Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an oral history interview with

Mr. Chad Spawr. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Spawr is in Cincinnati, Ohio. Mr.

Chad Spawr, if you would, begin of giving us a brief biographical sketch of yourself.

Chad Spawr: Sure. I was born Clarence V. Spawr III in June 1947 in Mt. Clemens, Michigan. I grew up and spent my early years in mid Michigan in the Lansing area where I went to high school and started college in 1965. At the time, the Vietnam War was beginning to heat up and we had a draft facing us at the time and it made some, it made for some very limited decisions about what we would do. As long as you were in college going to school full time you could maintain a student deferment and not have to worry about the draft. I went to school for a while, got tired of it, burnt out, ran out of money, couldn’t find a job, and dropped out, which meant I was an eligible fighter for the draft and had a choice between enlisting or waiting to be drafted and I got tired of waiting so I just went in on my own.

SM: Okay, so this is voluntary enlistment and you mentioned in your responses that another part of your reason was family tradition of service in wartime.

CS: Yeah, my family has served in almost every war that this country has had. My third great grandfather was wounded at the Battle of the Fallen Timbers with Mad Anthony Wayne in 17, I think, 94. Ever since then, my great grandfather fought with the 14th Iowa infantry in the Civil War. I have a very, very distant cousin that was killed in the Civil War. My grandfather served in World War I, my dad in World War II.
Somehow we missed Korea, but I seemed to be one of the few members of my family, of the entire genealogy who served in Vietnam. But we’ve always served, it seemed like the thing to do.

SM: And you also mentioned that if you got drafted that you had fewer choices for MOSs.

CS: Yeah, when you were drafted you went in and got trained in whatever the Army wanted to train you in, and at the time the military was drafting both for the Marines and the Army. I had no desire to go into the Marine Corps, so I enlisted in the Army and was given a choice of schools. I chose language school with the Army Security Agency and wound up leaving that. I finished language school but I did not continue with ASA.

SM: Why didn’t you continue with ASA?

CS: I was offered an opportunity to go to officer candidate school, and when I went to OCS I had to give up the ASA piece.

SM: I see.

CS: I did not complete officer candidate school. I had a knee injury and they wouldn’t let me finish. They told me I couldn’t finish OCS with a bad knee but I wound up going to Vietnam with the infantry, which didn’t seem to make a whole lot of sense to me but it was what it was.

SM: Okay, so you went from…to basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. When was that?

CS: I got there very, very first part of May 1966 and left there in mid June of the same year en route to Monterey, California to the Defense Language Institute where I was to study the North Vietnamese language.

SM: Okay. Before you left for basic training, what did you know about the Army and more importantly, what did you know about what was going on in Vietnam that you remember?

CS: Oh, I remember that Vietnam was heating up. The battle of the Ia Drang Valley had been fought. I was very familiar with what had happened there. I had a couple friends who’d dropped out of school and gone into the service, and they were writing letters home from Vietnam. It was on the news, I mean, it was on the evening
news every night so I knew pretty well what was happening. You know, there was a war
going on, there was a developing protest movement, but I knew what was happening.

SM: You weren’t concerned knowing you were going to be going to learn North
Vietnamese at DLI?

CS: No, I didn’t really care. I figured I was going in the service and I’d probably
wind up over there anyway. My suspicion was that, as I recollect it now, as I think I
recollected, if I hadn’t been sent I probably would have volunteered.

SM: Okay, so your basic training; why don’t you go ahead and describe that
briefly.

CS: Well basic training was 8 weeks in Fort Leonard Wood Missouri, early
summer, very hot. Second day of basic we’re coming across a field with a lot of rocks on
it and I twisted my ankle and broke it and continued basic training with a broken ankle
and actually managed to do fairly well. I couldn’t run very well but I could do everything
else and so I continued with my basic training class. Heavy emphasis on physical
conditioning, you know, a lot of discipline, a lot of harassing by the drill instructors
trying to break down the sense of individualism and identity and begin to form people
into team members who think and act as a team and support each other. I actually found
basic training to be kind of fun. You never like being dirty and hot and sweaty and stinky
all the time but there were a lot of things I learned how to do and had exposures with
people I’d never come in contact with before and I found it to be not a bad experience.

SM: Your broken ankle, was that splinted or did you have a cast on it or what?

CS: Yeah, they put a thing on it called a gel cast and it held it pretty rigidly. It
was pretty painful for a couple of weeks and I could hobble along. Some of the long
marches they went on were pretty tough because I was dragging up the rear, but after a
few weeks I got to where I could move fairly well. You know, my mobility was
handicapped a bit, but I managed to get to rifle range with no trouble and I could do most
of the physical training, the physical exercise stuff which nobody likes to do PT but, you
know, I had lost a lot of weight and I was starting to firm up and feeling pretty good and
thinking this isn’t all that bad. Probably pretty good for me.

SM: Ironic that you could break your ankle in basic and they wouldn’t drop you
out or give you any time to recover, but at OCS you injure your knee and you’re out!
CS: Well, you know, the difference is in basic training they’re trying to take as many people as they can and push them through to fill as many slots as they can. Officer candidate school, the Army’s philosophy was to take a lot of people and whittle it down to a few who’d they’d commission. The Navy on the other hand took people they only planned to commission. You know, so it was a numbers game for OCS.

SM: Okay. You mentioned, I asked a question of you in the written questionnaire about discipline during your training and you talk about intimidation and push ups and things like that but you don’t mention any physical contact between the drill instructors and the trainees. Was there no incidence of that?

CS: I had one experience with a drill sergeant who I really turned out to respect a lot. He used to carry this welding rod, a whippy little piece of metal, and you know, every once in a while if you weren’t doing something you were supposed to do or doing it right he’d switch you on the butt or on the back of the legs with it. And I guess he forgot that I had a broken ankle and we were in our hand to hand combat class one time and I was not able to do one of the routines that required me to jump off that ankle and he saw me, I guess he thought I was dogging it because he smacked me across the back of the legs with it and it really burned. I turned on him, and I said a few choice words and I thought, “Oh no, I’m really dead now,” but my own platoon sergeant came over and reminded this fellow that I was on a broken ankle and it really amazed me, could have knocked me over dead, because he apologized to me right there on the spot. He apologized for that, and I mean, the man just grew in my opinion. I really came to like the man a lot after that.

SM: Wow!

CS: Tough, he was tough, he was a World War II, Korean War vet. But I think I realized intuitively that those older drill sergeants really were trying to train us to help us to become good soldiers but also to help save our lives when we were in combat.

SM: Any other incidents with other trainees?

CS: I can’t recall any, I think I would have, you know, if there’d been any problems like that with abusive drill sergeants I think I would have known. These guys were combat veterans, I mean every one of them had a combat infantrymen’s badge, they were all older, they were mature. I think there was a real difference. They weren’t a
bunch of young, inexperienced guys who felt like they had to prove something. I was impressed with my DI s, I still remember two of their names, they were decent men.

SM: What were their names?

CS: Sergeant Erkle who was my platoon sergeant, I’m sorry, senior drill sergeant, and actually there is three of them. Sergeant McDonald led my platoon. Sergeant Blanton led one of our neighboring platoons, but the fellow with the whipping metal rod was Sergeant Mortenson. He was a big, burly, heavyset guy. He was pretty cool.

SM: Now you mentioned that these gentlemen were predominantly World War II, Korean War Veterans. Did they invoke that wartime experience during training to try to instill in you the importance of what they were trying to teach you?

CS: Oh yeah, oh yeah. The whole thing is constant references to, you know, “If this happened in combat,” or, you know, “Get your butt down or you’ll get it shot off.” It’s not like they told a lot of war stories but it was real clear, especially after I came back with combat experiences I could look back on that and realize what was different about them. They were combat veterans who were trying to teach us to be combat soldiers.

SM: But they didn’t rely on any kind of anecdotal kind of stories or anything like that for training purposes?

CS: Not a lot.

SM: Specific things that they themselves experienced that they could pass on to you?

CS: No, we got more of that in advanced infantry training. Basic training was really about learning to become a soldier. They were really concentrating on making us into what a basic trainee should be to be successful.

SM: No Vietnam Veterans as DI s in basic training?

CS: No not one. Sergeant McDonald, in fact, we had one, the drill sergeant who was my platoon sergeant was the only black drill sergeant that we had in our company. And he was a pretty neat guy, he and I didn’t get along too well sometimes because I think he thought that with the bad ankle I was dogging it, but we got over that.

But no, no Vietnam Veterans. These guys were all older.

SM: And weapons training in basic training, primarily with the M-14?
CS: Correct. It was the primary infantry weapon at the time, it was the weapon that was issued to our land forces in Europe. The first guys in Vietnam were carrying M-14s, but they quickly switched over to the 16.

SM: Okay.

CS: I didn’t see an M-16 until infantry training.

SM: Okay. Now was there any mention or discussion of Vietnam itself while you were going through basic?

CS: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Yeah, we knew what was going on. They kept talking about getting us ready to go. I have a recollection of one evening we were coming back from a night firing exercise and they literally marched us back four miles in the dark and they set us up to patrol, it was a march on both sides of the road and then every so often they’d pitch a rock out there and we had to bang, bang, bang, you know, to quick react to it. I just remember them talking about ambushes in the dark and that kind of thing, I just remember that.

SM: So night training?

CS: Oh yeah.

SM: In basic training?

CS: Oh yeah, we had what they call it [the Night Infiltration course]...well there’s the machine gun course, the infiltration course where you had to stay low and crawl underneath the machine gun fire. That was at night. We had [?]. We had some night marches and that type of thing.

SM: Okay, and that was the live fire exercise with machine gun, right?

CS: Correct.

SM: You could see the tracers going over you?

CS: Go about a foot over your head, sure. Yeah, what they did, they had the M-60 machine guns set up in an upright bunker, and then the muzzle of the machine gun was contained within probably a 2-3 inch square frame so they couldn’t depress it too low. So it was set so that if you stayed down you could crawl the roughly hundred yards and infiltrate, you know, you had to go under wire and through some obstructions but the objective was to get you used to the sound and the feel of being under fire.

SM: Right.
CS: It’s a very freaky feeling.

SM: Anything else about basic training that strikes you as being remarkable or memorable?

CS: No, it…after a while it got boring, you know, keeping the barracks clean and all that kind of stuff. There are a few recollections of things with some of the guys in my platoon. I remember one fellow who didn’t take a shower for about the first 5 or 6 weeks and we were out on the PT field and it was very, very hot. The drill sergeant made us take off our T-shirts. This guy took his off and there was just a mass of sores.

SM: Oh God!

CS: It was just disgusting. Several of us were delegated to march him back to the barracks with one of the other, the assistant drill instructors, we literally, we got in the shower with him with toilet brushes and scrubbing cleanser and we gave him a shower. He was an unhappy camper after that but he was very clean.

SM: And did he suffer from his lapse of personal hygiene after that?

CS: Well, that was probably, that was the 6th, I think the 6th week of 8 weeks.

SM: Oh, okay.

CS: After that I never saw him again so I don’t know. And he was a young fellow who I think was just very, very modest and was probably embarrassed to be naked around other men. So he wouldn’t shower.

SM: Okay. So you, when did you start infantry AIT, that would’ve been…

CS: Well I got out of basic in June of ’66…

SM: And you went directly to infantry AIT?

CS: Nope, went directly to language school in Monterey.

SM: Okay the language school first.

CS: In Monterey, yeah. I remember, its funny, I had to be there right after the 4th of July but just after I got home from basic on my 2 week leave there was a big strike that was supposed to happen, an airline strike, so I remember getting an early flight out cutting my leave short and I got to Monterey a full week before my classes were to start and it was the most amazing experience, you know, being a young kid growing up in that time with all the things going on in the country. All of a sudden at the age of 19 now I’m sent to central California on Monterey Bay, it was a little bit of heaven. And I had a
week, you know, living in the barracks, eating in the mess halls, with a little bit of cash I
could literally walk around the area and tour the area. Here I am in California and I
thought I’d died and gone to heaven. I just remember before we started our classes and
things just how wonderful it was. I couldn’t believe I was in the Army and I was getting
paid to be here, it was just wonderful.

SM: The civilian population in the Monterey area, were they friendly to soldiers
that were attending language school and that were stationed there?

CS: Well, you also had Fort Ord there which was a huge place, it was 8 or 10
miles away. It was like any other military town. They liked the soldiers, they liked the
money that it brings in, but frankly if we’d all dried up and blown away they wouldn’t
have missed us too much. But Monterey was, you know, it was a nice place. I love, and
in fact Monterey is still my favorite place, I love to go whenever I can.

SM: Okay. Defense Language Institute, North Vietnamese Language classes.

CS: Right.

SM: Describe those. What would your average day in class be like?

CS: Well I’d get up in the morning and go to a morning formation at 6 o’clock
and go have breakfast. Go back, clean up the barracks until about, oh, 6:30 thereabouts.
We were in Company B which was, you know, down the hill. That part of Monterey is
quite hilly. My classroom was up on top of the hill about half a mile away. So about a
quarter to 7 or so I’d start up the hill. We wore our class A uniform which is, you know,
the dress greens and climb the hill. Start classes around 7:30 thereabouts and we’d be in
class up until lunch. Come back down the hill to the barracks area for lunch. Back up
the hill in the afternoon and we’d go to class until about 4-4:30 and then go back down
the hill for dinner and then the evening was free. But we had so much work to do, we
had lessons to learn, tapes to listen to so it would take a couple of hours to get ready for
the next days class.

SM: So not a lot of free time?

CS: Not a lot, not a lot. If you managed your time right, though, you could have
some good times. Weekends were generally free. The lesson plan for a Monday was no
more strenuous than a lesson plan for any other day, and so I got to spend a lot of time
touring around San Francisco and Sacramento area.
SM: And these classes were Monday through Friday?
CS: Yes, yeah.
SM: And usually no weekend duty?
CS: Very seldom, I only remember a couple of times where maybe I’d have KP
duty on a Saturday or something. Very seldom, I just don’t remember it happening very
often. You know, they were pretty aggressive about making sure we attended classes, I
mean, we’re not allowed to cut classes. But every so often the school work would get to
us and there’s just a lot of studying. I lived in a barracks where you weren’t allowed to
speak English, it was a Vietnamese speaking barracks only so for the new kid going in
who didn’t speak anything it was very difficult, you know, and as we acquired facility
with the language it became easier to communicate with the other guys but after awhile
you needed a break. So invariably every so often we’d do a little gold bricking, you
know, get a note from the medic to, you know, spend the day in bed and just, you know,
sleep, and that helped. I figure I did that, oh, in the 9 months I was there I did that
probably 2 or 3 times, just enough to keep the edge off.
SM: So 9 months of language training?
CS: Yep.
SM: Okay, the barracks that you lived in that was Vietnamese speaking only,
what would happen if you did speak English, if you lapsed?
CS: You got to clean the toilets. You got to use a very small sponge or small
brush, and if you did it too often that sponge got cut in half. When it got down to the size
of a postage stamp it was pretty tough to clean 9 or 10 toilets. You learned real quick.
SM: Now did…how many times did you have to clean the toilets?
CS: Oh God, more often than I know. If you could get a degree in toilet cleaning
I’d have one!
SM: Was it pretty common for most of the soldiers to lapse?
CS: In our barracks, yeah. I mean, yeah, they really did cut us some slack for the
first several weeks of language school. You know, the guys who were there who were
more senior to us knew what we should know and they expected us to do what we should
have done. But, you know, they didn’t expect us to know any complex grammar. We
could make a lot of mistakes and not be penalized for it. But you know, if I should have
known how to say something in Vietnamese and I said it in English, you know, back
downstairs, back down to the toilets.

SM: And so this was enforced internally by the soldiers that lived there?

CS: Oh yeah, yeah. It was like an honors system, you know. The whole purpose,
it was a privilege to live in a language only barracks. You had to apply for it.

SM: Wow.

CS: You had to be accepted by the other guys in the barracks and I was pretty
happy to get that.

SM: The class routine itself; when you would go to class in the morning, I guess
describe the instructors that were teaching you and then what methods would they use to
instruct you?

CS: Our instructors were all native Vietnamese and they were all North
Vietnamese, you know, so you learned the intonation, the inflection, the pronunciations
which were very different in many cases from the South Vietnamese. My primary
instructor was a lovely woman, her name was Nguyen Thi Tuyet. She was probably 60
years old at the time, but she was very caring and very concerned that we learn things
right. Every so often they’d bring some different instructors in just to break up the
routine but they were all Vietnamese, they were just really nice people and they were
very, very patient with us. Every morning we had to do a dialogue that we’d practice the
night before and it was a preset dialogue. You’d each do the parts, you know, there’d be
two people doing it back and forth, you’d switch parts, and then there was a lot of
vocabulary training and grammar training. We had classes on Vietnamese history and
culture. As we went along through the program more and more of that was conducted in
the Vietnamese language so, you know, there was a lot of repetition, a lot of not so much
writing but a lot of learning to speak and to develop your ear.

SM: Okay, so that was the emphasis was on speaking and hearing vs. reading and
writing?

CS: Yes, and the reason for that is most of the guys who were in ASA were going
over there to do radio intercept, communication intercept and listening to radio
frequencies. Not so much writing required. Those of us who were going to be doing
combat interrogations and interpretation that’s oral and verbal skills.
SM: Okay. The instructors that would come in and visit, were they also Northerners?

CS: Oh yeah, they were all North Vietnamese. I remember one woman, her name was Su Vien. She was South Vietnamese, and I remember she stands out so starkly because she was just a outrageously beautiful woman, I mean, she was a show stopper, but you could tell very clearly when she spoke that she was a Southerner as opposed to a Northerner. The intonation, some of the pronunciations of certain vowels, I mean consonants, is very different. So you could tell the difference. And they had her come in quite often because, you know, when we were over there we'd be interfacing with a lot of South Vietnamese and they wanted us to acquire a sensitivity for that set of dialect.

SM: Well yeah, I was curious because if they emphasized exclusively Northern, how would that affect communication with, say, Viet Cong who were Southerners?

CS: It would have made a great difference, but then again most of the ASA guys were, you know, getting ready to intercept. Those of us who were going to be working with the infantry units had to be a little more versatile.

SM: Did you have opportunity to meet with any of your Vietnamese language instructors outside of the classroom?

CS: Not very often, I don’t recall, I mean on a weekend I’d be walking around on campus or down in town I might bump into them but I don’t remember anything structured.

SM: Okay, and when you either in classroom or either on those few instances where you did happen upon them would you ever talk about the war or what was going on in Vietnam at the time?

CS: I don’t recall it. I remember that Miss Tuyet and Mr. Hiep and I can’t remember the other person’s name, they had all come from the North in 1954, they’d come South but I don’t remember much discussion about that. I mean, we really…most of our conversation was about our lessons, about where we were in the curriculum, not a lot about their specific experiences.

SM: Were they Catholic?

CS: I couldn’t really tell you, I don’t know. I don’t know. Most of the people, I mean a lot of people, came South and a lot of them were Catholics because, you know,
they didn’t want to deal with the communist North. But I really couldn’t tell you if they’re Catholic or Vietnamese…oh no, that’s not true, that’s not true; I do remember. Miss Tuyet always wore a cross, a gold cross around her neck. Now that’s an old memory. My God, I haven’t seen her since 1967. Wow, funny I remembered that.

SM: Anything else interesting from your defense language training? Anything in particular that stands out that was important once you got in country?

CS: Well there’s something that I remember about coming to the end of the program when I applied for officer candidate school. At the same I applied and was accepted I was offered an opportunity to stay in Monterey for an advanced course for an additional, I think it was 16, weeks. I turned it down. I really thought I wanted to go be an armor officer, but I frankly was ready for a change, you know. I’d had 9 months of good times, but 9 hard months as well, I mean, a lot of academic work and I was ready for a move. There have been a lot of times when I’ve regretted that because Monterey was just…it’s just a wonderful, wonderful place; just a magical place for me. I thought they did a pretty good job of preparing me to learn the language, to speak it, and I’ve always looked back fondly on the experience.

SM: And when you did get to Vietnam did you feel comfortable talking with native Vietnamese there?

CS: No, I didn’t because when I left the language school in April of ’67, I didn’t get to Vietnam until October because I had gone to officer candidate school, I’m sorry, went to infantry…an abbreviated infantry school and then to armor OCS so from the time, like, middle of…early to mid April of ’67 until the very end of October ’67 I almost never spoke a word of it so I lost a lot very quickly. By the time I got to Vietnam I had been assigned to something called the 2nd Civil Affairs Company which is where they put a lot of linguists and they sent me right out to an infantry division. So by the time I got out there, I mean, I’d had a little bit of exposure to South Vietnamese language but not enough that I could be effective at it and most of the people I was talking to in the field were Viet Cong prisoners, South Vietnamese citizens in the villages, very rarely do I come across early, until Tet, a North Vietnamese soldier so I’d forgotten a lot. I’d forgotten a lot and it took some time to reacquire it.
SM: Anything that you wish they had discussed and they had taught you at Defense Language Institute that they didn’t when you were in country?

CS: Yeah, yeah. Looking back on it I wish that they had taught us more interrogation technique, how to conduct a proper what we call Order of Battle interrogation. They taught us language, they taught us some military terms, but they didn’t teach us how to really do an intelligent interrogation. I really had to learn to make it up my own, on my own. You know, there’s a lot of misconceptions about what it is to interrogate somebody, I didn’t have a clue and I was never one to get into slapping people around and beating them up or doing torture or that kind of stuff. It just didn’t seem to be, well, it didn’t seem to be effective and it just didn’t seem to be right, so I never did that. But there were a lot of people who thought, “That’s what you’ve got to do. You’re interrogating some guy, you’ve got to beat the snot out of him, and when you’ve got him hurt and scared then he’ll tell you what you want to know.” I found that to be completely untrue. I found that I got a lot out of people just by treating them…by speaking very softly and gently, you know, feeding them if they were hungry, giving them a cigarette if they wanted to smoke and if the guy was hurt, getting a medic on it. I think that caused enough…well, it disconcerted some of them enough because they had been told that as soon as we caught them we’d kill them. So they’re kind of like in panic and shock and all of a sudden they get some big, dumb, ugly American who speaks their language treating them kindly. It was enough of a shock for them that I actually got a lot of good information out of several people.

SM: Interesting. We have to pause just a moment so I can flip the tape.

CS: Yep. I think the expectation was that since I could speak the language that I knew how to interrogate people and I didn’t.

SM: Right, okay.

CS: You know, but the interrogation itself, I mean, the things I had to find out were really pretty straight forward. You know, if we were actually in contact and they brought me a prisoner the first thing I’d determine is what unit they were from. Were they Northerners, was it a North Vietnamese unit, was it a Viet Cong unit. You know, what unit was it, where were they, how many of them were there, how many weapons did they have, how were they deployed, were they a lead element for a larger unit coming
through, were they a squad, were they a patrol, were they a company, how long had they
been in country, what were they doing, where were they going, and then try and orient
them to a map and, you know, show them where we were at the time and then, you know,
see where they’d come from.

SM: Okay.

CS: Try to collect some information because it’s really important, you know, especially if you’re with a small unit in the field, you know, with a company it’s important to find out if what you’re dealing with is a regiment or a platoon or if you’ve got 5 guys in front of you or 500.

SM: Right.

CS: So we did what we called Order of Battle Intelligence trying to find out who and what we were facing.

SM: Okay. The transition from language school to abbreviated infantry at Fort Ord, was it an immediate transition? Did you have a break?

CS: Oh no. We got done, I think we graduated on the 10th of April so I think that’s right, and I can’t remember what day of the week it was, probably a Thursday or a Friday and like 2 days later we were there. I mean, we jumped on a bus and put all our nice stuff away and we went over…it was almost like going back into basic training. Instead of the standard 8 week normal infantry AIT, they took a bunch of us who were graduating and put us through an abbreviated 4 week program where we learned, you know, almost the same kind of stuff but, you know, the language school people were much higher, they tested much higher on the basic aptitude and intelligence tests so we were already prone to learn faster. You know, basic training and infantry training, you know, you’re teaching to the level of the lowest common denominator. Our lowest common denominator was a higher learning group. Most of the guys in our class, in fact, most of the guys in my graduating class were college graduates. I was one of the few that was not. So we, you know, they set this up for people coming out of language school to learn infantry things that we needed to know, you know, because we were going and they needed to have us know how to survive in the field so we learned a lot more about march man ship, qualified on the 45 automatic pistol, the M-60 machine gun, I can’t remember the [?] for the 81 millimeter mortar, learned how to use clamor mines, learned how to set
up a hasty L shape and horseshoe ambushes, what else did we learn...oh, observation
posts, ambush patrols, that kind of stuff. You know, they taught us a lot of things that we
would need to know if we were going to go out and work in an infantry environment.

SM: And were you expecting that?

CS: Well I was after they sent me to training!

SM: Well I didn’t know, it seems like with your training at the Defense Language
Institute that you would be going on to either a Psy Op job, or like you said maybe
combat interrogation, not actually combat operations.

CS: Well see, a lot of the combat interrogations happened in the field.

SM: Yeah, okay.

CS: I mean, if somebody snatches a prisoner in contact somebody’s got to be
there to find out what’s going on. Again, you know, literally there’s a matter of minutes
and inches. You know, there were different kinds of situations where prisoners were
captured, you know. Sometimes a patrol would find some poor young kid walking
through the woods and just grab him. Other times, you know, the enemy, you know,
they’d be in real hot contact with us and somebody would be grabbed. You know, the
guy would over run his objective and somebody would nail him. Fly him out or run him
to the rear a little bit. And the other times they deliberately went out and snatched a
prisoner and the whole thing is to find out what they know right now as fast as possible
because, you know, that kind of intelligence, is...it goes cold real quick. So, you know,
the expectation I think...I thought the Army was pretty forward thinking about it because
I was one of the first groups to go through this abbreviated program. A lot of the guys
who’d gone before us had been trained in language and went right over. They had no
clue about how to survive in the field.

SM: Interesting.

CS: So I was kind of glad I had it. I didn’t like going through it, I didn’t want to
be an infantryman, I figured, you know, I enlisted to get out of that. But in hindsight it
made a lot of sense.

SM: Okay. When did you receive notification that you might be going to armor
officer basic?
CS: I started the application process probably in October or November of ’67, I’m sorry, ’66 while I was in language school. It’s a fairly long process, a lot of interviews, physical tests, that kind of crap and I think I got my orders probably in March, before I graduated. I knew before I graduated I was going to OCS, I knew I was going.

SM: Okay, so you knew before you went to abbreviated infantry?

CS: Yes.

SM: But they sent you anyway?

CS: Well, and the reason was that the OCS classes were pre-scheduled and there was some time in there, and filled up a class.

SM: So rather than give you some time off they made you go through infantry training.

CS: Yeah, exactly. Or the alternative was to go to Fort Knox and learn how to paint rocks and I didn’t want to do that, so. I got to go shoot weapons, you know, blow up stuff and have some fun.

SM: Anything particularly memorable about your abbreviated training, your infantry training?

CS: Fort Ord, being right on the Monterey Bay, there’s a lot of sand. Sand everywhere. My prevailing memory of Fort Ord is sand. The rifle ranges are across Highway 1 from the Fort, and you know, you shoot out into the banks and then out into the water. It’s always seemed kind of strange to me, I mean, I don’t know where else we would have shot, but it just seemed kind of dangerous or weird that we’d be shooting out into the ocean with, you know, the possibility that somebody would come by on a water ski or a boat or something. Just seemed kind of strange. Nobody ever did, but I just had this overwhelming memory of sand. A couple of years ago I was out there after Fort Ord closed as a military base, it’s just wide open now, and driving through and you know, it’s dilapidated and falling apart and seeing some of the old sights was just an interesting juxtaposition from how busy it was when I was there.

SM: And now it’s deserted?
CS: Pretty much. You know, the University of California has opened a campus there, principally studying Marine Biology but other than that there’s not much there. Buildings are falling down and the weeds are growing up and it’s kind of sad.

SM: Other aspects of advanced infantry…or abbreviated infantry training, weapons training. You mentioned that there was a transition eventually from M-14 to M-16, this was it, correct?

CS: Yes, this is when I first had my exposure to the M-16. We learned how to break it down, maintain it, clean it, fire it both short range and long range, I think the longest range targets we shot were…oh the M-14 was about a 400-450 yard range, I think we shot probably 250-300 yards with the M-16. We learned to fire it; the whole emphasis of an M-16 is to learn fire discipline, that’s a very high cycle right weapon, I mean, you could blow out a 20 round magazine in less than 3 seconds. But, you know, it’s also a great waste of ammunition. There’s a great tendency in combat to panic and put the thing on automatic and just blow up your ammunition, but when you do that, you know, you run the risk of hitting nothing and being really dangerous to yourself and your partners so they really tried to teach us good marksmanship and good fire discipline.

SM: And did they emphasize not putting select a lever over to auto and keeping it on single shot?

CS: Oh yeah, and just, you know, so we had the experience of knowing what it was like to fire the thing on full auto every so often they’d let us burn up a magazine and it’s kind of a rush. You know, I mean, you blow out the equivalent of 600 rounds a minute it’s kind of exciting. They didn’t let us do it very often, but once in a while it’s, you know, it’s kind of a neat release. But there’s, from a military perspective there’s almost no value to it. Makes a lot of noise, scares a lot of people, and in certain conditions it has a very effective tactical value. For example, the special forces, the SEALs, the Recon folks, and I worked with Recon for a while in my first and second tours, use the automatic high cycle rate of fire as a technique when a patrol encounters an enemy force in the field, especially if you’re overwhelmed. Four or five guys firing their weapons in a patterned way on full automatic can create the appearance of a much larger unit and it helps to create confusion on the part of the enemy that can give you time to escape. So there is a use to it, but it’s not a real effective use against the enemy troops.
SM: It’s more of a diversionary tactic rather than an actual way of killing enemy soldiers?

CS: Absolutely. Absolutely. In fact the M-16 now is set up much like European infantry weapons are. You can pull the trigger but the most you’ll get out of it is a three round burst. A three round burst if very, very accurate in the hands of a good marksman.

SM: What did you think about that transition, though, going from the, you know, 762 round M-14, you know that bullet’s going to stop whatever you hit, vs. the M-16 556 smaller…did that concern you at all?

CS: No, not at all. It’s reputation is pretty well established as a real killer. It was lightweight which any soldier gets excited about, it’s lightweight, high cycle rate. The biggest concern we had was all the stories about them jamming because the early ones jammed real bad. The weapon was designed to be used with one type of powder propellant but government contracts being what they are, the powder that was eventually contracted for left more residue than the weapon was designed to manage and as a result they had quite a problem with fouling and jamming, plus the guys didn’t keep them clean and that made it worse. A lot of guys died when their weapons jammed. But I was pretty excited about the M-16. I liked the 14 because it’s just a deadly accurate weapon and you’re right, it does have tremendous stopping power but the M-16 was just, it was just a killer. I liked it, I liked it. Especially the new ones, I like that a lot.

SM: You mentioned the problem of cleaning it or the problem with residue on the weapon as a result of firing. Wasn’t it difficult to keep weapons clean or spotless in Vietnam, a jungle shooting environment? Muddy, water, moist?

CS: Oh yeah, it was a problem, you know, because the tolerances inside the receiver group on that are very close. You know, the bolt carrier? Slight, very close tolerances. By comparison, an M-14 is very, very sloppy. I mean you can rattle an M-14 and it…an M-14 and it will rattle. By the same token, you almost can’t jam it. You can pack the thing full of concrete and it will still fire much the same as an AK-47. Once they re-engineered the 16 and fixed the powder problems and they put a kind of chromium plating on the bolt it was just slippery as could be. It was just a great weapon to handle. But yeah, keeping them clean was tough and, I mean, every time we stopped, you know, we’d set up a perimeter like for a meal or for a break or something, we’d set
up a perimeter and the first thing guys would do was break out their kits and clean them.

You had to do it, you had to do it.

SM: Okay, so from advanced infantry to armor, officer basic?

CS: Correct.

SM: Fort Knox, Kentucky?

CS: Right.

SM: How long, how far did you get into that program before you had to stop?

CS: I got my knee blown out in the 11th week.

SM: Oh wow!

CS: A 23 week program, and we were on a night map cross country exercise in Kentucky. It was one of those where you had to navigate by map with a red lens on a flash light in the dark. It happened to be raining very badly that night and it was terrain that we’d never been on and we couldn’t really use the light much except to hover and check our map coordinates and our compass readings. Couldn’t use it for vision because there were, you know, we’re supposed to be escaping and evading. So we’re literally moving through a pretty heavily wooded area and I stepped into a hole and put a big twist on the knee and down it went. I tore some ligaments, I tore the cartilage. That was it.

SM: And up to that point, what did you think about the training you were receiving?

CS: Officer Candidate School, there’s 10 times more harassment, 10 times more discipline, it was a whole lot tougher than basic. The whole idea was to cause guys to quit, to break you down to the point where you just wanted to quit, find your breaking point early. I think that there’s a good logic to that, I mean, I don’t want some guy to lose it in combat if he’s my platoon leader and I think they were testing to find out who’d break when. I think had I not blown the knee out I probably would have graduated but in hindsight that comes with wisdom and ears I think if I had graduated and been commissioned I would not have been a good officer. I was too young, too immature, and in hindsight probably too stupid. But it was very tough, very tough training.

SM: Any mention during that training of what you would be doing in Vietnam? Were there any instructors that had Vietnam War experience?
CS: None of our instructors were Vietnam Veterans, they were all young recently commissioned 2nd Lieutenants of armor. None were combat veterans. I do remember that one of the lieutenants from one of the other classes, I was called to officer candidate school company G2, one of the guys from G1, a lieutenant, had gotten his orders and gone to Vietnam and was killed. I remember that because it put a pall over the whole thing. They didn’t really talk to us a lot about it, about Vietnam. Really we were training on the M-60 main combat tank, main battle tank and the M-60 was never deployed to Vietnam. Very much like basic training I felt like we were being trained for European land war and, I mean, we were learning armor tactics, you know, how to deploy armored units both in the platoon and company environment, you know, night firing, the kind of things that tanks do but against large fixed targets at long range. At Fort Knox we didn’t really get any exposure to Vietnam until we went through what’s called POM/POR training, which is Preparation for Overseas Movement/Preparation for Overseas Replacement. Everybody had to go through that before they went to ‘Nam and that was really the first time I got any exposure to what tactics in Vietnam would be like. But that was after I was already out of OCS.

SM: Okay, now what did you think about being trained by such young lieutenants compared to your basic training experience where you’re being trained by the senior combat veterans?

CS: It was really a juxtaposition. I didn’t think much of it at the time, they kept us so busy. I mean, they ran us crazy. I counted 1000 push ups one day, I mean everything we did wrong or everything they thought we did wrong or if we looked like we might be thinking about doing something wrong we got dropped for 10-15 pushups and that would happen…well, you know, for example we’d be sitting in the mess hall. If a lieutenant caught you looking at him, it’s outside for 10 chin-ups and 10 pushups. You might not get breakfast if you’re busy doing all that. The whole thing about that was to enhance our physical abilities, build up our body strength because that’s the biggest asset a soldier has is upper body strength and keep us attuned to a sense of discipline and self control. So, you know, they did that well. These young lieutenants had just been through it themselves, they were commissioned to train us, they knew all the tricks. One of them, in fact he was my tactical officer, a guy named Steve Wilmeth. The last I talked to him 10
years ago or so he was a president of a steel company in Texas and he and I struck up a
fairly nice relationship for a while but then we parted our ways and I haven’t talked to
him in a while.

SM: And after you blew out your knee what did you do? What happened?

Where did you go?

CS: Well I finally got out of the field, I mean, it took a couple of hours to get out
of the woods and get back to the assembly point. I had to wait for everybody else to
come out of the woods. You know, it was night and I literally sat and waited on this bus
with a bad knee in just real major pain until, you know, everybody got back and then they
drove us back to the company area and at that point the drill sergeant or the tactical
officer put me in his car and took me to the hospital. So I must have blown it out around
10-10:30 and got to the hospital around 3:30 or 4:00. They did x-rays and they drained
some fluid off of it and it was just a real mess and I stayed there for several hours and
they, you know, gave me some pain pills, wrapped it up, and sent me back to my
unit…back to my company, but, you know, right then I knew I was done. I knew I was
done. There was just no way I was going to be able to do anything. I thought I’d be able
to tough it out like I did in basic training but, you know, we were running 15 and 20
miles a day in OCS and I was having a hard time walking 100 yards much less, you
know, running 10 or 12 miles. So I knew then it wasn’t going to work. Later that day
company 1st sergeant came up to see me. Looked at me, looked at me and looked at the
knee and he called the Army hospital, checked it out, and 3 days later I had my walking
papers.

SM: Or limping papers, as it were!

CS: Yeah.

SM: Where did you go from there?

CS: They had a holding company where they sent guys who’d dropped out or
kicked out because, you know, a lot of guys got bounced. They had a holding company
and that’s where they kept us until we got orders to go to our next assignment. 2/3 of the
guys in that place got sent to Vietnam.

SM: Wow.
CS: A couple of guys, you know, there was a guy who had Korean language training, he went to Korea, but it was a holding ground.

SM: And you had Vietnam language training?

CS: Yeah, I kind of knew where I was going, I wasn’t going to Germany.

SM: No, and you had infantry training.

CS: Yes.

SM: So basically you defaulted to 11 Bravo or the equivalent. Basically you’re an infantry MOS.

CS: Well yeah, but that was my secondary. My primary MOS was 04B2LVN which was North Vietnamese linguist, combat interpreter. Secondary was the infantry.

SM: Which meant more than likely you were going to be assigned to an infantry unit to engage in…

CS: I could smell that coming, yeah. When I got there, we flew over, I got there the end of October, it seems to me the 28th of October is the right date. We landed at 2:00 in the morning at Bien Hoa, and they put us in busses with chicken wire over the windows and they told us it was so that as we’re driving in the middle of the night from Bien Hoa Air Base over to Long Binh which is about 4-5 miles that people couldn’t throw grenades in the windows. Cold comfort, you know? But we got there and I was in the reception station for 3 days before I finally got my orders and I was sent to this thing called the 2nd Civil Affairs Company. Turns out it was a quarter mile from the reception depot. It was commanded by a lieutenant colonel, his name was David Wade and I’ll never forget him. I, you know, was taken over to check in and he personally greeted every new soldier coming in. Well turns out he had gone to college with my uncle at Western Michigan University and so we got a nice conversation and he told me that there was a need for a guy at the 1st Infantry Division and I said, “Gee sir, I’d really like to avoid that if I can!” And he said, “Well, you know, it’d be real nice but sorry, you’re gone,” and I was on a chopper the next day to a place called Phuoc Vinh which was the base camp for the 1st brigade of the 1st infantry division and I went up there and I was assigned to the S5 operation which was where the linguists and civil affairs and Psy Ops people were. I had no clue what Psy Ops was, didn’t know what those guys were but they just seemed kind of weird to me.
SM: What about civil affairs?
CS: Huh?
SM: What about civil affairs?
CS: Well civil affairs was supposed to be working for refugees and those kinds of folks and I thought that that’s what I’d be doing but when I got up there I thought, you know, the infantry comes in contact with villagers and they work with villagers and that kind of thing. I thought that’s what I’d be doing, you know, helping resettle people, you know, helping with civil affairs projects like, you know, digging wells, building houses and that kind of stuff. That wasn’t what it was at all. I mean, some of that stuff was done but really what they did with me, I was the only interpreter that they had, a Vietnamese speaking interpreter in 1st brigade. When one of the units got into combat, got into contact with somebody or if they anticipated getting into contact they’d call up and they’d grab my butt and stick me on a chopper with the infantry. So I wound up working with a lot of different units unlike the guys in the battalions like 1st of the 2nd, or 1st of the 16th, or you know, 1st of the 26th, I’d be out working with them but I didn’t belong to them. They didn’t, you know, if I got left behind somewhere somebody might forget that I was gone and that was not a comfortable feeling, so I worked with…in 1st brigade I worked with every infantry battalion and armored cav battalion in the brigade in my first 5 and ½, 6 months. So I mean, literally, and my first exposure to it was in November ’67, I mean not long after I’d been in country, when the North Vietnamese captured the town of Loc Ninh right along the Cambodian border. Two battalions went up to take it back and they called me out of my hooch at about 1:00 in the morning and said, “Get your stuff together, we’re going to Loc Ninh,” and I said, “Where’s Loc Ninh?” and they walked me up to the air strip and put me with a squad of guys getting on board a Huey and we made a night combat assault about two miles from Loc Ninh and literally walked over land to get there, so it was my first exposure to it.

SM: Take a quick step back, your recovery from your knee injury, was that complete by the time you got to Vietnam?
CS: Pretty well. I mean, it was weak. The knee was still weak, I wasn’t in any pain but I recall before I went, before I went overseas I got a little brief home leave and while I was home I went out and tried to run around the block and I remember that, how
uncomfortable, how painful it was trying to run on it. And I remember thinking, “If I can’t run around my block in my own neighborhood, how in the hell am I going to live with this thing in Vietnam?” It just didn’t make any sense but it strengthened real quickly once we got over there. It was a lot of walking and it recovered fairly well. I still had a lot of damage in it, I didn’t actually have any surgery on that knee until 1984. I finally had ligaments repaired and the cartilage removed so I lived with it for a long time. I had some recurrent injuries later in the service and I had some real bad sprains in it in Vietnam but they always recovered pretty quickly.

SM: And a quick question going back a little bit further, on the questionnaire you mentioned that on the question that I asked about volunteering to go to Vietnam and you said, “Not specifically,” but when you got your orders to go to language school to study North Vietnamese you realized you weren’t going to Germany. Now, does that mean that you didn’t ask for North Vietnamese language training or that was what you wanted?

CS: No, it was interesting. I’d signed up for ASA which is a 4 year enlistment. We went through all of our testing and that kind of stuff. I remember one day at the end of the training day just around dinner time in basic and I’m going to say it was probably the third or forth week, my platoon sergeant came to me, Sergeant McDonald, and he said, “They want you over in the Company Headquarters, in the Company Office,” and I went over and there was a couple of guys there sitting in greens, one was an officer and one was a senior NCO and I thought, “Geez,” you know, “What have I done,” you know, “I haven’t been here long enough to do anything too stupid.” They were real pleasant, gave me a cup of coffee and I thought, “Oh no, what have I…now I’ve really done something wrong, they’re being nice to me,” and they told me I’d scored real high on the language aptitude test which didn’t come as a surprise. I’d studied Spanish in grade school and French in high school and I guess I had a facility for languages, but they said I’d scored real high and asked me if I wanted to go to Army Language School, and I thought, “Sure, why not,” you know, “I’m in for four years, I might be in for career, I don’t know, I mean, what do I care? Just send me where you want to send me.” And I said, “Well sure,” and I said, “What language,” and they said, “Well we don’t know yet, but we’ll be in touch.” And about the…several days before we graduated from basic our platoon sergeants got us all around in a big circle outside the barracks and they called us
off by name and read off our orders, told us where we were going. They told me, they
called mine off and they said, “To study the North Vietnamese language at the Defense
Language Institute in Monterey, California.” I almost fell over dead. Couldn’t believe I
was going to California. I mean, that was every kids dream in the ‘60s, and here I am
going to Monterey. So, you know, I found it out but I knew right at the time that’s where
I was going.

SM: So were you blinded by California and didn’t see North Vietnamese?

CS: Oh no, I knew exactly what I’d heard. I mean, yeah, I was blinded by
California but I also knew that when they said I was going, you know, study Vietnamese,
I have to be very honest about this and I don’t think it was a macho thing, I had a feeling
of pride that I’d been selected to go to a really great school because not very many people
go, I think less than one percent of soldiers are eligible for that. But not only was I
selected to go but I was going to go in this language. I thought, “Hell, this is okay.” A
lot of guys got selected for infantry or for armor training, some guys for cooks and I was
just listening to these guys getting their orders and their assignments and I thought, “Boy
I’m glad that’s not me. Glad that’s not me.”

SM: Okay. Alright, so your trip to Vietnam after your leave, I guess, during your
recovery from your knee injury, you went home then you got on your plane and flew to
Vietnam. What were your first impressions getting off the plane?

CS: You know, I wrote a really bad book about it all, I mean it’s a real piece of
trash, but I wrote about that and I remember the decent because it was dark and it had all
the lights on in the plane. I remember looking out the window and I could see flares off
in the distance, little tiny yellow lights on the ground and all of a sudden we hit the
ground when we landed. We taxied up to [?] terminal. They shut the engines down and
immediately it was like being in a microwave. My first recollection was this huge bang
as we hit the ground in the dark, the second one was this tremendous heat. The door
opened after a few minutes and this Air Force sergeant got on and I remember two things:
I remember this deep, booming voice, he reminded me of James Earl Jones, and then I
remember this incredible smell. I had never smelled anything like that. It was the most
ungodly horrible odor. I couldn’t believe it! I mean, I looked at the guy sitting next to
me and I said, “Larry, is that you?” I mean it was just unbelievable. I mean, nauseating,
and I remember so clearly that one of the things he said is, “By now you smell it,” he said, “Welcome to the ‘Nam.”

SM: Wow.

CS: And that was it, it’s this overpowering stench of diesel fuel, jet fuel, and rotting vegetation, weird food, fish sauce, burning ammunition and burning toilet cans and it all combined into an odor that you just never forget.

SM: Wow. Okay, we’re going to have to pause for a second so I can change my tapes again.

CS: Yep.

SM: This is tape 2 of the interview with Chad Spawr.

CS: …real clearly. They were very passive, they didn’t talk, they were very…they seemed almost sullen. I tried to speak to a couple but they looked at me like I was, you know, like I was weird. And I may well have been, you know, here was this American speaking to them in North Vietnamese, these were Southerners. They thought what had happened to their world that all of a sudden there’s a, you know, American speaking Hanoi dialect? I thought they were stand offish. And after several weeks I thought, well, you know, “Geez, we’re here to help these people, don’t they appreciate it?” I felt kind of unappreciated. I didn’t really realize or think about what, you know, what they were really were going through or what their experience had been. We were just somebody else that’s in their country. So I thought, you know, I thought my first experience with the Vietnamese people it was kind of ambivalent. You know, we were there, they were there, we had something we had to do and that was the way it was.

SM: That brings up an interesting point. Now in your Defense Language Institute training you mentioned that part of that was culture and I guess history and society, politics, what not. Did they discuss the aspect of Vietnamese history, the constant occupation of Vietnam by outside forces, whether it be China, or then the French, and how what the United States was doing now might be viewed in the same context, [?] Vietnamese?

CS: No, not with regard to what we might be doing. Vietnamese history is very, very long and rich in conflict with China. You know, there’s a great deal of Vietnamese history, and myth, and culture, and tradition that deals with Chinese occupation and
liberation. You know, the wars of independence they fought to be rid of the Chinese. I mean lots of it, the Chung sisters are great historical figures in that, I’m amazed I can even remember that. I mean, all the battles around…I can’t think of the names, but there’s a tremendous culture and history around the Chinese. Everything else after that is like, you know, second fiddle to the cultural things about China. They have a real preoccupation with China. Like the Chinese occupied their country for so long that anything else; the French, the Japanese, the Americans being there, was, you know, a footnote by comparison. I mean, we were just another one but we were not China. We didn’t really, you know, some of the…I don’t recall any of the language training or the dialogues or any of that kind of stuff involving anything about Japan. I don’t remember any mention of Japan at all. But I remember mention of French, they have a very high regard for the French. You know, French is a second language in Vietnam. I don’t remember it impacting, I don’t remember conversation about the impact of all of that on what we were trying to do there because everybody else had been a foreign occupier and invader, we weren’t an invader, we weren’t an occupier, we were there to help the people of South Vietnam. So I don’t the context was ever created for us to see ourselves as a continuation of foreign domination. I don’t recall getting that sense at all.

SM: I didn’t know if perhaps the stand offishness or the apparent unfriendliness of the Vietnamese may have reflected perhaps that kind of an attitude.

CS: It could have, it could have, but I can’t recall anything I could put my finger on to say that, you know, it was or it wasn’t. I know, I say I know, they’re a very proud people. They have a long history and you know, the Vietnamese are not just one people. There’s lots of different groups of people that form that population and culture and that’s not just counting the Montagnards, you know, the mountain people. They’ve had a long hard time, I mean, there were people that I encountered, you know, who had suffered under the French before World War II, had been guerillas fighting against the Japanese and had fought against the French again. You know, their whole life was constant warfare and we’re just a bunch of other warriors. I don’t think they blamed us for it, they just saw us as, you know, more people there doing more of what they’d always lived with. Probably kind of wishing everybody would go away and leave them alone so they could, you know, have a life.
SM: And what year was this? This was 1967 when you arrived, correct?

CS: Yes. I got there at the end of October of ’67.

SM: What were your expectations having arrived at that point? Not too long after that in November, of course, there’s the visits from General Westmoreland to the United States, claims that the war’s almost over, things like that. Did you all, were you all hearing that type of rhetoric as well?

CS: Yeah, we were hearing it. It was in Stars and Stripes. If you had a radio that you could, you know, that could pick up Armed Forces radio station out of Saigon you could hear it, but I don’t think any of us really believed it. I mean, the war may be over but from the day we got there it was 365 days until we went home. Our whole objective was to survive that year. We just didn’t…it’s hard to say any of us really paid attention to the political aspects of it, you know. I know I didn’t. Early on in my tour the whole thing was, you know, just get through this and survive it. As my [?], it was, you know, this isn’t too bad, you know, not paying any income taxes. My girlfriend dumped me, hell, I’ll stay here for another tour, you know.

SM: By the time you reached Vietnam, what rank had you achieved?

CS: I was a Specialist 4, equivalent of a Corporal.

SM: Specialist 4, alright. Your first unit of assignment, 1st brigade, 1st infantry division, what was your primary job as you understood it and why don’t you, I guess, discuss some of your first experiences, your first…and well, your major experiences with that unit?

CS: First brigade was the major combat unit in that part of III corps tactical zone, you know. 1st Brigade had the whole area from roughly An Loc and Quan Loi north of the Cambodian border. We were bordered on the, it should be the west, by the 25th Cav or the 25th Infantry Division so we had a pretty good sized area of operations. 1st Brigade was at Quan Loi, 2nd Brigade was at Lai Kai which was about 40 miles south, well maybe 25 or 30 miles south, and then the 3rd Brigade was at Di An which was down closer to Saigon. The earliest unit I worked with was the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, Company A was the primary company I worked with. The company commander there appreciated having an American who could speak the language even though he had South Vietnamese soldiers to do interpreting and that type of thing. He wanted someone there.
who he felt he could trust more because he didn’t really know sometimes if the soldiers
we were dealing with were Viet Cong or not. There were a lot of VC, there were plants
and infiltrators and he wanted somebody to kind of help, to double check to make sure
that what he was hearing was right and I was actually pretty good with him, he was a neat
guy and to the life of me I can’t remember his name, he and I weren’t together very long.
But whenever he was called out on an operation somewhere, his company went out on a
multi day operation or some kind of, like a participate in a search and destroy or if his
people were going out to occupy a fire support base somewhere, he always asked to have
me go along with him. So I remember that and I mean, that was interspersed around my
time going up to Loc Ninh with the 16th and the 18th Infantry, so I was kind of in and out
of and between the units between the battalions.

SM: What time period is this? From October to when?

CS: This went on until…let’s see, I was there for Tet which was the end of
January ’68 so that took into account November, December, January, and February and I
worked with the 1st of the 2nd and the 2nd of the 2nd Infantry which were mech infantry
units. Quarter Cav, 1st of the 4th Cavalry which was the armored cav unit of the 1st
infantry. 1st of the 26th, 1st of the 16th, 1st of the 18th all those different battalions. On a
couple of occasions I worked with the Recon unit of the 1st of the 26th also.

SM: Okay. Can you tell us about particular actions that you were apart of as far
as particular operations and activities? Memorable ones that stand out in your mind.

CS: Well Loc Ninh was my first time and it was just, I mean, you talk about
being a green rookie, man, I might as well been a new born kitten. I had no clue what I
was doing. You know, I had had the text book training and the training in the States
about what it was to work in an infantry environment, but never like that. That was my
first experience with a human wave attack, my first experience having somebody really
shooting at me. My first experience under fire with rockets and mortars. It was, as I look
back and now I think I spent that whole week, or better part of a week, in pure terror not
knowing what in the hell I was doing. I mean, I was…I was…I was a cherry. That’s
what they called us was cherries. I was too dumb to know what I didn’t know, it was just
amazing. How I survived it I just don’t know.

SM: And what exactly happened at Loc Ninh?
CS: Well the NVA, I think they sent a regimen or two regimens, I don’t remember now, to capture the town. I mean, it was the last large town in South Vietnam along Highway 13 between Saigon and Cambodia. And, you know, they captured the town, they captured the advisory compound and the air strip there. The big reason that we sent a couple of battalions in is that there was a underground communication center there, you know, like a tactical operations center and a couple of Americans were trapped underground there and they sent us, you know, to seize the territory back but also to rescue these Americans. They had pretty heavy blast doors on this thing so the NVA couldn’t get in to get at them but they were trying. So we literally went in and fought our way in and rescued these guys.

SM: Any particular things stand out as far as the action itself; what certain individuals did and how they did it?

CS: I have tried, you know, since I did the written part of this thing trying to freeze some memories of that. And as I’ve thought about that one I thought about some actions in Tet. There’s this huge sense of blur. I remember just huge noise, tremendous terror, huge uncertainty. You know, I guess the most terrifying part, well the two most terrifying things; one is seeing a man running at you from any distance and you see the light twinkling in front of him which is the muzzle of his weapon firing. That’s pretty terrifying when you realize what that is. The other thing that was…is the sense of anticipation and dread, especially at night as you’re going on an ambush control or an observation or listening post out in front of your own lines, in front of your own units kind of like an early warning. Because what you are is you’re a trip wire and you’re vulnerable. A lot of guys bought it, you know, when they got detected by the enemy trying to infiltrate and, you know, that’s what you were there for. If they heard you getting shot up they knew the enemy was coming. That was pretty terrifying to realize that you’re out, you know, maybe 40-50 yards or even further in front of your own guys, alone, you get a real sense of loneliness. I can imagine, I mean, I felt abandoned a couple times, but I can only imagine that would be what it would be like to be marooned in space.

SM: Now given your language expertise I’m surprised that you weren’t kept out of that particular duty with too much frequency.
CS: Well, you know, when you’re out there, I mean, I don’t remember any
infantry unit I was ever with that was over strengthened. They were all under strengthened.
Every gun was a gun and it’s like in the Marine Corps, you’re an infantryman first and
you know, if I was working with a platoon or a squad or a company that was under
strengthed and they didn’t have enough men to do something, I was there, you know. I
could tote a weapon and I knew just enough to be dangerous to the enemy, probably a
little less dangerous to myself and my own people. And at that point, you know, it’s
extra fire power. I think, I mean there were times when I was not out in the bush with the
guys, I was back in like a rear area or like a night defensive position while the other guys
were out and I always felt kind of, well, like I’m not doing my part. You know, if these
guys are going out in harm’s way it’s nice not to have to but you see them coming in the
next morning with their eyes all blurry and red and dirty and stinky and wet and covered
with leaches, it’s nice you didn’t have to do it but you don’t really feel like you’re part of
them sometimes. So there’s a real sense of comradely that can build up in a unit where
the guys take care of each other and it’s nice to be apart of something.
SM: Did your unit suffer heavy losses taking Loc Ninh back?
CS: Not, well, heavy. We killed a lot of them. They did a lot of company size
human wave attacks on us. We had a lot of guys wounded. Snipers took quite a toll.
Now the snipers objective was not necessarily to kill us, because if they kill us we could
leave the guy behind and come back and get him, but if they wounded one of us that
would tie us up. If they could get a group of us around a guy then they could take
somebody else out. If they got the medic that was just the best of all. You know, so the
snipers, we had to be real careful of snipers. I remember we had a lot of guys wounded
by snipers. I think we had 18-20 guys killed in that operation to about 350 or 400 enemy
troops.
SM: Wow. And…
CS: They always…anytime they came into our fire power they always took much
larger hits, much larger casualties. I mean, the night of Christmas Eve, so the evening of
December 23 of ’67 at a place called Thunder 4 which was a fire support base, 1st of the
16th infantry had along Highway 13 back in the rubber plantation a battalion of the 271st
VC regimen hit us. They hit from the north and from the west and as darkness fell they
did not see a platoon of tanks and armored cavalry assault vehicles come into our wire. They’d been out patrolling Highway 13. They came in after dark, aligned themselves to the west, facing to the west and that happened to be where the major enemy attack came. They didn’t know the armor was there and so when they launched their ground attack about 2:00 in the morning, they ran right into the muzzles of the tanks and the A cavs and their 50 caliber machine guns. The tanks were firing 90 millimeter anti personnel rounds and we killed 300 of them in half an hour, I mean it was just slaughter. I mean, there was nothing we could do, we had one tank burn and one guy wounded, you know, so it was just…it was just what it was.

SM: The enemy counts, would these be confirmed on the ground? Captured weapons and guys in uniforms?

CS: We used to have a joke that if there was a body or a part of a body, it counted as one. Kind of a grisly joke, but you know, if we could count a body, that was a body count. You know, one for one. If we found a part of a body and that was it we counted it. Sometimes if we found a part of a body and a weapon we’d count it as one. You know, if you find a major body part laying in a field like an arm or a leg, that guy’s dead. We’d take a count for it. I always…I never really understood the thing about body count, I mean I know we counted them and I know we reported them but it just never made sense to me. I just could not understand why that made sense. And that was…it made sense if and only if you’re collecting statistics because it was really intended to be a statistical war. If the statistics are favorable for us then that means we’re having a higher attrition rate on them which we did, I mean, you can’t run human bodies into mass fire power and not take heavy hits. I mean, after Tet we were taking kids who were 16 and 17 years old. We even found North Vietnamese who were 14 and 15 carrying weapons, so I mean it took a hell of a toll on them.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and describe quickly your first face to face contact with an enemy soldier as a combat interpreter.

CS: Captured this young kid during Tet and, I think it was Tet…no, I’m sorry, it was Loc Ninh 2nd or 3rd day of Loc Ninh, he was 17-18 years old, lightly wounded, mostly bruised up but he’d had some fragment wounds. He was kind of in shock but he was scared to death and some what emaciated, had malaria, he was sick, but…and I don’t
remember the circumstances under which the guys caught him, I think he was a straggler. Snatched him, brought him back to our TOC our Tactical Operations Unit and asked me to do a field interrogation. He was sick, he had some, you know, he was bleeding from some small wounds, they weren’t life threatening or anything but he clearly was hungry and he was thirsty. I got him some water and gave him a cigarette. He was exceedingly reluctant to accept anything and basically what he said, he asked me several times, “When are you going to kill me?” and I said, “We’re not going to kill you.” I said, “If you try to do something stupid we may kill you but as long as you answer my questions and as long as you don’t try to escape then you will be safe, we will protect you,” and I don’t think he ever…I don’t think he believed me. One of the guys, I had one of the guys break open a can of C-rations and heat it up, I remember it was spaghetti, it was all we could find and I gave him some food and I think he swallowed it down in like 3 seconds; he was hungry. And we had some hard tack crackers, I gave him some of that and we boiled up some hot water and a guy had a tea bag so we gave him some tea. This kid was just falling over dead, he couldn’t believe how he was being treated. A medic came over and gave him a tetanus shot, put some antibiotic on his wounds and cleaned him up, put some bandages on him and the more…the nicer we were, the more things we did for him the more he talked; I couldn’t shut him up. Every time I asked him a question he just blurted out more and more information. I mean, he gave me the name of his company commander, his platoon sergeant, the political officer, told me what weapons they had, the names of the guys in his patrol or in his squad, told me where he came from. We talked about his mother and his father and his sisters. He came from the Red River Delta up near Hai Phong and tried to build a report with him, and as I got the report built I asked more and more tactical questions and it turned out, learned what they had, learned that was the…learned the name of the regimen he was with, I can’t remember the number, I think it was…it was a regimen of the 7th NVA division I just don’t remember which one it was now. But more and more conversation and after a while we got pretty well through it, I noticed he was eyeing my weapon that was sitting off, you know, just out of arms reach and I saw him look at it and I thought I saw him twitch, and I just said to him, “If you move toward that weapon, I will kill you,” and he just looked at me, I think he knew I was serious. And he never moved again, he didn’t make a single move
and I think he knew that I’d do it. Now whether I knew I’d do it or not was a different story. But the fact of the matter was that he believed it and I think what made it more powerful is that I said it to him in his own language and I used some language that conveyed the threat. I think he knew it. That was my first exposure.

SM: Wow. And you found that this particular technique of interrogation was effective throughout most of your military experience in Vietnam?

CS: Oh yeah, I mean, I didn’t learn until after I came home when I studied, you know, things like in psychology classes through the use of physical intimidation and violence that, you know, if you scare somebody enough and hurt them enough they’re going to say what they think you want to hear to stop the pain. And I figured, I just figured if you don’t hurt somebody then they don’t have to be defensive or as defensive with you. I just never thought it was important to hurt somebody. You know, if you can get something out of somebody without hurting them, it’s much better. The other side of the coin is that, you know, some guy’s carrying a weapon and shooting at me I’m going to do my best to protect myself but, you know, this kid was unarmed and it just didn’t seem fair.

SM: And he was about 17 years old you say?

CS: I think he was 17, 16-17 years old.

SM: And was this Bu Dop special forces camp or was this Loc Ninh?

CS: No, this was Loc Ninh. Bu Dop was, like, 2 weeks later. Bu Dop was a special forces camp right along the Cambodian border but in hindsight if you read Plaster’s book about SOG you find that Bu Dop was something more than that. I didn’t realize it at the time, no reason I should have, but Bu Dop was really a launching base, a launching pad for special forces operations into Cambodia and Laos. We thought it was just a place where, you know, special forces observed the Ho Chi Minh Trail because you could see parts of the Ho Chi Minh Trail from Bu Dop. I mean, you could see the trails, you could see the cross border points and the NVA tried to over run it.

SM: Would you like to take a break for a second?

CS: Yeah, I need to go grab a soda just to loosen my throat, I’ll be right back.

SM: Okay. Before we talk about the action at Bu Dop, I was wondering about, you know, your first experience of interrogation, first experiences with an enemy soldier
close and personal like. This obviously established, in your mind, an appropriate was to interrogate enemy soldiers. Were there any times that you found that you had to deviate from that? Were there any instances where you felt like you had to?

CS: You mean get physical with them?
SM: Yeah, get physical.
CS: No, there were some you knew you weren’t going to get anything out of. I knew that if I got somebody like a captain or a major I wasn’t the guy to do the interrogation. I just knew I wasn’t going to get it. One time during Tet we got a unit political officer. This guy was just...he was just tough as nails. I’m going to say he was probably late 20s, early 30s and he was a dedicated hard core communist. I mean, he just...you could have struck a match on this guy and there was no way we were getting anything useful out of him. We just, you know, packaged him up, put him on a chopper and sent him back to Saigon, you know, for professional interrogations. How they did it, I don’t know but it was out of my hands by then.

SM: What about your fellow interrogators, your fellow soldiers that did similar activities that you did?
CS: In the units I was in I was the only one who did that.
SM: So you didn’t really have contact with others?
CS: No, I was kind of an anomaly. You know, there were very, very few...I mean, when I was there there were very few Americans who spoke the language who were out in the field with American infantry units. A lot of the guys who spoke the language were advisors, they were in radio reconnaissance units, they were, you know, in Saigon doing things that, you know, those guys did. Very few of the guys who went to language school, spoke the language, were actually out in combat units. I was, you know, one of a few. Almost never came across another American who spoke the language, and those I did were generally Green Berets because they were all language trained. Couple of occasions I ran across a guy, there was a guy named Clarence Stone who had been in Vietnam for a couple of years, self studied the language, got his discharge from the Army and came back and worked for COORDS which is a...you know what COORDS is. And I met him up in a Montagnards village near Loc Ninh and he spoke the language but, you know, by that time he was, you know, he was of civilian
capacity. He spoke it really well. He also spoke a dialect of Montagnards which
absolutely amazed me, couldn’t imagine how he could even pronounce most of the
words.

SM: Did you ever run into any kind of resistance from American soldiers in your
units as far as your technique of interrogation as obviously one of…a slightly more
passive one than the stereotypical interrogation that allegedly occurred in Vietnam? Did
soldiers want to try to intervene and extract information through pain?

CS: Oh, they wanted to intervene and kill these guys. And most often that was
guys who’d seen their buddies killed or seriously wounded or who themselves had been
hurt and wanted some payback. I think I spent as much time interrogating as I spent
protecting. Not to say that everybody was bloodthirsty, there were some guys who just
felt like they had to take a poke. If they could have been turned loose on them they
would have killed these enemy soldiers, but there are just as many or more American
soldiers who are, you know, decent, civil, you know, human beings who, you know, who
wouldn’t go out of their way to torture. But there are some guys who you know, “Just
don’t bother interrogating, just kill the son of a bitch.” I was not up for that.

SM: How did you know whether or not the information you were getting was
reliable and what kind of tests could you, or did you, use to check the reliability of
intelligence you received?

CS: Most of the reliability stuff was really assessed by the military intelligence
thugs, really I was collecting first order information. If I had something to check it
against quite often what I’d do is I’d take something I knew, I’d ask a question and see if
I got accurate information back. For example, if I knew the designation of a particular
unit I might ask the guy what unit he came from and if he told me, you know, gave me
the name of that unit I’d know he was telling me the truth there. If I had something I
already knew that I could use I could ask questions that would tend to confirm it. There
was a lot of times when you’d get information you just didn’t know. Generally I found
though that if you had a real young prisoner like a private in his mid to late teens who
was scared, hungry, hurt and you could break through with him, get him to the point
where he felt profoundly grateful that he wasn’t being tortured and killed, they generally
didn’t have a reluctance about answering questions honestly. I didn’t find a lot of
evasion except among, you know, the more hardened veterans that we came across.

SM: Okay. And most of the information you focused on order of battle type
stuff?

CS: Oh yeah, yeah I didn’t, you know, I didn’t care about much else, I didn’t
want to know about his mother and sister and that kind of thing.

SM: Except to establish repore?

CS: Exactly. What I really want, especially in the field under fire, I want to
know who I’m dealing with, who’s coming, how many there are, what kind of weapons
they have because if I’m dealing with, you know, a 51 caliber…a set of 51 caliber anti
aircraft machine guns which can be, you know, with the muzzles that can become
depressed to become anti personnel weapons, I want to know that. I want to know that
before I really care about, you know, what color his ox’s eyes are.

SM: Now were there times where this information obviously was very helpful, in
terms of…

CS: Oh yeah.

SM: …you forces dispositions, and things like that?

CS: Yeah, a couple of times with the information we got we got out of there as
fast as we could. You know, we might have come up against a, like a point unit. They
might send a squad or a small, like a patrol, out in front of an advancing unit. And they
might be, you know, maybe a quarter to a half a mile ahead. Well you take them on,
capture a prisoner, if those boys coming up behind you hear it they’re going to be, you
know, boogying to catch up. I want to know who’s coming. On a couple of occasions
we’d find out, you know, who they were and what they were and find out there’s a
company of infantry, you know, a quarter of a mile back, we’re going to pack up and get
out of here because 5 of us can’t take on, you know, a company of NVA infantry.

SM: Right. Let’s pause for a second, I’ve got to start over my tape again.

CS: Yep.

SM: Alright, so let’s go ahead and continue on in terms of looking at some of the
major engagements you were engaged in. In the battle of Bu Dop in December of ’67,
what happened there?
CS: From a larger perspective, Bu Dop is one of those situations where the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese were drawing American forces away from the major cities, pulling us out around the border and then opening them up, making them more vulnerable for the Tet Offensive. Here again, you know, is a major thorn in the side of the NVA on Ho Chi Minh Trail, and I think it was good way to draw a couple of battalions of American infantry out there and, you know, shoot them up a little bit and maybe draw focus away from the cities. I don’t remember how many...exactly what unit it was but a couple battalions of North Vietnamese regulars attacked the Bu Dop special forces camp. They over ran part of it and they did it at night and one or two battalions got up, the 1st of the 26th and part of the 1st of the 16th, were called up and sent up. Now Bu Dop was just north of Sam Bay along the Cambodian border so it was kind of a long hop from Quang Loi. First troops went in, they fought for a day or so. Pretty pitched, sustained combat. I went in with a reserve unit, a back up and by the time I got there they had several prisoners for interrogation so really what I went in to do was to sit in the special forces camp since they pushed the enemy soldiers back and assist with the interrogations. I didn’t see a lot of combat at Bu Dop, enough that it, you know, I was under fire and there was snipers and I was out on a couple of ambush patrols at night and there were hot ambushes but it wasn’t as bad as Loc Ninh had been.

SM: The interrogations that you conducted there, were these also North Vietnamese main force regulars?

CS: Oh yeah, they were all NVA, no VC there.

SM: Were there any ARVN interpreters and interrogators present?

CS: Oh yes, there were several ARVN interpreters and one of the things that I did, to the extent that I was able to, listen to them, listen to the questions they were asking, listening to the answers, and try to corroborate the accuracy of their information just kind of as an extra check. That wasn’t really effective, I mean, I was not a native speaker and so it made it kind of tough. Sometimes I’d ask them to slow down and they would. Generally the interpreters that we had, they were pretty good guys.

SM: Were there ever any incidents of incorrect information, incorrect translation?

CS: That was always subject to opinion. You know, here again they used the new nuances of the languages as natives more than, you know, than a westerner would.
So there might be some question where the guy would say that it was battalion and I might say, “Wait a minute, he said it was a regimen.” Well, battalion, regimen, those are really more western terms. What it really had been was a reinforced battalion that wasn’t quite a regiment but a whole lot bigger than a regular battalion, you know. But it forced the question to be asked.

SM: The information that you got from the interrogated personnel at Bu Dop, was that particularly helpful in the operations in that area?

CS: It principally confirmed that it was a NVA unit that was trying, you know, capture the special forces camp much as they’d tried to do to capture [?], you know, DAK To, Duc Hiep, those places, they were doing what they’d done all along the border and just tie up American forces. I don’t think we ever really saw that for what it was until after Tet started but basically what we were able to confirm, again, it was basically order of battle stuff, who they were, what weapons they had, where they had come from, how long they had been coming down the trail kind of thing.

SM: Based on that information and based on your combat experiences up against these PAVN forces, how well equipped were they and how did that meet your expectations going into Vietnam?

CS: Well, I think I was raised like most Americans were, that we were the biggest and the best and we’ve got the best of everything and nobody could come close and how stupid could you be to fight us? I got over there and it was a real shock, you know, I mean those guys lived in the jungle and they lived under very, very primitive and rough conditions, I mean, you know, virtually no sanitation, they don’t get to shower, there’s no electricity, you know, they sleep out in the rain, you know, they sleep on the ground. It was, it was, terrible conditions by western standards. But these kids were tough. These were good soldiers. Now they didn’t have advantage of the high tech stuff that we had, they didn’t have the fire power we had, but they had something we didn’t have and that was a commitment to an outcome. They were committed to throwing the foreigners out, they were committed to unifying their country. They didn’t understand all the geopolitics of it but, I mean, you know, they were Vietnamese, it was Vietnam, and we weren’t. They were dedicated to killing Americans. They trained them well, they were hard, tenacious fighters. I was real surprised at how tough they were and it was a
real shock for me to, you know, realize what these North Vietnamese went to coming
down the trail, you know, the deprivation they experienced, living under B-52 air strikes,
B-52 attacks and air strikes coming down…my God, what they had to go through. I
don’t like communists, I’m not a communists, wouldn’t want to be a communist, don’t
want to associate with communists; I’ve got to tell you something, those were good
soldiers. They were good soldiers. I really respect them.

SM: Do you think it might be that because they were Vietnamese first and
communists second?


SM: So these weren’t soviet communist puppets that you were up against?

CS: Well, you know, at the time we thought they were but no, they weren’t. I
mean, you know, if we’d had…it would have been nice if at the time we’d had the benefit
of the hindsight we have now. We would have not spent 58,000 American lives on a
cause that really wasn’t the right cause.

SM: What about the Viet Cong?

CS: Well, again, I dealt with some Viet Cong before Tet. The Viet Cong, you
never wanted to get captured by any of them. If you got captured, I guess the rule of
thumb was if you ever got captured by the North Vietnamese you had at least a
snowball’s chance in hell of being kept as a prisoner and surviving it, maybe. You got
captured by the Viet Cong, you were dead. That’s just it. They had no way to keep us or
maintain or store prisoners. They just killed you and sometimes, you know, they weren’t
real pleasant about it. There were a lot of guys who were captured who either we didn’t
find or when we did find them they were just horribly mutilated. These people could kill
their own people without remorse, they did a lot of terror against their people. The Viet
Cong, I mean, I think that they were as politically attuned and as focused and as
committed as the North Vietnamese were but I’ve just always had the mindset or the
impression that these guys were just hardened killers. They were just, you know, I can’t
put words…they reminded me of hard-core criminal killers. Now I don’t think they were
criminal, but, you know, they were doing what they believed to be right and best, you
know, trying to restore their country or liberate their country, but they were scary people.

After Tet, the Viet Cong changed. We virtually destroyed the Viet Cong with our fire
power. They massed their battalions and their regiments in front of us. You can’t do that,
I mean, B-52s and airstrikes and helicopter gunships and artillery and automatic weapons
take a huge toll on human bodies especially when they run in mass waves and we just
killed hundreds of thousands of them. Frankly I think the North Vietnamese did it on
purpose. I think they set the Viet Cong up for annihilation during Tet. The reason being
that when they eventually won the thing they didn’t want an armed, effective South
Vietnamese political force or military force to stand in their way of the reunification that
they wanted. There’s always been enmity between the northerners and the southerners
and my view has always been that the North Vietnamese set the Viet Cong up for
annihilation so there wouldn’t be any potential for a rivalry once the war eventually
ended. Because after Tet, it was all a North Vietnamese war. I mean, there were still
some Viet Cong guerillas, but they were nothing compared to what they had been. I
mean, the 271st, 272nd, and 273rd VC regiments were destroyed during Tet, I mean I
fought against all 3 of those boys. I remember those guys, I mean they were just hard,
fast, tough trained, vicious killers. And after that the regiments didn’t exist, what we dealt
with is some old guy with a 1943 Japanese rifle taking a pot shot from a rubber tree. That
was the Viet Cong, I mean, you’d throw a few shots his way, he wets his pants and runs.
You know, they were just…Viet Cong were done after Tet.

SM: Now..

CS: Go ahead.

SM: No, I’m sorry, go ahead.

CS: After that we were dealing with the North Vietnamese.

SM: Speaking of weapons, the older weapons in particular, you mentioned the
World War II vintage, normally the PAVN units, what kind of weapons would they bring
to combat with them?

CS: They were almost exclusively armed with AK-47s and SKS carbines. The
SKS, it looks like a rifle, kind of along the lines of the M-14. Small magazine, folding
bayonet, but it’s a carbine type rifle, short barrel, gas operated, very effective weapon.
It’s a good long range weapon. I was wounded with one, by one, and in fact I brought
one home with me when I came home finally. I just got tired of having it around and I
sold it to a guy. It just, you know, I just got tired of it. But that was a good weapon. The
other one, the one that I was… I mean, I was always scared of the AK, I mean you’re
scared of anything that can shoot you, but the ones that really worried me were the rocket
powered grenades, the RPG 2 and the RPG 7. Those could knock out our armor. But
you know, a guy could shoot one of those and, you know, shoot it into a rubber tree, hit
the trunk, and that thing would explode into a million pieces of shrapnel. So as an area
weapon it probably was as effective as the M-79 grenade. But it was a real killer on
tanks and armored personnel carriers. Real killer, I was always afraid of those. The RPG
had a very distinctive sound, it was, I mean, if a guy fired an RPG you knew exactly what
it was, there was never any question about it, just a real distinctive kind of a flash, bang,
crack, and then a high pitched rocket sound as the thing flew to it’s target.

SM: Did your fellow soldiers share your concern about the RPGs?

CS: Oh yeah, we were all scared to death of the damn things. You know, I mean,
everything that they had that they used was frightening. They had a light machine gun
called the RPD, it was belt fed, very light weight. Sometimes many of our special forces
guys would get it and cut the barrel off real short and, you know, make essentially a
personal assault out of it. High rate of fire, pretty accurate, fairly cheap, not real heavy; it
was a good weapon. Any kind of automatic weapons is frightening though, you know,
they put out a lot of fire and just the prospect of getting hit was just…it was just too
terrifying to consider.

SM: What about heavier weapons?

CS: Biggest thing that we had to deal with was their 51 caliber. I can’t remember
the nomenclature for it, I used to. They bundle them up both as a single infantry weapon
or as a single heavy weapon, sometimes they put them in groups of fours as an anti
aircraft weapon and take helicopters down with them. It was very, very close to our 50
caliber machine gun in fact where ours was a .50 caliber, theirs was a .51. So our
ammunition could be fired in theirs, but theirs couldn’t be fired in ours and that was very
common around the mortars, like our mortar was an 81, theirs was an 82. Their AK
round was a 39 millimeter, theirs was…what was ours, I think it was 45 or 48 or
something like that. In other words they could chamber our stuff but we couldn’t
chamber their stuff.
SM: Right. They could use our M-60 machine gun ammunition but we could not use their AK-47 ammunition.
CS: Exactly. And that’s a Soviet military…that’s what the Soviet military’d done. Smart move.
SM: How about heavier weapons? Artillery, mortars…
CS: I think their most popular weapon was the 81 millimeter mortar. I was under fire from their 107 and 122 millimeter rockets. Those things are bad. You know, they’d fire a lot of those into our base camps like Quan Loi, Lai Khe, that was always pretty scary. You could always hear the rockets coming, sometimes you could see the rockets, there’d be a little trail of sparks behind them if you’d look in the right place. The mortars, if you could hear the mortars coming you were generally safe. If you couldn’t hear it, I mean, if you didn’t hear it before it went off you were probably done. Something about the, you know, the way sound travels. But when the, when they’d fire the mortars you could hear the tube, you could hear the round leaving the tube, it was a thump and if you could hear the thump you had time to get to a bunker before the thing landed.
SM: You mentioned in some of the questions that I asked about weapons and what not, you mentioned that sometimes you would actually come up against American weapons that had been captured?
CS: Right.
SM: Any particular memorable experiences with that?
CS: Yeah, most of the Viet Cong, they’d scavenge anything they could find on the field. They had a lot of World War II, Korea War weapons. The M2 Carbines, the M1 rifles, that kind of stuff, but they fought with anything they could find. As the war went on and as we took more and more casualties and some of our, you know, our company and platoon sized units were getting beat up they began to pick up more M-16s as they overran South Vietnamese units they’d get M-16s and M-79 grenades and I always used to be really scared of coming up against enemy troops with an M-16 just because, you know, the M-16 round was just, it was just a killer. Real high velocity, you know, when that round hits it generates tremendous hydrostatic shock so you get tremendous crushing effect. When an M-16 round penetrated, it hit bone, it would climb
the bone. You never knew where it was going to come out. So you’d get a little tiny
entry hole about the size of a pencil, maybe smaller than a pencil, you could get an exit
wound the size of a dinner plate and the damage all along the path and everything, I was
just terrified of it. It just scared me. I was always glad I had one but I never wanted to
come up against one and we came up against enemy units that had them and being fired
on by your own kind of weapon is a very different experience. You get used to the sound
of an AK-47, you can always tell an AK, you can always tell an M-16, but having an M-16 fired at you is a different sound all together and it just made my blood run cold.

SM: How about M-60 machine guns?

CS: That’s just…the M-60 is based on a World War II German design. The
Russian RPD is very similar. The M-60 is absolutely a superb infantry weapon, that
thing will be around for 50 more years. There was almost nothing that could be done to
improve it, I mean, it’ll fire when it’s full of wet concrete, you almost can’t break it, the
only thing you could do to really screw it up was put it together wrong, and if you put the
gas plug in backwards it fires one round at a time. You put it in right it’ll just fire like
crazy. If you handle an M-60 right you don’t have to change the barrel very often. You
run it, you know, you run a long cycle rate, burn up a couple of belts the thing turns red,
the barrel warps and bang, you’ve got to change barrels. Not a big deal, but if you’re in a
fire fight and you’re changing barrels, you’re not putting out fire. That’s scary.

SM: Did you ever come up against a captured M-60?

CS: I don’t recall it. I know that we had enemy units doing what’s called grazing
fire on us, but you could see from the color of the tracers that it wasn’t our stuff. Their
tracers were green, ours were red. I don’t recall…I recall incoming red tracers, but those
were M-16s. I don’t recall M-60.

SM: And one more quick question about weapons, you mentioned that at times
you would be working with ARVN and sometimes you’d have to carry different types of
weapons. At one point you carried a Thompson sub machine gun.

CS: Right.

SM: What did you think of that? Did you get to fire it in a combat situation?

CS: Oh yeah, oh yeah. A Thompson is like…how do I describe it, it’s heavy.

It’s all this cast iron and heavy wood and the magazines are 30 round stick magazines and
it goes through a lot of ammunition, they’re prone to jam. Not very accurate, but there’s
nothing worse in the world than getting hit with a 45. I mean, it’s like getting shot with a
cinderblock, I mean, it’s tremendous stopping power. I don’t think, other than a 44
magnum, I don’t think there’s a better stopping power weapon around. The Thompson
makes a distinctive sound, it’s a scary looking thing. It’s like carrying a brick, I mean
you can’t carry a lot of ammunition. I used to try to carry 20 magazines with it and it was
just a bare to carry all this stuff, but the nice thing about the 45 is that that round is not
deflected by brush. If you’re shooting into vegetation, the vegetation moves. With an M-16
you shoot into vegetation, that bullet’s so fast and so unstable that it’ll be deflected by
twigs and leaves. Not always, but you don’t deflect anything...nothing deflects a 45! I
mean, hell, that thing will penetrate an engine block if you do it right. So I liked the
Thompson from the, you know, perspective of fire power and the knock down power. I
didn’t like the weight and frankly had developed a comfort level with the M-16 before
that and was anxious to get back to it.

SM: And this was a weapon that was issued to you?

CS: Well when I went with the advisory team after I left the First Division I went
to the advisory team at An Loc and they wanted us to, you know, it made sense to carry
weapons that were the same as what our counterparts were carrying so, you know, I
wasn’t about to carry an M-1 rifle. I mean, it was a nice rifle but I didn’t want to carry
that and they gave me an opportunity to carry the Thompson. Well I thought, “Hey, this
is great,” like I used to watch the Untouchables and this was a pretty neat thing. Never
got a picture of myself with it, I figured that would be cool! But so I got to carry that and
you know, it made sense because it was common ammunition. You know, if we got into
trouble and they had to kick some ammo out over a drop zone, they could kick out a
couple of cases of 45 caliber pistol ammunition and bang, I’m in business.

SM: And what about carrying an AK-47?

CS: Well there was kind of a mystique about the AK, you know, it was supposed
to be this really absolutely outstanding, great weapon, you know, it’s the old Kalashnikov
design came out of World War II. Everybody talked about it, you know the special
forces guys were carrying them. I carried one for a while with the advisory team because
some of our ARVN counterparts had them, especially the regional forces types and we
knew the ammunition was plentiful, we could get lots of it. Great feel to it, I mean stable and high rate of fire. You literally could…it was muzzle heavy, the front end of it was heavy so you could literally hang onto the pistol grip, pull the trigger, and get almost no muzzle rise because the weight of the weapon offset the muzzle climb. So from that perspective it was a good weapon. What always bothered me about it is if I was in a night environment, a night engagement, if I’m shooting a weapon with green tracers am I going to draw fire from my own guys? And the answer to that was yeah, you very well could. I did not want to be shot by my own people. So other than the mystique of the AK-47, after carrying it for a while, I gave it up. And then we came across the story and the reality of these AK’s that had blown up and you know, killed the soldiers carrying them and I thought, you know, like the story went, that this is, you know, just a cheap weapon that, you know, it could blow up and kill you. Didn’t know about the, until recently, about the sabotaged ammunition. So I decided, you know, it’s not worth it.

SM: This wasn’t just a myth? There were actually documented incidences where enemy soldiers were killed by sabotaged ammunition?

CS: Yes. If you read Plaster’s book SOG, he writes about this that somebody had the brainstorm to take some captured ammunition, booby trap some rounds so that when they were fired they exploded. They didn’t just shoot the bullet down the barrel, the whole thing exploded like a little tiny grenade and when it did that the receiver group of the weapon would explode violently and throw shrapnel into the side of the guy’s head and kill him. I remember…gosh, when was it, I remember hearing about it, one of the companies I was working for had found a body like that; the receiver had blown up and the guy was dead and his head was pretty well torn off. I remember hearing about it, didn’t believe much of it until they walked me over and opened up the body bag and there he was, with the weapon in the bag. So we thought, you know, the story that was going around was that, you know, it was a Chinese weapon, they made it with inferior grade material that when it heated up it exploded. Didn’t know until back in…just this last December that it was part of a psychological operations thing to raise doubt in the enemy’s mind about, you know, the safety of their ammunition and equipment. Didn’t know it for all these years.

SM: Wow. Any evidence or any idea whether or not this was effective?
CS: Don’t know. The stories, you know, we heard stories that, you know, some enemy soldiers were scared of it but I don’t think we ever did any leaflets or propaganda about it to plant the seed in their mind. I think probably we did but I don’t think it was real successful. I mean, when they’re coming, you know, they’re coming at you with a weapon they’ve got a choice; you know, take the risk of firing it, or don’t. You don’t fire it, you run a greater risk of being hurt yourself. I don’t think it deterred much.

SM: Other activities that you engaged in during your first tour as far as leading into Tet of ’68, anything between Thunder 4 and Tet, December and January, or the end of January?

CS: Well, you know, Thunder 4 was like the night before the Christmas truce and it was, you know, I think people generally honored the truce. There were some ambushes and some snipers and some mortar rounds and stuff like that where we were, but generally it was quiet for Christmas and New Years. January was pretty quiet, I don’t recall a lot happening. I remember a couple of times going with some guys from Quan Loi from the combat base the 8 or 10 miles into An Loc which is the province capital and poking around the town. Not a big town, but just seeing the sights and you know, having some…a bowl of noodles, and you know, buying some local knickknacks in the local stores to send home for souvenirs. Don’t know what happened to them, don’t remember that I ever sent them, but I just remember going shopping. Just don’t, you know, just not a lot happened that…until Tet and in hindsight what it turns out is that they were gearing up and laying low and not trying to get into any trouble with us until they could really unload the whole offensive. No, it was pretty quiet until Tet and then, you know, the rest is history.

SM: You mentioned briefly Tet. Was Tet a surprise to you and the men in your unit?

CS: Oh yeah, we were absolutely shocked. We were at Quan Loi, I was at Quan Loi when Tet started and Quan Loi was…it was a French rubber plantation. I can’t remember the actual name of the plantation, I used to know it but…I’m sorry, it was the Hon Quan plantation. It was built around the runway there, it was the French runway and there was a big plantation house down at the end of the runway and when we first went up there the place was called Dixie North. It was the northernmost U.S. combat base in 3
corps along Highway 13. We owned the north side of the runway and Charlie owned the
south side of the runway and before aircraft and helicopters could come in they used to
line us all up along the runway with our weapons and we’d do a combat assault across to
the south side and clear them out of the rubber so a plane could land and eventually we
got tired of it. Somebody decided we needed both sides of the runway and so we went
over and took that and put a big perimeter around it and made a big combat base out of
the place. That’s where I was when Tet hit. My barracks or my tent, it was actually a
wooden frame with a big G2 medium tent over it, was on the south side of the runway
and that night, we’d had mortar rounds before, we heard them. We could hear the tubes
firing. Quite often when they were firing a gunship would hoover with lights out off over
the side of the runway aiming toward where the mortar rounds were firing from, and as
soon as they’d see the flash of the tube they’d fire the many guns and rockets, okay, so
we could hear that. And it was kind of like a dual, you know, you’d see the flash of the
mortar tube, bang, the cobras would fire. It was kind of neat, if you’re there I guess. But
when Tet hit, they just, I thought the sky was unloading. They dumped hundreds and
hundreds of rounds on us. There was so much going on that you couldn’t hear the tubes
firing. It was going off so fast and so furious you couldn’t hear the individual rounds, it
was just a continuous roar. And then the rockets were coming in and you could hear the
shrapnel flying through from the rockets because we were in trees, in rubber, and the
rockets were blowing up in the tree tops and the shrapnel was just flying like flying
scissors and it was shredding the tents and you know, shredding the buildings we were in.
We got underground as fast as we could and we stayed underground for a couple of days.
We couldn’t get out.

SM: Wow.

CS: It was just…they were shelling, you know, the hooch areas, the residence
areas. If you keep the troops pinned down, they can’t get out and at that time they tried
to overrun Loc Ninh again, they tried to overrun An Loc, overrun everything they could
while we were pinned down. They did a pretty good job of it. But that was terrifying
and I thought being in Quan Loi the first night of Tet was as bad as it had been at Loc
Ninh just from the sheer volume of incoming fire.

SM: Why don’t we go ahead and pause for a second, let me change this tape.
CS: Yep. I can hear the thing beeping at us.

SM: Yeah. (Beginning of tape 2, side 1). So once the shelling stopped, what happened at Tet?

CS: Well, they’d shell us all night and then it’d let up during the day and we’d get a lot of harassing rounds. Anytime an aircraft, like a helicopter or a fixed wing plane came to try to land, they just stepped up the rate of fire. So we didn’t get much coming in and out, we couldn’t get many guys out to go help where we were needed so we had…essentially we had 1st of the 2nd (beginning of tape 3, side 1, conversation skips)…so as long as they could keep us tied up, you know, they did. Once it began to lift we could, you know, we could get our guys out to go help where we are needed but we couldn’t get out until the Air Force and the Navy were able to mount some sustained air strikes on the areas around us that were being used to generate the fire. They were, you know, the big stuff they were shooting was the rockets and it’s really hard to do counter rocket fire because, you know, they could lean a rocket up against a tree trunk, put a battery on it with a timer and just leave it and it would just self fire. Mortar tubes require a crew to be present, though and they just had a lot of tubes around us, you know, I don’t remember the exact number but they had 50 or 60 tubes around us and they could be anywhere up to, you know, half, ¾ of a mile away and you know, if a guy’d set up his base plate, aligned the tube toward us, drop two or three rounds, pick it up, and run like hell before the counter battery fire started. And they had guys, you know, just literally jumping around all over in the bush moving these tubes. You know, they’d set up, fire a few rounds, you know, run, set up, fire a few rounds, run, and you had 50 or 60 teams doing this, you know, it was like cat and mouse. What really got it to stop, we had a couple of B-52 strikes come in close and I remember, you know, we could hear B-52 strikes off in the distance. It’s a horrendous sound, it’s like 1000 freight trains rumbling through, but one was dropped within 2 miles of us and I never ever forget that. We didn’t know it was coming and they ran it to our north and I remember the ground just shook and the sound was horrible and I could feel the shock wave 2 miles away. Towering columns of smoke and dust and I remember seeing a tree trunk going up in the air and coming down. I couldn’t believe it, I’d never seen anything like it and it was my first exposure up close to a B-52 strike. But that took out some of
the tubes that had been firing at us from the north and that pretty well broke it. After that
we still had a lot of incoming fire but nothing sustained and we could get troops in and
out. I never forget, I went out a few weeks later to the area where the B-52 strike had
gone in and the devastation was absolute, total, and complete and I couldn’t imagine how
anybody could survive that. Unbelievable, nothing in the world like it.
SM: So after the B-52 strike what did your unit do during this offensive?
CS: They took different units of us, they broke us up into companies. My
company went into An Loc for a little while, provided some security to the American
advisory compound there because that was also the province chief’s home and they’d hit
that pretty hard. And then they took a couple of other companies, they pulled a bunch of
people together into what they call, it’s like a temporary company and they sent us down
to Thu Duc down on the northern outskirts of Saigon to…and we did a little house to	house and street to street fighting down there trying to kick the enemy soldiers out of the
Saigon area. That was pretty tough because we’d received no training in urban warfare at
all, had no idea how to fight house to house. It wasn’t what I think the guys went through
in Europe, you know, where they literally had to clear a house out room by room. We
could stand off with a rocket powered…with a light ended tank weapon, or we could
stand off with a tank or an M-79 grenade and blow a place up and clear it. You know, we
didn’t have to slug it out as much as they did. Now down in Cholon, the Chinese part of
town, they had to fight house to house much more than that. We didn’t come up against
where we were the organized heavy resistance they had there or at Hue. You know, a
few stay behind kind of guys will slow you down, some stragglers and snipers and things.
But, I mean, it was tough none the less.
SM: Were there many civilian casualties during this fight?
CS: Lot of civilian casualties, we found a lot of dead South Vietnamese. We
found a few with their hands tied behind their back where they’d been shot in the back or,
you know, had their throats cut. Lot of, you know, wealthy middle class type folks had
been captured. Some were tortured and many were killed. We found families that were
killed by the communists, their hands tied behind their backs and they were shot and left.
You know, there were a lot.
SM: And anything else memorable about Tet ’68?
CS: Yeah, a guy I knew, not real well, but a guy I knew was killed as a mortar
round landed right under him while he was laying on his rack in his hooch, first night of
Tet. Literally landed under his shoulders and blew up and just cleaned him off from the
shoulder blades up. I remember that, I went to…that was bad. I was just, there was a
sense of panic and frustration and how could this be happening and it was…I almost had
a sense of despair, how could this be happening?

SM: Was it compounded, that sense of despair, by the reports and the discussions
of, you know, “Well, we’re almost done,” again the end of ’67 rhetoric was, you know,
“The light’s at the end of the tunnel, we’ve almost won this war.”

CS: Oh yeah, you know, I’ll tell you, that’s one of the things that was almost kind
of tragically comic. I remember one of the guys talking about the light at the end of the
tunnel. I remember him saying, “It’s a guerilla with a flashlight, and he’s pissed.” I
remember…I’ll never forget that because that just put it in perfect contrast for me and
we’d heard all the stuff about how we were winning it, you know, we were winning every
battle which we were but we really never lost any major combat on the ground. We
really thought we were doing a job on them and in fact as it turns out in hindsight we
really had, I mean, this was an all out thing they did that, you know, cost them huge
casualties but it was so disconcerting because they weren’t supposed to be able to do this,
and yet they did and they did it really well, I mean, it was a very impressive thing. Scary
as hell, but as I said earlier when we were talking about the individual NVA soldier, they
were tough gutsy little guys who just fought like crazy and were very dedicated. I think
that same set of characteristics applies to the way they fought the Tet offensive. Boy,
they were tough.

SM: When did you move down to work with the advisory team?

CS: April…excuse me, April I think, maybe May of ’68.

SM: So by that time had…what kind of information was coming from the United
States to Vietnam and what were you hearing about what was going on in the United
States especially in the aftermath of Tet?

CS: Well when I got to the advisory team I almost completely lost my flow of
information from the States. I got letters, but I didn’t see copies of Stars and Stripes. We
were far enough North that my little transistor radio really couldn’t pick up AFCN, didn’t hear much. I really, other than letters from my family, I was really feeling cut off.

SM: This is when you were in the advisory team?

CS: In the advisory team, yeah.

SM: What about just before that?

CS: What do I remember, what do I…not much. Again, most of my source of information being out at Quan Loi was from letters in the family. I don’t think I ever saw a television at Quan Loi. Radio reception was very hard. If you could get a copy of Stars and Stripes it was a week or so old but it was the Army’s paper and, you know, what did you hear? So I didn’t really know much of what was going on back home.

SM: Now at what point did you and your fellow soldiers realize that, you know, after the despair and everything else of Tet it was, in essence, a military victory over the Viet Cong?

CS: I think we knew, from a tactical perspective, tactically as opposed to strategically, we knew we’d kick their butts. We knew it. I mean, you could see it on the ground. When we fought them, especially during Tet we got big human wave attacks, we could see the bodies, we could count the bodies. We knew that we’d kicked their butts and everytime we came up against them and we kicked another unit’s butt we saw, you know, it was a different unit, it was a different regimen, it was a different battalion and it was almost like we were doing a unit, like a body count version, of military units. Like, “Okay, we wiped out this battalion, now this battalion, now this battalion,” and it’s like we knew that we really, really were taking a huge toll on them. And then as Tet began to wind down…I mean, there was a time when to drive the distance from Quan Loi to An Loc which was 8 or 10 miles down a really a two lane pretty badly rutted road, a lone Jeep, no matter who was in it or what weapons you had, did not go alone. If you wanted to go to An Loc you set it up with the [Armored] Cav and they’d go out and patrol the road and, you know, you’d kind of follow them. By the time Tet was done, pretty well done and I moved on to the Advisory Team, I could get in a Jeep by myself at An Loc at the Advisory Team and drive to Quan Loi by myself, refuel the Jeep, leave at 6:30-7 o’clock when it’s just starting to get dark and have no anticipation of being bothered, okay? There was nobody left. We’d go out on operations with the ARVN soldiers we
were dealing with and see nothing, we’d find nothing. When we’d go into areas that we
knew the enemy had used to frequent one of the reasons we could always tell they were
present was you could find their latrines, find fresh latrines. We went out there and
couldn’t find latrines. We could find nothing. One of the ways you could always tell that
they were in the area and getting ready for an attack is you’d find an area where they had
a weapons cache where they’d dig the weapons up, open them up, clean the cosmoline
off them, leave the wrappings, just leave them on the ground. We couldn’t find weapons
caches and if we did they were, you know, they were rusty and rotted out. There was
nobody to collect the weapons. They dried up, they went away so we knew, we knew
that we’d put a heck of a crimp in their organization and their military forces. On the
very rare occasions for that first, oh gosh, from April until July I don’t think I came under
enemy fire once and we should have where we were. We were, you know, right along
War Zone C and War Zone D, the Iron Triangle, right along the Cambodian border near
the Fish Hook and the Parrot’s Beak, we were all over that area and I think it’s accurate
to say that from, like, late April or maybe early May until July I was not near an
incoming enemy round. They weren’t there.

SM: When you worked with the Advisory Team was this like, what are
they…what they call MATs, a mobile advisory team?

CS: Yes.

SM: Okay.

CS: It was based in An Loc, province senior advisor was a lieutenant colonel
named Raymond Suarez who was killed at Song Be by the following February.
Wonderful man, he used to get on me about my Thompson sub machine gun all the time.
He used to, you know, kid me about it. He said the thing, that it was older than he was
and I said, “Well sir, there aren’t many things older than you are, here!” You know, he
was a cool guy but it was really a tragedy, he was killed, a terrible loss. Anyway, the
Advisory Team, he was the province senior advisor to the South Vietnamese province
chief and they had a team of U.S. Army infantry and other types that were there to advise
the ARVN infantry, it was part of the 5th ARVN infantry regiment. I went to work with
them, working on a lot of things but I got the opportunity to work with an ARVN infantry
company with an American infantry captain. I met this guy, as I was coming in he was
leaving. New guy came in, he was a West Pointer, was there for 3 weeks, got his ticket
punched and he left. So I can’t remember who the company…who the captains were but
I got to go out on a lot of operations with the ARVN.

SM: What did you think of those?

CS: Not much. You got to remember that South Vietnam as a country had only
existed at that time for 14 years. It was not a well established nation. I mean, there was a
Vietnamese identity but now you had this South Vietnamese country that wasn’t really a
country yet, it had been established by an act of treaty, you know, under the office of the
U.N., but didn’t have it’s own established culture as South Vietnam, didn’t have it’s own
established political and social systems as South Vietnam. It was still part of the overall
Vietnamese culture and ethic and they were trying to create a sense of loyalty and
commitment to the, you know, Republic of Vietnam, but you know, 14 years, look back
on American history, I mean, how cohesive were we when we were 14 years old?
Probably not very. So these troops were largely draftees, they went into the field with
their wives and kids along with them in trail. They took their, you know, their ducks and
pigs and chickens and cooking gear and when they set up at night in the night defensive
position it was like the extended family was there. It was about as covert as a B-52
strike. They did not want to go out and fight in many cases. Now there were some that
did, you know, there were ARVN who’d fought the communists, who’d fought the
Japanese and the French who were darn good soldiers, but the rank and file ARVN
soldier was a draftee, did not want to fight, he did not have a lot of choice, it was, you
know, go in the Army or go to prison. The Army was definitely, you know, a long step
ahead of prison and they were not real motivated and they just wanted to survive and take
care of their families. They were not, for the most part, really good soldiers. There were
some really elite units that were excellent. ARVN airborne was pretty tough. ARVN
special forces and rangers pretty dedicated guys, but most of those guys were volunteers,
they really wanted to do it, you know, because there were patriots in that Army. There
were people who believed that they were doing the right thing and they fought for a cause
but they weren’t the rank and file.

SM: What else did you do in the MAT, or what were you specific duties as a
member of a MAT team?
CS: Well I was attached to them, I mean, I came from the 1st Division. I went
over there because I spoke the language and they were short, you know, a guy with a rifle
and so I went over there. They asked for, you know, for someone to go over and I went.
So I did just about everything. I did a lot of training...for example, I’d go out with a
squad or a platoon of ARVN soldiers to a range and teach marksmanship. I’d work with
some of the other infantry sergeants and some of the other advisors to hone their skills in
doing ambushes. Teach them a lot about weapons maintenance. You know, and we’d
work with them to teach basic fire and maneuver tactics and try to hone their skills, try to
teach them how to break out of an ambush. On a couple of occasions we were able to get
the first infantry to send a few choppers over so we could teach them air assault
maneuvers. You know, how to get into an LZ, how to load people to do an air assault,
once you’re in an LZ how to set up a perimeter, you know, how to break out of an LZ in
your patrol patterns, that kind of thing. A lot of, you know, real basic combat maneuver
training. I actually enjoyed it, I liked the teaching part of it.

SM: And that was exclusively in Vietnamese?

CS: Oh yeah, yeah. The Vietnamese ranked by soldiers spoke no English and
they wanted to learn, I mean, I used to get a chuckle out of these guys, they’d offer to pay
me. On a couple of occasions one guy offered me his daughter if I’d teach him to speak
English. I turned him down, you know, she was 9 years old, you know.

SM: Oh for crying out loud!

CS: And whether he was serious or not, I don’t know but they’d...they were
anxious to learn from us and I think that the Vietnamese like Americans and so, you
know, I’d do some little English classes, you know, with a few of them. Never had any
materials, you know, if I could get a book or something, you know, I could try and show
them what the words look like, but I tried to teach them basic conversational English.
You know, hi, how are you, what’s your name, you know, my name is, my rank is, you
know, this is an M-16, teach them basic stuff like that. It was kind of fun. The thing I
liked about that is that it was rewarding in the sense that I felt I was doing something that
added some value to their lives, but the real reward was seeing the light come on when
they got something right. You know, a guy would come out with a phrase he’d been
working on and I’d say something to him and he could answer me, he understood me.

That was rewarding. I liked that. That was fun.

SM: Was the training for combat equally rewarding? Did they pick up the
combat techniques and [?] training and everything else?

CS: Yeah, well they pick it up in a training environment but the proof of that is
when you actually get into trouble, how they apply it, and again as I said, you know, from
like April until July we didn’t get into any combat. You know, we took them out, ran a
lot of ambush patrols. It was the strangest thing, you know, I remember being in areas
where we crossed trails out in the bush that were marked with real fresh sandal prints
from Ho Chi Minh sandals and yet in June and July going out along those same trails and
seeing nothing, no tracks at all. I mean, those kinds of things told us that, you know, that
Charlie was gone or pulled way back and they were, they’d pulled way back into
Cambodia. Honest to God, I could have set up a, you know, a resort up there and nothing
would have happened.

SM: During your first tour, from October until your last days with the Mobile
Advisory Team, did you ever encounter any Chieu Hoi, or Hoi Chanh?

CS: In other words, ones that I came in contact with?

SM: Yeah, did any defectors come to you, to your unit? Did you have cause to
actually accept any?

CS: Let me think…yeah, it was funny there, at…where were we…I can’t
remember the place, but we pinned some guys down and they ran out of ammunition and
they started hollering “Chieu Hoi, Chieu Hoi,” like, “We’ll do the best we can, or we’ll
hull up and hope like hell we can make this thing work.” Really what they were was
POWs they weren’t Chieu Hois. I did interrogate some guys who came in, you know, to
surrender, but not many of those. I didn’t really deal much with Chieu Hois until my
second tour, not much. Saw some, knew they were there, but, you know, if you were
Vietnamese out in the field with a weapon and in hot contact with us you were a target,
you weren’t a defector opportunity.

SM: So how long were you with the Mobile Advisory Team?

CS: I left there in August of ’68…no, that’s not right, I left there in July of ’68. I
went back, the 2nd Civil Affairs Company to which I’d been assigned when I got there,
apparently discovered that I was on their books. They tracked me down, they thought I was still at the 1st Infantry Division, and they tracked me down at An Loc and they requested that I come back down to Long Binh and I did and by the time I got down there the colonel, Colonel Wade who’d I’d known when I got there was long gone and I reported in and the commander by this time was a major, and he asked where I had been. And I told him, and I mean, I’d gotten my pay through the 1st Infantry Division, my personal and medical records were at the 1st Infantry Division, all my mail went there. I, frankly, when I got the message saying I was to report to the 2nd CA company, I said, “Who’s this?” I didn’t, you know, I had to think hard to remember who it was and so I got there and they said, “Where have you been? We’ve been carrying you as absent without leave.” And I said, “You’ve got to be out of your mind,” you know. So I got them to join me, we got in a Jeep and we drove up to Di An which is where the division headquarters was and they pulled my files and sure enough there were some orders attaching me to the 1st Infantry Division, but nobody at 2nd CA company had bothered to, you know, keep a track of who was out in the field which, you know, really didn’t bode well. So I got back and they said, “Well okay, you’re going to be assigned down here now,” and that was August, I’m sorry, July, and about 3 days after I got there I started getting real sick to my stomach and real nauseous and somebody said that my eyes were all yellow and they checked my nail beds and I went to see the medics and they had me urinate in a bottle and my urine was all black and they said, “Well, boy, you’ve got hepatitis.” So I was back at the 2nd CA for, like, 3 days and I went in the hospital and I spent the next 3 ½, 4 weeks in the hospital at the 93rd evacuation hospital at the 6th Convalescent Center up at Cam Ranh Bay on the South China Sea. So, I mean, my whole…I think my whole time at the 2nd Civil Affairs Company was a total of about 4 days in my first year and I got out of the hospital in August and came back and they said they had a desk job for me and I said, “That’s great.” “You’re getting ready to go home, you know, you’re going to go home in October,” and I said, “Well, I don’t know that I want to go home,” you know, I’d gotten a Dear John letter from my girlfriend and you know, she’d run off with some sailor and I figured I’d show her who was tough and so I said, “I’m going to stay here for another tour,” you know, like an idiot and they said, “Well good, we could use you for another year,” and I said, “No, I don’t think so, I think
I want to get out of this chicken shit you guys don’t know who I am, you didn’t know where I was, so I kind of poked around and wanted a desk job, I wanted something that would be kind of interesting and I ran into a guy who was with the 6th Psychological Operations battalion. He and I talked and spent some time together at the hospital, so when I got back I filled out papers to volunteer for a 2nd tour and the way it worked at the time is you stayed for a second tour you could pick any unit you wanted to go to so I volunteered for the 6th Psychological Operations battalion and it was really a simple decision for me. If I could go into the 6th Psy op battalion I could do something kind of, you know, maybe different, maybe get a desk job, but I’d get a chance to earn flight wings and some air medals and I thought that’d be cool. So I did that and went to the 6th Psy op battalion in September of ’68.

SM: Real quick question about your brief, your month long, hospital stay in dealing with hepatitis. How was the treatment there?

CS: You know, it’s funny, I think the prescribed method for treating people with infectious hepatitis was complete bedrest. That seemed to be the principal treatment modality at the time but the Army was experimenting with a new method which is keep these guys really active, keep them physically challenged, and you know, don’t run them into the ground but put them on normal military details, have them fill sandbags and, you know, rake sand and paint rocks and that kind of stuff, but get them out of bed. And so when I got to the 6th convalescence center at Cam Ranh Bay and these gorgeous white sand beaches on the South China Sea, we were required to swim everyday for 2 or 3 hours, and I thought, “Well this isn’t bad, I’m getting combat pay for this,” and the food was good and the mess hall area was air conditioned and I was in big comfortable barracks and wards to recover in with mattresses and clean sheets. Wow, man, I thought I’d died and gone to heaven because I hadn’t slept on a mattress the whole time I’d been there and so I’m thinking, “This is okay, I can take this.” So I stayed pretty busy. I lifted weights and did a lot of swimming, went to the USO and read a lot of books, caught up on my sleep, got a lot of jungle sores healed up, got rid of some, you know, some skin things I had; I had a problem with like a fungus that was growing in my groin just because I couldn’t stay clean and dry and I got that cleaned up and after about 4 weeks, you know, I was feeling pretty good. Pretty well got healed up and the food was good,
got a lot of relaxation. The doctors and nurses were just really super nice people. Being
in the hospital was, it was okay.

SM: How about the USO facilities?

CS: It was kind of a big open area room with some donut dollies in it, you know, the Red Cross ladies that worked there. They were wonderful. Those people had hearts of gold, I mean, they were just, you know, they had to be special people to be there in the first place but they’d always take time to sit and talk and, you know, if you were feeling kind of down they’d talk you up, they’d play chess or play cards or checkers with you. It was nice, it was nice. It was a decent facility for Vietnam, a lot of magazines, newspapers, I caught up on a lot of reading. It was nice.

SM: We’re getting close to the end of this side of the tape so I’m going to go ahead and flip it over before we start talking about your 2nd tour in 6th Psy op battalion.

Now…

CS: I was just going to hit the john right quick.

SM: I was just going to say…

(end side 1, tape 3)

SM: Alright, so in…you went to 6th Psy op battalion in October?

CS: Actually in September.

SM: September, okay.

CS: Yep.

SM: September of ’68.

CS: Right. It was located, the 6th battalion was part of the 4th Psychological Operations group. The group was headquartered in Saigon, the 6th battalion was on Kong Le street in Bien Hoa. It was an old French hotel next to another hotel that was occupied by about 40 Australian Army nurses, well located. It was about, oh, 6 or 7 miles from the 2nd Civil Affairs Company so I literally borrowed a Jeep, threw what little junk I had in there, drove over, and had someone take the Jeep back and bang, I was there. So it was a real easy transition, its not like I had to, you know, find my way from one part of Vietnam to the other.

SM: What were your primary duties as a member of the 6th Psy op battalion?
CS: Well when I first went there, you know, the [lieutenant] colonel who was the commander of the battalion had assured me I’d be able to have a nice, safe, cushy desk job which was, after all, why I extended my tour. Once I got there he said, “Well, you know, things have changed.” Since I’d interviewed with him they’d had an ambush and one of their young lieutenants had been killed and so one of their field teams was very short of people. They generally ran 2 man field teams, either 2 Americans or an American and a Vietnamese interpreter and after this lieutenant, who’s name was John Miller, was killed they had to realign some teams and the team up at Quan Loi where I’d spent Tet now was vacant and they really needed someone up there because the 1st Cavalry Division had moved into Quan Loi replacing the 1st Infantry and they wanted Psy Ops and they said, “Well, we need you to go up to Quan Loi,” and I said, “Whoa, wait a minute, you know, first off I came here to sit in a desk job. Second of all I came here for, you know, a couple of air medals and some wings and third is I just spent a whole first tour in Quan Loi and I really don’t want to go back there.” The colonel said, “Son,” that’s when I knew I was in trouble, said, “this is after all the Army and it is not a democracy.” I knew then, you know, it’s kind of like, you know, when I got my orders for language school I knew I wasn’t going to Germany, I knew then I was going back to Quan Loi and he said, “Well you’re going to go up there and you’re going to plan and run Psy Op missions,” and I said, “Sir, I haven’t got a clue what Psy Op missions are,” you know, one of the other things I thought I was going to do was get some OJT on what it was all about. So he spent about 20 minutes with me describing what it was to plan and operate a Psy Op mission and it made absolutely perfect sense. I mean, this guy’s name was Otmer Gorrell and he had died since, I just learned recently, but he had this ability to communicate something very, very clearly in very few words. It’s a gift that I wish I had. But he laid out for me, you know, the kinds of things I needed to do. He told me who to contact when I got up there, and I got up…I said, “Well, you know, since it’s not a democracy and that’s the way you want me to do it, gee, okay, I’ll do it.” And he said, “Well you go up there and do a good job and in a couple of months I’ll promote you.” So I thought I had all kinds of things going for me, I said, “Okay, I’ll do it.”

SM: Had you been promoted since you’d been to Vietnam?
CS: No, I was still a spec 4 and I had not been in a situation or in a slot that qualified, that was a higher ranking slot. But a field team leader was usually reserved for a sergeant or a staff sergeant, so I said, “Well, you know, I’ll accept that assurance and I’ll go.”

SM: Do you remember much of that explanation that he gave you of how to run a Psy Op mission?

CS: I can’t remember much about the words, it’s just that I know that when I got up there I did it, and really it was about…it was really about creating relationships and managing relationships because I was dealing…I would be dealing with an infantry division that did not really understand the use of Psychological Operations. I mean, most American military units at that time didn’t. They do now, they use it real effectively now, so I had to sell myself and sell my service, sell my capabilities of my battalion to provide service to them, to encourage enemy soldiers not to fight, to encourage them to lay down their weapons, to encourage them to defect from their units and he said, “You have 2 principal tools to do that; you’ll have an unending supply of leaflets,” and he gave me a whole listing and inventory of what the leaflets were so I knew what I had. He said, “You design,” you know, “You decide where you want your leaflets to go, you work with the S-3 and the S-5 of the division and find out where they need things and then you figure out how to go do it.” He said, “You’ll have a helicopter and a crew available to you, you’ll have a very high powered set of loud speakers that you can use that will mount in a helicopter so you can fly aerial speaker missions, and you and your interpreter can go out and you can, you know, do whatever kind of mesSOGe you want to try to encourage enemy soldiers to lay down their weapons and not fight.” And that’s pretty much the way he put it, and when you get down to the bottom line of it, that really is what Psychological Operations does, it’s really about dissuading the enemy from fighting, trying to cause them to question what they’re doing, lay down their weapons, and not fight. And it just made perfect sense, I couldn’t figure out why someone else hadn’t figured it out and so I went up there, went back to Quan Loi. Wound up, the area where I was billeted was within 20 feet of where I’d spent almost my entire first tour so like, you know, visiting old turf again. I went to the tactical operations center for the brigade, it was the 2nd Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division and was introduced to the S-3
who was the operations and planning officer, and his name was Walter Marm, and Walter Marm in November 1965 had been a lieutenant with the 1st Cavalry Division at the Valley of the Ia Drang Valley, and he earned the Medal of Honor there, so I was absolutely mesmerized by this man. Now he was deformed because he’d taken a bullet through the face at Ia Drang but survived that and earned the Medal of Honor. He was…words just aren’t there to describe how much respect I had for that man. He, boy, I’ll tell you what, he just knew it and he appreciated the potential that Psychological Operations could play for his unit and he not only made sure that, you know, that a helicopter and crew was available when I wanted it, he assigned a helicopter and crew to me. Whenever I felt like I needed to go somewhere or an operation was planned, he built me into it, and you know, we planned how my role would be involved in that so literally I was working with, you know, the top planning officer of the infantry regiment and it was a hell of an experience. Hell of an experience.

SM: At this point you said he was a major, right?

CS: He was a major then, yeah.

SM: So what was your first operation where you planned your own Psy Op mission as part of this regiment?

CS: My first mission was a helicopter leaflet mission. There had been some signs of increased infiltration across the border near Loc Ninh, kind of between Loc Ninh and Song Bay. 95% of the province at Phuoc Long province where Song Be is located is controlled by the NVA, had been for years and you know, they used that and the river, I think it was the Saigon River, as a major infiltration zone. Apparently there had been a lot of signs of increased infiltration so we decided it would be appropriate to go up and, you know, dump a whole lot of leaflets along the infiltration routes, you know, safe conduct passes, some things designed to cause these guys to think, you know, about their families back home and he said, “What do you have that we can put along there to start causing some disruption in their units,” and I told him what I had, and he said, “Good, let’s lay it on. We’re going to put some B-52 strikes in there, we’re going to put some…” what are called, “…TOTs…,” which are timed artillery barrages, “…on certain locations. You know, we’ll put those on, and then we’ll plan leaflet missions around those.” So I
loaded up a chopper with a bunch of leaflets and took my interpreter and another guy and
we went out and threw hundreds of thousands of leaflets out on my first Psy Op mission.

SM: Now this was, you were in a chopper?

CS: Yeah, we were in a helicopter.

SM: Were you throwing them out by hand?

CS: Oh yeah. Well there’s not too many other ways to do it. And you know,
because a helicopter can’t lift all that much, you know, we had 3 people in the crew cabin
or in the passenger cabin, we could only take 8 or 10 boxes of leaflets because, you
know, bulk paper’s pretty heavy but so we took them out and we’d open up a box and
you’ve got to be real careful, the door’s open, because there’s a lot of air turbulence and
if it gets ahold of them it just turns into a blizzard inside the cockpit. Couldn’t see out.
So, you know, we’d reach in carefully and grab a handful of leaflets and throw them and
it was just very time consuming. Eventually we got to the point where we were pretty
adept to hanging onto a box and dumping a whole box at once. Then we had a lot of the
old leaflet inventory, we decided it would be fun to go out and play some games with, so
we’d load a helicopter up and the pilot would make strafing runs on a target area and
we’d throw out whole boxes and then, you know, just laugh and just chuckle really great
when the boxes would hit the ground they’d just explode in this blizzard of paper, so you
know, we had some humor out of it too. We always kind of figured if we got lucky we’d
drop a box and it’d hit like a battalion commander or an NVA regimental commander or
something, we’d bury him in paper but I don’t think we were ever that lucky.

SM: Now what did you use to develop your fliers, your brochures or whatever
that you would distribute on your missions?

CS: I didn’t generate a lot of my own stuff and the reason was that, you know,
most of the leaflets that were developed had to go through a development process. They
had what’s called propaganda development center, the PDC down in Saigon and the
mesSOGes were written based on, in many cases, on tactical intelligence that we were
able to collect up in the field. And we could get a fast turn around leaflet in a day or less.
They literally, we could get a mesSOGe, I could get a leaflet targeted on a particular
enemy unit that maybe had just taken some real big casualties or maybe we found that
their regimental commander or some senior officers had been killed, I could radio that
information in and the PDC could put together a leaflet for me. They’d put it right
through their printing process real fast and have it on an otter aircraft and landing at Quan
Loi in less than 24 hours. So I could take those leaflets, jump in the chopper, and go up
and throw those out in the area where that unit had withdrawn to and just say, “Hey guys,
so and so was just killed yesterday and 300 other of your guys, here’s pictures of them.
Are you next?” you know, “You want to come up against this kind of fire power and
take that kind of hit? Surrender now, or put your weapons down and walk away. Bring
some of your buddies with ya.” So we could do a quick reaction leaflet.

SM: And you could actually get pictures of former members of that unit and get
those on the leaflets as well?

CS: Get them dead, sure. Picture of a guy dead? Yeah, because you got to
remember Quan Loi was just a little over an hour’s flight from Saigon so if I had some
good hard photographic evidence there was always some kind of an aircraft going south
or I could just go to Major Marm and say, “Sir, I got this intel, I want to go down and get
a quick reaction leaflet, I need to go, I just need you to know.” He’d say, “Fine, get out of
here.” And I’d, we’d go fire up the chopper and we’d fly down to Bien Hoa and I’d take
it to the battalion because there was a landing pad right next to the battalion building and
I’d run it in and boy, that sucker was back that night or the next day. Oh yeah, it was
good.

SM: That is pretty impressive.

CS: I thought so. Now that didn’t happen often, but you know, when I came in
and I’d call from the radio and say, “I’m coming with this,” I mean, they already had
things started.

SM: Were there ever any times where in this capacity as a Psy Op mission
developer you’d work with an ARVN counterpart?

CS: Oh yes. Remember at Quan Loi which is only a little ways away from An
Loc was still the 5th ARVN regiment. Quite often I’d work with them to develop leaflets,
you know, the 6th battalion would get them printed. But quite often we’d develop leaflets
in support of ARVN operation as well. Oh yeah. Not a lot, but you know. And quite
often we had leaflets that would, you know, cover that. Some joint operation leaflets,
safe conduct passes, that kind of thing, you know.
SM: And what about the use of information from prisoners and defectors and
whatnot?

CS: Quite often when we do an interrogation we get some really useful
information that we’d try to capitalize on for a leaflet and you know, prepare a report of
some time or call in a report and, you know, sometimes a leaflet or something we’d put
together. I don’t recall it happened all that often. Now there was a specific case, I wasn’t
involved in it, but in February ’69 during the second Tet offensive a North Vietnamese
regiment hit part of the Bien Hoa air base which was right near where the 6th battalion
was headquartered. This enemy battalion was driven into hiding in a village called Tam
Hiep, they were surrounded and just got the snot pounded out of them. One of their
senior officers was captured and was induced to…not induced, he was encouraged to
write a leaflet to the remaining members of his battalion encouraging them to surrender
and not to fight futilely and die. They were completely surrounded. Within 6 hours of his
capture, the 6th Psy Op battalion had leaflet and loud speaker teams on sight and within 3
days 66 members of that regiment surrendered. So I mean there was real evidence of the
power of Psy Op there. Now on June 11 there’s going to be a special on the History
Channel. Colonel Raymond Dietch who was our battalion commander at the time, lead
that effort to take those guys out of Tam Hiep and he relays that event in there. I
remember it. I remember that event because when that second Tet hit I was back at Quan
Loi and the 6th battalion area was a major target for that attack. They got on the horn and
asked all of us who were out in the field teams to come back and provide additional
security and fire power for the battalion because we didn’t have our own indigenous
infantry unit it was just all these American GI s there who basically knew how to fire a
weapon but they got all of us from the field teams, all of whom had a lot of infantry
experience, to come in and help provide security for the battalion. So that incident sticks
out in my mind. That night or the night before the battalion was right across the road
from a place where a company of North Vietnamese regulars was trapped in the open and
just annihilated by helicopter gunships, and when I got back 2 days later the bodies were
still there. Yeah, they were just shot up terribly.
SM: Were there ever any other examples that stick out in your mind where you saw clear evidence that your Psy Op missions were having serious effects on the enemy and their morale?

CS: Yeah, there is one other. There was a tape that we used, it was an audio tape, called “Wandering Soul” that played on some of the cultural aspects of the Vietnamese. One of the important tenants of Buddhism is that when a person dies within a very short period of time they have to be buried in consecrated soil in a family plot. We had a tape developed which was the voice of a wandering soul who had died in South Vietnam; it was done in North Vietnamese language, I mean dialect, and it was supposed to be the soul of a man who was killed and his spirit was wondering in space aimlessly because his body was lost in the South and would never be buried in the family plot. Very haunting, very eerie, it was done with voice and echo chamber. It was very effective. I always carried copies of that tape, I have a copy of it today. It was so effective that we were told not to play it within earshot of South Vietnamese units because, you know, the North Vietnamese and the South Vietnamese were, you know, both Vietnamese, they both had the same set of superstitions. So it sometimes had a negative effect on the South Vietnamese soldiers who might be fighting far away from home, so we had to be careful about where we played it, but I know there were a number of times when I played that tape and quite often I’d go out like on a night ambush patrol with an American infantry unit with the 1st Cav and set up a small speaker, a battery powered speaker and a tape player, set that up in a tree and direct that toward an area where we suspected enemy troops were and I’d play that tape for a couple of hours. There were a couple of occasions when I did that where we’d get a prisoner later and the interrogation would indicate that they’d heard the tape and they were frightened by it, so I know that it had an effect, I know that it had an effect.

SM: Any other incidents or examples where Psy ops was effective against the North Vietnamese?

CS: Well there were several occasions where the, you know, speaker teams, my team in particular, I know, we’d be in hot contact with an enemy force that might be trapped in bunkers and we’d work our way up close with a speaker and we’d talk to them directly and we’d tell them, you know, “You folks are surrounded,” you know, “more fire
power’s coming, the artillery is here, the gunships are here, we’re holding back. We’re going to give you some time, now, to think about this. Stop firing and if you don’t stop firing we’ll open up on you, we’ll give you so much time to surrender and if you don’t we’re going to come and kill you and then,” you know, “your bodies will rot here in the South,” and you know, “your family will never know what happened to you and you’ll be dead and nothing good will come from it.” And I’ve had people come out of bunkers. I’ve had people come out of bunkers. And I know that it happens, I mean, in the Desert Storm engagement Psychological Operations had 1000s of Iraqi soldiers surrendering directly to them, so I mean, you know, Psy Ops is very powerful. I was able to see it in action.

SM: Any other examples of Psy Op missions?

CS: No, that was pretty much it. My last, my very last operation in April of ’69 was my very last operation in Vietnam. I had intended to stay a full second tour, I was going to stay until the Fall of ’69 and maybe stay for a 3rd tour depending on whether I had anything to go home to or not. But in April of ’69 I went on a joint operation with the 11th Armored Cav and with the 1st Cavalry to which I was…with which I was working. The objective was to find the headquarters of the 7th NVA division in the Michelin Rubber Plantation near Dan Tieng. I was back with the reserve waiting for them to come into contact with my speaker and my interpreter and they called us up and they said, “We think we found what we’re looking for, chopper’s coming back to pick you up, get your stuff together.” A few minutes later a Huey landed, my interpreter and I jumped on board and they flew us out and I was linked up with the point unit of a 1st ARVN 11th Armored Cav recon patrol riding in the back of an armored cavalry assault vehicle, and I said, “Well where do I hook up my speakers?” And they said, “Forget the speakers, we need the extra guns.” And my interpreter and I literally became infantry soldiers again. My last Psy Op mission intended to be one where I was going to try and talk guys out of their bunkers but the next morning we wound up getting ambushed and I was pretty badly wounded and flown out and hospitalized. So that was my last Psy Op mission. I did not have an opportunity to be a Psy Op hero, I got to fire my gun a lot in the ambush but, you know, unfortunately, even though I was wounded I was able to survive it. So that was the end of my Vietnam Psy Op career. I was hospitalized for
about 4 or 5 weeks, came back briefly to my unit back at the 6th Psy Op battalion to pick
up my stuff and clean things up and then they were going to send me home.

SM: Okay, so when did you get back State side?

CS: I got back, you’d think I remember this, I can remember when I got there. I
got back toward the end of June, I don’t remember the date, toward the end of June ’69. I
was still in a lot of pain. My leg had been broken, my lower right leg had been broken by
an AK-47 round and I’d taken a lot of…I’d been shot in the hand and shot in my upper
left leg, and I had a lot of fragment wounds, so you know, I was still on some pain
medication. I was mobile, I was on crutches, but the dates and times just don’t make
much sense to me right now. I remember getting home in June because I…and I went
right to Fort Bragg, met up with a friend of mine there and went to his house with him in
New York City for 4th of July. That’s really the first thing I really, really remember is the
4th of July in New York City.

SM: Wow. Shot 3 times?

CS: Well actually 5 but two of them were ricochets off the side of a tank, so.

SM: Wow. So you’re back State side.

CS: Yep.

SM: What kind of reception did you receive?

CS: That’s a real sore point. When I got home, you know, they flew us all to
Travis Air Force Base and then took us from there to the Oakland Army Terminal where
we got a shower and a steak dinner and clean, fresh uniforms, new ribbons and patches
and all kind of stuff. I got a medical check up to make sure that I had, you know, the
right medications so I could go home. I was supposed to go home for a…I was supposed
to go to Fort Bragg first, check into the Army hospital there and then go on a 30 day
convalescent leave. I got home, you know, got my checkup, got my uniform, they put me
on a cab, put me on a bus and took me over to San Francisco International Airport. Well,
I’m walking through the airport on crutches and a brand new uniform and some idiot
walks up and spits on me and called me a war bait, or war killer, or a baby killer, or a war
criminal. That was my welcome home, and I’ve been kind of bitter about that every
since. People who I’d been friends with and before I dropped out of college in ’65 had
stopped writing. I tried to make contact with them when I got home. They wouldn’t
return phone calls like the friendship was done, it was like somehow I’d done something
wrong like some kind of a criminal. Coming home wasn’t real good. I wasn’t…couple
of times I said I ought to go back to Vietnam, I just…you know, maybe I don’t belong
here anymore. I found much more solace and comfort by being around other soldiers and
so going to Fort Bragg was a good thing for me. You know, my parents were glad to
have me home naturally, my grandmother and my sisters, you know. My brother was
very distant from me, he was still in high school but he and I just had a real gulf between
us. That was ’69, he and I almost couldn’t talk to each other until just this last
Thanksgiving and we finally reconciled. It’s been a wonderful thing, but, you know, we
both missed a lot in each other’s lives, that’s what’s kind of hard. But coming home was
hurt. I was happy to be home, but, you know, I just…we were, well, I was made to feel
less than welcome.

SM: Did you find that other soldiers shared that experience?
CS: Oh yeah. Yeah, you know when I got out of the service and went to school
at Michigan State I was in a veteran’s club and, you know, we just…we provided moral
support to each other. If many of the other students knew that we were veterans they just,
you know, shunned us. You know, we were war criminals. I took a lot of heat from
some of the faculty members on campus who had been anti-war themselves. I guess what
troubled me early is they couldn’t distinguish between the, you know, between the war
and the warrior and I was bothered by that. One particular professor at Michigan State
made it a point in class of singling me out. There were two of us in the class who were
Vietnam Veterans, singling us out for our criminal conduct in the war and we had to…we
eventually had to have a conversation in words of one syllable about how inappropriate
that was and what the effect would be if he continued and I think he was really shaken by
that because I don’t think anybody ever challenged his authority before. But I mean, I
was in my 20s and I was pretty tough and I had just enough of a temper and just enough
of an attitude that I probably conveyed to him that, you know, this is not the right road to
go down. And a lot of veterans had to experience that. But you know, it’s been 30 years
since I been home. The only people who really seemed to appreciate what we did were,
you know, like out parents and other veterans, so we kind of paper over it.
SM: How long were you at Fort Bragg before you…oh yeah, how long were you…were you stationed in Fort Bragg?

CS: Yep, yep.

SM: How long were you there? And I assume you were assigned to the 4th Psy Op group.

CS: No actually the 4th Psy Op was in Vietnam. I was assigned to the 2nd Psy Op group at Fort Bragg.

SM: Oh, okay.

CS: But I never really knew what I was supposed to do there. They put me in the personnel shop for a while processing guys for discharges and that was kind of boring. I could do it really fast, there was no real challenge to it so I’d get my work done by 10, 11 o’clock in the morning and then what was there to do, you know? So I’d go play golf or you know, go play football or something. I wound up talking my way into a job in the intelligence section, an S-2, and found out that wasn’t any fun. About, oh gosh, late September found out that the post commander wanted to form a football team so I went out for the football team, and lo and behold, even though I was still not quite completely recovered from my broken leg, made the football team. So I wound up spending most of September, October, November literally doing nothing but practicing playing football, and that was kind of fun. We played some other military teams and we played some very small colleges locally and just, you know, just…they were tackle football games with pads and everything and it was fun. And unfortunately I got my knee blown out again in that so that ended my potential career with the NFL. And after that they didn’t know what to do with me, so I wound up spending about 3 months helping to train Green Berets and teaching these guys things, you know, that I’d learned in Vietnam. I was teaching Green Beret troops in training in Soviet block weapons and use of small scale demolitions. That was kind of interesting, we used to call them the Green Beanies. But I always felt like I was doing something important because these guys were all going to Vietnam, and if I could teach them how to, you know, properly field strip any Soviet weapon blindfolded and use it, I felt like I was doing something that might save their lives.

SM: Absolutely.
CS: I actually ran across one of the guys I trained back in 19...oh gosh, 88. He was the Chief of Police in Thiensville, Wisconsin and we kind of recognized each other and we struck up a nice friendship so that was kind of nice.

SM: Hold on a second, let me go ahead and change this tape again.

CS: Yep.

SM: So how much time did you have left in the service once you got to Fort Bragg, played football for a few months, then started training Green Berets?

CS: Well the part we didn’t talk about was before I went to Vietnam, when I was at Fort Knox. The Army had a program where if you had less than 2 years into your tour...into your enlistment, they would give you what they called a short discharge if you reenlisted for 6 years and they give you a bunch of cash to do that. I thought, “Well hell, I could use some cash.” So in August of ’67, yeah, August ’67 I took a discharge and then immediately reenlisted for 6 more years so when I got back to Bragg in ’69 I still had 4 years to go. But I didn’t mind that, I mean, I was really thinking about making a career. I mean, when I went in the Army I had no sense of personal discipline, my life was a shambles, I couldn’t hold a job, I couldn’t stay in school, I had no money. Honest to God, the Army gave me an opportunity to get my head together. I got to learn how to, you know, do some leadership stuff, I got to learn some sense of personal responsibility, I developed a much greater sense of personal self discipline, they even...I mean, I knew about the GI Bill, but when I got to Bragg I found out about a program that they didn’t advertise very well that if I got accepted to a college somewhere the Army would pay all of my tuition and books if I’d just pass my classes and it wouldn’t affect my GI Bill. Well I looked at that and I thought, “Hell, I don’t ever want to have to go through a situation like Vietnam again, maybe a way to avoid that is to get a college degree.” So I started taking classes at North Carolina State and everywhere I stopped after that for the next 4 years I took classes and by the time I got out I had 3 years of my undergraduate degree done at Army expense and I had 4 years of GI Bill left. So I used that to finish my senior year and I got 2 master’s degrees with it, and that worked out real well, so you know, the Army put me in a position where if I used my head or learned how to use my head I could benefit from it. So it was a good experience for me.
SM: Where did you go from Fort Bragg, did you...were you assigned other bases, other places?

CS: Yep, I realized that, you know, doing these odd jobs at Bragg wasn’t going to be real rewarding and probably was not going to get me anywhere if I really wanted to have a career. There was no place for a Vietnamese linguist who was also an infantryman to go for a career. I mean, I could have gone airborne and gone to the 82nd Airborne, or could have gone to Special Forces or something like that but all those boys are going back to Vietnam and I didn’t want to do another tour in ‘Nam. So I was looking around and trying to figure out what I wanted to do next so I took some aptitude tests and one of the things they told me was that I had a real dent for intelligence type work; data collection, data analysis, that type of thing. And I started reading about it and then met a fellow who was in Army Counter Intelligence and I thought, “That’s pretty interesting.” So I talked to some Counter Intelligence agents and it seemed kind of exciting, you know, doing security, investigations, back ground work, you know, I got the James Bond kind of mentality so I signed up for Army Counter Intelligence School which is a whole different career field and was accepted. I left in March of ’70 from Fort Bragg to go to Fort Halberd, Maryland where I spent 16 weeks training to be a Counter Intelligence agent, and I enjoyed that. It was a good school, I got college credit for it, so I spent the rest of my time in the service as a counter intelligence agent.

SM: Okay. Where were you stationed?

CS: My initial assignment was in Norfolk, Virginia. I was assigned as the what they call the J271 which is the Counter Intelligence sergeant for the Counter Intelligence office for the Atlantic Fleet and Atlantic Command. It was a joint four service command; the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines headed by a 4 star Navy admiral. He was, on the one hand, he was the commander of the Atlantic Command which is all Naval and Marine Corps commands in the western Atlantic. He’s also the commander of the entire Atlantic Fleet and commander of the Allied Naval Forces in time of war. They operate what was called a J staff or a Joint staff, it’s populated by officers from different services. The J2 or the intelligence function was a Navy captain. The Counter Intelligence was an Army major and the Counter Intelligence NCO was me.
SM: Any interesting events or incidents while you were working in Counter Intelligence there?

CS: Yeah, I was one of the first people to notice one of the first visits of a particular type of Soviet submarine to Havana. And I can’t even begin to tell you how I discovered that but I did and I noticed it, nobody else had noticed it and I reported it and got a commendation for it.

SM: Wow.

CS: So that was pretty neat. A lot of the work that I did was really around conducting security investigations. We did some Counter Intelligence operational planning because, you know, there was a lot of stuff going on, a lot of anti military stuff going on even inside the military and we did have a problem with defectors and stolen, classified information so I worked on a lot of those kinds of projects. I left that in June of ’71, I got orders to go back to Vietnam for a third tour as a counter intelligence type and was not real excited about it but I thought, “What the hell,” you know? CI type in Vietnam can’t be too bad. But while I was home on leave my dad was seriously injured in a car accident, almost died, and so they assigned me to stay in my home town and work at a local counter intelligence operation in Michigan. So I spent my last 3 years literally working within a couple of miles of where I grew up. There was no work to do, they had an office but almost nothing to do so I continued going to school and got all the way through my junior year at Army expense. It was a nice arrangement, I had an apartment, I was back on my home turf, I was going to Michigan State, the Army was paying the bill, and once a week I went to the office to see if there was any work, there almost never was so I just kept on going to school. So I finished my career, my Army career in academia. It was wonderful.

SM: That’s amazing.

CS: Yeah, it was a nice payback for 2 tours in ‘Nam.

SM: Your counter intelligence work before you went back to Michigan, that was…was it anything surrounding physical security and things like that?

CS: Yeah, we did some industrial security surveys, you know, to make sure that there weren’t bugs and that kind of stuff. We did background investigations, we did certain kinds of tests to make sure that [...] and listening devices weren’t available, we set
up a window, what you call window securities so that people couldn’t use lasers to detect
vibrations caused by voices against windows. We did a lot of that kind of stuff. We did
security assessments of buildings, we did background investigations on people who were
in very sensitive positions in the industry, helped to facilitate that process so, you know,
industrial contracts could be performed. A lot of those kinds of things, did a little bit
of…some surveillances on some defectors, people known to be defectors, people
trafficking with stolen military weapons. Had the chance to work in conjunction with
some federal law…you know, local and federal law enforcement agencies. I had a
chance to make some real nice contacts with some really good law enforcement people.
One fellow is still a police officer in Michigan, became probably one of my very closest
friends to this day and he was best man in my wedding and our families are still very
close. He’s going to retire in another couple of years, after 30 plus years of police work.
So I had an opportunity to really meet some very nice people.

SM: Now, would you work in terms of, like, surveillance weapons dealers and
things like that, would you work also with the CID?

CS: Yeah, the CIDs jurisdiction is essentially limited to military bases. We
would provide conduits for information between us and local and federal law
enforcement folks but, you know, we had jurisdiction to surveil and in some cases arrest
known deserters, especially those who were trafficking stolen military weapons.

SM: Anywhere, you could arrest them anywhere?

CS: Yes.

SM: Wow. Okay, that’s a lot of authority.

CS: Well, you know, it is on paper but in reality if we were going to go to that
extent, to that length, we would involve local law enforcement officers to actually make
the collar. It was just…it just avoided a lot of potential constitutional issues and legal
issues so we’d do the work and then…and really get things lined up, set the operation in
motion, coordinate with local or federal law enforcement people to actually make the
bust. It was a lot safer, you know. One of the things was an anomaly; we could actually
get a warrant and make an arrest, but we weren’t authorized to carry weapons. And you
know, quite often if you’re going to go after somebody who’s that bad you want some
muscle. We had some really great contacts with FBI, those people, you know, they were
great to work with and the local police agencies as well. Real comradely in law
enforcement types. Interestingly, of all the different publics who had the opportunity to
interact with Vietnam Veterans, I found the highest degree of respect and admiration and
appreciation from police officers for my service in Vietnam. I found that police officers
really respected and appreciated who I was and what I did. I may have a bias about that
because my dad was a career cop, but maybe that’s real, maybe it’s not. I think it’s real.
SM: What did you think about the Vietnam War when you came back?
CS: Oh boy, I puzzled about that for quite a while. By the time I got back, I was
beginning to have some questions about what in the hell it was really all about. It was
dawning on me, I mean, when you’re up close and personal in something you don’t think
about, you know, the 30,000 foot analysis of it, and that was certainly true for me. I
mean, when I was in it I was fighting it, I was trying to survive, you know, help my
friends, get through my year or whatever tour I was going to do, and come home. I didn’t
have a real sense of the geo-political side of it but toward the end of my tour and as I was
first home I began to wonder what the hell was it about? What are we dying for? What
are those people dying for? What’s the point? I was troubled that I was even asking
myself the questions, but even more troubled that I didn’t know the answers. So I started
reading, you know, I read the Pentagon Papers when they came out. Now that really
troubled me. I read the Mike Gravel edition. In fact, I had to re-read them when I was a
senior in college, I took an honors course in the Pentagon Papers and boy I’ll tell you
what, I got a real sense of feeling of betrayal. I came to conclude that the politicians who
sent us had not a clue what they were doing. A lot of cold war hysteria, cold war macho,
a tremendous fear of a hegemenistic, you know, Soviet world dominating kind of thing
that was no more real than Peter Pan. You know the Soviets posed, I think, a real serious
threat of nuclear war, but in terms of the ability to overthrow this country or capture this
country or rule this country, I mean hell, they couldn’t rule themselves much less us. We
know that now. But I came…it began to come to me that we didn’t have a purpose in
Vietnam like we did in World War II. You know, we didn’t capture anything, we didn’t
hold anything, we just killed a lot of people. And there were times that, you know, when
I was in my first tour and during Tet we’d take a hill, they’d take it the next day and we’d
have to go take it again. Well, you know, if you lose 5 or 6 guys at a time and you give it
back, what did they die for? So I came to…I began to come to a conclusion that it hadn’t
been…we weren’t doing something that had a real purpose or goal, and I began to feel
really betrayed. It upset me that, you know, a lot of guys that I knew are dead and that
hurt. Sometimes it still does. I’m still very, very upset and irritated with Lyndon
Johnson and Robert MacNamara because they knew and they lied. I’m upset with Nixon
because they…you know, he had his plan but he…his plan was to get reelected and then
do something and, you know, sacrifice American lives in the process so I’m profoundly
distrustful of politicians, profoundly distrustful of the congress, profoundly distrustful of
those who claim to have a picture or a vision or a view that would justify the expenditure
of American blood. I’m just real cynical about it.

SM: So what do you think about the use of American forces and their current
deployments like Kosovo and other places; Haiti, Somalia?
CS: Well, here’s the question; what are they supposed to accomplish, how are
they going to do it, and when are you going to bring them home? I mean, what does it
mean…if you send forces in to accomplish a task, when they accomplish it they should
come home. What’s the task we’re supposed to accomplish in Kosovo? What’s the task
we’re supposed to accomplish in Bosnia? What’s the task we’re supposed to accomplish
in Haiti or Somalia? And if we can’t define the task with some degree of relative
precision, then we shouldn’t go because we can’t define what we’re going for and we get
our kids engaged, how the hell do we know when to bring them home? And I worry
about that. I really worry about that. I have two teenage boys that, between you and me,
I’m just not interested in sacrificing like that. I’m just not. I mean, you know 3 million
men and women went to Vietnam, what the hell did we go for? I mean, if it was about
beating the enemy and taking his territory and you know, capturing his leaders and
executing them and running the country and yada de yada, okay, that’s different. Is that a
laudable goal? I don’t know. What I have fought for, at the age of 18 if my country said
we need to go fight for this, well, okay, you know, I’m 18 years old, I’ll go. As a
relatively more mature 52 year old, I don’t think so. You know, what does it benefit this
country, what does it benefit the people of this country, how does it benefit the people of
the world who are going to be affected by it? If it doesn’t, let’s just stay home and stop
messing around with this.
SM: What do you think about the argument that’s been made recently that one of the benefits of fighting in Vietnam was that in Stalin communism in North Vietnam, at least until 1975, it allowed for the development of more stable, capitalistic, democratic republic type governments and economies in the rest of Southeast Asia?

CS: Nah, I don’t buy it. I don’t buy it. You know, I don’t think Ho Chi Minh ever had any intention of doing anything more than unifying their country and I think their principal…they had two principal objectives there; one is to gain independence and autonomy for their country, for their homeland, one. And two, to provide the strongest possible bulwark they can against future Chinese hegemony. They’re always afraid of the Chinese, they should be. I don’t think they ever had the intention of capturing and running Laos or capturing and running Cambodia. I mean, I think there are principally communist oriented countries…governments in those countries, but they’re principally…beyond that they’re also principally nationalistic. I don’t think Ho Chi Minh’s a great hero or patriot except to the Vietnamese, but his whole thing was about, you know, securing his country’s freedom and communism was a way to do it. If he could have done it by being, you know, a member of the Mickey Mouse club and that would have worked, he would have done that because his whole thing was about securing his country. I don’t think the Vietnam War did anything positive to buy time for anything else to happen there, I just don’t buy it.

SM: What are the most important lessons we should take away from Vietnam, then?

CS: Well, there’s some things worth fighting for. Make damn sure that when you go to fight you know exactly what they are. That’s one. Another is before you spend a single drop of American blood or American treasure make sure you know what you’re going to do, make sure it’s the right thing to do, go do it, and when it’s done get out. I mean, if you’re not going to do those things, don’t do it. And the other thing…one of the things I think we learned and I think it may have been the end of our relative and perpetual innocence as a nation, I mean, you know, when you get down to it by the time we were out of Vietnam we still weren’t 200 years old, so in that sense by comparison to, like, China, you know, we’re still in our adolescence. I think…

(tape skips)
SM: ...infancy, I’m sure.

CS: Oh absolutely, and they may well be right. You know, I think that Vietnam signaled the point at which this country finally grew up and matured in international/political sense. I mean, from the Civil War forward, this country began growing into being a world power. The Spanish/American war submitted us as an international power. World War I really nailed it down, World War II, Christ, we owned the world after that practically. The first questionable result was Korea. Vietnam we got our come-uppance. You know, we thought American power and the mystique of America would be enough to sway these poor, ignorant peasants and what we didn’t realize is that they weren’t impressed. I think Vietnam marked the end of...really marked the end of our innocence. And I think we started to grow up from that. And I think it’s given us the ability to look at something and say, “Is this important? Is this the right thing to do?” And I think that it’ll be a long time before we’ll be able to answer those questions really intelligently and answer them right the first time, but I think we’ve taken the first steps in that direction. We cannot be the world’s policemen and I think that whole situation in South Central Europe is still a vestige of the Cold War period. I don’t think we can be a cop. I think we have to be careful not to put our nose in where it doesn’t belong. On the one hand, it can be argued that any place where there is violation of human rights then we should be there. You know, I’m sorry, I guess I just don’t agree. You know, it’s not...it’s our place to help but it’s not our place to shed our blood. I guess I’m...I’ve gotten cynical enough that...the people screaming the most about how we have an obligation to be where those things are being done, now those people should go and their kids should go first. Once you’re there, once the congressmen are there, their kids are there, then you know, then start talking about sending the rest of the kids. Get some skin in the game and then, you know, then I’ll be happy to talk to you about whether my sons participate or not. I think it’s too easy for people to argue intellectually that we should or shouldn’t shed American blood when they don’t have any skin in the game. I think we’re beginning to learn that. I don’t know if that’s a clear answer or not, but kind of feels like it might be.

SM: Well, it is, but I’m curious. What do you think about all of that in the context that we do have an all volunteer force?
CS: Well, let me give you my read on that. I think we have, obviously we do have an all volunteer force, and I work fairly regularly with people from 4th Psych, Psychological Operations group. I’ve been a guest speaker at some of their functions, I was a guest speaker at their recent [1999] Christmas dinner, so I’m involved with those folks, I get a chance to see these people and interact with them. Their former group commander and the current group commander are personal friends of mine. I like these people a lot. But the real truth of the all volunteer force is that it is not a democratic force. It does not mirror or reflect the population of this country. It’s generally a lower socio-economic force, it’s a relatively less educated force than the rest of the…than the major segments of the rest of the population, it’s increasingly becoming a military made up of larger and larger numbers of minorities, it is not a democratic force. It is not lead by…it is not lead or participated in by people from upper socio-economic classes and I think that’s a detriment to us. I really do. I’m not going to tell you that I believe in national military service, but I think that there are major segments of our country that, as I said before, have no skin in the game and they have no commitment to anything bigger than their own personal welfare and if they can send someone else off to do it who happens to be a volunteer, so much the better. They benefit, someone else pays the price.

So I have a problem. Now, the other side of that is I’m not sure what the answer is. I don’t like the draft unless it’s a truly democratic draft and everybody gets stuck going. There should be no exemptions, you know, as there were in Vietnam. What it did was allowed the children of the wealthy or those who could afford to go to college to sit the war out. I have a fellow I grew up with, he lived three doors…three, four, five houses down from me, who took over 200 credits in community college, still doesn’t have a degree 30 something years later but he stayed in college and kept his deferment. And he’s very proud of that, he told me I was stupid for going. That was probably the last time I ever saw him. I’m just…I guess it’s just not right. I’m bothered that in our great democracy, and I really think that we are, I mean, it’s overstated to say we’re a democracy, we really aren’t, but in this great, free society people have a right to choose and a right to participate and a right not to. But the problem I have is that the burdens of citizenship are not shared equally. I think that’s unfair.
SM: Let me take a step back real quick, one more last question about Vietnam.

The reason I want to ask this is you raised the issue of commitment and one of the questionable policies of the Vietnam War was the 365 day rotation system and as a psychological operator, someone who worked in that field and talked a lot with Vietnamese and I guess worked to understand the psychology of the Vietnamese, what kind of message do you think it sent them that the average American was only there for 365 days then going home?

CS: You know the difference between…I mean, if you look at a plate of bacon and eggs, you know the difference between a chicken and a pig? Chicken’s involved, right? I’m sorry, the chicken’s involved, the pig is committed, okay? The Vietnamese were committed, we were only involved. I think it sent a message to them that this country is committed to them, was committed to them and to whatever the struggle was but only temporarily. I think the overall larger message was that we’re only going to send our troops part time and our commitment for the longer term was questionable. What could they really see us as providing of value to them other than weapons to blow up the enemy? I mean, there was no serious nation building that went on at the time, no serious strengthening of democratic foundations and institutions there, no reduction in the oppression by the political elite, no improvement in civil liberties and constitutional democracy in that country so if you look at the whole scope of things, I mean, the economy suffered, the citizens suffered, the political system suffered, the educational system suffered. I think that the very fact of our very temporary, short term, uncommitted involvement other than for pure military power sent a very powerful message. I mean, none of us could be committed to what was going on in Vietnam unless we personally volunteered to stay extra tours. I mean, our whole job was to survive for a year, and damn don’t get in our way, I mean, don’t keep me from surviving my tour, you know, I’ll hurt you! I think the whole idea of the rotation, the one year rotation, while it’s good for the troops in an open ended, undeclared war, you know was good for us because it gave us a picture of the light at the end of the tunnel, but I think the real serious thing about it was that we did not have a commitment to a particular outcome which should have been, “At some point this will end.” There was other pieces that come from that, I mean, when you look at our infantry units, our combat units, our officers
were not with us through our whole tours. An officer would come into Vietnam, an
infantry or armor or artillery officer, he’d be in the unit for maybe 4, 5, maybe 6 months
or less before he’d be rotated out. He’d get a, you know, punch on his ticket and he’d go
off to another assignment. It was even worse with West Point graduates. There was a
young captain, he was a brilliant guy, probably one of the brightest people I’d met up to
that point in my life. His name was William Shiner and he was an engineer graduate,
very high level graduate out of West Point. He came into our advisory team and was
there for 11 days and was reassigned to Saigon. He got his ticket punched. You know,
we barely got to know who the hell he was. I think it was very deleterious to our ability
to drive something bigger than just short term, tactical issues.

SM: Hold on one second.

CS: Yep.

SM: Okay, so another Vietnam related question, what kind of interactions did
you have with SOG personnel, PRUs, Phoenix program, operatives, I6 personnel, and I
guess, the spookier sides of the war?

CS: Well, I was familiar with SOG and I knew who they were and we had some
interaction with them while I was at Quan Loi with the 1st Cav with 6th Psy Op Battalion.
Quan Loi was a major launching base for SOG operations into Cambodia and they did
make active use of Psychological Operations. They did make some use of people who
spoke the language. The SOG guys, you know, they were all Green Berets, some of them
were pretty neat guys. I mean, you know, these were real war fighters and these were
dangerous guys who did dangerous things and loved the excitement and, you know,
they’d share with you, you know. I had an opportunity before my last operation with the
11th Cav and the 1st of the 8th Cav before I was wounded to do a little…to get a little
exposure with SOG on some Phoenix activity. And Phoenix, as you probably know, was
a program designed to identify and neutralize wherever possible the Viet Cong political
infrastructure. There was some Phoenix activity in Binh Long province where Quan Loi
and An Loc were located but again, a lot of that had been damaged pretty badly by Tet,
you know, 2 years before or a year and a half, two years before. But I did have an
opportunity to see some of the SOG targeting information, or the, I’m sorry, the Phoenix
targeting information. They knew who the infrastructure was. I got a chance to go on a
couple of raids with them to snatch some VC tax collectors. On one occasion, had an
opportunity to interrogate one of them but it was wholly unauthorized and it was not part
of what 6th Psy Op battalion was doing, I just had some free time and had struck up a
relationship with a couple of the Phoenix operators through SOG and had an opportunity
to participate. It was kind of exciting, but I only did it a couple of times.

SM: What did you think of that project, Phoenix, to identify, neutralize Viet
Cong infrastructure?

CS: Well, if one of the things you’re trying to do in building a nation is destroy
the ability of the opponent to operate politically, I thought it was pretty effective. Really
it had kind of a, if you look at it from a high enough level of extraction, had kind of a
noble purpose but it was plainly a killing program. I mean, you neutralize people either
by putting them in jail or killing them, or turning them, you know, and with defectors you
never really know. There were…the real operational downside of Phoenix was that it
gave a lot of people an opportunity to exercise vendettas against long standing enemies
and it may not have been a Viet Cong person at all. But you know, somebody in a
position of power could say, “Hey, you know, this guy’s a Viet Cong,” and really what it
was is, you know, they cheated them on their taxes or something. So they rat him out as
a VC and bang, the guy’s dead. So I think Phoenix, from 30,000 feet, had a laudable
objective but operationally the way the Vietnamese intended to use it, it was really a
matter of, it was a political tool. And I think we kind of got roped into using it.

SM: You mentioned not knowing about the defector. Was it ever discussed with
you by Vietnamese counterparts or by other people not knowledgeable in Vietnamese
culture and whatnot, or did you just pick up on your own the notion and Vietnamese
culture that changing sides is okay?

CS: Well I don’t think it’s anymore entrenching to Vietnamese than to any other
culture, I mean, I guess the only culture I could think of where…no, I was going to say
the Japanese would be pretty hard to have much of that going on but they’ve got their
own problem around that as well. No, I think it was not specifically entrenching to the
Vietnamese, I think anytime you have someone who is allegedly committed or has
committed something and turns their back on it, you’ve always got to question what
they’re going to do tomorrow, and I think that’s the way most people are with defectors.
Once they change, I mean, even if they change their working for you, I don’t think you can really trust them, so I think there’s always a question, you know, “Would I turn my back on somebody who is a defector?” Probably not. And that, you know, we always had an open question about the Hoi Chans and the Chieu Hois. You know, the North Vietnamese who came over into the Hoi Chan program or the Viet Cong who surrendered and defected under Chieu Hoi because there were cases where some of them were double agents. They’d come in and they’d kill somebody and disappear. Or you know, they’d do something else but you always had to wonder and I don’t know if you’ll ever talk to Jack O’Niel, he is a good friend of mine now. We hated each other in Vietnam but we both ran field teams over there and we both worked with Chieu Hois as part of our field teams on occasion, you know we’d lead field team operations, you know, Psy Op operations where we’d take a couple of these guys out to broadcast to their buddies in one of the old units. You always kind of had to wonder, especially, you know, if you’re alone with them, they’ve got a weapon, you’ve got a weapon, you know, do you turn your back on them? Can you really trust them? And the answer is you don’t really know. So I always worried about defectors.

SM: Those sound like pretty interesting projects there.

CS: Yeah.

SM: Taking these guys up to talk to their own units?

CS: Yeah, I have a picture of Jack O’Neil with is Ho Chan, it was a North Vietnamese from up in the Hanoi area, picture of them, two of them on a leaflet mission…on a handheld speaker mission. Jack felt he had a good, close relationship with this young fellow and you know, maybe he did. On a couple of occasions I took a squad, you know, maybe 8 or 10 Chieu Hois who had allegedly demonstrated some loyalty, armed them, and went out on a Psy Op operation to go out to, you know, hand spread some leaflets along a trail. But, you know, one American out there with 5 former Viet Cong who are well armed, you tell me the odds.

SM: You made it back!

CS: Huh?

SM: You made it back.
CS: I made it back, I was lucky. Maybe they were good guys, maybe it wasn’t my time. But yeah, you have to ask the question. I remember sitting on a hill, actually on a ridge with my 5 Chieu Hois looking for a place where we were going to leave a bunch of leaflets and maybe a couple of booby traps as well, and hearing some jets coming over. Suddenly this area about 500 yards away from us, you know, down at the far side of the ridge, just erupts in artillery fire and you know, we’re sitting there watching, we’re at a pretty safe distance. Well these F100s come in and start doing air strikes in napalm and, you know, they’re dropping these things at 400 miles an hour and after a little while we could feel the heat of the napalm, it was getting kind of close. And I’m watching my Chieu Hois and their eyes are real big and they’re thinking, “Oh jeez, you know, what if this stuff gets close?” and so I asked one of the guys, “How you feel about this?” He says, “I been a lot closer than this. I was on the receiving end of this.” As we’re watching we saw a number of enemy soldiers come flushing out of some bunkers that were being assaulted by the air and they came our way and we literally ambushed them. Captured one, killed the rest. So in that situation my Chieu Hois really came through, you know, they set up the ambush, they set up a Viet Cong style ambush and I was just a participant in it. I had never been in that style of ambush and it was devastating.

SM: What kind of ambush system did they use?

CS: They use a horseshoe. Most of ours were L shaped or like a linear ambush. They set up a horseshoe. There was 6 of us and they sent 2 guys along the trail. You fire on angles so you’re not firing into each other. It was devastating. I didn’t think you could do it with 6 guys, but they did. 3 guys on a side...well actually the way it works out is 2 guys on one end where they close off the trail so you’ve got people in a cross fire and these guys came running into the cross fire and they were done, I mean, right now. There was no question about it, you know, we hit them hard and they were done.

SM: Sounds great.

CS: They got a head on from the flanks, you know, pretty scary.

SM: Anything else you want to talk about?

CS: Oh gosh, I guess we talked about so much. The food wasn’t bad, ate a lot of rice. I do remember the Americans opened a milk plant over in Saigon and they took dry
milk over and reconstituted it with liquid milk and put it in cork containers. The white milk was just terrible. But they put huge quantities of chocolate and they made chocolate milk and that stuff was like ambrosia. I still remember that. I’ve had chocolate milk since I’ve been home but no chocolate milk has ever tasted as good as that did and I think…I thought about it a long time, you know, how could reconstituted chocolate milk taste as good as that, how could nothing else taste that good and what I’ve realized it wasn’t the taste of it, but it was a touch of home. It made me think of home. Oh yeah, one other thing. There were times in my, especially in my first tour, when I felt almost no sense of connection to home. When it seemed like there was no end to it as if I was not going to make it, as if it didn’t matter. In the fall of ’68, late summer ’68 the Detroit Tigers had won the American League and went to the World Series against St. Louis. I remember one of the big players on the Tigers was a guy named Al Kaline and Al Kaline had been a childhood hero of mine, you know, growing up in Michigan and he’d come up as a kid right out of high school. Big hero for the Tigers and I remember listening, a couple of times I’d get down around Saigon I could hear the games and I remember hearing the games and being absolutely thrilled that here on the other side of the planet I could listen to a Detroit Tiger baseball game and I got so homesick and so lonely. And the last two games I couldn’t be in radio reception range so I had to go up to a really horrible place on the Cambodian border called Katum which is an old special forces camp and every so often recon teams would hull up there, you know, very discretely, and use that to watch the border and on a couple of occasions I’d go up with the recon teams because I liked being with the recon guys, and you know, you could always use an extra gun, they could always use somebody that spoke the language in case they could snatch a prisoner. So I was up in Katum with them and I…I really wanted to hear the Tiger game, it was the last two games of the World Series and so I took my transistor radio and we had a good communications guy with us and I told him what I wanted to do and he said, “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you.” So he had a whole bunch of communications wire, you know, radio wire, and climbed a tree and he strung an antenna up in this tree and then ran it down and he hooked it up to my stupid little transistor radio and I could listen to that ball game up there just like I was sitting in Tiger Stadium in Detroit and I had this overwhelming sense that I was going to make it. I had a link to home, something that
was so important from my childhood, it was…I remember that to this day, 30 years later.

It was a great feeling that I had that link with home because up until that time I’d gotten
to the point at that point in my tour after being in the hospital and all, you know, coming
out of Tet and all, I didn’t think I was going to make it and that began to get me on the
right track. I knew even if I stayed in Vietnam longer I could make it. And I remember
that. That’s all I can…I guess that’s it.

SM: Okay. Well, this ends the first interview with Mr. Chad Spawr.