

Robert Munson
Dartmouth College Oral History Project
The Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Ben Katz '26

BEN KATZ: This is Ben Katz. Today is May 4, 2023 and I am conducting this oral history interview for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. I am conducting this interview with Mr. Robert Munson. This interview is taking place in person in Carson Hall on the campus of Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. Mr. Munson, thank you for being with me today.

ROBERT
MUNSON: You're welcome.

KATZ: All right. So let's, uh, let's take it back to the start. Where and when were you born?

MUNSON: I was born in Brooklyn, New York on April 4, 1947.

KATZ: All right. Can you describe your family for me, your parents?

MUNSON: My father was career military. He was a pilot in the Navy. Uh, graduated from Cornell. And he was in the Navy from 1937 until 1959. So while I was [in] my young years. My mother was a public school teacher. She graduated from P.S. 1, in New York City, went to school at University of Michigan, and had a degree in physical education. And so when she met my dad during the course of the war and had a lot of kids, and we moved around a lot, so that was my progenitors. I had five brothers and sisters and moved around a lot as a child. So—

KATZ: Gotcha. What was your experience with moving around a lot as a child that changed? Do you think it changed the way you grew up at all?

MUNSON: I think it—well, first of all, I don't have any lifelong friends. Number one.

KATZ: Mhm

MUNSON: Nobody that I knew in first to 12th grade, do I have any connections with. However, it did allow me to be chameleon-like, in traveling, I love to travel. I've never felt uncomfortable in new places. Because

I know how to adapt into situations where I don't know anybody. I've learned through that that people are pretty much the same everywhere we go. They're uh—they may speak a different language, they may eat different types of food, but the percentage of them that are good, bad, whatever. It's pretty much the same where everyone goes.

KATZ: All right. Can you take me through some of the places that you lived?

MUNSON: Started off born in New York City. My dad moved—we moved to Rhode Island when he was in his—my brother, I'm number two, we lived in New York, until my dad moved to Newport, Rhode Island. He was in war college there. We then moved to Dayton, Ohio, where my second—third brother was born. Then we moved to Newfoundland, or Argentinia, Newfoundland. Then we moved to Kansas. And then we moved, uh, and then we moved to Corpus Christi, Texas, and then to Hawaii. And then back to Coronado, California, and then to Bremerton, Washington, and then to Arlington, Virginia, and then to Newport, Rhode Island. Actually, we lived in East Greenwich, my dad was stationed in Newport.

KATZ: So, were your times in each of those places, like about the same amount of time? or were you...

MUNSON: No, it was very limited. They were, moved around a lot more frequently when I was very young. I spent one—I—essentially had one school year in most of the places. With the exception of Hawaii: we were there for three years, 1954 to 1957. And then California and Washington. I split the third grade, I was removed halfway through my third grade. And then we moved to Virginia. We were again there for three years. And then my dad retired, we moved to Rhode Island. I was in eighth grade then. And I finished up my schooling there and then moved on to—moving to other places on my own. Shall we say. [Chuckles]

KATZ: So you're in Rhode Island for high school, right? How was your high school experience?

MUNSON: Not very good.

KATZ: Not very good?

MUNSON: It was too different from what I had grown up with in Virginia. Arlington, Virginia is an amazing school system. And I flourished there, dramatically—fantastically. East Greenwich, it was a, you

know—Arlington, Virginia is a hub of lots of things, it's the Pentagon is there one, you know, DC. It's a place, it's a suburb of the district. So you got a lot of people who have traveled. People who were in, I guess military families, government families. So a certain type of people I think that were there, very welcoming, very—and it was there weren't a lot of people that had been there for that long, so we have a kind of a transitory—so I fit right in. And then moving to East Greenwich, Rhode Island, Greenwich, actually, much more parochial attitude.

KATZ: Mhm.

MUNSON: And I did what I always did. I tried immediately to say, “Here I am!” And wasn't very successful at that. And the dynamic, the way that the school worked, by the culture of Rhode Island is very insular, as opposed to open where I was from. So very quickly, I was lost. And I had no—I never really made, never got involved with much of what was going on there. I kept trying to do new things. So very quickly, I decided that the solution was to get out of there and get out of high school as quickly as possible and sanely as possible and go someplace else. So it wasn't very—it was a very, it wasn't a good experience for me personally, shall we say?

KATZ: Did you have any escapes? Do you have anything that you...

MUNSON: Yeah, actually, my escape was where I learned to bowl. [laughs]

KATZ: Bowl?

MUNSON: Yeah. And I don't know—the base where we were, my Dad was stationed at Quonset point, there was a bowling alley, and there was a Saturday morning, young adults league. And I made, that's where I actually made friends, I had a couple of girls that we became friendly with. And so that was really my only, that was my only real escape. I didn't really ever connect with my fellow, my classmates— Played a little bit of sports, like high school play, you know, did a little bit of this little bit of that. Did okay, academically, I was in the advanced classes and things, but never really linked up. So that was my escape, to go on Saturday mornings. And then I would date some of the—this one girl in particular. That was my, she was my point of contact [Laughs]

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: with the other with the opposite sex through high school. But I had nothing—but she had nothing to do with—that was all that was an

escape, in that we had no common friends. She was in North Kingstown. I lived in East Greenwich. We saw each other on Saturday mornings, and then on dates. And when I would go to pick her up, we go someplace else and go back. We didn't go to school functions or anything like that. So that was really the only escape I had was Sue Steel and bowling. [Laughs]

KATZ: Did you spend a lot of time on the base? Or is it just those Saturday mornings?

MUNSON: That was about it. We would go, my parents would—there was a steamship round Sunday afternoon dinners that we would go out into the base. The base was in North Kingston, we lived in East Greenwich, and there really weren't any other activities, we belonged to a country club in East Greenwich. So even though I had an ID card, I could go on to the base, there really wasn't anything there other than the bowling alley to attract me or anything like that.

KATZ: All right, so what year do you graduate high school?

MUNSON: 1965

KATZ: 1965. So just a couple of years earlier, John F. Kennedy is killed. Is there any kind of reaction? I know you come from a very military family? Was there any effects in your family and any effects socially in high school?

MUNSON: It was a seminal moment, no question. I remember I was in an English class and my teacher, Mrs. Robert—fantastic English teacher, I had some really great teachers in my high school. We were sitting there and her husband came knocking [Munson knocks on table] on the door. So he comes into the class, pulls her aside, and she comes back and she sits down at the desk, because her hands.. y'know, outs head on the desk, hands in her face. So we find out then what's happened in—in that the, what they did at the school, as they said, "Everybody home," And then the next day, we had an assembly where we all sat around and talked about what was going on. We went home, they sent us all home, and we saw the thing with [Jack] Ruby and all that. And I would say, you know, again, I'm, for whatever reason, I'm not somebody who is quick to emotionally engage in those kinds of situations. So it was obvious something had happened.

But then again, we just gone through the Cuban Missile Crisis. And we were in the middle of a Cold War with Russia. So there was a lot

of—foreign policy was a big deal in those days with a lot of other things going on. And the beauty of this country is that when something like this happens, there is, you know, no coup is going to happen. There was this...LBJ was sworn in immediately. And the point of government was that, at that point in time was “Everybody has got to calm down. We’re going to solve, you know, don’t go crazy,” And so it was a time of mourning and introspection. Wasn’t a time for anybody to take to the streets, start yelling and screaming about some political entity or what that. So, of course, there had been lots of conspiracy theories thrown on around about it. But the government was very quick to try to tamp down on that [Munson taps table]. And I think it did help. And everybody was—I think it was very similar to if you had a family member who had been killed in a car accident, individually. If everybody in the country had a family member that was, that died in a situation too soon. So everybody was sad, for the same, for the same person. But it didn’t, didn’t rise to the level of, you know panic or chaos or anything like that. I would say.

KATZ: So you, you briefly mentioned the Cold War. And obviously, Vietnam is all about, you know, we have the capitalists and the communists. Do you remember the first time that you heard about things happening in Vietnam?

MUNSON: I knew pretty much from the get go, I mean, my family was very politically engaged. And my dad being in the military, even though he got out before things really got started. We always, we were a family that paid attention to the news and current events were part of my schooling as well. And so we didn’t know what was going on. And we just got through with Korea. So our country had been on pseudo-war footing for a long time,

KATZ: For sure

MUNSON: Pretty much. And this was just another iteration of that, at some level, know what’s going on. Obviously, the government was—wanted to be able to do more than what they could present.

KATZ: Mhm

MUNSON: So we needed, as soon as the Gulf of Tonkin happened [inaudible]. But because it was never, our government never really engaged in trying to explain to the public why this needs to happen. And because we just had a stalemate go on in Korea I think the powers that be were— really didn’t know what to do. And how are we going to do this? And how are we going to do that? And I think that was

one of the big problems with the Vietnam War is that they tried to backdoor a lot of things instead of trying to get the public engaged, which is why we disengaged quickly, because people weren't engaged in the first place. It was just those of us that went were, well, this is what you do. It wasn't as if there was some second alternative, you know. Then only after the lottery came into being and you start seeing a lot of where we go to Canada, burn the draft card, all of that kind of stuff didn't happen until a larger percentage of the population became without—we had to become engaged, because they were then really going to be part of it. Much more likely to be part of it.

KATZ: All right. So let's shift quickly, back to back to you personally. So you graduate high school 1965.

MUNSON: Yep.

KATZ: What's the next move for young Robert Munson?

MUNSON: Well, I just want to get out of there. So I applied to a bunch of colleges and got accepted to Georgia Tech. So okay, I'll go down there. Spent a year down there, and I just went—I mean, I did what freshmen do, and there was no grade inflation back in the day.

KATZ: [laughs]

MUNSON: The end of my second semester there, they said, "Uh, we think it would be a good idea if you take some time off, and come back later." And the minute that happened I was a 1-A and I was drafted. It happened within—the letters passed in the mail, because that was what, would have been May of 1966. And so, immediately, I was drafted. And so I had already gone through my pre-induction physical while I was in Atlanta. So I was ready to go. So they might—I was scheduled to appear for induction in September. And in the summer, I went home and worked for three months. I knew I was you know, I already got my—there was no second choice. I was going into the military. And I talked up with my father and a few other people, and, you know, "should I go in, should I volunteer for the Navy? Should I do something other than just get drafted into the Army?" And the wisdom was that if I took the path of volunteering, then I would have more control over what I would—what would happen to me when I went in, so I grabbed at that. So I raised my right hand and I looked around and I said "Oh, engineering! That looks like a good idea." So that was what I—so I went down and I enlisted for three years, I took three years active instead of two. And anyway I went.

KATZ: Alright, so after you enlist, where's the first place that you go?

MUNSON: Well, I was at—Fort Dix is where I was inducted and I went to Fort Jackson, South Carolina for my basic training.

KATZ: Mhm.

MUNSON: And then Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri for my advanced individual training. And then I was, I was again in kind of a—I did nothing. This is all new to me, I have no idea what's going on. So they say, “Hell, you know, you could potentially be an officer. You’re smart enough.” I know that I'm a relatively intelligent human being. So I passed all the tests so they give me these math, science, [indiscernible] top of the bunch. They said “We should go to OCS [Officer Candidate School] and see how that works for you. You get more money because you're an E-5 when you're in OCS,” I was an E-2 at the time. E-5 was a buck sergeant and I said okay, so I went to Fort Belvoir, Virginia for engineering. OCS. And there I kind of had to—I was forced into a situation where very rigorous training, great opportunities, met a lot of good people. But [pause] I came to the realization pretty quickly that it's not in my DNA to be a real leader of human beings. I've got a lot of skills, one of them—being the boss isn't a good one. Got a son who is, but I'm not. So again, I was forced—this is all internally, of course I never really talked about anybody else in this I wasn't used to doing that. So I figured, I should hang out here for a while. Because if you don't, you know you get raided every once [inaudible]. I forget how long the program was, but after a certain period of time they say “Okay. You doing okay? If not you go back and start again or blah, blah, blah.” So I made it all the way to kind of the end. And then they said “Well, you don't—We don't think you're really doing this well you know, you need some more leadership skills. Why don't you go back in halfway and start again?” and I said “No, not really”.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: And so I said—we parted ways. And I went and ended up into a replacement company in—at Fort Belvoir. And very quickly I got my orders for Vietnam.

KATZ: So at Fort Belvoir, can you compare kind of the—I guess the social community you found there compared to, I guess what you experienced in high school?

MUNSON: Kind of the same way again, I don't—It's not—I have a lot of acquaintances, not a lot of friends. And that's kind of the way I— it's kind of who I am in a lot of ways. I'm really good friends with my wife.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: And I love my kids and I'm good friends with my grandkids, interestingly enough, but I guess maybe I just don't know how or it's not in me. So I'm in a situation where all of these—a lot of interesting—kind of a subset of the draftee military was the draftee OCS people. A lot of other people there had been drafted they weren't—this was—picked them out of you know, pick the—skim the top 2% if you will, of the basic—of your AIT [Advanced Individual Training] crowd and give them some tests and see what happens. And then throw them into OCS because we need new officers, there weren't enough people coming out of West Point, [United States Military Academy]. Because we got a huge army all of a sudden. And I know it's not really the best way to create a talented officer corps. You know, some of them were good, some of them were not, we just need them anyway. That's the military way, is if you need 10,000 new second lieutenants, you got to get 10,000 2nd lieutenants. So again, it was pretty much the same way I was—that was probably one of the, my failings there is that I didn't really—I looked at it more as an academic exercise. And I don't think that's what they were really looking for.

KATZ: For sure.

MUNSON: I think they were more looking for what is this—Who was this guy? Was he going to make a good leader of men? Are people going to follow this guy? Are they going to shoot him? Are they going to frag him in his tent at night because he's driving them all crazy? And so I think it was the right call and in my cadres perspective, even though I completely, I mean, aced everything that they did academically there. Physically, intellectually, I could do all, any of those given tasks, performed them well, but they figured out really fast that it wasn't going, the military wasn't a good fit for me in a lot of ways, especially as an officer. As an individual contributor I was fine. So again, it was probably, it's who I am as a person. I don't think of it as a flaw. It's just who I am. I'm not a good, you know—I don't [Laughs]. We all have our strengths and our weaknesses! I embrace both.

KATZ: [Laughs] Alright, so you finish up your training at Fort Belvoir and then...

MUNSON: This would have been in—I went in in September. It would have been say around July of '67.

KATZ: July of '67?

MUNSON: Yeah because, I get drafted in '66. I went in 1966. Yeah. So then I was in the summer of '67, all my training is done. And then I could—probably more like August. And then at the end of— then when I went to this [inaudible] outfit, it didn't take me very long to get the orders to go to show up in something something, some detachment in Cam Ranh Bay, South Vietnam.

KATZ: Alright, so what, do you remember the date exactly when you were shipped to Vietnam?

MUNSON: My date in—well, I showed up the day before Thanksgiving in 1967. And I came home the day after—no. I showed up the day after Thanksgiving 1967. I came back the day before Thanksgiving in 1968. So actually, I was not in country for Thanksgiving Day. I missed both.

KATZ: [Sigh of Anguish]

MUNSON: My last day at home was Thanksgiving dinner. And my first day back was Thanksgiving dinner. So how that works out, November of 1967, the day after Thanksgiving and the day before that, that was my tour of duty. Those dates.

KATZ: Well, I'm sure your parents enjoyed you, having you home for Thanksgiving.

MUNSON: My parents are very—again, my mother— Neither of my parents were very demonstrative in that respect. I mean, I think to my father I was doing I think both of them it was just “This is what you're supposed to do.” You know, we're at war. You're the right age. You've got nothing. You're not doing anything else.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: I had no excuse! So there really wasn't much. Actually, interestingly enough, talking to my sisters, my two youngest, the two youngest of my sisters. Because I've asked him this question recently. And they told me they were worried every day. And my parents, I don't think ever worried. So there's an interesting dichotomy within the same family. They sent me all kinds of goodies and my sisters baked

fudge and sent it to me, writing letters and stuff. So they were my—interesting, they were my sisters who were, they were probably in middle school at the time. They're eight and 10 years, six and eight years younger than I am. So middle school, maybe early high school age, when I was in country.

KATZ: And I recall you said you have an older brother?

MUNSON: I had an older brother, he passed away at age 55.

KATZ: Did he serve as well?

MUNSON: No.

KATZ: Okay

MUNSON: Because he actually worked for the NSA [National Security Agency] during the Vietnam War.

KATZ: Oh, very interesting. Okay, so you're heading to Vietnam? Where do you first get in?

MUNSON: Well, so the airfield, it's called, it's the airfield near Saigon [Tan Son Nhut Airport]. It's the main airport in Greater Saigon, sort of like JFK in New York City or Logan in Boston. Forget the actual name of it. But I showed up there very quickly and then they shipped me immediately to Cam Ranh Bay, which was sort of a—I think it's an interesting little anecdote. So when I left my outfit in Fort Belvoir, I was friends with a, I was, I got my, I had to show up at Fort Dix on November x, 1967. So I had my orders. And so I had a duffel bag full of clothing. And I was supposed to—I had this a period of time, say three weeks before- between the time that I get my orders and the time I have to show up at Fort Dix. It was four or five weeks before that, that I get my orders and I think to myself, "Hmm, well I'm not doing anything in this repo department, repo outfit, I'm just hanging around." So I [inaudible] the guy and said, "Hey, could you ship my duffel bag?" Here's my orders, put a copy, and ship 'em to Vietnam. And I'll say "Sayonara!" and just go home and hang out and I promise I'll show up at Fort Dix on [phone notification noise] due date. So he said "Sure!" So—bag disappears, I drive home in my civilian clothes. I have a Class A uniform to wear, my khakis. So I hang around them home, you know, doing this and that seeing, doing—being a civilian a little bit. And then a time shows up, my dad drives down to Fort Dix and he says "See you later, Bob," So I walk up to the—I get asked to show my ID on base. So I

walk up to the in-processing and I say "Here I am." And they go "Who are you?"

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: I show them my orders and they look around. [Munson mimics the looking around] "I don't have any Robert Munson. What are you doing here?" "These are my orders!" "Oh, well what's your MOS [Military Occupational Specialty]?" "12A10," "Oh, you're a combat engineer. Okay, well we're gonna send you to the replacement battalion in—outfit wherever it was—in Saigon. Tan Son Nhut airport I think is what it was. So away we go, so I'm flying in commercial, so I get on a 707 with a bunch of other GIs. I go to Alaska, Japan down to Vietnam, I show up. And I go to, again, I go to the in-processing and I say "I'm here!" and they go. "And you are?" Said "My orders, Bob Munson" [Munson types on table to imitate in-processing person] "We have no record of you!" "So you probably don't have my duffel bag either. Right?" "Not that we know and that that we're aware of." So I said, "Well, what am I going to do?" He said, "What's your MOS?" "12A10," "Okay, 35th Engineer Group, they're in Cam Ranh Bay, we'll send you there." So off I go, and then that was my—again, I show up at the 35th Engineering Group [inaudible]. "And you are?" "Here I am!" "Okay, well, we spotted, we got a spot, can you do anything differently? Can you do anything special? Can you type?" I said "Yeah, sure I can type," [Munson imitates typing on the table] "Oh, well they need a company clerk at Charlie Company so we'll send you there. That was my—so I'm, I believe to this day that I could have just stayed home and they never would have found me. So that's crazy things were,

KATZ: Yeah

MUNSON: during that time. And I don't, I have no idea that duffel bag ever went.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: Probably it's in some depot someplace or maybe whatever. But it just had my military stuff in it anyway, which they reissue you. When you came in country, you've got jungle fatigues, jungle boots, and all that stuff. I get a whole new issue of clothing anyway. But it was kinda it was, again, this is and nobody really thought anything of it. Hey, this stuff happens in the [inaudible]. So that was how I got into and showed up and so it could have been anybody else. I could have been, given that, of course I had an ID card and my

military ID but I'm sure I could have said I lost that. I could've sent my brother and they would have taken him as well.

KATZ: So you say you went to Charlie Company?

MUNSON: Yeah. It was Charlie Company, it was a line Company,

KATZ: Line Company?

MUNSON: It was stationed up at the Central Highlands.

KATZ: Central Highlands. And that was after Cam Ranh Bay?

MUNSON: Yes, Cam Ranh Bay, I was only there for a short period of time,

KATZ: Short period of time.

MUNSON: Just trying to figure out what, "He's—we got this random human being. He's got these skills. He graduated from this, he this old, what it is a good fit for him. Okay, we'll send him off," because our headquarters was in Cam Ranh Bay. And all the Line Companies were out embedded with in some kind of an infantry presence somewhere else supporting them, as combat engineers tend to do. And this was the one that had the spot that seemed to fit my skill set.

KATZ: Do you have any memories of the day you moved to [the] line Company or joined [the] line Company?

MUNSON: Oh just jumped into a peewee and flew up there.

KATZ: Just flew up there?

MUNSON: To help. Yeah, it was always some—mode of transportation, in Vietnam was helicopters.

KATZ: Mhm.

MUNSON: The roads weren't very good. And they were not necessarily safe. And if you had a small amount of stuff, or mail, it was always something going—you could always hook a ride going somewhere. Choppers flying all over the place all the time. So that was the preferred mode of transportation. "Okay, you know, you gotta go up on Tuesday, because we're sending the mail up on that day, that's when the choppers go so get your gear going up that day." And then there had been some communication with the folks up there to

say, "Hey, he's coming. This is who you are getting." And he can be your company clerk because the company clerk had just rotated out of there. He can type, so that's mostly, fit him in." So away I went.

KATZ: So this is around December?

MUNSON: December of 1967.

KATZ: December of 1967. Awesome. Can you describe what a normal day would be like for you? While you were with Charlie [Company],

MUNSON: [Laughs]

KATZ: I assume every day is a little bit different.

MUNSON: Yeah. Because I was company clerk I didn't have a lot of—I mean, I did have to pull duty, I mean guard duty. I don't, I never did KP [Kitchen Patrol] as far as I remember. But I had, I was kind of a floater in some ways, because I had certain things, I had to type up daily reports and this and that but it was always easily—my job was not driving a road grader or you know, one of the heavy heavy equipment operator, all those kinds of things. So I was, when some, when there was a kind of a person who needed an extra hand to go places or drive this. They would yank me and I would fill in. So I had a chance to do a lot of different kinds of things. I love going out of the compound into the countryside because it was really—it was very—that sort of thing. Put me behind the wheel of a car and I go anywhere. I love driving. I'm nosy. I like to see things. So I've tended to be on hand to a lot of different kinds of things.

So as far as a normal day, well, I obviously had the morning report I had to type up. And other than that, I would, I don't know, just kind of float around for something to keep me busy. And because again, because I could actually touch-type around 30 words a minute, [Munson taps table] I could typically get rid of my actual duties very quickly. And there really wasn't much to do. So I hooked up a ride with the waterpoint people who were going out to do some water purification system out there, or one of the Line Company guys are gonna go out and work on some roads or fix a bridge and I just kind of tag along, say, "Hey, you guys anybody?" "Yeah, sure. Come on along,"

And that's where I first started driving Jeeps as well. What became my job [inaudible] was that you don't have to have any special license. And again, Jeep drivers are, was one of the commodities that was very lacking. Because a Jeep Driver was supposed to be a

radio operator. And radio operators were worth their weight in gold, especially at that time because [inaudible]. So I don't think our our—combat engineering department and company because they're not out of the field so much, they tend to not get them, you know, get an actual 05B20.

And so I started doing that, sort of learning the Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo. And so again, I had a chance to do a lot of traveling around. And that was what I did, it was kind of a mundane job doing a little bit of typing, a little bit of, you know, working with anybody working with the medics if they needed, keeping track of material writing and requests for supplies. Just that sort of thing.

KATZ: Alright, so we have on January 30—
MUNSON: Yes—

KATZ: [The] Tet Offensive happens.

MUNSON: Yes.

KATZ: Where are you? And what's happening at the base?

MUNSON: Okay. Well, that's a story. So I'm up in the highlands. And so it was early in the morning, because I was sitting in the tent, the headquarters tent, typing up reports, surprise, surprise. And all of a sudden, we were supporting a MACV, Military Assistance Command Vietnam Special Forces Group which was embedded with ARVN, Army of the Republic of Vietnam, ARVN Company.

KATZ: Okay.

MUNSON: And they were, they were kind of attached with one made one big compound, they were on one side, we were on the other. So they had, and they had artillery there. So every once and a while they'd be shooting away, so we were used to the sound of these things. So I'm sitting in the tent, when all of a sudden, boom, boom, boom, happens. What the hell's going on? My first reaction is "Eh, normal". And then there's a boom, boom, again, and the tent sounds like it's raining. [Munson taps raining noises on the table] And I feel this in my side, it was shrapnel hitting the tent. And then I get a big piece of shrapnel in the side. Not very big. And my real immediate reaction was, it was really hot. I remember that. And I said "Shit!". And I had no clue what had happened to me, other than I had been hit by something. I had no idea how big it was, what kind of injury this is going to be. And so I sat down very quickly and I laid down at the back of my bunk. And I said "What,

what,” And of course, I have no idea at the time frame for how long this took. And then, very quickly I did the fingers and toes and then I rolled off onto the ground, grabbed my flak jacket and my steel pot and my rifle and lifted up the side of the tent. Looking around “What the hell's going on out there?” I see people running around. So I said, “Oh shit.”

So I ran up to the perimeter. And what had happened was, is that there was a North Vietnamese group of guys, I had no idea how many. I think it was battalion strength is what they guessed. And they were about two miles away in a valley. And on the valley next to the valley was an elevated—a small hill where their artillery support was, which were mortars. And the mortars started—it was supposed to be this coordinated attack—and mortars started shooting too fast, too quickly. They weren't coordinated, fortunately, and the 105s were doing counter battery fire, which is why I heard these booms and nothing happened while the incoming rounds were still coming in. So that was a quick brief artillery exchange with shard artillery. One of our radar control 105's versus a few mortars in the hills. The mortars are doomed.

And then—so stuff's going on. And so in that headquarters tent was our radio operation. And so I heard all of this [inaudible], I had gone back to the perimeter and they said, “Well, go back and get more stuff.” And I walked into the tent. So all of a sudden I hear this stuff on the radio going on, our radio operators on what's going on blah, blah, blah. And so we called, they called in air support from Dalat, which was the closest airfield. And so, how long this took, I have no clue. And it was just my brain was running. And then so then at that point in time, we all go back out to the perimeter, and waiting for something to happen, it's pretty quiet. Also, there's no more boom, boom. And then a flight of Phantoms, F4 Phantoms out of Dalat comes in and napalm, bombs, rockets, you name it, where the poor bastards, this North Vietnamese group was there, and they got annihilated.

So we're sitting there watching what's going on. So it's like watching a fireworks display if you will, and they never got anywhere near us. So there was no—we had—and so then we went back in and we started getting word about what was going on. So we thought this was unique to us maybe, and all of a sudden we're listening on the radio and Dalat was one of the places, was one of the major focuses of the Tet Offensive. So we listened as all hell broke loose in Dalat. And so we're sitting out in the middle of nowhere kind of and listening to all this stuff going on. And the final—we know there's a lot of stuff going on in the country but all we have are just

you know, chatter from pilots or whatever we're just listening on the right frequency or AM outfit guys tune the right frequencies and listening to orders being passed you know, bomb this, do that, do that, do that. A lot of like listening to a war movie on radio. And there's nothing impacted us at all. And then our Headquarters Company and in Cam Ranh Bay, which was the safest place in Vietnam to be, they were never attacked anywhere. They had tons of—their security was run by South Koreans. And they are okay. And nobody ever went after them.

So they put together a platoon of grunts, if you will, out of the Headquarters Company and flew them up and they did a combat landing, there was an airstrip right next to where we were. So they came in—this is all, we're all sitting on the sandbags smoking cigarettes, kinda, “What the hell is going on here?” All of a sudden, a C-130 comes in. There's a combat landing, guys are jumping off the back and then it does a quick 180 and flies off. And we're all just kind of looking over there. “Oh, this is kind of cool. What are these guys doing?” And they get out and they're all looking around? Like they think this is the middle of a war zone and we're all just so—they came to us and we said “Calm down guys.”

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: So we had to feed an extra platoon for a couple of days, and then they flew them back. But it was just kind of crazy goes on. So it really wasn't, again, we were, we had been singled out probably as an easy target. But they screwed it up big time. And we ended up being—they ended up saying, “No,” The people they had tasked to do [inaudible] maybe because it was a MACV and an ARVN compound. That was what they were after. But I have no idea what they were doing. They might have been doing something in around with the locals that they thought. they were getting hearts and minds in the wrong place from their perspective. So I don't know. But they did come after us but they didn't get anywhere near us.

So that was Tet. And then I saw the results of that when I went up north later but because— then I would convoy back to Cam Ranh Bay. The Tet Offensive, I read about it in the newspaper more than anything else. And of course, it was all— we did not really didn't have access to much information. All we had was the Stars and Stripes and hearsay.

KATZ: Yeah.

MUNSON: So it wasn't much. We didn't really have much of an access to any strategic information, if you will.

KATZ: So was there no sense of Tet being this kind of big change or big turning point in the war?

MUNSON: It didn't change. It didn't change what we were doing there a bit. Had no impact at all.

KATZ: At all?

MUNSON: Nope.

KATZ: So after Tet—Oh, of course you were injured as you said. What was the outcome of that?

MUNSON: I got a purple heart. I didn't, you know, I always thought, this is even growing, you think of growing up in a military family would know better. But I always thought of the Purple Heart, as something as a—if you're going to hopefully award this medal, it requires some major physical injury of some kind.

KATZ: Mhm.

MUNSON: And all I got was a piece of shrapnel to the side. And so a couple of weeks after we—after Tet, I am in Company Clarksville, I get this letter from some communication from headquarters that battalion commander is coming up. And the following people who should form up for a formation tomorrow. I saw my name on the list, “I wonder what this is all about.” So we get up and he comes up and he walks down the line and pins, Purple Hearts on us. And I was flabbergasted. “Holy crap, I got this?” Because there were a fair number of people, not a lot, but there were half a dozen of my company mates were injured relatively badly. And I would never have thought that.

So I, you know, that's where I learned, what a Purple Heart is and what it is not. So it's funny medal in that respect. Because what it really says to me more than anything else—and it writes it in indelible ink—that you were someplace where you were getting shot at and shooting up actual live combat action was going on and you were there and you got injured. So that's really what it means, there's no indication of how badly it was or not. So it's an award that I think of as just kind of a check mark in some respects. So you go OK, it leads us into a different direction. It kind of puts you into a “Yeah, I've been there done that” kind of scenario when you talk to

other veterans, if you will. That's a mark of, kinda the next level up would be the CIB the combat information—CIB is a badge you get if you've been in combat for a certain length of time, Combat Infantryman's Badge. That's another thing that says you were there a lot. And you were in some really bad places. There's no requirement that you get shot or anything but that's what the true grunts who are in combat, that's a medal that you don't get unless you've been a lot of bad places. And more than once. So that's, to me, that's the next step up from Purple Heart. Yeah, I was there, CIB you were there for a longer period of time, bad things are happening. So people who wear that are, they get a lot of respect from veterans for that reason.

KATZ: All right. So after Tet, where are you heading next?

MUNSON: Okay, well, I'm not sure of the time frame exactly. But we hung around for a while. And then, if you know, the weather patterns in Vietnam, monsoon season happens at different times in the North and the South. Well, being that my outfit is—we're building roads and bridges and all that kind of stuff—when the monsoon is going on, it limits our activities tremendously. So monsoon is going away in the North. monsoon is hitting in the south, we're in the south sort of. So convoy gets together, they bring up some, some protection, we had some recoilless rifles, armed Jeeps, a couple of—we had, maybe a platoon of infantry comes up to guide us back. So we convoy back to Cam Ranh Bay. This was, you gotta bring all our junk back, so you can't chopper individual people, you've got to get in your—So we drove back from wherever we were back to Cam Ranh Bay.

And I use this, it was interesting. This was my real my, the only time I was ever actually what I would consider to be driving through the Vietnamese countryside, in a safe and sane manner. You know, there were a couple of bridges that have gotten blown up to try to slow us down but we never got attacked [inaudible]. And there's a whole bunch of US company sizes, maybe 130 people, and we had maybe another 25 or 30. So 150 of us driving back. And it was a three day trip, so we drove through a lot of small towns. And I look back at that, that's my and, I remember when we showed up in these towns, a bunch of guys we jump out of our vehicles and go run and try to you know, just kind of walk around see what's going on here. And everyone, there would be some stores of some kind, we'd look around, could we get a coke or that kind of thing? And most of us had "funny money", it was military payment certificates. [inaudible] The US currency was not acceptable for the GI's to

have. So we would find some way to barter with cigarettes or maybe they take the MPCs or whatever.

We wander around this town; I look back on that and I think—it's one of those “come later and have answers.” And I'm thinking to myself, what would have been like, if I'm in some little town, Enfield, New Hampshire, all of a sudden, 150 Russian soldiers drive up, and they're armed to the teeth. And they just go walk out and start walking around town and walking into the grocery stores looking for something to eat or chatting up with the locals. How weird that must have been to these locals, even though you know, so we're—these are small towns on the road now. So I wonder. And the people were pretty friendly to us. And we didn't—I mean, they put on the face anyway. So I look back at, I had some great views and scenery. I had taken some pictures, I have no idea where they are. The mountain was—beautiful countryside. And at night, a couple of nights we bunker hunker down, like the wagon trains and go in a circle. And so I look back at that it was a chance to really kind of get a feel for the country a little bit. Little towns in the middle of nowhere, rice paddies, villages. And it was—I never felt any kind of fear or anything, we just got a bunch of guys driving through. I didn't think of it as a, I didn't think of it that way. But again, this is one of the reasons why my tour was, I think, a little less intimidating for me emotionally and intellectually because I never really felt at risk. I was just, I was too interested in what was going on around me, I guess.

KATZ: For sure. Do you have any specific interactions with the Vietnamese that you recall?

MUNSON: Yeah, I remember, I think I remember walking into someone who said, “Hey, they've got cokes over there.” So I walk into this little store. Of course, I'm wearing my flak jacket, I got hand grenades on my chest, carrying my M-14. There was a round in the chamber with the safety on, it's cocked and locked, as you say, and I'm just, you know, I'm carrying it loose, it's not slung over my shoulder, because that's what you did. And I remember going in there and, my memory is that I was able to swap some cigarettes, a pack of cigarettes for a couple of cokes or something. And I remember feeling like I just kind of gone into a corner store in New York City because, the thought process to say, because this is where I live with my you know, “leave your rifle with your life it goes wherever you go.” And I didn't feel like I was I didn't feel like, they should be intimidated. I don't didn't feel like us, me, and you. Say “Hey, I've got this, you've got that. How about we do this?” And so I do have a memory of this younger gentleman and just two people meeting up,

neither of us could understand a word the other was saying but, kind of like when I go to Europe, you know sometimes it's—

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: “Dollars? Marks? Zeros? What do you want?” You always find a way. There's an easy way to find, you can find a way. So, my interactions with—the villagers seemed pretty, I mean it wasn't “Hide the women and children”, wasn't you know, just a bunch of guys coming through. Maybe we didn't appear threatening, I don't know what it was, but the Christmas was early in our interaction with the local populace over there in some respects. And they had had foreigners in their country for a long time. So perhaps they were—they didn't view us that way either. “Ah, a bunch engineers coming down, they're fine. They're just looking for something to drink.” So, my memory was it was just a normal everyday kind of interaction. I remember relatively substantial buildings, wasn't mud huts or any of that kind of nonsense. So it felt like an actual village, town.

KATZ: Very Interesting. So you, after you're driving through, you go through these villages, and you arrived back in...

MUNSON: Cam Ranh Bay.

KATZ: Cam Ranh Bay. Okay. Are you staying at Cam Ranh Bay after that, or do you move around any other...

MUNSON: Well we were heading North.

KATZ: Headed North.

MUNSON: They were re-constituting the battalion,

KATZ: Yes

MUNSON: To be shipped north. So, all the line Companies were coming back. We had four Line Companies. All— they were all heading back to Cam Ranh Bay to get together to refit to head North. And that was where I started deciding that maybe I had more value to the battalion than company clerk in Charlie Company. So, the legal clerk was leaving, Spc/6 Hammacher, some names I actually can remember.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: And so they said “Hey, Hammacher’s leaving and it’s going to be, we figured it’s going to be at least a week or two between actuals, so why don’t you take his job? You work with him and see if you can figure this out what’s going on.” And the legal clerk is someone who’s, you know, you process, interestingly enough, any Article Fifteens, slaps on the wrist [Munson slaps wrist], the court martials. I forget what else was going on. There was certain—just was a higher level of paperwork, essentially. But Spc/6 Hammacher was the, he was the guy who got stuff for the batallion. If you needed something unique, he was the guy that would get it for you. There’s always some scrounger in the military. It was these guys. I learned all how it, firsthand how some of this stuff you see in movies, it’s actually true. So, I’m hanging out with Spc/6 Hammacher he’s running around like crazy. They decided they needed—a couple of quick stories. We decided that our battalio commander or whatever, whoever was the upper level, decided we needed, where we’re going to go, we need some, we need our own mortars. 60 millimeter mortars, small. Even though we’re not supposed to have him as an incumbent. We don’t—it’s not our job. So they go to Hammacher and say, “Hey, Hammacher, we’d like to get a hold of a couple of mortars. What do you think you can do?” So he goes, “Okay” So he goes to the motor pool. And he gets his jeep. He had his own personal jeep, which was not on—if you looked at our table of what we’re supposed to have, table of equipment, T.O.E., we were supposed to have X number of Jeeps, well we had one more, because he had scrounged it somewhere.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: We traded his jeep for two 60-millimeter mortars. So, I remember this story, but I remember I went down with him to get the jeep. And he went into motor pool and said, “Okay, I’m taking my jeep out of here.” And the motor pool says, “What are you talking about *your* jeep?” And he said “That one over there, that belongs to me.” Guy said “That’s not your jeep, that’s our jeep!” He said, [Munson knocks on table] “Show me the paperwork that says it’s your jeep.” So 10 minutes later, we’re driving out with his jeep.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: And so that’s one. And the second one was we knew we were going to be in country north, [inaudible] we’re going to be there long enough to where the rain is going to start. Well, the only rain gear we have with these ponchos, which they look good on paper, but they don’t really, stuff wicks through them and all that sort of stuff. He decides, what Hammacher decided, that he was going to get us

some raincoats. So, we went east, so we went down to some Seabees. So, Seabee groups—because you know in the Navy because they're always getting wet, they have good rain gear. So, he managed to finagle 20 raincoats out of them. And I happen to get one, he got one for me and one for a bunch of the guys. That story ends up later when I go home, whatever.

But so I found that I was watching this guy work and I'm thinking "I can't, when he's gone, I'm not gonna be able to pull this shit off." So, again, so we go up north, and I'm still kind of this assistant, actually by then, by time we go up north, maybe March 1, early March,

KATZ: Okay.

MUNSON: We land and we go to a place called Wonder Beach which was a built-out landing debarkation for ships coming from the United States. It built out a port, made a port. And so we should land there, we've traveled the coastline in ships and we disembark there and we land there. And so at this point in time I'm kind of the legal clerk. So, I don't think this is a good place for me to be, pretty much, so I talked to the—now I'm in with all the battalion commander, the XO, the combo officer, the headquarters mucky-mucks so I said "Geez, you know, guys, this isn't..." They said, "Oh, okay, we got a new guy coming in" "Okay." So I said, so I'm thinking, "Well, you know, what, what am I going to do?" as I said, "Well, I've been trying this radio operator stuff, can I go give that a shot?" "Yeah, well, we're always looking for 05B20s." So I thought to myself, "Okay, self." At this point I'm on a Spec/4. I thought to myself "Shit. I want to do this but I want the right MOS too, to prove that I'm doing it." So the legal clerk has access to—

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: —demotions and promotions. And that's where, that's one way to change your MOS, is to get promoted into an MOS, but you have to get promoted into it. So I had to get demoted. Because to be an 05B20 is a Spec/4, I had to get demoted to PFC [Private First Class] and then promoted.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: So I became an [Munson taps table] 05B20. And then I became part of the Commo [Communications] section. And that again, gave me the opportunity to do some traveling and all that other kind of stuff. And I became part of the FM radio net, pulling shifts, six hours

on 12 off, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, eight hours on and eight hours off while one of us would go on R&R. And I also became the combat officer's jeep driver, which gave me access to driving around the country.

KATZ: Did you travel anywhere specifically interesting that, that you think—Did you travel anywhere that had any special significance to you?

MUNSON: Yeah, where we were at. We were pretty much due east of Quang Tri, which is almost at the DMZ. We're pretty close—

KATZ: Okay.

MUNSON: —to the [North] Vietnamese border. And the closest, we embark through Da Nang, and then we convoyed up north. So Da Nang was our port of entry and exit. That's where we took our R&Rs [rest and recreation]. Well, between Da Nang and Winter Beach was Hué, up on Highway One. And that was where most of the real—well not most of the, a lot of the real action that happened during Tet. There's a lot of books and movies, about, kind of focusing in and around what happened there. And so I was, I did convoy past, driving up and down Route One, to get convoyed down to Da Nang to get sodas and beers and driving around to get [inaudible] our codes and that sort of thing. So I had an odd chance to interact with a lot of and see a lot of the detritus of what Tet had happened up there. And it was obviously had been real combat in a lot of ways. A lot of destroyed facilities, bridges, homes. And driving by Hué you can see the outcome. A lot of blown—obviously is a result of real pitched battle with major artillery and, and the like.

KATZ: Did you have the opportunity to talk with any of the soldiers at Hué?

MUNSON: I had a little bit of interaction with some of the Marines who were there. Every time we went over a bridge, there would be a pillbox on each side. And so we had—we would, we'd sell, we'd get extra beer and soda and we sell to these guys on the way by. And we were pretty ethical we didn't charge them significantly more than what it cost us.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: But yeah, we'd have a comment. They'd talked about some of the stuff that went on there, and how bad it had been. And because most of them had been in combat during Tet, this was only a couple of months afterwards. [Inaudible] you hadn't rotated a lot of them

back. So yeah, there was not a lot of banter. But we, you know, just chit chat kind of stuff. And as soldiers will do. It's difficult to talk with soldiers about stuff, I think. One of the things I've found out – it's not necessarily limited to that—is that there are certain activities, like I've said this before. Is that if you need a point of contact, to be able to really talk with somebody at a certain level about certain types of things. And because you have to lay yourself bare in certain types of situations in that to be able to get into the details. And I think certain types of things, it's really hard for people to do that. Well, it's like what we're doing now. And I trust that you're not going to think I'm, think poorly of me,

KATZ: Of course not.

MUNSON: But this but we Vietnam vets, that was a really tough battle to fight. Because its kind of [a] tangent—

KATZ: It's alright.

MUNSON: —starting out here is that—the public's perception of this people who were there had no relationship with my experience. You know, all the *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket* and this and that. So, and most of the the people who presented themselves at the time as veterans did so in a way that made me not want to be part of that group. So, it was kind of tough. So, interactions with some—I segued away from where I was starting from I think—but a lot of the dialogue I had with the in-country people, I mean, we're all there, we're all, it sucks, nobody wants to be there. We're all just trying to keep our sanity as much as we can. So, any opportunity to chat up somebody, especially someone at your relative rank—

KATZ: Mhm, for sure.

MUNSON: —You kind of grab at [the opportunity]. And of course, sometimes it's, you know, he started going into you say, “Whoops!” I just want to kind of push away, because the person you're talking with is getting off into some really weird stuff. Either they're stoned, or they're, you know, they've lost it. And if you add those two—so it's always a, again, it again, I think that's one of the reasons why I was able to be so—I would never had these problems because I knew how to withdraw—

KATZ: Yeah.

MUNSON: —emotionally, intellectually without maybe showing it. So it never impacted me my first move, my reaction would be, “Ooh, what's

going on with this crazy dude.” And then I would back down, just continue the conversation. I've tried to slide it in something a little differently. But so I did have some, a few interactions with, mostly Marines – there were a lot of Marines around the DMZ. And we had a lot of—a fair number. And Marines were the ones who were in the thick of it. Most of the time, that's what they are. They're the tip of the spear. That's what they've always been. They don't—their job is not what I had as a job. So I'll stop there. [Laughs]

KATZ: [Laughs] So you're—we're in around March or April, right now.

MUNSON: Yup.

KATZ: Okay.

MUNSON: Early spring.

KATZ: Early spring, and you're going around the country, you've been to Hué and you've kind of been bouncing around. At this point, have you received any, a whole lot of communication from home? I know, you talked about talking, having some letters with your sisters—

MUNSON: My mother, my family keeps pretty much everything. I would write probably once a week. And I would get back probably the same pattern. My sisters always sent a box of something. They were great, man. They make the best fudge on the planet. I was well-liked that when a box showed up for me, they knew what was going on. But I didn't get any—it was always pretty vanilla. And I look back on some of the letters, I reread some of my letters. And I have to admit at the time [inaudible] saying, “What are we doing here?” You know, because I'm out there and—fixing the same road every day. It just it never seemed to be—we weren't moving the ball down the field.

KATZ: Mhm.

MUNSON: We're playing football and we never get past the 50-yard line. After a while it's like, if this is the best we can do it's time to go home.

KATZ: Yeah, for sure.

MUNSON: Right? We're playing, we're just playing defense here all the time? We're just trying not to get pushed back to the 40? We're not trying to get to the other team's? And that became pretty obvious after a while when my interactions with—because again now I'm really out

in the country, I'm talking with all of our Line Companies on a regular basis, I'm sitting in headquarters, I'm driving down, up and down Route One all the time so I'm in, out in the in the, this is one of the more active theaters in the, in the war. Delta was a little bit more active. But like nothing's going on. You know shit would happen and once in a while, you know one of our, our, our deuce-and-a-halves would run over a mine and get killed. Or you know, we once in a blue moon, some sappers would try to breach our compound. Well, we had an armored cav outfit that ran our perimeter. And it did control the perimeter. And they had, back in the day, these great big night vision apparatus mounted on the main gun and they would, these tanks [inaudible] they weren't M-1s, but main battle tank of the military at the time. They would run around and the sappers never, I mean it was every once in a while middle of the night, we'd hear "Boom, Boom, Boom" explosions "Holy shit, what's going on?" And we're all jumping, we're onto the perimeter. "What the hell just happened?". And in the morning, one of our pocket loaders to go out there and scoop up the remains—

KATZ: Ugh.

MUNSON: —and dig them in a hole and throw them in. So you know, it was just probably not normal, but it became pretty normal because they never got anywhere near us so you think after a while that they would give up. But somehow they figured "Oh, we got to keep on trying." It's every once in a while. But we were so well guarded, there was no chance of this and we weren't doing the guarding as much as the army cav people were doing it. So, looking at what was going on, there was just just every day is the same thing. What's going on in our companies? Again, our line Companies were all embedded out there on these landing zones. And just doing the normal stuff and we had one of our companies got overrun one night. But that was over there I'm here. [Inaudible] So stuff was happening, but it would happen and then nothing would change. Okay with the you know, they got attacked, I had to call the med evacs and we'd help them out in this in that and then, okay, tomorrow's a new [inaudible]. Okay, gotta rebuild this, you gotta we got some, we got to send some more [inaudible]. Somebody needs more people because they lost 10 people, so we got to send replacements out there and figure this sort of stuff out. But nothing changed.

You know, after a while, if you're especially if you're someplace where you're supposed to be making a difference, and we had these 10s of 1000s of armed-to-the-teeth soldiers and equipment, we're spending a fortune over there, and you think that something

would move down field, get better at something, as not as many attacks and this and that. So became the tone of my letters at the time would've reflected that it's like, "What are we doing here?"

Because I saw a lot of people, a lot of young guys, getting addicted to drugs, you know, behaving badly, and getting myself in— and nothing happening to them. It's kind of "Oh, you know, we know this is going to happen. So we got draftees, whatever." And in our—my officer corps seemed distant. They weren't involved, they had not learned, I didn't have any respect for most of them. So it became obvious that this was not a commitment that our country was making seriously. They might say that it's serious, but it wasn't. Because nobody could keep on that, doing that for—and the veterans I've spoken with have all the same idea that some of them are very bitter about it, some of the very cynical about it—I just think the people that were in charge didn't have a clue what they were doing. And they had to pretend that they did know what was going on. Because if you're the boss, you can't say "I have no idea what I'm doing." Well, you can but you got to be good about it.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: But that was the problem with that, is it just wasn't—no coherent strategy. And granted, I was just a Spec-4 radio operator. But I did have access to a lot of communications, I did travel a lot, I saw what was going on. And again, I mean, I was a point of contact for a lot of stuff there too. Sad to say, marijuana is cheaper than tobacco.

KATZ: Mhm.

MUNSON: The locals grew it in abundance, I guess. Wherever, wherever reason, Vietnam was a good climate for it. And they would, the locals would roll up a whole bag full of joints and sell it. And I was still a tobacco and beer guy at the time. I never, I dabbled in a little bit of those controlled substances. But I guess maybe my personality is that I, I don't need to get high. I want to I want to be able to see what's going on. I don't need to get away. So, I was the point of contact, because I'm the guy out there. Say, "Hey, you know, could you stop by?" So yes, I saw a lot of that. I didn't, I didn't buy or get involved in that. And on the personal level, I saw I would see what you know, the lethargy that set would sit in with these, the stoners would get. And I saw the net result of that thinking, "Do I want that?" And the answer would be "Nah, I don't think so." So, this is you know, this is wink-wink nod-nod stuff going on too.

KATZ: Yeah.

MUNSON: Just wasn't—you know, if you get in your career, you're going to work for some companies and it's going to be the same damn thing. You're gonna work for a company that knows what they're doing and they go for it and they're making progress. And you're working for someplace you think to yourself: this place is not going to last. They don't know what they're doing. They have no business model that makes any sense. And that was our military in Vietnam. We just, I don't think it was necessarily—I'm not cynical about it. I don't think it did it on purpose. I think it just was the people in charge. We didn't have enough Pattons and Bradleys and Eisenhowers. The military had become maybe too politicized at a time, I don't know. But the—the strategic objectives, were never actually going to work and it just wasn't gonna work. Tactically, we never lost a battle.

KATZ: Yeah.

MUNSON: Tactics were great. You know, we're here, we're gonna get them, and we always got them. But okay, now what do we do? “Well, we'll look for some more guys and we'll get them.” Okay. “We'll wear them down eventually.” I don't know, these people were fighting wars for a long time, and no has worn them down yet. So why do you think what we're doing now is going to be more successful than [inaudible]

KATZ: Do you think the other soldiers matched your level of frustration? Do you think they were as aware of the lack of progress?

MUNSON: This may sound a little, tooting of my own horn. But I was 21 on April 4, 1968. I had a really, very strong educational background, I had a strong family background. And I had seen and done a lot of things prior to going over there. So I think I had a little different perspective on things. I didn't expect too much, I guess. There were, there weren't a lot of gung-ho guys, but there were some. Most of them were just putting in their time. And I didn't see a lot of—because I was there early. Don't forget I was on when I was there when the war was young. And I think pretty much everybody was willing to accept the fact that, yeah, maybe they'll change tactics and stuff. Didn't have a lot of people that were really antiwar, anti-military in my outfit. Plus it was the combat engineers are a subset of, of the whole that's—we're not the same as the infantry. I'm sure if I had been in an infantry outfit, seeing all my troopers getting killed on a regular basis, mostly in sniper attacks, booby traps, you know, that kind of thing, no real combat. I might have a different perspective on it. But I didn't see a lot of that. We did have,

I think I looked it up, on the time that I was in country. I believe there were about 100 casualties in my battalion, out of a force of maybe 600 people, no, more than that. [inaudible] There are four Line Companies, five, maybe more like 650-700 people. And there were 100 casualties. So there's a fair number of people got killed. Mostly Line Companies during things happening, but, and some suicides, car accidents, that kind of thing. So I didn't, again, I think it's our—

Human beings, if we're wired correctly, we can adapt. And I adapted pretty quickly, pretty well. Came after a while it's, you know, a road grader, guy gets killed. Grading the road, cleaning the road up. It's a mine, boom, he's gone. Guy I played cards with the night before. [inaudible] I never really got that tight with anybody. So, it's like, this is an accident on [Interstate] 89, somebody gets killed. Of course, your first reaction is that "Thank God it wasn't me". Second reaction is that "Oh that was too bad." Car accidents happen, year after year a bunch of people get killed on the roads in New Hampshire and you move on. And there weren't enough casualties in my outfit, to rise to the level of worrying about that perspective of it. But so, I think I was probably a lot less impacted than most.

But it's hard to generalize, I guess. But it depended on your—where you were and how—so few of people that actually served in the military during that that era actually saw combat, really. So I'm skeptical about a lot of what I hear and see. Because the people that I've met through my various groups that have been in combat in whatever war they were in. Most of the ones that I've met were World War Two, Korea, or War on Terror up until we bailed on Afghanistan, have a certain amount of pride in their service. Vietnam veterans are angry and cynical. And I am neither, so I guess it puts me into a different category than most. But then again, the only the veterans I've met, right, are typically combat veterans. So again, it's a subset of a subset kind of thing. And we—I know, it's real hard question, because I know, my experiences don't seem to mirror a lot of other people's but I was there, I could do that stuff. [inaudible]

KATZ: So coming back to the US: So you wrap up your last few months in Vietnam? Was there anything specifically—

MUNSON: Well, I took my two R&R's to Hong Kong.

KATZ: Oh, how are those?

- MUNSON: [Laughs] Aw man. That was a lot. It was two great times.
- KATZ: Two great times?
- MUNSON: It was fabulous. Well, Hong Kong had been the R&R port for the Fifth Fleet, our Pacific Fleet, since kind of forever and the Brits too, so they knew how to give a GI good time. I don't need to go into much more detail there. And I hooked up with somebody the first time I met on the plane going over. We had a friend who had been there before. So he had a contact with a pimp/tailor. Those are the two things you do when you get there, you buy clothing and you buy women. And so I was able to kind of get into the mood ended up with two other guys in kind of a foursome. And the other two guys were just great. We had so many laughs and we just went off. Four of us and the four ladies who accompanied us. We just went all over the place and had a blast.
- KATZ: How long were you in Hong Kong for?
- MUNSON: An R&R is seven days.
- KATZ: Seven days.
- MUNSON: And I went back again. Typical Munson finagle, I pulled—
- KATZ: [Laughs] Typical Munson finagle.
- MUNSON: —and that was on my own. Yeah, it was an opportunity to kind of feel human again.
- KATZ: Were both R&Rs in the later months?
- MUNSON: Yeah, I took my first one in August, my second one in October.
- KATZ: Oh wow. Okay.
- MUNSON: So I waited a long time, because I lost all my records so I had no money. They couldn't pay me because they didn't know who the hell I was. So it took about six months before actually, before the military had figured out oh [inaudible] an RA 1192225. So, all of my records, the records they could find got finally get transferred out to my existing outfit. At which point in time they owe me a lot of back pay [inaudible]. So I could've gone on an R&R anyway. So then I was there, and I waited a little bit longer then I took my first one. And luckily I went to Hong Kong, but and then the monsoon hit very quickly and they moved inside of Wonder Beach, maybe in

September, October timeframe. And to LZ [landing zone] Nancy and we just kind of by then, the monsoon nothing really much was on, so we just kind of hung around. Although we did—I think we did skip over the one thing, that the one aspect when I was in Wonder Beach. We did go up in our outfit, I didn't I was just back in [inaudible]. They went up and we were part of the relief column that brought the Marines out of Khe Sanh.

KATZ: Oh really?

MUNSON: Because they were, they had been there for a couple, three months mostly guarding the Ho Chi Minh trail in the DMZ and upper left hand corner of [South] Vietnam. And they've been under constant artillery barrage for months. And these guys were they came into our, they distributed and they came back, they distributed some into each of the various outfits. And so I ran into some of these folks and they were completely bonkers. Fistfights would breakout in chow lines. These guys would just yell, scream, “ahhhh!” And so we were all “What the hell's going on here?” But so that was my first, I guess you could say that's why I understand what PTSD is. I've seen a lot of good examples of people who just lose their mind, they have no way to cope with the slightest issues. It's still fight [Munson punches hand] so that was I think that was in late summer of '68. And so then hang around LZ Nancy for a while and then time comes for Bob to go home. And actually coming back from it—I'll give you another quick anecdote—coming back from my second R&R, which was not a legitimate R&R but I took it anyway.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: So I had my own words typed up, in good with the R&R, with the legal clerk. So I'm coming back and flying to Da Nang and I have to get back to my outfit in Wonder Beach. So we land in Da Nang and as I said, choppers are how you get around. So I had to, I went to the flight line, said “I gotta get back to Wonder Beach.” Guy said, “Okay, well we got a marine recon squad that's going up there. It's gonna pull a test-the-wire activity tonight, so you want to go with them?” “Okay,” I'm not gonna say no. So there was a sergeant coming back from R&R too so to the two of us they said, “That chopper over there, its leaving at 10 o'clock, 11 o'clock. Go with them and they'll get you through the wire to get back to [inaudible]”

KATZ: What was the test? You said test-of-wire?

MUNSON: They were testing the integrity of the perimeter.

KATZ: Okay.

MUNSON: They were going to do it at 10 [pm]. They're going to pretend to attack, see if the guards were awake. So of course, everyone knew about this, so it wasn't a live fire exercise.

KATZ: Okay.

MUNSON: Although The people there were coming out of live fire. We're just going to see how close you could get before they were noticed, if they were. So the sergeant and I, we got our suitcases and we're getting on this plane with a squad of these blacked, gunned-up marines. And he flies up, drops us off and then these guys are infiltrating through the undergrowth, the underbrush, and the sergeant and I are walking along behind them in our Class-A's and suitcases.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: It was pretty cool. So finally, you know, the exercise was done and we walked through the wire. So which, at the time, I thought nothing, this is nothing odd. This is just "Hey, I need a ride" and these guys give me a ride.

So the war is over for me. Go back to fly out of Da Nang, home. And it so happened it's the day before Thanksgiving. So I fly into commercial, straight flight from Da Nang to Seattle. Arrived, there's a song by Arlo Guthrie called "When A Soldier Makes It Home". And one of the lines is that "he flew them in at midnight and unloaded all the sacks." Well, that was me. They flew us in at midnight into Seattle-Tacoma Airport, which is right next to Fort Lewis, Washington, and then we walked up—there's a plane-load of GIs coming home. And this is November 1968. And so I think they said that we had to go through customs and you know, make sure we didn't bring anything, any contraband back. And then we go to our tickets and they say, "Okay, guys," you know, and they gave us the voucher which would give us airfare. You can trade it in for airfare back to where the closest airport to where you were inducted, which to me was Logan Airport in Boston. So "Okay guys, you know, we can hang around, and we'll feed you a nice steak dinner and breakfast, whatever you want. Or you can just leave." So we all everybody said, "I'm out of here." We get on a bus and they drive us to the airport. And immediately all of us run into the men's room and change into our civilian clothes. Which I suppose you could say is a little different than what when the soldiers came back from World War Two, perhaps Afghanistan. Well actually in

Afghanistan, I think they they brought them into military base and they hung on to them for a little while. They didn't let him just immediately go back into the population.

KATZ: Yeah.

MUNSON: Like we did. But, uh, you know, this was happening probably every night anyway. So every morning in Seattle, that the SeaTac Airport, there's a couple 100 GIs that are going home. And it was pretty obvious, although we didn't have buzz cuts at the time. But we're all, this is November, and we're all tan like you wouldn't believe.

KATZ: Yeah. [Laughs]

MUNSON: So we're pretty obvious with who we are. So I get my, put my civvies on that I bought in Hong Kong, and get a flight back to Boston. So I get on the plane. This is again, culture shock. Here, I've been spent 12 months in a third world country, and all of a sudden I am dumped off in Seattle, Washington at the airport. And so we get on the plane and I had one stop in St. Louis, interestingly. So I get into St. Louis, and I'm sitting on the plane and this was Spring Break—not spring break, Thanksgiving break. So a whole passel of young ladies go on the plane. Some college in St. Louis, and they're going to Boston. So one of them is nice enough to sit next to me. So we're then, being who I am. And she's kind of cute. So I started chatting her up and very, pretty much she knew what I was, where I had come from. And very pleasant, she said, "Oh, by the way, my parents are coming to the airport to pick me up." Because I had mentioned the fact that I had actually got out of Vietnam three days early. So my parents did not know I was going to show up. And I had no cell phone, no calling. I was just going to show up. I said "Hey, when you get there, how are you going to get home?" "I'll call my parents" "Where do they live?" "Rhode Island." "Oh gee, my parents live there. We'll take you and drop you home." "Ok." So I get off the plane in Boston. And her parents show up. Nice. "Hey!" [inaudible] "Hey!" Very welcoming. It's a [inaudible], because again, this was early, I didn't expect to be, have a cadre of anti-war protesters running around at the time, it was still pretty early in the war. So, I get a ride home. And she drops me off at my parent's house and I walk up to the dor, knock on the door, and here I am.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: They had no idea. And my parents again, were pretty non-committal about it. My sisters were very happy to see me.

KATZ: I'm sure.

MUNSON: And the next day I sat down to Thanksgiving dinner. So I'm back, not out, but I'm back. And again, it's a really bad way to reintegrate soldiers anyway. And we've never done it that way before. World War Two, because they weren't flying people, they were shipping it back in boats. So it was months after you fired your last round before you were actually back in the population, the civilian population. And during that time, you had plenty of time to decompress. They would give, you get, you're starting to wear clean clothes again. Food, the chaos is [inaudible], you're with all your buddies. When they got back things were a lot calmer.

And we've done that, and then now, I know, they do the same now, only instead of the Afghan, War on Terror guys, they fly them back, but then they keep them in. They have their family, but they keep them on post, they don't just [Munson claps] say goodbye, because most of them are actually still in the military and will be in the military for a while afterwards anyway. So, they're still part of their unit. And it all there's still a lot of issues with people that have been downrange a lot. That they are subject to a lot of problems. And, you know, just emotionally it's really tough. For—I don't know, in both actually, the World War Two and the Afghan War on Terror people have a lot in common, because World War Two you signed for duration. And we in Vietnam, it was a year and you're done. And in Afghanistan and Iraq, they keep on sending them back over and over again. So they're, they, they know that. And it's a volunteer in both situations, and the vast majority, the people doing this, raise their hand, say "I'll go." So the dynamic work, I think it used to work and they didn't, they totally blew it with my group. And then they got a little better, but it's still not very good. You know, they have a lot of things in place. But still, it's—you have to self—you have to raise your hand for it. They don't make it, they don't do a very good job of integrating, of getting people who have seen and done that stuff, they haven't found a way to encourage them in a way that they're going to accept—to seek counseling and to get them back.

KATZ: Did you have any difficulty readjusting? I know you said you weren't really affected by much in the war, but was there anything—?

MUNSON: Nah. Just another day in the military.

KATZ: Just another day?

MUNSON: Never. Again, I don't know if I'm that unique? Or just the way I'm wired, I guess.

KATZ: So, we're at Thanksgiving. What's the next move?

MUNSON: Okay, I'm home for leave only maybe three weeks and then I go down to, back to Fort Belvoir, of all places. Because I was still thought of as being an engineer, even though I'm a radio operator at this point in time. And I got another nine months to pull until I'm out, not getting out till September '69. So I go down to Fort Belvoir. And it's Fort Belvoir, being engineering, OCS and a few other things. It's one of the few places, it's actually the closest, actually, active-duty military outfits in the DC area. So you kind of support as an engineering outfit, they got a lot of road graders and heavy equipments so they help with snow removal in DC—

KATZ: Ok.

MUNSON: —that kind of stuff. It's nice to have an outfit around like that. So I was attached to a combat engineering battalion in Fort Belvoir 18th Engineering Battalion, I think. And I'm a radio operator. So I'm a 05B20 with a Purple Heart, Vietnam veteran who's got nine months to go. The battalion commander says, "I want this guy driving my jeep." So it sounds like a good job to me.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: So I became the battalion commander jeep driver. And that was a good gig. Because again, they would go out to maneuvers of the battalion and my colonel would say "Hey Bob, you know, I gotta be out of this. You know, I'm gonna be living in a tent for a few days." He said, "If you want to go back to the barracks, as long as the Jeep is here, seven o' clock in the morning. I don't care what you do." So I dropped him off and the first Sergeant's behind me. He wasn't too pleased about it. Again, he was a great guy. This guy, great Colonel. He was he knew I was getting out. I did a great job. I helped you know, I was the guy that would you know, some Lieutenant would say like "My radio isn't working." And he would drive out drove over there and you know, some ground wire had come loose or something.

KATZ: Do you remember his name? Do you remember his name for the colonel?

MUNSON: Colonel? I don't know. Commanding officer—I don't remember.

KATZ: No issues. No worries.

MUNSON: So I was—he appreciated who I was. He said he had somebody, I knew he treated me with respect I treated him with respect. A full colonel and [a] Spec-4—I know that the sergeant major in the backseat wasn't too pleased with the camaraderie.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: I didn't call him Joe or whatever his first name was. And he called me, he did call me Bob. And he liked me, I did a good job for him. The jeep was always clean, ready to go, gassed up. Anytime we had a problem with somebody else's jeep, "Hey, Bob will take care of that." and I fix it for him. So he loved it. He was good, too. We got to be pretty good, I wouldn't say friends necessarily, but we both—I respected him, he respected me and got along really well.

And then in the summer, one of our line companies went to West Point every summer, because the plebes their freshman year don't go home. They spend a summer, the summer after their freshman year they stay at West Point and then regular army outfits come up and introduce them to the various branches of the service. This is what these guys did. So every summer one of our Line Companies would go to West Point spend the summer teaching them about combat engineers. So West Point isn't that far away from East Greenwich, Rhode Island. I went to my boss the colonel and said "Hey, maybe it would it be okay if I became the jeep driver for the company commander of Charlie Company who's going up to West Point?" he said, "Yeah sure, I'll talk to him." So I'm going to be his jeep driver. So we convoyed up, real funny, interesting military convoy from Washington DC to upstate to West Point. You know trying to drive around the tunnels and somebody would get lost and we have to go try to find them.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: "Oh my God!" and I was the jeep driver. "Where the hell did he go?" Like the sheepdog and the sheep. So we get up there and and I spent the summer teaching them land navigation. You know every day, I'd go out and have another 20 cadets, and show them how to use a compass and this and that. And then they, we'd send them out into the woods. There were three of us, I think that did it. And then it was supposed to be a, say a four-hour exercise, and getting late. Okay, we jumped the jeep, we knew exactly where they screwed up. This is where they'd end up, we go and pick up the two or three who got lost. It's kind of, it was interesting interaction,

because I'm the same age as these guys pretty much. Well, I'm 21. [Inaudible] I'm 22 at the time. So I would've been 22-year-old Vietnam veteran radio operator, they're a 18-19 year old, soon to be First Lieutenant, Second Lieutenant. So it's an interesting kind of dialogue, because I'm supposed to tell them and they're supposed to know it all. And you know, we had this kind of interesting, back and forth. And then on the weekends, I have car, I bought a car when I came back from Vietnam. On the weekends, I would drive back to Rhode Island. And I ended up becoming friends with my brother's secretary. My older brother was working at Digital Equipment Corporation at the time. His secretary took a shining to me, I think she was trying to get—she liked my brother, but he was married, so whatever.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: So I would drive back and forth to on the weekends I drive down the Merritt Parkway back to and come back and arrive at reveille at Seven o'clock in the morning on Monday, I'd be driving all night, Saturday, Sunday night to get back in time. So for the last couple of months in my tour, I was up at West Point fiddling around. And then I drove, then went back to the Fort Belvoir at the end of the summer and September 29th, whatever. I got done. I'm out of there.

KATZ: Where do you go from Fort Belvoir, September 30. Next Day?

MUNSON: I went back to Rhode Island where my parents lived. I got a job in Massachusetts. Working as a warehouse manager for a company with my sister-in-law, married to my older brother. Was a PR, was a personnel manager for a leasing company. So she got me this job, which was where I met my wife who's a secretary for one of the bigwigs in the leasing company. And the rest is history.

And I met up with her started going out in June, got married in October. Six months later, I let her know that it was time for me to go back to school, I needed more education. I found a two-year college in Atlanta to go to. It was called Southern Technical Institute at the time. Right now it's Kennesaw State College now. Went down there spent a couple, three years of GI Bill, wife is working as secretary for VP of a bank. Actually the president of the bank, she's very—my wife was a tremendous personal secretary, she went to Katie Gibbs, and she was great. Hard worker, skills, bright. And I spent three years on the GI Bill, settling my life. And then we decided that we were going to move back, I'm gonna graduate, I was trying to decide. I could have had an option for four-year degree, but I got my two years and it's like, well, she's like, "I gotta

go back home, had enough of Georgia. I love it here, but—.” and then in October, I guess, of my senior year—earlier than that, we find out that she’s pregnant. So, gotta go back home. So I got a job at GenRad, General Radio Company in Concord, Massachusetts. And the rest is history.

And then started up on a 40 year career in technology, ended up—starting off as an entry-level technician, ended up as a senior software engineer. Ended up running a data center later on in Boston. My very successful wife went back to school nights, ended up being a Principal Financial Analyst at Raytheon. So while we both had very successful—she stayed home for a while, she was 30 years at Raytheon, I was forty years, trying to get a job at a company would stay around. I kept on working for companies who went out of business: Digital Equipment Corporation, Wang Laboratories. A couple of smaller companies, then a big human service company in Boston, where I ran their data center, their voice and data network for 13 years, couple thousand employees. It was good, it was a good gig. That was probably the only job I've ever had in my life where I was a perfect fit. I started off being a boss for all the technicians and I know that's not what I do.

KATZ: Yeah.

MUNSON: So, I convinced my management as it got bigger and bigger as it did, I need to spend all of my time in the data center. And in the PBX, personal branch exchange, we had our own phone system, I need to keep on top of what's going on with the stuff, latest revisions of software, this and that I don't have time to be the boss of these people. so they said “Ok”. So they hired, I knew exactly who I wanted this young woman who was—she's always kind of wanting to get into the racket. Nicole is the person you have to hire, and you got to give her a nice raise to do this. “Oh, Okay.” So I segued into the technology guy. I didn't have to work with our clients, never had to work with the clients. I didn't have to work with our employees either. I had a team that was those people. And so I spent the last seven, eight years of my career just making sure that nobody ever lost any, any files, your data set, everything was always, always up to date, worked, and kept them reasonable, and in even within the budget requirements of the nonprofit, it was able to keep us on top of the technology. I knew what we needed.

I'd spent a lot of time going to seminars, conferences to see what HP is doing next. And do we really need that. And I had enough knowledge to be able to, to make decisions about whether or not, so when the boss would come and say, “Hey, I heard about x.” So

yeah, "I know about that, but I don't think it's good fit for us and this is why." And then they would go "Okay." Or "Yes, you're right. That's perfect. Dan, aren't you a good boy, that's exactly what we need." I've known for six months that's exactly what we need. I learned how to you know, it was a good fit, really good fit for me. Because I had a lot of responsibilities. I'm sure I'm more than happy to have—I want to be responsible. I want to have, I'm willing to take the hit for a failure. But I want I'd like to have the kudos when I have success. And I think that served me well, because you gotta think what your boss is going to think. "I trust this guy." "So we need that, we need to do this" We were a cost center, not a profit center. So they didn't ever really want to spend any money. But they never really wanted to lose any data. And I was the senior technology guy in the company. So he had to trust me, right? That's my line to them is if you don't trust me, you better fire me now.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: Because I can destroy this company. And I can go ahead and do this, and all your files are gone forever. And I can make it look like it was it was an act of God. If you don't trust me, it's time to get rid of me. So I could never do that, ethically. I consider myself to be an ethical, honorable human being. I would never think of doing that. But that was my career. Three kids, four grandkids. Successful. Married 52 years. That's who I am. I guess.

KATZ: How did you make your way up to the Upper Valley?

MUNSON: Oh, my parents bought a place in Eastman [Community Association] with my older brother back in the early '80s. And my brother lived in New Hampshire at the time, in Amherst. And a big skier and Eastman was being built up. He found it and the prices were great. So he convinced my parents to go in halvesies with him on a plot of land, which turned into a condo and then, he was, till a couple of years later he's going to Denver for his job, is transferred there. So he convinced my parents to buy him out. And so, in my parent's place, we're living in Rhode Island at the time, we're not skiers, but we have this place in New Hampshire. So my wife and I are the only two close by, my other siblings have moved out in North Carolina. So it was my family, it was our weekend getaway; winters, summers. So the wife and I and three kids, my three kids were all elementary school at the time. So it was a great getaway period. So we got to know the area really well. Kids all learned to ski, play tennis, got all that stuff at Eastman.

And then my dad passed away, my mother moved down to Maryland to be with my sister. Sell the place, Eastman's gone. And the kids, my kids are high school done college. My wife and I are just—we're both professionals making good dough, traveling around doing our thing. And then we both get old, and it's time to retire. I knew I had to get out of Massachusetts, I never really was comfortable there. And it's where all my wife's people are. So she wasn't quite as enthusiastic about it, but so we gotta find a place to go. I just wanted out. I always liked the Southwest think we should get an RV and drive around the country for a couple of years and check in with the [inaudible], and my wife is internally thinking, "Torture! Torture! He's gonna kill me!"

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: So, now we got grandkids, now we have grandkids at the same time. It's like oh my God, we gotta do this. So we finally said, gee, I think was her idea at the beginning, "Let's look at Eastman". So 2007, I think, no, later than that. Maybe 2012, [20]13. We started looking, I retired in 2013. She retired in 2014. So maybe 2015 or 14, whatever. We're living in Lowell, a nice condo on the river. Nice place. And so we come up here, start looking around and the prices were unbelievable, there were properties that were being given away. Right? Because Eastman never recovered from the 2008 housing recession. Almost like in Lebanon, but it was you know, this was a cheap place to live. So we start to look at it, "Whoa! I can write a check and buy that place." Okay, so we bought a condo here and rented it for a couple of years and then finally sold out of Lowell because we were still involved with my great—my daughter had twins and we were still involved with them a lot. So we had two places for a while but they got old really quickly. And then we took us a while to sell our place in Lowell. Years after we bought, we sold it for exactly what we paid for it. And then we moved up here full time and then we redid the condo. Rehab, got rehabs all over the place. And I've been living here ever since and it's been great.

Grandkids come up all the time. They're both—they've learned to ski, they're involved in summer activities. They're now 14. And my oldest son's kids are both in college. So we don't see them as much. But my son, eldest son just came—he was a, he got out of the military. And he was working his way up to the ladder of success of the corporations. And he ended up two and a half years ago in Mansfield, Massachusetts. So all three of my kids now live in Massachusetts. My grandkids are now my older ones are off in college—one's in Montana, one's in New York. And so we love it up here. And so we already kind of knew what it was like. You know,

it's close enough, but it's far enough away. It's a great area for retired people, and people with kids in school.

KATZ: [Laughs]

MUNSON: Little kids. Young adults, maybe not as much, but it's perfect for us.

KATZ: Have you had a lot of interactions with veterans since you've moved up to the Upper Valley?

MUNSON: Yeah, well, I'm in a book group with [Prof.] Roberta Stewart, who's a professor here. And I initially—when I got out, there's a place called the Vet Centers, which is, which is a subgroup of the VA, and it's for combat veterans. And they said, they have a lot of services, counseling services, they do a lot of great things with vets. And I ran into the one—when I got out of the military, I got prostate cancer really quickly. And I know the history of that so I ended up using them. I have a small disability because of that. But I also got access to counseling there. And I had this great psychologist, she was fabulous. I had her for a couple of years talking out, learned that I have issues that I wasn't aware of. And so the vets, through that, I found it, that it was great people there. People that help you out with all kinds of things. And so I was with them for a couple of years in Lowell and they have great vets and vet centers were all over the place. And so I got to meet a lot of guys there, they're mostly Vietnam veterans, but a fair number of War on Terror vets.

And, and that's actually where I met Roberta. She came down and was on a sabbatical for something—or she's doing something at Harvard, I think maybe. So she taught the Odyssey there at that vet center. And so I started with that. And then so I got back into the veteran community. Through that, I kept meeting a lot of these War on Terror [veterans]. There's soldier from New Hampshire who has the Medal of Honor. And I met him and then I met two Medal of Honors, actually, and so I had this great, I had a lot of great experience.

And then I came up here and there's a Vet Center at White River Junction. And I connected with them, but their sweet spot wasn't me. So we passed ways. But though Roberta I've met maybe 20 other vets in the Upper Valley. And because they're Dartmouth, because it's area tends to have as its demographics a lot of well-educated, strong people. I think it's because they had had some kind of a link with Dartmouth either they went to Dartmouth or they really worked here, whatever. So I had a good group of guys, and gals that we've been doing our book readings with over the years.

So the last few years has been really tough because I'm not a Zoom guy. I just don't like Zoom. I hate it. So now we're trying push Roberta to—but she hasn't. Don't tell her I said this, she's she knows. Most of us really don't. It doesn't it just doesn't feel the same. And because we had it for, I've been doing this maybe eight or nine years. And I had the first six that once, one day a week, six months of the year get together, have a cup of coffee, talk about a book, Zoom doesn't cut it. So we know what it what it could be. What it is now is really a small percentage of what it used to be.

KATZ: Have you noticed any, I guess, similarities between the Vietnam War veterans and the veterans of the war of terror, the younger ones?

MUNSON: Over the last six to nine months? The answer is absolutely yes. Before that. No. We ran away from Afghanistan. The way we did. Again, I think soldiers who got it. One of the things I think the military does to you, it puts you into a situation where you have to really examine who you are. Words like honor, ethics, means something a lot more to the difficult—to someone who joined—for a military person. Because you get put in situations, first of all, anybody who has more rank than you can tell you to do anything, and you got to do it. There's no, "I don't want to do that." So in a situation like that, you really got to understand what it's like to have your management, if you will, people who take that seriously, they're not going to tell you to do something that isn't right. Because you have to do it. If they say "charge that hill," and they know you're all gonna di—"Wait a minute, we got to do that. You knew we were all going to die and you did it anyway?" So, you have to, there's a certain basic understanding that we all in this together, and we all have to pull together.

So in my war, I think that was broken. That we—because it's more about the way we ran away at the end, in 1975. When we said, we said, "We're going to help you guys out forever. But we don't think we want to do this anymore." Congress cut off the funding for the for the [South] Vietnamese, that was the wrong thing to do. And, but whereas the Afghan guys, gals—they also were put in a situation where they saw a lot of friends die, maimed. And they thought they were doing something, they thought, they trusted, they were being told to do this for good reason. And they trusted that people are not going to say, send it back again and again and again. If the people who are doing it don't recognize that these people are doing this, they're putting their lives on the line, you better have a damn good reason we're doing that. And up until we

ran away. I mean, it was we were done. I mean, we had a couple thousand troops there, hadn't had a combat casualty in 18 months. So it's like things had kind of settled down, we kind of won, if you will, in a way. Like we— North Korea is still, South Korea still an entity, right? Berlin Wall came down, you know, we know how to do that. Instead, we just said that we don't want to be here anymore, we're gonna run away. And oh, by the way, we know when to leave a lot of Americans there and some soldiers gonna get killed on the way out, but “Ah, what the hell?” we're gonna leave.

From the day that happened, we're on the same team now. I've noticed that there were two[indistinct] vets in my group, who had a real close relationship with their interpreters. In country, where they knew their families, they knew these guys who were putting their lives on the line too. And they felt that, you know—again, they were the people who were supposed to be ethical. So they're telling these guys, you worked with us, and we'll take care of it. And then they leave and they expect the people who come in behind them be the same way. People behind them say, “Nah, nah to hell with them.” They broke those debts.

The Iraq, Afghanistan vets were broken. By the way we ran away when we left them. So it's interesting that, all of a sudden, these guys are like, I know, I know how you feel. I know how it feels to say you sent young people into combat. A lot of them were screwed up and emotionally, physically, they died. And you just “We don't want to do that anymore, we can't afford that anymore”? Well, what? What do you mean you can't afford that anymore? So it's just money, that's why we're running away? How about people's money wasted over here? Can you ship that over there and keep this going? “Nah, we said we're going to—”. So that, so that is come full circle.

Up until then, up until when we ran away, I think the basic attitude was, yeah, things were kind of screwed up, but in the end of the day, we settled things down over there. It's a, it's a frontline of our war on terror. You know, we've got we're embedded in Afghanistan, which is where a lot of the stuff is going on. We're sending out, you know, working with the locals, we have access to, you know, Pakistan, lots of other places. So it made sense, it kind of made sense. They could see what we had done and actually accomplish something. And now it's all gone.

So yeah, that's, I guess is— the takeaway there is, I lend it to the fact that we have in this country, we've, we've decided that people in charge—and I think this is a relatively new phenomenon, that the

people in charge, the fact that they none of them have ever been in the military, they've never had anybody in their family serve. That's okay. And the people that are around them, none of them served—okay. And these are the people that are making, they're making the decisions to send people in harm's way. And none of them, none of their immediate family is ever going to be—has a chance of ever having been involved in that. So it tends to lead one to be very skeptical of their motivations. And, again, I don't want to get political here too much. But if we're going to be in a situation where we're fighting, we're sending a lot of people into harm's way, I think the people in charge have to recognize that they have to go a little further than one would expect to keep—to recognize, that the people—they need to help those people understand why they're doing that, and have a damn good reason for putting them there, not some vague, you know, nation building or something that we know is never going to happen, that never has.

So why would we think we're going to do it now? The Romans weren't able to do it. The Greeks weren't able to do it. You know, the Germans were there, [but] didn't do it. The Japanese, Brits, the Britons, I mean, hell yeah, half the world at one point in time. They don't have it anymore. So why are we why are we going to do this? I don't know. Where's the historical? Where's the history? Where is history teaching you that this is going to work? That you people of this type, you can impose your morality or ethics, your behavior on these other people who have their backstory is so different than yours? You look at how you got to where you are, and look where they are in that cycle. You expect that you're going to get them there without—they have to get themselves there. Bottom line. You can try to help them get there, but you can't get them there.

Hubris, I guess is a good word. Yeah, [inaudible] So, again, I, but I still, I still I don't think the people that are doing that are doing it because they wish—this is my point for military. I don't think they're doing it for because they're bad people or they're I think they believe what they're doing. I think the people in power in this country all think that they know the right answer. But I don't think they have the experience necessary to actually come to the right answer. And so I get—that's why I again, I look back on my military career, and I'm very pleased that I—you know, people say thank you for your service, my response is, "Thank you, but was my honor to serve." I learned a lot about me. I learned a lot about human beings. I was placed in situation where I had to really understand, get to know who I am. And I think at the end of the day, I decided that the best way to be is to be as honorable and as ethical as I could possibly be and that's the best road forward. I

haven't always been successful, but I've tried. So that's me. "He said smiling."

KATZ: [Laughs] Well, I think that might be a great place to finish off. Thank you so much for coming in.

MUNSON: Sure! Okay.

[End of interview.]