Interview with Thomas Spencer  
Session 2 of 2  
October 8, 2001

SM: Alright, we’re back from break. It’s approximately four o’clock. Sir, I was wondering.

By the time you left from your first tour, what was your feeling; what were your thoughts about the United States effort overall and whether or not you thought we were accomplishing our missions or goals, and how successful did you think the policy was up to that point?

TS: I guess by the time I left in the first tour, I had doubts of our ultimate success, even though we had dealt the Viet Cong a tremendous blow. Going back to what Bernard Fall had told us and what we read and learned about the effort in Singapore and Malaysia, I didn’t think we were doing what we said we were going to do about winning the hearts and minds of the people. It looked to me like we were getting more ever-increasing American military presence and driven activity as opposed to an internal, Vietnamese-driven activity to make their country free of insurgents or whatever. I was disturbed I guess personally because [of what] I read; sitting around headquarters there in Saigon, I got hold of messages that were going out, back to the States, giving the status of things, and some of them appear to be maybe not as forthright and truthful as they could have been. Maybe they weren’t lies, but maybe the whole truth hadn’t been laid on the line as well as one might have expected a military man to have done it. I think a lot of that may have been triggered by our own internal system in the Army. You’ve got to look good in order to move up. McNamara had come up with some sector advisory report where your improvement this month [was measured]...you did ten medCAPS and 10% of your province was under [government] control of the population, et cetera, et cetera. It had to [show] improve every month while you were an advisor or perhaps you weren’t doing your job. They were all just sort of pie in the sky answers because there was no way of really checking or doing anything, so people tended to inflate these things, I felt. And one time as an example, I remember seeing at our province team, they had a map that had green and yellow and red on it. Red was Viet Cong and green was controlled by the good folks and yellow was in between. And I remember seeing this one area that was green which was way out beyond the Thap Muoi Canal, and I asked the guy at province why that was green, and he said, ‘Well, there’ve been no incidents reported in there in over a year.’ I said, ‘There hasn’t been a friendly soldier in the area in over a year that I knew of, so who would have reported that?’ That was kind of the concept; so we painted this green. Now we’ve got 20% of the provinces
green, but in reality, it was pure red because nobody would go out there. It was that kind of a
thing. And so I began to really doubt our reporting system and what was going on.

SM: Was this part of HES? The Hamlet Evaluation System?

TS: Yeah, it was the Hamlet Evaluation and the Province Evaluation. This was the G2
office that I was talking to that said, ‘This is the enemy situation and this is green because there
were no incidents.’ Well, there won’t be any until somebody goes out there, and nobody was going
out there because it was way out at the end next to the Cambodian border, and there as just
nobody going out there. There was no...there was only a couple little hamlets out there anyway,
and no friendlies were going out there. So, that was an example of what I mean. I began to
wonder whether we were really misleading ourselves sometimes. Our own system did it to us. But
I wasn’t convinced that we were getting ahead of the game. There was a siege mentality. All of
the province chiefs set their own little security guards around them and in this job in Saigon, I’d
flown out from Saigon to look at in-place training to see if these [ARVN] battalions [who] were
coming back [in from operations] and doing this training while they were [in base camp]. I’d seen
Ban Me Thuot, which was blown to hell during TET and seen Pleiku, [which also] suffered during
TET, and I got the serious impression that though we might have won those battles, that we were a
lot further from winning the war than we thought we were before.

SM: Now at any point during your year, your first year there, did your opinion at all change
about the nature of the war in Vietnam in that -- you mentioned earlier that of course the purpose
behind the U.S. involvement was to protect South Vietnam from this northern controlled partisan
insurgency in the South. Did that opinion change at all? How much control did the North have
while you were there that you could estimate?

TS: From a personal standpoint, I couldn’t ascertain the control. But, I knew that after
TET, the North had a tremendous impact because of all the weaponry we were getting now was
new, modern, automatic, as opposed to what it was before; whatever was left over that they could
scrounge up from the French period or the whatever period it was, but it was older stuff and now
they were moderately resupplied. So I thought it had taken a quantum leap forward as far as the
supply of the people in the South. But, up to this time I’d never seen an NVA. I’d never seen an
NVA soldier, so whether they were there or not, other than somebody telling me they were, I didn’t
know they were. But, I had the impression that the system of supply in the South had leaped from
zero to one hell of a good resupply system.
SM: And how about in your conversations with your counterparts and with other advisors, was there ever any discussion about that issue, about how much it was really controlled from the North versus how much was just internal strife, that kind of stuff?

TS: Well, I think everybody believed at that time and in talking to people that the war had taken a dramatic leap forward in TET, and that we had a lot of problems. As far as winning this war, we had now a hell of a lot of problems from a small man’s standpoint. I don’t know what the big people thought. I read what they said a lot of times, but we didn’t think that. We thought the problems were about out of hand, I think, as most of the advisors that I talked to at that time. Things were not good.

SM: When you left, did you think we were going to win?

TS: When I left the first time, I don’t think that I [had formed an opinion of the final outcome]…well, I had envisioned coming back, so I didn’t think we were going to [win soon]. I knew I was coming back, so there was no light at the end of the tunnel as far as I could see. I mean, this was going to be a long haul thing and I didn’t think we were going to lose or win either way. This was going to be a long haul.

SM: So you left in May of ’68?

TS: Yeah.

SM: What was the trip like back, and how were you received when you got back to the United States?

TS: I flew back to Travis Air Base and my wife picked me up and drove me to…we drove home. We drove to the place where we were going to live, where she was living, where we were living. I didn’t have any reception one way or the other, but my assignment was to the Alameda, California Recruiting Main Station. And we recruited everything in northern California from Bakersfield to the Oregon border and all of western Nevada except Las Vegas, which included University of Berkeley. University of California at Berkeley, Stanford University, and some of those finer schools in the west. That’s why at lunch, I mentioned how I was doing during that session. That’s when I began to [doubt our country’s willingness to go the distance]. Of course this was after TET of ’68 and this is June of ’68, and I’m going on recruiting duty, trying to go to the universities to recruit people to go into the Army’s Officer Candidate Program or Warrant Officer Flight School Program and the Army Nurse Corps Program, and big city schools were not receptive to this military fiasco we were running in South Vietnam. Not at all.
SM: What kind of...

TS: Now we didn’t have a bit of problem with Humboldt State University up in Eureka, California. They were small town, lumber town. Nor did we have [a problem] out in Reno in the western Nevada area. We had good recruiting. But in the big city areas, San Francisco, Oakland, it was bad news.

SM: What would happen when you’d go to those places like Berkeley?

TS: Well, people would heckle you and hackle you and spray paint the recruiting sedans and pour sand in your gas tanks. The Army recruiters that worked in Berkeley walked to work in civilian clothes and put on the uniform after they got to the office. The recruiting station we had in Palo Alto, California, which is right outside of Stanford, they used to throw a brick through the window every time we put a new window in. The owner of the building evicted us as undesirable tenants because he got tired of replacing the bricks in his window and the insurance company said, ‘We ain’t going to do it no more. You keep the recruiters in there, you’re going to have to pay for your own windows.’ So he evicted us. It was a bad thing. The university climate, the only time a university student would talk to you was with a draft notice in one hand, trying to find a way out of getting drafted into the infantry. That’s practically the only way a university student in the metropolitan area or the Bay area would talk to you. He had a draft notice and you were going to draft him into the Army and he was going to become an infantryman. He was interested in enlisting in the Army to go to some tech school in quartermaster or anything other than infantry. That’s the way it was. Recruiting got worse. President Nixon decided that we were going to solve some of the…or somebody, I don’t know if it was Nixon or not….were going to solve some of the problems in society and we had Project 200,000, which required us to recruit only out of the [inner city]. I call them ghettos for lack of a [better description]. A geographical area of the downtown Oakland and downtown San Francisco that were poverty-stricken. We would recruit out of those areas and we’d get a recruit and then we’d have to go try to get a waiver to get him in the service because he had a rap sheet that went from there to there. Recruiting duty just became a nightmare because you were required to get these people out of these districts and they had to be minorities and they had to live in these geographical boundaries. Everyone that lived within those geographical boundaries that didn’t have a job had a rap sheet that long. ‘What did he have?’ ‘Well, joyriding five times, and grand theft auto six times, and armed robbery.’ What the hell! But, he was the only guy that would come in and apply so you filled out the [paperwork] and some of them got approved;
sometimes they wouldn’t get approved for a waiver, depending on how bad his rap sheet was. But it was ridiculous. The Army Nurse Program, we had good success with it. But, it paid for all their education. Warrant officer flight training, everybody wanted to fly a helicopter, no problem. From there on it just went downhill as far as trying to get somebody to go in. About the time we started going all-volunteer – we started talking about an all-volunteer Army – we didn’t go there then, but we started talking about it. And they upped the quotas about how many people we were supposed to get, and recruiters were just going crazy, trying to get the whole quantities. In order to get the quantity they wanted, they had to go down in quality. So, it was not a good scene. I didn’t enjoy it at all. It could have been a good assignment maybe in some other circumstances and some other timeframe, but it was bad at the time.

SM: I’m not sure if you’ve heard some of the more recent articles and literature being published by some of the former anti-war protestors that are alleging the statements from veterans, Vietnam veterans, the stories about veterans being spit upon and being poorly received when they came back from the United States, that all these were lies, that that never happened, that the anti-war students on campuses and communities around the United States were peaceful protestors, didn’t mistreat people as individuals?

TS: Nobody ever mistreated me as an individual. They were pretty blatant at spray painting an Army sedan or breaking out a recruiting station window and calling you a pig or whatever walking down the street, but I mean, there’s nothing you can do about it. You can’t do anything about it. Nobody came up and spit on me; I think if he had, I’d have smacked his head in. I don’t know what I’d have done at the time, but nobody did that. They’d heckle you and you weren’t well-received.

SM: How would they heckle you? What would they say?

TS: Of, if you were walking through campus – and after a while, we quit walking through the campuses. If we had to go somewhere to get something, we got the guy to go in civilian clothes. I mean, that’s what recruiters got for that. Like I said, they’d park their car somewhere way away from the recruiting station so nobody would know it was their car because almost all of them had a government sticker on there for whatever base they were going to get the commissary and then they’d walk up to the recruiting station in civilian clothes, go inside, and change clothes. They wouldn’t keep a sedan there.

SM: How were you heckled? Do you remember? The ‘baby killer,’ that kind of stuff?
TS: Sometimes you get ‘baby killer’ and ‘war monger’ and phrases like that.

SM: How long did you –

TS: Comments and whatever. How long did I stay on recruiting duty? I volunteered to go back to Vietnam in July of the next year.

SM: Ok. Why did you decide to volunteer to go back?

TS: I didn’t like recruiting duty that much. My boss on recruiting duty didn’t like me that much, and it just needed to be done. I needed to go someplace, and recruiting was a high priority. The only thing more high priority than recruiting duty was Vietnam. If I volunteered for any place else, it would have been a no-go, so that was the only logical thing to do. Infantry officers, it was probably only a period of three or four months one way or another anyway as an infantry officer before I’d be recycled anyway.

SM: Since you volunteered to go back, could you choose your assignment?

TS: Yeah, well, I could choose to go to an American unit or MACV, and I chose an American unit. Then they chose the 101st Airborne for me.

SM: That’s when you arrived at the 101st. They evaluated you based on your experiences and put you in SERTs?

TS: No. That was the end of my tour.

SM: That was the end of your tour? What did you do the first half of your tour?

TS: First part of my tour, first two and a half months, I was the S1 or the personnel officer of the 1st Brigade. Then I was assigned as the S3 or the operations officer of the 2nd Battalion of the 502nd Infantry.

SM: Then?

TS: Then I went to SERTs.

SM: Then you went to SERTs?

TS: I went to SERTs in the end. I had to extend in that job.

SM: In SERTs?

TS: No, in the 101st because I wanted to go to bootstrap and finish up my college degree. In order to get in line to go in the January [spring] semester, starting at the January semester, my tour in ‘Nam – my one-year tour would end in September, so I had to volunteer to stay in ‘Nam until the end of December in order to fit time wise into going to bootstrap.

SM: And this was September ’69?
TS: September ’69. I got there in September ’69 and came home in December of ’70.

SM: What were the biggest differences between doing your job as an S1, then an S3, and then SERTs, compared to what you’ve done previously in Vietnam?

TS: Number one, dealing with Americans. It wasn’t trying to convince somebody to do something that you thought they ought to do. It’s if you thought they ought to do it, you told them to do it, and it got done. Hopefully. That was the main thing. You were dealing with Americans who were going to follow out what you told them to do, hopefully most of the time. We did work on joint operations with the Vietnamese Army units while we were up there.

SM: Where were you in country?

TS: Thua Thien province, which was up near Hue. The base camp [Camp Eagle] for the 101st Division at that time was right outside of Hue.

SM: And what had changed in terms of, I don’t know, were there any changes as far as rules of engagement, any changes as far as your in-country briefings when you arrived for your second tour? Was the atmosphere different in terms of what we were trying to accomplish? Of course, Nixon’s already announced the Vietnamization program for Vietnamizing this war, which means American withdrawal eventually.

TS: Yeah, the rules of engagement as an advisor, we always deferred to the Vietnamese. They had the choice, as I was telling you about the sampans. ‘Major Dong, there was some sampans there. Do you want to shoot?’ And he said, ‘Yes.’ I tell the Americans to shoot and they shoot, and our rules of engagement in the 101st, because my brigade and the battalion I was in, we were in the canopy at all times. The rules of engagement out there was, anybody that was out there was fair game.

SM: It was a free-fire zone?

TS: It was a free-fire zone, yeah. We didn’t have any problem shooting anything we came across, because anything we came across wasn’t supposed to be there. So that was…the rules of engagement down in the lower land were different. The battalion that operated in the populated areas, they were restricted to bringing artillery in until they cleared to make sure that it was defined as the Viet Cong or NVA. We didn’t have Viet Cong. Well, maybe we had some. 90% of the contacts we made in the 101st, the battalion I was in, were all NVA.

SM: How frequent were these contacts?
TS: Hopefully every two days, and I say hopefully because every time a unit went too long a period of time without some contact, when it had contact, it took [more] casualties as opposed to...[otherwise], you got lax. The longer they went without contact, the more lax they got. And then when the contact occurred, the unit would get more casualties. So personally, I was hoping for contact more frequently, but we had contact in every company. Somewhere in the battalion, we had contact every day in one of the companies. What we operated on...we operated with the battalion [HQ] on the firebase with one company securing the firebase and the other companies in the canopy, and each company had an area of operations it would work in. They were all working independent of each other, ambushing trails and doing search and destroy or whatever, searching for caches or whatever and ambushing. So each company was working its own individual area of operations.

SM: was there any overlap to those AOs?

TS: No, so you don’t have any friendly fire. If you had overlap, you had friendly fire. When I first joined the battalion, [it was on] Firebase [Rifle], it had been on this firebase for two and a half months, I guess, and they had hardened the firebase and they built themselves nice hooches and it was a nice thing. It was a showpiece. It was a wonderful thing. We'd been there so long that Charlie had figured out every broken piece of wire we had and whatever. I joined the battalion and seven days later Charlie visited us one night and it was a sappers [attack] and they overran the firebase. I think we got 11 killed on the firebase and using satchel charges everywhere. We had sort of an unpleasant situation there.

SM: What changed?

TS: The problem we had at that time is we didn’t have one of our companies on the firebase. Security of the perimeter of the firebase was a Vietnamese company from the 54th Battalion, the 1st ARVN Division. I guess the major change after that occurred was that we never let an ARVN unit secure the perimeter of the firebase. I’m not saying that they were at fault, don’t get me wrong. I say the fault was we stayed one place for three months and got fixed in what we were doing and they had time to scope out and make a plan on how to do it and we were in the siege mentality and they figured out how to break the siege and do it. I don’t blame in on the ARVN battalion; I think it was just our operational procedure. After that, we did change operational procedures. We moved about every seven to ten days after that. We’d just pop up and move to a
new firebase. Of course that takes a lot of work, but we paid them by the hour so it didn’t matter.

So, after that little thing, we started moving.

SM: Now would just the headquarters firebase move, or would the companies also move and so their areas of operation?

TS: The companies would stay out in the field in the same location. What we would basically would do on the firebase, we would pull one company in out of the field, let them take up the perimeter security of the firebase, and take the company that was securing the firebase and put it out in the field into an AO. About a month after that happened, our battalion was designated the swing battalion of the division and what we did then is we replaced another battalion that pulled back into the base camp for stand down and we’d take over their firebase or another firebase in their area of operation and take over operating their area of operation for the week that they were back, and then they would come back out and we would go to another area of operation and take it over while that battalion went back in for a week stand down. During the stand down, we got to see the dentist, the doctor, check the payroll, take a shower, whatever, everything administratively and a little relief. Because of the number of battalions we had in the division, we’d get back in about every eight to nine weeks. We were out eight weeks and back one, and then back out for another eight. So, my battalion did that hopscotch the rest of the time that I was in the battalion.

SM: So during that period you were the S3?

TS: Yes, I was the operation’s officer.

SM: What was it like in terms of as you jumped around to these new bases, was there ever any comparison to what the previous unit would engage and what they had encountered while they would patrol those AOs to what your unit would as a new unit, a fresh unit into this area and maybe finding new contacts, more contacts, anything like that?

TS: We almost always went to a different firebase than the previous battalion was on. So, we went in and set up a new firebase and they just pulled off [the old firebase] there and went back to the rear and then we inserted our companies and air assaulted into the areas. We usually came up with different things, because we were new. We didn’t know the area as well as they did perhaps because they’d been there for a while and we did our thing, and our thing was a little different than theirs as far as our patrolling tactics. Maybe we disrupted them a little bit but we’d find different things that they hadn’t found even though they’d been there for a while. We went into…I guess it was Firebase Veghel and when we got into Firebase Veghel, we put our recon
platoon up on a hill and they got into a little trouble and put B Company in behind them and that
didn’t do any good, so we put A Company in and that didn’t do any good and we kept piling on this
thing and we didn’t realize that this was more or less a new sector that nobody had been in before
for a while. We didn’t realize that we’d selected the hills to go into that happened to be the 29th
NVA Regiment’s base camp. So, we just committed everything we had and we borrowed two
companies from another battalion to continue the thing until we finally cleared the area. That took
us a couple of weeks to get in that little thing settled down. The battalion for that operation got the
Valorous Unit Award for the action on 882 in contact with the 29th NVA Regiment, and that was my
first [major engagement]…up until that time, it was an ambush here of a squad or platoon or just a
little something. That was the first time we got into a pitched battle against people that were dug in
in bunkers. We took a significant – I don’t remember the numbers now, but it’s in the reports – a
significant number of casualties and so did they. We got a whole cache full of weapons and
medical supplies and everything else. It was a good operation. But, we just got there and ok, no
intelligence [other than terrain analyses] told us to pick the hill. We picked the hill and we jumped
firebases right in the middle of this operation because the division said, ‘You’re not going to stay on
one any longer than a week because we don’t want the kind of thing [like FSB Rifle] to happen
again.’ So we jumped in the middle of the week and I think when we jumped, I think we were the
deciding factor of the NVA finally breaking and pulling out, because we jumped our firebase closer
into it, right into almost into the middle of it. And it tended to settle off after that happened. And
then during that period, there was the next jump we made, we went to another firebase and all this
super-secret stuff; we got this ‘usually reliable source’ [intelligence report], whatever the hell that
was, that they were going to make a human wave attack and try to run us out of the area, and as
you know, you’re talking about we’re in the Vietnamization process, and the division was now at
that status that we didn’t want to take huge casualties. We didn’t want to lose anything bad. So
we got mortared and they didn’t attack, but they mortared us, and we lost…four or five killed or
something in that mortar attack. But we put up a flare ship, a C-130 just flew a circle around us for
two nights in a row, just flew circles around us. All they did was dump flares all night long. They
kept the place lit up all night long and they brought in some B-52 strikes and they brought in [other]
air strikes. I didn’t know what they brought them in on. I wasn’t directing any of that. Somebody
with intelligence in the rear was looking at maps and we were just blowing the hell out of
everything. I don’t know what we blew up. But anyway, the division was bound and determined
they were not going to lose a battalion out there in the edge of the A Shau Valley where the human
wave attack [that some] ‘usually reliable intelligence source’ said was going to happen. So, we
bombed and shelled with eight-inch artillery from the next firebase [which was] backed [up] and
supported the fire all night long and we fired [our 105s] all night long. But, nobody came. We gave
a party and nobody came to it. It was one of those odd things. They never told me – I was not
cleared for all that super-secret stuff – what all this was about other than it was supposed to be a
human wave attack was supposed to take us out, North Vietnamese Regiment was going to take
us. Anyway, we got that experience.

SM: As the S3, were you tasked with sending out patrols to do battle damage
assessments to see what was hit, if anything?

TS: We send people out and worked the area afterwards and didn’t find essentially
anything other than the site where we got mortared from. We found the results of that and got one
of their tubes. Most of the stuff, the B-52 strike, which doesn’t leave a lot of evidence around – it
leaves some, but it doesn’t leave a lot. We went back out and tried to find out if there was
anything, if we succeeded in anything, but we never really found anything. So, whether there was
or not, or whether their intelligence was spooky, I don’t know. But, maybe because of the flare ship
and all the bombing they decided to go someplace else. It was supposed to have been the same
unit that took Ripcord. Three months later they called it the Ripcord Incident. Aware of that one, or
not?

SM: Just a little bit familiar. What did you hear about it when you were in country?

TS: I watched it while I was in country. Ripcord was another firebase that got essentially
surrounded by NVA and they kept shelling it and finally we had to abandon it and evacuate it. The
battalion commander was killed during the evacuation. Lieutenant Colonel Lucas, he got the
Medal of Honor for that action on the firebase. Andre Lucas was his name. Anyway, that was the
same unit that was supposed to be doing this human wave on us was the unit that was involved in
the attack [on FSB Ripcord.]

SM: While you were S3, how good would you estimate the intelligence you received was
in making your plans for your battalion?

TS: As the S3, I didn’t make any plans based on intelligence, other than geographical
intelligence.

SM: Why not?
TS: It in essence didn’t exist.

SM: Ok, why not? We didn’t have any military intelligence at that point in the war?

TS: You’ve got an S2, which is your intelligence officer and he’s supposed to know, but he could tell you that certain enemy units were operating in this area, but where they are he doesn’t know. What we did is we had an area of operation and we divided that up by terrain features and some were smaller than bigger and we just determined how we were going to go into that area and search the area to try to find it. If he was there, we would find him or he would slip away or whatever happened. But, the entire time that I was S3, my S2 we never got intelligence that the enemy’s located at that location, other than this time when we were on a firebase when we were supposed to be getting overrun was the only piece of hard intelligence I ever got on what the enemy was going to do. Once we found the enemy, we knew where he was. But otherwise, we had an AO and we were operating in that AO against – by terrain analysis, where he would most probably be. That was what the S2 would come up with, ‘This is the most probable location based on terrain, the availability of water, trail network. This is the best chance we’ve got is probably in this area.’ So we’d target that area. As far as having hard intelligence, if there was any enemy anywhere, we never had it.

SM: How did that strike you? Were you surprised?

TS: No, I don’t guess I was. He moved around. He was elusive. We weren’t that good at intelligence. I mean, the usually reliable source was normally ASA or one of these people getting a radio message, radio intercept type stuff. But as far as us knowing or having anybody behind the lines or anything like that, now some of the Special Forces people, they had data on units that were moving somewhere and they may bring an air strike in on them and so forth. But as far as knowing where the local NVA was, we didn’t know.

SM: What about the use of scouts, recon, snipers?

TS: That’s what we were doing all the time.

SM: But they weren’t smaller units going out, bringing back intelligence on larger unit movements?

TS: We didn’t operate any. The Ranger company went out and did some of that trail watching and so forth, but as far as our battalion went, we didn’t go out and try to find anything out. We gave an area of operations to a company with a map reconnaissance the highest probability was that this would be a trail network they would use and we would sit a company out there and
they’d ambush this trail with a platoon and the other two platoons would work a sweep over this
way and that and maybe it would force the people down this trail past the ambush and whatever.
When we found Charlie, we stumbled on him or he found us. That was just about the way we
operated most of the time. Now this Firebase Ripcord, the VC were in the area – or not the VC,
the NVA were in the area, and they put this firebase out there and it was in the wrong place.
Charlie didn’t want it there and he made a concentrated effort to get rid of it. But, that was towards
the end. That was in July of ’70, somewhere along in that. August of ’70, something like that, and
that was towards the end when we weren’t willing to step up and take tremendous casualties. It
wasn’t like two years prior, when we had Hamburger Hill. It was almost an unwritten rule that we
weren’t going to have any more Hamburger Hills just for a piece of terrain.

SM: Speaking of Hamburger Hill, were there any friendly fire incidents when you were with
the 101st?

TS: Any what?

SM: Friendly fire incidents?

TS: Oh, yes. In the battalion when I was the S3, we didn’t have any in my battalion.

There were friendly fire incidents. In fact, I think we were extremely lucky that we didn’t have one
on Hill 882 because we had a lot of air strikes coming in, but we didn’t. I was investigating officer
on several of them for somebody else, some other battalion. Most of the friendly fire incidents
were a short round. Very seldom they were negligent. In fact, the ones I investigated there were
none negligent. They were just one of those [things that happen in war].

SM: Freak accidents?

TS: Freak accidents, or you’d tell a jet to drop a 500-pound bomb; well, it strayed ten feet
to the right and shrapnel went as far as it did. [Just how accurate can you mark friendly positions
in the jungle for a jet?] It’s just one of those unfortunate things sometimes. Every now and then
there were some things that people screwed up. I got wounded in one when I was in SERTs. We
were having an artillery adjustment demonstration for the new troops and the battery that was firing
our fire for us fired a short round. I happened to be the stupid fool that was standing there and took
the shrapnel; I was the only one that got hit! It was no big thing, because we went back and found
out that the executive officer who was supposed to be the firing officer was in the mess hall having
coffee and hadn’t gone out and checked the lay of the guns. His problem occurred at that time
because the reason that I was out watching the demonstration that morning was because we had
the DIVARTY commander with us and he went back with me to find out what happened and when
he found out that his company exec, battery exec was in the mess hall having coffee instead of on
the battery, he had the problem and he solved the problem, I guess, because he relieved the
company commander and the battery commander and the battery exec both at the time. Did their
career in, I'm assuming. But anyway. Those are the kinds of things that happened, somebody not
checking things. We never had a case of an infantry platoon jumping another infantry platoon and
shooting it out with each other, but those did happen over there. We never had that because we
had an area of operation that was separated enough that nobody was going to jump anybody, and
if we had a platoon in one company get over close to their sector line, we made sure the other
company in the next area of operation over knew that they were over near theirs and to watch out
and not get involved in a shootout with each other. In the battalion I was in, we never had trouble
with a friendly fire incident.

SM: One of my interests or one of my concerns was, did you as S3 and did your
commander, were you ever concerned about the fact that by having those area of operations that
you maintained that distance to make sure there were no friendly fire incidents, but that of course
eventually could be figured out by the enemy, that this is an area that's kind of safe because we
know they're not going to get them too close together because they don't want incidents, so if
there's any place that might be a soft spot, that might be it?

TS: That didn't bother me because I only stayed there a week. I worked this area a week
and then our battalion moved to another firebase. The other battalion moved out and then we set
up our area's operation different from what they had. We were a new kid on the block every week.
Now I'm not saying that couldn't have happened if you stayed in the same thing for a period of
time. That may have been the problem that we had on the Firebase Rifle when we got overrun.
We were there too long and got too complacent and too set in our procedures and whatever.
That's what happened to us on that.

SM: How about fragging incidents? Where there any fragging incidents in the 101st when
you were there?

TS: Yeah, there were a couple. The sergeant major in my battalion didn't get fragged, but
I think they threw an incendiary grenade in his hooch, caught it on fire, but the only thing we lost
was the hooch. Sergeant Major Sabalauski was an old soldier. I mean old; Second World War. I
almost think he came from the First World War, but he was a dedicated soldier. He was a strict
disciplinarian and the troops in the rear area hated his guts and the troops in the field loved him
when he was out there with them because when he was with them, they felt 100% safer because
he knew what was going on and he made them do what was right and he took care of them. But in
the rear area he was kicking their butt to get the boots shined and clean up and get a new uniform
on, and the troops in the rear area didn’t appreciate him near as much as they should have. He did
get an incendiary grenade or something thrown in his hooch and caught it on fire. He wasn’t even
in it when it happened.

  SM: That was lucky.
  TS: Well, he’d have got out, I’m sure.
  SM: Maybe done on purpose as a warning?
  TS: Yeah, but it didn’t slow him down any. He kept on going; he never changed a bit.
  SM: Let me go ahead and pause for a minute. I’m going to change out the CDs. This will
end CD number two. This is CD number three of the interview with Mr. Thomas Spencer on the 8th
of October 2001. You mentioned that there were several fragging incidents. What were the
others?

  TS: Somebody tossed a grenade usually at some headquarters hooch or officer’s hooch
or whatever, and I heard about them. I didn’t go look at them or anything. They were on Camp
Eagle [or in other rear areas]. There was some dissention among the troops. The longer it got into
’70 I guess because we were on the down run, I think the 101st or at least my battalion and brigade
that I was in, the 1st Brigade, we had reasonably decent discipline and morale and whatever you
want to call it. I hear stories of the rampant drug use or whatever, but I never saw it. It didn’t exist
in the units where people were taking care of things. In the 1st Brigade, we had portions of bunker
line at Camp Eagle and each battalion got a portion of the bunker line around the whole camp. In
the 1st Brigade, the brigade staff in addition to the battalion staff that went out checking every time,
the brigade staff was also going out and checking the bunker line and making sure the troops were
awake and alert in the bunkers and weren’t sitting there smoking marijuana and so forth. So we
were checking and I’m not saying there weren’t any drugs, I’m just saying that it was not rampant
and out of hand like is depicted in some circles. Troops that came back to the rear came back for
a purpose, either a medical purpose or had a personal problem, had to get their finances
straightened out or need to have a tooth taken out or whatever it was. But, we had NCOs and
officers in the rear that were checking the barracks and people weren’t sitting around hooches with
nothing to do and smoking pot. We didn’t put up with that trash. I mean, we were doing what we
were supposed to be doing; at least we were in the 1st Brigade. Now I wasn’t ever down in the 2nd
Brigade or the 3rd Brigade so I don’t know what they were doing. The brigade that I was in, brigade
staff officers and the battalion staff officers that were in the rear were pretty much hounding the
troops to the point that they were alert on the bunker lines and they had something to do in the rear
all the time, so they weren’t just nothing to do and sitting around trying to smoke pot. While I was
in SERTs of course they were new in country and we’d get them for a week, maybe a week and a
day, and they would be gone. We did get some other troops in. We ran the sniper school and the
kids would come in to go to sniper school and they were long in country and they were always
good soldiers, so they weren’t a problem. We ran sort of a Recondo school type thing where we
taught rappelling and stuff like that. So those troops would come from in country and come in and
they were always selected because they were some of the better troops. The new troops in
country hadn’t been there long enough to figure out where to find their dope or anything yet, so
they didn’t have any. All in all, I think the rear area [was pretty squared away]. I had a little bit of a
problem at SERTs. A guy stuck a note on my door, ‘Watch your step or we’re going to get you,’ or
something like that. I don’t remember. I kept it; I’ve still got it in my scrapbook. It’s one of those
things, give me a break. I had taken over and I was making some changes and I realized that. I
changed the fact that some of these things we were doing weren’t going to be done anymore. And
they were going to do some other things, a new broom sweeps clean and does its changes. So I
got a note like that, but nothing ever happened of it and I don’t [couldn’t] believe them going
through a newspaper and cut out words out of a newspaper and pasted them on this sheet of
stationary and thumbtacked it on the door in my office.

SM: Did you think it came from one of your permanent staff?

TS: Yeah, that’s where it came from! I mean, I wasn’t hassling the new troops that were
coming in, I was hassling the old staff because some of the things they were not doing were not up
to snuff and I was making some changes in things so it had to come from one of them, probably
one of the lower enlisted, I don’t know. I ignored it and he didn’t frag me, so I guess I was alright.

SM: Was that the only threat you ever received?

TS: Yeah. Well, one guy said he wasn’t going to go to the field for me in the battalion, and
I told him he was and he said he wasn’t and I gave him his weapon and loaded it for him and said
he had two choices, he could shoot me or go to the field, and he decided he’d go to the field rather
than shoot me. I mean, he refused to go to the field for his lieutenant, and his lieutenant didn’t
know what to do with him and he came and got me and I said, ‘Give me his equipment, give me his
gun, put a magazine in the chamber.’ And I handed it to him and said, ‘Now you’ve got two
choices: you’re going to shoot me or you’re going to go to the field, because the four of us are
going to pick you up and carry you up and put you in the helicopter. You can go kicking and
screaming or you can start shooting. You’ve got a loaded weapon; take your choice. Or, you can
walk up there like a man and get on the helicopter.’ He got his rucksack and walked up there and
got in the helicopter and flew away! They’ll try to run [over you]. I mean, it’s just like a little kid in
your house. A little kid will tell you no until you whack him alongside the head and then he’ll do
what you tell him to. I understood. He just didn’t want to go back out there.

SM: Did you encounter that much?

TS: Huh?

SM: Did you encounter that much?

TS: No, only a couple of cases where people didn’t want to go. People got wheezy. I
remember some replacements we got one time. We were taking them out to the field and we were
unloading body bags off the helicopter they were going to go out in, and that was not a good
scene. But sometimes that happens. So, they had to unload the body bags and the guys they
were replacing got on the helicopter to go out. Of course I know that made their stomach feel real
good on the flight out. I’ve only had a couple of times I remember where somebody has wanted to
refuse. Both times they went ultimately and did what they were supposed to do.

SM: Do you think that type of activity was demoralizing, the new recruit coming up to the
chopper, taking off the dead body...

TS: It is not a good feeling, I can see that. If there was any other way to prevent it, I
wouldn’t do it, but it just happened to be the log [logistics] bird that came back in to pick him up,
happened to bring back body bags. We avoided that if at all possible. I mean, that wasn’t the kind
of a scene you wanted the new recruit going out to the field to see. But, it had to be. It had to be.
Yes, it’s not a good morale builder-upper to start with, but then again, maybe it got his adrenaline
up and got him alert and more so than ever, I don’t know. That’s hard to say.

SM: Certainly brings the reality of war in very quickly to the new recruit.

TS: Yeah.
SM: As the S3, did you ever arrange for training? Obviously you’re in charge of operations, trying to get these guys into the areas where they’ll make contact and do some good for the war.

TS: The only chance you had for training was during the one-week stand down you got every ninth week when you came back, and we usually did some remedial training in that period of time. Occasionally I would schedule people to go to SERTs for rappel training because we rappel out of helicopters, but most of those are recon, individuals being assigned to the reconnaissance platoons. But, we would do some specialized training during that stand down period back in the rear. We had about two and a half days of the week that we did some training and the first day back was sobering up from the first night back, usually. That was just one of those things that happened. And then during that stand down, we all got to go see the dentist and see the doctor and got their payroll checks and their personnel records checked and got new boots and equipment, completely did all that kind of jazz, administrative…and we tried to give them a couple of days that were just theirs, to lay around and do nothing, relax. But, about two and a half days of training we scheduled, specialized training, whatever aspect we thought we were deficient in talking to the company commanders and everything, then scheduling with people from special schools. That’s about all the training that we had time for. So, the training we didn’t do too much of as far as the job of S3.

SM: Was there anything else, any other operations of anything that stood out in your memory, anything interesting, significant?

TS: Several instances we rappelled the platoon in to an area and then usually rappelled an infantry platoon in and a squad of engineers in, and they would sort of secure the area and the squad of engineers would blow an area big enough to get a Huey in and then we’d just bring in the rest of the company. We did that quite a few times. One time we did it and got away with it until the last man was going down the rope and some crazy NVA stuck his head out and went [makes noise] with an AK-47 and got the pilot, scared the flip dip out of the copilot. He pulled collective I guess out of the floor, so the bird went like this and here’s old Joe Blow still on the rope. Looking back at it now, it was a funny sight to behold, but I know at the time, the poor kid…the bird’s going off like this, this kid’s scared shitless. He’s on the rope and people are shooting and the bird’s taking off with him hanging out. The bird’s getting higher and higher away from the ground and he’s holding onto that rappel rope saying, ‘What the hell do I do now?’ But the bird took off and the
crew chief and the door gunner were doing the best they could. They finally got him up into the
bird just as the bird [went down]. The copilot had to set it into [another] LZ because [the NVA had]
hit a hydraulics line or something, whatever else [and he couldn't fly it back to base camp]. They
had another bird come immediately in, picked up the pilot, took him to the hospital. He took it in
the head and the bullet had gone through his helmet, went around between his head and his
helmet, and come out the front, and all it did was leave him with a crease around his head; weird.
But, he lived, took it in the head and lived. I talked to the Spec 4 later and he said he'd never been
so scared in his life. He didn't know whether the bird was going to crash or what was going to
happen, but we did quite a bit of that kind of activity. To get into areas, we would have had to take
three days or four days to walk in to get there, and by the time you walk in a direction three or four
days, if anything was there, it's gone. It's packed up and carried off [all its equipment] and was
gone the other way.

SM: Did you ever use daisy cutters to clean those types of areas for helicopters to come
in for basically clear landing zones using daisy cutters?

TS: They did sometimes, yeah. Most of the time we tended to cut our own. The platoon
would reach an area that was good and they'd cut an LZ for resupply. Every time we cut an LZ, we
were expanding our ability to reinforce and get into areas and out of areas and everything, so we
tended to want to cut as many LZs as possible; most of them were only one ship LZs, but that was
enough unless it became too hot. But, usually we could get as many as we could get cut, we did.
So, we had these little LZs cut allover. Every ridgeline had one, practically.

SM: How available was close air support? You were too far in for Naval gunfire, weren't
you?

TS: No.

SM: You could get Naval gunfire?

TS: No, we got some [Naval gunfire support]; not all the time, but we got some from a
destroyer off the coast. The problem we had with that was we didn't always have Naval gunfire
team with us, and they liked to have their own man on the ground to control stuff. But, they were
out there and they could support us.

SM: How about close air support?
TS: Never had any problem getting any, because we were an airmobile division and we
[also] had our own aerial rocket artillery, so it was almost always available depending on who else
might have higher priority in the division than you did. It was almost always available.
SM: Was there any ADA in the area where you were, air defense artillery?
TS: I don’t remember ever seeing any. I don’t think there was. There may have been [at
the airfield], but I don’t remember seeing any. I don’t think there was.
SM: Did you ever receive briefings that there might be an air threat from the enemy side?
TS: [No!] We did have quad 50s, which are basically an air defense weapon, but they
were all utilized for ground [use].
SM: They were anti-personnel?
TS: Anti-personnel, and they were pretty good at eating up a piece of terrain as far as
[clearing out light undergrowth]. When they got through chewing up a piece of ground, you’d rest
fairly sure that there wasn’t something there.
SM: You could use it for bunkers and trenches and trench lines and things like that?
TS: They were sitting on [our defensive] bunker line to control the fire support for the
bunker line. They were truck mounted or they were taken off the trucks, slung underneath the
helicopter, and they were flown out [to firebases]. A couple of them were on firebases, firebases
that were sitting in the valley with hills around them like that so that the quad 50 could fire at the
hillside across the little valley from them, things of that nature. But, we had the quad 50s and that’s
the only air defense, pure air defense [weapon] that I ever saw in country.
SM: I thought that the quad 50, was that not against the Geneva Conventions to use that
against personnel?
TS: Not that I know of. If it is, I didn’t read it close enough! [50 cal are standard weapons
on tanks, etc. which fire at personnel.]
SM: I thought, but I didn’t know.
TS: But we used it against personnel and that was its sole purpose.
SM: For your unit, yeah, that’s all you could use it against or that you were going up
against. And was there anything else that you wanted to discuss with regard to your time in
service? We talked about some spots here and there.
TS: I don’t know. The 101st seemed a good unit. We seemed to have operated in a pretty
good state of affairs. As far as the people in the unit, at this stage in the war we were down to
NCOs being a lot of shake and bakes; senior NCOs were getting scarcer and scarcer. I didn’t
know whether that was a failure in the turnover system or the fact that by this time, old people were
getting out of the service. There’s 20 years from the Second World War being up and this is 20
years from the Korean War was coming up and they were getting out, but we didn’t see as many of
the old hard-line NCOs that we used to get. The Sergeant Major Sabalauski that I mentioned, he’s
one of the few that seemed to be around in the old days. The lieutenants, and I don’t know why,
maybe it was society, but the lieutenants in the ‘70s tended to be of a mindset that they wanted to
be friends. They wanted everybody in the platoon to be their friend. That was bad because 32
kids, they didn’t need another friend, they needed a daddy to keep them alive, and that was a hard
thing. I used to have to almost beat that into some of their [the LTs’] heads, that you don’t get to be
friends with these kids because you’re deciding between him and him who’s going on point to die,
and if you’re buddy-buddies, you can’t be making those clear, distinct decisions, and you’re not
making the hard [choices and enforcing hard discipline like] you’ve got to clean your weapon
before you go to bed. As soon as they stop, clean your weapon. Get it ready for the next go-
around. You’ve got to be kicking people in the butt because a private only does what you make
him do. If you don’t make him do anything, he’s tired, he’s humped over nine hours that day and
he’s dead tired and he wants to get some sleep, he ain’t going to clean it before he goes to sleep.
They had a lot of trouble with young lieutenants [not] wanting to distance himself from the men and
[not] be the strong leader for them, as opposed to four or five years earlier when the lieutenants
that were getting in [where older and more experienced]. I don’t know why, whether it was part of
society or what, maybe because we were getting kids out of college. That’s where they [most of
them] were coming from. Most of them were ROTC [or college], OCS or whatever and tended to
want to be more buddy-buddy than the daddy figure.

SM: Did that cause specific problems that you identified in addition, like cleaning
weapons?

TS: The problem it caused I think is that the platoon might not have been as ready as it
should have been. Do you dig in tonight or do you just sort of sluff it off? You read in books some
places where they only dug a half a foxhole or they only scooped a little dirt out. But, if they dug in
like they should have, maybe more of them would have survived. It was enforcing that [necessary]
discipline that they should have enforced and they didn’t do that because they were friends, and
that was an aspect that came in. Part of the cause of that was a captain had only [a minimum of]
two years in the service. He was a second lieutenant for a year, first lieutenant for a year, and now
he’s a captain and now he’s supposed to be teaching the second lieutenant what to do and he
hadn’t figured out what to do yet [himself] and he’s already a company commander. Whereas
before you were a second lieutenant for 18 months and you were a first lieutenant for four and a
half years and then you were a captain for another four or five, six years, seven years or something
before you became a major and we condensed that whole stand [experience level] down, and
therefore the leadership at the lower ranks towards the end [of the Vietnam War] was strained I
think because of the speed up in promotions and the lack of experience people had. I mean,
they’ve had experience in country for a year, but they still lack some of that background experience
that they should have had, whereas in ’65 to ’66, probably every captain we sent to Vietnam had
been in the Army seven, [five to] eight years or more, probably. But in 1970, they had only been in
the Army a couple of years, and I think that had a [terrible] effect on the quality of leadership. I’m
not saying they were bad leaders or anything, but I’m just saying the experience they had and they
decisions they might have made might have been different or better had they had more
experience.

SM: What did you think about the 365 day rotation system?

TS: It was not good. You really learned a job and then you moved on; like I had three jobs
in that year in three months that I was there in the 101st. You were rotating people. By the time
they got really good in their job, you were rotated out so somebody else could get in and get their
ticket punched – or whatever you want to call it – and get out. Converse to that, we had generals
that stayed in Saigon forever and I don’t think that was good. I chatted with some guys and we
said that if we would have not let an air conditioner get in Vietnam, we’d kept the PX out of
Vietnam, and we’d have made the general officers sleep in tents, we would have probably been
home in two years because there was a whole different world. The general in the 101st Airborne
Division had a mobile home; all the generals had a mobile home in the field. I mean, I’m talking
about 10’ wide, 50’ long mobile home. The troops are sleeping in little C-huts or tents or whatever,
and the general officer that are prosecuting this war are living in a completely different style or
society. And the generals in Saigon are living in villas, French villas, and PX facilities and officers’
clubs and the whole nine yards, and they’re the ones that are prosecuting this thing. I think there
was just too much of a difference there, and they lost some kind of concept of what the war was
about, where the troops were and where the advisors were and what was going on. I think there
was too much of a spread there. Of course the general officers who stayed there for a while had their wives living in the Philippines and they were flying over once a month to have a concubinal visit with their wives and things like that, and the troops that were there [fighting the war] were not getting this. You got R&R twice or R&R once and leave once, but still, there was a total difference of breaking down from the highest rank to the lowest rank was a problem, I thought. I just didn’t think that all the decisions might have been made differently if they’d had a different living style. I could be wrong, I don’t know; that’s just a personal aspect [opinion].

SM: What did you think about the attrition strategy developed by Westmoreland, General Westmoreland?

TS: I think Macarthur said that you can’t fight attrition with an Oriental. You can’t kill enough of them, especially when we’re counting bodies that aren’t there. If you go out and have a fire fight and lose four American soldiers, you’ve got to count at least 40 enemy bodies or somebody thinks you did something wrong.

SM: Did that happen in the 101st?

TS: It didn’t happen in my unit, but I don’t doubt that it didn’t happen. You had a fight and then you brought an air strike in and you blew this place all to Hades and there’s nothing left but pieces. Well, a platoon was held down by four machine guns and a bunch of other people and you blew it away, how many was there? Well, it was, ‘I don’t know how many was there, four machine guns, two a piece, that’s one man, that’s two, that’s eight, that’s 22 people.’ I don’t know. People came up with numbers like that and made their best estimate, I’m sure. But, I’m also sure that when bad things went bad and you went out and you found blood trails and you estimated that you killed so many and they carried off their dead, I don’t know that they always carried off the dead. Sometimes I think the dead weren’t there because if we were killing as many as we killed, we should have hurt them more than we did. I’m thinking maybe we inflated our body counts. I never inflated one that crossed my desk. If the platoon leader told me he killed ten, that’s what went in my report to higher headquarters. I know for a fact that sometimes things didn’t leave higher headquarters with the same numbers.

SM: So the inflation, from your perspective, occurred at multiple levels?

TS: Yeah.

SM: Or could have occurred at multiple levels?

TS: Could have occurred at multiple levels, yes.
SM: Certainly if the S3 were a different person and hadn’t inflated them, then they got inflated again at higher headquarters?

TS: Yeah. I’m saying that it happened. I don’t know how bad it happened, but I know it happened on occasion. The first place is the first man that makes an estimate. Like I said, you blew the whole thing away and somebody was there before the air strike hit and nobody was there when the air strike finished, how many was there when the air strike went in? You pull a number out of the air or you make your best guess and that’s what went down. That best guess may have been inflated by 50% or 100%, I don’t know. It’s a hard call, but I think we probably tended to inflate the thing by human nature. If I blew the enemy away and it was only four enemy and he held up my entire company, am I going to say it’s only four enemy that held up my whole company? No.

SM: No.

TS: It might have been only four enemy, and four enemy could have possibly done it. But, the tendency I think may be that we inflated our kill factors to compensate for our own egos or whatever because we didn’t have all those bodies. I do know that. But when we did get bodies, we counted bodies and did reports and I know that ARVN units counted civilians as VC because surely an ARVN unit wouldn’t blow away its own people. I know some of their units counted civilians that got killed when shelling a village as VC because the VC were there and the civilians were there and when it’s all over, they’re all VC. I don’t think attrition is a good way to win a war, or a good policy.

SM: Did you notice any difference? In your first tour, you served under General Westmoreland; your second tour under General Abrams. Did you notice any difference from on high in terms of the leadership style, what was happening in country? I know it was two completely different types of assignments.

TS: I think the biggest difference was we turned the corner and we were in the Vietnamization, and that tended to be a deciding factor in what we did.

SM: Therefore it influenced how much units were willing to sacrifice, which of course…

TS: We still went out and aggressively pursued the thing, but there was a line someplace that you weren’t going to cross over just to take a piece of hilltop. I think when we got to that at Ripcord, that really was a crowning blow because we reached the point and said, ‘We are not
willing to commit enough soldiers to keep this firebase. It’s better to give it up and evacuate it than keep it because we don’t want to risk that many lives.’

SM: Was there anything else that you want to discuss about your time with the 101st?

TS: No, I think that’s what comes to my mind so far.

SM: Jon, did you have any questions?

JB: No.

SM: Well, when you left after your second tour, what did you think about the course of the war? How much confidence did you have in the South Vietnamese military?

TS: We were whatever you want to call it, Vietnamizing, and the South Vietnamese military in the 101st Airborne Division area, the 1st ARVN Division was one of the best Divisions they had. It was well led and it was a good division. But, my doubts I don’t think were against the ARVN military per se as much as it was my doubts that we had established in the country, or they had established in the southern country, a political leadership system that was going to hold up because by this time they’d gone through a couple more changes in Saigon and their district chiefs, whatever you want to call it, the province chiefs were predominantly military officers. That didn’t bode well. You’re talking about a free democratic government, yet the district chief, he’s a military officer and the province chief is a military officer, so we’re not talking about a democratic government that the people elected and were going to support. We’re talking about officers that had been assigned down there by Saigon. They were or were not liked locally. They were corrupt or were not corrupt, depending on the situation; some were, many weren’t, but there were some corrupt ones. They had a problem in that aspect, I thought. The system just wasn’t going to shake down, I didn’t think.

SM: With regard to political issues, of course the United States has some problems, too. How important do you think Johnson’s decision not to run for reelection in ’68 was, especially in the mindset of the American people and the American soldiers over there fighting? Here’s the commander in chief; he’s kind of given up. Was that how it was interpreted by people like yourself? How did you view it?

TS: I viewed Johnson not running again and getting somebody else as a good move personally because my personal feeling is that the way we had been prosecuting the war wasn’t too swift; this on and off again bombing. I just wasn’t happy, I guess, with what we had been doing. I didn’t think we were fighting the war that we were supposed to be fighting. A conventional
Army is supposed to be fighting for terrain, not fighting and winning the hearts and minds of the people. That should be advisors, working with the locals and trying to upgrade their civilian leadership in their villages and rooting out the cells of the Viet Cong. But, we hadn't been doing that. We had in essence quit doing that and gone to a conventional or quasi-conventional war of attrition. We were fighting for a piece of terrain and then turn around and leave it, and that didn't make a lot of sense from an Army standpoint or to me from my standpoint in the military.

SM: How much of that changed with Abrams and with President Nixon?

TS: I don't think it changed that much. Abrams and Nixon were in the mode of getting us out, but as far as I saw Nixon drug his feet in doing it. Whether we promised to give them support forever and then come back and bail them out when the North came south, we backed out on that. Maybe that was bad for us. From an Army standpoint, when we started getting out, I was glad we were getting out. Personally, I couldn't see us winning the thing unless we were willing to go beyond, well beyond, where we were and I don't think anybody in the world would go beyond where we were. I think we were dragging out an ultimate [defeat] that was going to happen. That was my personal feeling.

SM: What was it like when you came back from your second tour, when you came into the United States? Was the atmosphere at all different from when you came back the first time?

TS: When I came back, I went directly to the University of Nebraska at Omaha to the boot strap program and at that time that university was just clogged full of people like me. So, half the students there were boot strappers. So, it was not all Army but with a bunch of Air Force guys in there and so on, because Offutt Air Force Base was right out there. There was a whole bunch of Air Force guys in there. It was a pretty conservative [group on campus]. The war was not an unpopular thing on campus. They had an ROTC unit and the whole nine yards, so it was a pretty good feeling I thought in Omaha. I didn't have a problem. Then I went to Germany and in Germany there was a lot of anti-war sentiment with splinter groups in Germany that wanted us to get out of Vietnam, whether they be Communists or just radicals or what they were, but there was a lot of German individuals that wanted us out, and of course we got out in about '73 and on.

SM: Now when you came back from your second tour and in subsequent years, especially say after January of '73 when we signed the Paris Peace Accords and kind of officially pulled out, did you feel comfortable talking about your experiences with other people, your experiences in Southeast Asia?
TS: I didn’t talk to very many people other than in the military about it. I was in Germany and I didn’t discuss it with the German people, German civilians that I knew. I didn’t discuss it with them. But, I didn’t have any reason not to talk about it among ourselves, other guys stationed there.

SM: Other veterans that were over there too?

TS: Military, but I didn’t talk to the Germans about it.

SM: How long did you stay in the military?

TS: I stayed in until ’76. Retired in ’76.

SM: What did you think about the Paris Peace Accords and what did you think when Saigon fell in April of ’75?

TS: The Paris Peace Accords, I was happy for them because as I said, I had two classmates that were POWs and they were getting the POWs back and they both came back alive. That was good, and I thought it was good that we had got this thing behind us, whatever you want to call it. I guess subconsciously I didn’t expect anybody to adhere to it. I expected Ho Chi Minh to be the president or whatever he was of all of Vietnam ultimately, because I didn’t think the South was going to prevail against the North as far as the insurgency that was going on. I did not expect an open assault quite as quickly as it happened. I figured it would probably be ten years down the road coming, but he just manipulated the way in with guerillas and whatever and then finally take over. But, I didn’t expect it to come as fast as it did.

SM: Were you surprised when Congress decided not to continue supporting the South Vietnamese military with weapons and ammunition, monetarily?

TS: That was a little [of a shock]. I kind of thought we sort of pulled the rug from [under] them [the South] on that one. I wasn’t in favor of sending more people back there, but we’d led them to this point and I kind of thought they deserved to have a little [more] financial backing anyway, more so than we gave them. By that point in time I was dead set against going back because I’d continued to read, and the more I read, the more I got disturbed at what we’d done up to that point.

SM: What disturbed you the most?

TS: I guess in the ultimate was that we, we the government, was not honest with the public. I don’t think we were ever honest with the population as to what the hell we were doing, what it was costing, and what we intended to achieve. And Nixon and Kissinger could have ended
a couple years earlier than they did, on almost the same grounds that they ended it when they
ended it, and those kinds of things kind of bugged me. It was like this was politics, and 10,000
more dead soldiers for a political whim or something. We weren’t up front with the people in telling
them what was going on and then years later we came out and the Gulf of Tonkin incident was not
what it appeared to be to start with. We went to Congress to convince them to get the War Powers
Act. All those things were just [lies]. This is not the greatest period in our governmental life, I don’t
think, and I think there were serious things that happened here that were wrong. I also mentioned
to a friend there that I hoped that the things that you’re doing [here at Texas Tech in trying to keep
the history of this period, because somewhere down the line people are going to need to look at it,
and if we don’t study it, I understand that we’re doomed to repeat it again sometime, and I hope we
don’t repeat something like this again.

SM: What do you think are the most important lessons we should take away from that
experience?

TS: From a military standpoint, the most important lesson we should have taken away
from this – whether we did or not – is that general officers have to stand up and tell the truth and be
counted, even if it costs them their career. I don’t know whether we learned it or not. That, ‘This is
not a good move, Mr. President, we shouldn’t do this.’ And if he tells them to do it, then they’re
duty bound to go ahead and say, ‘Yes, Sir, we’re going to do it,’ but they’ve also got the option to
put the papers on the desk and say, ‘I retire,’ and go out on the civilian side and say, ‘Hey, I raised
my hand; this is not right. And we’ve got to do something different over there.’ And we shouldn’t be
punishing generals who stand up and be counted and say something that’s against the policy. I
mean, Truman did Macarthur, and I don’t fault that because Macarther was a little out of hand.
But, General Singlaub spoke out in Korea and he got punished because he spoke out in Korea
against some policies. I think when you start punishing people that are speaking out on those
military issues, you start closing their mouths and then we’re not getting a true picture, and if we’re
not getting a true picture then we’re sacrificing the youth of the nation for causes that are not
winnable or not proper or faulted or whatever. I don’t think we should be doing that. That’s the
biggest lesson that we should have learned from that is, to me, that the general officers should
have stood up and said, ‘Hey, it ain’t working. We can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel.
There ain’t no light at the end of the tunnel. This is a 15 year, 20 year project we’re involved in;
we’ve got to take this one hamlet at a time, one sector at a time, one province at a time, and
gradually build this nation back up and get rid of things. This is going to be a 20 year job.’ Now if
they’d said that and all stood up, I don’t think we’d have gotten near as deep as we did in that as
quick as we did. We’ve got to send a division over there that was going to fix it, or put another
division in that’ll fix it. Those weren’t fixes to a problem that if they had read history and studied the
books, putting our soldiers on the ground over there wasn’t a problem at the time we started putting
them on the ground, because the North hadn’t really [infiltrated a lot of the soldiers to the south].
They had come south, but they hadn’t really come flowing south in massive quantities yet. All they
did was every time we put something in, they put something more in and then we tried to surgically
bomb the North, take out this little thing, take out that, don’t want to touch that because that’s [not
humane or whatever]. I don’t think we ever went for it, for the jugular. Sherman marched to
Atlanta and was going to burn everything on the way. If we’re going to go to war and sacrifice, we
need to go to war to sacrifice, from a soldier’s standpoint. I think we’ve lost too many men and
there’s too many names on the Wall.

SM: You mentioned the importance of allowing dissention basically, and officers want to
dissent – general officers in particular, but officers in general – want to dissent, they should be
allowed to without fear of punishment or retribution. Then of course sometimes people just don’t
want to listen. Did you ever encounter that yourself as a Vietnam veteran, where maybe the
subject of Vietnam was brought up in the company of other people and it just became apparent
that people didn’t want to hear about it?

TS: Yeah, and I’ve heard military [say] that, ‘If they’d have given us a free hand, we’d
have won the thing,’ and I don’t believe that personally. The only free hand that they could have
given us to win it would have been to blow North Vietnam into the dark ages with atomic bombs or
bombs, but there was nothing…the military’s hands weren’t tied to the point that we could have
won the South because it wasn’t a military war we were fighting, it was a war of what the people
wanted. I don’t personally believe the people wanted what they got in the South enough to stand
up and fight for it. If they’d really wanted what they had deep enough in their hearts, they’d have
fought strong enough for it and kept it. But I think Uncle Ho offered just as much [or more] as the
South did, from their standpoint. Now did they know what Uncle Ho was going to do when he got
over there and put them in reeducation camps and things like that? I don’t know. But, we
supported Tito in Yugoslavia all those many years and he was a Communist, so I can’t look at a
person and say, ‘Communism is wrong,’ because if you want the concept of Communism, then
that’s your choice. I don’t want it, but if you want it, and these other ten guys want it with you, you
can go out and have your little Communist community. That’s ok. If y’all work equally and y’all
share equally, then that’s great. The only thing wrong with Communism was a couple of dictators
that wanted to take in too much, and that’s not part of Communism. I just think that Ho was not
bent on taking Thailand or Burma into his realm of influence, and he wasn’t going to side with
China in all their 1000 years of history. So, what made us thing that Ho was going to side with
China? I just think we got sucked into something that we didn’t really belong in. I’m looking back
on it now, I didn’t have all those convictions then, but as time went on I got those things. I’ve run
across retired Air Force people and some retired Amy, ‘If they’d have just turned us loose, we
could have won that thing [war].’ And I said, ‘Turn us loose and we could have won it? We had a
pretty free hand to go out and shoot up anything we wanted to shoot up and we weren’t winning it
when we were shooting it up!’ I don’t know what else we’d have done, taken more troops and I
don’t think the American people would have put up with it too much longer. There were just too
many names already coming back, too many body bags. We weren’t showing any results. We
couldn’t show them any progress on a map or anything. It was everything was the same. You’re
right that a lot of people don’t want to talk about it. I find more people that are willing to talk about it
now than I did ten years ago.

SM: How has the war impacted you most personally? What’s the most important personal
experience or lesson you’ve taken away from it?

TS: I guess the biggest impact of the war or the aftermath of it or whatever had on me was
a more critical distrust of my government than I had before. When I went in, what the Army did
was right, ‘Yes sir, three bags full, we’ll go out and get it.’ Now I sit back and when they talk about
things I wonder if they’re telling me the truth about the situation and whether this is critical enough
for us to want to do. I guess that’s the philosophy standpoint, the way it impacted me most. From
a personal standpoint, I’ve kept some bad times with people, friends that I lost, their loss, and
trying to deal with people that don’t understand what war is about. I guess [an example], I came
during Panama or one of those invasions down in Grenada or Panama, some mother was on
television raising hell about her little son had gone and had lost his leg, and her son didn’t go in the
Army to get shot at, her son went in the Army to, ‘Be all he could be,’ and get a college education.
The concept to what an Army’s about, and I think maybe even our government doesn’t know what
it’s about; we want to send them to be peacekeepers and policemen in Kosovo. I look at some of
those assignments, and I [want to puke]. The Army is about enforcing the foreign policy of the
country, enforcing it with force, killing and destroying something and being killed. If we got to the
point where all these humanitarian missions [are being given] to the military – I don't think that’s
what we want an Army for. I think we want an Army to protect our country against foreign or
domestic, if that be the case, forces. That Army, maybe the Air Force or Marines or whatever it is,
has got to be a well-trained, well-oiled killing machine, because that’s what it’s about. You don’t
win wars by patting people on the head and hoping things are going to be right. You’ve got to go
out and enforce the thing and when we lead the public to believe, ‘Join the Army, be all you can be,
get an education,’ what mindset are you putting in the soldier that you’re sending out to war? ‘Son,
I want you to join the Army to protect your country, and your mission is to go kill people, and if
necessary, die for your country.’ That’s the message we’ve got to be telling soldiers. If we’re not
telling them that, we’re not psychologically preparing them for what they’re going to have to do and
not getting them ready, I don’t think. I get bitter sometimes at the way the government has
gradually began to treat veterans. It’s bugging me. ‘We’ve got it down now, we guarantee every
soldier three people at his coffin when we put him in the ground.’ Used to be we sent a firing
squad and people to hold the flag, we’d send ten or 15 people to take care of the burial detail.
Now, they get more sometimes, but [as a] minimum we give them three. Then I turn around and I
see a destroyer go out in the Bay or somewhere out there with the whole Naval compliment to
shove the coffin of a senator’s son into the ocean, and he wasn’t even in the service, and yet we
can’t afford to give the soldiers that fought and lost a leg or whatever he did, a full burial detail, yet
the senator’s son can get a destroyer to take him and bury him at sea? Some of those things just
rankle me about what we gave up and where our country thinks we ought to be. So, maybe I’m
bitter, I don’t know; not for myself. I had a good career, I came out alive. I got wounded, but I’m
alive, I’m making it, and I’ve had good jobs. I’ve retired, and I’m happy. But, I know others that are
not as well off and yet I don’t think we’re doing what we should have done for some of those,
especially when we get around to burying them and we want to short circuit the burial process.
The guy wants a funeral, then we ought to ship the people from Ft. Hood, Texas, all the way to
Lubbock to bury them if that’s what it takes, and we’re not doing it. We’re taking some shortcuts.
They’re trying to do as good as they can because of the shortage of funds and money, but the
country ought to do better by them, I think.
SM: Yes, sir. Do you think that the increased number of requests for burial details is contributing to that, too, because of course there’s a lot of World War II veterans dying every day now? That’s really stretching that burial detail thin.

TS: Yes, we’re at that point, but those guys went to war in ’42 and stayed there until ’45 and really suffered, and they deserve it. They’re part of the people that have kept this world free, and if we can’t do something for them or do some little thing like that, then where are we as talking about being a nation? This latest thing in New York, it’s brought a lot of the flags out and people starting to gel together a lot better, and maybe that’s good. I mean, I hate to see that many people die to bring some patriotism back into the country. I [recently] went to a grammar school dedication and cornerstone laying ceremony and they brought in the flag, and half the teachers standing there put their hands at their side. Teachers don’t even know enough to put their hands over their heart as the colors are moving past, and singing the National Anthem, same thing. The kids, most of them seem to, but half the teachers are just standing there; they don’t know what to do. I don’t know, some of those things just sort of irritate me. Maybe they shouldn’t, but they do.

SM: Are there any other veterans’ issues that you’re concerned about, things that the government isn’t doing but should be doing for its veterans in health care, the Agent Orange issue, PTSD?

TS: That Southwest Asia Syndrome or whatever it is, Agent Orange, the VA seems to have taken a more positive approach to that than they used to. The VA as a whole, the hospital system, seems to have improved and gotten better than it used to be. I don’t know whether that’s a function of increased funding or reduced people utilizing the system because, as you say, the Second World War, people are dying off now in quite large quantities, so maybe it’s a system that there’s less people using the system than before, there’s more funds or more resources available. But the VA system seems to be on track and we seem to have taken a better approach to that Southwest Syndrome or whatever it was in the Gulf War than we did to Agent Orange. ‘Agent Orange didn’t hurt anybody, blah blah blah blah,’ and that was a boldfaced lie. They seem to have taken a better approach to the Gulf War Syndrome than we did to Agent Orange. I think the thing that bothers me about the military now is that we’ve let it go to hell. Janice’s [(friend of Mr. Spencer)] daughter is in the military and I visited her at Camp Drum. There’s no [preventive maintenance]...well, I shouldn’t say no, but it appears that there is no operation and maintenance budget for maintaining the facilities at Camp Drum because the facilities are just rack and ruin. It's
terrible. In fact, there was an article in the last or next to the last *Army Times* about some Congressional committee had flown around to half a dozen different bases and saw the fact that the buildings aren't being maintained and all these things. What happened is when you ship people to Kosovo and you don't have that in your budget, you've got to take it [the funds] from somewhere, you take it from operation and maintenance first, you take it from training second because that's the only two places you can take it from essentially. So, if you're taking it, if you're supporting the troops in Kosovo with this money, you're not doing any training, you're not maintaining your bases, so your living standards are going down, your training is going down, and that's not good. We've got divisions. Her daughter was in the 10th Mountain Division. It's not a division; it only has two active brigades. The other brigade is in the National Guard. So, we [the Army Brass] talks about how many divisions the United States Army has, but they don't have that many divisions at full strength. They're at 66% strength because they're missing a brigade. So, if you call up the National Guard brigade and then ship the [whole] division, and the next thing you call up to back them up is who? The brigade went with them! The National Guard have already gone with the first row of fighters; there's nobody left! Not only have we gutted the active duty, we've assigned the backup forces to be part of the active duty to go [in the first wave] and now we don't have a good follow[-on] armed force behind the first response. That's the thing that bothers me from a political/military standpoint as far as what we're doing. I think we're getting ourselves in serious trouble.

SM: Spreading ourselves too thin?
TS: Yeah.

SM: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about this afternoon?
TS: I don't guess so. Do you want to talk about something else?
SM: No, I just wanted to make sure that we cover everything that you were interested in discussing.

TS: No, I've talked about everything I guess I know.
SM: Well thank you very much. This will end the interview with Mr. Thomas Spencer.