

A Way Out of the Bronx
Gene Gitelson

My name is Gene Gitelson. I'm 67 years of age, and I was a second lieutenant, and then first lieutenant, in Vietnam, serving from August 1966 to August 1967. I spent one year in Vietnam, and I was with the 1st Infantry Division, 1st Brigade, 1st of the 28th Infantry Regiment that was stationed northwest of Saigon in War Zones C and D.

Interviewer

Do you recall where you were, how old you were, when you first heard of Vietnam?

Gene Gitelson

Well, it was probably in high school. I graduated high school in 1961, and of course, in 1954 there was the end of the French involvement in Dien Bien Phu, and as a student of history and political science, I was always aware of it. And I remember winning a contest, essay contest, when I was in high school that had to do with the U.S. dealing with Quemoy and Matsu in China and Vietnam and how we—I think I said that we wouldn't be involved in Vietnam if the essay won first prize, but didn't demonstrate my value of prediction. I joined ROTC in 1961 with really no thought that Vietnam would be something I would be facing in 1965 when I was commissioned—just wasn't on the radar in that way.

Interviewer

Where did you do your ROTC?

Gene Gitelson

At City College of New York, which was an interesting school because it had—well, it had one of the largest ROTC components. It was also one of the most liberal, left-leaning—and I was, I think, pretty moderate left. There was New York, and there was a time of reflection of our parents' generation, so there was a very liberal environment. Yet in the middle of City College, in this public school, was a large ROTC component. And it was quite a juxtaposition between being in ROTC and being involved in a lot of human development work and sensitivity and awareness training, and being a leader in that, so. And then I was a political science/international relations major. So as things heated up in 1963, 1964, 1965—that was very much on my mind as I was preparing to leave school and go into active duty.

Interviewer

Why did you join ROTC to begin with?

Gene Gitelson

Well, that's a very complicated issue. I think, one, cousins of mine had served in the military in peacetime in Germany. It was also a way, upon reflection, of being different in a school that was very large, very homogeneous ethnically—and so I was doing something different, and I always was drawn to being a little different. And I think it was also a way to step forward, to figure out—it was a way, in retrospect, to get out of the Bronx, ultimately. It was like passing Go in Monopoly, although I didn't think I was going to go to Vietnam.

Interviewer

You grew up in the Bronx?

Gene Gitelson

Yes, I did.Â So that was very much a working-class, Jewish neighborhood, and people going into the military was very unusual.Â It was just not something that one did.Â And I think it was partly I wanted to live my own life, and do things differently.Â And I figured if I went into the service Iâ€™d rather go in as an officer, whatever that was, than an enlisted.Â Soâ€”and I donâ€™t regret that at all, it was a very good decisionâ€”even though we donâ€™t always know the implications of our decisions.

Interviewer

How large was your ROTC class at City College?

Gene Gitelson

Oh, I think it was over a thousand.Â It was one of the largest in the country, which made it very unusual in that respect.

Interviewer

So you graduated college inâ€”Â

Gene Gitelson

In June of â€™65, and I was going to go to graduate school in international relations and had applied.Â And at the same time, I was working as a caseworker in the South Bronx for the welfare department, in the lower South Bronx.Â And after a whileâ€”andÂ decided not to go to school at that timeâ€”I asked that I be called up to fulfill my obligation, â€™cause I had a two-year active obligation as a reserve officer.

Interviewer

Between the time you joined in â€™61 and â€™65, by the time you graduated, obviously the war had escalated tremendously.Â By â€™65, Tonkin Gulfâ€”

Gene Gitelson

Yes.

Interviewer

Were you alarmed at all?Â Did you think, â€œMy God, I may be going off to a real shooting war?â€

Gene Gitelson

I think increasingly, as time went on, as the build-up happened, it became more and more a possibility in my mind.Â Particularly, at City College, there were only two choices of branches in the Armyâ€”Engineering (and I wasnâ€™t an engineer) and Infantry.Â I wouldâ€™ve preferred Military Intelligence, something akin to political scienceâ€”but it was either Infantry or Engineering.Â Many other schools had a wide range of choices.Â So I was Infantry, and when, as things heated up, it became very clear that there werenâ€™t a lot of other places to goâ€”although I think there was a certain amount of

denial that, "Okay, I may go, but I may not."

Interviewer

So when did you find out actually you were going?

Gene Gitelson

Well, when I came "the first step for new officers is to go into Fort Benning Infantry Basic Officers School, or Benning School for Boys, as it was known among us." And so I went through Infantry Training, which was very challenging but very good, and then was assigned to the 5th Mechanized Division in Fort Carson, Colorado. So that was an Armored Cavalry kind of unit with mechanized "what they called the M113s, troop carriers." And so I was doing winter training "preparing people in Basic Training and Advanced Infantry Training for Vietnam as a training officer.

Gene Gitelson

And I had received orders to go back to Pennsylvania for the summer of '66 at Indiantown Gap Military Reservation (IGMR) to provide training to ROTC cadets, as I was in IGMR when I was a cadet. And then about, I guess, a week before I was due to take off to go east, my captain "who was a Vietnam veteran" said, "Lieutenant, do you believe you're going east?" And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "No, you're going to the other east" "you're going to Vietnam." So that's how I got my orders. And that was a watershed of emotions and experiences, because that was it, that was clear "I was going to Vietnam in that late summer.

Interviewer

This is in '65 now?

Gene Gitelson

'66.

Interviewer

'66.

Gene Gitelson

Yeah.

Interviewer

By '66, were you already getting a lot of stories back from the field, stateside?

Gene Gitelson

There were some. There were still a small amount coming back to Fort Carson, although the captain and another lieutenant were both decorated veterans being advisers for the most part, because the larger units didn't start going over until I think the end of '65, '66. So there were a number of Vietnam veterans who were in the unit as officers and as NCOs, but it didn't seem "it wasn't the majority.

Gene Gitelson

And it certainly was early in the war“relatively early in the war“so I did go to jungle school in Panama for two weeks prior to going on leave and then going to Vietnam. And that was pretty intense training“probably the toughest training I’ve ever gone through, and probably the best“because there were no safety lines on anything we did. This was as real as you could get, and wet, and cold, and wet.

Interviewer

What did they teach you at jungle school?

Gene Gitelson

Sort of living in the jungle, being able to operate in the jungle, being able to survive. Crossing rivers and simulated combat activities, escape and evasion“just slipping and sliding through the jungles in gear that was more for Europe than it was for Vietnam, “cause I didn’t get that gear there. And it was pretty intense, and I remember coming back pretty banged up, with my hands swollen from black palm disease, and it was intense and wet and just wading in rivers constantly. And I remember one time, during one of the exercises, was just stopping in the middle of a river and tying myself to a branch and trying to get some sleep, and then just sleeping in the mud. It was raining all the time, and in many ways, it was a preparation. So that was an intense experience, and then came home for a while for leave.

Arrival in Vietnam and the Rhythm of War

Gene Gitelson

And then went over and landed in Tan Son Nhut, and then got sent in the middle of the night to Phuoc Vinh, which is about an hour drive north, but it was“I came in by air.

Interviewer

Tan Son Nhut was the big air base.

Gene Gitelson

Right“that was the big air base that served the Saigon area, and so we all came in there and went through a process of intake, so to speak, and acclimatization, which“the heat was oppressive“and then a couple of days. And I remember coming in off the aircraft and seeing the coffins of killed service people on the runway going on the cargo planes going back to the States. So it was very sobering.

Interviewer

That must’ve been quite a realization.

Gene Gitelson

Oh, it was, it was. It was like each succeeding step“getting off the plane, and then going through Saigon with one of the people who was on the plane manning the machine gun as we went down the streets of Saigon to, I guess, Bien Hoa, where Tan Son Nhut to sign in. It was strange, our juxtaposition of coming to Vietnam on a commercial airliner, as most people did that came as replacements“as opposed to a whole unit going over there to be the first unit. I was really coming in as the first part of the replacement wave for the officers that went over with the 1st Infantry Division. So it was very much an individual experience. It wasn’t a unit experience like the veterans in Iraq and Afghanistan have shared with me. It was a solitary experience, on a commercial airliner,

with stewardesses who would say, "Well, hope to see you boys in a year."

Gene Gitelson

And then you go into the unit—you arrived in the middle of the night. You see the adjutant, the S-1—the personnel officer—and get signed in. Then meet the colonel late at night, who greeted me with saying "I have two positions open right now. All the line positions are filled—which was sort of a relief. I mean 'line' meaning direct combat platoons, and he said he had two positions. One as the medical officer and the other as the support platoon leader, which was the combat resupply logistics lifeblood of the battalion.

Gene Gitelson

And he asked me at that point if I was Jewish, and I said, basically, "Oh, shit, 'cause I had some experiences in Basic Training where, when I was with the ROTC, where people were from the South and from other areas—not only from the South—but who were not—the Civil Rights Movement and other things were not prominent in their mind. So that was a tough experience, and so when he asked me that question, I said, "Oh, God. I remember thinking, "Here I am in Vietnam and people are trying to kill me, and this guy presumably has prejudice." And he said, "No, no, no, no, no—my wife is one of them," and he said, "But I always wanted to do this—take a Jewish guy and put him in Supply and Logistics." So I'm like, "Hardware."

Gene Gitelson

So that's the position I had. I took over from another lieutenant who had done a decent job but had had some problems—and wound up being the support platoon leader with the call sign Defiant 4 Foxtrot. That was my call sign. And I wound up being very good at it—in fact, better than I had ever seen myself in any situation. One, the ante was pretty high and people depended on me for ammunition, medical supplies, food and water, clothing. And I was with the unit as it moved in the jungle, so I wasn't back just sending—some of my staff were back at the base, but I was the person that was responsible for bringing the choppers in, getting things in and out at night, in the dark.

Interviewer

So you were in the bush.

Gene Gitelson

I was in the bush and was very much a part of what was going on at that time with some very large military operations.

Interviewer

Now what was it—you were the 1st Division, I think you said?

Gene Gitelson

Yes, Big Red One.

Interviewer

What was your unit's mission?

Gene Gitelson

Well, the mission was to search and destroy, to continue to pursue, to secure areas, to go into free fire zones—to do combat operations. It was a combat unit that went back in history to World War I, when it was part of the first units that went in as part of the American Expeditionary Force. So it had a bit of history. It was called the “Lions of Cantigny,” and Cantigny was the place in World War I that the unit had its first assignment in combat operation. So I felt pretty good about being a part of this unit and being given the responsibility that I was given at the ripe age—let’s see—66, so I was 23, and older than many of the people in my platoon, except for some of the noncommissioned officers.

Interviewer

So you were operating on the platoon level, or you were operating on company level?

Gene Gitelson

Well, I had a platoon whose responsibility was combat logistics, and we operated within the battalion as we moved in the jungle, and moved from base camp to base camp, my job was to keep it moving and do the convoys—these large, what they called Red Balls, which were large 100 or 200 trucks that we would take from our base down to Tan Son Nhut to re-provision, bring what we needed back. And I would either be near the front of the convoy or in the back eating all the dust, depending on the season.

Interviewer

Did you come under fire much doing these convoys, or did you come under fire much when you were in the front?

Gene Gitelson

Well, all the time.

Interviewer

Yeah?

Gene Gitelson

I’m sure there were people who were under fire much more, much more directly, and there were people who were less. And so when things happened in the battalion, they also happened to me, because the enemy didn’t distinguish. And I was with the colonel and the senior officers because it was my job to anticipate what was going to happen and be able to get what we needed moving. An Army lives on its belly and on its ammunition and on its medical supplies—in our case, through our helicopters, for the most part.

Interviewer

Do you remember the first time you came under fire?

Gene Gitelson

I remember I got to the unit, and I think we were in the Iron Triangle, which was an area that had been—became a free fire zone, but there was a lot of activity. I think at that point

of the war, the major battles were in my area with the 1st Infantry Division and the 4th and a few others. Later on, it moved to the south, it moved to the north—but at that point, we were in the biggest operations of the war.

Interviewer

And I remember going—either I was brought into the unit in the field or we left to go to the field, I don't remember—but I remember we were near the Saigon River, and we were walking in the bush. And I passed a tree, a cluster, and walked past it, and the next person hit a mine booby trap and was killed. So that was—I remember feeling, "This is real." It was very concrete, and for the grace of God, whatever, that could've been me, because he was right behind me. So that was

Gene Gitelson

And then a lot of times we would get sniper fire or there'd be booby traps. It was later on during the year that we started to get into sustained operations, sustained combat. It was a lot of hit-and-run, a lot of VC snipers, booby traps, and so at any given time, things could happen. Most of the time, nothing happened. It was the waiting between those periods of time. We'd be on road-clearing operations, which meant we were positioned on both sides of a road. We'd be blowing up trees to have some safety, so that there wouldn't be booby traps and mines in the trees hitting the convoys, and we'd be there all day, or two days, or a week. And there would be mines going off, but sporadically. We would be moving around a lot from base to base, and jungle area to jungle area, and it was mostly jungle and rice paddies—pretty flat terrain, but very tough terrain.

Gene Gitelson

And I think most people would reflect on that the experience goes from times of boredom to times of terror, and disorganization, and chaos, and bombs going off, and hearing the rumble of the B-52s who were dropping bombs—not near us, but maybe ten miles away, and you could feel it, the ground shaking. And then we'd get hit by snipers or a small unit of mostly Viet Cong at that point, and then we would fire, and they'd call in helicopters. We had the advantage of air support, but it was intense at times, and then there was the quiet, and then sending the bodies out, medevac-ing people, getting the replacements in.

Gene Gitelson

It was constant movement of people coming in and out because of the nature of how the war was set up with the one-year replacement. So you never had a chance to have a fully coherent team for very long; you had to be very good at being able to bring new people in, and you had people at all different stages of the 12-month tour. But I had a good team—a really incredible platoon of hardworking, dedicated people who—and I did a good job. I was very creative in ways that I think that experience calls out a place in some rate.

Interviewer

Can you give me an example of that creativity? What were some of the problems that you had to overcome?

Gene Gitelson

Well, there was getting choppers in at night, either to take supplies out for the next base or to bring in sandbags and metal stakes, â€™cause we dug in.Â Â The general who led the division was William DePuy, whoÂ was very tough and was very demanding about digging in.Â Â In the beginning, we didnâ€™t dig in much, and officers would put up hammocks as a sort of a way to stay dryâ€”until they got shot and killed because they were above ground.Â Â And so then we dug in, and we dug in every night, and we would be tromping through the boonies for 12, 16 hours, and get into position maybe at dusk.

Gene Gitelson

And then we would be digging in for hoursâ€”sandbags, metal stakes, building what were called DePuy foxholes, which had very interesting strategy, which was instead of â€”if you saw a World War II filmâ€”a bunker, with sort of theÂ letterbox slit, this had very carefully defined fields of fire, so that when we built the bunker, the only parts that were open were the two front corners, and we would have maybe 45 degrees, and we wouldnâ€™t be able to see in front, yeah.Â Â But another foxhole, slightly up and to the left and to the right, would be covering our front, as we were covering theirs, as the fire would be going oblique.

Interviewer

So each position covered each otherâ€™s flank?

Gene Gitelson

Covered each otherâ€™s front and flankâ€”

Interviewer

Okay.

Gene Gitelson

And it was a way to get overwhelming firepower and to create a real barrier.Â Â It was a little unnerving in the beginning because we would be able to see out the side and the enemy could come in on the side.Â Â But we were so camouflaged that sometimes we would be walking around our own bunkers and not know that they were there.Â Â But it was to have very defined fields of fire.Â Â And it was a strategy, and I think it worked.Â Â It was just a little strange not to have a 180 degree view, but we got very good at doing those and being able to overlap the fires, to be able to make sure that in our platoon, that we were covered.

Interviewer

And how long would you maintain that position for?

Gene Gitelson

Well, weâ€™re supposed to beâ€”the nature of how the strategy was in Vietnam was six months on the line, and then six months in the staff position, in the same battalion.

Interviewer

I mean on the field, though, in that bunkerâ€”how long would you be in the bunker?

Gene Gitelson

Oh, okay, I mean we could be there just overnight, and in fact, just have it operating for three or four hours, because then we'd dig it out, fill the holes, empty the sandbags, put the stakes on the chopper, and then go out and do another six or seven clicks if we did that much. If we were moving from base to base because we had our own base in Phuoc Vinh, but out of the whole year, maybe I was there 120 days, 90 days because we were in the field all the time. So in that case, if we were guarding an air base, we might dig in and might be there for a week or two, but it was very rare. Most of the time, we just kept moving. We were out in the field for a hundred days at one point, just continuously moving, before we came back to base camp.

Interviewer

Now, you're a Bronx boy. What was the jungle in Panama like? How did you prepare you adequately for the jungle in Vietnam? Could you talk a little bit about what the jungle was like? What was it like being in the bush for a hundred days?

Gene Gitelson

You're just living a different life. You're on the move all the time. You catch what you can in terms of food, whatever it is. If our position was viable and we had a landing zone or we made a landing zone, then we might get some food, hot food, come in, so that troops could eat well. That was part of my responsibility. And then we'd send these big marmite containers back out, and then we'd go either on ambush patrol at night, and then five o'clock in the morning, we'd start to close the foxholes, and then go on operation that particular day to look at to reconnaissance a village, or just recon by fire, meaning to attract attention, so to speak. Sometimes the units would be out there as bait.

Gene Gitelson

But during those first seven months, seven and a half months, I was, as the support platoon leader which was longer than anybody had served in that position. One, because I was really good and the colonel depended on me. He didn't like the S-4, my boss, the head of logistics, so most of the other platoon leaders and company commanders would deal with me directly. And so I got to have a reputation as being somebody who could get the job done, no matter what. And my role model was Milo Minderbinder from Catch-22, [MMPGG1] who had traded cotton. So I was trading jeeps and vehicles and stealing air conditioners from Division Headquarters so that we would have the best stuff. So I had the best ammunition, the largest supply in fact, at one point, the Division confiscated it because I had more than they had in many of the types of munitions.

Gene Gitelson

But I made sure that it was my purpose to make sure that we had everything we needed to be able to conduct a combat operation. I didn't want one person to die because they didn't have what they should have. So I took that very, very personally, and I was intense about it, creative in ways of getting things in, being able to bring choppers in at night, pure dark, with lighting little fires in C-ration cans, we'd save, and gasoline, to be able to get, be able to direct those choppers in to me, and be able to get them in, get them out, get the wounded out.

Gene Gitelson

So it brings up a lot of feelings about what it was like as a young man to have that

responsibility and to be respected for what I did, and appreciated. A A And it was a great unit, we worked together well. A A It was very strange whenâ€”I know weâ€™ll talk when I came back and the differencesâ€”but it was a unit that I was very proud of being part of, and we didnâ€™t burn down villages, and we didnâ€™t shoot up things in the way that My Lai and other things that came up later, and I know they happened. A A But they didnâ€™t happen with us.

Interviewer

Was morale good? A A You were there in the early A phase of the war.

Gene Gitelson

Right.

Interviewer

Did people still believe in the cause of the war, and was morale high?

Gene Gitelson

Morale was good. A A I mean, I canâ€™t speak for other peopleâ€”there were professional soldiers, I was a one-year guy coming into Vietnamâ€”but we felt strongly about our mission, and there wasnâ€™t the dissension that showed up later that I noticed when I spoke to veterans who came back in the ensuing five, six, seven years. A A It was a long war. A A The degree of racial amity was strong. A A I mean, I had been with some of those officers in Benning, and they were from deep parts of the South, and theyâ€”came from their programming and didnâ€™t want to serve with blacks, had no experience. A A But when we were there, there was little room for that. A A The point was, can you be counted onâ€”and I saw their attitudes change 180 degrees.

Gene Gitelson

Later on, after Tet, way after I was back, or several months after I was back, then a lot of the racial tensionsâ€”Martin Luther King killedâ€”but we had, there were black officers, black NCOs, white NCOs, and a mixed platoon of whites, Hispanics, and blacks. A A Things could be happening inside the unit that I was not aware of, but it never came to the pointâ€”where I had to do anything about it.

Gene Gitelson

And in terms of drugs, that was a big surprise to me when I heard that that was a major problem. A A And I donâ€™t think I was naive. A A I just think it was either at a very low level, and I think we conducted ourselves as a professional unit. A A We drankâ€”I mean, I did my best to supply my troops with beer and French champagne, which I got from trading with the French who had the rubber tree plantations in Lai Khe and those places. A A And sort of the deal was, we wonâ€™t blow up your rubber trees, youâ€™ll be nice to us, and weâ€™ll buy and trade French champagne from you.

Gene Gitelson

But we didnâ€™t do that in the middle of a combat operation. A A We would fly A beer in at night in postal bags, â€”cause I figured out that was the best way to get it past people. A A I mean, the postal bags were dripping, because I made sure they put ice in them. A A So, if nothing else, we had some cold beer at night. A A But thatâ€™s about as far as it went. A A You know, Iâ€™m sure there was marijuana and people were smoking,

but it was never an issue. A A We were ready when we went out to the field.

Relations with the Vietnamese
Interviewer

Did you have much contact with the Vietnamese themselves?

Gene Gitelson

Well, I did in some of the trading I did, and I got to know the people in the village of Phuoc Vinh not very intimately, other than in bars. A A They were people who cut my hair, and some of them supposedly were Viet Cong, and one didn't know because of the mixed loyalties and the pressures they were under. A A But I got to know the people in the village. A A It wasn't a great way to know people, during the war, and I'm sure they conducted themselves in a way to make sure that they didn't attract attention. A A Found them to be decent people.

Interviewer

Did you have a sense of whether they wanted you there or not?

Gene Gitelson

Well, from what their public statements were, that, yeah, they wanted us there. A A I think there was the Catholics who were, and there were many in our area, and we supported a church that was outside our wire in Phuoc Vinh, Catholic church that our Catholic chaplain supported and worked with the orphans that the church was taking care of. A A So he would always be collecting money and supplies and food, and I did the best I could to give him things that he needed for the kids.

Gene Gitelson

And then we would have an artillery exchange or short round, blow up part of the church, and then we'd find the construction material and rebuild the church, and then we'd knock a wall down, and we would rebuild it again, because there was a whole lot of supplies and a lot of building. A A When I came in there, it was mud and we were living in tents. A A When I left, we were living in hooches that were metal and wood frame buildings that I didn't spend a lot of time in, being in the field, but they were very nice, dry.

Gene Gitelson

So there were all the I think the certainly people who were Catholic, or very active Buddhists, did not want to be part of a communist system, and I don't think anyways that people were looking at it politically. A A I don't think people fight wars for political reasons. A A People didn't read Marx. A A They wanted land, they wanted food, they wanted to take care of their families like anybody else. A A And if the Viet Cong could do a better job of that since many of the South Vietnamese politicians were crooked and corrupt, and certainly were allies of ours by convenience.

Interviewer

Did you see much evidence of that corruption on the South Vietnamese? A A Did you see any signs?

Gene Gitelson

Well, I didn't see how the South Vietnamese Army lived, and how the officers lived, and how poorly the soldiers lived, and supposedly how the pay—every officer in the South Vietnamese Army would take a cut, so it would be everybody would take 10% or more. So by the time it got down to the private, he wouldn't have much, and sometimes the families would be traveling with the ARVN, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. It was very hard to tell. It didn't involve—we didn't involve ourselves with the politics. We had a mission to do. We thought we were doing the right thing, and I think at that point in the war, we were fighting as best we can for what we believed to be the right thing.

Gene Gitelson

I mean, what people in the States did not hear about is a lot of the civil construction and medical missions that we did all the time. They were called MEDCAP—medical capacity building, I guess that's what the word stood for, MEDCAP. But we would go to villages, particularly in the—they're called Montagnards, the tribespeople, which is, as I learned, is a general name for mountain people, but there were different tribes in it. And we would go to the villages, and we'd bring up water, we'd provide inoculations, we'd have to convince the chief of the village to be the first person to sort of get shot with this pneumatic gun or needles, and then we would inoculate all the kids. I remember giving a baby its first bath—his or her first bath, blowing up balloons.

Gene Gitelson

And then the political people from Saigon would come in and sort of do a political rally, and it might be during the elections, so the elections would take place. We would secure the village. Yeah, the elections obviously were probably contrived, but we were there to do that. And I felt really good about that—it was taking care of the people, and the Montagnards, who were really good people, who the South Vietnamese would crap on all the time.

Interviewer

They're not Vietnamese?

Gene Gitelson

No, they were not considered Vietnamese by the Vietnamese, even though they lived there probably for centuries. But they were—

Interviewer

Are they the Hmong, or—

Gene Gitelson

Hmong and Meo and all different tribes, Aka. And they had no love of the South Vietnamese government, who supposedly would bomb them when they had some extra bombs left over from a run in North Vietnam. They were hated, racially hated, and so we could trust the mountain tribes. Couldn't trust the South Vietnamese Army as much as we could trust the Montagnards, who were very honest. And when you dealt with them, when you traded with them, they were honest about it. I remember buying a crossbow once, and the man, who was in a loincloth and very basic, primitive kind of—from our quote "civilized" point of view—lived at subsistence, farmers—and I remember he wouldn't sell it to me unless he could show me how to use it.

Gene Gitelson

It was thatâ€”with the Vietnamese, I think we created such a crazed economy of mixed loyalties that everybody was buying, selling everything. Â And it was what happens when you have a large army in somebody elseâ€™s country. Â You disrupt it. Â And yet I had good feelings about the South Vietnamese I got to know. Â It just was a very challenging environment where we were in the midst of intervening in a civil war, and I understand that from a political point of view and domino theory and all that stuff I had learned in schoolâ€”but the question was, who were the good guys? Â It was hard to tell.

Platoon Command
Interviewer

What was the scariest moment you had in Vietnam, may I ask?

Gene Gitelson

The scariest moment was, this was after I was this platoon leader for seven and a half months, then I became the platoon leader of a rifle platoon, Charlie-1, and about a month after I took overâ€”

Interviewer

Why did you switch from one role to the other?

Gene Gitelson

Because the colonel left.Â Â The colonel liked meâ€”he was the one who wanted to put me in that position, and Iâ€™d taken care of himâ€”we had a still going in the motor pool, and just took care,Â if he needed ice when we were back in base, I would make sure we got the ice, and he could always count on me.Â Â And he just thought I was one of the best logistics officers heâ€™s ever served with, and he was, I suppose he was in his late 30s, early 40s, and he seemed old at that time, but he was a colonelâ€”tough guy.

Gene Gitelson

So when he left and rotated out, the executive officer took over.Â Â And I didnâ€™t have the same relationship with him.Â Â And he got pissed off at me one day and said, â€œThatâ€™s your new platoon.â€Â Â So that was my new platoon, and it was like the worst platoon in the whole battalion, had the worst reputation.

Interviewer

Why was itâ€”what was its reputation?Â Â Why did it have the worst record?

Gene Gitelson

Well, it had a succession of platoon leaders, either relieved or shot.

Interviewer

And youâ€™re a second lieutenant at this point, right?

Gene Gitelson

Firstâ€”I wouldâ€™ve been almost the first lieutenant. Yeah, I wouldâ€™ve been a first

lieutenant. Didn't matter on the platoon level, you could be a first or a second. Captain would be in charge of a company. So once you were a year in grade, you would move, it was more automatic to move from a second to a first. After that, it was promotion-wise or a board. So I got to take over this platoon, and it had a hard luck reputation, having lost a couple of platoon leaders.

Interviewer

In combat.

Gene Gitelson

And because of incompetence. I mean, General DePuy, the man, the Commanding General of the 1st Infantry Division, would not tolerate officers who were not good or didn't do their job or put their platoons at risk unnecessarily. And so we would have what was called Midnight Flight 2400, where the chopper would come in at midnight and then leave. And then the next morning, there'd be one or two lieutenants missing 'cause they had been relieved. He was not—he was a good commander, but he was really death on lieutenants.

Interviewer

So all of a sudden, you're given this hard luck platoon—what do you think?

Gene Gitelson

Oh, I think I was going to die. When I took over and they had—

Interviewer

And this is what time now—this is 196-?

Gene Gitelson

Yeah. Â This would've been '67, and it would've been around May.

Interviewer

So the war has heated up, too.

Gene Gitelson

Yeah, and we were in Junction City, Operation Baton Rouge, and—

Interviewer

These are all search-and-destroy missions?

Gene Gitelson

They were division-size engagements. Â Junction City, if I remember correctly, was near the Cambodian border, and the first airborne operation since Korea was conducted there. Â We were on the ground securing the area while everybody jumped out of planes, and of course, it was a secured area—it wasn't Normandy.

Interviewer

But you wereâ€”the area was held by NVA regulars, or it wasâ€”

Gene Gitelson

We started to see more NVA regulars because they were starting to supplant the VC, who were much more loyal to the South . Â They were more Southerners, and there was this Northern-Southern thing, and the North was definitely starting to engage more directly with its own troops. Â Sometimes you couldnâ€™t tell who it was.

Interviewer

Were the engagements that you were running into different because they were NVA, you were running into NVA troops, or it was still hit-and-run sort of?

Gene Gitelson

Well, they were different because we were running into large forces, as opposed to annoying snipers. Â So it changed from thatâ€”and being shot at in a convoy and having a couple of rockets or mortars come in, and then theyâ€™d leave, so the hit-and-run. Â These were much more sustained engagements, and when we would find the tunnels, when we would find the suppliesâ€”I mean, the supplies could refit a whole division. Â I mean, it would cover several of these back yards, just stacked up, all kinds of ammunition. Â So we were gettingâ€”we were engaging large units, which was much more intense.

Gene Gitelson

And in one of them I lostâ€”it was while I was still support platoon leaderâ€”but lost a number of close friends. Â One guy lâ€™d roomed with in a tent, so we shared a tent together, and he was killed, and it was on November 8, â€™66. Â And thereâ€™s a whole portion of a panel in Washington, with just the names of people from the unit.

Interviewer

How were they killedâ€”was it in a specific action or attack or?

Gene Gitelson

It was a major engagement, a major attack, and my buddy, Tom Murphy, walked into an ambush, and then just successive numbers of people, and justâ€”that was very painful, and we were very close. Â But in terms ofâ€”you had asked about the scariest momentâ€”I remember when I took over this platoon, and we got intoâ€”we were given orders to go down to the riverbank and sort of recon by fire, recon, and we ran into a very large force. Â And it was just my platoon out there, so the platoon would attract attention. Â And it was one where we were clearly outnumbered, and we had to use a lot of stealth to make sure thatâ€”we were not in a position to engage that large force. Â And so it was they were searching for us and sort of provoking fire, and we were trying to make sure that we didnâ€™t attempt fire imprecisionâ€”so we kept moving around and had numbers of helicopters up in the air, command and control, with conflicting orders.

Gene Gitelson

The person I trusted most was another first lieutenant who was the Assistant S-3, operations, and he probably saved our lives that day by getting us out of that area. Â But we were getting machine gun fire in, and we didnâ€™t have much to dig in with, because we didnâ€™t bring our shovels with us, â€™cause we were going out and coming in the same day. Â And I remember calling in gunships and walkingâ€”artillery fire in front, and on

the side, in the back of usâ€”in this sort of little contained capsule to make sure we didnâ€™t bring it in on ourselves. Â And then we had jets from carriers come in from the Navy to bomb the area, and we were very lucky to get out of there.

Interviewer

Did you fear friendly fire?

Gene Gitelson

Oh, yeah. Â Thatâ€™s always part of the mix. Â When you got all this munition going off, itâ€™s dangerous.

Interviewer

Can you please explain what that must be like to be in the middle of all this?

Â Sensoryâ€”whatâ€™s the sensation of being in the middle of artillery fire, and thereâ€™s air support, and thereâ€™s jets flying inâ€”it must be overwhelming.

Gene Gitelson

It can be overwhelming. Â I think the training and what I learned by being a support platoon leader and watching what other platoon leaders did really, I think, helped me a great deal. Â So I think at that point I went into automaticâ€”in that, okay, my job was to protect my men and do the mission. Â But after a while, the first prerogative was to protect the men I was responsible for. Â â€”Cause when we wereâ€”I thought we were going to die that day anyway because I just had a bad feeling about being sent down to that riverbank, and it justâ€”all by our lonesome, 28 of usâ€”and everybody else waiting for something to happen, and the colonel sitting back at headquarters. Â And when the shit hit the fan, we were out there by ourselves, so thank God we had the air support we did and some good advice on how to deal with that situation. Â But I remember everybody doing their job, and my job was to do my job, because I had to lead that unit in the midst of chaos, and sound and light, and small arms fire, and machine gunsâ€”and knowing that the unit we ran into was much larger.

Interviewer

And it was NVA regular.

Gene Gitelson

Itâ€™s hard to tell, but at that point, it probably wouldâ€™ve been NVA, given the time of the year.

Interviewer

There have been a number of movies that have been done about Vietnam, and Iâ€™m just wondering if any of the movies, popular movies about Vietnam, any of them, sort of, can actually capture the combat experience?

Gene Gitelson

Well, Iâ€™ve always been rather disappointed with the movies because I felt they had a political edgeâ€”like Â Platoon, which was totally unlike anything that I experienced. Â And somebody, a friend of mine who was in the Marines, said there were many similaritiesâ€”it just wasnâ€™t part of my experience. I think the one that I saw that

was the closest was A Hamburger Hill, which was about an infantry unit, and it didn't have the politics and the bad morale and the fragging of officers—all that crap that I never experienced.

Interviewer

I'm just talking, though, about the combat, about the actual experience, the combat experience—things going off around you—if any film has managed to actually capture what it's actually

Gene Gitelson

Hamburger Hill was, I think, the closest in its feel and its realism. 2.9 million people served in Vietnam, and there's probably 2.9 million or 3.5 million stories. That was closest to my own experience. But I think at a certain point as an officer, the training and the more—and of course, the experience of the preceding seven or eight months really kicked in.

Interviewer

Did you make it out without taking any casualties?

Gene Gitelson

I think we had got out of there without any casualties, which was a minor miracle. I know everybody bought me drinks in the Officers' Club that night, so like, wow. But everybody had wow experiences. I mean, mine was intermittent. There were times when it was really bad, when we took casualties, we got hit by Claymores, and it was ambush, and other times we ambushed them.

Interviewer

What was the thing you feared most while you were out on patrol? Was it booby traps? Was it being wounded?

Gene Gitelson

Feared every second—cause every second, one could die. All you have to do is step on something, or you're caught up in an ambush, or you get mortared, or you get hit by your own artillery. That happened to us, where we lost nearly a whole platoon because of short rounds, or transposed digits. I mean, it's not like auto-fire now—people were doing actual calculations, and 99 times out of 100, they were right, but you had to have a number of things right for it to work. One, you had to know where you were—most of the times we didn't, because it was dense jungle, so we'd throw smoke, smoke grenades, and then a chopper would identify the color, and we'd make sure it wasn't a VC throwing another small grenade, so.

Interviewer

The VC sometimes threw smoke grenades to confuse the artillery spotters?

Gene Gitelson

Oh, yeah, yeah. So you'd have to—you'd throw the smoke, and then they would identify the color. There were four or five different colors, so. I mean, the odds were in our favor, but not perfect, so that you could pinpoint your position—and then the

supporting artillery can fire the artillery around you—hopefully not on top of you. A A So if you get the position right, and then the spotters up in the planes got the position right, and then they called in the coordinates—which the artillery unit, the battery, didn't know unless—we had a forward observer who was with us, who represented the battery. A A So it depended how good he was, and I had a pretty good guy, and he was accurate, and he did a good job.

Gene Gitelson

But then you have to calculate it by hand, not computer, and then the digits have to be right. A A And then the artillery has to be positioned correctly, and the number of—there's the shell, and then there's the gunpowder, and of course, it's not totally precise. A A Sometimes they would be precise, and sometimes a round would fall short or it would be defective. A A So you could get killed numerous ways. A A And at any given moment, any of those could be an eventuality.

Interviewer

Was there any sort of a split between, sort of, career Army officers and those who were, like yourself, ROTC and only in for a limited time? A A Were you aware of any?

Gene Gitelson

Oh, yeah. A A There's class culture, and certainly in the Army. A A Before we went to Vietnam, the people who were lifers were different than those of us who came out of ROTC. A A And there was always this thing between the West Point ring knockers and the ROTC, because we were the short-time guys, we were civilian soldiers—where the West Pointers were professional soldiers. A A So it would be known who was West Point and who was not, and there would be a—not unusual in anything in society, but they were. And the Southerners tended to come from military families—they didn't come from the South Bronx. A A I mean it was very different culturally. A A And yet when we became, and as we were an effective combat unit, that stuff tended to be on the side—where we grew up, whether North or South, which was still an issue at that time in our society. A A West Point and ROTC—ah, it was always in the background.

Gene Gitelson

But, in the end, you counted on the people you knew who could do the job, and that's what counted. A A It didn't matter where they were from, where they went to school, whether they had a ring or not, of what religion or background. A A It was like you do the job, you can be counted on—you're part of the group. A A And if you can't, it doesn't matter what school you went to—you will be ostracized, and you will not be trusted. A A And trust is everything.

Training Men and Measuring Progress in a New Kind of War

Interviewer

So tell me more about the second half of your tour, leading the rifle platoon.

Gene Gitelson

Yeah, it was—they were really—had poor leadership. A lot of turnover as they had with casualties and people rotating out. And so, when I went in, I just saw how ill-prepared they were, and how the morale was bad. Their skills were far from desirable. There are skills that are needed in a combat situation—people need to know how to patrol, people need to

know how to walk point, people need to know how to protect the flank and the rear. And there are certain practices thatâ€”you pick the best one in the situation, and you want people to be able to implement those. They were not able to do that.

Gene Gitelson

And so in the midst of a very intense and active time in terms of engagements, you wound up training them in the field. And justâ€”okay, this is how youâ€™re going to do a cloverleaf. A cloverleaf was a way ofâ€”like a cloverleaf in a highway, itâ€™s going out in front of the unit a certain number of meters, and then coming around on its flank, and then coming back. And so by doing that, youâ€™d be able to prevent beingâ€”as much as you canâ€”prevent being ambushed. But that took a certain amount of skillâ€”being able to go out and make sure you went out far enough and came back in so that you joined the unit at the end. And these were skills that people didnâ€™t have.

Interviewer

This was an individual maneuver. Doing a cloverleaf would be a maneuver taken by a couple of individuals?Â

Gene Gitelson

Thatâ€™s correct.Â

Interviewer

By a squad, or just aâ€”Â

Gene Gitelson

Yeah, or part of a squad. So these were basic things, and how to dig in at night, how to set up fields of fireâ€”how to do the basics of any of our professions.Â

Interviewer

How did they take itâ€”howâ€™d they take the retraining?Â

Gene Gitelson

With difficulty, because I had to have a very hard hand, because my sense was, â€œthese people are going to kill me.â€ It was like I was going to dieâ€”we were going to wind up killing each other.

Interviewer

Through incompetence.Â

Gene Gitelson

Yeah, through incompetence and lack of leadership. And it was really they didnâ€™t haveâ€”canâ€™t blame them. Troops will do what you train troops to do, and to support them, and so I had a couple of good NCOs. I had some that got into the service because they did something bad in civilian life, and where they were told, â€œEither go in the service or youâ€™ll go to jail.â€ So there was a mixed amount of skills. And I had to bring that, in the midst of all the stuff happening in the jungle, bring them to a level of competence. And that would mean, being very tough with people, not taking any crap.

Gene Gitelson

I remember one of my listening posts, outposts, that you put out at night so there is a prevention for attack or being able to see whatâ€™s going onâ€”one of the men fell asleep. Â Presumablyâ€”because he wouldnâ€™t answer his radio. And so the worst thing I wanted to do is to go out in front of my unitsâ€”which were well camouflaged at that pointâ€”go out, find the sucker, find himâ€”Iâ€™d follow the wire outâ€”and either he was dead or heâ€™d fallen asleep, because we were humping through the boonies for 16 hours and then digging in for a couple hours, sleeping for two hours, then getting up and doing the same thing. So I mean, yeah, in retrospect I can have sympathy, but not in that situation.

Gene Gitelson

So I remember going up to himâ€”he was asleep, which meant he couldâ€™ve been killed, and certainly we couldâ€™ve been attacked, â€™cause we were vulnerable. And I remember pulling out my .45 and cocking it and putting it to his head and saying something in Vietnameseâ€”something I learned in the bar, so Iâ€™m sure it wasnâ€™t appropriate to the situation, butâ€”and he woke up, scared shitless. And I donâ€™t believe he fell asleep again at any time on listening post, â€™cause he thought I was going to shoot him, and at that point, I could have.

Gene Gitelson

So there were some really tough decisions to make and really just being relentlessâ€”because in the end, it was going to keep us alive and keep each one of them alive. Being niceâ€”there are platoon leaders who would just say, â€œLook, itâ€™s been a tough day. Theyâ€™re exhausted. They havenâ€™t eaten. We justâ€”we wonâ€™t dig in tonight.â€ Well, thatâ€™s when you get hit. So regardless of sympathy and all that, thereâ€™s no sympathyâ€”you dig in. I donâ€™t care how tiredâ€”Iâ€™m tired. We dig in, and thatâ€™s an order, and thatâ€™s the way weâ€™re going to do it.

Gene Gitelson

So slowly but surely created a unit that then became the show platoon, â€™cause the general, General DePuy, visited our unit and was looking over our defensive positions one night in the field, and he wanted to know where the unit was. And I said, â€œYouâ€™re standing on itâ€”â€™cause we had camouflaged, dug in. And he was very impressed. And finally itâ€™s like, okayâ€”that was more towardsâ€”we were doing our job. I mean, people in combat bunch up. Itâ€™s a normal tendency of human beings when youâ€™re scared and youâ€™re living in uncertainty every second. So people would bunch up, even in triple canopyâ€”except for bamboo, â€™cause thatâ€™s relentlessâ€”you could see people bunching up. So the question is, how do youâ€”thatâ€™s dangerous, because one grenade, as they say, would get them all. Â It also reduces our effectiveness.

Gene Gitelson

So I would carry a whole bunch of rocks in my pocket, and then I would be throwing rocks, trying to hit their helmet or hit themâ€”spread out. Because if I started yelling, I might as well put a bullâ€™s eye on me. It was bad enough that I had the antenna of my radio telephone operator wiggling around, becauseâ€”Iâ€™d try to pick a short guy to keep the antenna from being too long, but obviously if you can take out a leader of the unit, whether itâ€™s an American unit or a VC unit, youâ€™re in much better shape. So the idea was not to create undue attention. But they learned, they became a really good unitâ€”a good, solid, high morale, effective unit. And it can be done, it can be done. It was just the kind of

circumstances, but youâ€™re never prepared for this stuff. Itâ€™s the way it is.A

Interviewer

Were you surprised at yourself with being able to exhibitâ€”that you had this leadership capability within you? I mean, this isnâ€™t, obviously, anything you knew about yourself back when you were at City College.Â

Gene Gitelson

No, it was a surpriseâ€”both as the logistics combat resupply officer as well as the platoon leader. Those situations called on a different part of me.

Interviewer

And what part was that, do you think?Â

Gene Gitelson

That I had leadership skills and abilities, and that I was smart, and I was dedicated, and that I cared about my people. And that wasâ€”you find out a lot about yourself in that situation, and it was a remarkable experience, probably the most significant experience of my life, in the midst of that chaos. The agony and, in many ways, the ecstasy of leadership in combat. Being close to death means being close to life. It means losing people, and then, at other times, just telling jokes and finding ways to relieve the stress.

Gene Gitelson

And being with incredibly good peopleâ€”both my platoon, my platoon NCOs, and my fellow officers. For the most part, they were an incredible group of people that I would choose to be in combat again with if I was. Weâ€™d all be a little older and heavier, and probably be more dangerous than anybody. But itâ€™s the kind of experience thatâ€™s unfortunate that we have wars, thatâ€™s where we find out about ourselves that way, and why it becomes in some ways an attractive thing in our society, on a very primitive level. But I felt I did my job. I made mistakes, and I did the best I could. But I can look in the mirror and see somebody who did the best job they could.

Gene Gitelson

And I didnâ€™t do anything that I regret greatly. I mean, there are always day-to-day decisionsâ€”go left, go rightâ€”but I didnâ€™t do anything that I felt morally in pain about. And Iâ€™m very sensitive morally, so that wouldâ€”I mean, the cumulative effect of war did weigh on me for a long, long time, but it wasnâ€™t because of the decisions I made. I was given an opportunity, I was tested, and I think I acquitted myself wellâ€”and so did a lot of other people around me.Â

Interviewer

What was the moodâ€”now your experience with the rifle platoon was in â€™66-?Â

Gene Gitelson

â€™67.Â

Interviewer

â€™67. Once again, was the mood among the troops changing at that point, or were you still fairly optimistic about the progress of the war?Â

Gene Gitelson

Well, I think that, Iâ€™m trying to remember when the Paris Peace Talksâ€™itâ€™s hard for me to distinguish what happened when I was there, politicallyâ€™and certainly, we knew about the demonstrations back home, and that it wasnâ€™t simple, it was a very complicated issue. For the period of time that I was there, I didnâ€™t notice anyâ€™I think we each would have questions about the war, but we didnâ€™t spend time talking about it.

Gene Gitelson

That was somebody elseâ€™s job, and we had a moral obligation, but our job was to take care of our people. Whether it was ludicrous to think that we were fighting communism and the Red Horde is irrelevant. War is personalâ€™they killed your buddies, you want to kill them. You want to keepâ€™the prime directive is keeping your people alive while you meet the mission. And those two are always juxtaposed, and sometimes itâ€™s the mission is more, but most of the time itâ€™s taking care of your people and doing the best you can in a situation that is uncertain and crazy.

Interviewer

Vietnam was a war unlike earlier wars, and that was not a war about seizing territory and holding territory. Certainly, in the popular imagination, itâ€™s a war more of body counts andâ€™

Gene Gitelson

Right.Â

Interviewer

â€™more of attrition. Do you have any thoughts about that, or did you have any thoughts about that at the time, about the fact that youâ€™re going in, taking, patrolling territory, then leaving it almost immediately?Â

Gene Gitelson

Yeah, it was like thereâ€™s something fundamentally wrong about paying for the same ground twice, and yet we did that all the time, because the purpose was not to hold territory but to engage the enemy. And yet we would find ourselves clearing an area and then, establishing ourselves for a little while, and then leaving it, and then the enemy takes it over, and the village might be our friends during the day but not during the night. Yeah.

Gene Gitelson

But it was a different war, and I think that affected our effectiveness, because we were not clear about what the objective was. Were we trying to build a civil society, protect a government that was not democratic, and yet we presume to be saving the world for democracy? But tactics had been discussed by people who knew more, who know more, than I do, but my opinion is that we werenâ€™t clear about our objectives. And if we wanted to win the hearts and minds of people, we didnâ€™t go about itâ€™you canâ€™t bomb people into wanting you to be there. And yet, a lot of South Vietnamese wanted us to be there. They had made a commitment, we left a lot of people when we left. The tactics that we used on my level, which was the small unit level, were the ones that tended to

work, but we had massive firepower and we tended to use it. Butâ€”

Interviewer

Did you see a lot of civilian casualties?

Gene Gitelson

There were casualties.Â Â A lot of times it was not seen.Â Â When you have a free fire zoneâ€”which meant that you could fire, the areaâ€™s been supposedly cleared of friendliesâ€”but friendlies didnâ€™t always get the word.Â Â And so, Iâ€™m sure that the fire we put inâ€”since weâ€™re in dense jungle most of the time, we didnâ€™t see a hell of a lot.Â Â We could see the bullets coming at us, the tracers, they could see our tracers.

Gene Gitelson

So it was in, with exceptions, an anonymous kind of war.Â Â Youâ€™d be sending in artillery against fire that came from an area, youâ€™d be firing backâ€”but you wouldnâ€™t necessarily see anybody.Â Â There were units that had close engagements in hand-to-hand combatâ€”that was not, that didnâ€™t happen that often in my battalion.Â Â We tended to be heavy, very heavy-handed, as we moved around.Â Â Everybodyâ€™it was a joke about camouflage.Â Â And you could always tell an American unitâ€™itâ€™s noisy.Â Â And so we would walk artillery in front of us.Â Â As we moved, the artillery would move in front of us.Â Â So people knew.

Gene Gitelson

And, yeah, there were secret operations, and weâ€™d go into areas to continuallyÂ try to find the South Vietnamese Viet Cong Headquarters called COSVN, C-O-S-V-N.Â Â We never found it.Â Â Only the intelligence people would make up these things and say, â€œOh, theyâ€™re there.â€Â Â They were never there.Â Â The only thing weâ€™d find there is aÂ mama sanÂ selling Coca Cola, meeting us at supposedly a very kind of secret operation.Â Â But she knew where we were going, and we would then buy Coca-Cola from her.Â Â I mean, it has absurditiesâ€”every war does.Â Â And that war had a lot of absurdities.

Interviewer

Was there much emphasis on body counts?Â Â I mean, later in the war, the body count became a very political issue, if I remember, if I know my history.

Gene Gitelson

Oh, body counts were always seen to be the measure of success, and that a unit was considered effective if it produced a highÂ body count.Â Â And we would give estimates.Â Â I remember the colonel looking down part of a tunnel complex after we did the bombing and sent in tunnel ratsâ€”I meanâ€”

Interviewer

This was whereâ€”Iâ€™m sorryâ€”inâ€”

Gene Gitelson

This would be on one of the operations, I think Junction City I or II, near the Cambodian border.Â Â And he would say, â€œWell, 85.â€Â Â But itâ€™s sort of, what were the things

that people at Headquarters in Saigon wanted? A A Their measure wasâ€”I mean, how many times can you kill the same person? A A And I donâ€™t see how they couldâ€™ve been accurate, but they were accurate, yes. A A After an engagement, youâ€™d count the number of dead bodies. A A Whether peopleâ€™ added to that number was always suspect. A A But since it wasnâ€™tâ€”as you mentionedâ€”it wasnâ€™t territory, it was body count. A A Engage and kill the enemy.

Gene Gitelson

And whether they were friendlies, whether theyâ€™ if the VC was not dressed in their appropriate uniform, then everybody dressed as civilians, as it is in Afghanistan and Iraq now. A A So itâ€™s not science. A A Itâ€™s just people looking, and they want to produce a number that justifies the casualties that we had on our side. A A I think it was sort of an understandingâ€”I donâ€™t know if it was something that people did so consciously. A A Iâ€™m sure there were people who inflated body counts, A Iâ€™m sure of that. A A But I think people were just trying to guess, and sort of say that things were effective and we were able to kill and capture so many enemy.

Gene Gitelson

I donâ€™t know any other way, because the political objectives werenâ€™t clear. A A How do you reduce the number of attacks on villages, on ourselvesâ€”thatâ€™s one measure. A A But the measures of success were not very clear. A A And I think itâ€™s similar to what we found in Iraq and Afghanistan. A A But Vietnam was its own world.

A Fortuitous Trip to Saigon
Interviewer

Did you get into Saigon at all during your time in country?

Gene Gitelson

Well, I did when I was running the convoys, the Red Balls, with several hundred trucks, and so would go into Saigon and would have a chance to sort of take in a little bit of the city as I was picking up supplies or looking for certain specialized equipment. And so I would wind up going to the air base, and I remember walking in one time, and I was filthy and cut and dirty. And I stopped in to get a couple of beers for me and my driver, and I was looked at by everybody in their prim uniforms. The Air Force and Army from Headquarters is like, â€œWhat are you doing here?â€ I mean, it was, I had my weapon, and I thought for a moment that this would be a timeâ€”but I didnâ€™t. But it was clearly, â€œYouâ€™re one of these Infantrymen, grunts from the field.â€

Gene Gitelson

But I did. I remember going, stopping and shopping and picking up supplies, and then going through Saigon to get back, â€”cause we were in driving distanceâ€”a couple hours of Saigonâ€”so it gave me a chance to just see a little bit ofâ€”

Interviewer

You never got leave in Saigon or anything like that.

Gene Gitelson

No. A No, I neverâ€”there were times I couldâ€™ve taken some time to go to the Bob Hope show or religious services, but never did â€”cause I didnâ€™t want to leave the troops.

A I just felt that that wasn't what one does, what I would do.

Interviewer

Did you get any leave during that time? Did you get any leave at all?

Gene Gitelson

Yeah, I took R&R—it was like in my 11th month—and went to Hong Kong. And that was strange, and just sort of a weird experience.

Interviewer

How so?

Gene Gitelson

Well, it was going into this big city, and everybody was buying things. I think I spent \$2,000 in four days on suits and stereo equipment and presents and watches. And it was nice to have a long day, but then the Chinese said, "Cut off the water supply every other day," and they were having an argument with Hong Kong with who was which was autonomous at that point. So there would be water, there wouldn't be water. But it was—the whole thing was surreal in many ways—Vietnam and Hong Kong—but I was glad to get away for a couple days. It was a long 11 months without any leave.

Interviewer

And you let us talk a little bit about here your departure from Vietnam. When did you leave Vietnam, when did you give up the rifle platoon?

Gene Gitelson

I turned over the rifle platoon on the beginning of—no, the 15th of August. I was supposed to—

Interviewer

1967.

Gene Gitelson

Seven, yeah, I was supposed to leave on the 30th of August, and then I found out a couple of days before the 15th that the time that I'd spent in Panama, which was considered overseas time, was counted towards my tour, which was a big surprise. So I had to—I left two weeks earlier. Although it was a difficult—the battalion was going out to the field, and it made sense for me to turn over my platoon to a guy who was from Queens, New York, and to go back to Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa to get processed out.

Gene Gitelson

And supposed to stay over that night. It was quiet in the base camp, most of the troops were out in the field, and we had the basic support staff. And then one of my buddies, who came over about the same time I did and got that other position as medical support platoon leader before he went to the field with me as well as a rifle platoon leader, turned over his platoon, and he said, "Well, why don't we—he had a lot of contacts at

the 3rd Surgical Hospital in Saigon”so he said, “Why don’t we get out?
“There’s nothing for us to do here, and we’ll just get out and leave the field a day earlier, and just hang out for a day or so in Saigon.” So I said, “Okay.” So we left on a chopper, and we went to stay over at one of the hospitals that he knew a lot of doctors. And that night, the base camp was rocketed for the first time, and a number of people who were due to leave with us to go home were killed.

Interviewer

Wow.

Gene Gitelson

As well as people from the motor pool and from support and [battalion] headquarters, so

Interviewer

Was that fairly rare”this is a base camp, right”to be rocketed?

Gene Gitelson

Well, base camps got mortared and rocketed, and we did, but not very often, “cause, one, we weren’t there very often, so we were out in the field. But we had never been hit with rockets or mortars like that before, and if I had stayed, I might’ve been killed. So that morning when I woke up, my buddy said, “There’s a lot of activity, the base camp got hit.” I said, “What do you mean?” And so we found out that a number of people were killed. And the last thing I did, Mark, before getting on the plane, was go to the morgue to identify with him some of the soldiers who were killed that night. And then I got on the plane with a commercial airline, with stewardesses, and”

Interviewer

Was this at Tan Son Nhut, you mean?

Gene Gitelson

Yeah”and watched something like Gidget Goes to Rome, the movie. But I remember going to the morgue, and that I felt like walking past that bush when I first went to the field and narrowly missing getting killed, then narrowly missed getting killed at the base camp because I left, had an opportunity to leave one day earlier. And sort of, hadn’t thought about the juxtaposition of those two”beginning in the field and ending in the field”events. And I was lucky, I was very lucky. Things went off, things happened. I managed to get out of there without getting killed or wounded, and that was rare. A first lieutenant is not supposed to have that long a longevity. It makes one feel grateful, and at the same time, it’s whether I almost died that stays with me, rather than just I survived.

Interviewer

Once again, it was a very individual journey. You come into the country alone, and you leave the country alone. It was a very”you said there was no cohesion.

Gene Gitelson

No. It wasn’t units. Every week, or every two weeks, one person out of my unit”whether it was the support platoon or Charlie-1” would be leaving. Somebody

brand new would be coming in. A There would have to be some mentoring, coached by somebody else”and hopefully they didn’t get killed or wind up killing us because of their lack of experience. A So getting that coherence, getting that level of combat readiness, was very challenging. A

Gene Gitelson

The experience of the young men and women who are going to Iraq and Afghanistan is very different because the units stay together, and I don’t know what that would be like. A In some ways, it’s very hard for them, because some of them have to leave”get wounded and leave”and then they’re troubled by the fact they’re leaving their buddies behind. A I was concerned about leaving my men behind. A I felt I was very close to them and to my fellow platoon leaders and company commanders. A But I knew it was my time to go.

From a Tough Return to Pioneering Leadership
Interviewer

What was it like coming back to the States?

Gene Gitelson

Surreal. The environment”I came back to New York City, and my folks were glad that I was home. But we didn’t have any way to communicate, and I shut down. There was nobody to talk to in the neighborhood. People say, “I hadn’t seen you for a year.” Fortunately, I had a few months of duty to finish up my commitment at Fort Dix and wound up training people in Basic Training, specifically in Advanced Individual Training in night operations. And so I was able to give everything I could, based on my knowledge. And people regarded me highly as a training officer and really knew that I had real experience. So I tried to””cause they were all going to Vietnam”so I tried to share and train and be rigorous about what I knew, and to give them every insight and everything I could offer at that time.

Gene Gitelson

But it was”I think that was, from a mental health point of view, that was probably the healthy transition, to have that time at Dix. Because coming back as an individual is very weird. I came to Dix, and there were Vietnam vets there, and some people from my unit there, but it was still”nobody talked about it, nobody wanted to talk about the war. We were in the environment of pre-Tet, anti-war demonstrations. Was the war right, was it wrong? They were struggling with that.A

Interviewer

And certainly, public opposition at home to the war was building in late ’67 when you came back.

Gene Gitelson

Yep. And I had to struggle with that for many, many years”one, being in the constant buzz of the media, and then sitting at night and watching the news as an observer, but having been a participant. And then the war changing, and hearing about fragging, and hearing about drugs, and hearing about racial conflict. I didn’t have a framework for dealing with that. It was changing. The absurdity of dealing with the shape of the negotiating table in Paris, and them wondering, like, was it worth it? I was there, and it felt

like it was worth it—that I had a mission, it was clear, and we did the best we could. But as time went on, it became absurd. There was nothing to feel good about, to have a sense of mission about. I was lucky that I was there at the early part of the war.

Interviewer

Did you later—did your own thinking later—did your thinking change so much that you actually actively opposed the war or marched against the war after you came back?Â

Gene Gitelson

Well, after a while, I just felt that it was enough, and it took a long time for me to come through a very personal passage. And so I started to go to meetings of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, the group that Kerry was, Senator Kerry was, a leader in. I felt I needed to take a position, but I never felt comfortable with that position, or to be with those vets who were so—it was beyond anti-war in some, certainly in the group in New York, it was like anti-American, it was anti-government, it was anti-capitalist, it was anti. And I understood it from their own perspective, they having served later than I did, but I couldn't buy the whole thing, and I always felt between the two opposing sides.

Gene Gitelson

There was very little middle ground for any of us. People didn't talk, didn't try to dialogue—you were either for or against the war. People were surprised that when I was back in the world and working, that I had gone to Vietnam. Â And they wanted to know, “Did you get drafted?” And I said, “No, I had signed up for ROTC.” And “Why didn't I go to Canada?”—and I would never think of going to Canada, it was not on the radar screen.Â

Interviewer

Did you ever consider going—making the military a career?Â

Gene Gitelson

Well, I was encouraged to do it—I had a good war record. And I remember my brigade commander at Fort Dix giving me a big pitch about staying in, and that if I stayed in another year, I would've made captain. But then I would've gone back to Vietnam, and I just felt that that was not something I wanted to do. But he really pressed hard about me staying in the military. I just felt that I didn't want my life to be about that.

Gene Gitelson

Sometimes I think it would've been good to have stayed in the Reserves, but I needed to make a break from that. And I think I would've had a good military career, if I was alive, because people in my time period probably would've gone back two or three times, and it just was enough. I was lucky enough to get out and to be able to get most of my people out. It just wasn't something—I respect those who stayed in. It was a tough time in the Army for people to stay in. I have a great respect for military people. I work with a lot of military people at the UN from different countries, and I enjoy being with them, and I understand they respect me for my combat experience.

Interviewer

Talk a little bit about your post-Vietnam career because it's very interesting. Explain to me the work—you've been working with the UN for some years, right?

Gene Gitelson

Right, but before that, I had a number of different careers, and I had gone intoâ€”when I came back, it was pretty easy to get a job as a military officer, given the draft and everybodyâ€”there was a shortage of men. So I worked for Seagramâ€™s for 18 months as a market research supervisor and staff consultantâ€”just found that to be very isolating. I wound up traveling during the week, and it was almost like I was back in Vietnam changing my night position, except this time it was hotels. And in some ways it has some interesting existential parallels.

Gene Gitelson

But then I wanted to do something that had more of an impact on society, and went and worked in the Lower East Side and founded a school called The University of the Streets, which was for dropouts, and job training, and that wasâ€”I grew my hair long, and all kinds of sort of semi-hippie, never quite that way, but sometimes playing the part. And then went back to business, worked for Chase, got an MBA, and then was askedâ€”There was a turning point in my life when I hadnâ€™t spoken about the war for 15 yearsâ€”wasnâ€™t on my resume. It was something that just brought up a lot of angst for me, and a lot of criticismâ€”no understanding, no conversations. The walls wereâ€”I was part, I think it was a conspiracy by all of us not to talk. Wasnâ€™t just nobody was interested. It really takes a safe place, like youâ€™ve created here, that I go into my vet group with other combat leaders to talk about.

Gene Gitelson

And so I wound up running into other people who were successful in the world of business, as I wasâ€”reasonably soâ€”who were lawyers, investment bankers. And we were all Vietnam vets. And we sort of looked at each other, â€”cause the Vietnam vet that existed in society was the guy with jungle fatigues who was living on the street, who had taken off of McDonaldâ€™s, even though he wasnâ€™t a vet â€”but everybody had this negative stereotype, and I felt I was the only person in New York City that wore a suit who was a Vietnam vet. I mean, I felt that way.

Gene Gitelson

There was just this sense of loneliness and isolation, and I wasnâ€™t in the service so I would have other people to talk toâ€”I was in New York City, which was a hotbed of anti-war. So there wasnâ€™tâ€”I know there were a lot of people like me, but nobody talked. People I worked with at the bank who were Vietnam vets didnâ€™t talk, so I didnâ€™t even know who they were, and they didnâ€™t know me.

Gene Gitelson

And so, when we met each other, it was quite an awakening and a validation, because we werenâ€™t the stereotypical vets. We were people who were trying to make up for lost time, and we also said we wanted to see if there were ways we could help each other as a network, just like the people at Harvard had their network. Well, we had this Vietnam combat group. We didnâ€™t know quite what to do with it, and then the White House under President Reagan was starting a program to be based on helping vets get jobs, that would be based on vets helping vets.

Gene Gitelson

And so we found ourselvesâ€”this sort of informal group of bankers and lawyers and wrestling coach and postal guyâ€”wound up being the receiver of funds from the White House to start this outreach program for Vietnam vets, but from a very positive, not negative, point of view; not an anti-war point of viewâ€”using business skills. And so I became the Executive Director, they became the Board of Directors.

Interviewer

What was the name of the group?

Gene Gitelson

It was called the New York Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program (VVLV). And there were VVLVs set up, ultimately, in 49 other cities around the country. We were the largest, and I think people would accept, the most successful, longest-serving program that helped 5,000 vets get jobs, get career assistance. And wound up putting it in Wall Street in Drexel Burnham Lambert, they gave us spaceâ€”one room, with myself and six volunteers who were like my platoonâ€”in this case, troubled vets from all different parts of the service. But we pulled together a program that became a national and international model.Â

Gene Gitelson

And had our own radio program talking about the Vietnam experience, and I was the host, and that was a good experience, and had 30 staff. And we dealt with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorderâ€”but mostly around helping people get jobs in the most successful, positive, respectful way. We didnâ€™t deal with who won or lost the war. We didnâ€™t deal with any of the political issues. We just dealt with helping people get jobsâ€”getting jobs that were not security guard jobs, but jobs befitting the experience that we had. And I think it helped me understand my own experience, after putting it on the shelf for 15 years. So that was supposed to be two years of grant work, and wound up doing it for 14 years.

Interviewer

Full-time job?Â

Gene Gitelson

Full-time jobâ€”30 staff, 25,000 square feet in Wall Street, and building business, building careers for vets, dealing with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Interviewer

Did you have any Post-Traumatic Stress?Â

Gene Gitelson

Oh, yeah. Â Yeah. Â I donâ€™t think I realized it. Â I think thatâ€™s why they call it â€œdelayed.â€ Â Yeah, I think when I came back, whether or not the reception was welcoming or not, I think since I had to learn a lot about PTSD, not only running the program, but my own experience as I later had to deal with it, was understanding that war does things to people. Â And itâ€™s an abnormal experience that affects people in a predictable wayâ€”that you canâ€™t go through something like that without having an aftereffect.

Interviewer

How did it affect you?

Gene Gitelson

I think it closed down my feelings. Â Difficulty relating with other people. Â I did well in business â€™cause it was like the responsibilities of being a platoon leader. Â Job to do, do it. Â So I was successful in whatever I took on to do. Â But inside, remained a very sensitive issue that I didnâ€™t deal with, and I didnâ€™t have a way to deal with it. Â I think it helped running the veteransâ€™ program, but there I was official capacity, sort of like Executive Director/Presidentâ€™ was like being a platoon leader of a mixed Vietnam vet and non-vet staff.

Gene Gitelson

And I think only later did I start to see the impact it had on me, so that the residual anger, the disconnection in many ways, being able to operate effectively out in the world but being closed emotionally in many ways. Â And I had a long-term relationship, married for 26 years before that ended, so I was capable of having a relationship. Â

Gene Gitelson

But there were a lot of things that were not dealt with from the war. Â Not justâ€™and certainly coming home, there were issues, but just being in the violence, being in that thing. Â Seeing life, seeing death. Â And I realized that it just was getting to an explosion point, and I just felt that I needed to deal with it, rather than be the Vietnam vet leader, that I had to be my own leader, and I had to take care of my own experience.

Interviewer

And how did you deal, how did you get through that?

Gene Gitelson

Well, one of the things was tapping into the resources of the Vet Center program. Â I had worked with all of themâ€™we had started in the Vet Center. Â These were all my professional contacts, and going into a Vet Center was like admitting that I had to deal with something. Â It wasnâ€™t like I was this leader, and I was on television, or all this stuff. Â It was like, I had to walk in there to be a client, and to beâ€™rather than being arrogant and somehow I was better, and I had all the trappings of success, and I knew a lot about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and I gave lectures in Europe and all that. Â

Gene Gitelson

And as my great therapist said to me, â€œYouâ€™re okay from the shoulders upâ€™â€ meaning I had greatâ€™I was quite eloquent about Post-Traumatic Stress, how it affected me, but I hadnâ€™t felt it, I hadnâ€™t experienced it. Â And so, with her great help, and a technique called the EMDRâ€™which is reliving some of the events to experience it and then to be able to process it more logically, but if theyâ€™re not experienced, then they sort of sit there waiting to get kicked off. Â I mean, I slept okay, I didnâ€™t have nightmares. Â I was just sort of numb in many waysâ€™part of me was not alive. Â And it cost me. Â It cost me in terms of my career and relationships. Â Just living a life, a full life, living fully.

Gene Gitelson

And dealing with it and experiencing it in a safe environment really gave me the

opportunity to open myself up and to a lot of people fear it, and I feared dealing with it, because sometimes the fear is greater than the reality. But it was it really opened me up to being who I am, and being more of who I am, and not carrying this albatross around with me, and that it was okay. I mean, it was a normal reaction to an abnormal human experience or a normal experience, who knows with wars? And so it gave me the opportunity to really get to know myself better, to be able to be more alive, and to be closer to people. And also, most importantly, to be able to express my leadership even more, and to own my own skills and own who I want, and to go for it.

Gene Gitelson

I think the work with the UN, which came after the Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program days, and after going back to business for a while the UN and the consulting I do with peacekeeping missions is a perfect I just want to say, there's a sense of coming home and being able to make a difference in the world, and it's about peacekeeping, not war-making. And yet it's working with people who spend years in a peacekeeping mission in the Congo or in Afghanistan or in Ethiopia or other places of post-conflict being able to work with military, being able to work with police.

Peacekeeping, Management, and Giving Back
Interviewer

Explain, if you could, just sort of in a capsule, exactly what it is you do with the UN and some of the peacekeeping missions you've been involved with, just so

Gene Gitelson

Just because a lot of people don't know about it, one of the largest departments in the United Nations is the Department of Peacekeeping. And it was never it actually is not part of the UN Charter. It was not known the first one was in 1948 in Jerusalem and in Sinai too so to end the war at that point when Israel became independent and there was a cease-fire.

Gene Gitelson

So troops of different nations contribute units to maintain the separation between the armies. And it's funded by the Security Council and then by the member states. There's no UN Army so you'll get a company from Poland, you'll get a group of Brits, you get Irish, you'll get Nepalese, and all them have to sort of fit together with their different radios and munitions. And then there's a support staff of police, because often in these missions there's no security, rule of law, in post-conflict situations. And then there's military. So you have civilians, military, and police and it's an incredible conjunction.

Gene Gitelson

It's the most challenging in terms of dealing with it from a management consulting perspective of how people can work together across those boundaries. How do you help people who do political work be able to establish goals and objectives? How do they manage because there are a lot of experts, but very few people who are good at management. And my job is to help them with management and leadership.

Interviewer

So you're basically a consultant to the UN, to these UN's

Gene Gitelson

Peacekeeping missions. So I've been in Afghanistan three times, and I've been in the Congo. I've been in 16 different peacekeeping missions, a lot in Africa and Asia. And I find it to be

Interviewer

And sort of relying upon, sort of, your logistic experience, I assume, among other things.

Gene Gitelson

Well, I don't do much logistics. But I work with logisticians there who do that, and they're former military, so there is a certain bond. But most of it is dealing with how do people manage a very complex organization. And so the issues that I consult with here in the States, on issues of leadership, communication, management are in many ways not that different. Except it's more complex because where else could you be in a situation where you're dealing with generals and police chiefs from around the world, and their units, and they don't have full operational control of their units, the logistics are handled by the UN administrative side so a general has to go to a secretary sometimes to get permission to fly his helicopter. It's very challenging, and yet it's very exciting for me. And there is something about the danger that has a familiarity.

Interviewer

And you go on these missions for months at a time?

Gene Gitelson

Often two to three weeks. I don't want to be away more than three weeks, so I manage two to three weeks in working with them and getting to know the managers, and working with the people from 150 different cultures among two or three thousand people and managers, who have to manage like anybody else in the world. There's finance, there's procurement, there's air operations, movement control, personnel, police operations, occasionally dealing with the military.

Gene Gitelson

But most of it is really the challenges of management and leadership. How do you recruit and retain good people in a situation like that, where people are away from their home and it's somewhat dangerous? People aren't prepared. The fact is, I've been in combat, and a lot of times consultants won't go to Afghanistan because it's not I go, I'm mindful of it. I'm not dumb, but I'm also not, don't sit in, hiding out. Things can happen at any time, and things have happened, and there are hotels I've been in that got bombed and guesthouses that I've been in got bombed. Fortunately, I was not there.

Interviewer

This was in Afghanistan?

Gene Gitelson

Yeah. I was not there at the time, so my sense of timing has done me well.

Interviewer

Have you been to Iraq, too?Â

Gene Gitelson

No, I havenâ€™t, I’d like to. I’d like to go there. I may go to Kuwait in the next couple of months.

Interviewer

Do any of these conflicts you’ve been toâ€”do any of them remind you of Vietnam in any way?Â

Gene Gitelson

No, they’re all so different. And yet, of course, Afghanistanâ€”I look at it, and I meet American troops, and I see a young lieutenant, meet and say hello to a young lieutenant at the PX that the ISAF force has, and he’s been on his third tour, fourth tour. Beyond my understandingâ€”I honor him and I appreciate what he’s doing, and they’re incredible troops. But I don’t know how to take that in. I really feel they’ve got a tough job. I went, came home, and dealt with moving on in my life. They go, they come, they go back, they come backâ€”back and forth.

Gene Gitelson

But there is something about it, not only because it’s peacekeeping, so I have a chance to make a little difference in a big, different situation. And being around the military and seeing the troops and the soldiers, and stopping and looking at the Gurkha Guards who guard one of the bases in Afghanistan where the UN is, and see him, sort of, with his sand bag and his machine gun up on the top near the water tower, and go, “Oh, okay.” And hearing bullets fire in the distance, and so I know it’s not coming in, and then finding out it’s the Afghan Army doing night training, and hopefully they aim in the right direction.

Gene Gitelson

But some of these things are very familiar. I’ve been in helicopters in Afghanistanâ€”different, Russian helicoptersâ€”over the mountains, and sometimes I think how different it is, how stark it is, the desert, as opposed to the jungle. So helicopters always have that connection for me, whether it’s a civilian helicopter I hear overheadâ€”helicopters always mean Vietnam. And they generally mean safety, “cause we had them and they didn’t. So they are alive for me in a way that planes aren’t.

Gene Gitelson

But I’ve been able to take some of what I’ve learned about myself and the work that I was able to do to help other vets. And then I found myself in the situation being asked to, by the American Red Cross, to start a program to help job assistance for the widows and orphans and the displaced workers from the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. So I wound up, while I was doing UN peacekeeping duties, also running a program where I work with 250-300 family members and people who lost their jobs who just barely got out of the towers.

Gene Gitelson

And people felt very comfortable with me because I was very open about my experience in

Vietnam. And even though my experience in Vietnam is very different from the Trade Towers, they felt very comfortable. And even though I didn't do the counseling I would have counselors that I could send them to but we reached a level of connection that was extremely a gift that they gave to me, as hopefully I was able to give back to them.

“We Each Have a Purpose in Life”
Interviewer

Have you ever reflected upon the fact that for a guy who grew up in the Bronx—a good part of the Bronx—you’ve lived a life since then surrounded by a lot of violence.

Gene Gitelson

Well—

Interviewer

I’m just—

Gene Gitelson

Yeah, there were periods when, yeah, I worked at Chase and I worked at Seagram’s, which was hardly, yeah. But those were numbing times in many ways, where part of me was not alive. I mean, I did a good job, got promotions, but I didn’t feel I was really engaged in. I think all we can do is give from our own experience. And, for whatever reasons, life gave me the experience of being a Vietnam combat platoon leader and logistics officer, and coming home alive, that I have a responsibility. I also have an insight and a knowledge about it to be able to use it, rather than just put it in a file cabinet.

Gene Gitelson

But it’s interesting, what you’re saying, is that there is—I work with gang kids in the South Bronx at The University of the Streets, and I don’t want to be somebody that goes into a peacekeeping mission and stays there for several years. I’ve done my thing in that. But as a consultant, to be a bridge, to be able to bring knowledge and insight in from some other experiences, that works for me. But it is a very interesting statement on your part, Mark, maybe we should switch places. But it is—it’s—

Interviewer

You don’t strike me as being a warrior type, and yet you have this, you spent a lot of time in some very violent situations.

Gene Gitelson

Yeah, and there is, maybe there is something about Vietnam that keeps needing to be rediscovered about myself, and also giving meaning to that violent period. And it’s better to build than destroy, and peacekeeping missions—even though they are hard to measure the success of—it gives me a sense that I’m making a difference. And being with people who understand what the difference between life and death is. And I think that’s what it really is. Once one is part of that world where life and death move very quickly back and forth, you change forever. And you can suppress all that stuff and sort of say—and I understand, and for some people, it made a lot of sense to say, “That was then, this is now, and there’s no relationship.” But for me, I can’t—these were all parts of me.

Gene Gitelson

And maybe when I go out there each time to a peacekeeping mission, I'm feeling like I'm healing something. I'm doing something that produces, hopefully, in some small way, a little bit of good. I don't have any pretensions about making a big impact, but I want to make an impact.

Interviewer

Have you kept up with any of your former comrades in arms from Vietnam?

Gene Gitelson

Very, very few because part of it was the isolation. At the same time, I've chosen some of that isolation, because I don't go to reunions. There are reunions for the 1st Infantry Division, and then there's a reunion for the 1st of the 28th Infantry. I went to some of them but didn't feel that I could relate. A lot of it was full-time military officers, and then sort of disgruntled vets, which is unfair, but sort of. And that's why I'm in the group at the Veterans Center, which is the first group they've ever had for combat officers. So it's those of us who served in Vietnam and Iraq who talk about our experiences as officers and what the difference is. And to talk about it with enlisted men is not the same experience because there was a cultural, a class difference.

Interviewer

And what's the different between the experience of the officers in Vietnam and the experience of the officers who are coming out of Iraq?

Gene Gitelson

The scenery is different, not the experience. When we talk about what it's like to be responsible, to be accountable, to send men into harm's way now men and women into harm's way I think we found that our experiences and our homecomings are not that different. And yet, we all are culturally different, we've had different lives, but the experiences. And it's been a wonderful healing for me, and an opportunity to appreciate the value of leadership, and that being a combat platoon leader in Vietnam is really an extraordinary experience to have in life with all that brings with it, good and bad and uncertain. But for many years I denied that experience, because I couldn't figure out the politics from my own experience, the lack of recognition when I came back, and not knowing what was right and wrong, all that.

Gene Gitelson

I do know now that that experience of being a platoon leader is real, and I can take from that, and the question is, what does one do in life with those experiences that we have? We need to learn from them, and I'm hoping that what we're doing with this wonderful project, Mark, that may serve other people, is to each of us, of the 40 or 50 that you'll bring into this project, have an opportunity to share their point of view and their particular slice of a very complex thing so that people can understand how individual it is. And to try to find meaning in that service to the country is a wonderful thing.

Gene Gitelson

Hopefully the wars are thought out, and we don't do them precipitously, we have clear objectives. There's learning from that experience. But that under those circumstances, men and women serve their country and served out of leadership and loyalty, and were

able to make a difference. And I think as we pause, weâ€™ll be part of this experience. And unfortunately, in our lifetime and thereafter, is that we learn from them, and that we also tap into what weâ€™ve learned in that experience so that we can continue to serve others and so that it gets integrated and that we bring our wisdom and that we make a difference.

Gene Gitelson

And I think one of the things that I noticed about my colleagues and fellow combatants in Vietnam, of the guys that were having the most difficult time, that were homeless, is that they still wanted to serve, Mark. Even though their service wasnâ€™t fully appreciated by the society that sent them off to war, every single one of them still had room for service to the country. They didnâ€™t lose that. Â They still had that, and that is a remarkable statement about the people who serve and put themselves in harmâ€™s way.

Interviewer

One last question for youâ€™’maybe one last questionâ€™’itâ€™s about the nature of leadership, â€™cause a lot of our conversation for the past two hours has been about leadership. And clearly you see yourself as a leader and have been a leader. And I guess my question is about the nature of leadership. Do you thinkâ€™’clearly, leadership can be taught, aspects of leadership can be taught. But ultimately, do you think the fact that you discovered this identity of yourself as a leaderâ€™’whether itâ€™s a small group in the platoon in Vietnam or with the outreach group that you foundedâ€™’is ultimately leadership something thatâ€™s innate, and that must be developedâ€™’is it something that we just discover within ourselves, or is it something that can be taught?Â

Gene Gitelson

Well, I think thatâ€™s an age-old debate. I think there are things within each one of us that have been, that are part of our make-up. That it goes to the philosophical side ofâ€™’that we each have a purpose in life. I believe that, and itâ€™s our job to discover that purpose as we live our lives, and to have a vision about what we want our life to mean, â€™cause thereâ€™s only one of me, thereâ€™s only one of you, in this whole world. So thereâ€™s a reason for what weâ€™re doingâ€™’itâ€™s not all accidental. It may look accidental, but itâ€™s not. Some of us have whatever, whether itâ€™s something innate, or something developed, or something that really had a chance to come forth because of the nature of the circumstanceâ€™’Vietnam and other challenges that I had in my life in addition to Vietnam. And then we haveâ€™’if the circumstance is rightâ€™’we have a chance to express that leadership.

Gene Gitelson

When I talk to managers, new managers, in the UN and other places, I believe that leadership is about, first, the ability to articulate a powerful and inspiring visionâ€™’whether itâ€™s for a platoon that we can do this, we can be the best, and we will be the best. It takes somebody to make that statement and to believe in itâ€™’not just some vision on a plastic card, a corporate vision. It has to be believed. And then I think what that leader does is also inspire the people that theyâ€™re leading to make that vision their own, so itâ€™s not somebody thatâ€™s a charismatic leader and says, â€™œFollow me,â€™ but people incorporate that vision that they want to be part of the best organizationâ€™’the best platoon, the best delivery program for Vietnam vets. And then a leader empowers, and if one can do that, or enables other people to reach a level of excellence, to really go for it, and to support the hell out of them, and do it.Â

Gene Gitelson

And I think thatâ€™sâ€”there are many definitions of leadership, thatâ€™s one that I found that resonates with me. And Iâ€™ve seen it happen. And I think we donâ€™t have an excess of leadership in our society. And I thinkâ€”and it doesnâ€™t have to be that it comes with rank or a corporate title. Iâ€™ve seen people who were receptionists in my organization, individual soldiers, who could come from that leadership. Rank and leadership, command and leadershipâ€”I found that out very early on and I thought I was a hot shit second lieutenant who could command people to do things. And that didnâ€™t work. People will follow youâ€”I mean, why would anybody follow you into harmâ€™s way across a rice paddy or up a hill? You donâ€™t manage people up a hillâ€”you lead them up a hill.Â

Interviewer

But you also support them up a hill is what I hear you saying.Â

Gene Gitelson

Thatâ€™s right, yeah. Itâ€™s not about meâ€”itâ€™s about them, itâ€™s about the vision, itâ€™s about the mission. And, yeah, you support them. You make sure that they have the food, they have what they need, and you give them whatever you can toâ€”and you let them know that they are supported, that you have their back. Then youâ€™ve got not only individual leadership, you have a collective powerâ€”and that brings with it the passion for excellence, passion to get the job done, for people to offer their lives up for someone else. Itâ€™s illogical to do that, but people will do that because they believe in somethingâ€”the mission or each other, that there is something greater.

Gene Gitelson

And I think hopefully we can find it in other places other than war. And I know it exists in other places. I see a little bit of it at the UN, where people are doingâ€”as imperfect as that organization is, it also is an inspiring hope, â€”cause itâ€™s the best we got in difficult circumstances. So weâ€”and we thank you. Itâ€™s an honor. Iâ€™ve very few times been able to tell, in a sense, my story, and I appreciate this, and I hope it is useful for other people.

Interviewer

Anything else you want to addâ€”any otherâ€”

Gene Gitelson

Coming out of combat is an evolving experience, and I know this is the year 2011, and itâ€™s a long way back to Vietnam. And yet that experienceâ€”and when I had the radio program, I used to end it with the statement that the War in Vietnam was overâ€”â€”cause this was in the mid-â€™80s, early â€™90s. The War in Vietnam is over, but the experience lives on. So it lives on in me, lives on in the country. Itâ€™s still not resolved, and Iâ€™m not sure it ever will be fully resolved within my soul. But I think by actively engaging in it and living the life I want, doing what I can in the world in whatever way, then it honors the people that were there, it honors the experience. Itâ€™s a good life. Iâ€™m grateful.