

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH
MARVIN MATHIAK

FOR THE
VETERANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WAR AND SOCIETY
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

INTERVIEW BY
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TRANSCRIPT BY:
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CYNTHIA TINKER: Okay, this begins an interview with Marvin P. Mathiak at the Center for the Study of War & Society. This is November, the 5th, 2014, and joining us today, also, is our intern ...

LESLIE CRISP: Leslie Crisp.

TINKER: And our graduate assistant ...

MIKE MCCONNELL: Mike McConnell.

TINKER: Well, thank you for coming today. Sorry again about the trouble finding the place. So, like I said, we'll just go chronologically, and how do you—not how do you, but do you know—I was noticing that all of your family is from Wisconsin, right?

MARVIN MATHIAK: Yes, I grew up in Wisconsin.

TINKER: Do you know how your family settled there?

MATHIAK: Yeah, I got into genealogy thirty-some years ago, and I've got it traced back, way back, in some cases back into the, uh, early 1700's.

TINKER: Oh, really?

MATHIAK: Yeah.

TINKER: Do you know where your family originated from?

MATHIAK: Yeah, well, I know where some of my great-grandparents—I've been in the village where my grandfather was born back in East Prussia, and I've visited with relatives. I used to live in Brussels, and I travelled a lot, and I've met a lot of distant relatives in Poland and in Germany.

TINKER: That's really interesting. So, you travelled there just to visit them?

MATHIAK: I did make one trip, but when I was living overseas—and I've also just travelled and met people on my travels, as well. I've had some very interesting relatives, some very interesting stories to tell. One of my grandmothers, my mother's mother, was sort of a family historian so she had a lot of information on the people: who they were, what they did, stories about their lives, and so forth. So, I've got a very interesting genealogy, not just names, and dates, and places.

TINKER: It sounds like it. And so you've traced your father's and mother's lines back?

MATHIAK: Yeah. Yeah.

TINKER: Yeah. That's interesting. So what was it like growing up in Wisconsin, besides cold?
(Laughs)

MATHIAK: Cold. That's why I'm from Wisconsin. (Laughter) Wisconsin is a pretty state. It's got a lot to offer, but the weather is prohibitive. No, I grew up in a small town. The name of the town was Horicon, and it's about fifty miles northwest of Milwaukee or fifty miles northeast of Madison. It was kind of a farming town. Nothing special about it, you know, one of those places if you have an interest in something beyond the place where you grew up, you're probably gonna leave, which I did.

TINKER: You're gonna have to leave. Yeah. Hmm. Well, I noticed your mother was a kindergarten teacher, so she was an educated lady?

MATHIAK: Yeah. Both of my parents were. My father had a, uh, I guess it was a forestry degree from the University of Michigan. He was a biologist with the Conservation Department in Wisconsin, and yeah, my mother was a teacher. She actually completed her degree while I was a teenager, I guess, and that's when she started teaching.

TINKER: Okay. So, does that mean that your father's family, were they pretty well off financially for him to be able to get an education?

MATHIAK: No. No, not at all.

TINKER: He worked his way through?

MATHIAK: Yeah, his father was an immigrant from East Prussia/Germany, who came over to the States in 1911, and he couldn't speak English, and he got as far as Chicago before his money ran out. He knew he wanted to go to Milwaukee, so without any money, got up from Chicago to Milwaukee, and made a little construction business of some sort. So, but no, there was no money. I come from a background with no money. I put myself solely through college, one hundred percent, and yeah.

TINKER: Excellent. Was your father a veteran? Did he serve in World War I? Or World War II?

MATHIAK: No. No, he'd played hooky from school when he was sixteen years old to go duck hunting, and shot off his left arm, so he was unable to go into service. He was the only one in his family that went to college, and his other siblings never went to college.

TINKER: Right. So he shot his arm off. That, like, elbow down?

MATHIAK: Just above the elbow.

TINKER: Wow. And he survived that. I mean, he must've got to the doctor pretty quickly.
(Laughter)

MATHIAK: They must have. They must have. (Laughter)

TINKER: Tied it off or something.

MATHIAK: I don't know the details of it, you know, but he lost it as a result of the shooting. Let's put it like that. I don't mean to say it was cleaved.

TINKER: Right, just damaged. Do you know how your father and mother met? Did they ever tell you that?

MATHIAK: No. I think they might've met at a church organization or something. I really don't know.

TINKER: Mm hmm, church social. I noticed you said they were both Lutheran. Were they very religious people?

MATHIAK: They went to church all the time, yeah.

TINKER: Did they?

MATHIAK: Uh huh.

TINKER: And what was school like when you were a young boy? Did you enjoy it or was it just something you had to be dragged to? (Laughs)

MATHIAK: No. I was bored with it, and didn't pay attention, and goofed off as much as I could until my senior year in high school, I decided I'd probably pay attention so I could get into college. So then I started to pay a little more attention and ...

TINKER: Late bloomer?

MATHIAK: Pardon?

TINKER: You were a late bloomer? (Laughs)

MATHIAK: Yeah, and when I got to college, I started taking things very seriously.

TINKER: Mm hmm. Well, what was it like in the summers, and when you were out of school? What kind of fun activities did you do, you and your siblings?

MATHIAK: Uh. Well, we played baseball, football, ran around. I—you know, nothing special, just standard kid stuff.

TINKER: And did you play sports in school?

MATHIAK: Yeah. I played football, and did track in high school. And I was a manager of the high school basketball team. I never liked basketball, but that way I got to sit next to the cheerleaders from the opposing team on our home games. (Laughter)

TINKER: Yeah. That's always good, I guess. So you didn't have a favorite subject in school, then?

MATHIAK: Definitely not. No.

TINKER: I mean, I know you majored in Chemistry, but that wasn't something you were thinking about early on then.

MATHIAK: No, not early on. I don't know why I decided to do that, and then after I—well, I went to the University of Chicago to get my PHD in Physical Chemistry, and they changed the draft laws just then so that they could draft students. I wasn't there to avoid the draft. I was very serious about it, because I had put myself through school, so this was very difficult. So I managed to get my MS in Physical Chemistry before I was drafted, and when I came back, I was in no way able to go back and pick up where I left off, so I went back and got an MBA in Finance and International Studies when I came back, from Chicago.

TINKER: Right. So you were at the University of Wisconsin at Madison getting your [undergraduate] chemistry degree '63 to '67, so we're just getting into the war then. Were you political, or did you follow the news closely? Did it ever occur to you that I might get drafted?

MATHIAK: Not at that time, because at the time, the draft laws were such that if you were in college, you weren't drafted. It was as good as being the son of a rich man, or a politician. But that was not my objective to be there. I was very serious about school. No, I was not particularly political. I was opposed to the war, but really didn't pay that much attention. That was an extremely turbulent time. Wisconsin was one of the most radical campuses in the country.

TINKER: Oh, was it?

MATHIAK: Wisconsin and Berkeley, I think, were peas in the pod as to Looney Tune bins that were unreal.

TINKER: Really? Even that early on?

MATHIAK: Oh yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

TINKER: What kind of things? Like protests regularly or ...

MATHIAK: Oh yeah, there were all kinds of protests. They'd have sit-ins in the chemistry building. You'd have to step in, over, and around some of those clowns that were protesting. I never thought too much about them until some friends of mine were talking, [and] said, "Oh, you've got to protest! You haven't lived 'til you've protested!" They were just in it for the lark. It wasn't a political thing for most of these protestors.

TINKER: It was like a club or something.

MATHIAK: No, well, not that formal, but it was a fun activity to do, you know, like going out drinking on a Friday night or something. (Laughter) Really. We're not talking about serious people. Now, some of them I'm sure were, but I'd say it was a very small minority. Then, you had the organizers who wanted to get their name in the paper, and you'd see a few of them hanging on today, you know, like Bill Ayres, for instance, and his Weather Underground. They were a big deal on campus, and SDS: Students for a Democratic Society was another one of those nutcase jobs. These protests did all kinds of stupid stunts just to get in the paper. There was a—I don't know if it was an army or an air base in Madison where the university is, but they staged a big deal one time to go out and arrest the commandant of this little air base as a war criminal. I mean that's how stupid it was. It was ridiculous, but very passionate, very involved. It impeded, as far as I am concerned, my attempt to get an education.

TINKER: Right, 'cause you're just trying to get to class.

MATHIAK: I was focused. I was focused, and they were a distraction, shall we say.

TINKER: I'm sure most of the professors on campus didn't appreciate it either.

MATHIAK: I would guess. I don't know. It didn't make life any easier for them particularly those in chemistry, 'cause that was one of the favorite things to protest because napalm was being used in Vietnam.

TINKER: Oh! Okay.

MATHIAK: And so they were protesting all chemical by going camping out, and staging sit ins in the chemistry building, for instance. Then there was this nutcase, I can't remember the name, in 1970 blew up a big bomb in the physics building and killed one person, and injured several others. Fortunately, it was at night so there was only one killed.

TINKER: And this was there?

MATHIAK: At Wisconsin, yeah. 1970. Yeah, they did millions of dollars in damage to the physics building ...

TINKER: They killed somebody.

MATHIAK: ... and we're talking 1970 dollars. Yeah, this is 1970.

TINKER: Yeah. That's terrible. That's rough.

MATHIAK: Yeah. It was a bad time. In fact, my father was really upset because my father had pioneered means of blasting pot holes for wildlife. It's like making an instant pond for ducks out in the marshes. They used to do it with dynamite. Well, he figured out that you could do it with

ammonium nitrate and fuel oil, and he wrote a pamphlet on it. In fact, if you google my father's name, you can find the pamphlet he wrote. But, these terrorists that blew up the physics building used his ammonium nitrate fuel oil thing to make their bomb. That's what it was. The same thing Timothy McVay used.

TINKER: Yeah. And they had looked it up?

MATHIAK: Yeah, and my father was furious about it, I know that, because they apparently mentioned where they got it from, as well. The idea—I mean, not the idea—the idea for the bomb.

TINKER: Right. Right.

MATHIAK: The sixties were a horrible, very stressful period.

TINKER: Yeah. They always say turbulent. That's a good word for it. Sounds ri—yeah. Sounds terrible.

MATHIAK: Yeah. That puts a little gloss of paint over it.

TINKER: Mm hmm.

MATHIAK: But, you know, that was a time that the big '68 Democratic Convention came. That was nothing but a prolonged riot, both by protesters and police. Martin Luther King was assassinated, you know. Everything got worse and worse and worse. They burned down half the west side of Chicago. They burned down Watts neighborhood in Los Angeles. That's what the sixties were like. They were horrible. Hopefully this country never ...

TINKER: Yeah, we really can't imagine it now. You know, thinking of cities being burned. Yeah. So what made you decide to go to University of Chicago for your masters?

MATHIAK: Uh, it was kind of a whim. I applied to a number of schools to go to graduate school. I applied to Yale, Chicago, and I think Cal Tech. I can't remember, and one other I can't remember. And I was accepted to all of them and offered fellowships in all of them. I finally decided that Chicago was closer. It'd be easy getting back home, and so forth. I had no money at all to travel anyways, so that's what I—it was more of a whim than anything. But Chicago is very well known for its physical sciences. In fact, there's two national monuments on the campus for work that was done there.

TINKER: Oh yeah? Yeah.

MATHIAK: Yeah. That's where they ...

TINKER: That's right ...

MATHIAK: ... first self-sustaining nuclear reaction.

TINKER: Yes. That was one of the major places: Oak Ridge, Chicago, New Mexico, and Washington State.

MATHIAK: Yeah. Chicago's where a lot of the theoretical work was done, and yeah.

TINKER: So how long were you there?

MATHIAK: Uh, September '67 to March of '69, I think.

TINKER: Okay. Then that was when you got drafted, right?

MATHIAK: Yeah. Well, the draft started coming after me in late '68, and I delayed, and delayed, and delayed. You know, there are several steps they had to take before they actually got you. I took the full—I think it was thirty days to do this, thirty days, so I'd wait the full thirty days and then get the thing postmarked and send it in and so forth. I managed to stall off actually being inducted until June of '69, but I completed my degree in March of '69. I completed the work for it.

TINKER: Right. At least you got to finish. And did you—I mean, how did you feel about that? Were you just dreading it really bad?

MATHIAK: Oh, yeah. When I knew it was coming, I knew I was gonna be cannon fodder, because that's what draftees were. They were the cannon fodder. You know, I just lost interest. But, I did manage to get a job. I really wanted to do that because I knew that by law, if you were drafted, they had to give you your job back when you came back from service. So I scampered around as hard as I could and I had something like twenty interviews, and a lot of them were really good. Some were so-so, but almost all of them would get to the final question after we'd sit down and have lunch: "By the way, what's your draft status?" I'd tell 'em, "It's 1A," which means you're ready to go. They'd say, "Oh, we really wanted somebody with more experience." I'm serious. It would be that blunt, but one company did hire me, so I knew I'd have a job to come back to.

TINKER: Oh, that's excellent.

MATHIAK: I was hired as a research scientist.

TINKER: What was the company?

MATHIAK: Continental Can Company. Manufactured metal beverage cans, beer cans, beverage cans, that sort of thing.

TINKER: That was good. That was good of them then, I mean.

MATHIAK: Yeah. I was fortunate to be able to do that, because when I came back from service we were in a little bit of a recession. There were not very many jobs to be had, especially if you were a Vietnam Vet. That was—you were taboo.

TINKER: Right. And I was gonna tell you guys, just jump in if you've got questions. Okay? Don't let me just, you know, keep rolling. Okay, so, did you go home and visit family before you left?

MATHIAK: Yeah. I was—had gotten married at the time, and yeah, we were living in Chicago, and trailered our belongings up to my parents' house in Horicon, and left them—they had a big front porch, unheated, so we just packed everything in there while I was gone.

TINKER: How did your parents feel about you getting drafted?

MATHIAK: They weren't very happy about it, but you know, I really can't remember even discussing it with them.

TINKER: Really? It's just life.

MATHIAK: Yeah. I mean, it was obvious what was going to happen to everybody at that time. It was just a matter of the shoe finally dropping.

TINKER: Mm hmm. So there wasn't a lot of political discussions going on at home either?

MATHIAK: Not at home. No.

TINKER: Yeah. Okay, so you went to Fort Campbell for your basic?

MATHIAK: Yeah, that was a real ...

TINKER: You had your degree. Was there an option for you to become an officer early on or how did that work?

MATHIAK: Sort of. When I knew I was being drafted, or just after I was drafted, I made inquiries—I think writing to my congressman or something about getting a commission in the chemical corps. I had a Master's in Physical Chemistry at that time, which you would think would not be something you would want to send out to be cannon fodder if you can put them to actual use. And they came back, as I recall, they said they would offer me a Captain's commission, but it'd be a four year obligation. But by that time, I was almost through basic training, and I'd developed a burning hatred of the army, of the military. There was no way. The dice still hadn't settled down. I knew where I was probably gonna go, but I didn't know for sure, so I thought, well, I'll just take my chances, and just dropped it, because I didn't want to spend four years in the army if I could possibly get out in two.

TINKER: Right, even though it might have been riskier doing the two.

MATHIAK: It was a lot riskier. (Laughter) A lot riskier, but the basic training was—the one good thing about the basic training is that they got everybody in very good physical shape.

TINKER: Oh yeah.

MATHIAK: Because when you're actually in the infantry, it's a matter of brute strength and endurance, and nothing more than that, just brute strength and endurance. You've got to be in good shape. They did a good job of whipping us into good shape, but it was very brutal. There were frequently beatings of the trainees. Sometimes they would take them into the day room, and you could hear the beating going on in there. One time, there was one kid that hadn't eaten a piece of gristle that was on his dinner tray, and two drill sergeants grabbed him, one by each arm, and one little pretty boy officer—if it were a movie Tom Cruise would play him—came and repeatedly punched him in the stomach, while the two drill sergeants were holding him, in the middle of the mess hall with everyone sitting there, watching ...

TINKER: Really?

MATHIAK: It was brutal. I mean, it was ridiculous. One of the drill sergeants was real proud of himself. He had a picture holding up—he had been over in Vietnam. He had a picture of himself holding the heads of two Vietnamese, one in each hand. He bragged about taking a Vietnamese woman, tying her upside down, and shoving an iguana into her vagina. I mean, that's what we're talking about.

CRISP: And were you training with all draftees at Fort Campbell?

MATHIAK: Well, no, no. Not all draftees.

CRISP: Okay.

MATHIAK: At that point, everyone's in one big pot.

CRISP: Mixed. Right.

MATHIAK: You know, I remember there was somebody who—there were a couple of people who had enlisted for specialties. There was one guy, who was a friend of mine in basic training, who—I think he was a trumpet player or something, and he enlisted to be in the Army band. He was in the same basic training as we were. Unfortunately, the guy was real heavy, and he had a real tough time. I don't know if he made it without going to—if they couldn't pass the physical training test at the end, there was another very unpleasant place they sent you to train until you could pass it. Anyway, we were not all draftees, but I would guess that probably most of us were.

CRISP: Right. At that time, yeah.

MCCONNELL: You'd gone to college. I mean, you had completed a degree in higher education. How did you relate—the demographics, they were quite different I would imagine

from your background. I mean, you had gone to college, you had completed your degree. You would've been slightly older than a lot of the other draftees in your cadre.

MATHIAK: Yeah.

MCCONNELL: I mean, were you aware at the time of any sort of demographic—a difference between yourself and these other individuals?

MATHIAK: Very definitely. There were a lot of us in there who had completed college, and quite a few had post-graduate degrees when we were drafted. In that same platoon, with some—there was one kid that was so stupid that they didn't want him to have to repeat the—the officers basically lied for him to get him out of basic training. But yeah, I was twenty-three. There was a smattering of ages from my age down to the eighteen year olds. I don't know if there could have been any seventeen year olds. I think eighteen was probably the youngest. You know, it takes one thing to motivate an eighteen year old, especially somebody that's gung-ho, and "Oh, I'm gonna go. I'm gonna be a big hero. You know, I'm gonna get in uniform and the girls are gonna like me," and somebody's who's twenty-three who's been married, and out on his own supporting himself and all that. It's a world of difference, two different worlds.

MCCONNELL: How big of roll did anti-communism play in training? Were there any sort of sessions that were directed towards discussing the domino theory or classes on anti-communism at all?

MATHIAK: No. No, basic training, as I recall, had no overtones other than getting you in shape, learning military discipline, drills, that sort of thing. That was it, as I recall at this point. I know later on—it might've been AIT, Advanced Infantry Training. I think that it was about then that we had something where they tried to say why we were in Vietnam, and I can't remember the reasons. They gave three reasons, and one was, I'm sure, to fight communism. I can't remember what the others were off hand, though.

MCCONNELL: So, your drill instructors, some of them had done tours in Vietnam already.

MATHIAK: Oh, yeah. They all had.

MCCONNELL: Okay. They all had. Okay, did any of them mention what it would be like going over or was it just sort of bravado or ...

MATHIAK: I don't recall discussions of what it would actually be like. No, I don't—I really don't recall anything like that. I avoided the drill instructors as much as possible. (Laughter) I would have nothing to do with them. Period. So, I never talked with them at all.

MCCONNELL: Yeah. My dad was in a National Guard unit roughly the same time, and very similar experiences. (Laughs)

TINKER: Yeah. You're just trying to lay low and get through it, right? (Laughs)

MATHIAK: Yeah.

TINKER: So you said the physical training was tough, and they really got you in shape. What do you remember being the toughest thing or you feel—or what do you remember that you think was most beneficial to you?

MATHIAK: Just getting us in shape. I don't know ...

TINKER: Just the physical conditioning.

MATHIAK: Yeah, I don't know what to say. The only thing I remember about it—at the end, to pass it, we had to run a mile on an oval track, you know, in our fatigues and combat boots. There was an oval track that sloped up and down like that, and I remember my time was six minutes, and twelve seconds or something like that, wearing combat boots. (Laughs)

TINKER: Yeah. That's pretty good. (Laughter) I couldn't run that now.

MATHIAK: Yeah, I was in pretty good shape by that time.

TINKER: So when you left Fort Campbell, did you know—well, when you were in basic, you knew you were going to be in infantry then, right?

MATHIAK: No.

TINKER: You didn't? When did you find out you were gonna be in infantry?

MATHIAK: It wasn't until the end, the very end of basic training that you got your assignment.

TINKER: Oh okay. Right.

MATHIAK: So, they conceivably could've put me into the chemical corps.

TINKER: Oh yeah. Just wherever.

MATHIAK: Or given me a nuclear thing, so I'd be stationed in Germany. Except for those type of slots were one hundred percent volunteers because people would volunteer for them so they know they couldn't possibly get sent to Vietnam. So those kind of things were all volunteer, one hundred percent.

TINKER: So you got sent down to Fort Benning?

MATHIAK: Well, from there we went to Fort Polk, Louisiana for Advanced Infantry Training, AIT. That was less harassment, and more training. Map reading, navigating, survival skills basically.

TINKER: You were there probably in the summer? Early fall?

MATHIA: Uh, well let's see. I was in Fort Campbell from middle of June to—June, July, August—it must've been late August or September when I left Fort Campbell and went to Fort Polk, and then I was there until, must've been Dec ...

TINKER: And did your wife go with you or was she ...

MATHIAK: No. No. There was no way. They were very generous with us, by the way, during that time, with pay. I remember that my pay as a draftee was like one hundred and one dollars a month, and if I kicked back sixty dollars of that, they would make another hundred dollars—a total of one hundred dollars available to cover my wife. So we had like 160 dollars a month to eat, live off, which was difficult shall we say, even then.

TINKER: Yeah. (Laughs)

MATHIAK: But, no, I think AIT—we must've been out of there—there was probably another, I'm guessing, eight to ten week program. I really don't remember, 'til probably early winter. Then there was a program—I can't remember what it was called. I presume you've had somebody talk about it in the past. There was a severe shortage of NCOs in the infantry. You know, it was definitely the infantry, it was Advanced Infantry Training. I was assigned to go to Fort Benning to take their NCO course, out of which I would graduate as a sergeant, which I did. I was trained in the mortars, as a mortar squad leader at that point. So that was purely mortars, nothing—well, plus the usual, navigation, and this kind of stuff. My wife did come down and join me then, because we could get off base occasionally. We'd go AWOL occasionally. Our wives used to drive in and we'd lie down in the backseat, the floor of the backseat, and sneak out, and come back in and that sort of thing. (Laughter) That lasted until, must've been, ended in June or January or something. Then, I stayed on as an instructor at Fort Benning. I was in my sergeant stripes at that point. I stayed down there as an instructor at Fort Benning for a few more months until I think it was the beginning of May that I finished with that, and then of course at that point, I had my orders for Vietnam. I think I left for Vietnam on, I want to say, May 31st or something like that. It was right at the end of May, I think. Went through Fort Lewis, Washington, and got on a plane with a zillion other people and nobody knew anything. Unlike now, at that point you were just mixed. They didn't have units that went so you were always just another, a new guy, tossed in with a bunch of people you've never met before every step of the way, including going into combat.

TINKER: Right.

MATHIAK: Which is kind of unfortunate, but they've learned that lesson. They haven't done that since Vietnam, and that was a really stupid thing.

TINKER: Yeah. Now they send units.

MATHIAK: You know, you get on a plane with everybody—I can still remember looking at the plane, all these people in fatigues wondering how many of us are gonna be coming back. Although, if you weren't out in the bush in Vietnam, it was actually good duty. I mean I'm sure

you hear a lot of whining and moaning from some people who've never been out in the bush, but if you were in the rear, it was good duty. Good duty.

TINKER: Mm hmm. Yeah, because they were in the cities, right? Mainly.

MATHIAK: Yeah.

TINKER: Or in a camp close to the cities.

MATHIAK: Anything other than in the bush.

TINKER: Yes.

MATHIAK: Or flight duty, you know, if you were in a helicopter crew or something, that would be relatively physically easy duty, but also dangerous.

TINKER: Dangerous, just not slogging through the jungle, right?

MATHIAK: That's a big just, but yes; just not slogging through the jungle.

TINKER: Okay, so, were you aware of anything about what you were gonna be doing when you got to Vietnam?

MATHIAK: Well, I expected I'd be assigned to lead a mortar squad when I got to Vietnam because that was what all my training had been for. I was expecting, "Okay. Here's these ten guys and this is a mortar squad. You're gonna be humping it out in the bush, carrying all this heavy gear." And the mortar stuff is really heavy, not just the equipment, but the rounds themselves. You're talking burden of beast duty. When I got to Vietnam, which was beginning of June—right, very early June, I don't remember the date—we'd been in Cambodia since May, and the press was saying what a great victory Cambodia was being, which was exactly the opposite of the truth. Cambodia was an utter military disaster. I mean, it achieved the goal. It did, but it was at a very high cost in terms of blood. Very, very high. I was expecting when I went over, from what I saw on the press, that I'd probably be sent up north to the DMZ. I figured, "Well, they've taken care of the problem coming in from the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Cambodia. No, let's all be sent up to the north." Well, they sent me into Cambodia directly, because so many people had, you know—let's put it like this. In one company, I know, out of all the people that walked in to Cambodia, and we're talking probably 150 boots on the ground walking in, nine walked out. The rest wounded, or killed.

TINKER: Right.

MATHIAK: My unit was known as—I was an Alpha, First of the Seventh, the First of the Seventh Calvary. First Calvary Division was Custard's old unit. Anyway, I know my company was Alpha Company. We were known as Ailing Alpha because so many people had left the hard way. And I remember that Delta Company was known as Dying Delta for the same reason. All the companies had names like that.

TINKER: So did you know—before you got there, to the First Calvary, did you know what the big picture was going on as far as Cambodia, what the North Vietnamese were doing? You know, just going there for their rest and getting resupplied. Did you understand the big picture when you got there? Or did you just slowly find out or ...

MATHIAK: Well, vaguely, I mean as much as you could understand from what you saw on the news. But you've got to remember, the news is put on by people who want to show what they want to show and they've got agendas, like the news today. You're looking at people's agenda in most cases. I knew what the Ho Chi Minh Trail was. I knew that it ran down Laos and Cambodia and never was in Vietnam at any point, and I knew that that's how they kept their operations going, because unlike—there's a lot of popular myth. I don't understand. I've even seen it in history books that they thought the Viet Cong were the people that were fighting us, and they were—they pretty much become a very minor factor after the 1968 Tet Offensive, beginning of '68. The main people that we were fighting in Vietnam was the North Vietnamese Army, which was an army just like us, supplied just like us, and so forth.

TINKER: Right.

MATHIAK: You know, it's army to army stuff. So I knew that, but you know, getting there and getting involved; that's a whole different kettle of fish.

CRISP: So when you entered Cambodia, you were entering as a replacement for those faltering troops?

MATHIAK: Yeah. Although I was expecting to go in there to run a mortar squad, I was just a replacement for a normal, rifle-carrying grunt. So I ended up in a machine gun squad. We had two types of—let's put it like this, a company would be divided into four platoons, about a quarter of the people in each platoon, and each platoon was divided into four squads, roughly. Each platoon would have two gun squads and two point squads. The point squads would be the ones that went first down the trail, then, followed by a gun squad, which would have the M16 machine gun which is the heavy fire power. So I was in a gun squad.

TINKER: Mm hmm.

MATHIAK: That was about it. I never saw or touched a mortar. I was on the receiving end of the mortars a few times. (Laughs)

TINKER: Never touched a mortar. How often—like what was your routine like week to week or day to day? How often were you going out into the jungle or crossing over the border?

MATHIAK: Okay. Um, we'd go out. We'd be taken out by helicopter ...

TINKER: You need a minute?

MATHIAK: Yeah, I've got a bad dose of PTSD.

TINKER: Okay. Take your time. Well, do you remember the first time you went out?

MATHIAK: Yeah. I don't know if I can do this.

TINKER: Okay, we can take a break. Let me stop a minute. We'll stop.
(Tape Paused)

MCCONNELL: I have one question. You were in the First Calvary which had been involved in the '65 Pleiku Campaign, the first real confrontation with the NVA. Were there any guys still around, I'd say company level or battalion level, that had experience with that traditional "Old Army," with that first campaign in '65?

MATHIAK: Not that I knew of. There were one year tour of duties in Vietnam. Marines had thirteen months to be tough. (Laughter) Everyone else had one year tour of duties. Some people did multiple tours. They'd go back someplace else and come back. Not many people in combat did that, but no, I don't remember any older type people being involved.

MCCONNELL: So there wasn't any references made to that first Pleiku Campaign in '65 or parallels drawn with that?

MATHIAK: Oh no. No.

MCCONNELL: Okay.

MATHIAK: Past history meant absolutely nothing, you know, for several reasons. One, the most obvious, it was a long time ago. Things evolved as the war evolved. You know, both sides got more accustomed to negotiating through the terrain and meeting each other head on. More importantly, no matter—in different parts of Vietnam, depending on the terrain and what was there, everybody had a totally different experience.

TINKER: Yeah.

MATHIAK: If you could compare exactly my viewpoint to other people who had been there and actually in combat, it might sound like two different wars because the conditions were so different. You know, I was in the bush. I was in Cambodia, and in the Tay Ninh Province, which is a western part of—comes across Cambodia there, meets up with Cambodia. We were always in triple canopy jungle, almost always in triple canopy jungle, which is pretty cool stuff, I guess, in its own way, but it's hell to try to be in.

MCCONNELL: Yeah.

TINKER: What? Triple canopy jungle. I haven't heard that term. What?

MATHIAK: Triple canopy, in the jungle, there's sort of three levels of vegetation. A lower level with trees that maybe go up, I don't know, say, twenty, thirty feet. And then another level where the trees—and it's mixed in. It's not like here's one, here's the other. It's all mixed together.

TINKER: (Laughs) Right. Right.

MATHIAK: And then there's another level where there's trees, let's just say trees, say, sixty feet tall or sixty to a hundred feet tall. And obviously, there's a continuum. It's not like there's this stratum and this stratum and this stratum. Then, the really tall trees would be probably 200 plus feet tall and stand out above the jungle. But the triple canopy jungle is very thick, very dark. Parts of it, there's so little light that gets on the—it's almost like, not like a park in terms of flat level ground, but very little lower level vegetation, just because not enough light gets down.

TINKER: Right.

MATHIAK: And at night, for instance, you very literally cannot see your hand in front of your face. In fact, some of the leaves that decompose on the ground would glow a little bit from the bioluminescence from the decomposition.

MCCONNELL: Wow.

MATHIAK: You could see that on the floor.

TINKER: That's something. I've not heard of this before.

MATHIAK: I had a little, I can't remember, a little camera of some sort, and I tried—there were very limited opportunities to get it out and try to take a picture. I failed taking any pictures in the jungle itself because there wasn't enough light for it to do it, so I didn't get any pictures in the jungle. Yeah, the trees were so tall that I remember one—he was an operations officer in the brigade, telling me that he, or somebody, their helicopter had been shot down and crashed in the top of one of the tall trees. They had something like two hundred feet of rope and it landed on, it stayed in the top of tree, and they had like two hundred feet of rope on board they tied to the skid and went down the rope and still had something like a thirty or forty foot drop to the ground.

TINKER: Oh man! (Laughter)

CRISP: It makes my stomach drop.

TINKER: I know.

MATHIAK: We're talking big trees.

TINKER: So helicopter crashes and just gets stuck in the trees and then they still can't reach the ground.

MATHIAK: Yeah. The tree is supporting it that high off the ground.

TINKER: Wow. That's—yeah.

MATHIAK: Yeah, and I remember one—well, anyway the trees were huge. Being out in the bush was a lot of fun. There were leeches everywhere. We'd take breaks and pick leeches off each other, because, you know, leeches don't just live in water. They live in the trees. They live everywhere in the jungle, and they have heat sensors, apparently, because they'll drop out of trees on to you and get on you. Just humping through the jungle is—yeah, we'd hump through the jungle for about an hour at a time before we take a break 'cause we'd be carrying probably seventy to ninety pounds of stuff on our back. It goes up. It goes down. There's lots of vines, and thorns, and bushes, you know. It's very, very difficult going. In a whole day we might go as far as a kilometer and a half, if we made good time, just 'cause of the difficulty muscling our way through the bush. In single file. But when we took a break we'd always pick leeches off ourselves and put them in a little pile.

TINKER: Oh. Gross. (Laughs)

MATHIAK: And I remember one time there was a little kid that was in my squad who had just joined us. He was a little Puerto Rican kid from New York City and we were sitting there just after he was there taking a break and picking leeches off ourselves and bitching and he says to me, "Sarge, what's a leech?" So I showed what we were picking off as he rolled up his pants "Oh like these?"

TINKER: What's a leech? He had no idea.

MATHIAK: Yeah, yeah. When we crossed the river from, it's not much of a river, from between Cambodia and Vietnam on the way out of Cambodia, I had forty-seven leeches on myself. One guy had a hundred and twenty some leeches on himself.

TINKER: Oh, that's rough. So that would happen every time you went out then?

MATHIAK: That's what it was. (Laughs)

TINKER: Yeah, that's how it was.

MCCONNELL: For basic, in AIT, you're in really good physical shape. But how did that compare to your first hump through the bush, your first impression going in the jungle and having to march all day?

MATHIAK: It's very difficult.

MCCONNELL: It's very taxing, yeah.

MATHIAK: Yeah, but it's not really quite marching all day. You know, we take an hour break every once and a while through the day. We might make a kilometer and a half. So it's fighting your way all day and this is in all weather. You know, during the monsoons it rains and rains and

everything is mud and you never dry, ever. You get all kinds of skin diseases, something, I don't know what the medical term is, but we always called jungle rot. You get big, black patches where your skin just kind of disintegrated and ringworm and all kinds of stuff and all kinds of skin diseases.

CRISP: Did you feel like your diet was adequate when you were doing all of that?

MATHIAK: (Laughs) Our diet. Well there were no fat grunts in the jungle so apparently it was enough to keep us going but we didn't gain weight. Our food was either C-rations or LRPs which were Long Range Patrol rations. I think they were the forerunner of MREs that the military uses today. They have a pouch with dried whatever. I know there was a Chili con Carne in it, beef and rice or something dish, you just poured boiling water in and you had your supper there.

TINKER: Right.

MATHIAK: Yeah, there wasn't ...

TINKER: Did you all ever eat anything from out of the jungle?

MATHIAK: Occasionally we'd have what was called a Kit Carson scout working with us. And a Kit Carson scout would be either a local Vietnamese or I remember one guy was a Cambodian that probably spoke very little if any English. But they would go with us to, you know, help us get where we were going and to interrogate anybody we came across and so forth. And they would occasionally eat leaves off the jungle, I know one time one of them gave me some, I think it was a horseradish root, it tasted like horseradish root or something, but we didn't eat stuff of the jungle.

TINKER: No.

MATHIAK: You know, it wasn't like we were sitting "I wonder if we'll ever see..." (Laughter) When you're humping through the jungle you are struggling literally with the weight on your back and the conditions. You're not looking for food and when you sit down, you're exhausted and you sleep.

MCCONNELL: As far as your food—I mean, I've heard stories of people having favorite ... Did you favorite C-rations? I imagine you trade them among yourselves, sort of (show?) game of getting whatever is the best. Come out on top, sort of. (Laughter)

MATHIAK: Yeah, I think the thing that was everybody's favorite in C-rations was fruit salad, which you saw once in a while. Yeah, we would definitely trade. See, the way we'd get resupplied in the bush, we'd get logged every three days. You know, we'd find some place where we could have a helicopter figure out where we were or we could show them where we were in the jungle. Remind me to tell you how, it's kind of interesting too, I suppose. And they would kick out cases of supplies. They'd hover overhead, they normally couldn't land, they'd just kick out cases of supplies every three days. Cases of Cs, cases of LRPs, cases of drinks, water would come in what was called elephant rubbers, they're like balloons, maybe that

diameter (Gestures) , maybe six inches diameter, maybe three feet long or something, very heavy duty rubbery stuff full of water that would survive the drop, so we'd get water and they would occasionally drop in a little bit of cold soda and beer so ...

TINKER: Oh, nice.

MATHIAK: ... if we had time to stay and stop and drink at that point, which didn't always happen because usually when you—in fact, I can't remember, I think maybe once it happened. Normally when you get logged, you got the hell out of there because Charlie knew the helicopter was logging you and he was gonna be coming to see what was going on. So there wasn't time to sit and drink so we rarely got to drink anything cold. You know, everything was just room temperature.

TINKER: Mm, right. Well do you want to go over the note you made? Or look at, 'cause we're talking about, like ... ?

MATHIAK: Well, I tell you, I can talk about what it was like in the bush, what it was like when we got back home, the way medals were awarded. Let me tell a little about the navigation. That's kind of interesting, perhaps. That was Stone Age navigation, you know, there was no GPS in those days and when you're in the jungle you can't see anything, literally, except maybe five feet in that direction and fifteen feet in that direction and that's it. Nothing up, nothing to the side, it's all just green. And we would pop a smoke—when the helicopters used to log us they'd know approximately where we were and we'd find some place where the overhead cover was a little lighter and wait there and pop a smoke, an orange smoke or a purple smoke or whatever it happened to be and the helicopter would tell us what color he saw and if he told us the right color, we'd tell him to come in. But that was the only way that they could find us because to know approximately where we were, to navigate through the jungle, you couldn't walk in a straight line. We tried to count paces but whenever we had an opportunity and could see a little in the distance, we'd have artillery pop a white phosphorous round, do an air burst out in the distance and if we could see it, we could take a compass bearing on it and then they'd pop another one somewhere different. And if we could take compass bearings, we could figure out where we were and then tell them. Because we had maps, of course, topographical maps, but ... What are you interested in hearing about?

TINKER: Well, I guess if you could talk about or say anything about engaging the enemy, like how, when you all are ... Like your mission was to what? You're going through the jungle ...

MATHIAK: Our mission was to follow the guy in front of us. Period. That was it.

TINKER: Would this draw the North Vietnamese out or ...

MATHIAK: We were looking for them.

TINKER: If you're looking for them were there ... ?

MATHIAK: We were looking for them. We'd go out looking for trouble. I am sure

—normally we didn't operate at a full company strength; normally we might be out in a platoon or sometimes two together. And somebody—there'd be an officer who'd know where we were supposed to be going and had the maps and all that. As for the rest of us, it was just, you know, just go, follow this guy. That's all there was to it. At night when we'd set up, we'd look for any trails because there were trails through the jungle that the NVA used and you never wanted to be on one—of course you never ever walked along one because they'd be booby trapped, possibly. But when we set up at night, we'd send out little scouting parties a couple hundred meters or so or less in every direction to look for any trails and if there were any, we put booby traps along them. They're called Alpha Alphas, automatic ambush. It was a claymore with a trip wire, sometimes a couple of claymores strung together with det-cord, set usually with their back to a tree, so facing down a path so that if anybody came down and hit that trip wire, it would blow them away. And they did a good job. I know, one of the claymore mines have ball bearings inside and I don't know, it's about that size as I recall (Gestures) and they would punch right through the wooden stock of an AK-47. They were effective. We'd put the point claymores always down our back trail. If we were in really hot territory, sometimes we would have our own artillery come in and walk rounds of high explosive up our back trail toward where we were camped in case somebody was following us.

TINKER: Right.

MATHIAK: And I know, the first time, when I was new in the bush, the first time that happened I was scared to death because we'd been shelled real heavily by the NVA that day and I thought they were coming for us. I didn't realize it was us 'cause you could hear it getting closer and closer. And uh ...

TINKER: That must feel like good protection though, once you realized what it really was. (Laughs)

MATHIAK: It's good. The big artillery shells are pretty impressive if they can get through the jungle. You know, if it's triple canopy they're ineffective because the trees will stop them. And triple canopy, nothing happens, but if you're in lighter stuff, which is very common, they'll penetrate. I've seen our own artillery turn about a six inch tree into toothpicks where it blasted it away close by.

TINKER: Now I was gonna ask, you said you had the Kit Carson guides sometimes, the locals.

MATHIAK: Yes, Kit Carson scouts.

TINKER: Yeah, scouts. Did, you know, this is always talked about, like the whole betrayal issue, did you all ever experience any of that with the locals?

CRISP: Playing both sides kind of thing.

TINKER: Yeah, playing both sides.

MATHIAK: I'm sorry, I missed your ...

TINKER: Like the betrayal, like a ...

MATHIAK: Oh, betrayal? No.

TINKER: Yeah, like a local turning you guys in or you didn't have any of that?

MATHIAK: No, no, never. I never heard anything like that either. These people hated the NVA and the VC where there was VC. I mean they ...

TINKER: So maybe that's become more part of the Vietnam mythology, sort of.

MATHIAK: I've never even heard of anything like that happening.

TINKER: Really?

MATHIAK: No.

MCCONNELL: I was under the impression a lot of the Kit Carson scouts had been defectors, people who had left the VC or the NVA or local guides that had come over so I'd never really heard about the, I guess today you call it blue on blue.

MATHIAK: I can't tell you because I was never involved in selecting them. But I seriously question whether they were defectors, ever. I cannot believe, I mean that's ...

MCCONNELL: Yeah, that's just what I picked up from reading, so I didn't know. That's something that always struck me as very peculiar that you would trust a company or platoon's lives in the hands of a defector.

MATHIAK: Yeah, that makes no sense. These were very simple people, very superstitious. I mean, we're talking real, real primitive people. In fact, I remember one of them had a little bar of gold embedded in his skin above his elbow there and that was so the bullets couldn't hit him. That little bar of gold was ...

TINKER: He believed that was his protection?

MATHIAK: Yeah, yeah. They were very simple, very uneducated people. I remember, my mother sent me pictures of snow at our house in winter time and I showed it to some of the locals and they couldn't believe, they just couldn't understand that it was frozen water, that water can fall out of the sky frozen. I mean, it was completely beyond their comprehension. I couldn't convince ...

TINKER: Never even heard of it.

MATHIAK: I couldn't convince them it was real. No, we're talking primitive people.

TINKER: (Laughs) I'm not really laughing at them, it's just like, so ... Just to think, you're trying to explain snow. How would you explain snow to somebody? You know, that would be hard to do.

MATHIAK: Yeah. I know one thing I probably ought to mention is drug usage 'cause I know, we came back, we were always accused of being a bunch of druggies which is absolute nonsense. You know, when I was over there, I saw marijuana exactly one time. Once. We had come back in from the bush and some kid came into the barracks with a bag of grass and said, "Hey, look what I've got!" That's the only time I saw it. It never, ever, ever, no narcotic of any sort, would ever be used in the bush. I mean if anybody says something to the contrary, I'd outright call him a flat liar to his face.

TINKER: Every Vietnam veteran I've interviewed says just about what you're saying and I don't know how that became such a ...

CRISP: Yeah, how did that get so twisted?

MATHIAK: Well, there was a hatred of Vietnam veterans when we came back. It was lies, lies, lies. We were called baby killers, you know. We were despised. People hated us to the point that I know of one person who was looking for a job and he was walking down the street and saw a sign that said "Vietnam vets need not apply." Yeah.

TINKER: Wow.

MATHIAK: Yeah, I had a job to go back to, which I did go back to and they took me back, no problems. But that was when I decided to go back and get my MBA. And they had a policy of educational benefits, standard company educational benefits. They denied me standard company benefits because I was a veteran. They denied them to me.

TINKER: Wow.

MATHIAK: You know, I fought it.

TINKER: Wow!

MATHIAK: And I needed the job, I couldn't tell them to go get screwed and walk off or I would have, which is why I left the company within days, my job lined up and I was gone within days after I got my MBA.

CRISP: I noted that you used the G.I. Bill to get your MBA, right?

MATHIAK: Yeah, that helped but this is University of Chicago and that's not exactly a cheap school.

CRISP: Right, exactly.

TINKER: I'm sure that didn't cover it.

MATHIAK: Yeah, yeah.

TINKER: Well before we get that far, I was gonna ask you about, I think you made a note that you served as company clerk for a little while.

MATHIAK: Yeah, after several months in the bush, our company clerk had his tour and he DEROSed, as we say, and they needed a new company clerk. And they picked five people back at the company—I don't know how they did it, you know, they had little data cards on everybody in the company so they knew our backgrounds. They picked five of us to come in from the bush to interview for the company clerk job and it ended up being a typing test. And they gave us a big paragraph to type and a limited time to do it and we all had to do the best we could. Well I won the typing contest, and so I became company clerk. And I was company clerk for, I don't know, a month and a half, two months or something like that. And then, the operations officer at brigade level, which was—I was in a company, the next level up is battalion and the next level beyond that is brigade. Well the operations officer in the brigade, for some reason, called me in and asked me if I wanted to come and move to brigade and do the—I was an S-3 Air. I coordinated air support in our sector of Vietnam, in the III Corps which is about a third of Vietnam. So I went over there and finished my tour.

TINKER: Well that short time must have been a relief. I mean, compared to ...

MATHIAK: Oh, I would do anything to get out of the bush and I was glad.

TINKER: You were feeling like you were living the good life then, right?

MATHIAK: Oh yeah, yeah. I mean because being in the bush, shall we say, was dangerous. And being in the rear, you know, neither of those places was I in a place where I could take advantage—I was not in a city or anything, so I could not take advantage of the bars and the brothels and all the rest of that a lot of the people did. But it was very, very safe. I know in Phuoc Vinh, which is where I was a company clerk, it was a lot closer—it was in the middle of the bush, actually, but it was still a big camp, we'd get mortared occasionally but it was no big deal. It's not like being on LZ and being targeted.

TINKER: So when did you find out you were gonna go back to the states? Let's see.

MATHIAK: My unit was one that had been in Vietnam longer than most of them, if not the longest. And we were so depleted still from Cambodia. They'd never brought us up to strength. When we were in Cambodia, we had a constant stream of reinforcements coming back in and they never got us up to more than about half strength because we were losing people faster than they could bring them in. And they never brought things back up to the normal amount, so they disbanded my unit. It was just dissolved. And I had enough time in country at that point and small enough time left in service that they gave me an early out. So I got out twenty-two and a half months or so in service. But yeah, getting out was interesting because the plane that was called that took you out of Vietnam was known as your freedom bird. And it was a nice long ride

home but we got there and processed out—I don't remember, I think it might have been Oakland, I really don't remember, told us to get out of uniform as quickly as possible for obvious reasons. You know, soldiers were hated, even draftees. We were hated, lots of dirty looks on the plane coming back, lots of them. I brought a few pictures along so you all can look. We'd be out in the bush for some period of time. This is a picture of our first opportunity to wash after being in the bush for three weeks without any opportunity to wash, at all. No sanitation, I mean literally no sanitation whatsoever. That's our bath after. This is over three weeks.

TINKER: You took that with your camera?

MATHIAK: Yeah, these are pictures I took.

TINKER: What's that one?

MATHIAK: This is, that's just what it looked like going out or coming in. I took that picture coming back in. They were extracting us from the bush. You know, going out, there's no way you'd have your camera out.

TINKER: Is this in a Huey?

MATHIAK: Yeah, uh huh. Yeah the sound of the Huey is something very, very special. And yeah, in order to carry a camera, which had to be kept dry, and writing paper and toilet paper and cigarettes and things like that, we used what was called a love box which was a 60 millimeter machine gun ammunition case, probably a base about like that and maybe about that high that was waterproof and that was strapped in our backpack to keep cameras dry and so forth. Papers, paper to write letters home and notes and so forth, anything that needed to be kept dry because we're wet. Especially during monsoon season, you're just wet and you never dry out, you just get skin diseases, one after the other. And this is something, I don't know if any—this is back in the rear, where it's real safe, you know. This is a picture of shitters and the shit being burned. In the rear, you had just outhouses. They had pissers and shitters. Pissers were like a steel drum they cut both ends off and sliced it in half down the middle and just propped the half up like a little windbreak, dig a little hole in front of it and they were just be scattered randomly around the post, out in the open. And when you needed to use one, you used it. When you had to do a number two, you went to the shitter. And they had fifty-five gallon drums cut in half underneath with a couple inches of diesel fuel in it. And it dropped in there and they pull them out, I don't know, once a week or whatever and burn it, which made the most interesting, almost a sweet smell. It's lots of smells associated with that place.

TINKER: Heat and smells.

MCCONNELL: I had a question about when during the Fishhook Campaign—the First Cavalry was operating alongside Arvin, I believe an airborne brigade or a battalion of South Vietnamese paratroopers. Did you have any—I guess this would be right about the same time Vietnamization was beginning to really go into effect. What were your impressions of South Vietnamese troops?

MATHIAK: I never had any contact whatsoever.

MCCONNELL: Okay.

MATHIAK: Never, ever. I don't think I ever even saw one. I don't remember ever seeing one. All I know is the local Vietnamese that we talked to disliked them very much. You know, over there we developed a sort of a patois that was a combination of very bad English, German, French, and Vietnamese and a little Japanese thrown in to speak with the locals and uh, I still remember this one guy saying to me, "Arvin same same chicken shit." (Laughter) You know, Arvin is the same as chicken shit. But yeah, they, you know. I had no experience with them. You know, I was in Vietnam, as I said everything was very personal and in my little sector, there was nothing. One thing I should probably mention is medals because that's always kind of fun. You know, you see people—in fact I remember seeing a picture of in Iraq, I think it was Iraq, it might have been Afghanistan outfit some time ago, they showed a company and there were, I don't remember, it was thirty some people in the picture and in this group of people there were four of them that had Silver Stars, there was like thirty-two that had Bronze Stars and a bunch that had Soldier's Medals. And they apparently, really devalued the meaning of medals for that group. It's really pathetic looking at, I mean—we used to say back then a medal and twenty-five cents will get you a cup of coffee because that's what a cup of coffee cost at that point, it was twenty five-cents. But they did not pass out medals, ever, that I know of. You know, we came out of Cambodia, I remember they brought us back to the company grounds and had us stand in formation and almost all of us there had bandages of some sort on. Almost all of us, and we had to stand in formation to watch the Soldier's Medal, which is the highest non-combat medal the Army has, be awarded to the executive officer of the battalion.

TINKER: Oh man. (Laughter)

MATHIAK: Because he put out a fire in a file cabinet. And I am not lying, I swear to God, we had to stand there and watch him. Not one of us, ever, got a medal for being in Cambodia. Now there were Purple Hearts given out, but that was it. That was it. Later, apparently somebody figured out that there had been some pretty heavy stuff going on in Cambodia and my unit was awarded the Valorous Unit Award which is equivalent to every individual getting a Silver Star and that was, I'd say, well-deserved. But the medals that you see on people, even back then, we always said, I won't believe, I won't take it seriously unless I saw it happen. I think that's gotta be true in spades today. But now for officers it was different because I know there was a—the head of one of the battalions, it was an Italian name, I wanna say Abruzzi or something, that's probably not right, anyway his tour was gonna come up and he wanted to get a Bronze Star. So he went out to lead a company one time and walked—wherever he was there was a path of some sort and he went walking down it yelling, "Hurry up! Get going!" which was crazy because when you went through the jungle, you were silent, absolutely silent. You didn't make any noise, absolutely nothing.

TINKER: Right.

MATHIAK: Well he got his Bronze Star with a V, of course. I mean, that goes without saying. That goes without saying.

TINKER: Mm hmm.

MCCONNELL: On a related note to the medal issue, what were your impressions of morale? This is 1970, U.S. troop movements are about to start drawing down, but the draft levels have been raised and are now drafting college students. Do you recall any impressions of morale?

MATHIAK: Oh yeah, yeah. It's horrible, it was horrible. Nobody wanted to be there. Now when I was there, it was not at the point that we were gonna be getting out. You know, there were—troop levels were coming down a little bit. You know, Nixon started bringing them down but there was still a pretty healthy ...

MCCONNELL: Large presence.

MATHIAK: Yeah, things were still going hot and heavy. And uh, it wasn't like, I'm not gonna be the last one killed you know, because you knew it wasn't going to end like that, that quickly. But morale was very bad. I don't think anybody wanted to be—now I can think of one or two nutcases. There was one guy that we called wild Bill that was real gung-ho, but not the rest of us. No, no, we did what we needed to and no more. None of us wanted to be there, you know, and the education level was very high, at least in my experience in my company in the bush, it was much higher than you see walking on the street. Now maybe on campus it's probably gonna be a little higher, I'm sure it is. You know, if you—but many of us had graduate degrees. The guys—I didn't know that many people because of the way we operated in the bush. You never saw more than three or four people, five or six people, at any time. I mean, the others would be there but you couldn't see them because the bush is so thick. But uh, education level was way way above; Lots of people with graduate degrees, lots of Bachelor's, lots of people with some college. You know, to some extent there is a myth that these are uneducated idiots going to Vietnam but from what I've seen, that's definitely not the case. You know, because I think graduate students were the only ones that you could draft at that point, I think undergraduate was still deferred. I don't remember, I can't remember.

TINKER: Hmm.

MATHIAK: But uh, you know, I know there was always a myth that it was poor blacks that were out there fighting the war and that also was completely, completely out of anything that I ever served. I never saw a company comprised with even a significant, more than you see in the general population, and if you look at statistics you know, in terms of deaths, blacks and whites is essentially the same as far as that goes. So I think that's one of the myths that definitely needs to be dispelled.

TINKER: Yep.

MCCONNELL: What was the relationship like between officers and men during this period? Or enlisted men and officers?

MATHIAK: It depended on the officer.

MCCONNELL: Okay, so ...

MATHIAK: If it was somebody you respected, you know, you respected them. If it was somebody that was a jerk, you didn't. In the rear, there was no problem with officers except like there was this one officer that was a real jerk that nobody respected. In fact, the last I heard of him he had been out in the bush and they were logging him and he got hit in the head with a case of C-rations that was tossed out of a helicopter to log them and he ended up, I guess, in a permanent coma, last I heard. But no, you hear of fragging officers, I think that's—I'm sure that it did happen at some point, but commonly, absolutely not. That's a myth.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, I was gonna ask you the extent of that. I always considered it to be a huge myth.

MATHIAK: Oh yeah. That's a complete myth, a complete fabrication. You know, you depended on each other. Even this guy that was a jerk would never have been fragged. Although, he got threatened once with being shot, because I remember we came up on something—this was another officer, and the point man stopped and you're in a long line, you can't see more than one or two people in front of you and this point man saw something so he stops, so of course everybody stops behind him and this stupid officer from the back hollered, "What's going on up there? Hurry up!" And the guy in front of him turned around and said "You make another sound and I'm gonna shoot you." Which he should have been shot, he deserved to be shot. But in terms of just general officers being fragged or anything, no, no. I don't think anybody put officers on a pedestal because they were officers. It's not like a few hundred years ago when the nobles were officers and "Yes, Lord. Yes, Lord," nothing like that. They were—everybody's in the same boat out in the bush. You never addressed anybody by rank, there were no signs of rank whatsoever, no indication of who was who.

TINKER: Right. Yep. So do you wanna talk about when you came home, now? You flew home; you thought you arrived in Oakland. How long did it take you to get from California—now where was your wife, was she in Chicago?

MATHIAK: No, she was living with her parents while I was in Vietnam, in Cuba City, Wisconsin, which is right in the corner, southwest corner, near Dubuque, Iowa. And so I flew, I think through Chicago, there and she picked me up at the airport in Dubuque.

TINKER: And had you all written letters regularly? Did the mail reach you?

MATHIAK: Yeah, yeah, we wrote back and forth but there was no telephone communication. You know, at that point, there was no electronic communication available, which is something else I probably ought to mention. I don't know if you've heard about the MARS System, but it was, there was a system of short wave radio operators, volunteers, that would assist in communicating with Vietnam because there was no telephone link whatsoever. You know, there were no satellites available to do that sort of thing at that point and no trans-Pacific cable. And when the thing would be up, when a radio operator in Vietnam would contact another radio operator in, you know, Guam or wherever would get somebody in Los Angeles who'd get somebody there and there until they could finally make a link to where you wanted the place to

call. That was—it's MARS is the name, it was called the MARS System, but it stands for something, I can't remember, military something or another, I think. But then you could talk by radio, but that was something that was—the only time it was ever available to me personally was after I had my orders to go home. I was able to use it to call and tell my wife that I was gonna be coming home and I expected to be there on whatever day it was. But you had to use normal radio protocol and when you finished talking you'd say over so then all along the line they'd all have to switch from their mic to the speaker.

TINKER: So did you have any trouble when you were traveling back home from California to ... ?

MATHIAK: No. I was in uniform because I had no civilian clothes at all with me at that point. I got a lot of dirty looks but ...

TINKER: But no real ...

MATHIAK: Nobody spit on me, nobody called me names. I know that did happen to other people, to some other people. It wasn't to everybody by any means but it definitely was not uncommon or not unheard of. I know in some places, they had a fence to screen off the general public from the military so that they couldn't get close to you.

TINKER: Mm hmm.

MATHIAK: Yeah, it's quite a difference. That's one reason, I think, the Vietnam vets are one reason that our veterans are being treated so much better today, because World War II vets looked down their nose at us. You know, "you weren't in a real war, we were," and I was never interested, I avoided anything to do with the military and I would never go near the American Legion or anything like that. But I know people that did, generally, were greatly sneered at, turned away, disrespected because they were Vietnam vets. But the World War II vets were very unfriendly and so we started saying, never again will one generation of veterans disown another. And it's good to see that things have turned around and they're finally getting a little bit of respect.

TINKER: This is true. Yeah, it really started with Desert Storm, I mean, I remember that and it was like America's big great apology, you know. It's like America started an apology tour.

MATHIAK: Yeah.

TINKER: And ever since then, like what you're saying, it's turned around.

MATHIAK: Yeah, there are a lot of people who should feel greatly ashamed of the way they behaved, a lot of them.

TINKER: This is true, that's true. So you had a happy homecoming?

MATHIAK: Yeah, yeah.

TINKER: Did you?

MATHIAK: Yeah, I went back to work and ...

TINKER: How soon did you go to work when you got home?

MATHIAK: Very soon because I needed money. (Laughs)

TINKER: Within weeks, months?

MATHIAK: Oh definitely within weeks, yeah, definitely. I mean, I hadn't been able to sleep on the trip home and I hadn't been able to—from leaving Vietnam until I got to wherever it was I processed out and that took another day or so, I think, and then the trip home. I hadn't been able to sleep for probably a couple of days and I stood in line for pizza that night. (Laughter)

TINKER: Couldn't wait to get pizza, right?

MATHIAK: Yeah.

TINKER: That's a good memory. So you go back to your job, which they held for you, which was good, but then they, we talked a little bit about how they denied you the educational benefits, right?

MATHIAK: Yeah, they just refused to let me have the educational benefits.

TINKER: And you just kind of took it from them, I mean, you put up with it because you needed that job.

MATHIAK: I needed the job desperately. There was not a lot of work available and I needed a stream of money coming. I didn't have two nickels to rub together at that point. My military pay wasn't very much. Even combat pay, which I think everybody who was in Vietnam got, was like sixty-six dollars a month, whether you're sitting at a desk safely in the rear or out in the bush, sixty-six dollars a month.

TINKER: And had your wife been receiving the pay or had she been working while you were gone?

MATHIAK: Uh, you know, I don't remember. I don't remember. I know that I had some money. We didn't use American currency over there, we used MPC, Military Payment Currency, because it was prohibited to have green backs over there. And I know I had some. I didn't have much opportunity to spend money though. When I was out in the bush, I know I went for over a month at one time without spending a cent.

TINKER: Mm hmm. No doubt. So how long did you stay with that first company where you came?

MATHIAK: Going back, it must've been in April 1971, I left in June 1974. As soon as I got my MBA completed, I was gone.

TINKER: What made you decide to go back and get your MBA?

MATHIAK: There was no way at that point I could go back and pick up where I left off with my science education and the stuff I was interested in was real theoretical. Basically stuff that would've been Star Wars stuff and the space race was pretty well over at that point and I saw the writing on the wall and really didn't have the stomach for going back at that point. I came back a different person and I went over very different. And uh, decided I'd get the MBA and do my thing like that.

TINKER: You say different. In what way? Does this mean your view of the world, of people, of ... ?

MATHIAK: Well, to some extent, that, but most importantly, they didn't identify it at that point, but I had a good dose of PTSD at that point and that was a very negative factor for a lot of years. It finally blew up in 1999. It was extremely severe, but I was not in a condition to go back and pick up where I left off.

TINKER: Mm hmm. So you knew, though. Did you have something in mind with the MBA, specifically, that you wanted to do?

MATHIAK: Well, I knew I wanted to get involved in finance and wanted geographically to get into the southern half of the United States.

TINKER: Okay. (Laughs)

MATHIAK: I only considered looking at companies in the southern half of the United States, when I started looking for jobs and I ended up deciding between a job with Lockheed out in Los Angeles and Phillips Petroleum in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. And I bought some blue sky and joined Phillips because I was gonna be in Tokyo in about nine months but that didn't happen. (Laughs)

TINKER: Oh, okay. So you did settle on Phillips Petroleum? And that was in Oklahoma. So you were there a long time, '74 to '88.

MATHIAK: Yeah, I was there for about fifteen years.

TINKER: Pretty good job?

MATHIAK: I had some very interesting jobs, but Phillips was an extremely corrupt company at that time. I mean, it makes the current administration in Washington look like choir boys.

TINKER: (Laughs) Oh, really? Wow.

MATHIAK: Extremely corrupt and I know that ...

TINKER: How long were you there before you realized that was the case?

MATHIAK: Probably three or four months.

TINKER: Oh, wow. (Laughs)

MATHIAK: You know, when I was called in and told, “Look, you’re not gonna get any promotions, you’re not gonna get any advancement, I don’t think there’s much future for you here,” and I had made three major accomplishments at that point. I was hired into their treasury department and one thing I did was revise their banking system of the corporate banking system that actually created, in the most true sense of the word, created 16 million dollars for the company by riding float on the Fed. I also went out with my boss, the guy who was in the slot I was, but ahead of me, who later became the president and CEO of Phillips, and one other guy to renegotiate bonds on a plant in Puerto Rico that we wanted to sell. We each had four bondholders we needed to convince to sell their bonds to us so we could close this deal in Puerto Rico. I was the only one that got all four of mine. None of the others got any of theirs. And there was one other thing like that and after that, I was called in and said, “You know, what about this? And what about this?” and, “No, you don’t have a spot,” so I went to the human resources department and said, “Look, this is what happened,” and the guy looked at me kind of puzzled and said, “Well, you need a sponsor. I have one.” That’s, you know. But the company was extremely corrupt. I mean, in working the treasury operation I saw a lot of money disappear; a lot of money, a lot of money.

TINKER: My goodness. My goodness.

MATHIAK: I mean, we’re talking big time money. Hundreds of thousands of dollars at a pop, frequently.

TINKER: My goodness.

MATHIAK: It was very corrupt.

TINKER: There was nothing really that you could do about it?

MATHIAK: Well, if I wanted to keep my job, no.

TINKER: (Laughs) Yeah. So you finally left there in ’88? Just because of that, you got tired of all that?

MATHIAK: Well, not because of that but I was—I migrated through one area where I had a great opportunity. I went into developing new projects in our petrochemicals division and got a couple good things going and I got a new plant going in Pasadena, California. I got a petrochemical complex, a huge petrochemical complex, this is in 1980. The first phase that I got

approved was 762 million dollars. This was in 1980 dollars. And the second phase would have been about the same, later on after completion of the first phase, but I got it approved by the executive committee, got it and we started engineering. We hired Stone Webster, a big engineering company, to do the engineering for us. And I spent six months in New York, with that, working with them. And after six months, we got our first really good cost estimate and it was ten percent below the figure that I had used to justify it, which meant that we had a gold mine. I mean, we had a real gold mine. And just then we got a new CEO who decided, "I don't want any more petrochemical plants. Cancel it."

CRISP: What?

MATHIAK: And at that point, you know, I was completely adrift, and I found another slot for a while and then I finally got this offer to go over to Brussels.

TINKER: Oh yeah. And what was in Brussels?

MATHIAK: I joined a company called Vista Chemical, which—Vista was the first major LBO, Leveraged Buy Out. A bunch of the—it was a Conoco subsidiary in the chemicals business. They did primarily surfactants and PVC, the PVC predecessors. And they—a bunch of the senior people got together and bought the company out from Conoco and bought themselves positions of senior management in the new company, which was named Vista Chemical. And they were really lucky because for the first few years, their feedstock prices stayed flat, but the product prices went through the roof, so their margin widened and all of a sudden it was a gold mine. They became filthy rich and that was the time I was hired to go over to Brussels where they had established an office and I was sent over there to manage their industrial chemicals business outside of the Americas. And just about that time, the product prices started dropping back to normal levels, their margins got squeezed, but they had very cleverly decided to pay themselves, using dividends, by going deeply into debt. They took a whole lot of debt and paid themselves using dividends so they were cash poor and in debt and their margins disappeared. They got to the point that they were trying to get major suppliers, I mean major customers, to prepay invoices so they could make payroll. And the company finally was, and I was pulled back, and everything collapsed in a heap.

TINKER: Yeah, if you're having invoices prepaid, you're in trouble. (Laughs)

MATHIAK: Yeah, it was bought over, bought out by a former subsidiary of Conoco (Laughter) It was now a subsidiary of a large German company.

TINKER: Yeah, so that was only four years. Four years, you watched that happen, right? And then, okay, so, your next job, what were you looking for when you left Brussels, anything in particular?

MATHIAK: What was I looking for?

TINKER: Yeah, like were you looking for a job along the same lines, like ... ?

MATHIAK: No, I was offered, I didn't leave to Brussels and find the job there, they recruited me to go to Brussels.

TINKER: Oh, okay. But then ... ?

MCCONNELL: How did you like Brussels?

MATHIAK: Pardon?

MCCONNELL: How did you like Brussels?

MATHIAK: Loved it. Great city, yeah. Great city, great location and for traveling in and out of Europe and well any place really, it's a great location, too. Yeah, I loved Brussels. Yeah, we were really disappointed when things collapsed.

MCCONNELL: I'm sure.

MATHIAK: We were pulled back unexpectedly. I was expecting to be over there for at least five years and I was doing a lot of traveling, of course, but I didn't enjoy it as much as I could have. But still, the travel is interesting, too. Unfortunately, it was all business travel, you know, which is, you see airports, hotels, restaurants, and that's it. But ...

MCCONNELL: Did you learn any languages along the way or was it ... ?

MATHIAK: Uh, I was reasonably fluent in German. I could do business in German. I've had meetings in German, I've done business over the phone in German. So I could get by quite easily throughout almost all of Central and Eastern Europe because German was widely used as a second language there.

MCCONNELL: Mm hmm.

MATHIAK: But uh, almost everything, all the international business, almost all of it was in English. And anytime you're dealing in international business, with some exceptions, the discussion is in English because it's the only global language. You know, there is no other.

MCCONNELL: Yep.

TINKER: Right. So when you left Brussels, where did you move to?

MATHIAK: Uh, Houston.

TINKER: Houston?

MATHIAK: Yeah, we went back to Houston and then Vista put me in a project. (Laughs) I'm not gonna go with the line. One of these guys that bought his position was a real screw up and he screwed these things up badly and they needed a scapegoat and I became a scapegoat, and trying

to sell plastics that would corrode the molds used by the manufacturers, to manufacturers that didn't want their molds corroded. (Laughs) I mean it was a ludicrous situation and so I was a scapegoat. And that whole division disappeared as they collapsed in a heap, it's gone, I mean they brought me back and didn't have any place to put me and I don't know if they knew this thing was gonna go away eventually or just dumped me there to get rid of me or not. I have no way of knowing. After that it was just scrambling.

TINKER: Right. And what was your next job after that?

MATHIAK: Uh, well a friend of mine and I, an ex-Vista guy, actually set up a competing business with Vista in surfactants. Which, surfactants are, if you will, the active ingredient in detergent, the stuff that's in your laundry and under your sink for your dishwashing. Surfactants are what make that stuff work. And that was one of Vista's main product lines. Well this friend of mine, who had also been with Vista and his job had disappeared, knew that business and he was Colombian and knew all the Latin American people and he knew a good supplier in Colombia of really good quality surfactants, so we kind of went in the business together, very informally. And he started arranging to bring surfactants into the United States and I arranged storage and developed markets, found people who could buy them and we managed—we actually upset Vista by what we were doing because not only were we competing head-on with them, but our product specifications were better than Vista's were. So we actually caused a whole industry in the United States to improve their specifications. And then unfortunately, our one supplier in Colombia, just when we were going well—I mean, we had major storage facilities in use in the Gulf Coast, you know, shipping stuff in tank trucks and rail trucks and working on getting barge shipments together, and we're talking good volume here, just then his supplier reneged on a Brazilian supplier for something or another and his supplier went out of business so we had nothing left. So that was the end of that.

TINKER: (Laughs)

MATHIAK: And then I ended up buying the flooring company which I kept for a few years and unfortunately that was another sad story because it was a good company. It had good revenue, the books looked great, went in there with an accountant and everything looked good. It wasn't until after I purchased it I found out I was buying a money laundering operation from the Mafia. And let's just say ...

TINKER: And was this still in Houston?

MATHIAK: Yeah. And let's just say, things didn't go well and they were competing directly against me and I had a really good legal non-compete too. And I finally caught them with all the information. I knew the credit card, whose credit card it was they were paying the suppliers with, who the customers were, I'd actually received payment from one of the customers because they sent payment to me instead of them, and filed a major lawsuit. And I had them by the short and curly, but unfortunately just as we were getting down to the nitty gritty, as I said, this is a Mafia thing ...

TINKER: Right. (Laughter)

MATHIAK: The judge who was handling the case was out of town for one day and a replacement judge came in and he dismissed the case immediately. And it would've taken, they said it would take about 60 thousand dollars to get back with (unintelligible) and I didn't have that kind of money, so ...

TINKER: How convenient. Yes.

MATHIAK: Yeah, you want a tale of woe; I'll tell you a tale of woe.

TINKER: Oh man. So how did you regroup after that trauma?

MATHIAK: Well, I was scrambling at that point. I was too old to be hired by anybody at that point and started just—I ended up selling appliances at Sears as a commission salesman.

TINKER: Mm hmm. In Houston still?

MATHIAK: Yeah.

TINKER: How did you end up here in Tennessee?

MATHIAK: I retired. When my PTSD really went off the charts in '99 and didn't really do much improvement, I finally ended up retiring early and we moved here. We didn't like being in Houston so we moved here. And we wanted some place that was pretty and had moderate seasons.

TINKER: And had you been here before or had friends?

MATHIAK: I think I might've passed through on business, I don't know that I was ever in Knoxville before, but we looked at Asheville and Roanoke and Knoxville and liked this kind of part of the country, the Appalachians and so forth and so we ended up here. We've liked it real well.

TINKER: Yeah, there's a lot of military veterans that retire here.

MATHIAK: Yeah, it's a nice place. You've got moderate seasons. My wife is from Louisiana and I'm from Wisconsin. Neither of us wanted the hot weather.

TINKER: You didn't want it too hot or too cold. (Laughs)

MATHIAK: It's moderate here. The winters can get a bit much and the summers can get just a little more than you want but it's not too bad.

TINKER: Mm hmm. Well that's good. So you're not working now, just retired?

MATHIAK: No, no, I retired in 2005 when we moved to, uh ...

TINKER: Have you stayed in touch with any of your friends from the service?

MATHIAK: No, never. We never really got close to each other.

TINKER: Oh, okay. Never really formed that bond with anybody in particular?

MATHIAK: Not really. You know, you'd have people you were friendly with you worked with, but it wasn't the sense of having, making good life-long friends.

TINKER: Right, and you didn't join like, VFW or any of the unit ... ?

MATHIAK: No, I avoided anything to do with the military. In fact, I'd never even heard of PTSD until I was really in bad shape and the VA mentioned it to me. I'd never heard of it before.

TINKER: Mm hmm.

MATHIAK: I had nothing to do with it, avoided anything, any contact at all.

TINKER: Yeah, yeah. Um, well would you like to say anything about, I mean I don't want to pressure you on it, but is there anything you'd like to say about the treatment you've received through the VA for your PTSD or ... ?

MATHIAK: It's worthwhile mentioning. The VA's problems are not just administrative, there's a reason that a lot of these people end up working at the VA where they have very light workloads, very easy schedules. I'll give you a couple examples, uh, when we moved to Knoxville, I'd been seeing a VA psychiatrist frequently in Houston and when we moved here, we went, got an appointment with the guy here in Knoxville, and he uh, his only interest was, "Can you do this? Okay."

TINKER: You mean just touch your fingers?

MATHIAK: Yeah, yeah. And, I mean, it was ridiculous, it was absurd. So I ended up going up to Mountain Home after that until we got things straightened out and then they finally, basically ...

TINKER: Is that the one up in Johnson City? The ... ?

MATHIAK: Yeah, yeah. And they finally got somebody new back here but even on the medical side, a couple years ago, I was working outside and slipped and fell and landed, if you turn me ninety degrees, on the ground like this with the force of my body coming straight up my humerus into my shoulder and did a major problem on my shoulder. This was on Memorial Day, or the day before Memorial Day a couple years ago. And I had a lot of pain and I couldn't raise my arm above that (Gestures) you know, I could grab it like this (Gestures) but there was no way I could do that so I knew something was cut, something was bad. There was a lot of pain. So I went up to the Mountain Home VA thing, emergency room. Well there were no doctors there,

but a physician's assistant was there and he had me x-rayed, well there were no breaks, see. He said, "You need to have an MRI but I can't order one so we'll just have to set an appointment with your local doctor down in Knoxville."

TINKER: Right.

MATHIAK: Well it took me a week to get to see him, with a lot of pain. And I finally saw him and I went in there and my blood pressure was really high at that point and the nurse took it twice and it was really high, well he didn't even comment on that, which he should have, of course. But, he said, "Well, I can't order an MRI. Even if I order an MRI, they won't let you have it." He told me that twice, two times. This is a physician, an MD.

TINKER: Right.

MATHIAK: Who was supposed to order the MRI.

TINKER: Right.

MATHIAK: And then he prescribed an anti-inflammatory and said he'd set up an appointment for physical therapy. And he knew I couldn't raise it. I could do this (Gestures) but, and painful. So the next day, the very next day, I had an appointment with an actual surgeon here and they did the MRI and surgery and so forth and I had two torn muscles, one torn tendon that showed up on the MRI and when he got in, there was another tendon damaged. And he was able to get that repaired, and fortunately I had a good recuperation. And now, after that episode, I wrote a letter to the VA. They have a, what do they call it, patient advocate that's supposed to handle situations, problems, and so I wrote a letter and they changed me to another doctor, who seemed to be alright except I've got a big problem with Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, have had it for about a month and I'm gonna finally get it fixed. I finally went to a private guy just recently and this guy, also a physician, doesn't want to have anything done with it. I've got some pretty severe problems occasionally, like if I'm trying to use the keyboard and use my thumb for the space bar, I can't feel it. And I don't use it, you know, if it's bad. Driving bothers it (something). But anyway, uh, this physician told me, well, Carpal Tunnel surgery is only successful 50/50. And that's one of the easiest hundred percenters there is. You know, he just didn't want to provide it.

TINKER: Right. Huh.

MATHIAK: That's what the VA is. Not to say that they're all bad, I'm not going to say that, but I'm gonna say that there's enough that are bad that in my limited experience, I've run into some real doozies.

TINKER: Mm hmm. But do you feel like you've gotten adequate care for your PTSD? Fairly adequate?

MATHIAK: Not really.

TINKER: Okay.

MATHIAK: When I was able to quit working, things slowly improved. I'm doing much, much, much better than I was while I was still working, not because of their care. Medications help a little bit, but the care—you know, I went up to Mountain Home and each, six visits, on six consecutive visits up there, I saw six different people.

TINKER: Right.

MATHIAK: They didn't—you know, every time I came in it was like, I'm seeing some intern that's trying ...

TINKER: You're starting all over again.

MATHIAK: ... to do his first thing and it was ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous. So no, I'm not impressed with the VA. That's why you, I have a private physician and anything I really want done, I'll go privately if I don't get it done, because I do not have confidence in the VA. I mean, it saves money, it's cheaper than being on your own, but for anything of any importance, I wouldn't trust the VA.

TINKER: Mm hmm. I interviewed another Vietnam veteran not too long ago and he kind of said the same thing. He was in the Mekong Delta that actually a booby trap blew up, basically in his face and part of his body and he said the same thing. He doesn't really go for the VA. But, uh, yeah. His experience wasn't that great either. So, is there anything, did you guys have any additional questions, or is there anything you'd like to say before we stop? Oh, do we get to keep these copies?

MATHIAK: Yeah, those are yours.

TINKER: Oh, thank you. Thank you.

MATHIAK: Yeah, it might lend a little bit to whatever you're doing there.

TINKER: Okay, thank you for the pictures and thank you for the interview.

MATHIAK: I know the pictures you see of Vietnam are normally pictures in the rear because there were not photographers out in the bush where the action was going, ever, you know. When you see an action picture, it's something to always question.

TINKER: Well, before we end, I should've touched on this earlier, because we mentioned the Vietnam myth so much. What do you think about the myth—like, there was this whole genre almost of Vietnam War movies. Is there any that like, you really hate or you think that one's okay or ... ?

MATHIAK: Uh, I've—I can't watch that kind of—there's only one I've really watched all the way through. I've looked at parts of a couple of them and the ones I've seen are really horrible, uh, they're Hollywood. Just, I mean, ridiculous, you know, like, I can't think of the names.

TINKER: Like *Platoon* or something like that?

MATHIAK: *Platoon*, yeah. Nonsense, I mean, they're some Hollywood director, even Oliver Stone made one, I don't know which one it was, and he was in Vietnam. Now I don't know if he was ever in the bush, but even his movie, whatever it was, I didn't see it, but I've heard from people that have done and it was just absurd. The only one that I've actually seen and sat all the way through was *We Were Soldiers* because that's about the unit I was in before I was there. And I'd say that was probably about seventy-five percent realistic. Much more so than any of the others.

TINKER: Right.

MATHIAK: I mean, they really made an attempt to be realistic. They uh, you know, they had some really stupid things in there, like, uh, what's, I can't think of the name of the guy, the Colonel and the Sergeant standing where guns and people are shooting and they're just standing up, looking around and talking. I mean, good God. And this one kid is dying and he ...

TINKER: They have to have some Hollywood in there though. (Laughs)

MATHIAK: This one guy is dying and he says, "I wish I had only more than one life to give for my country," I mean, that kind of stuff is it. But the combat they showed was actually, a lot of it was believable.

TINKER: Yeah, yeah. It should've been, I guess because Moore, I think, worked pretty closely with them, you know, trying I guess to make sure they stuck to the book.

MATHIAK: Well, they actually did use input from people who were involved to make that movie. Now, they still had to make it Hollywood but, as far as I know, that's the only one that's actually based on input.

TINKER: Right.

MATHIAK: I mean, that even tries to approximate reality. The rest, you could set them in Panama or something, they'd be just as realistic.

TINKER: (Laughter) Yeah. Well I appreciate your views on that and I guess, we'll um, I guess we're finished. Thank you for coming, okay.