Dennis Garry Beyton – Life during Vietnam

By Dennis Garry Beyton

March 2, 2003

Box 2 Folder 3

Oral Interview conducted by Matt Johnson

Transcript copied by Maren Miyasaki August 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho
MJ: Where were you born and what day?

DB: I was born in Winnipeg, Canada, November 12th 1947.

MJ: What year or what grade [were you] when Vietnam broke out?

DB: Well I was in, let’s see, actually Vietnam started with advisors…American Advisors going over in late 50s, ’58, ’59, somewhere in there. But the…I remember very specifically I was a junior in history class and our teacher brought an article in and about some advisors, more advisors going to Vietnam. And he was totally accurate. He said, “You know, this is just the beginning.” So I think the first thought I had about it, first awareness was in 1963.

MJ: Were you and your family Canadian citizens or were you…?

DB: Yep, I…Well, I came to the states when I was eight, my folks moved to the states in 1956, when I was eight years old, and five years, it took five years of living in the country and applying for citizenship, so 1961 we became U.S. citizens. And I was under age at the time so I was actually granted dual citizenship. I had a choice of you know, I could have retained dual citizenship, I eventually gave up my Canadian citizenship, and, primarily because I, my thought was if you’re going [to] live in a country you ought to be part of it, you know. So, when I went into [the] military and took a commission is when I gave up my Canadian citizenship.

MJ: Were you drafted then or did you actually enlist?

DB: Actually it was an interesting scenario, I, my dad was an officer of the Canadian Army and resigned when we came to the states. But I was, you know, going to be in the military, I guess I had some thoughts about that. When I was a junior in college, I, I was a fulltime student and I really wasn’t giving much thought to it. I was just going to college. But then I dropped a course and I went down to this…I guess fulltime was 15 units; I went down to 12. So I got a notice from the draft board. They said, “You are now 1A.”

MJ: What’s that, 1A?

DB: 1A means that you’re eligible for drafting—you are the top of the pick. And they have different categories, like 4F would mean you were deficient in fitness or something. But anyway I was 1A, and I remember my thoughts, now I, I didn’t mind serving, but I didn’t want to go as a draftee and not have any choice. And so I went over to the ROTC program and basically looked into it, and ended up signing up for the ROTC program. And since I was already a junior or a sophomore at the time instead of a four-year program I ended up in a two-year program. And, I joined…I mean there was some incentive, you know with the threat of draft about, so I decided I’d go ahead and have some choice as to what I was doing and which branch I was going into or whatever.
MJ: Good. About the draft system, there were some people that resisted the draft or tried to get around it. Did you have any thought about those people?

DB: Yep. Well, first of all, I don’t know how much you know about it at the time, but the draft system had a lot of inequities to it because you’d get deferments. And say… if you’re going to school fulltime, you’d get a deferment. I remember there was a rush of guys getting married up ‘til a point of time, if you’re married, then you get a deferment, and I remember the deadline, which they would change that guys would just run off to Vegas, get married, and I thought…that’s a dumb reason to get married, you know (laughs). But I, I guess my feelings Matt, were I personally didn’t like having people resisting the draft or trying to avoid it. But, you got a duty—then you need to assume that duty. But at the same time I also realized it wasn’t the fairest system running. I think history shows where it is, inordinate number of blacks and blacks served, who were drafted, as opposed to whites or Caucasians. ’Cause they just didn’t have the options. Some guys would go into the National Guard, and some guys would obviously get married, some guys would go to school and sometimes quit.

MJ: Where did, when you started out where did you receive your basic training and your other training?

DB: My first—since it was a two-year ROTC program, what they did is they sent you off between your sophomore and junior year for six weeks of basic Army training. And they sent us all to Fort Benning, Georgia which is an infantry school. And, then you’d come back and throughout the years of being in the ROTC program going to classes and so forth. And, then the second year in your junior and senior year you’d go another advanced, they’d call it advanced summer camp, another six weeks depending on the year, for additional training. And, in my case, I went to Fort Benning, Georgia and as I was flying out my appendix began to rupture and a couple days later while I was training, it perforated. And, so they hauled me to hospital and I had an appendectomy. I was in the hospital two weeks recovering, of course I mean, I was, that was it. So they sent me back, basically discharged me, but so…but I still stayed in the ROTC program, but then I went back the following summer, same place. That time for the full six weeks.

MJ: What year was that?

DB: That was the summer of ’67. And so the following year, I then went to advanced camp in Fort Lewis, Washington. Actually the first year was ’67 and like I said I was only there long enough to have surgery. So the following year…that’s right, summer of ’68 I went back to Fort Benning…and the year after that, in 1969 I was in Fort Lewis Washington because I remember we were out in the field when the first man walked on the moon.

MJ: Wow.

DB: And the other thing I remember is the second time I went back to Fort Benning, Georgia—in the summer of ’68—I had gotten married in March…March 23rd. And I
think it was June 4th or 5th I was out to Fort Benning, Georgia...so maybe...let's see, I remember we were married eight weeks then I left for six. And I thought six weeks was an eternity—it would never end (laughs).

MJ: How'd your wife handle that—you being away?

DB: Oh, she did pretty well. I mean, it was rough, but she did okay but she was working fulltime...and then the following summer I went up to Fort Lewis, Washington for six weeks.

MJ: And what was your job and M.O.S. and where were you assigned?

DB: When I was in the Army?

MJ: Yeah.

DB: When I received my commission, I was commissioned in the transportation branch. So my first assignment was called the officer basic course...to get on active duty enlistees the Transportation Corps’ branch school for officers—new officers and that was eight weeks. That was memorable because our daughter Kim was born two days before I left to go on active duty. Okay, we’re living in California and I have to go to Virginia. And I was out there for eight weeks and then came back. I couldn’t finish the course ‘cause my basic M.O.S. was...six twenty-eight twenty-three I believe. I was a transportation branch. And then after I finished basic officer training in the branch, then I went to flight school and became a...that’s where I made the six forty-eight—it was the graded aviation maintenance officer. So I went through about a year of flight school and then they sent me, from there to, back to Virginia and I became trained in aviation maintenance. So I was overseeing maintenance on the helicopters. And then, then they made me a test pilot. So your job is, once the aircraft is fixed you go back and fly it—make sure it’s airworthy.

MJ: So, make sure it works good enough and you don’t fall out...?

DB: Yeah...yeah.

MJ: And, did you actually go over to Vietnam?

DB: Yeah. I, as soon as I finished the maintenance officers course...I had thirty days leave. So I went to Vietnam in early November of 1971.

MJ: At that time what was your understanding of America’s goals in Vietnam?

DB: Primarily we were there to stop the communist aggression, which had started with it in Vietnam. And one of the prevailing thoughts of the Government at the time was what they referred to as the “Domino Theory,” which means if one falls, all these other countries are just going to fall in behind—in terms of being converted to communist
states. And I was...as you could probably tell, you know, there were two groups or maybe there were three groups of students—if you would—among the young people at the time; one stayed a minority of those who supported the war effort or the idea of trying to help this country [Vietnam] reach or obtain democracy. There was another group who were very much against the war—the anti-war people. In some ways I was maybe a little more advanced than a lot of kids. But my focus was on my family and whatever, so...I look back and think, “no gee,” I wasn’t aware of some of those current events, not at the time. It just, shoo—right by me.

MJ: So the antiwar movement...you were kinda...?

DB: Well, I was certainly aware of it. But I guess I just didn’t give a whole lot of thought to it. I just didn’t do a lot of research on it or...you know debate back and forth, whatever. Mind...now I wasn’t a member of the Church [of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints] until I was 27. My wife and I joined later when we were at Fort Campbell, Kentucky...But my folks came from Canada...just a whole different mindset if you would have now. And I was taught, you know, you respect authority, you support your government, you know, work with them. So, in some ways I didn’t question a whole lot. But my own view was, you know...I’m...Country calls and—it was me—that I’d go ahead and do what I was expected to do. So, that, again, that was not necessarily the prevailing thought because—you’re probably aware—the Sixties...not only Vietnam but, I think that was a big impetus to it but, there was just a whole thing towards anti-establishment...you know, this whole sexual revolution was going on and...you can’t trust anybody over 30, and it was just a whole different culture of the way kids were being raised. And, 'course there—I mean one thing that had a big impact, because I remember this day, the day that President John F. Kennedy was shot. I wasn’t in support of Kennedy...but my folks were Republicans and I was of that persuasion you know. And I don’t know how much thinking I did on my own, but I just didn’t think that much about it. But I can remember profoundly sitting in geometry class when the principal came over the P.A. system, he announced that “President Kennedy had just been shot,” and that was a major, major thing to the young people—I mean, to have your own president assassinated. And then, of course Johnson came in and—again I don’t know how much you’ve studied this—but one of the errors Johnson made in his approach was that—you may have heard the term “guns and butter?”

MJ: Yep.

DB: Well, his approach was he didn’t want to sacrifice one for the other. And he thought, rather than going to the American public and saying, “We’ve got a real problem here, and we’re going to...you know, we need to draw on the reserves and the National Guard and go do this,” his strategy was to just rely on the draft. And of course his big thing was not the Vietnam War—he inherited it from Kennedy. But the Gulf of Tonkin incident in November of ’64 was a primary incident that he used to escalate our involvement. And supposedly, a Navy gunship or couple of ships, were attacked by Vietcong, and there’s a lot of debate today as to whether or not it happened or not. But be it as it may the Gulf of Tonkin incident is when Johnson went to Congress and said,
“You need to step up” so the draft could be escalated and start bringing in more people. Johnson’s real thing was not the Vietnam War it was the “Great Society”—and that was focused on the people who were poor. And so Medicare was passed, 1965…I think Johnson was probably attributed with more social programs being invoked at one time than any other president. And he didn’t want to sacrifice the “Great Society” for Vietnam, and so he tried to maintain both. And one of the great lessons—and if I’m going off in a tangent, stop me—

MJ: No. You’re doing fine.

DB: But one of the great lessons learned from Vietnam was, if you are going to conduct a war—I’m talking about the American public—you need support of the American public. And that’s why, that was a lesson learned very well by George Bush, George Bush Senior. And so, when the Gulf War came around in the 90s, I mean, he was a superb statesman and had lined-up all these countries in support of our going. And so there was a concerted effort. And that’s what his son George W. Bush, now is trying to do—build a consensus among the different nations. But, Johnson’s approach was, “No, don’t, don’t go to the American public,” and as a result, that’s where a lot of the resistance started coming from. And I remember—and if you read books by Colin Powell—he was a major in Vietnam, as was… I think he [was a] first lieutenant…Schwarzkopf. These were what they called company grade officers—second lieutenant, first lieutenant, captain. Those are all company grades. And so they served as company grade officers in Vietnam and saw the fact that we didn’t have the support of the public. And if you talk to historians, we did not lose the Vietnam War militarily; the big turning point was the Tet Offensive in ’68. And I mean the Vietcong took a horrendous beating militarily in terms of bodies, you know, body counts. But the psychological impact was it started turning the public opinion against the administration; that’s one of the reasons why Johnson chose not to run for re-election. But we didn’t, again, lose it from a military point of view. We lost it because the public wasn’t willing to support the ongoing effort. And that lesson wasn’t lost on people like, Powell or Schwarzkopf. The commitment was to then make sure we never got into the same predicament again.

And, just another side-note to that: there was a general by the name of Creighton Abrams. He was the last field commander in Vietnam for the United States Army. And after he finished that, he came back and became the chief of staff for the Army, which was the highest ranked officer in the Army. Creighton Abrams was a battalion tank commander under General Patton in World War Two. In fact, Patton said he was his finest tank commander that he had—was Creighton Abrams. And he was a crusty old guy. Oh, I mean crusty. I was a lieutenant at Fort Campbell, Kentucky when he came out to visit us up there and spoke to us. Cigar chompin’…kind of rumpled up old guy—but I mean, just bright as the day is long, I mean he was sharp. But he saw what happened and the politicians started running the war. President Johnson started handpicking targets to bomb in North Vietnam. Instead of turning over to his commander and saying, “What are your objectives, what are you trying to do,” and letting them do what he needed to do, he started handpicking things. So everything started escalating downhill from there. And Abrams saw what was going on and so he, when he became chief of staff, he vowed to posture the Army in such a way that it would
never have another repeat of Vietnam, in that sense. And what he saw was Johnson did not go the American public for their support and say, “I need your support. Buy into this,” and then use the Reserve and Guard system. He just relied on the draftees. And again, most of them came from poor social classes, you know. But what Abrams did then was to say, “Alright, well I’m going to restructure the Army in such a way that if we ever go back to war again, it will require the Guard and the Reserves…” Because, what they did was—your major size unit in an Army is called a division—the 101st Airborne Division, the 82nd Airborne Division, 1st Infantry Division, 3rd, so forth, so on…and commanded by a two-star general. Well, within a division you have brigades; there’s usually three line brigades within a division. So the 101st Airborne Division has three infantry brigades. Well, under this new structure, one of those brigades would be a Reserve or National Guard unit. So if you’re going to activate the 101st Airborne Division you’ve got to call up a whole lot of National Guard or Reservists. So, he actually structured the military in such a way that, he basically tried to preclude that from happening again. And basically, that’s how it ended up. Did I answer your question? (Laughing)

MJ: Yeah, you did.

DB: I think I went all over the map!

MJ: That’s a good nutshell of the war and how it was conducted and its players.

DB: It was a… it was a tragedy in many ways. I mean, first of all we were supporting—and I don’t…I think history proven itself over time that, many people have said: “This is a civil war. We have no business in a civil war, and it is up to the Vietnamese to decide what kind of future they want,” when in fact, there was truly aggression from North Vietnam into South Vietnam. But it was a very political type of war and, in many ways the average Vietnamese—first of all, it’s agricultural country, and these people, all they want to do is plant their rice, raise a family, and live in that sense. And so there is great debates about how much do they really want democracy, do they understand it, so forth and so on. There’s no question that there was aggression by communists led by organizations or entities, countries, whatever, striving to control the populace. And some of the governments…some of the administrations running the South Vietnamese, South Vietnam from time to time were extremely corrupt so, it really complicated the whole scenario as to “Why are we supporting DeJong…” you know, he was corrupt, so forth and so on. But you can see a lot of that corruption from our point of view. But it didn’t change the fact that there was this, this aggression and the wanting to control the entire…both Vietnamese, both Vietnams. And, but it made it more difficult because—I’ll give you an example: things became very politicalized. We used to have what they called free-fire zone, which meant, if you were in a particular area and it was a free-fire zone and you were engaged—that is, if they started shooting at you, you could fire back. But there were other areas that were not free-fire zones, which meant if you took fire—somebody started firing on you—we’d have to call over to our headquarters and say, “Hey, we took fire. Can we return fire?” And then we’d go up the line [of command] on outside, and go over to the Vietnamese side and come down because there was a village
chief in that area, and so you had to get that permission...well by then, it was all over with.

MJ: Did you have much experience with that—being in a zone like where you had to get permission?

DB: Yeah. I had some of that and you know the irony of it was, sometimes depending on the situation, I mean, sometimes you’d call up and sometimes you wouldn’t (chuckle). But that’s how political it became and...as opposed to what people think of more of the “conventional war” you know—you’re military, and if somebody starts shooting at you, fire back...So that made it very difficult from that point of view—of the politics and a lot of the corruption that was going on—to really understand, you know, who’s on who’s side.

MJ: Yeah. I’ve read—you were talking about how sometimes you’d take fire, but would have to call for permission to fire back—I read recently that there were an estimated 40,000 Americans that were members of helicopter crews—pilots...

DB: And crew chiefs...

MJ: Nearly, it was just under 5,000 of them were killed throughout the war. The helicopter—what was the, what was the worth, what was the value of helicopter use in Vietnam?

DB: Well, to appreciate that you need an understanding of the topography of the country. Vietnam is a long country that from, the south is basically rice-paddies land, what they call delta. Then you go into the central region, what you call the highlands, which is not unlike the mountainous area around here [in Ogden Utah]. It has, of course, a long coastline, the entire east part of the country there is a coastline and then as you go further up north you got into their jungles, with their triple canopies...stringy, dense vegetation that shot up 50, 60, 70-some feet—and so it was a tremendous variation. But the worth of a helicopter was mobility. You could get troops from one spot to another and not have to worry if you were stuck down in deltas and the rice paddies—bogged down in that—or if you were trying to get over a mountain ridge, or move through the jungle. The helicopter gave mobility to the Army to do a lot of things. And that wasn’t really, just for example, moving troops; it was moving supplies, it was also evacuating wounded. And so without the helicopter we would not have had anywhere near the success we had in Vietnam—from a military point of view.

MJ: What kind of scenarios do you think would have been more likely without the helicopter presence?

DB: Well, the French were in Vietnam before us. Of course they had a major battle in...I think in 1964, they basically defeated the French. I have trouble with the names; it was in Northern Vietnam. But it was more traditional—movement by foot...there were many places in Vietnam where tanks were just out of the question, those tanks just got bogged-
down; they were virtually useless in a good part of Vietnam. So, conventional warfare, 
be it by foot or armored warfare was really limited. And the Vietnamese, the Vietcong, 
North Vietnamese\Vietcong by far out numbered us. The reason we were able to be 
effective in the militarily point of view was, because we were simply able to leap over 
them in a short period of time. Those Hueys would fly at basically at 100…cruise at 100 
knots…at 100 to 110 miles an hour if you had to. So, it just gave you great mobility and 
surprise—the element of surprise. If we found that there was, let’s say…an NVA unit 
somewhere hiding something, we could mobilize the ground troops in a matter of minutes 
and virtually pop in there when they weren’t suspecting it. Of course, now, just, as 
you’re coming in, of course, they’re going to start hearing you, but that would still give 
you a great deal of the element of surprise.

MJ: What was a typical day like for you when you were there in Vietnam and flying?

DB: Well, there are two different aspects of that because I was in a combat—an air 
assault unit, and then I was—half of my tour—and then the other half I went into a 
maintenance unit. But in the, in the assault battalion, an all be it, it would be more or less 
a typical, mine was still a little bit atypical, but a typical day was, you would fly 
anywhere from maybe 6 to 10 hours a day…and it could be a number of things. You 
could be given a mission to fly infantry troops on what they call insertions. You’d pick 
them up at a firebase or some threat they were in. And they’d give coordinates and you’d 
fly off and drop them into a landing zone—the L.Z.s and they’d go do their thing and 
you’d come out. Or you may be given a mission of what we call “ash and trash,” an 
administrative run, or carrying supplies—hot meals, ammunition, medical supplies, 
whatever—into firebases or base camps from other areas. You could…I did some 
medevac runs. So that was pretty much a typical day for most of the pilots in my 
battalion, and I did a certain amount of that. But because of my maintenance 
background, I was also a test pilot. So we would see that if an aircraft got shot up or just 
needed routine maintenance or if something unexpected went wrong, then we could get it 
repaired and it had to be test flown to be sure it was flying correctly. But I did a lot of the 
test flying at night because most of the time “birds” had been flying all day long 
supporting these troops and then come back, you know, late in the afternoon, or maybe 
even later. My second unit is a higher level of maintenance. And so we did actual 
rebuilds of helicopters—not just repairs, but more in depth type of repairs. And so a lot 
of my flying then was really for maintenance test flying. I remember—going back to my 
first year—for example, one day I was—the other thing we did as test pilots is, when an 
aircraft went down—if it was shot down or malfunctioning, it was not only not 
functional, but it was out on the field. Then we’d go out and recover it. And it depends 
on what was wrong, I mean, we might actually sling it out—get slings on it, secure it all 
down, call in the big “Chinooks,” and they’d come out and they’d airlift the thing out and 
then we’d repair it. But I remember one day I went out and we had five different birds go 
down in five different locations. And so we would go out to where that was check out 
what the problem was, either fix it on the spot or we’d get somebody to come in like the 
Chinooks. I remember one had a blown engine, so we ended up evacuating that with the 
Chinooks; another one had a tail-rotor service go out, so we took ours off of ours and 
gave it to them, put it in theirs and got them flying again and then, you know, we were
flying without tail rotor service (laughing). And then last one—I can’t remember, the engine was blown, the tail rotor service, something else—but the last place I went…

<Interruption>

DB: The last place we went into was a “hot LZ”—in other words, we were taking [enemy] fire, there was an actual firefight going on. And this one bird had gone in and got shot up. Co-pilot’s window was blown out; there was a round through the twin-blade. Those blades, if you took a cross-section, it looks like a honeycomb. So, we had a round about so big [about the diameter of a finger] in the bottom, and it came out about this big [about tea saucer-sized] on top. And so (laugh) I went in with this old Warrant Officer—this was on his third tour, the guy was just crazy—a short little guy. And we went in there and (chuckles) here it is a hot LZ, people were firing at me, and he jumps up and gets a ball-peen hammer, goes out on the blade and beats it down. He wrapped it with some duct-tape; and we cranked the thing up and flew it out of there. (Chuckling) You know, I remember flying back—and we sat side by side. And I remember another time, we must have been up against the…I don’t know if it was the Laotian border or the Cambodian border—one of the two—we were supposed to be in that country. And one of our ships went up and had engine failure. Something in the engine started going out—because on these engines you have what they call magnet parts…and at key-points, like in the oil system where if you start to grind metal, it will attract it to the magnet part and of course, it shorts out the circuit and gives you a warning. What it basically tells you is that you’ve got engine metal fragments…

MJ: Like the check engine lights in a car?

DB: Yeah. So anyway, they had this happen and so they shut down, and we were told to bring in a sparse engine and a portable hoist so that we could change it on the spot. And because the Hueys had a thing on the top deck where you could install this hoist, this hook, and then just swing it around and put the engine into place—but it takes you four or five hours just to do an engine change-out. Then we were told there were support troops up there to protect us. So we got up there…nobody was there. So the choice was—well, do we swap-out this engine with no protection—not knowing what to expect—or do we just get another? We elected to…we had a civilian tech-rep with us from the engine company and I told him, I said, “What do you think, John?” He said, “I think you ought to use it.” So we flushed out the engine system and the cooling system two or three times, and got rid of most of the chips. But then we opted to take our chances and fly it out. So, we took off…Well, when we left, we left from the coast. That’s where we were based at; so we went up to the Central highlands…fixed this bird up against the border there. By the time we got there, did all that, and we were trying to come back it was later in the day, now the clouds had built up. And so, where it was clear before, we were now—we were probably about 10,000 feet…on top of the clouds. I don’t know if you are familiar with flying, but you can either fly VFR, which is spells Visual Flight Rules—where you see where you are going. But if you can’t, then you’re flying on the instruments. And because of the quick buildup in Vietnam, we didn’t get a lot of instrument training. We got enough to give us what they call tactical instrument card. It
was just the bare rudiments of flying on instruments. And the guy I was flying with just hated to fly instruments, he just refused to fly. He was a great VFR pilot—scared to death of instruments. So, we were flying back about 10,000 feet, I looked down—just solid clouds so you can’t see where you were going. And I called up for control and said, “Hey, we need an AGC.” That’s a ground-controlled approach on radar. They track you on radar and say, “Okay, fly this heading and this altitude”, you know—and they direct readings—you could just fly your instruments, but they tell you where to go. So I started going down…next thing I know—we used to call this guy “Pappy”—and I said, “I’ve got it. I’ve got a hole.” Well he found a hole in the clouds…and they’re called sucker holes because as soon as you start to go into them, they close in on you. So here we were, he’s grabbing the controls and takes over as we were screaming down at 120—it’s red-lining on the thing, and all the sudden—he’d found this hole and all of the sudden we were sucked in again. We almost got in a fistfight in the cockpit [chuckles] trying to take control of this thing. And finally, we…about 7,000 feet we pop out of this thing—of course it scared me. It was a dicey few moments there. Anyway, we landed this helicopter back at the base and we took the engine out and put it on the test iron, and it lasted fifteen to thirty minutes and it totally disintegrated. So we were all grateful to be down. But those were some of the typical type activities—either maintenance support, you know, on the maintenance part, or if you’re just in operations, test-flying different types of…or another type of mission run, that was gun runs where was you actually fly gun ships, fly convoy cover or cover for the Hueys going in. Hueys had .50 cal…well, they had M-60 machine guns on the side, but the rockets, the heavier firepower came from the gun-ships. So as the main Hueys are going in to make the insertion, then you would have gun supply cover overhead so that if you started taking fire, then they would come down and return fire.

MJ: What experiences left lasting impressions on you? What times or experiences influenced the way you do things today or since then?

GB: Well only something I kid about but, when I started going through flight school it was so much fun that my friends and I would say, “I can’t believe they’re paying us to go do this. This is so much fun.” Then we got to Vietnam and they started shooting; then we’d say, “They can’t pay me enough to do this.” So, it all works out, I mean (laughing) the Army invests a lot of money in you, but they also took a lot out of you. But I think of the most important lessons I learned in Vietnam was—I’ve said this repeatedly, but one—it’s a situation of flying, but never to panic. The minute you panic, you’re dead. No matter how bad things get, you have to maintain control of the situation you’re in. Just don’t panic. There’s always a way out if you just stop and think. And the other thing I’ve said is that…one lesson it taught me is: there are very few things in life worth worrying about. But the few things that are, pay attention to them.

MJ: What would those things be?

GB: Well, this is reinforced again by having joined the Church, but you realize that the most important thing is the Gospel, but it’s also the family. Those things are things that have lasting impact. Those are the things worth focusing on. A lot of other things: be it
financial, be it a certain position, a career, whatever—I mean a lot of these things just aren’t worth worrying about. What kind of a car do I drive or what kind of a house do I live in…sometimes we put an over emphasis on those things…

<Interruption>

DB: It’s having your freedom, and your health—those types of things, and as we understand it too, there is a knowledge of the Gospel and its importance and you need help to go through, so you live the Gospel. Those are the things that are important. Everything else kind of takes second seat. As Penny reminded me, the other thing is, there are a lot of people that got frozen in time and sometimes use the experience in Vietnam as a reason why they got all messed up. And I can’t deny that some of these guys saw some horrific things that bothered them—that would bother anybody—but they could never move past it. They’re just frozen by it. You see the long-haired guys…the Vietnam Vets, and they ride the bikes, don’t hold a job, and just kind of live in that world where they can’t get past anymore. One of the important lessons, because the same things happened in the wars throughout history…the guys that went through World War II, the Korean War, World War I, and if you read about the Civil War, you talk about brutality. You know, these were, get in a row, let’s face off, and shoot each other, and of course there weren’t many medical treatments. The point is you’ve got to move on with your life and put that behind you and get on your…a number of guys just turned to alcohol, to drugs…just refusing that that was another part of their life and that it’s over.

<Interruption>

DB: …I think those are some of the main things. Some other images that come away with it, now the phrase, I can’t remember how it goes. People talk and even debate right now about going to war with Iraq…the reasons we shouldn’t and the morality of it. And then a lot of people, I think it was more so in Vietnam than today, but there was this prevailing thought by many anti-war people about how military was just bloodthirsty and how all we wanted to do is kill; and unless you’ve been there…I won’t say there wasn’t, I mean we had a small element of our military people who were sick or crazy. I mean they just…

MJ: Isn’t that like society in general…?

GB: Yep, absolutely. The military is just a reflection of your society as a whole particularly in a democracy where you have a good cross-section of people. But the vast majority of the people in the military particularly…the last thing we want to do is go to war. So this idea of “just go for the throat,” that to me is just crazy. And nobody can appreciate the price of freedom except those who paid the price, and know what it costs—in that sense…The other thing is that you knew that to see the brutality, and the inhumanity—man’s inhumanity toward man. And one thing that bothered me about Vietnam was because we were dealing mainly with draftees, I mean, these kids were seventeen, eighteen, nineteen and again, from disproportionately lower social-economic classes, if you would, who didn’t have any idea in the world why they were there. They
got drafted and [thought to themselves], “Here I am.” And [had] no appreciation for the people of Vietnam—didn’t try to understand their culture or their background, whatever. I mean, in this case in Vietnam, we didn’t—well, it was mixed—in many cases, if you were stationed in Saigon then you were integrated into the populace—the general population. A lot of places you were in a camp, and so you were isolated from your local people. And so a lot of these guys would come over and all they wanted to do was get drunk, you know, and…have sex. And to them—there was a term to go down to the local compound, the local village—quote: the meat market. And this was where the young prostitutes would hang out and that’s all the guys would want to go. And to me it was really sad. You tell yourself, “We’re really here to help this people, but all we’re doing is exploiting them.” But a lot of it just came from the fact that so many young people in the service…you could see where they didn’t have values. All they were looking forward to was being done with their one-year tour, and so all they were going to do was go drink, hang out, some had sex, and whatever until the tour was up. To me, that was always depressing. Whereas, you know, my dad tells stories—he was in the Canadian Army right until the end of World War Two—but, he went to Japan. And…well, I know it might not be the same thing as in Vietnam, but I know he tried to take an interest in the culture and tried to get to know the people, the food, and so on. So that was kind of an interesting idea.

MJ: You said something just a minute ago about the freedom and the appreciation of it…

DB: Uh-huh.

MJ: Is it possible, in your mind, for people that hadn’t gone through war to truly appreciate freedom?

DB: Oh yeah…I think you can. I think it’s possible to appreciate, but it’s like any thing else. You don’t have to be a combatant to fully appreciate that. But most, I’d say the general public doesn’t have an appreciation of the price paid by those who went up through the combat…in defense of freedom, like in World War Two, so forth…or in Vietnam. I mean, war is war. And we just take it for granted, we just can’t comprehend. I’ve always said, if you want to appreciate [what] it’s like without actually going through it, watch the movie, Saving Private Ryan—not the whole thing, but just the first twenty minutes. And it starts off with the troops landing in Normandy. And it’s the most realistic thing I’ve ever seen in the combat environment—just because of the sheer terror and horror of what’s going on.

MJ: Since I know you from home and from scouting, the next question is about patriotism. First of all, what’s your definition of patriotism, and second of all, how does a person foster that in himself and in youth?

DB: Well, I think there’s so many different definitions of patriotism; I haven’t even found a single one per se. But I’d define patriotism as one’s love of country, a willingness to defend that country, and a way of life which is worth fighting for…defending. How do you foster it? I think it’s like—in some ways—just like the
gospel. It’s something you teach at a young age, ideally in the home. You somehow, when the children are young, try to teach them the importance of freedom and what your country stands for. And I guess I’d also have to say as I think about it, that our definition of, in my mind, our definition of patriotism is colored by the fact of living in a democracy. So I mean there were very many patriotic people in Germany in World War II, you know, and Japanese. And you can’t fault them. I mean they believe in their cause as much as we believe in ours—in some degree. But I think the difference is in a democracy you see where you have…you understand, hopefully, the issues. You’re contributing time to preserve liberty where people live in an environment where they can choose for themselves. That adds to that definition or motivation for being patriotic. It’s important. But back to the question of, how do you foster it? I think it is one: something you do by example. Two: you try to put on some people as they’re growing up, the values. And it’s something I’m concerned a little bit about; although, it’s interesting because of “Nine-Eleven” how patriotism swung back with people. Before that it was pretty well lulled along about—you know, this way of life and everything else, but “You want me to defend it? Come on.” And there we can see how quickly it can turn. And then we can get down to the question real quickly: “Well, what is worth dying over, fighting for?” It’s a way of life. Some people argue, “Well it’s not worth it.” If the issue is about oil or driving SUVs or that kind of thing—that’s one issue. But when it comes down to being able to live in a peaceful society where you have agency to choose for yourself, that’s a whole different ball game. But, you know, sometimes I reflect on this and I just thought I was doing what I needed to do or what I was expected to do, but I think being born in Canada—and that’s a democracy, it’s a different form of government, the parliamentary government not a republican government—but, I had a choice. I could have—in hindsight I could have said, “Hey wait a minute, I don’t need this.” And because I had dual citizenship all I had to do was say that “I’m a Canadian citizen” and then legally go back…I didn’t have to avoid the draft, whereas some guys would illegally go to Canada to avoid it. I was in a unique situation where I could say, “I’m a Canadian citizen, Adios!” And then go to Canada for a few years, and if things settled down a little bit, I could come back. But my, my basic thing was, if you are going to be part of this country and a citizen of this, then you also have an obligation to support it and defend it or do what’s required not to. That’s not to say that people shouldn’t have the right to say, “I’m a conscientious objector,” or you know, whatever reasons. It takes a certain amount of courage to do that if you do it for the right reasons—but if it’s just a matter of, “I just want an easy way out,” I don’t think that’s fair. But I guess I was always raised with that mindset and I always felt…That, and I always thought whether it be Vietnam or some other country, if people are being oppressed and asking for help, that I think we should certainly try to help them.

MJ: You did your duty. And, when you came home how were you received?

DB: Poorly. It was…I came back in ’72 and that was the beginning, probably the peak of the anti-war movement. And people, different people, it was an interesting situation. I mean, I always took pride in wearing the uniform, and I was amazed at the lack of respect people have, the disrespect they have. And what was hard for me was, first of all, a lot of these people who had that opinion had never been over there to see either side of it. And
a lot of them, in my mind, were somewhat intellectually dishonest because they weren’t really concerned about the real issues. It was, “I don’t want to go over there.” You know, “I don’t want to go over there and put my life at risk. For what?” It was part of this generation of “What’s in it for me now? I mean, I don’t want anything to do with a commitment.” So it was kind of hard that way, as opposed to someone who objected—let’s say—truly objected, had some very strong moral grounds from your own philosophy: “I just can’t kill another person.” But I think so many people just ruled that way just because they didn’t want to be committed in any sense.

MJ: For posterity’s sake, you mentioned how some of the veterans have kind of been…they got themselves stuck in a sense, and then they’ll blame their troubles or where they are now on what they happened to see there. What have you done since your military experiences? What are some [of] the things you’ve done career and family-wise?

DB: That’s interesting. When I got back in ’72 I was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division, which is one of the Army’s units. And they had been in every major war in a major way. They were at the Battle of the Bulge in World War Two, they were an elite unit in the Gulf War, anyway—a long tradition and history. Anyway, I was assigned with them and in 1975 when—by then we had Chris—and was when I was fellowshipped by a doctor who was treating our daughter. And he was the branch president of the branch in Fort Campbell. Anyway, he and his wife fellowshipped us and we joined the Church. And up to that time I was a career officer. I mean, my plan was just being in the military for my career. And after joining the Church I just grew to feel that I needed a change…and it wasn’t that you can’t serve in the military, be a good member of the Church—you can be. But, my lifestyle was so different. I mean I smoked, I drank, I did a lot of things, and I think more of myself I needed to have that break, a change. The idea of pulling up my family and moving all over, that kind of thing—so I opted to get out. Actually, in hindsight I still moved around a lot (laughing), probably as much as we did in the military. But, anyway the first thing that really changed was joining the Church. But then I decided to, I stayed in the Guard and the Reserve another 20 years. And then got into a career in health care administration. So those were some of the major changes I experienced after coming home. Okay, sometimes I say, “What if...?” But I always come back with the answer of first of all you always want to say, “Gee, here I am now. I would have been retired; yet there’s no guarantee I would have made it that far.” And secondly, the thing that really answers that question for me is the fact that Jeff and Ryan ended up in South Dakota. That was a major thing…well, it was a major event for them to be there with all they were involved in. The other interesting—I don’t know if this even ties into your question. Because I was a military officer, after we had Chris we felt that we could only afford two kids; that was an ideal sized family and so forth, so on. So just after Chris was born I had a vasectomy. After we joined the Church and then go out [of the Army], then we really learned the fact that I had more to produce. We understood now the importance of the family. So when I was in graduate school getting my masters degree, there was a surgeon…ureological surgeon who was kind of pioneering a reversal technique, so I had a reversal done. And as a result of that we ended up having Jeff and Ryan. So, but as I think back, I think, you know, gee, I think where would we
be, what would we be doing and whatever. I think the idea of going to South Dakota, for as much as they were involved in. It was the best thing for Jeff to move from where we were in Des Moines to Sioux Falls. And then also likewise for Ryan because of the music program and the band. We were very fortunate. And of course, it’s interesting how events happen. You know, [my wife] Joanne died of cancer up there. And if I hadn’t gone to Sioux Falls, I would never have known the Bertines. Of course when I decided to leave Sioux Falls, I came out to spend time with them until I could figure out where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do. Bertines were in the same ward as Penny’s aunt. So, it was Lisa [Bertine] and Penny’s aunt who kind of got us together. So…

MJ: It works out.

GB: Penny says, she owes Lisa a lot (laughs)! She was in South Dakota, and we joke about it. Lisa says that, “I had to be in South Dakota six years just for this couple.” But it’s interesting to see how…we have as individuals, we think of our own careers, our own goals, what we do and it’s not always your plans…it’s what the Lord would want. I mean, I would’ve never saw this plan (laughs). That wouldn’t be how I scripted it (laughing). But it did…and I’m grateful it happened.

MJ: I appreciate your time.

GB: Oh, my pleasure. Are there any questions I haven’t answered?

MJ: I think that’s it.

GB: Do you have enough to go on?

MJ: Yep.

GB: Well good. Well, as you are writing this or whatever, if you have any other questions or anything you want me to expound on, you just give me a call.

MJ: I probably will…I’m sure I’ll think of something.

GB: I’m sure you’ll have some…yeah. When you start drafting and everything. And I look back, and I’ve always been grateful for the experiences I had in the military. It made it possible for me to get a GI Bill to get a master’s degree, they taught me to fly. It gave me a lot of good experiences. I traveled the country. I’ve been to Vietnam, I’ve been to Korea…all across the U.S. I’ve done some great training and what-not. A lot of it valuable…in terms of career; it certainly taught me principles of leadership—some good, some bad. But if you align those with Gospel principles, then you really see the points of leadership and experience. I think it’s helpful in my callings in scouting.

MJ: I can testify to that because I remember…our troop, we were, I think the High Council nicknamed us the “Dirty Dozen”…
GB: Oh is that right? I hadn’t heard that. [Belton was on the High Council]

MJ: Your troop was really in ship shape. I remember seeing you guys come down and—Omaha, we were at Camp Cedars—

GB: Uh-huh.

MJ: We were already there, and I don’t think any of us were wearing our uniforms—it was kind of muddy and grubby and really humid and hot—just sitting around. And here comes your guys’ group parading right before us, everybody had their shirts on. They were all dressed, single file, carrying their equipment. And I remember thinking, “Man, these guys are militant.”

GB: One of the things I always tried to stress was the importance of…most kids just hate to wear the uniform. And again, it’s somewhat reflective of our culture or whatever—it’s just a lack of respect for it. And it’s the idea of what that uniform stands for. And so I always tried to—the kids, I would tell them, “You need the uniform.” And the other thing—and again I think a lot of kids have a misconception of discipline. It’s not just to see how tough or how hard you can be on them, but it’s the idea of disciplining yourself to do certain things, so when things really are…tough situations you can respond with discipline—and I tried to teach them those kinds of principles and concepts. But some of my greatest memories are of the high adventures. You know when—doing more than most kids think they can do. And that wasn’t the hardest by any means, but even Rapid City in the Black Hills when we went up there. We did that one hike, some twenty miles in one day. You know, I mean we did a lot of different things on the different high adventures we went on. And I remember one of the last ones we went on just before we came up to Sioux Falls, but we were in Des Moines and—have you seen Jeff’s kayak?

MJ: Yeah.

GB: We’ve got it out in the garage here but—he was thirteen years old, and a lot of the kids were that age. There were two troops—some thirteen-year-olds, some sixteen-year-olds. This particular year we planned a high adventure to go up to the Boundary Waters of Minnesota. Canoed seventy-five miles around the lakes and everything—and that included whitewater rafting. And so in order to do it, they each had to build their own kayak. So we made the bows and put them together and, I mean this was a several month project. But just before we left—I was going with, boy I was really looking forward to this thing—was when Des Moines got flooded in the summer of ’93.

MJ: Oh yeah.

GB: And our unit was activated so I was flying helicopter missions in support of that. So right before we were getting ready to go, and I guess we were leaving on a Monday and the flood started on Sunday, so at the last second I couldn’t go. And Jeff was thirteen at the time. And so I told him, I said, “I can’t go with you but I want you to remember
four things.” I said, “First of all, I want you to not complain. And second, I want you to carry your own weight. Third thing, I want you to do is to be safe and have fun.” You know when you’re a parent talking to a 13 year old, you kind of hoping that some of the words that go from ear to ear sticks a little bit. Well, they went up there and after the trip they came back. And so I went down—I was going to pick him up and I was just curious as to how he did. So I went to talk to one of his leaders and said, “Well, how did he do?” One told me this, he said, “He’s the only one in his group who didn’t complain, and he carried his own weight.” In fact he said, “At some point in time, everyone of the 13 year olds maybe paddled half the day and quit and jumped into the canoe with an older scout paddling, but Jeff was the only one who paddled his own way all the way.” He said, “He’d come in a half hour behind us at night.” But anyway, he did that and it really just impressed me (laughing). But you know, you try to teach them some of those basics and those things are important to them. That’s something I always enjoyed about scouting. It’s fun to go out and do those things, but as a leader it’s really a challenge to try to teach some of those leadership principles, you know. And they stick with them. It’s been a lot of fun.

MJ: We’ll turn this off.

DB: Okay.

<Interruption>

DB: One of my basic beliefs is that there is a role for the military and a role for the civilian government—of course, that’s why the President is a civilian as commander in chief, because the military responsibility of the President is not to control. But the importance of delegating and trusting people and letting them do what they need to do. But I was, for the Iowa National Guard, I had been a colonel in it, I was running a troop medical center—so I was back into hospital administration. My real love was flying, so I knew I would retire as a colonel—I just kind of had that locked in. So, I just reverted and gave up my commission and took a warrant, which is a rank between commission and enlisted personnel—you’re a specialist. It basically says, “I’m a pilot, I’m an aviator, I fly.” Anyways, I was a warrant officer, and I was assigned to this medevac unit. And when Clinton first went into office, and Somalia came up. Have you heard about Black Hawk Down? That’s a story about what happened when the warlords and all the fighting was going on. So Clinton decided that he wanted to be involved in some way, so he committed forces. Well Lee Aspen was the Secretary of Defense. And normally these kind of things, these small interactions, they put together a task force—they put a Marine general in charge. And so he said, “Okay, this is the equipment we need; cannon, helicopters, tanks, and this kind of thing.” So he drew up his list and…Aspen turned it down and said, “We don’t want this to be a show of force.” So as a result, when we committed Special Forces there without real support, and of course when they were engaged we couldn’t support them. So we lost some soldiers, a couple helicopters. And to make matters worse, rather than reinforce it and stay, we decided to back off—which I think it’s come out since then in terms of Bin Laden because Bin Laden looked at American commitment and said, “These guys are a joke. When the chips are down, you
will not stand and fight.” And so that factored into his way of thinking about us. I reached the point I said, “You know, I served in Vietnam, I was almost called up for the Gulf War, and here I was a W2.” If I had been activated at that time, my income would be cut by three-fourths of what I was making in my civilian career, and the financial stress, of course with a family—I’d have one-fourth of what I could make. But I thought, if our government isn’t willing to support us—in the military you do what you need to, you get the job done—then what business do we have in committing troops. That’s one thing I really respect about Powell. Even in the Gulf War, using his lessons from Vietnam he said, “We’re not going to play around and skirt around it.” And I see the same thing with Rumsfeld now, and I am convinced we will go to war. The plans we have, and the approach is almost surgical. Strike, get in, get it done…It’s one thing to ask people to sacrifice when you’re putting lives on the line and to make that ultimate sacrifice, but if you’re not willing to support them, you’ve got no business being here.

MJ: It’s got to be all the way?

DB: There is no…Churchill said it best: “There is no substitute for victory.” Warfare is probably one of the worse aspects of mankind and we’ve been…and you read about it in the scriptures to avoid warfare, but if you are going to do it because it’s the only course you have, you have an obligation to do it, and do it quickly. And it’s basically—if you stop and read the Book of Mormon—I don’t recall, and I’m not a historian, but I do consider myself a history buff but, I don’t remember any other…countries or whatever they had, that had the degree of fighting that they did in the Book of Mormon. Some battles—tens of thousands and this isn’t because they had a lot of cannons and tanks and bombs or any of that—this was hand to hand combat. And at the end of the day, one battle—ten thousand people, just…and they didn’t have guns. They just, they had spears, they had swords…

MJ: It was personal.

DB: It was personal. And at some point we read of battle after battle after battle and it was 10 thousand, 20 thousand, you know. And there are things, worse things in life than this. And then you have a better perspective of this when you have the gospel. You realize that death is a transition. But I think there are far worse things than death—to live a life of fear, of brutality, or whatever…I believe the point is…was it Shakespeare or someone else that said, “A hero dies but once, and a coward dies a thousand deaths?” To me it’s more important to live for principles, true principles, correct principles, and to make that ultimate sacrifice then to abdicate those principles so you can live longer. Anyway… (Laughing)