

## Transcription: John Salinas

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*Today is Friday, September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2009. My name is James Crabtree and I'll be interviewing Mr. John Salinas. This interview is being conducted by telephone. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Salinas is at his home in Corpus Christi, Texas, and this interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board's Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time today to let us interview you. It's an honor for us, and usually the first question we always start off with is maybe just tell the listeners a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went into the Army.*

**John Salinas:** Okie dokie. I was raised in Corpus Christi, all the way through. I was raised as a Christian and went to church quite a bit, and my biggest influence when I was growing up has always been Dr. Hector P. Garcia of Corpus Christi. He'd always tell me, John, no matter where you go, son, always remember your Christian upbringing, and that carried me all the way through my life. He was a very influential man in my life and my parents were very good and very unique in growing me up.

*Did you have any brothers and sisters?*

**John Salinas:** Yes, I had 10 adopted brothers and sisters.

*OK, and had any of them, had any of your family served in the military before you went in?*

**John Salinas:** One was in the Marines, one was in the Army, but none of them were overseas.

*You had pretty much a routine childhood in Corpus Christi, did you ever think that you would end up serving, especially in a time of war?*

**John Salinas:** Not really because back then, if you had any trouble when you were in childhood, you weren't necessarily acceptable in the Army. But everything turned out to be all right and I got drafted.

*Tell us kind of what that experience was like to know it was a pretty controversial time with people burning draft cards and all that sort of thing.*

**John Salinas:** It sure was. I had just gotten married, nine months ago had gotten married, and here I was called to go serve two years in the service.

*Did you have any inclination that you might be drafted?*

**John Salinas:** I had forgotten all about it. I didn't know about the draft going on because I was in love and in marriage, and I had completely forgotten all about the draft. When it hit me, oh did it hit.

*Was it a telegram that you had received?*

**John Salinas:** Yes, greetings from you are hereby inducted into the Armed Service of the United States. So that was good. Dr. Garcia counseled me and he took me to the bus station down here where I was sent off to San Antonio, and I'd never been on an airplane before in my

life. I took a treetop from San Antonio to Fort Polk, Louisiana, and man, I'm telling you, I'll be living in high cotton by now, had never been anywhere out of south Texas, you know.

*When you got the draft notification, how long was it before you had to report to basic training?*

**John Salinas:** It was about three months, and I was in by January, yeah.

*And you said you were newly wed, how did your wife take it?*

**John Salinas:** Well I don't know, she was pretty well upset, everybody was upset, but like all of us, they knew it was a duty to the country, and everybody made me feel that way, and so I also felt that way. I really wanted a chance to represent my country which was OK then.

*Tell us, you said you went to San Antonio, were you at Fort Sam Houston for a bit of time there?*

**John Salinas:** Negative, we were just to San Antonio to the airport. That's where I took my induction and straight on there at the San Antonio station, we swore in and then we were put on the treetop to Fort Polk, Louisiana.

*Tell us what Fort Polk was like.*

**John Salinas:** Same almost as Vietnam. Skeeters, you know, and swamps and stuff, but it was cold when I got there because it was in January and February, and I'll be dog gone if I didn't catch pneumonia in my basic training and I missed three days and they cured me, and if I would have missed anymore, I would have had to repeat basic training, but I made it.

*At Fort Polk, were you living in the old World War II style barracks?*

**John Salinas:** Yes sir. And then I got transferred to Tiger Land.

*Where was that?*

**John Salinas:** Jungle training right there in Fort Polk, Louisiana, you get advanced over into Tiger Land and there's where they treat you, or they start training you to take ground attacks at night, ambush patrols, listening posts, everything you need to learn about Vietnam. Search and destroy, you go on S&D's, and that what's you'd be doing plenty of as a grunt in Vietnam, that's what they told us. And Tiger Land was pretty good training, let me tell you, very good.

*So you knew when you got to Fort Polk as a basic recruit that you were going to be going to Vietnam, there was no doubt.*

**John Salinas:** I had it figured that I was an infantryman, yes sir.

*With the rest of the guys that were in your platoon in boot camp, were they all draftees as well?*

**John Salinas:** The majority of them were. There were very few RA's.

*And did all of them pretty much get sent to Vietnam as well?*

**John Salinas:** Yes sir, they did, and while we were there what struck me as being funny, when we all got there at first, there was a lot of prejudice and a lot of hatred and a lot of stuff going down, you know, between blacks and whites, but since I was Mexican, I stayed on the sideline, but there was a lot of stuff going down back then, in 60 – there was a lot of stuff going down and those people really did not like each other, and they were putting some bad vibes there. When we all got on that plane going to Vietnam, I made sure that all of us were brothers and that we were peaceful and we laid everything behind. We had some bumps and grinds in basic, but we took care of it.

*Were there ever any cases where the drill instructors had a hard time dealing with recruits that were there that didn't want to be there because they had been drafted?*

**John Salinas:** Never, not in my group they weren't. We were strictly men. And we were young and dumb I guess, and we were ready to go.

*How long did you spend at Fort Polk, all tolled?*

**John Salinas:** About four and a half months, 30-day leave, and then Vietnam. That quick, Bubba, it was that quick, in and out and to the jungle.

*Tell us a little bit about what your thoughts were when you were making that trip to Vietnam.*

**John Salinas:** It was 18 hours in flight. I have never been that long in a plane, and that was really a trip because the first thing that happened when we landed in Benwa airport, when they cracked the door, you could smell Vietnam. Oh my God.

*And what was that smell like?*

**John Salinas:** Pig, pig, pigs, pigs, everywhere, all through the air, and as soon as they opened, cracked the door, that's the first thing you said, and everybody, there was over 300 of us on the plane, and through all that smoke and everything, the first thing you smelled was Vietnam. Well, you got used to it.

*What type of plane did they send you over on?*

**John Salinas:** It was a TWA, a big job.

*Like a charter plane?*

**John Salinas:** No, it was a big jet plane I guess. We went, stopped in Dakota, Japan, for about a 45-minute layover, and then back in the air straight to Benwa airport.

*What happened once you arrived in Vietnam? How long was it before you got to your new unit?*

**John Salinas:** It took about seven days of orientation there in the 25<sup>th</sup> Division's headquarters, and then three days later I was in the field. So about ten days and I was in the field with my new unit.

*What was it like coming to a unit that had been there? I'm sure you were around some guys that had already seen action.*

**John Salinas:** Right, the Tomahawks were very well known. They were known as the Tomahawks and they were very well known, and when I got there, it was amazing, to live in the bush in a mechanized infantry you carry everything with you. You have all your ammunition, you have everything you need, and when the stuff starts happening, you've got to unload it and load it up because it's the first thing that blows up is your vehicle, and you want to take all your ammunition and all your extra stuff out every night because it might get hit, and then load it back up in the morning. So it was very unique that you could carry everything in there, and with just enough ammunition for your search and destroy not to tire you out. It was very unique to have mechanized infantry, but they were the coffins, because those RPG's would tear those mechanized vehicles up left and right. RPG's are rocket propeller grenades. That was our biggest nemesis there.

*When you got to your new unit, were any guys from your basic training still with you?*

**John Salinas:** Yes, there was about seven of us that went together. We were very close and I started losing them. On the first day, I lost Terry. He got hit. He had already beat me to the field as a matter of fact. He was a day early and he became the lieutenant's RTO, and I got assigned to the same platoon as him, but he was the lieutenant's RTO and we talked about that in basic. You never want to be an RTO. And he got it, he got his left arm taken off, and I got hit that day, too, a little bit, but not enough to get dusted off. But that was quite a day. I remember Terry was gone. I never saw him again.

*That was his first day in the field?*

**John Salinas:** He was there before me, so it was my first day, his second or third day, and he was gone.

*What was going through your mind at that time knowing it was such a bloody -*

**John Salinas:** I was scared to death, sir, and I had to become some kind of way to get beyond this and to function properly, and to try to save my own life and those of the others, so I automatically started snapping to this war thing. I had an amazing knack for it after a while. It became amazing how I was able to get, I don't know what it was, some kind of sign, you know, and it just let me know that danger was there, and I became very good at detecting it. Especially that night, that ground attack I went through in late August, that was a good, ground attack. You go through training and never go through a ground attack at night.

*Tell us a little bit about the ground attack you are referring to.*

**John Salinas:** Because who in their right mind would attack an armed American force, surrounded like the wagon train, or like the cavalry, and it was at our support base Rollins, and it was in August of '68, and we were next to the Blackbirds in mountain, Nuibaden, that's in South Vietnam, close to Tanian and Kuchi, and what a beautiful country, what a beautiful mountain, what a beautiful place, but that night we got hit by a big ground attack that almost took us out at 12 o'clock. Simultaneously they hit us all around. But I had everybody up and ready and we were amazingly repelled that ground attack and only lost one man dead in our section. It was an amazing story that went on that night. I sent my LP's out in front of my position and they fell asleep. They would not answer my radio calls, and I was training two new men, and I told the captain and I woke up everybody, the artillery units, all the other companies, all the other

platoons, and told them I'm going to have to go out of the wire to see if my LP's are still alive, and that's very dangerous to do that at night, to go outside of the wire and try to raise your LP's. We tried everything else and couldn't raise them on the horn. They would not come on the radio. And so I was gonna hit the wire and as soon as I hit the wire, 25 meters to my right in front of Armando Flores's track, the trip wire went off, and I saw immediately three NVA soldiers strapped to the teeth with sabo-chargers on their back, do a 180 and run back to the berm that they came from, and brought us boom, got one right in the middle and blew 'em right up right there, and the lights were still going, and the LP's still did not wake up. I'm out there on the radio, I have a radio going out, and I call 'em LP, did you hear that, did you hear that? Come over, over, \_\_\_, please, over. They still didn't hear nothing. And shoot, I'm not going out the wire now that I saw those gooks. I turned around and went back to my bunker and told the company that I'm not going out, that I'm staying in because the LP's are probably dead because I saw those gooks and they were real soldiers. They weren't my three LP's running in, because the LP's are in front of my position, Flores's position, and those three soldiers were in front of Flores's position and they should be in front of mine if they were my LP's. So as soon as I came back to the bunker, boom, all hell broke loose. You could hear the tubes leaving the countryside, boom, boom-boom-boom, mortars leaving the tubes by the hundreds, and here they come, incoming. Wa-ba-ba-bam, but everybody was up, everybody was up already standing, too, because when you go to hit the wire, anybody's gonna go out of the wire at night, the whole company, everybody has to wake up and stand to because everybody has to be on alert because we're going out. And I was very fortunate that I had everybody stand to. We were all up and ready. As soon as that hit everything, we opened up with everything we had all around the circle. The next morning we had over 782 KIA's in front of our positions, and in front of Flores's track, there was 98, a whole platoon of NVA soldiers strapped down, 25 meters away from the bunker, from the wire, and 25 meters, so about 50 meters away from his APC. He took six hits with a rocket propeller grenade, and he did not jump off of that 50 caliber. He stayed on there. If it hadn't have been for him, he took those six hits, I saw 'em coming up, I'm 25 meters to his right, boom-boom-boom, I see 'em leaving the tube, and he stayed there on that 50 caliber and mowed those people down. If it wasn't for Armando Flores, we would all be dead because 96 people were trying to run in right there at that wire. They had bangalar torpedoes already shoved under the barbed wire, and the person that had the trip in his hand had a bullet, 50 caliber bullet in his head where he froze, before he could blow the bangalar torpedoes, and those people behind the berm were ready to run in and they were fully strapped down. Armando Flores saved us that day. He is a hero and I hope he got a, I don't know if he ever got any kind of medal out of that, but that's a one man that did not give up his position and he stayed there and we all opened up together, and boy, what an amazing night. We only had one man killed that night, and he was out of position.

*Were the LP's, I take it -*

**John Salinas:** The LP's came back in, and boy were they lucky. They had to come in to my position because I put 'em out. They come up to the deal, and I had been shooting the M60 and throwing grenades on the other side of the bunker, keeping it off of their line in case they did, you know, and then the next thing I heard, don't shoot, but it was too late. I had already pulled the M60 machine gun, and the three were jumping over the berm, and my first time in like two months, my M60 misfired. Are they lucky. I almost killed them, and I had a grenade ready to pull in case I was going to be overrun. If my stid didn't get off, I was gonna pull the grenade, and I saw it was them, and everything froze. I said oh my God, I almost killed them and I almost killed myself. And we fought all on and into the next morning. We didn't stop fighting until daylight. The next day we searched the area and we had over 780 something bodies.

*And what did you do with that many bodies?*

**John Salinas:** We put them all in one big hole. Mass grave. About a football field off the highway, to the left there in front of my position. Because most of them were dead right there in front of our position, first platoon, you know. We had over 98 dead right there. And there was women and children, there was five groups of one child and a China man had a little string with a detonator on it, and the child was sent up 25 meters in front of him, tied with semper charges tied to his back, and they were all dead. Since we were up and ready, when we opened up, we caught them all in the open, just at the time that they were gonna hit us.

*That's amazing.*

**John Salinas:** It was very lucky that we were up that night and I guess we gotta thank that the LP's did go to sleep or I would have went to sleep. We were tired. And they went to sleep out there and they shouldn't have because the person in charge of the LP out there was Pruitt, and he had nine months in country, and he fell asleep on LP. And I was training those two new boys and I had to train 'em right, and I couldn't just say aw, forget about the LP's, let's go to bed because we were tired. Search and destroy all day, you're tired, man. I said no, I better show these boys right, and I'll be dead gone if I didn't show 'em right, and it's a good thing I did because second platoon lieutenant called me and says John, what should I do with the bush? I got 12 men going out. I said just let 'em go out as your LP, go out 25 meters and lay down, the 12 men, and if something happens tonight, you just turn 'em around and bring 'em in, and it's a good thing he did that. We had a new captain with us, incidentally. Our other ones, Captain Phillips, which is another story, had gotten killed, and he was one heroic guy, man, he was one good guy, and I was the last one to see him. He told me, John, you take those boys, let's 180 out of here, and I'll go to this other side, and take 'em out. I said OK, sir. He got up, I moved, he moved, and boom. That was it. If I would've went to the left, if he would've went to the right, it would've been me instead of him, and what a man he was.

*When you're dealing with all of that in a combat situation, do you think you kind of became just fatalistic at a certain point, like if it's gonna happen, it's just gonna happen? You can't worry about it?*

**John Salinas:** That's what happened. You just couldn't care about it anymore. Even if you hid around the tree, the bullet's gonna come around there and hit you. So you just give up and you just go for it, and hope you make it. And that ground attack at night was a very good experience. We all were together and we all worked. A lot of people froze that night, too, now. There's a lot of stories in there that aren't, that I bet if we talked to a bunch of these people that was in that attack that night, they'll have plenty of stories to tell, and they will all tell you that if it wasn't for me keeping everybody awake, and if it wasn't for Armando Flores especially for not getting off of that APC and staying on there even though he took six hits, he's our hero. He is our hero. I was just doing my job. And when you get hit, you can un-ash your vehicles, but he did not. He stayed on it and saved the night. And we were all scared, so we're not all big heroes, but he is, the one, Armando Flores of San Antonio. I wish I could see that boy. I wonder if he made it. I don't even know if he made it. That's what kills me. I don't know if Scott and Hardy made it.

*When was the last time that you saw him? Was it still in Vietnam?*

**John Salinas:** Yes sir, that was it. I never know if he made it, and he was our lifesaver. The little man, I wonder what he's going through now, knowing that nobody appreciates what he did that night. He should know, man, he was quite an amazing little boy.

*Have you ever tried to locate him?*

**John Salinas:** When I went to the VA clinic in San Antonio, I asked the VA clinic up there, has there ever been an Armando Flores here? She looked it up and said no, he's not registered. So I don't even know if he made it through Vietnam. And I hate to find out because I don't want to know that he's dead. He was such a good guy. But anyway, that ground attack was quite moving, what a mover it was.

*Was that the first major engagement you were involved in there?*

**John Salinas:** No, no, my third day in country was the major.

*What was the sense of morale amongst the men in your unit while you were there?*

**John Salinas:** We were all pretty well just happy as little campers could be out there I guess. The skeeters and all that elements were down on us, not to mention the booby traps, and being in mechanized infantry, you stayed in the field. They could resupply you from the air. You did not have to go to base camp. You stayed out there, search and destroy.

*What was the longest stretch that you were out on a mission?*

**John Salinas:** Four months before a stand down, yeah.

*Wow.*

**John Salinas:** And I got to go in and see Bob Hope and Ann Margaret in Kuchi.

*Tell us a little bit about what that was like.*

**John Salinas:** That was really great, because we come in last, the captain said the colonel said all right, ya'll go on in. Ya'll could see that we come roaring in with our 90 APC's and tanks, like everybody, and we finally make it and we were sort of way into the back, and doggone it, here come Bob Hope and Ann Margaret right by where we were at. That was quite a trip, I'll never forget that. And we were only in there for about one show, and we had to boogie. It was in '68 and we had to boogie because incoming rounds were coming. But it was quite a trip seeing Bob Hope and Ann Margaret.

*I'll bet. Did you get much mail from home? Were you able to correspond?*

**John Salinas:** Yes, I was married, I had mail, but I could not answer mail, I could not read mail. I was on another trip entirely.

*How long would it take for a letter from home to get to you?*

**John Salinas:** I have no idea, sir, but not too long, I'm sure. But I tried not to, I tried to tell everybody I don't want to write, I don't want to do anything, I just want to get out of here. And I

was missing coming back, but sure, I sure don't know if all my boys made it. That's what's really sad.

*And you were drafted for a two-year enlistment?*

**John Salinas:** Two-year enlistment and I ended up doing six months in the stockade. I got in trouble when I came back.

*Did most of the guys that you were with, they were all two-year draftees as well for the most part?*

**John Salinas:** Most of them, yes sir, there was a few RA's.

*And in those cases, I imagine you knew when you were going to get out, right?*

**John Salinas:** Supposedly, yeah, whenever they TS date. When you have 30 days left in the service, you know, especially in Vietnam, you come out of the field, and when you got 30 days left back here in the States, you get out of duty and start clearing post, same thing.

*Did you guys know much about what was going on back home in the United States in terms of all the unrest?*

**John Salinas:** Not at all, not at all. I never paid attention to anything going back in the States. It was just, I mean I was in the bush, and the bush was pretty, took care of all your time and effort just to stay alive out there.

*What were the civilians like that you would encounter?*

**John Salinas:** Nice people. And the very thing that I have nowadays is the only person that I feel that was the best person out of there, the whole bunch in that theater, was Ho Chi Minh. My enemy was the greatest man on earth.

*Why do you say that?*

**John Salinas:** Because of his people, of all the bad, for 500,000 years anybody that wanted slaves would go into Vietnam and conquer 'em and take off with 60,000 people, you know. Centuries and centuries and centuries, and finally he stopped all of that. Do you know what I'm saying? And now those people are independent and they are very good, and that's very nice. And look at the French. What did they ever do for us? But no, I think my enemy is really my best friend.

*Did you have any encounters with Viet Cong while you were there?*

**John Salinas:** Yes I did, sir. I had some hand to hand combat, and I had to kill a bunch of them. Yes, I was in, I got in ambushes. I got in kill zones, you know what I'm saying? When you get in an ambush, you're in when they call it the shit hits the fan, oh man, you just have to throw down. They sprung some night ambushes, too, you know.

*Was there ever a way to really tell who was a Viet Cong?*

**John Salinas:** In my case, I sure did know who was Viet Cong.

*What were some of the tell-tale signs?*

**John Salinas:** The NVA wore regular uniforms with hard hats. The Viet Cong wore the little camouflage black stuff. And you could tell the North Vietnamese because they were more yellowish than the South Vietnamese were more brownish people. Real easy to tell. It was just like you can't tell a Mexican apart but I can because I'm Mexican. I can tell who's from Mexico, who's from Honduras. I know where they come from by the way they dress.

*So you had kind of an inkling then of who was who.*

**John Salinas:** Of who was who, yes I sure did. You betcha. And the Vietnamese people were just people in hooches. There was no roads. There's no neighborhoods. It was just villages, you know. It's dirt and mud, rice paddies, jungle. No electricity. Only in the cities, but out in the countryside there's nothing. It's just a jungle, really, really jungle. It was quite a trip. Boodoo, and the area that I was in is called Nuibaden, the black version mountain, oh, what a humungous mountain that was. You could see that baby 60 miles away from Saigon, in Saigon, you could see the Nuibaden where I was working at, and it took us four months to go around that baby, search and destroy. And we lost a lot of people around that place. It was very good. And Koochi, oh man, what a trip. I'm not sorry for what I did. I did what I did because I was serving my country. And there's no hard feelings with the South Vietnamese people as far as I'm concerned, at all. Instead of them being the gooks, I was the gook. I looked up gook, when I came back I went to college, I looked up gook in the dictionary and it's any foreigner in the country fighting, and I was the foreigner, so I was the gook. So I became, I find out that I'm the gook. I went five years to college when I came back, Indiana State University, and I was learning that Ho Chi Minh and all that stuff over there, they had every right in the world to do what they needed to do, every right on earth was for them. So you've got to explain, those people were very ferocious and tenacious and they had a right, and they had a reason, they had a cause, which outweighed ours. But we never lost. I always performed and we always performed good. We lost plenty of men, but at the same time, we were still trying to be individuals, you know, and in a country that man, it was totally different from the way we were raised up. These people didn't have nothing. They were still happy.

*During that two-year time, did you ever get any R&R leave?*

**John Salinas:** Yes I did, I went to Hawaii, to be with my wife, and got to see the Don Ho show.

*What was that like flying out of Vietnam and going to Hawaii and then you've got to go back?*

**John Salinas:** I know, six months and then I got to go back. I said goddummit, what am I gonna do, see my wife, kiss her, say hello, and then say well baby, maybe you'll see me in a coffin next time, and you are so right. That was quite a different feeling splitting it up in the middle. It was not that good.

*How much time did you get for R&R?*

**John Salinas:** One week, seven days.

*One week.*

**John Salinas:** And the most unique thing happened, now there, my little daughter was conceived at that moment, then my first born, Cindy Ann Salinas, was conceived at that moment, which was very unique at that time because you were high strung when you go on R&R to Hawaii. My God, what do they expect you to act like? I don't know. I looked like a monkey, I felt like a monkey after being in the jungle so long, you know. But I don't know, I had some good times over there, too. The boys, trying to stay civil was the main, important thing. We were always scared of 'em, but you weren't showing it. You threw down as a soldier and as a man, as the next man did, and there were some that froze, and I would get 'em out of it, you'd have to bring 'em out of it and they turned out to be good soldiers. But it was hell being in gorilla warfare, I'll tell you.

*What was your rank at that point?*

**John Salinas:** Specialist 4<sup>th</sup> Class. And then I was an Acting Sergeant, and they made me an Acting Jack they called it, and then for two weeks I had to take over as an Acting Platoon Leader, because we didn't have lieutenants in the fields. The lieutenants were getting killed left and right, bless their hearts. Those young boys were so god-dang-gum good.

*Tell us a little about, people have often read and heard about how a new second lieutenant didn't last very long in the field.*

**John Salinas:** I know. That is so sad, especially in my case, and the Tomahawks, we lost three lieutenants and the captain, and the only one left was my lieutenant, which was a very smart guy because he listened. He listened to me. I told him don't get up there, don't get in the bunch. It just takes one hit on that vehicle and you all are all gone. And no sooner than I said that, boom! There goes the captain and three lieutenants. And I had to tell my lieutenant, take over, sir. You're the captain now. Get us out of here. And I took over the first platoon, he took over the company, and off we went. We got out of there, and took our people out of there. But it happens, you know, it really happens in situations like that. The lieutenant one, lieutenant, oh what a West Point, what a nice guy, stands up, we're on the side of a mountain, you never charge a mountain, and he gets up and he runs over there and he says "charge!" Nobody goes with him. He runs up there and boom, there goes his little head right off his little body. That is so sad. And you have to develop an attitude damn, that's stupid. Better him than me. You know what I'm saying? You've got to use your senses.

*Kind of immune to it.*

**John Salinas:** I usually took my lieutenants under my belt, winged 'em, and they would let me be in charge until they caught wing and then they'd say OK, I got it. And they would live. That was great. But it's all a trial and effort, you know what I'm saying? And Vietnam was really, you couldn't rely on being a hero all the time or not scared or not a coward. You just had to be able to do it right then and there, and I had to do it because I wanted to be sure that all of us got out of there OK. And my biggest hero was running into Colonel Patton, General Patton's son.

*Oh really.*

**John Salinas:** Yeah, he saved us. There was only 5 of us left out of 36 men, and nobody could get to us, and we were on the edge, we were pulling road security of all things on the Denang highway, and the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne tried to get to us and they shot down six of their choppers. They

couldn't get in. The Vietnamese were moving a division to Saigon and we were right in their area. The 101<sup>st</sup> tried to get in on the south side. They couldn't get in to us. They got Patton on the phone and Patton said I'll be there, and that man, he really came in flying like six tanks. He still came in. They come roaring in there and surrounded us and saved us. There was only 5 of us left, and one of them was a medic, and he didn't fight because he was a conscientious objector, but he was sure taking care of everybody. What a medic he was, what a guy. I'd give my life for that man, and he would give his life for us. He'd run up and get up out there in the fire and go get you out of the kill zone with complete disregard of his own safety. I was really amazed with Doc Brooks, and he was a conscientious objector, check it out. But that man was Johnny on the spot, and you needed somebody like that when you're in combat because he's gonna be there. I'll get you, I'll get you, don't worry.

*You mentioned earlier that you had been wounded a couple of times.*

**John Salinas:** I had gotten hit but I never reported it. And when I got back here and got locked up, it started setting off those alarms, so they had to start removing the medal out of me. But that's no problem because I didn't want no purple heart and that was very stupid of me not to take the purple heart. I found out all these people were purple hearts get all kinds of benefits, and I didn't want to have no, because there was too many people hurt worse than me that needed to get on that chopper, not me. And then I was ordered in three days later or six days later because I got infected and they went in and removed some steel, and that should be on record. And I still didn't accept the purple heart.

*When you got hit, what were your thoughts?*

**John Salinas:** Oh, I screamed like a bitch. It hurt, and it was my own, it was an F4 that hit me. He came in and we were in close quarters, close contact, etc., and they said get down, and we got down and a little piece of shrapnel hit me right in the leg and just made me feel like it tore me to death, and it burnt like shit and I screamed like a sissy, and that was it. I had to take it out. In the pen, they took it out because it was setting off the alarms, or the mine detectors or whatever they call it. They operated and took it out for me finally.

*When you were wounded, did they just patch you up there in the field?*

**John Salinas:** Yeah, I got me some antibiotics, I screamed bad, it was really bad, and I screamed, and the doc just gave me some darvons. I didn't need no morphine or nothing like that. It was not a bad wound. It was so small and teeny weeny, I was embarrassed to take the dust off, so I didn't take the dust off, but three days later it got infected and I was walking very bad, and the doctor had to give me a bunch of antibiotics and said see, I should've dust you off. I said, no, no, come on, help me out. I don't want to be dusted off, because look, sir, when you get dusted off, you got to come back out, and that's what I did not want, to go in and come back out because it did happen. I had to go in because my hand got infected, I got hit, and my trigger fingers were all swollen up. Over there, infection was bad, you know what I mean, and my trigger finger, and the captain ordered me, said John, you'll be no good to me if that finger is frozen. How are you gonna shoot that M60? He said you are ordered in. Take the bumble bee this morning and go get that taken care of, and I'll be doggone if I didn't have to stay in base camp three days for them to break the swelling, and I'll be doggone when I was there, that's the very night that they hit Kuchi. They attacked Kuchi and downed 12 Chinooks in the helipath. Oh man, I never wanted to be in a big base camp like that. I'd rather be in the field.

*So you felt it was safer in the field.*

**John Salinas:** Right, because you didn't know where to shoot and there was incoming, the gooks were hitting the fence, but they went out and I saw it from where I was, two clicks away I could still see, and they were running in there on the field and blowing up those Chinook helicopters. Oh my God, they had tore into that fence that night, they killed the eight people who were guarding that bunk through there, a chick had gotten in there, a prostitute, whatever, and killed them all, and they infiltrated right through there. And that's in a big base camp, and base camp's got thousands of people, hundreds of bunkers and they get in. Kuchi was big, was huge, and they broke in. Doggone it I never wanted to be in base camp again. I wanted to be in the field where I could at least get in a foxhole. Finally I got out of base camp. Those three days, I said I got to go, get me out of here, man, or I'll never go.

*Do you remember, sir, where you were when the Tet offensive took place?*

**John Salinas:** I was there after the Tet. I got there in June of '68, so I was the cleanup boy, cleanup of Tet. Then August of '68, it was like another Tet. That's when the poo-poo hit the fan, on those ground attacks, they were moving a regiment to South Vietnam or whatever. I forget the intelligence it was. But they had to come right through our position to do it. Oh man, that was quite a bit, that ground attack. You can go through the Army for years and never go through a ground attack at night. You can go through an ambush. I went through plenty of ambushes. On the search and destroy, you worked into an ambush, that's called the shit hit the fan. And at night, I'd take out an ambush patrol, I'd take out 12 men, a click away from the fire support base at night, set up, and for ambushes and we started doing that in late '68. New strategy they called it. And it was working. We were controlling the countryside then.

*How much interaction did you have with the South Vietnamese military?*

**John Salinas:** Not too much. The only action that happened was when there was just five of us left that time I told you about, and Patton came to save us. The Vietnamese that were in front of us where we radioed in, we got South Vietnamese. They were in South Vietnamese uniforms and they weren't. They were NVA soldiers, stolen South Vietnamese uniforms, and they got up so close into our position and I had told the lieutenant, don't let 'em get that close, shoot over their head, tell them stop 200 meters away because of the RBG's, and we had this new lieutenant, and he said no, let 'em come up, they are South Vietnamese friendly. He was looking through the binoculars. And I said sir, call division. We should not have friendlies in our front. He called division, that takes a few minutes, and they are still walking in. They are still coming in slowly, sweeping. And then I see the ones with the 25, with the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division uniforms on the South Vietnamese Army, and behind me I see leaves moving. The rest of them have camouflage on their backs. I said sir, there should be no friendlies. And it was too late. Before they come in, the radio came back and said sir, you should have no friendlies in front of you. There's no operations in front of you. The lieutenant was just about to tell everybody and it opened up, boom, we started losing people left and right. And he wanted to deed him out, he got on his vehicle, ordered his six men to take off, and he was gonna leave the other five vehicles here and I told my people no, stay, because we had already unloaded the vehicles, threw everything into the culvert ditch, and was ready for a stand down, for a fight. And the lieutenant jumped and ran with his six men. He goes 25 meters, boom-boom-boom. There goes his whole vehicle and his whole men, and I crawl over there and save him. He was the only one left alive and I dragged him back down to the ditch, and he's blinded, he can't see, and he's screaming and hollering. I didn't want to tell him I told you not to go nowhere, you stupid idiot, and we started

fighting. And we stayed there all day. It was like we were fixin' to get killed, we were fixin' to get overrun, and Patton saved us, Colonel Patton, hot-dog it, boy, I was never so glad to see that man, and he had his daddy's gloves and goggles and his little whip. He pulls up there with his tank and he jumps off it and says who's in charge here? And we all looked up and said you are! And we got to go back to camp. Boy, we were tired and we were ready. Every ammo we had was almost gone, every grenade. I had tore, almost tore my finger off pulling safety pins off of the laws, our rockets and everything. We were down to almost nothing but it's a good thing we threw everything out of vehicles. It's a good thing my men listened to me instead of that stupid lieutenant. And we would be alive. He lost his people but we saved him, and I couldn't save his five people. But it was quite a day. I went through a lot of that stuff, sir. Man, that ground attack was still, actually I think I ever went through and then saved the day, Armando Flores, my hero, if I could ever see that man, I sure would thank him. And everybody else should, too, because he saved a bunch of lives that night. Armando Flores from San Antonio. I don't even know his number or nothing. I sure wished I could get it. That's my biggest thing is finding that boy and thanking that man. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have my son who is in the Air Force now, and good wife and a good family if it wasn't for Armando. I'm not kidding you.

*How long has it been that you've been trying to locate him?*

**John Salinas:** Oh, just I've looked in every phone book I could find, or maybe I should go online and see if I can find him. Maybe I can find him with, the Tomahawks are bound to have a reunion or something.

*You never know, there's ways to find people.*

**John Salinas:** I was in the Tomahawks, I was five months with the Tomahawks, and then I was four months with C Troop, and I was three months with the MPs in Kuchi. I got rewarded for doing such a good job at one of those fights or something at Tomahawks that they transferred me to what they called a house cat job with the 25<sup>th</sup> military police company back in Kuchi, escorting the convoys 60 miles to Taynan and 60 miles back each day. That was no turnkey job either. Those convoys are what would get hit, you know. And they needed a professional group of infantrymen so they formed a special group, six vehicles, six men to a vehicle, and we were to escort and help the MPs escort the convoys back and forth to Kuchee and Taynan. I tell you what, that was a job in itself. We mounted 50 calibers in the jeeps which was the first time for it to be done. I had some mechanics and engineers put double plates, steel plates in the back of the jeep and mount a tripod with a 50 caliber machine gun in the jeep, and it became SOP. Also we mounted in my Track 1-4, in the Tomahawks, a mini-gun that became the first mini-gun in an ATC because the mechanic I had said look, this little shoe could fit here, that mini-gun could sit right up here, and those boxes just like in an airplane, 8,000 round boxes can sit down here, and 10 of them can fit in below. Well we had one killer Track then. The mini-gun became SOP. They wrote it up right there in the field, and it became standard operating procedure, and they adopted it and put a mini-gun in the ATC's, which swept that jungle out good. We did it in '68.

*Tell us sir, you mentioned earlier, you get to 30 days left in country, they pull you from the field. Did you have a countdown?*

**John Salinas:** Everybody does, I'm short, I'm short, I'm short. But I could not leave my men. I couldn't leave my men. So I waited until I had four days left in country before I was ordered out of the field. I was waved my mat, see, because you're supposed to go in 30 days, John, you're going in. I said OK, I'll go in tomorrow, not a problem, not a problem. 30 days left, no

problem. So I went in when I had about three weeks left, I said OK, I'll go in. He said better go in, John. So I rode in on a convoy, and that night I'll be damned if they didn't get hit. So I went back out the next day like an idiot. I knew I'd get killed this time. I was already short, already home safe so to speak, and then I go back out. Then finally they had to order me out of the field, and that felt good to be ordered out of the field, instead of going in on your 30 days, they ordered me out of the field. I had four days left in country and had to clear 25<sup>th</sup> Division and make it to Tonsenut to catch the freedom bird home, and they wouldn't let me go because my hair was too long. What? What are you talking about? So I took a convoy instead of flying a copter, from Kuchi to Saigon, I took a convoy which it's dangerous to be on any convoy, from Kuchi to Saigon, and I'll be damned if we didn't get hit, and I'm on my way home. You've already turned in my weapon, right, so I had a grab a weapon around there which they had plenty, and fight my way into Saigon to come home, which was well worth it. Boy, getting on that freedom bird was a big lift, sir.

*Did you fly back into San Antonio or to Corpus?*

**John Salinas:** Travis Air Force Base, Oakland, California. What a trip that was.

*Was your wife waiting for you there, or was she back -?*

**John Salinas:** No, I had to go to San Francisco and take a hop to Corpus. And at that time there was demonstrators, and shit-pissing on people and calling us killers and pigs, you know, and I couldn't get on the airplane there in San Francisco because they were making all of us military from Vietnam go standby, so I took off my uniform and got into my t-shirt and got up to the town and got me a ticket, and then the rest of us started doing it. So we had to go buy a normal ticket to come home. They were really treating us bad, the son of a bitches, you know, but that's all right, I understand their reasoning. I understand it now. I really did. But back then I did not like that because I had nothing to do with the political part of it. I'm just glad to be home, thank you, and that was very bad, and when I came back and I made it to Corpus Christi, and I still had my uniform off, and I looked out the window and I saw Dr. Hector P. Garcia out there waiting on me with my family, I said uh-oh, I better get back in uniform. So I jumped back in my uniform and I was the last one off the doggone plane trying to get dressed. I wanted to be proud for my country and my people, and Dr. Garcia was a very good man to make it up, good little Mexicans, huh, and he did a good job, boy, he made us very patriotic and I'm very patriotic today. I stand behind the American flag no matter what. I'm an American first and then I'm a Mexican.

*That's great.*

**John Salinas:** That's the way I look at it. I'm an American first and that feels good because when I've got my boys with me, we didn't care what color we are. Every time any of us got hit, blood was red, period. Blood was red no matter who you were. So Vietnam really did wake up, it was really a very, very good traumatic part of my life, but I've had other more exciting than that.

*And you said when you got back to Corpus, did you have leave? You hadn't been discharged yet when you got home, right?*

**John Salinas:** You get a 30-day leave when you come home and then back to duty, Fort Stewart, Georgia. There's where I got into trouble.

*What happened with that?*

**John Salinas:** Oh, some dude, I had left to see my baby born in September, my Cynthia, and I was gonna go back. I went back and he had gotten busted with drugs, one of my best friends, so-called best friend, right? And when I come back, I left my car there, and when I fly back, I get in my car and everybody tells me don't mess with that boy because he got busted by the CID or whatever it was, and I got 18 days left and I'm clearing post, right, 30 days, you know, and I have 18 days left to derose properly, with the Spec 4 class and all that. And this guy had gotten busted and he set me up. He had borrowed my car, he had hid some dope in there, and I got busted with his dope. And see the only way that came out right because of my lawyer, Captain Robert E. Lee Self, was my lawyer, Captain Robert E. Lee Self, check that out, and then I said just put the guy with the captain and listen to him and let's ask him why he set me up. And he set that up. I was three months in the stockade. He set up a meeting and he heard the man say I'm sorry, J.J., I had to set you up because they had me by the balls, J.J. I had to set somebody up. I said why me? You know I just had a baby and my wife and I'm getting out in 18 days, why me? I'm sorry, J.J. And Captain Robert E. Lee Self told me, he said John, he said Robert, get out of here. The MP's were all there and everything and he said John, go back to the stockade and no matter what happens in here today, you are my last case for defense. My next cases are prosecution and I will see that you get an honorable discharge and get out of the service is what I heard from that man. Because he heard that they did, they set me up. It was just too traumatic. I was not into that crap and they did set me up, and I was lucky that Captain Robert E. Lee Self heard it. He heard it himself and sure enough, about three months later, Salinas, report to the sally port, back to duty for two weeks that I had left, back to duty and an honorable discharge. Oh my God, I was so thankful. I sure wouldn't have had to come back to Corpus with a dishonorable discharge. I would have been embarrassed.

*You didn't get to keep your rank though?*

**John Salinas:** No, I got reduced down to private.

*Even though –*

**John Salinas:** I just wanted that honorable discharge. Because I did serve honorably, I dad-gum sure did.

*It just seems like a crime to have taken your rank, too, if you were set up.*

**John Salinas:** I know it. But see, the Captain, he told me, he said don't worry about it. I'll see that you get an honorable discharge. And see, they did not take away the payments to my wife either, so she was still getting paid while I was in the stockade for six months, over my ETS state. I was six months in the stockade over my ETS state, over some BS. That was so hard and when I got back, my marriage didn't last for shit, needless to say because there was a big difference there. My old lady wasn't gonna put up with that drug stuff, and boy, I'm telling you. So we didn't stay together long. That destroyed that. And the only thing that's helped me now to make it through all of this is my present wife who we've been about 20-30 years, what a blessing she was. She is my psychologist, everything. And she's from Seattle, Washington, and she's very sharp and her father was an engineer with NASA and I'm glad that my son took after them because he graduated from Virginia Tech as an Air Force cadet, and he'll be making Captain in December. So I'm very proud.

*Yeah, you should be very proud. That's amazing.*

**John Salinas:** And he just came in, too, and he's here today and he'll be here until Tuesday.

*That's great.*

**John Salinas:** And they're gonna go see grandma tonight, they're gonna go to the ranch. It was so nice.

*That's good to hear.*

**John Salinas:** But no, Vietnam was quite a trip and my respect goes to the enemy. They are not an enemy. They were really good people and we should not have been there. I really feel that way. After studying history and studying everything, I've come to that conclusion, that Ho Chi Minh was really an honorable man, very honorable man. But that ground attack at night was really a trip, sir.

*Yeah. What was your opinion of the South Vietnamese people?*

**John Salinas:** They had no liking for those drug lords or whoever was in charge of the South Vietnamese government. They were still peasants. It was not helping them in any kind of situation at all. You know how like when we get something, we get garbage picked up, we have services, services, services. When they get a government, they don't get nothing. It's still a dirt road. They still have no electricity. They are still getting water from a well and they are still raising their own pigs, live in their living room. Over there the pigs live in the living room. There's no living room, it's the pig room, in every Vietnamese countryside house. That's why you can smell it when you first landed. But that was an amazing source of their food though, see, aside from rice, and boy did I see plenty of rice paddies. And like being in mechanized infantry during the wet and dry seasons, you're on the road and then you're in the bush, in the dry season, and you're on the road during the wet seasons, and then you sweep in and out towards your vehicles clearing the area. It was quite, Vietnam was so beautiful. What a place that was. I worked in the iron triangle, I worked in the hobo woods, the borlo woods, the forlay woods, and I worked in the Michelin rubber plantation. Michelin, you hear 'em talking Michelin tires. 72 grid squares of full-grown rubber trees, and there's where I lost my boys that I could not recover 'em, and they'd grown up in those rubber trees. And I never buy Michelin tires for that reason because I don't want to be rolling on them. Because I did, I lost my two billy goats in there, and we couldn't recover their bodies, so they had to grow up in there, you know what I'm saying? So that was bad, and I just don't buy Michelin tires. It's a French company and I just don't admire that at all. But he's on it by now, I'm sure they do. But doggone it, that was bad being in a Michelin rubber plantation and then coming home and riding Michelin tires, too. I couldn't do that. It's like the same thing with this thing about Jane Fonda. I used to hate her with a purple passion, but now that I found out that Ho Chi Minh was really a good person, I envy her for being able to see that man before he died.

*You don't feel like she -*

**John Salinas:** I don't, I just think she's fine. I don't hate her no more.

*I think you're probably the only Vietnam vet I've ever talked to that said that.*

**John Salinas:** Well they better snap because they should snap and if they're anyone like Pruitt, I can understand, that dude that went to sleep out there on the LP on me, after being nine months in country. He turned out to be a bad nemesis because I was the one that signed him to LP, right, and he came back and got promoted to the captain's \_\_\_\_, became the captain's delta, and he told some stuff to the captain about me, which got the captain under his confidence, and it cost me my sergeant stripes. Because I chewed his butt out for going to sleep on guard duty, on LP. I started to shoot him. He almost got killed, almost killed Thomas and the other guy that was with him because of his stupidity, and he had nine months in country, and he knew I was the only one that knew that. And he put bad vibes on me. He was going down after me and I didn't know that. He was a bad man behind me. It's a good thing he changed out of my platoon.

*It's interesting to me that after coming back from Vietnam years later that you don't have any ill will towards Jane Fonda or the North Vietnamese.*

**John Salinas:** No I don't, I sure don't. I'd like to shake her hand and tell her I'm sorry for being mean to her. Really, I swear to God, and Ho Chi Minh, too, because we did our service, I'm proud of my country, we did what we were supposed to do, we served our country, we did it honorably, and with courage, and I did mine the way I was taught to do it. And I had no misgivings, no misbeliefs at all, and I did not leave anybody. As a matter of fact, I would risk my own butt to save 'em so that we could get in and get out of there and get off contact before I do get it. Everything had a purpose and a meaning. My actions were to speed up everybody else's actions to get us through with this and get out of it. And it worked numerous times. Everybody said I was gun-ho, but that's not true. I was just concerned about all of us boys. You could call me gun-ho if you want to, but no, I got up and I ran in there just to get those three boys out of there, and brought them out the best way I could so we could break contact and leave, and it worked.

*Well, sir, I really appreciate you taking the time today to share some of your stories with us and with anyone that may listen to this years from now -*

**John Salinas:** One that's really sad that I don't want to tell because I don't want it to be proved, it's about Flaco and Chango. I only met them one day and they were from San Antonio and they had never seen the Alamo, and that's the first thing they said they were gonna do when they get home was to go see The Alamo. At 3 o'clock in the morning, whatever time it was -

*And they were from San Antonio?*

**John Salinas:** Yeah, and scratch their names on the wall. I only met 'em once for eight hours, and Flaco was like Osta de la Hoya, and Chango was like Paul Rodriguez, exactly copy, kidding and playing with each other, they were such good, unique guys. And they got killed, and one of them had drawn the picture of The Alamo on the road in Vietnam, on that dirt road. There's no asphalt, you know. They had clawed up there because Flaco got hit, Chango wouldn't leave him, he went back into kill zone to get him out, and he got hit, too, and so they both, and they had to leave them in there overnight, and the next morning, as we were pulling out we found their bodies three football fields away from the south gate of Kuchi in the road, with their hearts cut out up under and stuck under their armpits, and I don't know if the gooks did that or who did that, but somebody had drawn a picture of The Alamo before they died on that dirt road in Vietnam. That was really something. I never want to say hello to anybody again because you meet some good people like that and I tell you what, I bet you their parents really do miss those boys. They were such great fellows. They made me and Armando feel like we were heroes

because they had a housecat job. They were roving mechanics for the cut boys and they would go out every other day on the road just to work on trucks that broke down if need be. But they would sleep every night in base camp, and that next day that they went out and that was the first time I told you I had that R&R and that stand down after being four and a half months in country, we finally got a stand down, that's when we met them and they were coming over to our barbecue for the night, our stand down barbecue. And they didn't come that night and I said I wonder what happened to them. We went to see and they were dead. The next morning we found them, and that was so sad about them. And they wanted to come to Corpus, you know, where I lived, to go to the harbor bridge, go fishing, they wanted me to take 'em, you know, and they said and please don't ask us about The Alamo. He said the gooks, the Chinese, the Vietnamese, everybody always asks us about The Alamo, and we've never been there. Those two little Mexican boys never had been to The Alamo, and they live on Guadalupe Street there in San Antonio, which is probably a stone's throw away to The Alamo, and they had never gone into The Alamo to see it, and they were gonna go there, they didn't care if they landed at 3 o'clock in the morning, and scratch their name on the wall. Flaco and Chango. And man, they won't get to do that. Those boys got killed and I don't even want to know their names because I'd cry with their mamma and their daddy and their brothers and sisters, or whoever had 'em, they were such good boys. And there's many stories like that. It can be traumatic and you can keep your own self in check.

*Well we appreciate you sharing some of your stories with us. Our goal is to save these interviews for posterity, so future generations can hear 'em and -*

**John Salinas:** And we should bless Armando Flores saved all of us that night. If it wasn't for Armando Flores of San Antonio, we would be dead, I'm telling you the truth.

*Well we've got your words saved about him now and -*

**John Salinas:** He's such a great man. I wish I could find him.

*Yes sir, well I'm gonna go ahead and wrap up the interview now, sir, but I want you to know that everyone here at the Land Office is very appreciative of your service and sacrifice for our nation.*

**John Salinas:** I would do anything for my nation and ya'll would be proud of me. I would not break the law.

*Well we are proud of you and everyone that served, and we'll make copies of this interview and at some point down the road, hopefully not too long from now, we'll get copies of this mailed to you on disk so you'll have that, and then if you have any pictures or anything along those lines that you want us to put on our web site, you can also send those to me and we can scan 'em and put 'em on our web site. It's gonna take a little time because we've had a lot of interviews done just recently, but we'll get the disk and all that stuff sent to you. And you've got my phone number too so feel free to give me a call at any time.*

**John Salinas:** Okie dokie, Mr. Crabtree. I really appreciate it, sir. Vietnam was quite a trip and I'm still proud of my country no matter what. I would serve it again.

*Yes sir, well we hope you have a great weekend and thank you very much for letting us interview you.*

**John Salinas:** Thank you, sir.

*[End of recording]*