A Veterans Oral History

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Carl Jerold (Jerry) Nygard
Narrator

Linda Jenson
Interviewer

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CN: This is Carl Jerold Nygard and I served in the United States Air Force from 11 September 1956 to the 1st of October 1978. I served in Vietnam is the war that I participated in.

LJ: Jerry where were you born?

CN: I was born, do you want precisely or just the town?

LJ: Whatever you want to tell us.

CN: All right. I was born in Detroit Lakes, Minnesota, at the home of a Mrs. Gridley, who provided her house in those days because doctors still made house calls. And Dr. Rutledge was in attendance and my grandmother acted as the midwife.

LJ: Interesting.

CN: It was kind of the way it came about.

LJ: At Detroit Lakes and who were your parents?

CN: My father is Karl E. Nygard. His name is spelled with a "K." Mine starts with a "C" and my mother was Helen Elizabeth Nygard. I have one brother, Gordon, and one sister, Anita. My brother, Gordy, is 11 years younger than I am and my sister 13 years younger so for a number years I was like an only child, but…

LJ: Now what did your parents do?

CN: My father starting from about 1945 tested dairy cattle. And by testing it was the milk, the butterfat in the milk that he tested and kept records of. My mother was pretty much a housewife that did work odd jobs in one capacity or another; but mostly, she maintained the home and that was pretty much her lot in life.

LJ: And where did you go to school?

CN: For the first six years it was unorganized schools in the White Earth Indian Reservation. And then when I started the seventh grade, I started attending school in Detroit Lakes where I continued for the six years, graduating from there in June of 1956.

LJ: What did you do after high school?

CN: After high school … at those times there was a draft and they had a lottery and my number was quite low. So they informed me that I would be subject to be drafted that fall in the Army. So looking at my options, decided that I would go join the Navy and see the world. So Detroit Lakes was some 25 miles' distance and being my father was out testing cattle no transportation was available. So getting into town required hitching a ride, which I managed to do. And when I arrived at the recruiting station, the Navy recruiter, who was my target, had gone off someplace. And there I was wondering what to do next. And this gentleman in there said, "Can I help you?" And I said, "Well, I was looking for the Navy recruiter." He said, "Oh, he's out of town today. If you'd like, come over here, I'll tell you about the Air Force." And I did and that's what happened. He told me about the Air Force and that was my route in life. I went that direction.

LJ: Where did you go for basic training?

CN: Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas.

LJ: Did you like it down there?

CN: In the dim recesses of my mind it seemed like there was a lot of people shouting at me in a continuous … So liking it, I suppose under different circumstances, it would be quite a nice place to visit.

LJ: I was thinking more weather-wise.

CN: It was September and it was hot and you're from this area here and all of a sudden you are into something that is extremely hot and you're expected to function at a high rate of speed so you sweat profusely, its...

LJ: How long was basic training?

CN: They had started a unique program, so I was only at Lackland Air Force Base for four weeks. And this wasn't the end of my basic training. Then I was loaded on a troop train and taken to Scottfield, Illinois, and started into electronics training at that time airborne communications. The concept was that I would go to school for these six hours and I would continue my basic training for the other two hours. Although I started in September, I did not complete my basic training until the following March. By this time, I was close to completing my training in airborne electronics. So by May, I had

graduated school and was on my way to Carswell Air Force Base in Fort Worth, Texas.

LJ: What was that like?

CN: The Carswell Air Force Base had at that time B-36s assigned. This was the Strategic Air Command. B-36 is the largest aircraft ever, ever constructed as a bomber. They had six pusher-type engines and four jets. I remember the tail itself was five stories high because I used to have to climb up there.

It was so big that only a few places were strong enough in their runway construction that the plane could actually land and take off. And, of course, it was a huge plane and it was the initial deterrent for the Russian Bear at the time. They were capable of carrying enough – see there was no refueling at this time. This plane had to carry its own fuel and it could launch and take off and stay airborne for 24 hours. It had facilities for two different flight crews onboard. In the back of the plane, there were sleeping quarters for one crew while one was up front flying. And there was a little chute that went through the bomb bay compartment, so the crew, one at a time, could change places with and then continue flying the airplane in shifts until they had completed their mission.

LJ: Amazing. How long were you in the base in Fort Worth?

CN: I arrived there in May of 1957 and had come, oh it would have been, let's see '57. I departed there in 1958 in December and went to Newfoundland, Ernest Harmon Air Force Base, arriving there in January would be like the 3rd of 1959. I served there from then 1959, through 1959 and through 1960 until September. September 1960, I was reassigned to Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota.

At this time, Minot Air Force Base was just being constructed. In fact, the farmer that owned the land the base was being built on still had crop rights. I remember helping him with his hay crop there n that fall after arriving there. And then I served there with the B-52s.

Now back in Ernest Harmon Air Force Base, they had the first tankers that they had in the fleet. They were referred to as KC-97s and they were prop-type aircraft. Ghe KC-135, which was a version of the Boeing 707, had been brought into the inventory and these were the upgraded jet-refueling tankers. The B-52s had been constructed and were being implemented in the fleet. When I left Carswell, the first models of the B-52 arrived but I had nothing to do with them other than to look at them. And the B-36s were so huge that this B-52 seemed small by comparison. But it proved to be back to a large aircraft when I got back to it in Minot Air Force Base.

Minot Air Force Base had just nothing except a grouping of tankers but then after I arrived they began to bring in the B-52H which is the latest, greatest

version of the B-52 that they had built up to that time and it could carry missiles on the wings besides. And there I spent five-and-a-half years at Minot Air Force Base. And do you just want me to go on or...

LJ: Where did you go from Minot after five years?

CN: Well five years at Minot Air Force Base, I was highly prized because I got suspicious; most people rotated after about three years; and I was there after four and pushing five. And so inquired about why I hadn't been transferred and they said, well orders had come down but your commander had just discarded them because he wanted to keep you onboard. So I had an option after so many years on an installation, I had an option of applying for a transfer.

So I applied for California and they agreed to transfer me and the family … I had acquired in the intervening years. I was reassigned to Mather Air Force Base, Sacramento, California. And at Mather Air Force Base in California, they basically had more of the same, but it was a navigator-training wing, so most of the aircraft were dedicated to the educational program, training navigators. So when I got there to Mather Air Force Base in California, the B-52s that were present there were – actually – well, let me explain this and see I'll try to keep it in mind.

President Lyndon Baines Johnson had come into this Vietnam conflict. And he had opted that we would bomb them into submission with the B-52s, so when I came to Mather Air Force Base they were taking part in this. This was going to be the big mission that we were going to entail. So shortly after I got there, I discovered myself at Anderson Air Force Base, Guam, working 12-hour days, seven days a week, as we attempted to do just that. Launch these B-52s heavily loaded with ordinance and fly over Hanoi and Vietnam and then pellet them. Into South Vietnam we destroyed a lot of jungle and really – but I did that shortly after my arrival, I...

LJ: What year was this?

CN: This would have been 19 and 65. I departed Minot in September of '65 and with the delay in that, and my family was en route; because I heard I could be going to temporary duty when I arrived. And so – at Anderson Air Force Base, Guam, in this particular time I was entertained by the Bob Hope Christmas troops that come out with the USO. And I saw, at that time would be, Joey Heatherton, was married to some football player.

LJ: Lance Rentzel.

CN: Yes, there we go. And Phyllis Diller even was onboard, Jerry Colonna and that entire group, you know, so I had a first-hand view of them. Of course ironically, I'd seen the show again the following year in Vietnam because after I was in Guam under this initial bombing efforts we made, I was

selected as the one person who had contributed what they said, at the time, was the most to the success of the mission. And I was rewarded with a special recognition, but the big thing is I was allowed to go home early.

LJ: Oh, how nice.

CN: And so we flew the Pacific and came back to Sacramento so I could get my stuff in order and move my family out there. You see and of course that was the nice thing about it.

But I got back and got established. And it was really nice because all the planes were over in Anderson Air Force Base Guam, so I had about three weeks after my return to just kind of take it easy. Then they returned and I suppose even though I'd been awarded a special recognition for all the effort I'd done, I hadn't done enough. Because then they told me I would be going to Vietnam but this time in-country, I suppose, to see if I could get the job done over there. I took it kind of personal. I mean, I know there was a whole fleet involved but, anyway, I bring that up, the special recognition because not to boast but it just is a little streak of humor.

LJ: What an honor.

CN: Because in Vietnam at the time the Viet Cong had a bounty on us. And the tech sergeant, whom I had made at the time, was worth $38 but if they might have got wind of this special award I had on that B-52 thing it might have been a lot higher. So anyway, by November the 7th of 1966 I was in Vietnam, in-country and a...

LJ: What was that like?

CN: Well it was an adjustment. It was quite a change. You see, to begin with, the jungle affects you kind of like Montezuma's revenge when you go to Mexico. I don't want to expound on that, I mean it's like – it's an adjustment, the bacteria or whatever that's prevalent, your system is not geared for, so you go through a period of adjustment. It takes about six weeks or so. And all this time, you kind of keep an eye out for the nearest men's room because the time you have between the first warning and getting there is condensed to a few steps. But that's a – well, you asked how it was. I adjusted, I suppose by Christmas. I got there.

LJ: You were the first Vietnam vet to tell me that. So I'm glad you said that because no other Vietnam vet has told me that there is this adjustment, because of the jungle.

CN: Well I can assure you they all went through it, because I stood in line while the rest of them were in the hall. Anyway, it's just telling it like it is. And then, after I got there like the 7th of November, see then once again, we were gathered in a field as Bob Hope came again to entertain us at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, in the Republic of Vietnam, as they called it at the time. And I

remember distinctly at that time the truce had been declared for Christmas and the sounds of battle were always around you, the guns and the bombing and the many ships and you got used to it. It was like the noise was part of your ambiance. Then they declared a truce and there was silence. And it's an adjustment to silence. When the show came in and the troops came to the show from the jungle and on the open they were gathered and, of course, raining is relatively common, it is just kind of a routine thing. The monsoon brings the rain. Then as they were sitting there, they had kind of a conical thing supporting the stage to keep the water off the entertainers; Anita Bryant serenaded us with *Silent Night.*

LJ: Oh.

CN: Beautiful rendition.

LJ: What was it like having to be there for Christmas?

CN: Well you had company. You looked around and you weren't alone and we could commiserate.

LJ: And you had the entertainers.

CN: I could tell you some really good stories but, see, we'd go on and on and on, so we'll suffice to say it was – it was different.

LJ: Now while you were in Vietnam, did you have a one-year tour of Vietnam?

CN: Vietnam ... when I got there it was during the big build-up. It was prior to the big Tet offensive of 1968. And I got there and I served 367 consecutive days, with one exception. I got off out of the country but I'll tell you about that if you want.

LJ: Um hum, yeah.

CN: But I got there at that time they hadn't considered the effect of combat on the troops, so they dealt with the thing called R&R, rest and...

LJ: Relaxation?

CN: And recuperation. And after six months in-country the troops were allowed to go out of country for two weeks to just [unclear], anyway they could go like to Hawaii or Australia. I mean it was really … but when it came to where this was instituted and I excitedly ran down and said, "I'll be up. Me. Me." They said, "You can't. You've been in-country too long. You're not qualified." I had like a simple matter of two or three weeks I couldn't go, so I had to serve the entire time, that whole stint, you see in combat.

LJ: Three sixty seven.

CN: Three hundred and sixty seven days. I still remember.

LJ: Who could forget?

CN: **But I had one time I was given a nice little outing. There was an island in the South China Sea called Con Son. And Con Son is a unique island. It comprises two peaks that are dormant volcanoes and where they come together is a little flat area there. The Coast Guard had a radar site there and it was kind of a recreational area where the beautiful waters of the South China Sea would provide some – oh, I don't really know who went there, but – they offered me an opportunity to go there if I would install a radio system for the aircraft so they could find it in bad weather because it was such a small place.**

I agreed to go so, one day I boarded this ancient C-47 type aircraft, two props, pretty much a little larger than a Piper Cub but, anyway, we flew off and landed there; beautiful, beautiful island. And discovered it was a political prison. And it was kind of an eye opener to see how they incarcerated their prisoners. They're not as nice as we are here. They dig a pit and concrete walls around and put the bars on top so the weather and everything is like. There they are and the rain, you know, falls on them. And they drop down a bucket that has their food in it and bring up one that has whatever else is in there. And I noticed that like a campground of people living and said, "What is this?" Well, you see here when someone is incarcerated, the authorities don't feed them. If they don't have family here to cook for them, they don't survive. We've got quite a nice penal system in this country.

Of course, you're going back now to 19 and 66 at this time. But the radar site was on top of the mountain so I had to climb. And they told me they would have prisoners bring my equipment up on that pole where they throw it over their shoulders and climb. So I started ahead to get started on the job and I climbed the mountain trail. It was kind of like the movies are. The jungle noises follow you to the top. And when I got there I was exhausted and I had some refreshments. I won't say what they were. They had a certain alcoholic content, but.

I had to refresh, I expired a lot but when I was sitting there and I looked around I noticed a tremendous amount of shotguns on the wall and I said, "What is the purpose of all these shotguns?" "Oh, it's for the snakes." I said, "There are snakes here?" "Yeah, there's 12 species on this island and 11 of them are poisonous." And I said, "This is not good." But curiosity, I had to ask, "What is the one that's not poisonous?" "Oh," he said "that's the boa constrictor." You see, so that's delightful.

But, anyway, I successfully installed the radio and it worked and I managed to get down from through the jungle path before darkness set in. And I got a chance to swim in the South China Sea and the plane returned. In fact, I had a tour of the island and they really did me up proper. It was just that one day and then I was flown back to the war and that was my R&R.

So then after November the 9th, of course, I have to keep this 367 worked out, I rotated back to the States and my family which at that time comprised of a wife and three kids were in Kansas where her family lived. And I went back and we went on to Michigan where I was assigned to an air national guard base; and it was kind of a nice assignment up in Alpena, Michigan, right along Lake Huron, Thunder Bay. And of course a little reward for whatever, except leaving the jungle and going to Michigan in November is quite an adjustment again. But we settled in there and the duty was extremely nice because we just had fighter aircraft on alert and maintained them and worked part-time, matter of fact, to take up the time.

LJ: So your 367 days in Vietnam, were you right in the war zone? I mean…

CN: There were no battle lines, you know. I mean the enemy was all around you. You want to know what that was like. Okay? Well here is how it worked. I had gone in to get a haircut and the barber that I had frequented there was not there. There were strangers and inquiring what happened. Well there had been a suicide attack on the installation. And my barber had been annihilated in that. But see he was one of the enemies and he had been shaving my face for some time before that.

LJ: And you didn't know?

CN: Had no idea – until this event occurred. And that's how it was. – When you're there and well, we got there – I know you're interested in Vietnam. When we got there, it was a big build-up. And I'm going to tell you this. I wouldn't have believed this, if someone had told this to me. But I went to the war. And I got there and they said to me, "We have no place to put you." This build-up, we just don't have room here and so we'll give you this money and you'll have to go downtown and find a place to stay. So I had to go rent a place to live so I could fight a war.

LH: That doesn't even make sense. You're the first one to tell me this. I never heard another soldier say, "I had to go rent a place to live."

CN: To sleep ... I found a place with another fellow named Russell Thurman [sp?] from Georgia. And we're thrown together because we arrived at the same time and we got the same room. You know, guys, you got to go. So they gave us some money, at the time which was the piastre, which was the local currency and we had script. We had no greenbacks, not allowed, but they gave you a script, which is a substitute kind of money. And the two of us went downtown, first time ever, and we kind of asked around. And we found an apartment on what they call Truman Key. The city was French architecture, and there were, like Cho Lon was the Chinese sector and Truman Key was close to the installation.

So we got up in the morning and we had to hike in and do whatever we need to conduct a war. And then come night we came back home again whenever they let us go.

But eventually, they managed to construct enough facilities so after about six months of commuting from downtown to the war, I was able to get lodgings on the installation to limit the travel time because they had a curfew at night so you are always subject to them. Yes, we would be there on the installation and they'd put up these barracks, you'd call them and they put up a big pile of sand. And they told the troops to fill the sand and put the sandbags around the billets in case of an attack.

But you work a 12-hour day in the hot heat, you don't feel like shoveling sand at night, so the whole thing was kind of ignored, those billets were just sitting there. But the object was to put the sandbags up so if a rocket hit this one, the shrapnel wouldn't sweep across … it was protection. But there hadn't been an attack in quite a while and so we got pretty complacent. But then Charlie came with the rockets and mortars one night and, boy oh boy, the next day miraculously all that sand disappeared into bags and appeared, you know, around the – you just need the right motivation to really kick you into gear.

LJ: And when you say "Charlie" you're talking about the North Vietnamese?

CN: The Viet Cong, that was just what you called them. It still hangs in my mind, yes, the Viet Congs. VC referred to as Charlie.

LJ: No doubt you have seen – *Forrest Gump*?

CN: Oh yes.

LJ: What did you think about the depiction of Vietnam in that movie?

CN: That was good. Vietnam was good. I enjoyed that. It it had a humorous and very entertaining [unclear]. *Platoon* was another one that they showed the war. Got right down to the nitty gritty, I think was a pretty, pretty good enactment. Yes, it's easier now to recall, but I don't know, you don't want to hear the gory details of what war is like, do you?

LJ: I've heard a lot from the World War II vets.

CN: Yes it's...

LJ: You can tell me anything.

CN: Oh, I mean…

LJ: Whatever you're willing to share.

CN: General Sherman, the general in the Civil War, said, "It's good that war is such a terrible hell less people become too fond of it." But when you talk of it

– when the movies show a body coming off a land mine, they show it going off intact, but it doesn't go that way.

LJ: It's not reality.

CN: The pieces – the body is flimsy and you have to pick up what you can find, in the bag and then bring it and dump it on the table and then try to determine which arm belongs to that torso and how much of its left. And this took place there and you witness it going on.

LJ: What's it like the first time you see that happen?

CN: It's like a nightmare. Like it's there and you recognize it but your mind does not really take it as real; and you see it and – oh my goodness that's human parts. These guys are working as best they can to – mortuary technicians. And they're putting these together; but the thing I guess I found the most shocking is when – you had to go by this to go to the dispensary and you know you're required shots and the other things because of the jungle environment, there was gamma globulin and everything. They sent yellow fever, whatever they had.

You'd go there and these tables were out in the hot sun, and they – but you'd come there during coffee break. These guys in these blood-smattered smocks would be sitting amongst this carnage having coffee and donuts and talking about what they did the night before. They became so calloused to this carnage, you see that it meant nothing. That's what it comes to. That's why these veterans are weird. They're strange. They go for the drugs to allay the reality of what is there and they're not the same.

LJ: Once you left Vietnam did you go through a debriefing period?

CN: No.

LJ: Any kind of psychological counseling to get through that?

CN: I was fortunate. If I would have been 18 years old when this happened, I don't know how I'd have managed. But in 19 and 66, I was 28 years old. And old for the time and I wasn't as subject to the trauma that would have hit me eight years earlier, so I was more equipped to cope with it. I have all the sympathy I can for them that were out of high school and taken to that as their first encounter with, with life, I mean that's…

LJ: Just babies.

CN: Yes, that's what takes them. That's what brings in the drugs, anything. The drinking, something to drown out what is going on.

LJ: Take away the pain.

CN: Yes.

LJ: So you didn't have any type of debriefing? You went basically from Vietnam to, to Michigan?

CN: Yes, just boom, back stateside and then…

LJ: What was that like? I mean not having a transitional debriefing period, what was that like going from jungles of Vietnam back to your family again in Michigan, that had to have been, as you said, the weather was one thing but just psychologically, what was that like?

CN: Well, when I was there for 367 consecutive days. I don't want to harp on that but you see…

LJ: Well, I mean that's gruesome.

CN: I had been there a long time. And at first you just, you're fatalistic, you kind of think, well, "I'm not going to make it." But six months go by, and you start to thinking, you know, "I got halfway." Then you're 100 days. Now you got 99 days left in-country. You're a two-digit midget … they call them that, because you've got 99 days left. Two digits, right? And as the days start progressing, you're starting thinking, "Oh Lord, we're getting close."

I mean I suffered through this. "I want to go home. I want to go home." And the closer it gets and the closer it gets, you can feel the tension mounting, so within a week of rotation, you can't sleep no more because you might it make but they might get you. And you don't want to spend all that time and then finish. This is not good.

So when you're there with your crew in the plane, Trans World Airlines flew us back nicely, beautiful stewardesses and all the drinking that you wanted. It was quite a trip back, once you got airborne. But finally you get onboard the plane and you are one tense unit. But they take off and you make it, you come home. You're exhilarated, you're relieved, you see. So now nothing bothers you because "I survived, I'm home." And you come there and you roll in a state of euphoria to be away from there, so the adjustment is this kind of delayed, I mean, you're glad to be home. You're glad to be with your family.

There are some residuals because if you're walking down the street with your wife and kids and a car backfires and you've disappeared, they're looking around. What happened? And you've taken cover because you're so geared for that reaction that even though you know, you're mind tells you but you don't have the time. You know you're still geared to react and then you're kind of sheepish as you come out from behind that postal receptacle. And that's just and it goes away.

When I got to Alpena, Michigan, Phelps/Collins – the airport was Phelps/Collins International Airport but it was like an air guard unit there and I was with an active unit looking after the couple of fighter planes they had on. I had encountered some tropical afflictions just because of the high humidity and everything. We had there in the town of Alpena, a physician who was a civilian physician but he was contracted by the military to look after the military personnel that were assigned there. And I had encountered an ear fungus that had developed – one of the things I encountered and so when I was back in Michigan during the spring, the warm weather came and it returned. And so I made an appointment and went to see tthe contract doctor, who also acted as the local coroner, but that's beside the point. And I went in there and complained about my ear and he took his thing and he looked in there and his exact words were, "What the hell is that?"

And I said, "Well." He said, "I've never seen nothing like that." He said, "That's horrible." I said, "Yes, well." He said, "This is a reoccurrence?" I said, "Yes." He said, "What'd they give you?" I said, "Cortisporin." He said he wrote a prescription for that. He said, "Try this." He said, "I've never seen it, I don't know. I have no idea what to do," he said. "But try this," he said, "if that's what they gave you, it might work." Well it did. I had to use it for a period of time and it vanished again, which it didn't return, thankfully. But, I don't know, how did I get on this drifting line?

LJ: That's okay.

CN: I think I was trying to explain what you wanted to know how the adjustment goes, you know.

LJ: Yes.

CN: So it takes time, but you know you come back into reality and it's okay.

LJ: Now you came back to a wife and three children, right?

CN: Yes.

LJ: So of course, you had your own family thrilled to have you home, but what was it like as a Vietnam vet coming back into the community? Because this was a very unpopular war, how were you received by other people knowing that you came back from Vietnam?

CN: Oh, you had to keep your mouth shut, because it wasn't popular. No I mean, you were baby killers and whatever, see. And you just quietly took it. There was no glory.

LJ: No hero's welcome?

CN: No, that's right. You suffered and you died but that was it. You didn't. I didn't, I survived, so for that I was grateful; but I have a deep understanding of what goes on, I mean, the emotional impact. You were sent there by your

elected officials to fight an unpopular war, and you were cursed for doing it; but still you had no other choice. Even now, you see there's popularity again. The military, they're only appreciated in time of need. And I suppose those Vietnamese weren't threatening our country so.

LJ: Yes.

CN: Yes.

LJ: You made the military a career?

CN: Yes.

LJ: Did you know, going in…

CN: Well now, you don't want to hear about the times I went back to Southeast Asia, do you, huh?

LJ: Oh, I do. Let's get to that. Just one second. Help me finish this. When you went into the recruiter's office in Detroit Lakes all those years ago as a young high school graduate, and you wanted to go into the Navy, and you met with this Air Force recruiter, did you know right then and there that you wanted to make it a 20-year career, a life-time career, or were you just thinking, aah – it's just four years of my life, I'll do four years and see what happens?

CN: Well going back to my youth, I was raised on the White Earth Reservation and the land there is extremely poor so life was harsh to begin with. And when I went into the Air Force at that time it was because I would be drafted into the Army so let's go and get something out of it. I went in with no intention of making a career out of it. But you know, you get used to it you get there.

And at the time I considered after the first hitch, my options. I had a job at that time and if I would have gotten out I would have had to find something and it was like, well this isn't too bad. Why not? And what I did is I decided I'd give it another go and then see how things looked. Well I gave it another go and this got to be 1960s now; and the older you get the longer you're in, it's kind of like, well, no point getting out now. I've only got a dozen years and I can get a retirement check and that check is nice every month. I mean, my gosh, it's paid for the house.

LJ: Good for you.

CN: Yes, you don't have to drink the cheap beer.

LJ: Now Jerry, you were saying you went back to Southeast Asia again?

CN: Yes.

LJ: After your 367 days of duty in Vietnam, were you called back there or did you elect to go back there?

CN: I was sent back there. See – well, I was – I'm really good at what I do, okay? I – for performance of duty, I have received four commendations – Air Force Commendation Medals and a Meritorious Service Award.

LJ: Congratulations.

CN: Plus numerous others ... it's all for the guy that can do the magic, see, magic.

LJ: That's awesome.

CN: Well just to put this mildly, a lot of this stuff is top secret, but so many years have passed. You know, you're not supposed to talk about it, but I don't know there must be a statute of limitations; but, okay. We're always planning to fight a war.

LJ: Yes.

CN: All right? So we test systems and the best place to test them is in combat because that's the real thing. So we devise weapons platforms and, of course, as the war was winding down and pretty much going to be resolved. We had this set-up with airborne forward fighter control where we had these slow-flying planes and then direct fighter attacks and this whole bit. So I served in Korat, Thailand, for about three months, field testing weapons systems and relaying the information back to the engineers who were working and devising these products. There's lot of stuff evolved. That was my second stint.

LJ: Three months in Thailand?

CN: Yes, three months in Thailand.

LJ: And how long after you came back from Vietnam did you go to Thailand?

CN: I was in Michigan for three years and then I opted for California and I was reassigned to McClellan Air Force Base, which is back in Sacramento. And McClellan Air Force Base, when I was assigned there, they were also dealing with this temporary assignment to Thailand.

Phelps/Collins Michigan, we'll go back to that point. The outfit I was assigned to at Phelps/Collins Air Force Michigan was an Air National Guard unit, but it was a detachment from the air Wurtsmith Air Force Base at Oscoda, Michigan, which is somewhat to the south; but the reason I left there was they decided to close down that particular air defense operation and I was sent out to McClellan Air Force Base, California. And while I was at McClellan Air Force Base, California, I was sent to Korat, Thailand, to assist in this weapons testing there to wind down the war.

LJ: What year was this, Jerry?

CN: This would have 19 and – see it would have been – I got there in '68, '69, '70 – this is '71 now. This is the winter of '70-'71. And I'm at Korat Air Force

Base in Thailand, Korat, Thailand. I had a unique experience there. There are a lot of things but we had, it's jungle and, of course, you drink a lot of liquids – regular liquid, but…

LJ: Water.

CN: Yes, water ... don't drink the water, you know how it goes? But there was a vender that used to sell like Coke and these products, and as you'd be working out in the hot flight line. Now flight line is the concrete taxiway where the aircraft are parked and this is where we did the maintenance.

There a little bit off and through the grass was this vendor and we used to run over there and get a soft drink to quench that burning thirst. And as I was working one day a bunch of natives were cutting that long grass, seemed kind of surprised, so I inquired what they were cutting it for. They said one of the big king cobras had been discovered in that long grass where I'd been running through each day. And they were going to cut it back, hopefully he would go someplace else. It's kind of—recalling it –

LJ: Scary.

CN: Oh, I'd been walking through that grass. Oh no. But what I had done, I had been working in the Air Force electronics communications and the whole bit. I was getting closer to retirement; so I inquired about the possibility of cross-training from my Air Force special into something that would be applicable to my civilian career after retirement. So I applied for television engineering, and they agreed to it, I had served my long and hard and well.

So I was given a assignment to the Army at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, where they had the television engineering school. After my return from Korat, Thailand in the short period of time, I was allowed to go to Fort Monmouth and study with the Army for – well, actually it was started in September and by the following probably about March, I completed the cross-training and was assigned to George Air Force Base in California out in the Mojave Desert. When I arrived there, I was assigned to a training unit as a television technician and I worked in that capacity for, oh, that would have been until 19 and 72 and then I was given an assignment to Alaska as a television engineer. So I left the family in Kansas again and I went to Alaska.

LJ: So the family couldn't go with you though?

CN: Not those remote assignments like that, you know.

LJ: Even though it was U.S.A.?

CN: Where I went was to a mountaintop. Takotna Mountain and McGrath was where I flew into and McGrath, Alaska, is on the Kuskokwim River and there are no roads except just around town. The main street of McGrath, Alaska, is a runway for airplanes. They fly in and they fly out and this is, this is where I got. And then a bush pilot flew me to the airstrip that's right

below the mountain and where the site was. I got there and I ran a television station for a year supplying entertainment to the local residents of Sparrevohn, Catalina, and the Inuits, the Eskimos in between. And I spent a year there but I did get to come home. I went there in November and then I come home the following June for a month and then returned and completed my hitch there. And it was quite entertaining. They're close to Ophir and it had recalled the excitement of the gold rush in Alaska. And I honestly got to go out and spend a day with a dredger and extracting gold from the ground in Alaska.

LJ: Exciting.

CN: And I still have those gold nuggets and I could show them to you if you was interested in looking at them. Raw gold right out of the Alaskan ground, right out of the river bottom, done with my own little pan, you see. Rocking and rolling.

LJ: People don't do that on any given day.

CN: Oh, yes. I got another commendation medal too for my tour there because the whole time I was there not once was the station ever down. It had never happened before my arrival and it never happened after I left.

LJ: Well, congratulations.

CN: Dedication, you know.

LJ: That is awesome.

CN: Yes, in fact, they were so enthralled with my performance that they flew me back to Anchorage so I could watch, on the wide screen, at no cost to me the *Rumble in the Jungle* between Mohamed Ali and George Foreman.

LJ: That was your treat, huh?

CN: That was my treat.

LJ: Good for you.

CN: Come on back and watch this show free of charge, no problem. I said, all right. Cool way to go, but I got this record at home that they gave me, it's put together a special recognition for once again this remarkable performance.

LJ: Terrific, what a guy.

CN: But then on with this, I was such a stellar performer. I was from Alaska now, I was plucked up and sent to the premier assignment, the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs.

LJ: What was that like?

CN: Ah, that was a reward.

LJ: Well, I bet.

CN: For a career, see, hard fought. But I went there for my terminal assignment. They took me.

LJ: Terminal assignment?

CN: Well, see, that's your 20-22 years, okay.

LJ: That's where you end of your career?

CN: Yes.

LJ: Okay.

CN: Well it was at that time. I could have continued on but then I thought. Well I stayed 22 years because my daughter I didn't want to pull her out of school, you see. I didn't have to reassign, the Air Force Academy was where I finished. I retired from the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. That was in October the 1st, 1978.

LJ: How long were you in Colorado Springs?

CN: I got there about four-and-a-half years. I got there in the summer of '74, I think, I'd say about four years I was there at the academy before retiring and going to Minnesota – Moorhead.

LJ: What were those last four years in Colorado Springs like?

CN: When I was there, I was involved in training the cadets. I was classified as what you'd call the superintendent of the teleproduction facility where we generated video, that's a lot of what we do here, but see that would be the other area over there. And I had 20 military civilian employees that I supervised in this operation. Yes, I got to meet some pretty neat people. I got to shake Ted Kennedy's hand when he came for a little work. That was when he was much younger. And I met Mr. Wizard, the guy that … what was his name now? He did the science thing on TV.

CN: Remember the *Mr. Wizard's Show*? We would videotape the production and program and then distributed for the students in training. Anyhow, I got a chance to do some mountain climbing and some exploration and this sort of thing, kind of delightful weekends and whatever. Yes.

LJ: Sounds like a beautiful place, beautiful way to end a military career.

CN: Yes, I thought so. It was nice, that's true ... a little reward for long, hard service.

LJ: Definitely. You had your 22 years in Colorado Springs, where was the next destination for the Nygard family?

CN: Right here. [unclear] My family was here and as I was getting prepared to retire. I had traveled up here to visit and I had a position secured in

Colorado Springs, but my family said, "Why don't you come back," and, in fact, my brother offered to provide lodgings and whatever and I said well, you know, "I got a job." He said, "Oh, you can get a job here." And I said, "Well, what?" He said, "Look in the paper. They're looking for a television engineer out at Channel 11." He said, "Check that." So I went out there and I said, "You're looking for an engineer?" And they said, "Yes." Well, I had the training and I'd got my first class FCC license so they said come onboard, so I had a job there at Channel 11 which was KTHI-TV, now it's KVLY. But, yes, they took me on there and so...

LJ: How long were you there?

CN: I was there about a year. It was the easiest job I ever had but it was boring. To begin with my license hung on the wall and they needed that to operate the station. But for me it was kind of like sitting around eating donuts, drinking coffee and getting fat. I built a lot of sets for the backdrop and worked with a lot of the news staff and whatever, set [unclear]. whatever, but when you're watching TV, somebody's working.

And I was working and I thought retired from the military I need something that's more. So I went over and got employment with what would have been Northern School Supply at the time, as an audiovisual technician and then this position opened up here at the university. That would be in late 1980s. So then 21 years ago, I came over here and been here ever since.

LJ: Do you have any final thoughts about what you went through during your service to your country?

CN: No, I served honorably. I was good at my job. In fact, I was offered, two times I was offered. Once I was offered to go with the Blue Angels, which was the Air Force performance, the acrobatic team; and another time I was encouraged to come and work on the Air Force One, the presidential airplane. That was tempting, but I had a family; and it entailed a lot of travel. And with all the travel I'd done, I felt it wouldn't be fair to take that on because it would entail a lot of travel, but I had the clearance for it and I had what they called the credentials.

LJ: Yes. What an honor to be considered.

CJ: Yes, even to be asked.

LJ: What an honor.

CN: If you turn it down, that's one thing. But I could have gone. Lyndon Johnson after serving in that [unclear].

LJ: Yes.

CN: Yes, but it was nice. It's nice to be asked, anyway.

LJ: Jerry, how would you like to be remembered?

CN: Oh, you mean, if I had a choice.

LJ: Yes.

CN: I guess, just he did what he had to. You see, I came from the White Earth Reservation ... sunset between us and 'Nam. I didn't have anything to begin with. In fact, I think I came in owing. And from that point I've come a long ways.

LJ: Yes.

CN: And I've been motivated. I've got a pretty poignant life story. This is just one segment of it. In retrospect, my father has a recorded oral history file here, too. He was a pretty notorious character, too.

LJ: Well, that's terrific.

CN: But you know it's tough. You can say you know I was there. I lived my life. I did what I could to the best of my ability.

LJ: Any final thoughts before we wind up?

CN: Well, I hope I kind of fulfilled what you needed.

LJ: Absolutely, I'm just honored that you shared your story for us.

CN: Yes, I hope I was able to tell it well.

LJ: It sounded good. Thank you very much, Jerry.

CN: You're welcome.