

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center**

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
**CHARLES WELLENS**  
Mortar Man 60mm, Marines, Vietnam  
2015

OH  
2039

**OH  
2039**

**Wellens, Charles**, (b. 1948). Oral History Interview, 2015

Approximate Length: 2 hours 3 minutes

*Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.*

**Abstract:**

In this oral history interview, Charles Wellens, a Stiles, Wisconsin native, discusses his Vietnam War service as a 60mm Mortar and Infantryman with the 3rd Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment, K Company at Hill 861 and Hill 881 at Khe Sanh and Quảng Trị, and his return to the U.S. after his thirteen month tour from early 1967 to 1969. Wellens briefly discusses his upbringing in rural Wisconsin and his transition into the Marine Corps having previously never left Wisconsin. He recalls his first encounters with Marine veterans at Okinawa, on their way home from Vietnam, and notes their ragged appearance while realizing the war was going to be more than he anticipated. Wellens describes his four month participation in the Siege of Khe Sanh on Hill 861 and Hill 881 through detailed anecdotes that provide insight into the daily life of enlisted men and the character of combat against the NVA [North Vietnamese Army]. He reflects on his assumptions about the Vietnamese people and the capability of enemy combatants during his time in Vietnam as a young idealistic soldier. Wellens later mentions his R&R trip to Australia. He reflects on the issues of race between Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites in Vietnam. Wellens further reflects on his climbing of the ranks and the increased responsibility over the lives of his men after becoming platoon sergeant. He outlines his return to the United States and reflects on the cold treatment he received from civilians over his participation in the war. Wellens mentions his early-out from service and attending LZ Lambeau.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Wellens (b.1948) served with the 3rd Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment, K Company during the Vietnam War. He arrived in Vietnam in December of 1967 and was involved in the siege of Khe Sanh and the Tet Offensive before returning to the U.S. in early 1969 from his thirteen month tour.

**Archivist's Note:**

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript, if possible.

Interviewed by Helen Gibb, 2015.

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2017.

Reviewed by Matthew Scharpf, 2017.

Abstract written by Helen Gibb, Matthew Scharpf, 2017.

## Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of OH2039.Wellens\_user]

Gibb: So, today is Monday, November 23, 2015. This is an interview with Charles Wellens, who served with the Marine Corps during Vietnam from 1967 to 1969. This interview is being conducted at Charles' home in Stiles, Wisconsin. The interviewer is Helen Gibb, and the interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans' Museum Oral History Program. So, if we just want to start with where you were born and grew up, and a bit about your early life?

Wellens: Okay. I was born in Stiles, Wisconsin. It's about thirty miles north of Green Bay. My early life was—it was a good life. We weren't extremely wealthy, but just, we all had a good time. I think that's where your roots in life are set. My mother died when I was real young, so my dad raised myself and my sister. And he did a heck of a job. And we got some real strong moral values and everything else. I think it kind of set the stage for the rest of my life.

Gibb: Okay, great. And what about school? Did you even go to school here?

Wellens: Well, for schooling I went to a local school. Then I went to high school in Green Bay. My schooling, I pretty much was geared—my dad wanted me real bad to go to college. So, I took college prep courses. And I mean, I wasn't a genius, so I kind of—I struggled, but I did get good marks, and that was my goal was to go on to college. But in the back of my mind at that time, Vietnam was starting to percolate, and you've seen it on the news, the evening news. And I came from a very patriotic background. My dad and a lot of my uncles served in World War II. And, you know, from that type of a setting, you kind of admire—and I still do admire anybody who wears a uniform. And so, I—deep inside of me I did want to go into the military, but to kind of serve my dad's wishes, I went on to college and I made it for half a year. And I was just tired, totally tired of studying. And like I say, I struggled, and it was difficult, you know, to keep the grades up there. And I said, "I'm just tired of this."

So, I came home that semester and I told my dad I was going to drop out of school. And at that time the draft was pretty much ramping up. And he said, "Well, you know, you're going end up in the service." And I said, "Yes. I'm aware of that." And he said, "Well, you'll probably get drafted." I didn't want to get drafted, so I enlisted, and I chose the Marine Corps because it was—to me it was a little more challenging. I always enjoyed doing something more physical—a smaller unit, a branch of the service. And it was [chuckles] a lot more than I anticipated, but it was—in the long run it worked out real well, and so.

Gibb: Do you have fam—you know, your father and your uncles—had they spoken much about their service, their time in service when you were younger?

Wellens: You mean to talk about it?

Gibb: Yeah.

Wellens: My dad didn't say much until he got older. As we were growing up, it was—he didn't—I remember always his uniform hanging in the closet, and it was interesting. But as he got older, and I think that's just the way I am now, too. You kind of—you had that lapse period in there. You just wanted to just shove that in the background. And then as time went on, you get more—you understood how much, how important a part of your life it really was. It wasn't that long, but it was—it's—some of the things that happened you just can't forget. And so, my dad—when he got older, he got involved with all of his old Army buddies, and they all went to the reunions and everything. And he just cherished them. So, you could see how important that was to him, and now I'm kind [chuckling] of following the same path, so it was a good experience in that sense, as far as the growing up part of it, and the camaraderie that you experienced.

Gibb: What were the expectations for the people that you went to school with? What were they looking to do? Was it military? Was it college, or other kind of careers in the area? Was there a—

Wellens: You mean when I went to college or—?

Gibb: Well, when you were in high school was there a sense—and then you were on sort of the college path, but what was the sense for other people around you?

**[0:05:00]**

Wellens: It was pretty—at that time, being in the late sixties, it was pretty much geared towards going on to get a further education higher than a twelfth-grade education. And it just seemed a normal thing to do. And the kids that obviously were better off, they knew they were going to college, whereas us, we had to figure out a way to pay for our education. So, it was more of a burden on our parents. So, you knew that if you didn't make that commitment, you were going to do the best you could. You know, you wouldn't let them down, so it was kind of a—when I did drop out I felt kind of ashamed of myself. But on the same token, I said I always wanted to be in the military. And I knew that that was going to be part of my life, and I just knew it was evident. So, when I got out, that was first and foremost. I went right down to the recruiter and enlisted.

Gibb: And what was the conversation like with the recruiter? Do you remember how that went?

Wellens: Well, they were definitely at that time—it was in 1967. And they were really ramping up, and Vietnam was—to me, Vietnam at that time was just some remote area on the other side of the world. But due to television, you know, you got to see how—how real—it was starting to come right into your living room. And I guess growing up, you always kind of—I got that out of my system, but you kind of glorified a combat soldier due to TV again and Hollywood. You looked at a—you know, the macho image. And plus, the fact I always had a strong faith that being American—and it was basically an anti-Communist mood at that time. And we were right, they were wrong. [Chuckles] I mean, in that sense, you know. You want to—you had a—you were very idealistic in your ways of thinking, and you wanted to go over there and help them out. I mean, and

that was my goal, I guess. To—and that, and to be a soldier, and to serve my country. Not as a career person, but just to experience it.

And so, the recruiter, he kind of—they were after people then. I mean, they needed bodies, especially in the Marine Corps, to fill all the turnover of people they had. And so, he [chuckles] more or less told me—I had pretty decent marks on my tests, and he said that my marks that I had for my pre-military tests, that I'd never end up in Vietnam. He told me that in—it was in July, or earlier, about March of 1967. By Christmas of the same year I was in Vietnam, so [laughing] I guess it wasn't, but it didn't bother me on account of I always liked to experience things—the hardest part of it, the in-the-trenches type part. And so, I wanted to experience it from the infantry level. So that didn't bother me any. I mean, I didn't get mad about it. By no means was I going to avoid the draft or run to Canada or anything else. That was the furthest thing from my mind. So even though he didn't tell me the truth, it didn't bother me any.

Gibb: Was that just a lie or what was it about?

Wellens: Well, I had a—there's a story behind that, too. When I was in my wild teen years, I got picked up for underage drinking. And in the Marine Corps, they stressed on you—I was supposed to get a top security clearance and go into Communication School, but they told us, You got to write down even a parking ticket. If you had a parking ticket, you write that down, because if we find out you will be court martialed. And I was really scared. [chuckles] So I never got—but I ended up getting hauled into the local law enforcement agency around here for underage drinking, and I didn't know if it was on my record or not, but I wrote that down. And they called me in and they just told me, This is not a big deal, but you know, we just—we're pretty fussy on who we take to get into those type of—Communication School and the classifications, top security clearances you need. And so, Infantry.

**[0:10:06]**

I said, “Okay.” I mean, really, you don't think of anything, how that can affect the rest of your life when you're younger. But it does. It does have some bearing on it, so all in all it turned out okay, though. [Chuckles]

Gibb: So, what was the conversation like with your dad, that you were leaving college, that you were enlisting?

Wellens: He was upset at first, and rightfully so. I mean, he wanted out of—he only had an eighth-grade education, and this would have been—it was his goal. And, but you know, once I talked it over, he didn't—he said, “Well, fine, you know.” He was proud of the fact I was going into the military, too, so it didn't—it wasn't a lingering thing. And so, I—it wasn't anything that we had any fights about. I was just off to the military then.

Gibb: Okay. And so how long before going to basic did you have after enlisting? Did you have very long?

Wellens: Yeah. I enlisted—in the Marine Corps, they had the hundred-and-forty-day delay plan.

So, I enlisted, I believe it was in March. And I went active in July. And I had a lot of fun in between there. [Laughing] I think that was the idea of it, you know. And there was one thing that was a kind of a sobering effect during that period. Well, just about when I got into boot camp, a good friend of mine—he lives about—well, I went through grade school with him. And he was killed in Vietnam. And it kind of brought things to a little bit more in perspective then, that okay—at that time, you’re young, you’re invincible. And the names that they—they were flashing across the TV were just names. You didn’t, you know, okay—you just kind of stand back away from it or a distance from what was happening there. But then, when it did happen to somebody that you actually grew up with, it had more of a sobering effect that this could happen. And so, it was—that time you kind of—deep inside, you live to experience things that just maybe might not be able to, you know. And, so that four months I had a pretty good time.

Gibb: What did you get up to? What did you do in those four months?

Wellens: Oh, a lot of partying with my friends basically, and just you know, you had this set date. That—the fun’s over now. And so, you put a—packed as much life into that time as you possibly can. And you know, I mean, it was just a good time, and living in a rural community back in the sixties, as opposed to the kids nowadays, we were pretty much in a bubble here. You know, I mean, where we lived. We didn’t go much beyond our boundaries, so we knew—everybody knew everybody. And everybody enjoyed pretty much the same things. Life was, like I said, it was very simple, but it was one that you were comfortable with. And we just—that’s why it was such a huge change when I did go into the military. It was just—everything was—almost had to wire my jaw, because it was all so new to me. Nowadays, kids are—it’s just a whole different ga—world, you know, like we lived back in prehistoric times then. [Chuckles]

Gibb: So, tell me about your basic training, boot camp. What was that?

Wellens: That was a—quite an experience, yeah. [Laughing] I thought, “Oh, goodness. What did I get myself into here?” And it was everything I anti—I kind of thought, because you’d heard stories about it, but when the actual thing had happened, it was quite an experience. But I do understand now—and you look back at it and see what was going on then. You understood that—my drill instructors had all been to Vietnam. And they knew the majority of us in our boot camp platoon were headed to Vietnam. So, they—what they did, the discipline was extremely tough in the training. And it weeded out a lot of the fellas that couldn’t make it, which is a good thing, because when I got to Vietnam I realized how important it was to respond to a command, to work as a unit.

**[0:15:00]**

Because if you dropped the ball, either you’re going to end up being injured or killed, or one of your friends. And so, it was huge to—the discipline and the training they gave me was outstanding, and I thought—at that time it was brutal. But once you got into the routine of things, it went pretty well then. And then finally it was thirteen weeks of boot camp, and your goal was to be called a Marine. I mean, that—they just brainwashed you into that—and physical training and so on. And the day that I graduated I was extremely proud to be called a Marine and to reach that first part of my journey in the Marine

Corps.

Gibb: So, what kind of things were you doing in boot camp?

Wellens: It was lots of physical training. First thing they do is they just beat you down. You know, I mean, you're—you feel like an insect, so to speak. And that was it. And then they start rebuilding you and reshaping you. It taught you confidence, like in—they had the obstacle courses and things like that that you know, and I think it was the most physically fit I've ever been in my life. And your stamina, everything was—you were just very healthy, and you ate well, you slept well, and it was really good training. But they were—they weren't going to allow anybody to graduate that didn't deserve to graduate. So, I think that was—I said that before. It was huge to get rid of some of these fellas that they just—they wanted the title, but they didn't want to go through what it took to get the title.

Gibb: How many people do you think did not make it through?

Wellens: In my—well, we were in platoons, so those were the fellas you got to notice. It was usually about—it was about probably forty to fifty of us, and in that platoon and out of that I would say there was a good ten to fifteen that didn't make it. So, I mean, it was—they did the—the things they stressed, especially was we had a long period of training on marksmanship. That was stressed in the Marine Corps. You know, it was one of the big issues there. So, I did well in that. And just team work, to understand that you work as a unit, and if you screw up [chuckling] you're going to pay the price. And I guess one of the things I learned, too, was to try to stay anonymous. If you made stupid mistakes, then they always remembered you and you always got picked on then. So, you know, it did. But it did. It built character. You did things you weren't—you didn't think you were capable of doing, so to speak. And you just—you found out that your body could take more than you thought it could.

Gibb: And where was this? Where were you training?

Wellens: In San Diego. And that in itself was something, because California was always the center of the world as far as if you lived in United States then. And as I said before, I'd never been out of the State of Wisconsin, so it was quite an experience to hop aboard—I never flew. So, I mean these are all new things to me. And it was exciting. And we went through—the thirteen weeks of training was in San Diego. So, it was, in itself, was—had kind of an offshoot. It kind of distracted from all the hardships you were going through.

Gibb: And so, was there anything that you were doing in training that was particularly—that you were told, "This is what you'll need for Vietnam"? Or was it sort of—

Wellens: Not so much in boot camp, but then, just after we graduated from boot camp, we went on to Camp Pendleton then. And there, you started to familiarize yourself with weaponry, all the tactics. There was a lot of hills out there, and up and down the hills, and forced marching, the ability to have—they'd give us like, two full canteens of water in the morning and they'd better be full at night. Discipline. You don't drink out of them unless you pass out or something. But they—those instructors also were from Viet—had

been to Vietnam, and they knew, there again, almost all of us, that's where we were heading. Most of us were going into the Infantry.

[0:20:01]

So, the training there was very rigid. And we went on there—I'll just—I can walk through that with you now then, too. I went to—it was Advanced Infantry Training is what they called it. It was the units there, and we went through all this, how to throw a hand grenade and things like that. And then after I got out of that—I was actually trained in the Infantry, but then I went—I had a little extra training. There was—I was still considered in Infantry, but I had training in mortars. So, I had a little advanced, two more weeks of training in how to shoot a mortar, and that was my MOS or Military Occupation Specialty, I guess is what it stands for.

So, I got trained in that. And then it was a twenty-day leave prior to going to Vietnam—and nothing registered yet as far as what lay ahead. I think that was a good thing, because as far as I was concerned, my ideology was that we were right, and the fact that you could see—I knew that we were, you know, Vietnam, come on, it's a small country. I figured it'd be over before I even served my full tour of duty there. And I went there with kind of a concept these were backward people. They'd be fighting with spears or something, you know. And I just—you just had this whole different concept of the things that—I was enlightened very fast [chuckling] when I got over there. But to that time, it was just in the back of your mind yet, because still, when I came home I had a lot of fun. And the time flew by, but—I'll just keep going right on into this then?

Gibb: I was going to ask you what you got up to on your twenty days of leave?

Wellens: What's that?

Gibb: Well, I was going to ask you what you got up to on your leave? You came back to Wisconsin?

Wellens: Yes. Yeah.

Gibb: To see your family?

Wellens: Yes. I came back. And basically, it was like my hundred-and-twenty days prior to going in again. You know, you just had a good time with your friends, and—the hard part was—it was in November of sixty-seven, and my schedule date to report back in California was the day after Thanksgiving. And that was hard because Thanksgiving was a family day also. And to leave the night before Thanksgiving, I had to leave. And see, that's when everything just start closing in on you. I was very sad. It was difficult, but when I got back to California again, you met some of the fellas that you had met through your earlier course of training, and we're all in the same boat. So, you look at—they're sad, you're sad, but you're not—you're supposed to be a macho Marine, [laughing] so you're not going to show that. So, we went on. You know, it was something. That was the first Thanksgiving in my life I'd ever been away from home, but you made it through that then. And then we had two more weeks of training prior to



going to Vietnam. It was into December then and we—it was just getting shots and things like that. It was some big units, but they—it was just your last hoorah in the States.

And I remember going—it was just before Christmas then of that year. And it was at night and we were traveling in buses to board planes to leave continental United States, and seeing Christmas decorations and lights on. It was very quiet in that bus. I think we all felt the same way, that this was obviously the first time away—we were all about eighteen, nineteen years old and never been away from home at Christmas time in your life. So, it was kind of a very sobering experience then. But once again, you look around you and everybody's in the same boat, and that was always my way out, that I'm not in this by myself. We all feel the same way.

**[0:24:51]**

But I remember leaving. We left the United States then and flew to Okinawa—a lot of ocean. [Chuckles] You look out the window, that's all you see was blue. And it was pretty quiet on board the plane. And then we landed. Did you have any other questions?

Gibb: No. You carry on.

Wellens: Okay. We landed in Okinawa and there—it was your final staging prior to going to Vietnam. It was kind of the transient area where guys going back home, and guys going to—and believe me, those guys going home let you know it. I mean, it was—you were starting, you'd be wide-eyed, and oh, goodness. You could see they looked pretty bad. As far as—they always call it that faraway stare, and they were kind of—you could just see they'd been through some stuff, and you thought, Whoa, there's more to this than I anticipated. And they gave you a number and you had to muster out in like a big area every day. If your number was called off, you boarded the next plane to Vietnam. And that, finally—it was only about two or three days I spent there, but then I boarded that plane and unfortunately, I got stuck in between two—like we called them lifers, you know, higher up in the ranks, and I was just a measly PFC [Private First Class], so I didn't have anybody to talk to. I was right in the middle of them. And we flew into Vietnam, into Da Nang. And it was night—it was around nine-thirty, ten in the evening. And I was looking out the window as we were coming in, and you could see night illumination rounds. And I thought, “Oh my goodness. They're being hit.” But that was just normal.

And we landed, and I'll never forget when they opened the door to the plane, the intense heat and humidity. I'd never—and that time of night it was quite a shock. And the smell—it wasn't a nauseating smell, but it's just a different smell, the air and everything. And I went into like a small open-hutted, dirt-floored area. And they said, “Well, you won't get your orders out of here until tomorrow morning. Things are kind of shut down, so find a place.” Well, you laid down on the sand on the floor and tried to sleep. And morning came, there's a lot of activity then, and you were assigned to your unit then.

And I'll never forget, this guy walks up to me. He was on his way home, and once

again, he had that—he just—his clothes was all ripped up and everything. And he asked me where I was—what division I was going in. The Marine Corps had two divisions there, 1st and 3rd. And Vietnam, it was divided into four sections. And the Marines pretty much took care of the furthest north section in South Vietnam, along the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone]. And in that section, the Marines were divided into the 1st and the 3rd Divisions. The 1st had the further area to the south, Da Nang and south of there. And the 3rd was right along the DMZ. I was assigned to the 3rd. And he just looked at me, and I told him, “I’m going to 3rd Division.” He says, “You’ll never make it.” And then walked away. And I thought, Whoa, [chuckling] that wasn’t very nice—and it was kind of different. You’re just going to accept stuff as it came at you. And I ended up going, or getting my orders to—I was assigned to 3rd Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment, K Company.

So, they gave me my flight out of there and when it came to where I boarded the plane, and was—I flew to a place called Phu Bai, and that was my first real—we had a few days there, and you had an opportunity to see what the local culture was and everything. It was kind of an eye-opener, too, to experience this, having grown up in America. But I mean, I was kind of like a tourist, basically. There wasn’t anything big going on then. It was just—the activity during the day was kind of interesting. And they gave me my first rifle there. They pulled it out of a fifty-five-gallon drum of oil and handed it to me. [Chuckling] And it was dripping with oil and then they threw some—they gave me some hand grenades and some bandoliers of ammunition. Now, that was kind of a shocker, because all the while through training in the States, everything was so rigid, especially when it came to arms.

**[0:29:59]**

“Here. You’re on your own. This is it. Clean that thing up. That’s your rifle. And here’s—put ammunition if you—” Nobody said anything to you. So, it was kind of different. And then—and so I did—I got things kind of squared away there, and then we boarded trucks heading up north. They called—we were security for the trucks. And that was a real good—my first real experiences of the local things in Vietnam, because we went through a lot of the villages. And there’s only one main highway there that went all, pretty much followed the coastline heading north. And we went—you go through some of these towns and everything else, and just to see the way these people—they seemed so backward, you know? [Chuckles] And by our standards, I should say, but one city I remember going through distinctly was Hue—and that was prior to being kind of devastated during the Tet Offensive. This was before the Tet Offensive of the same year. And it was a beautiful city. And it was ancient, all these ancient like, castles or something there. It was beautiful, just beautiful. And the Vietnamese women there, the girls were dressed in those white—they were beautiful. It was like a fairy tale, you know. I mean, I—wow. It was just like you were in a different world for that short period of time as we drove through there. You tried to hold back your sightseeing thing [chuckling] because that’s not why you were there, but you couldn’t help but to acknowledge some of the stuff there, that it was really, really something.

And we ended up at a place called Đông Hà and that was a military base, and that was back to being military. It was dirty and miserable, and trucks, and all this stuff, all this

activity going on. I spent just a couple nights there. And that was pretty close to the Demilitarized Zone. And what I was finding—what I was going to find out later on, too, like in Vietnam, as far as even the terrain, was radically different which parts of the country you were in. And so were what you were fighting. Like the further south you got, you were more involved in fighting the Việt Cộng. You know, they were a farmer by day, soldier by night, booby traps, things like that. The further north you got, you ran into a very, very well-trained, well-disciplined, well-armed North Vietnamese Army. And I was going to find that out real soon. [Chuckles]

And I mean, neither one of them was good, but on the same token, it was—you might say more of a conventional war where I was heading. And I got assigned—when I got assigned to my—my unit was at a place called Khe Sanh, and it meant nothing to me, but little did I know when I boarded that plane to go there, there would've been five horric—horrific months of my life there. It was sheer hell. But I was on a C-130, a big transport plane, and we came into the—we flew in. I remember it was—I looked out the window there and it was down in a valley surrounded by hills. And the old military thing was high ground. I thought, Oh my goodness, you know. [Chuckling] This doesn't look good. And the fella sitting next to me had been there. He could ju—he read my, you know, because I was just like—and he says, he said to me, “Well,” he said, “Don't worry. They haven't been hit here in eight months and no major skirmishes.” So, okay.

So, we landed and we got out of the plane, and went and reported. And they said—our company at the time was out on an operation. So, they told us where our area was located on the perimeter there. It was on the outside edges there, and how to get, you know, just find out and we just kept asking questions. Finally, you were there. And there's nine of us that were replacements for that company. And we kind of bonded together a little bit, but there again, I began to realize that you didn't—you were pretty much on your own there as far as if you didn't put something over your head you're going to get wet. It was the monsoons and it wasn't like the southern part of Vietnam. It was cold and damp there. And it was in December then.

**[0:35:00]**

You teamed up with somebody and you just, you looked at the guys that had been there a while did, and they had like ponchos and you could snap them together, and that was your way for your shelter. So, myself and one of the other replacements kind of teamed up, and we were—we were able to stay dry. And in a couple days, our company came back and you realized then, too, that—my theory was always any time you come, you know, you went all through life. Every time you start out at the bottom level. Like when you're a freshman in high school, you kind of get hazed a little bit there. Well, here you are, starting all over. And you were treated like dirt. I knew that. I said, “I'm going to keep my mouth shut and my eyes open,” and you learn from these fellas that had been there. Obviously, they'd made it seven, eight months because they knew what they were doing.

So, you took all the guff and everything else. And we had Christmas, we spent in Khe Sanh. And then they—we had a meal, our meal there, and one of the last ones I would have for quite a while. The rest is all out of C-rations. And the day after Christmas, we

walked out of Khe Sanh to a hill, outpost overlooking the base. It was about four miles away. And it was quite a walk—hard, you know. You're all—[chuckling] and you weren't used to that. So, we got to the—we relieved an outfit on top—there was two hills. They were designated to protect the base itself. Ours was Hill 861, and our sister company, India Company, was on Hill 881 South. And we relieved another company that was up there, but the hill—the top of the hill was completely void of any vegetation. And it had a real definite perimeter around it, a landing pad for the helicopters. And it just looked like a super fortress. I wasn't—there again, I wasn't a bit as scared of anything. I thought, Well, gosh, you know, the triple rolls of that concertina wire. I mean, there was no way they could break through there—plus, jets, and helicopters, and everything else. So, you felt pretty confident that things were good.

Then there wasn't mu—there wasn't anything going on when we got there, either, as far as—it was just—it was kind of routine, getting into the swing of things there. And we went on patrols. And being new there, you always got the crappy details, and one of the worst was listening post—I just hated that. You had to go—you and another fella and a radio had to go just at dark, had to go outside the perimeter. And you were—I figured it out. [Chuckling] You're the early warning thing if something went wrong. In other words, if you came back, if you didn't—you had a possibility to get shot by your own people than get shot by them, so it wasn't too pleasant, it was horrible. And the other thing, this was totally disgusting. I don't know why it was, but in Vietnam they had you—they'd cut a fifty-five-gallon drum in half and that's—and they'd put a board over it and that was your outhouse, so to speak. And they'd make us, because you're the new guys, they didn't—you had to put, like it was like a fuel oil mixture. You dumped it in there and you stirred that—you know, the feces and stuff. It was the most nauseating smell you could imagine. And, Okay. I'm the new guy. [Chuckling] I had to do that all the time. And I even had to do it after—after Tet Offensive started up. And you're getting sniped at all the time. You'd have to pull these things out. They were all in bunkers. You'd lift these big things out and then—and you'd be get—bullets would be coming in and I thought to myself, If I get killed doing this, [chuckling] I'm really going to be upset. You know? Not a way to go.

But you made it through that time, and you started to gain the respect of the fellas that had been there for some time. And it was kind of routine. You knew something—all right. When we—one patrol—that was one of my first lessons by fire. We were on a patrol, and you were walking single file. It was real thick elephant grass area, and we got sniped at. And I was just, you know, Oh. You know, standing there, and I remember this big hand reached up and threw me to the ground. And I won't repeat what he said to me, but it wasn't very nice. But he said he didn't care if I got killed, but I was drawing fire [chuckles] towards him. So, he was—you know, Okay, lesson number one. I never forgot that one. It's just little things like that. But from the buzz from the upper echelon there, they knew something was happening there.

[0:40:00]

They knew something was building up. But once again, I was totally oblivious. I thought, we're safe here. We got everything at our disposal here. You could just—I felt—it didn't bother me in the least. And when I was finally on the—we had—we

were—it was about a week or so before the twenty-first of January. And things were really starting to ramp up. They made us reinforce our positions and everything. I was in this—and the mortars. I got into the 60 mortars, 60-mm mortars, which is small ones. That was the field. So, I was in the Weapons Platoon of an infantry company, and we had machine guns, the 60 mortars and the rockets. And we were assigned to the squads in that outfit.

The larger mortars, they stayed more or less in a stationary area because they were too heavy to bring into the field. So, we were right in with the infantry. And basically, our position was only about twenty-five feet up from the main perimeter that went around the Hill 861. And we got to know all the guys that were right down in front of us pretty well. And we start—it's just things start—you could just see they were concerned, the people that had been there. They were getting concerned about stuff.

And then on the twenty first—prior to that they had been probing the lines every night, the North Vietnamese. And it was, you know, it still didn't bother me that much. And then on the twenty first, one of the fellas crawled up to our position from the down the line. He says, "We can hear them out there. They're pulling their dead away. They're pulling their injured away. They're moaning, but they won't fire back." And I thought, "That's weird." And then all of a sudden, they left off a signal and then it was—it was kind of the end of the world. And that was really a baptism by fire.

I was in my bunker and my friend, the guy that I bunked with there, he went over the mortar pit. They called for one of us to come over there and break out rounds, because they kept—they were firing illumination rounds to try to light up the area. And he said, "I'll go," because I was—myself, I was making a cup of coffee. So, he said, "You can just stay here." So, I'm sitting there and all of the sudden the ground kind of shook around me. And I thought, well, that was weird. And then, the next thing I knew, a round hit right directly on top of my bunker, and it just blew the—it blew all the sandbags off. And I was knocked out.

That was the worst thing. I'd never experienced this before. I was all by myself, scared as hell. I mean, I came to. When I came to, I was just shaking like a leaf, and groped around. I found my rifle. I found some hand grenades. And I just couldn't stop shaking. And then I heard Vietnamese voices, and I knew that we didn't have any Vietnamese up on our hill. They were all just—we're all Americans. So, it was just a sense of talking to yourself and realizing that this is it, you know. I'm over—it's over. So, I made that decision. I kind of calmed down then, but then I heard my squad leader. He was calling for Corpsman, because two guys in our unit got hit real bad. And he was just a short way's away, and I just hollered over to him, and he hollered to me, "Are you alive?" [Laughing] And I says, "Yeah. I'm talking to you." He says, "Well, get over here." So, I says, "Well, don't shoot me." So, I just stumbled over there and fell in their trench, and then I made my first attempt at patching one of the fellas up. He had a real bad leg wound. And I don't know how well I did, but then I hauled him up to the Corpsman. And luckily, I got teamed up with one of the guys in our squad who was very—he had been there for quite some time and very—he kept me grounded because I was ready to crawl out of my skin then. We had to fall back to our secondary positions because ours—we—they had been overrun. I t was just the longest night of my life, and we

just—and then they actually infiltrated and got up to a small piece of artillery we had there and they blew up the ammunition thing there. And I swear. There was—they were coming down for, oh gosh, it seemed like five minutes. And there again, got knocked out again, you know. And I says, “Oh goodness.” It was just—

And then finally, mercifully, morning came and it was just a mess, but they were worried about a counter-offensive then. And we had breached their lines, the perimeter down in front of us. They were inside of our lines.

[0:44:59]

And they needed ammunition in case there was a counter-offensive. So, the Lieutenant came down and hopped into and he says, “You guys got to bring—” And that’s where the discipline came in. You didn’t question nothing. You just grabbed them cans of ammunition and start going down to the lines. And I almost got shot [chuckling] by my own guys. They were so nervous that night—and you can imagine why. And so, after that I just screamed, “Oohrah,” as I came on. And it was, you know, we made it through.

And I just had this thought, Boy, they just went through just sheer hell. We lost a lot of people that evening, and I thought we were going to get helicoptered out of there. Well, that’s not the way it works. You’re alive and moving yet, you’re staying. And that was my first experience of you know—I had to help pick up guys that had been killed. And I’ll never forget that. Our gunnery sergeant was killed, I really admired him. He was just a strong person. And the one guy I was helping on the detail, he picked his legs up and I was going to grab his arms and I hesitated, you know. And he just looked at me, said, “He won’t hurt you. He’s dead.” I can just remember the look in his eye he had. Yeah. Unfortunately, you got all too accustomed to doing that over the—my year there.

And you just—things just kept happening. Then we had to rebuild a new position, but we were just under constant fire then. Every day was incoming, incoming, incoming, losing people. And they’d attack us sometimes, but it was—then we weren’t getting resupplied. So, we went from three C-rations a day down to very limited, no water. So, we caught water in our ponchos. And you got very resourceful, you know. And you understood what it was, the things that you gave up at home. [Chuckling] You just thought a whole new—and as I kept driving, you know, I want to go home. But like I say, we’re all in the same boat. Everybody kept their sense of humor, so to speak, and I think we all aided one another, and it was quite a while.

And we were stationary because the valley was just full of the NVAs [North Vietnamese Army]. So, their object was to overrun the Khe Sanh Base, and they had to get rid of the hill outpost prior to that. So, we were a thorn in their side, so they just kept on hammering us, and we just kept on responding. It was just a—the time, you didn’t pay much attention to it. It’s just another day closer to going home. But the living conditions were very, very bad. The rats came on board there, and they were as big as dogs. I remember they were crawling across you at night time and stuff. I just—oh, it just gave me the willies. They go scurry across your legs or something and we—

There was a big bomb crater up on top of the hill, and the C-rations were bad enough the

way they were, but there some that were better than the others. And when you were, had enough of them, when you're issued three a day, while the crappy—there was even crappy ones, they'd would throw them into that big bomb crater. Well, we started scavenging them out to eat them, and then we had dehydrated soup. And I remember there was bad feces in there. We'd pick out the bad s—I should rat feces. And we'd pick out that and we ate that. I mean, we were hungry. And we were dirty and everything. It was quite a time. So, we spent until, it was in April, and then things started to—we were starting to think of going on the offensive then.

Every time a helicopter tried to land, they'd get hammered there, so they'd drop the netted loads in there. And then they told us to, Get all your stuff together. They're going to helicopter us over to Hill 881, and with our sister company, we're going to pull an operation off of there. Well, that was total chaos that day again. Everything was—they had their landing zone zeroed right in, so you never knew when that round was going to come. You just go, go, go, you know. Then you get up in the air, and when you're landing the same thing happened again.

But we made it and then we did pull an offensive off of Hill 881. We teamed up, and we even practiced it in the middle of the night, which just seemed like, kind of stupid. But it was the first time in like, four months that we actually came off of our defensive positions. So, we went out in the middle of the night. We snuck down to a little plateau just below that hill.

**[0:50:04]**

And then the next morning, we went to another hill that they had been—had artillery positions on, and we had a pretty successful day—a lot of confirmed kills and everything that day. And we caught them all, basically by surprise, because we had been so, just stationary for so many months. And we came back to our position that we had set up just off the base of that hill we took off from, and they told us to fill in our holes, we were leaving. They were going to helicopter us out of there down to the Khe Sanh base, and we did that. And then we got mortared and we lost a whole bunch more guys. And there was only seven or eight of us left. And they told us no more helicopters were coming in—we had dead guys with us. We had picked up the weaponry, and they told us, You're going to spend the night there. And I thought, It's over, because they were all around us then. We were completely surrounded, there was only a few of us left.

And luckily, I don't know what it is in the helicopter pilots there, but by god, they were sure good. And they knew. They always knew. They just—they knew. Either, be it in a medevac situation or responding to pick-up, guys that—they always went—and they were a prime target. So, somebody heard a helicopter coming just before dark, and we scurried on to that helicopter with our dead people, and all the weaponry that they had dropped. And we went down to the Khe Sanh base, and there it was. All hell broke out again. So finally, we got out of there and that was—we left that Khe Sanh area. And it was oh, about mid—to the end of April. And from then on it was—wasn't as bad. I never experienced that bad, but it was quite an ordeal. And you learned a lot. I think one of the things coming from this area was that I was never exposed much to—

It was basically a poor man's war because you were drafted. And you know, I never—the blacks and the Hispanics, the minorities were huge. And you got to really link up with those fellas. And you really, really had a good bond with them. Color, skin meant nothing. And we got very close. I mean, I always said, "Underneath that skin there's all red blood." And we did, we got very tight. You understood some of these—like one of my best friends was from a large city. And at night, just before dark, you had an opportunity to exchange stories about home. And he told me, you know, I mean, we never had a lot of money when I was growing up, but boy, under their conditions, I lived in the Taj Mahal.

And that was it. I mean, you just—I'd say that's the silver lining in some of that. I had a good opportunity to see what other—diverse cultures and everything else. And so, I did. You know, you really drew a real strong friendship with these fellas. And it taught me that skin color doesn't mean anything. It's what inside of a person that counts. And so, it went on—as time went on, you went up in rank. You got to be more of the person that sent you on these dirty details instead of the guy doing it. And since you had been there, you tried to be fair with everybody. And you'd let them know that, you know, I'd been there.

And I got to be the platoon sergeant towards, about eight or nine months into my tour. And that was even more difficult than being the peon, so to speak, because now you knew what these—you had to send these guys through and it was hard, [choking up] especially if some of them got hurt. One of the big—one of the things when we were—we came down—we had like guarding roads up north of Da Nang. It was up through like, a hilly area and if you didn't guard where all the culverts and the things like that were, the bridges, they'd blow them up at night. So, we were dispersed to, like for twenty-some miles, our company. And some of the guys I knew were smoking dope down there.

**[0:54:59]**

It was a big thing in Vietnam, but these are guys I'd gone to Vietnam with, I was friends with. I didn't do it, you know. I got drunk when I had the opportunity, but it was just a release, but I just—I stayed away from drugs. And I knew it was happening, but I wasn't going to squeal on them, you know. It really puts you in a bad spot. Well, the North Vietnamese, they did, they had all the time in the world. They'd watch and watch and watch. And these guys, you know, nothing would happen. You could go two, three weeks with nothing. Well, you get pretty lax, and that's what happened. They hit them one night and a couple guys got killed. And to this day, that haunts me. Should I have said something? You don't know. I mean, it was really a hard place to be in. To have that—you know, you could have blew the whistle, but you understood, too, that as I said, these guys, well, some of them I'd come over there with and we'd gone through a lot of stuff together. And I was—there was no way I could—I just couldn't. So, it was—there was some things like that that was just very hard to accept and understand.

And I think as time went on, and to my thoughts about, my ideology about being right about the war, it just kind of drifted the other way. You know, you understood that, no, it's just myself and the fellas I'm with, want to go home. And I know talking—when we



talked together at times in the evening or something, we were more afraid of losing an arm, or leg, or your eyesight than getting killed. There's no way I wanted to come back an invalid. And I know everybody felt the same way. So, it was, [sighs] overall, I think I was very fortunate. I think it was, you got very kind of—you could take gruesome things and after a while you kind of get that way of thinking, too, that it wasn't good. You know, you're—death, you've seen it day in and day out. And especially when you'd go out, like on an ambush or something, in the heat of battle it wasn't hard. Or you didn't have a chance to think. But when you were there, you were just laying there waiting, and that was hard. It was really hard, too, to know that you had the, you know, to take someone's life. I mean, I wasn't brought up that way. You know, you respected life.

And I think you had a whole different—the one time that it kind of brought me back to reality was after you would have a—when your ambushes were successful, you would go through the belongings of the dead person and pull out his—this guy's wallet, or you had pictures in it of him and his family. And it just hit me. Somebody back there cares about him like my people do about me. And it just brought me back, but it was, still life went on. And you know, it was yours or theirs, so you did what you had to do, but not with the same—you know, you look back on wars and you figure like, World War II was a legitimate war, so to speak. I mean, they fought for a reason. And it was—I'm not glorifying it by any means, but still, there was a purpose and everything else, and you see it—I was hoping out of Vietnam we'd get the fact that, you know, send people off to war and to experiencing all that without a reason to win. And you see it happening again. And unfortunately, it's not good. And there again, my—I respect and have the utmost respect for people that do—elect to go into the military because it's giving up a portion of your life and you don't much payback in return. You know, so—take a break then? Or—?

Gibb: You want to take a break?

Wellens: Mm-hmm.

Gibb: Yeah. Yeah.

Wellens: I'm going to take a drink of water. Did you want some water or something?

Gibb: No.

**[0:59:45] [Break in recording]**

Gibb: Okay. So just to back us up a little bit. If you could tell me just how far away from Khe Sanh was the hill that you were and how many people were out there, just so we can get an idea of—

Wellens: Okay. It was approximately four miles from the Khe Sanh base. You could see the base real well. And 861, that denotes how high—you know, it was pretty high. And about two hundred of us were on the hill. In its own way, if you want to look at some of the things that you could experience when you could kind of blot out where you were,

sometimes when you'd get up real early in the morning and you'd go outside your bunker, we were actually above the clouds. The clouds would set in the valley and you could just see the tops of the hills. It was beautiful. It was serene. You weren't getting shot at because they couldn't see you on the hill then. And within an hour, everything returned to abnormal. [Chuckles] But it was, just to be able to experience the beauty of some of that there. It was a beautiful country. Unfortunately, it got a bad case for it because of what we were involved in, but overall, once in a while, I think it was an opportunity to kind of ground yourself again and reflect on your thoughts. Because usually you were either so tired or so—everything was happening so fast you never—sometimes it was good you didn't have a chance to think, because I think it might have really disrupted your mental stability, but overall, it was—and that was our main goal, was just to sit up there and be the thorn in the side so they couldn't overtake the base, which was their real—their goal was to take that over.

They figured at one time, we—down in the valleys it was a very thick jungle down there. There was—we were outnumbered. I forget what it was. It was quite a bit, but they figured about forty-thousand NVA [North Vietnamese Army] troops were down there. And as I said before, I found out the hard way that they were very well armed. They were very well disciplined. And they were good soldiers. And they were fighting for a cause.

Gibb: What was your first experience of enemy fire with them all coming into contact with them? Do you remember what that—when that was?

Wellens: You mean—

Gibb: So, the first time you realized that they were—

Wellens: Oh, that they were—

Gibb: —so well trained, when was that?

Wellens: [Sighs] Oh. It was far as—to realize how really strong of a [inaudible] they were, it kind of floored me, it scared me. And I began to think in terms that I might not make it. You know, and that was the first time, but overall—then again, you would see some of the—when our own—they fought hard to save our lives there. If it wasn't for air power, I don't think we would have made it. We had B-52 bombing runs. They would drop those bombs between us and the base, which was just four miles, but it was amazing. You could look up in the sky at a blue—a completely blue sky. They wouldn't even see them things. And they could drop that bomb load [chuckling] down in that valley between us and them, and how they did that is beyond me, but it just—it was just devastating. And this was disheartening. Just after they'd do that, they'd start shooting at us again. [Chuckles] Now how—it was just amazing that their resolve was—it's just beyond my comprehension because I would have been getting out of there. I mean, how can you go up against a B-52 bomb raid? But they did. And they just replaced the ones that didn't survive and go at it again. So, you know, the time, and I guess it's true, as far as I'm concerned, we lost the war because the resolve to win and we didn't.

Gibb: So, what was your day-to-day work, or what were you doing when you were on that—in that defensive position?

Wellens: Pretty much reinforced positions—anything that came in. Like if a helicopter, a re-supply came in for—they wouldn't even land, and they would just drop the nets down. We'd have to carry—the helicopter, it was like a—the helicopter pad was in the lower part of the hill. It was like a two-grade hill, but there was this big, steep hill up to where all the defensive things were. And when they dropped—we had to carry that stuff up then, and it was, oh. That was sheer misery.

[1:05:00]

Because they were getting shot at and you got incoming mortar and everything doing this, so it was—needless to say, it was a little stressful. [Chuckles] [Beeping] And as far as—you actually wore your clothes until they basically rotted off. And then—you wouldn't get anything new if it was still hanging on by a thread. And we were pretty ripe, as far as—and I remember one fella I was teamed up with. We were in a bunker, underground, now at night time. We had to perform missions with our mortar tool bin, so we had our landline communications there. But we were down in the bunker right next to the mortar pit, and if he laid on his back, I'd lay on my side. That's how close the quarters were. It was very tight.

And then this one time we got the bright idea, we'd get boxes of—they'd have cigarettes and things for cosmetic—or, not cosmetic, but you know what I'm saying. Soap and stuff.

Gibb: Yeah.

Wellens: Toothpaste. And so, you'd get bars of soap and stuff and what for? [Laughing] You don't have any showers here, but it did—it was during the monsoons and it did. It would rain. And then it'd quit—rain, quit. So, we got the bright idea to, when it rained, we hopped onto our mortar pit and stripped down, and soaped up, and then it quit raining. [Laughs] I said after that, we'd start sweating, we'd bubble. So, it was funny things that did happen. And I'd say, I think the biggest thing was to retain your sense of humor. You know, even under the conditions, you had to, and to relay things of home and stuff.

And we'd get—not like the wars nowadays. Your main thing was communications from home, a letter—a letter from your girlfriend, a letter from your parents or something. And they sent things like—I remember—well, I turned twenty up on the hill there in January, right after we got hit. And [motor] my parents sent me—my dad sent me a cake wrapped in newspaper. And I mean, living out in the country, here was the local yokel paper here. Like, “On Thanksgiving, so-and-so visited. They had turkey and cranberries and they—” You know, and these guys—we all shared everything. And so, I shared—and some of the guys there, some of the fellas from the bigger inner cities there, they'd start opening up and they'd say, “Hey, listen to this one.” And they got the biggest charge out of that. I mean, theirs—that was the way we lived out here, you know. They got a big charge out of it, so it was fun.

Even like on—prior to the twenty first of January when all hell broke loose, we had to man the radios every night. And me being one of the new guys then, I had the middle-of-the-night watch. And it was about, I think an hour or two hours' watch. I'm not sure what it was. But we had small transistor radios, and they had a very strong Armed Forces radio network over there, and repeater stations. So even—it was very remote at Khe Sanh. It was out in the middle of nowhere. And I was on—you always listened to the radio they had, and music from the sixties, which I'm still addicted to. [Chuckles] And they would play—you know, as on—

And then I was listening and they said, “Live from Green Bay, Wisconsin,” that Ice Bowl was on. And they broadcast it live. And living in this area, I mean, we were Packer all the way. And I couldn't believe it. So, I took my watch and however long—and you know how an AM station—right towards the end, that big Bart Starr ran it in for a touchdown. And the radio was fading and I'm sitting there, “Come on. Come on.” And then I just heard Bart Starr a touchdown. And there was two guys in that bunker—they were sleeping in cots there. And I just, you know, I just let out a scream and oh, my gosh. You know, they thought something was happening. [chuckles] And I just, Oh, must not be Packer fans. [Laughs]

But as I said, there were just certain things that you do recall. The day-to-day thing was pretty mundane and basically to keep things—keep on the upper edge because you never knew when you were going to get hit again, that was it. You got into a routine and once you figured it out you were okay with it.

**[1:10:11]**

Gibb: You mentioned things from home. Were you sending letters back? Were you receiving letters?

Wellens: Yes. That was huge. I mean, mail call. When you got a letter, it meant a lot. And then you wrote home. And one thing I wished I'd never told my dad is where I was at when I first got there. But I had no idea at the time it was—nothing was happening. And then it got to be one of the major events of the Vietnam War. And every day people were injured or killed there. So, it was pretty bad. You know, and you don't want to share that. You just, “I'm okay. I'm fine. Still doing well and up and kicking.”

Gibb: You didn't tell him anything specific about what you were—

Wellens: No. No, I didn't. I think he knew because he was in World War II, but he understood that part of it I wouldn't—I didn't want to bother him any more than what he'd seen on TV.

Gibb: Okay. And were you aware of what that particular battle that you were involved in, were you aware of how that was being reported and how important it was going to—

Wellens: No. I had no idea. I thought because it was my first initial—I thought, Man, this is going to—this is the way it is. [Laughing] And it's going to be a heck of a year. And it turned out—we had—you'd go for lapses then, after we got out of Khe Sanh. But no, Khe Sanh was probably my most memorable by far experience there because of the conditions of

how dire it was. And I had no idea until I got back home, and some years later you start watching the whole year of 1968. Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King. All these things happened that year. And I was totally oblivious to all of that stuff. You know? And you didn't worry—you weren't aware of how big of an event Khe Sanh was even, because for us, we experienced it. You know, okay. [Chuckles] You just took it on a day-to-day basis and it was really something.

Even like the Martin Luther King, if I can—as long as I'm on that topic. Once I got to be the platoon sergeant, I say I always had a good—a real good, you know, with the Blacks and the Hispanics. I—we had no issues about race. But you noticed—that was in probably October, November of sixty-eight. These new replacements coming into our outfit, especially if they were black, there was a real strong animosity towards us. And I—What's going on? I mean, the fellas I had been there with, the African-Americans I'd been there with through my whole thing, there was no problem. But these people were—there was lots going on here in the States then, too. There was the riots and everything else that, there again, you shut this part of your life out. You were in a different world right then and you were living to go home. And it was—

And I didn't figure that out until I was watching something on PBS one night about 1968, the turbulent year. Holy frig, all that stuff went on there? Oh, he says, yeah. I said, "Oh, I didn't realize that." And you start putting two and two together. Okay. There was a reason, you know. There was a reason, and you could just sense it. And being in a command position, you didn't want to push anybody too far, [chuckles] because they were—there was a real animosity there, something I hadn't experienced. I mean, as far as we were concerned, we were all fighting for the same cause then and all of a sudden it was—just like that. It just happened. It turned things right around on a dime there.

Gibb: That's a really interesting observation.

Wellens: Yeah.

Gibb: So, after Khe Sanh. So, you left the base there?

Wellens: Yeah.

Gibb: Khe Sanh?

**[1:14:58]**

Wellens: Yes. We went down to a place called Quảng Trị. They helicoptered us out of Khe Sanh. [Laughing] And I remember that helicopter, "Go, go, go." And you know, finally it lifted off and you looked back and you could just see it fading in the background. Ahh. We got to Quảng Trị and we came running off that helicopter. Well, this was kind of—it was a secure area and the guys, "Don't worry. Don't worry. You know, you don't have to—" We were running looking for a hole. And no, everything was different. So, they just, you know, "Just throw all your clothes in this pile." They had big tanker trucks there. We took a shower. They fed us that night. They fed us, oh gosh. It was steak and everything else. Well, after eating all that C-rations food, ahh. [ Laughing] It just—it

was horrible, the stomach cramps and everything else. I mean, you just ate too much too fast. And it was a horrible night. But then they set us that night—they set us in a tent. It was like white beach sand there. It was real—it was just comfortable. It was nice to feel safe for a change.

And were just in these big tents sleeping above ground. And it was right near the airstrip there in Quảng Trị. In the middle of the night they rocketed the airstrip and it hit the tent next to us and killed every guy in it. And I just thought then, There is no place in this stupid country that's safe—every guy was dead. I don't know how many were in there—twenty-some guys, but it had a direct hit. I mean, they weren't aiming for that. They were aiming for the air—but they had the massive rockets that they shot in that night. And it was—that was the, you know—I mean, it was a strong realization that there's no front here. It's all over.

And we went—we pulled operations out of there then. And there again, I think after you start analyzing some of the things and you see it now, too, in these things that are going on over the East, Far East there. I feel so sorry for the people, the Vietnamese even, the kids and the women and stuff. If they were partial to our side, the other side would kill them and vice versa. They had nowhere to go. We knew that if we made it—we had a thirteen-month tour of duty. We were coming home. They weren't, you know? They had to stay. And that was a—when you start realizing, getting more philosophical about things—at the time you didn't think any of that. I started thinking this after I got home, just that—and you know, and the people, they were nice people, really. A lot of them were.

I can bring one incident up. When we came—we were operating out of—Quảng Trị was our home base, but we'd go out and pull operations and stuff from there. But there was one girl. I still remember her name. It was Quynh. And she must have been twelve, thirteen, a real pretty girl. And we came back in. It was hot and miserable, and she offered us a cool drink of water. And usually it had a price tag to it, you know. And they sold soda and stuff for two bucks a can, and well, you'd buy it, well—to spend your money. But she says, “No, no, no, no. You know, it's yours.” And every time we'd come in she was there to greet us and give us that. What a nice person, you know. I mean, there was humanity there, that you could really—and it was just something—it sticks in your mind because it was just a little act of kindness. And she did. She really, she did. She exemplified that in a big way.

Gibb: So, did you have any leave while you were—?

Wellens: R&R [Rest & Relaxation]?

Gibb: Yeah.

Wellens: Yes, I did. My friend told me—we got R&R by kind of like, seniority. The longer you were there, you could pick your spot. He says, “Wait for Australia.” [Chuckles] So I did. I was there almost eight-and-a-half months, and I got Australia. And I tell you what. [Laughing] It is a beautiful country. I don't remember anything, but I sure had a good time. Yeah, it was really nice.

[1:19:58]

I mean, the people—that was the biggest thing, was to be able to experience somebody that spoke your language. There was a lot of other R&R ports, but in Australia—and the people were so friendly. And I remember when we got there, we were on a bus going from the airport to the R&R Center to get some more, how would you say? Briefings on what we had, could and couldn't do. And we were riding down in Sydney on the street there and well, at that time, it was in the sixties and the mini-skirts were really mini. [Laughs] And our guys, "Look at this one over here." And the whole bus almost tipped over. And the guy driving, "Sit down, [inaudible]." He says, "You're going to get your chance." He was mad, but we were—nobody listened, but it was really a nice week of—unfortunately—

My dad was there in World War II because he fought in New Zealand and the Philippines, too. So, he asked me if I—[laughing] "I didn't get to watch—" I didn't see any of the local country, but he was there for a quite a while. But you know, you had to pack as much into a week as you could, but it was really nice. And the people, I said, they were overly friendly. They weren't out just for your dollar. It was a true, you know, they invited us to parties and things like that. And they treated us really well. But it went by, bam, and it was over. That's what was kind of mind-boggling. One day you're in mud up to your nose and mosquito bites and leeches and everything else, and then all of a sudden, you're in a hotel with a shower, and a TV, and we stayed right in the Kings Cross section if you're familiar with Austral—with Sydney. Yeah. We stayed in the fancy part of town. Money was no issue because I'd saved quite a bit just to go there, and so we had really a good time.

Gibb: What did you do when you were there? Or what I assume you did? [Laughter]

Wellens: Well, the first night, I ran into a—it was early in the afternoon, and I came into this bar. It was like in a lower level so that the lighting, it was kind of—my eyes weren't adjusted to the dark yet. And I was just standing there looking around. And all of a sudden, some guy comes in and just nails me right in the arm, and I thought, Oh my god. I come all the way to Australia and get in a fight. And I turned around and this big guy who's about six-foot-four, well, it was a guy that I hung out with. He lived about not even ten miles from here—a good friend of mine. And he was in the Army, and he was on R&R at the same time, and it was a choice coincidence. I almost died. You know, I thought, "Oh my goodness. What are the odds?" So, between the two of us—

As far as what we did? Well, we went to Bondi Beach quite a bit. [Chuckles] And you know, well, the girls were just super. And that was probably the main part of your—you know, it was—they were really nice. We just enjoyed it and they were beautiful. [Laughs] And the fact—if they talked—if like you'd talk real fast you got the accent, too. I, you know, but when they talked slower I could understand everything. That's what was nice, I guess. You were just able to relate to everything. And I wished I would have gone and seen more, but you only had seven days. And we went across that big bridge there. And that was beautiful. So, we did experience some of the things there. But even like I remember this one cab driver we had, and he just, he says, "I won't charge

you anything.” And he just took us all around, just out of kindness, you know. So, it was nice. It was a really nice experience.

I remember when I got back to Vietnam, it was just before dark and everything pretty much shut down there, and I was right at the Da Nang Airport. And they said, you know—I was find some pla—there was a picnic table right next to the runway and they were flying night jet sortie missions out of there, and all night long. [Chuckling] And I didn’t wake up once. And the next thing I remember, somebody was shaking me in the morning. It was an older, like one of the papa-sans with the little goatee things there. And he was shaking me and I’m looking up at him, [laughing] “Where am I?” I just—I was just dead to the world. And it was—so it was a fun time, but you know, you wished you probably had done more to see the scenery. But the scenery to me was pretty girls and that [laughing] was it. So, I had that, so it was fun.

[1:25:00]

Gibb: So how long were you in Vietnam after you got back from R&R?

Wellens: I had another—it was, let’s see. I had eight, nine—four more months. We had a thirteen-month tour of duty. So, I had four more months. And yeah, it was still a lot to go then, but by that time, you were into the swing of things then. And we had different things that happened. And certainly, after that I remember when we got back and we were way out in the jungle area, leap-frogging from point to point. And this was one of the most horrendous things that happened, too, was we would clear a landing zone so we could get re-supplied. And then they’d re-supply. Then we move on and the other group would stay behind.

Well, we were the stay-behind group this one day and one of our own jets dropped a huge bomb on our forward company. And I don’t know how many guys they killed of our people. And they loaded them, because it was a triple canopy there, they loaded them in an external net in a helicopter, body parts and all. And we had to go unload them, and they didn’t want to fly into Da Nang because of news people. And by then, the war was getting a very bad name. And that would have been really—try and—newspaper or television. I mean, to put all them body parts from that into the chop—inside the chopper, it was—it was bad, really bad. And I guess you often thought of that. This is somebody’s son, somebody’s brother, somebody’s you know, whatever. It just—it scares you, too, because it could have been you, you know. And then to have it done by one of our own planes, that was hard to take, too.

So, I mean, it was—by far it wasn’t over yet. Even though you did experience some of living life again, and then you’re back to doing stuff like that. It was—it wasn’t a good thing.

Gibb: And you were saying you were a platoon sergeant at this point? You were a platoon sergeant—

Wellens: Yes.



Gibb: —during this?

Wellens: Yeah. I was—

Gibb: So, what were your responsibilities doing that?

Wellens: I was only in—I wasn't even a sergeant then.

Gibb: Oh, okay.

Wellens: I was only an E-4, a corporal, but we were hurting on people so bad that I was the senior person, and that's what they went with, experience. And the responsibilities, you find that out the hard way. Like sending people to do the things, like listening posts and things like that that you hated to do when you were on that end of it. It was hard things. And that incident I told you about, the drug thing—making sure that I was in charge of the machine gunners, the mortars and the rockets. But they were spread out with the squads. Sometimes—like that one time when we were on that—that's when I took over when we were on that twenty-mile stretch, watching the roads. And so yeah, you go up and down and make sure their machine guns were all okay, and all their weaponry was in good use.

So, I found out that one time, too. When we were up at Khe Sanh. I forgot to mention this, that machine gunners were one of the prime targets. They were hit real hard that night. We got hit that we got overrun on the hill. And we lost quite a few machine gunners that night, so they—our lieutenant came down into our mortar pit one day and he says, "You are going to learn how to operate a machine gun." [Laughs] Just, "Okay." So, they gave me a course because they lost so many, so you know, it was—but there again, the discipline part of it. You understood that this was—nobody wanted to be there anyways, but you had to do your part. So, you did. You accepted everything. It was—

But the responsibilities of it, you looked so forward to being in that position. The one time we were in a rear area, you'd get a couple days to kind of get squared away, write letters home and stuff, in between operations. And just—they'd bring in palettes of beer so you can kind of drown yourself in that.

[1:29:58]

But it was in the monsoons and we had this—I also compared it to, like some of these officers—we had some really good officers, some really, really decent ones. But some of them were jerks. And I always compared—if you ever watched the show, *Hogan's Heroes*, sending you to the Russian front or something. It's relating to the World War II. Well, some of these officers, this one captain we had, I'm sure that's what happened to him, that he screwed up in the rear and somebody said, "Send him to the Infantry Company." And he wasn't good at it at all, so our guys—we were in a tent. It was raining cats and dogs. It was the monsoons. And they were in there, just kind of relaxing. And he came in there and he says, "I want your men outside filling sandbags." And I told him, "Come on." No. He was adamant. Okay.

So, I told the guys, “Come on. You got to fill sandbags.” So, we went out there and I mean, they were really, really mad. And I was out there and he called me over. He says, “You know, you don’t have to do this.” And I says, “My life depends on these guys.” [Chuckling] And I hope I got a message to him, “so does yours, buddy.” You know, you can be shot in the back any time, and you know, but that’s it. I mean, you had to, as well as being a leader, you understood that the responsibilities to your people was to understand them, too. And you know, that you tried to do because not too long ago I was at that same level, and it wasn’t too pleasant then, either. And some of these guys I had been over there with, too. They didn’t come up through the ranks as fast as I did, so there was—it was something.

And one thing, too, you always remember, whenever we went on anything, if we were going—if they were getting—if we were being installed into an operation—when you’re sitting in that helicopter, the noise is quite loud. So, nobody’s talking. But you just look at everybody’s face and you can just see the same, you know, you don’t know what’s going to happen. And you’re minutes away from if it’s going to be a hot LZ [Landing Zone] or one that you can just run off and you don’t know. And everybody, you’re all scared. And you’re just—you’re twitching your rifle and everything, and stuff like that.

That one experience I had that time when—if I can go back to something here. When there was just the few of us left on that one hill when they mortared us and we had an old friend of ours in my squad, he got killed. And it still, it’s hard—just a few minutes before I was talking to the guy. Now he’s dead. And you know, and his eyes are wide open and you shut them. But there was another friend of mine, he was a machine gunner and we had—we were one of the nine that entered the Company together. And he borrowed my watch that my dad had given me prior to going to Vietnam. It was a real fancy watch, because it was—time—when you had watches at night—the guy I was with had a watch, so he always borrowed mine so they could tell when your two hours were up or whatever. And he got hit real bad. His arm was blown off. And I was carrying him to the chopper and he apologized for losing my watch. And I just—“You know what? I—[sighs]—I don’t care. You know, I just don’t care.” And it just—it really hurt. I mean, things like that that sometimes it’s lucky you don’t have an opportunity to sit down and grasp all that’s going on because I’m sure you would go crazy. You know, and you were—it was activity.

Then that friend of ours that was killed—when we did finally get helicoptered out that night, we were all over the Khe Sanh base with our dead friend trying to find admissions to that. And I mean, things were—artillery was going off there and everything. So, everybody’s—it’s not that they’re ignoring you, but that things were happening that you couldn’t—so you know, it’s hard.

And then you want to respect that body because there are people back here that belonged to him. And it’s very difficult to—when you think deeper than just the moment, and you start thinking deeper, it kind of gets to you, that, too.

**[1:35:01]**

So, I guess, when you see things that are happening, again, like they them ads for the

Wounded Warriors and stuff like that, I just—that just tears me apart.

Gibb: Did you ha—so you mentioned that you did have some friends out there. Was there anybody else that you were friends with the entire time that you were out there, and that you went home with?

Wellens: Yes. Yes. There were a couple of guys that we did make it. One guy—and I'm not that skilled on the internet yet. I'm going to—I get my daughter [chuckling] to help me, but one of my friends, the friend that was with me that kept me sane the night that we were in that foxhole together, him and I—he lives in—he lives down south in Georgia. And we got together one night, and we just talked all night. We went down to—when the kids were young, we went down to Disney World. We still correspond and everything. And I mean, it was—we got a lot of common things. Unfortunately, the one fella that I really, really got close to, he was from Jacksonville, Florida. He was black, but him and I were just like brothers. And I'd been looking his name up—I've been trying to find him on the internet and everything.

I'd just love to get together with him again, because when we were in K Company, 3rd Battalion, 26th Marines most of our tour. And just prior to us rotating back to the States, our unit was going on float. They would go on board ships off the coast of Vietnam and where things really happened bad, they would heli-lift these guys in off the ship and install them into where the action was. Well, we didn't have enough time left in the country, myself and his name was Joe. We didn't have enough time left, so we got—and unfortunately, the night before, you know what we did. [Chuckles] So we just raised heck, and the next morning I just remember him. He was on the back of one truck just kind of slumped over. I was in the back with everyone going in different directions the last time I saw him. But we had gone through Khe Sanh together. We'd gone through—all through the whole thing and whenever, I mean, he was just a super guy. And I knew as much about his family as he knew about mine because we just exchanged everything. I sure hope that before I get Alzheimer's disease that I can [chuckling] find him. It'd be nice. It would be really nice to link up with him. We'd have a lot to go back on there. That's for sure. But we developed a very strong friendship. There again, color was not an issue.

Gibb: So, I don't know if you want to talk about maybe the end of it and then returning home. What was that?

Wellens: Oh, yeah. That was an experience in itself. I think the whole event, especially as you were starting to wind down your tour into Vietnam, they always had the short-timers' calendars and stuff on your helmets or something, and you were. I mean, you were looking forward to that day of coming home. And as it got closer, and closer, and closer, you know, Oh God, finally. And finally, the day came and you got your orders, and I had—we had met up in Okinawa again, get cleaned up and everything to come home. And you put your—got your uniform on. I was very proud of the ribbons I'd won, and my rank, everything. I was just—I was proud. I was proud to be a Marine, you know. And as—

I remember the plane. It was a civilian jet or—yeah. Civilian airplane, commercial

airplane, and there was two-hundred and some odd Marines that had been to Vietnam for over a year. I felt so sorry for them [laughing] stewardesses, because everyone on there thought they were Don Juan or something, you know. They were all hitting on the stewards. And I remember one in particular. She was real beautiful. She had this—the big beehive hair thing that—and she had the little party curls. By the time—it was, I think like, eleven straight hours. We flew non-stop from Okinawa to California.

[1:40:00]

[Laughing] The party curls were straight. But they did—they did a wonderful job of—I just went to sleep. I tried to sleep. And when the jet hit the landing—the area into California there, “Please remain seated.” [Laughing] You might as well talk to a stone. Everybody was just lined up by the door trying to get out. And then, it was funny. We took—myself and some others, we had to take a cab, and we’d all pooled our money together and took the cab. And as I got closer to home, I got more scared. I didn’t want to come home. I—it was funny. And the people, they looked right through you. You know, I didn’t get spit on or anything like some guys experienced, but a very cold, very cold—you could just sense it. These people, they don’t even know you exist. Nobody came up to me and said, “Hey, you know—” Nobody. Nobody acknowledged me. That hurt. I mean, I didn’t want to hurt—I mean, to any—you know, it was just what you were plugged into and it was very difficult. And I was very happy to get rid of that uniform when I got home—and not that I wasn’t proud of it, but I was just happy to get out of it.

And then I went to my local area, my local bar and everything, and everybody seemed so immature. You just—you couldn’t—you talked as though you were picking up where you left off. Never happened, you know. I mean, it was—your youth was gone, basically. Everything that you’d grown up to—everything was tipped upside-down. So, you start rebuilding, and luckily I got my wife and things start—and just start coming together again and stuff. But I didn’t—I would say sometimes people look at the Vietnam era Vet and they kind of depicted him as a person, you know, drug problems and homeless and everything else. Well, it—the majority of us—I know a lot of people that did it, returned and I had a very successful life. So, I have no qualms about that, no. I mean, it was just—that’s the time of history I was plugged into and, you know, I survived.

There are some things that—there’re good things out of it. I know sometimes when you had some difficulties in life, you look back and say, “I’ve been through a lot worse.” And you could just [chuckling] dust yourself off and way you go. So that was—

Gibb: And what was it like seeing your family again?

Wellens: That was, well, my dad, he had—I said—I told you my mother died when I was real young, so he had gotten remarried. He didn’t remarry until after I was in the service actually, and on—so I was coming home and they picked me up at the airport. And having lived under that environment for that amount of time, I did something that I was so embarrassed. When I was talking, I dropped the “F” bomb in front of them. I was so embarrassed. And I just looked at him. “I’m sorry. I’m going to go to sleep.” So, it was

just—it wasn't me. I just—I didn't—it took a while of—well, that was your routine way of talking. I mean, everybody talked that way, so you just get accustomed to it and it just came out. You know, "Oh my God. I got some retraining to do here." And so, you had to work at it, but everything went fine.

And then returning, I still had—this is a good thing, too, I think. A lot of the guys, especially the draftees, were boot camp, Vietnam, out. And I actually enlisted for three years, but you notice that I was only in for twenty—I think twenty-five or twenty-six months I was active. Well, there's a reason for that. I came back to the States and I got sent in to Camp Pendleton again. And it was different. They sent us out on—all of us were Vietnam—we were a bunch of smart asses, you know. [Chuckles] You were just—you went from rigid boot camp training, very disciplined, to Vietnam. Let your hair grow. I mean, everything's just a wash. And all of a sudden, bam, you're back into this strong discipline again.

[1:45:00]

And there was a reason for that, too, because at that time you had to spend, I think it was over a year or something, and it was some kind of a law to that effect, before you were—they could—eligible to send—and Vietnam was really ramped up heavy then. That was nineteen, you know, the 1968, sixty-nine, yet they were still on the upward swing. So, they needed bodies. And they made it hard on you because you could sign a waiver. And you know, you'd get another rank. You'd go up in rank or they'd send you back. And then they could send you back over to Vietnam like that. I made it. I'm not [chuckling] going back there. No way.

And so, I just—I was able to just be calm, and so but in California, we were playing war games of all things. And it was just the most hid—stupidest thing in the world, running around on the hills of Camp Pendleton playing war games after you'd seen the real thing. And I thought, This is stupid. So, I knew a guy that worked in the office, or up in the front end. I said, "You got any—" He'd get the quotas coming in for transfers, and I said, "I got to get out of here." So, he told me that there was a place in—coming up in Norfolk, Virginia, which I didn't even know where that was at. I knew it was on the east coast some place. I said, "Fine. Put my name in there."

So, I got transferred to Norfolk. And there I got my top security clearance because [laughing] I—that they wouldn't allow me to get before. And we watched—because the Marines are part of the Navy, we'd watch all the main gates and all that stuff there. And they had a military prison there. And at that time, I was a pretty good-sized guy. And they put me in the military prison. So, I called home and told my Dad, "I'm in the Brig." "What'd you do?" [Chuckling] And I says, "I'm a guard." "Okay." But it was different. And that in itself was kind of difficult, too, because a lot of the fellas there—it wasn't—we would get transients, just spend some time there. They were in for something like murder or something, but they were moving on to Leavenworth or something. But the majority of the guys were there for being AWOL [Absent Without Leave] or something, and they were all Vietnam—you know, it was hard to break hard on them and anything.

So, I was there with—we had our own little Marine barracks there and everything else.

And we had a pretty good time. We were a small unit. And we—I came back from leave in July of that year and they called me down to the office. And I said, “What do you want me for? I didn’t do anything wrong. I wasn’t even here.” And they just told me that because of my military occupation, I was Infantry, they were only keeping people with critical—people that had been really trained in stuff. You know, and specialized in artillery or something more specific. And all the Infantry they were going to give an early out. “Are you interested?” [Laughing] I says, “Am I interested? Yes.” So, I got that. I got out almost a year early. So that was kind of nice.

And the fella I roomed with, he was really upset because him and I were doing the same thing. We were both at that Brig, guards. And he had a critical military occupation. He didn’t get out. [Laughs] Oh, was he upset. So, I was—it was nice, but I was also happy to get out. And then I got promoted just before I got out. I had a pretty good service record. And they—they did take note of it, that my lieutenant, when I was overseas that time and brought that ammunition down to the fellas that one morning, and he was the one who assigned it. And he gave me a meritorious promotion for that. So, I just, you know, I just shot up in the ranks. I never got in any real trouble or anything. So, I got out as a sergeant. And I thought, that’s kind of nice. It looks nice on your record then, too.

That’s what I say. The patriotism has never left. I do—obviously, it’s with the enlisted man, you know, that have more partiality to it. But where I worked for my career, I was a lineman, an electric lineman. And the boss of our—the utility we worked for, he had a fitness program one time. So, we—he broke us into groups and we’d jog, and whoever had the most miles in your group won, you know.

**[1:50:03]**

It was just a thing to get people out, getting their heart beating. We got to talking. Come to find out that his father was a colonel in the Army, and he was the last official casualty of the Vietnam War before they signed the—just before they signed the Armistice. There were more people killed after him, but he was the last official one. And he got—and my boss’s name was Byron. Well, he got—his dad’s buried in Arlington now. And he actually rode on Airforce One, because his dad was a colonel. And—well, Nixon was the president then, and so they got—he’s got pictures on his office wall of them, their family with the president and things like that. He was only thirteen at the time. But it just brought us a bond. So now we’re still real good friends.

And, in fact, when I came close to retirement, the utilities did go out there and they lobbied for different things for utilities in Washington, DC once a year. And he asked if—he told our board of directors that he’d pay my way if I could stay in the hotel there—it’s right near all the malls and everything, and downtown DC. And they said no. I had worked there for like, forty years almost. And they said, “No. We’ll pay his way and everything.” So, I went there. We were there for five days and it was like having a tour guide because he knew his way around—he went to see his dad’s burial. I mean, we just had a great time. It was just nice, all the monuments and the highlights of—and things like—I mean, it was really nice. Some of the things, even like the Holocaust Museum. I don’t know if you’ve ever been there. It’s horrible to see what humanity can do. And then you understood why wars sometimes are necessary. But it was just a nice

sidetrack to some of the things that occurred in my life that restores your faith in humanity, you might say, and things that are related to Vietnam that—the good things, you might say, that we were able to build on.

And I often wondered, being one of the guys that either carried or zipped somebody up in a body bag, and carried him to—you start thinking sometimes. You said, “This—he belongs to somebody.” And I met somebody now that was on the other side of the story, and able to go back and forth, and some of the things that—and you never realize how difficult sometimes we do fight. You might say, “Well, it’s just a dead body,” but you tried, like they say, you never leave a fallen soldier behind. And we practiced that a lot. We really—you put yourself out a lot of times just to get a guy—you didn’t know if he was dead or alive, but you’d crawl out there to get him and bring him back to safety. Just out of respect. And you hope that somebody’d do the same for you. I mean, it’s—it was quite a thing.

But then, I think as time went on and you got more and more—time heals. And that was, as I was saying before, that was a good thing that—my dad always told me—when he was in the Philippines for four years—at that time, they just went and they stayed until the duration of the war. Well, he said coming back on a troop transport he had a time—it was like group therapy. You all had experienced the same thing, so you all related your stories, figured out we all had it just as bad. Well, that was the same thing about having time to do, as opposed to getting discharged as soon as I got home. I was able—we were able to go out—when I was in California, we’d go out to the bars and you’d just start with some of the stories. You know, obviously, that’s what you all had in common. And you found—you kind of—you were able to get some of that aggression and the inner things out of you prior to coming home. So that was a good thing overall, even though you did want to get out real bad, but on the same token, you were able to decompress a little bit in that time period. And I did. So, I thought in a roundabout way, everything just fell into the right slot, so to speak.

**[1:55:02]**

And maybe some people dispute that, but I am normal. [Laughs]

Gibb: [inaudible] anything.

Wellens: [laughs]

Gibb: You did mention on your form that you sent us that you heard about the program at LZ Lambeau.

Wellens: Oh, yeah.

Gibb: Tell me a bit about that, going to that.

Wellens: That was—I went—it was a three-day event. I went every three days. [Chuckles] Well, my boss, the one that his dad was killed, him and I went the opening of it. We went down there together. And it was quite—I thought, “Wow, it’s really neat.” So, then my

kids called me and they wanted to go. And I, “Well, sure.” So, we went all day that Saturday, and especially the boys, they were interested in some of the—they had the trucks and stuff, and some of the smaller muni—you know, the—and you’re very familiar with that stuff, so I just showed them some of the things. And then there was a lot of really—it was a nice camaraderie group there. Everybody was in a good mood, so to speak, and I really enjoyed it. And the kids—I was just proud of them that—I was happy, you know. You’d think that they didn’t care, but they do. They really did. They really enjoyed it and we just, we had a good time. We were there the entire day and stayed well into the evening. And they even had—one of the girls that was on the Armed Forces Radio Network, Chris—no, was it Chris Noel? Yeah, I think so—was her name. And oh, she had the sexiest voice. And she would [chuckles], she’d get on the thing and she was a disc jockey, and she’d, “Hi, love.” And then she would go on to—and she’d go—and I mean, she was at the event. “But she got old,” [Laughs] I said. “Well,” he said, “Did you look in a mirror?” I says, “Yeah. Oh, yeah.” But it was a really, really nice thought. I just had a great time there. It was really a nice event, and a lot of the fellas that you did—it was easy to talk to anybody. “Where were you at? Where were you at?” So on, so forth. And so, it was a nice event all the way around. I give credit to who put it up there. It was really, really quite an ordeal.

And I say one of the biggest things, I suppose the silver lining, and I think as far as the reception we got when we got home—and that’s what I told a class in the school there. “Don’t ever, ever do that. You have no idea the sacrifices these people go through when they go to Afghanistan or to the Iraq, or wherever it might. It’s huge. Respect them and appreciate them. I mean, if there’s anything you got out of Vietnam, please get that out of it. That’s all I ask.” It’s not a thing that you want to dwell on as far as, you know, “Oh, poor me.” I never felt that way. You came back and there again, it was just a time slot. I told the kids, “If you were born in the sixties, you would be up here talking and I’d be listening.” So, it’s just the time you’re plugged into. I was plugged into that time frame and here I am.

Gibb: And do you—maybe so, given the fact that they had the event—but do you think that the reception towards Vietnam Vets has changed—

Wellens: Yeah.

Gibb: —since you first got back?

Wellens: Yeah, I do, because you see them at Memorial Day parades, and a lot of them are in the, your Veterans groups and stuff, VFWs [Veterans of Foreign Wars] and so on and so forth. They’re the leadership right now. And I think they do us honor, the people that had been there. You know, there was a lot of events that did happen, and I didn’t realize—the Mỹ Lai Massacre happened while I was there. That was horrendous. And you read about that, and the few guys that actually did something to deter some of that. But how anybody could be that cruel, I—it’s beyond me. I mean, come on.

**[1:59:59]**

I mean, you’re not an animal. You’re expected to do some pretty hideous things, but



you're not an animal. And those things like that are—it's just—and unfortunately, that gets top press, and not everybody was that way. There was some very kind things that people did do there that we did as soldiers, too, to try to help things along. And unfortunately, they didn't turn out—it just got too much politics and everything in it. And it was—I say my whole attitude changed in the period I was there. And it just—it follows through to today's whatever you want to call them. And you see what's going on. You understand you can't turn the other cheek sometimes, but on the same token, don't go overboard either. You got to have some restraints and give it some thought.

It seems like such a long—it is such a long time ago now, but the guys that were getting to be, the olders now, too, you might say, but the memories of it and everything—I've got a hat that says, "Marines Vietnam Veteran." If I wear it, like if I go to shopping at something like that, you'd be surprised how many people usually I end up talking to as long as I'm talking to you here. You've got a lot of experiences to exchange and stuff, and that in itself is kind of interesting, too. You all share something that was really a major portion of your life, even though it was a short portion of it, but it sure left an effect on you for the rest of your life. And it always will. It's—it was quite an event. I mean, from just being some obscure place overseas to all of a sudden something that was huge. And then it's over. [chuckles] You know, it was just kind of a rollercoaster ride.

Gibb: I don't have any more questions. Is there anything else that—

Wellens: No. I guess that's about it. I think I covered pretty much everything that I can think of.

Gibb: Great. Thank you very much.

Wellens: Thank you.

Gibb: Appreciate this.

Wellens: Thank you.

Gibb: Appreciate you taking the time.

**[End of OH2039.Wellens\_user] [End of interview]**