

Premel, Donald USMC

[00:00:14.55] MARC HENDERSON: This is Mark Henderson conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Donald Premel on May 15, 2021 at 3:30 in the afternoon. And we are at a reunion of 3rd Force Recon Marines in Nashville, Tennessee. Sir, before we begin could you please state and spell your first and last name for the transcriber.

[00:00:36.05] DONALD PREMEL: Donald A. Premel. Last name P, as in Paul, R-E-M-E-L.

[00:00:43.37] MARC HENDERSON: Thank you, sir.

[00:00:48.49] DONALD PREMEL: I was born in Seattle, Washington on November 26th, 1949, AD.

[00:00:59.79] MARC HENDERSON: Thank you. And so what do you consider your hometown?

[00:01:06.98] DONALD PREMEL: What do I-- sorry.

[00:01:08.20] MARC HENDERSON: Where do you consider your hometown? Where did you grow up?

[00:01:11.35] DONALD PREMEL: Seattle, Washington, by SeaTac.

[00:01:13.87] MARC HENDERSON: Born and raised then.

[00:01:15.17] DONALD PREMEL: Right, it was SeaTac they call it now. Not born in a hospital, I was born at home on the couch because we didn't have a car that would operate to take my mom to the hospital. So I was born with yellow jaundice and-- which went away after a short period they said. I was one of nine children, five boys and four girls. And they kept us going and keep us motivated to survive in such a large family environment.

[00:01:48.70] MARC HENDERSON: Were you first born, last born?

[00:01:52.36] DONALD PREMEL: Very good question. I was actually-- I was number six.

[00:01:55.99] MARC HENDERSON: What was your sense of the war before you entered the military?

[00:02:02.77] DONALD PREMEL: Well, when we were young, probably around 6 and older, we used to play war games in our backyard with the neighbors. And so with stories, we saw World War II movies. And then later in life when we got teenagers, the Vietnam War, we could see news.

[00:02:25.96] And at that time it was horrifying because when we grew up in elementary school there was still the fear, in the '50s, of Russia launching a nuclear war on the United States. So

during school each week we had to go through a bomb-- a nuclear attack routine and get under our desk. And then-- so we always had that threat.

[00:02:55.42] And then when the Vietnam era happened it basically became real for many of my friends that didn't come back home.

[00:03:04.40] MARC HENDERSON: Sure. What was your sense of the draft growing up before you entered the military?

[00:03:10.13] DONALD PREMEL: Well, my friends were being drafted. But I was still in high school at the time. So I didn't receive a draft number yet.

[00:03:18.65] MARC HENDERSON: What informed your decision to go in the military? Were you drafted or did you enlist?

[00:03:25.40] DONALD PREMEL: I find that probably the most interesting question. And I thank you for asking it. It was a combination of one, I was in a drum and bugle band called The Blue Angels. It was a Philip Sousa drum and bugle band. And our uniform was red, white, and blue similar to the Marine Corps dress blues. When my brother went in the Marines I saw his dress blues. And I associated the drum and bugle corps dress blues. And that-- I said, well, someday I want to wear that uniform.

[00:03:56.84] The second thing that motivated me to go into the Marine Corps was when I was in high school some of my upperclassmen didn't come home. And that created an issue with me wanting to go to war to-- kind of in their honor.

[00:04:17.27] The third influence was-- she was the one that influenced me, was my mom one day had a very bad day, an angry day. And she challenged me. I went to school that day, and went to work, and did sports, and doing well in school. And I came home. And she says, you're nobody. And you'll never be like your brother who's in the Marine Corps.

[00:04:42.53] So the next day, I went down to school, quit high school, quit the band, gymnastics, and track, and went down and quit my job. And one week later, I was in the Marine Corps. So I thought, I'll prove you wrong.

[00:04:56.28] MARC HENDERSON: So the Marine Corps took you even though you hadn't graduated high school?

[00:04:59.09] DONALD PREMEL: Yes, both my parents had to sign, which they were reluctant. But I finally talked them into it.

[00:05:04.31] MARC HENDERSON: What instrument did you play in the band?

[00:05:06.38] DONALD PREMEL: I played drums.

[00:05:07.40] MARC HENDERSON: Drums.

[00:05:08.39] DONALD PREMEL: Yeah, marching drums. I also played drums in the school band.

[00:05:14.30] MARC HENDERSON: What year is this that you went in the Marine Corps?

[00:05:18.35] DONALD PREMEL: That was February of 1968.

[00:05:22.84] MARC HENDERSON: What basic training did you go to? Where did you go to do basic training?

[00:05:27.22] DONALD PREMEL: I was a Hollywood Marine, went to San Diego. And I went there and later got to experience some other bases after basic training. And our advanced training after boot camp we went up towards Del Mar and Camp Pendleton.

[00:05:45.10] MARC HENDERSON: And so what did you do for advanced training? What MOS?

[00:05:50.77] DONALD PREMEL: MOS, I was an M60 machine gunner. And after I realized how heavy it was to carry I said, I've got to get out of this.

[00:06:01.66] MARC HENDERSON: Were you able to?

[00:06:02.80] DONALD PREMEL: Yes, I was. Well first of all, if I could just maybe reflect back.

[00:06:08.92] MARC HENDERSON: Sure, please.

[00:06:09.64] DONALD PREMEL: In boot camp we had, towards the end before we graduated, we had maybe a company commander, I don't know what his title was, but he'd come walking through with the DIs and presented us with some motivation. In doing so, he stood there I saw these big, bright gold wings on his chest. And they just sparkled. I said, wow, I got to get those someday. So I found out they were Force Recon wings.

[00:06:41.74] When I got out of boot camp and then went to advanced training, out of boot camp, out of a series of Marines, I got the highest physical fitness score and mostly because my motivation was they only promoted four people out of boot camp out of series. You received a promotion. And you either got it through academic. You got it through being a guide. Or you got it through the rifle range or high physical fitness.

[00:07:12.49] And I think my best shot was probably physical fitness because coming out of high school sports I was in pretty good shape. And so I pursued the physical fitness. Getting it, I got a meritory promotion to PFC, private first class.

[00:07:27.85] So as we were sitting there through completing our advanced training in machine gun school, a gunnery sergeant walked down in front of us wearing the big gold wings. And he says, I'm looking-- he called my name. And I stood up. And he says, we're looking for graduates

out of boot camp that were elite, that got promoted at boot camp under one of the four categories. Because we're looking for them to be part of the best of the best for Force Recon. He said, would you be interested in Force Recon?

[00:08:00.49] I jumped to my feet and said, I'm your man. And so I was selected. And then they put me into initiation to see if I can qualify to be Force Recon.

[00:08:13.84] MARC HENDERSON: Are there any memorable stories from boot camp that stick out that you'd like to share?

[00:08:19.03] DONALD PREMEL: Wow. You are asking the most perfect questions. Yes, they were very motivational to me. I will start with the first night as a recruit. And just to reflect back a little bit, well, let me explain. The first night they have you stand on the yellow footsteps. And then they shave your head, and issue your clothing, and two sets of utilities. And then they basically harass you, teach you the basics of marching, and push-ups, sit-ups, squat thrust, and push-ups and sit-ups all night long.

[00:08:54.55] And in doing so, they worked us until probably 2:00, 3:00 in the morning the first night. When we got into the barracks they said we can go hit the rack, go to bed. And as we're sitting there all the recruits were complaining. Oh, the bed's not soft enough. Oh, they worked us. And oh, I got to sleep on a bunk bed and just complaints.

[00:09:20.29] And I'm sitting there going, oh, ah, I just feel fantastic. And they're all telling me, Marine, will you shut up and go to sleep? But what they didn't know was, when I grew up, I grew up in a family of nine. It was an 800 square foot house. We had two bedrooms, one bathroom, did not have any indoor plumbing. And so the girls got the one bedroom, the parents the other bedroom, and the boys had the living room.

[00:09:49.40] So we had to sleep on the living room floor. But there wasn't room for me. So I had to sleep in an overstuffed chair in a curled up position. And so I think that's why I was the shortest one in the family. I never got to stretch my body out.

[00:10:09.34] So anyway, so I got boot camp at night. I mean, I got a free haircut. I got free two sets of clothing. And because growing up, my mother didn't have enough money to buy clothes, we had one set of clothing we wore a week. So we had to wear clothes for a week. So I had two sets of clothing now, and my own bed, with a mattress, a pillow, and sheets, a top and bottom sheet. So I was in heaven. It was wonderful. But they didn't know-- this is my first night-- I enjoyed those pleasantries of being in the Marine Corps. So that was a very fun night for me, very enjoyable.

[00:10:50.79] MARC HENDERSON: Your advanced training for the M60, tell us a little bit about that.

[00:10:55.74] DONALD PREMEL: Well, they basically taught us all the functionalities and the nomenclature of the M60. And they told us, basically, one person will carry the tripod, which is

quite heavy. And the other one will carry the ammo and the rifle. And so playing both parts in training I knew I didn't want either one of them.

[00:11:18.40] Secondly, I heard that the first thing they try to shoot out in an ambush is the machine gunner. So I'm thinking, hey, I'll be your number one target. So there's got to be something better than this. So when that recon man walked in with the gold wings that's why I was so excited to jump up. This is my way out and my way in. So I looked at it that way.

[00:11:41.26] MARC HENDERSON: What about indoctrination do you remember?

[00:11:44.76] DONALD PREMEL: The indoctrination was quite extreme. It was the first day when we went over there. The few of us that they selected, we had to run in formation. And they ran us to the motor pool is where they keep all the equipment and do all the maintenance on equipment. And they had a pit that was I'm guessing 15 feet long, maybe, and maybe 2 and 1/2 feet wide. And it was full of oil all the way to the top. And that was where they drained the oil for the vehicles, changing their oil.

[00:12:21.60] Well, they had to submerge at one end. And we had to swim to the other side without surfacing out of the oil. And doing so I immediately got under. I couldn't push off the walls because it was slippery. So I decided to go push myself back. And then like a kick-start when you swim I pushed myself off the back wall through the thick oil to the other end until I touched my fingertips on the end. I come up.

[00:12:52.20] At that point, they wouldn't let us wipe our eyes. But we had to stand at attention. And then when we all, the ones that completed it, got out. They had us roll in the sand. So we became like a tar baby almost. And then they give us a big telephone pole that we had to put up in arms and run. And then as we're running we had to do up in arms with the telephone pole.

[00:13:18.30] Then they ran us down to the beach and did harassment down there, push-ups, sit-ups, flutter kicks. And then we washed off in the ocean. And that was the first initiation right there just within the first probably hour of being initiated. I said, boy, this is going to be a tough thing trying to become a Force Recon Marine. But-- excuse me.

[00:13:41.46] All that is basically to test your willingness, and your fortitude, and trying to find each person's, basically, comfort zone, where they feel comfortable. And once you reach your peak, your breaking point, that's when they started measuring us. But they want to see would we break first? And those that broke or wanted to stay in their comfort zone didn't make it.

[00:14:08.72] MARC HENDERSON: Did you consider any of that indoctrination to be hazing? Or do you think it was beneficial?

[00:14:15.06] DONALD PREMEL: Back then we didn't know that word. And it was-- no, I took it because I played football and wrestling in high school. So even there the coaches will push you to your limit to see if you can get that position. So I was-- I already dealt with some of it, but not to that extreme.

[00:14:35.33] MARC HENDERSON: You made it through indoctrination and then onto Force Recon training. What was the actual recon training like?

[00:14:44.36] DONALD PREMEL: A lot of classroom. They really, truly wanted to test your academic level out. And being I dropped out of high school, I was probably the least educated person there. But I had to study a little harder to get through everything. And then there was the physical training and then the mental. The hardest part, I think, was the mental, the mental survival, because they'll purposely get you to rethink are you as good as you really think you are? And so that was a strain.

[00:15:21.11] But constant, constant push-ups, constant exercise. And it was a constant challenges. But at the end of the day when you made it you truly felt refreshed because you know you made it, some of them didn't.

[00:15:37.52] MARC HENDERSON: Can you give an example of one of the mental challenges that you had to see through?

[00:15:42.29] DONALD PREMEL: Well, I guess part of the training was pre-scuba. Before you go to jump school, or even scuba school, or even mountaineering school, you have to do a pre-school. And the pre-school is, basically, to test and weed out those that they don't want to send because when you go to jump school they're sending you to an Army school. And you're representing the Marine Corps. So they don't want you to fail. And scuba school is to send you to a Navy school, same situation.

[00:16:15.83] So they put you through the ultimate testing and endurance that they can to make sure that when they send you there you're going to pass. Not only pass, pass in the highest graduation of the class.

[00:16:30.23] MARC HENDERSON: Sure.

[00:16:30.44] DONALD PREMEL: And one of them was probably, which we call today waterboarding, but back then we didn't know that term as well. And we did a full day of underwater breathing techniques and testing how long we can hold our breath. And so it was, basically, an underwater morning we did.

[00:16:55.71] In the afternoon they got us out of the pool. They told us to stand at attention along the pool. And then they assign you a swim buddy. So you each have a buddy so you don't drown. And so we're standing there. And my buddy is next to me. And then they told us to get over into a back bend and do upside down push-ups. And we did that.

[00:17:18.20] And then when you notice when you do a backbend your mouth is-- you can't pull your mouth up. So your mouth is wide open. They come by with a water hose and shoot it down our throat to see if we would break, or give up, or panic. And some did. But they did it to me three times. And the second time my swim buddy was with me. We both made it through the second.

[00:17:49.64] There was about 10 seconds or so, maybe 15, between each hit. They give you enough time for you to catch your breath again. And so what flashed back in my mind is, basically, when I was a kid and how I had to keep my throat open in swimming. And so what I did is I told my buddy next to me I said, just blow out all your air. And that way you won't be able to suck in any water down your throat.

[00:18:25.79] And so we did. And then at the point where we thought we couldn't handle it anymore because we're blowing it out as they're squirting it in, it worked. And so we passed that. So mentally, can you handle-- ? And that's what they're looking for is are you going to panic? You can't breathe. And do you keep your mental mind on it so you don't quit?

[00:18:49.88] MARC HENDERSON: So did you do any other specialized training before Vietnam? So you talked about Force Recon indoctrination, and then Force Recon school, and then scuba school, or pre-school.

[00:19:06.13] DONALD PREMEL: Yeah, and then we had pre-jump school. Then we went to Army jump school in Fort Benning, Georgia. And then we attended the Army jump school. Out there I was the only Marine in the class. It was all Army. And there were some Navy there. And so then we attended their class and survived it.

[00:19:28.75] Being a Marine, obviously, they call them black hats there, they give you little extra challenges and harassment because you're in a different uniform, you do things differently. For example, we were taught at the Marines you always do your chin-ups overhanded and you put your chin over the top of the bar. The Army they did them underhanded and brought their head to the bar.

[00:19:54.01] And so a little different standard. So when we did ours overhand they would harass us more because we're not doing it the way they're doing it. Little fun stuff, that to me is fun stuff though.

[00:20:05.08] MARC HENDERSON: Any other unique experiences at airborne school?

[00:20:11.11] DONALD PREMEL: Yes, I don't want to gross anyone out. But like the Army, any time a Marine is challenged you don't back away from the challenge. So they were trying to come up with, every day while we're standing in line, who could challenge the other out and gross them out. So this Army guy picked up this little bug on the tarmac, the concrete deck, and put it in his mouth and said, hey, Marine, can you beat this? Well, then comes big old cockroach across the ground. So I picked the cockroach up and ate it alive. And I'm going, I can't believe I just did this. But it was just a way to prove that you can do it.

[00:20:51.70] MARC HENDERSON: Sure. How many jumps did you do?

[00:20:53.71] DONALD PREMEL: At the basic jump school, Army, you do five. You do a full equipment jump. And you do a night jump. And then you do a day jump. And then-- trying to think what the other one is. I think the other ones are just day jumps, yeah.

[00:21:13.24] MARC HENDERSON: Any other training after jump school?

[00:21:16.09] DONALD PREMEL: Yes, then I come back and I had to complete five more jumps in the Marine Corps to get my gold wings. Because when you do Army you get silver wings. So to be a Force Recon Marine you're supposed to have the gold. So you come back and do five jumps there. And that was an experience because in jump school in the Army I was always the last one in line on the airplane.

[00:21:40.73] And what you do is they call hook, stand up and hook up. So the jumpmaster will say, OK, everybody stand up, hook up. So you take your static line that they have and hook it up to the wire. And then the last person is supposed to push everybody else forward so nobody will hesitate at the door. And you push them out. So my five jumps I was the back guy pushing.

[00:22:04.69] When I got to Force Recon, I was the-- all of a sudden they assigned me as the first person in line, which I've never been before. But I knew that the jumpmaster will give you signals to jump. So it was a C-130 with a platform went down the back. He said stand up, hook up. I did. I went to the platform, put my feet over the edge. And I'm looking at the jumpmaster who's kind of on his knees next to me below me. And he, all of a sudden, takes and points the thumb downward.

[00:22:42.19] I'm thinking, oh, I jumped, thinking that means jump. I've never been first to know what the answer was after all that training. Well, I opened up. And I look around. And I'm the only parachute in the sky. The helicopter's just flying away. I'm going, oh, no. I must have done something wrong here. So I looked around. And there was no field, no landing zone. It was just canyon walls with jagged cliffs and trees coming out. And I'm going, where am I going to land?

[00:23:13.40] So I went to-- the straps that hold you to the parachute, the T-10 parachute, are called risers. And so I started pulling the risers down trying to move the parachute. They didn't have a thing called toggles, which you can steer a parachute. You can draw your name in the sky with toggles. But you're really limited with the risers.

[00:23:36.40] So I'm trying to slip away from the jagged rock sticking out on the cliff and the big trees. And so I finally maneuvered it the best I could and landed in a tree sticking out of the side of the cliff with a large drop off below. And so I'm there. So I did a quick release and got rid of the parachute so the wind wouldn't come up and blow me back out into the canyon.

[00:24:02.32] So I did that. And I worked my way, crawled my way back on the tree to where it intersected with the cliff. And then I worked my way face climbing up the cliff because it was basically a sheer wall. And face climbed, got to a flat area on top. And next thing you know a medevac helicopter came in and picked me up. They debriefed me on the airplane. How could you be so stupid?

[00:24:28.27] And so anyways, so I got back to the-- basically they were checking me out and make sure I was OK, the medics were. Got back to the base and my sergeant and the jumpmaster called me in. And they didn't call me by name. At that time, I was a corporal, Corporal Premel.

They called me, I'm trying to think it was-- it was a-- something about being a beginning jumper and not knowing what I was doing. And told me to get in.

[00:25:04.70] And so I got up there-- and I thought I was just going to get really ratcheted by them. But they-- just the opposite. They said first of all, we want to know, are you OK? And we're concerned about you. We didn't know what to find out there, if your body is going to be hanging from a jagged rock or what. And they said, secondly, I want to applaud you for at least doing the correct maneuvers with your risers to avoid the jagged rocks.

[00:25:36.88] So he said, but now, I want to talk to you about your stupidity. He goes, let you know, that signal that he gave you was signaling the pilot to lower the aircraft. You were too high. It was not a signal for you to jump. And secondly, he said, you jumped five miles away from the landing zone. So he says, don't ever pull that stunt again. He said, but you owe me a day of push-ups. But just coming out of boot camp I thought, I can handle that. In fact, I think he said he wanted-- I think it was 50 or 100 push-ups. I can't remember.

[00:26:13.21] And so then, the next day was my push-up day. I got back to the barracks. And my other Marines there, they had some choice nicknames for me they created. But other than that, I got over that.

[00:26:31.04] MARC HENDERSON: And were the other four jumps uneventful or unremarkable?

[00:26:37.45] DONALD PREMEL: For me, yes. A couple of the people that jumped with me, one had a Mae West, and-- that's where the chute doesn't open up and they had to go to reserve. The other one had-- I'm sorry, I can't think of the names. It's been so many years. The Mae West was when another guy had one of his riser straps go over the chute making it into like a mushroom. And he was able to clear it off.

[00:27:09.40] But later, we did have a person jump, and misguide, and landed on telephone wires. And they had to amputate his leg. But he was OK because a false leg-- he had a false leg with a flipper on it, a false leg with a shiny shoe on it. So we said, spare leg he hooked on. So that was interesting.

[00:27:38.35] MARC HENDERSON: So we we're still talking about your training, your training before going to Vietnam. And so I was wondering after you did your 10 jumps what other additional training did you require?

[00:27:51.91] DONALD PREMEL: Well, there was additional training. But you just don't get your gold wings. They just don't give them to you. You have to earn them they call it. They call it a straight leg until you get the wings, the ceremony. You have to go through the gold wing ceremony of them pinning them on you. And I don't know if you've ever heard of what the ceremony is.

[00:28:16.39] But anyone that has their jump wings already line up in a straight line. You have to come in front of them and stand at attention. And they take their fist-- or I should say, first the

wings. They have to steel metal pegs off the back that are sharp. And then they have two things that hold them to the uniform. You take those off. And you just have the metal pins sticking out. They slug those pins into your chest. And depending on how many people have their gold wings, it can be pretty difficult.

[00:28:52.96] Then you walk to the next one, turn around, snap to attention. And he punches it in your chest. And you go all the way down the line. By the time you get down to the end the blood is just rolling down your chest. You're in severe pain. But you feel so good because you passed the initiation ceremony and got your wings. From that point forward, you can wear your wings on your uniform.

[00:29:17.51] And the other training was probably the most memorable was mountaineer training and demolition training.

[00:29:26.62] MARC HENDERSON: Where were those at?

[00:29:28.72] DONALD PREMEL: They were in California. And I might be wrong, but I think it's the Onofre Mountain Range, if I can recall correctly. It's been over 50 years. But the first thing-- we had to climb a 10-foot sheer wall and then a 15-foot sheer wall, which means you have no safety lines because there has to be a first climber to go up there to throw the ropes over for the other climbers. So they taught us how to face climb.

[00:30:04.61] And the instructor said, as we're climbing, if you see us hesitating because we're trying to find somewhere to grab a hold on to. It's not like these mountain climbing things you see now where they put these little handholds and footholds. It wasn't like that. Anyone that's climbed sheer cliffs know what I'm talking about. And that is he said, if an ant can crawl across the ledge you can climb it with your fingernails. And that's pretty much what it was.

[00:30:33.78] And so as we got up and started maybe struggling he would say, don't you quit and fall on me. Kind of saying hang in there, never quit. So we would make it to the top. And then they would take us five feet higher. And we had to do it again.

[00:30:52.76] Then, they taught us all the mountain rescue techniques and rappelling. To me, that was the funnest part-- is rappelling-- because it's not like the rappelling you see in the movies today where they walk down the hill or they kick out and come back on the wall maybe 2 or 3 feet below. We kicked way out, and we went down, maybe hit the wall one time all the way to the bottom. Because ours was with the military and you don't want to be on that wall very long to be shot at. So you had to get down as quick as you could. So they taught us to do quick rappelling or rapid rappelling you might call it, which I found really thrilling. I thought it was fun.

[00:31:35.36] The first time you have to lean out straight back, a right angle to the cliff. And you're not sure where your balance is. And two, is the rope going to snap? So the first one was a little nervous. But after that, it became really fun. And then they taught us how to rappel from helicopters and fun stuff like that. So mountaineering school was fun.

[00:32:03.33] MARC HENDERSON: So you mentioned helicopters, which reminds me about airborne school. Were all your jumps in the two schools, were those from C-130s or from fixed wing? Did you jump from helicopters at all?

[00:32:18.99] DONALD PREMEL: I'm amazed from your question because you're making me think now. No, actually, it's a good question because it was from various aircrafts. It was mostly from CH-53, CH-46. And then one time they wanted to do a test, use us as guinea pigs I call it. They wanted to find out could a jet fly in under radar, under 500 feet, and could we jump out, and hit the ground without bouncing too many times?

[00:32:55.35] So they took us out to the Salton Sea Desert in California. And we did the side door on a C-141 jet. And it was right behind the engine. So as soon as you he said-- you want me to say, jump. You didn't have to jump. You got sucked out the door. But it was on a static line. You shoot yourself. And it was really quick. And then we had, by the time it opened, we had a couple hundred feet to slip and get prepared for the landing. They call it PLF, parachute landing fall. And we hit the ground pretty hard. But we proved that it could be done.

[00:33:36.82] And they told us the lowest you can allow your canopy to open, it was a parachute, is 250 feet. And we were pushing that envelope pretty good there. But we did it. And so that was one that a lot of people don't get the opportunity to jump out of the side of a jet.

[00:33:56.43] MARC HENDERSON: What was it like jumping out of a helicopter? Differences?

[00:34:00.54] DONALD PREMEL: Yeah, a helicopter they only had the back ramp that lowers. I think the 53 we went out the side, but the back ramp of a 46. And when you're on the ramp and looking out, to me, it looked like a postage stamp, the ground below. And it was so beautiful, especially in California with the greenery and everything. And so to me it was a beautiful sight, very mesmerizing to look at.

[00:34:32.41] And I would have to say after about the seventh jump, one jump I got real nervous because I described that jump before. We had a couple of malfunctions of other people. That kind of scared me. I said, you know, I'll just stay on board. But I thought, no, I've got to do this. But the only thing that was running through my mind was watching their parachutes malfunction thinking, oh, I'm going to have to pull my reserve on this one. But you get over that real quick.

[00:35:02.54] MARC HENDERSON: Any other training? So mountaineer school, airborne school, recon school.

[00:35:08.51] DONALD PREMEL: Demolition school they took us in and-- explosives and demolitions. They taught us every type of explosives there was, how to use the explosives, and how to make your own booby traps, how to use it for other things like blowing trees down, like C-4 plastic explosives.

[00:35:34.28] You know, Marines are pretty smart. Sometimes we do stupid stuff. Like in this one class we did a stupid thing. I did it, personally. I was in the second row. The guys in the front row-- there was this Marine, a Force Recon Marine-- they dared him to take a little smidgen

piece of C-4 explosives and put it on his tongue. Well, they did. And his body went into immediate convulsions. His body was bouncing-- literally bouncing-- on the floor. His head turned pure blue. And it changed shape. It turned into shape like a pig's head. I mean, it was weird.

[00:36:14.09] And the paramedics got on real quick and got him out of there. And he recovered from it. But from that day forward, his nickname was Hog Head. So we got a nickname for him. Everybody has a nickname. So his name was Hog Head, we called him. And it was about 30 some years later-- I went off to Vietnam after that. And 30 years later, I'm walking through the airport. And I'm thinking, could that be him? Could that be Hog Head? And so I yelled in the airport concourse, said, hey, Hog Head! He turned around. And he goes, no one's called me that in 30 years. And he come up, and we hugged and everything. And so I knew he survived that way. So never eat C-4.

[00:37:04.59] MARC HENDERSON: I'll take your advice. Any other training?

[00:37:12.84] DONALD PREMEL: Yeah, we went to submarine lockout training, we did LSD, and LST training which is land side docking is LSD. And LST was land side tank, it was.

[00:37:34.35] So what it was in the submarine training they took us out for a week. And we had to go up by the torpedo hatch. And they have a chamber up there. And it's called a lockout chamber. And we were 60 feet below the surface. And they put three of us-- no, two of us in-- no, three of us in the lockout chamber. And-- probably one of the more scary times in my life because they let the water come in and fill the chamber.

[00:38:07.75] You can see if three people are tightly squeezed together, shoulder-to-shoulder. The tank was maybe 4 feet across. But the water kept coming up to the point there was like 4 inches left to the top. We all got our mouths up there breathing the last bit of air. We're thinking, we're going to drown. Well, suddenly the side hatch of the chamber opens up. They had to pressurize to the same pressure down below outside.

[00:38:32.43] So it opened up. Then, we had to take a deep breath, and then go out the side hatch, and grab the side of the submarine, and hold on to it. And then, blow out all the air in our lungs. I mean, blow it until our guts were hurting and our lungs were killing us. We had to get it all out because we did call pre-ascent. We had to pre-ascent from 60 feet to the surface. Again, the submarine was moving a knot and a half forward while we're doing this.

[00:39:04.80] And so as we got up to about 30-- maybe about 30 feet we ran out of air, blowing. We'd blow it all out at the side of the submarine. But then, as we got up about 30 feet there's nothing, nothing at all. And then, all of a sudden, boom, we got a big gush of air because the molecules inside the bubbles in our-- expand as you get closer to the surface. If you didn't blow all your air out you would basically rupture your lungs.

[00:39:40.08] So we got to the surface. And the periscope was there. We had to grab a hold of the periscope until two of us got up there. And there was-- on the periscope there was a 10-foot rope and four metal pipes. And they told us to go ahead-- and the submarine was going to

leave us, and we were to tie the rope around us, 10 feet apart, and then bang the metal pipes below the surface of the water. We're thinking, oh, my gosh, we're going to get every shark in the area here.

[00:40:10.00] Anyway, so the submarine took off, gone for a long time. And finally, we seen-- it got dark, pitch black. And all we could see is water spraying up, fluorescent water. And these two big green eyeballs coming at us. And we're going, oh, my gosh, a sea serpent. And as a kid I've never been out to deep sea. So this is all new to me. And we're sitting there, banging-- all of a sudden our tapping on the pipes came really quick. And what it was it was a periscope. And it snagged a rope between us and pulled us together.

[00:40:41.65] And so they went out to see if they could pick it up through sonar. And then they had scuba tanks. And we took the scuba tanks back down to lock back in again. And we hit a school of jellyfish going down. And we come in, and we're just itching like crazy. But that was a nice experience learning how to lock out. And we did it several times after that.

[00:41:04.62] The other one was preparing us for how to do topographical and geographical beach surveys when you hit a beach. And so the additional training was that. We had to come in under the surf, roll in the sand, until we became camouflaged. Then, we'd conduct our business. Basically, that was the submarine training.

[00:41:32.31] The LSD-- LST went on. And what happened is the Marine Corps got notice that there-- it was in '68, 1968, there was a large group of hippies that set up their own condo, beachfront condo living, made out of shanties on the beach of the Marine Corps base. Legally, they couldn't get them to leave. We had to do a mission. So we decided to Force Recon. The Marine Corps said, Force Recon, can you help us?

[00:42:10.58] What we did, we conducted a raid, a beach raid like we're going to the enemy. And we did everything perfect. Came in, we hit the beach first. Force Recon, rolled in the sand. Fortunately, it was a moonless night, so they couldn't see us. We could see all their little tents and everything lined up there. And it was a chilly night. So fortunately, they're all inside getting warm. It was a little after midnight. So we hit the beach.

[00:42:37.88] Right behind us, the landing crafts hit with the ramps already down. About 50 other Marines come running off. We had no weapons. They didn't have any weapons, but running off. So we grouped. Then, there's about 56 or so of us. And then, they had a land side thing called Ontos. It has six-- one of those six recoilless rifles on it. Well, they're cannons is what they are. So that came right up the beach.

[00:43:08.27] And by that time, they can hear the Ontos coming. So they all come running out of their tents. And half of them stark naked. And they're looking and seeing us, all this Marine Corps tanks, and water landing crafts, and all these Marines standing there. And they thought they were being attacked or there's a World War or something.

[00:43:29.30] They took off running. And they were-- oh, they were scared. When they got further enough away, then we went ahead and burnt all the stuff down and got rid of it. And from

what I know they never came back. I think we scared the heck out of them. So that was a fun mission. We enjoyed that.

[00:43:49.59] MARC HENDERSON: So any other training before Vietnam?

[00:43:55.26] DONALD PREMEL: That was a-- well, except for the weapons, learning all the weapons and everything, and other than that I think that was it before I went overseas.

[00:44:06.93] We had the final mission that we had before graduation. They sent each of us out on a mission that we had to run our own patrol. And then they test our leadership and rate it. My patrol, to this day I don't know if it was the planned patrol they had, or if it was actually what happened. But we were going in on a Huey. And they said the gunship got shot down.

[00:44:41.49] And so instead of going on our mission two of us had to-- what made me think it was real is because the instructor didn't come with us. Two of us had to rappel from the helicopter and into a top of a tree top. We can only carry a PRC-25 radio, a KA-BAR each, that's the knife, and one .45 pistol is all we could take. We had to leave our rifles, our backpacks, everything. No food, nothing. No water.

[00:45:15.52] And they dropped into a tree top. So we had to get in. And they told us get to the downed helicopter and rescue the pilots. Well, going in it was on a very steep hillside. And the only trail was a goat trail alongside the hill. It's probably about a couple hundred feet up and several hundred feet down. It's just a little goat trail. We never walked trails, but we had no choice here.

[00:45:40.01] We're going down the trail and it got dark. We didn't get to the helicopter yet after hiking a couple of hours. They called us and said, you're losing radio contact because we don't have a relay. So you're on your own out there overnight. We'll be back in the morning. Get to the helicopter-- to the downed helicopter.

[00:46:03.82] So we went ahead and started down the trail. Dark had set in. All of a sudden, the Viet Cong-- we could see flashlights. And then there's fireflies, to the point that our minds started playing games on us. We couldn't tell the difference between a flashlight and a firefly. So there's probably 20, 30 flashlights. But we thought there were 200 flashlights.

[00:46:27.52] So then we saw the Viet Cong coming down the trail at us. And so we turned around to go back. And then we saw the Viet Cong come up to trail behind us with flashlights. And we thought we can't go up. We can't go down. So we went off. We decided to, two of us, slip off the side of the trail and leave about, maybe, a foot above our head to the trail, but then would kick our heels in the side, and hold on to the vegetation. So we didn't slide down and let the Viet Cong go by.

[00:46:59.41] Well, they ended up meeting right above us. And the dirt is running down the back of our neck. And they're jibber-jabbering. And they were Viet Cong because they're jibber-jabbering, and flashlights going everywhere and stuff. And so we sat there to a point that our heart was beating so hard, we knew they could hear our heartbeat-- which they couldn't. But we

thought they could. And sweat's just rolling down us. We couldn't even wipe the sweat off our face.

[00:47:27.37] And we had our KA-BARs ready. We decided that we would not be taken prisoner, that if the gooks spot-- we would take KA-BARs and just run right up our sternum. And we wouldn't be taken prisoner because we had too much valuable information as special forces that they would really torture us bad. So we went ahead and they finally dispersed.

[00:47:54.14] And we worked our way back to where we got inserted and set up a perimeter watch through the night. And then, the next morning a helicopter came in and said, are you guys alive down there? And we said, yeah, we're here. OK. We dropped you guys into the middle of a regiment sized Viet Cong base camp. What? No wonder there was so many of them looking for us. And they said, we're going to drop down some equipment for you to make a landing zone to bring in the Army.

[00:48:27.40] And so, they wanted a landing zone big enough to do a CH-46 landing, double propeller. They dropped down C-4. They dropped down chainsaws. They dropped an M60 machine gun down. So one of us kept perimeter watch to keep the gooks away with the machine gun. And then the gunners on the helicopter were shooting around us keeping them away,

[00:48:47.98] while the one that was out there was wrapping C-4 around trees. We never had so much fun with C-4. We were blowing trees to smithereens. And we were chainsawing, chopping trees down. And after an exhausting period of time they said, hey, you've done your job. We're coming in. So they dropped in. The first CH-46, and just massive Army guys come running out. And we got on. They took us up. And we hovered. And they had a big line of CH-46s. And this guy-- and they come in.

[00:49:20.08] I don't know how many Army guys they dumped there. But they went after the-- to get the pilot or attack the base camp. I don't know what they did after we left. So I got a nice letter of commendation from the Army for that. But that was-- so I still don't know if that was part of the mission or not, but we ended up getting second place, not first. But that's it.

[00:49:46.54] DONALD PREMEL: August 18th, 1969.

[00:49:51.34] MARC HENDERSON: OK.

[00:49:51.73] DONALD PREMEL: No, yeah, 1969. Excuse me, yeah.

[00:49:53.86] MARC HENDERSON: So before you were sent over did you know what unit you were going to go to? Or did you go over as a replacement?

[00:50:00.61] DONALD PREMEL: No, I did not know. We were just saying we're going to Vietnam. We're going to fly into Da Nang. And that's all, basically, we were told. Or they told me more. I can't remember.

[00:50:10.72] MARC HENDERSON: Sure. So tell me about the flight going over. Was it a military flight, civilian flight?

[00:50:15.97] DONALD PREMEL: They called it a MAC flight. It was Continental Airlines. It was a major airlines that volunteered their aircraft because the military did not have enough aircraft to fly all the troops. So we flew-- I think we stopped in Hawaii. It's the only time I saw Hawaii, through a porthole window. And the flight attendants were very nice.

[00:50:38.95] When we took off from Hawaii to Da Nang the whole demeanor of everybody changed. The flight attendants, us, because we knew this could be our last flight. And you could see how somber they were the rest of the flight.

[00:50:55.60] When we arrived all kinds of things run through your mind because we weren't told what to expect when we land. We were told to expect the enemy and ambushes. But we didn't know when the aircraft lands in Da Nang. When the aircraft landed, what was running through my mind, because I was naive at time, I thought they were going to hand us M16 rifles. And we're going to run off the aircraft shooting our way off is what I thought because we're in a war zone.

[00:51:24.41] When we get off, the flight attendants were lined up. And the captains were lined up in front. And they gave us each a kiss. And we thought-- and they, actually, one of them said, this might be your last kiss. And they-- (CRYING) tears running down their eyes. And it was quite emotional. But what hit me most was as soon as I got on the stairway to go off the airplane, the smell and the stench. It was just something that I can never forget. It was something I never smelled before. Because the mixture of filth, dirt, and gunpowder, burnt gunpowder, it was all a mixture of that. And that will stay with me forever.

[00:52:08.59] MARC HENDERSON: So how did you find out which unit you were going to go to?

[00:52:12.85] DONALD PREMEL: They put us on 6-by trucks and took us up north. They might have said something in Da Nang. I don't recall. But they took us to a 3rd Force Recon up on the DMZ zone, demilitarization zone. And we operated out of Quang Tri. And we were introduced into 3rd Force Recon.

[00:52:36.04] MARC HENDERSON: So what were your initial duties?

[00:52:38.53] DONALD PREMEL: Initial duties was basically perimeter watch because we got rocketed, basically, every night. And they would send sappers in. A sapper is a Viet Cong that they would wrap in explosives. And they would run through our wire, and get in, and then blow up certain key strategic positions inside the base. So that was the first part is make sure the perimeter is secure.

[00:53:17.94] MARC HENDERSON: And what were your living conditions like there?

[00:53:21.99] DONALD PREMEL: We called it a hooch. It was basically a metal, wood frame building, metal roof. And it was just basically built enough to be habitable. But it wasn't nothing that you want to entertain someone in. We had a rack. We had-- not bunk beds, we had single racks. We each had our own little rack. And we, basically, had a place to hang our equipment on the wall. And the racks were close enough together that we had our team on one side. And the other team on the other side. Usually, I think each hooch had about two teams per hooch.

[00:54:04.15] MARC HENDERSON: How was the food?

[00:54:06.67] DONALD PREMEL: The food was actually hot in the rear. And it was good. But when you were in the field, it was C-rations, mostly when you were in the field.

[00:54:21.95] MARC HENDERSON: What was your favorite C-ration?

[00:54:24.83] DONALD PREMEL: Probably turkey loaf, I think was my-- in the can. Now, when it got to later we got long rations, towards the end of the year. And then it was spaghetti and meatballs. But turkey loaf was my best. And I didn't smoke. Well, I never drank coffee in my life. So someone told me to drink coffee. But when you're in the bush you can't make a fire because they'll find you. So you had to take cold water and dump the coffee grounds in. It's like, to me, it's like eating mud, drinking mud. So I traded my coffee and my cigarettes for chocolate bars with other guys.

[00:55:07.52] MARC HENDERSON: Describe your friendships and impressions of fellow Marines in Vietnam?

[00:55:12.86] DONALD PREMEL: At first, when you first get there, you're the-- what we called greenhorn, because when you arrive to country you're wearing your United States-side green utilities. And in Vietnam you have camouflage. So if you're wearing your green utilities they know you just got in country. So they had many other names. But they called us greenhorn until we got our camouflage. And I thought, well, this is going to be just like boot camp. I'm going to get brand new utilities and everything.

[00:55:43.19] But I was surprised when they gave me some old beat up cammies. And the boots had hardly any leather on them. And I'm going, oh, just like when I was in childhood, I get hand-me-down clothes. And they told me the reason for that is if you go out in the bush wearing brand new, shiny camouflage you're going to be like a neon sign. They didn't say neon sign then. But now, I relate it to it. And you're going to stand out, and you're going to get us all killed. So you have to be like the rest, all torn up utilities and stuff. So I found that interesting.

[00:56:27.06] MARC HENDERSON: What about your impressions of the fellow Marines?

[00:56:30.79] DONALD PREMEL: Getting there, I had a high level respect for those that have been there for a while because they really knew what they were doing. Now, I found that some of the Force Recon over there were assigned Force Recon because of the shortage. And they have never been through Recon training in the states. So I felt privileged that I had at least a year's

training. I went over there a corporal. Many of them were PFCs and Lance Corporals. So I feel I had an advantage that way, knowledge-wise and experience-wise.

[00:57:04.15] But you got a team leader that has been there already, you respect him. And you respect your corpsman. Because each team, we operated in five 6-man teams. And each one had to have a corpsman. And those are the two that are going to get you through it in an ambush.

[00:57:22.48] MARC HENDERSON: Did you ever see any social tensions amongst Americans over there?

[00:57:29.51] DONALD PREMEL: The only social tensions I saw was in the rear area, when we come in, they had Vietnamese, primarily women, that would work in the rear area doing stuff for-- clean the hooches, or setting up a little barbershop, or something, cut our hair. And they became, unbeknown to us, they were taking-- drawing maps of our area, taking them back, and giving them to the Viet Cong. So the Viet Cong knew where to fire the rockets to to take out our ammo dump, or the officers quarters, or whatever. And when we found that out, yeah, we felt very, very bad about trusting them and who they were. How could they be doing this to us when we're here to protect them? So that did bother us.

[00:58:18.88] But in reference to us, any blacks, any Hispanics, we had a Brazilian on our team. No, we called it a brotherhood. We were true brothers. Now, I think in the infantries they might have had some issues. But being an elite force like Force Recon, I never experienced it. We never even thought about it. We were all Force Recon. We're here to take care of each other.

[00:58:47.32] MARC HENDERSON: How much free time did you get to yourself?

[00:58:50.41] DONALD PREMEL: When you get back to your area you debrief. You get one can of Schlitz beer a day. And then you shower if the shower was working. And the shower was made up as a 55-gallon drum full of water. They just poked a bunch of holes in the bottom of it. When the drum ran out of water you had no shower anymore. So that was the shower. And after you showered up, you shaved and everything. And then you got the afternoon to relax.

[00:59:21.03] And I was able to stay close to the troops and my team until I got to 1st Force Recon. And then they put me in a sergeant-- so now as a sergeant, they put me in a sergeant's hooch, was all by myself. Which some would probably have liked. Say, hey, I got my own freedom here. But it was boring because I could hear the music coming out of my troops' hooches. And they were partying and having a great time over there. So they walked over one day. And one day, several days, and asked me to join them. And I said, no. But I finally decided to go over one day.

[01:00:04.53] MARC HENDERSON: You were telling us about your off duty time and what you did for recreation.

[01:00:08.76] DONALD PREMEL: Right. So I was approached several times by my troops saying, come over and join us. Don't sit by yourself. And my hooch was boring. I had nothing in it. I didn't even have a Playboy picture on the wall. I had nothing.

[01:00:23.20] So I finally went over one day. But I avoided going over because I didn't want to, as the leader, I didn't want to get in trouble. Right? But when I approached there, in today's terms, or movies, I didn't realize I was walking into the old movie scene like the M*A*S*H tour with Hawkeye. Well, my teammate, Michael Dapaah-Gettle was like a Hawkeye. In the field, he saved us on patrol. He was alert. He was smart. You couldn't ask for a better being on the team. But when we got back, he was kind of like the fun guy, having fun.

[01:01:02.44] So we entered the hooch. And first I noticed that there's more people in the hooch than is assigned to that hooch. So other hooches came over. And some of them were sitting around totally stark naked playing cards. And then I realize, it was like 120 degrees out. So there's no air conditioning in there. So that made sense to me. They were all guys. And so I look around. And I go, oh, my God. He had these big CS-77 Pioneer speakers. They had turntables. They had a 7-inch reel-to-reel TX tape player. And I'm going, wow, this is amazing.

[01:01:40.53] And they're playing-- they have reel-to-reel tapes of all the popular music back in the United States. Where did you guys get all this stuff at? So then, I look around. And to the left is one of my teammates, Michael Dapaah-Gettle. And he's got a like a purple hat-- a pink hat on, and a purple vest. And he's standing in front of a bar, an actual bar. And all these bottles of hard liquor. I'm going, what? Where do you guys get this stuff? We get one can of Schlitz a day, beer.

[01:02:13.23] And he goes, well-- he said, I got the hat and the vest from the ladies at the USO show. Because Alex Lee was downsized 3rd Force. So they're sending him back to the States. So we had a going away party for him on the beach. They had a band. And the woman in the band, Michael convinced her, that he'll give her some of his old utilities, military because she liked camouflage, and she gave him the hat and the vest.

[01:02:39.39] So he's wearing this hat and a vest. And I said, where'd you get the bar and the alcohol? He goes, oh, we got it from the officer's lounge. We stole it. I go, what? Like, oh, we're in trouble. But it was like a M*A*S*H unit. I mean, it was like, we had rules, but they had their own rules. And so the first time I saw that movie M*A*S*H with Hawkeye, I go, that's Michael Dapaah-Gettle, in Vietnam. And so it was great. But had fun there. But like I said, you get into the bush they were totally professional.

[01:03:20.99] MARC HENDERSON: So what about your other leadership, officer leadership, as high as you could see it?

[01:03:26.64] DONALD PREMEL: Well, we had Alex Lee who, at the time, was leading us. And-- remarkable man, still alive today. And he was probably one of the most perfect leaders I've ever met even out of civilian life.

[01:03:41.37] MARC HENDERSON: What made him so perfect?

[01:03:42.66] DONALD PREMEL: Pardon me?

[01:03:43.17] MARC HENDERSON: What made him so perfect?

[01:03:44.55] DONALD PREMEL: Because he-- even though he was in charge, and an officer, he treated us like equal. And he gathered with us and talked to us. And he wasn't isolated. You felt you could talk to him any time. It was amazing. He's an amazing man.

[01:04:04.92] MARC HENDERSON: Does any examples of poor leadership stand out in your mind from your experience there?

[01:04:12.48] DONALD PREMEL: I would say maybe when I was in control. No. Actually, I didn't experience that. I know I've heard stories. But fortunately, I didn't experience poor leadership.

[01:04:27.42] MARC HENDERSON: Sure. And you were a corporal when you arrived?

[01:04:29.43] DONALD PREMEL: Pardon me?

[01:04:29.85] MARC HENDERSON: Were you a corporal when you arrived?

[01:04:31.44] DONALD PREMEL: Yes, yes.

[01:04:31.62] MARC HENDERSON: Still?

[01:04:32.40] DONALD PREMEL: Yeah, I had three meritorious promotions before I got there. So I was kind of the youngest guy, in the least time, but was with a high enough rank that it gave me authority.

[01:04:49.11] MARC HENDERSON: And how about your NCO leadership?

[01:04:52.46] DONALD PREMEL: They did teach us. I was a corporal before I went over. So we did go to some NCO training and leadership training. Once you get to 'Nam, the only training there is is keep your head down and bring your guys back alive, basically, and don't do anything stupid like I did when I parachute jumped.

[01:05:16.85] MARC HENDERSON: So I see in your paperwork that you were in both 3rd Force Recon and 1st Force Recon. Did you do one tour or did you extend?

[01:05:29.51] DONALD PREMEL: I did one tour. They-- at the time, I was given some consideration of staying over. But Nixon was president, and they were drawing back the war. So that's why they-- we called it axed 3rd Force. And they put us in 1st Force because they were downsizing.

[01:05:50.47] MARC HENDERSON: OK, well, did the leadership change? I mean, clearly the positions did. But the type of leaders, leadership style change?

[01:05:59.53] DONALD PREMEL: Yes, I would say when we were 3rd Force we were really primed to do the most professional job that could be done. When we went to 1st Force, because

we became the new guys coming into their unit, and they wanted to cut back on the number of patrols we were on.

[01:06:19.69] That's why a lot of us went to-- Dick started putting us in different training schools over there in 1st Force because they had to fill our time. And at the same time, they didn't want us to be the gung-ho 3rd Force Recon that we were in the A Shau and the DMZ. So I didn't see that much of the upper leadership at that time. It was like, basically, run your basic patrol, come back, and don't make us look bad type approach.

[01:06:51.07] MARC HENDERSON: So your area of operation, as you just said, in 3rd Force Recon was the A Shau Valley and the DMZ. Did that area change when you went to 1st Force?

[01:07:02.23] DONALD PREMEL: Yeah, we operated out, I think it was called, the Thuong Duc corridor. They had Razorback Ridge out there. They had Monkey Mountain. And they also started putting us on observation relay posts where they would put us on a mountaintop. And then we'd observe and gather intelligence from up there instead of being down crawling around through the bush. So the mission changed a little bit.

[01:07:31.42] Some of them turned out be more devastating being on a hilltop sitting as a target more so than when we were out there, and were clandestine and stealth, and they don't know where we're at. So it was different being a sitting target on top of a mountain, or hill, I guess I should call it.

[01:07:52.66] MARC HENDERSON: Sure, do you want to talk about that a little bit more?

[01:07:54.77] DONALD PREMEL: Yeah, some of them, one of the patrols we were on, we got in on the OP site, observation post. And I think the two teams stayed up there. And then they ran the other teams down the fingers of the hillside, that's the ridges, the fingers. And we got in. It was called triple canopy which means there's basically three levels of vegetation. So you can hardly see the sky.

[01:08:25.09] And that night when we were in there, we couldn't shoot an azimuth to a mountainside or something to find out where we're at. So we had to call in air bursts from artillery. And then you take one air burst. And you shoot it. And then you shoot another azimuth to the others there. Then you come back and it's called a resection. And it shows where you're at.

[01:08:47.20] And we did that. And we plotted our position. That night, the OP site got overrun by Viet Cong. And so they told us to get to an extraction point the next morning. We were going down the finger, and I'm looking at the map, topographical map, but also at my point man. There's a big cliff in front of him. And I look down. I go, wow. I look at the map, and I said, that's on the other finger over there.

[01:09:17.38] What happened was the air bursts they called in were in the wrong position the night before. So it gave us the wrong position. Fortunately for us, because the other finger was already engulfed and you could see through the side when we went back to a clearing area that it

was just like ants of gooks looking for us over there. So we knew now that they could see where we were at over there.

[01:09:40.75] So we went to get extracted because we couldn't go down to the valley because of the cliff. So we couldn't go back up to the finger. So basically, we had nowhere to go. So one of my team members, Michael Dappah-Gettle, he remembered where there was a small clearing in the treetops. So we went back to there. He brought us back to that point. And then we shot a flare up to let them know where we were at. The helicopters came in.

[01:10:10.87] And there's a thing called a spy rig. It's a large rig that you hook on your C-clip. You hook up to it. Well, they hooked up to us. And they told us that the Viet Cong were coming down the finger on us. And so the helicopter started taking fire, shots from the Viet Cong. And I was-- being the team leader, I was the last one to hook up.

[01:10:39.02] So I hooked up. And as soon as I got the C-clip hooked up the helicopter had to pull up. When he pulled me up and there was a big tree branch, and hit me right across the bridge of my nose, shattered my nose, and blood's coming everywhere. And it looked like I'd gotten shot up. And I come up to the top. And as I clear the tree line-- when you're a spy rig you spin, and we were spinning around about 100 feet below the helicopter. And we could see the Viet Cong. They were right on us. That's why the chopper had to pull up.

[01:11:13.79] And so he took us back to the base. And then we got off the spy rig. But like I said, we felt better being in the bush where we were in control versus being on a hilltop where they were in control. And so that was a major difference to me.

[01:11:31.79] MARC HENDERSON: So what were some of the other missions that recon did?

[01:11:37.25] DONALD PREMEL: Some of them were basically-- the most interesting was, if I can reflect back to A Shau Valley, is David Draper and Michael, both on my team, and I wasn't the team leader on this patrol. I was a thing called tail-end Charlie, where you walk the rear, make sure you're not being followed. And we were supposed to go to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which is a large supply trail coming down from North Vietnam. It's on the border of Laos. But it's not a trail. It's basically a four lane highway. But they have so much vegetation above it they can't see it from the air, from the satellites. So they asked us to go out and gather intelligence.

[01:12:20.03] Well, we were on our way to the trail. And we were taking a rest stop. And our team leader heard Viet Cong voices. When he called it in, they said, go get us a prisoner. We'd like to have a prisoner snatch. That way we have someone we can find out the intelligence what's going on on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. So we approach their base camp. And their base camp, I think maybe 50, 60 feet away, wasn't that far. And as we're coming in-- in recon we'd never walk on a trail. That's a no no. But it was alongside a creek. And it went right into a hillside from the creek. So there was a small area along the creek the Viet Cong had a trail.

[01:13:07.31] So in that case we had to walk on the trail, like I said, which is a no, no because of ambushing. So I'm walking-- I need to cough. Is that OK?

[01:13:16.91] MARC HENDERSON: Yeah.

[01:13:17.27] DONALD PREMEL: Good. (COUGHING) As we're walking up the trail, as recon we're taught you keep about 10, 15 feet intervals between each person so if you get ambushed they can't get the whole team at one time. And we were going in. I'm tail-end Charlie. So I'm walking back. It's not backwards. But you swing left to right and in a backward motion. But so you want to make sure nobody's following you.

[01:13:44.39] As I turned-- the rest of the team arrived to the campsite of the Viet Cong. It was stacked with rice bags and all kinds of gear. And as I turned left, like I was swinging around, my team was already in the site. But they set up a perimeter on the site and wait for me to get in. As I turned, a Viet Cong officer was about maybe 15 to 20 feet in front of me. And he had an AK-47 ready to initiate ambush on my other team members because they thought everybody was there.

[01:14:22.52] And they didn't anticipate there was one more coming. So as I turned he heard me. So he turned toward me. We both looked at each other in the eyes. And at that time, I always flashback, and I'm going, you ever talk about if you looking eye-to-eye to somebody could you kill him? It was a thought always in my mind. I didn't know how I'd respond even after training. But that was a thousandths of a second thought.

[01:14:50.36] I took my rifle. I took it off-- I set-- I put it on semi-automatic, the safety, and got the first burst off. And he fired simultaneously. But I say first burst because my bullet hit him before his hit me. And it caught him right in the cheek, took him down. So he was out. And that initiated the ambush. And then as I got into the camp area, they were firing. Like Dave said he saw one Viet Cong running along the hillside. He was trying to get him.

[01:15:28.40] And then I looked to my left, soon as I enter I looked to my left, and there was a Viet Cong behind a tree a little short ways up the hill. And I thought, I tried shooting at him. I couldn't get to him with my rifle. So I took my grenade. And I thought I'll throw my grenade past him, have it come down, and blow up right behind him, and take him out.

[01:15:51.26] But unfortunately, if you ever played golf before, if there's one tree in the fairway your golf ball is going to hit that tree. Well, my grenade hit another tree, bounced down, and landed right at the base of my feet. And I'm thinking, like a millionth of a second, throw your body on it and save your buddies like in the movies. But that went away real quick, real quick. And I thought, I said, wait a minute. Grenades go off between 4 and 5 seconds. So I'm thinking, it's been in the air close to 3 and 1/2 seconds. So I'm dead. I said--

[01:16:27.65] so there's a big rice bag next to me. So I picked the rice bag up, threw it on the grenade. So it'd muffle and absorb all the shrapnel. But the bag rolled off of the grenade to the other side, protecting all of my teammates. In the meantime, there's a grenade right at my feet. I'm done. I'm gone.

[01:16:49.31] And it blew. And the concussion blew me back. And I kind of shook my head, got my senses back. And I go, I can't believe it. Not one piece of shrapnel hit me. I looked at the rice

bags to my right. And it's just riddled with shrapnel. To tree to my left was riddled with shrapnel. And I'm thinking, I can't believe this.

[01:17:13.71] So I've been running through my mind for almost 50 years how I could have avoided it. And the only thing that came to me was-- I became a believer because I think God put a shroud around me. That's the only thing I can come up with. I can't come up with any logical explanation. And I've told that story to so many people. And they say, yeah. Even my teammates, I told them that. Yeah, we couldn't believe you were still alive.

[01:17:37.62] And so then the ambush continued a little bit. And then we did a ceasefire on it and then stripped the Viet Cong I shot, took all his clothing, his weapons, and everything. And as a trophy they gave me pictures of his kids, his money, his belt, officer's belt, but couldn't keep his rifle. No, they wouldn't let me have that. But because each time there's always a token that you seem to do on the confirmed kill.

[01:18:13.41] But it was hard. I suffered that situation for many years after the war from nightmares. But other than that, we had to continue on with war.

[01:18:25.08] MARC HENDERSON: Sure. So that particular mission was to recon the Ho Chi Minh Trail?

[01:18:30.12] DONALD PREMEL: Correct.

[01:18:30.57] MARC HENDERSON: And then you mentioned--

[01:18:32.07] DONALD PREMEL: We had to divert.

[01:18:33.00] MARC HENDERSON: --radio relays.

[01:18:34.68] DONALD PREMEL: Right.

[01:18:35.31] MARC HENDERSON: What were some of the other types of missions that Force Recon-- ?

[01:18:40.14] DONALD PREMEL: Mostly observation and gathering intelligence. As we would come upon Viet Cong we would get all the information we could, then call artillery in on them, and then basically wipe them out that way. And then we'd complete our mission, we'd get out.

[01:18:59.85] Some of the patrols we were never able to get on the ground without being detected by the Viet Cong. They would start shooting at us as soon as we got off the helicopter. So that became an escape and evade mission. We had to get rid of them and lose them so we can complete the rest of our patrol. And then another one was in the DMZ zone. It was our first ambush that we initiated on the Viet Cong versus them initiating on us. It was on a bomb crater.

[01:19:31.38] And we did have one where we had to go out and did sonar buoys and aqua buoys. Sonar buoys you would go 20 miles. You plant the device out there on an active trail. And then

you would leave it there. And 20 miles back at the relay point, when any Viet Cong would come by it would send little chatters, beeps, whatever. And they could tell how many Viet Cong were there, and the troop size, and how frequent it went off. So we gathered intelligence through that device that way. Same thing in the riverbeds.

[01:20:13.02] Now I did have one dive mission that we had to go up to the rivers and deactivate booby traps on the river. Because they would tie a grenade on one side, a grenade the other side, and put a wire across. And then when the boats, the military boats, came down the river it would trigger both grenades and blow the boat out of the water. So we had to scuba dive up both sides of the river deactivating the grenades they had set up, the booby traps.

[01:20:38.25] MARC HENDERSON: Did you find any?

[01:20:39.72] DONALD PREMEL: One. And it was so difficult because the water was just pure, mucky, dirty brown. I mean, you might move 6-inches in about 60 seconds, maybe 1 minute. And because you had to go real slowly because you couldn't see in front of you underwater. So you had everything was by feel.

[01:21:03.15] MARC HENDERSON: Were you on scuba or snorkel?

[01:21:05.28] DONALD PREMEL: No, scuba. Full scuba. And we did that jointly with the Navy. Other than that, that was the only time we got to do any water diving over there.

[01:21:14.97] MARC HENDERSON: What were your impressions of the Sailors you worked with?

[01:21:18.36] DONALD PREMEL: The Sailors? They were good. Most of them were the boat members. I'm trying to think of the name of the boat there. Not PT boat, it was something else.

[01:21:29.88] MARC HENDERSON: Swift boat?

[01:21:30.99] DONALD PREMEL: Something like, I couldn't remember the name.

[01:21:32.42] MARC HENDERSON: PBR?

[01:21:32.70] DONALD PREMEL: But no, they were fine. They were well-trained. And I had a lot of respect for them. I really did. I think anybody in the war I had respect for them, just for going there.

[01:21:44.63] MARC HENDERSON: Can you describe any cutting edge technology, or scientific advancements, or medical advancements that you witnessed or used that were cutting edge then but we take for granted today?

[01:21:59.81] DONALD PREMEL: I don't know when it came out. But probably to me the most fantastic device we used quite often was the Claymore mine. It has thousands of BBs in it. And it blew. It just shattered anything in its way. We used those for perimeter watch.

[01:22:16.85] And probably grenade launcher, the M79, was quite amazing to me. You could really-- the accuracy of that was fantastic. And you can shoot it further than you can throw a grenade. I found those two things. And I really fell in love with my M16. If I could have had a name on it I would have named it.

[01:22:38.96] But other than that, that sonar buoy that I was telling you about, the tech 20 miles away, to me, that was like beyond comprehension. That you can have a device out there 20 miles and it would tell you when somebody was close to it? That amazed me. And other than that, I guess--

[01:22:59.84] Towards the end, we did advance to, I think, it was Miller beer from Schlitz.

[01:23:06.15] MARC HENDERSON: Was that an advancement?

[01:23:12.76] MARC HENDERSON: Describe the worst day you had in Vietnam.

[01:23:16.48] DONALD PREMEL: Probably A Shau Valley when we had some patrols that we lost several of our members on. And we had a memorial back for them. And the story we were told then was somewhat accurate and somewhat inaccurate. And I think it was Sergeant Garcia was walking point. And I might have the names wrong, but walking point.

[01:23:46.71] And this is the part of the story-- I've got two stories. I wasn't on patrol. I was in the rear area. And they went on patrol. And he went up over a knoll. And the Viet Cong-- they walked into an ambush, but the Viet Cong had so many machine guns hitting his body, so many at one time, his body just stayed on top of the ground bouncing because there's so many bullets hitting him it wouldn't fall to the ground.

[01:24:11.34] From that, the rest of the team had to retreat. And they got them out of there. When we heard about that then we thought, no, we're going to go get him. We never leave a body behind. And I mean, we were primed, ready. All of us in the rear, we wanted to go. And because of higher orders said, no, we can't afford to risk the helicopters. We're not going out.

[01:24:37.44] And we were all livid. I mean, we couldn't understand. We were mad. We were going to say, we'll learn how to fly that helicopter ourselves. And we'll go out there ourselves. We were that intent on getting our buddy's body back. And they said they sent a team out the next day to recover his body. And we heard different rumors from that.

[01:25:03.15] And we had a memorial service after that. But one of the things that I was told, and I believed, true or not, I don't know. Maybe it wasn't, maybe it was. They said when they got the body, it's totally riddled from bullets, but the Viet Cong cut off his head and took his head back to North Vietnam. And they were able to put it on a post outside his family's hooch, your living quarters up there. And his family was recognized, like, hey, your guy's a hero, whatever. It was kind of symbolic to put-- our faces were camouflaged. And the only people who had camouflaged faces were special ops, Force Recon. So when they had a head that was camouflaged they knew they got the best of the best.

[01:25:56.73] Well, that's what I was told. That's what I believed. Which unfortunately, I don't know if it's true or not. I believe it was. But because of that is what caused my nightmares later, part of my recovery from 'Nam. And so that was probably one of the more worse times ever, that time.

[01:26:18.66] MARC HENDERSON: Do you want to talk about the memorial service?

[01:26:21.08] DONALD PREMEL: Well, it was a simple one. We took the boots, and the rifle with the helmet on it, and dog tags. And we-- they gave a remembrance to him and sacrifice. And obviously, we were all in tears. And like I said, we were so angry. We just wanted to go out. We just wanted to go get him. We didn't care if we came back or not. We just wanted to go get him and the ones that killed him. And we, I mean, we were beyond angry. So emotionally, it was hard.

[01:26:53.03] MARC HENDERSON: What was your best day?

[01:26:55.62] DONALD PREMEL: My best day in Vietnam was probably when they gave me the-- I wasn't over there seeking medals or anything, but when they awarded me the Navy Commendation Medal with a Combat "V," that was a proud day. That I proved-- the first thing that flashed in my mind was my mom. She said I was a nobody. I would never become a Marine. And here, not only am I Force Recon, but I got a medal. And so I was proud.

[01:27:32.77] MARC HENDERSON: Do you want to talk about the incident that led to you earning that medal?

[01:27:36.04] DONALD PREMEL: Well, actually, I did already. It was the ambush where I took down the officer gook. It was that one.

[01:27:46.55] MARC HENDERSON: How much contact did you have with our allies? The Australians, the Koreans?

[01:27:51.83] DONALD PREMEL: Not too much in north Vietnam. But when I went to 1st Recon they sent me to a school called Recondo School. And what Recondo School is made up of all the allies' special forces. And they put us in one competitive group. And then we have three weeks to compete.

[01:28:13.01] The first week's academic. The second week's physical. And the third week is leadership and patrolling. So we had the Korean ROKs there. We had just about every ally of the United States sent in a representative from their special forces.

[01:28:29.57] And so they're engaging, watching them. I thought we were good until I saw the Korean ROKs. They are amazing, absolutely amazing.

[01:28:44.18] MARC HENDERSON: Can you give one example of what amazed you about them?

[01:28:46.82] DONALD PREMEL: Well, the first day, the Marines were very competitive as well. The first day they took us on a 5-mile run or something. And at the end I came in second of the run. And the Korean ROK came in first. So my goal was, I'm going to win them tomorrow. So the second day we ran, I beat him.

[01:29:10.07] Well, that afternoon we were all in shock. They had a Korean officer there. He was a Korean because he could speak English. And he would translate. Well, the first we saw this Korean ROK before, he knew about every type of karate you can imagine. He was good at it. And they had him that afternoon standing at attention. And that officer literally beat the heck out of him. And he never flinched. He knocked him down. He got right back up. Snapped to attention. And he said, in whatever his language was, what he said to him basically was, you will never lose again.

[01:29:50.42] And he never did. He ended up getting number one out of the class. And I got number two. An Army Ranger got number three. And so yeah, I was amazed at how well-trained he was.

[01:30:07.28] MARC HENDERSON: How much contact did you have with your family back home?

[01:30:10.43] DONALD PREMEL: Zero.

[01:30:16.12] MARC HENDERSON: How much news about the war you were fighting in did you receive?

[01:30:22.17] DONALD PREMEL: Over there? They had a thing called Stars and Stripes, a paper. And all of our news came through that. I didn't get anything from my family if I can relate back to that. When I was in school, even though I'd get gymnastic awards, and football awards, and stuff, and neither one of my family members or my parents ever came to any of my ceremonies of getting the awards.

[01:30:54.13] When I went to boot camp I got the top award out of boot camp. They had all the other parents fly in. And the Marine Corps invited them. But neither parent would show up. Later in life, when I got married, neither one would come to my wedding. But what it was is they had such a despise for the war. They hated the war. And maybe what happened to my father in the Second World War, I don't know.

[01:31:20.43] But when I came home from Vietnam, and we can talk about that later if you wish, but the reception was far less than what I expected, put it that way. But during Vietnam, I don't recall getting any letters from the family members at all.

[01:31:36.37] MARC HENDERSON: How much news about what was going on in the United States did you receive as far as politics, or social movements, demonstrations?

[01:31:47.78] DONALD PREMEL: We heard about some of the stuff going on. The hippies, the free love people, protesting the war, and we heard about that. People were getting these letters.

Their families were writing it in there. The unfortunate thing is all of our mail was screened over there. And we'd get it, it's opened already. And when we mail out anything, they open it and read it.

[01:32:13.78] And so they screened. They didn't want us saying anything about the war going out. And anything they talked about politics coming in they took out. Or they didn't give us the letter. So we just basically heard it from word of mouth and rumors what was going on.

[01:32:35.39] MARC HENDERSON: Did you ever, either during your training or in Vietnam, witness any demonstrations like antiwar demonstrations or civil rights?

[01:32:46.58] DONALD PREMEL: In Vietnam, no. Stateside, immediately when I got back.

[01:32:56.64] MARC HENDERSON: So when it came time for you to go home, how were you notified it was your turn to go home? Did you go home early, or late, or what was the process?

[01:33:07.92] DONALD PREMEL: Well, I lost track of time over there. Most people got short timer sticks. But I kind of lost track of time. But it came upon a year. I was supposed to do 13 months. But Nixon was cutting back. So he brought back, I think, about 8 or 10 of us from 1st Force. They brought us back. They said, hey, you're going home.

[01:33:30.60] And I had a feeling like I had unfinished business. I just wanted to stay there. But at the same time I thought, well, it'd be nice to get back home and say, I made it. They took us to Okinawa. And then we stayed there the night. And then we landed in San Diego. Los Angeles, San Diego.

[01:33:49.14] MARC HENDERSON: When is this?

[01:33:49.38] DONALD PREMEL: August 19th, we got discharged.

[01:33:52.54] MARC HENDERSON: 1970?

[01:33:53.64] DONALD PREMEL: 1970, correct. Sorry. And we got off, went to the Marine Corps base. They gave us discharge papers. To this day, I said, they never gave us a physical. I cannot remember having a physical. We had one in Vietnam, leaving. But they didn't give us one in San Diego. Maybe that was the physical I guess. I don't know.

[01:34:12.72] But anyways, they discharged us. And so I went to the airport. And I had my uniform on. And I couldn't believe the way I was treated. I mean, it was just like people staring at me, whispering, making horrible comments.

[01:34:32.59] And so I got to Seattle, hometown. And I thought, well, I'm going to surprise my family. Every Sunday my family had a potluck dinner at my sister's house. So I thought I'd take a cab there and surprise them. I had my uniform on and my duffel bag.

[01:34:51.75] And I walked in. And my dad was playing cards with the boys in the front room. My dad looked up at me coming in the door, looked back at his cards, and never said a word. So I walked in the living room, and my sister said, oh, we thought you were dead.

[01:35:07.26] But my mom walked out of the kitchen. And she says, I am so happy you're home. I thought, oh, my gosh. Finally, somebody. She says, you owe me money. I said, what? She goes, yeah, you sent stereo equipment home six months ago. And I've been storing it in our front room. And you owe me storage charges.

[01:35:27.24] My brother grabbed me from the shoulder, took me outside. He was a Marine. He said, Don, it's not you. He said, I was treated the same way when I got home. He says, they hate the war. And he said their head's just full of propaganda. And I go, wow.

[01:35:47.84] MARC HENDERSON: So what did you do after the war? Did you still have time in the Marine Corps? Or were you completely discharged?

[01:35:56.81] DONALD PREMEL: No, I later went in the Reserves. I stayed in the Reserves for, I think, three or four years. But after I got back, I went round to visit my high school buddies, and friends, and what I thought was a girlfriend before I left over there. And my buddies, even through middle school and high school, wouldn't have a thing to do with me. They are all against the war in Seattle. And basically, disowned me.

[01:36:27.93] So I went to the girlfriend's house. And she says, I got another boyfriend. But my dad said I have to go out with you. So she went on one date with me. And she says, no, I'm going to be with my boyfriend. She ended up marrying the guy. So I said, OK.

[01:36:43.37] So I went to the airport, got a job with Flying Tigers. And I was there working. And a gentleman by the name of Jim Hanna, who was a baseball player for Kansas City, he was there. He came home with us. And he had to go to spring ball down in Florida and wanted me to drive him down there. He had a car. I didn't have a car at the time.

[01:37:06.65] So I said, just take me by California first. I need to see my Michael Dapaah-Gettle's mom because he gave me a message to give her. And so we stopped by Michael Dapaah-Gettle's mom and then went to Florida. And all the way he's saying, Don, it's going to be wonderful. There are so many chicks, so many girls, that want-- come down there, it's beautiful. And they're going to treat us so well, got a hotel, and food, and drinks.

[01:37:33.35] So I've got my self built up. When I get there. He pulls up in front and goes, OK, get out. What? Yep. He says, this is for baseball players only. So he left me stranded. And so I decided, to get the war out of my head, I'll just hitchhike. So I spent-- from Florida back to Seattle, I spent three months hitchhiking. Not staying in a hotel or anybody's house, just sleep on the side of the freeway, roughing it. And I was able to put the whole war behind me and start off, well, most of it, and move forward.

[01:38:07.73] MARC HENDERSON: Were you able to-- did you have any difficulty readjusting to life after the war?

[01:38:15.32] DONALD PREMEL: Yes. The biggest thing I had was being disowned by family and friends. Basically, I had to develop new friends again. So I hung out with my brother who was a Marine. We kind of connected. And then, I decided, well heck, I'll just go ahead. Since I dropped out of high school, I'll go back, get my high school diploma.

[01:38:41.97] And I did that. And then I went on. And my dream in life was aviation because I live close to the airport. So I went and got my degree in aviation management. And then tried to get a job at the airport, couldn't get one. Nobody was hiring. So I thought, the only way I can get a job at the airport, because whenever the job came open they would give it to a relative or friend, so I became a janitor at the airport. So I could find out what new jobs open.

[01:39:11.61] So it happened. Boom, after I got on two jobs opened up. And I applied for it and got it. And that started my career at Continental Airlines. I didn't say, when I came back there was one lady I met when she was 14. She was my buddy's girlfriend's friend. But she had a boyfriend at the time. But I had met her. We went over to see his girlfriend. She was babysitting. And she introduced me to Jenny, at the time. And within probably 15 seconds of--

[01:39:49.28] MARC HENDERSON: Go ahead, finish with your thought.

[01:39:49.97] DONALD PREMEL: Within 15 seconds of seeing her I said to her, I'm going to marry you someday. And she laughed. And the other girl laughed. What are you laughing at? They go, she's got a boyfriend. I go, OK. So I met him. So I saw her probably three or four times throughout that, just bumping into each other. And every time I saw her I said, I'm going to marry you someday. And she would giggle, respectfully.

[01:40:12.80] And then I heard she broke up with her boyfriend. So I went over and said, will you go to the lake with me and we'll go swimming? She goes, yeah. And we got done that day. And I said, wow, you know, I'm going to marry you someday. She laughed.

[01:40:31.99] And then, finally, I asked her on a second date. And I didn't have a car. So I asked. And she's like, I can borrow my brother's car. So she showed up at my house with her brother's car and went to the drive-in movies. And I got there. I said, I don't have enough money for the drive-in. She goes, oh, my dad gave me \$20 emergency money. So she paid our way in. Halfway through the movie I said, are you hungry or thirsty? And she goes, yeah. I said, well, I don't have any money. Can you buy? So she bought the food.

[01:41:00.97] So she went home that night. And she told her dad the story about where the money went. And he said to her, he goes, now, I like that guy. It's kind of a nice response from him. So he wanted to meet me later. So I did. And he goes, I like that you have guts. You have guts. He says, you wanted to go out with my daughter. You didn't have a penny to your name. But you still went. So I thought it was kind of cool.

[01:41:31.65] So that was it. And I did that last minute sign up for the Marine Corps. And we were hitting it off. And I said, OK, bye, because I was enlisted. And so I left. She did write me in Vietnam. She got married to an Army guy when I was over there. So I got back. I didn't try to contact her or anything because I knew she was married.

[01:41:56.43] And so I took off hitchhiking. When I come back-- I got back in Seattle on her birthday. Not planned, it just happened that way. And so I picked the phone up and called her mom's house. And she said, come on over. It's her birthday. Well, so I picked up red roses, chocolates, and a big 3-foot tall teddy bear, and hitchhiked.

[01:42:18.78] And a family picked me up and said, where you going with all that stuff? I said, well, I'm going to see an old girlfriend. And they said, well, we'll drive you to her house. I pulled up front. And her dad answered the door. And he goes, he looked at my wife sitting on a couch, says, now this is the guy you should have married.

[01:42:37.89] Anyway, so she was with her husband who they just were separating that day. And so, I waited for the separation, waited for the divorce. Then a year after the divorce, I asked her. I said, I'm going to marry you someday. And she goes, I don't know. So I gave her a year of dating. And then, a year later I asked her to marry me. She said, yes. And neither one of my family members or my parents would show up to the wedding. So just me and her family.

[01:43:10.26] MARC HENDERSON: How much contact did you have with veterans over the years?

[01:43:15.91] DONALD PREMEL: Very little in the first years because the VA-- when I go into the VA, the VA wouldn't even talk to me for 37-years, until 2007. I couldn't get appointments. I couldn't get anything from the VA. So I got a hold of my buddy, Michael Dapaah-Gettle. And we stayed in contact. First by name was Dennis Sweet, who we served together and I visited him right before he died, because he died from Agent Orange cancer. And so I got to see him before he died.

[01:43:53.02] Other than that, nothing until then. We had reunions that started up. And I started attending the reunions. And that's been our contact ever since.

[01:44:10.48] MARC HENDERSON: How did your experience change you and affect your life afterward?

[01:44:16.39] DONALD PREMEL: Very much so. It played a reverse psychology on me. At this moment, I guess I can reflect about the head being cut off. What happened was is from when I got home, I got married to my wife. She would spend many hours at night. And she would just put me into a closet so I couldn't hurt anything. And I didn't have an alcohol problem.

[01:44:42.67] But I had a mental problem because that episode about the heads, I didn't know it at the time, but for almost 38 years-- it started off where I would have nightmares where these heads were coming to me in my dream, just the heads, and telling me, we didn't make it. You better do better. You better do this and kind of challenging me to do better, whatever I did. But then the heads would come and tell me that you didn't do right. And just-- basically they were haunting me.

[01:45:22.48] It got to the point later when I became upper management with the airlines. We were sitting in meetings with 20 people at the table. And my eyes were wide open. And the heads

would start coming to me. I could see them right in front of my face. And there was Sergeant Garcia and all the other buddies that we lost. And so their heads were coming to me.

[01:45:47.42] And so it got to be a point that it was not only nightmares. It became daymares. They were constantly challenging me saying, you better do better because we're dead. We can't be there. You better make up for us and stuff like that. It was all mental.

[01:46:03.58] Until the VA would see me 37 years later, 38 years, a year after that, I saw a psychiatrist and a sociologist. And they told me that they knew what it was. They said, what's happened is you felt so much guilt. It's called survivor's guilt. You feel guilty for surviving. And these heads you think are haunting you. And what it is, the heads of the people that lost their heads in 'Nam, and you need to realize that and put it behind you. It was that next day I have never had a vision or dream ever since.

[01:46:48.58] MARC HENDERSON: So how did your combat experience affect the way you think of combat veterans returning from war today?

[01:47:00.62] DONALD PREMEL: I think today, I compare today with the Second World War, other than-- take Vietnam out of the picture. Second World War, when they came, the war ended, and they came back from war, they had 30 days on a ship to basically put the war behind them. So they came back. And they came back to a great celebration. So they-- sorry. Hold on.

[01:47:29.51] MARC HENDERSON: Take your time. Take your time.

[01:47:30.59] DONALD PREMEL: OK

[01:47:31.31] MARC HENDERSON: You want a tissue?

[01:47:32.03] DONALD PREMEL: No, that's OK. So they felt appreciated. Today, ever since Desert Storm, there's parades. They get VA benefits right away, everything. And people appreciate them. The Vietnam War, we didn't have that. Being disowned by my family and friends had a real emotional impact on me. I had nobody to lean on, nobody to talk to. The VA wouldn't talk to me. So I was lost.

[01:48:03.61] But anyway, so sometimes it takes 50 years to get past that. But it motivated me. It gave me more motivation to overcome. Sorry about that.

[01:48:15.50] MARC HENDERSON: No, that's fine. What do you think the war meant to your generation?

[01:48:21.88] DONALD PREMEL: I'm sorry?

[01:48:23.08] MARC HENDERSON: What do you think the war meant to your generation?

[01:48:27.79] DONALD PREMEL: Embarrassment. Embarrassment for the government. Embarrassment. They had no respect for us as military. They had no respect for the government at the time. The '70s was a difficult decade where it tore the United States apart.

[01:48:54.97] MARC HENDERSON: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered today?

[01:48:58.36] DONALD PREMEL: I think finally, after Desert Storm, I think people started realizing and appreciating all veterans. And I think there's the younger generation because it seems so distant to them. To them it's like the Second World War, First World War, even though we're still alive. Many of them want to hear the stories. And they're amazed is what I'm getting now.

[01:49:26.92] MARC HENDERSON: If you could reflect on your experience in Vietnam, what lessons would you impart for future generations?

[01:49:37.99] DONALD PREMEL: I would probably say that you have to find, early in life, what really is your goal in life. What's your purpose? And understand it and then seek it. Don't let anybody tell you you can't do it or it can't be done. And go for what you truly believe in. And the military, to me, is the best stepping stone to have in my life because it gave me a foundation to grow on. And I became, as I write, I became a nobody to somebody. And without the military I don't think I would have done that.

[01:50:24.95] MARC HENDERSON: Have you been to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial?

[01:50:27.29] DONALD PREMEL: Yes, I have.

[01:50:29.90] MARC HENDERSON: What are your impressions of that?

[01:50:31.58] DONALD PREMEL: I think it's probably one of the most fantastic monuments ever built in recognition. Having the names there, you can touch the name. And you can feel. I mean, you literally touch a name that someone that was in the war with you that you lost. You can feel like you're touching their heart. It's a feeling that you just don't get anywhere else. And that Wall allows that to happen. It just brings out the love and caring that you had back then for your brother. I call them brotherhood, we call it.

[01:51:12.64] MARC HENDERSON: Have you heard of the Vietnam War Commemoration?

[01:51:16.52] DONALD PREMEL: You might have to refresh my memory.

[01:51:19.64] MARC HENDERSON: So the Vietnam War Commemoration is the office that I work for.

[01:51:23.00] DONALD PREMEL: OK.

[01:51:23.63] MARC HENDERSON: And so as I've mentioned to you before, we're a DOD office. And our mission, our objective, is to, on behalf of the government, thank and honor

Vietnam veterans and their families. And so one of the ways we do that is with a Vietnam veteran lapel pin. And on the front there's an American Eagle, a bald eagle. There's five stars, one for each of the five allies that fought along with the United States. And it says Vietnam War veteran. But to me, the most endearing part is on the back. And it says, a grateful nation thanks and honors you. And if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to pin this on you.

[01:52:20.24] DONALD PREMEL: Oh, I'd be honored. Oh, thank you. I hope I didn't talk too long.

[01:52:28.20] MARC HENDERSON: You were perfect. It was perfect. And with this, sir, I want to say two things. One, I want to say, welcome home.

[01:52:34.09] DONALD PREMEL: Thank you.

[01:52:34.78] MARC HENDERSON: And I want to say, you have every reason to be proud of your service.

[01:52:38.59] DONALD PREMEL: Thank you.

[01:52:38.86] MARC HENDERSON: Because we're proud of you.

[01:52:39.73] DONALD PREMEL: I appreciate it.