Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Gen. Alexander Bolling on the nineteenth of August 2002, approximately three o’clock. We are in the Southwest Collections/Special Collections Library Interview room, in Lubbock, Texas and this is an oral history for the Vietnam Archive Oral History Project. Thank you for consenting to an interview sir and I’d like to begin just briefly discuss some of your early experiences and if you would just tell me when and where you were born and a little bit about your early life growing up in the military with your father as an officer.

Alexander Bolling: I was born on the eleventh of September 1922 at Ft. McPherson, Georgia, the son of an Army infantry captain who had completed his combat service in World War I with the Third Division and at the time was stationed as adjutant of the Twenty-second Infantry Regiment. My first five years of my life were spent at Ft. McPherson and then I started the normal lifestyle of an Army brat, which means that you change about every two or three or four years and either get used to it or you don’t; I enjoyed it. So the second place I lived was in Washington DC when my father was given command of headquarters company, the predecessor of the Old Guard which is now the Third Infantry Regiment. He commanded that company for three years as a captain. From there we went, my dad went to Ft. Benning for a year and WPA (Works Progress Administration) was on and he was ordered by the president to go out and work some WPA troops in Florida building roads. His base being what is now, what became Camp Blanding, Florida. But he worked all summer and at the end of the summer he then went on to the Command General Staff College and then he got in the intelligence business up in Boston and when the war broke out, he was a lieutenant colonel and very shortly he
was brigadier general because of the rapid promotions when the war broke out, World
War II. And he was a personnel officer for the Army ground forces for the Army; and
made the assignments, activated a division a day and arranged for the selection of senior
officers and staffs of divisions and then he came up to my alma mater where I was a
senior at West Point and gave us our first assignments. I selected Florida because I had
never been there but by the time I graduated the division I was in Little Rock, Arkansas,
so I didn’t see Florida.

SM: So there was no foreign travel as you were growing up?

AB: The only foreign travel, there really was not very much in between World
War I and World War II because we had very few US forces overseas. My dad served
two years at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii when I was a young teenager and I got an
opportunity to have a teenager’s life on the island of Oahu, which is quite an experience,
I went to Leilahoo High School.

SM: Was there very much of an emphasis in your education on foreign
languages?

AB: Not at the time, I started French as an experiment in the fifth grade, did not
do well; took it again first year in the sixth grade, did not do well; and by the time I got to
West Point I had had six years of French and really knew first year French very well.
Consequently when I volunteered to take French at West Point I ended up number two
man in the class and the war broke out and they said, “We’re taking the top fifty men in
French and we’re going to bring in some German instructors and the top fifty men are
going to learn German.” Because at the time they taught only French and Spanish at
West Point. So everybody, all my classmates were motivated to learn and because of my
background in the language of French, I did quite well in German to the extent that after
the war they brought me back to teach it and that was the beginning. So it really wasn’t
my dad’s traveling, it was just the way things worked out.

SM: And you mentioned while we were talking earlier, you were eventually
fluent in Portuguese as well?

AB: Well, after the war I was brought back to teach German, we spoke not a
word of English all day long and so I got pretty good in German, I got a call from
Washington in 1948—now there was no war going on or anything—saying, “You speak
French and German. How would you lie to go to Brazil? We have an opening in Brazil.”
And I said, “That sounds great.” They said, “Well, you’ll go to the Army language
school and learn Portuguese.” Well, after having taught German and having all that
German and French, I learned Portuguese in about four months and when I got down
there I found out I was the only one on the mission down there who spoke Portuguese
and so the general made me his aide-de-camp, interpreter. I really had to work at my
Portuguese and so I learned—Portuguese is now my strongest language, Portuguese and
German.

SM: Any other languages over the years?

AB: I speak Spanish and I learned a little Chinese when I was in Taiwan, once
again the experience of having been exposed to foreign languages helped and a little Farsi
when I got interested in a situation in Iran, not much, a little English.

SM: What other subjects interested you as a teenager, as you were going to high
school in particular?

AB: What subjects? I really don’t know. As I recall I did pretty well in math and
English, the basics and history, those three subjects were always my strong points and the
ones that I made good grades in. I hated physics and chemistry and I still hate physics
and chemistry and I have a grandson who is a genius here at Texas Tech and he loves
physics and chemistry and I told him he could have mine.

SM: How about sports; play many sports?

AB: I played football and lacrosse at West Point came back after the war and
coached lacrosse and the coached lacrosse at Dickinson College when I was at the Army
War College and we won the national championship; and then coached a Dallas city team
when I got to Dallas after I retired. My son went on to West Point and became all-
American lacrosse player and he now has twelve teams in Coppell, Texas, so I guess
lacrosse is my favorite sport, except for Monday night.

SM: What made you decide to go to the military college as opposed to another
way of getting commissioned like though OCS (Officer Candidate School) or ROTC
(Reserve Officer Training Corps)?

AB: I was previously interviewed by another element with that same question
and then thinking back it never entered my mind at any time in my life that I would go
anyplace but the United States Military. My dad was OCS graduate; but he still thought
that West Point was a great school in spite of that. It never entered my mind that I would
do anything but go to West Point and be in the infantry. I just accepted that as the only
way to go, maybe that’s stupidity but I went to West Point because I decided that I
wanted to go to West Point when I was about four. That’s not true in every case.

SM: Now how far back in your family does military service go?

AB: Very little, my father’s father was a well known surgeon in Philadelphia and
when World War I broke out he volunteered and became really the Army’s first flight
surgeon. We had a brand new Air Force and they made him the surgeon at guess where,
what is now Camp Blanding, Florida of a flying school down there where he spent the
war. Then his grandfather was an Army doctor in the Civil War. But there were very
few military, my seventh Great-grandfather was a captain of cavalry in the Revolutionary
War and I can take you on back to the War of the Roses if you want 1461, Robert Bolling
was there on Good Friday at the Battle of Touten, 1461 as a knight. So but other than
there were many hundreds of years where they didn’t know anything about the military.

SM: Well it seems like those who were involved made up for that lapse.

AB: I’ve told you all who were involved. The first man ever to use the Bolling
name was a fellow by the name of Tristan Bolling in the year 1190 and he fought with
Prince John who was the brother of Richard the Lionheart and Prince John tired to steal
Richard the Lionheart so Tristan was really the first soldier and he wasn’t a very good
one.

SM: How did your mother feel about your perspective military career?

AB: Well, as the wife of an Army officer she didn’t mind, she fully expected me
to go there. My father’s mother was the daughter of a Navy admiral and she named her
son, my father after Adm. Alexander Wilson Russell, so there’s that connection and
military life. My mother always supported my desire to go to the military academy.

SM: How about brothers or sisters?

AB: I had two sisters; one married a West Pointer out of the class of 1940 who
went on to be a major general. The other married an Air Force officer who fought in
World War II so I guess we were really pretty military.
SM: What was it like, your first experiences in the military academy, was it a surprise?

AB: It wasn’t for me, it is for most people but I fully expected everything that came about including the first day. I showed up with a toilet article kit, that was it, no clothes, no suitcase, nothing because I knew exactly what was going to happen and my first roommate, when they made us go draw five hundred dollars worth of mattress and sheets and everything and take them to our room, my first roommate was a fellow by the name of Tom Elgin and he was standing in the middle of the room saying, “I’m going to go home, I’m going to call my father and tell him to come and get me,” and Tom Elgin is a retired officer. He stayed and he retired as a colonel and he lives here in Texas.

SM: What were the greatest challenges your first year?

AB: Football. I hadn’t played a lot of football before I went and so I was inexperienced compared to the rest of them. Academically I had graduated from high school so young that I was too young to enter West Point. I graduated from high school when I was sixteen so I went to a prep school in Washington DC called Malargue West Point Preparatory School so by the time I hit West Point academics were no problem. They are today, they’re driving the cadets much harder than they drove us, so I played football and lacrosse, stayed on the training table—those were my challenges so I could stay on training table and eat that ice cream and good food. And worked in the 100th Night Show in the winter when there was nothing else to do. I enjoyed West Point very, very much. A lot of them were anxious to get out, I was glad to graduate, but I enjoyed my life there, enjoyed the camaraderie and I still communicate with most of my classmates.

SM: You mentioned you did what was it, the 109th?

AB: Well, a hundred days from graduation, West Point cadets put on what they call a 100th Night Show, big production, takes about five months to rehearse it, lots of scenery and it’s put on for the kids of the post, then the cadets, the plebes, and then cadets and the officers and their families. I was in that for the time I was a cadet, I had the lead.

SM: What did you do, what was it?

AB: They were all comedies, they are all musical comedies really with the cadets, the women are all cadets dressed up as girls. You see they’ve got girls up there
now, but when I was there the women we all cadets. Ruby Keeler, you’re too young to
know who she was and Dick Powell were in a show about West Point and she was the
superintendent’s daughter and he had a role in the 100th Night Show. But it’s a big
production and it marks the final trail towards graduation, a hundred days till June and
that’s what 100th Night Show was, a lot of fun putting it on.

SM: What about tactics, military protocol, things of that nature, anything
challenging there for you?

AB: No, mainly because I was an Army brat. I didn’t have any trouble learning
how to shoot a rifle, didn’t have any trouble in any of the military operations. We had
tactics all summer. When the war broke out and they made us a three-year course, the
only thing they eliminated were vacations. We had no vacations, stayed at West Point
the whole time. When I went back to teach German in the summer I trained the cadets in
night operations, squad night operations, so I really enjoyed the military part of it, as
much as—probably more than the academic part. I had no problems. I was kind of, I
guess in today’s vernacular they would say he was pretty cool because I enjoyed life
including the military.

SM: Did your father involve you much as you got older in some of the things that
he did in the military, whether it be going on base with him or doing certain things,
anything like that?

AB: No, that’s against the rules. I tried to stay as far away from my father as I
could because he had his reputation and I didn’t want to soil it and I had whatever I
wanted to do, I wanted to be my own man. I was my father’s son until I was about thirty
and then I became his friend. The only time I was anywhere near close to him is when I
escaped from prison camp in World War II and the chief of staff, Twenty-first Army
Group, Gen. David Barr said, “I guess you want to go up and say hello to your father.”

Who commanded the division in World War II and I said, “Yes, sir.” Because I knew if I
went up there, he wouldn’t let me go home and that’s what happened. I went up there
and General Simpson, the Army commander was in there with him at the time near
Hanover and General Simpson said, “Well, son I suppose you’ll be going home.” And
my dad looked at him and says, “The war isn’t over.” And I was by Geneva rules, I was
supposed to get out of the theatre because I had been a prisoner over two months and so
that next day I was assigned to my own father’s division and he said, “I’ll give you a
week and you’re going down and take a rifle company.” So I ate all I could to gain some
weight back, I’d lost about forty pounds and went down to take A Company, the 334th
Infantry and the only time I ever saw my dad was when I back for the payroll once a
month and I’d stop by and say hello for five minutes and then I’d get in my Jeep, take the
money and go back and pay the troops. We got along great as long as the troops in the
Eight-fourth didn’t think I was getting any good deals and I never did get any, I don’t
think.

SM: Well, when you were growing up, did he talk much about life in the military?

AB: No, Dad was, no he really never did. He was more distant from me than
most fathers are from their children. He was a hard worker, very hard worked and once
he brought me home a German helmet with a spike on it from World War I and I traded it
for a yo-yo to a friend, I think I was about seven and he took a real dim view of that and I
think I got a spanking. But he would bring me bugles and still at home I have an old
World War I steel helmet that he brought me. That’s the only connection he ever made,
only communication he made to me regarding the military. He would bat balls to me
when I was learning baseball and he’d throw footballs to me, but it was always yes or no
sir, I was always on a yes or no sir basis with my dad until many years after the war. I
didn’t mind it because I knew that he respected me and I respected him. He was guarding
the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and he was doing a lot of good things that looked
pretty good to me as a kid, so he had no influence other than by osmosis. I liked what he
was doing and I liked him so I tried to emulate him, he was a great man.

SM: Now, did that lead to a stronger relationship with your mother?

AB: I was my mother’s pet so I had that deal made. She thought that I was—of
her three children I was her pet.

SM: When you graduated from West Point, did you know where you were going,
what unit you’d be assigned to?

AB: Yes, because my dad as G-1 in the Army had come up and let us pick the
divisions and before he did he said, “Okay, you’re going to pick your branches too.”
“Now,” he said, “West Point in the past has had graduates go into non-combat units like
the quartermaster corps,” he said, “In this class; everyone will go into a combat arms.”
The guys went wild, they just cheered and yelled. He says, “You can go into the armor, the engineers, the infantry, the artillery and the coast artillery,” which became the anti-aircraft artillery. So then we selected branches on the basis or our rank in class. And I knew I was going infantry so when it came my name I said, “Infantry,” and then I knew I was going to go to the Sixty-sixth Infantry Division at Ft. Blanding, Florida. But it turned out to be Ft. Robinson, Arkansas.

SM: How long did you stay at Ft. in Arkansas?

AB: Well, we trained, I reported as a platoon leader and we trained, sure we were going over. This was the fall of ’43, October ’43 and we were levied right when we were hottest, so we had to go back and train and we moved to Ft. Rucker, Alabama and trained down there and I said, “Well this outfit is never going to get overseas.” So I took a leave to go visit my father. That was the first time I was really figuring on asking him for help to get me overseas. Well, he was busy, he was in maneuvers with his thing so I went into the officers’ club and there was a colonel in there who had had I believe a scotch or two and he was talking about how he could get any officer in the Army. I said, “Colonel, I’m a lieutenant now, a first lieutenant,” and I said, “I know someone you can’t get.” He said, “You write his name, rank and serial down on a piece of paper and let me try.” So I wrote my name, rank and serial down on a piece of paper in an officers’ club at Camp Cleburne, Louisiana and gave it to him. And when I got back to Ft. Rucker, Alabama there were telegraphic orders signed McNair, who was the commanding general of the Army ground forces saying, “Report immediately to Camp McCain Mississippi to the Ninety-fourth Infantry Division.” And that’s what this guy was chief of staff of. I drove my car, gave it back to my dad, he had given it to me at graduation, took a train, went to Camp McCain, Mississippi, two weeks later we were on the Queen Elizabeth.

SM: Where were you heading at that point?

AB: England, to our equipment went across the strait and landed on Utah Beach.

SM: You were on the Utah Landing?

AB: Not on D-Day, about four weeks after.

SM: Four weeks after D-Day. I know that you’ve already conducted an interview about your World War II experiences; I would like to get a little bit of information thought, just as it might have impacted or affected your future military
experiences in Vietnam in particular. How long were you in Europe before you were
captured?

AB: We landed in the summer of ’44 needless to say. We fought down through
Brittany towards St. Nazret Loriann, our division did, the Ninety-fourth. We spun around
in December just before the Bulge and headed north. We were not victims of the Bulge
but we were in Patton’s Army when we started the counterattack. We were going up the
Moselle River and on the twentieth of January I was wounded by the Eleventh Panzer
Division and captured. I was a prisoner for sixty-seven days and got away on the twenty-
seventh of March and took about twelve days to find eight million Americans but it did.
Then that’s when I joined the Eighty-fourth and finished the war out. There was a lot that
happened there, but I finished the war on the Elbe River, thirty miles from Berlin as
commanding officer of the A Company, 334th Infantry. Then we went into occupation
and in November of ’44 my first sergeant came into me with a telegraphic order to report
to West Point as a German instructor. In the Army in those days every was trying to get
out and this was just a PCS order, just a permanent change of station order for me, so I
headed for Camp Lucky Strike and came home and they gave me a lecture on how to be a
civilian after I got off the ship and I finally went up and found me a major, and I said,
“Major, I’m Captain Bolling and I’m on PCS orders to West Point.” And he says, “Oh
boy, did we boot the ball with you. Will fourteen-day delay in route help,” and so he gave
me fourteen days leave. I went down to Washington and my fiancée who lived in Little
Rock met me there and that’s when we set the date for the wedding, two weeks later in
Little Rock. So I was back teaching in January of ’46, back teaching German. When I
first started teaching I told those cadets if they got one lesson ahead of me I was going to
give them a flunking grade because we were only allowed to speak German in there.

SM: Well, for your time in Europe, what were the more significant things that
you learned from that combat experience that was particularly important for you later,
especially Vietnam?

AB: The main thing I learned is that a new person and/or a new unit is not much
of a unit, that it takes time fighting to make someone experienced enough to stay alive if
you’re a person or to stay undefeated if you’re a unit. That lesson was relearned in
Vietnam. When I had C Company of one of my battalions was the first to get into
combat and I watched it mature like a flower to where their casualties weren’t as great, company commander was more confident. It was emphasized, I always remembered after I saw that company—C Company, First of the 505th Airborne Infantry Battalion—that you almost have to ease units into combat. Now, you couldn’t do that on D-Day and there were a lot of casualties and in Vietnam they tried very hard to give us what they called orientation. Even though I had 70, 80 percent of my men were veterans, and although I have trained my unit for a whole year back in the States it still takes actual combat to get a unit adequately acclimated and prepared to save lives and to win. That was the biggest lesson I learned in World War II. I made a lot of mistakes, I almost had all the officers in my company and about four or five of the noncoms killed on the very first day when I took them up in a wooden fire tower to look for the enemy. And the guy with that German 88 must have died laughing when he saw us and the first round of the 88 missed that tower by maybe a quarter of an inch and exploded behind us. Fortunately we had no one hurt, we all ran down and got in these big French buildings which 88s couldn’t destroy because they had too flat a trajectory and that was one dumb thing. You wonder why, after all the training that I had had, I’d even think to go up in a fire tower, but I guess I expected to see the enemy running around all over the place and in combat you don’t see the enemy. We did a little later when we were a mile or so away or two miles away and they didn’t think we were looking at them and we had a peep hole through a granary and we let them all get out in that field and then put a concentration of about forty 105 millimeter rounds bursting in the air over them. That surprised them. But the point is that there are lots of mistakes made in combat and it takes time and by the time my unit had been there a couple three months they were all great. They knew how to go through jungles, go through rice paddies. For the record I guess I ought to tell you the story of one of my troopers. I was out with him all day, wherever they were going and there was one unit that was walking through a rice paddy, probing for mines so I got out of—my chopper landed and usually when he landed he would go up in the air and go around just so he wouldn’t get blown up and I jumped in the mud in the rice paddy and walked up to this one trooper and I said, “Trooper, you’re doing a good job.” I said, “What were you before you came over here?” He said, “Sir I was a hippie.” And I said, “You were a hippie, are you mad that you’re here?” He said, “No, sir,” he said,
“Someone’s got to be here.” And I said, “Well I will be darned.” I said, “I ought to send that to the papers.” I said, “What are you going to be when you get back home? He said, “Sir, I’m going to be a hippie.” And I said, “I want to tell you something, don’t you ever forget my name.” I said, “If you go back and grow a big beard and you’re a hippie and the police arrest you, I want you to contact me and I’m going to come get you out.” I said, “Because you’ve earned the right to do anything you want.” You know what he said, “You know you’re from Ft. Bragg, airborne.” And so that was, these were the great soldiers that I had, the youth of the America in the ‘60s was fantastic. What you see in the movies is nothing what they were; they were just great, including that hippie.

SM: Well, more on this topic of Vietnam and you mentioned the importance of experience, long term experience and the building of cohesion within a unit in terms of getting them ready to withstand the rigors of combat, what did you think about the rotation system in Vietnam, which seems to contradict that?

AB: Well, the thing—that’s an excellent point. The worst rotation was that of battalion commanders. It was an altruistic decision because they wanted all these young tigers to get experience commanding battalions in combat so they’d all have a chance to be generals. After the war the Army changed that, they take the best guys they can find and put them in their command for a year or two years. In the time that I was commanding a brigade, that one-year that I was commanding in combat, they sent me new battalion commanders three times. They hardly knew their men. So I went a message to Gen. Dick Sykes, Commanding General of the Eight-second Airborne Division and I said, “Send me Colonel Irons, Colonel Round and Colonel Thomas,” because they’d all been battalion commanders when I was back at Bragg. They came on the next plane. They knew their sergeants; they knew the varied personality of the Eighty-second, which is different from lots of outfits. So that I could Jim Irons, Ross Round and G.G. Thomas and say, “Okay, go fight the war.” And I would know that even though this was their first combat they were calm under fire and everything. Now, the younger officers worked their way into the company command positions so we didn’t worry about that rotation. Now, let me get into the rotation of a year. I don’t know how you solve that. In World War II all of the people who went over in World War II knew that the only route home was through Berlin. We all knew that. No one ever thought of
going home. We wrote letters, we got gifts from home, but we knew that we had to get to Berlin. I don’t know whether it is within the moral fiber of our country to take out soldiers and—even in Afghanistan the 101st Airborne was there for only six months. Now that meant they were there on TDY (temporary duty) and they apparently did pretty well. I can say that I just got back from Ft. Bragg and I know how the 505th trained before they went over to Afghanistan and they trained underground, at night with everything Afghan you could find and they were trained to fight the war they’re fighting now. I really don’t know whether it would be psychologically advisable for our citizens, when you got into a long war to have the soldiers and the families feel that they’re going to be gone say for four years or five years, which in World War II, that’s what happened. We had people go away for four and five years. So rotation is a point of great significance for the leaders of the future. I really would object if they should ask me, I don’t think they will to the rotation for career purposes of battlefield commanders, I think they should pick the best people to fight the battle. If they don’t do well, get rid of them and get a better one, but the name of the game is put the best men running your battalions and brigades and regiments and divisions. I hope that answered your question.

SM: Yes, sir it does. But in terms of your second tour in Vietnam as the separate brigade commander, one of the things that you mentioned before we started recording the interview was when they made the decision to transitions you from TDY to the separate brigade that entailed sending men home on thirty day leaves and getting a lot of new personnel in.

AB: It was a new unit. But I think what happened is when the White House—see now don’t forget that President Johnson and I hope his heirs read this, micromanaged that war from the White House Oval Office. I think that without—they may have consulted with the Secretary of Defense and Army—but I think they said, “We’re sending you over there on TDY.” Now, Army regulations are written so that TDY gotten exceed six months so that as six months were approaching, they then made the decision, we’re going to keep it over there permanently which meant that they had to come up with an organization for a separate brigade. They had to take the people who had just gotten back from Vietnam before we deployed and come up with a time thing and I think they said if they had just been back from Vietnam less than six months, they would go home
permanently, which was most of my noncoms, you see? So that what we had is we kept
fighting with the troops still there as the rotation was going on. But at the same time we
were evolving into and entirely new unit, entirely new unit. We made it and the unit did
well. They were over there for another year and then they came home, they were over
there for a total of two years.

SM: How long did it take the new unit to become seasoned approximately?

AB: Well, this is probably to General Abrams’s credit, he was a great warrior and
General Abrams decided that the brigade would leave the North and come down and but
put in, “defense of Saigon.” Now, that isn’t a very tough job, so when we got down
there, the Corps commander said—I didn’t like him anyway so I will not mention his
name—but he came out and gave me some nice polite comment about how he didn’t
want any dumb airborne tricks and so I got in the last word, I said, “Yes, sir.” But we
were only fighting at night, our unit was still pretty good, maybe not as the one that had
arrived earlier but they did all right, but it was mostly patrolling then they went into the
thicket over in Cambodia and they got into some bloody fighting and they did beautifully
but by that time they trained to battle noises and stuff.

SM: Well, in terms of your training prior to going over to Europe, who well did
you think the military academy prepared you for active duty military service and then
how well did IOBC (Infantry Officer Basic Course) and your initial military training
prepare you for combat?

AB: In the time that I went to the military academy, what we learned up there
were basics of how to shoot a rifle and everything else. When the war broke out, during
the summer they sent us out with troops to training centers and we got a different from of
leadership training. Nowadays, because of that experience, military academy focuses
even on the treatment of plebes and the leadership cadet to cadet more on the way they
want their officers to work with the enlisted men out in the service so that there isn’t the
shock of getting out into the service and finding out that you can’t talk to a soldier the
way you could talk to a plebe. I think that started in World War II when I was a cadet
because they would send us out to Camp Croft and we would train soldiers, in the basics,
how to shoot a rifle, how to march, how to pack a pack and all this basic stuff. So it
prepared me a little bit to be an officer and a lot to be a loyal American. The motto of
“Duty, Honor, Country” is so ingrained in the Corps of Cadets that that leads you all the way. There are some who slip a little but most of them go down a pike one to learn and to accept the fact that that NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer) is going to teach them. You asked what my father’s influence was. He always used to say the guy you look up to is the sergeant and I’ve never forgotten that; so the NCOs have always been my best friends in the Army and they still are. They are the ones that I see when I go back to Bragg, some of my old first sergeants and stuff. So I think the military academy does an excellent job in training you academically, a good job in training you about the fundamentals of leadership of the American soldier, a far better job today then they did when I was a cadet. I hope that answers your question.

SM: Absolutely, well when you left the Academy and found yourself in the real world of the military, did you feel comfortable, did you feel confident?

AB: Yes, which don’t forget I grew up hanging around orderly rooms. It wasn’t any surprise to me and when my platoon sergeant came up and he says, “What do you know, Lieutenant?” That’s what a sergeant calls a new lieutenant, “Loo-tenant!” He says, “What do you know about the 105 mm Howitzer M-3?” And I said, “Not much Sergeant.” He said, “I’ll meet you at the guns after the men go home tonight.” And we trained for six weeks and finally after six weeks he saluted me and said, “Lieutenant the platoon is yours.” That’s the way I got in the Army, that sergeant training me. I never missed a reveille, he always leaning behind me and telling me what to do and so I lean on platoon sergeants. They are the key and those are the people who led the men in Vietnam too, that tech sergeant, they’re really good. Because you know what, when they get promoted up they stay in the front lines, when an officer gets promoted up he doesn’t. So I really have great respect for the non-commissioned officer in the United States Army.

SM: How was the initial military training when you went active duty, that is IOBC and how well did you prepare you for your initial assignments, especially combat?

AB: It was fine, it was adequate. My first unit was a cannon company which was the Four-Deuce Mortar Company and after the war. We were good at shooting a gun. The Third Platoon always went with the Third Battalion so I knew all the officers in the Third Battalion; I was the Third Platoon leader. They knew that they could call, our relationship was strong. I was never back at the company because the company
commander just had the first sergeant and the mess sergeant and the mess crew back there. I was always up with the Third Battalion so I was trained adequately for that type of assignment and also could have been a rifle platoon leader, when we first got into Brittany; I went behind the lines every night, every night. It was fun, of course I was twenty and it didn’t bother so I took my instrument corporal and my radio operator and I went behind the lines every single night.

SM: What did you do?

AB: Well, at first we ran into a French battalion, a Free French of the Interior battalion, the battalion commander had the Germans had chopped off his right hand and they were operating behind the lines too and they never took prisoners. So they would show me the best places to go, like church steeples and everything to be a forward observer for my guns. So I would go and get in a church steeple and shoot the guns right towards me and the Germans never did figure that out. We were there with them for two weeks one time because we couldn't get back through.

SM: You were stuck behind enemy lines?

AB: Yes, but we sang “La Marseilles,” the French national anthem every night and I had to teach my men the words to our “Star Spangled Banner” because they didn’t know it and they made us sing it every night. We had potatoes and chickens and eggs all the time because they had lots of chickens and lot of potatoes. When they’d capture a German prisoner they would say, “Do you want to go to war with us?” And they’d say, “No,” and they’d shoot him. They would say, “Do you want to go to war with us? He’d say, “Well I might.” They’d say, “Well can you cook?” “Yes,” and they made him a cook. They were mean, they were tough. They had all their girlfriends with them and everything and we’d stand up and we’d sing “La Marseilles” and they’d cry every night so it was an interesting life for two weeks. But the rest of time I was back, when I was on a patrol I was either with a line rifle unit or looking for a place to go to set up an observation post.

SM: Now when you were gone for two weeks, what happened when you got back?

AB: I was in communication with the compound.

SM: Okay, so you were in radio communications with the compound.
AB: Oh sure, I called in fire every day.

SM: What were the circumstances concerning your capture, how were you captured?

AB: We knew the Bulge was over and we were in Third Army and they said “Okay, we’re going to attack the North.” And the Ninety-fourth Division will be on the east side of the Moselle River and we went up the Moselle River and the ice was about a foot thick along the edge of the river and they told us we were fighting the 416th Folk’s Grenadier, that’s old man, as old as me now. And we thought well this will be easy because we’ve been fighting some pretty tough people. Well, what had happened, they moved the Eleventh Panzer Division about four days before we started up to the North, so we hit a little town called Nennig all hell broke loose and that’s the first time I ever saw a Tiger tank and Colonel Clute, the battalion commander said, “Bolling, you can adjust artillery fire, can you go find L Company for me? Captain Smith, they’re surrounded.”

And I said, “Yes, sir.” So we started up the snow, up this high hill, got up to the top of the hill and machine gun opened up on us and it wounded my instrument corporal, he lost a leg and so I told the radio operator to get him back to medics and I went and handed the machine gunners a hand grenade with the thing pulled. Now I thought that was the only enemy up there, but there was a whole armor division up there, Eleventh Panzer and I was going through like this on the snow and artillery came in and I was wounded in the knee and in the right arm. I kept on going and pretty soon I saw nothing but black boots all around me and the only thing I could think to say was, Nicht schiessen, “Don’t shoot.” And the first thing a German said to me was Krieg ist kein gutes, “War’s no good.” And so they got me up and I could walk and they took me back to the company headquarters, squadron or whatever they called it, good looking soldiers, all young, fresh in from the Russian front and they treated me great, just great. The lieutenant said he was going to put in a captured American Jeep and take me back to battalion right away to get my wounds treated. I said, “Okay.” I got back and they sent a sergeant in and he apologized that they didn’t have anyone who spoke English my rank, like in the movies and I got away that night. They treated my wounds there at regiment and then sent me back to division.

SM: Are you speaking German to them through this?
AB: Whenever they couldn’t speak English.
SM: But you weren’t voluntarily speaking German?
AB: No, so the division AG (Adjutant General) put me in a room with a master
sergeant who was writing his girlfriend home and told the master sergeant that I got his
bed, which didn’t sit well with him. He and I ended up talking about who was winning
the war and they still had confidence and so I bet him fifty thousand marks that we would
win the war, I never collected. Whenever I needed to go out and relieve myself he’d say,
“Go ahead,” and the snow was about two feet deep and roads had been plowed so the
third time I went out, I just kept going across the field. He came out screaming, “Prisoner
escape, prison escape!” And they put a whole company and they searched for an hour
and couldn’t find me because I was hiding in a little stream freezing to death. There is
always a sad sack in every unit, a sad sack when they called, they gave up and they called
the troops in and damned if he didn’t cross that field and jump over that stream right
where I was. So that sergeant was going to shoot me with that beautiful pistol of his and
colonel AG called me up, called him, said, “Bring the prisoner here.” And he said, “Do
you understand the rules of the Geneva Convention?” And I said, “Yes, sir.” He said,
“We know from your serial number, you’re regular Army and you’re supposed to
escape.” He says, “I’ve just discussed you case with the division commander and he
sends his congratulations.” I swear and I said, “Thank you sir.” He said, “Will you give
us your word that you won’t try again?” And I said, “No sir.” He said, “Okay, we’ve got
to move you out at two o’clock in the morning and that was the last good treatment I got.
So when I was taking prisoners back in after the war, I had five dorfs, five towns that my
company, and I put the word out to look at their every soldier trying to get back home to
look at his soldbuch, his soldier’s book and anyone from the Eleventh Panzer Division
was to brought to my CP (command post). So, they would bring these scared soldiers in,
thought they were going to get killed and I would tell them that story and then I’d give
them a carton of cigarettes and about ten bars of candy and send them on their way and I
said just thank you very much. So I told that story at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas when I
was a student when they asked who I thought was the best enemy commander I had ever
known, it was Eleventh Panzer Division. I didn’t mean to divert.
SM: No, that’s a tremendous story. What happened, when you say that was the last good treatment you had, how did things digress from there?

AB: Well, then we stopped eating. We had one more good day. When they took me out alone, two in the morning, we went maybe ten, fifteen miles and stopped on a road with a narrow trail in the snow, the snow was this high there, up to a lonely house. In the house was a German frau and her mother and when I walked in, she said in German, “My husband is in America.” And I spoke German I sat down and she found real quick that he had been in an Africa corps for four years and was captured and was in a prison camp in Mississippi and he had written her that America was such a great country they were going to come there after the war and that the Americans were treating him very well, so I slept on this dirt floor and the old woman would get up and throw a little log in the fire all night long. So, I was only there for one day and that was when we went back to the rough interrogation and liter of soup a day, a little over a quart of soup a day and two slices of bread a week and that kind of stuff, but you get used to it. Germans weren’t eating much either.

SM: How did you escape the second time?

AB: When I got away from Hammelburg which is near Schweinfurt, I went through a hole in the fence which had been made by an armored task force which General Patton had sent in to our camp to try to free it because General Patton’s son-in-law Col. Jake Warders was in that camp. Well only one tank made it, but it made a hole in the fence. Jake Warders was wounded and was in the hospital. He was wounded trying to raise an American flag, so six of us went through the hole, two of them didn’t make it and two of them had to turn themselves back in because they were too weak and two of us picked up a British corporal and an American PFC (Private First Class) on the way and the four of us ultimately made it after twelve days and that’s a long story.

SM: Is that covered in your interview at University of Texas?

AB: Every bit of that, the whole twelve days. We liberated the town of Oberfell, as four escaping prisoners.

SM: Well, how much resistance was there?

AB: Oh, there were forty French prisoners in the town and we found four of them and they went and told the mayor that I was the point of the attack and he came out with a
white flag. And so we want to see every weapon here within an hour and they brought
old 1865 weapons, blunderbusts and I said, “Hubert,” that was the Frenchmen I had met,
I said, “You’re now the platoon leader.” I said, “Give every one of your men weapon and
guard, we’re going up in the rot house and go to bed, we’re sleepy.” So we went up and
made a milkshake out of their Red Cross parcels and fell asleep. The next morning the
Forty-second Infantry Division patrol came into town because a little Polish we didn’t
even know was in town, had gone out, found them and said “Americans, Amerikanski!”
And they brought this patrol in and we got with them and that started a whole new story
of first American colonel not believing us and he’d been the regimental executive officer
at Little Rock and I said, “Sir, you’re Colonel LaWango.” And he said, “Boy those
Germans really trained you well didn’t they?” I said, “Sir you were the executive officer
in the Sixty-sixth Infantry Division at Camp Joseph T. Robinson, Arkansas.” He said,
“Boy they’re phenomenal.” He said, “Where did you go to school?” I said, “The
military academy, sir.” He said, “What class?” “Forty-three.” He says, “Douglas,” and
he called a classmate in, classmate said, “Bud Bolling what are you doing with that
beard?” And that started another cycle back to the division commander, dinner with the
division commander, sergeant waiting on us with an American PFC scared of sergeants.
They had never seen generals before, but that’s all in that other interview.

SM: You came back before the war ended in the Pacific, is that correct?
AB: No, no I was still in Europe. I don’t come back until just before the Army,
Navy came, December 1, 1945. The war ended in August.

SM: Of ’45, okay. What did you hear about the dropping of the bombs at
Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the atomic bombs?
AB: Oh, of course we had *Stars and Stripes* and it hit just as soon as it hit
anywhere else in the world.

SM: What did you guys think when that happened?
AB: Our guys had seen a lot of combat and we didn’t know whether we would
have to go to Japan but most of the people in Europe felt that we’d ultimately see service
fighting in Japan. None of them wanted to go to Japan because they knew that it would
take at least a million casualties, so when the bomb went off there was nothing but great
elation. They knew that that was the beginning of the end and when the second bomb
went off; I was busy trying to keep my men busy then. I’ll take them out to the rifle range and we’d shoot had a lot of bullets left and I was trying to keep them from meeting too many girls. First sergeant came in, Bob Vallansy, he had been the vice president of Hershey’s Chocolate Company and he came in and he said, “Sir you’re going to beat me home.” He said, “I thought you regular Army guys would never go home.” And he handed me the orders to go back to teach German at West Point and he was counting his high points, he had a lot of points, two silver stars. So, the reaction of the American soldier in Europe was nothing but a combination of relief and joy. They knew that that would save millions of lives, because Japanese as hard as they fought in Saipan and Okinawa for their homeland, would have been every man, woman and child would be fighting. Now you’re nice and young, never forget that every time you hear some newspaper columnist saying there were six innocent civilians killed, when that bomber, at thirty thousand feet, fired that ugly old machine gun and killed those poor innocent enemy civilians, by that time in World War II, Germany had tried to wipe out every civilian in England and lost. We had almost wiped out every civilian in Germany and caused the civilians to want to stop the war and when those two nukes hit, that ended the war with two bombs, which is a point to lesson to learn for your next war. No war is successful without the complete unadulterated support of the nation it fighting for.

Subject: Vietnam. We could have won that war in Vietnam, we’d have been in Hanoi, the Chinese wouldn’t have dared come down, that’s why they didn’t let us go to Hanoi, they remembered Korea. So, who knows? The political decisions—I’m a Republican incidentally and—I guess I’m a Republican, I voted republican for the last twenty years, but the decision that’s ever made with regard to Vietnam was the decision made by John F. Kennedy to use only advisors and had he lived, we wouldn’t have lost fifty-five thousand men. Because I was one of those when he said I want ten thousand of the best people you can find over there right now and they came into our War College class, allegedly the upper 15 percent of the Army and took everybody that wasn't already on orders and over we went. Had he lived, we would have not had combat troops in there and we probably would have won because there would have been no motivation to have Diem eliminated by someone other than his local people. When we were over there as advisors, there wasn’t one single North Vietnamese soldier south of the DMZ.
(Demilitarized Zone), not one. They were all Viet Cong, little fellows in pajamas, and our civil affairs operation was beginning to pick up speed. We were teaching them how to road IRA rice, which produced four times as much rice in a rice paddy than they were producing and we were helping them plant that. And even though it didn’t grow any higher than that it produced more rice. We were doing all kinds of good things that would have helped the cause but it’s too bad that we got into the military thing because Mr. McNamara thought that the technology of America was such that we could put ears all the way across the DMZ but he knew we couldn’t do it into Laos and they could have cared less, they just came down through Laos and Cambodia. So, all we did was kill a lot of elephants up there in those jungles and tigers. I’m so glad that Texas Tech is building this Vietnamese thing for the basic reason that there is so much that as you can see in Afghanistan and in Saudi Arabia, we learned in Vietnam. What we need to study now of the Vietnam experience is all of the political ramifications, of which there were many.

Popular support, the old poem, “Now it does no good for the Christian white to hurry the Asian brown, for the Christian riles and the Asian smiles and he weareth the Christian down. And at the end of a fight is a tombstone white with the name of the late deceased, the epithet, drear, a fool lies here who tried to hurry the East.” And if someone hadn’t read Rudyard Kipling from the State Department and if they haven’t read History of China, this is what made Patton incidentally a great general. He had a read a lot, but if they haven’t read the fact that the Chinese have been under totalitarian regimes for six thousand years, you can’t say now there will be a democracy, they don’t even understand the concept, same thing in Vietnam. I watched Chiang Kai-shek feed it into Taiwan; I was over there on his staff, so there is a lot that can be learned. I’m so glad that you all are making this collection. I only hope—I’m going to try and get everyone of my old outfit up here to see it and see what you have because in my outfit we have college professors now, we have wealthy CEOs (Chief Executive Officer), and they really need to see part of the conflict that they didn’t see when they were PFCs, wading through the jungle.

SM: Well, thank you. I think our time is up.

AB: Is it here?
SM: Yes, sir. This will end the interview on the nineteenth of August, thank you again.