

**Frank J. Gubala  
Veteran**

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Interviewers**

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**Q:** Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth please?

**FG:** Frank Gubala. Date of birth is 11-15-47. And I was born here in Buffalo, New York, but I lived most of my life in Ransomville, New York, just north of here.

**Q:** What was your educational background prior to entering the service?

**FG:** I finished high school and I completed one year of engineering school; I went to the University of Wisconsin and I tried to transfer to a little bit more local school and was caught up in the draft.

**Q:** When were you drafted?

**FG:** August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1967.

**Q:** You were drafted into the army?

**FG:** Yes.

**Q:** Where did you go for your induction and your basic training?

**FG:** Basic training was Fort Dix, New Jersey and then I went to Advanced Infantry School (AIT) and then to Vietnam.

**Q:** How long was your training?

**FG:** The normal; eight weeks and about eight for AIT also.

**Q:** Do you think you were prepared for what you encountered in Vietnam?

**FG:** No, no. Not at all.

**Q:** In what ways?

**FG:** It didn't compare. One day in Vietnam was...we learned more our first day than we learned in our whole four or five months of training back in the United States. It was very inadequate I thought.

**Q:** You flew into Vietnam?

**FG:** Yes.

**Q:** Were you assigned to a unit prior to going or were you assigned there?

**FG:** I was assigned to the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, but not to any particular unit. Because I landed in Vietnam in the beginning of TET, I was kind of left to my own means for about three or four weeks before I actually was assigned to a unit and just spent a lot of time doing nothing, waiting for them to get me there because the units were so heavily involved at the time with the fighting.

**Q:** What was your impression when you first got off the plane?

**FG:** It was scary because it was TET and it was happening at the airport. The fact that they had let the short ladder hoists from the plane and everybody stepped you out of the plane. We all had M-16's and no bullets and we were still dressed in our kind of travel uniforms and all that, and we were just let go to the four winds to find a place to be safe. It was days before I got to where I was able to talk to somebody to find out where I should be and what I should be doing. And even then, it was total chaos. It was spooky. As fast as they unloaded us off that plane, they closed that door and took off. No refuel or nothing. They just took off. Our baggage went back on the plane with them so we didn't have anything except for the clothes on our backs and like I said, a brand new M-16 and no bullets.

**Q:** You were trained on the M-16?

**FG:** Yes.

**Q:** Where were you assigned?

**FG:** Eventually I was assigned with a company. 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion 47<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment. They were at Mekong Delta and that time they were part of the Mobile [unclear] Reinforcement. It was a unique unit where army troops lived on troop ships. We hit the beaches off of a landing craft every day. Of course we did a lot of helicopter assaults and other means; trucks, we were transported in and tracks and I even got to ride on the hovercraft a couple of times.

**Q:** What were some of your assignments as a [unclear] reinforcement?

**FG:** It was all search and destroy. Luckily because it was so close after TET we weren't ambushed as often as people in other units up in the highlands that we heard about. Even the guys that survived TET that had to experience the normal search and destroy mission before would say that there wouldn't be a day that they weren't always being ambushed or something like that. Whereas we would get sniped at once in a while. Mostly our biggest problem was booby traps.

**Q:** Was it strictly Vietcong that you were fighting or were you fighting regulars also?

**FG:** To tell you the truth, we didn't see the enemy. A couple times we were ambushed at night after we set up in a village to something like that. If we did find a body, you

couldn't tell if they...they wouldn't be in regular uniforms. They would generally be black pajamas and that sort of thing. We were on a sweep outside of Saigon later on in May and we captured the fellow and he was huge. We found out through interrogations and all that afterwards that he was a Mongolian. We never heard any further. The people from Intelligence Forces took him away. That's what we were told; that he was Mongolian.

**Q:** Now did you have the jungle fatigues or state side fatigues?

**FG:** Yes, it would be the jungle fatigues but not camouflage or anything like that. Just the lighter with the diagonal pockets on and the big baggy stuff. Standard thing to wear.

**Q:** How did you like using the M-26? Did you have any problems with it?

**FG:** When they gave it to me, I talked to some of the other guys, I said, "No thank you" and I volunteered to carry the M-79. I liked it better. It never misfired, never jammed. It was unreal because I used to carry as many rounds as I could with it. So it got very heavy, but I got very proficient with it and liked it a lot better. Especially when we were in close quarters.

**Q:** Did you ever carry a side arm at all?

**FG:** I was supposed to, but I was never issued one. A lot of the other people who carried the M-79 used to carry a .45 or .38. I did acquire a .38. It was unofficial and once the sergeant of weapons found out that I had it he tok it away from me. I technically should've had it with me all the time for once you're out of bullets, you're out of bullets.

**Q:** Did you have very much close contact with the people of the region?

**FG:** Yes. We did get to go off. Because search and destroy would have to go from one location to another, it generally required going through villages. Sometimes we'd wait in villages and do different things there. We went out a few times with our medics at Gibson Security when they were doing humanitarian type things. Giving shots out or just checking the kids out for diseases and the people around the village. So we did go out in the village. We had a [unclear] with us. His name was Bah and he was very likable and in any village we would go in he would make friends right away with people and we got a little feel for what the people were like and about their everyday lives. They're mostly [unclear] farmers and stuff like that. They just wanted to go on with their lives. They didn't want to be involved with the war.

**Q:** Any problems with tropical diseases or leeches or malaria?

**FG:** (laughs) All of the above. I am aqua phobic and I cannot stand being wet. But when you're in the Mekong Delta I was wet even on dry days. You would have to walk across canals. I almost drowned a couple of times. Leeches were just common. You find out who your real friends are because you would have to drop your pants and say "Can you look back there? Are there any leeches?" Your friends would tell you and take care of you. The other guys would say, "No, no no" but an hour later you feel something about the size of a snake on you. Mosquitos. I cannot stand mosquitos to this day. Even if I

put on all the bug repellent in the world. But just to hear them buzz, it drives me nuts. We had bamboo vipers that were there. Just all kinds of creepy crawly stuff. I had ringworm from my chest on down. I was taken out of the field quite often for that. Every other kind of known rash that you could have. We couldn't wear underwear because if you wore anything elastic around your waist, you'd get a horrendous rash within hours. Whenever we came back to base camp or to the ships we would just walk around in shorts to dry out and let our skin heal from all the stuff. A lot of the times a lot of us were taken out of the field because of it.

**Q:** What were peace relationships like within your unit?

**FG:** I accepted everybody until it came to the point where they gave me problems. As I got along [unclear] I was in for sergeant. So I was responsible for some guys and what we found was most of the black guys were great guys, but as soon as you go four or five of them they would start working together and next thing you knew they were complaining they were always walking point. And I just said, "Hey guys. I do it, too. I'm going there, you're going there." And that's how it was. If they didn't want to, I said, "That's fine. Go see the 1<sup>st</sup> sergeant and work it out with him because I can't do anything for you. I'm here, you're here. Let's get through it."

**Q:** Now, you were wounded twice?

**FG:** Yes. The first time we were at the end of a mission. It was pretty quiet. There was no contact. Our 1<sup>st</sup> sergeant was with us in the field for some reason that day, which he shouldn't have been, and we were [unclear] security for the boats to come in and take us away. As we were waiting there, the radios were on and somebody from one of the other units came across the radio that a Vietcong had shot at them and ran into the wood line. Well, we were in the woods. It was jungle and the only thing being us was the canal. The bullets were coming. The 1<sup>st</sup> sergeant heard that the Vietcong ran into the wood line right in front of us. Well, he told us to all get on lines and open fire. A couple of us balked at him and said, "You can't open fire here because we don't know where the other Americans are coming in because they are all coming to get on the boats." He ordered us all to fire, so we fired. When the firing stopped we heard bullets going both ways and all over the place. I was bleeding profusely from my ear and the back of my head and what we surmised was a grenade or something went off fairly close to me and grazed my ear and the back of my skull. Just missed my eyes. Hit my glasses and broke my glasses. I was medevacked out. That was the first time I was wounded. There were quite a few of us that were wounded in that scenario that were taken out of the field.

**Q:** Do you think that it could have been friendly fire at all?

**FG:** It could've been. My one friend laughs at me because he claims that he was sitting next to me and he was shooting the M-79. He got wounded; he got hit in the groin. He says to me afterward, "You know, I really shouldn't have been shooting the M-79 because once it goes ten feet, it's still a live hand grenade and all it needs to do is hit a twig and it can explode." I says, "Yeah, maybe we shot at ourselves, who knows." Just all hell broke loose once everybody opened up. It could've been our own guys someplace

in the thicket. We never found out. That was the other thing. We'd go out as a platoon or as a company and we'd do a sweep through an area. We'd know that this company is over here and that company is over there. But you don't know how far away they are from you at that given time because outside of radio, you're really not in contact with them and you're left at the discretion of what he sees and where he's telling you he is as per where you are. If you're in the jungle, he could be ten feet from you or ten miles away from you. You don't know. So it was very scary sometimes in that scenario if we would get fired upon from a certain side. In fact there were a couple times that we'd be told we can't shoot that way because there was another company over there. They'd play those games with us all the time.

The second time was a scenario where we made to do a sweep around our base camp. In the sweep a couple of the men got wounded slightly because of small booby traps. I forget what they called them. They usually weren't too powerful. They weren't enough to kill you, but they were enough to scratch you all up and make you bleed a lot. The medic was with us and he kept complaining to this sergeant or the guy in charge that we should get these guys out of here because of the swampy area and they're going to get infected to go on a sweep just around the perimeter of our base camp. Finally they agreed that we could medevac them out and I was an active sergeant at that time. I was familiar with the area because we had gone through it once before. I said I knew there's a landing field about a hundred years up or so and just a little further in. So we went to it. When we were certain that the field was big enough for the chopper to come in, I told the radio man to call the chopper and tell them that I'm going to pop a green smoke once I go out in the field and just confirm that it's clear. I went out to the field and I went through a brush pile to get to the open field and the sergeant was with us, he was an E-6. He said, "I can't go through there." I said, "Well then why come out here?" He says, "There's a trail over here." I said, "Don't go that way. Either come the way I came through the brush or don't come out here at all." I go out in the field. I walked around the perimeter and made sure there was nothing there that I could see that looked like an ambush. I yelled back to the radio guy to tell the chopper that I got the green smoke because I could hear them in the sky. I'm standing there, I pull the pin out and all of a sudden I hear a metal click. I go, "Aw shit!" I hit the ground. The sergeant came through the opening. He tripped off, they told me it was a landmine. It hit me and I almost lost my leg and I just found out about a year ago, the medic that saved me and patched me up. That was my last day.

**Q:** Was he killed?

**FG:** The medic told me that he was killed. But I just talked to the medic about a month ago and I said to him, "Doc, it was a little vague about that day. What do you remember? What can you tell me?" He said, "I don't mind talking about it." He claims it wasn't a sergeant E-6. There was a major with us for some reason and he needed to go out in the country to get his combat [unclear] bags and that's the one who got killed. I'm still trying to find out who it was because I have a database and I have the names of 10,000 guys that went through the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. I have a list of all the K.I.A.'s and I

know the dates and either he didn't die that particular morning or that day, but I can't figure out who he is. Maybe he wasn't even patched to the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division because that happened, too. We had a lot of people, forward observers, go out with us. They weren't attached with the 9<sup>th</sup>. They were part of a Mac-V or I-Corp or whatever. They wouldn't be in the 9<sup>th</sup> Division patch. After a while you didn't pay attention because half the time the uniforms didn't have patches on them. The story is still a little bit vague as to who that person was that tripped the landmine booby trap. I remember vaguely that when Doc came to me I said, "How's the other guy?" whoever he was, and I remember him telling me that he's gone. Doc would not have come to me if there was some way to take care of him. I remember there was a body bag in the chopper when they put me on, but by that point I was drifting in and out of consciousness.

**Q:** Can you count on the medical treatment that you received all the way through?

**FG:** Once you got to Vietnam, it was great. It was definitely hard getting to it because they wanted you in the field all the time. SO unless you really screamed, yelled and kicked a lot, you didn't go. If you had a hangnail or something, they couldn't get to it. 1<sup>st</sup> star general was first defense. You had to get through him to see a medic if it was serious. With the ringworm and the rashes they were pretty good. We could get to them. Most of the cases we go see a Navy Corp man because I lived on a navy troop ship. SO they were really great. They give you down time. Though the 1<sup>st</sup> sergeant always found something for you to do. Do something. Keep busy. But I was very well treated. Then when I was wounded every time I was taken care of very well. I spent about a week in the hospital and then about two or three weeks in Saigon. Almost a month in Tokyo and then four or five months in Walter Reed having some minor surgeries done. A lot of physical therapy. That was okay. Then I still had time left in the army. They wouldn't give me a medical discharge so I had to finish up my tour duty with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division at Fort Hood, Texas. Luckily I knew I had [unclear] so I became a company clerk.

**Q:** How long were you down there for?

**FG:** I was supposed to be there for almost five months, but because my father owned a farm, there were certain things on the books that for seasonal labor or college you could get out of the army. I applied for it because I qualified so I could get out three months earlier than I was supposed to. It was getting to be a little rough because I couldn't do anything. Being an infantry soldier attached to an Armored Division, I had to go out in the field running and jumping around and I wasn't physically capable of doing it. But luckily, like I said, I did get the ninety day early out which helped me recover from all of that. I think I could not have taken the ninety days of it. It was getting really rough on me. Still wasn't in very good shape for what they wanted me to do.

**Q:** Did you ever suffer from post stress?

**FG:** Yes. I mostly suffer from nightmares. Most of mine are bad nightmares. I almost drowned a couple times when I was over there and just certain things bring them on to me. Nightmares about [unclear] and rats, stuff like that. But I think there was only one

time that I had a flashback. We were in France in 1976 and we were traveling around the country side and we went through this town in France and all of a sudden just kind had weird feelings. It was very strange. Afterwards, I was talking with the tour guide and she said, "Were you in Vietnam?" I go, "Yes." She had observed that something was wrong with me and I said, "Why?" She says, "Vietnam was a colony of France and probably what it was the architecture in that village was very unique and probably what you saw in Vietnam and it came back to you." I said, "Oh, yeah, that was it." I don't have any violent tendencies or hallucinations or jump out of windows or anything like that. I've met people who suffer from post-traumatic stress and they frighten me. They frighten e big time. But I feel sorry for them.

**Q:** What do you feel about rules of engagement? Restrictions that were put on some of the units?

**FG:** We were in no fire zones where we were told not to put bullets in a gun. Of course our comment was, "If you want to come there and ensure that we don't have a bullet in a gun, then we won't put a bullet in a gun. But you're welcome to come out with us and tell us that in the field." No way in hell. We were locked and loaded every time. And if we felt we were in danger or we were being shot at, we returned fire. That was the dumbest thing I've heard in my whole life. Go to war and not have a bullet in your gun. And walk around in broad daylight. They're hiding and you're walking. They're around open fields in the jungle, they're going to shoot at you and then try to get the bullet out of wherever you got it and get in in your fun. No way. The bullet was in the gun.

**Q:** Now, when you came back to the states, you came through the medical area. Were you aware of the protestors and antiwar movement?

**FG:** Yes.

**Q:** How did you feel about it?

**FG:** It was awakening. My first thing was I landed at Andrew's Air Force base in Washington D.C. and it was a hot August day. They put us into like an old school bus but the windows had chicken wire on them and steel bars and were all the way up, and there was no air conditioning. I was still able to walk. I said to the people, "How do you open the windows?" They said, "You don't want to open the windows." I go, "What?" They said, "You'll find out." When we were all loaded up they closed the doors and we had an escort. Sirens going and the military police and all that. We went flying through the front gate. As we went through the front gate the bus was pummeled with every kind of rotten fruit that you can think of and the protestors were out there. I had a couple experiences while traveling. I was lucky because I think I came home three or four times at Walter Reed and of course at that time you had to wear your uniform when you flew. A couple times coming through the Buffalo or Dallas airport I was approached. It was just ugly. I have no sympathy for protestors. Glad I don't run into them now.

**Q:** How'd you feel about Jane Fonda and her confession?

**FG:** She's a joke. Go to hell. Bottom-line. I'll help you get there.

**Q:** Would you think you'd ever want to go back and visit Vietnam?

**FG:** Probably not. I've known a lot of guy that have gone back and other people that weren't there that had fathers or something else...I'm on the Board of Directors for the Mobile [unclear] Force which is a unit for both Army and Navy guys. Lost every year they have raffles for tickets to go back, all expenses paid. I go, "I'll give you the money for the raffle, but I don't want it." I'll help the organization. Here's a donation. Don't give me a ticket. I think it would bring back too many bad memories. The smell would be one thing, first off. Growing up on the farm I thought I'd smelled everything, but man when I got there, whew!

**Q:** That's the one thing a lot of veterans that went to Vietnam said, when they got off the plane, the smells. But you of course, got off under fire.

**FG:** Yes.

**Q:** Did you use the G.I. Bill at all?

**FG:** Yes, I went back to college. I got an associate's degree and eventually got a bachelor's degree. Also, I learned that the G.I. Bill could be used for a lot of other things. Not only college education. I was working as a computer engineer for Burrough's. We were constantly being trained and sent to school. Of course the corporation paid for it, but what I was able to work out with the New York State Department of Labor and the VA was that since it was a regimented program and there were guidelines and you had to pass courses, I was able to not only for myself, but for all the other guys that worked with me, that we got all of our money that was left over from our G.I. Bills, if we had a year or two years, what was left over everybody got it. My boss took that to the corporation, which was Burrough's Corporation and submitted it to him. A lot of guys all over the United States got to use their G.I. Bill bays of the plan that I'd laid down for them. That was pretty gratifying for me. Nobody else thought about it. I just said, "What the heck, it's like school." And it worked. All we need was people to sit down, sign some paperwork. Lay out a plan and it was a done deal. Burroughs did not pay a lot back in the '70s, but it was nice to get back a hundred to two hundred bucks. Especially a lot of these guys who were family guys with kids. If you were married and had kids, you're talking four to five hundred dollars in some cases. So it really benefited a lot of people.

**Q:** Did you join any veteran's organizations?

**FG:** Oh, yes. Let's see which ones? (laughs) I'm a life member of EVA Chapter 77. I'm a life member of the American Legion. I'm a life member of the Military Order of the Purple Heart. I'm on the Board of Directors for the Mobile [unclear] Force.

**Q:** Is there any you didn't join? (laughs)

**FG:** I don't know. (laughs) Well, there's a reason for that too. About four years ago I was looking for a new business to start. After working fifty years for Burrough's Corporation and the bottom fell out back in the '80s, I couldn't find a job as an engineer.



Nobody wanted to hire, at least in this area. So I started my own business. I was a sports photographer. I was doing very well. Then about two or three years ago I had health issues coming down and it was getting to be too much running around all the time. I started a business where I was selling military challenge coins. By that time I was already a life member of some of these organizations, but it helped me sell my coins. Most of them I'm selling on EBay. I go to meetings. That would be worthwhile sometimes but it was a lot of nights and traveling and drinking beers with guys and I need to cut back on the drinking the beers so I sell on EBay. But there was a method to my madness to join all the different organizations. I still communicate with them and it's rewarding too.

**Q:** Do you design the coins?

**FG:** I buy coins that have already been pre-designed. I have designed a couple coins for myself and I helped the fellow who owns the company who I buy most of my coins from. We kid each other that he was actually my replacement in Vietnam. He was in my company and everything but he came about four or five months later and he did his tour. He has an interesting story about how he came back, went to college, and had to join ROTC in order to afford college because his father had passed away. After he got out they said, "Well, why don't you stay in? We'll give you Captain's [unclear]." He said, "Well, that's not good enough." They said, "We'll give you anything you want," because he was infantry. He said, "I want special forces and scuba," and a couple of other things. They said, "No problem." He just retired two years ago as a colonel from Special Forces. He's the owner of the company. He's the one who got me started in the business. We design a lot of coins between us, him and me. Sometimes he'll send a design to me and say, "What do you think of this?" and I'll tell him this or that and okay I can see that or okay I want to do it this way, I want to do it that way. When I went back to college I got a degree in graphic arts and computer science. Being a photographer, I have an eye for detail, and eye for what makes things look right. He appreciates that when I give him back my input as to what I see when I look at things. It works well for us.

**Q:** Is there anyone that you served with that you stay in contact with?

**FG:** Years ago my daughter was at RIT she was taking a course in journalism and she needed to interview somebody. I was at a time in my life where if I didn't need to tell you I was in Vietnam, I didn't tell you. In fact, we still have friends today that can't believe that I was really there. But my daughter interviewed me and brought me home. About that time, I realized I had a lot of good buddies that I wanted to see again. I started a website, that's where the 10,000 names are now, and since that time helped a lot of other guys too, find their buddies because of the information that I've gathered that I pass on to them. I have hundreds of stories of people I've helped. In the course of helping other guys, I've been trying to find all of my people. I think we have maybe two or three more guys from our platoon that we haven't found yet. But we are getting it narrows down. I actually found two of my buddies, the medic that saved me because he patched me up pretty good; stopped the bleeding and all that, and another guy. His name is

Robert Sigman and I found them both on the same day about four or five months ago. That's very rewarding.

**Q:** Do you ever read much on Vietnam?

**FG:** I've read two or three books on Vietnam. Most of them I bought when I was at [unclear]. One was written by a chaplain who was with the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. In reading his book I felt sad because he told a lot of great things, but he was very fixated on people dying. Whenever he talked about someone dying, he would go on into such detail. And I felt it wasn't necessary. He would go on, like a whole chapter would be kind of all on this one person and this whole scenario. After a while I felt this was his method of accepting what he had experienced. He was out in the field, too. He wasn't a chaplain who sat in the back. There was another one by a guy who was an infantry soldier and then volunteered to go back like an observer in the bubble helicopters. I can't exactly remember right in full detail. His book was kind of interesting. He focused more on the lighter side. He talked about ambushes and stuff like that but he didn't get into the gory details of people getting killed. I've tried to pick up a couple of other books and just didn't...

**Q:** How about any of the movies?

**FG:** When I can tolerate them, they're a joke. Hollywood's interpretation of what me and the Mobile [unclear] Force really did, which we didn't go into battle with raised [unclear] blasting and some guy wearing a [unclear] or surfboarding behind a PT boat because you couldn't do that. They wouldn't go that fast. And the other story, it's kind of a joke for us because Forrest Gump was in the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division 2<sup>nd</sup> in the 47<sup>th</sup>. Which is kind go wrong because the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 47<sup>th</sup> was a mechanized office and 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> of the 47<sup>th</sup> were the straight leg outfits. The story is floating around that we really know though Forrest Gump is and the name's been changed. I understand. [unclear] when I started going and talked about it. The Michael J. Fox movie, I can't remember the name of it, I thought that was very realistic. There was probably a lot of issues like that, someone went over the line and did something and someone was a whistleblower. I really haven't watched a whole movie. I don't know if it was considered a protest type Hollywood movie, or could be used in that light. They're always saying to us "Oh, you're baby killers." No, no no. That might give fire to that group of people. The Marine one, [unclear] Jack, I really hadn't gotten into that one. But that one seemed like a bit too much. There was another one with the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. That one got into people got [unclear] and they were smoking pot all the time.

**Q:** Were you aware of drugs at all while you were there?

**FG:** No. No. Our unit was very tight. If we had a suspicion that somebody was into something, they had an accident. Nothing bad, nothing serious, but they weren't going out in the jungle with us. We drank crazy when we went back in base camp. Beer parties and all that stuff, but when we went back out, you were sober as a judge and no fooling around.

**Q:** How do you think your time in the service changed or had an effect on your life?

**FG:** Great effect. See things totally in a different light. Some sad. Some good times.

[Pause]

It was hard when my son came to us and told us he wanted to go into the Marine Corps. But it was his decision at that point in time. I told him, "If it had been my decision to go into the service for Vietnam, I would not have gone." I would not have volunteered. But I had to go. I had no choice. Somebody else decided for me. Even if I knew I would walk out without a scratch, no. Not what I saw. Not what I had to put up with. Not in a heartbeat.

**Q:** Thank you very much for your interview.