

OWENS: Covered up at the very top level. So, you know, need I say more about Lieutenant Calley and what is happening over in Iraq?

BOULTON: Well, that's one of the legacies that have come out of Vietnam possibly through the movies and from the testimonies about the whole atrocity thing. Do you think it is being exaggerated or being blown out of proportion or just misrepresented in any other way?

OWENS: There have been—I've seen most of the movies that have come out on Vietnam. ... It was a travesty in the sense of how the early movies were made of Vietnam. Until *Black Hawk Down* came out, which didn't have anything to do with Vietnam—and if you read the book only about thirty-five percent of what was in *Black Hawk Down* was really to the point of what happened. But you still had a cover up in that aspect of it too. You had a—I can't think whether it was a colonel or a two star general who knew that he should not have did—placed those individuals in harms way in the middle of daylight versus—doing his op—his operatives were working at night. But he decided because he got this information that he was going to do it in the daytime. Hey, just drop right into the skillet! But those of us who, and the American public who waited so long to see a movie of exactly what did happen in Vietnam and how things were and with all of the feeling and all the emotions of what a family is going through, and what a soldier is going through, for those of us who waited for a long as we did ... for *We Were Soldiers*, ... everyone that I talked too has told me that had those movies been made from the outset it could have created a lot more positive take on what actually happened in Vietnam.

I don't think that any of the movies before or after, will leave the affects that *We Were Soldiers* put on the table. It put on the table, a movie about personal attention from the top to the bottom within a battalion. It showed all the emotions, all the sacrifices, the good times and the bad times, and I can tell you that there were a lot more bad times than what was physically there. That could really break a person's heart. You don't really understand how something like this can affect you for the rest of your life, but it does. Even though I was in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement, even though I had seen Molotov cocktails, I had seen the cross burning exercises, I'd seen everything else except for a human being, being actually shot with a bullet. To see another human being's life being taken by me or another individual in combat is something that the imagination can't behold, but it is the difference in life and death. If I had to do it all over again without knowing what I know now, yeah I would do it all over again.

BOULTON: You would?

OWENS: If the burden was placed on me to do that, yes. If the burden is placed on me that I have to sacrifice that to keep my family safe today, yeah. If you invade my house, you invade my space to inflict bodily harm on anyone in my family or someone that I love and I am there, you are going to pay the price for it. And I am not going to say it is going to be lightly priced. I am not going to say that I am going to waste you away, only thing I will tell you in that your life is really on the line, because I have no sympathy for you, because if you try and take what's mine in my domain, I have no sympathy for you whether it is on the battlefield or in regular life. That's something that I have learned over the last few years.... Having something taken away

from me that is very, very dear—I know that I can be forgiven for those transgressions that meant the difference in life and death. But at one time I didn't feel as though He had kept his bargain, but He did. I have to right my ship and ask him for that forgiveness. And it wasn't—for me it wasn't easy. And at times, I still question myself, but at the same time I feel better about myself on the inside that I have asked for that forgiveness. And I know that I have received that forgiveness because of the things that I do today.

BOULTON: When did you first see the film *We Were Soldiers*? And what was your reaction to it?

OWENS: When I saw the movie the first time after I came back—in fact I was up at Salem when it showed there at Fort Benning, and I came back, and I went to the movie with my wife and a few of the other members at the church. It didn't bother me, it bothered my wife probably more than it did anyone else. She was asking, "Where were you at?" "Well, we were over on this side over here." And the other couple they were crying, because they didn't understand even though they had read the book. They didn't understand how emotionally draining that type of film would be. Even though you can prepare them for it, but the reality of it to see it right in front of you, that you've got napalm that strips the body of its flesh in the flash of a light, and it's like.... So, when we got home my son asked me, "How was the movie?" I said, "Ask your mother." And she said, "Yeah your daddy was doing so and so, so and so." "Nuh uh, not from what I heard. You were popping up screaming, where was so and so, where was so and so." That is what she was doing. Even though I was physically next to her in the flesh, the reality of it was that, because she knew that I was once there, she couldn't physically see me at that time that the film was going. She was that concerned, but I was physically sitting next to her the whole period of time. But she couldn't comprehend that. And that's why I say I don't think there will ever be another movie of that magnitude which can blitz and show that reality on the screen of someone whose husband was physically there. And she knows that she is physically sitting next to that individual now, but because of that is happening on that screen, she still thinks that I am still there. And that's how much affect it had on her.

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

BOULTON: Now you mentioned ... some of the problems coming back, problems sleeping things like that. What other kind of problems did you face, in terms of, the late '70s? You have alluded to the problems that you had throughout the '80s. How did that manifest itself? What kind of things did you suffer?

OWENS: You suffer physically, and when I said physically that's—you are so caught up in your 24-7 routine about ... going to work, coming home from work, I didn't understand half of what goes on in my life until I got into therapy. I didn't understand that ... because of the emotional affects of what happened to me in Vietnam that it affected my entire clock within my body. The clock within your body says you have to go to work, but you also have to have enjoyment in between. But because my clock is so screwed up, I have to go back and try to adjust everyday my work habits. And because I can't work—I can't adjust my work habits, I use other things to fill in. My fill-in were go to work, I am a college sports official. In order to not deal with the everyday problems that go on in my life, personally or anything else, I find other

things—I found others things to fill in. Now it didn't make any difference whether my wife wanted me to do them or not. "You march to my drummer beat. If I go to work and I go to a ballgame. And I come home at eleven-thirty, twelve at night and get up and go to work the next day, you shouldn't complain because you got everything that you need. Not, emotionally. Not, everything physically, but you got everything else you need. So what are you complaining for." "Well, you know if you slow down." "Slow down for what?" So, the emotional and physical baggage that you bring back. You bring back so many aspects of what you didn't have. I didn't know that ... because my clock was so screwed up that my physical drive to make everyone like me—because I worked all the time, and because somebody asked me to do something that I did it because I wanted to. Didn't make any difference whether or not you hurt the wife, hurt the kids, hurt anybody else. Well they can take a second seat.

You know, I have remembered—I remembered my wife said, asking me if we were going to do something. "Yep!" And I can go to work and a college assigner can call me. "Hey Fred, I got a game with so and so, and so and so, can you do it?" "Oh yeah, I can do it. No big thing!" Call the wife, "I'm doing the ballgame." "Well, we're supposed to ..." "I'm doing the ball game! That's it! Don't interfere with what it is that I am doing. I am doing this for your good." "The therapist tells me that you are not doing it for their good Fred. You are doing it for your good." I said, "What do you mean?" "You are isolating yourself." I said, "How am I isolating myself when I in the public all day long?" "You are isolating yourself." "But it's what ..." He was talking about a different type of isolation. I was talking about personal isolation. "You are isolating yourself individually, selectively." And I am saying, "Okay," but I said. "I go to the ballgame, I get some money, I give it to her. She does what she wants too. She acts like she is happy." "She ain't happy Fred." "Well, why don't she tell me?" "Because she never hurts your feelings. She don't want you to feel as though you are not doing those responsible things." So that is what was occurring up through '90, '91, when she said, "I'm tired. I can't do this anymore. I am tired of being the family keeper." "Well, that's your job, to be the family keeper. I am going to be the family provider, so you be the family keeper." Even though the only thing is she was basically doing was those things around the house. I was working, doing all that other stuff, paying all of the bills, making sure they are doing stuff, but I forgot about—I had a family.

BOULTON: Yeah.

OWENS: They come second with everybody else. I think that was the greatest transformation—I said, one the greatest transformations that I have gone through in the last eleven or twelve years. I still fight at it, still fight at it every day. My son and I, we went at it heads on tail. I mean one time I almost (makes popping sound) ...

BOULTON: How old is he now?

OWENS: He is thirty-three, you know—thirty-one! You—but it's just that our attitude and our tempers are so much—and I had to learn how to manage my temper, because three months before we went to Vietnam I broke my platoon's sergeant jaw because he called me the N word.

BOULTON: You missed out that detail in the first interview.

OWENS: Yeah. You know, the judge told me, "If you weren't going to Vietnam I would put you in the slammer. I would definitely put you in the slammer." And I said, "He be calling me all those words. And I had six witnesses." He said, "He's a senior NCO." I said, "He's senior, yeah, he can be a senior whatever he wants, but your don't call me those words in the presence of someone else when I know in the way that you use it that it was used in a negative way, and it mean something else when he said it. So, don't give me that stuff." "We are still going to put you in prison, put you on ten years probation, you know."

But ... I have learned many ways of learning how to love all over again. How to ... appreciate ... those things that she does ... learn how to compliment. I look at somebody, I say, "It's okay." They taught me so many things at Salem to resurrect your life versus defeating yourself. People ask me why I talk about Salem the way I do? I said, "It changed my life, and if you want to change your life, you have to be willing to sacrifice some of those things that you feel as though are important to you." And they told me at Salem, "Until you understand what it is that you've been put here to do after what has happened to you in Vietnam your life will not be worth anything. We will show you how to take your weakest points and make them into a strong point, and take your strong points and balance them out to make sure your life is even across the board." And that's what they've done for me over the last five years.... They know I am strong willed. They know that I won't bend an inch, but they have taken those strong points and have made me understand how to blend them in with my weakest points, you know, to make me into what I am right now.

BOULTON: Did you use the G.I. Bill when you got out?

OWENS: Uh huh.

BOULTON: You did? When did you use it? And where did you go?

OWENS: I went to what is now Columbia State University in Columbus, Georgia. And I finished up my degree work at Troy State in '79.

BOULTON: So, when did you start?

OWENS: I started the program in '75.

BOULTON: How would you characterize the benefits? Were they adequate for your needs at the time?

OWENS: You use it ... for your benefit, but at the same time I have heard a lot of guys complain about that it's too contrary because it is cumbersome. My answer, or my question to them is, "What is it that you are looking to gain." A lot of them just went to school just to draw the money and didn't get anything out of it.... A lot of them sign up ... and even though the administrators knew they weren't coming to school they still got the benefits. And after it was all over they would complain that. "I have been in school now for three years and I don't have anything to show for it, and I need some more benefits." "Well, what did you do with the other three years that you had. You know, why didn't you do something with it." I could probably be

better along in my life, educationally, right now, probably, if I wanted too. I got a thesis there at my house that's been written for almost twenty-years that all I have to do is register or either go online and get a master's degree, but with the limits that VA placed on an individual who is 100 percent disabled it doesn't behoove me to pursue it. I can't do anything with it.

That's one of the things that I gripe with VA about. I have many things that I can share out there in life, even though I am 100 percent disabled, educationally, but because I am 100 percent disabled I can't use my education in the way that I like to on a full-time basis. I can do a two-hour lecture here or a two-hour lecture there, but there are great benefits that I can give whether I am being paid for it whatever. If you do too much, you know they will say that you can have a job. "But let me do as much as I can for as long as I want to, then give me those benefits." It's just like the G.I. Bill, if it is used correctly, you can prosper by it. If it is used incorrectly, which was did a lot back in the 70s and 80s, you won't prosper from it.

BOULTON: Do you remember how much you were drawing?

OWENS: I think it must have been five or six hundred dollars a month, something like that because I had one, two, three dependents. I think it was something like five or six hundred dollars.

BOULTON: And did that cover most of your costs?

OWENS: Hmm?

BOULTON: Did that cover most of your costs?

OWENS: Yeah, because I was working, I was working full-time and carrying a full load at night, you know, so I'd go to work at eight o'clock in the morning and get off at four in the afternoon, be in the classroom at five-thirty and be out of the classroom at ten-thirty at night. You know, that didn't include the drive time. So, normally I wouldn't be back in bed 'til one o'clock in the morning. And if I had an assignment I would do it during the day when I was working. And it amazed me that I could keep up that type of schedule and go to school and not even bat an eyelash.

I did a—a teacher there, I forgot one of the English subjects, I had to do an impromptu one night, and it had to do with ... from an historical perspective. And when she said impromptu I knew exactly at that instant what she told me what it was I was going to do. And she sort of looked at me, and said, "Mr. Owens would you come up here and do an impromptu?" "Well, what?" "Well, I know you got something in mind." I stood there about thirty seconds. I said, "I give you one." So, I told her a story about Jesse Owens in the '36 Olympics. And my name being Owens and being able to run on the same hollowed ground that he ran in Berlin. And she looked at me, and it only took me about a minute and a half to run through it. And she looked at me and she said, "I can't believe that you made that up." I said, "You said impromptu." But I can do impromptu like, ain't no big thing. You know, because the minute you give me a subject matter of what it is I am going to do, my mind says, "Okay, if she calls on me this, this is what it is I am going to do." And that's what happened. And the impromptu concerning Jesse Owens was

natural, because I ran track and his last names was Owens. And I knew his whole life history, so it was easy to do.

BOULTON: Did you have much interaction with students at the college?

OWENS: No, because I had my little domain. In a—because I was having a hearing problem. And what I would do is, I would walk into classroom and I find out where the acoustics, where was the best place for me to sit in the classroom and not have to look directly at the teacher. And at that time, I have learned how to read lips. So, what I would do was come into the classroom beforehand and I pick out a place on the far wall, or this side of the wall, and the sound would bounce, and I didn't have to strain my ear to try and hear, but at the same time I could see the professor wherever he or she turned. So, if I missed something bouncing of the wall, I could see their lips. And only my English professor picked it up, because she asked me Mr. Owens, "Why do you always sit over there?" I said, "Really I have a hearing problem." "Well, you could have told me." "Well, you know you don't like to tell nobody that you have hearing problem whatever, so I just find myself doing things." But she was the only professor that even asked me why that I separate myself from the rest of the class. But as far as speaking and doing things, ain't no big thing because it was natural. But I didn't want to interact with the other students. I felt as though I was better than them in some ways, because I sat over there by myself. And I am trying to get more out of it than they do, and I've got this disability and they hear better than me, so they should be able to respond better than me. But I found out in all of the classes that I was better off separating myself because by the time I—if I was right there in the middle of them, they would be mumbling all over the place and I couldn't hear half of what I am going to hear. And when the teacher asked a question it was like ... they want to answer the question, but they will do one of these numbers like this. And I am over here the corner and they ask questions. I stick my hand straight up. "Okay, Mr. Owens what do you have to say?" And that's basically it.

BOULTON: Did they know that you were a veteran? The other students?

OWENS: Yeah, they knew that I was a vet.

BOULTON: Did they have any reaction to that? Positive or negative?

OWENS: They didn't know what it was that I had gone through.

BOULTON: Did they know you had been in Vietnam?

OWENS: They knew I was in Vietnam. No one knew ... about this battle. No one never mentioned this battle. The first time it was even mentioned to the American public that they could even acquaint themselves with it was the Day One episode. And ... that's when General Moore and the rest of them went back to Vietnam for the first time. And Forrest Sawyer did ... a Day One episode on it. And—I will think of the girl's name, she works over here at Grace. Uh, goodness, as much as I want to recall her name. But anyway—Yvette Martinez—she called me one day and she said, "Fred were you in Vietnam?" "Yeah." "We've got a program that's going to be on tonight." I said, "Yeah." "Do you know anything about this group that went back to Vietnam?" I said, "Yeah." She says, "Anybody in that group that you know." I said, "Yeah."

She said, "Who do you know?" "I know everybody in that group." She said, "How do you know everybody in that group?" I said, "Because I was there with them." And her face got just as white as it could be. And she called the guy there at Channel Six, he is a NASCAR announcer now. And he had just came here when—he came here at the same time Lori Tucker did. And he called me and asked me if I wanted to sit in and be interviewed afterwards. I said, "It's okay." So, I went down, sat through it. And they did an interview. She said, "I had no idea that you were in that battle." She said, "1965?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "I was a little bitty girl." I said, "Yeah." "You don't look that old." I said, "Such is life." You know, and we became, you know, friends from there. And she did the all the interviews there at Channel Six. And the last interview she did was when the movie came out and I was getting ready to go back to Salem that same Sunday. And she came over and she said, "I know I'm late, I have been out of town all week long ... but I need to do this interview." I said, "That's okay, that's cool." So ... she did the interview. She just boo hoo cried. "Boy, to think that you have come full circle, from battle to a movie." She is great girl. I wouldn't trade her in for nothing in the world. Nothing in the world.

BOULTON: Were there any other veterans on the campus that you knew of? Or much of a Vietnam veteran presence even?

OWENS: Not that much. I don't even think the bulk of the guys that was in Vietnam even thought of going back to school before '80, '81 something like that. There at Fort Benning—I was at Columbus—now there was Chattahoochee Valley Community College, which could have had some there. I think a lot of them were in the vocational trade school. Troy State was only about an hour and half drive out of Columbus, which is where I spent my last semester there getting mine. When I got there and registered, the group that did—she said, "What are you doing here? You got more hours than what you can comprehend?" "Well, they told me I had to be here in order to get this piece of sheepskin." She just gave me three assignments. She said, "You do your assignment, type them up and send them back to me, and we're cool." I had them back to her in less than two weeks, you know, because they were nothing more ... than things I had done in life, things that had occurred during the Civil Rights Movement, during the time I was in the military.... And the thesis that I wrote had to do with diversity in the military, and the ... enslavement of the Japanese in concentration camps. And I had one of the ... teachers, you know, read it. She said, "I knew about a couple of these places, but I didn't know that." Most people only think there were one or two places, but there were five camps all total. She said, "I didn't know about the other two or three." I said, "Yes ma'am."

And I included—another ... part of it in there that had to do with blacks in the military after [Harry S. Truman] and ... blacks during the Civil War. And ... it just sort of stepped all the way through of what happened to the blacks, and what happened to the Japanese Americans, and what was taken from them, and what was not given back to them. And she said, "Where did you get all this information?" "Well you know, get it out of books, you can read it out of books." She said, "Is that all you do." I said, "No, but I will tell you what ..."—and even today I can't comprehend half of what I read in a book. If I read any one of those books up there, and you ask me to tell you what was in it. I can't tell you what was in it. If you ask me to write what I read, I can do it. Because this is something that came out of the Vietnam War and I don't know why. It's just, after Vietnam ... I can't comprehend as quickly as I did before I went, as far expounding



what's in the book. The same thing has to do with the Bible. I can read a verse, and it doesn't register. If you ask me which verse I read, I can tell you if you stand up there and start ... taking the verse apart. I can tell you what comes after the next word. And I don't know, and I have told the girl up there at Salem the same thing. She said, "I just don't understand why it is." I said, "I don't know." I can't comprehend, I cannot—my brain will not let me comprehend what I want to now. I can see it, yep. I can tell you maybe the first letter of it ... "He said so and so and so and so." But to try and give it to you verbatim, I can't do it. But I can write about it, but I cannot give it to you verbatim.

BOULTON: You've already alluded to the ... brotherhood, almost, of people who were there, especially in the Ia Drang Valley. And you mentioned some of the organizations and reunions you go to. Could you describe a little bit more about the sense of camaraderie that's there amongst the people that are there, the veterans?

OWENS: Well, ... we have a—what we call a special group. These are guys that will lay their life on the line for you. To understand that—and this goes back to some of the other things that I have alluded to in reference to the training and the brotherhood that we had prior to leaving Fort Benning. We were the only unit, full size division size unit that went into Vietnam as a unit. Everyone else came over as replacements. And, I think, that's one of the reasons why you have the closeness of brotherhood within the unit because you feel obligated to the cause. We have guys who came back from Vietnam who married widows of individuals whose husbands were killed in the Ia Drang and Albany. And that said a mouthful, because they made a promise when they left that their family would not suffer, you know. And some of them would give their life all over again just to do this, even General Kinnard, he married one of the lieutenant colonel's wife who ... was wounded and later died there in Vietnam. I think that, I'm pretty sure that is right. I know he married one of the officer's wives that was there in Vietnam. I might not be exactly right, but I know he married one of them.

A lot of the other guys married NCOs wives and there are some of them now that are still committed to these individuals even beyond the children and the grandchildren that are still in school. The brotherhood runs deep. When something goes wrong, I feel as though I have to pick up the phone and talk to someone, I can always call someone. I can pick up the phone and call General Moore, pick up the phone and call Joe Galloway any of the rest of them that were there physically on the ground. I can talk to George. And it's like having a brotherhood from top to bottom. It doesn't make a difference what their rank is, you can call them any time you want to; "You can call me at night. You can call me in the morning." We pay homage to those individuals who—every Sunday morning there at the Wall, our own private ceremony. We read all of the 243 names. We say a prayer over them, and God speed and we'll see them at some point in the future.

We are getting old. We are sort of like the World War II veterans of Vietnam. I look at it—it is almost forty years. That's a long time. What most people don't realize is that the we've had some type of presence in Vietnam back from the early '50, '51, '52, even there in Hanoi. A lot of people [think] we weren't there then. Read your history book. And I think that is what annoyed a lot of American people in that they don't know the history of the conflict before they open their mouth. The eerie thing about it is, I think, one of the first guys, the first names that

were placed on the Wall—the first four or five guys names that was placed on the Wall, one of the guys was from Tennessee, that was killed in either '60 or '61. I'll have to look at my paper and see who exactly it was.

But ... we express a great brotherhood as well as sisterhood. We just lost one of our greatest sisters in General Moore's wife, you know back in April. And ... our relationship goes back about forty years and ... a lot of the things that we took for granted today as far as notifying military wives, and notifying any of the individuals who were wounded or killed, you know, she did those things. She was what was called a soldier's wife. She is buried right among the rest of the brothers right there at Fort Benning. Our sisterhood and our brotherhood within the Ia Drang alumni association is unquestioned. We will get up and go to one of our brothers in a minute. And, we lost Jack Smith the first part of April. We talked about some of the guys who were there at the funeral. It's not too many times you can get news anchors from major networks for someone who shared the spotlight with them. One of the guys—when you get Sam Donaldson and Peter Jennings and all ABC news crew to come to Arlington and pay respect to someone that they worked with and who their fathers worked with, that is showing whole lot of respect. So, we've lost two great parts of our brotherhood in about forty-five days. And within our company we have lost about four in the last six months. Most of those guys are younger than I am, and most of them have to do with cancer. So, we are blessed with the time that we have available for the brotherhood, we pray for those in the brotherhood and that's about it.

BOULTON: There is just one other thing I want to ask you—it relates to story you told me before, and that is your reaction to the Wall, the story you told me about the snow up the Wall, and if you could just relate that so we can have it on record?

OWENS: Well, I think it was—if I can remember it right, I think it was '95, '94 or '95. We went over to the Wall, a group of us did. It was kind of chilly, and it was snowing. The park ranger was there. He was basically cleaning the snow off the walk way and putting down the snow ... there. And he was telling us about how the snow wouldn't sit on the Wall. And we looked at him and said, "What do you mean the snow doesn't sit on top of the Wall? It snows all the time. The snow falls down." He said, "No, let me tell you something ... last year when it snowed ... I came over here and ... I was walking I noticed that, you know, snow fell away around here it was around the lights"—he was cleaning up around the lights that reflected in. And he said, "I was really cold. And ... one of the guys told me when you get cold what you do is you go around to the Wall, you stand about six inches from the Wall, I guarantee you won't be cold." He said, "I will take him up on it next time when my hands are cold and it is snowing." He said he went down there that night and he stood there. He said, "I stood there and took my gloves off and ... my hand was just as warm as I don't know what." He said, "It was snowing, and I look up, and ... there was no snow on the top. I wanted to make sure. I walked all the way up on the top. The snow was on the grass, but there was none on the Wall." And I told him, you know, "That's just the warmth of the human spirit in the Wall." I've seen it on two occasions that it snows and it will not accumulate on the top of the wall. People have said that some holy things about the Wall. And I tip my hat to Maya Lin. I don't know what they have in the stones. I know part of the stones came from Tennessee, but it is heart warming to see it snow as hard as it does up there and to just physically walk around that wall when it is snowing and not see the snow physically sit on any part of that Wall, except for the accumulation at the bottom is mind

boggling. And like some of them said that attests to the great spirit and great comfort and the warmth that is in the Wall itself. It is just the spirit that is there.

BOULTON: That is a wonderful story, I like that. Is there anything you wish I'd ask you that I haven't? Anything we haven't covered?

OWENS: I don't know. There is—I can walk out of the door and probably remember, you know, many other things, many other accounts that occurred while I was there.... The only other thing I'd say is ... I am in the process now of doing my own book. I am about half-way there. It is a tedious process. I know I will probably miss some high points in there and it will be nice to compare the two, what was missed and what was not missed in that aspect. There may be stories that occurred during the training cycle there at Fort Benning that we missed.

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

BOULTON: You will have to let me know when your book comes out that is certainly one I would like to assign to my class at some point in the near future.

OWENS: Well, I hope so. I hope to have it, in some ways, at least 90 percent finished by this time next year. I got one company that is interested in it, and ... once I finish ... the process of going through it and have them take a look at it—they said it could be a book, it could be a pamphlet. I don't know. It was just something that I felt as though I needed to do to satisfy myself about what happened in my life and why I'm really basically the way I am today, you know. So, I think this book will ... put in perspective ... many of the things I have gone through and [what] some of the other guys out there were going through that don't want to own up to it. I am not ashamed to own up to it, and if this will better my life and better their life by there reading it, I hope it does.

BOULTON: Do you have a working title for it?

OWENS: Yeah, but I couldn't tell you what it is at this moment. (Laughter) I've got so many things working in there. There was one that I was—and, I think, because I work on the other aspect of the part of what I am doing so much, which is the Dawning of a New Era, which, as I do as that part of the lecture as a part of the school system, and I am always updating that part of it. And that is the first thing that I see when I go in there sometimes. But there is a title, you know, of the book, but I couldn't tell you what it is at this moment.

BOULTON: Well, I will look for that. We certainly appreciate you sharing your experiences it has been a great interview so thanks very much.

OWENS: Thank you.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

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