Transcription: Stephen McGrew

Today is Friday, June 14th, 2013. My name is James Crabtree and this afternoon I'll be interviewing Mr. Stephen McGrew. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, and Mr. McGrew is at his residence in Katy, Texas. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us. It's an honor for our program.

Stephen McGrew: Thank you very much, Mr. Crabtree.

Yes sir. Sir, the first question that I always start off with with all of these interviews is please tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went into the military.

Stephen McGrew: OK, I grew up in the state of Kentucky, and raised on a farm, very poor growing up. I was the oldest of eight children, and I just went through our daily chores of taking care of the farm and on to school, and that kind of thing, just basic farm type life, country life.

As you were growing up, did you have anybody in your family that had gone in the military, any relatives or that sort of thing?

Stephen McGrew: Oh yes, yes sir, I had a half brother, James, that was in World War II, and then I had another half brother that was in the Korean war, Robert, and he retired out of the Air Force after 22 years. And then I've had many nieces and nephews that served Sam, and my son also served.

When you were growing up on the farm in Kentucky, did you think at some point yourself that you were going to enter the Army?

Stephen McGrew: No sir, at that time in late 1960s, the draft was still going on, and I was told even by my military brothers that they wouldn't take me because I didn't weigh enough, I was too light. That was kind of an ongoing joke around, but they wanted me anyway.

So you did get drafted in.

Stephen McGrew: I did get drafted.

Was that a surprise for you when you received the notice?

Stephen McGrew: Yes it was because I'd heard all the altercations and everything, and about how they were taking people that were single mostly first and that kind of thing, so selfishly, I guess I rushed my marriage, I get married 10 months before I got drafted thinking that would kind of shield me from that, but it didn't.

And during that time, the Vietnam War obviously was pretty unpopular here in the United States and when you got the notice that you were drafted, did it tell you what branch of service you were going in?

Stephen McGrew: Oh yes sir.

So it told you the Army.

Stephen McGrew: United States Army.

And how long did you have before you had to ship off for boot camp?

Stephen McGrew: I had about three months to get everything in order. I had a preliminary physical exam some months ahead and then I had to have a follow-up once they told me, said come on, report.

How did your wife handle the news that you were going to be drafted?

Stephen McGrew: I was married 20 years old and she was 19 and just started a new life and it was just something never been around before. I'd been raised like I said on a farm all my life, never really traveled, so I guess I kind of looked at it optimistically as being able to see the world or something.

Where did they send you for your basic training?

Stephen McGrew: I went to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for eight weeks of basic.

I guess that wasn't all that far from where you grew up if it was in Kentucky, right?

Stephen McGrew: No, it was about 90 miles away from where I grew up, but it was in January and February which were in the winter months, and that was pretty tough basic being in the cold.

Sure. How many guys in your boot camp platoon were also drafted?

Stephen McGrew: At the time I would guess at least half.

And so you went through your basic training. When did you find out what your specialty would be?

Stephen McGrew: Oh that was at the end of the basic training. They kind of give you, they said we'll guarantee you not to be up front or in combat if you'll sign up another year and become regular Army, and I said well no, I'll just take my chances with this. Unfortunately I ended up being in infantry.

Basic infantry, yes sir. When this was in 1968, is that correct?

Stephen McGrew: Yes.

I guess you had to have known then at that point that you were going to go to Vietnam, right?

Stephen McGrew: Yes, I was pretty sure I was. Once I left Fort Knox, I was sent to advanced training, for the IT in Fort Polk, Louisiana, for what's called Tiger Land, and that is infantry training prep for Vietnam.

Did you follow the news of the war very much or did you try to block a lot of that out?

Stephen McGrew: I think I blocked it out. I think I was very busy with other things and I tried not to watch it so much on TV or anything like that. I just figured I would go eventually.

So how long did you spend there in Fort Polk doing the jungle training?

Stephen McGrew: Eight weeks.

And then at that point did you get a little bit of time before you had to go to Vietnam?

Stephen McGrew: Yes sir, I had two weeks in May of 1968 after I got to Tiger Land, and went home to see my family and all that, and prepare for going away and saying goodbye to everybody, and then was leaving, so I had to report to California in two weeks.

Was that a hard time, those two weeks, spending that time with your family knowing that you were getting ready to go to Vietnam?

Stephen McGrew: No, best I can remember, it was an angelical time catching up and just being with, since I was from a very large family and a newly wed and all that, it was just a lot to think to take on at the same time.

So you didn't have a lot of worries then. You just enjoyed the time with the family and didn't worry about the future I guess.

Stephen McGrew: Well, all the worry I carried with me was and at the time I left and sent off, my mother-in-law was in the hospital deathly ill, and I had to leave my wife with that, too, so she was losing, in fact, her mother died while I was making my trip over to Vietnam, so I didn't learn about that until I got the first letter, so after she lost her husband to war and her mother to death the same week -

Yeah, that's got to be tough. What are your first memories of Vietnam when you arrived there?

Stephen McGrew: Just getting there and seeing all the terrain around. I arrived in Benhua, that's the main spot where they come in and get you designated for your spot, and I came in there and just saw people laying around on sandbags and just fully clothed, and I really kind of first opportunity to say this is how people sleep, just see where they can sit down and drop? That was my first exposure to it.

How long did it take before you got assigned to an individual unit?

Stephen McGrew: It was about three days, so that first day I was there, they just give you some kind of details, and I remember going on details being that just it was a crappy job, that was a real crappy job because they had the portable toilets for the officers and the guy was to go around and pull the barrel out of the portable toss and burn everything with diesel fuel, so that was kind of my first detail job.

Yeah, that's not a good job.

Stephen McGrew: And then I waited for my next set of orders to come, it would be a couple of more days, so the second and third day, I filled sandbags up in the open field. So it was just a detail waiting to be assigned, and finally I got my assignment.

And who did they assign you to?

Stephen McGrew: On the fourth day I was there, I got my orders and I was assigned to Company D, 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry 101st Airborne Division, and it was far north, all the way to the border, the DMZ.

So did they have to fly you up there to join your unit?

Stephen McGrew: Yes, a group of us assigned, they flew us up on the C-47 aircraft and it was like being cattle shipped up there because there was no seats on the plane. Everybody sat on the floorboard of the plane and flew up there, and flew into a city called Way.

OK, and did you have any gear you had, or did you get issued gear when you joined your unit?

Stephen McGrew: Well, I had some gear, but most of the unit's gear when we got there had a different kind of a rough bag and packings and that kind of thing, so that's how we ended up getting assigned and came in there to a small outpost camp.

And this was in the summer of 1968?

Stephen McGrew: Yes, this was in May of 1968.

What do you remember about joining your unit? Was there any particular advice that you were given when you joined?

Stephen McGrew: No, basically the thing was to say you're here and you've had your training, you've had your 16 weeks of training, you're prepared for this, and basically you're infantry, meaning you're a grunt, and you will be packing and off and in the jungle.

What do you remember about your platoon commander and your platoon sergeant?

Stephen McGrew: Well, it's very much I remember about the bravest man I ever was around was my platoon sergeant. His name was Sergeant Herman, and the story about getting up with him was when you're in a unit, you're in a platoon and three platoons make a company, and each platoon had a platoon sergeant and a platoon leader, which was a first lieutenant, and basically first of all we were just in a squad, and your platoon turns leading the company. Every three days you rotated to the front and roped for ale or watched for boobytraps or ambushes or anything like that. So after a few days of, I'd say weeks after getting into critical situations and other responsibility, like anyone else I started politicking for another position, and what happened was our radio which was called RTO operator got killed, so Sergeant Herman needed an RTO. So I said well, if I become the RTO meaning I won't have to have perimeter watch at night and that kind of thing, so Sergeant Herman checked me out and said here you are weighing 126 pounds, and you want to be my RTO. You realize that you're adding 35 pounds, you're adding the 25-lb. radio and you're adding extra barrier. I said yes sir, I know I want to do it, but I can carry this. So he took me on and many a time he got me out of many a scrapes and seeing his bravery, because he was on his third tour. So it was a pleasure to follow him and for him to show the way and everything.

You had to have known that as a radio operator that they made you a bigger target though, right?

Stephen McGrew: Yes, the end pound laden target and you lost a lot of RTO's, but basically even though you set up in a perimeter at night and you had four people per foxhole, and one person had to be awake all the time, once you was an RTO, you had to have radio watch every night, so meaning you had one hour a night you had to man the radio and listen to it. Unless you had the first watch or the last watch, you never had an uninterrupted night of sleep. It was always broken. And that's how I had, but Sergeant Herman, I remember him getting into the fire fights and he would always lead us out of it because he was the kind of guy that was like that, and one of the special things, I remember him now, he wore these big framed glasses that were right thick, and then in the morning the humidity was real bad and I could see him, so why am I following this man? This man can't see where he's going, his glasses are all fogged up, walking through the jungle. I hope he can see what he's doing, because I got concerned.

Tell us sir what some of the other soldiers were like in your platoon. Are there any that stand out in your memory?

Stephen McGrew: Yeah, I guess so. What stand out with me was most of the people had nicknames or they had shortened names, and to my day, when I got back here after years later with the Internet and everything, you were able to look up people, and I can only recall a handful of names, four or five names, full names of people. And those that got killed, and able to look them up on the wall and that kind of thing, wasn't able to find 'em out. But I know that we had a guy that always was a funny guy. He kind of kept the morale up. His name was Liston, and the funny thing he always said about it was here I am, I'm out here in the jungle, he said my MOS is a cook. I thought how did a cook guy here, I don't know if I won't be able to battle out with you or not. You haven't had no advanced infantry training being this is a cook out here. And I remember a medic and his name escapes me, but our medic was one of the most important people in your platoon because he took care of everybody and he always had scrapes, scratches, jungle rot, any kind of infection you got it would infect real bad, and I know that he always came around and gave you malaria pills. Here's a pill, thank you. I guess I know it's a Monday. You never know what day of the week it was and he kept track of all that, so it didn't make any difference what day of the week, it was all the same, you were in the jungle and you were out there for a month at a time, so the days all run together. When you got your Monday pill it kind of gave you a little mark to know where you was in your time served and everything anyway.

Were you able to get mail from home pretty regularly?

Stephen McGrew: Yes, mail from home was very much of a morale lifter because when my mother wrote me, my wife wrote me, and older sister wrote me, so I got a letter, you only got, I was in long range recon outfit, so they only dropped out the supplies and food every five days. So that's when you get your mail, hopefully. Sometimes they made it every other time for mail. But when you get your mail, you get your food and C-rations and everything and water for five days, and it's up to you, it's your responsibility to make your food and water last for five days. One of the things I remember about that is that most people run out of water on the fourth day, and you had to hide your own water from your own comrades or sleep on it or something because people would be taking your water after the fourth day.

Yeah, that's not good. How long did it take for the letters to get to you?

Stephen McGrew: Yeah, I kind of recall that. I have all my letters. Most of the letters, I got every one I've ever gotten from my mother or the ones I've written to her. I was able even the ones I wrote to her, years later I was able to get those letters and scan 'em and put 'em into a recorded – so I have all the letters that I wrote home to her.

That's great.

Stephen McGrew: I would guess the letters would come in about a week, something like that.

OK, and then did you have much idea of what was going on back in the United States? I know 1968 is considered to be a pretty tumultuous year with the election and some rioting and assassinations and that sort of thing, were you following a lot of that or did you just try to focus on where you were?

Stephen McGrew: We had no media resources or anything. Everything in the letter that was wrote to us would tell us what was going on, and no, it was all business. We didn't know anything about politics, we didn't know anything about what was going on back in the States or anything unless some of the other guys shared some of their letters and that kind of thing. It was pretty much of a block out. It was a dead time to where you was all business and all focus and you're out there to stay alive, so it took all your focus to do that.

How long did you end up spending there in Vietnam ultimately?

Stephen McGrew: Well, I guess it was about six-seven months totally, because I went in in May, and I returned in September.

The way it worked, you wouldn't go as a unit, right? You were an individual that would join a unit and then I guess your time would be up and they would send you home, is that right?

Stephen McGrew: Yes.

How did that affect your platoon when there were some people that were short timers, knowing that they were getting close to going home? Did that change how they behaved?

Stephen McGrew: Oh yes it did, and people that you knew that were short timers, and you knew who short timers were because at the end, when they got within a month or so of going home, they were almost useless to be a defender on the front line because they would take very few chances. They would get behind a rock or a log and almost wouldn't return any fire or get into any scrapes or anything, because seen so many of them, short timers, that was very spooky and at the same time they always had your back or the other people's back because they were getting so short that they didn't take any extra chances.

I've always heard and read about that and I was curious what your experience was and it seems pretty consistent. Tell us, sir, how often during that time you'd go out, I guess you'd go out on patrols and that sort of thing, would you be out in the bush for a couple of weeks at a time, or what was a normal cycle?

Stephen McGrew: No, I was in a recon unit and our cycle was a month mostly. We would track and come in once a month and get a shower and a hot meal whether we'd need it or not. So that was always kind of a point to look for because I remember 29 days coming in and all that, at

20 years old I didn't have many whiskers then, in 29 days I had to have a shower or a shave or hardly even a toothbrush or anything like that, so all your water, basically I carried two gallons of water to last for five days, and you didn't use it for bathing or anything. Most a lot of it went on the back of your neck. You had a green towel that you kept around your neck and you kept that towel wet on the back of your neck. So obviously half of my water went there and the other half was to drink. So that was how the water supply lasted.

How often would you have contact with enemy forces?

Stephen McGrew: Oh, almost every day. But like I said, we'd rotate platoons every day, so usually the front platoon would make contact or get in an ambush or find a nest or a booby trap or something, and I can only remember a couple of times that we got ambushed in the middle and one time we got ambushed from the rear. It was pretty much you could count on three-fourths of the time that your action would be with the patrol that was in the front.

Do you remember the first time you were involved in combat?

Stephen McGrew: Oh yes because it was I guess my first exposure was when I got to my assignment I was sent out, Company D was out to this artillery base they were setting up and we were going to spend a couple of days there, and it was just a hillside mostly on top of a hill, and had some underground bunkers in it. I remember getting attacked one night there from the east side. I heard some firing going on, explosion and that kind of thing. Then I heard two people talking, yeah, they had killed a couple of people that tried to attack from the east side. My exposure was at the first dead person I saw this one next morning I went up to the chow line up the hill, out in line you get in this tent and get you breakfast, and here they had this enemy laying out there dead, laying out there on the path and kind of breaking you in, saying here's what it is. This is what you're up against. He was laying there dead and we just walked by and seen him. I know the first combat I was in in the jungle, a platoon up front got some fire and they says all clear, meaning they sent the word back "all clear, all clear," so we walked ahead and I remember stepping over a log and I stepped on something and I said what is that? I didn't know if I stepped in mud or what, and I looked down and I stepped in the chest of a dead enemy soldier laying there. He had a bullet hole in his head and I remember looking at him and they had to be the 101st, a white eagle patch was stuck in his bullet hole and he had an ace of spade, somebody stuck an ace of spade in his hand. I said well this is what I'm up against here. I learned that was kind of the way the unit did, if they left a dead enemy on the trail somewhere, they left their sign, we've been here.

As the time went on that you were there in Vietnam, do you think you got more used to being in combat? Did you get acclimated to it, or was it something that you never fully adapted to?

Stephen McGrew: I think some of both. I noticed that after a few fire fights and seeing some of your own guys get hit and wounded, you get a little more bitter about the enemy and what they're out there for. I remember one time killed a guy that was coming down the trail, and he ended up being, looked like an officer because he had a safari hat on and an old Mauser German rifle, that kind of thing, and we set down just like it was nothing and ate our C-rations right there where he was laying, and I don't know if I was feeling a little more hardened or what, but I remember just taking his belt, I took his trenching tool and canteen cup, things that I needed because just like swapping out stuff, and things you were going to keep for yourself I guess, or rather than just leaving there for some material thing that he had that you can use, you did it because think about the Army, in the U.S. Army, a trenching tool probably weighed 10-12

pounds and it was very heavy and very cumbersome. The enemy had like, almost like a sandbox kind of shovel on him, a little light thing that weighed several pounds, so I carried that the rest of my time because it was easier digging foxholes and things with it, rather than having something big and heavy and cumbersome.

Sure. Were there ever any times that you captured any of the enemy?

Stephen McGrew: No, I don't remember us ever catching anybody alive. It was almost always over that in the central highland up in the lakes, it was called the Ashal Valley, which is near the Laos border and also way up north and the valley was about 25 miles long, and we spent most of our combat time in there. That's where we lost probably two-thirds of our company in that valley. Anybody we ran into out there was the enemy, so one of the things about being out around the VC, I was always engaged with the NVA which is the regular Army because almost anybody you saw out there was the enemy, so there wasn't really any civilians out there to worry about, whether they were enemy or not enemy.

I was going to ask you about that. I guess that probably made it easier in some respect because I would imaging dealing with civilians and the Viet Cong would have been really difficult and at least maybe it was a little bit more clear cut when you're just dealing with the NVA.

Stephen McGrew: Yes that's true because I thought about that, too, after hearing other stories after I got back about people had to deal with VC and some of that kind of thing, because it wasn't uniformed people. I would say 90 percent of the people that we made contact or got fire fights with were uniformed soldiers.

A lot of times I guess when you'd rotate back and you'd come back to get your showers and that sort of thing, was that at a battalion headquarters?

Stephen McGrew: Yes, it was like a battalion headquarters. We'd come back and get some medical attention for scrapes and scratches, and like I said, get a shower which would be cold but very refreshing, and get a meal out of something other than a tin can.

I'm sure that was a relief.

Stephen McGrew: I can remember one of the hardest things about the jungle was that it was so hot, 105, 111, you're carrying 100 pounds, and humping and trying to get through the thing and all the vines and hills and terrain to get through, but it seemed like you could almost daily or almost around dusk it would rain a shower enough to get you wet. You would end up hot all day, and believe you could be that cold all night because you went to sleep wet and that would bring in the leeches, and you had to learn how to sleep out of the leeches. I started making me a little hammock out of what's called a poncho liner which is a nylon camouflage liner and would tie each end to a tree and that would get you a couple of inches off the ground. Anytime it was damp or wet, you'd want to get off the ground. The first thing you do is get up and de-leech yourself because there would be several of them on you.

Yeah, that had to have been miserable. Did you share any of those types of stories with your family when you were writing home to them, or did you just leave all that out so you didn't worry them.

Stephen McGrew: No, I don't think I put any of that in the letters. I know I didn't to my mother. I may have to my wife or some other, but I didn't bring those stories home. I just remember a lot of things that to me the combat was hard enough, but the worst part about it was just I guess mainly the terrain and the elements. I think about that and being fortunate enough raised in the country, raised on a farm, hunting and fishing all my life, and there was comrades out there with me that had been raised in New York City and every place else, and I saw it very, very hard on people that had not been exposed other than their training to the elements. A lot of people got heat stroke, they got shock, they just got exposure shock because 16 weeks or 8 weeks of training or whatever they had was not enough to prepare you for the elements. I thank goodness I'd been raised in the country all my life and it was somewhat second nature to me, as bad as it was.

I noticed sir on the form that you filled out, you mentioned on there you received two Purple Hearts. I was wondering if you could tell us about that.

Stephen McGrew: Well, essentially I had one Purple Heart on paper, but I got wounded twice, and being that the first time because there was no record, was not sent back to our MASH unit to be treated at the time, so I guess the scariest day of my life was the first time I got wounded because that's where Sergeant Herman comes into play, and he saved my life. We were scaling this hill and we were supposed to be outnumbered 16 to 1 or something like that, and we were taking this hill called L1100, and as we went up there patrolling up the hill, we would go across some clearings in different spots and in our training you needed to stay 15 feet apart, move across three and four at a time and that kind of thing. Well, I was in the middle of that clearing when we got ambushed, and I hit the ground facing uphill, and I could see the muzzle blast coming out of the bushes, and of course I pointed my body to make it small as I could. I could see the muzzle blast and the bullets were hitting me round, kicking up dirt and rocks, and as these pebbles and things hit me, I kept thinking I'm getting hit, I'm getting hit. And then twigs and stuff and cutting off limbs and they're falling on top of you. How can I not be hit? But everything was kicking around me, and I looked to my left and here comes Sergeant Herman, and he comes running over the hill and he barrels over that rock, crushed on your knees, and shooting his modified M16, and he drives the guy back. Then I hear some more shooting and looked up and here he comes, he's coming over the rock and he gets shot in the back. So now that he kept us, he told about it, the three of us was pinned down, and we went and got him and carried him back to the clearing out of sight. So your adrenaline is sure pumping and you're still going back down the hill, so we did that and one of the guys looked at me and said look, we got your foot. I looked and I knew my foot was squishy, but it was squishy most of the time from wet and mud and water anyway, so I didn't think anything about it. But I looked and my boot was full of blood and I had a hole in the side of my boot, so that's when I realized I'd been hit and I didn't even know I'd been hit. Just adrenaline pumping and everybody trying to duck and run and everything. But the medic got my boot off and sock off and he treated it and said it's mostly it's a flesh wound. It didn't hit any bone or anything. So that was the first time that I got hit. So I didn't even leave the field that time. I just know we had Sergeant Herman who was hurt now, and we had to get him down the hill and call in a Medivac for him. Well, they're getting late and one of the things you got to remember about Medivac's, Medivac helicopters, they don't land at night, so we knew we had to get him out pretty quick. I don't know if we had a couple of bodies or five or six people hurt or whatever it was, but we went back down the hill and we spoke to the Medivac to come in. We called them in and here they come. So at the time they had these like morphine pens. It looked like a ballpoint pen or kind of a pen like, just spring load it into your leg and so you don't really hear the morphine until you know the helicopter is coming. You're not going to be out of their head after you get the morphine. So give 'em the

morphine and the helicopter's coming in, and I remember the helicopter getting almost down to the treetop and it started taking fire, and I see the bullets glancing off the blades and that thing pah-pah-pah-pah. And then the helicopter decided he wasn't going to take any of that and he wasn't going to come in and get the rest of us and he left. Now we have a sergeant that's shot up with drugs and wounded people and dead bodies, and here the helicopter just leaves us in the dark, wouldn't come back. So that was probably the worst night over there because I remember after the helicopter left, they called on the radio and got on the radio and said well, we got to get these people out of here. Said well, there's no place clear enough to get 'em out. You'll have to move back to your last LV, which is ___ from a few days ago, where it's two or three days ago you got to at least fly. That's the last place you got to reach flying, that's where you'll have to move back to where we can pick you up. So we moved all night through the dark and I remember it was so dark and raining and wet, and I was helping carry this body, and had a dead person and four of us were carrying one, each corner in the poncho, and we'd move through the jungle. But the bombs had blown over the trees to where they were lapped like tree laps, and we had to go over logs and under logs and over tree laps with that body, and about every 15 minutes you'd change corners, a different hand in front, back, so four people took turns carrying the bodies. Then we called artillery which like I said was our kill, give them the coordinates and tell 'em to fire ammunition round, and they would shoot these parachutes that would burn for five minutes, these little parachutes would float down. So we moved for five minutes the best we could while we had light and then when it went dark, we'd rest again and change corners, handle, and took us all night like that. I remember it must've been a thousand meters or so we moved back through the jungle. We got back close to it the next morning. I remember just collapsing in the water hole and then just wet, rainy, wind was blowing, said can't go any farther. They said well, we're here, so we might as well just rest where you're at. So the horriblest thing I remember about that was that after I slept a while, I remember waking up with leeches on me. The leeches kind of woke me up. And the wind had blew the poncho off the guy we was carrying. We had him wrapped in a poncho before. And we really couldn't see him, we were just carrying him, and now the wind blew it off of him and he had been shot in the face and his whole face was gone, and I looked and he didn't have nothing but an ear, and a piece of the scab left on him. I remember covering him back up and getting him over to the edge and it was almost daylight again. We called in the helicopter, and I remember we were so mad at the helicopter the night before because he wouldn't take a chance to come on in and get the few. Now we see another helicopter come in that couldn't get in on the fire base like we wanted to. He had to come in and it was on this valley, this valley divide, half a mile peak, and he brought the helicopter in and landed with one rudder on the side of the mountain and he sat there and hovered, and he hovered until everybody got loaded. We loaded the bodies, we loaded the wounded, got Sergeant Herman on there, last time I saw him. I watched the heliblade turn into the side of the mountain and I said that mountain blade ain't two feet from the side of that mountain. If he wobbles any at all, he's gonna crash this thing loaded with people. Probably had 8 or 10 people on it. And the funniest thing happened, I just remember everybody was setting and he cut his engine, and that helicopter just dropped over the edge. I said oh no, way to go. I remember 100 feet from the ledge and I went on over there and I looked down over the ledge and I didn't see anything and I was waiting for the crash of the helicopter, and then I heard the Bell helicopter going pah-pah-pah-pah- I looked and I seen the blades going, so he was up and going. So that was the bravest helicopter pilot I saw over there that was able to do something like that.

You said it was the last time you saw Sergeant Herman?

Stephen McGrew: Yes. So that was pretty much the end of that mission because at the time that we went into that valley, we had about 60 and we were down to like 20 something, 22, 23 people left. That's all we had left. So they said rather than, we're not gonna bring two-thirds of new people out to you, we're going to bring you back to the rear and get your showers and whatever it is, medical attention and all that. So I went back. We finally got out of there and flew back to the camp base, we got our medical attention and I got my ankle worked on and got it up in shape, got a shower and hot food, and they brought in 40 new people for us to make our company again. So now we had two-thirds, which is an expression, the term is called cherries, anyone that's never been in a fire fight before was a cherry, so I remember Captain Norris was our commander at the time, his name was Rango Norris. He said well we can't go out to a hot spot like we've been doing with 40 new people. So they give us a new assignment to go out to this artillery base and they were building a new artillery base so they just wanted us to go out and patrol the base of that mountain. It would be an easy assignment so they said. We got out there about three or four days patrolling that mountain, and that's when the worst thing happened to me. My last day in Vietnam was, we'd been through four or five weeks of hell in Ashaw Valley and now we're out here, supposedly had a lesser assignment, and so we were camped at night. Usually you camp with a circle and you have outer perimeters and you have Claymore mines set out front through your perimeter, you have M60 machine guns set out on your perimeter and all that. So that was the time that I guess the enemy had been watching us and we had no contact since we'd been out there on the new assignment, and so we do our normal thing. We bring everything in in the morning and take up our Claymore mines, we take up the M60's and we all get out of our circle and start our patrol straight up the hill. That was when we were ambushed from the rear. I remember standing there and we were waiting on somebody to pass around the intake, that's what you use to get the leeches off, because the other drop of that intake on their head and they just fall off, so you wouldn't bleed then. So everybody made sure they had plenty of intake __, and somehow we got delayed by that and that caused, we were vulnerable at that point, so the enemy started firing RPG rounds and you hear that whish-whish, and you only hear it a second. I remember looking to my left and I saw the blast out of the corner of my eye, and a concussion just ripped me out of my rucksack, and I went flying I remember head over heels for 50 feet or so and I landed and hit the ground, and then I heard the AK47's of the ambush coming in, and here we're all a pile of us because of the explosion from the 37 millimeter, and I flipped over and hit the ground and I remember feeling a body very, very hot from the shrapnel inside me, and I smelled the gun smoke and phased for a minute or two I guess, and I said no, I'm blew out of my rucksack. My radio was wherever my rucksack is. That's the only radio we have in our platoon. So I thought I must get to my radio. That was the first thought I had, and then I knew my head was numb, I was headaching and I couldn't hear from the concussion, and I said I've got to move, I've got to move. So I gathered my muscles on me to jump and run and nothing worked, nothing mechanically would work. I looked down at my left arm and I could see the bone inside my left arm. I said no, this is not good. So I started moving my right arm, and I could move my right arm, so I started crawling on my elbow on my right arm and I got back to my rucksack and got to the radio, called the first platoon and they had to turn around and come back down the hill and drove off the ambush because we were getting overrun, and at the time we had like seven or eight people got wounded by the initial blast. So they come down there and after we got everybody in a circle and got to checking everybody, they come in and said well, you're the third most wounded. The medic said you're the third worst wounded. Said we've got to hold you. We only have two baskets, we have two helicopters coming to lower a basket after the three, but you will not be going in one of the baskets. So you got a head wound and a gut wound, that's got to be taken out. So that's fine. So I remember them carrying me and putting me in a bomb crater and started giving me morphine and I got up and started talking out of my head, and I can't even remember talking out of my head, and then the wife talking out of

my head. But later and probably after 20-30 minutes, they started, I saw baskets coming down through the trees and things, that's fine. But I never saw because we'd already cleared our LZ plenty of time head of time, but they come in and lowered a chainsaw down through the trees, and men started cutting an open area big enough to helicopter land so they could get the rest of the wounded out. So they cleared, took about 30-45 minutes to get all the land clear for the helicopters. So I remember just laying there and getting number and number. I felt like I had a toothache all over, and finally getting loaded onto the floorboard of a helicopter and they lifted me out of there and put me into a MASH unit in Fooba. So that's the memory I had of that, going to the MASH unit hospital and getting operated on. As soon as I got there they started, I remember they put shaving lotion on me, shaving my leg, started taking an x-ray, even though as hot as I'd been out there, they laid me on this cold, flat x-ray table and I said that kind of makes me feel so cold and not feel good to me, but they were x-raying me all over and pushing me out of there, and said what did you have to eat this morning? I said well like I always have, I had a can of fruit, that's all I had. They said well maybe we won't have to pump your stomach. I just had a can of pears or something. I remember them. I looked down and had a person on each leg and they were shaving my leg, shaving the hair off of me and then the mask coming on and put me under. I remember that part of it and I remember them putting me under, I was under for about six hours, and it takes forever to come out of the anesthetic because I remember waking up way ahead of time before I could move. I could hear things around me but I couldn't move. And then I heard the sweet sound of a woman's voice and I hadn't heard a woman's voice in months and months, and I just kept listening to that for a while, one of the nurses. So finally I was able to open one eye at a time and kind of move around. I opened and looked at myself and I was like a mummy, from head to foot I was wrapped in gauze. So basically how they did it there, they just cut you open and get the shrapnel out and then they wrap you in gauze, but they don't sew you up, and so I was at Fooba that time and I stayed there a day, and then the next day I was taken by ambulance to Danang, and it was in Danang that they sewed me up, but it was like wow, half inch stitches like a half inch apart. Sew you, got a wire and crimp it and that kind of thing. So I remember after getting all that stitches in you, I had about 70 in me I think, but you feel like you're sleeping on barbed wire or something, all the prongs and twists in you like that. I remember before they got it sewed up, the worst part of it because changing gauze twice a day and the pulse and the infection coming out with seeping through the gauze and it would dry, and then they would rip it out. I remember dreading it from one change to the other, I was sick to my stomach when they came, everything they changed, took it off. It was two or three days before they sewed me up there. That was probably the most difficult time in the hospital just enduring the gauze changing, the injuries.

How long did you end up spending in the hospital in Vietnam before they sent you to the States?

Stephen McGrew: Like I said, I was at Fooba first, I was at Danang, and then I was sent to Cameron Bay, the third hospital, and then from Cameron Bay, a day or two there, I was sent to Camp Drake, Japan, and in Japan I was in the hospital there for 16 days, and out of that 16 days after like 10 of it, I was sent to another hospital there in Japan, and I started physical therapy then. So that's when my had to start from scratch and learn how to walk again because I couldn't walk at all.

When did you family learn that you'd been wounded?

Stephen McGrew: My wife says it was by Yellow Cab, a telegram came to her, and it just said that, told her that your husband had been wounded in combat, he had multiple shrapnel areas to the arm, back, legs, concussion, ear drum busted, that kind of thing.

I'm sure that had to have been horrifying when she received that.

Stephen McGrew: And the good thing about it, I remember she was went by her cousin at the time she got the telegram and he had just gotten back from Vietnam, so it was kind of a moral support for her at the time it was happening, so that's how they found out about it. Then my mother, I really don't know how she, I think she got a telegram, too. I don't know how long it took from the time I got wounded. I still got the telegram somewhere I've got a copy of.

Were you able to eventually give them a call? Did they let you call home at some point?

Stephen McGrew: No, in fact I never called from Japan at all. So after that 16 days I realized I wasn't going back to Vietnam. Said you won't be wearing combat boots and you won't be carrying no rucksack again, so OK. So from Japan I remember it was going back to the States and I remember being on a stretcher, hospital plane they took me out and I saw Mt. Fuji out there with a snowcap on it. It was 100 degrees out on the tarmac out there in Japan. So I got on a plane and it flew to Fairbanks, Alaska, and they got to Fairbanks, Alaska, they fueled or whatever they did and they opened the plane up by my door on my litter. Inside was stacked like corn wood inside the plane, and I remember looking out the door and seeing snow. I just come from 100 degrees. So the long around story about it, I left Japan at 11 a.m. on September the 16th, whatever it was, and I flew to Scott Air Force, Illinois. The flight was 16 hours. By the time I got there, I caught up with the clock, and I got to the Air Force base and it was 11 a.m. the same day that I left Japan. I lived that day twice. Then from Scott Air Force Base, that was my first contact with family. My brother that was in the Air Force had retired, he was stationed at Scott Air Force Base. Well he was the first family member to see me at the hospital to see me there. So I was probably at Scott Air Force Base about two or three days and they told me they were sending me home to Paralin Army Hospital at Fort Knox. So I went to Fort Knox, and that was one of my last hospitals. It ended up being seven different hospitals when I got there. I was in and out. I was outpatient hospital there for 39 days because I had to come in for therapy. I was able once I got to Fort Knox, I was able to the leave the hospital as an outpatient.

What ever happened to Sergeant Herman?

Stephen McGrew: Over the years I've contacted people in my unit, I even know one or two of 'em that we've had conversations about, and in fact the guy that I know very little about called me out of the blue from Minnesota and said he got my number somewhere, and I don't even remember him, but as we talked, we talked about the same things so I know he was there, and we just don't remember each other. He was remembering Sergeant Herman and he was telling me Sergeant Herman lives in California, and is still alive. I said well if I ever go to the 101st conventions in Oak Haddle, I might be able to run into him because I think he goes to all of them.

Yeah, it definitely sounds like he's someone that you need to track down so you can, sounds like that would be a good reunion.

Stephen McGrew: In fact there's only, in the 45 years now almost I've been back, I've only been to one of my unit's reunions. That was in 2009 in Florida. So I didn't see anybody from my unit there, so sorry to say I have not been to very many reunions. But as you remember, Vietnam veterans when they came back wasn't welcome. So I kind of put it in the rear out of focus for probably 15 years I wouldn't watch combat movies, I didn't talk about Vietnam or any

kind of thing like that. When I had children and our children grew up, I had a daughter and a son, and what brought it to the forefront again I guess finally, it probably took maybe 20-25 years, my son came home from high school and said he was joining the Army. I said well, we need to sit down and talk about this before you do this. And his expression was as a teenager would say, what do you know about the Army? So we had to have a little talk. He was only 16 years old and I never told him my Army story or anything like that, so he was, that was when I kind of started expressing my story, wanted to see things about it, searching in and at the time we had the Internet, and they would go back and find my comrades and names on the wall. And I've been to the Wall in 2006 in Washington DC. I took a trip there and that was good. Those kind of things brought my family back together and I think about how strange that is that I never talked about it. It took something like that to open it up again.

Well that's good, yes sir. Well sir, I really appreciate you sharing some of these memories with us and for our program. It's an honor for us and what we do with these interviews as well is we save these for our archives here at the Land Office, and we have archives that go back to the 1700s. We have the original Registro that Stephen F. Austin kept of the settlers that came to Texas and we have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received when he was killed at The Alamo, and so our goal is to take these interviews and save these for hundreds of years from now so people can listen to 'em and study 'em and that sort of thing. Then also as I mentioned before we started the interview, we're going to send you copies of this to give to whomever you want, just a very small token of our appreciation for your service to our nation. I know everybody here at the Land Office is appreciative of your service and Commissioner Patterson is a Vietnam veteran, and there's a lot of us that are veterans that are still in the Reserves, and we definitely appreciate what you've done, and being able to tell your story I think helps a lot of people, too.

Stephen McGrew: I was thinking about the combat veterans especially. One of the things I learned about coming back was I thought everybody, I was so naïve to think that all Vietnam veterans are in the jungle, they're in combat, but I get to finding out about it, only like 1 out of 20 were actually in combat. So when I go out with my comrades and I'm a life member of the military, the Purple Heart, the VFW, the DAV, all them, but the comrades that are my Purple Heart group are blood brothers literally because we are combat veterans, and combat veterans are a little bit different group and support veterans. We need to support, thank you for it, all of that, but I get jealous when I get by people setting back on the old ice chest and sleeping on cots. I was out on hills every day. Actually people did that in Vietnam? I said I guess I was so naïve, you know, but I thought everybody had a chance to go through the jungle. But I think one of the proudest things is my son after he did join the Army that he was the one, did you get any mail or anything like that? And here he turns around and he goes, he makes it a project to go dig out all the medals and everything and put 'em in a box and display 'em, and the first time, as I said I'd never seen 'em before, they all been hid away, and he puts 'em on a display. So he joined the Army in 1996 and he was in the Army for seven years. He's a Bosnia and coast a little bit.

That's great. Well I hope you can give him a copy of this interview as well. I think they would all appreciate it. Like I said it'll take a couple of weeks but once we get 'em made we'll get 'em in the mail to you and it's just an honor for us to be able to do so.

Stephen McGrew: I thank you for your work and I know Mr. Patterson, I've heard him, heard several speeches from him. Being a Marine, you can only tell a Marine, but you can't tell him much.

That's right. I'm a Marine as well. That's one of his lines he uses a lot and I like it, it's a good one.

Stephen McGrew: I appreciate you all, thank you for your service.

Yes sir, we'll talk again soon and have a good weekend as well.

Stephen McGrew: Thank you.

[End of recording]