

ORAL MEMOIRS
OF
KENNETH BURGESS

An interview conducted on

March 21, 2018

Interviewer: Cameron Nichols

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 Kenneth Burgess are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 21, 2018.

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NICHOLS: My name is Cameron Nichols. Today's date is March 21, 2018, and we are in the library, one of the library study rooms. What is your name?

K. BURGESS: Kenneth K. Burgess.

NICHOLS: Okay, when and where were you born?

K. BURGESS: I was born in San Angelo, Texas on 6-23-47.

NICHOLS: So, you grew up around here in San Angelo?

K. BURGESS: Yes.

NICHOLS: How do you define West Texas? Where exactly would you say it begins?

K. BURGESS: I would say it . . . See, Brady is the heart of Texas and we're what, 60-miles from Brady? Something like that. San Angelo is the start of farming. From . . . It does cotton, maize. That's primarily the . . . what they grow here and is that way all the way to Albuquerque basically. And we grow the . . . That what is there and San Angelo. I'm familiar with a part of San Angelo that is familiar with Goodfellow Air Force Base. It was established here for the Second World War and it's kind of enriched about what San Angelo is, what Texas did for the Second World War. 'Cause there's little bases in Brady, San Angelo, Midland, Odessa, when during the Second World War they have . . . They were . . . They did . . . They trained the pilots from where the bombing for the Second World War here in . . . That's basically were most of it was done in the United States.

NICHOLS: Yes, sir . . . What do you think the difference is between West Texans and Texans from other regions of the state? Like the South Texans or North Texans?

K. BURGESS: I could not say much. I'm not sure about the North so much. The southern is a little bit different. It's more Houston. The area is different because, I think the larger the city the less people communicate with each other. It's just the nature of the beast. It's just when there's less people, people I think go out of their way to get familiar with the other people, you know.

NICHOLS: Yes, sir. How would you characterize West Texans' relationship with to military?

K. BURGESS: To the military here, they are more apt to join the service because the sense of duty. And I mean it wasn't . . . It was never forced upon me but, I mean, well, the draft was then, so you had a choice what the deal was during that period of time. Either you are going to be drafted . . . And then a friend of mine . . . My best friend's mother basically set it up. She called the . . . She didn't want us to go in the Air Force, Army or the Navy. She wanted us to be . . . She didn't want us to leave the United States basically. So, she called the recruiter from San Antonio, because there wasn't a Coast Guard recruiter here. So, he recruited three of us, and that's how we ended up being in the Coast Guard.

NICHOLS: Okay, that ties into the next question. When and where did you enter the armed forces?

K. BURGESS: Ah, see . . . There it is here. April 12th, 12th of April '67. Oh, wait a minute, that was when I was in Vietnam, sorry.

L. BURGESS: It was '66.¹

K. BURGESS: It was '66, yes.

NICHOLS: Do you have an exact date or is there one?

K. BURGESS: Um, let's see. [Searches material brought during interview.] See where they're at. [Continues to search materials] I was discharged July of 1972.

NICHOLS: Seventy-two. Okay.

L. BURGESS: You entered in '66.

K. BURGESS: Oh, okay, yeah. I entered in . . . I'm sorry.

NICHOLS: That's fine. Entered in '66. So what branch did you serve in?

K. BURGESS: The U.S. Coast Guard.

NICHOLS: U.S. Coast Guard. What were your years of service?

K. BURGESS: Okay, my first year was in Alameda, California. And then I went from Alameda to Vietnam. And then, from Vietnam, I was stationed on Venice, Louisiana. It's the . . . When you go down the Mississippi River, the road stops, that is Venice. What we did there . . . There was the way the Mississippi River comes in . . . You got . . . Let's see, south pass and southwest pass and it comes in to the main river, and they had light stations there. And they were manned. They were. They were manned there and they had a light ship off to the northern part or no, the eastern part where you came in . . . the shipping lanes came in through Lake Pontchartrain, and then it would come into the box, into the Mississippi River. And, basically, what we did was we supplied them with their food and transportation because they would be on those stations. Every week we would bring some in, bring some out. We basically supported them and supported search and rescue for that area down there.

NICHOLS: Yes, sir. So, during your years of service were you primarily in the enlisted ranks, a noncommissioned officer, or officer?

K. BURGESS: Enlisted.

¹ Kenneth Burgess's spouse, Loretta Burgess, was present for the interview.

NICHOLS: Enlisted. Okay, yes, sir. So, in which military conflict did you take part in?

K. BURGESS: Vietnam.

NICHOLS: So, why did you enlist in the armed forces?

K. BURGESS: I enlisted so I would not be drafted.

NICHOLS: Would you say that was your motivation to do so? The draft?

K. BURGESS: Well it is. You were drafted, you were either going to go. They would say you were going to go into the army period. But that's really not true because I had a friend of mine . . . He was drafted into the army but when he got off the plane the marines grabbed him because there was a shortage. So, when you were going in you don't have a choice, you know. I mean, you can complain but that's not going to do any good.

NICHOLS: What did you think of the conflict going on in Vietnam before you enlisted?

K. BURGESS: I didn't even know to be truthful. I didn't know what was going on. I had no idea.

NICHOLS: What conception did you have of the United States at the time of your enlistment? What did you think about the United States at that time?

K. BURGESS: I felt like it was my duty to serve my country. I didn't have any political thoughts about anything to tell you the truth. Right out of high school, you would have been there. [Laughter] You know, what do you want me to do? [Laughter]

NICHOLS: What did America symbolize to you? What did it stand for at that time?

K. BURGESS: At that time, it was, help the underdog. That's basically it was. I didn't have any political views, you know. West Texas wasn't . . . I didn't know there was a difference until I went out to California. There were a lot of political views. I didn't really realize the political view until I came back from Vietnam. And we were, when we got off the plane in California we were told what, you know, what was . . . They couldn't tell us what to do but they could suggest. It's like when we got ready to come in, they suggested that we take our uniforms off, put on civilian clothes. Because during that period of time there were a lot of riots, and protestors, and when you wore your uniform and you had your ribbons on from Vietnam, you were a target.

NICHOLS: What did you understand about the mission you were asked to complete? Did you know what you were getting called to do?

K. BURGESS: You mean going over there?

NICHOLS: Yes.

K. BURGESS: Let's see . . . Put this right. Our main goal after all the training we went through, knowing what we were getting into is to destroy the enemy. That's basically it.

NICHOLS: So, what was your training like? Where did you go for training?

K. BURGESS: You mean to go to Vietnam?

NICHOLS: Let's start with the Coast Guard first.

K. BURGESS: Okay, when you go to the Coast Guard in Alameda, they basically . . . The boot camp was in . . . They had one on the Pacific side and the other Coast Guard is on the Great Lakes. So, we went to Alameda. You go through the training there and, of course, you go through the boot camp and, basically, you go through there and they're breaking you down. Basically, telling you you're not trained to think but to do as you're told. It's like when we had to go up and, there was a certain procedure you did if you had to go to the doctor or whatever. And when you go up there . . . And they'd have a sign up there with four monkeys. And you were supposed to look at those four monkeys and if your eyes ever varied you were doing a hundred pushups for not looking at the monkeys, so that got your attention pretty quick. I didn't want to do pushups, and when someone is speaking to you, you don't wander, you look eyeball to eyeball. You know it's . . . It's to train. I really never thought about it then but it is to train to focus on what you're . . . They want to know what you're doing. It's like the one thing that in boot camp the first thing that they'd say, they'd say if we were marching in anything and they told us to hit the deck everybody would just go to the ground. Because that was basically, ah, it was danger. So, it's . . . It was to get you ready to obey the orders. And if you didn't obey the orders, you were running. So, it was just discipline, and you've got to have that. You know that's what the whole military is about is to . . . Whatever they say, you do, and if you don't, you pay the consequences.

NICHOLS: Yes, sir. So, what were racial, race relations like when you were enlisted?

K. BURGESS: I wasn't aware . . . I don't . . . There weren't race issues that I knew of. Maybe I was naïve. But my parents, they raised us that we are all equal. I mean it was mostly white but there were Hispanics and I was aware they had less than we did. But we got along and my parents instilled that we are all the same. I can't say that was for everyone but we were . . . I was never . . . I was never around black people until I was in the service. I mean, basically, here in San Angelo, there were blacks here and it was a very small area like it still is.

NICHOLS: Yes, sir. So, what sort of training if any, did you receive regarding race relations in your unit? Did you receive any training for that? Was there?

K. BURGESS: No, there wasn't any.

NICHOLS: Okay, so what training did you receive regarding encounters with the locals? Such as the Vietnamese. Would you ever come into contact with them? Or . . .

K. BURGESS: We did. Well, see . . . Basically . . . This is what they call a junk boat. [Presents photograph] See, that's me and, basically . . . See that metal rod there?

NICHOLS: Yes.

K. BURGESS: Basically, these are fishermen. That's primarily what I dealt with. And my job was to go on there and to look for weapons. This metal rod, we would push down through their rice or fish or whatever, if it hit metal we made them unload it to see what was in there. Because all the boats were wood. So, basically, it was . . . And really, I mean, these people, they were used to us. They would come around us and, you know, knew we were going to stop them. And the ones that ran, that's the ones we went after. You know, we knew that was a problem but, basically, that only happened once and it was a big ship, it was a Chinese ship. But we couldn't catch them and we couldn't . . . We were told not to shoot at them so they just got away from us.

NICHOLS: I was about to ask you, how often did y'all find weapons?

K. BURGESS: We never . . . When I was there, we never found any weapons. But I was on the patrol boats for six months and then I was on . . . There is a . . . See these boats? [Presents photograph] These are swift boats. This is what the Navy had. And basically, this is what I was on. These are 82-footers.

NICHOLS: Oh, wow.

K. BURGESS: See and like these. You can't see them here. These are twin 50s. They would swing around. That's a 50-caliber back here. And this is . . . We would have four 50-calibers here and this was an 82 millimeter with a 50 caliber on top of it.

NICHOLS: So, tell me a little about your time in Vietnam. What was it like for you?

K. BURGESS: Okay, as far as . . . There was an instance . . . This happened on the Tet Offensive. We were on a . . . We had a, let's see, what was it . . . We had a call and there were some . . . There were some Vietnamese, the south Vietnamese had been shot. There were some wounded and, on this boat . . . See there is . . . I don't know if you can see it. Right here is a little boat. It's a Boston whaler and it had a 25-horse mercer on it. And, basically, their boat had . . . we were trying to get them off the coast because the Vietcong, during the Tet Offensive . . . So that was when all hell broke loose. It was just coming in and they were . . . That's where, I guess, they're trying to run us out. So, we sent in a boat and it got beat. It overturned, so we had the army come up—their special forces—they came up and there was a seaman and myself . . . We got in with them because we were going to go on the beach and try to get them off. And when we got there—we had life jackets on, the other guy and me—and we asked, "Do you want a life jacket?" And they said no, so we didn't. So, when we got up there and we were going in, I'm not sure if you've heard of a riptide . . . Well, I didn't know what a riptide was. I don't think . . . I never heard of it talked about. Anyway, we got in the riptide and he made a bad turn and it flipped over. So, we were in the water, we had life jackets and the other ones didn't . . . So we started swimming and, unfortunately, this other guy couldn't swim and we were being pulled out to sea. I gave my life jacket and I started swimming to the beach but he drowned. He let loose of

the life jacket. So, we get to the beach and the Vietcong started to overrun us and the only thing that stopped them was when our vessel went across the side and started firing into them. So basically, we had to carry, ah . . . Well, I had to go and destroy the engine on the boat, Boston whaler, so that they wouldn't . . . So they couldn't use it. And knock holes in the boat. So, we had to go. We went with the . . . We started to go along the coast and the Vietcong were still shooting at us and we're going . . . down the beach. And I guess we wore them down and they stopped. We ended up going to the special forces camp and we came . . . Trying to remember how we got back there . . . Well, the 82 medics were there to doctor us. And that was, I would, that was the worst part for me.

NICHOLS: So, what were your first impressions when you arrived in Vietnam?

K. BURGESS: In Vietnam, I'd really . . . It's just a big city. And it's crowded. And of course, there was no communication except for other military. It's just a big city, and I think I got pictures here of . . . I don't know if I brought those photographs or not but I have pictures of . . . of . . . in Saigon. I don't know if you've ever seen Vietnamese money but that is what the Vietnamese money looks like.

NICHOLS: Wow!

L. BURGESS: That's then.

K. BURGESS: Yes, I don't know what it is now. And this was an article . . . Actually, this is kind of interesting how this works out. This was the boat I was on. And this was . . . I got this out of a . . . This is the district I was in. It was in three different districts. This is the 11th, this is the 13th, this was the 12th.

NICHOLS: So, you were in the 11th district?

K. BURGESS: Yes, the Gulf of Thailand and, let's see. Basically, this is like we never . . . This was done before I went there. But this is basically what . . . you would be armed and you would have this flak jacket on and they would come beside us and then I or somebody else would go on the junk boat and check for weapons. Let's see, This is a picture of . . . This is the bow . . . This is what I was talking about, the .50 caliber. This is an 82 millimeter here. I'm not sure what that is. I'm not familiar with that. This is the kinds of helmets and stuff we would wear and, ah, okay. Well see, I was stationed with him. He was a cook on the boat. This is basically what you see here and if you want to take pictures of whatever or copy these, that is fine. But what else . . . It kind of gave a . . . This is kind of a . . . I would say a cheesy magazine, but it told . . . When I read this, it made more sense of what really happened.

NICHOLS: Okay.

K. BURGESS: It wasn't . . .

L. BURGESS: Filtered.

K. BURGESS: Filtered. This right here will tell you more about Vietnam, what was going on then.

NICHOLS: Okay. Yes, sir.

L. BURGESS: You haven't talked about like at night where you would shell the shore. They would be out in the . . .

K. BURGESS: What we would do, we would see . . . They would tell us to shoot and we would see where it were and, when you're shooting 50. calibers, you would have what they call a tracer and you would have a tracer and four other bullets, a tracer, a tracer. And then, when you would shoot, you would . . . You would just kind of scan the beach and if you had a secondary explosion you would just kind of sweep the area and another one and sweep it back and forth 'till basically there was no more shooting and then, on this, see this little thing right there? It's a little plate, it's got a square plate with a slot for the machine gun. They said, well that's to save, uh, the guy shooting it? Well, not really, it's to save the gun from being destroyed because if you got shot up they are just going to drag you off to the side. Somebody else is going to take your place. So when we are shooting we could see . . . We actually couldn't see our tracers because that is going away from us. But when you see all the red coming towards you, see the tracers, you can see off to the side but you can't see the tracers coming to you. And when you see all that stuff flying around, there's a pretty good chance you're gonna get hit. And that was just instinct, I didn't have a choice. It was what I had to do.

NICHOLS: Did you find your service challenging?

K. BURGESS: My service was challenging because it was dealing with people. The Coast Guard is a cop on the water. You're checking for life jackets. They got to have fire extinguishers . . . So, basically, when the boat saw us coming, we were inconvenienced. We were stopping them from working. But then again, but that wasn't to say they were all ugly to us or anything but, you know, sometimes we would suggest maybe if they gave us some shrimp so we could have something for supper, that would be nice. (Laughter) Most of us . . . Ninety percent of the people were happy we were there. Of course, when they're trying to fish and we're bored and we're stopping them from working, they're not real happy. So, I mean, it was kind of like when you're getting a ticket. You know, you're gonna be respectful, you'd like for them to go away. And that's basically what we were. A cop on the water. Actually, for the Coast Guard.

L. BURGESS: And there's search and rescue . . .

K. BURGESS: Well, that's a different deal. When you search and rescue, there's times . . . Well, we got a call. It was at night. And there was an SOS call. So you got to find out where they're at. So we had a good idea but where they were getting the SOS was from uncharted waters. So we didn't know . . . So we go out there and we sit until daylight comes so we can find them. So, usually when people are out there, they got a nice boat and they've got money. So we go to this boat and this man is very upset, asking what took so long. We told him we couldn't find him. It was dark. He was really angry and you could tell his wife was getting upset with him. They basically ran out of gas. So when we out there and, since I was second in charge, I always had to

board the boats. Went on the boat and said, "Okay, let me see what the deal is." Well, they ran out of gas, so I start checking the fuel system. This tank is empty and this one has fuel in it. So I go over there and say, "I looked at the valve and it wasn't turned right." And then she looked at him and she looked at me. And I turned it on, I cranked it up, and she looked at him again, and I was thinking, "Okay . . ." And then he gets a ticket and then she really is giving him the look!

L. BURGESS: These were the days before GPS!

K. BURGESS: It was very political, and you'd like to say, "Idiot, what the hell are you doing?" But you know, it's not worth it.

NICHOLS: So what unit did you serve in during your deployment?

K. BURGESS: Just strictly the Coast Guard. Well, wait a minute. Okay. The unit I guess, I think that's for the army and stuff like that but the Coast Guard is just a broad spectrum. There is no specialty. Basically, the Coast Guard is a smaller unit, so you have to do everything. You don't have a choice. Now, you have different enginemen. There's boats to make. There's basically guys that drive the boat and clean the boat. There's officers and then there's . . . In the regular ranks, you've got the seamen. Then you go into whether you're gonna be an engineman or an electrician or whatever. And then you get into the other officers. You've got third class, second class, first class, then you go into a chief. And then you got a warrant officer. He's an enlisted man but he's basically an officer though the regular officers look at him as an enlisted man who wants to be an officer. There's kind of this limbo stuff there.

L. BURGESS: The Coast Guard is so much smaller than our other branches.

K. BURGESS: I don't know about now but everybody in the Coast Guard, in the United States, if they stood, they could . . . they would fill up a football field and that's it. Compared to all the other branches of service, it's small.

L. BURGESS: You could find that out easily enough through researching, like how the numbers are now, but compared to the others, they're much smaller.

K. BURGESS: It's a small branch of service.

NICHOLS: Did you serve in direct combat during your deployment?

K. BURGESS: Yes. I mean, now, combat, no. If you're talking about hand to hand, you know, or . . . To me combat was, well, when we were shooting, that was combat. I mean, the only combat was when I was in Vietnam.

NICHOLS: You were talking about the metal plates on the guns, so, were you wounded in action?

K. BURGESS: No.

NICHOLS: Did you ever become a prisoner of war?

K. BURGESS: No.

NICHOLS: What did you think of the local inhabitants that you encountered? What did you think of the Vietnamese when you encountered them?

K. BURGESS: I didn't have a problem with them. They were just . . . They just wanted us to check their boats so they could go on about their business, working. They knew that we were going to board them and we disrupted their day. We had interpreters. He was basically a Vietnamese Navy man. He and I got pretty close. He even said, "I got a sister and she wants to get married. You could take her back to the United States!" I said I didn't think I could do that. [Laughter] But that went on a lot. He wanted his sister to get out of the country. He knew it wasn't gonna work. They told us they thought he was the Vietcong. I don't believe that. We talked. He was a real kind man. Maybe he was slick. I don't know. No . . . He was a good man. But he wanted me to bring his sister to the United States.

L. BURGESS: It was a secret to me!

NICHOLS: When you interacted with locals, what do you think their conception was of the United States?

K. BURGESS: Well, there was no communication. But you could tell, the ones that wouldn't look you in the eyes were a problem. Just like anything. When you talk to someone and they're looking down or whatever, you're not communicating. But, you know, you could tell . . . When we were boarding and they were fishing, trying to make a living, and we were disrupting, there would be some agitators. Then you'd just want to get things over with so we could carry on minding our own business. Then again, when you got all these guns pointing at you, it's kind of an attitude adjustment. So, we had the big guns.

NICHOLS: Did you ever engage them in conversation about what America meant to you?

K. BURGESS: As far as a fisherman?

NICHOLS: Yes, well, let's go with a fisherman first.

K. BURGESS: No, because I didn't speak the language. The only thing I could talk about was through the interpreter. Now, everybody that listens to him, they'd all like to come to the United States. Even they knew their country was corrupt, anyway. The South was more corrupt than the North from what I understand. I didn't know that until years afterwards. Their cause was better than the South. But the United States is good about doing the wrong thing, sometimes.

NICHOLS: So, what are the most vivid memories of your time in the service?

K. BURGESS: Of course, Vietnam is very vivid, because it was more being in danger. I guess as far as my service, when I was in San Francisco, that was interesting because it's two large places, Alameda and Oakland. But you know, when we were . . . I was on a boat, the recruits would get on a boat and we'd have to go around Alcatraz. This was because the waters were very swift and cold. And, basically, they'd have to get in the water so they'd get used to it. Now, unfortunately, my job was, if they had problems, I was the one who had to go in and get them out. But that was interesting, being there. And there's a lot of people out there. A lot of different nationalities there. I enjoyed that to a certain point but, then again, when you're in the service, you're making less money than the minimum wage, so you're limited to what you can do. Then I went to Vietnam and it was something I gotta tell you about. People ask me, say, "Where did you come up with your water?" 'Cause you're in the South China Sea. But they have boilers in there. And all these tubes going through there. And you're running cold water in there. So, those pipes sweat. And this water drips down there into troughs. And that's basically what you're drinking. Sweat. And it has no taste whatsoever. So they'd send Kool-Aid to us. And the way it'd work is it would start from the North and go all the way down to the South. So, basically, we got the junk. And we called it green death. You drank green lime water.

L. BURGESS: They never got a different flavor! [Laughter]

K. BURGESS: So, either that or beer. And the beer was the same way. They got the good kind and we got the worst. It was usually Pabst Blue Ribbon. And it was horrible. But it was better than nothing. So . . . But then we were younger and didn't know the difference.

NICHOLS: What sort of technology did you use in the service?

K. BURGESS: There wasn't much technology. The biggest technical stuff we had was radar. That was it. There was no high-tech stuff. It was radio radar, and where we could communicate with other boats. That was it.

NICHOLS: Oh, wow. So, how did your service influence or affect your family at home? How did you keep in touch while you were away?

K. BURGESS: It was strictly by mail. No telephones. They wouldn't let you talk on the phone. There was no communication. Strictly radio. It was just mail. Now, we would get it . . . sending care packages and stuff and have candy bars or something like that. But we'd ask for Kool-Aid packages. A different flavor! [Laughter] Ah, yeah. It was just strictly letters. I think I still got my letters and stuff, maybe. I don't remember. I didn't keep mine but I think mom . . . Somewhere, she kept hers. I wasn't much of a letter writer. Basically, the officers told us, they made sure that we wrote our parents. It was very political. You know, parents are unhappy, it was gonna be more problems.

NICHOLS: Do you know about how long it would take for mail to come back and forth in that time?

K. BURGESS: I never thought about that. I would say probably weeks. Time, you figure . . . Let's see . . . I would think it came over by ship. I don't know how it worked. It had to go into

Vietnam itself. Then it'd be sent to the three different districts, wherever we were at. That's gotta come by. Now, they did fly it in. Everything's gotta be flown in. There's something I forgot that I need to tell you. On this particular . . . Right here. This is where I was stationed, this little island. Basically, the interpretation of the Vietnamese name was Phu Quoc.

L. BURGESS: That's how they said it.

K. BURGESS: Yeah. There's a huge prison camp on there. I don't think it's there anymore. But anyway, all the Vietcong, they were sent to this prison. A lot of times you'd see these planes coming in and then they'd land . . . And the boat we were on . . . Basically, what it was, there was a ship and then there was what we called the floating hotel. It was towed and it was three stories high. They had it where they make the water and had all the food. The mail was there. Whatever candy would come in we'd buy it there . . . And my train of thought is gone. Where were we?

L. BURGESS: You were explaining to him what was on the island.

K. BURGESS: Okay. There was a prison camp here. Whatever Vietnamese, it was what they called the hardcore VC, the really bad guys. So they put them on this prison, they fly them in, and you could see them, and they all squatted. And they'd go off into there but I'd never see any of them come out. And from what I understand, they didn't come out. I don't . . . That's just my opinion. I would say they were probably the worst of the worst. They came in, at least three planes a day. The time that I saw, in that area, for six months.

L. BURGESS: I know at this particular point in time there were certain . . . San Francisco was one, New York . . . depending on where the service guys were, you had air mail, you know, special envelopes, all that. And depending on where they were stationed, you sent them to one of those places. And then from there, they were distributed. But it was like there were hubs for mail, for people overseas. Depending on if you were on the Pacific side or the European side, or wherever. So, it wasn't like you sent it . . . You had the Vietnamese address but it was sent to a certain place. And they were accumulated and then they were shipped out.

K. BURGESS: Yeah, it was, I would say it was weeks before it got to you.

NICHOLS: Okay. So how much news from home did you hear while you were deployed?

K. BURGESS: What do you mean, by mail?

NICHOLS: Yes. Did you hear any news?

K. BURGESS: I mean about what was going on in Vietnam? They didn't talk about it. My parents didn't. They were just wondering how I was doing. They never say, like, "Were you in firefights?" or anything like that. And I never talked about that. The only time I talked, I did tell them about that instance when things got about how I felt. My mom was upset. And my dad too. My dad didn't write. Mom basically wrote all the letters. But I would say they both had

comments on it. They were concerned. I was reluctant to tell them but officers said I needed to let them know. I was the second of seven children. Yeah.

NICHOLS: How did controversies over the war affect you while you were in the country?

K. BURGESS: You mean in Vietnam?

NICHOLS: Yes.

K. BURGESS: I . . . It didn't affect me, really. I didn't know the political part of it. We were just doing our job. I mean, I didn't know that there was a problem . . . I knew there was a problem when we were coming into . . . when we flew into California, coming back from Vietnam, and they told us if we put on our civilian clothes . . . because we'd be a target for the protestors. I would say 90% of us said, "To hell with that. I'm wearing my uniform." And basically, when we flew in there, we had to go to keep . . . They were there. So we basically went through another area so we didn't have to deal with them. But they told us we'd have problems at the airport too. But I was already pissed off, so I didn't care. And I would say, yeah. There was one instance when we were approaching the Bay Area, along the coast. You could see the lights. It was at night when we were flying. You could see the coast. And when we landed, I almost cried. And once you got in there and they told us what was going on. We went from happy, to crying, to pissed off. It was just a lot of emotions going on. You know when they're telling you, you're gonna be approached by protestors, we had no idea what was going on. So it was kind of a roller coaster that night. You know, and really not knowing what we were gonna deal with, because they told us they would be at the airport too. But that didn't happen for me anyway. It was like three in the morning when we got there. And then I had no problem there, I didn't see it. But we were told about it. That there would be problems. But once I got to Texas and got into Dallas and got on the . . . Well, the only thing they had coming to San Angelo was the old prop planes, two propellers, one tail. And we were flying in and the plane goes bump, bump . . . and hey! I'm alive. [Laughter]

You know, in getting home, that was very emotional. I had no clue. We didn't even know what a protestor was. I didn't even encounter that. I was there . . . there for a week and then I had to go to New Orleans, which is where I was going to be stationed. And basically, that was a Coast Guard district. I wanted to be there because my grandfather was there. And then my choice duty ended up being in the armpit of Louisiana. But, you know, I spent six months there. At least six. It was interesting for me to get out of Venice . . . I had an overbite and my chin was out. So I went to the hospital . . . Well, the Coast Guard doesn't have . . . It was under a . . . merchant marines. So we were in there and I had an overbite. So basically, they broke my jaw and brought it back. So I was in there six or eight months.

Now, let's see, they had a hurricane coming in there, and this was just before the surgery. And they were wanting me to go back out there. Luckily for me, the doctor said, "No, we're gonna do this." Because this is one of the first they ever did. And I was lucky because they were gonna send me back and they said no. And that's what saved me from going back to Venice. So when I got out of there, they were talking about sending me back. They said, "Yeah, you will." And I said, "No, I won't." I'll go AWOL. I was a loose cannon then. So I was stationed in New Orleans and that's where I finished my term.

NICHOLS: So did you expect to face any challenges when you returned to civilian life?

K. BURGESS: I didn't because I knew what San Angelo was like. And in New Orleans . . . I didn't . . . It wasn't . . . I think the West Coast had the most as far as protestors but the Gulf Coast wasn't that way. Even when I was in Venice, there was a parish, and Judge Perez. And he didn't like the government, period. He was pretty much a dictator there. So we went to a party. All the fisherman wanted me to go and we went. I got drunk and started mouthing off about not liking Judge Perez and the guys said, "No, no, you don't wanna do that!" They had a jail across the river and you could see it. It was about a foot above the ground and you didn't wanna end up going there. You were in a dictatorship when you were there. As far as they were concerned, they didn't belong to the United States. So it was interesting. All the fisherman, all the people treated me good. It was good.

L. BURGESS: We still have lots to go!

NICHOLS: Did you face any challenges whenever you returned to civilian life?

K. BURGESS: I didn't.

NICHOLS: So after your time in the military, had your conception of the United States changed?

K. BURGESS: No, I felt it like it was my duty to serve my country. I never had any ill feelings against what I went through. I knew there were people who went through worse than I did. Or I think they did. I'm not a flag waver or anything but that was part of my duty. I basically . . . And another thing I didn't say. The deal is, I knew if I went to Vietnam, my brothers wouldn't have to go. They only let one boy go from each family. And that was part of the reason too. I mean, Brent, who was under me, he went to Germany. And then Mark, well, the draft was over with by then.

NICHOLS: How do you feel about your military service looking back?

K. BURGESS: It was interesting. It wasn't boring, that's for sure. I met a lot of different people with a lot of different ethnic backgrounds. It was a pretty fast four years as far as I was concerned. New Orleans was different, you know. It's a different culture there. It's not like down south where the real Cajuns are. New Orleans is a wannabe Cajun. They're not really Cajuns. But it's the atmosphere. And New Orleans is a party town. New Orleans never shuts down. It's going all the time, 24/7. Except when the Catholic church bells ring. [Laughter]

L. BURGESS: And he can say that because we're Catholic!

K. BURGESS: It's different. Trying to think of anything else here. I don't know. Any other questions? I'm not sure.

NICHOLS: Well, when were you discharged?

K. BURGESS: In '70.

NICHOLS: Okay. Do you have any advice for the young men and women who are just entering the service?

K. BURGESS: Anyone to give yourself, play the game. Make life easier on yourself. Learn from your mistakes. And share with each other, so someone else doesn't make the same one. But don't lose your integrity. It's your right to respect but you gotta respect other people too. There's a balance. In the military or civilian life. I'll hear a lot of people who are lacking and then I say, you need to change.

NICHOLS: Do you have any objects, items, or correspondents that you wish to share with the project?

K. BURGESS: Well, there's a lot of misconceptions about what happened in Vietnam. I can pick out the ones when they start talking about war stories. If you talk to someone who has really been in combat, it's a different conversation. You can tell pretty quick this is being made up. It's like bragging rights. I want you to hear my story. I can tell . . . The guys that have gone through rough times, most times, they don't even talk about it. It's like dragging up bad memories. It comes down to . . . And then, unfortunately, what'll come up in the conversation is, "What did it feel like to kill somebody?" I didn't encounter that. I knew we did. I knew we killed people but we didn't actually see it. There's a difference in seeing it, instead of just being told there were so many casualties. But when you see someone that's been all shot at and ripped apart, that's a whole different feeling. I mean it's like that person can't talk back to you, period. That's it. And that could be me.

L. BURGESS: Do you want to share any of this with them? The articles or pictures?

K. BURGESS: Ah, here. Okay. This picture here is political. This is what was done.

L. BURGESS: The archives.

NICHOLS: The West Texas Collection?

L. BURGESS: It was on . . . I don't know . . .

K. BURGESS: The exhibit. Basically, this was done, they went around to everyone that was in Vietnam and this was taken. There was a photographer. And basically, what it was, was he was showing . . . and my picture was in . . . let me see if I got the article somewhere in here. [Searching material] It was an article in the *Standard Times*, "Kenneth K. Burgess is in Vietnam" . . . There's a clip in here somewhere. That's the map there. Phu Quoc.

NICHOLS: Awesome. Thank you.

L. BURGESS: I'll look through there. You have several copies of things . . .

K. BURGESS: We can leave the whole thing with you. This guy was . . . I went to the Wall when they brought it in, and this guy was from San Angelo. He was a marine. Jimmy Wells. I grew up with him and he got killed over there. Let's see. Plaques, pictures of my sisters. This is the guy I went into service with, David. This is my luggage deal out of Saigon.

NICHOLS: Okay.

L. BURGESS: These are just things he's printed online about the Vietnam stuff.

NICHOLS: This is . . .

K. BURGESS: This is my discharge.

NICHOLS: Oh, here we go, date of entry, 18th of July, 1966.

K. BURGESS: This is my address here, okay, and this where I was discharged. Honorable discharge. Yeah, this is my discharge paper. Ah. There's some officers, a cook, seamen second class. That was the radar guy. This is the gunner's mate. He kept the machine guns going. That's another officer, and a chief and an officer.

L. BURGESS: I think it's challenging for young people to understand that there was no communication.

K. BURGESS: This is how we dressed. Just to keep cool. It was so damn hot and humid. It was unbelievable, the humidity. I mean we didn't wear . . . The only time we wore, you know, that was our helmets to keep us, if we got hit in the head. But it didn't matter, because it'd go right through it anyway. Yeah. That's my honorable discharge.

L. BURGESS: It's the same as this one. We have two daughters. We have a lot of duplications so they'll have the same when he's gone.

K. BURGESS: Okay. Let's see, what else. Oh, this is something. It was during this period of time. This was when Nixon was in office and he was run out. And they said, well . . . And a lot of people didn't want it. I wanted it. This is history! This is from Nixon.

NICHOLS: Oh, wow.

K. BURGESS: This is when I served from '66 to '70. That's my serial number. That's very political. I wanted it!

NICHOLS: Would you like to share anything else about your service?

K. BURGESS: I don't really . . . if you have questions I'll answer them. But as far as my service, it was . . . I knew I had to do it and the less waves you make, the quicker you get out. But I didn't have that feeling about it. I met some good people and I enjoyed . . . I knew had to do the job. If you do your job and if you just . . . you don't like it and you beat yourself up, it's gonna be

longer. Just get it over with. But I met some nice people. And I met some assholes too. But that's life. So, yeah.