

Interviewer: Clay Turner

Interviewee: Robert Kirkland

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TURNER: Hello, this is Clay Turner and I'll be interviewing Robert Kirkland. Could you please tell us your uh you repeat your name and your position in the military during the Vietnam War.

KIRKLAND: Okay. This is Robert Lamar Kirkland. Uh, when I left, came back from Vietnam, uh, I was a D five of Sergeant in the United States Marine Corps. And my background was in top secret communication as far as, uh, installation and maintenance of all types of communications for the first Marine air wing and the first Marine division. Uh, and, uh, the iCore of Vietnam. And that was from, uh, '67 through the first of 1970.

TURNER: Thank you. Could you please, uh, tell me how you came to be in the military?

KIRKLAND: Okay. Um, after I finished at Mississippi State, uh, I had a degree in, uh, I was majoring in electrical engineering and mathematics and then I got drafted and well my notice at first came in 1965 and I went and asked for an extension, hopefully because of working my way through college, I was having to go for five years rather than the typical four um, having not being able to take a full load. In 1966 I got my notice again and that they were going to have to draft me, uh, to go in and fill the quotas that they were having to fulfill for Vietnam. And when I went to get my physical, I was going down and at that time they were drafted into the Marine Corps in order to fill the quotas needed for the Marines as well as for the army. And every fourth man that they went through the line and picked was grouped over to the side and we were then informed that we were automatically a member of the United States Marine Corps. Upon being drafted, I went to the Marine Corps and asked them if they could in some way or form or fashion, use my edgy- electrical engineering degree and in some form communications, electronics. And so after testing, then they assigned me or gave me, um, what they call a 28 1128, 1328 17 which were MOSs for a communication technician and that's how I ended up. And it all dealt with, uh, cryptography and telecommunications for the Marine Corps.

TURNER: Yes. And that's how you came into having top secret clearance?

KIRKLAND: That's right, in order to, uh, work on all of that equipment and for what I was being exposed to at that time, uh, I had to go through and then they did a background check that I had to have a top secret clearance, uh, in order to work in that field.

TURNER: How long did your training take before you were deployed to Vietnam?

KIRKLAND: Well, I went in, in June, uh, uh, 66 and I went to Vietnam in October of 67 and all of that was well combined with specialized schooling and training as well as, uh, infantry training, uh, you know, and so forth, all kind of combined together, I guess you could say. Yes.

TURNER: Okay nice, where, where were you deployed for most of the war?

KIRKLAND: Okay. I was, uh, assigned to Da Nang, uh, Vietnam and that was where headquarters was at that time for both the first Marine air wing and the first Marine division, uh, uh, infantry. They, at that time I was assigned there to maintain on a constant basis the communication centers and, uh, equipment for the headquartered personnel and so forth. And then from there as needed, I would send out to all of the different outpost and groups within the iCore. That was the area from the developers, the demilitarized zone, down to Tu Li, Vietnam. And that was where all the, mainly the majority of the Marines were.

TURNER: Could you describe Da Nong's, Da Nang's geography a little bit please?

KIRKLAND: Yeah. Uh, the name was located, uh, by the river. Uh, the heck, I guess it was, wasn't there wasn't a Da Nang River.

TURNER: Oh, I'll footnote it.

KIRKLAND: Okay. There was a main river in a beach area, kind of, uh, the, uh, kind of a gulf area in there where Da Nang was and it was a poor, uh, well not like deep water port, but for, you know-

TURNER: Fishing boats.

KIRKLAND: Fishing boats and all of that to come up and down in the river and that area. And, uh, it was, uh, I forget the population at that time, but it was a major, the major city up in that part of Vietnam. Probably the largest.

TURNER: Yeah yeah, um, could you tell me about um, the relationship with the, um, the four districts of Vietnam?

KIRKLAND: The different cords?

TURNER: Yes.

KIRKLAND: Vietnam was divided into four divisions and they, Oh one, four, two core, three core, and four court. Uh, as I mentioned before, the Marines were mainly based up in the, what we call the one core or we refer to it as Icore. And then that was from the DMZ down to Tu Li. And then it went all the way from the coast to the Laotian border. Or the ho Chi Minh trail as a lot of people refer to it. Then you had the two Corps, which was the army, and then the three core, and the four core was now where Saigon was at that time.

TURNER: Could you describe your time in Khe Sanh?

KIRKLAND: Okay, so, yeah, during that, well, I was only there. I wasn't there during the whole time, so that long it both for the time that I would say, it was during the siege, the Tet Offensive Siege of Khe

Sanh when they comm center had been hit. It was under constant shelling, uh, by the North Vietnamese. Uh, and they were got a direct hit on the comm center. And so I was flown in with, uh, another designated technician that I chose to, to go with me, and we had to go in and help them to re-establish communications and so forth. During this time, it was just constant, uh, artillery, uh, from the North Vietnamese. It was, uh, day night, just, it was constant. From January, uh, 30th, let me see, uh, till March, I believe.

TURNER: April.

KIRKLAND: April, yeah. Oh, I gave you the notes, but yeah. Okay. Yeah. During those dates. Uh, they, uh, and it, it was just, uh, well, it's hard to describe except that we were constantly being bombarded, uh, while I was there. And then, uh, then after we got the communication, which was built underground in a bunker, um, back up operational again, then, uh, I flew back out to Da Nang and until after the siege, uh, was over. And then, uh, and then ultimately the main thrust of the Tet Offensive.

TURNER: Could you describe your overall experience during the Tet Offensive? Like...

KIRKLAND: Well, I guess a lot of fear of course. Uh, fear of what to expect, and of course, you know, until I went into the service, I'd never been shot at. I've never gone through a, a war situation. Uh, and I don't know, it's just hard, uh, a very strong feeling of survival, uh, ed times of anger, uh, you know, just wanting to eliminate the enemy and, uh, uh, and, and sadness because of losing your friends and, and fellow office, uh, military, uh, personnel. Uh, it's, I guess (it is) difficult to put it all in one word except fear, frustration, anger. Uh, just I guess those three words are about the main three that come to mind.

TURNER: Did you deal more with the NVA or the Viet Cong during the time in Vietnam?

KIRKLAND: We dealt mainly more with the North Vietnamese regular army,

TURNER: The NVA

KIRKLAND: Yes, in Vietnam yet because they were, uh, they were the ones that hit. But then at times we were hit by the Vietcong, uh, on other times at our parameters where they would send small, uh, saboteurs in to try to break up the Constantine wire perimeters that we had around our post. And they would go in and try to sneak in, you know, undetected, whereas the North Vietnamese army just really had major attacks, like waves of them. I even remember, I've been, Oh my goodness, I've been up in Khe Sanh, if I remember correctly, we, there were over 15,000 of them killed during that month and a half, uh, of the North Vietnamese regular army up there. I mean, it was so large oh so large of a number. I mean, there were just bodies everywhere. I remember, you know, they had board dozers coming in and just, uh, there were so many, you couldn't bear them. They had to just-

TURNER: Mass graves?

KIRKLAND: Mass grave in order to get them under the ground.

TURNER: With your role as an electrician, what was it?

KIRKLAND: Technician, telecommunication technician.

TURNER: Did you see, did you ever see the enemy like during battle usually?

KIRKLAND: Oh yeah, when we were, when we were getting hit, now my job was to be a technician during certain hours and then we had to stand post out on the perimeters we have. We were assigned a certain sections of our perimetry, and I was in charge of squads along certain areas, and we would do that at night. And during the attacks, you know, we would, uh, we would have a skeleton crew for continuing communication, but if only that was work, then everybody went out and was assigned along the perimeter with, uh, and you know, with periodic machine gun, riflemen, bunkers, uh, uh, Oh, Oh look, what eludes me now is, uh, uh, holes in the ground. Uh-

TURNER: Mines? Mines?

KIRKLAND: Not mines, uh, um.

TURNER: Some traps-

KIRKLAND: Where, you sit there on the ground. You're in-

TURNER: Foxholes!

KIRKLAND: Foxholes yeah, that's what I was trying to think. Uh, and we had also long dug, uh-

TURNER: Trenches?

KIRKLAND: Trenches all along there. And then we've had major, you know, like positions up here, with maybe a machine gun and then maybe, uh, 20 feet, 30 feet farther had another machine gun. Oh, kind of like a bunker. And I bought though. And then in between you had trenches where you had riflemen all in between and that was all along the perimeter. Now when we weren't being attacked, uh, they had only, uh, people in those main machine gun locations that were served as lookouts, what we called forward observers or posts or whatever. And they were manned 24/7 all the time. And uh, but only when we were a hit and there were signs of attack were that everybody filled up those trenches and foxholes.

TURNER: Of course. How were your interactions with the allied, uh, Southern, Southern Vietnamese and the other allied forces in Vietnam?

KIRKLAND: Uh, myself, I really didn't interact with the South Vietnamese army that much. That was mainly the infantry. They would carry them with them out on, on, uh, uh, raids or on, uh, uh, patrols and so forth, I guess. Uh, you know, I did not go out with the infantry, uh, myself. Uh, all I did was

occasionally I did go out and carry, uh, or oversee patrols in the areas around our perimeters and the night.

OTHER: *inaudible*

TURNER: Okay, continue.

KIRKLAND: And so it wasn't like I was doing, I never went out on a, a so to speak, in the bush patrols, it was only patrols around the perimeter if we thought that there were, uh, uh, Oh, Vietcong or we'd go out and we'd search the villages we'd search houses and so forth and so forth. And depending on what we found. But other than that, uh, that was all I, my experience involved.

TURNER: Uh hmm. You told me before that you had experiences with the ROK Marines, correct, from Korea?

KIRKLAND: Uh huh, the ROK Marines of the Republic of Korea Marine. They did a lot of interrogations for us and they followed along side of, and they were, they were assigned to different areas. I had, I had only come across them, two or three times where, uh, where we had, uh, caught prisoners and we, to my knowledge, we used them for interrogating a VC.

TURNER: Because they did not have the same limitations as the Americans.

KIRKLAND: That's right. So that's why they were not restricted by the rules of war that we were and they could do anything they pretty much wanted in order to get information out of the prisoners.

TURNER: Let's see, uh, what were your experiences with Agent Orange during the war or your observations of it?

KIRKLAND: Well, you know, at that time, Clay, we weren't aware of what, other than using Agent Orange,

TURNER: But you did see it correct?

KIRKLAND: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. They'd come in, the C-130s, it was like huge crop dusters and they, you'd C-130s. And um, and they would spray um, this defoliation chemical, which was they referred to now as agent orange, but we called them rainbow herbicides.

TURNER: Because there were multiple colors.

KIRKLAND: There were different colored red, green, and And I'm going to give you a book over, here. That refers to that. That may be of help to you and is entitled. Uh, let's see here then one book, uh, I may have already given it to you?

TURNER: I believe you already gave it to me, but this will be useful as well.

KIRKLAND: Yeah. And there, there's a book there that were written by some people about the uh, America and the Vietnam war where they were referring to. We won all the battles but lost the war and uh, but Agent Orange at that time was really a welcome sight because it was causing all the foliage on the trees and bushes to fall off and we could have a good clear shooting right around our parameters that did not allow the VC and the Vietcong to sneak up close to our bases.

TURNER: And you were completely unaware of the ill effects to humans, correct?

KIRKLAND: Yeah, we were totally where you are totally unaware and in fact, you know, they even studied it for years after the war and never really came to, from what I understand that conclusive decision and I just until Congress, I understand, said, look, we've been studying the same for years. All these people are coming down with mysterious diseases, side effects and everything. And then that's, I forget the year they declared-

TURNER: I believe it was in the 1980s.

KIRKLAND: Yeah.

TURNER: And there's still from what I've observed like ill effects of it happening in Vietnam as well, like continued generations.

KIRKLAND: Oh yeah. Birth defects, uh, cancers, hive rates. So those poor people will be living in I'm sure for years.

TURNER: Well, yes. Uh, could you tell me about how aware you are of like the political situation like in Vietnam and abroad while you were, did you know very much about what was happening?

KIRKLAND: Well, politically, uh, I guess things were, we were frustrated by the political, uh, machine or the political situation and especially after Tet Offensive of '68 because we had gone, we knew that the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong, were building up for that attack in, uh, January of '68. We knew it, we had surveillance, we had pictures of them, they were just, and all of this time they had stopped the bombing in North Vietnam and in order to have these peace calls, you know, in Paris. And so it was kinda like, okay, we're going to hold up, we're going to talk about peace and a peace treaty and all of this and, uh, resolution and at the same time, North Vietnam was building up forces like crazy. I mean, they were just, I mean, we saw it, we knew and we kept informing the people and everything and it was like to no avail. I mean, there was like, they were ignoring it and they should have let us keep bombing, stopping those, the flow of those, uh, military supports and resources coming down into Vietnam, I mean, even during the talks now, if they wanted to hold up bombing Hanoi and North Vietnam and side, you know, I wouldn't have stopped, but that was their decision. But when they kept up holding up and restricting us from going over into allowance and stopped and all that flows into South Vietnam. We couldn't understand it, it was like, you know, are you people even listening to us? And then we started getting really frustrated then. And especially after we beat them back in the Tet Offensive, we beat every battle.

We, we killed just multiples of thousands of them during that month and a half. And even in Da Nang they were trying to stop and, and blow up the air base and the airstrip and the name. And there were three offensives, three Tet Offensives in Da Nang that a lot of people don't realize there was one in January to March, uh, and then again in May and then again in August of 68. And where they were, they came back and they hit us all three times. But you know, even after beating them back all after the Tet Offensive of 68 and everything, the tide turned in America and then they kept saying, well we can't win that war. We can't win that war. And that's again what frustrated us.

TURNER: Yes. Cause I noticed your dates line up pretty well with the, um, like the later, like there was the presidential election coming up, I believe, in America.

KIRKLAND: Oh yeah.

TURNER: What, like the Chicago Convention and such?

KIRKLAND: Oh and well, we weren't, I wasn't really, I didn't, I didn't, wasn't able to keep abreast of all what's going on. But during that time frame, you know, and that was when Nixon was, became elected. And Johnson said that he would not run again and he was not going to go for reelection. And so after-

OTHER: *inaudible*

TURNER: I can cut that out.

KIRKLAND: Okay. But, and then so after, uh, after Johnson did and everything, uh, we, uh, Nixon ran for president, got elected, you know, on then he, he was about this honorable retreat or honorable withdrawal and that was that frustrated us, how can you have an honorable without a peace treaty and where the North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese came to an agreement, there'd be two countries, but Ho Chi Minh wanted a United Vietnam country. He always wanted that. And you know, even after World War II and so, and a lot of these things really never came to light and was made aware of because we were just too involved in one, trying to win the war and two, to come back alive. Now me on the short term, that was our goal as a soldier, just being able to make it and come back alive and with minimum in injuries and affects. So.

TURNER: Okay. Uh, could you tell me a little bit about your experiences with, uh, the technology that you were using during the, during the war? Like the radios and such?

KIRKLAND: Uh, we were working on telecommunication. It was a crypto graphing, uh, technology and of course by today's standard it's prehistoric and you know, uh, with so much improved technology is kinda hard. It was kinda like now using a computer compared to a typewriter back then. And that was basically what we did. The teletype machines, the operator would sit there and type a holes in a perforated tape, you know, and then after they type that message or whatever, they would take the tape off and then run it through a reader.

TURNER: Are those like punch cards?

KIRKLAND: Yeah, yeah. It was like you know how the old stock market reader tapes, you know, that used to have, same thing. And so they would sit there and they would type out on this typewriter basically. And it would punch, uh, uh, codes, uh holes in this tape. And when they got through, then they'd tear it off and then hand over to another, uh, operator, and then he would run it through a reader and then it would transmit out to wherever mags, the different outposts and things like that, or either back to, I don't know, whoever it was going to. And then, uh, also on the receiving end as it came in, it would come out on a printed sheet, you know, with a, with a typewriter or a reader. And so that's basically, now the cryptography was electronic. Uh, by then we had transistors, they was transistors, a transistorized-

TURNER: Not vacuum tubes.

KIRKLAND: Yeah, that would code it. And we change the codes every day, every, uh, every 24 hours we would change codes. And, um-

TURNER: Did you suspect that the Vietnamese are trying to like code break?

KIRKLAND: Oh, I'm sure they were. They were, um, I don't know if it was, I don't know if the Vietnamese, North Vietnamese, was that advanced to do the decoding-

TURNER: Capabilities?

KIRKLAND: Yeah, the capability, like the Japanese word during World War Two. But I'm sure they were, they were listening all the time trying to uh, understand and decipher verbal cause a lot of time and so forth during that time. But as far as my knowledge, we were never, uh, we were never breached. Now that I will say this, during the time that the USS Pueblo, uh, got captured by the North Koreans, you know, in the up in this, on the East coast of China.

TURNER: When was this, when was this?

KIRKLAND: Oh goodness. Um, we'd have to look and it was in the late, uh, sixties.

TURNER: So during the Vietnam war?

KIRKLAND: During the Vietnam war.

TURNER: I just wanted to make sure that wasn't during Korea.

KIRKLAND: No, no, no. It was your, the Vietnam War. They captured the Pueblo. Well, at that time they had all the code, all the equipment to all of the, uh, equipment that we were using.

TURNER: You were afraid that they would hand it over to the Russians who would hand it over to Vietnam or China, either one of them?

KIRKLAND: Oh yeah. Uh huh. So at that time I remember I was flown to the Philippines and we were at school in altering all of the equipment, making modifications. And everything, so that that could not be, uh, uh, understood our changes were, made our equipment, uh, strategically in order so that equipment couldn't be used against us. And coding.

TURNER: Could you, could you, uh, um, can you describe to me your experience with the, um, infantry radios that you had?

KIRKLAND: The what?

TURNER: Like the experience with the hairdryer.

KIRKLAND: Oh, yeah, there was, there was one incident where we were experiencing, uh, uh, misunderstood or understood problems with our equipment, our field equipment, like radios and so forth that were being used whereby the infantry would go out with radios and equipment and, um, and they were having failures in the field. Well, after a while it was brought to my attention and, uh, and so based on my education and prior information and experience, I knew that we were probably experienced what we call transistorized heat sink problems. And that's where if transistors get too hot, uh, they will break down and fail to work and operate. Uh, proficiently. Well, this was what was going on. So one of the things that they did, it was that I had my mother and father send me a hairdryer and I used this hairdryer when the equipment piece of equipment came in and I had to take the technicians after they, they checked it out and everything operated fine. Of course when the radio was brought back in and cool, they all knew it operated properly. Well then he did up with that hairdryer real hot and then it would show any kind of technical failure and a heat sink problem. And so this was one of the things that we, uh, we implemented, uh, among the technicians to overcome that. And then it alleviated a lot of that problem when the infantry took those radios back out into the field. And a lot of the problems weren't just heat seat problems, but that was just some of the things that we did have to modify in order to, uh, make sure that that didn't occur out of the field.

TURNER: You were in Khe Sanh for about four months or five?

KIRKLAND: No, I was only out there for a couple of weeks.

TURNER: Oh. Would you say that that was the most intense, like fighting experience you had?

KIRKLAND: That was the most intense fighting that I experienced yet. It was constant and um, I mean it was, uh, it was constant and other times like in Da Nang. Now, another incident in Da Nang was during, I think it was in August when they came in and when they did us during that third Tet Offensive, they hit our bomb dump in Da Nang. And for about four straight days, bombs were going off, exploding. I mean, it was just constant. And that was something, another, one of the most intense time. Those were the two most in my time. Now, at times, you know, like unexpectedly at night, you would hear the sirens go off and they had uh, they had outposts. There was, uh, uh, Da Nang Airbase at our headquarters, uh, facilities

were all at the base of a mountain called Hill 327. And they had outposts of people that were up on the tops of these mountains around Da Nang and they were always looking. And if they saw rockets or mortars being shot out at night, then they would sound the alert and alarms. And then that way we could head to our bunkers during that time. And, and that would occur just at random. I mean, it may, it happened a lot during 1968 your, during the Tet Offensive, but other times it would happen maybe once a month. It may happen several times a month. It was just in random whenever got them and they would shoot rockets in and we were located between the Hill 327 and the airstrip. So we would always get what we called, short rounds. They would come in short that were really aimed at the airstrip. But you know, you never knew where they were going here, the way they shot them.

TURNER: Yeah. Okay. Missile, could you, uh, could you describe the down time you had during the Vietnam War, the R&R?

KIRKLAND: Yeah. Uh, one of the things that you were given during a thirteen month tour for the Marine Corps, uh, that was a typical, uh, assigned duty, uh, time for all soldiers in Vietnam. And during that 13 months, you were allowed one month R&R, and they were at designated different ports like Japan, Hawaii, uh, Thailand, uh, Taiwan, Australia and so forth. They had all of these designated R&R ports, and they had facilities set up. And what you did was to go and you would take, you could, uh, you would take and you traveled in military and when you got to the R&R ports, then you would change into civilian clothes. Then you could go out and they, you had to be back at that R&R port at a specific time. And otherwise you were categorized as AWOL. And, but during that time you were pretty much free to travel within the boundary, like Bangkok, Thailand, Australia. Uh, it was more flexible in certain areas than others.

TURNER: Like Europe for example. Right?

KIRKLAND: No, you were not able to go to Europe.

TURNER: Oh, that was your other, I'm misremembering.

KIRKLAND: Yeah, it was only, uh, in Southeast Asia or Hawaii, most of the Hawaiian R&Rs were reserved for married people married men.

TURNER: Like reconnecting with their wives.

KIRKLAND: They could reunite with their wives at Hawaii, they were never able to reunite at the other. So, uh, or they didn't, I don't, I don't, I can't remember not being, being single. I wasn't, I didn't really think about that, so, but I always remember that the, uh, married soldiers were kind of given a preference if they wanted to put for R&R and meet their wife for a weekend or in, uh, Hawaii.

TURNER: How would you describe like your social life during your deployment? Because I remember you told me that you don't, you never really kept up with any of your, the people you knew in Vietnam after the war, correct?

KIRKLAND: Yeah. About when we were there. Like how we interfaced and what we-

TURNER: Did you have friends?

KIRKLAND: Yeah. Oh, well, it was mainly the people that I worked with-

TURNER: Your work?

KIRKLAND: Twelve on, twelve off, seven days a week. The whole time I was there. Um, and the, and when I was off I even learned, uh, I would go out, uh, we had a chance we could go out to China Beach, uh, there in Da Nang there was a big beach, uh, there on, the, uh, in Da Nang and you could go out and, and the military maintained, uh, and it was for all branches, the Air Force, Navy, the Marines, and all Army. And you could go out and you could go swimming and, and they had places where you could, you could buy a hotdogs, I guess. I don't know. I don't remember ever eating anything out there, uh, because I never went, really went out there that much. Uh, I can only remember going maybe once or twice. And, uh, and of course they had beer that you could buy. They, they tried to, uh, have beer and no hard liquor on the beach, but beer, uh, let's see. Uh, and you know, really you should just go out and go swimming and, Oh, you did with, just have cut off a pair of your, uh, jungle utilities, you know, without a shirt. And that has what you used for maintenance suits.

TURNER: Like shorts.

KIRKLAND: Yeah, just shorts and, or, and some of them wore these dark green boxers shorts that we had for underwear, you know, I mean, you know, there weren't any women out there so, but they wouldn't let you go nude and everything.

TURNER: So this was a strictly like military beach, there weren't any civilians around?

KIRKLAND: Yeah. That I never saw, there were of being scattered around, but they were very, uh, very sparse as well as I can remember. I don't remember. It wasn't like seeing a butcher knife looking Vietnamese girls in bikinis or anything out there, that have been too hard to control with, with that many soldiers around, you know? So, yeah. Anyway, uh, and also another thing I got involved in was there was a Catholic orphanage that, uh, they were in Da Nang and I went over and spent some time with some of the children and I, uh, I don't know, I've tried to direct my attention when I was off to a, you know, helping them, playing games with them. And I would, I would take candy and things like that to them. And, you know, it was nice. Uh, I think it helped. Uh, I don't know what happened to them after I left, I never kept up with it, but I'm sure things were rough on them after we pulled out. But, uh, that saddened me. But, uh, I didn't know what wasn't anything I could do about it. Uh, so really, Oh, and there was one other thing, the Air Force, of course, the Marine Corps didn't have it, but I found out that the Air Force, uh, had, had set up what they call a lapidary, uh, lab. That's where you can take raw stones and make and make a shape out it, you know, stones and made jewelry out of them and so forth.

TURNER: Was that in Da Nang?

KIRKLAND: In Da Nang there in Da Nang over near the air base on the Air Force side. And the Air Force had a lot more things like that than we did. Yeah. But we were able to use it. You know. So I found out about it and, um, I went over and, and I started studying up in my off time and redirect, you know, and I learned a lot about jewelry-making while I was over there. And I bought over there, uh, later on. Uh, they had outlets where I could buy a lot of Opal from Australia and, uh, other gemstones. It's uh, from, uh, uh, uh, Bangkok, Thailand and uh, Burma and Jade and thing. And I could get these and I would take and I would learn how to make pieces of jewelry from it. And I enjoyed that. I learned something.

TURNER: Did you keep any of them?

KIRKLAND: Yeah. Uh huh there. My wife is now giving them to our daughters, you know, and back then I sent them back to a, uh, my sister and my mother and mainly them, and I bought up jewelry, you know, fixed jewelry and sent it back to them.

TURNER: That reminds me, how regular was communications between you and your family and friends in the US, like how quick was mail, would you say?

KIRKLAND: Uh, it would take, it would take days, you know, I would write letters. I wasn't real good about writing letters. I hated the, uh, you know, but occasionally I remember once or twice, I believe, maybe no more than that. They gave us a chance to use a certain radio where we'd interface with telephones back to the United States. I remember once-

TURNER: So you could call them, just like once or twice.

KIRKLAND: Yeah. And I called them and never will forget. And the operator in between us said, now I told my parents, and then when you get through talking, say over, cause we've got to click it to transmit one way or the other, you couldn't talk like on a telephone.

TURNER: So it was like a recording, a message almost.

KIRKLAND: But it was like, Hey mom and dad, I'm over here in Vietnam. I'm here in Da Nang, everything is fine. I tried to reassure them and everything, over, and then uh, it would go to them and then they could tell,

TURNER: They would respond...

KIRKLAND: They could respond to my question or my comments. And then sometimes my mother and father would forget and the operator that was monitoring, is that, uh, Mr. Kirkland are you through? Oh yeah. Okay. Then say over, be sure to say over and it was funny how, you know-

TURNER: So, so you both could hear the operator in between, correct.

KIRKLAND: Oh yeah. It was nothing. You didn't tell her anything? Well, I guess you could tell private, but it wasn't anything private, you know, it was all, uh, it was, it was funny to talk to them that way and never will forget that. And my parents always had trouble, uh, cause being used to just talking on the telephone and everything with it, over, and then I would click it, over, and talk to them. Then, over, here, it was a funny experience.

TURNER: How has your experience in like the, um, cause you said like the most intense time was in 1968, correct? Right.

KIRKLAND: Yeah.

TURNER: How's your, how's your experience from like in the later part of your deployment? In like 1970 '71.

KIRKLAND: Well uh, it was pretty much just constantly just trying to do my job the best I could. Uh, kind of making sure focusing on coming back alive.

TURNER: Because you knew that you would, you were near the end of your deployment by then, correct?

KIRKLAND: That's right. Oh well yeah, I knew when I was coming back that last time. Now I don't know if you want me to tell you, uh, about the time when I extended, you know, that program about it. Okay. After they had a program in Vietnam whereby after your first thirteen month tour in Vietnam, they installed a program called a "Six Months' Extension" and that was set up in order to encourage people on with certain MOSs is to extend their service in Vietnam, by six months and you were given one month plus travel time to any designated home address. And in the middle of that six months you were given a one week R&R. Well, upon reading that order, they came out, I went to the JAG lawyer and it said to any designated home address instead of your actual home address. Well, I asked him, I said, well, I can designate any place in the free world, and they would be obligated to pay my ticket plus travel time to there and back. And so what I did, is I did this three times because at the time, I knew, and they had already informed me because of my expertise and uh, area that I was working in, that I would have to come back over, for another tour, a partial tour anyway. So by extending six months I could get that free trip and another R&R and I would still stay at my assigned area. And I was familiar with that area. I was familiar with Da Nang. I didn't want to be sent back to the United States and then sent somewhere else where you have to get reoriented on what to look out for, where the enemy would probably hit you from there. So a lot to be sad about being acclimated to where you were because you knew where they at attack. You knew what they did when they hit you, blah, blah, blah.

TURNER: You are here in Da Nang for most of your time.

KIRKLAND: I was based in Da Nang the whole time by doing this. And so what I did is, I did this three times and then the first time I put the U S embassy, I had to put a designated location or like an embassy so they could send my orders there and I had to pick those orders up. So what I did is I put the US

embassy in Helsinki, Finland, Athens, Greece, and then Buenos Aires, Argentina for three trips, and I took half of that thirty days plus travel time going one way. And then I came and then my orders would be there by the time I got there. So I'd pick up my orders at the US embassy and tell me where and when to report back in the United States. And then I would come back another way coming back. And so I did that on three real nice trips.

TURNER: So yeah, this was, this was when you were traveling around Europe. Okay.

KIRKLAND: That's right, twice.

TURNER: Yes, that's what I was thinking

KIRKLAND: Twice to Europe and once to South America. Yes.

TURNER: All right. Well, uh, I, you, um, the, the Russians and the Chinese, the Soviets and the Chinese were assisting the Northern Vietnamese. Did you ever see their equipment or any advisers from them during the war?

KIRKLAND: Uh, the only thing was that we saw a lot of the missiles, you know, rockets that were being shot at our airplanes and being shot and they were all Russian and Chinese made. And then uh, we had, uh, and of course the rifles, um, uh, AK-47s and also AK-52s, that was another one that a lot of people weren't aware of. It was a like of a, a, an automatic weapon that they had. And uh, but those two were the ones, rifles.

TURNER: I would assume that the equipment would be what you would usually see, not, you know, actual Russians or Chinese.

KIRKLAND: Right.

TURNER: Well, yeah. So what was your experience, you know, getting back to the, you move. What was your experience getting back to the US after your deployment?

KIRKLAND: Oh, it was frustrating because when we came back, uh, from Vietnam, there were demonstrations against us, you know, we will call them names now. This was the first of '70. And uh, they were just still talking about, you know, pulling out of Vietnam and, and, but the protest and demonstration were still against us and we were called names. We were made. I was very angry.

TURNER: Where did you return? Like which airport did you come back to?

KIRKLAND: In St. Andrews in California-

TURNER: Ah, that makes sense.

KIRKLAND: We all flew into the West coast.

TURNER: I would assume that like-

KIRKLAND: Then we were deployed from that in a holding station. We would come in on military, on flights or it was, it wasn't really, well it was military flight, but it was contracts with the commercial airlines that would have big, just open a 737, 727, I forget what the designation, 707. And then it was nothing but just rows of seats, they'd put as many as they could. And the government contracted to those civilian airlines to bring us from either Saigon or Da Nang back to the West Coast. All right. Then, when we got to the West Coast, they'd put us in a holding, uh, area at Lockheed St. Andrews and then they would give us our tickets back to, well, when I was on those R&Rs. I got tickets to those embassies. And so I would immediately just had out to them, but on my last time coming home then they would, uh, uh, they would send me and I was getting out when I returned from Vietnam. So they sent me to Camp Pendleton. And then that's when I went through a debriefing for all of my top secret security. I've been a full, almost two days being reviewed and debriefed by the military. And then, uh, I got my discharge page uh papers there and then they gave me a ticket back to my home address and then I was out.

TURNER: Were there different feelings of sentiment, like for the war and against the war in different areas in the US you would say, cause I imagine the West Coast be a lot more anti-war than here for example, in Mississippi.

KIRKLAND: Oh, West Coast, the West Coast where the pits, I excuse my French, but it was awful. There were more demonstrations and, and incidences and, and more attacks. And, and I never will forget one. I'd like to share this, uh, about the Hell's Angels. And we were coming off of the military plane and they had these, uh, uh, storm fence. They fences between the demonstrators and people that they were on.

TURNER: They would be like near the air strip?

KIRKLAND: Yeah, they could see us coming off the plane and they somehow they, knew, when we were coming in and, or they were informed by somebody. And so when we were getting off the plane and then we were all marching, you know, just in a line coming over to this holding the building where we were supposed to, uh, go into and they were calling and throwing stuff over the fence. And I never will forget the Hell's Angels, one time, came through and they had motorcycles, they had clubs, and they came through and just beat, ran over these demonstrators and hippies and so forth. And it was, it was so funny. That's the only time in my life I ever, hoorayed and supported the Hell's Angels, you know, and all, you could see the military just, just yelling and supporting the Hell's Angels as they were over there. And then they called in the police, you know, and then the Hell's Angels.

TURNER: *inaudible*

KIRKLAND: Oh, it was like, it was up there. We were so supportive, you know, uh, of it. And uh, it was funny.

TURNER: Yeah. I just, I just think it's interesting because, you know, we, we live in divided times now, but I looked back to the days during the Vietnam and that seems like very, it was also very divided as well.

KIRKLAND: Oh goodness. Sometimes I wondered if I, United States will hold together, you know, being so divided, you know, the ones that, you know, so to speak, supported going over there and wanted to do the we thought the right thing at that time. And, uh, you know, it would be a drafted, we didn't desert and go to Canada and, and then they come back and be treated the way we were treated, you know, and uh, disgraced or shamed and, and cussed and called names, baby killers. And, uh, it was just, it was a bad time, but we were so divided and I thought, my goodness, will our country ever survive through this time? I really did. But we did. Yes.

TURNER: And so we did.

KIRKLAND: And, uh, I have various opinions on, you know, being a conservative Republican. I, uh, I was very, uh, ashamed of how our country left that Vietnam. Uh, I just, it just really angered me that we left them in such harm's way. And, uh, I felt so sorry for them. It just got so many of them killed and then pulled all out, withdrew without. Yeah.

TURNER: And that's not to mention the other, like I, like we discussed before, like you heard about like what happened in Cambodia and Laos.

KIRKLAND: Oh yeah. That was one movie. I don't know if you've ever, if you ever get a chance to see it, The Killing Fields?

TURNER: Heard of it, yeah.

KIRKLAND: Yeah. That's a good depiction of what happened, uh, that after we pulled out. Yeah. Oh, it is.

TURNER: It's interesting though that the Khmer Rouge were actually deposed by the, like the Vietnam Army after that. Cause apparently like they didn't like them.

KIRKLAND: Yeah.

TURNER: Because they were killing Vietnamese.

KIRKLAND: Yeah. Oh, I mean it's just, ah, it's just hard as well. I worked in over there then I didn't see it

TURNER: Yeah, I believe it's in 1975.

KIRKLAND: So yeah, it was after I came back and, but what I heard about all that went on and you know, and the people that I got to know over there, I felt so sorry for them, their families and so forth.

TURNER: Well, I believe that's about it for this. Thank you, thank you very much Mr. Kirkland.

KIRKLAND: No problem. Clay, if there's any other information or details that I can provide you, uh, in follow up to this, I'll be more than happy to.

TURNER: Thank you.

KIRKLAND: *inaudible*