

**Louis D. Featherman
Veteran**

**Rita Shapiro
Interviewer**

**Chemung Valley History Museum
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RS: Louis is fifty-nine years old, living and having been born on September 21, 1944. I am Rita Shapiro. To begin with, Louis, will you please state your name for the record and the war in which you served?

LF: Louis D. Featherman, I served in the Vietnam War.

RS: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

LF: I was drafted.

RS: You were living where at the time?

LF: I was living at home. I graduated college.

RS: Where did you go to school?

LF: I graduated from what was Claremont Men's College, which is now known as Claremont McKenna College.

RS: Were you drafted shortly after you got out of school?

LF: I was drafted and told to report at the end of February, the 1st of March, the year after I graduated. I graduated in 1968.

RS: So you went in in 1969. Did you have a say in which branch of the service you were going to go into?

LF: No, although interestingly enough at the induction center in Syracuse they actually were drafting people for Marines and they just randomly selected a couple of people for the Marines. I'm glad I didn't get selected.

RS: So what branch did you go into?

LF: I was drafted into the Army.

RS: Where did you do your basic training?

LF: We were bused from Syracuse, New York, which was the induction center, to Fort Dix, New Jersey. I did eight weeks of basic training and eight weeks of advanced infantry training there.

RS: Both at Fort Dix. What was it like?

LF: Fort Dix?

RS: No, I mean your training. Your officers who were teaching you. The men with whom you were serving.

LF: You'll have to remember the time. Because it was a very volatile social situation. The people that were doing the training, the NCOs, were all either regular Army or they were draftees who had returned from Vietnam and were doing some of the advanced infantry training. The makeup of the training companies in basic and in the advanced infantry training, was a fairly good cross-section of American society at the time. Although there seemed to be a disproportionate number of non-college educated, non-whites in the training units. And there was a considerable amount of racial tension. Because you have to remember this was in an era of extreme societal unrest, where black power had become a very significant political arena at the time.

RS: How was this manifested?

LF: How was it manifested? There was a lot of tension amongst the troops. It was bad enough having to deal with the training aspects of being in the Army. The racial tensions that went on in the barracks. In terms of people fighting and people being territorial about who they wanted to be with and all this. It added to the tension and added to the stress of training.

RS: What was the role of your instructors with all of this?

LF: I don't really remember that much about the training NCOs, other than the fact that they were, I would say, pretty cynical about what was going on. Especially the draftees.

RS: Were they white or black, most of the trainees?

LF: We had both. And the people that did the training did a good job. They were, for the most part, pretty straightforward. But there was always this underlying understanding that we were going to Vietnam. We had no idea what we were getting ourselves into, and a lot of us were going to get killed or wounded.

RS: You mean, that was made known immediately?

LF: Yeah, they said pay attention, because this might save your life or pay attention, this might save you from really getting messed up. For the most part, people didn't pay attention.

RS: After all this training, where were you sent?

LF: I was sent to Vietnam.

RS: Immediately?

LF: Yeah. Actually, I was given, I think, a two-week or thirty-day leave. Then we went out through Fort Lewis. Yeah, we went up through Fort Lewis, Washington.

RS: Was it as a group? I mean, the same group with whom you trained?

LF: No, by this time in the war. The original deployments to Vietnam were in units. At the time that I was in the service, we were all strictly replacements. There was no unit integrity of troops that were being sent over to Vietnam. As a matter of fact, when we went to Fort Lewis, we flew over and landed at Cameron Bay. It was just a general assignment. When we got there, they assigned people to specific units or divisions according to whatever the needs were of the divisions at the time. We got in country and we didn't know where we were going until they told us where we were going. I was sent to the Americal Division, which was headquartered in Chu Lai, which was about midway up the coast of Vietnam. At the time that I got to Chu Lai, I was sent to a replacement camp and given a couple of days of in-country training where you were acclimated to the climate and to some of the local tactics that were being used at the time. Then I was put on a helicopter and sent out into the bush to meet the people that I was going to spend time with.

RS: You were sent alone or was there anybody else with you?

LF: There were just other replacements.

RS: Other replacements sent with you?

LF: Yeah, and we just jumped off the helicopter. I don't specifically remember who was there at the time, but when I jumped off the helicopter I was greeted by, I don't even remember. Then I was assigned to a platoon in this infantry company. When I went to the platoon, I was then assigned to a squad, which was about eight or ten men.

RS: What was the physical structure and the land setting where you were?

LF: The area which I was assigned to Vietnam in July had a lot of rice paddies and mountainous jungle, triple canopy jungle. Most of the patrolling that we did was in areas that were rice paddies and tropical forested areas. Our method of operation during the day was in an exposed area in what they called a day logger. We stayed there, rested, slept and relaxed. Our main mission was to go out at night in squad-sized ambushes to predetermined targets or predetermined areas that were determined by the battalion intelligence arm, the S3 Arm of the battalion. We were deployed all over this particular area. Our mission was to deny Viet Cong access to the villages near Chu Lai, where they came in to eat or resupply or do whatever they did in the villages. There weren't a lot of mission statements going on. They just said go here and do this. We weren't in on the big picture.

RS: What was your feeling when you were doing all this?

LF: Again, you have to understand, I was a college educated draftee who had been in school and in society at a time where the American public were becoming very disillusioned with the war. The anti-war movement had already started and there was a lot of anti-war sentiment and there was a lot of bad attitude. When I say bad attitude, I mean, it was just a matter of the political implications of what we were doing be damned. Our main mission was to survive the year that we had to spend there. Incidentally, that was the other thing. The assignment for the replacement troops was one year.

RS: Did you stay in for a year?

LF: I was there for a year.

RS: No longer?

LF: No. There was an option at the end, it was called an early out, if you stayed an additional X number of days so that your remaining service was less than six months, I think it was. Then when you came back to the United States, you out-processed when you returned. Not too many people opted to do that because most people wanted to get out of there at the absolute instant that they could get out. Getting back to the attitude, there were a lot of people out in the field who were opposed to the war or they were not regular Army. At the time that I was there, our platoon was probably, I would say, ninety nine percent non-regular Army, meaning they were non-what they called lifers. Well, I mean, they might have been enlistees, but they were short-term enlistees. The whole command infrastructure, the NCO infrastructure and the officer infrastructure, by the time I got there was not what had originally gone over there, which were all volunteer units that had unit cohesiveness. There was no unit cohesiveness. There was really nothing. It was just basically people figuring out how to survive out there. Your abilities to survive really had

a lot to do with how long the people that were in charge of your units had been out there and how well versed they were. You know, understanding the environment that they were in.

RS: In other words, you depended upon them a great deal for your survival?

LF: Yeah, oh yeah. But I think that's always. Well, I don't know. Because the skills that I came over with were very rudimentary. I had not been an outdoors person, per se, when I had been growing up. So I wasn't used to living outdoors, I wasn't used to being in the woods..

RS: You mean you were an indoor person, not an outdoor person?

LF: Well it's not so much that. It was just that there were certain types of people that grew up in rural America who spent time in the woods hunting, fishing, tracking, whatever. I didn't have those skills and most people didn't. So that was the type of environment we were in. At dusk, we figured out where we were going to go. It was usually within three to five kilometers of where we had been during the day. We got there and formed an ambush and put out Claymore mines in areas that we thought that the VC [Viet Cong] were going to come through. We set up in a line for an ambush and we laid out there all night. We were supposed to be at fifty percent alert. But the way it worked was that one person at a time pulled guard and we slept. Since we didn't have officers for the most part on these ambushes and the NCOs were not regular Army, we basically did what we wanted when we were out there. Our number one rule was survival. So rather than putting ourselves at risk as a small unit out there, we very often put ourselves in a maximum defensive position and tried not to engage the enemy. And I think the enemy, the Viet Cong, knew this. They had a pretty good handle on where we were going to be and we were typical GIs with little training. We left tracks, we made noise. They were very much able to avoid us whenever they wanted.

RS: Did you ever have any contact with them?

LF: We did, but they initiated it. It wasn't our initiation. The times that we were, it was not pleasant. We took casualties. It was a bad situation.

RS: Is it difficult for you to talk about this, Louis?

LF: Honestly, Rita, I can look at it very clinically at this point in time, although interestingly enough there are certain things that will evoke emotion. I'm thinking about something that happened this summer that was interesting. My wife Joan and I attended a Crosby, Stills and Nash concert. They were a group that was popular then and they're popular now. One of the songs they sang was a song called *Southern Cross*. That song

had a lot of meaning because the Southern Cross was the unit patch for the Americal Division. And listening to that song was very emotional, it flashed back a lot of different things. I've had other moments. One that I can recall very vividly was a couple of years ago. I was in Washington, D.C. with my son. One of my sons lives about maybe a half a mile from the Vietnam Memorial. We were visiting him. This was a couple of years ago. We went down to the memorial, my wife and my son and my daughter and myself. We started to walk through. My daughter had a friend that had asked her to get a rubbing of a person's name off of the wall. It was an uncle of a friend of hers who had been killed in Vietnam. So we were walking along, looking at the wall and everything, and I saw all these people that were walking by. It was in the summertime and there were a fairly substantial number of people. I looked at all of these people walking by and not stopping, just kind of glancing over. I had a complete emotional, I think meltdown is probably the word. It was a reaction that anybody who served there or who knew people who were killed or wounded in Vietnam probably would have experienced if they had been at the wall. Because I looked at the wall and I looked at all these people, all these names, and I realized that each and every one of them represented a life unfulfilled. I think it really hit me very hard at that point. My kids and my wife understood that. It was a very emotional experience. And the other thing is that, after I came home, it took a long time to____

RS: I was going to ask you how long you think it took for you.

LF: It took me until...I think the defining moment was when my first child was born. Until that time I was really...I thought about it a lot. I read a lot of stories and articles and books, fiction, nonfiction, whatever about the Vietnam experience. It was something that was emotionally kept alive within me for a long time. And then, when my first child was born, I was, in a sense, reborn in a way myself. Because then you realized that there's somebody else there that you have to...and this is no disrespect to my wife. But at that point you realized you had to think of other people. That was the turning point. And now, I will occasionally think about it. It's like I said, hearing a song or seeing something on TV or something, will bring back the emotions and evoke. I'll think about things. I hopefully was able to survive it. I know a lot of people have not emotionally survived it. My situation, what I went through there was bearable. The incidents of violence and combat were few and far between. There were other things that happened that were very distressing that I wasn't directly involved in. I was in the field for about seven and a half months as a foot soldier. After a month or two I started carrying a radio. Being a radio man was a fairly important job. When I got out of the field, I was assigned to a Public Information Office at the brigade level. Our job was to go out and interview people and write human interest stories for *Army Times* and Army publications. Took pictures and things like that. I interviewed some people and did some interesting things.

RS: Did the things that you read depict the situation as it was? Was it truthful? Was it to the letter?

LF: Well, some of the things. Yeah, the experience for the foot soldier out in the field, the infantry part. Basically, you lived outside and you marched around and were at risk all the time, but especially at night. We went on operations. I remember a couple operations where we took our whole company, or whole battalion. They landed a bunch of helicopters and we got on and they took us up into the mountains where they thought there were base camps and stuff and dropped us off. You were in this triple canopy jungle which was basically impenetrable without a machete. You hacked through the jungle for hours at a time, not moving very far and making a lot of noise. So if there were any troops around, any VC or NVA [North Vietnamese Army] were around, they would have been long gone by the time we got anywhere near them. By the time I got there, the tactics on both sides were pretty well established. It was at a time when the war was, quote, unquote, winding down and I think our mission was basically to keep pressure on to let these people know that we were still there. While they tried to straighten out the political mess that went along with it. The political mess, I think, contributed considerably to what we had to deal with, particularly near populated areas. We had strict constraints. There were no-fire zones and there were areas where we had to get permission from governmental people before we could fire weapons. It was a nightmare. That part of it.

RS: How could you get permission? Did you have to get permission beforehand?

LF: If we were fired upon in some areas, unless you were in imminent danger, you had to call and get clearance to return fire. Obviously, if you were being attacked, if somebody sniper fired at you or something like that, you had to get permission before you could____

RS: Before you could return fire?

LF: Before you could call for artillery or return any kind of fire. It was outrageous. During the day, in most instances in the areas that we operated, we were surrounded by civilians. And during the day, the kids who were entrepreneurs came out with iced coke that you could buy. They had all kinds of services. They had women they brought out. I mean it was like a gypsy band. You were in the Army and you were out in the field but you were still dealing with the public. And these people, they kept pretty close tabs on our...

RS: Did you consider them your enemies?

LF: We knew that they were the main source of intelligence for the VC. But by the same token, it was quid pro quo. We were receiving things, benefits in the field that we didn't have. They had ice, they had soda, stuff like that. You tried to coexist. And when things got out of balance...I remember an instance where a couple of guys in our platoon, and I'm not sure what they were thinking, but they cheated a couple of the prostitutes that came out. Didn't pay them. That night when we went out on patrol we got ambushed.

RS: So, you really did know. You knew this area.

LF: The classic story that I remember from this whole time was that Christmastime was a ceasefire, quote unquote. That was supposed to be a twenty four hour period where it had been agreed upon that there wouldn't be any conflict between either side. We were out in the field and we had our company. We normally didn't get together as a company. We stayed in a platoon during the day. But the company all came together in this one area. The area was called Pine Island.[?] 30.16 It was probably, at one time, a farm, or some type of structure, and it was in the middle of a rice paddy area. You could see three hundred and sixty degrees around this area. It wasn't that big, maybe fifty yards, maybe seventy five yards across. But it was considered to be a safe area because you could guard all approaches. You could see everything from all sides. There were some major trails that passed through there. Our company set up there for, I think, Christmas or New Year's. No, it was after New Year's, I remember. The next morning we woke up and there was a big banner across one of the trails wishing us a Happy New Year with our unit designation, Delta Company, First to the Sixth, Happy New Year. They snuck in there at night and put up a sign. The Intelligence people came out and took pictures. They were very distressed about it.

RS: But they let you sleep through the night?

LF: We had people posted on guard.

RS: But they didn't see them?

LF: They didn't see or hear anything. These people were masters. They could do anything they wanted and they pretty much did anything they wanted. You can chalk it up to, our training wasn't adequate. I don't think we were properly equipped. I think the units were too large. The way we did things was not effective, searching and destroying, seeking out the enemy. The catchword at the time was search and destroy. And our catchword was search and avoid. An interesting sidebar. When I left the field, our battalion switched areas of operation with another battalion and we went into an unfamiliar area. I left the field the day that we did this. The area that we switched into

was the area around My Lai in that area. This was after everything had happened, but it was still the most heavily mined and booby-trapped area in Vietnam.

RS: Done by the American soldiers?

LF: No.

RS: The traps and everything were done by the Vietnamese?

LF: Yeah, they were done by the VC. After that my old battalion and my old company started to take horrendous casualties. Matter of fact, the reason for the switch was our battalion commander that I started out with had left. The new battalion commander was a much more aggressive soldier by the name of Norman Schwarzkopf. He was my battalion commander. As a matter of fact, in his biography, there's a section about our unit, which he called the most poorly trained unit that he had ever been involved with. It wasn't our fault. It was just the way things were done. He was wounded. He went in to try to rescue some people who had gotten into a minefield. He went in, he was brave. There was no question of his integrity and his bravery or anything like that. He went in to try to rescue some people who were trapped in a minefield and he got hurt himself. But I avoided that. I missed that. I was very fortunate. I think part of what I experienced after I left there, I guess you would call it survivor's guilt in a sense. I had missed something.

RS: You didn't have any sense of responsibility or anything for what had happened? Not responsibility, what's the word I want? Any angst or anything?

LF: Yeah, as I said, I think part of what I experienced after I left Vietnam was what they call survivor's guilt. In the sense that I was taken out of a situation or I survived a situation that for a variety of circumstances I was able to survive. And that was rule number one for people who were over there was to survive as far as the average soldier was concerned. If you could help your buddies to survive, that was what you did. I think it was very different from the other wars.

RS: In other words, it wasn't really a cohesive unit?

LF: No, no. It became a very big problem after they started sending in replacements. Because the replacements were coming in as people were being wounded, and then as their term of service was up. They were being replaced. So you had people coming in as replacements at all times. Nobody was there for that long. It wasn't like World War II where people were together for years and had unit cohesiveness and leadership and a clear political mandate. They knew why they were there and what they were doing. So when people did make a sacrifice, it was for something. Whereas with Vietnam, I think that at the time, there was a great deal of anxiety, anger and despair because all of these

lives were being wasted. The other thing about it was that at the time that I was there, we never saw any officers above company level officers in the field. Company commander was the highest rank. The battalion command, the lieutenant colonels and the colonels and whatever, were in a firebase in a bunker with maps and they were directing the war.

RS: But protected.

LF: From maps they were making decisions based on probably faulty intelligence or non-intelligence. They were moving people around out there. Very infrequently would they actually come out. I remember all the time that I was going on these ambushes, we had one visit out there by a major who spent the night on an ambush to see what was going on.

RS: And nobody even of lesser rank was out there?

LF: Well, there were captains and lieutenants, but in World War II and Korea, when you were in the field, your entire unit moved. The staff level officers were moving behind the lines a little bit, but at least they were involved. These people were on a firebase being protected by other people. They were actually in air conditioned operations centers. It went up the chain of command. The brigade command was the same way. The division command was the same way. The people who had the most experience and the most understanding of how to wage war were not involved in waging the war.

RS: Were there Non-coms directing you and telling you what to do or did you just individually do it?

LF: Every day we received orders to where we were supposed to do our ambushes.

RS: But who was directing it? Were there Noncoms there? Did you have any sergeants?

LF: Yeah, yeah, yeah. There were NCOs.

RS: Corporals?

LF: Yeah, I mean, but as far as anything above a company level officer in the field, no way. They weren't in the field.

RS: Did you feel protective, were you protecting your people, the other people in the unit, or were you out for yourself?

LF: You had to protect other people. You pulled guard with these people, you slept with them, ate with them. You were with them twenty four hours a day. Yes, you did. You were there for them. But you weren't fighting this war for anybody other than those people, and for your own survival. The radio operators were very important because we

received all of the coordinates for the ambush sites and the instructions of what we were supposed to do, which then we relayed to the NCOs. Basically what happened, and this happened all the time, is that we were given a specific ambush site. The squad leader looked at it and saw it was ridiculous. Because it was maybe five or six kilometers from where we were and it went through an exposed area or a high-risk area where there was potential. So we went somewhere else where we were safe, but we told them that we were where they thought we were supposed to be. That got to be kind of dangerous because we also had artillery registration where they gave you registration points so that if you were attacked during the night, you called in artillery on these references. They also did some H&I fire, which was harassment and interdiction, where they randomly fired artillery at night. So you had to make sure that you were fairly close to where you were supposed to be.

RS: Or let them know.

LF: Well, we never let them know because...

RS: Because they were in the wrong place.

LF: Yes. We weren't where we were supposed to be, but we were near there. We were in an area nearby that we considered to be safe. Whereas some of the places that they were putting us, they were just looking at a map. We were there and we said, well, that's ridiculous. You were exposed on three sides and you had no way of effectively defending yourself where you were. Or they put you on a trail intersection. You could have been overwhelmed if more than four or five people came down the trail. That was the kind of stuff that went on and it was constant. Being a radio operator, you had to really be able to play this game. We all knew it. I mean everybody knew. The people out in the field knew what was going on and the people in the battalion, at brigade command centers didn't. But, it worked out. We were able to minimize our casualties.

RS: I was going to say, were your casualties heavy?

LF: No, not until when I got out of it, then they started to take horrendous casualties. They were horrendous injuries, too. The reason I knew that they were horrendous injuries is that in the brigade information office they had the casualty reports. Part of the job was to radio these casualty reports up through the chain of command. The way everything works in the Army is that the casualty report came to the unit, and the unit reported it to the next level, which was the brigade level. Then the brigade level reported it to the division. The division reported it to the Army who reported it to the family. But the way that the casualty reports...actually there was a casualty office that was right next to ours, that's what it was. There was a casualty officer and his job was to write up casualty

reports. They were coded according to severity of injury. They used random words that represented different levels of injury. I went in there, and I saw somebody's name who I'd known. I looked and saw and it was T-R-A-N-E [?] which was multiple amputation or something like that from a mine or booby trap. It was just awful. Day after day after day there were people.

RS: You saw casualties day after day?

LF: On these reports were people that I knew. There were a few instances where I went over to them when I had time off. We worked obviously every day, but occasionally I had time off and I went over to one of the hospitals to see these guys that I had spent months with. You saw them and it was just awful.

RS: Well now straighten me out about something. When you became a radio operator, whatever you called it, you were not attached to the same unit?

LF: Oh, yeah.

RS: You were still attached to that?

LF: Yes. Each squad had a radio. The squad was the smallest operational unit in a regular infantry company at that point in time. So there was one radio per squad and I was in the field. I was attached to the unit. There were times when I didn't carry the radio, I became a rifleman again. If we got shot at, I was a rifleman anyways. But more importantly, it was communicating and letting people know where we were and what we were doing and calling in situation reports at different times.

RS: But then you were sent away from that arena. I mean, if you were able to go and see the men who were in the hospitals, what were you doing at that point?

LF: Okay, at that point, I had gone from the infantry company. I had been reassigned to a brigade headquarters in the information office. I got a call from the field one day. [They said] come on in. It was one of these things where I had been in there a few weeks before or a week before maybe, and I had seen my company commander. No, actually it was a lieutenant that I was friendly with. I said, if you hear of anything back here that's open, let me know or put my name in. A week later I got the call. It went from living in the mud in a rice paddy to being in a barracks with a cot and eating in the dining hall and getting up and going to work every day.

RS: It was like an office job.

LF: Well not exactly because we were on a firebase and we got mortared and we had to occasionally pull guard duty and a series of, oh I can't remember what they called it. It

was like a tower, there was a set of towers. You had tower duty. You had to go out on the picket line.

RS: Then how long were you actually out in the field?

LF: Seven and a half months.

RS: Seven and a half months. What'd you do about eating? How did you get your food? How did you get any of the amenities? Or didn't you have any?

LF: There weren't any. They brought C-Rations out by helicopter. They brought out boxes of food.

RS: Daily?

LF: Usually, yeah. They tried to get a helicopter out at least once a day, and sometimes twice a day if things were quiet and the weather was good and the helicopters were flying. So you got stuff, you got food and you got fed every day. If the weather was bad and they couldn't fly, you went hungry for a day or so.

RS: You just didn't eat?

LF: Well if you ran out of food, you didn't. The food was like C-Rations. It was like a cardboard box, it had a little meal tin. There was usually a tin of fruit and some cookies or cake or whatever. There were some meals that were edible and some that were inedible. The only fair way to do it was we turned the boxes upside down and then you picked randomly.

RS: So they weren't all the same?

LF: No. And then you traded. Some people liked certain things and other people didn't like certain things. There was one meal that not only we would not eat, the ham and lima beans, but even the Vietnamese who ate anything wouldn't eat that. But there were some meals that were edible. I mean, you had to eat. I'd say about once every two months we got called into a rear area. Are you ready to change it?

[unknown female speaker] Actually, there's eight more minutes. I'll come back.

LF: Okay. Something called a stand down. You went into a rear area and you were in a barracks and they set up a big barbecue and you had steak and you ate and got drunk for two or three days. Got clean clothes and got a haircut.

RS: What about your clothes and what about shaving and all that sort of thing?

LF: You got water out of the rice paddy and your canteen. Your helmet, you used that for shaving. As far as bathing was concerned, in the field, there were some streams and rivers. Occasionally, every day or a couple days we tried to set up during the day near one of these areas. You went down and bathed in the river. But for the most part, there was no____

RS: Couldn't get them.

LF: Mail from home was a big deal. That was something. They tried to get the mail out every day.

RS: Oh, they did. [unclear] 53.18

LF: If they could. You know, getting letters from home was a big thing. It was very important. And writing letters. This was in an era where we didn't have email. You couldn't pick up a cell phone or any kind of phone and call.

RS: Everybody wrote in those days.

LF: Exactly. Matter of fact, my mother saved all of my letters, all the letters that I sent home. They're at home. In them, I described a lot of it.

RS: How open were you about this when you were writing home? Did you tell them everything?

LF: I told them about the conditions that we were living in and the feeling of how screwed up the war was and how misdirected everything was. But as far as talking about people getting killed or wounded or anything, no, there was no point to that. We didn't really take that many casualties. We suffered. There was a lot of marching, moving and carrying a lot of equipment across country and stuff like that. Physically, it was very demanding. People got hurt.

RS: Were you ever wounded?

LF: No. The only thing that ever happened to me is that we were on an operation in the mountains one time. I jumped off a helicopter, and the helicopter had not landed. It was hovering. The ground wasn't level. I jumped and turned my ankle. So I was on a sprained ankle hiking around for about three or four days. And finally I just, I couldn't. I had to get medevaced out of there. I had a trench foot, but everybody did. Crazy things happened over there.

RS: You want to list those to me? Do you want to go any further?

LF: Yeah, I mean some of the things that happened were really strange. I remember we were on an operation during the monsoon season and it rained constantly. We were out in the rain and we were just drenched. You couldn't get dry, there was no way to get dry. I don't know what happened, but I didn't drink any water for like two days because I was absorbing water through my skin. It was unbelievable. I had a full canteen that I never used. Just crazy. I got trench foot and I think I was absorbing water through my feet. And what other crazy things happened over there? [ponders] On one of these operations we were walking down a stream bed and saw tiger tracks. The mountainous areas of Vietnam used to be prime tiger country. Another time we were on a patrol during the day. We were just at the edge of a rice paddy and I looked up and I saw a bear. I couldn't believe it. I yelled, look, there's a bear and he took off up a hill. A couple of guys went after him just to track him. They were country boys, they liked to track animals. They went up about a hundred feet a hundred feet up this stream bed and they found a lair. They said it was where this bear had been living. It was hard for me to believe that a bear lived in that climate. I never really believed that I had seen a bear until I came back to the United States and I was visiting family in San Diego. I remember going to the San Diego Zoo and we were going around and we were in the bear section and they had a pen where they had something called the Southeast Asian Sun Bear. I looked and I said, that was the bear. We were on one of these trolleys with a person giving commentary. I told her the story. I said it was just really bizarre. This bear took off and disappeared. She said you were very fortunate. I said, why is that? She said that that particular species of bear is very aggressive. It's one of the most aggressive members of the bear family. I said, he was fortunate that he didn't come the other way because he had about twelve guys with automatic weapons standing there.

RS: He wouldn't have gotten too far. In other words, what you're saying is you had your moments.

LF: There were moments, yeah. And I worked at the brigade level. The brigade commander at the time was another very famous soldier from another era. Joseph [G] Clemons Jr., who was at Pork Chop Hill. Yeah. Gregory Peck, I think, played him. Yeah.

RS: Pork Chop Hill was well known in the Korean War.

LF: He was very, very much an old school, old Army, brown shoe Army, I guess they called him. He was actually an enlisted man who had won the Medal of Honor. And then he was given a commission.

RS: Field Commission?

LF: Yeah. And at the time he was a full colonel, in command of the 198th Brigade in the Americal Division.

RS: What was your most memorable memory? What was something that really stood out in your mind? Was there anything besides what you have told us here?

LF: Memorable in what?

RS: Just something that has stayed in your memory or was perhaps even a happy experience. It could be either good or bad.

LF: Well, I remember the high point of my tour was we got on what they called the Freedom Bird. That was the jet to take us home. We got on the runway and this jet was all filled with guys that were going home. We went down the runway and it was very quiet. The minute that jet left the ground, there was this cheer that went on for about five minutes, people just screaming and clapping and cheering, tears running down people's faces. It was probably the happiest moment of our lives up until that point in time. Because that was it. We survived.

RS: You were going home.

LF: Yeah. I remember crazy, memorable things. I remember going to China Beach for the Jewish holidays. We were given an option of being able to take in-country leave to attend Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services. I remember going to China Beach, which was beautiful. It had been a resort, I think, at some point.

RS: Wasn't this well known in one of the television shows?

LF: Yeah. But there was a beautiful beach there, and I remember going out and swimming and body surfing and everything. It was really pleasant. But the most interesting part, or the most memorable part for me, is that I ran into people who I had gone to summer camp with when I was a kid.

RS: How could you recognize each other then?

LF: I'll tell you a story afterward about recognizing. But I don't know. You saw these people, and I think people had name tags. Yeah, we had our name tags so that helped quite a bit. But yeah, I ran into people I'd gone to camp with. That was funny.

RS: But did you have a good experience? Did you go to services?

LF: Yeah, we went to services. Actually I only went for Rosh Hashanah. When I got back there was a certain amount of anger toward me for having left for a couple days. So I

didn't go for Yom Kippur. I decided I wasn't gonna push it. It wasn't worth pushing it. But it was nice to, you know, it was needed.

RS: That was a good respite for you.

LF: Yeah, it was.

RS: Even if it was just for a couple of days.

LF: Let's see, other memorable things. [ponders]

RS: All right, then conversely, what were the worst things? Or was it all [bad]?

LF: I was just thinking about that. I think the worst thing that happened that I can remember and the thing I think that made me the saddest. In our squad, there were a couple of guys that were very good friends. Actually there were four of them. They used to set up together, meaning they put up shelters together during the day and hung out together. They were very friendly. This actually happened the day I left the field. I wasn't there. It was terrible. One of the guys was cleaning his weapon and when he got done cleaning it, he pulled the trigger because that was what you normally did. He hadn't unloaded it and he shot one of his best friends in the head and killed him. It was an accident. That was just terrible. I heard about that and that was just awful. They actually charged him. I can't remember what they charged him with. I can't remember whether it was Article 15 or whether it was going to go beyond that or not.

RS: What was Article 15? Manslaughter?

LF: Non-judicial punishment. It was probably for disobeying a regulation about having a weapon loaded in the day, whatever. There were certain things that you were supposed to not do. The kid that did it was of Japanese descent. He was from Hawaii. About two months later, I went into the casualty office and I saw that he had been killed. They told the cause of death and everything. He had jumped out of a hotel window in Tokyo. Part of it I think was cultural, because he had dishonored himself. I mean he was from a very traditional Japanese family. That has stuck with me all these years. You know, two lives wasted. Yeah, it was terrible. Things like that, you just____

RS: You don't forget. Do you think your experience has changed you in any way?

LF: [Looks afar and ponders his answer] I think for a long time after the war or after my experience over there, it was very easy to be angry at this. I've always been somewhat cynical about authority and about the government. Having been there and seen what went on and how the decision making was done. The difference between what the Army was

saying and what was really happening. It was reality. You tend to become cynical. I was angry for a long time. I got over that.

RS: Were there any positives?

LF: Yeah, I think that upon reflection. Pride in having served the country. As you get further and further away, you realize that it was part of being a citizen. I make a point of trying to vote every time there's an election. Because I realize that people sacrificed their lives so that people, everyday citizens could vote. You become aware that you're part of something. Part of something a lot larger than yourself. But there's this hefty dose of skepticism. If you're gonna do something like that, you better be damn sure that you know what you're doing. And when you do it, do it right. That was the one thing that Schwarzkopf learned from Vietnam. He said it in his book. You can just tell from the way the first Gulf War was waged. Nothing was left to chance. Everything was planned out. They fought a war that tried to minimize casualties. And they did.

RS: Well what do you think about chapter two of that war?

LF: Different leadership. I hope it doesn't become another Vietnam, but from what I've seen over there happening on a day-to-day basis, it sounds like it's becoming that. I think the troops are becoming demoralized. As we were. We went over there demoralized. Most of the people going over there, if they had any awareness of public affairs or current events, they knew they were going into a situation that was very political. By that time they realized it was unwinnable.

RS: Was there conversation about that among the men?

LF: Let's put it this way, just about every single guy you saw over there wore peace signs and had FTA [Fuck The Army] on their helmet. There was a lot of dissent, dissension in the ranks. There were a lot of racial problems in Vietnam. There were numerous incidents of people...if you went into the wrong place, you could get beat up. There were other instances of officers having grenades tossed in their quarters and stuff like that. There were a lot of bad things going on. And these were in relatively safe areas, these were not in the field. [?]

RS: Was this black against white or white against black or both?

LF: Black power. I remember at base camps there were a bunch of black guys walking around together. Not with any military bearing. Very long hair, very aggressive and you tried to stay away from those guys. Because it was dangerous. Those people were dangerous.

RS: But you lived with them. You lived with a lot of them. I mean, you were in camp with a lot of them.

LF: Yeah.

RS: But, and you said originally, I think, that you felt the difference. You felt the tension.

LF: Oh, there was a lot of that.

RS: And did it survive throughout the whole time that you were there?

LF: Did it?

RS: Was it still there during the full time? And by the time you were dissolved or went off to different places, it was still present?

LF: It was always there. I mean that's what it was. That's what the times were like. The Army was merely the reflection of what was going on in society. Only, you were living in close quarters with people that were like that. That was unfortunate. It was a very difficult time for everybody. And particularly for the poor young blacks that came into the Army because they were disenfranchised to begin with. Then they were being put into this situation where they were being asked to sacrifice for a country that had never given them anything. In my situation I was angry and I had grown up with a lot of advantages. So I can imagine these people were even angrier than I was. Nobody wanted to be there. I remember receiving letters from friends about a month after I got to Vietnam describing their experiences at Woodstock. And here I was. That was what was going on, a real dichotomy. It was socioeconomic, there were not that many college graduates that were down at the infantry level. There just weren't that many. Most of the people that were in the infantry were the poor white rural or urban blacks. People who more or less came from a part of society that didn't have a lot of advantage.

RS: Well, Louis, I thank you very much for reliving this. I know it was hard for you.

LF: It was, Rita, to be honest with you. Yeah, I don't mind doing this once in a while.

RS: A little bit of cathartic?

LF: I don't think so much that, but it kind of refocuses your thinking and gets you refocused on what's important. All in all, having survived this I think it probably did me more good than harm.

RS: Good. Glad to hear that.

LF: I was able to contribute something to society.

RS: And you did. That's great. Thank you so very much.

LF: Oh, you're welcome.