Mark Taylor: My name is Mark Taylor. It is 9:06 on the 21st of March. I am interviewing
for the first time Mr. Michael Cisco. This interview is taking place at his home at 1909 Duke in
Richardson, Texas. This interview is part of the Vietnam Archive of Texas Tech University.
Mr. Cisco, the first question I'd like to ask you is just how did you become involved in the Vietnam
Conflict? How were you -- were you drafted, did you volunteer? Just how did you get in the
country?
Mike Cisco: I had gone two years to Oklahoma State University and ran out of money. All
of my other friends had already been drafted, so I knew I didn't -- I didn't want to necessarily be
drafted. I was in electrical engineering school. I couldn't afford to stay away for four years, which
was Air Force and Navy. I didn't think I wanted to stay gone that long and so I volunteered. At that
time the Marine Corps would take you for two years if you volunteered to go into helicopters or go
into the infantry.
MT: And so once you were in the Marine Corps and -would you describe a little bit what
your job was, or what your mission in Vietnam was?
MC: Once I got to Nam?
MT: Yes.
MC: Recon, ground reconnaissance.
MT: And what year were you in Vietnam?
MC: '68 and '69.
MT: What were some of your overall impressions when you first entered Vietnam about
the country, the people, the government, the conflict, in general?
MC: Well, the country itself was real pretty. It kind of makes you wonder why that was going on there because it's -- it's one of the prettiest places in the world, and I've been all over the world it seems like. We didn't know too much about the conflict. I guess -- what was happening. I was one of the old ones. I was twenty. I'd already gone two years in and -- but still, I'd seen protesting before I went, you but it wasn't anything, like at Oklahoma State, it was always at Berkeley -- California. So, really, I didn't go for any particular purpose. I went to come back on the GI Bill. I went into the service in order to finish college. That was the only way I could do it. I volunteered for Recon -- back then, I guess I was pretty cocky, so I didn't -- I wasn't smart enough to be scared. That was the quickest and most efficient way to get in and get back out, I thought. Because you could do it for two years if you volunteered to do it, so -- this is what I did. The people there didn't want us there at all, the South Vietnamese. They may have wanted the Americans at first, I don't know, I don't know many of the guys that were there in '65. The whole place was pretty disrupted and there was a lot of corruption by the time we got there. You weren't there for any purpose other than to survive. That was your purpose. There were, I mean, we took some time with some basic civilian -- South Vietnamese and there were -- you know, there weren't any problems but the people that were in contact a lot, like up and down Highway One in the villes - that saw the Americans all the time didn't -- didn't want us there. Of course, you have to understand that we were, you know, you went in there a bunch of kids -- and you're overrunning the country -- but, remember we were there to fight that was one of the things ...

MT: You kind of mentioned briefly about pacification program. Is that what you meant with the civilians in the villages that you worked with a little bit? Or is that something different? I was wondering if you had anything to do with the pacification program?

MC: Not really. You have to understand what I was and what I did. I took time to try to understand some of the culture. I ended up speaking southern Vietnamese, I could get along in the villes, I could -- language wise I could -- about as good as I do German now. As a tourist I could make my way through and I went to the Buddhist temples; I went to the Catholic temples over there; I went to some orphanages, just to try to understand what was going on. But I was not part of any program. I was Marine Recon. The worst animal that ever walked the ground, okay? And our only purpose was to do and be that. If we were not in combat, something was wrong. That was what we were there for. We didn't see much -- a lot of the good side of the pacification program for the people.
MT: What would you say was the -- recon has a very elite type label that is usually 
associated with it. During Vietnam did you have much of the -- some of the drug problems that 
were supposedly associated with American fighting men?

MC: Well, surprisingly, when I tell people this -the answer is no. Zero, none. That's why I 
went into recon in the regular Marine Corps, we really didn't have that much in the regular Marine 
Corps. Now, we ran across -- I don't mean this to be biased, I'm just telling you what I saw, we ran 
across Army quite a bit just in passing and there was a lot more of it. It was pretty frequent with 
them. Marine corps -- I think the difference was the attitude of the Army felt that sometimes the 
way we do over here, well, you're old enough to vote so you're old enough to drink; you're old 

enough to get killed, so you're old enough to get high and you -- the officers just kind of let it go. 
The Marines, at least back then, pretty well kept the same uniform code of military justice intact, 
no matter what. If you got caught smoking pot, you got busted. It didn't make any difference where 
you were or what you were doing. The other reasons, particularly in a firefight, you just couldn't -- 
you couldn't do it, you couldn't be sharp. I spent a lot of my time sniping, as a sniper, and I 
recommend if you really want to know how a lot of it is, because you can't get it, I don't think, 
talking to people like me, because what I would tell you would change from noon to night, to 
environment, or whatever I'm doing. I might watch the show "Deer Hunter" and view a whole 
different story. It just depends on how I feel. But, there' s a book, Marine Sniper that is excellent. 
To me that was—I don't read novels either, I 'm a true blood engineer. If I'm not learning 
something from what I read, I just can't do it. That's the only novel I think I've ever read that was 

so real to life that I could smell the places back where I was. In fact, that named a lot of the places I 
was and I could tell exactly where that guy was when he sniped. He operated just north of Da Nang 
in areas called Happy Valley. It’s been a long time, there's some other places -- Happy Valley was 
the main stomping ground. One reason I went into the recon was because most of the other guys 
were pretty elite and although we went out on four man recon teams, that's all we had, sometimes 
we'd go eight to a chopper but we dropped and jumped four in one area and four in another zone 
and there's not very many, but it was -- to me we always felt -- I always felt safer. Marine Recon 
today would be, I think people might compare to what they hear about -- Delta Force, 82nd 
Airborne, and that's about what we did.

MT: What did you think of the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong as far as their fighting 
ability, their motivation, morale? How well they were supplied and led? Just kind of a general 
overview of the ability of the North?
MC: Well, they were excellent. We had, no problems with the North Vietnamese as far as hating someone. Like I said, what you were there for was to make sure that you survived and I don't think in general we hated. In fact, if you look back at history most, what you might say, elite or professional soldiers or armies don't hate each other; it's a contest. It's a contest of gladiators. The best man wins. I think they had respect for us. We always heard they feared Marines more than others. I don't know that. The actions that they took against us made us think that was true. One thing we were always pretty well told was never to be captured as a Marine because of what they would do.

MT: And what were some of your general impressions about the way that the war was run from top up? Or some of our -perhaps some of the strategy or the lack of strategy? Was that evident in the field?

MC: Oh Yeah, it was real obvious that there was no strategy to win. Now, I don't know whether there was a lack of strategy or whether there was just real bad planning. But I don't see how you could miss it. I remember standing, in fact, on top of the hill overlooking Happy valley. On one side you had enemy, on the other side you had friendly forces. All this firepower was flying around and there was your F-4's and your Cobras and Hueys and we could call Puff in at any time, -- are you –

MT: Gunship?

MC: Yeah, and it just wasn't used. You could wipe out whatever you wanted wiped out but it wasn't done. It seemed like all we did was contain them.

MT: Did you ever work with any of the other units? I know you're Recon but did you ever work with the units of the ARVN?

MC: Yeah, South Vietnamese.

MT: And what was some of your general impressions of them vis-à-vis the North that you described as being excellent?

MC: Well, it wasn't good. Maybe -- like I say, you know, it's going to be hard to put all this together because I only can speak from my own individual experiences. The ARVN for some reason did not like us. They probably -- but you have to understand -- now that we're -- all of us are older and maybe even, of course, a lot more mature, you understand they just probably didn't want to be told and taught. We went over there as the big educators. The 101st Airborne, Green Berets, really their purpose is not to fight; their purpose is as advisors, front line advisors. They can teach and the Marines taught the South Vietnamese Marines. The problem was that we were always better. All of the American forces were always better; so you can understand how that makes a
person feel. If you're always better and probably, you always tell them you're better, then they just
get a tremendous complex and the typical military just doesn't handle, I don't think, personalities
very well. So we kind of just came in and took over and ran over them and while we were doing it
told them how bad they were. So, they just kind of wanted us to go away. I'm not sure they cared
whether they had North Vietnamese control or South Vietnamese control.

MT: Could you describe a typical deployment when you go out in the field would you go --
would it be for several weeks at a time or a few days?

MC: It varied. It just depended on where we went. Again, I think we did things a little
differently than the regular forces. The regular forces would go out on real common, everyday
excursions usually no more than three days. We'd usually go out on three day just because we
couldn't cover that much recon that fast. You couldn't get anything done in one day if you were
going to recon we'd go out into the area and try to find out what's going on. And then you would
call in strikes or come back and show your command post where -- on the grid where the
coordinates. We'd go out a lot of times for a week, a couple of times for a month and one time we
got lost and that lasted 48 days. I'll never forget that. Things like that.

MT: You said your primary mission would be gather intelligence, is that correct? That
would be intelligence about any formations or enemy leaders?

MC: Or movement.

MT: Or movement?

MC: You have incoming that always happens -- the -- I think I’ve forgotten some of it.
Some of the numbers, though I've got R 122 the rockets that they would send it. Even some of the
mortars. Our job was to try to find out exactly where that was coming from. There was also a lot of
underground tunnels and we would try to find out what those networks were, where they were
coming from. Some of the main trails, Ho Chi Minh Trail and others like it. We operated from Da
Nang, as far south -- normally -- I went and got down as far as Saigon a couple of times, but not
under normal conditions. We'd go down to Hoi Yang, and that's where the Koreans were based. I
spent my last six months with the ROK's, Republic of Korean Army, 2nd Marine Brigade and we'd
go up as far as Quang Tri, Chu Lai.

MT: When you said you noticed some of ROKs and they had the reputation of being
extremely brutal as well as being very effective, did you have anything to add to that or comment,
your observations of the ROK?

MC: I didn't notice them really being brutal. They are just -- they just didn't play the
politics that we had. They were extremely effective. We always thought the marine Recon was
pretty disciplined and I think for Americans we were. The ROK discipline was unbelievable. It scared me the first time I got to their camp. I never will forget a Gunny sergeant -- I was reporting in and a Gunny Sergeant wanted to give me a chair. I didn't know this at the time - he pointed to a staff Sergeant, only one rank lower, to go bring this thing, and the Staff Sergeant comes back with a chair and he sets it down. Well, I'd been bouncing in the back end of a 6 by, a truck, for two hours, I just didn't want to sit down so I said no, no, no, that's okay and the Gunny looked at the chair and he went like this (indicating) he thought it was dirt on the chair and he thought that's why I wouldn't sit down. He took the staff Sergeant by the collar and started beating him, slapping him because he brought me a dirty chair. I said "No, no, no, that's okay, I just don't want to sit down," you know, and the next day -- the first day we were there, you know, we didn't have much to do so I was going to lay some slats for our commwire up in the trees, and I started climbing the tree and this same staff Sergeant starts pulling on my pant leg, “Me do, me do," and I said "No, I'm already in the tree, that's okay, I'll do it." "No, no, no, Gunny see you up there, me do," and so the discipline was that they treated us like kings. But that would never happen in an American armed force. I think it was over -it was overpowering, it was not necessary but that's how disciplined those guys were. I didn't see any brutality, it's just that when they went out to do a mission, they did it and we usually had to get shot up pretty bad before you could even return fire. Those were our game plays. Another reason I went ground recon in four man teams is because at least where I was, and when I was there -- some people may argue with you-- but the highest rank that went out on those was Sergeant, so we didn't have any officers out with us -playing or directing the politics. The Marine Corps didn't have fragging of officers like the Army did, so I'm not saying we hated our officers so much that we killed them if they went out with us, but I guess if I put my mind back to twenty years old, I'd have to say we didn't have any use for them out there. They were fine back at base and if they wanted to send us out on a mission we could handle the mission and --in the right way, the appropriate way, we weren't brutal either, but that's just -- just how we operated.

MT: You were commenting on the officers, so would you say that the leadership necessarily wasn't all that effectual in Vietnam or it just seemed to be out of tune with what was really going on, or what would you say? Why you really wouldn't want the officers around, they just didn't impress you as -- or what?

MC: Well, nobody respected leadership because nobody respected the war. War is led by the leadership so when you keep asking up the chain, "what am I doing this for?", you know, "I just took the hill yesterday, now you want to walk away from it" and you lose a lot of guys doing that, and then, what for? So that's what I mean by there was no purpose other than to survive.
yourself. You didn't do anything unnecessarily, like you use the word brutal, nobody was
unnecessarily brutal because there wasn't any need to be. I've heard some criticism about brutality
of Vietnam. I wasn't even close to being brutal if we'd been told to go in. You see what I mean?
There's no purpose to go out and do any more than you had to because that was the direction, so I
don't think the war was half as bad in brutality as what we were told.

MT: What would you say were some of the problems you faced, maybe, after coming back
from Vietnam, or even during Vietnam with some of the war protestors that were making life hard
for the American soldier?

MC: Well, when I first got over there, I couldn't see what they were talking about that
much. Of course, after about four to six months into it you could see what they were talking about.
In fact, it made you kind of wonder how could they figure that out when it took me six months to
figure it out and I was there. I couldn't figure out where they were getting their information -- to be
so smart about it. Evidently the Berkeley students, you know, knew --- it's hard to explain. Again I
was just an animal in the jungle. I wasn't confronted on a daily basis about why I was there or the
politics or the direction. Whatever I know about it is what I figured out myself. Nobody took me
through any programs or training or whatever. But you look back on it and see that -- I don't think
the students were wrong. As far as coming out -- I didn't -- while I was still in the Marine Corps
and without a job I didn't have that much contact with real civilians. Do you know what I mean by
civilians? When I went on liberty I still went to Oceanside, it's a military town so you don't have
conflict there that you might if you came back to Tulsa, Oklahoma, or someplace like that. And I
was DI, also, unfortunately. I was supposed to get out when I left Nam, they made DI when I got
back so -- because I was DI, I was also very busy with people and training Marines and I didn't
really see these protestors that we all heard about until I went back to college. I got, out only ten
days before the last day of registration and I was on campus. I was, as you know, recon Marine I
was near bald, you know, I had -- almost no hair and when I came back to this real world and that
was -- you know, we're talking 1969. So that's the real hippy days, you know. I hid -- I just tried to
hide for six months. It was obvious -- not only was it obvious I was military, it was obvious I was
Marine and we were the worst, probably most hated. They called us baby killers. And that wasn't
true at all. Those rumors get modified by probably stories that came from killing six year old kids -
six or ten year old kids - six or ten year old kids that had M-16 machine guns operating at the time
they were killed or going up and down Highway 1, as I said, the people in the field that didn't like
us or whatever. You never knew when a grenade would just bounce on the floor of your truck bed.
You don't know where it's coming from and you don't really even worry about where it's coming
from. All you can do is -- you think of it constantly. As soon as you see it, grab it and get rid of it before it blows. That happened up and down Highway 1 all the time. A lot of that was by the kids. So, anything, I think that's where the rumor "baby killers" came from. And I think the reason it was directed towards the Marines probably more than the others is because for some reason the kids hated the Marines most of all. So we got most of those kinds of attacks and probably, therefore, most probably killed more of them because of that. But, I was not -- I don't believe I had a date for six or seven months when I got back to college.

MT: That -- that's rough.
MC: For a while I asked, and then I just quit asking, I just, you know, paid attention to my school work, did pretty well in my school work. Maybe that says something -
MT: So the overall attitude was just horrible. You couldn't get dates because you were a Vietnam vet, right? Is that what you're saying, because you were a Marine?
MC: Yeah. You know, most of the girls, nothing against them, again, I've already defended the protestors. But, because of that most of the girls that I wanted to date were either protestors themselves or dating protestors, so they couldn't -- or even just friends or acquaintances. You might even have an entire sorority that had, say, a couple of protestors in the sorority and again, nothing wrong with the protestors, so they were liked, you see, and that meant that not one girl in that sorority would dare date a Vietnam vet or the whole -- the whole peer group just avalanches.

MT: Okay. This is side two -- we were just commenting on the problems of after coming back, couldn't get dates and -- I was kind of curious as a follow up question what did your parents think when you decided to --
MC: Well, again, one reason, as we started the tape, I ran out of money. My dad died when I was sixteen and so I put myself through. My mom wasn't in real good health. She had moved down to Fort Worth to live with my oldest brother, who was eight years older than I was, and I think she was -- I guess she was living with my oldest brother when I was in Nam and she didn't like it but, you know, I had already grown up at age sixteen. She didn't really have any control over what I wanted to do and knew that -- The only promise I made to her and my oldest brother was, -- "Hey, I've got to do this to get the GI Bill and come back," and my promise to them was to come back and finish up college when I got through. And that's exactly what I did.

MT: Touching on something else, you talked about training, what type of training did you have to prepare you for Vietnam, or was there any at all?
MC: Oh, Yeah.
MT: Maybe with the jungles and terrain?
MC: Yeah, Yeah. I had --- I mean I still give the Marine Corps credit for that. The training we had was as close as it could be to what -- nothing takes the place after you get there. I don't know what you want to know about, I mean we fired all the weapons, one of -- back then one of the prerequisites for being recon was you had to be a rifle expert. Some of us again, like I say, went further, went to sniper school. We jumped out of helicopters all the time. We had that training in the States. I went to Oslo Beach Recon Training in South Carolina and I went to North Carolina, I can't remember any more. It was out of Camp Lejune, North Carolina and over to Oslo Beach. I went through my training in Pendleton, my basic at MCRD in San Diego and then my infantry training in the mountains at Camp Pendleton. Yeah, that's where the city is, Oceanside and all the weapons; all the jungles, the Carolinas provided pretty good jungles. No jungle was quite like Nam, but -- it wasn't all jungle, either, a lot of Vietnam looks like Carolina, the sands, basic foliage, but the training was excellent. We continued to train when we were over there. We had to continue to qualify with the rifles, we had to continue to practice our jumps under different foliages and terrain and at different altitudes as low as 200 feet, and emergency extracts on helicopters. That's where they drop down either a D-ring, it's a nylon rope, the D-ring is on it where if you have the harness you hook up and jump and the pilot flies low and as he comes up, okay, each guy hooks onto a different D-ring, that's when you're under attack and we used that several times. Or sometimes it was a metal -- metal ladder, just a roll out ladder.

MT: That sounds pretty good. So you were pretty much prepared for Vietnam. Is there anything that changed once you got in Vietnam between, maybe, after you were trained and ready for everything, and then maybe once you got to Vietnam you figured out -- well, tactics changed or there was something that was different that -- that you weren't accustomed to?

MC: As far as combat firing, not really. Now, we weren't ready for the -- we weren't really ready for all the different booby traps that there were there. We had -- we had booby trap training in the states, in the Carolinas, but they were kind of Mickey Mouse compared to what we really ran into because it was too dangerous to -- you can't make a trap that, you know, simulates what's going to happen without really getting hurt. You have too many casualties to practice that, so that's something you get used to and you get that just by instinct. You start seeing the wires and you start seeing the punji sticks and things like that. I don't know if it's because I was 20 or 21 when I was there, or not. Some of the -- and there were some 17 year olds that weren't supposed to be there. Some of the 17 and 18 Year old guys would react, maybe, like a typical teenager or whatever, but I -- the more I ran into I just kept getting a higher and higher degree of respect for what we were
fighting -- the North Vietnamese were good and they -- at least they knew what their purpose was, and we didn't.

MT: I was wondering what effect you think Vietnam might have had on foreign policy today, especially regards to Central America, could Central America be another Vietnam, is that possible? From your experiences, from what you've seen?

MC: I don't think so, because as you hear on the news, they keep saying, well, here we go again, another Nam. And every time they say that, you'll notice we -- if we do do anything, like either Panama or Grenada, you get in -- the lesson learned was get in, do what you want to do, and get out quick, because the public has too much force. And the news media is -- even as good as it was back then, the news media now is almost instantaneous and I -- hey, let’s face it, Mothers don't want their sons in war. I don't think they'd let it -- that linger on again. That went on for years and the French -- plus, we already saw a good lesson, you being a history major know more about it than I do, but we should have paid more attention about what was wrong when the French were there, but -- and actually the Vietnamese wars go far back beyond that knew at one time but don't remember now, but you can't conquer them the way we tried. We never went in with troops to the North. We did go to Cambodia and we did go to Laos but we never took over North Vietnam with troops, we just dropped bombs. Bombs don't do any good when the tunnel system, so that's what we knew -- that's what we found out I think this might help answer part of the earlier question, you see, is that -- I knew we couldn't. It's like a bunch of ants coming, you know, and you just keep stepping on them as they get under your foot but until you go kill the anthill you'll never win and that's what we didn't do.

MT: I really don't have any more questions, do you have any more -- anything else you'd like to add, any other impressions you have about Vietnam, maybe -- possibly about fellow vets, how -- is there -- have you really found any of the post traumatic stress that is often reported in the media? Vietnam vets, flashbacks, anything like that?

MC: I have -- nobody knows it, I just don't let them know it, I have flashbacks all the time. Obviously, they're not serious. For a few years when I first got married, we might watch -- it still can happen, if I watch maybe a movie like Deer Hunter or not necessarily Apocalypse Now. That was more fairy tale than anything else, but there’s been some more recent ones, Platoon, Full Metal Jacket, Hamburger Hill and some of the others. I didn't watch Platoon for over a year or two. I don't even remember when it came out, just because I was afraid that it might. It’s funny how that happened, it just causes nightmares and I was shot down three times and I might watch something that will trigger me, that fall again, and knowing when you're going to hit, and know
that you're probably going to hit, probably happen. But maybe it's just a strong will, I don't have
these total breakdowns that you hear about from certain guys. But I think about Nam, probably
every week, probably all the time. You just don't forget that. It's almost a benefit as a management
tool, though, really. I'm in program management now, and I have sometimes, as we all will
experience in a job, you know, a lot of people think they have power over you, or think they
control you or whatever, you know, some jerk, you know. I use it as either leverage-- not control,
but -- you don't allow people to run over you any more. What's he going to do, shoot me? You see,
they already tried and they couldn't. That's the attitude you have. You have to keep. So there have
been some benefits. Just because of the will to survive back then, I always felt like it doesn't make
any difference what happens now. Everything after 1969 was extra, so you take defeats in your life
a lot easier. Getting fired or not getting your promotion or not getting a new car that you want, or
getting sick, or whatever, upsets everybody else more than me because it can't get any worse than
its already been. So that's the positive part of it. The training -- the mental training. I think I heard
so much about the Post Trauma, even while I was there, guys were already coming back, that I had
a mind set that I wasn't going to have it and maybe I worked hard against it, maybe I just didn't
give in and so I have really had no problems with that. It's funny to me, I taught Junior
Achievement for a couple of years -- are you familiar with what that is?

MT: Yes, I am.
MC: Okay. And the class I was teaching was history. Now, I still -- of course, my wife will
make a joke about this. I still say I've got the mind of a 16 year old and she says, "Yeah, you do,"
but what I mean, I don't feel I've aged at all because I do remember those days as if it were
yesterday and yet, sometimes I see the age that has happened without me even realizing when I'm
in front of a history class and they've barely heard of Nam, Vietnam. They have no idea where
Vietnam is on the map, and they have no idea when -- of course, you have to understand Vietnam
to them is like what World War II was to me. So, it's all relative, but I guess it doesn't seem 20
years ago. I can't think of can't think of much else unless you have other questions.

MT: That's about all I have. I guess that concludes the interview.