

Transcription: Kenneth Liljestrand

Good morning. Today is Thursday, February 21st, 2013. My name is James Crabtree and I'm with the Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. This morning I'll be interviewing Mr. Kenneth Liljestrand. Is that good enough, sir?

Kenneth Liljestrand: That's perfect.

Liljestrand. Mr. Liljestrand is at the Big Spring Veterans Home and I'm at the General Land Office building in Austin, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me today. It's an honor for us. Sir, the first question I always like to start off with is please tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you entered the military.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, I was born in Pennsylvania, and my daddy was in the Navy, and he was teaching diesel engines to guys coming into the Navy to learn how.

Yes sir. Were you more by Philadelphia, kind of the eastern part of the state?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I was born in Altoona, Pennsylvania, and I there until the war was over and he moved back to Houston, and I grew up in Houston.

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I had two brothers. I didn't have any sisters.

Did any of them go into the military as well?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes, Roger went into the military as well, and Howard didn't go into the military because the war in Vietnam was over by that time.

What was it that brought you to enter the service? You went into the Army, is that correct?

Kenneth Liljestrand: That's correct.

Were you drafted or did you volunteer? What was the circumstances?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, I was graduated from Rice and I was going to TCU when the Army decided they needed me more in Vietnam than I needed to get a degree in psychology. So they drafted me.

What year was that?

Kenneth Liljestrand: That was in – well, '66 was when I got out of Rice, and '68, I guess '69, when I probably went into the military.

Was there not a college student exemption that you could have taken?

Kenneth Liljestrand: No, not in those days. Whenever the Army decided you needed to go to Vietnam, you did.

Sure. So at that point you had not gone through ROTC or anything of that sort?

Kenneth Liljestrand: No, I didn't. I didn't have any plans.

So you were a grad student at TCU?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes.

And you get the draft notice. Is it a telegram or a letter in the mail?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I don't remember.

At that point, do you recall how much time you had before you had to report for training? Was it a pretty short period of time or did they give you a little time to get things in order?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I guess they gave me 30 days, but it was, I don't remember exactly how it happened, how long it was, but it was a very short time.

Sure. So where did they send you to at that point for your training?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, I went to basic training at Fort Dixie, Jersey.

When they sent you to basic training there at Fort Dix, did you know at that point what your specialty was going to be? Did you know what you were going to be doing after basic training?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I was just going into the Army and I didn't know anything about it. My idea was that I would spend a couple of years in the Army, and when I got out of AIT, then I went ahead and enlisted to go to OCS.

OK, because they knew at that point, you went through regular basic training, you were already a college graduate, you graduated from Rice which is a very good university. Was there a reason why they didn't just send you to OCS to begin with?

Kenneth Liljestrand: No, because they weren't even thinking about it. I was just drafted.

Sure. So how did it come about that they recommended you for OCS? I guess at some point they realized that you were a college grad.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yeah, I don't know.

Did they ask if you wanted to go to OCS?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I guess they did. But I'm not real clear on how.

So you graduate from basic training at Fort Dix, and then they say hey, you'd like to go to officer candidate school and at some point you say yes. So then I assume pretty much right after that they sent you to OCS, is that correct?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Right.

Where was that?

Kenneth Liljestrand: It was at Fort Benning, Georgia.

Tell us, sir, what your memories are of Fort Benning and OCS.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, I just went and did my duty. I didn't have any particular plans at that point except I thought that I would go to Vietnam.

You had to have known then that the war was going on and it was a pretty difficult time and that the odds were good that that's where you were going to go, correct?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I went to Vietnam in 1970.

And you were a brand new second lieutenant.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes.

Were you an infantry officer?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes.

OK, tell us, sir, what that was like because I know a lot of people have done movies about it and written books about it, but what are your memories of being a brand new boot second lieutenant infantry officer in Vietnam.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, I had spent oh, four months, in Colorado Springs, and then went to Panama, and spent two weeks in Panama and then went to Vietnam.

When you were in Panama, were you doing jungle warfare training?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Exactly.

OK, that makes sense because you were going to a jungle type environment in Vietnam.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Exactly.

What were your feelings at that point? Were you nervous, scared, excited? Can you describe how you felt knowing you were going into Vietnam?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, I had no intention of ever going to anywhere the Army was going to send me because I didn't have any intention of being in the Army in the first place. But I was scared I guess about Vietnam.

Did you talk to anybody that gave you any sort of advice that had been there?

Kenneth Liljestrand: No, everybody that could give me advice didn't want to because they had been in Vietnam and they didn't want anybody else to go.

So when they sent you over, did you fly over?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes I did.

Did you fly on a commercial charter flight?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yeah.

Do you remember where you landed, where they flew you into?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I think Tonsenut.

Tonsenut, OK. What are your memories, sir, of arriving in Vietnam? Did they send you directly to a unit at that point?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes, I had 24 hours to get ready and then I went to the 25th Division.

Where were they located?

Kenneth Liljestrand: They were close to Saigon.

So you report into the 25th Infantry Division, where do they send you from there?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, from there I had to go out one night, I'm trying to think about what I had to do, but I went out and I was brand new in country, and didn't know my platoon at all, but I had to go out and defend our rifle, we had a platoon set up.

You had to go out with your platoon for a defensive type mission then.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Exactly.

And this was pretty much the first day you were part of your unit?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yeah.

I know you said you were in the 25th Infantry Division, but what was your company battalion?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I was assigned to a platoon in the 25th.

How many men were in that platoon? Was it about 40 soldiers?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, theoretically it was 40 soldiers, but it was about 20 actually.

OK, so pretty small.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes.

And I assume that it was only about 20 because of combat losses?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes.

Did you have a platoon sergeant?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes.

What do you remember about the platoon sergeant?

Kenneth Liljestrand: He was excellent as far as managing the people and so forth. I don't have a recollection of what his name was, but he was an excellent sergeant.

Did you talk to your soldiers at all when you first took over as their platoon commander?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Not really.

What was that like knowing that you were in charge of 20 men in a combat zone?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, it was scary. I don't remember exactly what I thought about it, but it was just doing my job.

Tell us, sir, if you can a little bit about what the soldiers in your platoon were like. I imagine they were all pretty young?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes, and some of them were people that were involved in drugs, but they weren't that I knew of involved in drugs in Vietnam. But they had been involved in the States and had gotten sent to Vietnam as a result of -

Having gotten in trouble with the law I would guess.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Exactly, so they went to Vietnam instead of going to jail.

How many of your platoon do you think were drafted, a pretty good number of them?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I'd say everybody was.

Every one?

Kenneth Liljestrand: There may have been half a dozen that were volunteers, but most of them were draftees.

How would you describe the morale of your unit, in having some of those guys in it that had prior legal problems and then you had combat losses?

Kenneth Liljestrand: They were good as far as that goes. I think the platoon was very well behaved. I would say we didn't have any -

No disciplinary problems?

Kenneth Liljestrand: No, I don't think so.

That's good. After that first defensive mission, what did your platoon normally do? Did you do a lot of patrols?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes, we did a lot of patrols and we had to go through rice paddies and so forth, VC.

During those patrols, did you have a radio man close to you?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes. He was about the fourth one back. I had a point man and then I had maybe one or two other people, and then myself, and our radio operator.

So you had to have known as a second lieutenant on those patrols that you were a prime target, correct?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Exactly.

How did that weigh on your mind, or did you try not to think about it?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I tried not to think about it.

And kind of along the same lines for the radio operator, too, I'm sure that he knew he was a primary target as well.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, he was injured when we were in Cambodia. We were in Cambodia to stop the VC coming down, and he was right there and injured.

Did you have much interaction, sir, with the local Vietnamese civilians?

Kenneth Liljestrand: No, I didn't. The interaction was done on the battalion level.

So then your platoon primarily did a lot of patrolling. How long would an average patrol last?

Kenneth Liljestrand: About four or five days.

Yeah, that's a long time. That's a significant amount of time outside the wire. Do you know how much ground you would cover on a patrol like that? I imagine it had to have been quite a few miles.

Kenneth Liljestrand: I'd say an average of four or five miles a day.

And how often would you make contact with the enemy?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Not too often. By 1970, the area that we were in was basically secured, but we had to go into Cambodia and that was -

And in Cambodia I think you said, sir, you were dealing with trying to find the Viet Cong?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yeah.

Describe, sir, if you can what type of interactions you had with them. Did you make a lot of contact with the VC?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, the VC were not, we didn't approach them as friendly. We approached them as enemies. And they were dug in and we called in air support.

Was the air support fairly effective?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, we thought it was, but it really wasn't, as they appeared the next day and they would hide and open fire on us again.

I'm sure that had to have been frustrating.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes, it was.

What would the average number of casualties be on an encounter like that? Did you normally have a couple of men that you had to evacuate?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, that particular incident, we had two or three that we had to evacuate the first day, and the second day there was again about two.

Was it as simple as just getting on the radio and calling for a helicopter to come?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Exactly, yeah.

During that time that you were out there in Vietnam all those months, did you have much word from back home in terms of letters or care packages?

Kenneth Liljestrand: In terms of letters -

Did your parents write to you?

Kenneth Liljestrand: No. My wife wrote to me.

Oh, I didn't realize you were married at that point.

Kenneth Liljestrand: I was married, went out, got into the Army, and my daughter cost me \$25 and my second daughter cost me \$25.

To be born?

Kenneth Liljestrand: To be born, yeah, because the Army paid for everything else.

Well that's not too bad.

Kenneth Liljestrand: The third daughter cost me \$25. Now my son cost me \$1,000 because I was out of the Army. But the first three were \$25 each.

So you were married when you went in, and then where did your wife live while you were in Vietnam?

Kenneth Liljestrland: She lived in Fort Worth.

OK, so she was I guess at home then. She wasn't on a military base.

Kenneth Liljestrland: No, she wasn't. She could go to the Px at Carswell -
Carswell Air Force Base?

Kenneth Liljestrland: Yes, exactly, but she didn't have any -

How did she cope with you being in Vietnam and not knowing day to day where you were?

Kenneth Liljestrland: Well, she divorced me after I got back.

I'm sorry to hear that.

Kenneth Liljestrland: I don't know if it was all Vietnam or not, but she decided that she didn't want to be married to an ex-Army officer.

I'm sure it didn't help the circumstances. Did she seem like she was a different person after you got home from Vietnam?

Kenneth Liljestrland: Well, not exactly, but she was a different person and I don't really know why.

How long did you spend in Vietnam, sir?

Kenneth Liljestrland: Just 1970, just the one year.

You did a 12-month tour, correct? Yeah, that's a pretty long time and you were with that infantry platoon the entire time?

Kenneth Liljestrland: Well, I was not with them the whole time because I got demoted out of the 25th Division, where I mean, to a general's site, when I spent four months with a general and flying around Vietnam.

Wow, so you got picked to be a general's aid.

Kenneth Liljestrland: That's right.

Is that something you wanted to do?

Kenneth Liljestrland: Well, I liked it better than being out on patrol.

I bet you ate better food and slept in better places.

Kenneth Liljestrland: That's right.

Who was the general?

Kenneth Liljestrand: It was General Green. The PRE -

Was he the general of the 25th ID?

Kenneth Liljestrand: No, he was the Assistant General. General Bouts was the general of the whole 25th Division, and General Green and General Thurman were behind him.

How do you think that you got picked to be his aid?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, I thought it was pretty fortunate.

I assume this was something you had to apply for, correct?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes, there were about four other people that were also in the running, but I got selected.

That's great. What was it like working for the general?

Kenneth Liljestrand: It was pretty much -

As an aid, what type of duties would you have? I'm sure you had to help him. I know you traveled with him everywhere.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes.

But it was basically things that the general would have you do that needed done, correct?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes. He was involved in everything else and I was just helping him do whatever he needed to be done.

Sure, and I imagine then because you were his aid, you got to travel and see a lot of Vietnam. Is that right?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I got three medals just for traveling with him.

What are some memories, sir, of being a general's aid that stand out to you? Are there any particular memories, any places you went?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I remember getting in trouble once, and the reason I got in trouble was because my platoon was involved and they were there in base camp and they were not able to go swimming, and I called the guys that were in charge of the swimming pool and said what is the reason? And they told me it was I think the 4th of July or something, and I said wait a minute, we don't have a 4th of July in Vietnam. And so they opened up the pool, and then I got in trouble for doing that.

For having them open it?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Uh-huh, and the general said he was supposed to call the staff sergeant.

OK, so you were acting on the general's behalf I guess and had it opened?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes, exactly.

That's pretty funny. Was he angry at you because of that?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Not really, I got chewed out for it.

But you were just looking out for the troops' welfare, so he couldn't have been that angry.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Exactly.

That's funny.

Kenneth Liljestrand: It seems funny now, but in those days it wasn't.

Oh I'm sure, not at the time getting chewed out by a general I'm sure wasn't enjoyable. Did you have a chance, sir, to take any R&R during that year you were in Vietnam?

Kenneth Liljestrand: No.

None at all.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, my wife was pregnant with my second daughter, and she couldn't fly to Hawaii, so I just didn't take any.

So you just stayed there.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Right.

But you didn't get to come home any quicker because of that, did you?

Kenneth Liljestrand: No.

Yeah. How old was your first daughter when you were in Vietnam?

Kenneth Liljestrand: She was a year, and my second daughter was a year – I mean -

She wasn't a year when your second daughter was born?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Right.

So they were pretty close together. So you didn't get to see your second daughter then until you got home, is that right?

Kenneth Liljestrand: That's correct.

I'm sure that had to have been a great day for you to get home and be reunited with your children.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes.

Do you think it made it harder for you knowing you had a wife and children at home than if you'd been just a young, single guy over there?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Probably.

I'm sure it caused you to worry more or be more homesick.

Kenneth Liljestrand: I wrote my wife every day. They weren't necessarily long letters or anything like that, but I wrote her every day.

That's good. I think, sir, I'd heard, too, before we did this interview that you were awarded the Purple Heart over there as well, is that correct?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes, the Purple Heart was something I got when I was wounded in Cambodia.

Before you became a general's aid.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes.

OK. Tell us, sir, if you would, the circumstances surrounding that.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, I was leading my platoon, and I was I think probably the third person in line, and we happened onto this Vietnamese stronghold, and they opened fire on us and I got wounded. We backed off and called in an air strike.

Where were you hit?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I was hit in the shoulder.

Did you know it as soon as you were struck?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, I didn't notice it then because I was busy doing other things, but I noticed it later.

Was it a round from a weapon, or was it fragmentation, or do you know?

Kenneth Liljestrand: It was fragmentation.

Did they pull you out of the field to patch it up?

Kenneth Liljestrand: No, they didn't. I was alive and so forth and they just sent me back in the next day, and it was probably a week before I got patched up.

Wow, did they take it out of your shoulder?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, not really. I got my shoulder worked on after I was in Fort Worth, but even today it's massive.

So you probably still have some fragmentation in your shoulder.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Exactly.

How long was it before they awarded you the Purple Heart?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, I got that a week later.

About a week later. Do you have any particular memories of any of the soldiers in your unit or did you try not to form too close a bond with any of them? I know you were an officer and they were enlisted, but I didn't know if you got to know any of them very well.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Exactly, I didn't form anything.

How about other officers in other platoons in your company or in your battalion, did you get to know any of them?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I would say no, not really.

Yeah, I didn't know if you had a chance to talk to any other platoon commanders or that sort of thing.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Not really.

So when was it, sir, that you finally got to come back home to the United States?

Kenneth Liljestrand: It was November of 1970.

What was that like? I guess at that point you were still a general's aid?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes, but he was coming back, well his position was coming back to the United States in 1970, and the reason was that the 25th Division was going back to Hawaii. As a matter of fact, he went to be the mayor of Saigon.

Oh, interesting. When you came back in November of 1970, was your time in the Army up or did you still have time to do?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well I still had a year to do.

And so where did they send you at that point, sir?

Kenneth Liljestrand: To Colorado Springs.

Colorado Springs, OK. And did you family come up from Fort Worth at that point?

Kenneth Liljestrand: That's right, my wife and daughters came to Colorado Springs.

That's good. And then at that time I know the war was pretty unpopular with a lot of people, the protestors and the hippies and that sort of thing, did that weigh on you at all?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, it didn't weigh on me that much because I didn't get involved in any of the movements. The people that were obviously protesting were at the airports, and I came back with a plane load of Army personnel, and we landed at night, and got off the plane and moved through the airport, and we didn't see the people that were really involved in the protesting because they weren't there at 10 o'clock at night.

Did you at that point know that you wanted to get out of the Army, or did you think you wanted to stay in for longer?

Kenneth Liljestrand: No, I didn't think that I would be in the Army. I got promoted to captain when I was in Colorado Springs, but I didn't want to stay in.

So then you got out in 1971?

Kenneth Liljestrand: '71 or '72.

And so then you were out, you were completely out. You weren't in the Reserves or any of that sort of thing.

Kenneth Liljestrand: I still had four years in the Reserves.

Did they make you join a unit, or you just technically belonged in the Reserves on the list of paper?

Kenneth Liljestrand: No, I was involved in Reserves in Fort Worth, and I guess I spent most of my time dealing with Reserves business, but I didn't get involved with anything.

And once you were in Fort Worth, I guess then you got a civilian job?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Well, as a matter of fact, I didn't get a civilian job because I got a job with my father-in-law who had an insurance agency, and I got involved in selling insurance.

Well, that's what I meant by a civilian job, sir. You left the military and you got a job, you were a civilian now. Did you find that to be a hard transition after having been in Vietnam, or was it fairly simple for you?

Kenneth Liljestrand: No, it was very difficult for me to go out and meet people who were probably basically opposed to Vietnam.

Do you think it was difficult because of the experiences you had in Vietnam or because of the way people felt towards you being a Vietnam veteran?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I think it was because of me being a Vietnam veteran.

How long did you stay in that job, because I know you said that your wife divorced you at some point. Did you continue to work for your former father-in-law at that point?

Kenneth Liljestrand: No, as a matter of fact I got a job as a clerk at 7-Eleven, and was a clerk at 7-Eleven until I got a job with the government.

There in Fort Worth?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes, I was working for – I can't even think of it anymore – HUD.

Oh, Housing and Urban Development?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes, exactly, and I was doing all right except that they wanted me to go out and look at houses and be an inspector, and the problem was that my experience with Vietnam kept me from doing my job, and they let me go.

You said, sir, you have three daughters and a son?

Kenneth Liljestrand: Yes.

Did you ever talk to them at all, or did they ever ask you at all about your time in the Army?

Kenneth Liljestrand: No, not really. I'm close to my daughter who lives in Big Springs, and she is a school teacher, and I talked to her some about it, but not really.

And that's why you're in Big Spring now because your daughter is out there?

Kenneth Liljestrand: That's right.

That's good.

Kenneth Liljestrand: She and her husband, her husband is also a school teacher, and teaches agriculture.

That's good. Do you think with your other children, do you think they are afraid to talk to you about Vietnam, or is it just something you never brought up?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I've just never brought it up.

Well, I appreciate, sir, you agreed to do this interview with us because here at the Land Office, we have archives that go back to the 1700s. We have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received when he was killed at the Alamo, and we have the original Registro, which is a big, huge register book that Stephen F. Austin kept of the original settlers that came to Texas, and what we're doing with interviews like this one today is we're saving these to add to that archive, and the goal is hopefully that even hundreds of years from now, people can listen to these interviews and study them and learn from them and hear the spoken word of those veterans that have actually been in places like Vietnam. So it's not just something written down in a text book, but it's something that kind of comes to life. And we're going to send you free copies of this interview on CDs and you can keep those or you can give them to your children or whomever, and potentially they could listen to it and maybe learn from it as well. Then we're also going to send you a nice letter and certificate from Commissioner Patterson in a commemorative binder, and that's just kind of a very small way of the state of Texas saying

thank you for your service to our nation. I know Commissioner Patterson is a Vietnam veteran as well, so I think he definitely will thank you for your service.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Thank you very much.

Yes sir, so sir, I guess kind of in closing, is there anything you would want to say to somebody listening to this interview, potentially hundreds of years from now, long after you and I are both gone?

Kenneth Liljestrand: I don't think I have anything to say, but war is hell.

Yeah, I think anyone that's been there agrees with that. So I'm an Iraq war veteran myself, so I definitely agree there is nothing enjoyable about facing some of the difficulties that come out of it, but again, we're very appreciative, sir, for your service and I hope everyone out there at the Big Spring home is taking good care of you, too. So I appreciate Miss Pomeroy for you sending me an email and putting me in touch and saying hey, this is a gentleman we should interview, because it's definitely been an honor.

Kenneth Liljestrand: Thank you very much.

Yes sir, and then in a couple of weeks, be looking for that package from me. It will have all those CDs and that letter and certificate, and I'll put my card in there as well.

Kenneth Liljestrand: OK.

All right, sir, thank you again very much and talk to you again soon.

Kenneth Liljestrand: OK.

All right, sir, take care. Bye bye.

[End of recording]