Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m conducting an oral history interview with Lieutenant Colonel Michael Sweeney. I am in Lubbock, Texas in the Special Collections Library Interview Room on the campus of Texas Tech University. It is November 14, 2002 on Thursday morning about 9:45 Central Standard Time. Colonel Sweeney you are in Buhl, Idaho is that correct?

Michael Sweeney: Actually I live between Buhl and Filer, Idaho, but both of which are near Twin Falls. I am doing this interview from my office in my house, looking out onto the Snake River about half way in between Buhl and Filer.

RV: I am very jealous [laughs]. That’s sounds great.

MS: It’s a beautiful spot. I can see Sun Valley, I can see several mountain ranges. Eight or nine different counties as a matter of fact are out here.

RV: Let’s start with talking about your youth, your childhood. First, where were you born and when were you born?

MS: I was born July 14, 1936 in Denison, Texas down on the Red River. My parents were actually from a little town across the river in Oklahoma, Calera, Oklahoma. They were divorced when I was like two and I never did know my father who just died about six months ago I guess. I grew up with my mother until the war started and then she went to work for the FBI in Washington D.C. during the war and I lived with my
grandparents in Calera and later in Durant, Oklahoma which is just four miles up the road.

RV: You were raised by your mother, basically?
MS: Yes and my grandparents.

RV: You had no contact with your father?
MS: Not at all.

RV: Did you ever have a desire to get in touch with him?
MS: Actually he entered my life once when I was going to college there in Durant and was married and he appeared at my doorstep one day. We had a little chat and that was about the last of my contact with him.

RV: So did you grow up in Denison? How many years did you spend?
MS: No in Oklahoma, in Durant. My mother came back from the war and taught school and then worked in a bank in Durant and then in 1950 the pay was much superior in Carlsbad, New Mexico. I think it was 1,600 dollars a year for a schoolteacher. So mother packed us up and we went to live with my aunt Helen in Carlsbad, New Mexico.

So I went my freshman through senior years in Carlsbad and did the usual stuff, did some athletics and was always involved in student politics. I was in the ROTC from the ninth grade on and left. I was a cadet colonel my senior year and I was the president of the student body my senior year and all that stuff. Got an ROTC regular scholarship to the University of New Mexico. Floundered around up there through my freshman and half my sophomore year, just wasn’t ready for it. Essentially flunked out of school. Then I went down to the potash mines in Carlsbad and worked in the potash mines. Went to school at night, at what was then New Mexico A&M. Eventually a friend who worked down in El Paso said he had a job available with the Rocky Mountain Banknote Company in El Paso. I went down there and worked for a few months and then worked for Dun and Bradstreet was dating a beautiful girl in Carlsbad named Ann Bennett. We eventually decided to get married and I said, “This is not working.” So decide to go back to Southeastern State College in Durant, Oklahoma. So Ann and I went there and I worked in cotton gins for my granddad for the first year and then Oklahoma went wet. Then I ran a liquor store for the next couple of years and worked full time and went to school full time. I don’t think I ever made another “B” from then on. Eventually
graduated with a double degree in English Literature and American History. I’d gone into the Reserves in January of ’60 and went in to the officer candidate program in September of ’60 at Quantico.

RV: If you don’t mind, let me ask you how would you describe your childhood growing up. In Denison and Durant, Carlsbad, what are your most basic memories of that?

MS: Well, it was during the war. Which had a profound impact because my two uncles both of whom I was very fond [of] went off to war. One to the Pacific and one to the European theatre. Both came home, but both saw a lot of war and stuff.

RV: Did they tell you about their experiences?

MS: No, no not much. My uncle Tim who was a 19-year-old when he went in. He went in to be a pilot in the pilot training program in, I don’t know ’43 and about that point they no longer needed as many pilots. So he became an artilleryman and went over with the 106th Infantry Division, which was the division that the Wehrmacht kicked in the Battle of the Bulge. They just hit them head on. It was a division of 17 year old draftees and had never been fired on. They just broke and ran. He was lucky to get out without being killed or captured. So he discussed it with me a little as I got older. He was a big influence in my life and still is a great hero of mine.

RV: This is your mother’s brother?

MS: Yes, Uncle Tim Cotner who lives in Durant. He’s 12 years older than I am. So when I started school in Calera, he was a senior and a basketball played and all. Just my hero, that’s all.

RV: Would you say he was your biggest military influence, as far as military tradition in the family?

MS: The two of them I guess. My grandfather was too old. He was on the draft board. I don’t know we were just a patriotic family. The country was hugely important to us. When we moved from little old Calera, which is about 500 people, to the big city of Durant, about 10,000. I had a great childhood. I had good friends. We lived well. My granddad was, I guess by those standards of the time a wealthy guy. We never thought about it, but we certainly never were deprived in any way and we lived well.
Certainly not half as luxuriously as I live now. We lived probably a little better than average. When we moved to Carlsbad it was a little bit of a culture shock.

RV: How old were you sir?

MS: I was 15. To leave all my friends and athletic programs. You know I was a big baseball player and all that stuff. It was a hell of a shock and I was not at all happy about it, I remember. We moved over on the south side of Carlsbad, which is kind of the rougher part of town. I went to a brand new, first-year-it-opened, junior high. It happened that the principal of the junior high was a guy named Phil Ambros who was a Marine major in World War II. He was a Ph.D. and a very bright guy, a guy I respected, admired a great deal. I got into the ROTC right away. I had been in band and stuff in Durant I knew how to march and all that. So I kind of got into a leadership situation right away in there. I, of course, played sports. I guess I was a pretty popular guy actually and hung around with a bunch of popular kids.

RV: What were your favorite subjects in high school?

MS: I was always a reader. So I liked the literature and English and writing and all that stuff. I hated math, which came back to haunt me in the ROTC program in New Mexico because I was totally deficient. Got thrown right into college algebra, which you may or may not remember is just a very difficult math course. It ate my lunch and kind of defeated me mentally. Psychologically more than intellectually. I let it become more of a bug than it was. Anyway Carlsbad was a great place for me. The next year, sophomore year, [there] was just one high school in town. I went over to the high school where the kids form the north side of town and our wrong side of the trackers kind of collided and eventually became great friends. I was in student politics all the way through. I was a class officer and continued in ROTC. Kind of quit jocking so much and didn’t have a baseball program which was my main sport.

RV: Did you have any jobs in high school?

MS: Yes, we had a dance band that played every weekend. I played trumpet in that and different things. I worked all one year cleaning the cafeteria after school and after basketball, football or whatever. I always had a job of some kind. I started delivering papers back when I was nine or ten. Just always had a job. You know mom didn’t make a lot of money. I was fairly independent financially.
RV: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

MS: No, I was an only child. We lived with my Aunt Helen, my mother’s sister. Eventually moved over to the north side of town, not far from the high school. I dated a lot of lovely ladies and got terribly serious about one when I was a senior. That went on for quite a long while.

RV: What year did you graduate?

MS: ’54. I’d spend the summers in Durant always. We’d go back to stay with my grandparents. I maintained my connection with my friends there. The transitioned back to Durant when Ann and I were married in ’57. It was a real easy one.

RV: Was Ann your high school sweetheart from your senior year?

MS: No, no she came along later. The other and I eventually split the blanket and went our separate ways. She lives in Lubbock by the way [laughs].

RV: Oh, really?

MS: Yes [laughs]. She married a guy in Lubbock.

RV: After high school, tell me why did you do ROTC in high school?

MS: I liked it and I was good at it. I guess I always liked the uniforms and there was a guy named George Duffy, who was an ex-Marine, but an Army lieutenant who was a World War II veteran, who headed up the program. George died when he was much too young. He was an inspirational kind of guy. He was feisty, great leader. I liked the responsibility, I liked the leadership, I liked the military. Even though it wasn’t a real popular thing, it wasn’t whatever you call it, what class leaders normally participate in. I liked it and stayed with it. I thought it was beneficial from that perspective. I always thought it was beneficial.

RV: Did your mother support your decision?

MS: Yes, mother’s very much a patriot. She died a year ago.

RV: So you go to the University of New Mexico and you said you had kind of a difficult time there, your freshman year. What happened?

MS: I had a terrible time.

RV: Were you just not motivated?

MS: Yes. I was just a typical 18-year-old kid. I should have gone right down to the recruiter and held my hand up and gone to the Marine Corps or something. I just
wasn’t ready for it. I’m not making excuses. It appeared there was a conspiracy against me. I had a roommate who was a lazy bum, who wouldn’t get up. I had this terrible time with math. I never had been a person who avoided things. I began to not go to class. I just had a terrible time. I got through the first semester all right. I had, I don’t know a 2+, but I had an “F” in college algebra. Nobody ever told me I could withdraw. I mean the counseling system in our colleges in a word, “sucks.” In my view that’s one of the greatest roles that ROTC played on the college campuses. I had a tour at Oregon State in the Navy ROTC. We provided more counseling and guidance and straight talk than anybody else on the campus by far. I didn’t get that kind of leadership really out of the ROTC program. Nothing like what I think we provided at Oregon State. You know somebody should have grabbed me by the stacking swivel and bounced me off a wall and said, “hey partner, wake up. We can help you. You can get tutoring. There are other ways to go.” I didn’t get any guidance of any kind of that kind of stuff. I was just stumbling around out there like a lost kid. I staggered through the spring semester, I don’t know what I made. I always did well on the liberal arts side of the page. That kind of kept my grade point total up, but algebra and physics just ate my lunch. So mid-way through this fall semester I went on a cruise with an ID on the U.S.S. Wisconsin. They had a real sharp Marine detachment. I was much more impressed with them than I was the Navy. I came back I the fall semester of ’55 I just packed it up one day and left.

RV: Did you have any plans?

MS: No.

RV: What did your mother think about this decision?

MS: She was not happy. Obviously I had just given up a damn good scholarship, I ought to have had my ass kicked. I was in pretty much a state of rebellion at the time about everything. Of course I was angry at myself for sure, more than anything else and disgusted with myself. So I went to work at the mines, which is a pretty common thing to do in Carlsbad at the time. At the time, there were five potash mines and they hired. Each of them hired 1,200 or 1,500 people. Pay was pretty good. It was union stuff. I never did join the union. I avoided it like the plague.

RV: What kind of work was doing the potash mines? Can you describe that?
MS: I was fortunate in that I worked above ground for several months. In the beginning I was stacking bags of potash in railroad cars. You’d stand there at the end of a conveyer belt and 12 bags that weighed between 98 and 102 pounds each a minute came off that conveyer belt. You stacked them and filled railroad cars with them. I was always pretty strong anyway, but it tightened me up a whole lot. I was pretty much a brute at that time. Then I worked at other jobs above ground. You weren’t working you so hard after you’d been there a while and had a little seniority. A friend of mine, Leland Boatwright, who just died recently, was working for [the] Rocky Mountain Banknote Company down in El Paso and I wanted to get the hell out of Carlsbad. So I went down and another friend Bo Bohannon lives down in San Antonio now and I rented an apartment together.

RV: This is in 1956?

MS: This would have been ’56 probably late in the years of ’56. I didn’t stay at Rocky Mountain very long. Dun and Bradstreet and I had credit investigators and money was better and it was a much more interesting job. I went with them and worked for I don’t remember. Maybe a year or somewhere in that neighborhood. Of course I was running back to Carlsbad every weekend where Ann was and all that. When I was 21 and she was 18, in 1957, December we got married.

RV: What did you mom think about that decision?

MS: I don’t think she loved it at the time. Ann was such a catch because she was such a beautiful girl and bright and just super. Mother even recognized that. She didn’t support it, but she didn’t fight it.

RV: Ya’ll lived in Carlsbad or did you move back down to El Paso?

MS: No, we went back down to El Paso for less than a month. I knew that I was spinning my wheels and needed to go to school. I knew I could work in Durant and go to school at the same time. I had friends there and a support system and all that crap. So I went back to Durant. I really had a stumble or two getting through the first semester.

After that I just knuckled down and did what I should have been doing all along.

RV: What school is this again?

MS: It’s Southeastern State at the time. It’s now Southeastern State University I think. It’s just really a teacher’s college in Durant. At the time there were probably as I
remember 1,500 or 1,800. Now I think it’s 6,000 or 7,000. It was an [in]expensive place
to go to school and I had a job all the time. As I say, [I] had my old friends here. It was a
comfortable place for both of us. Ann went to school too. We pounded away there for
two and a half years and on into the green soup.
RV: So this was 1958 to ’60. You said you majored in English Lit and U.S.
History. Why did you choose those majors? I guess obviously because you liked them.
MS: I liked them, I was deficient in math. I never had any confidence in Math. I
think I took intermediate algebra four times. As a matter of fact I made a “D, C, B” and
finally an “A.” I Still didn’t understand the damn thing and still don’t [laughs].
Geometry I’m fine. Arithmetic I’m fine. Day to day math I’m splendid. For some reason
algebra is sort of like some code that I just never could break. To this day I’m deficient
in Algebra.
RV: I don’t know how much it matters today [laughs].
MS: It still irritates me [laughs].
RV: I’m sure you could sign up for a local course somewhere.
MS: I’ve considered that or just getting computer programming, going at it that
way. I may do that one of these days.
RV: Tell me about English literature, what did you enjoy reading?
MS: I liked all of it. I guess all my life I was the guy at the library who’d go get
four books and go home on my bicycle and then be back two days later for four more
books. I just always was [a] voracious reader.
RV: Was that influence from your other who was a teacher?
MS: No, actually she became a librarian later on. I was a precocious reader. I
was reading when I went to school, when I started. I don’t know. Wasn’t television. We
didn’t listen to the radio, except the Lone Ranger and Cardinal baseball games. Walter
Winchel and Fibber McGee and Molly [?]. We just didn’t sit around and have the radio
on all the time. The radio was kind of a treat. So I read. I read everything and enjoyed
everything. I guess I really liked all of it.
RV: Do you remember any books that really had an influence on you, that you
really enjoyed?
MS: I wouldn’t call them necessarily influential, but certainly Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. I read a lot of outdoors stuff. I was involved in Scouts for years, Boy Scouts. So I liked all the outdoor books and adventure books and all that.

RV: So you graduated in 1960 is that correct?

MS: That’s right.

RV: Why did you choose to go into the Marine Corps at that time?

MS: I didn’t know what else to do: I had always wanted to be in the military, give it a try. I read a book, I think I have a copy of it here, called *U.S. Marine Operations in Korea*. I read about [Captain] Barber and Fox Company and Raymond Murray and Ray Davis and all those great heroes who were [fighting] 52 years ago right now. Coming down from the Chosin Reservoir. I thought if I’m going to go into the military I want to be around men like this.

RV: Plus you had met some people you said in your past who were Marines and who impressed you greatly.

MS: Yes, not very many though. George Duffy and Phil Ambrose. Most of the people I knew were Army folks. That book and it’s a factual account of the withdrawal from Chosin is a very powerful account. I also read as I remember “The New Breed” about that time. That’s a very powerful experience to read about something as foreign to me as all of it was. I’d grown up in a part of a country that was relatively warm. Hearing about .30 and .35 and imagining men being well led enough to continue to fight and all the rest. That just kind of blew me away really. It still does. I still can hardly think of it. It was so brutal. Of course there was no difference on the eastern front with Russia. For this little group, this First Marine Division, which I later was a proud part of, to fight their way back down like they did was just impressive. I giggle about it every now and then.

As I said I was running a liquor store and the Marine recruiters came to town and officer selection team. One of them was an aviator and the other one was not. They were a couple [of] young captains. Hot dogs, both of them, pretty much. So I invited them to my house for dinner. Bought a bottle of Johnny Walker Black Scotch, which I really couldn’t afford but I thought boy I’ve got to impress these guys. I know they must have walked out of my house and fallen down on the lawn laughing. I mean I was recruiting
them, they weren’t recruiting me. I had all the tickets and looking back at it from a guy who has been involved in officer selection it was really humorous.

RV: Apparently it worked though.

MS: Yes, so I ended up signed up and locked in and all that stuff.

RV: What did your wife think about this?

MS: She was delighted. She was always very supportive of everything I did, especially the military.

RV: How soon did you ship off to Quantico?

MS: I didn’t finish school until August, actually, of ’60. Then I left. At the end of August Ann’s folks had moved to Edgemont, South Dakota so I took her up there to stay with her folks while I went to Quantico. Her dad, who became a great friend of mine, was a mining guy. There’s a Uranium mill in Edgemont and he was the maintenance engineer on that project. So she had a job while I was gone there for a few months working in the mill. Away I went to the 27th OCC at Quantico.

RV: Was this the first time you’d been over to the east coast?

MS: No, I’d been there when I went on the cruise on the Wisconsin because we’d sailed out of Norfolk. I had an aunt who lived in North Carolina.

RV: Whereabouts in North Carolina?

MS: At the time she lived in, I believe the little town was Sanford. She lives in Raleigh now with my Aunt Helen, with whom my mother and I lived for years in Carlsbad. The two of them live in Raleigh.

RV: That’s where I was born.

MS: Oh, really?

RV: Yes, in Sanford. So you had some folks out there?

MS: Yes. When I went over there in’55 Dale and her husband Earl took me to Norfolk and saw me off and picked me up when I came back. I think. There was a train ride in there somewhere, maybe I took the train down to Raleigh down to Norfolk I’m not sure.

RV: Tell me about your impressions of Quantico when you first arrived [laughs].

MS: Oh my [laughs].

RV: How much of a shock was it for you?
MS: I flew into Washington National and I don’t remember how that all worked. I ended up going to Quantico on the train. When I got off the train there was a fine looking young staff sergeant standing there. I’m in a suit and tie and it’s September in Virginia and it’s hotter than hell. He said, “Excuse me sir are you here for the Officer Candidate Program?” I said, “Yes, I am.” He said, “get your as over there in that line.” Just very quietly. So he was herding them in like cattle. I expected harsh treatment. I had no illusions. I certainly was not as prepared. We’re doing such a much better job now of preparing, not just officers, but young kids. There are a couple of recruiters here in Twin Falls that recruited 15 [of] Buhl High School’s little graduating class of about 75. Gosh they’re out running and doing PT. By the time they go to recruit raining they’re ready. They’re country boy to begin with, but they’re getting ready, both mentally and physically. I didn’t get any of that, but I read enough and knew enough that it was going to be a tough place to be for a while. We were treated civilly. We were just structured. I had a great young lieutenant platoon commander. Of course I’m sure everybody I’ve ever talked to will tell you that. My platoon sergeant’s name was Baciagalupo and the sergeant instructors name was Sergeant Wolfmule. He was a full blood Indian. A lieutenant named Dougherty was the platoon commander.

RV: How long was your training there?

MS: Twelve weeks.

RV: What was the first week like? Was it very difficult for you to adjust? Did you find yourself drumming back into this military mindset that you had previously been in with ROTC?

MS: Yes, I was very comfortable. Forgoing your privacy and obviously control of your every minute is a shock for anybody. I had a real cool guy who was my bunkmate named Seth Warner. He was from Connecticut. His family was the last manufacturer of horseshoe nails in America. He was cool. I was at the platoon with a bunch of really fine guys. Our leadership was tough, but fair. Because I knew a whole lot of basic stuff, I knew the manual of arms, I knew the weapons, I knew how to march. I knew how to say “Sir.” So none of that was at all a surprise to me. I was very comfortable with it. As a result, I know now from having been a platoon commander out there that the first staff meeting that you had with the platoon sergeant instructor [staff]
they pretty well said, "We don’t have to worry about his one, this one and this one. This one over here.” So I was probably identified right away as somebody who would be ok. I was in pretty good physical shape. I was a little older than [most]. I was 24 I guess. I was a little older than the average, but not much. I was in fair shape and my weight was proportionate to my height. I could do all the physical stuff.

RV: What was your daily routine like?

MS: It’s been along time. The first week or two was garage cans down the middle of the squad bay and old reveille and all that kind of stuff that they used to do that they don’t do anymore.

RV: Such as what?

MS: I don’t know. The morning was just kind of a harassing time. I mean Wolfmule was always hung over. Bacigalupo was a tough little old Italian. They were both a little bit sadistic, nothing serious but they kind of enjoyed kicking those college boys asses out of the rack. They took turns doing it and they did it well. Then after the first 10 days or so things began to settle down into a ritual where the candidate platoon sergeant’s leadership began to run the place a little more. Harassment sort of tailed off.

RV: Were you identified as a leader early on do you think?

MS: Probably, yes.

RV: By your platoon leaders or by your comrades there in your platoon?

MS: I guess a little of each. I was not the shining star. W had a couple of former NCOs who obviously were head and shoulders above the rest of us by virtue of experience. So they were the early shining stars. Then later on I graduated in the top 10% or something I suppose.

RV: What kind of weapons training did you have?

MS: None, really. We didn’t fire a live round I don’t think. In OCS we fired blanks. We may have fam fired. Guess we did fam fire the M-1 and the .45. I can’t swear to that Richard, that was a long time ago.

RV: Had you handled weapon before outside of ROTC training?

MS: Yes, I’ve always hunted and fished. So weapons were something with which I was very familiar.
RV: How would you describe the training you received there from the Marine Corps?

MS: In those days that was called training and test regiment, T&T. That’s what they did. They were testing you more than training you really. The officer candidate school is an evaluation process. It’s intent is to separate the people who are going to be Marine officers from people who aren’t. So the training is really more a test than bonafide training. Everything is designed to stretch you physically or mentally perhaps. The training is adequate, it’s good. Better than adequate, it’s good. But that’s not really the intent of the course.

RV: Right that came from basic.

MS: That came from Basic School.

RV: Right.

MS: The basic school is what separates the Marine Corps from all the other services. It separates the young Marine lieutenant from his secondary counterparts in the Air Force or Army.

RV: How so?

MS: Well, I once had a gunnery sergeant who had been in the Army. Kind of explained it as well as anybody did. He said, “When I see a Marine second lieutenant I assume he knows what he’s doing until he proves otherwise. When I see an Army lieutenant I assume he knows nothing until he proves otherwise.” You come out of the Basic School, 26 weeks with a pretty good primer. You’re ready to function as an officer. You may not have it all in one bag yet, but you’re damn sure ahead of the people who haven’t had that training.

RV: This took place in Quantico as well?

MS: That’s right.

RV: Let me ask you a question about your basic before we move to the next stage. Do you remember the movie Full Metal Jacket?

MS: I didn’t watch it. I’ve seen vignettes and I’ve watched little pieces here and there. I don’t watch Vietnam movies well at all.

RV: We’ll get to that later. I wanted to talk to you about that specifically. The first half of the movie is about Marine Corps basic training, Paris Island on Quantico. I
was wondering if you had seen that and if that was even comparable at all. But you
haven’t seen it then…
MS: No, but I know The Basic School [and] recruit training and [they are] two
entirely different cats. OCS is more like recruit training.
RV: That was considered from what I understand by Marines today that was
considered the old corps. Today we have the modern corps. The old corps, the rumors
are, where they more physical with you in your training, personally at this school with
you?
MS: Yes, they didn’t hesitate to push you around or put their hands on you.
Later on when I was a platoon commander at OCS I had a young sergeant who liked to
twist thumbs and do little tricks like that. My last tour was at MCRD San Diego, so I’m
very familiar with the changes that have been made. Yes, it used to be a hell of a lot
more physical than it is now. To the point where abuse is not far off. You know?
RV: Yes.
MS: I was once a platoon commander at OCS hailed in front of the commanding
officer of the regiment there was a colonel named Fenton J. Mee, M-E-E, who was kind
of a pain in the ass. But would get a little vigorous with a young officer candidate named
Pologe, P-O-L-O-G-E. I remember him very well because he wasn’t hacking it. He was
falling out of the hike. I’d been carrying his gear and everybody else had been helping
him and al that. I gave him a little extra push as we came into the area and a couple of
FBI agents out for a Saturday stroll from the FBI Academy put me on report for being a
little enthusiastic with my assistance. I got my tail chewed. Yes, it was more physical at
the time.
RV: Are there any outstanding incidents that you remember from that basic
course?
MS: At The Basic School?
RV: Yes, sir.
MS: Yes, The Basic School leaves an indelible print on every Marine officer that
goes through it. I mean the stories you hear years and years and years later still relate to
The Basic School. It’s one of the things that makes the Marine Corps what it is. It’s a
bond that all Marine officers share. “When did you go to the basic school? Who was
there? Who were the instructors?” The instructors are generally pretty top fliers. You meet some of the great. When I was there Jim Day was a captain. I later served with him when he was a brigadier general and a major. He was the epitome of [what] being a Marine was all about.

RV: How would you define that? What a marine was all about?

MS: He was legendary in combat. He had two Purple Hearts from World War II, two Purple Hearts from Korea, two Purple Hearts from Vietnam. Later on he was awarded the Medal of Honor, when he was 72, I think, finally. For an action I think that happened in Okinawa when he was a corporal. He had been highly decorated in Korea. He was tough, but had a great sense of humor. Wouldn’t hesitate to drop you in your tracks was always the sense you got from him. I never saw him physically do that to anybody, but he was tough. He was a tough guy. He was also just a hell of a lot of fun and straight shooting and at the time he was teaching with a fellow named Bill Cartwright who was also a highly decorated Korean vet. The two of them taught tactics, which most of us really like anyway. They were just entertaining as hell and fun and fired straight at it. They dropped the Bravo Sierra. They were just the kind of people you say, “Well if I’m going to go to war, that’s the guy I want to go with right there.” They always set a great standard. Later on when the Marine Corps got so wrapped up in the physical fitness business, both these guys drank and smoked. Back in those days most people did. They were just the epitome of Marine Corps leadership in my view at that time. The CO of the school was a colonel who later became the commandant of the Marine Corps. Jesus, I’ve dropped his name right now, a Medal of Honor winner. The basic school was where it all happens. My platoon commander was a guy named Carl Mundy, [Louis Wilson] he was [a] first lieutenant and he later became Commandant of the Marine Corps. We were serving with all those names I’d read about. Everyone of them lived up to what I expected. So The Basic School, I’m still close to several of the guys, even guys who got out and didn’t make the Marine Corps [a] career and stuff. We still correspond and chat and all that. Because we were just pretty close. It was fun. I was a married guy. About 1/3 of the platoon at The Basic School was married. We shared two rooms and each of us had a drawer. Chest of drawers, that’s where we kept our stuff. We commuted. I lived down in Falmouth, Virginia, which is just outside of Fredericksburg. The other guys in
my carpool lived in Fredericksburg. Our wives were friends and all that. It was challenging, it was hard and all that. It was fun.

RV: Ann had moved out to Virginia by this time?

MS: Yes, after OCS I went back to Edgemont and picked her up. I had a ’57 Ford convertible at the time. We drove down to Oklahoma to visit, then drove from Oklahoma I guess back to Virginia.

RV: Did the training that you received at Quantico, did it prepare you for what you would face in Vietnam?

MS: Richard, I don’t think anything can prepare you perfectly for what you’re eventually going to see. I had a lot of experience after Quantico. After basic school I was really looking forward to going out to the Fleet Marine Force and being a platoon commander and all that. I think there were 12 of us. Of course they told us handpicked, but I didn’t [want to] ship back out to the Training and Test regiment, TNT to be platoon commanders in the officer candidate school. Some of those guys were guys who were still dear friends of mine and were great heroes in Vietnam, some were killed and all that. But from there I went up to the 2nd Marine Division and I commanded two rifle companies Mike Company 3/2 and then later India 3/2 [3rd Battalion, 2nd Marine regiment]. I’d had a lot of experience beyond The Basic School. If you look at the basic school and ask the question, “Does it prepare a Marine second lieutenant to go to combat?” The answer is probably, “Yes.” We don’t do enough with supporting arms. I know it’s a matter of primarily money, I’m sure. You don’t get the opportunity, at that time at least, now it may be better, I hope it is. You don’t get to work with live ordnance enough. But beyond that I think it prepares you about as well as anything could.

RV: You received most of your weapons training during your basic course?

MS: That’s correct.

RV: What did you train on?

MS: We trained on the M-14 rifle, the M-60 machine gun, .45 pistol, 81 mortar, no 60s. They took the 60s away after Korea and of course when Vietnam started they broke them back out. 60 mortars were the company commander’s artillery. Of course we trained some in helicopters. Helicopters were still relatively new at that point. Very
little with air, no Naval gunfire of course. Our weapons training for the hand weapons
that the infantryman uses was pretty good, fired a lot of rounds.

RV: This is in 1961, is that right
MS: That’s correct.
RV: ’61 ok. After Quantico tell me again where you went.
MS: I went to TNT there in Quantico, just across town. I did the 30th OC as a
platoon commander. I did the 3rd warrant officer class. I did the summer out at Upshaw,
which is the first increment PLC training. I did the 31st OC in the fall of ’62 I guess.
RV: Obviously they had pegged you a leader and someone very capable of
training other officers.

MS: Well, I don’t know what their point of view was. I just know I was serving
with some mighty fine officers. I was pleased and proud to be. You know one of the
things that my wife doesn’t like me to say I don’t think I’m a little country boy from
Calera and Durant and Carlsbad and a graduate of an institution that’s flashback [a small
spot] on the map and intellectually. Here I am serving with guys from the Naval
Academy and Stanford and other names. I was always very flattered to be a competitor
with the top of our guys, to the Marine Corps’ great enduring credit, the most democratic
institution on the planet. Nobody ever asked me where I went to school except to fill out
a form. Nobody ever said, “Well, hell, I can’t have some kid from Southeastern compete
with my Naval Academy boys.” There was none of that. I was serving with some great
guys. We all left there at about the same time, which would have been right after
Christmas of ’62 I guess. Along with several of the others I got assigned down to the 2nd
Marine division. I went down there hoping to go directly to one of the really good
battalions and I got sent instead to an outfit, the 1st battalion 22nd Marines. The 1st
division [battalion] 22nd Marines had been formed during the Cuban missile crisis in a
typically creative Marine Corps way. They sent the word out to all the infantry
regiments, “You will provide X Marines to go to this extra battalion here.” You can
imagine what the regiments did. They just dumped their trash. The 1st battalion, 22nd
Marines was headed by a guy who later killed himself named Moleski. The other officers
were recognizable for their inadequacy. The troops were a Goddamn mess. I’m telling
you if there was a renegade outfit that was it. I got assigned as the adjutant. Adjutant
and legal officer. When I walked in they had 22 court martials pending, 22 special
courts. I’d never even seen a special court. Here I am, a legal officer and I’ve go to put
these courts together, try these guys and get them out of the way and move on to other
exciting news. I kind of made that a full court press. We tried 22 of those crooks in, I
think, 21 days. We got them done. They were all simple, guilty plea. If you’re not there
and you’re supposed to be there, that’s unauthorized absence. If you’re gone for 50, 60,
80 days obviously you have a problem. So out they went. I was there maybe three or
four months. I began to learn something about the personnel system in the Marine Corps.
I had friends over in the Second Marine Regiment, lieutenants who really wanted me to
come over there and be in the battalion with them. 3rd battalion specifically. They put
pressure on their battalion commander who did what we used to call, worked his bolt a
bit. Then I got orders over to the 2nd Marines in the 3rd Battalion. At that time the
Marine Corps had the finest training and personnel beneficial program going. That was
[what] we called it “controlled input.” That meant you reported into a battalion and
you’re a PFC or a lieutenant, you’re going to be there two years. It was set up so that
50% of the people would leave every year. So you had room to promote people and
bring your own team along. He’d [You could] take a kid when he was a PFC or a
private and in two years the good ones would be corporals and be given leadership
opportunities. It was a terrific environment in which to work because it was orderly. The
kids could see the logic of it. The lieutenants could too, because a lieutenant would
usually go be a platoon commander or work in a rifle company one year and then maybe
be on the staff another year. So it was just an orderly process all the time. Half your
people were trained all the time. They turned around and trained the other half. Boy we
turned out some great battalions. I went down there because I’d made first lieutenant by
then. I went to be the XO of my company, executive officer of Mike company for one of
the great fine officers I’ve ever served with, George Slade, who was a captain and a
pretty senior captain, good operator and a good man. Great troops, great troops, good
NCOs. I mean it was a fun place to go to work.

RV: When was this?
MS: This would have been ’63. Then we were getting ready I went down there
in late Spring or early Summer. We were getting ready to go to a deployment to the
Mediterranean. We left on that deployment in September I think, maybe August. The deployments at that time were six months. That was a new experience. I’d never been away from Ann for that kind of period of time. By then we had a little girl, Pat [who] was born in ’62. She was a cute, little redheaded thing. I sure didn’t want to leave her. Away you went. We went to the Mediterranean and by then we’re pretty well trained. We made amphibious landings, the old style, down the nets all that stuff. Aranei Bay, Sardinia Almeria, Spain. Some place in Crete I’ve forgotten where in the hell that was. By the time you finished that deployment you were good. You were ready.

RV: How many men were under your command at this point?

MS: In the rifle company there was 205. Then with reinforcements you’re looking at 230or 240. What happened was George Slade’s son [got sick while] we were in Barcelona over there for the Marine Corps birthday in ’63. George’s son developed spinal meningitis and I inherited the company. Here I am a first lieutenant with a rifle company. I mean talk about a dream. It was the greatest thing ever. I was loaded. I had all this wonderful talent, all these great people. It was a hoot. I kept the company the rest of the deployment then we came home in February, March in there. That was the end of the cycle and half your people left. You joined all these brand new kids out of recruit training and ITR and all that. I’ve got a bunch of new lieutenants. There was a shortage of captains in the division. My time was up. I was [a] reserve officer and I was ready to get out. We had a marvelous guy come in as the new executive officer named Jack Westerman. Black Jack Westerman, Navy Cross winner from Korea, a piece of work. I mean he’d grown up on an orphanage in Oklahoma, on an Indian reservation. He wasn’t Indian. The Marine was God to him [laughs]. The Marine Corps was his parent. He was tough, rugged and [if] Black Jack Westerman chewed your ass, your ass had been chewed. Certainly he never raised his voice, but [at] any rate he called me in. He said, “What would it take to keep you in the Marine Corps?” I said, “Well, “I had about three or four months to go, but they would have rotated me out of the battalion obviously because they were moving in a new cycle. I said, “Well, if I can have a rifle company, then I’d extend for a year.” He said, “I’ll talk to the old man.” The old man was a guy named Jim Weizenegger who was a really fine battalion commander. So I got India Company. India Company had kind of been the weak sister of the battalion. I went
down and I got a guy named Larry Celmer for an executive officer. I got four brand new
lieutenants, three of who were really good and one was ok. We went to work and we set
up some very definite goals.

RV: Where were you stationed at this point?

MS: This is still LeJeune. Same complex, same battalion 3rd Battalion 2nd
[Marines]. So we put together at that time the Marine Corps squad competition was four
or five years old. Nobody had ever won it but a squad from Hawaii, from the 4th
Marines. We put together a squad for the squad competition. They did well. They won
the battalion squad competition and they won the regimental squad competition, then
they won the division squad competition. So they were off to the Marine Corps squad
contest. While all that was going on we’d also really worked hard on our drill. The
company won the division drill competition as a company. We won the division
marksmanship competition by qualifying the highest percentage of shooters in a
company-sized unit. So we were essentially identified as the best rifle company in the
division. I was the only first lieutenant company commander in the division at that time.
We moved on and deployed to the Caribbean and left our squad behind to compete in the
squad competition. I don’t know after about the first month or so the competition was
held and we won. We won the Marine Corps squad competition. So my company was
flying high and my reputation was pretty high. We were just having a hell of a good time.
The regular augmentation board, we were on the U.S.S. Fremont, APA-44, Filthy Freddy
Fremont. The regular officer augmentation board was meeting. I had not applied. I had
just decided I’d ride my extension out and get out because one deployment after another
you get a little discouraged. I was sitting in my stateroom, which I rated as a company
commander, in my skivvies. There was a knock on the door and it was Westerman the
battalion executive officer. He said, “I don’t see your name, I don’t see an application for
this board.” I said, “No, sir I didn’t apply.” He said, “I’d like you to appear before the
board.” I said, ‘Yes, sir.” I was in my skivvies and I reached for my trousers. He said,
“Just like you are.” So I appeared before the regular augmentation board on the U.S.S.
Fremont in my skivvies with no paperwork. Westerman said, “Do you want to be a
regular officer in the United States Marine Corps?” I said, “Well, yes sir.” He said,
“Thank you very much” and that was it. So I filled out the paperwork the next day.
There were eight of us that appeared before that board. Seven of us were selected. The one who was not was a superlative Marine officer named Kenny Jordan, Kenneth D. Jordan. Who, when he retired from Marine Corps was [a] colonel and was director of personnel in the Marine corps, a two star billet, Silver Star winner, force recon company commander. He was the one who didn’t get selected to be a regular officer. So much for boards.

RV: Were you promoted at this time?

MS: No. All that did was just change you from reserve to regular. We finished that deployment in March I guess of ’65. Well, the war was heating up in Vietnam. The Marines had landed at Chu Lai. We’re all sitting here saying, “How are we going to get to the war, because that’s where Marines go?” I get orders to be the CO of the Marine Detachment on the U.S.S. Hancock. Well, seagoing is a feather in an officer’s cap. Sort of indication of your record. In a normal case that’s be just fine. Plus it’s an overseas deployment without having to go to Okinawa for 13 months. I’d just come off a seven-month deployment and a six-month deployment. So, no choice, I left there and I don’t remember the days, probably late March, early April of ’65. We packed up and went across country again. We reported in to U.S.S. I had to go to a school on how to run a brig down in San Diego. My ship was at Alameda. Hancock was an old World War II 27 Charlie class carrier that actually had been kamikazed at Okinawa. It had upgrades in the decks and all that stuff, but it was an old ship. CVA 19 to give you an idea. The Enterprise is [CVAN] ’65. She was an older ship. I reported in to her at Hunter’s Point Shipyard in San Francisco in about April of ’65. Relieved a guy named Phil Kieselbach. Marine detachment and that’s a different deal. You’ve got 52 Marines. I got promoted to captain about that time, April or May. Fifty-two Marines, you’re responsible for ship security and security of nuclear weapons. You run the brig and you provide a ship landing force. You look pretty around in your blues and all that stuff, try to teach the Navy discipline. Something about the military I think we all agree is pretty unachievable. Splendid captain and was well received by the officer on the ship. Next thing I know, November 10th in ’65 we’re going under the Golden Gate Bridge on the Marine Corps birthday headed to West Pac. So we got over into the Gulf of Tonkin in the South China Sea area in December.
RV: Were you stationed at Yankee Station?

MS: Yes, all the time.

RV: Sir, you said when you came back from the Caribbean that’s when you made the cross-country trip over to California, correct?

MS: Yes, we had a new addition my son Michael Christopher Sweeney was born in January the 26th. He was later a lieutenant in the Marine Corps who served all of Desert Storm. When we trekked across country in our ’62 Falcon station wagon it was Ann and my daughter Patricia and Chris. No seatbelts, no car seats, just a crib in the back. It was different world then,

RV: Wow!

MS: It was [a] different world then.

RV: Times have definitely changed.

MS: Somewhat.

RV: You arrived on Yankee Station in the spring of ’65?

MS: No, winter.

RV: November ’65.

MS: Would have been November.

RV: Actually December ’65 I have here.

MS: You’ve go tot remember I’m an infantry officer. My knowledge of the airside thing was pretty damn slim. Here I was thrown in with the Carrier Group 5 and the ship’s company and the rest. I kind of got adopted by the air wing, a couple of squadrons especially, met some of the absolute finest human beings I’ve ever met. Great heroes and what they did on the carrier day to day is just hair raising by any other standard. I always found that Naval leadership was pretty poor below lieutenant. Their lieutenant commanders were commanders, mainly captains who were the first team of superior leaders. Boy, among those guys we lost over there were a true loss to American civilization because they were just great human beings.

RV: If I could ask you what did you understand of and what was your opinion of American policy toward Southeast Asia and Vietnam as you arrived in ’65? Obviously things had heated up to the point we were deploying ground troops in there in the spring and summer of ’65.
MS: I tell you, you can’t believe how ignorant we were of what was going on. I know it’s hard to comprehend in today’s communications. We had *Stars and Stripes* once in a while. I happened to go to work in the air operations center. They were short people and I wanted to make a bigger contribution. I volunteer to work up there and I did that for both my deployments aboard the Hancock. I saw a lot of stuff there that was classified stuff and all that sort of thing. You know we didn’t have satellite television, we didn’t have any of that stuff. We had a movie every night and we had internal ship’s television. We didn’t even hear the news on the radio. I guess there were short wave radios aboard, probably. We didn’t know what was going on other than our little world. I think probably in your experiences interviewing people, that’s going to be a consensus. Your world reduces to that little sphere over which you have some influence or which influences what’s happening to you. The larger picture is just in somebody else’s hands. That’s all there is to it. I knew I wanted to get on the ground and get in the war. That’s what I was trained to do and here I was could see South Vietnam, airplanes were flying and we had airplanes landing. I was begging to go ashore. It was really very frustrating. In fact, I resigned along about ’66 maybe summer of ’66 before we came home. I just knew I wasn’t ever going to get in the war and I was angry. I wrote a letter of resignation, gave it to the 1st Sergeant and told him to have it typed up. A few months later I asked him if he still had it. He said, yes, he’d been carrying it around in his pocket, but it wasn’t going anywhere. It was a frustrating time. The guys on the ship, the carrier crew, the pilots, the ship’s company and the rest of them were just true heroes, every one of them in my book.

RV: A couple of questions. First, what were you told why the United States was going into Vietnam? What were the reasons the United States was involved?

MS: Well, I guess the Domino theory was probably the most dominant, kind of philosophical reason we were given, political reason. We all understood that Communists basically were taking over the country that was in a hell of a mess. Our government felt it necessary to go in there and make a stand. In my own mind at least, I related it more to Korea than anything else. That we needed to draw the line from DMZ and say, “Whoa that’s it folks.” That’s kind of how I visualized it. We couldn’t even
keep up with whom the latest leader in South Vietnam was. We were professionals and
we were doing what we were told to do.

RV: What you just said just a minute ago about you wanting to get into the war,
get on the ground and get into the war, I think a lot of people who have and listen to this
in the future might not understand that mentality that you wanted to actually get into the
fight. I understand based on my studies and I understand Marines and other people want
to get it, but just for the record how do you explain that mentality? You have two kids at
home, you have a wife back in the States. There’s a lot to lose. I’m not saying that you
didn’t want to serve the country or anything. I’m wondering that mentality of actually
wanting to get in to the fight where you could be killed.

MS: I was a Marine infantry officer. I had commanded two rifle companies; I
knew what I was doing. I knew I was pretty good. My friends were there and that’s
where the Marine Corps was. I mean the heart of the Marine Corps is where the fight is.
I’m sitting on the outside looking in. I was serving and I was drawing my combat pay
and doing all that stuff, but I wasn’t where I felt my talents would have been best used. I
wanted to be a Marine. My first sergeant was a guy named Jack Chidgey and he used to
tell me, “You know, Skipper, you’re not [a] Marine until you’ve had a damn limb shot
off. You know you’ve got to get an arm or leg shot off.” He said, “Here I am, I served in
Okinawa, I served in Korea and I’m still in one piece. I’ve go to get over there and get in
the war.” I mean it sounds silly, but that was the mentality.

RV: So while you were on station on the Hancock, you never actually got into
Vietnam?

MS: Yes, I did. I had two great captains and they let me ride the C-1A when it
was going in and stay a couple of weeks and bummed around the country and visited all
my buddies and all that stuff. All that did was just frustrate me more. I worked awfully
hard on the ship in the strike operations center. It was kind of unique deal. You had
Marine infantry officer working in strike planning and all that while we were bombing
North Vietnam. I became pretty proficient at targeting, pretty proficient at I’ve forgotten
the name, choosing the proper ordnance to go on the airplanes and defusing and all that
stuff. I felt I was a pretty valuable member of the team there in strike ops. That made me
feel somewhat better. One of our duties there was to de-brief every returning flight. So
that became my job to write what was called an OPREP 4, Operation Report 4 form, which essentially said, “Here’s where we went. Here’s the ordnance we dropped and here’s what the results were.” I interviewed literally hundreds and hundreds of flight leaders when they came back from bombing missions. Then later on was involved in Alpha strike planning on two or three Alpha strikes that were pretty significant. Do what we’re told to do and that’s where I was and that’s what I did.

RV: Did that experience working with all the flight planning and the strike coordination help you later when you were on the ground?

MS: Absolutely.

RV: What other duties did you have on board the Hancock besides that?

MS: We had gunnery stations and air defense and that sort of thing. Of course we were forever shooting the drones and all that sort of thing. At one point, they were pressuring, they, the Navy were pressuring a bit to have the CO of the Marine Detachment and the XO of the Marine Detachment stand bridge watches, become qualified watch standers because they were fairly short. There was some correspondence back and forth between not just myself, but some of the COs in Marine Detachments asking the people at Headquarters of the Marine Corps, how do you feel about this? I would have been willing to do it, but I thought it was a damn poor precedent. Because I know how the Navy does things. Essentially they would have abused it. The CO of the Marine Detachment would have become Naval officer and to the neglect of the Detachment and still been held responsible for the duties of the Detachment. It was not a good street to go down. A couple of guys did it I heard later on, but generally speaking it was frowned upon and we didn’t do it. I was permitted to [work in] strike ops. We were working 16 to 18 hour days and seven days a week. When you went on the line at Yankee station as I’m sure you know, you were there for 40, 45, 55 days. I think the longest we were ever on line was 52 days. Those are 18-hour days, seven days a week without rest. It was a meat grinder. I’ll never forget those poor kids that had to hump bombs. The Hancock, as I said, was an old ship and didn’t have all these bomb elevators and all that stuff. Everything was by hand. You’ve got all these 500 pound bombs and bigger and 750 pound Napalms and all that stuff was being handled by the sailors in the
gunnery department of the ship, weapons department. It was a man killer. Those kids just kept on grinding. Boy, I tell you, they changed my whole view of sailors I tell you.

RV: What was your first impression of Vietnam, the country and people when you did get in finally to fly in and get on the ground there?

MS: I don’t know. I remember I landed at Da Nang and immediately got on a chopper that went out to Hill 55, which was ironically where I first reported in ’68. It was, “Is that all there is?” It was not terribly exciting. I don’t know I was pretty comfortable. I just felt well, ”Hello, this is what I’m trained to do here.”

RV: What did you think of the Vietnamese people, did you have any contact with them?

MS: Not at that time, no. Not until ’68 did I have much contact with them other than just seeing the kids and I think I got a haircut or two over there and stuff like that. I didn’t have any real opinion of them.

RV: Why is that?

MS: I just didn’t associate with them. I thought it was interesting to watch them. They were just going about life. You could see artillery going off, airplanes flying and bombs dropping off in the distance and here they are out in their paddies planting their rice or whatever and going up and down the roads on their bikes. Just kind of going on with their lives. I don’t know that particularly surprised me, I just thought it was interesting.

RV: What about Vietnam geographically the country?

MS: It was a beautiful place. It’s a beautiful, beautiful country. You know if you’d been there it was a beautiful country.

RV: Did the heat or weather bother you at all?

MS: I tell you I was more miserable on the ship. Yes, the ship had hardly any air conditioning. The water temperature in Yankee Station was like 85 or 88 and the ship was just essentially a radiator. I slept better and was more comfortable ashore then I was on the ship. At the time I was not here in the monsoon or not there in any particularly miserable weather during that period of time. It was just pretty benign actually.

RV: How would you rate the morale of the troops that you came in contact within ’65 and ’66?
MS: It was high. It was like the textbook. I was very impressed.

RV: So you’re there on the Hancock ’65 to ’66 into how late did you stay in ’66 onboard the Hancock?

MS: We went over in November. I believe we got back in July. We went immediately into the yard at Hunter’s Point again, then went back over in January of ’67.

RV: Still on board the Hancock?

MS: Yes, so it was just a repetition of the first time around only we lost a few more pilots. I made a couple of friendships there that lasted forever. A couple of them were two of the last guys on the Wall. I’ve never been able to bring myself to go to the Wall, but I know where their names are. Clarence Tolbert, “Smoky” Tolbert and Vern Donnelly who were both just wonderful heroes. Smoky had been the next to the anchorman at the Naval Academy, but he was middleweight boxing champion for four years. He was a handsome guy, he’d been a Blue Angel. Drove a racing green Jaguar XKE and was just all around a very studly guy. He won the Silver Star. He saw where a SAM came from somewhere near Vinh in North Vietnam and took a flight of what was then called “Iron Hand” birds. They were flak suppression missile birds. The [NVA] wouldn’t turn on their radars so Smoky just kept circling and circling and circling lower and lower until they finally couldn’t stand it I guess, and turned their radar on. Then when they turned the radar on, the Iron Hand birds went in and got the SAM site. Smoky’s airplane was shot all to pieces. When he brought it back aboard they just pushed it over the side. He was awarded the Silver Star for that. Then he got out of the Navy and flew for United for a couple of years and then came back in and was killed in, I guess it was ’75. He and Vern Donnelly were two of the last Naval aviators killed.

RV: Tell me how Ann handled all of this while you were over there on station, both of these deployments on board the Hancock?

MS: This made four deployments in four years, you know?

RV: Right, that’s tough.

MS: She’s a trooper and the Navy wives were really great to her. They had real strong wives group, support group and socialized together and did things together. Babysat each other’s kids so they could go do different things together. She’s just a tough gal. She lived there in Alameda in base housing, Naval Air Station Alameda. Our
neighbors were dear friends of mine. John Nicholson who was probably the finest leader of men I ever met Marine, Navy [or] whatever, was the air operations officer on Hancock. They lived right across the backyard. Ann and John’s wife Evy were good friends. She believed in what we were doing. She was just a great trooper.

RV: How much contact did you have with your mother during this time?
MS: Not much.
RV: And I guess through Vietnam?
MS: Not a great deal. I probably was a little neglectful about that. I wrote Ann nearly everyday. We have every one of those letters here somewhere. She boxed them all up. I wrote my mother occasionally and that was it. We didn’t make phone calls in those days and all that. So when you left you were gone until you got back.

RV: You weren’t able to patch through on the MARS calls or anything like that?
MS: No, not at that time.
RV: So in ’67 how long was that deployment?
MS: I got orders to the amphibious warfare school in Quantico. So I had to be back by early August. So we came off the line in early July ’67. I flew home with the air wing on July 14th on commercial air. I remember it because it was my birthday and we celebrated it twice. Once in Japan and once in Hawaii. That was a great experience coming back [with] those guys. These were giants.

RV: Tell me about that.
MS: Well, you were just so damned glad they were off the line and that they’d made it. We lost pilots regularly. You kind of held your breath all the time and boy I remember when that airplane touched down in San Francisco there was a sigh that went through that airplane. You felt. [I] could almost have lifted it back up. It was huge relief for those guys and for all of us. We had to hustle around and take our leave. Incidentally one of the nice moments you know how they “bong” dignitaries on and off Naval ships, “bong, bongbong, bongbong Captain of the United States Navy arriving “or whatever. When I left the ship at Yokosuka the captain has me bonged off. Said, “United States Marine departing.”

RV: Sir, why don’t we take a moment?
MS: I’m all right.
RV: Go ahead sir.

MS: I was aboard Hancock for 27 months. We were at sea, that is not tied up to a pier 21 of them. That’s the kind of schedule those carriers were on. It was just brutal. I was excited to leave the ship and head back [do] another damn cross-country to do [the] Amphibious Warfare School, which had been a nine-month [course] that had been cut to 22 weeks because of the war. Boy, when you walked into that classroom, I guess there were probably 60 in the class. I mean they were all guys who had either just come back or were en route or whatever. People like Bill Keys, who had won the Navy Cross, Silver Star, Bronze Star, I think that’s it, his first tour he’d just come back and he later became a lieutenant general, Commanding General Fleet Marine Force, Atlantic. Harry Jenkins who retired as a two star. It was a killer bunch of long ball hitters. It was a thrill to be in their company. Walt Boomer who became the assistant commandant led [all the Marines in] Desert Storm. [He’d become a four-star.] I don’t think many people know that he was in the lead tank when they cut them loose and went into the attack in Desert Storm. Just a whole bunch of really splendid memories. The Amphibious Warfare School was a terrific experience.

RV: tell me about the curriculum, what did they teach you?

MS: One of the things that still annoys me about it, and we’ve laughed about it over the years, they carefully avoided any mention of Vietnam.

RV: Really?

MS: Yes. They’re talking in generic terms about warfare. We’re sort of almost antagonistic about it. Several of the staff had not been over and they were majors and lieutenant colonels. We were all senior captains and majors. I don’t know whether that explained the reticence or I don’t know what the problem was. Finally Bill Keys stood up one day in class and said in his inimical way, “This is a bunch of bull shit. Let’s talk about the war. Let’s talk about what these guys [who] are going over next a[re] going to be doing.” He finally went on for must two or three minutes and he got a standing “O” from the whole class. Kind of embarrassed the faculty. It did loosen them up a little bit.

RV: Do you think the curriculum should have been kind of tuned?

MS: Absolutely, absolutely. What’s the point in talking about what happened on Guadalcanal when you’ve got a war right at hand to study? I thought it was one of the
few really stupid things I ever saw the Marine education side do. Generally speaking
they’re pretty progressive. In this case, I will never quite understand it than perhaps they
just didn’t have enough experience on the faculty to talk about it. I remember we got a
couple of guys right at the end of the course, Don Fulham who later became a major
general who had just come back from being a battalion commander gave me one of the
greatest pieces of advice I ever had. Became one of me three tenets of warfare. I asked
him at the cocktail party at the end of the class, he was a major and I was still a captain. I
said, ”Major Fulham I’m going over to get a rifle company in Vietnam.” I had already
waived my overseas control date and requested duty in Vietnam. I said, “I’m going to go
over and fight my ass off to get a rifle company in Vietnam. What’s the best advice he
could give me? He looked me right in the eye he said, “Every time you stop, dig.” That
was the best piece of education I got out of the whole damn school to tell you the truth. It
was geared toward operations and a lot of logistics. In my view at the time and still I
think I still feel this way, not enough tactics and not enough supporting arms. We never
taught enough supporting arms. I learned more in the coffee room talking to the guys
who had just come back and associating with all these good minds and there and there
ideas as and sharing their experiences and that sort of thing. Like most classroom
environments you learn more on the coffee break than you do from the lecture. That was
the most valuable part of it.

RV: So you left there in ’68?

MS: Left there in December of ’67. Made yet another cross-country. I decided
to leave Ann in Ogden. Her folks lived in Elko at that time. Elko, Nevada and Ogden,
[Utah] was a nice little three-hour drive. There was [a] military base there, Hill Air Force
Base, and just for whole bunch of reasons we decided that would work. So I bought a
little house that was the first house we’d ever bought for $16,000. Ina nice little
subdivision with a school right up the street, because Pat was starting school. She was
like in first grade. Safe, sort of secure part of town. I was real comfortable with leaving
her there. So I spent what little leave time I had pretty much getting this bare lot ready to
be lawned the following year. I left there in February and went to Tildon, no I think I
went directly to El Toro and flew out of Toro, end of February.

RV: You flew to where?
MS: I’m trying to remember if we stopped in Okinawa, I don’t think we did. I think we flew, I think we stopped in Hawaii and then just flew into Da Nang as I remember it.

RV: So this time around you’re on the ground and you’re commanding K company?

MS: Land, yes. Land in Da Nang go to the 1st Marine Division headquarters, checked in with the G-1 and then he assigned me to the 7th Marines. Getting around Vietnam is sort of a disorderly, orderly process.

RV: What do you mean?

MS: You essentially hitchhike. So I went to a helicopter pad that had Marine helicopters flying out of it. I said, “Is anybody going the 7th Marines re on Hill 55, south of Da Nang. Anybody got anything going to Da Nang [Hill 55]?” There was kind of an operations attempt deal there. Anything going to Hill 55, finally caught a CH-34 going to two or three different places. One of them was Hill 55. I got to 55 to meet the adjutant. The adjutant took me in to meet the executive officer who was a lieutenant colonel named John Love. He took me in to meet one of the most remarkable human beings who ever lived Reverdy Hall, the CO of the Regiment. Reverdy was a little 5’6,” wrinkled, chain-smoking, gravely voiced guy. He had a reputation. He had been CO of the 3rd battalion, 2nd Marines like the year before I went to the 3rd Battalion 2nd Marines. He immediately said, “Well I immediately see you were in 3/2.” I said, “Yes, sir.” He said, “What do you want to do over here?” I said, “I want to command a rifle company colonel.” He said, “How would Kilo do?” I said, “Kilo sounds good to me, sir.” He stuck his hand out. He had a reputation for loving commanders and eating staff officers. He was very cordial and they put me in a jeep and drove me over to Hill 37, which is not very far. The CO over there, S-3 was guy named Matt McKivet. The XO was Bob Woeckner, the 6th battalion commander was Roger Baynard. So I went through the process, me and him. Somebody said, “Why don’t you go for a little orientation around the country side?” The air liaison officer was a captain. He said, “I’ll go with you and show you around a little bit.” We got in the jeep and I don’t remember where in the hell we went. In the process of making this drive a South Vietnamese truck driver pulled across the road right in front of our jeep and we hit him broad side. To this day I don’t
know what I hit, but when I landed, my eyeball, not my eyeball but below my eye, was split from my nose all the way out to the corner of my eye. Typical Vietnam deal I hitch hiked a ride with ride with a truck and rode into Alpha Med and they sewed me up.

RV: This is your first day?

MS: Second day out.

RV: Second day out there.

MS: Then I hitch hiked another ride back on another helicopter. Got back the same day and colonel insisted that I lay around for a day. They told me that I’d have to go back to Hill 55 that’s where Kilo Company was. Colonel Baynard called me in and said, “the company commander you’re relieving is being relieved for cause.” I, to this day, don’t know what that cause was. I can’t remember his name and haven’t been able to for 20 years. He was not a happy camper needless to say. I reported to him, told him that I was there as his relief. He was in his little company command post and there was one squad down in Dodge City that had just been hit with a B-40. They had one dead and eight or nine wounded. They had another squad out Southwest of the hill. It was in a firefight. Nobody seemed to be in charge of these things. He said, “You’ve got it,” and walked off.

RV: That was that.

MS: That was that. So we extricated the squad, which happened to be led by a corporal named Merrill Runk. Runk had temporarily lost his hearing. He couldn’t hear anything. The other kids were, well we medevaced two or three of them. I don’t remember. Some of the other ones were minor ones [wounds]. The other squad in the other direction we got them extricated by sending a tank out and having them get on it. We were then lead to Hill 55, you know the times don’t make a lot of sense to me anymore. Maybe a week, ten days or something like that. They moved us down to Liberty Bridge. Did you get to Liberty in any of your travels?

RV: No, sir.

MS: Ok, Liberty Bridge, Da Nang, An Hoa, that became my area then for months. Liberty Bridge when I think back at it, it’s almost a cartoon in some ways. The seabees were there trying to re-build this silly bridge across the Thu Bon River. It had been built two or three times, twice I think, before, and burned down. This detachment of
seabees, 12-15 of them was in the process of trying to rebuild it again. We were providing security for the seabees. We were response units to two or three CAPs, the Vietnamese outposts that had Marine advisors with them. Usually a couple of corporals and a couple of PFCs or whatever. Also at Liberty Bridge at one of the strangest little things. There was an LSU, which is a tank carrying landing craft with a crew of three. These guys had been like abandoned. Nobody seemed to know to whom they reported. Nobody seemed to support them. Nobody seemed to know they were there.

RV: Were they Marines?

MS: No, they were sailors. They had all this equipment. They had an 81 mortar, they had .50 caliber machine guns. They didn’t have anybody to feed them, so we fed them and sort of adopted them. They became part of my defensive setup. The Seabees, God bless them, came over and asked if there was anything they could do for us. I said, “Yes, build a latrine for one thing. If we could steal the materials would you build us a little mess hall?” They said, “sure.” Had a remarkable gunnery sergeant in that outfit named Raymond P. Fitzhugh who was later on, the third senior sergeant major in the Marine Corps when he retired. He was a hell of a guy. He had a way of gathering things up. The material appeared that we needed and the Seabees built us a little [mess hall], we could feed maybe 15 to 20 at a time. But it at least allowed us to eat B-rations instead of C-rations. There’s a quite a difference in the level here. The kids had a place to go sit down and go tot the bathroom. We built a little shower of sorts. We had the river right there so that kind of hygiene wasn’t too bad. The other side of the river, the other end of the bridge is unprotected. We built a little combat outpost on that end that was a platoon outpost. Seabees came and dug the trenches for us. We set that up. We put a couple of 106’s out there and the North Vietnamese would routinely parade across in front of us with civilians carrying obviously rice and food and stuff going to Go Noi Island from the Arizona. The Arizona was two hours west. Go Noi was two hours [clicks] southeast. We’d sit there with the 106 and every time we caught one out by himself, we’d zap him. We killed a number of NVA like that. Finally and I swear I don’t know where it came from, but a .55 caliber ground mount machine gun showed up. Somebody welded an eight-power scope to it. We had three or four guys get so they could shoot the basket off a guy’s back out there at 1,600 yards. At a mile they were deadly. We ran a lot of
patrols. We lost several people with patrols and all that stuff. Then along in the times all
run together. But I guess mid or late March the battalion put together a little operation
called Jasper Square that was to the southeast toward Go Noi Island. Are you familiar
with that area? Do you have a map?

RV: Not in front of me, but I am familiar with that area.
MS: Yes, well Gannoi was the big bee in our bonnets because we knew they
were there in large numbers. Like I told the troops, “I’m not angry at him, he’s not angry
at me. Let’s keep it that way.” Because I couldn’t do anything with that size of the force.
We went out on a little sweep and got into our first real firefight as a company on that
deal.

RV: Would you go out there with a company?
MS: Yes.
RV: Can you describe, I guess describe that first contact with the enemy, that
firefight.
MS: We were sweeping as I remember south. Maybe southwest a little bit. Lima
Company was on my right. The other company commander at the time were Carl
Shaver, who had Lima company and Carl Holdaway who had Mike company and Chuck
Robb, who had Lima company.
RV: Chuck Robb from Virginia?
MS: Right. Chuck and I had been in the same company at Basic School, so we
knew each other pretty well. I knew Carl Holdaway somewhat. Shaver was a new guy to
me. Boy, all of them were great, just superior. So Shaver and his guys were on my right,
we were sweeping past a little hamlet, maybe four, five, six hooches. I thought Carl had
people in there, he thought I had people in there. The only thing that was in there was
about a dozen NVA. So they let my first platoon get by and then opened up on our
command group, it was close enough that two or three times I saw explosions behind me.
I was lying down behind a little rice paddy dike. About the third or fourth one I saw go
over it was hand grenades. They were close enough they were over throwing us. They
can’t throw a grenade very far. The gunny was laying right there next to me. I said
something like, “God damn this is not scripted. This shouldn’t be scripted play or
whatever.” We had just a hell of a fight going on. Lima Company was shooting us up
and we were shooting Lima Company up because we had the bad guys in between us. I remember getting so frustrated with that, I finally just stood up at one point and yelled, “cease fire, cease fire.” Even the goners [NVA] stopped. The whole world stopped for about 15 seconds there, long enough for everybody to get reorganized. Finally Carl and I talked to each other and he felt he had a better shot at them. He felt he was more behind them than I was. His guys came roaring in there and it just turned in to kind of a fistfight. I mean pistols and grenades and all of that. We killed, I don’t remember. We captured three or four. One of them was a warrant officer who was, as it turned out, a paymaster who had been going around paying different units. I remember I had a Kit Carson scout and I had him ask this steely-eyed little feller two or three questions. He was not interested at all in helping us. Finally I told the Kit Carson scout to tell him we were going to turn him over to the ARVN[s]. He kind of winced because he knew that wasn’t a good deal. The Americans were probably not going to mis-treat him but he knew the ARVN[s] would. Going out of the village, I left some wounded. I had, I don’t remember one or two or three killed right there. One of them was right by me. Between the gunny and I. The kid crawled up about three or four yards and was firing away and just went down. The gunny and I dragged him back about 100 yards from there and we couldn’t find any wounds. The gunny kept trying to give him mouth to mouth. Finally we discovered he’d been shot armpit to armpit. There was hardly any blood or anything. He died I’m sure right away. As we left those behind and Carl stayed, Lima Company stayed in the zone and brought the medevacs in. He had some casualties too. We were going out of the village, we were supposed to meet with the rest of the battalion, that was12 or 13 kilometers away. It was getting dark and we ran across another North Vietnamese soldier who had dug himself into the mud. The only thing you could see was his eyeballs. My Kit Carson scout found him and yanked him up. He’d been hit in the arm pretty badly. He couldn’t do much. I took him about 20 or 30 yards back around the row of trees and turned him over to a squad and turned around to go about my business and I heard whack, whack, whack. I turned around and they had him in the middle of a circle and were pounding on him pretty good. So we put a stop to that and got him medevaced. I don’t know what became of any of those guys after that.

RV: Did that guy start talking, the earlier guy?
MS: No, he didn’t. But he was not quite as tough looking after I told him that. He was just a professional. You know I’ve got great respect for those guys. They were great soldiers.

RV: You’re talking about the NVA?

MS: Right.

RV: What was your impression of the Vietcong?

MS: I never dealt much with them. We dealt almost exclusively with the NVA. The Vietcong no doubt set some of the booby traps we got into because the NVA didn’t like booby traps. You could tell when NVA units moved into an area because the booby traps would go away. But the Vietcong we lost a lot of folks to mines and bobby traps. I’m sure they were VC. We were dealing principally with uniformed NVA units.

RV: You arrived sir right after the 1968 Tet Offensive?

MS: It was still going on.

RV: What was the fall-out of that and what was happening where you were located?

MS: Well, we were murdering them. They made a terrible mistake when they came out to play. Their real advantage against us was their ability to maneuver in small units and work at night and do a lot of that kind of stuff. Boy, when they came out and engaged us mano a mano they didn’t have a chance. We’ve got all the air support in the world, we’ve got artillery. The way to fight the NVA was really very simple. One you found them, just hold them at arms length and pound the hell out of them with air and artillery and don’t ever put your troops up there if you can avoid it. That was my second maxim, “don’t take a step without a prep.” Why risk a Marine when I can blow the tree line away. I’m not going to risk one of my guys for one of their guys. Not going to do it if I can avoid it. Anyway that night we did a hell of a night cross-country maneuver with I don’t know how many switchbacks because the rice paddies were flooded and we were walking on paddy dikes and we’d have to do a 90. We were supposed to meet battalion at a railroad bridge; I mean I had [a] corporal named Williams who was a super compass guy. I’m a good land navigator too. Spent an awful lot of time outdoors and all that. I kind of have a sense about that. I’m petty good but I never could have done it without his help. He was essentially shooting the compass and I was doing the counting and making
adjustments and that sort of thing. We finally got to where I thought there ought to be a railroad. It was black as pitch. Of course here you are, you’ve got the whole rifle company strung out for 500 yards on these rice paddy dikes just inviting an ambush. I said, “I’ll go up,” and I got on my hands and knees and I went about 30-40 yards and I felt this vertical ground in front of me. That was the build up for the railroad tracks. We went down about a quarter of a mile and there was the damn bridge, I couldn’t believe it. We’d gone about 13 kilometers in pitch black and hit it pretty close.

RV: Were you still a captain at this point?
MS: Yes.
RV: How did you feel like your men performed on the field?
MS: They were superb. I think one of the most important things in talking with my counterparts over the years, it was pretty generally true. Most of the time you operated without many lieutenants. They just were casualties. You’d get a lieutenant, you’d get him about half going and he’d get hit or whatever. At any given time I don’t think I ever had more [than two]. I had an artillery FO named Jim Shaver, that made it the whole time with me. But my platoon commanders were forever getting shot and stuff. The Marine Corps in its infinite wisdom had promoted an awful lot of good sergeants and staff sergeants to lieutenants. So you were left with corporals. They were geniuses. They were amazing. I mean they’d learn so fast and they could do so much. I mean I had a corporal named John Lord who did eventually become a company commander in Kilo Company for a few hours. He could do it all. He could call artillery, he could draw patrol routes and give a five-paragraph order and call in air strikes and work with helicopters, whatever was required. I had three or four of those guys who were just superb. The kid Runk that I mentioned earlier, I kind of made him my jack-of-all-trades because he couldn’t hear for a while there. He really didn’t want to eave and so I called him my bodyguard. He took that very seriously. He did an awful lot of other stuff for me. He was in my back pocket everywhere I went all the time. Unquestionably saved my life on one occasion for sure.

RV: What did he do?
MS: Well, it was Operation Allen Brook, let me work my way to that.
RV: Ok, sir go ahead.
MS: So that little Operation Jasper Square was kind of a good warm up and we killed a few people and I began to learn real fast about supporting arms and realities of using supporting arms and the availability of it. How to have my company organized so that we were in control of all that all the time. So it was a really good operation for us. We lost three or four dead and a half dozen or so wounded. It wasn’t bad and we beat up two pretty good units, little units. Went back to Liberty Bridge and just a very few days later, hell it may have been a week or 10 days, [2nd Battalion, 7th Marines] 2/7 call sign was Cossack. Battalion commander was Ray Mueller, wanted to know. Went out on a battalion sweep on Go Noi Island, reconnaissance in force. We knew, my company knew what they were going to find out there. We knew they were going to get in a hell of a fight. So I kind of go the word out to my folks through the gunny primarily, “Get your stuff ready, get ammo distributed and get chow, get your gear ready. Get your weapons clean because we’re going to get involved in this damn sure as hell.” The first day we heard them get into a hell of a fight. It was about five [three] kilometers as I recall from Liberty Bridge out to Go Noi Island. I could be wrong but that’s close. We heard them get into a big bru-ha-ha. I had a radio on their battalion frequency and could tell that they were in extremes right away. At Liberty we had land line then. Reverdy calls me, the regimental commander’s call sign was Moveable 6. No, he called me on the radio. In his characteristic way he said, “Kilo 6 this is Moveable 6 how soon could you move to the support of Cossack?” [Cossack was 2/7’s call sign.] That’s the way he talked too, he was neat. I said, “We can be across the rive river in an hour.” He said, “Do it.” By then I had hem half saddled up anyway. So we saddled up and waded the river. We were en route in 30 or 40 minutes. I called him, Reverdy when I got on the other side of the river and said, “Moveable 6 this is Kilo 6 we’ve crossed and are en route to the support of Casak.” He said, “Kilo 6 I admire your alacrity. Out” [laughs]. Of all the things you expect to hear in that kind of situation, “I admire your alacrity” is not real high on the list. So we took off. We’re wet from crossing the river. We were in a hurry. Of course we were loaded for bear, everybody was carrying everything in the way of fighting gear they could carry. I was pushing pretty hard. I had a brand-new lance corporal, hospital man whatever E-3 [corpsman]. [He came] up and he grabbed me by the flak jacket and said, “Sir, you’re killing them.” I said, “What?” He said, “You’re killing them. The people in
the rear can’t keep up and you’re killing them. You can’t do this.” So I went back and
took a look and we were pushing a little too hard. I told the Doc, “Alright Doc, you’re
doing your job. You’ve done well, you’re off to a good start. Take care of them and let’s
go.” We started moving again and got into a pretty good fight right away. We used
Napalm that day for the first time. I think I used it at 200 meters. It’s awful close. I
remember the pilot said, “Say again range from friendly?” “2-0-0 meters.” He said,
”Ok.” He made two or three ID passes before he dropped it. I remember watching those
canisters come lose and there was no doubt they’d have killed us all. Of course he put it
pretty much on the money. We ended up that evening in a little place called Le Bac, little
village. My little command group, Runk and my radio operators Red Herron and Kalisho
and Jim Shey Bryan, there were five or six of us got a little separated. I remember we
stood in a sunken roadway there and watched the old women dismantle hooches that had
been built out of bamboo poles and palm fronds and stuff like that, that obviously had
been a hospital or shelter or some kind for the NVA. We ended up rounding up about 70
or 80 people and I remember hearing two or three times, “Let’s waste them.” I got the
gunny and I had [Lieutenant] Barney Blank and two men of the first platoon, Dick
Webber was the platoon commander of the 3rd platoon and I had a staff sergeant who was
the platoon commander of the 2nd platoon. I had a staff sergeant named Smith, who was
Jim Smith who was the acting gunny if Fitz was gone [home] somewhere on R&R or
something. I told him to get out there and get the word to those people, “That’s not what
we do.” So that put a stop to that right away. I sent the people back toward Liberty
Bridge. I’ll never forget there was one old patriarch who had about one tooth and looked
like he had to be 1,000. They all strung out together and I passed the word to all our fire
support people and all that to make sure the aircraft and nobody hits them because they’re
just civilians coming out. Even though we’d dug up all kinds of weapons and all kinds of
stuff, we don’t make war on those kind of people. The old man was the last one in the
line and as they stepped out of sight through a bamboo wall sort of thing he turned
around and flipped me off [laughs].

RV: Did he really?

MS: Yes. I’ll never forget it [laughs]. It was one little gesture of defiance. They
went on their way and we went on our way and got in that night to just all kinds of
harassment and grenades and all that stuff all night. I had a kid hit in the back of the head along the middle of the night. The corpsman said, “He ain’t going to make it if we don’t medevac him.” I told him there wasn’t any way I could bring a helicopter in the middle of the night. If I did, it was just not a practical thing to do. Have to hang on until morning. The kid was unconscious and didn’t look good at all. We got a helicopter in first light and got him out of there. About this time last year I got a call from a retired Marine colonel down in San Antonio. He said, “Did you have Gary Kilo Company on such and such a date in April ’68?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Do you remember a young Marine named so-and-so?” And I can’t think of the kid’s name right now. But I said, “Well, no.” He said, “Well he was wounded the first night of operations.” I said, “Oh yeah, I know who you’re talking about now.” He said, “He’s in my Navy league organization here in San Antonio and has been pretty successful as a business man.” The kid called me later on and we chatted and I told him, “I owe you an apology I’m sure because I sure could have caused your death.” He said, “If you’d have killed me I’d have forgiven you, because you did what you had to do.” Anyway we went on and that was just running gunfight for six to eight days along Ganno. We kept killing them and they kept pounding the hell out of us. I went out there, I had 106 [Marines] reinforced when I left Liberty Bridge because that was just the way it was. We got down to around 60 at one point. We got some brand new kids right off the airplane. They were almost more of a burden then they were worth because they weren’t in shape. You know the heat was awful. You mentioned the weather earlier, this was a period of time when the weather was a definite factor. It was not even 5:00 and 108 and nights and [over 100 degrees and 100%] humidity. We were using napalm and going through burned off areas. I lost a lot of people to heatstroke out there. The kids aren’t in good shape anyway. You think they would be. They’re lean, but they’re not eating right and they’re not sleeping much. They’re just not in real good shape. So, the weather was just bitter. The NVA poisoned all the wells. As they fell back they cut up water buffaloes and dropped the carcasses and the guts or whatever in the well, so we couldn’t use the water. Then we were out of water. I remember drinking water out of a caribou footprint, wiping the green scum off of it and just hoping to hell it didn’t kill me.
RV: Sir, how was combat? You said you were itching to get into a war onboard
the Hancock, now that you’re in it how did it feel to you? What was it like? Was it what
you expected?

MS: Yes, I tell you when there’s a real fight going on, you’re so busy as a leader
that you don’t really have much time to think about it. I mean I was just busy. We were
calling in air. We were calling in medevacs. We were shifting people around, we’re
moving people around. I remember in the middle of it, we got in a fight and we were in
an old graveyard. I was pointing to Barney Blank with my left hand, trying to get him to
move and yelling at him. You’ve always got a radio in your hand, a handset and all that.
I had a handset in one hand and was trying to get Barney to move one direction or
another. I remember the flash and the snap and I knew that something had happened. I
piled up behind a grave and Runk comes piling in behind me and says, “he shot your
watch off.” I looked down and sure enough my watch was gone. I haven’t worn one
since. I’ve never worn a watch since because of that. Runk says, “When you run to the
next one I saw where the fire came from. When you run to the next one, I’ll get him.” I
told him, “You give me the rifle and you run to the next one Runk.” Then I took off and
Runk had an M-14 he’d picked up somewhere. He fired three or four times and piled up
again behind me. He said, “I got him, let me go get him.” I gave him two or three
people, he took off and went and got his weapon and helmet and ID card and left him
there. He had a scoped rifle. There was no question he was trying to take me personally.
I took great offense to that. That was a rare incident when you felt you personally had
been designated as a target.

RV: Sir, were you able to get all the supplies you needed while you were in the
field?

MS: We couldn’t get water out there, was a horrendous problem. We didn’t have
a delivery system for delivering water from helicopters. They couldn’t land. The fire
was such that wasn’t an option. So they’d come in and they’d drop the damn five-gallon
plastic jugs, most of which would break when they hit. So water was a terrible problem.
You don’t need much food, everybody sticks two or three rations in their pocket and
that’s it. The temperature was such that everybody cut or ripped the legs off their
britches and were basically wearing skivvies, shirts and helmets and flak jackets and cut
offs. You don’t even carry anything to sleep in. Sometimes you carry a poncho. I
carried a little old space blanket that I could stick in my pocket. I found out later on it
was a by-product, a spin off that the troops could find me at night with that shiny blanket,
so that was kind of handy. I could just fold it up and put it in my pocket. By the time
you carry your fighting gear and in many cases, radios, everybody had to carry some
mortar rounds. Everybody had to carry some machine gun ammunition, everybody had
to carry some C-4 explosive. Everybody had several grenades. Out there we needed four
canteens. We actually just were carrying two, we needed four because we were going
through the water. As I said we couldn’t get water. You just figure SLA Marshall wrote
a great little book called *The Soldier’s Load and the Mobility of a Nation*. This
personified it right here. You were out there to fight and personal comfort just kind of
went by the wayside.

RV: How about your weapons, did you have enough ammo and did your
weapons function properly?

MS: Yes, this was ’68 and the M-16 they had cured the chamber problem that
had been around in the early ‘60s and the mid ‘60s. They’re just an inferior weapon in
my view and the view of a lot of other people. It shoots a little old .60-grain bullet. You
can carry a lot of ammunition and stuff like that, but aimed fire goes out the window. It’s
just an inferior weapon. The M-60 was [a] terrific weapon. The M-79, I had two or three
kids that could shoot that M-79. It was astonishing what they could do with that thing.
Supporting arms were absolutely off the page. We had everything at our beckon and call.
In fact we got hit the third or fourth day with 22 rounds of friendly 155 and eight inch, off
Hill 55. That was subject to investigation later on. “Every time you stop, the dig” rule
saved our ass. That was a rule in the company. We were out in a sandy sweet potato
field actually. Just soil and everybody had a little shallow hole dug and when those
rounds hit an artillery round, if you’re not in the crater, and you’re below the surface of
the ground you’ll survive. You may not hear well, I still don’t. You may have bloody
nose and extreme dislike for whoever fired the round, but you’ll be alive. After getting
hit with those 22 rounds I had three or four minor wounded and nobody seriously injured
or dead. It was strictly because I had abided by Don Fulham’s basic rule: “Every time
you stop, dig.” Anyway we ended up, I got acquainted with [the CO of 2/7] Colonel
Mueller in a 1,000 pound bomb crater, met with him once for about five minutes. That was our sole nose-to-nose meeting. After several days we started back out of there and we were tail end Charlie to the battalion movement. As I said we’re down to, I don’t know, close to 50, I expect. It might have [been] 60 [Marines] at that point. We had a tank with us and I got a call from an OV-10 pilot overhead. One of the first OV-10 s we ever saw saying that there were “hordes of gooks coming over the railroad tracks behind us.” That’s an exact quote. I asked the classic question “what’s a horde?” He said, “Many, many.” So I called the battalion Cossack and told him what the observer had said. It was barely dark. “Circle the wagons and we’ll do the same and we’ll talk to you.” I remember clearly we set up [a] little perimeter around that tank. You can imagine 60 guys and it was fairly open. We set up a pretty tight perimeter. I went around to every hole. By then Barney Blank had been wounded I think on the second or third day. He’d been standing on a tank.

RV: Standing on the tank?

MS: Yes, something I told him, “Stay the hell away from tanks because they draw fire and everything ricochets off the damn things.” There are a million reasons to stay away from tanks. There’s Barney trying to direct the fire of this 90 on a .50 caliber that was pounding away at us. I see him go down and lay there on the deck of the tank and his platoon sergeant was a corporal who came up on the radio. He said, “Kilo 6 this is 1 Alpha, the XO [Actual] is down.” I said, “I see him. We’ll get to him. Keep moving. You keep your guys moving on.” So they kept moving in the direction of the fire. The tank was firing away. All of a sudden in the middle of all this damn chaos, Barney [who] was from Georgia [and] he talked very slowly, had an oval pause that was sort of a lip-smack and all of a sudden my radio is out, obviously. This voice comes up, “Kilo 6 this is Kilo 1 XO [Actual]. Would you tell this tank commander to quit turning the turret my foot’s under it.” [laughs] So we finally get over to him and there’s a lot of stuff flying around and we get him loose and his foot out from under the damn turret. So he’s medevaced. He’s out of there. That leaves me with Dick Weber and Shaver. No, Shaver was not with me. Shaver was on R&R and gone.

RV: Sir, let me interrupt.
So when Barney Blank left, that leaves Dick Webber and Staff Sergeant Smith, who’s the acting gunny and I’ve got two corporal platoon commanders. That’s the leadership and at this point I guess I may have had 60 Marines left. I’m not sure. Anyway we’re tail end Charlie and we’re sitting there. I go around to each hole and they’re digging and getting ready and I tell them what the situation is. Here’s the deal. We’re told we’ve got a lot of enemy over into his tree line off to our west. By then I was pounding the hell out of it with everything that would fly. And the AO was working with me to get everything he could on that target. I remember F-8 pilots flying in under flares and swearing as they pulled out because they’d get vertigo after they’d come out of the darkness into the light and out again. I went around to each hole and about the second or third hole I heard “click.” I turned around and looked and the two Marines in the hole were putting bayonets on.

RV: Oh, gosh!

MS: That’s what I said exactly [laughs]. I said, “Oh, God this is not good.” I told them if this is Custer’s last stand we’re going to make a hell of a deal out of it here. Kids all just dug a little deeper and put their grenades up and got ready. I had about as much concentrated firepower going into that tree line as I ever saw deployed in one spot. They never bothered us except they mortared the hell out of us in the middle of the night. I remember lying on my back in the hole I was in with my radio operator Red Herron, Corporal Red Herron. We had a round, you could hear them coming toward us, walking towards you. Boom, boom, boom. One hit on the front side of the hole. You could see the sparks and all that fly up. Then one hit on the back of our hole. That wasn’t a real big hole. It was that close. Then there was one more night and they mortared the hell out of us again. It was raining and Red couldn’t find his handset. I heard the mortars going off. I’m yelling, “Incoming, incoming, incoming!” I can’t get Red to get the word out to everybody by radio because he’s flailing around trying to find his handset in the mud. I remember I grabbed him, bounced him off a tree. I’m not very proud of that and had at him pretty good. You know he was a great radio operator. Just one of those deals, he dozed off in the rain in the mud and the blood and the beer I suppose. The next day we trekked out tail end Charlie and as we crossed...Go Noi is not really an island, it’s really a peninsula. But in real high flood it becomes and island and that stretch where the river
runs through and cuts the rest of the peninsula off is all sand. We were crossing it and they are [a] real determined [NVA] mortar crew started shooting at us. It just pissed me off. I stopped my little .60 mortar crew, and we set up two tubes in the sand, just out in the bare open and just started shooting back. In the meantime I could hear my little lance corporal forward air controller yelling on the radio. He grabbed me in the middle. He said, “I got a flight of four F-4s over head” [laughs]. It’s the old “that ain’t no knife this is the a knife” deal because we had them pretty well spotted and marked them. Four F-4s can inflict a lot of pain and suffering and they did. We finished the hike another 300 or 400 yards and there was Reverdy Hall waiting to meet us. He counted them as they came by. He’s standing there with big old tears in his eyes. He said, “Is there anything I can do for you?” I said, “Get us beer and soda pop at Liberty Bridge.” You know most kids didn’t drink beer. Hell, they were too young. Most of the wanted a coke. By the time we got to Liberty Bridge there was a trailer there with beer and soda. So we went out and got back to our little place on Liberty Bridge and there’s Roger Barnard and Mac McKiver and Sergeant Major Trojanowski from 3rd Battalion 7th Marines telling me that we’re going to go back out tonight. I told Colonel Barnard, “I’ll go and Dick Webber will go, but my kids can’t do it.” He looked them over and looked at me and I could tell he was thinking some really unkind things about me, but I knew my kids had had it. So he said, “All right I’ll get somebody else.” He got Alpha 1/7. They went out en route four days and came back across the bridge. When they crossed the bridge Sergeant Major Trojanowski came up to me and said, “I’ve seen a lot of combat in my career in the Marine Corps, but I didn’t much like what you said to the Colonel the other day.” But he said, “I understand now perfectly. You were absolutely right to do that.” Made me feel a little better. So that was the end of Allen Brook for us. Allen Brook went on to become one of the most successful operations in the whole war. Just completely eliminated two regiments out there. It was, it went on for months. We moved shortly thereafter to An Hoa. I became the An Hoa defense coordinator, which meant I was the base commander and still had my company. We were there all of May, most of May and June, mostly patrolling. We were there at Liberty Bridge just before we went to An Hoa. This is something I will never forget. I see this column coming down the road, a column of Marines, and as they got closer I looked at them and they were the meanest and most
focused looking bunch of Marines I ever saw. I mean these guys would just scare the hell
out of you.

RV: What company were they?

MS: It turned out it was the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines. Colonel named Seymour I
believe was the CO at that time. I turned to the gunny in there, Smith I guess then. I
said, “That’s what Lee’s Army looked like right there. You’re looking at Lee’s Army
right there.” They shambled down the road. They weren’t running and they weren’t
walking. They were carrying nothing but fighting gear. They all were a little bit
individual. You know Marines are famous for all uniforms are exactly the same and all
that. All these guys had a little bit of personality. I recognized one of them was a
sergeant who had been my supply sergeant in Mike Company. His name was Loucks.
He was a gunnery sergeant. I yelled at him and he came over. He was carrying a tommy
gun I remember. They were going out on Allen Brook. I gave him a quick rundown and
the battalion commander came over and I gave him the run down of what we’d
experienced and kind of what to expect and all that. They went on out. Well, later on
when we were at An Hoa, we saw them again and then I ended up being the operations
officer of that battalion later on. An Hoa was relatively quiet for my guys.

RV: How far away was this from Liberty Bridge?

MS: I should know that exactly. That’s about 12 clicks.

RV: North or south?

MS: Southwest [southeast].

RV: It seems like you had really good coordination between your troopers on the
ground and air support.

MS: We were magnificent. I mean, our air, it was just, it was overwhelming at
time. The spotters, the airborne guys. OEs and OV-10s they’d be there in five minutes
or so. Once you had them, then you really had it going. My guy on the ground, my lance
corporal and corporals on the ground were terrific at calling in air support. The pilots
were wonderful and accurate for the most part. We did get rocketed on Allen Brook by
our own aircraft. I’ve read a lot of stuff since that implies and some of it’s rumor. I don’t
know what’s fact and what’s rumor out there. But there [rumor] was an American
turncoat or whatever, that called in both the artillery strike that hit us and the air strike that hit us.

RV: On that operation?

MS: On Operation Allen Brook. We weren’t the only ones who got hit by friendly fire on that thing. That’s been a rumor for years. I don’t know what’s true and what’s not.

RV: Sir, what do you remember most about combat today when you think about it?

MS: I think about supporting arms I think more than anything. I became a real artiste if I do say so with supporting arms. I had this wonderful lieutenant Jim Shaver from Montana who was just terrific. We just don’t take a step without a prep was serious business with us. If we moved we had artillery walking down our flanks. If we had any doubt whatever we had air overhead and on call. We used supporting arms the way it’s supposed to be used. There was an abundance of it. Boy, I just wasn’t bashful at all about using it. I think about that, you always see the faces of people you lost and people who were hurt and all that. When we walked off Go Noi Island there was I think 56 of us left out of the company. I’d had very few killed, but many, many wounded and heat stroke and the rest of it. One of the saddest things about that whole business was that when you had a kid hit, you lost him. When Barney got hit, I didn’t hear about him again for maybe a month or six weeks. I get a letter from him. I get a letter from U.S. Naval Hospital Guam. Now, Barney had been hit in the head, but obviously it wasn’t that serious. He’d had his foot put in a squeeze, but there was no reason for him to be in Guam. I have the letter somewhere it’s priceless. It said something like, “Dear Skipper, you may wonder why I’ve not reported back for duty. I got as far back as Hill 37 or Hill 55 and the 1st sergeant and I were watching Combat [the TV series] on television and the 1st sergeant said, ‘Lieutenant those are not on the TV, those are real’.” He said the next one came through the roof and got them both. Barney got hit in the legs and the 1st sergeant got a minor wound out of it. So Barney had his two Purple Hearts and that was it. Two 48 Purple Hearts, and two 48 hour hospitalization with Purple Hearts you went home. So Barney went on home.

RV: Sir, were you ever wounded?
MS: No, I had the great good fortune not to ever be wounded.
RV: Can you describe the leadership you had in Vietnam, beginning with your immediate superiors and then overall American military? And then overall American political leadership in Vietnam?
MS: I’ll start at the top. I knew it sucked big time. But until I read Dereliction of Duty I didn’t realize how badly it did.
RV: JCS. The book on the JCS?
MS: Well, that young Army major wrote.
RV: McMasters.
MS: McMasters, yes. I knew from the Hancock and the bombing halts, I knew the absurdity of all that stuff. I knew in my heart that we weren’t there to win it, which profoundly affected the way in which I employed my troops.
RV: Why did you know that? Why did you feel that?
MS: You just, you don’t stop bombing if you plan to win. You don’t treat those people like we were treating them if you’re planning to win. I mean it’s just obvious. I was very cautious. I’m one of those people and I know several, not several few. I don’t think I ever wasted a Marine. I don’t think I ever lost anybody through being overly aggressive or stupid. That’s been important to me over the years when I’ve gone back over this and tried to. You can’t help but wonder why am I here? Why did I leave kids dead behind me? I honestly believe I can say that with all my heart. I had no confidence whatever in McNamara. McNamara was a damn joke from the beginning. I mean the McNamara line and all that nonsense; I mean these people in uniform are not stupid people. When you see the meddling. I remember on Hancock sitting there with pilots in the aircraft, engines ready to turn, waiting for the White House to tell us whether or not we could bomb some little obscure bridge in North Vietnam. That is not a commitment to win. I mean I may have been 32 years old, but I just was not stupid. I had no confidence whatever in the overall strategy, none whatever. Marine Corps leadership and Naval leadership that I experienced was generally very good. Dancing Bobby Cushman was the CG of 3-MAF when I was there. I had considerable contact with these people because after I left the company I got drafted to be the general’s aide for the, the aide to the commanding general of the 1st Marine division.
RV: That was in 1968 as well right?
MS: Right, that was in July of ’68.
RV: Why were you selected for that position?
MS: I don’t know. As Reverdy Hall used to say, “Ah, ha, ha. Big Mike Sweeney Goddamn general’s aide.” He’d shake his head and laugh every time he’d come to a meeting or we’d go out to visit the 7th Marines and there he’d be. I’d be all clean and shiny and well-fed and all that.
RV: Go ahead.
MS: Well, after I went up to being aid I routinely sat in on meetings and arranged travel and was around Cushman and all the other generals quite a little. I wasn’t overwhelmed with any of them. They were all pretty good folks.
RV: Did they seem really frustrated with what was coming out of Washington?
MS: Yes, they were very private about it, but we all knew. We all knew it was stupid.
RV: Did you think the cause was worthy, a democratic South Vietnam?
MS: I did. I really can’t speak for anybody else, but yes I did. I don’t think it’s right for anybody to have to live under Communism and I’m sorry they do today. I never gave up on the cause and I was around General Lam quite a little. I saw two or three other ARVN generals that I really had some respect for. I’ve always wondered what became of General Lam, he wasn’t bad at all. I had a great deal of respect for them. I’ll tell you, one of the things about the leadership that I still think we did wrong. We never should have built a hardback building in Vietnam. We never should have had Southeast Asia hut in Vietnam. The generals ought to have been living in tents. That would have expedited some of the military operations. I was shocked when I left a [my] rifle company and we were pretty comfortable at An Hoa. I mean good grief we had a mess hall, we had showers, and we had real latrines. We were living very well for a rifle company at that time. Then I go back to the rear and good grief one of my jobs as the aide is to run the general’s mess. We’re serving prime rib and wine, and I’ll never forget a colonel telling once that I shouldn’t serve wine at room temperature. A given wine at room temperature, it should have been chilled. I’m thinking, “You ought to be eating a C-ration
somewhere.” I didn’t approve of. We made life too good for our senior level I think. I still don’t think that can be justified.

RV: What rank were you when you were the general’s aide?

MS: I was a captain until I got promoted in November of ’68 I guess. Another kind of interesting sidebar about that aide business, I needed a junior aide, general aide, captain and a lieutenant. I had met this young lieutenant from Kilo 3/5, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines who had really impressed me; he was very impressive. He’d spent the whole 13 months in Kilo Company. Started out as platoon commander, became the company commander and a first lieutenant. Won the Silver Star, had been wounded I don’t remember once or twice. He stopped by to see me and his tour was up. He wanted to extend [in country] and stay another six months but he didn’t know what he wanted to do or what was available or whatever. So I said, “Hey, how would you like to be the junior aide for six months? I need a guy, you work for me.” So he said, “Sure.” He worked for me for six months. His name was Fredrick W. Smith III. Does that name mean anything to you?

RV: Fredrick W. Smith III?

MS: Right.

RV: Not off the top of my head.

MS: I’ll tell you. We sat watching Da Nang get mortared one night in a foxhole. He described to me this business he wanted to start when he got out of the Marine Corps when he got out of the Marine Corps of flying the mail overnight from point A to point B. It’s Fred Smith of Federal Express [laughs].

RV: Yes, yes.

MS: Smitty worked for us for six months. He’s a great guy. We had a lot of fun together. He extended again to be a backseat guy in OV-10s. He was an aerial observer for six months. When I was the 3 of 3/5 we were way out on Elaja Borseat [LZ Tomahawk]. He’d fly over and drop me notes or send me a message on the radio or something. “Do you need anything? Can I drop you a bottle of whiskey or anything? Do you need any B-52s to day or whatever?” He was a great guy. That level of leadership, these guys were great professionals. They couldn’t change the system. The system was what it was. I met a lot of guys who became generals later on and had great
careers and all that stuff. It was certainly a totally different viewpoint, or point of view.

Not viewpoint, but point of view. I made my mind up at that point that I didn’t care a thing about being a general. I don’t want somebody scheduling every minute of everyday for me. The general used to take off Sunday afternoons from 1:00 to 3:00 and that was it. I worked for General Carl Youngdale who was a very fine man. In fact, Smitty and I sort of inspired Operation Meade River, which was very, very successful operation. We cornered the general one time and told him about Dodge City and what we believed was out there and all that stuff. He got the G-3 who was a guy named [Colonel] Schwenk who later became a three-star [and] who had been CO of the 27th Marines. He was a familiar with Dodge City and that was really the genesis of the operation.

RV: Was the general receptive to what you had to say?

MS: Oh yes. He was just a good man. Kind of a professorial [type] I thought. He was 52, I thought that was old at the time. Of course now, I’m 66 so it doesn’t sound so old. Yes, he was very receptive.

RV: How long were you doing that as his aide?

MS: I was there from July till December.

RV: Did you prefer that versus being in the field?

MS: No, it just killed me to leave my company, it broke my heart. I had to go in for an interview and they flew me in from An Hoa in a damn helicopter and I go report into the general and I’m looking pretty scruffy. I was real grumpy. I just told him, ”Sir, I don’t want tot be an aide. I’m not the kind. Get some slick guy from Stanford or something. I’m not aide material. [Please] just leave me where I am.” He said, “No, I think I want you to do this. I think it will be good for you.” Incidentally that was the 5th of July. One July 28th I was sitting in the morning briefing. Well, July 29th. I hear this awful account of Kilo 3/7, my company having been in a horrible fight on the 28th. I excused myself and borrowed the general’s jeep and drove down to Alpha Med, which was just down the hill from Alpha [1st Division] headquarters. The first person I see was gunny Talanian, who was my last gunnery sergeant. He’d been shot through and through the, in the chest. The whole damn ICU was filled with my guys. The gunny told me, “Make sure Sergeant Lord gets the Medal of Honor or the Navy Cross or something because he saved our butts and took over the company and all that.” The man who
relieved me was, had them on an operation that went wrong and 28 of them were killed
and I don’t remember the exact number. Sixty or 80 wounded in one hour, one
afternoon. The guy who, the company commander was one of the first down and all the
officers were killed and all the NCOs were [killed or wounded], every time they’d move
they got shot. So Corporal Lord who had just made sergeant came up on the radio and
said, “This is Sergeant Lord I am now Kilo 6” and started getting medevacs going and
getting close air support in closer. According to Talanian he went out six or eight times
[and brought wounded back]. This is one of those 30 or 40 yard fights. I mean the
enemy’s that close. By then they had learned that the only way to fight us, is just get us
by the throat because if they were 100 yards away we’d blow them up with artillery or
air. Lord had personally dragged six or eight dead or wounded Marines back. I mean he
just was an incredible hero.

RV: Did he ever get one of the awards?
MS: Well, that’s another long story. Red Herron my radio operator had been on
R&R and he had flown back into Da Nang and had heard talk at the airport about Kilo
getting shot up. So he had hitched a ride over to Alpha Med and he walked in while I
was there. I said, “Red get statements from everybody you can, and see to it that they get
to the.” No I think I had him bring them to me.

RV: Get the statements and then bring them on to you?
MS: Yes. I forwarded them to the battalion. Basically thought no more of it,
because I was busy with my work and they were busy with theirs. Years later at
Corvallis in Oregon State I looked up and here’s a young Staff Sergeant John Lord
standing in my door. He’s assigned to the officer selection team out of Portland. He’s
wearing a Navy Commendation Medal, which I knew he’d had from his first tour. A
couple of [purple] hearts or whatever; nothing blue certainly. So we sat down and I said,
“Where’s your Navy Cross?” He said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” So
that started [it], and I wrote letters and got statements. While I was at Headquarters,
Marine Corps in mid-70s both Roger Barnard who on the 28th of July the battalion was
changing command. Barnard was giving up command to, I had his name just a second
ago. I worked for him later on when he was a brigadier general. Francis X. Quinn. Is
that right? I believe that’s right. Anyway.
RV: Was the paperwork lost in that shuffle?

MS: Somehow or another the paperwork never got where it was supposed to get. But they were both at Headquarters Marine Corps one day. I was working at headquarters Marine Corps and I grabbed them for lunch. They were both colonels. I said, “Ok here’s the deal,” and went through and gave them the package. Went through the whole mess with them and they wrote tepid statements because the Marine Corps doesn’t like to celebrate adversity. That’s unfortunate because some of them most heroic acts are committed when things aren’t going very well. [That’s also when the fog of war is most dense.] I don’t know what the motivation was. I certainly would not accuse either one of those, both very fine men with anything but the best. At any rate, that summer which would have been like ’73 or ’74 John Lord finally got a Bronze Star at Camp LeJune.

RV: Did you feel like that was enough?

MS: No, I’ve never. I’ve always felt terribly about it, but you can only pursue those things [so far]. If you don’t have sufficient statements and of course it so often happens in the worst situations [when] all the officers were gone. So there were no statements from any officers other than the two-battalion commanders who were long far removed from the scene. They can only write what they’d been told. Not what they can attest to.

RV: It sounds like you did everything you could.

MS: I tried but I didn’t get it done. I’ve never been very happy about it. I’m part of the damn system because when I was a company commander I had kids daily who should have probably had some kind of personal award. It makes me shutter to think how many Marines I sent home with no legs or no arms or three Purple Hearts and not even a little old Navy Com or a little old Bronze Star. You know? I got on the airplane to go home, I’ll ever forget it. Every damn GI in there had on a Bronze Star. I thought, “What have I done?”

RV: What do you think of the award system?

MS: It stinks. It just needs complete revision.

RV: Even today you think?

MS: Oh, I’m sure. Yes. Positive. We’re too parsimonious with them. I don’t think we ought to diminish the standard, but I think we’ve got to be more attentive even
perhaps the point of having a billet within a battalion at least that is responsible for
making sure those things happen. There’s no continuity. I happened to work when I was
an operations officer in the 3rd battalion, 5th Marines for a guy who was very frankly lazy
[unwilling to write awards]. We didn’t do the job. We did not take care of our people in
that way. I don’t feel I got recognition that I should have had and I don’t feel I
recognized people I probably should have. I know I should have. Not probably, I know I
should have. It was one of those things when you just think, “Hell that’s our job. That’s
what we do. It’s a hazardous way to make a living.” But then you turn around and you
find out, gee there’s a whole different standard over here, but whatever. Anyway being
the aide was a different experience for me. The general took really good care of me and I
learned a lot. When it came time for the general to leave he said, “What do you want to
do?” I said, “I want to go back to the field.” By then I’m a new major and he said, “Let
me talk to the G-1.” The G-1 called me and said, “You want to be the S-3 of the 3rd
battalion, 5th Marines?” I said, “Who do I have to kill to get the job?” He said, the
general bless his heart, he said, “Before you go anywhere we’ve got an empty seat on the
plane to Australia for R&R. I want you to go to Australia.” So I went down there for a
week and came back and took a shower and saddled up, landed on a helicopter in a damn
fog bank on top of a hill way over by the Laotian border, and joined the 3rd battalion, 5th
Marines as the operations officer. Hard dudes I saw coming down the road at Liberty
Bridge six months before.

RV: You got to join those guys?

MS: Yes, and they were still hard [laughs]. We were living hard. We were on an
operation over in those mountains for all the winter of January, February, March of ’69.
We had one hot meal in that period of time. It was different. That was over there in cold,
wet mountains. Froze to death, never been so cold.

RV: Sir, let me pause it just for a second.
Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m continuing my oral history interview with Lieutenant Colonel Michael Sweeney. I am in Lubbock, Texas on the campus of Texas Tech University. It is November 19, a little after 2:00 in the afternoon, Central Standard Time. A little after 112:00 Pacific Standard Time. You are, Colonel Sweeney in…

MS: I’m in Mountain Time.

RV: You’re in Mountain Time yes in Idaho.

MS: Yes, right.

RV: Great. So we left off discussing we had gotten to the point where you were aide to the general in the 1st Marine division. We discussed that a little bit and we discussed some general topics. Would you like to continue with picking up there in the fall of ’68?

MS: Right. Well, I was as I said the aide for about six months. General Youngdale’s entire tenure as a commanding general of the 1st Marine division. First Lieutenant Fredrick W. Smith III was my junior aide. Of course we worked hand in hand on all, everything we do with the general. Had a most interesting tour. When it ended the General Ormand Simpson came in and relieved General Youngdale, and the general obviously one of the blessings of being an aide is you’ve got a guy at the top who can kind of help you go, where you want to go. He asked me what I wanted to do. I had several months remaining in my tour. I wanted to be a guy who was a freshly promoted major. I think I was promoted the 1st of November ’68. I requested duty as the operations officer of the 3rd battalion 5th Marines, a billet that I knew was coming open on the first of the year.

RV: As I recall you did want to get back in the field.

MS: Yes, well that’s where the war was. I felt prepared to do that. I was a graduate of the Amphibious Warfare School, which is the kind of prep school for operations officers and that sort of thing. Having been a company commander I really wanted to be the S-3 for an infantry battalion, the S-3. That’s the operations officer, and so I got the assignment to go out and relieve the officer who was departing the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines. As I recall he had been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. At any rate his tour was up in the field and he was going on to something else. I reported in to
the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines on top of a foggy hill, 27 kilometer west of An Hoa. Which
puts it over not far from the Laotian border in the mountain country of that part of South
Vietnam. I remember going into the zone in terrible fog and all that stuff. It was a long
way from the nearest friendlies. The battalion was out there operating independently. As
I remember and I’m sure I’m right, we were OpCon, that is 3rd Marine Regiment was our
boss. We were under the operational control of the 3rd Marine Regiment. That
commanding officer was Colonel Mike Sparks. The commanding officer of the 3rd
Battalion, 5th Marines was Lieutenant Colonel Harry Adkinson. Good old South Carolina
Citadel graduate. Very fine officer with a splendid reputation. He’d been a battalion
commander for about nine months at that time, which was very, very, very long for a
battalion commander. Normally about six months was it. I remember feeling not overly
welcome when I reported in; probably because I had just come from the rear. Like all
good combat Marines anybody who comes from the rear can’t be all good. The fact that I
had been a company commander helped, but didn’t mitigate the situation entirely. I
cannot remember the name of that liaison [operation] to save my life. I’ve been trying to
remember since we talked last and I cannot remember the name of it. We were only there
three weeks. I ran across a map that I had kept, laminated topographical map that I
operated off of that I’d actually carried in my pocket. I mean that was what we operated
off of. I have the last operations plan that I, not the last, but an operations plan that I
wrote up [after we were] ordered to move from that LZ about six or eight clicks further
west to LZ Tomahawk. Since we were so far from friendly artillery and everything, we
were at the real edge of the .175mm howitzer range. That’s as far as they can shoot. So
we set up a little different. I planned and executed moving our 106mm [recoilless rifles]
platoon into a position where they could fire directly on the hill mass that was LZ
Tomahawk. The highest hill, highest part of the three-hill complex and the highest part
of it was Hill 417. Which means it was 417 meters high above sea level. We moved
there on January 25th and everything went very well we had no contact, no discussion
with the enemy at all about our move. Crossed the river below the hill mass without
incident. Got set up on what is a peninsula. It sticks out like a beak going northwest into
the river. The river then goes around it. That’s the Song Bu, Song Cai I think it is, the
river. Song being the Vietnamese for river. C-A-I. We moved into Tomahawk and set
up house keeping in there and moved in a battery of 105s and built two landing zones.  
One for the artillery battery and one for us in the infantry. Set up in three separate  
perimeters around the tops of the three little hills as I remember. I think we had two  
companies on 417 and then a company each on the other two little hillets. The artillery  
proceeded to fire H&I, harass and interdictory fires on a lot of routes of supply and all  
that stuff that could only be reached from positions out where we were. We got mortared  
quite a little. We’d get a little trouble from people trying to infiltrate the lines, but it  
really was pretty quiet for most of the time.

RV: What were your rules of engagement there?
MS: Everything was Indian. It was all Indian country. There really were no  
civilians other than a few indigenous. Oh gosh, I’ve forgotten what we called them.
RV: The montagnards?
MS: Yes, montagnard folks back in there. We’d find a little montagnard  
settlement once in a while. We tried not to bother them and they didn’t bother us.
RV: How much interaction did you have with them?
MS: Very little very little. They’d run like hell when they saw us in the area.  
They’d disappear. I’ve been in villages where stuff was still hot, food was still hot and  
things like that and they’d be gone. They were sort of zero-factor in the deal. After we’d  
been there I don’t know two or three weeks, Colonel Sparks and Sergeant Major  
McClintock, I remember him very well. He’s a really fine, dignified pipe-smoking sort  
of professorial sergeant major. A very impressive guy. Colonel Sparks came in and  
wanted us to go northwest about 12 or 14 kilometers and set up another fire support base  
for an artillery battery.
RV: How close were you to the Laotian border at this point?
MS: I really don’t have [that]. My map doesn’t quite reach the Laotian border,  
but I think as the crow flies we were no more that maybe 20 or 30 kilometers. I’d been in  
country quite a while by then. If you’re at the end of [the line]. I mean you’re only  
supported by helicopters and somebody says something you don’t like; you really don’t  
care too much. You don’t mind saying you don’t like it or you object to it or [if you  
think] there’s something wrong with it. I objected somewhat to the idea. He wanted us  
just to go across country. That was triple canopy [jungle] and you just couldn’t move fast
in it. If you did, you were just inviting disaster if you got in a big hurry. So I said
something about that. I remember old Harry Adkinson looking at me like I was the
lowest worm on the planet, and saying, “Colonel, my battalion will [can] do whatever
you want.” Boy I knew I just been told to shut up without a doubt. When Sparks flew
out and he was killed, he and McClintock were both killed, I don’t know within two or
three days of that. They were shot down in a helicopter. He was to my knowledge the
only regimental commander killed in Vietnam, Marine Regimental commander. There
might have been others, but I’m not aware of it. Anyway I was sorry for he and--
McClintock was a most impressive guy. He was retiring on 30 years, Sergeant Major
McClintock was when he got home he was done. [This happened on January 15, 1969.]
He was killed and our troops had to go in, American troops had to go in and recover [the]
bodies and stuff. Harry [Atkinson], when we walked away from that meeting and the
helicopter flew away, he just looked at me very coolly and said, “Don’t you ever tell
anybody my battalion can’t do anything.” Boy, my tail was chewed right there. I knew,
he wasn’t angry or anything, he just made it clear. So I started devising a way for us to
accomplish this mission that I didn’t believe in a whole lot. I finally figured that we,
rather than go across country, if we went down stream there was a trail indicated on the
map and I talked to the OV-10 pilots and they said they could see the trail. Pretty much
the way I wanted to go. It would be a little longer. It would be like 16 or 18 clicks but I
knew we could move a hell of a lot faster. That was a kind of a canyon in there. It was
not vertical on both sides, but it was very steep and it was scary. I suggested to the
Colonel that I take two companies and lead them. I had an idea how to move pretty fast
in that environment. He said, “So be it.” So I go the troops together India Company and
I believe it was MIC [Kilo] Company. India Company was Mike Gurolla, and Mic [Kilo]
Company was Pat Burns I believe [I can’t remember]. We went off of Tomahawk down
to the river, crossed the river and got on the trail on what would be the west side of the
river. It was just a bicycle trail. I mean there were bike track everywhere. What I did
was I’d have one company double time up for maybe a quarter of a mile and then set up
flanked out on each side of the trail when the other company would double time up
through them and go about the same distance and just repeat it. Because it was just, it
was ambush country if ever you saw ambush country. We had no options with artillery
or anything because artillery couldn’t even get down in the bottom of the canyon there
with 175s. I had an OV-10 most of the time hanging around. We got into two or three
little scrapes along the way, but they were just very small units. We just used a little air
support and moved fast and overran them and kept going. We finally got to the hill I
think it was the third day. It may have been late in the second. I told the troops, we’re
not going to medevac anybody. There won’t be helicopter support, this is strictly a
covered movement. No fire, no firing no nothing unless you get in a fight. The only
food and water you’ll have is what you carry. Don’t carry much because we’re going to
move fast. So that’s the way we went. I did promise them that as soon as we got there,
I’d get chow in by helicopter. We were going to go in and build a landing zone. As soon
as we got in the LZ blown, then we’d get chow in. The old stuff about an Army marches
on it’s stomach is not just stuff. I mean troops expect to be fed and they ought to. You
ought to feed them. Water is a problem after a while. Even though it was cold and wet
there was still a certain amount of water consumption, and you’ve got to replace it. You
couldn’t trust the river. So at any rate, we crossed I don’t know how many pretty little
mountain streams. I thought I bet every one of these is as pure as it can be. I would still
bet on it because they were coming down out of the mountains. There aren’t people up
there. At any rate we got up on the objective and blew down huge I guess virgin
mahoganies, incredible trees to build a little tiny landing zone. I was down the hill a
couple hundred yards, 300 yards from the landing zone when the helicopters came in
with what was supposed to be our chow in external loads. Of course we didn’t know
what to expect. We’d been blowing bunkers and there’d been obviously a lot of activity
in the area from the NVA, and we just didn’t have any idea what we were in to. So the
helicopter came and dropped their loads and got the hell out of there. There was no
loitering around and all that. Mike Gurolla’s company was on top. I’d known Mike a
long, long time. He was a decorated second tour guy who knew his stuff, was very
professional. After the helicopters pulled out he said, “Well we got chow. Which would
you like chocolate, vanilla or strawberry?” I said, “What do you mean?” He said,
“We’ve got 150 gallons of ice cream up here, and that’s it.” Somehow they’d hooked on
the wrong load. It was dark by then and our food re-supply consisted of chocolate,
vanilla and strawberry ice cream. Of course the troops hadn’t had anything like that in a
long time so, the top of that hill is still pink and brown and white as far as I know. They were all sick and all of them had the trots and all the rest of it. It was a rotten deal all the way around. We were only there like a day or two. Another company from another battalion flew in with the Army artillery battery and were setting up the fire zone. As they came in, we left and went back to Tomahawk.

RV: By the same trail that you came up?
MS: No, we flew back.
RV: Oh, you flew back? Ok.
MS: We landed at Tomahawk and we hadn’t been there very long, maybe a week. The time element of this whole thing had just completely has left me. Because we were up there for 60 or 80 days. They kind of all run together. But after we got back, oh I’d been hit in the head just before that operation. I remember I couldn’t wear a helmet because I’d been in the infantry landing zone. When helicopters come in we’d occasionally get mortars. So when the ARTY battery would be getting resupply or ammunition or a new tube or something like that, we’d have our mortars set up in the infantry zone ready to fire counter battery fire on enemy mortars if they fired. I was out there amongst the mortars and heard a CH-53 when it took off out of the ARTY zone it didn’t sound right. I looked up at it and I could see that they were in big trouble. The airplane was yawing and it didn’t look right. So I’m yelling at everybody to get out of the zone and running like hell myself. I had on a jungle hat. Just a soft wide-brimmed hat. And as I’m running a [wooden] .81 mm mortar block [ammo box] gets blown up by this CH-53 rotor prop wash and hits me in the back of the head and knocks me off the side of the hill. The CH-53 crashes into our zone. Nobody’s hurt either on the airplane or on the ground. It was just a real hard landing. Broke the [landing] gear and we were stuck with a damn helicopter at that point. I had my head split open and I went back up and we had a battalion surgeon was in the field with us, which is unusual. I don’t remember whether he was just there for a visit or what. You know head wounds bleed a lot and so I’m bleeding out of the back of my head. He looks it over and says, “Well it’s nothing serious. Do you want me to sew it up or do you want to get medevaced?” I said, “Sew the damn thing up.” I sat down in a hole in the ground, foxhole, put my feet in there and he walked around behind me and gave me a couple
bottles of brandy. Little 2.5 oz brandies and I drank them. He put eight or ten stitches in
the back of my gourd. So when we left on that operation two or three days later I’ve still
got bandages dangling. I couldn’t wear a helmet I remember I just wore a soft cap.
Anyway when we got back to LZ Tomahawk, Mike Company went out. And I’ve looked
and looked at this map and I can’t remember exactly where they went. But they got in a
fight with a fairly serious unit. We had four Marines, we knew were dead we could see
them but we couldn’t get to them. They were on a spiny ridge. They even tried CS out
of them, gas out of A-4 aircraft trying to recover them. Finally division called us off and
forced us to leave them. It’s not something Marines do. We don’t ever leave our dead. I
remember Harry Atkinson balling [crying] like a baby about it. It just broke his heart.
Later on after we’d gone back down to An Hoa, Pat Burns, the company commander and
I think the company gunnery sergeant flew back in there and went down on jungle
penetrators. The North Vietnamese had buried those four Marines, wrapped them in
ponchos and buried them and marked the graves. They’d taken everything off of them,
but they did mark the graves and they were shallow and all that, but they were covered
with dirt. Better than we treated theirs I guess.

RV: What would you do with their dead?

MS: We just left them normally. We knew they’d be gone the next day. On
occasion I’ve medevaced them if it was real quiet or something and there was no reason
not to. Usually I tried to take any identification they had and then I’d turn that over to
our S-2, ID cards or whatever. At any rate that was the only occasion I’ve ever heard of
in the war and talking with all my friends and all that, that such a thing happened. We
were grateful for it. I always had unmitigated respect for the North Vietnamese soldier.
They were tough and they were disciplined and they were ferocious little guys. That
didn’t diminish my respect for them, that they did that. For the most part the rest of the
time, it was fairly quiet except we moved two companies and I guess that’s where Mike
Company was going when they got in this fight. To another landing zone. I don’t have
on this map called LZ Maxwell. Whenever we came down off that hill and I think it was
late February, the battalion flew back, two companies and a headquarters group flew back
down to An Hoa, helicoptered back down to An Hoa. I was the last guy out of the zone
at Tomahawk. I was the last Marine in the landing zone. I remember I got on the last
bird and we counted the next to last Marine aboard and then I got on. Landed at An Hoa
and Harry was standing there and he says, ”We’ve got troubles at Maxwell, I need you to
go back.” I didn’t even get to go sit on a toilet. I just got back on the next helicopter and
flew into LZ Maxwell. There were two companies up there. I believe it was Lima and
Mike companies. I became the senior guy up there.

RV: Where was Maxwell located again?
MS: It was, as I remember it was northeast of Tomahawk. Not very far. I’m
talking maybe eight or ten kilometers. I can’t find it here on any map. I’ve got a couple
of the maps I used. I don’t have it indicated on either one of them. Anyway we got over
there, it was kind of hot. We were getting a lot of mortars and we had a 105 battery. I
hadn’t been there but just a matter of a day or two or so. We were talking about closing
the base, closing the fire support base and getting out of there because the compensation
wasn’t high enough, the rewards weren’t high enough for the losses we were taking. I
remember one incident we had eight Marines killed with one round there. Damnest thing
I ever saw.

RV: Did it land in the bunker?
MS: No, they were brand new kids and the squad leader had gathered them up
and had them scattered out. He had done everything right. There were six new ones and
a squad leader and one of his old guys. And an .82 mortar round hit in the circle and
killed outright every one of them. I mean you could drop a nuclear weapon in there and
not do that. The fog was just terrible. We couldn’t get resupplied. We couldn’t get any
air support. We weren’t being very effective shooting because our spotters couldn’t see.
After that incident we had the eight dead Marines on the ground. I tried to get them out,
couldn’t get them out and finally a helicopter came in and there was a television news
crew aboard it. They got in the way and of course the helicopter drew fire as they always
did. We only got four of them aboard, four were still with us. I remember the news crew
was taking pictures. One of the kids hands had fallen out of the poncho he was wrapped
in. They were taking pictures of it. I just turned around and told the correspondent, “I
hope you don’t think you’re leaving with that.” He said he could do whatever he wanted
to. I told him that I’d leave him for the North Vietnamese to talk to. We had a sort of
heated discussion. Finally he agreed to destroy the film. He told me he was going to put
me on report to the highest authority. I said, “What are they going to do? Cut my hair
off and send me to Vietnam and put me out here 25 kilometers from the nearest
friendlies?” How the hell are you going to scare a guy in that position? So it was kind of
laughable really [laughs]. In fact I remember the old gunnery sergeant from Mike
company turned around to this guy and he’s well know you could see him every week
correspondent and saying, “You’d better listen to him mister. He’ll do that, he’ll leave
you here.” That was that. We got them out of there on the next helicopter along with the
four dead.

RV: Can you identify who that correspondent is?
MS: I would off the record, but not now.
RV: Briefly, what other exposure did you have to the media, while in the field?
MS: That was one of the very few. You’d see them in the rear, you’d see them in
Da Nang. You’d see them on III MAF headquarters in Da Nang or somewhere like that.
They liked to hang around the Da Nang Airport a lot and all that. Out where it was dirty
and nasty and smelly you didn’t see them much, gratefully so.
RV: What did you think of the media coverage of the war in general?
MS: It was just totally inaccurate. Even *Stars and Stripes*, and biased and part of
the reason we left here without finishing the job. You’ve got to understand where I’m
coming from. I’m one of the people who believed we were right to be there. I still
believe it. I’m one of the people who knows we won the war, militarily. Then when I
came home in ’69 the war was over. Their butts were kicked. It was only because we
negotiated and begged and pleaded and gave it away that the results were what they were.
It was not the military that lost the war in Vietnam. It was strictly the politicians and so
called statesmen. At any rate, it stunk. It was terrible. I remember reading about
Operation Allen Brook, and all I read was about how many casualties we took and this
was *Stars and Stripes*, the military’s very own. All it talked about was how many
casualties we took. Never did talk about how many we inflicted and how we destroyed
two elite North Vietnamese Army regiments out there. That was never mentioned. It
was totally one sided and totally poor me stuff. Never gave an accurate picture, nor has
any movie, nor has any book written yet.
RV: I wanted to ask you that.
MS: Told the truth. The best book is *Fields of Fire* by Jim Webb, who was in that battalion in the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines at that time as a young lieutenant. So anyway we had a hell of a time closing Maxwell up because we couldn’t get the weather. We sucked our perimeter in, the two companies and kind of kept getting them out when we could. Finally we were down to 52 of us in the zone. I’ve told this story a million times because it was one of the moments of hilarity. I had an engineer corporal, who shall remain unknown. When we were going to pull off the hill we had all kinds of unexpended explosives and artillery elements and powder and all kinds of stuff. We imported some more and we just wanted the whole hill to blow up [when we left] because we had semi-bunkers. It was the simplest way to dispose of all the stuff. We had that whole hill set to become Vesuvius II. When the weather finally broke a little bit, we ran what was then called a mini-gaggle with A-4 smoking the hillside. I remember an OV-10 pilot overhead yelling at me, “Get out, get out they’re coming up the north side, they’re coming up the south side.” And a 53 comes in and of course the mortars start. I’ve got this corporal standing there with a five-minute fuse igniter on a five-minute fuse to blow the hill up. I’m counting Marines aboard as they run aboard this 53. Of course this crew chief is counting them too. When we get over 40 his eyes get big. We know it’s going to be a hell of a load and finally I got 50. That leaves Cluck and me, the corporal and I. I pointed at him and told him to pull the fuse. He pulled the fuse and covered up his ears and just stood there [laughs]. He was like 20 yards away, and I had to run over there and grab him by the flak jacket and throw him on the damn helicopter. The pilot’s eyes are as big as saucers. The CH-53 is shuttering and shaking. Of course he doesn’t know we’ve got five minutes. He’s trying to get out of there. We shuttered off the hill after about three minutes. We hadn’t gotten 200 yards when the thing let loose and the whole hillside, hilltop blew up. Then we flew on into An Hoa, made sure we had everybody aboard. Everybody was out and all that sort of thing. The general’s jeep was sitting there waiting for me. General Ross Dwyer who was the CG, commanding general of task force, I forget whether it was Yankee or Hotel whatever task force we were working for. General’s driver says, “The General will see you.” Went and reported in. General Dwyer had been at 1st Marine division when I was the aide and I knew him very well. He knew me very well, and I’d known him. He’d been an instructor at the basic school when
I was a lieutenant. So, I’d known him forever. He offered me a beer and sat me down and asked how it went and all the usual stuff. Then he said, “What did you say to that reporter up there?” I told him and he said, “Why didn’t you just shoot him?”

RV: Shoot him?

MS: Yes [laughs]. He was being semi-facetious. I knew he felt just like I did. He said, “I’ll take care of anything he brings to bear on you. Don’t worry about it.” I never did and I never heard another thing about it in forever. So General Dwyer was a great man, very, very fine general. So we hung around then. I was at An Hoa with the battalion until I came home. The only other, I really know we ran patrols out of there and kind of got our strength back. Got ginned up and ready to go again. While I was there the ammunition dump did get blown up. When I was a company commander as you may recall, I was at An Hoa and I was the defense coordinator of the base and all that stuff. Along the south side of the airstrip there was a huge ammunition dump. I mean that was probably a quarter mile long and like 30 yards [meters] wide. It even had old French ammunition and stuff in it. It had been there forever. It had old Marine Corps stuff and Army stuff. It was a mess. The NVA hit us on that side one night after mortaring us pretty hard. Somehow the dump caught on fire and blew up. It was an awesome spectacle. I wandered around that night with a radio on my back and sort of narrated. Everybody else was kind of underground in bunkers and stuff. I kind of wished I were. There was stuff going on up there that needed to be seen. I just did my thing up there and I mean we rained artillery rounds and stuff all over the countryside. I remember the sergeant major of the 5th Marines had an intact 105 round come through the roof of his hooch and go right through his cot. Luckily, he was not in it at the time. I mean the stuff was just raining down. At one time there was a huge explosion that you always though was probably, there was a whole bunker full of .106 ammunition, and I kind of think that’s what it was. I remember it just rolled me up in a ball. It knocked me down like somebody put their hands on my chest and pushed me. It didn’t hurt me. Then early April I think it was I got the word that I was to go home. Bill Keys had sent me my orders back in December telling me I was going to Oregon State University to the ROTC program. I’d known fear many times, but I was rally scared after I got those orders because I wanted to go there the worst way. I was so afraid I’d get a chunk in the rear
end or something that would keep me from not being able to execute those orders and go
to Corvallis, Oregon [laughs]. It just sounded like a dream to me. One day Harry
[Colonel Atkinson] calls me up [on the radio] and gets a big old canteen down off the
bulkhead and pours me a big slug of gin and we had a drink and shook hands. I got on
the helicopter and flew to Da Nang, then Da Nang to Okinawa, and Okinawa on home.

RV: How did you feel when you knew you were going home?

MS: Scared. I was scared that something would happen up to the minute we
landed in San Francisco. You know you can’t shake the idea that Murphy’s out there. If
it can go wrong it will. I was more scared in the last two weeks than I was all the rest of
the tour. I was just so afraid something stupid would happen.

RV: What do you remember about that flight back?

MS: I remember it was awfully long. I remember the big collective sigh of relief
when we landed in Honolulu and then the big sigh of relief when we landed in. You
could feel it in the airplane just like when I came home with the airline [Air Wing in
1969]. Anytime anybody came home from over there you could better believe the first
thing they did was take a deep breath and maybe talk to the Man a little bit and say,
“Thank you very much.” Then I got the usual Bravo Sierra, I mean I got, because you
came home in uniform, and I came home in a set of old washed khakis that I’d borrowed
from somebody because I’d long since parted company with my stuff. I had no idea
where anything was. Of course looked pretty sad anyway I guess. I think I weighed 156
pounds. I mean I weighed just 50 pounds more than that. But my fighting weight was
about 185 so I was pretty skinny and tired and goosy. I got spit on in San Francisco
International Airport. I had a cabby as soon as he saw my uniform drive off. That’s
wrong. I didn’t fly into San Francisco, it was Travis. I got spit on outside on the base at
Travis.

RV: Outside the walls?

MS: Outside the airport, going to get a cab. Then the damn cab driver, who had
to know. Why else was he there? He wouldn’t pick me up, he drove off. The next guy
picked me up, and a couple of sailors who’d been on the flight with me. Got in with me,
and we rode to. My family was meeting me in Reno. I remember they held the plane for
me in San Francisco because I was just running to get aboard and barely made it. They
held it for a second and let me get on for Reno. That was the end of it for me. I didn’t go
back.

RV: Who was it that spit on you up there at Travis?

MS: Pardon me?

RV: Who was it that spit on you up there at Travis?

MS: I don’t know, just a couple of clowns walking down the street. They
weren’t even dressed like hippies or anything. I dealt with that at Corvallis. They didn’t
seem that type. But this woman turned around and just spat at me. Her boyfriend
laughed and they walked off.

RV: How did you feel?

MS: I didn’t really care [laughs]. You know, I was home. I guess if she’d have
urinated on me, I wouldn’t have cared. You’re just so glad to get home. I was on a real
tight schedule as I said to catch this airplane. I didn’t care. Later on I got a little angry
about it. But then I dealt with those people at Corvallis a little bit, not much. Corvallis
was such a conservative school, that was right up the road 40 miles at Eugene it was an
all together different matter. My counterpart up at Seattle, Washington who did two long
tours in Vietnam was more serious injured at the University of Washington than he was
in Vietnam. He was thrown down the stairs and broke some ribs and all that. But I was
just thrilled to get home.

RV: Let me ask you some specific questions. Well, actually they’re general
questions about your tour. Did you ever witness any tension between draftees and lifers?

MS: No.

RV: Did you ever hear of or see anything about fragging?

MS: Heard stories about it. Those are just not Marine Corps things.

RV: How much drug and alcohol use did you see? I know we talked a little bit
about this before.

MS: Never saw drugs. I say never, in the rear in Da Nang around the logistical
areas or around the airport I’ve smelled marijuana. In fact I was puzzled about it. I’ve
chatted with a number of my troops over the years. I’ve always asked them that question.
Was I just stupid or what? They all said, “Hell no, we didn’t want anybody stoned more
than we wanted anybody drunk in the hole with us.” They’d go to sleep on watch and
you’d get killed. They just didn’t tolerate it. It was something the corporals handled. I never had caused to be involved in any of that. As far as liquor is concerned, the officers got some liquor, but hell I remember in ’65 and ’66 Marines couldn’t buy hard liquor in Vietnam. I remember sitting on the front steps of the Doom Club, the Da Nang officers open mess, the Air Force club, and they wouldn’t serve us. That was ’68 by golly. That was not ’66 because we were in our utility uniform. Of course Air Force could walk in, in their flight suits, that was ok. This Air Force colonel came up and said, “What’s the problem.” We said, “We thought we’d get a drink, but obviously we’re not going to.” In fact I think Charlie Robb was with me I’m not sure. There were four of us I remember. He went in and got us a bottle of scotch and a bottle of vodka or something. We could access it some, but in the field you got some beer once in a while. As I said the troops half of them preferred Coca-Cola. If you got beer if you were careful you could put back a little stash and have a couple of cans every night or something for a while. I remember National BO. We used to get National Bohemian, which is not at the top of my list of fine beer, but it had to do. There was a little whiskey around. Some guys had a bottle and they’d get a drink every now and then. But where I was you had to carry everything. As a result, you didn’t have it, it was just that simple. In the rear, when I was an aide we had the finest bar you’d ever want to see and all that. Not in the field.

RV: How well were you able to keep up with news back in the United States?

MS: Not at all.

RV: Even when you were an aid?

MS: I tell you Richard, I guess you could have, maybe. But all we got was Stars and Stripes basically. You really didn’t give a damn. Your world was just, an infantryman’s world is just that portion of real estate that he can see. That’s all that matters. In the rear, it might be a little bigger than that. Very often, it just doesn’t exceed the boundaries of the country you’re in. You’ve got enough to think about without it. My wife kept me reasonably current on things of importance. I do remember kind of the same thing. When I had been a company commander in 1963, on the beach at Almeria, Spain, Kennedy was assassinated. I called the company one of the kids had a Zenith trans-oceanic. He heard it on that damn radio and he came and told me, “The president has been shot.” I said, "Don’t start rumors.” He said, “You better come listen.” So I
went over to listen. Then I called the company around a big fire I remember on the beach and told them that Kennedy had been killed. When I had Kilo Company Robert Kennedy was killed. I gathered as many of them as I could and felt safe and told them about that. Otherwise you just didn’t know and didn’t really care very much.

RV: Did you ever experience any race issues?
MS: Yes. We had, once again in the rear; there was quite a little racial tension in ’68 and ’69.

RV: That was at the height of the Black Power movement and all that.
MS: That’s right. That’s when the dapping and Afros and all that stuff were going on. In a rifle company everybody is green. Believe me that’s not a trite saying. That’s just the way it is. You’re just proud to have somebody with you and it doesn’t matter what color or what city of origin. It doesn’t matter.

RV: What did you see back in the rear?
MS: You’d see the brothers doing their dapping and hanging out in groups, and you’d hear about fights and that sort of thing that were racial in context. There was always a little bit of an undercurrent, you could kind of feel it. But I don’t know whether it affected our abilities to fight. I have no idea. It was there. It was a cultural fact. That’s something you watched for as a commander and if you’ve got any hint that it was starting you just put a stop to it right away.

RV: Did you have any experiences with disease, playing a role in your combat effectiveness?
MS: No. I would say no.

RV: How much access did your men have or in general that you could witness there in Vietnam access to priests and church services and things like that?
MS: We always, well there were exceptions. You know when you’re out on a big Operation Allen Brook or whatever that sort of thing. We always even over in the mountains in 3/5 I remember we had a neat chaplain who had played basketball for La Salle University. I remember he played across the Harlem Globetrotters and traveled around the country with them. He was a hell of a guy. He was in 3/5. It also had Father Copadano who won the Congressional Medal of Honor and was killed. He was a
legendary Catholic priest. There was always a service of some kind to go to almost
everyday, and that sort of thing.
RV: Did you ever get to take any R&Rs?
MS: Yes, I did. I took an R&R in Hawaii and a second R&R courtesy of General
Jimmy Youngdale in Australia.
RV: Were you able to meet Ann in Hawaii?
MS: Yes. We were just talking about that the other night. It was the most
unfortunate visit.
RV: Why is that?
MS: I wasn’t ready for it. I couldn’t make that transition from being one thing to
another in a day.
RV: How about your Australia trip, how was that?
MS: That was kind of a good trip. I was between jobs and between being an aide
and being the S-3 so I didn’t feel like I was away from my unit and all that sort of thing.
It was pretty relaxed and the Aussies were great. Sidney was a beautiful city and it had
cold beer. It was just a wonderful, wonderful little break.
RV: What else would you do for entertainment back in base?
MS: Some places depending on where you were, you had movie at night.
RV: Do you remember any of the movies you saw?
MS: I was always a big John Wayne fan. In fact on the Hancock I had an
opportunity to visit with John Wayne. That’s kind of an off the record deal too. We got
acquainted a little bit. Mostly it seems like there were all these dogs I didn’t know. I
didn’t go to many.
RV: What else for entertainment? You had your offices club?
MS: We read and when you’re in the rear you had the club and that’s pretty much
where everybody headed in their off hours. There were a lot of card players and cribbage
players. I never did play much. We had a couple of ping-pong tables back in the rear
that got a lot of action. Once in a while you’d have a softball game or something.
Sunday afternoon if things were quiet. Mostly you just worked, you just worked.
RV: Any USO shows?
MS: Hope was in Da Nang the year I was there. I didn’t go. We did have maybe one or two I guess we did in the rear. Not anywhere else.

RV: Did ya’ll have any pets in the field on base or out in the field with you?

MS: Have what?

RV: Any pets, like a dog?

MS: The troops always had some scrounge hill dog. Troops are always going to do that. They try to hide it from you. Of course you know it’s there and you just don’t bother.

RV: What exposure did you have to wild animals, anything unusual?

MS: Yes, we did. We had a couple of real fun deals [laughs]. When I was with 3/5 way over close to the Laotian border, I had a company commander named Hal Overton who was a 1st lieutenant, who had been a first sergeant. Very, very fine officer who also was black. Just a terrific guy. Hal was going down a ridgeline to our left, now I don’t remember what direction that was. We were probably going west, so he was probably south of us. He’d call me earlier in the day and said, “I’ve got a 15 inch human footprint out here in the sand. I said, “Well, ok Hal.” We kind of laughed about that. Then a little later on in the day something else kind of bizarre happened and then he called me. They were setting up in a single rifle company. It was pretty light at the time. Maybe 120 or 125 people. So they were setting up in a pretty tight little perimeter in that triple canopy. Hal calls me on the radio and he said, “I hate to bother you with things like this.” He said, “I know I’ve already brought up a couple of unusual things today,” but he said, “I’ve got a tiger inside my perimeter [laughs]. I just wondered if you had any advice.” I said, “What do you think?” He said, “Well I’d like to shoot him out of here.” I said, “Well, I’ll shoot a few rounds of 175 over there in your neighborhood and we agreed on a target.” Your guys can use their M-79s or something and scare him out of there.” So we fired the artillery and the kids fired their M-79s and the tiger took off. In a minute I got a, I was standing there laughing around the radio. All of a sudden Hal’s gunnery sergeant comes up n the radio and says, “This is Lima 7. It’s going to be a couple minutes before the 6 can talk to you because the tiger just jumped right over his hole and I’m not sure he hasn’t fainted on us [laughs].” Anyway when Hal would tell that story he’d just break up. It was a funny situation, but it was great big old tiger and it
ran and jumped right over his foxhole and went off into the jungle. We saw some elk like
deer back in there quite a little. That’s just a wild country. Beautiful, gorgeous very
much like the coast range of Oregon. Rolling hills and occasionally rock assortments and
stuff. It’s just a beautiful, beautiful place. As I said not very highly trafficked. So there
was quite a little wildlife and fish. I’ve always wanted to watch the Vietnamese fish a
little. I could see fish in these little streams we were crossing that looked a lot like trout.
I’ve looked and looked on the net and all kind of places trying to find a little information
about water life and whatever and never have been successful. It was a gorgeous
country.

RV: How about snakes?

MS: Yes, we saw quite a few snakes. Never had anybody hurt with one. The
worst critter over there, obviously mosquitoes were bad, but the worst critter was leeches.
Leeches were a real physical problem. Because they’d crawl up your urinary equipment
and inflate and then you had a medevac just as surely as a guy who’d been shot. The kids
used to put condoms on at night to keep them from doing that. They’d get in your ears.
I’ve medevaced on two occasions medevaced dogs, canine dogs that had leeches in their
nostrils or ears or whatever. A couple of Marines who were unfortunate enough to get
them in places they shouldn’t be. I remember burning 14 off my legs one morning with a
cigarette. They were as big as your thumb then, full of blood. You’d see them. I always
associated leeches with water. I remember on that trek down the river choosing a place
where I wanted to set up for the night, the first night, and was standing there and Gerolla
and I think were talking and he said, “Holy Moly” or words to that effect. “Look here.”
If you looked down at the leaves on the ground, you could see these leeches. They were
about as big as a hair, a single hair. They were coming at us like snakes do with their
heads up. I mean they were smelling you and obviously the place was just a swarm with
them. So much so that I wouldn’t even set up there. I went on further and we still had
leeches but it wasn’t as bad as that.

RV: What did you think of the Vietnamese civilians?

MS: I didn’t interact with them all that much Richard. The little bit I did I found
them very much like the Filipinos. Kind of a simple pleasant people. I worked with
regional force and CIDG and all that at An Hoa and got to know those guys fairly well
and had a lot of respect for them. Particularly an RF regular forces lieutenant or reserve force lieutenant at the little village of Duc Zuc. He was quite a good soldier and I had kind of an interesting incident with them when I was there in probably June of '68. The Army major who was advisor to the CIDG group, Civil Indigenous Defense force Group, 500 or 600 of them they had rounded up out of the jails of Saigon and they were just sorry. They had an Army major and a captain and two or three sergeant majors. I don’t know several Army folks who were herding them around. I get a call from this major saying this lieutenant over in Duc Zus apparently the CIDG troops had been over in the town and harassed this guy’s wife who was pregnant. He was plenty upset about it. He had his troops all mounted out and they were setting up on the little hillside and the CIDG were maneuvering up and they were going to go to war between friendlies. So I took my jeep and my radio operators over to see what was going on and I talked to this lieutenant Mui. Through his interpreter or mine, I don’t know which told me how affronted he was that these guys had insulted his wife and he was going to kill the, the bunch of trash and on and on. So I went down and talked to the CIDG leader and he was a lieutenant I think. He told me this guy had insulted his troops and he was going to have to uphold their honor. They were going to have to have a fight. I got them together and I told them I said, “Look if you guys,” of course all this has got to go through interpreters so you hope like hell you’re conveying the message that you intend to. I said, “If you guys go to fight I want you to wait until I can gather up my Marines so they can come and watch and see how you mighty warriors do your job. If you’re going to fight then I think I can give artillery to one side and maybe air support to the other side to kind of even it up. You guys can really get out there and kill each other.” They kind of walked around and talked and pushed each other a couple of times. Finally Mui said, “Maybe it wasn’t a good idea.” He gave his troops word to go home. The other guys turned around and went back. This Army major was standing there with his mouth hanging open. He wasn’t sure whether I was serious or not [laughs]. We left it at that. My radio operators collapsed when we got back to the area. They just fell on the ground laughing. They’d had to sit there straight faced while all this went on.

RV: What was your impression of the ARVN, and the Vietnamese Marines and the indigenous forces in general?
MS: I don’t think I ever worked the Vietnamese Marines. I had a lot of friends who were there in ’72 during the spring offensive who were advisors and thought very, very highly of them. I had never, I associated with the ARVN’s a little bit. Didn’t really have a clear opinion one way or the other. I didn’t have much use for the Koreans.

RV: Why is that?

MS: Well, Probably unfair, but the Blue Dragon brigade was outside of Da Nang. Anytime we’d get VIPs when I was the aide the Congressional type or the visiting admirals or whatever, generals we’d have to tour them through the Korean compound. The Korean would be out there doing their Tae Kwan Do and waving their flags. I remember they always had this static display of weapons they had just captured. You know several machine guns and mortars and all that stuff. I knew I was seeing the same thing every time. So I marked under the barrel of one of them with a piece of chalk I carried over in my pocket just for that purpose. The next time we went I told the general, “I bet they show us a static display and I bet there’s a machine gun in there and I bet that machine gun has a chalk mark on the bottom of the barrel.” He said, “Really?” So when we went through he picked it up and looked at it and sure enough there was a mark of chalk. He just laughed. What are you going to say? They had some Kaiser rank [some kind of arrangement] and I never have gotten the facts on all this. I think it’s more than an urban myth that the United States had agreed to haul 2,000 pounds or whatever of merchandise or whatever for each soldier back to Korea when they rotated. That was part of the inducement to get them over there. They kept the radio jeep in front of the Freedom Hill Post Center PX. When a new shipment of steel guitars or stereos or something, whatever the hot ticket time was at the moment arrived. This radio jeep would tell the compound and here would come all the Koreans in there six bys [trucks] and they’d flood the PX and go out and load it up with all this stuff which disappeared. Obviously it was going back to Korea to the black market. So I didn’t have much respect for them at all.

RV: Did you hear anything or see them in action as far as fighters?

MS: Yes, they never showed up when they were supposed to. I think the fiercest thing they did was they’d do out and skin somebody alive once in a while and scare the
hell out of everybody for 10 miles around. Then they’d go back to their compound and
practice Tae Kwan Do some more.

RV: Did you or any of your men ever have any exposure that you’re aware of to
some of the defoliants such as Agent Orange?

MS: I’ve never been sure about that. I’ve never been sure. I hope we didn’t. I’m
reasonably sure we didn’t. It was so endemic to the whole experience. I don’t know.

No, I can’t say we did. I can’t say we didn’t.

RV: Going back to the canine units, did you actually work with the canine units?

MS: Yes, we always had. Not always, but I loved to have the dogs. They were
great.

RV: Tell me what kind of function they played.

MS: Dogs and snipers [laughs]. You don’t go to war without dogs and snipers.
They were great at sniffing mines and they were wonderful for night patrols because the
dogs and the handlers were generally so efficient and tight that the dog would help out.
He’d smell the enemy, he’d smell the presence and they served to alert people,
particularly at night. All the troops as far as I know had great confidence in them and
liked to have them along. They were very useful.

RV: Tell me about your use of snipers.

MS: I had one sniper named Webb, Spider Webb who was a genius. Not only
could he shoot, but he liked to shoot. He liked to kill people. I’ve always wondered what
became of him. He stayed, he’d been wounded, I don’t know three or four times. The
deal was when you got wounded three times you went home, no questions. It’s over. I
remember when he got wounded once and he said, “Don’t report this because this would
be three for me and I’d have to go. I know I’m not ready I don’t want to go.” He was a
warrior. A dead shot. I once happened to be walking by him. We swept through a little
old ville and we took some fire after we swept it. We were across about 1,200 meters of
rice paddies. We saw these two NVA soldiers break and run out of the woods, out of the
little village we had just swept. They were running along side it. I said, ‘There they go
Webb.” He dropped on a pile of rice straw that was just conveniently lying there. This is
1,200 meters at a running target with a pretty good crosswind. He cranked off one round
and I’m watching them through the glasses and one of the guys grabs his hip and falls.
He gets up and drags himself back off into the brush. Of course Webb immediately
breaks out, they carried a chit book that you were supposed to sign validating kills and
stuff. I said, ‘I didn’t see a thing Webb. That’s not possible. I didn’t see that. That’s an
optical illusion.” I strung him along for two or three days before I’d sign his chit. He
was always where you needed him. I had a couple of others who were real good too. He
was sort of the epitome of what the sniper mentality, I guess you’d have to call it. He
was good at it and he like to do it and he was pretty damned fearless.

RV: Going back to combat and your tactics in the field, did they change over
time for years during that year you were commanding?

MS: Oh yes.

RV: How did they change? I guess it would change depending on terrain and
enemy.

MS: Well, yes without a doubt. As I grew more cynical about what we were
doing, I mean the way we were doing it. And I came over there pretty cynical from the
tours on the carrier. I guess I would characterize myself as cautiously aggressive. We’re
taught in the Marine Corps that the mission comes first. Mission first, then the men. I
put them a little more 50/50 probably. I tried never to risk a Marine life if I could avoid it
in any way. Not to say that we didn’t attack when we were supposed to attack or do what
we were supposed to do with great enthusiasm, but I took great precautions. Ergo, I have
three basic rules of combat: every time you stop dig, number one. Number two, don’t
take a step without a prep. Don’t ever expose your troops without blowing away the
objective first. If you’ve got it available, use it. My third is scouts out. Which, my
troops, we rotated through the company, every day a different squad would be the scout
squad. So if we had a situation where we wanted to put scouts out. Say you’re going, a
lot of the country that we fought in when I was a company commander was paddies and
farms. Between each of these little farms it might be an acre, or two acres or 10 acres of
50 acres. I don’t think I ever saw one that big. Ten of 15 acres. There’d be a bamboo
hedge, that’s just like a fence or there’d be a little tree line. You never knew what was in
those tree lines. So I knew from experience and learned as I went along that the worst
thing you could do was to get your major maneuver elements pinned down or tied up in
some situation where you couldn’t maneuver. You’re a hell of a lot better off to put four
guys out there, a fire team. Or even a whole squad, you send them out let them feel their
way across into the target, into the objective area. If you put a few rounds of artillery in
there as they’re maneuvering up, it has a tendency to make the other guys say, “I don’t
want to stay here anymore.” But if they do want to fight and if your squad does get in
trouble all you’ve got tied up is one squad instead of a whole platoon or two platoons or
something. So you’ve got your maneuver elements in hand and you can do something
about it. So, I lived by those three precepts. One of them I went over with, every time
you stop, dig. I told you where that came from. And don’t take a step without a prep I
learned just as we went. And scouts out I learned just kind of on my own. I saw what
happened to India Company 3rd Battalion, 27th Marines on Operation Allen Brook when
the whole company got pinned down out in the open because they. Well, I’m not going
to, I didn’t have anything to do with those decisions so I’m not going to critique them.
But at any rate, they were pinned down and the company commander was killed and all
the officers were killed and all the corpsmen were killed. That’s where I met Fred Smith
as a matter of fact, over in response to that fight. His company and my company both
went to the assistance of India 327. It was a sad sight. I just distilled a number of
different experiences to my own, and came up with my response, which was, scouts out.
I learned how to use supporting arms and we had lots of it. Most of the time, not all of
the time. We had great artillery support, great air support and I used it. I used it
copiously.

RV: Did you ever have any resistance when you called in all the support?
MS: No.

RV: Let me ask you just a couple questions about your impressions in general.
How did you deal with the loss of your men that you were commanding?

MS: Usually when you lost people you were busy. So there wasn’t a lot of time
to get particularly emotional about it. Plus, it was my job not to get emotional about it. I
do remember that in late June when we were at An Hoa we built a little fire support base,
not a fire support base, a little platoon combat base to stop the mining on Liberty Road,
from Liberty Bridge to An Hoa, a distance of about six or eight kilometers as I recall.
We put a tank out there and we fired H&I fires with the .50 caliber. I tell you what, we
put a stop to the mining on that road. But when we were building it, I sent a couple of
LVTs, as I remember maybe a tank and I remember it particularly we had the LVTs, armored personnel carriers of that era and a platoon and a gunny and I were out there. This piece of ground I’d selected to put this platoon position on was a little hillet. I had them just spin their tracks and tear out everything on that hill, knowing that there were probably some booby traps around. They did they blew up a couple. None of us noticed there was one stupid little bush left. We were putting up wire and two kids, somebody detonated an M-26 grenade booby trap in that bush, killed one of them and my gunny was standing right by me, splattered him in the face. Just little fine stuff like number eight [shotgun] shot almost. Blew the other kid’s legs off. He was a little kid that I was real fond of. I got over to him and he looked over and one of his boots was laying a few feet away. He said, “Is that mine?” I said, “Yeah, that’s yours.” He said, “How about the other one?” I said, “It doesn’t look good either.” He said, “Skipper give me my Bible, it’s in my flak vest pocket.” He had a little St. John’s Bible. I put it in his little shot up hands and he said, “Don’t worry I’ll be all right and I’ll pray for you guys.” That’s the only time I ever lost it. I had to just go behind the bush and the gunny went over there with me and held me while I cried. That was just one too many. I lost a lot of kids to mines and booby traps. You just grow to despise the damned things. A: because they’re so plentiful and B: because they do such heinous damage to the body. So many kids lose limbs and legs. I remember when I was the aide to one great gestures the Marine Corps does is if you lose two limbs you get the Bronze Star in addition to the Purple Heart. It’s a real big deal. So the general would go around and present those personally. That was a policy of his. I went with him for three or four months. You know, it’s not daily, but it was a hell of a lot more often than you wanted it to be. Finally I just asked the general one day, “Would you mind if Smitty did this for a while? I’m having real trouble here dealing with it.” He said, “No I know exactly how you feel. That’d be fine if Fred wants to fill in for a while. I don’t care you guys work it out, but you certainly have my permission to do so.” Smitty took a lot of them. He had as much trouble as I did. I was a captain and he was a lieutenant [laughs]. I guess I took advantage of it. I just got where I just could hardly bear it. Smitty was tougher than I was I guess, because he pulled it off. I disliked it. You just dealt with it, that’s all. It
wasn’t easy and some days were better than others and some days it made you kind of
crazy. It was just a job, that’s all.

RV: What was the greatest action that you witnessed while there?

MS: Getting up everyday and going to work [laughs]. The thing that’s the least
understood sort of point of view I guess of the war in my view is just the daily grind it
presented. To the pilots on the helicopter for instance, getting up everyday knowing they
were going to go fly over North Vietnam and have people try to shoot a Sam up their ass
and all that kind of thing. To the Marine, individual Marine who maybe had pulled a
watch from midnight to four o’clock getting up and going on a sweep the next day or on
patrol or knowing he’s got another damn patrol that night or whatever. Now, Iwojima
lasted I think three weeks, maybe four. Normandy was a relatively brief battle. I mean
there were a lot of GIs in World War II who fought for years. To the average grunt going
over to a Marine rifle company meant he was going to be in the bush for 13 months if he
made it. And very damn few of them made it without being wounded once, twice or
three times or killed. It was just the bravest act getting up every day and continuing and
laughing and taking care of your friends and all that. The greatest single act of courage I
ever heard of was Sergeant John Lord when he took over Kilo Company on July 28th. I
was not an eyewitness to that. I know enough people who were to know that he was an
incredibly brave guy. I would love you to talk to him.

RV: I’d like to very much.

MS: I have his e-mail address and what I’d rather do is let me contact him and
get his permission to give it to you.

RV: Yes, of course.

MS: Because I don’t know how he feels about it now. But the did two infantry
grunt tours, rising from private to sergeant, was easily the best combat Marine I ever saw
across the board. He was cool. He was smart. He was courageous. He was everything
you can ask of a human being.

RV: We’ll talk about that after we finish so we can set that up. Looking back is
there anything you would change about your tour in Vietnam?

MS: I don’t know. That had never even entered my mind. You didn’t feel
enough in control of anything to make that even a point of conjecture. I wish nobody I
knew had to die and had their legs blown and all the rest of it. My doctor asked me the
other day, “Have you ever had any trouble dealing with your experience in Vietnam?”
He was a Navy doctor and feels terribly guilty that he doctored in Hawaii instead of over
there. Of course, I’ve always reassured him, “You’re the guy we most wanted to see.”
He asked if I’d ever had any mental trouble dealing with it. I just had to tell him, I’m
immensely proud of my service in Vietnam. I’m immensely proud of the people with
whom it was my honor to serve. I did as good a job as the good Lord and I put together
could get me to do. I just have to leave it at that I guess.

RV: Did you have any trouble transitioning back to the States after you got back?
MS: I was pretty wooly for a while, yes. I don’t know that trouble is exactly
right. But I was not somebody that you wanted to upset particularly. My patience was
very short. I had a couple of experience early on at Oregon State that reflected that. I
was and I don’t mean to sound vain, I was a consummate professional Marine at the time.
I viewed that as my profession. I viewed what I had done as a professional endeavor. I
took great exceptions of course to the media, the coverage. I took exception to the
protestors and stuff. Even them, the college kids, I couldn’t get particularly angry at
them because I knew they just didn’t know the truth anyway. They were being so
sandbagged by the press and by their own ignorance. You know, college kids are
emotional and all that stuff anyway. I never could get real angry with them. No, I don’t
think I ever had any huge problems.

RV: What did you feel or think in April of 1975, when Saigon fell?
MS: I was sick, physically sick. I knew what was coming and what those poor
people, what was being thrust upon them. I was sick that everything we had done was a
lie. I readily admit that I am angry and bitter at the McNamaras of the world. And
despise the very mention of their name. I was sick that my government, the country that I
loved so much would send me off to war and make me responsible for young men, the
finest young men anybody ever knew without intention of winning the damn thing. They
lied to me just as surely as we’re sitting here today. They lied knowingly to me and made
me lie to those fine young men. That was wrong. I’ll never forgive that. So that was just
the worst day of all when they rolled into Saigon. I have a friend named Peter Arnett and
you’ve probably heard Pete. He’s one of the trio there in Baghdad and all that stuff, who
probably knows more about Vietnam than any human being alive. He lived there from
’62 to ’75. He actually met them [the NVA] and got a ride on a tank before they ejected
[him] from the country. He married a Vietnamese, speaks French and Vietnamese. Has
the best [Vietnam] library, even better than mine. Later on I wrote book reviews for the
San Diego Union while I was in San Diego and two or three years after I retired. Ed
Hutching, who was the book editor for the Union at that time used to send me every book
about Vietnam. So I had a huge library of strange books about Vietnam. Pete had a
better one than I. He’d be a hell of a resource.

RV: Do you think the United States learned any lessons from Vietnam?

MS: I hope and I think Desert Storm sort of reflected it. We learned to A: don’t
go unless you plan to win. B: if you’re not going to win, at least know how you’re going
to get out. What your exit strategy is. But most of all, if it’s not worth winning, then
don’t go. But you’ve got to remember that the people with Vietnam experience in
positions of leadership in this country are fast disappearing. I’m afraid we could repeat
the same silly nonsense again. Go in without a total commitment. War is not a game. I
know it’s an instrument of diplomacy and all that crap. To the people who put the
pointed thing on the end of their fire stick and go shoot at the bad guys and let the bad
guys shoot at them, it is not a damn game. Anybody who treats it that way is either evil
or a fool.

RV: What do you think is the most significant thing that you learned in Vietnam?

MS: I guess I learned an awful lot about the human condition. The human spirit
and just how tough human beings can be. I mean how self-sacrificing they can be and
how kind they can be to each other. They can endure almost anything. I guess those
would be the main.

RV: Would you ever want to go back to Vietnam?

MS: I’ve been offered time and time again. I’ve got all kinds of friends who do
guided trips. Harry Jenkins, who’s a dear friend of mine, retired as a two-star. Another
guy you ought to talk to really. He and I were discussing this the other day. I hooked
him up to a website. I think it’s USMC Heritage because he had been at Khe Sanh the
whole time. There was a picture of the Khe Sanh airstrip. I had him look at it. I don’t
know if you’ve ever been on that website, but here’s the place where this fierce battle goes on. All it is, is just red strip of asphalt with cows grazing on it now.

RV: I’ve actually been there and walked on that back in ’98.

MS: Oh, you have?

RV: Yes and it’s a red, clay dirt strip and it’s now a coffee plantation off to the side. You can’t tell anything happened there really.

MS: Right. Harry and I yakked about it. I asked him, “Do you have any desire to go?” He said, “No, I don’t think so.” He was a true warrior.

RV: Have you ever been to the Wall in Washington?

MS: Well, once I got out of the transit and once I got out of the cab and I can’t do it.

RV: I’m sorry, say that again.

MS: I’ve tried to go twice and I just can’t make my legs go that way. I just get shaky legged. I can’t do it. I’ve been to the traveling wall. It came here, I don’t know 10 years ago to Twin Falls I suppose. Of course the first damn thing I see is two or three people I know really well. I couldn’t do her. Tears start running and I start running too. I get the hell out of there. No, I haven’t been able to do it.

RV: Do you plan to try again or not?

MS: I don’t know. I’ve got a lot of friends in the Washington area that are forever inviting me to come visit and play. Harry lives back there and a whole bunch of my friends. If one of those trips somebody said after a couple of drinks or something, “Let’s go.” I might be stupid enough to go. I don’t know. It still is an incredibly emotional thing for me to think of guys like Smoky Tolbert, Vern Donnelly and all those young Marines who served with me. Just all the guys I’ve known. Larry Selmer who was my XO in the Academy [3/2] and on and on and on. Being dead and being dead for God, not one good reason because after all we didn’t get it done. They were just pissed away in the wind. I get a combination of just incredible sorrow and a huge lump of anger in my throat. Just scared to deal with it. This has been very difficult for me to talk about all this crap. I just don’t do that. I’ve written an awful lot. I’ve been working on this Vietnam novel for 22 years and longer now I guess. I keep trying to get it right and then I get all tied up in all the rest of it. Then I abandon it again. It’s just had we gone over
there and won, maybe I’d feel differently. But to have been sold down the river the way
we were and the way all those kids were. It’s just so reprehensible and so evil. I just
can’t forgive the leadership for that.

RV: What do you think about Vietnam today, the country?
MS: Sad little country that’s lead by Communists and all that implies. I’m not so
stupid that I don’t think. It may be better off with some sort of leadership like that. My
limited experience with Vietnam was those people are capitalists and they love
capitalism. Hell, the biggest influence in their lives was introducing them to the flush
toilet and the television set. That changed their whole view of life. Gosh, they’re just
busy little capitalists. Look how well they’ve done in this country. You give them an
opportunity and boy, they’ll fly. To saddle them with that same old Socialist crap is just
real sad. I think they’re just a tragic little country that didn’t have to be.

RV: Have you had much contact with Vietnamese here in the United States?
MS: No.

RV: Is that on purpose or is this by chance?
MS: Just by chance. There aren’t many in this part of the world. You know we
have our three or four Vietnamese restaurants around. Boise has a few. When I go over
to Seattle or somewhere on the coast I see a lot of Vietnamese. I worked for a year in
1981 at the Cuban-Haitian task force with the boat people, the Cubans at Ft. Smith,
Arkansas. I worked down there about 10 months I guess. The people there were still
talking about the Vietnamese and how different the Vietnamese had been as prisoners,
internees or whatever you want to call them [Laughs] from the Cubans. All they had to
do with the Vietnamese was tie up a piece of string and say, “Please don’t cross this
string” and they didn’t. Of course the Cubans we had fences 10 feet high and all the rest
of it. I feel so sorry for those people who didn’t get away who helped us and all the
terrible things that happened to them. Of course American media has totally neglected all
that too.

RV: Are there any songs that take you back to Vietnam?
MS: I left my heart in San Francisco, absolutely. That’s what White Christmas
was to World War II. I don’t think any others.
RV: You talked earlier about the lack of good quality movies and books on Vietnam, can you elaborate on that?

MS: You mentioned one, *Full Metal Jacket* that I watched. Just a little bit of that appeared to be a little more accurate.

RV: The first half or the second half of that?

MS: I was watching the first part.

RV: That’s the Paris Island Marine Corps.

MS: Right. Of course Marine Corps recruit [training] I’ll tell you it’s been done by a lot of people. Nobody is ever quite done as well as well as Jack Webb did really, the oldest one. But if you look at *Apocalypse*, I watched part of one the other day that showed this lieutenant sitting there smoking pot with his troops and all this stuff. The portrayal of the American fighting man as some sort of drug-crazed rebellious loony-toon is just not a portrayal of the people I knew. I know after ’69 things went down hill. I realize that. I know without meaning to reflect poorly on the Army, that they had more problems that way than we did. We had just always been a more disciplined organization than the Army. I didn’t see it. My troops deserved better than what history so far at least has come up with.

RV: How about the most recent movie, *When We Were Soldiers*?

MS: I haven’t seen that.

RV: *We Were Soldiers*.

MS: Yes, *We Were Soldiers*. I haven’t seen that one. I did finally watch *Private Ryan*. Found it difficult to watch. Accurate I suppose of combat in general.

RV: Why do you think authors have not been able to get it right on Vietnam?

MS: There are a number of reasons. The first of them is there were so many different wars in Vietnam. If you were in the Delta and I brought you up to I Corps where I spent all my time, you would have thought I took you to another planet. When I went up to the DMZ in Hue Phu Bai and Vandergrift and the Rock Pile and all those places up north that was an entirely different war from the war I was fighting in all the parts of I Corps that I served in. That was totally a different war. When you talk to the guys at Khe Sanh, that’s a different war from the guys down just a few miles down in southern I Corps. That’s one difficulty. The other I think huge difficulty is the points of
view of history of the whole event and why we were there and all the rest of it are so disparate and so biased. I don’t think anybody has objectively been able to put it on paper yet. I read all the reported historical books just about on the subject and most of the novels. Until I read Dereliction of Duty I was not able to totally vouch for any of it. I think they’re all superficial and it’s a tough subject in short I guess.

RV: Do you think the U.S. government takes care of its Vietnam veterans?
MS: I regret that Vietnam veteran has become a dirty phrase.
RV: Yes, sir.
MS: That “Vietnam Veterans For This” and Vietnam Veterans For That” have besmirched the term. My wife gets a little impatient when I yell go get his DD2-14 and see where he served. I want to know where that son-of-a-bitch served because I’ve heard all this whining and I have this sense that these guys never got out of Da Nang or never got out of Saigon or whatever. Because I’ve never heard any of my guys whine. I don’t know. I guess they try. My son is still not well from Desert Storm. I don’t think they’re doing anything at all. I think there is a classic case of governmental avoidance going on in that subject. I don’t think Vietnam veterans were treated quite that shabbily.

RV: For young people today, and you just mentioned your son, just for young college age students, high school students if you had to walk into a classroom and tell them about Vietnam or teach them about Vietnam what would you say to them?
MS: I’ve done that. Veteran’s Day or Memorial Day or something I speak to the high school fairly often. I usually prefer to do questions and answers. To go back to why I don’t think it’s been written about right it’s just so complicated an issue. You can bury kids [with information]. It’d take a semester to scratch the surface. I usually just tell them I’m not going to try to teach you the history of the war in Vietnam or anything like that. I’ll just try to tell you what it’s like to have served there and what the country is like. If you want to know what combat was like I’ll try to tell you a little bit about that. I kind of let them ask questions. Because it’s just such a great big old balloon to get your arms around otherwise.

RV: Yes, sir is there anything else that you’d like to add to our discussion?
MS: No, I think you’ve done a wonderful job of conducting the interview. Obviously extremely well organized to your approach and all that sort of thing. I’m
grateful for that. It’s been a pleasure talking with you. I do have a couple of recommendations for you guys that we ought to talk about afterward I think.

RV: Alright, let me sign off. This will conclude our oral history interview with Lieutenant Colonel Michael Sweeney. Thank you, sir.