

This interview is being conducted on Wednesday, September 7, 2022 at the home of Jerome “Sonny” Zdancewicz. My name is Fran Prokop and I’m speaking with Sonny who served in the Army and is a veteran of the Vietnam Conflict. Sonny learned of the Veterans’ History Project through a mutual friend of ours, Kennard Whitfield, and he has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans’ History Project. Here is his story:

Sonny, when and where were you born?

I was born 6-18-48 – June 18, 1948 in Chicago.

What were your parents’ occupations?

My father was a truck driver; my mother was a helper, a homemaker.

How about brothers and sisters?

I had three step-brothers and one step-sister.

What did you do before entering the service?

I worked construction.

How old were you when you entered the service?

18, but I was going to high school and working.

Did you graduate high school?

Yeah, I got a GED.

Oh, GED, okay. Which high school did you go to in Chicago.

Harrison.

But you didn’t finish and then you took the GED?

Yeah.

Did other family members serve in the military?

My brother was in the Navy and one was in the Air Force.

How did you enter the service; were you drafted or did you enlist?

I was drafted.

Did you have a choice or did they just put you in the Army?

I got my draft notice and I just went.

Where did you have to go –

In Chicago.

Downtown?

Downtown.

What happened there after you signed papers and stuff –

I went through a physical and they asked if I was gonna go in and I said yes.

Did they give you a certain time that you had to report?

Like a month or so.

Oh, you had a whole month?

Yeah.

So in other words go home, take care of your stuff and come back on a certain date –

Right, right.

And where did you go when you finally got in?

I went to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

How did you get to Fort Leonard Wood?

They took me on a bus.

With all the other recruits?

Right.

You get to Fort Leonard Wood – how are your early days of basic training? Could you describe a typical day of how your basic training went?

They taught you how to march, taking commands, shooting guns.

Did they have classroom training too?

Yes.

What did they teach you?

The classrooms were for like maps, radio and a lot of it was in the field.

Field training?

Yeah.

How long did you stay at Fort Leonard Wood?

I want to say eight weeks.

Do you remember any of your instructors?

No.

Do you remember any incidents that occurred, either with you or some other guys at basic training?

Oh, just a cable breaking when we were going over a small river and a lot of guys got hurt.

Really.

And I ended up holding onto the cable and slamming into the side –

Wow – were you supposed to be crossing over the river –

Yeah –

And then the cable broke?

Yeah.

They say, even today, there's all kinds of training accidents.

Well, there's accidents, yeah.

But nobody got killed at that time?

No, just hurt.

Okay. Did you have any specialized training?

Well, they sent me to Fort Polk in Louisiana –Tigerland.

What is that?

Tigerland is training for Vietnam – jungle fighting.

Oh, Vietnam jungle fighting. How long were you there?

Another, I don't know, six weeks or so.

How was that training different from your basic training?

It was basically swamp training and how to fight –

Like hand to hand combat?

Hand to hand combat; more deadly training of warfare; how to do booby-traps, bombs –

And you had medals for sharp shooting, I see, so were you one of the sharp shooters?

Yeah. I was – it was easy for me -- I don't know.

It just came naturally to you?

Natural, yeah. I was -- on rifles, pistols, machine guns –

So you were a marksman.

Yeah, it just came real easy to me, once they taught me.

So as a result of being a sharp shooter, when you finally got to Vietnam, were you one of the first ones to go in – were you a point guy?

Uh, walking point – I walked point, did recon –

And that was both day and night?

Right.

After your six weeks of specialized training – during this whole time how did you adapt to military life – how did you adapt to the physical regimen, the barracks, the food?

I just always had the attitude I didn't know how to quit; so when things got rough, I just roughed it out and kept on going, so –

So you had no real problem adapting to military life. How about the food, was it okay?

The food was decent.

And how about living in the barracks with the other guys?

Eh, that was rough, because in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri we had the disease called spinal meningitis

Really –

... and some mornings you'd wake up and some guys were blue and they weren't there any more.

Did you have to get shots and stuff –

Well, actually we'd sleep with the windows open and no heat.

Oh, really?

And it was cold.

That's what they recommended that you do so that didn't spread?

Yeah.

Wow – windows open and no heat. I think I'd get pneumonia.

In your specialized training, what did you have to do all day long, you got up what time, how early, and what did you have to do – the swamp fighting and all that – describe it.

Well, we would get up early; they would put us in trucks; drop us off in the swamps and then we had to make our way back by ourselves with compasses, and not get caught by – they were military people dressed as MBA soldiers, and we're capturing them.

So you had to not get caught, and get back safely.

Right.

So that took the whole day for you to get back?

Well, we'd do it all right too.

Did they ever drop you off and you had to stay out for a month or so – any try to get back on your own?

Yeah, a week – seven days.

Did they give your provisions for that?

They only give you a minimum of food and water and you had to learn how to survive on what they gave you.

So your six weeks is over after the second training, what happened then?

They sent me to Vietnam.

How did you get to Vietnam?

I flew on an airline called the Flying Tigers.

I've heard of them from World War II.

Right.

Military transport – MATS. Where did you land?

Ben Wah (phonetic).

Where was that near? – was it near Saigon or some other big city?

Out of – it was – out of Saigon, it was a city out of Saigon.

So near Saigon, like a suburb or something on the outskirts.

Yeah.

And what was the first thing you had to do?

Well, just basically get my jungle equipment, my rifle, grenades and ammo and then helicopters came in and I went out into the jungle.

And how many guys were you – like a unit or whatever?

No, I was a replacement for people that got wounded or killed.

Weren't you with a certain battery or unit or something?

Out there I was. I was sent to the cavalry – 2nd and 7th. That's General Custer's outfit.

So how long were you out there?

Oh, I was out there, I don't know, two months or something. I got wounded the first time.

Two months without any break? You just stayed out there?

Yeah.

Can you describe your daily activities of your whole unit?

Well, we basically just tried to find and track and hunt the enemy and engage.

Engage the enemy – could you tell me about that?

Well, every night with a certain platoon we'd go out and set up an ambush and try to ambush the enemy and then find information on where they were at.

Get information in their activities?

Right.

]So what happened? Did people get killed doing this stuff; did yo9ur buddies get killed?

Oh, yeah. Killed, wounded.

How were they transported out? How did you get them back?

From the ambush we had to carry them or drag them all the way back to where the company was and then we'd have to cut an LZ –

What's that?

That's for the helicopt6ers to come in and take them out.

Is that like a signal for them?

No, it's like an area so the helicopters could come down and pick them up.

You had to make a clearing in the area – get all the brush and trees – make a clearing

Right.

And they picked up the wounded?

Wounded and guys that didn't make it.

Wow – wounded and dead. Tell me ab out how you were wounded and you got your first Purple Heart.

My first one was -- I was in a battle and they were shooting RPG rockets and mortars and I got hit in the elbow by shrapnel.

Which arm was that?

That was the right arm – upper arm.

Were you taken out like you described before – they got you to do the helicopter?

Uh, yeah, I – actually I pulled it out myself.

Ugh – you pulled out the shrapnel?

Yeah. The problem I had is my fingers melted to the shrapnel because it was hot. And then I couldn't –

My God, what did you do?

I – I found a branch or something and I pulled it off my fingers – off the skin.

Oh, my God, you must have lost some skin, I guess, pulled it off with a branch.

Yeah.

So you had to be resourceful.

Right, right.

How long did it take for you to get medical care?

Probably two days.

You weren't severely injured.

No, we let the more seriously injured guys get first choice

Oh, they go first, I see.

Yeah, there wasn't enough blood coming out of me.

So what did you do for those two days – just laid someplace –

No, I just wrapped it up and kept going.

Really.

Yeah.

Wow – so no time to rest, huh? Just went out on other forays?

Yeah, you're in the jungle so you keep moving every day.

So you didn't stay in any place twice?

No. If you stayed one day, then they can zero in on you with mortars and bomb you at night.

So you finally get to the hospital – where was that hospital, in Saigon?

It was a hospital in Kwon Lai (phonetic) it was a tent hospital –

Oh, a field hospital.

Yeah, a field hospital. Right.

What did they do for you there?

They stitched me up and I went back out in the field.

Wow – how long did you stay in the hospital?

There – probably two days.

Two days' rest. Did you get new uniforms or cleaner uniforms?

Just got cleaned up and went back in the field.

Did this happen within your first two months?

Yeah, after two months.

Did they send you somewhere else or did you go back to where you were?

I went back to the same unit.

Then how much longer were you there in that same capacity?

I was in that unit for maybe 4 and a half months.

And did you get injured further?

Yeah.

What happened? Can you describe that?

I was the sergeant –

\Wait a minute – how did you get that? Was that a field promotion?

Yeah. I kept going up.

Wait – did you get a corporal too?

Yeah. I was a private when I got there, then I went from a private to a corporal, from a

Corporal to a sergeant –

So all this happened within four and a half or six months that you were there?

Right, right.

Were you there 4 and a half or six months totally?

No, with that unit.

So you were a sergeant now, after you got injured the first time, they made you a field sergeant.

Right. Field Promotion – rank.

You witnessed a lot of combat action, like I said your duties were specifically to set ambushes and hunt the enemy down –

Right.

Anything else that you –

Then I got like a – a bullet in a battle went and shattered my front two teeth --

This is in that same place still?

Yeah. And I went to a hospital and they sent me to Saigon to some military dentist thing –

Okay. And what did they do?

They put pins in my mouth and they put the front teeth back in.

So they put pins in your jaws and put the teeth in.

Right.

And how long did that take?

I was there for maybe a week.

And you got new teeth.

Yeah, in the front.

Front teeth – and that was a one-week stay.

Right.

And how were you feeling? How did you feel during this time?

Were you willing to go back – you went back willingly or did you protest?

Well, no, I was -- that was my job. I went out there, I went back.

So when they sent you, you went back.

Yeah, I didn't get a rear job or nothin'.

Did you get a second Purple Heart for that injury?

Right.

Eventually you got it –

Right. Medals – medals in Vietnam meant nothing to a person in the jungles.

Um-hmm.

While I was in the hospital with my teeth I met a Major that was a Recon – and he was in a big battle and lost half of his men being killed and wounded, and I ended up sharing a room with him –

Do you recall his name?

Mmm –

Maybe it'll come to you later. You shared your hospital room with him.

Right. And we talked and he said he needs guys that could shoot good and with experience to go back out into the field. But, I told him I wasn't Recon. And he went and got my Orders and had me transferred to Recon with him. And I spent the rest of my time with him.

You would remember his name eventually – it should come to you.

You're asking me like – I could tell you about 17th Street – but –

\Right, right. Is he in any of these pictures that you have here?

No, no.

If it comes to you – since he did quite a bit – got you transferred and everything –

Right.

So what did you do at the Recon? Right now you're in about six months, so far.

Right.

How long were you in Vietnam totally – how many months, do you know –

Well, probably a year. It was maybe less, I can't remember offhand.

Yeah, you were in combat and they tried to limit it at least to a year – not too much more.

Right.

So what did you do with Recon now that you went with this new guy?

We went – they would take pictures at night from certain planes and see where the enemy was at or moving –

So planes took the photos and send it to the Major.

Yeah. They would send it to him and tell him which way they were going and that – then we would try to hunt them, and then we would call in air strikes on them or artillery.

And how long did you do that type of thing?

Hmm, maybe – I don't know. Maybe three months.

And were you injured or were many men in your units injure?

Right, but I wasn't injured.

How about the other guys?

A lot of them would be injured and we would rotate guys in. New guys would come in.

So you really didn't know these men either. They were not good friends of yours –

No.

Because they would keep rotating, coming in and out. You just knew them as combat –

A lot of them would come – it wasn't – a company like the cavalry company is roughly about 100 and something guys. Recon is maybe 40.

Oh, I see.

And then when you go out, lot of times its only maybe six guys.

So six guys would go out on a mission?

Yeah.

And you didn't really know those guys. You just knew them from –

Right. But they were experienced, like I was.

Oh, right. Experienced. So what did you do on a mission with the other five guys?

Try to hunt down the enemy, find their camps, their communications –

So trying to locate them and find their communications.

And find out which way they were going.

These are the Viet Cong.

Yeah – no, MBA soldiers.

What's MBA?

MBA is highly trained combat infantry soldiers.

So these are specialized groups?

Right. Like the VC is mostly like farmers or people that just want to fight us.

Yeah. The VC were the ordinary people.

They were ordinary people. These guys were specialized at heavy Chinese and Russian weapons. They were nobody to play with.

Whew – Wow. So you spent all of your time in Vietnam doing that type of service.

Well, I got hit. I got blowed up – my right hand.

So this is the third time now.

The third time – right hand. Lower right hand lost a – they reconstructed my finger and my hand. They sent me to a ship called the Hope –

Oh, yes, I've heard of it – how long were you on that ship?

Oh, not long, maybe a month and a half or something like that.

So you were completely healed, more or less. Your hand was reconstructed. Were you right handed?

Right.

\So that was your main hand – that's important because you were a marksman –

Right. They sent me back to the States to Fort Sheridan, Illinois.

So that was after you were there about a year, right?

Something like that; I don't know.

Let's look at your DD 214 – we might find out. Hold on, I'm going to stop the recording.

I just looked at Sonny's DD 214 and Sonny was in the service for two years, from February 1968 to February 1970. He was actually in Vietnam for six months and during that time he was wounded three times. He finally got two of the three Purple Heart medals, but not until 2018 – 50 years later.

What did you tell me about a friend who lived in the neighborhood who was a photographer?

There was a guy that was assigned with me that – his family was photographers, so he took a lot of pictures in the jungles. I used to not pay attention to it, but about 15 years later he sent me, after I was out of the service, and that, he sent me an envelope with those – a lot of pictures I have never seen.

Wow.

And that's how they based me being wounded, uh, being Medivaced –

Because he had pictures of you –

Yeah, and being a Sergeant.

Well, good thing he was there.

Yeah.

He took those pictures which you didn't pay attention to at the time;

No.

But they became important later on.

Like I said about medals – you don't care –

Right. Looking at the DD 214 and DD 215, I'm going to send a copy of these, along with this recording – because Sonny has medals for – the National Defense Medal, Combat Infantry Badge, one overseas bar, Marksman Badge, two Marksman Badges, an Expert Badge and a Sharpshooter Badge. Those were listed on the DD 214. They amended the medals on the DD 215 – they removed the Vietnam Service Medal and then added the Purple Heart, Army Good Conduct Medal, Vietnam Service Medal with three Bronze Service Stars, Vietnam Gallantry Cross Unit Citation with Palm Device, Republic of Vietnam Civil Actions Honor Medal Unit Citation, First Class. Those are all the medals that Sonny received while he was in Vietnam.

I'm sure you were happy to be back in the States and at Fort Sheridan –

Right.

What did you do in Fort Sheridan?

Well, when I got to Fort Sheridan they made me in charge of the jail.

Ha, ha.

They made me an MP.

Were you like a warden?

Yeah. I was in charge of the jail and security of the base a lot, as a sergeant.

Oh, yeah, you were a Sergeant by this time.

Right.

You were only 18 when you went in so what were you 20 years old?

Twenty-one.

Twenty-one and you were a Sergeant.

Yeah.

What was it like being in the service now being in Fort Sheridan after coming back from combat in Vietnam?

It was like a resort.

Ha, ha. Did your injuries give you a problem later?

Yeah, I had trouble with my right hand for years. They wanted to cut off – take off my finger, because they had bad troubles at the VA and I got so mad about it I didn't go back to the VA for 40 years.

Oh, my God! But you go back there now?

Yes.

So nothing was ever done. Your hand that they repaired at the beginning; that was how it stayed.

Right. They told me to keep it –

You have use of your hand today, correct?

Yeah, see, like that (demonstrating bent fingers).

Oh, yeah, yeah, you can't make a full fist, really.

I got this – but I still have troubles with my hand.

As a result of that can you still shoot a gun today?

Oh, yes, I can shoot.

You still can.

On that finger, yeah; the rest is –

So your trigger finger is okay.

Yeah. When the VA took off – they fixed my teeth, refixed my teeth –

They refixed them when you came back?

Refixed them.

The highest rank you achieved was Sergeant?

Yeah, I was an Acting Lieutenant when I had two Lieutenants, one after another, get hit.

In the field?

In the field. So they bumped me up to Lieutenant but I'd rather be with the guys more – that I was around.

Ok, you preferred to stay with your –

Men.

Looking back on it now, what were your emotions related to combat and witnessing casualties?

I look back at the casualties as sad. It kinda depresses me; people that I got to know that didn't make it.

They were just young boys, really.

Yeah. And I went to hospitals and places and tried to see guys that were critical – lost arms, legs or that – but, it was too depressing after awhile to continue –

Yes, you try to do good, but that's what it is. Did you form friendships with guys that you still are in contact with today?

Right, in the Cavalry. We have reunions – with the Cavalry at Fort Hood, every second year.

And you attend those reunions?

Right. I attend them and see the whole Division. But every once in awhile once of our Sergeants, lives in Arkansas, has a reunion just for the guys we served with.

For like your squad?

Yeah, squad or platoon, or our company; Just our company.

So you're still in touch with some of the guys from there.

Right.

When you were in Vietnam were you able to receive any communications from home? How did you stay in touch with family and friends?

I got some letters, but --

Did you ever send any back – were you able to –

I sent some back, but then I stopped writing and I didn't want no communication with the outside world because I seen too many people that would get letters and pictures and that and then they would get killed and that – when you're in charge of men, that plays heavy on your mind. So I just stopped writing – and communications with the world – I call it the world.

Well, luckily you weren't in there that long, a year probably, not in contact with people.

While you were on duty in Vietnam –did you ever get off duty in the jungle – go on R & R or anything like that?

No. We would come out of the jungles and go to what they call an L Z.

What's that – you told me before that L Z was a clearing.

It's a base in the jungles where they bring the canons in and they support us out there in the jungles. So we would come in and that was kind of our R & R.

So was that for a day or six hours?

Uh, 24 hours. We did new clothes –

Oh, resupply –

Resupply.

When they returned you home, did you fly back again?

I flew on a Medivac to New York.

Oh, to New York.

And from New York I was transferred to Fort Sheridan.

By another plane?

Right.

And you spent the rest of your time at Fort Sheridan.

Fort Sheridan.

Were your family members able to come see you at Fort Sheridan?

I would come home.

Oh, you came home from Fort Sheridan.

Yeah, Fort Sheridan was not that far away.

No, it's not – how did you get home? Did you have a car?

Yeah, I had a car that I left.

So did your family bring it to you in Fort Sheridan?

No. I used to have to come from Fort Sheridan to 39th & Pershing Road; there's a military jail there, to get prisoners.

And –

And, well, it's not far from my house. So I got my car and followed the military transport back to the Fort.

Oh, I see. So how was your homecoming – your reception by family and friends when you got back from Vietnam.

Not much.

Well things were – people were – veterans from Vietnam were not welcomed back.

Not really.

How about your family? They were happy to see you, I'm sure.

Sort of.

How about friends? I heard stories from some guys when they were in the airport with their uniform on, they got spit on and everything – terrible.

Yeah. That would be the wrong thing to do – I was extremely mean and mental, you know. I wasn't a real friendly guy.

I'm sure, not after going through that – can't expect you to be.

My friends thought I was – something was wrong with me because I was mean – extremely mean.

Well, I'm sure it took you a long time to get over that –

Yeah.

That's just an adjustment – PTSD – or whatever you go through. Well, you're still in the service this extra year so you would go back and forth and see your family from Fort Sheridan.

Right, I lived at Fort Sheridan.

And while you lived there they continued to work on your hand and your teeth?

No; my hand was a healing process. I would have to go to other cities and get prisoners and bring them back to Fort Sheridan.

Just tell me about that. That was all in your line of duty while you were at Fort Sheridan.

Right.

Okay. So where did you go to get prisoners?

New York

Pick up prisoners – you flew to New York?

New York or California, Detroit –

These are military guys?

Yes.

Were they AWOL?

They were AWOL but some of them I would have to go find because they were wanted by the government doing major stuff – like bank robberies –

Really?

Murderers –

Wow! While they were in the service they did these –

No. They were in the service then they went AWOL –

Oh, and then they committed the crimes.

As long as they were still not -- on paper – they still belonged to the government.

Oh, I see.

That's like, a guy does a crime now and goes here to Statesville, say, and they find out he's wanted by the government; the MPs will come and get him and take him to Leavenworth.

But you didn't take them to Leavenworth; you took them back to Fort Sheridan.

I took them – wherever I kept them --to Leavenworth.

Oh, you did. So that went on for quite awhile –

Until I got out.

That was over six months – 6 or 8 months.

Whatever.

So how many times do you think you picked up guys like that – I mean how many trips did you make?

Probably every second week.

Oh, really, every other week. That soon

I would go – like the FBI would have a lead on somebody, or the CIA, or the local police, and then I would come with – and hunt them down.

Did you go alone or did you take other guys with you.

No, I took – I took some MPs with me.

How many, usually?

Maybe two, but they weren't experienced in combat, so –

So you were the lead guy?

Yeah.

You were a sergeant?

Yeah. These guys weren't real friendly. So, you know, they didn't want to come. You get fire – you get into shoot-outs with them and that.

Wow – Wow – Did you ever have shoot-outs?

Yeah, in the United States, yeah.

Wow –

Transferred their bodies to Leavenworth where they would fingerprint them, document them, and that was it. (turn tape)

Sonny was telling me that he was – they got tips – the Military Police got tips from the FBI and CIA and the local police and that he would go along with two other military police, that they would pick up guys who have committed crimes and were still technically in the Army. They had several shoot-outs and if they died as a result, that they would have to transfer the body to Fort Leavenworth and they had to document it –

They document 'em and fingerprint 'em and –

And discharge – Ha, ha –

Yeah, and they were discharged forever. Or put them in, you know, if they were still alive, they'd put 'em in Leavenworth prison. That was a pretty rough place to be.

Were they ever – what happened to these guys? Did they go to trial for their crimes or did they just –

Oh, the government, yeah, they'd prosecute 'em. What happened is the States would send the papers, like being in process – what they did –

What were their crimes – what they were charged with –

Yeah. Sometimes the military would bring them to that state and they would try 'em and then whatever time he got, he would go back to Leavenworth – and serve it there.

And not in the state he committed the crime.

Not In a regular prison.

This is interesting; this is something new. Every time I talk to somebody there's new things. I never heard anything like this.

Today – so their time was up and the government, you know, they – dishonorable discharge and they got no rights and no benefits, no anything.

Wow.

So how many of these guys do you think you picked up during the time you did this job?

Maybe a hundred.

Oh, my goodness – 100.

Probably went after maybe 40.

Did you ever have to testify in court, about these guys, or no – once you brought them in your job was over.

That was it, yes. Sometimes I would have to make out what happened – if the family was fighting the government about, you know, what happened to them, but as far as the government was concerned he still belonged to the government.

Ok. So, after your time was up at Fort Sheridan and you were officially discharged, you just came back to your home in Illinois?

Right.

What about jobs? How was your readjustment to civilian life?

I worked construction, didn't socialize that much.

Did you just stay with construction?

I did for awhile and then I worked -- I got a job in a factory as supervisor for maintenance. I worked there 30 years.

What company was that?

Klement.

K-L-E-M-E-N-T?

C.

Klemenc.

Yeah.

Did you ever use the G.I. Bill?

No. No, I take that back. I went back to college for like a year or two.

Okay – G.I. Bill. Did that help you with your jobs?

Right, right. I worked there till I was having trouble with my hand and then I couldn't – I was having problems. Then I got laid off and then shortly after that the company went bankrupt.

That's Klemenc you're talking about.

Right.

But you worked there 30 years, so –

Right, but I got no retirement from them.

You got no pension from them?

No, because they used – we had in-house stocks, like Enron, you ever hear of Enron?

Oh, yes, yes.

And they used the money to regroup -- because the Chinese were making the same product all of a sudden cheaper.

What were they making? What did they make?

Rims.

Tire rims?

Tire rims for trucks, cars, and boats and they used our money to regroup and then maybe about, I don't know, four or five months later, they went out of business. So, I got no retirement.

I think that happened with the people who worked at Midway Airlines; they went down and all the people who worked there never got any pension.

They didn't get nothin'. We fought it in court for a long time.

Yeah, yeah, okay. So, are you a member of any veterans' organizations today?

VFW, Holmes 52 out of Romeoville, American Legion.

And you attend meetings?

Right. Combat Infantry Association -- for combat people.

Is that like a national association?

Yeah.

Where is that at?

It's out of Rhode Island but they have meetings all over the United States for combat people.

And do you ever attend them if they're here locally.

Yes, yes. And then the Cavalry Association out of Fort Hood, Texas.

So you're pretty active with that.

And then, we're in charge of the flag line for the Honor Flight.

Oh, the flag line -- what is that?

That's when they get off the plane at Midway Airport, all the veterans are standing with flags saying "Welcome Home." Thanks for your service.

My brother-in-law went on that flight from Midway and it was nice; we were there when he came back at night --

Right, right.

It was very nice.

My wife and me are in charge of the flag line.

You are an active veteran. How did your war time and your military experience affect your life?

Rough.

What life lessons have you learned from the military?

Well, honor –

I think you learned survival.

Yeah, right, but honor, you know, never quit and respect the flag of America.

Yeah. Today it's sort of sad.

I got married and I had three boys and then I got divorced and kept all three boys.

Did they go into the service – your boys?

One did – went in the Air Force, 15 years. And then I married my second wife and life's been good.

Good. Well, that's about it as far as the interview. If there's anything else that you want to add to the story or if there's anything that you think of afterwards, I can always put it in.

No, I just -- we go to bases a lot – try to promote the Honor Flight and – tell veterans to keep all their records while they're in. It's a big thing because where the government keeps their records, they have lost a lot of Vietnam records and Korean – so guys have to fight for their disability or their medals or their medical, so –

So you help them in those things – you help veterans to try to get those things.

Try to, yes.

Well, that's good. Okay, I think that that covers it. We turned the tape so I think we'll have about 26 pages, I'm sure. Thank you for this interview and thank you for your service to our country.

Thank you for doing this.

You're welcome.

I never could tell my story at length.

Good. I'm glad that I got to meet you and take it all down.

Thank you.

We're back on the record with Sonny – Jerome Zdancewicz because we found other material that wasn't mentioned in the interview. Going back to Vietnam, there was an incident on January 10, 1969, that Sonny will describe for us that he was involved in.

I went back with the – I was in the Cavalry, 2nd and 7th, and we ran – the whole company ran into an ambush of the MBA soldiers and there was a full battalion – there was like 1,200 of them and there was like in the Cavalry maybe 160 guys. I'm not for sure how many guys – but we fought 'em for like two

days and the only things that saved us was air support and canon fire and the Navy planes – the Air Force planes, the Army planes and the helicopters. But it was – the only bad thing was it was hard to get the wounded out because there was so many snipers that were shooting the helicopters up so bad. That was the first time I -- it was rough.

How many men were injured of your 160 that were there?

Probably, one way or another, with shrapnel, 'cuz we got bombed, probably I would say probably about 65% were either killed, wounded – it was pretty tough.

Is that – did you get injured during that time?

Yeah, that's when I got the elbow.

That was your first injury.

Yeah. Pretty sure.

We talked about it but we didn't say the intensity of it, even though that was a battle, it wasn't called anything in particular –

No, no.

There was no special campaign or anything, it was just an everyday occurrence as far as you were concerned.

Yeah.

And also Sonny said that for 40 years he did not go back to the VA Hospital but starting in about 2011, he did return to the VA. What prompted you – why did you decide to go back in 2011?

I was just having trouble with my hand and people – my wife – pushing me to go back. I blame all that on her, but yeah, I went back and found out the VA has changed to the better – in treating veterans better and now I support the VA to veterans that ain't going – so –

So they took care of you and did a lot of testing with your hand –

They did a lot of testing with my hand and they're treating my knees – I went down in a helicopter one time – and hit my knees. As I got older they gave me a lot of trouble.

So you were in a helicopter that was shot down.

Right.

And you did say that you're on 100% disability.

Right.

So you had a lot of injuries.

Linda: He had a lot of dental.

And a lot of dental work too. And the VA did that also?

Right.

Now, beginning in 2017, September 25, 2017, Sonny got in touch with Eric Papineau, who is the Assistant Superintendent of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Will County. Eric helped Sonny to get an appointment to complete his request to add the Purple Heart. Even though he was injured three times, he never got his Purple Heart Medal.

In 2017 they sent the application – I'm holding in my hand a local paper called the Herald News(Joliet, IL) and there's a picture of Sonny on the front page with all his medals. He finally received two Purple Hearts in 2018 as a result of his association with Eric, who made this happen. Would you tell us everything about that. How did you go about getting it – what did he do?

Well, he needed documents of places and different branches of the service and I had pictures that one of the men I served with sent me – and that helped with the documentation. Some of the men I served with wrote letters and gave places and times, so it helped. I got one of my Purple Heart medals, and then recently I got the second one in the mail.

Sonny gave me an original photo of him wearing his Purple Hearts in Dayton, Ohio. (photo included).

Dayton, Ohio at the 2nd Cavalry Division Reunion - the Division – so there was probably 1,000 people there, so –

And you received the Purple Heart from –

General –

He's showing me the photo of the General pinning on the Purple Heart – Colonel Albert Guarnieri from Rhode Island along with Brigadier General Steve Carpenter from Fort Hood. He was awarded the medal during a ceremony on July 9, 2022 – just two months ago, in Dayton, Ohio.

Sonny's wife Linda just told me that he will be speaking at various high school in the area – talking to the football team at Romeoville High School, basically talking about team spirit, and also Lockport High School – they are studying the Vietnam war in a History Class.

We don't know, the gentleman is asking me, would I come back and talk to them.

That's good. You're very active person for veterans' causes and rights.

Trying to.

Right. And I will get a photo of Sonny with his medals that he has on a plaque. Good, we got all this in. I'm sure if there's anything else you want to say – he's got his two Purple Hearts and all his medals. We will get a photo of him. So, you're feeling much better about your service and the war and everything else – no looking back on everything.

Right, right. I feel better. It helps me more knowing that I'm helping; the veterans I served with are veterans that need help, or talking to the younger guys to try to smarten them up a little bit or help them – so, that's my goal in life now.

Well, you're doing a good job of it. You're very, very active; you do a lot more than many other guys do, so – that's the most I've heard about a veteran helping other veterans so I salute you for that too. Once again, thank you again for your service and for everything you're doing after your service.

(end of recording).

Jerome M. "Sonny" Zdancewicz

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