

Miles J. Becker
Sergeant E-5
Narrator

Jim Regan
Oral History Project
Interviewer

June 7, 2012
[Location?]

JR: Give me your full name.

MB: Miles Johnston Becker

JR: When were you born?

MB: August 7, 1948

JR: What was your pre-war education?

MB: I graduated from high school in Plattsburgh, NY.

JR: What were you doing before you went into the military?

MB: I got drafted—and then I signed up because I wanted to do what I wanted to do.

JR: So what were you doing before—

MB: Looking for jobs—and they weren't hiring then because of the draft age.

JR: Your dates of service?

MB: 11/15/67 to 11/15/70

JR: And you said that you had received a draft notice—

MB: I received it in my junior year.

JR: Junior year of high school?

MB: Yes.

JR: So then you chose to enlist?

MB: Yes.

JR: Why the Army?

MB: A three year commitment—Air Force was four; Navy was four; everything else was four.

JR: When you went in, where did they first send you?

MB: Fort Dix—that's the basic training outfit post.

JR: And what was your specific training?

MB: After the eight weeks at Fort Dix—which was just basic training getting you in shape and doing all the military combat strategy—you go to AIT, which could be anything from Advanced Individual Training to Advanced Infantry Training. I chose the engineer part which was at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri in 1968—early '68. They trained me to run heavy equipment, which I wanted.

JR: What was your unit?

MB: When I went over the first time, it was the 4th Infantry Division, 4th Engineers. I was stationed in Pleiku—was their main base. Then I ended up in Xuân Lộc and I never saw heavy equipment machines after that.

JR: You never saw any heavy equipment?

MB: No. I was then trained to be an explosives expert with C-4 and carry on missions up in the mountains of Central Highlands which went into Cambodia-Laos—1968, which [President] Richard Nixon said we weren't in until '72.

JR: We are only going to talk about things you want to talk about, so if I ask anything—

MB: Feel free to ask; I'm here to educate you too.

JR: Right. What was your most memorable experience? Or do you want to talk about when you first got over there?

MB: I'm going to make this a political conversation and not combat because they've heard enough of the combat. You can watch it on TV all you want—Band of Brothers, Apocalypse Now—you can watch Platoon, which is the closest thing I saw to a real action type Vietnam War. I will keep this to the political end of it.

When I was up in the Highlands, I got associated with the Montagnards up there, which are considered to be the low levels of the Vietnamese country; I would compare them to the minorities in this country. But they were ferocious fighters and they were very loyal to us—more loyal than the South Vietnamese Army—I don't know how they survived down there. I mentioned this before in many other interviews...they might still be still alive out there. But, they kept to themselves and they were tribal—just like over in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran. They're tribal and independent—just like the Kurds.

That was the first time I was over there. They were very nice people. They were very loyal to us. Then, I had to come home—but I had to go back again, and I'm not going to explain all that.

When I was over there the second time, I was stationed at Saigon Port and I had the privilege of working with a professor from Saigon University, and he told us... I asked him how he felt about us being over there in the '70s and he said, "It's time for you to go home; we've had enough" and that was enough for me too.

There's no lessons being learned here because our leaders just haven't read the books on how to get educated on these wars; they just continue to fight stupid wars.

These two wars [Iraq and Afghanistan] have turned out to be not what they should have been. No way should we be committed to a country for ten years of fighting and sacrificing our soldiers when those people really don't appreciate us being over there anyway.

Afghanistan has been run over about fifteen million times—ever since Genghis Khan. What are we doing over there? What are we doing? Our own special interest? I don't know what Afghanistan's got. Iraq—we all know what they've got. But, why? Why? We've got our own oil. I just don't get this history stuff. And we've got leaders here in this country who have never served—and dodged the draft in 1968—and now they're telling people we've got to fight overseas.

Do you have any more questions?

JR: Do you mind if we go back to when you first got to the Highlands?

MB: Ya [Nods to allow question]

JR: So, when you first got to the Highlands, what was going on at the time?

MB: Well, there was a strategy over there at the time of firebase on a staggered position up the HÓChí Minh trail, which eventually ends up in the middle of the Cambodian-Laotian borders. Where they come together is where the HÓChí Minh trail came down through the heaviest concentration of North Vietnamese

Army and VC [Viet Cong]—if you want to use that word. They were all using it [the trail] and they tried constantly to bomb them back into the second century, but they had other things to go through. Their bunkers were 25' into the ground—they had all kinds of strategy over there to outlast us because the interest of the country [USA] was waning.

But, anyway, there was a firebase I was on for maybe about two days that was inside the Cambodian-Laotian border—and I'll repeat the part about Richard Nixon saying in '72 that we weren't over there—we were over there—and we were over there big time. Special forces—maybe not part of the active army—I don't know. You have to explain that one...Green Beret.

JR: So you arrived in the Highlands at the—

MB: [Nods] Right during the Tet season—

JR: The Tet Offensive?

MB: Ya. It was house-to-house in Pleiku; it was house-to-house everywhere. [Wai ?], Da Nang, Saigon—they were all doing it. We were called in off the firebase to go and help out—engineers *did* get involved.

JR: So where did they send you?

MB: I was called off this firebase called • k Tô into Pleiku for about a week or two just to clear the houses out because that's where the VC [Viet Cong] and NVA [North Korean Army] were located.

JR: Now how long had you been in country at that point?

MB: I think I was there two months.

JR: Now—during the previous two months—what did they have you do?

MB: Clearing firebases off, which means either cutting the trees down or using the C-4 [explosives] on them cause it was easier to get them out of the way. I was part of about three firebases that we cleared off.

JR: So your routine would be to go out and clear the area around that particular base—

MB: [Nods] We'd go out in a helicopter around • k Tô and go out to the firebases and clear out firebases and set up a perimeter and [cotton teeter wire ?] and...Claymores.

JR: What was your relationship with the indigenous people?

MB: Up in that particular area we never had to deal with the South Vietnamese Army much. We had the Montagnards—indigenous, if you want to use that word. We got along with them real well; they got along with us *real* well. They respected us; they knew we were up there for a reason and—in '68—I thought we were there for a pretty good reason. But as the war dragged on, I think the reasons became a little *clustered*—we'll use that word, okay. I really do think the priorities started changing then.

JR: Did they [Montagnards/indigenous] live near the firebase?

MB: Yes. It was like about a mile—the one [settlement or village] I saw. They live in huts—grass huts.

JR: So would each firebase be near a village?

MB: No. This one particular—• k Tô—was a pretty flat area, so they lived there. But, as it got into the mountains—more so in Cambodia—it was too mountainous for them. I think there was a river there, but I'm not too sure where they were.

JR: So the idea with the firebase was—

MB: To stem the tide of the NVA—of the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong.

JR: How near was it to the trail?

MB: Right in the middle, okay. It's about five miles from the Cambodian-Laotian border, and the trail came right by us. And they had several trails—you could see it on an old map—where all the arrows were—but the main concentration was right through us.

JR: Since that was the main supply line for the North Vietnamese Army as well as the Viet Cong, what were their responses to the development of all these firebases along their supply line?

MB: Let me just say that with our air superiority—I'm telling you those B-52s are bigger than any building around here—and the phantom jets—they kept them under control. **THEY WERE UNDER CONTROL.** We had them, and we had them good.

They just made a sudden surge during that Tet, and that was it for a while.

But occasionally they'd test the perimeters and they'd start...maybe...well...the firebase I was on in '68 got surrounded by...they said by about five or six divisions of VA. The 101st Airborne and the B-52s came in and took care of that, all right.

JR: When you say five or six divisions, what would be the estimate of the numbers of the—

MB: I would like to be able to answer that, but I don't remember too much what a division is anymore.

JR: Well...I mean...in the American Army, it's like a thousand. Well...no...Fort Drum is like ten thousand, so—

MB: That would be close enough. It would be pretty close to fifty...sixty...I don't know. They had us surrounded and they came in there and the B-52s just bombed them back into Cambodia and Laos.

JR: How many people were at the firebase?

MB: I think it could have been maybe a company—MAYBE a company.

JR: Maybe a hundred guys?

MB: Ya—at a single time.

JR: So suddenly you've got ten thousand hostiles—

MB: Ya...well...let me just say this to you. Khe Sanh is the one that's in history; • k Tô I don't think has been mentioned too much. Khe Sanh got run over about eight times. I had a marine friend there and he was telling me about it—and that's in Platoon [movie]. The actual scene of taking over a firebase by the North Vietnamese Army—and the actual fact of the guy covering himself up with a body—that's actual! It was scary.

The only way to get into that firebase was by helicopter—and they were laying it down pretty good—but they never took over because the B-52s came in there and settled them down a little bit.

JR: Prior to them surrounding the base, did you have any indication that they were coming?

MB: Well, there were rumblings everywhere. They were walking—what they call walking artillery fire—B-40 rockets, I guess you could call it—and other rocket type ammunition. They were walking them up the perimeter to see how far they could get. There was constant probing—CONSTANT—and you could tell they were *mounting it up* real easy.

JR: What was the thinking among your fellows at the time?

MB: We tried to keep busy so we didn't have time to think about where we were at. We knew—*everybody* knew. You should have seen the drop they had—the 101st Airborne. That was a small airport there at • k Tô and it was constantly moving troops in—and they were moving right out going right after them.

JR: What would have been the period of time this occurred?

MB: May '68.

JR: So as you and your fellows discover that you're at the point of this theater and that your firebase is being surrounded, how many days did it take before—

MB: They had them cleared out in two weeks. Like I said, the B-52s were very effective over there; they've *always* been effective. The first experience I had with a B-52 raid was ten miles away from me and I could feel that rumbling all the way to the firebase I was on. You could feel it—it was like an earthquake. That's how effective they are—VERY effective—they bring it on. [Smiling]

JR: So as they began to drop ordinance on these—

MB: Sometimes it was right on the perimeter; we had to go hide—we were underground. "Find a place" they said, "cause we're dropping it." They were coming.

JR: So you must have had mixed feelings at that point.

MB: Mixed? I was hoping they weren't missing. [Laughter] No friendly fire, you know what I'm saying? [More laughter] It was scary, but we managed.

JR: How many days of bombing was there?

MB: I think they did three days of it. They scattered them quite a bit—then the 101st came in and scattered all of them. It took about a two-week cleanup before they got them all.

JR: Since this is an area that you only got there by helicopter—or basically...to an extent—how did the 101st get there?

MB: Helicopter—and also C-141s...I think they are...and Caribou, which are able to land, disburse the troops, and get out of there. They weren't in any problem at the time because the B-52s scattered them a little bit—and the Phantom jets—they came even closer than the B-52s did and they bombed everywhere. VERY effective—kind of lighten the *scare* word up. [Laughter]

JR: Well, it sort of returned the favor to these guys. [More laughter]

MB: It was sort of like a miniature Battle of the Bulge, but it wasn't cold there. At the time I think it was about seventy-five degrees and was considered cold there because it was a monsoon season coming upon us. They were just trying to get their last jab in before the rain.

JR: During that time period—as opposed to when you came back on the second tour—what was the feeling with the men concerning what they were doing over there?

MB: I would like to say my feeling—and the feeling of guys that were over there in '68—was pretty much of an approval of what we thought the mission was. I think in '70 the mood had changed because of all the protesting back here [at home] and it wasn't being justified by then. I don't think the South Vietnamese had their stomach in it anymore, their heart and soul wasn't—obviously—because they got run over just as soon as we left. I think that they just wanted us out of there and I think they paid for that; I think they paid dearly with the North Vietnamese.

JR: Now—with the Montagnards—how much direct contact did you have with them during that—

MB: They were on patrols with us—they were out there with us. They weren't supplied too well. I mean, there were crossbows and muskets in their arms, and then finally we got around to arming them a little bit better with M1s—and, I think, M14s, I saw a few of them with. They were very, very good with us; they helped out a lot. For some strange reason, the North Vietnamese Army left them alone—just like the Kurds over in Northern Iraq; they leave them alone too.

JR: Was it because the Montagnards knew their terrain very well and made it dangerous?

MB: It's like taking on a wasp that you don't want to tackle—better leave it alone—let sleeping dogs lie. They left them alone.

JR: They weren't treated very well after the Americans pulled out.

MB: The South Vietnamese didn't want them around either. Like I said, they treated them like they were minorities. They were indigenous and they were very proud people—and they didn't want any part of the South Vietnamese either; it was mutual.

JR: In '70—when you came back—take us there.

MB: I'm in Saigon at the time, so it's a whole different culture. It's mostly Viet Cong that are down there and I didn't see as much going on from them as far as activity. I was stationed at Long Binh Fort...or camp...which is about ten miles outside of Saigon. It might be more than that—I can't remember anymore. We

had to ride the bus every day from Long Binh to Saigon Port and work on the Port with the Vietnamese. They did most of the labor while we did the pointing. [Smiling] That's another thing about the war—they didn't teach us the language; we had to learn it in stride as we go along. "Papa-san, do that" [pointing] "Okay, G.I."

JR: So, your duties were, you supervised unloading—

MB: [Nods] Unloading and loading LSTs [Landing Ship Tanks] and oceanside ships, too.

JR: What was the mood inside Saigon at the time?

MB: With the people?

JR: Well, both with the people and with the Americans.

MB: I think the GIs had enough—they wanted out. I mean they came back here [home] from '70-'72 and made sure that their word was told to the [US] Congress. The South Vietnamese...well, like I told you...the professor there...I think most of them...they had a job. I think most of them had a job and probably wouldn't have had a job if it weren't for us. They weren't quite as vocal as him—as the professor—and I think he was telling me how they felt. I agreed with him, and I heard him real loud and clear.

JR: As someone who had been out in the field and had seen what was really going on in Saigon, do you think the people there had a glimpse of what could come?

MB: Well, I thought for sure the way they were going that they thought the North Vietnamese Army and the government of the North Vietnamese would let them off the hook—but they didn't. They treated them pretty poorly—as a matter of fact, some of them didn't make it.

JR: You were saying there was a lot of Viet Cong in the—

MB: Ya—and they were recruiting constantly down there.

JR: Were they doing anything to make your life difficult at the port?

MB: At the port? No. We were pretty safe down there. Like I said, it was two different wars.

The thing is, I'd like to be able to comment on what happened there in '73, '74 and '75, but I can't. I was out of there in '70 and I was glad to be home. It wasn't quite as prevalent as it was in '73 and '75 when they started making an impact in

Saigon. They infiltrated that city pretty good, from what I have been told. I'd like to be able to help you with that, but I can't.

JR: You were home in '68, '69—where did you live and what was the reaction at that time?

MB: All right. Plattsburgh [MB's hometown] is a very rural farming community down in Steuben County on the Pennsylvania border. There wasn't much reaction of anti or pro there—everyone was going about their business and doing their own thing.

JR: Wasn't it kind of a shock to you after all you had been through and seen and experienced that you come home and nobody seems to—

MB: Well—let me say this to you. When I came home in '70, I had a girlfriend who was going to school in Fredonia [NY], and that's when I started catching some "opinions" about that war.

JR: But in '68, '69...I'm just wondering...at that point—

MB: [Shaking head] In my town there was no pro or con.

JR: What I'm wondering is—for someone who had just seen what you had seen, and then to come home and these people don't realize what the troops are experiencing—there must have been a real disconnect.

MB: When I came home in '68 it was because it was an emergency leave. My mother had just died, okay. People weren't bothering me too much about that kind of war opinion; they kind of felt a little sympathy toward me. That's why I was stationed at the Seneca Army Depot for thirteen months—because it was called a "compassion" reassignment. After the reassignment was done, I was sent back over there with eight months left in the service. And that was the Vietnamization program that Nixon was bragging about, but there were just as many troops going over as there were coming back.

JR: When you were at the Seneca Depot—

MB: That's when Woodstock was on.

JR: Yes. What were people thinking—

MB: See, you're in a conservative area here—Upstate NY is very conservative. There wasn't much activity going on off the campuses.

JR: Right.

MB: The Seneca Army Depot—when I was there at the time in '69—was not getting any kind of flack because loads of ammunition was coming out of there on big, big cargo planes every day...going to Vietnam. There was no activity on that post at all. Off post—like protestors or anything like that—NONE.

JR: So, '70 you're back and dating a girl who's going to Fredonia; what are you hearing at that point?

MB: Well, there are some statements being made—and it's this old stuff; "Oh, there's the child killer...the pregnant mother killer..." all that kind of stuff. "What are you doing over there...doing that kind of stuff?" And, ya know, it's fine. That's fine; say your opinions. I didn't do any of that stuff, so we had to justify the reasons. The campuses were alive with radicalism; you know that as well as I do.

JR: I think every war has had some protestors, but no war—I think—has had that kind of nasty, vicious attack.

MB: Well, here you go. See, this is something...you don't know too much about the history of this country then because the Civil War—

JR: The Civil War...there were draft riots—

MB: Draft riots—killings and hangings, too.

JR: Yes. And, like I said, even World War II...World War I...had its peace protestors, but during the Vietnam conflict people were personalizing it to attack the troops and accuse them of heinous things as opposed to being against the war...as opposed to being against Lincoln...fighting the south. I mean, we've never seen that kind of thing during Iraq, Afghanistan—

MB: Okay. I know where you're going with this. The media was a big influence during that war. You will not see that again—the media is not covering this war like they did that one. Dan Rather was over there in the bunkers. He gave his full account of that war—and so did a lot of other ones that reported the war. A lot of them got killed over there. They gave this negativity after '69-'70 when the protest started getting really huge here. I'm not saying whether it was good or bad; all I can say is that we lost our direction in '69-'70.

I don't think that McNamara knew what he was doing to begin with. You remember Bob McNamara?

JR: Oh, yes.

MB: He was the one who wrote the book to get himself into heaven and he didn't deserve to go wherever he was. He needed that...he needed that little push, by the way. You've got a couple of people in this town here who served in office too

who didn't deserve to go as far as they went. Do you want me to mention their name? 'Cause I can.

JR: Sure.

MB: Senator Jim Wright burned his draft card in the post office in 1969. Jack...I forgot his name...he was the county administrator...draft dodger. John McHugh—never served, but now he's the Department of the Army.

I don't get any of this, ya know. How come they get to go up to high office and they never...I don't mind protesting, ya know. Protest and burn your card, but how'd you get to be a NYS Senator? I just don't get it.

And the rest of us are slugging it out down here...that served in a war. You answer the question—I'm not gonna. [Laughter]

JR: I don't have an answer.

MB: No. And neither does the rest of the country either.

JR: So as things continued to unravel when you returned home and got out, where did you—

MB: I stayed in my hometown for a couple years; there was no protesting going on in that small community. Although I did get a few shots in from my father and girlfriend's father about, "You war heroes come back here and think the country owes you a living." I didn't think the county owed me anything; I was just trying to settle in and try to find something to work on. Other than that...I even worked in Rochester for a couple of years and went to Monroe Community College, and it wasn't too bad there. Monroe was very good with us—there was something like 1,200 Vietnam veterans there. It was a very good college to go to, but when I moved on to Brockport and this college out here, they still had the attitude there. Even in 1980 when I graduated out here, they still had attitude. That's ten years later and they're still coming up with it.

JR: So, in '74—as they're withdrawing and when Saigon fell—what was going through your mind?

MB: It's about time we should have left there. We should have left there in '70 when he said he was pulling everybody out. It was time to go—you never spend ten years in a war. If you can't get it done in at least five, what are you doing? Time to move on; we weren't doing any of them any favor.

They called it back in the Cold War days of communism, "Oh, watch out!"

And Ho Chi Minh was supposed to be our friend during WWII. I don't get it—we're friends one day and enemies the next. Now we're back being friends with them again. They're making windmills over there, and we're buying them. I don't get it. You just sacrificed 58,000 troops over there and now we're friends again? I don't get that.

And the Germans are...I've got to go for this...the Germans...okay...two wars... maybe three. What did we call it? Russian-Franco War? Three wars—and we crucified them. Now, they're bailing Europe out and they've got Europe right by the neck right now. How do you figure all that? [Shrugs] German intuitiveness, I guess. I don't know.

A couple more questions—okay?

JR: What would you like to talk about?

MB: I think I've covered just about all I could—

The vice president of this country—Cheney—took six deferments during my war and he said he had other priorities. What kind of leader is that?

And George Bush—I'm a Republican city committeeman—if you think I'm not ashamed of all this—I am. Bush...he's on the Texas International Guard when all of a sudden he's getting a call up and his father gets him a transfer to Louisiana where he isn't going to get a call up.

These guys got a lot of nerve—A LOT of nerve—you just can't justify that to me. And I'm sure I'm not speaking only for just myself. I haven't talked to anybody because I'm trying to forget.

A couple of years ago I had an award trying to be given to me, and I told them, *What for? It's forty-two years later; what are you giving me an award for now? Forget it. I don't want it. I don't want nothing. Put it in the Hall of Fame down there in Saratoga.*

Shut the camera off. Enough.

[Interview ends abruptly]