

John C. Swiderski Oral History Interview

November 17, 2012

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Hansley: This is Pritzker Military Library's Oral History Program, Stories of Service. This is Chris Hansley. Today is November 17th, 2012. I will be interviewing John C. Swiderski, a Vietnam War veteran. John, welcome.

Swiderski: Thank you.

Hansley: Could you tell us where and when you were born, please?

Swiderski: I was born in Chicago in 1946. I lived on the Northwest side of Chicago, off of Milwaukee Avenue, until I was about 6 years old and my Father built a house just outside of Chicago and we moved to the suburbs. And I lived there another 20 years, that's where I lived. I was one of 13 children. I even brought a picture of them.

Hansley: That was a good picture.

Swiderski: Yes! Yeah, we got it together for our Mother.

Hansley: What line of work were your parents in, your Dad and your Mom?

Swiderski: My Dad was in the TV repair in the early 50s. My Mother was a homemaker. She had 13 children so that was all she could handle. And we all grew up working for our Father on weekends, working our way through high school and college. It was very interesting. That's way I climb roofs and clean leaves out, doing antennas on Saturday. Now you don't hear about antennas, but that's what we learned to do.

Hansley: Was there any military background in your family?

Swiderski: Yes, my Father actually tried to join the Army. He had one bad eye and thought he'd be refused, but they took him because of his technical background. And he actually worked for the time on radar, in the United States on the Air Force bases.

Hansley: What was going on in the country when you were going up?

Swiderski: The Korean War had just ended. I didn't understand it as a child. But it was a war and you saw it on TV. Growing up, obviously Vietnam, you could see on TV at

suppertime. My Father would put the TV on in the kitchen area. Everybody had to be quiet so we could listen to the news. Very interesting, one thing I've learned, when my youngest brother, I think he was 5 or 6, when he heard the news that they were showing pictures of jungles in Vietnam and some gorillas (guerillas) were killed, he said why didn't they just take them to a zoo. We didn't explain anything to them. But, you did see films of Vietnam.

Hansley: You decided to go to college. Where did you go and what did you study?

Swiderski: I went to Loyola University and I studied Accounting. I did graduate with a Bachelor in Business Administration Major in Accounting. I was actually looking forward to trying to join the FBI. I know that was one of the things, a prerequisites either a lawyer background or accounting background. So that's where I attended.

Hansley: What did you do right after graduation?

Swiderski: Right after graduation I took a two week break and then I joined Arthur Anderson Auditors in Chicago. They had their headquarters here, and I was actually earning \$800 a month. That was pretty good making \$9,600 a year. And I figured I was going to get my first car pretty soon before summer, but I got my draft notice instead. I was in basic training Labor Day weekend.

Hansley: Where did do your basic training?

Swiderski: Basic training was in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Actually the Army flew us down there. It was the first time I was on an airplane. We had 8 weeks of basic. They gave us, I think I got a 10 day leave. Then I was forwarded to my first base camp.

Hansley: When you came back on leave, what was the reaction of your family as far as you going overseas and your friends what did they think?

Swiderski: After basic I actually went forward to Fort Hood, Texas. And I served out my first year in the Army in an AWOL apprehension section. And I thought just after I turned one year in the Army I figured ok, for my second, this would be a great place to be at. But when I got back to my barracks I got my orders to ship out to Vietnam.

Hansley: When you were back into basic, when you were there you were a little older because of being a college graduate, did the other fellows treat you more like an older brother or just one of the guys?

Swiderski: We were all screamed at like anybody else. We had a college education, but the Sergeant Stone didn't have a high equivalency so they jumped on us a lot. We were all treated the same way. We were trained with the National Guard troops going into basic training. It was just a matter of getting through the day. We had some young people 18 – 19 years old. A lot of people that I was with had actually graduated from college, so they were in their 20s already, because our student deferment ran out.

Hansley: What was your assignment at the 256th MP Company at Fort Hood?

Swiderski: Basically I was taking over a position for a Sergeant that was leaving the Army after 2 years. I would make phone calls, keep in contact with the local police, to find out if any military were there and they wanted to bring them back to our base or they were serving a criminal sentence of some type. I worked with the Texas Rangers, I worked with the FBI, I also worked with the Texas Highway Patrol. They don't call them State Police, because in the South they don't call their State Police, State Police, they're safety officers, that goes all the way back to the Civil War. I thought it very interesting, I came up with a couple ideas how they could speed up their filing system, I got a \$100 reward for that and the Army obviously took \$20 out for taxes right away. Then I also received another award for how they could fill out legal forms, basically a Federal warrant for someone's arrest, and instead of typing with carbon paper, which people may not know what that is today, but back then, they would try and put five sheets in and type it, well after the 2nd and 3rd sheet it was just mush. And I would always have to send them back to them and have some officers come into our area and read me the riot act. And I'd say, "Sir Fort Sam Houston, our 4th Army Headquarters, they won't accept this." And I just showed them how they could save time on this by putting in a mimeograph sheet, type it and you could run off 100 copies, and they'd all look the same. They thought it was great. I got \$200, but then the government also took out their taxes.

Hansley: Gotta have taxes.

Swiderski: Yes.

Hansley: When you were sent to Vietnam from 1970 to 1971...

Swiderski: Yes.

Hansley: Did you come home on any kind of a leave or anything like that?

Swiderski: No. Actually before going to Vietnam I was allowed to take a 30 day leave, I used it up, I thought that was kind of nice, but of course I used it up, but that was fine. I

did meet the Sergeant Major there, that used to work at Fort Hood, Texas in the 256th MP Company. The funny thing was on the Policeman Company you would go out to like a football field and line up with your duffle bag ready to go someplace in Vietnam. And they called out my name, and I came to the stand out there and 2 MPs are standing there and everybody is laughing that these 2 MPs are going to take me—which is fine because I always worked with MPs. So they put in the sedan and took me over to the Headquarters. And I saw the Sgt. Maj., I didn't know he was there, and the first thing he said, "Ski"—they always called me Ski—"what do you want to do here?" I said, "I want to go home." He laughed and said, "I can't do that, what else can you do?" "Well, I'm an Auditor." "Is that like bookkeeping?" "Well it handles numbers." He said "Run across the Highway"—Highway 1 ran right through Long Binh—"and find this Maj. He's got some guys who works for him to do auditing. I said, "Fantastic." In fact I met two people there that came from Fort Hood, Texas before I did. So I thought this will be nice, I think. So that's how it started over there.

Hansley: Over in Vietnam?

Swiderski: Yes, in Vietnam.

Hansley: When you came home on that 30 day leave before going over, did you come back to visit Loyola, and what happened there?

Swiderski: Yes, I did go back to visit Loyola University, the Lakeshore Lewis Tower campus, and I saw some of my fraternity brothers, but at that time everybody was "Hell, we don't want to go" slogans and they really kind of shunned you away, because they didn't want to have anything to do with you, because if you didn't protest they might get drafted. So I said OK. So I never went back there. Just spent the 30 days, in fact I was called to Fort Sheridan for a while, within that 30 day period for interviews. They wanted to put me on graves registration and burial detail. I said, "Nah, I don't think and could handle all the emotion there." "But then you're going to Vietnam." I said, "That's where I'm going." And that's how I ended up going to Vietnam.

Hansley: Where in Vietnam were you stationed?

Swiderski: I was stationed in Long Binh, which was just a little North of Saigon. I found a few years later that Long Binh was the largest Army Post in Vietnam. Very large place, it was almost as big as Des Plaines I realized on the measurements. But, the thing was, three days a week we went someplace else, in Vietnam as auditors. South Vietnam was broken into four sectors. So we would breakup, we had 21 men, and they would go into different teams, and go as far North as Da Nang and as far South as Rach Gia, Cu Chi, Chu Lai and Da Lat. Definitely a lot of

traveling and then some of the letters I see that I wrote to my brother, he was in the Army at the Fort Aberdeen Proving Grounds, in Maryland, I didn't write a lot of this to my parents, but I explained to them where we were going and sometimes we'd be out, we'd come back to the base in Long Binh, get a change of clothes and go out for three days. You didn't change your clothes for three days. It wasn't like going to a Laundromat or anything like that. So, it was very interesting.

Hansley: What was your job there and how did you get to and from these different places?

Swiderski: Basically we were set up to make sure that the units that had non-appropriated funds, that was not government funds, that they were following some rules and regulations, there was a lot of waste, fraud, any time there's some money somebody is trying to take it from someone. We did fly out with Huey's. I loved the Huey Helicopters. I get goose bumps when I hear a helicopter blade opening up someplace. You'd see on TV the C-130 cargo planes a C-7 was much smaller than that which we'd fly out on, or the C121s. And one time we actually flew in a C-5 Galaxy plane which is the largest cargo plane in the United States that they had at that time. It was going back after bringing in ammunition for Da Nang, they were going back and they were trying to clear out the airport. It was wall to wall people standing around trying to get out. We were there three days and the said, "Hey anybody that wants to go back", those planes didn't have seats, They just laid you on the cargos and put the cargo belts over 5 or 10 guys in a row, it had a garbage can in the front of the plane and you flew out, but that was nice, at least you knew you were going back someplace. And I loved that. We did ride out on duce and a half's, which is a two and a half ton truck you see in the movies, basically I believe it held six men, you sat on a bench on each side of the walls, and the funny thing, not funny thing, but I realized that when you get in there the cargo, there's somebody always responsible for loading a truck or a plane, you call him the Cargo-master, and he has two flak jackets you see, and I thought one's large and one's small. He said, "No, put one on and sit on the other one." And I said, "It's going to be a bumpy ride?" And the Cargo-master said, "I hope it's not, because in case you rode over some explosive the flak jacket might help you." I figured okay, I'd rather fly in a helicopter, but it was interesting, a lot of traveling. Yes.

Hansley: Okay. I understand there was one incident with a Huey where it started to takeoff and then it lost power?

Swiderski: Yes.

Hansley: Tell us about that please.

Swiderski: Yes, we were coming out of little base camp, probably half as big as a football field, it had barbed wire around it and a couple of little buildings. Got on it, strapped in and, I don't think we got more than 5 – 6 feet off, when suddenly he lost power and he came down like a ton of bricks, really bounced. There was no fire, but all I heard was, "Get the seatbelt off and get out of the plane." Which we did, we ran maybe twenty – thirty yards away from it, turned around, and he said "We not going anyplace today." They lost their hydraulics. It was just dripping all over the plane. So that wasn't going to go anyplace, so that's when we got on a convoy. But, I don't think anybody was hurt that I know of. But it happened and you get on with things.

Hansley: While going from post to post, to check on these clubs, did you feel that you were in danger at any time? And if you were, was this common?

Swiderski: I was probably more concerned about being in Long Binh. My first two months in Vietnam, I thought I was going to die. Because of the unknown. What you saw on TV and everything they're showing you, from what I remember, all they showed you was combat, hooches being burned and firefights. From what I understand, 70% of the 2.6 million veterans that were in Vietnam or around Vietnam never were in combat, 70% of them. So that was a good chance. But once you got into a convoy or a helicopter, you were fair game for anybody to shoot at you, which luckily nothing bad ever happened. But again I was there in 70 – 71 when we were turning the country over to the South Vietnamese Military. And they seemed to be doing a pretty good job of keeping it safe for us. The only time I realized, my Father used to teach us when we were kids, you know you're always responsible for what happens to you I said, "Okay." What I found out, is when we were flying out of Oakland going over to Vietnam, that's when they give you jungle uniforms and stuff. And we flew into Alaska, they were changing the crews on the planes and then they fuel it up. We realized it on the runway the plane behind us crashed on takeoff. And we got to Japan and people were asking, "What did it look like." You know, you don't look back when you're flying on airplanes. There were several, some twenty or thirty people killed in that plane taking off, which is kind of ironic. Then went from Tokyo, we flew into Saigon, Tan Son Nhut, we were there. I knew that you just don't do anything stupid and do what you're supposed to do.

Hansley: In your job in Vietnam, could you explain what V-O-M-A is? And where these clubs that were doing this, got their provisions from?

Swiderski: Okay, yes, V-O-M-A is Vietnam Open Mess Agency. Again it was non-appropriated military funds, so basically the members in that area, or that base camp, would give \$5 a month, then they would buy pizzas, or hamburgers or

chicken or steak and have it on a Sunday night, a little bit better than the mess hall. They would get their beer and that they could get it through the supply chains. There was an agency, the C-P-A, the Central Purchasing Agency setup so the military didn't get ripped off when they were buying things, so that they knew they were buying them from an approved vendors, because if you wanted to write a book on how to rob some areas, that everything that you could do was done there. I mean you would have a Sergeant in charge of a large club system, again at one point you had 500,000 troops spread out, and he set it up that his wife had a pizza company in San Francisco, and there were 50,000 pizza shells in a warehouse that they bought for this unit, they were rotting in this warehouse, they got paid, and the soldiers didn't get anything. So they were trying to setup regulations to watch over this. And I thought we were definitely helping people. We didn't try to get on anybody's back, you had people doing books there that did bookkeeping in high school, and they really weren't sure what they were supposed to be doing. I'd take some index cards and at night and show them how to fill them out for inventory and things like that. And most of the units that we worked with, they were trying to the best to keep track of this. It was nice to have a steak dinner once in a while. And that worked pretty good.

Hansley: In the course of going to these different bases and things, did you ever interact with any of the Army of Vietnam soldiers?

Swiderski: We actually had some of them as co-pilots on our helicopters were South Vietnamese troops, which was kind of an eerie feeling. I didn't feel threatened, but it's just "Okay, I hope everybody knows who everybody is around here!", because he's behind the stick of the helicopter flying for us. But it was kind of interesting. We didn't really, most of the South Vietnamese troops, were to be out in the field, because they were supposed to be protecting us now, taking over. So, we did come into contact the mama-sans that cleaned our hooches on the bases, they were basically wooded buildings that had screening on the outside, to get better airflow through the buildings, they didn't have any doors on them. They were just some plywood lying between the two by fours so there was a foot off the ground, you'd get a good airflow through the building. The mama-sans, my understanding was, they were widows of Vietnamese soldiers, so they got first right to work on the bases. We basically paid them \$2 a month to do our uniforms twice a week. They'd sweep out the hooches and stuff and at Christmas time we'd get them a carton of cigarettes which they'd sell on the local market. Our cigarettes back there at the time were because there were no taxes was \$2 a carton. So it was kind of interesting. They were very nice, I thought it was kind of interesting, the first time we would walk into our hooch, and the mama-sans were trying to speak English, and they would ask you, "Where is GI from?" And you'd

say "Chicago." Well the mama-sans would just point their fingers at you like they were using a machine gun, and that's what they knew about Chicago. I'd say, "Yeah mama-sans." Another thing I thought was kind of interesting with the mama-sans, they would iron our uniforms with starch and they would listen to a little radio and they were listening to soap operas in Vietnamese. And the mama-sans at the beginning of the show the mama-sans would march around their little ironing board, their national anthem, and then they would listen to soap opera, "Mama-san why are you crying?" "Oh GI goes out to war, and the lady's home with her baby." Okay, I guess it's all over the world. So that was kind of interesting.

Hansley: Did you ever have any interaction with any of the higher ranking officers, like Post Commanders or higher or guests who came in?

Swiderski: Yes, since Long Binh was supposed to be one of the best secured areas, they actually had their bunkers underground, and they did have some of their Generals, 3 star Generals. The one in fact in one of the office buildings, a little office room they had for a chapel, and whenever I could I'd go into the chapel in the morning for services and there was a 3 star General there. It was interesting, when you're walking out and he's in front of you, everybody standing on the steps turns around and salutes him. Well then you gotta return the salute to the other officers. So I thought that was kind of nice. The first time I ran into a General actually in Vietnam, I actually ran into him, I had just came out of the little mess hall, turned the corner and bang, I ran into this guy. I'm laying on the ground, ready to cuss at him, and I'm looking up at 5 or 6 officers all standing there. And their mouths are all dropped like, I looked and there's stars on this guy, holy cow, so I didn't cuss, I jumped up and I saluted him right away. First thing he says, "Son, you okay?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Okay, be careful" and he went on. So I definitely ran into a General there. But, some of the officers, it was interesting, rank has its privileges. I'm sure you've heard of that. Well when you get into a helicopter and you're sitting there with 5 guys, everybody's strapped in, and the Captain's, the pilot's going to take-off and he suddenly shuts it down. And everybody out and at attention, so you jump out and go to attention, that's what you automatically do. And suddenly a full bird Colonel comes on, must have been a Doctor, a woman Doctor. She was the first one in, which means she's the farthest away from the doors when they're open. Then they loaded the officers and the Sergeants and here I'm a Spec 4 and I get in the plane and share my gum with the gunner. And he says, "Okay, we have to close the doors." I said, "Wow, is that to protect the Colonel or us?" They actually flew higher, because there was a Colonel on the plane. "Oh gee, they didn't do that for us." But that's alright. I got a lot of pictures hanging out the window or door flying a lot of places. Yeah, but it

definitely has its privileges. Some of the nicest people were officers. Our CO was a Major. He was actually a Sergeant in the Korean War. And his officers of the unit were killed and he was promoted, field promotion, to an officer. And he worked his way up and he was a Major in Vietnam. So, he was a very nice guy. Some of them it went to their heads and they were not nice guys.

Hansley: Do you remember his name?

Swiderski: No I don't.

Hansley: Okay.

Swiderski: Yeah, I'm sorry.

Hansley: That's alright.

Swiderski: Very nice guy. His wife was a teacher in East Chicago, so they used to send us coloring pictures for the soldiers and we'd share them with each other. And we would send them our name and stuff like that. It was kind of nice. I could tell you the name of the officer I didn't like. Tell you how bad it was. We had flown out of a briefing up in Chu Lei, and it was after supper, we never, didn't have any breakfast, lunch or dinner. We debriefed him and he ran us a riot act, so we're walking out of the office, down near some desks down each side of the hallway there. Believe it or not this was the Judge Advocates Office, they're all lawyers. I must have had a really nice expression on my face, because someone said, "We're taking up a collection for the first guy that shoots him." I didn't say anything. My two Sergeants knew that I carried a .45 with me. Uniforms were so loose that you could do that. Well I said, "I'm not going down without a fight." I said, "No, I'm not going to pull it today." He was lucky I guess. But there were a lot of nice people. They were just trying to do their job. Yes.

Hansley: More nice than not?

Swiderski: Yes, oh yes definitely. Otherwise you couldn't take it, yes.

Hansley: Where you able to go on any leave during your time overseas?

Swiderski: Yes, you did get R&R. It was 10 days. I put in for R&R, you had 3 locations, and I put in for Hawaii. Contacted my parents and they set up that they would meet me in Hawaii. We were in Rainbow Towers for a week. It was the hardest thing coming back, getting on that plane to come back. Hawaii, when you hear about the real world, it's just a sensation that, "Wow, okay I'm going back to someplace that don't want to go." But, it was nice, I took pictures. I brought a lot of pictures back with me. So, it was nice, very relaxing, very relaxing.

Hansley: How did you spend your down time when you were in camp?

Swiderski: Yes, in Long Binh, we were lucky. The USO had supplied us a little pre-fab building and a dark room, and equipment however they got it. And we could actually develop. I learned how to develop film, I learned how to print it, and I also learned how to expose it for different pictures to make them look good. And the time really flew by quick. That was nice to do that.

Hansley: Did the USO provide the photographic liquids and things?

Swiderski: Yes, they did.

Hansley: And the other materials?

Swiderski: All you needed was your own negatives and it was really nice. I mean you were in a different world when you were inside there. It was very nice.

Hansley: Did you write home a lot and if you did, who did you write to? And did you send different letters to different people? As in, you might send you Mom one letter, but send your Dad a different letter to his office.

Swiderski: Yes, I did send letters to my Mom that she could read to my brothers and sisters. I did send letters for my Father and the ones that were “Real” I sent to my brother Tom when he was in Aberdeen Proving Ground in the Army.

Hansley: Okay.

Swiderski: So there were 3 different types: A, B, and C.

Hansley: When was your tour of duty up in Vietnam?

Swiderski: It was in August of '71. It was, interesting everybody had calendars on their walls, putting X's through the dates. “Man it looks like you're in prison or something.” But anyway, they'd send your orders in your morning report and the clerk would tell you, “Okay Ski, get all your stuff together, you're going.” Once a month, we would have a party. Try to have a party for the guys that were leaving. So you knew you were coming up to the next shift, which was pretty nice. But you grabbed all you stuff. It was very interesting, you had your footlocker, a wooden box, people I'm sure have seen that. I actually have a picture of one that I actually mounted to a wall for a while with 2x4s. But we have to take them down because the inspector was coming, you couldn't have that, it wasn't military like. It sure made sense to me. But, you grabbed all of your stuff and went in to check it out. You basically went into an area, where they had large 4x8 sheets of plywood and you dumped all of your stuff out there and they looked for contraband. If you had pictures they asked if you had any dead bodies on the

pictures. You loaded back up and they had a check list. You had to make sure you had all the stuff that was government property that they were going to keep. You kept one dress uniform, your fatigues, they didn't want those back anymore. Your Army jacket, which I still have, I thought it was interesting, you could tell some of the newbies, what we call newbies, somebody who had just got to Vietnam. Their uniforms were all starched and they were really green and I'd say, "Oh man." They're on one side of the table and I'm watching the infantry guy come in there and he just dumps down, there's dust on it and mud on it, canteens everything. The clerk's telling him, "You know you gotta straighten this up so I can count it." And this guy reaches across the 4x8 sheet of plywood, grabbed him by the throat and he says, "Check everything off now or I'll kill ya." And the guy checked everything off and he walked out. I guess he wanted to go home sooner. But, believe it or not, within 24 hours we were in Fort Dix, New Jersey. And it was a weekend. I guess it was Friday night or whatever it was. And they told us that we'd have to wait over the weekend, until Monday, because they don't work on weekends. And we're thinking, "Are you kidding us. Way did they fly us over here and now we're going to wait." Somebody came up with the idea, "Well can we type up whatever paperwork you needed to release us on? We have enough people that can type here." And they agreed. We actually processed the paperwork. And then they'd send you down the hallway and they'd say, "Okay, there's a Doctor on one side and a Dentist on the other. If you have any illnesses tell them right away, otherwise get to the end and you can check out." And we did, the next morning, believe it or not, we were going to fly back to the United States, I mean we're in New Jersey, we were going to fly back to home. It was kind of interesting because actually the Sergeant at that time, now again this was '71, he said, "If you have civilian clothes, wear them, because people have ideas about uniforms." But I believe everybody wore their uniform. And in 48 hours I was at O'Hare Airport waiting for my duffle bag. And I met a guy I went through basic training with, two years before that. He worked on diesel engines and he was waiting for his duffle bag, and he was going to Lockport, Illinois. And we're talking and he says, "I wanted to show my Father my medals. But I didn't [get mine when] I got out. I said, "Aww, that's a shame." I had an Army Commendation Medal from Fort Hood, Texas with me. When I got my duffle bag, I gave it to him, the medal. I said, "Here take this with ya." He said, "You sure?" I said, "Yeah, I'm going to get another one once I get my orders straightened out. So, because they didn't give you all your medals when you left, they were just trying to get you out. And he was really happy after that. That was something you see in movies, the camaraderie. I felt it. I know a lot of other people felt it, that there's something there that you don't even speak about. And you're going to cover one another. And we did it even in basic, we had a young

kid that didn't want to go through the night firing, you do low crawls and they're blowing up and exploding things in the field has you're crossing is like a football field. You shouldn't be able to get hurt if you don't climb on the wrong things. And they're shooting live ammunition across with tracers. And our Sergeant tells us, "If any of you guys lose your weapon out there, everybody goes back again." "Oh man! I don't want to do this, it's getting late at night." And this one kid wouldn't even climb up the wall to get out of the trench. And I said, "You have to. I'll hold the front end of your rifle. Take your finger off the trigger. In fact give me the clip. You're not going to have ammunition in your rifle." "I don't want to go out there without ammunition." "You're not going to shoot anybody. Just hold on to it. Another guy is going to push you." And we dragged him through 100 yards, in the mud. And he came out feeling that he was happy. And the Sergeant couldn't believe that this kid's laying there, he made it through. We said, "Yeah, Serge he made it through." It's a neat feeling, I always loved teamwork. I never played team sports in high school or college, except with the fraternity, because we always worked after school and on weekends. So, anytime I could work I worked, I played with my brothers. We played baseball at our house. Anytime we could do that with a team effort I liked that. I liked it very much.

Hansley: On your flight back from Vietnam, obviously it was all military people?

Swiderski: Yes.

Hansley: What was the atmosphere on that plane?

Swiderski: Very quiet. It was very quiet until the plane took off at Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base in Saigon. And there was just a big yell. And then it got quiet and people just went to sleep again. So it was very subdued.

Hansley: Which route did you take? Did you come across Europe or did you come across the Pacific, since you wound up at Fort Dix, which is in New Jersey?

Swiderski: Yeah, I really don't know. I fell asleep and the next thing I knew, they woke us up and we were landing. So, yes, sorry.

Hansley: All you saw was the back of your eyelids.

Swiderski: Yes, that's good.

Hansley: What was it like when you got back home? Obviously your parents were happy to see you. But, how was it after your deployment having been in a combat zone, even though you really didn't see combat itself really?

Swiderski: You're back at the real world. I used to hear that when people were coming back and say "the real world." It doesn't change. But it is, it is something different. It's a feeling that you have. The first thing people would ask me, "What was the first thing you were going to do when you first came home?" I went into the kitchen got a glass of water, cold water, stood out looking out over our drive outside on Canfield, which is a street in Chicago, and drinking clean water. If you ever drank water with a drop of bleach in it, you'd know what it tasted like. It was yellow. And sometimes it was green. But at least you could drink it. It made you sick though. But just a cold glass of water was really nice.

Hansley: The medals that you received, Oak Leaf Cluster in the Army Commendation.

Swiderski: Yes.

Hansley: Did you receive any other medals and what do those medals mean to you today?

Swiderski: I would say there kind of standard: National Defense, Good Conduct Medal, your campaign ribbon from Vietnam, I really appreciated and knew that the Army understood I was trying to do my best when I was at Fort Hood, Texas, because that was the first place I got it, the Army Commendation Medal. The Oak Leaf Cluster means you got a second medal. When I was leaving Fort Hood, Texas, the last day I was able to contact, to call in for the MP car to give me a ride to the different places. You check-off at the Dentist, then the Doctor and Chaplain and Finance and all of that. I walked into the Provost Marshall's office building and there's nobody there. "Man, are they having a party already?" And I'm looking around, and the new Sergeant Major that just came back from Vietnam comes up and he says, "Your name Walski" and I say "Yes." He says, "The Colonel wants to see you." "Oh, man." It's not good when the Colonel wants to see you. So I walk in there, and everybody's standing against the wall. The whole room is lined up with people. I figure, "Oh, man, something really happened." And there's two Sergeants in the middle of the room. And one of them was my boss and they said go stand next to him. I said, "Did somebody steal something, I don't know. I want to get out of here." And the Sergeant Major reads off the commendation of the two officers. Now these two Sergeants, one was there 17 years and one was there 19 years. Now I was there less than a year. I had just turned 1 year. We were all getting Army Commendation Medals. I thought, "Oh, that's pretty good." I think they were a little miffed that I was getting a medal that they weren't getting for years. So I say, "What can I do?" And know after, they didn't have the medals with them, they just read the citation. And my Sergeant looks at me and says, "That and 37 cents will get you a cup of coffee." So I say, "Ok, thanks." But that did make me very proud. That was very nice.

Hansley: Is there any one moment or experience that you can think of that exemplifies your time in the service?

Swiderski: Mmm. No, I don't think there was any one moment. There was just a continuous flow of things happening. The thing that didn't happen, which was good, I almost walked into Cambodia by mistake. I was walking down a dirt road and an MP popped out of a tree area and said, "Where're you going?" I said, "Taking a walk." He said, "That's Cambodia." I said, "Ok. There're no signs." "They don't have signs in Vietnam. Turn around." And I did. A lot of the posts that we visited were actually former French Foreign Legion Posts. Vietnam was a French Colony at one time. So it's kind of interesting that some places were very ornate, but everything was kind of on the smaller side. You couldn't flush the toilet. You had to wrap it up in toilet paper and through it in a basket, which was interesting, yes. But, it was kind of interesting walking around there sometimes. I relate to my wife, I was the only one in our unit of 21 people that would go out and get a driver's license. Now believe it or not you had to have a driver's license in Vietnam that you were qualified for certain vehicles. So I studied up, but they were all in French, the signs. So I said, "Ok I'll learn what they mean." You just look at the letters and try and think what they meant. The International signs we have here in this country, no left turns and things like that, do not enter, I said, "Ok, I can understand those." It was great to me, because the 25th Infantry was pulling out of Vietnam when we just got there. They actually gave us one of their pickup trucks. They weren't going to use it anymore. And they had turned over their base to the South Vietnamese. From what I understand and I saw, the South Vietnamese, for whatever reason, would take the bases apart and sell them, fans and whatever else, to whoever would buy them. It was kind of a shame, it was very equipped stuff. Actually the 25th Infantry, which looked like, the insignia looked like a red strawberry and had a lightning bolt in the middle. It actually goes all the way back to World War II. We used to call it the electric strawberry. They were pulling out of Vietnam, and they had a swimming pool in the shape of a big strawberry, their insignia. And when we were flying in they were filling it in with bulldozers. And some of the South Vietnamese for whatever reason did not want used helicopters. And we figured, you know guys, you are going to have to learn how to fix them, when we're not here. And they took them and threw them in the South China Sea, because they didn't want the enemy to have them, but then guys save them for parts or something. I don't know. It's a very interesting place to visit. Now they actually have tours of some of it if you want to go back. I don't know, I don't think I want to go back. I don't think what I had back there is there anymore. I would be interesting to see what Long Binh looks like. But I did get to travel a lot, because I started talking to some of the guys from our Chapter 311, which I belong to the Vietnam Vet organization, they will talk about that

they were in Da Lat or Pleiku. I'd say, "Yeah, but didn't you go anyplace else?" "Nope, we just traveled whatever highway number it was for six months or a year." I was up and down the place, all over. I think maybe that's what saved me from some of the exposure to Agent Orange, because I was always someplace else. Maybe I drank the right water. Several of our people have illnesses from Agent Orange.

Hansley: You mention the V.V.A, the Vietnam Veterans of America. How involved are you with them?

Swiderski: I'm actually the auditor of their records. I'm also in the Color Guard. Actually I didn't join any units, I didn't even think about it until 2006, so from 1971 to 2006, the only thing I did with the military was go to memorial services in Des Plaines. Just stood off at a distance, and watched and listened. But then they asked me, "Did you ever think of joining Vietnam Veterans?" A lot of them in our group, actually Vietnam Veterans of America was established because they couldn't get into the American Legion Post or a V.F.W. Post. They didn't want to have anything to do with us. They said you lost the war. We said we followed orders. That was the best we could do. Which was really a shock, I've heard that from people from World War II that said that the Veterans from World War I looked at them. Everybody, it was very cliquish, and I never liked cliques. I said, "You know guys, we were all in the same place at the same time, or different places, but we all did the same job." So Vietnam Veterans of America was started in, I believe, in 1986. It spread out, and we're Chapter 311 in Des Plaines, Illinois now. We're actually on the corner of Canfield and Higgins, the V.F.W. Hall there, we moved there because it's a bigger hall and it's easier to get to for our members. So we have members spread out all over Chicago, which is pretty nice. I am involved in the Color Guard which is very nice. I enjoy that, it's a privilege to represent our Veterans. You know, I don't take any credit for it, and I don't think any of the other people take it. We're trying to represent those that can't stand here. It's kind of sad, you go to some of these memorial services on Decoration Day, people don't call it that anymore, we're there, you have people with canes and walkers and they really can't stand very long. So any of us that can still take the standing, will go and do the presentation of the colors. We just did one with the Art Museum in Chicago, the Veterans Art Museum near Six Corners. They just opened up an art museum there from, soldiers, and black and white pictures of course. So it's kind of interesting, met a lot of politicians there for Veterans Day. It's kind of nice.

Hansley: In your paperwork you also mention that you also do school visits. What do you tell the children and what kind of questions do they ask?

Swiderski: Basically, right now we have 4 to 6 people that will go, not in uniform, because we want to try to take it a little bit of a step back from where we are. But we do present in high schools. I understand that the high schools have, I don't know, I think it's their English class actually, it's a book that was written, "What We Carried" by Tim O'Brien, I believe it is. And he was a combat veteran. I think he was there, actually twice. And he wrote a book, that he just wanted to give people a feeling for the country, the combat and what they carried. Basically the book boils down to what they carried emotionally. What we try to do is what people see every day in the movies, is what the soldiers carried. And we try and explain to them what the draft was. And we take some of the high school students and we tell them how the draft boards were formed, and how it was very favored, "You're the Mayor's son, you're not going to get drafted, and so forth. Or you're trying to date the Police Chief's daughter, and you're going to get drafted." We dress them up in the flak jacket, in the uniforms that were used outside of Vietnam in the jungles. So they can get the difference as to why the boots were different. You had all leather in Germany, but you had to use canvas boots, because of the moisture. We also explain to them about the food and what C-rations look like. And we actually have a contest between a boy and a girl, in high school, to open up a can of fruit with a P-38, it's a little can opener. Well they've never done that. Actually, we don't know why, but the girls can do it faster than the boys, which is good. But, it's interesting. Then we have a question and answer period from the students. One student says, "Well if you didn't like the food, why didn't you go to McDonald's?" I think he missed the whole point of where we were. But that was alright. No question is stupid, it was just - ok that's interesting. And then when you put a flak jacket on, we usually get a large person, so you can handle it, because it is kind of heavy. And you'd have a backpack on. And we'd explain everything that you'd carry in the backpack. And the one student says, "But it doesn't cover up my arms and legs?" This isn't body armor. Besides this, if you got shot with a rifle, you'd be dead. Flak jackets were designed for World War II from the bombers. Because they used to say that the German flak guns were shooting at their planes. And they were trying to absorb whatever loose stuff was coming into the plane so it didn't really tear you apart. But it wasn't going to protect your arms or your face. That's true body armor, and even the Defense Department still says that it was body armor. It's not body armor, it wouldn't stop a bullet. It's interesting, the different ideas the students have. And they're very appreciative that somebody's come out and explained it. And we ask them if they have any family members that were Veterans or are Veterans. And some of them do have that are Afghanistan or Iraq. It's very nice. We've gone to Maine West. I think we're going to 6 or 7 different schools right now. So that's working pretty nice. I have to watch out, or I have to not watch out, but I have to be aware that

some of my nieces and nephews are in these schools now. So it will be interesting to come across them. And I think they do get an appreciation, between when you pass out what a metal helmet was like and the boots, and just putting on the flak jacket, not the flak jacket, but the backpack. You know it was a 70 pound pack for three days. They couldn't understand why you would take all of this with you. Well I'll tell you what. In basic training when we went on maneuvers one of the goofs, in our unit, put newspapers in his, just rolled up, fluffed it up, he wasn't going to carry all stuff. Well when you're out for three days and you've got nothing and you're supposed to carry half of the tent for the other guy. So he learned why you put the right stuff in the bag. The schools are very nice. I was asked to go to my Granddaughter's grammar school in Algonquin, Illinois, and I think there were 6 or 7 of us from different units. We gave them a little file on each one of us. And it was a presentation for the school. It was very nice that they recognized the soldiers. I mean, we're all getting older. The Department of Defense estimated that the life span of a Vietnam Veteran is going to be 63. Well at least I'm 3 years beyond that. So I made it that much. The Department of Defense has to figure out how much they're paying benefits for health and that. For a long time they never recognized Agent Orange as an illness. And finally when they had to, the Department of Defense had to figure out what it was going to cost them to treat these people. Actually there are memos out there, between the people trying to figure this out, we can't do this because it's going to cost us 14 billion dollars a year. And finally Congress approved it. Yeah, Agent Orange is definitely out there. It's something else.

Hansley: What do you think the importance of the different veteran organizations is today?

Swiderski: It does serve to, we meet once a month, and basically we have different organizations. Just like, your Director here came out and gave us information on this library, it was very important. We also have people from the V.A. come out to tell us how to apply for benefits. It's just the camaraderie. Because there is, again it's a little hard to explain, but you can just feel comfortable with these people, these people will cover your back. It's not like just walking into, ever though they're strangers, you've never seen them before, you've had shared experiences that kind of puts you together. It's like a bunch of football players got together at a dinner or something they'd have something to share. And you're always trying to help people. Since I'm an accountant and auditor people have questions about taxes, or "I had a loss, and my basement flooded and the insurance didn't cover it." So I say, "Okay get all of your bills together, and you can itemize it, and I'll tell you what forms you can get." "Oh, I never knew that." "Your insurance agent should say that too, help you on that." But it is nice. And in going to these schools, I've learned more about them, "Okay I didn't know they

did that. They were engineers. Engineers, I always thought, well you build bridges and things like that." Well these engineers, engineered roads. When you sweep a road for explosives, sometimes they blow up or maybe they've already blown up and you have to put them back together after they clean up the body parts. So okay that's kind of tough, but those were Engineers.

Hansley: Since you already had your accounting degree and they used your abilities in the service.

Swiderski: Yes.

Hansley: Once you got back to the States, how long was it before you went back to work?

Swiderski: I took thirty days off. And I also got 2 speeding tickets and realized I had to slow down. It was a little bit of a different world here. I'd never got a speeding ticket before that or after that. So I said "Okay slow down. We're back to the real world." But, I went back to work for Arthur Anderson. They didn't give me any credit that I had in the military that I had gained anymore auditing experience. I said, "Well the whole thing was auditing fraud." They said, "Yeah but, its Army stuff." I said, "Okay." By December I got the flu, so I stayed home for a couple of days and I said, "You know what, I've been working in my families' business on and off all my life. I said, you know what, I'm going to quit my job at Arthur Anderson and work for them then full time." In which I did. I worked loading trucks in the driveways and alleys in Chicago, and unloading them. I'd always wreck a tie that way. My wife would kill me. But also again I was working with my brothers and it was a team effort. And it was very interesting, I liked that.

Hansley: What do think the younger generations can learn from your experiences?

Swiderski: Something, it is bringing the books, the history that they read in a book may only be a paragraph or a page. Hopefully this brings them a little bit more meaning and understanding and brings it to life, of what they're reading about. And it does seem that way.

Hansley: Where and when did you meet your wife, before, during or after your service?

Swiderski: I met her after it. I keep complaining she never wrote to me. She says, "I never knew you were out there." She was actually a 4th grade, school teacher for a number of years. And she taught, one of the students in her class was the sister of the girl that my brother was dating. And he was in the Army. And when he came out he said, "John, when you come out, I've got a good phone number for you for a girl. My wife says she has a good personality," the last thing you what to hear. I said, "Okay give me it." Well he forgot about it. And I can still remember, I still

have the phone number written down on a little piece of paper. His wife said, "Tom, didn't you give John the phone number?" "Oh I have in my coat still." So he gave it to me and my wife, at that time when I called her for the first date, she answered the phone and she goes into the kitchen, talks to her Mother. And her Mother asks "Who's on the phone?" "Some guy who's asked me out." "Well do you know who it is?" "Yeah, it's Tom's brother." "Well, why didn't you talk more?" "He asked me out and hung up." In fact next week is our Fortieth Anniversary.

Hansley: Congratulations!

Swiderski: Thank you. We have two daughters and a son. My youngest son works in the IT department at Walgreens in Lincolnshire. My oldest daughter is a Physical Therapist, she has three daughters. She works for Marianjoy. And my middle daughter, in fact she's taking one of her medical tests today for the boards. She's an emergency room doctor in Kalamazoo, Michigan. She'll tell us on the phone or when she comes over the stories about handling emergency patients, which is very good except at supper time, so, it's very interesting.

I found one thing Long Binh was a very large post and well equipped for the Generals and the Officers. I found the main PX. Which, I didn't even know where it was. I just walked around the base, down roads I could find. They don't have maps; they don't have many signs out there. I was just walking around taking pictures and found the PX. I said, "Wow" this is like Target or something, really nice. It wasn't as big, but it was well equipped. And most buildings in a combat zone are surrounded with sandbags, in case there's an attack. And I walked outside and they had big berms, piles of dirt, built-up 8 or 10 feet high. And I walked around it and believe it not, this PX had soft service ice cream. I said, "Wow, this place is equipped." So I get an ice cream and I climbed up to the top of the berm, and I'm looking around, and right behind it was Graves Registration. Graves Registration is where they bring the bodies, in the body bags. And I sat on the top watching as they unloaded the body bags on to the pavement there, the stone driveway. And I had no emotion. These men could be my same age. They could even be men that I knew. I had no emotion towards them. And somehow things changed for a long time that way. I don't know if it was something you built up in yourself, just so you could handle things around there. But looking at body bags there, I said, "Wow." That never changed I found out until I was driving down a side street in Des Plaines, and I hit a raccoon. And I felt sorry for it. I thought, "Wow this really changed." And I realized how many years had passed before that went away. So it does change you.

Hansley: You indicated you haven't been back to Vietnam. Do you think you ever will travel back? And if you do, what would you like to do there?

Swiderski: No, I would not travel back to there. I think it's changed too much. But, there was a Vietnamese restaurant in Des Plaines that opened up. In fact my wife, her hair dresser, works there as a waitress. And she says, "Well, you said your husband was in Vietnam. Maybe he'd like to come to our restaurant?" So my wife was all thrilled and she said, "You could go back to the restaurant and have Won Ton soup and Spring Rolls." I said. "Okay." That night I had a terrible nightmare. So I could never go back.

Hansley: Okay, that's understandable. Did you miss any major events in your life while you were overseas? Like major birthdays, birth of some of your nieces and nephews? Important weddings or any deaths of any loved ones?

Swiderski: No, I didn't. I was pretty much focused on where I was. I was kind of brought up to date once I got home. One of my daughters, one of my sisters rather, she used to like make Charlie Brown cartoons. And so they got a 4 x 8 sheet of plywood, painted it white and she painted a dog house with Snoopy and the characters and it said, "Welcome Home John." And I have to find that picture someplace. But it was very nice.

Hansley: What is your understanding of what it means to be a Citizen Soldier?

Swiderski: From my understanding of a Citizen Soldier, it goes back to where people put arms together, like the Revolutionary War, the National Guard, which is developed today. But then I think you get to an extreme where you have some right wing groups that feel that, and it is guaranteed by the Constitution, where it actually talks about the National Guard baring arms. And it was written at a time when they thought every group of people that formed states had to protect themselves. So we didn't have a national Army as we have today. We have professional soldiers, they have the weapons and the training which I think will keep us safe. You could carry it to an extreme, which they do sometimes. Different groups that kind of go off the deep end. I don't know. Citizens drew, when you were drafted, you know they're not drafting people. It's now a volunteer Army. I think we have enough protection.

Hansley: Tell us about being a "Citizens on Patrol" in Des Plaines?

Swiderski: Yes. I joined them in 2006. I've been with them for six and a half years now. Basically they perform non-police work. We do drive around on patrols, 2 four hour patrols a month. We do have training once a month. We do railroad crossings, when the gates are stuck. We have to prop up the gates so people can

drive through it. Or we have to make sure we can turn people around when they can't drive through it. Sometimes a train will be stuck on the tracks and you want to divert cars as quickly as possible, far enough away from the tracks so they can get to another street detour. That works very nice. It's a little difficult in the cold, rain and the winter, but it's interesting. We can also push cars off a public highway when they're stuck, run out of gas or they break down. Or protect them if they can't move the vehicles until a tow truck can come. We can call dispatch and get a tow truck out there. So that works for people. We can also unlock cars. I've gotten pretty good at it. I don't use a "slim jim" anymore. I use a plastic wedge and they have an "inflatable wedge" they call it. Once you get that into the doorway a little bit, after 3 years, they finally told us to put a little bit of soap on the end it will slip in a little better between the weather stripping. I love doing that, getting the cars open. They've also come up with some bars that you can press the buttons on your armrest, and open them. So that works pretty good, so I like doing that. We also do traffic for parades, and for different events for the city. They have the, Maryville is also having the Our Lady of Guadalupe, coming up in December, and they expect some 10,000 cars will be there. So, we'll be doing traffic, cutting off certain intersections and to get people not to park all over the place and block up driveways and such. Things work very well.

Hansley: You mentioned training sessions. What kind of training do they put you through?

Swiderski: They train us on, you first go through what is called Citizens Police Academy for 8 weeks, two hours a week to expose you to the different types of things the policemen do. And then they'll, then if you're selected they interview you and if they accept you then you go through the Citizen Police Academy and that's another 8 weeks, 2 hours a week and they'll train you on to use push car, the push bars on the car. Because not all police departments will use that anymore, because of the liability. If the car slips, and then what do you do. So, they train you, certain cars you can't push. If the bumper's hanging off the back you're not going to push it, because they're going to complain that you did it. They train you lock-outs. They train you how to block a car, so that if someone's stuck in a lane to make sure they don't get hit by another car. How far back you are, the lights you should use, putting flares out during an accident, or a detour, because detours usually happen because something is not working. It's raining, it's cold, it's dark and how to lay out the flares so that no one gets hurt. And directing traffic, they are doing more direction. They don't have us direct traffic for intersections that are completely shut down. Normally you would do it, put the lights on red flashing on all 4 sides, so we can control the flow of cars easier. Or we put the stop signs down that you see in Des Plaines. Then just walking the grounds when they used to have the Taste of Des Plaines, we'd walk the grounds. Or we'd do

the ID identification at the beer tent and things like that. We also deliver the government mail to the Aldermen and we also do the budgets. As they get close to the budget year, the binders that they have, with all the information, 3 inch binders. And each alderman when you're delivering them you have to make sure you're handing it to the Alderman. One Saturday I was working and we had 3 of them to deliver and we couldn't find one. We couldn't get a hold of the Mayor he wasn't home, of Des Plaines. I was going home after the shift and I know the Watch Commander was trying to get one of policemen to go over to see if the Mayor's home. "We have to get rid of this binder, you know." "Well I can do it, I'm a couple of blocks away from him, and he's in our parish, at St. Zachary." So I go up there, I'm in uniform, I don't have a police car, but I'm in uniform. Knock on the door. I know it's his wife because I see her in church. I say, "I have to give this to the Mayor." "Well he can't come to the door, he's taking shower. You want to go in and give it to him in the shower." "Nope, no ma'am. You can give it to him." It was interesting.

Hansley: What made you decide to go into the Citizen's on Patrol?

Swiderski: Again, basically I was not working 7 days a week anymore. Our family business we had to close in 2005. So once I got a full-time job at the National Association of the Board of Pharmacists, which is an association of all 50 states. I had time, we only worked Mondays thru Fridays, and get off at 5 o'clock. It's unbelievable, never did that before. And I heard about this and read about it, and I liked what they were going to do. And I trained for it. Again you're working with people, half the people are women, there's about 30 – 35 of us, and half of them are women. There's 3 or 4 married couples that work together, I don't know if I could do it, my wife tells me no. I never worked with her. For 4 hours driving around in a car. It's seeing and knowing when you can do something. And people are safe. I got spoiled the first time I did traffic at a big event. The 4th of July, we had to shut down Central Avenue for an hour at 9 o'clock at night. And then once the fireworks were finished, then people could drive down it and walk down it. We opened it up. And I was working with three very good people that had trained me. And it's interesting, believe it not, you get a car pull up to you, and you're telling the person you have to go left or right, you can't go down this road because there's a squad car there with lights and everything, and person starts making a left turn and then he cuts across the street. And he's telling the police officer to move his car because it's the only way he knows how to get home. Wow, and he's driving a car on the streets. Okay! But directing traffic and stopping River Road, which is a 40 mile an hour speed limit, and you see these kids and the parents pushing buggies and wagons and they just feel they're so safe. And that's part of what you doing it for, it's nice.

Hansley: Is there anything else that you would like to add or anything that you thought of that maybe I haven't asked about?

Swiderski: I'm glad I served my Country. It was a difficult time, because I know I lost a lot of friends. People I thought that were friends in college, they looked the other way because they felt if everybody protested that it would go away. That's not what I felt I should be doing. And I do feel that we contributed to the South Vietnamese, it didn't work well. But there was a peace signing of a sort, but I think people forget that North Vietnam re-attacked them after we left. And there are still over a million people that are unaccounted for. So I think the news played a lot into it, of what was reported and what wasn't reported. There was a lot of misinformation that years later they got the right information but, it was on the last page or the back page and nobody paid any attention to it. But I'm glad I was able to serve.

Hansley: I do have one last question. And this is a little bit of a fun question. A lot veterans both men and women, complain about the boots that they were given.

Swiderski: Ok!

Hansley: What was your thought about your boots? Did they fit, did they not fit?

Swiderski: I think they made a pretty good try to get them to fit. In basic training, I thought they hurt. I wasn't used to wearing leather boots, but in Vietnam when they gave them to you had a little bit more of a choice. I can't fit into my boots anymore. I think they must have shrunk. But yeah, the combat boots, the jungle boots that we had are pretty nice. Yes.

Hansley: Good.

Swiderski: No sores, no blisters, which is important. And you always carry a pair of dry socks.

Hansley: That's what my Dad always said.

Swiderski: Yes, very nice.

Hansley: John.

Swiderski: Yes.

Hansley: Pritzker Military Library would like to thank you for coming in to share your stories and your experiences. Thank you very much.

Swiderski: Thank you for your time.

Hansley: And to all Vietnam Veterans, welcome home

Swiderski: Thank you. Thank you.