Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone; I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Stephen Dant. Today is May 18, 2005. It’s 8:36 a.m. Central Standard Time. I’m again in Lubbock and Steve, you’re in Colorado Springs. Steve we were just talking for a second there before we began the interview again about an incident that you did talk about in your last session when you all had to unload your weapons when was it a colonel who came to visit?

Stephen Dant: I think it was a lieutenant colonel. Don’t hold me to that, but I think so.

RV: Tell me a little bit more about that incident. You said you wanted to talk about it.

SD: Well I just, kind of as a follow-up and it occurred to me after our last conversation that you know the time that I was in the field…what occurred to me was, with the exception of that one incident where I think it was a brigade commander, again don’t hold me to that, I’m not sure. The entire time I was in the field there was never anybody on the ground with our troops that was higher rank than captain. The captains were usually our company commanders. Then lieutenants were platoon leaders. But for the most part in the Vietnam War, at least where I was, and I don’t know about other wars but the guys on the ground were officer corps, were captain and below.
RV: Right. What does that say to you about that? You really didn’t see any other officers except this one incident besides a captain.

SD: Well as I said and we talked about previously, the higher brass was obviously somewhat afraid of getting shot by their own men. We had to unload weapons when that one time when one came to the ground. There was resentment when we would know that the brigade commanders or battalion commanders or whatever commanders would be flying overhead in their helicopters and there were times that we knew we were getting orders to move a certain direction because maybe they had seen something or whatever up there. We were the grunts on the ground having to do all the hard work and these guys were, at least from our perspective, were just kind of sitting up there in their nice, comfortable helicopters and got to go back at night to a hooch. They just weren’t participating in the action.

RV: What did that do to you guys? Did you think that that was legit that you had to unload the weapons? Did you think someone would have actually taken a shot at the guy?

SD: I was surprised that we had to unload the weapons. It wouldn’t have occurred to me to take a shot at the guy but when I was told that, I was really surprised. I wasn’t happy, nobody was happy about having to unload weapons out in the, we were out in some pretty heavy terrain and it was out in a jungle somewhere. In my mind maybe the brass knew something we didn’t know but I didn’t think it was wise to be unloading weapons out in the middle of the field.

RV: Did you all ever talk about taking a shot at the command chopper above you or anything like that? Did you ever hear talk like that?

SD: No.

RV: So this, I want to say rumor, or what people have reported, or what I have heard actually and it has been documented in history books is this thing about morale starting to really decline in ’69, ’70, ’71. Would you say that this is evidence of that? That this is maybe part of that tide of declining morale of American troops on the ground in Vietnam?

SD: Well if not the troops on the ground, certainly the officer corps. (Laughter)

RV: That’s a good point Steve.
SD: If they are worried about getting shot by their own men then their morale can’t be too high.

RV: That’s a very good point. (Laughter)

SD: You know morale; I don’t know how morale can ever be very high in a combat unit just because of what you’re up against. I mean it’s just a matter of keeping it above ground, I guess.

RV: Right. I mean you’re in a difficult circumstance, a very stressful.

SD: Right, with a lot of high stress and people have gotten hurt or the potential of getting hurt or killed and you know so morale is a relative thing.

RV: Tell me when you got back in the rear, and we’ve talked about this a bit but I want to know what you’re specific duties as a driver was. I mean tell me did you have to report to a jeep at a certain time? Were you on standby hanging out in an office?

SD: I had to report to the office. I had a jeep to take care of. I was responsible for the low-end maintenance on the jeep, you know taking care of it, seeing if the oil was changed. I didn’t do the tune ups but I helped with that. I just had to make sure that it was in good working order. I reported every morning for duty at brigade headquarters, at 198th Brigade Headquarters in Chu Lai, then my duties really varied throughout the day. I would run a lot of errands that included picking up some kind of supplies. As simple as picking up some kind of supplies from PX or I might be running some documents from brigade headquarters over to battalion headquarters. I might be driving somebody from officer corps there at brigade headquarters someplace around the base. Every once in a while, not very often, maybe off the base where we would go down to…oh, I don’t remember what the fire bases that were still open, I want to say Gator or Bayonet, or one of those. I might work with some of the RTOs and then back at the communications center off and on, maybe taking some radio calls from out in the field. That’s usually when somebody was going on break or something. It was cake duty. I was proud to be a REMF.

RV: (Laughter)

SD: That was something that we talked about earlier with, what did the guys say when they found out I got my rear job. You know they instantaneously everybody in the company was calling me a REMF. My retort to them was, yeah and proud to be one.
RV: So when you say low-end maintenance of the jeep, tell me what that means.
SD: Again like changing the oil, rotating tires.
RV: You personally had to do this?
SD: Yes, I remember doing that kind of stuff. But if the jeep needed a tune up or something wrong with transmission then I took it over to the motor pool. Since I had to have a vehicle I would swap one out and take one back until they had mine fixed. I remember the number on my jeep; it was number 37. Just the low-end maintenance. I don’t know how else to describe it.
RV: This is a huge difference from being out on patrol in the bush.
SD: Oh sure. Number one, it’s not nearly the physical work of humping a rucksack around out in the 95-degree heat with 95% humidity. It was sleeping in a bed every night. It was showers every day, hot meals every day. You know it was in a clean uniform with shined boots. It was closest to being back to the world as you could be while still being in Vietnam.
RV: Did you know the date you would leave Vietnam?
SD: Well originally I was…I had gotten here in February. I think I got there February 9, or February 8 or something like that. So I figured I was scheduled to leave in early February of 1971. But when I got my orders and you get them a few months in advance, to go back to the States and I was going to come back to Ft. Hood, Texas. At that time you got to make a decision as to whether you are going back to the States and finish your active duty back in the States for the five months that you got left or there is an option that if you want to extend your tour of duty in Vietnam for an extra couple of months. If you came back to the States with less than five months of active duty they released you for the remainder of your active duty and you could sign out of the Army. Since I had this great rear job I decided to extend my tour an extra couple of months so instead of leaving in February I left in April. It turns out that had I not extended, that they turned a lot of guys loose so that they could be home for Christmas and I probably would have been home for Christmas.
RV: Really? But of course you didn’t know that at the time.
SD: I didn’t know that at the time and had I known that I probably wouldn’t have extended my tour.
RV: Yeah. Well, before we talk about coming home and everything that happened after Vietnam. Let me ask you just a couple of other general questions about Vietnam. First of all Steve, what else is there to say about your duty in the rear? You’ve talked about where you lived, you’ve talked about your duties, and I want to ask you about R&R and I want to ask you about some other things. Are there any incidents, anything that comes to mind when you today picture your duty that last part of duty in Vietnam in the rear, what do you see? What’s in your minds eye? You see jeep number 37?

SD: I see jeep number 37. I see driving all over Chu Lai. I see parties in my hooch with sometimes the guys coming back from Charlie Company when they would be on stand down. I see myself hanging out on the beach. I think we had one day off a week. I think. I’ve forgotten. That would usually mean that you would head down to the beach. South China Beach is a beautiful, white sand, nice place to just kind of hang out and drink a beer, read a book or something. It’s just you know counting the days. Everybody had a short timer calendar going. You know, how many days do you got left. Well it’s 30 days and a wake-up. (Laughter)

RV: (Laughter)

SD: 25 days and a wake-up. 14 days and a wake-up. The time just absolutely crawled.

RV: Did you have a short-timer’s calendar?

SD: Oh yeah, I think everybody did. I mean you’re marking off the days. I mean it’s just a calendar that…you’re putting X’s through it. How much time do I have to go to get back to the world where they can’t shoot you and eat you?

RV: Is that what you would say?

SD: That was one of the phrases that was around. Just put up with this shit and get back to the States. Used to say that a lot in the field. Don’t mean nothing and get out of here, get back to the States, they can’t shoot you and eat you. Which hanging out with some of the…when you saw some of the tribes out west you wondered if they would shoot you and eat you.

RV: Tell me about that phrase don’t mean a thing, or don’t mean nothing.

SD: Don’t mean nothing, God you heard that all the time. Somebody got hurt it was a way of…or if somebody got killed or if somebody got a Dear John letter it was just
a way of everybody trying to say you know, you’re alive and we’re going to get through
this and it was a way to try to tell somebody…a whole mixed bag of things but look at
the big picture, I guess. This don’t mean nothing.

RV: Of course that was a lie right?
SD: Yes, somewhat. You had to, particularly in the field; you had to get things
behind you quickly. You didn’t have a lot of time to be thinking about things or letting
them really get to you for too long because you had to have your act together. It was a
way of also commiserating with whatever was going wrong with the guy you were
talking to or whatever.

RV: Steve, tell me…in the rear, did you have pets? Did you personally, or did you
see this?
SD: God. I guess there were some dogs around. I never had a pet. The only thing I
saw around my hooch was a bunch of lizards.

RV: (Laughter).
SD: And nobody wanted them for pets.
RV: Yeah the geckos you mean?
SD: I don’t know what kind they were. They were about a foot long, ugly looking
creatures. You know I guess lizards and rats, that was about it.

RV: Tell me about the rats.
SD: The rats weren’t as bad. Can you hang on one second?
SD: I said that the rats were worse as I remember in the stand down areas when
you came out of the field.
RV: How so?
SD: Well it just seemed like there were more of them. I don’t know if that’s
because they didn’t keep these places clean or humans weren’t around all the time
because sometimes the stand down area would be, all the troops would be in the field so
it wouldn’t be being used. I just remember waking up a couple of times when we were
back on stand down and hearing rats scratching around, moving around under the cots. I
hated those fucking bastards. (Laughter)
RV: (Laughter).
SD: You know you turn on the lights and you get them all out of there. Just give
you the willies. I really don’t remember them being a problem in my hooch when I had a
rear job. These suckers were big.

RV: That’s what I’ve heard.

SD: They were big as a small cat, some of them. Ones not like the little three or
four inch variety. I mean these guys, hell they probably take on one of my house cats
here. (Laughter)

RV: I didn’t really talk to you about this too much, about your life in the field and
the rear, but could you made some comments about the wild animals you saw in
Vietnam?

SD: You know the scariest things I ever saw was one time I came through a
hedgerow, I was walking point, I think I was walking point. I don’t remember. Anyway I
came through this hedgerow and standing in front of me about, oh I don’t know, 30, 40
yards away is a water buffalo. He’s looking at me and I’m looking at him and he is not
happy.

RV: Why is he not happy?

SD: I never saw a water buffalo that liked GIs; that liked American troops. These
little kids, these little Vietnamese kids who go out in the middle of the rice paddy with a
stick and beat the ever living crap out of this thing and they would just go wherever this
little kid wanted them to go. If you came out into the rice paddy I mean that water buffalo
was looking at you like he was coming after you. This thing was looking at me like he’s
going to charge and I’m going, ‘Oh shit, I don’t have enough ammunition on me to take
this thing down.’ The word always was if one of these things charged at you, don’t shoot
it in the, don’t even try to shoot it in the head, take its legs out. Put your weapon on
automatic fire and try to wipe out its legs. You’re not going to stop it with an M-16. I
thought sure that this thing was going to come charging at me and I just slowly backed
through the hedgerow and told whoever was behind me we’re going to go around.

RV: Why did the water buffalo have a problem with Americans? Was it that you
guys smelled differently?

SD: I think we smelled differently. My dad grew up on a farm. We had a family
farm in southern Indiana. I would kind of be the city kid coming down there every once
in a while and the farm kids always got along better with the animals than the city kids did. I think there is just something that animals sense about you. I’m sure we smelled a whole lot different than the… I know we smelled a whole lot different than the Vietnamese villagers. This animal saw us as a threat and acted that way.

RV: I’ve heard this before, quite a few times. I’ve joked from time to time with Veterans that the water buffalo must have been Communists. They really didn’t like the Americans.

SD: Must have been. They did not. The other incident that I ran into with animals, when we first moved out of the Batangan Peninsula and we went west out into the jungle and the first night we were out – I’d kind of forgotten about this. We set up a perimeter and in the morning just before dawn we hear all this rustling in the trees and we thought the NVA was on its way. So we open fire. We just tore into this line of trees. The next thing you know you hear somebody yelling, ‘Cease fire, cease fire.’ It turns out it’s a whole bunch of monkeys up in the trees making all this rustling noise waking up in the morning. (Laughter) I don’t think we actually shot any monkeys because we were shooting down towards the ground and they were all up in the trees but scared the hell out of us. It was the first time that we had been in the jungle as opposed to down on the plain in the rice paddies. We just didn’t realize. So after that we got use to every morning these monkeys were going to be overhead and doing their morning thing.

RV: Did you ever run into rock apes?

SD: No.

RV: Okay just wanted to ask. I’ve heard quite a few stories about the rock apes.

SD: What are rock apes?

RV: Monkeys or apes that were quite good at sneaking up on American troops, just kind of families of them living out in the bush. Mainly in the Central Highlands area.

SD: No, the monkeys that we ran into were the smaller variety. They probably stood maybe a foot in a half, two feet tall. I don’t know if that’s the same one but I never had any sneak up to our perimeter and try to take any of our stuff, or something. They kind of stayed up in the trees.

RV: What about snakes?
SD: A lot of snakes. One of the things about if you were humping out in the bush, particularly up in the hills, you know sometimes the easiest way to get from one point to another was to be in the stream. The stream wouldn’t be that deep or you would walk the edge of the stream but it provided a natural trail whereas otherwise you would have to, and you would pretty much know it was pretty difficult to mine a stream whereas walking on a trail, particularly if you’re out in the jungle some place you know there aren’t many trails out there so it’s probably mined. So I remember a few times humping along a stream and just seeing a lot of snakes that would go swimming by you. They would see you coming and they would head a different direction. I remember particularly these, I don’t know what they were called, but they were some kind of green snake that looked, well just scared the shit out of everybody when you would see one of these things. I never had one crawl up to me when I was in a foxhole or anything. I got bit by a lot of different bugs. We had this game going out in the field where we would have a ‘Bug of the Day’ because every day, I mean literally every day you would find some kind of insect or bug or rodent or something different that what you had seen, had never seen before.

RV: Every day?
SD: Everyday. I would have something different crawling on me every single day.
RV: How would you guys play the game?
SD: I don’t know. Somebody would have the first bug of the day.
RV: Would you come up with a name for it?
SD: No, it was another way to stay sane.
RV: Right. On that subject tell me about humor played a roll for you over there.
SD: Well I guess, I never really thought about it. I guess you had to have one or I don’t think you would make it. There were a lot of practical jokes played. Everybody knew kind of where the line was with regard to practical jokes. I’m trying to think of one and I can’t. A lot of horsing around. I remember my platoon leader; Lieutenant Franko somehow got a football out into the field.
RV: Oh really?
SD: So we had a little touch football game going out in the middle of nowhere, like three guys really throwing the ball around. I mean just something that would break
the tension and take a little bit of the edge off. He was good at it; I was fortunate to have
him as my first platoon leader. He was good at that kind of stuff. He knew when it was
time to be serious. When we would go back on stand down that it was time to party. I
don’t think he minded if guys, when they went back, were smoking a little pot in the rear
while they were drinking their beer, but he wouldn’t see of it, he wouldn’t put up with
that shit out in the field.

RV: Yeah you’ve already said that…

SD: Did I answer your question or did I kind of meander around there?

RV: No, you did a little bit of both probably but I get the gist of it that humor
played a huge role for you guys. You just needed it to cope on a day-to-day basis. Is there
any incidents that come to mind?

SD: Any what?

RV: Any incidents come to mind, humorous incidents?

SD: You know I don’t know. We were always, you know during the day
sometimes you would be out at night on patrols and during the day…one of the ways that
relieved tensions was card games being played. I played a lot of poker out in the field.
Most of it was nickel and dime games, which you know, added up to a couple of bucks
here or there. If you had a pot with probably ten bucks in it, it was probably a big pot. I
think there were some guys that played for higher stakes than that. I think that that helped
take the edge off as well, pass the time.

RV: Okay. Steve what about, to really change the subject here, what about
running into or exposure to defoliants, as of course specifically Agent Orange? Anything
that you know of?

SD: I only ran into an area once where we were out on a patrol and it may have
been platoon or company strength and I do remember I was, pretty sure I was walking
point that day, and all of a sudden I came into this area where I thought it had, it smelled
like CS gas. It appeared to be all over. By that I mean it seemed like it was covering leafs
and branches and stuff. I remember the word going back to the LT said, ‘We’ve run into
something here that maybe, we don’t know what it is but this place has been gassed or CS
here or Agent Orange or something but we don’t want to go in here.’ So he called back to
the rear and they turned us around and we headed someplace else. So I only had one
instance. I don’t know what we were walking into. I thought it smelled like CS but I’m not sure. I knew I didn’t want to walk in there.

RV: Tell me about what you think about the whole Agent Orange in Vietnam.

You don’t have to comment on that obviously if you don’t want to. I’m curious as to what you think.

SD: You know I didn’t, at the time, have a lot of thought about it one way or the other. I just thought it was something else we were doing. I guess I still don’t one way or the other. If you’re asking me if I think it was wrong, I don’t think so. If you ask me if I think it was right, I don’t know. When you’re at war you have to use the weapons that will hopefully help you win the war. We’re fighting a war in the midst of a jungle and the Viet Cong and the NVA were hiding in the jungle so take away that asset.

RV: What do you think about all the claims and the stuff going on now by veterans saying that they were exposed and it’s caused this disease and this disease and this problem? Do you have any opinion on that or any experience with that?

SD: I don’t because I wasn’t…if I was exposed to it, it was just that one time. I don’t know of anybody that had made those kind of claims and I wouldn’t, you know, I wouldn’t judge anybody on what their experiences were in Vietnam because there were a whole lot of guys that had much worse or much more traumatic experiences than I ever had. I consider myself lucky. I think I got off easy. I think I had a relatively easy tour of duty compared to a lot of other guys I’ve talked to.

RV: Tell me about the relationship of the guys in the unit. You’ve described a little of this when you went back to the rear for duty there. How would you describe it in general, the bond you all have?

SD: The bond was really tight when you’re in the field and while I was still in Vietnam. One of the things about the Vietnam War is you didn’t go over as a unit; you didn’t come back as a unit.

RV: What do you think about that?

SD: Well looking back on it now I think it was stupid. It didn’t forge that community, that relationship before you went over there, which I think would have been important and I think we’re doing that today now. Units go over as units. Certainly that’s the way it was in World War II. I don’t know about Korea. And on the flip side when you
got out, you ended up losing contact with the guys that you had been so close to, and so there wasn’t a...you individually had to decompress from the experience of Vietnam as opposed to going through it as a group of people. You follow what I’m saying?

RV: Absolutely, yeah.

SD: I think we all learned a lot from that as a country, at least I hope we did.

Doing it that way doesn’t contribute to a good morale situation either.

RV: How so?

SD: Again I think if you go over there as a unit and you’re building that team atmosphere, that fosters higher morale than you go over there and you’re thrown in with a bunch of people and they’re all looking at you kind of like well, we’ll give this guy a month. (Laughter) You make it through the month and you’re part of the deal. Whereas if you go over as a group, I guess there’s always going to be some of that I wonder if this guy’s going to make it. I don’t think it would be to the same degree.

RV: How would you all treat the new arrivals?

SD: The FNGs?

RV: Yes, the FNGs.

SD: (Laughter) I was always treated pretty well. I think I told you this; I was lucky I had a sergeant kind of take me under his wing and really help me through the first few weeks that I was out there. I think most guys were that way with the exception of if you really did get somebody who came out to the field that obviously was either as dumb as a rock, and we did have a couple of those guys come out to the field, or had a real attitude problem. You usually try to find a way to...if they are dumb as a rock, you try to get them out of the field, get them back and get them a rear job.

RV: How do you do that?

SD: You tell the sergeant, you tell the lieutenant who tells the top sergeant back in the rear. I think the top sergeant then you know, most of the top sergeants had been in combat, they knew. If they had somebody that was just so stupid that they were going to get people hurt that you had to get them out of there. So I assumed that the top sergeant would find a way, some job back in the rear where this guy could go and spend his tour in Vietnam burning shit you know or something.
RV: Well let me ask you this and I don’t mean this to sound like a dumb question, and no pun intended, how do you tell when someone’s dumb? When they get to the field how do you tell they are not, well dumb, as you said? They are dumb as a rock as you said.

SD: I think that most people know. It’s not just in Vietnam but it’s anywhere. I don’t think it takes very long for people to size people up to determine that somebody doesn’t have, and it’s not their fault, a very high IQ. That’s what we’re talking about here. Where they have been through the training and they can do the rudimentary parts of the job and this is not a sophisticated job, being a grunt. (Laughter) They’re slow to the take. It’s, how long does it take you to set up that Goddamn claymore? They know how to do it but they are just slow. I don’t know how else to define it. There’s no way that they belong in the field.

RV: So you can just basically tell the sergeant?

SD: Say, ‘Come on, look at this guy.’ You yell at them a few times and you realize that’s not going to get anywhere. Everybody realizes that you got a problem here, you got to deal with it. A lot of this just goes unsaid. After everybody figures out that this guy’s going to get himself hurt. He ain’t going to cut it.

RV: Well I guess that’s a problem. When you’re talking about the safety of the unit you got to take action in your own hands to do this. Did you ever see any homosexuality in the field or in Vietnam in the rear or anything?

SD: Not in the field. I don’t remember any in the rear. No, I guess not.

RV: Okay. Well could you tell me about your R&R experience, what you remember of it?

SD: (Laughter)

RV: You said you went to Bangkok.

SD: Yeah I went to Bangkok, Thailand, me and actually it turned out, I was working in brigade headquarters at the time, but I ended up going and hooking up with a guy who was from my old company who was the company clerk at Charlie Company and Bangkok was just a party town for GIs on R&R. It was sin city. It was a wonderful place for a young, unmarried GI. It was cheap. I’ve forgotten what my hotel room cost for a week but it was cheap. When you got there you got the lecture from the, before they
turned you loose, you got the lecture about VD and all the sexual diseases that you could
catch by screwing these whores without any condom on. You had to listen to that for 20
minutes and keep looking at your watch. Can I get the hell out of here so I can go party?
Then they turn you loose on the streets. Somehow everybody finds out that you go, you
go hire a driver, and I don’t think it cost me more than 10 bucks a day if that much to hire
this guy who would drive me anywhere I wanted to go at whatever time of the day I
wanted to go. A very nice guy. We got to know each other pretty well by the end of the
week. You find out where the bath houses are and you go and pick up a nice, cute, good
looking Thai girl and you spend a few days with her, but actually the first couple of days
I mean I really don’t remember very much. I know Sully and I were out partying and we
were drunk and we were hanging out with these women and screwing our brains out and
having a good old time. Then the last couple of days you start saying, ‘Well I’m in
Bangkok, I guess I should go do a little sightseeing along with all this partying.’ So we
went over to the big temple with all the gold Buddhas and by the palace and just did the
normal tourist stuff. I ended up hanging out a couple of nights with my driver and he took
me over to his pad and we partied over there for a while with a bunch of Thai guys,
drinking Thai beer, and smoking some kind of weird pot that I’m sure was laced with
opium. Then it was back to Vietnam where I think I had a couple more months to do then
I was gone.

RV: Have you ever been back to Bangkok?
SD: No, I haven’t.
RV: Would you like to go?
SD: Sure. I would love to go back and see the palace and I would like to go back
and see, I think there’s a big temple. I’m not sure I would hang out in the same bars with
my wife that I hung out with the last time I was there. (Laughter) You know I think,
looking back, I think the Thai, Bangkok government did a good job of taking the GI’s
money and showing them a good time and I understood that all of the prostitutes and all
of the bath houses had to go to like weekly checks or something to see if they had
contracted any kind of VD or something. So they worked hard at keeping the wares
clean. It was a great party town. It was great to let your hair down and just get away from
it in a week. It really was, what I thought, was a beautiful city.
RV: Have you talked to your wife about all this stuff, about Vietnam, about Bangkok?

SD: Oh yeah. She knows almost, I think I’ve told her over 30 years just about everything that we’ve discussed here. I don’t think that there’s much that she doesn’t, I don’t think that there’s anything that she hasn’t learned along the way. It just kind of, it comes out…it seems like over 30 years it came out in spurts. A lot of it didn’t come out at all at first. It was like that time I told you that I found myself crawling under the bed when I was joking about it, but really that kind of stuff kind of, more than anything else scared the hell out of her when she first saw it.

RV: Did you ever go to USO shows? See anything like that?

SD: No.

RV: Okay.

SD: Most of the USO shows that I was aware of I was making sure that Da Nang was secure.

RV: Right. Okay, Steve, could you make some comments about fear and what you saw, witnessed, felt, anything?

SD: About what?

RV: Fear.

SD: Fear?

RV: Yes.

SD: Well I guess I don’t know how to answer that other than you were always afraid.

RV: Were you?

SD: Sure.

RV: Did you talk about it with the other guys or did y’all leave that alone?

SD: It was a given. The only difference I saw about how people were fearful and I think I talked about this earlier, was there were the guys that dealt with fear that basically said, ‘Well if it’s time for me to go then it’s time for me to go. That’s what the good Lord willed,’ or whatever. I never bought into that. I liked to believe that that what I did, what we all did mattered and we were in control of our own destinies if we had our shit
together. That all relates to fear. I mean if you’re not afraid then there is something wrong with you.

RV: When were you most afraid, when would it happen the most? Do you remember?

SD: Well, I was really afraid that water buffalo was going to charge. I really was. There were a couple of times when I was…one time when we were coming in on a, we were going into a landing zone and I think there were a bunch of helicopters so we must have been company strength. We’re landing in this big open field, high grasses, and we must have been taking incoming. You can never hear if you’re taking incoming or not because the helicopters are so damn loud. For some reason, either the door gunner or pilot or co-pilot was anxious to get us off the helicopter because I think that they thought we were taking incoming. So if you’re on a helicopter, I mean those things are big targets. As much as you really don’t want to get off them you would prefer to keep flying, you really want to get off and get away from that huey as quickly as you can because it is such a target. So this guy, the helicopter pilot, for whatever reason, I mean we’re still like three or four feet off the ground and I jumped out. I don’t think he wanted to sit down because he thought it was wet and it turned out he was right. So we jump off of the helicopter. I dropped down about three feet and I find that I’ve sunk up to my knees, or a little above my knees in mud so I’ve got a 65 pound rucksack on me and I’m up to my knees and hips in mud and I can’t move. As far as I know we’re taking fire. So you get pretty scared if you’re stuck in the mud and there’s a helicopter hovering above you and you think that there’s incoming and you can’t move. That was a scary moment.

RV: What happened, how did you get out of it?

SD: I ended up slipping off my rucksack and getting unstuck from the mud. I was able to walk at that point or you know, well you’ve been in mud. You know what it’s like to try to drag your feet out of that and try to walk. I slowly made my way up to the wood line with everybody else. I still don’t know to this day if we were taking fire or not, but I guess he thought we were and somebody else thought that they were. It’s just little things like that, it doesn’t seem like a big thing but at the time it seemed like a big thing.

RV: Yes, I can imagine. Could you make some comments about bravery? What did you see?
SD: Well I told you I saw, I know that Jerry got a Silver Star. He got shot in the stomach after his first dustoff went down, his second one, they got him back on that and he’s still firing his weapon after he’s shot in the stomach over in the hillside. He probably didn’t have to do that. There’s just a certain amount of bravery that goes with, in my mind, all the guys that were there. The fact that they were there says something about them. Although we all didn’t have a choice but the fact that every single one of those guys that were grunts in Vietnam, one way or another said, ‘I’m going to allow myself to be put in harm’s way.’ So I just look at a whole generation of guys that I thought were very brave. If you’re asking me if I ever saw anybody charge up a hill against machine gun, no.

RV: Well yeah I was going to ask you any incidents, and if it’s that fine, if it’s not then what did you see? Or did you not see some extraordinary heroic moment?

SD: The most heroic moment I ever saw really was when Jerry was wounded and man he’s still firing. That’s why I say you know, I consider myself lucky because most of the combat and action that I saw was not nearly as fierce as some of the other things that I hear guys tell me about.

RV: Is that something that you hear talked about at reunions and things like that?

SD: Yes. I mean guys talk about where they were and what they did and do you remember this. Some guys remember it a little differently than you do. You try to fit the pieces together. So yeah, there’s a lot of those kinds of conversations. You try to validate what you did. I think I’m like most people, we spent a lot of years trying to forget this stuff and then something comes back and then you’re trying to remember it and it’s sometimes tough to remember everything that happened. It’s a little fuzzy.

RV: Tell me Steve, one last question about in country, did you ever take part in any kind of civic action, any kind of serious interaction with the civilians?

SD: Um…

RV: Excuse me, the Vietnamese civilians.

SD: We were in a lot of villages. We would be on patrol. We would come through villages. There were certain villages that I thought that the people were pretty friendly and were for us. There were other villages that we really had our doubts about. When I was in the rear from time to time I would be in the village that was outside of Chu Lai
base dealing with those little merchants, buying little stuff. You know having little
conversations, but in terms of having an ongoing relationship, I mean the person that I
probably knew better than anybody else was the gal who was you know cleaning my
hooch when I had a rear, when I had a rear job. She would show me pictures of her
family and I would show her pictures of mine. I remember trying to explain to her what
snow was. (Laughter)

RV: (Laughter) How did you do it?
SD: Well I don’t know, like shaved ice, you know. It’s kind of hard to describe. In
pictures I had I had snow on the ground. But she was a very nice gal. All the gals were
that were working on the base I thought. I kind of felt sorry for them.

RV: Did you?
SD: Yes.

RV: Did you tell them that? Especially your hooch maid, did you try to talk to
them about how you felt?
SD: There were a number of accounts where girls in the rear would, and you were
warned against this, that they wanted to have a relationship with you. They wanted to be
your girlfriend because they wanted you to fall in love with them and marry them and
take them back to the States.

RV: How do you know this, did they tell you this or was this the deal, this was the
rumor? This is what you were warned about?
SD: Well I don’t remember if I was warned about it or not but I knew that it
happened on a couple of occasions where guys fell in love with Vietnamese women and
it was, the Army made it very difficult for them to well A, if you got married I think you
were in trouble if you tried to take this girl over to the States. The red tape was
unbelievable. There was no question in my mind that a lot of those, I don’t want to say a
lot, some of the people, South Vietnamese people that worked in the rear were trying to
find a way to get out of Vietnam and move to the States.

RV: Did you ever have any incidents like that yourself?
SD: No.

RV: What did you think the Vietnamese thought of the Americans?
SD: I think most of them thought we were very rich and by their standards we were. I think that they probably thought that we were arrogant. Maybe we were. I’m talking about; this is a reflection of when I had a rear job. I think that some of them thought that we were nice guys and they thought that some of us were idiots, which was also probably true.

RV: Right. I guess that’s inevitable.
SD: Yeah, it’s inevitable.

RV: Did you get a sense that they understood why the United States was there and what you all were doing?
SD: I only remember having one little conversation. I remember a snippet of a conversation of which my hooch maid made the comment somewhere along the line that the Viet Cong were very bad people. Beyond that I don’t remember having a lot of conversations about why. It was just a given that we were there.

RV: Do you think that the civilians understood like the big picture or were they more concerned based on what you saw, especially in the field, with their day-to-day lives?
SD: I think that they knew if we left they were in deep shit. I really do.
RV: And what is deep shit to you?
SD: I mean that if we went away the NVA would be there in a couple of weeks.
RV: And what would happen? What do you think they thought would happen?
SD: I think that they feared for their lives. I think that’s why so many of them wanted to go to the States.

RV: Let’s talk about the going to the States, let’s talk about you coming home. You got shorter, and shorter, and shorter, then you extended. Tell me your reasoning behind extending. You explained that.
SD: I had a cake job in the rear that I didn’t consider dangerous at all. I really didn’t want to go back to Texas and ride tanks around and play war games. I would have thought that that was a bunch of bullshit. I really wanted to get on with my life. So I saw an opportunity to start my life back as a civilian five months earlier than I would have if I’d have come back to the States. That’s why I extended an extra couple of months to stay over there so I could get out of the Army in April instead of September.
RV: What were your plans after the Army? What did you have in mind? And when you were still in Vietnam, what did you think? Where did you see your life going?  
SD: Oh there was no question and I said this to myself probably a 100 times, if I get through this, if I ever get out of this fucking place I’m going to get my act together and I’m going to go back to school. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do, but I was going to be more successful at some…I was going to make a success out of my life.  
RV: Did you not feel it was a success at the time?  
SD: No.  
RV: Was it based on your lack of…?  
SD: I was not a good student. I was partying. I was horsing around, no direction. I was a pretty immature individual.  
RV: Is that Steve talking today or did Steve back then at age, what 22, 23 see that?  
SD: Well I saw myself as a much different person coming out of Vietnam than I did going in or coming out of the Army than I did going in to the Army. People ask me, ‘Was Vietnam a good experience?’ They don’t put it that way, but you know. In some ways, you know I don’t want to ever have to do it again, but it really, there’s nothing like getting shot at to, you know, kind of focus your life like a laser beam.  
RV: Is that what did it?  
SD: You know I think so because it put so many things in perspective. When I came home and I went back to school, my grades were so crummy when I came out of school that I went…my folks had moved to Delaware and I applied to the University of Delaware. They wouldn’t accept me as a full time student. So I had to go to school for a year as a part-time student. I think I took six credits a semester and proved that I could…I had to have a B average for 12 credits in order to get accepted as a full time student, which I did. I think having the Vietnam experience you know helped make me a better person.  
RV: How did you become a better person? I mean you just talked about it but what do you mean by that? Is this what your Vietnam experience means to you Steve?  
SD: Well I think it gave me a new perspective. It gave me an appreciation for what I had. If you see a third world country and see how those people are trying to make
a living and how many problems that they have to overcome compared to being a citizen of the United States, I mean there’s just no comparison. If you get yourself in the middle of a few life or death situations you begin to appreciate life. And so you know that’s why I say I’m not fortunate to have that experience, but having that experience brings a unique perspective that at least really helped me in getting my act together. I can just remember, one of the things I do remember very well is being in a foxhole in drizzling rain and muddy boots and wet and cold and thinking, ‘If I ever get the hell out of here man, I am going to make something out of my life.’

RV: Well looking back right now, today in May 2005, did you do it?
SD: Yes, I think I’m living the American dream, I really am.
RV: Really? You kept that promise to young Steve in that foxhole?
SD: I think so. There have been some bumps along the road. I have a wonderful family and a great job and a nice house. I make a nice living. I didn’t come from money or anything but there’s lots of opportunity out there.
RV: Right. Well before we go there can you describe coming home? How did that happen? This is April ’71?
SD: Yes, this is April ’71 and again I was one of the lucky ones. I came out of the field and got a rear job so I got to decompress a little bit from being in the field to being in the rear and then coming home. I knew a lot of guys who came out of the field and two weeks, three weeks later, they’re home. That’s really a different transition to make than what I went through. Even so I mean, hang on one sec.
RV: Okay.
SD: Coming home was wonderful but it was different and at times difficult. Landing in Ft. Lewis, doing that final wake-up in Vietnam and signing out of, I don’t even remember where we flew out of.
RV: Was it Chu Lai?
SD: No it wasn’t Chu Lai, I had to fly down to, I think it was Cam Ranh Bay. I had to fly down to Cam Ranh Bay then go through all the forms and bells and whistles and get on a plane. When you got all those guys on a plane and it was wheels up, I mean the cheer that went up was unbelievable. Then it was a long flight home, but I really
don’t remember very much of it. I think I slept most of the way. I do remember we had airplane problems and we had to stop in Japan.

RV: Oh really?

SD: Yeah, Jesus Christ. I survived all this and I’m going to drown in the fucking ocean now.

RV: (Laughter)

SD: We had an engine go out or something so we had to land in Japan. We were in Tokyo for like eight or nine hours while they repaired the plane. Then we took off again and then we were up and running. Then we landed in Seattle and spent a couple of days in Ft. Lewis, Washington, and had a couple great steak dinners and more than a few beers. I remember seeing the guys who were about to go over and they would look at you and want to come talk to you and I just…(laughter)

RV: (Laughter)

SD: I’m going no. There wasn’t anything you could say to those guys; just you know pay attention and keep your head down.

RV: Steve, do you remember your feeling on the plane? You described the cheer but when you left, you got out of Vietnamese air space, how did you feel personally?

SD: I was elated. I was just thrilled. I couldn’t believe it. I cheered I’m sure as loud as everybody else when those wheels were up flying away from the coastline. I remember that I think everybody was giving the flight attendants a hard time.

RV: I’m sure. I’ve heard that.

SD: But they were having a good time, too. My bet is that they hated dropping guys off there and loved bringing guys back, and we were the guys that they got to bring back.

RV: Okay so when you get into Seattle, nighttime or daytime?

SD: Boy, I don’t remember.

RV: Do you remember getting off and getting onto American soil?

SD: I remember it was morning when we got to; it was early morning when we got to Ft. Lewis, so we must’ve got there at the break of day or something. I remember having at six o’clock in the morning or something a steak dinner in the chow hall, in the
mess hall at Ft. Lewis there. I thought well this is cool, steak dinner and beer at 7 o’clock in the morning.

RV: Right, but it worked for you.
SD: But it worked just fine thank you.
RV: Did you notice changes about the United States, anything?
SD: Well not at that point. It was all Army on the plane ride and I don’t remember much of the airport in Seattle. Then I was quickly onto Ft. Lewis. So it was, as much as anything, I think I loved the cool air. Then I was just in Ft. Lewis I think for two or three days and you send over to a battalion or some kind of headquarters and sign a couple of forms and there’s a big book that you sign and that’s where you sign out of active duty. You have to sign this statement that you’re actually on active duty for the next three days so you’re not allowed to go punch out any officers or anything you know. Then I caught a bus to, or there was a bus ride back to Seattle airport and I caught a United Airlines flight from Seattle to Chicago and then Chicago to Philadelphia. I remember I got on the plane and the stewardess woke me up because the plane had landed. She goes something to the effect of, she goes, ‘You’re unbelievable.’ I said, ‘What?’ She goes, ‘That was the worst flight that I have ever been on.’ I guess we bounced all over the sky. People were getting sick everywhere.

RV: Oh really?
SD: Yes. I slept through the whole thing.
RV: Gosh, is that a statement on the sleep deprivation over there or you just were exhausted?
SD: I think I was physically and mentally just drained. Then I caught the plane in Chicago to Philadelphia and my folks lived down in Newark, Delaware, so then I was going to get a cab from…I told them, ‘Don’t come pick me up.’ I just wanted to show up at home.

RV: Why?
SD: I don’t know. I didn’t want all the hubbub in the airport you know. So I got in a cab at the airport to go over to 30th Street Station to catch a train to go down to Wilmington. Actually, my sister was going to pick me up at the train station in Wilmington but the cab guy, for some reason this sticks with me, you know I was in
uniform. He wanted to know where I had been. I said, ‘I just came back from Vietnam.’ I
guess he had a nephew or somebody that was over there. I get to 30th Street Station and
he said, ‘Cab ride’s on me.’
RV: Oh really?
SD: Yes, it was very cool.
RV: That kind of falls in line with my next question, and please continue to
comment on that if you would like, but what kind of reception did you receive in the
United States? That certainly is a positive thing right there.
SD: Yeah that was very positive. You know you did see that from guys who had
either been in the military or who had sons that were over there or nephews, whatever. It
was very strange. Nobody really wanted to talk about it. There was a lot of anti war stuff
going on. Certain people would look at you like you were from Mars. I think I
mentioned…
RV: What do you mean?
SD: You know there were stories going on about the atrocity’s that were going on
over there. I got home just as Senator Kerry was doing his shtick about how we were all
barbarians. So people would look at you and go well, they would wonder.
RV: So do you mind if I ask about that? You did think that Kerry’s testimony
before Congress did have a tangible effect upon your life right there in 1971?
SD: I think he was a contributing, no question in my mind he was a contributing
force to how Vietnamese, how soldiers who served in Vietnam got treated after Vietnam.
There is just no question in my mind. I mean you can have a lieutenant who is supposedly
served a tour of duty over in Vietnam who’s testifying to the fact that he’s seen all these
atrocities go on. At the same time the My Lai thing has come down so that doesn’t help.
You know there pictures of that little girl who ended up with napalm on her, that doesn’t
help. You know it helps...stories like him then lead to movies like Platoon and…what
was the one with Marlon Brando?
RV: Apocalypse Now.
SD: Apocalypse Now, which were ridiculous, stupid movies.
RV: Tell me why. Tell me about the Vietnam movies. I want to ask you about that later but go ahead and comment on that if you would like. Did you see them? Do you try to avoid them?

SD: I think the first one I saw was Deer Hunter, which is another stupid movie. Yeah I would go see them and I would just come out and go...people would ask me and I would go, ‘No.’ You know, the helicopter scenes look good. (Laughter) That’s about it. I just realized what time it is here.

RV: Yes. You want to go ahead and break and we’ll continue next week?

SD: Yeah, I got a meeting downtown I got to get to.
RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview for the Vietnam Oral History Project with Mr. Steve Dant. Steve, why don’t we continue? A couple of things that we wanted to talk about that you said specifically that you wanted to talk about since our last session was something that you remembered about being in the rear and then also something about being in the field. Why don’t we start with what you remembered about being in the rear? Also, let me say that it’s May 25, 2005 and it’s about 8:37 a.m. Central Standard Time. Steve, go ahead.

SD: There were two different types of guys that were serving in the rear. At least from a grunt’s perspective. There were the guys who had rear jobs who had been in the field and there were guys who were REMFs who had rear jobs who had never been in the field. There was, in my mind, a distinct difference between those two types of soldiers who got jobs in the rear. What you tend to do when you got a rear job is you tended to really hang out more with the guys who had been in the field as opposed to the guys who showed up at Vietnam and for whatever reason whether they were, and nothing against those guys, they were lucky or they ended up getting the right MOS, as opposed to the guys who showed up in Vietnam and had a rear job and never went to the field. The difference in serving in Vietnam between having a, and I may have said this before but serving in Vietnam and having a job in the rear and having one in the field were just a 180 degrees different. Even if you had a rear job it was still an issue of you never got enough sleep because well in my case I pulled a lot of guard duty at night or if you were…a lot of the guys that were out in the field that ended at brigade or battalion
headquarters were radio/telephone operators, RTOs, which meant that they spent a lot of
time with communicating with troops in the field, which meant that they pulled all
nighters also. There were other…so the duty was still different than what you would have
had in the States, but the difference between the guys that served in the field and the guys
that served in the rear and I did both, were just very, very different.

RV: You’ve commented a lot on those difference and the attitudes of both. What
it sounds like is that there is some kind of mutual respect in general between the guys
who were in the field and went to the rear, who were in the field and I guess there is
maybe a lesser degree, and correct me if I am wrong, between those of you who were in
the field and then compared around those who were in the rear permanently.

SD: Well the guys who were in the rear they never really, and you wouldn’t
expect them too just like nobody ever understands and there is no way you can fully
explain what it’s like to be in a combat unit out in the field. Some of them, not all of them
I mean just didn’t get it. So they were REMFs and they were REMFs. (Laughter)

RV: I hear you, that makes sense. Are you saying that the real REMFs, that was
their MOS versus the REMFs who were half field, half REMF?

SD: Guys like me who ended up getting, who after spending a certain amount of
time in the field and then lucked out and got a rear job somehow, I mean I thought were a
different class of REMF than the guys who had been there permanently.

RV: And you’re saying that your type of REMF, you, when you were back there
you guys garnered different respect from those who were in the field permanently.

SD: I mean I think the guys who had been in the field tended to hang out with
guys who had been in the field as opposed to guys who were permanently back there.

RV: Well tell me about, you remembered something else about being in the field.

SD: Well I do remember when we had been in country, I had been in country for a
while and I don’t know the exact date. If I were to guess, I would say it was in summer
sometime when we were told that there was a mission that was going into Laos and we
weren’t going to be part of the troops that were going to go in but we were going to be on
standby reinforcement in case things did not go well we would reinforce the troops that
were in trouble or needed help or they needed further support or whatever. I remember
going on one of the longest helicopter rides I think, oh I’m sure it was, the longest
helicopter rides that I had ever taken. We were flying for it seemed like a long time out
west of Chu Lai. It may have been southwest of Chu Lai. It probably was near, I mean I
didn’t have a map with me at the time, but got us to within a pretty quick chopper ride
into Laos. We were set up on a perimeter basically waiting and as I remember we were
there for a couple, three days waiting to see what happened with the troops that actually
had gone into Laos. We were all really very nervous and apprehensive I guess. We felt
like if we were going to go in there that means things were not going well and that we
were going to go in hot which didn’t make anybody happy. So after a couple, three days
of just hanging around we ended up not going on and we ended up getting back on
choppers and I don’t remember where we went from there. I remember everybody was
very relived that we weren’t going to have to support the troops that went in there. I do
remember they found a whole bunch of caches of weapons, supplies, and you know
bombed a bunch of bunkers. I remember reports at the time, also that they were bringing
some reports back from the States and I don’t remember if was Stars and Stripes or
hearing it on Armed Forces Radio about arguments about what we were doing going into
Laos. There was some denial that we were there. (Laughter) From politicians.
RV: Right. Massive denial.
SD: Right, massive denial. I remember thinking, ‘Well shit, if we weren’t who
were those guys?’
RV: Right. Did you guys actively discuss this kind of stuff? Like my God why are
we going into Laos, or what’s going on in Laos? We’ve heard this but…was this part of
your discussion?
SD: Well we knew why. We knew why we were going into Laos and I mean there
was no doubt in everybody’s mind where the supplies were coming. They were coming
down those trails that were out of North Vietnam through Laos and farther south than us
was Cambodia. That’s how the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese were being resupplied.
In some ways, from a...kind of a no-brainer.
RV: Right. Well, what do you think about that looking back at it? What do you
think about America being in Laos? Was that something that doesn’t make sense to you?
If it was a no-brainer then, what do you think about now?
SD: I think it made sense. We were at war with those guys. That’s how the Viet
Cong and the NVA were getting their supplies so anything we could do to hurt that
supply line to cut them off made it more difficult for them to launch any kind of ambush
or whatever against us. So I guess we understood why people in the States, some of them
would not be happy about this because obviously they would see this as an escalation of
the war. But if you’re on the ground and you know that’s how the Viet Cong or the NVA
are getting resupplied. I mean let’s figure out a way to cut that off.

RV: Right. Okay what else?

SD: It somewhat goes back to what I was saying before that we…you know I
guess part of, although I probably didn’t think about it at the time, the tactics of what we
were doing sometimes didn’t make sense. This one didn’t necessarily not make sense.
Well I guess that pretty much…there is just a lot of aspects of this war that you just got to
go around on circles on.

RV: Right. Do I hear you saying that at some point the United States needed to
going into Cambodia and Laos and cut the Ho Chi Minh trail and pack the sanctuaries…you
know 1970, ’71 was too late or it was late and that was not good?

SD: I go back to what I think I said earlier. You either get in to win this thing or
get the hell out. Don’t be screwing around. Just trying to hold on to positions or you
know, almost fight it on the enemies’ terms.

RV: Why do you think the United States didn’t do that? What do you think was
going on?

SD: Well I can answer that now. I couldn’t have answered it there because I’ve
done some reading since then. If you go back and read what Johnson and McNamara and
then later Nixon were doing, especially Johnson and McNamara. I mean they were trying
as much as anything, fight hard enough to hold the enemy at bay but not so hard that
you…they thought that, well they thought there was some danger about bringing in China
into the war effort. I think they were really looking for some way to establish South
Vietnam as a separate country and not worrying about defeating North Vietnam. When
you’re also lying to the people about how many troops you’re planning on sending there,
you know you’re somewhat lying to yourselves as well.
RV: Well Steve let’s go back to when you came home and what was going on. We had discussed a little bit of that. You talked about John Kerry and his testimony to Congress and what you thought that was doing to kind of the mindset, morale of the country. Before we get there I want to ask you about your personal transition to civilian life and when you came home, what was that like?

SD: Well I’m not sure I know quite how to answer that. I think I told you there were some good parts to it and there were some bad parts to it. The good part to it was it that the guy in Philadelphia, the cab driver, who gave me a free ride from the airport over to 30th Street Station. But you got home to…at least family were very happy to see you. I think they had been sitting on pins and needles since I left and were glad that I was home. So were close friends. It was strange in that you know that there were a lot of things that I didn’t want to talk about and at the same time there were you know your friends and family you know didn’t really want to talk about it either. So you were in many respects you were out there in limbo. You know the Calley situation, with the massacre in My Lai and all of that that had happened didn’t help. What really didn’t help was that instead of My Lai being considered an exception, which I really think it was. I mean I’m not here to say that all American troops were goody two shoes and nice guys. We were grunts and we had to be tough and sometimes be tough with the Vietnamese people. I don’t know of another incident that even comes close to what happened in My Lai and yet you had a Naval officer testifying in front of Congress that basically that was the norm. That’s, in my mind as I look back at this now, set up a 10 or 20 year period where people considered that the norm and considered Vietnam soldiers or Vietnam Veterans to be people that needed to be watched very carefully. I don’t think that was fair. I don’t think it was deserving. I say that at the same time that you know I had some incidents when I came home where you learn that when you’re in combat to wake up in a hurry. When somebody shakes your shoulder or somebody you know kicks your boot one of the things that you learn to do man is to come instantly awake and try to become very aware of where you are and what the situation is because you may be getting waken up by incoming, or somebody’s heard some rattle of bush or something. So for a long time I would wake up with a start. My family had to be careful about how they woke me up in the morning.
RV: Oh yeah?
SD: Yeah.
RV: What was that like? What do you mean? They literally had to be very careful?
SD: I had one incident where my mom made the mistake of coming over and she must have shook me on the shoulder or something and I came up with at start and out of bed and I knocked her down. She kind of got upset by that and I had to tell her, ‘Look, yell at me from across the room. Throw something at me.’ I don’t remember exactly what I told her, but I told her, ‘I tend to have to wake up in a hurry. I’ll get over this but don’t do that again.’ So those kinds of things worry parents and loved ones and that kind of thing. You slowly after a while get over that stuff.
RV: How much did you talk to your parents about what you had been through?
SD: Not much. Like I said everybody was very glad you were home. You know I guess there was a sense of, ‘We’re sorry you had to go through this.’ It was a very strange time because of all the things that were happening politically at home as well as what was being said about Vietnam soldiers. So it was like everybody wanted to get over this and get this behind us. So there wasn’t a lot of conversations about what had happened over there. In my own case I’ve talked to my wife about this a lot off and on through you know 30 years of knowing her. It’s all sprinkled out over time. But she’s probably one of, the only one that I’ve had these conversations with up until recently.
RV: What made you change and want talk about it more recently?
SD: I think I said early on that 9/11 was like a flash point to me. I took it very personally that somebody would attack our country. I thought right from the get go we needed to take the offense because to play defense would be unacceptable. If you’ve ever been in a war zone the last thing that you want is to be in another war zone or to have your family have to deal with a war zone. That’s just unacceptable. You got to take it to the people who are attempting to take it to you. There is just no other way to do it or you’ll suffer the consequences and the consequences are unacceptable. I also took, not to the degree that I took 9/11, but the Kuwait War was a very personal thing for me as well. It was the first time since the Vietnam War that American troops were going to go back on a very large…what’s the word I’m searching for, on a very large basis go back into a
combat situation. I really felt for the guys who were, and I don’t remember the exact day, but the day that Schwarzkopf basically said, ‘Let’s go.’ The mission was on. I mean I just felt for those guys who were getting into helicopters and onto tanks and we’re going into harm’s way.

RV: Did it bring back memories for you?

SD: Brought a lot of memories back. It was somewhat of a gratifying time as well. I remember I was in Pittsburgh the day that Schwarzkopf, you know the troops were launched. Pittsburgh on that day had decided at some time and I don’t remember and I remember walking down the street, I had just come out of a business meeting and they decided they were going to ring all the church bells at some designated time. I was walking down the street and I’m going, ‘Holy shit this is wonderful. It’s nice that we can support our troops.’

RV: What about today when you see what’s happening in the Middle East and central Asia, troops coming back, what are your feelings about that?

SD: Well we had a…Colorado Springs is the home of Ft. Carson, which has a lot of troops in and out of Iraq all the time. Last summer when I think 20,000 troops came home, the town put on a big parade. This is a city of about, oh I don’t know 450,000 people. They had 100,000 people lining the streets, which was very cool.

RV: Were you there?

SD: Oh yeah. I wouldn’t have missed that for the world.

RV: Did you see yourself in those young men and women who were in the parade?

SD: No, not really. Well I just wanted to make sure that those guys – well men and women as the case would be here – that they got the support that they deserved or got the thank you that they really deserve. I just didn’t want them to come home and not be welcomed home like the Vietnam Veterans weren’t welcomed home.

RV: You’ve kind of touched on this but let me ask this straight up. Why was the American public indifferent to you guys? And there are a lot of reasons; you’ve already talked about a lot of the different things, but if you could answer that in a concise way, because that question constantly comes up with students who study the war today, with
the public, with the media. I don’t know if anybody really understands it from the
veteran’s point of view and why that happened.

SD: You know I know you want me to be concise about it.
RV: I didn’t mean it that way. I meant like…
SD: I think there’s kind of a multiple answer to that.
RV: Yes.
SD: By the time ’70, ’71 came along there was a lot of anti-war fervent or
feelings in the country. That’s part of it.
RV: Do you include Kerry in that basically? That kind of anti-war, America’s
doing wrong kind of thing.
SD: No, Kerry is separate from that. There was I think also, there was an
embarrassment about the war because America felt as if, parts of America felt like we
were losing and this was the first war that America was going to lose and we were the
soldiers who were going to lose that war so that was part of it. I don’t think anybody
would ever admit to that but it was an underlying feeling that Vietnam soldiers weren’t as
good as other soldiers in past wars. Then you get to people like Kerry who contributed to
that directly. You know I almost puked when he got up and said, ‘I’m reporting for duty,’
when he was nominated to be the Democratic candidate for President. (Laughter) You’re
either stupid or ballsy; you’re one or the other.
RV: (Laughter)
SD: The guy who defamed us worse than anybody else coming home was now
going to use his Vietnam record as the foundation to become President of the United
States.
RV: What did you think of the rest of the VVAW members, the Vietnam Veterans
Against the War?
SD: I really didn’t understand where those guys were coming from. I thought they
were…it was one of the reasons that, and I come to find out that a lot of people felt the
same way. I’m going, ‘Who are these guys; what are they talking about?’ I didn’t know
anybody like this when I was in Vietnam. I didn’t hang around people…I didn’t know
Vietnam Veterans when I was either at home or when I was going back to the University
of Delaware or when I went into a career. Vietnam Veterans were you know kind of like
me, guys who either got drafted or enlisted and did their duty and came home and tried to
get back into the American way of life. You know it was almost like a light bulb went off
when, it was the movie with Tom Cruise, where the guy ends up in the wheelchair and
ends up being very bitter, *Born on the Forth of July*?

RV: Yes.

SD: It turns out the guy was a fraud. (Laughter)

RV: You’re talking about Ron Kovic?

SD: Yeah, I think that’s the guy I’m talking about.

RV: Yeah he was the central character of that movie.

SD: Right. It turns out that he didn’t have nearly the experiences that he was
claiming to have. So you know it was like Kerry and the people like him in that group
helped perpetuate a lot of myths about what happened in Vietnam and the Vietnam
soldiers, that it took us almost 20 years to get over and to get past and for people to begin
to say you know what, the things that Kerry and his folks were talking about weren’t true.
It’s another reason people didn’t want to talk about what was going on because they
thought somehow you might have been a part of that.

RV: Did it affect you being in the war, when you came back, did it affect you like
getting jobs or in that kind of thing?

SD: No, at least I never saw that. I went back to college and that was in some
ways strange because every university had its anti-war groups and had some kinds of
demonstrations going on although most of that was over by the time I was back being a
full time student. I was a different student because I was a little older. I didn’t really start
back to school until I was 22 and graduated when I was 25. Most of the student body is
18, 19, 20 year olds. So I wasn’t doing the normal things that undergraduates do in
college. I was working in a men’s clothing store and there were a couple of guys there
who were juniors and seniors and they were 20, 21 years old and they said, ‘Why don’t
you join our fraternity?’ It was one of the nicer houses on campus. I said, ‘Well it sounds
like you guys have a lot of fun,’ and blah blah. He goes, ‘The only thing you have to do is
you have to go through the initiation.’ ‘Well what’s the initiation going to be like?’ I
thought they try that shit on me somebody’s going to get hurt. It was bullshit I wasn’t
going to go through.
RV: What was it like being in college right after the war? You came back in ’71 and how soon were you back in school?
SD: Well I got back in April of ’71 and I started back part time school in that fall. I was working just about full time in a men’s clothing store. I had done some of that when I was in high school and taking classes at night. After a year I started going full time. It was just as I was starting back as a full time student moving into a new apartment that I met my…
RV: I’m sorry Steve you cut out, say that again. You met your…
SD: I met my wife. And she was younger than I am. She was a couple of years ahead of me. I guess she was starting her senior year and I was just half way through my sophomore. She was a big help in getting me past a lot of these issues as well.
RV: How so? What did she do for you then?
SD: She’s a good listener.
RV: She was interested in what you had been through.
SD: Yes.
RV: Was she one of the first ones to really take interest?
SD: I mean there were other people who took an interest but it was almost a…kind of like looking at somebody from the sideshow at the circus interest. (Laughter)
RV: That’s how you saw yourself? Or how you think she maybe saw you?
SD: I think that’s how a lot of people you know they wanted to know what was going on but they didn’t really. Where she had some, I think, heartfelt interest. Part of it was probably knowing who I was but she took a personal interest.
RV: Obviously that touched you; that meant something to you.
SD: Yes, no question.
RV: Well how much did you follow of what was happening in Southeast Asia, you know when you came back and you were in school? There’s still plenty of stuff happening there.
SD: I was still following it a lot. You know I thought we should, I was never one of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War marchers. I thought that those guys were all weird, but at the same time I believed that if we can’t win this thing then let’s get the hell out. I also felt like we got to be supporting the South Vietnamese as much as we could
and try to help them win the war but I also knew in the back of my mind that if we left, they were toast.

RV: Yeah you have already talked about that. What did you think that we needed to do or what would you have liked to have seen us do, the United States, after you left in the early ‘70s?

SD: I don’t know what else you could have done than what we did and that was to try to negotiate our way out. It was too late to try to go back and try to win this thing the right way. I read some place recently and I don’t remember where it was but some general was quoted that we lost this war the wrong way and his point was, and I guess I agree with this, is that we never should have gotten past the advisory role in terms of involvement in this war. This is hindsight and speaking 20-20, you know 20-20 hindsight you know. It was the South Vietnamese people who were ultimately going to have to be responsible for winning or losing this thing. If they weren’t willing to fight and get their act together both politically and militarily then you know, we would probably still be there. If we were going to lose this thing, his point was, we should have lost it from an advisory capacity as opposed to committing hundreds and thousands of troops into this campaign because once we did that then the Vietnamese kind of went okay good, you guys can do this for us. So I guess I didn’t realize it at the time but that’s kind of the way I felt. Again if we aren’t in there to win this thing, and I never felt like we were, then let’s get the hell out and let’s try to find an honorable way to get the hell out of this thing.

RV: Yeah. What about the…you’ve commented on Vietnamization and kind of how you did not think the South Vietnamese could pick up the ball and run with it. What about, you know, when we kind of started withdrawing and got out permanently in ’73 and then, you know, the Paris Peace is signed and Kissinger announces Peace with Honor, did you see it that way or what were your thoughts then?

SD: No, I don’t think anybody thought that we were going to have peace with honor. (Laughing) I think we were kidding ourselves, you know, I think we lost the war and the North Vietnamese won. And there’s, you know, there is some honor in being a good soldier, but there’s no honor in defeat.

RV: What did you think about the Nixon and that administration and what happened?
SD: I thought Nixon was an asshole. (Laughing)

RV: Yeah?

SD: I thought his, you know, I looked at him as kind of carrying on what Johnson was already doing. You know, I think that he, and looking back, Nixon was probably a little more honest about it than Johnson was in carrying out the war. But you know, at the time, I didn’t, you know, think that, you know, as a troop in the field or when I got home that he was a very honorable guy, that he was a very good president. I guess he, you know and then Watergate just confirmed a lot of things about, you know, he had some personality traits that were…that did not lend himself very well to be a good leader.

RV: Yeah. What about Johnson, can you make some comments on him?

SD: Well, you know, again, there’s some things that I did not know at the time, but I mean, it’s pretty obvious now why he decided, you know, not to run for reelection for President because it was going to come out that he had misled the American people about our involvement in the Vietnam War and the quagmire that he had gotten us into. You know, there’s no question that he did a lot of great things for civil rights in this country, but I mean, in my mind, there’s no question that he lied, up one side and down the other about what his plans were, you know. In fact, actually what he was doing with regard to attempting to step by step escalate the war in Vietnam.

RV: Right.

SD: And he and McNamara just lied their asses off.

RV: Why do you think they’re doing that, just to make them not look so bad or because they really believed that, you know, that this was…okay, this is a bit of a lie, but you know, this is actually really going to happen for the United States or this is happening for the United States. Maybe not that, you know, one thing or one incident and you know, the Gulf of Tonkin or whatever it is that’s coming out. Do you think Johnson was genuine? You know, you said Nixon kind of no; he was not.

SD: Well I think Johnson, you know, looking back on it now, you know, I think Johnson in some ways almost, he was so absorbed with what was going on domestically with his Great Society Plan that you know, he didn’t have his eye on the ball as to what was going on with regard to Vietnam. And that’s why I keep bringing up McNamara’s name because there was the guy who was leading Johnson along as to, you know, how
we should, how we can slowly escalate this thing and make the enemy come to the table
and we’re going to scare the shit out of these guys and they’ll see it our way. Well, that’s
a fundamental misunderstanding of what is happening in Southeast Asia.

RV: An underestimation perhaps of the enemy?
SD: Absolutely. I mean, they didn’t understand that in some respects, they were
getting into the middle of a civil war and that’s kind of what we got into the middle of.
RV: Yeah, yeah. What about John Kennedy, what can you say about him?
SD: You know, I like a lot of what John Kennedy was saying at the time. You
know, I don’t think he was alive long enough to form an opinion about what he was
going to do or not do in Vietnam. I mean he had advisors on the ground as far as I
remember. But at the point where Kennedy died, we were still an advisory capacity with
South Vietnamese Army and whoever was in charge of South Vietnam. If there was
a…the problem that Kennedy ran into was probably determining which corrupt
individual was going to be the, what was it, the president or premier or the leader of
South Vietnam, I forgot the title.
RV: Ngo Dinh Diem?
SD: Well yes, but I mean, you know, we were trying to determine which corrupt
individual was the better one to lead Vietnam.
RV: Right. You had people called Big Minh and then you had General Nguyen
Kanh.
SD: Right.
RV: Yeah, and then Thieu.
SD: Wasn’t that Nguyen Kao Ky or something like that.
RV: Ky, yeah, and Thieu were the ones that kind of settled on for the remainder
of the thing.
SD: Right. You know, Kennedy wasn’t around long enough to really kind of, I
mean, he was and he wasn’t, but you would hope that he would’ve seen things a little
differently or more clearly than Johnson in terms of what we would get into in terms of
escalating this war. Although McNamara was his guy too, so maybe it would’ve gone
the same way.
RV: Well what did you think or how did you feel in April 1975 when Saigon fell and the country fell?
SD: I guess I was very sad. I was not surprised, it was just, you know, a gloomy day. I still have I think one or two old *Newsweek* magazines of about that time, you know, that I kept all these years of the troops coming home and the pullout dates and I don’t remember what’s on the front cover. I remember it has a big helmet on the front cover, I don’t remember what it says though, I should go dig that out. So I was following it. You know, I guess I was resigned to what was going to happen. I mean, before Saigon fell, I mean I just knew that was going to happen, I knew it was going to be a mess.
RV: Yeah? When you left country you knew potentially?
SD: Yeah, yup.
RV: Hmm. How did that reflect upon you personally? Do you think, I mean, did you feel it personally or was it more this is the United States?
SD: Well I guess some of both.
RV: Yeah.
SD: You know, as I look back on it now, I guess I still think it was a personal loss to have put that much effort and time and have so many people get hurt and killed, you know, and then to…the South Vietnamese have not done better under the North Vietnamese conquerors. I mean, you know, how many people…you know, I’ve heard estimates of hundreds of thousands of people I know went into those reeducation camps and never came out. You know, look at how many refugees, you know, went on boats trying to escape or went over to Thailand or Laos or Cambodia and lived in camps because, you know, they’d rather take their chances with Khmer Rouge than with the North Vietnamese, what does that say?
RV: Yeah.
SD: You know, this was a regime that was going to take over and they were going to kick ass and take names and they did. So it was a…I mean, it was very much a huge loss of life and in a lot of respect, that’s embarrassing. You know, it’s embarrassing when, and I go back to Kerry again, but if we get out, a few thousand people will get killed. Well, you obviously don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.
RV: Yeah, yeah. Looking back Steve, what do you think about your service in Vietnam personally, taking a look at the, you know, significance for you?

SD: Well, you know, I think I said that I’m, you know, I’m not sure I’d want to do it again, but I’m glad I had the experience. And you know I’m proud of the service that I had in Vietnam. You know, I wasn’t a great soldier, but I think I was a pretty good soldier. You know, I don’t think anybody can fault, you know, and obviously this is somewhat self serving, but the job that the grunts did on the job…the grunts did on the ground in South Vietnam, you know, and I always wondered about that for years and years and years after you hear all these stories about all these so-called atrocities and what have you. But you come to realize again, those were the exceptions to the rules, to the rule and you know, most of the guys that I met, you know, were kind of ordinary, you know, come from middle America families who went over and thought they were doing their duty.

RV: Is there anything that you would change about your experience if you could?

SD: Um, God, you know, that’s a ‘What if…’ question.

RV: Yeah, I’m sure it is.

SD: You know, because, well, we never should’ve gotten ourselves into the situation that we got ourselves into. You know I guess the question that goes by, the question I get asked; ‘If you had to do it all over again, you know, would you have gone to Canada?’ You know, and the answer is, it’s a moot point.

RV: Yeah. It’s what we call in the historian field, counterfactual history.

SD: Yeah, right, because of course in any place that you are in your life, if you could go back and do redo something all over again, you might. But you know, then the circumstances aren’t the same because then you know something different than what you knew then. I guess if I’d go back and change something, I’d go back and try to have a conversation with President Johnson and Secretary of Defense, Mr. McNamara.

RV: What would you say to them?

SD: (Laughing)

RV: (Laughing)

SD: ‘Be honest with yourselves,’ you know, because I don’t think that they were.
RV: What if they had said, ‘Well Steve, you just don’t understand it up here at this level.’ (Laughing)
SD: (Laughing) Well, then you go back to the hindsight question, you know, and then it becomes another moot point.
RV: Yeah, good answer. What do you think was the most significant thing that you learned about Steve Dant in Vietnam?
SD: Um, I guess that I shouldn’t waste my life. Um, that there were, you know, that I needed to get my act together.
RV: Would you say that…?
SD: But I guess I wasn’t running my life very well prior to that. (Laughing)
RV: (Laughing) Right. You mention that, do you think that you have been that, do you think you succeeded?
SD: Oh yeah. You know, Vietnam woke me up, and you know, I became a, you know, I don’t want to say better person, but a more focused person, better. You know, it matured me, it got me to be more goal-oriented and make me realize that I could, you know, after you go through a stint in the field, you realize a lot of the other things that you were kind of blowing off or that’s not right, you know, it makes other things seem a lot less difficult, you know.
RV: What do you think about Vietnam today?
SD: Well, you know, I guess I have mixed emotions about us reestablishing relationships with Vietnam.
RV: Tell me about that, why?
SD: Well, you know, the resentful side of me says, ‘Don’t give those bastards anything,’ you know, but I don’t think that’s realistic. And the other side of me says, ‘Get over it.’ You know, that’s foolish, you know, we don’t try to reconcile our differences. So, I’ll get over it.
RV: Yeah. Have you ever wanted to go back or do you plan to?
SD: No. You know, I’ve talked to some other guys who either have been or planned to go back but I, you know…and I have one friend who kind of, you know, said to me, ‘You know, what do you think about going back together?’ And I go, ‘No Dave, I
don’t know, I really don’t think I want to go do that.’ I may change my mind, but right
now, I don’t think so.
RV: Why not?
SD: I just don’t want to go back and relive some of that stuff that close up.
Again, I may change my mind, but I don’t think so.
RV: Okay. Well do you think Vietnam is still with the United States today or
have we been able to put it behind us?
SD: Oh, I think it’s with us all the time.
RV: How so?
SD: I think it’s with us somewhat of how we’re dealing with the Iraq and Iran I
think particularly and hell, I’m in the business. I think that there is still a distrust of
American military and presidential power. And I think it shows through in how the war
gets reported. You know, I look at some press reports, you know, coming out of Iraq and
I ask myself of that reporter, ‘Whose side are you on?’ You know, and the answer comes
back, ‘Well, we’re trying to be neutral.’ Well bullshit you know. In World War II, our
reports weren’t neutral. I mean, they tried to get to the facts, but they were Americans
first. And I think that comes from that attitude of distrust, comes from the Vietnam War
and it goes back to Johnson and it goes back to McNamara and it goes back to Nixon,
you know, and those guys, you know. It goes back to, you know, when I’m sitting out
there and acting as reinforcing, standing by us, reinforcing troops that for guys who are
going into Laos and there was denial of what we were doing by the President back in the
United States. And I understand, you know, the military and the President had to protect
the troops at some point with regard to giving away the plans. I mean you know surprise
is an element that you want. You have to level with the American people over the long
haul. I think what Johnson did and what Nixon did created a distrust, and what the
military did created a distrust that lives on today. It’s something that the press needs to
get over.
RV: Well you’re in the media, right?
SD: Yes.
RV: So from your standpoint, from looking I guess from the inside out, do you think that the press needs to get over that, move forward? What needs to be done differently?

SD: I think that you have to come from this from a, I hate to use the word bias, because it’s overused these days.

RV: I’m sorry you cut out again; you said you hate to use the word bias?

SD: Because it’s overused. Somebody’s trying to beep in. You have to get over Vietnam. I think you have to come up from a perspective of let’s trust what the military is telling us, let’s trust what the President is telling us, let’s trust what the Secretary of Defense is telling us until we find out that they are not telling us the truth.

RV: So give them the benefit of the doubt first.

SD: Right, and we’re not doing that as a press corps. What we’re doing is we’re coming from the position of we don’t trust you and until you go through all these exercises then maybe we’ll allow you to win back some credibility. I think that that’s detrimental to well number one the troops in the field. You know we’re almost right back to, and I don’t care what anybody says, if you call the President a liar, if you call the Secretary of Defense a liar, if you question their ethics, you got troops in the field, those guys and those women hear that and the last thing that you want them to start thinking is that their leaders have no credibility. It does hurt the troops in the field. That’s why you asked the question five or ten minutes ago, is Vietnam still thought about. I think it’s thought about in a whole lot of different areas. I certainly see it in the press corps.

RV: Do you think that’s one of the lessons that the media needs to take or that the country needs to take forward is don’t forget that…let’s move past this, in the media specifically?

SD: I think the media needs to get over Vietnam. So many young reporters or reporters today cut their teeth on Woodward and Bernstein with regard to *All the President’s Men* and then finding out that the Nixon Presidency was corrupt. Those are our heroes. It’s a gotcha game, and don’t get me wrong, it’s a reporter’s duty. It’s the press’ duty to hold the government accountable, to find out what’s going on behind the scenes and I’m not saying they should roll over for any government…

RV: I’m sorry you cut out again. Any government group?
SD: I said that they shouldn’t roll over for any government or military group. On the other hand there should be some respect for those institutions and I think that there, in some ways, is a lack of respect. Again I think that’s a carryover from Johnson and Nixon and we’re still living with those sins.

RV: That’s very interesting. Well on that note, we’ve already talked a little bit about this, but tell me about how Hollywood has portrayed Vietnam and your thoughts on that.

SD: Well some of the same carryover. I mean I guess you can tell I’m not a fan of Senator Kerry, but you know his testimony gives life to, you know My Lai, there were lots of My Lais, there were lots of soldiers like Calley and so then you get Hollywood right behind that. I mean the portrayals of most American Vietnam Veterans in the years following the war were well look at the movies and look at how they are portrayed. They are a bunch of nut cases or people with no conscience, ethics and not to say that there weren’t some terrible things that happened in war. There are always terrible things that happen in war but the way the Vietnam Veteran got portrayed as opposed to any other war; I mean even the Rambo stuff. (Laughter) You go from portraying the American soldier as a nut case and barbaric as Kerry would say to then Rambo, who’s a guy who’s kind of out of it but you feel sorry for him. Now we’re starting to feel sorry for the American soldier. There have probably only been a couple of movies that have somewhat captured what happened in Vietnam.

RV: Can you give me any examples?

SD: Well probably the first half of…

RV: Full Metal Jacket?

SD: Full Metal Jacket, was a pretty true depiction of basic training. I thought that once they got to the war part I mean I thought it was you know, sophomoric. There were parts of We Were Soldiers that I could you know kind of see, parts of Hamburger Hill, but beyond that I mean the rest of them were kind of…just, they had good helicopter scenes. (Laughter)

RV: So that was pretty true to form?

SD: True to form, yeah.
RV: Do you think that movies like *Apocalypse Now* and maybe *Platoon*, parts of *Platoon*, did that hurt the American Vietnam Veteran?

SD: I think so. Again you look at those movies and you go man that’s why people were reluctant to talk to you. Is that really what it was like? Is that what you’re like? There was more made in the press of, and there always is, I mean the press is going to go, you know, it’s a part of that, if it leads it bleeds. If it bleeds it leads. Some Vietnam Veteran who goes off to reservation and kills somebody or his family or whatever you know, that gets a lot of headlines. What doesn’t get a lot of headlines is the guys who came out, went back to school or went back to work and you know living an American life.

RV: Do you think that’s the majority of Vietnam Veterans?

SD: No question in my mind.

RV: Yeah. What about books on… I’m sorry go ahead Steve

SD: The overwhelming majority.

RV: What about books on Vietnam? You said you had done some reading. Anything come to mind that struck you as being really valid, a worthwhile read? I hate to put you on the spot for titles, you don’t need to do that but you can make general comments if you would like.

SD: Oh there was one I read a while ago and most of it focused on, and I can’t remember the name of it. Well I’ve read Burkett’s book on…

RV: *Stolen Valor*?

SD: *Stolen Valor*. I read that a while ago. The most recent on I read was… which one was it?

RV: Is it David Maraniss, *They Walked Into Sunlight*?

SD: No, McMaster.

RV: Yeah, H.R. McMaster.

SD: *Dereliction of Duty*.

RV: Yes.

SD: I thought that was a great read.
RV: Well in this same vein, what would you tell young people Steve about the Vietnam War if you walked into a high school classroom or a college classroom? You could say whatever you wanted to. What would you tell them?

SD: Boy I don’t know how to say that without going back three hours’ worth. Well I guess you know, don’t believe everything you read or hear. Probably half of what you read or hear probably isn’t true. I think American’s hearts were basically in the right place when we started down this road. I think we had some poor leadership along the way. There are a lot of great stories that came out of Vietnam. It wasn’t all negative. We all need to get over it. That’s not obviously easy. Easier said than done but I don’t mean forget about it when I say that. I mean that we need to…some of what I was saying before, we need to learn from our experience but don’t be caught in the trap of thinking that just because we made a mistake that we should not be you know pushing forward to our development as a country. You know a lot of people make mistakes in business or in life or whatever it is and they want to crawl in a hole because they are afraid of making another mistake. I think that in some respects the United States did that for a while. But you know we’re a great country and our hearts are in the right place and the worst thing we can do is to crawl in a hole and go, ‘Oh woe is me.’ We owe ourselves more than that and we owe, you know, the rest of the world more than that.

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

SD: Yes.

RV: Can you tell me about that experience or experiences?

SD: Well it was after 9/11, it was after I hooked up with a bunch of guys who I had known in Vietnam. It was the first Americal reunion that I went to. It was the, I have forgotten what year, anniversary of the Wall so it was like a big anniversary so there were tons of people there. It was on Veterans’ Day, I think. I guess I was like everybody else. I was sad. I felt like, well to a certain extent, what a waste. I found a couple of guys who I knew on the Wall. Cried like everybody else. It took me a long time to get there. I said for years, and years, and years, people would go ‘Are you going to the Wall?’ ‘No, not going.’

RV: Why would you say that?
SD: Why would I want to go there? Well because I knew it would be an emotional experience. As I said I spent years trying to put this all behind me and that was just going to bring it back.

RV: So when you were there, did it?

SD: Oh sure. Like I said to a couple of guys in my unit, ‘You know it’s funny, you spend 30 years or whatever trying to put all this stuff behind you and then something happens and all of a sudden you’re sitting around in one of the reunions and you’re showing pictures to each other and you’re trying to remember.’

RV: Trying to remember.

SD: Trying to remember all these things, where was this and what day was this and do you remember that? You know it’s just 180 degrees. Thank you Osama Bin Laden.

RV: And you say that sarcastically, obviously.

SD: Yeah. On this 9/11.

RV: Yeah. I mean the remembrance that you’ve gone through recently, and it seems to me after talking to you for so long that it’s been a cathartic thing for you, that’s it been a positive thing for you. I mean with obviously with bittersweet memories in some cases. Am I wrong?

SD: Yeah somewhat. There is no question about that. You know the one thing that, the one question that always got asked of me along the way, you know a lot of times if you had to do it all over again question. My answer has always been…do I want to do it all over again? No. But am I glad I went through it; am I glad I did this? Not necessarily but on the other hand, I am glad I had the experience. It changed me as an individual and there’s a greater appreciation of I guess what you have that’s very hard to explain. It’s you know kind of almost silly. Like sometimes marathon runners or people who do a lot of exercise and I’ve done a lot of running in my life. Well why do you do this? Well it feels so good when I stop.

RV: That’s true. As a former marathoner I absolutely agree with you.

SD: (Laughter) Well I’ve never run a marathon but I’ve run a lot of 10 and 15 Ks.

So did I answer your question?
RV: Absolutely. Steve, is there anything else that you feel that we need to talk about or cover that we have not?

SD: I can’t think of anything at this point.

RV: Okay. Well we will go ahead and end the Oral History Interview with Steve Dant for the Vietnam Archive Oral History Project. Thank you very much, Steve.

SD: Thank you.