Transcription: Colonel Sam Floca

Today is Thursday, March 18th, 2010. My name is James Crabtree and I'll be interviewing Colonel Sam Floca. This interview is being done in his home in Temple, Texas, and it is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much today for letting us interview you. It's an honor for us, and I guess the first question we always like to ask is just to tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the service.

Sam Floca: Well thank you, the honor is mine to be included with fellow Texans who have had the privilege of serving our state and our country. I'm a Temple native. I was born in 1941. My dad was a Texas aggie. He was too young for World War I and too old for World War II. I grew up in like when I tell my daughter when she'd watch reruns of Happy Days on TV, I'd say that was the time in which I grew up. It was a very simple time. But it was also during the Cold War. We came of age during that. I have no recollections of World War II. I distinctly remember the Korean War. I went through high school. One of the real, and I think it had a lot to do with making the Army a career, was I had to quit football as a sophomore in high school because I was diagnosed with a heart murmur, and in 1950s, heart surgery, I mean I don't think Denton Cooley ever had even thought of a transplant, and all they could say was you may grow out of it, but no rigorous athletic stuff. It got me playing golf if nothing else, but I think maybe I had something to prove and I finished high school and I went to SMU, and I literally wasted my parent's money. Now I'll tell you, my friends from college, my fraternity brothers, they're still some of my dearest friends, but I somehow I wanted to be a soldier. I just really did. I'd grown up around people here, the men and not necessarily professional soldiers, but men who had served their country and come home and gotten on with their lives, and Temple has a great military tradition and a relationship with Fort Hood, and finally I just went down to the recruiter here in Temple, had a sergeant, and in those days they were pretty stable, and like his wife was the Red Cross regional director here. And I wish I could remember his name, but I told him what I wanted to do, and he said all right, let's take the test first. And so I took all the tests and clearly I qualified for officer candidate school, and I had sufficient college that I had the two-year minimum to be a regular Army officer. But he told me, he said the Army is not for everybody. He said what I would suggest you do is enlist for the Infantry and spend a tour as a rifleman somewhere, and find out what the Army is like. He said you'll see it up close, you'll see NCOs, you'll see officers, and you'll understand exactly what it means. And I took his advice and it was next to the advice my dad gave me throughout my life. His advice was probably the best I've ever gotten. But I took his advice and I enlisted in the Army and I went through basic and advanced infantry training. I was the honor graduate of my advanced infantry training company which made me feel good, and I passed the physical. That was the main thing.

What year was this?

Sam Floca: I enlisted, I figured it out later, 19 November 1963, and that date was the 100th anniversary of when Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address. But I went off to Hawaii. I served two years in a rifle battalion, and I applied, I wanted to go to infantry officer candidate school. They said at that time there was a long waiting list and they said you can go to Fort Sill, the artillery, they have had a real tough time with the program and nobody wants to go there. I thought oh boy, that doesn't sound too good. But I applied and went before the board and I got accepted, so I went to Fort Sill. I planned on transferring in the infantry, but the Army said hey, we just spent all this money making you a second lieutenant of artillery, we're not transferring

you. So that basically took me up to the 11th of May 1965, when I put on the gold bars of a second lieutenant and I've never regretted it.

That's great. You did the two years first enlisted and went to the officer candidate course at Fort Sill. I know in the Marine Corps they call someone that does enlisted and then becomes an officer a Mustang. Is that the same in the Army?

Sam Floca: No, that's a term that's unique to the Marine Corps. I've been referred to as a Mustang because these things kind of overlap, and if a Marine is talking about you, oh, you were a Mustang or something like that, but you'll hear 'em in the Army, they'll say oh, he was prior service or something like that. But the Mustang I think really is something that's a tradition that had its origin with the Corps.

You probably think though that having served enlisted first you maybe had a better understanding of what your troops were dealing with, or you'd been where they were so maybe they respected you more because of that? Did it give you an advantage of some degree?

Sam Floca: I hope the men I commanded respected me. I do know that as an enlisted man, I had and saw role models, i.e., those I liked, and then that little middle notebook of don't ever do that, and that applied to both the noncommissioned officers and the officers. I was in a rifle company. Golly, our first sergeant had gone ashore at Lady Gulf. He'd been the first sergeant of one of the companies in the 3rd Infantry, the old guard in D.C. We had some fine officers and fine non-com's. All were Korean War vets. One had gone up on to Ho with the Rangers in Normandy, so I got a good look at the Army, and there's no question that it helped me understand soldiers living in the barracks because I had been one. Probably the most important thing that came out of it was I mastered every weapon that was within the organization of a rifle unit, and I had occasion in Vietnam where I had to fire a .50 caliber machine gun to save my own life, and it was because of what I had learned. And I had a policy when I was a captain as a commander and then as a colonel as a commander, I required every officer serving under me to be licensed and trained by the motor sergeant to drive every type of vehicle assigned to the unit, and also to either fire for qualification or familiarization with every weapon that was in the structure, because the reality is if you're riding in an armored personnel carrier and the driver is killed and you've got to keep moving and you're the only one left, you better know how to drive the thing. And so I think I picked up things like that, but I didn't really model my leadership style after anybody. I saw things that officers should do. And I'll tell you something and this applies at every level I served in the Army, the saddest thing about leaving whether it was a staff assignment or whether it was a command assignment, but especially in command, I would either sit there with my first sergeant or my sergeant major, and we'd talk over and I'd say golly, I wish I knew two years ago what I know now. I think I did a good job, but golly I wish I could do it again. I could do so much better for my soldiers.

Tell us about May 1965, you'd become an officer in the Army, Vietnam is something on the horizon in a sense. Were you aware at that point of Vietnam or what was possibly coming?

Sam Floca: Well, I had a pretty good feel for it because my enlisted time had been in Hawaii with the 25th Infantry Division, and at that time we had only the advisory level, but we were training door gunners for the helicopter units that the Americans had in Vietnam, and I had a kid in my infantry company who was killed in action in Vietnam, and this was '64. Oddly enough at that time, all the sergeants and officers, they thought Laos would be the place we would go, but when I came out of OCS, we also we had sent troops into the Dominican Republic, but by '65

we had started the buildup, and of course the air cavalry was going, and I came here to Fort Hood assigned to the 2nd Armored Division to an artillery unit, but there was no doubt in anybody's mind we were going to war, and it was just a matter of time when we went. And a massive turnover of people, they had to expand the Army's training center, they literally took ¾ of our sergeants away from us and sent them all to Fort Sill to expand the training base, and then, and I'm a 2nd Lieutenant, and I'm now commanding the battery because my captain has been moved up to fill a space at a higher headquarters, and we are told still, and the Army has never been ready for anything, I'm sorry, we had to continue to do everything that our artillery unit was supposed to do to be prepared to fight in Europe, and then they said oh, by the way, we're now going to turn Fort Hood into a basic training center because of the draft and all that. So then we had to turn around and train everybody to be drill instructors, and start taking cycles of trainees. And I just went ahead and put in my papers and volunteered for Vietnam. I'd rather go over there than what this, I said this is utterly ridiculous. And I guess the most significant thing that comes to my mind about my first tour in Vietnam was how utterly, totally, and completely unprepared I was. Now, if you look and Joe Galloway and Hal Moore, their book, *We Were Soldiers Once and Young*, you get an idea of a unit that trained together and deployed together, and this was true of all of our units that first went over, the Big Red One, my unit, the 173rd Airborne, the 1st Brigade 101st. They went with unit cohesion and they had trained for it. But I would be what you'd call the first cycle of replacements. I'd get over there in March of '66. We'd been involved in combat, heavy combat, for, well since November, landings on X-Ray of '65. But nothing the Army had done for me training-wise in any way related to what we were doing in Vietnam, and we literally had to learn from scratch. Nothing, nothing was the same. I mean the Army, I had been educated and trained to defend the full, the gap against the Russians pouring into West Germany, and you just literally had to learn as you went. That was, now I was frightened a whole – anybody tells you they weren't afraid in combat is either a liar or a fool. You know, famous line in *Moby Dick* when the boat captain says I'll have no man in my boat who is not afraid of a whale. Well he's saying if you don't have enough sense to fear something, and so I was frightened to death. My personal fear of getting killed, I think it kind of vanished when the bullets started flying, but it was replaced by a fear of failure. I mean my God, would I make a mistake. And then you just, it's like Dave Hackworth, one of our greatest combat commanders, he says courage has really been the only guy that knows you are afraid. But we were so unprepared and so poorly trained, and I mean a lot of young privates paid the price because it wasn't that their lieutenants and captains were incompetent, it's just that there was no precedent for what we were trying to do over there, and we learned, and we had a horrible policy. You know, Johnson never declared a national emergency, and you went through this cycle of the one-year tours and all of that, and then everybody that's over there, the officers, oh, I got to have this job, I need this job for my career and all this stuff, and it was just chaotic. If we had taken the regular Army and sent them over there and said we're gonna fight this until it's over. Now I won't get into the politics of Vietnam. I believe that the war was a horrible mistake for the simple reason that it wasn't so much that we didn't know our enemy, we didn't know our ally. I mean the South Vietnamese government, it was a Catholic minority trying to ride herd over a Buddhist country. And I'm sorry for our French friends, but they had picked up all of the nuances of French colonial corruption, and we had no clue. Militarily we could've fought forever, but we weren't going to provide an environment for the people of Vietnam to have confidence in their government. It was just that simple.

Why do you think it was that the decision was made to do the individual replacements instead of going as an entire unit?

Sam Floca: Well, you got to bear in mind that there was always the threat of the Soviets in Europe, and we stripped a lot of the people out, the men I knew, I didn't serve in Europe during the Vietnam War. The guys that were there tell the horror stories of not enough men, this, that, and the other. But the Army was only a certain size, and in World War II once we got everybody over there, we used a replacement system and that was simply what we did. Now we did call up some of the National Guard units, but just the national policy we had the draft, and it was very, very unfair. But just the standard replacement cycle, and like for my second tour, I volunteered the second time, I wanted to go back to the 1st Infantry Division, and they said well, we're not giving captains pinpoint assignments. You'll just, you'll go the 90th replacement and be assigned. And I was trying to be courteous to the major, the assignments officer in Washington and I said well look, I've been with the Big Red One. I know the ground. I know their procedures. I know the enemy. That's where I want to go. He said well, I'm sorry, our policy is we're not doing it. I said but I'm volunteering, and I was a captain this time. He said well, there's nothing I can do. And then he said well wait a minute, I do have a vacancy for the Division Assistant, Public Affairs Officer, and he says now that would require you going to a military school first. I said hey, I had 16 hours of journalism in college and that wasn't the first lie I ever told, I did take two courses at SMU, but the thing was it guaranteed me an assignment at the Big Red One, and also the ward officer where I was at Fort Sill, personnel ward officer, had just been assigned to the 1st Infantry Division, and I knew once I got in country, all I had to do was go to him and say I don't want any of this PAO BS. I want to get back out with an artillery unit. So I accepted the assignment. I'm glad I did because the defense information school in Indianapolis is one of the best in the country, and later when the Army started assigning everybody a second area of specialty, I had several military historian, whatever, but public affairs became my secondary and I had some magnificent assignments which we'll probably talk about later, but at least it got me back to the division, and I did the courtesy, I went up to the headquarters, I met the division PAO and I'm looking around and this isn't what I want, and they just had a bunch of guys sitting there writing stories. They didn't send their officers out in the field to actually cover the troops and stuff, and so I had a nice chat with him and I had already talked to the personnel ward and I called him back and I said I don't want anything to do with this mess, and he told me, he said Sam, don't worry. He said they're killing artillery captains right and left. I said oh, that's cheerful. And he said I'll get you out there. And so I got on back out into a combat unit, the 5th Field Artillery, which is the oldest unit in the U.S. Army, Alexander Hamilton's Canoneers, and from that I was assigned out as they called them in those days the LNO Liaison Officer, which today we call them the Fire Support Officer for a rifle battalion. And that's where I spent that second tour. But we really, we've learned a lot of lessons militarily. The way we of course, Desert Storm, let's face it, we were awfully lucky. Saddam, after he took Kuwait, set on his butt and gave us all that time to build up in Saudi Arabia, and then the American Army and the Coalition, the Brits, performed magnificently. That was as well-trained an Army as we ever sent over. And of course, with the Iraqi War, we have deployed as units. I mean I'm right here with them at Fort Hood. I know them. I go out and chat with them. I have a young man out there I think of as a god son, and he's been through three tours, but they deploy as units, they come home, and of course we all hear about this, how it's stressing the Army. I mean the minute you get home if you're married, you really look at a calendar on the wall saying OK, how many days before I go back? But at least they can train together and they go over there with that confidence, and that was only seen in Vietnam that initial cycle of deployment. So the soldiers we're sending to battle today has confidence in the guy on the right and the left, not just because he's trained, but because he knows who he is or who she is.

You also see a difference between those that were drafted and those that wanted to be there like yourself – was that - ?

Sam Floca: Absolutely not, you're in a jungle green uniform. I wrote a letter to the editor to a guy at Fort Sill when the volunteer army came into effect. I remember I was rereading it a while ago, and he was trying to talk about the volunteer army, but he said too often draftees didn't want to be a good soldier. I took great umbrage to that. By and large, the vast majority of the draftees answered their country's call, they served honorably, and then they tried to come home and get on with their life, but unfortunately they were called murderers and everything else. But the draft itself was not fair. There were far too many loopholes, but it would be inhumane to draw a distinction between the regular army rifleman and the draftee over there. If you look, we've used conscription before, not everybody rushes to the colors. Some wait, and then they answer the call. Same thing in the Civil War. But the tragedy of the draft was that it was not equitable and that the president never articulated what the heck we were doing in Vietnam. I mean he makes a statement, our goal is to prevent a Communist takeover of South Vietnam. Well, that's a defensive and a negative. That doesn't say how we're gonna win, and we had a lot of fine generals over there, but we had a lot of others. What bothers me, I think of gallant men like John McCain and those guys that flew off those carriers every day going against targets that they knew had no effect on North Vietnam, and I love the Navy. I have some good friends in the Navy, but in my own mind as a combat soldier, I cannot imagine being an admiral on a carrier knowing that Lyndon Johnson and McNamara have picked the target. I could not have sent those pilots. I would have resigned. And he's deceased now, but he was a retired three-star, a very good friend of my uncle's and we were turkey hunting out at our ranch, and we're sitting in a turkey blind one day and I asked him, I said admiral, I was a major at the time, you're pretty young. Why did you retire? And he said because they didn't need another four-star picking targets for Lyndon Baines Johnson. We all carry ghosts with us from Vietnam. A lot of the redemption came when Schwarzkopf and those men marched down the Broadway or wherever it was in New York, they won one for all of us, but unfortunately we didn't do a very good job in Iraq and I think there's going to be a good outcome, but we didn't learn. We went into Iraq blind as to the culture, and to me, the lesson of Vietnam was not just know your enemy, but know your friend. I mean we had this ludicrous idea that everybody in Iraq was going to be happy as clams in the water, and obviously, and nobody planned for anything after. General Hal Moore speaking at the War College made a very profound statement and one I agree with. He said I thought I would never live to see a worse Secretary of Defense than Robert McNamara, but I did. And he was referring to Secretary Rumsfeld, and I share that assessment. I mean there are a lot of Rumsfeld fans, but we didn't learn our lesson. And that haunts me because I had friends that died and men die in war and there's a price, and a Frenchman said, you know, the nobility of the warrior is that he dies, he agrees to die for the mistakes of others. But we have an obligation not to make mistakes.

Tell us sir a little bit for those that are listening to this interview what it was like day to day in Vietnam from your first experiences, maybe share with us some certain memories that you think people should hear about.

Sam Floca: Well, there was a big difference between my first tour and second tour in just the type of jobs that I had, but I think what stuck with me most out of my first tour was I understood what it meant to have friends. And I'm an only child. I have no brothers or sisters, but I understood what they meant about a bond between men. I served under some senior officers that became my role models, my mentors, and one became my father-in-law. I'm divorced now. And I'll mention here, I'm a recovering alcoholic. I had my last drink on the 4th of December of

1980. But prior to that I was an alcoholic, and somebody once joked and said you mean you were a practicing alcoholic? I said practice, hell, I had it down perfect. But I led a double life. I was a good soldier but I was an alcoholic, and it cost me my marriage. But it just, I've lost my train of thought. All right, so that's kind of interesting about that kind of lifestyle I led as an alcoholic, but like I said, that first tour in Vietnam, the men, the senior officers convinced me that being a soldier was honorable, and that being an officer was an honor and a great responsibility. The division artillery commander, Colonel Marlin Camp, later a brigadier general, and later my father-in-law, had given me a very difficult assignment as a second lieutenant, and I had performed it to the best of my ability. It was kind of interesting because it involved working with Vietnamese and our cavalry squadron was into a heavy ambush and I had been sent up to this place to work with the Vietnamese artillery because that was the only artillery that was going to be in range, and the Vietnamese army hadn't cleared the road and the men walked into it, and so then the observers start calling to me to get the fire, and the Vietnamese captain won't shoot, and he keeps saying that oh no, there are Vietnamese soldiers up there. And I was with a couple of Special Forces guys, and so I just pulled my pistol on this Vietnamese captain right there with eight or nine of his men, and I said you son of a bitch, Americans are dying up there. Your men are not in the way. Now you either start shooting or I'm gonna kill every one of you. And Special Forces sergeant, he thought where did they find this crazy lieutenant? So he locked and loaded his M-16, and then the other Special Forces guy went back next door to the Special Forces camp and brought some of there Nang's, mercenaries over, and I held that Vietnamese captain and his fire direction sitter at gunpoint for three hours while they fired, and then when they were, he said that's all the ammo we can shoot. Well I said I can get you more ammo. And Colonel Camp later found out what I'd done and the division commander, General D'Pieu, gosh, what a great man, General D'Pieu found out and so D'Pieu wanted a lieutenant of artillery with his long range reconnaissance patrol and the air rifle platoon. We didn't have the mobility of the 1st Cavalry, but we did have a cavalry squadron which had a 40-man platoon that could go by helicopter, could develop situations, and the long range reconnaissance patrol operated under the cav squadron once again because we had the organic chopper aviation, and every second lieutenant in the division was trying to volunteer for this job because it was gonna be special. I didn't even know about it and I got volunteered for it. And it was because of they felt that evidently the initiative or whatever I had done up there at Chon Ton, and of course I had done it for the very guys that I was now gonna be working for. And so General Camp, Colonel Camp sent me down there and I was in that assignment for about five weeks, and then I got very badly wounded and the Medivac helicopter couldn't come in to get me out, and I was, I had switched over that day to go with a Vietnamese cavalry troop. They needed an American artilleryman, and they had an advisor with them, but the chopper couldn't get in and I was bleeding badly, and they finally gave me morphine and I got on my radio and I said I want to get back on my old cavalry frequency. We'll have a chopper up somewhere. Well lo and behold, the next thing I know the dust and everything is coming in and it was Brigadier General James F. Hollingsworth who by the way passed away this March, the most decorated American soldier in the history of Texas A&M, there's a statue to Holly down there, and he was the Assistant Division Commander, and he knew me. I had met him before. But heard that call sign and he brought his helicopter in to bring me out, and I remember they were pushing the stretcher in the chopper and I kind of looked up on the stretcher and here was Holly, General Hollingsworth, and he had his hand on each end of the stretcher pushing in. I looked up and he looked at me and of course it said Floca on my name tag. Anyway he said you're all right, Sam. I don't know how you got into this, but we'll get you out of here. And his aid was Jack Lyon who was later a classmate of mine, but so you have Hollingsworth and you have D'Pieu and you have Camp, and the next day Colonel Camp and Charlie Etteridge, Charlie is from Troy and he is a retired colonel and he lives down in, Mayor of Lakeway, and aggie, Charlie was General

Colonel Camp's pilot. Well the next morning down at the 9030 vac after they tried to sew me all up, in comes Colonel Camp with the Sergeant Major and with Charlie as the pilot, and I mean I'm just another second lieutenant, but I left there, I thought this colonel came all the way down here. He felt responsible for me.

That's true leadership, that really is. That's leadership by example.

Sam Floca: I never forgot that and I wrote to him when I was in the hospital in Japan, and I asked him. I said would you please thank General Hollingsworth and General D'Pieu. I understand now what they mean about the tradition of the Big Red One, the 1st Infantry Division, and I said it was an honor for me to have served in combat and to be able to wear the 1st Division patch, and with men like that, I said gosh, I don't think I could ever be that good, but there's some good mean leading us out there, and from that moment on, there was never a doubt that I wanted to be a soldier. I had the privilege, Colonel Camp before he got his star, he later commanded the officer candidate training brigade at Fort Sill, and I had gone back there to teach and most of us, this was '67, all of us that were tactical staff were Vietnam veterans, and we knew we had to prepare these guys because the syllabus wasn't really doing it, and it was very frustrating because they were mass producing these lieutenants and they weren't being trained right, and I got so frustrated one day, Colonel Camp was over in another directory at Fort Sill and I went over to him and I said sir, and I'd gotten to know him. He'd gone hunting with us at the ranch, he and dad had become friends. I hadn't met his daughter at that time. Gosh, I said sir, I'd never ask you for a favor, I said you got me in a lot of mess in Vietnam. Can you get me out of one here? He said what are you talking about? I said sir, I can't train those guys. We have no authority. We're passing candidates through. They're not gonna get it done. And he said I understand. He says why don't you think about it for a week? I said sir, I thought about it a long time before I ever came over here. A week's not gonna make any difference. He said yes it is. He said I take command over there next week. He turned the entire climate around. As tactical officers, he put the responsibility on our shoulders. If we said the kid couldn't cut it, he was out. So once again, there was this inspired leadership and he inspired all of us. It was just another time in my career where I saw the impact that a senior officer who really cared, the impact that he could have.

Sure. I think that's absolutely right. To go back a little bit, sir, you mentioned that you were wounded. When that happened, I mean there's nothing that can prepare you for something like that, but what were your thoughts when you were hit? It's just something that I guess is unique for everybody, but can you share with us your memories?

Sam Floca: Well, I wear five purple hearts. Five official wounds in action. If you want to count John Kerry style purple hearts, you could say I have nine because I got wounded three times in the same day. But I wasn't really worried about racking up, that's the did not duck medal. That first time in '66, it just all happened out in the clear blue, and I didn't have any of these feelings of my God, it can't happen to me or whatever. I'd only been in a couple of firefights. I didn't see a lot of combat the first tour. I'd only been in a couple of pretty tough firefights, but I just remember looking down and half my leg was gone, and the worst part of it was the hospital. This is the summer of '66, the casualties are rising, and the Army medical system hadn't caught up, and I wasn't sent straight to the States. I was sent to Japan and there was a hospital there that they had literally thrown the medical staff together, a lot of drafted doctors and stuff. The medics were all first rate though. But and there was no such thing as trauma care in those days, and these people hadn't even been given any training about dealing with people who essentially have come out of a car wreck if you will, and I suffered more in that

hospital, and I swear the two doctors I had must've interned under Mingla at Dachau. I remember their names to this day and I swear as God is my witness if I ever saw either one of them I'd walk up and knock his teeth out. The care that we got was horrible. It was horrible. They screwed me up so bad that I mean, just learning how to walk again was a nightmare, but I watched everybody suffer and I thought my God, this is medical care? If I'm an officer in this officer's ward and I'm being treated this way, how in God's name are they treating the privates over in the other ward? Now I'm happy to say that that was the exception and not the rule. '68 my second tour, I got hit a bunch of times but they were kind of in theater type minor stuff. The last one required medical evacuation, and that time I was in Camp Zomma in Japan and golly, I couldn't have gotten better care if I had been right here at Scott & White. The two-year difference, you could see the medical corps how it had matured and how the forestructure for the medical corps had caught up, because '68 was our worst combat year for casualties over there, and so these docs and nurses in '68, man, they were good. Of course now also, our battalion sergeants that were with us in Nam, boy, those were brave men. Let me tell you something about an Army medic or Marine Corpsman. To me, every time one of those men moves forward to treat a soldier, he's just won the medal of honor, but his job description requires that he do that knowing that he's going to get shot at. Medics in Vietnam, you didn't wear armbands. Geneva Convention made us keep the red cross on helicopters, but God, they used them as targets. But I mean when you think of the medics and what they did and many were conscientious objectors. They wouldn't carry a weapon. But those were unbelievably brave men what they did. But the medical corps, the treatment in the hospitals, it caught up and I got back to Brook, San Antonio, golly, first class down there at Beach Pavilion, and it put me all back together and but I just, I'll tell you, of all the times that I picked up cheap Czechoslovakian scrap metal in my back and everything, the times that scare me the most are the ones that were near misses because the fact is, I'm sitting here with you which means I survived all those wounds. Well I remember in one firefight and Mike Atkinson, my Sergeant Mike was right next to me, and it was a rubber plantation, it was raining, we were taking heavy fire, and we're laying flat on the ground and all of a sudden there's a pff-f-f-t, and my nose and mouth is full of dirt, and I looked at Mike and he looked at me and he later told me, he said 2-4, you went by your radio call, he said 2-4, your eyes were as big as saucers. A bullet had literally gone right under my nose, and I'm thinking four inches higher and I'm toast, and in the movie, Patton, when he, and whether it's true or not I don't know, he says his worst dream is always a bullet coming straight at his nose. But later after I saw that movie, I said boy George, and that dream is pretty scary, but that was more frightening to me, but I'm no hero. I was frightened. I mean you walked and you talk about what's it like over there, for a rifle unit, you walk, you get up and just patrol a sector of the jungle. The initiative was with the enemy. Seldom if ever did we ever surprise them. There were times when we got good intelligence and we knew they were in a buildup to do something, and then General Weir who commanded a division then, later killed over my firefight, a medal of honor winner from World War II, Keith Delaware, but where it would dump a bunch of battalions in and we'd do good work and they'd have all their supply caches all set up for maybe to prep for the Special Forces camp they wanted to overrun. Well they had to defend it, and so then we could fix 'em and we could fight 'em, but it was most of it was just a matter of walking through the jungle, and our battalion was good. The recon platoon leader, A.C. Green, A.C. is Amy's godfather, and he'll be coming in this summer. We're going to a reunion in San Antonio. But A.C. had that recon platoon and he was so good, they were small enough in size to move quietly, but large enough that they could hold on until the rest of the battalion caught up, and they actually surprised North Vietnamese a few times. But normally it's just you're walking and you're waiting, and you don't know where it's coming from or how far away or whatever. And then it is a veritable firestorm, and everybody gets down and you just start putting out the maximum amount of fire you can, and then you start maneuvering and then of course my job and

the lieutenant's job, get artillery in there. But once the shooting started, the fear I had of taking a bullet, I wasn't conscious of that. I was more conscious of I've got to do this right, I've got to make sure that lieutenant that I can't see 100 yards away, and a couple of times I had to run up there. I did it. I don't know how I did it, but it had to be done. He was wounded and it had to be done, so I did it. But I was, it was fear of failure. There were 200-300 infantrymen there counting on me to know what I'm doing bringing in jets and bringing in artillery, and when the firefight or something would be over, I understand in that scene in Private Ryan when Hank's is shaking, I mean there were times I literally just shook, and then what made this so bad was you survive a day of this mess, and then you lager in for the night, you dig in everything, you're sleeping in the mud, and the plan comes down for the next day, and your first thought is I've made it through the day, and then you say tomorrow is one more of the same. I never, you hear guys talk about they kept their short-timer calendar, how many days – I never. I blocked that out of my mind. I mean just today is today and tomorrow I got to do it. But it was, and I was a professional. I would've stayed over, had I not been medivac-ed, I wanted to stay, I was in hopes maybe after being with the rifle battalion I could come in an artillery battery, and I had my public affairs training, and I would stay on Saigon as a press officer. Because I'll tell you, I don't like what was happening back here in America, and at least in Vietnam, I felt a sense of purpose that maybe what I had learned could help someone's son or brother or father come home because I'll tell you man, this thing of burning the American flag and waving the Viet Cong flag, I just, at least over there, but a lot of people ask well what about post-traumatic stress syndrome? Well the only time I think I've ever come close to it was watching the Iraq War go to hell in a hand basket early on. Thank God for Petraeus and Odierdo and the young men that believed in 'em and they're getting it done now, but I never felt what so many veterans felt because I stayed in the Army and it was like a cocoon. I was with people with shared experiences and with nightmares the same, and so I wasn't like the kid from Alabama who comes back and has to make this adjustment back to civilian life. But when I started attending division reunions and veterans groups, I really saw the impact it had had on these brave young Americans, draftee or regular. They did their time, but and Vietnam's the only time in history where the soldier got blamed for the mistakes of his government. But I was almost immune to that. I've always been very conservative in my political views, but I was immune to the horror that haunted so many of my generation because I stayed in. There were a bunch of us. I remember we were watching TV. We were the staff college in '75 May when Saigon fell, and there were about nine of us over where Charlie, Amy's mom, where our little cottage was on post, and we watched all that and I remember it might have been CBS, they did a piece, they took the old ballad where have all the flowers gone, and they did a collage showing a young American all the way from being a child all the way up through, and different people of course, but and then the song ended of course with the flag-draped casket and the flag being presented to the mother, and it was just, it was just so sad. But I think without ever seeing it, that group of us and that class, we just, we weren't gonna get out. We were gonna try to make the Army better, and every one of us that night achieved the rank of at least full colonel. Several that were in my home that evening, general officers, one whose name I won't mention, but retired as a four-star, but I do like to think that what we took out of Vietnam made us better and like I told my guys when I took over my battalion in Germany in '84, I said if you're going to stay in the Army, raise your hand. If you're on your second enlistment or whatever and everything, apparently laughing message, I want to tell you something. I said 90% of you have either indicated you're on your second tour or you're considering being a professional, and I said I want to swear to you right here as you sit here, that if you are going to be a professional soldier before you retire you will go to combat. And of course this is only six years before Desert Storm. And I said I've got the sergeant major and I have one job, and that is to prepare each of you for that awful day, and boys, it's gonna come, and I'm gonna try to prepare you for it. And so it was Tony, my sergeant mate. So I was

probably a hard ass battalion commander, but I tried to take care of my soldiers. I've always believed, talking about loyalty to the chain of command, my first responsibility is down the chain of command. It's to my soldiers, and not to my boss, because my boss has been where I've been or he wouldn't have gotten up there, so he understands. And I have to look those men in the eye, I have to issue orders in my own name, and I have to look them in the eye and I don't want any accolades. If I end up getting credit for what the unit does right, OK, fine, I'll take that. But by God I also will accept the responsibility for what we screw up, and I was one of those make your mistakes in training, not in combat. There's no such thing as a perfect unit. I never thought about an efficiency report. I never thought about a rank. I thought about I have a responsibility, and so our major and I wrote a letter to the next of kin of every soldier that joined the battalion, told them who we were, what we did, what their son's job was, and that it was our commitment to that soldier and to his family that if we ever had to face the enemy, their loved one would be trained, prepared, and go into battle with men he could trust, and that was just my approach to it.

When Saigon fell and of course we started pulling out of Vietnam, everybody, I read a lot about how there was a decrease in morale or it was kind of a low point for the Army in the late 70s, going into the 80s, did you see that to an extent?

Sam Floca: You know, I've heard most of the men that were in Germany in the 70s really have some horror stories to talk about, and it was both drugs and racial issues. I never saw, only time I saw drugs in Vietnam, and now bear in mind, I came out of there in '68. If I'd been there in '71 when we'd announced we were coming home and there were cases when men wouldn't follow officers out into battle, I don't know how I would have motivated guys to go on a patrol when they knew it didn't matter. Nobody wants to be the last guy to die in a war. But the only drug-related incident we had in the battalion in Vietnam, two guys out on the outpost in their village bought some marijuana and the relief came out and found them stoned, beat the living hell out of them because they had put everybody at risk. Now what might have happened in the bunkers in the base camp, I don't know, but I was a battalion operations officer here in '76 to '78. '71 to '74, I taught military history at Fort Sill, '74 to '75 I was at staff college, so I came back to Troop '76 to '78. As operations officer, I wasn't so much involved with unit discipline. That was the battery commander's job, and I was the battalion training officer. I executed and developed the colonel's training plans. We had good NCO's, and this was when we were changing a lot of, we were force feeding NCO's out of supply into the artillery and all of that, but we had a good, 2nd Armored was good. I didn't see a lot of the problems. I'm told that a few years before in the early 70s out here there were some trouble, but everybody, the issue of race consciousness was very challenging. Jim Davids, who is a dear friend all the way back from combat and from the advanced course and we're still in touch, and Jim is an African American, Madison High School in Dallas, a fullback at Grambling, as he said he was the best they had since Tank Younger, and Jim and I had long talks and he talked to me about racism and what he'd gone through, and I got educated. I mean I learned some things from Jim. Like we were talking once about military history and he said you know, Sammy, you look at that picture of Pigot's charge and you see that rebel battle flag and to you it's those gallant men going up that slope. I see that and I have memories as a kid of guys with white sheets over their head with that flag. But the Army was, black NCO's took tremendous abuse from activist young soldiers. They were called Oreo's, black on the outside, white on the inside, but somehow we got through it and I think I have to give credit to the non-commissioned officers for that, because they're the ones that dealt with it on a daily basis, but it was a troubling time and we were going to a volunteer Army and we weren't sure what our standards were gonna be and it took us a long time to sort 'em out. But you know, has it worked? I think it has, and you look, these units going to battle today, my gosh, they meet and exceed their re-enlistment quotas.

That's just amazing.

Sam Floca: And these guys, they're not re-enlisting to get somewhere else. They're re-enlisting to stay with that unit knowing that 9 months later, they're gonna be either in the Kunar Valley or back in Falusia or something. So I mean these young men and women, they are amazing, and I look, I'm 68 years old, but I go out there and I look at these sergeant majors and first sergeants, and they look like somebody off of professional wrestling except with a PhD, and they're young to me, of course, and they are young, but I look at the non-commissioned officer corps and how wonderful it is, and I look at these fine young captains, and then I look at these majors and colonels who are the sons of my peers, and I'm thinking boy, let's use 'em right because this is a magnificent Army. So if I got a legacy, if my generation has a legacy, the guys that were lieutenants when my generation was commanding battalions, they're colonels and generals now, so maybe we did something right. Maybe what we took out of Vietnam and carried with us, maybe it helped. I hope it did. I hope it did because this country has a fine Army and I say Army in a generic sense, the Coast Guard, the Air Force, the Navy, our Reserve components. I mean these are, I don't think there's any such thing as the greatest generation. I know Brokaw wrote a beautiful book, but I am proud of my fellow soldiers and I am so proud of this generation. I hope we made a difference. I know the men whom I respect and honor, I know they tried, and that's all you can do is try.

So you were in, when did you finally retire from the Army?

Sam Floca: Memorial Day of 1992. I'd come back from Germany. I had a great privilege. Crosby Saint, General Butch Saint had been the 3rd Corps commander here at Fort Hood, and I had known General Saint as a brigadier. I had done some battle studies, briefings, and then when he was the three-star out here, he knew that I was a recovering alcoholic and he had me flown back from Germany to do a leadership tape on alcoholism, and I was honored to do it. And I mean my fellow soldiers knew I was a recovering alcoholic, but and I also was able to have a major impact as the Army developed it's drug and alcohol policy because I went to a rehab center the Navy had, but General Saint got his fourth star and was going to Germany as the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Army Europe, and he asked for me by name to go with him as his Chief of Public Affairs, and that was quite an honor because Butch Saint's a hell of a soldier, and I was a first hand witness to the end of the Cold War. I chopped my own piece off the Berlin Wall at checkpoint Charlie. And I had a wonderful time over there, and General Saint, well, I'll tell you, he trained some good men. His Junior Aid at the time was Johnny Abazade, our four-star from Iraq. Johnny is a great soldier, fought in Grenada, and when I was coming out of there, General Saint asked me, he said Sammy, you know you're not gonna be a general. I said sir, I'm not worried about that. Well what do you want to do? Where do you want to go? I said I'd like to go back to the War College and teach military history, and I got that assignment, and then I got to know the Civil War artist Dale Galland, Gettysburg, and I could've stayed on until '95 probably, but Dale was talking one day or something, and I said I could live down here. He said well you know, you're a military historian. I need someone to help me with research and I also with my limited edition prints, I want to do historical essays. And I said boy, that'd be fun. And he said well let me call Lynn. He called his wife and came back and he wrote on the score card, said how does this sound for a salary? Jiminy, I nearly turned the golf cart over. And I said well let me tell you what, let's quit the golf right now. Let me go back and see General Stoffden. I'll put my retirement papers in tomorrow. But I had terminal leave, and so I'd already bought my house, or rented my house in Gettysburg, and my last day of duty, it was a Friday at a Memorial Day, I believe fell on a Sunday that year, so my last day of duty officially in the Army would be

that Friday night. And so I left Gettysburg, I dressed, I put on my Army green uniform, and I drove back up to Carlisle. I hung around at the club and had a alcohol free beer, a club soda or something with some people, and then shortly before taps, I went over in the football field there. It's the field where Jim Thorpe played. I mean Carlisle is a famous place. And I got out there 30 minutes early and I just sat in the stands that night. I had eschewed any formal retirement ceremony. I did not accept a retirement award. God, General Saint had already given me the Legion of Merit, and I was honored, and I sat there in the stands and I just thought about how blessed I had been. Number one, I was still alive, and number two, all of the great men I had known, and I looked at my watch, and so I marched out to the 50-yard line and turned and faced back to the headquarters building because most places now don't use a bugler. They have a record player. And of course you can hear the scratch as the guy puts the thing on, and so they heard that scratch so I came to attention, and they started playing taps. I came to present arms and I held my salute until taps ended. I dropped my salute, I thanked God and I walked off the field and never looked back.

That's great. And you mentioned Gettysburg, I think we talked earlier. You had a chance to really have some pretty amazing involvement with that film that was made. Maybe you want to share a little bit about that with us.

Sam Floca: Well first of all, Gettysburg is the essence of Americana. Everyone should go there once in their life and stand there where Lincoln, what was it, 373 words, probably as powerful as anything ever spoken or written by anyone on this side of the ocean short of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, but it is also the first great test of our Constitution. There is a high probability if Lee had fought a better battle there, the nation could've been divided. The North could've lost the war. But living there and I thought I was a good scholar – I'd studied under Jay Louvas, one of the most eminent historians this country ever produced – but I had two years of, and of course like I said, also working with Jay, but I got to know the really great scholars that came there. I learned that battlefield. I learned the others. And I got to write about it and I got to walk the ground, and with the soldier's eye and trying to put myself back in Winfield Hancock's shoes, how did he feel? Longstreet, Hood, and it just so happened that they were making the movie, Ted Turner was making the movie *Gettysburg*, and through a long story, I've done a lot of work on General John Buford and I got to know Sam Elliot. He had asked for me as his personal assistant. It was a privilege and an honor. He is a great American. He by the way, Sam played Sergeant Major Basil Plumley in *We Were Soldiers Once and Young*. Sam Elliot's probably played an American soldier in every war we ever fought, and he does a fine representation of us. He's a good man. I got to know Tom Beringer, I got to know the whole cast. It was really fun. The Farnsworth House which is a tavern, Beringer had a sign made said "Officers Club, Army of Northern Virginia." But everybody hung out there, the scholars came in there, and to watch the filming of the movie, I was on set whenever I wanted to I had the pass, but to watch it and see these actors and I'll tell you something. Martin Sheen is pretty outspoken politically, and the only thing I object to is sometime his characterization. He's a great American, has the right to saber. I saw Martin Sheen up there. I wish everybody could see the kindness he had, the way he was with kids and stuff, just a super guy, and these men are professionals. All those re-enactors lived out in the tents and stuff. Elliot and Beringer and those guys, each night they'd send pick-up trucks loads of beer and soft drinks down for 'em. And when the filming was over, Sam went back over to the props department and got the guide on the flag that had been used and he inscribed it and gave it to the young man, the young re-enactor who had served as his guide on barrack. So I saw Hollywood and I saw American history, and Gettysburg is an amazing place, and it was a wonderful transition for me coming out of the Army because I often wondered, what am I gonna do? And I got paid to write and talk

and teach history for two years, and I came back here in '94 and my parents were getting up in years, and I'm glad I did because my mom and my aunt from Corpus Christi who was like a second mother, they both each had almost a decade, part of it overlapping, of nursing care, and my dad, I did a lot for him, and this is my home and I'd always intended to come back here. But that Gettysburg experience, it couldn't have been better. I had done battlefield guides, tours when I was at the War College. I'd taken Japanese ambassadors, I've taken generals from everywhere. I'm not nearly as smart as the real licensed battlefield guides at Gettysburg, but my gosh, that's like a doctoral degree to do what they do. But it was really great and I came home and I play golf. My daughter came to live with me when she was a senior in high school. She and her mom are on good terms. I mean she just, once I got sober her mother and I were on very good terms. Her mom remarried of course. But Amy lived with me and had a lot of fun, and she took her undergrad at Texas and her graduate at SMU, and I'd swore to her, I said boy, it's obvious to me they had purged their old records because Amy J. Floca, if that keyed of Sam Floca Jr., they wouldn't have let you near the campus. But she completed her Masters and she is a regional director up there for a company called Group Excellence, and it thrills me because I like to think of myself as a good teacher and counselor, and that's what she is doing and it's a natural for her. So she's kind of, she's my legacy. I mean I'm lucky. I tell you I'm gonna speak here on Memorial Day.

I was gonna ask you about that.

Sam Floca: And I've spoken once before. I spoke in Marshal 3 years ago, but as I look back, and for the Army, for a professional soldier, you can't really draw a distinction between Memorial Day or Veterans Day because if you're looking at Veterans Day, you still, there are still guys that are not here. They didn't get to do this. Yes, Memorial Day, the primary focus is on America's fallen. But it's so difficult and I'm trying to put this speech together and I realize how lucky any of us that went through a war, that I'm 68, I have a wonderful life, and every generation that this country sent off to war, there are men like me that are happy and old, but there are so many that didn't. That great line in Binion's poem, for the fallen, they will not rage, they will not grow, age, years that will not condemn, but the setting of the sun, and in the morning we will remember them. And I try to. I just, Plato said only the dead have seen the end of war, and regretfully the guy was right, and it's a waste. I wish there was no need for my profession. I would trade every scrap of, I won't say scrap, that's disrespectful – I would trade every medal and ribbon in there on that cabinet if there had never been a need to develop awards. The older I get, the more I hate war. I look at World War I, and the more I study it, and I think in 1918, every French and British four-star general should've been stood against the wall and shot as a war criminal. I mean a whole generation for nothing, at least you look back on World War II, we accomplished something, Korea to a degree, Vietnam a waste, Iraq we're gonna make it. Those 4,000 haven't died in vain. Afghanistan, the jury is still out. Different place, different country, different time. But I wish I'd never known there was such thing as the Army as a career. But that's a wish. That's not reality.

Well we're glad for your service, sir, and we're thankful for it. I know that Commissioner Patterson and everybody at the Land Office is very thankful for your service and sacrifice to our country, and what this program is about is trying to save those memories so that people can learn from them and don't forget 'em, and it's been an honor for me to be able to talk to you today.

Sam Floca: Let me tell you something, this great state of Texas, God bless it. Now I had two antecedents with Sam Houston at San Jacinto, as did Sam ___. He had an ancestor that was a

doctor there. But when I was wounded, Texas started this in '66, and I was the first one, but the state of Texas started sending a flag to every Texan wounded in Vietnam.

I didn't know that.

Sam Floca: I have my flag and I have the letter signed by I believe it's John Hill who was in Secretary of State, and the certificate stated this flag was flown over the Capitol in Austin on this date in honor of Lieutenant Sam W. Floca Jr. Now we traditionally, I know our state representatives can have a resolution and have a flag flown for a citizen. My dad was so honored by Representative Diane Dileezie, but this state, it treasures its soldiers. It really does. I still have that flag, and that letter, and my gosh, that meant so much to me to know that someone cared, and so I'll brag, you know, the old joke says never ask a man where he's from. If he's from Texas, he'll tell you. If he's not, you don't want to embarrass him.

That's great. Well sir, thank you very, very much.

Sam Floca: Thank you James.

[End of recording]