Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. Vel
Varner on the eighteenth of April 2003 at approximately 8:25. We are at the Sleep Inn
Conference Room in Charlottesville, Virginia. First of all, sir, thank you very much for
consenting to this interview. Why don’t we start with a brief discussion of your early
life? If you would, just tell me when and where you were born, where you grew up.
Veloy Varner: Well, I was born in Helper, Utah, 7 March 1935, but I actually
grew up—my mom went to my grandparents’ to give birth. I grew up in a small coal
mine town in southeastern Utah, about four hundred people. My dad was a coalminer
and my mother was a schoolteacher. Everybody knew everybody and everybody’s dog
and cat in the town. I look back on it as a fulfilling and good childhood.
SM: Yes, sir. Helper, Utah. That was where you lived where the coal mine was
or was that where you were born?
VV: No. I was just born there. I lived in a town called Columbia that doesn’t
exist anymore because they closed the mine.
SM: When did they do that? Do you know?
VV: Well, the mine opened in 1925 and it closed in about 1985 primarily because
we just didn’t need the coal that was produced there. Mechanization has made other
mines much more efficient.
SM: This was a tunnel mine.
VV: That’s correct.
SM: How old were you when you left this part of Utah and went to the military?
Was the mine still in operation at that point?
VV: Yes.
SM: It was. Was black lung and some of the other traditional ailments you
associate with coalmining, was that common?
In fact, he had black lung and would’ve undoubtedly died from it cause of emphysema
and so forth except he was killed in a car wreck. But it was very common.
SM: Now, was he a multiple-generation coalminer or was he the first in his
family to do this?
VV: No. His father was a railroad conductor, but he had a brother that was also a
coalminer. He was a coalminer, but he was really a mechanic. There is a little difference
there, but it did require him to go down in the mine, work on loaders and different
machinery and that sort of thing.
SM: I would imagine accidents were probably pretty common in the mining
industry, as well.
VV: Yes. Particularly before John L. Lewis, who is sort of the patron saint of
coalminers all over the United States, imposed a lot of safety requirements through the
union process. Gee, I can remember on the playground in elementary if you heard a
whistle blowing in the town other than at a shift change time, which everybody knew
about, or the curfew time at night for kids off the streets at nine o’clock, but if you heard
a whistle any other time you knew there was a mine accident. Women were out in the
yard asking. Kids at school were whispering to one another thinking, “Is it my dad?” or
“Thank heavens my dad’s on nightshift. It’s not him.” That sort of thing. But I can
remember that very well. In fact, several times where classmates ended up—one day we
were in school with them and after that they were gone.
SM: How did that affect you in terms of growing up, the precariousness of life?
This is not a very common experience, I don’t think, for a lot of Americans.
VV: No. It’s not common, but I don’t think it had a major impact as I look back.
Maybe at the time I was a little concerned or worried, but I don’t know, I felt fairly
secure. Maybe it’s because that’s the other guy, but not me.
SM: Right. The mechanical work, this is what your father did. Was it a specific kind of mechanical work as far as the different types of machines or equipment to being used or is that just in general?

VV: No. I think it was more general in nature. In fact, he would end up doing work on hydraulic systems. He would do work on electrical systems. It was sort of jack-of-all-mechanic trades if you like. He was very adept at it.

SM: What was the population of your town, Columbia?

VV: Four hundred people.

SM: Columbia, Utah, four hundred people. Most of them employed in the mine, I would imagine.

VV: Oh, everybody. Everybody with two exceptions, the postmaster and the company store which was, of course, run by someone who didn’t work in the mine.

SM: Yes, sir. And the teachers, your mom.

VV: Well, we only had elementary school in Columbia. You had three rooms, two grades per room, three teachers.

SM: That’s what your mom did.

VV: No. She taught in another town about five miles away. She was a home-ec teacher. She taught in junior high school.

SM: A junior high school teacher. Okay.

VV: In that particular case junior high was the seventh through the tenth. There was only one high school in the entire country and it was for eleventh and twelfth.

SM: I would imagine that growing up with your mother as a school teacher probably had a little more emphasis on education.

VV: Oh, no doubt about it.

SM: Was that a strong component of your home life when you come home from school?

VV: Yeah. I think so. She was the pace setter as far as homework and that sort of thing. No doubt of that. Also, the fact that I ended up going to junior high school where she was a teacher had an impact.

SM: On behavior especially.

VV: You better believe it.
SM: What subjects did you find yourself enjoying the most as you were going to school?

VV: Mathematics, science. I liked English, too. I was fortunate. Schooling was fairly easy, not an onerous task.

SM: Okay. How about an interest in things mechanical like what your father did?

VV: Not really. I suspect in hindsight my dad felt, I wouldn’t say disappointed, but somewhat chagrined because I’d just as soon not get my hands greasy.

SM: Okay. Let’s see. Well, being born in 1935, it’s just as World War II is breaking out. You’re getting a little bit more cognizant of the world around you. How much do you remember about those types of events?

VV: I think I remember a great deal. Now some of that may just because of feedback after the fact, but I remember a great deal. The first memory of the impact of the war after hearing it on the radio and seeing my mother crying and so forth, the first impact of the war, however, was when I went back to school after Christmas in January. One of my little classmates was gone and nobody knew why and nobody knew where. She was a little Japanese girl. She looked just like a doll, just a sweet little gal. Everybody loved her. We’d ask the teacher. The teacher just said, “Well, they’ve moved away.” We didn’t know—as a child, I didn’t know for years and years whatever happened to her. As it turned out we had a major camp in Delta, Utah, called Topaz where we had hundreds and hundreds of Japanese families interred.

SM: Was she the only—was she in the only Japanese family in the town?

VV: Yes, as a child. Now we also had what was called the, for want of a term, the bunkhouse where a lot of the single miners lived. They lived there and they ate there and so forth. The kitchen or the mess was run by a group of Japanese who were very popular in town. Every year, once a year, they’d put on a big feed for the town at their expense. Unfortunately, after the war broke out and people started being rounded up, two of them went out in the cedars and hung themselves. So this had another sort of dire impact. People didn’t look upon the Japanese as our enemy, per say, at least in the town. So that was unsettling, particularly to the kids who knew them.

SM: Were there many German Americans, first generation German Americans?
VV: No, not very many. We were a very polyglot society and had—it was sort of a small UN (United Nations) because we had Basque and Greek and Italian and German. The only ethnic group we didn’t have, believe it or not, were blacks. They just weren’t there. Later as I got older one black family did move into the county, but at that time there were none. But your question as relates to the Germans was not an issue because we had some German families, but nobody considered them German. Now in contrast we had a lot of Italian Americans. I can remember as a small boy going to the shower house with my dad. The shower house had a series of baskets which you pulled up on chains to get all the mining clothes up there. Then when they’d come back from the mine they’d pull it down and take their shower and the regular clothes off and pull it back up. I can remember listening to some of my dad’s Italian friends joking and sort of bragging to one another about how well Mussolini was doing and in Eritrea in Ethiopia and so forth. I’m thinking, “Where’s that?” I can remember my—I asked my dad about it and he would say, “Oh, those wops.” Talking about such and such or so and so. I use the term as a quote not for any other reason.


VV: That kind of struck home at the time.

SM: Now were the Italians in your community treated any differently once war broke out and Italy was aligned with—?

VV: No. Not really. Not really. There was a sense of just prior to the war when they were talking about Mussolini doing this and so forth. Then later it became more terms of derision because they would say that the Italian tanks had only one gear and that was reverse and so forth.

SM: The Italian guys at the mine would say that kind of stuff too?

VV: Well, some of them would. Some of them would.

SM: Okay, to get under the skin of the others.

VV: Yeah, because it became very apparent there in North Africa that the Italians were not that stalwart.

SM: No. Okay. Well, what about entertainment in your town as far as like a movie house or anything like that?
VV: They had converted the barn. You see, for years and years they used mules in the mine and then when it became mechanized they suddenly had this barn. So they put a floor in it and it became the movie. In the winter you froze and if it rained you had to pick your seat carefully, but there would be one movie and it would be ten cents. A couple times in the year they’d take the seats up and have dances in there and that sort of thing.

SM: Did you go to the movies when they did come to town?

VV: Oh, yes.

SM: How frequently would that happen?

VV: Rare that you’d be allowed to go on a school night, but you’d go Saturday and maybe a matinee on Sunday or whatever. Oh, it was a big deal. We had that and we had what we called the confectionary. Now the confectionary you could go buy on the one side was sort of a beer place for the adults and on the other side you could get sundaes and shakes and candy.

SM: So that was kind of like the young people’s hangout?

VV: Yeah.

SM: Okay.

VV: Yeah. Sort of a hang out I guess you would say. It was more to go get you what you’re gonna get and then leave, but you could hang out.

SM: Okay.

VV: For the most part entertainment had to do with entertaining yourself with your friends. You know, “Run Sheepy Run” or “Rover, Rover send”—whatever.


VV: We’d hike. We had a hill nearby called the Scoutt Hill and we’d go hike out there and spend the night and roast potatoes or whatever.

SM: How about exploring the mining areas? Did very much of that happen?

VV: Not a great deal. This particular mining complex, unlike a lot of others, didn’t have a lot of what you’d call sinkholes or dry holes. When they went in there they knew what vein they were going after. There was not a lot of exploratory holes around. So that was not an issue in our area which made it a lot safer. Now I did later when I got old—I worked in the company store for a couple of years when I started at twelve sort of
a gopher pumping gas, carrying out bags, so on. When I was fifteen I started working on
the local railroad on the section gang. We had a lot of Mexicans and Indians. So it was
great from that standpoint to get to know them. The kids that worked there, it was just
sort of a make-a-job project for the summer for the teenagers who were out of school, the
local president of the railroad. In fact, his son was a friend of mine. He did it sort of just
out of kindness. Now they needed the work to be done, but—I mention that only because
it’s a little different from the mine. It was a different experience. It was a very
worthwhile experience.

SM: Now how large were those populations of Native Americans and Mexicans?
VV: The Native Americans in the area were very, very small percentage-wise. I
would say had to be maybe two percent or less because in that period of time most of
them were still out on reservations just as there are a lot of them even today. But there
wasn’t much freedom of mobility as far as there is now to leave and whatever. The
Mexican population at that time was just starting to grow and to increase. I would say we
were roughly somewhere between five and ten percent whereas now it would be over
twenty-five and higher.

SM: Okay. How about religious institutions? Were you brought up in a church?
VV: Well, as you know—yeah. As you know Utah, seventy percent of Utah are
what are referred to as Mormons or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, but
we did have Catholic. We did have Greek Orthodox and a few Protestants. Not in
Columbia, per say. The only church in Columbia was the LDS (Latter Day Saints)
and it was done in the schoolhouse, but if the Greeks or Italians—they had to go
to another town about five miles away or further. Growing up I never had a great sense
of “He’s this,” or “He’s that,” or whatever. We just didn’t sense that. We just thought
Charlie’s Greek. That’s fine. He goes and does this and I go do this or whatever. There
was no friction like that. In fact, growing up I didn’t have any sense of anti-Semitic
feelings. In fact, I don’t know of anybody who was a Jew and I’m sure we had Jews in
town, but it wasn’t an issue. It wasn’t an issue because we were so polyglot. Everybody
was—

SM: You had to get along.
VV: Yeah. In fact, I had asked my dad, “What are we?” He said—or, “What are you?” He said, “Slop bucket Dutch.” I had to think about it and then I figured out what that meant and that’s the way it was.

SM: When you—um let’s see. While you were going to school were there sports that you liked to play?

VV: Oh, yeah. Sports were a big deal. I mean big deal. If you weren’t in some aspect of sports, boy, there was something wrong. Even the adults were active in the company baseball teams, like Columbia Steel would sponsor a team, Sunnyside nearby sponsored teams. Uniforms the whole bit. I played junior high football, high school football, basketball, but you know we were in everything.

SM: What sport did you enjoy most?

VV: Well, as far as an organized sport it would’ve been football, but I also liked skiing a great deal. I started skiing when I was about eight. So I’ve been skiing now sixty years and still skiing. I just skied last week.

SM: Did you really? Where you grew up, you were right there in the mountains.

VV: True.

SM: You could just go up and ski whenever you wanted. Did they have lifts or anything or did you have to hike up?

VV: We had to hike up in the Columbia area, but they had actually graded off a hill. We did have a lift up by Kaiser Steel—it was about nine miles away, ten miles away, and it was a rope tow that they had installed.

SM: How long had that been there, Kaiser Steel?

VV: That was in Sunnyside. It was the oldest mine in the area and I suspect it was started in about 1900, maybe 1895.

SM: They never changed the name?

VV: From Sunnyside?

SM: From Kaiser.

VV: Oh, well, prior to the time Kaiser bought in it was something else. I don’t know when Kaiser—I think Kaiser bought in when they realized that they were trying to vertically integrate their entire system. In other words, instead of just making steel, let’s
go to the source and buy the coal and then make the coke so that we have the process under control. I’m sure that’s the way it was done.

SM: Right. Did you notice did anything in your community change as a result of the outbreak of the war as far as like German names or things of that nature and Italian names?

VV: No, not from that standpoint. What did change, though, believe it or not, even though we were out in the middle of nowhere was this sense of security and sabotage. For example, we had on the railroad there we had a series of cars, railcars that were derailed. Right away everybody says, “My God, it’s sabotage.” What did change, though, and had a marked impact on every family was the rationing, gas rationing, sugar, whatever. Then we went on big patriotic drives. Everybody were buying bonds. Everybody was saving tin foil. I remember that very vividly and the ration booklets and so on. The fact that suddenly so-and-so’s brother’s not gonna come home alive. He’s dead. They’d have a funeral. Then I had a cousin who was killed. He was a Marine, died on Iwo Jima. Things like that impacted from the war.

SM: As you were growing up and getting more movies into Columbia, were there specific types of movies you enjoyed more? Were they like the war type movies or Westerns, adventures?

VV: Well, not just the war movies, but adventure movies. Yeah. We used to have serials like Spy Smasher and sort of the quasi-Spiderman of today type things. Those were always great. We thought they were super.

SM: Let’s see. As far as your intramural sport or your school sports was there a lot of competition within the county or did it spread throughout the state?

VV: Oh, strictly within the county. The junior high school was the county, but the high school we played throughout the state. In fact, my junior year we won the state championship, which was just unheard of that these coal miners from Carbon County have beat all of us people in Salt Lake City. Yeah, well, they play dirtier. They’re too rough. They’re tough or whatever.

SM: Oh, boy. Any excuse except to admit that you were just better than they were at that particular time. What was your position in football?

VV: I played linebacker on defense and on offense. We didn’t have two—
SM: You guys played both sides?
VV: Yeah. We didn’t have two platoon systems.
SM: Made it a long game.
VV: Yeah, but it was fun.
SM: About the company store. Now that store was owned by the coal company?
VV: That’s correct.
SM: How did that sit with the community and was there very much concern over “Here they are? They’re giving you the money with one hand and then reaching out and taking it with the store?”
VV: I don’t think there was a lot of thought given to that. There may have been some by those who were a little more erudite or more expansive in their views, but for the most part people saw that as, number one, as a convenience. Number two, that’s the way it is. Now you didn’t have to buy there, but we had the county seat called Price was about thirty miles away. In fact, when I went to high school I rode a bus everyday to high school thirty miles, down thirty and back thirty. If you played football you had to hitchhike home because we didn’t have—most of us didn’t own our own cars. I don’t know. The company store was a convenience. The prices were considered to be fairly fair. The guy that ran it was very charismatic.
SM: So when people went to the company store and then if they did go into town thirty miles to the other stores that were available there, they didn’t see that much of a disparity between prices and things of that nature?
VV: No. I don’t think so because the company store even though it was a general store, sold a little of everything. In fact I can remember buying a twenty-two pistol with my first paycheck for my dad’s—to give it to him for Christmas. You could buy—there was one gas pump there. I remember going out and pumping the gas. It had the glass top where you could see the gas level and just crank. As I recall it was like nineteen, twenty-one cents a gallon. If parents were going to buy clothing for a child to start school in September, they went to Price to J.C Penny. I remember being intrigued by J.C Penny because it had these cables around the ceiling where the clerk would put the money, the bill on this thing. It’d shoot it across to some cashier and they’d shoot it back. I don’t know.
SM: Now, the gas pumps. You would pump the gas. It would fill up the glass cylinder and then that would gravity-feed into the vehicle, correct?

VV: Mm-hmm.

SM: That caught my attention for some reason. Okay. So I guess with the advent of the automobile the company store’s ability to monopolize the market became much, much lesser so.

VV: Was reduced, yes. Again it was so convenient.

SM: Yeah the convenience is the most important thing.

VV: The people—if they were gonna shop during the week it was right there ‘cause it was just a matter of yards to get to it. On the weekends now they could go to Price or somewhere else to do whatever they had to do.

SM: Okay. Were family cars common in Columbia?

VV: Every family had at least one car. If you didn’t you were—there was one bus—not a bus, really. It was sort of a station wagon that drove back and forth from Price everyday. It’d make a trip out and a trip back. Then how you got the other way—the only reason it was doing that or the main reason it was paid by the post office to deliver the mail there. But you could ride back and forth on it if you had to. So everybody had a car. I say everybody. I mean every family had at least one car.

SM: Of course, your mom would need one to get to school.

VV: She rode on the school bus.

SM: Oh, yeah. Okay.

VV: Yeah. She rode a school bus which was four miles away.

SM: That makes sense. The students had to be transported there, too, so why not just jump on that bus? When you mentioned hitchhiking home from football like thirty miles from Price, did you ever have to hump it all the way?

VV: No. It was amazing. Typically you’d get a ride. Now if you knew that you were gonna have a late practice, somebody would convince their dad to let them borrow the car and then we’d all pile in there and get back that way.

SM: Okay. I was gonna say, boy that would be pretty rough after a full day of school and football practice you have to walk thirty miles home. Whoa.

SM: Okay. You mentioned the impact of the war on your community to a point. Were blue stars and gold stars common in your neighborhoods?

VV: Oh, yeah. They’d hang out in the windows. Yeah.

SM: When the war ended what was the atmosphere like in your town in 1945?

VV: Well, there was a great sense of relief, obviously, and happiness. Guys were gonna come back. A lot of guys came back. It was interesting from the stand point, there were divorces, too.

SM: You mean guys that went off and—

VV: Came back and they ended up getting a divorce from—you know, they were just different people after four years, five years, whatever. I guess the other aspect of it, too, the war brought a great surge in development because coal was needed so much. Hundreds and hundreds of people moved into the—not into our town, but they built a whole new town about five miles away. New schools, new this, new that. Suddenly when the war was over the demand for coal dropped so there was a period of time there where there weren’t a lot of jobs. Yet you still had people coming back from being released from the services coming back. So there was a short period of time there where there’s a real problem, but then that changed with time. A lot of people left, went elsewhere. A lot of people went to California to work in the industries out there and do different things. I remember at the time that California was held up as that’s the summit. “Let’s go to California.”

SM: Well, you know, it stems back to the Great Depression and the great migration of Americans west to California.

VV: Right. In fact, you raise an interesting point because during the build up right after war was declared, we suddenly had a tremendous influx of people that we referred to or that were referred to as the Okies or the Arkies. Suddenly I remember in school we had all these new kids, new guys, new girls. “Well, she’s cute. She’s from Little Rock,” or whatever. There was a tremendous of influx of people that came and moved there. It really had a marked impact on our whole society, our whole area. Yeah, I remember that well.

SM: Now how did the depression affect your family most? Did you have parents and grandparents talk with you very much about it?
VV: A little bit. There was a period of time my mother was—she taught school after graduating from college and then she met my dad. They were sort of going together and they had some friends that dared them to get married. So they went off somewhere and got married, but they had to keep it a secret because she would be fired from her job. This is really dumb. I don’t know why a married woman couldn’t teach school, but that was the rationale. Well, lo and behold, six weeks before school is out the cat’s out of the bag and she’s fired. So she’s not allowed to teach school there for a period of time. Suddenly the war breaks out and they need teachers. They come back and beg her.

“We’ve got to have you.” “I’m sorry. I’ve got a child to take care of.” She had my sister who at that time was eighteen, twelve months old or something like that. So they said, “Well, we’ll find a babysitter. We’ll do this. We’ll do that.” It was interesting. I say this only because there was a window of time when she didn’t have a job. So we were dependent upon my dad’s salary. It was also a time there in the late ’30s after the depression when not only was there not a demand for coal, but that the union was striking under John L.’s leadership. So I can remember when my dad would be out of a job for two and three months at a time. We’d go down on the flats and hunt rabbit. My mother’s father had a farm. So he’d go down and help out on the farm to get other food. Now I don’t mean to imply we didn’t eat. We did. We ate, but there were other things you didn’t have. You just couldn’t afford them. So they were much more impacted by the depression than I was. Obviously as a child I didn’t think that much about it. They were really impacted by it just as they were the war much more than the rest of us.

SM: Now the union. Was it universally accepted in Columbia by the workers?

VV: Let me tell you. The union was like a church. John L. was God. The union’s gonna take care of it. It wasn’t the case of being accepted. You had no choice. You worked in the mine, you belonged to the union. It was a union town. When they said, “Go on strike,” you’re going on strike otherwise you’re a damn scab. It had a marked impact on the whole community.

SM: Were there scabs?

VV: If there were, I’m not familiar. I don’t know of any. But I remember them talking about that the ultimate put down was, “Oh, you’re a God damn scab if you talk like that.” You know, type of thing. It’s not like it is—when we look at sort of union
activity today you’ll see where they’ll have people come in to bust the strike, so to speak, or people who will cross the line. This didn’t happen.

SM: Now as the Second World War came to a close, of course, the United States became much more concerned about communism, global communism, collectivism, all that other stuff. Of course, some people equated unionism with that. Did that ever happen in your town?

VV: Not that I remember at all. No. I remember the town as being very, very patriotic. For example when Roosevelt died, God, I can remember men and women crying because he had been looked upon at least by my parent’s generation as their savior not only from the standpoint of the depression and so forth and the war. Of course, they didn’t realize the war really pulled us out of the depression type thing, but no I don’t—to answer your question again I don’t remember seeing that as an issue of the far left.

SM: I didn’t know if the attitude towards unions changed over time in your town.

VV: Probably, yes, because the impact of the unions has gone down dramatically throughout the United States, not just in Utah. Of course, with the demise of the mining industry the impact of the union has gone down.

SM: You raise an interesting point with Roosevelt as to how people perceived him, his projects, his programs. How did his New Deal programs—do you remember them impacting your community very much, the Works Progress Administration, in particular the WPA?

VV: Only in the sense that WPA started working on a rock building that was going to be given to the community. It was never finished.

SM: Oh, no.

VV: It was just rock walls. (Both laugh)

SM: So the monument, the New Deal monument.

VV: Right. I can also remember the WPA. In fact, I had a distant cousin who later became a very well known artist. He put murals in city hall as part of a WPA project. They still stand and they’re excellent.

SM: Okay. The artist project.

VV: Yeah.
SM: Oh, that’s great. What about the Civilian Conservation Corps, any activity, conservation activity?
VV: We didn’t have too much CCC activity in our county. Now it had a marked impact in other places in the state, particularly in the national parks and that sort of thing. Now, in contrast, my wife who grew up in a little southern town, they had a German PW (prisoner of war) camp in their town. They didn’t have the CCC, but they used the German prisoners and they built all kinds of walls and whatever.
SM: Interesting. Yeah. Yeah. People don’t realize that we brought Germans over here and they were labor.
VV: In fact, in 1961 we were assigned to Germany. We lived with a German family and they knew she was from Alabama. The word got out—a German who had been a prisoner in her hometown came to visit and was saying it was one of the greatest experiences of his life.
SM: You know, I was gonna ask you did any stay.
VV: He said, “It was wonderful.” He said, “I’ve never eaten so well.”
(Laughter) She says, “Yeah, I remember. You had butter and we didn’t.”
SM: Couldn’t imagine. Yeah. They got better rations than the Americans.
VV: Well, that’s what he said. I don’t know. I don’t know that it was better, but I do know that they got things that the local town folks couldn’t have.
SM: Wow. Do you know if any of them stayed after the war ended, decided not to go back to Germany?
VV: I don’t know of any, but I presume there may have been some. I do know that there were—I lived in Arizona for quite a period of time and I do know for a fact that there were quite a few German officers who had flight training in Arizona, fell in love with it or fell in love with an Arizona girl or whatever. Came back, stayed, became citizens. Yeah.
SM: You mentioned the effects that Roosevelt’s death had on your family and in your community. Were there any community memorial services held?
VV: When he died?
SM: Mm-hmm. That you know of or just private?
VV: Only in the LDS church do I—I grew up in the church. I’m not a member of the LDS church now, but I grew up in it, so to speak. But I do remember that they had set aside a period of time on one Sunday where they commemorated his passing and so forth.

SM: Were there any other experiences growing up that you wanted to discuss, things that really had a powerful effect on you that we haven’t discussed yet?

VV: No. There undoubtedly were, but I can’t think of them at the time.

SM: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. What was your relationship like with your grandparents?

VV: Well, my paternal grandparents were dead. I never knew my grandmother and my grandfather, he died when I was three years old, something like that. The other parents it was a good relationship. They had a farm. He also ran a service station. In fact, it was the first service station in the county. He was a pioneer in that sense. I enjoyed going to the farm. It was great, milking the cows, getting the eggs, playing in the hay, so forth. It was a real adventure.

SM: How far was that from Columbia?

VV: That was forty miles.

SM: Wow. Now would you go for extended stays over the summer, stuff like that?

VV: Well, not super extended, but maybe for a week.

SM: Yeah, okay. You mentioned having a job at the company store. Any other types of employment as you got older while you were going to junior high and high school?

VV: No, just the store and then working on the summers on the railroad.

SM: On the railroad. Okay. How far would you travel on the railroad? What was the furthest you would travel?

VV: Well, it was a very short railroad. It wasn’t that far. The furthest we would’ve been able to go before another D&RG (Denver and Rio Grande Railroad) took over would have been about six miles, but it had a lot of traffic because of the coal cars back and forth, back and forth.
SM: Was there a lot of train hopping, train jumping? Just jumping on and taking a ride and jump back off?

VV: A little, not a lot. A little. In fact, my paternal grandfather had a homestead which was about fifteen, twenty miles from where we lived out in the middle of nowhere. One of my uncles would go to school in Price and ride the train. He would jump off. One day he slipped and he lost his arm. As a consequence of losing the arm they paid him enough money so that he could go to college, but it was interesting.

SM: That’s quite a sacrifice though.

VV: Yeah.

SM: My goodness. Now did that happen a lot? Were there a lot of those types of accidents in your community and this is a very high risk type of work?

VV: There were a lot of accidents even in the mine. You never knew when you get a cave-in. You never knew when somebody’d get their foot run over, that sort of—they wore steel-toed shoes, but there were problems like that. There were quite a few. It was interesting.

SM: Now the cave-ins, how frequently did that happen?

VV: I can’t quantify it once a month or whatever, but it was often enough that people were really concerned about it. Safety was a real drive. I remember one time my father was on a rescue team. They wore, they call it steel lungs or something, but anyway oxygen-type of device. The one thing that impacted me I remember he was called into a major cave-in in Sunnyside. I think they ended up losing twenty or thirty men. He would have nightmares. He’d wake up in the middle of the night screaming. Being young, it scared the hell out of me. I overheard him talking to another member of the team. They were having a beer or something. They were talking about how they go to pick somebody up and the skin would come off the bones. I’m thinking, “Oh my God.” So that was something that—of course, that worried you even more whether your dad was going to have that impact.

SM: What happened—would that happen to those people? Was it—?

VV: Well, what typically would happen you’d get black dam. The coal dust would create a gas system, spark would ignite it.

SM: Yeah. Fuel air explosive.
VV: Precisely. Then explode.
SM: Oh my. That—yeah so that’s why. Okay.
VV: In fact, in sometime around there, 1930s, ‘20s, they had 212 people killed in
a place called Scofield which is about fifty miles—they had to get caskets from
California. There were so many killed.
SM: That’s a risky, risky business. Well, let’s see. As you were growing up did
you ever have not necessarily a desire, but did you ever think, well, this’ll be my life, too.
This is what I’ll do when I grow up?
VV: Oh, no, I knew exactly I wouldn’t.
SM: You knew exactly you would not?
VV: Oh, there was no way I was gonna do that. In fact, if I look at my
immediate friends one grade higher, my grade, and at least one grade below none of
them, none of them went into the mine. In my particular case my parents wouldn’t have
had it growing up. I just knew from day one I wasn’t going to work in the mine.
SM: Was this something that was consistently reinforced that your parents would
say?
VV: Oh, yeah in a positive sense.
SM: Right. Right. Yeah.
VV: Without a doubt. In fact, one of the reasons I was encouraged, although I
would’ve done it anyway, to work on the railroad was my dad wanted me to see what it’s
like to have hands full of blisters, sunburned, and aches and pains and living and working
with guys that were of different—they weren’t that different from my dad, but he wanted
me to know that there are different socioeconomic strata. You better know that education
gets you out of that box.
SM: Yes, sir. At what point did you realize that you might want to consider a
military career? How old were you?
VV: Oh, I never considered it.
SM: You never did?
VV: No. I only considered it in the sense that I might be drafted someday.
Korea was going on while I was in—well, Korea ended when I graduated from high
school in ‘53. I had a few, very few friends who had enlisted and went to Korea.
SM: How closely did you follow the Korean War? Of course, at this point you’re older, a little more mature.

VV: Only in the sense of looking at headlines and that sort of thing. I mean, I knew what was going on. Plus, this was the period of we were testing nuclear weapons in southwestern Utah. Every now and then you knew that something had happened. We weren’t that far away.

SM: You hear it or—

VV: Yeah.

SM: Would you ever see the cloud, the mushroom cloud?

VV: Never. No, because, see, in the southwestern Utah they could because it was being done in Nevada.

SM: I guess the mountains around you would block your view.

VV: Exactly, but we knew about it. The teachers would say, “Now if the Russians attack go under your desk. Get down flat. Get on the floor.”

SM: Did you guys do duck-and-cover drills, really?

VV: Oh, yeah. I mean it was just a big deal. I figured they were going to fly over. (Both laugh)

SM: Was this discussed very much at home as far as, I guess, the world events and the communism, anticommunism and things of that nature?

VV: Not a great deal. Probably more from my mom than from my dad, but we did listen to the news all the time on the radio.

SM: Yeah. I was gonna—radio was a big thing.

VV: Oh, yeah.

SM: Part of the home, right?

VV: Yeah. Yeah. In fact, radio was a source of entertainment, “The Shadow knows,” and the screeching door—whatever, I don’t remember. The Lux Radio hour and all that stuff.

SM: *The Shadow*—let’s see. You mentioned your sister. Do you have any other siblings?

VV: No.
SM: Let’s see. How many young men were sent to Korea from your community that you knew of, about?

VV: From my small town no one, but there were a couple that enlisted in the junior high school that I was in that went.

SM: What was the attitude towards that war in your community? I mean, was it seen as being this essential war like World War II was seen, was viewed?

VV: No, not at all. It was looked upon with some disdain as Truman’s war. “This police action is none of our business. Why are we over there?” That sort of thing. It was a sort of a precursor of things to come for Vietnam is what it amounted to.

SM: That’s really interesting. In a pejorative way, “Truman’s war, this is Truman’s war.”

VV: Exactly.

SM: How did your community feel when he fired MacArthur, the big World War II hero?

VV: I suspect that they felt that they admired Truman for having the gumption to do that and no one questioned the fact that he could do that. There were many that would say, “Well, why did he do that?” or “He shouldn’t have done that,” or “Couldn’t there have been another way to have done it with a little more grace?” type thing. No one questioned the right that the president has the sync to do that. I don’t know. I guess there was a lot of criticism with the fact that he did it.

SM: Let’s see. The Korean War ended and you graduated high school the same year, 1953.

VV: Right. The war ended in ’53. I graduated in ’53.

SM: What were your immediate plans upon graduating from high school?

VV: As soon as I graduated I had about one month and then I went to Beast Barracks at West Point.

SM: West Point. Well, at what point did you decide to seek an appointment to West Point? How old were you when you? What drove you to do that?

VV: Well, in November of my senior year I saw an article in the paper and it said, “Anyone who’s interested in taking the screening examination for the U.S. Military Academy show up at such-and-such a place and there will be an all day exam type thing.”
So I thought, “Well, I’ll go down there and just try it out of curiosity.” So I went and I took the screening exam. Later I got a letter from the congressman said, “You are a qualified alternate to go to the academy.” Well, I didn’t think that meant much. Just said I was qualified and I was an alternate. It turns out I had another friend who was in high school with me who took the exam and he turned out to be—he had a different, he had a senator. The way it worked was a little different. Now he didn’t take the exam. He applied a different route. His father was the car dealer and he went another route. He didn’t have to—I took a screening exam because that’s the way that particular congressman did it. He gave the exams all over the state. So anyway, I didn’t think much about it. Then I guess it was in February I got a letter from the Army. It said, “You’re to go to Fitzsimons Army Hospital in Denver and you’ll be there to take a medical. There will be a physical aptitude test. There’ll be mental tests.” It was about three or four days of examinations. So I went and later I got a feedback said, “You’ve passed everything, but we’re still waiting to see if you can get an appointment.” Things lucked out and I ended up going.

SM: Wow. What was the response of your family when you made the decision to go to that testing—the initial testing?

VV: I didn’t even mention it.

SM: You never even told them?

VV: No. You have to understand I had not—the only goal that I had was to go to the University of Utah or Utah State or somewhere and get an engineering degree either mechanical or aeronautical. So that was the plan.

SM: Okay. Why engineering?

VV: Because I liked mathematics and I was good in it and science and so forth. Also growing up within the coal mine area the engineers had a certain prestige factor. There weren’t that many engineers, number one. Even though they were mechanical or mining engineers, everybody knew that they had a certain role that they played and they were looked up to because they were considered to be smart and sharp and so forth.

SM: Were there many geologists employed?

VV: Not in our town. Now there were geologists elsewhere that would come in on an occasion to make an analysis or do a survey or something like that.
SM: Okay. What was your parents’ response when you told them, “I’ve been accepted to go to West Point”?

VV: Well, after the examination—before it I never mentioned it because I was going to school and I got to leave school and go do this thing. Then I told them after the fact and they said, “Oh, that’d be great.” I said, “Well, I don’t—don’t worry. It ain’t gonna happen.”

SM: So they were supportive? No surprise they were supportive.

VV: Yeah.

SM: Okay. Well, that must’ve been a very exciting thing to get that letter in the mail saying you’ve been accepted.

VV: Well, yeah, plus another factor. At this point it sounds kind of petty, but at that point it wasn’t. That was just the economic aspect of it.

SM: You don’t have to worry about paying for your university education.

VV: Right. Exactly. In fact, my going to West Point cost my parents a plane ticket and three hundred dollars for uniform. That was the only requirement at that time.

SM: I don’t think that’s petty at all.

VV: It was a factor to a coal miner’s family.

SM: Yeah, a big factor.

VV: Because going to the University of Utah it would be expensive and I would expect to work all year long.

SM: Right. Well, sir, I think we’re at the end of our time. So I’m gonna put a quick ending on this. Thank you very much. This will end the first interview with Vel Varner. It is 10:15 and we actually started at 9:30 this morning. Thank you, sir.
Interview with Vel Varner
Date: May 29, 2003

Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Vel Varner on the twenty-ninth of May, 2003, at approximately 2:35 Lubbock time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Varner is in Salt Lake City, Utah. Sir, thanks for consenting to continue this interview. Why don’t we pick up our interview today with a discussion of your time at West Point? If you would, just describe what you remember, some of the more memorable aspects of being a West Point cadet and attending school there.

Veloy Varner: Well, it obviously was very much a surprise to me. I was very lucky to get to go, at least that was my sense of it. It was also quite a change for someone coming from a small coal-mining town, going to West Point and meeting with young men from all over the United States. Also, the fact that I’d just graduated from high school in some ways was a, of course a disadvantage compared with a lot of the guys who had been to prep schools or even some who were college graduates, which seems strange, but there were, I think, one or two of those. So I had—I felt sort of a disadvantage academically, but in the same context, the fact that perhaps I wasn’t quite as mature as some of the old ones, as I look back, I think I took a lot of the hazing in a different sense than they did. They looked at it probably as kind of silly. I looked at it as sort of a competitive relationship, and just accepted it and got on with it. I learned a lot, obviously, from all the people that were in my class. I was particularly impressed with the staff and faculty because they all came across as being very professional, knowledgeable, and dedicated to their task.

SM: Did you get a chance to participate in any particular extracurricular activities?

VV: Well, I skied. I ended up, in fact, as captain of the ski team. Every cadet has to participate in some kind of athletic activity, either a varsity squad or intramural. Intramural we jokingly referred to as “inter-murder.” So, every semester we were doing something as far as the athletics were concerned. Let’s see, I wrestled. In fact, I was the corps wrestling champion my sophomore year, in my particular weight. I was active in what we referred to as the “hop committee,” the people who were sort of the social gurus,
even though I wasn’t. I didn’t consider myself a social bug. I ended up doing that. Later
I ended up being the class vice-president. Other activities, Russian clubs and stuff like
that. Anyway, I enjoyed all the extracurricular activities.

SM: Now, in terms of the curriculum there at the academy, what subjects did you
gravitate towards? What did you enjoy most?

VV: Well, in those days, you didn’t have an option. Everybody took the same
thing, the identical same curriculum with the exception of language. Language was the
only elective that you had. I ended up choosing Russian because I felt that I would have
a little better means of competing with the other people because it just wasn’t that
common. In fact, a lot of people came there that had already taken French three or four
years, German two or three years, so on. But the curriculum was predominantly science
oriented, a lot of heavy math, calculus, differential, thermal dynamics, so forth. So it was
about, I would guess, sixty-five, thirty-five as far as the science versus liberal arts. A lot
of the courses were tough for me, but all-in-all I enjoyed them. As I look back it was a
great opportunity.

SM: How did they address—I realize that, I would imagine a lot of the first year,
perhaps even much of the second year there’s a lot of emphasis on military customs and
courtesies, uniform, marching and all the other aspects of being a good soldier. What
about military history, tactics, all those things that deal with some of the, I guess, the
meatier aspects of being a good leader in combat?

VV: Yeah. Well, every summer was devoted to some type of military training.
One summer you may just travel to military posts, and then have orientation training at
each of those sites. Another summer I was like a third lieutenant and I was assigned to
the basic training center at Ft. Dix, and actually had a platoon of recruits that I worked
with. During the academic year, there were courses in tactics, that sort of thing. Then,
we had a one-year military history course that started out as a survey course of history
back to the time of the Greeks and so forth and then right up to the present time. So that
was an opportunity. Then, as far as military courtesy and that sort of thing, bearing,
whatever, that was every day of your life. That was just part of the regimen that you
were confronted with.
SM: Now did you have an opportunity to go on any kind of trips to the various
battlefields in the area? Mostly along the eastern seaboard, I suppose, whether it be some
of the Civil War battlefields, Gettysburg or what have you, and I guess, go on terrain
walks or field walks of those areas?

VV: You know, that’s a good question. Actually, that was not done in the
context of the way you are saying it. They do that now, and that was changed. A lot of
that started to be integrated sometime after I had graduated. I graduated in 1957. But as
far as anything beyond the academy, as far as a [tour] recce of Gettysburg or somewhere
else, that was not done as a cadet. Now, of course we did study all those battles, every
battle that the United States participated in. We looked at it, analyzed it and so on. But
as far as actually getting into the field, we did not do that. They do that now.

SM: Of course, there were no women at the academy at the time.
VV: No women. That’s correct.
SM: But there were women in the military.
VV: Well, there were women in the military, but not very many. Because as you
know, the volunteer Army aspect of the thing and the total push for women, just because
they couldn’t meet the demands, didn’t take effect until about 1974. Of course, the first
class to come in as far as the academy was concerned for women was the class of 1980.

SM: Now were there any other particular events, memorable events that occurred
while you were there? Maybe football games or other games or something?
VV: Oh, those are always memorable, you know, the “Beat Navy” syndrome, the
great spirit of that, as we look back. Then you’d take a train to go to the annual Army-
Navy football game in Philadelphia every year, that sort of thing. Actually, I take that
back. There was one, in hindsight a very memorable event at the time. In my senior
year, the class president and I and I guess the first captain, the three of us went to Hyde
[Park], and we had lunch with Mrs. Roosevelt. We went there, as I recall, April twelfth,
to put a wreath on President Roosevelt’s grave. Then we ended up, just the three of us
having lunch with her. I look back on that as a very memorable time.

SM: Did you get—I would imagine as you progressed through your class years,
you’re granted a little bit more freedom, whether it be over weekends or short breaks to
go into town and things like that. Was that the case?
VV: Yes. Actually, most of that didn’t occur until your junior and senior year. You were allowed to go off post sometime during the day itself. However, and you’re probably going to smile when I mention this, the only weekends, we got two weekends, two free weekends our junior year and the senior year we got twelve. Of course, you had to be academically proficient and also not have an excess number of demerits and that sort of thing in order to have that privilege.

SM: When you went into town, what was the relationship like between the academy, the cadets and the surrounding community?

VV: Well, the only major town in the nearby was a little town called Highland Falls. Of course, that little town has been there, I presume, since 1802 when the academy started. So there’s a long time, deeply-ingrained relationship. You know, it’s a win-win for both sides.

SM: How well prepared—what was your degree when you graduated? Was it in engineering, right?

VV: Well, that’s the other thing. In those days, you didn’t have a major. All you did is you graduated with the Bachelor of Science degree, not specified. However, if you did an analysis of the course work, it was probably comparable to a BS (Bachelor of Science) degree in maybe general engineering because of the high extent of science- and math-type courses. That has subsequently changed, and now people pick majors and so forth.

SM: Most of your course work did emphasize the sciences and engineering, is that correct?

VV: I would say about sixty-five percent, yes.

SM: When you—?

VV: You know, some of that, most of that stems from the fact that the engineering curriculum at West Point goes back to the very beginning.

SM: Yes, sir.

VV: Many of the railroads in the country, a lot of the engineers on the Panama Canal were all West Point graduates.

SM: Yes, sir. When you graduated, how well prepared did you feel for active duty and military life?
VV: I felt fairly confident. I presume some of that is just a function of, I don’t know, just people thinking that they had more capability than they really had. You know, a typical, I guess lack of experience or maturity, whatever. But having been like a third lieutenant had really given me, I thought, an insight as far as what I was going to have to do as a platoon leader working with the troops. Then, as you know, all of the new graduates go to their branch school and take a basic officers’ course in their particular branch. I had selected infantry. So I went to Ft. Benning, Georgia.

SM: Now you could put in for a choice. That is, you could put in on—

VV: That’s correct. You were able to pick your choice of branch. Then based on your class standing, you might or might not get your particular choice. For example, people who wanted to go into the Corps of Engineers, typically, and there weren’t that many slots in the engineers, so that particular branch would go out fairly high, academically, in the class. My particular class, I remember, signal corps and I think artillery were the ones that went out last. In fact, there were probably some people that were ranked into those, even though they would have preferred something else. Also, in my class, since the Air Force Academy didn’t start until 1955, the classes at West Point had the option of providing, I think it was twenty percent of the graduates to the Air Force. The Naval Academy did the same thing. So in my class, twenty percent of the people ended up going to the Air Force.

SM: That’s quite sizable.

VV: Yes.

SM: What made you choose infantry?

VV: Well, good question. Actually, I had planned to go into the Air Force. Had I not gone to West Point, my goal was to get an aeronautical degree, an aeronautical engineering degree in one of the state universities in Utah. When I got there, I thought, “Well, I'll just become a fighter pilot.” Unfortunately, in my junior year, in a ski competition up in Vermont, during the ski jump, I ended up getting a concussion, spent two weeks in the hospital. Subsequently, when I tried to get into the Air Force, I failed the physical because of that head injury. So I ended up going into the infantry, and Ranger school, jump school. Then about three years later put in for Army aviation and was accepted there.
SM: How much leave did you get after you graduated, until you reported—?

VV: From West Point? Sixty days, everybody got sixty days. Normally you would get thirty days every summer, but they gave you an additional thirty days for graduation leave.

SM: So you went back home?

VV: Yes.

SM: How did that go?

VV: Actually, it went fine. As it turned out, I got married on graduation day.

SM: Did you really?

VV: My wife is an Auburn University graduate. She graduated that day in absentia. We got married at West Point on the same day I graduated.

SM: Oh, that’s outstanding.

VV: So then we took a long honeymoon to get back to Utah, and spent some time with my family there before we went to our first duty station, which was Ft. Benning, Georgia.

SM: Oh, that’s excellent. What was it like reporting in, your first duty assignment there at Ft. Benning, to go through the infantry officer basic course?

VV: I don’t know. It was no big deal. Of course, I think myself and even a lot of my classmates, we felt that we had been exposed to so much of the tactical and other aspects of infantry training, that we didn’t anticipate any problems, and didn’t have any.

SM: If you would, just describe the training process there at Ft. Benning, what you remember about the training, memorable events, memorable activities.

VV: The basic course, as I mentioned, I didn’t feel it was that demanding. A lot of the stuff, we had had before. This went into more detail, obviously. It was good. It was worthwhile. It was something we were going to need very quickly when we got assigned to our initial units. In hindsight, I guess I enjoyed the Airborne and the infantry training. Particularly the Ranger training more than I did the other two because it was so demanding, not only physically, but even mentally, with the challenge of things we were exposed to and so forth. The fact that there was a very ingrained competitive edge to it because everybody wanted to win the Ranger tab, and everybody knew that everyone wasn’t going to get it.
SM: I guess that’s a good question as far the challenging aspects of some of your experiences. What would you say was the most challenging part of West Point, or did it depend on year, on what year you were in?

VV: It probably—the first two months at the academy, the only class that’s there is the plebe class, the freshmen. Then the leadership for that class consists of members of the first class, or the seniors. You know, they’re the platoon leaders, the squad leaders, and so forth. I guess in hindsight, that first two months was demanding. It’s referred to as Beast Barracks. You know, a lot of physical activity, you’re being exposed to a lot of things that most of us had no knowledge of at all, having not been connected with the military. I guess the big crunch your first year there is a function of time management. You’re pressed with so many competing issues, not only academics but military requirements, requirements as a member of the fourth class, the plebe system, so to speak. Do this. Do that. Jump. Bang. Whatever. Getting ready for this parade, getting ready for that. Make sure you don’t get demerits because you don’t want to walk the area. So I guess coming to grips with the need for time management, being organized, learning those particular skills. Then coping with a lot of the stresses and the demands placed on you. But in hindsight, I don’t know. I look back on it as sort of a great adventure. I didn’t feel that concerned that I was not going to stay there, if you follow me.

SM: Yes, I do.

VV: The junior year had some really demanding academic courses. We were taking mechanics of fluids, thermal dynamics, calculus, differential equations, spherical geometry. It was just a lot of things that made it tough. I remember thinking about electrical engineering, and I thought, “Oh my god. I’m not ever going to get through this course.” Of course, I ended up doing that, but—I mean, I graduated, I guess in the upper thirty-five percent of the class, but there were some demanding requirements as far as a lot of those science courses. My mathematical background had left something to be desired in high school. I took the courses that were there, but they were just not—the courses weren’t available.
SM: When you were going through the officer basic course there at Ft. Benning, what was the most challenging aspect, or was there anything that was particularly challenging at all?

VV: I don’t look back on anything that was that demanding. I ended up somewhere in the top five or top ten out of the, I guess there must have been like 150, 200. I’m not sure. What they, we had—I think we were a mix of our class of people who were there from the academy, and then there were, I think, distinguished military graduates from ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) were in that same program. I don’t remember exactly. I didn’t have—as I look back on that particular period, I don’t feel that I had a big problem at all.

SM: When you graduated from IOBC (Infantry Officer Basic Course), how many months was that? Do you recall?

VV: Let’s see. It was about six or seven.

SM: When you graduated from IOBC, did you go straight into Ranger school?

VV: No. I went to jump school first.

SM: Jump school first?

VV: Yeah. Of course, jump school was about three, almost four weeks. Then Ranger school, as I recall, was about nine weeks in those days. They’ve since added a desert phase to it that makes it a little longer.

SM: When you—jump school was there at Benning as well?

VV: That’s correct.

SM: How did you enjoy that?

VV: I thought it was exciting. I enjoyed it. Of course, the big demand on people in jump school, and even more so in Ranger school is the physical training aspect of it. Fortunately, most of us had already been working out on our own while we were in the basic officer’s course. So we could handle that.

SM: How was your first jump? Do you remember it very much?

VV: I guess the thing that struck me about the first jump was that when you threw your little pink body out of a perfectly good airplane in fright, that everything happened so quick. The thing that I guess as I look back on it is that I felt that my body was being [buffeted] on a big—I don’t know, just being thrown around as you hit the
prop blast. I won’t say I wasn’t scared. Don’t think that for a minute. Everybody is because it’s just so unusual, but you know, you cope with it.

SM: Now, were they operating the towers when you went through?

VV: Yes, both the thirty-four foot and the 250. In fact, people marvel when I tell them this, but this is the truth. In those days, on graduation day, it was the custom that those of us who were married, that if our wife wanted to, she could go off the [250 foot] tower. They had one tower that had a seat. The cables, there were cables that guided, that went up and guided the skirt of the chute. In other words, when they released the chute, it couldn’t be blown off to one side or another by the wind because of these guide cables. So, those who were not pregnant and those who wanted to go, went. My wife went.

SM: Oh, excellent. How did she like that?

VV: Thrilled. Scared.

SM: Gets the adrenaline going.

VV: Yeah.

SM: Oh, that’s hilarious.

VV: Then, of course, the two of you sat together. Then they’d go up the top, and ten feet from the top there’s a safety release. Then you pulled the belt out and they took you up and hit the top, and then that’s when it would let you go free. You came down free. I kept saying, “Look out there at Columbus, Georgia.” She said, “My eyes are closed.”

SM: How was her landing?

VV: Well, see, the way it works, since you’re sitting in a seat, you don’t have to worry about hitting the ground, the way it worked. They’ve stopped that years ago, I’m sure.

SM: Yes. For probably legal liabilities.

VV: Oh, yeah. Amen. A lot of other reasons.

SM: Oh, that’s fun though. Well, then off to Ranger school, which is of course broken down, broken up into a number of different sections?
VV: Yeah. In those days you spent three weeks at Benning, then three weeks
down at [Eglin Air Force Base] in the swamps, Florida, and three weeks up at Dahlonega,
[Georgia] in the mountains.

SM: How did that go for you? How was Ranger school?

VV: I enjoyed it. It was very demanding, very demanding. As I look back on it,
the biggest challenge to me was the lack of sleep, because just as you thought you were
going to be going back to bed and you’d go back to the barracks, suddenly the thing
would go off, and you’re off again on another patrol. Of course, they were doing that
purposely, you know, to stress you. But no, it was a good program, good course.

SM: What was the attrition rate in your class at Ranger school? Do you recall?

VV: No, I don’t. I know there were—well, there were two types of attrition, of
course. Those that just quit, those that got injured and then were given an option to back
to another course. Then the third type of a quasi-attrition, they completed the course, but
were not awarded the tab. I particularly felt bad for those guys. They’d gone through it.
I heard, I don’t know this for a fact, that there were people that even though they didn’t
get their tab, tried to get back in to go through it again, to keep trying.

SM: What was the most challenging part of Ranger School for you?

VV: Well, like I said, the sleep deprivation.

SM: Well, in terms of the phases. Would there be the Benning phase, the—

VV: Oh, okay. The phases?

SM: Which was the most challenging phase?

VV: Yeah, that’s a good question. I wasn’t big on the swamps just because I
hated to walk through water up to your chest and look over to the right and see a damned
cottonmouth sitting on a log. I didn’t like that at all. The other two phases I didn’t—the
mountains, of course, I’d come from the mountains, so I didn’t have any issue there. The
Benning phase was primarily conditioning and a lot of other basic Ranger skills that you
were learning that you were then going to put together in the subsequent two phases, as
far as patrolling and so forth.

SM: How many weeks was each of the phases? It was three weeks each phase?

VV: As I recall, in our course it was three, three, and three. I think they’ve added
the desert phase now, which is another three. I think another aspect of the current course,
if you’re Airborne qualified, they take advantage of that. You actually have patrols that parachute in.

SM: Now when—as you were going through that training, were there any significant problems or injuries or anything for anybody?

VV: Well, we had some guys that sprained ankles. Going on a night patrol at night and ended up having a tree branch stick them in the eye. I don’t mean to blind them, but it was a serious injury. In fact, most of us got so that at night when we were trying to watch the compass and also walk, we’d put one hand up above our eyes, so if we ran into a bush or a limb, you wouldn’t get your face punctured.

SM: Of course, this is before night vision devices.

VV: Oh, yeah. We didn’t—none of those.

SM: No. So you’re going red lens flashlight and compass, and not very much flashlight I would imagine.

VV: That’s correct.

SM: Now when you were out, I assume that the structure really hasn’t changed that much, that is you’re rotated into various leadership positions, and everything else, peer evaluations were in place?

VV: Yeah. Typically, say if you were the assistant patrol leader back at the end of the column somewhere, and the patrol leader’s up near the point and the compass people, and when the lane grader, you know, another regular officer, usually a first lieutenant or captain, he’d walk up to the patrol leader and say, “You’re now dead.” The patrol leader would say, “Oh, I’ve got it,” or, “Had it.” So then word goes back to get his assistant patrol leader to come up and take over. Maybe you’ve been through the program, I don’t know.

SM: No. I haven’t been through Ranger school. No, sir.

VV: But anyway, that was the system. It was an opportunity to see how the new guy, how quickly he takes over and what changes he makes and so forth.

SM: And how well the mission was briefed to everybody to ensure that he could take over.

VV: Exactly. Yeah, so there was a chain of command.
SM: Let’s see. It seems to me to fill up that much time, three weeks for instance, down in the Everglades, I would imagine that there was a lot of location-specific training that you did. Whether it be special survival issues for surviving in a swamp and jungle type environment.

VV: Correct.

SM: Learning the fauna and the animals that you’d—

VV: Yeah. Well, for example, like eating alligators. I remember eating raccoon thinking, “Oh, my God. What a greasy mess.” Then we also had a night amphibious operation off what’s called Santa Rosa Island, which is down there somewhere south of Ft. Walton Beach or Destin. Quite a ways from Eglin, but we actually used landing craft and went in off the Navy ship and that sort of thing.

SM: Now, did you get to actually kill your own alligator and eat it, cook it?

VV: No. No. I’m not sure who did that. Maybe some of the Ranger camp staff, but no, we didn’t do that. We cooked it, but we didn’t end up killing it.

SM: What about other game? Were you actually able to be trained with and learn how to use traps and snares and set them?

VV: We did use traps and snares. As I recall, because of the way the things were set up and the schedule and so on, it never seemed to work out that if you caught something you ended up eating it.

SM: Okay. Did that kind of regional- or geographic-specific training occur in all three phases? That is like, for instance, when you got up to Dahlonega, to the mountain phase, did you go through similar types of training for that kind of an environment?

VV: Yes. But see, there we did stuff like rock climbing, repelling, a lot of stream crossing techniques. I mean, you know, crossing rapids or gorge areas. A lot of that stuff as opposed to the different approach that you’d do down in the swamps.

SM: So just to reinforce or reaffirm which one, you would say that probably swamp phase was the most challenging for you?

VV: Well, not. I guess challenging in the sense that you were wet all the time. I mean, you’d come back to barracks. Now the other aspect of this, I went through jump school in January of 1958. So I was in Ranger school February, March, maybe a week of April. But that time of year, it’s still chilly. In fact, the course before us had to break ice
on where they do the slide for life up in Dahlonega. So that was another aspect of being
cold, wet, and miserable in the swamps.

SM: Did they have the worm pit? Is that what it was called? Didn’t they have
some kind of a pit that you had to low-crawl through or something or did they at that
point?

VV: I don’t know. The only pit I remember was at Ft. Benning, we had kind of a
deep circular pit. Everybody got in there, and the goal was to be the last man in there.
That was fun. I mean that was a knockdown, drag out. That was good. That was a good
thing. But I don’t—I’m not familiar with the one you’re talking about.

SM: That might be the one. I’ve heard about it, but I’m not sure. Okay. What
was the prize if you were the last man standing?

VV: Well, just, no prize, but just the fact that you did it. You know what I mean.

SM: The bragging rights.

VV: Yeah.

SM: Okay. Well, let’s see, any of the memorable aspects of Ranger training?

VV: Well, I guess the whole program is memorable. I think one of the important
things of Ranger training is the sense of confidence that it gives the graduate. Maybe
even more important than that, it gives the individual a sense of comparing himself with
other men. It gives him a personal measurement, so to speak, and a sense of what he did
and maybe what he could do better, and how much more he could put up with. And of
the fact that you learn to see how other people who participate operate under those kind
of stresses and pressures.

SM: What were the most important lessons that you took away from that
training? Was it that, in that category, under better understanding how stress and
fatigue—?

VV: Well, that was important, but I think also an appreciation of the importance
of physical capabilities, and the need for mental toughness. Of course, the whole aspect
of security demands, being prepared for the unexpected, making sure you have, you
know, contingency plans for that type of small-unit operation. I don’t know. There’s a
host of things that make it important. They make it a very valuable course for any small-
unit combat leader.
SM: How much time did you get in between each phase, to rest and get ready for the next one?

VV: It seemed to me, we had one or two days, if I recall. Maybe it was one, a day and a half something like that. I just don’t remember. I don’t know. It wasn’t much. I know that.

SM: Were you able to correspond—was there any kind of a mail system set up so you could continue, or get correspondence to and from your wife? Do you remember?

VV: Must have been. Must have been. I just don’t remember.

SM: When you left Ranger school, what was your next assignment?

VV: I went to the 82nd Airborne Division at Ft. Bragg. Here again, this was a function, but I knew I was going there before [I left West Point]. As soon as the cadets all put in a request for assignment. Of course, the Airborne divisions at that time, the 82nd, the 101st, and the 11th Airborne were typically, you know, the first choices for all of the, particularly the guys going into combat arms. So, I had requested the 82nd, and I got it and went to Ft. Bragg.

SM: Go ahead, if you would, just describe what it was like arriving at your first duty assignment as a platoon leader.

VV: Well, it was exciting because I knew I was going to an Airborne division. As it turned out, my wife and I and a lot of the other people that arrived when we arrived, lucked out and were able to move into brand-new officers’ quarters. So that was super, you know. All these young wives were thinking, boy, this Army is okay, not knowing what was going to be down the road when they got the pits somewhere in Camp Swampy. I was impressed with the units. The professionalism not only of the officers and the non-commissioned officers, but the enlisted people as well. I was fortunate because when I got there in ’58, there were a lot of NCOs (noncommissioned officers) who had participated in the Korean War. So that was a great source of not only experience and inspiration and so forth, but an opportunity to learn from those guys as a young platoon leader. It was surprising how many of them went out of their way, knowing that, “Okay, this young shave-tailed lieutenant doesn’t know a lot, but I’m going to help him.” They did. There was a great asset. It was a great learning opportunity.
SM: When you arrived, how would you describe the unit in terms of strength, morale, discipline?

VV: Well, the morale was super. The discipline was great. Of course, the 82nd had such a high priority. They were in full strength, or not full, but adequate strength.

SM: What was your specific unit of assignment within the 82nd Airborne? Do you recall?

VV: Yes. I was assigned to the 2nd Airborne Battle Group, 503rd Infantry. Sometimes referred to as “The Rock,” because the 503rd Infantry Regiment is the one that parachuted into Corregidor [in the Philippines] in World War II. I was assigned as a platoon leader, an infantry platoon leader.

SM: What was your first meeting with your men like? Do you remember?

VV: Well, actually I met with the squad leaders and the platoon sergeant first. I just remember that I very briefly gave them a rundown on who I was and where I’d come from, and tried to make sure they understood that I knew I didn’t know everything. That I anticipated I was going to need their help, and I was going to learn a lot from them. The other thing that was interesting, and a lot of people today wouldn’t realize this, in those days, within that platoon, you only had maybe three or four married people, the platoon leader, the platoon sergeant, maybe a couple of the squad leaders. Today, you may have ninety percent of your platoon married. You know, all the privates, the specialists, whoever. So that was a real change. So if we were going to go somewhere, or going to work late at night, we worked late at night. It was not an issue. We’d get up in the morning and go run at 5:30, work all day. Those who were married maybe would run home for dinner then come back or whatever to get ready for the inspection the next day or something.

SM: I think that’s a very interesting observation. When you were platoon leader there in the 82nd Airborne, were men discouraged from getting married, young enlisted men?

VV: No. Not really. They weren’t discouraged from it. Many of them just thought it was impractical just because, from a monetary stand point, number one, and number two, there wasn’t a great deal of post housing. Of course, that hasn’t improved
that much. A lot of the lower ranking enlisted people, you know, live off post, even
today.

SM: Do you think it was in part financial?
VV: Oh, I think that was the major driver, yeah. No doubt about it.
SM: How many of your platoon would you say were draftees as opposed to
volunteers, or do you have any idea?
VV: Oh, that’s a long time ago. Let me think a minute. I would think that, well,
they were all volunteers in the sense of being Airborne, but what that meant was that
even though they were drafted, after they became, into the military, they volunteered to
go Airborne. You see what I’m saying?
SM: Oh, yes, sir.
VV: But I would say maybe eighty-five percent were draftees. That’s probably
too high. Maybe drop it down to sixty.
SM: That’s a significant portion. Do you remember, was that very much an issue
while you were—what years were you there at Ft. Bragg with the 82\textsuperscript{nd}?
VV: ’58 to ’60. You mean the issue of being a draftee?
SM: Yes, sir, about the draft. Was that at all an issue?
VV: No. I don’t think so. I didn’t see that. I remember, you know, there would
be some typical bitching and moaning about, “Oh, I got drafted,” or whatever. But I
think most of the people just accepted it. That’s the way it was. It had been that way,
and it was going to be that way. No. I don’t think that you can, from a sociological
standpoint, dig into that and find any underpinnings for what was going to subsequently
happen during the Vietnam War.
SM: No. I didn’t think so, but I thought I’d ask. What was the training regimen
like? How much of your time was devoted to actually being with your men, whether it be
improvised training in the barracks area or actually going out into the field and doing a
field training exercise, versus post details and that kind of stuff?
VV: Yeah. I’m trying to remember. It seems to me the post detail thing didn’t
come around except every two, maybe a week every two months because it was rotated
by battle group. So most of our time was devoted to training. We had—there were
inspections and so forth. I’m trying to remember, we had an acronym for what we were.
We were part of what was called a STRAC (Strategic Army Corps), a strategic alert corps or something, because the 18th Airborne Corps, which is there had both the 101st and 82nd. Somebody was always on alert status in case we had to be scrambled. I can remember a couple of times, they would say, “Hey, get ready. We may have to parachute into Havana Airport,” or we’re going to do this or going to do that. Of course, a lot of that was just make-up to give the status to the alert action, but most of our time was spent training. Now, of course, we did a lot of—we did jumps, tactical jumps, both night and day jumps. Of course, when you’re going to have a major tactical jump, say nine aircraft or more or one entire battle group, that tied up a good part of the day, and if you were coming back. If you were not coming back, well then you just stayed out in the field until you’d finished your exercise.

SM: So then, very little time. Very little of your time was spent on—
VV: Details?
SM: On details, and a lot of it was, the majority of it was spent actually training with your men.
VV: That was my recollection, yeah.
SM: How much of that was in the field approximately? Would you say? How frequently would you go to the field?
VV: Well, let me clarify what you mean by the field.
SM: You would go out actually on a field training exercise, whether it be on a jump and then patrolling or whatever.
VV: Okay. As opposed to being on a rifle range or some—
SM: Yes, sir. Like a day—
VV: Yes, okay. Well, it seems to me like we had a group [FTX], a field training exercise, battle group field training exercise, once every three months. But it would may be, in one case it may be only command post exercise, [CPX]. In another case, it may be the battle group going out and running against some hypothetical enemy situation, or even against some other battle group or a unit acting as the aggressor. Then we spent a lot of time getting ready for ATTs, Army Tactical Training tests, which they were called at those days. These were typically a seventy-two-hour exercise where you were graded. They’d have umpires and that sort of thing. We’d have squad ATTs, platoon ATTs,
company, so forth. So, typically you trained at the small unit level and gradually
integrated at a higher level, ‘til you got together with the battle group. Now, a division
exercise would probably be just once a year, as I recall. Those were typically where you
would parachute in as part of a division team and so on.
SM: The various exercises, especially the, when you were actually being
evaluated, how effective were those, do you think, in evaluating your unit’s performance
and preparation for combat and more?
VV: Well, that’s a good question. So much of it was by guess and by God,
because one of the things that they have now is this laser designator that they put on
people who, you have a one on [one] opposing force structure. If you fire your [laser
designator] rifle and it sets off a laser on the guy you’re shooting at, he’s out. He’s dead.
Well, of course, in those days we didn’t have anything like that. So it was just a
judgment on the part of the umpire. Well, they would have taken those people out or this
platoon would have survived or this company would have got behind—you see what I’m
saying?
SM: Yes, sir.
VV: So, so much of it was just sort of a speculative, best-guess approach. Unless
some tactical situation was so apparent that they had been surrounded or something else.
I think it was important for moving troops into field, particularly into night operations,
but as far as coming up with a decision on how well it was judged, that’s a good question.
I don’t know. It’s improved. Let me say that. Particularly the training that’s done out at
Ft. Irwin, [California] and the desert training out there, where you have a standard
opposing force who’s stationed there and can operate against those that they rotate in.
SM: The NTC, the National Training Center.
VV: Right. Exactly.
SM: As you were training with your platoon and getting to know your men and
working closely with your NCOs, how well prepared did you think your unit was for
combat? Did you think that you were getting adequate training time with them?
VV: Well, I’m not sure I thought—I guess I was—my approach was more next
day, next day, or next week or whatever. You know, trying to anticipate what we were
doing, where we were going, what our goals were and so forth. I’m not sure I ever
reached a conclusion that we had adequate training for combat. I don’t think so. I think I
was more concerned with the more day-to-day, week-to-week pressures. You follow me?
SM: Yes, sir, I do.
VV: Rather than saying, “Okay. If we do this, now we’ll be ready for combat.”
We didn’t look at it that way. We looked at, “We’re going to be ready for the ATTs,” or
“We’re going to be ready for this exercise.” For example, our entire battle group went to
Alaska for two months. A group of us went up ahead of time, went to the Cold Weather
Mountain Warfare School at Ft. Greeley. Since I skied quite well, I got to end up being
part of that cadre. Of course, we also had to end up teaching, helping our guys learn to
ski, at least the basics of it so they could go cross-country. So we were in Alaska for, I
don’t know, I guess a month and a half, two months, which was, you know, a good
operation.
SM: Well, did you think that was a good training opportunity for you, given that
you’re a reaction force and you could find yourself in who-knows-what kind of
environment on a moment’s notice?
VV: Exactly, and learning to operate. Here again, we were there during—I can
remember one time when it was like thirty-five below zero. I know another time I had a
patrol. We were behind the enemy lines. Of course, the enemy was the unit that was
stationed there in Alaska. A guy broke through the ice, and of course we had to
immediately get him out of his clothes and into a sleeping bag with a fire because we
didn’t want him to have frostbite or some other—
SM: Hypothermia, yeah.
VV: But it was a good program. We learned a lot. It was a very good morale
builder for the unit. You know, a lot of bonding as far as the individuals and so forth.
Good program.
SM: Did he recover well?
VV: Yeah. Initially I was a rifle platoon leader, and then I became a weapons
platoon leader. In Alaska I was the company exec [executive officer]. So it was, that
was good because I was concerned with administration, and helping the company
commander, relieve him of pressure so he could do what he had to do.
SM: How would you evaluate or describe the leadership of your company and
battalion and of the chain of command.

VV: Solid guys. Most of the company commanders had had platoons in Korea,
had combat experience there. The battle group commander, who later became a three-
star general, had parachuted into Normandy and also Operation Market Garden at either
Neinmegen or Einhoven in Holland [during World War II]. They were all very capable
people, no doubt about it.

SM: What would you describe as your greatest challenges as a new platoon
leader in an Airborne unit?

VV: Getting to know your people, gaining their respect. The typical just, you
know, the leadership task that confronts you in that situation.

SM: Very challenging.

VV: Yeah. Like I remember, I had my weapons squad sergeant, super guy. I get
this call one night at home and my platoon sergeant saying, “Hey, old Sergeant Radcliff’s
in jail over in South Carolina. What are we going to do?” I said, “Oh, my God.” He
said, “If we don’t get him out tonight, he’s going to be AWOL (absent without leave)
tomorrow. He’s going to have enough trouble just getting past the civilian law
enforcement people as opposed to what would happen to him in the [court martial].” So I
drove to South Carolina and got the guy out at about midnight, signed for him. Well,
from then on, I could do no wrong with my sergeants. Because they felt, “Hey this guy,
he may be dumb and young, but he’s going to look out for us.” I didn’t even think about
it in that context at the time. I just thought, “Gee, he’s a good man. We’ve got to take
care of him,” that sort of thing.

SM: That’s a very interesting lesson, how it affects the perception, your
perception of your NCOs and also their perception of you.

VV: Yeah. It wasn’t devious on my part, or cunning or anything else. It was
just—I got to take care of this guy. He’s good and we’ve got to keep him.

SM: Yes, sir. Mutual interests. That’s interesting. What about your relationship
with the junior enlisted members of your platoon? How well were you able to get to
know them. What was the atmosphere like, the command atmosphere like in your unit?
How much interaction was considered appropriate between officers and the enlisted members of their platoons, their commands?

VV: Well, that’s a good question, because I think it’s changed dramatically since that time. In those days, there was—the only social context, I guess, would be maybe a unit day or whatever. I guess the way I tried to do it, with a lot of the enlisted people, was to get to know what they were doing, know those skills that they had, make sure they knew that I knew they could do such and such very well. I remember I had one troublemaker, a young guy, just full of himself, cocky, whatever. He took great pride in his physical prowess, but he was just a troublemaker for the sergeants and so on. So one time I said, “Okay.” I got my platoon sergeant, and says, “I want to have so-and-so at the company area at eight o’clock tonight.” He said, “Well, he’s supposed to have the night off.” I said, “Well, he and I are going to do extra training.” So we met there. I challenged the guy to run with me as long as he could run with me. If he won, he wouldn’t have to do, I don’t remember what it was, KP (kitchen police) in the field or something for the next four days, or whenever we were going out. He was really cocky. There was no doubt he was going to do it. Well, fortunately, I ran his legs off. From then on, I’m not saying he was always perfect, but if one of the sergeants had trouble with him, I’d go up and say, “Okay, we’re going to go out again. This time we’re going to let everybody know. We won’t keep it a secret. We’ll have people watch it.” You know, he would sort of straighten up and go on, but I don’t know. I think in hindsight I felt much closer to the sergeants than I did to a lot of the troops because a lot of the troops were constantly coming and going as opposed to the sergeants, who seemed to stay longer. But it was important to be with them. The platoon sergeant was a sharp guy, and he knew that any time the individuals had a problem, he made sure they had, they knew they could come and see me. Open door sort of thing, whatever you want to call it.

SM: Yes, an open door policy.

VV: Exactly.

SM: How much control did you have over non-judicial punishment, extra training, and things like that in your unit?

VV: Okay. Extra training, I would just advise the company commander what I was going to do if I were going to have some. Similarly, if the platoon sergeant wanted
to do that with one of the squad leaders, it was somebody in their squads, he would
advise me and make sure the first sergeant knew. Some of that extra training became an
issue where the platoon sergeant and the first sergeant decided they had some detail they
wanted done. So and so ended up being on those details, and he knew why he was on
that detail. But of course I had no authority from an Article 15 or a court martial
 standpoint. That was at the company and the battle group level. I did, in hindsight—I
guess enjoy is the wrong, no it was enjoy—enjoy participating in the judicial process,
either as a defense counsel or even as a trial counsel. Of course, at West Point we had
had a year, I think it was a year, a year of law or maybe it was just a semester of law
concerning non-judicial punishment, Article 15 and the courts martial process.

SM: If you had, like you mentioned with this one young man that you took out on
the run, if you had someone that was in obvious need of additional training, if you want
to call it that, you know, just basically someone needed to do some extra stuff with this
guy, and kind of jerk him around and get him to think about what he’s doing, you had
that kind of authority as long you could—
VV: Yes we did. In fact, when we would have an inspection, if so-and-so was
not properly prepared for the inspection, then we would have another inspection, say on a
Saturday afternoon. We had that freedom of action. Of course, another advantage of all
this from a command standpoint, when you didn’t have a lot of wives and kids and
families to demand time from the individual soldier, it made it a lot easier to control what
you had them doing. I guess, perhaps as I look back on it, we had more freedom of
action in those days than they do now, as far as what you could or couldn’t do.

SM: Well, certainly the issue that you raised earlier, as far as the single status of
most of your men would allow more flexibility in imposing extra training.
VV: Right. Similarly, in today’s Army, if a guy has to take his wife or child or—
he’s going to need time off from training during the week, and he gets it. That wasn’t
even an issue.
SM: That’s right. It’s very interesting stuff. We’ve been talking for a little over
an hour. Let’s go ahead and take a quick break.
VV: I can keep going, so if you want to just do it.
SM: Well, I’m going to have to. I’ve been sitting here drinking on a bottle of water.

VV: So you’re going to call me, is that it?

SM: Yeah. Let me go ahead. Yes. We are back from our break. I guess the next question I wanted to ask about your first assignment there at Ft. Bragg and the 82nd, what do you think were the most important leadership lessons you walked away with from that experience, that initial command experience?

VV: Well, there was an old cliché, I’m sure it’s still being used, “Take care of your troops and they’ll take care of you.” I’m not sure that’s the most important, but it was validated, let me put it that way. I guess the other thing that I learned, particularly from the battle group commander and then, I guess, from the company commander too, and that was mission first. But here again, those things are so—it almost sounds like pabulum because they’re so wrought in the genre of military requirements. I don’t know. Good question.

SM: It’s a tough one.

VV: Yeah. Plus, you know, it’s pretty hard. If you don’t set the right example, you’re hard pressed to get somebody else to, you know. The old, “Do as I say, not as I do” type thing. I always had this sense that if you were going to do something, or you wanted somebody to do something difficult, you ought to be able to do it, and you should do it to make sure they understood that you were not asking them to do anything more that you wouldn’t do, type thing. It’s the thing that as a young unit leader, as you look back, it’s obvious that those are the kind of things you learn, but they’re still valid. I remembered looking at superiors, watching them and how they reacted, not only to requirements from the troops but requirements from above. Whether or not they took a positive approach to it, even if it was something they didn’t like. Or if they took sort of a—and this was rare in those, because most of the people were experienced and good dedicated soldiers. But the whole aspect of saying, “Well, I don’t like this, but we’ve got to do it because the old man said we had to do it.” Which is really kind of a weak-kneed approach to, you know, to being a leader, to getting anything done. I’m not sure if I answered your question, but I’ve walked around it.

SM: No. I think you have. What was your following assignment in 1960?
VV: Well, I had—I didn’t think I’d get it, but I thought I’d try. I volunteered for flight school. Because of my concussion ski jumping, I had to go take a bunch of electroencephalogram tests and a bunch of others. Eventually I passed. Because they needed—they were trying to build up Army aviation, I ended up going to Ft. Rucker, [Alabama], to a fixed-wing course, which I enjoyed very, very much. Of course, it was only about a hundred miles from where my wife, her family lived and where she grew up so it was nice for her. It was a good program. I enjoyed flying very, very much, just as much as I thought I would, and followed it with an instrument course to get an instrument ticket [rating], which was good. We were hopeful we were going Ft. Carson, [Colorado]. That didn’t work out, we ended up going to Germany, which was fine too. Except that it occurred at the time of what they called the “Kennedy freeze.” He stopped all dependents from going to Europe. So I went without my wife. We decided we would just pay for her way to come over. Even though she couldn’t live on post, not being a valid dependent, at least we’d be together, and that’s what we did.

SM: Well, I forgot to ask probably one of the most important questions, as far as your 82nd Airborne experience. Were you guys ever deployed as a quick reaction force?

VV: Oh, yeah. Yeah, that was—now when you say deployed—

SM: Yeah. I mean, did you actually get called out and have to go somewhere?

VV: No, other than maybe to jump into Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, or just to carry out the thing as a training exercise.

SM: Yes, as a training exercise.

VV: But as far as an actual tactical operation, no.

SM: Okay. When you learned that you were—I assume you left Bragg because you got your flight school orders then.

VV: Correct, correct.

SM: Did you go down to Ft. Wolters, Texas, for your pre-flight?

VV: No, no I went to, straight to Ft. Rucker. Yeah. It was the fixed-wing program.

SM: Oh, this is fixed-wing? Excellent.

VV: Ft. Wolters is only—

SM: Right, rotary wing.
VV: Yeah.
SM: Yeah. What did you train in under fixed-wing?
VV: In the Bird Dog, the L-19.
SM: At the O-1, yeah.
VV: Yeah or the O-1. In those days it was the L-19. Later it was called the O-1.
SM: As you said, after that you did get your instrument rating, and then went on to Germany. Now what was the principal mission of a fixed-wing, L-19 pilot in 1960, ’61?
VV: Well, depending on what kind of a unit you were going to. Typically it would be for artillery observation, reconnaissance, administrative runs, whatever, because it only had room for one other passenger in the aircraft. I was assigned to an artillery battalion. In that artillery battalion it was an eight-inch, nuclear capable battalion in Germany. The aviation section had two L-19s, two pilots and it was my command as an aviator. I had four mechanics and so on. But we flew back and —our casern was south of Frankfurt, just east of Heidelberg. All of the artillery training was done at Grafenwöhr, over near the Czech border, which was about 120 miles away. So we must have made fifteen hundred runs back and forth to Grafenwöhr. Then when we got to Grafenwöhr, we would fly the artillery observers. Because we had done it so much, we were actually better than them. We ended up sort of being tutors to help them keep oriented where they were. They would come up and say, “Well, I’m going to add two hundred [yards].” We’d say, “Well, maybe you ought to add four hundred,” just because we did it all the time, if you follow me. But, it was fun. It was enjoyable.
SM: Well, what was the effect of the Kennedy freeze on morale, in your opinion?
VV: Well, it had an impact, no doubt about it. Now wait a minute. I said Kennedy freeze. It was the Eisenhower freeze. I’m trying to think. Yeah, because Kennedy came in in ’61 right?
SM: Yes, sir.
VV: It was not Kennedy that had done it. Eisenhower had done it, if I recall.
SM: If it was in, if it happened in 1960, then I think you’re right. It would have to have been Eisenhower.
VV: Yeah. I guess what happened is that, we had saved money. If I recall, it
cost four hundred bucks for her to fly over. We thought that was just outrageous, but it
was worth it. We got an apartment on what they called the economy, that’s the way they
termed it in those days. We lived above a German family in Germany. Of course, then I
flew. But I got tired of that. It was not that demanding. I mean, I enjoyed flying, you
know, that sort of thing, but it just wasn’t much demanding. So at this time, Kennedy
was [expanding] Special Forces. So I thought, “That’s me. I’ll put in for Special
Forces.” Of course, the aviation side of the house says you can’t do that. “We don’t
have any aviators who were in Special Forces.” I said, “Well, you ought to just try it.”
Finally I convinced the people in Heidelberg to at least let me have an interview. So I
flew to Bad Tölz, which is down in Bavaria, and I had an interview with several people
down there. I think they were a little reluctant, too. But they said, “Here’s an Airborne
Ranger. He’s got senior jump wings, and he’s been a small unit commander. We need
people. He speaks Russian and so forth.” So anyway, I ended up getting that
assignment. I ended up getting an A-team, detachment, you know. Are you familiar with
their—?
SM: Yes, sir.
VV: Okay. So I had this A-team, and as it turned out, it was oriented to Iran, in
the event of a world war or a strategic requirement. We were oriented to Western Iran.
That’s where we’d go.
SM: I’m curious, though. Here you are. You’re in Germany. You’re supposed
to be unaccompanied, but you’ve brought your wife over on your own. Now what was
the—how did the command view that? Were they just turning a blind eye, they didn’t
care?
VV: Well, there was nothing they could do to stop it. For a couple of reasons.
Number one, we paid. She wasn’t sponsored by the command. I had the right of either
living on in the BOQ (bachelor officer’s quarters) or living off post. There were a lot of
bachelor officers who lived off post. So as far as the command was concerned, it was a
non-problem.
SM: Okay.
VV: The only reason it was implemented in the beginning anyway was to cut back on the cost, you know, from an economic standpoint of bringing dependents back and forth. Since I was paying, it became a non-issue. Then as it turned out, later Kennedy reversed that decision, I’m sure because of morale impact and people complaining to their senators or whatever. When that was done, then we became eligible for post housing and so forth.

SM: Okay. How long were you flying before this opening in Special Forces occurred?

VV: Okay. Let’s see, I arrived in Germany in January. After about a year of flying, I said, “This isn’t it.” I enjoyed it and so forth, but then I started scouting around. I knew they were building up Special Forces. I’d heard about some of the people they ended up taking and I knew my background experience exceeded that. So I guess after about thirteen months, I tried to go into Special Forces. I ended up spending—the flying assignment was about sixteen months and then I went to Special Forces. Now, I still flew in Special Forces. This is interesting. This was in the days, if you were a rated aviator, and you went on ground duty, you were supposed to maintain your proficiency. You follow me?

SM: Yes, sir.

VV: So I flew on the weekends, or I flew at night at Bad Tölz. Then, of course, I also parachuted or jumped. Now, I didn’t get both the jump pay and the flight pay. I had to take one or the other. Of course, since the flight pay was more than jump pay, I took the flight pay.

SM: Of course. But in order to maintain proficiency in both, you had to do both?

VV: Yeah.

SM: What did your wife think of this idea of yours to go from pure aviation to Special Forces?

VV: She was very supportive. Plus we were going to Bavaria, another nice place to live. Plus, well, that’s a personal issue. I won’t go into that. Well, I will too. We had adopted a child in northern Germany. We were hoping to get another one and we hadn’t been able to. So we figured, “Well, if we go down south it would give another opportunity.”
SM: Okay. While you were flying in the pure aviation position for those sixteen months, what kind of interesting things were going on? This is, of course, the height of the Cold War, the Iron Curtain.

VV: I’ll tell you an interesting thing. On, what was it, the thirteenth of August, 1961? The Berlin Wall went up.

SM: Yes, sir.

VV: Which was very interesting, and we were riveted. We had our own TV, but of course all the news was in German. We’d get about every five words. That went up and there was a lot of pressure as far as what the Russians were going to do or not do in Berlin. Then, in fact, we—what happened is the West German government started subsidizing travel to Berlin. So my wife and I decided, “Well, we’ll go to Berlin.” So we flew into Berlin in February of ’62. The Wall went up that previous August. While in Berlin—let’s see. I don’t remember when we went to Berlin—sometime in ’62 we went to Berlin. I remember that she could go in the Eastern Zone and I couldn’t because of security classifications. So that was interesting, to see Berlin and what was going on and the Wall and watching people on one side waving handkerchiefs to their loved ones on the other side and crying. It was very dramatic, needless to say. Of course, and then later in ’62, that fall of course, that’s when you had the Cuban Missile Crisis. We didn’t really have a sense of the magnitude of it because we were in Germany. Nothing was happening in Germany at that time because the eyes of the world were focused on Cuba.

SM: But given that part of the Cuban Missile Crisis was a near escalation to hostility between the United States and—

VV: Oh, yes. We were on full alert.

SM: I was going to say you guys had to have been on alert.

VV: Oh, yeah, yeah. Everybody was. There was all this speculation that the Fulda Gap was no longer going to be a gap, it was going to be filled with Russian tanks.

SM: Yes, sir. Now what about—some of the things I’ve hear about men who served in Germany, was that every once in a while there’d be incidents, at border check points or at—you’ve got enemy soldiers or communist soldiers on one side of this line, wall, whatever, fence. Americans and our allies on the other side, and every once in a
while there are exchanges. Sometimes they’re friendly exchanges, sometimes they’re not so friendly. Did you ever witness anything like that?

VV: Well, not like that, per se. But once, something slightly different.

Graffenwöhr is near the Czech border. Graffenwöhr was a major training base for the Bundeswehr, all German armies. Of course, after we took over, that’s where we did all of our—a lot of our live-fire training. I can recall very, very specifically, on two or three occasions, and talking to friends of mine who had similar experiences, where we would be flying into the beacon at Graffenwöhr. Suddenly that beacon would blackout, and we’d get a new beacon, but it would be in the wrong position. What the Russians were trying to do, or the Czechs, was to try to get us to cross the border so I guess we could be shot down. Now that was an interesting situation. Particularly if you were going to make an instrument approach into Graff, because you got a little squeamish. Then later on, I think they actually put a GCA (ground-controlled approach) into Graff to preclude people being sucked over the border.

SM: Now when you arrived there, did they warn you about the possibility of that happening?

VV: Oh, yeah. In fact, we had a lot of orientation flights along the so-called DMZ (demilitarized zone) so that we would have a feel for what it was like. You know, key check points, key radio stations that we could clarify where we were located and so on.

SM: While you were there, did anybody accidentally stray over?

VV: I’m trying to recall. I’m not sure. I know when I was—later when I was Korea, we had that happen.

SM: Well, any other memorable events occur while you were there flying in the pure aviation position?

VV: Very memorable, particularly for the guy that worked for me. He hit a power line. Fortunately, both the pilot and the crew chief in the back, they both survived with fairly minor injuries considering what happened. Because I don’t know if you’ve been to Germany but they have these major power lines very high above ground. He flew into one going into the sun the wrong way and crashed. It arched a big hole in the
plane, in the wing. The tank didn’t explode, but they hit the ground and they both
survived. The aircraft was totally wrecked. That was very memorable.

SM: Yes, sir. Now in an accident like that does the pilot, does he lose his flight
status?

VV: No. Well, no. He didn’t lose it, but of course there was an aviation safety
board. They were looking for the cause of the accident, and it was pilot error, clearly.
The irony of it is that where he was going, we had marked our maps with what we called
our wire map because we knew that this was a problem all over Europe. In fact,
Germany was one of the major reasons that helicopters now have wire cutters underneath
and above because there would have been so many wire accidents over there.

SM: When you went from aviation over to Special Forces—were there any other
memorable experiences or observations from that time?

VV: In Special Forces?

SM: No, before Special Forces.

VV: No. I don’t think so.

SM: Okay. When you transitioned over, did you actually have to go through the
officer qualification course?

VV: Yes.

SM: Where did you do that?

VV: Well, we did that at Bad Tölz. We ended up with the, I don’t know what the
regular course was, but we ended up going through like a three-week program. You
probably know better than I do. I don’t remember what the regular course—anyway, we
went through an accelerated three-week program. Now we weren’t given a prefix three
on our MOS (military occupational specialty) after that because there were a lot—like we
had to pass things after the fact because of the way the course was set up. For example, I
remember I didn’t pass the code requirements, but I was lucky. I was ahead of the game
because I knew the code having gone through flight school and was familiar with picking
up the alphabet listening to radio signals and so on. But I didn’t get the speed up. I think
it was ten words a minute. Gee, it’s a long—I don’t remember what the requirement was,
but I did pass it, I think a few weeks later because we went to code training everyday.

Then I passed it and later got my [SF (Special Forces)] three prefix.
SM: What else did they cover in that course that qualified you to the Special Forces?

VV: All kinds of guerilla tactics, all kinds of explosives. I really enjoyed the explosive thing. Ribbon cuts with C-4, how to take down transmission lines, how to sabotage electricity, electrical generating facilities, the use of—what’s it called? The thing where you, like they did in Oklahoma with the fertilizer?

SM: Oh, improvised explosives?

VV: Yes. We did a lot of that, improvised booby traps, a lot of hands-on stuff there. In fact, this is no longer classified, but at that time, we also, later as I got into my team, we trained with ADM, Atomic Demolitions Munitions. We had the backpack types.

SM: What was the approximate yield of those or can you say?

VV: I don’t remember the exact yield, but it wasn’t that high. 0.5 KT (kiloton)? I don’t know.

SM: I was going to say half a kilo ton or so. You can’t fit very much in a backpack.

VV: Pardon?

SM: You can’t fit very much in a small enough pack, a three-man portable.

VV: No. Even those manned portables, as I recall, it took two of us because we had to separate certain aspects of it and so on.

SM: When you got to your team, to your detachment, what was—you mentioned already that your emphasis was on Western Iran. So in terms of your mission as a Special Forces A-detachment, what would you guys be focusing your attention on in terms of training for that environment and what eventualities did you expect?

VV: Okay. Typically, we spent a great deal of time in Farsi language training. A great deal of time in cultural, sociological aspects, and then also considerable time as far as the geography of the area was concerned. Then later, I’m trying to remember the date, December 20, 1962. I remember October was the Cuban thing. December twentieth, my team and two others were—yeah, three teams were selected for a classified mission into Iran. It was in concert with the Iranian government. One of the main reasons it was classified was because we were going to exceed a U.S.-Russian troop level agreement
after the Azerbaijan mess and so forth post-World War II. So what was going to happen
is that when they put our fifty troops in, we would exceed the maximum level that we
were supposed to have in Iran. Our orders had us go into Rome. We flew into an airport
[in Iran] that was under construction, Hamadan, I think it was. From there we went right
into—we ended up going right into the Kurdish area. Good stuff, good training, good
opportunity, good troops, one of my most enjoyable assignments was Special Forces.

SM: If you would, I’m not sure how much it has changed. So would you break
down how your detachment was organized?

VV: Yeah. My team sergeant was an E-8, and he was also the ops sergeant. I
had an E-7 who was the intel sergeant. I had two sergeants. I think they were E-6s. One
was a light weapons expert. The other was a heavy weapons expert. I had two commo
[communications] guys. I had two medics, excellent. In fact, one of them had had
experience with the White Star teams in Laos. They were really good. Let’s see, that’s
two, four, six, eight. Then I had two demo sergeants. Two, four, six, eight, ten, and then
I had a lieutenant [XO (executive officer)]. As it turns out, he got promoted. So I had a
captain working for me, and I was a captain.

SM: When your detachment, your team was called out on this particular
operation, what did you guys do?

VV: Well, as soon as we got the mission, the cover story was that we were going
to train an Irani Airborne battalion so they could convert to Special Forces. We did that.
We actually did that. We trained—we had this battalion. We helped them organize into
Special Forces teams, and then we gave training to help them. Now it turns out that a lot
of that training was pretty basic. It was stuff that they probably should have known, but
for whatever reason, they didn’t; particularly in the area of compass work and so on. But
for the most part, they were dedicated guys and going to do their best. Sadly, I’m sure
they were all killed. I know the officers were when Khomeini took over [in 1979]. I
suspect a lot of the sergeants were, and I suspect some of the other guys were killed just
because they ended up dying in the Irani-Iraqi war timeframe. The covert part of the
thing was to assess what was happening as far as back and forth across the Iraqi-Iran
border. At about this time, one of the Barsanis, Mustafa Barsani, who is I guess the
grandfather of one of the guys that’s still active in the Kurdish area in Iraq today. He was
referred to as the Red Mullah because after that group, his particular tribe was driven out of Iraq by the Iraqi government, they actually went into Russia and was there for several years. So there was a concern on the part of the U.S. government that the Kurds in the Mosul-Kirkuk area would end up coming back and taking over the northern oil fields and on a fait d’accompli end up giving it to the Russians. So we went into a place called Sanandaj, and used it as sort of an administrative base. Then we left there and we went into the Lake Marivan area. If you look at the map of Iran, they call it the Cat’s Head, to the northwest. It’s like the head of a cat. It goes out and then it comes in. Well, we were in—the head itself is called Tabriz, I mean Azerbaijan area. Then the leading city in there is Tabriz. But underneath there, right on the border is where we were. We stayed there with the Kurds for I guess a couple of months.

SM: Well, how—?
VV: This is more than you want to know.
SM: No, not at all. How effective was your training in Farsi in terms of when you got yourself, when you were in Iran—?
VV: Well, we couldn’t—all we were interested in was conversational Farsi. When we did interrogations of border crossers, my intel sergeant would have not only a good Farsi speaker but a good Kurdish speaker because that became the problem. Farsi wasn’t the problem, it was Kurdish. Because those were the guys that were going across that border as if it were Time Square, but easier than Time Square. When they had come back, of course, we were checking. When they went over one way, they were trying to find out what they were taking with them. Coming back we wanted to know, like when they’d come back if they had a pair of Russian binoculars. Well, that was pretty obvious. The other thing was trying to make sure they came back to him. So we would end up giving them stuff that would encourage them to come back. Maybe something that required batteries. We’d say, “Okay. Well, when your batteries run out, come and see us and we’ll give you some more.” That sort of thing. We got a lot of data, a lot of information. Was it any of it earth shaking? No. I think at the time we made a major impression on the Kurds, and also on the Iranis just by virtue of our physical prowess. For example, a gimme—

SM: Yeah, go ahead.
VV: We’d have PT (physical training) every morning for all that battalion of Iranis. I lead the PT. If I didn’t lead it one of my sergeants did, or my other officer. Well, this staggered them because in their business, the officers wouldn’t do that or couldn’t do it. I don’t know how you want to characterize it. We would go on marches, and they would—their packs would be nearly empty. We’d say, “Why don’t we trade packs?” They’d take our packs, which were like fifty pounds, forty, fifty pounds. One time I remember one of their captains asking one of my sergeants, “Why is your pack so heavy?” He opened it and dumped it out. It was rocks. I mean, it blew their mind. Why would you carry a bunch of rocks? Then we had to sit down and have a discussion on what we were trying to do. This was a training regimen and that if you were going to be gone out into the boonies forever, or for a long time carrying ammo, food, explosives, whatever, it was going to be heavy. Might as well get ready for it.

SM: In terms of the Kurds, what was their role in all of this? What was the relationship like between the Kurds and the Iranis as you witnessed it?

VV: Well, that was one of the problems. We were right in the middle of it.

SM: Not too unlike what we’re dealing with now with Iraq.

VV: Yeah, exactly. Fortunately, the area we were in, there had never been any Iranian—well, I say never. There had been very, very few Iranian soldiers. Now, having said that, the ones that had been there had not won the hearts and minds of the people. That’s for damned sure. So what we tried to do was just to try to stress that we were Americans, which they recognized, knew. We were trying to bring a better relationship between the Iranian soldiers and the Kurds. We were not going to be even marginally successful in a matter of two months, but we hoped that if we could convince the Iranians how important it was as a source of intel, and also not to [be] generating an enemy. That they ought to do what they could do to help these people. We also made them see how important our medics were, for example. Hell, we had Kurds come from miles and miles away to see the American doctor because we had a sick call everyday. We had people showing up saying, “So and so, I can’t get an erection. Can you help me?” Others came with TB (tuberculosis). Others came because they knew they were going to have a major pregnancy problem. One of my guys, I think, did an emergency appendectomy. Another one helped with two or three births, one of which was a breech birth. The medics were
just vital. I can’t say enough about how well they were, and how important they were to our relationship with the Kurds.

SM: But in terms of the relationship between the Iranis and the Kurds.

VV: Well, you know, like I said, all we were trying to do was to set an example for both sides and stress how important it was to maintain a good relationship with them, not only for intelligence, but for just any potential combat operations later on. Now how successful, who knows?

SM: Was there very much open hostility that you witnessed between the two groups, or mistrust?

VV: No. I’ll tell you one reason why not. We had quite a few Kurdish guys in their battalion. They were helpful, very helpful. One of the things, when we’d go into these Kurdish villages was just the basic sanitation: defecating in the water up the stream for somebody down below was going to get a drink or going to wash their clothes, or a dead animal in it never removed. So it was important using these Kurdish guys who were soldiers as part of our team, I guess you’d called it a civil affairs team, to tell them how important it was not to do that. The *kadkhoda*, the village leader said, “Well, we do that forever. That’s not a problem.” Then trying to explain to them why it was a problem, what could happen. It was a real challenge. It was great. I enjoyed it.

SM: How receptive would you find them?

VV: The Kurds?

SM: Yeah to changing the—especially in that kind of context where they’ve been doing something for so many generations?

VV: Here again, it was tough. I mean it was tough to be—the first *kadkhoda*, village leader, first Kurdish village leader I met, I went with one guy, an interpreter. We had made an appointment to see this guy at X time. I had asked my Kurdish interpreter, who was taking me to go see him, “How long is it going to take us to get there?” He said, “Oh, no more than forty-five minutes.” So I allowed an extra, I think twenty minutes or something like that. God, after forty-five minutes, we weren’t even close. So I started jogging, and the guy said, “Why are you running?” I said, “Well, I don’t want to be late.” “Oh, no problem. We’re going to be late, don’t worry about it.” I said, “It’s a problem for me. When we say a time, we mean a time.” So after we got there, and we
got there barely on time, I think he spent a whole, I don’t know how, about five minutes
explaining to the guy that the American was crazy because we’d been running the last, I
don’t know, whatever it was, twenty, twenty minutes or so, twenty-five, to get there so he
wouldn’t be late. They laughed and laughed about that. I tried to explain to them how
important it was that when you say you’re going to do something at certain time, at least
particularly from a military standpoint, you better do it at that time, if at all possible.
Hell, I don’t think I ever made that move. Anyway, I was going to tell you that because
its one of the memorable events of that whole trip. The kadkhoda came up to me, put his
hand over his heart and bowed his head, just sort of nodded, he didn’t bow. He said,
that all about?” He said, “It’s the only American word he knows.” He says, “but he
loves America.” I said, “Why does he know that word?” He says, “Because he hears it
on his radio.” He had a transmitter radio, and whatever station he was picking up, that
was one of the words that he heard a lot.

SM: Oh, that’s too funny.
VV: Oh, that was great.
SM: The power of American culture at work.
VV: The wrong way, whatever. So then we go to his house. It’s made out of
clay and so forth. We sit down and we’re going to have tea. So they—oh, and yogurt.
The yogurt is in a wooden carved bowl. There’s a fly upside-down in one part of it, you
know, natural yogurt. He brings in one teacup and some sugar, which he breaks off.
God, his hands are—I mean, he’s flat dirty—and puts the sugar in the tea. Oh, and in the
teacup, he sloshes around water and throws it out on the floor and then fills it. He gives it
to me. No one else has a cup, so I drink, sip. The interpreter says, “Are you through?” I
said, “Well, yeah.” So then they take the cup and they use it for everybody else. I was—
weird, I mean really weird. Then of course, we had yogurt. Oh, my god. The guy takes
the back of his hand and swats the fly off. This has little to do with what you want to
hear.

SM: No, no. This is good cultural information.
VV: But anyway, so we got through with having the yogurt and the tea and so
forth. The leader and my interpreter, they have this drawn out conversation. The
interpreter’s shaking his head, no, no, no, and smiling, no, no. So it turns out that the
village leader wants me, has invited me to spend the night there with them. I said, “Oh, I
thank you very much.” You know, but trying to be gracious, “But I have an important
meeting I have to get back to.” He said, “Yeah, but if you stay here you can have my
daughter for the night, spend the night with you.” I said, “No. I am honored, truly
honored by that opportunity, but I think not. I’ve got to really get back.” So we got
back. But anyway, it was interesting. One of many interesting experiences meeting the
Kurdish people. I really admired them. They were just very straight forward, very, I
don’t know—at least my relationship with them.

SM: Now did you, when you went out in the field like that, did you wear a
wedding band?

VV: Oh, yeah.

SM: Or did you take that kind of identifying material off?

VV: Oh, no, no, no. I wore my West Point ring, wedding band, whatever. Not
an issue.

SM: How much of what you were doing there was considered classified either
clandestine, covert or whatever?

VV: Well, you know because we had this overt training mission, it was easy to
integrate whatever we were looking for with that. Do you see what I’m saying?

SM: Yes.

VV: Like, we were not—we may have crossed the border of Iraq, just because it
was so ill defined in the area, but that was not our intent. We weren’t told to go into Iraq
to do anything. We were to stay in Iran. One other thing that was kind of interesting.
We maintained a daily, maybe it was twice a day, a communications with our SFOB
(Special Forces operations base), special operations base in Bad Tölz. Sometimes it may
have even gone as—no, it was just Bad Tölz. But we used a blind transmission
broadcast. What I mean is, we had a set time, trans time that we were to come on the air.
So we would come on the air, and using one-time pads—are you familiar with them?

SM: No, sir. I’m not.

VV: Okay. A one-time pad is where I have the pad, and the base has the pad.

It’s in five-letter code groups. Those are the only two pads for that particular, when
we’re going to use that code. Do you see what I’m saying? So when, whatever you want
to send, you will put a letter in for that particular—how do I say this? Anyway, when we
broadcast this thing or transmit it, the only way that it can be broken is for the guy on the
other end, because he has an exact pad that we have or exact code for that timeframe.
That’s how he can know what we’re sending. So we would transmit. Then we might get
a response to our transmittal three hours later, six hours later. It was interesting because
we had been in the area for maybe three weeks, two, three weeks. We got this message
from Bad Tölz, and it said, “Based on your last transmission of the person you told us
about,” and we had told about a six foot one guy, Caucasian, obviously not a Kurd. We
didn’t think he was an Irani because the Irani soldiers said he wasn’t that were with us.
So we described him and so forth. When it came back, it said use extreme caution. We
think that’s the Soviet military attaché from Tehran. As it turns out, it was. They were
on to us.

SM: Sir—okay, this is a continuation of the interview with Mr. Vel Varner on the
twenty-ninth of May, 2003. This is CD number 2. I’m sorry sir, go ahead. You were
saying that this was a Soviet—

VV: We got this message from our base saying it would appear that the Soviet
military attaché was in the local, little village called Lake Marivan. It was a little village
down there, and, snooping around. As it turned out it was. So then the speculation was,
“Well, how did the Russians find out about us?” Well, as you may or may not know, the
Communist party in Iran at that time was called the Tudeh Party. If you spell it
phonetically, it would be T-U-D-E-H. So the speculation was that there must have been a
rep from the Tudeh Party in the area, and that they had in turn called Tehran and told the
embassy. So this guy came out. Now he did see a couple of my sergeants, but of course
he never did come out to our base camp area because it was so far away. It would have
been very difficult to get to, although he could have, I presume. Anyway, that added a
little spice to it, that they knew we were there and we knew they knew we were there and
so forth.

SM: What about other communist nationals, whether they be from Eastern
Europe and the Warsaw Pact, not just the Soviets, but perhaps even Asians or anybody
else working in the area?
VV: In that area?
SM: Mm-hmm.
VV: No, because we were out in nowhere. Now, you mentioned Eastern Europeans. We had several guys in the group that had been, fought against the Russians in 1956 in Budapest during the so-called Hungarian Revolution. As you may recall, the Russians intervened in—well, they actually left Budapest because they were chagrined at the impact it was having on them in October of ’56. Then they came back in on, I think it was the fourth of November and killed a bunch of people and drove out a lot of them. So we had guys in the group that came into the Army under the so-called Lodge Act, Senator Lodge. What that allowed them to do, even though they couldn’t, would not normally have been able to be integrated into the system because of security clearance problems, they were allowed to do that. Those guys were excellent, very knowledgeable. As you would expect, most of them were either on a Russian team or an Eastern European team. By team I mean an A-team. Our B-team, S-2 sergeant was from Hungary and he was smart. He was pretty good.
SM: Were there any other teams operating in the same area or were you guys the only ones?
VV: Where I was, we were the only team. The nearest—our nearest headquarters was about a hundred miles away. The nearest team to us, to the north of us was probably one-hundred fifty. Then where our headquarters was located, there was also a team there. We were the ones furthest out in the boonies as it turned out. In fact, if I—when I would go in to meet with the B-team commander or my boss, what would happen is the Irani Air Force would bring in a T-6. An old, it was called the Texan in World War II, T-6. They’d pick me up there on a grass, sod area. Then I’d fly to Kermanshah, have the meeting and they’d bring me back. That flight in itself was an adventure.
SM: I would imagine so.
VV: Yeah, the plane. I would swear the seat packs were full of—the parachutes were full of sawdust, and the tires looked like they had been re-treaded off a jeep or something. It looked like the only thing that held the plane together was the shiny paint. I asked the guy. I said, “Have you flown this plane long?” He said, “I’ve been in this plane fifteen years.” He could flat fly it.
SM: I would imagine so. Now did you get to fly very much—?

VV: Oh, yeah. He let me fly. Yeah. I didn’t land it or take it off, but he would let me fly en route. He was happy to do that. Of course, I’m trying to remember what else I—the Air Force, we went over in C-124. They let me sit behind the seat, just to see what it was like to fly a C-124. C-124, I don’t know if you remember it, but it had two decks. There was an upper deck for troops and a lower deck for troops. It was the four props engine, had a big radar nose on it. It was interesting to parachute out of it because what would happen, you’d have the bottom deck would parachute first, and then the first ones would come downstairs and hook up, and they’d go out. You’d have to have multiple drop zones just because it took so long to get everybody out of it.

SM: When you got into Iran, did you jump in?

VV: No. The only time we jumped into Iran was at a tactical demonstration that we put on with our counterparts for the Shah, near Tehran. In fact, he came and shook hands with each one of us. We got to meet him. It was kind of interesting.

SM: What did you think about the situation in Iran and American policy towards providing so much support for the Shah?

VV: At that time?

SM: Mm-hmm.

VV: Well, that’s a good question. I guess my thoughts on it were that what we were doing was important to stop the Russians from getting one of their traditional targets, clear back to the time of the czars, and that was the warm water port, and going all the way through Iran. Even in the post, at the end of World War II, when they set up the so-called Azerbaijan Republic, it was just a communist front government. You want to clarify what you mean by the question?

SM: Yeah. In particular, did you think that American policy in that region, in the Middle East at the time was appropriate to the Cold War situation?

VV: Oh, yeah. No doubt about it. If you’re saying, “Was I concerned that the Shah was a dictator and obviously brutal, was I concerned about that?” I didn’t think about that. Now maybe I was naïve, but that’s about what I was thinking about, because I knew we were supporting a lot of dictators around the world who were anti-communist.

SM: That was the important component?
VV: Yeah.
SM: They were anti—they were against the communists.
VV: Yeah. Exactly.
SM: Well, while you were doing this, working in Germany, working in Iran, of course the United States had been picking up its efforts in other parts of the world as well. As you already mentioned, in Southeast Asia for instance were putting a lot of support behind Diem. What was the timeframe that you were in Iran?
VV: Spring of ’63.
SM: The spring of ’63? So like the April, May, June timeframe.
VV: Yeah. March, April, May into—yeah, that’s what it would have been.
SM: March, June of ’63. Then you left and went back to Bad Tölz?
VV: Yeah. Bad Tölz. This was the first mobile training team that Special Forces had done in Iran. After that, we did several others, quite a few others.
SM: Well, you mentioned that a couple of your NCOs had experience with White Star teams in Laos.
VV: That’s correct.
SM: I was wondering, did they talk very much about those experiences?
VV: Not a great deal. I mean, they talked about them if you asked them a question. They’d answer them.
SM: Anything stand out as far as what they talked about?
VV: Not that I recall, no.
SM: Or what was happening in Laos and Southeast Asia?
VV: Other than how good some of the native peoples were, the Montagnards and that sort of thing, how effective they were. They were good little troops. So even then, in the early times, we recognized their value.
SM: Yes. When you left, I guess in June, around June of 1963, did you feel like your team had succeeded in transforming that Airborne battalion into—?
VV: I think to the best of our limits. I felt that one of the things that we achieved, there was no doubt, they were flat-ass impressed with us as a group and I think particularly with my soldiers as individuals because of their knowledge, professionalism, their physical capabilities and so forth. I think there isn’t anything to doubt it. One other
thing, and I say this not as an issue of personal braggadocio, but here was one important
thing that happened. During a river crossing training operation, it was a gorge area with
rapids and so forth. We had anticipated that this could be a problem, because there were
some of these guys that, they didn’t swim. I mean they were brave enough, but they
didn’t swim. We weren’t sure if somebody fell off one of these crossing ropes what was
going to happen. So we put in two safety lines downstream from the crossing area with a
good, quality swimmer adjacent to each one. Well, lo and behold, wouldn’t you know it.
One of these young Iranis, he falls off. When he falls, when he goes into the water, one
of his buddies jumps in to help him. Well, hell, his buddy can’t swim either. So the first
lifesaver if faced with the task, “Which one do I go for?” So he gets the one that was
closest to him out of the water. For whatever reason, the succeeding line missed him.
I’m down the stream a way, standing on the bank with several Irani officers, watching the
operation. I’m thinking, “Well, they’ll get him. They’ll snare him, no problem.” Well,
hell, lo and behold they don’t. So here comes this guy. He’s approaching me and I’m
looking around. There’s no one else going to do anything, so I remember very
specifically taking off my pistol belt, putting it on the ground with my beret and jumped
in the water. Lucky, fortunately was able to get the guy and to bring him ashore. Well,
holy shit, you would have thought I saved the world. As I look at it very candidly and
with hindsight, it was not that big a deal because he came in fairly close to where I was
standing on the shore and got him out. But I mean, it was a—they made it a big deal. It
turns out the guy was a Kurd. It was a Kurdish soldier in the Iranian Army. God, the
general came and everybody came, and so forth. Anyway, as I look back on it, that had a
bearing on also, not only our relationship to the Kurds in the area, but also to the Iranian
soldiers and the officers. I mean, I was just there among, with a fairly large group. They
were all standing there with their thumb in their mouth or whatever. It was very apparent
to me that somebody had to do something. Anyway, I just mention that in hindsight
because it was interesting to look at it from a psychological standpoint, how it affected
the different people, and the different ranks, and the fact that an officer would jump in to
help. I guess the Iranis were thinking, “Jesus, I wonder if would one of my captains have
jumped in to save me?” Just, that was sort of the approach to it I guess.
SM: Good question. As you pointed out, this is in a military where the officers
don’t even do PT with their men.

VV: Yeah. Exactly.

SM: There’s not even that kind of a relationship.

VV: Well, they did PT because they required them later, but they, if it had been
their show, they wouldn’t have. That’s the point, yeah.

SM: How much were you able to learn? It seems like a lot of your interactions
obviously with some of the Kurds, the cross-border activities and, of course, the Irani
military. What about the Irani civilians, the Irani communities near where you were
working?

VV: Where we were there were almost no Iranian civilians at all. Absolutely zip,
because we were out in the boondocks. Now the little village nearby, it had some Irani
people. But for the most part, they were suspicious of us and the soldiers because they
were the center of a smuggling area. We tried to make it apparent to them that we
weren’t concerned that they were breaking the law, that they were smuggling and going
back and forth or whatever. But, you know, they still were suspicious, particularly of the
fact that Iranian soldiers were with us. So I just told the Iranian officers, “You keep your
people away from the village. Don’t even go down there. You have no reason to go
there anyway.” So that’s what—as far as I know, that’s what they ended up doing. Now
my intel sergeant would go down there because, and his assistant, because that was an
area where they could sit down and interface with the people going both directions.

SM: What were they smuggling typically?

VV: God, anything. I mean, if there was something you wanted, a Rolex watch,
whatever you wanted, they’d give it to you. Now this is another thing that was—I
mention watches. This was just one of the most interesting cultural aspects of the thing
that was amazing. When we’d meet a village leader or if we’d meet any other guy, and if
you were just making small talk, and he happened to see what time it was, and you made
some comment like, “Oh, that’s a nice watch.” God, he would tear it off his wrist and
hand it to you and say, “Oh, take it. Take it. It’s yours. It’s yours.” Then you’d say,
“Oh no, no, no, no. I didn’t mean that. I was just admiring it.” There was sort of a rule
of thumb that if this guy said take it, it’s yours, over say four to five times, and you didn’t
take it, then it was a personal offense. So we had to go great extremes to explain to our
interpreters that we were a little different. When we admired something. It didn’t mean
we wanted it. You know what I mean?

SM: Yes.
VV: So that was really intriguing to see that sort of thing. You said, “What did
d they smuggle?” Hell, I remember one time the guy, we said, “Well, what are you selling
over there?” He pulled his sleeve up, and he must have had fifteen or twenty watches on
his arm. Another guy had a bunch of ballpoint pens in one of his pockets. You think of a
ballpoint pen as next to, of no value, but if you take them somewhere they didn’t have it,
it was important. We had some really classy flashlights that we would use to give to
these so-called smugglers, just because we were hoping they would come back, you
know? Because it was a battery size they didn’t have. Oh, God, they went wild over it.
They wanted to know where they could get—they’d buy a hundred. They’d buy two
hundred, whatever. We just said, “Sorry, they’re only gifts.” But anything they would
smuggle, weapons, explosives. Whatever was needed, they’d get it. Particularly to a
tribal-type force out in the boondocks, coal lanterns, special coal oil lanterns, you know,
things like that.

SM: Well, how much of that type of material was being brought in by the United
States. Here you are, you’re trying to train some of the military forces, but was USAID
(United States Agency for International Development) or any other American agencies
involved with infusing new economic or financial assistance?
VV: No, nothing like that.
SM: What about—?
VV: I mean, where we were. Now there may have been that going on
somewhere else, but not where we were.
SM: What about military equipment, weapons and things like that? Were you
training them with American weapons or their own?
VV: They had American weapons, yes.
SM: These were M-14s?
VV: M-14s, that’s correct. There were still some M-1s, believe it or not.
SM: Oh, I couldn’t believe it.
VV: Not that many, but there were a few.

SM: What about machine guns, grenade launchers—?

VV: No grenade launchers, but machine guns.

SM: Mortars, artillery—

VV: Yep, yep. Eighty-one millimeter mortars, we were training on that.

SM: How about artillery pieces?

VV: No. We didn’t have any training—see, at Special Forces you end it so they didn’t have artillery.

SM: But you didn’t see any?

VV: No. Because see, we were so out in this area, border area, that like I said, there were no villages, nothing. I’m sure that’s changed now, but in those days there was nothing. In fact, to get there, as I recall, we went in on trucks. Hell, it must have been a five-, six-, seven-hour ride from where we came from. The roads were hellacious. In hindsight, or not hindsight, but I remember talking to the team guys as we went by and said, “God, you could sure sabotage this road pretty easy.” We did make that comment.

SM: I would imagine that the area was not very hospitable, that is geographically, environmentally.

VV: That’s true.

SM: Why don’t you just go ahead and describe what that area’s like?

VV: Well, we drove through what we referred to as part of the Alborz Mountains. I think they reach up at the highest point something like—God, I can’t remember this. I should remember it, but I don’t. It seems to me that they reach up something like sixteen, eighteen thousand feet. I believe the pass we went through was like at ten. I know the trucks had a hell of a time chugging along. Then there were several passes at different levels, until we ended up crossing down and going into the so-called Lake Marivan area. Which, by the way, right there before you cross into Iraq was the beautiful, big green valley area. There was a small lake there. It was just gorgeous. I remember one of the sergeants saying, “Boy, you could drop an entire division in here if you had to,” I mean an Airborne division.

SM: What were the major—what was the greatest challenge to this particular experience? What were the major lessons you took away from it?
VV: How important it was to ensure that the leadership on the other side were支持 what you were doing, in other words, the local division commander. The特别部队的家伙们其实并不属于他。他们在他的领域里行动，他们行动的空降部队。所以他可能只是把我们当作一种麻烦，但重要的麻烦，因为沙阿本人是支持我们的。所以我想确保他将支持我们，不仅仅是沙阿希望他支持，而是因为我们要做的事情对他们的国家和军队来说都非常重要。所以我们出去——或者说我想确保他的G-3和他的参谋长都对我们的行动、我们在做什么、我们如何做、为什么我们要做这些了如指掌。邀请他们出去，偶尔，我会寻求他们的建议，即使我认为他们可能并不太了解，但当涉及到他们的领域时，他们当然知道。但我从军事的角度来说。我们还，这是我以前从未知道的。我们在离开巴德托尔茨之前，我们就有了所谓的预支经费。我被给了一个可以用作我所认为合适的、或在需要时使用的特定金额。幸运的是，其中一件事——我在一个我非常欣赏和尊重的白星地区的士兵那里。我去找他，我说：“你知道，当我们到那里时，我们必须做的一件事是确保我们有个好的开始。”他说：“你是对的。”我说：“我需要想法子给指挥官和其他几个重要的人送些礼物，让他们知道我们很高兴在那里，并且我们希望他们欢迎我们。”他说：“如果你是我，我会买一把最大、最亮的刀子。然后装饰一下，然后如果可能的话，我们可以刻上字。”所以我这样做了。我买了大约六七把。在那些日子里，我想我付了大约二十美元一把刀子，这在当时是闻所未闻的。然后我们还买了一大系列的强光手电筒。这又是我的情报兵的主意。这些是真正的特殊手电筒，它们是由德国人制造的，你几乎每天看不到这种东西。我记得，它们用的是C型电池，这也是不寻常的。然后我们买了些急救包和其他一些东西。我不记得了。但无论如何，
carted those in with us. So the first visit we made, I asked for a courtesy call on the
commanding general, and went in there with my team sergeant and the very, very best
interpreter that we had, who was my counterpart, a Captain Tubrisipour. Spoke excellent
English and was a dedicated guy, and from the beginning knew that we were there to
help, that we didn’t have an ulterior motive, as far as he was concerned. He also knew
that this infantry-commanding general was not that big on Special Forces or whatever.
But man, he was smooth. We made this presentation, and it went over like gangbusters.
The fact that I in my very rudimentary Farsi did my very best to talk to him. As a point
of interest, one of our team leaders was fluent in Farsi. He was the only one we had, and
he helped the rest of us. He was in a team about 150 miles north. I mention this because
it really stresses how important the language is. I mean it’s obvious to anyone with a
brain, half a brain, but you just can’t overstate it. He and his wife and I think a child or
two children had actually lived with a Persian, or a Farsi-speaking tribe, in tents, out in
the middle of nowhere, the Dasht-e Kavir Desert somewhere, for months. I mean, he had
a special wife, too. I’m telling you. Anyway, he was part of what was called the FASP
program at that time for intelligence people. It was the Foreign Area Specialist Program.
So he had already taken Farsi and a lot of cultural stuff in the U.S. He’d gone through
the Monterrey course in California, and then he had done something in Tehran, too. So
when he walked in there, that guy was flat prepared as far as language and culture. I just
wanted to stress how important that language thing is.

SM: We’ve been talking for another hour. So I think it would be appropriate to
take another quick break.
Interview with Veloy Varner
Date: June 13, 2003

Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Vel Varner on the thirteenth of June, 2003, approximately 1:40 Lubbock time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Varner is in Salt Lake City, Utah. Thank you very much, sir. Why don’t we go ahead and start with, continuing our interview I should say, with a discussion of your assignments after Special Forces.

Vel Varner: When I left Special Forces, I also left Germany and returned to the States, primarily to attend the [Infantry Officers Advanced Course] at Ft. Benning, Georgia. However, en route to that, as typical for the Army, they sent me TDY (temporary duty) to a couple of other postings. One was to helicopter qualification course at Mineral Wells, Texas, which I enjoyed. From there I went to the University of Southern California to attend a special one-semester, actually part of a semester, Army Aviation Safety Course, which I also enjoyed. From there went to Ft. Benning, Georgia, to the infantry advanced course.

SM: How well did your previous assignments, especially for instance in Special Forces, how well did that prepare you for your advanced course experience?

VV: Well, of course, since the advanced course is aimed at an infantry officer, it didn’t have that much relationship, just because of the unconventional nature of Special Forces and so forth. Not to say that the infantry wasn’t concerned about unconventional warfare, because as you may recall, this is the time that, ’64 and ’65, that the seeds of what was going to happen in Vietnam was already started, and also because we had started to move in troops, so to speak, into Vietnam. So there was that relationship, but not a significant factor.

SM: Well, did you find that having shifted from the conventional infantry to the unconventional side of the Special Forces, did that hinder your ability at all or your experience?

VV: No. Not really. In fact, I enjoyed it. So it was not a hindrance, not at all. I guess it was looked upon as a little unusual for an Army aviator to be involved with Special Forces. That’s all.
SM: Okay, good enough. Now, what did—of course, that’s again, reiterate that point, this is before aviation was its own branch. So you went through the infantry basic and then infantry advanced course.

VV: Yeah, correct.

SM: Well, what did you find to be most challenging about the infantry advanced course? Or was there anything seriously challenging about it?

VV: I don’t—in hindsight, I don’t recall it being overly challenging. I mean, you know, I enjoyed the course. I enjoyed the social aspect of it, being with other officers, but as I look back, it wasn’t that dramatically challenging. I did fairly well. I ended up being what was referred to as—how did we talk about it—honored graduate. Not the honored graduate, but they had a series. As you may recall, I had mentioned that the *New York Times* had done some research and found out who the honor graduates were to include Colin Powell. That’s when they called and were trying to find out was he really a good selection by the Reagan administration and so forth. Anyway, so much for that.

SM: What do you remember most about the training you received and your fellow classmates?

VV: I know that, in hindsight, I probably spent a lot of time with those who had just returned from Vietnam where they had been advisors to troops there. I think I probably was more interested in talking with them so much than concentrating on the course, per se, just because it was interesting to see what their experiences were and what they thought of the of South Vietnamese as well as the Viet Cong.

SM: Now when did you start the advanced course? What month and year, about?

VV: I started it in August of ’64.

SM: Okay. So the advisor presence is picking up. You had exchanges then at the advanced course with guys that had been over there as advisors already, so—

VV: Yes. That’s correct.

SM: Do you remember very much about those exchanges and what their perceptions were about as the war was progressing?

VV: Not on a big-picture standpoint, because in each of those cases, we’re talking about a very limited perspective of where they were and who they were working with and what they were doing. So there was no big overall strategic point of view, I
guess I should say. Tactically, some thought they were pretty good, some thought they
weren’t. They had a lot to learn, but they would be okay if we could just work with them,
that sort of thing.

SM: What about the issue of the actual, what was actually going on in the
country? Of course, the perception that in the United States this is part of the larger Cold
War. This is communism versus free-market capitalism. This is, what’s going on in
Vietnam is basically an orchestration of the Soviet Union and Communist China, and is
part of this larger question and issue, versus the idea that perhaps what was going on in
South Vietnam was also, what was going on in Vietnam in general, in many ways was
just a civil war between two conflicting sides, North and South Vietnam without very
much—was that discussed much?

VV: The civil war aspect of it was mentioned, but it wasn’t talked about quite
that much. I’m trying to remember the books that—it seems like Bernard Fall’s Street
Without Joy, was that out then?

SM: Yes, sir. I believe it was.

VV: I could be wrong, but of course that focus was Highway 1. It talked
primarily about the French experience, which was important. So a lot of us were
interested in what the French had done or failed to do. You know, in typical Euro-
centric, American-centrism, we saw that as, “Well, we can learn from them, but we’ll do
it better.” You know, typical. But the focus wasn’t so much on whether it was a civil
war or whatever. The focus was, I think in hindsight that, you know, we’re going to be
involved in this thing from an advisory standpoint. Now that President Kennedy has put
aviation assets in there, some of us who are aviators are obviously going to end up being
there. I think more of us looked upon an aspect of, well, the communists in North
Vietnam are trying to violate what was the agreement in ’54. It didn’t allow the free-
elections. Therefore, we’re helping the South, embryonic democracy.

SM: How optimistic did the advisors that you talked to, if you can remember,
how optimistic did they seem about how the war was going, how the ARVN (Army of
the Republic of Vietnam) was conducting it, the political, with some of the political
aspects of the war? Were they very optimistic about success?
VV: I don’t know that optimism was something they experienced or talked about. It was much more down-and-dirty in that with respect to tactics, training capabilities, that sort of thing. I do know that most of them thought the Viet Cong were very good.

SM: So they had high opinions of the enemy?

VV: Yes. They thought the Viet Cong were very good. They were impressed with that. Just because the units that they had dealt with had had trouble tracking them down, there were intelligence problems and that sort of thing. Now several of my close friends had been advisors to the Airborne units. They were high on those guys. They thought they were very, very gung-ho. They had really been involved in some heavy fighting.

SM: In terms of, I guess, interest in or concern over the—about American involvement in the war, was there, do you remember if there was any kind of sense that America’s involvement would very soon escalate beyond the advisory role and that we’d start sending in conventional forces? Was that at all buzzing around?

VV: No. Not at that juncture. I don’t think that there was a concern that—I think there was still a view that perhaps we would be able to train them and that they would be able to take care of themselves. Of course, that was going to change very quickly because more and more units were to end up going in there. In fact, I think it’s important to, particularly being an aviator, there was a backdrop behind this whole year. That was the training of the 11th Air Assault Division there at Ft. Benning. As a consequence of that, we knew that a lot of our friends who we had gone to flight school with or we knew from other, from flying assignments, were in fact involved there as well as infantry people. It was obvious that this air assault division could very likely go. That soon became obvious, even though probably it hadn’t been published in the press, so to speak that that was the intent. It would be a clear verification of the validity of this type of a concept in the area that the tactical battles were being waged. In fact, I was hoping that—I knew I was going to go on a short tour somewhere. I assumed it would be Vietnam, and I was hoping I’d be able to go with the 11th Air Assault Division.

SM: When you—in your coursework there at the advanced course, was Vietnam discussed very much in a classroom environment?
VV: No, not really. I mean it was discussed, and there were things it related to, but very often, it was the function of, had the instructor been there or not. So that he could actually draw from his, albeit some limited perhaps, combat experiences to talk about it.

SM: Did you have many instructors that had Vietnam experience?

VV: Not at that stage of the game.

SM: Yeah. I didn’t think so. Because at that point—well, the advisory effort was over ten thousand at that point. So there were a few guys going through.

VV: Yeah. It was starting. Guys were coming back gradually, that sort of thing. Obviously, they were trying to, they being the Department of the Army, were trying to ensure that people coming back from the services in Vietnam were being assigned to training areas where they could have, you know, their knowledge could be spread around.

SM: Okay. That makes sense. Was there a feeling at all that people wanted to get over to Vietnam since that was the war going on?

VV: Oh, yeah. There’s always that sense. You know, “Oh, God, it will be over with before we get over there.” You always hear stuff like that. It just, it varies with an individual.

SM: When did you leave the advanced course?

VV: I left it in—I don’t have the exact date, but it was, I think in June of ’65. I went to Ft. Benning and got a check out in the UH-1H, Huey helicopter, which was like a two-week program is all. Came back, had a little bit of leave and then I left for Vietnam. Excuse me. I did not leave for Vietnam. I had—after many, many discussions with the Off-Personnel Assignment people in the infantry branch, they kept saying, “You’ve got to have an infantry company.” You’ve got to have an infantry company,” you know, as a captain. I said, “I understand that. Well, put me in the 11th Air Assault Division.” “Oh, those assignments are frozen. They have all they need of captains.” So I ended up going to Korea, believe it or not.

SM: Oh, okay, after your Huey checkout.

VV: Wait a minute. Forget the Huey checkout. The Huey checkout came after the Command & General Staff College. I’ll get it right here in a minute.

SM: Well, this is thirty years ago, so—
VV: Yeah. Anyway, after I went to Korea from the advanced course. So in the sense that I had just had the advanced course, that was a good review and a good preparation for taking over an infantry company. I took over an infantry company up on, near the DMZ (demilitarized zone) in what was called the 7th Infantry Division, and was very pleased to take over the command.

SM: Yes, sir. So when did you leave for Korea, about?

VV: It was in the June, July timeframe.

SM: Of 1965 or ’64?

VV: Of ’65.

SM: Of ’65, okay.

VV: Yeah.

SM: Then of course while you were—shortly before or while you were at the advanced course, I guess, there was quite a bit of activity concerning the Gulf of Tonkin and the Gulf of Tonkin Incident?

VV: That was then. Yeah, that was August ’64.

SM: Was that before you got to the advanced course?

VV: No, because I went to Ft. Benning early. I did what they called “snow birding” there because I had time to use somewhere, so they just used me locally there. I think that was August, September ’64, could have been a little later, but it was in the ’64 timeframe.

SM: Do you remember what the effect of that was, of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident?

VV: You mean with respect to how the students looked upon it?

SM: Yeah, how the students looked upon it, how the cadre there at the advanced course looked upon it?

VV: Well, it was not blown up that much, not like it was down on the East Coast in the media and so forth. It was one of these, well, here we go or there we go or there they go or whatever, meaning “they” talking about Navy pilots and even Air Force pilots.

SM: Well, why don’t you, if you would, describe your tour in Korea?

VV: Well, I was, like I said, I took over an infantry company. When you’re there, there’s only one thing to concentrate on, and that’s doing your job because
there’s—at least in those days, you typically worked six, six and a half days a week. There’s nowhere to go really. So you just worked and did your best. I looked forward to all the competition we had for 8th Army competition, weapons competition, that sort of thing. In those days, within the Army at least, they had the—I thought it was a shortsighted regulation or standard operating procedure, that a commander typically only had six months in command. So, when that same thing happened in Vietnam in those days, early days, right up to almost the end of the war. That was a tragic mistake because, number one, the individual commander didn’t really have a chance to get his feet on the ground and know the people and do what he’s supposed to do, but knowing, “Oh, my God. I’ve only got six months. I’ve got to do my very best,” whatever. So it really, really planted deep, deep seeds and roots of careerism as opposed to just genuine professionalism. You follow me?

SM: Yes, sir, I do.

VV: But anyway, I enjoyed my command tour. I was very, very successful. I did extremely well in a lot of the competitions. Then, of course, I continued to fly to get my time in to maintain proficiency. About the time my command tour was finishing up and I thought I would end up going to brigade staff or go back to the aviation battalion to fly, someone, I don’t know who, put my name in for an interview for the senior aide to the commanding general. Since I’d had a rifle company and had done fairly well, and also the fact that I flew, I guess made me an attractive candidate, and I got selected to be his aide. So that gave me a new perspective, which I enjoyed, and the opportunity to fly him back and forth to Seoul or wherever we were going and take part on his inspections and that sort of thing. It was very insightful. Plus he had been—during World War II, he had survived [during] the Bataan death march and the sinking of two ships. He was subsequently repatriated in the Inchon area of Korea in September of 1945 by the very division he ended up commanding in Korea at that time, the 7th Infantry Division. So it was—I enjoyed it. Oh, by the way, before I gave up the infantry company, I tried to get what was called an inter-theater transfer to Vietnam, which was not approved. But I also had the opportunity—I knew some of the aviators in one of the new Huey outfits there in Korea. So I at least got an opportunity to get my company to work with him on air mobile operations. They needed experience with the troops, and because I knew them, I
was able to get the company to do that. Then that [helicopter] company later moved to Vietnam while I was still in Korea, without me. So then, anyway, that wrapped up Korea, left Korea in about July of 1966, and was selected to go the Command & General Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth, [Kansas].

SM: Now, what were the most important lessons or experiences you took away from your company command in Korea?

VV: Well, for the most part, they were things that I had already observed or learned or knew about from personal experience, and also being told by others with experience, not only with the A-team in Special Forces, but also the units when I was in the 82nd Airborne Division. I don’t know. There was one that I particularly tried to use as a focal point early on and that was set the right example. If you were going to demand something, make sure that you could do it yourself, physically or mentally or whatever. If you were trying to teach something, you’d better know what you were teaching, because there’s no faking it with the troops, whether it was taking apart an M-16 or doing something else, you better do it as good as they could, or better. So I guess that whole aspect of professionalism, set the example. Be the leader. There’s the old cliché, “Lead, follow or get out of the way.” If you’re supposed to be the leader, you’d better lead. That doesn’t mean you can’t benefit from the experience of others and take advantage of their insights, but ultimately responsibility starts and stops with you. The old other cliché, “Take care of the troops, they’ll take care of you.” That doesn’t mean necessarily going out for popularity, but you know, if they’re supposed to be fed, make sure they’re fed. All the old stuff that you remember from your time.

SM: Any particular things stand out as an experience, for instance, were there, did you guys have any action in the DMZ itself?

VV: No, none. One aspect of action that I didn’t know was going to come back and haunt me several years later in Vietnam, and that was the aspect of young kids coming to Vietnam and getting involved, even at that early stage, but on a very limited basis, with some of the drugs from downtown. I don’t want to overstate this. I don’t mean that there was a high percentage. It was a very, very, very low percentage, but even then, it was apparent that some of those young kids were in trouble. I guess the other thing, the aspect of the young guys, and this is a problem that stems when you have a
rotation basis on the individual level as opposed to a unit. The young guy comes in, his first time overseas, has only been in the Army, just came out of boot training, whatever. Suddenly he gets all this peer pressure. We got to go down to the ville. We’re going to get drunk and we’re going to get laid and whatever. So about the first time he has sex, he thinks he in love, unknowing that the gal that he’s seeing down there every Saturday, as soon as he leaves she’s got somebody else coming into bed behind him. This created a lot of—well, not—it’s created disciplinary problems. I remember one young kid, God he was so—he found out about it. He tried to commit suicide he was so broken hearted. His dad flew over and I met with him. I’ll never forget seeing the dad just broken hearted to see what had happened to his kid in this man’s army. Anyway, some of those kind of disciplinary problems were wake-uppers, so to speak.

SM: Now what was the protocol in dealing with a soldier that was displaying problems with drugs at that point? Because there weren’t drug tests or anything like that at that point?

VV: No, no, no. Typically, it was a function of finding something, hearing about it some other way. From the Korean Military Police, that sort of thing. The disciplinary problem is something—most of them were handled right within the unit itself. Of course, as a company commander, I had Article 15 [authority], but depending how serious it was, it was done within the battalion level. I don’t recall. I don’t think we had any general courts for anyone in my unit, but we did have special where the battalion commander was involved or had, at that level. But the drug thing, it was miniscule. I don’t want to overstate it. I guess the fact that I brought it up maybe warrants more emphasis than it deserved.

SM: Well, yes, I understand your concern, because I think that is a misimpression that a lot of people have even from the Vietnam War. Just because some people used drugs doesn’t mean most people used drugs. In fact, most people did not.

VV: What I meant was, this was just a bitter drop of water compared with what was going to happen later in ’71 and ’72 as far as drugs. I’m just saying it gave me a flicker of a view of what it was going to be.

SM: But it was extremely rare to have a soldier who had a drug problem, I would imagine.
VV: At that time, in Korea, yes.
SM: Okay. Since this was in a company, for all soldiers, what additional challenges did you face as a commander of an infantry unit there?
VV: Well, the constant turnover. You’d get a team all trained to go participate in the 8th Army Championship, say it was a mortar squad or something, and lo and behold, so-and-so is going to rotate out. I don’t know why we didn’t learn that before we went into Vietnam. We’re sure not doing that now. We’re rotating units, maintaining that unit integrity, that cohesiveness. The reliance of a guy saying, “Well, that’s so-and-so. That’s my squad,” that whole aspect of it. Of course, when you were assigned there in Korea, or even later on in Vietnam, there was nothing as an individual you could do about it. The guys were going to come in, they were going to go out. Even the commanders at the higher levels realized how serious this was. They would try to have orientation programs for new people coming in, but you can’t do much as far as unit cohesiveness or morale just because a guy has been oriented for a week course or a two-week course.

SM: Well, did you find that the rotation system as it existed in Korea had a debilitating effect on morale?
VV: Oh, not so much morale, more upon the professionalism and the integrity of the unit.
SM: Well, did you find that the rotation system as it existed in Korea had a debilitating effect on morale?
VV: Precisely.
SM: Was that discussed very much? How this system of rotating was effecting?
VV: Oh, yeah. At the unit level we talked about it a lot, trying to figure out, “Well, what can we do to compensate for it?” and making sure that if somebody just came in, and you thought he was going to be pretty good at doing X, Y, or Z, make sure he got a good grounding in X, Y, or Z so that he could be used. To target if an individual was leaving, who was his replacement for that thing that was already in the unit, as opposed to waiting for somebody that was coming in.
SM: Here we’re really talking about combat readiness more than anything else, I would imagine.
VV: Yeah, you’re right. Sure we are.
SM: When you were nearing the end of your rotation there in Korea, did you already have orders for Vietnam? Did you know you were going?

VV: When I left Korea?

SM: Mm-hmm.

VV: No. My orders were the Command & General Staff College.

SM: Oh, that’s right. That’s right. CGSC (Command & General Staff College).

VV: At Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. But I assumed that I was going to Vietnam from there.

SM: Well, while you were there in Korea, how much was Vietnam on your radar screen? I mean, I would imagine that—you were there from ’65 to ’66. Of course, we’re starting to build up a lot of forces and—

VV: Yes. It was apparent to us. Of course we got Stars and Stripes, we got other newspapers, info as well. Also, then when I became the commanding general’s aide, I had access to some of his classified documents that all the general officers got, just to keep them abreast of what was going on, because I’d have to pick it up and deliver it to him and stuff like that and had the requisite clearance.

SM: Do you remember anything in particular from that experience working with the general and having access to that information?

VV: No, not really. No.

SM: When you—what do you remember most about hearing or reading about what was happening in Vietnam? Did you feel that the information coming in was—?

VV: Mostly, that I remember the most was about the build up. New units coming in, where they were going, that sort of thing. Then, of course, there was also the period we were getting more and more guerilla-type attacks, where they were going in, blowing up helicopters, mortar attacks, so forth on various bases.

SM: Was there any surprise at all at the level of escalation of American conventional force escalation at this point? Were you guys a little surprised by it?

VV: Yeah, I think there was a surprise. We just—obviously it was from, unknown to us, a lot of that was preplanned months in advance. It just seemed like every time we turned around it looked like some new unit was going in.
SM: Was there a general acceptance that what we were doing was the right thing or was there any skepticism?

VV: I don’t remember a lot of discussion about it, not at all. I guess so many of the guys I think in hindsight, and me to a less, to an extent too, are thinking, “My God, we’re over here in Korea, and the people are over there in combat. Why aren’t we over there helping?” That sort of thing.

SM: But the atmosphere was not at all probably like it was, like it is today? Like with the second Iraq war and the questioning that people do.

VV: No. Not within the units, no. Not in the military.

SM: Well, when you got back to the United States—well, is there anything else you’d like to discuss about your time in Korea first?

VV: No, not—well, one small thing.

SM: Sure.

VV: Every American unit over there had what were called KATUSAs, Korean Augmentation to U.S. Army units. So, in my rifle company I had roughly about a hundred, somewhere 125 to 150 people. About twenty-five of those were young Korean soldiers who didn’t speak too well, but had been through some training, and could understand some English. The one thing that I look back on is—two things. Number one, how well the other young American soldiers integrated them into their units, took to help them. The young Koreans, they didn’t have any money. Americans would buy shoe polish for them and whatever. At least that’s what I saw in my unit. I’m not trying to say that happened everywhere. I was also impressed at how hard they worked, the Koreans. They couldn’t, the other, their peers, the young American peers could not help, but be impressed how dedicated those Korean soldiers were. Later I got to the—and we had a Korean sergeant that was with them, sort of a liaison. He was saying they were delighted to be in an American unit because they ate better and the quality of life was better than if they’d been a Korean unit. But I was really impressed. I concluded later on when we heard that Korean units were going to go, at division level, two of them actually, White Horse Division and the 9th, were going to go fight in Vietnam. I knew those guys were going to do good because they were tough. And they did.
SM: Now were there very many joint training exercises between American and Korean units while you were there?

VV: Not that many. There were command post exercises, but not on the tactical level. There were command post exercises, where they would exercise it through I Corps or even higher.

SM: Did that surprise you, that when you were in Korea you’d interact more with the Korean forces?

VV: Yeah, a little bit, yeah. But here again, our unit was not right on the DMZ. So we had an opportunity to train on our own a little more than units like 2nd that had units on the DMZ that were rotating them in and out. I guess there was also a sense that a lot of the Korean units were really tied up manning that DMZ. So the training for the most part was done like this augmentation-type thing and then command post exercises that—well, maybe brigade, too—but I know division and higher did it.

SM: What was the relationship like between the, from what you witnessed while you were there, between the Americans forces and the surrounding Korean civilian community?

VV: Well, because we were so far north, there were no major metropolitan areas near us or even big urban areas. There was one small village outside the gate. As you would expect, it was set up by—we referred to them as “slicky boys.” Those were the guys that were trying to steal things from the post or the garrison or pickpockets, sell booze, sell illicit things that they weren’t supposed to have, to include prostitutes. From that standpoint, it was a pain in the ass for our young soldier, from a command standpoint because of our young soldiers getting involved in that sort of thing. But that was the only relationship that I was privy to. Now having said that, in the Seoul area, there were quite a few GIs stationed there because of 8th Army Headquarters and so on. I’m sure that they had a lot of problems, give and take.

SM: When you came back to the U.S. in 1966, of course there was—the American people in general were pretty supportive of the war. Did you see anything other than that when you came back?

VV: No, did not, did not. In fact, I’m trying to remember, I’m not even sure when some of the peace demonstrations started to begin. I presume some were starting
already by then. But I don’t remember, having been out of the country and then being
assigned to Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, middle America where they, and a big Army
facility as well. I just didn’t see any big demonstrations or anything.

SM: How long did CGSC last?
VV: It lasted—the actual course itself was about somewhere between nine, ten
months. But you got there, in my case I got there a little early. So I could move. By the
time it was time to leave, I got time to get my family settled somewhere and then go to
the Huey qualification course at Ft. Rucker.

SM: Okay, before you actually started CGSC?
VV: No.
SM: Or that was after CGSC?
VV: After, yes.
SM: When did you—so about when did you start CGSC, what month in ’66?
VV: I think C&GSC was like August, late August early September.
SM: Then you were there in Abilene until—
VV: Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas.
SM: Oh, I’m sorry, Leavenworth, Kansas. Thank you. Leavenworth, Kansas
until—
VV: About June the next year. I know it was—I left there in late June. The
reason I know that, the Israeli-Arab War of 1967 occurred while we were in
Leavenworth. We had one Israeli lieutenant colonel paratrooper in the class. We had
about six Arabs. It was interesting because of the way they interfaced or didn’t interface.
For example, if the Israeli went in the bathroom and an Arab came in later and knew he
was in there, he would leave. But there—I know of one case, because we were fairly
friendly with the lieutenant colonel, having both been Airborne and so forth. He told the
story one time where he—one of the Arabs came up to him where they were obviously
alone and said, “Look, I’m sorry the way we’re interfacing or how we treat each other
here. We should both be professional soldiers, but it’s impossible because of our
countries.” But that was interesting. Then as the Israelis kicked butt so quickly. God, it
was embarrassing for the Arabs.
SM: I would imagine so.
VV: Many of them left. They left the course early, or left Leavenworth early because of that.

SM: Did they really?

VV: Yeah.

SM: Wow. Now how much was that discussed when it happened in your classes?

VV: Oh, it was discussed a lot within our courses, just because it was very impressive, what the Israelis had done, particularly since they were being hit by the Egyptians and Jordanians, and Syrians and so forth. Now when I say discussed, I don’t remember having any Arab in my class at that time, in any of my classes when it was going on. Now in those sections where they may have had an Arab, they were probably a little more discreet about how they discussed it.

SM: How many other [foreign] nationals were there with you at the Command & General Staff?

VV: Gee, I don’t know. It seems to me there were like twenty to twenty-five. I’m guessing now, I don’t—but it seemed to me that there were at least a couple dozen. I know we had Germans and we had Brits and Aussies and so forth.

SM: Any Vietnamese?

VV: No. Not that I remember in my class. There may have been, but I don’t remember. Now, recall that we had two types of Leavenworth courses. We had the long course, which is what I went to, which was roughly nine to ten months long. Then they had a short course which was about four months. So a lot of the foreigners, or many of them, went to the so-called short course.

SM: I guess that makes sense.

VV: Yeah.

SM: What was the most challenging aspect of the Command & General Staff College?

VV: I guess stepping out of the company level and looking at things from a battalion and a higher level, even beyond battalion. Battalion wasn’t that much of a jump, but you know, a brigade, division, corps. Even though it was a tactical school, there were a lot of things you had to look at from a strategic standpoint, particularly with
corps. I guess that was that. Plus we had—I was a captain when I arrived there. It was unusual—well, not unusual, but it was not typical for a captain to be at Leavenworth. Most of those people were majors and lieutenant colonels. As it turned out, I got promoted while I was there to major. I guess the fact that, you know, that you were working with what you thought were guys with a lot more experience, but it was an opportunity, too, because you could speak up. It was an academic environment. It was good. I enjoyed it. Plus it was good to be back with my family after having been gone a year and knowing that I’m going to be gone another year.

SM: When you—is there anything else about Command & General Staff College you wanted to discuss?

VV: No, I don’t think so.

SM: Well, I would imagine they were integrating Vietnam quite a bit more in that time.

VV: Yeah. There was a lot more of that. Yes, exactly. Of course, more and more instructors had been to Vietnam.

SM: How were they reporting the war and how it was going?

VV: Well, at that stage, there was no one there that had commanded—I’m trying to remember. I don’t think we had anyone in our course that had commanded any U.S. units of any type. As the year progressed, we started getting people who had been aviators in units. As you recall, the 1st Cav went over there in about July of ’65. So we started getting some of those guys into the course. Obviously, they were always the center of questions and, “What if,” and, “How about,” or, “What did you do?” or didn’t do, that sort of thing. Yes, there was a lot of that going on. There was emphasis on air mobile operations, quite a bit of emphasis on jungle-type operations.

SM: Did you find that to be effective, useful training?

VV: Well, I thought it was effective at the time. I’m sure it gave me insight that I hadn’t expected when I ended up being in Vietnam, yeah.

SM: Well, how well were they integrating? Because since you’re looking at things more at a strategic level, as you indicated, how well were they integrating looking at tactical and strategic—?
VV: Well, you see that’s—that was part of the issue. A lot of the operations that we did—we when I say did, planned or worked on, you know, we assumed role playing, where we’d be members of a division staff, or members of a, even a brigade staff. So, there would be people within the class that would be the brigade S-3, S-2, so forth and then others who would act as division level. So you were going back and forth from that standpoint.

SM: In the context of looking at some of the bigger-picture issues, how well were they integrating the various facets of war fighting, that is the air assets that could be available to you, artillery, naval gun fire and looking at—?

VV: Okay, there was planning on that. Of course, it wasn’t a joint course, per se, but we did have naval and Air Force officers. We got into fire coordination planning where boundaries were going to be, where various FC, fire coordination lines were going to be. Yeah, we did a lot of work planning on that.

SM: I guess this might be a good time to ask here, when you finally found yourself in Vietnam, did you find that the training you had received at the Command & General Staff College had prepared you, had covered those issues well to deal with the real world of combat?

VV: Well, to some extent, but it’s hard to quantify it, very frankly, because my—people talk about the Vietnam War, but it was many wars. It depended what kind of unit you were in, and it depended which corps tactical zone you were in. They were dramatically different. God, there was just—I never worked in the Delta, but I know for a fact from talking to friends, the Delta operations were so different from what we were doing in the Central Highlands. Then later up in the DMZ area, there was just no comparison. So having, trying to answer the question, “Did it prepare us?” Well, yeah, probably. But in hindsight, we probably should have had more training on—we did some things that focused on the British experience in Malaya, for example, but we probably could have benefited if we’d had more of that, more of the French experience with the Viet Minh. I say this because later when I was at West Point teaching, I spent a lot—we spent a lot of time doing that with the cadets. One of the greatest counter-insurgency generals was a French general, Lyautey, Marshal Lyautey in North Africa. So many things he experimented with and threw out or used or whatever, the French didn’t really
use in Indochina until it was too late. A lot of it we never did capitalize on. I don’t
know. I’m not sure that I can answer the question with any quantification on how well it
prepared us. There’s always the sense that you fight this war with the last war’s lessons
learned, which doesn’t pan out too well.

SM: How about in terms of recognizing or addressing what kind of war was
actually occurring in Southeast Asia at the time, whether it was the, this again, the
communist-controlled partisan war versus an actual civil war between North and South
Vietnam? Was that issue addressed very much?

VV: Did not get—at Leavenworth I don’t think the aspect of a civil war was
focused upon. I’m not saying it shouldn’t have been, but it wasn’t a point of focus, no.

SM: When you finished up there, and then you went on to the Huey transition at
Ft. Rucker, how much flight experience, flight time had you had since leaving for Korea
and then coming to the C&GSC?

VV: Yeah, that’s a good question. At that point in time, I had about a thousand
hours of fixed wing time, but only about—I’m trying to remember. Roughly three
hundred helicopter hours, but that was in the H-23 observation helicopter in Korea. So
when I got through with that Huey course, I got twenty-five hours in Huey, and I’m going
to go to Vietnam hoping to command an aviation unit, knowing that I’ve only got twenty-
five hours experience in that aircraft. In fact, that’s what ended up happening.

SM: Wow. Rather daunting.

VV: Well, it made you recognize, or at least I recognized that I had a lot to learn,
I had more experience to gain, and I’d better make sure I flew with good warrant officer
pilots, and that they knew I knew that they’d forgotten more about it than I was going to
know for some time. That didn’t bother my ego one bit. In fact, in some ways it was
advantageous because it allowed me to concentrate more on things that I should be doing
as the commander as opposed to the pilot of the aircraft.

SM: Well, in terms of your preparation to actually command an aviation unit in
Vietnam, how much did they discuss the role of aviation and the current combat
environment that is in Vietnam, and the integration of aviation and air assets into the
mission, the larger strategic mission of fighting this war in Vietnam at C&GSC? Was it
very well integrated? Did you—?
VV: Yeah. We had quite a bit of that, but here again, the focus wasn’t on being an aviation commander. It was more being a focus of the staff requirements, that sort of thing. You hit on a point that was of, obviously going to be a challenge to me. I had never even been in an aviation unit, because when I got out of flight school, I went to a little fixed-wing outfit in Germany. Then I went to Special Forces. In Korea I was on ground duty, but I was flying on the weekends, that sort of thing. So I knew that it was—I was going to have a lot to learn and going to have to work hard and make sure I was integrated with my people who knew what they were doing. I mean, I didn’t look upon that with great fear or anything. I just looked upon it saying, “Okay here’s the way it’s going to be, and here’s what you’re going to have to do to make sure you compensate, and take advantage of the guys who have the expertise.” One example, the whole maintenance aspect of commanding a helicopter unit, it’s much more involved than people realize because you’ve got to integrate flying time with maintenance downtime, how many aircraft you’re trying to keep up. It’s got to be organized with your ops so that you do a stair-step process of flying time. You don’t want all your aircraft going into maintenance for a hundred-hour periodic inspection at the same time. You don’t want them all down for parts at the same time. So it becomes very complicated.

SM: When you did go into Huey transition, what was the most challenging aspect of that training? That lasted about two weeks, you said?

VV: Yeah. I didn’t see it was—probably the only challenging aspect of it was the switchology, you know, making sure you became familiar with the cockpit, where things are, so that if you had to, you could do it in the dark or whatever, knowing that you’re going to end up being pressed to start up quick or whatever when you got over there. No, I enjoyed the Huey. I enjoyed the course.

SM: That’s quite a transition. I mean quite a different aircraft than say the observation. Yes.

VV: Oh, yeah, no doubt about it. No doubt, you know just the turbine engine for example.

SM: Okay. Then so, immediately after your Ft. Rucker training, the transition you had probably a month’s leave and then Vietnam?

VV: Correct.
SM: Okay. How did your family react to the prospects of you going to Vietnam?

How closely were you watching the news and keeping up with what was happening?

VV: Oh, very closely, because we knew I was going to go. There was no doubt about it. I had two little boys and my wife. I’d already been gone away for a year in Korea. In Special Forces I spent quite a few months away. It was tough. This is the time when casualties are starting to mount. TV news every week gives you a body count. Of course it got—that very quickly got worse in ’67, ’68, particularly with the Tet Offensive.

SM: Well, what do you remember most about that kind of press coverage? The body count, that seems to have caught your attention, or seems to have caught your attention back then.

VV: Oh, yeah. Well, you couldn’t help it because at the same time you see these things on the TV, you hear of West Point classmates or other friends who have been killed. While I was in Korea, several of our very close friends. In fact, one of the wives that tried to have me escort the body home. In other words go from Korea to Vietnam to get the body to take it back and go through the funeral and so forth, which they didn’t do that. It wasn’t allowed.

SM: How was your wife responding to it?

VV: Well, she didn’t want to—I know she didn’t want to worry me because she felt I was under enough pressure, but at the same time, she’s trying to be the father, the mother, the taxi driver, the disciplinarian, the coach, whatever, the stuff on an Army wife. Tough, you know? It’s hard to overstate how demanding it was on the wives because all the time you’re in Vietnam, every week there’s on the news, somebody’s dead, somebody more killed, this shooting, got hit. She’s thinking, where’s Vel’s unit? Then the little boys are worried, “What about Daddy? Is he okay?” That sort of thing.

SM: Where did you situate your family to be when you left?

VV: My wife is from Alabama. So while I was in Korea, she went back to Alabama. Then we went to Leavenworth for a year, and then she went back to Alabama while I was in Vietnam. So she did have family to go to.

SM: What was—why don’t you go ahead and describe the trip over? What’s your first impressions, or what the atmosphere was like on the aircraft or what your first impressions were upon arriving in Vietnam? Where you went?
VV: Going over in the aircraft was no big deal. I was there on a charter aircraft with a lot of other guys who were going to Vietnam. I guess the thing that got me, and it’s hard to appreciate this if you haven’t gone into it, I guess a war zone like this, but it’s the massive logistical tail and build-up and go, go, go. God, I can remember when I arrived at Tan Son Nhut there in Saigon. My God, there were planes coming in and out, unloading stuff and all kinds of people moving and going, you know what I mean? So right away it gets your attention, this is a busy thing. Any time you go to war it’s going to be that way, no doubt about it. Well, originally, my orders were to go to a thing called SOG. The cover, the published name for that was Studies and Observation Group. It was really the Special Operations Group. Since I was both an aviator and Special Forces qualified, I guess that made me an attractive candidate for them. However, when I arrived in-country, it turned out that the assistant division commander for the 1st Cav Division had been one of my commanders at Ft. Bragg. He saw the name of new arrivals. At that time he was a one-star. So unknown to me, until the orders were changed at the replacement depot, he had pulled the string to get me out of the SOG and assigned to that division.

SM: Did you want SOG?

VV: It wasn’t a case of wanting it, it was just a case that it made sense that that’s where I would have been assigned. As I look back on it, from a career standpoint, I guess it was better that I didn’t do it because even in those days, the conflict between the conventional forces and the Special Operations was pretty extreme. There were a lot of people who thought that I had wasted a year in Special Forces as it was. You know, never mind being an aviator, too. Anyway, I ended up going to the 1st Cavalry Division at An Khe. Had a good little orientation course, went there. Upon arrival and assignment to the aviation group, I was told by the group commander, or one of, the personnel officer, I guess, that they wanted to assign me as a brigade liaison officer. In other words, I’d be with an infantry brigade because of my infantry experience. There I’d be a liaison for aviation requirements, air mobile ops and that sort of thing. I immediately said,” I don’t want to do that. I want to command a company.” So, they said, “Well, the group commander’s pretty convinced he’s going to do this.” I said, “Let me see him.” So I talked to the colonel, who was also infantry and explained I didn’t want to do that. I
wanted to command. I’d just finished command the year before of an infantry company
and I was convinced I could do it. He said, “Okay. I’ll gamble on you if the battalion
commander will.” So I had another interview. So anyway, I ended up commanding a
Huey company.

SM: When you went through your initial briefings and your initial processing in
Vietnam itself, what do remember most about those briefings as far as anything about
rules of engagement, anything at all, interaction with the Vietnamese people, that kind of
stuff?

VV: The only thing—of course, I don’t remember any ROE or rules of
engagement standpoint, not until we got to the division, but even at the repo-depot, I
think—the only thing I can remember being stressed, “Remember we’re in the host
country. It’s their country. We’re here to help them.” I think that was the only thing I
can remember of any consequence.

SM: When you first arrived to your unit, what were your impressions?

VV: I was impressed with how much work had obviously been done at An Khe,
preparing it for an air mobile division. Anyone who saw An Khe in those days had to be
impressed because they had the largest heliport with some four hundred helicopters in
and out of there. I mean it was massive. Then later, they started moving them out to
different tactical areas. I mean it wasn’t great, but it was satisfactory. We had hooches to
live in. Then there was a big security ring around it with barbed wire and outposts and so
forth. It was pretty impressive, as I look back.

SM: How surprised were you when you arrived of the American build-up and
how it had progressed?

VV: Oh, I was really impressed. I mean it was—I got there in ’67, but
particularly after I’d been at the 1st Cav for awhile and started flying around, going to Qui
Nhon and different places, Pleiku, and seeing the aviation units all over the place. Of
course, most of those units were supporting ARVN as opposed to American units at this
stage of the game, but the American divisions started piling in quick.

SM: What did you think about your morale, the unit, in terms of its morale and
combat readiness?
VV: Well, one of the things that concerned me was the same thing that I knew that I had experienced in Korea, and that’s the individual rotation. Because of that, I just knew it was vital that any time a new guy came in he had to be placed with some old guy. Not old, but experienced, and that we did everything we could to try to integrate them into the unit and make sure they felt that they were part of the team. One of the things that I insisted upon, shortly after I got there and looked around, was that I didn’t feel that people were responsive enough. So I got a hold of siren that I could wind up. Whenever that went off, the ready reaction force knew they were to go to their planes and crank up. Just little things like, who unties the rotor? Does the first guy there do it, or does he wait for the crew chief? What if the crew chief doesn’t get there to untie it? So we set a lot of simple procedures. First man there untied everything, got ready, hopped in. Didn’t wait, got cranking. Another thing, if the ready reaction force was six planes or twelve planes, we always had an extra one cranked. So that I had what I called a cranking spare, that soon was adapted within the rest of the units in the battalion. Because typically what would happen, one would go down and then you went through a panic trying to find out, well, who’s going to replace that one? I insisted that we do instrument training. Now that was something that hadn’t been done at all. So I got a hold of the best-qualified guy in the battalion who was a major, he was a safety officer in fact at battalion level, who had been an instrument trainer and examiner at Ft. Rucker, and asked him to help conduct my instrument program. Of course, he was delighted because it got him a chance to fly. So we did that, and made sure everybody, even if they weren’t instrument qualified, they went through instrument training, as much training time as we could get. That was another constant battle. You had to put up so many aircraft every day to fly in combat operations, but then you’re saying, “I need a training bird, too.” Constantly trying to make sure you had a training bird and the requisite, meeting the requisite requirements for operations. Then there were some planes you shouldn’t fly because you were trying to stagger them from a maintenance standpoint. I guess one of the things I liked about being in an aviation unit that you didn’t have in a typical infantry unit—I say typical—without APCs, armored personnel carriers—is that it was that integration of machine and troop requirements. Now, in an armored unit or even an armored infantry unit, you do
have that problem in a little less complicated sense with tanks or APCs, if you follow me.
Because you’ve got to have that maintenance category taken care of as well.
SM: Sir. We’re back from break. When you first took over the unit, and we’re
talking about B Company, 229th, correct?
VV: That’s correct. It was about 150 people and 20 Hueys.
SM: What was your primary—I guess to clarify by what, when we say 229th.
This is the 229th Aviation Battalion, that you’re a part of, B Company, 229th?
VV: Right. The official name at that time on the table of organization and
equipment was the 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion.
SM: To delineate that your primary mission was to provide helicopter assault
capability to infantry units.
VV: That’s correct.
SM: Why don’t you go ahead and describe, when you first arrived, how you
understood the mission of your company? Where you fit in, what units you were
providing support for, the whole thing.
VV: Well, it was very obvious that we were going to be—for the most part we
worked with the 1st Brigade, which was good because then you became familiar with the
commanders within the brigade, the brigade S-3 who as it turned out was a West Point
classmate of mine. You got to have confidence in what they did, and they knew what
you were going to do, and so forth. That worked well. Now having said that, that
doesn’t mean we didn’t work with other brigades as well, but for the most part we
worked with 1st and later, in fact, we went over on a brigade task force to relieve the 173rd
Airborne brigade in the Pleiku-Dak Tho area, or Kontum rather, Dak Tho area. But that’s
who we worked with, and that worked fine. The people who were in my ops and my
platoon leaders who were there and had been there for awhile, were experienced. They
were qualified combat assault leaders, which is one thing I had to become familiar with
very quickly. Fortunately, when I got there, we were assigned at An Khe. The company
was assigned the task of conducting air assaults for the orientation course that all soldiers
went through. So this was ideal for me. Not only did I get to fly, but I could do the
combat assault in that environment where we weren’t likely to get shot at, number one.
And number two, it was just a good way to do it. So that worked out super. I spent, like
any commander when you take over, you want to become familiar with all your people. Get to know all of them as well as you can, and also become familiar with the battalion staff above and the battalion commander. The other thing that turned out that was fortunate, the battalion S-3 was the guy I had gone through the Huey qualification course with. He had got there just a little while before me. So he was sort of in the swing of things. So that was very helpful, being there with him. I misspoke on that. I had gone through Ft. Wolters with him in the helicopter qualification course. Not the Huey qualification, Ft. Wolters the year before—well, several years before. I went through with him in 1964. So this is three years later, but we knew each other and that was helpful. In fact, we’d been in the same carpool together. So that was a big help as well. What else you got? I forget where we were?

SM: That’s okay. In terms of the overall mission of the unit and the different type, I guess at this point even, the different types of missions that the unit supported. You already mentioned the training support that you provided for the trainees coming in, but what other obviously combat assault—

VV: Okay, yeah. Okay, good. I got the picture. At that same time that we were doing this training support mission, we also had some combat operations that were going on. We’d do combat assaults that people would go on. So I could gradually integrate into those. Similarly we had what were called “log missions,” which were logistic support requirements. In other words, an infantry unit would be out in the boonies somewhere. Every day, he would need a log bird, typically maybe once in the morning, and once late afternoon. Depending where he was, it might be just once a day, but you flew in ammunition, food, mail. Occasionally you would take a troop in or troops in and somebody that would be pulled out because they were going to go on R&R (rest and recuperation) or they were going to go home, or they were going to do something else, or maybe they had jungle rot, or they stepped on a stick or something. So the log missions went everyday. Then at night, typically somebody would be responsible for flare operations. So that you would have the flares already loaded in the aircraft, and if you got mortared, you would immediately scramble and go up and drop flares wherever you were told to, to try to provide light or illumination for Cobras who were going in to try to hit whoever was doing the firing. Obviously it was tough to find out because typically
they would fire and run, but at least we did that. Then other people would be on missions
for what we referred to as the river patrol, or even costal support; try to pin down people
or Viet Cong that were bringing in supplies or moving ships down the river or whatever.
I think that’s about it other than I previously mentioned the training bird. Some people
would be doing maintenance test flights. That’s about the handle on it.

SM: When you were going through your initial flights in Vietnam, how different
did you find flying in Vietnam versus flying in the United States? Was it different at all?
Or in Europe, was it different at all?

VV: Oh, yeah, big difference. Just difference on, as far as the, having a road net,
having build-up areas. A lot of times where we would operate there were no build-up
areas at all. You know you were out in, strictly in the jungle. There were not a lot of—
well, almost no navigation aids. Now typically you could tune into the radio at Qui Nhon
or maybe a radio at An Khe or something else, or even an omni and occasionally that
would assist you. But for the most part, you were just using terrain, the layout of a river
against the map, this sort of thing to navigate. Ideally you would do a recon prior to
where you were going into an LZ (landing zone), but here again, you didn’t want to do
that too obvious. You would fly over and try to get an insight where it was and then also
take advantage of whatever the battalion commander that was going in, the infantry
battalion commander or his S-3 knew about the LZ. But there was no comparison to
flying in the States or Europe or even in Korea. In the case of Korea, you didn’t have all
the vegetation for the most part. The hills were bare. There was a road net you could
see. You could see the rice paddies in both countries, but of course they weren’t on the
maps, per se other than just a big spot, and it would say cultivated.

SM: What about hazards?

VV: Well, hazards in the U.S. and in Europe a lot of times were wire hazards,
major power lines. Of course that was not an issue except in the immediate vicinity of
build up areas along the coast or elsewhere in Vietnam. The obvious hazard and the one
you meant would be anti-air fire, anti-aircraft fire. But that was—they’d say, “Okay,
today there was an anti-aircraft site here.” Well, the next day it wouldn’t be there. Not
because somebody hit it as such necessarily, but because it had moved. The VC (Viet
Cong) were very adept at moving, very rarely kept any kind of an anti-aircraft gun in the
same position or same area. In fact, sometimes they’d set a trap up, and you’d think there
would be one there, because you were fired at it there early this morning. It had already
moved and they’d position three around it on higher ground, so that something, Cobras
came in and they’d be in a fire-trap.

SM: In terms of the briefings and the intelligence that you received, when you
first were introduced into the unit as a commander and what kind of overall briefing did
you receive and then what kind of consistent briefings did you receive about enemy
activity in the area, things like that?

VV: Well, the orientation briefing was done both at division and then
subsequently at the group level and then even in the battalion. Typically it was done by
the, either the group or the battalion S-2 or S-3, intelligence and ops. We would get an
update from battalion probably everyday as far as hazards to flight, anti-aircraft location
and that sort of thing. If there was a major operation coming, we’d get in a frag order
alert on that, so that we’d know that we’d have to go all out in getting aircraft flyable,
getting crew rest. If I recall at that time, we had a hundred hour max per month on flying
hours per person, although you could get an exception to that in certain emergency
situations. So we had to prepare for that as well. The intel wasn’t great because it was so
fleeting. That was about the size of it. Of course, we also had “pi-reps,” pilot reports.
They’d say I flew by the bend of the Bong Son River at such and such and I was fired on.
But here again, that’s very perishable information.

SM: Yes. Well, in general, what did you—as you started settling in as
commander, what did you think about the system of, I guess, intelligence, intelligence
sharing? How well, as a commander, how well did you feel you had a grasp of the
enemy situation in your area of operations?

VV: Not that well, frankly. I can make the same comment later when I became
an infantry battalion commander three years after the fact, in almost some of the same
areas. Intelligence was always too little, too late. As an aviation unit commander, the
intelligence we were concerned with were what was going to happen in the DZ (drop
zone) area. Very often, the infantry battalion commander going in there, he had a dearth
of intel himself. He didn’t know. So very often, it was just sort of a gamble as to what
was going to happen and where and how. That was just the way it was. We didn’t like it, but we worked with it and worked around it.

SM: Now, you mentioned pilot reports that would come back as far as from specific missions. Did you—I guess the equivalent of a flight information system, where pilots would consistently go in after their missions and debrief, the flight information?

VV: Yeah. They’d go into the ops officer and give a debrief as to what they saw, where they saw it, how the mission went, any problems, any suggestions, that sort of thing. That was done religiously. Every pilot did that. The ops people then would pass that up the tape to battalion, battalion to group, group to division, depending on what it was and how pertinent it was. The same thing applied even during night operations. For example, we’d go out on what we called fire-fly. You would drop flares along this river route, and then Cobras would be along because we knew that any boats out there at night on the river were Viet Cong supply boats. So anything you thought you would hit, both the gun pilots and the lift bird pilot with the flares made sure that they put those reports in as quick as they could, because then in the morning, the Cav squadron would send out a troop to see if they could find the wreckage or any bodies or remains, so forth.

SM: When you took over the unit, how was it in terms of its manpower and its TO&E (table of organization and equipment) strength in men and equipment?

VV: We were in pretty good shape. In fact, the whole time I was there we maintained pretty good manning. I say pretty good. You know we might be down, and it fluctuated with the month. We might be ten, down ten one month, and then up to par the next or whatever. We were always in good shape on pilots, very rare that we were short pilots. I can’t remember the exact manning. I think there were something like forty rated people, flight-rated people as far as pilots in the company. We would drop below forty, but you never had all twenty aircraft flying at the same time anyway. Of course, you always had somebody on R&R, somebody was down for some other reason, but our strength was good as I recall. It would be interesting. You, of course, have an ideal way to do this. You’ll be able to compare my comments with the other guys who were in the unit to get some insight from their perspective.

SM: Yeah, you all will be, because we’ll get this stuff online. So you’ll be able to see, you’ll be able to compare and contrast eventually how you guys perceived that
stuff. Yeah, I’m sure it will be quite interesting, because I’m sure the—from the
command standpoint, you looked at it differently than one of the subordinates that are
looking up. How about the equipment issue, and also your supply and logistics system?
VV: Yeah. When I first got there, we had D model Hueys, UH-1 Delta.
Fortunately though, we were just there a few months when we started getting the H-
model. The D-model was grossly underpowered compared with the H, particularly when
we operated in the Highlands. So that was a real boon, having brand-new aircraft. So
from a part standpoint, that was great. The fact that I was blessed with one of the finest
maintenance officers, probably in the division, a warrant officer, but the guy was super. I
mean, his name was Penn, but he was super. I don’t know. He was just great as far as
being able to get things and putting them together. One other thing, small point, but it
was always helpful as far as a network standpoint. My immediate next-door neighbor,
when I was in Germany, we were both captains at that time. I was flying with an artillery
unit and he was a transportation branch with a H-34 unit in Germany. He ended up being
at Da Nang at what we call Red Beach in the key maintenance slot. So if I got into a real
box, I could call up and say, “Help. What can I do about such and such?” If he could
help he would or if he couldn’t he’d at least offer some advice, so that was helpful.
SM: What was the chow or mess system like in your unit?
VV: We had for the most part, hot meals, because we’d fly out of a fire base. So,
we’d typically have a hot breakfast and maybe one other meal that day. Then we’d take
C-rations with us during the day so that we could—we’d be out in the boonies and get by.
Or if it was going to be some operation on an extended period, we might eat with the
infantry mess or, here again, we’d just take our C-rations with us. But I had my own
mess hall at An Khe and later on when we went up north, and when we went to the
Kontum area.
SM: Did you make it a point to try to get your guys hot chow as much as possible
when they were out in the field?
VV: Well—
SM: Well, was that so much an issue because a lot of your guys, of course, would
come back?
VV: Yeah. You see that’s the point I was to make. It was an issue however when we moved the whole company to Kontum. Because there would be a period of time before, we wouldn’t have our mess hall with us because we’d gone in on an operation. We were just going to live off the infantry or our own C-rations. But that’s not such a, or wasn’t so much of a problem with aviation units as it would be with an infantry unit. Later on, when I commanded an infantry battalion that got to be a real issue.

SM: When you were assigned or, I guess, why don’t you, if you would, describe how missions and operational support would be provided, how it would be tasked out to the men in your unit? I’m sure all through the S-3 shop.

VV: The battalion S-3, of course, would get the mission requirements for the day from the aviation group. Then they would break them out among the companies, the three lift companies. Then, of course, we had one gun company, Delta company. They would break them out based on what they knew you had been doing, who you’d been operating with, what you’re familiar with, and what your maintenance status was. Then in turn, that would come to the ops officer, actually Walt Levering, later became, and Mike, good old Mike—Woods? No.

SM: Mike Ward?

VV: Yeah, Mike Ward. Then they would break it out on sort of a “Whose turn it was to fly?” routine, or who came in and said I want to fly regardless of my turn or not, that sort of thing. It would be posted and the guys would come in the night before and say, “Oh, I’m going to fly with so and so tomorrow. We’ve got ship number such and such. The crew chief is old so-and-so, and the gunner’s going to be so-and-so.” They’d know crank time. So they’d know what—they’d have to get up and do their pre-flights early or whatever.

SM: While you were at An Khe, what was the base camp area, the living conditions like there?

VV: We all had—we had hooches. They were screened in, had tin roofs. Typically there would be sandbags up around, so high around them, you know. One thing that we did, we scrounged a bunch of wood from the Navy I think, most of it, I don’t know, you’d have to ask some of the guys where it came from. That was sort of beyond
me, but anyway, they got stuff from Qui Nhon and other places. They spent a lot of time
building a little club, like a bar. We had some great carpenters and some very innovative
guys putting that together. It was a way that they could kill time, so to speak. Not be
bored but have some fun as well.

SM: Yeah. Now when you—you got there, what month was it that you got there
in ’67?
VV: If I recall, it was like July.
SM: July of ’67.
VV: Yeah. We were at An Khe for a period of time and then we moved up to—I
may have the timeframe screwed up some way or another. We may have already—no, I
guess we were already at English. I checked into An Khe, did my orientations and so
forth, but the unit itself was up at LZ English. It was the fire base up in the Bong Son
Plain area. We operated out of there.

SM: Now what was the—so operationally, your real first operational experiences
as commanders were then in the Bong Son Plain?
VV: That’s correct.
SM: Okay. What was the principal composition of enemy units that operated in
that region?
VV: To the best of my knowledge we did not confront any NVA (North
Vietnamese Army). There may have been isolated a few supporting VC unit, but they
were VC units, Viet Cong for the most part. I spent quite a bit of time with our IPs
(instructor pilot) in the unit. Whenever I flew, I ensured I had an IP with me so that I
could learn and benefit from his experience. One of the platoon leaders, a captain, had
been one of the top IPs at Ft. Rucker. God, he was great. He helped me a great deal,
particularly with autorotations, that sort of thing.

SM: That’s an interesting point. In some respects, you were still training
yourself.
VV: Oh, no doubt about it, 199 percent. In fact most of those warrant officers,
were from a, just the handling of the aircraft, they were all better than I was, there’s no
doubt about it. Now, I had more experience in flying, you know, from a weather
standpoint or whatever, because I’d flown in Europe and I’d also flown in Korea. But as
far as having experience in that Huey, those guys were way above me. Typically when I
clew with them, even though I was the senior guy on board, I knew and they knew and
they knew I knew that a lot of them had forgotten more about flying that Huey than I was
going to learn for a year. That wasn’t a problem. It may have been a problem for them,
but I didn’t have a sense it was a problem for me. I respected their professionalism. The
finest thing that ever happened to Army aviation was ensuring that we had highly
qualified warrant officers as professional pilots. I say, making him a warrant officer as
opposed to a commissioned officer, like the Air Force, it ensured that they went from unit
to unit. They were going to fly. They were going to become just expert in what they did,
highly technical, just excellent. I know there was a lot of controversy of whether or not
they should have been commissioned or not. The problem was that the commissioned
people got so interested in careerism or, “I got to go to battalion next for this staff officer
assignment. I’ve got to go here. I’ve got to go there. I’ve got to command. I’ve got to
go to advanced course, Command & General Staff College.” That detracted in a sense
from their ability as aviators. Now that there—and plus at the same time they were trying
to maintain dual, their branch qualification, because they weren’t aviators. The warrants
were aviators. They were in an aviation branch like we have today, and which is the
better approach is to—if you’re going to be an aviator, have an aviation branch. Don’t
try to maintain two qualifications.

SM: So you saw the creation of the aviation branch as a very positive thing,
obviously.

VV: Yes, I did from the standpoint of just the technical aspect of aviation and the
fact that it got so complicated trying to maintain one foot in a branch and another foot in
this. Now, I did that throughout my career. I did an infantry assignment, an aviation
assignment, infantry assignment, so forth. But I fought to be in the infantry more than I
did to be in aviation. I was able to parlay that, but it was never at the benefit of the one or
the other, if you follow me.

SM: I think I do.

VV: That’s why I said that the warrant officer was the best thing to happen to
Army aviation. Those guys were super. They were young guys right out of flight school
that were hell on wheels on a motorcycle perhaps, but boy, they did their job. I may have
told you this, but if you had a formation, and you were going to fly into a mountain, the
warrants were going follow you. Not really, but what I meant was they would go into
hell in a basket. On the way in they would be hollering about the formation wasn’t good
enough, or the guy on the right, “Close it in. Get in tighter. Do this. Do that.” I mean
they were really professional young guys. I can’t say enough for them. I’m not sure that
the Army appreciated how much, how well they did in Vietnam. A lot of them died. A
lot them shot down, but boy, they did their job.

SM: Well, what was the relationship like between the different rankings in your
unit, that is the commissioned officers, the warrant officers and the enlisted men? As a
commander’s assessment, how did you look at the relationships?

VV: Yeah. I thought there was a comradeship that existed, particularly between
guys junior to me as officers, the captains, the Hamburgers and guys like that, with the
warrants. They got along extremely well. But both of them knew that one was a
commissioned officer, one was a warrant officer. Now I never saw any conflicts per se
between the two. I’m sure there may have been some, but also I’ve learned things just
talking to guys in that last, that reunion that I had no insight to at the time. I guess it was
the way I commanded, I tried not to be a big buddy-buddy. I mean I tried to be respectful
and to do my job and to know them and to do whatever I could to help them. Whether it
was just a BS session, something they needed or whatever. But, I had two guys that I
gave Article 15s to, which essentially would have ruined their career if they had stayed
in. One warrant officer took a young new guy with him to Qui Nhon, loaded with flares,
and that’s where we dispersed them from the fire base, over there at Qui Nhon from LZ
English. So if English came under attack, that flare bird would be available to skip up to,
and could get off the ground without being shot down or anything else and drop flares to
light up the area so that we could find out where we were being hit. Well, I thought I’d
just do a spot check. So I flew to Qui Nhon. I knew the plane was there. I looked
around. There was the young new warrant officer sitting on the plane with a radio. I
said, “Well, where’s so-and-so?” “Uh, well, I’m not really sure.” So I had the plane
flown to another location—or, I don’t remember what we did about that? Anyway, it
turned out that the more senior warrant officer was shacked up with one of the nurses, or
trying to, there at Qui Nhon at the hospital. So, man I put him in for a court martial as
quick as I could, because I didn’t want that spreading through, and maybe it already had
for all I knew, I didn’t know. But anyway, the commanding general ended up giving him
an Article 15, took a lot of his money, and I don’t know what else he did. I don’t
remember at the time. That was one incident. Of course, that had kind of a settling effect
upon my relationship with the guys. On one hand it was probably respectful, but on the
other hand, my God. Then another one occurred on a—during the Christmas holidays.
This was at An Khe. I think it was Christmas, Christmas or New Years. One of the guys
got drunk, went out on a flight line, and took off and was hovering over ops. It could
have been tragic. There was another one. He got an Article 15 from the CG (commanding general). You know, just as quick as I could. But then we had another
case, a different case, just to give you another story on it. One of—in fact this guy were
there at the reunion. He raised—I had forgotten about it, but he raised the point. He
says, “You know, I still have that letter that I got from the commanding general for not
crashing that airplane when we lost the engine on take off and I went into the rice paddy.”
He said, “You know, I found out years later that you wrote that letter and hand carried it
down and got the general to sign it.” I kept it a secret. I don’t know how he found out,
but I guess somebody, whoever typed it in the orderly room told him. But it was good
enough that I shook his hand and said, “Hey, that was really great. Good going and take
the rest of the afternoon off,” or whatever. He kidded me about that, too. But the fact
that you wanted to recognize good things as well as make sure you punished those that
deserved it. Back to your basic question, I wasn’t as close to the guys, I’m sure. I know I
wasn’t. I wasn’t totally aloof, don’t get me wrong, but I wanted to maintain my position
and I wanted them to maintain theirs and to know that I was the guy in charge, but I
wasn’t. I don’t think I was a hard-ass, per se. I was just trying to be professional and do
my job and expecting them to do theirs. Now probably in contrast to that, and it would
be interesting for you to pursue this, because when Rocky Lane took over, I imagine his
approach was entirely different. I suspect he was maybe more popular or more buddy-
buddy with the guys. I don’t know. I don’t know.

SM: In terms of the relationship between just, not necessarily yourself and your
subordinates, but just between the different groups within the unit, that is the enlisted
men, the warrant officers and the commissioned officers—
VV: Yeah. My perception was that the enlisted guys were close to the warrant officers, very close. I mean they both knew they had a job to do and they were going to do it, but I think there was a very good relationship between them. It was a team, I mean. The only thing you had to confront on that team thing was the fact that there was a constant turnover within the unit. But there was a good team relationship. I felt that we had a—I hate to—it almost sounds inane to put it down into some kind of an athletic team, but there was that sense. There was a sense of a team even with the infantry. That, you know, “We’re going to kick ass with Charlie,” or, “We’re going to do this,” or whatever. This team thing, drugs weren’t an issue for me at that time. Now there may have been some, but I didn’t see it. Now sometimes there was too much drinking. The guys would have a hangover the next day or whatever, but I guess the thing I’m trying to stress on relationships, there was this sense of team and that nobody wanted to let somebody else down on the team.

SM: That brings up an interesting point, though, as far as the alcohol and drug issue. When you arrived was there any drug use that you could see early on in your tenure?

VV: No, not that I could see, but I was told at division and brigade level that there was some small amount of drug use. I don’t know how to characterize that or I don’t even know how to quantify it. I didn’t see any in my unit. That doesn’t mean it wasn’t there. For example, I didn’t—if I walked around at night, I didn’t get a whiff of marijuana, that sort of thing. Now, when you talk to the guys who were warrants you may get a whole, or even some of the enlisted, you may get a whole different insight on that. I’m just telling you what I saw. Remember, I was only with this unit for six months.

SM: Right. Was there—I’ve heard that there’s basically a general rule in aviation, eight hours from your last drink to the flight line.

VV: Yes.

SM: That was pretty heavily enforced?

VV: Yeah. We tried to maintain that very rigidly. If there were going to be occasions where someone was going to fly and he knew he was hung over too bad to be
able to fly or had broken that rule, he would try to get somebody to fly for him or take a
later mission, that sort of thing.

SM: I was wondering, did it ever come up as an issue that although, yes,
marijuana and especially with the harder drugs, opium and opiates or morphine or
whatever—?

VV: Not during my tour with the aviation unit.

SM: Right. Okay.

VV: Didn’t see it. Didn’t have—

SM: Not even marijuana?

VV: I did not see it.

SM: Wow. Okay.

VV: Now having said that, I am sure that it was an issue. I’m sure it was,
because it was so readily available. You had a lot of young guys, some of whom were
bored or whatever. If I had seen it I would have taken some kind of action, you know, to
counteract it. Now, having said that, three years from then when I took over that infantry
battalion, there was no doubt in my mind I was going to have big problems. In fact, I just
reread the couple of letters I’d sent to my wife at that time. The first letter I sent to her, I
said my major problem is going to be drugs.

SM: Wow.

VV: I mean you could see the little plastic caps on the ground going to or from
the post-exchange.

SM: Oh, for crying out loud. And this is in ’71?

VV: Yes. It was a disaster. Guys didn’t salute. Guys would walk around with
improper uniforms. I don’t mean within a company area, I mean outside the area, going
to the post-exchange or something. It was like it was a different Army, Steve. I can’t
expand. Now I agree I was in a different type of unit, particularly for the first six months
again, but having said that, the drug thing ripped us apart. Hell, I had so many court
martials and Article 15s, I don’t know. It was just terrible.

SM: But during your time with B/229, morale, I guess based on what you
described so far, morale seems to have been high. Your supply and equipment systems
seemed to have been working well. You guys weren’t short of very much equipment at all?

VV: I mean yeah, we were short of some things, and there would be times when we would be hard up for some given part. I’m not saying that everything worked perfectly, but it did—it worked out. It did pretty good, really.

SM: The relationship between most of your men seems to have been pretty good.

VV: Yeah. Yeah, we were blessed with a very capable first sergeant. The mess people were pretty good. In fact, the mess guy I had served with before in the 82nd Airborne Division. So I had known him. We really had a—I had a sense of a good team, good people. When I say that, I don’t mean in my doing, I mean I’m just saying that we had—I had a sense of good guys working together trying to do their very best.

SM: Why don’t you describe some of the first combat missions and operations that you participated in, that the unit in general that you helped to lead?

VV: Okay. A lot of them at time when we were op-ing out of English were up in what we referred to as, it was very much considered Indian Country, the An Lao Valley. The An Lao was very rough, a lot of heavy jungle, so forth. Many of the LZ would be on high ground, single-ship LZs. You know, in and out. Whereas on the Bong Son Plain you’d actually be going into a rice paddy type area, next to a village, trying to surround it, cut it off because they’d picked up intel that there were VC in there, or VC may have been seen the night before carrying in supplies. The thing that I remember, and I’ll never forget to this day, and anyone who was ever on a combat assault, whether it was an infantryman or an aviator, and it didn’t matter whether you had just six aircraft, twelve, eighteen, twenty-four, whatever, going in on the assault, and particularly if you were in Yellow-One, the lead aircraft. You’re looking out the window, and you know what the time of touch down is supposed to be, and you know what time the last artillery rounds are going in or the last aircraft support from bombs or whatever going in. You’re trying to maintain a good flight speed because you know the people behind you, if you screw up, slowing down, going too fast, it just causes a ripple back through everybody behind you. Like I said, I typically let the warrant officer that I flew with that day fly the aircraft and I would try to maintain contact with the infantry battalion, the guns and everybody else what we’re doing on this thing. As you approach the LZ, you can see the rounds
going up, the high explosive rounds going off or the bombs or depending on where it was, maybe napalm over on another side to block off some avenue. It is noisy. You’re listening to a couple of radios, your own radio for the flight and you’re also listening to the radio for the infantry battalion commander. You’re talking to him. Then as a back up, you probably have somebody listening to the fire support guys just to double check the infantry battalion. As you’re coming in, you’re checking your time. You know that the last two rounds are supposed to be white phosphorus, and it is noisy. You’re thinking, “Aw, come on, Willie Peter, Willie Peter.” Because you know if you get too close to that LZ you’re going to break right or left, and not going in there till, to make sure that they’re not friendly rounds not going in. There were several times where we did that. Where at least I personally had to do it, and I’m sure some of my other flight leaders did, too. Because either our timing was off, maybe we had a tailwind, whatever, even though you wouldn’t land with a tailwind normally, or the artillery had a misconnection with the infantry, whatever. So anyway, when you saw those two big, white phosphorus rounds blossom out with that big white cloud down there, that was one good thing. But then you knew that when the artillery stopped, the VC knew what the white phosphorus meant, too, that they weren’t going to get hit by any more artillery. So then at that time, that’s when you had what was called ARA, aerial rocket artillery. Their call sign was Blue Max. So they would go in, and they would keep putting rockets on the area. Each aircraft carried seventy-six rockets, if you could get it off the ground with that many. Sometimes you had to do less. But anyway, he’s putting rockets in there. Then as he drops all of his ordnance, right outside your window on each side of you, you’ve got your own guns, and boy, they start. Of course, you’re getting closer and closer to touch down, and it is noisy. There are many guns are going off. They have their own rockets. They’re going off. Your machine gunners on both sides of your aircraft are firing. So then you’re in a scramble because you’re looking, you’re hoping the wind’s going to clear the LZ area of the dust and debris from the artillery as well as your own supporting aircraft rockets. You’re looking for a place to put the plane down so the troops can hop out, as safely and quickly as possible. Ideally, you’re hoping it’s more than one-ship LZ and you’ve been told and you’ve looked at it from recons or even photos on occasion, that it’s going to be big enough for two, three, four. If it’s a field everybody will land
almost concurrently. It’s the one- and two-ship LZs that are always where the problems, because you knew it was going to be lousy, or could be. But anyway, you go in and you go into a hover or you touch down, depending on the situation. The troops hit the gun and the crew chief will say, “Clear,” and then you’re out of there. Go back to, if you’re going to do a daisy chain and go back to the pick up zone to pick up more troops and come back to the same LZ or to another, whatever you’re going to do. The tempo of the thing was such that your blood, it got your adrenaline going. You were concerned that you wanted to do the job right, to put the infantry where they belonged and that you wanted to not endanger any of your own guys, you know, to get in, get out safely. Timing was critical. The noise was ferocious. At the same time you’re trying to talk on radios and give a countdown to your own plane and tell the battalion commander, you know you’d say, “Okay. It’s one minute to touch down.” He knew when the artillery was going to do such and such, and [you knew] what you were going to do. It was an experience.

SM: Sounds like it.

VV: Yeah. In a way it was fun. That’s kind of an inane way to say it, I guess, but here again it was a team thing. You knew all the guys behind you were doing what they were supposed to do, or trying to do their very best to maintain proper interval and distance and elevation, speed, whatever. It didn’t always work. It didn’t always work, but you always did your best.

SM: Yes, sir. Well, while you were working those six months, was most of it there at Bong Son, in the Bong Son Plain area?

VV: Well, most of it was. I think we spent one month at An Khe and then to Bong Son. However, in November of that year, the 173rd Airborne Brigade got their ass whacked in the Dak To area. One battalion was just crucified on, it was Hill 724. I don’t remember which. Part of that was a function of friendly fire and the other was the fact that they were just hit by a—now, I don’t remember whether that was an NVA regiment. Some of the first NVA started coming in at that time because it was close to the border, to Laos. Our company was picked to go with the 1st Brigade up to Kontum-Dak To area. When we got to Kontum, we had no infantry. We had nothing. So we had to provide our own security. We got a dozer that came in, put in one big hole so if we got into a
problem we could hide in there. We started trying to build revetments to protect the aircraft. At the same time we were going on combat operations. That was the first time for many of us that we just saw so many dead Americans. It just staggered the mind. I remember landing on that hill, going in with the 1st, leading the flight in, and very high trees, horrible LZ to go into. It had just been pummeled with artillery and logs were sticking up everywhere, stumps of trees. It was hard to figure out where you were going to actually put someplace to even, to hover because there was so much battle wreckage, debris. I remember looking through the nose down there, by my feet. It suddenly dawned on me. I was staring at a dead American soldier. Out of the dirt and the rubble you could see this face, and it had just turned black. It was blue and it had—the heat and the sun, you know what I mean?

SM: Yes, sir.

VV: About that time, we unloaded all the friendly troops that were going to take over the position and some of the supplies, and they started loading bodies. These were guys who were in grotesque positions. The smell was terrible. Arms were missing, legs, whatever. The crew chief and the gunner were trying to help load and they were vomiting. I mean, it was just horrible, and they were throwing them on like cord wood, you know, because rigor mortis had set in and so forth. They were trying to get us out of there because mortars were coming in, that sort of thing. We filled up and we left. We daisy-chained out. As we were—we waited for the flight to catch up to us because here again it was like a one-ship LZ. We went back to Dak To. As I approached Dak To, I gave my call sign, I think at that time it was Hardcore Yellow-One or something, I don’t remember. Anyway, we were told by the control to—they said, “Do you see the two-and-a-half-ton trucks on the north side of the field?” I said, “Yeah.” They said, “We’d like you to land over there. Don’t land on the field.” We landed over there because they didn’t want anyone to know the extent [of our losses]. They didn’t want the morale factor for the field to go around, how many had died. What they did is they loaded them on those trucks as we unloaded from our aircraft. We went back and got more. I don’t know how many trips we made. On one of the trips coming back, there was three C-130s down on the ramp that had brought in supplies. Props were going. They were waiting for their turn to take off. Three or two? Three, I think. They were waiting for their turn
to take off. I’m sure in some cases they had bodies on board them as well. We were
going in to refuel. About that time, we got, the tower said, “All aircraft in the Dak To
area, we are under rocket attack. Do not land or take off at this time.” As we watched,
you could see the puffs, the mushroom puffs, tracking to those 130s. Then suddenly the
tail of one was hit and it was a big, black blossom, of course kind of red from the
explosion itself. About that time, that aircraft stopped moving and the crew started un-
assing or getting off. As luck would have it, it was one of the 130s, as I recall that kind
of blocked where the others could get out easy enough. Then I think another one was
damaged. I think the third one got out of there or something. I don’t remember exactly.
But that was a bad day at Black Rock, no doubt about it.

SM: It sounds like some of the tougher duty you had.
VV: Yeah.
SM: Emotionally.
VV: Now, it got much tougher after I left the company in April when they had
some guys hit and knocked down and killed.
SM: While you were there, what were your combat losses in terms of aircraft and
men? And not just necessarily killed or destroyed?
VV: Well, during my six months, we didn’t lose an airplane to combat, not a
plane. We had one that—we didn’t lose it, but the engine went out. We had some minor
damage, but that was it. I mean, we had a golden time. We were very lucky, but it got
bad when they got up north, particularly during Tet.
SM: What would you say were some of the more challenging aspects of
command for those first six months? I mean, obviously that particular series of events
was pretty challenging, but in a general sense, as a commander, I guess.
VV: Yeah. One thing was to ensure that we had good quality flying aircraft, and
that we could balance the number of aircraft we needed to make sure we were supporting
the infantry, with what I knew had to be done to maintain the aircraft over the longer
period of time, as far as inspections. I don’t want to overstate this, but this was a very
important aspect of it. Maintaining a balance between operations and keeping flyable
aircraft and knowing what you’re going to do later on. Now, we had one situation on the
Laotian border where the—while we were over at Dak To, where the commander said,
“We’re going to go here. When you see it, it’s not going to look like any kind of an LZ at all.” God, was he right. It was bamboo. I don’t know how many sets of rotor blades we ruined that day. He said, “You’ve got to go in there.” We were dropping out ARVN guys, Vietnamese. They were going to block along this particular position, while the U.S. attacked from another direction. I mean it was—these small Vietnamese soldiers in some cases were dropping fifteen feet out of this aircraft. I know they must have sprained ankles or broke legs. Now we kept getting lower and lower into the bamboo, because the crew chief would say, “You’re too high. You got to go down.” I could hear—you could hear the bamboo hitting the rotor blade underneath. It just creased the hell out of it. Then after you left the area, you had a constant stream of vibration. I don’t know how many sets of rotor blades we had to replace after that. Now there’s a situation where the battalion commander said, “I don’t care what you got to do. Here’s what’s going to happen.” I guess in hindsight, we might have refused, but we didn’t. We did the best we could, and we ended up having a lot of aircraft down for a while.

SM: Right. How many support missions did you have with the ARVN, where you helped bring them, where you provided combat assault support?

VV: Not that many, as I remember. Typically, we did our own 1st Cav troops. I think we had a few missions with the Marines, even, where we helped them out. Then there were some—I’m trying to remember if we had any Ruff Puff (RF-PF, Regular Forces and Popular Forces). What they call Regional Force-Province Force guys that we dropped out. We had a few of those, but again, not very many. For the most part, we were U.S. troops. Now, in the case of where we had these ARVN guys go out, they were actually attached to the U.S. battalion. That’s why the U.S. battalion commander was in command, and that’s why he told us that they had to go where he was telling us they were going to go. I remember we made one of the first night assaults, which was exciting. We knew the LZ we were going into, and we knew it was fairly high and fairly open, but here again, as it turned out, we went in with complete innocence and came out with innocence and no hits of any kind. So that worked pretty well.

SM: Typically, when you’d go into an LZ, would there have been either a, I don’t know, a daisy cutter or some other munition used or pathfinder unit that would have gone through there, or something to clear, that kind of stuff?
VV: No. Not necessarily. Now, we may have had some—in my last tour as a battalion commander, there was one time when I did have a daisy cutter. I [did not] actually see the C-130 drop out an everything else. Made a hell of a beautiful LZ, I’ll tell you. I mean there were a lot of stumps and little [obstacles], but it was still, you know a great LZ. But, we didn’t have any of that when I was in the Cav, or at least where I was.

SM: Did the unit employ pathfinders at all?

VV: Rarely. A lot of times the pathfinders would be at the pick up zone where they were controlling traffic there. Because you’d have such a mob of troops and aircraft and everything else, depending on the size of the operation, that somebody had to control that set up and maintain control of it. Now, if you were going into a semi, quasi-administrative LZ, you would have pathfinders there. But if you were making a combat assault, there was nobody controlling it because you didn’t know who was on the ground, assuming it was going to be VC. Now once it was established, the unit that you put in there would take over, and they would provide LZ control. You would call in and they would say, “Okay, the LZ’s clear. Come on in,” or whatever. Now, later, when I had an infantry battalion, we used lerps (LRRPs) now and then, Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol. They would go into an area, and they would pre-check, or at least recon LZs in their given area. So they would have a pretty good insight as to where the LZs were and what could be used under what circumstances. So there would be occasions where you would go into an LZ that the lerps had picked out. Similarly, if you were going to go into pick up a lerp team, of course they would be on the ground and they would call you in, just, as if they were a downed pilot almost, tell you how to come in. If you didn’t know their exact location, and they didn’t want to pop smoke until the very last minute because they didn’t want to give away their location they would say, “I hear you coming.” Then if they got a visual on you they’d say, “To your right X degrees.” Then you would pass over and they’d say, “You’re over me now.” You would do a 180 and come back around into the wind. Shortly before you were into their area, or close to their area, they’d say, “Okay. Smoke now.” Then you’d come back and say, “Okay. I see yellow smoke.” They’d say, “Yeah, that’s right.” Because there would be at times, where there might be several other smokes out around that circle somewhere that were being popped, that the
VC had, trying to get you to come into where they were. But that’s essentially the way it was.

SM: Now at what elevation typically would you be at when you’d ask them to pop smoke? Because you’ve got to be flexible there, because you can’t be too low because those VC units could engage you.

VV: Well, plus we typically used a rule of thumb of fifteen hundred feet as far as, you know, small-arms-type stuff. But here again, if you were going to—if it was a one ship pick up that was one thing, because you could make a very accelerated approach to go down. You could drop very quickly to go in where you’re going, but if there’s several of you going in, it wasn’t quite that easy.

SM: Did the unit provide a lot of support for lerp and SOG operations?

VV: Not a lot. Now what happened later on, when we got up to the I Corps area, I know this because I became the operations officer for the 11th [Aviation] Group, we provided support for Marines, we provided support for lerp, and we provided support for SOG. Now one of the guys that you would want to talk to would be, you remember Tom Harnisher?

SM: Oh, yes, sir. Yes. The fireman from New York.

VV: The fire guy. Yeah, a real character. He extended six months. So he spent eighteen months over there. I think last part of his tour he was—he extended to fly Cobras. But anyway, he did some SOG missions. Now whether they went into Laos or not, I’m not sure, but I do know in the A Shau Valley, he did stuff before the unit ever went in there.

SM: How about support for ARVN, in terms of—how consistent was that?

VV: Well, like I said, we had a very few ARVN missions that we provided, but see, most of the ARVN support came from the 1st Aviation Brigade, because the U.S. units typically had their own aviation battalion. Then they’d get a committed battalion from the aviation brigade that was dedicated to them, you know what I mean? Most of the time. But the ARVN support came from 1st Aviation Brigade except in those rare instances like the one I mentioned.

SM: Did you or anyone in the unit ever express to you a problem with any of the ARVN units you supported?
VV: No. But here again, recall there wasn’t that many, so.
SM: What about support for other allies? Koreans?
VV: None.
SM: Australians? New Zealanders?
VV: None that I know of, no.
SM: Okay.
VV: Yeah. I had no knowledge of that.
SM: Right. When did you leave your command position there with B/229?
VV: Well, what happened, we were at An Khe. Like I said, we’d spent Christmas there. They sent us in there to rest up after all of our time over at Dak To and Kontum in the boonies. One day the first sergeant came up and said, “Sir, we’ve got to go to the Red Cross.” I said, “Oh, God.” Any time you had to go to the Red Cross, you knew that somebody in the unit had an emergency [at home]. You know, a kid, a little kid got killed or mother died or whatever. So I said, “Who is it this time, Top?” He said, “Well, it’s you, sir.” It turns out my dad had been killed in a car accident in early January. So I had to give up command of the unit because I knew that by the time the funeral and the flights and everything else, it would be somewhere between twenty and thirty days. Typically they let you take thirty days. Well, I was probably going to lose command of the unit anyway, because they had already picked Rocky as the rotation commander to come in. In hindsight, I would have hoped that because of when Tet broke out maybe they would have delayed that change and I’d stayed with it, but probably not. Anyway, so I’m home. While I’m home, the unit moves north and takes over the Marine fire bases at Evans and around there. So when I come back to An Khe, there’s a rear detachment of the 1st Cav. I didn’t even know they’d moved north. I’d seen some newspaper reports of it, but from the way it read, it sounded like just isolated units.
SM: Sir, I hate to interrupt, but I’m about to run out of recording time. So I’m going to have to stop real quick.
VV: Okay.
SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Vel Varner on the thirteenth of June 2003, at approximately 4:20 Lubbock time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Varner is still in Salt Lake City, Utah. This is CD number three of our interview.
Sir, why don’t we pick up again? You had just come back from your father’s funeral. You were back in-country.

VV: Correct.

SM: Now this was in January of, or February of ’68?

VV: Yes. Late January—well, around February 1st or so of ’68, yeah.

SM: Now when you heard about Tet—well, did you hear about Tet before you got back or immediately when you got back?

VV: Oh no, no. Of course, I heard about it on television while I was in the States.

SM: Okay. That’s what I thought. So were you surprised at all by this development in the war?

VV: Oh, yeah. Everybody was. I don’t think that was a—I suspect Westmoreland was as surprised as anybody else.

SM: What did you think about that at the time?

VV: Well, it’s hard to say. I was tremendously surprised, like everyone was, but then as they got more and more input on it, and found out that most of the people that were fighting were VC. I had a sense, and I think a lot of other people did, too, that they had made a really terrible strategic error in doing this all over the country. Because they ended up losing their main advantage, and that’s to blend in and out of the population, but here they suddenly blended out, but they were fighting like main units, which would in essence give the U.S. a marked advantage. You know, instead of fading back into the jungle, so to speak. However, there’s no doubt about the fact that they gained not only strategic but tactical surprise. It had such an impact as far as the PR (public relations) was concerned, that even though thousands of them died, it was a major blow. In fact, accelerated more and more NVA units coming in that it was looked upon as somewhat of—well, a victory.

SM: When you first heard about it, how was the press treating it, from your perspective? How well were they reporting it?

VV: Oh, I think the press was treating it just as you would expect, that this was a major setback. Every city was being occupied or being taken over. We were just going to have to barely fight to get out, on and on and on.
SM: When you first heard those types of reports, what did you think? Did you think, “Oh, this is just another example of the press being”—?

VV: No I didn’t think that that early on. Early on I didn’t know what to think. I just couldn’t believe that it was as bad as everything. You always got, you know, typical in combat, the first report’s always wrong or screwed up in some way, no doubt of that. I just knew there was no way that they were going to—they may have had surprises in the cities, and they may have wiped out a lot of the ARVN because of that, but I just knew that our main force units, there was no way they could have walked over them. But, of course, they weren’t in the cities either.

SM: When you did get back, what happened in terms of your assignment? You got back to Vietnam early February. What did you do?

VV: Well, here again, the group commander said, “Well, I still want you to be a liaison officer to one of the brigades. With all your lift experience now, you’ll really be valuable.” I said, “Well, okay.” Well, it turns out that the group S-3 and a bunch of others went to him and said, “We really need Varner in the operations.” So I became the group operations officer, which was a good assignment and an interesting one and in hindsight gave me a better perspective of everything that was going on in the division than if I’d been a brigade liaison officer. I do know that there were brigade liaison officers that thought they should have had that job, but didn’t end up getting it. But anyway, that’s what I ended up doing. Needless to say, I was able to keep a sharp eye on what Bravo Company was doing because I was the one that was tasking all the battalions like the 227th, the 229th and the Chinook battalion 228th. Telling them what their tasks were going to be the following day and what’s their status and so forth.

SM: Was that accurate, that is your experiences did provide you with a lot of good insight into how best to work in that position?

VV: Yeah. I think it did for a couple of reasons. Number one, I had a better feel of the sense of timing, you know, how much time a lift company would need before they could be scrambled, and being careful not to over-commit from a maintenance standpoint, allocate tasks a little better. If you were going to have a lift company work with brigade X, make sure that they were used to working with brigade X. A lot of things
that were just little simple common sense things, but sometimes if you put somebody in
ops that weren’t familiar with that, it was, it could have been a problem.
SM: Yes, sir. When you took over that position, did you have to go through any
additional training or briefings there?
VV: No, no.
SM: What were the various challenges inherent in that particular job?
VV: Staying awake.
SM: (Laughs) Okay. A lot of late nights and early mornings?
VV: Yeah, yeah.
SM: Not boredom.
VV: Pardon?
SM: Not boredom.
VV: No, no, no.
SM: I just wanted to make sure you—
VV: I was interfacing with the division ops and then each of the battalion ops
underneath us, and then the infantry brigades would be calling in. It was—so it was a
demanding, high-tempo job, but a good one. It was good.
SM: What were some of the greater challenges besides staying awake?
VV: Well, a couple of interesting ones. One was that any time we had some
special VIP that we were going to have to take somewhere, a lot of times I would get the
task to do it. The rationale for that, not because I was a great pilot, we had a lot of great
pilots. They, in fact I would end up taking some super warrant officer with me, but we
would—I’d get picked because I knew all the frequencies, knew all the contacts, what
was going on here, there, everywhere. For example, when we went in to relieve the
Marines at An Khe, if we had to fly in somebody, some VIP into An Khe, even though
they were under fire, a lot of times I would get the task, just because I knew the
procedures, knew the contacts, knew the routes, that sort of thing. We’d fly in, dump the
guy out, tell him what to do, where to go, so forth, and leave. I’ll never forget the first I
went into An Khe. That place was, battle debris everywhere. Ammo boxes, parachutes,
there was so much parachute silk scattered around that complex that they could have
made blouses for every woman in Hong Kong. They had to do a lot of what they called LOLEX?

SM: What’s that?
VV: Low-level extraction?
SM: Oh, okay, yeah. Yeah.
VV: Where the C-130 flies across and he has a little chute that pulls out the cargo. He doesn’t land. He just flies low-level. Then there were other cases where they couldn’t even get the C-130s that low, so they had to use resupply parachutes. Then, of course, the wind would blow them against the stumps and raggedy trees that had been blown up. Then all around An Khe had been arc light strikes, with the B-52s. I mean it was a real meat grinder, killing machine around there. Of course, we had been sent in to relieve them and relieve the pressure all around them. So that was interesting. Then later when we went into the A Shau Valley, I did a lot of weather checks because I was checked out in a Beaver, fixed wing L-20. You know, made by DeHavilland [Canada]. You’re familiar with the Beaver?
SM: Yes, sir.
VV: Yeah. Anyway, so I would go up and do weather checks over the A Shau. Then after we went in there and the engineers actually repaired one of the [old French] airstrips, they wanted a fixed-wing to go in and check the GCA. So I got that task. The group commander said, “You’re going in there, but there’s one condition. You’re going to go alone.” So I flew it alone. I mean, not that you had to have a co-pilot, don’t misunderstand, but that he just didn’t want anybody else on board if there was a problem. So I remember doing the GCA on that and hearing the controller saying, “You’re being fired at.” Hell, I didn’t know. I was concentrating getting through the clouds and finding the airstrip. That was interesting, but I enjoyed the ops assignment. The command assignment was better, but the ops assignment was different and challenging.

SM: While you were serving in Vietnam for the first series of tours, when you were with the B/229 and then with the operations office, what was the heaviest caliber weapon that was ever fired upon you as a pilot or as a passenger in an aircraft?
VV: Fifty.
SM: A .50 cal.
VV: Yeah.
SM: That’s big enough.
VV: Oh, yeah. Yeah. When I say .50, I’m pretty certain that’s what it was. There were supposedly some .57, but I don’t think they hit until the guys went into the A Shau. It was a meat grinder there.
SM: For the first six months of your tour though, when you were commanding the B/229, how would you describe the tempo of operations, and whether or not, or how if at all, it changed or shifted? Was it pretty consistent? Did it increase over time? Did it ebb and flow?
VV: For the first three, four months it was pretty routine. I think everybody felt it was routine. But when we went to Dak To to relieve the 173rd, it lost its—it was no longer just—it wasn’t fun anymore. It was never fun, but you know what I mean?
SM: Mm-hmm.
VV: It’s a relative term there. But from then on, it was serious business. No doubt about it. Then it got really worse when the guys had to go up north because of Tet. Birds shot down, whatever. Then, of course, we used to have rocket attacks. We’d had attack before at An Khe and even at English, but nothing like up at Camp Evans. In fact, May 19, 1968—I think it was May nineteenth. Ho Chi Minh’s birthday, whatever—I think that’s May nineteenth, we got hit by 120-millimeter rockets over and over and over. Of course, I was in the ops bunker working, but as luck would have it, one of them went in the ammo dump. The ammo dump went off all night long. In fact, I [was] surprised that the division commander didn’t get relieved. There was a big investigation over that. I think they kind of buried it, but it had been done beforehand. He had just copied what the Marines had done, and what others had done, but it was so bad that we had less than a handful of flyable aircraft the next day. I know for a fact I think we ferried out a 120, slung-load them under Chinooks to Da Nang for repair. Windshields were blown out because of concussion. Rotor blades were damaged, skin damage. I’m sure that the VC and the NVA were sitting on a hill with a clipboard saying, “One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five,” just laughing. In fact, just to add a touch of humor to this, my wife and I went back and did Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Burma, and Thailand in 1966, I think it was. We spent five weeks or six weeks. The guide in Hue had been a
VC. We started talking. It turned out he had also guided several other like reunion
groups that had come over from the military, U.S. military. So he spoke fairly well and
knew what was going on. He said the only reason he was alive today is that he had been
shot in the leg two weeks before Hue. So he couldn’t participate in Hue [battle during
Tet]. But that his unit had been decimated. The ones that did escape were blown up to
pieces by B-52s, but he maintains that he remembers Ho Chi Minh’s birthday of ’68 very
well. That he remembers seeing sling load after sling load of Hueys being flown out.
Then when Camp Evans got hit that night with rockets, I think we had one death. There
was a warrant officer whose tent and bunker complex was right close to the airfield. He
got hit in the chest with an eight-inch round. Just the projo itself, the warhead, if you
want to call it that, it had been blown up in the air, and when it came down it hit him.
Luck of the draw I guess, whatever. Anyway, what else on Vietnam?
SM: Well, in terms of, again your first six months, when you guys were working
out of An Khe and English, how did you guys handle base security? How much of an
internal combat, ground combat infantry capability did you have?
VV: Well, actually I hate to admit this, but we were very fortunate in that our
security participation, except for just some local sentries around the area was done by the
infantry, both at An Khe and in—now when we got to Dak To or Kontum, rather, we had
to maintain our own security for a few days there until units came in to back us up. But
other than that, it was not a big demand. Now I’m not sure what happened when they got
to LZ Sharon up north. That could have changed.
SM: So you really didn’t have the Internal Blues, as they were called, and some
of the other aviation units with the reaction of a platoon or so of pure ground infantry?
VV: No, no. Now just as a point of interest, you may be talking about an Air Cav
squadron.
SM: Yes, I guess so.
VV: See, an Air Cav squadron, they have organic infantry. Those are the Blues.
They have—there’s a platoon per troop as I recall. They’re the ones that provide not only
security, but they would go in to secure a downed aircraft or go on to do ground recon,
that sort of thing. A very good aviation unit, those were great little units, great economy
of force units. We used those later in 1971 and ’72. They were great economy of force
units. They did yeoman duty.

SM: What was the breakdown of the aircraft in your unit, in the company? Were
you all slicks or did you have gunships?

VV: Yeah. All I had, it was twenty slicks. Twenty UH-1H, that was it.

SM: So no Cobras, no gunships.

VV: Nothing, no. Now, we had a separate company, D Company. D Company
had twelve attack aircraft. I think twelve was the number. I’m trying to remember. I
believe it was twelve. They started out, they were B-model Hueys with mini-guns and
rockets. Then they transitioned into Cobras. In fact, I can remember when the first
Cobra flew into the 1st Cav. Unfortunately, the guy didn’t have enough night training and
he got vertigo and crashed making a night landing because the reflections off those
rounded cockpits was different than you experienced off of a flat-screen-type aircraft.
They immediately contacted the orientation or the transition training people and said
more night training, much more.

SM: Yeah. Oh, wow. In your work in operations, having had company
command time and then to move from that level up into operations as you did. That’s an
interesting transition in terms of your view of the war now, as your perspective has quite
changed.

VV: Yeah, because I’m writing ops orders. I’m writing after-action reports, you
know, that sort of thing.

SM: But not just for the company level units, but for the battalions as well.

VV: Yeah, because see, we had the aviation group, we had two lift battalions, a
Chinook battalion. We had a crane company, the 478th. Then on occasion, now, we
would have battalions attached to us from the 1st Aviation Brigade out of Long Binh,
down south. So it was different, yeah.

SM: Well, when you—given that different change in your perspective now of the
war, what did you find most interesting or have you been able to give it much thought
over the years, you know, your bird’s eye view, literally, as a company commander to a
more distant view of the war from the brigade? Were you able then to reconcile any of
the, some of the frustrations maybe you felt as a company commander with what the
responsibilities and the additional issues and problems that you have to deal with at the
group level?

VV: Yeah, well, to a certain extent, except that the war had changed.

SM: Okay, how so?

VV: We were post-Tet.

SM: Got you. What did that mean to you?

VV: Well, it meant that, a couple of things. One, we were flying in some really
tough terrain, particularly down in the A Shau area. There were places where you had to
go as high as sometimes eight, ten thousand feet just to get over the clouds that were on
that mountain chain then to drop into the A Shau Valley. There was a lot more enemy
action, much, much more. You weren’t just fighting VC anymore. You were now
involved with the NVA.

SM: Yeah. Now, what other—in what other ways did Tet affect military
operations? I mean, I know that, of course, obviously the after, the majority of the
fighting was over and there was the mini—

VV: Well, there were a couple of things. It used to—the rule of thumb used to be
fifteen hundred feet and higher you’re okay. Now suddenly, people are flying down the
road at ten feet, like a bat out of hell.

SM: Minimize their signature over the ground.

VV: Precisely. Because suddenly you weren’t just being shot at with .50 caliber.
It was 57 millimeter and some other stuff, 37. So a lot of things changed like that, tactics.
If you were going into an LZ, you may want to change where you fly in after the first
pass, or have another LZ even. There were a lot of changes. You may not want to
send—God, I remember we had a Chinook go down. There was a—no, I’m trying to
remember the situation. We had one or two, one Huey go down with a bunch of people
on board. So they were going to try to recover the Huey. So we sent a Chinook and two
gunships for coverage. We lost, then the Chinook was shot down. One of the gunships
was shot up so bad and the other has to get refueled. I remember listening to them talk. I
was monitoring the battalion then. I wasn’t talking. It was not my business, but I can
remember one of the last guys that was alive on that Chinook was a flight surgeon. I can,
just plain as hell, I can remember him telling his ops, he said, “Well, so and so’s dead, so
and so’s wounded. I’m okay, but I can see them coming.” We lost all those guys. Now
the flight surgeon and several of them were captured and I don’t know what ever
happened to this day whether they made it out or not.

SM: Do you recall their names?
VV: No, I do not. I do not. But I remember at the time thinking, “Good God,
I’m the one who committed those guys.” I gave the unit a requirement to send a Chinook
and two Cobras to escort them to recover that aircraft. We’d been telling, “Yeah, no
sweat. You’ll be able to get them out easy.” Well, it suddenly became sweat because the
enemy had brought in reinforcements and they set up a trap.

SM: So still a very strong sense of responsibility.
VV: Oh, yeah. Hell, yeah.
SM: Even through you’re not in the command.
VV: I might have felt better if I knew more about it, but I don’t.
SM: I guess what some people might not understand is even though you weren’t
in a specific command position, that is you were not commanding, you had a lot of
responsibility.
VV: Yeah, but I passed the requirement.
SM: You had a lot of responsibility.
VV: We had a situation where even though I wasn’t in the chain, per se, if I got a
requirement for division, I didn’t go get approval from somebody. We knew certain
routines that we were allowed to do and not do. This was a routine on my part. I knew
that I was to give this tasking down below, and that we should do it as soon as we could,
because the longer we delayed, you know, the worse it would get. The one thing we
didn’t do, and a lot of people, I’m sure weren’t aware. We didn’t blow up an aircraft if it
was shot down. We tried to recover it. It’s not like they were doing over in the gulf
because they had a lot of sensitive equipment on there, guns or whatever else, they were
blowing them up. So the enemy wouldn’t get to them. We ended up having this rule of
thumb, if we could recover that aircraft, we’ve got to recover it. I don’t remember the
exact numbers, you may, but I, it seems to me that there were like thirteen thousand
Army helicopters shot down in the twelve years of Vietnam. Now, that doesn’t mean
they were all strike aircraft. Probably most of them were not. They were shot down and
most of them ended up being recovered and repaired.

SM: Goodness. Anything else from your time in operations in terms of
especially, since we’re looking at post-Tet and how the Tet Offensive affected
operations? What kinds of pressures were you receiving from the chain of command
above on you as an operations officer, in terms of the assignments, the conduct of
operations, things like that? Anything?

VV: No. Because as the Tet thing wore down, so to speak, and then we started
going to big unit operations like Operation Pegasus where we relieved the Marines up
at—I think it was Pegasus, I can’t remember the name exactly—An Khe. Then you’re
talking about, ops was busy because we had—instead of small-unit-type thing, we were
taking all of the aviation assets to move brigade X. In other words, we’d use the 227th,
the 229th, and the Chinooks to move that whole brigade. Then we’d move another
brigade. Do you see what I mean?

SM: Yes, sir.

VV: So that kept us busy. Then later when we went into the A Shau it was sort
of the same way. You just needed a lot of assets and they were going in at one time. Just
remember his name. Anyway, this battalion commander, was one of the first guys, I
think it was LZ Tiger. He went in and we got this report back that the battalion
commander—they used the code, call sign—had been injured by a mule. The group
commander is in, he says, “What the hell’s that mean, ‘injured by a mule’?” I said,
“Well, it must mean mechanical mule.” He said, “What do you mean, somebody ran
over him?” I said, “Well, I don’t know. I’ll try to find out.” Then somebody else says,
“Oh, no, no, no. They’re talking about an animal that was one of the VC mules.” Turns
out, of course, it was a mechanical mule. The sling load, they had slung loaded in to drop
it off on the LZ, and somehow or other, it hit the battalion commander and injured his
back really bad. That same battalion commander was the guy that commanded Operation
Desert One into Iran, later as a two-star general, just a kind of an interesting parallel.

SM: Right. Did you get a chance to meet or work with some of the other
principle players in that, like Colonel Beckweth? At that level were you also
coordinating when you were S-3 with the group? Were you coordinating Special
Operations support? Working with Special Forces?
VV: No. I did not. We might get a tasking from division to provide some birds,
but we would just be told to have them report on this frequency at this location at this
time, because they wouldn’t—it was a classified mission. Then they would be briefed or
told to report to a ground location. Well, then they would get a thorough briefing. That’s
why I mentioned Tom Harnisher. He might be able to give you some insight.
SM: Now, what about coordination with ARVN and especially or more
importantly, perhaps, at your level now, at group level, did you have to coordinate more
with, for instance the province-level politicians, Vietnamese politicians in its various
operations?
VV: No. We would deal strictly through a U.S. channel. We would go to a U.S.
advisor, you know. It would be like, the senior district advisor was a colonel, but he
would have somebody that would be an aviation liaison guy, a U.S. major that we would
deal with if we had to do that. So it wasn’t like I was talking to an ARVN on a radio or
telephone or in person. I’d still be dealing with a U.S. guy.
SM: What about, just coordinating and liaising with other country forces,
whether it be ARVN or other allies, anything at all?
VV: No, did not.
SM: Wow. Okay.
VV: Now, I’m sure that people down in the Delta and also in the II Corps tactical
zone, particularly where the Koreans were, the Aussies, guys would have to coordinate
then, but I never did.
SM: Were there any other memorable, particularly memorable operations that
you helped support, participate in and, either as a commander with B Company or
working in the S-3 shop?
VV: No, not really, not that I can think of. They were all memorable, but I
don’t—
SM: Yes, sir, in one way or another.
VV: Anyway, I left Vietnam. In fact, I was supposed to go to the Pentagon to
work in infantry-aviator assignments. About a month before I was due to rotate, I got a
letter from my wife, and she says, “I don’t know what’s going on, but so and so,” who
was a West Point classmate of mine, “said he just drew quarters for us at West Point.”
What they would have would be an annual quarters drawing for the new people coming
in of the same ranks. So I sent her a letter back. I said, “Well, he’s all messed up. We’re
still going to Washington.” Well, it turned out that another friend of mine who’s in the
infantry and who was slated to go be an instructor there was killed. In fact, he was in the
1st Cav. When he was killed, they needed to replace him, and they wanted somebody that
was coming out of Vietnam to replace him as an instructor for the cadets. So they went
through. They said, “Here are the lists of people that will be available.” None of them,
me included, had had post-graduate degree in history or whatever. So then they were
going, had to go through and decide, “Well, what’s his experience? How did he did as a
student in military history?” and so forth. Anyway, long story short, I ended up going to
West Point for a three year assignment as a—ended up assistant professor in the history
department. That was nice for my family to get to stay in one spot for three years.

SM: Right. When you came back to the United States, and this was again in—
VV: ’68.
SM: Yeah, ’68. June, July of ’68?
VV: July, yeah.
SM: A couple of important things had happened just before you came back, a
couple of months actually before you came back. Of course, President Johnson had made
the decision that he was not going to seek re-election.

VV: Right.
SM: How was that perceived?
VV: Martin Luther King.
SM: He was assassinated.
VV: Bobby Kennedy.
SM: Right. But with Johnson’s decision in particular, how did that—when that
news arrived that the president basically was going to quit being the president, he didn’t
want to be president anymore. How did that affect you and the men around you that you
were working with at the time?
VV: I can’t—I don’t recall specifically how it affected the people around me. I know how it affected me. It was like, “Okay, he knows he screwed up. So he knows there’s no way he’s going to get elected. So what happens now?”

SM: What do you think it was that he did that would prevent him from being re-elected? Do you think Tet was the big thing?

VV: Pardon?

SM: Do you think it was Tet?

VV: Oh, Tet was a factor. Obviously, Tet was a factor on Johnson as well, but if you look at all of the recordings that they’ve unveiled after all this time, it was apparent to him long before Tet that there was no way this thing was winnable, at least the way they were doing it. They were afraid to do anything more because, in hindsight, they were misreading the Chinese and the Russians. But that’s the way it was.

SM: So when you heard that announcement, you don’t think it affected the attitude or the morale of the men that you were around at all?

VV: Oh, I wouldn’t say it didn’t affect their attitude or their morale. I think it—I’m not sure what the impact was. I’m trying to remember in hindsight. Well, it was a surprise. Then there were rumors going around that his health was bad, which it turned out it was. I presume he felt that—I’m trying to remember. Had Bobby announced before then? He had, hadn’t he?

SM: I think so.

VV: In fact, I think in Ferrell’s new book, he makes some comment that Johnson wasn’t sure he could beat—if he had a primary contest, he wasn’t sure that he could beat Kennedy. As you know, he was haunted by the aura of the Kennedys. I’m sure he felt the ghost of Jack was looking over his shoulder every time he did anything.

SM: When you got back to the United States—oh, sorry. One more question before you got back to the United States, what was the news that you were receiving in-country? What were your principal sources of information about the home front and—?

VV: I’m sure the principle source were letters from home. Of course, you’ve got the *Stars and Stripes*, but that didn’t have much. Now and then from home guys would get cuttings from newspapers and that sort of thing. But we really didn’t have an insight. I don’t think we really had an insight what the casualty, body counts were. I mean you
might know in your own unit and not with any kind of precise detail, but it wasn’t like
what the Americans were getting on TV every night. We didn’t see that. I was surprised
when I went home on emergency leave at the way it was, you know, five hundred this
week, four hundred next week.

SM: Now did that kind of reporting come up through your office at all when you
were working in the S-3 shop?
VV: No, not at all.
SM: When you got back to the U.S. after the end of your first full tour, what was
the atmosphere like here in the United States? Were you surprised at all? Because, of
course, you’d come back prior to Tet, and now you’re coming back after Tet.
VV: Yeah, but even just from January to June and July, the situation had been
exacerbated by the assassinations, Johnson, what he’s talking about, and the increasing
body count. At the same time we were increasing the number of people going into
Vietnam. I mean, there were reports that Westmoreland had asked for another hundred
thousand troops or whatever it was. I think we were—right away it looked like we were
going to 525, and all of that rolled together. Plus, I was surprised by the increase in
peace demonstrations and the clamor against the war. Kent State’s in there somewhere. I
don’t remember.
SM: Yeah, that’s in the ’70s.
VV: Oh, that’s later. Yeah.
SM: Yes, sir, that’s a little bit later. But yeah, I would imagine that there was—
you must have witnessed quite a change—
VV: Oh, yeah. It was dramatic.
SM: Just in that brief interlude between your two visits. Well, when you got
back to the United States you got another month, I suppose, of leave.
VV: Right and then moved to New York.
SM: Now you didn’t get an R&R probably, or did you?
VV: No.
SM: Okay, because you got that month.
VV: Yeah. I went home, yeah, just under a month. Right.
SM: Okay. What about—something I didn’t ask about before. What about USO (United Service Organization) shows, recreational activities, facilities and things like that? How available were they to your company when you were in B Company and then later when you were in the S-3 shop?

VV: You know, they must not been that available because I sure don’t remember any. Now, I know that the guys who were stationed down along Saigon, Long Binh, the big bases, they probably had people. I know on my second tour in Vietnam, when I became an operations officer of the aviation brigade, you know, one notch up after commanding an infantry battalion, we had—who was the little black guy that danced and part of the Rat Pack? Oh, Sammy Davis, Jr.

SM: Sammy Davis, Jr. Mm-hmm.

VV: He came in with the Blonde Bomber and the crew. In fact he ate with us in the commanding general’s mess. So I had that insight. One of the things that a lot of the guys liked were the so-called Donut Dollies. Now they were around to the different fire bases. These were just good-looking American gals that were with the Red Cross. They passed out books, talked to the guys, whatever. In fact, I can remember one time, had a flight of twelve, we were going to refuel at a place called Uplift, which was south of English. Somebody called over says—have I told you this story?

SM: No, sir, I don’t believe so.

VV: Okay. Over the air somebody, I called in, I said, “Yellow-One with a flight of twelve. We’re coming in to relump.” That’s slang for refuel. Somebody down on the ground said, “Yellow-One, you’d better hurry and get your flight on the ground as soon as you can.” I’m thinking, “What’s going on? Are they going to run out of fuel?” I said, “What’s up?” He said, “Well, we got two round-eyed, double-breasted split tails down here passing out donuts.” As soon as he said, “two round-eyed, double-breasted split tail,” you know out whole flight says, “Hurry up, Yellow-One! Let’s get on the ground.”

SM: Oh, for crying out loud. So there were Donut Dollies?

VV: Yep.

SM: Okay. Anything else you would like to discuss about your first tour?

VV: No. Probably, but I don’t know what it is.

SM: Nothing that comes readily to mind.
VV: I’ll be talking to you forever if I don’t get moving out.
SM: Well, we’ve been talking for quite a while today. This might be a good place for us to pause. We’ve got about three hours in, so—
VV: How long are we going to have to keep doing this?
SM: Ah, that’s a good question. Let me go ahead and put an ending on our interview for today. Thank you sir, this will end—
VV: No, no. I meant in the big picture.
SM: Right, yeah. Let me put an end on this and then we can talk about that.
VV: Okay.
SM: This will end the interview with Vel Varner on the thirteenth of June.
Thank you.
Interview with Vel Varner
Date: June 19, 2003

Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Vel Varner on the nineteenth of June, 2003 at approximately 1:30 Lubbock time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Varner is in Salt Lake City, Utah. Sir, let’s pick up today’s interview with a discussion of your experiences coming back from your first tour. What was it like back in the U.S. when you got back here?

VV: Well, of course, the media was still full of the political turmoil as well as the aspects of the military’s as you’re well aware and everyone would expect. I didn’t have any personal confrontations. I know there were probably some people that did, but I did not. Part of that may have stemmed from the fact that when I first got back I was in a southern town where my family had stayed. They didn’t have that kind of a problem going on at all. Obviously the media, the television was full of it, that sort of thing. Then I was assigned to West Point, New York. That was, of course there was no turmoil going on there at all. So that’s about the size of it.

SM: Okay. At what point did you move up the West Point to start teaching?

VV: Oh, very quickly because I had to go through an orientation program that summer and do—we did practice lectures, teaching and that sort of thing. So as soon as I got back from Vietnam, I spent just a few weeks on leave preparing for the move and then moved. So I arrived at West Point in, I think the July timeframe, 1968.

SM: What was the atmosphere like there with the corps of cadets? How, as you started getting into the teaching routine, how inquisitive were they of your Vietnam experiences?

VV: Oh, well, very. Any returning soldier from Vietnam had a lot of queries, a lot of questions. A lot of them were oriented to the area that the cadet anticipated he would be assigned, like which branch he would pick, infantry, armor, or whatever. So if he saw that you were an infantryman or you were an aviator whatever, he would ask questions related to that.

SM: Now did you find that there was very much concern among the corps of cadets concerning the war and how it was playing out?
VV: I don’t think concern is the word. It’s more of an interest, a curiosity, a questioning. “Why did we do this? Why haven’t we done that?” That sort of thing. Now, obviously, there may have been some concern on the part of the seniors, even though most of them knew they were not going to end up going directly to Vietnam for some time. At that juncture, no one knew how much longer it was going to go on, obviously.

SM: So when you, as you were teaching classes, you were teaching Russian? Is that correct?

VV: Pardon?

SM: You were teaching Russian?

VV: No, no, no.

SM: What were you teaching?

VV: No, I taught, the first year I taught a survey course in military history, starting back during the Greek-Roman period and then going on forward right up to the Vietnam War. Now that was a year-long survey course. My last two years there, I was an associate professor and I had an elective course which dealt with revolutionary warfare.

SM: The American Revolution?

VV: No.

SM: Or with revolutionary warfare, in general.

VV: Started with the French Revolution and went forward. We focused on, well for example, Mao’s experience in China, the British problem with counterinsurgency operations in Malaya, the French problem in Algeria. So it was a whole series of those type of—even including the Hungarian Revolution, even though it was also a very short pace. Lenin in Russia and, of course, ultimately we ended up with Ho Chi Minh against the French and then, with the Viet Minh and what we referred to as the First Indochina War. It was culminated with the so-called Second Indochina War or the Vietnam War that we were concerned with.

SM: Now when you were talking about revolutionary warfare in this context, in this class, you didn’t go back to the American Revolution first?
VV: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. But see, most of that, most of the American Revolution was covered in what we referred to as the survey course. So they had already had that.

SM: Okay. So you started focusing on other revolutions, other countries.

VV: Precisely. Now having said that, you know, just a normal teaching venue would be to refer now, as you recall, the Swamp Fox activities in the south or what so and so did, you know.

SM: How much when you started teaching military history, and in particular when you were doing the survey and you got to the Vietnam War, or when you were teaching revolutionary warfare and got to Ho Chi Minh and the revolutionary war experience there, how much of that—I guess it’s kind of difficult to—I don’t want it to be too leading, but at the same time it’s difficult for it not to be. It seems to me that, of course, the main premise of a lot of people’s understanding of the time was this is all communism. What was going on in Vietnam was communist inspired, was controlled by Hanoi, was controlled by, ultimately the Soviet Union and Moscow, and was not an internal revolution. Did you address that at all?

VV: Yeah, but I don’t think that there was a sense that, of the faculty that this was some hegemonic direct control by the Soviet Union. I think there was an agreement, and it was borne out, obviously, that supplies and stuff like that, because there were Russian cargo ships in Haiphong Harbor. One of the concerns on the part of targeting is what happens if they hit a ship? One of the concerns on the part of the administration at that time of not mining the harbor was “What would happen?” Those were the issues. But I don’t really feel that there was any sense on the part of the faculty—well, there may have been some, but most of the faculty were wide open on this, realizing that, particularly within the history department that the idea of some staunch central control, directing everything out of Moscow was naïve at best and stupid at worst. That, for a couple of reasons, not the least of which, Ho Chi Minh was his own guy.

SM: Yes. Yes. Okay. Well, was there anything else, as far as your time teaching at West Point? Was there anything else you wanted to discuss, any particular events or activities or things that were memorable about your time there?
VV: Every—it was interesting working with the cadets particularly doing the
elective, because every one of those, well not everyone, but the vast majority of them
were deeply interested in the insurgency/counterinsurgency aspects of historic eras, and
how they related to Vietnam and what we were doing or not doing. Fortunately, we were
able to bring in a lot of outside guest speakers, guys who had been key leaders in the
Philippines against the Japanese. Then later, leaders who were, had operated on the op—
in other words, against the Japanese, it was a guerrilla-type situation. Then after the war
was over and into the ’50s, we started to have the Huks rise up again. So there, the
[Filipino] leaders who had been guerrillas previously were now suddenly trying to deal
with the guerrillas from a counterinsurgency standpoint. So it was interesting for the
cadets to ask them questions and that sort of thing. Then we also had some [former] OSS
(Office of Strategic Services) people come in, who obviously were retired from World
War II. They talked about it from the standpoint of directing guerrilla-insurgent
operations. All of those things added to a very dynamic, interesting course for them. At
the same token, we had guys come in who were—I can’t remember his name right now.
Gosh, right on the tip of my tongue. He was a West Pointer and he worked for Kennedy,
President Kennedy, and was there at the seat of [power] when the Special Forces were
expanded dramatically. I don’t know that he was there involved during the time of the
decision to assassinate the Diems or not, but anyway, here was another guy that was
present five years previously, six years previously and involved in a lot of the decision
making that went on about putting troops into Vietnam and was candid enough to say that
things that we thought were pretty ignorant at the time because that’s not the way they
were.

SM: I guess a good question to ask would be whether or how you covered the
war as it progressed after you arrived as a course. You got there in West Point in—
VV: ’68.
SM: For the fall semester of ’68.
VV: Yeah, okay. As far as coving the war—
SM: Yeah, how was that? How did that happen?
VV: Well, remember now, we had a structured curriculum. So in September or
October we’re probably talking about Napoleon in a battle somewhere. Then we move
on and we may be involved with the War with Mexico or the Civil War, so on. Now,
obviously, cadets, like students everywhere would always try to inject a question that
related to current events and specifically Vietnam because they were so interested in it.
So even though you were maybe teaching Napoleon, you’d have cadets that’d say, “Well,
sir, could we ask a question about such and such?” In some ways trying to get you off
the subject, but also—so you always had that situation. I think that when we got to the
Vietnam War in the survey course, which we didn’t spend—I don’t remember how many
days we were involved with studying, looking at Vietnam. We looked at it from the Viet
Minh experience against the French, Dien Bien Phu and so on and taking that forward.
Then we got involved in a lot about the strategies, and not so much the tactics, but we got
involved in it from the tactics standpoint by looking at what had happened. What did the
British do in Malaya? Strategic Hamlet concept, for example. What did the French do in
Algeria, on and on? We did look at it from that standpoint, but ultimately, there was one
question that surfaced over and over and over: What was the strategy in Vietnam? When
you get right down to it, it was a strategy of attrition. The whole concept of body count
and the argument, or the way that we ended up discussing this, was attrition a strategy or
was it the lack of a strategy and you didn’t know what to do? Then coupled with that was
the whole aspect of graduated response. That’s got all kinds of historical writings about
it and so forth. But here again, in dealing with a tenacious, highly-motivated force, as we
were, the graduated response just gives them time to cope with what the new change is
going to be. As long as they were willing to kill, allow their people to be just killed and
killed and killed, and they were. Of course, they were reading our papers. They knew
what was going on in the U.S. as far as the media and the clamor for, “Stop this killing,”
and on and on and on. Look how that whole concept has, I won’t say distorted, but it’s
molded our approach to combat. In fact, so badly that in Bosnia and so forth, pilots
wouldn’t even go below fifteen thousand feet and were ordered not to because we
weren’t going to take any casualties. Then we were fortunate in the Gulf I and also
fortunate, at least so far, in Gulf II where our own body count has been relatively low,
particularly compared with what everybody was speculating on, thousands and thousands
of body bags, that sort of thing. Democracies don’t have their soldiers die well and often.
It’s not like a dictatorship or some other kind of highly autocratic regime. So anyway, I
think those two factors were key and the cadets were quick to leap on them. The aspect of what is strategy of attrition, a strategy and does the graduated response really make sense. For example, if you know that Haiphong Harbor is a critical node as far as resupply, communications and so forth, right in the beginning, but you elect not to hit it because of political reasons or potential political reasons, maybe you’re really making a serious mistake there. If you mine it and then you announce to outside people who are not belligerents, whether it was the Czechs, the Poles, or East Germans or whatever, or Russians, and say, “Okay. This harbor’s mined. If you want to resupply, it’s mined.” That’s it. Anyway, so much for that.

SM: No, it’s fascinating stuff. In terms of the conversations and the dialogue that you had with some of the cadets, what, I would imagine that you guys discussed the importance, the concerns that were obvious in the Johnson administration and the Kennedy administration before them. That needless escalation, in terms of either the deaths of Chinese that might be working in Vietnam, North Vietnam, or the deaths of Soviets that might be working in North Vietnam might escalate. Since escalation at that level means the infusion of potentially millions of soldiers from those sides or even nuclear escalation. It’s not necessarily purely political, but there are some serious strategic military concerns.

VV: Yeah. That was discussed and thought about, but in the same context, as far as the Soviets were concerned, they were better advised to do this on the cheap, just like they were, providing supplies. Also, from the Soviet point of view, it was a great intelligence boon because they had access to all of the interrogation results of pilots. They had access to the aircraft that were shot down so they could look at how various weapons systems on the airplanes were designed and so on. I don’t think that even at the highest levels of the government there was a concern that the Russians were going to come in and intervene. It didn’t make sense to the Russians to do that.

SM: What about for the Chinese, given the Korean example?

VV: Ah, well now. The Chinese did in fact have, and I think we knew this at the time, several thousand troops in North Vietnam. A lot of them were working on railroads and stuff like that. I’m sure there were people that were concerned that the Chinese might intervene. They would use the example of Korea as a precedent. However, even
that is kind of shortsighted and there were many China scholars at the time, political, military types that said, “Look, as long as we do not do anything that threatens China from the south, a cross-border operation or anything else, we shouldn’t be concerned that they’re going to take action.” As you recall, China at this time were still in the throes of the, “Let a thousand flowers bloom.” They had a lot of their own political problems there at home, trying to figure out what they were going to do, the Gang of Four and on and on. However, there were enough people in the Congress and elsewhere that were obviously concerned about these things. Key media elites were talking about these type of actions. So the administration had to at least think about it, consider it, so on. It since has come out there were numerous diplomatic contacts with the Soviets about this, look at this in the big picture standpoint, so on and so forth. Not unlike what happened in Afghanistan when the Soviets, after they invaded there. They knew what we were doing, and that we were not going to go too far. I mean, having said that, the Stinger [missile] sure raised hell with their MI-24 helicopter gunships.

SM: Now what about, in terms of your conversations about the attrition strategy, what was the consensus? Was this, was attrition the absence of a strategy or was it a legitimate strategy employed in Vietnam?

VV: No, no. We concluded that for—I say we. I think there was a consensus, at least among the guys that I talked to and my peer group of officers that the strategy of attrition for a democratic fighting force sucks. It is not a strategy. It is the absence of a strategy. It’s a scrambling for, “God, we’ve got to do something. Kill the bastards.” If you’re subject to having a lot of your troops killed at the same time, it ultimately it’s not going to work.

SM: In light of that, in the recognition that obviously there were serious problems with this idea of attrition, what did you guys discuss, potential alternative strategies to employ?

VV: Sure. That was always an issue of alternative strategies. Number one, was a decision of whatever you’re going to do, don’t do a graduated response. If something merits being done militarily, and even though there may be some political consequences, if the political consequence doesn’t override it, then you should go ahead and do it. We talked the whole gamut of things like should the U.S. adapt an enclave strategy? In other
words, don’t go out there and beat around in the jungle or whatever. Set up key enclaves
and then draw them to you rather than going out looking for them, even though at the
same time, you should do whatever you can do to—I want to say destroy, but destroy is
the wrong choice of words. Do whatever you can do to make sure that the Ho Chi Minh
Trail is a constant source of death, and that you can do anything you can to cut the supply
down. I think ultimately, the number one thing that we thought was the most important
thing to do, and which we should have done in the very, very beginning in a big way was
to develop the ARVN, the South Vietnamese fighting forces. However, in saying to do
that, one of the problems, which was a major problem, was the vast corruption that was
going on among the senior generals within the ARVN. There were some good fighting
generals, but there were others who were there just riding along, making money, which
later became really bad when they were into drugs and black market and every other
damned thing going on. Anyway, just to reiterate, the feeling was that probably the very
thing that we should have done in the very beginning was to concentrate more on
developing the ARVN forces. Now having said that, as you know, as soon as the May
1954 accords were reached and the French began their withdrawal, and you had in
essence the DMZ separating the North from the South, as soon as the French were going
out, American advisors were going in. Now even though they were there, obviously we
must not have been doing that much of an emphasis of trying to improve South
Vietnamese forces. I don’t know. The whole thing was rife with problems, and not the
least of which, in hindsight was the fact that in many, many ways, this was obviously a
civil war. Ideology was a factor, and maybe from the North’s standpoint, an overriding
factor. But I’m sure the Americans, as we looked on it, the fact that the North never
abided by the Geneva Accords. They never carried out free elections in the North or
whatever.

SM: But neither did the South. Was that discussed?
VV: Pardon?
SM: But neither did the South. Was that ever discussed, the fact that Diem also
refused to partake in the elections? In fact, it was really his refusal that also contributed
to the failure of the election to occur.
VV: Yeah, yeah. We talked about that aspect of it. Yeah, no doubt about it. The fact that that was just allowed to die on the vine, so to speak, from both viewpoints.

SM: Now did—I realize again the restriction on what you can cover as an instructor at West Point is dependent on the curriculum that you have to cover, that you’re required to cover for each class, but as you were—as your classes were evolving—you were there for three years, correct?

VV: Correct.

SM: Okay. As your classes evolved from year to year, and as you continued to discuss, to go back, to revisit the Vietnam War as a subject in the revolutionary warfare class or your general military history survey class, as you got to the Vietnam War, would you discuss how things had progressed since the last time? Kind of update, and like for instance, in 1969 you’ve got the new administration in power, Nixon’s administration. He’s got the secret plan to win the war. At the same time, you’ve got Hamburger Hill in May of ’69 and a lot of political stuff involved with that as far as, especially casualties as we already discussed. Were you able to do that a little bit or was it still pretty restrictive?

VV: Oh, yeah. Now, I wasn’t teaching the survey course at that time, but those instructors that were teaching the survey course, it was updated. I mean, it started with the French experience and went forward. Even some additional time would be allocated to it, and they would do that. They wouldn’t have a choice because there would be so much interest in the class itself. The other thing to bear in mind, that the classes, we’re talking on occasion fifteen students, but most of the time twelve with one instructor. So there was an opportunity for a lot of discourse, a lot of dialogue between the instructor and the cadets.

SM: Now did you find yourself following the war very closely on your personal time?

VV: Pretty much so, yes. Not only because of the media opportunity, but friends who we knew were going or coming. Then we were having a lot of funerals at West Point at that time. So, you know.

SM: You’re talking about guys that were killed over there.

VV: Oh, yeah. Hardly a week would go by that there wouldn’t be at least one funeral. You could hear bagpipes down by the cadet cemetery or whatever.
SM: How did that affect the atmosphere there? Because when you went through, it was during a peace time. So did you feel that it affected the atmosphere very much for the cadets that this is an ever-present thing?

VV: I’m not so much that it—I don’t know, because the cadet cemetery is quite a ways. When I say quite a ways, it must be—I’m going to guess. It’s about two miles from where all the dorms are where the cadets live. So it’s not like they would have seen it unless they happened to be down in that area for some other reason. Also, typically the funerals took place normally midday morning, whatever. Unless they heard Taps playing, it wasn’t something that they would see. Now needless to say, wives or other family members who where going to the post-exchange or driving along that road, it was very apparent to them. Or if you were up by the Catholic chapel, the Protestant Cadet Chapel. It was apparent, you know.

SM: Did you find yourself—were you daily watching the news? Watching the coverage coming in from Vietnam on the various news stations?

VV: Oh, yeah. We’d watch the news at night, sure, on TV.

SM: How did that affect you the first time you started watching it, the way it was being covered in the mainstream press on television? What did you think about that as far as this kind of coverage of the Vietnam War coming into the living rooms in the homes of so many Americans?

VV: Well, of course, I had seen that during the Tet ’68 problem, or offensive, when I was home on emergency leave. So it wasn’t like it was a surprise.

SM: Right. Okay. So maybe it’s better to ask about how that, how you reacted or how that affected you when you first saw it back then in Tet, ’68. Were you surprised at that kind of coverage?

VV: I guess I was surprised at how much they were seeing in the homes. Now even though that typically there was always a delay. It wasn’t like this embedding we had in Gulf II. I’m sure that the news was delayed twenty-four to forty-eight hours a lot of times before they could get the tapes back, you know what I mean? But not withstanding that, it was still—for me it was pretty dramatic because I’d hear them talking about something in the I Corps zone and then suddenly they’re up in the IV Corps, all over the country reports would be coming in of activities. It was dramatic, no
doubt about it. Having said that, it was also apparent, watching those scenes and trying
to make sense out of some of the reports, that there were sure a lot of VC and NVA being
killed, which as it turned out was sort of immaterial to what was perceived as at least a
psychological victory.

SM: Now as you spent three years there at West Point watching the news
coverage, were you—did you find that, or did you think that the news coverage was
biased or balanced? What did you think in terms of how news correspondents were
doing their job, both in print and television media?

VV: I didn’t—it was hard to have a sense of whether it was biased or not,
because obviously the only thing that we knew what was going on, I mean I didn’t have
any access as an instructor there to classified information of what was going on. So what
we knew is what we saw on television or read in the papers. At that point in time you’ve
had to have been a fool not to realize that we got a hell of a problem here. So those
people who, like columnists or editorial writers, they had a point to make, and whether
you agreed or not, it was made.

SM: Well, is there anything else that you’d like to discuss about your time there
at West Point?

VV: Well, it was a nice respite between two Vietnam tours, sandwiched between
them. No, I guess not.

SM: Now you mentioned in our previous interview that you ultimately were
teaching some cadets there that, of course, were later commissioned officers, and
eventually served under you in your second tour.

VV: Yeah. That’s correct. These guys were the class of ’69. I arrived there in
’68. So I taught the class of ’68, ’69, ’70. No, I didn’t teach ’68. I beg your pardon; ’68
had just graduated. So I taught ’69, ’70, ’71. So the ’69 guys I taught in the survey
course, when they left, they went to the basic course and so on. Some of them, of course
as you would expect, a lot of those guys were very gung ho and they did everything they
could to get to Vietnam. Unfortunately, or maybe it’s fortunate, I don’t know, I’m not
sure how you’d characterize it. There is this sense of feeling that, “Oh my God, the war’s
going to be over with and I won’t have had a chance to learn anything or experience it or
whatever.” I guess that’s sort of a feeling that soldiers have, not all of them, but some of
them. So anyway, those young guys, when I arrived in Vietnam in—let’s see, I got there
in June of ’71 and took over command of an infantry battalion. There were three of
them, three of them in the battalion that I had taught.

SM: Now, when you were finishing your third year at the academy, did you
put—you must have put in specifically to go back to Vietnam or was this just a follow-on
assignment that you received?

VV: There was speculation that since I was an aviator that I would end up having
to go back. Now, of course, I did not know at this juncture that, when I was doing the
discussion in ’70 with the assignment people and then early ’71, I wasn’t privy to the fact
that the decision had been made to pull the plug. I did know that we were rearranging
units. Some units had come back and so on. So it appeared that hopefully this thing may
change or be over with in the next couple of years. At any rate, OPO called me and they
gave me—I had, OPO being the personnel people. I guess Office of Personnel
Operations or something like that. They called and said, “Well, you’ve been
recommended for battalion command. You can command an aviation battalion in the
82nd Airborne Division.” They had one aviation battalion at that time at Ft. Bragg. “Or
you can command an infantry battalion in Vietnam in the 101st Airborne Division.” So I
took that one and went back to Vietnam.

SM: What did your wife think when you learned that you were going back?
VV: Well, chagrined, you know, sad.

SM: Now at this point, we’re looking at, we’re talking about 1971.
VV: Correct.

SM: Even though the Nixon administration had been telling the American people
that he was in the process of de-escalating the war and sizing down American forces, at
times he was actually increasing. He would be drawing back people, but also sending
them at the same time, and so kind of doing a little shuffle there. But by the time you got
there—

VV: Well, not major units.

SM: No, no, but—
VV: No, I think what, more of what he was doing was stuff like bombing Cambodia from Laos], obviously. Of course, the incursion into Cambodia had already transpired in the summer of ’70.

SM: Right. So when you got there—when did you arrive in ’71?

VV: June. By that time, the decision had been announced that we were withdrawing all major combat units. They were—most of them were in the process of being withdrawn. Now one thing that that created, people who had not achieved sufficient time to get credit for the tour, I don’t remember the formula right now. They were then being reassigned to other units that would not be coming out early on. So you had a real shuffle. You ended up with people going from—I had people in my battalion who had been in three divisions and they still hadn’t completed their Vietnam tour.

SM: They had to be shuffled around so much?

VV: Yeah. In other words, Division X is withdrawing in January, but unfortunately a bunch of guys in that division have just arrived or have only been there a couple of months so they can’t get credit for the tour. So they’re then assigned to another division. So you had this musical division, musical chairs of divisions, if you want to say. Now that shuffling around of guys, putting them into situations that they’re already nervous about, coupled with the fact that you also, at the same time, have other people who are being assigned to your unit coming in from the States. You talk about a hell of a mess. Then it’s exacerbated further by drug and discipline problems. As you may or may not recall, this is the time suddenly, ’70, ’71 when the fragging situation is ongoing. Anyway, that sort of an environment.

SM: Well, let’s go ahead and start from the beginning of your second tour. Did you find that the flight over was any different in terms of the atmosphere on board the aircraft, the attitude of people that were going over? Was it different from your first tour at all?

VV: It probably was, but I didn’t sense it. It wasn’t something I even focused on.

SM: Now you knew what unit you were going to be assigned to?

VV: Yes. I knew which battalion I was going to command and everything else. I even knew who my boss was. I knew him personally.
SM: When you arrived in-country, where did you arrive? What was your point of—was it Tan Son Nhut?

VV: No. I arrived in Cam Ranh Bay, I believe. Then from Cam Ranh Bay I flew up to Hue/Phu Bai. Then from Hue/Phu Bai I went to Camp Eagle, which was the division headquarters on the fire base for the 101st Airborne Division. I stayed there two or three days at command orientations. Then flew up to Fire Base Evans, or LZ Evans, which, by the way, I had left three years earlier when I was the ops officer for the aviation group. Then I assumed command of the 2nd Airborne Battalion, 506th Infantry.

SM: So this is pure infantry command that you’ve got here.

VV: Yes.

SM: What were your first impressions of the unit upon arrival? Correction. I’m sorry. Before your unit arrival, when you were getting your command orientation, what did they cover and what kinds of changes did you sense about how Abrams—because now we’ve got General Abrams commanding the U.S. forces in Vietnam. Did you sense any kind of change in the command climate in Vietnam, predicated on your new arrival as opposed to your previous service?

VV: Well, one of the changes, as I recall, unfortunately didn’t, or fortunately I should say maybe. One thing that Abrams had done, he had recognized that the six-month command tour was an abomination. People were just moving in and out, you know. Putting an “X” in the box with no, in some cases, with little sense of responsibility for future operations than the longer term view of what you had to do or not do. So he had made that change. That didn’t affect me because it turned out that we knew that we were going to stand down the division in six to seven months. So obviously that was a factor. At this time, since so many American units had withdrawn and others were withdrawing, it was hard to see generally what role he was playing. It would have been easier to see that earlier on when he had taken over and seen the changes if you had been there. You follow me? But by the time I got there, so many of the American units were long gone. He was trying to, in many ways do an economy of force role, using the remaining American units to sort of hold back the tide to provide more time for the ARVN to try to get them up to speed from a training standpoint and from a logistic standpoint. You would see major ARVN units going into where Americans had been,
taking over their positions. Which is another kind of an interesting thing. There would be situations where you would have a firebase that the ARVN was going to take over, and they would take it over. There were numerous cases where then the decision would be made by an ARVN general. Say, “Well, we’re going to leave that firebase and go somewhere else.” When you go—if you went back and checked that firebase, it had been stripped clean. Some had been stripped clean where the ARVN were supposed to go into even. By stripped clean I mean the barbed wire was gone, communications systems were wiped out. Anything that was metal, like, oh, stakes to hold in the barbed wire or stakes to hold revetments and sandbags in—wiped out, gone. So that even if they had wanted to come back and make that a fighting location, it wouldn’t have been there. You see what I’m saying? So that was, again, one of the problems that the whole system was confronted with.

SM: Well, when you got to the unit, what were your first impressions of their combat effectiveness, their morale?

VV: The very first impression I got was a lack of discipline. Maybe that stems from just the way I had perceived it three years earlier and knew what it had been, even though I had not been in an infantry unit, I’d been associated with them. Secondly, it was very apparent there was going to be a drug problem. Thirdly, although I was lucky, I knew that there were going to be racial problems.

SM: Now, the drug problems. This was mostly marijuana or other drugs?

VV: Oh, it was everything. Everything, heroin, cocaine, marijuana, whatever. Marijuana was the least of our problems. I mean we had situations where cocaine would be put, they’d take the lead out of an M-16 round and then empty it and then pack stuff in it. Put the lead back in and then take it into the fire base. We used big water bladders that Chinooks would carry in, big, giant things that carried five hundred gallons, if I recall. We referred to them as donuts. They weren’t really a donut, but they were big bladders. It turns out that a lot of times, the people who were acting as, oh, the reception committee at a fire base, the pathfinder teams. The pathfinders at the departure point would have a tie in with some of the guys who were pushing drugs. They’d take that green tape, and they’d tape it to the underside of the donut or on the side of the donut, and then it would be transmitted to the fire base. The receiving team then would take that
tape off and recover the drugs. Now they would be doing that because they’d know that at the fire base LZ, I even did strip searches of the guys. When people came in, they just knew they were going to be checked, coming in on a Huey. I mean there were cases where guys would fill a prophylactic, a rubber, with dope, tie a leader on it, you know, a thin nylon line, wrap it around a tooth and swallow it. You can’t—I mean, it was—and I’m not saying everybody did this, don’t misunderstand. I’m just saying though, there were enough doing it that it was a hell of a problem. So we were always having unannounced inspections down into the fighting bunkers and everywhere else looking for that crap. It was a major, major problem. I suspect it varied with type unit and it varied probably with location in-country.

SM: Well, what about fraggings?

VV: I was fortunate in the sense that we only had one fragging, actual fragging case. The sergeant did not get killed, but he got injured badly, from the fragments of the grenade. He was in bed sleeping and somebody went in and threw the grenade on to the bed. It went on to the floor by his feet. If it had stayed on the bed, it would have obviously killed him. But there were other cases of that going on and had happened in other units. That was the only one I had. Now I was also blessed with a very, very capable executive officer. He was a tough major. I mean, we took the situation so seriously that when—after that fragging, he carried an M-16 with him everywhere he went. Not so much that he thought he needed it, but to set the pace. Say, “Okay, fine. You want to do something? We’re ready.”

SM: What was your—what was the specific mission of your unit? How did you fit it into the larger scheme of things?

VV: What was the last question?

SM: How did you fit it into the larger scheme of things? The larger tactical and strategic aspects of the—

VV: Well, the larger scheme of the thing was that the 101st at that juncture was the last major U.S.—in fact we were the last major U.S. unit in-country, but at that point we were up in the IV Corps tactical zone. We were in blocking positions that could impact the Ho Chi Minh Trail through the A Shau Valley and also Highway 1, the so-called Bernard Fall’s, Street Without Joy. We were south of the—let’s see how far south
from the DMZ were we? I’d guess fifty miles. I’m not sure, thirty. There had been a lot
of Marine units up north of us. Those unit positions had been turned over to the South
Vietnamese. So we were sort of in a strategic reserve for the northern part of the country
and manned blocking positions on known previous infiltration routes. In that sense, we
were also [in a] sort of an economy of force role because they knew that what we were
having to do would be very tough, if in fact when they started to attack. The irony of
that, the major offensive in the north was the so-called Easter Offensive in 1972. That’s
where every major firebase that had previously been owned by the U.S. and turned over
to the South Vietnamese was being captured, one right after another. Not only that, [on]
those fire bases, the Marines and the U.S. Army, had left major artillery pieces in position
so that the South Vietnamese could use them. We’re talking 155-millimeter howitzers,
105-millimeter howitzers and in some cases, even eight-inch. Those guns were all
captured. Some were spiked, but many of them, most of them were captured by the
North Vietnamese troops, and then of course, turned south and used. Anyway, that was
our tactical sense of the strategic mission we had as far as being in a blocking position
and a strategic reserve [in] the north.

SM: Yes. Now did you work in close proximity to any ARVN forces?
VV: No. When you say close, what do mean, “close”? How close?
SM: Well, in any of your either of your flanks or were there many joint
operations where you were working with ARVN through the course of your second tour?
VV: No. I did not joint operations with ARVN. My battalion didn’t. Now there
were—I’m sure there were some battalions in the 101st that did. My particular one didn’t
because we were on the western exposure over there, towards the A Shau Valley, in that
highland complex.

SM: Well, why don’t you discuss some of the first operations, your initial
operations that you engaged under your command?
VV: Well, here again, the operations for the most part, the way we—in fact, we
were sort of controlled and this is the guidance we got from division. We did not conduct
a battalion operations in the field, per se. In other words, the way the routine worked,
you typically had a company back at the main firebase or the brigade. They helped
provide security for the brigade firebase at Evans. At the same time it gave them a rest
from having been out into the jungle, into the bush. If they had jungle rot or they had problems with their legs or whatever, it gave them a chance to let that dry out and get well. It gave them a chance to clean up weapons and replace just—not an R&R. I don’t want to say that, because they had things to do back there. They had some training to do, weapons testing and security for the base. Then we’d have another rifle company on the battalion firebase. They would be providing security for the firebase, doing some training, doing repair of bunkers, that sort of thing. Then there would be another company that would always be out in the bush around us, patrolling, looking. Sometimes that company would be in company strength. Normally it would be operating on the platoon-base level. Then there would always be a platoon at the firebase that was sort of a ready reaction force, so that if anybody got in trouble, they could be flown out of there to where they were going to go. There would also be a similar situation back at the brigade firebase. So what we were doing at this point in time was just patrolling, trying to make sure that there would be no infiltration of our typical infiltration routes, and also maintain security for the firebases. Now, we saw very little, I underscore that, very little enemy activity where we were. Based on the intelligence that we were being fed from the division and radio intercepts, the NVA apparently had said, “Look, Americans are leaving. Don’t stir up any bees. Do what we have to do to get through where we’re going to go.” In essence, that’s the way it worked out. Now having said that, they did put in mines. Sadly we had guys, I had a sergeant, I remember. They were walking by a bomb crater and they could look in there and see where this bomb had not gone off. He hit a trip wire, killed him and wounded quite a few guys. Had people blow off feet—feet, lose a foot because of a small, little booby trap along a trail and so forth. We had some successful ambushes where we would use a dummy drop or a false insertion of one LZ, go to another and go to another. Somebody would go in one, somebody wouldn’t go into another, and then they’d move to another location and just go into a hide, where we knew there had been infiltration. Those were successful. Now here again, we did not face any heavy combat. We were in the mode of standing down. For example, one of the things that we gradually did was turning in any kind of excess weapons that we didn’t need and vehicles that we had. We didn’t have that many vehicles, but we had some. Those things had to go through a process down at Da Nang to
clean them up, prepare them for shipping back to the States. In fact, back to Ft.
Campbell, Kentucky, where the 101st was going to [be stationed].

SM: As you were engaging in operations, receiving your intelligence briefings
about suspected enemy activity and suspected or potential contact, were your briefings
specific enough to identify whether or not you were going probably run into either VC or
NVA, or was it just “enemy” activity, and enemy there in quotes?

VV: Well, where we were, the VC had operated for a long time. So they really
knew the infiltration routes. So typically, the infiltration would be a combination, maybe
a VC as a guide and then a few NVA going along for whatever reason. So it was sort of a
combination activity. I’ll give you an example.

SM: Oh, sure. Go ahead.

VV: Say the NVA wanted to launch rockets against Camp Evans or another of
the main firebases over towards the coast. Well, they would use the VC as guides and
also to help carry the rockets to wherever the launch site was going to be, which had
already been recon’ed ahead of time. They knew the headings and hazards and so on.

SM: Now when you mentioned booby traps, were these becoming more
sophisticated or were these pretty simple, straight-forward toe-poppers and things like
that?

VV: They were very simple, but very effective. I’m not talking punji sticks. I’m
not talking pits. I’m talking always some type of an explosion.

SM: Were these field improvised or were these specifically created mines, anti-
personnel mines?

VV: It’s hard to quantify, but a lot of them were improvised, there’s no doubt
about it. But it was done very simply. A lot of them we, obviously it became known not
to do such and such. For example, a grenade with the pin pulled inside of a can, which in
theory would have it a guy comes along, a GI and he kicks the can. Or something where
you lift something and it goes off. The troops became quickly oriented on those type
activities. If they were going to move something, they made sure they did it some
distance away, laying down and whatever, you know, with a rope or so on.

SM: Now what about the weapon—I’m sorry, go on.
VV: Excuse me. One of the interesting, not just interesting, but demanding and
important things that you had to do was whatever you could do to help maintain morale,
because the guys said, “Geez, I don’t want to be the last guy killed over here.”
SM: Yes, sir.
VV: I don’t want to be the last guy to lose a leg, lose a foot. I want to go home
whole. Because of that, if you weren’t careful, there would be a tendency not to want to
do what you had to do to provide protection, force protection. Whether you were on a
platoon going out on a patrol, whether you were manning a fighting position on the
firebase. At about this time, we had a typhoon come in. God, it whipped the hell out of
the place. You couldn’t see hardly a foot in front of you. I can remember one of the
company commanders coming in saying, “I’d like to pull in the LP (listening post). They
can’t see anything, and they’re out there. It’s wet and miserable.” I remember thinking,
“Yeah, that would be nice for the guy.” But I said, “No, they’re going to stay out there.”
Because if nothing else, if any of these, if the VC come in and try to infiltrate them, the
fire base, they’ll at least hit the tin cans with the rocks in them and rattle them [and other
warning devices], which had been positioned so the storm couldn’t do that. But anyway,
to maintain morale, we—C-rations got old. We did everything we could every day to
feed a hot meal. Not only a hot meal to the guys on the fire base, but at least one hot
meal to the people who were out on patrol. When a log bird went out there to take water
or ammunition, whatever, mail, which was important, obviously. We’d take in mermit
cans with hot food. Another thing, in fact this got to be such a ruckus that the battalion
commander had to give a daily report to the [brigade] commander, a daily report that
every troop in the bush had got a pair of dry, clean socks and ice cream.
SM: Ice cream?
VV: Ice cream. Now I don’t know that that was my brigade only or if it was all
the brigades in the 101st, but that was it. Now you didn’t go to jail, obviously, if you
didn’t make it, but you had to report, did they get it or didn’t they?
SM: Oh, for crying out loud.
VV: I know that sounds ridiculous, but they had, I guess the division had
acquired an ice cream manufacturing facility or something. It was frozen, I mean big
time frozen. I don’t know how they did it, like in Dixie cups. I know there were cases
where they, where a helicopter couldn’t land. Went in and did a high hover and dropped
in water, rations, ammo, socks, and ice cream. (Laughter)
SM: Okay. Well, you know as humorous and almost ludicrous as that sounds, I
can only imagine that it did have an affect on morale. What did you think?
VV: Well, I think it particularly did in the beginning, and I guess when you’re
out there in the bush and it’s hot and miserable, sultry, whatever. After a while though,
the troops kind of looked at it as not a joke, but at least as humorous.
SM: Yeah. It’s ludicrous, but I bet they looked forward to getting it, too.
VV: Oh, yeah, yeah. Not only that, but the ones that didn’t like it, they would
trade it for cigarettes or some other damned thing.
SM: There you go. Yeah, another bartering item.
VV: Exactly. Exactly
SM: So, it just sounds so bizarre.
VV: Of course, at the same token now, we had previously, we would put in cold
cans of pop. But unfortunately though, I say unfortunately, I don’t know why, but we
must have had a million cases of Fresca. The troops got to the point where they hated
Fresca because that’s what we had. Now it was cold, and I’m sure they drank it whether
they wanted to or not a lot of times, but that’s the way it worked.
SM: What about beer?
VV: No. We didn’t pass out beer.
SM: What about other forms of entertainment? What kind of facilities were
available? Did USO shows continue to come through this late in the war?
VV: Not where we were.
SM: Not where you were?
VV: No.
SM: All right. What about—let’s see, you already mentioned mail, of course,
which would be one source of reading material. How about access to books and
magazines, newspapers, Stars and Stripes? Was that commonly available?
VV: Stars and Stripes were. There was access to some pocket books that made
the [rounds]. I don’t remember seeing many magazines. I do not. I’m not saying they
weren’t there, it just may be that I was not cognizant of the fact that they were there.
SM: We’ve been talking for a little over an hour. Let’s take a quick break. I want to grab something to drink and I’ll call you back in about ten minutes.

VV: All right.

SM: Sound good? We are back from break. Sir, I was wondering, as you continued in your second tour, did you notice very much difference in the attitudes of your subordinate officers concerning the war? Of course, understanding that that attitude that existed among many of the enlisted men probably, that is they didn’t want to be the last casualties of the war. They didn’t want to be the last person maimed in this war, and then obviously the atmosphere was, “We are definitely pulling out.” How did that affect the officer corps?

VV: Oh, I’m sure they felt the same way, but two things. All of the officers but one—no I guess him, too. I believe every one of my officers was Regular Army. So they were going to be in the—they were career officers, you know, professional. The younger officers had not been in Vietnam before. My S-3 was a major. He had been in Vietnam previously, two tours I believe, on the Special Forces operations. So he was there and knew he was going to do the best he could because it was his first shot at a major slot in a conventional unit. The other major I had was the executive officer, who was a professional through and through. He had been to Vietnam before, too. So he knew the big picture and knew what was going on and he was going to do his best. I’m not saying they weren’t all worried. They were. A lot of them were, but in the same context they knew that they were going to have to do their best, particularly since they were career soldiers. I think, there’s a big difference with that and the young guys who were draftees. This was not a volunteer unit like it is today in Gulf II or whatever. The draftees were there because they were told to be there. They weren’t happy to be there. Now, NCOs, some of the NCOs, the young ones at least had been draftees and hadn’t even had a change to re-up probably. So in many cases they were not much older than the guys they were leading. So that presented them with a real quandary, you know? “I’m trying to keep these guys alive, but I’m trying to do a job.” That was the same quandary that faced all of us, all the way down the chain of command, so to speak. But it became different as you went to the officer I think, because the officer—well, the senior NCOs knew this too.
In order to stay alive, you had to be out there providing patrolling and security and doing what you’re supposed to do. I don’t know if I’ve answered your question.

SM: You have. You have. But did you notice any difference at all from your first tour to this tour regarding the attitude of officers and the atmosphere, the command atmosphere in your unit?

VV: Well, it would be hard to make a comparison for two reasons. Number one, two different units and two different levels of rank. In this time I’m a lieutenant colonel, the previous time I was a major.

SM: Two different missions.

VV: Yeah. Two entirely different missions. In the first tour it was purely a support requirement with aviation. In this one I had aviation supporting me, fighters or whatever. You see what I’m saying?

SM: Yes, sir. Yeah, I do understand. What would you describe—if you would describe an operation where maybe this would be an example of some of the heavier contact your unit had.

VV: Had none.

SM: You didn’t have any heavy contact at all?

VV: No.

SM: How many losses did your battalion suffer while you were there for the second tour, about?

VV: The whole time I was there, I had about—I’m trying to remember. Four to five guys [wounded and two killed].

SM: For the whole year?

VV: Six months.

SM: Six months, okay. Wow.

VV: That’s what I said. The intel from the NVA that we were being fed, and, “Don’t screw with Americans. They’re getting ready to leave. Let them leave.” If you think of it from a logic standpoint, it makes good sense.

SM: Yes. It sure does.

VV: Because what the NVA were doing instead, they were marshalling their resources, making their plans and getting ready to take over firebases. Man, the 101st
pulled out of there, I think, in February, the very last units. In March, March 16, 17, I
don’ know what it was, the NVA attacked across the DMZ, firebase after firebase. At
that point, I was the operations officer for the 1st Aviation Brigade. We had the 11th
Aviation Group headquartered at Da Nang, Marble Mountain. They were providing all
of the helicopter support for the South Vietnamese.

SM: This is ’72.
VV: Exactly.
SM: This is the Easter Offensive.
VV: That’s right. That’s right. You had a feeling like every time you turned
around there was a new report of a firebase gone and it was a firebase that you had
known for years and years that we had set up and we had manned and whatever.
SM: Were you surprised very much by this?
VV: In hindsight, I know this sounds silly, but for me being in-country, the
Easter Offensive when it finally came, it achieved tactical surprise, number one. But two,
we knew there was a build up. We just didn’t know what was going to happen. But
when it came, I was really surprised. I wasn’t alone.
SM: No. Well, is there anything else that you’d like to discuss with regard to
your time as commander of 2nd Battalion?
VV: Yeah. Well, I’d like to emphasize a point. In many ways, the toughest
command job, the very toughest command job was the platoon leader lieutenant. Here
was a young guy who was a commissioned officer, didn’t have a lot of experience, most
cases didn’t have any experience. He was normally a college graduate. So he was
probably twenty-two, twenty-three, something like that. In many cases, he was leading
peers who were draftees. The sergeants he had, some of them had more experience, but
not much more. It was tough out there in the bush, you know, day in and day out, living
with those guys, no one to talk to other than his company commander on the radio for
support, trying to do his job, tough. I had one young guy, a young lieutenant who just
quit. It’s the only one I ever heard of. I’m sure there were others. But he just quit one
day. Called up on the radio and said, “I quit. Fuck it. This is it. I’m out of here.” They
had to—told the sergeant, senior sergeant to take over and they went in and flew him out
of there as quick as they could. Took him back to battalion and to division to isolate him.
It was tough, high stress, tough. Like everything else, like you know, Milton, *Paradise Lost*. “The mind is a strange place. It can make a heaven of hell or hell of heaven.” In many of these cases, it was the guy’s mind that was the worst problem for him, clearly. Not to be trite about it. I mean, magnifying things that weren’t there, but became beasts of fear to face.

SM: Did you ever get a chance to talk to him more specifically about the problems he was trying to cope with emotionally?

VV: See, I didn’t—the company commander knew that the guy was nervous, but he didn’t appreciate how nervous. I had met him just to welcome him. I’d seen him around, but I hadn’t—he’d never asked to talk to me or whatever. Other than the initial time when I had talked to him during his in-processing orientation, and I touched base with him maybe once or twice after that. You know, seen him in the area, or say, “How’re you getting along?” Whatever, that was it. When I talked to him as he was on the way out, in hindsight I should have been more compassionate. I tried to be, but I should have been more. I should have been more outgoing in telling the kid that, “Look, this doesn’t mean you’re a bad person. Don’t measure yourself against something that’s an artificial ladder. People have—we all have problems we have to confront. We have different needs, dislikes, whatever.” I tried to do that, but in hindsight I wish I had done more of it, spent more time with him. Because I—now maybe I’m thinking that he’s going to be haunted by that all of his life, maybe not. Maybe for him it was an opportunity to get out and get out good. I don’t know.

SM: Right. It’s hard to know.

VV: I mean the guy was not a con-person, don’t misunderstand me. What he did and what he felt, he was very sincere. He was worried to it fairly well.

SM: Any other problems like that with personnel while you were there for your first six months?

VV: No, other than the drug problems. Those people were either court-martialed or Article 15’ed, company punishment or whatever. It was like urinating in the ocean almost. The drug problems were so severe.

SM: Now, at this point the military had instituted a urinalysis program, right?

VV: I’m sorry that other phone’s ringing. My wife will get it but I—
SM: Okay. I’ll wait.

VV: Now I can hear you, say again?

SM: I was just wondering, at this point the Army had implemented a urinalysis program, hadn’t they? Where you could have guys pee and test for it?

VV: Yeah, they had. Some of that was being done, but not that many for people out in the boonies. Not really. There was a—in fact, I’m not sure at that juncture what the false positive rate was, I don’t know how much, what kind of a lab capability you have to have, all of those things that were fine for a garrison, and even for a—maybe down at Long Binh or Tan Son Nhut area, but I didn’t see it.

SM: Anything else you want to talk about with regard to your first six months?

VV: No.

SM: How did you feel? What did you think after your six-month’s command of an infantry unit?

VV: I began to think what I think today. I was proud to have served with a lot of great young guys that I felt chagrined that those, even fortunately it was a very few, those that died. I began to think what a tremendous waste that whole venture was. It was, I guess for the most part we as a country and we as an Army, or whatever, at least operating under the constraints that we were operating under, deluded ourselves. We now have fifty-eight thousand guys dead. I’m not—what did we achieve? What did we achieve out of that? There is no doubt in my mind, at least, that two administrations had let us down, a lot of senior generals. Where were the guys that resigned because they knew we weren’t either doing the right thing or we weren’t being given the tools to do those things that we had to do in order to make a better showing, which meant closing harbors, shutting down supply points, nodes, shutting down the trains from China, whatever? Now would that have made a difference? Probably not in the long term of the thing. As you remember, the Christmas bombing of ’72, so-called Linebacker. Now, I’m not suggesting that should have been done—well, maybe I am. I don’t know. But that sure as hell turned around the talks in Paris. Now is that an example of what might have happened earlier? Who knows? Who knows? Should we have been there? Probably as advisors only, trying to beef up the South Vietnamese Army. Were they able to be beefed up? I don’t know. There’s no doubt the VC was a hell of a fighter. He was a
cousin and a brother to the ARVN soldier. It’s got to be a function of leadership, commitment. That was the difference.

SM: Very interesting points, sir. Now when you went over to become the operations officer for the 1st Aviation Brigade, I assume that your—this was a G-3 position, correct?

VV: It’s like a G—yeah, yeah. Yeah, I was responsible for all aviation operations in Vietnam, helicopter and fixed-wing operations.

SM: But at the same time, of course, this is the time where things are starting to gear down, but while you’re there is the major offensive, the Easter Offensive.

VV: Exactly.

SM: So describe how all that unfolded.

VV: Now and also understand when we say “gear down” as far as the aviation units, providing to support to the ARVN, we weren’t gearing down. We were doing everything that we could to try to help the ARVN do what they were going to do, pull them out, rescue some, move them, put in reinforcements, that sort of thing. We were doing that, let’s see, with the 17th Aviation Group at Pleiku, the 11th Aviation Group at Da Nang, and the 12th Aviation Group at Da Nang, I mean at Long Binh. I’m missing—anyway, I think there was a fourth group. These aviation groups were scattered all around the country. The guy that I normally went with the most was the deputy brigade commander. He and I would fly all over the country to visit the different aviation groups to see how they were getting along. Each corps tactical zone had an aviation group. For example, the Pleiku—you remember A Bright and Shining Lie?

SM: Yes, sir.

VV: About, what’s his name?

SM: John Paul Vann.

VV: Yeah, Vann. Well, for example, we would go to Pleiku and we would meet with Vann and with the aviation group commander there, because we were providing, you know, support to Vann and the ARVN forces that he had in different places. Oh, and one of the things—I stayed at Pleiku for a while because I was the in-country OIC (officer in charge) for the first TOW-missile (tube launched, optically tracked, wire guided) firing helicopters. Now are you familiar with TOW?
SM: Yes, sir, yeah. Yes. Absolutely.

VV: Tube-launched optically-tracked wire-guided Missile. What happened, this is interesting. These were being tested at Ft. Hunter Liggett in California. When suddenly the NVA tanks streamed, you know, tanks—oh, my God, tanks—streamed across the borders not just off the DMZ, but also across the [Laotian] border west into Pleiku, Kontum area. When the first report of tanks came in, I remember some senior officers saying, “Bullshit. They can’t get tanks across from the Ho Chi Minh Trail. There’s no way.” Well, they did it. They had T-55 Soviet tanks.

SM: My goodness.

VV: In the Kontum Tay Ninh area—not Tay Ninh, Tan Canh, whatever it was up near Kontum. I remember we got in this top secret message and it had a very cryptic alert on it, meant it had to go really fast. It came in and the CG (commanding general) called me in and a couple of other guys and said, “We just got this. How are we going to handle this?” It said, “We’re sending in two UH-1B TOW firing helicopters.” It gave a rundown of the TOW. I remember one of the guys saying. “Hell, we haven’t even got them oriented yet.” They said, “Well, fortunately, all of the warrant officers who were flying them have previous experience in-country.” So we had the—we decided that based on what Abrams had sent down that they were going into the Pleiku area because they were concerned the armor there was going to cut the country in half. You know, Pleiku to An Khe to Qui Nhon. So I met them at Tan Son Nhut when they unloaded them and met all the guys and said, “Okay, we’re going to Pleiku.” That’s what we did. We went to Pleiku. The first firing shots we ever made, we actually made against enemy tanks. We had hits on target because these guys were good. They’d been practicing. I’ll never—I was in a C&C (command and control) ship with the deputy brigade commander observing the activities of these two birds. The first shot that went down there were—I remember very well, there were three T-55s crossing over this little stream area, you know, sort of an open area, two of them, excuse me, two. The first round fired on the first tank. The turret kicked off. The tank behind them saw what had happened. They stopped dead in their tracks and the guys got out of it and ran into the bush. I mean, that was the impact it made. Then the second missile hit and it didn’t knock the turret off, but it set it on fire. So we had a problem though. Instead of cutting the wire, the aircraft was
still attached to the damned wire uncoiling from the—so the crew chief had to cut it with
a pair of pliers, I mean he had to break it or anyway, he had to cut it. So what happened,
we didn’t go into a panic or anything, but at the same token we thought, “My God! What
if that gets wrapped around something?” Sure enough, wire had been wrapped around
the rotor, the main, not the rotor blades but the shaft up above. As you know, that’s a
very fine wire, so it didn’t cause a problem just having fired one round. But we went
back and had to rework the system to find why the automatic cutter didn’t work.

SM: Yeah. I would imagine it’s just a discomforting experience to have a wire
starting to wind around your rotor.

VV: Yeah. Even though it was a very fine, and it didn’t cause a problem, but it
would have in time. So we solved that problem, but those damned things, I’ll tell you.
They were impressive. This was a window into the war of the future. At Kontum the
French had built, back in the early ’50s, late ’40s, they had built a big concrete water tank
that was on legs. In other words it had concrete, reinforced concrete legs and then the big
tank up on top. Well, lo and behold, what had happened? The NVA got up inside the
dammed tank and they were impregnable up there from machine gun fire or even 40-
millimeter. It would hit that concrete and nothing would happen. So they said, “Okay,
take it out.” So the first TOW we fired, we hit the concrete tank easy. Of course, it was
like a shape charge round, you know it would go through. Well, it killed everybody on
the inside because it just punched a little hole. It didn’t blow the thing up, you follow
me? It killed everybody on the inside, but the next night they put new people in there.

SM: And other hard targets, other reinforced targets.

So the next day we went up there, and this guy says, “Let me take a leg out.” We said,
“You’ll never hit that.” He said, “Yeah. If we get—if we can hold steady enough, I’ll
hold steady”—and sure enough, he did. He took a leg out and the thing just sort of
spiraled around and collapsed down. I didn’t get to see that one. I wasn’t with them, but
that was the way it was told, reported to me. But anyway, it was exciting to have those
weapons and their capability on tanks. I mean it—Jesus.

VV: Yeah. Then, the other thing, the sad thing about it, we only had two TOW-
fi ring helicopters. We didn’t have that many TOW weapons [missiles]. Hughes
[Aircraft] was making them as quick as they could, but we just didn’t have them. But
they made an impact wherever they went, that was for damned sure. Oh, and by the way, one of the things that transpired. Just as I was leaving country, and I had arrived back in the States, I remember listening, hearing on the radio that Vann had been killed, his helicopter shot down. I was thinking, “Boy, that was a hell of a guy, hell of a guy.”

SM: Well, what was his reputation among your circles?

VV: Well, it was interesting because one of the guys that was in the history department with me had worked for him as an advisor when Vann was a lieutenant colonel. I remember him saying, you know, he said, “Vann is really a soldier, but I don’t think any—they won’t listen to him.” He said, “If MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) would listen to him and all of the advisors would do like he’s saying,” he said, “it would make a difference.” But he said, “I don’t think they’ll ever listen.” So later, when he was called back in, I guess Abrams—I don’t know who called him back in. He was given the equivalent of a major general slot even though he had diplomatic rank, you know what I mean?

SM: Yes, sir.

VV: I’d go to his briefings, and boy, he was calling the shots.

SM: Was he?

VV: He might as well have had five stars. When you’d go to his briefings, I mean he commanded. He was in command of that corps tactical zone. There was no doubt about it. Everybody knew he was. The guys reported to him just like he was a general. In essence that’s what he was, but I think he was an FSO, a Foreign Service officer, I don’t remember the rank. Foreign Service officer 1 or a 2? I don’t know. Interesting guy.

SM: Yes, sir. So in your circles he had a pretty sound reputation?

VV: Oh, yeah. Yeah as far as the guys that we were supporting him. So we thought he was sharp. We thought he was realistic, pragmatic, whatever. Now having said that, it was at a critical time. It was after the Easter Offensive. Things were going to hell in a bushel basket, but that was it.

SM: Well, as the Easter Offensive unfolded, how did you think that was progressing for the South Vietnamese?
VV: Oh, it was hell. They were dying too often, too many, and those that weren’t were on the run. I mean, it was the big flush. It was well apparent that it was just a matter of time. We just didn’t know how much time. So we were doing everything we could to bolster them. The telling blow is when the Congress refused to provide the money for the ammunition and other support that they needed, that they were going down. No matter we’d been there twelve years or whatever. The interesting thing about it, by that point in time, they had some good, capable combat generals at the assistant division and division command level. There were some good guys, some good fighters, but Vietnamization was a nice rubric that we used to say, “Yeah, we’re going to Vietnamize the war. We’re going to train them,” and so forth. It was too little too late.

SM: Well, when you transferred over to the operations for the 1st Aviation Brigade, this, of course, provided you an opportunity to see how the air war, the American air war aspect had changed from your first tour to your second tour. What were the most noticeable things?

VV: Well, a couple of things. From the U.S. point of view, the impact of the Cobra was important. Cobra helicopter was—it was in a whole different league compared with the old B-model Huey with mini-guns and rockets and so forth, number one. Number two, I think there was a better coordination with Air Force fighter support than there had been in the past. In other words, Army aviation working with the Air Force. Another thing that changed from the enemy point of view was the SA-7 Grail, the [Russian] heat seeking anti-aircraft missile. The SA-7 really, Jesus, suddenly we had Cobras blowing up in the air, nobody knew why. Oh, it was booby-trapped were some of the first reports, because they hadn’t seen the rocket. It became very apparent when the SA-7 started to come on board. We had some real problems. That meant changing tactics dramatically. Going in lower, doing other things. At that point, we didn’t have the device that the Apache has on board now where it kicks out flares every so often. The importance of the Air Cav troop and the Air Cav squadron as an economy of force factor, boy those guys were great. They did a hell of a job. They helped out Vietnamese after Vietnamese, going in there and getting their bacon out of the fire. Giving them a chance to regroup, reposition, whatever, did a great job. There is no doubt that the training of the aviators had improved dramatically at Ft. Rucker. When I say aviators, I
don’t mean just the Cobra guys but also the lift people. I don’t know. I’m not sure what else. Communications improved to an extent. Still wasn’t as good as it, like it is today for example. But it did improve. Oh, one other thing that I had to do as I look back in hindsight was interesting. I would get calls from SOG. I would be given a call sign and a mission task and a recommendation as far as an aircraft. It was interesting because every now and then, I’d get a request for a crane, CH-54 flying crane, somewhere in Laos to do something or other. We had a lot—we put in quite a bit of support around Vinh Thien and up further north. Sometimes they were—the cranes were going in because the U.S. Air Force had lost an aircraft like a T-28 or something. They were going in to pull out what was left of it just because they needed the parts, you know, for other aircraft. Usually it was an older aircraft. I don’t mean where we’re going in and pull a jet out, we couldn’t lift it anyway, but some of the prop-driven, the Sandies as they were called. They would provide escort for the Jolly Green Giants, particularly on pilot pickup evacuation. One other thing that I did, whenever I went with the deputy brigade commander or the brigade commander to one of our groups, aviation groups or to an area where we may not have had a group headquarters, but we had an aviation battalion headquarters. Since I had commanded an infantry battalion and since the brigade commander, a major general, had been, the one I had at least, was infantry. I was given an additional duty to inspect the security of the unit. So I’d end up walking the wire, checking the machinegun placement, seeing if they had range cards, seeing if the guys who were on duty knew their weapons. “When did you last fire your weapon? What happens if you’re overrun? Where do you go? What happens?” Did they have a reserve? Had they reconned routes so they could do it in the dark? Where were the flares? Who fired them? That sort of thing. Now this didn’t endear me with those battalion commanders or those group commanders.

SM: Because they viewed it as you encroaching on their turf?
VV: No. Not encroaching on their turf. They just knew that I was going to call a spade a spade.

SM: Oh, oh.
VV: They felt gun shy when Varner’s coming.
SM: I see.
VV: Am I going to have an on-the-spot inspection? What’s going to happen?

They knew they were going to get their ass reamed if I found something that—and I had briefed the brigade commander as soon as I got back on what I found. I had schematics of every firebase that we checked and where the positions were, where the helicopters were. How where they supported? How were they spread out? That sort of thing.

SM: Yeah. As you were getting ready to leave, I guess in June of ’72, what were your thoughts as your second tour was coming to a close? How did you think things had gone during the second tour and—?

VV: Well, from my vantage point, I was more—I guess I was more unhappy about the first part of the tour than the second, because the second we definitely knew that we were just trying to hold the dyke, so to speak, to help the South Vietnamese. I wasn’t as close to the—I mean we were losing pilots and crew chiefs right and left, but they weren’t guys that I knew, like in the battalion. You see what I’m saying?

SM: Yes, sir.

VV: I was really disillusioned by the first tour [six months], really disillusioned. God damn drugs and, I tell you. The impact on discipline. The shuttle of bodies from one unit to another unit, just, you know the kids knowing, “My God, I don’t want to be the last guy to die over here. I don’t want to lose my leg,” whatever. It was demoralizing.

Now, having said that, you know I did my best and I think I did fairly well trying to not show that, and to keep things going, but it was apparent because having been there in ’67, ’68, when things were on the go up and professional and people were working together as a team and on and on and on. No drugs, at least none that I was ever confronted with. It will be interesting for you when you talk to the warrant officers who served with me. Not only their perspective of me, but also, how my views are so different from theirs, if they were. I’m sure they will be, dramatically different. But comparing the two, the second tour was a disaster as far as being looked down as a professional fighting force. What we were doing, where we were going, how we were doing it. Even today as I look back, I served my country. I was a professional soldier. I did what I was told to do, but having said that, I really feel the Army was let down by not only the succeeding administrations, secretaries of defense, Congressional leaders, whatever, and even senior officers. Where were the guys that resigned in disgust? Where were the guys that said, “This is bullshit”?
We’re just killing Americans for no purpose other than trying to kill more of the enemy.

Like I say, graduated response, strategy of attrition—inane.

SM: Very difficult questions. Do you think that that was a failure of the military, the failure of certain commanders?

VV: I think it was a failure of the senior people being unable to properly advise the civilian leadership, the national command authority. The irony of it is that, damn it to hell, based on the tapes that have been released LBJ knew it. That rips my ass. But at the same token, he was madder than a hornet at the senior military because these guys just keep saying, and I’m quoting him in essence, he said, “These damned generals just keep saying send more troops or I need more troops.” He said, “I don’t know if that’s going to do anything.” Yeah it did. It got more killed. That’s why, you see, the senior leadership too, they—I don’t know. Obviously it was very complex at every level, and it’s easy to Monday morning quarterback now. But one of the things we should have recognized because even the French had told us, get the Vietnamese army trained. Make sure they’re involved. Hell, we took the fight away from them. Why should they get involved? These arrogant Americans are coming. Oh, we can do it. Next question.

SM: That’s a good point. Well, when you were nearing your time to leave, how confident did you feel that things were going to turn out well and good?

VV: Oh, I didn’t think—I had no confidence, absolutely zero. It was just a question of time. Then, what was it, ’74 that the Congress said, “That’s it, no more”? I don’t remember what it was. Then, of course, Nixon is wrapped up to his elbows and higher because of the Watergate situation. There are a lot of people, not a lot, there may be a lot. There are people who were in the military at that time and even in government at that time, felt that we’d just betrayed the South Vietnamese. I guess there is some of that, but then again you say, “Well, my God. How much should we have done? How many more should have died?” But I guess when they say betrayed them they meant in the sense that, shutting off all their, the ammunition and supplies and so on. You know, the other thing that warrants a great deal of consideration, I’m sure historians will debate it if they can get around the Kennedy myth, and that’s the whole aspect of the Diem assassination. Even Roger Hilsman, who was in the State Department at the time or he worked for somewhere. He was a West Pointer. He was the guy I was talking about
earlier. I can’t remember what class he was. I think he was like class of ’47, ’44, whatever. He was the one that was on the Kennedy team, big Special Forces kind of guy, counterinsurgency this and that and so forth. I remember talking to him and he said, “You know, I’m not—I don’t know. I’m not sure that was the right thing to do to have assassinated Diem. Right away it became our show.” He said, “You may not want to be happy with the guy, but at least he was a leader.” There were people who were dedicated to him and we ended up taking him out because some of the senior generals saw this as an opportunity for them to go in and we saw it for an opportunity to have our guy in there. I don’t know. That’s for somebody else who’s in on it to talk about it. Are we connected?

SM: Yes, sir. I’m sorry. (Both laugh)
VV: I’m sorry I’ve bored you.
SM: No you didn’t. You didn’t. My—
VV: I’ve put you to sleep.
SM: I have a mute button because I have a tendency to interject mms or wows or whatever. So I hit the mute button so that silly stuff doesn’t get on the recording.
VV: Yeah. Got you.

SM: So anyway, when you were talking with Hilsman, were you able to talk about other aspects of the Kennedy administration? In particular, of course, one of the controversies that has been discussed and hashed over about Kennedy was some historians and some scholars, some observers are arguing now that Kennedy was leaning towards withdrawing American forces completely from Vietnam to include all the advisors. His plan was to withdraw the U.S. military effort from Vietnam and let the South Vietnamese fend for themselves. That’s, of course, has become a hotly contested, hotly debated issue. I was wondering if Hilsman had ever mentioned anything to you about that?

VV: No. Nor did I ask Roger Hilsman that question. However, you can bet that Kennedy would not have done that before the next election. There is no way in hell he would have done that, and he was going to get elected. Don’t you agree?
SM: I would tend to, yes, sir. I would. Because if he had come out soft against communism in South Vietnam—
VV: But he was already, had portrayed the picture of a super hard-liner. No way in hell.

SM: Right. If he had contradicted that then—

VV: He already had the Bay of Pigs fiasco around his neck. No matter who planned it or whatever, he executed it and he cut off the aircraft. You see what I’m saying?

SM: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

VV: So those people that say that he’d have pulled them out, well maybe, I don’t know. Maybe he would have. But I don’t think it was a foregone conclusion and there’s nothing on the record. I’m concerned this is revisionism at its best.

SM: Yes, sir, or possibly at its worst.

VV: Yeah, depending how you look at it. You know, there’s a whole myth. This whole Kennedy myth of things he would have done or could have done or should have done, you know on and on and on. I just—I don’t know. I’m not sure how they’ll ever satisfy it. It’s going to go on and on just because of all the emotional trauma surrounding the assassination that I don’t think it will ever be solved.

SM: No, probably not. So is there anything else about the second half of your second tour that you want to discuss as you were working as ops, as an ops officer?

VV: No, no not really. Just as a point of interest though, when I left Vietnam I went to JCS (Joint Chiefs of Staff) and was assigned there in what was called the political-military division. We did studies, analyses and simulations. By this time my duties had nothing to do with Vietnam. It was also a sense of the people that I work with, although they were all veterans of Vietnam. The leadership and the people in JCS and what we were focusing on was Russia, Soviet Union. The first simulation that I worked on was called the Epsilon. Have you heard of those?

SM: I have heard of Epsilon, but explain it please.

VV: The Epsilon simulation, what we did is we acted as a control group between a red team and a blue team. When I say a red team, I mean senior, senior people, and also with the red team. The red team consisted of—it was not unusual to have the director of CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) sit in or one of his deputies, somebody from the Defense Intelligence Agency would be there, and knowledgeable ambassadors.
who had served within the Soviet Union, people from academia, the Brzezinski-level kind of guys would participate. When we did Epsilon, we did it in Heidelberg—excuse me, at Garmisch. We had the people from NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) on the blue team. The way it worked, before we ever got there, we would interview. I’d go with another team member, a friend of mine, and we, the two of us, had been designated to write the original situation. Then we would pre-plan ahead of time what might happen or could happen depending who did what to whom. So we went to guys who were Russian experts, who had the requisite security classifications in all the different intelligence agencies. We talked to people who had played in games before. We went to the National Security Council, talked to people in there who were Soviet experts. So we would come up and we would posit a scenario. In this particular one it ended up being incursion by, I can’t remember exactly—East German forces did something they shouldn’t have done and the Russians got involved. So when the blue team sat down, what they were presented with was a political-military crisis. At the same time, we could be, we could act as God in killing somebody, some key guy that would have been an advantageous player. So then the blue team would come forth and say, “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do, and we’ll take the following actions.” At the same time, the red team, they knew what the situation was at the Sarajevo Scenario. They were looking at it. “Can we exploit this or what can we do?” So then they would take action. Then there would be a break. The senior people would go golf, drink, whatever they were going to do. I don’t know. We would work at night or overtime, whatever, to posit, position the two different actions together. You see what I mean?

SM: Yes, sir.

VV: Then on our control team we had senior guys too that would say, “Oh, you can’t, they can’t—that won’t happen. That’s a bunch of bullshit. Don’t let them do that or do this or do” whatever. Then they’d have another get together where the red would see what had happened, the blue would see what happened and then we’d do that three different times. Then at the end of it, both teams would get together and we would record everything. There would be another senior player who would act as the interlocutor—you know, he would control the discussion. Then after the thing was recorded, we would put together lessons learned. It was interesting because Epsilon was just one of several.
We had things that had to do with Iran. We had things to do with Asia. It was really a fascinating place to work. I really enjoyed it. I learned a lot.

SM: Yeah, it sounds like it. I hate to stop you right here, but I’m running out of record time. Let me go grab another disk.

VV: All right.

SM: I will call you back in five minutes.

VV: All right.

VV: Thank you, sir.

SM: We are back from break. When you went to the Pentagon—well, first of all, when you got back from your second tour, had the atmosphere in the U.S. changed very much compared to when you left? How was it compared to your first trip home in ’68, or your second trip home because of the emergency leave situation?

VV: Yeah. Well, you know, it just had become intensified. The whole country was still in turmoil, as you well know because of Martin Luther King. I know those are back in ’68, but it still carried over after all that time. Watergate, God, it went on and on. In ’73 all the PWs (prisoners of war) came home. You know, the shoot downs over in North Vietnam. That just stirred up things all the more, or revisited the whole nightmare of Vietnam. I mean, the country was just ecstatic that they were home finally, but not withstanding that, there still were the long list of MIAs (missing in action) hanging out there, still hanging out there. I don’t know. There was also a sense, I guess, of “Let’s get this damned nightmare behind us. Let’s focus on something else.” I had that sense when I got to the Pentagon, I really did. Sort of a sense that, “Okay we’re back” to the, more concerned with the Soviet Union than we are with the, not that we hadn’t always concerned with them. But Vietnam was sort of in the background, you know what I mean? That’s just the way it was.

SM: Well, when you—sorry, go ahead.

VV: I guess I’m not being very specific or cogent on this, but it may have been just from my own individual standpoint, but get on with the future. But I had a sense, though, that that was the way the country was. That’s the way the Pentagon was. Learn the lessons of Vietnam and move on.

SM: Well, from your perspective, what were those lessons?
VV: Don’t get involved in any kind of a quasi-civil war and trying to think that there’s some massive conspiracy behind everything. It doesn’t work that way. You know, countries do what they got to do in their own self interest, but—there was no way in hell, for example those Russians were going to intervene on behalf of North Vietnam against us, no way. I don’t think China would have either, unless they felt that we were threatening them. Of course, they were happy to see us go because they would see that as a vacuum in the area that would enhance their status as well.

SM: What about domestic, lessons that would apply to the domestic situation as the war unfolded?

VV: Well, you sure don’t want to do it on a man-by-man replacement, that’s for damn sure. You should go with units. The one thing that we learned to the extent that is exemplified in Gulf I and also in Gulf II is that if you’re going to war, make sure you use the National Guard and your Reserves. Make sure the people understand that “more” involves all of them, not just draftees out there being killed. The need for a volunteer army, that came about in the ’73, ’74 timeframe. That was a very vital, important change in our whole military situation, there’s no doubt of that. Now there are some negative aspects of that, too. When you do that, there are whole groups from a demographic standpoint, elements of the population you just don’t touch, and who become very disconnected, and all the more reason why you need to ensure that you draw commissioned officers from ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) programs, good ROTC programs. You tend to, more and more draw from a, I guess you’d refer to it as the lower socio-economic classes who tend to join the military for economic purposes or who have a goal of getting a college education, and it’s a good way to do it. It also saw a tremendous increase in women in the military. Now that increase stemmed in part because there was an improvement in women’s situation from a socio-political standpoint in the entire country beginning, you know as far as jobs and so forth. But in the case of the Army, once we went to volunteer military, army, we had to draw on women in order to get high school graduates at the level we wanted. It was very apparent. I remember when I was at Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, as a G-1. In other words, what happened, just to very quickly, I left the Pentagon after one year, which is unusual. Normally you’d be there three years, but I got picked up to go to the Air War College, sort of ahead of where
I normally would have gone. So I went to Maxwell Air Force base and attended the Air
War College, which was a very, very inspirational year for me because many of my
classmates, a good, not a majority, but a very high percentage of them were people who
had been POWs in North Vietnam, who I got to know and admire and talk to and
appreciate. But anyway, when I left the Air War College, I went back to the 101st
Airborne Division. If you recall, that’s the one where I had my battalion. Went there to
be the G-3 in charge of operations for the division, but prior to doing that I spent six
months as a G-1 because they needed to fill that gap. One of my first tasks was to take a
look at our recruiting and how our personnel acquisition situation and how we were going
to maintain high school graduates as high as we—we’d refer to as category one, two,
three, and four soldiers. We wanted to get category one, if at all possible. I remember
after doing the study and the area that we recruited from around Ft. Campbell, Kentucky,
which was our main recruiting area. We recruited wherever we could, but that was our
main emphasis because of proximity. I remember telling the CG, the basic question he
asked was, “Do we need to go after women, and how many and for what slots? How’s
that going to be? How are we going to integrate them?” We’d looked at everything
including the Israelis, what they had done, or they hadn’t done. There were a lot of
myths about the Israelis, by the way. That they were in fighting units and they were out
shooting right next to their compatriot in arms, which wasn’t true. But anyway, after this
study, it was very apparent we were going to have to enlist women or go out and look for
volunteers for them. We called in the commanders and said, “Here’s what it’s going to
be. Now figure out how to do it.” They went everywhere to figure out with signs on a
latrine. Man inside, woman inside, whatever. You know, out in the boonies when you’re
in training. But anyway, it was an interesting period and interesting situation.

SM: Well, when you—sorry, go ahead.

VV: I guess in hindsight, the major lessons learned, at least that were being
talked about at the Pentagon when I was there was volunteer army, in future combat
situations ensure we commit Guard and Reserve, make sure the people understand that
what this is and what it’s about, whether the Congress is trying bury it or the
administration. So in doing that, they made it impossible, well, not totally impossible. It
made it highly unlikely that you could commit U.S. combat divisions without providing
Guard and Reserve units who are going to provide the combat service support if you need it. In other words, the U.S. division can do it for a while, but no way in hell would they exist if you didn’t have Guard and Reserve units in there supporting. So anyway, that brought about the beginning of a total rejuvenation of Guard and Reserve as far as equipment. They were no longer just sunshine soldiers with half-assed equipment, hand-me-downs from the regulars. The so-called total force became more than a rubric. It became the *sine qua non* for success of any U.S. regular unit in combat. I guess the other factor that became apparent, we would maintain unit cohesion, and we would transfer units on a TDY basis if we had to rather than shipping individual replacements. Now that’s not to say there wouldn’t be some individual replacements, but never again like Vietnam. Because what you had instead of a unit fighting a twelve-month war, you had a group of people in there fighting individual twelve-month wars. Everybody was trained and everybody had experience at a different level, half-ass. So unit rotation was going to be the key. The so-called total force meant that if Regular Army units had Apaches, by damn, you’d better get Apaches to the National Guard and make sure they could fly them, fight them, maintain them. I can remember later on, when I retired and after my requisite conflict-of-interest period had expired and I was working for McDonnell Douglas on—I was in charge of worldwide marketing for helicopters with McDonnell Douglas Helicopter Company. An aspect of it was to ensure that the Apaches that were planned to be delivered to the National Guard, that that was going to transpire. Wouldn’t you know it, sure enough, the Army said, “Oh, my God! We don’t have enough money for such and such. Well, what we can do is, we’ll just say Arizona won’t get their Apaches. Utah won’t get theirs, and that’ll give us X amount of dollars.” I’ll tell you, I fought that tooth and nail. Not only because it was good for our company or corporation, but because I knew damn well that the National Guard needed them and we needed the National Guard to have them. I’ll never forget. I got a call from—the division commander that I worked for in the 101st later became Chief of Staff of the Army. One day I got a call from one of his aides who I had known, and he said, “You know, the boss is really concerned what you’re doing on these Apaches for the Guard.” What had happened, I had—at the National Guard Convention I did a one sheet, black and white piece of paper. It said, “Cut off at the knees.” Underneath it there was a short squib that
said, “A good plan is about to die, and the National Guard units that had planned to get
Apaches, some of them may not get them. What does the other guy know that we don’t
know because he’s expanding the use of his attack helicopters?” In silhouette I showed
an MI-24. Oh, my God. I had people from all over, even within the company, say, “God
Vel, you’re committing harakiri. You’ll just piss them off to a fare thee well. We won’t
sell any or anything again.” I said, “I’ve got to do this.” We went to every hotel room
where a National Guard AG (adjutant general) was staying. We put one of these under
the door. Then we mailed one to every Congressman. It hit the fan. I mean it
ricocheted. Needless to say they didn’t cut out any Guard, because when the Congress
said, “You mean that the Army’s going to cut out my state from getting Apaches?” We
didn’t make a lot of friends, but we sure sold Apaches. Okay, where are we? Let me just
review, you asked a question and I said the important factors were the volunteer force,
which included the integration of women, the total force concept, Guard-Reserve active,
and unit rotation.

SM: Well, it seems like, in terms of the total force concept, that that’s been taken
to an extreme that could be damaging.

VV: It has. Yes. It has. What’s happened, one of the reasons it’s gone to an
extreme, it’s been easier, particularly for the Clinton administration, to cut active Army
divisions than it is to attack a Congressional ally and say, “Hey, we’re going to take units
out of your state.” So now, we’re down to ten active Army divisions, which means right
today we’ve got one active division in the U.S. and all the rest of them are scattered
around the damn world. Now some of those are scattered anyway. The one in Hawaii,
the one in Korea and, of course, there’s also—there were two in Germany, one of those
now in Iraq. It would appear that if the Rumsfeld team had their way, they’ll increase
fighters and bombers and whatever, but I think he’s learning that lesson quickly and
badly right now because of the way we’re scattered so thin. Because they were going to
rotate the 3rd Infantry back to Ft. Stewart, Georgia. They can’t do it, no way in hell. It’s
probably going to get worse before it gets better because there’s no doubt that Iran’s
slipping people across the border at the same time that Syria and other Arab units, Arab
individuals are going across with the so-called jihad. You know, we’re being played up
as just like the Russians were in Afghanistan in the Arab media, which is completely
different because we’re trying to help out and we’re not trying to kill any civilians.
We’re trying to get their country running again.

SM: When did you get out of the Army officially, what year?
VV: ’79, July ’79.
SM: So for those last seven years, from ’72 to ’79, the time that you finished
your time in Vietnam until you left, what were the biggest problems that you saw in the
active duty Army?
VV: The very first problem was recruiting, because the Army had to take over
recruiting. We had to organize a recruiting command. Oh, God, we were throwing
millions of dollars at advertising companies and doing this and doing that. Some of our
very, very best people, instead of going to command battalions were going to command
recruiting headquarters. There was a need to go back to basics—new training, new
doctrine with a tremendous emphasis on training because training had gone down the
tubes during Vietnam. All we were doing was turning out people to fire M-16s, 105
howitzers or whatever. But we really were not doing, for the most part, integrated
battalion- and brigade-level field training exercises. They talk about the impact of
Vietnam on the Army, most civilians don’t really have an appreciation of how dire it was,
not only from a psychological standpoint, but on actual combat efficiency, combat
readiness.

SM: Where did you go from the Pentagon?
VV: I went to the Air War College.
SM: And then from there?
VV: From there I went to Ft. Campbell, Kentucky.
SM: How was morale?
VV: At Ft. Campbell?
SM: Mm-hmm.
VV: As always, it varied with unit. From my vantage point the critical change
was leaving commanders in place for a minimum of a year and eighteen months or
whatever, if possible. This was really important. The demand on the battalion
commander was especially tough because of the need for recruiting at the same time you
were trying to train your units and maintain combat readiness—tough. The quest for
combat readiness was one thing that—you know we had C-1, C-2, that type status of units. Boy I tell you, nothing would get a battalion commander relieved [quicker than] if the combat readiness of the unit went down. Now a lot of that was influenced by our headquarters because they weren’t giving him the requisite NCOs or the people or whatever. In fact, the NCO problem was so serious that when I was a G-1, I would call around to different counterparts [in other divisions] and say, “Well, how many NCOs did you get in last month?” Unknown to them, I was putting together a package because I was comparing what they got with what we got. Then I’d go to the commander and say, “Okay, now look. Ft. Bragg got this, Ft. Stewart got this, Ft. Carson got this, and look what we got at Ft. Campbell.” He’d go into a tirade and he’d say, “Okay, first write me a letter and show that in a letter form so it stands out in red and green colors and then with us compared at the very bottom.” He said, “I’ll sign it and we’ll send it to Force Com [Forces Command] Headquarters in Atlanta, and then we’ll just wait and see what happens.” Well, typically the DCSPER (Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel) would call up and say, “Well, yeah. I’m really sorry about that, but we’ll make it up to you.” He said, “Okay.” Then we’d check two months later, and boy at the next Force Com commanders’ conference, the CG, the 101st CG would pass out these things and say, “Now this is a bunch of crap. I’m supposed to be at such and such and look what you’re giving me. Look what you’re giving them. I’m in the 18th Airborne Corps and we have to leave in seventy-two hours. What’s going on here?” But anyway, it was a constant problem, combat readiness. Not just equipment, but also more importantly, the people.

SM: How much was Vietnam being discussed?

VV: Not a great deal. Not a great deal. People in the garrison unit at that time were just concentrating on getting up to speed for operational readiness tests, training at different levels and making sure that the companies had what they needed. The other thing that became new, like for example when I was a G-3, I managed the total budget. The total, you know for the training, in dollars. Although I had certain guidelines to operate in from the 18th Airborne Corps, depending on what our commander wanted to do, we could allocate more to this type of training, that type of training and whatever. Plus we were setting up our own ranges for Cobras and doing a lot of that kind of training. As an air assault division, we had so many helicopters [about four hundred] we
were doing the same thing that we had done but on a different level in Vietnam, you know with combat assaults and that sort of thing. But trying to integrate more refined touches in the damned thing, I guess you’d say. Trying to do more night operations, knowing we were going to get knocked out of the sky in the daytime. We wouldn’t have the advantage of a total air dominated, not even dominated, just there was no air threat against us at all from enemy air [in Vietnam]. So that’s why we recognized if we were going to do something against the Soviets, it would have to be in the ground clutter [of radar coverage] and at night. So you began seeing the integration of night techniques, goggles and so forth.

SM: What about just personal conversations with fellow officers? In particular, say in ’75 when Saigon fell, in April of ’75. What do you remember most about those events as they unfolded?

VV: Well, I’d like to be able to tell you, “Oh, it was a gnashing of teeth” and so forth, but there was some discussion, but not a great deal. People were focused on the here and now and the future. There was this sense, well, we did our best for them. It was going to happen sooner or later and it did. I don’t think there was any, Steve, any set stereotypical view on it. There wasn’t a great deal of discussion about it. It was just accepted, “Well, that’s it.” There were still a few that would say, “Well, we let them down. We should have given more support so they could have defended themselves better,” but then there were others that said, “Hey, you know, we did what we could.”

SM: Were there any other lessons that you think we should take away from the Vietnam War, either militarily or just as a nation?

VV: Well, I’m not sure we ever really had a clear set of objectives going in there. A lot of that stuff it was just sort of ad lib. At least that’s the way I perceived it at a lower level. Now I’m sure that if you talked to a Maxwell Taylor if he were alive or some others, or even to Westmoreland, he would say, “Oh, well, we planned that to a gnat’s eyelash.” Well, I don’t know. It seemed to me like such and such would have—I’ll give you an example. The aircraft at Pleiku were hit by commando, or by guerrillas and the VC. So what do we do? We say, “Oh, well. We need U.S. units to guard our helicopters. Well, let’s move in some. Or up in such and such, let’s move in some Marines at Cu Chi.” So much of it was an action, response, reaction, action, response,
reaction. Did we ever seize the initiative? I’m not sure. If we did, where and when?

Now, could we have? Perhaps. The whole Tonkin Gulf—blasphemy, betrayal of our
country, the whole thing. It was the seeds of fifty-eight thousand dead guys. That was
the biggest damned fraud that’s been foisted on any country. I don’t know. To me the
whole thing was very—it was a big disillusion, I tell you. I know I probably sound very
bitter about it. Over the passage of time I’ve become less so, but it was not right.

SM: Have you been back to Vietnam?

VV: Yes.

SM: Would you tell me the circumstances of the trip and how it went?

VV: Yeah. My wife and I spent about five weeks, I guess. We went first to
Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, South Vietnam, Laos. Excuse me, all of Vietnam—south,
and then ended up in Laos. A couple of surprises, I guess in hindsight I shouldn’t
have been surprised. South Vietnam, Saigon, or as it’s called, Ho Chi Minh City. It’ll
always be Saigon. I think it will always be Saigon to the people who live there. Saigon
was just one bustling, capitalistic ant pile. Crane, construction cranes were everywhere.
We were there, I think in ’9—I think it was ’96. I could be wrong. Cranes were
everywhere. Walking on the street, God, there were more cell phones on the Saigon
restaurants than there are here in Salt Lake City. Guys talking on the cell phone in the
restaurant, all of them going up around, doing this, doing this, involved with this. There
were quite a few American tourists. Everybody welcomed you like a long lost friend. I
never saw any example of bitterness or any other kind of conflict when they found out
you were an American. “Oh, my dad fought in the war with you,” or, “My uncle did
this.” No sense of bitterness at all. Just glad to see you, “We need your money—spend.”
In sharp contrast, Ho Chi Minh, not a lot of hustle and bustle when I was there. Sort of
calm, sort of resolute, some construction going on. I did see a Baskin-Robbins not far
down the street. A few other places like that, but nothing like what was going on in
Saigon. Stores set up, Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonalds, you know, on and on—
totally different. It was just like the—I got a kick out of one of the Aussies that we ran
into in the lobby of the hotel. We were sitting there talking. He had had an older brother
who had fought in the war. He was there on business. He said, “Well, what do you
think?” I said, “Boy, it’s something else.” He says, “It’s just like you guys never left or
never lost.” I don’t know if I would go that far, but that was his comment. With respect
to the people in the north, they were very courteous. I didn’t have a sense of hatred,
whatever. The only time I ever felt any sense of discomfort being with them being
around me and vice versa was when I went to the so-called propaganda museums. When
you would walk through there you got a sense of the way they had cast the war as if we
were—instead of trying to help the South we were just trying to kill Vietnamese in
general, type routine. Laos—just happy to see us, glad we were there and wanted more
of us coming, same thing in Cambodia. Now one thing that was fascinating to me and to
my wife, when we flew into—no wait we—let’s see. We flew into Da Nang from
Saigon. No, I’ll get it in a minute. We flew from Saigon to Hue/Phu Bai. Phu Bai was
real close to Camp Eagle where the headquarters for the 101st had been. We stayed in a
hotel in Hue, which was right on the Perfume River, and we could see the Citadel across
the river from where we were staying. Then we later toured the [ancient Hue] Citadel.
Our guide, it turns out had been a VC. He wasn’t bullshitting us, he had been a VC.
Because you could see where he was wounded. Since I had been in that area, I knew
enough that I could ask questions that he would have had to have been there to answer
the questions. It was interesting because he told me the only reason he thought that he
was alive today was he didn’t fight in the Tet Offensive of ’68. He had had a wounded
leg from a B-52 strike. He was in a jungle underground hospital somewhere when the
Hue Offensive kicked off. He said, “We had thousands die. Not hundreds, we had
thousands.” He said, “We had people die that you Americans don’t even know about,
because we would drag them out and put them in the river or do something else with
them.” Anyway, it was interesting talking to him. We hired [him to be our local guide].
We took a break from the standard tour and I hired a driver and him. We went up
Highway 1, went to Camp Evans where I had been twice, once in 1st Cav in ’68 and then
again in ’71. I couldn’t find [recognize] Evans. When they took me to it, they said here
it is. This is where the turn off was. I said, “Bullshit. This isn’t Camp Evans.” I didn’t
recognize it. There were trees. When it was a firebase, every tree had been blown down
and cut down. On the firebase there was no grass. There was nothing. Now, suddenly
this whole place is covered in forest. There’s grass growing, and on the immediate
periphery, on the lower ground there were all kinds of rice paddies growing. I said, “I
They said, “We don’t remember. We can’t show you.” Well, we stopped to get out and look around. I walked a little and as I looked up I could see the way the trees had been cut out. There were no trees growing. I asked, “Why aren’t your trees growing over there?” He said, “I don’t know.” Well, we rode down there and that’s where the runway was. The reason the trees or nothing was growing because macadam had been put in and they had never plowed it up. Then we started finding some fighting positions, and believe it or not here it was, I left there in ’72 and here it was twenty-four years later, almost twenty-five and we could still find plastic C-ration spoons and some cans down in some of the fighting positions. The sandbags had been taken by the locals for their own use and emptied in the fighting. No metal was left, but stuff like that was still there, the only traces left. So much for our return to Vietnam. Left me with an eerie feeling and gave my wife an opportunity to see a very beautiful country with lovely people.

SM: Do you have any desires to go back again?

VV: Oh, yeah. I wouldn’t mind going back. I’d like to spend more time in the north. I’d like to go out to where the Dien Bien Phu fighting was. I’d like to have gone to Khe Sanh. I didn’t get a chance to go back there even with my wife. I could have, but we just didn’t have the time. Now they do run what they call American military tours. They take guys out to the battlefields and tour them around and so forth. I wasn’t on that kind of a tour.

SM: What about the stuff back here in the States, and in particular have you visited The Wall and how did it impact you?

VV: I have not.

SM: You have not?

VV: No.

SM: Consciously, purposely decided not to.

VV: Yeah.

SM: Any particular reason.

VV: I guess I don’t need to see The Wall to appreciate all of the individual tragedies and all of the individual sadness and heartache. I’ll probably see it sometime, but I haven’t seen it.
SM: You place a very powerful emphasis there on the individual nature of the
inscription of individual names on The Wall.
VV: Yeah.
SM: Does that concern you that that’s the way the nation has focused its
attention?
VV: On the individual?
SM: Mm-hmm.
VV: Oh, no, no. I think that’s important. No, I thought the young lady that
designed that, it was a brilliant design.
SM: Is there anything else in how the war impacted you as a person that you
would like to discuss?
VV: Just to highlight, you mentioned the individual nature of the tragedy. I think
it’s important, you know this, but people who have—a lot of people who have not been in
the Army or the military in combat don’t recognize that when a squad or platoon or
company or battalion or whatever, when they’re fighting they’re not thinking about
fighting for America. They’re fighting for the guy next to them. In a sense they fight for
their own self-respect. The last thing they want to do is to let down a buddy. It may be
that the guy is a buddy in their squad, and he’s a buddy in name only. Not because
they’re particularly close, whether they’re black, white, purple, but they know that
they’re depending on one another. That’s so important. That all ties into this unit
cohesion thing. Train as you’re going to fight, and fight as you train. Don’t shove over
individuals and pull them out at the end of X number of months and throw over another
guy because all you’re going to do is have unnecessary people killed and the morale is
not what it should be, the cohesion is not what it’s going to be. Enough lecture.
SM: Well, is there anything else you would like to discuss today?
VV: Good bye.
SM: That’s it.
VV: No, I don’t have anything unless you have a question?
SM: No, I don’t have any particular questions right now.
VV: I suspect I’ve wasted a lot of your time.
SM: You haven’t wasted a moment of my time. This has been a very good interview. Learned a lot. Let me go ahead and put an official, if you don’t have anything else to add to the interview, I’ll put an official end on it, and we can continue talking.

VV: No, I’ve got nothing to add. You’ve got things to go and do I’m sure.

SM: Well, hold on for one second. Let me just end the interview then I’ll talk to you afterwards. This will end the interview with Mr. Vel Varner. Thank you very much, sir.