Interview with Bill Spriggs

VRV-A-L-2010-001

Interview Date: January 11, 2010

Interviewer: Mark DePue

A Note to the Reader

This transcript is based on an interview recorded by the ALPL Oral History Program. Readers are reminded that the interview of record is the original video or audio file, and are encouraged to listen to portions of the original recording to get a better sense of the interviewee's personality and state of mind. The interview has been transcribed in near-verbatim format, then edited for clarity and readability, and reviewed by the interviewee. For many interviews, the ALPL Oral History Program retains substantial files with further information about the interviewee and the interview itself. Please contact us for information about accessing these materials.

DePue: Today is Monday, January 11, 2010. This is my first interview in 2010, and today it's my privilege to interview Bill Spriggs. Good afternoon, Bill.

Spriggs: Good afternoon, Mark.

DePue: We're sitting in the Kankakee County Museum in Kankakee, Illinois. Beautiful facility they have here, and some of the people who work here—I think Sarah Faford was the one who arranged this interview, and said that you would be the guy to sit down and talk to about your experiences during the Vietnam War, so let's jump right into it, and let you start with telling us where and when you were born.

Spriggs: Fine, I can do that. I was born here, in Kankakee, on September 23, 1945. I went to grade school here, I went to high school here. I went to college at the community college here for a couple of years—that was after service. I've been here all my life.

DePue: Are you a product of the public schools, then?

Spriggs: I am a product of the private schools—Catholic schools.

DePue: What was the name of the Catholic school?

Spriggs: The Catholic boys' school I went to was Saint Rose of Lima.

DePue: Saint Rose of Lima?

Spriggs: L-i-m-a, which has since been replaced by a helipad for the local hospital. I went to—at the time, it was Saint Patrick's Central High School. Two years after my arrival there, for some bizarre reason they changed the name to Bishop Martin D. McNamara High School, I think because initially it was Saint Pat's, but they changed the name to Martin D. MacNamara because the rest of the parishes, as people are wont to do, resented one parish having their name on the high school. And I went to Kankakee Community College upon my discharge from service for a couple of years.

DePue: Now, that's way ahead of our story.

Spriggs: Oh, I'll back up, then. I'm sorry.

DePue: No problem, no problem. Going to all these private schools, does that mean that you had the experience of having nuns as teachers, and the discipline and all the other things that people jump to and assume about that experience?

Spriggs: I did have that experience, and *Saturday Night Live* does it best, and most of that is probably true, but I had great experiences in grade school, and through my own fault, high school wasn't nearly as fun or I didn't turn out as well as I thought it would. But, I did the right thing, and it helped me, life's background.

DePue: You were born in September of 1945, so, a month after the Second World War. Was your father in the military?

Spriggs: My father was in the military. He was in the army. All I know about my father is that he was in the army military police. He was at Anzio; he was all over Europe, but the only thing I heard about was Anzio because we saw a lot of action there. And he was—prior to his departing point—I believe Fort Lawton, in Seattle.

DePue: His departing point—there's a story there, I suspect, when you say that.

Spriggs: Well, I guess there wasn't so much about him, except for that...I guess it's fine to tell you this, you asked—you know, I'm sixty-four years old, you know,

it's passed, but when my mother was pregnant with me, she went to work in the PX at Fort Lawton, and he was stationed there, and she stayed there when he departed, and came home to have me. And he came back to the States and didn't want anything to do with me, or even when she wrote him letters, he said, "No, I just can't do this." And so, I went back some years later—I suppose later on, that conversation, we'll touch on that. Okay?

DePue: Was it hard for you, then, growing up? Did your mother remarry?

Spriggs: No, she did not remarry. All devout Catholics, they didn't believe in that stuff, so my grandmother took us in when I was three weeks old—and maybe I was just a tad older. There's probably a little more to that story that I don't even know about, but I wound up living with my grandmother, three aunts, an uncle, and of course, my mother was there. So, siblings, I had plenty of those, and I lived only a block from the old Saint Rose school, and that's where I grew up. Good childhood—wonderful childhood.

DePue: Did you have any interest when you were growing up in the military?

Spriggs: None. Zero.

DePue: What were the things that got you excited?

Spriggs: I liked sports, and...sports kept me busy. I liked the outdoors. I'm not a hunter—I fish, but I don't know, I'm just a novice fisherman. I just fish to while away the time on a nice, sunny summer day, and I did the same when I was a kid. Sports was my refuge, I would have to say.

DePue: It sounds like your childhood—and I don't want to imply anything here, but I'll just ask you: did you have a primarily a female influence, then, in the home?

Spriggs: No, actually, I had an uncle who was like a big brother to me, who lived there until I was eleven years old. And my other uncle—my grandma had ten children—always came over to the house. My daily routine was basically female-oriented, but I was a fairly, shall we say, masculine child. I don't think it had an effect on me, one way or the other. Maybe a more stern hand would have been what I needed, but, I mean, I don't know.

DePue: Most kids, though, growing up in the 1950s and '60s spent as much time out and about in the community as they did at home, or more so.

Spriggs: Exactly.

DePue: Would that explain or describe your experience as well?

Spriggs: Absolutely, and that's why, at this stage in my life, I know so many families and so many people in the Kankakee area because it got around, of course—I got around, too, more than I should have. Without, you know, letting any cats out of the bag, but at the same time, I didn't get in any major trouble. I got around pretty well.

DePue: Tell us a little bit more about what Kankakee was like when you were growing up.

Spriggs: It was very interesting; it was prosperous. In this town, we had a lot of industry. For a town our size, it was amazing, now that I think back, that I didn't pay much attention to it. And as luck would have it for me, Mark, sports in Kankakee was big: this close to Chicago, that had an influence on us of course. But it was an interesting place to be because like everywhere else, it was a little slower-paced, you know?

DePue: This side of Chicago, does that mean you were a White Sox fan, not a Cubs fan?

Spriggs: I'm afraid it does, Mark. (Interviewer laughs) Does that affect our relationship?

DePue: No, no, not at all! Not at all. I'm just trying to put the markers down, you know?

Spriggs: Oh, I understand. It's okay.

DePue: And the Catholic schools had a healthy rivalry with the Kankakee schools in town?

Spriggs: You know, on the high school level they did, but the Catholic schools kind of always played within their own circles. And at this stage, right now as we speak, they—meaning the private schools, like the Lutheran schools and them—they're trying to join into what we call the IESA: Illinois Elementary School Association. So, they have more benefits, they have a state tournament, they have things like that, and I actually—before I got drafted—coached basketball at old Saint Rose, it was still there. So, it was an interesting phase in my life which got me, later on in my life, to become a basketball aficionado.

DePue: Then were you on the basketball team when you went through school?

Spriggs: No. Well, grade school, in eighth grade I was, but I couldn't play with a...

DePue: How about football or any other sports?

Spriggs: No, look at me. (laughs) Football, I don't think so! You know, ping-pong. I told you that before, which was at the time not a major revenue sport. Baseball a little bit, but you know, I couldn't hit a curveball, so you can't play very well if you can't do that.

DePue: Well, for those people who are reading this or are listening to this and can't see you, describe yourself physically, at that time.

Spriggs: At that time? Slightly built, skinny kid. My height was average.

DePue: Five foot...

Spriggs: Oh, 5'1", 2", maybe, as you'd gradually progress through the fifth grade on up, 5'3", 5'4"...

DePue: So, where did you peak out, in high school?

Spriggs: When I was a freshman and a sophomore in the high school, I started to grow a little bit, but I'm only 5'8", so I didn't grow that much, and I certainly didn't do anything more than gain weight in service and lose it when I got home, so...

DePue: You told me to ask you about Indian caves, too. Is there a—

Spriggs: Ah, the Indian caves, the famous Indian caves. Everybody in Kankakee and surrounding areas knows about those: that was one of our youthful delights because on a day, a sunny, hot summer day, we'd all get together, pack lunches, and head for the Indian caves which was in the area. It's still there, north of the Kankakee and into the Bradley/Bourbonnais area, right on the river. And you walked the river all the way to the caves, and then as you looked to your right—which would be east—there's this massive, massive conglomeration of rock outcroppings, and within that area is a small canyon, maybe a block long, and the Indian caves are there, and they're legitimately what they are, and always an adventure for a kid. And we spent a lot of time there, too.

DePue: A limestone cave system?

Spriggs: Great place, great place. I don't know if it was limestone—I assume it was. It was a system that was very old. Caves on both sides, elevated—extreme elevation—and then down below, there was running water through this canyon area.

DePue: This sounds just like the kind of thing that mothers and grandmothers would worry to death about.

Spriggs: Well, what's the need for them to know? (Interviewer laughs) You get my drift? Except when you're packing a lunch, you better have some stealth involved because it's the old, where are you going? And they knew—they knew. For the most part, at that time, it was an adventure. I think, in this day and age—and it kills me to say it—safety, personal safety, would always be something you'd have to worry about now.

DePue: So, those were different days back then?

Spriggs: Oh, my gosh: what a difference. You could bring a bike there if you wanted to take the long way, but now you couldn't bring a bike unless you had an armed guard.

DePue: When you're in high school, then, what'd you think you'd be doing with your life?

Spriggs: That's a great question, Mark. I actually had no plans. To get out of high school was the major project for me—I had no plans, I was seventeen when I got out of high school. Everybody everywhere was getting drafted. I knew I was going to get drafted; that I was prime meat to get drafted because I had no college aspirations. I just wanted to go to work, and you know, I always thought I'd play baseball for a living, but you know, that was so unrealistic. I finally started to wake up to that in high school, and after I got out I just worked. I knew I was going to service, Mark. I knew I was going to get drafted.

DePue: You graduated from high school when?

Spriggs: It was '63, and I got drafted November of '65, two years almost to the month.

DePue: So, we have two years between there: what were you doing for those two years?

Spriggs: Well, you know, I kind of slugged around a little bit and worked here and there, and...did some, you know, basketball coaching here and there, and I didn't do much. I got hired here locally, what is the mental health center, I suppose you call it now. At the time, it was a state hospital. Worked at Krohler's when I was seventeen—

DePue: Krohler's Furniture?

Spriggs: Krohler's Furniture, and then the same year, I got hired at Shapiro. Now, it's Shapiro, then, it was Kankakee State Hospital. They were all just stops on the way, stops on the way to Canal Street in Chicago, to take my oath.

DePue: So why didn't it occur to you, you know, if I'm just kind of kicking around and being drafted is inevitable, did you ever consider enlisting?

Spriggs: I did not consider that because my fear was the time to serve in excess of two years. For the most part, if you enlisted, you had to stay for three or four years. I didn't like the air force because I'm not fond of airplanes, I didn't like the navy because I hate the water, so what's next? You know.

DePue: So, I'm trying to figure this out here, and put you on the spot, I guess: you kind of are going through a variety of different things those two years, waiting for the time to get drafted, but were you thinking at all about what would happen after you got done with the military tour?

Spriggs: You know, Mark, I had an affinity for music, and I did a little bit of musical stuff right before I got drafted, but nothing major. I played in a garage band, and it was—

DePue: Hang on. Dropped your microphone, here, so...

Spriggs: Am I on pause?

DePue: No, no, we're still going. Let's pause you real quick because that's the smart thing to do. I'm going to start this up again, so. Okay, we took a very quick break because the old microphone had tried to disappear on us: (interviewee laughs) you were talking about getting into music, and in a very small way, but I suspect in part that's because you're a little bit modest about this. What kind of music were you into?

Spriggs: Rock and roll, jazz...the contemporary stuff that was going on at the time, and I always liked jazz. I was always a big jazz buff. God gave me a good singing voice and I took piano lessons for a while, but that flopped. So, I figured out that I could play by ear, and I just started playing the piano. So, I did a little of that prior to service.

DePue: Were you singing in this garage band?

Spriggs: I was.

DePue: What was the name of the band?

Spriggs: Let me think, now. One of the bands was TheWhat For...do you have to ask me these things? And the others I can't recall, to be honest with you, Mark.

DePue: Well, everybody had an interesting story, you know, you end up being an infantryman in 'Nam and you were a singer in a jazz band back in the States.

Spriggs: Yes, and I played in service. I found some other guys that had the same interest.

DePue: Nineteen-sixty-three, Vietnam is not going on very strong. Of course, that's the year that Kennedy was assassinated. LBJ comes in the next year. Do you recall the Gulf of Tonkin incident? Were you following the news at all?

Spriggs: Always, my whole life, followed the news. I do recall the Gulf of Tonkin incident, and to this day, I'm painfully aware pretty much of what that was all about.

DePue: At the time did you realize, oh, this might have some implications for me?

Spriggs: No. Well, no, I never did in '63. No, because I knew I was eligible for the draft, but I didn't think that it would get to the point that it did, to be honest with you.

DePue: By '65—what month in '65 were you drafted?

Spriggs: November the fifth. Day of infamy.

DePue: Do you remember that day pretty well?

Spriggs: I remember exactly where I opened my draft notice and who was with me, and what room I was in the house.

DePue: Well, tell me all about it.

Spriggs: I also remember the person who was in charge of sending the letters out—I will not mention her name, but we all had strange feelings about her. We knew she was busy at work in the post office. Got the letter—

DePue: She was on the local draft board?

Spriggs: She was. She was the person that sent the letter out, that signed the bottom of the letter that said, "Greetings from…." I was in the living room of my house, at 280 S. Sixth Avenue—in the old French quarter of Kankakee, by the way, lovely place to grow up. My grandmother was with me. I said to my mother, I can remember it like it was yesterday, I said, "I got my draft notice." Opened it up, there it was. Report to train station—I think it was on November the tenth or eleventh. No, they gave me eleven days—wouldn't that be the sixteenth? Report to the Illinois Central railroad station on the eleventh of November.

DePue: Why does that stick with you so clearly?

Spriggs: It's a traumatic experience because you read about all this stuff, knew you were going to probably get drafted, but when it comes, it's like anything else, you know?

DePue: What was your expectation, then, opening that draft letter? You knew that it was your time, did you expect to go to 'Nam, for example?

Spriggs: I knew I was going to 'Nam. We were all going, and a lot of my buddies got drafted at the same time I did. And I ride to Canal Street—they were giving the oath in Chicago—and the first thing the NCO—non-commissioned officer—said to me was, "Don't write home and tell your mother you're not going to Vietnam because you are going to Vietnam." That was the start of my tour, so, you know, it didn't... I was a big-eyed kid.

DePue: You already told us why the air force wasn't for you, why the navy wasn't for you. Did you ever consider the marines, or just ride your fate out with the army?

Spriggs: No, marines was a non-vote because they were, and to this day, they're the first in, they go to the hottest spots, let's tell the truth. I don't like saying that about them; I'm an army guy, but it's true, and they're a certain breed of cat, I think. And so, "okay, you guys just go ahead and go in first, and we'll mop up." I'm not a false hero, I'm just like the other guy, the next guy, you know.

DePue: Like the vast majority of folks out there.

Spriggs: Yes, exactly!

DePue: Did you have a choice of what your MOS or your specific assignment was?

Spriggs: No, I think that was just based on the exam that the military people give you upon entry into the service. And originally, I think as I mentioned to you earlier on, I was going to be going to [Fort] Sam Houston, [Texas]. You know how the military works—you were in a long time. The military reeks of rumor, and the paperwork was so vast that—and I found this out right away—when the paperwork hits where it's supposed to go, it's already obsolete. It's like a cell phone, it's like a computer: they're already obsolete. So, they pin this up on the bulletin board and scare the hell out of you or send you into euphoria, and all the while in the back of your mind knowing it's just going to change, and they never let us down—it changed. So, from Sam Houston I went to 11B10, which, in military jargon as you well know, is basic infantry.

DePue: Or, in military jargon, a grunt.

Spriggs: Exactly. There are other words for that, but we won't go into that.

DePue: Most people don't know why you might be going to Fort Sam Houston initially; what were you supposed to be doing?

Spriggs: Oh, Fort Sam Houston, I guess at the time was the major military post in the United States that trained medics and had a large health-type milieu in the entire post, and when you went there, that's what you were going to be.

DePue: Do you remember expressing interest, I think I might like to be a medic, or were you interested in biology or medicine, anything like that?

Spriggs: Not a bit, good question. You know why I think I got sent there? Truth be known, because I put down that Kankakee State Hospital is where I was initially employed, and somebody saw the word "hospital." (DePue laughs) Great way to size up a group, but I honestly think that's true. Makes sense.

DePue: But you never spent one day at Fort Sam, it sounds like.

Spriggs: I read where I was going to Fort Sam, and that's the last thing I heard about Fort Sam.

DePue: You ended up where, then, for your basic training?

Spriggs: For my basic training, I ended up at Fort Hood, Texas.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about basic training.

Spriggs: Basic training was very interesting: basic training was the first of many initial shock areas that I was going to be involved in, geographically speaking. Excuse me, Fort Hood, [Texas] was in the middle of nowhere, and we were involved in just what they say you're involved in—basic training. Training that was absolutely basic, out of what I'd never ever done in my life. So, they hand you a gun and they show you how to shoot. I was in a tankoutfit, "Hell on Wheels," 2nd Armored Division. Elvis Presley, I think I told you this, all his old drill instructors were my drill instructors. Fort Hood was a little tough because it was close to Christmas, but they gave us five days to come home—that's another story. It was a desert situation for us, Mark, and it was the first time in my life I had ever been "bullied", and I suppose "bullied" is the correct word to use. They call it training; it's a euphemism for being bullied. And we were bullied because I was in with so many guys, I mean, that were just like something to read about.

I'll give you a good example: I went to Louisville first, Fort Knox, waiting to get sent to Fort Hood. I apologize, I should have said that first. I was only there for a week-and-a-half. I was in a replacement depot, as we are all wont to be thrown in when we are transferred from one post to the other, and I went inside of a large building when we all got an indoctrination speech by this

staff sergeant who looked to me like a three-star general. I didn't know, you know, what was going on. And he got up, and the first thing—I'll never forget this—he said, "How many people in here can't read or write?" And you should have seen how many guys got up. To this day, I can see them. It was amazing, and he said, "The guys that can't read or write, go outside and wait." A quarter of the guys—there was about 90 guys, maybe 125 guys—got up, that couldn't read or write, and I thought, I'm not in America anymore. Where am I at?

So, from there, then, I went to Fort Hood. Basic training, usual stuff: firing range, you know, I had never taken orders from anybody in my life except my teachers, and these big drill sergeants were there, and it was awesome. But because of my personality, I didn't think I wasn't going to survive that—I saw a lot of guys that didn't make it, but I wasn't worried about not surviving it. The thing I was worried about is, when is this going to end? And of course, it was a long time, start to finish.

DePue: Do you think they did a good job of teaching you the basics of surviving in combat and the basic individual skills that you would need later on?

Spriggs: I think the basic individual skills that we all need when we first get into the service, whether you're RA or US—RA meaning regular army, US meaning you got drafted—was given to us with superlative skill by our instructors, but it had to happen so fast because guys were starting to go across the ocean so fast. Things I'm sure we should have spent more time on, we just didn't have enough time to do.

DePue: By this time, we're talking about late-1965, and it probably is worth mentioning here, just kind of a marker as we go forward, that this is the timeframe when LBJ and the Department of Defense is really starting to build up forces in Vietnam. Sixty-three, minor force operations. August '64, Gulf of Tonkin, and then he used that as a justification. So, they're ramping up significantly, and that probably explains why your drill sergeants were so insistent to get it done right and then move onto the next group, huh?

Spriggs: Exactly. The word "escalation" wasn't even in the vocabulary yet. In '63, there was no escalation. Then, when I got drafted, after a little while that was the word of the day, and you hit it on the head: they were in a hurry to get us trained, but they had another group waiting.

DePue: Were these drill instructors Korean War vets, maybe some of them World War II vets, do you know?

Spriggs: Some of them were World War II. Now, I say that not tongue-in-cheek because it's been forty-some years since I was in service, so having them be

World War II vets is possible. There were three wars: World War II, Korea, Vietnam—came back from Vietnam to train us. They were good old boys.

DePue: Did you respect them as NCOs?

Spriggs: Here's what I respected: I respected the fact that they want you on that wall, they need me on that wall philosophy. I was happy—I wish there had been more of them! Maybe I wouldn't have been drafted. I respected the fact they went to three wars. I never respected the fact that they had to talk to us the way they did to train us, only simply because me being me, I didn't need to be talked to like that. I'd have done it—I would have done what they wanted without the, you know, belittlement and all the other stuff, but I suppose that's fantasy land. I did respect them, and I think about them often. I really do.

DePue: Do you ever think that some of those guys never made it back from 'Nam after they went themselves?

Spriggs: Absolutely, absolutely.

DePue: I forgot to ask you a question earlier on, so this is probably as good a time as any: did you have a girlfriend that you left behind or any significant other?

Spriggs: No, I did not, and as it turns out, I saw that was a good thing.

DePue: Well, what else interesting about basic? You mentioned that Elvis had passed through there shortly before, and you mentioned earlier about ping-pong. Did ping-pong factor into basic?

Spriggs: Ping-pong factored into prior-basic, when I was at Fort Knox. I think I told you this story. I could play, I was a pretty good player, and we had a choice: to go to Fort Hood commercially or militarily, and we wanted to go as comfortable as we could. So, I played enough ping-pong and made enough money with my buddies backing me so that we could all fly there commercially. It wasn't a fun flight, but it was something that gave us three or four hours of independence, shall we say?

DePue: I'm going to ask a question, then you're going to smile: was this a formal tournament? Where did you play this ping-pong?

Spriggs: I played this ping-pong at the NCO club, which is a recreation area for troops, and it was strictly a gambling operation, I'm sorry to say. That sounds ugly, but that's what it was.

DePue: So, this wasn't authorized by anybody on Fort Knox?

Spriggs: Well, it wasn't unauthorized, it just was something we did on the quiet, you know what I mean? Unauthorized is probably correct.

DePue: How much money did you win, then?

Spriggs: Well, four of us flew commercial, and I probably won about six-hundred bucks.

DePue: Wow, that's some serious money back then.

Spriggs: It was serious money, and what was I going to do with it? I knew where I was going, so we might as well take it easy. We got in a two-engine prop—I'd wish we'd have done better than that, but I don't even recall how we left.

DePue: Was there a group of people you were playing against, or was this one guy who was that big of a sucker that—

Spriggs: Whoever was dumb enough to take the paddle, he had to be whipped.

DePue: Where'd you learn how to play ping-pong in the first place?

Spriggs: I was a big park guy when I was a kid. One block from my house was what they called the clubhouse in Alpiner Park, God bless it. Still there—they play baseball there, but they don't have the clubhouse. They had a ping-pong table, and my uncle that played with me, we called him Chink—I don't mean to be disrespectful, politically un-correct, that was just a nickname the guys in high school tagged him with—he was a great player. So, I put up with getting my fanny kicked all my young life so that somebody else had to pay. You know how it works! (both laugh) So, that's where I learned, and I did that a lot. Every day.

DePue: And it paid off, finally, when you got—

Spriggs: It did pay off, and then downtown in Kankakee, we had a Knights of Columbus building, a KC building, and down below on the bottom floor was an old CYO. You know, they're notorious for the old boxing matches.

DePue: CYO?

Spriggs: Catholic Youth Organization. It was a place to go—the place to go, not a place to go—and they had ping-pong tables. So, when I was a kid, I'd go up there and get tanned by high school kids until I got good enough to where we reversed that situation, and so then I went in the army and I was ready for them.

DePue: (laughs) Okay, that's one way to go through the army.

Spriggs: I got them. Well, it helped me a lot! Believe it or not.

DePue: What happened after Fort Hood, then? Where were you assigned?

Spriggs: Fort Hood, Fort Hood...after Fort Hood, I went to Fort Lewis, Washington.

DePue: And you arrived there about February, '66?

Spriggs: Yes, correct. For advanced infantry training.

DePue: What's advanced infantry training, then?

Spriggs: That would be where you do more practical exercises, like you pack up a pack, you go out in the field, and live. I lived on the foothills of Mount Rainier for six months, in and out of course. Where they took you out and actually had things like map drills, where they give you the destination, you get a map and a compass, and you have to go there at night. That kind of stuff.

DePue: Was this training as an individual, or were you now into unit-level training?

Spriggs: That's a good way to put it—unit-level training, that's where I went, and my platoon that was going to be, in the end, the people that I would go to Vietnam with and stay with were coming there with me, and some were already there.

DePue: So, when you say you were in advanced training, you were also assigned to a regular army combat unit?

Spriggs: Regular—how's it work?—battalion, companies, platoon, squad.

DePue: Well, why don't you take us from squad all the way up to division, then: what was the unit you were in?

Spriggs: Let's see, I was in, at Fort Lewis, my permanent division was going to be the Fourth Infantry, but I'll start at the bottom. I was in the first squad...give me a second here. First Squad...First Platoon...First Battalion, Twenty-Second Infantry, Fourth Infantry Division.

DePue: Do you remember the company you were assigned to?

Spriggs: Company C.

DePue: Did they call it Charlie Company at that time?

Spriggs: Either one. They called it both. I don't remember what brigade I was in—I think Second Brigade.

DePue: Well, that emphasizes one fact, that the army, at least at that time, did not pay as much attention to brigade as they did to what battalion and what division you might be assigned to.

Spriggs: Correct.

DePue: So, the first of the twenty-second infantry, and the Fourth Infantry Division?

Spriggs: Yes.

DePue: What kind of infantry division was the Fourth?

Spriggs: Well, you know, we didn't get to see the whole division because at the time, I think there were thirty-four thousand guys that were in the division itself, counting all of the platoons, all of the companies, yeah.

DePue: But was this a mechanized, or, like—

Spriggs: It was not a mechanized. It was basically a division that was on foot, unlike the First Cav that are mechanized and the Airborne Divisions, we were just a bunch of grunts, like you say, and knew we were going to be like that.

DePue: Did you enjoy your training that you got there?

Spriggs: I enjoyed it because I'm an outside kind of guy, I enjoyed the scenery and I tried to balance the misery of a training situation with my surroundings. And to say I enjoyed it—I didn't like the training. I was a bad soldier, to be honest with you. I wasn't a good soldier; I don't know how I was one of the first nineteen guys in our company to be given mosquito wings, PFC wings. I, to this day, can't figure out how that happened.

DePue: Why do you describe yourself as a bad soldier, or not a good soldier?

Spriggs: Because one, I didn't want to be there. Two, I was not gung-ho, I was not a great physical specimen who could score five-hundred on my physical—what was that, the PT test they gave you, which was, you know, physical therapy or physical training.

DePue: Physical training.

Spriggs: Physical training, and if I got a chance to slack...on a small level, I would take advantage of it. I don't think there's any harm in that.

DePue: But if you're one of the first guys to get, as you described them, your mosquito wings, at least you were managing to keep out of trouble.

Spriggs: I did something right. To this day, Mark, I can't figure it. I can see us to this day, sitting out in the middle of the field, and Sergeant Jett, my old drill instructor and dear, close friend and lifesaver, stood up and said, "All right, now, we got promotions coming up: there's nineteen guys that are going to be considered PFCs." Why, that was the farthest thing from my mind, and he hollered my name and I was taken aback by it, but because I respected him so much and liked him, I tried not to let him down, you know what I mean?

DePue: A PFC generally means you're going to get a little bit more responsibility.

Spriggs: Listen, let's tell the truth here, Mark: it meant more money. (both laugh) I didn't want any more—I had a hard enough time keeping myself out of trouble and alive!

DePue: What did you think about the training at Fort Lewis, knowing that, Okay, I'm probably heading to Vietnam?

Spriggs: I thought it was excellent, in that there were so many experienced non-commissioned officers, and I thought also that the non-commissioned officers we had were so experienced in prior action that it might be a good idea to listen to what they had to say. That's how I summed it up, and my training was extensive, it was pretty much six days a week. I can't say seven, but it was, interestingly enough, not much of what I would be thrown into overseas because the climate was so different. We were bivouacking amidst thousands and thousands of conifers—trees with no leaves—and it was all pretty much snow and cold. I went to hundred-degree weather with all of these jungles full of leaves and trees, and I never got it—I didn't get it. See what I mean? So, in that particular aspect, geographically speaking, I don't think there was any advantage I got. But getting to be with your mates which turn out to be your everything, your buddies, your protectors, that was a key thing. Who could you trust?

DePue: So, you developed the team, your platoon, the company, the unit all the way up and down the chain of command had some cohesiveness, this would be the term that the military would use?

Spriggs: Yes, it is, and I'm sure that's why they did it because it was, Who can you trust and it was, Is this guy going to watch my back, and, Who can I count on, and, Who's going to be some fun if we ever get to go downtown? I mean, it was everything!

DePue: You haven't mentioned the officers. You talked about the NCOs quite a bit.

Spriggs: Well, the officers we had...I'll be honest with you, there was such a turnover, Mark. I don't want to dramatize this, I don't want to be Mr. Drama here, but there were so many casualties overseas that the officers we had, a lot of times,

were shave tails. In army jargon, you and I both know that's an officer that's brand-spanking new. Probably you know more than he does, but he's got rank, and rank counts for everything.

DePue: Did you not see your officers much, though, while you were at Fort Lewis?

Spriggs: I saw a lot of first lieutenants and second lieutenants because, well, the captains we saw occasionally, but I saw a lot of officers, sure I did. But they weren't involved in much training, you know. They were just their overseers.

DePue: So, as far as you can tell, the NCOs were pretty much running the army?

Spriggs: Pretty much. I mean, it was always a shock to me to see a first lieutenant or a second lieutenant being bossed around by a first sergeant or sergeant major, and the reason they were was because these guys were new, the officers, and the first sergeant, he was an old dog. He knew what he was doing, and those guys were smart enough to listen to him. It was an interesting concept that the army had.

DePue: When did the unit deploy to 'Nam, then?

Spriggs: Well, that's an interesting story... My unit deployed to Vietnam in—gosh, let me think. I know when I went, but my unit went before me, as I told you before, so my unit would have gone seventy-eight days before me, which would have been...September, August, probably around June or July of '66.

DePue: Before we get to beyond Fort Lewis, what was your specific assignment, as an eleven-bravo, as an infantryman, even so, you still have some, you know, particular duty in the squad.

Spriggs: Well, I was a grenadier—that's the guy that carries a grenade launcher and a sidearm, .45 automatic. Grenade launcher at the time, breach-loaded—we had large shotgun shells, like three shotgun shells only it was one large bullet, and you breached the weapon and slid that in, and then you fired. For short range. That was my job.

DePue: Do you recall the range in that, roughly?

Spriggs: Pardon me?

DePue: Do you recall the range of the grenade launcher?

Spriggs: If it launched the projectile fifty or a hundred yards, it would be able to arm. Anything shorter than that, it didn't have enough revolutions to blow up. So, it was close range, but I mean, when I found out later that in the jungle, fifty

yards is fifty miles, the weapon was of no use to me, and consequently, they gave me a rifle.

DePue: What was the rifle you trained on at Fort Lewis, or did you train on one?

Spriggs: I trained on an M-14 at Fort Hood. And Fort Lewis, we trained with some M-16s and some M-14s.

DePue: The M-16 would have pretty new to the inventory at that time?

Spriggs: Very new. I think it was being used overseas, but if you know anything about the M-16's history, it took a lot of grief and there were pros and cons by the national brass as to whether or not we ought to use it, and it turned out to be a pretty good weapon. So, that's what I trained with, and I trained also with the grenade launcher.

DePue: And the .45 as well, sounds like?

Spriggs: .45 automatic, yes. Pistol.

DePue: And the stories about you can't hit anything with a .45, how did that bear up in your experience?

Spriggs: If you got close enough and kept shooting, sooner or later, you know? It's like the old hog digging for the acorn—you got to hit something, and if you don't, you put it away and start with your rifle. So, that's what I can say about that—it's true enough, I'm sure the officers got away when I pulled mine out. (interviewer laughs)

DePue: Tell us about why you did not go with your unit.

Spriggs: That's a great story. I did not go with my unit because we all came home for leave prior to our departure—excuse me while I take a drink here. I came home, and at the time of my leave, the country—the U.S.—was involved in a national airplane strike. That happened while I was at home. So, consequently, you couldn't just drop into O'Hare field and get a military stand-by and go back to Seattle. So, my sergeant who lived in southern Indiana—Sgt. Gerald Jett—called me up and said, "Listen, we can't get rides to flights to the West Coast; why don't we just hitchhike?" And I'm not that adventurous, so I just thought, Nah, Sarge, I'll figure something out. And I was usually pretty creative about that stuff, and I still am.

So, a buddy of mine and I found out through whatever means available—I don't recall what it was, it certainly wasn't the Internet, I promise you that—they had military air transport flights out of a hangar next to O'Hare field, which was a military facility. So, we went up to Chicago and on the fourth

time—because the first three times we went up... Actually, let me back up: the first four times we went up to Chicago, we tried commercial flights. We got bumped because we didn't have any money to fly coach.

DePue: But you said there was an airplane strike, and airliner strike?

Spriggs: Well, I said commercial—what I meant is we went up to MAT to get a plane out, and we got bumped because we didn't have any seniority, and that was the military area. I'm sorry, I apologize. And we couldn't get a flight out, so we had to come back home. Then, we finally went on a fourth trip to the military air transport area, and got on, lucky enough, to get a flight. But every other time that we went, we had to come back home—we had to cab it home. So, the fourth time up we went, we got on, and we flew to Seattle. But by the time we got back to Seattle, our division was gone. Fourth Infantry left, so we're stuck in Fort Lewis.

DePue: You couldn't have been alone, though—there must have been scores of guys—

Spriggs: There was 250 of us. That's a good point. There was 250 guys that flew in late because we couldn't get a plane out. So, we stayed there and helped—because we were at a replacement depot—the NCOs divvy up the equipment because they were overwhelmed by how many guys were going across. And they kept us there for—gosh, let me think...probably six-to-eight weeks, if I recall correctly, and then we flew—somebody got us, I can't even remember who, a flight to Pleiku through military transport. We took a C-141 Starlifter Jet.

DePue: C-141 from Seattle to...?

Spriggs: To Pleiku. From Fort Lewis to Pleiku. They finally got a plane for us to Lewis—they kept canceling it and holding us back, and they held us back. So, 250 guys who wanted to go join their outfits were held back for whatever reason. I think it was just bureaucracy.

DePue: Did they have work for you to do?

Spriggs: They were running out when we left, believe me. We were messing around with the supply sergeant and we had almost nothing to do by the time we got ready to go, so finally they decided they'll get us out, so they flew us out.

DePue: Were you guys in contact? Was there anybody in your group in contact with the division overseas?

Spriggs: None.

DePue: So, you had no idea what was going on with the Fourth?

Spriggs: No. We only knew where they landed, and we knew where the base camp was. And it was so new that they were still living in tents—they had no wooden buildings or anything like that when we left. So, we finally got a plane and flew out from Lewis to—let me think about this...let me think about this...let me think about this. I'm going to put me on pause.

DePue: Okay. (break in recording) Shall we get started again?

Spriggs: Yes.

DePue: Okay, go ahead and talk about the legs of the flight.

Spriggs: All right, I'm back. What we did was we flew from Washington State to Midway Island to Yokota, Japan—Clark Air Force Base—flew into Pleiku. In the interim or even previous to that, the entire division took a boat, and they were on the ocean for thirty-one days. We made it there in, like, fourteen hours, and come to find out that it was truly a blessing that we got held back because they said that boat ride was awful. So, we got into Pleiku, and then we went to Camp Enari, which was at Dragon Mountain.

DePue: Do you know how to spell Camp Enari?

Spriggs: E-n-a-r-i. And we joined up with our outfits.

DePue: You strike me as having a pretty good memory on things: do you remember landing in 'Nam and your first impressions, getting off that aircraft?

Spriggs: We landed in Pleiku, and I got off the plane and took fire. And...we were all flabbergasted because we thought, Well, here were are—I think the name of the air base was McCoy—and I think that some of the Vietcong had snuck up on the air base and just started random fire, which they were wont to do, almost every day.

DePue: Small arms fire, or bigger arms?

Spriggs: Yeah, small arms fire, yeah. Didn't last very long. So, you know, we were scattering and if I recall, we got on deuce & a half, the big truck, the military transport trucks, and drove out to Dragon Mountain, and tried to hook up with our outfits.

DePue: A rude awakening, though, to take fire right off the bat?

Spriggs: Well, it was, because I didn't know we were getting fired on. You know, I'd never been shot at before, so we heard pop-pop, and then the flight guys and some of the guys that were milling around said, Jeez, you know, we're getting

shot at, let's hit the deck! So, they had stuff that they used for airplanes to land on—I can't remember, it was a number and a letter—with holes in it—

DePue: The metal grating—

Spriggs: The metal grating, yeah, good enough. So, we hit the deck and we didn't know what was going on, and then, you know, that was our welcoming party.

DePue: How different was it from Fort Lewis?

Spriggs: Well, let me tell you: I got off that airplane and I saw all these guys and all these old fighter planes in their pens, firing up, flying out, and I'd seen them flying in—there was a lot of buzz, a lot of activity. I saw guys running around with weapons—nobody ran around with weapons at Fort Lewis! I saw so many, so much personnel, so many supplies, so many...native people working for the government, so many Vietnamese, and I'm saying to myself, Jeez, you know, what, are they with us or against us? I don't understand what's going on here. And it was a shock, it was a culture shock for me, and to my credit—I'll pat myself on the back a little here—I never wavered; I just took it as it came. I thought, oh, this is not going to be good, but look at all what's going on here. Look at all this. But I had to assume that I was going to be taken care of and brought where I was needed to be brought, you know. I was.

DePue: Do you recall the first combat or first mission you went on to?

Spriggs: The first mission I went up to was a long time coming because we were in base camp for a while—they wanted us to get acclimated.

DePue: To the weather, to the...?

Spriggs: Everything: to the weather, to the dampness, to the fact that we were sleeping and roughing it outdoors in tents, we didn't have anything else, we barely had cots. No shower facilities yet—it was a division of all those men in a huge area that was totally undeveloped. Not a single asphalt road, nothing. Just roughing it all the way, just dirt floors and, you know, wash your canteens in the old drums and barely get a hot lunch. Had the old smokers—

DePue: Slit trenches for latrines?

Spriggs: Tubes. Tubes, you know. You know what the other word is... So, you know, that was a shock, but I don't know. It wasn't as bad as all that. See, it had to get better. I'm thinking, oh, this can't last.

DePue: Was the entire division at that one bay?

Spriggs: The entire division was at it—it was a main division base of the Fourth Infantry Division. There was thousands of guys, there was so much equipment I thought, nobody can lose a war with this much stuff, impossible. And I look over and there's two great big hills, and on these hills were dozens, literally, of antennas, and I'm thinking, This is more secure than being downtown in Chicago! As it turns out, it wasn't, but it looked like it was all right. I'm where I'm at, so what are you going to do?

DePue: Maybe before we get into your particular combat experiences, try to explain to us what kind of combat the Fourth Infantry Division was into when they were in 'Nam?

Spriggs: All right, I think I can do that by indicating to you an athletic analogy. Baseball is the only sport where you have the ball and you're on defense. It was like that. We were chasing. We had all the stuff, so we went on patrols looking for all these guys, and we were the ones always catching the heat, always getting fired on, always getting mortared, you know what I mean? That is a perfect analogy for a guy that was in Vietnam who knew that he was going out on search & destroy—they called it search & destroy missions. Basically, for the Fourth Infantry Division, that's what their job was.

DePue: No front lines?

Spriggs: There weren't any lines. There was no such thing as a line over there. You had a CO that had a map that was indicated by klicks, the distance you covered, a thousand meters. That day, if you were to go to a certain area on the Cambodian border or the Ia Drang Valley or wherever it is you were going, the platoon leader, who was a field-grade officer, would come in after he was briefed—

DePue: Platoon leader? Well, platoon leader would be a company-grade officer.

Spriggs: All right, so that was the first lieutenant?

DePue: Yeah.

Spriggs: Okay, that's what I meant. I'm sorry. It would be a company-grade officer would come in, and he would tell the squad leaders what their job was, and it was always, Walk a thousand klicks in this certain area and see what you can find. And on the way there, if you got hit, you were the guy looking, chasing, following, dogging these guys, and they were the ones shooting at you.

DePue: The way you describe it, it almost sounds like you're going out wanting and waiting to be hit so you could put some hurt on them, to put it bluntly.

Spriggs: More or less that's the way it was, but here was the confusing part, Mark: I heard a colonel—that would be a battalion commander, like, colonel, right?

DePue: Mm-hmm.

Spriggs: Our battalion commander, I heard from his mouth, say, "You tell those boys they can fire those weapons, but they better put a body across my desk." Okay, all right—what does that mean? Does that mean if I fire my weapon and I don't have a body across your desk I'm going to the stockade because I shouldn't have been firing, you know, when there was nothing there? Or are you restraining me, am I under restraints in a combat zone? And if I am, that doesn't ring to be good luck for me. You know what I mean?

DePue: Was this the kind of combat you were being trained for in Fort Lewis and back at Fort Hood?

Spriggs: Yes, well, we were being trained for combat to go search these people out, and whatever they were up to, stop them. And it seemed like, when I got there, we were searching them out all right. Well, let me back up: when we were being trained, we didn't go out on a lot of night patrols. We'd maybe have a four-day bivouac, four-night bivouac, but certainly, when we went out, we were never told, "Now, remember guys, when you go out overseas, you're going to have to find these people and they're going to be camouflaged, and you're going to have to roust them out and shoot them because they're going to kill you if you don't."

We knew it was a war going on, but the word "war" was never spoken. Know what I'm saying, here? It was like, All right, boys, you fly into the country: here you are. You'll be told where to go and what to do every day, and if somebody fires at you, shoot back. So, the dichotomy here is they say that, then I hear—what kind of an officer would that be?

DePue: That would be a field-grade officer.

Spriggs: That's a field-grade officer?

DePue: A major and up is a field-grade officer.

Spriggs: Field-grade officer say that kind of thing, so then you've been trained, you think, to find these guys and to shoot them, and maybe you ought to let them shoot at you first before you shoot back. You know what I mean? It was confusing, it was always confusing.

DePue: Just listening to you explain it, I can see how confusing it is, and there's all kinds of questions that bubble out, out of what you've just been talking about here. So, let's start with this one: these people, that's how you've been

referring so far to what classically we'd refer to as the enemy, so who was the enemy?

Spriggs: Well, (laughs) the enemy was supposed to be: one, the Vietcong, which would be a regional, local people who'd take up arms against us.

DePue: And how could you tell them apart from the general populace?

Spriggs: Well, you couldn't. You couldn't. Most times, it was the general public during the day that was face-down in the rice paddies, doing their work, driving the buffalo. They were the ones shooting at you at night. You didn't know that—it was blind luck. I was there for a year, ten-and-a-half months, and saw the enemy maybe once or twice—maybe—movement. So, for sure, you didn't—I mean, I saw them on one particular night a lot, which you may want to get into later, but you didn't know who was who. And when we were there, certainly during the day, the guy that was driving the buffalo most likely was the guy shooting at you, you know?

DePue: How did the army deal with that?

Spriggs: Well, what he did was...without indicting the United States army, because I'm a flag-waver, was a lot of guesswork and a lot of interrogation, and a lot of walk at night, find the village. Was this village, depending on how it was, how it looked, what they had, perhaps a spot that would be ripe for Vietcong to just stay there? And otherwise, it was just if you were walking at night and they fired at you or you got fired on anywhere, you'd at least know that there was somebody out there. You know what I mean?

DePue: Well, the classic understanding of what Americans have today is that if the American unit is fired upon, you guys would have responded with massive firepower in the opposite direction.

Spriggs: Depending on where you were. Most times, if you were in deep jungle, you had no tanks. And one particular time, we had to call in air strikes, which was the ultimate protection for you if you came under fire, and it was always too close to our troops. They couldn't drop napalm too close to us because they'd burn us. So, where I was at, other than places like—what was the base, Cam...

DePue: Cam Ranh Bay?

Spriggs: No, not Cam Ranh Bay, it was where the marines were holding out...

DePue: Khe Sanh?

Spriggs: Khe Sanh! I always want to say Kcon Tum,[1] but that's not right. Where you could see where the enemy was, and the marines within a barrier—if the planes came in, you knew they weren't going to hit you because they knew where the guys were. But I was in jungle all the time, so it was fend for yourself, except for a couple of nights where we had to have it, and it was getting to close. I mean, so you just fought when you found them, and when you didn't find them, you looked for them.

DePue: How many times did the patrol set up ambushes yourself?

Spriggs: Every night. Every night, I was in the bush. You dug a foxhole every night, and you placed guards, and it wasn't so much—they call them ambushes, but it was like a stationary guarding position because you were chasing and you had to stop. So, if you stop, you need people to protect you. So, yeah, I suppose you could call that an ambush.

DePue: Did you ever have anybody walk into your ambush?

Spriggs: We actually didn't—I was never involved in anything like that. We actually, one day, bailed out, helped a company—excuse me—that were being beaten rather badly, and we had to walk a long way and help them out, but that night, after the battle was over, we had to set a perimeter. Which, you know, in layman's terms is what it is—just a circle of men guarding you in a certain area. And they came back and we fired on them, but I mean, I've never laid in wait knowing that the enemy was coming down the trail.

DePue: Was this the incident you had alluded to before?

Spriggs: Yes.

DePue: Why don't you, if you could, kind of flush that thing out in as much detail as you can possibly remember today, if you're willing to do that.

Spriggs: I can read an excerpt for you from a letter I sent home shortly afterward, indicating to my—I forget, I think I sent it to my uncle—indicating what I felt to be the battle itself, and how we dealt with it at the time.

DePue: Okay. Looks like you took a little bit of effort and time to explain this to your uncle in some detail.

Spriggs: We were pretty close, and I always found time to write, Mark, and I did explain in some detail because it was detailed enough for me never to forget it. I think it's in this letter I have here that I sent home on February 24, 1967,

[1] **Kon Tum** is the capital town of **Kon Tum** province in Vietnam.

which I...alluded to the sixteenth of February, the night that we ran into this big mess.

DePue: And this was Vietcong you were fighting that night?

Spriggs: It was North Vietnamese regulars. Let's see...I had a place marked here. Why don't we take a break for a second and I'll find that for you.

DePue: Okay. (pause in audio) Okay. We took a very quick break, and Bill, you found what you were looking for there, it sounds like.

Spriggs: Well, I did, Mark, and you had prior to my reading this short paragraph what led up to this night that I had overseas and the ambush situation that we were in. It was regular army, North Vietnamese regulars. It was running to the defense of a company that was in our battalion. It was a long, miserable night, and I jotted some notes down and sent a letter to my uncle. And this is the way I authored part of what happened to us, if you don't mind me reading a little bit of this for you.

DePue: Sure. Was this your entire company that responded?

Spriggs: Our entire company responded to A Company who got ambushed. As I've written here in this little letter here. I'll begin with this:"We're on the Cambodian border again, and on our second day here, the sixteenth, we really had a run-in with Charlie. A Company of the Twenty-Second was trapped in an ambush, so my Company C was closest—naturally, we were called on to go help them. We ran practically a thousand meters to get there, and they were really hurting. All I could hear was bullets flying, and I was scared. When we moved into the dense brush, my squad was called forward with a machine gun crew to wait for the VC and VA. They came, and everything broke loose. Charlie didn't know we were there, and a squad came down the trail: we opened up and killed about six of them. The firing didn't stop for three hours. Jets were dropping napalm so close I felt I'd be cooked. Finally, the word came forward that we had to pull back so the jets could bomb. Did I ever run with all my gear on my back. We finally fought our way back to the rear, and six of us had to stay to cover the company so they could move," and basically, that's where we went.

And we had our company commander get killed that night, and I and the Sergeant Jett I told you about before had to make a—out of birch, or whatever it was we used—poncho for a liter and carry him out. We'd had him four days. He died.His name ws McManus. He was a replacement I never saw. So, that's the kind of stuff we ran into.

DePue: How did he die, do you know?

Spriggs: He got shot. He got shot in the chest, in the heart area. I saw it—I looked right at him. Automatic fire got him. Yeah.

DePue: He was a replacement—what had happened to the previous commander?

Spriggs: Let me think what number he was. I had four company commanders while I was there, and they all but one got killed.

DePue: None of them were injured?

Spriggs: No injuries. Killed. He replaced a guy that wasn't with us very long—another guy—and he had gotten shot and died later on of his wounds, and my initial captain, my initial company commander, had gone there and when I told you I was late, when my company first got there—and he was one of the first casualties of the Fourth Infantry Division—Christopher Kukor, I'll never forget him.

DePue: Do you know what happened to him?

Spriggs: Got shot. Small arms fire. I found out from Jett, he's alive and spoke to Sgt. Jett last summer and through his research, Chris Kukor was wounded severely and somewhat recovered.

DePue: Leading a patrol?

Spriggs: Yes, out in the brush.

DePue: How many patrols do you think you went on during the time you were there?

Spriggs: Oh, gosh, let me see, Mark. I was there, now, you understand, only ten-and-a-half months because I was sent home in the middle of my tour—

DePue: And we'll get to that in a little bit.

Spriggs: All right, then, if you only count to ten-and-a-half months, I'll bet you I was there in...on patrol probably 80 percent of the time. I'll use percentages because I don't know.

DePue: So, 80 percent of the days, you went on some kind of patrol?

Spriggs: If you got a seven day week, what is that, five days?

DePue: Mm-hmm.

Spriggs: So, four or five days a week, we went up on patrols for as long as I was there.

DePue: Can you describe a typical patrol?

Spriggs: Yes, I can. Depending on what your assignment is, it'll be your platoon, and then the squads break up in their assigned areas. You pack up the night before, the morning before—usually it was at night we went out—you all packed up, get your rest during the day a little bit if you can. If you're back in base camp or even if you're in a bush, you managed to cop a few hours of sleep. And when you leave from the firebase, you just get your weapons readied up with ammo, and line up, and the officer or the NCO gets information as to how far you're going, how many klicks you're going to walk, and what you're looking for. That was it. Pretty basic stuff.

DePue: What were you looking for, typically?

Spriggs: You know what, see, that's the baffling part about that—the whole thing, the whole deal! We were always looking for "Charlie," and it was never because Charlie was capturing women from the local village or torturing the mayor of a town that was close by—it was we were just looking. We're looking for trouble, in essence. The army couldn't stand not to go chase them—them meaning the NVA, North Vietnamese regulars or the Vietcong. Amazing.

DePue: But again, if you're looking for Vietcong and you're seeing villagers, well, even at the night, was there some doubt about, Okay, is this really VC or is this just the villagers happen in their own place?

Spriggs: Well, you never knew that, but if they're moving at night—usually, the villagers knew not to leave. If they're moving at night, bang! You're dead. You're usually up to something. I used the word "baffling" before, and I will honestly tell you: I was well raised. I was a lousy soldier, but I went. I did my duty. I'm a flag-waver to this day. But when I went over to Vietnam, all the while I was there, I don't believe I met anyone that was really sure why they were there. God's truth. Sad but true.

DePue: Not even the lieutenants or the other officers would be talking to you about that?

Spriggs: I don't recall one time while I was over there did an officer say to us—they'd give us a rah-rah speech because "Here's why we're here", you know what I mean? Never. Load up, we're going on patrol, or you know, whatever they say.

DePue: How would you describe the discipline and the morale in your unit, then?

Spriggs: Well, I'd have to say, honestly, the discipline—it was Dodge City when I got there. There wasn't discipline—there was a group unit you were in, which was your platoon and your squad. Most times, the officers and the NCOs didn't

mess around with you too much—they just gave you your orders. If you were in base camp or if you were in the firebase, you self disciplined because you knew that if you walked far or anywhere close to far from that area, you were going to get hit, shot, or captured, worse. Discipline in base camp was okay, but it was a lot of lawless craziness going on, a lot of black market stuff. Look, I was looking for food in the bush and we'd go through a town, and I'd see the Vietnamese women selling c-rations. What's wrong with that picture? Didn't make any sense.

DePue: Well, a lot of the things you heard about Vietnam maybe a couple of years after you were there were serious, serious problems in these units with drugs and with race relations.

Spriggs: Rampant drugs. Could get them anywhere, any amount, any kind. I'm telling you the truth. Also, here's an interesting aspect of the war: we would drive through a town en masse, or maybe we'd get a couple of days off and go to Pleiku. Something that always baffled me was that I would go through this town and see all these young guys my age, Vietnamese guys, nobody in uniform, nobody carrying a weapon.

Whose war—see, I'm getting on my soapbox, and I don't mean to—is this? Whose country are we trying to defend, here? Yours. Why aren't those people out fighting? What am I doing out? That was a problem for the officers and the brass, for the army, and whoever else was there: how do you convince a guy like me from a small town, nice family, good background, to go risk my life when where you're going, they can't even do the same for you? I'm sure, you know, there were isolated areas, but I saw a lot of that, enough to disturb me. Know what I mean? And I never got an answer. To the day I left, they were still standing around downtown with no weapons. Makes me mad as hell.

DePue: What was the discipline like once you guys left the perimeter on a mission?

Spriggs: Good. It was good. The troops pretty much knew that they had to buckle down—or is it knuckle down? It doesn't matter. They had to do what they had to do: they had to stay alive and protect your friends, and do what you were told. I never saw any kind of revolt, you know, or any anarchy anywhere.

DePue: No refusal to go on the next mission because you thought it was just a waste of time or dangerous?

Spriggs: I never saw that. I know it was there, I know it was there. We'd hear about it, but I never saw it.

DePue: How did you keep yourselves sane, then, with all of this going on when you did have those moments where you had some downtime?

Spriggs: Mail. Mail was big—I had a lot of aunts and uncles. I got a huge family. Mail and packages. To this day, I'm good for this, I'm able to divert my surroundings and travel long distances in my mind. (laughs) I don't know if I'm complimenting myself or not, but I'm able to do that, ignore the moment. Of course, I was homesick like anybody else, but the downtime was so relaxing and we were so fatigued from all the chase—the chasing—that I didn't have time. Actually, when I think back, the year really kind of flew by.

DePue: From what you've described, it sounds like you went looking for them, but they kept finding you a lot more than you found them.

Spriggs: Baseball. The key word. We had the ball...but we were on defense. Go figure. We were chasing them all the time, and you know, it was all the stuff—we still read about it, you hear about it, you see it on the history channel, of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and they're hauling supplies and all that stuff. Well, I wasn't in that area. I was close a couple of times, but I was never chased by a Vietnamese. I was never chased by a Vietcong. I simply walked into them.

DePue: Some other things that just my own knowledge about this, and it's barely from watching movies and reading lots of books on the subject—

Spriggs: You got nothing else.

DePue: Booby traps on the patrol: I would think that would be an ideal way to cause some casualties to Americans. Was that a problem?

Spriggs: It was not a problem for my outfit. I only saw one, and I recorded it in a letter home that I will not bore you with the details, but I only saw one: it was a Punji stake that was a long, spear-type thing that was an artery buster, we used to call them, and we'd get them in the thigh. I saw it happen only once, but I did see a lot of...booby-traps that were non-explosives.

DePue: How were the casualties? You mentioned that you went through an awful lot of company commanders; I would assume lots of other folks as well.

Spriggs: Well, you know, Mark, I'll tell you: in this particular February sixteenth altercation, we lost some guys—I mentioned how many in the letter, there's someplace, I didn't read it—excuse me, but I think the large amount of casualties that the brass, MACV—which was Military Command, Vietnam—what they would announce as casualty, a perception of, compared to ours, were for the most part on a lower level correct. In the big picture, for the newsreels, it was inflated horribly. But, I mean, it seemed like these people were coming out of (laughs) everywhere, you know? That we had young kids fighting—young, young kids—we captured a couple of them a couple of times, and they were teenagers. So...

DePue: What were causing most of the casualties for the Americans, for your unit?

Spriggs: For us? Small arms fire. Is that what you're looking for?

DePue: Yeah.

Spriggs: Yes, it was small arms fire—always small arms fire! Not even hand grenades and things like that, just rifles and mortars. There was mortars.

DePue: Were some of these patrols where you'd have a couple of rounds fired at you, and then the enemy would just kind of vanish into thin air?

Spriggs: They would vanish into thin air, but once they started—they knew. Let me just postscript that: the first time I got fired on was friendly-fire. Pinned down for four hours. I'll go back to my regular story: what they would do is they would be very careful not to fire on you unless they meant to continue firing on you until you couldn't fire back because the first time we heard a pop, if we were able to call anything in or if we were in an area where there were more troops, they knew they'd be out-maneuvered or our—what would you call it?

DePue: Out-gunned?

Spriggs: Out-gunned, yes, out-gunned. So, they wouldn't take the chance. Snipers, eh, I saw one. I was involved with one who shot my weapon out of my hand, but he didn't hit me. It was just one of those crazy, you know, deals.

DePue: Did you get injured while you were over there?

Spriggs: No, not once. Not a scratch. Thought I had malaria once and I didn't.

DePue: But of the squad that you started with—what was it, twelve-man squad?

Spriggs: It was around twelve or thirteen guys.

DePue: How did that squad fare? Just as an example of the scale of casualties, if you will.

Spriggs: We lost half the squad, and when I came home from overseas there because of a few replacements, very few guys did I know in my squad. They were all new. My squad got beat up.

DePue: Was that typical or atypical?

Spriggs: I think it was atypical; I think it was just bad timing. You know, it was always bad timing if you got hit. It was just a matter of blind luck, unless you knew

on a map prior to arrival that you were going to a hotspot—like this thing on the sixteenth of February I was involved in, we knew we were going to a hotspot.

DePue: On a typical night patrol, though, what's the formation that the squad or the platoon would be in?

Spriggs: The...platoon sergeant would designate a point man, and then everybody else lined up accordingly.

DePue: Single-file?

Spriggs: Yes.

DePue: How often did you get to be point man?

Spriggs: Just a couple of times. The theory of the United States army was this: if you were on point, you were safer because they didn't want to get the first guy; they wanted to get the middle three or four guys. If they shot the first guy, the rest of them ducked for cover. So, the point was a strange dichotomy of safety and danger, you understand?

DePue: Did people volunteer to take the point?

Spriggs: We had a couple of knuckleheads that'd volunteer, you know (interviewer laughs) you always get a few. Thank God, God love them! I wish we'd have had all of them, but...

DePue: But you just said that was one of the safest points.

Spriggs: Well, it was psychologically, for me, I always wondered how could that be safe. Here's what you're doing with that—you're betting, as a sergeant, my life that on point, I got a fifty-fifty chance because they'll let me go. I don't like playing those odds because I'm the guy on point, so I push the envelope.

DePue: That means you weren't one of those knuckleheads, as you describe them—(overlapping dialogue; unintelligible)

Spriggs: Sat on my hands, Mark. Tape my mouth closed.

DePue: Well, that's what they tell everybody, every G.I., says, "Don't volunteer."

Spriggs: Don't volunteer. That's the best lesson you could learn. You know, we all kind of tried to do our share, but...

DePue: What got you up in the morning, then? What motivated you?

Spriggs: I don't quite understand that question. You mean over there?

DePue: Yeah.

Spriggs: Well, here's what motivated all of us, and make no mistake, this is true and I'll digress for a minute: I can speak for all of them; the biggest thing was you knew what day you were going home, you knew when your year was up, so the idea was you're not there—and I don't want to sound like I'm being crass or anything else, I'm just telling you the answer to your question—what motivated me was to get up, have another day pass, and stay alive to go home. That was everybody's motivation, if you got drafted. Usually, if you were IRA, you wanted to stay alive—if you were RA, I mean. IRA is the Irish Republican Army. But, that's what motivated me: one more day, let me stay alive just one more day to get out of here. (laughs)

DePue: You were raised a good Catholic boy and went to Catholic school, had all that experience: how religious were you while you were there?

Spriggs: Well, look, let's face it: when we get in a pinch, all of us, we go to God. We get in a jam, we start praying. So, you know, I prayed a lot when we took fire. When I was there, I always remembered my roots, even when I was in the States and I'm in a strange city, I found a Catholic church. Said the Rosary religiously, but you just didn't have time, when you were walking like that, you maybe had a few blank moments, but there wasn't a lot of time for that. I think, privately speaking, for me, my moments were when all the action was done, right before bed, I would have a re-check, an attitude check. It still works for me.

DePue: Did you have a chaplain with you on this base?

Spriggs: We didn't have one attached, but everywhere I went, we had access to. The army was very good about that.

DePue: Now, I don't know how to ask you this without maybe just kind of coming out and asking you: what were you most afraid of or scared you the most about going out on these patrols in your year while you were there? What was the thing that was always in your mind, bothering you the most?

Spriggs: Getting shot in the face. Getting shot in the face. I was always afraid of that. Is that what you mean?

DePue: Yeah. Exactly. Why that?

Spriggs: Well, not that my face is that precious to the rest of the world, but I was always fearful of the blind issue, the neck and mouth thing, I think I saw a lot of guys get hit like that. Some of my good buddies lost limbs—legs and

things—but it always seemed to be an extremely incongruous wound, and in essence, it was. It was a bad one. I feared that, I think, more than anything.

DePue: Being injured in the face more than dying?

Spriggs: No, dying was just, you know, for a year it was a matter of fact. You had two ways to go here, my friends, you're either going to live or you're going to die. Hopefully, you don't get shot. It was pretty simple stuff.

DePue: Describe the terrain that you're working through, and maybe we should have started with this, but you mentioned it was jungle: was it the classic triple-tier jungle that we hear about sometimes with 'Nam?

Spriggs: Well, actually, Mark, what it was, was jungle highlands. I think there's a difference. If you go to the Mekong Delta, as I read now—which I never experienced, thank the Lord—it was jungle jungle. In the highlands, there was a breath of fresh air—you didn't have the humidity that you might have in a damper area. I spent a lot of time in the highlands. I did go to the Cambodian border five or six times, which was jungle, but there was jungle everywhere. And in the highlands, you were always fairly close to people—in jungle highlands—because we were with the Montagnards, the mountain people. We were always close and they always had villages pretty close to us. The terrain was hilly around the entire Pleiku, central highland area, and then we went to the border. It was fairly flat, and I didn't go to many grassy, prairie-type areas. They just didn't have them, and of course, the river areas we were away from.

DePue: My understanding of the Montagnards is that they were much more aligned with the Americans than the average Vietnamese population—were there Vietnamese villages and Montagnard villages that you were walking through?

Spriggs: Yes. It was a racial compilation equivalent to what we go through in this country sometimes: the Montagnards were back-seaters, they were treated unfairly. I picked up on this right away; you could see it. Treated unfairly, made fun of when they went to town, that type of thing. They were simply the aboriginal people that were probably there before the Orientals, would be my guess.

DePue: Physical difference in the way they appear?

Spriggs: (muffled) Mm-hmm. Excuse me, I took a drink. Yes, they looked more like Australian aborigines. They had no Oriental features.

DePue: As far as you know, were there Montagnard VCs?

Spriggs: As far as I know—

DePue: Maybe it's contrary to the definition, but...

Spriggs: Well, you know, it is not because the Vietcong would force people to fight. I think the Vietcong, as I go back in my mind thinking about this, actually feared them, and I never once saw, in all my travels, a squad of Vietnamese, whether they friendly South Vietnamese or otherwise, with a Montagnard in their troop, in their organization.

DePue: So, they didn't integrate the Montagnard, but the American army sounds like they did.

Spriggs: I didn't get involved with any in my outfit. I didn't see many anywhere. They just stayed in their villages, walked their buffalo down the road. Their women had to go, you know harvest whatever. They were gatherers and hunters, and I mean, they were just clearly second-class citizens. You could see it.

DePue: A couple more thing about the American army you served with: how much were you bound to helicopters, and how much did you rely on that?

Spriggs: A lot. A lot, late in my tour.

DePue: A helicopter would take you out and then you would patrol, and—

Spriggs: They would land, pick us up, we would fly out, drop us off, and come back and get us. We'd patrol for a few days. The helicopters were usually when we had operations that were involving several groups of United States troops, separate divisions, maybe, we would go mobile. But for the most part, you know, we walked everywhere, and if it was far, we walked anyway. You couldn't land them where I was at—they had to cut a landing zone, throw smoke, and then you're discovered. So, we'd choose—I didn't choose to, but they choose to walk a lot of places.

DePue: You also mentioned earlier in our conversation about interrogation, and from what you've been describing, it would be extremely important to have accurate intelligence about the local, indigenous population: who were the ones who were friendly, VC, who weren't, and that kind of thing, and interrogation. Well, now interrogation seems to me much the buzz since we're in Iraq: what kind of interrogation, as you understand, was going on during that time?

Spriggs: It was only on a local level that I saw it. I only saw it once: I saw a young North Vietnamese regular get caught, and I saw him interrogated by two officers, a lieutenant and a captain, I think it was.

DePue: Americans or Vietnamese?

Spriggs: I'm sorry, American captains and he was Vietnamese, and he was interrogated by them with an interpreter. It was all done pretty above-board, and they tended his wounds while they asked him all kinds of questions, and I didn't see any real, you know, groups taken and brought in. No dramatic things like that.

DePue: You mentioned that you did see some other prisoners being taken. Vietcong?

Spriggs: Vietcong—only small groups, but not much. Not much.

DePue: And you were just talking about Vietnamese units...before I get to my other question, let me ask you: what'd you think of the quality of the Vietnamese units you dealt with?

Spriggs: Well, you want the truth, here? What've we got to lose, I guess. I always thought that they looked like this—let them take care of us. Meaning us, the United States. Their officers, I don't think they had much respect for them, and their groups were always real small. I never saw a South Vietnamese regulars in a large group. Not once, in a whole year. I always saw them in groups of two or threes, walking them close to the town to right outside of town, or walking—like, they had tea plantations, they'd be guarding tea plantations in a group maybe of two or three. I don't know. Well, of course, they got overrun. They weren't too good; their discipline wasn't the best. I'm sure that because they were conditioned to believe this way that they thought we'd take care of everything.

I was there during the election when Nguyen Cao Ky ran against Thieu, and it was an amazing thing to watch because that's the time when we went through towns that I saw more Vietnamese troops—South Vietnamese regulars—in town without weapons, without side arms, without anything. Just hanging around. And I refer back to what I said earlier: why aren't these guys armed? Holy smoke, you know! The election thing was interesting because there were a lot of people everywhere and signs and all that stuff, and of course, you know, it's a big deal for us but it was handled in kind of a bizarre, indiscreet, bully-ish type of way over there.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about the race relations in your own unit. We've kind of touched based on what was going on in Vietnam at the time.

Spriggs: Oh, they were good. The race relations in my unit and in our entire group, and even guys that I would go see in other groups, there was never any problem, and some of my best friends were of color, and Spanish and black and... There was nothing like that that I can recall.

DePue: But you mentioned that there were problems with drugs.

Spriggs: Well, only the availability. That was a problem. I'm not going to sit here and try to be the conscience of the United States army, but I will tell you this: if you wanted it—it being whatever in the heck it is—it could be gotten, and at a couple points, they were officers that would join in the fun. And I'm not going to sit here and tell you I never smoked a joint or, you know, anything like that. My point here is I was a nineteen-year-old kid thrown in combat, and it was lawless, it was Dodge City a lot of times, and the NCOs can't keep track of you twenty-four hours a day. But the availability of this stuff, of anything—anything, drugs, women, black market—if you knew where to go, not a problem.

DePue: Later on in the war, you started hearing things about fragging, where Americans taking out officers they didn't particularly like. Did you hear or know of anything like that when you were there?

Spriggs: No, but I will tell you this—interesting question—I know for a fact, by the way they acted, that some of my NCOs...were looking over their shoulder. I know for a fact that's true, and there's a couple of them—I would never wish that on anybody, but they were so antagonistic to these young kids that were risking their life everyday. What do you expect? You almost expected that. And there's this young kid like me—I never owned a gun in my life, Mark. I get on a train, they tell me, Here's your new clothes, your blanket. They give me a loaded gun—let me backtrack: they gave me a gun, not loaded, but they give me three big magazines full of bullets! Sure, I went to the rifle range, but you know what? You don't know what a kid like me's going to do with a loaded gun!

I'm fearful, I'm scared for my life, I'm thousands of miles from home, and you're telling me, as an NCO, what a knucklehead I am, and not in those terms. Well, I'm sure that happened. But I'd see their eyes get big sometimes when they knew they went too far. You know what I mean? I don't want to indict the good old American G.I., but boy, it was a lot of pressure on these kids.

DePue: But you're describing an army at that point in time. Again, this is '66, '67, when you were there, where there's still a lot of those old-school NCOs, it sounds like, the guys who had fought in Korea and maybe even the one or two that had been around in World War II.

Spriggs: You bet there was.

DePue: How important were they to the operation and the unit cohesion and making things work?

Spriggs: They were the proverbial straw that stirred the drink because those guys, we could see it: they'd wear their combat infantry badge, and some of them had

two stars above it, and I said the first time I saw it, "What's that mean?" They'd been in two wars. I'm like, "What?!" I was astounded, but because they were still alive, I was moved by that. And I think there was a lot of guys like me that were moved by that, that these guys still had the good old American flag on their uniform and their stripes and they were all decorated. If you didn't listen to them, who were you going to listen to? That's the bottom line. Want to live or die?

DePue: Let's go into some of the more memorable experiences, and one that possible you think you do remember, just because you mentioned it, your first incident where you were under real fire, and that was a friendly-fire incident.

Spriggs: Yes.

DePue: How did that happen?

Spriggs: I think it was a fluke. I think it was a fluke because I remember it like it was yesterday. It was dusk and there was a railroad—we were in an area that was a rice-paddy-type place, kind of wide open. By a village; there was a railroad that ran behind all the huts, and suddenly, I heard pop-pop-pop, and somebody said, "Fire! Fire! Fire!" And we dropped and stayed behind this elevated track for about forty-five minutes or an hour until probably—I was guessing and I still am—one of our officers went over and figured out and talked to whoever was in charge of that bunch of guys—excuse me—that they were South Vietnamese, and either mistook us for unfriendlies, or were bored, and decided, Well, you know, let's shoot at them. And you're grinning, but let me tell you, there were some of them—I didn't know whose side they were on.

DePue: Did you take any casualties then?

Spriggs: No. No. No, it was just early in my tour. We were already, you know, on pins and needles and we didn't need to have bullets whizzing over our head from people we were trying to work with.

DePue: Did you have occasion to fire your own weapon, then?

Spriggs: Oh, yes.

DePue: Well, the reason I ask—and you look surprised—is that during the Korean War and during World War II, I don't know if you remember, the Army Historian S.L.A. Marshall, who had done an inventory and found out that the American G.I.s, even under the most heated combat, maybe about 25% of them would actually fire their weapon.

Spriggs: That's very true, that's very true.

DePue: You bore up—

Spriggs: From personal experience, I can tell you that this night that we get hit so hard, I don't believe I fired my weapon one time, if I recall. While we're getting shot at and we're ducking and we're trying to help the others guys out because—because it was a situation where they had Company A ringed by commo wire, and Company A was the ones that were in trouble.

DePue: Commo wire, or concertina wire?

Spriggs: Commo wire. The radio wire! They had it ringed around them so they would know how far they went when they went in to make the kill. In a circle, they did this—the Vietnamese—and these guys from A Company were surrounded like that, and then when we got there, it was so thick and it was firing from everywhere that we didn't know where A Company was, so your chances of hitting A Company, if you didn't know where they were, weren't too good, and we were told, "Look, if you don't see them, don't shoot!" It was just so darn confusing all the time, you know? We come to that point, we come to where the colonel says, you know, "If you're going to shoot that weapon, you lay a body over my desk," and then it comes to, Well, now, do I fire or not because I don't want to hit our guys. And then, the final straw is you don't fire at all because you don't want to give your position away, or you fire like hell because you think you've seen the enemy, and it's a wheel in a wheel.

DePue: Do you know if there was ever occasion where you actually hit the enemy?

Spriggs: No. I couldn't tell you I hit them. I don't think—90%—well, not 90%, maybe 70% of the guys that did what I did, went on patrols and stuff like, couldn't tell you, unh-uh.

DePue: Well, this one's going to be one that you don't necessarily have to answer, but I'm wondering if you could talk about the most painful or disturbing experience that you had while you were there.

Spriggs: I remember it well. This particular night, on the sixteenth, when we first got to where A Company was taking this beating, we saw—boy, we saw five guys from A Company laying in a clump, a small circle, on one another, all dead, with playing cards still in their hands. And they were supposed to be on watch, and they got ambushed—bushwhacked. And I remember, one soldier was black: his entire elbow had been shot off. He had only a string, and the rest of the guys—the color of a corpse like that is something that you and I don't see very often. We go to a funeral home and see them made up.

And...they got beat so bad that night, Mark, that I remember a Chinook helicopter hovering over where we were at—above us, my group—hauling up bodies by twos all night, and I watched those guys go up face-to-face, but

their head—is this becoming too macabre?—thrown back, and being pulled into the Chinook until they couldn't carry anymore, and then he'd come back. All night, big spotlights on us. I was like, where am I? This isn't real. That stays with me all the time. The beating they took.

DePue: Maybe a different kind of memory for you, certainly hope so: anything that struck you at that time and still does today as especially funny or humorous?

Spriggs: Well, yeah, but it wasn't humorous at the time. But I tell the story today to my wife and my kids and they roll their eyes because, you know, it's an old war, who cares, and you lost anyway... I got Christmas Day off in '66, and...I was told I did; I was going to have it off, and I prepped for it, mentally and physically. And I was sitting on my bunk, and I got the old burning of the latrine duty all of Christmas Day, and I said to myself, "This is going to scar me for life," and I wrote home and told my mother that. And she, of course, didn't understand what the stirring thing meant, and...it was not funny then, but...

DePue: Well, that might require that you get just a bit more graphic about what that duty was.

Spriggs: Ah! Okay, well, I can do that. They have portable latrines when you're in a war zone. In fact, they have them in the States when you train.

Fifty-five-gallon drums cut in half, and four holes to sit in, as the latrine would be, and you'd go and everybody uses it, and then there's got to be a way to get rid of the waste, so you take two five-gallon cans of diesel fuel, pour them in, light it, and stir it, to make sure it all burns. So, that's what that is.

DePue: Why wouldn't they dig a hole and bury it?

Spriggs: Wait a minute—we're talking about the army here, Mark. (interviewer laughs) You want to retract that? You know why. I refuse to answer that question.

DePue: Very good.

Spriggs: Thank you!

DePue: Any other stories that you can recall before you actually went home on this emergency leave?

Spriggs: No, things went just about the way I said, and we managed to stay alive. Actually, I will say this: things got a little easier as we went along. We got a little better at what we did, we caught a few breaks. There was a place like the old trappers had to rendezvous; there was an old place where the tanks and

people in a certain area—the army in a certain geographic area—were all together. Maybe a certain amount of companies and tank outfits and whatever, called The Oasis, and we met there. A couple of times I got to go there for three or four days while the tanks that were there did guard duty, perimeter duty at night, and we could relax in our barracks or in our sleeping bags and sleep, you know, nice and tight and have a beer or two, and they'd bring in hot meals. That was good, that was...

DePue: They'd bring in beer as well for you?

Spriggs: Oh, yeah. They had beer available.

DePue: How about hard liquor?

Spriggs: No, no, and the beer they brought in, you were very limited. But it was accessible, and you know this as well as I do, there's always one guy that could get anything. (both laugh) But it wasn't a riot, it was just someplace where you could sleep without worrying about getting your brains blown out every night. It got easier.

DePue: Well, what do you think about the fellow soldiers you served with? I mean, you've talked about them quite a bit, but in terms of the caliber of character that they were and the kind of people that they were.

Spriggs: I served with a lot of guys that were from America's heartland, and a lot of guys that were from the East Coast. Then, there was a Chicago group. But I found the guys that were from states like Dakota, Nebraska, the breadbasket states, they were very dependable. And I don't want to indict anybody here, but the guys from the cities had other agendas, and these good old farm boys, you know what I mean? It's like that now, it's in real life! These good old farm boys would just be happy to clean their rifle and write a letter home. And the guys I was with, the troops that I was with—is that grammatically correct?

DePue: Works for me.

Spriggs: Okay. I always enjoyed being around most of them; they were all pretty nice guys, and we all had one thing in common, to live long enough to go home, and that was a binding mindset we all had, that the one thing in common would label us and make us brothers. And it wasn't so much that lifesaving came into play because we didn't see a whole lot, but it was just the fact that everybody was on the same page and closing their eyes at night before they go to bed, thinking about home, you knew that was happening. My sergeant, Sergeant Jett, was—whew! Well, I don't want to talk about him because I'll get emotional. There was a man. A good man.

DePue: Did he make it back?

Spriggs: Yeah, he made it back. I broke my leg about ten years ago; walking in my backyard on crutches. I'm not going to tell you this story because I'm not going to get through it, so I'll back off, but I'll tell you this much: Sergeant Jett came walking up my backyard—whew! It was too much! He was a lifer in three branches of service, and guys like that—when I first met him, whew! I thought to myself, who is this poor hillbilly that's going to show me how to stay alive? I'm dead, I'm a goner. Those guys were worth their weight in gold, those old NCOs. Man. They were good; I loved those guys. We're brothers.

DePue: We talked a lot about the enemy that you faced—VC, it sounds like, most of the time, a couple of occasions, NVA regulars.

Spriggs: Yeah.

DePue: What did you think about them? As people, as soldiers?

Spriggs: And Chinese, I fought against. Dedicated, followed orders to the limit, they were like the Korean troops. I fought with Koreans as well, and Australians. Korean troops—their officers could slap them. How do you like that? You're an officer. You're in the stockade if you do that. They were tough. The White Horse Division and the Capitol Division, I fought with. The troops we were fighting against...well, you look at it like this, Mark: you own a home with a nice yard, and half-a-dozen people come in there and try to take it away from you, and use force to do it. Well, you're going to fight back. Now, I'm not a North-Vietnamese-lover or Vietcong-lover, but I did understand why they fought us, and they were always well prepared. It seemed like they had a plan and they were always well equipped, but gosh, we were running around with fifty-pound rucksacks, and they had a few bullets and two socks tied together with rice in them. They were mobile, you just couldn't find them. They were good.

DePue: You mentioned Chinese.

Spriggs: Mm-hmm.

DePue: That's kind of a surprise—you're not supposed to hear about Chinese in the Vietnam War.

Spriggs: I know you're not, but we fought them and the NCOs knew which ones they were. And on the sixteenth of February, when we helped this A Company out on that big night that we caught all the flack, they were involved. There was some.

DePue: Why were the NCOs so sure? Were they dressed in Chinese uniforms?

Spriggs: Well, they don't look the same—they looked a lot healthier, and they had a few Chinese things on them, I think, that the guys picked up on. But you pretty much could tell the difference between a Vietnamese and a Chinese.

DePue: So, you had no reason to disbelieve it, but the army was saying that officially it was just NVA?

Spriggs: I'm not sure what the army ever said, but I know for a fact that our NCOs said that we had fought Chinese that night.

DePue: And this was an incident that was pretty close to the Cambodian border?

Spriggs: It was on the Cambodian border, yes.

DePue: Well, that's interesting.

Spriggs: Yes, true story.

DePue: Well, I think I've exhausted most of the questions I got about those first few months. Let's talk a little bit about coming home on emergency leave. How did you find out about that?

Spriggs: Sitting on a bunker—no, let me back up. I'm losing myself, here.

DePue: It's only forty years.

Spriggs: Yeah! You're right, you're right, I'm going to give myself some slack. No, I was in camp, and I had a guy from the Red Cross come in and give me a letter indicating that my grandmother—who I lived with when I got drafted; my whole life—was dying back in the States, and that my mother had called the Red Cross and asked if I could come home before she died. So, I hopped a helicopter and went to Saigon, and flew out of Tan Son Nhut, and flew home for thirty days. And good old grandma stayed alive, and while I was home, I...you know, I'm hoping you want to go back to that. I mean, how can you—it's hard to face going back, and I knew I'd have to go back for at least ninety days. So, I call the Pentagon up, and the night before my leave was up, they gave me an extra fifteen days. So, I was home forty-five days.

But the problem wasn't getting back—the problem was finding my troop when I got back, and finding my company and everything. So, I made it back in the country from my leave, and got hooked up with a lieutenant who was kind of a rogue, I think, as I look back on it now. I didn't realize that. And a place called Tuy Hoa was where my outfit was working with the 101st Airborne on some operation of some kind, and after we managed to go to Quy Nhon and a couple of other stops along the way, this lieutenant was in the same boat as I was, he was looking for his outfit. On a beach in Tuy Hoa, I

stumbled onto my...outfit, my company, and so I had seventy-eight days left, so I served and then came home.

DePue: I wanted to talk a couple more questions about going home for an emergency leave.

Spriggs: Yes.

DePue: How difficult was it being yanked out of combat, doing what you're doing—going on patrols all the time, having your senses tuned to surviving and counting days—to suddenly finding yourself at home?

Spriggs: You know, I think, if I remember right, Mark, I really didn't have a big problem with that. My problem was reversed—my problem was leaving home for that forty-five days and coming back. And then I had some sort of, I don't know, spiritual epiphany of some kind. Why should I have it, but I figured I'm coming back and getting killed. I got to come home for forty-five days because I'm going to die when I get back. One of those deals, you know? Not true, obviously, but going home was an experience I'll never forget it, and I managed to look at it like this: I'm not going to spend my forty-five days back in civilization worrying about how I'm going to feel when I have to go back. I have to enjoy this while I can, and I did. I did, I was almost out of control. I was having a good time. So, I was my grandma and everything wound up fine, and she was in the hospital. You know, the reason I came home was for her, and I made sure that I tended to my business and enjoyed myself. And then, when I went back, I just went back, you know? I had to go back. My choices were simple: you want to go to jail? No, I'll go back.

DePue: When you came back, how much did you pay attention to what was on the news when you came back?

Spriggs: Zero, I can tell you that emphatically. None.

DePue: Were you aware or were you paying attention at all to the growing protest against the war?

Spriggs: Well, when did the Democratic National Convention take place?

DePue: It was August of '68, so that was after you got back.

Spriggs: Okay, that was after me. It's the only time I ever paid close attention to it. I felt like this—they want to do that, they want to be that way, it's fine. I don't like it, but that's the way it is. Just get me home. I mean, I read the papers—I got the papers overseas and I read *Time Magazine* and stuff like that, but they didn't bother me. I was too busy staying alive.

DePue: What was so memorable—and maybe you've already discussed this—about that leave period? You said you would never forget it.

Spriggs: While I was home, you mean?

DePue: Mm-hmm.

Spriggs: The fact that I was in combat one night, and the next night sleeping in my bed. And I got off the train...I took a train from Chicago to here and got off the train here, and I decided, while I was on Sixth Avenue, which is close to the train station which was still operating, and I walked home. And it was eight blocks of heaven. I carried my bag—it was eight blocks of, like...it was one of those times when you say to yourself, "Don't let this go because this is going to carry over for the rest of your life." And it did, and that was the greatest part. Walking up my front porch steps, holy smoke! You know, I had to go back. I digress. I had to go back.

DePue: And you talked about how hard that was to go back and you talked about what you did—so, finding your unit again, what specifically was your job once you returned? Was it the same thing again?

Spriggs: It was the same thing for a while, but when we got down to about six weeks left—I believe I told you this—there was a first lieutenant named Danny Brown, and I'll never forget him. He was our—oh, I forget what; it doesn't matter what he was—he was attached to our outfit. And I pulled him side one day, and he was a good old boy from Texas, and I always thought I'd be able to talk to him if I ever had to have any kind of help, you know? And I just laid it on the line to him, I said, "Lieutenant Brown, I just got back from a leave. I got six weeks to go, and I think somebody out there has got a bullet with my name on it. I don't want to go back to the bush if I don't have to. You have some other job for me? And I don't want to be a slacker here, I want to do my duty because I'm close and now's not the time to slack." So, he said, "I got just the job for you."

So, he puts me with what they call a Two-Niner-Two radio antenna with one other guy, as a list-maker. The other guy was a list-maker, and I would go out to firebases, and I would take orders for special items or regular supplies from the troops out in the field, and have them flown in by firebase so they could pick them up when they got back for their rest. And that's what I did until the day I left.

DePue: The last six weeks, you're going from firebase to firebase, putting up the antenna—

Spriggs: Digging a hole.

DePue: —making your grocery list and sending it back home?

Spriggs: Yes, yes. Bullets to Tabasco sauce. The captain loved Tabasco sauce. I could talk, I knew my way around that stuff, and I knew a lot of guys that could help me. There was a lot of trade and barter—I got it done, and I stayed on that job and I had my buddy with me, and we'd dig a hole and get on the radio.

DePue: Once you landed that job, did this sense that there was a bullet with your name on it go away?

Spriggs: Well, you know, to tell you the truth, a couple of days after I got back, after I talked to Brown, I just figured, You know, I can't let this overwhelm me so let's just go about our business. It's like waiting for your birthday, eight months until your birthday comes. Or a vacation—it's a bad analogy—or some big event that's going to happen in eight months, and you start looking forward to it now. Don't do it, it's torture. It's self-torture.

DePue: Can you describe a little bit about the traditions of counting days because that's steeped in the military, especially in that war.

Spriggs: Steeped, steeped. If you had twenty-one days left, you managed to get somebody to buy you a short-timer's stick that was notched, and each notch was a day less, and you made your mark on that notch and you carried it everywhere you went. And of course, it was to make other guys feel bad. That's what you wanted to do it! Why else would you do that? So, you know, not to make them cry, you understand. So, that was part of it, and the other part was everybody pretty much knew what your last day was going to be, especially the officers in your outfit, so they kind of lightened up. As I would call it, they became human. They re-humanized, and it was kind of pleasant to have a sergeant that just a few months ago was screaming in your face say, "Good luck, kid. Have a safe trip home." You know, I always marveled at that comradeship. I liked that a lot.

DePue: Were there guys who would extend, try to stay a little longer?

Spriggs: Oh, there was guys that extended all the time. To this day, I don't know. I can't figure it out, so it's like, you know, I can't hardly even—I go tongue-tied when you bring that up because I'm sure part of it was for financial reasons, or had a girl or a wife that they had a problem with, but...

DePue: Some of them adrenaline junkies?

Spriggs: Some of them adrenaline junkies. Great way of putting it. Excitement-seekers, thrill-seekers. I mean, I just couldn't understand it. I still can't, to this day. But they would do it.

DePue: Did you have any sense—left a lot of buddies there, left a lot of people you knew there.

Spriggs: Yeah. Yeah, I did. I pray for them every night, and...I don't want to get maudlin here on you, but let me tell you this: every time my—ah! (voice shaking) I'm not going to get through it. I'm not going to get through it, so there's no sense in me going into this...but, never a day goes by, you know, when I don't think of it...and the guys that didn't come back.

DePue: Some people have even a sense of guilt, although there's no reason for it.

Spriggs: I don't feel a bit guilty. I went, I didn't burn my card, I didn't take a train to Canada—I went! It was no less sad in my house than it was in anybody else's that was there with me, so if that's misery loving company, I had a lot of company. Nothing wrong with that.

DePue: But a sense of real loss, obviously, from those who didn't make it back.

Spriggs: Sense of real loss. Sense of traumatic, violent loss. For me, personally.

DePue: Well, could you describe then that trip back home for us?

Spriggs: No. It's indescribable. I can only tell you that it's—it's—what is it? It's a state fair, it's everything when you're a kid, you love, Christmas, it's just so magnificent when you can come back. I'd see Chicago—whew! I couldn't believe—I can't do this. (voice shaking) I can't do this. I'm sorry.

DePue: You flew out of Vietnam—did you fly back to where, Travis? Well, that trip back, I think you flew back to Travis Air Force Base.Spriggs: I did. I flew back on the C-141 to Travis Air Base. All my group was already gone, and because I had gone on leave, I had to stay longer because I got sent home when we had a death, so... Anyway...I guess I forgot your question. I'm embarrassed to say that.

DePue: Well, let me ask you this: how tough was it to see the rest of the division leave and you're still there? All your buddies are leaving, the last few people that you still knew in your unit, they're leaving.

Spriggs: You want the truth of that? I didn't see them leave because they left while I was home. See, I came home and I stayed for forty-one days, then, when I got back, everybody had rotated.

DePue: Well, that's got to be a little bit disconcerting itself.

Spriggs: Good word, disconcerting. I was taken aback by the strangeness of where I was, with whom I was there with. I'm having trouble right now; my thoughts aren't good. I... Ask me a question again.

DePue: Well, again, we're just trying to get you back home here. I think you've done a good job of how you're feeling just by the difficulty, sometimes, with some of these questions, and I apologize for asking the questions.

Spriggs: No, not a problem, I just—I'm a hopeless crybaby.

DePue: No, you're not. You got back in late 1967, as I recall. You arrived in Travis; what happened after that?

Spriggs: Well, I shouldn't tell you this, but I'm going to tell you anyway. The girl I was going with, here in town, was a flight stewardess—no, flight attendant—who was stationed in San Francisco, so I spent three or four days in 'Frisco, we saw the sights, and then I came home. Then I flew home out of—let's see, how did I do that? It's been so long, I can't remember. Out of San Francisco, I came home.

DePue: You flew home being discharged from the army?

Spriggs: Yeah, I had no time left. My thoughts are garbled now. My thoughts are garbled now.

DePue: Somewhere in here, I think there's another ping-pong story, too.

Spriggs: Well, I played enough ping-pong—the ping-pong story is still back when I—my thoughts are becoming garbled, and becoming very upset. I'm becoming very upset.

DePue: Do you need to take a quick break here?

Spriggs: Yeah, Okay. (pause in audio)

DePue: This is the interviewer, Mark DePue. At this point in our conversation, Bill and I agreed to end the interview. The memories were simply too strong, and the pain to great for Bill to continue. I'm grateful that Bill was willing to share his experiences with us. We hope it gives you a deeper understanding of the cost these veterans bear in serving their country. Thank you.