

Oral History Transcript

Interviewer: Sam Fleming

Interviewee: John Furgess

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Sam Fleming: Hi, my name is Sam Fleming and I am honored to be joined today by John Furgess, a Vietnam Veteran. Mr. Furgess thank you for taking the time to sit down with me and answer some questions!

John Furgess: Thank you Sam! Happy to help!

Fleming: So, I want to ask you a little bit, I want to start off with Pre-Vietnam life for you. What was it like before the war for you? Where did you grow up? Are you from Tennessee? Or even if you weren't from Tennessee, what got you here to the state of Tennessee?

Furgess: Well, let me make that long story short. My father and my mother were married in 1942. He was a World War II Veteran and had been ordered out of Pearl Harbor six months before the attack and ordered to Langley, Virginia which was the Army Air Core base. I was born 31 March 1943 at Langley Field. It's now Langley Air Force Base. The Army Air Core after the war became US Air Force. My dad was in the Army Air Core. He was from Connecticut. The dilemma after he received his honorable discharge in '45 was where would they live, my mother being from Nashville. They decided on Nashville. They moved to Nashville in 1945, I was age 2. So, raised in Nashville, very happy to be a Nashvillian. Graduated from Father Ryan High School here in Nashville in 1961. Went on to MTSU and interesting story not to bore you to death. We were going to Ryan one morning. We were seniors. My dad was driving I was in the passenger seat, two classmates in the back seat and they were bragging about going to UT Knoxville. And I said well, I am undecided to that effect. They had heard me say that and he was driving. He said John is going to MTSC, Middle Tennessee State College, and take ROTC. And I looked at him and said, "RO What?" Did not know what it was but I tell people that was the beginning of my military career. I loved ROTC at MTSC. Fast forward four years now I'm a senior at MTSC. We had just gotten word that the Middle Tennessee State College would become Middle Tennessee State University the next semester. I said well heck, I'm going to stay another semester so my degree would read Middle Tennessee State University. So I did and graduated. First university class, 20 August 1965. The ROTC to this very day is infantry oriented and seniors generally put infantry as first choice. I put infantry as my first choice when I would be commissioned to second lieutenant upon graduation, but I put MI, Military Intelligence as my second choice. And low and behold my orders came as Military Intelligence for the US Army Security Agency. I remember getting those orders and going to the Sergeant Major and going "What in the world is this?" He said, "Oh John it has to do with radios, you'll like that." And so I did from 1965 to 1970, I was on active duty with the US Army Security Agency, volunteered for Vietnam in '66 and then got orders for Vietnam **pause** I was in Fort Carson Colorado, wonderful assignment, to Fort Hood, Texas. I was a bachelor officer in Fort Hood, Texas with orders to train up for that summer. We were deployed to Vietnam in October of '67, and so we did. The 198th Light Infantry Brigade. Deployed from Fort Hood by train to Oakland, California. We off-loaded right off of the train and on to the ship. Two ships carried 3,000 of us to Vietnam for three weeks across the Pacific. I will never forget that three weeks. We had about eight hours leave in Manila. The Navy Captain comes on and says "Eight hours liberty! Everybody leave the ship!" I said "What?! You're gonna let these people off this ship bound for Vietnam?" I was a new second lieutenant by then. He said "Yes, everybody eight hours liberty." Sam, we had not one AWOL and I am so proud of that group of soldiers. We continued our trip on the Pacific

Ocean onto De Nang. Large base. And this was the October of '67. Offloaded onto LST's. Smaller Naval ship, troop carrier, in the middle of a storm. Terrible storm! I can't describe everyone getting sick everywhere. And finally five hours later, we pulled into Chu Lai, south of De Nang. Chu Lai, large base. The Army was there, the Navy was there, the Air Force was there, the Marines were there. Pulled onto the sand ramp there at Chu Lai and I said to my 1st Sgt, "We're going to war" and he said "Let's go." Big ramp dropped on that LST and I pictured going to shore like John Wayne, but it was very administrative. Had some Navy people there saying you bunch over there, they kept saying bunch, and you bunch over there. We convoyed to our base camp. I remember going into that base camp and the first sign we saw was "THIS BASE FOR MARINES ONLY," which of course it was not but that's what the sign said. Travel a little further to the convoy of military and army vehicles, "THIS CLUB FOR MARINES ONLY." I said what have we gotten into. Finally pulled into our area. The 21 days across the Pacific counted as time and country, so it was a moral factor. The Army had a 12-month tour, the Marines had a 13-month tour in Vietnam. So I fast-forwarded that to get that off my chest for your interview! But that's me! I met my wife in Fort Belvoir, Virginia. She was raised in Clarksville, Tennessee near the 101st (Airborne). Her father had a heart attack when they were over in Germany. They got a medical discharge and moved him to where he was raised in Crossville, TN near Knoxville, where he passed away. So her mother decided with her two daughters that she wanted to move from Crossville to Ft. Campbell, Clarksville, TN to be near that Military Hospital. And so she did. Very courageous. She picked up and moved not knowing anyone in Clarksville. My wife to be, Alma, needed eye surgery and Ft. Campbell sent her to Walter Reed in Washington to get her surgery. One of the first Lasik surgeries in the country, not the first but one of the first. So she was staying with friends in Fort Belvoir, Virginia. We met **pause** I love how people meet and sequentially get married. I was in the officer's club and I was taking graduate classes at George Washington University and I was sitting in the officer's club drinking a cup of coffee waiting on the class that evening. I'm reading the Washington Post and on page two was a little column, "JOHNNY CASH. JUNE CARTER CASH. HAVE SON IN NASHVILLE. JOHN CARTER CASH" Just as I read that, the folk group came walking in, getting set up for music that night. Folk music, very popular. I shouted out, "Hey sing one for me! Johnny Cash is a new father!" They knew I was from Nashville, country music. And I go off to George Washington, drive downtown. Note on the door, pre cell phone days, "I've got the flu. No class tonight, see you next week." I drove back and said well it's too early to go to the BOQ, I'll go to the club. Pulled in, parked, walked into the officer's club in Fort Belvoir, VA, and just as I walked in the folk group says "Captain Furgess wants us to sing one for Johnny Cash. There he is now!" They gave me a standing ovation and said, "Come over and meet this girl from Tennessee!" That's how we met. And subsequently, got released from the doctor in Fort Belvoir and went back to Fort Campbell, Clarksville. I left active duty in 1970 after those five years. I was in love, we wanted to get married, and we married in March of '71. But that's how I met my wife and I've told that story many times, cause I'm interested in how people meet the lady they were meant to marry. She turns left, you turn right, you never meet. And I've heard some wonderful stories on how people meet each other! But I wanted to keep my commission. So we went to the Pentagon one morning before I left active duty, thinking I was going to join the US Army reserve. Walked into the Pentagon, not to exaggerate, but there was a big Colonel sitting behind a desk reading the Washington Post. Hardly looked up at us, myself and another Captain. "What can I do for you?" I said, "Sir, I am leaving active duty have anything in Nashville TN?" "Don't have anything." Hardly looked up. The other young Captain was going to Columbia, South Carolina. He had a job already with the University of South Carolina, Columbia. He said, "I'm going to Columbia, South Carolina." "Don't have a thing." We saluted and walked out. Got out in the hall and he said lets go see the Guard. I said, "What you gonna do? Put the Colonel in jail?" "No no no, the National Guard!" I said ok and he said they're right around the corner. Went around the corner and it said National Guard Bureau. Walked in, two of us, and there was a grey-haired major sitting behind the desk, reading the Washington Post. Two captains walked in and he threw the paper down and jumped up, "Gentleman can I help you? Welcome! What can I do to help you?" I said, "Sir, I'm going to Nashville, Tennessee to leave active duty. Just thought you may have something there." "Oh yeah, wait a minute!" Sam, he turned around dialed a number, handed me the phone and said, "Speak to the Chief of

Staff, 30th Army Division. Tennessee Army National Guard.” That was my introduction to the National Guard. I spent 23 years with the Army-Guard, retired as a Colonel in ’06. And that would have been November of 1993, 28 years after becoming a second lieutenant. So I enjoyed those many years in active duty and the National Guard. Been active with the VFW, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the American Legion. Just thoroughly enjoyed those two organizations and became National Commander of the VFW in August of ’04. August of ’05, it’s a three year run through the national chairs, and in those three years, I have visited all 50 states, 25 countries around the world, and the first National Commander to visit our troops in Iraq, which I am very proud of that experience. And every commander after me has been invited to visit our troops in Iraq, but only one has gotten into Afghanistan. Only one, and he’s a past National Commander from New Jersey. So to tell that very quickly, I’ve had a lot of VFW experience. Still active with my post in West Nashville Post 1970. Very active with my American Legion Post 5. After World War II, Post 5 had 8,000 members, one of the largest in the nation. They told me you do not run for public office in Nashville if you were not a member of the American Legion Post. Today, all these many years later, we have no post home. We meet every Monday for lunch, always with a speaker, about 1,000 members. And that’s the American Legion Post 5. I am very active and very involved with both organizations. I served my time for 20 years as the assistant commissioner for the Tennessee Department of Veteran Affairs, now the Tennessee Department of Veteran Services. Very proud of those 20 years. I worked hard. My wife and I had three daughters, but now have 12 grandchildren. Alma is deceased, she had a massive heart attack two years ago, but she was very supportive of me, and my military and veteran’s groups. And my three daughters are supportive this very day. So that’s me in a quick nutshell.

Fleming: And incredible story and incredible journey. So I want to talk a little bit about Vietnam from perspective. You talked a little bit about getting there. I wanted to ask you what were your first initial thoughts and impressions of Vietnam when you first arrived to the scene?

Furgess: When I volunteered for Vietnam, I was thinking a career military officer. Subsequently, I served five years on active duty but at that time I was thinking career. I volunteered for Vietnam and a couple months later, I received orders to Vietnam. I wouldn’t give anything for that experience Sam. You hear different stories from different Veterans who served in Vietnam. When I was at Chu Lai from October of ’67 to October of ’68, there were 500,000 Americans in Vietnam, half a million. I told them subsequently many times in meetings, I’ve been back three times on VFW visits, and it’s a total different world. At that time, I volunteered thinking a career officer. I needed to have my credentials punched to have served in Vietnam. Very glad I volunteered. Had a super experience. I lost one soldier in those 12 months. SGT Jernigan was my motor sergeant. He came in one morning and said, “Captain Furgess, I feel terrible and I want to go on sick call.” I said, “Sagre go! That’s what they’re there for. You call me when you get back.” About two hours later the doctor called from the division hospital. “Captain Furgess, I’m sorry SGT Jernigan has passed away.” I was shocked and I had said “What?!” He said he had the disease of an old man is the way he put it. That was his third trip to Vietnam. They traced it to Agent Orange from the springs and the jungles. Sergeant Jernigan, he was a young Sergeant from Alaska. US Army, wonderful, very capable Motor Sergeant. And his name is on the wall. And I don’t want to bore you with other stories I had with wonderful troops in my experience. A lot of my people were intercepting NVA, North Vietnamese Army, radio communications. They did a lot of communicating in international Morse Code, and my people were breaking out the code. And it was a real time intelligence mission, which we thoroughly appreciated having that mission. And so those were my early impressions of Vietnam.

Fleming: So, I know you said you volunteered to be in Vietnam. I wanted to get your perspective from a volunteer’s side. What did you think of the draft for the Vietnam war and what were your opinions on people of the younger generation being drafted to go into battle?

Furgess: Well, looking back on it now, all those many years ago, 50 years ago, 2 generations ago, I had no trouble understanding what the draft was all about. People after World War II as you’ve heard the

story, volunteered by the “millions” to join in the war effort, and lost so many thousands in war. But again most of the people in my unit Sam were college graduates. I couldn’t be more selective of a group than the group I worked with. Outstanding individuals. So that was my experience. Some were drafted yes, but many volunteered and they wound up in the Army Security Agency after going through basic training, and advanced individual training. That was my experience but in all my years later, I have heard all these stories about some of the problems with the draftees. Understand, some defiantly did not want to be there. And I’m sorry it developed into that. The war probably lasted too long. The POW’s were released in ’73, and my good friend was one of those POW’s. He spent 5 years as a POW. And I am so proud to say that when I was National Commander of the VFW that we visited Hanoi, which when I was a soldier, I never thought I would be in Hanoi, the capital of the North. Now, the US Embassy is located in Hanoi. So, we flew into Hanoi and we had a meeting with the ambassador. He had a reception. We landed at the airport in Hanoi. The gentleman with me was the Director of our offices from Washington. He says to the captain, “We want to go to Hanoi Hilton.” That’s what we call the POW camp, the Hanoi Hilton. Where do we go, but to a new beautiful modern Hanoi Hilton Hotel! Not the prison camp we thought we were going to. Beautiful hotel. He said no no no the prison. It finally dawned on him where we wanted to go and he took us there. An Army Captain was our guide and he was guiding us through the facility, which is a museum now. John McCain was there as a POW. My good friend was there, and we were going down the hall and there was his picture on the wall of the Hanoi Hilton. I could hardly wait to get home and tell him his pictures on the wall at the Hanoi Hilton. He’s deceased now but he found it hard to believe his picture is on the wall, but it is.

Fleming: You talked a little bit about some stories you had, brief stories from Vietnam when you first got there. Are there any combat stories you are comfortable sharing with us and also do you have any stories you had with some of your fellow comrades you served with?

Furgess: One of my favorite stories about my service there, people have all kinds of stories and all kinds of experiences and I am just one guy talking to you, was the wee hours of 31 January, 1968, which has become known at the Tet Offensive. I was standing next to one of my young Sergeants, about 4 AM, dark. The base was being attacked and we knew that, it’s a large base. We were a good distance away from the base ammunition dump as we called it. All kinds of weapons. I am convinced it was a lucky strike when they hit the dump with rockets. And it went up like noon in a mushroom cloud and my SGT said, “Oh my god! We’ve been nuked!” And I said surely not, that’s all I could say. It knocked us down, didn’t hurt us. Just the concussion from the tremendous blast. Hell, I’ll never forget that experience, I’ve told that a lot. People will have different stories. We were flying north one night in a helicopter flight. Chu Lai to Fu Bai on the DMZ. And about half way up near De Nang, we became aware that we were getting some rockets fired at our helicopter. And the young officer pilot said, “You people sit there and relax. I can get higher than they can!” He kept getting higher and higher and the tracers kept falling down, but I said, “Yeah, but you kept getting further north too and they’re pretty capable.” But we landed without incident. So many other stories, I could go on and on. I’m so proud too Sam I think the fact that, unlike most Vietnam Veterans, I have been able to visit three times. It’s a different generation, a different world. We were blown away by the friendliness of the people we met on those three trips, about a week each trip to Vietnam in ’03, ’04, and ’05. Now, it’s been 14 years ago since I was there, it has continued to grow, continued to develop. Business are standing in line to have business in Vietnam. I am just very proud to have that experience

Fleming: It’s cool to see that you have been able to go back to Vietnam after all those years. I wanted to ask you something about a book related to Vietnam and that’s *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien. It talks a little bit about the stuff the soldiers carried not only necessary for battle, but stuff that was personal to them. And I wanted to ask you what were some of the things you carried with you not only necessary for battle, but personal things that had some meaning to you.

Furgess: Oh Sam, but before I answer that, I would be remised if I didn't mention to you another book called *We Were Soldiers Once*. My closest friend at MTSU was our number one cadet in the ROTC. He became a second lieutenant in June of '65 from MTSC. He didn't want to stay that extra semester, he graduated. First assignment was Fort Benning, Georgia for basic officer's infantry course. The unit he was subsequently assigned to at Fort Benning were getting ready to deploy to Vietnam, the Air Cavalry Division. The colonel walked up to him and said, "Lieutenant, you just got here, and we are getting ready to leave. I want you to come over here with a rare detachment in a couple of months." And he said yes sir. So they deployed in July of '65 on the way to Vietnam. They were involved in the first major battle at la Drang. You may have heard of it. The book became very famous and the movie became very famous, *We Were Soldiers Once*. John missed the big Battle at la Drang because he was still at Fort Benning. John Fuqua was his name. He reported to Vietnam around Thanksgiving of '65, but was killed in action around 31 January '66. Great 2nd Lieutenant, wonderful family, young daughter. I was in Fort Devens, Massachusetts, undergoing basic training for the Army's Security Agency near Boston. I get a phone call from his then widow, Elizabeth. "John, John has been killed. I want you here for the funeral. They said it may be two weeks." He was buried on Valentine's Day here in Nashville, 14 February 1966. Large funeral. The funeral director told me it was the largest funeral up to that time in the city. Media was all over the story in that, John, in those days we would send tape recordings home. And John had sent a tape to his family. They were listening to the tape when the knock came on the door telling them that he had been killed in action. The story then got into the media. John knew Brenda Lee personally, and it just became a wonderful human interest story. Sad that he was killed tragically of course, but a very human relations story. First officer from Davidson County, Nashville, killed in Vietnam. And I was there. Got a leave from Fort Devens, Mass, was there for the funeral, and I will just never forget it. Had he lived, he would have been a General, he was just that sharp and we all knew it, but it just wasn't in the books for John to survive. They tell me he was dead before he hit the ground, killed by a sniper's bullet in an ambush. Thankfully, he didn't linger and suffer like so many soldiers subsequently did. But I tell that. I didn't carry a lot. I was raised a Catholic, still active in my Catholic church, and I carried rosary beads with me everywhere I went, not to be sacrilegious but I just had faith praying to rosary which I still do. Pictures of family, again I was a bachelor officer on active duty, so pictures of my family were keepsakes close by. People would send care packages. Again, a great story of mine, Christmas Eve of '67 comes a care package addressed to me from the VFW post in West Nashville. The Post Commander lived down the street from my parents in West Nashville. Commander walked up the street to my parents and said, "I want John's mailing address." The post was sending then what came to be known as care packages to soldiers in Vietnam. The commander wanted to address one to me, and he did and I got it on Christmas Eve. It was personal things like toiletry items, food things like little cakes and snacks. I was so impressed that they bothered to do that, that I said when I get home, I am going to join this post! And I did. I tell that story many times Sam. The personal act of kindness they did showing they cared enough to send that package, and to think I went on to be National Commander of the VFW, 2 Million Members then. People love to hear that story. It's human interest and I love to tell it!

Fleming: And you still see today with our soldiers those random acts of kindness. You talked a little bit about communication with family and the tapes that you sent, how many of those did you send in your time and do you have any memorable ones that you sent?

Furgess: The most memorable was the one on Thanksgiving of 1967. My parents every year since I was a small child for years would go have dinner with my mother's aunt and uncle, my great aunt and uncle, in a community in Nashville called Woodbine. Right across the street from a coincidence, Brenda Lee. I was able to place a MARS call, Military Affiliated Radio Systems, a MARS call. They patched me through Chu Lai, through Omaha, Nebraska, to Nashville, Tennessee, and I dialed my great aunts number, because I knew that's where they were. She answered the phone. She was elderly, and she asked me how I was doing, and I said I was doing fine. I said how is everyone doing there? She said everybody's fine except your dad. I said what? What's wrong with dad? "Oh he's in jail!" And I heard my mother laughing

as my mother came to the phone and said he's on jury duty because they had sequestered the jury. Well, he wasn't in jail, he was on the jury duty. I've told that many times through the years. I didn't make a lot of calls. Again being a Bachelor Officer, I went on RnR. Every soldier in Vietnam got one-week vacation. I had been there about 10 months and decided to go on vacation, and one of the places to visit was Sydney, Australia. I visited Sydney, Australia. I remember flying from Saigon to Darwin, their northern most city, then from Darwin to Sydney. I was able to see that massive countryside. It took us as long from Darwin to Sydney as it did from Saigon to Darwin. Saigon to Darwin is nothing but water. Darwin to Sydney was nothing but land for the large country of Australia. Spent a very interesting week there, touring, visiting, several shows. We loved the GI's, we love the Australians. To this day, we are allies. We learned not to drink beer with them because they were raised on drinking beer, they know how to do it and it's like water to them. But they are great soldiers and still 50 years later we are allies.

Fleming: That's awesome to see and Australia Trip! Who would have thought during that time period! You talked a little bit about, you served in the Army National Guard for the 23rd Infantry Division in my research?

Furgess: In Vietnam, it was called the Americal Division. They subsequently gave it a number. The 23rd Infantry Division. That was in Vietnam. The Americal Division traces back to World War II, Americans in Caledonia, and they used the name Americal. After Vietnam, the story went that they thought that division would go out of the inventory. I'm told that General Wes Moreland said himself, "No, I want the Americal to stay." They subsequently went out of the inventory. I was very proud of that patch of the Americal Division, the southern cross. Colin Powell, before he retired, wore that patch on his right shoulder because he too was a soldier in the Americal Division. So I met General Powell one time in Washington at a VFW conference. What we had in common was his wife's name was Alma, and my wife's name was Alma. Six months later, he saw me in a meeting, and he said before I could say anything, "How's Alma?" I was so impressed that here is General Colin Powell remembering my wife's name, because that was his wife's name. Of course my wife has since passed away, and I am told he and his wife are doing fine. I see him every once and a while on the news. He was a great soldier; I'd love to have seen him then president candidate, but the story goes that Alma said, "No! You will not run for President." And so he did not but a lot of people including myself thought he would make a great President of the United States.

Fleming: You talked about the 23rd Infantry Division and how you were promoted to being captain. Talk about your journey to becoming Captain and your story?

Furgess: That was interesting because I was promoted 1 February, one day after the Tet Offensive. And I thought to myself when I fell over from that concussion, "Oh my god! I am going to die the same day John Fuqua died." Here it was 31 January '68, I wasn't hurt I was just knocked down, but promoted to Captain one day later on 1 February '68. Just interesting coincidence, the dates. I was still thinking career, but after meeting my wife at Fort Belvoir, and fell in love, decided to get married, leaving active duty in '70, I wanted to keep my commission so I ended up joining the Army Guard.

Fleming: Fantastic Story. And it's cool to see how the National Guard has been such a big part of your life even after the Vietnam war as you talked about. Do you still keep in contact with the fellow comrades that you served with?

Furgess: Very few. Very few. One interesting answer to that question is, I was in to combat development command in Fort Belvoir, my final active duty assignment, Institute of Systems Analysis. There were about a dozen of us military, Army, and a couple dozen of civilian employees of the US Government. One of those civilians was a female technician, a GS 12 in those days. Her husband had just returned from Vietnam, and we became good friends. When I left active duty in '70, we said well let's keep in touch and

her and her husband agreed we should keep in touch. So we did! We Christmas carded for years. Then finally, I got active in the VFW, go through the chairs, attend the Washington Conferences which was an annual event. To include this very month Sam, they met me at the airport in Washington since they've done every year since I left active duty, that's tremendous! They met my wife one time when she was with me in Washington on a visit, and we've kept in touch all these years. And hear it is, she was female employee of the federal government, Dick was a young Sergeant with the Army just back from Vietnam. He worked for Fairfax County, Virginia, now both retired. But to think, even though they are both retired, and the daughter and the grandchildren still meet me every year at the airport for the Washington Conferences. We laughed about that for years. I don't know what word you use other than friendship. To think all these years later, they go out of our way to need to know when I am coming to Washington. Dick now has become active with the VFW in Virginia. I am so proud of that. He got his wife Jen to join the auxiliary, and they are big into quilt making at that particular auxiliary. She has a quilt making group of ladies that she tells me about. That's just one story. Gosh there are many stories, but I'd be remised trying to recall other ones, but that one is my favorite right there. Once in a while someone will talk. As a matter of fact, I got a call not long ago, about a month ago, from my university fraternity which was Kappa Alpha. When I was in college, they were not allowed on campus, no fraternities were, and we met off campus for several years. Tremendous experience. No problems, no troubles. And I go off to active duty after graduation and they become affiliated with Kappa Alpha National Fraternity. I get a call one day and it's 1969, I think I was just reporting to Fort Belvoir, and invited to be initiated formally to Kappa Alpha Fraternity on campus. Nice college fraternity houses on campus. So I went down for that ceremony and became active with the alumni association for several years. I then got a call and letter just this past month, inviting me to the 50th anniversary of that group of Kappa Alpha from June of 1919, to that year of June of 1969. So I look forward to doing that. I got a call from the chairman of the reunion and he said he had 50 people who told him they would be there. That's a good turnout of people getting up there in years like myself. But I am very proud of that fraternity experience, great friends, several of them have passed away of course, passage of time, but some good friends too to this very day.

Fleming: That's cool to see how much a fraternity, especially at MTSU, can get you guys and bring everyone back together for recognition especially. I want to ask you too, when you were in Vietnam, I know sometimes there was some downtime for the soldiers to relax and maybe entertain yourself. Did you have anything you liked to do to entertain yourself or any good stories from the downtime?

Furgess: Well, I have never been asked that particular question, but let me think right quick. **Pause** Sam it was a busy time. Looking back, we didn't have a lot of downtime. I do remember a tremendously nice Officer's Club overlooking the South China Sea at Chu Lai, of which officers from the Army, Navy, Air Force and the Marines which from time to time would visit that Officer's Club when time permitted. And I remember one particular Marine officer that every time he would come in that club and I'd happen to be there he would yell, "SWEET JESUS," and then find a seat. So why do you remember that all those years later? I don't know, but I guess if I heard him say it once I guess he said it a dozen times, SWEET JESUS! They hit the officers club with a rocket attack and wiped it out. I remember another fraternity member had sent me a Playboy Magazine subscription and he said, "John you'll enjoy this! The stories, not the pictures!" He's passed away but we laughed for years about him sending me those Playboy Magazines, and I have always remembered that of course. Not a lot of downtime. Busy time. Busy part of the war, but again, just thankful for the experience.

Fleming: The Vietnam War, like you said, you seem to see a lot of stories from Veterans you've shared with. I wanted to ask, because I am always interested to get different reactions. When you returned back to the United States after Vietnam, what was it like to finally be back home? What was the atmosphere like being in Vietnam after a year to be back home?

Furgess: Well, interesting, because when I got off the airplane in Nashville, I had impressions, I don't know why but maybe it was normal, but I had impression of a crowd of people being there. Not the case. My mother and father were there and my two sisters. That was my welcome home, my personal family, which was fine. Other friends of mine to this very day who live in Nashville tell stories about being spit upon. Things like that I never experienced. I became knowledgeable that Vietnam history will call it an unpopular war. We can't change what history says. Unpopular that I think it lasted too long. We were there Sam because we were a signatory nation of SEATO, Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. That's why we were in Vietnam. The treaty said that if a signatory nation asked for help, you help them. The Republic of Vietnam, which was typically called South Vietnam, asked for help to stop the communist invasion from the North. That's why the President first sent advisors, then sent troops, and when I was there a half million troops were in the country. So several million American's then became Vietnam veterans. Many of them have since passed away. I am age 75. When I was a youngster, 75 was an old man. Well, still and old man but I don't feel old. I've been very blessed in my life. I do receive a VA Disability, which they traced to Agent Orange. Prostate Cancer and Heart Disease. I remember filling out a form saying where were you in Vietnam, what were the dates. I remember a lot of jungle spraying which became known as Agent Orange, killing off the foliage so that the aggressor couldn't hide behind the foliage. That's what Agent Orange was, killing the foliage. To this very day, people are being affected by their exposure to those chemicals from 50 years ago. Just remarkable that Agent Orange is here and a big medical factor of course.

Fleming: Interesting story with Agent Orange, which I really didn't know that much until you brought it up. But I wanted to get to the VFW Involvement for you. I know you talked about how they sent a nice care package to you while you were on active duty. When you came back, what made you, were there other things other than the Care Package that made you want to be involved with post 1970?

Furgess: Well, the Care Package was the major thing but, what is next major is a phone call I got from a good friend who was running for the legislature. He was Vietnam Veteran. He said, "John I know you're just back from Vietnam and I want you to go down with me to the VFW Post this Saturday. I want you to join." I said, "Well Mike thank you for calling! I was gonna join but since you called me, I will meet you there." And I met him at the VFW Post 1970. I was going to join later, but his phone call made me join then. We walked in the post and there was a young member standing at the door and he said, "Yeah we know Mike's in but we need your dues." So, I gave them a check and joined the post that moment and walked on back to the canteen area, where the commander stood, my parent's neighbor who had sent the care package. He said, "John! Welcome home! I want to sign you up!" I said "Joe, I just signed at the front door." "What!? I was supposed to sign you up!" So I remember that and my good friend who had invited me was subsequently elected to the Tennessee General Assembly, one of the first Vietnam Veterans to be elected to the General Assembly, and his good friend had left that position to run for the state senate. A great state senator and World War II veteran who just recently passed away, and he was a VFW and American Legion member. So I always have those stories in my mind about their friendship and motivating me to join, which I did. And the commander said "We have a joint meeting Monday night." I said, "Wait a minute, joint?" "No, not that kind of joint. With the lady's auxiliaries Monday evening." So I show up Monday evening of 1970. This was July of 1970. I didn't get married until March of '71. Walked into that meeting on that Monday. Nice joint meeting with the ladies. The commander introduced the ladies president, and she started identifying her officers who were there, and the lady sitting just behind me jumped up and said, well you left her out, and you got her name wrong and you got that title wrong. That poor lady's turned red and I said to myself what the hell have I gotten myself into. We got beyond that and I thoroughly enjoyed my early days with the VFW and here we are almost 50 years later and I am still enjoying it. Those people who were there then are almost all gone now. Most were World War II veterans. I was the first Vietnam veteran to be elected post commander, first to be elected district commander for our district. Was elected state commander in 1978. Great experience. When they encouraged me to run for the state office I said, "Fellas I'm a fairly new member. Don't you

want some of these other members with.." "No! We want a Vietnam Veteran!" So, I was the first Vietnam Veteran elected State Commander in Tennessee. And again, great experiences traveling the state, 95 counties. Today, 2019, Tennessee is home to over 500,000 Veterans. Coincidentally, that is the same number of American's that were in Vietnam when I was there. Today the Veteran population in Tennessee is just over 500,000. Still a great group of people and you'll see more and more now, "Thank you for your service! Thank you for your service!" We use to never get that. I went for years with no one saying thank you for your service. Now, almost everywhere I go if I have a shirt or a cap on, somebody's going to say thank you for your service. Which we greatly appreciate the public recognition like that. It means a lot.

Fleming: It's cool to see the Veterans wearing even VFW Post hats. I remember visiting the VFW post that you work at back in my high school days. I wanted to ask you about the National Commander roll you talked about that allowed you to travel to all 50 states and 25 countries. And you even got to go back to Vietnam. One of my first questions was about your initial impressions going into Vietnam when you were going into active duty. What were your initial impressions going back to Vietnam after all those years removed from serving?

Furgess: Sam, good question. I was blown away, not to exaggerate, but blown away with the friendliness of the people. When I saw the itinerary, the US Embassy is now in Hanoi, I couldn't believe that, but it's true that's where the US Embassy is located today. But the friendliness of the people. There was a young Army Colonel at that meeting in Hanoi for the US Army, and he said, "John I see on the itinerary you are going to Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City." He said, "People you will meet this week are people that weren't even born when you were here." It's a young country despite its age and history. And I am obsessed with this term friendly, but every stop we made, we were welcome with open arms. I'll just never forget that. And each of those three trips, friendliness, friendly people everywhere! And the other impression was the good food! I wasn't expecting to be such a fan of the food they were giving us! Not thinking all those years earlier with sea rations and things like that. So that was interesting. I had never been down the Mekong Delta. We pulled in on one of the stops to a café right on the river. They introduced the owner who had been a Vietnamese soldier of the NVA. We were enemies in those days. He was so friendly, the food was so delicious, and that one little stop of an hour – hour and a half I will always remember. Just the experience of that visit. Then flying out of the country when I was a soldier, flying home, out of Saigon on the airplane. I went over by ship and flew back, and I remember the crowd breaking out singing Up Up and Away, the song popular that was by the Fifth Dimension as we flew away back to Tennessee. All wonderful experiences, I would go back tomorrow with the current situation if the opportunity presented itself. And everywhere I go, generally without exception, I'll ask for a show of hands, where are the Vietnam veterans and ask have you gone back? "No no" If they tell me they didn't lose anything there and don't want to go back, I don't argue with them. But I told them if you do go back, it will totally change your impression of Vietnam all these 50 years later.

Fleming: Wow, that's amazing to see how much Vietnam changed in technically such a short period of time for a country. One of the last questions I wanted to ask you, as a Veteran of Vietnam, working with the VFW, and even connecting current soldiers in the VFW, what do you want this current generation to remember the most about the Vietnam War? And if John Furgess could go back to being a soldier, would you have done everything the same way or would you have done anything differently?

Furgess: Sam, I can't think of a thing I would have done differently. I remember receiving an assignment to command a battalion of the Tennessee Army National Guard in Tullahoma, which is about 50 miles south of Nashville maybe 80 miles south. And as a coincidence to my first weekend with that unit as it's commander, battalion commander, I was a lieutenant colonel then, troops were leaving that morning bound for an overseas experience, in 1987. And they were to depart at 4:30 in the morning by bus heading to a plane ride, and I wanted to be there. I told my wife I wanted to get up early and be there in Tullahoma

and shake their hands as they got on that bus. And they were blown away that I was there at 4:30 in the morning, but I wanted to do that. I thought that was leadership to show them that we fully support what they are doing, wishing them well, and we will be there when they get home. I just enjoyed doing that. Tennessee has a great history of Army National Guard and Air National Guard, and I'm just proud in those 23 years with the Guard to have retired in November of 1993. And to culminate 28 years of service and I find myself encouraging young people to even this day. Several high schools now have ROTC to include Vanderbilt University, Middle Tennessee State University, and the ROTC more prevalent and popular these days. And the teachers like you mentioned at Ensworth High School, like the teacher here in Alabama, who show that interest in the young people and the military service, it just means a lot to me personally.

Fleming: And that would be the one thing you would want people to remember about the Vietnam War is to just cherish the story from the veterans?

Furgess: Yes, and to have served in what history calls an unpopular war, to have made it through that. And again, I was only there one time as a soldier, 12 months. Several Vietnam Veterans have been there two and three times when they were on active duty, fought in orders returning to Vietnam as a soldier. I was only there one term, 12 months, but I'll never forget 12 months. Just very honored to be a Veteran and look forward to continuing to promote the military service, which I greatly believe in.

Fleming: I'll ask you one more thing about the ROTC, I know you were talking about the programs expanding. Alabama has one, MTSU and Vanderbilt. Do you think the way they are going today, these ROTC programs, are they doing a good job getting the students ready who want to serve for potential calls to duty?

Furgess: Well in my opinion they are. MTSU and Vanderbilt I am specifically more familiar with than others, but they are very capable. Long tenures of history in our service. Those young cadets today are just as motivated as we were back in that era of 50 years ago when I was a college student and I am just very impressed with them. Another great story of mine Sam was one day I was with the Tennessee Department of Veterans Affairs and the phone rang it was a friend of mine that work with the mayor of Nashville, and he said to me, "John do you know Barry Sadler?" I said, "Do I know him? I know the song by the Green Barade, but I don't know him personally." "Well we've got his phone number. Will you call him? The mayor is going to be dedicating Victory Memorial Bridge and we'd like him to be here and sing it if he'd do it." I called him and he answered the phone. He lived in Hendersonville, outside Nashville. I said, "Barry you don't know me I haven't met you but Mayor Fulton's office asked me to call to see if you would sing your song at the dedication of Victory Memorial Bridge." "Well, yes I'll do that." I gave him the date and the time, and he showed up. Sang an acapella and did a wonderful job. They were so proud that he was there, and he gave me a card. "If you need me again, here's how you can reach me." I looked at the calling card and it was Honduras. And I said, "Barry, this says Honduras?" "Well that's where I will be!" And I said, "Well what are you doing down there?" "Well I am writing a book." "Well can't you write it here?" "No. I'll get too many calls like yours! But you call me if you need me." Well, unfortunately he was sitting in a taxi cab one day and somebody came out and shot him in the head. They medevacked him to the Nashville VA Hospital, they further cared for him then medevacked him to the Cincinnati VA where he passed away. He's buried out here at the Nashville National Cemetery on Galatian Road in Madison. And his funeral was one of the largest funerals that had been held there, and I stop in every so often to visit his gravesite and pay my respects. He was a great individual. Battle of the Green Barade by Barry Sadler and I'll never forget meeting him.

Fleming: Incredible story that you have told us today and I really do appreciate you taking the time to sit down with me Mr. Furgess and thank you for your service!

Furgess: I appreciate that Sam! And best of luck to you! You are at a great University! Keep it up and Roll Tide!