Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. William Paris on the twenty-seventh of May, 2003, at approximately 10:05 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Paris is in Piedmont, South Dakota. Sir, thank you very much for consenting to an interview. Why don’t we go ahead and begin by discussing your early life? If you would just tell me when and where you were born and where you grew up.

Bill Paris: Okay, I was born in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, in November of 1943. Shortly thereafter my parents were separated. My two sisters and my brother and I moved over to the central part of Wisconsin and I grew up in Wisconsin and Michigan. My mother worked for the National Girl Scouts staff. Part of the time she was traveling, so we traveled, too. We ended up in Michigan. When I was eighteen I graduated from high school and I left home.

SM: As you were traveling, how much time would you spend in any one location or one place?

BP: It would vary quite a bit. I probably went to seven schools in twelve years.

SM: Wow. In some respects, you know, I’ve talked to a lot of military brats, Army brats if you will, other branch brats. Kids that grew up in military families had to move around quite a bit like that. How did that affect you and in particular your ability to make friends and things like that?
BP: It never impacted on my ability to make friends. I’m pretty lucky in that I have an easygoing personality. I don’t have problems making friends, but as to how did it make me feel, I was pretty insecure. Constantly going to new schools, constantly having to adjust. There’s a sense of impermanence about the whole thing. I don’t know. My sisters and I have talked about it. You just kind of feel like you don’t really have a home. So I always felt like, when people would ask, “Where are you from?” It always stumped me because I’m from everywhere. (Laughs)

SM: Good point. What kinds of subjects and interests did you gravitate towards as far as sports or anything like that?

BP: Sports, growing up I was interested in baseball, football, hockey. I only played sports for one year in high school. I played football and the school I was going to at the time was doing very well and so there was a lot of pressure to perform. I thought it was, frankly, unnecessarily brutal. I went to the school newspaper and was the sports editor. That was how I handled that.

SM: What did you enjoy about school? Any particular subjects?

BP: I didn’t do well in school. I didn’t like it. I felt that school back in the ’40s and the ’50s was overly formal and ritualized. The education I received was a very good one. But most of the subjects I found boring. The only ones that I really enjoyed quite frankly were history, geography, and English. Things that if they would take you beyond the, “See Spot run,” sort of level of educating and get into more interesting stuff, then I was right with it. My school career is very checkered. I usually got As and Bs or Fs. There was very little in between. If I didn’t like a subject, I’d either drop it or fail it.

SM: Were you able to maintain very much contact with your father?

BP: No. My father died when I was ten and I only remember seeing him twice in my entire life.

SM: Did you—I’m sorry, go ahead.

BP: Other than his funeral.

SM: Did you gravitate toward any particular men in your family, whether it be on your mother’s side or perhaps on your father’s side, or even people in your community as strong male role modes?
BP: Actually, I had an uncle on my mother’s side who was a banker. But I think he was a waste as a banker. He was a very good one. But gee, this guy, he should have been in the military. He knew a lot about history, poetry, current events. The man was just fascinating to listen to. I think between him and history I found male role models that I could emulate and that I thought were important.

SM: Is there any particular historical personality or figure that stands out in your recollection?

BP: There were several. Napoleon, Julius Cesar, George Custer. There were quite a few of them. Abraham Lincoln certainly was probably my most favorite historical figure and a man I read a lot about.

SM: How about more recent twentieth century figures, presidents or anybody like that?

BP: There are quite a few. Some are rather anonymous. But the more well-known ones were Teddy Roosevelt who I thought just as an immense figure. Not in Lincoln’s category at all but just a fascinating person. Another one was General Douglas MacArthur. I found him to be just riveting.

SM: Of course, the majority of those individuals had very strong military connections.

BP: Yes.

SM: As you were growing up, and especially as you were going through high school, did you have aspirations to entering the military service?

BP: Yeah, I had originally intended on going to West Point to the military academy but I couldn’t get my life together enough academically to do that. I never really wanted to do much more than go in the military. That just seemed to me to be something I ought to do.

SM: As you grew up, in terms of youthful entertainment, did you frequent the movies?

BP: Yeah, I went to movies. Radio was—of course, in Wisconsin in the early days, they didn’t have television so you didn’t need to worry about it. Radio was our big thing and reading. I read an awful lot. When I was about fourteen, I read Plato, Cicero, all the great classics. Didn’t understand half of them, but I read them. (Laughs) “Yeah, I
read that.” “What’s it about?” “Boy, I don’t know. No clue.” (Laughs) Oh, and
Alexander the Great. I got on a big kick about Alexander the Great. I bet for two years I
read everything that ever had been written about him.

SM: Wow. Well, in terms of the movie activities that you were able to enjoy
growing up, were you drawn to any particular genre, whether it be Westerns or military
movies?

BP: I liked action movies because in my generation it was pretty clear-cut. Good
guys, bad guys. I liked that view of life. It made my world then much simpler. I liked
war movies, I liked cowboy movies. Anything that had to do with life and adventure.

SM: Any particular actors in movies stand out in your memory as being an
influence?

BP: John Wayne.

SM: John Wayne.

BP: John Wayne, absolutely. I just thought the world of him. There were some
musicals that I found fascinating, too. I had a pretty good, I think, cross-section of
interests in movies. I would be just as happy going to see the King and I. I thought that
was just a fascinating movie, the whole story. Then I went ahead and I read her book
after I saw the movie. She’s an interesting woman. But yeah, I mean if John Wayne had
a movie out I had to go see it.

SM: How did that affect your perception of the military do you think, especially
before you actually went into the military? What did you think about war and military
service, based on that experience? Just seeing it on the big screen?

BP: It was quite naive and childlike, but even so I thought military service was
very honorable stuff. I thought that war was a condition nobody wanted to get into, but if
you went, you went. It was what a man ought to do. I think on the outside looking in, I
probably felt like—because I tended to live in a world that didn’t include very many men
so I saw them all as honorable and noble with one or two occasional bad apples. (Laughs)
That’s how I saw it.

SM: As you were growing up, how aware were you of the situation globally with
regard to the Cold War? Did you keep up with that much?
BP: Very aware, very aware. Like I said, I listened to the radio a lot. There was a gentleman who had a program at the time, Edward R. Murrow. I was fascinated with Edward R. Murrow. Radio just exposed you to so many things, so I was very well aware of the Cold War and the geopolitical situation in the world. I kept up with it. It was interesting stuff. Yeah, I read the newspaper; I watched the evening news at night.

SM: Was it a conversation topic that would occur like at the dinner table with your mom or—?

BP: We very seldom ate dinner together. So it wasn’t a thing. It was more like something I would either internalize or—I had some, kind of interesting friends. Then I had some adult friends who were kind of—they certainly were a varied mix. (Laughs) They were interesting. We would talk politics and the world situation and things like that.

SM: At what point did you deicide that, you realized you weren’t going to be able to go to the academy, and so the next best thing, of course, would be enlisting into the military services?

BP: When did I actually decide that?

SM: Yeah. When did you decide to enlist?

BP: I think in my heart I always knew I would go in the military probably very quickly after school. Actually, my senior year of high school I had been accepted to college. That was what my mother wanted. I had a girlfriend so you know things got all cloudy. Finally I think what clarified it for me was my mother and I were talking about college one day and she said, “You know you’re going to have to get a job this summer.” It was like February and I thought, “Ugh, I don’t know anything about getting a job.” So I thought, “Well, you know, I think I just need to bite the bullet here and quit screwing around.” So I made up my mind I’d go in the military. So I went up and took the test. In those days it was a lot different than it is now. They had the draft and with the draft recruiters didn’t really recruit, they just sort of took orders. If you wanted to come by and put your name in the hat they’d do what they could to help you in the Army, otherwise they didn’t really care. The Army had just come out with some incentives to enlist, one of which was they would give you a guaranteed job or they would give you a guaranteed assignment. I thought that was pretty good stuff so I decide to go for that.
SM: Why the Army as opposed to the other branches again?

BP: I went to all the recruiters. They all had some interesting things. I knew the Air Force back then rank was terrible. I just did not want to exist in a military service that you couldn’t get promoted in. The Navy had some programs that interested me, but living on a ship didn’t do much for me. The Marines were just, you know, forget it. They were like all those high school coaches I had in football. The Army seemed to me to be the largest service. Promotion was pretty good. My brother had been in the Army and several family friends. They thought fairly positive of it. I just figured the Army had more of what I wanted. I chose them and I enlisted on what we would call now the delayed entry program. Back then it was just you signed up and they said, “We’ll see you when you graduate.” Then I went home and told my mother.

SM: What was her response?

BP: She dropped a pan of soup on the floor. (Laughs)

SM: Oh, no.

BP: I don’t think she thought I was going to do it.

SM: You said your brother had gone in the Army as well.

BP: Yes.

SM: How much older was he than you?

BP: Six years.

SM: Did you have very much contact with him while he was in the service?

BP: No, I never had much contact with my brother at all in my whole life. Bless his heart. He had a lot of physical problems when he was a real small kid and he got sent to boarding school before I ever really remembered very much. That was sort of a thing in our family. My brother came and my brother went, but not for very long did he ever stay. He was just sort of the odd sheep of the family. It was pretty sad.

SM: When you went to the Army recruiter did you sign up for a specific MOS (military occupational specialty)?

BP: Yeah. (Laughs) They had a notebook and so it was kind of quick and dirty. We spent a lot of time at this. He gave me his little test in the office. Twenty questions of, “Which is your right hand? Which is your left?” Things like that. He had openings in Germany, Korea, Alaska, you know, France. You name it. So you get kind of
oriented in that direction but you still had to go up and take the [other] tests and pass
them. I could not figure out what I wanted to do. What I wanted to do was be a military
policeman. But you had to be eighteen-and-a-half and I was just under that. I wanted a
guarantee so I finally settled on tanks. That sounded really cool. So a friend of mine
who I was pretty close to in high school said, “Hey, let’s go together. We’ll go to tanks
and let’s go somewhere short because we don’t know what the Army is like. Let’s go to
Korea.” So I said, “Hey that’s cool. Let’s go to Korea.” So we went up and we tested
and did the whole thing and they gave it to us. They said, “Okay, you can go armor in
Korea.” So when we joined the Army we joined together sort of on a modified buddy
plan. Then he immediately got sick in basic training and I never saw him again. (Laughs)
So I went to Korea. He did actually make it over there. I take it back, I saw him right
before I left Korea, he had just gotten over there.

SM: So armor, what made you decide armor as oppose to infantry or something
else?

BP: I knew the infantry had sort of a butt-ugly life. (Laughs)

SM: Yeah, that’s true.

BP: I couldn’t help just teasing you there for a second, Steve.

SM: That’s all right.

BP: It just didn’t sound very interesting. But tanks, yeah. They’ve got big guns.

You get to shoot all that ammo for free, so that sounded cool.

SM: They have engines.

BP: They have engines so you can ride around, you don’t have to walk.

SM: Lots of armor plating to protect you.

BP: Of course, then I found out what it’s like to be on one of those dogs. But,
yeah, they were cool.

SM: In terms of your view of military service, that is the honorable aspects of it,
what did you think about President John F. Kennedy?

BP: I didn’t like him. He scared me.

SM: How so?

BP: You’ve got to understand, I’m a Catholic. I went to Catholic school. We all
had to pray for John Kennedy. I’ve got to tell you, Kennedy was—how best to explain
this? He was one of these insecure guys that when he gets to the presidency he feels like he’s got to measure up to something that nobody is giving him any input about, this is something he’s driving himself. When he became president, right away he botched the Bay of Pigs things all up. The whole set up for the Bay of Pigs Invasion was that he was going to authorize naval aviation to support the Freedom Brigade that was being landed. Well, he withdrew support at the last minute and so that turned into a disaster. Then ten months later we had the Berlin Crisis. He started mobilizing reserves for the Berlin Crisis. We barely get through that and then he’s got troops going over to Thailand for some big exercise to intimidate the communists over in Indochina. Then by the time I get in the Army in ’62, all of a sudden we go through the Cuban Missile Crisis. I’ve got to tell you, man and boy, I’ve been around the world a couple times. I’ve seen some real odd things but I have never been as terrified in my life, with one exception, as I was in October of ’62 because that guy yanked us right up to the brink of war. I have never seen the United States Army in my twenty years get ready so fast, so quickly, and so badly for a conflict that nobody was really ready for. It was frightening.

SM: What about some of the myths surrounding him and also some of the observations that have been made about how he represented the youthful idealism of your generation? Did you not share any of that aspect of his presidency and personality?

BP: I think people in their twenties and thirties sort of considered him to be their guy. He was extremely good looking. If you’re good looking you can get by not having to say much. I think back to the debates. I watched Kennedy and Nixon debate on television in the presidential race. It was the first televised debate. I listened to Kennedy very carefully and I thought, “This guy doesn’t have a clue.” So the ratings come out the next day. The debate was on television as well as radio. The people who had watched television thought that Kennedy had won the debate, the majority of people in this poll that was conducted. Among the radio audience the poll showed that Nixon had the clear majority, which goes to show you the power of looking good versus sounding good. I’ve never forgot that lesson ever in my life that people tend to listen with their eyes. With Kennedy it all seemed so exciting. Boy, look here’s this vigorous young guy. You always saw pictures of him playing football. If you just kind of closed your eyes for a minute and thought about it. This was a guy who had a hell of a time getting his own
party to pass his budget. It was all glitz. I felt like and, of course, I was only a young kid
at the time, but I didn’t feel like he had a clue. I didn't feel like he was well advised,
either. He brought McNamara in as secretary of defense. McNamara knew about
secretary of defensing about as much as I knew about Ford Motor Company. Neither one
of us had any business being in those realms. He wasn’t the only one. Kennedy also had
the unmistakable habit of doing the wrong thing at the right time. There was this big
hoorah right after I got in the Army and people were very upset. Because Kennedy had
fallen in love with the Green Berets and he was reading all these books about James
Bond, and so he decided that the Army needed to start learning about counterinsurgency.
The chief of staff of the Army at the time, who was a pretty sharp guy, told Kennedy,
“Look, the Army’s mission is oriented on the northern plains of Germany supporting
NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). I am not going to take my troops in Europe
and have them go through counterinsurgency training because they’ve got enough
problems trying to do the mission that they're doing over there and this is silly. We don’t
need to be doing this.” So Kennedy asked for his resignation. That sent a message
ricoeheting around the military that was pretty powerful. This guy had only been chief of
staff of the Army like ten months. That’s a four-year tour. Everybody got the message,
“Oh. Well, if you want to get promoted,” and, of course, everybody in the Army does,
“you better play ball with Kennedy on counterinsurgency.” He would do stuff like that.
It just was mindless. That’s my complaint for the day. What was your question?

(Laughs)

SM: Oh no, just that a lot of the myth and mystique surrounding Kennedy is
about his idealism, his representation of American youth and whatnot. So, you very
much answered my question. That did not apply to you.

BP: Probably not.

SM: You didn’t share those rosy visions of Kennedy in Camelot?

BP: That whole thing was silly, but whatever. But then I was gone a lot. You
know, I left the United States in 1962 in December. For all intents and purposes, except
to visit and do a little bit of training, I never really came back until, hell, 1970. So I
missed a lot.
SM: Let’s talk about your introduction to the military then. Why don’t you, if you would, describe when you left for the military? You did your basic training at Ft. Knox, Kentucky?

BP: Yes.

SM: So when did you leave for that and what were your first impressions of military life?

BP: Well, I left on the eighteenth of June, 1962. Took a bus up to Detroit out to Ft. Wayne, which was an old 1812 post, which was still around. We spent the night and then the next afternoon they formed up enough of us and they put us on a train. We took an overnight train down to Louisville and then the Army met us with buses and took us to Ft. Knox. Of course, it’s always sort of a little bit of a lump-in-your-throat time because it’s like, “Oh, God. What did I get myself into?” Then they put us in barracks at the reception center. Of course, we’re all in civilian clothes. My first introduction to the Army—of course, I’ve got my buddy from high school with me. These sergeants come in and they started yelling and screaming, “Everybody stand by your bunk.” We’re all standing there and, of course, almost everybody is older than I am because they had the draft at the time. I am standing there thinking, “What the hell is going on?” They start reading a list. They say, “Okay, for any of you who may have brought the following items, this is your one and only chance to have amnesty. Otherwise we are going to court-martial you if we find you in possession of these items. Pay attention. This is the list.” It was everything from condoms to switchblades. I thought, “What in the hell? Why would anybody be carrying stuff like that?” He said, “If you have any of these items you may throw them on your bunk and that’s it. You’ve got two minutes. Go.” I am standing there thinking, “Condoms, switchblades, knives, razors? What the hell?” Then I hear all these items hitting the bed. Boom, boom, boom. (Laugh) “Oh, my God! Who are these people I’m with?” That was kind of my introduction. After that it was just the usual herding around military style. You know, eating in gangs, sleeping in gangs, doing everything by the numbers. I don’t know, it had its humorous aspects of it but, of course, they’re trying to do something here for you. I think the hardest thing for me in basic training was weekends because there was nothing to do. They didn’t let you go anywhere and there wasn’t anywhere to go anyway. It wasn’t like we made enough
money to even go anywhere. I sent most of my money home to my mother to put in a
bank account for me because I didn’t drink; I didn’t smoke; I didn’t have a car. I didn’t
have anything to spend all this money on. So I’m getting seventy-eight bucks a month,
that’s big money. So I learned. Eventually I caught up. I tended to hang around with the
older guys because they all seemed to have a pretty good grasp of what’s going on.
There weren’t too many young guys anyway in my unit. Most of them were in their
twenties. Which when you’re eighteen that’s a huge gap, or it was back then. I don’t
know what it’s like now.

SM: What was the overall makeup of your platoon, both socioeconomically and,
if you remember, ethnically?

BP: Ethnically we were mostly white. We were middle class, probably on the
underside of the class standing. (Laughs) There were some guys there that counting to ten
was a real problem and the alphabet might as well have been in Greek. Most of them
were draftees. There were some of us who had enlisted, but not a whole bunch. I think
probably in my company of, I think there were about 190 of us; I don’t think more than
30 of us had joined. Usually they were older. A lot of them were married. Some of
them had been invited to join the Army by judges from around the country and that was
interesting. They were a little rougher crowd than I was used to running with. They
didn’t read many good books. (Laughs) There were a few of those guys around, but not
many.

SM: Minority representation?

BP: There were some blacks. There was—next door to us was a whole company
of Cubans. They were being put through basic training by some National Guard NCOs
(non-commissioned officers) from Puerto Rico. That was interesting. They were still
training them in case they were going to go back to Cuba but, of course, that died pretty
quick. They were really unhappy people because they got their heads shaved so they
walked around with towels over their heads all day. They all wore civilian clothes; none
of them ever wore military uniforms.

SM: That’s interesting.

BP: Yeah, then they disappeared real quick. One day they were all gone.

SM: Okay. Any idea what happened to them?
BP: Nope. No, nobody talked to them. They didn’t speak English anyway.
SM: You didn’t have any Hispanics in your platoon?
BP: There were a couple, but generally they were pretty quiet. There were some blacks, probably three or four. But mostly white guys.
SM: As you were progressing through your training what were the more challenging aspects of it? Physical training? Marksmanship?
BP: There wasn’t anything challenging about it. It was pretty easy. I’m not trying to brag or anything. But the physical training was not that difficult. The marksmanship, I enjoyed the hell out of that. That was fun. We had M-1 rifles, which I loved that thing. No, basic training was actually pretty easy. The hardest part was what to do on weekends because they wouldn’t give you a pass.
SM: You started in June?
BP: Yep.
SM: So you finished up three months later?
BP: Basic training was eight weeks. I finished up in August.
SM: Where did you go from there?
BP: I stayed there at Ft. Knox.
SM: That’s where armor school is.
BP: Yes, then I went to the leadership academy, two-week leadership school. Which at that time, and I don’t know if it’s changed, but you went for a two-week leadership academy and then they put you into an AIT (advanced infantry training) unit as an acting squad leader, an acting sergeant, you know a platoon guide. So I went to my AIT unit and I was a platoon guide. So I didn’t get any leave after basic training. Everybody else did, but we didn’t.
SM: Then you jumped straight into armor advanced training.
BP: Um-hm.
SM: In terms of the leadership training, what did that focus on?
BP: Actually, it was kind of interesting. It focused on this whole business about leading men versus giving orders. I’ve always felt like the Army had a pretty good handle on leadership, at least in theory. (Laughs) They kind of taught us the nuts and bolts of how to march people and get them around, how to be equitable, how to listen;
which I found kind of interesting. That you have responsibilities other people don’t have
because you are a leader. It was enjoyable.

SM: The trainers that you had both in basic training and in leadership school—

BP: Oh, God.

SM: —would these combat—go ahead, why do you say that?

BP: You no sooner opened your mouth when I thought of SSgt. Bill Battle.

SM: What about him?

BP: Most of our sergeants were pretty good. Bill Battle was little short E-6. He
was a sergeant first class, E-6. Which we had a lot of those in the Army back then.

They’d changed the rank structure in ’57. So they went back to what you and I know.

For a period of years there it was like staff sergeant E-5, SFC E-6 and then master
sergeant E-7. Bill Battle was an SFC E-6 and he had made it in Korea during the Korean
War. He was a hell of a soldier but could not understand him. He had the damndest
Mississippi accent and he mumbled. He would give a command and half of us would
stand there and wonder, “What did he just say?” They finally took him off the drill field.

By and large, the sergeants we had not the brightest little stars in the sky but they knew
their jobs and they knew them very well. They were a rough-and-tumble sort. They
weren’t real long on explaining things but, you know, I just felt like you could trust them.

SM: When you refer to them as rough-and-tumble, how rough and tumble could
training get, especially in basic training? Was there very much physical contact between
the DIs (drill instructors) and the soldiers and the trainees?

BP: Most people got the message pretty quick. But once in a while, yeah.

They’d take you out behind the barracks and they’d take their jacket off and you could do
what you want they’d do what they wanted. There’s always some guys that have to try
that. The old saying was, if you weren’t a sergeant those guys were not adverse to taking
off their fatigue jackets and going behind the barracks with you. That happened several
times while I was over there. I never went, but I know some people who did.

SM: When they came back they were born again?

BP: They had seen the light.

SM: Okay. Did that continue in leadership training and AIT or was it a different
atmosphere?
BP: Leadership training was a different atmosphere. The Army was obviously trying to clean up their act a little. We were told, “Hey, you don’t put your hands on them.” But that was not true of the Army in general. They tended to settle their arguments behind the barracks. There were all sorts of ways they had of disciplining you. Everything from putting you on KP (kitchen police) for a week to see how you like that to push-ups, you know the usual stuff. They would also have you dig 6x6s under the barracks. If they really liked you, you got to use the shovel otherwise you used a mess spoon.

SM: Oh, my.

BP: Yeah, so they had their ways.

SM: Do you think that detracted from training, that potential for physical contact?

BP: No. Let me put this in context. I don’t think with that group it hurt at all. I think it allowed you to cut through the crap real quick with them. I wouldn’t want to try it with today’s soldier because I don’t think they would be able to handle that. I think back in the early ’60s you had a different type of soldier. They responded to that sort of thing. Nowadays people go crazy.

SM: There would be lawsuits.

BP: Pardon?

SM: There would be lawsuits.

BP: Well, not just lawsuits, but I mean we’re not that physical of a society anymore. Men have changed, if that makes sense.

SM: I think it does. I think it does.

BP: I just think that today’s young man would freak out over something like that, until you get them into jump school. (Laughs)

SM: Go ahead, if you would, describe what armor school was like, armor training. What kind of tanks did you train in? What was the regimen like? What were the greatest interesting and challenging aspects of that training?

BP: Well, armor school was a little tougher because it was a lot more physical work. Being on a tank crew is a very physical job. You’re wrestling that track, you’re changing sprockets and final drives and those things are heavy. There’s also an
environmental factor that you have to overcome, which is when you get down inside of
those tanks, there’s not much down there. It’s all pretty sterile white. If you get seasick
quite easily you’re not going to enjoy being in armor. The training was actually pretty
exciting. They started us out driving. Of course, because they’re just a bunch of fun
loving guys the first thing they do is take you out on the driving course and turn you
loose so everybody’s riding around having a good time and then they have a waterhole.
The waterhole is where the NCOs have their fun. It never occurs to you, you’re pushing
fifty-four tons through this waterhole and you might want to ease into it rather than
creating a tsunami and get drowned in the driver’s hatch. (Laughs) Of course, after the
first couple guys almost get inundated in the flood, why everybody learns to slow down.
Then, of course, the problem with tanks is when you’re done with your training that
doesn’t end your day. You’ve got to come back, you’ve got to refuel them, you’ve got to
clean them up. That takes a certain amount of time there. Gunnery was fascinating. We
trained on the M-48A-2. They had a 90mm gun, .30-caliber coaxial machine gun, .50-
caliber for the tank commander and it had a gasoline engine. One day, one fine day, we
were coming back from training and I was ground guiding my tank up to the POL
(petroleum, oils, and lubricants) point and some PFC (private first class) came up and
told me to go over to the other line and I told him no, I had to stay in this line. He never
let me finish, he gave me an order, even though I was a platoon guide. I thought, “Well,
okay. He’s permanent party so I’ll go do what he says.” Well, our tank blew up.
(Laughs) Not blew up, blew up but the engine shot flames I’d say about seventy-five
yards.

SM: Wow. What happened?
BP: It was a gasoline engine and he put diesel in there.
SM: For crying out loud.
BP: So he got court-martialed. The rest of the tank crew said, “No, no. Sergeant
Paris tried to tell him but he wouldn’t listen.”
SM: I didn’t realize that would result in such a massive explosion.
BP: Yeah.
SM: That’s amazing. No one was hurt?
BP: No one was hurt but it cost the Army a 750-horsepower final drive and one of those big twelve hundred horsepower engine.

SM: Yeah, that’s not good.

BP: Transmission, I mean, not final drive.

SM: What model tank was this again?

BP: It was the M-48A-2. The problem was some training units had M-48A-3s which are diesel and some had M-48A-2s. So you had to be careful. I enjoyed it. Had a few little leadership challenges with a platoon of guys mostly because a bunch of them came in out of Texas. They didn’t believe in anybody telling them what to do who wasn’t a sergeant major in the Army or something. We got through that and then no sooner did we come together as a platoon than the Cuban Missile Crisis happened and that brought everything to a screeching halt for a week. We were out in the training field and had come back and were just putting up the tanks when we were told to get up to the company, report to the barracks and stay there. Everybody was confined to the barracks. We had no idea what was going on. So we did. We went up and we stood by in the barracks for about an hour-and-a-half and then they would come in and they would take details. Details to go do this and details to go do that. We didn’t get tapped for any and finally they called everybody together and said that we may be going to war. The president was going to speak later on that night and we could watch TV in the dayroom but as soon as that was done we were to go back to the barracks. We watched Kennedy’s speech about the nuclear weapons in Cuba. Ft. Knox closed down, literally. It’s an open post so closing it up was kind of interesting. But they strung concertina wire and put up barricades. If you were off post you couldn’t get on. If you were on post you weren’t going off. They packed up the [194th] Armor Brigade which is pretty much school troops there and put them on trains and shipped them out to Florida. Then they cancelled training. So for a day-and-a-half we stood in the barracks and just literally did nothing. Then they went ahead and were talking about accelerating our training and then by the end of the week it settled down. So we graduated normally but it was a pretty rugged week.

SM: As you were watching President Kennedy during this crisis, what did you think about his leadership capabilities and his presidential leadership at that point?
BP: Initially I believed everything he said. I mean, there is no reason to
disbelieve the president of the United States. Later on when I got over to Korea I fell in
with a guy who was in military intelligence. He said, “You know, Paris, we have nuclear
weapons in Turkey, which is right on the Soviet border. Why is this such an issue for us
when we’ve been doing it to them for six years now?” I didn’t know that. I thought,
“Yeah, how come?” (Laughs) Initially I thought, “Well, gee. Nuclear weapons? We
can’t have that.” What bothered me was the fact that Kennedy drew a line in the sand
with this whole thing and it didn’t seem to me, and in retrospect, I don’t think he gave
Khrushchev much wiggle room, which is not a good idea for a politician. I have to hand
it to Khrushchev for getting through that Cuban Missile Crisis. Because I think if he
would have been any less of a man we probably would have gone to war. I think
Kennedy was bound and determined he was going to go.

SM: So you think Kennedy was responsible needlessly escalating this to the
brink of war?

BP: Well, that’s a good question. I think that Kennedy was probably not as good
a diplomat as he should have been. I think it would have escalated into war had
Khrushchev not made a compromise. I guess, yeah, that’s the long way of saying yeah.
To the children of the future, I apologize. (Laughs)

SM: If that’s what you thought. Were you able to discuss these types of things
with other guys you were going through training with?

BP: Yes.

SM: How did they feel? What did they think?

BP: They were scared to death just like I was. Of course, your feeling is, “Geez,
we can’t let them do that.” I think that’s probably the way I felt for six months, you
know, that Kennedy had done the right thing. When you back up and you look at it like,
“Well, we’ve had nuclear weapons on their doorstep. They didn’t go to war with us.
How come we’re going to war with them?” I had no faith after that in the man, whatever
I’d had before.

SM: Well, let’s take a break. We’re back from the break. Were there any other
interesting or challenging aspects to your armor training that you’d like to discuss that we
haven’t discussed yet?
BP: No. I don't think so.
SM: How well prepared were you when you finished going through your three phases of training there at Ft. Knox?
BP: I think I was very well prepared to be an armored crewman, which was what I'd hired on to do. I think we knew what we needed to know and how to go about it.
SM: When did you know your follow-on assignment after you finished your training?
BP: I knew I would be going to Korea because I had enlisted for it. They were very good about it. If you were going to go then you were going to go. I didn’t have a leave after basic. Then they announced if you were going overseas, particularly to Korea, you were going right away. There would be no leaves en route. I wanted to go home and see my mother at least before I left. So I borrowed a guy’s car and went home one weekend and it was horrible. It drank oil, got about ten miles to a gallon of oil. (Laughs) So I did that. I got back and then I pulled CQ (charge of quarters) runner my last week in the company. They came down just before that and announced that and changed the policy and anybody that wanted a three day pass could take one. I was so mad because I thought, “God, I’d spent the better part of two days in a car trying to get home. To hell with it.” So I just stayed there. I didn’t get a leave until I got back from Korea the next year.
SM: What was the trip like going to Korea?
BP: The trip to Korea was by troop ship. (Laughs)
SM: How long did that take?
BP: That took thirty days.
SM: What was your point of debarkation?
BP: We left out of Treasure Island at San Francisco, sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge right into a typhoon.
SM: Oh, my goodness.
BP: I was in the bow compartment. I knew nothing about troop ships but I certainly learned a lot on the way over.
SM: What did that mean, being in the bow compartment?
BP: That’s a hell of a ride because when the ship goes up you go up with it. Midships it’s a little more settled down. We hit rough seas, oh, probably four hours out of San Francisco. We banged around. In the three-and-a-half days it took us to get to Hawaii I lost ten pounds. I was so dehydrated and so sick because the problem in a troop ship is you have sort of kind of latrines but when you’re in rough seas like that there’s no place to go, so people start getting in sick in the aisles. Then like I say, you’re in the bow compartment and you’re up and down, up and down. When we first came into the compartment I was going to grab a lower bunk. Some Spec-4 grabbed me and said, “Unh-uh, take this one up above.” I said, “Does it make a difference?” He said, “Oh, yeah. You’ll see.” That guy saved me from a life of hell because everybody on the lower bunks got wet.

SM: Really?

BP: Oh, yeah. Guys were so sick and I was right there with them. They battened down the hatches and they restricted the Army component to the hold. We rode it out. By the time we got to Hawaii, of course, the ship was stable then but we were all going back and forth, back and forth. (Laughs) We just spent a quick afternoon in Hawaii then we took off again and we went to Okinawa, Japan, and then finally to Korea. By then I had my sea legs, it was cool. On the way out they called everybody together and this is where I met this guy from military intelligence. He was pretty sharp. He took a liking to me. So they said, “I need plumbers.” Some guys raise their hands, “Yeah, I was a plumber.” He said, “Okay, you’re going to be on latrine detail. So you’ll be doing that everyday.” Then it was like, “I need cooks.” “Yeah, I used to be a cook.” “Good, you’re on KP permanently. You’ll be assigned to the galley.” He said, “I need electricians.” This guys nudges me, he says, “Raise your hand.” I said, “What?” He said, “Raise your hand.” So I stuck my hand up. He said, “You’re an electrician?” I said, “Yeah, sure.” He said, “Fine, I need disk jockeys.” He said, “You ever done anything like that?” I said, “Oh, sure. In high school. You know I ran the—” “Fine, I don’t want to hear your story.” So he picked this kid from military intelligence, myself and two other guys and that was our job. We played music all the way over. Best job I ever had in the Army? Well, almost. That’s what we did. Then when we got to Korea you had to go climb down the cargo netting in your Class As. Then you climbed into an
LCI (landing craft, infantry). This was at Inchon. Then you went in on the LCI to the beach and they pulled up next to a dock. We scrambled up the ladder onto the dock. Of course, you’re carrying your duffle bag with everything you own. Then they put you in buses and they take you over to the train station, put you on a train. So you’re all sitting there, a herd of new guys and these NCOs start calling your name and handing out packets. These are your assignments. I look at it and it says 3X and I had no idea what the hell that meant. So I asked the sergeant and he said, “You’re going to the 3rd Infantry.” Right away I thought I had a violation of contract because I was a tanker. What the heck was I going to do in an infantry battle group? I opened the packet while I was waiting for him to come back so I could tell him how wrong the Army had this whole thing. I look in there and the only letter I’ve got is from my recruiter and it’s not even a letter, it’s an advertisement for, I don’t know, something, the Army band or something. One of those printed brochures. I thought, “Welcome to Korea.” (Laughs) So when the sergeant finally came down I told him, “Hey, look, I’m not infantry I should be going to an armor unit.” He said, “You stupid ass.” He says, “They’ve got tanks in [infantry] units too. They’ve got a recon platoon and that’s where you’re going.” So sure enough, I got up and went to the 7th Infantry Division. Went to their rear, drew equipment and then put on a truck and sent up to Camp Kaiser. Got up there and heard the colonel’s famous monkey speech. (Laughs)

SM: What was that?

BP: The famous monkey speech?

SM: Yes.

BP: An infantry battle group was the equivalent of what you would call a regiment now. I was in the 2nd Battle Group, 3rd Infantry. We were the Old Guard, same as the unit that does the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and all that. We were a regular infantry battle group. There were [ten] companies in this battle group. It was commanded by a full colonel. All of us new guys get into this room and the sergeant major comes in and tells us “Shut up, don’t ask any questions. If you’ve got any problems see me afterwards, but don’t bother the colonel.” Hell, we’d never talked to a colonel in our lives. We were scared stiff. This colonel comes in, crusty old devil. He looks around at us, he’s got combat patches and CIBs (Combat Infantryman Badge) and
everything. Here we are slick-sleeved privates. He sighs and he says, “I want to
welcome you to the Old Guard,” yadda, yadda, you know, “very proud.” Goes through
all the who we are and what we do over here. Then he said with a great deal of disgust,
“Now, I’m going to tell you boys something.” (Laughs) He said, “I’ve been in the Army
a long time.” He said, “When I was a young captain, I commanded an infantry company
in the South Pacific.” He said, “They stuck me on this island and there was nothing on
this island but coconut trees and monkeys.” He said, “For the first three months
everybody drank coconut juice and threw coconuts at the monkeys.” He sighed again
and he looked out the window and he said, “By the end of six months on that damn
island, I’ve got to tell you, some of the guys were coming to me with monkeys and
wanting to marry them.” He said, “I’m going to tell you sons-of-bitches, right now, don’t
bring me any of these monkeys from down in the village and tell me you want to get
married because I’m not going to put up with it. That’s it. Dismissed.” (Laughs)
SM: Oh, my goodness.
BP: I thought, “Wow!” Is that crude or is that crude? (Laughs)
BP: It was not politically correct at all. Then began the integration of Bill Paris
into the real world. We were six miles south of the demilitarized zone. There’s a ROK
(Republic of Korea) division in front of us. To our left on the DMZ (demilitarized zone)
is the 1st Cavalry Division. We’re in a very isolated place. We’re the most forward
brigade of the 7th Infantry Division, although certainly the 1st Cav was right on the DMZ
and our job was to support the 1st ROK Division. They had this little village there. Of
course, I’m eighteen and what I know about life you could put in a thimble and still have
plenty of room for all your friends. They had what they called a two-week cooling off
period. That was if you were a new guy in country you didn’t get to go down to the
village. Which was fine because actually I got to go to the Bob Hope show. Which for
some reason or other everybody was mad at the company that day so they were
whispering around the ranks, “Let’s not go to Bob Hope’s show.” I said, “You guys have
got to be crazy. This is Bob Hope. Hell, I’m going.” So I was the only guy from our
unit that went. (Laughs) Went down to Camp Kaiser and saw Bob Hope. I really enjoyed
it. But I went down to the village finally, they talked me into doing that. This black E-4
takes me around and he says, “Paris, you need to understand all these women are whores
and for two bucks you can have any one you want.” I got offended. I said, “You know,
that really isn’t fair. Maybe once in a while a girl will sleep with a guy, but geez, to
classify them all as whores, that’s cruel. (Laughs) He looked at me like “Oh, my
God. I think he believes what he’s saying.” So naturally, he did what any red-blooded
American would do. He said, “Hey guys! Come here! Paris, tell them about these fine
Korean girls.” There I am defending the honor of every whore in this Inchonese village.
Finally some other E-3 grabs me up and says, “Come with me. You’re impossible. You
realize what an idiot you are?” I said, “No.” He said, “Do you know where you are?” I
said, “Well, sure. I’m in—” “No, you don’t.” He takes me in the first club. He says,
“Look around this room.” He said, “Tell me who’s the cutest girl here?” So I look
around and I see a well-endowed young female and I said, “She’s kind of cute.” “Come
with me, come with me.” So he takes me up and he says, “I want to screw you, how
much?” “Two dollars.” He looks at me like, “Did you get that?” Then before we could
say anything he takes me out the door and we go next door. He said, “Ask any girl how
much to go to bed with her.” I said, “Well, now wait a minute.” He said, “No, ask any
girl.” By now I’m sort of catching on. So I asked one more and it was like, “Doh!”
“Yeah, guess where you are Bill.” “Oh, my God!” So after that I hung out at the Army
Education Center and within, I don’t know, two or three months I had my two years of
college and that was about all they could do for you. It was interesting. It was quite a
unit to go to. There were a lot of old Army types that you never will see again. There
were professional privates. These guys used to be an epidemic in the Army. They had
come in during the Depression or the Second World War and they were happy being
privates. They didn’t want to be anything else. You had guys who had sixteen,
seventeen years of Army service and they had never been anything but privates. Every
time they’d get promoted they go downtown, get drunk, fight with the MPs (military
police), get busted and they were happy. The last one of these guys I ever saw was in
1965 in Germany. The last of the professional privates because the Army was changing
and, of course, they didn’t want that sort of stuff anymore. We had guys like that. We
had all kinds. It was quite a colorful mix. People that my mother would have just died
had she known I was hanging around with. (Laughs) In my unit we had blacks; we had
Hispanics; we had Puerto Ricans and we had a former Hungarian freedom fighter. He was a story-and-a-half. This guy became like my instant best friend. But he only had like two months to go. He and I did everything together. I just worshipped the ground he walked on. He was quite a story.

SM: What was morale like at the unit?
BP: I think morale in the Army in those days was okay. Most of the draftees weren’t real happy to be there but they understood that’s kind of what you did. They were okay. It wasn’t real low. They did their jobs.

SM: What about the relationship between officers, NCOs, and junior enlisted men?
BP: Well, it was different world back there. You didn’t see officers much. If you saw them it was because there were some officer things to do. Other than that, the NCOs pretty much ran the thing. They took care of business. Our job was to keep our mouths shut and not to talk to anybody unless spoken to. I’m sorry go ahead.

SM: No, no you go ahead.
BP: That was the last time in the army I worked under an NCO who administered what we used to call Article 5. He was an old Army master sergeant. He had come in during the Depression and got out after the Second World War and then came in for Korea and so he was trying to finish out. This guy would drop you like a bad deck of cards. I mean if you just gave him any crap, that was it. Sometimes he couldn’t even wait to get behind the barracks. The only time an NCO ever hit me in my life was Master Sgt. La Pierre. I had it coming. I wasn’t paying attention to what he was telling me. He said, “You want to hit me back? Let’s have at it.” It was like, “No, no. I understand quite clearly, Sergeant, thank you.” Lesson learned.

SM: That kind of is such an interesting and yet foreign concept to today’s military.
BP: Oh, certainly, yeah.

SM: How did that affect the relationship between the junior enlisted men and the NCOs in particular? Knowing that kind of physical violence was accepted, was tolerated, was implemented, and if you stepped out of line you’re going to get your butt kicked, was that conducive to good order and discipline?
BP: Understand that it was disappearing even by that date. I mean, yeah, it was around but not many people did it. Particularly the younger NCOs weren’t into that at all. It was just sort of the kind of thing—there wasn’t a lot of discussion about “How come and why.” So your relationship with your NCOs—the junior NCOs it was a little different. The senior NCOs, sevens and eights and nines, they were all World War II and Korean War veterans. Some of the E-6s and E-7s were Korean War veterans. They were just a whole different breed of cat. You just didn’t screw with them at all. The E-5s, well, that was different. They were usually guys who were closer to your age and were a little more agreeable. They weren’t quite as autocratic, although it was an Army that they only had to speak once or twice and that was it. Then you were up in front of the old man. In those days they had an additional level of punishment besides the Article 15 that everybody’s familiar with. In those days they had an administrative punishment, which was called the company book. The company punishment was strictly between the old man and the members of his unit. It was something that he could give out. He could give out up to a week on what was called company punishment. He could do anything you could do under an Article 15 except take pay and reduce rank under the company book. But company book was all details. Restriction to barracks, details, stuff like that. So you had that level, too. If they figured you were okay, you just needed a reminder, a lot of times they’d recommend company punishment if the NCOs felt like you needed an appearance before the old man. Then that way it never went on your record because the company book expired. They changed it every year, got rid of it, got a new one through the unit fund.

SM: Did you find that the junior NCOs relied more heavily on company book and on Article 15 than the senior NCOs to enforce discipline?

BP: To enforce discipline they took care of it as much as they could. But if you were a shitbird, then they’d turn you over pretty quick to the platoon sergeant. The platoon sergeant normally was the final arbiter. He decided real quick if he could deal with you or not. If he couldn’t, they’d turn you over to the old man and they’d chapter you out pretty quick. A couple Article 15s usually was about as far as they went with you if you weren’t correcting. Then some guys, you know, collected Article 15s the way some people do autographs. Payday was always deadly, we only had it once a month and
you stood in line for God-knows-how-many hours if you were down at the end of the alphabet. You'd change and go to town if that was in the program. Some guys wouldn’t stop drinking until they were out of money or the MPs came and beat them over the head.

SM: The career privates? Not just them?
BP: A lot of those guys back then, hell, what they had they spent.

SM: How often would you guys go out in the field while you served in Korea?
BP: We were in the field quite often. Plus we had alerts over there. If something broke loose on the line we usually would stand to. We were constantly—the year I was over there was a pretty messy year. My division lost seven people killed. I think total for Korea that year, ’62-’63, I think we lost like ten or eleven. What would happen was the North Koreans would send down infiltration teams. These were usually four to six guys. They’d come through the line and then they had a specific mission. It was either to change into civilian clothes, get down to Seoul and do something, or maybe destroy a target. There were always these little firefights taking place up there with the ROKs. Once in a while it would get down to us. The infantry companies got into a couple little minor scraps. Then once, the whole base got into a firefight with a Korean who got drunk. We had Korean augmentation troops assigned to each Army unit.

SM: The KATUSAs (Korean Augmentation to the United States Army).
BP: Yah. We had one go rogue. He took his carbine up on this huge hill that overlooked the base and started a firefight with the entire camp. (Laughs)

SM: Oh, my. Did he get hit, get killed? Did he hit anybody?
BP: No. (Laughs) But he ran the whores off, and that was something. At night the whores came and would cut through the wire. I don’t know how to describe it. You’d be sleeping and all of a sudden the door would open, if you heard that. Here would come these prostitutes. Oh, my God. It was just almost a nightly occurrence. You couldn’t keep them out. It was just something you put up with.

SM: What were the rules about that? Were you guys supposed to kick them out or would the command just turn a blind eye to it?
BP: Usually the command didn’t know they were there. Then they had their own deals going.

SM: What do you mean?
BP: Well, the officers—
SM: Okay. I got you.
BP: —ran a better group of people. (Laughs)
SM: The higher-class girls. They weren’t prostitutes, they were call girls.
BP: They were girlfriends.
BP: Usually most guys didn’t mess with it. But there was always one or two
takers. Usually, if you were going to get the clap that’d be the way to do it. This was
quite an army. You could sign out on pass, which you had to do in those days. You
didn’t just leave because they said you could take off. You had to have a pass in your
possession. If you were on the list you’d go over to the orderly room to pick up your pass
and right by the pass box they had this nasty five-by-seven inch picture of a man’s penis
who had a chancre. There was the pass box, the picture, and a box of rubbers. I don’t
care who you were, you got at least one issued to you and some guys took two or three
because they were planning on a big night. The first time I ever saw that I was so
embarrassed and shocked and humiliated. Then to have the guy slap a rubber in my hand
it was like, “Huh? When am I going to use this?” “Get out of here.” (Laughs)
SM: How long were you over in Korea?
BP: Thirteen months.
SM: During that time, how many fights did your unit get into with Koreans in the
DMZ area, the North Koreans?
BP: I was in the combat support company. We were doing a lot of different
things because we had what now in the infantry Table of Organization and Equipment
belongs to the headquarters company. We had the recon platoon, the mortar platoon, the
radar platoon and all that stuff in a separate company. We were fragmented out a lot.
Our actual company itself really only got into about two scrapes and that was up on the
DMZ, except for the one night the ROK got drunk. Usually our job in the recon platoon
was we would escort the radar platoon up to the demilitarized zone. Then they would
work the ground radar up on the DMZ. Sometimes that could get pretty damn exciting.
We always carried live ammunition but the rules were the ROKs were to do all the
fighting and we were only allowed to shoot if it became imperative to save our lives.
Sometimes you’d sit up there and the ROKs would have a hell of a war going and we didn’t pitch in but they understood. I think they were better at it than we were anyway. They were good troops.

SM: I was just going to ask you, what did you think of the ROKs?

BP: The ROKs were excellent soldiers. They really were. A lot of the Korean War vets didn’t think much of them.

SM: Really?

BP: Well, based on their experience in the Korean War, hell yes. Those guys weren’t very good because they weren’t very well trained. The ROKs we dealt with, which was the ROK Capital Division, they were tough. Well, we’d stand formation because in those days you had reveille at five in the morning. The ROKs had their own leadership so they normally had a corporal. Each platoon had a certain amount of KATUSAs and they usually had a corporal or a sergeant. Well, if the sergeant didn’t like what they were doing he’d call them to attention and knock them on their ass. I mean you think the American Army could get a little rough at times, they could get absolutely savage. They’d kick them and then put them back up at attention. They were good soldiers. They were excellent soldiers. I enjoyed working with them. They were tough.

SM: How about just in general the firefights that did occur while you were in Korea did many of them, or any of them result in American casualties?

BP: Oh, yeah. First Cav, right before I left, was the biggest one. The 1st Cavalry Division, up on their part of the border, the 1st Squadron, 9th Cav had a twelve-man team infiltrate a platoon position. They were coming through the DMZ. They got into a hell of a firefight. As a matter of fact, it was so bad they put us on alert and we were—what?—twenty-six miles away. They just didn’t know what was happening. They lost three guys killed and a bunch wounded kicking those guys back across the line. They reinforced them with a part of their parent battle group. I guess the 9th Cav was a battle group then and not a squadron. But yeah, they could get pretty ugly. Then the division artillery behind us at Camp Red Cloud had a truck ambushed on the road one day. Two guys killed and they were just driving down the road in a truck. Stuff like that didn’t really scare you so much as it just kind of made you a little uneasy.
SM: Were you surprised by the level of violence going on between North and South Korea?

BP: Oh, hell yeah. I thought the Korean War was over. It never occurred to me they were still shooting at each other up there. Boy, they could get to it. You could hear it. When it started up on the DMZ, we usually ran radar to two sites. It was GP III and GP IV. That was the name of them. GP III was situated down on part of what had been the Pork Chop Hill battle site. There was an old Sherman tank laying out there that had been blown up and laying on its side for like ten years. There was a draw coming off of the other side over on GP II that the ROKs [knew they] loved to try and infiltrate through. I don’t know why they always came the same way. Boy, it’d start up over there and it sounded like World War II. Then it’d start up—a lot of times they’d do a diversion over on II and then try and work somewhere else. There was a lot of lead flying some nights.

SM: That is pretty impressive. When you first got there what kind of combat briefings did you receive as far as what you should expect as far as a soldier serving in Korea and any kind of special briefings? Anything at all?

BP: No.

SM: How about at the unit level?

BP: No.

SM: Anything about Code of Conduct or intelligence concerns, things like that?

BP: For privates I don’t think they had lot of concern. It’s kind of funny because, sure, we had that Code of Conduct stuff. Then you always had unit training that you went through but most of it was related to more human issues, soldier issues, an awful lot about not getting out of control, trying to avoid VD (venereal diseases) and malaria. The things that would worry a commander more. I think that they just figured in our sector the ROKs would handle it and if the ROKs didn’t handle it well, hell, we’d go on out and kick their ass, too. When Kennedy got assassinated they put us on alert. We didn’t know what was happening. The only way I knew that he had been assassinated was by then I was the battalion mail clerk. We had switched from battle groups to battalions. I was the battalion mail clerk and that is the best job in the Army in Korea because you got your own hooch and nobody messed with me. I was ED (excused duties) so I didn’t have to worry about pulling duty. Twice a day I went and dropped the mail off or picked it up
and that was my sole reason for living. I got up at about 3:30 in the morning to go on over because the mail went out at 4:00. They had a real-low-wattage AFKN (American Forces Korean Network) radio station up there on the hill. They usually would play folk music when I got up because I took very good care of those guys. I turned on the radio and I heard some funeral dirge and I thought, “What in the hell?” I got on the little TA-312 and I called up there and said, “Hey, what are you guys playing?” The disk jockey said, “We’ve been ordered to play funeral music,” he said, “Kennedy got shot in Dallas.” I said, “He’s in Dallas?” “Yeah.” “Wow, so do we do anything?” He said, “No, but we’ve been told to play this music. We’ll post a bulletin. But I’ve got to tell you, people are jumping through their ass. It sounds pretty serious.” So I said, “Okay.” So I went over to the orderly room and said, “Kennedy has been shot, I’ll bet the siren is going to go off.” About that time it went off. The CQ said, “Oh, shit.” They went to the field and I went and delivered the mail.

SM: How did that affect you?
BP: Kennedy being shot?
SM: Hearing that the president of the United States had been assassinated?
BP: It took, God, almost a day for us to find out he’d been killed. We didn’t have television. We didn’t have a lot of the things. The military radio was pretty canned.

There wasn’t a lot of open communication like there is now. When I heard he’d gotten shot I thought, “Holy shit! What’s going on over there?” Then we heard that he had been killed. I frankly didn’t understand it, I had no concept. Of course, we were immune from the absolute media blitz that happened with his death. Stars and Stripes came out the next day and gave you pretty much the particulars, you know. He’d gone to Dallas and been shot and they had some guy in custody. But trying to struggle with that, why the hell would you shoot the president of the United States? What’s that going to do? When he died—I don’t mean this to sound improper—but I remember some guys were saying, “Who’s going to take over?” I said, “Well, the vice president.” “Well, who’s the vice president?” “Man you live in such a small world. How about President Johnson?” “Oh. So he takes over if the—?” “Yeah.” So then my mother saved all the papers and stuff. Then when I got back in December—when was it?—Geez, three weeks later it was still going on, non-stop, sixteen hours a day. Because in those days television stations signed
off at like 2:00AM. It just went on and on and you could not get away from it. It was just incredible.

SM: Beyond the shock that the president had been assassinated, how did that news affect your unit, if at all?

BP: The people who liked Kennedy were upset by it, but they weren’t very many. In that world at that time the president didn’t have much influence on you. It was kind of like, “Well, that was stupid.” I don’t think people really knew how to think. It was just such an alien concept. Why would they shoot the president? I can’t conceive of that. Why would an American shoot the president? Of course, then, some years later we found out the guy had been a former Marine. Holy shit, if you think the Marine Corps veterans didn’t get shit over that. (Laughs) “Hey, so you taught this guy how to shoot, huh? Good job.”

SM: Was there any kind of collective memorial service, mourning ritual, anything that happened while you were there in Korea?

BP: Not so much a mourning ritual, but the Army has a thing—the day Kennedy was buried we had the day off. So we didn’t do anything. They had services for the major denominations. They brought the major faiths up, which usually in those days were Catholic and Protestant. They had services and they encouraged you to go to that, which usually went like this, “Protestant services are at eight o’clock, all Catholics fall out. Be here at nine o’clock. Everybody else column left.” Then at nine o’clock the Catholics would form up and it would be, “Column left!” (Laughs) That way the chaplain didn’t have to worry about whether his service would be attended or not. (Laughs)

SM: How did you find the memorial service?

BP: Pardon?

SM: What was the memorial service like?

BP: Pretty quick and dirty. I was Catholic, so we had a Mass. It was what they call a Requiem Mass, which the priest wore black vestments. I don’t know what the Protestants did. But for the Catholics, of course, it was a little bit more serious because he was the first Catholic president. I’m sure they were a little down in the mouth about it. But that was it, he gave a Requiem Mass and then if anybody wanted to stay afterward
and say a Rosary for Mrs. Kennedy and the kids and the nation. Some of us stayed for
that and some didn’t.

SM: Was that common feature of your experiences in Korea? Was the chaplain a
common person you saw frequently and were religious services emphasized?
BP: I did because I was an alter boy in Korea. I mean, I continued, I practiced
my faith very much and so, yeah, I saw him a lot. Normally in that army in that situation
the chaplain came out in the field once in a while. Usually it was on a Sunday and he
would do services. Sometimes you’d have the Protestant chaplain or you’d have the
Catholic chaplain. There’d be a combined service kind of thing. No, we usually went to
see them. They didn’t come to see us.

SM: Were they accessible to you? That is, if you felt you needed to talk to them
about something personal you didn’t have any compunction about going to see them?
BP: Listen, that was one of the Army’s iron-clad rules. If you wanted to go see
the chaplain away you went. So, yes, they were very accessible. I mean they were
always there if you needed them.

SM: Given your location in such a hot area of the world, and by that I mean the
active fighting that was occurring on the DMZ, compared to the other Cold War
environments that American forces were finding themselves in in Germany and
elsewhere, was there very much discussion about the likelihood of an all out war with
communist North Korea and the use of atomic weapons and the potential escalation of
war into a nuclear war, that could result in massive devastation? Was that discussed very
much?
BP: That’s an interesting question because that came up. We got issued—this is
an old weapon. I don’t know if you’ve even heard of it, but it was called the Davy
Crockett.

SM: Yes, yes. Jeep mounted, correct? You could pull it with a jeep?
BP: Oh, yeah. It was fascinating. The Davy Crockett was very secret. We
always had to guard the Davy Crockett section when they went out to the field. Which
was like this major pain in the butt because you had to have clearance even to pull guard
for them and so it was all hush-hush and, “We can’t tell you anything.” The damn thing
looked like sort of an odd-shaped 106 recoilless rifle. They would go out and they would
fire live fire, not the nuclear round, but they would fire an HE (high explosives) round.

This thing only went like two thousand yards. It wasn’t until later on that some smart kid
sat down with a slide rule and figured out that if the Davy Crockett crew ever fired the
full .2-kiloton warhead that they were authorized it would incinerate them.

SM: Yes, they could not get out of the blast radius quickly enough.

BP: Yeah. Yes, we did discuss what would happen. Our leaders used to tell us,
“Hey we’re speed bumps.” Our job is to, if they break through the ROKs, to hold them
off as long as we can to hopefully get somebody in here to help us. You know, we’re
meat. I don’t think that ever really sank in what that really meant. Although I was
familiar enough with the Korean War, what that meant. We had some Korean War
veterans who were itching for another go at them. We even had one guy who came over,
he was an SFC E-6 and he had no business being on active duty, much less in Korea. He
had been a prisoner of war for eighteen months until they found out about it. He’d been
mal-assigned. Normally if you were a prisoner of war you weren’t allowed to go back to
that country [of imprisonment] unless you volunteered and he had not volunteered to
come back to Korea. He was with us about two months and then he left. But yeah, we
had thought about it. I think nukes were probably in the plan because I don’t think the
Davy Crockett section would have sat there and fired HE at them.

SM: No. Was it discussed at all by the chaplains, not just a purely tactical sense,
but also philosophical, religious, spiritual sense?

BP: About nukes?

SM: Yeah, any concerns about nuclear Armageddon? Nuclear annihilation?

BP: No, the chaplains pretty much confined themselves to trying to save us from
the prostitutes.

SM: Okay, they had their hands full with that?

BP: That was a bigger issue. It was a bigger problem. We had those wonderful
old movies. (Laughs)

SM: What was the point of the movie, the movies that you were shown?

BP: About every three months. It was a requirement and so, of course, we did it.

We would all go in the mess hall and the chaplain would show us a film about Johnny
getting drafted and going off. Then in some far-off base the boys con him into going
downtown. He and Suzy, of course, are going to get married as soon as he can get back. But instead he gets drug off to the whorehouse. Not only does he go through horrible amounts of guilt and shame but he finds out he has a social disease. Then the doctor tells him that he and Suzy can’t get married. It was all very horrible. Of course, everybody wanted to laugh and snigger all the way through it but the sergeants would patrol the aisles and make sure everybody was handling this whole thing appropriately.

SM: On your best behavior.
BP: So they all did. (Laughs)
SM: What was the relationship like in general between the Americans and the Koreans, the civilian population, Korean civilian population?
BP: Well, there was a lot of racial overtones to it. But then it was a very prejudiced army. This was an army that still was not only not politically correct, but thought of minorities in their worst [characterizations], if I can say that. There was a lot of calling people gooks and sniggering at them and laughing at them. A lot of juvenile pranks. Some of them were actually quite mean. I would say the relationship was one of a stupid bullying child to someone who certainly didn’t deserve it. I did the best I could on my own level not to fall into that, although it was very easy to see everyone as, you know, women as whores and men as stupid. Which they certainly weren’t. I’ve got to admit at times, you live in that environment it rubs off on you in some strange ways.

SM: How did it affect, do you think, your—
BP: You get pretty callous to people. I think the thing that saved me more than anything was that I tended to hang around with the black soldiers more than the white. So many of the whites in my unit were mental category four rednecks. It was just irritating to constantly be around that low intellect. After a while you just want something. I would not go on R&R (rest and relaxation), as a matter of fact, because I just didn’t want to go to Japan and spend five days watching somebody chase skirts. I found a guy—he was Argentinean of all things—had been drafted. He was an art major at the University of New York, SUNY. Carlos had dropped out because he ran out of money and got picked up by the draft board. When he and I went we agreed no chasing women, we’re going to go over there and we’re going to see something of Japan and find
out a little bit. We had a great week over there. It was absolutely fantastic. We went to
museums, we went to concerts. We saw the sights.

SM: What about the Hungarian?

BP: This guy is a story! Really a story! He’s thirteen, he lived outside of
Budapest. When the Hungarian revolution started in ’56 he joined kind of like a little
neighborhood group. They went into Budapest when the head of the Hungarian Army
turned against the communists. They fought the Russian tanks. When they pretty much
destroyed the resistance, he went back home but he got arrested. Somebody had ratted
him out. He was arrested and by this time he was—what?—fourteen. They took him
into Budapest and there was this rather famous, or infamous, headquarters for the secret
police. He was in there for three months, during interrogation they pulled out every one
of his teeth, among other things. They knocked a few of them out. As part of his torture
they did his fingernails and his teeth. Finally they figured he must not know anything.
But what he would do to get through the interrogation was he would bite—oh, God, what
was his story? He had a piece of skin where they had ripped one of his teeth out. He
would press down so hard on that and what he was trying to do was to force his lower
jaw into his brain. He told himself if he would just bite hard enough he could do that.
Then what would have happened was he would pass out. It’s a horrible story, actually.
They finally kicked him loose. Before he even got home he had run into a friend who
had served in one of these resistance units with him who said, “Don’t go home. They’ve
changed their mind and they’re going to execute you. They’re just waiting for you.” He
said, “Come with me. We’re going to try and make a break for the border.” He made it.
He got over to Austria. In the camp they just kind of went down and counted off by
numbers. He was with the group that went to the United States. So he gets to the United
States, he gets a job. He’s got all that behind him. Let me see, he got to the States in ’59
or ’60. Fifty-nine, so this was what, three years after the revolution. He spent about two
years in camps in Austria. He’s getting his life back together and then he gets drafted.
They did that a lot to a lot of these foreigners who came to the US under whatever
conditions. So he goes in to the US Army and they sent him to Korea. He was about
twenty-one, I think, at the time. Sixty-three, yeah, he was about twenty or twenty-one,
but I thought he was thirty. He just looked rough. He was in bad shape, he really was.
He had a lot of broken bones that had not set well. Of course, he was missing all his teeth. The Army at least gave him a set of dentures that worked. Yeah, he was a story.

SM: My goodness. How do you think your experiences in Korea—sorry, before I ask that question. Were any of your fellow soldiers there in Korea, any of the NCOs especially or officers or anyone else, did you have anybody who had experiences in Vietnam or in Southeast Asia in general?

BP: Yeah.

SM: They talked about the American advisory efforts there and what was going on there?

BP: Oh, yeah. This was like the best kept non-secret in the Army. Walking down the street by the PX (post exchange) one day and I see a guy, a Spec-5 with a combat badge. It was the MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) patch, which I didn’t know it what it meant. But he was wearing it on his right shoulder and I knew enough to know you only wear the combat—shoulder. So I stop the guy and I say, “Excuse me, Specialist, how come you’re wearing a combat patch?” He said, “Well, maybe because I’ve been in combat.” I said, “What do you mean in combat? We’re not at war.” He said, “Oh, yeah?” He had gone on two three-month TDYs (temporary duty) from Hawaii to Vietnam as a medic. Had the Combat Medic Badge and the whole thing. For a while I was an S-3 clerk. We got a new S-3 in and he was Captain Couvillon. He was quite a guy. Then one day they announce that they’re going to have a brigade parade to give some awards out. Lo and behold, Captain Couvillon gets the Combat Infantryman’s Badge put on by the brigade commander and then something else, I think a Bronze Star. It just floored me. I thought, “What the hell is going on?” Well, he was with Special Forces in an A-team. We talked about it a little bit. It was still pretty hush-hush and classified. I didn’t understand a lot until I got over to Germany and then Robin Moore wrote his book. I happened to be training with a bunch of SF (Special Forces) guys and they went wild. Man! But at the time in Korea, no. There were guys popping up all over the place who had combat badges and were wearing combat awards. It was like, “Well, where do you get that?” “Well, you go over to Vietnam.” “Oh, really?” “Yeah, we’re over there.” “Really?” “Yeah, and it’s shooting.” “How do you do that?” So I start putting in what in those days you called a 1049, which was a request for transfer. I
thought, “Yeah, hey I ought to go do that.” (Laughs) But they kept turning me down
because I didn’t have the MOS (military occupational specialty) they wanted. They
didn’t need tankers over there, they needed advisors. Yeah, Vietnam was on the screen in
’63.

SM: How did your experiences in Korea, do you think, how do they affect your
perceptions of Asia in general and Southeast Asians, perhaps Vietnamese in particular,
when you finally found yourself there? Did it have an effect at all? Did it predispose you
to thinking any particular way?

BP: Not particularly. Korea was okay. It was hard making that psychological
adjustment from going into such a cultural void. That may sound a little arrogant, but
believe me, when you have nothing but a new movie once a week and whatever you
haven’t read in the Special Services library in this small little post, you don’t realize what
it’s like to starve intellectually. It’s horrible. Then to be constantly thrown in with
people whose idea of a good time is a drink and a cheap prostitute, I mean, it really wore
on me more than I ever thought. I consider Korea probably to have been one of the
hardest tours I did. Certainly much harder than Vietnam.

SM: Well, we’ve been talking for another hour. It’s time for me to stop. I’m
going to have to say thank you very much for our interview today. This will end
interview number one with Mr. Bill Paris.

BP: Okay.
SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Bill Paris on the ninth of July, year 2003, at approximately 9:45 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Paris is in Piedmont, South Dakota. Sir, let’s go ahead and continue our interview by looking at some more of your time in Korea. If you would, you mentioned that you had another interesting story to tell about Korea. We can discuss whatever else you’d like.

BP: One of the things that I remembered the other day was in thinking about that army that I joined, when I got to Korea and went eventually after a period of time to the tanks section and the recon platoon of the combat support company where I was assigned; we went down to do normal what they called motor pool, motor stables. At any rate, we were doing vehicle maintenance. Being armored crewmen, of course, this is not strange stuff to us. We’re kind of in the middle of doing the normal maintenance on the tank and then I hear this bullhorn. I look over and in the motor pool—which is just really an open dirt area with a fence around it—here is the chief warrant officer II who is our unit’s maintenance officer. He’s standing on top of about a one-story stand and he has a bullhorn and he has a book. The book was what in the Army parlance they call the Dash-10. The Dash-10 is the operator maintenance portion of it. What he’s doing is he’s got the Dash-10 for trucks. He literally is going down through the book telling these guys how to do maintenance. It just astounded me to sit there and watch this because I didn’t know whether they were that stupid or he was that controlling. I’m not sure, but it probably was a combination of both. I just stood there and watched this guy reading things like, “Take the dipstick in your right hand and remove it from the engine block with a swift upward motion. Look at the dipstick.” He was talking the guys through how to check oil, how to do this, how to do that. It just blew me away. I will never forget that. (Laughs)

SM: What were the biggest maintenance challenges?

BP: We were what we used to call a straight-leg infantry outfit. In other words, our battle group, they walked everywhere they went. This was in the old days. The only
maintenance that most of the operators had to pull was on the trucks and the support
vehicles like jeeps. Then in the combat support company, which is where I was, that’s
where most of the teeth for the battle group was that was not assigned down to the line
companies. We had the heavy mortar platoon. We had the recon platoon which had a
tank section, an infantry squad, and a scout chief. I just lost my train of thought.

(Laughs)

SM: In terms of just maintenance and other problems with equipment, maybe the
effects of the environment especially the very harsh winters in Korea, that kind of stuff?

BP: It still is pretty simple maintenance. Most of the vehicles that we had were
very easy to maintain. We probably had the most complex vehicles with our tanks. It
wasn’t that hard. We had probably a greater time maintaining weapons because the
weapons we had were all World War II vintage and that took a little extra work to keep
those going.

SM: Were there any other experiences that you had in Korea that you remember
that we have not yet discussed or if you can encapsulate or discuss how your Korean
experiences affected your outlook toward Asians, toward America’s involvement in Asia
militarily, and how that might have colored or affected your outlook toward the Vietnam
War and your work with the Vietnamese or in Vietnam?

BP: Interesting question. I think generally the Army that I joined in 1962 was a
pretty professional group. You had a lot of career non-commissioned officers and
officers who knew their stuff. There was an interesting flavor to that Army because you
had the last of the Depression-era soldiers going out. There were still a few of them
around who had been in the Army during the Depression. There were a lot of World War
II and Korean War vets in the NCO and officer ranks, guys who knew their stuff. I
thought it was an experienced group. We had a company of what they call KATUSAs,
attached to us. These are Korean Augmentations to the United States Army, hence the
acronym KATUSA. These were Korean soldiers. The Korean War vets did not like the
Koreans. They thought they were poor soldiers. Of course, the nickname, the slang word
was “gooks.” Everything was “gook this” and “gook that.” I think in my own experience
I never particularly felt that way. Looking at the Koreans and just being around them a
little bit up on the DMZ, I thought they were pretty squared away. We would have
physical training and stuff. We’d do the Army daily dozen, however many repetitions we
were up to. Then we’d go for about a mile-and-a-half run. Once every two or three
months we’d go on a twenty-mile road march. The Korean soldiers, three times a week
they went out to, we used to call it the post field. I meant not as a base field but it was
literally a field of posts. They would get out there and they would do some form of
karate. They’d be out there for an hour, two hours, religiously working on it. Their
hands were something. These guys could crack blocks, they could do all kinds of stuff.
They weren’t like us, certainly, but when I left Korea I didn’t hate the Koreans. I didn’t
think they were less than we were. At the time I was in the Army there was a lot of
racial—what do I want to say? Bigotry. Particularly among the uneducated enlisted
types. The less education they had, the more bigoted they tended to be. The guys from
the South hated the blacks. The guys from the North, they didn’t like blacks particularly,
either. You know the old Kingston Trio song, “The French hate the Germans, the
Germans hate the Dutch. I don’t like anybody very much.” There was a lot of that going
on in the Army, like I say, among certain elements. It was irritating to have to put up
with that because it was so nonsensical. I don’t think in particular either in Korea or later
on in my two tours in Vietnam I particularly disliked any of those people as people. I
certainly disliked the enemy for their habit of shooting at me. Beyond that I respected the
Vietnamese tremendously. My saying is “I don’t know how the hell you can cast
aspersions to somebody who can kick your ass with half of what we have to work with.”
So, no, I don’t think there was a pre-disposition there unless you didn’t like people very
much anyway. Then I think, yeah, you probably didn’t like the Orientals or the blacks. I
know guys that hated Northerners. Some of those Southern guys really had a thing about
Yankees.

SM: Well, when you left Korea what were the major lessons you took away from
that experience that helped you as you continued in your military career?

BP: The major lessons I took away was that, number one, I didn’t know nearly as
much about life as I thought going into the Army. Number two, when I walked out of
Korea I thought I was pretty world-wise. I made the same mistake again. (Laughs) You
have a certain set of experiences and you think, “Oh, yeah, now I’m qualified to judge
everything.”
SM: Well, that’s human.

BP: But yeah, it just set me up for something different in Germany. I think the biggest thing I learned was confidence as a soldier. I was beginning to like the military. I thought, you know, “Hey. This isn’t bad.” I liked to travel. I really liked to travel. I had gone to Japan while I was in Korea. That was fascinating. They were getting ready for the ’64 Olympics. The Japanese, they’re an interesting people. So, that’s what I walked out of Korea with.

SM: How did it affect your perception of American national security policy? In particular, our American force projection capabilities? How realistic or how effective did you think our contingency in Korea or our force presence in Korea and perhaps elsewhere, like in Germany and whatnot, how effective did you think this was as a form of foreign policy? Did you delve too deeply into those types of thoughts and issues at the time?

BP: I think everybody in Korea realized the two divisions we had over there—when I was there it was the 7th Infantry Division and the 1st Cavalry Division. We realized that we were just tripwires. We didn’t think that we had really much of chance. If they really were going to come again, we could slow things up but we sure weren’t going to stop them. Then as to why we were there, I think it was still a continuation of what had been going on for the last nine years which was just reassuring the South Koreans that we were going to be there with them. We had made this commitment. Hell, we had over a [fifty] thousand American troops over there in Korea of one type or another. We had a pretty good chunk of folks over there. I think that’s all I felt we were doing was continuing the commitment. I was quite relieved in a way that Kennedy was gone. I mean it was tragic what had happened to him, but I think having served in Korea I realized that guy could get us into more stuff quicker than we could get out of it. I felt like when I left Korea with Johnson in there, at least we had somebody that wasn’t quite as a freebooting adventurer who was going to get us into trouble. That was about my thoughts on force projection. Of course, I was only twenty years old at the time and that’s not much of a twenty-year-old’s idea of it. Walking out of there, that is what I had felt.
SM: Go ahead, if you would, and describe your transition from Korea. You got leave probably after Korea, you were able to go home for a little while and then on to Germany, or did you go directly to Germany?

BP: I had requested what was called an intra-theatre transfer, which you certainly could do. I wanted to go to Germany. I still thought I was probably in the Army for just three years and I wanted to see everything. So, to hell with going to the United States. I didn’t want to go to Ft. Hood. I could see Texas anytime. But Germany, now that was something. I put in for Germany and was accepted. Went back on a troop ship. I screwed myself out of a plane ride. (Laughs)

SM: How did you do that?

BP: At that time the Army was still using troop ships to deploy people to Korea, but it was getting pretty expensive for the Army to do that. The way it worked is the Navy maintains the troop ships but the Army pays for it. So they have to give the Navy certain operational funds so that the Navy will give them a ride over to the Far East and back. The Air Force, never being one to miss an opportunity, came in essentially and said, “You know we could fly these guys over and back and, hell, save you a lot of money.” They were starting to do that in ’63. Everybody had come down on orders that had arrived with me for a ship. So I waited a week and nothing happened. I called my good friends down in 7th Division and found out the guy I normally talked to wasn’t there. So I talked to another guy. He said, “Oh, wow. Gee, you should have your orders. I’ll get them out for you. We’ll get you on that ship, no problem.” Three days later I get a phone call, “Paris you idiot.” “What?” It was the guy I normally talk to down at division. He said, “You know I had you manifested for a flight out on the fifteenth, you stupid. Now you’re going to ride thirty days on a troop ship and you could have been home.” (Laughs) Oh, well. Like I told him, “Hey, had you let me know I wouldn’t have raised hell. Why don’t you cancel the orders?” “Oh, no,” he says, “I can’t do that.” So I got to ride a troop ship back for thirty days. Unlike my trip over, this one wasn’t nearly as much fun, although I was an E-4. I was on garbage detail all the way. But it still was a good time.

SM: To what unit were you assigned in Germany and what was it like there?
BP: Went home for Christmas. I was supposed to be there a month. I got bored as hell. I went early to Germany and when I got there I was assigned to the 8th Infantry Division. This always happened to me in my Army career. I would be somewhere and some guy would come along and say, “I wanna to tell you, don’t do this.” Usually that guy would be right. In the replacement company for the 8th Infantry Division this guy was going home and he said, “If they try and assign you to Baumholder don’t do it. It’s an armpit.” I thought, “Uh, I don’t want to do that.” I said, “Where do they have tanks?” He said, “Well, they’ve got them at Baumholder and they’ve got them at Mannheim,” and there was some other place. So I said, “Hmm.” Okay, so the next day I went up for my assignment and this NCO hands me a set of orders and he said—no, it was an officer. He said, “We’re going to assign you to Baumholder to a tank battalion.” I said, “Think fast, Bill.” (Laughs) So, I said, “Sir, do you know I have family in Mannheim?” “What?” I said, “Yes, sir, we have some second cousins,” and I used my grandfather’s name because they were German. I said, “They live in Mannheim and I was really hoping that I could live in the same town as my relatives. The problem is if I get to Baumholder I’m never going to see them and this is—” “All right, all right, all right,” he said, “We’ll change your orders. We’ll assign you to Mannheim.” “Woo-hoo!” I went to Mannheim. I went to a little place stuck out there where what they called casernes, which really were like little posts. One was Coleman Barracks, which had the huge brigade there, and then there was Sullivan Barracks which had an infantry battalion and an armor battalion. When I got there, this was real armor stuff. In Korea I’d really had not much of a chance to serve on tanks. So I was kind of pumped up about it. The unit was a pretty good unit. The guy who had command of it later on became a lieutenant general. He was a sharp cookie. The company was a good company. It was different being in a tank battalion as opposed to an infantry battle group. Everything was about the tanks and you lived and died on those tanks. There was actually a lot more work on the vehicles and a lot less area beautification than some of the other things we had done in Korea. Quite honestly, I spent my last three months as battalion mail clerk, so I’d gotten kind of lazy and I wasn’t used to all that work. They assigned me to Bravo Company and put me in 2nd Platoon on a tank. This tank commander, his name was Sergeant BoJesko and he was Romanian. He had been one of the displaced persons during the Second World War. As a twelve-
year-old kid he and his family left Romania because of the bombing. They ended up over near Vienna. Then when he was fourteen he ran away because the Russians were there and he hated the Russians. So he literally escaped to the American zone over in Austria because in the ’50s it was partitioned. Then he kind of lived hand-to-mouth until he was old enough and then he walked over to a post in Germany and tried to enlist. They said, “No, you can’t do that. You have to go to the States.” So he did. He went to the States. He went through all this tremendous paperwork, lied about his age. Told everybody he was twenty-one because they don’t allow, I guess, people under twenty-one at that time to immigrate. Immigrated to the United States, got off the ship, walked over in New York City to the nearest Army recruiting station and signed up. So Sergeant BoJesko, who was probably one of the more interesting characters I ever met in the Army, was a fanatic about that tank. He was a damn good tank commander; I’ll say that for him. But, oh, my God. I never could—he spoke five languages and none of them well. He had this horrible Romanian accent. When he would talk—it probably took me two months before I could make sense out of what the guy was saying. He would get so damn mad at me he started hitting me on the back of the helmet. Finally we worked out a code to where the loader who understood him perfectly would tell me what he wanted. It got even better than that until about the second month. We jumped right into tank gunnery when I got there, which kind of excited me. I enjoyed that. I was a pretty good gunner. So BoJesko liked that but we worked out a system of taps. He would tap me and that would mean this or that. Then finally I could understand him. Went through one cycle of tank gunnery and I fired high in the company and second in battalion. So I was an E-4 when I got there, which is a very hard rank in Germany to make. Once you made E-4 that was sort of the hump. I kept waiting to make E-5. I was there probably five months. I had fired top gun in the company. Other guys in the company are getting promoted ahead of me. I got more time-in-grade, I got, you know—I would go to Sergeant BoJesko and I’d say, “Sergeant BoJesko, what’s going on?” He’d say, “Well, I don’t know.” He’d check on it and it got to the point where it became a personality conflict between myself and the platoon sergeant. What I found out later on was that he had a lot of buddies and he would do favors for people. One of the favors he was doing was promoting a couple guys for another NCO in another company and so on. So at any rate, I finally took off on leave. I
took off for two weeks and went around Europe. When I got back one of the guys who
was in Headquarters Company came up and said, “Hey, congratulations.” I said,
“Congratulations on what?” He said, “You got promoted to E-5.” He showed me his
orders. He and I were on the same orders. I said, “Well, hell, I’ve been back two days,
how come nobody told me?” He said, “I don’t know. Hell, go ask.” In the meantime the
company commander had left, the platoon leader had left. What happened was the
platoon sergeant was sitting on the orders, just screwing with me. I thought what he’s
doing is he doesn’t want to have a ceremony and promote me. He’s just going to let me
find out and sew them on. I thought, “Well, two can play this game.” So I didn’t sew
them on. People would say, “Hey aren’t you an E-5?” “Yeah, I don’t know.” (Laughs)
Finally about three weeks later we’re having an inspection on Saturday. Saturday
inspections were legend in the Army. That’s how you spent your half-day. You either
had a full field layout in which you GI the barracks—I’m sure you know what that
means, but that’s where you got out all your field equipment and laid it out just so on
your bunk and all the damn canteens were measured on every bunk so that they were in
the same spot. All this mindless stuff that you go into in the Army. Or you have greens
inspection or something that they can do that will keep you busy but doesn’t require them
to do a lot. At any rate our [new] platoon leader is inspecting us in ranks and he comes
up and he looks at me and he looks at my nametag and he looks at my arm. He says,
“Specialist Paris, are you an E-5 or an E-4?” I said, “Sir, I’m an E-4.” He stops for a
minute and there is this, kind of shuffle, shuffle. (Laughs) The platoon sergeant is looking
the other way, the tank commander is looking the other way. He pulls out his list and he
says, “Well, is my roster wrong?” Turns to the platoon sergeant. “Is my roster wrong?
Is Paris an E-4 or an E-5?” The platoon sergeant said, “Well, he’s an E-5.” He turns
back to me and he says, “Why haven’t you sewed on your stripes?” I said, “Because I
haven’t been promoted, sir.” Well, holy cow! Geez, if that didn’t start World War III.
He got onto the platoon sergeant rather harshly and the platoon sergeant came up and
notified me, “In no way don’t bother sewing them on, I’ll find some reason to get them
off of you.” I realized right then this was not going well. My career in the Army just got
ugly. To make a long story short, I decided maybe I ought to re-enlist. So in the
meantime I cast around and they were looking for an S-3 Air NCO up at battalion. So I
took that. I had also taken the flight aptitude selection test for rotary wing for warrant
officer school. By this time now Vietnam was sort of rumbling and rumbling along. It’s
getting to be more and more noise. It’s no longer such a big secret and no longer such a
big hidden thing, although guys are still going TDY in civilian clothes, that sort of thing.
They have a gunner’s school for door gunners in Hawaii and you can volunteer for ninety
days TDY to Vietnam, be a door gunner on a chopper. You go to a little two-week
school in Hawaii and you go over to Vietnam. Those kinds of things. In Germany it
hadn’t really penetrated too much yet. I had put in for rotary-wing flight. In the
meantime, this new company commander got a hold of me one day and told me I was
going to up to battalion to be the S-3 Air NCO. He said, “Paris, you know, why are you
going to rotary-wing flight?” I said, “Because I want to fly, sir.” He said, “Why don’t
you consider going to West Point?” I had considered going to West Point but I thought
why in the hell should I spend four years to get a bar when I can do that in 180 days with
OCS (officer candidate school)? Not really thinking much about what he was saying, I
was thinking more about the immediate effects. He pulled me in his office and he gave
me this pitch about going to the West Point crap and, “You go to Ft. Monmouth for a
year. You work hard and you brush up on your math.” He said, “Think about it.” I said,
“Okay.” Then when I went up to the S-3 shop up at battalion, the S-3 Air officer who
was first lieutenant gave me the same pitch only he said, “Why would you want to go to
rotary-wing flight? That’s all you’re ever going to do in the Army. If you go to OCS,
then you can do a lot of things. Plus when you go to rotary-wing flight you go on
temporary duty and you get an extra,” I think at that time it was twelve bucks a day.
“You get that extra money so you ought to think about it.” So I did. I thought about it
long and hard. Within a month or so I got my orders for rotary-wing flight at Ft. Rucker
and I turned them down. (Laughs)

SM: For crying out loud.
BP: That was not a good idea. I’ll tell you that right now because being the
Army and everybody counting everything, one of the things they count is how many
people go for officer schooling or rotary-wing flight. That all is a positive. So from
division commander on down, everybody is looking at those kinds of stats going, “Ah,
this is good. We want more of this.” When I turned it down there was rather a scream
from division on and bad grace knocked all the way to Mannheim in about two seconds.

Essentially the gist of the message being, “What in the hell?” Then things really got bad.

Everybody started really getting on my case. “Why the hell would you put us through this if you don’t want to go?” “Well, I do want to go.” “Well, then go.” “No, that’s not the point. The point is I decided I’d rather go to OCS, then go to flight school.” “No, that’s not the way the Army works. You have to accept these orders.” “Well, no I really don’t. This is voluntary.” Oh, God. So on and on it went. Then there were getting to be some hard feelings. By this time I was dating a German girl rather seriously. I was thinking, “You know, if they have a war”—I was due to get out in about eight months. I thought, “If they have a war, I don’t know that I’m going to want to get out and go home and try and support a wife. I don’t know that I can support a wife back home trying to go to school and do everything else.” So the position I put myself in, that was it. So I said, “Well, you know, I can re-enlist. Then I’ll re-enlist and I’ll stay around and I’ll have enough time.” That was one of the first things they told me, “You don’t have a year left, so you can’t put in for OCS. You have to accept these orders to rotary-wing flight.” So I went ahead and I re-enlisted and married this German girl, put in for OCS. I found out later, division sat on it for about four months. Finally after I went to the IG (inspector general), the IG told them, “You’ve got to file the paperwork. Come on, be adults about it.” So they went ahead and they filed the paperwork. Now I was on what they called an OCS hold. OCS hold means that you’ve been taken out of the levee pool of the Army and you’re waiting for orders to go to Officer Candidate School. This coincided with Johnson’s build-up in Vietnam in March. I think it was March. They announced that they’re sending in a Marine brigade. Then the 173rd Airborne leaves Okinawa and goes in. When I re-enlisted I went over to the 13th Infantry at Coleman Barracks. That was what I liked to call a positive geographical change, because I went to an infantry unit in the recon platoon, supposedly to the tank section. But they were short scouts, so instead they gave me a scout team. So I took over the scout team and—infantry battalions—you know, back then we had reveille which was six o’clock in the morning everybody has roll call and that sort of thing. Then work formation is at 7:30. We fell out one day for work formation. Of course, the company streets, they’re lined up, three companies on each street. We could hear the first sergeants all up and down the street saying, “The
following personnel, when I call your name head for the orderly room, you’re being reassigned.” There was all this muttering about, “What? What? What the hell is this reassignment stuff?” So the first sergeant told everybody, “At ease,” and he starts calling out names. “Sergeant So-and-so, Sergeant So-and-so, Sergeant So-and-so.” He calls out about ten names. So all these guys head off to the orderly room and they find out that the first ten guys—and this all I remember—they were going to Camp Shelby, Mississippi, and they were forming up the 196th Light Infantry Brigade. They were being sent over as cadre. Well, this comes as a big shock to these guys, you know, most of them have wives and kids and girlfriends, sometimes all three. They don’t know that they’re being levied. “How long do I have to clear post?” “Well, actually you’re leaving this afternoon?” “What?” “That’s right. Turn in your field gear, get all your uniforms together.” “Well, what about my wife? What about my kids?” I mean this was a huge change. The first sergeants didn’t know so they called the sergeants major. The sergeants major called division. Division said, “Well, you guys tell the families orders will be cut,” because they’re kind of jumping through their butts, too, trying to react to all this. “Tell the families the orders will be cut. They’ll be sent home. Their household goods will be shipped later, but they have to go now.” So they did. Now the planes start leaving Germany. It started out like once a week. They would come down with these levees. Work formation got to be pretty grim because nobody wanted to go because it was all NCOs. They would start calling these NCOs’ names. Well as you can imagine pretty soon it’s getting really ugly, there’s nobody left. Within, oh, I’d say, this started probably in April of ’65 and I venture to say by August, you know—by August there are only three real NCOs in the battalion. There’s me, as a Spec-5 on OCS hold. I’m in charge of damn near everything in that company. There’s the first sergeant who is on a medical retirement board. They’re boarding him into retirement. He’s got like five Purple Hearts from World War II and Korea. The guy is just a walking mess. Then there’s the battalion sergeant major who’s retiring. That’s it. That’s all the professional NCOs we had. We started getting in hordes and hordes and hordes of private E-2s from the training centers and second lieutenants from the various schools and that’s all we got. Our company commander who was a captain, he was a Chinook pilot, real nice guy, I think this is like the second week. He’s walking down the company street and the first
sergeant sticks his head out the door and says, “Captain Saindon.” “Yeah, Top.” He said, “I need to see you right away, sir.” He said, “Well, I’m on the way to the battalion.” He said, “No, no, battalion just called. You need to come talk to me.” He went in the office. The only reason I know is because we were standing outside having a cigarette with a work detail doing area beautification. All of a sudden he comes running out the door and jumps in his car. That’s the last time I ever saw him. He got put on levee to go join the 1st Cavalry Division, which was going to Vietnam. He was on his way down to Ft. Benning to become a Chinook helicopter pilot again. It was just that way. People would go in the darnedest times. One afternoon they called and there was a bus sitting in front of battalion and they filled the bus up with like thirty NCOs and they left. It got to the point of where, you know, we had acting sergeants. We put all of our tracks in administrative storage, which means you load them up with their basic tools and equipment and you seal them up and you tag them. Then you lock them and they’re in administrative storage. The only thing we had was a couple vehicles we used to run details around. We had a two-and-a-half-ton truck in front of battalion every day. One of the acting sergeants usually would take a detail and go over to the quarters area in Benjamin Franklin Village and these kids would be cleaning government quarters for the families that had left. So they did that and I mean that was how we spent our time. We put stuff in government storage in the way of vehicles or we cleaned quarters. We would clean weapons and put them in storage, it was just phenomenal. All the time I’m thinking, “Good God, you know, if the Russians decide to come across that border, I don’t know who’s going to meet them.” Because they pulled—what was it? The 14th Cavalry was up on the border. They changed their unit designation to the 11th Cavalry and then they left, the whole damn regiment, gone. Just weird things like that were happening. Then, of course, in the Army Times, which is sort of the house organ if you will, the newspaper everybody reads. Even more so than Stars and Stripes because Army Times keeps track of the important stuff like promotions and stuff. They always had, ever since I came in the Army, every once in awhile they would have the name and rank of somebody who had been killed in Vietnam. Well, in ‘65 it started to get pretty serious. I remember particularly in October of ‘65 we had lost our—most of our radar platoon had been pulled over to the 4th Infantry Division. Some of the guys that we had sent in July
to the 1st Cav, all of a sudden their names started showing up in the *Army Times*. One
guy I remember particularly, Sergeant Reese, he had been gone from the unit, I think,
two-and-a-half months. We saw his name in the *Army Times*. He was killed with the 1st
Cav over in Vietnam. It just, it was incredible. Everybody realized then what in the hell
was going on. It was serious and it was ugly. In the meantime, I don’t know whatever
happened to my paperwork. They told the IG they submitted it. I mean that paperwork
was in for almost a year before I got an assignment to officer candidate school. Finally it
came down and I left in June of ’66 and I went to OCS in July of ’66.

SM: You mentioned that you thought as you were doing a lot of that packing and
putting things in storage that if the Russians decided to do something now, in terms of
vulnerability; was that discussed at all? Or was that some thing you kept—
BP: Oh, yeah.
SM: Okay, so it was talked about?
BP: Oh, sure. That was like the great “what if” game. What the hell happens if
the Russians decide to use the northern plains? What are we going to stop them with?
Then it became—and also France had gotten crappy with NATO. They decided under de
Gaulle that’s really what they wanted to do when they grow up was be a big boy and so
they had pulled out of NATO. We’re sitting there counting up, “Well, let me see, who
does that leave? The Germans. Yeah, they got a pretty good army. Maybe we can hide
behind them.” (Laughs) The US mission was to go to the Fulda Gap and block the
penetration and channel it through the northern plains into the big killing zone. The Air
Force announced they didn’t have enough planes anyway, they were all over in Vietnam.
So it was like, “Oh, God.” (Laughs) We were not happy.

SM: I would imagine not. I mean and how realistic did you think American
plans were? How effectively could the American units and the other NATO allied units,
how effectively could they have responded based on your outlook there?
BP: It was another one of those things where you just felt like you were sort of a
speed bump until they got something else going on. It was obvious the effort was going
to Vietnam. Then they started this Vietnam training for tank battalions. That was the one
that got me. Here we are, we have to go to a Vietnam village and our mission is to
defend the northern plains of Germany. “Okay, we’ll look for the snipers as we go.” It
became obvious the Army was totally focused in another direction and Germany was going to be a backwater, which was a huge change because Germany had always been the diamond in the crown. All the best and the brightest went to Germany, the best equipment. Then pretty soon you couldn’t even get a seal for a tank. It was bad. But then we didn’t have to worry about it because we put the tanks in storage. (Laughs)

SM: I hate to stop us here, but I’ve got to change out a disk.

BP: Nope, that’s fine.

SM: This might be a good time to take a quick break. Let me call you back in about ten minutes.

BP: Okay.

SM: All right talk to you in a few.

BP: See you then. Bye.

SM: Bye.

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Bill Paris. This is mini-disk number two of our interview on the ninth of July. Now as events were unfolding in Southeast Asia and as you were spending more time in Germany as your tour continued in Germany, how closely were you watching events? How closely were you paying attention to what was happening in Vietnam?

BP: Of course, at the time I was in Germany that was like going into the great information void because in those days the Armed Forces Television and Radio were in the embryonic stage. In Korea we had no Armed Forces Television, although they did down at Seoul, very low power reruns of programs in the ’50s. Then in Germany we had Armed Forces Radio but it was mostly canned programs and then the news with the right spin on it. As I had mentioned earlier, I was engaged to a German girl. I picked up the language and so we watched German television. German television had kind of an interesting spin on this whole Vietnam thing. They were aware of it and kind of looking at it in sort of a—their attitude was, I mean, they would present the news about the advisors and the Vietnamese and the fighting, but it was kind of an aloof, “Well, here’s what the Americans are doing over there,” sort of thing, “Then now back to the regular news.” I had been trying to get to Vietnam since Korea. I kept applying and didn’t have the right MOS. I didn’t want to go for three months, you know, that just seemed to me to
be counterproductive. I wanted to go and go. I didn’t want to just be there for three months. So I did keep my eye on it. I remember in the election of 1964 there was really what appeared to be a tremendous difference between candidates with Barry Goldwater as the Republican and Lyndon Johnson as the Democrat. All we got in Germany—it made it very difficult to vote. You got very little of the issues and how they felt about it. You would get *Time* magazine or something at the base exchange or the PX. It had things in it but they were old and rather out of date. So you could kind of keep up. It led me in my first presidential election to vote for Lyndon Johnson which was—in my heart that’s what I did but my ballot request came back. (laughs) I didn’t know whether that was the reaction to the company commander’s letter when they tried to draft me or what. But that’s who I would have voted for. So when Vietnam really got cranked up, the impression in the ranks was, “Well, hell, let’s go over and kick their ass, too.” You know? Nobody really understood, of course, the issues or anything else about it. But by and large it was like, “Yeah, sure, let’s go do that.”

SM: When you were in Germany did you have occasion to talk with or meet with any guys that did go over to Vietnam either as advisors or—

BP: Yeah.

SM: —in the early phases of the ground war and learn from them what was happening?

BP: Yeah. Kind of a salient moment for me was October of 1965. Because I was in reconnaissance the Army was doing a lot of cross-training. So they sent me for five-and-a-half weeks down near Bad Tolz, which is the home of the 10th Special Forces in Germany. It’s right outside of Munich. They sent me to Murnau, which is the 7th Army training area. They sent me to explosive ordnance demolitions training. It was quite a comprehensive course. Of course, the Special Forces are always cross-training, always. We had like four Special Forces guys who were in our little engineer class. The rest of us were all pretty much line slugs, just regular combat arms. These Special Forces guys had been to Vietnam at least once, every one of them. They all had the CIB, they all wore the combat badge. They gave us a lot of information about what was going on over there. At the time they were quite upset about Robin Moore’s book *The Green Berets*. It had just been published and I don’t know if you’re familiar with the story, but Robin Moore had
contacted the Department of Defense and he promised to be a good boy and clear everything if they would let him go over with a Special Forces team. They put him through the VIP Airborne course, which is ten days of moderate training. Then they sent him to the VIP Sneaky Pete—I’m sorry—Special Forces course at Ft. Bragg and then sent him over with a team. Well, what people, particularly in this day and age, don’t realize is if you read that book there is nothing fictional about it. Each of those little vignettes in his book is an actual Special Forces operation they were doing at the time. The reason the Special Forces were so upset was when Moore got back to the US in late ’63 and started writing this book and he sent the drafts to the Department of the Army, they penciled through everything and said, “You can’t talk about this. It’s classified.” So Moore made this conscious decision to publish it anyway, and he did. The reason the Special Forces guys were so upset was that it burnt a lot of their operatives on the Vietnamese side. When they started discussing these covert operations—the one if you’ve ever seen the movie *The Green Berets* where they snatched an NVA (North Vietnamese Army) general, they use a woman. A very attractive Asian woman to set this guy up. Then he goes to have sex with her and the Special Forces team snatches him and captures him and takes him out. That actually happened and then she was, oh, I think—what they related to me and, of course, I have no idea whether this is true or not, but I assume it is. She was killed within three months of that book being published. She wasn’t the only one. It caused a lot of problems in Da Nang where the Special Forces had spent a lot of time getting covert operatives. There was a tremendous amount of bad feeling towards Moore and he was not very well thought of. Yeah, they gave us the story on Vietnam. It was jungle fighting, it was nasty, and it wasn’t any place that you wanted to go unless you had your ducks in a row.

SM: What time period, what time frame, did that training occur for you?

BP: October of 1965.

SM: What did they think about the way that Westmoreland and Johnson were building up and starting to lean towards a conventional war in Vietnam as opposed to unconventional guerilla counterinsurgency, counter-guerilla, that kind of stuff?

BP: They were not really in favor of it. The reason they weren’t in favor of it was they felt like the Vietnamese had to have an investment in this war and that if we just
come in and shoulder them aside, which is our natural way of doing things, we’d relegate
them to a very minor function in this whole thing. They’d be more than happy to sit
down and not mess with it. That’s exactly what happened. “Sure, hell, you want to come
over here and do all the fighting? You go right ahead. I’m going to stand right here and
watch it.” That’s what they did. I learned a lot about what was happening over there. I
did not realize the extent that things had gotten to in the way of unconventional force
commitment. Sometimes they would even bring Marine recon units in off the ships and
do something and then go back out. It was an eye-opening experience for me. I
realized—of course, by then the 1st Cav was going hammer-and-tongs in the Ia Drang. I
realized, “Uh-oh. This is serious stuff.” They told me then and they certainly were right.
They said, “These little bastards don’t play and you can kick their ass all day, but they’re
coming back that night.” It certainly was true.

SM: The Special Forces guys that you interacted with there, all CIB holders—

BP: Yes.

SM: —very critical of Robin Moore’s book, but at the same time did they think
that he did a fair job of showing accurately the kinds of things the Special Forces were
doing in Vietnam? The criticisms aside, very serious criticisms aside, did they think that
it was worth reading so that Americans could get a better understanding of the kind of
war we were trying to fight there and the kinds of tactics that needed to be employed?

BP: No, mostly they felt like they had been burnt.

SM: Just a lot of resentment?

BP: It coincided also with the release of that song by Staff Sgt. Barry Sadler. SF
had been JFK’s pet. They were riding high anyway. They felt like they had a handle on
the war and the conventional troops did not and wouldn’t and would come in and screw it
up. It was obvious that was probably going to happen. One of them had the chance to
work with the Marines and his comment was it was like working with the Vietnamese.
Some of that is just that non-conventional, elite thinking anyway. If you ever want to
watch some thing humorous watch a paratrooper and a Special Forces soldier sit at the
bar, have a drink, and start dogging each other. It’s like, “Okay.” (Laughs) We all have
our unit pride don’t we?
SM: Yeah, that’s a good point. Inter- and intra-service rivalries are rather commonplace.

BP: Oh, yeah.

SM: Did you experience very much of that in either Korea or Germany? That is, in particular intra-service rivalry, say, between ground infantry, and “tread heads,” or armor and other, aviators and things like that? Then also between other various components of the Army versus the Marine Corps, versus the Navy, the Air Force and so on?

BP: The only time I ever really worked with the Navy was on the troop ship, particularly going back when they tried to put me in the brig. So yeah, there was some feeling there. Yes, there’s always a certain amount of tension between the various branches and the various services and it’s because it’s sort of an ego-oriented business anyway. Everybody dogged the Air Force because, you know, they lived like guys at camp. The Marines were always, at least in the Army—and I’ll get into that later when we get to Vietnam—most everybody just thought of them as this bunch of guys who had awfully high opinions of themselves based on very little performance measures, for want of a better way of saying it. Yeah. You know, infantry and armor there were unit bars in Korea. If you were an engineer you didn’t go in the infantry’s bar. If you were a tanker you didn’t go in the infantry. Yeah, there was always that going on in Germany and Korea during my time. Each unit had their own bar and that’s where they went. Don’t be messing around in another unit’s bar unless you want to fight.

SM: Wow. Any other experiences in Germany that were particularly sentient or important, pertinent to your time in Vietnam later?

BP: The girl I married, her mother had been in the German navy as a telegrapher during the Second World War. Her father-in-law had been in the signal corps in the Wehrmacht, the German army, on the Eastern Front during the Second World War. The German mother-in-law in particular, she and I kind of buddies, really good buddies. I liked her a lot. Didn’t understand half of what she was really talking about because I was too young. She had told me that Vietnam was the wrong place for the United States. We had no business being there, but it looked like we were going to go and so I should be as careful as I could be and still do the job I had to do. I thought that was pretty sound
advice. I also thought she would know. (Laughs) She was tough as nails and knew a lot about war so I listened. (Laughs)

SM: Very interesting point. What was the relationship like between the Americans and the surrounding Germans? Was there any residual resentment that you could detect regarding the Second World War?

BP: You know, that’s interesting because the war was not even twenty years finished when I got there. Of course, the one thing that was a positive was that the average American soldier was dimly aware that his parents and uncles had gone off to do something in Europe but he wasn’t real sure what. (Laughs) They ran in one of two kinds. There was a very, very small group, whose immediate family had fought in Germany and they didn’t like the Germans at all. The average GI looked at them as some sort of odd bird. They didn’t understand one damn thing about them, didn’t really care. Wanted to go get drunk, wanted to go get laid. The rest of it took care of itself. Personally, I found the Germans to be fascinating and I spent a lot of time with them. I probably spent more time with the Germans than with the Americans just because I found their insight and their mindset absolutely riveting because these were the people who had fought that war. You ran into these elaborate defense mechanisms. Of course, even as young as I was and as naive I understood very clearly: nobody likes to lose a war. There were aspects of that war that just didn’t exist in their life, particularly with the concentration camps. The expression they had was the Vernichtungslager. Every German I ever met said, “I didn’t know. We didn’t know. Nobody told us. We did not know.” I would say to them, “How could you not know? How could this escape you? How is it that you don’t see what is happening right under your nose?” “That’s the way we are. If it’s not our business we don’t know about it.” What I discovered was there was this kind of German group-think and it’s very hard to explain. I stumbled across something in my reading about the Civil War. I was reading the autobiography of Carl Schurz, who was a German revolutionary, came to the United States in the 1850s. Very, very well read young man, writes beautifully. Probably the best memoirs I’ve ever read by a military man. He made the comment that when you translate German into English you already are at a handicap because the connotations don’t come through in a spiritual sense, only in a literal sense. I discovered that when I learned to speak German that there is a bond among Germans
that’s not easily perceptible, but it’s there. They do engage in group thinking. I know what I’m saying and it’s really weird but I was always fascinated that Germans have a spiritual bond with their forests. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen. I don’t know if you’ve ever been over there—

SM: I haven’t.

BP: —but they take care of their forests like most of us take care of our children. They groom them, they watch over them. They know each tree. Those forests are just of vast importance to them on a level that I don’t think they even understand. They go out on Sundays and what do they want to do? They want to go into the forest. They want to go for a walk. They want to sit there among the trees. It’s just incredible. I mean, I’ve lived in the West most of my adult life, in and out of the Army since I’ve retired I’ve never seen anybody that has a bond with a damn tree like a German. That’s the way those people were. They would have this way of thinking that was very German. On one hand, yes they knew. But on the other, it doesn’t mean that they would give credence to the thought. I found myself with some of them, not with all of them, but some of them honestly believing that they didn’t know because their mind would just close it down and say, “This is none of our business and let’s go on.” That’s the way they are. Now there were some of them who were lying through their damn teeth. (Laughs)

SM: But in some incidences you did find it credible that they did not know?

BP: Yes. Absolutely credible. The funny thing was that by and large, Germans respect strength. Even though in some cases a lot of the people who had fought in that war hated what we did, they admired it. They wished they could have done it to us.

SM: You think if they could have they would have?

BP: Oh, absolutely. They would have kicked our butt from here to Sunday and laughed all the away. The fact that we did it to them, they harbored no resentment. It just sometimes left me scratching my head.

SM: That in and of itself is rather fascinating. How much do you think the Marshall Plan played into that?

BP: I’ll be quite honest with you. I truly believe this and I’m not a big Harry Truman fan, but I think history put him in the right place at the right time with George Marshall right by his side. The Truman Plan and the Marshall Plan saved us an immense
amount of—I honestly think—war, famine, disease. That I’m convinced saved this
planet. This was a world in trouble after the Second World War. What Marshall and
Truman and this country did was just beyond the pale of understanding because those
countries were in horrible trouble. They would have all gone communist no doubt about
it.

SM: Well, any other observations about Germany or your time there, the
American forces there, and the general Cold War atmosphere that existed?

BP: Yeah. The funny thing was that the Russians had a way of playing with you
and I think we, at least at a certain level, understood that. I mean they would close Berlin
and they would do this and they would do—it was just kind of like naughty kid stuff.
The things they do were just sometimes, I don’t know, almost didn’t even make much
sense. They’d throw MIGs across the border. All of a sudden three MIGs would come
screaming across the East German border and go twenty miles into West Germany and
then turn around and blast back before anything could happen. It was like a little game
that they would play. I never took a lot of that stuff seriously because I always felt like
the Russians were so paranoid anyway if they decided to come, they were coming. It was
going to be big, bad, and ugly.

SM: Well, what about nuclear and atomic weapons? Was that discussed much
and what were the protocols in place? What kind of training did you do to prepare for
that possibility?

BP: Well, we didn’t train a lot at it. We tried on occasion, not like they do now.
They do so much better now with the MOPP III (mission oriented protective procedure)
gear and all the other stuff. They’ve got their heads up and on the swivel. In our day it
was more like—to be honest with you, I always sort of subtly got the impression, nobody
ever said it, but you could tell by the kind of training we did that Eisenhower had said
there was a trip wire there and we were going to go nuclear just as soon as they came
across the border. Which, I think, was probably the smartest thing he could have said
under the circumstances. I had the feeling in the Army that either they didn’t believe it
ever, ever was going to happen or they didn’t think anybody would survive it anyway so
why bother? We did very little of that training for nuclear, biological, and chemical.
Except go through the gas chamber once a year and clean your sinuses out. (Laughs)
SM: Okay, yeah.
BP: I loved that. (Laughs)
SM: Um-hm. Do you know were Davy Crocketts deployed in any of the units with which you were assigned?
BP: We had Davy Crockett when I first got over there and then it left. I think within a year after my arrival in Germany they pulled Davy Crockett out. That was about the time they discovered, “Uh-oh.” But we had tactical nukes, the artillery had it. There were plenty of nukes everywhere. Everybody had a lot of them.
SM: When you say then they discovered, “Uh-oh.” What do you mean? Can you elaborate please?
BP: The Davy Crockett, which essentially was an enhanced recoilless rifle, for want of a better expression, only had a very limited range and could fire up to, I think, a .2-kiloton warhead. Well, hell, it’d wiped the gun crew out. Somebody finally figured that out and so they pulled it. That was the only battalion-level nuclear weapons we had with the exception of the atomic munitions. We did have mines that were sub-atomic. People didn’t really know about them, the engineers knew more about that than we did. That was present at battalion level and it would have been used particularly up around Fulda. Then we discovered that the Russian tanks couldn’t elevate their gun tubes on the T-55. (Laughs) Everybody thought that was actually kind of funny. “We’re going to be up in Fulda on the mountains and they can’t even elevate to shoot at us.” (Laughs)
SM: Difficult problem to overcome.
BP: Yeah. (Laughs)
SM: How did your time in Germany, how did that impact you most in terms of your military career, but also in preparation for going to Vietnam, if at all?
BP: It didn’t prepare me for Vietnam other than I got some information to help me understand what was going on over there. Mostly on a personal level I made a very bad decision in marrying this German girl and, you know, the rest of it. My Army career always sort of went along the same way through the whole twenty-year pattern. I’m always very opinionated. I’ve never learned when it’s a good time to shut up. That can sometimes cost you. But by the time I left Germany I’d had a great two-and-a-half years. Enjoyed myself tremendously, saw a lot, did a lot. I was very happy when I left. I was
also excited to get on to officer candidate school and get off to Vietnam. Hell, they’re
going to have a war. You’ve got to have me there. You can’t fight a war without Bill
Paris.

SM: There you go. So you were still pushing to get to Vietnam?

BP: Absolutely.

SM: Your entire time in Germany?

BP: Absolutely. I assume that eventually that’s what led you to be assigned
there.

BP: Oh, yeah. Actually had I not put in for OCS, I’d have been in Vietnam a
year before, if not a year-and-a-half.

SM: Where did you go for OCS again?

BP: I went to Ft. Benning, Georgia.

SM: When was that?

BP: Pardon?

SM: When was that again?

BP: We started on 3 July, 1966, in 93rd Company, 9th battalion, Officer
Candidate.

SM: Okay. Were you automatically slotted to a particular branch or was this still
kind of up in the air?

BP: You could pick. When you submitted your request you had to pick three
branches. I did not want because artillery for two reasons. One was there was a lot of
math. I wanted fun travel and adventure with no math, thank you. The other was that
artillery was too far back. I wanted to get up there and get in among them. I put infantry
as my first choice. I had already figured out anybody who asked for infantry is probably
going to get it because they also have the biggest need. I was not disappointed. I think I
put infantry, armor, and military police and I sure enough got infantry. When I got to
OCS they were opening new companies almost every week. The requirements were
huge. By this time, June of ’66, the Army is in full gear-up now for Vietnam. They had
gotten the training centers open. They were pulling the people in through the draft. They
had phenomenal manpower requirements. When I joined the Army there was like
740,000 people. By the time I reported to OCS, the Army was over a million. They’d jumped up considerably.

SM: Wow. When you got to OCS, what was the atmosphere like there? What were your classmates like as far as how representative of the melting pot that is America was it? Just describe your impressions.

BP: Well, when I got to officer candidate school I, of course, was an E-5. I knew exactly what I was getting in for. I had been doing some physical training but I was a little overweight, probably fifteen pounds. Got there in Ft. Benning, Georgia, in July right before a three-day weekend, which was dumb. I don't know why they did that except to just begin ruining our lives immediately. Of course, as soon as I got there they in-processed you and all the screaming and carrying on. They did not have any senior candidates. Senior candidates are in their last four weeks. They’re considered semi-officers. So they were using other candidates to bring us in. Officer candidate school at that time was just a lot of physical exercise, a lot of screaming and yelling and harassment and eating square meals. That’s where you sit on two inches of your chair at a modified position of attention and you have a plate in front of you but, of course, you can’t see it because you’re not supposed to eyeball your plate, which means you don’t look at anything except straight forward. You try and hopefully, magically scoop something up off your plate, bring it up, straight up vertically. None of this horizontal, no looping. You bring it up straight in front of your mouth and then you bring it to your mouth. You take whatever it is off your fork if you got anything. Bring it back straight out in front of you and then down to the plate and then your hands at your side. Don’t screw this routine up. Now, you normally had ten to fifteen minutes in the beginning to eat. So you didn’t get much to eat. So now, you know, you’re working long hours, you’re doing a lot of running, a lot of exercising. You’re burning a lot of calories and you’re not getting much. People would have a heart attack if they did that today. People were always having, you know, fainting and getting heat exhaustion. (Laughs) It looked like some sort of Buchenwald for the military. It was funny, to be quite honest with you. There was a lot of spit-shinning floors, spit-shining this, spit-shining that. Doing push-ups every thirty seconds for this. Finally it got so bad that guys were going on sick call so much from it. You know, they were literally starving. They would give you what they
called “gobbling privileges.” That’s where you had about three minutes to go before you had to go back outside for some nonsensical thing. So you could eat with your hands. It sounds rude, but actually you could eat a lot in a minute-and-a-half if you get to use your hands. So what if it’s mashed potatoes and gravy, who cares? Oh, yeah. We did a lot of that and a lot of running here, there, and everywhere.

SM: Ironically, they gave you two choices. Either you could eat like a robot or you could eat like an animal?

BP: Yes, exactly. That’s the way your life went in officer candidate school. Then they had bogus academics. You went all over the infantry center taking classes and this and that. I spent six months there and all I really learned to do was yell and scream and run and do push-ups all day. I can’t think of a whole bunch that they gave me that really helped me much. The idea was that you were supposed to forge some sort of tight unit identity, which you kind of do anyway because you’re so miserable. You can’t have radios. Anything that would be entertainment or diversion you cannot do. Then all of a sudden they went the other way. By August we had had two heat exhaustion cases. So they said, “Okay.”

SM: It had become reactionary.

BP: Now the word came down, “Okay, we’re not supposed to kill you in training. All right, now we’re going to unblouse our boots and we’re going to walk everywhere, no more running.” Which was fine. What we discovered real quick was that the TAC officers who had all been in OCS the cycle before, they were all getting comfortable and happy and they didn’t like that. So they would take turns. We’d go out for a six mile run and each of the TACs would run a mile with us. Well, after a while we picked up the pace to where we’d run their fat asses into the ground. (Laughs) You learn. Then we would sing to them and we’d toilet paper their offices. Just little things, little mind games you play with each other. When I left there, to be quite honest, I don’t think I had a clue of what I was supposed to be doing. Maybe that was just me. I picked up a few things along the line but not a whole bunch. By the time I graduated I just thought, “I’m not sure what I’ve just undergone.” After thirty years I’m still not sure what it was that experience was supposed to give me.

SM: Did you feel like an officer when you graduated?
BP: Yeah. Yeah, eventually. Sort of. Actually I felt like Spec-5 who’d gotten too big for his britches. When we graduated in those days you, of course, requested an assignment. By then we all knew you have—they have what they called a shakeout tour. Officer candidate school graduates could not be assigned directly from Ft. Benning to Vietnam. They had to give us four months to kind of cool off.

SM: Yeah, yeah, to give you some real world experience in leadership.

BP: Well, yeah, as if—

SM: You didn’t think that was necessary?

BP: Well, I ruined my career, so yeah I’m probably—(Laughs)

SM: What do you mean?

BP: I mean exactly what I said, I ruined my career.

SM: You mean during that four-month period?

BP: Yeah during that four-month—I mean I just killed that baby right in the womb. (Laughs)

SM: Do you want to talk about it or is that something you’d rather—?

BP: Sure, no, absolutely. When I left officer candidate school, my twentieth week, or nineteenth week when we turned senior we got preliminary orders. My preliminary orders were for Special Forces, Panama. I was pumped. I thought, “Hot damn! This is going to be cool.” Then you get your final orders the week before you graduate. Hopefully they’ll give you time off to go ship what little household goods you have. A lot of us had our wives down there. I got my orders for Ft. Ord, California, 1st Training Brigade. I raised seven kinds of hell. You know, “What the heck?” The company commander calmed me down. He said, “Hey, guess what? Welcome to the Army. That’s the way things work. Get out of my office.” “Okay, thank you.” We pack up and we go. My wife is pregnant with our second child. We go out to Ft. Ord, California, and we go into some Byzantine world that I have never seen before or since, although it exists. I wasn’t prepared for all the things that are going to happen to you as an officer. It’s probably just me. In those days it was very tedious, formal, social life. You made a call on the brigade commander. You brought your calling cards and your wife brought her calling cards. You spent fifteen minutes there. You walked in and you sat down and they said, “Hi, how are you Lieutenant?” “Hi, how are you?” “Where are
you guys from? Oh, how nice. Well, enjoy yourselves.” You left and you put your
calling cards on a silver tray in the hallway. Then you called on your battalion
commander and you went through the same ritual. Well, the company I got assigned to
the guy, the company commander there welcomed me to the unit. He was an old soldier.
He’d been enlisted I think eight years before he went to OCS. He was a senior captain.
He calls me in, sits me down, you know I’m ready to go, “Hell, what do you want me to
do?” “Well, I don’t want you to do anything.” I said, “Huh?” “Yeah, the drill sergeants
have control of the troops and I don’t want you getting in their way so you just follow
along and learn.” “Sir?” “Yeah, that’s what I want you to do. You just follow them and
stay out of the way and watch what they do.” Now in the realm of extra duties he said,
“I’m going to make you supply officer and I’ve got a real problem down there.” “What’s
that, sir?” “Well, the supply sergeant drinks on duty.” “Okay, sir.” “I want you to do
something about his drinking.” I thought, “What?” He said, “Yeah, I want you to do
something about his drinking and get that crap stopped. Okay? Any questions?” “No,
no, sir. I don’t think so.” “Okay, I’ll talk to you in two months when I give you your
report.” I thought he was kidding. He wasn’t. He never came out to where the troops
came out. I saw the guy maybe once a week, other than that he was doing something
else. I had nobody to talk to. No guidance. I went to see him once and he said, “Well,
you’ll work it out. Don’t come in here bothering me every day. This is what you trained
for.” I thought, “What the hell?” So I wandered down to the supply room and started
talking to the supply sergeant. Yeah, he’s a drunk and yeah, he has a bottle of vodka in
his desk drawer. “Gee, Sarge, don’t you think this is probably not the way to do
business?” “Yeah, could be.” “Well, you know you can get in a lot of trouble.” “Yeah, I
guess so.” I thought, “Oh, God.”

SM: My goodness.

BP: Come on! Then, you know, I felt pretty isolated and trapped and like I
couldn’t talk to anybody. So I’d talk to the NCOs. They were a little uncomfortable with
it and rightfully so. At the end of sixty days, the company commander calls me in and he
says, “Well, I’ve got your report here, first efficiency report. I’ll be honest with you, I’m
not real happy with you.” I went, “Huh?” He said, “Yeah, you know, I don’t think
you’re cut out for this. You’re not very good at it.”

SM: What?

BP: Yeah. He said, “You act like you’re a buddy with the NCOs. You’re not,
you’re an officer. Sergeant So-and-so is still drinking and I don’t see much initiative on
your part.” That pissed me off. I said, “Come on, sir. What do I know about—?” “I’m
not asking you Lieutenant, I’m telling you. Here’s your report, you can read it.” In those
days we had what was called the “hundred little men.” It really was this odd little thing
and it had a narrative in there where you could tell what you liked and then you had some
boxes you checked off on tact and initiative and things. Then you picked somewhere on
the hundred little men where you figured this officer would fit in. Well, sure enough, I
was probably about sixty. He gave me, what was it, 160 out of 200 points. Well, that’s
the kiss of death. Most officers are operating probably in the three-point range. I wasn’t
even close.

SM: Of course, that’s kind of an inflated system. How could all of the officers be
in a three point range?

BP: Exactly, exactly.

SM: In terms of the atmosphere of the military at the time, correct me if I’m
wrong, but alcoholism, alcohol use and abuse was, for lack of a better expression,
somewhat commonplace, wasn’t it? My understanding is that cracking down on alcohol
use and abuse and drunk driving and things of that nature, really weren’t hit on in the
military as far as the problem trying to tackle them. The military didn’t tackle them as a
problem until later in the ’80s. In the ’60s you’ve got to get your stuff in order but it’s
not the kiss of death.

BP: The gaffe was that he was drinking on duty, which was not uncommon. I
remember in Germany we’d go over and have beer on a half-an-hour break. Well, you
know, he was drunk on duty which that was uncool. Hell, my company commander was
a drunk. I mean that guy was an interesting fellow. At any rate when I got this report I
became quite upset. I said, “Look, you know, number one, Captain you have not talked
to me. I have tried to talk to you and you wouldn’t. For you to then turn around and tell
me I don’t show initiative, how am I supposed to show initiative when you won’t talk to
me?” Well, that ended the interview rather precipitously. I went to the battalion commander. I was very upset. I was pissed because I knew what he had done to me. He’d ruined my career without so much as a fair warning, nothing; like, “Goodbye. I don’t like you.” So I went to the battalion commander and the battalion commander blew up and threw me out of his office. He told me to quite whining, I was no good. In retrospect I remember what triggered it. It was another one of those things that occasionally you do in your life that is rather insensitive and you wished to hell that you hadn’t. But you can’t call it back once you say it. What had happened was the battalion commander’s daughter had married a young lieutenant fresh out of OCS. He was the fair-haired boy and went to Vietnam and got killed. Well, one of the first functions I ever attended somebody was telling me this sad story. In my own unique way I said, “Well, that’s really sad, but you know what? This battalion is still in mourning. What’s going to happen when we go over there? I mean this is going on everyday, don’t you think we ought to get with it?” Oh, holy cow. So, I’m sure with that I essentially—because I know it got back to the battalion commander I was persona non grata, believe me, for the rest of my three months or two months. It was fine. The day I left the first sergeant said, “The old man would like to see you in his office and wish you goodbye and good luck.” I said, “Tell the company commander I don’t need any good luck from him. I’ve had all I need from him,” and I left. (Laughs) I said, “Screw you guys.” So when I left—and he gave me another report on my way out that was, I think, five points better than the other one, or no ten points worse. At any rate my career was done. As soon as I went up for major because there was field authority for promotions down to captain. You made captain at division or post [level]. Then the first real Army board you went to in those days was for major. So I knew I’d make captain, no problem. But after that I was dead in the water. The first time they looked at my record for major I was on my way out of the Army. Hell, now I’m going to Vietnam. I have no career so it doesn’t make any difference what I do over in Vietnam. It really doesn't make any difference what I do ever again. There is no amount of good work that’s going to overcome two bad OERs (officer efficiency report). I did not know until, oh, man, what was it 1970? This all happened in ’67. I didn’t realize you could appeal on officer efficiency reports. But you can. But I didn’t know. Otherwise I should have and could have very successfully
appealed those two. At any rate, I went and got my wife situated. Our son was born
while we were out at Ft. Ord and so I left her back at Lansing, Michigan, my family was
there, and set her up. She was very unhappy about the whole thing and told me she really
didn’t appreciate my leaving to go to war. I told her, “Hey, tough, Honey. I told you
what I was going to do before I married you. You could have opted out then.” So, on
that happy note with my career in the tank and my wife very unhappy, I left for Vietnam.
(Laughs)

SM: Just out of curiosity, how long did your first marriage last?

BP: While I was over in Vietnam on my first tour, I’d been there about four
months when the Red Cross called and said, “You better get home.” I went back and
filed for divorce, but Michigan has a cooling-off period so I couldn’t finalize it until I
came back and they had a hearing. I had to wait until I came back in June of ’68. It
lasted about three years and two months.

SM: Okay. What was your trip like over to Vietnam?

BP: Oh, God.

SM: From where did you leave? When did you leave? Describe the atmosphere
like on the aircraft over there. Everything you can remember.

BP: We were ordered to Oakland Army Terminal. So I went out to Oakland
Army Terminal. Got there and they put you in a room for two nights while you waited for
a flight. The guy in the room with me was going back on his second tour. He was a first
lieutenant. He’d been over there as an enlisted man. He was also an OCS grad. It was
his first tour as an officer. He told me, “Get rid of your underwear.” I said, “What?” He
said, “I’m telling you, get rid of your underwear. You don’t need it. I’ll tell you what
you need,” he said. “You need one set of khakis, a pair of low quarters and a pair of
boots. That’s what you need.” I said, “Okay.” So I shipped the rest of it back home
from Oakland Army Terminal. Then, because I was an officer, all we had to do was look
on the bulletin board. So the evening of the first full day I was there, I was on the
manifest for the next day to fly to Vietnam. So I went down and reported with my gear
and they put us on buses and took us out to Travis Air Force Base. We got on these big
contract jets, they were 707s. Then we left from Travis, but I had requested a delay en
route because my mother was in Japan. I left essentially five days early. I got on a flight
and my flight was not going direct to Vietnam, I was going to Japan. So we got to
Hawaii for a refueling stop and a lieutenant in the Navy, which is a captain in the Army,
and chief petty officer called my name as I got off the plane because I was on my way to
get a drink in the bar like everybody else. He pulled me off to the side and he said,
“You’ve been designated as a USARV (United States Army, Republic of Vietnam)
courier.” I said, “What?” (Laughs) He said, “Yep, you’re a courier and here’s what you
do. We’ve got this stuff and you’re going to watch us and you’re going to count the
boxes and we’re going to load all this crap on the plane. Then when you get over to
Yokota, you’re going to watch them unload it. Then there’ll be another fellow there to
meet you. He’s going to count the boxes just like you’re going to count the boxes and
then he’ll sign off. Until then these are you’re boxes. Do you understand me?” I said
something to the effect of, “Hell, no.” He said, “Well, I don’t care Lieutenant. You’re it
and here we go. Start counting.” So he slapped a clipboard in my hand. Forty-seven
boxes go into this plane. The Navy is standing there with guns watching these guys load
the boxes. They’re Navy people loading them in. They don’t want anybody. There’s
somebody from the airline who opens the hatch and stands there and shows them where
to put it and they load these forty-seven boxes. Then they have him close it up. Then
they have him brief me on how you can get into the plane into that compartment. “That’s
the only way right?” “Right, okay.” So he hands me a .45 and a pistol belt and he hands
me the clipboard and says, “When you get to Japan, somebody will meet you.” I said,
“Well, what do I do?” He said, “You stand right here and watch it. Any time this plane
is on the ground, you’re right here and you watch it.” (Laughs) Okay, so I stand there and
watch it. Then the plane has a maintenance problem. So everybody’s in the bar, happy
as can be. I’m standing outside in Hawaii watching this plane compartment door. We
load back on, I go up the stairs, I’m the last one on. I tell the stewardess, “I need to sit by
the door.” She said, “No, those are only colonels.” I said, “No, there now is a second
lieutenant who is a USARV courier,” I’m sorry, “a PACAF (Pacific Air Forces) courier
and I’ve got all these documents,” and I showed it to her. She said, “Are you carrying a
gun?” I said, “Yes, I’m carrying a gun.” She said, “Oh, my God.” So she ran some
colonel out of his seat, which really went over well. I sit down and we take off and we go
to Japan. Now this flight is mixed. It’s civilians, military combination. But it still is not
a very nice plane. It’s a, hell, I don’t know, fourteen-hour flight to Yokota. We get to
Yokota and I’m the first one at the door. Some colonel says, “Excuse me, son.” I said,
“No, sir, excuse me. You’re not getting off the plane until I do.” The stewardess said,
“That’s right.” He looks at me and he says, “Oh, you’re a PACAF courier?” I said,
“Yes, sir.” He said, “Well, no problem. Enjoy yourself, son.” (Laughs) I was the first
one off the plane and damn if that lieutenant wasn’t right. There was a naval contingent
there and they had all these guys and I watched them and they opened up and got the
forty-seven damn boxes off. He signed me off, I gave him the .45 and life was good.
(Laughs) So then my mother met me and I spent probably four days in Japan with her.
She was the head of the Girl Scouts in the Far East. We saw all the sights and some of
her Japanese staff members took us around to this place and that. It was a wonderful
time. Then it was time to go. So I went back to Yokota Air Base and caught a flight and
went to Vietnam. What was the plane ride like?

SM: Uh-huh. What was the atmosphere like?
BP: The atmosphere going over to Japan, of course, was much different. Going
to Vietnam it was all military people. People were quiet. You could tell. It was like,
“Oh, shit. Now it’s getting real. We’ve had all our discussions and thoughts about it.
Now, it’s about to get real.” Of course, we traveled everywhere in khakis. So Army
guys—the Air Force wore their blue uniforms, poor things. We went into Bien Hoa and
we landed at Bien Hoa, and pulled up and we had to hurry. They had been getting some
rockets. So it was like, this NCO came up from USARV. He said, “We’re going to
offload through the front door. Move quickly. No lollygagging, this plane is leaving as
soon as possible, heading back to the States and you’re not on it. Get off!” So we
hustled off and went into this big open tin shed and my first—when they opened the door
was like, “Oh, my God.” The heat just blasted in. This was in June of ’67 and I think it
was probably the eighteenth of June. The heat and the smell, so you get off and it’s like,
“Ugh.” Of course, as you get off you go down a stairway, you don’t have those lovely
teleoping doors. You get off, you go down the stairway and who is sitting over there
but the guys who are going home. (Laughs) Now they all got over there in June of ’65
[’66] and believe me, they’re happy to go. So they’re all cat calling, “You’re going to be
sorry,” all this crap. So you walk over to this big open shed and then they tell you that
they’re going to put you on buses and take you to the 90th Replacement Battalion. These buses pull up and everybody is standing around now holding their bag trying to get used to the idea they’re in Vietnam. Planes going everywhere, here, there, helicopters all over. So you get on these buses and they have chickenwire on the windows. That’s your first introduction. “Uh-oh.” They’ve got MP jeeps in front with guns and MP jeeps behind with guns. So away you go. The officers go on one set of buses and the enlisted men go on another set of buses. You go through parts of Bien Hoa to the 90th Replacement Battalion. As we're on the bus and everybody’s looking out wondering, “Geez, I wonder what a VC (Viet Cong) looks like?” Every street corner you see US equipment. You see cans of Coke. You see cartons of American cigarettes. You see C-rations. You see poncho liners. You see fatigues. You see helmets. I’m thinking, “Where does this shit come from? What the hell is going on over here? Why are these Vietnamese selling this equipment? Where does it come from?” Then you pull in the gate at Bien Hoa and the buses go in. Then you unload and there’s NCOs there to meet you. “Officers, you’re assigned here and you’ll be posted on the bulletin board with your assignments.” So we all came, in those days, on my first tour, we all came with pre-assignments. So I had orders for the 1st Cavalry Division, which excited me to no end. I thought, “At last I get to go to a real unit.” I liked the patch, I thought it was exceptionally nice, and the 1st Cav was kind of an elite unit. So I was pumped. I hoped against hope that USARV wouldn’t change my orders. They’d done it to me so often before in the Army I thought, “Just once, can I have a gimme?” (Laughs) Sure enough, I came down two days later and I was going to An Khe to the 1st Cav. So we jumped on a C-123 Provider. God if that isn’t a horrible aircraft to ride around in. We’re still in our khakis. We get going, take off and they land all over the country. They finally get up to An Khe from Bien Hoa. We get off at An Khe and there’s an NCO there, “Welcome to the 1st Cav. Get on the trucks.” We get on the trucks and they take us over and we’re in the replacement company. They say, “Officers, you’ll be going over for assignment and we’ll take you over when they’re ready for you. In the meantime chow is here.” You know it’s the usual Army thing, herd left, herd right. Some guys were coming back on their second tour who had been TDY before or something and you know, “Hey, this place looks pretty good.” I’m thinking, “What a dump.” (Laughs) Everything is tents and crummy little buildings with tin roofs.
The smell. Smells never go away. I got there and, lo and behold, a major calls me into his little office that’s not air-conditioned. He is in khakis, I’m in khakis, he looks at me and he says, “I know you from somewhere.” I said, “Yes, sir. I said, “You and I were in the 3rd Brigade of the 8th Division in Germany at Coleman Barracks.” “Yeah, that’s where I know you from.” He said, “What were you, a Spec-5, right?” I said, “Yes, sir, went to OCS.” “Yeah, okay.” So we talked and catch up on old times. He’s made major and I’ve made second lieutenant and life is good. Then he kind of sighs and he says, “Well, I’ve got to tell you something Lieutenant Paris. He said, “You know, infantry officers there’s not much in the way of job openings for anything other than your regular infantry duty.” I said, “Major, I don’t want any other duties. I want to go to a rifle platoon. I want to be in an infantry company. I don’t want any place in the rear. I’m happy to do that.” “Oh, okay. Good thinking.” So he said, “The least I can do I give you your choice. Which do you like: 1st Battalion, 7th Cav, or 2nd Battalion, 7th Cav or 1st of the 12th?” I said, “1st of the 12th?” He said, “Yeah they’re an Airborne outfit. We took them off status in September. They don’t get paid or anything.” He said, “You can go, you don’t have to be a jumper to go there anymore.” He said, “We’re filling them up with regular people but there are still a lot of guys there who are drawing jump pay.” I said, “Well, hell, give me an Airborne unit every time.” He said, “All right, goodbye.” (Laughs) Off I go. So they call the 1st of the 12th and eventually the S-1 sent a jeep over for me. I gather up my stuff and go over there. Then I meet this most fascinating character. The S-1 is a captain and he’s kind of the rear detachment commander. So I check in and give him my orders. “Hey, how are you, Lieutenant?” He looks at them and he looks at me and I’ve got the standard two ribbons: the National Defense Service Medal and the Good Conduct Medal. He looks at me and he says, “Did you go to OCS?” I said, “Yes, sir.” He said, “What were you before that”? I said, “Well, I was a Spec-5.” “Hmm.” He said, “So you’re Christmas help, huh?” I said, “Sir?” (Laughs) He said, “Let me tell you something, Lieutenant. I went to West Point. This is my Army, not yours.” He said, “You’re an enlisted man and we just gave you a commission to help out because we need a lot of guys. So you’re going to go on out there and you’re going to tromp around and you’re going to do everything that you possibly can. When this war is
over we’re going to shit-can you and it’ll be my Army again. You know what? You won’t be missed. Have a good time. I’m going to send you to C Company.”

SM: My goodness.

BP: I thought, “What a sweetheart.” The other thing was he said, “You see this? This is a CIB.” He said, “I’ve never spent a day in the field and I’m not going to.” He said, “You’re going to go on out and get the CIB and you’re going to work a lot harder for it than I ever did. But when it comes time, you’re going to get shit-canned out and I’m going to still be here.” I thought, “Oh, what a lovely type.” I thought, “You old REMF (rear-echelon mother fucker).”

SM: Unbelievable.

BP: They sent me down to C Company. (Editor’s Note: Text and audio removed per interviewee’s request). Then I went off to charm school. That was a little more instructional and a little helpful. They essentially taught you how to pack your ruck and how to patrol and how to set up a night defensive position. Then the third night of charm school or the second night of charm school you actually go out on the Green Line at An Khe. You sped up and you took over part of the perimeter defense and that was fine. Then we went back and then they were going to send me out. The battalion was up at Dak To. Our brigade was kind of the fire brigade for the 173rd of the 4th Infantry Division. Having been Airborne and the 173rd being Airborne there was sort of that kinship there. They had been called up to help. There was another rumpus up there. So they said, “You’ll fly out tomorrow morning and you’ll go to Kontum.” “Okay.” So there’s nothing left to do, so I’m packing up my stuff to go to the field. They called me up to battalion and my friend the S-1 says, “Hey, they don’t want you in C Company. You’re being assigned to B so move all your shit over to B Company.” I said, “Yes, sir.” Go down and pack up my few little worldly belongings and move them over to B Company, check in there, turned all my equipment to C Company and re-drew stuff in B Company. (Editor’s Note: Text and audio removed per interviewee’s request.) Unfortunately, it got worse that night and the next morning I think the plane took off for Pleiku. It was Pleiku not Kontum. We take off and I am so hungover, actually I think I am probably still half-drunk. I’m sitting in the back of a C-7 Buffalo. I don’t know if you’re ever seen a C-7, but it was a high, twin-engine thing. It was not very comfortable
on a nice hot morning in Vietnam. We’re bumping and bumping and bumping and bumping. I thought, “Oh, my God, I’m going to lose my lunch.” Which I don’t think I had any, or my breakfast. We’re on final approach to Pleiku and I’m looking around and they’ve got no bags, nothing. So I pulled off my helmet and used that and immediately felt better. But I went out to the field. I got there, checked into the rear detachment. They put me on a helicopter and sent me out. They were in a defensive position. I get off the helicopter and find the company commander and report in. I notice immediately there’s huge difference between us. Like, to begin with, they all look really, really tanned (Laughs) and I did not. (Laughs) Actually I looked kind of white. They assigned me to the 1st Platoon and, gee, I had an excellent platoon sergeant. He told me, “You’ll learn the ropes. But, you know, you got any questions you better ask.” Another kid had come in and they gave him the 2nd Platoon. His name was Tom Beasley and he was a West Pointer, a hell of a nice guy, great fellow. He and I became ultimately good friends, although we started off a little ragged. I went down to find my platoon, talk to the platoon sergeant, okay. We’re not doing anything right now so I’m kind of bored and I’m wandering around. I meet the 2nd Platoon leader in my own inimitable fashion. He’s got a Confederate flag flying off of the antennae on the radio so I walk up and spit on it. (Laughs) So he walks up and spits on me. It was a great way to meet people. (Laughs)

SM: One way.
BP: Well, you know. So I asked him, I said, “Why the hell would you fly a rebel flag out here?” He said, “Why they hell wouldn’t I?” I thought, “Well, that makes sense to me.” After that we became quite good friends. (Laughs)

SM: What was the morale like in the unit?
BP: The morale in that unit was high, very, very high. I was thrilled. As the British would say, I was chuffed to bits.

SM: What was that high morale attributable to, do you think?
BP: Well, there were seasoned NCOs at every position. So not only did I have an E-7 platoon sergeant, but I had staff sergeant squad leaders. I had E-5 team leaders. These were all guys, you know, at the end of their first or second enlistment. These were not instant “shake-and-bakes” like we had later. Most of them were Airborne NCOs. There were a couple of them who weren’t. The unit morale was super. The guys knew
their jobs and there was good leadership. You know, I was really happy. I thought, “Man, this is what it’s all about.” The first couple weeks we sort of slacked around a little. Then they air-assaulted us out to make a sweep. When was it? I don’t remember exactly, but I think the 173rd had gotten involved in quite a mauling. They’d lost almost half a company and got hit. So we were going in on their flank and we were going to do a sweep. It’s a company sweep and so we’re going along and one of my squad leaders gives me a call and says, “We’re being followed,” which was not unusual. So I check and sure enough we’re being shadowed. I talk to the company commander and he says, “Okay, what I want you to do is I want you to drop off at the first turn and set up an ambush.” So we did. It was very well done. I mean these guys knew their jobs.

Everybody got in position, we waited about forty-five minutes and sure enough you could hear somebody coming down a hill on our left. Then [we] opened fire and there’s some shooting for about twenty, thirty seconds and then above the shooting you hear the sound of a baby crying and it was electric. Everything stopped, I mean just stopped with this baby’s wail. Pretty soon you hear, “Cease fire, cease fire, cease fire,” on the radio and people hollering around. So I go barreling up there. It’s a Montagnard man and a woman and their baby. We had killed the man and the woman and the baby was pretty seriously hit. We called for a MEDEVAC (medical evacuation). The medics came up and started working on the baby but, of course, babies are so little anyway. That was my introduction to war. The child died just as the helicopter was coming in and it was probably the most disgusting, nauseating feeling I’ve ever had in my life. I’ve never forgotten it.

SM: Want to take a minute?
BP: No.
SM: When you—
BP: Go ahead.
SM: After that incident, how was that handled in the unit? How do you guys talk about it? How do you try to prevent that from happening again?
BP: In double- and triple-canopy jungle you can’t stop it. It’s just one of those things. The platoon sergeant—we had a leadership meeting. You know, they all said essentially the same thing: “Hey, fuck it. It happens. Its sucks, but no big deal.” Then I
could see the difference between the experienced guys and those of us who were just coming in because I had some enlisted men who had just come in, too. I mean, we were all just in shock. Those guys had been over there for a while it was like, “Bummer, I really wish that hadn’t have happened. Oh, well.” You realize they’ve got something you don’t have and you’ll learn it. You’ll have one, too, someday and you’re not going to be happy to have it either. God, that rattled me. Just horrible. So then we went on and they pulled us back to An Khe and we went out to our normal area of operations, which was in II Corps. We were in a place called the Bong Son Plains, just north of LZ English. We did a lot of stirring around there and there just wasn’t a lot going on in July. A lot of moving around, no contact, nothing. Then about the first week in August is when the Red Cross contacted me and told me my children were wards of the court.

SM: Oh, my.
BP: Pardon?
SM: Oh, my.
BP: Oh, yeah.
SM: This was the emergency you talked about earlier.
BP: Yeah.
SM: Okay.
BP: That my sisters had petitioned the court for custody of the children and I was requested to come back.
SM: So you did?
BP: Reluctantly. It was like, “Excuse me. I’ve got a war to fight.” It just shows the mindset of where you’re at. So my battalion commander made it real easy for me. “This is an order, go home.” He was brand new. So I went back to the States, I spent thirty days, got everything set up. My ex-wife finally showed up. She’d been off on a toot with some guy. So I said, “Well, that’s fine. We’re getting a divorce, so do what you want. I frankly don’t care.” The kids were with my sisters, so I packed up the household goods. You know, what I wanted. Gave her what she wanted. It’s like, “Well, where am I supposed to go?” “Well, I don’t care.” I called Salvation Army and told them, “Bring a big truck.” They said, “Are you kidding?” I said, “I am not kidding. You bring a big truck.” So they did. Took them almost all day to get that crap out of
there. Then I jumped on a plane and went back to Vietnam. I showed back up in the end
of September and I’d lost three men out of the platoon that had been wounded and
nobody had been killed. They were just getting ready to assign a new platoon leader to
them. They thought I wasn’t coming back. “Ha! I’m not going to miss that war, buddy.”
(Laughs)

SM: Let me ask you a few quick questions about your first month or so there.

First of all, briefings. What kind of, I guess, country-specific briefings, briefings about
interacting with the Vietnamese, rules of engagement, all that kind of stuff. What kind of
briefings did you get?

BP: Well, you didn’t worry about interacting with the civilians because you’re
not gonna. The only civilians you’re going to interact with are either the enemy or
victims. That’s just policies based on common sense. Protect the innocent as well as you
can and don’t go crazy. If you’re killing people who aren’t wearing uniforms and don’t
have guns somebody is going to come talking to you. In a unit with good morale you
don’t worry about that sort of stuff. Most of our briefings were done in the way of frag
orders, fragmentation orders. The battalion commander would give, “Hey, move out go
to these coordinates.” We either operated as a company or independent platoon. We did
a lot of what we used to call night search and destroy. We spread out to the four points of
the compass, near, within about four klicks of a village. What we were doing was we
were finding out if the NVA and Viet Cong were coming into the villages at night and
then leaving just before dawn. So we started a series of search-and-destroy operations
and what we’d do is, you know, the first platoon would go this way, the second that, that,
that. The command group would accompany someone, a particular platoon. Then at,
say, two o’clock in the morning my job as platoon leader was to night navigate and link
up at the village on a particular side of the village, tie in with the other platoons, and then
we’d seal this village off. They’d bring in some National Police in the morning, South
Vietnamese, and then they’d start on the bullhorn calling for them to come out and
surrender because we’re going to come in. If we found you in there, we were going to
kill you, otherwise you could surrender. I had some great exercises in land navigation
and I’m very pleased to say, and without any ego here, that I did it every time. How I did
it, I’m not sure. But I did it. Because we never traveled together on those ops. We were
always out, you know, single platoon out in the bush, go into an NDP (night defensive position) and then get up at two in the morning and move. You had to be tied in by four. Those were the kinds of things we were doing when I left on emergency leave.

SM: When you were working initially where you guys experienced that accident, with that family, what were your expectations of enemy activity there? Were you expecting contact with the Viet Cong, NVA, combination, didn’t know?  

BP: It was NVA. These were regiment-sized forces. They had hit the 173rd a couple times and bloodied them up bad. The NVA was like, this is first team. These guys were tough, well armed, well led. If you went up against them, you were in deep shit. That’s who we were anticipating. The Viet Cong were in their units and they had Viet Cong formalized units. But they were usually in closer to the cities and the towns. Although they’d operate out of rural areas, they would orient on villages, whereas the NVA could be and usually were, particularly up there by Dak To, all along that stretch along the border. They’re not that far. They can assemble and bring in regiment- and battalion-sized forces very easily and well equipped. When we ambushed that family we fully anticipated that we were looking at North Vietnamese Army reconnaissance elements. They were the best of the best. The NVA recon folks were superior. You very seldom caught them. When you did, it was only rarely that you ever caught the recon. They were very good at what they did. So that was it. When we got back to the Bong Son Plain in the end of June, first part of July, now we’re back with the VC. Who was it? The 20th NVA was the regiment that normally operated in our area. They had a tendency to come out like semi-annually. (Laughs) There were a lot of Viet Cong units around, small little units. We’d have a rumpus with them once in a while. The NVA, when they came they came as a unit and then we were going to have a fight. We did run into them later in December. We had a heck of a series of fights with them. In June they had just—they’d had a fight with the 1st Cav in the An Lao Valley in May. So we weren’t anticipating that they would be around except maybe rice-gathering details or tax gatherers or something like that. That’s mostly what we were finding in the villages when we’d do these night sweeps. We were finding Viet Cong and occasionally an NVA runner or something who was moving through.

SM: How much fire support did you have at your disposal?
BP: The world. (Laughs) You had the world. You had 105, you had 155, you had 175/8 inch if you wanted it. You had TAC air. You had aerial rocket artillery. We always went as a package, in other words, when our battalion deployed. Usually, like when we went up to Pleiku, both times we went we took B Battery, 2nd of the 19th Artillery with us. We had a slice of aviation. We had ARA (aerial rocket artillery). We had our own integral team. Very similar to what the Marines have. We had our own package that we took with us.

SM: During your first couple of months there, about how much of your time—and during that introduction into fighting in combat in Vietnam, how much of your time at that point was just familiarizing yourself with the day-to-day operations and the realities of combat in Vietnam deferring mostly to your platoon sergeants and squad leaders? How much did you lean on them? What was your relationship like with your NCOs?

BP: My relationship with the NCOs was excellent. Like I say, they were all professional. They were all experienced soldiers. They were good leaders. I could give mission-type orders. I would spot check, but I didn’t have to double check. These guys had their squads. Their fire teams were ready. The weapons squad was always, you know, guns were clean. You spend probably a couple weeks and really you’re on trial with them because they’re looking. They want to know a couple things like, “Are you stupid? Do you know what the hell you’re doing? When you get shot at are you going to be able to handle this fight coherently and do a good job or are you going to fall apart?” The first thing that really helped was that I could read a map and I could navigate. They relaxed a little with that. But until you actually hear a round crack in anger they don’t really trust you. In my case, that got deferred for what I thought was a very long time. I mean I got there in June and I never really got in a firefight until October.

SM: You mean a serious one? You never got into a firefight until October?

BP: The unit did. Now the month I was gone, they got in two firefight and, like I say, I lost three guys wounded. The fighting in my unit really started in October and then November and December and that was it, baby. It was Katy-bar-the-door on that. It never calmed down until I left. The first four months or so I was beginning to think, “Hell, I’m ripping the government off.” Let me put that into perspective. That’s not true,
either. I have to kind of think. On these sweeps we would find a guy here or a couple
guys there. I got into a situation twice where I made the wrong decision based on doing
something that I thought was the American way. This has to do with people trying to
surrender. First time it happened to me we were on a sweep in a village. We knew there
were bad guys in there. We looked around and looked around. I think this was about in
August right before I left. Yeah, it was. Damn, we couldn’t find them. The National
Police came in, they would bring them in. They would bring a hundred thousand of them
in on a Chinook. They’d come pouring out of there, it looked like the Keystone Kops.
They poked around, poked around and then they grabbed some woman and they said,
“She’s a VC.” That was the big thing. “She VC.” Then they started giving her the water
treatment. I don’t know, are you familiar with that?

SM: No. Describe it please.

BP: The water treatment is probably the most disgusting thing you could ever
watch. What they do is tie them down to the ground, so you’re flat on your back, spread-
eagle. Then they put a handkerchief over your mouth. Kind of like you know, you see
bandits, cowboys where they’ve got the bandana pulled up over their nose. Well, they do
that under their nose, not over their nose and it’s tied real tight. Then they get water in a
can. They hold the jaw open and they start pouring water down your throat. The trick is
if you do this right and you’re good at it, you take them to the point of almost drowning.
You don’t ever let them get enough water that they drown, to where they’re almost
drowning. The National Police had their own advisors. The first time I saw this, I was
pissed. I mean that’s torture. There’s no fine word for it, they’re torturing. I went up to
the MP advisor, he’s the first lieutenant and I did not realize this but we were going to
have a history with this guy. I said, “Hey what the hell are they doing?” He said, “Get
the hell out of here.” I said, “Bullshit. You know you can’t do that.” He said, “Look,
I’m not in charge of this outfit and neither are you. I’m going to tell you something, you
get out of here.” So I went to the company commander and he went to the battalion
commander. The battalion commander said, “I’ve been told to leave them alone. So
that’s the word I’m telling you, leave them alone.” So while this is going on, one of the
guys in my weapons squad is showing a new guy just a few little things. He walks over
by this bamboo bush and he says, “Yeah, I’ve got to tell you,” he said, “They love this
shit. What they’ll do is they’ll dig right underneath the root and put in a little hidey-hole—” About this time a grenade comes out of the bush. It was like, “Grenade!” Everybody jumps. Bam! Well, we found him. So we get some of the National Police over there. They start talking to him. Okay, they’re going to surrender. So they remove this little cover and we never would have seen it, you know, never. It’s just a little bamboo thing and it’s probably one foot square. They drop this down and there's a hole there, right under this bamboo tree, bush. So this guy comes out and he’s got his hands up. He’s standing up in the hole and we’ve got him surrounded. I mean there are thirty guys with a huge variety of weapons pointed at this guy. He’s got his hands up and he’s talking as fast as he can in Vietnamese. The National Police guy says, “He surrenders, he surrenders.” I said, “All right, all right, all right, let him up, let him up, let him up. Watch him.” I’m standing there twenty feet away from this guy. All of a sudden he puts his hands down to pull himself up out of the hole. He gets his feet up on the edge of the hole, this AK-50 comes slipping up out of the hole. He turns and he fires twenty rounds at me. Son-of-a-bitch. Pissed me off. Well, I didn’t have to move except down which I did. They sent him off to his final reward and his buddy in the hole, too. That was the first time that I made what I would consider an error in judgment. (Laughs)

SM: How did that affect the way your men looked at you?

BP: I almost learned my lesson, okay? Almost learned my lesson. Not quite because I’m me. The gods really have to use a jackhammer to get this idea across. The next time was some months later in my tour and there was almost the exact same situation. This guy threw a grenade and that pissed me off. Holy shit! That pissed me off. I was mad at myself more than anything because I knew better. At any rate, I learned a lot from that. It always looked so evil. I’ve been watching “Band of Brothers” and I noticed these guys are pretty up front about just shooting guys, alleged prisoners or people under their control if something even looked suspicious. I kind of smile to myself because that’s that thing you learn in combat, that there are no rules. If you’re coming in thinking you have this gallant set of conduct that you’re going to follow, you’re gonna die. I guess my point is that you learn real quick that you don’t get many of these mistakes. People either do things very quickly and very right the first time or you don’t mess with them. That was something I learned very quickly. No, not quickly, I learned
eventually. (Laughs) Yeah, I got the lesson. That was the kind of stuff that was going on before I left on emergency leave. When I came back we were still doing some of that. Then we were also doing some night patrolling which, oddly enough, for some reason the Army kind of got out of night patrolling and they started putting out LPs, listening posts, and that sort of became it. I always thought the American infantry got awful lazy and comfortable over there. They got into a groove. Well, I got back the first week in October of ’67. We were up on an LZ, a very small landing zone called Geronimo and it was up on the northern end of the Bong Son. The company commander told me one afternoon, “I want you to take out a patrol. I want you to go on out about four klicks and see what you can find.” I said, “Fine.” I picked five other guys and for some reason, don’t ask me why—well, officers carried what they called the CAR-15. It was the sort of the Tommy-gun version of the M-16, if that makes sense. It was the carbine version, that’s what it was. Carbine version of the M-16, I hated that damn thing. I did not like it. I hated it. I thought it was useless. It always jammed. It was worse than the M-16. So I borrowed an M-79 grenade launcher from one of my grenadiers not going on patrol. So I took it out and I fired it a couple times, and yeah that was fine. So I put a canister round in it and off we go on this patrol. The way we would normally do it, the platoon would go out on a sweep. Then when you got to a spot that had some good cover you’d drop your patrol off and the rest of the platoon would go on. So we dropped off. We were out there, oh, gosh, probably about five hours. It was about eleven o’clock at night. We set up several ambushes on trails, nothing. I mean there was nothing. So I pulled the patrol in and I said, “We’re going to head due north. We’re going to see if we can find some trouble.” I had an Indian kid, he was a Piute. His name was Cesspooch. He was an excellent scout and so I put him up front. “Cesspooch, you go first.” Then we lined up and I had my RTO (radio telephone operator) and myself and another guy behind and off we go. A very bright moon had come out. I mean it was a bombers’ moon, you could read a map by it. So we’re heading up. Of course, for this patrol I had already sat down with the artillery forward observer and put in some, what we used to call DTs (determined targets), which were just artillery concentrations that were pre-plotted. Then it made it easier to call in artillery. You could go right from Delta Tango 4, right two hundred, drop fifty. It just saved you having to call in all the other stuff. I always carried
the map because it wasn’t very big. It was about probably fourteen inches by maybe eight. We had Prick (PRC)-77s at that time, Prick-25s. I’d just take a prick-25 battery, the plastic that they would wrap the new battery in. I’d use that for a map cover. You can travel pretty light. We’re moving down and Cesspooch puts everybody down so I go crawling up there. He says, “I think somebody is in that hooch up ahead.” I said, “Well, go check it out.” So I spread everybody back a little bit. Cesspooch goes up and he’s gone a long time, probably twenty minutes. Finally he comes back and he’s pretty excited. I said, “What is it?” He said, “NVA. There’s a bunch of NVA, probably three or four of them in this hooch. They’re having a party, sir.” I said, “What?” He said, “Yeah this guy came out and took a piss right next to me.” I said, “You’ve got to be kidding me, Cesspooch.” He said, “No.” He said, “He’s stoned out of his gourd.” “Cool, let’s go join the party.” (Laughs) Here’s my thinking, okay, there’s three or four guys in a hooch. This is the usual thing. Three or four guys just spending some time in the village, moving through. I threw everybody in a fan around the hooch. You can hear them in there. Everything else is dark, everything else is quiet. Here are these three, four guys in there. So we go in and we kick open the door, okay. Because I’m the platoon leader, I go in first. I kick open the door and two things come into my field of vision simultaneously. Number one is this guy and this girl on a little makeshift bed having sex. The second thing I see is Keith David who actually went in the door ahead of me. I had that wrong, I was the second one in the door. Keith David went in the door and he’s standing, almost he could put his hand out and touch this guy who’s rolling up his blanket roll on one of those little NVA pistol belts. Right next to him is an AK-47. So I push Keith out of the way, shoved the M-79 almost in this guy’s face, pull the trigger and hear this “click.” (Laughs) Well, you know what that awful feeling is? The fun just went out of the war right then because the NVA soldier is not having the same problem. He grabs the AK-47 and it’s like slow motion. I watch him reach down, grab the AK, pulls it up. He’s aiming right at my stomach and I see him pull the trigger when all of a sudden all hell breaks loose. What happened was Keith David puts a magazine into this guy. Well, I go out the door, clear the weapon. Now all hell breaks loose. It’s like watching those ping pong balls in the lottery where they’re just bouncing around. Things start happening so fast you can’t keep track. A guy runs out past Keith David, he’s NVA. I don’t know
what happens. There’s more firing. You know, just mass chaos. So I try again to shoot
this guy who’s running past me. Click. Boy that pissed me off. I had a .45 pistol and I
take off after him. How I don’t know, but I shot him anyway. It was a good shot for it
being as dark as it was. I come back, I pick up an SKS that this guy had dropped on his
way out the door. Now there’s firing going on. I get on the radio, I call in a report and I
ask for some illumination. Tell everybody to get down. Now into my consciousness
comes a lot of noise. Now Cesspooch says, “Sir, gooks!” I said, “Where?” He said,
“They’re coming out of everywhere!” “Holy shit!” We’d stumbled into an ants nest.
They were everywhere and I mean everywhere. They were all over this damn village. So
I get back on the radio and I tell my team, “Pull back, pull back, pull back. Let’s go. Fire
and maneuver.” So we start maneuvering back out of this village and I called in for my
first call for artillery as a battery of six. The artillery FO (forward observer) says, “Are
you crazy?” I said, “Shit, I’m standing right on the DT.” So he said, “It’s going to be
danger close.” I said, “Shit, bring it. I’ve got more people here than I could ever fight.”
So he did and it was wonderful. I did tricks with that artillery that night. I was so
pumped. It took me a week to get down. We got out of there. We brought out three
weapons. One of which, Keith David brought out the AK-47 that he had got off this guy
he had shot. We didn’t know it until we got back to the LZ about an hour later. We
fought our way back and I mean we smeared that village with artillery like you wouldn’t
believe. When we got back, the battalion commander was pumped because he’d been
watching the thing from the top of the LZ. The AK-47, the bolt was half way forward.
One of Keith’s rounds had hit the bolt. That was the only thing that saved my life. So I
talked to the old man. I said, “Sir, we’ve got to give Keith a Bronze Star.” He said,
“Why?” I said, “Look at this it was pointed right at me.” He said, “You’re probably
worth a Bronze Star, Paris. I’ll give him one.” (Laughs) I said, “Great.” That really
started it. Then after that it stared picking up.

SM: What time frame is this? This is September, October?
BP: This was October ’67.
SM: October. Now in terms of the—you said NVA were principally in this
village?
BP: Yes.
SM: Okay. You mentioned that you guys brought out three weapons. Did you have a chance to go back to that village after the artillery barrage was settled and do a little bit more of a battle damage assessment, see what kind of damage you did? How many more weapons might have been available? Were there any caches or anything like that?

BP: Yeah.

SM: What was the finding?

BP: What they found was—they didn’t go in until the next morning because we were our company-minus. We only had three platoons up there that night. With me off on patrol coming back, the old man didn’t feel like he had enough to send down in there. Plus, we brought in ARAs, Spooky came up. They were shooting all night in and around that village. The company went in the next morning, and blood trails everywhere. But they only found like three bodies that had been hastily buried. A lot of bandages. So we only claimed three because in those days we were doing pretty much “step-ons.” Brigade commander came out and gave me the Bronze Star on the spot. He was pretty excited. We did some damage. Then we found out, we captured some documents and come to find out this unit of the NVA had come down to pick up some rice from one of the Viet Cong. That’s what they were doing in the village that night. They had gotten their rice and they were going to spend the night in the village and then go out in the morning. When I came barreling in, we changed their plans. Then after that, it was not more than two weeks after that the 173rd got into some real shit over in Dak To.

SM: This is the first time you guys went to Dak To?

BP: This was the second time. That’s where they were when I joined them in June. Then in November we went up and we spent three weeks up there and the 173rd had a horrible fight on Hill 871. I need to take a break not because of anything except my bladder.

SM: I was going to say, in fact, I’ve got to evacuate this room so that some one else can use it for another interview. This might be a logical stopping point for us today. Let me put a quick ending on this. This will end the interview with Mr. Bill Paris on the ninth of July. Thank you, sir.
SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Bill Paris on the eleventh of August 2003 at approximately 9:10 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Paris is in Piedmont, South Dakota. Sir, why don’t we go ahead and pick up with our interview. If you would, just go ahead and describe—you already mentioned an incident with Colonel French.

BP: Well, yes. What started to happen was that I—Colonel French came and took over the battalion. Prior to that we had had a gentleman who was very rigid, I would say he was a harsh task master. He was one of those guys I grew to hate over there. He had all the answers. Never went out and did it himself but, of course, he could fly over at fifteen-hundred feet and tell you everything that you needed to know. When Colonel French came, he was sort of an odd bird. To begin with, he was an armor officer. He was commanding an airmobile infantry battalion which had been—we had been Airborne up until, I think I mentioned sometime previously, when they came off status. Colonel French stood about 6’3”, had a real high-pitched voice. He was a wonderful man, a great commander and I loved him dearly. But for some reason or other, and I’m never sure about these things, but I took it upon myself whenever I was in the rear detachment area, which for us was either LZ English or wherever we happened to be. Of course, the big thing is when you get back to the rear you get troops settled or sometimes I’d go back to get pay or whatever and I would spend the night. Then, of course, I would have a drink or two. When you’re living the extremely healthy life where you’re eating very little and you’re working very hard and so a warm can of beer hits you like a two-by-four between the eyes. (Laughs) Usually I would end up in front of Colonel French’s tent serenading him and he’d get mad. He’d start hollering at me, “God damn it, Paris! Go to bed.” So this was sort of our relationship. Shortly after the night patrol we got word that the Miss America show, the USO (United Service Organizations) show was coming around. Everybody was pretty excited about it and at the time we were in the Bong Son Plain up on LZ Geronimo. Colonel French called my company commander up—we were doing base security that week. It wasn’t much of a base. This thing sat up on the very tip top of
a little tiny mountain. But he called my company commander in and gave him some very
detailed instructions and the next thing I know the old man calls me over. He said, “Paris
saddle up your platoon. You guys are going to the field.” I said, “Sir, why am I going to
the field?” He said, “You going to the field, Paris, because of your habit of waking the
old man up at three in the morning when you’ve been drinking. I’ve told you about that
and now he’s nervous that Miss America is coming with all these women and I quote, ‘I
don’t want Paris and his God damn Indians all over those women. They’re here to do a
show and we’re going to represent the 1st of the 12th as gentlemen.’” So I thought it was
unfair and I said, “Hey, you know, send me somewhere. It’s not—” “No, no, no. The
colonel wants all of you off the LZ.” So they called in a lift and they put us out in the
coast, which was about sixteen klicks away. They said, “We’re gonna take you out there
and drop you off and you’re going to do a sweep back toward the LZ. We’ll bring you
back when the Miss America show is over.” “Okay.” So on the way out we had brigade
scout aircraft and the brigade scouts saw a guy duck into a hole. The flight lead, I always
was in the lead chopper going in and the last chopper going out. So the flight leader of
the flight taking us in, of the lift helicopters, told me, “Hey they’ve got a guy in this hole.
He’s in a bunker and when you land he looks like a military-aged male.” “Okay.” So we
get on the ground, we secure this village, it was a little tiny thing. This guy doesn’t want
come out of the hole so—a lot of times we’d throw smoke grenades in but usually it
would just asphyxiate them. They could tolerate it and then they’d pass out and choke to
death. I came up with a brand new theory which was that if you throw a white
phosphorous grenade in there nobody could put up with that crap. So I said, “Okay, let’s
not throw any more smoke.” So I threw a white phosphorous grenade in and sure enough
that had a therapeutic effect. This guy came roaring right out. My platoon sergeant got a
hold of him and he was a military-aged male, a little bit older, probably in his forties. So,
we decided to detain him, we tied him up. So we start moving back to the west towards
the LZ and people are kind of grumbling and we are on a long march and the brigade
scouts break off. There’s nothing further, it looks like the way is clear. So we’re moving
down—and the area is fairly open. We’re moving down this trail and I was always up
with the lead fire team. Then the platoon sergeant would be back toward the tail end of
the formation and that’s where the two radios were. We only had two in the platoon.
That way we could effectively control the platoon. Well, as we’re coming around the corner there’s an old rundown, ramshackle hooch. All of a sudden, I hear the point man holler, “Look out, here he comes!” Here comes this military-aged male and he’s got a pistol belt with a grenade on it. So I open fire on him and I’m not sure what happened because it all happened so fast. But at any rate, his hand hits his head (Laughs) and it kind of stuns him. He looks like a stunned ox and he goes to his knees. We rush up and get him. What happened, I guess, is I shot him in the hand because he had a huge crease across his palm. He must’ve had it up just in the right position because it smacked him on the head and that’s what stunned him. So, well, this is interesting. We checked the area and there is nobody else. I’ve got this bunch of guys in my platoon, this is the newer group coming in, these are all draftees. They don’t know that there are limits to all this. One of my PFCs (private first class) says, “Do you mind if I talk to this guy?” I said, “Sure. I’m sure in New Jersey the Vietnamese you learned must have been pretty good.” He starts talking to this guy and this guy starts making gestures and pointing up the hill. So his squad leader comes to me and says, “Sir, you know, I think this guy will take us. I think he’s got some buddies,” because he sure as heck wasn’t alone. He was in a white shirt and the kind of khaki shorts that a lot of them wore. So I said, “Hey, we’ve got nothing better to do.” I talked to my platoon sergeant, “Hell, yes. Let’s go find out what’s going on.” So we move up this hill and he starts pointing towards a bamboo tree, actually. But I mean visually, to help you, it’s just kind of like this huge bush, okay? So he starts pointing and yelling, “Uh-oh, shit. Here we go.” So we get everybody deployed around. “Watch him. We’ve already been through this one time.” But we can’t see really well. So this guy starts hollering and some guy answers him. It’s like, “Uh-hm, they’re in a hole.” Of course, we don’t understand Vietnamese, but he apparently talked him out. We see a guy’s head kind of come up and we can see he doesn’t have any weapons. Yeah, right. “Okay, he’s coming out. Get ready.” About that time I hear this, “pling.” I know exactly what it is; it’s a damn spoon going off a grenade. I holler, “Grenade!” We all hit the dirt. It was close. I mean, I was probably ten feet from the ticket. What happened was the guy apparently tried to flip the grenade towards us without being too obvious about it. Well, it hung up in the branches and he got the whole brunt of it. That was enough for me. I was so pissed. By God, I’m going in. So we
layed down a little fire on this hole and you can see it now. The guy is dead there is no
doubt about it. So I go up to that hole and I start hollering, “Pass me some grenades.” I
sit up on this hole throwing them a mix of white phosphorous and frags. I could hear
them down there screaming and I keep throwing shit down there until they stop. Okay,
well, so we go back and this guy has no weapons, no documents. We secure the prisoner
and then we call it in. About the time I’m on the radio calling this into battalion—all of a
sudden we come under kind of long-range heavy weapons fire. Well no, not heavy
weapons, AK-47s. So it’s like, “Oh, shit. Here we go.” Obviously he’s got company.
The battalion decides to reinforce us. The only folks to reinforce us with is the rest of the
company up watching the Miss America show. So they don’t get to watch the Miss
America show, they have to come out. Eventually I got my tunnel rat down there before
the QRF (quick reaction force) came out. The platoon sergeant took a couple squads and
went up and checked the hill and pushed them away, whoever they were. So we’re
digging around in this hole and it’s a tax collection team, we find out later. There’s all
kinds of money in this hole, pieces of bodies, but money. We found a lot of South
Vietnamese money. We found some North Vietnamese money and some other stuff. So
we pull all this crap out of the hole and about this time the old man comes in, Colonel
French, and starts cussing me out. “Paris, there had better be some bodies. You just did
this so that everybody would have to miss it.” “Sir, you know, come on. It’s a little hard
for me to stage a war on command.” “No, no, no you did this. I know you did.” I said,
“Sir, I did not, honestly.” (Laughs) So they land the rest of the company and they push up
over the hill. Then this Vietnamese National Police team comes in with their American
sergeant advisor and they start reading the documents. “Oh, yeah. They’re a tax
collection team from the North Vietnamese Army and VC. They’re there to collect taxes
to support the cause.” This sergeant keeps looking at this—there was a lot of bloody
money we didn’t even mess with, probably twenty bucks worth. He looking at this and
his boys are reading the documents and finally he sidles over to my platoon sergeant and
whispers to him. My platoon sergeant looks at him like, you know, he broke wind in
church. He walks over to me and he says, “This guy wants to know if he can have the
money.” I said, “What?” “Yeah, he wants to know if we’re not going to take the money,
can he have it.” So I said, “Well, sure.” So he gave him about twenty bucks, whatever
was laying there on the ground. Of course, what he didn’t know was we had already taken all the South Vietnamese money. There was about $150 bucks worth of South Vietnamese money they collected and we put it in what we called the “platoon fund.” So Colonel French brings my company commander back and he says, “Ask him, ask him.” The company commander says to me, “Bill, he’s convinced that you probably hired these guys to come out here and stage this war just so Colonel French wouldn’t get to watch that show.” I said, “You tell Colonel French there is no way possible.” (Laughs) So that kind of ended things for a while and then the end of the month, right around my birthday—my birthday is the first week in November. Our company forward observer, the guy from the 2nd of the 19th Artillery who always went to the field with us, he’s an artillery lieutenant, he came up to me and he said—we were back at LZ Geronimo again, or English—he said, “Come on over here. I have something for you.” He said, “I got a birthday present for you.” I said, “Well, what’s that?” He said, “Well just come over here.” So we walked over to B Battery, 2nd of the 19th Artillery and the battery commander is there. So I salute him with, “Good morning, sir.” “Hey, how’s it going Bill?” “Fine, sir.” He’s got two howitzers lined up. (Laughs) I said, “What’s the occasion?” “Well, I understand it’s your birthday.” (Laughs) He said, “We have a present for you. I’m told that you like white phosphorous more than anything.” I said, “Oh, yes, sir. I really do.” He said, “Well, happy birthday. You got six rounds for each gun. Go ahead, we’ve cleared it. Our boys will load it. All you’ve got to do is walk back and forth and pull the lanyards.” I said, “Oh, be still my rushing heart.” (Laughs) So I got twelve rounds of white phosphorous for my birthday to poop into the AO (area of operations). (Laughs) Best birthday present I ever had.

SM: Now, around your area there, was this a free-fire zone? Were there villages anywhere near by? Were there very many Vietnamese civilians around or was it pretty much all military activity?

BP: Most of it was a free-fire zone. We had moved the villages because by that point in the war, we understood that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were, you know, living off of the villagers. So they were all in controlled hamlets. So where there probably had been forty small villages or little, kind of like, you know, three or four little hooches together, most of those were abandoned now. So there were areas that you
couldn’t fire into, but by and large, particularly up on Geronimo because it was the north
dge of the Bong Son Plain and it was next to the An Lao Valley. The An Lao Valley
connects up towards Laos and that was an enemy infiltration route into the Central
Highlands area. So we were sort of the cork in the bottle. It wasn’t a particularly bad
place. Now if you were back on LZ English, which was I think about eight klicks to the
rear, then you couldn’t do all that free-fire stuff. But most of the area up around there,
there were only two or three occupied villages and they all had Ruff Puff forces and
advisors and stuff. I put a basic load of 40mm into the side of the An Lao Mountain one
night. (Laughs)

SM: Okay.

BP: We had those Dusters, those twin 40s. I’d never fired one so I did that night.

Colonel French came out and gave me hell. They had to get nighttime resupply.

(Laughs)

SM: Well, what was the motivation to put that much up there?

BP: It was fun. It seemed to me that I’d had a couple beers.

SM: Was this a common issue? That the alcohol affecting—

BP: I don’t have a real high tolerance for alcohol anyway.

SM: How frequently would you guys get resupply as far as your—?

BP: We never got beer unless we were back in the rear or on an LZ and we didn’t
have to do perimeter defense.

SM: Okay.

BP: So like what they’d try to do was at least once a month they’d try and rotate
us back to English and we’d stand down a little bit. You know, you could kind of take a
break from the ceaseless vigilance because what you learn is that you can really only do
that so much anyway. But we’d go back to the rear and, God, we’d have a couple beers
and we’d be on our butt. You know, unless you’re an alcoholic or something and have a
huge tolerance for alcohol. I mean a big night for me was six beers and I’d be just
reeling.

SM: I would imagine that because there would lengths of time where you would
have to go without it for so long.
BP: Well, yeah, and then you get a couple hot beers in you and it just hits like a brick. You know, because you’re not eating much. You’ve seen those little cans of C-rations we were eating. It’s not like the catered meals they have now. So you’re system is pretty clean and, boy, when you hit that alcohol it just kicks your butt. I’ll tell you a little story and I’m not real proud of it. But we received a—we were chasing down some intelligence of the NVA moving right on the coastline, so we opened up a little tiny LZ right on a peak. I mean it’s not a mountain peak, but it’s a hill peak. Probably elevation of six hundred but the damn thing looks like a, you know, it’s probably got a forty-degree pitch on one side and thirty on the other. So we opened up this little tiny LZ. One of my squad leaders went on R&R to Hawaii and when he came back he brought me a bottle of Old Granddad, which was a favorite of mine. Well, you know, we’re out in the AO and I certainly shouldn’t have done what I did but I start drinking and sharing and the next I thing I know I don’t remember anything. Well, I woke up the next morning and I have never had such a horrible hangover in my whole life. I wake up and it’s hot, and it is blazing hot. I’m in a pup tent, a little shelter half. My feet hurt, God they really hurt, and I look down and here is this kid doing something with my feet. I opened up one eye and I just asked him, “Who the fuck are you?” He looks at me and he says, “You know, I’m sitting here pulling cactus pines out of your feet wondering who the fuck are you.” (Laughs) I said, “Well, good morning. Who are you?” He says, “I’m your new medic and if you’re my platoon leader, I’m gonna kill you if you ever pull this shit again.” I thought, “Oh, God. Now what? What the hell did I do?” So I had just gotten a new platoon sergeant and I said, “Well, is Sergeant So-and-so?” This kid says, “Hell, I don’t know, the whole platoon is waiting for you to get up, Lieutenant.” I thought, “Aw, geez. I wish I was somewhere else.” (Laughs) So I finally said, “Leave me alone.” He says, “No, no you’re never getting your boots on again if I don’t get these cactus pines out of you.” So I crawl out and I drink everything, every bit of water I can get my hands on. My platoon sergeant gives me look like usually a wife gives you when you’ve made a total ass out of yourself. Everybody is kind of sniggering and I thought, “Oh, God. I guess I better start, ‘Wild Bill Paris the Vietnam Apology Tour’.” So I talked to the platoon sergeant and said, “Well, the company is gone, sir. The old man said that when you finally arise and shine that he’ll meet you at these coordinates. So we’ve been sitting
on our ass waiting for you.” “Oh, how long ago did they move out?” “Oh, about an
hour, sir.” So I asked him, I said, “Is there anything I should know about last night?” He
goes, “Aw, God damn!” Turns around and stomps away. Well, my RTO looked at me
and he says, “You fucked up.” I said, “What the hell did I do?” He says, “Well, you
know, Lieutenant, you drank that whole bottle of bourbon.” So I said, “Oh, my God. No
wonder I feel like shit.” He said, “Oh, that’s just the beginning of the story, sir.” He
said, “We lost you.” I said, “What?” He said, “Yes, sir. We lost you.” He said, “Then
about midnight all the flares start going off in front of our position.” I said, “Oh?” He
said, “Yeah, you’re lucky that we didn’t pop a claymore on your ass but Sergeant So-and-
so said we better send out patrol. So when we sent a patrol out we found you.” (Laughs)
“Passed out.” So, that was probably the worst morning of my life, ever. I don’t think
I’ve ever done anything that I was more ashamed of. I think the company commander
knew because he never said a word about it, ever.

SM: Wow, my goodness.
BP: But I sure had to apologize to everybody I met for about a week. Colonel
French never got wind of it that I know of.
SM: Well how did you guys deal with discipline issues in your unit? Not
necessarily, I’m not talking about this particular incident, but for instance, if you had a
guy that fell asleep on guard duty or that kind of thing, how would you guys deal that?
BP: We took care of it ourselves.
SM: It was all internal?
BP: Yeah.
SM: To the platoon or to the company?
BP: Usually the platoon. There were sometimes that things would happen you
had no control over. Once in a while a guy coming back from R&R would get drunk,
hoorah up, the MPs would catch him. The DR (deficiency report) report would come
down or the rear detachment commander would have to go get him from the MPs and
then something had to be done.
SM: Yeah, once it gets to a certain level of acknowledgment then it’s kind of out
of your hands.
BP: Yeah. But like sleeping on guard, we had a system—because everybody falls asleep on—I don’t care who you are. After you’ve been humping all day, particularly on days when you’ve got your rucks, you know you’re humping ten, twelve klicks or you’re going through triple-canopy jungle and we’re on fifty-percent alert all night. Normally you’re in three man foxholes so you’re on one, off two. People are going to sleep. But the squad leaders and the platoon sergeant and the team leaders policed as they went. I remember one night we were, I don’t remember where, but we were up in the Central Highlands somewhere. All of a sudden I hear this snoring. I thought, “What the heck?” Because you never heard people snore out in the field. That was like, “Un-huh.” When I came back from Vietnam I bet I didn’t snore for four years. You know, I don’t care exhausted you are you just learned, “Don’t make that noise.” I heard this snore about three times. I thought, “Holy shit. We need to do something.” About that time I hear this, “Whack!” “Ouch!” (Laughs) Then, bam! Bam! Bam!

SM: I guess someone did do something quick.

BP: Well, then I found out later the platoon sergeant snuck up and everybody in the hole was asleep. So he took all their weapons and went over and he just beat the shit out of the guy who was supposed on watch and then crawled away. (Laughs) Yeah, but this business about everything going for company punishment, very seldom. Towards the very end, right, we caught a guy with marijuana cigarettes and that was like a bolt out of the blue. You know, nobody, at least in the chain command, knew that—we didn’t even know what they were. Somebody had to tell us. So we put the guy in for a court-martial but he got killed before he could be brought out of the field.

SM: Was that the only incident of drug use that you knew of?

BP: On my first tour, yes. Of course, in ’67, ’68 it wasn’t a real problem yet. It was just starting to come in ’68, although I’m sure it had been going on in a very small way. But it didn’t really hit the field until, I’d say, probably the end of ’68. Then it was a problem. But until then, no.

SM: What was the ethnic makeup of your unit, of your platoon in particular?

BP: I’d say probably mostly white, lower-middle class to poor. Some blacks. A few Orientals, not many. A couple Indians. I’d say it pretty much mirrored the societal makeup at the time. But we didn’t have a lot of black soldiers in my platoon the whole
SM: How was morale in general for your first tour?

BP: On my first tour morale was excellent. People were fairly stable, mature. You know, they knew that it was just something they had to get through and do it and they’d be done. They were cooperative. They didn’t like the Army and they didn’t particularly care for being in Vietnam, but they were willing to cooperate and graduate, as we used to say at OCS. I had very few real problems. I was probably more of a problem to them than they were to me.

SM: All right. Now you think that your prior enlisted experience helped you as you were leading men in combat in Vietnam?

BP: It does and it doesn’t. I think having been an enlisted man I know how miserable it can be but then you still have to do the job of an officer. I mean, having been an enlisted man will only buy you a little good will if you are doing things well. Right up front it’s a great ice-breaker. But after that, you need to either perform or they don’t care. So I would say it’s of dubious value because I think you either care about people and you’re willing to try and accomplish the mission and still take care of the troops or you’re not. I’ve known men who have been enlisted who were horrible officers. They were brutal to their enlisted men. I’ve known other men who were superb leaders and never served a day as an enlisted man in their life. Leadership is a funny thing. I had to try and teach it down at Ft. Benning and what I always used to say to myself was, “I think leaders are born, not made because most men either have the capacity or they don’t.” I think you can teach managers some techniques, how not to screw it up really bad but I think a man brings so much of this to the table that you can’t take a malleable person and change him into a leader. You can change him into a manager who doesn’t screw up real badly but you can’t make him a leader. Leaders are born. They’re the guys who step to the front and they’re everywhere. I mean, I had leaders who were PFCs who were magnificent. It’s just something these guys have. I used to promote them as fast as I could. I had guys who came to me as E-2s and they left my unit as E-6s because we could do that then.

Here’s a kid who’s a draftee and he’s got five-and-a-half months in the Army and he
comes to you and he’s an E-2 ready to make E-3 and he leaves eleven months later, he’s an E-6.

SM: What qualities or characteristics would you ascribe to that type of person that makes them such an effective leader?

BP: They’re the kind of guys who don’t just shrug they’re shoulders and sit down and wait for something to happen. A leader is the kind of person who is—this may be an odd word—but vigilant. I don’t just mean vigilant in the sense of always watching on the battlefield, I mean this is the guy who’s aware. He’s aware of what’s happening and he’s aware that something needs to be done. A leader is the kind of guy who will step forward and if he’s in charge he will come up with a solution for a problem, whatever it may be. Even if he’s subordinate to another man, he’ll help that man come up with a solution for the good of everyone. I think what makes a man a leader is the willingness to step forward and take the risk to do that because there are times it is a tremendous risk.

SM: About how many of those individuals did you have come through your platoon while you were there for your first tour? As far as people that arrived in a relatively low rank that very quickly stepped through the ranks to assume leadership positions, whether they be as a team leader or as squad leader?

BP: I had six of them, two of whom never made their tour. One guy, while I was gone on emergency leave, he pulled that whole platoon through as Spec-4. I had just gotten his Spec-4 and made him a team leader and I was going to make him a squad leader. I had a sergeant going home. He got hit and, like I say, I was gone, but he—two other guys got hit with him and he did first aid on them and fought the whole night through. They gave him the Distinguished Service Cross for that. He was probably my best guy. He was the kind of guy, I gave him a map told him a little bit about you’d do this, taught him how to call in fire. He was something, he was a natural. Hell, I’d have recommended him for a battlefield commission if would have lasted a little longer. But yeah, I’d say six. I promoted four of them all the way to E-6, one got to E-5 before he got hit. Then James, who only made it to Spec-4, and he was my greatest loss because I just was so at home with him. You know, I had mentioned earlier we would do these seven-, eight-klick midnight humps to link up in front of a village by four in the morning. By the time a month was into—we were a month into doing these types of missions, he
was always my lead fire team and he was point man. I’d just tell him, “Okay we’re on this azimuth. We’re gonna go this far and start your pace count,” because I taught him how to do a pace count for distance. He’d come up with the same count I had. It took some of the burden off of me, he was good. Just a natural. Always took care of his men and, you know, I did that, too. I was the last guy to eat. I was the last guy to do anything that was good and the first guy to do anything that was bad. Sometimes by myself I’d be all bad all by myself. (Laughs)

SM: What was the most—what would you say was the most significant leadership challenge you had? In your first tour.

BP: The most significant leadership I had, in my first tour. Wow. Hmm, let me think. Probably Tet of ’68. That was a bad one. I was company XO (executive officer) at the time. But, I won’t take that one out of context because that comes up later.

SM: Okay.

BP: I’ll just push on with my narrative.

SM: Yeah, go ahead.

BP: In November, right after my birthday and the wonderful present, the 173rd Airborne of the 4th Infantry Division were getting pressure again. For the year that I was there that was always a problem. The NVA—and, of course, right there, they were right along the Laotian border. They had the Ia Drang, all of that area. Of course, there were good high-speed avenues off of Ho Chi Minh Trail. In November of ’67 the NVA came down, they brought howitzers. There was a division-plus moved into the area. The 173rd ran into them first on a place called Hill 875, I think. The mind is a terrible thing. Anyway, the entire brigade ended up getting involved in that and we got swept up—I had mentioned earlier that our brigade of the 1st Cav having been Airborne, we were sort of the fire brigade for the division. So we got swept up and sent off to the Dak To area. We always went as a package. We had our own artillery, our own aviation, the whole thing. So our job, the 1st of the 12th, was to move up on the east side of Dak To and take over from the 4th Division. They had some strong points that they manned. So our company moved up onto this strong point and then the 4th Division went down to help the 173rd. It was a butt-ugly fight that ended up involving one of our battalions, all of our aviation, and our artillery assets. I mean, when we got there Dak To was getting shelled and that
hadn’t happened. It had been mortared, but it had never been shelled with artillery so
they took a lot of casualties. My best friend at that time was a West Point grad class of
’66 and he lost three of his classmates just in that one battle that the 173rd had. We lost
some aviation people and some others. So that went on and then this is about the time I
met the guys from the 229th. Colonel French was rotating one platoon out of the battalion
back to Kontum to provide security for our aviation folks, who happened to be Bravo
229th, Killer Spades. So every platoon in the battalion went to the rear and spent like,
three, four days in Kontum, except mine. They started cycling through again. So I went
to the company commander and I said, “Whoa, whoa, whoa. What is this?” He said,
“Orders from Colonel French. He doesn’t want you back in the rear, he can’t afford the
trouble. He’s afraid that your guys will get drunk and get VD, and malaria, and
know, why is this man always picking on my platoon? The platoon sergeant can take
them back to the rear.” “No, he thinks that they’re all like you.” (Laughs) So I said,
“Well, you know, this is a raw deal.” He said, “Hey, this is not my order. I’ve already
tried to get him to see the light. You know, he’s your little friend, why don’t you talk to
him?” I said, “Okay, I will.” The next time Colonel French came choppering in I was
there and I was primed for bear. I went up and got Major Ordway who was a really super
guy. He was the S-3. I said, “What is it?” He said, “Bill, look, I’m just going to tell you
like it is. You want to go twist this man’s tail at the three o’clock in the morning, these
are the kind of things that are gonna happen to you.” I said, “Well, you know it’s still not
fair.” He said, “Well, take it up with him. We’ve all talked to him about it.” (Laughs) So
I got Colonel French and he had this high-pitched voice. I used to call him Jingle
because there was an old TV show way back when TV first started and it was young
Buffalo Bill. Andy Devine, the old character actor, kind of a heavyset guy with a real
high pitched voice, played Buffalo Bill’s sidekick and the sidekick’s name was Jingle. I
used to call Colonel French, Jingle because he had the highest-pitched voice. He was like
George Patton of WWII fame. You know, who was this big brawny lad and then he had
this high-pitched voice and it was so—you know it ran against type. You couldn’t
believe this high-pitched voice was coming out of this man. So anyway, I grabbed
Colonel French before he got back on his chopper and I launched into him. He started on
me, “God damn it, Paris. I don’t want to hear this. Those Indians of yours will just run
rampant and you can’t control them.” I said, “Come on, Colonel, I promise you. I will
come work for you for three, four days.” “No, I wouldn’t send them back without you.”
So I said, “Okay, do this: send us back, let the guys have a stand down. Come on, they
work hard. I’ll be a good boy, I’ll report.” “All right, you report to me every hour by
radio.” “All right.” So he sends us back to the rear and it’s at Kontum Airfield is where
it is and this airfield is unsecured. So the 1st of the 12th has like, oh, I don’t know, eight
helicopters and four gunships there and we provide security. They had built some little
sandbag positions and so the only thing that we have to do for this three days is we have
to be there at dark and we’re done at dawn. Well, this is like a vacation for us. So we get
back to the rear, to Kontum, and man we’re in tall cotton. So I tell the guys, “Okay,
here’s the deal. We’ll have morning formation and we’ll take our malaria pills,” because
I was very, very religious about it. I mean I watched them take their malaria pills and
then made them open their mouth afterwards because that was the easy to get out the field
was just forget to take your malaria and your Dapsone tablet, which was sort of a booster.
So I’d go around and I’d watch them take their malaria pills and they hated it, but tough.
So I said, “We’ll have morning formation and then you guys got the day off.” “Well, we
want to go down and find the whorehouse.” I said, “Oh, well, that’s a whole different
story.” So I got my medic, the new guy who had been pulling the needles out of me, and
I said, “Doc we got a problem because you know these guys. Even if we hand them a
prophylactic they’ll walk right down to the village, throw it in the nearest trash container
and then they’ll go get VD.” I said, “You know I can’t do this because the old man is
going to have my ass if these guys start coming down with VD and we’ll never get out of
the field.” So he said, “Well, there’s only one thing to do, sir.” I said, “What’s that?”
He said, “Go with them.” Hey, there’s an idea. So I get the platoon sergeant and I said,
“All right tomorrow we will go down, we’ll have a platoon party. I want you to send—"

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Bill Paris on the
eleventh of August 2003 at approximately ten o’clock. I’m in Lubbock and Mr. Paris, of
course, is still Piedmont, South Dakota. All right, sir, why don’t we, why don’t we
continue with the story.

BP: Only because Neighborhood Watch doesn’t know he’s there. (Laughs)
SM: (laughs) That’s right. Continue with the story about the—

BP: Platoon party.

SM: —platoon party. Yeah, there we go.

BP: That evening before we take the defense my sergeant comes back and he talks to the platoon sergeant and they come to me. They say, “Okay, we found this place tomorrow is a go. You know it’ll run us about eighty bucks and they can all have a couple of runs through and then anything else they got it.” So I said, “Okay.” I said, “Doc, go over to the Special Forces,” because they always had the best stuff, “Go over to Special Forces and find all the prophylactics you can get your hands on. We probably need sixty of them.” So he takes off with another guy and they come back and they’ve got a box of prophylactics. So, okay, we get through the night and we head on down and I had just had a flag made up. I still have it to this day. It’s based upon the standard cavalry guidon which is the red top and a white bottom. I had B Company, 1st of the 12th Cav on the red part in yellow and then down on the bottom in bright red was my motto, my personal motto.

SM: What was that?

BP: “Bring on the cunt!” (laughs)

SM: (laughs) Okay.

BP: Well by this point, you know everybody is fighting for what they believe in and I’m a serious believer in that. (laughs)

SM: Okay.

BP: Although I’m not a pig about it. Anyway, so we take off down the street like a herd of ducks armed with M-16s with our little flag. We get to this whorehouse, I pay mamma san and everybody is excited, all right. So they square off and I say, “Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on guys.” “Well, what?” “Doc.” So he reaches in his bag and he hands them a prophylactic. The first guy looks at it and says, “Oh, okay,” sticks it in his pocket and starts through the door. I said, “I want to hear the snap of latex.” “Huh?” (laughs) I said, “You heard me.” “Oh, bullshit.” “Doc.” He said, “Okay this is the way this is going work. We’re going to go in and if necessary we’re going to stand there and make sure that you are covered. We are not going to have VD anywhere.” “Aw, sir, it’s like showering with a raincoat.” “I don’t give a rat’s ass. When in the hell
do you guys ever shower in acids anyway? They’ve got stuff that’ll eat you alive so
you’re going to wear a raincoat.” So they did. I had Doc stand in there. When he came
out, we were finally getting ready to go back up, at about fifteen-hundred he said, “I have
watched more sex than I ever thought possible.” He said, “You know what, sir? If I ever
get a hard-on again I’ll be surprised.” (Laughs) So we took off and that was the story of
our platoon party. But when we get back the 229th guys were just coming in and they
saw that flag. So they come over and they start looking at it. All these warrant officers—
and then Ken Hamburger, who is their platoon leader and he is in charge of them, he
comes over. They all say, “Well, where the hell did you get that flag?” “Why I had it
made up.” “Well, that’s just the coolest thing we’ve ever seen!” So, since the platoon
sergeant, the medic, and I, you know we didn’t have a drink; we didn’t do anything just
watched everybody screw. They say, “Hey, come on over we got a cold beer.” Cold
beer, this is like, “Whoo-hoo! So, yeah, I’m gone.” So I told the platoon sergeant, “You
got it. You know, I’ll be back whenever and then tomorrow night you can have off.” He
said, “I don’t care.” He was a pretty stable married guy. So I went over to the tents
where these 229th guys were and we became like very, very good friends. They were
wonderful, wonderful people. Super-sharp guys, these young warrant officers and they
were kids. Of course, you know, I say that. I wasn’t that old but I was like twenty-
three—I had just turned twenty-four and these guys, you know, they’re all like nineteen,
twenty. Some of them were a little older but not a whole bunch. They’re doing this
combat flying and these guys—well, you saw them, I mean thirty years later. But a little
guy like Dale Fillmore and he just looks like somebody’s baby brother, you know, that
everybody is babysitting. This kid, you know, an aircraft commander flying combat, you
think, “Holy cow! This must have been the way World War II was.” You know, these
guys zooming around in Corsairs and P-38s and they’re just kids. So we became quite
fast friends after that and then the next day one of the pilots, Ron Gutwein, who is no
longer alive, said, “I’ve got to take a ship back to the rear.” He said, “Do you want to
come with me?” I said, “Oh, sure.” So since, you know, during the day we didn’t do
much again, I tell the platoon sergeant, I said, “I’m going to go down An Khe for lunch.
I’ll be right back.” He looks at me and he says, “Well, okay, sir. Have a good time.” So
there’s two door gunners, Ron that’s flying the aircraft, and I’m in the right seat. We take
off and Ron is hoorahing and I mean with a capital H. He’s going low level, our convoy is coming up the MSR (main supply route) from An Khe and he’s buzzing them. He says, “Watch this.” I didn’t know what a hammerhead stall was. But Ron does a hammerhead stall in a “D” model Huey, which was not overly powered, up over this truck convoy and loses it. We go screaming toward the Earth and he’s frantic and I’m wondering, “Does he do this all the time?” We recover about two feet off of the ground. I can tell by the door gunner’s reactions that I think we just dodged one. I can tell by Ron’s reaction that he’d sort of over-exceeded his capabilities because he’s white. He says, “Uh, we’re not going to do that anymore. As a matter of fact, let’s go up to altitude.” Then it hits me, “This son-of-a-bitch just almost killed me.” So I tell him, “Don’t be doing that shit.” So we fly on back to An Khe and we have lunch back in their mess hall which is very gentlemanly and they got air conditioning and it’s really nice. All of a sudden this guy comes running through the mess hall saying, “Is there a Lieutenant Paris here?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Sir, um, we just got a relayed message from your platoon sergeant. You guys are the QRF and you’ve been called. They’re trying to stall up there, but they need you because you guys are making an air assault out of Kontum.” My eyes got as big as pie plates. It was like, “Oh, shit!” I looked at Gutwein, he looks at me and he says, “Oh, my God!” Because it’s a thirty-minute flight. So I ask him, you know, “Can you talk to my platoon sergeant?” He said, “No, sir. That was on a relay.” So, “Oh, God, hurry up.” We run out, we jump in the Huey, he grabs the two door gunners, we take off and he is hauling ass. He’s got the variable high-frequency radio on so that I can listen and Ken Hamburger, who’s the flight lead, Yellow-One, comes up and says, “Gutwein, where the hell are you?” He says, “We just cleared An Khe. We’re heading up there.” He said, “Well, you better haul ass, son.” Because he said, you know, “I’m stalling as long as I can but they’re screaming for their QRF and you’ve got their platoon leader.” “Oh, God.” So, “Okay, hurry, hurry, hurry.” So we’re going. Finally, Hamburger says he’s off, which means he’s launched and he’s got the troops with them. I asked Hamburger, I said, “Can you get my platoon sergeant on the radio?” He says, “Yeah.” So he—it was just sort of a thing, he gives you the helmet and then, you know, when you talk he’ll activate the switch. Later models, they had a voice activated but not in these. So I get my platoon sergeant on, I said, “Where
the hell are we going?” He said, “Where the fuck are you?” Then I hear Hamburger hollering, “You can’t say that on the radio!” (Laughs) I said, “Listen, we’re halfway there. So we’ll join you.” I said, “Do you have all my shit?” He said, “Yeah, Mays has got it.” Mays was my RTO, the most long suffering man in the world. So Mays was making an air assault and he’s got all my crap with him. So Hamburger tells Gutwein, he says, “I’ll go as slow as I can, but you get your ass up here, young man,” and he gives him the coordinates. So we join up just as they’re on long final into the LZ. So instead of a six shipper now all of a sudden there’s seven. (Laughs) So everything touches down and then Gutwein sets us down. I jump out, run over and find Mays, get my helmet, get all my web gear and my weapons. (Laughs) Then Gutwein takes off and the last thing I heard before I took the helmet off with the radio on it was—I could hear the command and control bird pilot come up on the low frequency and say, “I thought this was a six ship lift.” Hamburger says, “Shut up. Get off the air.” (Laughs) That was my lunch at An Khe. We didn’t really get into any trouble up there. We mostly sat and watched the war from the hill we were on. Then there were rumblings coming to us from in the Bong Son that the 1st Brigade had been sent back, one battalion had been sent back, that 40th NVA Regiment had attacked a town near LZ English. The ARVN's were scrapping with them and there was a—that’s the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam.

SM: Right.

BP: And the ARVN's were in heavy contact. They brought battalion back and then another and we were going to follow. By this time the 173rd fairly well had the war stabilized between themselves and the 4th Division. So we were notified that we were being pulled back, as well. Ourselves and the 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry were pulled out in the sequence and we went down to Kontum, jumped on C-130s, because it was the fastest way back, and then we went back—this is in early December now. The 2nd of the 8th got off the C-130s and went right out to the field and got into a hell of a fight because they were picking up from the ARVN who is in a blocking position. So all the lift assets that came flying back from Dak To and then they joined in. Then the next morning we went out to the field. At this point in time I had been moved over to the mortar platoon because their platoon sergeant—they didn’t have a platoon leader, he had been—he was my best friend and he had been moved up to command Headquarters Company. Their
platoon sergeant had gone on R&R so they gave me the platoon for about ten days since they had no one in charge. So I get this strange platoon the night before we go out to the field and, lo and behold, the platoon sergeant shows back up. This is about a forty-year-old guy, which is awfully old. He’s a sergeant first class E-6 which shows how long he’s been an E-6 because they stopped doing that rank in 1958, I think, ’59, when they restructured the rank again. But he was a hell of a soldier. So he came back and we went out the next morning. They inserted us and then they picked us up and moved us again. The 50th Mech, which was a mechanized infantry battalion, had been brought to the 1st Cav like four months before that and they were going to be a mech infantry outfit to help us because we really had no heavy weaponry other than whatever we carried or the aerial rocket artillery. Anyway, the 1st of the 50th Mech had run into a buzzsaw and they moved us down. We were supposed to tie in with them and we got the word that they were in on this village about a kilometer away so we started moving in kind of loose tactical order. The 3rd Platoon is kind of in lead, we’re going in sort of in platoon-in-column. I hear this point man up front, the kid had just got back the night before from his extension leave. He was an eighteen year old kid. He was drawing jump pay so as long as you extended, even though the unit had come off status, you could continue to draw jump pay. So a lot of guys were still drawing jump pay in the unit. I hear this kid say, “What the fuck is that?” All of a sudden an AK opens up and that’s last of this kid. So what he was looking at was—there was an armored personnel carrier with the back down, a 113 armored personnel carrier. There was a guy inside, the driver, and he’s dead and nobody is around the track. No track commander, none of the 1st of the 50th Infantry, nobody. I mean the track is just sitting there with the engine running and this guy is dead in the driver’s seat. So we deployed and we moved up and got this kid, it was too late for him. So they left him with me and normally the mortar platoon was kind of the last element committed. We did not have mortars with us, so we operating as a rifle platoon. So the old man was working the other three platoons, got into contact, and then we started getting pushed on the flank and so he whipped back and we ended up moving back away from the track because we were getting pressure on all sides. Pretty soon he committed me and so we had left the body along with our rucksacks and a small guard. We left them a radio. They called us on the radio and said they were taking fire so the
old man pulled us back and we went into a graveyard. So by this time we had probably four or five wounded and one dead. Then it gets kind of fuzzy because I’m really not sure of the sequence. I’ve got a copy of the after action report of the Battle of Tam Quan, which is what it became. It was like a two-week, knock-down, drag-out fight that the 1st Cav had with this reinforced NVA regiment. I don’t remember any of that. What I remember is snippets and vignettes. They brought our mortars in so we set up to fire illume (illumination rounds) and HE but then we got hit early in the evening so we just had to drop the mortars and fight as a rifle platoon. I remember we were getting real low on ammo and I had gone back to get some and I was kind of scrunched down by this dead kid’s body and all of a sudden, holy shit, we got hit from the south side of the perimeter near where this dead kid is. So I just flopped down behind him and rolled him up and he became my fighting position. But later in the evening, probably an hour later, I reached and was feeling around on his web gear for his ammunition and about the third magazine I got from him all of a sudden my weapon jammed. Because by this time the artillery was firing illume for us, the next bit of illumination I looked and, shit, his whole magazine has got blood in it, half-coagulated. So I threw that one away and then one of the—we had flare ships over all night. One of the flare ships came and just at a high speed run, taking fire all the way, just start kicking out boxes of rifle and M-60 ammo and that was enough to keep us going. So the next morning they broke contact and we got up and we back-hauled our dead and wounded and resupplied and got ready to go again. We moved around and my feeling is we moved around for a couple days and then we were kind of in and out contact, in and out of ambuses and we ambush them, they ambush us. Then the fifteenth of December, which is probably, maybe four or five days later, we hit them and we hit them hard. I got cut off because I was up trying to make contact with another platoon and we got hit again from the flank and there I am behind a palm tree. They’re shooting all around and I probably spent two hours before I could, they could push them away enough so I could get away from that damn palm tree. So that was a long afternoon. Then I lost a couple of guys killed in that fight. We were pushing on a tree line and part of the weapons squad came up and was trying to lay down some suppressive fire so I could move one of the other fire teams. Some guy with an RPG (rocket propelled grenade) machine gun, just took my gunner, just bam, took him
out, the gun the whole thing. So we got through it. Supposedly we won that one. They
broke contact and then we moved into a blocking position and then they brought in
another brigade and they chased them around for a while.

SM: What timeframe is this again?
BP: This is December ’67.
SM: Okay. Now, what was your expectation here? Were you, I mean at this late
in ’67, of course, Westmoreland is back in the US telling the American people, “Hey, the
light is at the end of the tunnel. The war will be over pretty soon.” Was that the sense
that you guys had that the war, that everything was going really well, we were winning,
and it was just a matter of a little bit more time and we would eventually be finished
here?
BP: Good question. I need to take a short break.
SM: Okay you are ready for a break. Okay, okay. Good enough, yeah. All right,
I’ll pause this. I’ll call you back in about ten—
BP: Five minutes is fine.
SM: Okay.
BP: All right.
SM: Bye.
BP: Bye.
SM: Okay, we’re back. We’re back from our break. Okay, why don’t you go
ahead and continue, sir.
BP: I think my feeling was—just a second. The Titanic is sinking again. (Laughs)
SM: This was the question about what your expectations were going in here.
This is late ’67.
BP: Yeah, how did I feel we were doing?
SM: Well, that and, you know again the, I guess the context of the question is
Westmoreland was back here in the US, of November of that year telling the American
people and the Congress and everyone else, “The war is almost over, hang in there. The
light is at the end of the tunnel.” All that, and then obviously you guys are out there
having these experiences and I was wondering what were your expectations? Did you
think, based on your experiences, is the war almost over? Are you guys doing all right?
Does the war seem to be progressing in that manner or is there some kind of a disconnect here between what is being said back in the US and what’s actually happening on the ground with you guys?

BP: Well, of course there’s—I think the current buzz-phrase today is situational awareness, which everybody likes to talk about. I don’t even think I knew Westmoreland was back in the United States until later. I think probably late December or January was I even vaguely aware. But then, you know, not only was external communication pretty vague, we really didn’t have access to much. We’d listen to Armed Forces Vietnam Radio once in a while, we had little portable radios. But mostly you’re caught up in the immediacy of the moment so you’re kind of trying to stay alive and do your thing. I guess my feeling in December of ’67 was that we knew the Viet Cong such as they were, were drying up fast. I mean, they really were not the force to be reckoned with that they had been two, three years before that. They had been pretty much fought through and although the units were still around I think the—I could be wrong here but it probably doesn’t make any difference to anybody—I think it was the 2nd or the 3rd Viet Cong Main Force Regiment or something that supposedly was operating in our area. But quite frankly they were more of a flag on a map than a real live romping-stomping entity. You know, you catch one or two guys that maybe have belonged to them but usually when you ran into a Viet Cong outfit, even though they wore the standard black pajama kind of thing, they really were NVA. They had been brought in and in some cases made to look like locals, but they sure as heck weren’t. There were still locals participating in all that and certainly the Viet Cong presence—I don’t mean to minimize it, but as the actual tactical units in the field they had very little. So we knew we were doing well there and then—except for these occasions when enemy main force units would come out and they would be well supplied and they’d give you a hell of a fight. They never stuck around so our feeling was, “Hey, we’re kicking their ass.” We just felt like we were on top of the situation and that the war was well in hand. We were doing our bit, we just couldn’t understand why this thing had been going for three years, two-and-a-half years, full tilt and we didn’t seem to be making much effort. At some point in my first tour, and I don’t remember when exactly, but Johnson called a bombing halt which, you know, we laughed at because, you know, that was stupid. By then the air war was being so
mismanaged I don’t know who he’d think he was kidding. He wasn’t hurting them much anyway. So, yeah, you’re dimly aware of all that but it doesn’t have much impact on what we were doing. We were fighting to stay alive.

SM: Okay. Now, the last really bad incident you described, though, this was in December ’67.

BP: Yes

SM: What were your expectations going into ’68? Had you heard, or were you expecting the tempo of operations to change in any way? What happened for the rest of December and into mid-January? Where were you at that point?

BP: God. (Laughs) It’s a good thing I’ve been talking about this because it happens again! Well, after the Battle of Tam Quan the NVA cleared out and went back up the An Lao Valley and into Laos to resupply and rearm and re-equip. We used to giggle about our, I mean, it’s sort of coffin humor, but our semi-annual battles with the 40th NVA Regiment who would come out and be ready to fight and then go back and lick their wounds for six months. But as bad as it had been, I think in the entire company we probably lost five, six dead and a bunch wounded. Even so, we felt like, you know, we were still standing after it was over and they left and we didn’t. So, ha! Take that. But then we got excited because our turn came up to guard the Green Line. The Green Line was the division defensive perimeter around An Khe itself. Now like this is a big deal because the Green Line is—you get to pull it for a month. It’s total stack arms. All you got to do is you man these little towers and you run little local patrols. Oh, sure, every once in a while, you know, the NVA come down and take a bite. You know, see if the Green Line was still a potent force but by and large it was pretty easy duty. So we were really looking forward to it. I have to heave a sigh here because I screwed that up so badly. (Laughs) Steve is wondering, “Uh-oh!”

SM: What happened?

BP: (Laughs) Well, so we go back to the rear and it’s like, oh, heck I don’t know. It’s twenty-something of December. We go back to the rear and, God, we get to actually live indoors and have showers. Hot damn! The mess hall is open and you can have food that isn’t merminated out to you or eat out of a can. So this is tall cotton. Well, we’re there the second night a white phosphorous grenade goes off on the edge of the B Company
perimeter. I only know this because the rear detachment commander who is the adjutant
comes down to my hooch and I’m just sitting on a cot reading mail, “Colonel French
wants to see you now.” Well, the battalion commander on the Green Line also runs the
division tactical operations center for An Khe, while his unit has the Green Line. He’s
the base defense commander, essentially. So he throws me in this jeep and tells me I’m
in trouble, yadda, yadda. This is the same guy who laughed at me when I first got there.
Takes me up and drops me off at the division tactical operations center and Colonel
French is in high dudgeon and starts chewing my ass right away. It was like, “Whoa!
Colonel! What?” “You threw a white phosphorous grenade! That’s your signature. I
told you about this, you’re going to screw this up!” So I let him rant and rave and chew
my ass for throwing a white phosphorous grenade. I finally said, “Sir, I didn’t throw it.
Why in the hell? Look, I’m stone cold sober. I just took a shower. I’ve been sitting on
my bunk reading mail. I am not the only soldier in the United States Army that will have
white phosphorous grenades.” “But you always carry them, I know you do. Nobody else
likes the damn things. Paris, you’ve done this to me again!” It was like, “Colonel, settle
down.” So finally Major Ordway and I convinced him, “No, come on.” You know. “It
was probably—” “Well, it was one of your Indians then.” “Well, it could have been, you
know, hell. The guys are glad to be back. I’ll go back and talk to them. I’ll watch over
them. Sir, just chill out!” Well, the old the man was just nervous as a kitten. You know,
“Bill, what are you doing? Colonel French is on my ass.” “Sir, I didn’t do anything but I
will get the troops together.” So I get the whole damn company together and I read them
riot act. “God damn it, you know, you people shape up! If you like being back in the
rear then you better settle down.” “Okay.” So Christmas happened somewhere about
this time and then it’s New Year’s Eve. Like two o’clock in the afternoon, myself and
Lieutenant Beasley, my best friend who is now commanding the Headquarters Company,
we get called up to the DTOC, division tactical operations center, Colonel French wants
to see us. So we go up there and Colonel French announces that he cannot trust us, he
cannot afford to screw this up, and quite frankly he is going to make sure the two of us—
he’s going to babysit us personally so that nothing happens, no incidents, nothing to get
him into trouble and that’s it, that’s his word. Find a chair, find a seat, help out, but
we’re not to leave that bunker. I couldn’t believe it. It was like, “What?” (Laughs) So
Lieutenant Beasley and I kind of chuckle about it, “Geez, you know we must have a hell of a reputation.” So all New Year’s Eve, and the old man is nervous about our troops. Of course, they’re on the Green Line. But you know REMFs have weapons and they start firing up in the air and bullets are falling everywhere. Geez, it’s like—but we get through it and there are no incidents and nobody is hurt and nobody is killed. Colonel French has a successful New Year’s Eve as base commander. So, all right, he releases us the next morning, “Get out of here. Go get some sleep.” About two days later we get another summons to the DTOC. “Lieutenant Beasley and Lieutenant Paris report to the Colonel French.” “Oh, my God! Now what?” So we go down there and this is like four in the afternoon, 4:30. We report to Colonel French, “Yes, sir.” “Boys, I feel bad.” “What?” “I feel bad because, you know, I was so worried about everything and it went so nice and it went so easy. I’m hard on you because, especially you Paris, you remind me of when I was a young 2nd lieutenant and I didn’t have a lick of sense either. You know I was screwing the regimental commander’s wife.” (Laughs) My jaw dropped and I went, “What?” “Yeah, and it went on for two years. It was a big scandal and I’m lucky I didn’t get run out of the Army. You’re just exactly the same way.” I thought, “Oh, my God. This man is crazy.” (Laughs) So he said, “I want to make it up to you.” “Huh?” “We’re going out tonight. We’re going to have our very own New Year’s Eve.” “Huh?” “Come on! Let’s go.” So about that time, well, I don’t know what time this is, but he calls for his jeep and we hop in the jeep and we go over to the 15th Transportation Battalion club. They had a very nice club. It was called the Can Do Club. So we go over there and we start drinking. Of course, nobody has had anything to eat and I’ve already told you what happens when that—but we’re drinking drinks with ice in them and this is good stuff. Well, wow. Let me see, there is Colonel French the battalion commander, Major Ordway the S-3 who is the operations officer, Lieutenant Beasley my best friend whose is commanding Headquarters Company, and myself the executive officer of Company B. We’re drinking and it’s probably after seven or eight and guys drifting in and they’re in civilian clothes. They have these nice-looking girls with them and Colonel French starts muttering, “God damn REMFs.” REMF was a nickname we had for people who lived in the rear. It stands for rear echelon mother fucker. That’s the way we felt about them. So we’re sitting there and Colonel French says, “Paris, you got
you God damn flag with you?” I said, “Of course, sir. I always have it with me.” So I
pull it out of my jungle fatigue pocket. When Colonel French took over the battalion he
got these red and white buttons that says, “We charge harder.” He gave everybody these
damn buttons, so we all have to wear these buttons. We all grab our buttons and we put
my flag on the wall. Well, of course, it’s not a very nice flag for mixed company, I guess
is the only way I can put it. So we start drinking and the club manager comes over and
says, “Hey, guys, you know, we don’t mind if you come here and drink but we’re going
to ask you to take the flag down. It’s offensive.” Aw geez, the last thing in the world he
ever should have said. Colonel French came unstuck, “Why,” you know with his high-
pitched voice, “What in the God damn hell do you know about offensive?” (Laughs) He
just rakes on this guy. “My boys fought—” (Laughs) Lieutenant Beasley and I are sitting
there watching this performance. Major Ordway is going, “Oh, no. Oh, no! Oh, no! No
wonder he doesn’t drink. Oh, no!” French is standing there, “You God damn people!
You’re only safe because my boys die out in the bush to save you!” (Laughs) He goes on.
Finally Major Ordway gets him calmed down, takes him outside. Wish and I sitting there
looking at each other like, “Holy shit! We thought we were bad.” So this goes on until
about, oh, I don’t know, ten o’clock at night. The club empties several times because
people don’t want to be in there obnoxious people. They keep asking us to leave and
French keeps saying, “Fuck you. I’m the base commander, throw me out.” (Laughs) So
finally about, oh, I don’t know, I’m guesstimating here, we’re getting pretty well oiled.
About 10:30 French says, “I’ve never had a Vietnamese piece of ass.” We all look at
each other like, “Oh, no.” He says, “Come on, let’s go down to the village and get laid.”
We said, “Sir, that is not a good idea.” “Ah, come on, God damn it.” So he calls over to
the DTOC and he wants his jeep. Well, they’d sent it out to the airfield for something or
other and it won’t be back. He says, “Ah, it’s no problem.” He turns to me, he says,
“Paris, go get me a jeep.” I said, “What?” He said, “Go steal me a jeep!” I said, “Your
wish is my command, Colonel.” I walk out, look around, sure enough, find a jeep that’s
not locked up. I go back and pick up the old man, “I’m driving.” “Sir?” “You heard me,
God damn it, I’m driving.” Oh, boy. So he jumps in and takes Major Ordway takes off
and says, “Sir, you do not want to do this and I am not going with you.” “Aw, Rick, God
damn it.” (Laughs) Beasley, and myself, and Colonel French, we take off for the main
gate. Well, when we get there MPs got more sense than we do. They won’t let us through and French pulls rank on them and they’re unimpressed and they tell him, “Go home. We don’t care who you are, go home. You’re not going down to that village.”

SM: Damn.

BP: Yeah. Well, so we head back. “Let’s go up—” “Well, we can’t go back to the club, sir, because they locked the doors as soon as we left.” “Oh.” “I know,” he said, “Let’s go see my old friend So-and-so. He’s in the division BOQ (bachelor officer’s quarters).” “All right.” So we drive up to the division BOQ and this is where all the really nice facilities are. I mean these are like, these are nice buildings. So he says, “Well, I’m going off and find my friend.” So Wish and I stand there and he wanders through this other building in the division BOQ flipping on lights, hollering out, “Tom! Where the hell are you, Tom?” It was like, “Oh, my God.” So Wish said, “You ever been in this place?” I said, “Hell no.” He said, “Neither have I. Let’s take a look.” He said, “Let’s find out what they do at night.” So we start going down the hall and going in rooms, knocking on the door and walking in. Well, we find some guys in bed with girls, and some guys are sleeping like they should. We find one guy who’s got a tub in his room and he’s got a Virginia ham soaking in there. He’s got a glass of water sitting on his nightstand. So I grab the glass of water to take a drink and he kind of pats my hand, this guy is half asleep, “What, what, what the hell is going on?” Wish says, “Well, you God damn REMF!” He’s from Tennessee and he has an accent that you could use a chainsaw on. “You God damn strap-hanging son-of-a-bitch! He’s got a ham!” He says, “I haven’t had a fucking ham since I left home. I think I’ll take a piss on it!” So I hold the glass out and we poor water on the Virginia ham and this guy comes unstuck and we go laughing out the door. Well, unfortunately, between the three of us, we do create quite a disturbance. We get out of there just as the MPs come in, well, at least Wish and I do. I do not know about Colonel French. Because we go back laughing all the way and we go to bed. The next morning we wake up and there are a couple of officers from brigade and some MPs there. They’re looking for us. So they throw us in the back of this jeep and away we go. (Laughs) Now we go to the division headquarters. General Davis is the assistant division commander for something. I suppose support, I don’t know. But I know he’s a brigadier general and I know he was there that day and I know he was really
upset. The reason I can know is that he was upset is because we’re standing at parade rest outside of his aide’s desk and in the inside we could hear him screaming at Colonel French who comes out looking like death warmed over, looks at us rather sheepishly and says, “Um, General Davis wishes to talk you.” (Laughs) So then I hear this scream, “Get those animals in here!” So Wish and I smartly step out, go into the room, report. Stand at parade rest, because he does not tell us, “At ease,” he tells us, “Parade rest.” First he leaves us at attention while he starts describing our character. He tells us in no uncertain terms that not only have we dishonored ourselves as officers, cast aspersions upon Congress’s creating us as gentlemen, but also he might add that the corps deputy commander for the ARVN was woken up by a couple of young lieutenants who wanted to know who the fucking broad was with him and it was his wife. (Laughs) Then it goes on and finally he puts us to parade rest while he commences to rake on our ass for about ten good minutes telling us that we should know better than to let our battalion commander get out of control, like we even knew.

SM: Like you have control over that.

BP: Then tells us that because of our behavior, our battalion is packing up and is going to the field immediately, not tomorrow, not this afternoon, but as soon as we can find everybody, locate them, and get the hell off his base. So we do. The next thing we know we’re back out in the AO (area of operations) and another battalion is brought back to take over for us. So we are heck’s bad boys, believe me. I mean we are (laughs). Of course, everybody is talking about it. We no sooner get back out to the field and the word comes down we’re moving north. So we would have been leaving anyway, come to find out. I mean for all his protestations to the contrary, our brigade commander doesn’t want to leave without his best battalion so we were going to go anyhow.

SM: Okay.

BP: We didn’t find that out for months. We thought that we had been such animals that they had picked us out. But that was really only part of it, we were deploying north. So we pack everything up, go down to English, they start sending C-130s in. Meanwhile all the aviation assets take off for the north except for one brigade which was going to stay behind. We head down at—we had one battalion down at Phan Rang, working down there. Then a couple of other battalions running loose, but the rest
of the division deployed north and we went up to Hue/Phu Bai. We flew into Hue/Phu Bai in these C-130s and as we landed we saw this huge field of helicopters. I mean immense and we thought at first it was 1st Cav, but it wasn’t. They were all Marine Corps helicopters, Alpha and Bravo models, poor things. But they were all Marine Corps helicopters sitting there. We found out later that they couldn’t get parts for them. They had almost as many helicopters as we did, the Marine Corps, but they couldn’t keep them flying because they couldn’t get parts.

SM: For crying out loud.

BP: Pardon?

SM: I said for crying out loud. What a shame.

BP: Yeah. So we land at Hue/Phu Bai and we spend the night there and then we go up to—they decide to open up a division rear. But our brigade is being deployed forward. The 3rd Brigade, which is all 7th Cav battalions, they’re going to stay around Hue. We move up between the DMZ and Quang Tri with the Marines and the 2nd Brigade is still in the rear down south in II Corps. So we go up there and initially we go in to Quang Tri, which is the biggest base south of the DMZ. There’s like five klicks north is Dong Ha and then I think another four or five up is the DMZ itself. So we go in, we integrate with the Marines and they’ve got a whole different lifestyle and a whole different way of doing things. These are also the most pathetic things I’ve ever seen in my life. These guys have—they get the tail end of everything. We come in and we’ve got the best of everything and they look at us and we look at them and I saw these stares of a poor Third-World nation or something. I mean these guys literally had nothing and whenever they go to the field—we watched the Marines go out on patrol. They’ve got all the stuff that we have, they’ve got web gear, they’ve got weapons, they’ve ammunition, and then they’ve got these rucksacks full of food and ammunition. Then they’re carrying mortar rounds and they’re carrying mortars, and they’re carrying base plates, and they’re carrying recoilless rifles, and they’re carrying bazookas and bazooka rounds. They’re all loaded down, they look like draft horses. Then they go wander out for a walk in the woods and we’re looking at that, “Oh, my God. I can’t believe that.” Then while we’re there the Marines start coming up to us and, “Do you guys have any extra radio batteries?” “Well, yeah.” “Do you guys have any extra chow?” “What do you mean?”
“Well, we’re getting ready to go to the field and they only have enough chow for two
days and we’re going to be out a week.” “Um, yeah.”

SM: Oh my.

BP: It was really sad. They just lived like dogs. The first night we’re on the line
we integrate into the line and we tie into the Marine Corps artillery support, never forget
it, Dunbar County. We start taking mortar rounds from a village, oh, about half a klick in
front of the north part of the perimeter that we’re on. So I call for Marine Corps artillery
and it’s denied. I said, “What do you mean it’s denied? We’re getting shot at.” “Well,
it’s our policy we don’t shoot at occupied villages.” So the next day Colonel French
comes by and we say, “Sir, you know that they don’t shoot at villages they take fire
from?” “What?” “Yes, sir.” “I’ll take care of that,” he says. So he gets on the radio and
next thing we know there are two 105 howitzers up there on our part of the line tied in on
land lines. The old man said, “No. You’re going to do just like always do. You’re going
to call on this phone for artillery support. Don’t use this phone, okay?” “Oh, okay.” So
the next night, sure enough, they fire mortars at us. So our artillery FO picks up the
correct phone and the next thing we know this hooch goes up and base plate and then a
basic load of ammo with it. (Laughs) The Marines are freaking out. We want to send a
patrol down there and really kick their ass and they won’t let us. Then there is this huge
donnybrook in the Marines and it ends up where the head of the Marines—I can’t even
think of the guy’s name, I think it was Walt, before he became commandant. He and
Wild Bill Rosser, who is the Army general, they had to create a command for us because
we had such acrimony between the Marines and the Army. I mean they had this policy,
“Do not touch” in the villages, and our policy was, essentially, “Razed earth. If you’re
going to shoot at us, there won’t be a village there.” Well, I mean that’s mindless and I
have to kind of respect what the Marines were trying to do. But it’s the way we thought.
So then the word comes down the, this was the 3rd Marines, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines.
They were supposed to go on up to, geez, I can’t even think of the name now, but it was
right on the DMZ and it was hot spot and it was bad. They were supposed to go up there.
So Colonel French—we always had joint staff meetings. So we’re in this staff meeting
and Colonel French turns to the Marine battalion commander and he says, “Well, how
long is it going to take you to clear Quang Tri?” The Marine Corps battalion commander
said, “Well, if I can get all the trucks we should be out of here in two weeks.” So French looks at him, “Trucks? What? It takes you two weeks to get trucks to move your damn battalion?” You know this is guy who was embarrassed rightfully so. That’s the way we were. We were cocky. Then he said, “Well yeah. You know, the Marine Corps is a small outfit.” “Well,” French says, “You guys know how to do an air assault?” “Well, of course, we know how to do an air assault.” “Well, great,” says French, “Have your whole God damn battalion lined up tomorrow morning. We’ll air assault you. Ride out there and drop you right off on the DMZ.” Then the Marine looked at him, he said, “You’re crazy. Who’s got that kind of helicopters?” Then French just winked at him and said, “Shit, I get all the helicopters I want.” So, sure enough, the next morning they got the whole battalion out of there in about an hour-and-a-half. They couldn’t believe it. We were giving them ammunition and food. They had like a basis of issue. It was like so many rounds per weapon per day. So it was like in a weeks time you get could three round of M-79 ammo for an M-79 grenade launcher. Well, hell we probably dropped that many, you know. So we said, “No, you know, we’re not going to live this. We’ll supply ourselves, you guys—” Well, then they were always short this, short that and we were always giving them stuff. Right before they left I traded two cases of C-rations for a huge box tea. For some reason the Army couldn’t get teabags. We could get coffee up the kazoo, but we could not get teabags and I did not drink coffee. So I was in hog heaven. I traded them these two cases of C’s, they gave me a whole great big huge, like a hundred boxes of teabags. Then they came back and they said, “Do you want some 60-mm mortars?” I said, “Sure.” (Laughs) They gave me five 60-mm mortars and a bunch of ammo. (Laughs) I upgraded significantly. We used them for probably about a month before they went bad. Shit, I was great on direct fire with a mortar, that’s fun. You can do that.

SM: How accurate?

BP: It’s an area fire weapon. (Laughs)

SM: Okay. (Laughs)

BP: Accurate enough. But then we did ops out of Quang Tri until Tet. I was coming up on R&R and I was pretty excited because they had just opened Australia up. I was well overdue for an R&R anyway because my R&R was supposed to start January
31, 1968. All the time we were rooting and tooting around in the area of operations, and I was still company XO at this time. We kept getting documents and we kept seeing things we’d never seen before. Even though we were new to the area, it looked like a buildup to us. Then we overran a little detachment of something and they had a bunch of documents, so we got out document guys, the intel folk out there and they said, “Holy shit, they’re getting ready for an attack! It’s going to be a major assault.” Then on the intelligence you started to see new units that had never shown up before. They have, their system, they have like the 326 A Division who normally operates in that area of I Corps. All of a sudden there was 326 A and elements of 326 B. Well 326 B was a new unit. We had never seen them before. Then things started perking up over at Khe Sanh. The Marines are bouncing between Khe Sanh and the DMZ and they’ve got their hands full. But we keep trying to tell everybody, “You know what? I think Tet, they’re coming.” Couldn’t get anybody to believe us. “No, no, no.” Our S-2 would check with brigade and brigade would check with division and division would check with this guy and that guy and they’d all say the same thing, “No, we always hear this. Don’t worry about it. We heard the same crap last year.” “I don’t think so, but okay.” So, January thirty-first comes along, or, I’m sorry January thirtieth, and—no I was supposed to leave the first of February. The morning of January thirty-first we go out to the field and, of course, even though I’m XO, hell I’m always out in the field. I’d rather be out in the field. I don’t want to be in the rear detachment, there’s nothing there for me. So I pay the troops once a month but that’s about my duties as XO, other than that I’m a hired gun with the command group and I go here, there, and everywhere, back-up platoon leader, this and that. Well, we go—we make an air assault. The brigade scouts have found something, some Indians running along in the river. So we go in there and get into a bit of a firefight and we end up killing eight of them. They’re a medical team and we find a nurse. Apparently we interrupted something because the nurse is naked and the guy with her was naked even though they both were fighting for the bunker. So Colonel French comes out to see what we have and he’s bringing an interpreter team so I hurry up and grab these bodies and I have them hauled up to where we’re going to bring his ship in. I put them in a sexual position, if you understand what I’m saying. Colonel French steps
out almost on top of them and just goes ballistic. (Laughs) “God damn it, Paris, where are
you? You did this! You’re desecrating the dead!” (Laughs)

SM: Oh, God.

BP: “Yes, sir, I am, as a matter of fact. Come on now, don’t you think it was
cute?” “No, get rid of it.” (Laughs) So on the spot they read the documents and there’s a
background rumble that you can hear. There’s trouble in the air and when you make a
living out in field as an infantryman you can smell trouble. We had that uneasy, ugly
feeling and now it’s starting up. All of a sudden things start happening, bam, bam, bam,
 bam, bam. We had probably one of the most imaginative and God-awful things with us.
There weren’t many of them left, but there was a Delta Company of a Chinook battalion
that had been rigged out of the gun company. So if you can imagine anything worse than
a Chinook as a gunship. These things had a couple of a rocket pods, a 20-mm. Well,
anyway, we call it “Guns-a-Go-Go.” The last two “Guns-a-Go-Go” were shot down that
morning because our scouts found, literally, battalions of NVA on the march down the
road to Hue, and from the east coming into Hue, and from the west coming in. They
were, the gunships were making runs, gunships were getting shot down. So they said,
“Okay, we’re going to move you to another location, standby for information. All
company commanders back to Quang Tri.” So the old man takes off and he says,
“You’re in charge.” “Okay.” So we’re sitting around having lunch and we see these six
helicopters in trail formation starting a slow turn about a couple klicks out. We thought,
“Is somebody making an assault?” About that time Ken Hamburger comes up on the
radio and called for Gunport 5 and then that’s me. So I answer, “So what’s up?” He
said, “Get your folks ready. You’re making an assault.” Then I see another six
helicopters coming in behind him. I said, “Where the hell are we going?” “We’ll brief
you on board.” So I get them broke down on how I want them to go in. So even though
I’m acting company commander I go in on the second ship because the platoon leader
will go in on the first one. If something happens we don’t want total chaos. So we take
off in the air and Ken, who’s the flight lead now for this twelve-ship assault, tells me that
we’re going in on a blocking position, there’s been a big donnybrook and all hell is
breaking loose all over South Vietnam, looks like a major attack. They’re going to put us
in a blocking position and he knows nothing about the LZ, and the old man will get back
out to us when he can, and just do the best. He no sooner tells me that than we hear this, crack, crack, crack, crack, crack, and it’s a hot LZ. So we go into a hot LZ and that starts Tet of ’68 really, for us. It was our third air assault of the day. We went in on the east side of Quang Tri City, oh, about six k’s (klicks or kilometers) out along a river line.

There was an NVA battalion that was moving in to assault Quang Tri City. Now Quang Tri had already come under assault and the 1st ARVN Division had a, hell, it was an old French fort. They had a reinforced artillery battery in there, hellacious fighting positions, and they had an Australian team of advisors. They came under fire and then Quang Tri LZ, our base camp, came under fire. I mean we were just all of a sudden knee-deep in shit. Well, we get on the ground and we finally get everybody in and Ken brings the rest of the company in about a half-klick away from us and then they fight their way in. So we link up and I get everybody pulled in and about that time the old man comes on the ground and so he takes over command of the company. Our job is to assault this tree line so he wants me kind of moving with the mortar platoon. Well, in the meantime the platoon I used to command, which was the 1st Platoon, they were in lead and we heard like two mortar rounds. Boom, boom. “Oh, shit. Here we go!” So they hit and one hit in front and one hit in rear of the 1st Platoon because we kept spacing, we were kind of moving in echelon. I tried to get on the radio, the platoon sergeant knew what was about to happen, but it didn’t make any difference. It’s one of those things where your natural tendency is to get down, but what you’ve got to do is you’ve got get up and run like a son-of-a-bitch. He doesn’t even get a chance to finish his message on the radio and they beat the shit out of them. That whole platoon was gone in thirty seconds. I mean it was just a mortar barrage. So I grab a—we had a spare medic and I go up there and the only one still functional is the old platoon medic, Doc Gatz, who was the guy who pulled all the tines out of my feet. So he and I start working on casualties, pulling them out of there, getting everybody out. In the meantime the old man, he is able to get some artillery fire on the, we can see on the river line where they’re at. He gets some artillery fire and that kind of chases them off so we pull the casualties back and the old man has me set up an LZ. So we get casualties back there and we’re all working on them. Hell, I’m working on them, Doc is working on them. Anybody who’s half-ass wounded who can still something, we’re all doing tourniquets and this and that. We’ve got, oh I don’t
know, hell, twenty wounded maybe twenty-five. I can’t really remember anymore. But
Doc was doing a tracheotomy, which was interesting. Then it all kind of jumbles
together, I’m not sure what happened. I know later on we did get a little resupply, but we
were critical. We were down to the point of where everybody had like five, six rounds
and don’t shoot unless you really have to. But what was kind of neat was we had—when
we moved north they decided to put Army snipers out with the Army, which we had
never had before. So we had sent a guy to sniper school, well he came back on the last
resupply ship. So he’s got an M-14 and a Starlite scope. Well, this is good shit. We had
Starlite scopes, but we never had them attached to rifles, well he did. So he spent the
whole night knocking dinks off at about three hundred yards because they’re walking
around. We couldn’t get any more artillery because the artillery was firing final
protective fires and beehive rounds, which is the modern version of canister, up on Quang
Tri because they were getting hit pretty hard. Nothing was flying, everything had either
been hit or, you know, they couldn’t get gas, POL (petroleum, oils, and lubricants) dump
went up. So it was just, you know, you were on your own. Oh, I don’t know, I really
don’t know how long it went on, but I missed my R&R. I know that. The only thing that
comes to me are snippets. We had captured a prisoner and this guy, he was a tough guy.
He was constantly yammering and yammering and yammering. You know, I’d just tell
him, “Shut up, shut up.” He’d keep talking and keep talking. So I’m sitting there and
I’m smoking a cigarette and he’s talking. Finally I looked at him and I just put my finger
up to my lips and he made some smart-ass remark and I whipped out my .45 and I made
sure it was right by his ear and torched off a round. (Laughs)

SM: Oh!

BP: I grabbed him by the hair and once more went, “Shh.” (Laughs) He got the
message.

SM: Um-hm.

BP: Then the other thing that stands out is we finally were getting casualties out
and there were a couple of ships flying and a herd of water buffalo comes by with a kid, a
very nervous kid. So I’m watching and I’m watching and this kid—you know normally
when they take the water buffalo out they are pretty relaxed and this kid was, he was
nervous as a whore in church. So I started watching him and I finally called one of the
RTOs for the old man over and I said, “Do you see anything odd about that herd of
buffalo?” He looked at them and he said, “Well, they seem pretty nervous.” I said, “No,
look at them for a minute.” He said, “Well, I’ll be a son-of-a-bitch!” I said, “Yeah.
Don’t you find it odd that some of those water buffalo have six legs?” (Laughs) I walked
over and I got the nearest platoon and I said, “Bring some machine guns over here and
give me some M-79s.” We killed off about five water buffalo and four NVA who were
trying to E&E (escape and evade) out of the area. What happened was we had broken
this battalion’s hump but the only thing that really made it occur for us was when things
were at the crucial point on the first day and we were really sucking water. We couldn’t
get any artillery; we couldn’t get anything. Aerial rocket artillery, everything had
been priority to Hue because the Citadel had been taken over. We couldn’t get any fire
support at all and it was an enemy heavy weapons company. They were kicking our ass.
We couldn’t get at them. We didn’t have anything that would reach them. It was a real
cloudy day because the monsoons were starting up in I Corps. All of a sudden the FAC
(forward air controller) starts yelling out, or the RTO, the artillery forward observer, I’m
sorry. He starts yelling and hollering, “Yeah, yeah!” I said, “What?” By the way, this is
an aside, this guy was the backup at Florida State University to Fred Belitnikoff when he
played football. That’s your trivia for the second. Anyway, he says, “There are two F-
100s that had to abort a mission over the North. They want to know if we need any help.”
So they put these F-100s on that heavy weapons company, the mortars. I’ve never seen
anything like it. Base plates went up seventy-five, a hundred feet up in the air. These are
82-mm base plates, these are not light. I mean, they brought smoke on those bastards.
Then once they were broken then we got in among them and they broke contact. But
what they did was they withdrew right into Delta Company, 1st of the 5th who was in a
blocking position. Then they finished making mincemeat out of them. We found out
later it was like the K-8 Battalion or something of the 326th B. They just became a non-
factor. We broke their hump. Finally they said, “Okay, get out and try and get your
R&R.” So what I thought was going to happen was I would go to Australia because it
was five nights and what, four-and-a-half, five days. Five nights, five days. I got down
to the R&R center, finally, down at Cam Ranh Bay and they said, “Well, you’re late so
we’ll send you over, but you can only have four days.” I said, “Why kind of shit is that?”
“Well, that’s the way it is.” So the next thing I know, I’m on a jet and one of our brigade scout pilots was also going on R&R. He also had been held up so we’re getting four days instead of five-and-a-half. So we go down to Australia and we land at Sydney. We’re like the third group of Americans to land in Sydney. So the Australian customs official comes on the airplane and briefs us after the R&R people come on the airplane and brief us. They say, “These people don’t know much about you. They’re a little leery about having you here. They’re very welcoming, but they got some odd rules. Just smile and we’ll get you over to the R&R center just as soon as we can.” “Okay.” So then the customs official comes on, “If you’re carrying anything we want to see it and every third person is going to be searched.” I thought, “Fine. I don’t care.” So they count me off coming through the line. “Okay, Lieutenant.” “All right.” So I go in this room and there are two customs officers in there, one male, one female. He says, “Do you have anything?” “No.” He pats me down and he said, “Are you carrying anything? Any Playboy magazines, any drugs?” “No.” He says, “Okay. Well, we’re almost done, go ahead and strip.” I said, “What?” He says, “Uh, that’s a requirement. We strip search every third person.” I said, “Welcome to fucking Australia.” I said, “I’d be happy to strip, but you need to understand where I live in Vietnam, we don’t have underwear out there and I’m not stripping in front of this female.” “Oh, well, okay.” So she hustles on out of there. So okay he strip searches me and then we go over to the R&R center and then they tell us the good news, “You’ve got to rent civilian clothes. You cannot be here in uniform. They don’t want you in uniform. All American personnel, whether you’re at the embassy or whether you’re on R&R you will wear civilian clothes.” “Oh, okay.” So we go downstairs, oddly enough they just happened to have a tailor shop right there in the hotel and they will rent you clothes. So we rent clothes and then they say, “Okay, because you’re American servicemen and they care about you here in Sydney, all these bars are having parties for you and it starts at five o’clock.” “Okay.” So we take off out the door and I’m pissed anyway. Welcome to Australia. You’ve got to strip search me? So, we ended up at a place called the Whiskey-a-Go-Go. It had never occurred to me that I have not been in civilization for eight months. Well, I was home on emergency leave, I take that back. But it’s been a while and I see my first miniskirt. I had never seen a miniskirt. I just stopped dead. It was like, “Wow, a miniskirt, and legs, and everything.”
So I took a picture of this girl walking up the street in her miniskirt. It was like, “Whoa!”

So we went to this bar and drinks were free for servicemen. I caused a riot at the door because of a very attractive—I have no idea if she was attractive or not, she was certainly stunning to me. She was in a kind of a cocktail dress with a low-cut neckline, not anything scandalous. She’s a very attractive girl and I didn’t know whether she really had a face because I was reading her nametag over and over and over. She finally lifted my head, “Darling, did you just want to go in or do you want to stand here and look? Because if you want to stand here and look why don’t you get off to the side so your mates can get in?” (Laughs) I said, “Oh, okay I’ll go in.” It was incredible. For two hours you could drink for free. Then all these girls were there. Oh, my! I actually went to the Sydney Zoo. They have a wonderful zoo there. I went out to Manley Island, I think that was the name of it. First ride in an airboat, never been in an airboat before. I just had a great time. At the end of four days, zip! I was back in Vietnam. After that they came down and they said, “Well, okay. You’ve had enough field time. Colonel French wants you up as the S-3 air. So I became the S-3 air and I spent a lot more time then with the 229th B Company, over there drinking with them because they had beer. That was cool. I really got close to those guys. Then we started planning for the assault into the—well, first we went to Khe Sanh. My company was short platoon leaders, so for the relief of Khe Sanh I asked them if I could go back out to the field and just be an extra officer. So they said, “Sure, go ahead.” So I went out. We went in and made an air assault right immediately after a B-52 strike, which was incredible. I have never in my life had an experience like that. Standing in the door at short final, waiting to step off of one of our helicopters into an area that has just had, I don’t know, what, forty or fifty 500-hundred pound bombs walked across it. It ended up we had landed right in the middle of a division supply dump for the NVA. It was like stepping on ants. We just went in there and they were all staggering around, those few who had survived. We just had a field day. Then we went down and we retook the Lang Vei Special Forces Camp which had been overrun by tanks the day after Tet. We were the first Americans in there and we—the Air Force had destroyed some tanks and the Special Forces, before they got killed off, they had destroyed some tanks. We found some incredible things there. An NCO and then a couple of the MIKE Force (Mobile Strike Force) guys had had a 106-
gun jeep on the perimeter and they had busted two tanks. There were a bunch of shell
casings; they had put up a hell of a fight. Of course, there were no dead NVA around
there. They had all been carried off. But we just found all kinds of incredible things.
They had put up a hell of fight. When we got to the team house all the rest of the
Americans were in there dead and there was a stack of LAW (light anti-tank weapon),
you know the LAW shoulder-fire rocket?

SM: Yes.

BP: There was a stack of casings there by this dead captain. I mean these guys
had put up a fight.

SM: Um-hm.

BP: Probably two, three inches of shell casings in the bottom of the bunker. It
was something. I’d never seen anything like it in my like. It may have been the Alamo
for them, but they made somebody pay heavily.

SM: Um-hm.

BP: Then I went on back up and we started planning the assault into the A Shau
Valley after we relieved the Marines at Khe Sanh. Then I—oh, I did read in Stars and
Stripes afterwards that the Marines fought their way out and linked up with us on the
highway. (Laughs) I happened to know the 2nd Brigade air assaulted right up to the
perimeter. They had been dropping C-ration cases and beer with Cav patches on them,
1st Cav patches. You know that’s that big patch. Their officers were so pissed they
wouldn’t let them eat the food or drink the beer but, of course they did, when their backs
were turned. (Laughs)

SM: Um-hm.

BP: We went into the South and then we started planning the division assault into
the A Shau Valley. The A Shau Valley was Indian country totally. It was the major
high-speed access route for the NVA into I Corps. Khe Sanh had had several Special
Forces camps there. They’d all been overrun and taken by the NVA in 1966. We were
going to go in, the 1st Brigade, my brigade, we were going to air assault in and take the A
Luoi Airstrip which was the biggest airstrip. It was capable of handling a C-130. So we
built this thing as a total aviation supportive assault, all the way from the assault
helicopters to the C-130s bringing in artillery ammo, bulldozers, 155s. You name it, we
had all this stuff lined up in sequence. So it was kind of like the Airborne invasion of Normandy, you’re on a time schedule and everything happens as such-and-such and at such-and-such. So there’s this huge long tail of aircraft waiting to go and finally about two days before—oh, and all of our reconnaissance elements were taking flak. So the little Bell helicopters that were scouts, they were taking flak if they went up high. The Hueys, the Air Force, everybody was taking flak, 57-mm and 37-mm radar controlled. So being the Army we decided, “Hell, we’re going nap-of-the-earth. We’re not putting up with that shit.” But then, as I had said, the monsoons had been kicking up a rumpus and so two days before the assault we received intelligence that showed there were a lot of 37-mm had been recently installed within, oh, about a three-kilometer area of the proposed LZ on A Luoi Airstrip. The Air Force started bombing those and the division commander changed the plans. He decided at the last minute—well not the last minute—but that they would put the 3rd Brigade, which is the three battalions of the 7th Cav, in on what was called the Tiger Mountains, right along the Laotian border as a block. He figured, and rightfully so, if he did that it would take the pressure—it basically would maneuver the enemy out of the area because they wouldn’t get resupplied.

SM: Okay.

BP: So we changed everything. We went with a different scenario, 1st Brigade was to go the third day and 3rd Brigade into the Tiger Mountains, they were going to assault in on the nineteenth of April 1968. So the were on a weather hold, so everybody is waiting, everybody is waiting and, of course, we’re all sitting back there the plan has been made and there is nothing to do. So, I’m sitting around battalion headquarters listening to the aviation radio and everything is a wait, everything is a wait. They’ve got, hell, two increments of forty helicopters apiece waiting to air assault the troops in. They’ve got Chinooks standing by to bring in artillery. They’ve got a whole field full of gunships, B-models, C-models, Cobras. Everybody is waiting, waiting, waiting. The Air Force is monitoring the weather over the A Shau Valley. Finally there’s a break in the clouds. He calls it back, there’s about a one-mile break and it looks like the Air Force meteorologists say, “That should hold.” That it’s going to start breaking up over the valley. So they launch the first forty-ship assault and this is the one that the guys from the 229th went on. Everybody was on that one.
BP: So they launch and we’re listening to it on the radio. They’d probably been
gone twenty minutes and it’s about a forty-minute flight and they’re climbing up to ten
thousand feet because they’ve got to come down through this hole. This is not the way
we anticipated it would go, but what the hell? War is war. All of a sudden some pilot
calls lead and says, “Where are the gunships?” This major from 11th Aviation Group
who was functioning as the flight leader for all the lift aircraft had forgotten to call them
and tell them to launch. So there is this hurried scramble to get the gunships launched
and get them off and join up. Well, what happens is that the gunships are just pulling up
to the hole at ten thousand feet because the lift has already started down. They’re at ten
thousand feet descending on about a mile-and-a-half, two-mile-wide hole in the clouds.
I’m sure John Pierce has talked to you, or somebody has, about this assault. It went bad
real quick. Then it gets real garbled and you can tell this is terrible. They’re taking flak
starting about six thousand feet. They’re descending down, they’ve got loads of troops.
So then we don’t hear it anymore. So I jump in this jeep and I go racing over to the 229th
rear detachment—well, actually it’s not the rear. I go over to their area and I listen to the
rest of the assault on the radio. The guys over there are just in shock because ships are
going down left and right. So, they finally come back, they get whatever lift they can get
in they get in. Chinooks are shot down hauling the artillery. A Crane, a CH-54 Flying
Crane gets shot down carrying a 155 howitzer. It’s bad; it is really, really bad. They
come in and they refuel, they shut down and these guys are white. I’ve never seen it. It
had never occurred to me in all my time in the infantry that these pilots were as
vulnerable as I discovered that day. It never occurred to me that my friends would die
like that and they did. Four of them went that day and then two the next day.

SM: Oh, my.

BP: It just broke my heart. All the fighting and everything, the affect it had on
me, to honest with you I don’t know because, you know, you kind of numb out about that
stuff. But on the nineteenth of April, I probably will remember that more than except for
the day I got shot down in my second tour. It just, it was like a blow to the chest and it
took me so long to recover. I just felt so sorry for those guys, I wanted to just hold to
them. It was so bad. But they made it happen and then I couldn’t take it anymore, I went
to the battalion commander and I said, “I just can’t sit and here and watch this war. I’m not cut out that way. I got to go.” He said, “You know, you’re out of your mind.”

Colonel French had left. His parting gift to me, his command time was up, his parting gift was to make me S-3 Air so I wouldn’t get hurt. But I went to the battalion commander, the new one, and I said, “I got to get back out to the field.” He said, “You’re crazy, it’s over. Go home. You know, just sit it out. You got what, two months, to go?”

I said, “No, I can’t do that.” So he said, “Well, if your really bound and determined, go ahead and go.” So I did. I went down and saw the B Company commander and he said, “Look, the only guy who is more senior to you in this company is me.” He said, “If you want a platoon, I got an XO that you outrank by six months. How are you going to feel about that?” I said, “I don’t give a shit. Just, you know, I just want my platoon back.”

So I went back out to the field. But I think people knew, you know. Coming back and I was pay officer the next month, for the company. I’m back in the rear and I hear this announcement. Tom Beasley and I are back. He’s back to get the pay for Headquarters Company and I back to get the pay for B Company. We’re drinking and we hear on the radio a new policy announced, that if you have a member of your immediate family coming over to Vietnam they can either hold that family member up or they’ll send you home early. My ears popped up because Tom was leaving country ten days before I was and I wanted to go with him because we were good friends. I said, “You know what? I could go home with you.” He just looked at me. He said, “You’re crazy.” I said, “No! How are they going to know? What are they going to do, check?” He said, “Well, you can’t do that.” I said, “Bullshit, come on. I’ll get a drop and I’ll go home with you.” So he said, “I can’t believe you.” I said, “Come on, let’s go down.” So we went to battalion, they called brigade, brigade said, “We don’t anything about it. You’re going to have to talk to division.” I said, “Fine.” We jump in a jeep, we go down to division. It’s obvious we’re field troopers, you know. We walk in and this guy kind of looks at me like, “Holy shit.” You know, “Who let the dogs out?” So he says, “Can we help you?”

We say, “Yeah, we’re looking for the G-1.” He says, “That’s me.” I said, “My brother is coming over.” I could hear Tom behind me go, “Oh, my God!” (Laughs) He said, “Oh.” I said, “Yes, sir. I hear on the radio you’ve got a new policy. If an immediate family member is coming over,” I said, “My brother is coming over the middle of June.”
He said, “Well, is he Army?” I said, “No, sir. He’s Navy. He’s a pilot. He’s on the carrier Ranger.” I’m making this up as I go, as fast as I can. (Laughs) He says, “Well, yeah, I think that’s policy. But,” he said, “Hell, I don’t know. Let me check.” So he calls I Corps, or I don’t know, 1st Field whatever they are. They said, “Yeah, that’s policy.” So he said, “Well, I got him right here.” Wish is behind me, “God damn. I can’t believe this.” “Shh. Wish, shut up. We’ll go home together.” So he said, “Yup,” he said, “What’s your brother’s name?” I gave him my brother’s name, “Robert Dickson Paris. Lieutenant JG (junior grade).” He said, “Oh, he’s in the Navy. No, I’ve got not way of checking.” He said, “Hell, they just announced the policy yesterday. How would this kid know?” They said, “Well, who cuts the orders?” “Oh, well hell yes I can cut the orders.” “Okay thanks a lot, bud.” He hangs up and he says, “When do you want to go home, now?” (Laughs) This is like early May. I said, “No shit, I can’t go home now, sir. You know he’s not due until the middle of June.” I said, “How about the fourth of June?” Right behind me I hear Tom go, “Ugh!” I got it wrong, he was leaving the sixth. I had miscounted the days. So he said, “Okay, fourth of June.” He said, “Give me your name and your service number.” He said, “You’ll have the orders within a week.” We walked out and I was feeling happy. I didn’t really realize until we got out the door and Wish told me that I had the date wrong. That’s why he flinched. “God damn! You’re going home before I do, and you lied to the man!” I said, “Yes.” I said, “Wish, I didn’t go to West Point. I’m not really a very good officer at all.” (Laughs) “Congress had to meet in secret session and there was a closed vote to make me and officer and gentleman.” So then I went back out to the field and then I was back at the rear detachment and Wish came up to me and he said, “Hey, why don’t we take a leave?” I said, “Hell, I don’t want to take a leave.” He said, “Yeah, come on. We’ll take a leave.” I said, “Where the hell do I want to go?” He said, “Well, let’s go over to Hong Kong. We’ll get some girls.” I said, “I do not want to go Hong Kong and get some girls.” “Come on. It’ll do you good.” So he talks me into it. “We’ll take a seven-day leave; we’ll go to Hong Kong.” I said, “Fine. We’ll go to Hong Kong, you get the girls, I’ll drink.” “Okay, that’s a good idea.” So we go down to Cam Ranh Bay and because you’re on leave, not R&R, it’s space available and they’ve got nothing going to Hong Kong. So, it’s like, “Well, when’s the next thing going?” “Well, not for three days.”
Oh, God damn, I’m not going to sit around here for three days. So I said, “Wish, why don’t we go see mother at Tachikawa, Japan?” “Your mother?” “Yeah,” I said, “Hell, let’s see if we can get a hop to Japan. We’ll go over there. At least we’ll eat decent, get something to drink. They may have women over there, you never know.” “All right.”
So we check. Yup, he’s got a C-130 going to Japan in about two hours. So we ride in the back on top of the cargo all the way over to Japan. We land at Tachikawa, I call my mother, wake her up at six o’clock in the morning. She said, “Who is this?” “Mom, it’s Bill.” “Well, what are you doing here?” “Well, hell,” I said, “I came to see you and I brought a friend.” “Well, I’ll be right down to get you. Are you at the airfield?” “Yeah. I just flew in from Vietnam.” So she came down and got us and it was great. Wish was a little, you know, this wasn’t quite what he had in mind but—we did want to get some clothes made for us. They had some great tailors in Japan. So we go over to this tailor shop. My mom said, “This is where everybody goes.” So we get a suit and some shirts and the guy, he’s an American who got a discharge in Japan. He’s working for this tailor shop. He says—you know, because Wish is saying, “Well where in the hell are the women around here?” This guy tells him, “Well, you’ve got to go to the Yokota officer’s club because that’s where all the American stuff hangs out.” “All right, we’re going.” I said, “Wish, why don’t you go by yourself?” “No! Come on God damn it.” So he drags me over to the Yokota officer’s club and that’s the night I met my wife. (Laughs) Wish has all these connections. He went to West Point with the Yokota Airbase commander’s son. So they’re having a big party. Wish and I walk in there in our khakis and he ends up at the head table and so I’m just drinking minding my own business. I go to the bathroom, I come back and all of a sudden he’s sitting in a booth with these two women. One of whom happens to be Joan. So, hell, this is the twenty-fifth of May and I don’t really have to be back to Vietnam except to leave because I’ve already cleared the company and everything. So at the end of a week Joan and I are seeing each other every night and falling in love. So Wish gets ready to get on a plane to go back to Vietnam and I said, “Well, I think I’ll stay a couple days.” He said, “You can’t do that.” I said, “Wish, who except for the rear detachment knows that I’m even, you know, not back?” I said, “Hell, you know, when I get back, all I got to do is walk over and get my ticket.” “Well, God damn!” So we put Wish on a plane. I spent two extra days. Then I leave, I
go back to Vietnam, walk over to the rear detachment and check into leave. Who should I meet but a couple of pilots from the 229th? Ron Gutwein, who’s the guy who almost killed me back in September when we went for lunch in An Khe, Walt Levering, who you met, and a couple of other guys. We go over to the Can-Do Club and get—well, we did it again. It’s disgusting. I’m not proud of myself but some—one of the ARA (aerial rocket artillery) pilots was going on R&R and he was so proud he had just got promoted to major. So he bought us a couple drinks and Gutwein who is—he can also get me into lots of trouble very quickly. We look at that major’s collars and the reason we were looking was because we had just cut each other’s collars off and ate it.

SM: Okay.

BP: I guess alcohol is a factor.

SM: Yes.

BP: So we’re looking at this and he’s looking at us saying, “Guys, this is my only set of jungle fatigues. Please don’t do—.” Well, we went across the table after him. Wrestling around on the floor with knives we finally cut his collars off because he’s terrified we’re going to kill him, which maybe, I don’t know. (Laughs) Cut both his collars off and eat it. Well, at about that time the club manager has had enough, he calls the MPs, we haul ass out the back door. It’s pretty late at night anyway. We get up the next morning and the only place that we have to eat is the division rear mess hall.

SM: Um-hm.

BP: So we get up and we frankly looked like shit: little superficial cuts, no collars, sweat, beer, I mean it’s not a pretty sight. So we decide to go over to the mess hall not realizing how we look, quite frankly. (Laughs) We get in, sit down, “Sitch, hut!” We all jumped to attention, General Davis comes on, my old friend. He sits at the head table. Now I’m sure General Davis probably does not recognize me, I certainly recognize him. But once again there I am in the presence of General Davis and I’m not happy and we’re just drinking coffee because everything else hurts, coffee and juice. In a very loud voice, all of a sudden we hear some colonel sitting next to him, “You know, sir, there was an incident at the Can-Do Club last night.” General Davis in an equally loud voice said, “Yes. I understand some alleged officers were creating a disturbance, cutting off collars.” Well, we didn’t wait, we hauled ass out the door as fast as we could go. We ran
to the nearest supply room. I still don’t know what unit it was or where but we paid some
supply sergeant five bucks to give us new jungle fatigue jackets and then we ran over and
got some insignia sewed on it and then we left the next day for Cam Ranh Bay. One little
P.S. to the end of that first tour. I had gone through OCS, and ahead of me one month
was a guy named Donny Smith, a heck of a nice guy. I had run into him somewhere, I
forget where up in I Corps. He had been in a Special Forces MIKE Force outfit. So it
was like old home week and it was like, “How you been?” We caught up on old times.
He said, “I’m extending and I’m going to SOG (Studies and Observation Group).” I said,
“Well, what the heck is that?” He said, “Well SOG, you know, they’re across the border
types, hush hush, working North Vietnam. Why don’t you come with me?” So I said,
“Hey, that sounds like fun.” So I extended. Well, what I didn’t realize was you’ve got to
have clearance, clearance, clearance, and clearance to get into SOG. So, since he’s a
month ahead of me and he’s already in SF he gets clearance. So, we were going to go
Rio de Janeiro and so he takes off for Rio, I’m still waiting for clearance. So by the time
I come back from Japan, now I’m in love I forgot all about it. So I’m in Cam Ranh Bay
and they say, “Lieutenant Paris, you got a phone call in the orderly room.” So I go to the
orderly room and it’s Captain Rosenbloom, the S-1 from our battalion who was a first
lieutenant when I joined the battalion a year before. He’s the guy that told me, “If you’re
a reserve officer you’re coming in a year because, Bill, I’m not back here because I want
to be.” So I said, “Yeah, you know, Rosie what’s up?” He said, “Did you file an
extension?” “Yeah.” “For 5th Special Forces Group?” “Yeah.” “Well, it just came
through.” I thought, “Oh, no.” I had just found out like the day before I went to Japan
that Donny Smith never came back from his first operation up North. So I mean all the
magic is gone for me. Plus, I’m ready to go home now, you know. Then all of a sudden
he said, “You’re breaking up I can’t hear you. Did you—hello? Is Lieutenant Paris
there? I have a set of orders,” then real quietly he says, “Do you want this shit or should I
tear them up?” Then I said, “I can’t hear you?” “Tear them up, I’m leaving.” Then he
said, “Have fun, bye.” (Laughs) So I think I dodged a bullet on that one. We left, we
came back to the States together, Gutwein, Levering, a guy named Mike Davidson and
myself. I saw Levering on my second tour but that’s a whole story.
SM: Okay. Hey we’ve been talking for over an hour, almost an hour-and-a-half, you want to take a break?
BP: Oh, if you’re game I am. I can take a drink of water and press on. Whatever you want.
SM: Well, let’s go ahead and take a break.
BP: Um-hm.
SM: Is that—I’ve got an appointment here in about ten minutes and let me see. I’m going to pull up my calendar and see if I can’t—
BP: The war is going slow.
SM: Well, we’re near the end of—well we’re getting to your next—
BP: Second tour.
SM: —next tour, your second tour.
BP: That’ll go faster because I don’t remember much.
SM: Okay.
BP: I mean it. I blocked a lot.
SM: What’s your schedule like, let’s see here.
BP: I’m open.
SM: How about Wednesday afternoon?
BP: That’s fine. Are you talking the thirteenth?
SM: Correct. There is an hour’s difference between us, right? It’s eleven, it’s 10:54 your time now, or about 10:55?
BP: Yep.
SM: Okay. Let’s say 12:30 your time, is that all right?
BP: Yeah, that’s fine.
SM: Excellent. All right—
BP: I’m up at five in the morning, four your time.
SM: Right. I would say a morning interview but someone else has got the interview room reserved and so they’ll be using our equipment and all that kind of stuff.
BP: Yeah, no that’s fine.
SM: Okay, great! All right 1:30 on Wednesday, or excuse me, 12:30 your time, 1:30 my time Wednesday.
BP: Okay.

SM: All right thank you, sir.

BP: All right, Steve.

SM: Bye.

BP: Bye.
SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Bill Paris on the
thirteenth of August, 2003, approximately 1:35 Lubbock time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas,
and Mr. Paris is in South Dakota. Sir, why don’t we go ahead and continue our
discussion of Tet? You indicated that you wanted to—you made an observation upon
your return to the United States regarding Tet. So if you would, just go ahead and
discuss that.
BP: Yeah, it was incredible the difference between how the troops over in
Vietnam felt about Tet of ’68 and how it was perceived back home. We felt like we had
done a good thing. We had—for all intents and purposes we wiped out the Viet Cong.
There was never again, ever seen, a fighting unit of the VC which were the first. It was a
tactical disaster for the North Vietnamese. I mean that—they came out of Tet in 1968
with absolutely nothing. They had gotten tremendous losses, they had lost phenomenal
equipment, which they could replace easier than the people. But it had turned out to be a
crushing defeat for them and a true a miscalculation for Giap. However, oddly enough
back in the United States, you know I don’t know if people weren’t paying attention or
what, because I hadn’t in the States much from the period of 1962 to ’68. I was very out
of touch and when I got home I was stunned to learn that people thought that it was a
defeat. I honestly, I don’t think I quite ever recovered because nobody was asking us
what we thought, they just essentially told us. You know, well, you know we lost. Well,
we didn’t and you would try and tell them the facts and they didn’t want to hear it.
Obviously what was going on was that they had suddenly woken up looked around and
the war was still going on and they had decided, “Well, that sucks.” There were all these
protectors and all this nonsense going on. It was very disconcerting. I felt like I had,
when I got back to the United States, I really felt like I had landed on a strange alien
planet. Even my own family, for the most part, didn’t particularly want to talk about it.
They were, you know, yeah they supported me but this was wrong, that was wrong. The
election was coming up, the presidential election of 1968. Nixon had decided to run and
there was all the usual—even before Watergate there’s always a lot of nonsense going
about Nixon this, Nixon that. But I just, I couldn’t quite comprehend what the hell they were reacting to and it made me quite angry, separated me—I think even further drove a wedge between me and the rest of society. It sort of set that experience then in concrete of being a very strange, isolated one that sort of went through by yourself while the rest of the country just pressed on with whatever it was they doing. They had their mind made up that, you know, this was a losing proposition and to say it hurt is, I think to—

you just can’t find an adjective to describe what it’s like to come out of fighting for your life and trying to do things that you thought that this country was behind and then find out that, frankly, except for a certain amount of the population, nobody really gave a rat’s ass. They were going on with life as usual and it was a strange situation anyway in that people who normally would not go to college went to college just to hide from the draft because they were exempt as long you were in college. So all these games were going on. Colleges were playing the game, kids were playing the game, parents were playing the game. What was happening was the guys who were getting drafted were either those with enough personal integrity to not want play a game or those who frankly couldn’t afford to hide, didn’t have the assets and the resources. So it’s that point—I was sent back to Ft. Benning, Georgia to teach at the infantry school—that I honestly think that I had no more illusions about what we were doing over there. It made no difference what we were doing over there people didn’t give a rat’s ass. If people don’t give a rat’s ass—and my personal feeling was, “Well, why the hell are we over there?” You know and what are you going to do? Are you just going to pull out? Of course some, particularly Democratic contenders for the nomination were saying, “Yeah, that’s what we’re going to do.” There was another thing that was going on that deeply concerned me, it bothered an awful lot, and that was the assassination of Martin Luther King in March of ’68. We were—this was right about the time we were Khe Sanh and it really caught us by surprise. “What are they doing over there?” I mean we knew that they were having riots. We knew that cities were burning at times. A lot of that we figured, at least I did, I figured it was just a residual, sort of a period of adjustment with the civil rights issues from the early ’60s. People were getting accustomed to being able to vote, being able to speak. A lot of what they were doing in so far as knocking down the Jim Crow laws, I not only supported I thought it was a damn good idea. But between March of 1968, right
after Tet and now in June, just almost immediately after I got back, Bobby Kennedy was assassinated. I was sort of flirting with the idea of backing Kennedy because, I don’t know, I hadn’t really thought about it much. I never liked his brother but I always thought Bobby probably had a little more sense. But he was assassinated and I thought, “My God, what’s going on in this world? I really don’t understand it. I mean we’re rioting, we’re looting, we’re shooting politicians, we’re shooting people we don’t like. Every day guys are dying over in a country that nobody seems to care about. What sort of madness is going on?” It just was—I felt like “Alice through the Looking Glass” or Alice in the book, *Through the Looking Glass*, by Lewis Carroll. It really was a blow and one I quite honestly never expected, never understood, it just—I felt so alone and isolated after that, like somehow it was my war nobody else’s.

SM: When did you leave after your first tour?

BP: I left fifth of June 1968.

SM: Okay, of course, before that President Johnson had made his decision, it was back in March, in fact, that he was not going to seek re-election.

BP: Yes.

SM: How quickly did you hear about that and what did you think, how did it affect your unit and your operations, your morale?

BP: Well, we heard about it fairly soon. I’d say within a week. The reaction was “Good.” You know, “Who needs him? He obviously has no idea what to do over there.” But, I honestly, in answer to your question, I don’t think it impacted much of anything.

SM: Well, okay, you’ve—that’s an interesting point. He didn’t apparently know what to do there. While you were there and I guess as you were ending your time there in June of ’68, what did you think about how the US had been conducting the war and in particular the tactics and the strategies?

BP: I thought it was incredibly stupid. I always used to use the analogy, especially after I got back and people would say, “Well, what’s it like over there?” I would say, “Well, it’s like being like being by a nest fire ants. You can’t go too close to him, but you can sit there and wait till one of them comes close enough that you can hit him with a ball-peen hammer. As long as you can sit there you can kill all the ants you can reach, but you can’t go to the nest and you can’t do anything about it. So if the ants
don’t want to come over, you can’t kill them. But your job is just to sit there and wait for the ants.” That’s the way I always felt. I thought it was totally mindless what we were doing. It was a not a military mission to go over there and fight for the status quo. There’s nothing in the book. I mean there’s nothing in any tactical or strategical manual that says, “You take five-hundred thousand American fighting men and then you sit and you wait or you go look in a certain area, but you don’t go look where they come from. You don’t go to the nest and clean them out.” There really wasn’t much strategy to that war it was just sort of like Brer Rabbit slapping the tar baby. There we were and nobody ever thought to maybe just go, you know, do away with it and go home. So there we were. We were stuck to the tactics we had used. The positive stuff I felt was that Westmoreland also left about the same time I did. They called him back to the States and he was kicked upstairs and everybody knew it and they all put their best face on it. But there was no doubt in anybody’s mind that he was being made chief of staff of the Army because they wanted fresh blood over there. You know it was his idea to go out on these big sweeps and kill lots of guys like they had done in Korea. The only difference was, you know, we didn’t do that for four, five, six, seven years. We had some other thoughts on our mind. They just—I felt like they were stuck and I felt like I was stuck because I was going to keep on going back every twelve months, like it or not, until I either got killed or somebody came up with an idea of how to stop the thing and it was about that time after I got back and after Kennedy’s assassination and I started looking around and I thought, “We need to get somebody in there who knows what the hell he’s doing.” The people that were running, Eugene McCarthy and Hubert Humphrey, and even Bobby Kennedy after I got back to the States and started reading the things he was saying, everybody just wanted to pick up and go home which is a technique but I think at that time there were like twenty-seven thousand Americans had been killed over there and I thought to myself, “Bullshit, pal.” You know, “You better come up with a better idea than that otherwise that’s just wasting my time and a whole bunch of good men are dead for nothing. So you better give us a little more than that.” My job back at Fort Benning was I had to teach leadership, which was kind of interesting. Fort Benning was in quite of bit of chaos. They had a lot of—they had, oh my gosh, five full battalions turning out officer candidates to be 2nd lieutenants. They had twelve companies, no more than that,
they had four battalions, yeah, sixteen companies turning out instant, what we used to “shake’n’bake” NCOs. We would take these guys who weren’t quite up to officer candidate standards, put them in what they would call a NCO prep and put them through a pretty intensive six-week program of leadership, tactics, et cetera. Then the top ten percent of the class could E-6 and then the next, I think, thirty percent could get E-5 and the rest of them came out E-4s. What they were doing was they were trying to build and NCO corps because they killed and wounded most of the infantry NCOs off. They just didn’t have enough. So I split my time between teaching leadership to officer candidates, ROTC, and the NCO courses for about six months. In the meantime I thought I might like to stay in the United States just a month or two longer so—I wanted to go to flight school anyway. I put in for flight school and I got orders and then in December of ’68 I left, took a leave. Joan came back from Japan we ended up getting married, we didn’t know we were going to but we did. Then she went back to Japan and I went on to flight school the first week of January.

SM: Well, before we talk about flight school, let me ask a few follow-up questions regarding your initial time in Vietnam. In particular, how did the rules of engagement affect you and impact your operations? What were the rules the rules of engagement as you understood them for your unit and your area of operations?

BP: Well, we were invariably out in Indian country so rules of engagement were pretty generous. I mean, we were—in the buildup areas you had to have an identifiable target and none of this just shooting people because they run. When you got out in the operational areas it was like, hey, if you saw them you killed them. You didn’t give a shit. Of course, if you took fire any time you could return fire but you tried to hold down on the nonsense. So I thought the rules of engagement were, you know, pretty sound. I had no problem with them.

SM: What about restrictions? Did they ever—did you remember or recall if they restricted your actions?

BP: Hm—

SM: To the detriment of the mission?

BP: Not on my first tour, no. The second tour, yeah. Yeah, the second got mindless.
SM: Well, during your first tour, I mean you’re ground infantry. You’re out in the field, as you mentioned you’re spending most of your time out in Indian country; in an area it’s hostile, unfriendly, and you can expect a lot of contact. How much thought did you have about your own mortality?

BP: (Laughs) Well, Steve, quite a bit. (Laughs)

SM: How did you deal with that, in addition to some of the escapades you’ve already discussed in the interview? (Laughs)

BP: Yes, that doesn’t hurt does it? I had an extremely deep faith, although sometimes the idea of you and God just being together and only you’re getting shot at and God ain’t, that gets a little frustrating at times. I honestly think that no matter who you are there are times when you run out of everything emotionally. The stress, the strain, the worry, the fear, the constant gnawing tension gets to you and you got to do something to break that up. So in my case, I have somewhat of a sense of humor and it helps, you know, if you can laugh and it helps if you can forget about it and just get away from it. Of course, whenever we were in the rear we’d drink whatever wasn’t nailed down, chase girls or whatever. But it’s a hard thing for a young man to face. It really is. Of course, you walked into that business thinking you’re immortal and you come out realizing that, you know, that the meanest piss ant or fly on earth can separate you from life in like nothing flat. You go through a process where at first you don’t know that you should be afraid and then I think it’s kind of like the first couple times it doesn’t really hit you. You begin to be living with fears, after a while you have no illusions. You know how easily you could die and how meaningless sometimes death is and how trivial. You have to come up with something, some don’t. In my case, I just figured, “Well, if I die, I’m going go to heaven and that’s the best I can do.” So I would pray. But even so, I didn’t lay a lot off on God because I was there not through God’s direction. I was there by my own volition. So, you know, I figured if something happened well that’s the way it goes. Then after a while you become philosophical about it and you realize it doesn’t make any difference whether, you know, you try hard or not sometimes the numbers just work out against you and it’s your turn. When it’s your turn, it’s your turn. It doesn’t help you much does it?

SM: Well, I mean it’s the way you develop a coping mechanism.
BP: Well, yeah, you have to.
SM: Yeah, was a death a topic that was discussed very much in a serious way among you and your subordinate NCOs, you and your fellow officers, the men around you?
BP: No.
SM: How about in a non-serious fashion? Mocking death?
BP: All the time. All the time. You laugh about it. I used to say that we were a force for good in the area of operations because we brought our Colt firearms and baptize the heathen—
SM: Okay.
BP: —into immortality. But I think later on afterwards, probably had a few serious conservations with other veterans, but not at the time. It’s too close at the time and death is so ever-present you don’t want to screw with it. I have a, let me see, I was rooting around the other day and I did find something I wrote. It kind of surprised me. It was—you know the little green book that all good leaders carry? Did they do that in your Army?
SM: I believe so. Are you talking, just the little memo—
BP: Memorandum book.
BP: Yeah, I drug out a thing and I wrote this right before Tet. Then I wrote right up until the A Shau and then—no. Yeah, I wrote this, we were—this is January 21st and I wrote this paragraph. I said, “I face my war. So many more NVA up here than we’ve ever seen before. We seek them out, we the Cav. Will a bullet score? Will I carry them out or will they carry me out dead as I have carried so many others? Somehow on this day at this place it doesn’t matter. It will end and when it will and I’ll see or I won’t. I at least will not feel that I have been cheated out of life.” So that was my thought at the time.
SM: How does that resonate with you now? Is that how you feel now about your service?
BP: That was a pretty tired kid. But yeah, I think when you get into war you finally realize that it, you know, what’s going to happen is going to happen. You just
keep putting one foot in front of the other. Some come out and some don’t. It’s beyond
your poor control to figure who.

SM: When you—go ahead, go ahead.

BP: I was just going to say that death in war is such a capricious thing. It just is.
It makes no sense, it has no rules. Some die, some walk away with a scratch. It’s just,
it’s weird. I remember one night we were doing one of those surrounding a village at
four o’clock in the morning. We were crawling up a trail because the way the ground
configured it was the only way we could get into our blocking position. I was, I think,
the second or third guy. I’m crawling and something had my foot and I thought it was a
“wait-a-minute vine” so I pulled and it came free. So we went in. We got a couple of
bad guys out of the village the next morning. We’re going back down the trail and one of
my fire team leaders—usually I was—and I had been with him the night before, he said,
“Hey, Lieutenant?” I said, “Yeah?” He said, “Didn’t you say something caught your
boot last night?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Look at this.” It was a booby trap. Sure
enough, it had caught me but it didn’t go off. When I pulled my boot it ripped the line,
the cap had ignited but it hadn’t gone off. You think to yourself, “Well, how does that
happen?” Well, that’s just the way it goes, you know. It wasn’t your day, it wasn’t your
time. So you do get philosophical about it. It’s like, “Well, phew! Okay.”

SM: When you left in June of ’68, and I mean you had been there for eighteen
months?

BP: A year.

SM: Oh, it was just a twelve-month, just a twelve-month tour.

BP: Yeah, the Army did twelve months. So the Marines, because they were the
Marines, did thirteen.

SM: Yeah, but I thought you stayed longer. Okay, but when you left after twelve
months, what did you think about the American war effort in Southeast Asia?

BP: Well, when I got on the plane I thought we were winning. I was proud I was
in the Cav, best damn unit in Vietnam. I just, you know, felt like job well done. You
know? Damn, that was a good year and I can be proud of it and you know I earned my
pay.

SM: Did you feel like the United States was winning?
BP: Oh, no doubt about it. I mean, not even an issue. For what we were given to do we were doing it well. In a strategic sense did I think we were winning? No, I thought the Air Force was wasting their time running up North dropping bombs on a particular route a particular day a particular way. I thought the Marines, bless their hearts, they probably had the answer to the whole equation but it wasn’t working real well for them.

SM: What was that?

BP: The defended villages.

SM: The combined action platoons?

BP: Yeah. The CAPs I thought was a good idea.

SM: Well, what did you think about attrition as an approach, which was really what Westmoreland had implemented? What you as a Cav member and the Air Force as an air asset for which you guys were doing?

BP: What approach?

SM: Attrition. The attrition strategy.

BP: Well, that’s a dumb strategy to use against Orientals. I think that’s a wonderful strategy to use against Western Europeans or Americans. But, you know, Orientals don’t think like that. To be quite honest with you, you look at our own Civil War; hell we don’t even feel like that. If I was trying reunite this country what’s another ten thousand dead? You know. So I don’t think that that’s, and I didn’t while I was over there, I didn’t think that was a very smart idea. I think if you want to go attrit them go right to the nest, take care of the eggs, take care of everything and then you got them. I’m not advocating killing women and children, but some women yeah. (Laughs)

SM: Well, I mean, some women in Vietnam were combatants.

BP: Yes they were. I have a story about that.

SM: Do you? From your first tour?

BP: Yeah.

SM: Yeah, go ahead and tell that.

BP: The toughest woman that we ever met, God! We were moon up in a village; it was in the Bong Son somewhere and took a little fire. We obviously had interrupted something so we deployed and we killed one and one was severely wounded. An SKS
kept shooting at us and it was like “God!” Two guys got hit and we hadn’t taken any
casualties before that. So I got pissed and we started deploying around, deploying
around. Whoever this is, I mean, they’re a shooting son-of-a-bitch. Geez! So we lay
down fire, lay down fire and we maneuver up. Finally they stop shooting and we thought
that we killed them so my—it was on the flank. The platoon sergeant saw him so they
kind of go up there cautiously and, geez, up jumps this Vietnamese. Has an SKS rifle
with a bayonet on it, lunges at my platoon sergeant and he just takes his M16 and knocks
her upside the head. (Laughs) That’s how we found out it was a her. It was like, “God
damn, it’s a woman! Shit!” Well, that wasn’t enough, I mean, hell she was going for
grenades. So he shot the shit out of her. But she was tough and it turned out she was a
platoon leader, NVA platoon leader. They were a recon element, which we normally
didn’t run into. I think it was a bit unusual that she was a platoon leader and I suspect she
may have been a special operative or something because normally their reconnaissance
folks were men. But we really admired her. As a matter of fact, we buried her. We
never buried them. But we buried her and we gave her a salute. Of course, part of it was
the two guys she shot, one was a million-dollar-wound and went home and the other guy
he was back in a couple of weeks. She was a tough customer and we respected the hell
out of that. So yeah, we saw women on several occasions and they were tough.

SM: When you—what about child combatants? Some of the popular depictions
of the war, of course, depicted children running up throwing grenades or things of that
nature. There is some speculation that a lot of that was myth. What was your
experience? Did you ever see, witness anything like that or hear firsthand or anything
like that?

BP: Well, I’ll tell you a story. One day when we, oh, I think this was like early
July. I hadn’t been there that long and we were up around, on a little—we were going to
do an NDP near a village, night defensive position. The old man was a Ranger and he
was good one, our captain. So we got hot chow and he said, “Go ahead and dig real light
fighting positions and set up everything. We want them to believe that we’re going to
spend the night here.” So for some reason or another they had brought us oranges. They
didn’t bring us just five oranges; they brought us like three hundred oranges. Well, you
know. So there’s about 120 of us all total in this company, probably not even that many,
and all these oranges. So whenever you’re near a village the kids come up and they’re 
always looking for something to eat or spying on you or, hell, I don’t know. You know? 
So anyway these—after everybody all the oranges they wanted they started giving them 
to the Vietnamese kids and the old man said, you know, “Get them out of here,” you 
know. “We don’t want them up here. So if you want to give them oranges throw them to 
them.” So our 2nd Platoon was throwing oranges to the kids and one of them threw a 
grenade back. Killed two guys, wounded a couple of others. There is this rather amazing 
moment, it was so surreal, I’ll never forget it. Everything stopped. The Vietnamese 
stopped, we stopped. It’s that defining line between how you’re going handle something 
and it can go either way. Then the captain started hollering, “Don’t shoot.” You know. 
“Don’t shoot, don’t shoot, don’t shoot.” This little kid is standing there he is probably 
nine years old, eight years old, just looking at us because you know somebody gave him 
this and said, “Here go throw it at the Americans and do this.” He didn’t really know. If 
he did, so what? He was still a young kid. For about a minute-and-a-half, it seemed like 
it went on for an hour, that whole platoon was just looking at that kid like, “You know, 
we’re going to kill you.” But the old man went up and some of the rest of us went up and 
we didn’t kill him. For that I’m eternally glad because, you know, it’s bad enough, all 
the other things. But, no. That was the only time I ever saw it and I honestly, in my heart 
anyway, I believe the kid didn’t know what he had done. He did afterwards because he 
knew he was about to die. But we never shot him.

SM: How old do you think he was?

BP: He was probably eight or nine. It’s always a little hard to tell. But, yeah.

We figure he didn’t know what he was doing because he didn’t cook the grenade which a 
lot of times you would do. You just pulled the pin and threw it. Then he stood there 
which said to us that he definitely wasn’t clued in.

SM: He didn’t realize, yeah.

BP: If he’d of run he’d had been dead.

SM: Yeah because that would have indicated that he understood and he was 
going to get out as quickly as possible.

BP: Um-hm.

SM: The danger of standing there, yeah.
BP: He was as shocked, I think, as we were.

SM: How about incidents with wildlife?

BP: (Laughs) I did not touch that chicken.

SM: That is out in the bush, tigers, elephants, monkeys, rock apes, snakes.

BP: (Laughs) Oh, we were out in the Central Highlands and we were—because this was in November. We were going, two companies, we were operating as twos. Alpha and Bravo were moving together and Charlie and Delta. So it was a beautiful, beautiful area we were in and God it was the sticks. I mean it was jungle, jungle, jungle. You could tell even if the NVA moved through there they didn’t stay there. So were set up and it’s dark as night and there’s kind of a little bridge. It was one part log, one part scooped out area and everything used it, you know. People used it, animals used it. (Laughs) So then about two in the morning, you know, I was on watch and all of a sudden you hear a flare go off. It was down in the Alpha Company’s sector. All I could see was this flare and then nothing happened for a minute and then I hear way down the line someone go, “Holy shit!” Everything in the world started going off. What had happened was a tiger had come up. It was just coming across the log not realizing there was a rifle company on the other side. (Laughs) When he hit the trip flare the tiger didn’t know what he was doing and neither did the guy who was looking at him. (Laughs) The tiger made it, by the way. I don’t think we ever hurt it. But the one that got me was that we make our assaults in the Central Highlands and you know about the elephant grass.

SM: Yes, sir.

BP: This elephant grass could get to be quite tall. Seven, eight feet high. Oh, I don’t know, probably my fifth or sixth air assault up around the Central Highlands, the first time we went over in June, I see all these black sticks. I thought, “I don’t see them when we get on the ground, I wonder what they are?” So finally I asked my platoon sergeant. I said, “Do you know what those black sticks are when we come in? You always see them.” He looked at me and he said, “Yeah.” He says, “Don’t you know what those are, sir?” I said, “No.” He said, “Those are cobras.” I said, “What?” (Laughs) He said, “Yeah, no kidding.” He said, “Over here the Asian cobra is black.” He said, “They nest out in these areas.” I said, “Well, they do?” He said, “Yeah, when
they hear the helicopters coming they always stick their heads up to see what’s going on.”

I said, “You mean we’re jumping off and—” He said, “You’re not kidding.”

SM: But you never had any—you never—

BP: Well, wait, there’s—

SM: Oh, there’s more.

BP: There is. “Wait,” he said, “There’s more!” So the next day we’re going
down this trail, we had just made an air assault in, we’re going down this trial and all of a
sudden they come running back. Because I’m always behind the lead fire team and I get
knocked down. It’s like, “What in the hell?” “Jesus Christ get out of the way!” They go,
“Holy shit! Did you see that?” “What, what, what, what, what? What are we talking
about here?” He said, “The cobra, sir! That damn thing is twenty feet long!” “Bullshit.”
So we go and sure enough it’s a cobra and he’s not going to share the trail so we spend
about a hundred taxpayer’s dollars and assert our right as the 1st Cav to use his trail.
Well, so after we make sure he’s good and dead we start putting the pieces together and
the pieces we can find are thirteen feet. I think he was, you know probably big. (Laughs)
Those cobras were a little scary but we also—we heard a lot about the kraits, the banded
kraits and they’re supposed to be the most venomous of all although I can’t imagine
anything worse than a cobra. But we never saw them but I think one time we saw a krait
and he was hauling ass to get away. The cobras, unless they were mating or they had
their young right there, they normally were not—you know they’d leave. But I never had
anybody bit by one, thank God. I never got bit by one. The worst thing that ever
happened caused by flora or fauna was I had a guy who got, he got nailed by a scorpion
that crawled in under his helmet and he didn’t know it. We were on break and he put his
helmet back on and the damn thing nailed him right in the head. (Laughs)

SM: Oh, no. What happened to him?

BP: We medevac’ed him, he came back that evening. He was fine. He had a
headache for a day or two.

SM: Yeah, I bet that hurt.

BP: Yeah. That’s what he said.

SM: But no, no snake bites, no—
BP: Never had a snake bite. Heard stories, a lot of stories going around, but never knew anybody. Yeah, and some of that you don’t know whether it’s guys talking or what. Supposedly—they did have anacondas down in the Delta and supposedly one of the 9th Division guys got taken by one of those but I couldn’t swear to it. I know they had crocodiles, too, but they never were a problem. The only contact I ever really had with a snake was in Khe Sanh crawling in after that B-52 strike I grabbed a vine and pulled myself up and the vine moved. It was a little, it was a small boa constrictor. (Laughs) I almost went back down the crater again. (Laughs) I bet he was not feeling well. Usually most of that stuff avoided you.

SM: What about general illnesses? How much sickness and general illness was there?

BP: We had very little sickness. Of course, you know, these are young guys and they’re in peak physical condition. Once in a while we’d get malaria. Not too often because we did take our malaria tablets quite faithfully. The biggest problem we had was boils, believe it or not, because you couldn’t bathe and you couldn’t get the dirt out of your skin. So once in a while the skin would really come up. So you have to send a guy to the rear and they’d have to cut that out which they always took a chunk of meat. That was probably two days, most of that was just for antiseptic reasons. But I don’t remember anybody getting sick, not sick sick. You know, I think I had one guy get malaria while I was over there and he was a repeat. He’d already had it once. Repeat malaria is pretty common. So yeah, unfortunately you got to be healthy to die for your country.

SM: Yes, sir. How about dysentery and, let’s see—

BP: No.

SM: Fevers of unknown origin?

BP: No, heat exhaustion, heat stroke once in a while, boils. We never got diarrhea unless we drank and then you know that passed rather quickly. Oh, and when you came back from R&R your system was all out of kilter again because for four days you’d been abusing it. It’d take you a day or two to kind of get your body used to eating that canned food again. But by and large, no.

SM: Any other observations or stories, comments from your first tour?
BP: Well, I’m throwing out some of the best ones but no. (Laughs)
SM: (Laughs) I certainly hope not.
BP: Well, there’s a couple we don’t want to get into.
SM: Okay. Well, how would you evaluate the general officer level leadership in your unit?
BP: Excellent. Really was excellent. The company commanders we had—of the four company commanders I had, two of them made at least brigadier general. One made lieutenant general. The platoon leaders, most of them got out of the Army. I was the only one that stayed in that I know of, well, one other guy and he got RIF’ed (reduction in force). But I always thought that the leadership was excellent. The division, while I was over there, we had Jack Norton when I first got there and Norton was an old Airborne trooper. He was pretty good, but then General Paulson took over and Paulson was hell on wheels. He was something. I loved that old man to death. I would have followed him to hell and never asked him, you know, for a canteen of water. He was really something. Took good care of us and the guy cared, you knew it. There were some bad officers, of course, but you didn’t run into them too much out in the field. Once in a while a battalion commander would be, like the first guy I served under. He was just such an incredible ass. Colonel French was a superior officer and he retired as a lieutenant general. Then the next guy that came in, Colonel Brown, he was an older fellow and he got out of the Army as a, he retired as a colonel not too long after that. But he was a good egg. I just thought those guys on my first tour were just really something. A lot of them were hand-picked and, you know, they were there getting their tickets punched but even so they were good people.
SM: What about the NCOs in general?
BP: The ones I had were very good. I lost my platoon sergeant, oh, probably two months in. They sent him over to Charlie Company because they were short NCOs. Then I had a series of professional NCOs who were E-6s. I never had an E-7 again but the two guys I had were good. One of them got hit in Tam Quanh and the other guy, I didn’t have the platoon then, but he got wounded in Tet. But I had him for a while as a platoon sergeant. Sergeant Ford in the mortar platoon was excellent. He was forty-one or forty-two years old out there humping the bush. Hell of a soldier. (Laughs)
SM: What?
BP: (Laughs) He was just a character and you don’t see them in the Army anymore because the Army has gotten too slick for all that nonsense. Sergeant Ford had come in the Army during the Korean War and like I say he was a SFC/E-6 and he did make E-7 while I was there, which was a good thing. But I mean he’s the kind of guy you’ll never see in the Army anymore because he had, what, a sixth grade education. Took him a half an hour to say good morning in that old Georgia drawl they have. That ol’ boy never knew what he was about. But one of the highlights of being around Sergeant Ford was if you went back to the rear and we got to drinking, which we always did, you had to have Sergeant Ford sing “Waycross Georgia” for you, (laughs) and “Miller’s Cave” and all these old country songs. He was a hell of a guy.

SM: Sounds like it.
BP: Yeah, I loved him to death but, oh, my goodness.
SM: You mentioned that when you went to Ft. Benning that you helped train some of the, obviously some of the OCS candidates and some of the, as you put it, “shake’n’bake” NCOs.
BP: Yes.
SM: Did you encounter many of the shake’n’bakes, as they were called, from the NCO academies while you there and if so how concerned were you about that system? Also while you were there at Benning, how concerned were you about this mass production—
BP: I totally disagreed with it.
SM: Okay.
BP: The reason I disagreed with it was because—
SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Bill Paris on the thirteenth of August 2003, at 2:40 Lubbock time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Paris is in Piedmont, South Dakota. All right, sir, I’m sorry, go ahead.
BP: There’s just one thing that I’m going to bring up and it’s something that I guess we haven’t really touched upon but I think if you’re going to read about war, which I assume somebody’s is doing if they can pile through my poor history. There’s something that I want to make very, very, very clear is this business in warfare about
atrocities. On the outside most people, I think, if you stand on a street corner and show them pictures or get them in a situation and say, “Is this an atrocity?” Most people will react and say, within a certain range, “Oh, yes. This is an atrocity. Oh, no. That’s not an atrocity.” But I want to try and explain how war shifts that boundary. That war in and of itself is an atrocity, if you will. It is, and if you define atrocity as an unusual violent act that has, you know, some illegality tinge to it, if you will. I think that in war men who fight each other develop their own code. That’s not what society says, but within the context of the Vietnam War, I’ll give you an example. There were times we shot unarmed men. There were times that we shot men who should’ve been prisoners. We did that based on the moment. Okay? There—and I’m not trying to excuse this or I don’t care, but I what I want people to understand is how this happens within the value system that is for a combat soldier. Because if I’m in contact and we’re really going at it and I can’t secure that prisoner, I’m not going to let him go and fight him again. Because that’s what he’s going to do. He’s going to go find a weapon and we’re going to start all over again. So he’s going to die. If that happens to me I’m going to die and I understand that. Okay? People who aren’t fighting war don’t have to. It looks, the nature of it if I just bring you into the picture and show here’s this guy gunning down an “unarmed man” is that an atrocity? Well, I’m here to tell you given certain situations, no, that not only is not an atrocity it’s trying to stay alive. However, there are things that happen on the battlefield that are totally unnecessary, that are particularly vicious, cruel, and harsh. That is the making of war against people that you can protect. Take that same situation, where that man is a prisoner and I could secure him and I can keep him safe and my people safe. Then if I shoot him that’s an atrocity. I hope that makes sense. What someone like Lt. William Calley did with his platoon in 1969 is an atrocity. I’ve been in that situation. I’ve been in villages I know, I know who’s putting the booby traps out at night. I know who’s mining the road at night, but so what? You know, our rules say if you can catch them fine. Now you know if I get in a situation where, you know, I catch them at it that’s different. So there are rules and it becomes highly emotional with people who have never been pushed to the limits of their emotional and physical experience to try and understand that. But those examples I gave you are pretty much the rules that I think most decent military people try and follow.
SM: Now did you—did you, sir, yourself witness other things that you thought were atrocious on a personal level, while you were in Vietnam?

BP: Yeah. Then one time I did one. That was pretty horrible and I did not realize until I did it how bad I was getting mentally. It was right during the Tet battle. It was after my former platoon had almost been wiped out. The situation was starting to stabilize and I was under, well, I’ll just say, worse emotional duress than normal—and what I did I’m not proud of but you know I—it caught me up, believe me. Then after that—and I have spent a long time regretting it. That’s not something I can defend, it’s just something that happened and that I’m sorry about it, but it did happen and I’ve seen other people do it. At the time the step you take with other people is you get them away, you get them calmed down because usually it’s when emotions run really high. Normally people aren’t like that, even in combat.

SM: Was there any—

BP: Is that vague enough for you? (Laughs)

SM: Sure. (Laughs)

BP: Yeah that was good.

SM: Was there—what mechanisms were in place to help you, besides your comrades, your buddies, your fellow soldiers, what else was in place to help deal with those issues, those problems? Anything at all?

BP: Well, I ran into this again on my second tour.

SM: Okay.

BP: But to answer your question now, here, none. That’s why if I say to you, “Well, Steve, those are jungle rules.” You would think, “Okay, things slip a little.” If I tell that to another Vietnam vet, “Hey, it’s jungle rules.” He knows exactly what I’m talking about because jungle rules mean there are no rules. You’re inventing as you go. Nobody’s looking, nobody knows, nobody is going to rat you out particularly because shit happens, I guess. So, no. It’s one of the real dangers of warfare. Nineteen-year-old kids start making their own rules.

SM: What about counseling by the chaplains or anything like that? Did you have access to that? Did you—

BP: I spent a lot of time with the chaplain, actually. (Laughs)
SM: You did spend a lot of time?

BP: Yeah, I did because it was right around that whole period of time that I ran out of Catholic faith. Particularly after the nineteenth of April when the helicopter pilots had such a bad day, many of them lost. I just ran out of everything simultaneously, as we used to say in flying. I went to the chaplain and he was a wonderful man. He was forty-five years old and volunteered to go in the Army as a chaplain, volunteered for jump school. Tried to go to Ranger school and they laughed him off and said, “Hell no, get out of here,” and sent him over to be a battalion chaplain. He was a wonderful man. He and I used to share a bottle of Mass wine and if there’s anything nastier in the world, believe me it’s drinking hot Mass wine at night. But there we were. I kept posing the question to him, “How can God be happy with what we’re doing?” I mean the thought came to me one day, “This guy that I’ve killed, what happens if he’s the man who is supposed to come up with a cure for cancer? Now what in the hell have I done?” Well, when you start getting that sort of philosophical bent, you’re in real trouble as an infantryman. I realized that I was probably past my thousand-mile check. Emotionally I was getting really ragged. I had done that other thing and, you know, I went to confession and I talked to him. He kept saying, “Look some of these things there are no answers for. You just have to stick with what you know and what you know is God loves you and He’s here. No He’s not pleased, but He understands.” Well, you know that’s great but what I found, what I discovered was that my religion didn’t stretch far enough to cover that. That’s a personal thing. It’s got nothing to do with the religion, the Catholic faith or any other. What I was really saying is, “I don’t know if I can deal with it. I don’t know if I can face this fact. I don’t know if I’m doing the right thing.” Then he got hit, the chaplain, you know. Probably a week later he’s was out with our Alpha Company and, boy, they ran into it buzzsaw and he was, what a hero. The guy kept going up and pulling casualties out and doing first aid and then he got hit pretty bad and then he was gone and I was sort of alone with my question. That question stuck with me. Then later on in my second tour it all—boy, when I really needed it, it wasn’t there. (Laughs)

SM: Well, at the point where you were seeking guidance from the chaplain, what was motivating you, was driving you? Was it actual concern over your mortal soul or
was this something more concerned over the here and now and over your sanity, your
humanity?

BP: I’d say it’s a part of all of that because war strips you to such an absolute
basic level. You cannot believe how low a level of functioning it is to be an infantryman
in combat. It’s just, I mean if you use anything, anything aesthetic, anything—I don’t
even know how to find words for this. But it’s just, it’s such a mean, low level of
existence of killing and violence and waiting to kill and waiting to be killed. It wears on
you and there’s no real opportunity for the soul to feel anything sensitive because you’re
so locked down. You hunger for that so desperately and you get so eaten up with just
living like an organism that fights and, you know, lives worse than any dog ever lived
just waiting to react like some sort of spider when a fly falls in the trap. I mean, I can
remember we were in the Central Highlands and we walked, we were going down this
trail and we heard water and water is a very important commodity to infantryman. So we
all went to look for the water and we found this pool and a little tiny waterfall. I honest
to God thought of the pictures I’d seen of the Garden of Eden because this pool, which
was about eighteen feet across maybe three, four feet deep, tiny little waterfall. There is
an orchid bush, tree, whatever. The damn thing was big and there were orchids
everywhere and the smell was just phenomenal. It just, it was like somebody hit me with
a ball bat. Here was something, you know, so pristine, so unspoiled. I just got tears in
my eyes and I thought, “Oh, my God. There is beauty in this world. You know, look at
this.” I just sat there and smoked about two cigarettes and just looked. You know it was
just, what a feast for the eyes. That’s so rare, and you miss it so much. You hunger for
things that are normal and what you don’t realize is that you’ve evolved into this
organism that is going to have really fight to ever get back to being able to even make
touch with stuff like that. If you’re not careful it’s—the analogy I often think of with
myself is it’s kind of like the Star Wars movie, the very first one. War turns you into
Darth Vader and you’re always on the “dark side of the Force” and you have to fight to
come back. You have to fight to stay away from the lure of the power of evil. War is
evil. War is consummate evil. Even if you’re fighting for good things you end up doing
bad things and you have to fight to come out of it. It’s a battle of immense titanic
proportions. I know veterans who are in their eighties who still fight every day to just try
and be sane and enjoy this world. It’s so hard and it wears you down so much.

SM: What do you think helped you most make it through your first tour?
BP: Well, I think I was so busy. (Laughs)
SM: Okay.
BP: What helped me? You know I was young. I was resilient. I had these
questions, I had a good faith and I had faith in my comrades, faith in myself. So much of
war is about who you’re with and I was with a good group. They were good men.
Together, the sum of us was better than any of the individual parts as I found out later.
When I went to Ft. Benning, I’d been there, oh, a month or two and I got a call. (Laughs)
I got a phone call from a second lieutenant and he was a company commander over in the
191st Infantry Brigade, I think. Anyway, they’re the support troops for the infantry
school. Three of my guys in my old platoon, first platoon, had been assigned to him as
NCOs. He said, “Well,” you know right off I didn’t know this guy from Adam. “Are
you Lieutenant Paris?” “Yes.” “Oh, you’re the famous Lieutenant Paris. I hear about
you all the time. Everything I do or say, ‘Well, that’s not the way Lieutenant Paris would
have done it.’ These three men of yours, they are the biggest pain in the ass I’ve ever—,”
on and on and on he goes. So I let him talk and I let him talk, he finally talks himself
down. He so frustrated with them. I said, “Fine, Lieutenant. You want to tell me what’s
going on?” “Well, I can’t do anything with these three guys. The colonel has busted
them all in rank, they won’t do anything. They say they’re not going to do anything.” I
say, “You’ve got to be kidding me.” (Laughs) He said, “No.” So I said, “Well, where are
they?” He said, “Well, I’ve got them confined to barracks.” I said, “Okay.” I said, “I’m
coming over there. Do you mind?” He said, “No. As a matter of fact, if the great
Lieutenant Paris would show up I’d be happy.” So after my next class I jumped in the
car and went over there. He shows me where they are and they’re sitting on their bunks
smoking. They’ve all got shadows on their arms where their stripes used be because,
hell, I promoted—one was an E-6, two were E-5s. I walked in and it was like,
“Lieutenant Paris!” I said, “Stand at attention!” “What?” “Stand at attention!” I put
them in a brace and I said, “What the hell do you guys think you are doing?” “Sir, we—”
“Shut up.” Come to find out they had, I think, four months left, three months left. Quite
frankly, they’d been through enough and they didn’t want to play. They just wanted out of the Army. Then after, probably within three, four months and they’d been out of the Army by then, the Army changed the policy. As soon as you came back from Vietnam they discharged you, which was a good thing. At any rate, I kind of got these guys half-ass straightened around. You know, we’d all get together in the evenings and, you know, chat, and talk, and drink, and quite frankly I was kind of lonely myself. I didn’t know anybody at Ft. Benning. But I know how they felt. I knew exactly how they felt. Kind of like, “Where the hell am I now? I used to know what I was doing, now I’m in a strange place and everybody wants me to do this and that.” (Laughs) Strangers in a strange land.

SM: Did that help? Being able to hang out, talk with guys that had been—
BP: It helped a little bit but I also realized, you know that this is just a momentary thing and I’m going to have to get on now and replace this with something else. They left shortly thereafter, about a month after that. They settled down a lot and I settled down, too, because I realized you know, hey. I looked around and I decided, “This sucks. I’m going back to Vietnam anyway so don’t worry about it.” Then I just got on with it in the fashion that we got on with things in those days.

SM: Which was?
BP: An immense amount of drinking and womanizing. I wasn’t married.
SM: Right. That didn’t happen until just before you went to flight school.
BP: Well, actually it’s how I spent my time until I went to flight school.
SM: Okay.
BP: I would teach, and I would drink, and such. (Laughs) I played flag football for post and various things. I was always working on my education. I took correspondence courses in Vietnam, both tours, went to classes at night but, boy, it was hard.
SM: I would imagine so.
BP: Yeah. It was the last thing I wanted to do but—the instructors understood.

Most everybody had been to Vietnam or was on their way and there was this—I have been to Ft. Benning many times over the years and I’ve never seen Ft. Benning like it was in 1968. There were a lot 1st Cav widows there because the division had deployed
out of Ft. Benning. There were a lot people there between tours. There were a lot of
widows there. There were a lot of young women there. There were a lot of scared people
there. It was, it’s just hard to describe. It was something. A lot of stress, very intense.

SM: Well, is there anything else you’d like to talk about with regard to your first
tour or the training time in between when you were at Ft. Benning?

BP: No. We got together several times with some of the pilots from the 229th.
They were over in Hunter Army Airfield. We got together several times. But, no.

SM: Now at what point did you decide you wanted to become a pilot?

BP: In OCS before I ever went to Vietnam the first time but I was so exhausted.
They gave you the test at about the eighth week, which was the wrong thing to do
because you’re right in the middle of all the heavy physical training and exertion. This
was not untypical, they’d bring you in the classroom, sit you down, give you the test and
you’d fall asleep. That’s what I did. First test I got a zero because I slept right through it.

SM: Oh, for crying out loud.

BP: So then I took it again at Ft. Benning right after I first got there and I passed
it. I put in for flight school and so I left pretty quickly.

SM: Now during this—how long were you there at Ft. Benning?

BP: I was there five-and-a-half months.

SM: Okay. What did you—okay, so you were there from July, I guess, until the
end of the year, until December?

BP: December.

SM: Of ’68?

BP: Yeah. I got promoted right before I left, to captain.

SM: Now did you maintain very much contact with guys back in Vietnam?

BP: A little bit. Not too much because most of the guys I wanted to keep contact
with were gone.

SM: How closely were you following the war in the news?

BP: Every day, every day. I’d watch them. (Laughs)

SM: How did that strike you?

BP: Watching a war on the news?

SM: Yeah.

SM: What did you think about that as a policy?

BP: I thought the policy was okay but some of the reporting was absolutely juvenile. It got to be quite irritating and then I got swept up in, shall we say the social life, and so then I didn’t watch much news after that. I’d watch it a little bit. But my big thing was I didn’t have any money. Most of my money went to my sisters to pay for my children. I probably had two hundred bucks a month to live on. So I lived in a house with four guys and the—we were all quite busy but Saturday morning I had to watch “George of the Jungle” at nine o’clock. That was my thing. Whether I was drunk or sober I’d watch “George of the Jungle.” “George of the Jungle” and “Laugh-in” were my survival tools. (Laughs) Other than that I could have cared less about TV. But, yeah, if the news was on I’d definitely keep up with it. We had newspapers and then a lot of that information over at the leadership lab we had access to. So we knew what was going on in the war and we got all the classified stuff, as well. We knew what was really going on.

SM: Okay. Now as you were preparing to leave for flight school, of course, the election of ’68 had occurred. Nixon had won and what did you think?

BP: Well, in this five-month process where I was back to the States and I’m sort of plugging back into the mainstream of American thinking, I became very frightened that Hubert Humphrey would win. Wallace, I didn’t worry about George Wallace. He was just, you know being George Wallace. He didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell. But the idea that Hubert Humphrey would get in there and we would continue with some more of the well-intentioned mumbo jumbo with nobody really doing anything just frightened the hell out of me. Nixon, I knew was as much of a statesman as this nation’s had since probably, hell, Franklin Roosevelt, and one of the few statesmen we’ve had in this century in the White House. I knew he could handle it. So when he won, it was a close election, but I breathed a huge sigh of relief because—you know, people were saying at the time, “Well, you know, what are you going to do about Vietnam?” Nixon would say, “Well, I have a plan but, you know, I’m not going to talk about it.” “Oh, so you have a secret plan?” “Well, you know, whatever you want to call it.” So then it goes around, “Well, Nixon has a secret plan but he’s not going to tell it.” You know, and a lot of it was just sour grapes by the media and the Democrats and their followers because
they had screwed it this thing up from A to Z. Once Nixon won the election they
realized, “Hey we’re about to dump this war. Hoo-rah! Now everything is going to be
Nixon’s fault.” So that’s exactly what they did. They made everything Nixon’s problem.
But the military settled down a little. The military, I think, was far more apprehensive
than the nation about having some more Democratic presidents in there wondering and
wishing about what they ought to do.

SM: Did you feel confident?
BP: Yep. Plus I knew I was going back and that’d settle things down. (Laughs)
SM: Now did you really think that that would be the case? I mean you had—
when you left in December of ’68 you had a year of training ahead of you. Did you think
the war was going to last that long?
BP: When I first went over there I was afraid it was going to end before I got
there. When I left I realized that I could relax about it, it was going to go on for a while.
SM: Okay.
BP: Until somebody came along who had an idea of what to do.
SM: Okay. Well, when you left and went to, I guess Ft.—where did you get your
initial flight training was it Rucker or was it here at Ft. Wolters?
BP: I was at Ft. Wolters.
SM: So here in Texas, Ft. Wolters, Texas. Why don’t you go ahead and describe
your introduction into the aviation branch of the military and what that was like?
BP: (Laughs) My introduction into aviation. It was like being a private again. I
mean I’m a very new captain, but even so. The flight classes were broken down into the
officer contingent and the warrant officer contingent. These guys are warrant officer
candidates. So you go—they have a company that you’re attached to so you go to the
company and then they announced that they would have a formation and it was like,
“What? Okay, fine. I’ll have a formation.” So seven o’clock in the morning all of us are
standing out there and we’re all strangers. Probably 120 officers and this major walks out
and announces that he’s not going to take any shit off anybody. I thought, “What the hell
is going on for God’s sake? I just came here to be trained as a pilot I didn’t come here to
listen to this.” So and all this stuff, you know, “You will do this and you will do that.” It
just sounded kind of like Mickey Mouse. But I thought, “Ah, what the hell.” Then they
took us over and they issued us our flight gear and it was—you know we marched
everywhere just like we were privates. Then they knocked that off after we started
bitching at them because it was like, “Hey, come on, you know. How about we don’t do
this?” They got a new commanding general in and he had come from the Cav and at the
very first social event a bunch of us who had been in the 1st Cav went up and said,
“General Berry, do you know we have to march everywhere?” He said, “What?”
(Laughs) So that crap came to an end. But it was pretty easy duty. We normally had
classes in the morning and flew in the afternoon or vice versa. Then you had classes in
the morning and you flew at night. We were only there four months. Joan came back
from Japan. We set up housekeeping in a house trailer. It went pretty fast, you know, it
was pretty idyllic. I was there on temporary duty orders, which the officers at the time
did. You weren’t assigned. You were only on temporary duty. So we got temporary duty
pay which was nice. My pay doubled while I was there. Hell, I was making more
between flight pay and temporary duty pay than I was for my regular base pay. I pulled
out a slip the other day. When I went to flight school as a captain before I drew flight
pay I was making a $490 bucks a month. (Laughs) So—

SM: That’s pretty low.
BP: Yeah. (Laughs) Of course, this is 1969 but even so it wasn’t real handsome
wages. So we did that for four months. We took basic flight, we soloed which was just a
riot watching everybody solo a helicopter. They’re very complicated machines to fly and
it’s not nearly as easy as it looks, although these days the helicopters are a lot easier to
fly. The ones we had didn’t have what’s called articulated throttle. You jump in a
helicopter now and the pilot doesn’t worry about keeping the RPM up. That’s all taken
care of for him. But in my day we had to do it all ourselves. So you had the throttle and
it would only stay open as long as you gripped it and held it open. So we had all that as
well as trying to fly those beasts. We had a great time, though. At the end of four
months we were going on for phase two and three and you either went to Ft. Rucker or
Hunter Army Airfield. I asked to go to Hunter Army Airfield so we were sent out there.
We got through—finished—we’re starting to finish flight school and we got our
assignment orders for once we completed and it was about a month away. Initial orders,
you know, it’s not necessarily the final word but, you know very few people are going to
have their orders tweaked. So essentially what you got was where you were going to go. I got orders to Ft. Benning, Georgia. I thought, “I can’t do this.” I talked to Joan and I said, “You know, I can’t sit here and wait for a year.” They were over on pilots in Vietnam so all the classes that were graduating were just standing around waiting. So they were assigning them anywhere and you, in those days you had to fly. Otherwise, you didn’t get paid. So the 10th Aviation Battalion at Ft. Benning, Georgia, because I called them, they had like six hundred pilots they’re trying to get through their minimums every month. I thought, “Holy cow, I can’t do this. If I’m going back Vietnam, I better go now or I’m not going at all.” So I call the infantry branch like a good fellow and talked to this colonel. He said, “Why are you calling?” I said, “Well, I wondering if I could go to Vietnam because I don’t want—” “You got your orders. You’re going to Ft. Benning. You know, when we need you we’ll call you.” Click.

SM: Okay.
BP: Okay. So I have a lot of friends at Hunter Army Airfield. Most of whom you’ve met. (Laughs)

SM: Yeah.
BP: So I talked to them and I talked to some other folks and they say, “Well, you know what you need to do is you need to find something they need. If you can get a school for it they’ll send right over to Vietnam. That’s the quickest way to get there.” “Ah-ha!” So I call infantry branch again and I talked to aviation assignments even though I’m not a rated aviator yet. I have a thing for Loaches (LOH), light observation helicopters. I just, I loved scouts. I used fly with them all the time on my first tour. Great fun, great fun. Low and slow, hovering around, geez that’s my kind of flying. Bugs in your teeth. (Laughs) So I call up and I say, some warrant officer talks to me and I say, “Chief, I’ve been back in the States now for a while and I probably need to think about getting back to Vietnam.” He said, “Well, how long have you been back?” I said, “Oh, almost eighteen months.” He said, “What?” Because experienced pilots were going back a lot sooner. But yeah, I said, “I really would like maybe a transition school into the OH-6 light observation helicopter and back to Vietnam.” He looks and he said, “Well, geez, I can’t really do that because all those slots are filled and we’re not getting many anymore because we’re introducing the new Loach.” My ears perked up and I said, “Oh,
really?” He said, “Yeah the OH-58.” He said, “They’re just going to becoming on line
to Vietnam in probably about four months, maybe five.” He said, “Would you be
interested in going?” He said, “They’re just starting the first IP (instructor pilot) class,
you want to go to that? Then I’ll send you on to Vietnam from there.” I said, “Well,
sure. That’d be great.” (Laughs) Now you got to understand in aviation usually the
instructor pilot ought to be a guy who’s got more than just the basic minimum to qualify
as an Army aviator. As a matter of fact, I may even go so far as to say that this shouldn’t
happen. I knew it. So I said, “Yeah, put me down, put me down.” So he gets my name
and everything and I know by now my records had been shipped over to the aviation
branch because they made the assignments when they cut our orders and they shipped the
records over. So he gets my name and everything and he said, “I’ll make sure you get the
orders. You’ll have them in about a week.” I said, “Okay.” Then Joan and I wanted to
go to the Bahamas for a little bit. In those days you had to have orders. So I had him
authorize that, “Okay, five days delay en route to the Bahamas, okay.” So we get that all
set up and he said, “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather go to a gunship?” He said, “I got a
bunch of Cobra openings.” Well, my stick buddy was standing right behind me, he
wanted gunships so bad. I said, “No, I don’t, but I’ve got a guy right here who does.” So
he got my buddy who—we were supposed to finish up on a Tuesday and on Monday he
went over to Cobra hall. So (laughs) he never did quite finish the course before he was
over taking transition training. They sent me off—they gave me a set of orders, sure
enough, Joan and I had orders now for Vietnam so we could at least get that under our
belt and out of the way because it was just too hard to contemplate having to sit around
and wait for that. So I got orders for the very first OH-58 IP school. So I graduate and
then I wait around, oh, I don’t know, two-and-a-half, three weeks and I worked for Joan
over at the education center where she was working. I was just sort of a volunteer, in the
Army what they call blackbirds. You know, guys who have finished their courses
waiting for orders. So I worked for her for a couple of weeks, so we went in together and
then I took off for Ft. Rucker. When I got down to Ft. Rucker I show up and I walked in,
“Are you here for the 58 IP school?” “Yes, sir.” He said, “Well, put your records on the
desk.” Now everybody has these big flying records, big thick jackets. I walk up with my
brand-new five pieces of paper jacket and throw it on the table. (Laughs) I go and have a
seat and this warrant officer comes in, picks up the records and leaves the room. So this
colonel gives us a briefing, “Welcome, you know, yadda, yadda. You know you’ll be
here for—” I can’t even remember how long it was. I think it was a month, maybe five
weeks. “You know, don’t worry about things. We’re pretty informal. Be here ready go.”
Now it was great. “You’ll—chief is going to make the assignments on who’s going to fly
with who and he’ll assign you to the SIPs (standardization instructor pilot).” These are
the super instructor pilots, standardization guys, and they’re qualified to do everything.
These are the guys who teach IPs how to do their job. So we’re sitting there and he’s
calling out names, and he calls out everybody’s name but mine. They all leave to go sit
at tables with their instructor pilots. He says, “Captain Paris?” I said, “Yeah, chief.” He
said, “Sir, you come with me.” (Laughs) So I said, “Uh-oh.” So he takes me in his office,
shuts the door very quietly and turns around and he yells at me, “What in the God damn
hell are you doing here? You have no business being here! Shit, you just graduated a
couple of weeks ago, you don’t have enough—” on and on and on. So I let him kind of
go for a little bit and I finally said, “Chief, I have to go.” “You can’t,” he said, “I can’t
put you through this course. Do you know what a travesty that would be? Not to
mention the fact that you can’t do it.” So I said, “Well, yes I can do it.” I said, “There’s
two reasons why I can’t go back to Ft. Benning, Georgia and that’s why I’m here.” I
said, “The first one is, I just got married and my wife and I emotionally can’t handle
waiting to go on the second tour. I’d just as soon go now, we’re all geared up for it and
this was the only way I could find to get through it. I’m sorry if I screwed up your life
and your school, but I think I can do it and you know, if you’re any kind of an IP at all
I’m a pretty good pilot. I’m not the greatest you’ll ever see, but I’ll learn.” He said,
“What’s the other reason?” I’m not going to tell you the other reason but once he heard it
he said, “Okay. I’ll tell you what I’ll do.” He said, “I’m going to take a chance on you.
I’m going to be—you’re going to be with me.” He said, “I’m going to be twice as hard
on you as any other pilot in this school.” He said, “Captain, you screw up one time and
you’re out of here. But if you do your job I’ll never say a word to anybody about this.”
So that was the deal and I did it. I made it through and I graduated and I was in the first
graduating class of instructors for the OH-58. (Laughs) By a guess and a golly.

SM: Um-hm.
BP: So then, you know, we had leave. Joan and I went down to the Bahamas. A lot of stress, a lot of stress. You know, newly married, hadn’t even come up on our first anniversary yet and I’m off for Vietnam. So we went down to the Bahamas and finally after about two days Joan said, “I can’t take this anymore. Why don’t we just do it?” So I said, “Okay, let’s go.” So we went back home and I reported in early and I went over to Vietnam on my second tour.

SM: Now when you—as you were nearing your date of departure for Vietnam, did you get some leave time?

BP: Yeah.

SM: Okay, about a thirty day leave?

BP: They gave us thirty days. I think I took ten.

SM: In what timeframe is this now that you’re preparing to leave for Vietnam on your second tour?

BP: This is November of 1969.

SM: November ’69.

BP: Um-hm.

SM: Now a lot had been going on during that year. There’s a couple of memorable events for instance, Hamburger Hill.

BP: Yes.

SM: Do you remember hearing about that?

BP: I got a letter from Teddy Kennedy in my file.

SM: Pardon?

BP: (Laughs) I said I have a letter from Senator Ted Kennedy that I keep in my files.

SM: What does the letter say?

BP: I wrote him a letter because he stood up on the floor of the Senate and said you know, essentially, “Bad, bad, bad nasty people, you’re, you know, killing off all these Americans and this is stupid. Yadda, yadda.” I wrote him a letter and I said, “Senator, in 1964 you voted on the floor of that Senate for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. I remember. You supported that war when your brother, when he was president and President Johnson, when he was in the White House, said we had to go to war. You
voted right down the party line for it.” I said, “And now, you know, it comes around and
the Army is doing what you sent us over there to do and you’re complaining because it
didn’t work out the way that you thought it should.” I said, “Senator, I’m real sorry but
you should have thought of this when you were voting all of this stuff. Because what did
you think was going to happen?” So I got a letter back, you know, “Dear Captain Paris.
Gee, I’m really sorry we don’t agree, you know. But that’s the way it is. Love.” So I
tucked that into my records. I thought, “You know, you two-faced son-of-a-bitch. Way
to go.”

SM: Well—

BP: But, yeah, I was very supportive of the war effort and the people over there
because, you know, I just thought it was stupid what they were doing back here. They
should have thought of all that. You know? I also had some faith that Nixon would
something about it. Of course, I didn’t know what but I figured he would in fact do
something. He wasn’t the kind to sit on his hands and, you know, whine about it.

SM: Um-hm. Well—

BP: Oh, yeah, I remember Hamburger Hill very clearly.

SM: What did you think about this, though, in the context of—again getting back
to the idea of strategy and the issue of attrition? The fact that what Hamburger Hill, I
think, maybe epitomized for a lot of people was this notion that here we are, we go, we
fight, we lose all these men, we take this hill, and then we abandon it knowing full well
that more than likely we’re going to have to go back and take the hill all over again. So
this idea that we just keep on throwing bodies after bodies after bodies, but there’s no
specific goal.

BP: Your question is out of context, to be honest with you. That applied up until
June of ’68 when Westmoreland left. Then the fellow that replaced him was Gen.
Creighton Abrams.

SM: General Abrams, right.

BP: General Abrams was probably one of the most savvy folks I’ve ever run into.
What the 101st was doing in the A Shau Valley was not—their primary mission was not
to get in a fight. What they were doing was they were going in, taking out supply depots,
mixing the roads. What General Abrams was starting to do was to try and block by non-
human means, enemy access, these high-speed avenues of approach that we always
talked about. What the 101st was doing out there was exactly that. Now, on Hamburger
Hill they ran into elements of an NVA division that were there to dispute that and so, yes,
they left the hill; yes, they, you know, they got a bunch of people killed. But what they
were doing was defending the area so that the engineers and the other folks could do their
work. Of course, we didn’t realize at the time the extent of the supply system that they
had either. I mean it wasn’t until we got over into Cambodia six months or a year later
that we realized, “Holy cow! These guys got better stuff than we do and more of it.” But
we didn’t know that. So at the time it made sense what he was doing. Sure, you know, it
would’ve been nice if they could’ve just backed off and not had that fight, but
unfortunately the lead elements were cut off and they had to fight. There were times in
the future when we had to fight. So it had changed subtly and the press never understood
that until much later. By then they didn’t care what was really going on they were so
invested in telling everybody what they wanted them to hear and what they wanted to
hear that, you know, that the press took a left. Their reporting of the war just became
total bullshit, you know, I’d say before Hamburger Hill ever happened. They didn’t stay
current. They didn’t stay up on what the military was trying to do. They just started
telling their own story. It caused us a lot of problems later on. It got a lot of good people
killed because they’re telling everybody what they want hear, to include the enemy. It’s
a problem that we ran into that we had not encountered since the Civil War of a press that
almost openly favors the other guys. It was an incredible experience. So at any rate,
that’s what really was going on with that whole thing at Hamburger Hill and, yeah, the
101st didn’t want to be there any more than anybody else. They weren’t real happy about
it but they had to bring that thing to its conclusion. But I’ll tell you this, they never did it
again.

SM: Well, yeah, I mean one of the—

BP: Abrams learned his lesson.

SM: Also one of the orders issued afterward involved—I don’t know if order
would appropriate, but certainly one of the directives from the president that was issued
immediately after Hamburger Hill was minimize US casualties.
BP: You bet. Even though it was accidental it sped up that process, although, you know as we used to say, “I don’t know how you minimize casualties when everybody has loaded guns but we’ll give it a try.” So by the time I got over there on my second tour—then if I thought I was confused before I really was confused when I got back over there. In my mind I thought I was going back to what I’d left. Good people, good esprit, you know, high moral. What I found when I got over there on my second time was—it was as big a shock as when I got back to the United States the first time. I didn’t—you know it looked like Vietnam, it certainly smelled like it, but it was incredible to me how in sixteen-and-a-half months things could change that radically. It was bad. You know, it was really. It absolutely floored me. The night before I left, just to set the stage, and throw in an anecdote, yes. (Laughs)

SM: Yeah, go ahead.

BP: We had a big party and we invited all the guys from the 229th who were at Hunter’s IP. So they all came over and we wet down my wings. (Laughs) We wet them down but good and we were wetting until about four in the morning and I had to leave—my plane left at like 7:45 that morning. I mean I staggered off to bed, Joan and I went to bed, got up and then part of the closing ceremonies they gave the aviators’ toasts. I don’t know. Did you hear it when Beaver did it? Was it Beaver?

SM: Um-hm.

BP: But the aviators’ toast, that was always a big—(Laughs)

SM: Okay.

BP: We always had to have that at any of our gatherings. So as they gave me the aviators’ toast everybody dumped their drinks on my head and they’re a wide variety of drinks. I mean a really wide variety. (Laughs) So I went off to bed and I didn’t shower. I was—I needed to get some sleep. So I got up and there was just enough time to make the plane if I ran like hell. So I threw everything in the bag, said goodbye to the kids, Joan drove me out to the airport in Savannah and I’m sticky. I mean, like, sticky. My hair is sticky. I’m sticky all over. I washed—you know just a quick, spit-bath kind of thing. But that didn’t work real well. So I get on this airplane and I’m hungover, I’m tired, you know. I’m scared again. I don’t want to be here but away I go. I get to Vietnam, I’m still sticky. (Laughs) You know, I just haven’t had a chance because in those days they
didn’t, you didn’t stop at Oakland Army Terminal on my second tour. My first tour you
got there, you had two days, you got on a flight, you left. Oh, no. These days this is a
whole different thing. I flew out, I landed at San Francisco, caught a bus or something,
went down to Travis Air Force Base, waited around a couple of hours, got on a plane and
went to Vietnam. So I end up at 90th Replacement Battalion after a twenty-two-hour
plane ride and I really needed a shower bad. I’m two days into wearing the aviators’
toast. But everything I see looked so disjointed. I mean you see enlisted men walking
around with beads on, peace signs, John Lennon sunglasses, and I thought, “What in the
hell is going on? Where am I?” I talked to some of the guys who are leaving and going
home or going on R&R and they say, “Oh.” Especially the second-tour guys. They say,
“Look out, baby. It’s changed and it’s bad. We got racial problems, we got drug
problems. We got problems like you wouldn’t believe. These guys ain’t the guys that
you were with a couple years ago. These guys are bad news.” I thought, “I have made a
serious error in judgment.”

SM: When you—on the flight over what was the atmosphere like on the airplane?
BP: Oh, the usual. (Laughs) Very quiet. People reading and particularly the
second tour guys it’s like, “Oh, here we go again. Don’t want to be here.”

SM: How many second-tour guys would you estimate were on the aircraft?
BP: Probably ten percent of the complement.
SM: Okay.
BP: Maybe even a few more.
SM: Were a lot of the people on that flight with you other fellow aviators or crew
members?
BP: Yes. Yeah. Yeah there was a smattering but you know on that flight over
you’re not very chatty anyway, you don’t really care. Nobody wants to talk much. The
new guys are, you know, they’re feeling pretty grim and the guys who have been around
before, they really don’t want to talk about it because it’s like, “Shit, I got to go do this
again don’t I?”

SM: Um-hm. Well—
BP: But it’s a very quiet group.
SM: Were you going over as a group to replace en masse?
BP: No, no.

SM: Okay.

BP: Always going over as individuals.

SM: That’s what I thought.

BP: Yeah.

SM: Well, what did you think about that system? The individual replacement system and the individual rotation, and also, of course, couple that with the one-year rotation system because you can’t separate the two.

BP: I thought it was stupid. Yeah, I mean everybody liked the fact you only had to be there a year but nobody liked the fact you know, you were constantly relearning the same lessons over and over and over again. You know, the old joke used to be, we haven’t been in Vietnam for seven years we’ve been on a one-year tour in Vietnam seven times. Even though they did their best operational lessons learned, yadda, yadda, you know, all the experience kept leaving the unit and you always are breaking in new guys and always teaching the same old lessons all over again. It produced casualties that didn’t need to be, quite frankly. But, by the same token, if you keep people over there then eventually people are going to want to know why their son has been in Vietnam for five damn years. So politically it makes sense, get them out because the American people would have had a cow. They had a cow anyway.

SM: Well, at the same time, even though again I don’t want to compare apples to oranges here, but in the, of course, Second World War, the Korean War, all wars prior to the Vietnam War, just about, very rarely was there the notion of you’re only in for a certain number—a certain amount time and then you can go. Of course, one of the exceptions to that, of course, was the American Revolution. But—

BP: Well the Korean War was where they first tried that system out.

SM: But I mean guys that went over for the Second World War were over for the duration.

BP: Yeah.

SM: Same thing for the First World War, although much more brief of a war for us, for the United States. Of course, the same for the Civil War.
BP: Yep. Although the Civil War regiments, they were in for fixed enlistment periods.

SM: Um-hm.

BP: I mean they went for one, two, or three years, some of them only nine months. So it was actually the First World War was the first war we fought where you were there for, until it’s over. Because the other wars, they didn’t last long enough. Yeah, the Revolutionary War was an ugly one. I can’t imagine doing that for five, six years but some of them did. But I honestly think it would have saved us a lot of problems had we stuck with it.

SM: Okay. Well, other than what you’ve already stated as your initial observations, what else did you notice was different, especially in terms of the command climate and, you know, you’re comparing your second tour to your first tour?

BP: Of course, it took a few days to get to a unit but I was just stunned by watching the guys around Saigon. They had lost most military cohesion. They were, they really looked bad and I figured, “If Saigon is like this, I can imagine what’s going on out in the field.” Of course, we had heard a little bit drugs over in Vietnam. We’d heard a little bit about racial problems and there had been a fragging or two but when you step into it, it’s like, “Oh, my God. What is this place?” But it really didn’t sink in until I got to the unit I was assigned to. Since I was the first OH-58 IP in-country I got pulled off to go to the 11th Armor Cav Regiment because they were supposed to be the first unit to get the OH-58 as the scout aircraft. So they plucked me out of the pool, as it may be, and pulled me over there. When I got to the 11th ACR and I checked in they assigned me to the headquarters troop, the aviation detachment, which just drove me crazy. The aviation officer and I had a lot of squabbles until he finally kicked me loose and sent me down to the Air Cav troop. One of the decisions they made, though, after they kind of picked my head for a while, was they decided to stick with the OH-6 and not jeopardize things the way they were going by bringing in the OH-58. They were right to do it. It’s a gutless aircraft for what they were going to do with it. So after three weeks of kicking around, cooling my heels, flying colonels here, there, and everywhere, and majors. I finally was sent down to the Air Cav troop because the Air Cav, the aero scout platoon leader had a mechanical problem and didn’t know how to solve it, so he crashed his aircraft. (laughs)
So he went back to the States and I used that as an opportunity to go down and replace him. So I went down—oh, I got to the unit on Thanksgiving Day of 1969, that’s when I got to Air Cav troop, yeah. I hit the Air Cav troop on Thanksgiving Day and I walked in the mess hall, I hadn’t eaten because I’d been flying for regiment in the morning. Then they told me, “Well, go ahead and go down to 1st Cav, 1st of the Air Cav troop.” So I walked in down there to the mess hall and everything was gone. The mess sergeant said, “What do you need?” I said, “Well, I was hoping to get dinner. I haven’t had any.” He said, “Sorry.” I thought, “Oh. Okay, welcome to the war, Bill.” (Laughs) I thought, “Kiss my grits. Look at this.” So they assigned me to take over the aero scout platoon.

SM: Okay.

BP: Looking around, we were at a base north of Saigon, oh, probably forty miles up on the edge of War Zone C. Ourselves and the 1st Cav, they had people there, too, aviation assets and some infantry. We were at a place called Quan Loi. It had been a plantation and a little community near the village of An Loc. At one time it had been very pretty but it was just all red clay when I was there. So I called everybody together, as is my wont as a leader, and I explained to them who I was, where I came from, and what I expected. One of the things that I told them was that I understand that some people over in Vietnam use drugs and I let them in no uncertain terms that drugs are illegal and that if I catch anybody I’m going to crucify them. “Leave the damn drugs alone. We’ve got enough to do without worrying about that.” Nobody said a word so—and I went over and talked to the officers, told them the same thing. I had a few different policies for them. I told them all that, you know, we were—flying scout missions is a particularly hazardous and perilous business and that as far as I was concerned they were strictly volunteers and that any man who had had enough, I didn’t want them to worry about, get in a stew about, I want them to come on up and tell me he was done and he would be done. I would get him assigned somewhere and it would be no shame, nothing. You only got so much of this stuff and when the tank is empty, it’s empty. That was my policy and I followed through on it. Well, that night I went to bed and there—five of us stayed in what was called the platoon leaders’ hooch, six of us I guess. So there was this tap at the door. One of the captains gets up and says, “What?” He says, “Is Captain Paris here?” “Yeah. Paris, you’ve got visitors.” I thought, “What the hell?” Well, it’s dark.
You can’t see your hand in front of your face, so at least I get up, “Yeah what do you want?” “Can you come on out here, sir?” “Well, yeah, sure.” So I go outside. “What’s up?” “Well, we heard your little speech today and it’s obvious you being new you don’t know how things are.” I thought, “Oh, interesting. A delegation of night riders.” So I said, “Well, why don’t you tell me how things are?” He said, “Well, we use drugs. You need to know that. We use drugs because it’s what we do. We don’t care whether you like it or not. You got to live with us and we got to live with you. So here’s the thing, you leave us alone and you stand a good chance of maybe making your tour. You fuck with us, your dead.” I said, “Well—” In my mind I’m thinking, “What?” (Laughs) “Excuse me?” So I said, “Now let me get this straight now. You guys all use drugs?” “Well, not all of us, but enough.” “Oh, I see. So all these faces I can’t see, you guys are the guys who use drugs?” “Yeah, that’s right.” “So you’re telling me that if I make an issue out of this that something bad might happen, huh?” “Yeah, that’s about it.” I said, “So you’re willing to do all this just for your drugs?” “Well, if you want to put it that way, yeah.” “Okay, well that’s kind of the way I want to put it.” I said, “So you know,” I said, “I don’t anything about drugs and you guys obviously do because you took the time to come and call on me. Why don’t you tell me this: let’s just say I buy into this, what does that mean?” “Well, it means, you know, nothing. We’ll just, you know, do our thing and you do yours.” “Oh, I see.” I said, “So while I’m doing my thing, whatever that is, are you guys doing drugs?” “Well, not during the day.” “Oh, so if I go out on a mission I don’t have to worry about you being on drugs? Is that what you’re telling me?” “Yeah.” “So when are you going to do these drugs? When you’re back doing maintenance on the helicopters?” “No, if we’ve got work to do, we do the work then we do the drugs.” “I see, and everybody is like that, huh?” “Yeah.” “Okay.” I said, “So I either do this or something bad is going to happen? But you guys are going to police yourselves?” “Yup, that’s the way it is.” I said, “Okay.” So I said, “Well, I’ll tell you what. I have a vested interest in making it through this war and since I don’t have much choice because there’s a bunch of you and just one of me, and obviously I don’t know who you are,” I said, “I’ll take your deal because I really don’t have a choice. But since you son-of-a-bitches are holding a gun to my head, I’m going to tell you this, that the deal is this: You can do your drugs, or whatever it is that you go to do.
after the maintenance, after the mission. But,” I said, “If I catch you during the day doing
this shit, I don’t give a fuck if you shoot me right on the spot, I’m going get you right
then and there. How’s that sound?” “Oh, yeah, that’s cool.” I said, “Okay, deal.”

SM: Okay. Now, did you talk with other officers in your unit?

BP: You bet.

SM: Had they struck similar deals with their men?

BP: Well, one of them said to me that, you know, it had never occurred to him to
say anything about drugs and frankly he didn’t think that he could foresee in the future
where he would bother.

SM: So in other words, he had already made up his mind that it was a non-issue
to him. He wasn’t going to make an issue about it?

BP: Yeah, and a lot of the guys felt that way. It was like, “Look, I can’t beat it
and I’m not going to mess with it.” So I was pissed. Oh, Jesus, I was pissed. I can’t tell
you how upset I was. But I thought, “Okay, you know I got enough to worry about by
going killed by NVA. I don’t want to worry about the guys behind me.” So we went
out and we flew our missions and it was hairy stuff. I mean, we primarily flew what’s
called a pink team. A gunship up at about fifteen-hundred feet and he’s supposedly
watching you all the time and then the scout aircraft at treetop level or below. The theory
is that, you know, you’re down there performing visual reconnaissance, you see all these
signs, you give first, you know, eye-witness intelligence and if they open fire on you the
Cobra just dumps the nose and kills them all and you both return happy to the club and
have a beer. The reality sometimes is far more awkward. (Laughs) As reality always is. I
quickly got into the business of losing pilots and aircraft. In the five-and-a-half months I
commanded that platoon I lost seventeen aircraft, twenty-one pilots and, oh, probably
eighteen enlisted men.

SM: Where was your principle base camp again?

BP: We were at Quan Loi.

SM: Quan Loi. And what was the range of your operations, into what area?

BP: Well, we operated War Zone C to the Cambodian border. Actually, we had a
three-mile limit that you weren’t to approach any closer, and a three-mile on the other
side. Oddly enough, both sides of that limit were beaten to shit with B-52 strikes. I
thought, “My, this is interesting.” But, yeah, we did a lot of work supporting the Rome
plow companies which were gutting out the jungle and our Cav squadron.

SM: Wow. You said that was just a five-and-a-half month tour?
BP: Well, it was as long as I wanted. I could only stand five-and-a-half months.
I got shot down twice.

SM: My goodness. Now this was in Loaches?
BP: Loaches, yeah.
SM: Were you guys doing the hunter-killer team scenarios?
BP: Yeah.
SM: With the Cobras?
BP: Yep. That was us.
SM: You’re principally going up against NVA at this point?
BP: Oh, yeah. No VC. (Laughs) These are hard-core main force and these guys
know the drill and they’re good at what they do.

SM: Okay, all right. Let—go ahead.
BP: Go ahead.
SM: No, no. You go ahead.
BP: Well, I was just going to say in that five-and-a-half month period I had
many, many interesting leadership challenges. I got shot down twice, shot up once. But I
still, I only walked away with one Purple Heart and I had the lowest number of anybody
in that unit.
SM: Oh, my.
BP: Everybody had, you know, several. Of course, the policy was if you got
three then you were done and you could no longer go on active operations.
SM: Right. Okay.
BP: So what would happen was I found my more aggressive pilots just weren’t
reporting things. But, you know, it was something. I think I had the platoon, oh, gosh,
probably not much more than two months when I got shot down the second time and that
was bad one.
SM: Okay. I hate to do this—
BP: No it’s okay. This would be a good time to stop.
SM: I was just going to say, I will have to take a break.

BP: Yeah, that’s fine.

SM: Let me, um—

BP: Me too. (Laughs)

SM: Thank you. This has been a really good interview. Let me pause this real quick and—
SM: This is Steve Maxner and I’m continuing the interview with Mr. Bill Paris on the nineteenth of November 2003, approximately 9:40 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Paris is in Piedmont, South Dakota. Sir, why don’t we go ahead and pick up with our discussion with the time in between your first and second tours. If you would describe that it was like coming back to the United States and how you felt.

BP: Sure. It was the first time I was really “back in the United States” since I left for Korea in 1962. By that, I mean it was the first time I really had a chance to be out and about. When I came back the other time I was in officer candidate school, then four months at a basic training center. I never really got a chance to get out and experience life in these United States, if you will, to steal a phrase from Reader’s Digest magazine. What I noticed when I got back was everything had changed. It was very stark. I felt quite alienated. Not only from my combat experiences and having served in Vietnam, which in 1968 was getting to be—the gulf had pretty much formed in this country between the hawks, and the doves, and the who-gives-a-shit. But so many things had changed anyway. Music had changed. Dress had changed. Sexual mores had changed. I ended up at Ft. Benning, Georgia, which was probably no different. I don’t know what to compare it to. When I left the United States in 1962, single people weren’t particularly having a lot of sex. It was going on somewhere I’m sure. But young people in particular weren’t indulging in it like they were when I got back. It was quite a revelation to me. Then, of course, going back to a Stateside Army base, particularly one that had just deployed a division a couple years before. Ft. Benning is the home of the infantry school. So all infantry soldiers are there either training up, initially officers and enlisted. There was a basic training contingent. There was the Airborne school, the Ranger school, the officer basic course, the officer-advanced course, the non-commissioned officer course, which we called the “instant E-6 shake’n’bake.” Take these kids that have pretty high IQs and instead of running them into officer candidate school, they’d run them into instant non-commissioned officer course because we had gone through pretty
much the infantry non-commissioned officer cadre. We’d run them through Vietnam
almost twice by that time. We were in desperate shape for non-commissioned officers.
So we take these kids out of advanced infantry training and we put them in for six weeks
of intense training. The top twenty percent came out as staff sergeant E-6s. The next
forty percent were sergeant E-5s. Then the remainder were specialists, fourth class. The
Army was doing this to fill the ranks up with not experienced NCOs, but at least people
who had some idea of what was going on in leadership. So there’s all this intensity there
at Ft. Benning and people are stressed. I mean you could cut that stress with a chainsaw.
Those of us who had already been to Vietnam once, particularly if you had a reserve
commission like I did, you were going back and you were going back soon, real quick,
like within a year. The regular Army commissioned officers knew they were going back
anyway, probably not right away. There’s that specter hanging over your head. It
influenced everything we did. We drank an awful lot. We screwed an awful lot. We did
pretty much what people under stress do, which is sort of laugh in the face of adversity
and wish to hell you were somewhere else where it wasn’t happening quite like that. I
ended up on the leadership committee at Ft. Benning. I instructed non-commissioned
officer classes, officer basic course, and officer candidate school classes all on leadership.
It was an enjoyable period, but I had decided, after my association with the pilots that I
had become very close with in Vietnam, I resurrected the flight school thing. So I took
the commissioned officer flight aptitude selection test, passed that. I left after about five-
and-a-half months to go to flight school. I got promoted to captain and went to flight
school, got married to my current wife. Went through nine months of flight school and
then hit a wall there on reassignment that Vietnam was full of aviators. Interesting
experience, you spend nine months because we were all TDY at flight school essentially
from Vietnam. It’s an administrative thing. They assigned us to like 2nd Field Forces in
Vietnam when you went to flight school. Even though you didn’t draw combat pay and
all that, you essentially were on temporary duty all the way through flight school, which
was good money. But then when we got out and we graduated we got our orders. I got
orders for Ft. Benning, Georgia, and I called Ft. Benning and they were at triple strength
on pilots. People were fighting to get flight time. I thought, well, two things. Number
one, “Uh-oh, here I am a new pilot. I’m waiting in line and I’m going to be about the
twenty-fifth captain trying to get flight time. There will be nothing to do, then I’ll hang
around and get comfortable. Then they’ll yank my butt back to Vietnam.” The other
thing was that due to a personal relationship that I had had, I really didn’t want to go back
to Ft. Benning with a new wife. Being me, I finagled my way around. I think I may have
told this story at the end of the last interview. I’m not sure, Steve.

SM: What’s that?
BP: I’m not sure if I told that story about going to instructor pilot school.
SM: I don’t recall. Go ahead and tell it.

BP: Well, what happened was I was facing some real discomfort having to go
back to Ft. Benning, which I had just left with an ex-girlfriend. Besides which I wanted
to go to Vietnam and get the second tour over with. Just newly married, there’s no point
in having this hanging over our heads. I also knew that if I didn’t go right away I may
not have gone. You know, there’s all this life suddenly that you’re enjoying and then the
idea of going over to that charnel house over in Vietnam. You better get going while
you’ve got the attitude to do it. So I called the infantry branch. Before when I had called
them a couple weeks before that—of course, the infantry branch at that time was the
largest branch in the Army. There are like thirty officers up there managing every
infantry officer in the world. The entire United States Army, which at that time was right
at 900,000 people. I called up the infantry branch before. They’d said, “Tough, you’re
going to Ft. Benning. Life’s a bitch and then you die.” One of those conversations. So
having talked to enough of my pilot friends I knew that being an aviator—and I also
knew that my records had been shipped and had been moved in infantry branch over to
the aviation section. So I called branch back up. I asked to talk to not the infantry
assignments officer but the infantry aviator assignments officer. Now that’s a whole
different class of people. So I get this warrant officer on the phone. I tell him, “Chief
I’ve been back for over a year. I’m thinking seriously I might as well go ahead back
over. What do you have in the way of schools?” So, always Cobras was open. They
always had other gunships open. I didn’t want to be a gunship pilot. That was kind of
like driving the truck around at fifteen hundred feet. That didn’t appeal to me at all. I
said, “What do you have in the scout aircraft? I want to fly the OH-6,” the current scout
in the Army inventory at the time. That’s the Hughes 500, civilian. That’s what they
called it. So he said, “No, we don’t have any more of those.” He said, “We’re bringing
this brand new helicopter in, the OH-58 Bell JetRanger. If you’d like, I’ve got an IP [slot
open]. The very first IP class in the country is filling up at Rucker in about five weeks.
If you want to go to that, then you’ll go right to Vietnam.” I said, “Fine.” (Laughs) I
didn’t tell him I was a brand-new pilot. (Laughs) I didn’t even have the protective sheen
off of my wings yet. So he said, “Fine, give me your statistics and I’ll cut the orders.” I
thought, “Hey, if it’s fine with him, it’s fine with me.”

SM: That’s amazing.

BP: I went back home, I told my wife, “Hey, I’m going to IP school in the 58.”
She looked at me because she had worked for the Air Force for two-and-a-half years and
hung around with a lot of pilots and said, “How the hell do you get to go to IP School?” I
said, “Look, they’re not asking and I’m not saying.” Okay, so I get my orders and sure
enough it’s class number one down at Ft. Rucker. I was still at Savannah at the time. I
did my Snowbird time at the education center working for my wife for about three-and-a-
half weeks getting a little flight time out, here, there, and everywhere. Then I went down
to IP school. When I got down to IP school, here were all these captains and warrants
who’d been in Army aviation for a while. They’ve all got anywhere from fifteen-
hundred to five thousand hours of flying time. I show up with 237 or 240 hours.
(Laughs) There were twelve of us in this class. They break us down. There were six
instructors, I think. No, there were four instructors and they each had three students. The
W-4 calls me off to the side and in a rather gruff voice, he wasn’t even friendly about it,
held, “What the hell are you doing in my school?” I said, “What do you mean, chief?”
He said, “Captain, I just looked at your flight records. Are you telling me you just
graduated from flight school and you’re in IP school?” I kind of looked at him said,
“Yeah.” He said, “I tell you what. I’m calling infantry branch you’re going back to
wherever the hell it is you’re going. You have no business being here. You don’t even
know the first thing about flying. I need seasoned pilots here in this school. I don’t need
you, rookie.” So my whole life flashed in front of my eyes and I thought, “Oh, hell. Here
we go.” Because if infantry branch finds out that I hoodwinked them, I’m going to be on
a one-man recon up to the Artic Circle for about five years. So I got the chief off to the
side and I said, “For God’s sake, would you please listen to me for a minute?” So I
explained to him what my real problem was. I could see as soon as I mentioned that this
would really cause lots of problems in so many areas, personal as well as professional, I
could see him kind of melting a little bit. He said, “So if I send you back to the Army
they’re going to send you back to Ft. Benning and you’re going to get divorced?” I said,
“That’s probably about it.” He said, “Okay, I’ll tell you what, Captain.” He said, “I’m
going to let you stay in my course.” He said, “I’m going to ride you harder than any
other pilot.” He said, “If you so much as twitch the wrong way while we’re up there in
that aircraft, I’m going to wash you out of this program and I don’t care what the hell
goes on.” So he kept me in there. For the next month, I was a pretty good pilot, given
the fact I didn’t have a lot of hours. I had flown a lot with the guys in Vietnam. I was a
little bit older. I think I was twenty-seven at the time. I was a little steadier on the stick,
not quite so quick to react and then think later. I made it through the course. I did pretty
well. Left right away for Vietnam. I had orders for a delay en route, thirty days, which
was normal. You got your thirty-day leave before you went to Vietnam. My wife and
I—because back then officers and enlisted men had to request permission to leave the
country. So if you wanted to go like, say, down to the Caribbean you had to contact
branch and they had to approve it. My wife and I wanted to go to the Bahamas before I
left as sort of a honeymoon. We’d never had one. We were going to miss our first
anniversary because I was going to be in Vietnam. So we went down to the Bahamas and
we were there about, oh, I don’t know, three days and it was just horrible. We enjoyed
ourselves but, you know, damn good and well what’s going to happen. You’ve got to
come back and face it. So finally one night we were sitting out on the [veranda] looking
at this beautiful beach, watching the sunset. We decided, “To hell with it. Let’s just get
on with it. This is nice but let’s just get this year over with.” But what we did do was we
went out the next day and bought two acres of property in the Bahamas and we’ve still
got them to this day. I don’t know what they’re worth, probably not much because
they’re kind of out in the bush. So we went two years ago, went down and saw the
property, still there. We headed back, flew back to Savannah and I went off to Vietnam.
Made that long-ass flight. Instead of going out to Japan, this time I left Travis and we
went up across the Artic Circle through Alaska. That knocks about two hours, three
hours off the flight, which was nice because they were long. About twenty-one hours in
an airplane is a hell of along time. Got to Vietnam and I noticed right away things was
different.

SM: Bill, before we delve too deeply into that, let me ask you a couple of
clarifying questions from what you’ve talked about in your interim period there. First,
your time at Ft. Benning in training at the NCO school, NCO academy, the shake’n’bake
program, how effective did you think that was?

BP: I’d say so-so. Most of these guys, it’s like having officer candidate school.
Most of these guys either have it or they don’t. The things that you’re teaching them are
tricks and techniques, but you can’t prepare these guys for what they’re about to undergo.
So quite honestly, it was about as effective as what we were giving to the OCS students.
Although I really did try. I tried very hard, but I don’t know. To be honest with you, I
have no idea how effective it was. The things that they were going to face over there and
I didn’t even know about it until I got back over on my second tour, these were things
that no human being is equipped to deal with at that level.

SM: What timeframe was that when you were in NCO camp?
BP: This was summer and fall of 1968. What I didn’t realize in that fifteen
months while I was gone everything had changed over in Vietnam, everything.

SM: Of course, I would imagine you were watching fairly closely from your
various news sources here in the United States what was going on in Vietnam, or did
you? Did you watch the news regularly, read the newspaper, keep up with what was
happening in Vietnam?
BP: Not really because we were trying to get away from it. We’d had enough.
Sure we watched news. In a sense your life is not stable. I lived in a house with four
guys. There was non-stop female traffic coming in and out. Male traffic coming in and
out. There’d be impromptu parties and you’re trying to sleep. You end up staying up all
night drinking when you ought to be sleeping. It’s not like you sit down and watch the
news. You do—I mean we did catch it. We had newspapers and, of course, we all read
the Army Times because it was still printing the casualties. So we all wanted to keep up
with who’s who. I mean we knew what was going on in the war. Not much, just the
same old business, killing and dying. It didn’t take a whole bunch of monitoring.

SM: How did you find the news that you did watch? Did you find it credible?
BP: No. No it was all the same thing. Even Walter Cronkite, who I had a
tremendous amount of respect for, it was like they’d give the baseball scores. Example,
“Today in the Republic of South Vietnam three American helicopters were shot down.
There was fighting around the city of yadda-yadda. Down near Can Tho there was a joint
US-South Vietnamese operation and there were thirteen American casualties.” Stuff like
that. I suppose I could have read *Time* or once in a while I’d pick up a copy and look at
it. This particular timeframe is when things started to really polarize. The media went on
the anti-war side primarily. There was some like the Columbus, Georgia, city newspaper
that was very pro-military. Of course, Charlie Black had gone over with the 1st Cavalry
Division when they deployed from Columbus. Oh, the community if you will, the
community newspaper was very supportive of the war and the people because they had
such close ties. You get out and get away from that. When I got home my older sister
and brother—who I dearly loved—kind of looked at me and said, “Man, we’ve got to get
out of there. That’s the wrong place to be and it’s just stupid.” I took it like real personal
when they said things like that. “What do you mean it’s real stupid?” My own family!
“Hell, you think I’ve been wasting my time over there for a year. It’s a little late for that
isn’t it?”

SM: How old were they?

BP: They were in their early thirties. I was in my late twenties, twenty-six or
twenty-seven.

SM: When you encountered people like that, especially close relatives, did you
ever begin to question the war yourself? Did it have an effect on you and how you
perceived it?

BP: Not at that time because I had just gotten back. I felt like I had done a good
job and I was very proud of it. Frankly, I was quite hurt by their reaction. It seemed to
me to be a gross travesty for people to sit around and intellectually discuss this business
when the visceral dying was going on over there. Whoa, this is the conversation we
should have had going into this, not during the middle of it. All you’re doing is giving
aid and comfort to the enemy. Believe me, they’re watching and we knew that.

SM: That brings up an interesting question then. Do you think that those issues
were discussed enough before Americans became involved in Southeast Asia?
BP: Absolutely not. That whole thing, the Kennedy and the Johnson administrations are like Thing One and Thing Two. These well-intentioned people who had no idea what the hell they were getting into, who had skills in a lot of areas, but none of them had any foreign policy skill whatsoever. Kennedy was a complete child in the woods about the world. Johnson wasn’t much better. He was a superior local politician. The guy could run this country like nobody’s business but the problem was we have to interact with the rest of the world. It just didn’t interest him. He sort of reminds me of Clinton later on, who didn’t give a rat’s ass until it came up to bite him. Suddenly it was like, “Oh, I guess you’ve got to pay attention to the other stuff, too.” Lyndon Johnson just went into that whole thing, really wasn’t watching what was going on, was making dumb decisions and then started into an over-control mode when it was way too late. It was like Eisenhower left in ’60 and for eight years we had all this fumbling around on the foreign policy area that was just pathetic. We got taken advantage of any number of times, any number of ways by our friends, by our enemies, by everybody. That’s my opinion.

SM: Do you think it’s had—I don’t want to bring us forward too far and get off the subject of your second tour, but while we’re on the subject of this—do you think we’ve learned any lessons from that? Do you think today we’re discussing our foreign policy enough before we actually become involved or embroiled in something? You mentioned the Clinton administration, and I don’t know if perhaps referencing Somalia or some other foreign policies, but of course with the current war, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the war against terrorism, I didn’t know if you thought the administration today had learned anything from those mistakes from years previously?

BP: They are vastly different scenarios. I think Kennedy and Johnson had no real business doing what they were doing in the foreign policy arena. Neither one of them really understood the world well enough to be there, number one. Then number two, they didn’t listen to their friends. Which at times is okay, but at other times that can cost you. It cost them horribly. To respond to your question, I think that in the last ten years, I think that what the presidency that Bill Clinton faced was opportunities to avoid what’s going on now. It would have taken someone who had more insight into the world. We don’t have many politicians who truly understand the world dynamic. They’re very few
and far between and we tend to smother their voices with our need for—I don’t want to say political correctness because that’s too smug and too narrow a definition. Americans don’t think globally. We don’t do a good job of understanding what the needs of the rest of the world are. We tend to exist as this very affluent pocket in a world that is quite dynamic and has needs that we don’t understand. I think where we are today with the present administration is they’re somewhat more prescient about that world but unfortunately now the bill has come due. I don’t think we can retreat from what we’re doing because we’ve gone too far. We have to take a stand for what we’re doing and it’s ugly. It’s ugly because you cannot do this in a communication format that Americans will understand. As a nation, we’ve gotten very illiterate about the rest of the world. To help people understand what’s going on doesn’t make any difference. We’ve been attacked everywhere to include New York City. Now we’ve got to go in and do what we’re doing. We need to do a good job there, but I don’t think people really understand the forces they’re up against. We’re up against some bad dudes. They’re not backing off. God help us if we back off. We just can’t take this on, it’s really uncomfortable. That’s my nickel’s worth.

SM: I think it’s important to get that kind of perspective because you were in the Vietnam War and you have that experience. So you’re looking at what’s going on today in the United States through that prism.

BP: I’m seeing a lot of *déjà vu* all over again, as Yogi Berra would say. Once again, we’re messing around with stuff we really don’t understand. We’re not willing to put down sort of, if you will, the idea that we’re a superior nation and take a look at others through the prism of what they’ve got to have to survive. They’ve got to have certain things and we’ve got to quit playing with it.

SM: A couple of other questions about your experiences in between your tours. In particular, you mentioned that, of course, you went through your pilot training and then through the instructor pilot training. How effective did you find that? What did you find most challenging, especially about your initial pilot training?

BP: The most challenging thing—flying a helicopter is—let me see if I can pull out some of the modern terminology. It’s multi-tasking under pressure. It’s very comfortable once you learn to do it. Unlike flying a fixed-wing aircraft where the pilot is
kind of important on take-offs, and landings, and the rest of it you can fake. With a
helicopter you’re constantly flying it. I had flown fixed-wing when I was fifteen or
fourteen years old. I had never flown in a helicopter except in the back and then once in
a while the guys would let me hop up front in Vietnam. I did not realize how physically
busy you are in a helicopter. You’re always busy. You never can just kick back, have a
cigarette, put your feet up and enjoy the flight. You’re always flying. That part is
challenging. Then understanding the aerodynamics of a helicopter as opposed to fixed-
wing aircraft. That’s a little tricky, too. There are far different forces that you’re playing
with there. Overall, I didn’t find flight school difficult. I found it was interesting. It was
challenging. I think it prepared me very well for what I was about to do. I was a pretty
good pilot when I came out. I was a pretty good pilot all the way through until I lost
interest in flying.

SM: What was it like transitioning from your training helicopter into—I assume
you went first to Huey transition?

BP: We flew, when I went through the little trainers we started out on, I was on
what they called the OH-23D, the Raven. That was an early ’50s product. Now half of
the class was on the newer [Hughes 300]. What they called the TH-55. Those things,
that’s literally a rotor strapped to your back. (Laughs) They’re these tiny little aircraft.
You can’t believe two guys are going to get into them. I flew the older one and they took
a little bit of getting used to. Most aircraft by that time had what they called an
articulated throttle, which means you just pull up and down on the collective and this
little mechanical mechanism took care of the hard part of keeping sufficient fuel going to
the engine. The OH-23s you had to manually control that yourself. You were doing a lot
of things at once. If you screwed up and you didn’t put enough gas into that thing, and
you pulled up on the collective and put some pitch on the blades, well, you know, you
may suck off the power and fall out of the sky. (laughs) You kind of had to remember to
do a lot of little things like that. It was a fun aircraft to fly. Just very nice. Very nice in
auto rotations, which is where you fall out of the sky. An auto rotation simulates an
engine failure. You just ride the helicopter blades down. Those are fun after you get
used to it. It’s kind if like being on a roller coaster where they take you up and up and up
and up and you think, “Oh, boy. This first one’s going to be doozy.” All of a sudden it
hits the peak and then you just fall. That’s kind of what an auto rotation is. You just
chop the power and drop the collective and you fall. Then when you get down to the
bottom, you just pull the collective back in and put some pitch in to the blades. If you do
it right it cushions your landing and you land very nicely and you step out to applause.
Screw it up (laughs) and you’re going to crash.

SM: Now, what was it like to transition into an aircraft like the Huey from the
training aircraft?

BP: The Hueys, of course, they were kind of the Cadillacs of the fleet. They
were very nice helicopters. We used them for everything and I didn’t like them. I didn’t
like them because they were big. It was boring that kind of flying. I’m more of a
Chihuahua kind of a flyer. I like lots of action and running around barking. (Laughs)

Hueys are too stable.

SM: Too predictable.

BP: Too predictable, too boring. To be honest with you, I never flew the Huey
well. That was just because it was boring to me. You talk to the guys who flew them and
they loved them. You know they did all these wonderful things. All the time I flew the
Hueys I was thinking, “Boring.” (Laughs) I like bugs on my teeth and leaves in my ears.

Woo-hoo!

SM: That leads me to my next question about your decision to forgo when you
approached initially or told initially about Cobras and gunships to go with the Bell
Ranger as opposed to the Loach. I would imagine that flying a Cobra, flying a gunship
into the heat of battle would be a pretty exciting job. As you put it, I think you said you
didn’t want to fly a truck at fifteen-hundred feet. I guess perhaps my impression of flying
a Cobra might be like it is a little misplaced. I don’t quite understand it.

BP: Okay, I need to explain this answer. It has a lot to do with me and who I am.
Don’t get me wrong, gunships can be very exciting, yes. But my perception of myself in
war is I’ve got to be in the mix. If we’re going to have a scum then I’ve got to be in the
middle of it. I don’t want to be in the periphery of it. Generally, gunships if they’re
smart are going to stay at fifteen-hundred to two-thousand feet. They’re going to go in
and try to attack their target. They’re not going to get real low. Although with that mini-
gun they’re going to have to get down at least at the thousand-foot level and then back up
and out. I developed this thing and it had to do with who I am exactly. Viscerally, this is
Bill Paris. I would always tell this to the gunship pilots. I like to see who I kill. Killing
is such a personal thing. When you make it impersonal it becomes too easy. That’s the
way I feel about it. I don’t like to get so comfortable with the idea of gore and violence
and killing that I never forget that this is something awful that we’re doing. No matter
the rectitude of it, it still is ugly business. You can keep your perspective as long as it
doesn’t become like a holiday, like a video game. When you start treating it like a video
game then your humanity is at serious risk.

SM: You just keep bringing up some pretty interesting and deep subjects here
Bill.

BP: Sorry.

SM: No, that’s okay. If you were to look at some of the current technology and
some of the tactics that we employ in war fighting, what do you think of that? You’re
looking at remote-control killing?

BP: I don’t like it at all.

SM: You can’t get much more remote controlled than a Predator drone being
remotely controlled by some guy in a truck a couple hundred miles away dropping a
bomb on somebody or something using cameras.

BP: I tend to agree—and this is just me—I tend to agree with General George S.
Patton, the World War II general, not his son. He said that when war gets down to
pushing buttons, that’s not war. That’s technology gone mad. Boy, it does. It covers so
many issues. There’s a place for Predator missiles, I guess, but not always. I think that
those who have the capability of taking a nation into war must know very clearly what
war is and the price that is going to be paid. Because even Desert Storm, let’s take a
quickie little victory. There are a lot of guys wandering around. I know this because
we’ve worked with some veterans from Desert Storm who are in a total fog. They’re not
sure they were even in a war. Yet there’s a certain coterie of that veteran population who
was over there who very viscerally experienced that. I’m thinking of a tank battle they
had at night. It was pretty horrifying to those guys. They understand very clearly. A lot
of the rest of them don’t. They were thundering left, thundering right. No, I think our
political leaders are at great risk when they do not understand the concept of what they’re about to unleash. It’s not an intellectual exercise.

SM: Sir, let me pause this for a moment. I’m going to have to change something in my equipment real quick. Just a second. No, no, no. I just need a pause for a second.

BP: Pause for the cause. (Laughs)

SM: Okay. Go ahead, sir. We’re back from our momentary break.

BP: Our short and brief pause.

SM: That’s right. I’m sorry. Go ahead. Continue.

BP: No, it’s okay. I’ve lost track of where I was.

SM: In terms of the changes you witnessed as you came back to the United States. Just to touch for a few more minutes on your interregnum between your two tours.

What—

BP: Oh, I love it when you use those big words. (Laughs)

SM: All right.

BP: I’m sorry.

SM: That’s all right. When you were back here in the United States, you mentioned some of the social and cultural differences you witnessed. What would you say was the most striking change that you witnessed during that time during the spring and summer and fall of 1968? In particular, address the political climate if you will.

BP: It was obvious to me that there was a great and powerful stirring throughout the land. There was huge changes in the wind and, boy, Bob Dylan had it right when he said, when he sang his song—I can’t even remember what it was. “The Times They Are A-Changing,” that was it. They really were and they had changed fast. Politically, I have the feeling that the old guard was uneasy because they had the Democratic convention in Chicago right after I got back. Of course, Martin Luther King had just been killed and then right before the convention Bobby Kennedy got killed. You could tell the people were floundering. The Democratic Party seemed to be not really in charge because it was real unpopular to own up to the war. All of their candidates kind of talked out of the side of their mouths, even Eugene McCarthy, who was a very strong anti-war candidate. You know, “We’ve got to end this. We’ve got to get out.” And then when they would push him and say, “Yeah? What are you going to do? Just get out and walk away?” It would be
like, “Well, no, but we’re going to get out. We’re going to get out.” So on one hand, the people that were supposedly in charge of this war were really not in charge anymore. You could tell. Johnson was quite isolated in the White House picking targets for bombers. The Democratic Congress was totally at each others’ throats. The Republicans weren’t a factor in the House or in the Senate except to get up and say, “Well, you know, you guys aren’t doing too well here, are you?” I honestly think that it was during this period that spin becomes more than an art form. It becomes sort of entrenched in American politics. Because you would hear things coming out of people’s mouths that just sounded so damn good, and then when you thought about it, it was in retrospect, number one, he didn’t really tell you much, and number two, he’s talking to what you want to hear. The contrast to, say, someone like Eisenhower was phenomenal. Eisenhower was not a great speaker but when he talked to you it was kind of like your dad sets you down and says, “All right.” He was always pretty honest with you. I remember when Eisenhower, that whole U-2 thing with Gary Powers. Eisenhower stepped up to the plate and said, “Yeah, I did that.” Then you had Kennedy who was very eloquent and very charismatic and told you all these wonderful things and, gosh, it sounded good. Couldn’t get a budget passed through his own Congress, but, gee, it sounded good. Kennedy’s always talking to you about, you know, you look at him and you think, “Man, this guy’s got it together.” Then you watch what happens and nothing happens. You think, “Whoa.” By the time Johnson’s in the White House they’re doing an awful lot of what we now call spin control. A lot of “Yeah, but,” and “No, that’s not really right.” Having come from the Army in Vietnam and watching how they were putting things, pretty soon the non-message became everything. The Air Force even had a joke that went around. It was a tape. Very popular. I used to have a copy of it. Well, my wife did. The whole thing was purported to be an interview between a civilian reporter, an Air Force fighter pilot, and an Air Force PIO (public information officer) officer who is there to make sure that they’ve got the right story. The tape is essentially a series of direct questions. You know, “I understand that you are bombing cabbage patches up in North Vietnam. Do you consider these likely targets as opposed to military complexes?” Then the fighter pilot would get on and say things like, “Yeah, well, bombing those goddamned cabbage patches, that’s the target assigned to us by somebody a lot higher up than me. I’ll tell you, he’s never
flown a jet before or he’d know the flak was so thick.” Then the PIO officer would 
interrupt and say, “Well, what the captain means is that oftentimes the difficulty of the 
mission is his biggest focal point that the target selection happens at the appropriate 
command level.” You know, it’s spin-doctoring in its early form. This got to be so 
 ingrained on our society. The military had to learn how to speak. Neil Sheehan covers 
this in his book, *A Bright Shining Lie*. What he leaves out in his book is that the press 
taught the military to do it and the government encouraged it, and then finally demanded 
it. Then pretty soon the press was doing it. So you had all these smart-asses who were 
reporters sitting around at the “Five O’Clock Follies” in Saigon sneering, and yet passing 
on this crap from a military who had long since learned not to tell them the truth. I think 
that’s where we were and politically you could tell we were in serious trouble. All the 
Democratic candidates for president were looking ugly. Hubert Humphrey, who really 
was a nice guy, Eugene McCarthy, who was not quite so nice a guy, he had they young 
people with him. “Oh, boy. Let’s get out of Vietnam.” Then there was Nixon who quite 
frankly said, “Well, sure. We can get out of Vietnam. But how you do it is much more 
important than if you do it because it’s obvious we’re going to do it.” Then he would say 
things like, “I have a secret plan.” You know, which, I think for those of us who were 
over the age of eighteen we understood very clearly that, you know, being Nixon, he’d 
get us out but don’t bug him with details. So I honestly think that the total shambles the 
Democratic Party was in is why they lost the election. But even so, it was very close. Had 
George Wallace not run we probably would’ve ended up with Hubert Humphrey and 
another well-intentioned man sitting in the White House wringing his hands going, “Gee, 
what do we do?”

SM: Well, in terms of that election and Nixon’s secret plan to win the war, were 
you a Nixon supporter?

BP: Absolutely, because I began to see that obviously the mood of the country is 
such that we ain’t going to be there forever. The only thing that Kennedy or Humphrey or 
Eugene McCarthy, any of these people could do would be either to stampede out the door 
or pretend you weren’t stampeding and running like hell anyway. I knew if they did that 
it would shatter the morale of the military. It also would leave a residual in this country 
that would far transcend what happened to Truman in China. It was going to be horrible
if we didn’t at least do this somewhat right. You can’t just turn your back on an ally. I mean, what does that say to the rest of them? How would you like to be, you know, Australia or Thailand having a mutual defense pact with the United States, very same as South Vietnam, and all of a sudden they decided, “Whoops. This isn’t fun. I’m leaving.”?
So, yeah, there were big issues and the Democrats were not talking about those issues. Nixon was and Nixon had a hell of a lot of experience compared to the rest of them. So, yeah, I was a huge Nixon supporter insofar as he’s the guy who’s going to do it right, and we need him. So I voted for him and I was very pleased that he won. He bore that trust out. I’m convinced that had Dick Nixon not been president of the United States we would gone into, this country would have gone into such mass chaos and recrimination and it would have been so horrible. I think we would have not been a world power within five years. I just think it would have been that devastating because people were polarizing so badly. For all the things that Nixon did wrong, and they’re pretty well documented, the things he did right tend to get overlooked.

SM: I assume you were not disappointed when Johnson announced he was not going to run for reelection.

BP: Not at all. You know, he was obviously so overwhelmed with what was going on. I think it was a good move on his part because I honestly don’t know that his party would have nominated him.

SM: When you got back to Vietnam—wait. I’m sorry. One more pre-second-tour question. When you were with fellow soldiers at Ft. Benning or going through training at Ft. Rucker, how much did you guys commiserate, talk about your experiences in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. How did that experience help you, if at all?

BP: I mean, jeez. That’s all we talked about. Well, that and women. Because that was so much part of our lives. How did that help you? Well, it was nice to have somebody to talk to about it because you sure couldn’t talk to civilians about it. Most of them didn’t care and if they did it was usually kind of sad. (Laughs) Quite misplaced. “We’re behind you one-hundred percent, boys.” “Good.” (Laughs) “Thank you. My personal nightmare goes on, but glad to know you care.” (Laughs)

SM: Having that kind of environment where you could feel comfortable and safe talking about your experiences, knowing that someone or the people around you could
understand them, could identify and relate directly to them based on their own
experiences, that did help in some ways?

BP: Oh, sure. Yeah, it helps an awful lot because there’s an instant understanding.
I mean, I don’t care where the guy served. Sure, you go through a little of that unit, you
know, “My dog is better than your dog,” but, you know, scratch the surface and we’re all
soldiers and we all went through it. So, yeah, and everybody had gone and those who
hadn’t there were damn few of them. Most everybody had been there at least once and if
you hung around too much longer you were going to go there again.

SM: Well, let’s see here. When you did go back, first of all, did you know what
unit you were going to be assigned to?

BP: Yes. Actually, I did. I was the first OH-58 IP in-country. I knew—I take that
back. No, I didn’t know going over where I was going to. I was just assigned to 90th
Replacement.

SM: What was the trip like over for the second tour? Was it different? The same?
BP: It was horrible.
SM: How so?
BP: Well, it was horrible because, you know, I wasn’t naïve anymore. I knew
what I was going back to, although I really didn’t. It never occurred to me that things had
changed over there radically. You know, I was leaving my wife and my children. It was
depressing. It was scary.

SM: How many children did you have at that time?
BP: Two, by my previous marriage. And my wife and I had gotten the children
from my sisters, so she was going to have the kids while I was in Vietnam. So it wasn’t
happy. In a sense, there’s almost—people talk about target fixation for pilots when you’re
bombing, you know, if you’re not careful you can get sort of fixated on the dive down on
the target and getting just the right angle and everything that if you’re not careful you
won’t pull out. I think when you’re faced with a situation where you have multiple tours
back to a combat area you get fixated on that emotionally because you can’t get over it
because you’ve gotta go back. So you’re trapped in limbo. It dominates your thinking and
you can’t get away from it. It’s always waiting for you. It’s like this specter that refuses
to go away. It’s always in the background of everything. So whatever time you’re away
from there—I mean this is why Ft. Benning was such an intense place because everybody
is doing this horrible slow dance of imitation life and it’s not life at all because death is
waiting. It’s sitting over there in the corner. It hasn’t gone away. You can’t get over your
experiences because you’ve gotta go back and have some more. So you stay (?). Then
when you start back over again you have to really get yourself under phenomenal control
because you know what you’re going back to and you don’t know if you’re going to walk
away from this one, either. I mean, you’ve already tempted fate once, now you want to do
it again? Okay. So you go back and you spend that whole twenty-one hours trying not to
think about it but, of course, it’s always there. You don’t know if you’ve seen your loved
ones for the last time or not. Then, you know, you get into these idle thoughts while
you’re driving along at thirty-seven thousand feet, you look at all the khaki uniforms in
the airplane and you think, “Damn! I wonder how many of these guys are gonna make it
back alive?” (Laughs) Yup.

SM: How did these experiences affect your religious beliefs, if at all?
BP: Well, I was no longer a Catholic, which that hurt. My basic belief in God had
never changed. My basic belief in my, I would say the keeper parts of the religion—the
keeper parts are, especially for Catholics because at that time, even though Vatican II had
come along and totally changed things, it hadn’t changed shit for me because I was in the
Army and we’re cloistered. We don’t know a whole bunch of stuff that’s going on. But
for me, the meat on Friday and the mandatory Sunday Masses, that’s not important. But
God is important and, you know, the Trinity and that sort of stuff, yeah. That never goes
away and, you know, I prayed all the time both tours and I still pray to this day. That
hasn’t changed one bit. But I didn’t have, shall we say, the succor that you have from
going to the Mass. I didn’t go anymore because I didn’t feel welcome. That was a me
thing. That had nothing to do with the church or anything else. That was Bill making his
break from Catholicism. But, yeah, I took God with me.

SM: Did the ever-present nature of death in Vietnam and in war, did it change
your outlook on life and on death? And if so, how? Is it even possible to articulate it?
BP: I give you my favorite saying. You’ve never lived until you’ve almost died.
For those who’ve had to fight for it, life has a flavor the protected will never know. This
business of dying becomes pretty sophisticated because on one hand, you don’t give a
shit. I mean, you get to the point where you’re so sick of being terrified that you don’t care. You do care, but you don’t care. That’s the cross on which you are hung. You have a lot that you want to live for. You have a lot that you feel that you can contribute and want to do. But on the other hand, you understand perfectly the old Lakota saying, “It’s a good day to die.” You get into that mode, that “If we’re gonna die then, hey, screw it. Today’s the day, let’s go. Rock-and-roll, baby. My job is to take as many of them as I can. If they get me, so be it.” Then there are other times when you are in the other mode. Death is so tangible. You can smell it. You can taste it. It holds you in its arms and it never lets you go because if you struggle against it, it’ll consume you. Life gets really precious and every time that you are able to save life, sometimes even the enemy, if that makes sense, then you win. There are other time when, yes, there’s killing to be done and you do it, and that’s the sad time. On my first tour I used to get exhilarated and get a rush and later on I realized, “There’s nothing to be excited about here. This is not a game. We’re not up 3-2 in the top of the ninth. This is humanity that you’re toying with. You have no business being here. These are things that belong to a higher power. You’re mucking about in territory that’s very dangerous. I don’t know if that answers your question. I don’t know if there is an answer.

SM: I think you did. When you got to Vietnam for the second tour, what month was this?

BP: November 17, 1969.

SM: November seventeenth. Okay. What were the immediate differences or changes that you noticed about the war and what was going on in Vietnam now?

BP: Enlisted men walking around with no hats and the John Lennon glasses, and the peace signs and the marijuana leaves on everything. (Laughs) That was fun.

SM: The counter-culture had arrived in Vietnam.

BP: Excuse me, this is like in a Superman comic when you end up in Bizzaro World. (Laughs) What happened to the Army? Isn’t the Army here? It was a shock, to say the least. It was a shock being back. Because no matter what you think, you have forgotten a lot. All of a sudden you’re right back in it. Then you look around and here are these really bizarre creatures. There’s no other way to describe it. You think, “Oh, my God. What’s going on?” What’s going on is drugs have arrived in Vietnam. The
crusade is over. This isn’t a crusade anymore. This is a slave ship. Everybody’s
supposed to be pulling at their oars, but no. A lot of guys, they’re not doing anything.
They’re just putting in time. A lot of racial issues. Things that, whoa, I realized real
quick, number one, I had made a serious error in judgment. Number two, this was going
to be a long, long year. The difference is we’re there, it takes you a moment. There’s
sort of a period of time where you’re catching up to being there. You keep looking
around and you don’t see much that’s familiar. So that was bad. Then talking to the guys
that were getting ready to go home, because of the 90th Replacement you had those that
were coming in and those that were going out. So you had the guys who were going out.
“Hey, man, this changed. It’s changed a lot from when I first got here. You’ll see it.
The enlisted men are doing drugs. There’s a lot of racial tension. The officer corps,
they’ve changed, too. We’re not a team anymore. We’re more like a bunch of guys kind
of going through a thing.” That scared me worse than anything. Because you could see
that there were some phenomenal leadership challenges that were evidencing themselves
but were not being addressed. Real quick, within a day or two. Of course, I needed a
shower like badly. God, I needed a shower. Those pilots of the 229th wet my wings
down. We had this party the night before I left for Vietnam. They dumped all their
drinks on me about four o’clock in the morning while Rick Beaver gave the aviators’
toast. (Laughs) I was so drunk, I went to bed, got up about three hours later and I’m
hungover anyway and off I go to Vietnam with all this booze plastered all over me
because I’d overslept. Didn’t have time for a shower. It was bad. So I was not a real
happy camper. (Laughs) Then when I got to the 90th Replacement Company or Battalion
I found out I was being sent to the 11th Armored Cav. I wanted to go back to the 1st Cav.
The 11th Cav picked me up even though I tried to pull some strings and then I was told,
“No, the 11th Cav has dibs on the first OH-58 IP in-country and you’re it.” So, okay. So
then I went up to the 11th Cav.

SM: We’ve been talking for over an hour, let’s go ahead and take a break.
BP: Okay, let’s do that.
SM: I will call you back in about ten minutes.
BP: Okay, see you in a bit.
(Editor’s Note: Audio for the remainder of this interview is missing.)

SM: We are back from our break. Let’s go ahead and discuss your immediate impressions of your new unit. This is the 11th Armored Cav?

BP: Yes.

SM: Let’s go ahead and talk about your arrival there. Exactly where were they located? What were your first impressions upon arriving?

BP: They were located at Quan Loi, which is north of Saigon about forty kilometers. They were co-located with elements of the 1st Cavalry Division. When I arrived it was Thanksgiving Day. No, let me see when I arrived at the regiment because I was initially assigned to the aviation platoon. I met with the aviation officer, who is a major and he had a lot of questions about the OH-58 helicopter. What did I think of it? He was a little surprised that I was such a low-time pilot. (Laughs) Sorry. But the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment was slated to draw the first OH-58 to be the scout helicopter for the Air Cav troop. His concern was, “Can the OH-58 handle the job the way the OH-6 does?” I told him what I had been told at Ft. Rucker, because I asked the same question. They said, “Oh, yes. This is a great product.” Then I ran into finally one of the instructors who had done some scout pilot time in Vietnam. He said, “Look, it’s too long and it doesn’t have the horsepower that the OH-6 does. I don’t like it and I don’t think it’ll be good to scout.” So I kind of gave the aviation officer a mixed report. So he said, “Fine. I’ll take that to the regimental commander.” He did. He went to the regimental commander and he recommended that the 11th ACR (Armored Cavalry Regiment) refuse the honor of getting the honor of the OH-58 first. So they did. Well, then he assigned me to the aviation platoon. I got an attitude about that because the aviation platoon at the 11th ACR regiment was just nothing more than an executive taxi service. Ash and trash here and there, pick this up, drop that off. Take the old man around. Of course, only the most experienced pilots did that. It was just a lot of bullshit. I mean my first flight was a night flight. It was late afternoon, early evening down to Vung Tao to drop some guy off who was going on an in-country R&R, some major. I thought, “I’m going to go crazy if I do this for a year.” I went back to the aviation officer and said, “Major, I’ve got to get down to the Air Cav troop. I need to be flying operationally.” He sat down and kind of had school with me. He said, “Look, you’ve already done one tour. You’ve been in the
infantry you’ve got the CIB. You’ve got all your credentials intact. This tour doesn’t mean anything to anybody. It’s just going to be another checkmark that you’ve already got in the States. You can’t beat your first tour for career enhancement. Quite frankly, you’re putting your ass on the line for nothing.” He said, “You know as well as I do we’re getting out of here eventually. Who wants to be the guy to [be lost in] an effort like this? We’re not doing anything over here except marking time until the politicians can figure how to get us out. So don’t do it. You’ve got a wife, you’ve got kids. Just sit back enjoy your year. I’ll make sure nothing happens. Don’t worry about it.” (Laughs) Right. This is beyond a doubt the soundest advice anybody ever gave me. As usual, I ignored it. (Laughs) Excuse me, I’m Wild Bill Paris. I have got the straightest-shooting rifle, the smartest dog, and the prettiest wife anybody ever saw in the entire universe. I am a ring-tailed ding-dong daddy. I am not going to stand up here and watch other people fight a war. No way! He said, “You’re crazy and I’m not going to do this. You’ll do what I tell you and that’s it.” A week went by and I was dying. (Laughs) I was dying, “Oh, God. I want to go out free flight.” I even flew rocket recon at night, which was even more boring. You know, that’s burning holes in the sky, waiting to see the flash, if they decide to shoot rockets at the LZ that night. You can mark the target for counter-battery fire. As if they were still there. Hello? They’re gone. These things were all automatically set, but at any rate. So finally I was pissed off one day. I had come back from I don’t know what. Flying down to some place in Saigon to pick up parts and I was furious. I walked back in the platoon hooch and one of the pilots said, “Where you been?” Boy, I lit up. I just was furious. I said, “God damn, I didn’t come over here to sit on my ass, flying parts around! I’m a combat soldier!” just on and on. What I didn’t realize in my state was that the regimental aviation officer was standing right behind me. Of course, I’m cussing him and everything else. “I’ll be damned if I’m going to sit on my ass for a year.” (Laughs) So finally somebody went, “Um-hm,” and pointed behind me. I turned and there he was. I said, “Oh, sorry, sir.” He looked at me and shook his head and sighed and said, “Come on into my office, Paris.” So we went into his office and he sat down. He said, “Are you serious about this shit?” I said, “Major, I’m dying over here. I would rather take the risk of getting killed and do something than to be doing this. I cannot stand it. I’ll be honest with you, sir. I’d rather be out in the field
with the infantry than doing this crap. I didn’t go to flight school to do this. I want to fly
scout.” So he said, “Well, you may be in luck because the scout platoon commander just
crashed.” I said, “What?” He said, “Yes, he had a high speed governor failure and he
panicked. He didn’t know what to do. So they told him to pull,” they have an emergency
fuel shut off. Nobody knew how long it takes exactly for it to kick in on the OH-6. So
he’s boring around up there, so he pulled the emergency fuel and it went in like five
seconds. He wasn’t set up over the field for an auto rotation, so he crashed in the trees.
So the regimental aviation officer said, “I tell you what I’ll do, Paris. Against my advice
and against all common sense I’m going to send you down to that Air Cav troop.”
“That’s fine. That’s great. Thank you, Major. I appreciate it.” Of course, he had
commanded the Air Cav troop, what, like four months before. So he knew. He was on
his second tour. He was the same way and he even admitted as much later on. He said,
“Hell, I couldn’t have done it either, but I had to try.” I went down to the Air Cav troop
and I got there on Thanksgiving Day and it pissed me off. I had gotten all my stuff
together and signed out and did this and that. Then I went down to the Air Cav troop. Of
course, they’re all out flying, where everybody’s already had Thanksgiving dinner. I
didn’t even get Thanksgiving dinner. I didn’t get nothing. So it was too late to go back
up across the base to the other mess hall so I thought, “War is hell.” I didn’t even get
Thanksgiving dinner. But I checked in. The Air Cav troop commander was a most, what
do I want to say? He was one of the old Army aviators. He was a real careful guy, very
structured in his thinking, which is not what makes a good cavalryman. A good
cavalryman has got to be half crazy like George Custer. It’s just the wrong business for
careful people to be in. He looked at me and he wasn’t happy with the fact that I didn’t
have many hours. He finally agreed, okay, because the regimental aviation officer had
been pretty firm with them and said, “Look, here’s this guy and he’s going to head your
scouts.” Of course, what I didn’t know was that was pretty dangerous work and nobody
really wanted the job anyway. (laughs) I want to do that. So he said, “Fine. You have to
transition into the aircraft,” because I’ve never flown the OH-6 before. Somebody else
ran the platoon and they sent me back down to the rear. Some guy transitioned me into
the aircraft. It’s like ten hours. The instructor pilot flies with you twice, shows you
everything about the aircraft. Goes up with you for an hour and you fly eight hours and
then he comes back and flies with you another hour. Really, what they did with the last hour, if you haven’t crashed and burned, they’ve got other things they’re doing. “Did you get your ten hours?” “Yes.” “Okay. Are you okay with it? You got any questions?” “No.” “Okay, you’re on.” I went back up and took over the platoon. I could tell I had some real misgivings. You know, I’d been around Air Cav troops before. Never been assigned to one, but I worked with them enough on my first tour. I’m looking around at these guys. You know, I’m getting used to the idea that it’s almost 1970, things have changed. You’re not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy. But, man, they were a rag-tag looking outfit. They really were. The Air rifle platoon and all, they looked like Mexican banditos. They had tiger fatigues and they wore sweatbands. They looked like a bunch of hippies. It turned out that was a pretty accurate characterization. They were well-armed hippies, that’s about what they were. The scout pilots, most of the pilots looked okay. They were all young kids on their first tour. None of them had much experience as pilots. They’d all come out of school and gone over to Vietnam. Enlisted men, [well, I] had a platoon sergeant who was a staff sergeant and he’d extended. He was on his third extension. I couldn’t figure out why anybody would do that. I found out later it was because of the drugs. He hadn’t been in the Army that long. Then I had a bunch of crew chiefs that were on their first tour, observers who were about the same. I didn’t have much in the way of experience. Of course, turnover rate in that platoon is very high because of casualties. Gunship pilots looked to be about the same. Most everybody on their first tour. The lift section in the Air Cav troop, that’s where if there was any stability, that was it. There were a couple of guys on their second tour. The instructor pilot for the troop, he was Chief Warrant Officer 3. He was a pretty steady guy, knew his job. Of course, the maintenance officer was the W-4. He had the most experience of anybody and knew everything there was about everything. Good man. I wasn’t sure about the unit because you never know until you watch them fly what you’ve got. Since being an aero scout you’re always fighting separately, it was going to be interesting to see how it all works. So I made up my mind going in that I would pretty much give them my rules and then learn while I was there. There are certain things I’ve got to have. The rest of it I’ll learn OJT (on-the-job training). So I’ll be doing a lot of observing. That’s kind of what I told them when I called them together and introduced
myself. Got the officers off and talked to them and told them the usual. “You’ve got
problems, you take it up with your section leaders and then they bring it to me. I expect
you to behave, be officers, be leaders, and be good pilots. We’re going to get better and
better at this business of scouting. There are some things that I’m sure you guys know
that I need to know. There’s a couple things I know that you need to know, having been
on the ground. We’ll work through this. I understand drugs are real popular over here
and I don’t want to see it. I’ll have your ass.” So they all kind of mumbled and they
went away. Then the afternoon I got the enlisted men together and kind of gave them the
same speech. “No drugs. Catch you on drugs I’ll crucify your ass. We’ve got enough
going on over here. Same for drinking. We don’t drink during the day and I don’t want
to see anybody doing it.” Nobody said a word. Then that night about ten o’clock at
night—all the platoon leaders slept in one screened-in hooch, which was the pits. But at
any rate, there’s a little tapping at the door. “Captain Paris there?” “Yes.” All the lights
were out. I go to the door, “Can we talk to you out here, sir?” “We?” “Yes.” “Okay.”
So I go out. You can tell there was probably ten or fifteen guys there. They said, “We’re
from the scout platoon, we heard your speech this afternoon. It was real nice but you
obviously don’t know what’s going on over here so we’re going to tell you how it is.” I
thought, “Say what? You’re going to tell me? Okay.” They said, “What it amounts to is
this. A lot of us like marijuana, it relaxes us. We don’t like booze, it’s too hard on us
flying and stuff. It’s harmless, it doesn’t hurt anybody. You’re a lot more coherent than
if you drink and that’s the way it is. If you want to make it home from your tour, you’re
not going to push this whole drug thing.” I thought for a minute, this is a very unusual
interview taking place in the dark. At first I got pissed and then I thought, “You better
shut your mouth right now.” This is one of these little situations they don’t teach you
about in leadership school. So I started asking questions. “Let me get this straight. What
you guys are telling me, then, is that you guys all use drugs? Is that right?” “Well, yes,
just marijuana mostly. It’s not a problem.” “I see. This marijuana, tell me about it
because I don’t know anything about it. It’s against the law, right?” “Yes, that’s what
they say. The lifers are all against it and apparently you are, too.” “So this is a controlled
substance that you guys are taking even though it’s against [regulations]?.” “Yes, that’s
what we’re doing.” “So if I pitch a bitch about this and make this a matter of command
interest, then bad things can happen to me? Is this what you’re telling me? You’re threatening my life?” “No, no, don’t get carried away. We’re just telling you how it is.”

“Oh, okay.” I said, “Then where we’re at is that you guys have to have your drugs. No matter what I say, all you do is make sure I have an accident and you can find somebody else who’s not quite so zealous. So if this is then what you’re telling me then I guess since all of you guys have come to me in the middle of the night so I can’t see your faces, you all know me, I don’t know you.” I said, “I’ll tell you what, since I can’t change it and I’m not going away and you’re not going away then I guess we’ll have to make ourselves a little agreement won’t we? I decided obviously I can’t fight you on this. I’ve got enough problems trying to stay alive without having to worry about the guys behind me and next to me. Go ahead, do your drugs, but I’m going to tell you this: This deal only lasts until something happens to one of the aircraft or something happens to one of the people.” I said, “I’m totally at a loss here. I have to take you guys’ word for it about marijuana. I’m going to tell you this. You’ll have to kill me if something happens to one of the aircraft and I lose a pilot or I lose a crewman, because you guys are stoned up. So if you can self-police yourself, after the maintenance is done and everything else you guys have got to do your thing, that’s fine. But if I see it during the day or, as I already described to you, if something happens because somebody is screwed up, I’m going to have somebody’s head and then you’re not going to be able to stop me. So is that a deal?” “Yes, we can handle that.” “Okay, then that’s the deal.” So they turned around.

I recognized the platoon sergeant’s voice anyway. His name was Bruce. I said, “Bruce, I’m going to hold you to this.” I said, “You and your buddies can come to me in the night like the Klansmen, thank you for not wearing sheets, but I understand.” I said, “But I’m going to hold you responsible.” I said, “Don’t fuck this agreement up.” “Oh, no we won’t, Captain. Don’t worry about it. We’ll take care of your aircraft.” That was the deal. Then off we go into the twilight zone of Bill discovering this brave new world that I’d ended up in. What I found out was that operationally the unit was pretty good. The pilots were, generally, I would say in the good to the exceptional range, which most of these young warrants that were coming out of the program were. These kids liked to fly and they were good at it. The enlisted men were pretty good, as well. Although they were a cut, I thought, below what I had been seeing two years before. Part of that was the
draft was getting to be so many back in the United States that you had to be really stupid
to get caught up into it. That’s who we had over there. We had a few guys who were
exceptionally motivated and wanted to go save democracy. Then you had a bunch of not-
so-bright guys who for whatever reason failed out of college because they could care less,
but proved to be even more typical. They were so stupid they couldn’t get a job and
couldn’t do anything and the draft swept them up. These guys were not, they were not
mature. They weren’t real well-grounded. The drugs were just taking them places they
didn’t know they had names for. I found out as the year progressed that marijuana was
just the beginning. What they were doing was soaking their marijuana in liquid opium.
So when you smoked the marijuana you got a real hit. You know, talk about a downer.
God, they go comatose on that stuff. That was just the beginning. There was a lot of
other stuff. For, oh, I’d say the next month-and-a-half I was kind of learning the trade.
It’s a little bit different when you’re hovering over a jungle looking at trails. But the
principles are the same. I went out and tried to fly with all my pilots. You know, you’re
taking losses quite a bit. This whole pink-team concept is not built on rational thought.
The whole principal is it’s a low-intensity environment. So all you have to worry about
is the guy with the AK-47 who may be feeling hostile. You should be able to sneak up
on him and then the Cobras will kill them and then you don’t have to worry about it.
Well, that’s the theory. In practice what happens is usually you find out that they’re there
when they start shooting at you. You’re real lucky if you can survive that initial surprise
attack. I went through, I’d say, five-and-a-half months I went through twenty-one aircraft
and nineteen flying personnel. Our losses were pretty substantial. That doesn’t count
accidents. I lost three more in accidents. There was a lot of turnover. One of the very
first things I did with that platoon was I made it strictly voluntary. I told the pilots and I
told the crewmen this. I said, “This is a dangerous job. You’ve only got so much left in
your tank to go do this. When you reach that point where you can’t do it anymore, no
sweat. You just need to come tell me, ‘I need to quit.’ No stigma attached. It’s time to
walk away before you can’t do it anymore at all.” That was my policy. I stuck to that. It
was all voluntary. Nobody was ever forced to go out and fly. If a man told me, “I can’t
do it today,” then I’d say, “Fine. You can either leave or you can take the day off,
whatever you want to do.” Some guys left, some guys stayed. Eventually all the pilots
walked away with the exception of one. That included myself. There came a day when I
had to walk away. Christmastime came around and my mother, I would call her at night
because we had the MARS (Military Affiliate Radio System) system up and running
there. I would call her in Japan because my wife was always at work. So my mom
usually because she was on pretty much the same time we were I’d call her and talk to
her in Japan. She said, “Hey, why don’t we get together for Christmas?” I said, “Mom, I
can’t get away. I just got here.” She said, “No, no. I’ll come over to Vietnam. We’ll get
together in Saigon.” I said, “You’ve got to be crazy. You actually want to come over
here?” “Yes, it’ll be a lot of fun, honey.” (Laughs) She said, “See if you can get a couple
days off.” I said, “Fine.” So I went to the troop commander and I said, “Major, my
mother wants to come visit me for Christmas. Can I have a couple days off?” He looked
at me and said, “Your mother?” I said, “Yes. She wants to come visit me for Christmas.”
“She wants to fly all the way over here?” I said, “Well, she’s in Japan.” “Oh, okay.” So
sure enough she was due to fly in, I don’t know, Christmas Eve, something like that.
Maybe the day before Christmas Eve. I think it was Christmas Eve, if I remember
correctly. I caught a ride down and got off at one of the pads around there. So I hitched
a ride out to Tan Son Nhut. My mom comes in and she’s in a wool suit because Japan is
having winter. They have four seasons over there. Vietnam doesn’t have winter. She’s
in this wool suit and it is hot as always. They lose her luggage. So, no luggage. Well,
which is kind of critical because my mom has carefully planned out all this Christmas
and now they’ve lost her luggage. So she’s in a panic because she has no clothes and
there’ll be no Christmas. Then the other thing was I was sending every cent I made home
except, I think, I kept thirteen dollars. I had no money. So my mom and I are standing
there in Tan Son Nhut. Of course, what do you do? We walked out and caught a little
Vietnamese cab and we went over to one of the—it may have been the Rex or one of
these BOQs that actually functions more like a hotel. No, I take it back. She had made
reservations at the Continental. That’s where most everybody stayed who came in to
Vietnam. We went over to the Continental, that’s a civilian hotel. That’s not military.
They not only don’t have a reservation for her, they’re full. (Laughs) Now I’m standing
here with my mother, we’re in the Continental Hotel and this is not looking good. She
has no luggage, she has no clothes and now she has no place to stay. My whole life is
passing in font of my eyes. What in the hell am I going to do? We had no Vietnamese
money. My mom said, “Can I cash a check?” The guy said “Well, only if you’re a guest
here.” So it’s getting real frustrating. Finally the bell captain comes over because we’re
standing there wondering, “What the hell are we going to do now?” The bell captain
says, “If you have military payment certificates,” the occupation money, if you will, “If
you have MPC I can give it to you for,” I don’t know the black market rate, whatever it
was. Some ridiculous amount of money over and above the normal exchange rate and I
hit the roof. I just had enough of this. All this nonsense going on. Here’s this guy who
is trying to trade money on the black market. So, I end up not yelling at him but in a very
loud toned voice telling him, “Get lost. I’m sick of the way this stuff works. For God
sakes, this is your country, man. Don’t you have any shame at all? You’re ruining your
own monetary system. You’re making a shambles out of everything.” Now, I’m giving a
lecture. “I didn’t come all the way over here, thirteen-thousand damn miles so I could
screw up your economy and mine both.” (Laughs) My mother is just standing there
looking at me like, “Okay.”

SM: “Don’t hold back.”

BP: Yeah, “Tell us how you feel, Bill.” Then it hits me. Yeah, you’re really
changing this guy’s heart and mind. So he goes away shaking his head. “What an idiot,”
he’s thinking. The guy at the front desk is watching me and listening to me. So I said,
“You know what, Mom? We’ll get a taxi and we’ll run over to the Rex maybe we can get
something. I don’t know.” So this guy comes out from behind the desk he says, “Wait a
minute, Captain.” He said, “I couldn’t help hearing what you said.” He said, “I was very
touched. Most Americans don’t feel that way.” He said, “You could have made your
situation a lot easier if you would have done the black market thing with your money.”
He said, “I’m going to help you out because I’m quite proud of what you said. I wish
more people felt that way.” He said, “I’ll get you a room.” Well, my mother looked at
me like, “My boy!” I really was quite touched. You know, Merry Christmas. There is a
Christmas after all. Well, hell, all right. We get this room with the obligatory gecko
lizard on the wall. (Laughs) Welcome to Vietnam. That’s where you are if the gecko
lizards are everywhere. We check into the room and go back down and mom says,
“Well, let’s go over to the Rex maybe we can get a bottle of booze. Do you have a ration
card?” I said, “No, we don’t have that. But I’d be willing to bet we can come up with something to drink.” We go over to the Rex and there’s this fat, old sergeant there. I shouldn’t say that because I’m turning into a fat old sergeant myself. Anyway he’s in civilian clothes and, “Well, if you don’t have a ration card, Captain—” I said, “All right, what do you want?” “I’ll tell you what, I’ll cash a check for you. You can’t do it because you’re not assigned to the BOQ, but I’ll write a personal check and you just give me ten bucks.” So that’s how I got a bottle of gin so my mother can have a drink. “Well, we’ll throw it in.” “Oh, gee. Great. Thanks.” He gives us a bottle of gin and cashes a check for Mom so that she has some money, which is good. One of us ought to have money. I can’t believe I went into that thing so unprepared. Well, Mom’s coming, no problem. So we went back to the Continental Hotel and each of the rooms has a little balcony. The guy did very nice by us. So we’d gotten something to eat along the way. I don’t know where. So we’re sitting out there and Mom is in her underwear. Of course, I’m not because I don’t have any underwear, but I’ve got my shirt off and we’re sitting out on the deck. She’s having a martini and I’m having gin and water with no ice. War is hell, I’ve got to tell you. We’re watching the flares going off and we’re talking about The Christmas Story and the very first Christmas that ever was and how there was a star in the sky. Then we started getting maudlin and [ginned up] on pretty much empty stomachs. So we started singing Christmas carols when we realized that nobody could remember the words. (Laughs) So that’s my memory of Christmas in 1969. My mother and I in a hotel in downtown Saigon. It was neat. She left, she was there two-and-a-half days. She left and I went back out to my unit. That was the all-time nice memory except for the R&R where I met my wife later on. Went back up and we had been running ops and it had been pretty much bad guy here, bad guy there kind of thing. We had lost a few, but the squadrons weren’t making much contact on the ground. We weren’t finding a whole bunch. This kept on until about the middle of January. One of the lift pilots, a real young kid, kept bugging me. He wanted to be a scout pilot. I kept saying, “Get some experience first. Get some experience.” What I was really trying to do was keep him out of the job. It was dangerous work. He was a young kid. He was like nineteen or twenty and had a wife and a kid. I was trying to do the very same thing for him that Major Braden did for me. This kid wasn’t paying any more attention than I was. So I
kept stonewalling him. I’d get scout pilots from other places. There’s always guys that
want to do it. You know, you pull them out of the pipeline and tell them when they get
there, “All right, son, you’re going to be a scout pilot. Got any problems with that?” “No,
I don’t think so.” “Fine.” On the twentieth of January 1970 I was number four on the list
to fly, which normally you don’t fly if you’re number four. Hell, we put out a pink team
in the morning, usually run it around one of the squadrons, whoever thought they had
activity or we’d react to information. Intel, they’d send a pink team out to do that. Once
in a while we’d send a white team, which was two scouts because we carried the mini-
gun on our OH-6 instead of a third guy in the back with a machine gun. We just carried
them for our pilots and a mini-gun. Once in a while we’d send a white team out for
convoy cover. It usually was pretty low-threat. That particular day our second squadron,
which at that time was our best squadron, was along the Cambodian border. The
squadron commander and the S-3 for the squadron both had taken ground fire. It was at
some range and they couldn’t tell where it was. They’d asked for a pink team to come
out. I’d sent two missions out and my pilots hadn’t found anything. Then the third pilot
went out on a mission, they had a third squadron out of War Zone C. They had
something they wanted looked at so their guy went out. So I got a call up to operations.
So I went up there and the operations officer sat down and briefed me on what was going
on. He said, “Look, we’ve got a problem here. For some reason your pilots aren’t
finding anything. We know something is in the area because they keep shooting at the
squadron commander, and the S-3, and one of the log birds that was running between
first squadron and here also took some fire. So we need somebody to get up there and
find out where the hell these clowns are at so we can get them.” The first two missions
that had launched were not my best scout pilots. These are guys, I was pretty convinced,
were getting ready to leave. They just hadn’t got to that moment where it occurred to
them that they’d had enough. As a matter of fact, one guy I was pretty sure was going to
leave real quick. We used to do what we call “search-and-avoid” operations just like
when I was there on my first tour. You can go look all over the place and ignore the
obvious and then go take on some fuel and come back and say, “No, I didn’t see
anything.” I had—one of the replacement aircraft was coming in and we were getting it
ready. We’d picked it up from the 4th Division because they were deactivating. I talked
to the operations officer. I said, “Look, you can go ahead and put the other pink team
back out if you want. Or if you’ll give me half-an-hour I’ll have this ship ready. It’s the
only one I’ve got available right now. I’ll go up and take a look.” He said, “Okay, I’d
rather wait than send these guys up because it’s getting to be pretty embarrassing that
nobody can find anything.” I said, “All right, just give me a chance to get the mini-gun
on and get the ship ready and I’ll take the mission.” So he called over to the squadron
and said, “Okay, White Six is going to pull this one, but he’s having some equipment
problems with his aircraft. He’ll be up in a bit.” So they loaded up a Cobra and briefed
the gun crew. “Okay, we’ll go.” So we’re getting there, mini-gun on and we’re putting
all the stuff in the aircraft and this kid comes up, the pilot from the lift section. He starts
in on me again. “Captain Paris, I really want to go. You know you’re short two pilots.
You’ve got to take me. You’ve been telling me “Get some experience.” Okay, I’ve got
150 hours. How much more do you want? You can’t do this to me.” I’m stonewalling
him and stonewalling him. Then I hear my own words. The kid looks me right in the eye
and says, “You can’t do this to me. I want to fly scout and you’re purposefully pushing
me away. You can’t do that. I didn’t come over here to fly lift. This is what I want to
do.” I thought to myself, “Oh, geez. I know exactly how he feels.” I relented. I said,
“Okay, tell you what Mr. (name expunged, per interviewee’s request), go get your flying
gear and meet me back out here.” I told the observer, “You’re not flying, you’re
scratched. I’m going to put Mr. (name expunged) in the left seat when he gets back out
here with his shit. Talk him through how to operate the machine gun, what you do.” So
we finished out the aircraft, this guy comes running back out, the observer shows him
how to load the gun, what to do. So we mount up, get the Cobra turning up and we take
off. We head north up toward the Cambodian border which is about a fifteen-minute
flight. We get up there and then the Cobra, it’s called “going in the box.” That was our
terminology for it. You come into the area at about fifteen-hundred feet so that you can
get a look at it. You’ve got an idea of the overall pattern of terrain. Now you’ve already
marked it off on your map. You have pretty much of an idea where you’re going. They
had showed me the location of the aircraft, where they were when they had taken fire.
The areas that they had checked didn’t look good to me at all. I mean, hell, if I was
manning a machine gun I sure wouldn’t be where they were looking. I had told the
Cobra pilot when we went up there, “I’m going to check more to the northeast. I don’t think west is an option. It’s already been checked anyway. So I want to look over right towards the border.” We go down near the box and I start sniffing around. Sure enough, I start cutting trails. So we’re going along three-hundred feet because the trees are pretty high. There’s teak, and teak trees grow high. It’s single- to double-canopy jungle. So it’s open areas and then some thick, but not real thick. So I’m following this trail and I’m talking to the Cobra. I’m talking also to (name expunged). “Here’s what you’re looking for. Here’s what you want to do. You know foot traffic. You can tell if it’s fresh because when they cross the water, if it’s not clear then they’ve been through there and pretty recently.” So we started in. This is a good-looking trail. Then the trail gets bigger, joined by other trails. I’m talking to (name expunged) and I’m saying, “It’s some hours old, but not that old. So I think we’re going to hit something. I want you to be ready. Have that 60 ready and wherever the fire comes from, you suppress, throw a red smoke grenade and then that’ll key the Cobra.” I talked to the Cobra. “We got you in sight, no problem.” Okay, so I’m going along and I’m kind of crabbing. By that I mean I’m flying sideways trying to keep this trail in sight that I’m following. So I’m three-hundred feet right above the trees so I can keep the trail in sight. It’s open to single-canopy jungle and clear areas. I’m following this trail kind of across a clear area and then there’s woods coming across. I picked the trail up on the other side of this big, long, open area. All of a sudden, I have never heard this before. I hear more shit. It sounds like there’s a roar. It’s a roar! I hear the cracking sound, but it’s a roar. I mean I’m taking fire like you wouldn’t believe. Then I feel on the back of my seat. I could hear bullets hitting the blades, the skids, everything. I’ve been acquired, as they like to say. I’m taking fire. So I called down on the radio because I didn’t think it went out because I saw a flash to the instrumentation and then everything went dark. Then all the gauges zeroed out. I hollered at (name expunged) because we don’t have a radio. I said, “We’re taking fire.” Shoot. So I dumped the nose. There was nothing to do. I mean tracers were going everywhere. Big green ones and big white ones. So I dumped the nose and I sucked up the collective and wrapped on some power and away we go. Tried to fire the mini-gun, nothing. I’ve lost all electronics. Now, we’re on fire. So, of course, you dump the nose, that gets the flames going. I can’t see shit but I know speed is more important
than seeing. I know there’s an open area there. Now the plane, when you fly without
doors the air in a helicopter moves in a circular pattern, it comes from your right or your
left into the aircraft and then goes through the top of the canopy and down. So from your
right to left or left to right, you’ve got air constantly moving. When you’re on fire in a
helicopter that same air pattern now distributes the flames from the top of your head
down through the bottom of your feet, then against your thighs. I go get up a pretty good
head of steam, but I can’t see now. Of course, I’m highly stressed. So I yell at (name
expunged), “Get rid of the gun, get ready to jump!” I said, “We’re going to crash. We’re
not going to make it. Try and get out.” So I just jammed the left pedal so I could see a
little bit. So I saw we’re heading for this open area and tracers are going everywhere.
Most of them are behind me, some of them way ahead of me. I’ve got them fooled. As
we get to the bottom, I straighten out. We’ve got to be going eighty or ninety knots now
but we’re also heavily on fire. The aircraft is fully involved. Right when I figure I’m
down towards the bottom I yanked that son-of-a-bitch, haul back on the cyclic and stand
her right on her ass. But I got way too much speed, even that doesn’t help. She falls
through because I’ve got no idea. I tried to bring off, soften the landing, but I’m late and
it doesn’t make any difference. We’re screwed. I don’t remember anything after that. I
had undone my seatbelt because if at all possible I was going to get out, too. (name
expunged) couldn’t get out or wouldn’t get out. I mean that would take some sort of, I
don’t know what, to jump from a helicopter at ninety knots, even if you are on fire.
Human nature being such. Well, that’s all I remember and then I woke up and I’m laying
up in the front. The Plexiglas is smashed. The bubble in front, and I’m laying about one-
third out of the way of the helicopter and we’re on fire on our left side, on (name
expunged)’s side. I don’t know from nothing. Takes me a minute, come to and I crawl
out through the bubble. I’m lying there and I hear Vietnamese voices. I’m trying to get
my wits about me and I look up and I see the Cobra just making lazy circles up there at
1,750 feet just going around in a circle. I think two things. Number one, my
transmission didn’t get out. Number two that son-of-a-bitch has been fucking off and
didn’t even see me go down. That pissed me off so bad, but I’ve got bigger problems.
So I kind of stand up and I’m in shock, there’s no doubt about that. I look around for
(name expunged), I can’t see him. So I go over to his side of the aircraft and I holler his
name as I kind of come around the bubble. He screams at me. He was trapped under the
wreckage. He was burning up. He’s on fire. Push your little button there for a second.
SM: Absolutely. Want me to call you back in a few minutes?
BP: No, I need to ask you something.
SM: Okay, one second I’ve got to pause two systems here. One second.
SM: We’re back from our short break. Go ahead, sir, and continue.
BP: That was a real important break. (Laughs)
SM: It was to establish—
BP: Now it gets a little bit surreal, because in front of me there are an avalanche
of emotions, horror, shock. I grab his arms and I try to pull him and that ain’t going to
happen. The transmission of the aircraft has fallen on him and has him now pinned. So,
as I say, he’s burning. The thought, it’s amazing what comes to you at what time. But
I’m thinking of all the people who have done superhuman things. I’ve got to get this
helicopter off. With adrenaline I can do this. So I grabbed the unburned portion of the
top of the door and I try and lift the helicopter off of him. I barely can make the damn
thing move. I don’t have any strength anyway, which I realize later. That horror has
been my constant companion forever since. We’re yelling at each other, “You’ve got to
try and get out.” He’s saying, “I can’t! I can’t! I’m on fire! Help me! Help!” You reach
a point real quickly where things boil down to what’s important. At that particular
moment in time I only had two choices here. I can walk away and let him finish burning
to death or I can do something about this. Now, either choice is not a happy one, but
there’s no time to really mull this over. I’m faced with the basic question: are you willing
to watch your co-pilot burn alive? Are you willing to watch another human being suffer,
what I consider one of the ultimate, worst forms of death? Not even thinking about the
rest of his life. Yes, and if you got him out of there, then what? What are you going to
face when you turn around? I did what I thought I had to do. I took out my .45, which
was the only damn thing that stuck with me, and I shot him. He stopped screaming. The
last thing he said and he screamed it was, “Help me! For God’s sake help me!” Well, so
I shot him. Holstered my weapon and turned around and now the psychological impact is
indescribable. You’ve just done the one thing that no man would ever, ever want to
consider ever happening in a war or in any type of a situation, destroying something that
you care about. Well, there are more immediate problems. I go back around and I
always had an M-3 grease gun which I carried attached between the pilot and the co-
pilot’s seats. I could hear the Vietnamese calling back and forth. I looked inside the
crash for the grease gun and it’s not there. The flames are getting quite bad now. I
realize, “You better get what you need out of here and get the fuck out of here because
this thing’s going to blow up.” So I grab a red smoke grenade. I can’t find the grease
gun. So I grab my helmet, I have no idea why. I see a bomb crater about twenty yards
away. I duck down and I run over and flop in the bomb crater. Now I can really hear the
Vietnamese voices back and forth, back and forth a lot of that excited jabber. It’s like,
“Oh, fuck!” This is a moment I never anticipated. I’ve already had one of these, now
I’ve got another one. The chances are excellent that this is my last few minutes on earth.
The only other option in this scenario is that, “Gee Bill, you’re about to take a trip to the
Hanoi Hilton.” So I looked down because I think if you’re captured you give your name,
rank, serial number. I’m looking. Well, let me see, I’ve got an 11th ACR patch on. I’ve
got a scout platoon leader patch on. I’ve got CIB, 1st Cav [patch]. Shit! I’m fucked.
Then I look up and lo and behold and finally, suddenly it occurs to the Cobra drivers that
they can’t see me. They come meandering down out of altitude and come lower and
lower. All of a sudden I hear these .51s open up on them and the great big tracers go up
in the sky. I thought, “Well, it’s about fucking time.” I see them jink to the left and off
they scoot. They grab altitude. Now it looks like maybe we’re going to have a war down
here. Well, in the meantime now I hear a bunch of voices off to my right. I peek up out
of the shell hole. I see the Cobra start to come back around and I think this would be a
good time to use that smoke grenade. So I pop the smoke grenade, we always threw red
smoke. I thought if I throw that red smoke grenade they’ll see it and they’ll know I’m
alive. So as they come around and now they’re at about two-thousand feet and this
[enemy] group that starts out toward the crash site goes back to wherever they go back to.
The Cobra comes closer and closer. As he starts down on his run I throw the smoke
grenade. The .51s opens up and all kinds of hell breaks loose. They fire like two pairs of
rockets and break off. It’s obvious to them, “Whoops.” I watched the smoke grenade
lazily go. This is like almost slow motion. I throw the smoke grenade. It goes up into
the air about four or five feet and goes about twenty, right into a puddle of water. No
smoke. The Cobra pulls out of his dive, goes away and they don’t even know I’m alive. I’m thinking, “Oh, geez. I’m going to be a POW (prisoner of war) and I’m going to get killed. Now what do I do?” Contemplating my life choices, I mean I’m probably more terrified than I have ever been in my entire adult life. Nothing in my first tour, no experience has ever prepared me for this. Yes, you’re going to die. Sure, I know that. Yes, you could get killed, I know that. But I’ll be damned if I want a long, long run up to think about it. I’m not going to be a prisoner of war. I’m not going be like those poor bastards in the Air Force. I am not going to rot away in some goddamn prison with some stupid little son-of-a-bitch making me bow every twenty minutes. I just can’t handle it.

So I pull my .45 back out, I throw the safety off and I start contemplating the unmentionable. Hell, I’ve already done one today, why not just put this .45 to my head and just pull the damn trigger and let it go? You know it’s like snap of the fingers and you’re gone. You’re out of this situation and you don’t have to screw around with it. You don’t have to worry about whether you’re going to be a prisoner. You don’t have to worry about are little fellows are going to come out of their holes and kill you. I’ve got a .45, what kind of a war am I going to have with that? If I had the grease gun, hell, I’d start a war right now. In retrospect, pilot’s note: Somebody did Bill a great favor by losing that submachine gun that day. So I spend what I think is a long time. I don’t think it was probably more than two or three minutes in real time. I very, very carefully consider committing suicide. I had to battle with that. It sounded awfully attractive.

SM: What stopped you?

BP: I started to pick the pistol up and put it to my head and then this voice inside of me said, “Oh, shit. We are not going to do this. I didn’t come over here to just roll over and die because some son-of-a-bitch shot me out of the sky. If we’re going to have a war, God damn it, let it start right here, right now. I’m not going to do this. I’ve got a wife, I’ve got a kid and I tell you what, you pull that trigger, son, and you’re standing in front of God. You know what’s going to happen? You’re going to have to look God in the eye and say, ‘God, I couldn’t handle it.’” If you really, really want to think about something frightening, think about God showing you your children standing there without a father ten years down the road, really needing some help. Think about your wife having to read that damn telegram and see those guys standing at the door.
they’re not going to say is, “Well, Bill pussed out because he couldn’t handle it.” Think about ten, twenty, thirty years down the road when God shows you somebody who really desperately needed your help and you’re not there because you pussed out. Screw it. We’ll fight. If they want to kill me, they can kill me. I’m not going to do it to myself. So I roll over and all right, let’s have a war. I’m going out fighting. Enough of this bullshit. I hear rotor blades, whoop, whoop, whoop. I look and there’s a Huey. It’s probably the squadron commander or the ops officer because it’s got squadron markings, comes over and all of a sudden artillery starts coming in. Yeah buddy! Artillery all over the place except for the crash site. I’m thinking, “Woo-hoo!” I could hear the guns over at the squadron LZ going off, boom! Boom, baboom, boom! Yes, bring it on. Now you’ve got a front seat to the war. Here comes a FAC (forward air controller). I thought, “This is good. This is really good. I’m glad I made this decision to live.” The FAC comes around and he puts a couple rockets down and fighter-bombers go in. Then I hear some more rotor blades, bup, bup, bup. Well this is a Loach coming in. I see a couple Cobras coming in at about a thousand feet throwing rockets down on each side. I can tell what they’re doing. I can tell what they’re doing. They’re putting down a path for them to come in. All of a sudden all of this ground fire comes up and the scout breaks off. I thought, “Well, all right. We’ll make it, we’ll make it. Now we’ve got us a war.” I watch this and then I hear a break. The Air Force is done bombing. I tell you, laying down there on the ground and listening to the screams after the bombs hit and the nape (napalm) goes in, that’s pretty damn therapeutic. I liked that. My morale is up very high right now. So then they try and make a break, more Vietnamese to the south of me try and get out to the crash site. I figure, “Shit, I’m going to help out, too.” So I throw a couple rounds at them. That was not a smart idea because now I start taking ground fire. It’s like, “Oh, Bill. They didn’t know where you were until you torched off those two rounds.” That was not bright. Now they started throwing shit at me but the artillery comes back in again. So they have to break off the war and hide. Which they do and all of a sudden I hear some heavier rotors now coming in. I thought, “What the hell is going on?” Now there’s like six Cobras in pattern and they’re laying down carpets of rockets on either side of the flight path in and some up ahead. So they’re getting these clowns’ heads down and sure enough here comes a Cobra. Comes zooming in. Well, it’s Carl
Marshall the Cobra platoon leader and one of the guys, Art Smith, in the front seat. So they come roaring in and as he pulls the nose up I thought, “Bill, you better get up and do something because these guys are never going to know you’re there.” So I jump up in this foxhole and I wave at them and they see me. It’s like, “Whoa! All right.” So I thought he was going to go back out and maybe they bring in the aero rifle platoon. Oh, no. Not Carl. He goes to a hover, does a pedal turn and Art is on the mini-gun on the nose just laying down fire all over the place. In the meantime they’ve got artillery coming in. The Cobras are still emptying out two or three pairs of rockets at a time. The Cobra hovers over and sets down. I thought, “What the fuck is he doing?” They open up the side window and Art Smith starts to get out of the Cobra and I thought, “Hey, Bill, your ride is here.” So I get up and I run like hell. I’m waving to Art, “Sit down, sit down, sit down!” Then Carl in the backseat of the Cobra hollers, “Grab the skids!” About that time I don’t know what happens. But all of a sudden I stop. I guess I’m getting cocky. I turn around and I fire about four rounds with my .45 and Carl hollers, “Get in the goddamn aircraft!” (Laughs) I jump up on the little outboard store thing that holds the rocket pods and Carl says there’s no room. I said, “Fuck that.” So I literally rip the helmet off of Art Smith in the front seat, who by now is out of ammo by the way. So Art, like me, is now a passenger. Carl brings it to a hover and turns and starts to go out the same way he comes in. I’m very unfamiliar with Cobra pilot’s helmets. I know they’ve got an intercom switch because he points. He says, “There, there.” Well, it’s a two-position switch. It’s like the old tanker’s helmets. Forward is radio or intercom and back is radio or the other way. I don’t know. I don’t remember anymore. At any rate, I hit the radio not the intercom. I start screaming. “Carl! Carl don’t go that way! God damn it, they’re everywhere! Go to your left, go to your left! Jesus fucking Christ!” Everybody in III Corps hears me that day. Guys told me they came right up out of their seats because it was so unexpected. They’re listening to the regular traffic. Even at regiment down in the ops they were saying when my voice came in it was about a force nine. Just liked to blow the maps off the walls. (Laughs) Anyway we get out. Damnest thing I’ve even seen. The ship doesn’t take one round. Crap is going everywhere. I mean they were bringing it as we leave. Green tracers everywhere. They don’t hit the aircraft. I’m hanging on the rocket mount standing on the side of the Cobra on the rocket store kind of
leaning over Art Smith screaming in the radio. Carl finally reaches up with one hand, I
don’t know how he did it because he’s flying that aircraft, pushes me on the shoulder and
said, “Shut up!” (Laughs) Took me over to Bu Dop Airstrip, which was about two
kilometers to the southwest, southeast, drops me off and says, “There’ll be a bird in to
pick you up.” He takes off to go get some more ammunition. I’m thinking to myself,
“Oh, God. Don’t leave me. Please don’t leave me.” So Bu Dop is abandoned so I just sit
down. There’s nothing else to do. If those dinks come and get me now I’m going to be
so pissed after all that. So one of the scouts comes in, one of my pilots comes in and I
said, “I’m flying.” He kind of looked at me like, “Sir, you look like shit.” I said, “I don’t
care. I’m flying.” What I didn’t realize was I had no facial hair. Going into the scrape I
had eyebrows and a mustache and everything. Coming out I had no eyebrows, no
mustache except for a little piece over in the corner. I really looked a wreck. I got first-
degree burns on my face and second-degree burns on my arms where the Nomex
flightsuit slipped up when I was trying to move the aircraft. Plus I had been laying in the
mud and the dirt. I took it up to about eight-thousand feet. That was as high I figured I
could get. We get back to Quan Loi about ten minutes later and I called tower. By now
I’m starting to feel, I’m calming down, coming down from all this stress and rush. I
suddenly realize that I’m not feeling so good. So when I call Quan Loi tower I asked
them for a reverse-course landing, which is come in with the wind instead of against.
They nixed that idea. So I get down to about six-hundred feet on shortfall and I told the
pilot, “You better land, I don’t think I can move.” So he grabs the controls and brings us
in, they call an ambulance. Well, the ambulance comes and gets me and along with it is
our ops officer. He’s standing there by the ammo and he says, “Bill, before they take you
to the hospital do you think you can brief the old man and the S-3 at regiment?” I said,
“Yes, I think so.” He said, “Man, you really look like shit.” I said, “Thanks.” So they
haul me in the ambulance and they check me over. It’s like burns. Of course, we don’t
know the full extent of my injuries. Get to the regimental headquarters, they have to help
me down into the tactical operations center. I show them on the map where everybody is.
They ask me a bunch of questions. “Well, what happened to your co-pilot?” “Well, he
was killed in the crash.” Might as well start that lie right away. “Fine, get him some
medical attention.” So then they take me over to the 37th Med. The doc looks at me and
says, “How you doing?” I said, “My feet just went numb.” He said, “Huh?” And I fell
down. (Laughs) He picks me up and they put me on the table. He examines me and he
says, “Well, I don’t know what’s going on but you’ve injured your lower back. That’s
the swelling. That’s what’s causing the numbness.” He said, “We’re going to go ahead
and medevac you. Your burns, we’ll go ahead and clean you up.” He said, “I don’t think
it’s anything too particularly bad.” So they clean me up and call for a medevac to take
me down to the 93rd Evac and they all leave and I’m just sitting there. What do you do?
I really wished they hadn’t gone away because now the demons come in the room and
stand there. We had this one-sided conversation about Jesus. “You know what you just
did? You’re going to live, yes, but you shot your fucking co-pilot.” Oh, man. Then one
of the pilots who I went through flight school comes up to see me at 37th Med. “Captain
P, we’re so sorry. The guys admitted that they lost track.” I said, “I know, I don’t want
to talk about it.” He said, “You need to know the second squadron came into the area and
they’ve got a hell of fight going. They’re kicking the shit out of those guys’ asses. It was
a classic helicopter ambush.” “Yeah, no kidding?” He said, “Can I do anything for
you?” I said, “Yeah, down in my foot locker is a flask with bourbon in it. Will you bring
it up here?” He said, “Do you think you ought to?” I said, “I think I need it desperately.”
So he went down because it wasn’t that far from our hooch, went in my footlocker and
got my flask, brought it up. It’s a pint-sized flask. I drank a pint of bourbon and didn’t
feel one damn thing. I was not medicated, nothing. I just drank that thing. It was like I
had a glass of water. I didn’t feel one thing. So then the time that the medevac chopper
from the 1st Cav gets there to back haul me I can’t move. So they put me on a stretcher,
take me down to 93rd Evac and you have to go through triage. That’s interesting. That’s
cattle call for the wounded. So they put all the stretchers out on the flight line ramp. So
you’re there laying on a stretcher and here comes the triage team. It’s the doctor and the
nurse and a couple of enlisted medics. So the doctor came up and looked at my tag and
said, “He’s got a couple burns and we’ll just send him back up to 37th Med. They can
finish him there. We need the room.” Well, the nurse, who’s a major, looks at me while
the doctor’s reading my tag and I said, “Major, I can’t move.” She said, “What’s the
matter?” I said, “I’m paralyzed.” Then the doctor said, “It’s just a couple of burns.” She
looks at the doctor and they’re squatting down over my stretcher and she says, “Doctor,
he can’t move. He’s paralyzed. Maybe we ought to do something, you think?” “Okay, I
didn’t see that. Yes, that’s good idea.” She turns to the medic, “Take him to ward such-
and-such.” Off we go. So they took me in and put me in the burn ward. The burn ward
is an interesting place because everybody in there is either in great pain or dying. So I
was not that bad. I had burns over ten percent of my body, mostly consisting of my face
and my right arm. But I’m paralyzed, can’t move, can’t move my feet. So he takes me
out of my flight suit. They have a television on the ward. So a couple hours later I
watched Walter Cronkite. It was such a slow day he even mentioned the fact that I got
shot down. Not by name, but a helicopter near the Cambodian border in III Corps. I
thought, “Damn, Bill. You’re famous.” What I didn’t realize was how famous I really
had become because it was a slow day for news. What Carl Marshall did was a pretty
heroic act. So the press hounds were up there. They had interviewed Carl and they gave
my name. I had signed a sheet saying if I’m wounded, please don’t notify my family.
But because my name was given out over the air on television the Army had to notify my
wife. So they send a car over with a telegram and my wife is at work. We have a
wonderful woman, black woman back there in Savannah. Her name was Lou, she took
care of the kids during the day. Then when Joan came home about 5:15 or 5:30 she
would leave. So Lou goes to the door and there’s a guy in uniform with a telegram. She
immediately freaks out, calls my wife, “Oh, Mrs. Paris! They’ve killed Captain Paris!
He’s dead! They’re here with a telegram!” Of course, they won’t let Lou open it because
she’s not my wife. So they talk to her on the phone. “Do you want us to deliver it down
there?” Joan said, “No, there’s nothing I can do. There’s nothing anybody can do.
What’s happened has happened. I’ll deal with it when I get home from work.” So she
told Lou, “Look I’ll be home in an hour. Just tend to the kids. Get yourself under
control. We’ll be okay.” So she thinks I’m dead. She doesn’t know until she gets home
and gets cooled off and gets the kids fed and puts them in bed and then sits down, fixes a
drink to read about the demise of her husband. It’s not until then that she finds out that
I’m wounded and in the hospital. So that was a great relief. Meantime, my mother in
Japan does not know. Stars and Stripes, which is the house organ—which you are aware
of—for the military publishes this wonderful story about my daring rescue. My mother’s
pattern during the day is such that she gets up, has a cup of coffee, gets ready for work
and then she stops at the little post office box, the little newspaper box that they have on Tachikawa Airbase which is where she is at in Japan, north of Tokyo. She gets the *Stars and Stripes* and then she has a cup of coffee at the office and she reads the *Stars and Stripes* before she starts her day, just to make sure her son who is over in Vietnam is okay. Well, her staff finds out about this. They read their *Stars and Stripes* copy before she gets to hers. There’s my name splashed all over the front page. “Up, Up, and Away in Daring Rescue.” It says that I’m severely wounded. So they go to the box where she always gets her *Stars and Stripes* and they take all of the papers out of there. They go to the office and collect every copy of the paper there and they lock them away in the safe because Mom has a board meeting at eight o’clock that morning which she pitches the annual budget. That’s a pretty important meeting. Since there’s nothing that apparently can be done they figured they’ll wait until she’s done with the board meeting and tell her. So Mom comes in and says, “You know what’s going on? I stopped at the box to get a *Stars and Stripes* and there are no copies there. Does anybody have a copy of *Stars and Stripes*?” “No, Jean, we don’t.” “Well, that’s something.” She goes over to the Boy Scout office on the other side of the building. “Anybody got a copy of *Stars and Stripes*?” “No, no, no we don’t, Jean. Sorry.” “Oh, okay. I guess I’ll get ready for the meeting.” So she goes through, has her meeting and then when she comes out the staff pulls her aside and says, “Jean, we have bad news for you. Bill has been shot down.” Well, that’s the wrong thing to tell my mother. Don’t sneak it on her like that. She calls the commanding general in Japan and says, “Jim, this is Jean. My boy has been shot down and nobody knows anything about it. What can we do?” So he sends his aide in a car over to get my mother. Takes her into his office and tells his aide get the Pentagon on the phone. So, of course, it’s daytime in Japan and it’s evening in the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. So the duty officer for the casualty section gets the privilege of listening to the aide from the commanding general in Japan, what they call USARJ (United States Army, Japan), inquiring about this captain in Vietnam. So he gives them whatever particulars they have and my mother feels slightly better. So that was what happened with that. It was an amazing thing. My mother, bless her heart, just to get away from this particular subject, which is not my favorite as you can imagine. I had a deal with her. Whenever I lost a pilot or a crewman I would call my mother on MARS,
give her the guy’s name and then she would go over to Kishini Barracks, which is where
the Army hospital was. She had the girls, the Girl Scout troops were involved in a
project, they’d make up care packages. You never had a razor or anything like that when
you got shipped out. Little candy and stuff like that, stationary so they could write home.
That was their project. She ended up going over quite a lot, poor woman. She’d look
these guys up and tell them, “You served with my son.” One guy told me afterward,
“Damn, Captain Paris, it was bad enough going into a strange hospital, but the next thing
I know there’s your mother sitting on the side of my bed saying, ‘How you doing?’”
SM: Amazing. Joan, not surprisingly, handled that initial news with a
remarkable degree of stoicy.
BP: Yes.
SM: When was the first time you were able to either correspond or talk with her
about that?
BP: I sent her a letter from the hospital, which she got about five days later.
There was just no provision to make phone calls.
SM: You could use MARS to call your mom at will.
BP: Well, but the MARS was through the phone system there at Quan Loi. If
you wanted to use MARS down at Long Binh you had to go across post. Of course, I
couldn’t move. I think it was like five days before I could move my feet.
SM: Did they discover what the problem was as far as your temporary paralysis?
BP: Yes. In the crash I had suffered because I wasn’t strapped in. I had suffered
a severe compressive strain of the lower lumbar region. Over a period of several hours it
had gotten all swollen and shut off the nerves. You know, it was just lower back trauma.
Using ice baths and medications they were able to get the swelling eased. As soon as the
swelling went down I could move my legs fine. The enduring, lasting thing is that I’ve
got a bad back. So the moral of the story, children, is if you’re going to go on out and fly
helicopters make sure you always wear your seat belt, even when you’re crashing.
(Laughs)
SM: Okay, you don’t think it was an important factor in your survival that you
were thrown through the windshield and you weren’t stuck inside smelling toxic fumes
that were accumulating very rapidly in that rather confined space?
BP: I smelled them anyway. My tongue and my throat, I suffered first-degree
burns there.

SM: Right, but if you had been wearing your belt you probably wouldn’t have
been thrown through the shield, correct?

BP: I would have been okay because on a helicopter it’s fatal, usually fatal,
whichever side. The other thing is if I hadn’t have told (name expunged) I’m
convinced—this is just my own little demon. I’ll give him a name. I’m convinced if I
had told him to keep his seatbelt on he’d have lived through the crash. He’d have been
fine. Is that real? I don’t know, but it’s part of the guilt I have to live with.

SM: As you were going through your convalescence, how long did that take you
to leave the hospital?

BP: It took me two weeks. I was in the hospital fifteen days. I was devastated I
wasn’t going to go back to Japan. I was ready to go home.

SM: What month was this?

BP: This was the twentieth of January 1970.

SM: Where you ever debriefed about the events that occurred?

BP: Debriefed?

SM: Yes, did you have to write up your own after action report on the events of
that day?

BP: We didn’t do that. The verbal briefing I gave the regimental S-3, that was
about it. Lying in the hospital, of course, as I say the demons come around and they sit
on your bed and talk to you. Being fairly traditionally religious with huge Catholic
overtones, I needed absolution. So I talked to the chaplain and the chaplain said what
anybody would say. “You did what you had to do. I don’t think God would want
anybody to suffer through that if they didn’t have to. It was an act of mercy. Yadda,
yadda.” That wasn’t enough. I’m punishing myself. Then I thought, “Okay, maybe a
court martial.” Absolution by court martial. So the troop commander came down to see
me and I told him what happened. He was pretty stunned. He said, in essence, “You did
what you thought you had to do. Never breathe a word of this again. You’re going to
have to take this one with you to your grave because you’re not going to like what’ll
happen to you if the Army finds out.” Ignoring, as I usually do, ignoring sound advice
Bill presses on. I asked to see the regimental legal officer. The legal officer who I’ve
never forgotten and yet I never saw before that nor after that except one more time came
down and I said, “I really need to talk to you.” I told him what happened and he looked
at me and he said, I think one of those phrases for which you go to school for so many
years, “You’re shitting me.” I said, “No.” He said, “What do you want with me?” I
want this thing cleared up. I want the Army to tell me that it’s okay.” He looked at me
and said, “I’ll tell you right now as your legal advisor this is not a good idea, but if you
insist I will talk to some people on the QT, but don’t talk to anybody until I get back to
you. Have you told anybody about this?” I said, “Yes, [troop] commander.” I described
the conversation. He said, “Okay, sound advice. Shut up. Don’t talk to anybody. I’ll
get back to you.” He came back a day-and-a-half later and we met again. He said to me
in essence, “Look, just in theory, not in actual fact. I talked to some actual people who
have a lot of experience in military law, in the grade of colonel. I mentioned this whole
thing about what you had gone through in very general terms.” He said, “This is what he
told me, ‘Right now back in the States Lieutenant Calley is getting court-martialed. The
Army has a black eye. The Army is not happy about Lieutenant Calley. The Army is not
happy about the controversy. If you insist on having a court martial to clear your name
what’s going to happen is they’re going to dig a hole and bury you deeper than Calley.
They don’t want this kind of thing to get out. If you insist on talking about it, you are
dead.’ Do you understand what I’m saying?” Well, I certainly did. “Got it.” Then after
that I did tell my wife. She told me what everybody said, as if that made the demon go
away. Then to some extent I still bear it to this day, but not nearly as bad. But it ran my
life for thirty-two years. But I got over it. I disabused myself of the notion of ever
clearing my good name. Oddly enough, when I reopened my claim several years ago and
I finally bit the bullet and decided I’ve probably got PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress
Disorder), the VA (Department of Veteran Affairs) sent me to a local psychiatrist. He
was a retired lieutenant colonel [medical] officer from the Air Force. Very nice man. He
started my interview with him by saying this, “I know you guys who have been in combat
have a lot of hairy stories. My job is just to determine whether you have post traumatic
stress or not. I would very much appreciate it if you don’t tell me any of those scary
stories, because I’ll have nightmares. I don’t want to have nightmares. I want you to talk
about what happened to you in general terms. Do you understand what I’m saying?” I
thought to myself, “You’ve got to be kidding me.” (Laughs) “This guy is a psychiatrist.
Do you want to know what the demons are here? Nobody wants to hear this story, for
Christ’s sake.”

SM: So to help you with this issue, it doesn’t sound very helpful.
BP: His job was not to heal me, his job was just to sniff it out and see if it was
there. So ultimately I got a rating of fifty percent for post traumatic stress. So I guess it’s
there. I digress, no. I’ve gone way ahead. Going back to Vietnam, after two weeks I got
out of the hospital and I realized that for all intents and purposes I was done flying
combat missions. I went out and gave it the old college try. I struggled through. I went
back on flying status the end of February. February and March and April I did the very
best I could, but I was suffering from auditory hallucinations. Every time the blades
would snap and pop in the air I thought I was taking fire. I became very erratic. I was
not sleeping well. It took usually half a bottle of booze to get five or six hours sleep. I
was a wreck. I was so torn up inside and I was so nervous. I was smoking three packs of
cigarettes a day. My flying was not nearly as good as it had been. I finally walked into
the scout platoon hooch one day and said, “That’s it. I’m done.” All the pilots looked at
me and said, “Don’t do this.” I said, “Yes, I’ve got to. I’ve got to get away from it.”
Before I walked they made me assistant troop operations officer until the other fellow
left. Then I took over as troop operations officer but I couldn’t fly scouts anymore. I just
couldn’t do it. I mean the bottle was empty and I realized it. I was no good out there.
That was a horrible admission to make. But I did it. In the meantime there were other
little problems that were creeping up. I must admit I don’t remember a lot. There were
really ugly things that happened. I hardly ever remember anymore. The one pattern that
was emerging more and more was the drug usage on the part of the enlisted men. It had
been bad and it was getting worse. By the time I took over as troop operations officer it
became pretty obvious that the enlisted men were fragmented down into two camps. The
“heads,” who were the majority and they were the drug users. The “juicers” were the
guys who only drank alcohol and they were totally isolated from everybody. There was a
lot of dissention. There was a lot of stress and strain. We went into Cambodia, which I
thought we did an excellent job. We took some kind of ugly losses there. I cut myself back from [flying] except for pretty much routine stuff. I decided I had gone as far as I could with the war. I just couldn’t do it anymore. I didn’t fly combat. As operations officer, that’s a good place to be if you don’t want to do that, so I did it. We got a new troop commander. He sat down with me and said, “Well, Bill, tell me about the squadron or tell me about the troop.” I said, “You know, sir, I got some real bad news for you.” So I told him. His jaw dropped and he said, “Holy shit.” You know, he hadn’t been over here since 1967, “You’re not going to believe this place.” He said, “Well, what can we do about it?” I said, “Hell, I don’t know, sir. They don’t teach us about stuff like this. These are huge sweeping sociological and political problems. We’ve got no leverage here to even do anything.” He said, “Well, we need to do something,” because by this time now guys were starting to OD (overdose). I found out they were moving across the spectrum of drugs where they had previously been using heroine and their knowledge about drugs was absolutely pathetic. So I told the old man, “We need to try something,” I said, “Because I periodically talk to them I’ve become sort of the friendly officer face even though I hate their guts. I’m the medium. They tried to kill the first sergeant, got that squared around. We got the first sergeant reassigned so he could live. So they took that as a positive sign.” The old man said, “Okay, do what you can. Start counseling with them.” We would have meetings probably three times a week in the mess hall and there was no officers allowed. Anything you said in there was, you know, stayed there. The issues I tried to address are, “Why are you doing all these drugs?” Of course, the answer is obvious. Then, “Do you know what’s happening?” I would bring in the doctors and I would bring in the chaplains and they’d tell them. “Hey, I don’t know who you’re fooling.” Nothing. Just couldn’t get anybody to move off center. I think a lot of it was they were afraid. They would say things like, “That’s why we snort the heroine so we don’t get addicted.” I would say, “Fine. Go ahead and quit for a week and tell me how you do.” But we tried and tried and tried. I think about the only thing we really did was that we were able to do—my doing all this was to kind of keep the peace a little bit. It got so that we briefed new officers, particularly those who were going to be in command slots, “Don’t go down to the enlisted area at night. Stay out of there. You can do what you want during the day. It’s not that we tolerate it, we’ve got no choice.”
would say an uneasy agreement existed. We came out of Cambodia and we moved on to
a place called Di An and relieved elements of the 1st Division because they were going
home. This place was like “strap hanger” city. I mean they had hooches with air
conditioning and refrigerators. We moved down there and took over for their aviation
unit, [nice, private] hooch. I’ve never lived like that, hell, even Stateside. I had a
refrigerator. I had a shower. I was in tall cotton. But the Army slowly got used to the
idea that it had drug problems, too. One day there was an announcement came from on
high, “We want you to tell us what percentage of your unit you think is involved with
drugs.” The old man called me in, the troop commander and said, “Bill, what should we
say?” I said, “Look, Major, this is your troop and your career. You can tell them what
they want to hear or you can tell them what’s real. It’s got to be your choice because
you’ve got to live with it.” He agonized over that because he said, “I’m no different than
anybody else. I want to make colonel as soon as possible and continue on up.” He said,
“You know, geez, this is terrible what’s going on. I just can’t see white washing it.” I
said, “Well, if you feel that way, then report what you think.” So he said, “Well, tell me
what percentage you think is on drugs.” I said, “I can tell you with some degree of
accuracy, sir, it’s about eighty-three percent.” He looked at me and he said, “You’re
shitting me?” I said, “No.” I said, “Now I can almost name the names of the guys who
drink. Everybody else is on drugs. There’s so much peer pressure anymore some of the
drinkers have gotten on drugs because they’re tired of the threat.” He said, “Well, geez, I
can’t do that.” He said, “How about seventy?” I said, “That’s going to shock them.” I
said, “You’ll be the only guy, I can promise you, that’s going to say something like that.”
I had just come back. What really upset me was I had just come back from the hospital.
The chaplain called me and he said, “I want to meet with you at 37th Med, you’ve got to
hear this.” Okay, so I went and it was a squadron trooper. It wasn’t one of ours, the Air
Cav troop. The doc was a regimental surgeon, just to kind of put you in the picture and
the regimental chaplain. They’re having me talk to this guy, they left the room and they
said, “Talk to him.” He was being evac’ed, he had no wounds, but he was breaking
down. Come to find out, and I had never heard of this before, these guys were taking
speed and I didn’t know what speed was. Well, I got a quick lesson. He told me they
were all using speed out there because it kept them awake at night and then they couldn’t
come down so they were taking downers. It was just kind of like talking to Elvis Presley. These guys, they had to have speed to get up and downers to get down. They were chemically altering their lives so much. That’s what broke this guy was their unit made contact and he was on a heavy dose of speed. I guess when you’re on speed your senses become quite hyper. He said the noise of the .50-calibers were splitting his head open.

So he freaked out and they immediately gave him a tranq and shipped him back and he was going back to Japan. Then I walked in to talk to the old man and he said, “What do you think we’ve got in the way of a drug problem?” I said, “Jesus, sir.” So he reported it as seventy-one percent. I told him, “God bless you, but hang on to your hat. You’re going to hear about this.” Well, a week went by and we didn’t hear a thing. I was getting sort of a reputation. Some of the other squadron officers used to call me Florence Nightingale and the Social Worker and shit like that. Because they were real combat officers and I wasn’t, I guess. I was in operations one day and I got a call. It was from the regimental executive officer, heck of a nice guy. He said, “Bill I’m over here at Red Carpet,” which was 2nd Field Headquarters. He said, “I’m in a meeting with Lieutenant General Wagstaff,” who was the second field commander. He said, “We’re talking about this report you submitted in which your commander said that you have a seventy-one percent drug rate.” I rolled my eyes and said, “Yes, sir.” He said, “General Wagstaff wants to see you immediately.” I said, “What?” He said, “That’s right, he wants to see you.” I said, “Well, what about the old man?” He said, “No, he wants to see you.” I thought, “Oh, great!” So I jumped in a Loach and flew over. I didn’t take my Huey. I took a Loach, went by myself, went over to Second Field, shut down. There’s a jeep there. They take me to this big, long, imposing building. I go in this building and the general’s aide meets me, “Are you Captain Paris?” “Yes.” “Come this way. Have a seat. They’ll be ready for you in a minute.” He opens his door and sticks his head in and I hear this voice say, “Well, if he’s here I want him now.” I thought, “Oh, shit!” (laughs) I walk in this room and there’s this huge conference table with probably twenty-five officers sitting around it from the 1st Cav, the 11th Cav, who else was there, 199th Light Infantry Brigade. Anyway, reps from all the units that are in the Second Field and there are charts sitting there, the usual, beloved acetate charts showing all the units. I looked at the charts while General Wagstaff is telling me what the meeting is about. He
says essentially what the XO (executive officer) told me that, “We’re having this
meeting. The Army is very concerned about drug use. We sent out a request three weeks
ago that people tell us was the drug utilization rate.” He said, “Captain Paris, I want you
to go over and look at these charts to your right. Go over there and just look at that for a
moment.” So I walked over and it was 1st Cav Alpha Troop, 1st/9th, Air Cav Troop: three
percent; 2nd Squadron, 11th ACR Headland Head Troop: two percent; so on down the line
three percent. Some gutsy devil even said four percent. I just shook my head and I
thought, “Well, you know. In a way I can’t blame them.” He said, “Now I want you to
look to the right. There’s the 11th Cav.” He said, “You notice that your percentage is
seventy-one percent. Is that right, Captain?” I said, “That’s right, sir.” He said, “Do you
and your commander stand by that?” I said, “Yes, sir.” He said, “Well, do you mind if I
ask you a question? Where the heck did you get those numbers?” So I ended up
explaining. Well, all these lieutenant colonels and majors and a couple of O-6s look at
me like the enemy is here. I explained to them what we were doing and what we were
trying to do and the experience I had and why I came up with those numbers. He said,
“Is that only your unit?” Oh, boy! This lieutenant colonel spoke up and he said, “Sir, in
general if you please.” He said, “These guys are in aviation, they’ve got a lot more time
than people like my boys. We’re out on the field all the time. We don’t have access to
the drugs. No guy in his right mind would ever do drugs out there.” I laughed, it was
involuntary but I laughed. As soon as I did that I wished to hell I’d have shut up.
Because everybody looked at me like, “Oh?” General Wagstaff said, “You have a
comment, Captain Paris?” I told him about this guy I had just seen a little bit before and
what he had told me. The representative from the 2nd Squadron just bristled as did all the
combat folks around the table. It was like, “Harrumph, harrumph, I don’t think so.” So
they all got their back up and the general held his hand up and he said, “Now wait a
minute, calm down.” He said, “Does anybody in this room have someone like Captain
Paris? Somebody who’s actually talking to the people about drugs, not about operational
requirements, not about—?” They all kind of had their heads down. Then he turned to
the XO of the regiment. He said, “You know, I’ll be honest with you. We looked at this
pretty hard when it came in because we couldn’t believe that Don Starry,” who was the
regimental commander at the time, “that Don would allow one of his units to show their
ass.” Then he turned to the group and he said, “I want to tell you guys something, all of you. That we all have a vested interest in this Army as commanders because we all want it to go well.” He said, “We’re whistling in the graveyard at night, guys, because I think Captain Paris is dead on. I think the reason it hurts so bad is because we know he is dead on. Somebody had the balls to stand up and tell us the king wears no clothes.” He said, “That’s it, Captain Paris. Go back to your duties.” He said, “I thank you for coming over.” He said, “We’re not going to change the way things are going and you can tell your commander and I’m going to make sure I tell Colonel Starry that we really appreciate what you men have done, the honesty that you brought to this meeting.” Well, I got the hell out of there fast. The old man came back that night and he sat down. We had a drink in his hooch and he said, “I just finished an interview with a regimental ops officer.” This guy was such a dick. God I hated that man. He was old Army and just he existed in this bubble where he had all the answers and nobody knew anything. If it was new or different we didn’t do it that way. He hated aviators, the old Army prejudice against them. You know the joke used to be, “I don’t begrudge you your flight pay but I just wonder why you draw your base pay,” kind of thing. I guess before the old man had got back from the meeting, he had just let my boss have it for getting the unit in trouble and making us look bad. Everybody now knew that we were a bunch of potheads down here at the Air Cav troop and we should be ashamed. He was going to make sure this had gotten away from him. He was on R&R when this happened and it never would have happened, yadda, yadda. The regimental commander came back and he went flouncing in there to tell him how he set my boss straight and the regimental commander unloaded on him. Told him in no uncertain terms that’s exactly what was wrong with the Army over here. General Wagstaff was happy, he was happy and he didn’t see where it was a problem. (Laughs) So that was nice. But no, the problem dragged on. As I finished up my year I got real sick and tired of being the lonely voice in the crowd saying, “We’re in trouble, we’re in trouble, we’re in trouble.” The only thing I think I ever did for king and country over there that made one bit of difference was I at least was able to raise the awareness level somewhat. Then we had like three ODs in a week in the regiment. What had happened was these guys were being told it was cocaine and it had been cut down. So they were snorting this stuff and come to find out, because I had the doc take a sample
and run a lab analysis on it, it was a hundred percent pure heroin that these guys were
injecting. Before, they were getting stuff that had been cut and this stuff was pure. They
were running the same amount and that was why the three guys OD’ed. I went to the
meeting that night and I brought the morgue pictures of the three guys, put them on the
wall and locked the doors and put one of the officers at the door with a weapon. I said,
“Until I found out where these drugs came from nobody leaves this room. I’m going to
have this and you’re going to give me this one because you’ve made my life a living hell
and you’ve made everybody else’s life a living hell. For one damn moment you’re going
to act like soldiers, you’re going to tell me before this is all over where this came from.”
We sat there for two hours. Finally I realized I’m pissing my time away. I said, “Well, I
want to thank you.” I was quite sarcastic. Later on that night somebody came to the
hooch and gave me the information. I gave it to CID (Criminal Investigation Division).
They busted this guy, he was the barber over there at [Di An]. Come to find out after all
that he not only was the barber but he was playing both sides. He worked for South
Vietnamese intelligence as well as the NVA. But you know that was one, just one. They
still got him. Then the year kind of closed to an end. I was drinking an awful lot on the
evenings. Towards the end I didn’t fly a whole bunch. I think my last whole month of
flying duty I only got twenty hours of flight time. I figured that would be enough to carry
me over for a couple months when I got back and that was all I could manage to come up
with. I wasn’t sleeping well, having a lot of nightmares, stress. I was up to four packs of
cigarettes a day by then. I had real trouble focusing and the auditory hallucinations were
getting really bad. I’d hear automatic weapons fire if I started to sleep at night, I’d hear
(name expunged) scream. The docs made me take a seven-day leave so I went off to
Hong Kong with other guys and drank some more. Then I left. I left Vietnam feeling
very empty.

SM: When did you leave?
BP: I left November 16.
SM: You were there a year?
BP: I was there a year.
SM: Did the word ever get around, did rumors ever start that—you know of what
happened to you that day with [your copilot]?
BP: Yes.

SM: Did you notice a difference in how people treated you at all?

BP: There was no difference.

SM: There was general acceptance and understanding?

BP: Yes.

SM: It was a difficult situation and you did what you had to do.

BP: It was the kind of thing that everybody wished they never would have to make that choice. So that was a great deal of tolerance. But it was only like two people that I told.

SM: Right. I didn’t know if it still got around.

BP: No, no. Not as far as, “Oh, did you hear Captain Paris shot (name expunged)?”

SM: So that didn’t happen?

BP: No, no.

SM: Did you ever have the chance to talk with other officers or soldiers who were in difficult situations that may have also faced that second challenging issue that you faced that day?

BP: One guy. One guy. He was an Air Force pilot. We almost got into a fight. It was really incredible. This was—I’d been back in the States, God how long? Two years. We were sitting down having some drinks, I don’t remember where it was. But he started to tell this story about this FAC who had gotten shot up, came back to their base in a Bird Dog, O-1 Bird Dog. In the crash he was trapped in the wreckage and they all ran out, tried to get him out and they couldn’t get him out. Says the guy, “He burned alive right in front of our eyes.” Whoa! The reaction I got was just incredible. It was like somebody stuck a battery cable up my ass. I almost leapt to my feet. I looked at the guy and said, “How the fuck could you let somebody burn to death while you sat there and watched? Jesus! What kind of asshole are you?” Everybody kind of looked at me like, “What the hell?” They all look at each other like, “What’s this guy’s problem?” Then the guy said, “What? You wanted me to shoot him or something, for Christ’s sake?” Everybody kind of went “Yeah. Jesus, Paris!” I thought to myself, “Well, that pretty much validates Bill. You believe you did the good thing.” That’s true. To my
dying day I will never appreciate having to go through that experience but the antidote to
the demon is if I had to I’d do it again, I sure as hell hope somebody would do it for me.
So I’m on solid moral ground.

SM: What about the situation you faced where you actually contemplated suicide
as opposed to the possibility of capture? Did you ever discuss that with anybody else?

BP: Yes, a lot of people.

SM: What was the general feeling?

BP: Whoa! (Laughs)

SM: Did those people have similar experiences or have you talked to people with
similar experiences who shared that same attitude?

BP: No, most of the people that I share that with are people who are a little
closer. That’s not the kind of thing that I would ever talk to anybody about unless it was
pretty unique. Somebody who had gone through very, very similar circumstances.
Sometimes it’s a funny thing. I’ve got to tell you that historically the military has always
known it’s there. It’s the unmentioned guest at any military occasion because I don’t
know if you’re familiar with the old Irish poem that the frontier Army adopted. It’s just
left. Hello? Where’s my brain? Fiddler’s Green. The last line in Fiddler’s Green is,
“So when the situation’s getting bad, my boy, and there’s nothing but Indians to be seen
you put your revolver to your head and you go to Fiddler’s Green.” It’s there. The
Fetterman Massacre, 1866, almost half of the officers killed themselves. Custer, at Little
Big Horn, several of the officers killed themselves.

SM: A lot of the soldiers, too.

BP: So this is like I say, the unnamed guest. The military is not comfortable with
that. Men will do that. I’ve seen it on both sides. There are all kinds of ways of
committing suicide. This is why the tremendous reaction against the Japanese in the
Second World War. The unspoken commentary always is, “Yeah, but if there was
nothing else, I might do the same.” Then you’ve got guys who won the Medal of Honor
for essentially committing suicide. Collin Kelley is a classic example of some guy who
with a B-17 had no options left and tried to take out a Japanese ship by ramming it.
Didn’t talk to the other nine guys on the crew. So, it’s out there. But it’s like
SM: Well, that’s a question I had never really thought of asking. While you were there in Vietnam and for either tour, or for that matter while you were in the Army, did you witness very many people being discharged due to homosexuality?

BP: A few.

SM: Were these all stateside or some in Vietnam or both?

BP: Didn’t see it too much in Vietnam. I don’t even know if I knew of anybody in Vietnam. But in the peacetime Army before and in the Army after, yes.

SM: Men were discharged due to homosexuality?

BP: Yes.

SM: But you don’t recall that happening in Vietnam while you were there?

BP: No, probably because in Vietnam it would be so easy to do with no consequences. I mean the Vietnamese were into that. That was not unknown. You could go down and rent a boy if you wanted. It was the old standard line when you went to a hotel like in Hong Kong, “You want a girl for the night? You want a boy for the night?” It was like “What?” First time I heard that in Japan I about freaked. A boy!

(Laughs)

SM: While you were there for your second tour, in terms of attitudinal change or policy change, did you notice anything different in the atmosphere regarding, well, first of all, the transition in leadership? You had gone from Westmoreland to General Abrams. Could you sense anything tangible in how the war was being run and the threat of tactics being employed? Did you notice any difference?

BP: Yes, from the top of the command structure, meaning the president of the United States on down, it was obvious that adults were back in charge. There were phenomenal changes. The morale of the officer corps began to kind of perk up a little bit as we began to realize that Nixon was serious. Then Abrams came around and Abrams did a wonderful job. What a shame he died. Oh, man. Cancer took a brilliant man from our midst right when we need him the most. I think he had done probably what he was intended to do because he made huge changes in Vietnam and also in the Army when he came back and took over as chief of staff. Yes, there was direction. Abrams came
around and told everybody, “Look, no more of these big operations when we go out
hunting them. We’re not going to do that anymore. The political climate has changed.
Our mission has changed. We’re here to support the South Vietnamese while they fight.
Yes, we will fight. We’re not going to run but we’re not going to go looking for it,
either. So within our own little bailiwick, yes, you keep doing the same thing. But no
more of these big bashes just because we happen to have the people here to do it.” So it
changed a lot. We no longer were out there on these big sweeps looking for trouble. It
was a little more what you might consider to be the active defense. We were aggressive
in a narrow sweep and that whole thing about the Cambodia operation even though the
hippies and the liberals freaked over it, that was the best time to get out. I mean, hell,
we’d have never got out if we hadn’t have done that. That was just designed strictly to
go into their sanctuary and clean out their supplies and while they rebuilt we would
disengage, buy the South Vietnamese time and leave. It was not an attack. There was
such a big hissy fit about the whole thing. It was so stupid. Then, since we’re talking for
the books, chief, I got to give this to you: I had a friend who flew for Air America. I
don’t know whether people know this or not but I want somebody to read it somewhere
because this just kills me. Air America did a lot of things for everybody and they were a
tool for a lot of everybody. Sometimes they even helped the bad guys, which people
don’t realize.

SM: What do you mean?
BP: I mean that up in Laos there were times that they were hauling stuff for the
bad Laotians if there is such a thing, the side who was against us.

SM: The Pathet Lao?
BP: Yes. One of the things they did was they also went into the Golden Triangle
and they hauled drugs out, opium. They brought the raw product out. They did this on a
quid pro quo. You give us that, we’ll give you this. There were a lot of deals made
under the table. There were a lot of things that looked like, “Huh? This don’t make
sense.” But it’s part of being in the spy business, I guess. But I’ve got to tell you
something though, a lot of the hard drugs that these kids were using over here in the
United States had been brought to them through the courtesy of the North Vietnamese
and the United States Army and they were funding that damn war. They don’t know it.
To this day they don’t know it. It kills me. Whenever I see these old hippies walking
around and I think, “Man, he put more money in the CIA’s (Central Intelligence Agency)
pocket and the NVA’s with your drugs. You will never know. You helped finance that
war.” There was some discussion about letting them know, but who wanted to get into
the business of explaining why we were doing that. Yes, they don’t know that. I take
delicious pleasure in telling every one of them who tells me how evil and bad I was over
there in Vietnam about how if you used drugs you supported that war. It’s a real pleasure
of mine at this age.

SM: I’m curious about your friend who flew for Air America, in what capacity?
BP: Pardon?
SM: I guess you said you have a friend that worked in Air America?
BP: Yes.
SM: In what capacity?
BP: He was a pilot.
SM: A pilot.
BP: Yes, he flew everything. That’s literally what you did over there. You flew
everything and sometimes for everybody. It was very quixotic.
SM: When you finished flying or when you transitioned from being an active
pilot in the 11th Cav and became the assistant ops officer for a little while there, did you
still have a lot of interaction with the other pilots?
BP: Yes, sure.
SM: Well, actually in that position you have firsthand knowledge of it. While
you were there from November of ’69 through the first six months of your tour, through
May or so of 1970, would you describe the tempo of operations as having increased,
decreased or gone up from the time you got there say until the spring of ’70?
BP: Well, the tempo of operations went up because the philosophical change and
then because we went into Cambodia to go ahead and buy time. Then in some cases we
were sanitizing the pockets, pushing them back across the border, pushing them out of
areas where they were too easily overwhelmed, the South Vietnamese units that were
taking over the war, so yes. Things perked up mightily. Then in June we went down to
Di An and we had a hell of time trying to find something to do because by then the 9th
Division had gone home, the 1st Division had gone home. Several of the independent infantry brigades had gone home. Now they pulled us down around Saigon and we worked for the South Vietnamese local forces. We had a party one night with them. That’s the only time I’ve ever flown drunk in my life. Bottom line, don’t try it. It doesn’t work. (Laughs) But anyway, yes, the last three or four months I was there we were doing nothing. Ash and trash, a little local stuff because the enemy was gone. They hadn’t filled in the void yet. So yes it was pretty slow.

SM: While you were—

BP: Before you do that, I’m going to tell you one story. That for my actions on the day I was shot down on the twentieth of January, I was awarded the Silver Star Medal with first oak leaf clusters. The gentleman who was assigned to write up the citation came to me and said, “Please tell me what happened.” I said, “No.” He said, “Please don’t make this hard on me.” I said, “I can’t do anything else but. You’re going to have to accept that answer.” He said, “Can you help me write up an award for (name expunged)?” I said, “Yes.” Put that through and then he had to figure out something nice to say about me. Now a month later they want to award me the Silver Star and the troop commander calls me and he says, “We’re having an awards ceremony tomorrow and you’re going to get the Silver Star.” I said, “No, I’m not.” He looked at me and said, “What?” I said, “Sir, don’t force me to do this. I did not earn the Silver Star. I don’t want the Silver Star. I already have the Silver Star. Another Silver Star means nothing to me. I did nothing brave or noble. I got my ass shot down. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. The guys who are heroes have already been mentioned. Carl is in for the Medal of Honor. Art got the Silver Star. Hell, even the forward air controller got the Silver Star. Shit, everybody’s happy. I’m happy. Leave it alone.” He said, “We can’t do that. We’ve got to give it to you.” He said, “If you don’t want it, don’t want to wear it, fine. I don’t care. Just hold still while we pin it on you.” I said, “No, I’m not going.” He said, “What?” “That’s right. Leave me alone. I’m not going.” I said, “Don’t try and put that thing on me, sir. That is not something as a soldier I have to submit to.” He said, “Well, screw you then.” Then this became the elusive Silver Star that everybody tried to give to me. We got a new commander and he gave me an order. I said, “Sir, I will be there. But if you try to give me that damn Silver Star I will tell the presenting authority I
refuse the award because I did not earn it and we’re all going to look like idiots.” So
that’s where it stayed. They tried two more times and I refused. Somehow I got my
Silver Star again. It was mailed to me while I was en route back home, sent in a package.
I opened up the package from the unit and it said flight records on it. I opened it up and it
was the Silver Star and the adjutant put a note in there that said, “Ha, ha. Got you.”

SM: That’s pretty good. So you got it anyway?
BP: Well, it was on my records. There wasn’t anything I could do. I wouldn’t
wear it. I finally did towards the end. I saw so much phony crap going on I just figured,
“What the hell?”

SM: So while you were there for your second tour, did you notice—and one of
the things that struck me as you were describing some of your initial interactions,
especially when you were trying to get out of actually being an instructor pilot and into a
Cav unit that was bathed in combat. The response being, “What are you trying to do?
You’ve got a combat tour. Basically no one wants to be the last casualty here. Why do
you want to push your luck?” It seems to me there probably is quite a change from what
might have been the attitude of a lot of people before Tet of ’68.

BP: Absolutely.

SM: Before the transition from Westmoreland to Abrams and also from Johnson
to Nixon. I was wondering if you could comment on that as an issue and how if you
witnessed that very much. That is, the attitude that it’s kind of like the handwriting is
already on the wall. The war is going to end we’re not going to stick around here for
very much longer. In fact, we’re trying to get out as soon as possible and no one wants to
be the last casualty. Did you witness that very much?

BP: Yes. It was obvious the war was winding down and whatever was going to
happen, we weren’t going to be doing the things we had done like on my first tour. What
I noticed operationally was that the officers in command had to work a lot harder to
appear a lot braver with a lot less to do it with. Because that was the thing that always
grated on me about the whole thing was that the middle tier of management, if you will,
the majors through lieutenant colonels and colonel took this as a wonderful opportunity
to fatten up their file and make themselves look good. That was winked at as sort of a
perk of being over there. Okay, you’ve got to be here. By the second tour it was so
jaded. The only thing people even hardly looked at with any degree of scrutiny was the Medal of Honor. Beyond that, shit, you could put yourself in for a DFC (Distinguished Flying Cross). Nobody really cared. Some did. I don’t wish to. But it was bad. It’s always tough to be in an environment instead of the spirit and esprit that we had on my first tour. It was all drugs and begrudging and sense of drugs around here, there, and everywhere but always on their own terms. The enlisted men were de facto running the war on my second tour if nothing else than by their wholehearted submersion into the drug culture. You know, the fact the officers weren’t really in charge, not in my humble opinion. Yes, sure, you can get up on the map and make big, bold statements, but down at platoon level, there are no real NCOs anymore by 1970. You’ve got shake’n’bakes. The hard-core cadre, the career guys, they’re gone. It’s kind of like watching Platoon. A bunch of young kids on drugs with guns and they’re an armed mob making their own rules. I think Westmoreland was an incumbent that Abrams certainly overcame. He got dealt a really bad hand because Creighton Abrams was a hell of a combat officer as he proved in World War II. But he did what had to be done. I mean the United States Army was broke. By the end of 1970, there wasn’t much left to it. We were a very large organization with no heart. It took a long time to rebound from that. The people that had enhanced their careers and were promotable were, frankly, the people who were the most benign and harmless. They weren’t the movers and shakers. Most of those guys had left the military. The few that were still around were buried under one stigma or another.

Douglas MacArthur made the comment back in the early ’60s in an interview that the wrong people were running the Pentagon, even as far as back then. I think this is a pattern that concerns me about the officer corps in the United States Army and in all the military systems, that these are men who have a careerist side to them that is not very attractive. That there were not many of them that, quite honestly, will follow the West Point motto of “Duty. Honor. Country.” To them duty is to be negotiated. Honor is something that is situational. Yes, they care very much about their country but they care about themselves, too. I thought that may sound a little bitter and I don’t wish to sound that way. But I just don’t see them making the decisions that need to be made. I don’t see general officers in the United States Army putting it on the line with the executive branch of government and with the Congress of the United States to tell them in no
uncertain terms that, “I bring you a story that you’re not going to want to hear. But, by
golly, you’re going to hear it. If this means these stars come off, so be it. I’ll retire out.
But you’re going to hear what we think you need to hear, not what you want to hear.”
There’s far too much of that. It started back so long ago that it’s just so much easier to
sing the company’s song than to be a soloist and announce bad news. Organizations
don’t like that. I don’t think they pick up anything at West Point or at any of the schools,
to be honest with you, that makes them as honest as they have to be if they’re going to be
in that business.

SM: When you were nearing the end of your second tour, at that point
Vietnamization is pretty much in full swing. As you described, General Abrams policy is
“We’re in the business of providing support for the Vietnamese Army so they can fight.
When we have to we’re going to fight as well. But our principle role is to facilitate
Vietnamization.” Again, you’re in the end of your tour. Were you looking back on your
experiences and that of the experiences of the US Army and the military and the
government, US government, and our policies in Southeast Asia being successful, as
having failed? What was your attitude? What were you thinking about American
involvement in Southeast Asia at that point?
BP: I thought that we had failed miserably and that we did it to ourselves.
SM: How so?
BP: Well, I felt that from the highest levels of government on down that we had
failed this nation. That we had gotten off with Kennedy in ’61 when he was inaugurated.
We got off on some naiveté that took us into dark places and we had no business, number
one, doing that. Then, number two, we had no clear-cut idea of what we were about. I
mentioned earlier in the interview in one of the other sessions that with Kennedy, he
always had a lot of crises. There was at least one major crisis a year and Kennedy was
always reaching for the gun. We had the Berlin call up, you know in ’61. Then we had
the Cuban Missile in ’62. The guy practiced brinksmanship, this uncompromising,
unyielding. He warned us in his inaugural speech. “We’ll go anywhere. We’ll pay any
price. We’ll bear any burden in the name of freedom.” Not realizing as we’re thrilled by
the phraseology and the emotions that it brings up of “Hot damn! Yes, we’re the good
guys.” Not realizing this guy doesn’t have a clear idea of what we’re doing. He doesn’t
know the world out there. He’s a privileged kid who lives in a bubble. Yes, he went off to the South Pacific. Yes, he got the Navy Cross but that’s pretty much the only times he’s been outside the lines. He’s not equipped to be president. He doesn’t know anything about being president. He doesn’t know much about the world. He thinks it’s all like a game. Here we are now standing there in Vietnam at the end of this thing watching this horrible collapse finally in 1975 with this tragic, tragic scenario of these poor Vietnamese escaping their own country. My feeling was what a horrible failure. What a botch we have made of this whole thing. We almost destroyed their country. We almost destroyed our country. You know, we got off on tangents that had nothing to do with anything. We’ve learned to numb out. We’ve learned to hide. We’ve learned to massage everything to worry about how it sounds and how it looks rather than what it is. Then we have the worst possible failure we’ve ever experienced and the guy who was helping us through this we ran out of office over some bullshit that started before he even got in there. Not to excuse Nixon. To me, Nixon’s crime is when he found out about it at whatever point he didn’t fire him and say, “Get out!” That to me is Dick Nixon’s crime, not the fact that some hothead would go break into the Democratic headquarters. Hell, that’s high school stuff. But it’s a felony when the president knows about it and doesn’t act. That’s the crime. The real crime is what happened to this country without his hand at the helm. Then we went in to a real dark period. Then we get into the worst inflation we’ve ever had. Then we get into this spiritual morass that still has its hold on us today. I don’t think we’ve recovered our wits yet about us. We have to watch voyeur television because we can’t live a life honestly. We have to go watch other people pretend to live our lives for us. What the hell is this “The Bachelor?” What the hell is this “Survivor” nonsense? My God almighty! This is life? People should be out living it not worrying about some twit who’s reading his lines and then walking pretending he’s having a real experience. That to me is off. What a tragedy we’ve provoked upon ourselves. When are we going to stand up and say, “Hey, it’s life? Get in there.”

Anything else? (Laughs)

SM: Good questions. Yes. Let me go ahead and pause this for a moment. We were still talking a little bit about the end of your second tour and other things that kind of come to mind. As you were there in Vietnam during the year of 1970, most of that
year, what do you remember most in terms of press coverage? In particular, did you get your hands on any of the mainstream, American news publications? Whether it be newspapers or magazines, *Time, Newsweek*, whatever? Were you able to watch any of the broadcasts that came over?

BP: One of my pet peeves. My first tour the reporting, at least the guys that were out with us, I think I told you about the one former Navy journalist stayed over in Vietnam and became a stringer for the Associated Press or UPI (United Press International), one of them and was killed in Tet of ’68. He was out probably five or six times, a hell of a guy. He humped the woods with us or the bush. He never was in the way. There was a couple others that came out, quick in, quick out. You know, “Just give me a couple things and I’m gone,” sort of thing. The reporting after Tet of ’68, it changed. The tone got a little accusatory, I guess. Sort of like, “What are you doing over here?” I bet you’re not doing that sort of thing. Then we heard Walter Cronkite came to Vietnam. That just sounded almost farcical. You know, I had nothing but respect for Walter Cronkite. When we had heard, because the *Stars and Stripes* covered it. Yes, once in a while we would get a *Newsweek* magazine. When somebody goes into this business and they’re in the news business and they say we were lied to, which essentially is what Cronkite said on his TV show. He can’t support the war in Vietnam. The first thing that came to my mind is, “This guy went all the way through World War II as a reporter. He knows the military, he’s been around it. What’s his deal? How could he be so naive and so taken in by all this that he wouldn’t even do his own independent checking?” That rather disheartened me. But then when I got back at the end of my first tour and I saw the kind of crap that was going on television, it was like “Oh, boy. No wonder.” Then on my second tour it was quite adversarial. My all-time memory is the invasion of Cambodia. *Time* magazine had a correspondent who wanted to go with us into Cambodia. We got him out. We made sure he got a hop out to the regimental headquarters. He was with then Col. Don Starry on the invasion, the fighting on the way into Snoul, which was a nasty fight. Then he came back out. The next week the cover of *Time* magazine shows an 11th Armored Cav personnel carrier in Vietnam and it had the grunts on top. They’ve got all these televisions stacked up. It says, “Americans Loot,” or “American Looting,” something anyway. I opened it up and I thought, “What the heck?”
I read the article and the article was essentially that, “Against light resistance the nasty
Americans bombed everybody who was peacefully tilling the rice paddies, slaughtered
the helpless, and then stole everything that wasn’t nailed down. As proof, here’s our
picture of the 11th Armored Cav stealing television sets from a store.” I was so furious. I
had occasion to see that gentleman again because he came out again looking for a ride. I
confronted him quite heavily. I said, “What the hell? I read that crap. You were there.
You watched Colonel Starry get wounded. You saw all kinds of the combat that went on.
How could you file a story like that?” He said, “Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait a minute.” He
said, “That was not my story.” He said, “Yes, my name was on it. But,” he said, “I filed
a story that pretty much told what happened. I was quite complimentary to Colonel
Starry and to the 2nd Squadron and to all you guys. But what happened was that story got
to our editor in New York,” or wherever they were. I forget right now what he said.
“They changed the story. They didn’t like it. They changed the pictures.” I said, “You
mean they do that?” He said, “Oh, yeah. If they don’t like my stuff, they’ll change it.” I
said, “So some guy in New York wrote the story about the invasion of Cambodia?”
“Yes.” I said, “Well, I tell you what. You’re wrong, John, and so is Time magazine and I
will never buy that rag again.” I never have, I might add. But just as kind of to show him
how impressed I was with Time magazine, he wanted to go out to War Zone C where the
3rd Squadron was. Instead I put him on a Cav log bird going to the coast. I don’t know
where the hell he ever went from there. To be honest with you, I don’t care. I was very
upset. He was just one of many. I went into Lai Khe, which is on the way between
Saigon and Quan Loi. I was getting a funny bump in the rotors. I’d just dropped off at
Lai Khe to have one of the 1st Infantry Division Aviation Division mechanics check it to
make sure I’d be okay to get home. So the part of the flight line where I was faced part
of the back where there was a range, a firing range off, I don’t know, about a quarter-mile
from me was a television camera and some guy with a microphone talking. Then back
behind them about another half-mile was a bunch of A-Cavs on line, armored personnel
 carriers all test-firing their guns. I asked this maintenance warrant who was there. I said,
“Who the hell is that?” He said, “That’s Dan Rather from CBS news.” “Is he doing a
story on your Cav troops?” He said, “No. He’s pretending he’s up,” I forget where. Oh,
God, I’ve got this all mixed up. I don’t remember the name of the 1st Division base. But
Lai Khe was the village, to the north of us where the fight is taking place. Anyway, the upshot was that the 1st Division had a big a fight the day before and Dan Rather was using these armored personnel carriers as background while he was reporting as if he was there and he wasn’t there. He was on an American firebase. He’s telling all about this big battle that he was covering that was going on. He had his little flak vest on and his helmet. I thought, “What a bunch of shit!” These guys are just doing this. It drove me crazy. That was the level of reporting on my second tour. Everybody wanted atrocities. They used to come into the operations shack all the time. “Hey, have your gunships killed anybody? Civilians and stuff?”

SM: You’re kidding.

BP: No. “We’re in contact out here. You want to go out?” “No, no that’s old news. I’m looking for good stuff. Atrocities, murders, rapes, stuff like that. You guys been doing any of that?”

SM: Unbelievable.

BP: It really was sad. I go back to that book by Neal Sheehan, and Sheehan rings his hands and does the same thing as Walter Cronkite about how they were lied to. My take on that whole thing is, “I’m sorry but we became the creatures that you wanted us to be. We were never as bad as you thought but you never would tell anybody how good we were, either, because we couldn’t give you a victory to fit into your broadcast time.” It was sad. When they start complaining about the controls put on them in this last go-around in Iraq, I just thought to myself, “Hey, great.” It used to be in the Second World War you didn’t really have to worry about it because the press had better sense. As long as you’ve got Geraldo Rivera out there that’s going to tell everybody in the world what’s going on because he’s so filled with himself and what he’s doing, you have to have censorship. It’s pathetic what we’ve ended up with in the way of journalism. If you look at television right now, my wife and I were talking about his last night, you’re not watching journalists. What you’re doing is you’re watching men who are semi-actors going through human interest stuff that they’ve created. You don’t even know if it’s real.

Sort of like watching “Survivor” again. How do I know Peter Jennings even knows what’s going on? Yet, he’s telling me very definitively this and that and everything.

Aren’t you glad you brought that subject up?
SM: Yes, the media in the war is one of the more controversial and debated subjects.

BP: They are controversial because they want to all be independent. They don’t want to play the game. They don’t realize people will die if we let them just sit up there and let them blab about this and that. They don’t get it.

SM: When you were back in the US, especially during that interim period when you were watching the news, were you getting a feeling at that point that the media was trying to sensationalize things at all or was that something that happened later? While you were there for your second tour and after?

BP: When I was there for my first tour I think we were getting into a state of change, after Tet of ’68 particularly. I think before that it was pretty much, yes. We’d be out an occasional thing. Then when the My Lai story broke, that just ripped the cover off of any sense that the press might have had that they needed to try and cooperate. After that it was, “Well.” For those who had no better compass than to believe what they were reading, then yes. That’s all we were doing was out there killing people, having fun. Pretending they were enemy. We didn’t have the balls to go face them. I’ve had people tell me that. “You guys shoot a bunch of women,” and then you say, “Oh, yeah. We killed ten of them today.”

SM: You’ve had people come up and say that to you?

BP: Not come up and say that to me but in the course of conversations people would say. “Yes, you guys. What do you do?” I had a guy when I came back on emergency leave. This guy thought we were all alone, we really weren’t but he thought so. You have to travel in your uniform. He asked me how many children I thought I killed. First he asked me, “You been in Vietnam?” “Yes.” “How many kids do you think you killed?” I just looked at him like, “What?” How do you respond to a question like that? I have no idea. I know I killed one because I heard the kid crying right before they died. But that’s kind of traumatic and certainly wasn’t intentional and, “How do I tell you, asshole? Because you have no better sense than to ask me something.”

SM: The person who asked you this question, was he a civilian?

BP: Yes.

SM: Just asked you at like an airport or something?
BP: Yes, I was at the airport waiting. I was on standby.

SM: Did you have any other encounters or problems with people who were opposed to the war? Especially when you were traveling in uniform, either during the times you were home in between tours, or before, or after the first or second tours?

BP: Well, the worst thing that happened to us was what Joan went through with the spray painting of the patio and sugar in the gas tank and that kind of stuff. As for me personally, the guy in the airport and then, oh, boy, where was it? San Francisco. No, that’s where I was when the guy came up in the airport. I think I was in Texas of all places. Oh, I was at Love Field, had just flown in. It was 1971. I was TDY from Ft. Knox down to Ft. Hood. I flew into the airport and was getting a rental car, walking through the airport. In those days they hadn’t eased the restriction, you had to fly in your uniform. Shortly after that, like within a month or two they changed it. Anyway I’m going down, I’ve got all my ribbons on and everything. This longhaired guy walks up to me and says, “Hey, man. You one of them officers from Vietnam?” I looked at him for a minute and I said, “Do you have a question?” He said, “Yeah, I just wanted you to know something. Fuck you.” Then he walked away. I said, “Fuck you, too. Have a nice day.”

But those are the only two times. They made Joan’s life pretty miserable.

SM: Did you hear about that during or after you got back?

BP: The biggest story going around when I got over there was about a guy from the 1st Cav. I don’t even know if it was true or not. It was passed around as, “This is no shit,” kind of thing. Some guy from the 1st Cav got back to Travis, went over to the San Francisco airport and some older woman walked up to him and said, “Oh, is that a 1st Cav patch? Were you in the 1st Cav?” The kid said yes and she pulled out a handgun and shot him. I have no idea whether that’s true. Among Vietnam veterans anymore it’s become very stylish to say, “Well, I was spit on when I got back.” I was never spit on because I don’t think I would have maintained any composure at all. To be honest with you, I know it did happen. But I don’t think it happened nearly as much as people say. That’s my sense of it. Every war has its mythologies. The Vietnam War is part of that is passed down with the, “Yeah, I was spit on when I got home,” kind of thing. I wasn’t. I may be the only person never spit on when he came back, not once but twice. (Laughs)
SM: As you were leaving, how much hope did you have that things were going to come to a good end in South Vietnam?

BP: I felt it was going to be a real close-run thing if the top Vietnamese were going to do it. Their hearts just wasn’t in it.

SM: What did you think about Vietnamization as a strategy? That is turning the fight over to them, let them fight the war and we provide support?

BP: It’s what we should have done in ’61 and then call it a bad deal and back off if nothing happened. It, of course, would. I think there are events that are going to transpire whether you do anything about it or not. That certainly was one. That country needed to be unified. It’s the same problem I have with North and South Korea. They need to be together. It’s so stupid to say, “This is the South these are the good guys. Here’s the North, they’re the bad guys. They’re Koreans.” On the one hand, I wish them well. A lot of men have died to make them free. I certainly hope that if that’s what they wanted. I never got a sense when I was over there that that’s what they all really wanted. There were some of them who wanted it desperately. Some that, quite frankly, didn’t want it. Then a whole bunch more. The, probably the majority who didn’t give a rat’s ass, they just wanted to be left alone. They didn’t want to be bothered with either side. That did not bode well. When I left in ’70 and it was almost ’71, thank God I got out of there when I did. I would hate to think I would have been there for Lam Son 719 in January of ’71. I didn’t know if they were going to be able to pull it off. Then when they had Lam Son 719 and so many units broke and ran, I thought, “Oh. I don’t think they’re going to do it.” What surprised me was that it took them so long.

SM: Of course, for your tour there, it was the big operation. The most controversial operation of the time was the Cambodian Incursion.

BP: Oh, yes.

SM: One thing we really didn’t delve too deeply into was the role that your unit played in that particular operation and what you guys thought of it, especially how it ended.

BP: Well, we were the tip of the spear going in on that particular area. Of course, the South Vietnamese and some of the other units went in, 4th Division to the Parrot’s Beak. We were farther south. But it was an old-fashioned jump-off and attack at dawn.
We felt like we’d given a pretty good account of ourselves. Of course, the problem was I think we were stunned by how much equipment they had. They had far more equipment, hell, than we did. That just blew me away. We had Long Binh and Can Ranh Bay and Da Nang and they had the equivalent of that and more all along the border. It was just incredible. Hell, I figure the people of China and Russia must have worked five years at full employment just making weapons and munitions for those guys. They had a stunning—it was more than we could haul out or blow up. That’s how bad it was. When we walked out there was still stuff. We knew where it was but we couldn’t get to it. It was mind-boggling. We felt like we did a damn good job in Cambodia. We felt like we did what we were asked to do, which was to buy time from the South Vietnamese. We also realized politically it was wildly unpopular. I ended up probably respecting Nixon more for that because no Democratic president that I could envision holding that office at the time would have had that kind of nerve. It took phenomenal nerve for Nixon to get us through that whole period. He really had to steel himself because the great unwashed were making his life a living hell and anybody who supported him. The “National Tantrum” was in full swing. I’m convinced had Nixon folded up like everybody wanted him to they would have never put him through Watergate, and the country through that long, slow nightmare that never went away. So finally they got their way.

SM: Okay. When the Cambodian Incursion finished and we pulled our forces out of Cambodia, did you all think we’d accomplished very much in that particular operation?

BP: Oh, yes. I thought we’d done well. It torqued me off that we had to announce to the children of America that we’re only going to go to this parallel and we’re only going to be in there twenty-one days. It was like, “For God’s sakes. Why don’t we just send them road signs and buy them a hamburger?” They did. They just holed up twenty-three miles away. They sat there and waited for us to leave. We did catch some units pulling out. The 11th Cav sure got in a rumpus. Some of the other units did, too. By and large, they just pulled back because they knew what was going on. They knew exactly what our plans were and what we were doing. But they didn’t know General Levall had no orders to bomb the snot out of them. (Laughs) Before we went into Cambodia—when I first got over there because this was a new area to me, I had been up
in II Corps and I Corps. I had nothing, I had no knowledge of II Corps. I’m flying along
the Cambodia border and I see all these Arc Light tracks on the other side of the border.
I’m thinking, “Hey, wait a minute. There’s a three-kilometer safety zone. What the hell
is going on?” (Laughs) Then later on when we got back I found out the general was doing
the bombing unauthorized. I thought to myself, “Oh, my God. What a war! Only in
America.”

SM: When you were leaving—you’ve already discussed that you weren’t very
optimistic that things were going to turn out very well. In essence, you thought we had
not succeeded in Southeast Asia at that point. How did it feel to leave for what would
obviously have to be for the last time for you as an American fighting man?

BP: I was hoping. That wasn’t in the plan. That was the basic deal when I first
got back. I have to tell you that the turn-around time between tours, when I got back to
the United States at the end of my second tour for aviators was thirty-two months. I had
to sweat out a third tour. I’ll tell you that like drove me over the edge. It was just
more than I could handle.

SM: When you came back, what was your initial assignment?

BP: My initial assignment upon return was to the armor officer advanced course
at Ft. Knox. I branch-transferred out of the infantry at the specific demands of the
regimental commander, troop commander and every other armor officer. Said, “You’re a
stone waste in the infantry. Get your ass over to armor branch.” Then what I didn’t
realize was the Colonel Starry was so well placed. Infantry branch had told me in like
April or May when I contacted them, they said they were going to send me to Ft. Rucker.
Well, “What the hell do I need to do at Ft. Rucker? I hope to God they’re not going to
just park me there.” But, yes, they were. I wanted to go to the advanced course because
flying had no charm left for me at this point. So they talked me into branch-transferring
from infantry to armor, which I did. Then they got me to the advanced course. So that
was a good deal. Then through the rest of my career as an officer the 11th Cav mafias, as
we used to call them, were able to reach out and protect me for quite a while. They got
me some good stuff even though Colonel Starry misspelled my name in his book.

(Laughs)

SM: For crying out loud.
BP: Got my rank and my name wrong. But other than that, hey. In his book he
calls me 1st Lt. William Parris, with two R’s. I thought about dropping him a line, but
then, hey, what difference does it make?

SM: Well, at least he got your name right in terms of its phonetic spelling.

BP: That’s true, that’s true.

SM: You were that memorable. Well, when you got back to the United States in
late 1970, what were your impressions of Americans now and how we were collectively
looking at the war and dealing with the war? As we were Vietnamizing.

BP: I hated them. I really did. I hated, you know. I wasn’t clicking on all four,
exactly. I was traumatized. I was frightened and I was angered. I was angered at the
country for having put us through that. I was angry at the country for putting me through
that. Then when I found out what happened to my family while I was gone I hated
everybody and everything. On the one hand, I understand that these excesses occur,
particularly in a free society. But after having to put up with drugs for a year in Vietnam
and then watching the way everybody just thought this was the coolest thing they’d ever
done. There were no rules, yadda, yadda. I thought, “What a sick place. These people
are nuts.” It took me a long time to get over being mad. It was like Vietnam existed but
unless you had to go nobody particularly gave a rat’s ass. As long as they could get
Nixon out of the White House they were happy. Just mindless, mindless stuff. Nobody
understood the war. Nobody wanted to know the war. It had gone on way too long. On
that score they were right.

SM: When you did go to armored training, you said that was Ft. Knox, Kentucky,
correct? At the advanced course, armored officers advanced course, what were your plans
as far as your military career?

BP: Let me see. I checked into immigration to Israel. (Laughs)

SM: You’re kidding, right?

BP: No, I’m not.

SM: Did you really? Why?

BP: Why? I never wanted to go back to war again. I’d had enough.

SM: I thought you said Israel.

BP: Israel, yes.
SM: Israel, the place where the Palestinians and the Israelis have been fighting
for the past—?

BP: This came to me when they sent me a letter and said, “You know, you being
a qualified helicopter pilot we would love to have you. Please start studying Hebrew.
Let us know. We’ll make the arrangements quick.”

SM: Wow.

BP: I said, “No thanks.”

SM: Are you being sarcastic?

BP: No, I’m not.

SM: I mean as far as your desires to go to Israel?

BP: Yes, I wanted away.

SM: Just wondering.

BP: Then I checked into immigration to Australia. They said, “Unless you’ve got
a job here, don’t bother.” I checked immigration to New Zealand and they said, “Yes,
put your name on the list. You want to come, that’s fine.”

SM: Why were you looking at Australia or New Zealand?

BP: I was really just looking at getting away, running from rather than running
to. I just wanted to be somewhere I was safe. Not realizing the demons were in my
mind. I was checking on that. My plans were to stick around the Army until I found
something better. You know, I liked the Army. I really did. But I also knew if they told
me, “You’re going back to Vietnam,” I’d go AWOL (absent without leave). I just
emotionally could not handle it. I would have had a complete breakdown. I think I
probably had one anyway. It was incomplete. (Laughs) Tell you a little story. In 1972,
I’m still out of the advanced course now. I’m in combat developments command armor
agency at Ft. Knox. We did some spiffy stuff. The Hellfire missile and the Apache
helicopter are the kinds of things that we worked on. We did all the what’s called the
material need document. That’s where you do a mission. In order to invent something
they have to know what you want to do. So we were the guys who invented low-level
flight-and-fire-and-forget missiles using laser target designators. But what happened was
the total missile was mounted on Charlie-model Hueys. They were experimenting out at
Hunter Liggett, which is where they put these great toys when they have neat ideas. We
would go out and we would work with them. In 1972, in April the NVA attacked South Vietnam and they had what they called the Easter Offensive. This is just right after the Paris Peace Conference broke off. They thought for sure they could just gobble Vietnam up. So they decided to send us two Charlie-models with the TOW (tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided) package over to Vietnam. They needed an observer from our office to go with them. I’m out at Hunter Liggett TDY working on the advanced attack helicopters with my team. I get a phone call to come back to Ft. Knox immediately. Which was quite unusual, actually, since I had driven out and didn’t fly like the rest of everybody. I had driven out and carried all the team equipment. It kept me off an airplane, which I really liked, which is odd for a rated Army aviator, but there you go. So I drove back. This lieutenant colonel had just taken over our division. He calls me into the office on a Saturday morning and he’s upset because I hit a snowstorm in Wyoming. Why he’s upset, well, it delayed him and he had to work on Saturday, which he didn’t like. So first he chews my ass for hitting a snowstorm in Wyoming coming back at his request. Then the next thing, he announces I’m going back to Vietnam. Only I’m going TDY and I’m going to be gone forty-five days. I’m going to be observing the TOW helicopter in the attack. They’re going tank hunting over there for the spring offensive. I look at him and I said, “I respectfully request that you give this job to someone else. I just got back from Vietnam. I’m not going.” He shut me off. He said, “I don’t want to hear your sad story. You’re going and that’s it. Be ready to go by Thursday.” So I went home and got very drunk and talked to my wife and said, “I can’t do it. I just hear that name and I’m not well.” So Joan said, “Well, you better do something because I don’t want to put up with you when you come back. I don’t even want to know because it’s not your style to go over there and watch. I’m not going to put up with it. I had my year, thank you, and I’m not going to do it again.” So I agonized over it. Finally asked permission to see the head of the agency who was a full colonel. He called me into his office and he said, “I understand you want to talk to me.” I said, “Yes, sir. I do and I want to close the door.” So we closed the door and I told him what was in my heart. That I couldn’t go back to Vietnam because I had had enough. I was still having nightmares, still having problems. My family had been through hell. I had been through hell. The real thing is that I was told that I had the most flight time in the
Charlie-model Huey which I told this colonel, “I’ve been in the Charlie-model Huey twice. Once I got a ride from An Khe over to Kontum in a gunship. The other time in flight school I actually flew a gunship as a demo. Left seat got to play with the guns. Twenty minutes later they threw me out and stuck another student in there.” I said, “Everybody in my section had flown Charlie-model Hueys many, many hours. I have not. Most of my time is in scout aircraft.” So he looked at me and he said, “You know Paris, I don’t know why people make decisions like they do sometimes, but every once in a while a man needs a little help. I’m going to give you some help.” He said, “Since your boss has so many answers we’ll let him go.” (Laughs) So they did. He called him into his office and he said, “How many hours have you got?” “Oh, I’ve got three-thousand something.” “Yeah, you got a lot of Huey time?” “Yes.” “You know what? I don’t think Paris can handle this. I don’t want to send a captain over there. I want to send you. You’ve got some Charlie-model time right?” “Sir, uh—” “Yes. This will be good for you. You go ahead and take the job. We’ll leave Paris here.” (Laughs)

SM: For crying out loud.

BP: After that my name was mud. I very quickly got out of there. Good idea. So that’s my story.

SM: When did you get out of the service? What year?

BP: I retired in 1982. I was kicked out after the promotion board in 1977 as a non-select, which is not surprising considering my first two OERs (officer evaluation report) together wouldn’t have made a maximum score.

SM: So this was part of the RIF (reduction in force) program?

BP: It wasn’t a RIF. It’s just a normal administrative thing. A thousand are in the zone and they’ll promote 690, everybody else is a non-select. You get two pass-overs, you’re out. I had statutory entitlement to come back as an enlisted man since I had a reserve commission. So I read the regulations. AR 601-280 says if you have a Silver Star or higher you can ask for a one-grade bump if you’re reverting back from officer rank. Since I had two Silver Stars, not one, I asked for a one-grade bump. So they pushed me from E-5 to E-6. Then somebody reached out and did a real nice favor. They gave me a date of rank of E-6 as my commission date. So there was a brand new E-6 taking a forty-four percent pay cut, but I was immediately in the zone for E-7. Got
promoted just as soon as DA (Department of the Army) got my packet and got five months back pay as E-7. Then we were able to make it. It was an ugly couple months though.

SM: I would imagine so. That’s quite a cut in your pay.
BP: Quite a cut in everything.
SM: That’s true. You’re looking at more than just money.
BP: Yes.
SM: What was your rank when you were reverted back to enlisted man?
BP: Staff sergeant E-6.
SM: No. I mean before, I mean an officer, what was your rank?
BP: Captain. Captain with what, eight years time-in-grade.
SM: Where were you in April of 1975? Do you recall?
BP: April of ’75 I was in college. The Army sent me for two years. That Black Horse Mafia again. They sent me to degree completion for two years. Let me go anywhere I wanted. I wanted to go to Notre Dame, but I was one credit hour short. They didn’t accept something. I forget what it was. I had to have a decision that day. Notre Dame wouldn’t give me a decision. They said, “No, we play it straight. Either you’ve got it or you don’t.” I said, “Look by next week I can.” “No, no if you need an answer today, the answer is you’ll come in as a freshman.” Well, I had to come in as a sophomore. So then I called a friend of Joan’s family, her old academic advisor. I faxed him everything. He took it over to the registrar, personally walked it over, faxed me back a letter of acceptance as a junior. I’m sorry. Notre Dame said I would have been a second semester sophomore.

SM: Instead of a junior.
BP: Instead of a junior, which I had to be. I had to be first quarter, or first semester junior. University of Northern Colorado faxed it back first quarter junior, no problem. So then I left two months later and I went to college for two years. Tough duty, it was horrible. (Laughs)

SM: Were you able to take your family with you?
BP: Oh, absolutely. Yes. Well, University of Northern Colorado is in Greeley and that’s where Joan is from.
SM: Okay.

BP: So that’s why we were able to do it so quick. She graduated from there. Her mom was there. We lived in Greeley for two years. I wore civilian clothes, became a game warden and all kinds of things.

SM: Of course, during that timeframe, we’re talking about the fall of South Vietnam. I was wondering what you remember about that? How you felt when you heard about the fall of South Vietnam?

BP: I thought it was sad. The whole thing was sad. Sad and even though I realized the United States had failed, I didn’t fell like I had failed. I always used to talk about it and say, “Hell, we were winning when I left.” But that’s the way I felt. I felt like, yeah, the United States probably had no business being over there. It was a dumb thing to do but insofar as what I did, I felt like I did the best possible job I could. I felt like I was pretty good this time. I did a good job. I feel that way today. I did a hell of a job considering what they trained me to do.

SM: I guess, did you have any problems when you first came back to the United States? Did you have any problems communicating with Joan or with any of your older family members who you might have been closer to?

BP: Yes, I had a lot of problems. It got to the point where when I went to college in 1974, I finally went and got some therapy. That made a tremendous turn-around in my life. That got me settled down. I still had nightmares, but not as much. It helped me a lot. I had tried to get therapy when I first got to Ft. Knox. But that amounted to the shrink saw me and said, “Look, I’m not equipped for this. Nobody’s got time for it. We’ve got so many problems. If you want to go get help in the civilian community, go ahead.” “Well, gee thanks, chief.” So I let it go at that. Mostly I numbed out with alcohol. We got through it. It wasn’t pretty. Had a lot of rough spots. Then after ’74 it settled down a little. I still almost screwed the marriage up totally. But Joan and I were able to work it out. We both had to put a hell of a commitment in to get this thing to work. But I never would—when this whole thing with post-traumatic stress came out about twelve, fourteen years ago I never would cave in. I watched everybody. It was like somebody hollered “free beer” outside an alcohol treatment center. Everybody came running in and they had PTSD. The problem was a lot of them did. But there were a
whole bunch more who were just going crazy, who had seen no more than you have. I’m hoping you haven’t seen a lot.

SM: Well, I didn’t see combat in Vietnam. I haven’t seen combat anywhere, sir.

BP: Yes, well, they hadn’t either but, boy, they were filing for it. It got to the point where they started abusing the system until finally the system would just give in and give them a rating. Then they started working on the system to up the rating. You know? So there’s a lot of guys running around with a hundred percent who don’t have PTSD, they have other things. But so finally my daughter wanted to go see *We Were Soldiers Once*. So we said, “Okay, we’ll go with you,” having no idea what this movie was about. I almost broke down completely in the movie theatre. I mean I was half-hysterical before they even got to Vietnam. It just triggered so many memories. After we came out of the theatre Joan and I talked. I said, “Okay, no more war movies.” Then I realized that I’ve go to do something because I shouldn’t have had that bad of a reaction. So I reopened my claim. I had been rated twenty percent by the VA before that. I walked out of there with a hundred percent, which blew me away. I filed for Social Security disability and got that. So damn, I guess I was lucky to walk away but I still carry a lot of it with me and it’s obvious. I don’t go to therapy anymore and I won’t for two reasons. One is I worked in the business and I know there’s a lot of questionable therapy out there, it’s not really therapy. Then number two, I’m too old. So I manage my own symptoms. It’s an everyday thing. It can get out of control. Post-traumatic stress is the damnedest thing I’ve ever seen. You fight admitting that you have it. Then once you have it and you go through effective treatment—there is effective treatment out there. But then after that you spend the rest of your life having to manage your symptoms because it will come back under the right circumstances. So you constantly are case-managing yourself and it’s a job. I have to tell you it’s an indigenous little thing that comes back and attacks you when you least want it or need it. It always comes to times of stress. I have to be very careful. I was very pleased that I was able to get through the reunion in April. It was a nice time. That, I was pleased about. I think I felt safe with those guys.
SM: As far as your adjustment back to life in the United States, do you think the military could have done anything to have made that transition better or easier for you? Especially concerning your PTSD?

BP: No. The military doesn’t understand it particularly. Especially at the time, given the time they had no clue. They were looking for what the World War II vets went through. When that didn’t happen then they figured, “Ah, hell. No problem.” I think they were as ignorant as we were. You know, we had no idea. I didn’t. I knew. I’m not stupid. I knew damn good and well you don’t just shoot your co-pilot and then go dancing off into the sunset. I really have to credit that civilian psychologist, which is what she was. She was damn good. I think she probably saved our marriage at a minimum and probably made me a lot happier. I mean I’ve still got problems, but I’ve got a whole lot less thanks to her. So it was good stuff.

SM: Can you describe in what ways she was able to help you?

BP: She was a highly effective therapist. In treatment of post-traumatic stress, it’s not an intellectual exercise. It’s quite visceral. A therapist has to be willing to go with you. Excuse me. Let me just clear this for a second. By that I mean you can only do so much of that, “How do you feel about that?” Most people today don’t really understand effective therapeutic techniques because it’s all got washed out into pop psychology that we manage to make into the industrial standard anymore. In the real world of psychology you have to get to the feelings. In order to get to the feeling it’s like peeling layers on an onion. You can’t just go in there and blunder about and wait until you strike something. It’s a process. It’s a process of going back to the stressor. That is so shielded. The walls are up and resistance is so high it takes time to do that. You’ve got to go in there. Then the lynchpin to this is to give positive meaning to your trauma. You can’t do that right up front. Nor will most PTSD survivors give you that right off the bat. You have to learn to feel again a little bit, then get to the stressor, then confront it. That’s horrible. Not everybody can do that. She was able to do it not realizing what she was doing. But she was a good enough therapist that when we finally got to that moment, although she didn’t say what positive meaning can you give, she mostly listened and would guide the conversation a little bit. Then when we got there she said, “Okay, stop. Would you do that again?” I sat up like I’d been slapped and I said, “Son-of-a-
“bitch! Yes, I would.” I jumped to my feet and it was a like a weight came off. I realized, “Wow! I hadn’t really thought about that, but yeah. I’d do it again. I’d do it any number of times because as bad as it was it wasn’t nearly as bad as burning alive. So shit yeah, that was an act of mercy. Got it!” Okay. Well, there’s some residual stuff now that an effective therapist would do. There’s some tools you’ve got to have that we didn’t know enough about to do. So later on it did come back. My son started acting out and got into drugs quite heavy and turned his mother into Social Services for child abuse and the list goes on. Unfounded, but at any rate another growth experience.

SM: Unbelievable.

BP: Oh, there’s lots more, too. But that’s just that. Ultimately I’ve learned. Joan is real good about helping me. You know the old counselor in her comes right out. She can smell it when I’m hiding. She knows it. It’s like, “Okay where are you at? What’s going on? What are we doing here? You’ve disconnected now.” She’ll hunt it out so that is real helpful to me because I do. It’s very subtle. I don’t even see it sometimes. Other times I do, Steve. Once in a while I’ll have a nightmare, but not like the old days. I mean in the old days they were pretty intense and graphic. Now the nightmares are scary. They are not like the old days. I’m able to handle those. It’s on a day-to-day where you have to stay connected. You have to interact with people. You have to care. You have to show that care. That’s always hard for trauma survivors. You have to keep that going. You have to keep working on that being human. Otherwise you’ll crawl in a hole and put the walls up and you won’t come out. Don’t know if you noticed at the reunion. Don’t know if this has anything to do with anything but I could tell you exactly where everybody was at by looking at that group. It was funny. A lot of them could tell where I was at. John Pierce and I are still talking about this to this day. It’s amazing.

SM: What would you say is the most significant way your experience in Southeast Asia affected you personally?

BP: What’s the most significant what, sir?

SM: The most significant way that your experiences in Southeast Asia affected you?

BP: Wow. The most significant way? Hmm. It has made me more real.

SM: Could you explain what you mean by that?
BP: No. I’m groping.
SM: Does it tie into what you were talking about earlier as far as that experience,
making you live life with more zest. The fact that you don’t really experience life until
you’re near death?
BP: In a small way, but I think in a larger since what I mean is that I’ve had to
embrace life. Sometimes you route step through life, if that makes since. You kind of do
it by the numbers. Today we get up and we go here, we go there. You’re pretty
detached. But then again it does tie into that doesn’t it? Yes, you have to live life. You
have to fill out all the spaces and all the corners. You have to bring good stuff in.
Ultimately, at the end I can say that. Not at the beginning. The beginning was a lot about
learning so much about myself and realizing how insignificant I really was in the scheme
of things. Then learning that you have a gift. When you come out on the other side and
after you settle down because it takes you a while to settle down. Once you do settle
down then you have to take your gift and use it. That’s what it’s taught me. This is not
capricious that I lived in another city. This is not a fluke. This is not as if an angel
comes down and says, “Great, Bill. Now that you’re done with that here’s a little lot that
God has created, now get out and do it.” No, it’s more like you have the gift of life and
by using your gift you overcome what war is and does. So you can use your gift and then
help others heal just by being you. You don’t have to go out and invent something or do
something grand. The fact that you’re walking around and that you’re there and you can
say, “Yes, I was there,” that in and of itself is a gift to some people and to others a lesson.
We’re all interconnected. I never quite understood that, whereas now I think I do. I’m
part of the living and I’ll stay part of the living as long as I have life. When I don’t, there
are other challenges and other things. But here and now I have to use my gift.
SM: What are the most important things or the most important lessons we should
take away from our collective experience in Southeast Asia, the United States generally,
you think?
BP: It’s an old lesson. It’s an old, old lesson to beware of leaders who tell you
what you want to hear. Leaders who desperately want to lead you. The ideal leader
effort, other than perhaps Christ, had to have been the old Roman general Cincinnatus
who as the parable goes—we don’t even know if it’s true per se—but supposedly he’s out
plowing his field. He’s called by the Roman senate to come lead the Roman army
against somebody, the enemy of the week. Rome has fallen on hard times. It was
horrible. Cincinnatus, who trains and leads the army to victory, comes back and they
offer him the imperial robe and he refuses and goes back to the farm. I think that George
Washington is a powerful example. It’s the standard that we have to hold for our leaders.
If we are willing to compromise and we are willing to put the hungry and the needy and
the desperate and the emotionally crippled in as leaders, then we do ourselves great harm.
Men who want these jobs desperately are not the men who should have them. That’s
news. That’s the story of a lot of wars, even World War II. We did so much to restore
things, we tried so hard and then we gave it all away because we didn’t want to pay
attention anymore. We didn’t want to think about it. We didn’t want to accept our place
and it was carved out and paid for in blood. We just wanted to kick back and have fun.
Play with our navel.

SM: What lessons do you think we can take away and apply to contemporary
foreign policy, if anything?

BP: I think that the lesson in Vietnam is a cruel one. You have to be very, very
wary of enforcing your will with arms. Once you are in that position then you cannot
stop until you’ve achieved your goal. I see us thrashing around with it so hard today in
today’s world. President Bush has not particularly taken us down this road. We’re
already there. He’s merely acknowledging it and saying, “Okay, we’re going to have to
do this.” Yet there’s this kind of reluctance that people feel like, “I don’t want to do that.
If we’re going to do it, make it stop after twenty-four or forty-eight hours. Give us the
few casualties and let us get on with our business of being us. Stop telling us, you know,
things we don’t like to hear.” The guys crying in the wilderness. I don’t know where it
goes. It’s a dark road we’re on. Like it or not, we’re there, not just because of Bush or
Clinton but because of our actions over thirty or forty years. We’d better wake up. We’d
better get ready. This isn’t going to end. Even if we stop, even if we left Iraq, this
business isn’t over. This is a relentless, implacable enemy that hates us. They’ve been
around for two-hundred years. We had a taste of them two-hundred years ago, we didn’t
like it then and we’re not going to like it now. But until, however it gets resolved, it goes
on. Whether we’re over there or over here it doesn’t make any difference. They’re not
going to quit. They’re coming for us, be ready.

SM: Is there anything else that you’d like to discuss with me?

BP: Is there any possible subject I haven’t covered? (Laughs)

SM: I don’t think so. I think we’ve talked about a lot. You know, there’s a
couple of things that I have overlooked. I don’t know why, this one just popped into my
mind. But while you were there did you get to see any USO (United Service
Organizations) shows?

BP: No, by choice.

SM: Okay.

BP: I had seen the Bob Hope Show—which to me, that’s the Cadillac of all
shows—in Korea. I thought other people should enjoy that experience so, no I didn’t go.
I think I told you the experience of the Miss America show coming to LZ Geronimo and
the old man sending me out to the coast?

SM: Yes, that’s right. So that you wouldn’t be able to do anything, cause any
problems.

BP: Yes. What was that all about? (Laughs)

SM: The other question that did come to mind especially as we’re talking about
some of your experiences in therapy. I’m just curious, did you ever have the opportunity
to meet with and talk with a chaplain in Vietnam and did that help?

BP: Yes.

SM: I know you said you did go to talk with him about absolution.

BP: But on my first tour that Catholic chaplain, gee, he was a gift. He was a
wonderful guy. Even though I kind of had problems he was wonderful. I think it
probably wouldn’t have changed a whole lot the outcome because it was time to grow
and I just couldn’t do it within the confines of the Catholic religion at that time. But it
was horrible the way he was taken from my life and he didn’t have a chance to struggle a
little more. On my second tour I didn’t go to the chaplain that much because I wasn’t
going to Mass anymore. Then they were very nice to me and very understanding but I
was having a hard time hearing what they had to say. I tend to pray in isolation.

Whereas my first tour I went to Mass all the time.
SM: That brings up a rather sensitive subject of your initial divorce. You mentioned that you were no longer a member of the Catholic Church.

BP: Well, I was.

SM: Was that a proximate cause of that, the divorce issue?

BP: No, the reason that I really had problems with my faith was in my mind there’s a speed bump with divorce/remarriage. As long as I was divorced I knew the Church could have me in there among the flock. But once I got remarried, in my mind, this has nothing to do with church doctrine. But in my mind, no, I couldn’t be a practicing Catholic. So I just walked away from it and said, “Okay, fair enough. I don’t think God wants me not to be with this woman. My faith says she’s [not my real wife]. This is the best deal I’m going to have forever.”

SM: Right.

BP: I mean I’m the one that provoked this and there are a lot of issues about “Why didn’t you?” and “How come?” It all had to do with the choices I was making in order to grow spiritually. I botched the whole job but I did it. I got there eventually.

SM: It’s an on-going journey.

BP: Sure is. I told my nephew, the one who just joined the Army, “A soldier without a spiritual faith is a man unarmed in a conflict.” I believe that sincerely. There are no real atheists in foxholes anyway. Who are they kidding?

SM: When you were there in Vietnam, in Southeast Asia, did all the men that were in your unit that were killed, were all of them recovered? Were they all brought back as far as their remains? Do you know?

BP: First tour, yes. Second tour, yes.

SM: I ask because we’ve been working with Joint Task Force Accounting. Now they’ve just changed the name to the Joint Personnel Recovery Center or something like that, JPRC. Joint Personnel Recovery. They came and did some research here and then one of the things we told them was that we had veterans, we’ll ask them if they had any knowledge of people that were left behind, that were missing. If that was the case then whatever information you might have might be helpful in resolving some open cases.

That’s one of the reasons I ask.
BP: I know of people who were lost. I’m thinking there were two helicopter pilots and I think they were from the 229th that were flying rockets [recons]. Not rockets, they were flying flare missions. Something happened and they went down on the river near LZ English. What was that, Song Be? As far as I know they were never recovered. The rest was just rumors. Otherwise, no. No, I don’t have any specific details on any bodies. We always brought ours out.

SM: That’s the only reason I asked that question.

BP: No. Some of the pilots might know of guys. Like in the A Shau, were all those bodies brought out?

SM: I don’t know.

BP: Yes, I don’t either—and some of the other men might.

SM: Or Mike.

BP: Yes, Mike, definitely Mike.

SM: Because he was in the operations unit.

BP: Yes, Mike is sort of a collective memory.

SM: I understand, at times, a collective conscience.

BP: Yes, at times.

SM: Then the last question I’ll ask that I have on my plate. What would you say to kids today if you wanted to tell them about the Vietnam War? About your experiences in Vietnam, what would be the most significant thing you’d want to say to them?

BP: Holy cow.

SM: Not just kids today, but kids of future generations as well.

BP: I don’t think—this is why I re-enlisted. This is just my opinion. I don’t think an American citizen who enjoys the rights and the protection of the American government and our system of democracy has the right of refusal not to help that system. I think that Vietnam if anything highlights what happens when people get it in their head that they know more than their betters, if you wish. Not to say that the government knew everything, but I have to say on my second tour I did not think I was going over there to save Vietnam from communism. I was going over there because I was told to and because if you’re a soldier, that’s what you do. I think that all too often we are lulled in our society with a bunch of little platitudes, which are evil. They’re innocuous sounding,
but they’re evil. But through a very painstaking process individuals and families came
together to form groups and cities and faiths and nations. There’s a certain amount of
leeway one must give a nation and it’s government. You must accept the things that you
don’t like at times. There are other things that, no, you cannot tolerate. In the business of
service to one’s nation, it’s not an empty vessel. It’s something that has to be filled with
the youth and the dreams of the young. The country without a military is an apple
waiting to be plucked by anything and anybody. The story of ancient Rome is the story
of a well-fed society that got too proud to defend itself. In the standard of living
everything could end so fast. When people think they’re too good to do things for their
nation in the military, in the Peace Corps or whatever, or in the government. That, I
think, is the lesson that every great nation has failed. Refuses to remember, they’re no
different than any other great nation. They’re no different than any other great people;
stay great by sacrifice. It’s that that Thomas Jefferson was alluding to. I believe it was
Jefferson that said, “The tree of liberty must occasionally be drenched with the blood of
patriots.” What he’s saying to me in my heart is that, unless the citizens of a nation are
willing to sacrifice for it, then it means nothing. It’s not a gift anymore, just an honorable
burden. My most favorite movie and my most favorite story is by a science fiction writer
called Robert Heinlein. It’s called *Starship Troopers*. Heinlein writes from the
perspective of a World War II infantryman who was drafted, certainly hated the military.
Served his tour and then his story *Starship Troopers* is really just a story about sergeants
and how they kind of keep things going and the necessity of young men to serve. I think
that’s comparative. I think when we lose that, then we’ve lost it all. That’s my story.

SM: Well, as far as movies, that brings up another good question.

BP: You want the rights to my movie? (Laughs) I give them to you willingly.

SM: No. (Laughs) Is there a Vietnam War movie that you have seen that you
think best represents the experience from your perspective? I mean, I know you talked
about *We Were Soldiers* and the powerful effect that had on you.

BP: A powerful effect because of my memories of the 1st Cavalry Division that it
was about. It, as much as anything, that happened with Hal Moore and his unit. There are
parts of movies, I’ll give you that. In *Apocalypse Now*, which is a terrible movie, that
scene where he’s with the 1st Cavalry Division and Robert Duval is 1st Cavalry
commander in the Air Cav squadron, then the air assault. That is so real. The first time I saw that movie I stood up, I couldn’t sit down. I was so excited. Practically, there are a few details that are way out of whack like the light observation helicopters go in with a lift, which never happened. But even so it’s the attitude and the spirit that they project. Robert Duval does this the best. He has that little speech on the beach where he says, “Charlie don’t surf. This is the 1st by God squadron of the 9th God damn United States Cavalry, son. If I want to surf on the beach, I’m going to surf on that beach. Charlie don’t surf and I do and I’m going to take it,” or something like that. That’s the way we felt on my first tour. We felt like that. Like we could do anything anybody asks of us. We’re going to go get it. I don’t care if he’s the baddest guy out there, we’re going to go take it from him. We’re going to kick his ass. If he’s going to kick our ass, then he’s going to have a long day at it. So you found out after a while, yes, there were days when they bury you. That was the epitome of what esprit de corps is and that’s the way we felt. We made five, six air assaults in a day, we get into a fight, we get out of a fight. We were ready for it, we were trained and we were good. That part of Apocalypse Now I liked. The end part of it where he’s walking on the beach talking about napalm as the smell of victory, that’s a little weird even for my taste. Frankly, I thought napalm had a very calming effect on the battlefield. Liked to see it as often as possible, but so be it. The other thing that I thought was very good was in Hamburger Hill, which is a movie about the 101st Airborne. That movie encapsulates that horrible feeling that we had where you get into these big fights and you went away, and then you went out and you went back out and you looked for them again. Then you would have another big fight and then you would go away. It was just like two prizefighters blindfolded in a room, running around looking for each other. You just kick the hell out of each other until one of you escapes and then you walk around and look for each other again so you can hit each other. It gets to be a little hopeless. But we thought at the time that we were doing good.

SM: Well, when you got back to Vietnam for your second tour in November of 1969, was Hamburger Hill—the Battle for Ap Bia Mountain—still being discussed? Was the idea that we’re not going to go and do this, engage in this kind of operation where we sacrifice so much?
BP: That word had already been out. Abrams had addressed that problem already. Although I have an interesting letter in my files from Senator Edward Kennedy. I took particular exception to his comments on the floor of the Senate about Hamburger Hill and what the hell are they doing over there. I took the time to sit down and write Senator Kennedy to remind him that we were only there because he voted for it. That I thought it was rather tacky seven years later to sort of sit around and wonder why things are going the way they are. But, of course, gee that went well. (Laughs) “Dear Captain Paris, I’m real sorry we don’t agree. Love, Edward Kennedy.” (Laughs) Not much to it, but, yes. They had addressed that issue and there were going to be no more of those unless we absolutely had to. But if we were going to then we were going to bring the world. But what I noticed operationally was that more and more aviation picked up the slack. More and more commanders wanted the aircraft to do the fighting. They wanted the bombers to do the bombing and the Cobras to do the shooting and the scouts to do the looking. They were happy to kind of bunker up and sort of continuously stick their toe into the water, which I must admit upset me more than a bit.

SM: It did?

BP: Yes, I still feel to this day, I don’t like fighting. But if you’re going to fight, let’s go do it and let’s do it right. Let’s defend and then we’ll be done with it. Tiptoeing around trying not to get hurt, that’s how real casualties occur.

SM: Is there anything else that we could talk about today?

BP: No I don’t think so. Thank you for your time.

SM: No, thank you. Thank you very much. Let me go ahead and put an official ending. Thank you very much, Mr. Paris. This will end the interview with Mr. Bill Paris on the nineteenth of November. What we’ll do now is get this into the transcription pipeline.

BP: Somebody’s going to be thrilled. (Laughs)
SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Bill Paris on the fifth of March, 2004, at 9:20 Lubbock time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Paris is in Piedmont, South Dakota. We’re continuing our interview, picking up with an area where there’s a gap in the interview we had previously, and so if you would, sir, go ahead and start discussing the events that occurred in November of 1967 to June of 1968.

BP: Okay, we had left off with my battalion being up near Dak To in November of ‘67. Going up there we had anticipated that we would be drawn into the fighting. The 173rd Airborne Brigade and the 4th Infantry Division were having quite a series of battles with the North Vietnamese Army up there. When we got in there, at the request of the 4th Infantry Division commander who had the 173rd Airborne Brigade attached to him, we were put into blocking positions and he used his own assets to go ahead and continue the fight, which I have to admit, that was fine with me. You know, it had been a bloody week. The 173rd had had several companies wiped out in a prolonged battle on one particular hill. We brought with us our own lift unit, which that was Bravo Company, 229th Aviation Battalion, which came up with us even though we went up by C-130. We got to Dak To and it was being shelled by artillery, which was kind of unique. In II Corps there were very few places that anybody had even heard of being shelled by North Vietnamese artillery, but they had set up over in Laos and they were moving around. But we set up on the firebases that 4th Infantry Division had had in blocking positions on the east side of Dak To and north. We spent several weeks up there and that was when I met these guys in the 229th that I’m still friends with to this day. After Thanksgiving November of ’67, we were still sitting around out there. We were doing local patrolling, that was about it. We were on company-size supporting positions. We never really got into it, although the 229th and the attached gun company supporting the 173rd got into some of the fighting. Early in December we were pulled back. We had heard that the 1st Cav was at a fight on the Bong Son Plain which was our normal area of operations over near LZ English. So we loaded back up on C-130s, went back because the 1st Cav Division commander wanted us back. The 1st Brigade was fighting this battle and they
had run through one battalion in the fighting already and the 2nd Battalion, [8th Cav] was involved and they wanted us back since 173rd in the 4th Division, things were quieting down there. So we flew in on C-130s and within the next day or two we got rotated into a series of battles known under the title the Battle of Tam Quan, and this started about the ninth of December. I think we were about the 2nd or 3rd Company, but I think 2nd Company had to go out to the field. We got air-assaulted out. We went in and we were supposed to link up with a brand new mech outfit that had been constituted at Fort Hood, Texas, and then had been sent to the 1st Cav to give us some sort of track vehicle capability because we really had no armor, we had no real heavy equipment. In II Corps where we were, it was ideal APC, armored personnel carrier country. So at any rate the mission is given to us by the battalion commander and we were going to go in, we were going to link up with a company of the 1st/50th Mech who had been in contact earlier and the situation was unstable and it was probably going to be a movement to contact, which is kind of serious stuff. I had been in some little brushes which some we’ve talked about, but I’ve never been in a pitched battle and so the anxiety factor was quite high. We air assaulted in and we started moving on and the coordinates where we were to link up with the 1st/50th Mech, this particular company, they weren’t there. So we started searching around, finally we found them and they were a little bit more west than we had been led to believe and they were a bit rattled. They’d lost a track, one of their APCs had been hit, they assumed the crew was killed, they had taken fire, called in some air strikes and artillery and pulled back. So we linked up with them and we moved forward and they had told us that this personnel carrier was probably eight-hundred to a thousand meters away. Well, we went about four-hundred meters and bumped right into it. About the time we found this APC sitting there and the crew was dead, all of a sudden we came under fire and then all hell broke lose. Quite honestly, it was my, like I said, it was my first pitched battle and usually it was my habit to—whenever there was contact I normally was right after the first squad. Sometimes I’d even be up with the lead fire team but because—you know, you can’t fight a platoon if you’re the lead guy. So as a leader you have to be back a little even though I didn’t like that. So when we got hit I moved up to see what happened and what I didn’t know was that my squad had split left and right. I thought they had moved up because there was a lot of hedgerows, some light jungle even
though it was the populated area. So the visibility wasn’t real good so I moved up and
the next thing I know I came under fire from about three different locations and I was cut
off and pinned down. My RTO (radio-telephone operator) had been behind me about
probably ten yards because we were moving in pretty loose order. So anyway, I spent the
better part of the next hour dodging around at the base of, thankfully, a very large
cocoanut tree while the NVA took turns trying to kill me. Then someone apparently had
lost an M-79 and one of the NVA was using it and was leading me on a merry chase
around this tree and finally some of the aerial rocket artillery, the ARA came in and as
soon as they started hitting them, I pulled back and finally was able to link back up with
my platoon. Then the company linked up and what we were trying to do was we were
just trying to spread out and take up positions. I know 2nd Platoon was on my flank and I
lost contact with them, and the 3rd Platoon was on my other flank. We had good contact
with them but what happened was the NVA was trying to penetrate between the gap and
they bent my flank around. We fell back to a graveyard, a little tiny graveyard which had
been back probably a hundred yards back and the old man pulled the whole unit back so
that we could reestablish contact. But the NVA came flooding into the gap and we spent
probably the next twelve hours under fire. It’s the first time I ever really understood what
they teach you at Fort Benning about fire discipline because when new guys particularly
are nervous, even some of the old guys, they’ll tend to fire their magazines up pretty
quick and it’s a battle. You have to have excellent fire discipline otherwise you’re going
to be sucking wind real quick and I know, we redistributed ammo several times. The
fighting lasted up ‘til about nine, ten o’clock at night and the opening burst, one of the 3rd
Platoon kids—I called him a kid because he went to Vietnam when he was about
seventeen-and-a-half and he extended. He was a paratrooper, he was drawing jump pay,
so this was a good deal. So, he extended and came back and he had just come back and
joined us when we got back from Dak To, kind of a young kid and he got killed in the
opening burst of fire. So when we spread out, we got his body and brought him back
with us and I had him with me in this graveyard. While we’re trying to sort everything
out and get our flanks reestablished, we were taking fire from the left, from the somewhat
to the, say half right flank and of course, from our front and I ended up using this kid as a
barricade because you couldn’t dig in. You had to be careful where you dug a foxhole
otherwise you’d dig up a grave. So where I was, was on the mound, on one of the burial mounds, so I couldn’t really dig a position. So I had to use this kid and about, oh, nine o’clock at night they were pushing on us pretty good and I ran out of ammo. So I just reached over this kid’s body to his LBE (load bearing equipment), his web gear, grabbed a couple of his magazines and my weapon jammed. I thought, “Oh, shit. What now?”

Well, what happened was he had gotten hit across the chest and some of the blood had seeped into his web gear and into the magazines, so that’s what was fouling my weapon. It’s just one of those things that stands out. You know there’s this moment where the flares going off and all the noise and I’m looking at the breach of my rifle under the occasional light of the flare and I see it’s all red and such, half-coagulated, half-not, just syrupy kind of nasty stuff. But that kid’s body saved my life because he got hit several more times while I was using him for a position. You know it’s funny. Then we’ve broken off, the artillery came in, the ARA air strikes and then they pulled back. We didn’t know where they went, so then some other units of the 1st Cav came in to back us up. We broke contact, the next day we resupplied and we started moving around looking for them and I’m not sure the directions or anything, it gets kind of foggy. In the between time the company commander moved me from the 1st Platoon to the 4th Platoon because the 4th Platoon leader became the XO and so I moved over. The 4th Platoon was always the heavy weapons platoon. They had the mortars, which we very seldom carried with us. Of course, as an extra officer, you’re supposed to know about such things. I have to admit I didn’t particularly like mortars when I was in OCS. I thought it was all kind of boring. But they usually served as a fourth rifle platoon and then in the night defensive position, sometimes we’d bring in a couple of the mortars and some ammo and they’d fire flares or final protective fires close in on the unit perimeter if they were needed. But I think my second day, we reestablished contact again with the NVA and this was a sad day. I had not been with the unit but only on one occasion when one of my people actually died. You know, I don’t know if we ever talked about that, Steve.

SM: I don’t recall.

BP: Earlier in the summer before I went back on leave, emergency leave, we were doing a lot of these blocking around villages and they had a village that was kind of on the east coast there in Bong Son, but it was on a river. They air-assaulted us onto an
island and then they brought in the National Police and their MP advisor. Some of the
other units of the Cav were on there and all of a sudden we started taking fire but, you
know, by then I was able to distinguish it and it’s that kind of low velocity [spit] from a
carbine. Though World War II, .30-caliber carbine, that was a very distinctive sound and
one of my kids got hit and he jumped up and he started screaming, “Oh, my God! I’m hit!
I’m hit!” I’m on the radio you know, “Who the hell is shooting at us,” kind of thing
because I had just seen the National Police go into the village off of a Chinook so it
would be very unusual for a single NVA or a VC to start a war between the two forces
because the National Police were probably within twenty yards of them. They’d more or
less rather get the hell out of there or stay hidden. So I’m on the radio and, of course, you
know then it’s got to go up your chain of command then over to the National Police
advisors and down their chain of command. Well, come to find out, it was them. They
saw us over on the island, even though they had been briefed we were there, they started
shooting at us. So to make a long story somewhat shorter, this was a friendly-fire
incident and we were pretty bitter about it. I know I was. But at any rate, on December
fifteenth, I had a brand new unit. I hadn’t been with them but about a day or so as
platoon leader and we were pushing into this village. We were following a trail, one of
the other companies had made sort of a light contact on the morning and they had to have
been the NVA because we knew they were in the area and they broke the contact. So
now we’re closing in on them from all sides trying to find where they are. So we get hit
and the old man pushes us up to take position on the flanks on one of the other platoons
and I brought up my weapons guys, one of the two machine guns, the M-60s, and I’m
very literally directing fire into a clump of bamboo where we were taking some pretty
good fire from. There was an RPD machine gun in there. So I wanted this guy and I had
my grenadiers firing HE (high explosives) in there and I wanted this kid to work it over.
So he starts and all of a sudden, I mean, they return fire and they catch him good. That
was the first real battle casualty I’d ever lost and, of course, it’s a chary experience for
you. But there’s just that sickening feeling that comes over you like, “Oh, shit.” You
know, there’s all sorts of guilt and blaming that comes later, but at the time it just kind
of—you can just feel the air going out of the unit and I knew I had to do something. So I
ran out, grabbed him, grabbed the gun. The medic came up and we moved him back and
get everybody busy again kind of thing. I had a couple of guys wounded. Some of the other platoons lost some people. We’re in this hellacious firefight all day and finally it breaks off about four o’clock. We get some tactical air in there, we bring it in pretty close. We find the next morning they’re gone, of course, even though we brought in intermittent H&I (harassment and interdiction) fires from artillery during the night. We found one body for all that.

SM: My goodness.

BP: You know, it’s just—(Laughs) In your heart you know there’s more than that. But when you find one body and he was buried in a grave and it was pretty fresh grave when we dug it up. I guess some of the other platoons found a couple of others that were buried, but we only found one and that was just, it was a little disheartening.

SM: I’d imagine so. Let me ask you—

BP: Yes.

SM: To go back to the first story you were telling in the firefight before you had to use someone as a shield, as cover and concealment, did you know that young man?

BP: Not well.

SM: Not well.

BP: I didn’t know many of the 3rd Platoon guys because we didn’t work much. I mean, I’d seen him and I knew who he was by face.

SM: Did you ever learn who he was?

BP: Oh, yes.

SM: The name?

BP: I know his name now to this day. The kid’s name was John. He was a nice kid, but eighteen-and-a-half.

SM: My goodness.

BP: He got married while he was home on leave. You know, the usual nonsense.

SM: Yes.

BP: So it was kind of sad.
BP: The other kid, the machine gunner that got killed, he was a heck of a nice kid, a black kid from North Carolina, just the niftiest guy. But then you don’t find many bastards who got killed I guess. (Laughs)

SM: (Laughs) Well, I think you raised a valid point. I mean, we have like a stigma in our society about speaking ill of the dead.

BP: Yes. Well, I do know one guy that—(Laughs)

SM: (Laughs) Okay.

BP: I did speak ill of him even though he was dead.

SM: Okay.

BP: Because he took a lot of good people with him.

SM: All right. Yes, these are difficult stories.

BP: Yes.

SM: This is all before Tet of ’68?

BP: Oh, yes.

SM: Well, what did you think—and I’m not sure how closely you were able to keep track of this kind of stuff, but it seems to me that your units are being pretty heavily taxed here and pretty well challenged and these are not pushover fights.

BP: No.

SM: These are contested battles.

BP: Very much so and very quickly you learn that they got better toys. They had better weapons.

SM: How so?

BP: Pardon?

SM: How so?

BP: Well, the AK-47 is 7.62-mm weapon as opposed to we were using a 5.56 high-velocity round and the M-60. It’s the old argument and people who were into weapons always get into these arguments and I’m sure you’ve been into one or ten of them yourself where, “Well, this gun’s better than that gun.” Any gun is good as long as you can kill the guy, but some rounds, just because of the fact that they’re a heavier round, have more shock effect. It’s the basic premise behind the .45-caliber ACP (automatic Colt pistol) round that we carried in sidearm for decades and the Army before
they went to the 9-mm and that is, the bigger the round the more of the shock value it has
when it hits the bodies. So the .762, it’d tear a guy up pretty good and we had those in
our machine guns, our M-60 machine guns. But we’re at a disadvantage with the M-16
in that it, number one, it has kind of a tendency to jam and has an aluminum bolt. They
came out with the M-16A1 which had a steel bolt which eliminated some of the jamming
problems, but the M-16 was not a good weapon. I still don’t like it and they still have it
in the inventory. They never asked me but I liked the M-1. I thought it was the perfect
infantry weapon. Yes, it was heavy as hell; yes, the ammunition weighed a ton. But
believe me, with that .30-caliber round when you hit people, you hit them. Whereas with
the M-16, you could shoot a guy a lot of times until you hit something vital and put him
down. Whereas one or two rounds with an AK or a three or four and that guy is—you
know, he’s not going to do a whole bunch of more fighting after that. But I’ve seen NVA
get hit three times with a ’16 and keep fighting. Some of that is personal tenacity. They
were damn good soldiers. But we have that problem. Then they had a lot of the B-40s,
the rocket launchers, the little shoulder-fired things. They have the RPD machine gun,
which was also .762. It’s an excellent weapon. A high cyclic rate of fire, easy to use, it
could stand up to any sort of punishment, whereas our M-60s, our .762 machine gun, was
a little flakey. If you ran into a heavy weapons company of theirs, they had the 82
mortars; they had the recoilless rifles. These guys, they came to battle pretty good. The
only thing that I thought was an absolute piece of crap was their potato masher grenade
and that damn thing was useless almost. Not nearly as effective as ours. So when you
locked horns with them, I mean, the mainline NVA units were using damn good weapons
with an effective round and you’re coming in there with rifles, machine guns, and
whatever artillery and attack air and ARA you can pull up, which I must admit is a
significant advantage. You know, I don’t care how good your machine gun is, if you got
a 750-pound high drag coming down the trees at you (laughing) guess what? You lose.
That’s all my pet theories on weapons.

SM: Okay. Well, one of the things, of course, that was happening, that happened
just before these battles that you’ve described is the general in charge of all the American
forces in South Vietnam, General Westmoreland, had gone back to the United States in
the month prior in November of ’67 and made the announcement in a joint session of
Congress that we’re winning this war, we have everything under control. That the proverbial light is at the end of the tunnel, so we just stay the course and we’re going to win this thing. I was wondering, in the midst of all this did you have that same feeling that America was on top of the situation and then ultimately we’re winning?

BP: Yes, I would’ve agreed with him. Then in defense of Westmoreland, who is not my most favorite general I must admit, but he was right insofar as what he was talking about. You know we never lost a major battle, which was true over there. We were killing a fair amount of them, which you know if you used the Korean War methodology of slaughter is good because you can’t come up with strategic and tactical objectives, that’s fine too. I mean we were killing a lot of them at some costs to ourselves, but in December they pulled us out of the field and it was my battalion’s turn to go back to An Khe and defend the Green Line, which was considered a candy job. I mean that was definitely thirty days of R&R. We didn’t last the whole month. (Laughs) I’ll get back to your Westmoreland comment a little later because in a few weeks we moved north and then there was a whole different view of the war, if that’s okay.

SM: Absolutely. But I was given at the timing of what we’re talking about and the timing of his presentation to Congress, I was just wondering.

BP: Well, you know, had he known what was coming—

SM: Oh, yes.

BP: —I’m sure he wouldn’t have said that.

SM: Right.

BP: Nor would Johnson have invited him back to do it. (Laughs)

SM: Right, okay. Well so what happened next?

BP: Well, our battalion just placed back to An Khe and all we had to do was man this, I don’t know, three-and-a-half mile perimeter. But we only had to man portions of it because other units back in the rear had permanent guard posts that they man anyway. So our battalion really is not fully committed on this what they call the “Green Line defense.” So we went back. It was the first time we had really been in our company rear since any of us had joined the unit, so it’s a chance to get down to work and we worked on lots of little piddly-ass administrative stuff. My battalion commander, who I believe I referenced in the past, was very nervous about me and a friend of mine, Lt. Tom Beasley
who had just—at that time now he’s the company XO and he had I were great friends and
tended to get into a little bit of trouble now and then, just kid stuff. You know, coming
back to the firebase and having a couple of beers because that’s all it really took.

(Laughs) When you’re leading that clean life out in the jungle, you can’t drink much
beer. Then we’d serenade him at two in the morning, things like that. Well, of course,
then he begins to think of us as some sort of possible troublemakers even though he likes
us. So we’re great out in the jungle but he worries about us when we’re back in the rear.

So when New Years Eve came along he called down to our company because the way it
worked was the battalion commander, he was the head of the base defense for the
division at An Khe while his battalion has the Green Line. So in the evenings he had to
be there in the tactical operations center for the base. So I got a phone call about four in
the afternoon that I’m to meet with Colonel French. Myself and Lieutenant Beasley are
to meet with Colonel French at the division tactical operations center and I for the life of
me, I couldn’t imagine why, but I go down there. Colonel French is there and he says,

“No listen you two yahoos (laughs) tonight is New Years Eve and I don’t want any
trouble and so you guys are going to stay with me right here.” Lieutenant Beasley and I
looked at each other like, “Say what?” He said, “Yup, you’re going to be with me and
then that way there will be no trouble and you’ll be my aides tonight.” So we did. We
spent all of New Years Eve 1967 buried four feet underground in the division tactical
operations center with Colonel French just sitting around, sleeping on cots. The next
morning he sent us back to our units and sure enough there wasn’t any particular really
ugly incidents that the MPs couldn’t handle. So we went back shaking our heads
thinking, “My goodness, what a reputation we got.” (Laughs) About two nights later,
about five o’clock, I get another phone call, “Colonel French wants to see you. His jeep
is at battalion headquarters. Get over there now.” So sure enough, Lieutenant Beasley
and I, we grab our stuff, “No, no, you won’t need anything. Just get in the jeep.” So we
get in the jeep, leave our equipment back there, and the jeep takes us to the 15th
Transportation Club which was one of two, if you will, officer’s clubs. They were just
hooches with a bar but that was pretty uptown stuff for us. Takes us over to the 15th
Transportation Corps Club and Colonel French is there and the battalion S-3 is there,
Major Ordway who was a good man. Colonel French says, “Pull up a stool guys.” So
we pulled up the stool and he starts buying us beer and apologizing. He tells us, “You know, I worry too much about you guys but you’re my best fighters. You raise so much hell and I worry because I was the same way.” He starts telling us a story about when he was a 2nd lieutenant. (Laughs) I about fell off my stool because this guy was doing stuff when he was a 2nd lieutenant I would’ve never had the nerve to pull. He had an affair with his brigade commander’s wife; he stole the flag off the flagpole. (Laughs) He’s going on and on.

SM: Sounds like a colorful character.

BP: Oh, very colorful. Well, my nickname for him was Jingles because he had this kind of high-pitched voice and it sounded like Andy Devine. The old television show, “Young Buffalo Bill” or “Young Wild Bill Hickok.” But anyway, he goes on and on and we’re drinking more and more and pretty soon we’re very lubricated. Then the old man starts noticing that there are a lot of guys in civilian clothes at this club and there’s not a lot, but there is some attractive round-eyed woman that are with these guys and so he starts talking about, “Hey, men only get to live like this because of guys like us.” So we start whooping it up a little bit and pretty soon the bartender comes over and tells us to calm down or he’s going to have to call the MPs and Colonel French pulls rank on him. “I’m the damn base commander.” He says, “I don’t care who you are, sir. We do have rules.” (Laughs) So pretty soon we make asses out of ourselves as you can expect and Colonel French turns to me and he says, “Paris, get me a jeep.” I said, “Sir?” He said, “You heard me. Get me a jeep.” Major Ordway had long since gone back. He, I think, could see where this was going and wanted nothing to do with it. (Laughs) So Colonel French says, “Go get me a jeep.” I said, “Hey! Can do, sir.” So out the door I go and I walked over to the division parking lot over there and I grab a jeep. I have no idea whose it is, go back, pull up in front of the club, “Great, great.” Colonel French jumps in and he says, “We’re going to town and get laid.” Tom and I look at each other, “Sir, we can’t do that. Now that’s Indian country in the evening, we don’t have any weapons.” “Ah, bullshit. Let’s go.” So, “Yes, sir.” We take off for the main gate and, of course, the MPs stop us and it’s like, “Come on, Colonel. Get a grip on it. You’re not going downtown. You’re not going anywhere. Get out of here.” So frustrated, Colonel French says, “Well, let’s go to the division VOQ (visiting officer’s quarters). I want to look up a
friend of mine.” So I drive him up to the VOQ and he hustles us. So we’re sitting there
in the jeep and my friend, Lieutenant Beasley looks at me and he says in his best
Southern accent, “God damn, look at how these people live. Can you imagine that?” He
said, “Well, this is like a VOQ in the United States. They got air conditioning, they got
all this shit. Let’s go and take a look around.” So we walk in, take a look around and it
gets a little out of hand. We start knocking on doors and going in (laughs) and find many
interesting and adventuresome things the people do at night when they are supposed to be
sleeping. (Laughs) One guy has a Virginia ham. Now if you can imagine this—I don’t
know if you know anything about Virginia hams, but they’re highly salted. This thing
somehow got over to Vietnam. It was a beautiful-looking ham and this guy’s got it in a
tub right by his bed. So I mean, it’s probably, what? One o’clock in the morning and
we’re standing there drunk looking at this ham and this guy wakes up, “Well, who the
hell are you?” So he doesn’t know whether to get up out of bed or what because we’re
kind of standing there and my friend notices he has a glass of water, so he picks it up and
he says, “You know what we ought to do? We ought to piss on this guy’s ham.”
(Laughs) So he pours the water into the bucket with the ham. Well, that did it. The guy
comes flying out of bed, we went tearing down the hall out the door, we left the jeep, we
left Colonel French. (Laughs) We hot-footed it back to the battalion area and we went to
bed thinking probably that’ll be the end of it. Well, 7:30 the charge of quarters is
banging on the door, “Lieutenant Paris, get up. Colonel French wants to see you down at
division headquarters.” “Oh, God.” So I get up, there’s a jeep there, Beasley comes out
of his quarters, we stagger out. We jumped in the jeep, “Oh, this can’t be good.”
(Laughs) Down to division headquarters we go. General Davis, he was the assistant
division commander for support and so he normally stayed at An Khe. The other
assistant division commander for maneuver, of course, is out in the field with the
commanding general somewhere. So anyway, this is General Davis and this was the first
of two escapades with General Davis that I got myself into. At any rate, his aide puts us
at the position of attention and asks us, are we Lieutenant Paris and Lieutenant Beasley.
“Yes.” He said, “Gentlemen, you stand right there.” We kind of get a quizzical look on
our face and the major says, “At attention, God damn it!” (Laughs) So we’re standing in
front of his desk at attention and I can hear some yelling and screaming going on in
General Davis’s office. Oh, it does not sound good. All of a sudden, the door flies open, Colonel French comes out. Now French is a tall guy. He’s probably 6’4”, 6’5” and he came out and he looked like he was about 5’8” and he didn’t have much ass left. (Laughs) French, he sits out there and says, “General Davis wants to talk to you.” (Laughs) Then all of a sudden we hear this scream, “I don’t want to see those God damn people! They’re yours, French! Get them out of here and you, too.” Well, so we all three left together. Tom and I, of course, were feeling very good and the old man is quite chastened about the whole thing. On the way back he said, “I think it got a little out of hand last night.” (Laughs) We didn’t say a word. He said, “The general was pretty upset with what you guys did last night.” Tom and I look at each other like, “What?” (Laughs) Well, we go, “Oh, yes, sure.” He said, “Yes, I guess the jeep that you borrowed Paris, that belonged to the head ARVN liaison for 2nd Field Forces.” Anyway, it went on and on. But the [upshot] of it was that General Davis kicked us off the base.

SM: Wow.

BP: Yes.

SM: That’s not good.

BP: Well, we had to package up the battalion and leave under a cloud. (Laughs)

SM: Oh, my.

BP: Which was okay because come to find out, we were going to be leaving anyway. We probably only shortened the trip by about a week or so, but it would’ve been nice to have had that much.

SM: Yes.

BP: So we went back up to LZ English and shortly thereafter we packed up and we moved up to I Corps. I mean this thing happened really quick. All of a sudden we were told, “Pack your shit, we’re moving north.” Like, “Huh?” The aviation elements that had already taken off and they were flying up and we were going by the ever-present and all-too-wonderful C-130 Hercules. We went over to the LZ English strip and started loading up and it took us about three-quarters of a day to finally get on a C-130 and motor the hundred-and-some miles up north. Then we came into Hue-Phu Bai and we landed there. As we’re coming into Hue-Phu Bai, of course, we don’t know anything about I Corps because we have never been out there. We had been in II Corps the whole
time and that’s the area called the Central Highlands and it’s all quite heavily jungled. So going into Hue-Phu Bai looks pretty nice. I mean Hue is the old imperial capital of Vietnam and it’s on the Perfume River. It’s a beautiful, beautiful little city. But as we come into land we saw row upon row upon row upon row of helicopters all belonging to the Navy and Marines and we think, “Wow.” Of course, because my brother-in-law had been a Marine and had sent me *Leatherneck* magazine for about a year-and-a-half, I knew that the Marines had been working on air assaults and air mobility with helicopters. So I just assumed they were doing like the 1st Cav was: helicoptering everybody in and out, and around. It was only later I found out that all those helicopters are awaiting parts, none of them worked. So anyway, we landed in Hue-Phu Bai and then we went out, moved out of the city by helicopter. Our helicopters were up there, they moved us out into a brigade staging area which was the only time I’ve ever seen anything that big and this was a massive enterprise. There were three battalions of infantry, there was the entire brigade headquarters, and part of the division headquarters was there, the division forward. So I mean, hell, there had to be four-thousand people there all in this huge area. Then we moved out further north. We went up to Quang Tri, which was as far as the Army was going to go and this is in early January. Quang Tri at the time belonged to the Marines, but we were going to go ahead and take it over and the Marines were going to move out. So we went up on, at first we just kind of hung around and while we tried to get settled in the command group went over and got briefed, and then the officers went over and got briefed. The battalion we were relieving on Quang Tri was that 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines, so they were a good unit. So they gave us a tactical briefing. They said the area was pretty dead, nothing going on. Most of the action takes place out and they have unique rules and we had to conform with the Marines’ rules of engagement. So they started breaking it down to us and the Marines had what I would say was a very restrictive set of rules. It’s not that we did not have rules, let me be clear about that, but our rules were much more liberal, I guess. Our response essentially was if you took fire, you return fire, and the Marines’ rule was if it came from a built up area, you did not return fire unless you have permission from higher authority. That was new for us. Of course, we didn’t operate around many built up areas and those we did were usually contested. But our rule up to that point had been, “If you shoot at us, we’re
coming in after you and then when we’re done we’re going to burn the place to the
ground.” Very reminiscent of the ancient Romans and the Pax Romana. “We’ll enforce
it with our weapons and you can either play it our way or we’re going to tear this place
down.” So we listened and we kind of looked at Colonel French and he didn’t say
anything and then we went back and then we were going to start filtering into the base
defense business. The first night we went on line, I was still the 4th Platoon commander
of weapons platoon. We go on line and we were facing the north and there is a village
off to the east of Quang Tri and then there’s some farmers out there and some rice
paddies and probably twenty or thirty hooches out there. The Marines considered this to
be a friendly area. So about probably midnight or one o’clock in the morning we start
taking mortar fire. So I go hopping up and get up into the fighting positions and I look
and you can see the mortar flashes. So I grab the TA-312, the little battery-powered
telephone, and I call and ask for artillery fire. So they pass the request for fire onto the
Marine artillery and they come back and tell us they can’t do it because it’s a friendly
area. Well, that pissed me off. I’m sorry, I am not going to sit there and take mortar fire
from some clown I can see. So, of course, there wasn’t anything we could reach them
with because they were about two-thousand yards out, maybe fifteen-hundred. So the
next morning I go to the company commander. We all troop in to see Colonel French
had raised hell with them and, of course, that’s not French’s style of fighting either. So
French says, “Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it and I don’t want any trouble with
the Marines and you guys shut up and go back to work. That’s the rules.” So we went
back down and kind of muttered, feeling kind of pissy about this business of when you
take fire and when you don’t. The next thing I know, here comes a couple of Chinook
helicopters with a couple of 105s and they set them right down by our battalion and the
crews get out and they dig in the ammo and they dig in the gun and the guns are facing
north. (Laughs) So that night, lo and behold, we take mortar fire again. This time our
TA-312 was hooked into the [Army’s] section. So I called the FO (forward observer), he
takes the fire report, he calls it out to the gun crews who don’t know the Marines, they’re
about to fire. So they fire on these hooches and we get some nice secondaries. Well, the
Marines raise hell and rightfully so because we are under their tactical control. However,
this becomes an Army versus Navy issue very quickly and the next thing we know, we
got general officers involved. So what the Army did because they really didn’t want to put up with, you know, during this transition period with introducing now major Army elements. Of course, the 1st Cav, they were one of the premier fighting units and General Tolson, who was our division commander, he had a little extra pull. So I Corps was normally a Marine Corps/Navy command billet. In other words, the commander up there, because the majority of the troops were Navy and Marine, he got to command the place. Well, Westmoreland took care of that. He put General Rosson in charge and he created some sort of 1st Field Forces or something. Anyway, I Corps was then subservient to the Army and that kind of irritated the hell out of them. But then apparently the brigade commander and the division commander and Colonel French all had kind of a “come to Jesus” meeting because the next day when we had the joint briefing—we had kind of like four o’clock afternoon tactical situation briefing. The Marines briefed us on what was going on, we briefed them on how we were doing on our ability to assume the base. We were ready by the second day. Well, the Marines couldn’t clear out of Quang Tri. They were supposed to go on up to Dong Ha, which was right behind the DMZ. The Marines had the DMZ and they didn’t want to relinquish it and that was fine with us because that was some serious shit up there. But at any rate, at the briefing Colonel French got up and this was obviously a planned question. He asked this Marine Corps battalion commander, “How long is it going to take you to displace?” First he apologized, “Well, we’re sorry for kind of being cowboys with you.” He was very gentlemanly about the whole thing and admitted that we’d made a mistake, although we were going to keep making this mistake every evening until the NVA got the word that there’s a new kid in town. We don’t take shit from him, which was our view of things. The Marine battalion commander said that it would take him two weeks to get enough trucks to move his battalion up to Dong Ha, which was six kilometers north of us. Colonel French said, “Well, hell.” He said, “You know what? I’ll tell you what I’ll do.” He said, “You know, the Army will provide the aviation assets. How soon can you pack your stuff and be ready to go?” The Marine said, “They’re not that many helicopters in Vietnam.” Colonel French said, “Well, I’ll have them here as soon as you guys are ready to go and you can count them.” So within a day-and-a-half the Marines were gone. The Army moved them, our aviation assets from the 1st Cav, we moved them out in one
afternoon. They had never seen so many helicopters and it was kind of sad because it was indicative of how those guys operated. We watched them go out on a patrol and they took the house with them, I mean literally. They had helmets, they had flak jackets, they had LBE, they had combat packs, they had their regular weapon. They all carried heavy weapons, either recoilless rifles or mortars. They had company mortars which were 60-mm, which are a lot easier to carry. But still that base plate is a bitch. They were still using 3.5-inch rocket launchers. So they had those and they had the rounds for that and they had recoilless rifles and then those rounds. I mean they looked like a camel train moving out across Saudi Arabia or something. We felt so sorry for them. Those guys couldn’t get food. You wouldn’t think it was that big of deal, but the Marines couldn’t get C-rations. I mean we were all watching those things and so first we started out giving them food and then we realized they got toys we can’t get. The two things that they had that we wanted were KABAR knives and tea. (Laughs) For whatever reason, the Army, you couldn’t get teabags in the Army. You had to go way back deep in the rear. So I would trade a case of C-rations for a couple 144-count boxes of teabags. I didn’t want a KABAR knife because I had a bayonet if I really needed a knife. But it was easy to see why they had such trouble moving around and being light on their feet. Then our gunship pilots were just furious and so were the lift pilots because they were going—the Marines had few Hueys and they borrowed our gun company that came up with the 229th and they wanted some gunships. Well, in an air assault for us back in ’67 we’d have an artillery prep and the gunships would be firing while we’re going in on short final. So that as we’re touching down, the gunships have just put the last rockets into the LZ and are moving out and the next gunship—because they worked in pairs—the next gun ship is coming around the [corner to] cover. Well, a Marine air assault, you had no artillery because they didn’t fire artillery unless you had a valid target. So there was very little suppression. When the gunships were getting ready they called the Marine lead and said, “We’re ready to start our prep.” He said, “Negative on that. We don’t prep LZs. If we take fire then we’ll call you.” So the gunships wheeled around in orbit and fussed and then they borrowed the 229th B Company, the Killer Spades, on an air assault. Marine gunships were out there and they called and said, “Go head and prep the LZ,” and they said, “We don’t do that.” (Laughs) So there were a few little cousinly differences
between the Army and the Marine Corps. But, you know, after all these years looking
back, I’m not so sure that they didn’t have the right idea about not shooting into villages
and stuff. It creates no good will when you destroy a village and I don’t think the
approach we used was any more rational than the approach they used. I think they
probably had a lot more hearts and minds than we ever did. Their CAP (combined action
platoon) platoons that they would put out there in a village at night, that’s a gusty thing
and I had nothing but respect for those guys. I liked the Marines. They’re good folks,
just differences in tactics and techniques.

SM: So where were you when Tet broke out?

BP: Okay. We took over the AO and being new guys, you tend to look at things
differently than the guy who’s been there for a while. So first thing that happened was
the 1st of the 9th which is our Air Cav unit working off to the west, started reporting
elephant signs and the Marines pooh-poohed that. “No, there are no elephants out there.”
Then the 1st Cav was told, “Knock that crap off.” Our brigade commander told Colonel
French, “Damn it, there are no elephants out there.” (Laughs) So Colonel French got so
upset he went over to the mess hall. He got a platter and he flew out to one of the
company locations and picked up some elephant shit and put it on the platter, took it into
the five o’clock briefing and slammed it on the table in front of the brigade commander
and said, “Well, if that isn’t elephant shit, sir, I don’t know what it is.” (Laughs) So at
any rate, in looking at the area of operations the Marines considered it very secure and
very safe and we began to detect that things were not quite what they thought. We began
running into some units they had not identified yet and there was a lot of infrastructure
activity. A lot of Viet Cong activity where the Marines hadn’t seen Viet Cong activity in
two years. All of a sudden we started getting hints and we were passing this stuff on up.
We captured some documents. I was the company executive officer by this time and one
of our line platoons captured some documents that talked about becoming offensive and
the glorious victory and we were sending this stuff up the line and we’re saying, “Hey,
something’s going on, something’s going on.” Then at night you would see a lot of green
and white star clusters and that was a NVA thing. We didn’t use green star clusters. We
used either red or once in a while we’d use white. But primarily we used red because red
was—we only used those as a sort of court of last resort in a night fight to let the aviation
elements know what our forward position was. But you can see them out there at night
and these clusters were going back and forth off in the distance and we were saying,
“Hey, if they’re all over at Khe Sanh surrounding the place, who’s this? Who is this out
here?” Then we started tracking a new division that had come in, the 326-B and they
were brand new. They had their unit designations kind of funny. Like 326-A Division
had been there for some time and was supposedly over near Khe Sanh. But the 326-B,
now that was a new unit. So we’re passing this stuff up and we’re getting real uneasy.
We know something’s up and this isn’t going to be a little thing. It’s going to be
something big and, of course, everybody was focused on Khe Sanh. “Oh, Khe Sanh this,
Khe Sanh that.” We know that we’re in a different area so you kind of wrote it off to,
“Well, this is jitters.” Then when Tet started up they made the usual agreement, “Okay,
we’re not going to shoot at you if you don’t shoot at us so everybody can enjoy the Tet
holiday.” Of course, jaded people that we are, we all snort and say, “Oh, yeah, right,
sure, I bet.” So we kind of held on. On the morning of the thirty-first of January 1968,
the brigade scouts found some activity along the stream. So our company got bounced in
on an air assault and we killed eight of them and it turned out they were medical people.
They were having a little Tet celebration and according to the documents—then they
were supposed to move out that afternoon to their pre-assigned position. So we sent this
up because that looked to us to be pretty hard intelligence and then we got bounced again.
We made another air assault to another, but we couldn’t find anything this time. Then
our company commander got called back, so now I’m acting company commander which
is no big deal. All of a sudden I get a call on the radio from Yellow One and he says,
“Get your people loaded up. You’re making an air assault and I’ll brief you when we go
in.” Now as an acting company commander I did the same thing with the company that I
would do with my platoon. In other words, since I’m the company commander I’m not
going in on a lead ship but I’ll probably be in about, shit, maybe Chalk Four. But since
[Captain] Hamburger is going to brief me because he was flying Yellow One,
Hamburger—excellent, excellent lift pilot by the way. I went in on the lead ship and he
briefed me in the air and he said, “All hell is breaking lose all over I Corps and it sounds
like all over Vietnam. Bill and you guys, you better get ready. This is probably going to
be hot.” He said, “We’re going over to the east,” and he said, “There’s some enemy
activity. We’ve taken fire.” But he said, “You need to know Quang Tri is being hit right now. We were just able to get out of there before the attack started. We’re taking artillery. We’re taking rockets and the 1st ARVN is getting hit in town.” Well, once we got up in the air, I could see and there was shit flying all over everywhere. I mean everywhere there was a built-up area you could see something was going on. So we passed over Quang Tri at a pretty good altitude and then he starts descending out over the *Street without Joy*, which was that Bernard Fall book, about that particular area of Vietnam up in I Corps. It’s all white sands, very beautiful, but it’s a lousy place to have a war. We turned and we started coming back in from the east to the west towards Quang Tri and as we come in—it was the only real hot assault I had ever been in and I mean it was hot. We got in, we were lucky then. The lift ships took some fire, but none of the guys got hurt because we were carrying four guys to a ship, which was pretty good. Then we got on the ground and our rule in the Cav was if one goes, we all go. So he put us in a little bit to the east of where the contact had been. They flew back, got most of the company there and then all hell broke loose. We had landed in the middle of a heavy weapons company. The old man came back in at about, oh I don’t know, right about the time the last platoon gets on the ground, about half an hour later and we just had a hell of a fight. I went back to being the XO, which meant taking care of resupply. Well, there was no resupply. It’s the only time that I’ve ever seen in two years in Vietnam when everything was literally committed. The artillery was firing actually final protective fire right there on the LZ. So there was no artillery to be had. We couldn’t get aerial rocket artillery because they were all down at Hue helping the Marines and the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Cav. There was nothing. It was an overcast day and it really looked bad. Our 1st Platoon, which had been my old platoon, got wiped out in about forty-five seconds in a mortar barrage. So now we got massive casualties. So I’m helping the aid men, we’re trying to get MEDEVAC. MEDEVAC is tied up, nothing is moving and we’re taking heavy recoilless rifle fire, mortar fire, plus the usual machine guns. It was the biggest fight I’ve ever been in and it really reminded me of World War II. We had no artillery and they had mortars to burn and they were burning them all over us. Once we got situated, we got the 1st Platoon moved back in their secure area, those that survived. We did that for two days then contact broke. We broke [contact then] because what
happened was just towards the end of day, all of a sudden our FAC starts jumping up and
down and he says, “I got two F-100s here to abort a mission for the north. Anybody want
them?” He says, “Hell yes, give them to me.” (Laughs) These two F-100 pilots come in
and the F-100 picked here had a hell of a lot of bombs. They came and we were
generally arranged along the east facing west and south. We were in kind of a
buttonhook position. The NVA were about 150 yards away and there was a little stream
sits between us and that’s where the mortars were. So we had to get the pressure off us
from the mortars and the recoilless fire. Those F-100s came in and I mean they laid it
right down. I have never seen an 82-mm mortar base plate go a hundred feet in the air
but that damn thing did. When those bombs went off they got secondaries, they got all
kinds of stuff and they stayed and they worked that area over. They literally saved our
bacon because we were in deep shit until that happened. Then the command and control
helicopter with Colonel French came in and they kicked out some ammo and some
medical supplies and that was our resupply. Oh, and then later on, they did a medevac.
They took out four of the most seriously wounded and they brought us a guy who had
just come back from the Marine sniper school down at Da Nang and he brought his M-14
with him with a sniper scope. So all night long this guy is up popping NVA because
they’re up walking around. Once it’s dark, hell, they figure we can’t see them and he
must’ve killed ten, twelve guys that night. But it went on for a couple of days and I was
supposed to go on R&R on February the first. Well, I spent most of February the first
being pinned down and you know, doing all that stuff. Finally, February the second
things had calmed down immensely. We were starting to break the attack. But initially
we were a little bit elated because it was the first time you didn’t even have to go hunting
those bastards, they were everywhere. But, of course, the whole country is involved and
it’s kind of serious stuff. But by the second of February we knew we were getting the
upper hand at least out in the country. Hue, of course, was a whole different matter.
Saigon, something else. The bigger towns, there was a lot of fighting going on. But
Quang Tri, the 1st ARVN Infantry Division held and I mean they kicked some serious
tail. We found out later we had been fighting, oh, I think it was the K 44 Battalion or
something like that. Anyway, their job was to come in from the west with these heavy
weapons and support the infantry attack on the city in the compound of the 1st ARVN and
we took them right out of the picture. So we felt pretty good about it. I went on R&R. I
got out on the second and so I finally left on R&R on the third. But because I missed the
plane, you know, then it’s like, “Well, yes. You can go. But your day started the second
so you better be back by the seventh.”

SM: Oh, for crying out loud.

BP: So I got three-and-a-half days in Sydney.

SM: Okay.

BP: Which I thought was totally stupid.

SM: Yes. This is a probably a good place to take a short break. We’ve been
going for about seventy-five minutes.

BP: Okay.

SM: Let me call you back in about ten minutes.

BP: Okay.

SM: All right. Talk to you then, bye.

BP: See you then, bye.
SM: All right, this is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Bill Paris on the eighth of March 2004. It’s approximately 9:20 Lubbock time in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Paris is in Piedmont, South Dakota. All right, sir, why don’t we go ahead and pick up where we left off from last week. We’re in the midst, of course, of discussing some events that occurred during Tet of ’68.

BP: Yes, I want to back up because—

SM: Sure.

BP: —always, what happened to me on the last interview was sort of, one of those little moments of epiphany that come to one later in life, never earlier. Ever since Vietnam I have always, because of the catastrophic second tour and the tremendous emotional burden of what happened with my co-pilot, I tended to sort of overlook and slightly romanticize what happened on my first tour because morale was high and drugs weren’t a problem and race and things like that. What occurred to me in the middle of discussing this thing of Tet of ’68 was I remembered something that I hadn’t thought about for a long, long time and it suddenly occurred to me that I broke down. I had never thought of it in those terms. But I described, you know, we went in on the thirty-first of January of ’68, opening day of Tet. Went in the hot LZ and then the company commander came in and took over the company during the midst of the fight. Normally then the executive officer would revert to logistics, MEDEVAC, things like that, and coordinating all the ash and trash, as we used to call it in the military, all the supply and the resupply. But because nothing was able to really fly and we weren’t able to get resupply, then you sort of become like the Prince of Wales. You kind of sit around and wait for either the king to die or the situation gets reestablished so that you can do your job or you’re waiting to take over a platoon or whatever. There was a kind of a lull in the fight after the air strikes and I had set up over kind of across from the CP (command post) about a hundred yards away. There was what had been a kind of a little place where these Vietnamese farmers kept some of their supplies and there was some ducks. I’m just sitting there and now I realize I was in shock. You know to have lost a whole platoon in
about forty-five seconds is quite a lot and then to go through all of that. So the impact on me is just starting to kind of hit and I’m watching these ducks, these baby ducklings. There’s probably seven or eight of them and mom running around because they really don’t know where to go. I grabbed my bayonet and I started throwing it at the baby ducks and one by one I killed all the baby ducks and the mother. What’s going in my mind is the only thing I can think of is, “How can these ducks be safe when all the rest of us are—” It doesn’t make sense, but then war doesn’t make sense. The whole set of experiences are bizarre anyway. I remember doing this and one of the officers in the company, I don’t even remember who it was, or maybe it was even an enlisted man, came by and saw what I was doing and said, “Stop that.” I looked at him and I just said, “Get the fuck out of here,” and just kept on. Then when the last baby duck is dead, then I was like, “Okay, all the innocence is gone out of the world and now we can get back to business.” That is an experience I thought I would never forget, but obviously you do. I encountered that in talking about Tet and the war started to really, really change for me then. I probably wasn’t in real good shape, but I was also having some religious concerns at the same time. I think I’ve described, I was very much a Roman Catholic. My marriage, which I thought was going to work, which was silly beyond reason, but what the hell. My marriage is gone by the wayside, now I have a decision to make because there’s a divorced Catholic, there’s a lot of issues back in the ’60s about where you really fit in. Then this wholesale slaughter is beginning to get to me. Religiously, I’m finding it very difficult to condone in my own mind the killing of strangers, as we used to say. I’m beginning to think that in my own heart of hearts, this can’t be happy stuff for God and I don’t know how you can say, “God, I love you and I’m going to do the best I can as a man and as a Christian.” Then you go out and you shoot people who these are not the worst people on earth. I mean these represent probably some of the better people that exist in North Vietnam, if you will, and now you’re killing them. It just didn’t really make much sense to me. These are people that hadn’t hurt me. They’re involved in a civil war and I’m involved in, I’m not sure what, but the president said, “Go.” So I go and I was just beginning to sort of run out of feelings that this is a good and noble work that we’re doing over here. The next day on February the first, this battalion that we were in contact with started to pull back and the next day when I got up I was angry. I
was really, really angry and had to come back into my heart and mind, I guess, if you want to look at it from that aspect. I wanted a piece of revenge. On the way and shifting around, we had passed some ammunition bearers for the North Vietnamese Army and I suspect the guy I saw had been wounded quite badly. He was carrying 82-mm mortar rounds and had been lying on the side of the trail where probably the suppressive fire or our fire or whatever had hit him and there he was. So I was talking to one of the other platoon leaders and he was a little bit aroused as well. Our blood was up, as they used to say. I mentioned I knew where this dink was I had seen on the way in. So we said, “Hey, screw it. Let’s go back and take care of business.” So we got up and we went. We left the company and went back down the trail and sure enough he’s still laying there and he’s pretty screwed up. He was alive, but you know, who knows, I’m not a doctor. He was either, you know, in a coma or if he wasn’t, he wasn’t able to sit up and say anything. So we shot him and then, of course, the immediate effect is I felt pretty good. The long term effect was, in my heart I got just a little sicker and I thought, “Oh, come on. This is not right.” So when I came back from R&R, I found the Catholic chaplain and he was really a super guy, what a wonderful man, man of faith. A man who at the age of forty-five wanted to go to Vietnam and be an Army chaplain and they let him and this old guy kept up with us and he was my rock. We had a real long discussion about all of this and essentially what he told me was what any good man of faith would tell you that you’re going to have to look in your own heart because the answers are there and God loves you. No he’s not particularly thrilled with what’s going on, but he understands, too. So don’t get so down on yourself. Then a couple of days later he got hit with another one of our companies and so he was gone and I felt really quite alone and abandoned. After Tet we kind of recovered our wits. The Marines and the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Cav fought down in Hue for the better part of another month, but we moved on. We pulled back to Quang Tri and kind of reorganized ourselves and got new blood, resupplied, the usual thing. About that time—we had had just before Tet, we had had a staff sergeant who was a Korean War veteran and he had gotten out of the Army and then come back in. When he came to us, he already had the CIB and was, I think, a 2nd Infantry Division vet from the Korean War. We figured, “Hey, this guy’s bringing us some experience to the table. We could really use him.” Well, what we didn’t
understand was guys in their middle thirties don’t and if they’ve been to war once, they may not be real excited about going again. This guy was in that category and he had had enough for whatever reason. We never did find out what his experiences were, but he didn’t work out. As a matter of fact, he was kind of cowardly. But you kind of have a live-and-let-live about these things in combat and so we sent him off to be an instructor down in Nha Trang at the jungle school down there. We figured that was a good place for him. But what had happened was the supply people were having trouble, they couldn’t account for quite a large number of weapons. Now as executive officer my mission in life was to keep the old man straight on supply and, of course, I hadn’t. I just considered myself as sort of an elevated platoon leader and I never went back to the rear except to get pay for the troops and I should’ve by all rights. So there was a big, little brouhaha about it and the company commander was quite upset. We went through some mechanizations and finally he sent another platoon leader, which was a little bit humiliating, down and the guy straightened it all out. The guns were there, we just didn’t have them properly accounted for. So I felt not only am I having all these moral issues, but now I’ve got some professional issues. I’m beginning to feel like I’m pretty inept. Our battalion commander, who was the guy who we went out drinking with and all the other things, he was getting ready to leave. For whatever reason, I’m sure my company commander had something to do with it, he pulled me out of the field and put me as the battalion S-3 air. So I left the company in February and right away we got into a planning cycle of going—we were going to go up to Khe Sanh. No, I’m sorry, I’m out of sequence. I think towards the end of February, first part of March, the Marines had been under siege up at Khe Sanh for the better part of a couple months. The 1st Cav displaced and went over and we made quite a large series of battalion-sized landings both at Khe Sanh itself and my brigade went in south of Khe Sanh. We came, and this was a rather interesting experience—we came in, we air-assaulted right behind the B-52 Arc Light and so trees are still falling out of the sky as we turn on final. That’s quite an experience, believe me, to have about forty 750-pound bombs going off a mile-and-a-half ahead of you and trees are just landing about twenty seconds before you arrive in a helicopter. But it was well placed and well timed in the assault I was in. I didn’t go in on a lead assault because I was the XO, but I think I went in with the 3rd Platoon. As we came in—it had
been an NVA division supply area and these B-52s had taken the top of this hill right off
and a lot of the North Vietnamese with them. So as our company air-assaults in, they’re
walking in among the dazed and the shattered, it was like a turkey shoot. We had an
good time cleaning them out in that area. There was a Special Forces camp right on
the Laotian border called Lang Vei, and that had been hit by tanks a month before. So
then we’re ordered, our company, to move down there and to see if there were possibly
any survivors living out in the woods or whatever. So we moved down there and there
were these bombed-out tanks that the Air Force had destroyed during the fight for the
camp. Then we found only Americans dead in a command bunker and a lot of other
stuff. We pulled a hell of a lot of weapons out and it was obvious that these Special
Forces guys made a hell of an accounting for themselves before they got overrun, even
though the area looked like the moon because the Air Force had worked it over so much.
Then I went back to the rear and became the S-3 air and then we started planning an
assault the next month into the A Shau Valley. Now the A Shau Valley is a high-speed
access corridor in II Corps that comes from the Ho Chi Minh Trail right into South
Vietnam. The Special Forces, it had several camps in there until 1966 when the NVA
attacked them and just wiped them out and pushed them out of there. Our job was—the
1st Brigade was going to go into the A Luoi Airstrip, which had been the biggest camp
and it had one time been a good C-130 landing area, about a twenty-five hundred foot
runway when it was somewhat serviceable. It wasn’t paved, but C-130s and C-123s
don’t need that. So there’s a lot of air activity. The 1st of the 9th Air Cav Squadron is in
there and the Air Force is in there and everybody’s taking a lot of ground fire. So at the
last—the division commander, because they had spotted some flak guns in there, he
decided to put a blocking force in right on the border in an area known as the Tiger
Mountains. It literally is the cap in the bottle for the A Shau and if he could take that,
then he would have the high ground and he could put enough artillery in there to cover
everything else. Our plan was, we were going to put four or five LZs in there, but this is
going to be a huge assault going in. So our part of the plan flips to the second phase and
the 3rd Brigade takes up Phase One and this all happens in about forty-eight hours. So
we’re moving fast and have to stay light on our feet. They pull together most of the
aviation assets of the 1st Cav. Then they build a timetable so that there’s going to be a
forty-ship lift of slicks and then probably twenty covering gunships, TACAIR (tactical air) will be on station and so on. Well, the day we’re supposed to jump off, we’re weathered out. It’s monsoon season in II Corps, so there’s that problem. The next day, everybody’s on hold again, we’re waiting to go in. From where we were at—I think they were going to stage out at Evans, which was between Hue and Quang Tri. It was the division base camp, not the base camp, but the division forward area. They’ve got forty helicopters sitting there, they’ve got Chinooks sitting there, they’ve got these huge Skycranes sitting there which are going to bring in the 155s, everybody is on hold. It’s kind of like waiting for D-Day. If you’ve ever seen that movie, The Longest Day, everybody’s sitting around twiddling their thumbs. Then the Air Force has FACs out over the A Shau Valley about thirty kilometers away waiting, doing weather checks. Finally there’s a huge hole that opens up right over the A Shau Valley. The problem is that the cloud cover goes to ten-thousand feet. Well, there’s about a two-mile hole in these clouds and so the Air Force FAC calls back and says, “Gosh, this almost reminds me of Longstreet on day three at Gettysburg.” He says, “If you want to go in, you can get in through this hole. How long it’s going to hold, we don’t know.” So then everybody scrambles, the lift ships take off. The lift is being led by a major from 11th Aviation Group. So the real experienced flight leads, they’re way back in Green section or White or Purple or something, they’re way back in the stream. Finally, one of these guys gets on the radio and says, “Hey, aren’t we supposed to have gunships?” “Well, holy shit.” You know, now they’re two-thirds of the way towards the valley at ten-thousand feet which takes them—flying when you’re in formation and you’re carrying three or four infantrymen in the back, believe me, you’re heavily loaded. So they put in a panicky call for the gunships, the gunships scramble off as fast as they can, but you got a mix there. You’ve got Bravo and Charlie-model Hueys, which they’re not real fast and at times they have trouble getting off the ground with a full load. Then you got the Cobras, which are just coming into the inventory and they’re fast as hell. So the Cobras race ahead trying to catch up. The B and C model gunships, they’re way behind and they’re not going to get there real soon anyway. So the initial lift arrives over the hole and the hole is still open and the FAC is saying, “Okay, I’ve got a couple of sections of TACAIR coming up and we’ll hold until you guys get down there and see what you need.” So these forty
helicopters start down from ten-thousand feet doing a real slow spiral down to the
ground. You kind of have this firmly fixed in your mind because what happens next is
it’s unimaginable. To see it is also unimaginable, but these ships start down to the hole
and they go down, down, down. Now they’re fully involved. Okay, if you’re a six-ship
lift, you can do some things. When you’re forty assault helicopters, you don’t do
anything. It takes a little bit of serious flying anyway because you’re shifting from
whatever formation they were in to what they call a staggered trail formation, which is
you give the guy in front of you a little room and the guy behind you gives you a little.
So it takes a long time to break and get this spiral started down. Then once you start
down, you’re fully loaded and you don’t have many options and what happens is, as the
lead gets down to the bottom third, they start taking flack. Well, helicopters are designed
for low-intensity warfare. Low-intensity warfare means guys in trees with rifles and light
machine guns. You know, there is no way you’re going to go through World War II with
a bunch of helicopters in formation coming out of ten-thousand feet and that’s exactly
what happened. These are radar-controlled 37-mms and they have a field day and they
shoot the shit out of these guys. Then because once the timetables start, then the gun is
loaded and it’s almost—it’s like trying to stop a racecar going 185 miles an hour at Indy
or one of these tracks. It takes a mile when there’s trouble to stop things. So the forty-
ship lift is committed, the gunships have not arrived, they are taking heavy fire, aircraft
are exploding, aircraft are falling out of the sky, they’re blowing up, all kinds of things.
Now, the Chinooks are right behind bringing in the light artillery and behind them comes
the heavy lift helicopters with the 155-artillery and you’ve got about a two-mile wide
band. What the lift helicopters do is they don’t try and go back up. They go a low level,
every man for himself, out of the valley. Out of this forty ship lift they leave, I don’t
know the exact numbers because number one, I was not there. So this is all on what I
heard on the radio and what people were telling me afterwards. They left, I would say, an
excess of twelve ships in the valley with the infantry. Of course, infantry gets spilled out
all over everywhere and so even those that survived the flight now land right in the
middle of a hornets nest and this was, I think it’s Charlie Company, 2nd of the 7th Cav. I
did meet the company commander afterwards and I think that guy is going to have a
hundred percent PTSD for the rest of his life because he was not in good shape when I
met him five years later. But at any rate, the lift ships take off, the Chinooks start down, all of the Chinooks get hit. I don’t know how many of them they lose, but of course, they’re dropping sling loads and the infantry on the ground have that to avoid as well as everything else. The Chinooks, of course, ain’t going to go low level, so they’ve got to climb back out and the heavy lift helicopters are coming down and those bastards are big. So there’s all kinds of chaos, as you can imagine, and about that time the gunships arrive. So it’s a hell of a war and I’m listening to this on the radio over in battalion and these guys—as you know, the people who will end up reading this, I’m very close to the pilots of the 229th in Bravo Company. They’re right in the middle of this lift and I jump in the jeep and I go running over to their area and then I sit in their operations and wait and they finally get back and three of their ships don’t come back. With all the other things that are going on, I felt like somebody had taken a sledgehammer and hit me in the gut. Because in my mind, I had worked out sort of the equation of friendship with them, which is, you know, I really liked these guys a lot but they’re not supposed to get involved with war, that’s my job. Yes, they’ll get shot at a little bit but I’ll take care of the dirty stuff. They just bring me the bullets and the beans and that’s fine. But it doesn’t happen that way and six of the pilots are dead along with the crew and that just about put me over the edge, too. That was very, very difficult and I just felt myself close down. It’s almost as if somebody just came by my mind and shut the door and said, “Don’t worry about it. Don’t think,” and I didn’t. I talked to the guys who made it back and I wandered back to my battalion area and, of course, then I went into the A Shau the next day. I told the battalion commander, “Well, you need me there on the ground.” He was like, “Fine.” But that was it. I couldn’t stand staff anymore so I went to the battalion commander. First, I went to the S-3 and I said, “Look, I need to go back out to the field.” They looked at me like, “Son, you’re not wrapped tight.” This is another one of these moments where God sends somebody to tell me the truth. (Laughs) Some advice comes to me and, of course, doesn’t mean I’m going to listen. He sat down and tried to talk me out of it. He said, “This is nuts. We got all kinds of kids. You did your seven to eight months in the field, don’t worry about it. You’re almost ready to go home, don’t do this.” But my mind was made up and I said, “No, I want to go back to B Company.” So he said, “Well, I’ll talk to the old man about it.” Colonel French had left. We had a new
battalion commander who said, “Whoa, that’s weird. Well, if he wants to go back, let him go.” So then you got to talk to the company commander in B Company because I’m the most senior lieutenant there and he said like, “I’ve already got an XO and I don’t want to move him.” I said, “That’s fine. Just get me in a platoon, I’m happy. You and the XO and everybody, just I’ll go back out, take my own platoon over, I’m fine.” So I did. I went back out to the field. Of course, by this time, it’s May and I’ve got, what, six weeks to go. A friend of mine who he had had 2nd Platoon when I had 1st Platoon. I was back getting the pay for the company because that was a good deal. Then the XO didn’t have to do it because they could let me go back and that was fine, I’d go back and get the pay. I’m back getting the pay and my friend now is Headquarters Company commander and he said, “Hey, why don’t we go to Hong Kong?” I said, “I don’t want to go to Hong Kong.” He said, “Well, we can go over and get laid.” I said, “Well, you go get laid. I don’t want to go get laid. I’m fine. I don’t want to mess with that, not a good time.” He said, “Oh, come on. You need to get out of the field. That’s dumb what you’re doing.” So he said, “Come on, we’ll go.” “That’s all right. I’ll go with you but you’re on your own with these women.” So I put in for a seven-day leave, he put in for a seven-day leave. We went down in Cam Ranh Bay and because if you’re on R&R, you get a seat. If you’re on seven-day leave, you take space available. So we couldn’t get to Hong Kong. So he’s grumping and mumping and I said, “Hey, look. How about we go over to Japan and see my mother. My mother’s in Japan. It’d be fun. I’d rather do that anyway.” He said, “Fine.” So we got on a C-130, which is the proverbial airborne slow boat to China, and I think it took us twelve hours to fly to Japan. (Laughs) We slept on top of some cargo boxes. I have no idea where the hell I was, but we were in the back of this damn thing bumping and thumping. God it was cold, too. We land in Japan at six o’clock in the morning and I call my mother and said, “Hey, I’m here.” She said, “Well, great. I’ll come right down to get you.” So I spent a week with her and during that time my friend—who went to West Point—and Yokota Airbase, which is an airbase near where my mother was billeted. The commander there, my friend had gone through West Point with him with his son. Also, we wanted to get some clothes made, so my mom took us down to a tailor outside the gate and she said, “Just call when you’re done.” Well, we’re there getting fitted for some suits and measured, there’s an American there and he’s ex-
GI who got out and married a Japanese girl. He tells my friend, “If you want some action, you got to go to the Yokota Officers’ Club because that’s where all the women hang out, all [the round eyed] women.” So he drags me off the first night, we go over to the Yokota Officers’ Club and to make a long story very short, that’s where I met my wife. So just before we had left on leave, they announced a new policy in Vietnam. They were getting complaints because some families had lost a couple of sons or a father and a son and so they announced a new policy that if a direct family member is coming to Vietnam, the one who’s in Vietnam can leave or the one who is supposed to go to Vietnam can defer his orders. Well, so I heard that on the radio when we were back in the rear just before we left on leave and I told my friend, “Hey, you know with that new policy,” since he had gotten into Vietnam about ten days ahead of me, two weeks actually, and we wanted to go home together, I said, “You know under that new policy, if my brother came over, then I could get an early drop and go home with you.” “Well, that’s great,” he says, “but you can’t lie to the Army because you don’t have a brother.” I said, “Yes, I have a brother. But, no, he’s not in the military, but they don’t know that now do they?” He looked at me and he said, “That’s lying to the Army.” I said, “Gosh, I’m going to hate myself, but you know? I got no problem with it.” I said, “Come on.” We were going to division G-1 and some lieutenant colonel was there and said, “What can I help you fellows with?” So I said, “Hey, I hear you got a policy that if a family member is on order for Vietnam, you can go home.” He said, “Oh, yes. I read something and it came through on a TWX (teletypewriter exchange) I think yesterday or this morning. Why?” I said, “Well, my brother is a pilot on the carrier Ranger and they’re coming over to Yankee Station in the middle of the month.” (Laughs) He said, “Oh, so you want to go home?” (Laughs) I said, “Well, no sir, no sir. I’ve got to clear my unit and everything, plus I’m leaving on seven-day leave. So no, I don’t want to do that. But if I could go home around the fourth of June, that’d be great because he’s not due until the tenth.” “Sure,” this colonel says, “Let me go look it up.” So he kind of reads the TWX and my friend, I hear him gulp because the colonel asked me again, he says, “Why don’t I call 2nd Field?” He said, “That’s the fourth of June, right?” I said, “Yes, sir.” I hear my friend go (squeak). (Laughs) He was leaving the sixth of June. So I screwed it up. But anyway, he called 2nd Field and they said, “Yes, his brother is coming on. He’s
in the Navy or something and I guess he applies. He fits under the new policy.” So he covers the receiver for a minute and he said, “Fourth of June?” So he says, “Oh, I can cut the orders, okay.” So he grabs one of his clerks and says, “Here, cut him orders to go home.” So when I left, I went over to my unit and cleared real quick. As a platoon leader, you know, you don’t have much in the way of the stuff to clear. Went up, cleared the unit and then this lieutenant and I went on a seven-day leave so all I got to do is show back up to go home because we go on leave like, I think, the twenty-second of May. We arrived in Japan. I’m due to rotate the fourth of June. So when I go back, I’ll just zip over to the replacement company and wait shipment. So I meet my [present] wife and I’m very charmed and very attracted and so the week is up about May thirtieth and my friend says, “Well, we got to make arrangements to go home.” I said, “No, I don’t think I’m going home.” He said, “What?” I said, “Hey, look. I’ve cleared the unit and the replacement company is not expecting me until the third of June. That’s four days. What the hell do I care?” He said, “You can’t do that.” I said, “Yes, you can. You know, Tom, when are you going to catch on? This is the Army. You know, I’m not frauding anybody out of any particular thing. A couple of days either way isn’t going to make any difference to anybody.” So I put him on the plane and he went back to Vietnam and I spent two more days with my mother. Joan and I saw each other and agreed to meet again. So I went back and went home on the same flight as a couple of the pilots from the 229th and that was my trip home.

SM: Wow.

BP: The lady and I got married and we’ve been married ever since. Then I believe we knew the rest of the story because it’s all here. (Laughs)

SM: I think you’re right. Well, how did you feel when you left? What was going through your mind when you finally left after—?

BP: After a year?

SM: Yes.

BP: A lot of mixed feelings. On the one hand, I felt like I had done a good job and the Army had done a good job and we were doing what was asked of us and we were doing it well in the case of 1st Cav. I was proud. I was very proud and I felt that the sacrifices that those men were making were magnificent. I thought that whatever it was
the government wanted us to do was being done. On a personal side, I was pretty
damaged. I have religious issues and some other things and then some other things I
didn’t know I had. I guess that’s why it’s called delayed stress because you just can’t
react to all of that stuff that you see and feel.

SM: Right.

BP: When I left, my head was up and I was proud. I was glad as hell to get out of
there. Right before I left, though, and this was—do you remember my thing? That God
sends people to you to tell you something? While I was up to the unit, a captain got off
the helicopter and I had known this guy as a 1st lieutenant when I first got there. He was
leaving shortly after I got there, like a month.

SM: Wow.

BP: He got off the helicopter and my eyes got big and I said, “Rosy, what the hell
are you doing here?” I saw he was captain and I said, “Excuse me, sir.” He said, “No,
don’t worry about it.” I said, “What’re you doing here? Why’d you come back?” He
said, “Why did I come back?” He said, “Hell, I didn’t have any choice.” I said, “What?”
He said, “Yes.” He said, “I was a company commander at the engineer center there at Ft.
Leonard Wood in about eight months. After I’ve been back, I get a letter from DA telling
me to call and so I call Infantry Branch.” He said, “I’m told reserve officers are going
back right at the twelve month level.” I said, “What do you mean you’re going back at
the twelve?” He said, “Yes, that’s our turn-around time, twelve months.” He said, “Bill,
you’re in infantry. You got a reserve commission. You’ll be back here a year from
today.” I said, “You got to be shitting me.” He said, “No.” He said, “Regular Army
commission is where you are going to school and going to here and there and
everywhere. But,” he said, “if you’re reserve commissioned, you come back in twelve
months.” He was dead right. That hit me like a two-by-four between the eyes because it
had never occurred to me you had to come back.

SM: Yes.

BP: I never thought about it. So then you get this little knot in the pit of your
stomach like, “Holy shit. You mean we’ve got to keep doing this over and over?” It’s
like a bad version of the schoolteacher joke.

SM: Yes.
BP: So when I went back, I was in another motivation to put in for flight school because I’m going home and everything. But, geez, I would like a little time back and a year is not very long. I had also extended for Special Forces. (Laughs)

SM: Why did you do that?

BP: (Laughs) Well, when I was in OCS, the company right across the street from us, they were eight weeks ahead of us. So I made acquaintances with this guy and he was pretty cool in that company. He kind of sat down and clued us in in a lot of stuff. He had been prior service like we had been and that was very helpful. I saw him in Vietnam when I came back from Sydney, Australia, on R&R. He had been attached—he was in Special Forces, but he was attached to a Mike Force in III Corps and he was going to extend for SOG (Studies and Observation Group). That’s SOG, the special Studies and Operations Group, which really were the euphemism for guys who worked in North Vietnam. Trail watchers and special—all these, what they like to call these days, black ops. All the shadowy, CIA-type crap.

SM: Right.

BP: He talked me into extending with him because he asked me how things were going and I told him, “Well, I got a divorce and so I’m going through that.” He said, “Listen, I’m going to extend and I’m going to SOG, why don’t you go and extend and we’ll go together?” Well, that sounded pretty good. So I came back and I put in my paperwork. Now at that time, SOG was not real easy to get into from the outside. He had the inside track because he was already SF. I was not Special Forces, so you know there’s that whole thing of penetrating in and do they want us. So they got a lot of looking at you to do. I hadn’t heard, and I hadn’t heard, and I hadn’t heard, and I cleared the unit and I’m down—I’m back from seven-day leave and I’m pretty much in love and I meet the guys from the 229th and we’re laughing and scratching and everything. We’re all going home and then I get this phone call from the unit. It’s this captain friend of mine who has become the S-1. He tells me, “Bill, I got orders for you to go to the 5th Special Forces.” He says it in a real low voice, I can hardly hear him. I said, “What?” He said, “Did you extend?” I said, “Oh, shit.” Because I had called them several times and it was always the same thing, some surly warrant officer would get on the phone and said, “Hey, if we got your paperwork, we’ll act on it and quit bugging us. Goodbye,” sort
of thing. So I figured that was a dead issue and all of a sudden, the day before I return to
go home, it’s a live issue and I’m supposed to go to the SOG. Well, in the meantime I
found out that my friend did his first mission and he never came back. So I now have no
motivation whatsoever to go spend six months in SOG going in and doing all that stuff.
So then real softly he says, “You can’t hear me.” (Laughs) I said, “Hello?” I’m a quick
study. So then he starts shouting into the phone, “I can’t hear you, is Lieutenant Paris
there? I thought that was Lieutenant Paris, who the hell have I been talking to? Hello,
hello?” Then real softly I hear him say, “Get the hell on that plane, get out of here.” So I
hung up, that was it. I don’t want to hear any more about SOG or anything else. So I
went back to the States. Then I think I told about the incident where they reached out
later at Fort Benning and tried to con me into going with them. But that’s my life in a
nutshell.

SM: Well, when you, (coughs) excuse me. When you came back, how much of a
crisis were you facing in terms of your religion? Did you go right back into church and
start attending again or did this take time or did you never go?

BP: No, no. I went back because number one, the divorce was not final.

SM: Okay.

BP: So I attended quite faithfully. When I got back to the States, my ex-wife was
desperately trying to get a hold of me and I didn’t want to mess with it so I just
disappeared for a week until they had a final court hearing. We got our divorce and I
gave her some money and wished her well and asked her never to bother me again. It
wasn’t until Joan and I got married in December. Then in my mind—and I’m going to
apologize in advance to Catholics who read this because I come from a far different
Catholicism. Then I have some invented Catholicism as a very young man and probably
wasn’t true nor very realistic. But in my mind, I thought that if you marry in the Catholic
Church, which I did, and then you divorce, that you are no longer able to be married. At
the time, if somebody wants to research it, you can tell me what the rules were. But in
my mind, I had to choose between being married again or being a Catholic and no
amount of faith could in my heart replace that woman. She was the right woman for me.
This was something that I knew was good, that I knew I had to do and it doesn’t change
your relationship with God. It just changes the format by which you approach him. So I
turned my back and never messed with Catholicism again and it was very painful and I spent a lot of years mourning that loss quite actively and I did not replace it for thirty years.

SM: Well, when you came back on the civilian side of things, what was going on with the—what do you remember most about the anti-war movement and did you encounter it? We may have covered this already, but just to reiterate here.

BP: Yes, we did.

SM: Yes. Did you ever encounter anybody who was vocally hostile to you because you were a Vietnam vet right when you got back?

BP: No.

SM: Okay.

BP: I did on leave. (Laughs)

SM: Okay.

BP: I think I covered that incident where I came back on emergency leave.

SM: Yes.

BP: The guy wasn’t vocally hostile and I never got spit on. I’m probably one of the few veterans who will admit to never being spit on. There was a lot of anti-war stuff around and you didn’t wear your uniform, that’s for sure.

SM: Okay.

BP: The mood of the country was totally given over to the young and their need to stick in everybody’s eye that they could get away with this stuff and nobody could do anything to them and “Na, na, na, na, na, the war is bad. We don’t like you.”

SM: Well, what do you think about the—how credible do you find stories from veterans that they were indeed spit upon?

BP: Well, forgive me, but I’m going to answer your question with a story.

(Laughs)

SM: Okay.

BP: To Vietnam veterans, the myth of getting spit on as soon as I came home is an allegory and it’s a parable, if you will, to talk about the way we felt when we got home because there was no support for us. In the Civil War, for some decades after that, the normal veterans’ meetings were pretty much as you would expect. But by the end of the
nineteenth century, and this started in about the late 1880s, a lot of guys began to fantabulize their service and it got to the point of where everybody was an officer. That wasn’t true, but that’s what the veterans said. “Oh, yes. I was a captain during the Union, in the Union Army during the war.” It got to be so implanted among those enlisted veterans, that they began calling each other by way of greeting, “Captain.” You know, “Hi, Captain, how are you?” For us Vietnam Veterans, when they say, “I was spit on when I got home,” and, believe me, there probably were a few that that happened to. I imagine you could count them on two hands. It’s a way of our saying when people tell you, “Well, I was spit on.” That’s really a way of saying that it hurt like hell because when I came back, nobody, number one, wouldn’t talk about what we had done and number two, they laughed at us and they ridiculed us and they made us feel like we were the bad guys for doing it. That I think is the true meaning of when they say, “Well, I was spit on when I got home.” No, but I might as well have been spit on because we were very unpopular and there was a lot of bad press. In the movies and TV shows, every time somebody went crazy and had problems, guess what? He was a Vietnam vet. You see this after a lot of wars. There were stories after World War II, you know, the crazy World War II vet and Korea. [There was a movie, The Manchurian Candidate] and this essentially was about crazy Korean vets. So there’s a little bit of a stigma attached to it and certainly during the ’60s. I mean, did we fight our own popular war, yes, because the silent majority if you wish, they stayed silent. So the great en masse all dancing in the street, they were the ones the press was following around loyally repeating everything they said. So yes, we were made to feel like outcasts.

SM: Yes, okay. You know it’s ironic how much the Hollywood perpetuation of certain myths and, just in my own experience, I do remember that. My first impression of the Vietnam veteran returning home was a television program where this guy was a nut.

BP: Yes.

SM: It was a purely fictionalized portrayal, but that stuck with me as a young person that this was the effect of the war.
BP: Well, we’re an unsettling influence in that some cases make people feel apprehensive because after every war, you have a bunch of folks who are dumped back in your home who had been trained and are very successful killers.

SM: Right.

BP: Yes, there’s a little bit of feeling of, “Okay.”

SM: Yes, “Not real comfortable with you sitting right next to me, but—”

BP: Yes. (Laughs) Well, you’re one of them, huh?

SM: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

BP: I’ve had people and then they ask you the dumbest questions, “Did you ever kill anybody?” That’s my favorite.

SM: Oh, goodness.

BP: Then followed by, you know, there’s a certain segment, very small that’ll ask you, “Did you kill women and children over there?” Well, you know, you hear it often enough that finally—the best response I ever heard in the middle ’70s was from a guy who was at Special Forces and somebody asked him, “Did you kill babies?” He looked at her straight in the eye and said, “You know, honey, never more than I could eat.”

SM: (Laughs)

BP: It’s the only way to handle a question like that.

SM: Yes, it sure is.

BP: You know, what do you say?

SM: Well, yes.

BP: Yes, no.

SM: You answer an absurd question with an absurd answer.

BP: Exactly and it’s the only way to deal with nonsense like that.

SM: Okay. Well, is there anything else you’d like to add to our interview?

BP: No. My goodness, this has been a real growth experience for me.

SM: Well, I really appreciate you taking the time again.

BP: It’s been great, Steve. I appreciate it and I hope it’s of some use to those who come after us.

SM: I know it is. It is now. It’s a use to people who use the resources now.

BP: Great.
SM: All right, well, let me go head and put an official ending on this. Don’t hang up yet. This will end the interview with Mr. Bill Paris on the eighth of March. Thank you again, sir.