

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

VIRGILIO V. FLORES

An interview conducted on

February 25, 2016

Interviewer: Melinda Holder

Angelo State University

West Texas Collection

“War Stories: West Texans and the Experience of War, World War I to the Present”

LEGAL STATUS: The oral memoirs of Virgilio V. Flores are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on February 25, 2016.

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The following document has been edited.

HOLDER: This is Mindy Holder. We're here with the *War Stories* project, and let's start off with your name.

V. FLORES: Virgilio V. Flores

HOLDER: Okay. Where were you born and where did you grow up?

V. FLORES: I was born in the Philippines, and I grew up there and I came in December of 1969.

HOLDER: Okay. Where did you come to . . . Like where did you live when you . . . ?

V. FLORES: Hawaii. My father was working as a plantation worker . . . sugar plantation worker on the island of Oahu in Hawaii. And then I got drafted from Hawaii.

HOLDER: You said you got drafted from Hawaii?

V. FLORES: Yes, into the Army.

HOLDER: Into the Army? Okay. How many years did you serve?

V. FLORES: Two years in the Army, and then I needed some money to go to medical school, so another five years in the Navy. Wait a minute . . . Yeah, two years and five years . . . More like, yeah, five years in the Navy because they sent me to school . . . through medical school in Hawaii also. So, most of my combat happened in my first two years in the Army. And I total one year in Vietnam, basically.

HOLDER: Okay. So, were you primarily in the enlisted ranks or an officer?

V. FLORES: Enlisted because I was drafted. When you are drafted, you go to the enlisted ranks. Those who go to Officer Training School, then they become officers. But not me; I wasn't.

HOLDER: And even when you were in the Navy, you were also enlisted?

V. FLORES: No, I was officer then.

HOLDER: You were an officer in the Navy?

V. FLORES: Yeah, being that I was going to be a doctor. So, you know, they're usually officer material. So, in fact, when I signed papers I was already in medical school, and when I signed my scholarship papers with the Navy, I became . . . I think I started with lieutenant . . . no, ensign actually.

HOLDER: Okay. And so, what motivated you to enlist in the Navy during your second . . . ?

V. FLORES: Money. I needed a scholarship. I got married to my ex at that time, and the GI Bill was not enough to pay for medical school. And so, I think I had a daughter at that time also. So, I needed more money because there was no way I could go to medical school without help. I needed more money, and I could not be a working student because it's just not possible.

HOLDER: And what did you think of being drafted?

V. FLORES: It sucks [laughter]. When I first came to Hawaii—I think I came in December of 1968—by May of 1969 I was already in . . . I was inducted into the service, so it was just a matter of five months really. And at that time, they were, you know, drafting people. You had to report to the selective service in Wahiawa. I did. And next thing I knew, I was drafted into the service into the Vietnam War. I didn't have any choice. Well, actually I had a choice: go back to the Philippines and never come back or be drafted. So, I figured I'll take a chance. I didn't want to go back to the Philippines and, you know, be back there again. I mean I wanted something else better for my future, I suppose. And, plus, it's kind of actually an embarrassment if I went back. Then I would say, "Oh yeah, embarrassing because I didn't want to be drafted into the service." So, that's why I stayed, and I took my chances. And actually, when I came to the U.S. in Hawaii, I was already a college grad in the Philippines. I already finished my bachelor's in preparatory medicine, pre-med. So, my goal was to stay two years in the Army and then come out and go to medical school, which I did eventually after I survived the Vietnam War. And I enlisted in the Army because they were only asking two years. I think the Navy was three years. And then the Air Force, four years of enlistment. And the Marine Corps, of course I didn't want to go to the Marines. Well, I thought it was a good choice, but in the long run it was not a very good choice because I saw combat more than I could . . . or more than I expected.

HOLDER: And what did you think of the conflict going on in Vietnam?

V. FLORES: Well, it was . . . Some people who had choices said that it was an unpopular war. But since I was drafted, I didn't have any choice. So, I wasn't thinking. I was just doing what the government wanted me to do, which is join the service. Then, you know, I got into the infantry and I figured . . . I just accepted it as a fact. I was not a thinking person; I was just a doing person. So, I said, "Okay, you send me there." The government sent me there, and I went. I did not raise a flag, and say, "Ah!" You know? One of those, especially like the hippies. But I thought they were kind of cowards, I think.

HOLDER: All right. What was your conception of the United States during this time?

V. FLORES: Well, supposedly . . . Actually, I was following the Vietnam War when I was in the Philippines never thinking that I would be in it . . . in the midst of it. And I thought that, you know, they were fighting communism, and I believed in that. We were preventing the spread of communism, so to speak. And I thought, "Well, somebody's got to stop them. And if I'm in it, so be it."

HOLDER: Okay. What was your training like?

V. FLORES: Hard. I did my basic training . . . basic infantry training at Fort Ord, California. I think it's not there anymore. And, of course, it was geared towards infantry because I was in infantry. And when you're in infantry, you shoot people, and I thought, "Well, if it's the only way to survive, so be it." And it was tough. I would not want to do it again. Especially for me, I was basically a nerd. I mean, I was a college student, and I was not into—well, maybe I was a little bit—you know, the rigorous physical activities. So, I was—I would say—barely passing, you know, the . . . the training. But I made it, so . . . and I thought, "I'll never survive it," but I did. And I just take it as, you know, it was mandatory. And they would tell us in basic training that you have to learn as much as you can so not to get killed. It's kill or be killed, basically. So, I said "Oh, okay." And they taught us about how to, you know . . . military strategy, and tactics, and how to shoot the gun, qualify with a rifle, and I did it. I did pretty good with it because I got—in marksmanship training—I got an expert in shooting the rifle. And then I got an expert in shooting a machine gun. So, I figured, "Well, I'm ready not to be killed."

HOLDER: So, what were race relations like when you were enlisted? Was that an issue in your experience?

V. FLORES: Actually, we were all friends, fortunately. My best friend was a Mexican. And I had some black people, and I had some Caucasian, and we mixed fairly well. It's like a big brotherhood basically, which worked. Among the ranks, the enlisted, there were no racial problems because we all could get killed any time. And if you don't like the guy beside you, he could get you killed, or you could get him killed. So, we protected each other basically. So, racial discrimination I would say was—I thought was—nonexistent. Although, they may have discriminated on me a little bit with my assignments, but I survived them, so I don't feel bad about it.

HOLDER: What sort of training did you receive regarding encounters with locals?

V. FLORES: Not very much, really. I was in two languages, so I learned about . . . I think they gave us a small pamphlet. But when we were in our area of operation, we were in what you call a "free fire zone." Meaning whatever moves, you can kill; no recrimination. When we went to villages, we just razed them because whoever was there was the enemy basically. And I kind of liked it that was. I mean if there was a cow we shoot them. If there are people, we shoot. They shoot us first, of course. And a few rudimentary language things that I learned was like we say, "đến đây" is "come here;" "dừng lại," "stop." And that's it. And you tell them to "dừng lại," and they don't, you shoot them. Easy.

HOLDER: So, it sounds like there wasn't much training on distinguishing between civilians and the like.

V. FLORES: Oh, yeah. No. There was none because in our area of operation, basically they were all enemy. That's why we call it the "free fire zone." There were no civilians, which is good for me because I don't have to think. If they're there, they shoot at us, or we shoot them.

HOLDER: So, what was your time in Vietnam like for you?

V. FLORES: It was like an eternity. When I first started I said, “Oh man, I have 365 more days,” and then you get down to 360. Like, if you . . . Like an eternity because you can get killed in 30 seconds. You could get ambushed and you die. That’s it, you know. So, it was tough. I was . . . for me it was tougher also because I was small. I was about 5’3”, 5’4” or 3 ½”, and I weighed 110 pounds. And I carried a rucksack—my backpack—with my ammo and my food, which weighed about 70 pounds. So, I was basically almost carrying my own weight. And the place was very hot and humid. And we welcomed the rain, basically. And so, it was tough. It was tough going all around. Although they made it so we go out for about 60 days and we come in for about 15 days. And then the cycle rotates. I mean repeats.

So, I didn’t have an easy time, basically. Easy time is being back in the . . . We have what you call the “rear area.” And we have our “area of operation” where we do our patrols. And when we go back to the rear, that’s when we have fun. You know, we have entertainers that come in. People get drunk and do whatever they want. Then when we go back to our area of operation, we do the patrols; that’s when bad things happen. So, you’re always on the alert not to get killed. Whereas in the back we say, “Forget it.” And then we go on R&R for a week. Basically, they just let it all hang out. And you don’t live that way. So, it was not . . . for some, I think . . . for some enlisted, the Army has different branches, and infantry is the worst, for me anyways. Because you go out there; you seek the enemy. You’re basically the hand that touches the enemy. Whereas the other support people who stay in their office in the back, in the rear area, they handle supply, they handle food, they handle, you know, medical care. They don’t get to face the enemy. Only way is the enemy goes to them and attacks the rear area, which seldom very . . . which seldom happens. But me, I go out to touch someone. So, I didn’t like it. Basically . . . Actually, I hated it. But, I had to survive, so I did what I did to survive.

HOLDER: What were your first impressions when you arrived in Vietnam?

V. FLORES: Well, it’s a hot, humid country. And I thought, “Wow, this is where I’m going to get killed.” You know, it’s a place where a war is going on. I just thought . . . I looked at people around and said, “I wonder who will survive and who will die.” You know. And that’s pretty much what I thought of it. It’s a place to get killed or kill. And there’s no ifs and buts about it. It’s just . . . basically that was it, and that’s why you hear some soldiers who kind of go crazy and lose their minds, things like that. It’s because the anticipation of something or the . . . I think, the fear of the unknown, because you could be alive today and gone tomorrow. And that’s what infantry is all about. And they even called the infantry the “Queen of Battle.” You know why they call it the Queen of Battle? Because they get screwed. And there’s another word for it, but I don’t think you can print it. You know why they call artillery the “King of Battle?” Because they screw the enemy with their artillery, but they don’t have to go there. They just, you know, fire here. It goes miles out there. So, that’s basically what it is. Go ahead.

HOLDER: All right. What did you find challenging during your time of service?

V. FLORES: In the war? Keeping alive. That’s a big challenge. And staying with the . . . you know, with the unit. Because if I did not hurry up, I would get left behind. So, that’s a challenge. And I would say . . . yeah, knowing the enemy and knowing how to get them before they get me and my friends. It was a big challenge. I think the biggest one is staying alive—the biggest challenge. How to stay alive. It’s a combination of luck; a combination of, I would say, courage

in a way. Because if you are in the wrong place at the wrong time and somebody ambushes you, you're gone. You're dead. And if there's a firefight, you have a choice between taking cover when you're getting shot at, or fight back. A big challenge. And the courageous ones go out and fight back. And the ones who, I would say, are not too courageous, they take cover and stay there. And they take somebody to fire back to ward off the enemy, so to speak.

HOLDER: Okay. What units did you serve in?

V. FLORES: Oh, I think it was Company A. Well, it's 2nd Platoon, Company A, 1st of the 46th, 196th Light Infantry Brigade of the 1st American Division. Yeah, that was it. Yeah, 1st of the 46th, 196th Light Infantry Brigade. We were in Chu Lai. That was the town, or that was the city the division was headquartered in . . . [flips through papers]. No, this is my discharge papers. Yeah, I had written it down. But that's basically what I was in that unit, Company A. Go ahead.

HOLDER: All right. And did you serve in direct combat during your deployment?

V. FLORES: Oh, yeah. Several times. That's why I got the Bronze Star and the Silver Star. I would say . . . Well, I knew I was going to be facing the enemy because I was infantry. And I knew that I could get killed. And I knew that a lot of our soldiers were afraid of dying. And most of those who kind of lost their minds are afraid to die every second of the day, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. And I thought that was a long time and a huge mental burden on anybody to be so afraid for their lives. No wonder why they crack, and they become crazy. So, I kind of psychologize myself. I was a college grad. So, I said, "Okay. How do I not get crazy?" And then I came to the conclusion that because of the mental burden of . . . or for fear of dying for so long and for so much. I thought, "Well, what can I do?" So, I just came to almost like I psychologize myself, like self-therapy. I said, "What if I consider myself dead already from that point on? I don't have to worry about dying, you know. I'm dead." So, it can come at any time, but I don't want to help them kill me. I want to help myself to kill the enemy first, you know? So, that's what I did.

From that time on, I was in . . . I think I came to Vietnam, or they took us to Vietnam, and we landed at Cam Ranh Bay. And that night that we were there in the barracks, there were explosions in the distance. And everybody was taking cover, and I kind of did too. I looked around at everybody. They were bright-eyed and scared. So, that's why I came to the conclusion. I said, "If I'm dead, I don't have to worry about dying. But I don't want myself to get killed unnecessarily. So, I'll do whatever I can to survive, but if I happen to get hit, I just want to be dead." And it helped me. And that's why I . . . Well, that's why they called me "Pineapple." They thought I was crazy, so they called me "Crazy Pineapple." That's how they called me there. They said I was crazy because if there's a firefight—you know, firefight meaning we're shooting at the enemy, and they're shooting at us—instead of running away, I run towards it. And so, I guess being the smallest guy too I was afraid they would bully me, but if you have a weapon nobody bullies you. There were no bullies. So, I did those things. And sometimes they just were like . . . There'd be a firefight up front and then they needed some bullets for the machine gun; they needed somebody to bring it up front. So, I go. And then I start shooting too. So, that's why.

HOLDER: Were you ever wounded in action?

V. FLORES: That's the curious thing kind of. I was lucky. I did not run away from a firefight. I . . . I shot when I can. Killed some of the enemy before they could kill me. Bullets come this close. And, in fact, I saw it. I happened to look back . . . I looked down and my foot was here and the bullet went [ricochet noise]. You know, just like you see in the movies. I said, "That's really close." And that was it.

And my enemy . . . my friend . . . There was another instance where they were shooting at us. My friend to my right got hit. It skipped me, and the one to my left got hit. And I happened to look up, and the bullet was, you know, was—I would say—was coming to me, but it hit a branch . . . a bush . . . a branch or something. It went up like this. And then it hit it and then it went and got caught in the middle and the bullet landed right next to me. So, I was not hit. And that's why later on I kind of . . . I had like a . . . a complex because they awarded me the Silver Star Medal. It's, of course, the nation's third highest for bravery, but was I never wounded. But my aim was not to get hurt or be dead completely. So, if I were hit by the enemy, I would just continue charging until they killed me. But, it never did happen. I did the killing. I mean . . . In fact, I just thought that it wasn't me killing the enemy; it was my weapon. I just pointed it in the right direction, squeezed the trigger, my weapon did the rest. And I saw some of the effects of my weapon—not pretty. But no, I was never wounded. Thank God, I suppose. My mom was praying for me every day, basically, to not get, you know, wounded. And I guess . . . Yeah, that's what I call luck, basically. Bullets were just all around me. My friends . . . my buddies get hit, and I didn't. And I didn't question why. I said, "Thank you, God." And that's it.

HOLDER: Did you ever become a prisoner of war?

V. FLORES: No. And you know why? I did not want to be a prisoner of war. If there was . . . If I had one bullet left, I'd kill myself. Or I would just charge the enemy until they killed me. But no, that was not an option for me. I would rather be dead than a prisoner of war.

HOLDER: And what did you think of the local inhabitants that you encountered?

V. FLORES: They were the enemy. We were in the free fire zone. So, we shoot them dead.

HOLDER: And what are your most vivid memories of your time in service?

V. FLORES: Well, I guess my time in Vietnam. Okay, the first one: when we first went on patrol, and it was a hot, humid day. And in the middle of the day, we took a break and my—I can still remember it like it was yesterday—my platoon sergeant asked us, "Oh, did you take your salt pill?" I said, "Nope, I didn't." So, he gave me a salt pill and gave everybody a salt pill. And I swallowed it with water. It tasted so bad that I vomited right away, you know, upchuck right away. And I said to myself, "Man, I still have 300-something days here. If I cannot even survive this salt pill, how can I survive the rest of the time?" So, I just keep it to myself. That's the first thing that I said, "Man, this is a bad, bad place." And then . . .

S. FLORES: What's a salt pill for?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Flores's spouse also attended the interview.



V. FLORES: It's because when you sweat, you lose sodium. And then you basically are hyponatremic and can go into convulsions and you die. So, that's why they didn't want us to, you know, to be . . . to lose our sodium and be a casualty basically because then you have to be medevacked out. And so, about afternoon . . . noon . . . like midafternoon, it rained. I said, "Oh, God. There's a God in Heaven." Because then it was nice. I was so hot and sweaty and bothered. And then it rained, and then we came to this old bivouac area. There were foxholes all around. And this is my first screw up. What happened was, we were in the rear, and the company was in front of us. We were holding the rear, and then, the rain drops, you know, we were in the forest, so it sounded like footsteps. So, I said to my friend—we're both new guys, first time out in the bush—and I told him or asked him, "Do you hear that? It sounds like the enemy."

And he said, "Yeah, I think so."

So, I said, "I'm going to investigate."

And when I did that. I had my rifle in my arm like this, the M16. And being a new guy, I didn't know any better, but my finger was squeezing the trigger. I didn't have any bullets in, so that's why nothing happened. But then when I pulled the charging handle, and I released it, the whole 17 rounds in the M16—it's basically an automatic rifle [mimics the sound of rapid fire]. And I said, "Oh, no!"

And then everything was quiet. And then about maybe three seconds later, there was a shout, "Who was that?!"

"Oh, it was an F-N-G." You know, "F-ing New Guy"?

Then . . . Then later on, they told me that what happened was that the commanding officer, the company commander, was next to a foxhole, and it was raining, right? The foxhole was full of water, and then when there's, you know, shooting you take cover. You don't think. So, the company commander dove into the foxhole full of water. There was no other foxhole, and the first sergeant that happened to be nearby dove into the same foxhole. Then there was four of them in one foxhole, and they were wet. That's why they were so mad.

And . . . But I didn't think about it later, but the first tunnel that we went to, guess what? "Get the Pineapple here!" So . . . so, that's why I became the designated tunnel rat from that time on. So, I said, "Oh, man."

Then they said, "Pineapple Flores, go. Here's a pistol." It was a 1911 .45 caliber.

"Yes, sir."

"Here's your flashlight."

"Yes, sir."

"Go in there."

I looked at him. I looked at this. I looked at the tunnel, and I said, "Oh, damn. If I go in there, I could be killed. If I don't, he could shoot me." And then I said, "Okay." So, I went in. And I tell you, as I was going in I thought to myself, "If I fire this one this close, my eardrums will be busted. If I don't, I'll be dead." I said, "Oh, well, eardrums they can fix it for me later." So, I went in. But fortunately for me, there was, you know, there was no enemy that came. It was empty.

And I could remember the first time that I went in with somebody in there was . . . They had . . . We were in a . . . like in a village, and they said, "There's a tunnel here. Come get Pineapple."

So, I went over there. I said, "What's going on?"

They said, "Well, there's people down there."

I said, "Really? Okay." So, they give me the same thing. And I said, "All right, before I go in there, let's do this." And I put a grenade in there, and I said, "Now I can go in." And sure enough, there are about five people in there—all, you know, VCs, Viet Congs. And I thought, when I looked at them, "Oh, dead. Oh, dead. Oh, dead. Oh, dead. Dead."

And then, I heard somebody topside say, "How many did you find? What did you find?"

I said, "Five dead." Then I said, "Okay, who wants to see one?"

They said, "What? They're already dead. What for?"

I said, "To see one. To see one."

They said, "Okay."

So, I grabbed one. And they said, "Okay, now satisfied?"

I said, "Yes." So, I went up and that was my . . . The first, I think . . . Yeah, in fact that's the first time that I saw somebody dead . . . You know, the enemy. And then the second time was when one of the . . . I may have for gotten some. One of another exciting time was when we . . . when we . . . My squad was taking point, and we came into this big clearing. And then he . . . I saw, or we saw, two individuals: one tall and one short. And being a free fire zone, we shot at them. They were not able to shoot back at us. They were wearing the hat and the black pajamas. And they continued walking away from us, and they disappeared.

I said, "Oh no." You know? I said, "Another one got away . . . or another two got away." So, I told my buddies, "Okay," I said, "I'm going down there." And so, I told them, "I look like them; don't shoot me. If you shoot me, shoot me dead. And I don't want to live. But when I go down there, then you shoot, make sure you use your sights. So, do not get me in your sights. Get everything else." So, I said, "Everybody ready? Okay . . . so okay, Fire!" So, everybody . . . You can just imagine all . . . just a line of people firing and a machine gun [mimics machine gun sound]. I went down, down, down, down, down, down.

And then on like a small like depression, I saw one VC. I shot him a few times. Then I told them, "Okay, I got him." And I turn him, and he was facing down like this, like he was protecting somebody. Then when I turned him, there was a small kid underneath him still alive, did not have a gun, and the foot was missing—I guess it's from all the shooting that we did. And I didn't have the heart to shoot him. But then when I turned the man over, his head was . . . a small entry wound . . . the part . . . the other side of the . . . the skull was open. I looked at it and, "Woah! Looks like pig's brain." And I said, "Oh, okay."

So, then next thing I knew, somebody was behind me. And I could hear this \*bang, bang, bang,\* and the bullets hitting the VC. And then another one came, and then another one came. But the fourth guy said, "Enough already, he's dead!" You know, so they just stopped. And then the CO said, "Okay, hold your position. We'll be here a while, so . . . while we have the boy medevacked out." And then it was noon time, and I was hungry. Everybody was hungry. So, I said, "Man, what do I do?" I mean, usually when you eat, you eat somewhere safe and, you know, nobody dead behind you. So, I said, "Okay, he's dead; I'm alive. I'm going to eat." So, I eat like here and the dead man was over here behind me. And that's what makes it more memorable, you know, because I was instrumental in killing him and here I am having lunch. So, you know, we medevacked out that boy. I don't know what happened to him or if he lived.

And another one was, you know, another memorable time was when I . . . That's when I was awarded the Silver Star. That's when . . . Usually in Vietnam . . . over there, I noticed about every 60 days one of us either gets killed or wounded or a few of them . . . of us. And during that time, it was about maybe 30 . . . 30 days, and we were due for a beating or a killing basically. And I didn't know it at that time, but the whole battalion was sent to . . . basically to get rid of a

machine gun nest that had been killing . . . that had been shooting helicopters down—.50 caliber machine gun.

And there was a brigade of North Vietnamese regulars. They're not just VCs. They were well-trained, you know, soldiers, and we were going against them. And the front . . . I mean . . . Yeah, the front of the . . . the . . . our unit, got ambushed. So, the CO said, "Okay." There were 12 of us supposed to be crazy guys—the "Dirty Dozen." And they said, "Find us a way out of here."

So, they sent us to flank the area. And then we came to this rice paddy, and there was a hill in front of us. And everybody was just not paying too much attention, but I was. And so, I kind of separated myself from . . . from the unit a little bit, maybe about a few feet. And they designated people to go in across first. So, this one guy—I guess he was from Tennessee or something—they said, "Tennessee first, then I'm next, Pineapple's third." And then four, five, six. And so, the first guy went in, and I had a feeling that somebody was waiting for us. They were just ambushing us. So, the first guy went in. He almost got to the other side, like here. And then the other guy, the third . . . second guy was about halfway. And just as I was ready to get out, and . . . you know, and go across, that machine gun started firing. You never can . . . I would say, you cannot forget the sound. It's loud, and it was \*bang, bang, bang, bang, bang.\* And I could just feel everybody taking cover, but I did not. I went up and started shooting back at them. And then I borrowed a grenade launcher and shoot . . . There's another group of bushes; shoot both of them until nobody moved.

And then we had the problem of two guys still left in the field. And the CO said, "Okay, enough dead people." You know, like, "Enough casualties, so pull back." Then I said to myself, "I'm not going to get pulled back." Because if we did, we'd leave these two guys behind. Then they'd be captured, or if they're dead, they'd be desecrated basically and hang up a tree. I said, "That's not going to happen, you know, to me." I said, "If you guys want to go back, go ahead. I'm getting these guys back." Then to, you know . . . I did not want to go right away, and I figured, there must be a way we can them back. And fortunately, as it turned out later, it was easier because those two guys were not hit at all. I basically saved them because before they got hit, I already killed the enemy. And so, I called them back. I told the guys, "Okay, point your gun that way, that way. And then you." And then I told them, "If somebody shoots me, shoot them back. Shoot them dead. Don't wait." You know. So, I stood up and exposed myself to enemy fire and nobody did shoot me. So, the guys about five minutes of calling them back, they started coming back. And then I said, "Okay, good. Now we got all."

So, we went back to our, you know, to our position. And then when we got there, we were so clustered in a small area that if the enemy were to launch a counterattack, we'd be dead. And we could hear the enemy walking around us. So, that night, I thought, "I'm not going to live until morning. If they throw a grenade at us . . ." We were such . . . we could fit the whole company in this room basically. We were kind of in a small spot for a foxhole. And so, I said, "God, this is it. I'm not going to live until tomorrow, I think. So, take care of my mom. Take care of my dad. And if, you know, if I were going to be a bum in the future, just take my life completely. I just want to be dead. But if I could be somehow of service to you in the future, I could not be a bum. I could be somebody, you know, a doctor maybe. Please save me." I said, "Please save me. In one piece. I don't want to lose an arm, a leg, and eye, or an ear. Just in one complete piece. And then, in return, I will go to church every day." Of course, my mom was really religious. And then a few seconds later, I said, "Well, if I survive this, I could not do nothing else but go to church every day, you know." So, I said, "Okay. I amend it a little bit. I

will go to church every weekend.” And the next day the sun shone. I said, “Oh, I’m still alive.” So, to this day, I still, you know, go to church every weekend when I can. So, and then, that was that.

And then another memorable time was . . . You know, usually my goal was to save myself and then my buddies next. And as it turned out, I ended up . . . In a way my mind changed. I said, “I save my friends—because I’m already dead—first.” And so, I shot . . . shoot to kill basically. Then one night, after that incident where I got the Silver Star, I was on guard duty. It was pitch dark. We were in the forest. I could not see my hand this far. And around past midnight when I came on the guard duty, I heard movement in front of me, you know? Usually when we do that, when we establish a defensive position, we are in like . . . like a circle. So, whatever’s in front of us, that’s our defensive position. So, I put tripwires and I put my grenade . . . my claymore—the claymore mines you can detonate—in front of me. So, if somebody comes in front of me, I can kill them all before they can kill me. And I heard this movement like somebody slowly walking in front of me. And I said to myself, “Either it’s one of us or certainly one stupid dink.” I mean, I could hear him, you know. I could hear him. So, I waited. I waited for him to come closer. I said . . . I was ready to shoot him or whoever was there. And I said, “I’ll take a chance.” So, I shouted at him, “Who’s there?!”

And they said, “It’s me.”

“Who? What’s the password?”

He said it; it was right.

So, I said, “Come here.” So, he came towards me. When he came to me, I said, “Do you know I could have killed you? That’s what happens all the time. Somebody in front of you by mistake, and they’d be dead. You could be dead. I could have killed you. And I would have gotten away with it.”

And he said, “Oh, I’m very sorry.” He was so scared. So, I didn’t tell anybody about it. So, that kind of amused me when I think about it. I said, “All this time I’ve been shooting, you know, somebody to save my friends. And this time, I saved somebody without even shooting,” you know? So, I don’t know if he live . . . he lived, you know, the whole one year in Vietnam. But I left maybe about a couple of months after that. But I didn’t tell anybody because, you know, it’s kind of embarrassing for him. But it was deadly embarrassing because if—I told him—if I were a new guy, he’d have been dead now because I would shoot first before asking questions. And I said, “You are very lucky tonight.”

He said, “Yeah, I know. I know.”

I said, “Don’t do that again.”

And I guess he did not anymore because he said what happened was he had just gotten into the bush that day. And at night he was on guard duty. And then he needed to pee and to poop, and he went in front of his position, and then he got lost because it was so dark. And he wandered into my defensive position. So, he could have been dead, but lucky for him. So, yeah, that’s memories, you know. When I think about it, I still kind of shiver a little bit because it’s still vivid. I think as long as I have my mind intact, I will still remember it like it was yesterday. It’s been about, what? Thirty, 40 years ago. Yeah. So, I can still remember those things.

HOLDER: What kind of technology did you use in the service?

V. FLORES: Technology? Well . . . No, the internet was not there yet. Basically, just the guns.

HOLDER: Just the guns?

V. FLORES: Yeah. I became a grenade . . . a grenadier also. We have an M-79 grenade launcher. You know, in the Second World War, they put the grenades in front of the rifles, and they shoot it, right? Whereas this time, it's like a shotgun, you know? You break it, open it, break it, so you can put your bullet just like a shotgun does and close it. And you have the sights, and then you shoot that. And there was also a story behind it—why I became a grenadier. What happened was that when I first came, I was a rifleman; you know, you handle the M-16. And then one night, I was on guard duty. And then you know, on top you have the LZ position was up here, and then, you know, the enemy had to come up towards us and, you know, to shoot us. And then, that night, for some reason, the sensors . . . We have motion sensors. They had motion sensors down below. I guess that's another technology that they have. And then they have also a starlight scope. It's an old one . . . big one. That's another technology. They look, "Oh, I do not see anybody. Just green and the trees out there and things like that."

So . . . and then, the next thing I knew, the CO came to my foxhole. And then he said, "Go get a grenade launcher." So, I did. He said, "Okay, put a round over there." Shoot it, \*boom.\* "Over there," \*boom.\* "Over there," \*boom.\* And then we did that maybe about ten times, and everywhere he pointed, that's where the round landed or seemed to be, you know, where the explosions were. So, he told me, "Flores, from now on, you carry a grenade launcher."

So, I was the . . . And I think, in a way, he saved me that day because when you have a grenade launcher, you do not have to shoot the enemy directly. Like if in this room, if I can get the bullet in, I had to shoot the ceiling \*boom\* everybody's dead. And that's what I did. And when we have firefights, you know, I could be eating in the back and then they wanted machine gun rounds. And then we looked at each other like who's going to, you know, go up there. And then they pointed at me, "He's crazy." Okay, so I go over there with my grenade launcher, and then I go up there, and that's when I almost got hit in my foot. I gave them the machine gun rounds, and then they said, "Where are they?"

"Over there."

"Okay, fine."

And with the grenade, it's like a rifle, so you can take good cover and then shoot. And so, I shot, you know, overhead on top of them. And by the third round, everybody was quiet. So, I figured a fourth one would be good \*boom\* and by the fifth round, they were shouting "Pineapple, stop it!" I didn't want to stop shooting. I said, "What? I'm . . . Was just having fun." You know? So . . . So, every time we had a firefight, they call me and I go shoot the enemies, and they run away. They didn't stick around. I wouldn't either, you know, if it was me.

And then one time, we almost got ambushed, but I suppose I foiled that one unknowingly. Because what happened was, we were in the rice paddy. One side is the hill; the other is the rice paddy. So, we were walking, you know, single-file. And then my unit . . . My squad was taking point, and fortunately for me, or for us, I was the third guy in line to go into the . . . the kill area, in the ambush. But before we got there, maybe about 20 . . . 20 feet away, I heard somebody chopping wood across from us about maybe 50 yards. So, I told the CO, I said, "Sir, I think I heard some chopping over there." And then he listened. I said, "Yeah, I think so. So, can I put some rounds in there?" So, it went like this \*boom\* and by the third round, I think the enemy that were going to ambush us got maybe scared or mad at us for killing some of their own. They started shooting from where they were at. And then . . . So, it was easy for me, and after I put rounds . . . Just shot them with my, you know, with my grenades and I saw the

grenades go in where they were shooting at. And, of course, after the third or fourth round, they were gone, and we went on our merry way. So, I was . . . when I look back . . . I mean, I think back at it, “Man, I saved my ass that day.” Because if I did not do that, if it did not happen, then I would have . . . Because, you know, in an ambush, the first three guys always get killed in the first 30 seconds. I was one of the three. So . . . but I never got not even wounded. So, that’s . . . that’s what it was. The Crazy Pineapple saved again.

HOLDER: So, how did your weapons compare to the Viet Cong’s weapons? Were they similar, or . . . ?

V. FLORES: No.

HOLDER: No?

V. FLORES: Fortunately, because they had the AK-47; we had an M-16. When we fire, there’s a definite \*boom, boom, boom,\* and then the AK . . . we call it “AK” because it was like \*ak, ak, ak.\* So, if the . . . [mimics different gun noises]. But one time, they had an M-16. So, we fired and repeated. You know, bullets I could hear them. I said, “Is somebody in my unit firing back at me or the enemy?” It turned out to be the enemy. And then I happened to stand up a little bit. I had my rifle like this, and I saw somebody in black pajamas. Then I hesitated, because they were not firing an AK-47 at us. And then, you know, just like [snaps finger] he was gone. I said, “Oh, that was the enemy!” They had an M-16, they probably ambushed somebody and, you know, they got one of those. But yeah, they were different. And one thing I was really fortunate and happy about was that they did not have a grenade launcher like I did. Yeah, I was . . . I was the king of . . . I was the local artillery. I was the king of the . . . king of the jungle at that time. Yeah, when I start shooting, they’re gone. They didn’t stick around.

HOLDER: How did your service influence and affect your family at home?

V. FLORES: Well, they were scared. My mom was scared for me to die and would lose her only son. That’s why she went to church almost every day. But, you know, they took it. Like they didn’t blame anybody. They just were scared for me, you know? And I did not help because when I write letters to my mom—I didn’t have any girlfriends then—so I said, “Mom, we were in a firefight today. Maybe two or three of us got killed. But I’m good. I didn’t get hit.” And you know, I did that several times. Then I guess she died a few times, you know, when she received my letters. But, at least I wrote her letters, you know? So, that’s basically that, yeah. They were more accepting to the fact that I could be killed also. That’s why the only thing that she could do was pray. And that’s what she did.

HOLDER: And was your family in Hawaii, or were they in the Philippines?

V. FLORES: My mom . . . They were in Hawaii. My mom and dad were still in Hawaii, yeah. My dad sent me off to Fort Ord when I went to training. My mom and my dad and some of our family friends. Yeah.

HOLDER: And how much news from home did you hear while you were abroad?

V. FLORES: Quite a bit. They had, I think, *Stars and Stripes*, you know? Oh, from the U.S. basically?

HOLDER: Yes.

V. FLORES: So, they have, you know . . . When we're out in the bush, we didn't have radios. But sometimes when we get resupplied every seven days, sometimes we get *Stars and Stripes*. But we were . . . When we were back in the "rear area" we call it, then we, you know, we have free access to news and radio and things like that, yeah. So, quite a bit. Yeah, and we knew the winner of the Super Bowl, the Major League Baseball things like that. They were following it. I was not into it yet. But then, yeah. They were following the, you know, World Series and Super Bowl, things like that, yeah.

HOLDER: How did the controversies of the war affect you while you were overseas?

V. FLORES: While I was there?

HOLDER: Oh, wait. No, sorry. While you were in-country.

V. FLORES: In Vietnam?

HOLDER: Yes.

V. FLORES: Well, like I said, I was not, you know . . . I was not into politics at that time. My only politics is the enemy's trying to get me, I get them first. Yeah. And that's the only way to go home. In fact, my idea of sneaking up on the enemy was, you know, put a curtain of fire . . . of lead between him and I. So, some people sneak up on the enemy, well that's their country. You can't sneak up on them. This is how to sneak up on them \*bang, bang, bang,\* and then move forward. Yeah, but politics? It didn't enter my mind very much.

HOLDER: And did you expect to face when you returned to civilian life?

V. FLORES: Well, not really, you know. There were, you know, a lot of protesters and they did not like us, you know. But nobody ever spat in my face. I probably would have hit them anyways. I would have thrown a punch at them. But no, they were . . . They were . . . I went home. Just went into like an easy, quiet life basically. Because I had to . . . When I came back . . . Came back to Fort Lewis, Washington and then went to Hawaii on a month's leave, and then went back to Texas. Actually, here in Fort Hood is where I finished my enlistment and then went back to Hawaii. So, no, I was . . . I did not expect anything. And then I was not accosted, or I was not bothered by anybody. I just went to, I guess, back to regular life, and then when I went to . . . when I came back to Hawaii, I just wanted to go to school, but I did not get to medical school yet. So, I became a beach bum for about nine months courtesy of the government. You know what happened was I realized . . . Or I found out that they had such thing as unemployment insurance. And I was living with my mom then, and they were giving us \$90 a . . . \$90 a month.

That's big money then in the 1970s. So, I was going around, walking the beach and all over the place. So, that was my life.

And then after that, I said to myself, "Is this all there is to life?" And I got to thinking about, you know, my promise. I said, "Well, I lived, you know, in one piece, and I have to do something for myself or some for other people as well." So, I was going back . . . I was going to . . . I was planning to go back to the Philippines and finish my medical school. But I got accepted to a program in Hawaii medical school where I finished five years instead of four. And I said, "Well, fine. As long as I get into, you know, medicine." And then I thought that I could do more service, you know, to God's people by being an anesthesiologist because, you know, we save lives basically. Surgeons can screw up, but we save their lives.

S. FLORES: Tell her how you were afraid of blood.

V. FLORES: Afraid of?

S. FLORES: Blood.

HOLDER: Afraid of blood.

V. FLORES: Oh, blood. Oh, oh, yeah. No, I . . . Like they have PTSD, right? That's basically PTSD, and I never thought that I would have any, you know. And it just came to me in like . . . almost like a dream, basically. The first inclination I had that I had PTSD—I was affected by the war—was one time when I was getting ready to come home, I was watching *Green Beret*. The show that was open, almost like a drive-in. And I . . . As we were watching it, it started real nice, calm. And then when they started the blood showing, I could feel like a cloud, a cold cloud hitting me, like engulfing me. So, I started shivering. Then I said to my . . . asked my friend behind me, or beside me. I said, "Hey, do you feel cold?"

He said, "No."

"Do you feel cold?"

"No." He was talking like this. That was one time . . . That's the first time I knew that something was the matter. And then when I got to medical school, we had to start IVs on each other. Before that, in the Philippines, I used to donate blood. I looked at it and saw the needle going in and the blood coming out. And then . . . so, when we had to start IVs my . . . you know, my classmate started on me. And then when I saw the blood coming out from that catheter, I could feel my heart going slow like [mimics slowing heart beat]. Like I scared the guy, I said, "I think I'm going to pass out."

And then they said, "What's the matter? You've been to war. You're supposed to be, you know, brave. How come you're going to pass out on me?"

I said, "I don't know. I don't have any control." And then when I got to, I think, between first and second year, I had to go in like a clerkship in Great Lakes Navy Hospital. And I knew already what was going to happen. I had to get dressed up, you know, like a hospital gown, and then the surgeon went like this [makes hissing sound]. I see blood coming out. I could feel myself already passing out. I said, "Excuse me." You know, "Excuse me, please." And then I said to myself, "Man, I cannot be a doctor if I'm afraid of blood all the time." And so, when I said to myself, "Okay, I just have to expose myself." So, the second time . . . I mean, after a few minutes I went in. And I see blood, and I went out, and I went in, and I went out, went in. I went



out maybe three times in one surgery. And then, after maybe about five or ten surgeries, I could stay in the whole time like, “Oh, yeah.” And then I said to myself, “Okay, I’ve got to finish this.” I said, “What’s wrong with me?” I knew there was something wrong. I just couldn’t figure it out.

Then I just kind of came to the conclusion that in Vietnam, if I saw blood, somebody’s dying or dead, you know? I see the . . . I see . . . Saw all my friends get, you know, all banged up and dead, and I see their brain, and they’re dead. And then I said to myself, “Okay, what’s the difference?” So, then here, I said, “If somebody . . . If I see blood, and they’re receiving it, they live.” So, I said, “Okay.” And then I found the answer. I told myself, “Blood is life. Blood is life.” I kept repeating it a thousand times. And it worked! So, blood is life meaning, you know, you give somebody life if you give them blood or if I see blood. And so, I knew that I passed that. You know, I kind of almost like graduated from it. When one time I was . . . We put in an arterial line, and when you remove the . . . the needle, you get the catheter with the needle and you see blood go [mimics the sound of blood spurting]. Then instead of being afraid, I said, “Yes!” And then I said, “Oh, yeah, I’m fast.” I mean you know, I was not afraid of blood anymore. And from that time on, I was not afraid of blood any more. So, yeah, that’s . . .

HOLDER: All right, and after your time in the military, did your conception of the United States change at all?

V. FLORES: No.

HOLDER: No?

V. FLORES: No, not really. Yeah, still the same. Plus besides, you know, the United States government was sending me to school. So, I owed them and I thought I just have to carry on with my work of, you know, saving God’s people, so to speak. Yeah. So, I became a better man actually. I mean, you know, not too many things can bother me anymore. And, you know, I don’t sweat the small stuff. That’s basically what I did if somebody always shout at me, “Ah, Okay.” You know, as long as you don’t go punch me, that’s fine. So . . .

HOLDER: And, how do you feel about your military service looking back?

V. FLORES: Well, it’s just a phase of my life. And, you know, I went through it and came back out alive in one piece. And I was thankful that I had a scholarship from the Navy. I became a doctor because of it. And so, I was thankful, you know? But I would say, being in the Army . . . Well, it was kind of educational too. And actually, it gave me a better appreciation of life because life could be so fleeting and so fragile. You have to take care of it. So, live and appreciate the little things in life. Basically, that’s what they gave me.

HOLDER: All right, and do you have any advice for young men and women who are entering the service now?

V. FLORES: Oh yeah. My stepson joined because of me. Do your job. Do the best you can. And pray, you know, because there are things even in this day and age you cannot predict and you cannot fathom and just happens. So, you do the best you can and just pray to God that you survive through it all. Yeah, and being in the service, it’s actually good training. So, you can use

it in civilian life. And if you can, apply for scholarships. That way, you know, you don't have to worry about where the money's coming from while you go to school, yeah.

HOLDER: All right, and do you have any items, objects, correspondence, or photos you'd like to share with the project? The *War Stories* project?

V. FLORES: Well, items. You can have my DD214 to show you that, you know, I got the Silver Star over there.

[Audio pauses and resumes]

V. FLORES: I mean, you know. This is my . . . I had a picture at home, I guess. It's a picture of me with a machine gun . . . the .50 caliber machine gun that I basically knocked out. I mean, not the same . . . the same machine gun, but it's a similar, you know, gun.

HOLDER: Okay, and is there anything else you'd like to share about you time of service?

S. FLORES: You feel like you're owed the Medal of Honor.

V. FLORES: Oh, yeah. After that, you know, I got . . . I got . . . After I saved those two guys from the machine gun, one of my buddies came to me excitedly. He said, "Hey, they're going recommend you for the Medal of Honor."

I said, "Really?"

"Yeah, they're going to recommend you for the Medal of Honor."

I said, "Okay." And . . . but I knew that I was not going to get it because for one thing I was not a citizen at the time. So . . . and, you know, I was Filipino. So, I said, "Nah, I don't think anything will come out of it." So, it got downgraded to a Silver Star. Then I said to myself, "Oh, okay. The Silver Star is fine." Because, you know, for me, going home in one piece that's the main goal. But now, I kind of like the Medal of Honor. I said, "Oh man, if I had the Medal of Honor, I can have this, I can have that. More honor kind of stuff." So, my wife started to get mad.

S. FLORES: Because they had told him he was going get a Medal of Honor, and he never received it because . . . I guess, because he was Filipino. But, still, like when he retires and any benefits . . . He'd be getting benefits when he's older.

V. FLORES: Yeah. So, I kind of liked it. So . . . So, in the process of putting like a story of my life up here. I basically told you already also what happened. And so, I take it over to the congressmen to see if they can, you know, upgrade it to the Medal of Honor.

S. FLORES: He was . . . He's always been kind of ashamed that he served. But recently, I made him go get license plates that have "Silver Star Recipient."

V. FLORES: Yeah, want to see it? Everywhere I go, I kind of looked to see if I could find something similar. I never did. I saw a Bronze Star.

S. FLORES: But your point was, you were always ashamed. Didn't want to like, you know, put it out there that he was a Silver Star for, I don't know . . .

V. FLORES: For the longest time. It was 1972.

S. FLORES: But you didn't want any recognition for it. And now, later on in age is why he's wanting to be recognized for it.

V. FLORES: Would be nice. Nice to do that. So, and it's free registration. There you go. That's my license plate.

HOLDER: Cool.

V. FLORES: Yeah. So, I haven't seen anyone like that in . . . in San Angelo because there's not too many people who have that. And even the state of Texas I don't think. There's another one I heard was a medic, you know, he did something, you know . . . you know, something heroic to save other peoples' lives. But, yeah. And it's free.

HOLDER: Cool.

S. FLORES: But it took you 30-something years to get that because you . . .

V. FLORES: To finally get it, yeah.

S. FLORES: Because you didn't want any recognition for being in Vietnam or nothing, but now he's changed his story.

V. FLORES: Yeah. So, that was that.

HOLDER: Okay. Thank you very much.

V. FLORES: You're welcome.