

Robert L'Ecuyer - Oral History Memoir

Interviewed in person by Barbara Ambos

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BARBARA AMBOS: This is Barbara Ambos interviewing Robert L'Ecuyer on Friday May 25th, 2018. The interview is taking place at the Massasoit Community College library in Brockton, Massachusetts and it is part of the Massasoit Veterans History Project. So, welcome, Robert. Thank you for your long trek from Leicester. We'll go back to the basic biographical details like where were you born and originally from and families.

ROBERT L'ECUYER: I was born in Worcester; Worcester, Mass. And basically I lived there most of my life but then I got married and even then I was in Worcester for like thirty years and we moved out to Royalston, which is out near Athol, Mass and really isn't nothing to do out there, you know? I just kind wanted to get away from everything because I was having a lot of problems in Worcester with the drug dealers, and I really don't have a lot of patience with people. And I guess it's because I got post-traumatic stress, and I kind of blow up quick, so I had like forty jobs in my lifetime because of threatening employees and supervisors and what not. I guess that was all due to the PTSD. And with the drug dealers, it was minor things, but they kind of like were taking over the neighborhood. And in the wintertime I would shovel out everybody's space so you could park your car there. And one of them came in right after I got done shoveling, and he pulled into my spot and I says, "Hey, do you think that I shoveled that out for you?" and he goes, "Well, I can park here. It's a private court. Anybody can park here." So I goes, "Let me put it another way." I says, "You see the way your car looks now?" And he goes, "Yeah." And I says, "Well, it's not gonna look that way when you come out of that house." So he goes, "Is that a threat?" I says, "Geez, I don't know. Sounds like a threat to me." So, he looked at me and he kinda smiled—and this kid was probably in his twenties, and I was like in my early fifties—and he must have said, Boy, this guy's got guts." And he just pulled out and left. My wife was kind of up in the window telling me, "Bob, keep quiet. These guys could shoot you." And when I got in the house, I told her, I said, "Well, he better get me with the first shot because if he doesn't, he's gonna be dead." (laughs) And she kinda like just shook her head and went in the other room. But it happened a couple of times after that, you know, similar instances. And I did threaten him again, and the second time I told the guy, I says, "You know what a tire iron can do to a car?" And he kinda looked at me and he went—and he got in his car and he left (laughs).

AMBOS: So that's why you moved?

L'ECUYER: Yeah, I couldn't get along with the drug dealers. (clears throat)

AMBOS: So I can see by your shirt, you were in the 1st Cavalry Division?

L'ECUYER: Mm-hmm.

AMBOS: Did you hold any jobs before you joined the service or drafted or?

L'ECUYER: Yeah, I was working at a warehouse, Thom McAn (clears throat) out in Auburn, and I worked there for, well, only maybe a little over a year before. I had quit high school my junior year (clears throat), excuse me. But I quit my junior year. My father told me, he says, "You're gonna get drafted." and I went, "Well, if it happens, it happens." So, I went to work and they had a number system and my number was getting close, so, I says, "Well, you know what? I'm just gonna sign up." So I went down and I volunteered for the draft cause I was gonna get

drafted anyway. Recruiters lie to you because my best subject in school was math, and the test was very simple, it was like straight math, a little algebra, you know? So I got a hundred on it and he told me he'd get me in finance. So I says, "Alright." So I was gonna sign up for three years, and he goes, "Well we have another program here; it's a volunteer for the draft and you only have to do two years." I says, "Well, am I gonna get the same job?" And he says, "Yes." That's where he lied. So, anyway, I came home—my father was in World War II—and he said, "How'd you make out?" And I says, "Well," I says, "He told me he's going to get me in finance." So he says, "You get that in writing, son?" I goes, "Well, no." He goes, "I hate to tell you this, but you're not gonna be in finance."

So, I went to basic training. We had a Spanish TI and he kept yelling, "You're all gonna be eleven-B ten (11B10), which didn't mean nothin to me—I didn't know—nineteen years old, I don't know what the Hell eleven-B ten is. So, eventually when I graduated, I looked at the board and it said Bob L'Ecuyer, eleven-B ten, Infantry School. So that's when I knew the recruiter lied to me. So, I ended up in the infantry, (laughs) which is probably one of the worst jobs you can have (laughs). But, I don't know, it is what it is, I guess.

[0:6:00]

AMBOS: It's important. So, when was that?

L'ECUYER: That was in sixty-eight.

AMBOS: Sixty-eight. So that was in the heat of—

L'ECUYER: I went in August, sixty-eight, I think. Probably the end of sixty-eight. I went to Vietnam in sixty-nine, February of sixty nine to February of seventy.

AMBOS: So the two years is some basic training and then a year overseas?

[0:6:32]

L'ECUYER: Yeah, and I still had seven months (clears throat) to do when I got back. I actually wanted to extend my year. If you extended—I think I would have to extend like thirty-seven days or something—I wouldn't have to do my last six months. So, I extended, but when I extended, I'd planned on getting a rear [U.S. Army Rear-D or Rear Detachment] job because that's what happens on the old timers; they all go and work on the RCs? have to stay out in the jungle, you know? So, I got malaria near the end of my tour, so now I'm in Camron Bay with malaria, and by the time I got back, all the rear jobs are gone. So they said, Well you still can extend for 37 days, but you have to spend it out in the bush. I goes, "You know, it only takes one day out in the bush to get killed." I says, "I'm lucky I'm here for the twelve months." And I did get wounded once, but it was actually back in the LZ [landing zone]. It was supposed to be a three-day rest, and they rocketed and mortared the LZ, so I was in a bunker and I grabbed the machine gun, I ran up on top of the bunker, and just as I went out and around, a mortar round hit about ten feet away and I got a little scar on my neck here and a piece of shrapnel there, I don't know if you can see it or not.

AMBOS: Oh yeah.

L'ECUYER: Then I had a piece go in the back of my head, but that one there is—I guess it worked its way out. I guess that's what happens over the years sometimes it starts coming out of you, you know? But, that one there I had removed because it was pinching a nerve in my neck. But it was a superficial wound, nothing big. The medic just patched it up and they sent me out back in the jungle the next day (laughs). But that's the way it is in Vietnam. Even when I got malaria, our company had a policy where they would not medivac you out, even though they

knew you had malaria. They wouldn't medivac you out unless you had a 104 temperature. So, they took my temperature; it was 103-point something, and of course I'm carrying a seventy-pound pack and a machine gun and I only weighed 145 pounds, right? And I'm kind of like delirious because of the humidity and the heat and I'm bumping into trees, and finally they took everything off me—my pack—everybody was carrying something of mine, and they took my machine gun, they handed me an M16 and two bandoliers of ammo just in case we got in a fire fight, and which I would have been useless because I could barely see and everything was—so they said, Ok, so keep going. So we kept going and eventually I banged into a couple of more trees, and the medic took my temperature. He says, "Alright, call the medivac." But now they can't get you out right away cause the jungle is so thick. They have to like take some C4, they put it on a tree—the bottom of a tree—and put a blasting cap and they blow it and so they blow the trees enough so you could go up. But they didn't want a chopper to come down and set down the medivac because the—we call them gooks, but they're NVA and VC—they can hear that chopper coming in. So they send a gurney down and put me in the gurney just so they could lift me up. And that was the most scared I ever was in Vietnam, believe it or not, because all I'm thinking of is "I'm going up. I'm gonna get shot." You know what I mean?

I mean I'd rather be on the ground (laughs), than be just laying back and going up in the air. But it was kind of frightening, but I was kind of delirious at the time, so not as scared as I would have been if I was straight, you know.

AMBOS: So what area were you in in Vietnam?

L'ECUYER: Mostly down south, but we did go into Cambodia in late sixty-nine, which according to President Nixon, nobody went in Cambodia before 1970—I never tell a lie (laughs). We did go into Cambodia in sixty-nine and I know we did because they said, We're going on a secret mission and we want to cross this big river. And everybody was out of water—this is gonna sound kinda gross, but we took our canteens, put it in the water. It was like red water because of the clay dirt; it turns the river red. Well, everybody filled up, we get a purification tablet, you throw it in there, you shake it up. You're supposed to wait 24 hours, but everybody was thirsty, so nobody waited. So we all took a drink, got across the river, on the other side of the river, there was two dead gooks laying in the water that we just drank. (laughs) So kind of turned my stomach a little bit (laughs), but we did have the purification tablet in it but, basically it was useless with that water.

AMBOS: But you didn't all get sick?

L'ECUYER: Nobody got sick.

AMBOS: Yeah, it's hard when you're thirsty to stop yourself. Wow. So, did you receive any specialized training when you were in basic training?

L'ECUYER: (clears throat) Actually, I only had three and a half, four weeks of training in infantry because we had wall locker inspection—you got two guys' gear in each wall locker and the guy that was supposed to be my partner was on sick call. So I got the drill sergeant out there yelling at me, "Get that locker out here," cause everybody else had their locker out and the lockers are, I don't know, probably a little taller than that one (pointing to filing cabinet). But you know, I was pretty strong cause I was doing warehouse work, even though I only weighed a hundred and forty-five pounds, so I grabbed it and picked it up, and I got it out the door myself, but I made the mistake of not bending my knees when I put it down, so I strained all the muscles in my back. So now they send me to sick call, and he says, "Well, you can't do any more

training. You're gonna have to be the barracks guy for the next three or four weeks" or whatever. So I go, Alright. So that's what I did. And at the end of the training session, my CO called me in the office and he says, "Listen, I got two choices for you. You can take your orders—go to Vietnam—or you can do your eight weeks' training over again and get your orders and go to Vietnam. So, I says, "I really don't want to do another eight weeks' training." I said, "Well let me ask you something. Am I missing anything important here that I need when I get over there?" And he goes, "Oh no. They'll teach you everything that you want to know when you get there." Being naive like I was, I believed him. And most of the stuff he was telling the truth about, but there are certain things that I missed that is pretty important when you become the squad leader. Like we had to go out on recon one day, and they handed me a map. Well, I didn't have no map training, so I tell them that, and they says, Well, yeah, everybody had map training in AIT. And I goes, "Well I didn't." So, they said okay. So they give me like a five-minute course and (sniffs) I'm looking at the map and I still didn't understand it, so he gave me a compass, anyway. So they says, "You gotta take your squad" like I don't know, half a click through the jungle, "and then when you get to that point, if you don't see any movement over there, turn around and come back." I goes, "Alright." So you never walk through a path in Vietnam because that's what they booby trap. Any open area where it's clear, they know that the GIs are gonna walk down that path, so when you're going through the jungle, you have to cut your way with a machete because it's so thick. So you're making a path as you're going. So we got to that area, I looked at the map to go back, and I'm looking at the trees and everything. I goes, "I have no idea where the hell I am on this map." I says, "You know what? We're going right down that path." (laughs) where you're not supposed to. I says, "And I'll lead the way (laughs). That way if we hit a booby trap, it will be me." But we did; we made it back.

[0:15:54]

AMBOS: What does AIT stand for?

L'ECUYER: Advanced Infantry Training.

AMBOS: I got the 'IT' part.

L'ECUYER: So that was about the only thing that I really needed. The rest of it, they told—actually had a guy save my life one time because he—this is after he died—he saved my life, which is hard to believe. I used to carry my hand grenades on my pack, and he said, "When you're going through the jungle, it's so thick that it could pull on your grenade and pull the pin out." So he says, "You bend the pins back, but," he says, "it still could break the pin off eventually. Every time you put your pack down, check your pack. You know, make sure your grenades are alright." Cause a lot of guys carry them inside, I don't know why I carried them outside. Anyway, one time I put my pack down—this was after he got killed after a fire fight—and I put the pack down and looked at the grenades, and one of them was like hanging by a thread, so it must have got caught on a bush and broke the pin off, but it didn't completely come out. And I goes, "Oh damn!" Right? (laughs). So, I takes the grenade and I chose my platoon leader, I says, "Hey." I said, "This pin is like almost out. I'm just going to pull it out and hold on." Cause it won't go off unless the handle flies off. You can hold it like that with the pin out and it still ain't gonna go off. So, he basically told me—I says, "Well I'm gonna throw it." He goes, "Well you can't throw it here because it makes so much noise, it will attract the NVA or VC." So I said, "Well, what do you want me to do with it?" He said, "Well hold on to it until we come to a bomb crater." I goes, "That could be a while, right?" (laughs). So, I did—I had it squeezed, and my hand was almost white by the time we came to a bomb crater. Well, I don't

know if you know what a bomb crater is. When they drop the bombs, they fill up with water from the rain. And if you throw it in there, it just goes poof. You know, you can't really hear it. So, that's what I did. But I probably was holding on to that for a half an hour or more before we came to one, which was—

AMBOS: Good thinking too, though, right?

L'ECUYER: Yeah, it's good because it doesn't make a noise, so it was still kind of frightening holding on to the grenade (laughs) knowing if you did let go of the pin, then you've gotta throw it then. But, I don't know. It is what it is, I guess.

AMBOS: He saved you by giving you that advice. So, what was the best part of your training or experience if there's such a thing.

L'ECUYER: The best part of the training?

AMBOS: Well, it's asking about training, but—yeah.

L'ECUYER: I don't know. The physical part was pretty good because I was always in good shape. I didn't really play a lot of sports in high school, but I had a kind of a team around—the group we hung around, we played football, baseball, basketball. We were always out. These kids nowadays are all playing with the phone or the computer or whatever. But my parents used to say, You're out, that's it. You're out for the day. So I was in the physical training—the PT test they give you. Well, they give you an initial one when you start. The highest you can score is a 500. And I scored a 490 without even doing any training on any of the things, which was probably one of the highest ones because I was in good shape. And I kinda like physical work anyway. PT, I liked that in high school too.

AMBOS: Do you recall any of your instructors?

L'ECUYER: Yeah. I mean I don't really remember their names, but I mean we had a Spanish drill sergeant—and we actually had two drill sergeants. One guy, he got orders to go to Vietnam, and I guess he was going airborne or something and our platoon was so good at physical training, they have competition between all the platoons. And he knew we were gonna win, so he took us all down to the PX the night before the training, which wasn't a good idea. And he was buying us beers, which is 3.2 beer. Well, everybody didn't feel good the next day when we did the PT, but we still won anyway. (both laugh) But, he got us pretty well loaded, you know.

[0:21:08]

AMBOS: Was he trying to sabotage or trying to reward you?

L'ECUYER: (talking at same time) No, he just wanted to give us a good time before we went to Vietnam, you know. And he said, "Now this better not affect the results of this." (laughs) But everybody did pretty—I would've scored a five hundred, but it affected me because on the one-mile run, my stomach was upset, and I made a hundred on all the other ones, but, you only had to do it in six minutes, and I went around, let's see—I went around three times in like four minutes, so I actually had two minutes to make it around one more time, which would've been no problem, but now my stomach started aching and I'm going, Oh God, I'm not going to make it. I was all ready to drop out, and my drill sergeant was behind me yelling, "You don't drop out on me—you keep running!" (laughs) So, I kept kind of like jogging, and I didn't make a hundred anyway. I only scored 497, I don't know, whatever it was.

AMBOS: Still pretty impressive. So, you spoke a little bit about your war-time service in Vietnam.

L'ECUYER: Yeah, I was a machine gunner. Well, in the gun squad, you start out like an ammo bearer. You have to carry like three hundred rounds of machine gun ammo. They weigh like seven pounds apiece, so that's twenty-one pounds on top of your seventy-pound pack, which—it's hard going walking through the jungle when you're carrying almost a hundred pounds of gear. But then people start getting wounded or killed and eventually you move up quick. I went to ammo bearer to assistant gunner, and then before you know it, I was the gunner because the assistant gunner got wounded, I believe. And then I was the squad leader because the gunner got wounded (laughs), and I took over the squad. And we kind of had a rookie gunner and I didn't know it, but he was a little more scared than most of us because we'd been in country for a while, and the first fire fight he got in, he didn't fire the gun; he kept his head down, so I'm yelling for him to, you know, fire out, and he just didn't want to get hit or wounded, so he kept his head down, and finally I went over and I had to take over the gun (laughs) because the assistant gunner actually should've taken over, but I think he was scared, too, because the bullets were kind of flying all around us.

[0:24:15]

AMBOS: Were you all about the same age?

L'ECUYER: Roughly, yeah. The best guy that was in our platoon—his name was Sergeant Goff [phonetic], Donald Goff. And he actually saved a lot of us, you know. He was the oldest one. I think he was like twenty—twenty-three, twenty-four, and that was old in Vietnam. Most guys were like eighteen, nineteen, twenty-years old. Mostly nineteen, getting out of high school and they get drafted or whatever, but, he was the smartest guy, I think, in our platoon. I still talk to him on the phone.

AMBOS: Oh, that's great.

L'ECUYER: But, he got cancer from Agent Orange in his esophagus, I guess. And I guess through the chemo and everything, it got rid of it, but he ended up with a touch of it on his liver, now, but he says eventually that's getting taken care of. He said he's starting to gain a little weight back because he was kind of a tall guy, and he used to weigh about one-ninety or something, and he went down to like a hundred and forty something pounds from the chemo and stuff, but now he's back to a hundred and sixty. So, he says he's starting to turn around, I guess.

AMBOS: So when you were squad leader, you were in charge of somebody who was senior to you, age wise?

L'ECUYER: Yeah, you had about, I don't know, seven or eight guys in the squad, so you were in charge of them basically.

AMBOS: And they were all your peer age?

L'ECUYER: Yeah, they were all young guys.

AMBOS: You were talking about the guy who was really scared. He joined your group later, then, if it was one of his first gun fights?

L'ECUYER: They eventually sent them back 'cause he was just too scared to fight (laughs), you know. It happens, you know.

AMBOS: But they would replenish—I don't know if that's the right word—they sent you another guy? (talking at same time).

L'ECUYER: Yeah, they sent another guy out. We actually had guy shoot himself in the foot because he wanted to get out of the field, so he ended up Long Binh Jail, I guess, that's what it was over there.

AMBOS: Court marshalled that, right?

L'ECUYER: Yeah. He tried to say it was the enemy shot him, but everybody knew.

AMBOS: And all the transportation was by helicopter then?

L'ECUYER: Yeah. First cab is air mobile—but that's kind of like a (laughs) I don't know what. It's air mobile as far as taking you out and dropping you off, and then you hump through the jungle for about roughly thirty-something days, and then they pick you up and bring you back for like two, three days' rest, and then you're back out there for another thirty-something days. So air mobile, as far as going out and coming back. And then if there's like a hot area where they see the enemy, in the meantime, in the thirty-something days, they'll pick you up and they'll take you over, drop you off near that area so you can engage with the enemy. And they'll give you an air medal if you do twenty-five combat assaults. So I ended up, I don't know how many I did, but I got an air medal, anyways. I guess we were in action quite a bit (laughs).

[0:28:03]

AMBOS: Did you have to carry all your supplies all the time, or did they drop them?

L'ECUYER: They would supply you every three days for like food and water and ammo. That was the basic necessities in Vietnam. Your clothes weren't a necessity. So, every now and then, they would drop off new clothes, but I counted days one time where we went thirty-seven days with the same clothes on, which is your heat and your sweating, and you basically couldn't sleep because you could smell your B.O. And the only way you could wash up in the jungle is you took a bar of soap, you stripped all your clothes off, you got in a bomb crater, a hole in the ground where the water filled up, and you washed up that way. But now you gotta put the same clothes on, so basically, you still smelled the same, you know what I mean? So, it wasn't a good thing to be a grunt (laughs).

AMBOS: So you say you're still in touch with Mr. Goff?

L'ECUYER: Yeah, Don, yeah. He was in Texas. Well, everybody had a nickname in Vietnam, and his was Tex. Mine, I had a bad nickname when I first got there because remember I told you I hurt my back? Well, when we first got there, we were in the rice paddies. Now they're sticking a seventy-pound pack on me with three hundred rounds of ammo and plus my M16 and a couple, two or three bandoliers, you know, ammo for the M16, which was basically—when you're going through the rice paddies, it goes up to your knees, and you're kind of walking like this. Well, my back was still sore from getting hurt, so I kept falling way behind, and everybody was way up there, and I was like a hundred yards away from everybody, and I was supposed to be in the first platoon. And they thought I was a loafer or something, and I told them, I said, "I can't do this. My back is killing me." So they sent me back to the rear for a few days. And eventually, we weren't in the rice paddies when they sent me back out again; we were on solid ground, so I could do that on solid ground, but I couldn't do it in the rice paddies. And I get the nickname Bad Back, you know. That was my initial nickname. Later on, they changed it when they knew I was alright and I wasn't bullshitting them. They started calling me Boston because they knew I came from Massachusetts. Everybody in the whole platoon, everybody had a nickname.

[0:30:55]

AMBOS: Are you in touch with anybody besides Tex?

L'ECUYER: Yeah, I went to my first reunion a couple years ago, and not a lot of the guys were there because we had guys killed and everybody has different versions of how people got killed because most of the time it happened at night, so you can't see that good, and whatever. One of

them I talk to, he—actually I talked to another guy in New York to Tony Girodana [phonetic]. I talked to him because I met him at the reunion. He was in our platoon, too. But the other guy's, he's down South somewhere, Georgia or I don't know, Virginia, maybe? I don't know, I can't remember.

AMBOS: Who organized your reunion?

L'ECUYER: I guess they've been doing it for years, but I really didn't want to go because I thought that they're gonna start talking about war, different things, and I knew that it brings up—cause I still get nightmares and stuff from different battles.

AMBOS: I hope this doesn't spur anything on.

L'ECUYER: No, not really, because we do the high school things all the time and it's kind of therapy for us. I go to a psychiatrist. Not that I'm nuts, but (laughs) I guess for the PTSD, and I see a counselor and stuff like that, and I'm on mediation for all that stuff.

AMBOS: I'm sure you've seen things that nobody should see, probably. When you were off duty and a couple days' rest, how did you spend your time?

L'ECUYER: Mostly drinking beer and (laughs) just having a good time and stuff. We still had to pull guard duty at night, switch off. But I mean the guys in the rear kind of treated us like shit because we get back there and we look like shit, you know. I'd be in ripped up fatigues and dirty with dirt, filthy. I mean it was good that we got to take a shower there and stuff but in the beginning, they're looking at us like mmm, you know, so kind of like irritated us.

AMBOS: Was there anything that you did for good luck?

L'ECUYER: Yeah. Actually, my mother gave me a Saint Christopher medal, and I wore that in Vietnam. But when we were going through a village, this Vietnamese girl come over—well, there was a few of them—they came over and they were selling sandwiches and Cokes and stuff, and we only ate sea rations the whole time, so I was a new guy, so I was eating canned food for like two weeks, and I go, You know, I think I'm going to buy a sandwich. So I see some of the older guys kind of looking and they didn't buy one, but I go, Well, I'll try it, you know. So, I took a bite of it and real grizzly and like the worst meat I ever tasted in my life, and I'm chewing on it and I'm going, Well, probably better than sea rations but not really. So, I took a couple more bites, and I goes, Nah, I can't eat that. So I finally threw it away, and one of the older guys says to me, "You know what you were eating there?" And I goes, "Well, no, but it was the grizzliest meat I ever ate in my life, right?" And he says, "Well, the Vietnamese, they kill the dogs, and you were eating a dog sandwich." I goes, "Are you shittin me?" (laughs) But, I guess that's what I was eating.

AMBOS: Yeah. Wow.

L'ECUYER: Didn't eat it all though; I threw it away. You know, after a while you get used to eating canned food; I just got so used to it, I thought they were pretty good after a while.

AMBOS: If you're hungry enough, you'll eat it, right?

L'ECUYER: Matter of fact, I still got the—(jingling noise)

AMBOS: You got the can opener?

L'ECUYER: Yeah. They call it a P38.

AMBOS: Oh, look at that.

L'ECUYER: You just hook it on a can, you turn it like that, it's almost like the can openers that they have nowadays, but they're a lot bigger, but this thing here just—and I had that in Vietnam, so survived fifty years (laughs).

AMBOS: So, when your service ended, do you remember when the day when it ended? You spoke a little bit about—

L'ECUYER: In Vietnam or the whole thing?

AMBOS: Either. Your last day in Vietnam was probably interesting, yeah? (both talking)

L'ECUYER: Yeah, I mean, it was a commercial flight coming back. It takes twenty-four hours. Well, we stopped in—where did we stop to refuel? I think Hawaii. I think we stopped in Hawaii to refuel. But the stewardesses, they were handing out beers to everybody, but they knew nobody was going to make it all the way back without falling asleep. It was like twenty-four hour flight, so most of us had a couple beers and we dozed off. I mean it was like when we got on the plane, everybody was sharing because you were happy you got back, but that was the happy part. When we got off the plane—I got off in California—and there was hippies there protesting with the signs, and they're trying to spit on us and calling us baby killers, and that was a downer because we just got out of war and we were really disappointed because we didn't know what was going on back here, the protests and everything. So we were going to go through the hipp—go get them, and they had the National Guard standing there with M16s, and their orders were to shoot us if we broke through their lines. Even though we just got out of Vietnam, they were going to shoot us for going after these assholes—excuse my—but that's the way it was when we got back. And then they told us, Don't wear your uniform because people back here are all protesting. So it kind of was like a downer when you got back. It was nice getting on the plane and everybody was cheering, but after that, we were kind of forgotten people.

AMBOS: Where did you spend the last six months?

L'ECUYER: Fort Benning, Georgia. My last six months they gave me a job—a desk job—I was assigned it by then, and they said they gave me a desk job when I got in. I said, “I don't want the desk job.” I says, “I want to go with the infantry unit.” And they says, “Well, you don't have a choice; this is your job.” So I go, “Oh, okay.” The Colonel come in—this is my second day on the job—and everybody jumped to attention, and I was sitting there reading a paper. And he looks at me and he goes, “Don't you know an officer when you see one?” So I looked at him, and I goes, “Oh.” So I put the paper down and I snapped to attention and everything and I saluted him and everything, so he goes, “What seems to be your problem?” Right? I goes, “I don't have a problem.” I said, “This job is my problem.” I says, “I told them I didn't want it.” I said, “They gave it to me anyway. I want to be with the infantry unit.” So he goes, “Well, I'll tell you what, Soldier,” he says, “Starting tomorrow, you're with the infantry unit.” (laughs) So he got me out of that job anyway, which was good. And when I went with the infantry unit, I liked it even more because we were training officers and sergeants to go to Vietnam, so we actually were showing them different things that because we were there for a year, and mostly all of us in our company were—not all were sergeants, but some of them were—and we got to train people to go to Vietnam, so I kind of liked that. Actually, I could yell at the officers and they couldn't do anything. (laughs). You know, showing them the mistakes they were making but that helped your life, you know what I mean?

AMBOS: Yeah. Wow. That sounds interesting. And when you came back, how did you adjust to civilian life?

[0:39:54]

L'ECUYER: Not too good. (laughs) Well, I came back, I got my job back, and I was working at Thom McAn, and I think my second week back, I had a couple friends working that I grew up with who were still working there, and they went in the National Guard or something but they didn't have to go to Vietnam. But they told me about this big guy, and they said, Oh, he's a—don't mess with this guy, he's a tough guy. He weighed about, I don't know, two-hundred-fifty pounds or so, kind of on the chunky side, though, but he was big. And one day we were sitting around eating lunch, and I just told him, I says, "You know I think he's a bullshit artist because he tells everybody, Oh I did this, I did that." I said, "Most people like that, they tell you how tough they are when they're not really that tough." We're sitting there eating lunch, and I don't know if you ever did this or not, but we had ketchup packets; we're all banging them like this and it's going all over everybody, which is no big deal. But he had it on his hand, and I'm sitting on the side of him and he took this hand like this and he wiped it on my shirt, which I already had it on me, but to me, that's disrespectful. So I just looked at him and I didn't care how big he was, and I goes—and I was smoking at the time, so I had a cigarette in my mouth—so I took my cigarette out and he had his arm down, and I put it out on his arm, right? And he went Rrrrr, like this, he jumps up, right, and I knocked the table over, I says, "Come on, big guy, let's see how tough you are." So he goes, and I heard the union steward, and he didn't like me and he goes—he's got a deep voice—he goes, "Don't hit him! You'll lose your job!" He didn't say him not to hit me, he said me not to hit him, right? So I goes, "Alright." So he says, "I'll see you outside after work." I says, "Okay I'll be out there waiting for you." So, evidently, some of my friends must have told him that I was a Vietnam veteran, and they says, You know, I wouldn't mess with that guy. He's kind of crazy. So he come over to me a half hour before work ends, and he goes, "Hey Bob," he says, "Why don't we just forget it." He says, "It was no big deal." I goes, "Oh, so you're backing down now?" He goes, "Well, no." He says, "It's not a big deal." I goes, "Okay," I says, "I'll forget it," but I said "I'm going to tell one guy that you backed down, and it's going to go around the whole warehouse," and I says, "Guess what? You're not going to be the big man anymore," I says. So evidentially, I told my friend there, and he told someone—and it goes around quick. And all of a sudden, he quit two weeks later (laughs) because he wasn't the big tough guy anymore, you know. I mean I wasn't a tough guy, I just told him I'm not afraid of anybody. But I did learn how to box when I was young cause my father was a boxer, my older brother was a boxer. They didn't fight pro, they fought amateur, but they showed me how to fight so, I still now—I'm sixty-nine years old, and I'm not afraid of anybody (laughs), so maybe because I am a little crazy, I don't know (laughs).

[0:43:27]

AMBOS: Did you use the GI Bill at all?

L'ECUYER: No. I should have, but I didn't really like high school, so I'm really kinda kicking my ass that I didn't. But, you know, like I said, I had a lot of problems with different jobs. That's why I worked like forty jobs in my lifetime. I don't like supervision, I guess. Most jobs I tried to take where I didn't have to deal with supervisors—I could just do my job and that's it. Once they tell you, that's it, you don't see them no more. And those are the jobs that I got along good with. The ones where I had people supervising me.

AMBOS: Micromanaging?

L'ECUYER: Right. I think it all goes back to Vietnam, too, because we had a CO that, he was top-ten in his class, so they made him a first lieutenant. Never been in infantry or anything like that, but they made him in charge of our company. And he was kind of an idiot, and we got in

well, kind of an argument. We were walking up and they had bunkers on top of the hill, and I was in the first platoon, so I called back with the RTO and I told him, I says, “Tell the CO that there’s Gooks in the bunkers up there.” And he goes, “Well, how does he know that?” Well, right then I was in my tenth month, I guess. I said, “Well, I heard chickens as we’re coming up the hill.” And that’s what they do—they use them as a warning signal, and they grab and they choke ‘em and there’s dead silence.” So that’s what I told him. He thought I was nuts. He says, “I never heard of that.” Well, he never did because he was never over there. So he goes, “You tell that sergeant to put his squad on line and to sweep through that bunker—like you see the Marines do???” And I go, “You tell that CO that he’s out of his mind and I’m not putting my squad on line walking through there.” So he got back to me and he says, “Either do it or you’re court marshalled.” So, I says, “Okay, guys, we’re gonna sweep through but” I said, “I’m telling you right now, we get in the middle, they’re gonna open up on us.” And that’s what happened. We got in the middle, there was our platoon and a rifle squad, and we got in the middle and they opened up, and we were pittin??? out all day long, right, and you know, guys got wounded and killed and stuff, and I kind of—

AMBOS: Blame? Yeah..

L’ECUYER: Yeah, so that’s where my supervise thing—I think that’s what happened. And I did eventually try to get back to him to—I was gonna kill him, you know, cause he got people wounded and killed—but that first sergeant, he kind of stopped me and he says, “Bob,” he says, “you can’t go back to the CP because,” he says, “I know what you’re gonna do.” (laughs) And he says “I feel like doing the same thing, but.” he says, “It is what it is. I can’t let you go.” I says, “Alright.” So, eventually, two days later, they flew him back in and he got a rear job. So by being a screw-up, he got a rear job out of it. So I guess that’s the way it worked (laughs).

AMBOS: That’s the way it does sometimes. It’s frustrating.

L’ECUYER: I think they said he was incompetent, but they didn’t—

AMBOS: You think he was incompetent? (laughs)

L’ECUYER: (laughs) I know he was.

AMBOS: What do you wish more people knew about veterans?

L’ECUYER: Do I wish more people knew about that?

AMBOS: No, what would you like people to know about veterans?

L’ECUYER: Well, just that they’re like normal people, you know. I mean, the press really went down on the Vietnam veterans. Every time something happened, it was negative. They would say, Oh well, Vietnam veteran did this—he shot up the post office or he robbed this place or he did that. But anything that was positive, you didn’t see in the papers. Now I had a friend of mine who was a marine I grew up with, and I don’t know if you know where Lake Quinsigamond

is in Worcester. Well, he belonged to the Marine Corps League, which was part of Lake Quinsigamond, and this kid crawled out—walked out on the ice and he fell through—a little kid—fell through the ice. And I guess he was out having a beer in the back, and he saw the kid go down, so he grabbed a branch and he crawled out on the ice, pulled him out, and saved his life. You didn’t see anything in the paper about that. Now that would be something positive, but you never saw—if a Vietnam veteran or a Korean veteran or any veteran, if they did something positive, they liked the negative stories. The negative stories sell papers. The positive ones don’t, obviously.

AMBOS: What would you like people to know or remember about your story?

L'ECUYER: I was just doing my job in Vietnam. The true heroes in Vietnam were the ones that died in Vietnam. That's my opinion. Not everybody has that opinion, but I mean, that's my opinion. You did your job and that's it, you know.

AMBOS: Well, thank you for your service. I appreciate it. We have been going for 50 minutes. I don't know if you're winding down. You've got me all verklempt talking about it (RE laughs). Is there anything else you want to add? You have very interesting stories. If there's something that you've just thought of.

[0:49:57]

L'ECUYER: No, I had a lot of, like I say friends and you know they tell you don't make friends with people in your unit because you might see them today and they might be dead tomorrow. So I did have one guy that I kind of got like really got close to, and they tell you not to, but he came from Tennessee and that was his nickname, Tennessee. And what happened was he went back for a three-day rest supposedly to get his teeth worked on for dental work or something. And he had gone to Hawaii, met his wife because he was married. And I guess they had like a honeymoon in Hawaii, and that was his seven-day leave or whatever. But we were coming back to Quan Loi where he was, and we got back there and I was ready to meet up with him, and they told me he got killed the night before. So, that kind of really got to me because I guess he was killed by friendly fire, too. Somebody on the LZ had a tank and when they got to the ground—people came in to attack, they set the tank up; it was supposed to be set up between the bunkers, and the guy hit the bunker with a beehive round and it was like ten of them on the bunker, they were all partying, having a good time until they started ground attack, and that's when they were ready. They got their rifles, but it was too late. The guy shot the tank, and boom, blew them up and killed them all. And that was the worst. There was other guys that got killed, but I was really close to him.

AMBOS: Yeah, that's sad. And you're part of a group in Worcester now? A veterans group?

L'ECUYER: Yeah. I belong to the Vietnam Veterans for the Community and we get high school kids up there—different high schools and tell them all about—we have a question-answer thing where they can ask us any question they want. And usually the kids, they're reluctant to ask you if you killed somebody in Vietnam. But most of us are combat veterans that belong to this group, so we get that away—they won't ask you—we just tell them. We'll say, You want to ask us if we killed people in Vietnam? Well, the answer would be yes because it was either you kill them or they killed you. So, that was your job, you know. So, they don't like to ask that question cause I guess they're afraid how you're gonna react. But, that's the first question we get out of the, you know. But we tell them where the food was, the water, any question they want to ask, we tell them. And it's good for the high schools cause like I said, there's nothing in textbooks where they can read about Vietnam, where if you're all combat veterans, you could tell them anything they want. We tell them about the snakes, the scorpions, the tarantulas, there were tigers, we never ran into any tiger. One of the guys in our group did. They killed it, I guess, because they were afraid it was gonna attack them. But there was Asian pit vipers, bamboo vipers, all kinds of snakes.

AMBOS: So you not only have an enemy, you have Mother Nature to worry about.

LeECUYER: Everybody smoked in Vietnam, too. And you know why they smoked? If you went through a stream or a river, ten out of ten times, you're gonna have leaches on you. And they go for all your wet spots, underneath and around, your crotch area, you know. And so if you

smoke, you can't get a leach off—you can't pull them off because the head stays in there because they suck your blood. If you smoke, you touch them with a cigarette and they fall off. So that's why they gave us—actually they'd give you four cigarettes in with your food and you got like a candy bar, which was hard as a rock, you couldn't even eat it (laughs). But, anyways, you had four cigarettes in each meal, so everybody in Vietnam smokes, and that's the reason because you've always got leaches on you when you went through the water. (laughs)

AMBOS: What an experience, wow. Well, I thank you for your time. I think we've made exactly an hour—fifty-four minutes. I'm going to shut it off then.

[end of recording]